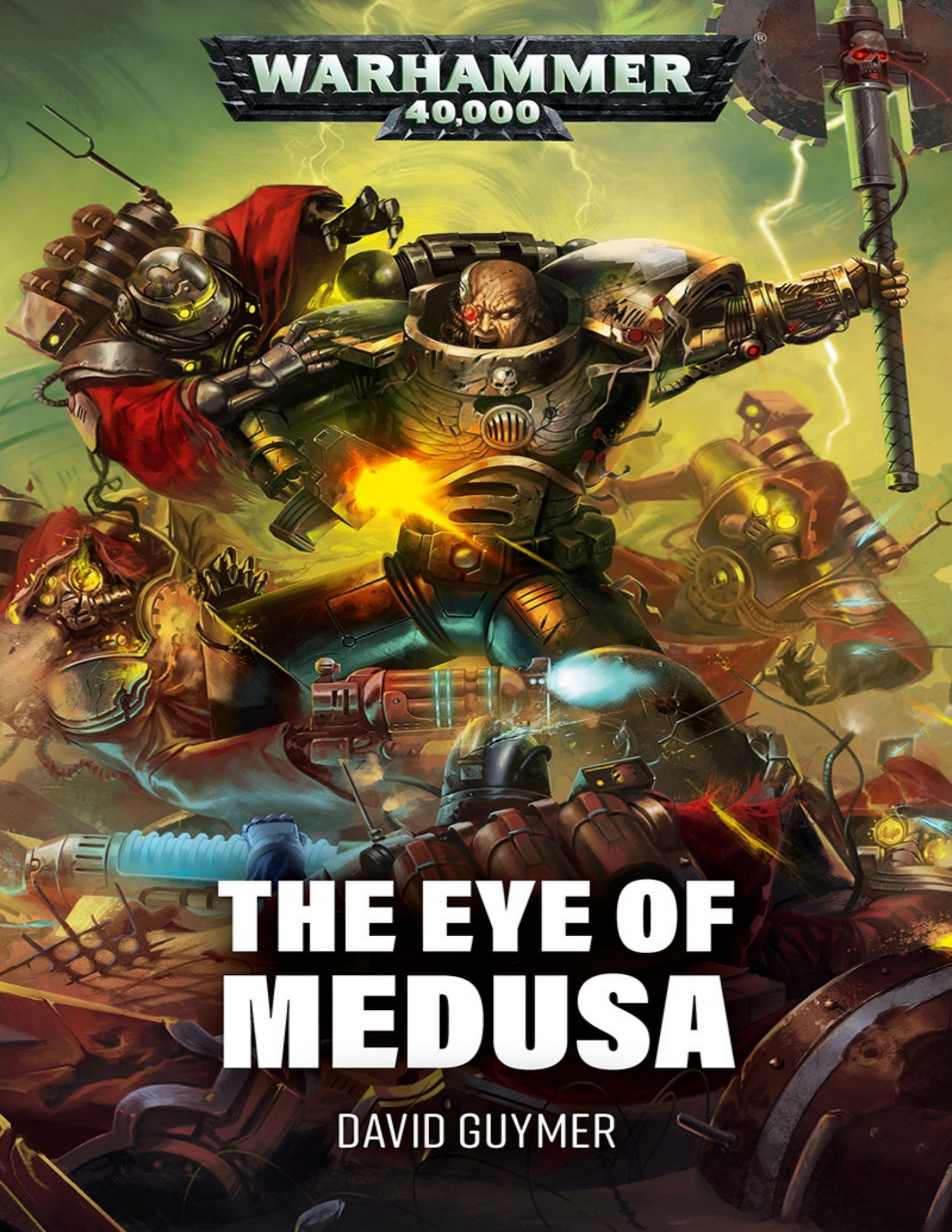


WARHAMMER
40,000



**THE EYE OF
MEDUSA**

DAVID GUYMER

The illustration depicts a chaotic battle scene. In the center, a heavily armored warrior with a red cape and a glowing yellow energy source on his chest is engaged in combat. To his left, another warrior in a red cloak is seen from behind, holding a trident. To the right, a large, mechanical, golden-colored figure is visible. The background is a dark, stormy sky with green lightning bolts. The overall tone is dark and intense, characteristic of the Warhammer 40,000 universe.

WARHAMMER
40,000

THE EYE OF MEDUSA

DAVID GUYMER

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THE EYE OF MEDUSA

DAVID GUYMER



BLACK LIBRARY



WARHAMMER 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

LORDS OF THE IRON HANDS

KRISTOS, Clan Raukaan Iron Father

TUBRIIK ARES, Clan Garrsak Iron Father

VERROX, Clan Vurgaan Iron Father, and iron captain

CLAN AVERNII

DRATH, Third sergeant

CLAN GARRSAK

DRAEVARK, Iron captain

BRAAVOS, Iron Chaplain

NAAVOR, Techmarine

ARTEX, Second sergeant

ANKARAN, Eighth sergeant

STRONOS, Tenth sergeant

JALENGHAAL, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

KARDAANUS, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

VAND, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

LURRGOL, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

BURR, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

MORTHOL, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

GOVALL, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

RUUVAX, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

TRELLOK, Battle-brother of Clave Stronos

CLAN BORRGOS

RAAN, Iron captain

HUYGENS, Iron Chaplain

DUMAAR, Apothecary

TARTRAK, Sixth sergeant

CLAN DORRVOK

MAARVUK, Second sergeant

GORGORUS, Scout of Clave Maarvuk

SUFORR, Scout of Clave Maarvuk

SARRK, Scout of Clave Maarvuk

NOVITIATES OF THE IRON HANDS

ARVEN RAUTH

KHRYSAR

EHRLACH

JURAA

BORRG

ADEPTUS MECHANICUS

NICCO PALPUS, Logi-legatus, Fabricator General of Thennos, and Paramount Voice of Mars

TALOS EPSILI, Metachirurgion and Secondary Voice of Mars

CHIRALIAS TARL, Tertiary Voice of Mars

HYPROXIUS VELT, Fabricator-locum of Thennos and dominus of the Thennosian Macroclades

THEOL QUOROS, Technologist, adjutant-spiritual to the fabricator-locum of Thennos

MELITAN YOLANIS, Enginseer

CALLUN DARVO, Enginseer

IMPERIAL OTHER

TALALA YAZIR, Inquisition, Ordo Xenos

HARSID, Deathwatch captain, originally of the Death Spectres

LYDRIK, Deathwatch, Epistolary of the Iron Hands, Clan Borrgos

YMIR, Deathwatch, originally of the Space Wolves

NON-IMPERIAL OTHER

YELDRIAN, Autarch of Craftworld Alaitoc

IMLADRIELLE DARKSHROUD, Spiritseer of Craftworld Alaitoc

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>>> ORIGIN >>> UNKNOWN
>>> DATESTAMP >>> UNKNOWN
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>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>**



CHAPTER ONE

'May the Omnissiah watch over this instrument of holy war.'

– Artisan Adept Sabeq Rawl

'With this link, I bind you to my clan.'

'To my clan.' Echoes of gears and metal.

Kardan Stronos barely heard the words of the litany. They had become inseparable from the shriek of bone planes and laser scalpels. Every tiny bone vibrated to its own share of the agony, and only his fundamental genetic hardening kept him conscious of the process at all.

'Is there pain?' The voice of the tech-priest, Artisan Adept Sabeq Rawl, was perfectly level. Stronos was equally fastidious in answering, the question as much a component of the ritual as the pain.

'Pain is of the flesh. From this day onward, I am iron.'

The words they spoke were Reket, the dialect of the mortal Garrsaki clansmen and the ritual tongue of their iron overlords. It was a language of few words and constraining syntax, colourless and harsh, enforcing the terse, inexpressive speech of its wielders. The differences between it and other Medusan forms were sufficient to make its usage under the present circumstances a challenge. As was the intent.

'The flesh cannot speak with the clarity of machine to machine,' said Sabeq.

‘It communicates its needs through the code-language of pain.’ Stronos felt the ceramite outer casing of his upper backplate adeptly unscrewed and detached, servomuscular bundles shrinking from their first taste of the *Alloyed*’s meagre atmosphere. ‘What about...’ Then came the sharp jab of a spinal probe between the mechanisms and into the marrow. ‘Now?’

Stronos’ gasp perished midway up his throat, and he swallowed his cry with an effort. ‘Barely.’

‘Good.’ Impossible to be certain, but the priest sounded impressed. ‘The sensation you are feeling now is your spine passing instruction to your pain centres that the graft has been integrated successfully. Congratulations, Lord Stronos – you are of the clan.’

‘Of the clan.’

There was a chittering whir as hook limbs passed over the back of his neck, anointing the new implant with oils, machining them into the gloss with an array of rotatable scrubbers.

Stronos winced, the area still raw, and fixed his gaze firmly forward.

The cell was small, iron grey, the minimum necessary for the physical existence of a transhuman being. Elevation to the rank of sergeant brought the privilege of single quarters, an archaic custom for his needs were few, but tradition was tradition, and the single cot was the one on which he sat. The occasional spasm of his muscles, and the artisan’s insect-quick shifts in position, brought sympathetic creaks and groans from its frame. The current placement of his hands, laid one atop the other over an ironbound incunabulum in his lap, played a large part in his outward stoicism. Not the hands so much as the book itself, his iron core, all his body’s weaknesses pouring into its worn binding and creased parchment.

‘With this link,’ said Sabeq, withdrawing his implements, then gimballing in close enough to Stronos’ neck to physically blow on the polished surface, a ritual benediction to fortune. ‘I bind you to my clan.’

‘To my clan.’

Unconsciously, Stronos dialled through his bionic eye’s spectral bands, the muscles of his cheek clenching and releasing to an ingrained rhythm, matching the acuity of his organic eye to the augmented as he flicked from wavelength to wavelength. Iron Father Verrox had laughed it off as a tick, one that often manifested under duress or in the build up to a deployment, but to Stronos it was the very definition of physical deficiency. That it arose from a desire to

expunge his body's weaknesses did not repudiate it. Realising what he was doing, he stopped, the final transition from red to infrared leaving his flesh eye behind, staring into a pall of excavated bone as three heat wraiths materialised from the corners of the cell. They were hulking, black, visible only by the dim yellow corona that outlined their armoured frames, patches of fiery white around power packs and partially disengaged armour seals.

They bore witness.

One amongst their number stepped forward. His name was Jalenghaal. Stronos did not know him except by name and honour roll. He stopped half a metre before Stronos' cot, and there triggered the manual release of a sectional plate from his power armour's girdle band. For any Iron Hands battle-brother of a certain age, the removal of armour that they had long ago ceased to consider distinct from their own increasingly augmented frames was a labour of hours, if not days, one that demanded use of a forge and a team of servitors. Jalenghaal and his brothers would have devoted many days prior to Stronos' arrival in preparation for this ritual. Sabeq's dendrites flicked expertly around Stronos' front, swifter than either eye could track, to strip him of the corresponding piece.

'With this link,' Jalenghaal intoned, flat and without cadence as he presented the slab of black armour. Corpuscular attachments and tentacled bio-circuitry probed the air for the ligand sites of a Space Marine's black carapace. 'I bind you to *my* clan.' The emphatic use of 'my' sounded an uneven note in the otherwise monotone purr of the Iron Hands brother's words.

It was instantly forgotten as the armour plate slotted into Stronos' prepared harness perfectly, his armour's systems snarling at the influx of foreign data. He gasped, overwhelmed, as command protocols, tactical runes, and much, much more exploded from the other Iron Hands brother and splayed across Stronos' bionic eye. They hovered in view, like dripping steel, and in the blink of an eye Stronos *knew* Brother Jalenghaal.

'By your iron, am I bound,' Stronos managed to utter, and remembered to blink-click the ritual confirmation to Jalenghaal's helm display.

In silence, the Iron Hand stepped back, and the second presented himself. <*Lurr-gol*,> his armour told him. Then the third. <*Burr*.> Both came bearing parts of themselves, and further bindings from battle-brothers, ten in all, unable to attend. To each new addition, his armour's spirit responded with snarls and whines, and Stronos felt his mind whirl with the influx of information,

fragments of thought and emotion that fell on his cortices only to melt away like flakes of snow. The given components were not offered at random. Each incorporated a data-tether twinned to the giver's system core.

When it was completed, Stronos heard the territorial growl that emanated from his armour's intelligence core, a surly welcome to a quorum of ten.

He had studied the customs of Clan Garrsack in preparation for his transfer and swift elevation, his fascination genuine, but the power of their bonding took his breath away. It was as though the individual identities of ten battle-brothers had been subsumed into a gestalt being, its mind noospheric, its view from a plane above its constituent sum. This being had a name.

Clave Stronos.

'It is done.' Jalenghaal stood tall against the wall, an autopsy in monochrome of dull black ceramite and sleek plasteel bionic. For all his machine detachment, his impatience was as audible as the power hum of his systems.

'Almost,' said Sabeq. 'I need only add rank insignia and ident wafers that the Ommissiah might know it.'

'The *Alloyed* approaches Thennos' orbit,' said Jalenghaal. 'Brothers muster.'

'A fact to which I am cogent.'

'Then give me a time frame, adept.'

A ripple of mechadendrites, a shrug. 'The armour's spirit demands its due, and yours must recognise clan-brother and commander.'

It was in the nature of the Iron Hands to challenge their superiors, for in such challenges were weaknesses exposed, but at that Jalenghaal fell silent. The bonds of clan went deeper than Chapter, deeper even than the shared gene-link to the primarch.

In times like these, it was the one bond of brotherhood that remained stronger than iron.

With the ritual essentially over, Stronos allowed his muscles to relax; his hands parted from the book in his lap.

The *Canticle of Travels* was the only surviving text describing Ferrus Manus' early life on Medusa. This volume, written and annotated by the paramount Voice of Mars some time in the early centuries of M33, was the oldest version of the collected stories still in existence. The forgotten adept's anonymous opus, bringing the Ommissiah's enlightenment to the old legends, was the cornerstone of doctrinal thought from Medusa to Mars, and anywhere else that two Iron Hands collided. This copy had seen more action than most Imperial

Guardsmen, and was better read. The pages were dog-eared, the las scorch across the lower spine earned on Furios Minor when he had still borne the book with him into battle.

It had been a gift from a friend, and Stronos had few enough of those.

He closed his flesh eye and massaged his forehead with the knuckles of his gauntlet until the dizziness receded. ‘Iron Captain Draevark has apprised me of the situation on Thennos. The ships of my former clan are uplink-capable.’

The stereotype of the thuggish warrior of Vurgaan was as old as that of the robotic butcher of Clan Garrsak; Stronos found the cultural idiosyncrasies fascinating, but the allusion to the caricature raised a death-rattle chuckle from Lurrgol.

Stronos glanced up to address the whipping tendrils of Artisan Rawl. ‘Perhaps we might dispense with the abjuration of rejection and the ancillary rites of inscription until after the initial deployment.’

‘Your forgechain shows me that you have undergone the rite more than once before. I see you have learned from the experience.’ Rawl bowed his mechitinous head-section. ‘Very well. The machine-spirit would welcome a late arrival to your first battle even less than it would a rushed blessing. Oh, for the purity of a warrior’s calling.’

‘Iron is not dug pure from the ground,’ growled Jalenghaal. ‘It is made pure.’

Lurrgol and Burr nodded in agreement.

The artisan hooked a bloodied extensor over Stronos’ shoulder and gestured for the servitor, hidden in somnolence behind the fog of counterseptic and bone. At the artisan’s unspoken override, the lobotomised bio-construct started towards the cot. Its necrotised room temperature biology had hidden it from Stronos’ infravision until then. A neat square of blood vessels and bone had been dug out of its brow. The flesh there had borne a binharic ident-brand containing Stronos’ clan, clave, and personal authentications. All now former. It too would eventually require re-baptism that the Ommissiah might know it.

The servitor presented the adept a tray of implements, which he selected from, replacing drill bits and nozzle heads as he dutifully blessed the currently nameless servitor. Then he returned his attentions to Stronos’ armour, hyper-fine laser sculptors erasing rank and squad insignia and replacing them with new ones. Stronos felt the artisan’s sculpting tools hover uncertainly over his battleplate’s more glaring imperfections.

Scratch marks in Juuket, the barbaric dialect of Clan Vurgaan, recorded the

many worlds on which he had fought. Strings of spent shells and power casings recalled particularly impressive kills, the trophies hanging from his armour like threaded beads.

He nodded reluctantly. When one joined a clan, one joined absolutely.

Lurrgol appeared amused by Stronos' hesitation. 'Kardaanus and Vand look forward to fighting under you, brother-sergeant.'

Stronos had never met the clave's two heavy-weapon specialists, but somehow he found he knew them well. They had a shared appreciation of firepower. 'I look forward to fighting alongside them as well. With all of *my* clan.' He glanced at Jalenghaal's brooding form as, with a serried click, Artisan Rawl's lasers snapped back into folding sheaths.

It is done,' said the artisan. 'May the Ommissiah watch over this instrument of holy war. May the Motive Force move it. May the Machine God see it unmake the impure works of the heretic, the abomination and the alien.' He made a complex concatenation of gestures.

'*Ave Ommissiah*,' the four Iron Hands legionaries rumbled in unison.

Stronos rose. The cot creaked with the removal of his immense weight. He risked a turn of the neck. Stiff, but the pain was bearable.

'How does it feel?' said Burr.

'Weak.'

Stronos grunted as he pushed the softseals of arm and neck joints to run his fingers down the forgechain. The augmetic vertebrae symbolised acceptance into his new clan. The first that every new Scout received was the plain steel of Clan Dorrvok. Next down his chain was the opalxanthine of the Clan Vurgaan, followed now by the acid-etched gold rosarium of Clan Garrsak. He felt a frisson of connection to his prior, lesser selves, an unbroken chain that ran back, through his initiation, to his long-discarded humanity.

'With this link we bind you to our clan,' Jalenghaal intoned. There was a single century cog-stud bolted into his helm. He clasped Stronos' wrist in a grip that was stronger than superhuman and harder than plasteel. Stronos returned it with equal stiffness.

'You are fully connected?' asked Burr.

Through the constant feed of inload/exload from individual to clave to clan, Stronos found that he could see the ident-runes of every battle-brother aboard the cruiser, the *Alloyed*. Recognised by the interlink manifold as a sergeant, he was able to pinpoint their approximate location, determine their combat status,

listen in on private vox loops, and even see through a brother's eyes by siphoning input from his visual feeds.

It felt... godlike.

'I am.'

'What is the calculus of battle?'

Stronos quickly read the runes. 'Full-scale deployment. An example must be made.'



CHAPTER TWO

'Your failure is one of calculus.'

– Sergeant Tartrak

The wind was biting, dark with Medusa's dust. The temperature hovered just above freezing, average for the season; day or night made little difference, visibility was in the tens of metres. Weird columns of rock dotted the plain, wind-carved over millions of years into flutes and coils, rugged stacks that looked from the corner of the eye like giant men and lopsided plinths that defied gale and gravity simply by enduring. Backing under one of the twisted formations, Arven Rauth crouched into a crevasse on its leeward side. Dust crunched and swirled around his boots. The Oraanus Rocks extended several hundred kilometres north to south; the ultra-hard lumps of diorite, a metamorphic crystal found only on Medusa, were all that remained of an ancient mountain range. Granite, limestone, soil, all of it dust now, pulverised by erosion and the winds thrown down by Medusa's ferocious spin.

Appreciating the brief respite from the storm, Rauth broke his rebreather's rubberised seal and forced up a cough of blood-phlegm and debris. He peeled off one glove, partially exposing the wrist, and carefully scraped his lips of dust on the underside. Then he did his best to blow and brush clean the inside of the mask and reattached it over his mouth and nose. He scowled as he

replaced his glove and hugged the action of his shotgun to his chest carapace.

It got everywhere. His armour had been scoured to a mottled eggshell pattern of raw armaplas and black metallic paint. It clogged the joints of his knees, hips and neck. The bare skin of his arms and face had been abraded beyond mere redness, to the point where the as-yet unestablished grafts of black carapace became as prominent as second degree burns. *Birth marks.* He rubbed his burning eyes, gritted his teeth and turned out from cover. The wind struck his sore cheeks with all the kindness it knew. Laying his shotgun over bent knee, stock up by his shoulder, muzzle in the dirt, he held up a hand to shield his face.

If all worlds were Medusa there would be no war. That was what they had drilled into him. *If all worlds were Medusa then what would be the point?*

Raising battered magnoculars to his eyes he glared into the wind and spite. He panned across, the sameness blurring, cardinal runes checking left and right on the viewer's sliders. He stowed the instrument in its belt pouch with a grimace. The storm was too heavy. As he considered that, a spasm of self-loathing brought the realisation that he'd allowed himself to be taken in by the shelter of the rocks and remained stationary too long. His spine prickled as he turned and looked over his shoulder.

Dust over carved rock. Wind.

He still remembered how it had felt to be hunted, when it had been his turn to face the rocks. He had been the only survivor that day, and that included the elder neophyte who had then been tasked to hunt him and his 'brothers' down.

There will be no such upset today.

It took him a second to distinguish the crackle of his vox-bead from the gale.

'*You are immobile, neophyte,*' came a voice. Sergeant Tartrak of Clan Borrgos. It was more than just distance and a distorted connection that robbed his machined tones of heart. Rauth scowled. The distance was an improvement. '*Have the Oraanus Rocks defeated you? Are you dead or do you simply surrender?*'

Rauth ground his teeth. Anger beat against his breast and beat hard, giving his muscles a fizz of energy. It hurt. His rib plate was fully formed, his chest enclosed in a slab of bone, but the new growth was yet to harden and he felt the full-powered thump of both hearts like a slow fracture in the bone. He gripped the shotgun's muzzle with his ugly bionic left hand and rose.

'*The clan could always use another servitor,*' Tartrak growled. '*More than*

it needs another neophyte without the strength to endure his initiation.'

Rauth bit his tongue and sighted into the swirling dust. From what little his mentors deigned to teach, he knew that the technical capabilities of the Iron Hands were superior to most other Space Marine Chapters, with the possible grudging exception of their immediate genetic successors.

They could have managed a two-way vox if they'd really wanted to. 'I'm the eldest,' Rauth muttered to himself, spoken with an emotionlessness that he most certainly did not feel. 'I should be on Thennos with Clan Dorrwok by now.'

'The Iron Fathers say that Medusa's spin slows year by year.' Tartrak's voice was a belittling bluster in his ear as Rauth pushed into the gale. *'The storm had twice its power when I was given the Trial of Rocks.'*

Rauth forced himself to concentrate.

With an application of will, his Lyman's ear tuned out the bile from the vox. Even the wind dropped to a whisper as the audial implant belatedly responded, allowing him to disregard his environment and focus on that which moved within it. With similarly enhanced powers of vision, smell, and even taste, he scanned the rocks.

He was a killer, a hunter, biologically rooted to his birthworld in a way both overly familiar and not in the least bit pleasant. It disconcerted him, his enhanced prowess, so fundamental to what he had become, and yet so contrary to his conditioning to the Creed of Iron.

He paused, shotgun trained between two darkly glittering stacks three times his height. The wind brushed the gun barrel, scraped the side of his face. Something lay on the ground there.

It was dark and at first he'd taken the dark lump to be another rock, one of the many smaller fragments of old stacks or more altitudinous veins that now littered the floor of the plain, but now he looked directly at it, it did not glitter like diorite. He parted his lips just enough to expose his tongue and tasted the air. The wind left little of the original spoor except a trace, but it was enough for him to taste. Gun oil. Fyceline. Blood. *A body.* He turned his face downwind to spit grains of dust from his lips.

One down. He thought back to his first Trial of Rocks, when he had been the neophytes' age. *We fought amongst ourselves too. Somehow, Tartrak had neglected to mention that we were all being hunted.*

Senses straining, gun loose, he zigzagged towards the body. It took him a full minute to cross the thirty or so metres and crunch down beside the dead man.

Rauth recognised Sarokk, the youngest of the neophytes.

The armour he wore was the same as Rauth's, weather-ravaged black carapace, moulded plates over chest and back and the lengths of arms and legs, ballistic thread covering the exposed joints. Blood splashed the chest plate and left arm. Shot to the back. *Pathetic*. Rauth could see no obvious wound to his chest. He looked thirteen or fourteen years old – Terran standard; Medusan years were desperately brief – but already packed more heft than a fully-grown mortal man. There was little augmentation. A surgical scar that ran down the throat, another under the orbit of each eye, a steel plate bolted across the right side of his forehead where a power maul had shattered the skull and destroyed his frontal lobe, subsequently reconstructed once Apothecary Dumaar had deemed him sufficiently chastened. *He'd not spoken out of turn a second time.*

He felt little remorse for his brother.

Whatever tenuous bond of empathy might once have existed between them, their brutal indoctrination had beaten it out of them. He had been hardened, as his instructors had desired him hardened. If he had thought for one moment that a show of weakness on his part would spite them sufficiently to make them care then he would have shown it, but he knew that it would not. He was raw material, as easily replaced as a jammed magazine or a frontal lobe if judged defective.

The powerful crack of a bolter rang from the looming columns at the same instant Rauth spotted the shooter – belly down, on a rock shelf about three metres up. He observed the muzzle flare with split-second disdain. In that time he'd seen three additional vantages, all of which offered superior cover and concealment.

Already on one knee, Rauth dropped through his supporting leg and rolled.

In perfect conditions the bolt-round would have punched him through the skull, but the wind bent its trajectory, and it whistled past his head into the rock formation behind him. The mass-reactive blasted out lumps of diorite as though it were a mining charge. He turned his roll into a rise, using his escape momentum to sidestep into cover.

The second bolt-round boomed out, the echoes of the first still ringing from the rocks, and tore open the rock plinth that Rauth sheltered behind at head height. He ducked and kept moving. A rain of metamorphic debris chinked off rock and carapace, finer dust finding its way into the filter pads of his rebreather, clogging his airways with the smell of cordite and burned crystal.

Coughing, trying to force his breathing to heel, he scraped and shuffled around the formation. He heard a third bolt-round punch into the other side of the rock, but the structure at that point was too thick and the mineral too hard to present any danger, and Rauth didn't flinch. Guided by biology, psyk-conditioning, and hard, hard practice he subconsciously calculated ranges and trajectories.

The shooter hadn't moved from his initial vantage. Rauth's disdain for his brother grew. There would be some small pleasure in forcibly instructing him on his inferiority.

He pulled up with a skid, intending to double back rather than attempt to circle about his ambusher's vantage as his brother had clearly anticipated. As he swung round, he saw another figure charging towards him from the way he had come.

Deviance from the anticipated caused Rauth to momentarily stall.

Impossible. I missed no one.

There was no time to react. The newcomer was big, blood splashed across his arm and torso, war shout muffled by a rubber mask as he dropped his shoulder and tackled Rauth through the waist. Rauth gave a grunt as the air was pushed from his chest, then a tortured wheeze as his multi-lung autonomously dragged that air back in. His vision swam, and he landed hard with the other man on top of him. They rolled a way, blocking each other's knees and elbows with their own before spraying to a stop in a dust dune with Rauth underneath.

A ruse. Idiot. You mistook the bait for the hunter.

With a grunt of annoyance, he got a bent knee under Sarokk's chest piece and kicked him off.

Bigger than an unimproved mortal the neophyte might have been, but he was at the beginning of a process of enhancement that Rauth was soon to conclude.

Sarokk flew back six metres before smacking into a tall rock. The back of his head cracked on a projecting spur, and he cried out in pain as he dropped back to earth in a heap. Rauth found the display of weakness unconscionable. He drew up his shotgun.

He could have willed the imbecile dead from that distance, but he had time to be precise. He aimed down the barrel, square to the chest, and tightened his grip on the trigger at the same instant that a bolt-round thudded into the dusty underfoot half a metre to his left and blew out a geyser of coal-black chips. He glanced aside.

The shooter had appeared from behind the column, signalled by Sarokk's

initial shout. He came through the storm with the unwavering stride of an automaton, the heavy stock of his bolter pressed between shoulder and jaw. At this range, Rauth had little difficulty picking out the iron jaw replacement, the mother-of-pearl bionic eye that shone through the dark like a data-savant's prophecies. Khrysaar. The second eldest.

When granted their choice of weapon, most opted for the bolter, but Rauth was better than most. *Most are idiots*. Compared to a shotgun, the bolter was by far the superior weapon, but range and accuracy were no advantages when cast into the elemental wrath of Medusa or the close cover of the Oraanus Rocks. More damning however – and thus, Rauth suspected, true – the bolter was almost symbolic of the Adeptus Astartes. The neophytes could not don power armour, few yet had their iron hands, and so they took the next best thing.

It makes you look strong, brother, but where is the substance?

Rauth coolly returned his attention to Sarokk. A pull on the shotgun's trigger and Sarokk was blasted into the rockface. Rauth stepped back, going with the recoil, and allowed a second bolt-round to fizz across his pauldron guard. The bolt cut a track across the Iron Hands motif but didn't penetrate deep enough to set off the mass-reactive. It whistled into the storm and detonated out of sight with a muffled crump.

Khrysaar came on without a sound, just a biomechanical grunt from his semi-reconstructed jaw as he lifted his bolter like a club and swung it at Rauth's shoulder.

Rauth's weight was over that foot, and he had to pull away to avoid having his shoulder smashed in. He pivoted over the ball of the opposite foot and whipped out his knife, then slashed the thirty-centimetre combat blade at Khrysaar's neck even as the bolter swung past him. Khrysaar bent back and the blade nicked just shy of his neck. The bolter hit the dust as Khrysaar dropped it. *Unexpected*. Rauth still had one eye on the weapon as Khrysaar shattered his kneecap with a crunching blow from the heel of his boot.

Pain receptors automatically shut down as Rauth staggered back, parrying the stinging blows of Khrysaar's gauntlet and a suddenly drawn knife. And still, Khrysaar never said a word. Hatred poured from Rauth like Larraman cells to a wound. Enough to terrify him with its intensity, had he been thinking at all. With an embittered snarl, he smashed Khrysaar's knife a ringing parry that knocked his own blade from his grip and sent Khrysaar's streaking for the rock

column where it sank into the superhard crystal matrix to the hilt. Rauth simultaneously kned him in the groin and chopped him across the throat. Khrysaar was good, probably good enough to survive to see the Iron Moon, but skill alone wouldn't bridge the gulf between them.

He caught Khrysaar in a lock, one arm bent backwards, his own hand pushed into the younger neophyte's throat, and drove him back against the rock column. Khrysaar's knife was there, still vibrating from its impact, and Rauth ripped it free, then cut sharply down across Khrysaar's body. The younger neophyte raised his left hand to block the more critical targets of throat and face. *Betraying his inexperience. Easier to have twisted to take it on the shoulder guard.* The knife carved diagonally through Khrysaar's open palm from the knuckle of his forefinger to the wrist bone.

The younger neophyte screamed at last as blood spurted from the mangle of bone and tissue, and his fingers, still attached to the larger part of his hand, hit the ground. For all that he shrieked, however, he seemed pleased, as though something he had always been ambivalent about had been taken from him.

'You will never trust,' said Rauth, quoting from the *Scriptorum of Iron* as he kicked his younger brother onto his back. Drawing heavily on his oxygen supply, he found his shotgun where it lay, already half buried under black dust, and brought it to bear on Khrysaar's half-metal face. He thumbed fresh cartridges coldly into the loading breech located between trigger and muzzle. 'You will never dilute your strength by fighting alongside another. We alone are strong.'

A bolt-round exploded in Rauth's shoulder blade. The shot pulped his left lung and primary heart, explosively amputated his arm from his body and flipped him ninety degrees before his next experience, a second later, when he slapped into a rock crag like raw meat fed into a tenderiser. He fell in an ungainly sprawl, but managed to stand, genhanced biologies struggling hard with the system shocks of extreme blood loss and pain. Rauth realised that he'd lost his shotgun along with the arm that had been holding it, and fumbled with Khrysaar's knife, faltering into a fighting stance.

A monolithic shape stamped into view between the rocks, polished and black, as though a column of diorite had torn away from the ground and was coming to finish the three neophytes.

The storm broke across him. The hum of powered armour systems was audible over the wind. Rauth could not understand how he had not heard it

before. Bionics whined as the Iron Hands sergeant lowered his bolter, the massive weapon held loose in one coldly artificial hand. The limb was external to, but fully integrated with, the warrior's armour, pistons and cabling in proxy of tendons and veins.

'Your recall of the *Scriptorium* is beyond reprimand, neophyte,' said Sergeant Tartrak. His voice echoed from his bleak helm, as though his suit were a hollow shell, a golem for a vox relay and a distant, bitter rage. Those words were perhaps the kindest that Rauth had ever heard him utter. 'But in war there are no rules.'

Anger swelled Rauth's chest. *The Oraanus Rocks were never intended as a trial that we might pass.* It was a ritual humiliation with Tartrak the ultimate insurance. He flashed his blade, but some embedded instinct forced him to lower it. 'You don't trust us even to kill each other without guidance? You were to judge us from the crawler.'

'Your preparedness to condemn others for your failings is admirable and noted. It is efficient. A warrior must always remain effective. It will be reflected in your punishment.'

Rauth took a step forward, fighting to bring his knife up. *I will have respect.* He had taken the Black Carapace, the iron hand; he was a Space Marine in all but the final rites, and if Tartrak thought him that far beneath his prowess then he was mistaken.

'I'm not a child like Sarokk or Khrysaar. I will not go down as easily.'

'Your failure is one of calculus, neophyte. An Iron Hand never enters a fight unless he is certain he will win it.'

Tartrak's armoured frame betrayed no indication of emotion or intent. He simply transitioned from a state of inaction to one of action. His bionic arm whirred, the heavy muzzle of his bolter bludgeoning forwards. It was not a swing. It was a calculated-to-the-millimetre minimal path from Tartrak's hip to Rauth's jaw, and Rauth recognised before it struck that this was not going to be like Sarokk's effort.

Tartrak was as far beyond Rauth as Rauth was his fellow initiate.

The blow was unexpectedly painless. The dim sense of contact disappeared into the emptiness of unconsciousness almost as soon as he felt it against the side of his head. In some half-felt way, Rauth was aware he was smiling. He'd made Tartrak work for his submission. And there was some pleasure in that.

**>>> SIMULUS INLOAD
>>> SOURCE >>> DAWNBREAK
>>> ORIGIN >>> PSYCHIC IMPRINT > ACCESS RESTRICTED >
AUTHORITY MAGENTA
>>> DATESTAMP >>> 563100.M41
>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>>**

The world was called Ayoashar' Azyr. It meant bluestone, jewel of Gea, or at least that had been one of the word's two meanings. No longer. The virile young race that had colonised the jewel a thousand years ago had given her another name, not inelegant by the species' conventions: Dawnbreak. Over the millennia these mon-keigh had culled its ancient flora to plant their shrinegardens, raised city-spires over the ruins of elegance, and carved the glyph art of their un-nuanced faith upon psycho-sculpted ranges. Terror of that which lay beyond was the common birthright that all intelligences shared. And say what one would of mankind, they were intelligent.

After a fashion.

Yeldrian touched the ribbed inner wall of the Falcon grav-tank. His gauntlet sang to the wraithbone and the psycho-plastic shimmered before him, its opacity parting like the veils of Isha to create a window in the armour.

It was more than just a viewing portal. It was a psychic channel. Through it, he could feel the anti-graviton hum of the Falcon's lift generators on his skin as though he stood unarmoured. The ground streaked past at speed. The wind whistled past his ears and he could hear the shriek of shuriken from the grav-tank's main armament. He shared the Falcon's fleeting blindness as a mortar shell showered him with dirt as though man and wraithbone rode as one soul. His mind was an infinite well. It consumed the flood of expanded stimuli without limit, but his thoughts were flighty, agile, and even as his mind revelled in the immediacy of the experience, it had already abandoned it in search of more.

A hill.

No, a ridge, an artificial barrier of packed earth and blended stone, cleared spoil from an excavation. Yeldrian tracked the tinkling descent of every loosened stone and hot shell casing in scintillating detail.

A snagged line of sandbag walls and razorwire cleft the top of the ridge. The temporary fortifications meandered in jarring disorder around embedded heavy

weapons teams. Heavy bolters. Autocannon. Lascannon. Yeldrian was well versed with the crude armaments of the mon-keigh Imperium. A pair of siege tanks mounting heavy mortars hunkered hull-down behind the barricades. Trench wire crawled across their armour as though it had grown over them. Primitive weapons all, but potent. Hubris became the eldar, but the Path of Command taught those that walked it respect. Yeldrian had battled these mon-keigh many times, alongside them on occasion when the fates had been thus aligned, and he knew that in the right hands an obsidian axe could cut as deeply as the god-blade, Anaris.

With the Falcon's eyes he saw the crude ordnance streak past him. Most were confounded by the Falcon's holofield and tremendous speed. A few did strike, but without conviction, and the wraithbone, though light, was harder than the strongest of human metals, attuned over centuries of war to Yeldrian's adamant psychic will.

The Falcon arrowed through the weapons' fire, the tip of a closed formation of Wave Serpent transports and Vyper jetbikes. Yeldrian sensed the other vehicles through his own transport's peripheral senses. As they flashed into close weapon range, a tessellation of las-fire opened up from the top of the ridge. It was low-powered, but dense, and a jetbike went up in a high-velocity spread of shredded moulding. The formation scattered. The Vypers split left and right, drawing fire, strafing the gun line with shuriken and scatterlasers while the transports drove in.

