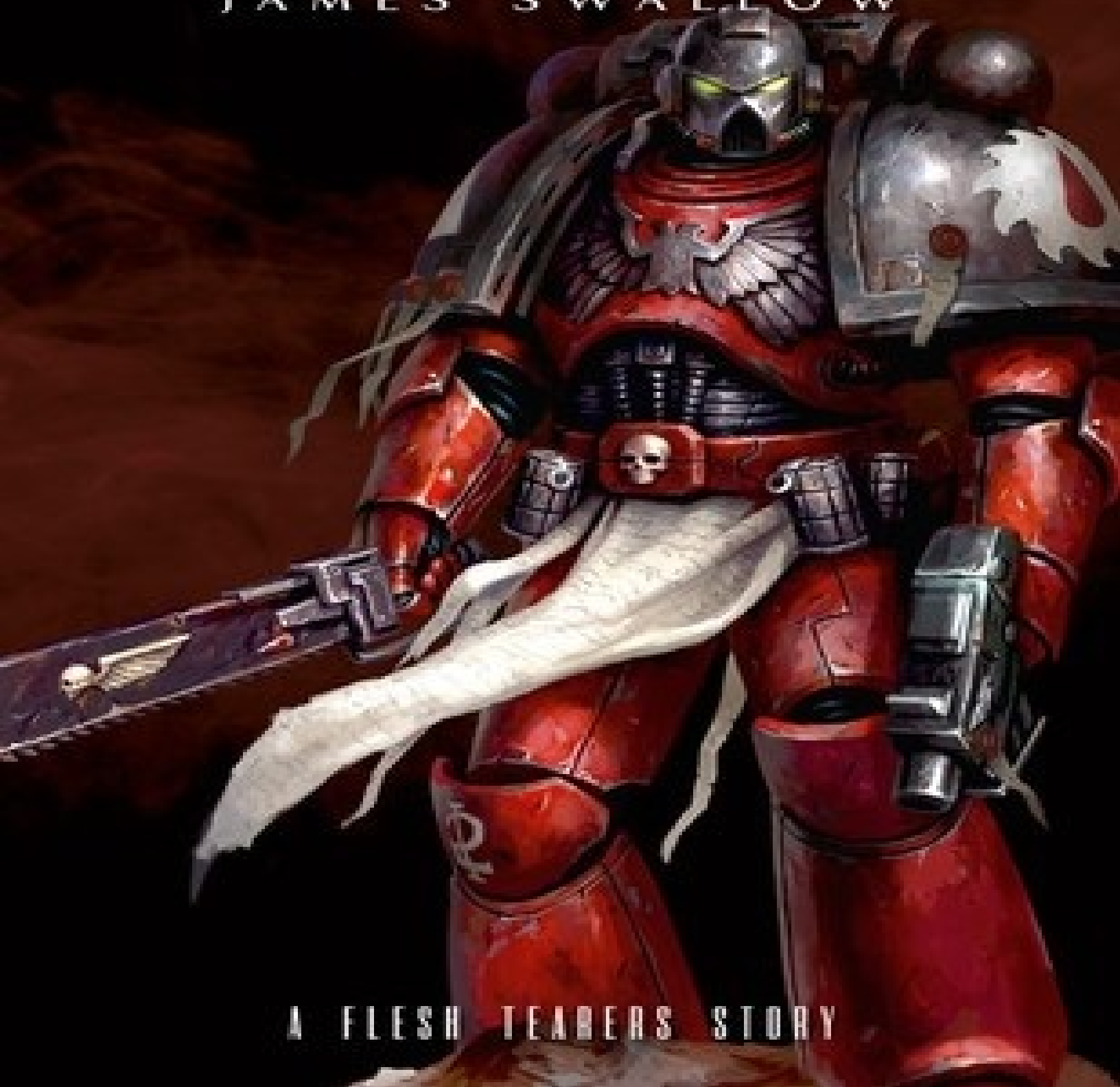


WARHAMMER
40,000

CRIMSON NIGHT

JAMES SWALLOW



A FLESH TEARERS STORY

CRIMSON NIGHT

James Swallow

THE SEWER'S AWFUL stench would have crippled a normal man with stomach-knotting nausea. It was a heady, foul cocktail of repellent, putrid matter, stagnant water and base stinks that signalled ripe decay.

Tarikus rose from his hands and knees where he had slipped into the sluggish embrace of the liquid effluent, and spat out the matter that had choked his mouth. The gobbet impacted the hard-packed bricks of the sewer tunnel wall with a wet slap; something small and chitinous, an insect scavenger he had almost swallowed, skittered away. He glanced backward, in the dimness catching the merest glint of metal from his armour, the paldrons and plates piled perhaps a quarter-league behind him, at the mouth of the access channel.

Tarikus shook off the oily remnants of the muck and came up as far as the tunnel confines would let him. His bulk filled the conduit, the edges of his shoulders clipping the bricks, his head forced down into a cocked angle. Even bent at the knees, it was all the Space Marine could do to fit his mass into the narrow passageway. Had he still been clad in his ceramite armour, he would have been wedged like a bolt shell jammed in a cannon breech after just a handful of paces. In his service to the Golden Throne, Tarikus had lost count of the number of Light-forsaken worlds he had fallen upon in the name of the Emperor, carrying the savagery and the cold fury of the Doom Eagles with him; and if his captain wished it, he would venture on and fight naked, with tooth and nail if that were to be the order of the day.

He spat and took a measured breath, concentrating for a moment, casting his hearing forward. Beyond the drips and spatters of falling water, past the slow slopping current of effluent, there were voices: faint sounds that someone without the enhanced senses of the Adeptus Astartes might have missed, murmurs borne to him on breaths of reeking air. The voices were indistinct, ephemeral, but laced with the touch of terror. Tarikus nodded to himself. He was close now.

His knuckles whitened around the grip of his bolt pistol, the solid shape of the gun and the weight of it in his fist familiar and comforting. Bringing it up to sight along the stubby barrel, he pushed forward, the rhythm of his footfalls sending ripples out before him, rings of liquid catching the faint glow of organic

biolumines set into the tunnel roof. As Tarikus walked, he strained to catch a sound from his quarry, some random noise that might give away its position and alert him, but he heard nothing, only the pitiable crying of its victims. No matter, the Marine told himself, there can be no other way out of this stinking warren. He's in there.

