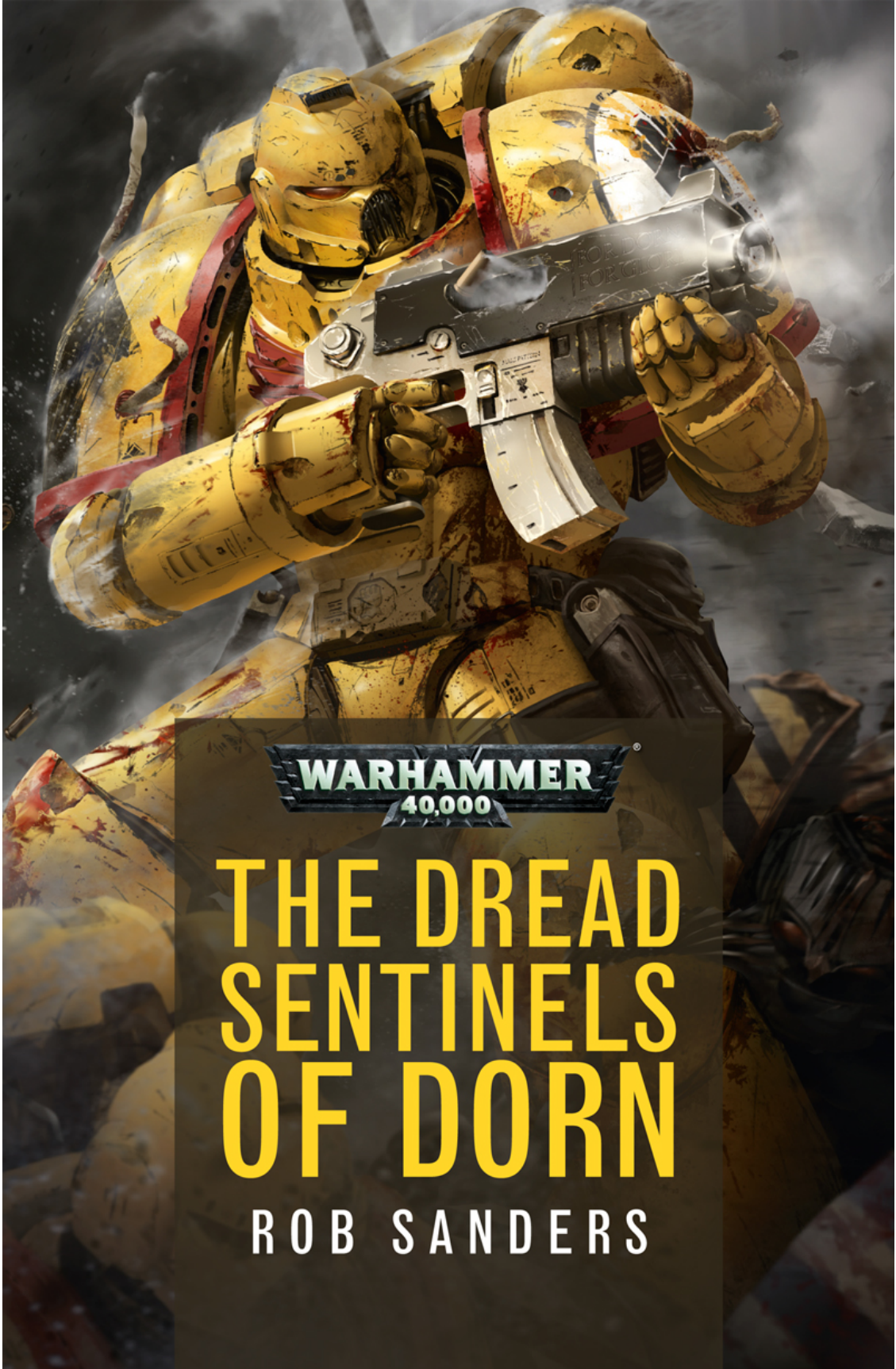


WARHAMMER
40,000

THE DREAD SENTINELS OF DORN

ROB SANDERS



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Caractus Kontrador stared out into oblivion.

Starlight glinted faintly off the old gold of his plate as the Imperial Fists captain stood on the edge of the ruined deck. The *Dread Sentinel* star fort was a derelict. It was a mangled wreck, floating through space.

Kontrador's mag-locked boots anchored him to the ragged edge of the deck in the absence of gravity. He was standing alone in what had been the fort Reclusiam. There was little left of the hallowed chamber. Its altar and minor relics were gone. The stained glass of its lancet windows was smashed, the coloured shards drifting and clinking against Kontrador's plate. Its candles burned no more. Now the searing blackness of the void intruded on the sanctity of the place. The deep cold of its darkness felt its way through what remained of the *Dread Sentinel* star fort.

Kontrador scanned the utter devastation. As he cast his gaze across the twisted superstructure his optics returned an annotated catalogue of destruction.

'It's as if...' he began, but words seemed to fall short of the picture his imagination was painting, '...something took a bite out of it.'

'Certainly looks that way from here, captain,' Veteran Sergeant Athalric Saggitar voxed back from the command deck of the *Praetoriax*. The Imperial Fists frigate was docked to what was left of the decimated *Dread Sentinel*.

Kontrador soaked up the pain of the situation. He felt the crushing responsibility between the thud of his hearts. As captain of the Fifth Company he was also the 'Master of the Marches'. It was the Fifth

Company's frigates that patrolled the border between the Segmentum Solar and rest of the galaxy. The sentinel star forts situated on that border were Kontrador's to inspect.

The destruction of even one such relic bastion was a grievous loss to both the company and Chapter. For the Imperial Fists, its absence left an unacceptable opening in the strategic defence of the segmentum and Ancient Terra itself. Traitor crusades and xenos invasions had been launched taking tactical advantage of less.

'Opinion, sergeant?' Kontrador asked.

'Comet strike?' Saggitar ventured. 'Vessel collision? Some kind of gravitational phenomenon? Our brothers and their bondsmen couldn't manoeuvre the star fort out of its way, whatever it was.'

'All possible,' Kontrador agreed, 'but they do not explain the absence of our brothers and the crew.'

'No power, no air, no gravity, no medicae facilities,' Sergeant Saggitar crackled over the vox-channel. 'Perhaps they took any remaining landers and tried for a nearby world.'

'Would you have done that, sergeant?' Kontrador pressed.

'No, sir,' Saggitar answered. 'I would not. Nothing would have persuaded me to abandon my post.'

'That's what bothers me,' the captain admitted. 'I don't think our brothers would have done so either.'

'You think them dead, sir?'

'I don't think anything less would have driven them from their relic fort or their sacred duties,' Caractus Kontrador told his sergeant.

The captain changed the vox-channel on his helm.

'Zoltan,' Kontrador said, 'Del Cano, Zyracuse – report in. Anything?'

'Sweep of the upper decks complete, brother-captain,' Lessandro Zoltan returned through the static. The company champion of the Fifth sounded defeated, which was something he had never been. 'No Imperial Fists to be found.'

Kontrador cycled through the channels.

'Antonin,' Kontrador continued. 'Techmarine Novax – report.'

Kontrador had sent Ancient Antonin – the Standard Bearer for his company and the command squad searching the derelict fort – down to the

blessed generatorium and engineering decks. Accompanying him was Brother Novax, the Techmarine assigned to the *Praetoriax*.

No survivors, brother-captain,' the grizzled Antonin replied. 'Imperial Fists, fort serfs and servitor crews all gone. Brother Novax has made his diagnostic assessment.

'Proceed, Techmarine Novax,' Kontrador urged, desperate for anything that might explain what happened to the *Dread Sentinel*.

'An examination of the main plasma reactor reveals a great deal of internal damage, brother-captain,' Tancrazar Novax told him.

'Internal damage?' Kontrador repeated back to the Techmarine. 'You mean, not consistent with the physical damage sustained by the fort?'

'No, sir,' Novax crackled. 'While the reactor is still operational, the workings between it and the rest of the fort display electromagnetic disruption and damage.'

'Could this be the result of a natural phenomenon?' the captain asked. 'Discharge from a nearby nova or some kind of void quake?'