The humans maintained fire. They had fought Farseer Elmath's first wave for several turns of the heavens and knew that the high ground offered them little protection.

Dawnbreak was of no strategic significance, but it was beautiful.

It was no surprise then that the illustrious and the powerful had transformed this ancient paradise into a retreat, and provided it with a sizeable garrison. Soul-scrying from beyond the webway horizon had descried a force of over a hundred thousand, but Yeldrian had seen immediately that less than a tenth were what he would call warriors. Those men were from a jungle world called Catachan, which Yeldrian was familiar with only by its reputation, and only then out of the completeness of his calling. He respected their tenacity, but for all their firepower and the good fight they showed, the resolve to win had left them.

Their angels had forsaken them.

Yeldrian blinked once. The thought-pulse passed through the Falcon's closed infinity circuit to the pilot's sanctuary.

+Ascend the ridge and deploy the Aspect Warriors. As the Khaela Mensha brought vengeance unto Eldanesh.+

+They are crowded in too thickly, Autarch,+ came the thought-reply. *+There is no space to set down, and their fire is too heavy for an aerial descent.+*

With a nod, Yeldrian turned to his companions. Four warlocks, sigil-heavy cloaks draped over slender armoured shoulders, occupied the narrow benches that ran along the sidewalls of the compartment. They sat motionless despite the buffeting of the grav-tank's manoeuvres. Despite the bulk of their wargear and wraithbone devices, Yeldrian did not feel cramped. They were eldar. Their existence was of the mind, the body but an extension of the will, an expression of the way.

'Follow me,' he said to them. 'The worst may yet be averted.'

Removing his hand from the bulkhead caused the psycho-plastic to shimmer solid. He held the tonality of the experience in his mind, the sounds, the smells, then thought-activated the warp jump generator melded to his shoulder mesh. The generator's power output built to an altissimo as a silvered web of unreality arced up and down his armour. A pressure built against his forehead as though he were being compressed. His ears popped. He felt his heart stop, pause, and then slur into a running beat as the energy web tightened like a net and dragged him into the warp.

>>ERROR>>

The jump was short, metres rather than light years, the transition momentary.

His aspect armour's aethero-plasticity drew him back, and he burst into the materium amidst a squad of entrenched Catachan on the ridge, silvery wires of energy cracking from his armour's edges. They yelled in dismay. They had been kneeling in firing lines behind their barricades. Only the squad leader, a brawny bandana-wearing mon-keigh with a crude bionic fist in which he held a chainsword, was standing. The human took a stumbling step back, eyes bulging. What he was seeing was the manifestation of his innermost dread as Yeldrian's psycho-reactive masque mirrored it forcibly back at his soul.

They died quickly.

The gunners of an autocannon directly in his path pivoted their weapon. Its heavy barrel kicked out shells, too fast even for eldar eyes to follow. He grimaced, running towards the incoming fire, and pulsed his jump pack.

>>ERROR>>

He burst from the warp mid-stride. The autocannon team spun around and gawped as he leapt up the stacked ammunition crates behind them, then vaulted onto the roof of the siege tank, front down under a wall of sandbags at the crest of the ridge. The artillery piece was open-topped and the gunnery crew had seen Yeldrian's approach all the way.

The four Catachans abandoned their siege mortar and laced the air around him with las. He danced through their fire. His aspect armour was heavy, but psychically responsive to his intent to move. He whipped his humming blade clear and cartwheeled over the safety rail onto the roof of the tank. When he was as close to the mon-keigh's guns as he could get, he jumped once more, >>ERROR>>, translating through the empyrean's grasping fingers directly behind the loader's muscular frame. Yeldrian's blade pierced the human's sweat-stained shirt.

The dead man's comrades mobbed him. He dropped his shoulder. A wrench sailed past and smashed the mortar housing. A guttural voice cursed him. He threw himself under the mon-keigh's arm and into his chest. The crewman's arms milled and he fell off the back of the tank and rolled down the slope. A las-bolt sizzled past Yeldrian's masque. He ignored it, focusing instead on the machete swooping for his gut. He parried it on the psychoplas of his kneeguard and hacked off the man's arm at the elbow, then returned to the shooter and shot him through the mouth. It beamed through the back of the human's skull and a welter of cooked flesh and the last of the four-man crew thumped to the deck. The tank commander clutched at the stump of his arm and roared. Yeldrian let him.

He vaulted onto the angle of the heavy mortar's barrel and squatted there, one hand over the bore of the gun, foot wedged securely against a bracing ring near the loading breech, and looked down over the embankment.

Elegant ruins had been sectioned off from the rest of the site with plastek hoardings and fluttering tape. Huge earthmovers with solid rubber tyres as high as a Falcon were lying dormant amidst secondary mountains of spoil. Semi-permanent tracks scuffed with tyre marks and gun casings wound between them. Bodies lay partially buried, in massed pits for those in the yellow and blue of the Alaitoc, in dressed rows for the Catachan and the Dawnbreak militia, awaiting a burial detail that was never going to come. Here and there, left where they had fallen, colossal, transhuman warriors in heavy armour

dotted the site. Yeldrian counted no more than nine or ten, their carcasses savaged antemortem by crude augmetic surgeries. These were unlike the Blood Angels that Yeldrian had fought beside in the past. Those warriors had been primitive, but noble.

These Iron Hands however...

His gaze turned to the ruins, and that which the mon-keigh had unearthed.

>>ACCESS DENIED > AUTHORITY MAGENTA>>

‘Barbarians,’ he murmured.

The buzzing crack of discharged las scarred the air and punched across his lower back – his right side; the left was pressed against the mortar barrel. He hissed in pain as the psychoplas mesh stiffened under the blow. Feeling the soreness of what would in time become a vicious bruise, he turned his head. The tank commander stood on the decking at the rear of the tank. The laspistol in his hand smoked in the garden world’s dying chill. Blood drenched his torn sleeve. He started at the touch of Yeldrian’s probing masque but, uncommonly for a mon-keigh, held his nerve.

‘The Seventeenth don’t die so easy,’ he said, and sealed his doom.

He should have just fired.

Yeldrian was on the man before he had a chance and slapped the pistol from his hand. The human threw a punch, which Yeldrian neatly sidestepped, then the Autarch hooked his trailing heel through the human’s legs to crash him to the deck. The Catachan pawed at the cross-hatched metal with his bloody stump until he could roll himself over. He found Yeldrian standing over him, a slender pistol a whisper away from his eye.

‘The metal-clad that slew Farseer Elmath and defiled our land,’ said Yeldrian, the clumsy mon-keigh Gothic sticking like liquid armour mesh in his mouth. ‘You will tell me his name.’

‘Is that right?’ The Catachan drew his elbow under to prop himself up and pushed his face against Yeldrian’s pistol as though daring him to fire.

‘Your destiny is trivial. Tell me this one thing and you will live.’

The human’s near eye rolled, as if to gaze down the pistol’s barrel to the crystal at its end. He appeared to think. Then he sighed, angry, and said a name.

>>ACCESS DENIED > AUTHORITY MAGENTA>>

‘He’ll rip you apart,’ warned the mon-keigh.

‘He is a child.’

Yeldrian’s awareness was such that he could have related the number of times

the human had blinked his eyes, or described in detail the smell of his breath – by contrast his efforts to draw a weapon from the webbing around his chest without Yeldrian noticing might as well have been heralded in prophecy. The human displayed a string of metal pins between his fingers, sparks dribbling from the pouch full of primed grenades that he was lying on. He grinned like a fool.

Yeldrian almost admired his hatred.

‘Get fragged.’

Fire the colour of human blood tore at the warp space liminal as Yeldrian flicker-jumped. >>ERROR>>. He reappeared within the confines of the Falcon in a puff of flame and a blizzard of fragmentation shards before the empyreal tear was sealed. A burnt odour and the thumping of Yeldrian’s heart was all that remained. He let out a relieved breath and closed his eyes to the soothing throb of the vehicle’s infinity circuit. The sound of metal shrapnel breaking underfoot drew his attention.

‘That was a great risk, so soon after the loss of Elmath.’

Imladrielle Darkshroud had risen from her bench, buffered against the grav-tank’s sudden shifts in vector by a witch staff set firmly to the floor and one hand, beringed with black stones, braced to the wall. Her void-blue cloak brushed bladed metal shards before her. The osseous pattern of her wraithbone armour glowed with an inner light, the structure already beginning to re-grow to heal the fragmentation grazes.

‘I underestimated the mon-keigh’s capacity for self-destruction.’

‘But you saw what you wished to?’ returned the spiritseer.

‘What I wished? No. The site has been picked bare, and that which must never be spoken of has been plundered.’

The spiritseer bowed her head. ‘What then is our next step? Without Farseer Elmath to guide us?’

‘We are the hounds of Kurnous,’ said Yeldrian darkly. ‘I have the scent, and now the hunt resumes.’

>>> TERMINATING SIMULUS.



CHAPTER THREE

'The arm remembers.'

– Sergeant Kardan Stronos

I

Thenos was a small world with a thin skin of atmosphere and drop pod *Alloyed One-Seven* was barely ten thousand metres above the surface when the first flicker of re-entry burn ignited its heat shields. Stronos and his clone shook against the over-shoulder restraint bars of their harnesses. Hazard systems painted the pod's cramped interior a slick black and red, and the flames that licked the viewing block shifted to a rancorous yellow-brown. Stronos ignored it. The radiation levels were within the tolerance of Mark VII power armour. Borderline perhaps, but the nature of binary distinction rendered nuance irrelevant. It was within the tolerance limits.

He looked through the radiative burn-off at the planet he was here to kill.

Storm bands cloaked the majority of the surface in an ochre pall of radioactive dust and electromagnetic lightning, the half-shrouded topography of impact scarring appearing to shake as forces beyond either body's control hurled Thenos and *One-Seven* on their path to collision. Blast craters were arranged like mountainous inversions, easily visible from orbit, the rims of

some high enough to breach the storm layer, ice-capped with the crystalline fallout of thousands of years of atomic upheaval.

Dust swept up to pummel the viewing block as *One-Seven* hit the storm layer. The added stress of the crosswinds caused the pod's hull to creak. Automated lateral guidance thrusters fired correctional bursts to push them back over the target, interior supports groaning. After a few seconds of white-out blindness, Stronos' organic hearts pounding with the exhilaration of the descent, the dust cleared enough for the drop site to hiss into view.

Port Amadeus was sunk into the cratered wastelands like a plugsocket, surrounded by rigid square walls, set to a deflection gradient that a determined attacker could walk up if they weren't discouraged by the macro turrets and plasma culverins inside. The rad-wastes themselves had always been the installation's first line of defence, that and the proximity of Medusa. An atmospheric retention field fizzled over the base, lighting up like a snowstorm under floodlights as the angle of the blast walls turned a particularly dust-laden gust onto the field.

Critical objective markers blipped from the interlink, interfacing the viewing block to Stronos' tactical display, ordered by Draevark's battle calculus into a sequential cascade of priority, proximity and projected outcome of attack. Out of his own need for completeness, he double-checked the iron captain's calculus and found it to be without flaw.

Never enter a battle unless it is one that you cannot lose: this was the ultimate expansion of the Iron Creed. Over ten thousand years, the divinations of the magos calculi must have pronounced death by inaction on trillions, and begun feuds that even the great calculus could not have predicted with embittered 'allies' that had, at some long ago juncture in history, entered a warzone without the expected support of the Iron Hands beside them. The fault was clearly not in the calculus. It was a simple question of logic.

And logic dictated that Thennos was a war they could not lose.

'Port Amadeus is defended by the entire Century-Gammic Thennosian macroclade,' said Stronos. In the interest of expediency, he spoke in his native dialect, allowing his battleplate to translate into binharic for transmission to his clave and re-translation by their own suits into Reket. The ten warriors and their equipment filled the reinforced confines of *One-Seven*. 'Four thousand warriors with support weaponry from the Legio Cybernetica and Auxilia Ordinatus support. Civilian population is estimated at two hundred thousand,

and can be expected to offer token resistance. Our objective is extermination.'

The Iron Hands' relationship with the Adeptus Mechanicus was as close as Stronos' brothers came to full collaboration. Even their closest genetic descendants, the Brazen Claws and the Red Talons, had been effectively cut off from their forebears and were virtual pariahs by comparison. If a single individual of the clave was troubled by the necessity of slaughtering the quarter million inhabitants of a Martian colony under the Medusan aegis then their impassive silence did not register it.

'Insurrection on our own thrall world will not be tolerated.' Jalenghaal's voice was twice-translated, arriving in Stronos' helm as a synthesised speech-sound. 'It will be returned to compliance. Iron Father Tubriik Ares has been roused. If this world believed it had suffered before, then it will soon appreciate the magnitude of its error.'

'The Iron Father is here?'

'Full-scale deployment,' Jalenghaal reminded him. 'Orders of the Iron Council.'

'You know Ares?' asked Kardaanus. The ordnance specialist had his arms crossed over his chest plastron to clench his gauntlets around his restraint bars. The compaction only served to emphasise his bulk. His lascannon rattled in an upright bracket beside him.

'Of him. Of course.'

Stronos was impressed. He hadn't thought the Iron Council still had it in itself to issue such a far-reaching decree. He turned his attention back to the viewing block.

Drop pods *One* through *One-Seven* were raining over the compound. Fires burned now in the dusty tangle of plasteel, the retention field spluttering to contain the smoke that billowed from the impact sites. Fourteen tonnes of adamantine, plus the not inconsiderable weight of passengers and wargear, hitting a target at terminal velocity were, in the right hands, weapons in their own right. Better than weapons. The planet's irradiated atmospherics prevented orbital targeting, but the vehicles' guidance spirits compensated well enough for the *Alloyed*'s blind flurry.

A spectacular flash turned the rad-weathered compound momentarily white, and a column of seething plasma mushroomed from the disintegrating shell of the outpost's primary power plant. Chain surge ripped outwards through the overhead cables of the power distribution grid, setting off secondary

detonations wherever the grid reached. Which was everywhere.

And then the field went down.

‘You may need to revise that civilian population estimate,’ said Lurrgol.

He was that rarest of beasts: an Iron Hand with a sense of humour.

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> PORT AMADEUS

>>> ORIGIN >>> NAAVOR, TECHMARINE

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

‘Disregard thirteen-beta. Signature codes identify it as a barracks for the traitor-skitarii, principal objective for Clave Stronos.’ Naavor gripped both flight sticks, forcing the Thunderhawk’s restive spirit to comply with his command to break off the attack. ‘The calculus states that additional assistance is not required.’

His co-pilot-cum-navigator didn’t answer. It never answered.

A human torso, a preserved cadaver parasitised by interface plates and cabling, occupied the second cockpit berth. The lower articulations of the spinal column had been cleansed and polished and extended on past the point at which the subject’s legs had been amputated, feeding in to a net of neural wiring that interfaced directly with the surrounding systems. Similar splays of conductive colouring erupted from the stumps of its wrist to emphasise the appearance of a half-digested corpse in a spider’s web. Its one eye gazed glassily into the smoke and static of the main oculus, absorbing in case pilot death should call on the servitor to intervene.

Naavor had been inducted into the mysteries of the Machine on Mars, as prospective Techmarines of all Chapters were, and he knew that the aircraft generally required a dedicated gunner, co-pilot and navigator.

Inefficient.

‘A close support fire pattern has been pre-plotted on a decay ellipse, convergent on Habitation J.’

With a squeeze of his forefinger he fired all four sponson heavy bolters. The torrents of heavy shells converged on a skitarii gun turret sixty metres ahead with a sound like two chains being driven through a metal hoop. A neural twitch then banked the *Iron Star* over the ensuing fireball, flechette bursts

riddling its aerofoil as it pulled away.

<Thirty seconds from no-fly zone.> The co-pilot's emotionless cant arrived directly in Naavor's speech centres through his cranial plugs. Some hard to touch part of himself felt angry at the servitor's incapacity for speech. <Interdiction authority magenta.>

'Compliance,' Naavor answered aloud, logging the fiery descent of *One-Seven* as he pulled the gunship's nose away from Warehousing and Transit C without question.

>>>**TERMINATING SIMULUS.**

II

Impact.

The sudden inversion of forces slammed Stronos' internals towards his stomach floor. Hard metal squeezed on weak flesh and equally, disgustingly, *vice versa*. His throat tightened as if to prevent his primary heart from pushing into his mouth.

Brace alarms continued to scream, seconds after the fact, dissipation buffers built into the walls venting off the impact force as steam. A mortal would have been smeared across the viewing block and pressure-cooked. The restrictor bars over Stronos' shoulders lifted away and shock responsive charges blew the exterior hatches. Walls, adamantine weighted, crashed into the rubble and deployed locking spikes to become ramps.

Stronos could see nothing.

His visor display stalled, jumpy, threatening complete dissolution into static if he moved too suddenly. *One-Seven* had punched a hole the size of a building into the side of a barrack block. The enormous thermal variances between the vapour cloud expanding out from the drop pod and the unshielded Thennosian environment turned preysight into a meaningless heat map of electric greens and itinerant blacks. His armour growled with data starvation as it sought him targets. The manifold overlay suffered equally, interference patterns producing waves of curiously emergent order in the data-wake of intermittent inload/exload.

His armour's haptic systems converted the ripple of displacement waves into the roar of *One-Seven's* cradle-mounted storm bolter.

The spirit-guided suppression weapon punched out bolt-rounds in each of the four available firing solutions, timing variable, a pseudorandom pattern formulated to draw fire. And it did. As target-poor as Stronos' systems, the skitarii that had flooded into the ruined barrack block to repel the Iron Hands incursion obligingly returned fire. Stronos' cogitator growled through its gears, extrapolating trajectories from static-chopped blocks of screed. Targeting possibilities lit up his display. There was not much left for his own mind to do.

<Objective is extermination,> he canted, and aimed his pistol where his armour guided it into the mist. The impact had accounted for fifty-point-one per cent of the structure, and a significant proportion of the Century Gammic Macroclade. The calculus did not allow for error. That still left five hundred hostile skitarii in this block. <Purge the weak-willed.>

Ten Iron Hands legionaries and a manifold-slaved machine-spirit opened fire, bolt-rounds punching through the vapour cloud in all directions as though a nail bomb had just been detonated underwater.

The skitarii adjusted their targeting parameters with an equivalent dispassion. It was as though two cogitators waged war.

Stronos strode down the skitarii guns, radium rounds spanking off his armour as he raked the rubble with bolter-fire. A bullet crunched into his faceplate, hairline fractures and bleaching static radiating from the point of impact. Targeting reticules fizzled out into the background of the massive radiation dump, and he blazed over the shooter's last position by memory.

The Imperium could produce warriors that were more ferocious, or that were swifter or deadlier. Somewhere in its vastness there might have even been a brotherhood of champions that were stronger. But there was no one that could lay down punishment and advance into enemy fire as relentlessly as one of the Iron Hands.

Stronos thumbed his pistol's release catch to eject the spent magazine, then thumped the grip against his belt holster to insert another. Only a half-second's delay and he resumed firing, advancing still at the same unwavering pace, still without a word spoken outside of his own clave's interlink. His vision cleared slowly. Targeting information metrics took longer to reacquire, but the hardened interconnectivity of the clave's data-tethers cast their runes over the static-walled display with black-on-white clarity.

His battle-brothers were advancing from the drop pod in a widening circle, a glacial encroachment of rapid-firing bolters. Kardaanus and Vand emerged to contribute their heavier fire. Titanic blasts from the brothers' lascannon and plasma cannon obliterated structural columns and rock piles that the skitarii sought to use as cover, driving them back under withering hails of debris.

Stronos' boot crunched into the arm bionic of a fallen skitarius. He looked down, static drizzling across his display against the ill-advised direction of movement.

The soldier was encased in dark red bonded carapace, limbs bracketed with piston-fired hydraulics, head an insectile blending of rad-burned flesh with omnispectral lenses and voxtennae stalks. A heavy trench coat spread out to one side like a pool of blood. He looked no different to any other loyal instrument of the Corpus Mechanicus, insofar as Stronos could discern. That observation was neither encouraging nor distressing. It was neutral data, logged accordingly for after-action exload.

He removed his boot with a splintering of bone and exoskeletal augmetics as he continued, marked a vanguard by the scan-pulse of the skitarius' visored optics and gunned the soldier down. Traitor. Renegade. The labels were as relevant to him as they were to his bolter, but he felt a cold, code-walled fury as he accelerated into a charge. His powered stride shook loosened masonry from the walls and ceiling. His genhanced frame ate up the ground at an astounding pace.

The skitarii backed away, in no hurry, fear responses dialled right back, pumping Stronos' plastron with radium rounds. A number penetrated; inbuilt rad-counters clicked like an empty storm bolter, but Stronos didn't feel it. He didn't have the flesh vitals in the area to be hurt.

His charge scattered the soldiers like body parts after a mass-reactive blast.

A single skitarius swung back in a whirl of hydraulics and cracked the stock of his carbine against Stronos' elbow guard. He ignored it, insignificant, shot two bolts through the breather mask of another, then traversed to gun down a third as it hunted cover. A visible change in posture overcame the surviving skitarii as they assimilated close combat protocols.

Stronos thumb-activated his power-axe's disruption field and carved out one hundred and twenty degrees of the skitarii's attempts to encircle him. The humming cogblade hacked clean through two cyborgised soldiers and deep into the chest of a third. He puked oil. A properly functioning vanguard skitarius

should have fought on, axe or no axe, but the combination of promethium-freezing cold and hyper-radioactivity with an armour breach killed him instantly.

As Stronos ripped his axe free, the garrison princeps, tall helm edged with gold, reactive armour spitting out directional conversion fields, lashed a transuranic blade across the vulnerable cabling behind Stronos' knee.

With a grunt, Stronos stepped back, crushed the princeps' foot under one five times the weight, and used his enormously superior size to drive the skitarii onto his heels. Showing no glimmer of shock, the princeps tucked his pistol to his chest and emptied it, a torrent of high-amperage arctricity earthing like a thunder hammer into Stronos' kidneys as he swung back. Discharge crawled over the non-conductive ceramite of his power armour, visor display whited out, and he had to settle for vibrational confirmation alone of his power axe cracking open the princeps' armoured skull. Vision grizzled back as the skitarii folded to his knees like a drained weapon platform into its cradle.

Stronos wrenched his axe back.

The last two skitarii in his immediate field of engagement altered protocols once again and broke off. Stronos shot them each once in the back as they ran.

The skitarii were good. The empirical rationale underpinning that observation allowed no room for misplaced superiority or faith-based denunciations. Had they been faced with anything other than a Space Marine they would almost certainly have prevailed.

Strange then, to consider it in those terms; that the Iron Hands' superiority was rooted in genetics rather than augmetics.

'The brother-sergeant remembers how to use a bolter,' called Lurrigol. 'The Devastators have not ruined him beyond all use.'

'The arm remembers,' Stronos returned, a phrase he'd heard once and found pleasingly ironic.

<The arm is weak,> Jalenghaal canted. A sustained burst of bolter-fire tore through a rubble barricade and shredded the skitarii behind it. He turned his helm towards Stronos, the beam of his optics piercing the white fog the way flesh equivalents could not. <Only iron.> The battle-brother resumed his advance as though the pause had been preset and anticipated, a retaliatory spatter of rad-rounds ricocheting from his armour. A handful of expertly marked shots lodged in joints, but Jalenghaal ignored the damage and drove himself bodily through what was left of the skitarii's impromptu stockade to

conclude the slaughter at close quarters.

‘He follows the creed of Iron Father Kristos,’ said Burr, by way of explanation.

The last skitarii were streaming for a break in the wall as Stronos blink-sent his brother the lingua-techna rune <understood.> Stronos quickly consulted his briefing inload. The breach led back onto a staircase to the upper levels of the block and what appeared to be prepared fire positions.

With one thought, Clave Stronos brought up its bolters to mow the routed soldiers down. The very second that mass-reactives began to chew up the wall and the soldiers in front of it, Brother Vand dropped to one knee, his cannon’s vents flared wide. For a second a blue-white ribbon of plasma connected his weapon to the far doorway, before a titanic explosion brought down the entire section of wall. Stronos ceased firing as brickwork burst under the suddenly untenable weight of what was above it, the entire section crashing into itself and blasting a wave of rockcrete dust over Clave Stronos.

‘Objective cleared,’ said Stronos as his visual inputs returned.

‘We will need an alternative route to the secondary objective.’ Jalenghaal locked the elbow joint of his bionic, securing his bolter one-handed in order to service the damage to his armour. ‘Draevark will be driving the renegades towards Amadeus’ central plaza, Habitation J. The calculus demands our contribution.’

‘Are you injured?’

A sneer somehow managed to be incorporated into Jalenghaal’s vox-translation. ‘Flesh wounds.’ A Space Marine, even one unaltered from the Emperor’s base design, was built to withstand the worst excesses of a hostile galaxy. Improved upon by a tradition of replacement and repair, an Iron Hands Space Marine was functionally indestructible.

A cursory glance at Stronos’ faceplate display revealed a smattering of insignificant damage throughout the clave, nothing critical. He blinked away the display and attempted to call up a structural schematic of the building from the clan manifold. If the use of suit optics had been like facing a blizzard, then accessing the manifold was like walking into an ion storm with both hands in front of his eyes. The tri-dimensional interpretation of their current location was a solvent hiss of white indistinguishable from anything around it. Contact with anyone more than twenty metres away was impossible. Even *One-Seven* intermittently dropped off the connection.

‘And they tell us our equipment is the best outside of the Mechanicus,’ Lurrgol complained.

‘Its current malfunction does not render that untrue,’ said Jalenghaal.

‘This is a harsh world,’ mused Lurrgol.

‘Like home,’ Stronos agreed, and turned to search for a street side exit.

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> PORT AMADEUS

>>> ORIGIN >>> ARTEX, SERGEANT

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

Artex thumbed the quick release catch of his bolter’s magazine and slammed in a fresh load. It clicked, locked. The orange slash along the base indicated dragonfire rounds. Raising the bolter to his chest to align the weapon’s sight with his helmet optics, he aimed for the fallout shelter at the far lower end of the foot ramp. It was an angular rockcrete bunker, lower than the surrounding blocks. The approach was marked with hazard lines, its frontage covered by radiation warnings and plaques extolling fallout protocol in a detail that no one in need of knowing would care to read. Every work district contained, at some accessible central location within it, a structure like it, integrated into the base schematic for the protection of Port Amadeus’ valuable labour force during test firings of the techno-priesthood’s more... *spectacular* weapons systems. They had never been intended to hold off a ground invasion.

A ground invasion was unthinkable.

Artex aimed for the gashes in the walls where Venerable-Brother Orfo’s lascannon had already punched in the diamondplex vision slits and pumped a single round through each one. The incendiary bolts sizzled like signal flares and left an arc trail of red sparks as they shot through the hands-width apertures. There was a moment of quiet, and then the tripled mass-reactive explosion blew out what was left of the diamondplex and crumpled the door as though someone had just tried to break it down from inside.

There were still seventeen rounds in the magazine but Artex replaced them with a conventional sickle pattern regardless. Mission parameters placed a low priority on ammunition conservation and a high one on kill counts. Optimisation was a product of balanced inefficiencies.

‘Ten seconds.’

Smoke gouted from the windows as the superheated gases contained within the dragonfire rounds found substances to ignite and burn.

Nine. Eight. Seven.

A secondary explosion, an oxygen canister or a petrochem generator, rocked the bunker and threw off a hazard plate from the front wall. It clunked onto the foot ramp and slid down a way.

Six. Four. Five.

Artex and his demi-clave of brothers readied bolters. Venerable Orfo continued to stump backwards. Four metres tall, his armoured sarcophagus more massive than all of Clave Artex combined, the foot ramp trembled under his weight. His left ‘arm’ lascannon hummed with gathering charge while his right arm missile rack angled over the Iron Hands’ heads. The Hellfire variant’s sheer firepower gave Artex an electric shiver, quasi-spiritual, the Iron Hands credo of overwhelming force encased in the adamantium frame of a revered ancient brother.

Three. Two. One.

‘For the Kristosian Creed, brothers. Hail the warleader.’

‘Hail the warleader.’

The door burst open exactly when Artex had calculated it would, belching up a pall of black smoke that in turn disgorged a panicked mess of rebreather-wearing figures swaddled in cumbersome Thennos-pattern environment gear. Artex saw one go down under the stampede, appearing to drop to scoop up what looked like a distressed child and failing to rise. Clave Artex had already driven the traitor skitarii ahead of them towards Habitation J, but every body counted in the final calculus.

‘Objective is extermination.’

He felt the kick of his bolter against his heart as he and his brothers opened fire.

He felt nothing else.

>>>TERMINATING SIMULUS.

With a grunt of effort, Lurrigol jacked the fire escape that opened from the barrack block onto Warehousing and Transit C, then stepped aside to allow Kardaanus a short run up to bulldoze it open. The vehicle haulage truck that had been blocking it from the other side was shunted two metres into the street, the door clanging against the tailbar and refusing to be forced a centimetre further. Kardaanus edged in and tried to push himself sideways between the wedged door and its frame, despite being clearly and irreducibly half a metre too broad even at his narrowest point. It took Stronos and Jalenghaal several minutes to rip out enough of the doorframe for the giant Space Marine to get through. With clearance enough for their largest, the rest of the clave flowed through like molten steel through a dripper.

They fanned out, keeping the gigantic eighteen-wheeler to their right. Its long trailer was open-sided, three tiers of rad-weathered vehicles stacked tight and enclosed within a diamond pattern of metal bars. Leaving the rest of the clave to proceed, Stronos used the ready handholds to climb up onto the top of the trailer. He may no longer have had the armament of a Devastator, but the battle calculus was imprinted. Its bias for high ground would take more than a change of wargear to shake off. Standing with one knee against the backward slope of an Achlys dune rover that buckled slightly under his weight, he scanned the ruined skyline.

Warehousing and Transit C was a space-efficient nucleation of narrow freightways and multi-storey stowage blocks. With each additional storey above surface level, the buildings encroached a little further over the freightways until they met in the middle, turning them effectively into tunnels. Corrugated steel shutters were up or down or somewhere inbetween, wherever they had been when the power had failed. The asphyxiated bodies of Warehousing and Transit C's menial population lay over one another, covering the visible freightways like a badly lain red carpet. Electroos flickered feebly in a dim proxy of life. The scale and immediacy of their battle calculus' human cost took him aback, but only for a moment. The interlink commuted the emotion amongst his brothers and blunted his sense of it.

The Iron Hands were not here to subjugate or to hold. They were here to eradicate.

'I feel... sorrow,' voxed Lurrigol.

'The Mechanicus can build another base,' said Jalenghaal.

Stronos did not think his brother had been mourning the buildings. He looked

up, his display jumping. The sky was a warzone between native yellows and fiery, insurgent reds. Thunder bursts of bolter-fire rang out over pockets of flame amidst the lighter rattle, like rain on metal rooftops, of radium rounds, arc weaponry and las. Smoke still poured from the wreckage of the power distribution grid, lightning flashed by the bolter spreads and missile flares of Thunderhawk gunships. Despite the determined intention of all sides to obscure it, the atomic haze was thick with stars. Thennos' atmosphere layer was so thin they didn't even sparkle. They just lit the sky, decorative irrelevancies like laurels for the dead. The nearest was a roiling bolt of purple.

Sthelenus.

Seeing his own sun burning back, so close, filled Stronos with a feeling he no longer had the emotional vocabulary to describe. It was as if his bionic internals had unilaterally decided to drop their temperature by ten degrees. As if his hearts had determined it to be of pressing import to beat harder. Or perhaps he had just been angry too long to recognise the feeling for what it was.

It was not the star. Stronos still remembered the myths of 'the sun' from his mortal life, and had not been the only newly admitted Scout to conceal his awe at the sight of it when Clan Dorrwok had first lifted them above Medusa's dark clouds. It was what the star represented. The children of Ferrus Manus were not the force they had once been. They had allowed themselves to become distracted, their gaze turned inward to questions of doctrine, and like iron left to rust, their strength too had corroded. He knew that. The dispute had been driving cracks through the Iron Council for a hundred and fifty years, but he would never have believed their outlook could become restricted to the extent that they could overlook insurrection on their own outermost world until it was too late.

It had to stop. Now.

Though Stronos had been thinking that for almost a hundred years.

'Clear,' he voxed, and jumped off the other side of the truck.

The long vehicle lay on a diagonal across the freightway, the driver's cabin rammed head-in to the opposite block, bent at the coupler in a stress position that made the metal keen lightly even without any further attempts at force. Stronos saw now why Kardaanus had been unable to push it further. Its monotask driver was still in the cab, blankly waiting on further instruction.

Following Stronos' direction, and with no other obvious way around, the Iron Hands stepped one at a time over the bent coupler between truck and trailer. Their boots crunched on broken glass. The block walls gaped like engines stripped for parts. Most of the windows had been blown into the street by decompression. The handful still *in situ* rattled, feeling every distant explosion and rumble of gunfire. The clan manifold came and went, slurring code, strident efforts overridden by static and noise.

'Where are we going?' Jalenghaal voxed.

Without breaking stride, Stronos dispatched an objective marker to his brother's overlay. He saw Jalenghaal turn that way. From the jumble of rubble-strewn rooftops, underlit by splashes of burning promethium, an orbital uplink tower rose into the choking black smoke like a coil of barbed wire.

'High ground,' Stronos said.

'We are not Devastators.'

'We are Iron Hands,' said Stronos firmly. 'I need data if we are to reconvene with Draevark's assault. With luck, the altitude boost will allow me to regain access to the manifold.'

Jalenghaal snorted. 'Luck.'

'You do not think that there is such a thing?'

'There is such a thing as randomness – it exists where a system defies logical reasoning. To call it "luck" is a crude attempt at apophenia. It implies control where none exists and thus creates weakness.'

'This argument is a waste of frequency bandwidth,' Burr growled.

'What is the cart-grid of that structure?' asked Lurrgol.

'A moment,' said Stronos, and pushed an inload request into the static storm swell of the manifold. He waited several seconds, continuing to break glass underfoot as he did so, until something snarled back to him. 'One-nine/seven-two/eta.'

A string of red runes blurred across Stronos' display.

Denied.

'Denied,' said Jalenghaal, and a shiver of exclusion passed through Stronos' data-tethers into his spine.

'Explain.'

'One-nine/seven-two/eta,' Jalenghaal answered, as if reading off a script displayed for him on his overlay. 'Flagged as a storage facility for three Kastelan class battle robots of the Legio Cybernetica. The Mechanicus have

been engaged in stress tests of experimental armour patterns against a range of xenos-tech weapon systems. Amendment to battle orders – one-nine/seven-two/eta is to remain a strict no-fire zone until all Kastelan units can be accounted for or confirmed absent.’

‘On whose instruction?’

‘Logi-Legatus Nicco Palpus, the paramount Voice of Mars.’

‘I appear to be lacking this addendum to my briefing link,’ said Stronos.

‘We deployed in some haste,’ said Burr. ‘Certain rituals were overlooked at your order.’

Stronos grunted. ‘A Kastelan is a match for a Dreadnought. It is inconceivable that an enemy on the defensive would continue to hold such potent assets in reserve. It is considerably more probable that the robots were removed from Amadeus to more secure facilities in the proving ranges prior to our assault.’

‘Supposition,’ said Jalenghaal. ‘Your mind is singular. It bears no insight that is not shared by the interlink.’

Stronos hesitated before answering. This was not his first time transferring between clans, and he knew that each had unique customs of which they were rightly proud and sensitivities over which they would tolerate no encroachment.

He knew what it was to be of the Iron Hands, but he had yet to learn what it was to be Clan Garrsak.

‘The manifold is barely functional. I have command of this clave. We will proceed as I have outlined.’

Lurrgol made to take a step forward, then hesitated, stalled with one heel off the ground as though caught out by some irreconcilable internal logic conflict.

‘Amendment to battle orders – one-nine/seven-two/eta is to remain a strict no-fire zone until all Kastelan units can be accounted for or confirmed absent.’

Stronos turned towards the uplink tower. ‘Then let us go and account for them.’

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> PORT AMADEUS

>>> ORIGIN >>> DRAEVARK, IRON-CAPTAIN

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

Iron Captain Draevark strode imperiously into the heavy gunfire, distanced from the hammering it struck up on his armour by the thirty centimetres of adamantine, ceramite and titanium of tactical dreadnought plate. His faceplate displays sizzled with static, radiation heat and white noise. Stacked targeting icons jittered against the electromagnetic swell of white. Near-invisible brackets, coded by priority in bleached-out colours, swarmed left to right, up and down.

A five hundred strong maniple of skitarii legionaries and battle servitor constructs, easily the largest single hostile force on Thennos, had holed themselves up under the splayed feet of a power distribution pylon in Habitation J.

The district was inherently defensible. It was boxed in on three sides by high rise habs, themselves booby-trapped warrens of Sicarian ambushes and room-to-room fighting. The closeness of the buildings alone would have made bringing down a Thunderhawk to offer close ground support a challenge, but the periodic discharges of arctricity from the splayed pylon stump made it too hazardous even for an Iron Hands servitor to attempt.

The only reliable access was the single elevated road bridge that passed from Habitation H over the trans-rail lines.

