

WARHAMMER  
40,000

# BENEATH THE FLESH

ANDY SMILLIE



A FLESH TEARERS SHORT STORY

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*A Flesh Tearers Story*

**Andy Smillie**

‘I am His vengeance as He is my shield. I will deliver death to His enemies as He brings deliverance to my soul.’

Noise filled his world. An incessant thrum reverberated under his feet. The metal and ceramite around him squealed as angry thrusters were pushed to their tolerance. Bolts and arc-welded plates rattled as their construction was tested. A thunderous staccato of impacts rang like bolter fire against the hull around him. Yet in his mind, there was only silence: a sanctifying stillness, in preparation for battle. He would not be distracted from the consecration, his weapons would be ready.

‘Brother Maion, ready yourself.’

Maion lifted his head at his sergeant’s command and touched the blade of his chainsword to his temple, finishing the rite. He sheathed his weapon, and pulled the combat harness over his head, activating the mag-lock. ‘Ready, brother-sergeant.’

The Stormraven gunship powered through the void, its crimson hull charred and pitted from hundreds of recent atmospheric entries. The serrated black symbol on the gunship’s wing was almost indistinguishable from the scorch marks emblazoned on its flanks, eroded by the vengeful impacts of dense minerals and debris clusters. Flames licked the Stormraven’s surface, tracing a searing thread along its squat outline. It dived lower, pushing into Arere’s embrace.

The planet’s twin arid continents were turning from the system’s single sun. Had any of Arere’s citizens still been alive to gaze skyward, they would have marvelled at the descending gunship. The brightest light in the sky, Arere’s dead populace would have mistaken the Stormraven for yet another meteor, destined to crash into the desert-earth and forever change the maze of ravines punctuating the landscape.

++Entry achieved++ The pilot-serf’s mechanical voice crackled across the vox-link.

Maion juddered in his harness as the gunship knifed downwards, turbulent crosswinds breaking against the hull. Next to him, Harahel sat immobile, a

massive eviscerator held across his lap. Maion smiled; it was a fitting weapon. Harahel was from Taci, a province of their home-world Cretacia. The region was well known for the broad, well muscled and aggressive individuals it bred, traits further amplified when they underwent the physiological enhancements required to transform them into Space Marines. Brother Amaru had replaced Harahel's harness with one normally used to secure warriors in Terminator armour, in order to accommodate the Assault Marine's bulk.

'Bring up the tactical hololith.' Sergeant Barbelo was on his feet, clasping an overhead assault-rail with a gauntleted hand. His face and shaven head were a mess of re-grafted skin and thick, serpentine scars.

'A moment, brother.' Amaru extended a bundle of data cables from his armoured-forearm and plugged them into a control slot in his seat. The Techmarine muttered something to the gunship's machine-spirit and closed his left eye. The glowing bionic that replaced his right continued to shine like a targeting reticule.

The compartment's luminators dimmed as a three-dimensional overview of Arere's primary continent appeared in the middle of the deck, the blue-hued landscape hololithically projected by an optical lens mounted in the ceiling. With a thought, Amaru narrowed the focus on a line of canyons towards the north-east. A series of fortified buildings resolved out of the map.

'Substation 12BX sits between the two walls of this canyon.' The area changed colour to a deep crimson as Amaru continued, 'The approach to the main entrance is overshadowed by a narrow gorge and high spires, landing improbable.' The Techmarine paused as he calculated an approach. 'We can land here.' Amaru manipulated the image again and an octagonal courtyard sprang into view.

'What of the enemy?' Barbelo's brow furrowed as his thoughts turned to battle, turning the deep lines of his forehead into shadowy ravines.

The image oscillated and zoomed out, the substation receding into the distance to glow faintly among the canyons. 'We do not have real-time data but estimates would place enemy forces here.' Amaru indicated the black mass surrounding the substation, representing the disposition of the Archenemy army on Arere.

Maion stared at the display, his muscles tensing instinctively at the mention of

the Archenemy. Their forces had dispersed from their landing zones like an aggressive cancer, brutalising their way across the globe. The outpost was the last bastion of sanctity.

‘We have less than two hours until they reach the substation,’ Amaru stated plainly.

‘And if the worse has happened and our brothers are as we fear?’ Maion voiced what he knew the others were thinking.

‘That should be time enough to retrieve their gene-seed,’ Nisroc touched his narthecium in emphasis. The Sanguinary Priest’s gleaming white armour was in stark contrast to the deep crimson and black worn by Maion and the others.

Barbelo scowled. ‘That is not our primary mission Apothecary. We must understand what happened on Arere, we must retrieve the compound’s data files.’

Nisroc felt his jaw tighten. ‘The Chapter is on the brink of extinction, recovering the gene-seed is paramount. I am bound by duty—’

‘Brothers...’ Amaru paused as one of the gunship’s many auspexs drew his attention. ‘We are closing on their auger range,’ the Techmarine looked expectantly at Barbelo. ‘We need to do it now.’

Barbelo glared at Nisroc. He knew as well as the Apothecary that the Chapter’s supply of gene-seed was critical. But the data files held vital information. Without them, they risked losing the entire Itan sector to the Archenemy. ‘They are our orders, and you will follow them.’

The Apothecary said nothing.

The sergeant took his seat and turned to Amaru. ‘You are sure this will work, Techmarine?’

Amaru nodded, ‘I sanctified this vessel myself. Its spirit is strong. It will not fail us.’

‘Very well, relieve the pilot.’

The hololith stuttered and dissolved as Amaru disengaged his cables and assumed the cockpit.

‘Prepare yourselves,’ Barbelo activated the mag-lock on his harness and clamped his helmet down over his head.

‘Emperor’s strength be with us,’ to his right, Nisroc locked his own helm in place.

‘Emperor’s strength,’ Maion joined the rest of the squad as they repeated the Apothecary’s words and donned their helmets. He felt his pulse quicken as hissing pressure seals locked his helmet to his armour, readying him for war.

‘It is done,’ Amaru moved at pace, taking his seat next to Barbelo. ‘The machine-spirit has us now.’

The gunship fell.

Amber warning lights lit up across the craft’s interior as the gunship surrendered to gravity. Maion was driven into his harness by the force of the descent, the metal bars gouging into the ceramite of his battle-plate as the gunship plummeted towards the earth. The reassuring rumble of the gunship’s engines was replaced by the frantic chiming of the altitude counter that counted down to their doom. ‘Ave Emperor, stand with me and I shall not fail in your sight,’ Maion mouthed the prayer, banishing the thought that he was about to be crushed to death inside an armoured coffin. By the Emperor’s grace, he would meet his end on the field of battle.

‘Ten seconds,’ Amaru’s voice cut over the vox-link.

The Stormraven bucked violently as it fell. Even with the benefit of his Lyman’s Ear and the myriad of other implants that were working to relieve the stress on his body, Maion struggled to stay conscious.

‘Five.’

Maion redoubled his grip on the harness.

‘Brace!’

The Stormraven's thrusters fired on full burn, exploding downwards in a hail of fury as they fought to arrest the gunship's descent. Their tumultuous roar drowned out the angry hum of warning runes and the whining collision siren. For the briefest of instants the world was silent and Maion was no longer falling.

A heartbeat later and the world was enveloped in noise. The Stormraven slammed into the earth, and Maion winced as he was driven up into his harness. The hull squealed in protest as fractures stabbed across its outer armour. The landing supports shattered, their metal struts fracturing on impact. Armoured glass broke from the cockpit and flooded into the compartment as dislodged rock hammered it. The gunship ploughed forwards, tearing a dark trench in the earth until its momentum was spent.

'Egress!' Barbelo was on his feet and out of his harness before the hull had stopped shaking, slamming his fist into the door release and motioning for the others to disembark.

The assault ramp lowered part of the way and stalled, its hydraulics spitting oleaginous fluid. Harahel barrelled forward, throwing himself at the stricken ramp. It slammed down into the earth with a dull thud, tossing powdered dirt into the air as the giant Space Marine rolled to his feet.

Maion pushed the catch on his harness. Nothing happened. The locking mechanism was broken.

'Sit back brother.' Micos flicked the activation switch on his chainaxe and the weapon roared into life. He freed Maion with a casual downward stroke, his weapon's adamantium teeth making light work of the harness.

'You have my thanks, brother.' Maion unsheathed his blade and followed Micos down the ramp.

Outside, beneath Arere's starless sky, it was pitch dark and the elements conspired to impair visibility. Howling winds tossed grit and earth into a storm. Torrential rain fell in near vertical sheets. Neither fact mattered to Maion. His helmet's ocular sensors filtered and illuminated the darkness, allowing him to see as clear as day.

Reams of tactical and situational data scrolled across his right eye, assimilated

by his eidetic memory. The atmosphere was breathable. The Stormraven's engines were cooling and unlikely to combust. His left pauldron had sustained mild damage during the landing but the servos were working within normal ranges. The squad had formed a perimeter around the stricken Stormraven. Their ident-tags and vitals hovered on the peripheral of Maion's retinal display.

'Stay alert! We may not be alone.' Barbelo's voice crackled over the vox-link.

Maion panned his bolt pistol around, scanning for targets. The outpost's walls towered over them from all sides. He glanced at them briefly and a new set of data drifted over his helmet's display. The base was designate Arere Primus. Its walls were an adamantium and ceramite compound, capable of withstanding a full-scale bombardment.

'Stay in close formation, the storm is restricting comms,' Barbelo's annoyance was evident in his tone. 'Amaru, can we extract in the Stormraven?'

'Undetermined. I'll need time to assess,' the Techmarine's reply rasped in Maion's ear.

'Atoc, secure the Stormraven while Amaru works.'

'Harahel,' Barbelo abandoned the hissing comm-feed. 'Lead us into the strategium.'

The towering warrior grunted in affirmation and sprinted towards the metres-thick blast door that sealed off the compound's command and control centre.

Harahel ran a gauntlet hand over the access panel, wiping away the dirt.

++Internal Protocol Active++

A command rubric blinked through a veneer of rapidly settling dust.

++Terminal Sealed++

The words blinked at Harahel. Harahel snarled and smashed his fist into the screen. 'Brother-sergeant, the door has been locked from the inside.'

'There are melta-charges and cutting equipment in the armoury,' Maion recalled

the information he'd assimilated during the briefing.

'Apothecary, you and Micos cover our rear,' Barbelo thumbed the power slide on his plasma pistol. 'No one comes out of those doors. Maion, Harahel, follow me.'

