

Machine Spirit

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‘Tracking...’

The gruff voice issued through a mouth grille, reverberating inside the warrior’s battle-helm. Gauntleted fingers rimed with dried blood, the black ceramite chipped from hand-to-hand combat, twisted a dial on the magnoculars.

‘Wait...’

A slew of data came through the scopes. The myopic visual of a white, trackless desert was augmented by a scrolling commentary describing wind speed and directionality, mineral composition, temperature and atmospheric in truncated rune-script. The most salient piece of intel was revealed in the hazy image return, however.

Squalls of armour-abrading calcite were whipping across endless dunes farther out, presaging another storm. The more dangerous hazard had yet to reveal itself, but Zaeus knew it was there.

He grunted, annoyed and trying to marshal his temper.

‘Any sign, Brother Zaeus?’ asked another voice, one partially obscured by the rising wind. What began as a zephyr had developed into a gale.

The more cultured speaker was crouched below Zaeus in a shallow calcite basin where the rest of the kill-team had taken refuge. He looked up expectantly at the Brazen Minotaur through the burning coals of his eyes. An orange drake head upon a black field on his right shoulder guard marked him as a Salamander, and he was supporting a third warrior who carried the sigil of the Imperial Fists. A fourth knelt in silent vigil beside them both, head bowed, while the last of their group was laid in still repose nearby.

‘Weather’s impeding visual feed,’ Zaeus muttered, careful to mask his fatigue. He adjusted the dials again, using small movements that looked too delicate for such a hulking brute.

Despite their power armour, he was broader shouldered than the others and his chin jutted as if in a challenge, even encased by a battle-helm.

Distant shadow figures, like patches of blurred ink on a canvas, resolved through the growing blizzard. The grain and rock whipped about within it plinked against Zaeus's shoulder guards. It wore at the gold trim and cracked the black bull icon against its field of flaking white.

Some of the shadow figures were larger than the others, gene-bulked by carapace and outfitted with forearm blades. Zaeus's stomach clenched, as did his jaw, as he remembered the fate of Brother Festaron. The former Star Phantom had killed a swath of the creatures before they'd gutted him. A greater mass of the less developed aliens moved slowly behind the hulks, bowed against the wind. Their avian war-cries, altered slightly by the hybridisation of the thorax, were just audible.

Zaeus counted at least fifty, but he knew there were more. He made a mental note of the ammunition left in his cache. Thirteen hellfire, four kraken rounds, three metal storm and two tangle-web. Including two clips of standard mass-reactive, it wasn't much.

'They have our spoor now,' he told the others.

He reckoned on over three hundred. The kill-team's present condition removed 'combat engagement' as a mission option. It only left 'harass and retreat'. That irritated the Brazen Minotaur like a thorn under a nail and he growled.

'I feel it too, brother,' said Ar'gan, the Salamander, 'the desire to burn them to ash.'

Zaeus lowered the magnoculars and headed back down into the basin where the others were waiting.

'Carfax will be expecting us,' he said, referring to their pilot.

The kneeling warrior, Vortan, looked up from his litany as Zaeus's shadow fell across him.

'How many?' he asked, voice grating, getting to his feet. Vortan was of the Marines Malevolent, and carried a winged bolt of lightning against a yellow background on his guard. He was also a miserable bastard, but hard as adamantium.

Zaeus stopped, racked his bolter's slide but didn't turn. He wore a bulky armature fitted to his power pack, a servo-arm that flexed in simpatico with his body's movements.

'We will be meeting the Emperor if we stay to find out,' he said.

Vortan sneered, hefting a belt feed around his waist and attaching it to his heavy cannon. 'Fleeing from xenos scum...' He shook his head. 'It's beneath us.'

The Brazen Minotaur sniffed noncommittally, 'Then I shall see you again at the foot of the Golden Throne, brother.' He checked his ammo gauge. 'My count is low,' he muttered, stooping to grab a length of chain looped around Festaron's torso.

Zaeus grunted, and began to heave the body. The trail left by the dead Star Phantom was quickly absorbed by the drifts of calcite. At least his blood wouldn't give them away. Not that it really mattered.

'We should move. Use the storm as cover,' he said, increasing his pace. 'Ar'gan?'

The Salamander was helping up Captain Polino. Both went without battle-helms, and Ar'gan's red eyes flared like hellfires in the blizzard. His face was like a slab of onyx. It stuck out but then they all did, wearing Deathwatch black.

'So much for the line of Dorn,' Polino rasped, flecking his ashen lips with blood. The Imperial Fist turned moribund, and as he leaned heavily against Ar'gan's shoulder said, 'I'm sorry, brother... I led us to this.'

Hunters had become hunted, their elite kill-team in danger of extermination by the very filth they were supposed to have already neutralised.

Ar'gan's tone was conciliatory. 'None of us, not even you, Captain Polino, could have anticipated what we found in that nest, their immunity to the nerve toxin.' He nodded to the armoured corpse of Festaron and the fist-sized puncture wound in his breastplate. The Deathwatch had sealed it with a binding solution that kept what was inside dormant. 'But soon the truth here will be exposed and end the Imperium's treaty with the tau by unleashing the wrath of the Inquisition.'

'Only if we escape this Throne-forsaken desert before we share the same demise

as our eviscerated comrade,' said Vortan.

Zaeus kept his own counsel. War with the tau had been ongoing for months with no sign of inroads on either side. Negotiation was sought, but certain interested parties within the Inquisition were keen to avoid that. A single kill-team was dispatched to eliminate the bulk of the alien's forces, a faction of avian mercenaries designated *krootis aviana* by Imperial taxonomers, through the utilisation of an *Ordo Xenos* nerve toxin that would remove them as a threat. Without their mercenary horde, the tau would be unable to match the Imperium on a war footing. That the nerve toxin had proven less than efficacious grated on the Brazen Minotaur, even if its failure did mean he and his comrades had unearthed a greater threat in their midst.

The Marine Malevolent was still venting. 'We should have broken into that council session and executed every single one of those grey-fleshed dung-eaters.'

'The Imperial officers would have resisted us,' said Zaeus.

'They would have been next before my guns.'

Zaeus believed him. The Marine Malevolent was a singular warrior, driven and harsh to the point of brutality, but he saw only in absolutes and so his view was oft narrow.

Vortan glanced at the Imperial Fist, whispering to Ar'gan, 'He slows us,' before he looked at the Star Phantom being dragged by Zaeus. 'They both do.'

As if to make Vortan's point, Captain Polino staggered and would have fallen if not for Ar'gan. Pain reduced his voice to a rasp between clenched teeth.

'Keep moving...'

Ar'gan gave Vortan a dark look that was both a reproach and suggested their captain wasn't going to last much longer. They needed to find Carfax and the gunship before the hunters found them.

Vortan shrugged, engaging the suspensors on his heavy bolter that allowed him to move as fast as the others in his kill-team, even whilst encumbered.

He marched ahead to take point. 'Give me a bearing, Zaeus.'

It was tough to get a reading with so much environmental interference. The retinal lenses of all the helmeted Space Marines were fraught with static, and ghosted with false returns and feedback.

Heat signatures were non-existent and visual confirmation of landmarks, geography or enemies was reduced to almost point-blank. The data stream through scopes or retinal feed was scrambled, useless. But the Brazen Minotaur possessed much better auspex than his brothers, and could cut through the fog of static easily. He sub-vocalised the coordinates of the rendezvous point relative to their position and ex-loaded them to Vortan's lens display.

'I have it,' said the Marine Malevolent. 'Advancing.'

Ar'gan's voice came through Zaeus's comm-feed, low and full of distaste.

'He would sacrifice them both for the mission.'

'As would I, son of Vulkan,' Zaeus replied, 'as should you.' He half-glanced over his shoulder at the Salamander.

'But he is callous to a sharpened edge, brother. We all must be pragmatic, but what Vortan suggests is disrespectful.'