'Possibly,' Tancrazar Novax confirmed. 'That still wouldn't explain the physical damage to the superstructure.'

'What would?' Kontrador asked. The captain wanted answers and was tiring of questions that led to more questions.

'Perhaps,' the Techmarine offered, 'both types of damage are the result of a field flux – a vessel attempting to translate into the warp within proximity of the fort. That kind of accident could conceivably have caused this damage.'

'Thank you, Techmarine Novax,' Kontrador said, before switching to an open channel. 'All Imperial Fists fall back to the ship. Your sweep is over. Sergeant Saggitar?'

'Receiving, brother-captain,' Veteran Sergeant Athalric Saggitar sent back from the serf-crowded bridge of the docked *Praetoriax*.

'Meet us at the airlock. We're returning to the ship.'

Kontrador lifted the magnetic sole of one armoured boot after another, turning slowly around. He had a zero-gravity negotiation of the star fort's twisted interior ahead of him.

'Very good, captain.'

'I want you to monitor cross-system communication over all company and charter channels,' Kontrador commanded. 'No matter how faint. If our

brothers are stranded on a nearby planetoid, then I want us to hear them.’

‘Yes, captain.’

‘And have Epistolary Tantal reach out for the fort astropath,’ Kontrador said.

‘I did, sir,’ Saggitar told him, his voice suddenly strained. Kontrador knew that there was little brotherly love lost between the sergeant and the psyker. On the segmentum border, however, with light years between patrol ships, sentinel forts and everything else – a Librarius communications officer was essential. ‘Epistolary Tantal has just reported something to me that I think you should hear, captain.’

‘Proceed, Epistolary Tantal,’ Kontrador said.

‘He’s alive,’ the Librarian said, his voice a haunted, cryptic hiss across the vox. Kontrador refined the channel reception.

‘Say again, *Praetorix*, say again.’

‘The fort astropath is alive,’ Tantal told him. ‘He’s close. And getting closer.’

Something akin to a chill ran through the captain at the psyker’s words.

‘Position?’

‘Port-side aft and closing.’

‘Saggitar?’ Kontrador said. ‘Returns?’

‘Augur arrays show nothing, captain,’ the sergeant told him.

Turning, Caractus Kontrador took several clunking steps towards the ragged edge of the deck. With his boots mag-locked and the fingers of his gauntlets anchoring him to a mangled column, the captain leaned out to get a better view down the decimated length of the star fort. There were no words for what he saw.

‘Dorn’s thunder...’ he managed.

There was something in the void. It was huge. Impossibly huge. A vessel, surging through the empty blackness like a monster of the deep. It had a streamlined, pod-like body. Not a hull. A body. It was a colossal, living thing, swollen with alien ugliness. There was something poisonous to the eye about its flesh-smearred form. Exoskeletal. Chitinous. Rachidian. As Kontrador’s optics scanned the nautiloid length of the beast he saw that it tapered to a flared prow, while the rear of the abomination trailed a nightmarish nest of barbed tentacles.

'*Praetorix*,' Kontrador called across the open channel. 'Battle-brothers. This is your captain. Enemy vessel inbound on a collision course with the star fort. Evacuate the *Dread Sentinel* now! *Praetorix*: disengage from the fort and charge weapons batteries. Prepare for evasive manoeuvres.'

'Captain,' Saggitar called back. 'Augur arrays show nothing. Nothing, captain.'

'Do as I say, damn it,' Kontrador roared back, looking at the accelerating behemoth. He didn't have time to debate the alien vessel's capabilities. His optics spoke to the silent horror of the vision, flashing with overlays, warnings and annotations. They told him what he already knew. 'The tyranid is here...'

Kontrador pulled himself away from the horrifying spectacle. He turned to make for the Reclusiam exit but stopped himself. The most direct route to the *Praetorix* was across the *Dread Sentinel*'s armoured hull rather than swimming through the shattered darkness of its labyrinthine decks.

Unlocking his boots, Kontrador drifted away from the deck. He grabbed for the mangled metal of the fort exterior, before pulling himself between the twisted struts and girders of the fort's exposed superstructure. The Imperial Fists captain kicked off from a piece of shattered decking and clawed his way through a kelp-like forest of free-floating wires. Surging with inertial urgency, he hauled his armoured form through the mauled innards of the star fort.

As Kontrador scrambled through the void, the *Praetorix* came into view. The frigate had disengaged but docking ports and airlocks were open. Only now did Kontrador regret his decision to dock with the *Dread Sentinel* rather than deploy the frigate's gunship. The captain could see the Imperial Fists of his command squad jumping the distance between the chewed ruin of the star fort and their ship in slow-motion.

The captain didn't dare take the time it would take to look back and confirm the alien vessel's progress. Bending the knees of his powered suit, he looked to the shape of his own vessel. Firing the hydraulics and fibre bundles of his plate, Kontrador launched himself off the mangled hull of the *Dread Sentinel*. He surged, the powerful servos of his suit sending him like a boarding torpedo at the *Praetorix*. The Imperial Fist moved with silky inertia through the blackness. It was a silent eternity, punctuated only by bursts of vox-contact. Tancazar Novax, Ancient Antonin, Lessandro

Zoltan, the company champion and Brother Zyracuse had all made it back to the frigate. Del Cano had yet to do so.

‘Del Cano, this is the captain. Confirm your position.’

‘I’m almost at the lock,’ Brother Del Cano answered.

‘Get out of there!’ Sergeant Saggitar called.

‘As fast as you can, brother,’ Kontrador added, but the silent destruction was already unfolding about them.

The *Dread Sentinel* suddenly shot by, its shattered decks and mangled superstructure a racing blur. Pieces of wreckage and debris scythed past Kontrador.

‘Del Cano!’ the captain bellowed into his vox, but the Imperial Fist was gone and the star fort with him. The impressive defences of the fortified station – its armoured hull, its towers, crenellations and gun ports – were nothing. The *Dread Sentinel* star fort was a colossal wreck, smashed aside by the alien behemoth, whose repulsive bulk struck the derelict at ramming speed.

The grotesque carapace-hull of the swollen thing streamed by. Where there should have been plate, rivets and ports, there were horny shell, spines and cephalopodous siphons.

‘Captain!’ Kontrador’s helm echoed with the sergeant’s urgent calls.

‘For Dorn...’ the captain snarled to himself as the abominate body of the void monstrosity rushed by. He prepared for impact.

With a roar, Caractus Kontrador smashed into the unforgiving hull of the *Praetoriax*. Reaching out with grapnel-like gauntlets, the captain latched onto the busy architecture of the frigate side.

Hull. Void. The chitinous horror of the living vessel. All became as one. As the alien behemoth smashed aside the derelict fort, it did the same to the Imperial Fists frigate. Like a fulcrum, the rear section of the *Praetoriax* was batted around.

With the force of the momentum, the captain lost his purchase, his gauntlets and mag-locked boots slipping away from the hull. Bouncing down the ship’s side, Kontrador managed to get his outreached gauntlet to the locking wheel of a maintenance hatch and save himself from the embrace of the void.

Riding out the movement of the vessel, the captain watched the monstrous nest of slipstreaming tendrils writhe by. Encapsulating these were four great clamping talons, splayed open like a barbed vice. It didn't take much for Kontrador to picture the alien vessel locking itself onto the *Dread Sentinel* with gargantuan appendages and savaging the star fort.

'Captain,' Kontrador heard over the vox. 'Captain, please respond.' It was Sergeant Saggitar.

'Sergeant, you are cleared to fire,' Kontrador voxed back. 'Then get us the hell out of here.'

'You're aboard, sir?'

'I will be if you unlock the mag-seals on maintenance hatch...'

Kontrador checked the engineering glyphs, '...one, thirty-three, twenty-four, C.'

As the *Praetoriax* owned the turn and presented its starboard batteries to the tyrannid ship, the blast-plumes of the frigate's macrocannons rippled down the vessel. Kontrador felt the quake of the staggered broadside through the hull but the cannon blasts were unleashed in eerie silence.

The damage to the tyrannid bio-ship was similarly so. Blossoms of horrid ichor streamed into the void from appendage-shredding hits that splintered exoskeleton and ruptured blister-sacs.