After a hundred more steps, the tunnel suddenly ballooned out into a circular atrium, an open flood chamber fed by a dozen more channels, each of them - unlike this one - blocked by a heavy iron grate. Tarikus scanned them in an eye-blink: not one had been forced open. As he had planned, the foe had been caught in his lair and trapped there. Tarikus hesitated a moment, licking at the sickly air. In the near-absolute darkness down here even his abhuman eyes strained to make out anything more than gross shapes, and his scent senses were fogged with the sewer's fetor. With a hiss of effort, Tarikus leapt from the mouth of the channel and dropped the seven metres to the chamber floor, the wet crash of his landing sending a surge of liquid roiling away. The moans he could hear jumped an octave. He could see people arranged like some grotesque exhibition in the chamber's centre, each in a box-like cage, piled randomly atop one another. A tiny flicker of child-memory blinked through Tarikus's mind: a nest of building blocks, a tottering tower built by small hands towards the sky.

In that second, the foe exploded from beneath the knee-deep fluid, a massive man-form spitting a reeking rain out behind it. Tarikus reacted with impossible speed, the bolt pistol turning to target, barrel winking like a blinded eye. The Marine's finger tightened and rounds screamed from the gun, finding purchase in the creature's chest - impossibly, ineffectually, bursting through it to spark away into the walls.

Tarikus ducked as the heavy head of a massive hammer hummed through the air. A split-second too late, he realised the blow had not been aimed at his skull; the arcing trajectory of the hammer dipped down and caught him squarely on the forearm. The impact knocked the gun from his hand and it vanished into the dark, claimed by the murk with a hollow splash. The foe pressed the attack, emboldened by disarming the Space Marine, looping the hammer around for a crushing stroke. As it strode towards him, the Doom Eagle caught the glitter of a lengthy silver probe emerging from his assailant's other palm. Tarikus let him come on, let himself be pushed back toward the wall. As he retreated, he used his free hand to shrug a metallic tube from a strap on his wrist. Consciously willing his optic nerves to contract, he thumbed a stud at one end of the tube.

With the brilliant fury of a supernova, a sputtering blaze of light erupted from the flare rod, filling the chamber with shuddering, actinic colour. The caged ones screamed, their faces caught in a frieze of cold white. Tarikus's eyes were fixed on the enemy before him, the foe revealed at last before the flare's illumination.

It stood a metre or so higher than he, clad in shrouds of rust-pocked armour, the broad feet anchored in the churning pool of effluent, the great mailed fists thrown up to protect its head, and the head itself concealed behind a helmet with dark eyes and the fierce grin of a breath grille. Except for its crimson hue, it was the virtual double of the armour Tarikus had discarded at the tunnel entrance, and staring back at him from its breastplate was the twin-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man.

BROTHER-SERGEANT TARIKUS first cast eyes on the planet Merron as the Thunderhawk made a sharp roll to port. The craft turned inbound toward the starport - the barren desert world's only link to the greater galaxy beyond - and Merron's rumpled orange geography presented itself to the Space Marine. He gave it a practiced survey: there was just one large conurbation, toward which they were flying, and the rest of the land as far as Tarikus's eyes could see appeared to be nothing more than a great web-work of ruddy-coloured scars.

'Open-cast mines,' said a voice beside him. 'Merron is rich in iridium.'

'Indeed?' Tarikus said mildly. 'Thank you for telling me, Brother Korica. Having ignored Captain Consultus's briefing this morning, I of course knew nothing of that.' He turned to give Korica a level stare.

The younger Marine blinked. 'Ah, forgive me, sergeant. I had not meant to imply you were ill-informed about our new garrison posting-'

Tarikus waved a dismissive hand. 'You need not prove your eagerness by reciting the captain's words, lad. Sufficient enough that you have committed them to memory.'

'Lord,' Korica said carefully.

The sergeant allowed himself a small smile. 'You are ready for a new world's challenge and that speaks well of you, Korica. That is why you were promoted

from novitiate rank to the status of battle-brother with such rapidity... but this is not a place where we will find combat awaiting us. Merron is a way-station garrison, somewhere to re-arm and lick our wounds while we watch the Emperor's mines for him.'

'But if that were so, why not use the Imperial Guard to protect it? Are not we more valuable elsewhere?' There was a hint of wounded pride in the youth's voice.

'Mere men? Ha! Iridium attracts the greed of weaker souls like a candle does moths. We could not expect mere men to stand sentinel over it, nor expect them to repel any of the warp-cursed traitors who prey on the Imperium's riches.'

The Thunderhawk rumbled through a pocket of turbulence and Tarikus gave a curt shake of his head. 'No, only the Adeptus Astartes can truly place duty before base desire.' The disappointment on Korica's face was clear as day, and Tarikus waved him away. 'Fear not, lad. If the Corrupted return to this world as they have in the past, we'll be in the fray soon enough.'

The younger Marine looked downcast and Tarikus watched him for a moment. So raw, so untried, he thought, was I ever the same as he? He had not exaggerated when he praised Korica for his swift rise to full status as a Doom Eagle, but still Tarikus regretted that such a promotion had been necessary. On the ice planetoid Kript his company had met an overwhelming force of rotsouled Traitor Marines and lost fully a quarter of their number. Although the enemy had been routed, the blood cost they exacted was paid back with new men, new brothers advanced from the scout squads. Under Tarikus's direct command, Korica, and with him Brother Mykilus and Brother Petius, were among many newly fledged Doom Eagles. Tarikus gave himself a moment to remember his fallen comrades; they had met death at last on Kript's airless plains, and gone to Him willingly with the blood of the impure on their hands. The sergeant had personally recovered a relic from the field of battle, the shattered blade of a chainsword that was now a memorial to one of his brothers. When his time came, Tarikus hoped that the Emperor would grant him so perfect an ending.

THEY RODE OUT across the blasted ferrocrete plain of the port in a line of Rhinos, bikes and speeders, carrying at the head the metallic banner of their

standard. From his vantage point at the hatch of his squad's transport, at the rear of the procession, Tarikus nodded at the clean dispersal and formation of the vehicles. Before him, the full might of the entire third company was spread, a glittering steel parade of tactical, assault and terminator squads - a suitable first impression for the Doom Eagles to make on their inaugural posting to Merron.

His gaze wandered to a force of vessels clustered at the southern quadrant of the airfield. They too were Thunderhawk transports, but wine-dark in colour where Doom Eagle craft were gunmetal silver. Their brooding livery looked like old, dried blood beneath the light of Merron's red sun. On their tail-planes they sported a disc-shaped sigil, a serrated circular blade kissed with a single crimson tear. The ships belonged to the Flesh Tearers, one of the smallest but most savage Chapters in the Adeptus Astartes.