'He is of the Marines Malevolent, and therefore practical to the point of being an utter bastard. I thought your Chapter was familiar with their ways?'

Ar'gan's tone grew darker and there was a scowl in his words, 'That we are, but I cannot condone—'

'Hsst!' Zaeus raised a clenched fist for silence. 'Stop.' It was an order to the entire kill-team, even Captain Polino. The Imperial Fist was all but incapacitated; as Techmarine, the Brazen Minotaur was next in command.

'Brother?' Vortan asked warily through the feed.

Intensifying storm winds were making it tough to hear, but Zaeus had reacted to something.

The Brazen Minotaur's entire left side, all the way down to his abdomen, was cybernetic, sacrificed to the Machine-God and the glory of the Omnissiah. As well as granting phenomenal strength and endurance, his augmentations also included superlative hearing courtesy of a bionic ear.

Zaeus arched his neck towards the skies. After four seconds, he shouted out, 'Incoming!'

Kraken rounds scudded through the storm-drift, chewing off pieces of carapace that fell in chunks. Vortan heard the creature bleat before it ditched into a nearby dune. Ar'gan was already moving low with his combat-blade drawn. It was acid-edged, fashioned to slice through hardened xenos-chitin like air. The creature was bleeding, one wing broken, the other shredded and incapable of flight when he found it. A jet of caustic bile spewed from its maw, but the Salamander warded it off with his vambrace before ramming the blade into the insect's throat. It shuddered once and was still.

From the shallow ridge, Vortan bellowed, 'More coming!' The dug-dug staccato of armour-piercing heavy bolter rounds joined a muzzle flash that spat from the cannon's smoke-blackened mouth. Two of the flyers were cut apart, exploding in a shower of viscous gore that coated Ar'gan's armour.

The Salamander scowled at his battle-brother, but the Marine Malevolent was laughing, loud and raucously. When the cannon chanked empty and the belt feed ran slack, his humour evaporated as he went for his sidearm. Before he could slip the pistol from its holster, a stingwing arrowed towards him, flesh-hooks extended. Vortan used the heavy bolter like a club and smacked the creature head-on, crushing its snout and most of its skull. He stamped on its neck, finishing it off.

Zaeus stayed at Polino's side, and also watched over the corpse of Festaron, who would be like carrion to the flyers. The injured captain was doing his best to keep upright, and snapped off loose shots with his bolter.

'Herd them to me if you can, brother-captain,' said Zaeus, eyes keen as he discerned a jagged shape arcing through the drifts. An ululating challenge, foul with alien cadence, resonated from a stingwing's throat as it dived hungrily.

'Here, filth!' Zaeus spat, and swung his servo-arm. The mechanical clamps seized the creature's neck in mid-flight, piling on the pressure until the

reinforced chitin buckled and its head came off with a snap. Gore spewed across the Brazen Minotaur's battle-plate, scoring the metal and acid-burning it down to raw grey. Through his bionic, he performed a split-second analysis.

'High concentrations of sulphuric and hydrochloric acid,' he related to the data-corder in his helmet. 'Trace elements of alkali, potential hydrogen levels fourteen or greater. Extremely corrosive, and inconsistent with the bio-strains inloaded to kill-team mission brief.'

This he catalogued whilst bringing down another stingwing with a snap shot from his bolter. The designation came from the xenos datacore identified: tau. Countless others filled the hard-wired cogitator arrays of the Iron Fortress watch station where Zaeus and his comrades were currently barracked. Interrogating the data from the mission brief and cross-referencing it with previous engagements, he noticed an inter-species correlation with a second organism class.

Tyrannic.

The xeno-form, 'stingwing', was a mutated strain corrupted by genetic hybridisation. It could explain why the nerve toxin failed, and why the kill-team were running for their lives.

'They're still coming,' breathed Polino.

Zaeus gave him a glance. The Imperial Fist was flagging, his left hand perpetually pressed against his torso. Dark blood flowed freely from the wound through Polino's fingers as his Larraman cells lost the battle against whatever anti-coagulating agents were rife in his dead attacker's bodily juices.

'Hold on,' snarled Zaeus, 'we're almost through them.'

Despite their initial frenzy, the stingwings were peeling off and returning to the larger herd now lost in the sandstorm.

Tracer rounds from Vortan's heavy bolter followed the creatures and a miniature sun erupted from the hellfire shell the Marine Malevolent had loaded, streaking flame across the choked sky. The red dawn was short-lived, however, though Vortan grunted his satisfaction as he watched the burning carcasses of a pair of stingwings spiral earthwards.

‘Slightly profligate, brother?’ Zaeus suggested upon Vortan’s return.

The Marine Malevolent grunted, almost a verbal shrug as he continued on the marked route that would take them back to Carfax and exfiltration.

Ar’gan was farther out and ran to catch up to the rest of the kill-team, who were already moving again.

‘How is he?’

Zaeus shook his head, trying to be surreptitious. He need not have bothered. Polino was putting one foot in front of the other, but his eyes were glazed, his expression slackening by the minute.

‘We need to get back to Carfax,’ the Salamander urged. He spoke through a comm-bead built into his gorget.

‘Aye,’ Zaeus agreed, taking up the chains wrapped around Festaron. The Brazen Minotaur’s eyes were fixed on the hulking ammo hopper attached to Vortan’s back. ‘But we won’t make it.’

‘What?’ Ar’gan turned swiftly. ‘Explain, Techmarine.’

‘Those flyers didn’t attack us for no reason,’ he said. ‘They were gauging our strength and our foot speed. Across this terrain,’ he gestured to the raging sand storm, ‘and in these conditions, we will be fortunate if we get halfway to Carfax before the herd catches us. And then...’ He paused to draw his hand across his throat in a cutting motion.

‘I didn’t mark you for a fatalist, Zaeus.’ There was some reproach in the Salamander’s tone that the Brazen Minotaur ignored.

‘I’m not. I’m a realist, as I thought you Nocturneans were supposed to be.’

Hooting cries, the bleating battle-cant of the hunters, followed them on the breeze.

‘Hear that?’ said Zaeus, ‘They are sending another vanguard to slow us down. It’ll be more flyers, but this time with support. This desert is theirs, Ar’gan. In it they are faster, cleverer and more deadly. Make no mistake, we are prey here and

our head start has almost been eroded.'

Ar'gan kept up the pace, just less than ten metres behind Vortan and in lockstep with Zaeus. He felt the urge to increase it but Polino was at the edge of his endurance already. He recalled what the Marine Malevolent had said about leaving the Imperial Fist, and dismissed the idea as unworthy.

'How can you know what they're planning, or did they teach you xenolexography on the red world too?'

'It's what any hunting pack would do,' Zaeus replied. 'Trammel us with lesser forces to give the horde time to arrive. Once they've encircled us, we will make a last stand and die before we've destroyed even half their number.'

Zaeus had stopped to manipulate a panel affixed to one of his armour's cuffs.

He called out, 'Vortan.'

The Marine Malevolent only half-turned, barely slowing his determined march in the direction of the Thunderhawk and extraction.

'What are you doing? We need to move! I'm not dying on this dust bowl world.'

A minuscule hololith projected from a node attached to the Brazen Minotaur's wrist. There was a small focusing dish appended to it. As he swept around his arm, the landscape was revealed in grainy green, undulating contours.

'I'm mapping the region, searching for weaknesses, a fissure, anything we can use.'

Ar'gan's expression remained concerned as his flicked from the injured Captain Polino to the storm belt now behind them. Somewhere in its depths, the herd were coming.

'Whatever it is you are planning, Zaeus, do it swiftly.'

'Madness. We need to move!' Vortan reasserted, having now come to a dead halt. 'If we march hard we can still reach Carfax and the gunship.'

'And what about our injured and dead?' It sounded more like a suggestion, even

coming from Ar'gan's lips. So conflicted was he that the Salamander could not bring himself to face Vortan.

