

WARHAMMER
40,000



IMPERIAL FISTS

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Parchments covered in words of devotion hung everywhere, illuminated prayers from the hands of Terra's own scribes. They had spent lifetimes hunched over their work, lifetimes scratching out the words of long-dead saints with quills carved from the skulls of penitents, ink distilled from the blood of martyrs. Holiness bled from the parchments, black ink turning red as it dripped onto the floor of the Phalanx's war archive.

The ritual decontamination of the space station would take years. The evil done to it by the culmination of a daemon's plan could not simply be washed away. It had to be prayed out of existence, scoured like a wicked man's sins out of the steel of the Phalanx until it was fit to fly as a flagship of Mankind again. Teams of Imperial Fist Chapter serfs scrubbed the contaminated decks with holy water while Ecclesiarchy priests were suffered to intrude into the Chapter's world to bless the wargear that had seen the presence of the daemon. But the Phalanx was still a warship, and war did not pause to let its combatants cleanse themselves of the sin that it brought. The Phalanx still had to serve; the Imperial Fists still had to fight.

The parchments waved in the breeze generated by the air recyclers as Captain Lysander entered the war archive. His own wargear, his Terminator armour and the great storm shield currently strapped to his back, gleamed after the day's maintenance rites. He looked less like a man and more like one of the statues of heroes that lined many of the corridors of the Phalanx, memorials to long-dead Imperial Fists whose acts of heroism had earned them a memorial in the heart of the Chapter. His shaven head looked like it had been chewed up and spat out, but his features had retained the nobility and focus that marked him out as a leader by sight alone.

The novices in the war archive seemed to shrink when they saw him. They were barely out of the earlier stages of physical transformation that would eventually make them Space Marines, and had yet to serve as Scouts or as apprentices to the Chapter's Techmarines and Librarians. They rarely saw the senior members of the Chapter, let alone stood before one of them as students. For the time being they were still men, not yet members of the Adeptus Astartes, not yet free of the weaknesses that the Emperor had created the Space Marines to overcome.

‘You know who I am,’ said Lysander. ‘And you know why I am here. You are the future of the Chapter. Some of you will one day serve as Imperial Fists, perhaps under me in the First Company. One of you may even wear these laurels as a captain, though I will not let that happen without you first understanding the meaning of war.’

He looked from one face to another. They stood in ranks, facing the tactical display table that took up a good chunk of the war archive’s floorspace. Each novice had been picked as a youth from one of a hundred worlds the Imperial Fists Chaplains had visited, according to the most exacting standards of aggression, fearlessness and physical potential. Now they looked like children compared with the monster that was Lysander.

‘War,’ said Lysander, ‘is sacrifice.’

He waved a hand and the mimetic alloys of the table’s surface reconfigured themselves into a complex topographical map, rising up to form the peaks and valleys of a rugged snarl of mountains. A holo-unit mounted on the ceiling cast hundreds of glowing symbols across the map. Cylinders among the mountain slopes denoted artillery pieces. Airstrips dotted the tops of foothills. Dozens of unit markings swarmed around the valleys and the lower slopes, various colours depicting the many sides of a great, confused battle.

‘What do you see?’ demanded Lysander.

‘I see Valacian Pass,’ said one voice.

Lysander looked at the novice. His jet black hair contrasted with the red of his irises and the greyish tone of his skin. An underhiver, one of a subterranean race of scavengers and gang killers from some Emperor-forsaken hive city’s depths.

‘Novice Apeyo,’ said Lysander. ‘You memorise the Precepts Militant well. But that is not enough. What does Valacian Pass mean to you?’

Apeyo swallowed. ‘Captain Siculus led a force of battle-brothers in evacuating civilians from the Draven Mask rebels. The rebels were engaged in their own war with the Scarlet Moon cultists who...’

‘No,’ said Lysander. ‘The words of the Precepts Militant are well known to me. I have no need of them. I asked you what the battle means.’

Lysander was met with silence that seemed to go on forever until one novice cleared his throat.

‘Novice Arnobius, you alone wish to speak?’ said Lysander.

Arnobius wore the blue-trimmed habit of the Chapter’s Librarium, its hood covering his shaven scalp and the patches of regrafted skin on his face. Behind the scarred but unassuming face burned a mind that might – just might – have the strength to serve as a battle-psyker in the Imperial Fist ranks.

‘Siculus,’ began Arnobius, ‘had a choice.’

‘Enemy air!’ called out Scout-Sergeant Noctis over the vox-channel, and a split second later Captain Siculus heard the scream of the engines overhead.

Ahead was the vast sweep of Valacian Pass, a deep valley cutting through the red stone mountains. From Siculus’s vantage point in the hatch of his Damocles command vehicle, he could see the great train of refugees choking the entrance to the pass, marshalled by priests of the Ecclesiarchy crying out prayers and appeals for calm. Tens of thousands of them were making the march through the pass to the landing fields on the other side, where they could be evacuated from this world and from the rebel forces encroaching on its cities.

They were Ministorum acolytes and Mechanicus fabricators, Administratum clerks, medicae surgeons and orderlies, the law-scribes of the Arbites and guards from the prisons. The Adept class of Key Thol, the latest city to find itself in the path of the Draven Mask.

The people heard the engines, too. They knew what they meant. Siculus could see the panic running through them.

‘Cover!’ shouted Siculus into the vox. ‘Noctis, you are Squad Iason’s eyes!’

The craft screaming down the valley was shaped like a dagger, a cockpit blistering up from the tip of its blade. Siculus glimpsed the face of the pilot, a blank, chromed mask with a single eye drilled into it, as the fighter aimed its nose down the valley and sprayed fire from the guns mounted on its swept-back wings.

A chain of impacts rippled across the valley sides, spiralling down through the

massed civilians. Bodies were thrown in the air, screams just audible over the engines as the fighter ripped overhead.

Siculus swung down into the interior of the Damocles. The Damocles was based on the Rhino APC, giving up most of its passenger capacity for boosted comms equipment that let the Imperial Fists force keep vox-contact through the interference caused by the mountainous terrain. Tactical readouts told Siculus that his force was scattering into cover. He had Scout Squad Noctis and the Devastator Squad of Sergeant Iason, along with his own command squad now sheltering in the rocky debris at the foot of the valley wall.

‘It’s a Red Fang,’ said Techmarine Hamoskon. The Techmarine was crammed into the back of the Damocles where there was barely room for the servo-arms folded up around his body. ‘It’ll cut those people to ribbons.’