Seconds later, the maintenance hatch seals thunked. With several powered turns of the wheel, Kontrador was safely on board the frigate. The *Praetoriax* itself, however, was anything but safe.

As the captain stamped his way along corridors that flashed with emergency lamps and hauled himself up deck ladders, a sea of bodies parted for him. Servo-skulls. Cherubim. Ship's servitors.

Chapter-serfs ran to their posts. Their shaved heads glinted in the emergency lighting, while their hoods and robes trailed their progress. Many clutched shotguns, hastily issued from the ship's armoury. With the weapons had come orders to repel boarders. There was no shouting. No panic. Just an acceptance of what needed to be done.

The serfs were not the only ones to be issued with weaponry. As protocol dictated with the frigate under attack, a throng of Kontrador's personal

bondsmen approached their captain in the corridor. Two carried the bulk of a relic weapon.

As Kontrador and the serfs entered an elevator, they slid a monstrous power fist over the workings of his gauntlet. They went to work about the relic, swiftly interfacing servos and suspensors with Kontrador's modified plate. The bondsmen ran a thick bundle of power cables back to Kontrador's pack, all the while offering cult benedictions.

It was called the *Dextera Dorn* or 'The Right Hand of Dorn' in Low Gothic. As the throng of serfs stepped away, Kontrador opened and closed the chunk digits of the power fist. He allowed the weapon's surface to crackle and spit with disruptive energies. Clutching the fist and aiming its knuckles at the elevator wall, Kontrador primed the relic weapon's other offensive enhancements. Protruding from the plating of the knuckle sheath and inset within the ceramite of each gauntlet finger were digital lasblasters. Mounted on the gauntlet back-plate was a twin-linked graviton pistol, all drawing power – like the crackling gauntlet itself – from Kontrador's suit pack. Satisfied that the *Dextera Dorn* had responded to the blessings, Kontrador lowered the weapon.

At Kontrador's side, another bondsman drew his Spectris-pattern bolt pistol from its holster. The serf loaded a half-drum high-capacity magazine and calibrated the captain's favoured targeters and scopes. Priming the weapon and pressing his forehead to the cold metal of its holy form, the serf mouthed a final benediction before replacing the pistol in its holster.

Kontrador released the seals on his helm and handed it to a nearby serf. The captain's tonsure was silver and spiked like a halo or crown. The silver extended down into a neat beard and moustache that partially hid a ragged scar and stapling. The scar worked its way down the side of Kontrador's face like a canyon on a map, with one craggy offshoot taking a serrated path across a single misted eye.

'Captain on the bridge,' a deck serf announced as Kontrador prised the elevator doors aside and pushed his way through. Again, serfs and servitors – impassive and hard at work – parted. The small bridge was a dark chamber of pillars, pulpits and cables that draped from the ceiling. It was like a runebank-lined chapel, vaulted only to accommodate the lancet screens of the grand display.

Kontrador saw Vitruvii Aeno first. The Apothecary stood in his bone-white plate and gave him the grimness of his eyes. While the captain inspected the force readiness of sentinel forts, it had been Aeno's responsibility to assess the physical well-being of the Imperial Fists and serfs manning such outposts. There had been little for the Apothecary to do at the *Dread Sentinel*, however. The rest of the Imperial Fists were assembled on the command deck. All except Brother Del Cano.

Tancrazar Novax had assumed the pulpit throne. The *Praetorix* was his. The Techmarine was ordinarily the only Adeptus Astartes on board the frigate. Novax broke off from the rapid succession of orders he was issuing. These were punctuated by the machine cant that blurted from the cranial bionics into which the flesh of his face was set.

He stood at his captain's arrival, intent on giving up his throne to Kontrador. As his servo-arm cranked around and Novax stepped forwards, the captain put up a gauntleted hand, indicating for him to remain and continue.

Kontrador moved past Lessandro Zoltan, Brother Zyracuse and Ancient Antonin, to grave acknowledgements of 'Captain'. Zyracuse had taken his helm off. Antonin's hulking pauldrons were draped with the black of the company standard, which the standard bearer wore like a cloak and inspiration to all in his veteran presence. Zoltan paced the deck with his gauntlets clasped around the hilts of his short blades, the weapons sitting firmly in their scabbards.

Osric Tantal stood by the busy navigator of the *Praetorix*. The Librarian's azure plate was buried in the yellow of his chapter robes. The haunted Tantal himself clutched his force hammer, leaning his patrician nose miserably against the shaft of the weapon. The slender head of the hammer and its long haft made it appear more like an arcane staff. Beads of effort rolled down the aged Epistolary's face. Even being in the presence of the tyrannid vessel – and the smothering blanket of psychic static that saturated it – was a sanity-tearing effort.

'Status,' Kontrador demanded.

At the pulpit rail Kontrador found an armoured silhouette cut from the glow of glyphscreens and the lancet windows. Veteran Sergeant Saggitar was a grim advertisement of their predicament. The grey stubble of his head and chin, like a smouldering agri world field, gave the sergeant a

swarthy, determined look. A cluster of service studs created a diamond above one eye while the other burned blue with the powered lens of a replacement optic.

‘*Praetori*ax accelerating to maximum speed, captain,’ Saggitar rumbled. ‘Navigator plotting a new solution for warp translation. Warp drive rituals expedited.’

‘Aft screen,’ Kontrador commanded.

As the lancets hissed to a pict-projected orientation, the full horror of the void beast was revealed. The tyranid bio-ship hadn’t bothered to turn. Like some agile, octopoid nightmare of the deep, it had reversed its course. An outstretched forest of tendrils, tentacles and chitinous appendages were framed by its four colossal clamping talons. About it, the decimated wreck of the *Dread Sentinel* drifted away in savaged pieces. The tyranid monstrosity was not interested in the dead star fort. Its attention was now fixed on new, fast-moving prey: the *Praetori*ax and the promise of flesh within the insignificance of its metal hull.

At the centre of the alien nest of tentacles gaped an obscene opening. The mouth was a slack maw beyond which lay a tomb like the fleshy inside of a ribcage. Each rib was lined with spine-like teeth. The sickness of a flesh-smear column spasmed forth from the darkness like a proboscis. Alien energies snapped and arced between the column and the surrounding cavern. The ghoulish illumination lit up the cloud-globules of zero-gravity slime and the disgusting interior of the bio-ship’s swollen pod.

‘Weapon?’ Saggitar asked.

‘Weapon,’ Caractus Kontrador confirmed. ‘Brother Novax?’

‘Most likely the same used to disable the *Dread Sentinel*, captain,’ the Techmarine replied. Kontrador recalled the internal damage suffered by the star fort’s main reactor.

‘Navigator, I need that Emyreal solution...’

‘He’s having difficulty, captain. Almost there,’ Osric Tantal confirmed. The aged Librarian did not look well and seemed to be having difficulties himself.

‘Not fast enough,’ Kontrador said as he watched the bio-ship’s maw crackle to intensity. His mind whirled with the dangers confronting the *Praetori*ax. He recalled the inert systems of the *Dread Sentinel*, imagining

how the alien vessel had paralysed the star fort. How it intended to paralyse the frigate now.

‘Brothers, we must defend ourselves from this attack. I want you to power down your packs. Core and reserve cells.’

‘Holy Terra,’ Vitruvii Aeno said, the Apothecary coming to realise how the tyranid bio-ship had not only incapacitated the star fort but also the Imperial Fists within. He removed his white helm also, revealing the corrugated cabling that ran like dreadlocks before sinking into neat interface plugs across his crown. As with the rest of the command squad, Aeno fell to powering down his plate.

‘Hard to port!’ Kontrador roared at the helmserfs and spindly servitors. He powered down his own pack, saving his plate’s precious electrical systems from the tyranid weapon. ‘Down your bow. Brother Novax, have all decks brace for impact.’

The Techmarine neither got the opportunity to acknowledge his captain or to issue the vessel-wide warning. A storm of alien static vomited from the flesh-smear column, seemingly amplified by the maw and the gargantuan, outstretched appendages of the tyranid vessel.