The Marine Malevolent's solution was brutally simple. 'We leave them behind. Both.'

Though he was largely incoherent now, Polino caught enough of the conversation to weigh in himself. He nodded. 'I will make the sacrifice for the rest, and take a heavy toll of the alien filth.'

'Stoic to the end, captain,' said Zaeus, letting a little machine edge grate his voice, 'but you can barely lift your weapon.'

Polino tried, but his entire arm was shaking.

'And, besides,' Zaeus added, 'it wouldn't matter. We still wouldn't reach the gunship. We have a further problem.'

Vortan snarled. 'This Throne-forsaken mission has been fraught with them.'

'Such as?' asked Ar'gan, raising his eyebrow in inquiry.

Zaeus's eyes narrowed behind his retinal lenses as he found what he needed, but his answer had nothing to do with this discovery.

'I have heard nothing from Brother Carfax in over an hour. The Angel Vermillion is likely already dead.'

'Without the ship, so are we,' snapped Vortan. He stomped to where Ar'gan was watching the storm belt. 'So are we to wait here for the end then? Kill as many as we can?'

'You don't sound displeased with that scenario,' suggested the Salamander.

'I want to live, but if doomed then I will at least decide the manner of my destruction.'

Zaeus asked, 'How many charges do you have?'

'A pair of krak grenades and a melta bomb, why?' Ar'gan replied, turning to see

Zaeus aiming the focusing dish at a point in front of them. A fractured script beneath the hololith display read: 5.3 km.

‘All of you,’ Zaeus corrected, looking down at Polino. ‘Festaron too, someone check his wargear.’

Vortan did, offering up another krak grenade. ‘I have four incendiaries,’ he said of his own cache.

‘Two melta bombs,’ said Polino, still struggling.

‘And with mine that makes four, plus the krak grenades.’ Zaeus shut down the scanner.

More avian war-cries knifed the air, louder now as the herd slowly emerged from the storm.

‘You have a plan, Techmarine?’ asked Vortan.

‘I do.’ Zaeus pointed. ‘Ahead, about three kilometres, there is a tectonic imperfection. It’s little more than a crack in the desert basin at the moment but with the correct explosive encouragement, I think we can broaden it into a chasm. The fault line is long, easily wide enough to impede the entire herd.’

‘And what of the stingwings? A chasm will be no impediment to them,’ said Vortan.

‘I doubt they’ll attack without reinforcement, especially given what we did to them last time.’

The Marine Malevolent grunted in what could have been either derision or approval. ‘Which way?’ he asked, revealing the truth of his first response.

‘North.’

They went north.

Thunder erupted across the desert as a line of explosions obliterated the edge of the basin behind them, plunging it into a deep sinkhole many metres wide and many more across.

It was, as Zaeus had promised, a chasm.

‘All our grenades went into making that pretty hole,’ remarked Vortan bitterly.

Ar’gan ignored the Marine Malevolent, asking, ‘How long will it take them to navigate around it?’

‘An hour, maybe two if the Throne is merciful.’

Zaeus was transfixed, his eyes on the vast clouds of expelled earth spewing into the air in dirty white geysers of calcite.

‘And what mercy do you think the Throne has shown us so far?’ asked Vortan, the sneer half-formed on his face when Zaeus struck him.

The Marine Malevolent crumpled under the blow, like he’d just been charged down by a raging bull.

In many ways, he had.

‘A second blow will shatter your collarbone, and you won’t be able to lift that cannon of yours any more,’ snarled the Brazen Minotaur. ‘Don’t think because I am of the Omnissiah now that I forget my heritage. You have been shown mercy. If any of my brothers had been present here instead of me, you would be dead by now for your constant dissent.’

Retaliation crossed Vortan’s mind for a split second, Zaeus saw it in the near-perceptible tremor of his fingers, but the Marine Malevolent recognised the error in that and his conduct thus far, so relented.

‘We the Watchers, though divided in brotherhood, are as one in our calling,’ he said, uttering one of the many catechisms of the order.

Zaeus nodded.

‘Accord is preferable to conflict, is it not brother?’

Vortan slowly bowed his head.

‘Especially a conflict you would lose. Now,’ said Zaeus, ‘we make for the ship

and hope that Carfax yet lives.’

Brother Carfax was dead. Slumped over the command console, the glaxis of the gunship shattered by several dozen bullet holes, the Angel Vermillion had been trying to take off when the snipers ventilated him.

Vortan was in the cockpit and placed a gauntleted hand against the dead warrior’s brow, closing his eyes, which were still etched with futile anger.

‘No way for a warrior like Carfax to pass,’ muttered Ar’gan, solemn as the Marine Malevolent murmured a benediction.

‘Aye, he was a bloody bastard,’ Vortan agreed, lifting his eyes from the corpse. ‘Do you remember when he gutted that clade of psykers?’

Ar’gan smirked ferally, giving a glimpse of the fire in his heart, ‘The eldar barely had a moment to consult their skeins of fate before Carfax had weighed in with bolter and blade to cut them.’

Vortan laughed warmly at the memory, but Zaeus returning from his inspection curtailed his humour.

‘The gunship’s inoperable, but I can repair it,’ the Techmarine informed them. An icon was flashing on his vambrace.

Abruptly, the mood turned grim.

‘How far out is the herd?’ asked the Salamander.

‘Too close for me to repair the damage and for us to take off.’

‘And what is that on your arm?’ Vortan gestured to Zaeus’s vambrace.

‘Carfax engaged the gunship’s distress beacon before he died.’ When the Techmarine’s eyes met the gaze of the others, they were bright and shining behind his retinal lenses. ‘It has picked up a signal.’

...the Emperor’s name, here all true servants of the Throne will find sanctuary. In the Emperor’s name, here all true servants of the Throne will find sanctuary. In the Emp—

Zaeus killed the feed.

‘There are coordinates, and from what I could discern when I interfaced with the ship’s long range augurs, they lead to a stronghold.’

Ar’gan had been crouched listening to the looped message, but now he sat up.

‘A bastion? Reinforcements?’

‘At the very least a way off this rock and back to the Watch.’

The two of them were sitting in the ship’s hold. Festaron was laid out in front of them, hands folded across his chest in the sign of the aquila. Polino was resting against a bulkhead, his eyes fluttering. In the dull lambency of the internal lighting, the captain’s skin looked sallow and waxy. He gave no indication he had heard either of them.

Ar’gan remained sceptical. ‘There was nothing in the mission brief that mentioned an Adeptus Astartes garrison on this world.’

‘Perhaps it wasn’t relevant. Perhaps it had simply been forgotten. Either way, we must investigate.’

After a moment’s thought, Ar’gan nodded.

Vortan was outside, keeping watch through the scopes from a vantage on top of the fuselage.

Three hard raps against the hull was the signal that he had seen something.

Wordlessly, Zaeus and Ar’gan went outside.

The Marine Malevolent handed the magnoculars to Zaeus who augmented the view with his bionic eye.

‘It’s them, isn’t it,’ said Vortan.

‘Yes,’ Zaeus confirmed, checking the internal chrono on his lens display. ‘Less than an hour. Mercy wasn’t on our side after all.’

‘I want to kill them,’ the Marine Malevolent declared.

Ar'gan was casting around the ship. Carfax had set it down in a narrow defile, high cliffs on either side that were tough to reach from the ground. It was a good extraction point: hidden, defensible with only two bottlenecks at either end of the valley as realistic points of ingress.

'Zaeus has found a bastion, potential reinforcement,' announced the Salamander. He was still appraising their surroundings when he added, 'We could hold here. Maintain a defensive perimeter until your return.' He looked at the Brazen Minotaur, who looked back impassively through his retinal lenses.

'Three of these turrets are still functional,' Vortan weighed in. 'I can liberate the cannons, set them up behind a makeshift emplacement with the cargo from the hold.' He thumbed towards Ar'gan. 'Salamander takes one, I the other. Both ends of the valley covered. A pity you used all our grenades,' he added wryly. 'We could have mined them too.'