The skitarii had driven a Balius pattern in-battlefield refuelling tank across the middle of the bridge and overturned it to block the approach. Bullets spat from overlooks on neighbouring structures. Heavier fire from the weapons squads crouched on the stripped down Chimera chassis' sky-facing side raked the roadway with searing plasma, energy beams and high calibre shot. Draevark waded through it, ignoring the impact alarms and the scarcely registered hits to sweep up his right hand.

It was Draevark's intention to unblock that approach.

Energy chained across the blades of his lightning claw, and he hacked into the Balius' lightly armoured roof. He raised a boot, slowly, heavy gauge ammunition slapping off the enormous armour plates covering his head and shoulders, then stamped down through the still-molten tear in the Balius' armour. His own mass wasn't much less than that of the support tank, and coupled with the ripping back of his lightning claw, the boot driving into it caused the whole vehicle to pitch towards him.

A skitarii ranger fell into the road with a blurt of alarm, and Draevark forced the rest of his bulk into the breach after his boot, clawing out spall lining and

interior decking like a parasite burrowing into a man's chest. Those skitarii that had managed to hold on quickly fell back as Draevark carved open the Balius' underbelly and then drove the skull-inset solid stone of the Crux Terminatus through the tear.

The bolters of Claves Soloron and Plutarrk, following over the road bridge from Habitation H, made straightforward work of the felled skitarii now that their captain had occupied or otherwise dealt with the worst of the enfilade.

Draevark tilted his helmet to the right and rolled the monstrous left pauldron to rid himself of a bit of undercarriage, complete with a trailing length of track, and looked over the fortified pylon on the other side of the bridge. Barricades of mangled steel provided cover for plasma calivers and neutron lasers. Ballistari and ground-hugging machine crustacea, Onagers, packing eradication beamers and heavy stubbers filled gaps in the line. Lengths of conductive cabling as thick as a man's arm that had fallen from the damaged pylon were concealed as tripwires. Through bursts of static, Draevark's autosenses picked out the traps, sometimes attached to plasma or haywire grenades at one end or both. Sometimes not.

Heavily defended. The calculus had told him as much.

Observing the ebb and flow of battle through the tactical manifold, such as it was, was like watching two finely matched tactical cogitators engaged in simulated warfare. The Iron Hands moved from strategic point to strategic point, eradicated then moved, while skitarii units retreated before them, observing varying doctrina imperatives to counter their opponents' battlefield supremacy. Their strategy was one of fend and frustrate, uniting with other fractal elements to engage demi-claves or unescorted Dreadnoughts in kill zones, fighting for as long as it took the action to seep through the confusion of the manifold and counter-actions be executed. But it was a decaying cycle. Draevark could see that. A contest of attrition favoured only Clan Garrsak, but it would be a victory bought with a mounting expenditure of time, munitions and replacement parts. Perhaps even lives.

Which was why the calculus had ordained that their resistance be crushed here.

He glanced up at the tall uplink tower that stood against the north-west face of Habitation J. It presented numerous potential firepoints and backed onto a district that was, if his overlays could be trusted at all, firmly in the new Clave Stronos' control.

It would have been an obvious route by which to flank the besieged skitarii, and yet his mind slipped across the possibility with the fading neural imprint *DENIED* stinging his cortices. Wincing, the cause of the pain already consigned to codewalled adjunctory meme-bins and Stronos forgotten, he strode ponderously on from the wrecked Balius. Frag and smoke bombs whistled from his shoulder launchers to cloudburst, Plutarrk and Soloron falling in behind as he spearheaded the final assault.

>>>**TERMINATING SIMULUS.**

IV

A sprawling warehouse unit blocked the most direct route to the uplink tower. Entrance was via a vast set of industrial shutters that had fortunately already been rolled back, a mammoth Hellhammer superheavy tank parked askew in the opening. Either it had been reversing in for warehousing when the Iron Hands had struck or it had been rolled out to aid in the defence. The evidence pointed to the former. There was no indication that its power plant was operational, and as Stronos moved closer he saw the winch lines that stretched into the warehouse interior. The storage bay was unpowered and unlit however, and the cables inked into blackness.

‘The uplink tower shares passageway connections to several storage facilities in this area,’ Burr advised.

‘Inside,’ Stronos ordered, and led the right hand pincer as the clave peeled into two to stream around the enormous tank. Jalenghaal took the other. The ordnance specialist, Vand, simply walked up the sloped glacis, the rigid suspension rods built through his shoulders and pauldron plates keeping his plasma cannon stable as he mounted the cupola and squatted down to cover the approach into the warehouse.

Stronos and Jalenghaal’s demi-claves fanned out into the storage bay, intuitively overlapping one another’s angles, a metaliminal understanding of each other’s orientation and intent. Stronos marvelled at the power of the interlink manifold. It was efficient, but there was something intrusive, something he couldn’t quantify or rationalise in so many words that he simply

didn't like.

The Hellhammer loomed over their backs, massive and still. The warehouse was equally dark. Eerily quiet. The rumble of gunfire was muted. From the way the sound of their bootfalls came back at them, he could tell it was cavernous. He estimated fourteen million cubic metres. He shared his conclusion via interlink and the groupmind of the clave concurred.

Phantom playback and scrap patterns in the screed snowed Stronos' display as he looked around. The clave interlink did its best to sketch out absent details but the results put forward by the networked sub-intelligences were garbled and nonsensical – the lash of tentacles where empty pallets hung from the ceiling on chains, machines in sybaritic embrace where access terminals fed cable connections to the walls.

With a twitch of the oculi muscle, Stronos switched his bionic eye to preysight. The low temperature continued to conjure false reports from anything with the faintest heat to emit, but the differentials were less pronounced now than they had been at the drop site. It was superior to his own low-light-enhanced vision, and tactically more astute than helmet lights.

The first thing he saw was a trio of Atlas recovery tanks. Residual engine warmth, and the places where friction had heated the treads and winch lines, appeared as a flush of green. The eye clicked as it optimised its filter sets, scores of tarp-covered mounds coming haltingly into view.

The vehicles were parked in staggered lines, wide enough to pass a moderately sized vehicle like an Atlas between them. There was even a space marked out with a folded tarp and a stack of tool cases, which were presumably intended for the Hellhammer.

Kardaanus approached the nearest bay and lifted the tarpaulin on the long neck of his lascannon. The vehicle underneath was sleek, swept back fins and flared lift jets giving a palpable aura of *speed*. All colour had been scrubbed from the armour. The material thus exposed was unusual, not metal insofar as Stronos understood it, and was neither comprised of sectioned plates nor held together with bolts. Rather, it seemed to have been cast, poured molten, whatever it was, into the shape it now filled.

'Xenos,' muttered Kardaanus.

'Devilfish,' said Stronos. 'A tau vehicle.'

'You recognise it?'

'They are a tenacious species. I have fought them most of my life.'

Kardaanus withdrew his lascannon and let the tarp cloak the vehicle once more. ‘You speak as though you miss them.’

‘I would rather kill xenos than my own. I see no flaw in that.’

‘You do not?’ Jalenghaal grunted.

‘What is it doing on Thennos?’ Kardaanus cut in.

‘I don’t know,’ said Stronos.

It was a secret, and he despised secrets. He looked into the darkness. An instinct for completeness – the lesser cousin of perfection – had him commence a tally of the tarped vehicles, but he stopped himself. Irrelevant. ‘Three units – left, centre, right.’ Chopping motions of his bionic left hand reinforced the command. ‘Confirm this area clear and converge on the destination. Do not wait. First to the uplink tower is to establish a stable connection to Draevark or to the *Alloyed*. Confirm.’

‘*Compliance.*’

‘If you locate one or more of the Kastelan units then do not engage.’

‘And if they are active?’ asked Lurrgol.

‘The Kastelans are irreplaceable,’ said Jalenghaal, coldly. ‘We are not.’

‘Disengage,’ Stronos confirmed.

‘At your order, brother-sergeant,’ grunted Lurrgol. He took the right, Jalenghaal centre, Stronos left, their battle-brothers assorting themselves into three groups without the need for spoken commands.

Garbled reports hissed through Stronos’ vox. He aimed into the drapery of slumbering tanks. Tarp rippled where the sheets caught the rad-winds let in through the open door and voided windows. Lumen heatfade glared on his screen and produced a sub-audible *pop-pop* in his vox equipment. At the same time, he became conscious of a faint itch in his bionic eye, somewhere in the connecting fibres that junctioned the optic to his helm display. It was a phantom sensation he’d never felt before and he had gone several metres into the dark before realising what the sensation was.

Another consciousness rode on his optics. Iron Captain Draevark wondered what he was doing in a proscribed zone.

‘*Sergeant,*’ came the choppy word-noise. His vox bead sifted it like dust from a clogged rebreather. ‘*Explain yourself.*’

‘Entering one-nine/seven-two/eta. No sign of Kastelan units or occupancy of any kind. It is safe to conclude that they are no longer present.’

‘*Something you could not have known before you entered. That decision*

was not yours to make.'

'I understand.'

The channel was silent a moment, or near enough to it, bolter-fire and Hellstrike detonations twinning themselves with tangential bursts of static. *'Continue to the uplink tower and provide fire support. I command two claws assaulting Habitation J from east and south, but their positional advantage is considerable and they retain sufficient numbers to execute firing protocols. Ranged support from a significant elevation to the north west will commute both advantages.'* Stronos blink-sent his understanding. Any lord of the Space Marines could achieve victory. Anything less than a *crushing* one, however, was a failure of logic.

'Your actions produced a favourable outcome,' said Draevark, darkly.

'They did.'

'But they were errant.'

'They were.'

'An example will have to be made.'

'I understand.'

'What is the iron captain's decree?' said Jalenghaal, unexpectedly. He must have been alerted to the active channel through their interlink connection, and inferred the identity of the instigator.

Stronos tried not to feel as though his second-in-command had been eavesdropping.

'We proceed.'



CHAPTER FOUR

'Sarokk survived, by the way. In case you were concerned.'

– Sergeant Tartrak

I

Arven Rauth could hear the rattle of stowage lockers, the clink of glassware behind their bolted doors. Packed instrumentation shifted and breathed with motion. Blinking away the mucranoid gum that had gelled shut his eyes while he'd been unconscious, Rauth tried to focus on the object that sawed back and forth directly above him.

It was a surgical arm that had been folded along its articulation planes, and swayed loosely from the ceiling. Plastek feed lines clotted with air bubbles bobbed underneath it. Dim light glinted from the hooked tips of excoriation blades. He focused on the streaks of light caught on their razored edges, transfixed.

The metal pallet he lay on trembled with a nervy, restless energy. It was the distant roar of power plants, the rumble of kilometres of track on rocky desert. Some of it too he recognised as Medusa's howl, blowing her fury against walls of adamantine metres-thick and causing the chamber to noticeably lurch from side to side. The understanding of where he was began to burn through the fog

that engulfed his brain.

He was on the land crawler, the *Broken Hand*, the mammoth superheavy fortress-monastery of Clan Borrgos. And with that horrific revelation came pain.

A lot of pain.

He felt dizzy, but not exactly, as that was a sensation his enhancements no longer allowed. More, it was a low swirling queasiness in the pit of his gut, a weakness that refused to disappear even if his physiology had rendered it mute. He was finding it difficult to catch his breath. Gasps came quick and shallow, a burn of oxygen hunger in his chest that was spreading. His heart beat shakily with what little it had. It took a few uneven beats for him to recognise the rhythm of his secondary heart. A Space Marine could function at close to optimal for an extended duration on his secondary heart alone, but his was not yet fully mature and it was struggling. Pins and needles prickled his fingers and toes and the tip of his nose. His legs trembled.

Horror, cold, stripped of physiological context by psyk-conditioning and reductive surgery, eked away at the strain in his chest.

This is the apothecarion.

He tried to rise from the pallet and found he couldn't. He lifted his head weakly and looked down the length of his naked body. Iron bands secured his ankles and thighs firmly to the bed. His toes were already turning blue. Another clasp bound his right arm at wrist and bicep. Then he noticed the ruin of his left side, and hissed.

The arm was gone entirely, the shoulder a wreckage of bone and gristle flecked with the pulp of internal organs. The sight of his own soft, weakly glistening tissue made him feel more ruined than the injury itself. He felt *embarrassed* by it. Compared to the lactic burn in his chest, the damage was oddly painless. It was just numb.

A noise from outside his bay, further into the apothecarion, made him look up.

Past the end of his pallet was a partition wall, an equipment trolley loaded with saws and vials labelled with mysterious runes wedged into the precious bit of space in front of it. A mechanical door stood off centre, half ajar where some undiagnosed glitch in the mechanism prevented it from being properly closed. Through that vertical slit, Rauth could see the hesitant blink of crudely maintained lumen fittings. Correctional messages in subliminally coded binharic grizzled into the corridor from rusty augmitter pipes. The

characteristic thump then drag of moving servitors rang from bare metal. But he saw no one. Even after straining his heightened powers of hearing until he almost blacked out, he heard no voices, no sounds at all beyond the background rumble of the crawler and the labours of servitors.

Determining that he would take the annihilation of his left shoulder – and thus the lack of anything bolting that side of him to the bed – as an advantage, he tensed his stomach and lifted his upper body across his unbound left side. He peered again through the door.

He swallowed hard, then rolled back onto his back. He closed his eyes.

Primarch, give me strength.

Across the corridor was another bay, as cluttered and claustrophobic as his own. The stuck doors had shown him only a glimpse, but it was the worst possible glimpse he could have had. He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Apothecary Dumaar had left the doors deliberately unrepaired, the pallets arranged *just so* in order to evoke the very nerve-shred of anticipation that Rauth felt now.

Such a level of care was Dumaar's hallmark.

In the chamber opposite, another neophyte lay on a pallet. Not one of his clone. Rauth didn't recognise him. From their relative positions he had seen only one arm, unbound, hung limp over the side of the bed, and a head. The head was slack and turned away. The scalp was shaved, puckered with exploratory drill sites and hatched into phrenological zones with a thick black marker.

Prepared for mindwipe.

He cursed again, a tremor of desperation to it, slipping into his mortal Medusan. He had heard from Iron Chaplain Huygens that other Chapters found ways for their failed aspirants to serve. Rauth could imagine there being such a serf-caste on Fenris or Macragge, but not on Medusa. Not in Clan Borrgos, certainly. Servitors were efficient. They ensured that the cost of failure was high.

He stiffened at the sound of footsteps in the hall space beyond the partition. They were heavy and deliberate. Methodical. Too precise for a servitor.

He tugged vainly on his restraints as the doors ground apart, his bed groaning on its wheel breaks but otherwise refusing to yield. He clenched his teeth to suppress a groan as Apothecary Dumaar entered, an engineered kill-or-be-killed instinct delivering a spike of adrenaline that Rauth's broken body

couldn't handle.

'Subject exhibits extensive biological damage. Presentation consistent with mass-reactive explosion within the thoracic cavity.' The Apothecary's voice was deep and unmodulated, as relentlessly precise as his walk. Ignoring Rauth's struggles, he circled the pallet. Servos whirred and armour hummed; scanning optics clicked and refocused. 'Left arm absent. Unsalvageable. Left lung and primary heart destroyed. Unsalvageable.' He emitted a blurt of content-dense binharic, then slipped through various strands of Medusan as he circled back around. 'Peripherally cyanotic. Inadequate blood pressure consistent with fluid loss. Corrective measures.' Another squeal of binharic, and the Apothecary reached across Rauth's body to operate the surgical arm. It gave a restive purr and emitted a flicker of greenish light from its control board to demonstrate that it was awake.

'What are you doing?' said Rauth, but it was as though the Apothecary didn't know he was there.

'Blood groups not on file. Unacceptable. Subject's biology is inefficient. Complete haematic transfer is recommended.'

Amongst the neophytes of Clan Borrgos, Dumaar was notorious. The shape of power armour predicated an essentially human form, but there was precious little of the Apothecary that was still human. His battleplate was bristled and vaned and in places fully supplanted with additive features: a telescopic objective in place of his right-side helmet lens, a battery of devices and sensors that extended his narthecium gauntlet to the elbow and incorporated two additional joints, a complex intercalation of mechanisms both exposed and hidden that clicked and whirred with clockwork precision. Somewhere underneath that cracked ceramite shell a few ganglia of the man that had been Dumaar remained. That that remnant brain was now irreversibly insane was beyond question.

Rauth felt the same drive towards self-improvement as did the Apothecary and despised himself for it, but Dumaar was a compulsive with all barriers removed. His key opened all of the apothecarion lockers; his hand wielded the saw.

'Pre-operative step – re-profusion of tissue with synthetic haematocytes. Immediate follow-up with excoriation of necrotised tissue. Calculate twenty-three per cent possibility of system shock resulting in death.' The ceiling-mounted servo arm came awake with a sudden squeal, whirring full circle

around its ceiling attachment and working out its stiffened joints. Air snorted through the tubes to be replaced with a turgid blood-like something that smeared the inner walls purple-red. ‘Risk acceptable.’

I’m right here!

Rauth made another impulsive effort to break free that made the Apothecary look down. One arm was fully engaged with the ceiling servo-arm. His optical objective visibly narrowed its aperture to contain Rauth. ‘Give thanks, neophyte. Such pain as you are about to experience you will, on the balance of probability, never feel again.’

Rauth ground his teeth. *Lobotomy might be preferable.* His muscles tensed as if to strike out, but even unbound and whole he knew that he would have been less of a match for the ancient Apothecary than he had been for Sergeant Tartrak. And for better or worse he was an Iron Hand: logical to a fault. Dumaar gave no reaction. The Apothecary moved behind Rauth, dragging the ceiling arm behind him like a truculent initiate. It was only then, with the iron mass of the Apothecary removed, that Rauth noticed the frail thing that had slipped into the apothecarion bay after him.

The engineer approached his bedside as though dragged. Eyes down, he telescoped a slide rule from the depths of his robes and unspooled a ream of tape, his bionic eye audibly taking pics as he measured Rauth’s arm. Rauth glared at him. The specialisation sigils woven into his robes in golden thread he recognised as those of the engineer biologists.

Then Rauth looked away, uninterested.

‘Continue, adept.’ Sergeant Tartrak stood under the doorway with crossed arms, the exo-augmetic folded over the armoured organic. His helmet was maglocked to his belt, baring the scarified network of rivets and ridges that made up his face. Puckered attachment sites for his helmet stuck from his face and head like needle probes, and intermittently gave off little puffs of air. Tartrak didn’t look at the adept once. ‘The adept is here to furnish you with bionic replacements, neophyte. It is a matter of days now to the Iron Moon and the conclusion of your indoctrination. If you prevail, you may yet call me brother.’

‘I thought...’ The force of relief was crushing. *That I have no great wish for lobotomisation after all. I’m pathetic.* Rauth closed his eyes as if to conduct an internal purge, then re-opened them, hard again as ironglass. Tartrak’s approval was tacit, but there. ‘When will I be able to leave?’

‘Immediately.’

‘You mean after my repair.’

Tartrak snorted, a scrunch of audio from his tarnished throat. ‘Who do you think you are, neophyte? When we are damaged we repair. When we find weakness in ourselves we remove and replace it. When we are defeated in battle we return, stronger than we were before. We are good at it. But you return to no war. You are as yet no asset to Clan Borrgos. You are a defective spare for a part that still functions. You are not worth repairing.’

‘Unsalvageable,’ Dumaar rasped.

‘Pass your final trials,’ said Tartrak. ‘Become a Scout-brother of the Clan Dorrwok. Then you will have proven your worth.’

‘To Clan Dorrwok,’ added Dumaar.

‘I have one arm.’ Rauth had to fight to keep from yelling. ‘I have one lung and a useless heart. How am I to pass this trial?’

‘The unyielding mind, the unyielding body,’ Tartrak quoted from the *Scriptorum*. ‘You will overcome. You will demonstrate your strength and then you will be remade.’

‘What is the final trial?’ Rauth asked Tartrak.

‘It is a trial, neophyte. It will not come at you announced. The new-forged blade is hardened by the blows of the hammer, yet even the proven relic will benefit from the strike of the stone if it is to retain its edge. We are under constant challenge.’ He gripped Rauth’s murdered shoulder, the force equivalent to being clamped to the pallet under a vice. ‘Sarokk survived, by the way. In case you were concerned.’

‘I was not.’

Tartrak nodded – *the correct answer* – and stepped aside as Apothecary Dumaar leaned in. A handsaw whined from his arm bionic. Liquid cauteriser dribbled from a nozzle and hissed where it spotted the deck. The Apothecary’s optics flickered, muttering in a dozen languages as he planed Rauth with his eyes.

Rauth readied himself. This was going to hurt.

The engineer was shaking as she left the apothecarion and hurried down the cloistered ambulatory towards the enginarium subdeck. There was blood still on her hands, between the fingers and under the nails. There was even a bloody scrap of blue papyrus cleanser that must have caught on her medicae-dendrite in her hurry to get out.

There was a washbasin further along the ambulatory. She walked towards it. It was an iron bowl, fixed to the wall next to the door that led to this section's exterior hatch for the cleansing of armour and weaponry of dust, but Melitan had seen visiting priests use it for the same reason. The water was lit from beneath by a red light, and something about the way it seemed to lap and slurp at the basin's rim made her uncomfortable. Cringing, she slipped her hands into the lukewarm water. She sluiced off the worst of the blood, not wishing to linger long enough to deal with the rest, then leaned forward to splash her face with water. She gave a chesty cough and pulled back the hood of her coverall robes and wetted her bald head.

Melitan Yolanis shuddered and closed her eyes, almost convincing herself that the squeal made by the cyclor fans as they rattled the apothecarion deck through the transverse ducts had always sounded like tortured screams.

She never would have believed that a Space Marine could make a sound like that.

Not for the first time – far, *far* from the first time – she wondered why Dumaar had not administered anaesthesia. Again, she shuddered, because she suspected she knew the answer, and suddenly wanted very much to be in a foetal curl under the scrap of blanket waiting in her dormitory cell.

Recalling the young girl that had been so pleased, no, *thrilled*, to have been given the honour of serving the Ommissiah on Medusa made her want to scream back through time.

Every cog of the great Machine Trinity serviced the whole, but not all gears were equal: a secondment to one of the Space Marine Chapters was what every initiate privately craved. What could be more glorious than servicing the wargear of the Emperor's Angels in war? What better way for the child of an impoverished Knight World on the dim outskirts of the Segmentum Obscuris to win the recognition of Mars?

She had grown up under the age-blackened frescoes of Fabris Callivant's X Legion conquerors. In the height of summer, when the ozone smog was so dense she couldn't see her own hands, she had felt the presence of the Angels

still above her and not been afraid. She tried to remember what it had felt like to cross the sky-bridge to services with nothing but the data-peal of the temple's bells and her faith to keep her from falling, but it felt like someone else's life. She'd been particularly good with the harpsiclave, she remembered, good enough to catch the notice of the magos harmonica who ordered the temple choirs. Her parents had spent what little they had to encourage her talent, but at six years old she had spoken her first vows and been ordained as a novitiate. Her manual apprenticeship in the manufactories, painting night-glow radium stripes on flare canisters, had cost her her hair and her teeth, and ruined her lungs, but she had achieved her parents' wish, after a fashion.

She had got out.

Turning off from the cloister's echoing hallways, she passed under a bolted arch, ancient door mechanisms shuddering open and then shutting again behind her.

The atmospheric ionisers in this section of the clan fortress always gave Melitan a dry mouth, and prickled the back of her neck. As though she were being followed. The periodic clank of heavy machinery did nothing to ameliorate the sensation. Spectral polarisers placed over the lumen sockets to preserve Clan Borrgos' precious technologies accentuated the ultraviolet range, and gave every edge an exaggerated violet shine. It was like being submerged in something mildly corrosive. There were only ever a handful of Iron Hands here, engaged in training or meditation or the ablution of their wargear, and this occasion was no different. No occasion was ever different. They ignored her, and she did nothing to discourage their disregard.

With a deep breath that racked her chest with coughs, she approached a thick metal door set solidly into the bulkhead. Rust had chipped into the frame. An augmitter grille in the corner between wall and ceiling piped the chastening truths of primarch, Ommissiah and Emperor – in that sequence – into the corridor while red-lit consoles displayed cycling messages of castigation as they slept. She presented herself before the door and formed of her hands a cogwheel across her breast.

‘Spirit of the machine. See me. Judge me.’

She bowed her head and in response the door's seeing eye, a blue-green marble set at face-height into the door, swept the corridor with fields of light. She felt a tingle of religiosity down her spine as the locking mechanism's

machine-spirit scanned the electro on her scalp. There was a gearing crunch from somewhere just behind the metal side panels, a data-blurt in a binharic form that Melitan did not know, and the doors slid apart.

The smell that struck her was of warmed nutrient gels, human sweat, the sulphides and nitrites that leaked from the ancient, semi-mythical pipework of the lowest levels. The engine noise grew louder, taking on a percussive quality, but despite the power of the *Broken Hand's* castigatus plants, other sounds also made themselves heard. She almost sighed in relief. She could hear real human voices. She could hear music.

She crossed the threshold as if she were slipping out of blood-stained coveralls after a treble shift, the blast doors to the enginarium subdeck sealing away the Iron Hands behind her.

A steep ramp led her into a teeming scrap-town, so removed from the rigid order of the Iron Hands cloisters that it was difficult to see how both could co-exist inside the same vehicle, however massive the *Broken Hand* might be. In purely numerical and operational terms, however, the Mechanicus quarters *were* the *Broken Hand*, the vibrant nucleus that ran the adamantine colossus without.

From warehouses and junk bays that had been consecrated to numerous regional aspects of the Machine, cult priests delivered their sermons to crowds of workers as they came on or off shift. The Iron Hands imposed onerous ten-hour shifts – Melitan imagined that they appreciated the decimal efficiency, and often wondered if the Legiones Astartes of old had earned the moniker ‘Iron Tenth’ out of perspicacity or choice – but thought nothing of working their labour force for as long as their task demanded. As such, the sermonisers too worked to an exhausting rotation.

The music Melitan had heard was seeping through the walls of a still that had been annexed from the water purification system.

She tarried a while, her fingers moving with the tempo. The rhythm was algebraical, apparently random, though with a root in prime theory that Melitan found she could solve quickly despite a lack of recent practice. Her harpsiclave was still in storage. She’d not opened the box in years, for fear that she would cry if she did, but her fingers effortlessly plucked the air position of every field string.

‘Melitan!’

An engineer in postulant coveralls of identical cut to her own waved

enthusiastically from the electrolytic heat-glow of a victualler's stall. Callun Darvo had assured her many times that everyone on his world shared his bottomless reserves of energy. A mitochondrial mutation, Melitan assumed, though Callun had thus far rebuffed her professional interest in his organellar genetics. His interest in her, she well knew, was less to the glorification of the Ommissiah. They had no secrets.

'I was starting to worry you weren't coming,' he said as she crossed the thoroughfare to join him.

Melitan glanced to the chrono of the nearby shrine to the Machine God As Manifested In The Saint Engine Of Tarsus Ultra and marked the position of the hands. 'You have no life. You know that, don't you?'

He play-pushed her shoulder. An excuse to touch her, but she let it pass. 'I like to listen to the sermons.'

Further up the path, a fulgurite preacher gave blessings to those whose disposable income didn't stretch to the temples' denomination fees. Verses about 'the true legacy of the father of iron,' and the 'deviant path of flesh' drifted towards her. Melitan found herself in agreement with Callun; it was soothing to listen to. Provided she didn't have to listen too closely.

While she watched the electro-priest, already half asleep, Callun bought her a portion of jerked blackmite from the stall. She hated blackmite. It got stuck in her prostheses and irritated her gums, but it was one of the few mass-harvestable life forms, a microalgae that somehow drew energy from particle friction in the upper mesosphere, native to Medusa. It came in a greasy bag. She ate with her fingers as Callun led her from the stalls and she surrendered to his energy. She felt better for the food.

She concluded that the flesh really was weak.

'Thank you,' she said.

'I can afford it.'

'Track repair again?'

He sighed theatrically 'Track repair. Again.'

'You must have an aptitude.'

'Thanks,' he said sarcastically. 'But I pray nightly for an internal assignment.' Melitan nodded. Callun, she was sure, hadn't slept more than four hours a night since they had been dormed together. He had to do something with that time. 'I've promised the Machine God half of what I've earned doing tracks. If I could just catch the attention of one of the Lords Adeptus Astartes, like your

Apothecary.’

Melitan warned him off topic with a look. ‘Where are we going?’ she said instead. Rather than take the corridors to the dormitory block, Callun had led her onto the starkly lit arterial to the Forum Mechanicus.

‘To pick up my next duty block. I have a good feeling.’

‘I’m tired, Callun. I just want to cleanse and crawl into bed.’ He grinned at her, imagining either or both. She sighed inwardly, too tired. Having spent the last seven years sharing a cramped dormitory and the grubby little ablutorial with ten other junior adepts there was precious little of either of them held back for the imagination. ‘Not now, Callun. Just... not now.’

His smile twitched. Suddenly embarrassed, he looked over his shoulder to the crowds gathered there as if searching for a reason not to make eye contact with her. ‘Look, I... it’ll just be a little while and then I’ll leave you alone. I just need some of your luck.’

‘Remind me to tell the magos instructor that you slept through the Systema Praeordino,’ she sighed, but hadn’t the strength to protest as Callun, swiftly recovered, found a new excuse to take her hand and draw her onto the Forum Mechanicus.

The forum was one of the crawler’s larger spaces, clan areas included, but the thick pillars of trunk cabling and low ceiling made it as claustrophobic as the dorm-blocks or the common spaces. Lume nets hung between insulated pillars like the luminous webbing of some stalking mecharachnid, ricocheting heavy shadows from the columns. Cabling ran in bundles along the ground and through the air towards the cogitator stack at the centre of the web. Incense burners surrounded it, palimpsest papyri fluttering over the rising warmth. A small legion of infocytes in dark robes and with fractal-lensed eyes siphoned data from cables as they passed, the recovered data there inloaded to pre-sanctified slates.

There wasn’t much of a queue. Most people would have been coming on or off shift and, like Melitan, would have rather put off the observance until morning. After a wait of about forty-five minutes during which Callun chatted on and off on interests as diverse as metallurgy and lumen chemistry and the various artificial condiments used to convert blackmite into something acceptable to the human palate, they reached the front of the line.

Callun went down first. He lay his hands on an exposed portion of cabling and sank onto both knees before one of the elaborately gowned data-savants

that acted as gatekeepers to the Ommissiah's harvest. He stiffened as the blind priest, eyes replaced by bulky binharic readers, read his electoo, and handed him the relevant slate, voice scratching like a worn vox-thief recording, '*Ave Ommissiah.*'

Callun visibly deflated as he unlocked the slate and read it.

'What is it?' said Melitan.

'Never mind.' He looked up with such a forlorn expression that Melitan couldn't help but laugh.

'Track maintenance?'

'I don't know why I keep hoping.'

He handed the slate back to the data-savant for re-consecration as Melitan got down, knees and feet slipping easily into the grooves that millions of initiate-labourers like her over several thousand years had left in the floor. By rote, she echoed the observance. With equally practised piety, the savant repeated his end of the ritual and reverently laid the slate containing her duty block in her hands. She keyed in her personal authorisation phrase and read it.

Her heart jumped like a body under defibrillation, and after a few seconds she became aware that she was gaping. She read it again.

Looking up at the data-savant, she tried to return the slate with the formula for 'thank you' but her lips wouldn't shape the words and her hand didn't seem to want to let go until the data-savant prised it off her. It wasn't the new orders themselves that had stunned her as much as the signature at the bottom of it.

Logi-Legatus Nicco Palpus. Paramount Voice of Mars.

She'd been noticed. At last, Mars had recognised her talents.

'Exterior duty?' Callun smiled at her. 'Out there with the rest of us, is it?'

She smiled back, shakily, her blood fizzing euphoria. She was going to have to requisition an environment suit.

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> DAWNBREAK

**>>> ORIGIN >>> ENGRAMIC RECONSTRUCTION OF CAL
DORTMUND, GENERAL, METACHIRURGEON TALOS EPSILI
SUPERVISING**

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 561100.M41

>>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>>

The truck bounced through the slurry of the roadside, its heavy-duty suspension finding the rutted mud left by Basilisk and Griffon tanks tougher going than it was built for. Rain drummed on the tarp roof. Wipers swished frantically side-to-side, water getting in through the window and the bullet hole over the passenger side of the windshield. The wind and the wet ruffled in under the roof ties, but a baking heat blasted out of the electrical heater under the dashboard. Vane had the wheel. He was fourteen years old, kitted out in the bright red uniform and golden carapace of the Dawnbreak local militia, folly bells and frogging included. The shoulder insignia was that of the municipal reserve. His features were tight. Dortmund could see the boy's concentration from the back seat in the poorly angled rear-view mirror, white-lit by the reflected glare of headlamps on heavy rain. The general looked through his steamed up window.

This part of Dawnbreak never saw rain. Bloody typical then that the skies piss themselves empty now while the chance was still there. Taking the handle in one hairy fist he wound the window down. The cold knifed in, wet, but Dortmund had sat through worse and thanked the Emperor for a half hour's uninterrupted sleep, and simply unbuttoned his jacket with one hand as he glared into the rain. The darkness rumbled like a jungle full of Catachan devils in heat.

'Sound the horn,' he said

'But sir, it's—'

'Sound it.' The Dawnbreak boy suddenly felt Dortmund's sidearm poking him in the neck through the stowage netting between his headrest and the top of his seat. 'Sound the bastard horn or you'll sound it with your face after I shoot you in the back of the head.'

'Sir!'

The reservist thumped the horn with gusto, hitting it a second time for good measure and letting the note linger.

'And buckle up,' said Kerrick. Dortmund's adjutant sat across the back seat, passenger side, bent head pushing up the tarp and causing the rain to soak down his back. One heavily tattooed arm was wrapped around the headrest of the empty front passenger seat, the other deposited over the back into stowage. Sergeant Kerrick was the proverbial rockcrete outhouse of legend. 'I don't want to hear about you getting shot and headbutting any steering wheels afterwards, you hear me, trooper?'

'Sir!'

The boy fidgeted one-handed with his harness, the other struggling with the terrain. The devotional saints hanging from the rear-view swung on their elasticord like men hanging from the gibbet.

‘Pull us in closer,’ said Dortmund.

Without even bothering with a ‘sir’, the boy dragged the wheel to the right, bumping the protesting truck over the more established ruts left by the retreating artillery. Dortmund clenched his fingers over the open window and narrowed his eyes. It was dark, no lights but the truck’s own jumping, rain-chopped beams, but Dortmund had made it to the age of five because he’d learned how to spot dark things in the dark.

A squadron of Rhino armoured transports were moving up the road in convoy. Their hulls were low to the ground and growling, their armour black, shiny with the wet. The white hand and cog-symbol of Clan Raukaan shone faintly against the surrounding black like a deliberate anti-adornment. Spearheading the convoy was the unmistakably vast outline of a Land Raider battle tank.

‘Right in alongside the bastard.’

‘Sir?’

‘Nobody leaves Cal Dortmund with his arse hanging out. You heard me.’

Kerrick smiled a little, then looked away as if to peer out the opposite window. Rank had done a fine job of smoothing Dortmund out over the years, but he still had a rough edge or two stashed away for a rainy day.

The truck tipped slightly as its right side wheels banked up onto the road, its left axle continuing to work furiously on the embankment. The enormous black wall of the Land Raider’s own left side was near enough to touch. The sheer noise of its power plant was phenomenal, a roar that surpassed even the flapping grind of wet tracks on the road. Compared to the tarp-roofed truck, the Land Raider was a beast. Rain splashed off the heavy sponson lascannons, just a few metres from Dortmund’s face.

‘Keep it steady.’ Dortmund leaned out of the window of the speeding truck and hammered on the Land Raider’s hull. ‘Afraid to tell me to my face? Is that it? I’ve found tougher than you wriggling in my ration tins.’ He beat the black armour plating once more. ‘Get out here and stand in front of me like a man.’

The Land Raider’s engine stacks belched out a ribbon of grey smoke, and it began to slow as it growled down through its gears.

‘Bastard.’ Leaning half out of the window, Dortmund pumped his arm forward to signal the driver to overtake. ‘Stop the truck in front of it.’

‘Sir. Are you absolutely—’

‘Stop the fragging truck!’

The boy hit the brake as though command had just voxed in a report of a phalanx of eldar superheavies inbound, and the truck slewed. It tilted onto its leading wheels, then rocked back, and was still. The rain drummed on the roof. The wipers continued to swipe back and forth with an incongruously mundane little noise, like sponging down a window. Dortmund and Kerrick cracked their doors and swung out simultaneously. Dortmund holstered his laspistol and straightened up, adjusting his beret cap in spite of the downpour that flattened it to his head. The wind slapped his face, the cold rain making a decent hash of shaving the thickening stubble from his jaw. He heard Kerrick tramping through puddles in the ankle-deep potholes, just behind, and the dampened clunk of the sergeant’s cocked shotgun.

Better safe than dinner, as his mother used to say.

A powerful phosphorous lamp suddenly ignited in the road ahead. Dortmund swore and covered his eyes with the back of his hand. He heard the heavy clump of footsteps moving down the Land Raider’s deployment ramp and then off the metal, onto the road. Taking a step back, Dortmund removed his hand from his face to hover over his pistol holster, squinting into the glare. Terminators. Four of them, spreading out. Dortmund was big, as men went, but these were goliaths, three times his size and heavier than the truck. Dortmund swallowed.