‘Iason!’ ordered Siculus. ‘Take it down!’

The sound of gunfire hammered closer. A lance of light spitted the Damocles, shearing through between Hamoskon and Siculus. Siculus threw himself backwards as the Damocles was thrown into the air and he felt the shockwave slam into him, driving the inside of the side hatch into the back of his head.

He was out for a moment. His senses swam back into focus and he was being dragged from the burning wreckage by Hamoskon, the Techmarine using his servo-arms to haul the captain behind him.

Siculus rolled to his feet. He went through the battle-drills in his mind, ticking off his limbs and senses. He was not badly hurt and could fight on. The rite completed, Siculus turned his attention to his own squad, who were running from cover to take him to shelter.

They were his closest brothers, those who had fought at his side since he had been able to call himself an Imperial Fist. One man from each squad he had fought in now wore the red helmet of Siculus’s company, and made up his own honour guard.

Brother Achaikos pulled Siculus into cover. ‘It’s coming back for another pass.’

‘Open fire!’ replied Siculus. ‘Keep his eyes off Iason!’

‘Aye, my captain!’ replied Achaikos. He aimed his bolter at the sky and the other six brothers of the command squad did the same, stitching rapid bolter fire up at the silvery dart now wheeling back around to point down the valley.

Siculus could see Scout-Sergeant Noctis, kneeling out of cover watching the enemy fighter through his magnoculars. The sun glinted off the bionic eye of Sergeant Iason as he took the lascannon from the battle-brother beside him.

He was going to take the shot himself. Arrogance, maybe, or simply the knowledge that Iason was the best shot in the company. It mattered not in that moment as long as the shot was true.

More fire spat down from the sky. It blew shards of stone from the valley sides. The civilians were wheeling now, a melee without head or tail, rushing in every direction at once trying to find a way out from the valley that wasn’t there. People were dying there, blown apart by the fire or crushed underfoot. People who were Siculus’s responsibility.

The lascannon fired. A pulse of glittering crimson sliced one of the fighter’s wings off. The fighter kept its course for half a second and then one side dropped, throwing it into a spin that arrowed off-course.

It slammed into the side of the valley in a bloom of red-black smoke. Shards of stone fell in a dark hail over the panicking people. The sound of the impact boomed back and forth across the mountains, shaking snow from the highest peaks.

‘It will not be alone,’ said Siculus. ‘The Draven Mask have the skies of this world, but they have plenty on the ground, too. Noctis! My brothers! Advance, and keep your eyes high!’

Siculus ran past the wreckage of the Damocles towards the edge of the crowd. ‘Citizens!’ he shouted. ‘Listen! The enemy wishes you dead, but it will not find you here! The Emperor is with you, for we are the Emperor’s hand, and we will deliver you! Carry the wounded and leave the dead, obey your priests, and follow us through this valley! We are the Imperial Fists, they who stood at the battlements of Terra and dared the Enemy to attack, and we will not let you down! On this you have my word!’

Perhaps it was Siculus’s words that had an effect, or perhaps the Ministorum

preachers got the majority of the crowd back under control. The heaving of the crowd subsided as the people began to move again down the valley, stepping around the heaps of broken bodies and smouldering craters. Siculus could hear the weeping and the wailing of those who had seen their loved ones die, and the crying-out of the wounded. Some were carried on the shoulders of companions; others dragged themselves along or limped in lopsided groups, leaning on one another for support.

‘I have eyes on,’ came a vox from Scout-Sergeant Noctis. His squad was moving rapidly down the valley, scrambling through the rocks that lined the valley side. Siculus scanned along the slope and saw the dark dots swarming there – light infantry, skilled and fearless, at home in the unforgiving terrain of the mountains. They were typical of the Draven Mask. They had infested this place, and now the call had come for them to crawl out from their holes and feast on the weak who limped past beneath them.

‘Noctis, hold and pin them down! Iason, move into position! My brothers, with me!’

‘Wait,’ voxed Noctis. ‘North-west, the second peak. I see him.’

Siculus looked to the north-west. There a shattered peak, like a broken fang, rose among the great flinty slabs of the range. Some ancient cataclysm had broken off its pinnacle and sent deep fissures running down its height.

There, among the broken, scorched rock, stood a coven of figures, their banners and cloaks waving in the cold wind. The augmented vision of a Space Marine could pick them out in every detail.

Seven of them stood there. Six were men, or at least had once been men. They wore plate armour looted from the tombs of this planet, forged into delicate scrollwork now bolted to bulging, mutated muscle. The weapons they bore had been taken from tombs and museums, blades, shields and lances from an empire that had died thousands of years before. Their faces were sagging knots of ragged skin and every one had put out his eyes, the raw, bleeding sockets the badges of their faith. For they had gouged them out at the order of the seventh.

The seventh was the Eternal Guide, the Light in the Darkness, Lord of the Beatifying Fire, Captain Cohpran Vaa’eigoloth of the Emperor’s Children.

He wore a cloak of caged flame, roiling around his shoulders and surrounding him in a heat haze. His armour was that of a Space Marine in bright polished purple, gilded panels bearing prayers to his own power and beauty. One shoulder panel took the form of a bird's wing, its feathers picked out in pearls and rubies. Emeralds clustered on his chest in the shape of a planet surrounded by eight stars. His helmet was a featureless gold cowl save for the eyeslits, and on its brow sat a crown of silver dripping with gemstones of every colour. In one hand he carried the Corruptor Prince, a daemon bound into the shape of a staff Vaa'eigoloth had taken from the cooling body of Governor Calx of the Subdamnas Sector. In the other he carried a shield he had made from Autarch Ysandrion of Deldrenath Craftworld. The Autarch was still alive and his face, set into the puzzle of body parts making up the shield's front, wept with pain.

Siculus froze. A Space Marine should never have allowed events to shock him out of his thoughts, but the sudden appearance of the Traitor Legion captain had thrown him. For a moment his mind was full of nothing but the vision of Vaa'eigoloth. This was the Emperor's Children captain who had looted a thousand relics of the Emperor's life and assembled them into a vessel for the daemon that still rampaged through the Ghoul Stars. He had raised a vast army of rebels, mutants and pirate vermin, solely to march them into a volcano so he could hear the laughter of his god as they burned. His armour had been forged in a pile of burning pilgrims and quenched in the tears of their orphans.

Siculus tore his eyes away.

'We can take him,' said Achaikos beside him. 'He has the Six Furies with him but we are a match for them, if we move now and falter not.'

