

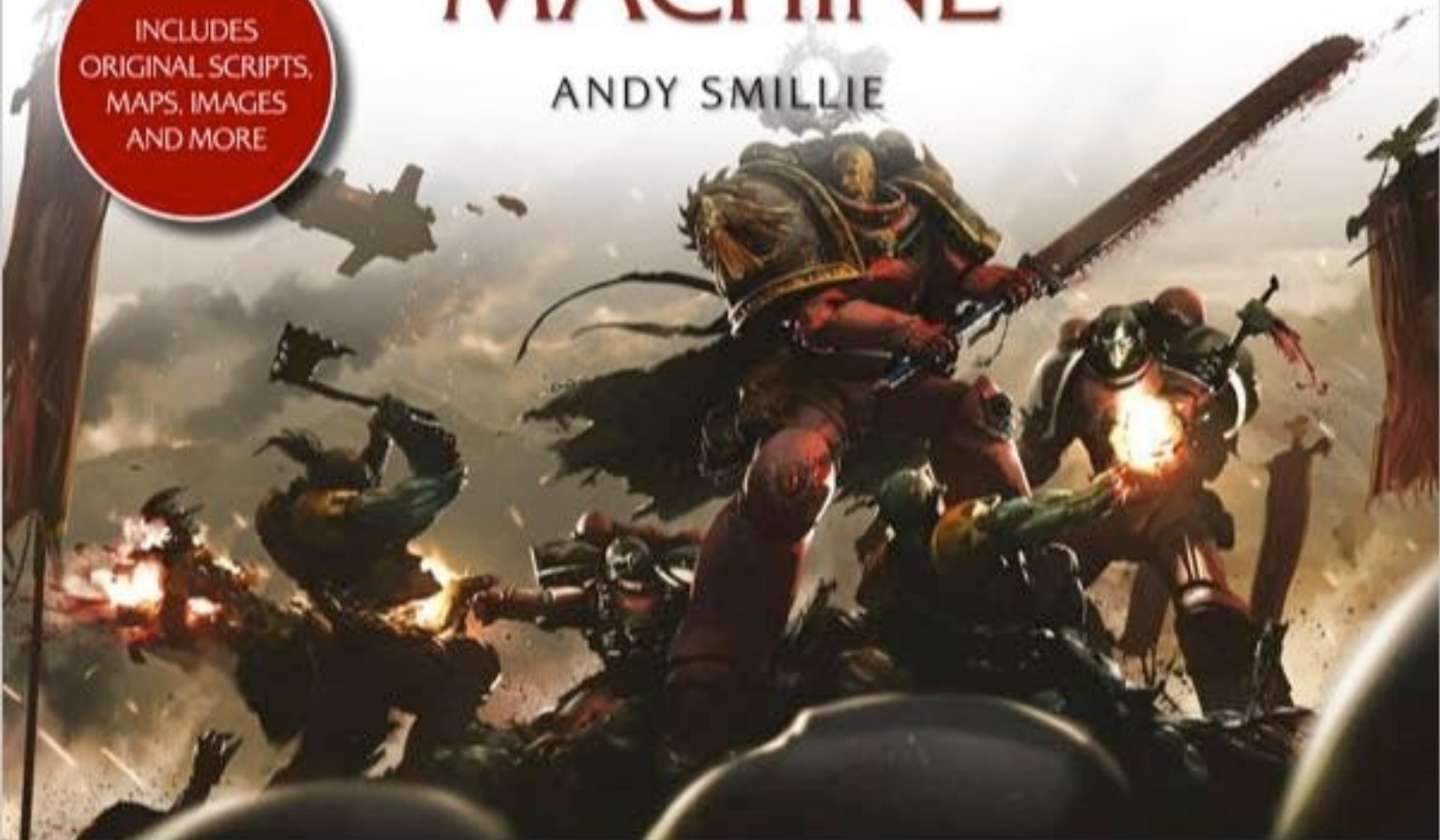
WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES

BLOOD IN THE MACHINE

ANDY SMILLIE

INCLUDES
ORIGINAL SCRIPTS,
MAPS, IMAGES
AND MORE



Blood in the Machine

Captain Iago emptied the last of the contents of his stomach onto his boots and replaced his rebreather. The bloodied remains of his command squad covered his fatigues, mixing with the slick mud to stain the tan of his greatcoat a ruddy brown. It was only by the grace of the Emperor that he had not died along with them.

‘Emperor forge my soul with steel.’ Iago whispered the prayer and straightened, leaning against the trench wall for support.

All along the line, members of the 89th Regiment of the Armageddon Steel Legion were picking themselves up and mouthing their own prayers. The ork artillery attack had been brutally effective. Spheres of crackling energy had glided into the trenches, exploding in fulgurant flashes that had turned men inside out.

Iago winced as he coughed, hammering a fist into his chest in an effort to clear it. He ached to his war-weary bones. Every instinct told him to lie down, to curl up in the dirt and let the inevitable happen. Perhaps, if he had been on another world, fighting in another war, he would have. But Armageddon was his home. If he did not fight for it, then who would?

‘Captain... Captain, you have to see this.’

Iago turned to find a badly scarred trooper proffering a set of magnoculars.

‘What is it, trooper?’ Iago’s reply was punctuated by another fit of coughing.

‘I don’t know, sir. I think... Yonis thinks they’re angels.’

Iago took the magnoculars from the shaking trooper and carefully climbed onto the lip of the trench. ‘How far out?’

‘Three hundred metres, sir.’

Iago adjusted the magnoculars’ lenses. ‘Where? I don’t...’ He cursed as a squad of crimson and ashen warriors resolved into view. They stood as tall as the monstrous orks and were clad in brutal war-plate sealed by fist-sized rivets.

‘Space Marines...’ The words fell unbidden from Iago’s lips. ‘Thank the Throne. Space Marines.’

Iago refocused the magnoculars, zooming in on the nearest squad of the Emperor’s angels. Though he did not recognise the red livery of their war-plate, nor the toothed saw-blade on their pauldrons, Iago had no doubt they were there to deliver him. Emboldened by their appearance, he snapped orders to his warriors.

‘Dorcas, get that heavy bolter operational. Triano, I want a firing solution for the mortar team in two minutes. Osric, get your men ready to move up when the bombardment starts. We’re retaking the forward line. Prepare—’

‘Sir, incoming. Enemy aircraft.’

Iago turned his view skywards. A cloud of thick black smoke was speeding towards them. ‘Ork bombers. Cover! Find cover!’ Iago threw himself flat, muttering a prayer for protection as the snarling prows of the ork aircraft tore into view. He pushed his face to the ground, folding his arms over his head as weapons fire erupted in the sky above.

Two explosions rumbled in the air in quick succession. Iago looked up to see a hunched raptor shape above him, its flanks blood-red. Multiple weapons on its wings and prow flashed with lethal discharge, blasting apart the ork machines.

Iago got to his feet with newfound vigour. ‘The Emperor has sent more of His angels to aid us! Let us not be found wanting in their sight! Forward! Push forward! For the glory of Terra, forward!’ Iago had no idea what Chapter this second wave of Space Marines were from. He didn’t care. For the first time since the morning rotation began, Iago began to believe that he might live through the day.