Klaxons fired across the bridge. Proximity alerts. Field warnings. Overloads. Kontrador couldn’t take his gaze from the abomination and the electromagnetic pulse it had spewed forth. Within moments the bridge was a blizzard of sparks and arcing energies. Console runescreens faded. Banks of chunk controls sizzled. Deck lighting died with the passing of the electromagnetic pulse.

Kontrador waited in the darkness. The lancet windows had lost their screens and hololithic overlays. They were just blank ports now, not even admitting the nightmarish vision of the advancing abomination. Somehow it made the waiting worse.

‘Bridge crew, clear the command deck,’ Kontrador ordered. As serfs and servitors made for emergency exits and ladderwells, he snatched his helm back from a waiting bondsman.

‘Prime your plate, brothers,’ the captain said to the waiting command squad. The gloom hummed with the reactivation of power armour backpacks. ‘Helms and suit lamps. Mag-lock your boots.’ Lumen beams cut through the darkness of the bridge. ‘Set vox-beads and comms to emergency channels. Secure the bridge!’ Kontrador ordered.

The Space Marines primed their boltguns and pistols, moving to assume angles on the sealed elevator door and the lancet windows. Kontrador had no sooner issued his warning than the *Praetorix* was suddenly knocked forward. Imperial Fists skidded across the deck. The frigate superstructure continued to buck and rumble. Kontrador could hear the excruciating screech of spines along the hull, tearing up antennae, vanes and armour plating. The captain tried to imagine the abominate vessel, surging through the void, chomping at the half-devoured frigate.

The deck bounced beneath Kontrador's boots. The shearing of metal reverberated through the ship. *Praetorix* shrieked like a wounded beast set upon by an intergalactic predator. Masticated. Pierced. Hulled. The vessels of the Adeptus Astartes were constructed in the shipyards of the Mechanicus as strong as they could make them, but little could stand against the crushing power of the tyranid ship's great maw.

Deck support struts groaned. Steam screamed from trunk pipes. The armourglass of the lancet windows creaked torturously and cracked. Air howled across the command deck, escaping the pressurised chamber. The command deck became a shrieking maelstrom of competing forces. The void was reasserting its supremacy within the frigate. Artificial gravity faded. Air vented. The temperature dropped, frosting the runebanks and cracked lancet screens.

'Listen,' Lessandro Zoltan said, placing the palm of his gauntlet on the metal wall of the bridge. His words were relayed through vox-beads and helms. In the silence of the airless bridge, Zoltan could feel faint vibration coming from both without and within the ship.

Scratching. The tremble of metal being slashed to ribbons by alien claws. The repetitive boom of airlock doors being smashed and buckled from their seals. The Imperial Fists could feel the distant thunder of shotguns as ship serfs attempted to secure the few sections aboard the frigate that had retained their atmosphere and integrity.

Kontrador sympathised with their plight. While the electromagnetic pulse had knocked out power across the decks, locking bulkheads in place, the bio-ship's monstrous maw had pulverised the vessel, turning the *Praetorix* into a shattered wreck. The frigate was afflicted with the hull-tears and torn-out sections required by an alien foe for swift entry.

Sergeant Saggitar snatched an auspex from where it was mag-locked to his belt. Flicking the stub antennae out from the instrument, the Imperial Fist brought the auspex to life. He scanned about the bridge, cycling through a range of spectra until he was satisfied.

‘Signatures closing,’ Saggitar announced over the vox. ‘Too many to count. The ship is being swarmed.’

‘Secure the command deck,’ the captain ordered. ‘Prepare to repel boarders.’

As the Imperial Fists took up positions about him, Caractus Kontrador took the moment. To think. To strategise. To prepare – as Rogal Dorn had taught them. His mind burned with possibilities. The star fort and the ship were lost and the enemy upon them. Divorcing himself from the hammering of the monsters and the unfolding calamity, the captain willed the beating of his hearts to slow. Within the dark intimacy of his helm, Kontrador’s world became the studied tactical models of battles long-fought by the Imperial Fists and their brothers.

He became one with the battle-philosophies of Rhetoricus and the cult teachings of the Bone Council. Improvisations. Accommodations. Inspirations. Kontrador’s own victories and failures – there being much to learn from both. His knowledge of the dread tyranid, with their ever-evolving flesh and alien strategies. Kontrador knew that an enemy understood was a foe half-beaten. Unfortunately, the tyranids seemed to understand humanity all too well, instinctively adapting their approach, and even their biology, to exploit man’s many weaknesses.

‘Ready, brother-captain,’ Saggitar reported.

Kontrador played through their doom. Estimations. Numbers. Distances. The fierce audacity of battle. Lives. Ammunition. Angles. The tensile strength of surrounding materials. Power. The lack of it. The subtlety of the quiet mind. The bombast of genetically-engineered capabilities. The virtues of an offensive approach. The necessities of a defensive one. Moves. Countermoves. The moments to follow like a game of Regicide yet to be played. Pieces untouched. Victory seen through enemy eyes and frustrated.

‘Enemy in sight,’ Ancient Antonin called, his boltgun nestled in the crescent cut out of the corner of his great storm shield. Presenting both the surface of the yellow shield and the gaping muzzle of the weapon to the

lancet windows, Antonin and the bridge were treated to a spectacle of horror. Alien abominations appearing from the darkness, like monsters rising from the ocean depths.

‘Hold your fire,’ Kontrador ordered. He could feel the righteous desire of his Fists to end the xenos monstrosities.

As suit lamps threw their beams through the cracked armourglass of the bridge forward screens, they cut through the darkness beyond. Mists of bubbled slime parted in the absence of gravity. Countless predator organisms swarmed the section. Carapace. Claws. Jaws. The whiplash of bony tails. Things whose disgusting biology protected them from the chill of the void.

‘Brothers,’ the captain growled. ‘This is the *Praetoriax*. This is the Phalanx. This is Inwit. This is Terra and a thousand worlds besides.’

From darkness came darkness, shadowy forms thrashing in the cavernous interior of the bio-ship. The Imperial Fists watched alien beasts squirm their way from sphincters before launching themselves from the chamber wall. Drawing in their cloven claws and scything talons, the monsters glided across the open space with alien ease, heading for the wreck of the *Praetoriax*.

‘This is ground held by the Imperial Fists and I know that we would give all in defence of it...’

Ancient Antonin turned his back to the monstrosities, showing the alien beasts the proud standard that hung across his pauldrons and pack.

Swarming into an attacking brood, the horrors were driven by engineered instinct and their collective hive mind. Like a monstrous immune system, the vanguard organisms descended upon the Imperial Fists frigate, attacking the foreign object.

‘There is more to defend here than just the wreck of our ship,’ Kontrador told his Imperial Fists. It took more than just single-minded fortitude to defend an empire. He could not allow himself to be blinded by such illusions. He could not allow his Fists to be blinded by them either.

‘We have to think beyond the holding of these metal walls against the tyrannid foe,’ Kontrador insisted. ‘The borders of the God-Emperor’s sacred Imperium have been breached. The darkness outside of this ship belongs to Him also. It is the darkness for which Great Dorn gave his life and we shall not sully his memory by giving it up so easily. For we are *his*

dread sentinels. The dread sentinels of Dorn. Wardens of the void. The shield of mighty Terra.'

Kontrador heard the rumble of cheers and grim affirmation from his command squad. He felt their pride and determination. Their faith and honour in the face of the alien hordes and appalling odds. Like the clunk of empty boltguns and the screams of the dying, pride came before the fall.

Scything talons stabbed at the creaking armourglass, while ancillary claws picked away at the chips and cracks. The tyranid creatures surged from the slick grotesqueness of the surrounding architecture, hammering themselves and their bodies into clouds of acidic blood. Smearing their alien filth into the lancet windows with every bone-breaking impact, the glass began to bubble and steam. As it did so the dead-eyed hordes of construct-creatures snapped, scraped and stabbed their way in.

'These creatures and their living vessel are intruders within the borders of our empire,' Kontrador voxed across the open channel. 'They must not merely be resisted. They must be destroyed.'