Squad Iason had seen the newcomer too. Already their heavy weapons were turning towards the shattered peak.

'Captain?' voxed Iason. 'Your orders?'

'Hold,' said Siculus.

'If we take him down now, whatever plan he has for this world will not come to pass.'

'And we will abandon these people,' replied Siculus. 'A planet's worth of the faithful. Not to mention that Vaa'eigoloth may well be here solely to divert us

from our mission.’

‘It matters not,’ said Achaikos. ‘The mission will be forgotten if we bring back his head.’

‘I agree,’ voxed Sergeant Iason. ‘It is clear to me on which path the greatest glory lies.’

Siculus paused. He saw himself carrying Vaa’eigoloth’s scorched helm back to the Phalanx and seeing it mounted as a trophy of war. And he saw the valley ahead of him choked with the refugees’ bodies.

‘I care nothing for glory,’ replied Siculus. ‘Iason, advance and engage at range. Noctis, support us.’ He turned to Achaikos and the other Imperial Fists of his command squad. ‘You are with me,’ he said. ‘Down the valley. Get these people to safety. Those are my orders.’

The Imperial Fists force followed the mass of refugees down the valley, Iason’s guns already hammering fire into the positions of the hidden Draven Mask rebels. Siculus looked back, only once, towards the shattered peak.

Vaa’eigoloth was turning away, perhaps in disappointment, perhaps in satisfaction. And Siculus could not help but wonder if, beneath that faceless helm, there was a smile.

‘A choice,’ said Captain Lysander. He looked between the faces of the novices. They were waiting for the object of the lesson, for Lysander to explain to them what they should have learned. ‘Arnobius?’

‘He was wrong,’ said Arnobius.

‘Explain, novice.’

‘Siculus had the chance to eliminate an enemy of Mankind. By the time the Imperium brought Vaa’eigoloth to battle he had gone between half a dozen more worlds and done countless evils on them all. All that could have been avoided if Siculus had killed him at Valacian Pass.’

‘I see,’ said Lysander. ‘Speak up, novices. Those who cannot express their own opinion in my presence will never dare walk into the guns of the enemy. Speak

up.'

'I disagree,' said a novice near the back of the room. Novice Kogen was from a world of scattered islands and vicious sea monsters, where bronzed men fought kraken from the shores under two blazing suns. His skin was the colour of copper and tiny pebbles had been inserted under his brow and temples, framing his face in a scarified pattern. 'Siculus's mission was clear and he followed it through to the end.'

'The loss of the adepts would have been regrettable,' said Arnobius, 'but that would mean nothing compared to the elimination of Vaa'eigoloth.'

'But without the faith and trust of the Imperium's people,' replied Kogen, 'the Imperial Fists can do nothing. If they cannot live in hope that we can deliver them, they will be without faith, and the enemy has his roots in the ranks of the faithless.'

'There is no statue of Siculus among the heroes on the Phalanx,' countered Apeyo. 'With a kill like Vaa'eigoloth he would surely be commemorated as a hero. He would have brought great glory to the Chapter!'

'And what more evil could the heralds of Chaos have done with a population devoid of hope and faith?' said Kogen. 'More than one Champion of the Warp could ever do, I would wager.'

'I would take you up on that wager, Kogen!' snapped Apeyo.

Lysander held up a hand. 'Good,' he said. 'These were the same voices that Siculus heard in his head as he wrestled with that decision.'

'Then what is the answer?' said Apeyo. 'Was Siculus right or wrong?'

Lysander smiled. He did not do this very often, especially in the presence of novices, and the unease that passed among them showed they were not sure what to make of it. 'That question,' he said, 'will be answered with another.'

Lysander adjusted the map table's readout. Valacian Pass and its array of tactical markers disappeared. A holo appeared above it, hovering in the air. It was a banner bearing the image of an iron fist against a pair of crossed lightning bolts. Burning xenos skulls were embroidered around the base of the fist, and above it

was the symbol of a planetary system with seven planets. The banner pole was topped with an enormous alien skull, taken from a species with a large brain case and complicated mandibles. One of its eye sockets was burned out by a plasma blast and the skull was scrimshawed with hundreds of names.

‘What,’ asked Lysander, ‘do you see?’

For an uncomfortable moment, no novice answered.

‘The Standard of the Seventh,’ said Arnobius at last.

‘Where is it now?’ said Lysander.

‘The Chapel of Hamander.’

‘Why?’

It was another novice, Dacio, who answered. His pallid skin and overlarge eyes were marks of his origin, on a long-night world where the population had evolved to a near-abhuman strain. ‘It was retired as a relic,’ said Dacio. ‘It is brought out only when the whole Seventh is assembled to fight as one, and when its captain deems it fitting.’

‘Partly true, Novice Dacio,’ said Lysander. ‘But not completely. A more accurate answer would be that this standard hangs in the Chapel because of Manufactorum Sigma. I trust that you have read of it, my novices. I am not here to educate you on what happened there. I wish to find out if you understand what Manufactorum Sigma truly means when it comes to leadership. To the status of an Imperial Fist. To your futures in the Chapter.’

Lysander looked among the novices. They were uncertain. Their lessons until now had not been easy, but they had been simple – wargear rites, tactics, history, rote learning and muscle memory. Now they were being asked to think.

Kogen spoke.

‘Hamander had a choice to make, too,’ he said.

The Granite Sprawl was dying all around, and the Imperial Fists, like everything living there, were bleeding out of it. They were a part of its death throes – the

last out, of course. The Imperial Guard had already fled on their seaborne transports and troop landers. The Naval airfields had been evacuated shortly before that. The Imperial Fists were the last out. When the last of them embarked on the Thunderhawk gunships waiting to take them back to orbit, there would be no humans in the Granite Sprawl.

The industrial city was a great dark stain across half a continent, its manufactoria standing as titanic cathedrals to the Imperial hunger for munitions and war machines. Though Captain Hamander had no love for this bleak and inhuman place, it wrenched at him to know it would be taken by the xenos.

Manufactorium Sigma had been the last glimmer of the front line. Now it was burning. The alien artillery had thrown beams of crimson light in through windows of shattered stained glass and set light to the very steel of its girders. The flames inside cast strange shadows from the blazing skeleton of the immense building.

‘Count off, brothers! We cannot wait for you!’ Hamander was in command of two companies’ worth of the Imperial Fists – the entirety of the Seventh and elements of the Fourth, Fifth and Ninth. His own captaincy of the Seventh made him the ranking officer but this was an army that could not be led by one man. Each unit operated independently in the withdrawal, brother watching over brother.