Tarikus let his helmet optics bring them closer. Dozens of Marines were trooping aboard the Flesh Tearer craft while helots and workers, probably Merron locals, were busily loading cargo pods. As he watched, one of them slipped and dropped a case, the labourer's face a sudden mask of fear. A Marine walked to him and gestured roughly, the worker nodding frantically, thankful his mistake had not cost him his life. Tarikus looked away and dropped back into the Rhino.

'...nothing but carrion eaters,' Korica was saying to Mykilus. The other young Marine glanced up at the sergeant with a questioning gaze.

'Have you ever served with them, sir?' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the ships. 'There are rumours-'

'You're not a child, Brother Mykilus. Your time to give credence to fantasy tales is long gone,' Tarikus snapped.

'You deny the reports that they eat the flesh of the dead?' Korica pressed. 'Like the Blood Angels that spawned them, the Flesh Tearers feast on corpses-'

Tarikus took a heavy step forward and the rest of Korica's words died in his throat. 'What tales you may have heard are of little consequence, lad. Soon the Flesh Tearers will be gone and we will assume their garrison here. In the meantime, I expect you to contain your half-truths and speculations - clear?'

'Clear,' Korica repeated. 'I meant no disrespect.'

Tarikus was about to add something more, but without warning the Rhino suddenly lurched to the right, the forward quarter of the vehicle dipping sharply. Loose items flew across the cabin and only the sergeant's quick reflexes kept him upright. The Rhino skidded to a shuddering halt with a heavy iron clang.

An attack? Tarikus's first thoughts were of battle and he snapped out orders. The squad did as he commanded and boiled out of the vehicle in a swarm, bolters to the ready, scanning for an enemy. As Tarikus rounded the Rhino, Captain Consultus's voice crackled in his ear-bead, demanding a report.

Tarikus expected to see a smoking impact hole or the burnt traces of a lascannon hit, but the vehicle was undamaged. Instead, the very road the Rhino had been passing over had given way, a massive disc of ferrocrete cracked and distended into a shallow valley. 'The road, brother-captain, it seems to have collapsed...' Tarikus banged his mailed fist on the Rhino's hull and signalled the driver to put the vehicle in reverse, and the slab-sided machine began to edge backward. The sergeant frowned.

The ground opening up beneath them was hardly an auspicious omen.

As the Rhino pulled back, a contingent of locals approached, cautious and fearful around the Space Marines, giving them a wide berth. They carried iron sheets and makeshift blocking to repair the collapse, and they went to work without speaking. Tarikus studied them for a moment to determine which one was the leader, then strode over to him. The man recoiled, his hands fluttering over his chest like birds.

'You,' Tarikus said. 'How did this happen?'

The man blinked fear-sweat from his eyes. 'B-by your leave, Lord Muh-Marine,' he stuttered. 'The airfield here, it was built over the old quarter. The cesspools are still beneath our, uh, feet. Sometimes, subsidence...' He trailed off, his frayed nerves robbing him of any more speech.

Tarikus looked past him. Some of the workers were covering the centre of the new crater with a rough cloth, trying to conceal something and making a poor try at it. 'You there, hold!'

The man reached out to touch Tarikus's armour and thought better of it, drawing back his hand as if it had been burnt. The Doom Eagle ignored him and stepped

forward, the Merrons scattered like frightened dogs. Tarikus ripped up the cloth with one hand and peered into the crater. Where the road surface had sunk into a dark chasm, a small void had been cut into the old sewers below. From the hole a dozen scents assaulted the Marine, but one came to him with the cold familiarity borne from a thousand battlefields. In the cesspool beneath the road were the naked forms of two corpses, pale and drawn, bleached by months of discorporation. ‘What depravity is this?’ Tarikus boomed, turning to face the Merrons. ‘Answer me!’

‘Don’t concern yourself, Doom Eagle.’ The words buzzed over the general channel of his helmet communicator, and Tarikus looked up to see who had spoken. Six Flesh Tearers had arrived, the black and red of their armour shining darkly.

‘Concern?’ Advancing on the Marine who had addressed him, Tarikus’s voice was almost a snarl. ‘Who are you to decide what should concern me?’

The Flesh Tearer removed his helmet and placed it under the crook of his arm, a casual gesture but one calculated to show Tarikus the skull painted on his shoulder plate and the rank insignia he bore. ‘I am Gorn, Brother-Captain of the Flesh Tearers 4th company. I command the Marine garrison on Merron,’ and here he hesitated, showing a little flash of teeth in a feral smile. ‘At least until the end of this day.’

‘My apologies, brother-captain. I did not recognise you.’ Inwardly, Tarikus fumed at his own indiscretion.

Gorn made a dismissive gesture. ‘No matter, sergeant. We will handle this.’ The captain directed his men into the crater.

‘If I may ask, what transpired here?’ Tarikus pressed. ‘I will have to make a report to my commander.’

‘A report, of course,’ said Gorn, lacing the comment with barely concealed disdain. ‘There have been minor incidents of unrest in the city, which we recently suppressed. This-’ he pointed at the crater, ‘-is no more than a sad reminder of the same, most likely a few misguided fools who took their own lives in a death-pact. Nothing more.’ Gorn laid a level gaze on Tarikus. Clearly, the conversation had come to an end, as far as the company commander was concerned.

Tarikus glanced back at the Rhino. Korica had arranged the squad to remount the transport and stood waiting for him to return. 'By your leave, then, brother-captain.'

Gorn nodded. 'Of course, brother-sergeant...?'

'Tarikus, lord.'

Tarikus. Tell Consultus I will receive him in the garrison tower within the hour.'

'As you wish, lord.'

Am I a mere messenger now, Tarikus wondered as he walked away? Korica seemed about to speak as he boarded the Rhino, but Tarikus silenced him with a glare. 'Get us out of here. Make haste to rejoin the column or else I'll see you carry this heap of pig-iron into town.' The sergeant regretted the sharp words almost as soon as he had said them; his anger was at the arrogant Gorn, not his own men.

CAPTAIN CONSULTUS SAID nothing as Tarikus relayed the details of the incident, the two of them standing in the stone annex before the Space Marine garrison. The sergeant kept his eyes straight ahead as he spoke, but even in his peripheral vision he noted a stiffening of Consultus's jaw as Gorn's name was mentioned. Tarikus had served under the captain for over a century, and knew that this subtle sign indicated an irritation that in other men would have manifested as a shouting rage.

'Strange that he and I should cross paths after so long,' the officer mused. 'I had not thought I'd see Gorn again in this life. I'd thought the Flesh Tearers would have torn themselves apart by now.'

'This Gorn, brother-captain - you fought with him?'

Consultus nodded. 'Our Chapters met briefly on Kallern. You know of it?'