The ork’s eyes were fist-sized fissures sunk deep into its gnarled face. Rage-red pupils strained at the centre of cancerous yellow sclera, glaring at Seth as though they might somehow break his hold. The Chapter Master of the Flesh Tearers tightened his grip on the ork’s neck and leaned closer. ‘You fight with bestial fury, ork.’

The ork stank of stale sweat and freshly spilled blood. The stench of undigested meat hung on its breath, wafting from between the cage of broken incisors

studding its gums.

‘But today, I will teach your kind the meaning of wrath. I will kill a thousand of your filth-breed before your blood dries on my gauntlets.’

The ork rasped defiance, its war cry ending in a strangled rattle as Seth tore its head from its body.

‘For Sanguinius, for the Blood, kill them all!’ Seth bellowed to his warriors and spun around, tearing his eviscerator from the dead ork’s chest, cleaving it through two more of the greenskins.

The orks came apart in a shower of gore and ruined flesh. Seth snarled, emboldened by the copper tang of their blood as it splashed across his face. He killed again, thundering his fist into an ork skull. The greenskin’s face broke with a harsh crack as its teeth spilled from its mouth. The sound of battle rang in Seth’s ears like righteous chanting. Yet it was as a whisper to the hammering beat of his hearts.

They pounded in his chest, louder than any boltgun, more visceral than any death-scream.

They were war drums, driving his limbs to battle with all the rage his father had bestowed upon him.

‘I. Am. Wrath!’

Beside Seth, the five members of his command squad cut into the mass of orks with the same unrelenting ferocity. The veterans Nathaniel and Shemal guarded his flanks, butchering their way forwards with a chainweapon in each hand. The Techmarine, Metatron, and the Company Champion, Harahel, were at the fore of the diamond formation. At the rear of the formation Nisroc blazed away with his boltgun, covering his brothers’ advance.

Nisroc growled, blasting apart an ork that was bearing down on him with a barbed cleaver. ‘Master Seth, to your left.’

At Nisroc’s warning, Seth pivoted, slicing his blade upwards to meet a powered claw intent on removing his head. His armour’s servos spat and whined in protest as he struggled against the ork’s bulk. A monster of sinew and aggression

bolted into an oversized suit of war-plate, the greenskin stood head and shoulders above the Chapter Master. Seth ground his teeth, pitting all of his strength against the ork. Yet it was not enough. The crackling claw neared his head.

Seth's hearts howled in his chest like caged beasts. In his mind's eye, he stood in a sea of ork blood. He would not yield. He would rip the ork's arm from its socket, drive his fist into its chest and pulp its wretched heart between his fingers. He would kill it, murder it. He would...

A status icon chimed on Seth's retinal display – they had reached the designated coordinates. The interruption tore the Chapter Master back to his senses. Seth eased his resistance, dropping his weight, letting the claw carry his blade low before slipping forward and tearing his weapon through the ork's thigh.

The greenskin roared in pain and slumped forwards. Seth allowed it no quarter, turning as he rose to drive his blade down through its back. The greenskin convulsed, spasming as the teeth of the eviscerator churned its organs to bloody offal.

'Xenos filth. Be still,' Seth spat, bringing his armoured boot down to crush the ork's skull. The Chapter Master opened a company-wide channel and addressed his warriors. 'Brothers, the Steel Legion regiments garrisoning the defence lines around the hive have been scattered. We will buy them the time needed to rally.' Seth tore the powercell from his eviscerator and slammed a fresh one into place.

'Master Seth.' Nisroc gestured to the five golden figures descending towards them.

Seth finished hacking apart the ork he was duelling with and shot a glance skyward, and growled low. 'Sanguinary Guard.'

Framed by wings of the purest white, they were clad in armour of polished gold. They wore ornate helms, glistening faceplates wrought into sneering smiles. The Blood Angels. First amongst the sons of Sanguinius, only they were arrogant enough to hide their rage behind masks of gold and brass.

Seth's face crumpled in disdain. Beauty on the outside did not remove the beast within.

‘What do Dante’s dogs want?’ Harahel didn’t bother using a closed vox-channel.

‘Nothing good, brother,’ said Seth.

The Sanguinary Guard landed amidst a hail of bolter fire. The unexpected ferocity of the Blood Angels attack momentarily stalled the ork advance as their explosive rounds blew off limbs and pulped torsos.

‘Master Seth. I am Brother Anachiel, first Sanguinary Guard of the seventh cohort of Angels.’

‘There is no glory to be found here, cousin. Why have you come?’

‘I am here to extract you and your squad,’ said Anachiel.

‘Extract?’

‘Yes. Brother-Captain Tycho wishes you to come with us.’

‘Our mission here is not complete,’ said Seth.

‘This mission is folly. You cannot hold back the greenskins without more support.’

‘Then have Tycho send some.’

Anachiel grasped Seth’s pauldron as the Flesh Tearer made to turn from him. ‘You must come now. More ork craft are inbound to this location. We cannot delay any longer.’

‘If you lay your hand on me again, I will cut it from you.’

‘With respect, there is more at stake here than you realise.’

‘There is plenty at stake. Here. Now. If we leave the Guard to fight alone, they will die.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Do not patronise me, Blood Angel.’

‘This is no longer your fight.’

‘Until the Emperor rises from His Throne, I, and I alone, decide where we fight.’

‘You would serve your own bloodlust over the needs of the Imperium?’

‘Be careful, cousin. You did not bring enough warriors to test me.’

Anachiel thrust a mag-ascender cable towards Seth. ‘Uphold your duty and do as Tycho commands.’

‘The blood of those we leave to die is on your hands, angel.’

‘Save your piety. My humour is too ill to indulge your hypocrisy.’

Seth’s muscles tensed until they pressed at the limits of his armour. His jaw twitched as he imagined ripping his teeth through Anachiel’s flesh. The growling of his eviscerator was like a terrible siren, his blade demanding he cleave the Blood Angel in half.

Seth roared and threw himself into a press of orks; hacking, cutting, tearing until every greenskin within reach had been reduced to bloodied mulch. Seth tightened his grip on his weapon, crushing what remained of his rage between gauntlet and haft, and turned back to Anachiel. ‘Another time, Blood Angel.’ Seth snatched the mag-ascender from Anachiel. ‘To me, brothers. We are leaving.’

Captain Iago sank to his knees as he watched the Space Marine gunship shrink into the distance. The Emperor had deserted him. Left him to die in the dirt. Around him, his men died in short order, butchered by the orks as they overran their position.

Iago pulled off his respirator and let his head drop back onto his shoulders. Without its protection the toxic atmosphere would kill him in minutes. He smiled. He doubted he had that long.

‘Emperor... why?’ Staring up at the sheet-metal grey of the sky, Iago had time to shed a single tear before an ork blade tore through his back and ended his life.

‘Tycho. Why was I recalled?’ Seth entered the command chamber at a march, his

words ringing out like bolter fire, an attack on the measured hum permeating the room. ‘What matter could not wait until we had secured Volcanus?’

‘Calm yourself, brother. All will be explained.’ Captain Erasmus Tycho replied without turning around. He stood with his back to the room, his attention fixed on the grey-blue tactical hololith dominating the chamber’s rear wall.