The main eldar force had been crushed two days ago. Somehow he’d imagined that the Iron Hands would have shed their armour now they were mustering out.

While not cussing or yelling at Vane to put his foot down, he’d had the – in hindsight stupid – idea of thumping some honest Throne-loving virtue into the Clan Raukaan commander. His anger was well frazzled now, like a match in the rain, and he was beginning to realise what a swine of a drill sergeant anger could be. He straightened up. He still had a backbone and he meant to use it.

‘Iron Father, are you in there? You all look alike.’

A lie, of course. Some didn’t look nearly alike.

The Iron Father strode down the Land Raider’s ramp, a colossus of raven black against the white burn of the spotlight on his back.

>>RESTRICTED DATA>>

‘Warp echo has the eldar reinforcements two days off,’ said Dortmund. ‘You

don't need to run so damned quick.' The Iron Father stared through him. You didn't goad a machine. 'Why even come here if not to hold this world? Why even waste your time?' He tilted his face to the rain to glare into the giant's cold dead eyes, just as he would have had a red-mawed thrasher that wandered into his encampment at night. It was like staring off against a rock that could stare back. 'What were the eldar protecting in that old dig site? Why did *they* come here?'

>>RESTRICTED DATA >>

'If you are strong you will survive,' said the Iron Father, his flat, emotionless tones under-run with the beetling click of machine cant. 'If you are weak you will not. Fight hard, general. Prove yourself worthy of living.'

'Frag you.'

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Dortmund dragged his pistol from its holster, so bloody furious that it caught on one of the buckles and he had to rip it to get it out. He aimed it at the back of the Iron Father's helmet as the Terminators turned and tramped back up the ramp into their transport. 'You get back in that tank. Fine. Then you turn it round and follow us back to base. You hear me? You hear me!' Dortmund yelled as the ramp emitted a clunk and started to rise. 'I'll have your ships shot down before you break orbit!'

The Land Raider, idling, gave a roar and heaved forwards.

Dortmund swore and flung himself out of the road, Kerrick rolling onto the embankment a second later, belly down over his shotgun and watching as the enormous line tank surged forwards at full speed.

Frightening acceleration, a Land Raider had, for something so huge.

Dortmund heard his truck give a panicked snarl, choked between gears. The boy at the wheel screamed, and then the Land Raider smashed it full broadside. For a second, the truck's headlamps beamed skyward as the tank crushed the middle, made into a V with bullbar and tailbar bent up in the air. A *pop* of crushed glass and the lights went out, the truck effectively flattened under the Land Raider's tracks. The Rhinos riding convoy smashed up anything larger than a rivet that was still in the road. By the time the last vehicle went by, a Razorback with its turret reversed, Dortmund had ceased flinching every time

something crunched. The remnants of the truck and its driver were spread out under the rain, like pieces collected up after some mid-air disaster.

‘Orders, sir?’ said Kerrick, quietly.

Dortmund shook his head.

He didn’t have the fragging words.

>>> TERMINATING SIMULUS.

III

Lucidity returned to Tubriik Ares in a rush of code, like cold water over their nerves.

Emerging from a dream when one had not strictly been sleeping was a disorienting sensation, akin to finding oneself wet with no memory of having been in water. They were aware of the ganglia bundles in their amnioesis chamber in the same way that truly living men were aware of their brain when it ached. Torpor had made their systems sluggish. They concentrated as they sought to isolate their memories from the fog of simulcus.

They were a general of the Catachan XVII, walking along a road in the rain.

They were a Techmarine of Clan Garrsak, flying a combat sortie.

They were a pure warrior of an alien world.

Their last memory was...

Was...

They felt suddenly, bitterly cold, as if this void in their soul was something old. They felt empty. Despite the long centuries of their hibernation, the burden of eternity was already beginning to weigh again on their shoulders. Wearily, they opened their eyes.

It was not instantaneous; it took several seconds for them to recall the proper pathways, and several more for the depleted bioelectrochemistry to respond.

Their view of the outside world was black and white, grainy, horizontal bars of bad capture oscillating up and down. Blocks of start-up screed burned into their vision in purples and greens like sun-glare as their view of a decaying chamber resolved out of the static. Faces of familiar men, long dead and forgotten by their descendants, looked back at them through eyes of marble and

diorite. Audio capture blinked online. They could hear the infinite series of diagnosticae engines. Targeting reticules for weapons systems as yet unloaded tracked back, forth, back.

They had the overpowering sense that they were not alone. ‘Who are you?’ they said, their voice loud, but so distant it might have come from the walls.

Then they saw. There was a woman knelt on the cold ground before them. Her stiff robes were a red that pleased and soothed, ritually cleansed, but the chemical signature of grease and oils clung to them like the restive spirits of lost machines. Electroos on her bald head and bare arms flooded the icy chamber with noospheric code, grounding the individual, *Ares*, with golden cataracts of logical confirmations. A spindly medicae-dendrite swayed above her bowed head, as painfully delicate as she was. She was praying.

To them.

Then they moved, one hard adamantine fist entering their visual feed and being swarmed by icons. Their spirit sank into the cold void that filled them.

‘Who are we?’



CHAPTER FIVE

'Clan Garrsak has a Chaplain and his name is not Draevark.'

– Iron Captain Draevark

I

The Adeptus Mechanicus capital tugs were two hundred metres of baroque crimson and brass, and when twelve of them began their descent into the Thennosian atmosphere it was with the scorching glory of a nuclear dawn. Their monstrous engine stacks were angled into the planet, pumping out bilious smoke, the concerted roar of a cosmic torch directed with relish onto the world's ragged thermosphere. The voidcraft sank in formation, two half-circles separated by a wide space that was filled by a burnt yellow smog. Within that ascerbic haze, the awesome rusted weight of the Clan Garrsak land crawler, the *Rule of One*, hung on an immense suspension of chains.

The vehicle itself was several hundred metres long. A *super* superheavy. A fortress-monastery on tracks.

Towering adamantiad modules housing the clan's armoury, apothecarion, halls of rigour and more were connected through a chain of tracked units, inseparably interlinked by aether-tether and cable as well as by flexible iron couplers. They wobbled like ships upon a metallic ocean as they were

lowered into the atmosphere. The crawler's formidable defensive armaments had been locked down. Its many hatches were sealed. Some modules boasted quad rows of steel tracks, others vulcanised rubber or flaking iron, but all continued to churn. Not since the lost ages, long before Ferrus Manus' fall from the heavens had flattened the Ice Pinnacle of Karaashi, had the fortress' motive units been powered down, and the knowledge of how to do so had been lost with the passing of that age.

Massive belts of orthotropic plastek looped under the coupler bars between the running tracks. Inset grav plates burned like flattened suns. Single-shot boosters fired adjustment bursts as the impossible was given life and a god of the Medusan plain was brought in to land. The tugs' engines increased their output to hold altitude, and the roar became planet shaking, the weight of their load drawing the two formations together as the land crawler sank between them. It touched down. Radioactive dust stormed up in the downwash, the crawler's tracks finding traction and adding to the drag on the straining lifters.

A series of small explosions dotted the tugs' hulls and the lift belts were detached, the tremendous lengths of sheeted plastek crashing to the ground like felled city spires. The crawler began to gain ground. The tugs increased burn to stabilise.

On the ground, three-score near-end-of-life servitors that had been waiting by the landing zone began to climb the moving crawler's high sides to cut loose its shackles. Several of the units were ripped apart by lashing chains, but to the Iron Hands these were acceptable losses. Subjects for lobotomisation were there for the picking on every contested world and Thennos had an eight-figure population to be pacified. The tallymen of the Adeptus Mechanicus would catalogue every armed encounter and then duly fail to care if a few thousand were slaughtered here on Thennos or hauled back to the apothecarion for a more functional pogrom of butchery.

The wind by this point was a force of vengeance, the sky around the tugs boiling as though giving birth to a star. Scavenger expeditions would later unearth servitor remains from craters several kilometres from the landing zone, many of them still holding listlessly to lengths of chain. The tugs fired their engines to full burn and began to lift out, wrecking the planet's established storm systems for decades to come.

It was a cataclysm of rare precision.

One that no one on Thennos thought it necessary to look up at and witness.

II

The razing of Port Amadeus had taken the entirety of the day and continued on into the night. For a planet as distant from its parent star as Thennos, of course, the diurnal cycle meant little, but the next rising of the Medusan sun, Sthenelus, would be over a world redrawn. Nothing had been allowed to stand. The destruction of a city was all about method, and the Iron Hands were singularly ruthless in their application of method.

Their object was extermination.

Krak charges had been set under every structure still standing. The precise position of each charge and its timing within the detonation sequence had been calculated meticulously for the most efficient eradication of a nine thousand year old installation from the face of the galaxy. Those caste labourers and skitarii that had survived the initial onslaught and fled into the wards to escape the detonations were herded into pens, tightly packed to allow for the highest achievable bolt-round to casualty ratio. Iron Hands on penitence duty took that thankless duty while draught-servitors dragged away the mess for nutrient recycling. Even Iron Hands needed to eat, albeit little and rarely. No particular effort was given to hunting down the escaped citizenry thus far unaccounted for. Those that the demolitions themselves did not crush would perish shortly thereafter from hypoxia or, if they were truly unfortunate, radiation toxicity. Thennos would have them, as Medusa, harsh mother to them all, had always taken the sick and the frail since time immemorial.

The thought would nevertheless have occurred to many – for though the Iron Hands were heartless, they were rational to a fault – that the overwhelming majority of the slaughtered would have been ignorant of why it had to be so, loyal subjects of the Corpus Machina and the God-Emperor unto death. That was also irrelevant: a canker had found life in their flesh, and in failing to excise the sore they were guilty by inaction. Eradication of the weak was all that would prevent humanity's backslide towards heresy and extinction. And the people of Thennos *had* been weak.

What was being conducted here was an amputation, the chainblade of the Iron Hands applied to the dead tissue of just one more of the Imperium's necrotised

extraneous parts. And who knew better than one of the Iron Hands how few of those parts a body really needed in order to function?

While Stronos' brothers tirelessly and silently conducted the extermination of the city and its remaining inhabitants, a handful of Techmarines and Adeptus Mechanicus logicians simultaneously oversaw the construction of a new redoubt in a neighbouring crater.

From that beachhead, the second phase of the Thennosian compliance would be launched. With the levelling of the planet's only port and the disablement of its linking capability to its orbital facilities, reinforcements from Clans Vurgaan, Borrgos, and Avernii were already inbound to finish the task. Through breaks in the storm cover Stronos could see the iron glint of ship lights as the clan fleets tightened their blockade around Thennos.

The Iron Council had been explicit: nothing was to get in and nothing was to get out.

The first half of that instruction had puzzled Stronos.

While his brothers went about their labours, Stronos sat at a trestle that Draevark had allowed to be set up over the ruins of uplink tower one-nine/seven-two/eta.

His belongings had been transferred from the *Alloyed*, his newly re-coded equerry-servitor amongst them, part of a bulk consignment of material supplies for the new fortification. Stronos' boxes sat in no particular order around the bench on heaps of plastek planking. Nails lay in the yellowed ground where Stronos had broken open the lids. Packing straw had been stuffed in between sectioned pieces of heavy machinery and frilled the tops, bristling in the radwinds that came in off the wastes like plant roots with the topsoil stripped away. Occasionally a group of tech-priests would drift through, but the adepts had their own duties and Stronos had his, with the effect that both voluntarily filtered the other from their minds.

With great care Stronos withdrew a steel rod from the washers and springs through which it had been threaded, and then dipped it in a ewer of oil. He removed the rod and blew on it to speed it dry. The springs he spread out on the trestle in the order in which he had removed them. They were part of the firing mechanism, the fiendish complexity of which was still in mostly one piece in a tubular block of impenetrable machinery laid out lengthways across the trestle.

Allowing his mind to wander, the muscles around his bionic eye indulged and

dialled through the spectra, hyperscopic magnification in the far-UV range picking up torsion fractures and material weaknesses in the rod that his organic sight never could. He thought of Jalenghaal and his twin optics. An itch in his remaining eye of flesh, he took the end of the newly oiled rod in the gauntleted finger and thumb of the other hand and, with remarkable dexterity for one so armoured, began to re-thread it with springs. Then he fed it back into the firing mechanism until it clicked.

A hundred years he had worked on this. There was no spring that had not been tightened, no moveable part that had not been oiled, cleansed, or replaced. It had become a ritual, a meditative act of communion with the machine that he could touch-navigate by rote memory alone. Stronos had always found difficulty in controlling his thoughts without such external aids. They were erratic, organic, less worthy of his Chapter. If anything the inner voice had become more strident as the flesh was detached from it piece by piece, its echoes amplified by the enclosing iron shell.

Whether or not he was alone in his difficulties he did not know. To look at an Iron Hands brother was to look upon pitiless dispassion; to listen to him was to hear words of such calibration as to be made empty. Who could say what embittered husks dwelled behind the iron masks?

The labour, at least, allowed Stronos to avoid those kinds of thoughts. His doubts he could process more efficiently with his brain thus disengaged.

‘You have performed a feat of great rarity,’ remarked Iron Captain Draevark. ‘You have gripped the brothers of Clan Garrsak with curiosity.’

Stronos was surprised that the hulking transhuman construct had managed to approach without his hearing, but he had long ago cut away the nervous pathway that would have made him show it. He looked up slowly.

Draevark’s slab-black Terminator plate was as broad across as the front armour of a Rhino. His helmet was beaked like a vulture’s, a cutaway section underneath grilled like the flayed snarl of an ork. Dual optics glowered, ruby red, inconstant, integrated directly into the helmet lenses and cross-connected by exterior cabling to a pair of wrist-mounted storm bolters. The silver tips of his lightning claws hung, pincerd, a centimetre off the ground, a menace offered even with the power disengaged. A wrist cradle held an underslung flamer. The hum of his armour’s power plant was constant, every minor movement announced in advance by a hiss of hydraulics.

If there existed such a thing as an intermediate form between Dreadnought and

man then Iron Captain Draevark was it.

Uncertain whether the iron captain's comment required a response, Stronos remained quiet, and for a long while Draevark added nothing further. Without facial clues or body language to cue their conversation, verbal encounters between brothers would often peter out that way.

'What is in the boxes?' asked Draevark, a vulturine cawing of throat hydraulics. Nothing to connote the genuine curiosity he ascribed to his brothers, just a blunt demand for information.

Stronos' lip performed an involuntary downward curl as he picked up a winding bar from the selection of tools on the trestle beside him. He inserted it into a long coil and, as though he were an artificer working with chisel and ironglass, began to tighten.

'A thunderfire cannon. In my inexperience – my *intemperance* – I attempted to assume its control when my brother Techmarine fell to enemy drone-fire.'

'It resisted.'

'My first shot annihilated the xenos encroachment and saved my squad from death, but it jammed immediately thereafter and has never been fired again since. The Techmarines could find no fault, and the magi to whom it was brought declared it irreparably offended by my handling.' He removed the winding bar and assessed the spring's tautness with one critically lensing eye. 'As an act of penance, Iron Father Verrox tasked me with its repair.'

'An impossible task.'

'I know.'

'You seem to be accruing penitence duties, Kardan.'

For the second time in two minutes, Stronos failed to show the surprise he felt. It wasn't that the iron captain knew his first name, but that its use implied a familiarity that was unexpected. Perhaps the clan interlink had given Draevark a deeper bond with Stronos' mind than he had realised. He met Draevark's eyes with his one and a half.

Again, he wondered what manner of thoughts were being processed behind that pulsing red glare. How much of a brain was left in there? Did it rail against its mutilation and diminishment as Stronos' did?

Unspeaking, he lowered his tools and watched for a moment as his battle-brothers erected their fort in the crater that nobody had yet cared to name. Their strength was awesome, their endurance inspiring. Stronos observed as a warrior of Clave Ankaran lifted an armaplas sheet three times the weight of an

armoured Space Marine without assistance and then drove it into the ground to begin a new stretch of defensive wall. One hundred and one transhuman warriors had just committed the last fifteen hours, Terran standard, to the slaughter of a quarter million without a single irreparable loss in return, and still they worked themselves harder than any engineer would ever demand of a machine.

And yet Stronos felt neither inspiration nor awe.

A decagonal redoubt was already beginning to take shape, surrounding a central bailey studded with transceiver vanes where a cabal of transmechanics and their servitors worked to set up an interlink module to *Rule of One*. Armaplas was a tough metal-plastic composite, resilient and easy to produce, but its atomic density gave it the less useful propensity to emit breaking radiation under the specific conditions prevalent on a nuclear wasteland like Thennos. These waves were more damaging even than the initial radiation they blocked – not to a Space Marine, but their equipment was susceptible – and so the armour sheeting had been specially coated in a crystalflex-paint that made them shimmer like volcanic glass.

Servitors and engineers unpacked static guns from the shipping crates that had been delivered by the last sortie of the *Alloyed's* Thunderhawks. Autocannon. Multilaser. Missile launcher. They came disassembled for efficiency of transit, but every component was colour-coded and rune-tagged to match it to its neighbour for ease of assembly.

The position of break barriers and a replacement retention field had yet to be plotted. There was no immediate need. The handful of Mechanicus specialists currently planetside had lethal incentive to finish their work expeditiously and would not be in situ for long. Clan Garrsak counted its serfs in the tens rather than the thousands, none of whom were present, and had no servitors that it could not, or would not, sacrifice. As for the Iron Hands themselves, most would never remove their armour except in the case of injury, when an Apothecary would remove it for them, and so the radiation storms that blew in off the wastes came as no hardship.

In two or three days when the reinforcing clans were embedded and the fortress completed, the Iron Hands would have to push compliance into those wastes. Then, clan serfs and loyal skitarii would be compelled to take charge of the fort, but its subsequent habitability would be their concern, not Clan Garrsak's.

‘Does something trouble my Brother Stronos?’ said Draevark.

Stronos looked down at the winding rod and hammer in his hands, every outward indication of his inarticulate frame being of singular focus on his work. It was a lie. The peace he had sought was broken.

On Virgos VI he had marched thirty thousand Guardsmen of the Scillian LXIV onto the tau’s guns so that Clan Vurgaan could engage the alien hand-to-hand with their strength undepleted by enemy firepower. He had watched Kullodinus Sept and its millions wasted from orbit when it might, at great cost in blood and materiel, have been saved. On Sceptica Maxis, when the world’s first glimpse of a Space Marine had induced a mass surrender of traitor militias on a planetary scale, Stronos had relayed Verrox’s order for them to relinquish their arms and kneel, and then followed his own order to shoot them with their heads still bowed.

He was the monster that humanity had clad in iron to protect it from those monsters it otherwise dared not face. He had no illusions about that. But through all the necessary purges of human fallibility to which he had been party, he had felt something. It might not always have been empathy or regret, but it had been an emotion and it had been his.

Through the purge of Port Amadeus he had felt little, until now. The manifold link to his brothers, their common bond of strength, had blunted his weakness. Alone now, limited once again, he found he craved the spartan utility of unity.

He gave long consideration to giving Draevark an honest answer.

‘No,’ he said.

‘No matter. Clan Garrsak has a Chaplain and his name is not Draevark.’ The iron captain rotated his gauntlet, palm up towards the yellow streamers of tattered rad-clouds. With a single claw-blade, he gestured for Stronos to rise. He did so, abandoning the equipment for his servitor to pack away. ‘I am your captain. And this captain has little patience for the impossible.’

‘Does that mean you have decided on my penance?’

‘I have not, but Ares may have.’

In the flesh-spare human softness of his gut, Stronos felt a flutter of trepidation. ‘The Iron Father is here?’

Draevark pointed a claw across the rising fort to where the wastes shone glassily under the storms. Once the magos calculi had satisfied himself that the lost Kastelan units had indeed been removed from Port Amadeus prior to the invasion and authorised rescindment of the interdiction order, the *Alloyed* had

wasted little time in levelling a thousand square kilometres of previously cratered wasteland. A landing zone big enough for a crawler.

‘The Iron Father has received simulacrum inroad of every feed from the battle, mine included, and is ready to receive the clan commanders in conclave aboard the *Rule of One*. And he has asked for you.’

III

Melitan Yolanis abased herself before the mordant altar of Clan Garrsak. A handful of ancient sources – a partial transcript in a library on Kelpis, an oral history in one of a thousand small tribes of Mundus Planus, to name but two – purported to tell of how the Emperor had gifted the anvils to the mortal clans of Medusa in recognition of their allegiance to his son, the primarch. The *Canticle*, however, which along with the even grimmer *Scriptorum of Iron* had been required reading amongst the Fabris Callivant initiates bound for Medusa, told a different story.

It described how a master adept – whose name, for reasons that escaped Yolanis, had been stricken from the tales – an artificer beyond compare even by the measure of that greater age, had devoted five decades of his priceless labour to the creation of the original mordant altar, an anvil of his own glorious design upon which a suit of armour worthy of the primarch of the Iron Tenth might be forged. In the years that followed entire hives had turned dark and forge-temples rang silent as the near-limitless reserves of Mars fed instead to the mordant altar. Only the word of such a master was mighty enough to demand so much as a moment’s cessation in the Ommissiah’s labours, and as it was given so was it done. Such was the power that went into the armour’s making, such was the ambition of the master adept’s craft, that the great anvil was said to have split into ten immediately as the finishing blow was placed.

Legend held that any machine ailment could be remedied by the prayers of a worthy servant, spoken over one of the mordant altars. Melitan had never seen its power invoked, nor known of it to have happened in the lifetime of anyone she could ask. The peril with such contingent miracles, she supposed, was in proving oneself *unworthy*.

‘If you mean to rise, then rise,’ came a deep voice, hard-edged and blunt as

the crozius that lay across the altar.

Melitan scraped herself immediately off the ground.

Iron Chaplain Braavos' helmet was a skull of gunmetal ceramite that had been darkened with polish, the depths of the eyes and mouth cast into deep shade by the single candle that flickered on the altar top. The bladed edge of a serrated iron halo pricked the wavering light, as high above her own head as that of an angel. His powerful augmetic left hand was highly stylised and shone like platinum, left like an offering to whomever might claim it where it rested on the altar's edge. The black of his armour blended into the dark of the chapel, but the silver scrollwork and ironglass scriptoria that embellished his wargear, like no other of the Iron Hands Melitan had yet seen, seemed to anchor his solidity where it was. The vast pectoral emblem spread across his chest plastron was a glyph in two parts: one half of a silver aquila conjoined with one half of the dark machine skull of the Cog Mechanicus.

Even a tech-priest would have asked after the comfort of Melitan's transit from Medusa, or made polite enquiry as to how she and her team had settled into their accommodations aboard the *Rule of One*.

But not an Iron Hand.

'What do you want?' said Braavos. The Cult Mechanicus and the Adeptus Astartes seldom mingled, even in their professional duties, and the Chaplain seemed nonplussed by her intrusion into this sanctum of the Iron Creed.

Without waiting for her to respond, he clamped a heavy gauntlet to the altar and passed his silvered left hand in blessing over the boltgun and gladius that lay upon it. The particular needs of the Iron Hands meant that the duties of Apothecary, Techmarine and Chaplain shared considerable overlap. Standing above them all were the Iron Fathers.

Melitan clasped her hands into the holy cog against her breast, and forced herself to meet his gaze. 'I am concerned about the Ancient, lord.'

'As am I.'

'Lord?'

'The great Ares warrants an attendant with centuries of experience in his making.' Melitan ground her plastek teeth. The idle assumption that she was male was the least of the daily slights she suffered. 'How the Iron Council has seen fit to grant a duty that would be the crowning glory in the career of a celebrated magos ten times your age to one so profoundly ordinary mystifies me. But we are Clan Garrsak. We do not query. Once more the universal

machine humbles me with ignorance of its designs.’

‘I am worthy, lord.’

‘Supposition. Unproven.’

Melitan bit her lip before she could argue.

She deserved this, she knew she did. The Voice of Mars, in his omniscience, had seen in her the ability that she had always known she had, and eventually even the Iron Hands would come to see it too. But she was worried. It had taken her the better part of an hour to rouse Tubriik Ares from his stimulus dreams, and the entirety of the night-cycle just to get him to repeat back his name. The spirit that inhabited Tubriik Ares’ sarcophagus was ancient and powerful, second only, she could tell, to that of the *Rule of One* itself. But he had problems, problems that Melitan, for all her natural talents, hadn’t the slightest idea how to resolve.

While she stood in silence, the Iron Chaplain returned wordlessly to his labour. The only sounds beyond those made by her own difficult breathing were the hum of Braavos’ armour and the burn of the votive candle. The scent it gave off was soothing to the machine, but harsh on her nose, like cinnamon blended with turpentine.

There was a long scrape of metal along metal as Braavos drew the newly re-sanctified weapon from the altar. Melitan flinched as the Iron Chaplain strode past her. With a blessing-blurt of binharic cant, Braavos thrust the bolter into the gauntlets of the Iron Hands battle-brother that had been waiting in the shadows by the wall. He had been there when Melitan had entered, and if he had harboured any opinion of his own on what she had come to say then he had kept it to himself. He said nothing now either, expressing his gratitude by drawing the bolter to his chest and stalking silently away.

Melitan watched him head for the chapel doors. For all their casual cruelty, that was what appalled her most. The silence.

‘Lord,’ she whispered. ‘I implore you. At least allow me to contact the logi-legatus about expanding my team.’

‘You will work with the tools given. That is the way. There is no other.’ Empty-handed, Braavos strode back to the dais, iron-glazed parchment sheaves fluttering with the servo-assisted whir of his steps. He spread his hands across the altar as though deciding which of his many duties should next be served, then pivoted to bring his silvery hand over the crozius. He lifted it up, the fingers of the augmetic locking as the device passed into the light. The shadow

of the solid iron staff and its cog-skull mace-head wavered over Braavos' pectoral emblem. The weapon was anything but ceremonial. 'Techmarine Naavor bears ultimate responsibility for the Iron Father's rites and maintenance. Your duties, though vital, are few. The power I hold to commute them still further is clearly less than you believe, though the fault of that is not mine.'

'Forgive me, lord.'

'I am not here to provide forgiveness.'

She bowed her head.

'We are at war, adept. This world is hostile. However limited your importance, you are a part of the great working. You will be proven or you will be replaced.' On the word *replaced*, the Chaplain set down his crozius with a clank of steel.

'Will you at least speak a prayer for me, lord?' she asked.

'Pray for yourself.'

IV

'Stronos,' Iron Father Verrox grunted. His unhelmed face was a scar-field of surgery and war, his grimace the moment that two warring chainblades bit. Stronos had expected no warmth in his former captain and mentor's welcome.

When one left a clan, one left it absolutely.

Iron Father Verrox resembled an ageing volcano in his old Indomitus harness of black iron and ceramite. Kill marks and the scratch-representations of a hundred worlds conquered or destroyed with his boot upon them marred every surface. The tradition harked back to the human colonists who had first called themselves Vurgaan, who had fashioned weapons of artifice and power to hunt the beasts of the Medusan plains and inked their valour onto their flesh. Pride was the final and most pernicious of the Iron Hands' flaws, and it was in Clan Vurgaan more than most.

'He did not ask after the Thunderfire cannon,' Draevark observed drily as Verrox withdrew to take his place around the hefty table that stood in the centre of the *Rule of One's* Hall of Audiences. Loosely fastened armour plates clattered as the Iron Father walked, a long cloak of chainmail dragging along

the metal ground.

The Hall of Audiences was rounded like an ancient coliseum, ten-sided in actuality but with corners so smoothed by art and rust that the difference only existed if one knew it was there. A ring of iron columns towered into the darkness. They bore weapons in brackets, ornate, ceremonial, but functional too as all things had to be if they were to earn their continuance. The hall was quiet, as poorly lit as his cell had been. A draft caused the banners hung from the galleries to flap, their balconies deserted except for, in the case of one, a flesh-withered old servitor that hobbled with the aid of a broom as it eternally swept around the rust that fell from the ceiling.

The ironglass table was a thing of spartan beauty. Its elemental composition was so exact, the craft that had gone into its making of such perfection, that the surface had a reflective transparency, like looking into a still lake at dusk. Contributing to the pervading gloom, the hall's washed-out light emerged entirely from lumen points set into the underside of the glass. There were no chairs. Around the table stood the Iron Council's commitment to the crushing of the Thennos uprising, as quickly and as utterly as was possible.

Endless war ensured the clans were separated by thousands of light years of realspace, but the practicalities of conducting the Kristosian conclave, the unprecedented philosophical deconstruction that had tied the Iron Council in knots of mutually contradictory calculi for longer than Stronos had been alive, ensured that more warriors were rotated back to Medusa than would ordinarily be the case and biased the battle calculi in favour of warzones within shorter reach.

Verrox laid a weighty fist on the plain black pauldron piece of Raan, which the iron captain of Clan Borrgos ignored as if it were just another fleck of rust from the ceiling on his Terminator plate. Clans Vurgaan and Borrgos were, as seen by outsiders unfamiliar with the clan structures of the Iron Hands, reserves and so generally lent their strength to a large number of conflicts at any one time and almost always under the command of another. Like any clan, however, they guarded their independence fiercely. On the other side of the table, a purposeful act of separation that even Verrox had thought better of breaching, Veteran-Sergeant Drath of Clan Avernii stared into the ironglass as though the weight of his thoughts might shatter it. Hundreds of small loops of parchment fluttered from his power-armour, tightly rolled, pressed to the battle plate with black wax. Each one bore the secret record of an act of shame, ten

thousand years of ignominy tracing a path to Clan Avernii's first great failure when they had proven unable to prevent their primarch's death. Five century cog-studs had been beaten into the inseparable fusion of helmet and bionics that by position alone remained a face. An Iron Hands Space Marine of Drath's age and construction could no longer simply die.

The last two at the table Stronos recognised but had never met. Fabricator-Locum Hyproxius Velt, effective governor of Thennos under the proxy of the Voice of Mars, and his adjutant-spiritual, Technologist Theol Quoros.

The fabricator-locum was an etiolated aristocrat with a supercilious frown etched into his jawline with nanoscale augmetics. A triad of cherub servitors droned through the air above him, trailing parchment and emitting the occasional chirrup, cataloguing every word and gesture. He raised his hands and offered a slow clap for the arrival of Clan Garrsak. 'Port Amadeus has been brought to compliance.' He spoke in Reket as was customary in recognition of the esteemed Clan Garrsak machine that hosted this quorum, and bowed his head slightly in its honour. 'The blessing and benediction of Mars for conducting so expeditious a campaign.'

'The facility had a structural flaw,' Draevark replied.

Velt's flesh-mouth twitched. The cherubs burred as they made permanent record of his irritation. 'An important first step, regardless. With Port Amadeus destroyed we now have complete orbital and tactical supremacy over the entire planet. Its purge can now commence in accordance with the prescription of the magos calculi.'

'It has commenced,' said Draevark. 'There is a pile of rubble under your providence five kilometres hence that attests to that.'

'That it should come to this,' growled Raan.

'Agreed,' said Verrox, grinding out words as though they were iron shavings brought up from his throat. 'What function do you still serve, fabricator-locum? Rebellion did not merely foment under your stewardship, it succeeded. You are as culpable as the dead of Port Amadeus.'

'Agreed,' said Raan.

'Agreed,' echoed Draevark.

Drath merely glowered, though it did not require a tech-savant to glean his thoughts.

Stronos observed them all, but contributed nothing. He was a sergeant here and a newly elevated one at that, nearly a hundred years Raan's junior. He was

unsure what function his presence served.

‘I propose immediate removal of the fabricator-locum,’ said Verrox. ‘Execution and replacement to be provisioned by the logi-legatus at his earliest convenience.’

‘Agreed,’ said Draevark.

‘Thennos is a sovereign world of the Empire of Mars. Its independence from Medusa is anointed by holy writ, and you have no authority to impose legislative decree.’ Theol Quoros’ heptapedal motive frame clacked on the metal floor in emphasis of his words. Stronos could taste the scent of machine-pleasing oils and silcaceous camphyr as the technologist’s oddly cut robes rippled around his legs. ‘Nor is there any provision to allow for the suggestion of said decree to the logi-legatus, except via majority rule of the Iron Council.’ His face was a steel plate, flat and empty and partially hooded by his robes. How he saw or emitted sound was not immediately apparent. ‘Does the position of the fabricator-locum require further clarification?’

The Iron Hands answered with their silence.

‘Blessings and benedictions of Mars.’ Velt smiled graciously. ‘Your criticisms are noted and welcomed—’ the scratching of meme-quill on parchment recorded his contrition for the future historians ‘—and I will be improved for the recognition of my prior failings.’

‘See to it,’ Verrox grumbled.

‘I will, Iron Father. As you know, the Iron Council demands the uprising be crushed immediately and utterly. To the last soul. Word of the Iron Hands’ failure to prevent insurrection within their own system limits cannot be allowed to spread. It will draw unwelcome attention at a difficult time, when the conclave of Kristos continues to engender discord within.’

‘I do not care what *others* think.’

‘What you will not have heard in open council,’ Velt went on, ‘is that Warleader Kristos himself has demanded the Mechanicus resolve this insurrection.’

‘Former warleader,’ said Verrox. ‘The Iron Fathers have chosen not to elevate one of our number to lead. Not since the debacle on Columnus.’

‘Putative,’ Quoros reprimanded the Iron Father. ‘The morality of Iron Father Kristos’ methodology remains in dispute. That is the entire basis of the conclave. He would undoubtedly emphasise that the Weirdwaaagh was crushed with minimal losses.’

‘Kristos is a blunt tool,’ Verrox returned. Stronos knew from his century and a half with Clan Vurgaan that Verrox was the strongest voice of an otherwise divided opposition to the brutalist ideology espoused by Kristos and his adherents. Neither choice was pleasant. That Verrox drew genuine relish from his services to Emperor and Ommissiah must have been tremendous mitigation to the billions dead by that service. In truth, the death toll of his existence was no less than Kristos’. ‘He adheres to the letter of the Creed of Iron as any monotask ought, but he has no understanding of its meaning.’

‘By Thennos’ enduring spirit, enough!’ Iron captain Raan’s frustrations overcame him and he thumped his gauntlet on the table. ‘I will speak for Iron Fathers Siilvus and Breeka before the Eye of Medusa, but do *not* force me to continue the conclave here as well.’

While the two Iron Hands studied each other’s impassivity, Stronos noticed the grandiose doors at the far end of the Hall of Audiences crack ajar.

This was not the functional entrance by which he and Draevark had entered. These were ten centimetre thick adamantine plates with chased gold bearing a diorama of Ferrus Manus locked in battle with the Elemental of Karaashi and set in diorite quarried from the Oraanus Rocks. The Iron Hands seldom commissioned pure ostentation, and despite its gilding it was both imposing and solid. A ribbon of orange light panned across the floor through the gap, running to a taper as it neared the head of the table. A shadow wavered across it, and Stronos felt the ironglass shiver, the way a puddle would ripple before the footfalls of a Titan.

Draevark clasped his shoulder with one cold lightning claw and whispered, ‘He is here.’

V

Melitan Yolanis slipped into the cramped moderatus suite, and eased the door shut behind her. She had been hoping to enter quietly enough so as not to distract the diagnosticians from their screens. In that she failed.

‘What did Braavos say?’ asked Callun, spinning his console chair towards her. The screen behind him profiled his eager expression in green. It was flooded with datascreed and source equations, a mathematised nonsense of

glyphs and symbols that no one in the room, and certainly not Callun, knew what to call, never mind how to operate.

But she would learn. She promised the Ommissiah that she would learn.

‘Essentially, deal with it,’ she summarised.

Callun snorted good-naturedly. Wishing she could be so sanguine about her responsibilities, Melitan looked over the vast bank of screens that occupied one wall. Most showed more unruly curves and their alien notations, but a handful were live feeds from capture-units ensconced in the columns that surrounded the conference table, the different screens offering varying shots of the fabricator-locum and Technogian Theol Quoros, or of the five Iron Hands that stood across from them. There were speakers installed amidst the visual displays and they provided a grainy audio.

‘Kristos is a blunt tool. He adheres to the letter of the Creed of Iron as any monotask ought, but he has no understanding of its meaning.’

Melitan could override the servitors’ simple doctrines to remotely operate them and eavesdrop closer in, if she wished. She wondered if the Iron Hands realised that their conference was not private, but reasoned that they must and either didn’t care or edited their words accordingly. Someone pushed a mug of ridiculously strong recaff into her hand, but she barely noticed the brush of fingers over hers as she parsed her attention between the feeds while the great doors opened.

To her astonishment, the Iron Hands began to kneel.

She stifled a delighted laugh with her hand. On those rare instances when the Iron Hands’ disregard for their own lives led to injuries that even Apothecary Dumaar could not rebuild alone, Melitan might have seen two, perhaps even three of the warriors at one time, and now here before her were five of their direst lords and they were on their *knees*. She doubted that Dumaar would have bent the knee for the primarch himself. And the God-Emperor?

She doubted it very much.

She took a sip of recaff, her mouth suddenly dry, and sketched the cog one-handed across her chest. She eased out a slow breath.

‘Wake up everyone. Ancient Ares is here.’