The acknowledgement runes flickered against his retinas. Seventeen squads of Imperial Fists were already embarked. The Techmarines and their tech-novices were still on the ground, overseeing the launch of the strikeforce’s eight Thunderhawks.

‘We are not fleeing,’ voxed Hamander as he reached the rear ramp of his command Thunderhawk, the gunship painted in the gold and black of his company. ‘We will return and rain fire on this place! When the xenos are celebrating chasing us off, then we will drop into the heart of them and scatter them in the confusion of dread!’

Hamander looked back at the manufactorium. The xenos were crawling through it. Light shimmered, fractured images shattering and reforming – a form of advanced force field that addled the eye and made them all but impossible to shoot down at range. The fire did not bother them, though the building was

falling down around them. No doubt they had some protection from that, too.

Thousands of them were advancing on a front wider than the Imperial commanders had ever imagined they would. Somehow, through cunning or witchcraft, the aliens had smuggled whole armies into the Granite Sprawl and were rolling across those areas they did not already control. They would take it in its entirety, much of it intact, as the Imperium fled before them.

And then the Imperial Fists would return. Perhaps in hours, perhaps days. Whenever the xenos were most vulnerable. They would tear the heart out of the xenos command. All they needed was a good target.

They would return. Hamander would swear it as soon as he was clear, and have his battle-brothers witness the oath.

‘We’re taking fire!’ came a vox from Techmarine Machaon. ‘Evading now!’

Hamander looked back through the closing ramp of his Thunderhawk. Sprays of las-fire were spattering up from the burning manufactorum, and a bolt punched through the tail of the Thunderhawk Blood Star. Hamander’s own craft, the Hymn to Dorn, lifted off, the final Thunderhawk to do so, and the Imperial Fists army was in the air.

‘The Star is wounded but aloft,’ voxed Machaon. ‘Devlan Wrath is hit. She’s going down.’

Hamander ran to the gun port and saw the Devlan Wrath tipping to one side, shedding a hail of shrapnel from a destroyed engine. It dropped into a flat spin and crashed through a nest of antennae on the roof of Manufactorum Sigma.

‘That’s Squad Talthybius,’ said Hamander.

‘They have the standard,’ voxed Machaon in reply. ‘We must return.’

‘No,’ came a vox from Assault-Sergeant Lapithos. ‘Our orders are to withdraw. There is no gain in sending more battle-brothers to die down there.’

Sergeant Talthybius’s icon was still illuminated against Hamander’s retinal display, but he was gone from the vox-net. ‘Talthybius is alive,’ said Hamander.

‘Then avenge him,’ said Lapithos. ‘Do not join him.’

‘And let the standard of the Seventh Company fall into xenos hands?’ retorted Machaon. ‘I will not return to the Phalanx with my head hung low, knowing I let aliens desecrate the symbol of our honour! Knowing I did nothing!’

‘And how many of your brothers’ lives,’ said Lapithos, ‘will you spend to say you did something?’

‘Silence!’ ordered Hamander. ‘The choice is mine alone.’

‘I will go with you,’ said Machaon. ‘Down there, to the cauldron of fire. I will go.’

‘You will stay with the fleet and get us off this world,’ replied Hamander.

‘Do not do this,’ said Lapithos. ‘Losing the standard is a lesser disgrace than throwing your battle-brothers’ lives away for nothing. You can atone for the one, but not the other. Let the xenos have it and return to avenge Talthybius.’

‘He yet lives,’ said Machaon. ‘He fights alone, his brothers faltering when they should bring all rage and fury to the enemy!’

‘I called for silence! I am your captain!’ Hamander gripped the edge of the gun port as he looked down at Manufactorum Sigma. He could just see the crash site of the Devlan Wrath, a tangle of wreckage that had plunged through the roof of the manufactorum and lodged in its upper floors. Sleek alien grav-tanks were emerging from the burning shell of the building, sweeping round to converge on the site.

‘I need twenty brothers,’ said Hamander. He looked back to the Imperial Fists in his own Thunderhawk – the battle-brothers of Squad Sartan. They were covered in soot and mud from the gruelling journey through the burning manufactorum, and now he was asking them to go back there.

‘We go not for a chance of victory,’ he said to them, ‘but for the future. For the brothers who will take inspiration from our actions this day. It is much that I ask.’

‘Not too much,’ replied Sergeant Sartan. Sartan had lost his jaw in action two

decades before and his voice was partially artificial, a metallic grating sound that suited him perfectly. ‘And any of my squad who will not stand beside you will have to face me in the afterlife.’

‘Assault Squad Martez are with me,’ said Machaon. ‘Marte has requested he join you.’

‘Then we are ready,’ said Hamander. ‘Take the Hymn down. Machaon, bring the Golden Dagger down with us.’

‘I cannot countermand your order,’ voxed Lapithos. ‘But I can ask you, not as an Imperial Fist, but as a friend. Good lives are not worth this gesture. Your life is not worth it.’

‘Recover my body, Lapithos,’ replied Hamander. ‘If it clutches not the standard of the Seventh in its fist, then do not mourn me too long.’

The two Thunderhawks, the Hymn to Dorn and the Golden Dagger, broke away from the ascending Imperial Fists gunship fleet and weaved through the fire streaking up at them. They swooped down low into the streets in front of Manufactorum Sigma, cutting off the sight lines to the alien artillery tanks gathered around the manufactorum’s main gates. Those streets were half-ruined tumbles of fallen debris with the occasional corpse dotted around. Skirmishes had washed back and forth across the Granite Sprawl before the xenos armies had pushed forward in strength, like the overture to a bloody play. Perhaps that was what the aliens thought this was – a play, a work of art, the battlefield their canvas. Some said that war was a dance to them, and that whether they lived or died mattered less than the artistry with which they made their steps.

The Hymn to Dorn slewed around, landing engines kicking skirts of dust up from the streets below. The main engines howled and the gunship shot forwards, covering the open ground before the manufactorum before the enemy tanks could get it in their sights.

Hamander hung on as the gunship roared up through the main gateway of the manufactorum, ruddy gloom closing in as it passed into the burning building. Alarms were sounding as the gunship wove between rafters and fallen pillars. Fire was everywhere, rushing across the ceiling and pooling in great lakes around the factory floor. Enormous banks of machinery broke the surface like islands.

The Golden Dagger shrieked by into the ceiling, clipping a wing against a pillar and spinning out of control. It smashed through the rafters and disappeared in a shower of debris.