A torrent of tactical information scrolled across its flickering surface. Shifting clusters of red and green marked the positions of the ork and Imperial forces. Lines of attack and retreat overlapped one another, depicting estimated engagement patterns. Truncated Gothic sprang up under Tycho’s gaze, detailing temperature, wind direction and soil density. Ammunition and casualty numbers flickered like broken luminators as they continually updated in response to the flood of vox-reports spilling in from across the planet.

Though dedicated banks of tactical cogitators worked ceaselessly to assimilate the information and serried rows of servitors chattered away on heavy keys, collating and processing the data, it took a warrior of Tycho’s mettle to make sense of it. The Blood Angel’s enhanced physiology and decades of bitter experience allowed him to do the job of hundreds of Imperial tacticians.

Seth scowled at the sight of Tycho’s unblemished battleplate. Like Anachiel’s, it was polished gold and glistened under the white light of the glow-lamps studding the chamber. ‘You may call me brother when you stand beside me in battle, bleeding in the dirt instead of cowering here among these clerks and serfs.’ Seth threw his gaze around the chamber. He despised the throng of robed savants that stood huddled over data charts and holo-projectors. They were miserable wretches and his contempt for them was palpable.

A Sanguinary Guard stepped from one of the chamber’s many alcoves to bar Seth’s path. ‘Watch your tone, Flesh Tearer.’

Seth growled. ‘I have had enough of your kind today, cherub.’

‘Were we not at war, I would see you learn respect in the duel—’

‘Were we not at war, I would kill you,’ said Seth.

‘You...’

‘Enough.’ Tycho turned to fix Seth with his one good eye. ‘All of you, leave us.’

‘Captain.’ The Sanguinary Guard kept his eyes fixed on Seth as he dipped his head in salute to Tycho.

The chatter and hum of the command chamber bled away to silence as the chamber’s occupants filtered out, leaving Tycho and Seth alone in the room.

‘Dante has given me charge of this war, Seth. You will pay me the same accord you would him,’ said Tycho.

Seth grinned. ‘It is good to see there is still fight in you, brother. I had worried command was beginning to soften you.’ Stepping forward, Seth clamped his fist around Tycho’s vambrace in a warrior’s salute.

‘In this tumultuous time, brother, it is pleasing that you, at least, have not changed.’ The ire drained from the Blood Angel’s face as he spoke, yet Seth detected something more behind Tycho’s composed greeting. A bestial glint in his eye.

Seth had spent enough time in the company of the damned to recognise the black flicker of rage. He felt the numbing touch of sadness in his gut. Tycho was a great warrior, one who would not easily be replaced. His spirit was as strong as Baalite steel, but it would not be long before the captain was lost to bloodlust and madness.

Tycho tapped a button on the console nearest to him, activating an overhead hololith. ‘This is the Ephesus ore mine. It lies on an island to the south-west of the Fire Wastes. I need you to secure it.’

Seth paced around the image of the mine, in careful study. ‘The mine is inconsequential. There is nothing to be gained by securing it. If I withdraw my forces from Volcanus, the hive may fall...’ Seth turned, gesturing to the larger tactical hololith at the rear of the chamber.

Behind him, the chamber doors opened.

‘If that happens, the flank of Hive Prime will be exposed,’ said Seth.

‘You are correct, Gabriel.’ The female voice preceded a series of footsteps as the

newcomer paced into the room. 'But there is more at stake here than the fate of one world.'

Seth rounded on the woman. An Inquisitorial pendant hung around her neck. His face hardened. An agent of the ordos heralded nothing but strife. 'You will address me as Chapter Master, inquisitor.'

'My apologies, Chapter Master.' The inquisitor moved past Seth to stand at the head of the room. 'I am Inquisitor Nerissa. Here by order of the Emperor Himself.'

'I doubt you had crawled from your mother's womb when last the Emperor gave an order.'

'I am an agent of the Emperor's most holy Inquisition. Every act I undertake is by His order, whether He speaks the words or not.'

'What do you want?' asked Seth.

'Why is it, do you think, that the orks have returned to Armageddon?'

'I do not wish to understand the xenos, only to kill them,' said Seth.

Nerissa smiled, though her face held no warmth. 'If that were true, then I fear the Flesh Tearers would be no more than the bloody berserkers they are rumoured to be.'

'Tread carefully, inquisitor. Your rank affords you a measure of protection, but you are not among friends.'

'War does not continue to find this world by chance.' Nerissa moved towards the hololith control panel as she spoke. Manipulating the controls, she brought the image of the mine into sharp relief. 'Though they may not themselves know it, I believe that the orks have been drawn here. Summoned to the mine by a psyche more attuned to war than even the greenskins'. The hololith shimmered as the mine faded away, dissolving to reveal what lay beneath it.

'A Titan?' Seth's voice dropped to a whisper.

'Yes, an Emperor-class to be exact, and it does not belong to the forges of

Mars.'

'The Archenemy has not set foot upon this planet in such force for thousands of years. Not since before Armageddon was resettled,' said Seth.

'That is true.' Nerissa nodded. 'But the terraforming process is not without flaw. Occasionally, elements are missed, the past buried beneath the new. It seems that when Armageddon was remade, we left something behind of the old.'

'Are you certain?'

'No, I am not,' said Nerissa. 'But it is rare that I have the luxury of certainty. If there is even the slightest chance that the Titan is buried there, we must move to destroy it before the orks find it. We have no idea what malicious sentience lies dormant within the Titan's machine core. We cannot allow the orks to awaken it, or worse, move it to another world. Such a grave threat to the Imperium cannot be allowed to slip through our grasp.'

'I will not abandon Hive Volcanus on a whim. When the hive is secure and the orks have been driven back I will reconsider your request.'

'You misunderstand me. This is not a request.'

'And you misunderstand our relationship. I am not beholden to you, inquisitor.'

+It saddens me, Chapter Master, that you would condemn your Chapter to extermination over something as trivial as a few million lives.+ Nerissa pushed her words into Seth's mind.

'Speak plainly, witch.' Unlike Nerissa, Seth was no psyker, but the anger boiling through him cut her mind like a dagger.

'If you refuse me... If you will not do your duty, then I shall ensure my colleagues in the ordos perform theirs.' Nerissa's eyes narrowed. 'When was the last time you submitted a batch of gene-seed for testing, Flesh Tearer?'

'You dare threaten me?'

'I am an agent of the Throne! There is nothing I dare not, or cannot, do in my duty to the Emperor.'

‘Enough, both of you. Seth, Dante believes Nerissa to be correct. He would have you do this. I will redeploy Third Company to bolster Volcanus’s defences.’

Nerissa grinned.

‘Do not mistake me for an ally, inquisitor,’ Tycho growled. ‘If you threaten a descendant of Sanguinius again, I will smash your bones and cast you into the deepest pit of Baal.’

‘Very well, but only my honour guard and me. The rest of my warriors will remain in place until Tycho’s Blood Angels are in position,’ said Seth.

‘No...’

‘It is not up for discussion!’ Seth turned his back on Nerissa, his eyes lingering on the image of the Titan as it rotated on the hololith. ‘We will be more than enough.’