'And Captain Polino?' Zaeus asked.

Now the Marine Malevolent gave a short, snorted laugh. 'He takes the third gun, squeezes the trigger until the moment his fingers give out. He's close to suspended animation coma as it is, but at least this way his contribution might count for something.'

'Agreed,' said Zaeus, giving the scopes to Ar'gan so the Salamander could take a look at the opposition.

'How far's the bastion?' he asked, tweaking the focus. 'Or should I ask how long do we need to hold them for?'

'Taking into account the return journey, one hundred and thirty-seven minutes. But the ident-marker on that message was Adeptus Astartes in origin, so reinforcement will be substantial and battle-winning.'

Vortan clapped Zaeus on the shoulder. 'Then bring back angels on wings of screaming death for our salvation, brother.'

'You always were the poet,' said Ar'gan.

The Marine Malevolent corrected him, 'You're mistaking poet for zealot, Salamander.'

Whilst his brothers made ready the defences outside, Zaeus was left alone to explore the hold. Captain Polino was in there too, but inert. Eyes closed, his skin the colour of wax, he might well have been dead. Only the slight murmur of his neck as he breathed fitfully betrayed the ruse.

‘Rest easy, brother,’ said Zaeus, lifting a hand from the Imperial Fist’s shoulder as he went deeper into the hold. It was dark, most of the internal lume-strips shorted out or simply destroyed in the attack that claimed Carfax’s life. If the ambushers were still around they had yet to announce their presence, but Zaeus suspected not. Some of the gunship’s contents had been stripped, only that which could easily be carried and reappropriated. It was why the heavy cannon still remained.

Zaeus mouthed a silent prayer of binaric to the Omnissiah that something else had proven too cumbersome for the xenos scavengers and smiled when he saw the cargo crate at the very back of the hold, still unopened.

A luminator attached to his battle-helm snapped on, revealing a dusty access panel. There were no runes upon it in which to punch a code. Instead there was a simple vox-corder. A blurt of binaric from the Brazen Minotaur’s mouth grille turned the red lume on the panel to green. Escaping pressure hissed into the cabin and the door to the cargo crate, which was easily as tall again as the Techmarine, opened.

Within, Zaeus found what he sought and quickly set to work.

The low, angry squeal of a rotating belt-track interrupted the defence preparations around the gunship.

Ar’gan looked up from fitting a drum mag into one of the cannons he’d liberated from the Thunderhawk’s wing. Vortan was stripping sections of the gunship’s ablative armour to form makeshift barricades behind which the Salamander would set up the guns.

‘In the name of the Throne...’ said Vortan, setting down a chunk of scrap he’d been hammering into shape.

Ar’gan simply stared.

‘What did you do?’

‘Removed the torso and organics,’ Zaeus told them. ‘It’s crude but will provide much greater land speed across the desert.’ He was squatting on the hard metal frame of a track bed, two wide slatted belts of vulcanised rubber grinding either side, providing locomotion. The Techmarine’s haptic implants were connected to the simple motor engine that had once been slaved to the cyborganic body of a servitor. Through them, he controlled the vehicle’s speed and directionality.

It had taken him approximately four minutes to affect the modification, engage the machine-spirit and drive from the gunship’s hold.

‘I have a revised estimate for my return,’ said Zaeus. ‘Eighty-eight minutes. Think you can last that long?’ he asked.

‘Be on your way, brother,’ said Ar’gan.

Vortan finished for the Salamander. ‘The chrono’s already running.’

Another xenos coming over the ridge line exploded, and Vortan revelled in the destructive fury of the gunship’s weapons.

‘Yes! Come and taste the wrath!’ he bellowed, stitching a line across the narrow aperture into the defile. With a jerk and a grunt, he aimed the cannon upwards to strafe the dwindling swarm of stingwings attempting to attack from above. ‘Watch the skies,’ he warned his comrades through the comm-feed.

Ar’gan nodded, but had his own problems. His autocannon’s drum mag was empty but locked. He couldn’t free it to slam home another. Polino’s support fire was desultory but no better than that. The captain skirted oblivion now and couldn’t be relied upon to hold down a trigger, let alone cover one side of the ravine.

Creatures were spilling into the gorge, a mutant soup of alien limbs, chitinous appendages and snapping mandible claws. They were krootis aviana but they were also something else, something altogether more abhorrent.

Aspects that were distinctly avian persisted about the kroot, their long sloping beaks and spine quills protruding from the backs of their heads. Long limbed, they had sharp claws and hooves, capable of impressive foot speed with the ability to wield semi-complex weapons. Natural armour was not one of the kroot’s usual traits but these creatures wore a sheath of chitin over their bodies

that provided some protection. Others had additional limbs that ended in scything talons. Some were malformed facially, possessing glands not unlike gills through which they could project flesh barbs or trailing hooks.

Despite their evolutionary advantages, an autocannon could render them down into bio-matter easily enough, but only if it could actually fire.

Ar'gan railed at his misfortune, eager to cut them and trying to resist the urge to draw blades and do just that. He was adept at close combat, more so than any of his kill-team brothers. In one sheath he carried a Nocturnean drake-sabre, fashioned from sa'hrk teeth honed to a monomolecular edge, and in the other a Kravian fire-axe. The heavy bladed weapon was a rare specimen of the Kravian machine-cult, a faction of xeno-artificers with obscure ties to the jakaero. A third blade, his back-up or culling knife, was strapped to his thigh.

Against a horde of fifty something kroot-hybrids, its use had limits.

In the end, it was his boot not his blades that prevailed as a swift kick dislodged the drum. Though quick to slam in a replacement, Ar'gan was already overrun.

The creatures had advanced almost to the edge of the gunship's perimeter and the Salamander engaged the cannon's fully automatic fire mode, yanking back the alternator slide and lighting up the muzzle with a roar of star fire.

Swathes of the kroot died, malformed carapace yielding to the aggressive fury of the high-calibre shells. Organs were pulped, limbs ripped off and bodies transformed into visceral mist. A clutch made it through the barrage, wounded but determined. Ar'gan wedged the trigger down and leapt over the barricade. He took a solid slug to the left shoulder; it scored his guard but left no lasting damage. A second hit mashed against his breastplate, blunted by adamantium. The kroot sniper lined up a third but Ar'gan's combat-knife had left its sheath and was lodged in the creature's throat. It bleated once before crumpling into a wretched heap of quivering mandibles.

The autocannon was still eating through its explosive payload when Ar'gan blocked the claw swipe of a second assailant, seizing its wrist and throwing it into the fusillade. Ululating screaming told the Salamander the threat was neutralised. A third and fourth he killed with two strikes, one an elbow smash to the thorax, the second a pile-driving follow up with his clenched fist that broke the fifth creature's clavicle and went on going into its ribcage. When Ar'gan

withdrew his forearm it was steaming with gore and intestinal acids.

Only when the fifth kept coming did the Salamander draw the drake-sabre. It flensed flesh and bone in an eye blink, leaving two halves of a kroot bifurcated along its breastbone. A rapid lunge, like an assassin would use with a punch-dagger but which Ar'gan employed with a full blade, speared another through the heart. The last he decapitated, just as the autocannon was rattling close to empty, having shred the ravine opening to rubble and corpses.

The alien head was still falling as he turned, looking for further prey, his other hand hovering near the hilt of his fire-axe. It remained undrawn – the kroot were slain, but Polino was down.

Ar'gan was already running to the captain when he cried out, 'Vortan!'

The Marine Malevolent was finishing off some dregs with snapshots from his bolter. He was an excellent marksman. Vortan looked up, breathless but exultant from the carnage he had wrought, but rushed over to Polino.

A ragged line of flesh barbs was lodged in the Imperial Fist's upper chest and neck. Fortunately, his armour had borne the brunt of the attack and the cuts weren't deep, but they were envenomed. Polino was fading, descending into full cardiac shock.