Kardan Stronos and his brothers lowered themselves to one knee. Awesome powered frames, ill-designed and ill-accustomed to that peculiar range of motion, whined in hardship as they clanked to the floor. The magi, Stronos noted, did not kneel.

The door was four metres high, half again as wide, but the ancient Dreadnought dominated it as he must have the battlefields of old. His sarcophagus was the perfect black of volcanic glass, edged in polished gunmetal iron fretwork. Every square millimetre down to the knuckles of his power fist bore exquisite reliefs of his workings, as though by the living glory of the Ommissiah the ancient's armour had been rendered opalescent to reveal the priceless thing beneath: a living, working, *breathtaking* manifestation of His blessed machine. Platinum nameplates bore the lesson of the living avatar with the inscription *ARES*, and shone under the dull light from every angle. That the Iron Hands were loath to adorn objects they saw as purely functional was not to say that they did not know worth when they saw it.

And Stronos saw it in Iron Father Tubriik Ares.

‘Why do you kneel?’ the Dreadnought’s voice boomed. ‘Diminishing yourselves does no one honour.’

Ares passed between the two magi at the head of the table without any overt indication that he had spared consideration to their presence, and then thrust an arm over the ironglass table. The power fist radially opened, the flowering of a mechanism that caused some mirror-unit within the table itself to click in response.

A hum of power built within the table and the ironglass illuminated with a frosty white light. Vox-synth burrs of surprise passed through the Iron Hands as a riot of hololith imagery flashed through the air above the table. Stronos gaped. For how many centuries had the lords of Clan Garrsak planned wars at this table without realising that it had possessed such a function? Even the two magi seemed taken aback though it was, as always, difficult to tell.

‘Nine hundred years we have been left to rest,’ Ares rumbled, his image vague behind the hololith blur. He paused, as if to confirm his tally. ‘Nine hundred years... years of sleeplessness and nightmare. Too long. We have absorbed simulacrum inload of the period and it is clear that the decision to leave us in state was an error. Iron Hands do not make errors. The source will be found and eliminated.’ The Dreadnought made no show of ire, but the Iron Hands stared in awe as though he had pounded on the table and roared. ‘An

example will be made.'

'Lord Ares,' said Fabricator-Locum Hyproxius Velt, bowing low, the scratch of his scrivener cherubs recording the precise angle of declination for the archives. 'I would not wish to speak for the master of the forge, but your value to the Chapter is too great to risk to any mere skirmish. The revivification rituals themselves carry a small but not insignificant probability of irreparable system damage. Your restoration to command of this mission was an oversight of the deployment orders from Medusa.'

'Iron Hands do not make that kind of mistake,' Ares thundered, dismissively. 'The Emperor built us to fight. With the blessing of the Ommissiah our brothers preserve us to fight. Left to dream we have no value. The function of servants is to obey. I will crush this uprising.'

Under Ares' digital manipulation, the stream of machine consciousness that swirled above the hololith table settled into a cartolith of a stellar system. It was Sthenelus. The star was a bloated purple-red, a giant heading towards its end years. Three rocky worlds of varying sizes and inhospitable aspects circled it before the eye came to Medusa IV; or just Medusa, as most knew it. The timeframe of the planets' orbits, the rotation of the sun was one-to-one, but even in realtime Stronos could see the black world spin. The detail was sufficient for Stronos to pick out the individual slipyards of the Telesterax, the partially collapsed iron collar of orbital manufactories that had once encircled the planet. From there to the system's Mandeville point, the cartolith passed three gas giants, another rocky, ice-caked spheroid, a dust belt, and then, at the cold extremity where sunlight came a distant second to the radiation of space, there was Thennos.

'Conflict there has always been between the clans,' said Ares as the eyes of all around him were drawn to the clockwork dance of worlds he had conjured. 'Such competition was encouraged by our Father. We remember. No.' Quoros and Velt shared an anxious look. Stronos caught it. 'Yes. We saw. Saw through others' memories. We...' The Dreadnought emitted a stalled noise. 'Regardless. For one of our worlds to fall because of disunity. This goes beyond. We will end this uprising with the iron of our own fists, and after that the Eye of Medusa and the Kristosian Conclave will answer to our ire.'

Stronos found himself stunned to speechlessness by the Iron Father's absolute moral conviction. Even the autonomic binharic chatter of his machine systems seemed muted in the ancient's presence. If Ares had at that moment commanded

the galaxy to reverse its spin or the speed of light to alter then Stronos was sure that the Ommissiah Himself would have bent every Universal Law to appease him.

For several long seconds, counted off, blessedly, by Stronos' temporal implant – for he was in no mental state to keep track of time – no one spoke.

Theol Quoros rapped the floor-plate apologetically, the percussive equivalent of a nervously cleared throat. 'Your urgency is gloriously received and approved, Iron Father, excepting one factual inaccuracy. This world belongs to the Adeptus Mechanicus, not Medusa.'

Ares pivoted, a minor readjustment in facing rendered massive by his own scale. The magos clung to the ground like a brass spider at his feet.

'Incorrect.'

'Your pardon, lord?'

'Incorrect. This is a Medusan world, a ward of Mars for a period of nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine years. We were there. Thennos, in exchange for the ten ironbarques that now serve the clan companies as fortress monasteries and flagships. We witnessed...' The ancient faded for a moment. 'Yes. *We* witnessed. And we remember. Thennos will be returned to direct rule on 062099.M43.'

Again the two magi shared an uncomfortable look, then Quoros turned back to Ares and bobbed his head-part in acquiescence. 'The details of the matter, I am sure, will be extant in the Thennosian archives, along with the proper backups in the Temple of All Knowledge on Mars. However, as to the present sit—'

'The truth of the matter is settled. My word is inviolate.'

'Agreed,' spoke Draevark, Verrox, Raan and even the sombre Drath in unison. Stronos nodded, though he doubted his contribution was required. Quoros hesitated as if he meant to argue the point before bowing in stiff accord.

'Then, as to the present situation.' Ares' power fist reversed direction and altered speed. The exact mechanism by which he commanded the cartolith to shift its focus onto Thennos was sufficiently abstruse for it to appear to be machine-will alone. The tiny globe welled up and then dissolved like a snowflake that landed on the Dreadnought's power fist, reforming into the inscrutable perfection of a golden masque.

The material was unusual, the aesthetic subtly alien. It took Stronos a moment to recognise the face as that of a skitarii princeps.

The masque rendered in light via the cartolith was one of pronounced human

perfection rather than functional augmentation. The jaw was high. The brow was smooth. His eyes appeared to be multiply-lensed, possessed of several overlapping filter sets that could be flicked across the optics or back into the surrounding mechanisms dependent on the situation. The present combination conferred a deep-hued multivariate shimmer on his gaze. His features were both imperious and uncannily beautiful. Stronos sought to compare the capture to his inload files of the Thennosian macroclades, but found no match. It was possible that the manifold's conscription registers were incomplete, but it was possible also that the princeps had altered his appearance since the last reliable exload from Port Amadeus.

The skitarius was looking directly out of the hololith, as though zeroing in on the servo-picter that had captured his image even as the data file was being exloaded. Stronos' bionic zoomed and refocused.

'The traitor general,' said Ares. 'Name and battle roll unfiled.'

'I had expected his appearance to be more overtly deviant,' said Raan.

'He is a skitarius,' Draevark added. 'How can one tell?'

'It is difficult to believe that a skitarii princeps could turn,' said Stronos. 'A magos, perhaps, but a skitarius?' Feeling the optics of all on him, Stronos' oculi twitched. 'I mean to say that the skitarii are warriors, not unlike the Iron Hands. No Chapter bearing Ferrus Manus' seed has ever fallen.'

Verrox emitted a mechanised growl and thumped his agreement on the ironglass.

'Within the narrow delineation with which you employ your terms, perhaps not,' said Quoros. 'Dare we omit the Sons of Medusa from our meme-files? No. Warriors of the Iron Hands and their successors were turned from the Ommissiah's true path by the false prophecies of the Moirae tech-priests to forge a splinter Chapter of their own, but were subsequently proven loyal in the Great Cull. As it was judged then, there is nothing here more malign than a rogue princeps with a corrupted control tether and some heretical ideas that have been permitted to disseminate through the hierarchy.'

'Such as?'

Quoros' blank plate regarded him emptily. 'That is hardly relevant for you to know. Such curiosity is unbecoming of a warrior of Clan Garrsak.'

Stronos raised a fist to remonstrate.

'Agreed,' said Draevark. 'The sergeant will be censured.'

'Another question then,' spat Verrox, with a condescending look at the iron

captain. ‘How did such degradation in a neural-slave pass unnoticed? Perhaps the Dominus’ own tether requires investigation.’ When neither priest offered a ready explanation, Verrox bared metal teeth in a sneer. ‘Thenos is one of three worlds in the segmentum with dispensation to handle xenos technology. It receives shipments from a thousand warzones almost daily. A dozen have already been turned back since my barge joined Clan Garrsak’s blockade. The potential for corruption is endless.’

‘This world tests xenotech?’ asked Stronos, surprised. But it explained the Devilfish in one-nine/seven-two/eta.

‘Irrelevant,’ spoke Ares, and his word was final.

The princeps’ hololith dispersed as though struck by Ares’ power fist, and reformed into a cartolith. This time it was not the Medusa system, but a top-down tactical grid of the Thenosian surface. The new fortress that stood by the crater that had been Port Amadeus was displayed with a black rune, as was the *Rule of One*, both of them surrounded by data clusters representing troop dispositions and spirit-guided weapon placements. Stronos noted a number of gaps in the defensive perimeter, but waited for Ares or Draevark to explain. Across the pseudo mountainous terrain of the crater wastes from the Iron Hands’ beachhead were several data-harvesting facilities identified by query marks. Ares caused the marks to fade and a bracket to close over just one of the outposts.

‘Locis Primus. Any or all of these other facilities may contain rogue elements, but this is the most likely base. It is an apocalypse-class weapons test facility. The Tenth’s orbital superiority is absolute, but battle calculi indicate that bombardment alone will prove insufficient. Ground assault is the only option.’ No one corrected the Ancient’s use of archaic Legion terminology. Again, Ares altered the image, calling up pict-shots of weapons turrets, walls and suspected defending units. The images spun through blocks of informational screed, too quickly for the mortal eye to process. The ability to dispatch reconnaissance skulls without losing their signals in the wastes had been greatly improved since the *Rule of One*’s arrival planetside, but Stronos suspected this was archive data. ‘Locis Primus incorporates an extensive subterranean bunker network adequate to house the entire population of Thenos. Resistance will be formidable but futile. All will be exterminated.’

‘What is this...?’ Draevark raised a claw to indicate one floating image. It was gigantic, armoured turrets and cathedral spires rising from its crenellated

tiers, a veritable fortress on two mighty legs. ‘Imperator. We have nothing to go up against that kind of firepower.’

‘The Titans are wrecks,’ said Velt, rousing himself to speak. ‘They were brought to Thennos decades ago to test shield and armour configurations against xenos weaponry.’

‘Titans,’ said Draevark, with full emphasis on the plural, ‘implies more than one.’

‘What does Sergeant Stronos say?’

The Ancient’s question caught Stronos off guard. His half-metal face showed none of his surprise. ‘We need more Scouts. Vox and augur remains short to medium range only. The blast wastes will be a haven for ambushers, and every subsidiary outpost on our approach will need to be purged. Clan Dorrvok does not bring enough men.’

‘We will soon have more,’ said Raan. ‘The Iron Moon rises.’

‘I suggest advance into this area.’ Stronos swept his bionic hand through the map over a grid region fifty kilometres north of Port Amadeus. Spread over a small area it contained a cluster of survey bunkers and data harvest facilities. ‘With a small force we could clear these structures, then commandeer more Mechanicus units to construct a road for the *Rule of One* to follow behind us. From there, the signal boost should extend coverage almost to Locis Primus.’

‘It would be slow,’ said Verrox.

‘Necessary. Until Clan Dorrvok receives reinforcement from Medusa.’

Drath nodded his agreement with Stronos’ contention, then Quoros clacked one leg on the table for attention. ‘Denied. Incursion into grid epsilon-three is prohibited by interdiction order Magenta-one-one-nine. You must find an alternative route.’

‘Unacceptable,’ said Stronos, expecting his brothers to argue likewise, troubled to find that they did not. Even Verrox, belligerence made manifest, accepted the interdiction. Alone, he turned back to the technologist. ‘We cannot wage war under such restrictions.’

‘The magos calculi has altered the necessary variables. The constants remain constant. Clan Garrsak was tasked to this uprising, sergeant, not because of their proximity but because of their reputation for obedience. Artisan Adept Sabeq Rawl informs me that you lack certain protocols.’

‘Ancillary rites only. We were in haste.’

‘Having reviewed all logs from the purge of Port Amadeus, I understand that

you are in the habit of exceeding the remit of your judgement, Sergeant Stronos.'

'He presently awaits censure,' said Draevark, and Velt nodded in appreciation.

'You will submit your battleplate for the proper anointing and codescribing that it lacks,' said Quoros, his voice gathering venom with every word. 'Its deficiency offends the spirit of His august machine. Your record states that you have previous infractions in this regard.'

Stronos said nothing.

The technologist was about to continue when the unmistakable patter of bolter-fire, far away, made it through the *Rule of One*'s adamantine skin. It was a sound that the ears of the Iron Hands were well attuned to, and a millisecond later all present turned in the general direction of the new Amadeus firebase. What followed was the dense silence of five Iron Hands and an ancient Dreadnought ignoring each other's physical proximity to submit their demands for information to the manifold.

'What is happening?' said Velt, nervous, lacking the instantaneous interlink capability of his Lords Adeptus Astartes.

Stronos was still challenging the manifold's codewalls when Ares, his ancient codes more forceful, returned in mind.

'We are under attack.'

VII

The attack was not what he had been expecting.

Stronos jumped from the back of the Land Raider Anvilarum while the tank was still drawing in alongside the fortress wall, boots grinding the yellow-brown dust that the wind was already beginning to drive up against the leeward side of the newly erected Amadeus firebase. Static continued to foul his display, but the signal-boost from the *Rule of One* had cleared it up considerably. The rune-blips of his clave were sharp, their battle-readiness infecting his sub-systems by increment, de-cluttering his display, boosting interlink access and stressing his power plant to increase its output.

Behind him the enormous armoured carrier ploughed to a full stop, and a

swarm of crimson-robed and environment-garbed engineers clambered out.

The Anvilarum was an open-topped variant of the standard Land Raider, an uplink-modified armoured transport large enough to ferry an Iron Father Dreadnought to war. Its design was reminiscent of the chariots of ancient Aegypt or the Roma, with the addition of quad-lascannon under the direct neural control of its principle passenger. The engineers moved skittishly, like rats, hyper-conscious of the pop and crack of gunfire.

But Stronos could see that the attack, such as it was, had ended almost as soon as it had begun.

He waded through the dust pile to the slagged breach in the fortress wall. Holding it like a barricade of black iron was Jalenghaal and half of Clave Stronos.

‘Report,’ Stronos demanded.

‘A small force of fast attack vehicles, rad-modified quad bikes and half-tracks. They assaulted the wall under storm cover, engaged with the auto-defences for seven minutes and thirteen seconds, executing a withdrawal just as we deployed to the breach.’

‘Testing our strength,’ Stronos surmised. ‘Clearly they had calculated your likely response times.’ Jalenghaal responded to the absence of question with an absence of answer, and Stronos turned towards the murmur of weapons’ fire.

With his bionic eye he could pick out the distinctive, bouncing judder of an Achlys dune rover, and the muted flares of beam weaponry that silhouetted the retreat of the crab-like Onager walkers. The fire discipline of the Iron Hands meant that return fire was limited to the pair of servitor-controlled missile platforms covering this side of the fort.

‘Was the approach not defended?’

‘Inadequately.’

Acknowledgement of the lapse was as close as Jalenghaal would get to an overt criticism of his superiors. It was enough for Stronos, and he suspected his brother knew that. ‘We should assemble the clan’s bike and Land Speeder claws to give chase.’

‘They withdraw into a proscribed zone,’ said Jalenghaal, flatly.

‘I suspect they are aware of that as well.’

Jalenghaal brooded a moment, affecting subservience to the greater will of the clan through surly non-compliance. The Iron Hands warrior was several inches taller than Stronos and his machined lenses were directed at a point

correspondingly several inches above Stronos' own. Eye contact was an organic ritual from which Jalenghaal pointedly recused himself.

'Perhaps it was otherwise in Clan Vurgaan,' he muttered sourly, 'but in Clan Garrsak we adhere to the commands of our superiors.'

'I *am* Clan Garrsak,' said Stronos, and then, when Jalenghaal did not reply, said, 'How can we call ourselves strong when we allow others to rule us unchallenged?'

'I disagreed with your judgement on entering one-nine/seven-two/eta. I challenged you. But did I disobey?'

'No.'

'Then that is your answer.'

'But you *did* challenge me,' Stronos said, frustration causing his fist to clench and rise towards Jalenghaal's faceplate. 'Is that not the point?'

'I performed my function. As you perform yours through challenging Draevark, and he his through challenging Ares and the other Iron Fathers. But "Garrsak" in old Reket means unity. We obey. The will of the clan is my will. It is absolute.'

'And yet the battle calculus was in error. It failed to predict a skitarii raid on this position, or that the enemy were in possession of fast attack vehicles at all. What if the skitarii are familiar with the formulae? Who challenges the magos calculi?' Stronos vented his body's frustration and turned back to the transports with a grunt.

Standard template Rhinos and Land Raiders bearing Verrox, Raan, Draevark, Drath and their honour guards had ground in around the heavier Anvilarum variant and disgorged their troops. Iron Father Verrox and Captain Draevark stomped towards the hole in the wall.

<Maintenance dispatch to the wall,> Draevark canted through the interlink. <Release the damaged section and authorise Armoury to ship a replacement.>

'And assemble the bike and Land Speeder claves to give chase,' added Verrox, with a look at Stronos and Jalenghaal. 'Any who mean to countermand that can do so to me.'

'Compliance,' Draevark responded, and duly paused to relay the command.

'Better to ask a servitor to speak in verse than a man of Clan Garrsak to think for himself,' Verrox said, approaching Stronos alone. 'The Iron Council has itself in such knots over the conclave that it can no longer function. I would have countermanded the Voice of Mars' prohibition order had I been present,

and a majority would have fallen in line had I been. Do you concur, Iron Father?’ That last he addressed to Ares, who had just joined them at the foot of the wall.

The ancient had needed to back out of the Land Raider as a dozen adepts unplugged him, splashed his armour with oils, waved gem-encrusted wands over data hard-tethers and muttered invocations of plurality in plea-coded binharic to the two machines’ spirits. Successfully extricated and purified, oil droplets glittering where they clung to his sarcophagus, the Iron Father turned to zoom his focus towards the retreating skitarii vehicle squadron.

‘Garrsak concurs,’ he said. ‘The Iron Council does appear errant, but with good reason does the individual defer to the logic of the collective.’ Clave Stronos clenched iron hands to their chests in memory of the Father’s fall.

‘Why do you not persuade the council of its error?’ said Stronos. He looked at Ares and Verrox both. ‘Many of the Iron Fathers will have returned for the Iron Moon.’

Verrox grunted.

‘An option we had not considered,’ said Ares. ‘Strange.’ The ancient’s speakers clicked off as his perceptions turned inward. His sarcophagus hummed. ‘Garrsak accepts his brother’s logic. It will take two days at least to complete construction of the fortification and to ready the new arrivals for the second phase of the compliance. Sufficient time to observe the Iron Moon, address the Iron Council on this matter, and then return. We demand that Stronos accompany us to Medusa.’

Stronos felt his next heartbeat as though it were his first. He bowed his head, as low as the stiffness in his still-new spinal augmetic allowed. ‘It would be an honour.’

‘Honour you have had enough of for one campaign,’ said Draevark. ‘Stronos is a child, barely yet of the clan. Indeed, he has rites still to complete and a penance as yet unspecified.’ His lightning claw twitched. ‘Even I have never been admitted to the Eye of Medusa.’

‘One must oversee the deployment and the completion of the firebase and command here for the duration of our absence. The Avernii, for all his years, is but a sergeant, and the Mechanicus are not to be trusted.’ Stronos had expected Ares to add *with command*, but the ancient did not elaborate. Draevark lowered his claws in a signal of compliance.

Stronos caught Jalenghaal’s look, eye contact, arresting by the power of its

rarity.

I challenged you, it said. But did I disobey?



CHAPTER SIX

'The mass of a human brain is greater than that of his lungs – headshots will give more consistent mass-reactive detonation.'

– Techmarine Yorrvik

I

‘Eyes open, neophyte.’

As though bidden by a hypnoseer, Rauth obeyed. He winced, pained by the brightness before his enhanced biology adapted. He was seated in a chair, a light shone in his face, in the middle of a spartan chamber of slowly deteriorating metal. His right arm was secured at the wrist, likewise his legs by the ankles. His left arm was free, though he doubted the acid-cauterised stump stoked the same expressionless choler in the Iron Hands brother that leaned over him as it did in Rauth himself.

The unhelmed man was pale as chalk. Some veteran Iron Hands did away with the melanchromic organ as a redundancy – what could variable skin pigmentation protect a Space Marine against that encasement within ten centimetres of bonded ceramite could not? – but this one did not look that far gone. His eyes stared deep into Rauth’s, soul-deep, the flicker of a pupil prompting some odd feeling or forgotten phobia to swell.

The last thing I remember is being roused by Tartrak.

Rauth squirmed in his fastenings. ‘Who are you?’

The Space Marine flashed a half-smile, but spoke no answer. The squeeze Rauth felt on his brain withdrew as the stranger retreated. His armour was the nightshade blue of the Chapter Librarian. Rauth’s head hurt and he ached to rub his temple. He held the Lexicanium’s stare, not because he was compelled, but because defiance was all that his mind could still call its own.

Remember this face.

Summoning a servitor to undo Rauth’s fastenings, the psyker turned to punch data from a handheld slate into a wall terminal.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Lydriik’s duties, for as long as the Deathwatch demands the Epistolary’s time. Captain Raan assures me he will return soon, but I will believe it when I see it.’ The Librarian’s albino features took on the glaze of the screen, his lips locked in that nerve-dead half-sneer. ‘I am assessing your mind for late-development psychic abilities, or of any mental weakness, ensuring your conditioning controls it as it should.’

‘And?’

The Lexicanium shared a private smile with his screen. ‘You may stand now.’

His own free will overridden, Rauth found himself pushing up from the chair. The servitor still pulled with slow, routine motions on the straps around his ankles. When it was done, Rauth took a step forward as if to mentally distance himself from whatever had transpired in that chair. His chest ached like bolter recoil in the rib plate from the strain of his one lung and secondary heart, but somehow he knew that his grogginess was not purely physical. His brain itched, the irritation that of some psyk-conditioned scab he couldn’t quite reach to scratch.

He felt... altered. Nothing overt. As if he’d been roused to find the ceiling of the initiate’s cell an infinitesimally darker shade of black. He found that he was angry.

‘He is all yours, Apothecary,’ said the Lexicanium without looking up.

Rauth turned to look over his shoulder. The figure waiting in the doorway showed his heart a whole new level of pain into which it could sink.

Preparations for the eve of the Iron Moon consumed the apothecarion and its staff. The sounds of drills and torches and welders rang over the clatter of equipment racks improperly stowed by overworked serfs. The mortals were stretched to breaking point taking the slack left by their augmented lords, their long faces gaunt and pale. Servitors representing various stages of human breakdown and reassembly moved between bays as 'living' examples of what awaited those who failed to maintain performance at the pace required, mopping up fluid spills of every kind. Genator adepts and technicians of the engineeer biologis fluttered about in their blood-red robes and odd, floating detachment, which Rauth ignored as irrelevant.

'Samples one through five show a point-zero-five per cent genetic variance,' said Dumaar, prowling around the med-pallet to receive a fresh syringe from a serf. 'Acceptable. Within margin of sample error. Implant markers stable. White cell counts contraindicate rejection. Preparing sample six.'

Rauth braced himself as the Apothecary passed in front of him with a glass syringe locked into his narthecium attachment. Its long needle glinted under the lumens as Dumaar lent in and, without further preamble, plunged it into Rauth's armpit. The pain was intense, but focused, and at least Rauth had been prepared for it. He tightened the bite on his already clenched teeth and grunted.

Because you couldn't have scraped enough blood off the table from the last time I was in here.

Dumaar moved his other hand to the plunger and began to withdraw fluid. Slowly. Watching Dumaar operate was like watching a static object surrounded by the frantic blur of an accelerated pict-recording. Rauth let out a long, stifled moan.

'Sebaceous lymph,' said Dumaar, perhaps for Rauth's information, perhaps for the machine-spirits in his brain. He held the canister to his optics and swirled its contents as though assessing colour and viscosity. Running his gauntleted forefinger up the needle, he flicked off some residual lymph and tasted it, whatever bionic replaced his neuroglottis breaking it down and sampling. 'Minor thickening. Fluid loss due to prior injuries a possible causal factor. Acceptable.' The Apothecary passed the canister to a servitor that awaited this single duty with a padded metal case bolted to its forearms, held open.

At least he wasn't strapped down this time. Rauth sat up on his elbow and saw Sarokk on the other side of the corrugated partition, waiting his turn under the knife. In the adjoining bay was Khrysaar, sat on a pallet and hooked up with drips, poked and prodded and ritually bled by a small team of magos biologis.

And I get Dumaar. Blessed by the Omnissiah, that's what the name of my battleplate will be when I receive it.

Rauth had endured these procedures a thousand times since he had first made his way to the Eye of Medusa as a child. Then it had been to assess his compatibility to the precious gene-seed of Ferrus Manus. In this, the apothecaries of the Iron Hands were characteristically rigorous, more so even than their counterparts in other Chapters. Fewer than one in a thousand were deemed sufficiently lacking in heritable deficiencies, and it was not uncommon for the Iron Moon to come and go and decades to pass without a single suitable candidate coming forward. Rauth should feel honoured, but part of him wondered how the Chapter managed to maintain its numbers with such a merciless regimen inflicted on an already thin trickle of aspirants. *Pray, Emperor, let them have miscalculated. I'd take Dumaar's knife right now if it meant the line would wither.* The process had intensified, however, with the approach of the Iron Moon.

It was the final opportunity to weed out the weak.

The servitor turned about on the spot, lumbering in forty-five degree increments, then lurched off with the lymph-filled canister towards the laboratory of the diagnosticae.

'What happens if you find something wrong?' Rauth asked.

He hadn't really expected an answer.

Dumaar patted the pallet next to where Rauth sat. 'Then I have you, neophyte.' A fresh servitor pushed Sarokk in. The initiate glanced tragically over his shoulder to the other bay, his youth conspiring against his efforts to appear unafraid. Dumaar drummed his gauntlet fingers on the bed, the motors in his bionic hand whirring. 'Then I have you.'

III

The servitor at the end of the firing range had been bolted into an upright

position. The expired unit was a cadaver sporting a few scraps of corroded metal. Anything that could be feasibly re-used had already been cannibalised prior to this final duty assignment, its flesh waxy, the early stages of decomposition evident in the blackening crust where augmetic systems had been removed. Rauth took aim, the tremendous weight of his bolt pistol steady in his one hand. The motion of the *Broken Hand* made the firing range deliberately difficult, but Rauth had been conditioned to its movements and allowed his aim to float accordingly. He tried to steady his breathing, but it proved equal to his will, rasping unevenly, in and out. He sighted down the thick barrel to a mentally calculated blast point behind the servitor's forehead.

‘Fire.’

Less a command than a temporary secession of control from master to slave, and no sooner had the ‘F...’ made its vibration on the air than bolter-fire barked from the stalls.

The efficient use of space demanded that the neophytes be packed in close, separated by demi-partitions of metal and plastek. The confines, and a frustrated wrath that kept fingers on triggers for three or four shots more than was required, fomented a savage thunder that Rauth's Lyman's ear did well to deaden.

He lowered his bolt pistol, still breathing like a bellows with a hole in the bag, his air misted with fyceline discharge. The taste was sulphurous. *Oddly pleasant. Like a warm wind without dust.* It was an effort on his part not to advance down the range, to unload what remained of his clip into what remained of his target. His aim had been perfect. Splatter painted the interior of the target stall, lumps of red meat barely recognisable as a leg or a torso scattered over several metres as though a servitor had in secrecy removed his target and emptied a bucket full of offal in its place.

‘Your aim deviates half a degree to the right, Ehrlach. I will recommend that Apothecary Dumaar conducts a complete remyelination of the optic fibres to enhance hand-eye coordination.’

Techmarine Yorrvik strode behind the row of neophytes in their stalls, doling out criticism and advice.

‘Sarokk, the mass of a human brain is greater than that of his lungs – headshots will give more consistent mass-reactive detonation. Juraa, I registered a millisecond delay between triggering and firing. Submit your weapon for reconsecration at the conclusion of the exercise. Khrysaar, eight

shots is excessive. You are rostered for a rest block – I will proscribe you an additional session of meditation instead. We will purge that zeal from you, neophyte.’

As he spoke, tracked servitor units with ablative ballistic cladding at their rear – *because it wasn't just Khrysaar with the urge to kill* – juddered away from their pens and moved down the firing range. They collected the larger pieces for recycling, and then liberally hosed down the target areas.

‘Rauth.’ Yorrvik set his hand over Rauth’s torn shoulder. The Techmarine’s gauntlet vibrated against his carapace, like an overpowered engine. Up close, Rauth could smell the oils he used to treat his battleplate and the emission fumes of his modified power plant. ‘You are firing too low. Your flesh hand is weak.’

Tell it to the Apothecary. ‘I know.’

The Techmarine held him a moment longer, his helmet lenses a red burn a centimetre from the side of his face. Then Yorrvik released him. Rauth gave a thin smile, nodded, and turned back to the range. Servitors were just clearing away and new targets being led in, their chains fed through loops in the ceiling to hold them up straight.

Rauth raised his pistol, no need to reload.

‘Fire.’

IV

‘You are the gene-descendants of Ferrus Manus,’ said Iron Chaplain Huygens. He stood with crossed arms like a statue on a pedestal, set there in centuries past and there to stand for centuries to come. His skull-faced helm glittered like polished silver under the intensity of several lumen globes, his battleplate streaked with bands of white. If not for his armour’s environment seals he would have found the chamber punishingly hot.

Rauth and his brothers had no such advantage.

The doctrinal chamber of the *Broken Hand* shared a module with the halls of rigour. The waste heat of the plasma, las and melta weaponry discharged in the battle-brothers’ exercises all sank through the conductive metal walls to where thousands of neophytes over thousands of years had sat to memorise the

Chapter's histories and its rolls of battle. *And I can smell every one of them still. Thank you, Father, for that particular gift.* The walls were hung with iron-glass tablets, acid-etched with selected passages from the *Canticle of Travel* and the *Scriptorum of Iron*. The ventilation system wheezed as though manually operated by a dying servitor on the other side of the small, rust-clogged grille.

'Manus died because he was flawed...'

Rauth was already starting to feel drowsy. The day's regimen would have been punishing had he been at his peak; maintaining the same standard as his brothers with only half his strength had drained him almost completely.

'You are flawed...'

The Chaplain's words moved through his mind, unwelcomed yet unchallenged. He was too tired. Something at the back of his mind began to tingle, something he had felt before but been unable to reach.

'Pride. Passion. Trust. These are flaws. Our Father trusted his brother, Fulgrim. In so doing, he bears equal culpability in his death...'

Istvaan. The Dropsite Massacre. These were seared into his genetic makeup and into his soul. He could recite the episodes by rote. He wore them on his flesh as truly as the elite of Clan Averni sealed them to their armour.

The flesh is weak.

Something in his mind opened: the rattling of the ventilation system became bolter-fire, the massed roar of engines, the soaked-in stench of sweat transmuted into blood.

'Only by eradication of the weak will humanity prevail, only by unflinching example will it accept its path. Thennos' fate is the fate of the flawed...'

And so it went on. A combination of heat, exhaustion and sub-psychic cues had left Rauth one step from comatose, but he took it in.

He took all of it in.

V

Rauth had never entered this section of the *Broken Hand*. Its narrow corridors were the haunt of Praetorian servitor patrols, home to few with a nervous system not slaved to the crawler's dorsal batteries and auspectoria. The

overwhelming forbearance of the *Broken Hand* itself seemed to make the walls groan. Rauth could feel its eyes behind every flickering terminal. Rust flaked from the surfaces, the locked-in odour of electroplating and aerosolised anti-rust clouding the passageways like spores.

His supposed mentor, Sergeant Tartrak, strode into the alchemical pall. Rauth struggled a few metres behind, the gap between them widening by increments. *Lost a heart? Lost a lung? Don't slow down on my account.*

'Where are we going?' he asked, masking his breathlessness with a dose of venom.

'It is traditional for the neophytes of Clan Borrgos to spend their last night before the Iron Moon together. Here. It is called The Smelting.'

Of course it is. 'To what purpose?'

Tartrak didn't answer. The floor panels creaked under the weight of his passing; the handful of lumen globes still functioning sputtered to the moan of the wind.

'I asked a question.'

'It is traditional.'

'But—'

'It is considered to be a neophyte's final night of freedom before he is accepted into the Scout claws of Clan Dorrrok.'

'Freedom... ' Rauth almost laughed.

'Innocence, then,' said Tartrak, his voice cold, even, as impervious to a neophyte's sarcasm as power armour was to his fists.

Rauth turned to look down past his left shoulder. *So this is what innocence looks like. I always suspected.*

Corridors branched off from the main dorsal spine at regular intervals, just as empty, just as dark, leading to gunnery bays and sensorium suites. Tartrak ignored them all. Several times the sergeant led them through airlocks, heavy-duty shutters locking behind them as they crossed the crinkle-walled connectors between modules. The halls of rigour were far behind now, and still Tartrak walked.

'The flesh is weak,' said Tartrak, leaving yet another turn untaken. 'But it is free. Appreciate it while it lasts.'

Rauth glared after the sergeant, expecting some backhand comment to follow what sounded like honest concern of a mentor for a student, and so failed to notice Tartrak approach a door. The sergeant punched the activation panel to

order the mechanism to open, and then turned. Rauth remained still, poised, until it became clear that this was the extent of Tartrak's action. The sergeant extended an open palm.

A kind word, and now you want to hold my hand? Do I die and go to Nocturne?

'Your weapon,' the sergeant prodded. 'You will not need it.'

Ah yes, I feel its warmth. Rauth grunted and drew his pistol from its mag-holster, then pushed it barrel-down into Tartrak's gauntlet. The sergeant clamped it to his thigh alongside his own.

'And the blade. It is—'

'Traditional,' Rauth parroted, unclipping his scabbard and sliding out his gladius. 'I'm sure.'

'Until the Iron Moon rises.'

The sergeant left, and Rauth stepped through the open door.

He gasped.

Comfort and space were alien concepts. Even from his precious existence as a mortal, he couldn't recall the sensation of a full stomach, of a padded surface, of a room that had not stunk of oil, sweat and blood. The chamber he had just entered was disconcertingly spacious, trapezoidal, its forward wall composed of crystalflex cells and aligned to the bullet nose of the *Broken Hand*. The space was scattered with couches, large enough to seat three or four men of Rauth's augmented size. The upholstery was well worn, clearly old, but looked comfortable. Rauth regarded them with distrust. The couches were arrayed around tables laden with food and potatoes. Medusa produced little that was edible, and so most were off-world delicacies for which Rauth had no name. Freestanding sheets of iron-glass dotted the area, without purpose. The heavy panes had been acid-etched and then washed with pigment, the final effect serving to retard the light just so to produce florid mezzotints. The scenes so displayed were as diverse as Ferrus Manus' battle with the Emperor of Man – *real dust from the battleground in the Northern Reaches is a nice touch* – to the Skarvus purges of Iron Father Kristos.

It was that forward view, however, that took his breath away.

Situated over the very front of the *Broken Hand*, thirty metres above its grinding tracks, it was simply astounding.

The Felgarrthi Mountains rose high over the basin of the plain, less a product of geology than a challenge thrown down by the gods. Ten patrician

countenances, each hundreds of metres in height, gazed down from the storm-blasted summit. Not gods perhaps, in the conventional sense, but any man blessed by the Ommissiah with the machines to tame Medusa warranted the accolade like no other. Their likenesses had brooded over this plain for five thousand years before the next god from Terra had fallen from the sky. As the founding patriarchs of every clan on Medusa, it could be argued – and some did – that the Iron Hands owed as much to these ten mortal men as to their primarch.

The Dark Age techno-sorceries of those prehistoric giants protected the Felgarrthi Mountains still, and in this shrinking oasis of habitability on the Felgarrthi steppe, Medusa's solitary permanent settlement had been allowed to grow.

Meduson – the origins of the name were lost to myth – was famously unwallled, and so despite the manifold aegises of the Felgarrthi archeotech, fierce winds still tore through the settlement's streets. The Iron Hands were not great believers in walls.

Walls encouraged the weak to prosper.

The settlement itself was a mean thing, deliberately so, a compact cluster of metallic lean-tos under a canopy of electrical cabling. The wondrous technologies buried far under the site had brought to Medusa myriad sub-orders and borderline heretical sects of the Cult Mechanicus, and with them a promulgation of sprawling, semi-derelict temples. The shanties that had grown around them catered to the colourful needs of the priests, menials and visiting pilgrims that filled Meduson year-round, as well as the leaner demands of the Iron Council itself.