‘This is madness. We’ll never reach the mine in one piece,’ Harahel growled as the Vengeance shook under another burst of anti-air fire. The single red lumina mounted on the ceiling strobed in warning as shrapnel and las-blasts pawed at the gunship’s flanks, assailing her like a terrible storm.

‘Brother Harahel is right.’ Metatron tapped the Stormraven’s hull in an effort to appease the craft’s machine-spirit. ‘The fighting only intensifies as we head north. We cannot continue in the air.’

‘Fortunately, Flesh Tearer, that is not our intention,’ said Nerissa.

‘Then perhaps, inquisitor, you will dispense with this facade and enlighten us.’ Seth spoke slowly, struggling to stay calm.

Clad in sapphire battleplate, the inquisitor was a striking figure, far more imposing than the loose-robed woman Seth had met in the command centre. ‘Secrets are the armour of my order, Chapter Master. You will forgive me for not throwing off their protection until necessary.’

‘If Chaplain Appollus were here, he’d remind her that only death brings forgiveness,’ Harahel’s voice crackled over the private squad channel. Like the rest of the Flesh Tearers, the Company Champion’s face was hidden behind his

helm.

‘We are only travelling as far as the defence line at Sreya Ridge, where we will rendezvous with the 11th Armoured and travel the rest of the way on the ground.’ Nerissa tapped a dial on her gauntlet and a hololith sprang from it to fill the space in the centre of the gunship’s hold.

Metatron sat forward, studying the hololith as a series of icons and vector-tags detailed their route from the ridge to the ore mine. ‘The orks have crippled the infrastructure. There is no bridge, inquisitor. We cannot reach the mine overland...’ Metatron paused as details of the Imperial forces stationed at Sreya scrolled over the image. ‘The Validus...?’

‘You are astute, for a soldier,’ Nerissa grinned. ‘The Validus is void-shielded and stands taller than the deepest recorded furrow of the Boiling Sea. It will carry us to the mine.’

‘What of the 11th? The Validus cannot carry them all,’ asked Metatron.

‘She does not mean to take them with us,’ said Seth.

‘The 11th will cover our advance and buy us enough time to complete our mission,’ said Nerissa.

‘And what of them then? The plains north of Sreya are overrun by heavy ork war-engines, and more than a battalion of their towering idols. The 11th will perish without the Validus’s support.’

‘It seems you have answered your own question, Chapter Master.’

‘Pilot, turn us around.’ Seth got to his feet and turned towards the cockpit.

‘No! Stay on course. This is my mission, my command.’ Nerissa stood, barring Seth’s way.

Seth growled. It took every ounce of his restraint not to rip the inquisitor’s head from her shoulders. Around them, Nerissa’s retinue tensed in apprehension, their hands edging towards weapons. The two females, bound in tight leathers, wielded slender power swords, their faces hidden behind masks of skin. The larger of the males was covered in crude tattoos and the litany of penance had

been burned into the flesh of his left arm. The fourth was more machine than man, the lower part of his face and most of his torso replaced with augmetics.

Nerissa had come ready for war, but if she thought that even warriors as dangerous as these would buy her a single second against his wrath, she was gravely mistaken.

‘Arrogance has made you foolish. The ridge is under heavy assault. The entire region is embroiled in a full-scale engagement. We’ll be blown from the air before we get within a kilometre of the Validus.’

‘I have diverted a squadron of Vendettas and a wing of Thunderbolts to cover our approach. The orks will have more than enough to worry about.’

‘And who were they supposed to be covering? Who else have you left to die?’

‘I don’t know, and I don’t care,’ said Nerissa.

‘The lives of the Emperor’s servants are not yours to waste.’

‘They are! That is what it means to be of the ordos. I would sacrifice every man, woman and child in this sector to do the Emperor’s work. It is a shame you do not share the same clarity of purpose, Flesh Tearer.’

‘Know this, inquisitor.’ Seth’s voice dripped with menace. ‘It is only my oath to Dante that keeps me from ripping your heart out.’

‘You—’ Nerissa began, trailing off as the gunship shuddered violently and a slew of weapon impacts rang out against its hull.

‘Lord, the fighting is even heavier than anticipated. We cannot slow down enough to land. We’ll be too easy a target for the ork guns,’ the pilot’s voice crackled over the comm.

‘So much for the air cover.’ Seth turned his back on Nerissa, moving to the rear of the hold and slamming his fist into the assault ramp’s release catch. ‘Equip jump packs. We’ll drop the rest of the way.’

‘What about them?’ Nisroc gestured to the inquisitor and her retinue.

‘You needn’t worry about me, Flesh Tearer,’ said Nerissa. ‘My gifts will see my team and I safely to the Validus.’

‘I’d sooner place my life in a servitor’s hands than trust to such gifts,’ Metatron muttered over the private squad channel as he hefted a jump pack onto his back.

‘Given the choice, brother, I’d rather we walked.’ Harahel double-checked the mag-clamp on his own jump pack, and moved to the ramp.

Below the gunship, the Sreya plains were a mosaic of fire and steel. The battle tanks of the 11th Armoured were spread out in a thin defensive line in a bold attempt to hold an area they did not have the resources to contest. An innumerable horde of ork vehicles swarmed towards them, tearing across the desert in a chaotic mass of gunfire and exhaust fumes.

Ahead of the Imperial line, the Validus strode forward, a mountain of metal and plasteel bent on the orks’ destruction. An Emperor-class Battle Titan, the Validus was a monument to the achievement and arrogance of man. As much city as war machine, it was capable of housing entire platoons in its armoured legs and torso. Its top deck spread out like a mammoth landing pad, as though it carried a slab of the world on its shoulders. Crenellated buttresses and armoured spires grew up from the platform. Studded with battle cannons, las-batteries and missile silos, they housed more firepower than a small army. Yet they were little more than defensive trinkets when compared to the Titan’s primary weapons. When the Validus attacked, it did so with purpose.

The colossal weapons mounted under the Validus’s shoulders blazed like miniature suns as they fired, annihilating entire columns of ork vehicles and burning great furrows in the earth.

‘It is glorious, is it not, brother?’ Metatron stood on the ramp, transfixed by the might of the Validus.

‘I’m just glad we are not here to kill it,’ said Harahel.

‘Yes, thank the Blood for small mercies.’ Nisroc was not joking. Outside the gunship, carnage reigned.

Ork anti-air batteries spewed a constant stream of rounds skywards. Ork and Imperial fighters dogged each other, stitching the clouds with tracer fire. Clusters

of aerial mines detonated in a wash of flame. The air between the Flesh Tearers and the Validus was a morass of shrapnel, las-fire and explosions. Jumping was madness.

‘The Blood protects.’ Harahel touched his blade to his helmet and locked it to his armour.

The gunship bucked hard, threatening to toss the Flesh Tearers into a free fall. Dark smoke rolled over its surface, its engines ignited by a rocket strike.

‘Go. Now.’ At Seth’s command, the Flesh Tearers leapt from the gunship. Nerissa followed them. Wrapped in a sphere of flickering energy, the inquisitor and her warriors fell through the clouds like leaves trapped in a plasma bomb. Seth jumped last.