'The Kallern Massacres.' Tarikus recalled the records of the conflict from the indoctrination sessions of his training. 'Millions dead. Terror weapons unleashed in untold numbers.'

‘And the Flesh Tearers in the middle of it all. What they did there earned them the attention of the Inquisition, from that day to this. They embrace the tactics of the berserker, rending and destroying all that stand in their way - enemy and ally alike. If I could command it, I would never place Doom Eagles alongside them, even in the darkest of days.’

Tarikus shifted uncomfortably. ‘The brothers... tell stories about them.’ The sergeant was almost ashamed to give voice to the thought.

‘There are always stories,’ Consultus said simply. ‘The trick is to know if they are just stories.’

The door before the two Doom Eagles opened to reveal the chamber beyond, silencing any more conversation. A group of Flesh Tearers stepped past, among them a blunt-faced codicier. ‘Captain Gorn will see you now,’ he said, his grey eyes flicking over Tarikus’s face. The sergeant said nothing, wondering if the psyker had heard every word they had uttered; as if in reply, the codicier gave Tarikus the smallest hint of a scowl.

Consultus entered the chamber, beckoning Tarikus with him. The exchange of commands was a formal ritual, and it required witnesses. Inside, Gorn was overseeing another Flesh Tearer as the Marine removed the company standard from the wall. This was a solemn duty, the banner a sacred artefact that no helot would dare lay hands upon. As the blood-red pennant was taken down, Tarikus heard the Flesh Tearers murmur a prayer to their Chapter’s progenitor, Lord Sanguinius.

The two commanders met each other’s gaze.

‘Consultus.’

‘Gorn.’

‘My men are ready to take our leave of this sandpit. I can think of no better a company to take our place here than yours.’

If Consultus noticed the derisive tone in Gorn’s voice, he gave no sign. ‘The Doom Eagles will strive to be worthy of the honour of this posting.’

‘Indeed.’ Gorn removed a long ivory rod from a small altar before him. ‘This

token was granted by Merron's governor, as a symbol of our command here. Accept it from me and you will be this world's new defender.' He held out the rod to Consultus like an unwanted gift.

'A moment,' said Consultus coolly. 'First, I would address the report Brother Tarikus brought to me. These "uprisings" of which you spoke.'

Gorn grimaced. 'The report, yes. It is, as I told the sergeant, of no matter. A circumstance we dealt with. It will not trouble you.'

'All the same, I would have a full accounting of it before you leave.'

The Flesh Tearer commander gave a sideways glance at the other Marine, in shared, unspoken scorn at the Doom Eagle's expense. 'As you wish. Sergeant Noxx will see to it.'

'Lord.' Noxx spoke for the first time.

'Now,' Gorn continued, still proffering the ivory wand, 'For the Glory of Terra, I transfer command of the Merron garrison to Captain Consultus of the Doom Eagles. Do you accept?'

Consultus took the rod. 'In the Emperor's name, I accept command of the Merron garrison from Captain Gorn of the Flesh Tearers.'

'So witnessed,' Tarikus and Noxx spoke together.

Gorn's mouth twisted in self-amusement as he took the banner from Noxx. 'You'll find this an agreeable assignment, Consultus.' He patted the chamber's only other item of furniture, a simple carved chair. 'This seat is most comfortable.'

Tarikus frowned; from any other man, such a thinly veiled insult would have had him knocked to the stone floor. Gorn and Noxx left, the heavy ironwood door slamming shut behind them.

'He mocks us,' Tarikus grated. 'Forgive me sir, but by what right-'

'Keep yourself in check, Tarikus,' Consultus said mildly, the words instantly stopping the sergeant in his tracks. 'You're not a novitiate any more. Quell your

enmity and save it for the foe. Let Gorn and his men play at their games of arrogance. They have little else.'

Tarikus stiffened. 'As you wish, brother-captain. Your orders?'

Consultus weighed the ivory token in his fist, then handed it to the sergeant. 'Place this somewhere out of sight. We have no need to validate our command here with the display of vulgar trinkets. All of Merron will understand, the dedication of the Doom Eagles is symbol enough of our devotion to the Emperor.'

'So witnessed,' Tarikus repeated.

THE GARRISON TOWER stood ten storeys tall, dwarfing the largest of the other buildings in Merron's capital, and beneath the surface were a dozen basements and sanctums carved from the sandstone. It was cool and damp down here, a comparative comfort to the uncompromising heat above. Tarikus made a circuit of the lower levels. Squads of Flesh Tearers were everywhere, completing their final preparations for departure, securing weapons for transit and storage. He checked here and there on the numerous Doom Eagles mingling among them, setting up storage dumps for ammunition and equipment. The groups of Marines moved around each other in a controlled dance of parade-ground efficiency, with little interaction.

Tarikus secured the rod in a weapons locker, and turned to discover he was being watched. A Merron male, half-hidden in the shadows, gave a start as he realised he had been discovered.

'Are you lost?' Tarikus asked.

The Merron's head darted back and forth, clearly weighing his chances at running away.

'Speak,' the sergeant said carefully.

The man flinched at the word and dropped to his knees, hands coming up to protect his face. 'Lord Marine, please do not kill me! I have a wife and child!'

Irritation flared in Tarikus. 'Get up, and answer my question.' He did so, and Tarikus felt a flash of recognition. 'Wait, you led the work crew at the starport.'

'I am Dassar, if it pleases you, sir.' The man was trembling, terror-struck in the Doom Eagle's presence. 'I beg you, I was just curious... about your kind.'

Tarikus had often seen common men cower before him. It was the manner of a Space Marine to expect this, as the greater populace of the Imperium - especially on backwater medieval worlds such as this - saw the Adeptus Astartes as the living instruments of the Emperor's divine will; but something sat wrongly with Dassar's behaviour. The Merron's fear was borne not from awe and veneration, but from outright terror.

'I am Sergeant Tarikus of the Doom Eagles. You have nothing to fear from me.'

'Y-yes, honoured sergeant.' Dassar licked his lips. 'But, p-please, sir, may I leave?'

'What are you afraid of, little man?'

At these words, the Merron began to weep. 'Oh, Great Terra protect me! Lord Tarikus, spare me! My family will have nothing if I am taken, their lives will be forfeit-'

Tarikus felt a mixture of confusion and disgust at Dassar's craven display. 'You are a helot in the service of the Emperor! What cause would I have to take your life?'

Dassar's sobbing paused. 'You... you are of The Red...' he said hesitantly, as if the statement would answer all questions. 'You are predators and we are prey...'