Rauth approached the window and set his hand warily to the crystalflex, the rumble of the *Broken Hand's* vast tracks transferred in some small way to his fingers. The temperature outside hovered around freezing but his breath produced no mist on the surface. His physiology was perfectly adapted for the retention of heat. Pressing his forehead to the dully vibrating surface, he peered down into the dust plumes of the caravanserai.

An endless column of tired armoured vehicles, all of them much smaller than the Clan Borrgos crawler and many of them much *much* older, described a vast figure of eight around the Meduson uplands. Their relentless circuits had gouged a deep rut into the plain, a road in effect, the motley convergence of rusted crawlers. More continued to plough in from the plains as Rauth

watched, breaking through spoil walls and lurching into column. Rauth could hear sporadic bursts of gunfire through the glass. The clan companies of the Iron Hands were in constant competition, but that was as nothing to the open warfare that existed between the mortal clans. Medusa was harsh, resources scarce. Loose alliances of a hundred clans would go to war over an underground aquifer or a rediscovered fuel cache. Thousands died every year in internecine struggles, for want of the essentials of food or shelter that they had lost or failed to claw from others.

As it should be. He scowled, unsure from where the thought had arisen, or if it had come from him at all.

The Iron Moon was a time of truce, but hatred infected a man. Hatred kept him warm when he had no walls. It killed his enemies when his gun was empty.

I might not know innocence when I see it, but hate I know.

‘Would you all behold Rauth the One-Armed, the best of us all, awed by the spectacle of the Iron Moon.’

Rauth turned from the window to see his brother neophytes loosely gathered, spread across one group of couches with bared grins and poorly muffled laughter.

Khrysaar spread himself over a lounging chair, smile muscles tugging ineffectually at the metal of his bionic jaw. He was clad in plates of moulded black carapace, the strapping loosened sufficiently for the harness to creak as it settled. The neophytes were not built in to their armour in the same way as their masters, but it was an affectation they had all adopted. His left hand was a bandaged stump, awaiting augmentation as Rauth was. He looked up at Rauth. His eye bionic was the smooth pearlescent white of a blind man’s, set within a steel fixture that extended into his face from forehead to cheek to mouth. The other sparkled with challenge.

Your brain must not be getting enough oxygen, brother. You speak like a man with two hands. ‘It gladdens me to see you more or less whole.’

‘And I, you,’ Khrysaar returned.

Gritting his teeth, Rauth moved away. *This is why Tartrak took my knife.* Juraa looked up as Rauth stalked towards him and, like Khrysaar, moved to spread himself across the entirety of the couch. Then he caught Rauth’s eye. *Try it. Just try it. See what happens to you tomorrow.* As if the thought had been written into Rauth’s face, Juraa pulled his arm back in. Rauth then kicked Juraa’s leg out of his way, and sank onto the couch beside him, too bone-weary

to maintain the effort of not being so damned bone-weary. He glared at Juraa as if to dare him to remark on it, then over the laden table at each of his brothers in turn. *Make fun of my weakness. When they rebuild me, I'll be stronger than I ever was.*

The prospect thrilled him. He hated himself for that most of all.

But he hated the men who had made him feel this way more. He tried to call back the boy he had been, who had sworn that if he survived then he would be different, and could not.

A young woman approached and poured wine into a glass on the table in front of him. Rauth tensed, watched the glass fill with dark red liquid, and then stared at her back as she turned to serve others.

If he thought the Iron Hands' treatment of their neophytes harsh, then their attitude to women, who could not even provide the base material for new Space Marines except at one step removed, was one of disdain verging on brutality. Rauth had not seen a woman in years. Seeing one now affected him little. His physiology was incapable of desire.

His gaze passed to Sarokk last. Sarokk: the least threatening.

The youngster looked away sharply, causing the serving girl to spill wine over his wrist. Sarokk swore, embarrassed, as the woman pulled a cloth from her waistband and set to work drying his arm. Mumbling apologies, the woman left her sodden cloth folded on the table and hurried away, presumably to fetch another.

Rauth glared at the red-stained cloth, an itch of danger that he could not shake. Sarokk folded his arms and glowered as if his hardship was the fault of the universe.

'It's just a little wine,' grunted Ehrlach. He was the middle child of the six, distinguished by a premature greying of his hair, which he wore in a tail. 'They'll take the hand tomorrow anyway.'

'Go to hell,' Sarokk shot back, tense as a struck blade. He leaned forward, hands clasped, only to rock back and cross his arms again, this time even tighter.

The final pair, Juraa and Borrg, laughed at their younger brother's impotence and Rauth found himself relaxing finally, even if only a little. The others had found a new target, or rather, like beasts returning year after year to familiar hunting grounds, they had recaptured the scent of their favourite prey.

'Did the little girl hurt you, brother?' asked Borrg, deadpan, while Juraa

leaned forward, smirking. ‘Shall I find something cold to put on it until she returns?’

New initiates were accepted for training and old ones inducted into Clan Dorrwok only during the period of tectonic upheaval known as the Iron Moon. So it had always been and so it always would be, but good luck to anyone who wanted to know why. *It is traditional... by the Father, it could be like interrogating a servitor.* Medusa’s thick clouds, of course, made her moon a silent partner, but when its perigee coincided with Medusa’s perihelion, then the three bodies of planet, moon and star aligned perfectly in space produced a gravitational effect that ensured its presence was felt.

The moon’s odd periodicity meant that the interval between alignments varied greatly, but Sarokk was about as young as a neophyte could be and still be mature enough to participate in the ritual. Rauth was about as old.

‘It’s almost over,’ said Khrysaar, softly, the neophytes’ mutual dislike of one another petering out with Sarokk’s stubborn refusal to rise to their insults. ‘We survived. We six.’

They looked at each other, warily.

Rauth remained quiet, muscles stiff, eyes on the corners where the sheets of ironglass served to hide what was there. He had to force himself to lean forward, ignoring Sarokk’s sudden tension, and pick up what appeared to be half a mollusc shell stuffed with an alginate paste. He scooped the green slime into his mouth and chewed, his omophagea breaking down the complex provenance of its ingredients into a dizzying life history of rushing water, alien suns, and long, idling lapses between tides. He squirmed under the barrage of algal sensations, then discarded the shell for a draught of water to wash away the tastes.

Another gift I would gladly go without.

‘I wonder why the training must be so ruthless,’ Khrysaar went on.

‘Because they’re sadists,’ grunted Juraa, a contention with which Rauth privately concurred.

‘It’s to weed out the weak,’ said Ehrlach. ‘Only six survived?’ He shrugged. ‘We are the six that were strong.’

‘You are wrong, as always, brother.’ Borrg had always laboured under the belief that his Clan Borrgos ancestry in some way earned him higher standing amongst the neophytes. Despite the fact that such favour had never yet become evident, he continued to act as though it was forthcoming. ‘It’s to make us

biddable. I've overheard the battle-brothers' debates when they think I'm not near. They want the next intake to be more obedient to the Iron Council.'

Good luck with that.

'The Kristosian Conclave,' murmured Khrysaar. 'I wonder if we'll learn its purpose after the Iron Moon.'

'Probably not.' Borrg sighed into his own empty clamshell.

'The meeting chambers of the Eye of Medusa are here, deep beneath the Felgarrthi Mountains.' Rauth gestured to the crystalflex with a dark smile.

'Why not petition the Iron Fathers for an audience and ask them?'

'Why not find another bolt-round to walk into?' Khrysaar returned with a mildness at odds with the molten anger in his organic eye.

'There will be plenty waiting for us all on Thennos,' said Rauth.

'You think that's where we'll be sent?' asked Juraa.

'Of course it's where we'll be sent,' Rauth snapped at him.

'I can't wait,' said Borrg.

Rauth rolled his eyes.

Khrysaar leaned forward in a creak of armaplas plates and scooped the stem of his wine glass from the table between his fingers. His inhumanly large palm cupped the bowl. His bionic eye clicked as it dissected its contents. 'I had expected something more from our final trials.'

Borrg nodded. 'Tartrak did make it sound more threatening.'

Rauth's neck prickled as though a servitor breathed on his back.

'Sarokk, what are you doing?'

Juraa looked over, calling Rauth's attention to the fact that Sarokk had lifted the rumpled cloth from the table and was in the process of drawing something from under it. The something was small in his giant's hand. It took a moment for Rauth to recognise it as a weapon. That recognition hit at the same time as the weapon fired and Juraa's brains painted the side of his face. He spluttered, sucking a deal of it into his lung.

Sarokk grinned like death. 'Who is strong now? Brother?'

He turned the stubber on Rauth.

It should have been impossible, brother betraying brother, yet something in Rauth's mind made him react as though it was not only possible but something he had always acutely suspected.

He rolled from the couch, secondary heart thumping pain into his arteries, and hit the floor, the bullet meant for his forehead clipping the couch behind him

and exploding from the back in a cloud of stuffing. Rauth reached for his sidearm and yelled a curse. He looked up, hand on the armrest. The cover provided by the couch was ridiculously light, but it might steal enough from a passing stub round to let his genhanced durability and carapace take the rest.

Sarokk shifted his aim for another headshot, squeezed the trigger; the bullet whistled a centimetre from Rauth's ear as Ehrlach tackled his younger brother to the ground. The pair went through the table together, laden platters falling as the glass beneath them disintegrated. Amidst the wreckage, Sarokk and Ehrlach fought over the gun, blows exchanged with such ferocity that one man's fist or boot was indistinguishable from the other's.

Rauth vaulted the couch. Ehrlach had the beating of the younger neophyte, but the tenets of overwhelming force demanded his action. Defeat was defeat. Victory was crushing or nothing.

Las-fire raked his chest piece as soon as he emerged. The fire tracked up, right to left, across the plexus reinforcement, and shaved the underside of his chin. Blood streaked down his neck from a sliced artery, his carapace otherwise proving equal, but the barrage of the impacts was enough to throw him back into the couch.

Another attacker. Where?

Khrysaar and Borrg had been circling round their respective seating to engage Sarokk, the instinct to overpower and destroy as fundamental to their makeup as it had been to Rauth's. Neither was armed. Both now stopped to hunt for the second assailant. Then Rauth saw her.

By the primarch!

The serving girl had returned, and not with a cloth.

Walking slowly towards the Space Marines with cold exultation showing on her face, she lowered the glowing-hot laspistol in her right hand and raised the one in her left. Rauth instinctively drew up an arm to guard his face, but the shot wasn't for him.

A hissing volley of las-fire scorched Ehrlach's shoulder guard as he reared up over Sarokk with a raised fist to smash in his brother's face. The flurry overheated the weapon's cell, but twenty seconds of continuous fire melted the armaplas of Ehrlach's chest carapace and dropped the neophyte permanently. He slumped over his younger brother as if his dying will had been to smother Sarokk with his corpse.

'She's yours,' Khrysaar roared, and just this once logic overrode pride. Rauth

was no match for Sarokk in his condition and he knew it.

Rolling off the couch and onto his knees, he scrambled left while Khrysaar and Borrg moved in on Sarokk. Rauth saw the young neophyte bunch his legs under Ehrlach's body and propel it hard into Borrg, then put a stub round point blank into Khrysaar's bionic jaw. The elder neophyte ignored the sparks sputtering from his mouth and fell on the younger with a gurgling rage.

The woman calmly, too calmly, tracked her aim towards Rauth.

Las-bolts drew little gasps from the cushions as the pistol's aim chased Rauth from cover. He fell into a roll, streaks of las searing the air above his head, and then came up behind one of the ironglass fixtures. Fulgrim and Ferrus Manus on Gardinaal. The title of the piece, *Brotherhood*, was inscribed in black. Rauth hauled in a breath as las-bolts raked the other side of the glass. He scowled at her distorted image, the steam-hiss then click of power cells being replaced.

It would take a lascannon to fracture ironglass.

'Manus,' she murmured, unaware or perhaps uncaring of the fact that her genhanced prey might hear her. 'Strengthen me as you are eternally strengthened. *In eternum. In sanguine.*' She moved as she spoke, a wide circle around Rauth's cover, and unleashed a flurry of las from both weapons simultaneously that forced him into a reckless dive for another fixture. He skidded behind it. 'Blood of my flesh.' She holstered her pistols, then drew a pair of knives, one long and serrated, the other curved, and broke into a sprint towards Rauth. 'The Legion undying!'

Rauth threw a punch that would have shattered a mortal's bones had the woman not slid under it, leaving a pair of parallel gashes in his armour as she swung up. 'Flesh!' she hissed as the blood flowed, then drove a kick into the back of his knee. He grunted, the joint buckled, but he was stronger than that. He swung his elbow, windmilling back round to face her, but she somehow flapped aside his thrust with her arm. She was small, hard to hit, but what she lacked in strength she accounted for in speed. She came at him again, a blur of kicks and knife-punches that streaked his carapace with red. 'Flesh!' she crowed, with every puncturing blow. 'Flesh! Flesh!'

She slid the long knife from his stomach, where the girdle and groin pads of his carapace met, and swerved away, but the blade dragged on the carapace just enough for Rauth to grab her wrist before she could escape. His hand swallowed hers halfway to the elbow. He squeezed. Bones split. Blood

drenched them where the knife caught between their palms cut them both. Rauth stared hard into the woman's crazed eyes.

Neither flinched.

'Flesh is weak,' the woman hissed.

Rauth dragged the woman into the path of his boot, a kick delivered straight from the body that, as he released her hand, launched her three metres back and would have sent her further yet had she not struck an ironglass etching. She hit it like a sack of tools.

The ironglass shivered, appearing for a moment as if it would remain standing, then slowly tilted backwards and fell to the ground with a crash. The woman lay on top of it, head turned to one side, limbs splayed out. The image of a man on a lobotomy slab flashed through Rauth's mind, and he blinked it away, ballooned his cheeks with air and then lurched after her.

Death cult, murderess. There was rumoured to be a temple in the Land of Shadow, scrap-pedalled beliefs of the primarch as eternal and saviour, Ferrus the undying, building his strength one fool soul at a time for the last Black Crusade when he would lead them from the afterworld to battle. *And on, and on, and on it went.*

He stood over the foot of the felled slab as the woman groaned and began to rise. *Don't you even dare.* He stepped on her foot, breaking it, and she screamed as she dropped her last knife in favour of a laspistol. She swung it towards his head.

The Iron Council finds a use for everything.

There was a loud bang, and Rauth flinched. The woman's trigger finger spasmed, but rather than fire, it tossed the weapon from her hand as the stub round that had breached her skull blew out the other side. The weapon skittered across the floor and she slumped back, dead.

Khrysaar stood nearby, a bullet lodged in the metal of his chin, Sarokk's stubber in one hand. For a moment the weapon's aim strayed towards Rauth, then Khrysaar threw it away. Borrg removed his hands from Sarokk's twisted neck. Rauth nodded wearily. Not gratitude so much as an acknowledgement of a job proficiently done.

We are all brothers, after all.

Then the door opened.

VI

Sergeant Tartrak surveyed the damage. Bodies. Shell casings. Shattered glass. The augmetic tendons of his bionic arm tensed and untensed as he turned his helmed gaze to the three bloodied survivors. To Rauth, drained beyond all emotion, he looked like an edifice of black iron and ceramite, the sort to which feral peoples would offer sacrifice, and grudgingly give worship through fear. The hum of his powered systems filled the broken quiet.

‘What have you learned?’

What have I... what? ‘Learned?’ Rauth replied, too tired and bitter at that moment to separate his thoughts from his mouth.

Behind him, Khrysaar scowled. ‘Never trust.’

‘Correct.’ Tartrak turned his head, instigating a great whine of actuating servos, and regarded the ironglass etching, *Brotherhood*. He spent several seconds just looking, until Rauth began to think the sergeant had lost himself in his ruminations. ‘You can never know what thoughts one you call brother really harbours, to whom his ultimate allegiance is given. Remember that. Remember Sarokk. You can never know who might turn on you or when, but you can be prepared.’

‘Three is a good number,’ Tartrak continued. ‘Not too few. Not too many. Scout-Sergeant Maarvuk will be satisfied.’

Too many? How could there possibly be too many? ‘Was this our final test?’

Tartrak stared at him, his inhuman eyes inscrutable despite whatever emotion he might have intended them to convey.

‘The tests never end, neophyte. Remember that too.’



CHAPTER SEVEN

'Honourable men are beloved of those who make medals, and those who dig holes in the ground for the dead. Iron is un beholden to honour.'

– Sergeant Kardan Stronos

I

Warp technology permitted travel at tremendous – albeit relativistic – inherently incalculable speeds, but intra-system transit remained as arduous as it must have been in the pre-expansionist epoch. At their current relative positions, Thennos was five light hours from Medusa. From the vibrations in the decking, Stronos could tell that the Clan Vurgaan system frigate, the *Onslaught*, was still accelerating towards its maximum velocity, about ninety-five per cent of light speed. One day there, a few hours to convince the Iron Council of the logic of rescinding their interdiction orders, and then one day back. Stronos would be back with his clave before the order to push out passed through the interlink manifold.

Ares had opted to spend the interlude cloistered with his adepts. Verrox was on the bridge. Raan in meditation.

Stronos focused both eyes, organic and bionic, on the gearing wheel in his hand as he brushed yellow grit from his face. His armour, as much of it as he

could remove without assistance, had been piled neatly on the armourium floor. Sweat shine added definition to his hard muscles, and gleamed like polished silver under the lumens he had bent over the workbench.

His journeyed copy of the *Canticle of Travels* lay open on a cleared spot by his elbow. Occasionally, for a few minutes' respite, he would flick dry his flesh fingers, mop his brow, and read a verse. His own precise annotations, musings and random inspirations, his quill-craft barely altered in a hundred years, filled the margins alongside those of the unnamed Martian scholar who had compiled the disparate tales.

He was barely aware of the fact that he was smiling until he was interrupted.

'Can I assist you, lord?'

The robed woman before him was small even for a mortal, surrounded by the trappings of giants as though she had stolen into the workshop of some shadowland troll. Medusa was hostile to life without distinction, but it was home to beasts as would make a Fenrisian wolf or a Catachan devil howl for its mother. Stronos could imagine the role that he filled in this particular image and it amused him. Perhaps that was why he did not simply ignore the engineer and return to his penance.

'You are not like other adepts, to address me so.'

'You know many, lord?'

Stronos raised an eyebrow. The woman shuffled another step towards the trestle and gestured to the machinery spread across it. 'Weaponcraft is not my specialism, but I have some expertise. May I assist?'

'No.'

The conversation thus satisfactorily concluded, Stronos turned his attention back to the cog in his fingers. He picked up his finest brush, and began to work its bristles between the teeth. A fine drizzle of Thennos dust sprinkled his work surface.

The woman was still looking at him.

'Should I bid my servitor locate you a chair? Or sustenance?' He made the offer with such hollow civility that the woman actually smiled. He frowned. 'What is your name?'

Her smile became a wide 'O' of surprise. Her teeth were of a creamy plastek, a few acid-eaten craters still scattered in between. 'None of you...' She closed her mouth hurriedly. 'In all this time, none of you have ever asked me that. Yolanis, lord.'

‘Is that your first name?’

‘Melitan.’

Stronos nodded, a stratagem he had seen employed when humans sought to profess false interest in the words of another.

‘And yours, lord?’

Stronos put down his equipment. ‘You do not know?’

‘Should I?’

To Stronos’ surprise, he began to chuckle, a metallic grating sound, air scratching on his tracheal tract. But the feeling that it pushed into his chest was unexpectedly warm. It passed as quickly as it spread, marked instead by the chill where his augmetics enforced their boundaries. ‘I suppose not. I am not so important. I am Kardan Stronos, tenth sergeant, and only recently inducted into Clan Garrsak.’

‘As am I, lord. I worked in the apothecarion of the *Broken Hand* until my transfer.’

‘Clan Borrgos.’

‘Yes.’

Stronos detected the hitch in the woman’s voice. Unsurprising. Clan Borrgos were renowned amongst the Iron Hands for their single-minded pursuit of perfection and, amongst the mortals who invariably fell short, for their cruelty. Only Clan Raukaan surpassed them in their adherence to the path of the Machine. She seemed to want to talk, however, which presumably was why she had come, though why here, and why not to her own kind, he did not understand.

‘It’s complicated, you know, awakening a nervous system from torporific suspension. Particularly one as ancient as that of Tubriik Ares. You know how old he is?’ When Stronos nodded she went on, pacing now, her mono-tool servo arm twitching like a serpent held above a fire. ‘Eight and a half thousand years old. Give or take. *Eight and a half*. He’s eight times older than Clan Borrgos’ Venerable Castron Fell. So many memories to sort through. So many names. So many experiences. So much data. That’s what I’m here for, to help the Iron Father organise his data. If he seems at times confused, I—’ She seemed to become aware of herself and stopped pacing. Proud of the bulkhead at Stronos’ back was an idol of the Ommissiah, half man and half machine, to which Yolanis directed a passing piety. She straightened. ‘It was a tremendous honour to be selected for the task.’

‘I am sure.’

She gave him a small smile. It looked shy. She changed the subject. ‘Will this be your first Iron Moon since...’ She trailed off, uncertain how to phrase it, which words would be most accurate and least offensive. Her eyes drifted to his metal hand.

‘Yes.’

‘You must be looking forward to it.’

‘I am not.’

‘This will be my second,’ she said, appearing not to have heard. ‘We always look forward to it, in the subdecks. We don’t get much to celebrate. And...’

‘And you get to see us suffer.’

The look Yolanis shot him was of someone caught with their hands in the jar. ‘You are not like other Iron Hands either, are you?’

Stronos grunted.

He had heard that before.

II

No one who knew Medusa could have been surprised by the hostility of her welcome, and yet half of the two dozen Mechanicus adepts locked into their re-entry cradles were vomiting into their laps as soon as the shuttle hit the planet’s troposphere. Verrox laughed at them. No one else did. Winds approaching a thousand kilometres per hour spun the transorbital like a moth in a storm; stressed metal groaned, dust raked the heat shields as though the atmosphere had claws. Thickening clouds shot the viewing blocks with black until that was all they showed, so dense that even the shuttle’s spasmodic lurches gave nothing on the screens. The servitors would be flying on systems. The human adepts felt it in their stomachs. Shaking against his harness, his augmented biology experiencing nothing beyond the sound his armour made as it hit the restraint bars, Stronos watched them retch. To suffer so visibly was clearly a weakness, but he wondered whether it was a worthwhile price: he was as blind as they were, but they *felt* as he never would again.

The buffeting lessened as their altitude dropped and they entered Meduson’s aegis. Sweaty hands were unclawed from around restraint bars; battered

smiles and laughs lit up the compartment.

Medusa's winds were powerful enough to rip the wings off a Thunderhawk if approached incorrectly. They had to be ridden. Attempting to pit strength against strength was an invitation to be torn apart and cast over the Felgarrthi Mountains, and Medusa would never turn such an offer down. That was on any other day. This, however, was the Iron Moon, and the coming alignment added exponentially to the atmosphere's violence.

The shuttle extended landing gear and wobbled down, altitude jets sputtering against the gale, onto a pad ringed with blinking lights. The Iron Hands clumped down the debarkation ramp and into the wind. More than one of the engineers had to be carried.

'Iron Fathers Verrox and Ares and Captain Raan,' one of Verrox's guards growled in the direction of the human ground crew that ran ahead of the maintenance servitors to process the arrivals.

The starport was situated in Meduson's high ranges, where the peaks afforded partial shelter over the perilous routines of take-off and landing. It wasn't well used, but its small size crammed that modest traffic into a hive of activity. Servitors performed post flight checks on screaming landers. Fuel hoses snaked through metre-deep vapours that cloaked the ground but for the blink of guide lights. Living ground crew hurried about, dogged by iterator cherubs, and from ramps like that of the *Onslaught's* shuttle Iron Hands strode from the landing stages.

Stronos moved through the coolant wash to where he could better see the settlement at the foot of the mountain. The rumble of massed vehicles rolled in off the plain like the warning of a coming storm, a match in sheer volume to the cacophony raised by Meduson itself – a planetary population brought to this one place of sanctuary for a twice-in-a-decade cosmic event. Stronos could taste electricity on the wind. Anticipation. The sky was already beginning to burnish. The ground trembled, as if testing its strength for what was to come. In the dust that shrouded the horizon, Stronos could even see the faint outlines of the mountain range across the plain where it painted the clouds with an early flourish of magmic red.

'What's that?' Yolanis touched his wrist, tentatively, but with remarkable temerity for one so fragile, and pointed back across the parked landers to where a hulking Terminator loomed from the coolant mists.

The figure was exceptionally bulky, perhaps a third of his armour removed to

make way for powerful, heavy-duty augmetics. His armour was black, without trim. No clan sigil or clave number adorned it. Even the bionics had been darkened as though by great age. The figure remained unresponsive as the stream of departees crossed his gaze. If not for the steady flicker of his lenses, Stronos might have considered the immense suit inanimate.

‘The Helfathers,’ said Stronos, as softly as he could and still be heard. It was considered bad luck to draw the attention of a Helfather, and even amongst the Iron Hands most believed it. Stronos believed it. ‘They are the most ancient elites, surpassing all others. They serve as custodians of the Iron Council.’

‘I’ve never seen one.’ Yolanis stared in open fascination.

‘They rarely leave Meduson. Perhaps never.’

‘How do you become one?’

‘I do not know.’

‘How can you not know?’

‘By never having been told, and by not caring to ask.’ The engineer’s interest was beginning to make him uneasy. He touched her shoulder, not out of kindness, but to draw her attention before the Helfather took notice. ‘The Helfathers are not men even as I might still call myself a man. I do not know how many they are, I have never heard them speak, and as far as I am aware they do not even have names. I know nothing beyond that which you now know. Believe me when I say, Melitan Yolanis, that I have no wish to know.’

The woman looked unconvinced. Stronos could see the dangerous light of data-hunger in her eyes, but before she could frame another question Ares approached with Verrox and Raan in tow.

‘We must convene with the Iron Fathers for the ceremony,’ said Verrox.

‘We must,’ Ares echoed.

‘We cannot attend,’ Raan informed Stronos. He did not address Yolanis, but the implication was sufficient.

‘You will find us in the Eye after the ceremony’s climax,’ said Verrox. ‘It is customary for the Iron Council to sit on the night of the Iron Moon and I have already communicated with Nicco Palpus that I will have a vote on the Thennosian battle calculus. He tells me that almost half the Iron Fathers will be present.’

‘A rare gathering,’ rumbled Ares.

‘Time enough first for us to see a little blood be spilt.’ Verrox’s grin was a picture of cruelty.

‘I thought that you would wish to speak with me first,’ Stronos said to Ares.

‘We did,’ said Ares, so hollowly that Stronos could not tell if it was a question. Yolanis gave him a strained look of apology.

‘Regarding my actions in Port Amadeus,’ Stronos added, apropos of an explanation.

‘We did. We will. After.’

‘After the ceremony then,’ said Stronos, as the Dreadnought moved his immaculate armoured sarcophagus towards the exit stages, drawing awed looks from ground crew and Iron Hands alike as he passed.

With the exception of the Helfather.

The sentinel kept his dark omen for his own. For now.

III

Stronos had not set foot in Meduson since his own rites of initiation. Nothing had changed. He could have walked the grid-planned streets with his visor blacked out and his haptic sensors disengaged had he so chosen. Few Iron Hands returned for the Iron Moon unless compelled, even those of the Scout and reserve clans more commonly in the vicinity: Stronos was now beginning to understand why.

Humanity. The raw, febrile vicissitudes of mortal life in all its morass: insects called by some instinct of flesh to fight, mate and die.

Traders hawked their wares from stalls. Mortal enemies drank and diced and sang the verses of the *Canticle*, full in the knowledge that the man they had their arm around would have shot them in the back had their paths crossed the day before or the day after. A hundred strands of violent Medusan music shook the metal walls, as though the city vibrated. It was energy, excitement, crowded streets filled with nomads born into rusted shells, the smell of cooking fat and spirit enough to fuel a voidship.

‘Scrap here—’

‘No stronger slave this side of the Telesterax—’

‘Amasec—’

‘Ignore that fool. Who do you think took his other ear? No one distils clearer fuel than Clan Brukaal—’

It all came back. The way his hearts had beat in his chest like recoiling bolters. The sky changing colour, like iron poured into a cast. How it felt to be paralysed by his own nerves. The excitement. The power of the engines as they surrounded him. The roar of expectancy from the clans as he'd stepped into the laager and brandished his knife. He had never forgotten, of course – he was incapable – but he had been able to avoid reminiscing until now.

He blink-selected the rune in his faceplate display to narrow his nasal filters and block out his sense of smell.

It helped a little.

He left the hubbub of the mercantile districts that surrounded the starport and began to recognise that while Meduson may have been little changed, Kardan Stronos had been remade beyond recognition.

Men with peg legs, hook hands and similarly crude bionics defied physical disability and inebriation to remove themselves from his path. Mortals scarred by wind, weapon and promethium watched him as they would watch a partially unsheathed blade. The last time he had walked amongst them he had been recognisably, if not actually, human, the pride of a clan whose name he could not now recall. Now they looked on him and saw what he saw in the Helfathers, something inhuman, and while he could know no fear, they had no such limitation.

Stronos' path took him to the most populous of the many Cult Mechanicus quarters.

A few Iron Hands had gathered by the proving cages assembled for the Iron Moon, each armoured figure a bleak island of towering ceramite in the shadow of the spires, minarets and ziggurats of the temples.

Violence was aggressively discouraged during the Iron Moon, but the cages were a ritual exception. Here the strongest of Medusa's young sons competed for the attention of the Iron Hands. The passage of the Iron Moon would deliver a new injection of worthy blood into Clan Dorrwok, and representatives of clans Borrgos, Vurgaan, Haarmek and Raukaan loomed over the baying mortals to themselves contest the most impressive challengers.

In the main cage, a large fully enclosed structure, about sixty youths stripped to the waist fought a battle royale with clubs, knives and bare hands. The bars rattled as one boy crashed into them, the youth that had thrown him then spraying those same bars with blood as a diorite-tipped spear burst through his chest. The spearman kicked the impaled aspirant off his spear shaft and

immediately found himself dragged back into the melee.

Stronos walked past it and saw another cage that was barely as wide as he was. In it, two heavily muscled boys with greased torsos grappled. A mob of men and women beat their hands on the sides of the cage, cheering or jeering along clan lines.

In one large cage with fortified bars, a feral-looking youth from some highland clan fended off a mountain yarrk with a stave whilst simultaneously trying to re-load a stubber one-handed.

The yarrk stood several metres tall at its boulder-like shoulders, something between a primate and a giant leopard. Shaggy hair the black of Medusa covered its long arms and powerful body; a mane of the same hung over its face. It slobbered, smacking at the boy's staff as he struggled with his pistol. Stronos found his fingers reaching for his bionic eye. He had lost the original in his own proving cage, to the antlers of a wild oryx. His fingers traced the scar in the bone as the yarrk tore the staff from the current hopeful's grip and bellowed. Stronos felt pity. It was just a stick. He, at least, had been given a spear.

With a cry of raw triumph, the youth swung his stubber up and unloaded it into the monster's chest, six tiny pops before the yarrk flattened the challenger under its foot.

The beast's lips peeled back over creamy white fangs, and it head-butted the cage, then emitted a snuffling laugh as the onlookers leapt back in dismay. The giants amongst them merely observed, their presence a chilling one that soon had the mortals returning to their prior positions against the cage. The belief that the Iron Hands would come to the aid of anyone foolhardy enough to be dragged into the yarrk's pen was not one that Stronos shared.

While servitors with hooked rods in place of their hands dragged the corpse from the cage, another hopeful took the acclaim of the clans. A magos biologis, hooded and robed, a pale half-moon of a chin visible under his cowl, ran his fingers over the new challenger's muscles, prodding and grasping for reasons both mysterious and arcane. He turned to the cagemaster, a huge mortal with a matted chest wrapped in nothing but a length of chain, and nodded to indicate that the boy was acceptable. What parameters such pre-assessments were conducted to, Stronos did not know, but the clans roared their approval of the magos' assessment.

'That's a Felgarrth boy there,' spoke a weathered old man at Stronos' side,

referring to the Felgarrth clan that eked their livelihood from the plains beyond Meduson. Stronos turned briefly towards him. The elder had one eye sewn shut and an arm socketed by a crude iron cuff. Stronos looked back to the aspirant as he took up his weapons and stepped confidently into the cage.

Most clansmen were blood relations; inbreeding was inevitable, but the resemblance to the challenger was near enough for Stronos to infer that the old man was a direct relative, perhaps even a father. He showed no concern for the boy's danger.

‘Mark him well, lord. He’ll bring strength to your clan.’

The old man had clearly noted the emblem of Clan Garrsak on Stronos’ pauldron plate and mistaken him for one of the recruiting sergeants. ‘Your son?’

‘Nephew,’ the man replied, surprised at being answered. ‘His father’s dead.’

‘Do you not fear for his life?’

The old man’s rotator cuff clunked as he shrugged, and he scowled as he worked out the seized joint. ‘He could die feeding the engine, he could be dragged into the fans or be exposed to the wind. Both his sisters fell to the black lung before they came of age and his cousin, my son, died in battle.’ He shrugged, unmoved by the litany of the dead. ‘Or he could chance it all on immortality.’ He showed Stronos his shoulder. ‘I did.’

A throaty cry went up from the crowd as the youth ran at the yarrk and struck it on the snout with his staff. The uncle gave a coarse laugh, and slipped into a clan dialect with which Stronos was unfamiliar to yell encouragement. ‘You like what you see, lord?’

Stronos looked away to take in the totality of the proving cages. There were scores of them just in this one square. In addition to the gladiatorial challenges there were tests of technical ability, physical endurance, trials of pain. In one cage, Stronos witnessed a boy subjected to electrocution under the ministry of a Mechanicus priest, the object being not only to endure but to suppress entirely the body’s reaction to the pain. The boy did well. Stronos saw two Iron Hands argue briefly, before the victorious sergeant of Clan Haarmek dragged the stumbling boy from the cage to be corralled with the handful of bloodied and dazed aspirants already secured for his clan.

Stronos looked back to the yarrk cage. Angered, the yarrk had unfolded from its hunch. It wound back its arm as if to strike, then, with a roar, it lunged with its entire body. The boy scrambled to get out of the way, the brushing contact

with the beast still enough to fling him across the cage. The yarrk slammed into the bars where the boy had been, then sat back down to pick up the staff he had dropped and scratch its gums with it. Behind it, the boy picked himself up, giving no indication of the broken ribs Stronos could see he was carrying.

Such a waste: manpower was a resource like any other, and the whole bloody affair struck him as pointless. Perhaps this was the real reason he stayed away.

‘Would you like to know how I would fight such a beast?’ he said to the old man.

‘Lord, I would.’

‘The pistol. I would shoot the beast in the eyes before entering the cage, and then wait for it to bleed.’

The old man looked up at Stronos as though waiting on the explanation of the joke. ‘But lord, the honour of the—’

‘Honourable men are beloved of those who make medals, and those who dig holes in the ground for the dead. Iron is un beholden to honour.’ Stronos turned to leave. He had seen as much as he cared to.

‘My condolences for your nephew.’

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> BATTAKKAN

>>> ORIGIN >>> LYDRIIK, CODICIER

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 088282.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

Blood and ordure splashed Lydriik’s boots. Battakkan was an Iron Age feudal world, its ideas of drainage at considerable variance to Lydriik’s. And yet, even the most sanitised of core territories would have been tested by the volume of fluid that the Iron Hands had spilled here. The smoke smelled of wood and dung walls. Bolter-fire crackled like burning thatch. And screams. With the incandescence of his mind’s eye, he could see the soul-embers that floated above the fire like chaff on the wind. With a handful of archaic lasrifles distributed through a force that, though thousands-strong, was otherwise outfitted with wooden shields and iron axes, they had never stood a chance.

Genocide had never been so effortless.

Lydriik scattered a pair of weaselfowl, some local aberration of chicken and rat that had been drinking from a blood pool that had collected in a wheel rut in

the middle of the road. His boots squelched in soft mud as he passed the picket of Centurion Destroyers that held the main square.

The battle-suited Devastator elite of Clan Vurgaan had already torn down most of the surrounding structures to create kill-zones. There they waited like ambush predators, heavy bolters, autocannon and ultra-rare examples of volkite weaponry, phosphex incinerators and bio-alchem launchers, emerging from what ruins remained. The magos calculi had determined that anti-armor firepower would be superfluous, and so it had proven. They were so still that the weaselfowl had overcome their fear sufficiently to peck the gore from their boots. Compared to the bonfire of mortality that Lydriik could see burning into the warp, even their souls were dim, quiet things, cold spaces in a maelstrom of dying light. The Centurion sergeant admitted Lydriik onto the village square without a word.

The square was enclosed on three sides by half-stone buildings with high, sloping roofs, their gables blackened with soot. The building on the fourth side, though smaller than the great longhouses, was remarkable in its incongruity, neither wood, nor stone, nor endemic material unique to Battakkan. It was a creamy alien ceramic that Lydriik had encountered on worlds across the Western Veil. By the fractal glow of the windows' energy shutters, the Iron Father conducted the local chieftain's interrogation.