An instant later, the Vengeance exploded.

‘By the Blood,’ Seth snarled as the blast wave punched him into a sharp dive. Burning shrapnel pelted his armour like iron hail. Flame washed over him, scouring away the litany parchments that adorned his pauldrons.

Warning icons filled Seth’s display, his altimeter spinning down towards zero as the Validus’s deck sped up to meet him. Seth watched it near, unwilling to slow his descent until the last possible moment.

He activated his jump pack, gritting his teeth against the force as the booster roared into life and arrested his fall. Seth slammed into the Titan’s weapon platform, flexing his knees to absorb the impact. The servos in his leg armour whined in protest, sparking as a fracture spread up his left greave.

‘Report,’ Seth commanded over the squad channel.

‘On board.’ Harahel was the first to respond.

‘On deck,’ said Metatron.

‘I live,’ said Nisroc.

‘I am to your south, lord,’ said Nathaniel.

Seth listened to the chorus of vox acknowledgments as he called up his squad's ident-icons and locations. There was one missing. 'Brother Shemal?'

The vox-link hissed with silence.

'He is lost to us,' said Metatron.

'Sanguinius keep him,' said Nisroc.

'Sanguinius rip the heart from every one of these accursed greenskins,' Harahel snarled.

Seth bunched a fist in rage, and opened a comm-channel to Nerissa. 'This had better be worth it, inquisitor.'

Nerissa ignored the Chapter Master and addressed the Titan's pilot. 'Princeps Augustus, new orders.'

The Validus stepped into the ocean. The Boiling Sea had not been named in irony. More chemical mess than body of water, it was fed a constant stream of corrosives and pollutants by the waste pipes servicing Armageddon's hives and manufactoria. Super-heated by the toxic mix, the sea never cooled. The Validus remained unbowed as the sea did its best to beat back the intruder, weathering the barrage of rolling waves that broke against its torso.

'Enginseer Luag, status.' The calm note of Princeps Augustus's voice was in stark contrast to the violent waters enveloping his Titan.

'Integrity is holding, princeps. Ablative plating will dissolve in less than two days, Terran standard. The hull and superstructure are under no immediate threat.'

'Very good. Alert me if the situation changes.'

'Aye,' said Luag.

'Advancing, tactical stride.'

The Validus pushed on, lurching unevenly as it struggled for footing on the undulating sea bed. The water displaced by the Titan's monolithic bulk surged

up around it, rising into a simmering wall before crashing down over the Fire Wastes.

Seth listened in silence as the Validus's sensoria fed the death-screams of the 11th Armoured to his helm. The lucky ones died quickly, swept into the sea, dissolved before they could scream. The others, the unfortunate, were soaked by the corrosive liquid. Cast across the plain, they were left to die an agonising death as their skin bubbled from their bones.

'Such a waste,' Nathaniel snarled, unconcerned with who heard him.

Seth turned his gaze to Nerissa. Her face was impassive, as steely cold as her actions. 'You would use the tools of the xenos to do the Emperor's work?' He gestured to the pendant hanging around the inquisitor's neck. It was a single oval gem, the colour of darkness and blood. He had seen its like before, affixed to the breastplates of the accursed eldar.

Nerissa glanced down at the gem. 'A weapon is a weapon, is it not? It is the wielder that is important.'

'Perhaps. But the worth of a warrior can be judged by the weapons they use to make war.'

+So what then is your worth, Chapter Master? What will history remember of a warrior who deploys black-armoured beasts to fight his battles?+

Seth grimaced, suppressing a growl as Nerissa forced her words into his mind. +Be careful to what you turn your thoughts, inquisitor. You of all people should know that a mind that wanders in dark places is soon lost.+

A thunderous tremor ran up the Validus's spine, shaking the deck as the Titan reached the ocean floor and stopped.

'We've reached bottom.' The princeps's status report drew Seth's attention, breaking the baleful silence between him and Nerissa. 'The terrain evens out from here. Proceeding at one-half striding speed. Estimated arrival in twenty-three point eight five minutes.' The Validus's commander's tone was flat. To him, war was a perfunctory task. He acted devoid of emotional intent.

Seth's thoughts turned to his Flesh Tearers, to the rage that flowed through their

veins. It was the Chapter's secret. A truth each of them was charged with concealing, yet its touch made them more honest in deed than any of their allies. Unlike the princeps, their actions were all emotive. Unlike the inquisitor, they did not pretend to be anything but monsters.

'Contacts,' the Validus's tactical officer announced as the shrill chime of warning sigils rang out from his console.

'Number and direction?' asked the princeps.

'Fourteen, fast moving, from the north-west.' He paused. 'Correction. Eighteen, and there are a dozen more coming from below.'

'Below?' asked Seth.

'The orks have been using submersibles to cut off our supply routes over the sea,' said the princeps. 'It does not seem to trouble them that their craft eventually corrode in the water.'

'Harahel, Nisroc, stand ready,' Seth voxed the Flesh Tearers stationed in the vaulted bastions that were the Validus's legs. 'You have incoming.'

A shower of glowing metal spat and flickered in the gloom, sparking to the floor as the orks cut their way into the Validus.

'Men of the Emperor, prepare yourselves!' Harahel shouted the command, bolstering the spirits of the thirty or so Steel Legion troopers who stood with him and Metatron in the vaulted hold-space of the Validus's right leg. Locking his helm in place, Harahel watched as the Guardsmen checked the charge of their lasguns and fixed blades to the ends of their barrels.

'Their time would be better spent readying their souls,' Metatron said over the comm.

'What?'

'You know as well as I do, brother, that they are as good as dead. It will only be by the grace of Sanguinius that any of them survive the next ten minutes.'

Harahel cast his gaze over the Guardsmen. Metatron was right. Clad in

cumbersome enviro-suits, their movements were slow. It was a cruel irony that the equipment designed to keep them alive if the chamber flooded would likely speed them to their deaths. At best they would provide a distraction, something to keep the orks from swarming the Flesh Tearers. He turned to face the Techmarine. 'It is unlike you to be so tenebrous, brother.'

'Forgive me. I am... distracted. This Titan...'

Metatron gestured around and above them. 'The Validus is unlike any machine I have encountered. Its spirit is unknown to me. It speaks only to the princeps, and he is as fallible as all men. I do not enjoy trusting to his intentions.'

'Then it is a good job you were blessed with the strength to kill those who would abuse such trust.'

Metatron gave a grunt of amusement.

'Here they come.' Harahel motioned to the increasing flow of water.

Rivets spat and popped as they shot from their housing, ripping through the bodies of the closest Guardsmen.

Harahel moved his head, narrowly avoiding one of the heavy bolts. 'Stand firm. No one flees. Kill until killed.' He thumbed the activation stud on his eviscerator.

The Guardsmen lent their voices to the weapon's roar, hurling battle cries and oaths of vengeance.

Boiling seawater burst into the chamber, pushing through the fissure made by the ork cutters and tearing a wide rent in the adamantium bulwark. The Guardsmen screamed as the water swept them back and away from the centre of the room, slamming them into the walls. Undisciplined volleys of las-fire struck the walls as the troopers panic-fired.