'Keep a watch,' Vortan snapped at the Salamander, working at the Imperial Fist's armour clasps so he could remove the front half of his cuirass.

Ar'gan nodded, his gaze returning constantly to the stricken captain, trying to fight off the guilt threatening to impair his ability to follow orders. Mercifully, both sides of the ravine were clear and swamped with settling white dust.

'It was my fault,' he said, surrendering to dismay. 'The drum was jammed. I took too long to—'

'Forget that!' snapped the Marine Malevolent, wrenching off a chunk of Polino's battle-plate and noisily casting it aside. 'Are we still under attack or not?'

'No,' Ar'gan regained his composure, 'the gorge is clear for now.'

'They'll be back.' Vortan stepped back to regard the mess of Polino's bodyglove

beneath his armour. It was bloody and it stank like a gretchin had just taken a shit in his breastplate. 'I knew we should have left him.'

Ar'gan scowled, not at the stench but at the wound. 'Putrefaction. It must have been like this for a while. There's a narthecium in the hold,' he said, meeting Vortan's gaze.

'Get it. Quickly.'

Ar'gan returned a few seconds later with a small medical kit. It was rudimentary with gauze, unguents, oils and a small set of tools. It wasn't exactly apothecarion standards but it was still a useable field kit. Vortan had some experience as a field medic and rummaged through the few phials and philtres, ampules and other medicines.

They had resisted its usage until that point, not knowing when it would be most needed. That time had arrived.

'Excise those flesh barbs,' Vortan barked, taking a tube of briny-looking liquid.

Ar'gan had left his shorter combat-blade in the kroot sniper's neck, so took a scalpel from the kit instead and began removing the barbs.

'These things...' he swore, slicing the skin around the wounds carefully so as not to aggravate more of the poison and further envenom it. 'Abominations.'

Vortan's reply was curt, 'All xenos are abominations, fit for extermination and nothing else.' He licked his finger, tasting a droplet of the liquid in the tube before spitting it out with a grimace. 'Should bring him around.' The Marine Malevolent waved the Salamander back, who was done with his improvised surgery anyway.

Vortan had fitted a syringe to the tube and was squeezing out any air bubbles when he said, 'This needs to go into his primary heart. Immediately.'

Polino looked weak, murmuring incoherently, a pained expression gripping his face.

Using a clean scalpel, Ar'gan cut away the section of bodyglove over the Imperial Fist's primary heart to reveal skin. It looked pale and unhealthy.

‘How will you pierce the bone?’ asked the Salamander, glancing sidelong at either entrance to the ravine. Mercifully, a second wave wasn’t coming. Not yet.

‘With as much brute force as I can muster.’ Vortan rammed the syringe, two-handed, into Polino’s chest and depressed the trigger.

Enhanced adrenaline surged into the captain’s arteries, flooding his heart with the equivalent of a chemical electro-shock. It was dangerous, especially for someone in the captain’s condition. But they were desperate. Polino’s eyes snapped open like shutters and he roared, smashing Vortan off his feet with a backhand and kicking Ar’gan in the chest, doubling the Salamander over. Bolt upright, he jerked to standing position and then sagged, breathing heavily.

‘Sword of Dorn,’ he gasped, spitting blood. ‘What did you do to me?’ He looked up at Vortan, who was only just now rising, eyes wild.

‘I got you back in the fight, sir,’ he growled, removing his battered helmet. Polino had dented it and cracked one of the retinal lenses with his punch.

The Imperial Fist looked around.

‘Where is Zaeus?’

‘Off fetching reinforcements.’ Ar’gan grimaced, clutching his bruised chest. Straightening up, he glared at the spent autocannon. Smoke was rising from the ammo feed where it had overheated. Part of the metal was fused and had seized the mechanism.

‘It’s scrap,’ he said, cursing inwardly, ‘be more use as a club now.’

‘Do we have any other weapons?’ asked Polino, trying to get a handle on the tactical situation. Despite his enhanced strategic acumen, he was having trouble focusing.

Vortan spread his arms to encompass the gunship and the makeshift defences.

‘This is it. Everything you see.’

Ar’gan looked down at the chrono readout in his vambrace.

‘How long?’ asked Vortan.

‘Eighteen minutes.’

They had lasted only eighteen minutes so far, and already they were down one autocannon and Polino was unlikely to last the duration of the next engagement.

‘And the estimated arrival of Zaeus with our reinforcements?’ asked Polino.

Shadows were gathering at the edges of the ravine again, heralded by the tell-tale cries of the kroot. A deeper strain joined the shrilling chorus this time, as something larger at the periphery of the kill-team’s defences lumbered into view.

Vortan was already on his way back to the autocannon, ‘Not soon enough.’

At the edge of the crash site, the kroot had been waiting for him. Zaeus had barely left the ravine when the creatures attacked. He killed them quickly, using up the last of his kraken and hellfire rounds to leave a mess of destroyed carcasses in his wake. The ambush was predictable, Zaeus reasoning that the kroot would have drawn a loose perimeter around the gunship and were using it to bait a trap. It was one the kill-team had gladly fallen into. If nothing else, the Thunderhawk was the only defensible position in the desert and their only means of exfiltration, but only if Zaeus could repair the damage done to the gunship, and then only if they could defeat the horde pursuing them to enable the Techmarine to do it. Kilometres clicked by in the Brazen Minotaur’s retinal lens display, as did data describing fault lines, contours, temperature fluctuations and calcite density in the air. Beyond the ravine where he had left his brothers, the storm had not fully abated. It carved shallow grooves into his armour and wore at his Deathwatch black.

He remembered the day he had repurposed it, painted over the colours of his Chapter and taken the sacred oaths of moment of the xenos hunters. Back then, he had barely known the other warriors in his kill-team.

Carfax, so full of choler, his blood always up, had seemed ill-suited as a pilot; the quiet depths of Ar’gan hid a deadly bladesman; Vortan, the bitter and moribund priest, who cradled a heavy bolter like a favoured pet; Polino, the Fist, was as rigid as any son of Dorn but a strong captain; but Festaron, gifted as a field medic, was more open than any Star Phantom Zaeus had known or heard of. Their cultures and ways of war were strange, even anathema to the son of

Tauron at first. Giving up the black lion pelt had been hard during that time, but the bond with his new-found brothers made it a worthy sacrifice. Respect and synchronicity had grown between them, and their differences became as boons that strengthened and united rather than weakened the group.

Now they were one, but they were dying and Zaeus raged at the fates that had brought them to this mortal place. He could not fail them.

A chrono counted down in his other retinal lens. It was over twenty-six minutes old already, the harsh terrain adding precious minutes to his arrival at the bastion or whatever was broadcasting the signal. It looped in his helmet vox, repeating the same message over and over. Recently, it had become a taunt rather than a promise of reinforcement.

Zaeus fed more power into the half-track, ignoring the whine of its sand-clogged engine as he pushed the servitor unit to its limit.

‘Emperor, make me swift...’

Slowly a bulky structure began to resolve through the storm. Cycling through the optical spectra of his bionic eye, Zaeus discovered it was indeed a fastness, isolated but ironbound with thick buttresses and high, sloping walls.

He resisted the natural urge to charge straight at it, demand audience and bring back warriors to help save his beleaguered brothers.

Common sense tempered his Tauron desires and he eased his speed.

The bastion was dark green, much of its militaristic stencilling eroded by the desert, so he could only guess at its provenance. There was no mistaking the Adeptus Astartes ident-code of the signal. Zaeus switched to a corresponding frequency and spat a blurt of simple binaric that even the most rudimentary codifier could interpret.

I am an ally in need of aid. Cycle down your defences.

The half-track growled the last few kilometres to the installation, slowing as Zaeus approached the shadow of its defence towers.

No answer came from his hails, but the tell-tale muzzles of heavy bolters jutting

from lofty firing slits looked threatening. The gun nests sat in a pair of watchtowers that flanked an open gate. A quick biometric analysis suggested they were unmanned but could be auto-slaved.