The man was big for a mortal, his thick arms covered with warrior tattoos. He was dressed in rich furs with a circlet of iron on his head. His face was beginning to turn blue, his eyes to bulge, feet kicking a metre and a half off the ground where his entrails roped in the dirt. A flock of crowing weaselfowl flapped around the Iron Father's legs to get at the man's offal.

The Iron Father's name was Verrox, which meant that the man talked.

Lips quivered in their final attempt to make words. Verrox grinned and turned his head to listen. His eyes shone like bolters at dawn.

'Objection – engrammic extraction post-mortem would be more efficient,' complained the magos beside him, fully shrouded in his red cloak as though braced for cold, surrounded by a cacophony of semi-flightless birds.

'It would take you two hours at least to set up your instruments.'

'More reliable then,' said the magos as a death rattle jerked the chieftain's feet.

'He told me what I need to know.' There was a crunch of bone as Verrox allowed the man's head to snap. His head flopped to one side. Verrox tossed

the corpse away, pursued by a cawing flurry of weaselfowl. ‘But perform your extraction.’ The magos executed an elaborate bow, then directed his servitors to salvage the body.

Verrox turned Lydriik’s way and gestured with his hand to summon him, then slid his bloodied fingers into his mouth as the Librarian approached. His mouth was very deep and very wide. His eyelids flickered as his omophagea digested the dead man’s memories. ‘I can taste it when a man lies. The alien will be here within the hour. Believe it. And after Magos Tarl is forced to abandon his rituals half finished to attend to his war machines he will not question me again.’ He produced a simian grin, his lips smeared with human blood. ‘You know why I ordered your transfer.’

It was not a question. Verrox did not ask questions.

‘Yes.’

‘My Librarian was weak enough to be slain, and I still have neophytes to blood.’ The Iron Father waved a hand over Lydriik as though in blessing. ‘You are Clan Vurgaan now. Congratulations.’

Lydriik blinked in surprise.

>>DISREGARD FOR PROPER RITUAL IS A MARKED TRAIT OF THE VURGAAN. HOWEVER, THE PROBABILITY THAT THE CODICIER MISREMEMBERS THE PRECISE ORDER OF EVENTS IS CALCULATED AT 48%>>

Lydriik handed the Iron Father the dataslate he was carrying.

‘Summarise.’

‘Temperamentally unsuitable,’ said Lydriik, after a moment’s hesitation. ‘His emotions rule him still, despite my predecessor’s efforts. I would advise his training be terminated, and that he is transferred to your apothecarion for repurposing.’

‘Stronos is only half a year from his Iron Moon. It would be wasteful to discard him now. Raise Scout Clave Jerikko and see that he’s attached.’ Verrox’s too-large mouth split like a wound tearing at a stitch. ‘Let’s see what the tau make of his temperament.’

>>>TERMINATING SIMULUS.

A laager of superheavy armoured vehicles caused the world to roar, aping the prehistoric Terran mythos of a flat earth ringed by an eternal waterfall. In place of falls there rose an avalanche of rumbling steel and belched smoke. The *Broken Hand*, along with its counterparts from clans Vurgaan, Haarmek and Raukaan carved a circle several thousand metres in diameter from the desert. Dust from their tracks made the vehicles little more than shapes and thunder, the reddening sky turned once more to black, the towering idols of the Felgarrthi Mountains those of absent gods.

‘Many tried. Few succeeded.’ Iron Chaplain Huygens stood tall within the swirl of dust as though it rose from the earth at his command, his voice booming from a triad of slaved servo-skulls. ‘Those that faltered were weak. By your presence here you prove that you are strong. Rise.’ With one arm, he gestured. ‘You will never kneel again.’

Rauth and the other neophytes rose. Khrysaar and Borrg were there, as were two others that Rauth didn’t know. They were all naked except for their bionics and surgical scars. *Not a sight for the squeamish*. The Iron Chaplain walked the line of huge, ironclad young men, pausing to regard each one. Rauth glared back when it was his turn.

‘You are as iron, melted down, re-made as one. What the Iron Creed alloys let no force sunder.’

Tartrak and Dumaar and a handful of senior Iron Hands of the four clans observed in stormswept silence. Rauth could feel the empty weight of the Apothecary’s stare on his spine, a fleshy itch that wanted to be cut. A reminder that there was no retreat for him now. At a signal from one of the delegation, the ever-circling laager of clan crawlers fired off a shrieking barrage of noise from horns and loud-hailers.

The blast lingered, even as the rumble of tracks and armour shredded it, hollowed it and finally crushed it back into the wind.

A muscular growl answered the call, and Rauth saw several convoys of light vehicles stream through the moving gaps in the laager. Hidden by the dust and noise except for their headlamps, they swept into a second, tighter ring, myriad clan icons flashing by, emblazoned in fresh paint over the corroded bodywork of half-tracks and buggies. The human clans. Rauth wondered if his own clan was out there, his parents straining for a fleeting glimpse of the man who

would bring honour and trading rights to their clan. *Was it worth it?* He did not think he would even recognise them now if he saw them. *Pity.* He would have crushed their throats with his bare hands had he been able to pull them from the crowd.

Half a dozen open-topped transports split from the mass of vehicles and roared towards Rauth and the others. They were black, heavily armoured, driven by Iron Hands. Loaded into the backs like cattle were several score of the new intake from the mortal clans. Rauth would have pitied them. *If I had any pity to spare.*

The vehicles approached without further fanfare. The Iron Hands killed their engines and disembarked. The aspirants themselves emerged under greater duress. *Not so eager now, are we? That, I do remember.* They looked fearful. Most had been injured during the proving or so hard-pressed that they were practically unconscious on their feet. *Or so they think. They'll learn just how far a body can be pushed.* Under the firm guidance of the recruiting sergeants and the steely gaze of Iron Chaplain Huygens, the dispirited mob of youngsters lined up before the neophytes. Two lines of battle, present versus future, man versus metal. Sixty versus six.

It should be clear to all which line will win.

‘You have been hardened by challenge and you have overcome.’ Huygens now prowled the friendless space between the two lines. ‘You are no longer the men you once were. You are no longer men. You have plunged your hands into the raging fire and by your resolve they have been withdrawn as iron.’ He stopped at the end of the row and turned back. ‘But this is not the end. You will take the legacy of the Father into the galaxy and you will *show* it strength.’

The neophytes had no cheer for the Iron Chaplain’s words. They stared at him, sullen, expressionless, as the Iron Hands shoved their mortal charges towards them. The cacophony of trucks and horns clearly had the young men disoriented for they stumbled ahead of their new masters like herded livestock. Their eyes were wide, their mouths tight shut out of habit from life on a dusty world, but taut with awe and horror at the gene-bred musculature and bio-augmentation arrayed against them.

‘You will grow stronger yet,’ Huygens growled. ‘For before you stand those that will replace you should you fail.’

Scouring the unlikely candidates immediately before him, one caught Rauth’s eye. He stared back with as much defiance as Rauth sent his way in contempt.

With a flash of anger Rauth punched the youth in the face, breaking the boy's nose and hurling him back into the group. Two other boys were knocked down before the press of bodies brought the defiant youth down. A surge of bittersweet satisfaction made Rauth smile. He didn't know why he'd done it, only that every muscle in his body trembled with the shaking ground and that he was afraid. And the boy was weak and he was strong.

And it had felt good.

The boy stood back up.

Tough little human. 'What's your name?'

'Morvox.'

Rauth pointed to him and shouted, 'This one!'

The other neophytes similarly picked out candidates and drew them off while the Iron Hands bullied their brothers back towards the transports. *Your time will come.* Huygens deposited a serrated knife into the hand of each of the neophytes in turn. Rauth was eldest, angriest and last. When he was finished, the Iron Chaplain delivered a blistering sermon in ancient Medusan that Rauth didn't understand. Morvox couldn't have understood it either, but he seemed to grasp what was required of him. He held out his left hand. Rauth brandished the knife. The boy's eyes were unwavering. Rauth's knuckles were printed onto his shattered nose in blood.

Here it is. The chance to pass on the pain. I would have let it end by now if I hadn't had this moment to look forward to. Cry out. By the living Emperor, cry out.

He didn't cry out. None of them did. There were grunts, tears that streamed from clenched eyes, but no one screamed for they knew they had been blessed above their peers. They would be re-made.

Rauth looked at the severed hand on the ground. The warmth leached out of it as it did out of him. What little pleasure cutting it off had brought trickled away like blood into the black sand. Morvox's expression had reverted to what it had been, paler, more effort going into it, but no less defiant.

'You weaken, but soon you will become strong.'

Rauth held Morvox's glare as Huygens hauled them unceremoniously apart.

No sooner had the Iron Chaplain moved on to the next pair than Rauth felt Apothecary Dumaar's hand on the back of his head and he was driven to his knees. *And Huygens promised.* Rauth was strong, but the strength in the Apothecary's arm was astounding. Dumaar bent Rauth's head forward until his

chin dug into the naked flesh of his chest and he felt vertebrae stand up from his neck. He closed his eyes. He was afraid.

He cursed the logic of it. He was afraid because for the first time in his life he knew exactly what was going to happen next.

V

The Eye of Medusa was a vault, buried deep beneath the shifting plates of the Felgarrthi fault. Stronos had never been inside, but he had heard of its size and the technological marvels it contained from those few who had. Even its labyrinthine antechambers were rumoured to be a repository of lost wonders.

The Iron Hands had no particular name for those passages: they were a transitionary space, an incidental surety of the Eye's sanctity, but to the Medusans they were the Maze of Glass.

Some believed that at the heart of its fractal, ever-branching passages was a crypt where a reliquary containing the severed head of Ferrus Manus rested on an altar of solid diorite, watched over by a Helfather that never moved, ate, spoke, or slept. To some – and Stronos had once heard Verrox voice such a belief – the primarch had never truly died, his mortal demise a myth of his own making to drive his sons to greater plateaus of strength, and he dwelled here, within the etched glass. More than one pilgrim had spoken boldly of the revelations he would seek at the demi-god's knee, never to be heard from again.

The ironglass panelling trembled as Stronos walked by, emitting the vibrations of the Iron Moon as an eerie wail. It was as though Stronos had left the chaos of the surface world behind him, and found tranquillity in this cavern of singing crystal. The rituals on the surface were approaching their climax and Stronos would prefer to spend those hours prior to the meeting of the council of Iron anywhere but on the Felgarrthi plains. There were no humans here – something about the maze confounded the unaugmented's power to navigate – just a handful of Iron Hands in old Mark of power armour studying the etched glasses in solitude.

Most of the panels carried depictions of Iron Hands triumphant – or, not infrequently, vanquished in bitterness – or scenes from *The Canticle*. A few

were more abstract or impressionist in their subject.

Stronos found his footsteps drawn to one piece that was neither of those and yet immediately stood out. It portrayed a single Iron Hands battle-brother in antiquated wargear, facing down the viewer, the etcher having captured perfectly the rawness of a bolter mid-burst. It featured what looked like an injured warrior of the Raven Guard Legion, who at first glance the Iron Hand appeared to be sheltering behind his body. His face was pale against the dark of his armour, cleverly worked greyscaling serving to deepen the warrior's eyes and draw the ridge of his brow from the pane. An illusion of shade, but an effective one. Stronos turned his head, twitching his occuli muscles to adjust his bionic's focus, searching the two characters for some alternative interpretation beyond the obviously incorrect.

‘What are you thinking, Kardan?’

The sound of that familiar voice made his smile muscles ache. He studied the etching anew. ‘I don't know.’

‘Good. It takes an elasticity of mind to be knowingly ignorant. Few are capable.’

A Space Marine in glossed black plate, his pauldron a nightshade blue bearing the white hand of the Iron Hands, came to stand beside him. He was unhelmed, the back of his head shrouded instead, in part, by the velveteen shimmer of a psychic hood. He looked at least a century younger than Stronos knew him to be, clean-skinned and bright-eyed, blond hair slicked back in rows.

Stronos had never wished for more than one friend. One was sufficient. Friends supported a man's weaknesses. It was enemies that made him strong.

‘Lydriik. My friend. What are you doing here?’ He turned, the urge to clasp his brother's wrist in welcome firmly suppressed. He looked his brother up and down, noting the uncompromising finish of his armour. ‘I had heard a rumour you were hunting eldar pirates in the Dawnbreak Cluster.’

‘The Deathwatch tie us with oaths of discretion, brother. I know how you loathe secrets, but trust me that they are necessary at times. Suffice to say that my tithe of service is almost paid and I will soon be returned to Clan Borrgos.’ A shadow momentarily darkened his face. ‘And I was nearby.’

Looking for a change of subject, Stronos found it in the ironglass etching. It sang urgently of the Iron Moon. ‘What is it?’

The darkness swiftly passed as Lydriik turned to matters nearer his heart than

war. ‘It is Sharrowkyn and Wayland.’

‘Does it depict an actual event? It is difficult to conceive.’

Lydriik shrugged, a remarkably human mannerism, but then Lydriik was remarkably human. Only a handful of tiny augments silvered his face and neck where they traced the basilar artery to regulate blood flow to the brain. Both his hands were his own. Stronos supposed it was because the Epistolary was not Medusan. Isolationist though they could be, the Iron Hands were not above recruiting off-world for rare skills and Lydriik was one of those exceptions, taken from the Scholastica Psykana as their Black Ships had passed through the Medusan sector. It was a supposition that led to uncomfortable questions however – was the imperative towards perfection a cultural trait as much as it was one that the Iron Hands owed to the primarch? Did Stronos’ eye *itch* solely because those around him had discarded theirs? He and Lydriik had debated such problems of philosophy at length over the decades of the Western Veil Crusade, and had cemented a friendship that had been founded when the then Codicier Lydriik had been summoned to assess a certain neophyte of unruly psyche and uncommon weakness of temperament.

‘Do you still etch?’ Stronos asked

‘I find it focuses the mind.’

‘I am surprised you find the time.’

‘Time is an artifice,’ said Lydriik, smiling over his gorget’s high rim to show Stronos that he was being tested. ‘If I find time lacking then I make time.’

‘Ferrus Manus,’ said Stronos. ‘From The Scourging of the Vadraan Giants.’

‘Verse twelve. You’ve been reading.’

Stronos moved his arm to show the metal-plated leather holster in which he carried his copy of *The Canticle*. Lydriik’s eyes appeared to spark with shackled mirth. ‘I see you in the regalia of the Reclusiarch one day, Kardan.’

‘Perhaps in a hundred years or so,’ said Stronos, before adding, without exaggeration, ‘Jorgirr Shidd is indestructible.’

‘Believe me, brother. I see great things for you.’ Lydriik placed his gauntlet on Stronos’ shoulder, then looked back over his own as if to see whether the few Iron Hands wandering this section of the maze had moved on. They had. Lydriik smiled then and leaned in, as if the ironglass likenesses might read his lips. ‘You always had an open mind. That is the reason I have come here. I need to speak to you about Thennos.’

‘Thennos?’

Stronos probed his brother's eyes for an explanation, but he did not have Lydriik's talent for opening a man's mind. He was about to break contact and speak further when the clump of boots on metal made him look up.

Another Space Marine walked towards him. This one, however, was no Iron Hand. The stoop of his shoulders, the way he prowled rather than walked, spoke of some proscribed abhuman rather than the gene-might of the Adeptus Astartes. Eyes the colour of molten amber with vertically slit pupils locked onto his the way a traversing sentinel-gun would track a static target. His long white hair he wore in a tail. Space Wolf. The feral warrior snarled, canines showing, as though as insulted by Stronos' augmented strength as Stronos was his bestial odour. It was next to impossible to distract a Space Marine or to catch one unawares, and so Stronos was duly perturbed to look away and find himself staring into the featureless red eyes of a second member of Lydriik'sclave that had somehow come up on his blind side unannounced. His face was hairless, down to the eyelashes, his skin as white as regolith. His pauldron displayed the crossed-scythe emblem of a lesser Chapter with which Stronos was unfamiliar.

Stronos' flesh prickled and he became acutely aware of Lydriik's hand, firm now on his shoulder.

'We want *very much* to talk to you about Thennos.'

VI

Melitan watched the ceremony's climax in horror. At her first Iron Moon, she had only been on Medusa a few weeks and had been so overwhelmed by the alien customs and the horrifying local climate that she'd missed the transports out for the laager. This time had been different. Her mind was a stew of insoluble algorithms that no amount of loud music or potent liquor seemed able to break down, and so she'd been among the first to the staging areas to wait for a transport, hoping for a different kind of distraction. Colleagues native to Meduson or who had been here longer had told her what to expect, but hearing it second-hand and *feeling* the work of the bone-drills for herself was another thing entirely. She was accustomed to surgical procedures, of course. This was something else.

‘I think I’m going to be sick.’ Callun’s hood was thrown back from his head, his sallow hair flying out behind him with their truck’s speed.

Melitan didn’t know when or how he had managed it, but Callun was drunk. Some time before he had tried to sneak her behind the pintle mount and kiss her, she suspected.

‘Torture,’ Melitan yelled back in disgust. ‘I can believe it of Dumaar, I really can. But I didn’t want to think they could all be the same. And the people. How do they stand it? Why do they not rise up and... and...?’

She trailed off, uncertain what it was exactly that she expected.

Callun looked up from his communion with the dustguards. His throat rippled with every judder of the truck’s suspension. ‘I was talking about our speeding round in circles like this. Has it started?’

‘Damn it, Callun. Throne of bloody Terra.’

‘What do you care? I thought you hated them anyway.’

‘I...’ Melitan turned away, their rugged truck banging on the hard pan. ‘They were human once. I suppose that’s hard to imagine.’ Ignoring the dry heaving from behind her, she peered through the black streaks of blow dust to where the Iron Hands had gathered at the heart of the whirlwind. ‘Look at the number of Terminator suits out there. At least two dozen. It has to be the Iron Council. The magos instructor told me that some disaster befell the Legion of old, long ago, and that most of their suits were lost.’

‘Mmmm.’

Ever since her transfer to the *Rule of One*, Melitan and her staff had done all they knew how to make sense of Ancient Ares’ memory problems. She knew she was good, but she was at a loss. Naavor couldn’t help. Braavos didn’t care. She didn’t know where else to turn.

Except. Maybe. The one who had authorised that transfer.

The Voice of Mars was the only permanent position on the Iron Council, and the Iron Council were right there in front of her. An idea began to form in her mind, and managed to achieve what all the distractions of Meduson had been unable to: clear it of worry.

‘What is it?’ Callun slurred. ‘You looked a little... far off, for a minute there.’

Melitan gave him her best, least artificial smile, and watched his frown melt as she’d known it would. She felt guilty about what she was about to ask even before she asked it. She was exploiting his weakness for her as any of the Iron Hands would have done in her place.

And it was the most natural thing in the world.

VII

The earth could shake all it wanted; it couldn't deafen Rauth to the ignition of promethium torches being ignited, or the sound of bone drills being locked and whirred. With his eyes alone, Dumaar's hand holding his face down as if to drown him in self-pity, Rauth watched the phalanx of gargantuan figures approach on foot. Rauth counted nineteen before the ache in his eyeballs forced him to look back down. Nineteen venerable Dreadnoughts and Terminator-armoured lords: the Iron Fathers, just under half the council's full strength. After blinking several times, he looked up again, his eyes drawn towards the figure that led the March of the Fathers.

It was not a man he had ever seen, but one whose likeness stared out from more iron-glasses than Rauth could recall, and whose appearance he could have conveyed simply from the legends of his deeds. It was not, in any recognisable way, a man.

Bionics had taken over a large part of the Iron Father's bulk, insofar as there was any longer a distinction between the Iron Hands warrior and his armour. A lather of sanative oils bestowed both with shifting bands of colour. A servo-arm, bladed and weaponised, hooked like an iron mantis over a fully enclosing helm. Beneath its slowly rotating claws, eye slits shone like ice in the sun. A third and a fourth vision slit either side, where a man's ears would have been, glowed with the same fell light. There was a ruby set into his chest. Wedged between the solid ceramite of his left pectoral and the complex moving parts of his right, it burned with a magmic wrath, tracers of energy spitting over his armour frame with each pounding step.

As the Iron Father drew nearer, Rauth heard the whispering cant of machine parts. The ancient whirred, clicked, as though he were an armour casing for a hive of warrior beetles, hummed with power. But for all that, the Iron Father was *cold*, an empty presence. Medusa blasted through him as though he wasn't there.

'By the Father,' Rauth mouthed, similar exclamations of recognition and awe spilling from the mouths of the others.

At that very second the torch touched Rauth's neck.

No more words. No more thoughts.

The fire burned them all away. The universe turned white, and behind the hole burned into the heart of it the promethium torch seared away all trace of weakness, baptised him in the vapour of his own flesh into the company of Clan Dorrwok. He knew better than to scream.

Because Iron Father Kristos had returned to Medusa.



CHAPTER EIGHT

'God of the Machine. Oh, God...'

– Enginseer Melitan Yolanis

I

'If you wanted to know about Thennos, brother, then you should have asked. I would have told you.' Stronos spoke only to Lydriik. He had shared warzones with his brothers from other fathers many times: two squads of Crimson Fists on Lar'eshal, a full company of Aurora Chapter and their mortal armoury crew on Turkmen, but strict protocols ensured direct contact was minimal. He ignored them now as he had then. 'The Iron Hands fear no secrets.'

The Space Wolf's pantherish snort of amusement snarled back and forth between the reflective ironglass panes around him. Stronos looked over his shoulder, irritation preventing him from ignoring the outsider as he wished. That annoyed him. The warrior's physique, though immense and essentially ageless in the manner of all Space Marines, was remarkably unenhanced. His armour too was standard pattern Mk VII. Functional. He looked away again as the white-maned warrior bared his teeth.

'Ymir is a man of few words and acquired humour,' said Lydriik. His warning glance evoked a hoary chuckle.

‘Do we share life histories now?’ The voice of the third Space Marine was little more than a whisper, almost lyrically Medusan in its minimalism, and even the wolf grew abruptly more severe. He turned to Stronos, and there was no evading the rufescent intensity of his eyes this time. ‘He said he would answer if you asked, Lydriik, so please, ask.’

‘Yes, Captain Harsid.’

‘Wait. You do not command?’ Stronos glanced at his friend in surprise.

‘Believe it or not, but Harsid’s rank is well earned,’ said Lydriik. ‘Serving alongside the sons of other fathers has given me renewed appreciation of the many ways in which one can be strong. It has also shown me other forms of weakness to which we have allowed ourselves to become blind.’

‘Weakness?’

‘A debate for another time, perhaps.’

Harsid’s eyes drew Stronos back in. ‘You are familiar with Thennos’... privileges.’

Stronos thought of the Devilfish he had seen, and the scores of covered vehicles in one-nine/seven-two/eta. How many more had there been in Port Amadeus before the Iron Hands had levelled the complex, which had, in itself, been little more than a warehousing and supply hub? How many more again had the Iron Council’s interdiction orders spared from destruction? From there his thoughts turned in a disconcertingly organic fashion to wondering what else the Iron Fathers sought to protect by restricting access to large swathes of Thennos’ surface.

Belatedly, thoughts lagging from the demands for processivity that so many questions made, he wondered at the perniciousness of the xenotech code corruption that could turn a skitarii princeps and a loyal garrison against their doctrina imperatives. He tried to stem the flow of thoughts there. Curiosity was a weakness of the flesh.

The Space Marine, Ymir, let go of a boisterous laugh. ‘Not so open with your secrets now, eh, Iron Hand?’

Stronos did not answer. The Imperium was full of men who thought it their right, their duty even, to pry into the Iron Hands and their traditions. As they should, he supposed, though without the strength to back it up, the affront was risible and generally treated accordingly. That Stronos did not care what weaker men thought or said was not the same as giving license to pry. That a man he called friend had brought two of them to the very threshold of the Eye

of Medusa brought a sting of betrayal that Stronos had not felt since his Smelting. He glanced at Lydriik, aware as he did so of the light touch that skimmed the surface turmoil of his thoughts.

‘Keep your mind out of mine,’ Stronos warned.

‘I am sorry, brother,’ said Lydriik, chastened. ‘Truly. But if you know of Thennos’ unique status then you can understand the interest of the Ordo Xenos in recent developments.’

‘The Inquisition?’ Stronos felt a fresh twist in his gut, like a worm being squeezed in an iron brace.

‘Inquisitor Talala Yazir. She is aboard the Chartist conveyancer, the *Lady Grey*, that brought us here, one of several thousand with license to transport proscribed technologies to restricted handling sites like Thennos. She is attempting to bypass the fleet blockade around Thennos.’

‘She will fail,’ Harsid surmised.

Stronos silently agreed with that assessment, triggering another outburst of laughter from the grizzly beast, Ymir.

‘Another would try to justify denying an inquisitor her authority. I like you Iron Hands. I find your stubbornness amusing.’

‘I am not representative,’ said Stronos. ‘And nor is Lydriik.’

The Epistolary looked pained by that.

‘I have been led to understand as much,’ said Harsid, softly, then turned to the ironglass behind Stronos. He looked up, as if to appraise the etched depiction of the Raven Guard and his Iron Hands protector. ‘When I first saw Lydriik work his glass I was astonished. Your art is hardly what you are famed for.’

‘My brothers prize function,’ Lydriik answered softly, evidently rehearsing an argument from some ongoing philosophical debate. ‘To assume that we would accord art no value is to assume that art has no function. Ferrus Manus himself was said to have kept a small private collection.’

The wraith-like captain smiled. And Stronos had thought his own brothers cold.

‘See how he tests me.’ Harsid turned to Stronos and there was no smile there now, nor any evidence that one had ever left its mark. ‘I hate to be tested, by him, by Ymir, even by Yazir. And I *like* Lydriik, Ymir and Yazir. I don’t like many people, Iron Hand. There are things on Thennos that many people would be astonished to see the Iron Hands take interest in. Believe me, the people I know aren’t easy to astonish.’ His voice rose in ardour as he spoke, without

ever climbing above a whisper.

‘The Mechanicus have something at Locis Primus,’ said Lydriik, taking on his commander’s line. ‘Something that goes far beyond their license. With the complicity of the Iron Council or merely exploiting their dysfunction, it’s impossible to know.’

‘But we mean to find out,’ finished Harsid.

‘Thennos is a Medusan world in all but the banner it flies,’ Lydriik went on. ‘An uprising there is a black mark against the might of the Iron Hands. You might then wonder why the Iron Fathers make it so difficult for you to crush it.’

‘I warned you to keep away from my thoughts.’

Lydriik shook his head and bared his hands. ‘I don’t steal this from you, brother. The inquisitor has other sources, as do I. I know what your orders are, and why you are here. You asked me what I was doing on Medusa – do you not think I would have done the same had I not already known?’

Stronos had no answer and so did not give one. Ymir nodded in mock appreciation. ‘It’s like moving ice to a half degree above freezing and watching it melt, isn’t it?’

‘Not now, Ymir,’ Harsid hissed.

‘All I’m asking,’ said Lydriik, ‘is that you go before the Iron Council and see for yourself. I am not an Iron Father. I’ve not undertaken the trials or made pilgrimage to Mars. They won’t admit me. But you go under the aegis of Ancient Ares. His word opens many sealed doors.’

‘I do not expect to be heard.’

‘Nor do I. Just listen. Listen and make up your own mind.’

Stronos’ bionic eye clicked, a physical crutch for a mental tumult that was unflinchingly organic. The Iron Council had not been the core of strength that they should have been these past centuries, and yet the forty-one Iron Fathers were the physical repository for tens of thousands of years of accumulated knowledge. They were due respect if not unwavering obedience, and would surely have disdained the latter had it been offered. But when had Lydriik ever asked him for a favour? When had outsiders last trod the Maze of Glass?

‘*You will never trust.*’

That most quoted passage from the *Scriptorum of Iron* rose in his mind. The cycles of history demonstrated that it was a teaching worth reiterating, even if it was lacking in context, shorn of nuance to produce a truism with which there could be no confusion. Nevertheless, Stronos found it open to interpretation.

Recalling the fate of the primarch, he had always felt it was a rejoinder against placing too much faith in oneself.

‘Stronos!’

Blurry reflections of a brute in spiked terminator armour approached through the glass walls from several directions at the same time as his name was spat into the conspiratorial huddle like a gas round. At the last moment, Stronos saw the genuine Iron Father Verrox clump through an intersection towards him, Ares and Raan following behind. Heat vented off the Clan Vurgaan Iron Father’s old, much-modified battleplate like a miasma. Ymir bared his teeth and Verrox glared back, an alpha beast enhanced by extensive mechanisation. In his altered Indomitus plate the Iron Father had half a metre in height over the Space Wolf and more than twice the breadth. His cheeks unzipped to reveal an extended row of belt-driven diamantite teeth. Ymir backed down.

‘I told you that Deathwatch duty would ruin you,’ Verrox said to Lydriik.

‘I remember. But I don’t see it that way,’ the Librarian returned.

Verrox grunted. Harsid bowed his head to the Iron Father, and by example convinced Ymir to do the same. Accidents of birthplace notwithstanding, Lydriik was still one of the Iron Hands at his core and not designed to bow. Stronos noted, however, the softening wetness of his eyes as he looked up and beheld Tubriik Ares for the first time.

‘Do we know you?’ asked Ares, parchment banderole with golden inscription fluttering over his powerful augmitters.

‘I... would remember, ancient one,’ Lydriik answered.

Ares appeared satisfied by that answer and said nothing more.

‘Get them back to the surface,’ Verrox said to Lydriik, speaking over the two Deathwatch Space Marines. ‘I would hate to stumble on their armour in the maze fifty years from now.’

‘Now,’ said Captain Raan, his words apparently for Stronos rather than for Lydriik. ‘The conclave has already overrun by two hundred years. Do not expect it to be held one minute for us now.’

II

Melitan Yolanis peered out from behind her dataslate as the three Iron Hands

and Ancient Ares neared the blast door at the end of the hallway. The Iron Hands slowed to a halt, disturbing the white vapour that seeped into the corridor through the cracks in the door. The one called Verrox stepped from the group and bared his armour's spirit to the ident scanner. Melitan shivered as triangulating beams crisscrossed the Iron Father's pallid scars and stapled flesh, and rinsed down his armour. The scanner deactivated as though the lasers had been sucked back into the emitters, and brown lights flashed as the door cracked across the diagonal and slid open.

The Iron Hands entered together. None of them spoke.

Melitan breathed out, the air misting in front of her face.

'Why don't we just go with them?' Callun's nervous expression hung from his face as though its maintenance was too much effort for him. His eyes were bloodshot, but the slur was gone from his voice and Melitan estimated that he would be fully sober, if a little rougher for the experience, in an hour or so. Another advantage of his subspecies' extraordinary metabolism.

'They'll recognise me.'

'Of course they won't.'

'Stronos will.' She felt oddly certain of that. There were parts of Medusa where the red robes of the Cult Mechanicus were almost a field of invisibility, but Stronos was different. He would recognise her. She had seen it in his eyes. 'And then what if they'd said no?'

'I'd get over it. Look, this has been exciting, but I think it's time to turn back. If someone finds us here we can just say we got lost. Another cautionary tale for the pilgrims.' He pointed on down the corridor. Yellow-brown lighting flashed through the vapour cloud that billowed through the open door. 'There's no talking our way out if we get caught down there.'

'You just *assume* I'll get caught?'

'It's not just you though, is it?'

She shook her head firmly. She needed Callun. His neural implants allowed him to retain complex machine schemata and logic pathways that were otherwise too precious to be removed from their stasis vaults: navigating the Maze of Glass struck her as no different. It was either that or pray for another serendipitous party of Iron Hands to latch onto.

This, she had decided, was a test. The Voice of Mars and perhaps even, through him, the Ommissiah himself had set these trials for her that she might prove her worth as their servant. She shivered at the thought of an imminent

end to the horrors of her current servitude. That her escape from the effluvium slums of Fabris Callivant had not worked out exactly as she or her parents had hoped was a niggling worry that she tried to ignore.

The door slid shut behind Verrox's party with a resounding clang, the echoes lingering in the ironglass long after the lights stopped flashing.

'Come on,' she said and hurried after the departed Iron Hands.

The air grew colder as she moved down the corridor, the vapours disturbing her blackened lungs and making her want to cough. She muffled them with the loose sleeve of her robe, holding in her hiking ribs with the other arm. Black and white figures loomed out at her from the ironglass. Black and white. So much like the frescoes of her birthworld, as if she was still that little girl, hurrying home under the angel wings of ash-darkened heroes. The underground tremors and the play of light made some of them appear to move, to shift between panels. A trick of the light, she told herself, but remembering some of the pilgrims' legends she quickened her step.

Up close, the door was monstrous. It stretched away from her, machined metal, up above her head and way, way out to either side, as though she had come to infiltrate the fortress of a race of giants.

'What now?' Callun hissed.

Melitan bit her lip. Positioning herself more or less where Verrox had been, she stood on tiptoes and spread her arms. Even if the gaps between head and arms and arms and legs had been filled with ceramite rather than cold gases then she would still not have equalled the Iron Father's massiveness, but just as she closed her eyes to pray, the ident scanners blinked into life. She felt the beams of topaz against her eyelids, giving her a blood-gold imprint of her own venous web, and uttered her prayer.

'See me. Judge me. Find me worthy.'

The lasers vanished. There was a clunk. The warning lights began to flash and the doors once again slid wearily aside. Melitan opened her eyes, her whole body shivering as dirty grey vapour spilled across her, and let out a nervous laugh. This was a test, and she had passed. Callun numbly made the sign of the cog.

'I suppose adepts must pass this way after all,' he said.

Searching through the cloud for his hand, she took it in hers. He returned the clammy pressure and let her pull him through.

It was an elevator, but on a stupendous scale. Two Land Raiders could have

fit inside easily, if it had been possible to manoeuvre one through the Maze of Glass. The walls were bare, riveted metal and looked thick. The floor and ceiling were practically mirror images of one another, reinforced with identically angled struts. Melitan found a control panel on one bulkhead and walked to it. It was a bleak slate, set proud of the bulkhead with an iron bolt in each corner and a colorimetric side display that blinked in sequence. It didn't appear to be designed for human fingers. Melitan studied it, finding what appeared to be a plug-in port hidden behind the column of winking diodes. Her medicae-dendrite snaked out from under her robes, then slotted into the port.

She moaned in connectivity. Her eyelids trembled as the dataverse gave up the authorisation key to command the doors. They slid shut. She imagined the warning lights in the corridor going out as another identical set began to flash inside the elevator, swiping the walls with yellow and brown. Shadows grew from the heavy struts, bent, stretched, and then faded again as the lighting strobed.

Melitan threw out an arm for one of the reinforcement struts as the floor shuddered, her work-calloused palms finding easy grip on the equally rough metal. Her medicae-dendrite tendrilled back to her, slid under her robes and slotted into her spine. She was still holding Callun's hand and she felt him squeeze her, as the elevator began to descend.

She had once found a theoretical recreation of the lunar impact that had devastated ancient Medusa in the *Broken Hand's* hololith archives. Though it had not been slowed down, its degraded playback had seemed to run on forever, simply because the bodies and distances involved were so huge.

This felt the same.

Impact shock continued to rumble through the bracing structures and along Melitan's arms and legs long after the initial grinding crash.

'Are we there yet?' Callun whispered, hoarsely.

Without any interference from the two engineers the doors parted and the flash of lights again transferred to the corridor beyond.

There was no ironglass here, just riveted metal. Snaking coils of cabling ran along the ceiling and through the walls, and both cast shadows. The warning lights stroked the semi-reflective surfaces with oranges and browns. Melitan and Callun clutched each other. Their breath mingled and fell out of the air between them as frost. Melitan gave his frost-crikkled robes a squeeze, then took a step away and turned towards the door.

The clump of a boot made her freeze.

Her throat tightened in guilt and fear, emitting a strangled gasp, and she watched, rooted to the decking, as the awesome bulk of an Iron Hands Space Marine strode past her without so much as a sideways glance. She put her hand over her throat and breathed out. ‘God of the Machine. Oh, God...’ The Space Marine’s footsteps boomed down the metal-walled passage. She could hear the hum of his armour, the chitter of semi-autonomous systems.

Callun craned his neck over her shoulder. ‘That was close.’

Shaking herself of her fright, Melitan fished in her robe’s deep pockets for the dataslate she had put there. She drew it out, clutched it to her breast as if it were a shell casing from the relic-Knight, *Ubiquites*, and mustered a smile. ‘Try to look as if we’ve a reason for being here.’

‘I suppose we know that adepts *do* come here.’

Melitan followed the sinuous lines of cabling in the ceiling as she padded away from the elevator. ‘We go everywhere.’ A hazard sounder blared once and the elevator doors banged shut. The lights flashed out, plunging the corridor into darkness. She could feel Callun’s breath on the nape of her neck.

‘Do you have a plan?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ she whispered back, glad that Callun couldn’t see her face. And then, after a moment’s hurried agonising, ‘We’ll follow the Iron Hand. He must be going somewhere.’

She started forward, quietly, careful in the dark, her hand hovering along the wall, feeling every bolt, brace and join. After a few minutes her eyes began to adapt, and she realised that the dark was not quite as absolute as she had thought. A subliminal glow pervaded the passageway, fed by electrical sparks where the insulation coating the overhead cables had peeled, and by radiant emission from plasma coils and cells. Melitan was agog at the concentrated might of the machine here. It was a weight, drawing this place nearer to the Ommissiah, the way the mass of a black hole distorted the materium of spacetime.