Propelled by modified jetpacks that had spinning rotators in place of thrusters, the orks followed the water inside.

'Bring them death!' Harahel roared and powered forward into the press of orks.

The metal and fabric suits worn by the orks were like something from the ancient annals of man. Translucent, domed helms covered the orks' faces, a

crude system of valves and thick pipes providing oxygen. Harahel snarled as he drove his fist through one of the domes, shattering it and crushing the face of the ork behind it. Harahel's muscles burned with effort as he tore his blade through the water into the torso of an advancing ork. He reversed the stroke, snarling as the teeth of his weapon ripped apart another of the greenskins.

Blood. There was no blood. No blood on his armour. No blood choking his blade. The accursed sea swallowed the ork arterial fluid as quickly as he shed it. He snarled and killed another and another, butchering a dozen orks in quick succession. Still the water robbed him of his prize, diluting the blood, drawing it away from him. He killed again, reaching out with his hand in a desperate effort to grab hold of the blood as it spilled from the orks' veins. 'Must I turn the sea red?' Harahel roared as the blood slipped away from him. Drawing his bolt pistol, he emptied a clip into the orks, grinning as their bodies burst like crimson clouds in the water. He would not stop. He would not tire. He would have his blood.

Seth knelt on the deck, bracing himself as it shuddered under the wrath of the Validus's defensive weaponry. Above him, a squadron of ork bombers converged on the Titan, carrion intent on feasting. Submerged in the ocean, with only its buttressed towers visible above the waves, the Validus seemed an easy target.

It was not.

Where a Warlord-or Reaver-class Titan would have been almost defenceless against such an attack, the Validus's towering spires housed more than enough firepower for the task in hand.

Seth turned his attention to the angular gantries ahead of him.

Rain and seawater lashed the deck in an unceasing barrage, conspiring with the night to make visibility poor. But he knew the ork assault teams were out there. Even above the wind, the bark of thunder and chatter of weapons fire, he could hear the low growl in their throats.

Unbidden, the killer inside the Flesh Tearer growled in response.

Lightning tore across the sky, throwing splinters of light across the deck. Between jagged flashes, Seth glimpsed the yellow eyes and ragged teeth of more than a dozen greenskins. He smiled.

The orks roared and charged towards him.

Springing to his feet, Seth swung his eviscerator up and flicked the activation stud. He barrelled into the orks, denying their attack momentum, feeling his heartbeat quicken as bones broke against his armoured bulk.

Snarling, Seth tore his blade through a wide arc. The vicious stroke maimed a trio of orks, ripping out their guts and bathing him in blood. He reversed the motion, hacking the blade back down, butchering two more of the greenskins. He attacked again. Another ork died, its torso shorn in half.

His blade rose and fell, churning muscle and bone into sodden gobbets. He attacked and attacked and attacked, relentlessly cutting and bludgeoning, striking without any thought of defence, ignorant of the blows that hammered against his armour.

Seth snarled as he found his blade blocked by another. He pressed down on his opponent, feeling the other's weapon begin to buckle.

'Lord, it is I, Nathaniel,' Nathaniel stammered, driving his second chainsword under Seth's blade in an effort to stop it inching towards his face.

Seth couldn't hear Nathaniel. He couldn't see the aquila on the other Flesh Tearer's breastplate. Lost to his bloodlust, all he could hear was the sound of battle, all he could see was the blood yet to be spilt.

'Lord... Seth...'

Seth roared and tore his weapon free from Nathaniel's, punching it down into the deck. He knelt against his sword, gripping the haft as though crushing it might bring him solace, and deactivated his armour's auto-senses. His helmet display blinked dark, plunging him into silent isolation, cutting him off from the world, shutting out the violence. 'Sanguinius, clad me in rightful mind, strengthen me against the desires of flesh.' Seth ground his teeth, struggling through the litany. The beast in his breast shuddered, hammering a final blow as it felt his will shackle it. 'By the Blood am I made... By the Blood am I armoured... By the Blood... I will endure.'

The mine was a smouldering ruin. The vast geared systems of belts that carried away the rock had been reduced to a tangled mess of twisted metal. Dark

columns of smoke drifted up from scattered piles of ore that lay heaped around iron transit caskets. The energy-rich mineral deposits would burn for weeks, warming the bodies of the dead Steel Legion troopers who covered the ground like spent shell casings.

‘We are here. Now what?’ asked Seth.

‘We need to descend to the absolute bottom. The main tunnel should take us past half way. Beyond that, we’ll run into the exploratory lines. We should be able to use one of them to travel the rest of the way,’ said Nerissa.

‘Should?’

‘It is the nature of mines that they change on a daily basis. The last set of schematics I managed to secure were over three months old. Now that we are here, we should be able to procure a more accurate set.’ Nerissa indicated a damaged console to the right of the doorway.

‘Metatron, see what you can do,’ said Seth.

The Techmarine approached the console and pulled a pair of data-cables from a recess in his gauntlet. ‘It’s functioning, but the display is beyond repair. Give me a moment and I’ll route the data to my helm.’ Metatron manipulated several of the dials on the console. ‘According to the senior excavator’s last log, GSN-V is the deepest burrow. It is almost nine kilometres down.’

‘What is the time stamp?’ asked Seth.

‘It was recorded two hundred and sixty hours ago,’ said Metatron.

‘That is a long time. How can we be sure the tunnel is still open?’ asked Harahel.

‘We cannot. It is just a chance we will have to take,’ said Nerissa.

‘I do not like trusting my fate to chance.’ Harahel hefted his eviscerator as though to emphasise his point.

‘You are a fool to think it has ever been any other way, Flesh Tearer.’

Harahel took a pace towards her in threat.

‘Enough,’ said Seth. ‘Let us go.’

‘Be on your guard. It looks like the orks overran the mine. They may not have left.’ Seth spoke as they passed a string of dismembered corpses.

‘Orks I can kill. I’m more concerned with all these tunnels. A wrong turn and we’ll be wandering around here for weeks,’ said Harahel.

‘I am certain the data I extracted was accurate,’ said Metatron.

‘Let us hope so.’ Seth cast a sidelong glance at the inquisitor. It would not bode well for her if his warriors remained trapped underground for any length of time. Without an enemy to kill, their frustrations would soon get the better of them. ‘Pick up the pace.’

Plasteel beams shadowed them from overhead as they moved through the mine. Reinforced arches and cross-tunnels intersected their path every hundred paces. Twice they had to stop to dig through piles of rubble that blocked their path before they reached the base of the main tunnel.

‘Which way now?’ Seth indicated the arterial passageways and smaller feeder tunnels that wound off in every direction.

‘We should head—’

‘What was that?’ Nerissa interrupted the Techmarine, instinctively raising her weapon.

Seth snarled. ‘Orks.’

Without another word, the Flesh Tearers took up defensive positions. The burr of chainswords growling on idle broke the silence. A heartbeat later, a roar, primal and alien, responded.

The orks had found them.

Harahel took first blood. ‘Contact!’

His voice was quickly joined by the others as the orks engaged them. The Flesh Tearers opened fire as orks poured from every tunnel and cross-tunnel connected

to their position.