The doors to the armoury unlocked with a hiss of pressurised gas. The toothed slabs slid apart and disappeared into the recess of the armoured frame. Maion followed Barbelo in, sweeping left as Harahel moved right. Maion grimaced as his helmet worked to filter out the putrid air. Evidence of battle was everywhere. Broken luminators stuttered in the ceiling, throwing jagged patches of light around the entrance chamber. Fist-sized holes studded the walls. Sparks cascaded from exposed cabling that hung in thick bunches. The metal of the floor was scorched and charred. Webs of blood and viscera clung to everything.

'No bodies.' Harahel voiced what Maion had been thinking.

'The dead are not our concern. Keep your eyes open for the living.' Barbelo aimed his plasma pistol towards the adjoining corridor and advanced to the rear of the room.

Maion nodded. According to the schematics, the passageway extended half a kilometre before a set of stairs would lead them down to the armoury proper. 'Ideal place for an ambush,' Maion said as he stared into the darkness of the passageway. 'Luminators are out.'

'Harahel, maintain position and assume overwatch.'

'As you wish,' Harahel hid his displeasure poorly. Though he knew the sergeant was right – they'd be forced to advance down the corridor shoulder to shoulder; there'd be no room to wield his Eviscerator.

Maion advanced into the darkness.

Harahel stood immobile, panning his gaze around the chamber. He could hear Maion's footsteps as he moved down the corridor; the other Flesh Tearer was halfway to the stairs, the fizz of the electrical cables as they spat in their death throes... and the shifting of metal – Harahel pivoted left as a grenade hit the ground. His ocular sensors dimmed, shielding his eyes from the piercing flash that flooded the chamber. With a dense clatter, a half-dozen of the ceiling grilles

fell to the ground. A cluster of figures in sodden fatigues dropped down after them and opened fire.

‘Contact!’ Harahel shouted into the vox even as a hail of las-fire pattered off his armour.

‘How many?’ Barbelo turned his head as the sporadic flash of weapons fire lit up the corridor behind him.

‘Contact front,’ Maion swung his bolt pistol up, advancing and firing as las-fire erupted from further along the corridor.

‘Micos,’ Barbelo summoned the other Flesh Tearer as he opened fire, following Maion into the enemy ahead, ‘Assist Harahel.’ The sergeant didn’t wait for affirmation, deactivating his comm-link. He wanted no distractions; he wanted to be in the moment, to relish the kill.

Harahel’s attackers bore the Imperial eagle on their filth-encrusted chests. Traitors, he growled, grinding his teeth as a las round struck his helm. Harahel clasped his Eviscerator with both hands, twisting the handle to activate the power core. The weapon’s giant blade snarled into life, a physical manifestation of the rage churning through his veins. He ran at the traitors, heedless of the beads of las-fire that stung his armour.

Harahel grinned; the traitors were holding their ground. He tore the first of them apart with a savage upward swing that cut the man in half from groin to shoulder. Pivoting as the two halves of the man’s torso hit the ground, Harahel bisected another from hip bone to ribcage. A third died as he finished the move, chopping the Eviscerator down through the man’s head and dragging it out through his ribs.

Maion counted fifteen muzzle flashes. The traitors had ambushed them with woefully inadequate numbers. The cowards were nestled behind some overturned supply crates and sheets of metal they’d dragged up from the floor. Maion stitched a line across the barricade with his bolt pistol. His enhanced hearing registered the changing sound as the mass reactive rounds hammered into metal and blew apart flesh. Twelve muzzle flashes. To his left, Barbelo’s pistol hissed as it discharged, sending a flickering plasma round down the corridor. The barricade exploded in a blue flash as Barbelo’s shot struck home. Men screamed as superheated shrapnel perforated their bodies. Others were

luckier, dying instantly as the round liquefied them. Maion knew that underneath his helmet, Barbelo was smiling. A dishevelled traitor stumbled over the corpse of his comrade, toppling onto the wrong side of the cordon. He struggled on all fours, scrabbling for a weapon. Maion shot him in the head.

Bathed in blood-spatter and faced with an opponent whose armour bore their comrade's eviscerated innards, the traitors fell back. One held his ground, staring wide-eyed at Harahel as he pulled a clutch of grenades from a harness. Harahel decapitated the man as he advanced on the others. The grenades fell from the headless corpse's fingers. A cloud of flame and shrapnel washed over Harahel's battle-plate as they detonated. A slew of warnings lit up on the Flesh Tearer's retinal display. Harahel blinked them away; his armour's integrity was intact.

Ahead of him, the traitors had rallied behind a pillar. He could see the fear on their gaunt faces as he emerged unscathed from the billowing fire. Harahel heard the distinctive click of las power packs locking into place. It was insulting they thought the pillar offered any protection from his wrath. The huge Flesh Tearer growled, the metallic resonance of his helmet's audio amplifier lending the sound a bestial quality. The stench of ammonia wafted on the air. He smiled, one of the traitors had pissed himself.

Harahel rushed them. He leapt the last few yards, swinging his Eviscerator through the pillar as he landed. The blade showered him in sparks and pulped organs as it chewed through the metal of the column and into the bodies of the two traitors closest to it. The men died screaming, flesh ripped from their bones and tossed into the air by the churning, adamantium teeth. Harahel ripped the weapon free, maiming another traitor as he drew the blade back to the guard position.

A scarred traitor screamed at him, lunging at him with a bayonet. Harahel sidestepped the attack and backhanded the man across his face, smashing his skull and sending chunks of his teeth spearing into the face of a heavy-set warrior who was fumbling with the activation stud of a shock maul. The man cried out in pain, dropping his weapon and clutching his ragged face. Harahel clamped his hand over the man's head and squeezed, crushing his skull.

'Cowards,' he snarled, throwing the twitching body into the press of traitors as they scrambled away.

Five muzzle flashes winked at Maion from behind the barricade. The disorientated traitors' shots flew wide. He sighted on the nearest of them.

'Save your ammo,' Barbelo held his arm out blocking the shot. 'We are almost upon them,' he growled as a las-round ricocheted off of his rerebrace. 'Sanguinius!' Barbelo broke into a run, enraged by the pitiful attempts to kill him.

Maion stopped firing. Barbelo was lost for the moment, lost to a part of the rage they all shared. Chainsword roaring, he followed the sergeant into the press of traitors.

Barbelo dived over the barricade to land on top of a blood-caked traitor. Ribs broke under the impact, splintering into internal organs with a crunch. Barbelo drove his knee into the man's face as he rose, crushing the traitor's skull into the deck.

Maion went straight through the barricade, chopping his chainsword down through a scorched supply crate before reversing the motion and eviscerating the traitor that was using it for cover. Blood and viscera splashed across his helmet. His ocular sensors adjusted, allowing him to see through the flesh-mire. To his right, a stick-thin traitor turned to run. Maion threw his combat knife. The blade shot pierced the traitor's back and went through his chest. The man pitched forward as the blade clattered to the floor. Maion grinned ferally. He turned, searching for someone to kill but Barbelo had beaten him to it. The sergeant punched his fist through a screaming man's chest before stamping his boot down on the head of another, pulping it. Maion retrieved his knife as Barbelo stalked past him towards the armoury chamber, vines of intestine and bloody matter hanging from his gauntlet.

Nisroc listened to the exchange of weapons fire over the open vox-channel. With each broken retort he became more envious of his brothers. To be a Flesh Tearer was to be at the vanguard of the assault, to be elbow-deep in the enemy's bloody remains, not holding the rear like some Imperial Fist strategist. His muscles swelled with blood and adrenaline as his body willed him to engage the enemy. Targeting reticules swam over his display as his helmet translated his mind's unconscious need to fight. 'Reclothe my mind, that it may temper the needs of my soul,' Nisroc took a calming breath. Ascertain why Brother-Sergeant Paschar had not answered the summons to exfiltrate Arere. Locate and secure the squad

or retrieve their gene-seed. Rendezvous with the fleet. Nisroc ran through the mission objectives, focussing his thoughts. He could not afford to lose control, too many had been lost to The Rage persecuting the campaign already. He cast a fleeting glance up towards the barren sky; there was something about this sector of space that left him ill at ease, something malevolent that hung in the darkness where the stars should be. Nisroc bit down another burst of adrenaline, he would not allow himself to succumb to The Thirst. He was a Sanguinary Priest, duty demanded he control his rage. Too be lost in the throes of battle was to lose sight of the future. He lived to maintain the gene-seed and through it the Chapter. For without that precious link to their progenitor father, the Flesh Tearers had no future. 'For the Chapter,' Nisroc exhaled, emptying the last of the tension from his body – battle would find him soon enough.

Barbelo entered the armoury. Maion was about to follow but stopped as weapons fire erupted from within.

A noise like the birth of thunder filled the corridor as a heavy weapon roared. The sergeant jerked backwards as high-calibre rounds slammed into his armour, pitting the ceramite. His own shot went wide as a round clipped his gauntlet, the plasma blast scorching the ceiling. Barbelo dropped his chin and raised his shoulder as another torrent of rounds hammered him. Even as his pauldron cracked, the icon of the Chapter blasted from his shoulder in a shower of splintered ceramite, the sergeant took a step forward.

Maion recognised the harsh bark of an autocannon as the traitors poured fire onto Barbelo – the sergeant's armour would not hold. Maion lunged forward, tossed a frag grenade into the room, grabbed Barbelo's gorget, and pulled him back into the corridor.

'You dare!' The sergeant snarled at Maion, back-fisting him across the helm.

Maion staggered cursing. With disciplined restraint he quashed the rage boiling up inside him. 'Calm yourself brother. To proceed would have been folly.' Maion kept his voice level, but lifted his gaze to stare Barbelo in the eyes. He steeled his jaw, ready to receive another blow. But Barbelo's posture shifted, and Maion relaxed as the sergeant regained control of his emotions. The traitors continued to fire, their shots spitting into the corridor to impact on the wall opposite.

'You waste your time, brother,' Barbelo motioned towards the doorway as more

rounds zipped into the corridor. 'They are entrenched behind a barrier. Your grenade will have done little more than chip the—'

Maion held up his hand, the firing had stopped. His enhanced hearing had heard the bark of every round as they tore from the autocannon's barrel. His eidetic memory had catalogued every shell casing that struck the ground. The weapon's magazine was still half full. The traitors weren't reloading, they were baiting them.

Barbelo knew it, too. Incensed by their obvious ploy, the sergeant took a step towards the doorway. Maion grabbed his vambrace.

'Brother...' Maion knew that behind the red lenses of his helmet, the sergeant's eyes were redder still, his pupils alight with rage. 'You will die.'