The captain looked about. He saw his meaning hit home in the creak of gauntlets about grips and hilts. The readiness to answer their captain's call, the call of their Chapter Master, their primarch and their God-Emperor.

'Will you go with me, brothers?' Kontrador asked. 'Not only through the belly of this beast. Not only through the void it contaminates with its xenos presence. But to whatever repulsive node of nerve bundles serves as the monstrous mouthpiece for its thoughts and those of its mindless constructs.'

'Aye, brother-captain,' Ancient Antonin said. 'We will.'

'For Dorn!' Sergeant Saggitar called.

'For Dorn!' the Fists roared back across the vox, blocking out the horror of vanguard organisms battering themselves broken against armourglass and the bridge doors.

'Epistolary Tantal,' Kontrador said.

'Yes... Captain Kontrador,' the Librarian rasped. The captain could only imagine his sufferings within the confines of the alien vessel. Kontrador needed Tantal and his talents still, however, and could not allow the Imperial Fist to indulge his aetheric agonies. 'We have no vox-relays. You are responsible for company communications. Can you send an

astrotelepathic message to our brother Fists, stationed on the *Maximus Thane*?’

‘The tyranid bio-ship creates an obscuration of the aether, captain,’ Tantal told him, his gauntlets clamped like vices about the haft of his force hammer. ‘A disruption that precludes the use of my abilities. I fear I have never been more useless to you, my captain.’

‘And I say otherwise,’ Kontrador told him. ‘It seems the closer to the source of this disruption you are the more useless you will become.’

‘Yes, captain.’

‘Then when you are in the presence of this monstrous nexus or node – this alien organ that relays the needs of the tyranid from its fleet to its construct-creatures – then you will truly become useless to us. Then we shall know what part of this horrific vessel to destroy in order to free both you and ourselves of this living trap. Follow your pain, Master Tantal, and we shall follow you.’

‘You honour me with this burden, captain,’ the Librarian said.

‘Clear the forward section and take cover,’ the captain announced to the bridge. Ancient Antonin backed behind his storm shield and boltgun. The captain nodded at the lancet windows. The armourglass was creaking. Cracks were shearing through their length.

‘I think that they’re ready to go...’

‘As are we, captain,’ Athalric Saggitar said bringing up the twin barrels of his stormbolter.

‘Frag grenades, sergeant.’

Saggitar nodded with approval. The captain snatched one from his belt and primed the weapon. The Imperial Fists followed suit. Kontrador pitched his grenade down the length of the command deck with all the plate-augmented strength of one arm.

The impact of the grenade shattered the weakened window. Within a milisecond of breaching the *Praetori*ax, the weapon exploded. A silent brilliance – a thing of ugly beauty. Wicked shards of metal blasted out in all directions, tearing through the swarm of warrior constructs. Carapace shredded. Scything limbs tumbled away. Bulbous heads streamed blood and brain through the cavernous void.

Frag grenades sailed through the gloom of the bridge. The Imperial Fists launched the grenades at the lancet windows, through the shattered screens

and into the frenzied swarm.

The command deck was rocked by each detonation. Razored death tore through the spindly mesh of stabbing talons, whiplash tails and gnashing constructs. Plumes of alien gore rocketed through the darkness.

In the airless void of the bio-ship interior, the explosions were like tiny novae sending shards of twisted metal through the surrounding tyranid constructs. As the alien beasts closest to the detonations were shredded to floating scraps of flesh, the successive frag storms flew further and further.

‘Pattern: Alcazar,’ Kontrador announced as the last of the frag grenades did their worst. Releasing the mag-lock on his boots, he allowed himself to drift above the floor, his heavy plate weightless above the deck. ‘Conserve ammunition. Compensate for inertia. Use the surrounding architecture.

‘Sergeant Saggitar has point,’ Kontrador said, ‘Zoltan and Zyracuse: make sure we’re not followed.’

‘Let them try,’ the company champion replied.

‘Pick your targets and engage from an anchorage,’ the captain ordered. ‘Proceed through the vessel in a rolling formation. Point: take your heading from Epistolary Tantal. The opening’s mine.’

‘May Dorn smile down on what we’re about to do,’ Kontrador said, slipping his bolt pistol from its holster and aiming it behind him at the elevator doors. He intended to use the recoil of the weapon to blast him through the weightlessness of the void. The captain added grimly: ‘If Dorn ever did, indeed, smile...’

Looking forward, Kontrador felt the bolt pistol kick in his hand. The silence of the blast was like the short burn of a rocket. The force of the round sent the captain surging across the gloom of the crowded bridge. Through the decimated lancet windows. Out into the cavernous void of the tyranid ship interior.

Kontrador surged through spuming mists, with globules of bubbled blood rolling around and off his plate. Frag-shredded limbs floated past. As his suit lamps cut like blades of light through the horrific darkness, he saw the utter destruction he had wrought on the vanguard swarms.

Looking back he saw his Imperial Fists surging after him through the gloom. The silent bolt blast of their weaponry sent them shooting up behind their captain. Bringing up the rear, Brother Zyracuse’s gaping

boltgun and Zoltan's crackling blades were ready to meet the challenge of a xenos attack.

Behind them, Kontrador could see the miserable wreck of the frigate – shattered and broken-backed on the cavernous belly of the beast-ship. While the frag grenades had cleared the prow section of tyranid foes, a plague of horrors still scuttled across the hull. Upon detecting movement in the darkness, the creatures leapt after the Imperial Fists in a drifting swarm.

Aiming backwards, Brother Zyracuse blasted beast after clawing beast from the growing multitude of gliding death. Things snapped and snagged, trailing gloops of drool from their feverish jaws. The young legionary blew monstrous heads from bony bodies in spectacular blossoms of blood and brain. Zoltan and Zyracuse together were a thing of beauty. Brother Zyracuse blasted tyranid constructs that scabbled up through the void in their wake. Zoltan, meanwhile, hauled himself about his floating brother. Anchoring himself to Zyracuse's plate, the champion reached out to expertly slash monstrosities in half. He scythed limbs from seared joints and bulbous heads from armoured shoulders.

Kontrador slammed into the fleshy surface of the cavern's side wall. He was across. His plate soaked up the worst of the impact. The captain anchored himself with the sizzling digits of the *Dextera Dorn*. With the power fist holding him in place, Kontrador grabbed Sergeant Saggitar's plate and helped to slow his approach.

Kontrador pushed the sergeant at an obscene entrance below them that seemed to spasm open and closed like a kind of valve. The captain saw the twin muzzles of the sergeant's storm bolter flash as Athalric Saggitar went to work, clearing the fissure-passageway beyond the opening.

Dragging Epistolary Tantal with him, Ancient Antonin hit the flesh of the cavern wall. He joined his sergeant at the entrance, blasting through the valve lips at the warrior constructs clotting the confines of the fleshy corridor beyond.

As the Imperial Fists pushed their way in, the economy of single bolt blasts rocketed creatures from their path. With the power fist embedded in the flesh wall like a grapnel, Kontrador drew his bolt pistol. The limitless range of the environment meant that, by the time Zoltan and Zyracuse

made the opening, Kontrador had blasted away the drifting monstrosities closing on their gliding heels.

Hauling himself through the ragged opening and into the fissure-passage, Kontrador found it to be thick with globules of slime. His Imperial Fists had assumed formation, pushing off from one wall of the passage to the next, zig-zagging with armoured grace up the channel.

With Epistolary Tantal's rasping, breathless instructions and agonies guiding them, the Imperial Fists negotiated the nightmare of the bio-ship's pulsing, spasming and leaking innards. It was a gory labyrinth of constricting, muscular passages and flesh crevices. The tyranid ship was infested with the spindle-limbed horror of chitinous hordes. Where the viscera of grotesque, twisting channels did not allow passage, Vitruvii Aeno came forward with his chainblade. The silent blur of monomolecular teeth clouded the channel with bubbling storms of bio-ship blood.

Before long, Kontrador got the sense that Osric Tantal's instincts – his agonising awareness of the tyranid hive mind – were taking them parallel to the cavernous maw-chamber and up the length of the bio-ship's swollen abdomen. The static-streaming nexus of the hive mind's monstrous will lay beyond. The beast ship was like a warped pod of smeared flesh and blasphemous alien life. Its channels and bloody passages were flooded with tyranid constructs.