Zaeus decided on the direct approach.

‘Archeval Zaeus, of the Emperor’s Adeptus Astartes,’ he declared, letting the engine idle. If there was a data-corder or pict-feeder located in the gate somewhere it would have logged his presence.

Silence.

Time lapsed so loudly Zaeus could almost hear the seconds ticking over on the chrono in his retinal lens. The lion within him stirred, demanding action.

Zaeus looked through the gate but could find no evidence of habitation. The cannons were still, not even auto-tracking.

He snorted, a deep nasal exhalation that speckled the inside of his battle-helm with sputum. Caution was not a trait his Chapter held in much regard. He risked approaching the entryway. Like the walls it was thickly armoured, but gaped wide enough to fit the half-track. Easing down further on the speed to preserve the engine for the return journey, Zaeus passed through but met no resistance.

He met no signs of life or occupation at all.

Stretched in front of him was a large square plaza delineated by what he assumed were barracks or stores. Zaeus examined the signal data again and determined it was emanating from a large blocky structure at the end of the plaza.

Flurries of calcite were drifting across the ground, scuffing the Brazen Minotaur’s boots after he had ditched the half-track at the gate to rest its protesting mechanics. He crossed the square of metal plates quickly, trying to banish the itch that the back of his head was in crosshairs, but reached the blocky structure without incident.

Up close, he realised it was some kind of workshop or forge. Perhaps the Chapter here had a Techmarine as part of its garrison. Zaeus prayed to the Omnissiah he was right. It would make repairing the gunship much easier if

there were a second pair of mechadendrites devoted to the task.

A heavy door barred access but a simple chain and pulley would open it. Taking the partially corroded links in both hands, Zaeus grunted and heaved. After some initial resistance the chain spilled through his fingers, but the gate was obviously broken and only slid aside halfway to partially reveal the darkness of the workshop within.

He muttered, 'No time for this.' Taking a back step, Zaeus barged the gate using his head and shoulder like a battering ram. It crumpled inwards with a squeal of wrenched metal, and he snarled at his achievement, some of the old Tauron warrior emerging through his Martian conditioning. He could have torn it off its hinges with his servo-arm but old habits were tough to break, and he was feeling pugnacious.

Zaeus ventured into the darkness, his hand on the grip of his bolter.

'Hail, brothers.'

The machine growl of his voice echoed back at him.

In such a large installation, it was possible the warriors who had sent the message were deeper in its confines. It was also possible that a single Space Marine acted as its garrison as warden. Such postings were not uncommon. Perhaps their alarms were malfunctioning too, as the Brazen Minotaur's violent entry would certainly have tripped more than one warning klaxon. He penetrated further, but still nothing. From the condition of the ragged machines in the workshop it certainly appeared as if the bastion had suffered from several years of neglect. He found a heavy switch and threw it, igniting a bank of flickering halogen strips above, but the dim light revealed little else but more mechanised decrepitude.

Zaeus's bionic eye added little to that analysis. There were no heat traces, biological or otherwise, but he did detect the hidden Icon Mechanicus inlaid into the back wall. It was only revealed through specific data-interrogation, the likes of which only an adept of the Mechanicus could perform. Whoever had hidden this chamber did not want it found by a casual inspection.

A glance at his bolter confirmed his low ammo count. Zaeus mentally shrugged – hand-to-hand would do just as well if it came to that. Already, he could feel his

enhanced physiology priming him for the eventuality of close combat, fuelling his body, heightening his senses and reactions, incrementally increasing his strength and adrenaline levels with every step. For now, Zaeus kept himself in check. Closer inspection of the Icon Mechanicus suggested it might occlude a second gate leading further into the compound.

A quick glance at the chrono showed almost forty-eight minutes had elapsed. Over half his time had passed. He needed to move faster.

A patina of age and a veil of gossamer thin cobwebs enshrouded ranks and ranks of ancient welders, rivet-punchers, machine lathes and furnaces. As he walked through the graveyard of extinct machines a theory formed. Much of the desert was overrun by the kroot-hybrids. Whilst the high walls of the bastion would keep most casual predators at bay, they might not be proof against a hardier, more adaptive strain of xenos. From his research of the kroot carnivore, Zaeus knew they were a race that had the ability to absorb the traits and characteristics of creatures through ingestion of biological matter. He balked at what species of xenos would evolve through a fusion of kroot and tyrannid. So far, the kill-team had seen little of its potential but perhaps in the deeper desert the old garrison of the bastion knew more of such horrors.

Regardless of any possible danger, it was too late now to do anything other than press on. Zaeus had reached the concealed gate and shone a beam of binaric-filled decoding light onto the Icon Mechanicus. It responded instantly, illuminating, the light spreading to a data wire that ran up to the top of the gate describing a hexagonal portal limned in magnesium white.

Gears and motors, extant servos and half-forgotten engines grumbled into life from somewhere below. Zaeus felt the great machine beneath kilometres of rockcrete stirring like a leviathan awakened in an ocean trench. The gate cracked, split into four, each fissure running to a nodal point in the exact centre of the Icon Mechanicus. Monolithic in sheer size, the portal dwarfed Zaeus and he had to crane his neck just to see how far up it would open.

A vast hangar was revealed beyond the gate, immense and echoing. Dust motes thronged the air, which was musty and dryer than the desert. Zaeus's helmet sensorium detected mould spores and the activity of dormant insect life disturbed by his sudden entrance.

But there was no life beyond that; and no death either. He had feared there would be bodies, the empty carcasses of slain battle-brothers and the genetic soup of dead xeno-forms. Neither greeted him, but something else did, something he did not expect.

And as the gloom within was lit up like a firmament of a thousand crimson stars, Zaeus raised his bolter.

He'd been wrong, so wrong about everything. The kroot-hybrids had not come here. Something else had happened to the bastion. Possibly, something even worse...

'Ommissiah,' he breathed, taking up a firing stance.

The gorge was almost overrun. For over an hour and a half they had held the line with just the weapons salvaged from the gunship and inhuman determination. But after ninety-seven minutes of near relentless assault, ammunition was low and hope with it. Only wrath remained and the fervent desire to sell their lives at the cost of their enemies'.

For Vortan, the price could not be high enough.

He roared, a righteous expression of anger and defiance that merged with the ballistic shout of the cannon punching solid shot into the kroot beast's torso. The Marine Malevolent could hardly miss such a gargantuan creature. Slab-snouted, with two bulky forelimbs that were more simian than avian, it was broad-backed with much shorter rear legs and loped towards Vortan in the manner of an ape. Underneath its ribbed torso were paired rending claws, jutting forwards like tusks.

It snorted and snarled, its chitinous body wracked by cannon-fire, then bleated as Vortan found more tender flesh.

'Hate is the surest weapon!' the Marine Malevolent raged, chanting his Chapter's battle-cry as zealous indignation washed over him. 'Suffer not the alien to live!'

The beast was slowing. Blood oozed from its nostrils, foaming with its heavy breath. But it wasn't done, not even close. A half glance at Polino during the barrage revealed the Imperial Fist was in worse shape. He sagged at the gun emplacement, the adrenaline fuelling his system almost spent, his finger locked

against the trigger through sheer force of will. He strafed the gorge but his fire was only seventy per cent effective.

‘Keep them off me,’ Vortan spat down the comm-feed.

A horde of the lesser kroot were scurrying through the narrow aperture of the gorge, abandoning rifles in favour of the deadly gifts granted them through their hybridisation with the tyranid. A swarm of champing tooth and claw was descending on the survivors of the kill-team and only Captain Polino could stop it.

The Imperial Fist barely nodded.

‘By Dorn’s blood...’ It came out as a rasp, strained by fatigue.

‘I’ll kill them all if I have to,’ Vortan snarled through clenched teeth, putting a three-round burst through the kroot beast’s skull. It grunted once, spitting up more blood and acid-bile, before slewing to a halt. Momentum carried it forwards, its bulk carving a deep furrow in the calcite.