Harahel knelt among the corpses, blood dripping from his armour, his weapon humming on idle, and watched the last of the traitors run for the doorway. The cowards would not make it. Micos's ident-tag flashed on Harahel's helmet display as the other Flesh Tearer approached the entrance from outside. Harahel saw the pilot light of Micos's flamer as it shone in the gloom. Some of the traitors caught sight of the other Flesh Tearer and stopped running; they slumped to the ground in abject defeat. The others kept running, too lost in panic for rational thought. Harahel smelt their fear as Micos fired, blanketing the traitors in a sheet of burning promethium that washed away flesh and dissolved bone to ash. He watched them burn, frail wicks eaten up by a ravenous flame. The meek and the brave, they all died.

'Are you injured?' Micos asked Harahel over a closed channel. He knew his friend would not have wanted his condition shared with anyone save perhaps the Apothecary.

Harahel didn't respond, his gaze remained fixed on the dying embers of the traitors. His twin hearts hammered in his chest like the pistons of a giant engine, fuelled by the tang of spilt blood that filled his senses. A boiling darkness cloyed at his mind, threatening to overwhelm his restraint. He tore his helmet off and roared, driving his Eviscerator into the armoured floor. Gripping the hilt with both hands, he rested his head on the blade and prayed, 'Emperor bless me with your temperament. Fill me with a righteousness inferno that I may burn away my bloodlust. Emperor keep me from the darkness of my soul.'

‘Outer room pacified, proceeding to your position,’ Micos’s voice came through the comm-feed in Maion’s helmet.

‘The corridor is clear. Move to our position and assist,’ Maion voxed Micos and turned to Barbelo, ‘Micos is on his way.’ The sergeant nodded, his comm-link still powered off.

The traitors’ weapons had fallen silent as the two Flesh Tearers waited out of sight, their backs pressed against the wall of the corridor. But there was no peace for Maion. His pulse filled his head like the tribal drum his villagers used to attract the roaming karcasaur at High Feast. His hands trembled like the ground beneath the giant reptile as it loped through the jungle. Every genetically-enhanced cell in Maion’s body wanted to rush into the room and tear the traitors limb from limb, to bask in their death throes and drink deep of their blood. Maion clenched his fist and struck the aquila sigil on his breast plate. ‘What nourishes you also destroys you. Either conquer your gift or die,’ Chaplain Appollus had spoken those words to Maion when he was but a novice. He focused on his battle gear as the Chaplain had taught him, testing the weight of his bolt pistol, the balance of his blade. Maion needed to be as they were: furious and unyielding in battle, cold and impassive in respite. He glanced at Barbelo. The sergeant would be struggling with his own blood-rage. Over his centuries of service, Barbelo had slain more enemies of the Throne than Maion and the rest of the squad had tallied between them. For Barbelo, the call to violence would be stronger, harder to deny. Maion considered what he would do if the sergeant gave in to his desires, if he—

‘I stand ready brothers.’ Micos’s voice drew Maion’s attention. The other Flesh Tearer glanced at Barbelo’s smashed shoulder guard but knew better than to ask after his sergeant’s wellbeing.

Barbelo nodded towards the doorway.

Maion thumbed the selector on his bolt pistol, switching it to full auto. He stuck the barrel of the weapon into the room and opened fire. A man cried out as the explosive rounds tore across the chamber.

Micos swung low, sending a stream of fire into the chamber. The burning promethium swarmed over the barricade to feast on the cowards behind it. The traitors screamed.

Barbelo dived into the room. Maion heard him snap off three shots and the hungry growl of his chainsword as it cut into bone.

‘Armoury secure,’ Barbelo’s voice came over the comm-link a heartbeat later. ‘Apothecary, join us at once.’

Nisroc bent over the Flesh Tearer’s corpse. A gaping hole dominated the fallen Space Marine’s scorched breastplate. The flesh around it was fused with armour, a dark stain billowing out from the wound like a web. ‘Melta weapon or fusion-based explosive,’ Nisroc spoke for the benefit of his helmet’s data recorder, documenting his findings. ‘The high level of penetration suggests close range detonation.’ Nisroc extended a needle-like probe from his narthecium and stabbed it into the wound. Brother Haamiah, Second Company. Lines of biometric and biological data scrolled across Nisroc’s helmet display as the probe analysed the Flesh Tearer’s blood. There were traces of human flesh too, melded to Haamiah’s; a traitor had given their life to plant the charge.

‘Maion, if you would,’ Nisroc stood to give the other Flesh Tearer space.

‘My honour, brother,’ Maion nodded and knelt next to Haamiah’s body. Maion was the closest thing the squad had to a Chaplain. He had studied under the revered Appollus. Most of the Chapter had expected Maion to follow in the High Chaplain’s footsteps. But he could not, not yet. He wasn’t ready to accept that the Flesh Tearers were beyond saving. Maion bowed his head, ‘Emperor, your servant’s duty is at an end. Grant him peace.’ Maion made the sign of the aquila over his breastplate and rose. ‘I’ll wait for you in the corridor.’

Nisroc paused a moment. Of all the duties that were his to complete, this was the most important, the heaviest burden to bear. Only in death does duty end, the axiom may have been true for the soldiers of the Imperial Guard or the Sisters of the Adeptus Sororitas but not for a son of Sanguinius. In death, a Space Marine had one more thing to give. The transformative Progenoids implanted in his body had to be returned to the Chapter, ready to be received by the next generation of aspirants. Only through the harvesting of the glands would the Flesh Tearers continue to survive. Without the precious gene-seed they would be unable to stand against the Emperor’s foes.

The Apothecary extended his reductor and punched the bladed tube into Haamiah’s neck. A jolt of energy rippled along the blade’s length as the moulded

end closed around the first progenoid gland. With a wet hiss, the gland was sucked up through the blade into the narthecium. A green icon blinked in the corner of Nisroc's helmet display. The gland had been recovered safely, and was being frozen for transport to the gene-banks on the Flesh Tearers home world. Nisroc activated his bone-drill; the second gland was harder to reach.

It had taken over thirty minutes to cut through the mag-seals on the strategium's door and a further ten to fasten melta-charges to the piston hinges. Amaru had abandoned repairs on the Stormraven to oversee the work, directing Harahel as he wielded the industrial laser-cutter with the same ease the others handled their bolters.

'Ready to detonate, brother-sergeant.' Amaru turned his back on the huge door and paced back towards the Stormraven. The Chaos forces were under an hour away and he still had much work to do.

'Prepare yourselves,' Barbelo's order hissed in Maion's ear as the storm continued to hamper vox communication. He checked the ammo-counter on his bolt pistol and activated his chainsword, its roar inaudible over the wind. To his left and right, his brothers were preparing their own wargear. Micos's flamer hung by his side, its pilot flame would remain extinguished until they were inside. Maion shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, moving his weight forward.

'Go!' On Barbelo's command Amaru blew the charges.

The hinges detonated in rapid succession, like the quickening heartbeat of a colossal beast. The door fell from its housing, slamming into the earth an inch from Barbelo and his squad. Under his helmet, Amaru's mouth twitched in an approximation of a smile. His calculations had been perfect.

Maion was in motion before the doors had settled in the dirt. Adrenaline flooded his system as he powered into the strategium's entrance chamber. A warning rune filled his helmet display. 'Defence turrets,' Maion's warning came too late. Two automated weapons burst into life, pumping a stream of high-explosive rounds towards the Flesh Tearers.

'Cover!' Barbelo shouted the order even as he realised there was none. Whoever was cowering in the strategium had been waiting for them.

Maion winced, dropping to one knee as a round clipped his thigh. Barbelo threw himself into a roll as the weapons stitched a line towards him. Nisroc spun on the spot, turning his back to shield the gene-seed stored in his narthecium. Explosive rounds slammed into his backpack, knocking him to the floor. Micos's world went dark as a round tore through his pauldron and broke against his helmet. Atoc bucked, dropping his bolter as his breastplate was pulverised by a fusillade of explosions.

Harahel ground his teeth as Atoc's ident-tag disappeared from his peripheral display. 'Forgive me, brother,' He swung his Eviscerator over his shoulder, mag-locking it to his back, and picked up Atoc's body. 'For the Chapter!' Harahel raised the corpse-shield in front of him and ran flat out toward the guns. Anger drove him on as merciless shells hammered into Atoc's corpse, the weapons ignoring the other Flesh Tearers to focus on the immediate threat of Harahel. Atoc's armour broke like glass under the relentless assault, the dead Flesh Tearer's head spinning from his body as his legs and arms were pulped.

Harahel roared as he closed inside both turrets' sensor range. Dropping the stump of Atoc's corpse, he swung his Eviscerator round to shear the barrel off the nearest weapon. The gun exploded as the round in its chamber detonated. Harahel ignored the hail of shrapnel that cascaded over his armour, oblivious to the pain warnings blinking over his left eye. Cursing, he brought his blade down on the other gun, cutting through its ammo feed. The weapon continued to fire, making a tortured grinding noise as it cried out for ammunition. Harahel kicked it over, stamping on it until he'd flattened the firing chamber. 'Weapons neutralised.'

Maion was on his feet, advancing with Barbelo towards Harahel and the stairwell that led to the inner sanctum.

Nisroc pushed himself up off the deck. A damage alert scrolled across his display. The shots to his backpack had damaged his armour's power source. He checked the output. It would last an hour, two at best. 'Micos?' Nisroc's vox went unanswered. He turned to the other Flesh Tearer.

'I am fine, Apothecary,' Micos snarled, throwing his ruined helmet across the chamber. 'A flesh wound.'

The Apothecary cast his gaze over Micos. A blackened hole sat where his right

eye should have been and his face was a mess of dark scabs. ‘As you say, brother.’ Nisroc switched to his vox, ‘Orders, brother-sergeant?’

‘We advance on the inner sanctum. Secure the level beneath.’

Lasgun fire stabbed at Maion as he crossed the threshold into the command sanctum and peeled left. He raised his bolt pistol and shot two traitors in the chest. Their bodies snapped backwards, covering diode-encrusted consoles in blood and viscera. A third traitor opened fire, a bolter bucking in his hands and destroying a bank of data-screens as he struggled to adjust for the recoil. ‘The Emperor’s tools serve only his servants,’ Maion pumped two rounds into the man, plastering his innards across the wall.

Harahel entered behind Maion and moved right. Three men blocked his path. He shouldered them aside, decapitating two with a single stroke of his blade, and killing the third with a thunderous head-butt. Ahead, a panicked traitor struggled with a grenade launcher. Harahel tore the skull from the nearest corpse and threw it at the man. The macabre projectile shot into the traitor’s chest, cracked his sternum and stopped his heart.

Barbelo was the last to advance into the chamber. He moved straight forwards, sighting a traitor in a heavy overcoat wielding a plasma pistol. The man fired. The sergeant dropped his shoulder to avoid the shot. The plasma round burnt through the air to melt the wall where his head had been an instant before.