'You talk in riddles.' Tarikus bent down and placed his face by Dassar's. 'What is this "Red" you speak of?'

'The children sing the rhymes,' Dassar hissed, 'Here come The Red, they stalk while you sleep. Here come The Red, your blood do they seek. Here come The Red, to your soul they lay claim, and you'll never be seen in sunlight again.' He gingerly laid a finger on Tarikus's armour. 'Only the colour is different. We prayed we would be free of them, but now you have come as well, in numbers fivefold.'

Stone crunched underfoot behind him and Tarikus came upon his heel, whirling about. Framed in shadow, Sergeant Noxx pointed past him at the cringing servant.

‘You, vassal! Where is that case of grenades I ordered you to find? Your lassitude will not be permitted!’

Dassar bolted away into the dark, calling over his shoulder. ‘Of course, Lord Marine, I shall do as you order!’

Noxx gave Tarikus a hard look. ‘These locals. They are a superstitious lot, brother-sergeant.’

‘Indeed?’

Noxx nodded. ‘They’re full of naive fables. I would pay them no mind.’

Tarikus cast a glance in the direction that Dassar had gone and then pushed past Noxx, back up toward the surface. ‘I’ll try to remember that,’ he said.

NIGHTFALL ON MERRON was a slow, languid process. Out on a long orbit around its huge red star, the planet had lengthy days far beyond those of Terran standard, and nights that were longer still. Tarikus watched the sky’s gradual drift toward red-orange twilight through the window behind Captain Consultus, the colour shimmering off the shapes of a dozen armoured Space Marines outside as they drilled in tight-knit groups.

‘You were right to bring this to me,’ he said carefully, ‘but Noxx is correct. I have examined the Adeptus Ministorum records of this world and its natives, and their culture is disposed toward myths and idolatry. The Ecclesiarchy allowed it to continue with guidance toward veneration of the Golden Throne, but some anomalies of doctrine might still exist.’

Tarikus shifted slightly. ‘Captain, that may be so, but this helot, I saw nothing but absolute dread in his eyes. Reverence breeds a different kind of fear.’ When Consultus gave no reply, he continued. ‘A commissar once spoke to me of the Flesh Tearers’ legacy of Sanguinius, of’ - and here Tarikus had to force the words from his mouth - ‘the curse of the Black Rage.’

‘What you are insinuating borders on heresy, sergeant,’ the captain stated coldly. ‘You understand that?’

Tarikus found himself repeating Korica’s words aboard the Rhino. ‘I meant no disrespect.’

‘I have seen the Flesh Tearers in their unbounded fury,’ Consultus said quietly. ‘They would take prisoners for interrogation, and we would never see them again. Once, I found a mass grave on the edge of my patrol zone, filled to the brim with enemy dead. I thought to check the bodies for any whom still lived, but there were none. Instead, I found men with hearts torn out by human teeth, bloodless and bone-white.’

An image of the corpses in the crater returned to Tarikus’s mind. ‘If the Merron people are being preyed upon by...’ He paused for a moment. ‘By someone, and the Imperium does not protect them from it, their faith in the Emperor’s divinity may falter.’

Consultus nodded. ‘There are always dark forces that seek uncertainties such as this. If they were to gain a foothold on Merron, the consequences could be disastrous. That shall not come to pass while we stand sentinel here.’

‘Will the inquisitors hear of this?’

The captain shook his head. ‘This is a matter for the Adeptus Astartes. You, Tarikus, will take a few men and investigate these circumstances. I will have you put down this fable for all of Merron to see.’

‘It will be my honour, captain.’ The sergeant met his commander’s gaze. ‘I will follow this malfeasance to its source.’

‘I know you will, Tarikus. Wherever it takes you.’

THEY FOUND THE body after only an hour of searching. Dassar’s thin screech cut through the blood-warm air and brought Tarikus and Korica running, to where he stood flanked by Mykilus and Petius. Between the hulking forms of the two armoured Space Marines, Dassar looked waif-like by comparison, a child’s crude sketch of a man against the brutal shapes in silver-grey ceramite. The

servant had panicked when Tarikus had ordered him to accompany them, but it was the Merron's reluctant direction that had brought them here, to a landscape of wreckage and broken stone on the city's outskirts. Brother Petius raised his faceplate to the sergeant and flicked a glance at the ground.

'Elderly male, no clothing or identifying marks. I'd estimate he's been dead for two standard days.'

Tarikus accepted Petius's report with a nod. The young Marine's skills with matters of the dead were trustworthy; he would one day become a fine Apothecary for the Chapter. 'Show me.' Tarikus stepped around the shuddering form of Dassar and peered at what they had discovered.

'We found him concealed beneath some rubble,' began Mykilus. 'Not too well hidden, either. I suspect he was meant to be found, sir.'

The sergeant dropped to one armoured knee to get a closer look at the corpse. Like the bodies he had seen in the sinkhole, the frail old man's papery skin was fish-belly white and anemic. 'Drained of his vital fluids,' Tarikus murmured. 'Exsanguinated...'

'It is as he said,' Korica indicated Dassar, 'these ruins around the airstrip are a warren of tunnels. The ideal place to dispose of a body.'

'The others were found like this?' Tarikus asked.

Dassar nodded slowly. 'Y-yes, Lord Marine. Sometimes weeks, even months after they go missing from their homes.'

Mykilus's brow furrowed. 'Are all you Merrons sheep? You did nothing about these abductions, you did not speak of them to the garrison commander?'

After a long moment, Dassar spoke again, his voice thick with fatigue. 'We were told to keep our petty problems to ourselves.'

Tarikus stood up and gestured to Korica. 'Wrap the body in Dassar's sandcloak and take it back to the Rhino. We will treat the dead with the respect they are due. How was he killed, Petius?'

'Look here, sir.' The Marine pointed at a circular wound on the body's chest. 'A

puncture point, just beneath the heart. This poor fool was sucked dry through some kind of instrument, perhaps a metallic proboscis or tube. I believe he was alive and conscious at the time.’ Petius removed a thin scalpel blade from a pack on his belt and picked at something on the dead man’s flesh.

Dassar turned away and retched into the scrub. ‘Oh, Emperor, deliver us from this evil, save our brother Lumen-‘

‘You knew this man?’ Korica asked.

‘The metalsmith’s father-in-law,’ Dassar choked. ‘Taken last month during the two-moon festival.’

‘Whatever kills these people does not murder before it is ready,’ said Tarikus. ‘How many others are still missing?’

‘A-a dozen, perhaps more...’

‘Then, where are they if they are not already dead?’ asked Mykilus.