‘Hold formation. The first of you to break will pay with his life,’ Seth snarled as he fought down his own urge to abandon his position and charge headlong into the mass of greenskins.

In the close confines of the cavern, the thunderous staccato of weapons fire was deafening. The howl of the orks and the roar of the Flesh Tearers was like the voice of some terrible storm.

‘We cannot stay here,’ said Nerissa.

‘She is right.’ Nathaniel emptied the last of his rounds into a charging ork, reducing the greenskin to a ruined mulch. ‘If even one of us falls they will overwhelm us.’

Seth ignored them, his attention fixed on his own blade as it tore the guts from an ork.

‘Master Seth. We must move.’

Seth grinned at the panic in Nerissa’s voice and cast a glance towards her. Defensive wounds scored her arms and face. Two of her retinue lay dead beside her. The other two were bleeding badly.

‘Seth!’

Seth roared in frustration. ‘Metatron, which way?’

‘Here.’ The Techmarine indicated a narrow tunnel sloping down to their left.

‘Go. I will hold them here,’ said Harahel.

‘No. There are too many even for your might, brother,’ said Seth.

‘Perhaps.’ Harahel grinned and tore his weapon through another ork. ‘But we cannot fight a withdrawal. A single detonation inside that tunnel will see us buried.’

Seth knew he was right. ‘We will return for your body. Your bloodline will not

end here.'

'See that you do.'

'The Blood protects.' Seth banged his fist against Harahele's pauldron in salute and withdrew into the tunnel.

With the Chapter Master clear, Harahele threw a grenade up towards the ceiling. The detonation sealed off the tunnel, leaving him alone with the orks. 'Who dies first?'

GSN-V was a ragged borehole that plummeted sharply down into the earth. It grew narrower at irregular intervals, forcing the Flesh Tearers to hunch over and advance in single file. Unlike the main tunnel, there was no lighting studding the ceiling, forcing Nerissa and her warband to navigate by portable luminator.

'We can go no further.' Seth spoke for the benefit of Nerissa, who was several paces behind him.

'The Titan should be directly below us.' The inquisitor knelt down and ran her hand across the coarse earth. 'Arija.' She motioned to the tattooed warrior.

The man stepped forward, placing a flat metal cylinder on the ground. Twisting it securely into the earth, he depressed the activation stud on its side.

'Stand back,' said Nerissa, as the device began to charge.

The cylinder flashed azure as the noise built to a crescendo, emitting a pulse of energy that lanced down into the ground. The earth and ore-rock underneath the device began to crack, turning to powder and crumbling away to reveal a plate of green-brown adamantium.

'Brother Metatron,' said Nerissa. 'Your plasma cutter, please.'

The Titan had been buried face down, leaving them to enter through its back so that they walked on the internal walls while the flooring stood erect behind them. The ventilation-cyclers and atmos-scrubbers had long since fallen silent and the air was a stale mix of pungent decay. Cobwebs clung to every surface. Piles of grey dust, the powdered remains of organic matter, tumbled like sand where they disturbed it. It was not unlike the Validus. A maze of tight corridors and grilles

walkways dissected its interior, allowing begrudging access to the god-machine's manifold sections.

'It still functions.' Metatron indicated a flickering bank of luminators. 'Does it have a name?'

'Not one I am willing to share with you, Flesh Tearer,' Nerissa sneered.

Seth snarled. 'How much further?'

'We are almost there. The bridge should be on the other side of the next bulkhead,' said Nerissa.

'Pick up the pace. Let us be done with this.' The desire to avenge Harahel gnawed at Seth's bones like a starved beast. He itched to be back in the mine, killing orks.

'This doesn't feel right,' Nisroc's voice crackled over a closed channel.

'What do you mean?' asked Seth.

'Look around you. There are no heretical markings, no crude blood sigils.'

Seth stopped walking. The Apothecary was right. He had been so consumed with the desire to avenge Harahel, to kill the inquisitor, that he had missed it. The baleful miasma, the sickening air of perversion that permeated everything the Archenemy touched, was absent. The Titan had not been tainted.

'We are here,' Nerissa announced as she entered the bridge. Arija and the remaining woman followed her in.

Seth looked past them, studying the ruined chamber. Sparking cables hung like limp vines from smashed consoles. The husked remains of the Titan's crew lay slumped against the vast oculus that was the Titan's left eye. The armourglass lens was badly cracked, stricken with wide fissures. The symbol of the Legio Annihilator glared back at him from the upturned ceiling.

'Arija, get what we came for and plant the charges,' said Nerissa.

'Wait. Stop.'

Arija ignored Seth, pulling a device from his belt and connecting it to the princeps's jacks. A second later, his head vanished in a cloud of red mist as an explosive round detonated his skull.

Nerissa rounded on Seth to find his bolt pistol levelled at her face. 'What are you doing?'

'I am tired of your lies, inquisitor. This Titan is not a weapon of the Archenemy. Tell me why we are here or I will rip your face from your skull.'

'You dare—'

'Now.' Seth fired again, and the female warrior flanking Nerissa came apart at the midriff as the bolt-round tore through her abdomen.

Nerissa turned to face the woman's ruined corpse, and smiled. 'Ah, that infamous Rage of yours, Seth. I had wondered how long it would be before it surfaced.' Nerissa held up a hand to placate Seth as he advanced on her. 'Whether it is loyal to the Throne or not, we cannot allow this Titan to fall into the hands of the orks. It must be destroyed.'

'You cannot deny the Imperium a weapon such as this. We will send word to Mars, and have them excavate it.'

'Such a small mind. Another war machine will make little difference to the fate of the Imperium.' Nerissa spread her arms. 'This Titan is ancient. It is older even than that barbaric symbol you wear on your pauldron. It stalked battlefields ten thousand years ago when the galaxy was forced to its knees by your depraved cousins.' Emboldened by her conviction, Nerissa took a step towards Seth. 'Knowledge is the only weapon worth possessing and I will not lose this find to the asinine secrecy and inane bureaucracy of Mars. I will know what this Titan knows. I will unlock the secrets from its mind.'

Seth was silent for a moment, his anger momentarily crushed by the weight of the inquisitor's words. 'No. Knowledge corrupts. It is far more terrible than a simple weapon. It is justification. Too much knowledge, too little knowledge. Knowledge was the catalyst for the most devastating civil war mankind has ever faced. We cannot risk inviting such a war. I will not let you siphon the datacore.'

'Are you worried about what I might find? About what I might uncover about

your precious bloodline? Perhaps your progenitors were not who you think. Perhaps they aided the Archene—'

Seth fired, depressing the trigger before the last syllable could leave Nerissa's lips.

The round detonated an inch in front of the inquisitor, exploding against a shimmering energy field. 'I had hoped this moment would come sooner. Ghaargor kharnn ar-vgu raah.' Blood spilled from Nerissa's mouth as the dark words tore from her throat. The eldar gem on her breast began to vibrate, radiating a piercing light as Arija's and the dead woman's bodies drifted up from the ground.

Seth and his warriors opened fire. 'Psychic wretch,' he cursed as the rounds impacted against the shield of energy surrounding the inquisitor.