Polino was down. Hoping to share in his triumph, Vortan only saw the Imperial Fist’s gauntleted fingers slipping off the gun before he disappeared behind the barricade. He opened up the feed to Ar’gan.

They needed to retrench, head back towards the gunship and try to mount some kind of defence. Hold and repel. Victory through attrition – that was the Salamander way.

‘Vulkan’s fire beats in my breast.’ Ar’gan uttered the mantra known and honoured by every fire-born son of Nocturne. With his death so imminent he found comfort in this small act of remembrance.

‘Ar’gan.’

The comm-feed crackled in his ear. He didn’t risk a glance behind; his side of the gorge was filling up with xenos. Staccato bursts of heavy bolter-fire had turned into an unceasing salvo that would eventually reach its terminus. Ar’gan smiled. When that happened, he would turn to his blades.

For now, he squatted on the gunship’s nose cone. He’d stripped off much of the

armoured fuselage to gain access to the prow-mounted heavy bolter. The weapon was underslung, half-buried in the dirt but made for a good makeshift deterrent to ward off the attackers. As he fired, it spat out clods of calcite and mass-reactives. He kept up the punishment.

‘Ar’gan.’ The comm-feed sounded insistent.

‘Speak.’

There was a short pause. Behind him, Ar’gan knew the Marine Malevolent was as hard pressed as he was.

‘Polino’s not getting back up.’

Something large and hulking bullied its way through a crowd of lesser creatures. Kroot were crushed to paste and broken limbs. It didn’t seem to concern the beast.

It was a little way off, tough to discern through the drifts and the swell of alien bodies. But definitely monstrous. It filled the end of the gorge, spined shoulders scraping rock, the suggestion of a tail lashing in irritation behind it... a beak, eye clusters hooded by sheaths of nictitating chitin. Ar’gan absorbed the details, his brain analysing them for potential weaknesses even as he listened to the chug-chank of the cannon and heard the tell-tale hollow report of a rapidly diminishing ammo supply.

Vortan was speaking again. It sounded like he was moving.

‘We need to retreat.’

‘Where?’

‘The gunship. We get inside, defend it.’

‘We’d be besieged.’ Though the Salamander acknowledged he’d considered the same tactic.

A spray of shells cut down a cluster of kroot that had approached the twenty metre mark. Nothing breaches that line.

That rule was about to be broken. The fire-axe practically hummed in its scabbard.

Soon... It was like talking to an old friend.

‘Have you not noticed, Salamander,’ said Vortan, with an edge of irritation, ‘we already are.’

Ar’gan could not disagree. He tried to see beyond the horde, for evidence of Zaeus’s coming.

Vortan read his thoughts. ‘The Techmarine’s dead. We’re on our own.’

‘Meet you inside,’ Ar’gan replied as the underslung mount ran dry.

‘Where are you going?’

He was already up, leaping off the nose cone, twisting the fire-axe out of its scabbard.

‘To kill something.’

The beast was struggling through the neck of the gorge. Everything around it was dead or dying. A landslide would make a poorer bung. A pity they had used up their grenades or he would’ve already collapsed the rock face to achieve just that.

Instead, he had a beast, some fusion of one monster with another to create a fresh abomination more terrible than both.

Ar’gan was running at it. The fire-axe came alive in his hand, bright as sun-flare.

Eight pairs of milk-white sclera alighted on the Salamander. Nasal pits opened in the monster’s neck, drinking in his scent but not finding prey.

You are the hunted, Ar’gan told it, his mind cast back to gutting sa’hrk on the Scorian Plain when he was just a boy, when he was mortal.

He had transformed, just as this beast had. The strength of the evolution of both was about to be tested in a bloody survival of the fittest.

Recognising a threat, the monster opened its maw and a barbed proboscis lashed out like a whip. It caught Ar'gan's shoulder, piercing the armour and sending a jolt of pain that his advanced nervous system rerouted so he felt it as a pinch, a slow spread of numbness through his upper arm.

He whirled the fire-axe, severing the monster's proboscis tongue. Left it flopping like a drowning fish in his wake. Ar'gan rolled, ducking under a thick flesh hook that would have impaled him like a sauroch on a Themian's spear. He came up with an arc of fire clenched in his fist. It seared the monster's beak, which snapped like a bird's at the Salamander. Snarling, Ar'gan dug his blade into its snout. It jerked spasmodically, hurt, and wrenched the weapon from his grasp. In a nanosecond, he'd drawn the sa'hrk knife and proceeded to stab it into the creature's neck and face. Acid-bile ruined the blade but Ar'gan kept going, knowing that sometimes frenzy was as valid as any finessed sword tactic.

The monster thrashed against the gorge, squirming and fighting. It managed to angle a shoulder in Ar'gan's direction and released a cluster of dagger-thick spines. Three lodged in the Salamander's vambrace but one struck his chest, went through battle-plate, the epidermis of his bodyglove and scraped into flesh. He was wracked by convulsion, enhanced biology struggling to retard the sudden rush of poison.

Fingertips brushed the hilt of the fire-axe as it came back within reach. Ar'gan lurched forwards and took it, ripping the blade free and swinging it two-handed against the monster's neck. The head came off at an awkward angle, spilling gore and bile all over him. Kroot were crawling to get over the corpse. One had crested its back, clinging on despite the monster's last shuddering motions.

Ar'gan disengaged. Poison was turning his limbs to lead, stealing away his vitality and endurance, replacing it with agony. He took it. He was a son of Vulkan, fire-born. It would take more than alien venom to stop him.

The edges of the gunship looked blurred as he turned. He could no longer run. It was a half-limp, half-stagger.

Shrieking, avian noises behind him told Ar'gan he needed to be faster.

'Vortan.' His voice did not sound like his own as opened up the feed. A few minutes and his organs would counteract the poison, dilute it, neutralise it. He didn't have one minute. 'Vortan...' They were almost upon him. Engaging them

was suicide. His Lyman's implant picked out eight distinct tonal arrangements. And that was just the first wave.

The feed crackled in his ear.

'Get down!'

Three metres from the gunship, Ar'gan hit the dirt.

Overhead, the air was lit by muzzle fire.

Through a haze of slowly fading poison, Ar'gan saw the Marine Malevolent braced on the roof of the gunship. He carried an autocannon, one hand on the grip at the top of the stock, holding it like a scythe; the other on its trigger. He dampened the recoil by jamming the butt into his stomach. His armour's servos did the rest, steadying his aim.

Eight kroot vanished in the metal storm.

Ar'gan was dragging himself up to his knees, thumbing the release clamp off a grenade from his weapons belt. He rolled it behind him, hard so it would travel, then pitched into the gunship.

A few seconds later, Vortan swung in beside him. The autocannon was gone, empty and discarded on the roof. He had Polino's bolter instead.

The captain was lying in the hold along with Festaron. Both were of equal use now.

'Holding out on us, brother?' he asked as the tangle-web grenade exploded behind Ar'gan, filling a five-metre wide area with deadly razor-wire.

'Only for emergency,' the Salamander replied. 'I didn't think it was worth wasting on collapsing that chasm.'

Vortan laughed. It sounded like metal scraping metal.

'Got one of those for me?' Ar'gan pointed to the bolter. Sensation was returning, his body's advanced immune systems finally counteracting the poison.

The Marine Malevolent shook his head. 'Only half a clip, anyway. Not enough to kill all of them.'

'Fortune I kept hold of this then.' Ar'gan brandished the fire-axe.

'You'll have to tell me one day how you came upon that brutal weapon.'

Outside, the horde had recovered from their bleeding and was advancing. High pitched war-cries echoed from several directions, colliding in a deafening welter of noise that told the Space Marines they were surrounded.

'One day.'

Ar'gan glanced at the various points of ingress around the gunship.

'The hold has only three access points,' he observed.