The sons of Dorn would not be denied. They had abandoned their ship, their defensive position, to mount a surgical strike on the alien foe. They lay siege to the fleshy fortifications of the bio-ship – blasting and carving their way through the engineered swarms.

With backs to the fleshy wall, the Imperial Fists fired. Bolt-rounds cut through vaulting constructs, which clawed their way up the sides and across the ceiling of the passage with their scything talons. Leathery openings appeared spontaneously, erupting with spindly, snapping xenos creatures. Their brains were mercilessly dashed out by Ancient Antonin's shield and the ferocious arc of Kontrador's crackling fist.

Construct-cramped passages opened out into sac-chambers, tubules and birthing ducts, where the Imperial Fists found the tyranid bio-ship's defences to be ever more determined. The Space Marines surged through the weightlessness of the ship, pushing themselves with powered insistence and urgency from surface to pulsing surface. The Fists broke up

swarms with expert marksmanship and economic head-shots, the chitinous hordes constantly reinforced from flesh-locks and wall-sphincters.

Tancrazar Novax turned, smashing his servo-arm through the wretched forms of broken xenos, his claw-appendage wrenching heads from alien bodies. Apothecary Aeno was a maelstrom of tyrannid blood. The bubbled filth whipped about him with the torso-thrashing rage of his chainblade. Lessandro Zoltan was a vision of graceful savagery. The company champion jumped from wall to ceiling and floor, rolling boots over pack through the airless void. The crackling blades of his short swords hacked off talon-limbs. The powered blades seethed a bloody trail through tails and skewered ribcages, cross-shearing back and forth through spindly necks and spines.

Hauling themselves up through cavities and birthing chambers, the Imperial Fists found themselves increasingly driven through the repulsive innards of the tyrannid bio-ship. They had not the time nor the ammunition to clear the beast-vessel chamber by chamber. Wall to wall creature-constructs bled from leathery clefts, funnel-sacs and the spidery membranes of birthing pools. They pounced from behind quivering organs and slime-drizzling obscenities. They threshed their tails at the Imperial Fists, their open jaws and stabbing limbs primed with mantid lethality. Kontrador could hear the roar of his Space Marines, shield-smashing, eviscerating and bludgeoning a path through the alien hordes.

Tancrazar Novax physically grappled with the inhuman strength of monstrosities while Apothecary Aeno slashed the swarm back with overhead sweeps of his biting blade. Spindle-limbed abominates set upon the pair, driving them back towards a quiver-lipped orifice. The opening suddenly flared, pulling the Techmarine into the embrace of the horrific opening.

‘Novax!’ Vitruvii Aeno called.

Novax fought on, smashing the head off a tyrannid with his servo-arm and blasting another clear with a bolt from his pistol. As the orifice attempted to swallow him the Techmarine reached out with his appendage claw. Grabbing the spongy ceiling of cysts and vein-threaded flesh, Novax hauled back. The Techmarine’s servos and actuators strained, Aeno fought towards the struggling Techmarine.

As the spongy flesh of the ceiling came away in the pincer-grasp of the servo-claw, Novax disappeared into the monstrous opening. Reaching out, the Apothecary grabbed the hydraulic appendage and hauled back. The red plate of the Techmarine briefly reappeared with gauntlets snatching furiously for the opening. Novax was covered with slime and writhing with the serpentine lengths of ripper organisms. The things had muscular, eel-like bodies, with tiny hook-claws and chattering jaws set in the carapace of armoured heads. While the Techmarine's armour steamed with the corrosive slime, the slithering monsters chewed through cabling. As they ripped through the Space Marine's plate, the Fists could hear Novax shriek across the vox.

'Novax!' Vitruvii Aeno called once more as the Techmarine's servo-arm slipped from his grasp. In a horrid moment, it was over. The orifice sucked its victim back through the rubbery doom of its lips. Tancrazar Novax – ranking Adeptus Astartes of the Imperial Fists frigate *Praetoriax* – was gone.

Kicking his way towards the trembling orifice, the Apothecary gunned his chainblade and stabbed it through the opening. Cutting down through the flesh, bloody bubbles raged about him, staining the white of his plate. As Aeno stared down the length of the squirming cleft beyond, the Apothecary saw nothing. What was left of Novax had been dragged away.

Kontrador turned to see a scrabbling alien horde flood the chamber from below with its chittering malevolence. The captain ensured none of the beasts made it to his Apothecary. Angling his optics down the scope of his bolt pistol, he moved the barrel smoothly from one xenos foe to another, mercilessly turning bulbous heads to streaming explosions of brain and blood-filth.

'Apothecary,' the captain called, 'get out of there!'

Suddenly aware of the monstrous deathtrap the chamber had become, Vitruvii Aeno kicked back – stumbling and drifting out of the scything embrace of an alien thing. Sending his last bolt through the beast, Kontrador's bolt pistol clunked empty.

'Time to go,' the captain roared, prompting the Apothecary. Aeno swiped back and forth with his chainblade before kicking from the fleshy floor of the chamber. Surging up, the two Imperial Fists floated through a cilia-lined shaft of grasping feeder tentacles.

Horror awaited them above. The blister chamber was a forest of bony shafts, criss-crossing the open space. Kontrador and Aeno were suddenly separated by the spearing spine of a capillary column, erupting from the soft flesh of the chamber wall.

As the two Imperial Fists pulled themselves up through the thicket, they found Ancient Antonin. He had been horrifically skewered on an erupting shaft. The monstrous thing had speared the company standard bearer through his pack, armoured back and the proud plate across his chest. Antonin was roaring his agony, his storm shield drifting away and the black of the ripped company standard clutched in his gauntlet.

Brother Zyracuse blasted at the shaft with his boltgun, bracing his back against other capillary columns. Stamping down on the sinewy bone of the skewer he attempted to kick it and Antonin free.

Pulling himself up to the bellowing standard bearer, Kontrador drew back the sizzling Right Hand of Dorn. The captain intended to punch straight through the capillary shaft with the crackling power fist. As Vitruvii Aeno pulled himself past the captain to examine Antonin, the Apothecary saw that the skewer had ruined the standard bearer's chest. His hearts and lungs were a shredded mess. Aeno shook his head and Kontrador grimly lowered his relic weapon. Holding up a gauntleted hand, the captain brought Brother Zyracuse's efforts to a halt. Antonin, whose howling had stopped, seemed to understand, thrusting the black standard at Kontrador.

'Go!' Apothecary Aeno said as the swarm of constructs flooding the chamber rose to meet them. As Zyracuse and the Apothecary pulled themselves up through the shafts, Kontrador followed them – the standard of the Fifth Company trailing from his gauntlet.

Turning around, Kontrador knew that he couldn't leave the Ancient Antonin to the tyranid horde. Clutching the Dexter Dorn, the captain aimed the relic fist at the skewered standard bearer. Blasting his helm with the fist-mounted graviton, Kontrador killed Antonin outright.

'Captain!' Sergeant Saggitar called, prompting the Imperial Fists captain to push through the dark weightlessness and into a larger reclamation chamber. The vox-channel was suddenly lost to shrieking. While nightmares rose up from the depths of the ship, others had been re-

routed through fat, snaking siphons that afflicted the chamber ceiling. Beyond these birthing siphons, the chamber seemed a dead end.

As the captain pulled himself through the floor, he saw Zoltan thrashing in agony. Vitruvii Aeno finished the tyranid the company champion had been cleaving through, pinning the monstrosity to the fleshy wall with his chainblade. The Apothecary gunned the shredding teeth of the weapon to a torso-mulching blur.

In his efforts to kill the thing, one of Zoltan's power blades had sizzled through a pulsing sac of acid in the wall, spraying the Imperial Fist with a concentrated dose of the bio-ship's digestive juices. The champion struggled in both the bubbling acid bath and zero-gravity. His deadly blades flailed uselessly. Within horrific seconds Lessandro Zoltan was a steaming shell of ceramite and liquifying bone.

'Tantal!' Caractus Kontrador said. 'Where?'