The man fired again. ‘In the name of—’

Barbelo, dodged left and fired, his round vaporising the man’s head and shoulders before the traitor could finish his sentence. ‘We will not hear the name of your heathen god, heretic,’ Barbelo fired again; his plasma round obliterating what remained of the treacherous commissar’s corpse in a crackle of blue energy. ‘Sanctum secure. Nisroc, status?’

‘They were keeping their wounded down here,’ Maion heard Nisroc’s report as it came over the comm-feed. ‘Resistance was minimal. Lower chambers cleansed.’

Nisroc entered the inner sanctum to find Amaru poring over the main data console. The Techmarine had nano-wires and connective fibres plugged into every available data jack.

‘Brother Atoc?’ Barbelo had his back to the door and spoke without turning around, his gaze fixed on a wall-mounted viewer.

‘His duty is at an end.’ Nisroc touched a hand to his narthecium. ‘His gene-seed survives. His death served its purpose.’

Barbelo turned to face the Apothecary, pausing before he spoke. ‘And his body?’

‘His—’ Nisroc faltered. Bodies, where were the bodies?

‘Micos,’ the other Flesh Tearer snapped his shoulders back at the sergeant’s summons. ‘Return Atoc’s corpse to the Stormraven, his weapon too.’

‘Bodies,’ the word tumbled from Nisroc’s lips.

‘What is it, Apothecary?’ the grille mouthpiece of Barbelo’s helmet did little to filter his annoyance.

Nisroc cast his gaze around the chamber. Harahel’s armour was pitted and scared. Maion’s cuisse was fractured. The dismembered bodies of traitors were strewn around the floor, a madman’s mosaic. ‘Where are the other bodies?’ Nisroc repeated the question straining at his mind.

‘What?’

‘There were ten of our brothers stationed here. We have found only one, Brother Haamiah. Where are the others? There was no trace of them on the lower levels or here in the sanctum. They must be somewhere.’

‘I agree with you brother, it is an oddity. But we do not have the time,’ Barbelo turned back to the monitor, ‘the enemy advances from all sides. Their vanguard will contact us in thirty-eight minutes.’

‘Then we must make the time. We must find them. We must retrieve their gene-seed and honour their deaths.’

‘And what if they are not here? What if they are as ash, carried from here by the blasted storm?’

Barbelo's tone brooked no discussion but Nisroc persisted. 'Then we shall mourn their loss and the loss of their gift. But we must first check everywhere. We must be sure.'

Barbelo turned to face Nisroc, his poise threatening. 'The enemy outnumber us thousands to one.'

Nisroc moved towards Barbelo. 'Death means nothing as long as the gene-seed survives.'

'And who will collect our gene-seed when we lie dead beneath the starless sky of this world?'

'We must--'

'No!' Barbelo pressed his forehead against Nisroc's. 'Amaru has affected repairs on the Stormraven. Once we acquire the data from the base's cogitators we are leaving. You have until then.'

'Very well,' Nisroc took a step back and made to turn away. 'But know that I shall take no pleasure in reporting our mission as a failure to the High Priests.'

Barbelo snarled. Never had he failed his Chapter. His grip tightened on his chainsword. He should gut Nisroc. Stain the Apothecary's white breastplate crimson with his own sanctimonious blood. Out of his peripheral vision he saw Maion and Harahel edge closer. The other Flesh Tearers had remained silent but Barbelo doubted they would stand by and watch him kill the Apothecary. A warning shone on his display as he threatened to crush the chainsword's handle. He fought to bring his rage under control. Now was not the time. 'Go then. Look for the others. We will do what we must.'

Nisroc dipped his head, 'Thank you, brother.'

Barbelo growled, 'Do not push me, Apothecary.' His voice was void cold. 'Harahel...' The sergeant drew his gaze from Nisroc in an effort to calm himself. 'Go with him.'

Harahel walked silently beside Nisroc as they approached the chapel annex. It was the only spine of the compound the Flesh Tearers had yet to explore. If any evidence of Haamiah's squad remained then it had to be there. The chrono

display in Harahele's helmet clicked down to thirty. He turned it off, uncaring as to whether they made it off Arere before the Chaos advance struck. It didn't matter if he fought here or redeployed to another world, as long as he fought, as long as he killed. Blood, the thought rolled into his mind like an invading army. Saliva began to build in his mouth, his nostrils flaring as they searched for arterial juices. Blood, Harahele hungered for blood.

'We are here,' Nisroc's voice crackled in Harahele's ear breaking his stupor.

Harahele blinked hard, clearing the fog from his senses.

'Is something the matter?'

'No, I am fine,' Harahele unlatched the Eviscerator from his back.

'Wait,' Nisroc held up his hand. Stepping ahead of Harahele, he moved to the chapel door's access panel and removed one of his gauntlets. He wiped the grime from the console and pressed his palm onto the biometric scanner. The ancient machine chimed green as it recognised Nisroc's genetic code as that of a Space Marine. With a pressurised hiss, the arched doors to the annex swung inwards.

Harahele grunted and followed the Apothecary inside.

'The enemy will contact us here first,' Barbelo spoke as a hololith representation of the compound rotated in the air between him and Maion.

'I would have thought here a more likely target,' Maion gestured to the curving walls that formed the east side of the central courtyard.

'No, they will expect that area to be mined; more than a handful of detonations would bring the rock face down on top of them.' Barbelo pointed to the compound's main entrance way. 'They will attack from here.'

Maion studied the hololith, the sergeant was right. Had the base been fully manned, then attacking down the wide avenues of the main corridors would have been suicide. Under current circumstances the wide avenues would allow them to enter in force and overwhelm the Flesh Tearers. 'What is this area here?' He pointed to a dark spot on the display behind the armoury. 'It wasn't on the briefing schematics.'

‘That area...’ Amaru paused as his implants sifted through the compound’s memory banks for an answer. ‘It’s a missile silo. Surface-to-orbit ordnance. No use against ground targets.’

‘We cannot hope to defend the entire complex, we will make a stand here,’ Barbelo indicated a group of passageways that sprung from the main corridors and ran to the courtyard. ‘We’ll collapse these four and split ourselves into pairs to defend the remaining two.’

‘Four against—’ Maion paused, turning to Amaru.

‘Four thousand and seventy-eight separate contacts.’

Maion grinned, ‘Seems there’ll be blood enough even for Harahel.’

‘I think I can help even the odds,’ the hololith changed to show the Stormraven as Amaru spoke. ‘The Stormraven’s hurricane-bolters and missile launcher can be removed,’ the gunship’s weapon systems floated away from its hull, illustrating the Techmarine’s point. ‘It wouldn’t take much to reconfigure them as defensive turrets.’

‘What about the Stormraven?’ Maion’s face hardened. ‘The courtyard is uncovered, even a glancing hit from a siege gun and—’

‘We needn’t worry about artillery,’ Barbelo interrupted. ‘I have fought this enemy before. They are like us.’

Maion glared at the sergeant, ‘You would liken us to the Archenemy?’

‘You have fought beside our Chapter’s Death Company?’

Maion nodded, his unease growing at the mention of the Chapter’s damned warriors. The Black Rage was a genetic curse that threatened to overwhelm all of the sons of Sanguinius. Once afflicted, a Flesh Tearer would be lost to battle lust, his sanity replaced by a desperate need for violence. Those that succumbed to the madness were inducted into the ranks of the black-armoured Death Company where they’d soon find redemption in death.

‘Like our coal-armoured brethren, the enemy we face is lost to bloodlust. They are fuelled by an insatiable rage, ever hungry for battle. They will want to taste

our blood when they kill us,' Barbelo tested the weight of his chainsword. 'They will not attack from range.'

With the storm's howl locked outside, silence permeated the chapel. Harahel moved ahead of Nisroc, his eyes adjusting to the change in light as a string of angular luminators hummed into life along the ceiling, filling the corridor with the hushed yellow glow the Imperial church reserved for religious buildings and the homes of cardinals.

Harahel smelt blood. He touched his thumb to the activation stud on his Eviscerator, 'Stand ready.'

Nisroc raised his bolt pistol, letting its scope feed targeting data to his helmet display. He knew better than to question Harahel's instincts.

From the reception chamber, they entered the Hall of Solace, a long corridor with single-occupant prayer cells joining it every few metres. The two Space Marines stopped. Dried blood and fleshy matter coated the metal floor ahead of them, paving the way like the regal carpet of some warp-spawned fiend.

Nisroc knelt and extended a probe from his narthecium, using it to scrape away a fragment of gore. A line of genetic sequence flashed across his display as the probe finished its analysis. 'Sanguinius gut them,' the Apothecary slammed his fist into the ground, cracking the metal panelling. 'This blood belongs to the Chapter.'

Harahel tightened his grip on his weapon as his pulse began to quicken. He swallowed hard in an attempt to stop salivating. 'Blood calls out to blood,' Harahel recited the battle mantra as he fought down the urge to tear apart the walls.

'The main chapel lies at the far end,' Nisroc spoke as the chrono display flashed a warning in his display. 'Time is—'

'Advance behind me,' Harahel activated his Eviscerator, the weapon's barbed blades impatiently churning the air as they search for something to rend. 'If anyone emerges, shoot them.' Harahel spat the words through a pool of saliva. He dropped his weight and flexed his knees.

Nisroc nodded and slammed a fresh clip into his bolt pistol.

‘For the Chapter!’ Harahel broke into a run, the servos in his armour whirring as he picked up pace. The enhanced musculature of his thighs powered him forward at a speed that belied his bulk, an engine of ceramite and fury. ‘One, clear. Two, clear,’ Harahel looked left and right as he ran, updating Nisroc as his armour’s optical and audio sensors checked and recorded the disposition of each of the prayer cells in a heartbeat. ‘Three—’

Las-rounds stabbed at Harahel from either side.

‘Contacts, five through nine,’ Harahel kept running, ignoring the smattering of fire coming from the cells. Most shots went wide, his powerful strides carrying him past the cell openings before his attackers could take aim. A handful of rounds grazed his armour, picking the paint from his war plate. Harahel growled. The combination of his helmet’s vox amplifier and the hall’s acoustics amplifying his annoyance until it filled the corridor like the roar of some terrible beast.

‘Keep moving,’ Nisroc opened fire. His bolt pistol bucked in his hand as he sent three traitors sprawling to the floor, their heads blasted from their malnourished shoulders. ‘Your rear is secure.’

Harahel blinked an acknowledgement to Nisroc and pushed onwards. He was nearing the last cluster of prayer cells. His targeting overlay lit up with data, tracking the trajectory of the three fist-sized globes that rolled onto the corridor in front of him. ‘Grenades!’ Harahel bellowed a warning to the Apothecary, and threw himself into the nearest prayer cell as the devices exploded, avoiding the wash of flame and shrapnel that billowed out from them. He heard a muffled cry and a wrenching snap as the cell’s occupant’s bones broke under his immense bulk. Harahel snorted and picked the dead man up by his skull.