Tarikus nudged a loose stone with his broad, metal-shod foot. ‘Beneath us...’

‘No one ventures into the tunnels!’ said Dassar sharply, ‘A foetid place running with pestilence. Any man who enters would surely sicken and die!’

‘Any man,’ echoed Tarikus. ‘But we are not mere men.’

‘Brother-sergeant,’ said Petius, a warning in his voice, ‘I have something.’ He held up a tiny sliver of metallic material that glistened in the fading daylight. Tarikus examined it closely; such an artefact would surely be imbued with the despair of so terrible and tragic a death - a relic well suited to be taken to the Chapter’s Reclusium on Gathis when this mission was at an end.

Mykilus intoned a prayer to the Machine God and gently waved his auspex over the fragment. ‘A piece of ceramite,’ he pronounced, ‘old and corroded. It seems crimson in colour.’

‘The Red!’ Dassar husked, but the Marines did not answer him. Their enhanced senses caught the sound of tracks long before the servant’s human ears registered the approach of a vehicle.

A Razorback tank in Flesh Tearer livery rolled into view between piles of rubble, which had once been brick-and-mortar buildings in the old quarter. The vehicle halted and for a moment there was silence. With a squeak of poorly maintained hinges, the tank's upper hatch opened and a trio of Marines exited. Dassar shrank back, shifting to hide himself behind Petius.

'Ho, Brother-Sergeant Tarikus.' Tarikus recognised Noxx's voice.

'Noxx,' he replied with a nod. 'What brings you here?'

The Flesh Tearer sergeant looked around. 'I could ask you the same.'

Tarikus was suddenly very conscious that Noxx and his men were carrying their bolters in battle-ready stances. The same awareness seemed to flicker out to Korica, Mykilus and Petius, and from the corner of his vision, Tarikus saw them shift their hands close to the triggers of their own guns.

'We are conducting an investigation.'

'For another of your reports?' Noxx said archly. 'The Doom Eagles must be a well-documented Chapter indeed.' When Tarikus did not rise to his barb, the Flesh Tearer indicated the nearby airstrip. 'In answer to your question, I am supervising the transfer of this vehicle to one of our Thunderhawks.'

'Through a debris zone?' said Mykilus.

Noxx's words became a snarl. 'Not that it is any concern of yours, whelp, but this route is quicker than the paved road. After all, we are doing our best to remove ourselves from Merron as fast as we can.'

A sideways glance from Tarikus kept Mykilus from answering with an angry riposte. 'We need no assistance,' he said in a neutral voice.

One of the other Flesh Tearers spoke. 'What have you there?' He gestured toward the cloak-wrapped body. 'Another deader?'

'Nothing of consequence-' Tarikus began, but Dassar spat loudly behind him.

'Fiends! Eaters of men!' the bondman hissed, emboldened by the Doom Eagles' protection. 'Your time is at an end! Merron will fear you no more!'

Noxx gave a chug of harsh laughter. ‘Careful, vassal. The Adeptus Astartes does not take kindly to insults from lesser men...’

Dassar began to speak again, but Petius cuffed him with the flat of his gauntlet and he fell to the ground. The Marine had saved his life; had the servant vented his hostility any further, Noxx’s men would have been within their rights to discipline him as harshly as they saw fit.

‘You should keep him quiet,’ said the other Marine. ‘They never spoke out of turn when we were in charge here.’

Tarikus took a menacing step forward. ‘But you are not in charge here any more. The Doom Eagles are Merron’s protectors now, and the Emperor has duties for you elsewhere, Flesh Tearer.’

The sergeant’s words brought the tension in the air to a knife point. But after long moments, Noxx broke it with a nod to Tarikus. He ordered his men back aboard their tank, and the vehicle lumbered off, kicking up spurts of dust.

CONSULTUS’S RIGID EXPRESSION did not alter as Tarikus relayed the discovery of the body to his commander. Only when he handed over the metal fragment did the sergeant see anything more than cold contemplation on his face. Finally, Consultus put the ceramite shard aside.

‘Meaningless, Tarikus. If this is the best you can do, the chief librarian will laugh you out of the chambers.’

‘I suspect Noxx and his men knew about the corpse before we did.’

‘Conjecture. I cannot even begin to countenance the idea of placing doubt on a brother company without hard, irrefutable evidence.’

‘They were goading us,’ Tarikus said. ‘I won’t stand by and have my Chapter derided by carrion eaters-’

Consultus came to his feet with a snap of boots on stone. ‘You forget your place, sergeant, for the second time today. Do you plan to make a habit of it?’

Tarikus felt his colour rise. ‘No, brother-captain.’

‘Good, because the last thing I want is for one of my most trusted squad leaders to begin behaving like the novitiates I put him in charge of, clear?’

‘Clear, lord.’

The captain turned away. ‘Night has fallen. You have until dawn to find something substantial, otherwise the Flesh Tearers will leave and this matter will be closed.’

TARIKUS STEPPED OUT into the Merron evening. The crimson glow of the sunset still lingered at the horizon, and above, the largest of the planet’s moons was full and gibbous, hanging in mute judgement over the city. The sergeant walked the perimeter of the garrison block, along cloisters thick with shadow. Other Doom Eagles passed him by, leaving Tarikus alone with his thoughts. It was the nature of a Space Marine to be instilled with supreme self-belief, and like any other member of the Adeptus Astartes, Tarikus knew with all his heart that they were the strongest, the most dedicated, the most fearless warriors in the Emperor’s arsenal.

Despite their arrogance and savagery, Tarikus had a grudging respect for the Flesh Tearers. They had weathered more than their share of misfortune and hardship; from the jungle hell of their homeworld, they numbered merely four full companies, and their only starship was an ancient hulk crowded with ill cared-for equipment, like the patchwork Razorback he’d seen earlier. They were Brother Marines, and Tarikus found the idea that members of the Legion Astartes would stoop to such pointless barbarity as preying on innocent civilians disgusting. It was his duty, he decided, not just to his Chapter and to the Merrons, but to the Flesh Tearers and to the Emperor, to end the circle of suspicion without delay.

‘Tarikus.’ The voice cut through his musings. He became aware of three figures standing around him in the darkness, their blood-and black-coloured armour blending into the night.

‘Captain Gorn: I thought you were at the airstrip.’

‘I have other matters to attend to.’

The sense of threat from the ruins-rushed back to him. ‘What of them?’

‘It has come to my attention that certain... rumours are being circulated. This displeases me.’

Tarikus said nothing; although he could not see their faces, he could taste the familiar scent-trace of Noxx and one of his men from the Razorback.