'It's got to be close,' Vitruvii Aeno said, revving his chainblade at a horror that was snapping and seething at the Apothecary from behind another sac membrane. 'Look at him.'

The Librarian was shaking and convulsing as Zyracuse held him up.

'I'm almost out,' Sergeant Saggitar called.

Then Kontrador saw it. The yellow of plate. Dull, through the spidery membrane of a wall-pool. Kontrador saw that they were all over the chamber walls. Only one seemed to harbour the floating figure of an Imperial Fists Space Marine.

'Apothecary,' the captain said, levelling his fist at the tyranid creature hissing and spitting at the Vitruvii Aeno from the wall. Blasting a stream of particles at the monster, Kontrador splattered it with a graviton pulse. The captain gestured at the wall-pool. The Apothecary nodded, slashing his chainblade across the membrane. Careful not to get caught in the acidic expulsion of digestive juices, Vitruvii Aeno leant in and pulled the armoured form from the reclamation pool.

Kontrador snarled. The plate was an acid-eaten wreck: a wretched tomb for the Imperial Fist who had been slowly dissolved within.

Apothecary Aeno peered at the faded insignia on the plate of the cadaver: 'Fifth Company.'

'From the *Dread Sentinel*,' Kontrador said, his words like stone. The tyranid bio-ship had attacked the star fort. It had hulled and immobilised

it. It had flooded the *Dread Sentinel* with its monstrous horrors, dragging back the Space Marines, station serfs and servitors from within.

‘Wait,’ Aeno said as his captain went to push away. The dead Space Marine seemed to be clutching something. The Apothecary pulled away a robust, armoured cylinder. Its adamantium surface appeared to be scorched, but the cylinder was undamaged. ‘What is it?’ he asked.

The captain examined the instrument.

‘It’s the data logger for the *Dread Sentinel*.’ Kontrador shook his head. The armoured flight recorder was designed to survive the void destruction of the star fort or even the decimation of a planetary crash. There was little wonder it had so far withstood the attentions of the bio-ship’s digestive juices.

‘We’re not going to die here,’ Kontrador growled.

‘Where is it?’ the captain asked Tantal, prompting the Epistolary to point a ceramite finger at the opposite wall. Kontrador looked from the psyker to the fleshy surface of the chamber wall.

‘They’re coming,’ Sergeant Saggitar announced, sending the last of his bolts at the tyranid constructs swarming up the shaft towards the chamber.

‘Apothecary,’ Kontrador called, ‘cut it down.’ Aeno brought the monomolecular teeth of his chainblade to a furious blur before sawing at the spongy flesh.

With tyranids flooding up through the orifice opening in the floor, Sergeant Saggitar backed towards Vitruvii Aeno and helped the Apothecary tear the gash in the wall apart. As Kontrador helped to drag Osric Tantal through, Brother Zyracuse blew several of the vanguard organisms apart, giving Saggitar and the Apothecary time to negotiate the improvised opening. Seconds later, the young Imperial Fist followed them.

The Space Marines watched the ragged gash, waiting for the swarms to crawl through. When it didn’t happen, Kontrador turned. The chamber was larger than the neighbouring one. It was wet. Pulsing. Sacs and cysts in the wall seemed to glow with an organic intensity. The centrepiece of the chamber was a thick column made up of twitching, writhing tendons. They constantly contracted and slackened, and about the column was a nest of bulbous spores that fluttered with a life of their own.

‘Tantal’s out,’ Vitruvii Aeno said.

‘Opinion, Apothecary?’ Kontrador asked.

‘Looks like a nerve cluster,’ Vitruvii said. ‘Perhaps a simple brain or a synaptic relay for the vessel’s organisms.’

‘Where are they?’ Zyracuse asked, panning the boltgun around the chamber.

‘Perhaps such lifeforms aren’t permitted in such a sensitive area of the ship,’ the Apothecary said.

‘Please, Dorn, let you be right,’ Zyracuse said.

Sergeant Saggitar pulled his auspex from his belt. Flicking the stub-antennae out he scanned the nexus chamber.

Kontrador pushed himself off the wall and floor. He moved about the repulsive cluster-column of nerves. Hatred burned in him for the xenos thing. For the alien thoughts it was shunting to the ship’s swarm. For the ungodly intelligence the captain could only imagine was somewhere beyond: out in the void.

‘The Ordo Xenos could probably learn a lot from this,’ the Apothecary cautioned.

‘Yes.’ Kontrador said, lifting the crackling relic fist of the Right Hand of Dorn level with the writhing abomination. ‘A shame indeed.’

‘I’ve got signatures,’ Athalric Saggitar said suddenly. ‘Signals from inside the chamber.’

‘Where?’ the captain asked.

A bulbous spore before the nerve column erupted. As scraps of flesh flew in all directions, Saggitar was enveloped in a monstrous frenzy of carapace, tooth and claw. The horrific beast clutched to the sergeant’s pack with its taloned toes. Reaching over his pauldron it tore through the yellow plate and his chest with its savage appendages.

‘Zyracuse!’ Vitruvii Aeno said, prompting the Imperial Fist to turn from the gash in the wall and blast the claw-fiend off of the sergeant. The Space Marine’s aim was impeccable but the alien beast fast and deadly. Kontrador watched the mauled corpse of his veteran sergeant and that of the creature drifted away from one another.

‘Damn you, abomination,’ Kontrador spat at the floating corpse of Saggitar’s construct-killer. While the engineered creatures of the bio-vessel were largely unknown to him, Kontrador had seen the species of larger monstrosity before.

‘Genestealers...’ the captain uttered, watching the beast trail gore in its path. ‘Destroy these pods!’

A second beast burst from its mycetic spore, smashing Apothecary Aeno aside. The monster seemed to sense the threat of Zyracuse’s boltgun. As the last two bolts the weapon had to offer sparked off the creature’s thick carapace, it launched itself at the Imperial Fist.

Back-slashing the Space Marine, the genestealer sent a trio of ragged tears up through his plate and helm. Still, Zyracus fought on with his bare gauntlets. The thing slammed its claws through him, filleting his flesh with its monstrous talons. Its dagger-maw opened wide and the disgusting length of its ovipositor spasmed forth. With a grunt, Vitruvii Aeno plunged his chainblade through the beast’s armoured back.

The nerves of the column twitched and writhed spasmodically. The remaining spores about it burst, sending genestealers surging for the walls. Latching onto the flesh of the chamber they turned and pounced straight back for the remaining Imperial Fists.

Caractus Kontrador roared, the black banner of his company still clutched tightly in his gauntlet. Genestealers came at him. They leapt from the walls. They bounded off the grotesque column. They surged through the weightlessness of the chamber with a feral grace and horror.

Kontrador blasted through the armoured ribcage of the first, the graviton pulse evacuating the foetid beast’s alien organs. His next blast sent the dagger-fanged maw of a closing beast back through its skull. Genestealers leapt onto his back, hooking their grapnel feet about his pack. He felt jaws buckle and pierce the plate of his arm.

Another monster charged, smashing the Imperial Fists captain and the bundle of thrashing alien death about him into the wall. As they all drifted about the chamber, Kontrador grabbed the thing from his back with the *Dextera Dorn*. He squeezed the power fist shut, crushing the genestealer’s muscular body to pulverised carapace and broken bone.

Flinging the carcass away, Kontrador saw a claw scrape the faceplate of his helm, shattering an optic. The captain felt the freeze of the void burn the flesh of his face before his suit compensated. He punched the beast from him, the powered impact of the blow knocking the genestealer half senseless. Slamming its dazed form back against the vein-threaded muscle of the wall, the Imperial Fists captain smashed the power fist into the

tyranid again and again. The beast came apart in a miasma of bubbling alien blood. Kontrador allowed what was left of the beast to drift away, its carcass utterly destroyed.

Pulling himself around, the captain saw Vitruvii Aeno pinned by a genestealer, the Apothecary's chainblade floating out of reach. He kicked the monstrosity back with the pneumatic savagery of his powered leg, sending the beast back through the weightless gloom. Within moments the creature was sailing back at him from the wall. Setting upon Aeno, the alien monstrosity opened its jaws wide before his white helmet. Every murderous attempt, however, was smashed aside by the Apothecary's armoured fist.