‘Harahel?’ Nisroc’s voice crackled in Harahel’s ear.

‘I am unharmed,’ Harahel emerged from the cell carrying the head of the dead traitor by the spinal cord, his gauntlet slick with blood.

‘The way is clear brother.’

‘No, there is one left, there,’ Harahel tossed the dismembered head into the cell opposite. A man screamed, firing on reflex as the head landed with a wet mulch.

Nisroc stepped into the cell, allowing his armour to filter out the smell of excrement. The man had the nose of his lasgun pressed inside his mouth. His eyes trembled as they looked up at the Flesh Tearer. The Apothecary growled. The man juddered, reflexively pulling the trigger. The single las-round blew apart his skull, painting the wall behind him with superheated brain matter. Nisroc turned from the corpse to find Harahel on bended knee, his helmet discarded at his side. The veins in the other Flesh Tearer's forehead were threatening to push through his skin, his brow ran with sweat. Nisroc took a tentative step towards Harahel, his finger resting on the trigger of his bolt pistol.

‘Stay back!’ Harahel held a hand out to the Apothecary.

Nisroc resisted the urge to fire, ‘Control yourself! Now is not the time. The Archenemy has taken the lives of our brothers.’ Nisroc gestured to the arched doors of the chapel, ‘We must know what lies behind those doors.’

Harahel said nothing, saliva dripped from his mouth to burn away at the floor.

‘On your feet, Flesh Tearer! You can report to Appollus as soon as we return to the Victus, I’m sure he’ll welcome you into the Death Company. But right now, you need to get to your feet or, Emperor help me, I’ll put a bolt-round through that thick skull of yours.’

Harahel tilted his head to look up at the Apothecary, his eyes bloodshot.

‘On your feet.’ Nisroc proffered Harahel his helmet. ‘Use your rage for something useful, like getting through that door.’

Harahel took the helmet and locked it in place. ‘Never threaten me again, brother.’ He regarded the fusion marks on the chapel doors. Someone had welded them shut from the outside. He took a step back and then drove forwards, slamming his armoured shoulder into the weld-line. The metal buckled. Harahel brought his knee up and kicked out, the doors snapped inwards. A bank of suspended luminators stuttered into life as he stepped into the chamber.

‘Emperor save us...’

The mutilated corpses of eight Flesh Tearers decorated the curved walls of the chapel. Fixed in place by the blades of their chainswords, they hung like nightmare visages of the saints that decorated Cretacia’s Reclusiasms. Their

armour was pitted and dented from numerous impacts and lacerations; their helmets had been torn from their locking mounts, mangling their gorgets; all that remained of their faces were sunken husks, matted with bloodied hair.

‘Blood of Sanguinius,’ Nisroc fell to one knee, the desecration of his brother’s flesh staggering him.

‘Blood will bring blood,’ with a grunt of effort, Harahel pulled the blade from the nearest of corpses. The dead Flesh Tearer’s remains made a dull thud as they dropped to the ground. Harahel stared at the deep hole in the chapel wall; the blade had been driven through the outer rock into the metal support behind. ‘It took great strength to do this.’

Nisroc nodded, and cast his gaze around the chamber. The plaster finish and faux-brickwork of the walls was undamaged. The flagstones that paved the way to the raised, wooden altar were unblemished save for a single dark spot left behind by an errant blood droplet. ‘They weren’t killed here,’ Nisroc pushed himself to his feet. ‘There’s no sign of battle. Someone brought them here.’ The Apothecary struggled to talk, grinding his teeth in rage ‘After.’

Harahel snarled. ‘Brother-sergeant,’ he summoned Barbelo over the vox. Static filled his ear as he waited for a response. ‘Emperor damn this storm,’ the Flesh Tearer punched the wall, cracking it in a cloud of plaster-dust.

‘Report,’ Barbelo’s voice crackled back.

‘We have cleared the chapel annex.’ Harahel paused as another burst of static shot across the vox-link, ‘Eight of our brothers lie here.’

‘Status?’

‘Dead. All of them.’ Harahel turned his eyes from the corpses, his fists bunching in restrained fury as he glared at the aquila etched on the floor.

‘Show me.’

Harahel closed his eyes. He had no wish to look upon the massacre a second time. Activating his helmet’s visual feed, he panned his head around the room, streaming what his optics registered to the others.

For a long moment, the vox-link fell silent.

‘Nisroc, get what you came for. Harahel, meet us at the Stormraven.’ Barbelo’s voice rasped through another bout of static.

Six minutes. Time continued to count down at the edge of Maion’s peripheral display. The Archenemy’s army was almost at their door. ‘Let them come,’ he snarled, affixing the last of the melta-charges to the crossbeam that supported the ceiling. The charge was directional, and he’d taken care to make sure that the blast would travel down the corridor away from where he and Micos would be positioned.

‘Brother,’ Harahel’s voice rasped over a secure channel, ‘Back in the armoury, we gutted the traitors without incident. The ones in the command centre put up no more of a fight.’

Maion knew where Harahel was headed. ‘Yes, I had the same thought.’

‘How could such, such filth,’ Harahel spat the word, ‘have overcome our brethren? Those weaklings could scarcely have lifted a chainsword, let alone driven it into solid rock.’

Maion brought the percentile counter that recorded the progress of the data-stack download to the forefront of his helmet’s display. It ticked down slow and deliberate, like a dying man’s laboured breath. ‘Emperor willing, we’ll live long enough to find out.’ Maion sighed and blinked the counter away.

‘Jetpack assault troops. Bearing down on the courtyard,’ Amaru’s voice cut across on the main channel, interrupting Harahel’s reply. The Techmarine was still jacked into the compound’s data banks in the inner sanctum and was observing the Archenemy’s advance through a remote-link with the Stormraven’s sensors. The Archenemy’s jetpack squad appeared as solid red blips that drifted over the landscape and grew in size as they neared. ‘I count six of them...’ Amaru’s voice trailed off as he worked a calculation. ‘Harahel, you will not clear the courtyard before they descend.’

Harahel emerged from the chapel annex and growled up into the blackness of Arere’s starless sky, his enhanced eyes searching for the tell-tale flares of jetpacks. ‘I see no enemy.’

‘I assure you brother, they are coming.’

‘They’re a vanguard, nothing more.’ Barbelo growled over the vox-feed, his impatience evident in every syllable. ‘Harahel, ignore them and get to my position. The main force will hit us in less than five minutes. Amaru, cover his advance.’

The Techmarine blinked an acknowledgment icon to Barbelo and concentrated on communicating with the Stormraven’s machine-spirit. The gunship’s sentient mind was silent, almost dormant. It resisted Amaru’s gentle interrogation, blocking his attempts to rouse it.

‘My skin for yours.’ The Techmarine invited the machine-spirit into his armour as he probed deeper into the gunship. The connection sent a spasm through his muscles as he gained access to the Stormraven’s weapon systems. Amaru teased power into the gunship’s turret-mounted assault cannons.

‘Battle,’ the machine-spirit whispered in the Techmarine’s head as it stirred to readiness.

The red-blips pulsed on Amaru’s display as the enemy neared weapons range. He cycled the twin-assault cannons to firing speed, their multiple barrels whirring with a metallic hiss as the autoloader fed them rounds.

‘Enemy.’ The word growled from within the Stormraven’s machine soul, washing through Amaru’s mind like the strained rumble of thruster backwash. It was awake now, wearing the Stormraven like a suit of ceramite war plate, wielding its turret-mounted weapon with the same ease and precision that a Flesh Tearer hefted a blade.

A sound wave spiked across Amaru’s display as the Stormraven’s auditory sensors detected the roar of enemy jetpacks. The Chaos Space Marines were gunning their thrusters, slowing their descent.

‘Purge the heretics.’ the Techmarine urged the gunship to open fire.

The enraged machine-spirit obliged. The twin-assault cannon’s twelve barrels flared into life, lighting up the sky like miniature starbursts as they fired. Caught unaware, the Chaos Space Marines dived straight into the fusillade. The first three died in a heartbeat, their armour and flesh torn asunder by the unceasing

hail of armour piercing rounds.

Harahel was two-thirds of the way across the courtyard when the assault cannons opened fire. He risked a glance skyward and saw the visceral red power armour of the Archenemy's warriors. Their breastplates were shaped like cruel gargoyles and snarled at him from the darkness. A burst of rounds clipped the nearest of the Traitor Marines, blowing apart his thrusters in a shower of flame. The enemy warrior veered downwards towards Harahel, carried by what remained of his earlier momentum. The Flesh Tearer smiled and swung his eviscerator up through the stricken Chaos Space Marine's ribcage, ripping him in two. Harahel kept moving, tearing his giant weapon through the body of another foe that slammed into the earth in front of him a moment later. The Flesh Tearer bit into his lip, relishing the taste of his own blood as he pounded towards Barbelo and the slaughter to come.

Amaru watched as the Stormraven continued to track and fire. He felt his pulse quicken to the hoarse wheeze of the assault cannon's barrels as they spun. Several more of the red blips disappeared from his display, shredded by the gunships' unerring fire. The Techmarine could feel the machine-spirit's cold rage, its lust for violence and the gleeful abandon with which it massacred the enemy. He gasped, clutching the cables that linked him to the compound's datastacks, and fought the urge to sever the link. He needed to be outside with the Stormraven, fighting, killing. His body began to tremble as he tried to restrain his urges. The download sequence was in its final stage, any interruption now would corrupt the data. Amaru dropped to one knee, screaming in rage as the machine-spirit's emotions threatened to overcome him. 'My work is iron, my will steel.' The Techmarine held his clenched fist against the machine-cog on his left pauldron as he growled his way through the devotion, 'I shall not falter, I shall not heel.' Defend, he forced the order onto the machine spirit and drew his mind away, severing the link to the gunship and the violence outside.

Panting hard, Amaru focused on finishing the protocol. 'There is no truth beyond the data, it is the muniment of the future. Guard it well.' Download complete, Amaru unplugged from the datastacks and completed the rites of remembrance, secreting the data-keeper within his armour. The Techmarine let out a slow breath as the after-shadow of the Raven and the compound fell away, and the confines of his world reasserted themselves.

Alone in his armour, he took reassurance from the cold, impassive touch of the

bionics and augmetics that punctuated his body. Perfect where he was flawed, the machine components of the Techmarine would continue to function long after The Rage drove his flesh to destruction. 'Download complete,' Amaru voxed the update to the rest of the squad and pushed himself to his feet.

'Nisroc, status?' Barbelo's voice crackled over the vox.

'I need three minutes,' Maion listened to the Apothecary's reply as the chronometer on his display blinked down to one.