Gorn continued, his voice coloured with annoyance. ‘We have had our fill of this worthless sand pile, sergeant, and we wish to leave it behind. It would not go well for our departure to be delayed by needless hearsay. Do you understand?’

‘I believe so, brother-captain.’

‘Then I hope for your sake I will hear no more of this unworthy prattle.’

Without another word, they left him there, turning over Gorn’s cryptic half-threat in his mind; but then another voice called his name, and this one was screaming it, crying and shrieking into the moonlit night.

TARIKUS FOUND DASSAR in a shuddering heap at the feet of Brother Mykilus, the Marine’s face split with confusion over how he should deal with the wailing servant. Tarikus pulled him upright. ‘What is wrong?’

Dassar’s face was streaked with tears. ‘My Lord Tarikus, I am undone! I came to you with the truth and now I have paid the price - they took them! They took my wife and my son!’

‘He claims the Red abducted his family and dragged them into the sewers,’ said Mykilus.

Tarikus’s eyes narrowed. ‘Summon Korica and Petius,’ he told the Marine. ‘Tell them to bring weapons for close-quarter combat.’ As Mykilus did as he was ordered, Tarikus questioned Dassar. ‘These tunnels, what do you know of them?’

‘A web of sewers,’ the man said between sobs, ‘feeding to a central chasm. It

was once an underground reservoir, but now it is barren.'

A lair, thought Tarikus. Like a trapdoor spider, the Red was hiding concealed in the stone tunnels - just as the sergeant had begun to suspect.

'Mira and my boy Seni, they'll be killed! Please, I beseech you, save their lives!'

Tarikus looked up as Mykilus returned with the others. 'I have heard enough. This ends tonight.'

Korica handed him a loaded bolt pistol, and the four Space Marines advanced into the gloom.

Mykilus used a shaped charge to blow open a rusted manhole cover in the plaza near the garrison, and with Korica on point, the quartet dropped down into the foetid runnels beneath.

'The stench - I have never encountered the like before!' Petius gasped.

'Like a breath from a slaughterhouse,' said Korica with a grunt.

'Hold your chatter!' Tarikus barked. 'Look sharp! We can only guess at what we are facing.' He glanced up and down the tunnel they stood in: it was a wide pipe, a main tributary or flood channel.

After a few hundred strides, Korica pointed toward a small branch tunnel. 'Sergeant, see here. I believe this is one of the vents that joins the main chamber.'

'Too narrow for us,' noted Petius.

From behind him, Tarikus heard Mykilus give a growl of frustration. 'The auspex senses something, but I cannot interpret the runes...'

The squad halted, the echoes of their footfalls dying away. Over the licking of the effluent around them, Tarikus strained to listen. Dimly, he was aware of an organic rustling sound, like matted fur on cobbles.

'Above-' began Korica, leaning back to look at the tunnel ceiling. Without warning, a dozen bulky black shadows detached themselves from the crumbling

bricks and fell across Korica's upper torso. The sewer was suddenly filled with high-pitched squeals as dozens of rat-like vermin bit into the Marine's armour, acidic saliva melting through the ceramite. Blinded, Korica squeezed the trigger on his bolter and the gun crashed into life, a fusillade of shells arcing from the muzzle as he twisted in place. The bolts sparked off the walls in brilliant red ricochets.

Tarikus leapt forward, shoving Petius aside as a round whined off the tip of his shoulder plate; the Marine was unhurt, but his Battle-Brother Mykilus reacted seconds slower than the veteran Tarikus, taking hits in his chest and thigh. Mykilus sagged, slipping down the curved wall.

Brother Korica gave a bubbling scream; some of the rat-things that swarmed over his chest plate had bored into his armour and were scratching and tearing at him from the inside. One of the rodents leapt at Tarikus, spitting venom, and he caught it in mid-jump, crushing the animal in his fist. For a moment, it hissed and snapped at him, and Tarikus saw the tell-tale signs of mutation and corruption across its form. The tiny body bulged and popped beneath his fingers like an overripe fruit.

Korica's bolter clicked empty and still the injured, maddened Doom Eagle swatted at himself with the inert weapon, desperately trying to pick off the darting, biting shapes. Dark arterial blood ran in thick streams from the joints in his armour.

Tarikus grabbed at Petius's weapon - a narrow-bore hand flamer - where it had fallen and trained it on his brother Marine; the rat-beast's eyes had glowed with the same infernal hate that the sergeant had seen in the Traitors at Kript, and suddenly he had no doubt as to what quarry they were tracking. Korica seemed to sense his intentions and nodded his consent. Tarikus whispered a litany under his breath and pressed down the trigger stud, engulfing Korica and his myriad attackers in wreaths of glowing orange flame. The verminous creatures hissed and spat, catching ablaze and falling away from the Marine's armour. Korica shrugged off the licking fires, beating them out with his gloves, his breath coming in harsh wheezes. The Marine's skin was bloodied, burnt and cracked, but he lived.

'Thank you, brother-sergeant,' he coughed. 'Only the flamer's kiss can dislodge these warp-spawned abberants...'

‘What were those creatures?’ asked Petius.

‘Mutants,’ said Tarikus, handing back the flamer. ‘The twisted lackeys of Chaos.’

Behind them, Mykilus gave a hollow groan. Petius went to his side. ‘He’s alive, but the bolter shells hit a primary artery. The bleeding must be staunched or he will perish.’

‘Do it,’ Tarikus snarled, removing his helmet. With the ease of hundreds of years of practice, the sergeant began to divest himself of his armour.

‘Sir, what are you doing?’ Petius asked. ‘You cannot think to-‘

‘You said yourself, the channel is too small for one of us. I must leave my armour here and venture on without it.’

‘Let me come with you,’ grated Korica, ignoring his injuries.

Tarikus shook his head. ‘You are blinded and Mykilus will be lost without aid. You must carry him to the surface. I will see this through to its ending.’ The Marine shrugged off his torso plates and stood, unadorned and ready. ‘Get Mykilus to safety and inform Captain Consultus of the situation.’

Petius nodded. ‘As you command, sergeant. Terra protect you.’

Gripping the bolt pistol in his hand, Tarikus pushed on into the narrow channel alone.

STARING BACK AT him from its breastplate was the twin-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man.

The shock of recognition sent a thrill of adrenaline through Tarikus; bare-chested and unarmed, he was face-to-face with a fully armoured, crimson-clad Space Marine, the unmistakable broad shoulders and the fearsome mask of the helmet pressing down on him. The light from the flare tube began to gutter out in pops and splutters of greenish-white chemical fire, and as it did the foe let out an echoing cry that was half-pain, half-rage.