‘Damn it, Machaon!’ yelled Hamander.

The Hymn rose up through a great hole torn in the ceiling. The upper levels were a warren of offices, side chapels and adepts’ quarters, and everything was on fire. The Thunderhawk’s rear ramp opened up and superheated air slammed against Hamander as he leapt out, drawing his power axe from the scabbard along his back.

His lungs burned, even through the filters of his power armour’s helmet. Without the auto-senses of his eyepieces and his ocular augmentations, he would have been blinded by the smoke. The fire was white blooms against the monochrome chaos, his vision sacrificing colour to pick out movement.

Through the fire stumbled the battle-brothers of Squad Martez. Hamander saw Techmarine Machaon among them, obvious by the silhouette of his bulky forgemaster’s armour and servo-arm.

‘Machaon!’ yelled Hamander. ‘You were to drop off your brothers and withdraw!’

‘The Golden Dagger has fallen,’ replied Machaon. ‘Without my steed, I cannot ride! And so fate has decreed I must fight with you!’

‘Strange fortune that fate compels you to defy me.’

‘We can have an open discussion of it back on the Phalanx,’ said Machaon.

Both squads were deployed. Sergeant Martez was rallying his brothers, who while battered and scorched looked like they had made it into the manufactorum’s upper floors at full strength. Hamander saw the last of Squad Sartan jumping from the Hymn to Dorn.

‘Get clear!’ Hamander voxed to the pilot. ‘Join the fleet!’

The Hymn could do nothing here, with no lines of sight to bring its guns to bear. It rose up through the hole in the manufactorum roof, even as the rest of the

Thunderhawks passed overhead, silvery sparks reaching the upper atmosphere.

Gunfire spattered from their flank, shredding through carved wood partitions and mounds of flaming ledgers. A missile streaked past, bursting in a spray of fire against a wall.

‘Scatter and advance!’ yelled Hamander. ‘Keep eyes on all sectors!’

‘Do they seek us, or Talthybius?’ voxed Sergeant Sartan.

‘We will know soon enough,’ replied Hamander.

He saw one of the aliens through the flames. It wore close-fitting armour of curved plates, coloured in reds and oranges with a red helmet inset with triangular green eyes. It carried a weapon of unmistakably alien design, a fat tapering barrel hooked up to an ovoid power pack wrapped around with thick cables and circuitry. A gemstone was set in its chestplate. These aliens all had such gemstones displayed on their armour.

‘Fire Dragons,’ growled Sergeant Martez.

Imperial Fists were firing in all directions, aliens running at them through the flames, firing bursts of crimson power. Up close, here in this close-quarters firestorm, they were deadly. One of Squad Sartan – Brother Closs – fell as a blast melted right through his armour and out through his back, leaving a smoking hole straight through him.

Hamander dived through a burning wall, wood splintering under him, and he crashed into the alien who was aiming a shot behind it. His weight drove the alien to its knees and Hamander hacked down with his axe, slicing off one of the alien’s arms.

With his free hand he grabbed the alien by the faceplate, one thumb crunching through its eyepiece. He wrenched the helmet off its head, seals and cables popping as it came away.

The aliens were like parodies of humans. Long, thin faces and large eyes, like those of some feline hunter which some thought beautiful. In the language of the Imperium they were called eldar, but to Hamander, they barely deserved a name at all. He pinned the eldar to the floor with the butt of his axe and wrapped his

hand around its face, snapping its neck with a flick of his wrist.

‘I see him!’ came a vox from one of Squad Martez. ‘Talthybius! I see him! To our west!’

Martez jumped up from the alien’s body. The Imperial Fists were already charging through the wreckage, bolter fire streaking through the ruination littered with the corpses of dead xenos. Two Space Marines lay there too, the fusion weapons of the Fire Dragon eldar having melted through their armour and cooked the flesh inside.

Hamander could see Talthybius now. He held the standard of the Seventh as high as he could, but he was wounded, almost lying on his back as he fired seemingly at random around him.

But it was not random. He was surrounded. Aliens darted from the flames, running almost too fast to see, lashing at Talthybius with silver blades. They moved with the spring of acrobats, their armour the colour of bone, and their tall masks were fringed with flowing red hair.

Talthybius shot one down, sending it tumbling into the fire. But a dozen wounds were opened up in his armour. Members of his squad lay all around him, sliced open, armoured limbs and heads cut off and burning.

Hamander had seen battle-brothers fall in combat before, but it seemed that each time, it got worse. Rogal Dorn had taught the first Imperial Fists to take that anger and focus it, only unleashing it when the only tactical option left was relentless, headlong attack.

The battle-brothers of Squads Sartan and Martez were doing that now, sprinting through the flames to reach the enemy. Blades clashed on ceramite. Bolter shells chewed through the burning walls. Aliens were thrown to the ground and a ceramite boot crunched down onto the neck of one of them. Sergeant Martez lanced one through the belly with his power sword.

Machaon walked calmly, firing bursts of rounds from the storm bolter he had built himself in the forges of the Phalanx. Eldar ran at him and tumbled to the floor, blown open by the blessed ammunition.

Hamander ran through the bedlam. He slid to the ground beside Talthybius. The

sergeant was one of the biggest men in his command, and in all likelihood would have represented the Chapter at the next Feast of Blades. Now he was cut low. One wound had opened his face from forehead to lip. Another had ripped open his abdomen and his entrails glistened in the flame.

Talhybius looked around, face full of the pain he was holding back.

‘No,’ he said.

‘We are with you, brother,’ said Hamander. ‘We stand together.’

‘No, captain!’ said Talhybius. ‘You should have fled! You should have abandoned us! Only death remains for you here!’

‘Not so, Talhybius. No brother is given up for dead when he and a single Imperial Fist yet live.’

‘Damn it, Hamander! How many lives did you give up to these aliens, so you could die beside me?’

‘They will not take you, brother, and they will not take the standard.’

‘The standard? You throw away your lives for this? For a handful of silk? The battles you could have won, Hamander! The tides you could have turned! And now they are all lost, for you forsook them all for this gesture.’

The Imperial Fists formed up around Talhybius and Hamander. The eldar were disappearing, flipping away through the flames, evading the bolter fire that rattled after them.

‘We will get you out of here,’ said Hamander. ‘You and the standard. And you will be hailed as a hero before your brothers.’

‘I am dead,’ said Talhybius. ‘Leave me. Take the standard. Die with it in your hand.’