He stood immobile in the darkness. His gaze fixed on the heavy blast doors at the far end of the corridor, as the chrono display floating at the edge of his peripheral vision blinked down to zero. The attack had begun. If Barbelo was right and this enemy did indeed wage war like the Flesh Tearers, then they would have fallen upon the outer walls with all the fury of a scorned god. Maion imagined the scene outside, picturing the Archenemy's forces as they descended on the compound. Vindicator siege tanks would have lead an armoured charge, unleashing a devastating bombardment as accompanying Rhinos and Razorbacks disgorged frothing assault squads. With the siege shells exploding overhead, the assault troops would use melta weapons and crackling thunder hammers to finish the job, smashing an entry hole into the compound. Right now, the Archenemy would be tearing towards him and the others like a swarm of berserker locusts.

Yet the scene ahead remained unchanged, the blast door intact. The only sound Maion could hear was the gentle purr of his armour and the wash of his rebreather. His muscles twitched. The urge to break from his defensive posture and meet the enemy head on was almost overwhelming.

'The longer you stand, the more blood you can spill,' Micos placed a calming hand on Maion's shoulder guard, reading the other Flesh Tearer's mood. 'Save your fury, we'll be steeped in their entrails soon enough.' Micos thrust his chainaxe towards the blast door as a trio of sparks dripped to the floor.

Maion nodded, allowing Micos's words to soften the call to violence that rang in his mind like the summoning gong of an ancient arena. The other Flesh Tearer looked odd in Atoc's helm. Atoc, Maion's anger returned in force as he thought of his brother's death. His knuckles turning bone white inside his gauntlets as he squeezed his weapons, desperate for something to rend. Another burst of superheated metal flared in the gloom. He blinked away a myriad of tactical icons

from his display; he was going to kill whatever came through the blast doors, nothing else mattered.

The drizzle of sparks tumbled into a downpour as the Archenemy intensified their assault on the door. A pulsing, amber line resolved into focus, bisecting the door from floor to ceiling.

‘Here they come,’ Maion crouched down, motioning for Micos to do the same.

The cutting stopped. The weld-line hung in the gloom, glowing and raw like a fresh scar. Silence filled the corridor, threatening to steal the last of Maion’s restraint.

An immense, metallic hand punched through the centre of the blast door. Pneumatic pistons hissed and spat as elongated fingers flexed in search of something to rend. The audio dampeners in Maion’s helmet worked to filter out the torturous screech of metal as the hand reached backwards, gripped the door, tore it from its hinges and dragged it backwards into the darkness. An instant later, the hand and the lumbering body it was attached to, bolted into view.

‘Dreadnought, corridor one,’ Maion warned, resisting the urge to open fire with his boltgun. He couldn’t afford to waste the ammo and even the weapon’s mass-reactive rounds would do little more than scratch the paint from the armoured behemoth bearing down on him. A dread fusion of Space Marine and technology, the Dreadnought was more foe than he and Micos could stop unaided. The towering walker stomped over the wreckage of the door, emerging into the corridor proper, and opened fire.

Maion threw himself flat. ‘For the Chapter!’ he roared, thumbing the control stick Amaru had fashioned for him. On the ceiling above him, one of the missile tubes stripped from the Stormraven’s wings screamed into life, sending its payload burning on a plume of fire towards the walker.

The first of the missiles slammed into the Dreadnought’s sarcophagus and exploded, splintering its armoured hide. The missile’s secondary booster ignited a moment later, driving a tertiary charge in through the weakened armour plating to detonate in the Dreadnought’s core. Flame engulfed the walker, wreathing it like a burial wrap. Autocannon rounds tore across the walls and ceiling as the Dreadnought continued to fire.

Maion fired again, sending another missile towards the metallic beast. A shrill cry resounded from the Dreadnought's voice-casters as it raised its clawed arm in defence. The second missile's primary warhead broke against the arm, blowing it apart in a shower of silver shrapnel. The remaining warhead burrowed into the Dreadnought's flank, detonating with enough force to finish the job, destroying the Archenemy walker.

A blood-curdling roar filled the corridor as a tide of blood-armoured warriors swarmed over the Dreadnought's corpse towards the Flesh Tearers. Micos roared back, pushing himself to his feet and striding forward to bathe the enemy in a jet of liquid fire. The Archenemy's warriors ran through the flame, heedless of their bubbling armour and the flesh that ran from it like water.

Maion advanced to Micos's right, his boltgun flashing in the darkness as he pumped a stream of rounds into the press of enemy. Each time Maion caught sight of a foe it forced a curse from his lips. Their red armour seemed in direct mockery of the sons of Sanguinius. Where Maion's breastplate was adorned with the holy aquila and his shoulder guard carried the mark of his Chapter, the foe's armour was inlaid with brass skulls and blasphemous runes.

'We can't hold here,' Micos's flamer stuttered and died, its fuel tank exhausted. Letting it hang on its sling, he drew his bolt pistol and continued to fire. In the close confines of the corridor he couldn't miss, each round found its mark. He shot an enemy point-blank in the chest, then two more. At such close range, even power armour offered little protection, his bolt rounds punching out through their backs in a hail of gore.

Maion stood level to Micos's right, firing his boltgun on full-auto until the round counter flashed zero. There was no time to reload the next enemy only ever a breath away. 'Micos, down!'

Micos grabbed the nearest corpse as it fell to the ground and pulled it down on top of himself. Maion did likewise. Behind them, the hurricane bolter emplacement they'd fashioned from the Stormraven's sponson weaponry opened fire. The noise was deafening as the three pairs of linked boltguns pumped a storm of shells into the corridor. Funnelled by the walls of the corridor, and pushed onwards by the press of warriors at their backs, the Archenemy were driven heedlessly into the salvo. They died in droves, their torsos pulped and limbs severed by the vicious onslaught.

Maion lay under the twitching corpses of half a dozen enemy. His pulse was racing, his twin-hearts echoing to the call of the hurricane bolters. The smell of blood and burnt flesh was choking. He was lying in an expanding pool of blood that dripped from all around him, congealing into a puddle of thick, viscous fluid that threatened to swallow him.

‘Emperor, fashion my thirst to your unbending will.’ Maion focused on the data overlaid on his helmet display, turning his thoughts to the tactical challenges that an endless horde of berserker foe presented, and away from the bloodlust burning in his veins. The weapon emplacement’s ammo counter was racing towards zero. ‘Two seconds.’ Maion subvocalised the warning to Micos and slammed his last clip into his boltgun.

With a final thrum, the hurricane bolters racked empty. Maion shot upwards from beneath the corpse-cover. The Archenemy dead were heaped upon one-another like red-armoured sandbags. Yet still they came. He opened fire, sending two more abominations to join the pile of dead that choked the corridor. The smell of promethium and burnt flesh flooded towards Maion as the enemy turned their flamers on their dead, burning a path towards the Flesh Tearers. The damning clack of an empty firing chamber drew a curse from Maion’s lips as his boltgun spat its last round. He discarded the spent weapon and gripped his chainsword with both hands. ‘I am His vengeance!’

‘Harahel!’ Barbelo tore his chainsword from an enemy’s ribcage as he shouted for the giant Flesh Tearer.

Harahel wasn’t listening, his attention fixed on the dismembered bodies of the three Chaos Space Marines he’d just slain.

‘Harahel, fall back!’

Harahel ignored the sergeant, launching himself back into the press of enemy. Ducking a whirring chainaxe, he shouldered an enemy warrior into the wall, pulping his skull between rockcrete bulkhead and ceramite pauldron. Harahel smiled and swung his eviscerator around in a tight arc, hacking into the onrushing press of red armour with a cold fury.

‘Emperor damn you.’ The other Flesh Tearer’s disobedience drew a curse from Barbelo’s lips as a roaring chainblade flashed out towards his neck. He leaned back as far as his balance allowed. The weapon’s teeth sparked as they grazed

his gorget. Growling, he fired a plasma round into his attacker's leering helm, vaporising the Chaos Space Marine's head and torso. The headless body twitched backwards and disappeared in the press of red armour. 'Harahel! When they cross the line, I will detonate.' Barbelo let his smoking pistol drop to the floor, its power pack exhausted, and drew his combat knife. 'Harahel!'

Harahel snapped his head around, sighting the sergeant. Barbelo was embroiled with two Chaos Space Marines, a blade in each of his hands as he fought his way clear of the melee. A bolt round stung off Harahel's shoulder guard. He ignored it, snapping the neck of a charging foe with a thunderous backhand and delivering a low kick that broke the leg of another. It went against his every instinct to move backwards. Faced with the immediate need to kill, duty was a secondary consideration. The rage that burned in Harahel's veins was insatiable. Roaring like a mad-man, he continued into the enemy. Behind him, Barbelo went down under a flurry of blows.

Distressed bio-data filled Barbelo's display. A stray round had clipped his helmet, dazing him long enough for one of the enemy to rake his midsection with a whirring blade and batter him to the ground. He tried to focus but his head was ringing. Pain lanced through him as a blade dug into his back. Gritting his teeth, he pulled a bolt pistol from beneath a corpse. Twisting, he fired it on full-auto, sending half a clip into his would-be executioner. The Traitor Marine juddered and fell as the rounds slammed into him. Surrounded and badly wounded, Barbelo knew he had little chance of regaining his footing. I am redeemed. Proud that he had remained master of his rage, that his armour had not been daubed in the black of madness, the sergeant clasped his hand tightly around the detonator. The Cretacian symbol for caution flashed across his display, warning him that he was within the blast radius.

'In His name.'

Barbelo released the device's pressure-clasp.

The melta-charges ignited, blasting apart the corridor's support studs in a hail of shrapnel and filling the passageway with an expanding ball of flame. Harahel was tossed like a leaf in a hurricane as the explosion slammed him into the walls and ground. Strobing runes filled his retinal display, as fire washed across his armour, testing the limits of its ceramite plating. The scree of warnings were in vain, Harahel unable to process them before the ceiling collapsed and his world

went dark.

‘The gene-seed is secure. Moving to the Stormraven.’

Maion struggled to hear Nisroc’s voice over the pumping of his hearts and the roar of his chainsword as its teeth tore through another enemy. ‘Understood,’ he growled, turning aside an enemy chainaxe. He parried the weapon down to expose his attacker’s neck, driving his combat knife into the Chaos Space Marine’s windpipe. Maion immediately withdrew the blade and buried it in the face of another of the Dark Gods’ minions. ‘If we’re not there in two minutes, leave.’

‘Sanguinius guide you.’