'I can probably watch the roof and left side,' said Vortan, racking the bolter's slide.

'Then the right side is mine.' Ar'gan swung the fire-axe in a languid arc to relieve some of the stiffness in his shoulder from the proboscis wound. 'Bet you're wishing we'd have left the others now, eh?'

'No,' said Vortan. 'I like it better that we'll all die together.' He smiled. It was like a dagger slit across his mouth. 'Seems some of your compassion is rubbing off on me.'

Ar'gan met the Marine Malevolent's gaze across the length of the hold. 'I doubt that. Any last words, brother? A benediction perhaps, before we go before the Throne?'

Vortan tapped the bolter's stock, 'This,' he said, then nodding to the Salamander's fire-axe, 'and that are the only words we need now. Kill as many as you can.'

'Would you like to wager on the outcome?' Ar'gan asked.

More grating laughter from the Marine Malevolent cut through the cacophony from the kroot. 'Bolter versus blade? Very well.'

‘Good hunting,’ said Ar’gan.

Vortan didn’t respond, and went to guard the left side of the fuselage.

Embracing the sheer fatality of it all, Ar’gan turned his back on him and took up a ready stance on the right. Through the side hatch a torrent of aliens were swarming towards the stricken gunship.

The chrono on his vambrace was broken, damaged by the spine attack. It stood frozen but flickering, close to two hours.

‘Zaeus,’ the Salamander said to the air. ‘I hope you died well.’

Thunder filled the gorge. It echoed off the walls, rebounded and amplified by the natural close confines. Lightning followed, rippling in flashes along the high, rocky flanks right at the summit.

It wasn’t a storm, at least not any natural one. It was fire and it was fury, wrath distilled into an unremitting barrage that tore into the alien horde and savaged it. Missile strikes provided a different tone to the war chorus, dense fooms of exhalation ending in a crescendo of earth-trembling impacts and flame.

Kroot bodies were thrown into the air like leaves.

The larger beasts mewled like cattle as their bodies were ripped apart by incendiaries.

‘Vortan...’ Ar’gan said down the feed.

‘I see it! It’s on this side of the gorge too.’

A broad smile split the Salamander’s lips apart. ‘Zaeus isn’t dead.’

‘If he is, I salute his undead corpse.’

Gunfire rained down from either side of the gorge, angling into a kill box where the kroot were advancing. Ar’gan noticed it wasn’t accurate. As the xenos died they began to disperse, gaps appeared in their ranks that the massed fire from above failed to adapt to. Space Marines would not be so profligate.

Straining, Ar'gan tried to ascertain the nature of their saviours, but all he caught were snatches of silhouettes through split-second breaks in the continuous muzzle flare.

The kroot brayed and hooted at their unseen attackers. It took less than three minutes for their resolve to fail. Howling, they fled the gorge, spilling out in a tide in both directions.

They still numbered in the hundreds but the herd was spooked and sought the safety of the desert where the harsh flashes couldn't sting them further.

Slowly, the muzzle flashes faded one by one. Ar'gan detected the harsh clank of weapons on empty, the impotent clack of vented rocket tubes. Their saviours hadn't stopped firing because the enemy was dead or running; they'd stopped because there was nothing left for them to fire.

'What is this?' Ar'gan stepped out from the confines of the gunship.

There was a morass of sundered alien corpses outside.

Vortan joined him from the other side.

'I approve of the massacre, but what just happened?'

The Salamander shook his head. Craning his neck he saw a figure appear at the summit of one of the high walls of the gorge.

Zaeus gave a clipped salute.

'Thought you were dead,' said Vortan through the feed, having followed Ar'gan's gaze.

'You sound disappointed,' the Brazen Minotaur replied.

'Where are the rest of our brothers? Why don't they show themselves?' asked Ar'gan.

Zaeus stepped back from the edge as he manipulated something on his gauntlet the Salamander couldn't see. 'Because they are not exactly our brothers.'

After a few seconds the grind of machine servos resonated throughout the now silent gorge as a host of pallid faces emerged from the shadows.

Most were on tracks, but some stomped forwards on piston-like legs or tottered on reverse-jointed stilts. Others still were not like men at all, but merely automated weapon platforms slaved to the Techmarine's will. They were servitors, dozens of them, armed with stubbers and autolaunchers, heavy bolters and shot cannons. Zaeus had found his reinforcements; he had recruited an entire force of dead-eyed cybernetics to his will.

They stared, unthinking, unfeeling at the pair of warriors looking up at them.

'I am sorry I was late,' said Zaeus, 'but as you can see, I was busy.'

The Brazen Minotaur vaulted the edge of the gorge and slid down the sharp incline, grinding a furrow down the rock with his back and shoulders. In a few minutes he was standing with his brothers again.

'Climbing up wouldn't have been so easy,' Vortan griped, but gave a nod of thanks.

Ar'gan clasped the Brazen Minotaur's forearm in a warrior's grip, which Zaeus returned.

'Your arrival was timely, brother.'

Vortan eyed the servitors warily. 'Still need to repair the ship. I assume they aren't coming with us.'

Zaeus gestured to the edges of the gorge where a small cadre of servitors had begun to encroach. Unlike the warrior caste above, these cybernetics were equipped with tools.

'We can be airborne in under an hour.'

'So there was no garrison, no Space Marine bastion,' said Ar'gan, 'the signal was fake?'

'No,' Zaeus replied, 'just a little out of date. Our brothers were long gone but they left an army behind.'

Above, the weapon servitors began to retreat from the edge of the gorge and were lost to the shadows again.

‘I thought they were hostile but most were simply dying out. I accessed the doctrina programming of the functional ones, inloaded some new imperatives and led them here.’

‘You did all that with ones and zeros, brother?’ asked Vortan.

Zaeus snorted, pugnacious. ‘It was slightly more complicated than that. But now the protocol I gave them is complete they will revert to their default settings and return to dormancy inside the bastion.’

Vortan laughed again, he had never been so mirthful. ‘For the next beleaguered survivors to find.’

Zaeus shook his head. ‘This world dies, brother. I have already contacted Inquisitor Vaskiel and provided my report. I am certain her response will be Exterminatus.’

‘How soon until we’re wings up?’ asked Vortan.

‘We have ample time. The chrono is no longer running.’

‘Do you think they know?’ asked Ar’gan, staring at the blank space above them at the edge of the gorge.

‘Know what?’ Zaeus was directing the remaining servitors in the repairing of the gunship.

‘That they saved us but doomed a world.’

‘This world was already doomed, but I think perhaps a mote of cognitive recognition remains. A machine-spirit, if not in the literal sense.’

Ar’gan nodded.

‘Well, praise the Omnissiah,’ said Vortan.

‘Praise the Omnissiah,’ echoed Ar’gan.

Zaeus stayed silent. Polino would live, so too Vortan and Ar'gan. Carfax and Festaron would be returned to their Chapters with the highest honours, their legacies could live on.

Though he would never forget his Tauron heritage, Zaeus knew he was of the Machine-God now. Flesh or machine, he would serve the Throne and his brothers until duty ended in death. Even in that bleak thought he took comfort as he looked to the horizon.

A train of soldiers were marching. Their hearts still pumped, their limbs still moved, their lungs still drew air, but their minds were empty tombs only filled with what their masters put into them.

Zaeus saluted them as they faded into the storm.

It would rise higher and swallow the entire world in cyclonic death, a million souls consigned to the grave so a trillion more would live on. Then the Deathwatch would come to their worlds too, Zaeus had seen it happen countless times before, and the same thing would repeat.

Without an iota of remorse, he turned his back on the servitors and went to the gunship.

This world had only hours left to it, but there were thousands more in need of purgation. The task of the Deathwatch was endless, their victories unsung.

As he watched his brothers return to the ship, he wondered where they would be bound for next and what they would have to kill.

None of it really mattered. The mission could always be broken down to a single universal truth: suffer not the alien to live.