TARIKUS STABBED THE dying flare forward like a knife and connected with the red Marine's torso - but instead of blunting itself on the toughened ceramite exterior, the tube pierced the chest plate, flakes of metallic armour crumbling away under the impact. Like the fragment Brother Petius found, he realised. His surprise robbed him of the initiative, and the foe's hammer whistled through the foul air, catching Tarikus in the shoulder. The impact spun him about, and he stumbled, splashing through the muck in gouts of oily liquid. The sergeant's right arm went loose; the dislocated joint sang with pain, the edges of bone grinding together. Tarikus gave a bellow of anger as he dragged the limb back into place with a sickening crack. The hammer came out of the dimness at him once more, but this time Tarikus was ready and blocked it with a cross-handed parry. The slow, heavy weapon's path could not be quickly halted and it struck the wall, the head burying itself in the rotted bricks. The vague shape of the red Marine pulled impotently at the handle, spitting out wordless, hollow noises of frustration.

'Woe betide!' Brother Tarikus answered with a battle-roar and leapt at his enemy with a powerful kick that shattered the red Marine's greaves. The foe fell back, letting go of the hammer, and raised its hands in a poor approximation of a fighting stance. As he circled it, on some higher, analytical level, Tarikus's mind was marvelling at what he saw. What madness is this, he wondered? No Adeptus Astartes, not even the foul cohorts of the Traitor Legions would dare show such ineptness!

Tarikus saw an opening and took it, his fist striking his attacker's chest with such ferocity that the torso plate broke apart, crumbling like rotten pastry. The Imperial eagle sigil snapped under his knuckles, revealing itself as nothing more than painted glass. Tarikus reached inside the rent he'd made in the crimson armour and dug his sturdy fingers into the folds of flesh and clothing within. He felt thick blood ooze out around his wrist, heard, a gasp of pain. The sergeant balled his free hand into a fist and struck the red Marine across the helmet; the blow landed with a hollow ringing collision. His muscles bunching, Tarikus hit out again with all his might and his backhand took the helm off his foe's head, arcing away to clatter against the walls.

Revealed within the armour was a pasty-skinned parody of a man, his face riven with blotches and his eyes sepulchral with hate. Across his brow was a livid

brand: a grinning skull surrounded by an eight-pointed star. Exposed, he seemed pathetically small and weak, a faint shadow of Tarikus's rugged, broad form.

'Who are you?' Tarikus demanded, shaking him. 'Answer, you wretch!'

Above, the sergeant heard the cough of impact charges as the chamber roof gave way; stones crashed to the floor around him, but he did not spare them a glance.

'Talk, or I'll tear the truth from you!' His grip tightened, and the little man spat up thin, greenish-tinted blood.

When he finally spoke, it was in a fluid, gurgling murmur: 'Here come The Red, they stalk while you sleep. Here come The Red, your blood do they seek. Here come The Red, to your soul they lay claim, and you'll never be seen in sunlight again...'

The sergeant hesitated for a moment, then tore his hand from the little man's chest, ripping bone, lung and flesh out along with it. The ruined figure dropped away and sank into the torpid black water.

PETIUS FINISHED APPLYING the salve to a small wound on Tarikus's face and pronounced him healthy. His Space Marine physiology was already flushing the toxins from the sewer out of his system, and the salve would help it in the process. He watched as the Merrons brought up the caged ones from the chamber, as men and women greeted their families with tears; some joyful at finding those they loved still alive, some weeping as bloated, pallid corpses were hoisted to the surface. He noted with some small satisfaction that Dassar had been reunited with his wife and son; at least for the helot, the Emperor had moved through Tarikus this day to deliver him from his pain.

He rose to his feet as Captain Consultus approached, with Gorn and Noxx a step behind.

'Tarikus, you performed well. A citation may be in order.'

Gorn gave a reluctant nod of agreement. 'Perhaps so, brother-captain.'

'This is at an end, then?' he asked.

‘It is,’ said Consultus. ‘When Petius returned to the garrison with news of what transpired, I asked Captain Gorn to lend us the arms of his Flesh Tearers.’

‘It seemed a logical course of action,’ noted Gorn.

Petius jerked a thumb at several impact craters nearby. ‘We are storming the tunnels, flushing them out with flamers and plasma-fire. It is a nest of foulness and corruption down there.’

‘The man,’ Tarikus began. ‘He wore our armour...’

‘Not quite,’ said Gorn, ‘it was a well-crafted copy, but made from a poor ceramic compound. Not even strong enough to deflect a punch.’

‘But it was similar enough to convince the Merrons.’

Consultus nodded his assent. ‘He preyed on their fears to discredit the Flesh Tearers and the Adeptus Astartes.’

‘To what purpose?’ said Petius.

In reply, Noxx tossed a spherical white object at the youth, but Tarikus snatched it from the air before it reached him. It was a human skull, and etched into its bone were whorls and patterns of lines. The matrix of thin bands seemed to shimmer in the half-light, forming the shape of a many-angled star. ‘Ask him,’ said Noxx.

Gorn cocked his head and subvocalised a message into the comm-net. ‘Our transports are approaching orbit. By your leave, brother-captain, if you have no further use for us, the Flesh Tearers would quit this troublesome world.’

‘Thank you for your assistance, Brother Gorn,’ said Consultus, offering his hand. ‘Perhaps we will meet again under better circumstances?’

‘Perhaps,’ Gorn replied, returning the gesture. He gave Tarikus a wary nod and walked away. Noxx followed and did not look back.

The Doom Eagle sergeant watched them go in silence.

TARIKUS FOUND HIMSELF in the company of his captain once again a few days later, as he completed his prayers after early morning firing rites.

‘Brother-captain,’ he began, ‘have the tunnels been cleansed?’

‘The taint of evil has been purged,’ Consultus replied.

‘Were all the missing civilians accounted for?’ Tarikus said after a moment.

Consultus gave him a neutral look. ‘We only found live victims in the cavern where you killed the cultist, the Red. There were several caches of bodies scattered around the sewer complex.’

‘They were all killed in the same manner?’ he pressed.

‘Not all,’ said the captain. ‘A handful were found with different wounds.’

‘In what way?’

‘It is of little consequence now, Tarikus, but if you must know, there were some that sported torn, ragged wounds from claws and teeth. From human teeth.’

Despite himself, the sergeant felt a shudder of cold run along his spine. ‘The Red killed only by draining blood. If he was not responsible, then who was?’

‘Who indeed?’ said the Captain as he walked away.

Tarikus looked up into the sky, where the crimson night was fading into dawn; if he had an answer to that question, he kept it to himself.