Maion was in no doubt that the Apothecary would be leaving without him. The Archenemy had him surrounded. His armour had been struck clean of paint and insignia. Deep lacerations covered his arms and torso. His muscles ached with exhaustion. It would not be long before even his indomitable constitution gave out, and the enemy killed him. Only his rage kept him on his feet, allowing him to fight on. The insatiable need to rend powering his blows and staying death’s probing touch. In death’s sight, you are fury. In his colours you are reborn a reaper. None shall evade your wrath, Maion recalled the mantra Chaplain Appollus used to rouse the Death Company for war. Until now, he’d embraced only the edges of the beast growling inside of him. Never daring to fully embrace the whispering voices that scratched at his mind. But here, on starless Arere, in the darkness of the corridor, Maion stopped resisting. He invited the red mist to descend to light up his world in a whirlwind of gore. He felt his rage swallowing him, the shadow in his mind—

A staccato of miniature explosions snapped Maion from his morbidity. He felt the press of enemy ease off behind, allowing him to take a step backwards. Risking a glance over his shoulder, he saw Amaru. The Techmarine stood in the centre of the corridor like a vengeful daemon, the quad arms of his servo-harness spitting death from an array of laser cutters and plasma burners. In his gauntleted hands, Amaru carried his power axe, Blood Cog. The Techmarine had forged the weapon himself upon his return from Mars. The axe’s sparking head was shaped like the gearwheel from a giant machine. A weapon of exquisite beauty and terrible power, it was imbued with all Amaru’s artisanship. Blood Cog rose and fell like the levers of an antiquated stenogram, as the Techmarine hacked down

the Archenemy in brutal swipes that crackled on impact.

‘Quickly brother, fall back,’ Amaru called out to Maion as he chopped Blood Cog through another Chaos Space Marine, bisecting the unfortunate from shoulder to hipbone. ‘Fall back now.’

‘Micos.’ Maion cast his gaze around. He had long since lost sight of the other Flesh Tearer but his ident-tag still shone. He was alive, for the moment at least. ‘We can’t leave him.’

‘They will rally soon.’

Maion ignored the Techmarine’s caution, and bludgeoned his way past another assailant to where his retinal display indicated Micos should be. With a huge effort, Maion began tossing back the bodies of the Archenemy, until he spotted the familiar ashen helm of a Flesh Tearer. ‘I have him,’ knifing his chainsword into the thigh of an onrushing foe, Maion grabbed Micos’ vambrace and dragged him from under a heap of corpses.

‘Can you carry him?’ Amaru’s question bore no insult.

Maion growled, tearing his blade free and beheading the wounded Traitor Marine. ‘To Cretacia and back.’ With a grunt of exertion, he hoisted Micos over his shoulders.

The Techmarine nodded and hacked the weapon arm from one of the Archenemy, before beheading him. Amaru’s fury was methodical, the aggression of his flesh tempered by the cold efficiency of his machine parts. Maion envied his calm. Though he knew that someday, the Techmarine’s rage would no longer be held in check. On that day, Maion would know pity for the enemies of his Chapter.

Pulling his axe from the chest plate of another Chaos Space Marine, Amaru tossed a glowing canister over Maion’s head. ‘Run.’

Harahel pushed himself off the ground, shrugging a pile of debris and a limbless body from his back. He felt his twin-hearts quicken as they worked with his armour to pump pain suppressors through his bloodstream. Angry runes flashed on his display as his helm’s optics tried and failed to focus. The lenses were cracked. Stumbling to his feet, Harahel spat a curse and unclasped his ruined

helmet. The Chapter's armourers had their work cut out for them. He mag-locked it to his thigh and paused while his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Thick silence hung in the air. It was in almost painful contrast to the cacophonous din of battle that preceded the explosion. Harahel listen for signs of the enemy but could hear nothing beyond his own shallow breathing. The blast had levelled the corridor, chocking it with collapsed rockcrete and the dead. The Flesh Tearer searched for his weapon, picking through the rubble and bodies nearest him. 'The mists rot you', he said. Cursing in tired frustration, Harahel kicked a fallen Chaos Space Marine in the chest. The ceramite skull adorning the fallen warrior's breastplate cracked under the blow. There was no trace of the eviscerator. His weapon was gone. Harahel staggered forwards, steadying himself on a dislodged support beam. There was movement up ahead. Two figures, one crouched over the other. He stepped towards them, unsteady on his feet as he fought to remain conscious.

'Nisroc?' Harahel cried out, delirious from the chemicals keeping him alive while his body healed itself. 'Brother?'

He moved closer, stopping as the crouched figure's armour resolved into focus. It was not the white of the Apothecary or the deep crimson of Barbelo's garb, but a vibrant, arterial red. Harahel took a step forwards, and saw Barbelo slumped underneath the figure. The sergeant's breastplate was peeled open, his organs scattered on the ground. Harahel bared his teeth and snarled.

The hunched figured turned and rose. Fresh blood stained his baroque armour, tracing the outlines of the ruinous brass symbols that adorned it. Skulls rattled on rusted chains as the Chaos Space Marine stood. He was a walking effigy of death. A vicious chainaxe barked to life in his hand.

Harahel gripped his helmet and strode towards his enemy, all thoughts of injury gone as rage invigorated him. He would avenge the sergeant. The traitor would pay in blood.

'Skulls for His throne,' the Archenemy warrior roared through the skull-shaped vox-grille of his helmet, and charged at the Flesh Tearer.

Harahel caught his opponent's arm as he slashed down with the chainaxe, pivoting and smashing his helm into the side of the Chaos Space Marine's head. He followed with his elbow, folding it into his opponent's left ocular lens. The

Traitor Marine roared as the shattered armour-glass dug into his eye, and threw a panicked hook with his free hand. Harahel felt his jaw break as the gauntleted blow struck his unarmoured face. He struggled to keep a hold of the Chaos Space Marine's weapon arm, spitting a glob of bloody mucous and teeth as he slammed his head into his opponent's other lens. Pain shot through Harahel's skull as his toughened skeleton protested at the cruel misuse. The Archenemy's head snapped backwards under the blow, unbalancing him.

'Die!' Harahel roared and smashed his helmet into the Chaos Space Marine's head. The enemy warrior's grip on the chainaxe loosened. The Flesh Tearer struck him again, and again, using his helmet as a hammer, bludgeoning the Chaos Space Marine to his knees. The chainaxe clattered to the ground as Harahel battered his foe into unconsciousness. 'Die!' The Traitor Marine's body went slack but the Flesh Tearer held him upright and continued to batter him. 'Die! Die! Die!'

Only when his helmet was mangled beyond recognition, and his opponent's head was nothing but bloody spatter on the wall, did Harahel let the body drop to the ground. The giant Flesh Tearer stood panting, the Archenemy's blood dripping from his face. He growled, bunching his fists as he fought the urge to smash down the wall. 'Strengthen me to the demands of blood. Armour my soul against the Thirst.' Harahel looked down at Barbelo's corpse. 'Let me kill those who blaspheme against your sons.' Calmer, Harahel knelt and unfastened Barbelo's helm. 'Forgive me,' Harahel said as he locked it in place over his head. Both retinal displays lit up with sigils of bonding as the sergeant's helmet synchronised with his armour. Harahel called up the squad's ident-tags, thankful that his brothers were still fighting. Slinging Barbelo's body over his shoulder and picking up the fallen chainaxe, Harahel made for the Stormraven. 'Come, brother, there's more blood to spill yet.'

The Stormraven was a burning wreck of charred metal and crumpled ceramite. The courtyard compromised. Enemy assault troops sat perched on the upper gantries like sentry-carrion, their weapons searching for targets. Half a dozen more sat crouched on their haunches, nursing wounds the Stormraven had dealt them before its demise.

'Wretches! Sanguinius drink you dry,' Nisroc opened fire, pulverising the nearest enemy with a hail of explosive rounds. There was no place in a Flesh Tearer's mind for dismay. If he were trapped on Arere, then he would kill his enemies

until death came to stop him. The Apothecary dived into cover, throwing himself against a metal container as a slew of bolt-rounds and melta-blasts tore towards him in retort. 'I'm in the courtyard. The Stormraven's gone.' Nisroc's voice was punctuated with rage as he voxed the update. Movement to the left drew his attention. He opened fire, suppressing a pair of Chaos Space Marines that were trying to encircle him.

'Sanguinius's blood. What now?' Harahel snarled over the vox.

Another torrent of rounds smashed into Nisroc's cover, forcing him to crouch low as he reloaded his bolter. 'We fight, we—'

'I know a way,' Amaru interrupted.

'Explain... ' Nisroc trailed off. The enemy had stopped firing. On instinct, he subvocalised the Cretacian rune for haste to the rest of the squad.

'Apothecary!' The word rang out in a garbled roar, its syllables tortured by a voice unaccustomed to speech. 'I will feast on your hearts and savour the seed of your brothers.'

At the corner of his peripheral vision, Nisroc saw four more Chaos Space Marines, their weapons trained on him. He ground his teeth in frustration. His only option was to face the challenger.

'Not while I draw breath!' Nisroc drew his chainsword and stood to face his opponent. The Chaos Space Marine was a giant, taller even than Harahel, his bronzed armour covered in egg-shell cracks where it struggled to contain his warped bulk. 'Tell me,' Nisroc said in a low growl. 'Whose blood shall my blade taste?' The Apothecary activated his visual feed as he spoke, transmitting the locations of the Chaos Space Marines in the courtyard to the rest of the squad.

'Krykhan, Fist of Khorne,' the traitor growled as he launched himself at Nisroc.

Amaru sprinted from the corridor firing, Maion close behind him. 'Fall back to the missile silo.' The Techmarine dropped to one knee to avoid a plasma round, the arms of his servo-harness whirring as they turned to return fire. The Chaos plasma gunner died in a heartbeat, dissected by the merciless cutting lasers.

Maion ran past the Techmarine, Micos draped over his shoulders. It irked him to

be unarmed, but he hadn't the time to find a weapon. Bolt-rounds barked at his heels and churned up the dirt as he moved. He spat a curse, desperate for a chance to return fire. Angry runes flashed on his display as shell fragments spattered off of his legs. 'Where?'

'Back through the armoury.' Amaru was forced to shout over the din of bolter fire. 'The rearmost corridor.'

Harahel felt Barbelo's body jerk as bolt-rounds hammered into it. Growling, he took cover behind a shorn off section of the Stormraven's wing. The orphaned appendage stood in the ground like a piece of industrial sculpture. A grenade exploded, showering Harahel in shrapnel. The noise reminded him of a Cretacian thunderstorm. Ahead, he saw Nisroc. The Apothecary was about to die. A massive warrior stood over the prone Flesh Tearer, his murderous intent obvious. Harahel growled, standing to throw his chainaxe into the Chaos Space Marine's back. The towering warrior roared, pitching forwards under the force of the impact. 'Get up and kill him,' Harahel snarled at Nisroc.