Hamander hauled Talhybius to his feet and dragged him behind him. ‘Brothers,’ he voxed. ‘Find a way down. Find us a landing site!’

The whole manufactorum seemed to shudder. A beam of scarlet light ripped up

through the floor, bathing everything in a momentary flare of bright red.

When it died down, there was a hole in front of Hamander where a couple of his Imperial Fists had stood. They were gone, vaporised.

On a column of flame and shuddering haze rose a beast three times the height of a man, seemingly clad in molten armour that hissed and spat as it burned. It wore a crown of twisted bone and one of its hands was a bloody steel gauntlet, shedding an endless torrent of gore. In its other it carried an enormous sword, glowing with power that issued from the alien runes inscribed on its blade.

The terrible shrieking that issued from it was almost deafening.

‘Their god!’ yelled Techmarine Machaon over the noise. ‘Summoned to war! Witchcraft, brothers! Alien witchcraft!’

The Imperial Fists had recovered quickly from the shock of the demigod’s appearance. Bolter fire smacked into its molten hide, seemingly making no impact at all. It turned its burning green eyes from one Space Marine to the next, and if Hamander could read anything from its inhuman face it was scorn and anger.

‘You shall not take the standard!’ yelled Hamander, barely able to hear his own voice. ‘Not while one yet lives!’

The demigod thrust its sword down and Hamander rolled to the side, catching the end of its blade under the head of his power axe. Sparks flew as the axe’s power field fought against the energy of the sword. The demigod was strong, monstrously so, and Hamander felt himself being forced back.

‘When your kind have been forgotten,’ snarled Hamander, ‘they will remember us! They will remember this, when all who knew of you are rumours and dust!’

More aliens were storming into the upper floors. Some had chainblades and heavier armour, plated emerald green. Others, in black and purple, walked slowly through the fires to bring their rocket launchers to bear. The Imperial Fists who remained yelled their war-cries and ran into the fray, bolter fire streaking everywhere.

The demigod lunged forwards and threw Hamander onto his back. Its blade

came down like a guillotine, reflecting the flames and the sight of his brothers dying.

‘You have seen,’ said Lysander, ‘the Standard of the Seventh. You have heard the name of Captain Hamander of the Seventh Company, and looked on his image, carved in granite, looking down as you knelt in his chapel. What was it worth to put that standard in such a place of honour? To put Hamander’s name among those of our greatest heroes? If you knew you could buy that for yourselves, for the honour of your Chapter and the glory of your Primarch, how much would you spend to get it?’

None of the novices answered.

‘Come,’ he said. ‘You would charge into hell if I demanded it. You would grapple with the alien and lock horns with the daemon. Yet you will not answer a mere question? Apeyo! How much?’

‘The life of any battle-brother who would stand with me,’ replied Apeyo. ‘If they wished to put themselves on the line for such glory, I would not hinder them.’

‘And your own life?’ said Lysander.

‘Of course,’ said Apeyo. ‘My life for the glory of Dorn.’

‘Your life,’ said Lysander. ‘A life selected from a pool of millions of supplicants. Crafted in the image of Dorn, some say crafted from the very flesh of the Emperor Himself. Armed with the best battlegear. Transported on the best spacecraft. The recipient of resources that the Imperium can ill afford to muster, a life owed to the labour of a trillion men to make the existence of the Space Marines possible. This you would spend to purchase something as meaningless as glory?’

‘I do not believe that glory is meaningless, captain,’ replied Apeyo.

‘But compared to the life of an Imperial Fist?’ said Lysander. ‘How much weight does glory have, placed on the balance beside such a life?’ He turned to the other novices. ‘Answers!’ he barked.

‘None,’ said Kogen.

‘Then Hamander was wrong?’ said Lysander.

‘Yes, he was.’

‘This hero before whose statue you have knelt? This man whose battles and lessons have been taught to every novice since his death? He was wrong?’

Kogen could not answer. Lysander walked up to him, looming down over the novice.

‘Tell me,’ said Lysander, ‘that Captain Hamander made the wrong choice. Before me, before your brothers, tell me that.’

Kogen stayed silent. His eyes flickered to the faces of the novices beside him.

‘And if you cannot say it,’ continued Lysander, ‘then say that, too.’

‘I cannot, captain,’ said Kogen.

‘Good,’ said Lysander. ‘The force returned some days later to find the two survivors of the mission to recover the standard. Hamander was not one of them. He died at Manufactorum Sigma. Were it not for his actions, the standard would surely have been lost and a great shame brought upon the Imperial Fists. And yet, twenty Space Marines died for this. For silk and stitching.’

Lysander dismissed the holo-projection with a wave of his hand and the war archive reverted to its normal half-gloom. He walked between the rows of novices – they were already beginning the augmentation of their skeletal and muscular systems, but even so he towered over them. They did not shy away from him. That was good. The cowardice of a normal man was being hammered out of them. A decent proportion of them would receive the armour of a Scout, and of those, many would take on the armour of a full battle-brother. They were not ready yet, of course. Perhaps they never would be, until they wore the black fist of the Chapter in anger before the enemy.

‘One final question,’ he said. He took from an ammo pouch at his waist a single bolter shell. It was inscribed with the initials ‘IRIXA’, inlaid with gold filigree and studded with emeralds. It had been drilled and threaded onto a thin chain, to be worn as a talisman. ‘What do you see?’

He held the bolter shell up. The novices watched but there was no recognition on their faces.

‘Imperator Rex In Xanatar Aeternam,’ said Lysander. ‘What do those words mean to you?’

‘Xanatar is a world on the Eastern Rim,’ said Novice Lukra, a short, stocky lad with huge meaty hands and a square reddish face.

‘And what of Xanatar?’ asked Lysander.

‘I know no more about it, captain,’ said Lukra. ‘Such is my shame.’

‘You want me to tell you what punishment you are to administer to yourself for your ignorance,’ said Lysander, ‘and then explain to all of you what you do not know. There will be no session in the nerve-glove, Novice Lukra. None of you have been told of Xanatar. That is because this bolter shell was one of a hundred created in the forges of the Phalanx for Chaplain Belisar four hundred years ago. If you know of Belisar it is only as one of thousands of names on the rolls of honour, perhaps an inscription on the wall of the Reclusiam. He is not commemorated as a hero here, or recorded as a strategist in our histories. None teach of him at all, save I. I show you this because once, like Siculus and Hamander, Belisar had to make a choice.’