Kontrador made for his Apothecary, kicking away from the wall. The captain still had an abomination of his own clawing at his back. The captain found yet another beast leaping savagely for him from the node column. Bringing up his armoured forearms, like a pugillist defending himself in the ring, Kontrador took a slash of claws across his vambraces.

The captain surged back at the beast with a brutal swing of the crackling power fist. The impact decimated the monstrous creature, obliterating its head clean from its shoulders. A backswing of the relic fist broke another genestealer in half but the moment it took to destroy the beast was a moment too long for Vitruvii Aeno.

'Apothecary!' Kontrador said as he surged towards him and the monster. Aeno looked to Kontrador but the captain was too far away to help.

The Apothecary peered into the jaws of doom but a sudden impact on the back of the genestealer's skull fixed the abominate's face in a death mask of alien incomprehension. Within the fang-nest of its jaws, Aeno could see a slender hammer head. Pushing the creature away from him, the Apothecary could see that Osric Tantal had held on to his shredding sanity long enough to bury his force hammer in the back of the genestealer's bulbous head.

Kontrador felt the last genestealer scrape its claws about him and heave itself up over his pauldron. With a face-cracking snarl, the captain of the Fifth brought up the Dextera Dorn. Light flared from the knuckles of the chapter relic as Kontrador blasted the beast in the head with the fist's digital lasers.

As the genestealer drifted from the captain's shoulders, Kontrador went for the twitching nerves of the bio-ship node column.

He punched the power fist straight through the writhing mass. Probing the repulsive column, the captain clamped the relic weapon around the thick central node. Pulling. Heaving. Tearing. Kontrador felt the column quiver. He felt convulsions through the muscular floor. The walls bled an alien ichor. Kontrador roared and ripped the monstrous mind out of the thing.

Everything fell still. The walls stopped rippling. The distant thud of monstrous organs could no longer be felt through the pudgy floor. The faint chemical glow of the cysts faded. Kontrador let the horrific strands of flesh in his fist slip out of his grasp.

'It's dead,' Osric Tantal said. The Librarian drifted out from behind the ruined column and helped Vitruvii Aeno push himself up from the floor.

'Welcome back, Master Tantal,' Kontrador said.

'Captain, we are still in danger,' the dour Librarian told him.

'The swarms?' Vitruvii Aeno asked, reclaiming his chainblade.

'... are in disarray,' Tantal confirmed. 'No more interested in us than wild beasts in the wilderness.'

'Then what, master Librarian?' Kontrador asked.

Suddenly the captain felt his boots drift to the floor of the chamber. His plate sighed about him as the servos and fibre bundles took the burden of the suit's weight once more. Kontrador looked from Tantal to his Apothecary.

'We're in orbit?'

'It's a crowded system,' the Librarian said. 'Sergeant Saggitar brought up the surveys on the bridge. Mostly worlds long dead and scorched.'

'That's reassuring,' Kontrador said, picking up the *Dread Sentinel's* data logger. 'With any good fortune, all they will find of us is this.'

'We'll survive the crash,' Tantal told him with the certainty of a man who had glimpsed the future.

'You've been wrong before, Librarian,' Kontrador said.

'No,' the Apothecary said. 'There's a chance. The most vital organs of any biological system reside where they benefit from the most protection. They do in our bodies and I see no reason why the tyrannid should engineer their biology any differently.'

‘From what I’ve seen and the creatures I’ve destroyed,’ Kontrador said through the lamp-sliced gloom of the nexus chamber, ‘I see a great deal different about the tyranid and their biology. The loss of our brothers this day testifies to that.’

‘Master Tantal and I could try to recover the bodies of our brothers,’ the Apothecary said. ‘The gene-seed will be polluted – a great loss, but denied to the tyranid, at least. Perhaps their plate and equipment could be re-santified.’

‘Their plate will be beyond salvage,’ Kontrador decided, ‘in the corrosive environs of the vessel.’

‘What would you ask of us, captain?’ Osrice Tantal said, leaning against the shaft of his force hammer.

‘To endure,’ Caractus Kontrador said finally. ‘It’s going to get hot in here. The flame will cleanse the fighting spirit of our brothers of the xenos taint, as it will purify the void of the alien intruder. We will be tested with our fallen Fists. We shall endure and, Dorn willing, emerge baptised in the fire of our foe – cleansed by the sacrifice of the fallen.’

Caractus Kontrador stood atop the caustic dune, framed in the bleak setting of a distant sun. The standard of the Fifth Company was draped about his pauldrons. Behind him flames reached up into the empty heavens. The tyranid bio-ship, colossal abomination that it was, sat half buried in the chemical burn of the sands. A black husk, the fires of re-entry had torn through the monstrous vessel, its surviving creatures and its xenos pollution. Within, the bodies, sacred plate and promise of the Imperial Fists lost on board burned with the righteousness of their calling. For they were the dread sentinels of Dorn, the wardens of the void and the shield of mighty Terra.

Kontrador turned to find himself joined by Vitruvii Aeno and Osrice Tantal.

‘Any signs of life?’ Kontrador asked. ‘Settlements, feral populations, even?’

‘Nothing,’ the Apothecary told him. ‘I’m not sure that there’s even any water.’

The captain looked to the Librarian.

‘You have sent your message, Master Tantal?’

‘Yes, captain,’ the Epistolary told him. ‘I have contacted the nearest star fort, the *Maximus Thane*, the fleet tender *Censura* and the frigate *Ardent Angel*. Our brothers have acknowledged us and will be with us in a matter of weeks.’

Kontrador nodded grimly.

‘I need you to send another communication, Master Tantal,’ Kontrador said. ‘Do you think you can manage that after your trials with the xenos?’

‘I will do what needs be done, captain.’

‘Did your authorisations access the star fort’s data logger?’ Vitruvii Aeno asked.

Kontrador had the adamantium cyclinder in his gauntlet. He gave it to the Apothecary.

‘The rune banks of the *Dread Sentinel* managed to process and cross-reference more data than we first suspected, before being knocked out by the tyranid vessel,’ the captain said. ‘It is our solumn duty to report their conclusions and the warning they would have issued. Master Librarian, send word to the *Phalanx*. For Chapter Master Vorn Hagan’s eyes only.’

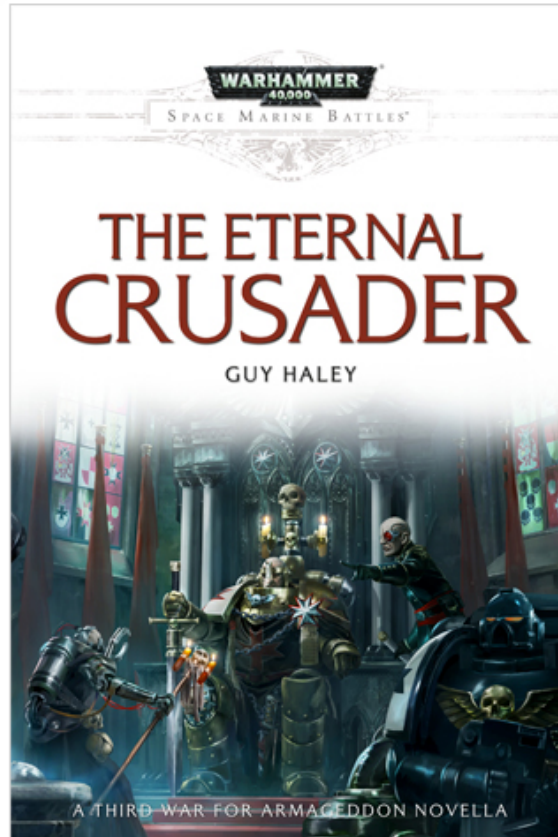
‘Yes, captain. The content of the communication?’

‘Xenos long-range scout ship encountered and destroyed. Harbinger vessel of Hive Fleet Proteus, splintering down through the galactic plane, Segmentum Tempestus. Inbound trajectory – corewards: Segmentum Solar. Projected target – Terra...’ Kontrador hesitated, then added, ‘...by way of the Inwit Cluster.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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