The Chaos Space Marine turned away from Nisroc, reaching for the axe in his back. The Apothecary summoned the last of his strength, shooting upwards to thrust his combat knife through his opponent's neck. The Archenemy warrior's body shuddered as his brain died. Nisroc caught the body before it could fall, pulling it around as a shield against the two Chaos Space Marines who immediately opened fire on him. He drew the dead warrior's boltgun and put down his attackers with pinpoint shots. 'Harahel, move! I'll cover you.'

Too late, Amaru realised a Chaos Space Marine had landed behind him. His servo-harness sparked violently, its arms falling limp as the Archenemy warrior sliced through its control fibres. Amaru hit the release clasp and rolled away, pivoting as he rose to face his enemy. He spun forwards, tearing Blood Cog down through his foe's shoulder and ripping it from his ribcage.

A round struck Maion's pauldron as he cleared the threshold of the armoury. Another hit his abdomen. He fell, Micos toppling with him. He pushed himself onto all fours and tried to focus. Everything was faint, murky, as though he were a long way underwater. Pain forced a growl from his throat. His injuries were severe.

'On your feet.' Harahel grabbed Maion by his backpack and hoisted him up.

‘Micos...’

‘I have him.’ Harahel pushed Maion further into the armoury, stooping to gather up Micos.

‘Amaru, where now?’ Nisroc backed into the chamber, a boltgun barking in each hand.

‘Enter the third launch annex.’ Amaru pointed to the passageway leading from the rear of the armoury. ‘Go!’

Debris dust drifted into the missile silo, bathing the Flesh Tearers in powdered rockcrete. Amaru had used the last of the melta-charges to bring the corridor down behind them, creating a barricade between them and the Archenemy. He hoped it would give them enough time.

In the centre of the chamber stood a single, towering missile, its base disappearing down into the earth, its tip several stories above the control deck. A ladder gantry snaked around the missile, weaving between vines of cabling and fuel hoses to connect the deck with its upper reaches.

‘We don’t have long.’ Amaru pointed up towards the missile. ‘Quickly, into the nose.’

‘What?’ Maion stopped, unsure if he’d misheard the Techmarine.

‘It is a Mark-XV defence missile, the nose space is relatively empty.’ Amaru detached a plasma cutter from his pack and passed it to Maion. ‘Make entry with this and seal it once you’re inside.’

‘And you?’

‘I will remain here to ensure your withdrawal.’

Maion made to speak, but the Techmarine held up a hand, ‘The missile will not launch itself.’

The other Flesh Tearer nodded grimly and took the plasma cutter.

Amaru grabbed Nisroc’s vambrace as he walked past. ‘Wait.’ He held his axe out

to the Apothecary. ‘The Chapter has lost enough this day.’

Silently, Nisroc clasped his hand to Amaru’s vambrace and took the proffered weapon.

The nosecone was cramped, only just accommodating the four Flesh Tearers. Nisroc had removed the gene-seed from Barbelo’s body while Maion had cut them an access hatch. They’d left what remained of the sergeant on the gantry. Maion bent the armoured panelling back into shape, heat-sealed it with the plasma cutter and squeezed his bulk between Harahel and Nisroc. Micos was still unconscious, and was only on his feet because there was no room to fall over.

‘We’re in.’ Nisroc opened a private channel to Amaru.

‘Ensure Tabbris sanctifies Blood Cog. Its spirit is strong; it will serve him well.’

‘It will taste flesh again,’ Nisroc answered. Tabbris was Amaru’s pupil, a novitiate Techmarine. That Amaru would cede him his weapon signified his faith in the novitiate’s abilities. Nisroc would see to it that the Master Artificer knew of Amaru’s wishes. ‘Death find you well, brother.’

Amaru said nothing. Extending a cable from his armour, he plugged into the firing console. Behind him, the forces of the Archenemy had already blasted through the rubble. He could hear them striding along the corridor. There was no time to perform the correct consecration or rites of firing. The missile’s machine-spirit was ancient. He hoped it would not be offended. Launch. Amaru sent the command to the missile. A tremor passed underfoot, rattling a canteen pack off a nearby workstation. Shrill klaxons screamed through the corridor as the warhead powered up. The Techmarine deactivated them. Sensors and bundles of thick cabling detached and fell away from the rocket as pressurised hydraulics moved it into the firing position. More rumbling. Fuel pipes retracted. Exhaust vents ground open beneath the floor of the silo. Amaru interrupted them, closing the grilles. The engines gurgled into life. More alarms rang out as the compound’s safety systems detected the block in the ventilation, Amaru overrode them, silencing the alarms and pushing the missile up thorough the shaft into the final position.

‘For the Chapter.’

A wash of flame erupted from the missile's booster like the breath of an angry dragon, propelling it upwards on an expanding pillar of fire. Amaru's world burned away in an instant, the temperature gauge on his retinal display flashing red as the thruster backwash broiled him. A second warning blinked across his vision for the briefest of instants before he, and everything else in the compound, was incinerated.

The maglift whispered to a stop. He stepped off into the corridor, his armoured boots making a dull thud as they contacted the deck plating. He paused for a moment while his enhanced eyes strained to adjust to the gloom. They could not. The walkway floated in complete, impenetrable darkness, shrouded by a long-forgotten technology that defied even the keenest of auspexes. To walk the passageways of this level was to know exactly where to tread or to fall to your doom amid the ancient bowels of the ship. He continued along the corridor, making the turns instinctively, following the pattern imprinted in his eidetic memory. His pace quickened as he felt his ire rise, his warrior blood drumming in his veins at the frustrating tediousness of the journey. He stopped and drew a breath, calming his mind. He did not have the luxury of indulging his baser nature. Such things were his burden to bear and some secrets were not meant for the light.

A door slid open into a darkened chamber. He stepped inside and the door closed behind him. The faint glow of an idling pict-screen cast the face of the room's single occupant into half-shadow.

'Where did you find them?' As always, his voice was dangerous, his pensive demeanour only ever a heartbeat removed from the violent rage that made him such an implacable warrior.

'The strike cruiser Jagged Blade intercepted them just beyond the Arere system.' Captain Araton stepped closer, the light from the pict-screen illuminating the crimson of his breastplate. The serrated blade emblazoned on his armour was thrown into menacing relief.

'Survivors?'

'Only three, lord. The fourth...' Araton paused, unsure how to continue. 'The fourth, Brother Micos, was killed in transit.'

'Explain.'

‘He succumbed to...a rage. The others were left with little choice.’

‘The curse?’

‘Perhaps, but Nisroc believed it to be something more, something worse.’ Araton turned to a console and activated the playback on the pict-screen. ‘These feeds were extracted from the datastacks the squad recovered from the outpost.’ The captain stepped away from the screen, retreating into the darkness.

++Recorder 3: Sanctum: I808++

The sanctum was alive with motion. Men clambered behind consoles and data stacks as explosions wracked the chamber. A straggler was hit in the back, the force of the blow spinning him through the air, his torso a bloodied mess. The Guardsmen’s fatigues marked them out as the Angorian Rifles, the garrison regiment of Arere. A figure burst into the room, too quick for the pict-recorder to capture fully. It barrelled into a huddle of Guardsmen. They tried to run. A vicious chain-weapon struck out and sent a bodiless head spinning past the pict-recorder lens.

An officer stood up and screamed, motioning for his men to fall back. His battleplate was blackened and pitted, his creased face caked with mire. Shrapnel danced around him as mass-reactive rounds slammed into the console he was using for cover. He shouted again, dragging the man nearest him to his feet.

A jet of super-heated flame blew over the console, incinerating both men in a wash of burning promethium.

++Recording Interrupted++

++Recorder 7: Barracks: I827++

Two squads of Angorian Rifles were taking cover behind a row of overturned kit-lockers. The barrels of their lasguns glowed hot as the troopers poured an endless stream of fire towards the doorway. Two objects flew in from off camera and exploded in front of the lockers. Ashen smoke filled the viewer.

It cleared to reveal a twisted mass of metal, the Angorians’ makeshift barricade in ruins. The corpses of half their number lay slumped lifelessly over the shredded lockers, shards of metal embedded in their flesh. A figure advanced

from the doorway, his armoured back filling the viewer. The Guardsmen opened fire. Untroubled, the attacker fired back. The unmistakable muzzle flash of a boltgun illuminated the Angorians as they flipped backwards, torn apart by the mass-reactive rounds.

The attacker turned his crimson breast plate—

++Recording Interrupted++

++Recorder 19: Armoury: I901++

A crimson armoured warrior was sprinting down the corridor into a hail of laser-fire, his breastplate scorched clean of insignia by their attentions. A bright muzzle-flash blazed into life up ahead. Heavy calibre, solid-state rounds began churning up the floor and walls as they stitched a line towards him. One struck his right pauldron. Splintered armour fragments struck the pict-recorder as he spun to the ground. The warrior rolled to his feet and continued into the gunfire, his weapon forgotten on the ground behind him as he disappeared from view.

The ruined corridor lay empty, battered ceramite flaking to the ground. The intensity of the gunfire lessened, sporadic rounds zipping down to the corridor. Then it died altogether. Within moments, the armoured warrior emerged from the end of the corridor. Blood pooled in the recesses of his damaged armour, which was pitted and cracked like the surface of a moon. His hands and forearms were thick with gore. Blood dripped from his fingertips, leaving a macabre trail behind him as he strode back towards his weapon.

++I901: Segment Ends++

++Recorder 12: Courtyard: I873++

A Flesh Tearer lay slumped against the wall, one of his brothers bent over him. The brother turned, withdrawing the blade he'd driven into the other's heart. His helmet was gone, his face contorted into a bestial snarl. He made to rise when a searing plasma round struck his chest.

A shadow fell over the Flesh Tearer's prone form. He pushed his hands into the dirt and tried to stand when a second plasma round obliterated his head in a stream of sparking gore.

The shadow grew larger until the Flesh Tearer's executioner was right beneath the pict-recorder. The man looked up, straight into the lens.

The image froze as the viewer's recog-system analysed the man's face. The image blinked once as data began to scroll down the screen.

First Commissar Morvant, attached to the Angorian Rifles. Awarded Iron Faith honours for the Ivstyan Cleansing. Last posting Arere, Substation 12BX. Current status: Unknown.

The image blinked again and playback continued.

The man's passive stare didn't change as he raised his pistol towards the pict-recorder.

++Recording Interrupted++

The viewer clicked off, emitting a faint buzz of static as it returned to idle.

Silence persisted.

'Destroy it.'

'And Arere?'

'Exterminatus.' Gabriel Seth, Chapter Master of the Flesh Tearers, turned on his heel and headed back into the darkness.

He had a world to kill.