The storms of Xanatar had killed civilisations before, rising up from the flint deserts in blizzards of razor-sharp stone. Every few centuries they would rise, occasionally striking a few decades apart or waiting for millennia, but they always returned and they always wiped out whatever hopeful young culture had sprung up on the rich volcanic slopes of the lava rivers.

They had stripped the Imperial colony of Port Xan of everything above ground. Of those caught in the open, not even bones remained. It had happened three weeks ago and the flurries of stone were still lashing against the chewed foundations. The small population were sheltering in the hazard bunkers underground, or huddled in twos and threes in the basements and storage cellars where they had fled to when the sky first turned dark.

Through the brown-black blur of the storm, the dark red glow of the nearest lava river cast a blood-coloured light. It was a tributary of one of the greater volcanic flows. Xanatar’s volcanoes placed a constantly renewed layer of nutrient

minerals on the planet's surface, making it extremely fertile and a coveted location for conversion by the Administratum into an agri-world to feed the young worlds of the Eastern Rim. And it would be a hugely productive world again, until the next storm came.

Chaplain Belisar walked against the storm, the weight of his Terminator armour alone keeping him on his feet. The black paint on its leading surfaces had been scraped off by the hail of flint, revealing the dull gunmetal of the ceramite underneath. The auto-senses built into the skull-faced helmet struggled to make anything of the storm save for a seething darkness and the deep red ribbon of the lava river up ahead.

Belisar forced his eyes to focus and could just see the shattered foundations of Port Xan nearby. He was in the middle of the settlement, what remained of it. The remains of the tallest structure barely came up to his shin. He tried to find movement in the darkness that was not a part of the storm's chaos.

A shadow moved against a shadow. Belisar drew his storm bolter, bracing his wrist to hold its twin barrels level against the stone wind.

'Ill met,' said Belisar on a broad-channel vox-broadcast. 'But met as a brother, nonetheless.'

From the darkness coalesced the shape of a Space Marine. In the light his Terminator armour would have been an iridescent black, like the carapace of a beetle. The emblem of a golden fist gripping a hammer was inscribed on his chestplate and the same symbol was sculpted in deep relief on one shoulder pad. Mounted in the Space Marine's golden helmet were a pair of similarly coloured sensor lenses in which Belisar could see his own reflection. On one knee guard was a campaign badge depicting a storm cloud and lightning bolt, demonstrating that this battle-brother had fought in the crusades among the Imperium's eastern reaches over the last decade.

'Chaplain,' said the Space Marine. The vox-net was distorted but audible. 'I guessed that they would send you.'

'At the Feast of Blades when we last met,' said Belisar, 'you defeated me and won the laurels for your Chapter. You conducted yourself as an honourable brother in all things. That is why I know you are not what some say you are.'

‘And what,’ came the reply, ‘do they say of us?’

‘That you are traitors,’ replied Belisar. ‘But I know that you are no traitor, Tek’Shal.’

Tek’Shal walked a few paces closer. His marks of rank were visible now. He had a veteran sergeant’s chevrons on the body of the boltgun hanging at his side. Acts of leadership were commemorated by the gilded crux terminatus and winged bolter shell hanging from the brocade across his chest. One greave was carved with the pattern of a spider’s web, with purity seals pinned to it like trapped prey.

‘Because I am a son of Rogal Dorn?’ said Tek’Shal.

‘Because I learn a great deal about those I fight. It is a Chaplain’s role to do so. I know you, Tek’Shal, better than you realise.’

‘So you think you can convince us to kneel as inferiors?’

‘Not kneel,’ said Belisar. ‘No one is asking for your obeisance. Just to take a step back from this path. It is not too late to choose a new one. Step away from it, leave Xanatar and the Eastern Reaches – not for good, just to demonstrate you have no designs upon it yourself. The Imperial Fists have great influence among the Imperium’s military, we will see to it that there are no repercussions. I swear this as a brother.’

‘You cannot swear that,’ said Tek’Shal. ‘Not when you will strip from us all we have earned.’

‘This world means so much to you?’ said Belisar, holding his arms wide to indicate the tortured landscape around them both. ‘This is worth abandoning the Imperium for?’

‘Xanatar is where it starts,’ came the reply. We have laboured years among these stars, fighting the Emperor’s fight, unheralded and unthanked. Not for us the honours of Terra, the fame of Dorn’s favourite sons! These hands that have taken a thousand lives have laid a hundred brothers to rest. All we ask is to keep what we have earned! The worlds of this subsector, in recompense for the war we fought and won here. Is this not what the lowest Imperial Guard regiment is offered – the right of settlement in conquered territory, in recognition of their

sacrifice? Thus we claimed Xanatar, the first world in our dominion. Thus we will take what we are owed, nothing more.'

'We are Space Marines!' said Belisar. 'We exist to fight the Emperor's war. We do not need the power over a world to motivate us to our duty. Where did you learn that you fight for reward? Our duty is its own reward, to see it done or die in the attempt. It is not the place of a Space Marine to seek to rule what he conquers. It is his place to win it back and defend it for the dominion of the Emperor, not his own.'

'And what of the Ultramarines?' retorted Tek'Shal. 'They rule their own empire, do they not?'

'That is different, brother. You know that.'

'Is it, Chaplain? Why? Because the Ultramarines have the most glorious of histories, because their word is heard when ours is ignored?'

'Because the Emperor granted that dominion to Roboute Guilliman! He who does not walk among us cannot cede the worlds of His Imperium to you!'

'Then what He cannot give us,' said Tek'Shal, jabbing a finger towards Belisar, 'we will take!'

'I see,' said Belisar. 'You are certain in the principles of what you do. I must respect that. But the consequences are another matter.'

'Ah, the consequences!' replied Tek'Shal. 'And tell me, what will they be? The Lords Militant will declare us Excommunicate, perhaps? A Naval fleet will appear in a few years' time to bring us to justice. Every line of ours they cross, we will be waiting. We will storm them and cripple them, one by one, just as we did the xenos and the traitor who once held these stars! Do not speak of consequences, Chaplain Belisar of the Imperial Fists. Those who fight us will feel the consequences of denying us what is ours by right.'

'No,' said Belisar. 'Those are not the consequences of which I speak.'

'The Imperial Guard, then? A million men sent to drive us out world by world? They will never bring us to battle. As Dorn once taught his scouting corps, we will melt away and emerge again in twos and threes to kill a dozen men and

vanish. Every force landed against us will be picked apart and bled white. The lifeless husks of armies will litter these worlds. You know this to be true, Belisar. You know how we fight.'