The floating corpses shuddered once and exploded, bathing the Flesh Tearers in blood and viscera. Seth grunted in pain as the psychic shockwave slammed him back into the wall. Pain. Pain that was not there lanced through his legs as his mind heard his bones snap. He fell to the floor.

He made to stand and stopped, casting his eyes around. He was on a warship, an ancient vessel far grander and mightier than any he had stood upon. Its plasma core thrummed with restrained fury, its walls rippled with power. Seth could hear the familiar sound of battle ringing from the ship's many corridors. He reached for his weapon.

Powerful hands that were no more real than the injury to his legs locked around his throat. They squeezed, gripping tighter, throttling the life from him. He struggled and tried to prise them away, but they were too strong. Death. Death and darkness closed in around him. He stopped struggling, giving up as his rage gave way to sorrow, to shame. Seth knew he had failed. He knew that this was where he would die. Unless...

Seth roared to his feet, and drove his combat knife into Metatron's jaw. Blood. Blood would wash away his shame. Blood would ease his anguish. Seth advanced and kicked his foot into Metatron's chest. He would kill and kill and kill. He would kill death itself if it came for him.

The Techmarine rode the blow's momentum, rising and firing. The first shot

went wide. The second struck Seth in the gut, blasting off a chunk of his armour and opening his abdomen. Seth barrelled into Metatron, dragging him to the ground. Pinning the Techmarine beneath him, Seth delivered a series of punishing hammerblows to his face, smashing his helm and cracking his skull. Pulling the knife from Metatron's jaw, Seth plunged the blade into his torso, stabbing him again and again, working the knife until it broke against the Techmarine's hardened ribs. Tossing the ruined weapon away, Seth drove his fingers down under the Techmarine's gorget and broke it off, exposing his throat. Ripping off his own helm, Seth sank his teeth into Metatron and tore out his larynx. He relished the taste of the chemical-rich blood as it filled his mouth and warmed his throat.

Harahel grunted with effort, pulling Seth from Metatron and tossing him to the ground. 'What madness is this?' Harahel demanded as he watched Nisroc wrestle with Nathaniel. 'Has the Rage claimed you all?'

Seth rolled to his feet, snarling, blood-slick saliva dripping from his mouth, and charged Harahel.

Harahel angled off, avoiding Seth's grasp, and ripped his eviscerator across the Chapter Master's thigh.

Seth kept coming.

'Be still, damn you.' Adjusting his grip, Harahel smashed the flat of his weapon across Seth's face. The blow shattered the blade and knocked Seth to the floor.

Seth's vision swam. He was barely conscious. At the edge of his vision he saw Nisroc. The Apothecary had a bolt pistol pressed to Nathaniel's face.

Nisroc fired. He continued to fire, blasting chunks from Nathaniel's corpse until Harahel's foot connected with his head.

'Harahel... I thought you were dead.'

'No such luck.'

'The inquisitor...'

'She is gone.'

‘Why?’ Seth glared at the hololith, his eyes burning into the image of the woman who stared back at him.

‘Consider it payback.’ Though she had changed much of her appearance, there was no mistaking the contempt that flickered in the woman’s eyes. After weeks of hunting through the shoal of vessels orbiting the Armageddon system, Seth had found Inquisitor Nerissa Lekkas. Docked aboard the Emperor’s Gift, she was awaiting clearance to translate out of the system.

‘For what?’ Seth growled, clenching his fist in front of his chest as though the act might squeeze the life from Nerissa. ‘What debt do we owe you?’

‘Inquisitor Corvin Herrold,’ she said.

‘I have met many of your kind, inquisitor. I rarely remember their names,’ Seth lied. He remembered Corvin. The inquisitor had come with deception in his heart and heresy on his lips. He had sought to undo the Flesh Tearers, to expose their curse. Corvin had sought answers in dark places. Seth had given him a taste of true darkness.

‘Do not mock me, Flesh Tearer.’ The image of Nerissa swelled to fill the hololith as she stepped closer to the Emperor’s Gift’s pict-transmitter. ‘Corvin was my master. My teacher. You broke his mind. You left him a shadow of the man he was.’

‘Whether I remember him or not is unimportant. What matters, inquisitor, is that I remember you.’

Nerissa laughed. ‘And you have come to kill me?’

‘Yes.’

‘You are a fool, Flesh Tearer. If you board this vessel, I will force you to butcher everyone on board. Your actions will sign the death warrant of your Chapter.’

‘I do not need to board you.’

‘You would open fire?’ Nerissa shook her head. ‘I think not. Your ship lies in the visual arc of a dozen Imperial warships. If you as much as power up a single weapons battery, I will have them obliterate you. We are even. Leave it at that.’

‘We will meet again, inquisitor,’ said Seth.

‘No, we will not.’ The image shuddered and dissolved as Nerissa terminated the comm-link.

‘Sanguinius feast on her soul.’ Behind Seth, Harahel snarled and thundered his fist down into a console. ‘She is right. If she leaves the system, we will never find her.’

‘I know,’ said Seth. ‘Open a channel to Chaplain Zophal.’

‘I stand ready, lord,’ Zophal’s voice crackled back over the comm.

The Mortis Wrath lay on the far side of the flotilla, hugging a debris field at the very edge of the system. The Flesh Tearers strike cruiser was void-black, an indistinct warship whose insignia and allegiance had long since been scoured away.

‘Do you have range?’ asked Seth.

‘Yes, lord, but we cannot destroy the inquisitor’s vessel without risk. The Light of Terra and the Redeemer are both within visual range and are scheduled to translate with the Gift.’

‘Then we cannot fire. We will be excommunicated, hunted as heretics.’ Scar tissue shone raw around Nisroc’s left eye socket. He had torn his eye out, given it in penance for killing Nathaniel.

Seth sighed. The Light of Terra and the Redeemer were medical transports. Their holds were crammed with tens of thousands of wounded. ‘Nisroc is right. There can be no witnesses. Zophal, launch the assault torpedoes. Kill them all.’

‘Yes, lord.’

‘The Blood cleanse us.’

Seth turned from his warriors and paced to his flagship’s oculus. Outside, in the darkness of the void, he could just about make out the Emperor’s Gift, The Light of Terra and the Redeemer as their engines built up enough energy to translate into the warp.

By now the assault torpedoes launched from the Mortis Wrath were attached to the ship's hulls. Inside each, a squad of Death Company waited to be unleashed.

When the trio of ships jumped into the warp, they would take the Death Company with them. The black-armoured warriors would breach the hulls and massacre their way through the ships. They were berserkers. Butchers possessed of an unrelenting bloodlust. They would hack, kill and murder until there was no one left.

'We are vengeance,' Seth whispered and grinned darkly.

The inquisitor's mind tricks would not work on those already lost to madness.

'We are fury.'

When there was no one else left, the Death Company would turn their wrath on each other, on the ships themselves. In their rage, they would erase all evidence of their deeds. Seth felt the tension ease from his body as he watched the ships jump. He felt no regret. He would seek no forgiveness for his actions, offer up no penance.

Nerissa's disregard for the lives of Imperial soldiers had appalled him because it had been unnecessary. But she had been wrong to think him above such actions. He was an angel of death, lord of murderers.

'We are wrath.'