'Again,' said Belisar calmly. 'That is not the consequence you face.'

Belisar took a single bolter shell from the ammunition pouches around his waist. He held up the shell so Tek'Shal could see it. It was intricately inscribed, and among the scrollwork were the letters 'IRIXA'.

'Imperator Rex In Xanatar Aeternam,' he said. 'The Emperor Reigns on Xanatar for All Time. Lowly as this world is, it is the Emperor's. The bleakest rock is His, and it is our duty to keep it His. I came here willing to kill you, Tek'Shal, because my duty to the Emperor and His Imperium is greater than the bond of brotherhood between us.' Belisar put the shell into the chamber of the storm bolter. 'I knew that you were a man of honour. But I am not. I will shoot you down here, though you are without a weapon in your hand. I will put you down, be you a fellow son of Dorn or no.'

Tek'Shal could have gone for his own bolter, hanging at his side. But the storm bolter was aimed right at his head, and he could not have drawn his weapon before Belisar's finger pulled the trigger. The Terminator's hand did not move.

Belisar sensed that Tek'Shal was smiling beneath the many-eyed faceplate of his helmet. 'I am not alone on this world,' said Tek'Shal. 'What will you do when I am dead?'

'I forged a hundred bolter shells for Xanatar,' replied Belisar coolly. 'When I have killed you, I will have ninety-nine left. How many of your brothers will I kill before they overcome me? I am a Reclusiarch of the Imperial Fists. I have faced members of the Traitor Legions, and unlike any of your men I have killed a Space Marine before. So, how many will I kill? And when I am done, how great a will do you think the Venom Thorns will still have to rule their own empire?'

'We will weave the web around you, strangle you like prey,' said Tek'Shal. There was steel in his voice now.

'Khorhadek, captain of the Skulltakers, took an oath to kill me and give my head to his god,' replied Belisar. 'But it was his skull that became the trophy, for I

placed it on the Altar of Brotherhood on the Phalanx.' Belisar kept the storm bolter levelled at Tek-Shal's face. 'I will break out of your web as I broke out of his, and stalk you through this storm like the Emperor's own ghost. All of this will happen unless you leave Xanatar and every other world in this sector to the rightful rule of the Emperor.'

'You will not kill a Space Marine,' said Tek'Shal. 'And we will not give up our right to rule what we have conquered.'

The storm bolter did not waver.

'I fought you, too, remember,' continued Tek'Shal. 'And the man I fought was not one who could kill a battle-brother in cold blood. Chaplain or no, you are a Space Marine. This is not a choice you can make.'

Belisar did not move. Neither did Tek'Shal.

The storm screeched across Xanatar, so dense that it seemed to hide everything on its surface from even the Emperor's eyes.

'What did he choose?' asked Novice Arnobius. The novice's eyes were still on the bolter shell dangling on its chain.

'What,' said Lysander, 'do you think?'

'Tek'Shal was a renegade,' replied Arnobius. 'A Chaplain would have no choice but to...'

'To kill another son of Dorn?' interrupted Lukra. 'Can any Space Marine do so? Not in combat, in battle, but as an execution?'

'Then you think, Novice Lukra,' said Lysander, 'that Belisar should have let Tek'Shal rebel against the Emperor's rule?'

'I think he would not have,' said Lukra. 'But as to whether he should have? I think that is another question I cannot answer, captain.'

'That is because you are a novice, Lukra,' said Lysander. 'Because no such choice has been demanded of you. But one day, it will. This I swear. No one who fights in the Emperor's name can ever do so without making decisions that cost

lives, or determine the honour given to the Chapter and to the Emperor, or which can force us against every principle we have devoted our lives to upholding. To answer your question, Novice Arnobius, Belisar left Xanatar alive. That is all anyone knows of the matter. What he did, what befell Tek'Shal and his Chapter, Chapter records do not show. They have been lost to the ages. Nothing but a trace of the incident remains, and that was only recently discovered in the Phalanx's archives.' Lysander coiled the chain around the bolter shell and put it away again. 'I can preach no lesson from Chaplain Belisar's example. You must draw your own lesson. You must make your own choice.'

Far off, in the distant depths of the Phalanx, a bell tolled.

'Bolter drill is due,' said Lysander. 'The lesson is ended. Go, novices, to your duties. Dismissed.'

The Phalanx was an old ship, one of the oldest in the Imperium. Parts of it, some believed, dated from the Age of Strife before the Emperor had conquered Holy Terra and forged from that darkness the current age of Mankind. Segments of hundreds of ships could be found within the vast mobile space station, and every few decades explorer teams were permitted on board to delve into the most ancient parts, forgotten and unused. Sometimes they turned up fragments of Imperial Fists history thought lost. Sometimes they found whole chapels, barracks decks, training halls and memorials that had been forgotten. In the voids between the mapped and used parts of the space station, there were corners that concealed secrets.

In one such void, choked with slanting support beams and wreathed in centuries of dust, stood a lone statue. Once, perhaps, it had been part of a larger memorial or statuary hall. Now it was all that remained.

It was of a Space Marine in Terminator armour. It was carved from obsidian, with a mask of ivory. The mask was in the form of a skull, the traditional garb of the Chaplain.

Lysander ducked beneath one of the beams to reach the foot of the statue. It was larger than life-sized, and the carved lenses of its eyepieces seemed to stare down at him. There must have been no question of the statue being sculpted with the Chaplain's face showing – the skull was the face he displayed to the Chapter, the face with which he confronted his foes. That was the way of the Chaplain.

On the battlefield he was not a man but an idea, a symbol, a vision of the Chapter incarnate.

The name inscribed on the base of the statue was Belisar.

Lysander knelt.

‘When I was but a novice,’ said Lysander, ‘I taught myself that there is no limit to what we must do for victory. Lives are forfeit to it. Even honour. Even the principles that make a Space Marine what he is. When I read the record of Xanatar, I knew the choice I would have made. And when I found this place, I knew I was right.’

Lysander looked up into the ivory mask. ‘I know that I am right. I pray that I am right. And that those who follow me will be right, too.’

In the statue’s right hand was the storm bolter, inlaid with deep yellow lacquer. In his left hand was another helmet, this one carved from iridescent blue stone – a neat hole was bored through one eyepiece, the impact of a bolter shell right through perhaps the only weak point in a suit of Terminator armour.

At the statue’s feet was an ammunition box. The box stood open and in intricate detail, as if it was the most important part of the whole statue, were rendered the ninety-nine bolter shells that remained.