‘I see the mind of the Machine God,’ Callun murmured in awe.

‘I can hear his thoughts,’ Melitan agreed, then frowned.

The words she thought she could hear were spoken not in the divine forms of binharic, but in what sounded like a harsh Medusan dialect that vibrated through the piping. She waved Callun quiet, a hand gesture that told him to stand still, and pressed her ear to the wall. She hissed at the bite of cold metal

on her face and made herself concentrate. The sounds came through more distinctly, but muffled still, and she couldn't make out the words. It didn't sound like any strain of Medusan she'd heard before.

But at least they were going in the right direction.

'For Ares, Callun.'

'For Ares.'

Walking with more confidence, reaching for the reassurance of the wall only every few paces, she came to a junction, only to spring back as another pair of Iron Hands marched past. They were escorted by a Helfather. Melitan stumbled into the wall and tried to do anything but stare. The fascination she had felt in the safety of the starport felt inimical to the both of them now. Here, in the heart of the Helfather's subterranean domain, she felt her knees weaken before the leaden horror that crossed her path.

Callun stuffed his hand in his mouth and screamed into it. 'What was that?' he said, after the three warriors were well out of sight. 'It felt like—'

'I know,' said Melitan.

She looked down at her dataslate as if for guidance. All of a sudden, she decided that Callun had been right – being here wasn't such a good idea after all. Too late for that now.

She focused on how exactly she intended to get an audience with Nicco Palpus and get out of here. She doubted she could very well just walk in on the Iron Council mid-session and take him to one side. She peered down the corridor in the direction taken by the two Iron Hands and their escort. If she could find the council chamber, perhaps she could find somewhere to wait until it was over, then waylay the logi-legatus as he left. A noise echoed down the corridor as she considered, but she thought nothing of it. It was just the Iron Hands, their footsteps distorted by the metalwork making it sound as if there were more of them than just three.

She turned to Callun to explain her thinking just as the other engineer tugged on her robes. His wide eyes pointed her back in the direction she had just turned from.

A maniple of skitarii encased in ceremonial gold armour marched back down the corridor towards them. Their long cloaks swept along the floor. Their tall helmets were plumed with electronic fibres that fizzed as they brushed the ceiling.

'What are skitarii doing here?' Callun hissed.

Saying nothing, Melitan endeavoured to look inconspicuous examining a section of bundle cabling. She saw the maniple alpha point at her. His eyes were an actinic blue inside his helmet exoskeleton.

‘You two.’

III

Stronos hung back as the Helfather escorted them into the chamber. He looked up into the hatched and filtered light that came through the long columnar tunnel from the surface skylight, his bionic eye struggling to find a point of focus amidst the drifting rust. Banners bedecked in clan heraldry rippled in an artificial breeze. There were more than the ten with which Stronos was familiar, names like Atraxii and Ungavarr woven in iron thread into faded cloth. His breath caught as he wondered at their history. Columns of high capacity data cabling descended through the columns of light and rust, forty-one of them splaying over that same number of iron thrones below. They were set up in a circle, facing inwards, a web of finer interface cabling running between.

The Eye of Medusa. Verrox and Raan’s descriptions had been inadequate.

Iron Fathers in power armour, and their slower moving elders in bulky Terminator plate, lowered themselves into thrones. Mechanicus adepts wired them in and hooked up fluid drips. Dreadnoughts stood mutely beside their allotted positions, whole teams of crimson-robed engineers working to remove protective armour panelling and connect them.

Stronos could hear the steady thrum of oxygenation units, and yet it was power of a type that no augur unit could define that stirred this air.

At the centre of the arrangement of thrones hung a war-axe. It hovered several metres off the ground in a crackling suspension field. Its haft was long, even to the arm of a Space Marine, with a grip formed of bundled power cords. It was double-headed, with two cog-toothed blades of dulled ormolu curving either side of a nest of cabling within which was set a functioning and alert servo-skull. Its eye sockets and mouth pulsed with silvery illumination as it surveilled the ranks of Iron Fathers.

Stronos had never seen the weapon in battle, but no brother of the Iron Hands

could fail to recognise the Axe of Medusa.

Beneath it was a speaker's podium in the form of the Medusa Mechanicus, the traditional emblem of the Martian Creed, but with the usual 'human' half replaced by the black contours of a Mk V power helmet. Two hooded magi were stooped together in chattering meta-conference. Their shrouded faces blinked with coloured lights. Their robes were trimmed with gold and sewn with arcane sigils of rank and status, but the crimson thread was so faded that in parts it was white or frayed altogether, exposing the inhuman augmentation beneath. Even their mechanisms looked of another era, masterfully crafted but archaic, clockwork contrivances that had wandered into the engine room of a great hall of war.

Verrox and Ares moved to their prepared thrones. Ares wandered for a moment, apparently uncertain which seat was his. The engineers waiting to attend on the ancient beheld him with expressions of awe and reverence. There was already a hexagram of scented votive offerings smoking over the prepared plug-in ports of his throne, and a chorister issued algorithmic blurts of hymnal code from her long, tubular throat.

'The Eye can be overwhelming,' said Raan, as the adepts spread out like docking buoys to guide the confused ancient in. Stronos set aside his concern to listen to the captain's advice. 'There are many inputs, physical and not. It is confusing, even without the full meta-inload of noospheric uplink.' Raan gestured cursorily to the heavy net of cabling.

'Are you connected?' Stronos asked.

'No.' After a moment's silence, the iron captain concluded that elaboration was required. 'I am not an Iron Father. Induction demands several years of indoctrination as well as specific neural augments that our own apothecarion lack the facilities to implant.'

'They must be performed on Mars?'

'It is a long and arduous procedure, and survival is not guaranteed. Not an expenditure that would be made on a mere proxy. I speak my piece when prompted, I listen to that which I understand and report it to my Iron Fathers, but beyond that I do nothing.'

'Who are the two magi?' Stronos pointed to the two hooded adepts stood in the electric glow of the static field. A gaggle of cherubic scribes were seated at their feet wearing expressions of beatific joy, the swaddling robes on their infant bodies tumbling down the podium steps. They tugged on the

creaking articulation frame of the servo-quill mounted above their heads and prepared to take minutes.

‘The podium is the position of the Voice of Mars, the forty-second voice on the Iron Council. When one amongst the forty-one is elected to warleader they cede the podium to him.’

‘Should there not be three of them?’

‘The one that requires the cane to stand is called Talos Epsili.’ Raan did not move or gesture in any way as he spoke, referencing the magi as if from an inloaded imager file. ‘The other that resembles a wisp of red smoke is Chiralias Tarl. Their positions are secondary and tertiary, respectively. Bodies wither and die and are replaced, but the Mechanicus has served in this capacity since the Tempering.’

‘Serve?’

‘Not all Iron Fathers can return to Medusa. Not all can spare a captain to speak for them.’ A note of ire in his voice at that. ‘The Voice of Mars speaks for them. It is not a task a warrior would crave and thus it is a service.’ He turned then to look at the podium with his own augmented optics. ‘It appears that Nicco Palpus has other business to attend. Irrelevant. Mars has three mouths but speaks with only one voice. The presence of the full triumvirate is customary but unnecessary.’

‘Where do I stand?’ Stronos asked.

Raan pointed to one of two hemispherical enclosures that encircled the forty-one thrones. Viewed from within the central shaft of illumination it was difficult to make out in detail, the shadows contoured by the armoured forms of honour guards and equerries, glimpses of reflectivity that might have been plaques mounted on the walls behind them.

None of the warriors already in the enclosure greeted him and he, in turn, said nothing to them. He found a space and stood there while Raan lowered himself into his Iron Father’s throne.

Stronos could see that about a third of the seats were empty. As Raan had observed, war could not be postponed for the Iron Council, and the expanse of territory over which the clans were spread was vast. Incalculably vast. Thinking on it, seeing those empty chairs, Stronos understood the logic underpinning the existence of the Voice of Mars.

The two ancient magi were still locked in conversation. The enthroned Iron Fathers and their representatives appeared to watch them without watching,

their attention diverted through that secondary mat of connective cabling that covered the floor. Stronos reasoned that it was comprised of one-to-one data hardlines, closed interlinks that would allow for the passage of private missives between the Iron Fathers even while public discourse ran through the trunk cabling or was spoken aloud. Stronos sought out Verrox. The grizzled Iron Father's eyes were shut, his scarred cheeks locked in a distasteful grimace. Stronos could not begin to imagine the deal making and ship trading that must have been running through those networked minds, before the main business of the conclave had even begun.

What were they waiting for?

Stronos looked up as the main doors drew back into the chamber walls with a reverberative clang and a striking figure in extensively rebuilt Terminator armour entered, flanked by a pair of Helfathers with a third keeping in lockstep close behind. Despite the company of such mighty servants, the Iron Father had a presence that chilled not just his immediate space but the entire chamber. The two magi looked up and fell silent. Verrox opened his eyes and scowled. The data-traffic noticeably decreased. Stronos felt a shiver pass down his spine, starting in his forgechain as though the augmetic had captured a stray piece of scrapcode from the local ether. The Voice of Mars retreated behind their podium and bowed as the Iron Father clumped past them.

Slits for several optic lenses glowed icily in the black iron of the Iron Father's helm, but he turned perceptibly to behold the Axe of Medusa as he walked past it. His fingers twitched as if to close around it, a weakness of flesh and memory that was gone as quickly as it came. But Stronos noticed.

'The Iron Council acknowledges Iron Father Kristos to the throne of Clan Raukaan,' said the magos who Raan had identified as Talos Epsili. Murmured and blurted greetings arose from scattered pockets of support within the circle. Verrox merely glowered, and he was not alone.

'Do we begin?' said Kristos, in a voice that for all its command and power could easily have been mistaken for that of a servitor. Armour clanked as he sat down, gripped the rests of his throne and waited for the adepts to link him. He folded a servo-arm with a rotatable ripper-claw appendage over his shoulder. He looked around the circle without having to turn his head. The glow behind his helm slits brightened and diminished as his attention moved; the beetling click of his armour's machine cant whispered as if offering counsel on the secrets and foibles of his rivals.

Stronos felt an immediate antipathy for the Iron Father, based solely on hearsay and intuition and with no grounding whatsoever in empiricism, and all the more bitter for that.

Iron Hands were never late. They did not make those kinds of mistakes. That Kristos had chosen to be so told Stronos all he needed to know about him and about the Iron Council itself.

With an indecipherable blurt of cant, the Voice of Mars called the Iron Council to session, and Stronos learned in short order that he would be drawing no pleasure today.

Debates blazed over the noosphere, at times simultaneously, conducted in a hyper-dense data-cant that even once removed from the network boggled Stronos' processors. Periodically, every few minutes or so dependent on the complexity of the matter in hand, one of the Iron Fathers would stir from his stupor and make a verbal pronouncement in such an archaic form of old Medusan that Stronos could decipher one word in six. It was enough to tax even the formidable boredom threshold of an Iron Hand.

The cycle of debate and declaration ran without remission for several hours, during which time Stronos slowly began to recognise the divisions between, for want of a better nomenclature, the Kristosian and Verroxian factions. He could not elaborate the content of the debates, but the vehemence of the metadata and the directionality of its movement were impossible to miss.

Verrox's face was drawn, as though he had performed the equivalent of ten days at peak performance over the last ten hours. He began to deliver a diatribe in the terse, consonant-rich expletive of ancient Medusan. Something about the battle calculus, the undying spirit – the word for 'escalation' cropped up numerous times. With a flutter of what might, earlier in proceedings, have been recognised as excitement, Stronos leaned forward to listen. This, at last, was what he was here for.

Kristos responded to Verrox's oratory with a mocking blurt of cant. Verrox then made to rise out of his throne, only to find himself in an inglorious struggle with the hardline tethers and connective cabling that bonded him to his seat, a few of the Iron Fathers that Stronos had already marked as Kristosians laughing at the intemperate display. Kristos himself gave in to no such reaction. He held his throne with an aura of machine aloofness that damned with far greater potency than mere words ever could.

The two technomagi leaned across their podium to whisper something that

Stronos could not hear and nobody else seemed to notice. He glanced to Ares, but the ancient was yet to contribute.

‘The vote on Iron Father Tubriik Ares’ motion is called,’ said Talos Epsili, silencing the chitter of data exchange with an announcement in cursive Gothic. ‘Those in favour of an escalation of force on the planet Thennos and a rescindment of interdiction orders, signal now.’

By an anachronistic mechanism of signalling assent, those in favour raised their hands. Raan and Ares both had theirs up. Stronos counted, his hearts calm, already planning how the loosening of their restrictions would bring the war on Thennos to a swift close. Stronos could see that Verrox and Ares had the backing of the majority, just as the Clan Vurgaan Iron Father had claimed he would. Twenty hands out of the twenty-seven were showing.

‘Those against?’ said the magos, out of ritual completeness.

Eight hands went up, including that of Iron Father Kristos. Stronos was irritated to see that Raan’s other hand had risen, and recalled that the captain was here as proxy to both Iron Fathers Breeka and Siilvus.

‘The Voice of Mars places its vote against, and in accordance with tradition will speak for those who cannot be present.’ The two magi shared a twittering conference. Chiralias Tarl appeared to gesture to the vacant thrones. Talos Epsili nodded and struck his staff upon the metal ground. ‘The votes against have it, twenty-two to twenty. Clan Vurgaan’s request for an alteration to the battle calculus is denied.’

Stronos stared at the podium in shock.

Every one of the absentee votes placed against? How could that be?

Verrox’s chain-teeth snarled in frustration. Stronos saw the Iron Father’s grip on his arm rests tighten, but this time he controlled the bloody impulse to rise and rip his counterpart from Clan Raukaan apart. Again, Stronos glanced at Ares, but again found he could glean nothing of the passive ancient’s mood.

‘This is illogical!’ Stronos shouted, and before he had reasoned what he was doing had pushed his way to the front of his darkened enclosure to the boundary of the light. ‘We will need to fight through a number of heavily defended skitarii enclaves in order to circumvent the interdiction zones.’

Kristos turned to him. Those around Stronos stepped back, muttering darkly at this breach of protocol. The three helmet lenses that faced in Stronos’ direction brightened as they worked to counter the gloom that Stronos was standing in. Stronos straightened. He would not be cowed.

‘Your objective is extermination,’ said Kristos. ‘So go back there and exterminate.’

IV

The workstation chair gave a warning creak as Melitan Yolanis dropped into it, tilting alarmingly backwards before the skitarii alpha that had pushed her caught her by the chair back and twisted her around. ‘Where is Callun. I– oh.’

Logi-Legatus Nicco Palpus was not at all as she had expected.

His gaunt frame was draped in crimson robes that bore the arcane sigil-workings of Mars, and was almost consumed by a high-backed command throne and its nested plug-ins and datasplays. His cranium had been extended slightly for increased capacity, and there was a faint metallic lustre to his complexion, but otherwise the most remarkable feature was how easily he might pass as human. His eyes emitted a subtle click as they mapped the nuance of her facial expression, his own altering to become an emollient mirror copy of hers. Melitan felt herself torn between squirming distrust and her body’s galvanic response to an empathetic face.

‘Callun Darvo,’ he said, without needing to access his meme-cache. ‘Enginseer adept of the twelfth grade, ordained in vehicular maintenance and tri-dimensional mapping.’ His voice was melodic, like the rhythms of a finely tuned engine, fatherly even, with the same dual undertones of pastoral concern and implicit personal authority this implied. Melitan found herself nodding obediently. ‘He is currently under escort to the surface. And he can expect a black mark against his duty record for his misuse of access protocols. His current assignation will almost certainly need to be reviewed.’

‘Respectfully, legatus, I would rather keep Callun where he is. I–’ She leaned over the table between them to protest before she realised how Palpus had manoeuvred her onto the defensive. She leant back, chair creaking, and resolved to treat her words with greater consideration from here on.

Palpus’ expression perfectly mimicked her patient resolve. Behind his chair and around his smooth metallic table, whispering multitask servitors moved through operation booths and alcoves. Hololithic representations of the Voice of Mars’ heraldic cryptex hovered over banks of quixotic instrumentarium,

wall-mounted repeater screens sealed away behind ornate bronze shutters. Palpus nodded over Melitan's shoulder and a moment later she heard the door ease shut as the skitarii officer exited. He steepled his fingers and settled back into his throne.

Melitan swallowed in sudden nervousness, as though the presence of an armed chaperone were preferable to being alone in a room with her legatus.

'I expected you to be occupied with the Iron Council,' she said, carefully.

'My position as primary is ceremonial. My secondary and tertiary are capable of speaking for Mars' interests.' With deliberate casualness, Palpus reached across the table to turn the dataslate he had been working on over onto its face. He slid it back towards himself, though Melitan had already seen that it was a deployment order for the commitment of Clan Raukaan forces to Thennos, requiring his seal.

And for some reason, she felt that he knew she had seen it.

Removing the slate from the table, Palpus held it up for a servitor to remove. The lobotomised slave plodded away.

'The demands on my time are, if not infinite, then sufficiently asymptotic as to appear so.'

'Forgive my intrusion,' said Melitan, pushing to keep the conversation on track. 'Entering the Eye was impetuous, I know, but it was the only way I could think of to speak with you.'

Palpus emoted surprise. Melitan suspected it was pure calibration. The legatus looked more human than most, but it was a façade, an anthropogenic skin for a sophisticated thought-machine called Nicco Palpus.

'You signed the orders charging me with Ancient Ares' care,' she said.

Palpus gestured to his workspace. 'I sign many orders. Such is my function, and the Ommissiah demands nothing of us other than to be true to our function. Without a single warleader to command the Chapter and the Iron Council riven by factionalism, my burden has become exponentially greater. Somebody must maintain control.' It was impossible to pin his mimetic expressions to a genuine emotion, but he did not seem at all displeased about his situation. His eyes clicked as he studied her reactions. 'I cannot be expected to recall every order of passing significance. But is the function to which you have been assigned not one of high honour?'

'It is!' Melitan blurted, unguarded, then quickly marshalled herself again, gripping the rests of the workstation chair as if to physically keep from being

drawn into Palpus' rhetorical manoeuvrings a third time. 'It is. A tremendous honour. And one I pray with every scintilla of my being to prove worthy of. But I need help, legatus.' She shrugged, a gesture of defeat that Palpus' optics zeroed in on. 'I request the addition of a more experienced adept to my team. I would... *humbly*... accept subordination to such an adept. For the sake of Ancient Ares. And the Ommissiah.'

Palpus smiled at her, kindly. 'You care profoundly for the Ancient.'

'Of course.'

'And for the Ommissiah.'

Melitan stared across the table, open-mouthed, shocked beyond words that her faith could even be called into question.

'Your dedication is noted – your pursuit of knowledge at the risk of your hard-earned standing within the eleventh grade will be similarly recorded. You will rise high, Yolanis. Your surgical aptitude has been remarked upon within the highest spheres. Know that Talos Epsili has already recommended you for a position within the tenth grade on Holy Mars. Subject to current performance, of course.'

Melitan could tell that her mouth was moving, but none of the swirl of thoughts in her head seemed to be making the crucial transformation into words. She could not tell whether the near-realisation of all she had ever wished for since she had been old enough for her own dreams filled her with elation or dread.

'In truth, the revivification of Ancient Ares was an error, an unforeseen consequence of the mobilisation order to pacify Thennos. He is a relic of a less enlightened era, an object of reverence that should have been left in state. I am responsible for the deployment of some eleven hundred Iron Hands, their ships, labour, recruits, and hundreds of thousands of skitarii detachments, all of them dispersed over dozens of sectors, and yes, mistakes will sometimes be made. It falls on you to ensure correction.' Melitan nodded, uncertainly. Palpus gestured to the dataspays built into his armrests, myriad action requests, all of which blinked furiously for his attention. 'I will of course look into your request, but it will take time to identify an individual of requisite talent that can be spared. The demands on my time conspire against a swift resolution. The situation is unlikely to change before the conclusion of the Thennosian compliance. In the meantime, turn your thoughts to the Ommissiah. He will guide you to the function you crave.'

Melitan almost forgot to thank the legatus for his efforts, assuming she was supposed to. In all honesty, she had forgotten whose side she was on.

‘I know that you will not disappoint me,’ he said, apparently recalling the skitarii by subvocal command, for the door opened and the cyborg soldiers entered a moment later. He smiled benignly, and again, Melitan felt a creeping itch under her electroos. ‘In light of your commitment to the Empire of Mars, I have decided to commute Callun Darvo’s mark of censure. You may keep him on your staff.’

‘Th-thank you.’

‘Talos Epsili will not be around forever,’ said Nicco Palpus, stacking his data slates with a pedant’s good order. ‘Continue to please me, Melitan. You might find yourself sitting in the Eye of Medusa sooner than you think.’



CHAPTER NINE

‘Power worth having is never free. Ask Fulgrim this.’

– Ancient Tubriik Ares

I

Kardan Stronos could feel his eyeball burning, retina bleaching, pupil tightening, but Space Marine physiology held mastery over the pain and kept the eyelid open. With a recalcitrant squeal, the surgical arm was drawn aside, glimmering after-colours chasing it out of sight. Stronos blinked rapidly.

‘Your eye is minimally functional, clearly defective – it is a wonder you have persisted with it for as long as you have.’ Apothecary Haas forced the reluctant surgical arm into its overhead cradle, then moved across the apothecarion to interface with a requisition terminal. ‘You are due to rejoin your clave on Thennos. I will provision for an augment without delay.’ After a few minutes of communion in which both the Apothecary and his terminal emitted a series of sharp clicks at one another, he disconnected and turned back. The lumens were typically dull – the surgeons required light no more than any of the Iron Hands – but Haas’ battleplate and augments gleamed with an abrasive shine. ‘Wait here.’

Stronos settled into his pallet. For want of a more pressing stimulus he stared

at the bulkhead above his cot, his bionic optic moving mechanically through the frequency ranges. His enhanced positional awareness and the augmented gyroscope implanted in his thalamus let him feel the movements of the ironbarque *Commandment*, as Clan Garrsak's monstrous flagship hove into formation with the Thennos blockade fleet. The frigate *Onslaught*'s return journey had been uneventful, but Stronos' thoughts remained in turmoil.

It wasn't good enough. His body was weak.

He had always known, but attachment to flesh had made him resistant to the action required. His encounter with Lydriik had provided the final push he needed.

He assumed that his friend had returned to his own ship, possibly sharing an orbit somewhere on the other side of the blockade, but in a way that no longer mattered.

In the photo-bleached colour blotches that floated out of reach above his flesh eye he saw the red eyes of Captain Harsid. Closer to him than the ceiling lumens were now. Part of him recoiled from the memory, but he made himself face it. The son of Corax – a Death Spectre, he had later learned, having made enquiries of the crossed-scythes emblem with the *Commandment*'s imager archives – had come upon him completely unawares. If he had been hostile then Stronos would be dead. Add to that his humbling before the Iron Council and his wayward actions on Thennos and it showed a pattern of behaviour that demonstrated his fault.

The eye was an obvious target. It had nagged him for decades, and its replacement was an important step on his drive towards perfection. That it simultaneously deferred action on the aspersions Lydriik had cast against the Adeptus Mechanicus he had noted and deemed incidental. Any action he might take now would be suspect in any event. For all that he had been discomforted at first, he found that he craved the surety of the clan interlink now. He desired the strength of his brothers' wills to brace his own.

The flesh was weak.

The bright metal cabinets fitted against the bulkheads rattled as someone entered. His first thought was that it was Haas, wheeling in a surgical trolley, but again his senses fell below expectation. It was Ares.

The Dreadnought towered over the stowed instrumentarium, the restricted space making his heavy armoured frame appear even more massive. His blocky torso pivoted as if to survey the room thoroughly before entering, his

optic slits appearing to alight upon Stronos only by chance.

‘Is Stronos injured?’

Stronos considered silence, but decided that he could keep nothing from the ancient. ‘I am defective. I seek to rectify that.’

‘How so?’

‘The Raven’s son proved himself my superior. I must improve and adapt.’

‘Improve and adapt.’ Ares’ vocabularisers rumbled with scorn. ‘We recall a time when Iron Hands were less like Kristos and more like Kardan Stronos. They were ruthless, yes, but adaptable, not slaves to calculus.’

‘You should have said as much before the Eye of Medusa,’ Stronos returned, bitterly, his gaze fixed to the ceiling plating.

‘Garrsak cast our vote as we saw right. Our word would have made no difference.’

‘When you first stood before me you declared the Iron Council would feel your wrath for their failure to hold Thennos. Your fury was sound. What became of it?’

‘Such strength of feeling is difficult to hold to. In time, perhaps, Stronos will know this too.’

Stronos scowled. The facial twitch lengthened his visual wavelength from infrared to microwave. The power conduits buried within the ceiling above his cot became a shadowy smear of crimson. ‘You believed the decision of the council to be errant, yet you left the argument to Verrox.’

‘From each according to his ability,’ said Ares. It sounded like a quotation. ‘Verrox is passionate and persuasive. Even when Tubriik wore flesh in place of iron, the Vurgaan were thought primitive. Now we wonder if they are not the sole champions of the Iron Creed as once we knew it.’

Stronos turned his head to regard the Dreadnought. The metal roundels of his forgechain bumped against the pallet, and he resisted the urge to touch the augmetic vertebrae, suddenly bitterly angry. ‘Irrelevant. All of it. Irrelevant. The Iron Council has ruled. It is clearly our decision-making that is in error, not theirs. I will not weaken my brothers by standing alongside them in this imperfect state.

‘We feel that we should experience contempt for such self-delusion, yet we find that we cannot care. How far from our Father’s likeness we have both fallen.’

Haas re-entered by another door. He regarded Ares hostilely.

‘You are beyond my skills to restore, venerable,’ said the Apothecary, bluntly, as a headless servitor pushing a medicae trolley and a wispish thing in crimson robes squeezed through into the already cramped quarters. The magos biologis rolled up long sleeves and rubbed his hands with counterseptic jelly while the servitor manoeuvred around Stronos’ bedside, its trolley rattling carelessly over the tension. ‘With respect, Iron Father, your presence here serves no purpose.’ He waited a moment during which Ares offered a blank wall by way of reply, and then added. ‘You take up space. Leave.’

‘The Kristosian question makes all matters subject to doubt,’ Stronos said to Ares, voice low. ‘All will be as it once was once the arguments are resolved.’

Ares turned from the Apothecary to him. His emptiness seemed for a moment... sorrowful. ‘Kardan Stronos speaks of the arguments, but what does he know of the question, for there is only one?’

Stronos made to formulate an answer, only to realise he had none. Often he had railed against the waste of energy that the conclave brought on the Iron Council, but had never found the time to learn for himself what, in effect, it was all for. He shook his head honestly. He had been built to be a war machine. This round voyage to Medusa was the first time since his novitiation that he had not been either in the thick of a warzone or in transit from one to another.

‘Better to leave questions of doctrine to the tech-priests and the Iron Fathers,’ said Haas, moving to Stronos’ pallet and the waiting servitor even as he spoke.

At the mention of his order, the magos looked up, but did not interrupt. Stronos frowned at the mortal. For every Iron Hands warrior on Medusa and scattered across the Imperium there were a thousand servitors, menials and adepts of the Adeptus Mechanicus to service their needs. Noticing his regard, the adept quickly looked away.

Stronos found himself wondering what else the unseen legions on which the Chapter so depended might see and hear.

A non-verbal burst of scorn rang from Ares’ vocabularisers. ‘And you call yourselves men of iron, you who cede all free will to others and call it strength. Do you even know how the conclave began?’

‘I know little of Kristos beyond his roll of honours,’ said Stronos, stung. ‘I know that he was once considered an exemplar of the Iron Creed.’

‘As it is now interpreted for you, perhaps.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ demanded Haas.

Ares did not answer directly. ‘It began on Columnus,’ he said.

‘Everyone knows that,’ Haas said, dismissively, then picked up a spoon-headed implement from his medicae trolley and bent towards Stronos.

‘And what happened there to cause such crisis?’ Ares countered.

Stronos couldn’t answer. He looked to Haas. The Apothecary let out a frustrated sigh and said nothing, focusing instead on Stronos’ eye. He had no answer either.

‘Stow thy leeches, Apothecary – there is to be no bloodletting today.’ Ares backed out of the surgical bay and into the main space of the apothecarion. With some reluctance, Stronos sat up on his pallet and pushed Apothecary Haas from him. ‘Come, Kardan. We will show you what happened that day.’

II

Tubriik Ares backed into the alcove, blasts of icy gases enveloping his massively armoured bulk. The alcove was vast, a cutaway section of bulkhead broad enough to house a Dreadnought, and extended up through the decks. Blue-tinged vapours drifted unhurriedly through the tangle of stanchions and piping that filled it, like the brush of clouds over the spires of a cathedral to the Motive Force. The stochastic pulse of conduits was its stained glass. The raw hum of moving data was its chorus. And at its core was Ares, the altar around which all faith and function was derived.

Mechanicus adepts crawled diligently around the Dreadnought, slid beneath his stocky legs, and even clambered onto his sarcophagus to drag up connective cabling and plug him into inload-exload hardpoints set into the alcove’s walls. They looked like red ants, crawling over an animal carcass.

Another labour crew guided the transferral of a stupefyingly thick brass-ribbed data-cable from one plug site to another. They sang hymns and drew sigil-schemata in the mist, the actual lift work performed by a pair of heavy draught servitors, specialist units of vat-grown muscle and power-assisted augments. There was a deep, reverberative clunk as the cable went in. The priests’ chant increased in volume and fervour, and the air modulated its hum, the chorus altering its tenor as the flow of data was diverted. Swarms of whip-limbed servitors swung between the hyper-chilled leaden cylinders of the

meme-cores and the labyrinth of serial cogitation cascades to which they were interplexed, establishing and breaking connections with an intuitive speed that would have dizzied even one of the Iron Hands.

Lights blinked their readiness. Klaxons spoke of connection errors that had magi converging behind one servitor or another to hand correct some nanoscale mis-alignment. Trembles spread out through the deckplates like ripples.

It was like watching novitiates perform embarkation drills, before their numbers had been culled and they had been pushed sufficiently beyond panic.

‘This is a simulacrum chamber,’ said Stronos and looked up, a quiet nudge against his heart that might have been akin to wonder.

Only the largest Clan Vurgaan warships, the battle-barges and its brutish ironbarque, the *Hammer of Manus*, were equipped with such powerful technologies and only senior officers were permitted onto their decks. Stronos had never seen one.

‘It is,’ said Ares. His voice, bounced by the vertical steel canyon in which he stood, resounded from the decks above. He appeared unperturbed by the insects that clambered over his metal skin. ‘The simulacrum is ancient technology, and has been exploited by the Iron Hands as far back as Tubriik’s memory goes. But never as much as now.’

‘The ability to inload strategic protocols, or to participate in simulated warfare against xenos species no Iron Hand has ever personally encountered.’ Stronos looked up admiringly into the vast banks of solid-state meme-cores, sweaty with the efforts of the deck’s atmospheric controls to keep them cold. ‘I have heard of its power.’

‘Powerful? Yes. But at a cost. Power worth having is never free. Ask Fulgrim this. No clan embraces the technology as Garrsak does – from where does Stronos think our reputation for blind obedience and inflexibility arises?’

Ares left the question unanswered as, at a blurt of binharic from him, a flurry of hunched adepts converged on Stronos and herded him towards a pod of his own. Where Ares’ mighty armature almost touched the walls, Stronos was swallowed entire, the flock of wittering magi descending with him into the hollow. He spread his arms and allowed them to connect him, the flex in the cabling allowing them to stretch the greater distance between him and the buffers in the wall. He felt stirrings of trepidation, and the first real jolt of pain as rods were inserted through plug-ins under the rear rim of his gorget and into

his brainstem.

His eyes turned to static, aggressive code spreading through his nervous system like a potent anaesthetic. He gave an involuntary gasp, and a jerk. Except that nothing moved.

<Simulus paralysis is similar to that of mortal sleep,> came Ares' cant through the spiteful rush of recoding brain cells. <It is for our own protection. To protect the dreamer from his body's responses to that which it will experience as real. The experience is powerful, and does not lessen with practice. Prepare yourself, Kardan. Hold to what makes him Stronos. If he can.>

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD
>>> SOURCE >>> URDRI FORTRESS FACTORY, COLUMNUS
>>> ORIGIN >>> ENGRAMIC RECONSTRUCTION OF ORVID
STENN, SHADOW CAPTAIN, METACHIRURGEON TALOS EPSILI
SUPERVISING
>>> DATESTAMP >>> 999100.M41
>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

With a spirited roar, the Land Raider, *Solanum*, crashed through the civilian wrecks and rubble barricades that littered the eastern superhighway, clearing an avenue for the column of fire-blackened Rhinos that followed. A rearguard of Leman Russ variants in charred regimental colours and mismatched urban camouflage charged after the Adeptus Astartes transports. Desperate guardsmen clung to camo netting and crudely fashioned armour of hull-lashed sandbags. The tanks' turret cannons were pointed backwards, and bounced as the vehicles sped over the broken road. Battle cannon blasted great chunks out of the highway. A single punisher gatling cannon raked the road behind them with such intensity of fire that there was not a single pool of smoke or blackened wreck not further pulverised by solid shot.

The orks ducked under the oversized steering bars of their bikes and powered into the incoming fire. A battle cannon shell immolated a posse of bikers and brought bits of blackened moulding and burning engine housing raining over the buggies and trucks that swerved to avoid the new crater. The following bikers simply went in, then opened the throttle and roared up the other side, revelling in the bellicosity of their brute machines.

The orks' return fire, great hosing sprays of it, sparked off the thick armour of the Leman Russ tanks, a sound like a megabolter choking on a hopper stuffed with nails. The torrential abuse chewed out the rearmost Rhino's rear plating, passenger doors and track housing, all of it giving out in a death cry explosion that volleyed the tank up into the air. It flipped, bleeding off chaff, stitched by the tracers of droning aircraft, then dropped like a hammer through *Solanum*'s roof.

The Land Raider swerved, fat sparks spraying out from its buckled underside, skidded half about and slammed into the side of a civilian transport. The gutted vehicle crumpled under the heavy tank and the lead Rhino shunted what was left of the drivers' cabin out of the way on its 'dozer blade. The rest of the column veered around the piled up vehicles, forced into a growl as they down-gearred to break through the detritus that blocked the east road to Urdri.

Pacing the fleeing column from the air, Shadow Captain Stenn felt his jump pack sputter smokily as its thruster timed out. Through sagging power lines and lumen cables that had miraculously survived the haphazard orbital and aeronautical assaults thus far, he fell. Cracks split the rockcrete as he hit, but shock converters in his power armour's joints redirected enough of the impact force into forward movement, servos burning white in the smoggy dark as he ran. Other Assault Marines fell out of the sky around him. Rhinos roared past in clatters of metal. Sprays of bullets withered the air. And he ran. As fast he had ever run in his life.

Just a few kilometres ahead were the goliath bronze-plated battlements of the fortress factory. Gate 743 was open, its void shields down, and though there was no sign of a sally sent forth to relieve the Raven Guard, a smattering of extreme-range energy blasts from wall-mounted anti-siege weaponry speared the pursuing mob. A score of ramshackle buggies fell apart, carved open by lascannon beams or demolished in the helium fireball of a plasma culverin. Drops in the ocean. The two rearmost Leman Russ tanks simultaneously went up in rocketing flames, and Stenn risked a backwards glance to see the flame-shadow of something even heavier rumbling noisily in behind the mess of screening vehicles, spraying crude but devastating energy beams from a toweringly high turret.

'Cursed Iron Hands,' he huffed, breathless, both hearts kicking into his rib plate at a rate not dissimilar to the smog-muted scream of the punisher cannon. 'Stubborn.' A breath. 'Inflexible.' Gasp. 'Arrogant.'

A ready rune winked across his visor display to indicate that his jump pack had vented and refuelled for another jump. The lead Rhinos were already breaking through the cordon and into the killzone that had been cleared from around the fortress walls, and screeching towards Gate 743. He looked up, still pounding the road, running the complex string of mental calculations to launch himself into the air and land precisely on the narrow strip of wall-walk behind the battlements. It took him a second.

His pack fired, heels lifting off the ground, and he looked over his left booster to the southern highway, where the Imperial remnants attached to what was left of the Legio Ferrax beat their own retreat.

Just at that moment, the sky above the ork horde flared neon green, flashing through the skeletal skyline of Urdri Conurb South and printing its post-apocalyptic death-shadow onto the backs of Stenn's eyes before his visor tint could adjust to the glare. A sound rumbled out a few seconds later, bestial, throaty, the silhouettes of the abandoned cranes and industrial habs appearing to writhe as the green light vanished as quickly as it had appeared and stole them back with it to darkness.

He blinked an urgent override for his jump pack to release emergency thrust. And then the Titans began to die.

>>>

<It is similar to the clan interlink,> Stronos canted, and though he was unconscious of his physical body he could somehow feel that he spoke with a strained jaw and through gritted teeth. <But it is so much more. Through the interlink I can see through my subordinates' eyes, impress upon them my will. But this is different. It feels as though I *am* Shadow Captain Stenn.>

He had a bitter, illogical loathing for the descendants of Corax that he could not explain. Having just experienced a small part of Orvid Stenn's existence, he felt that he should feel greater empathy for his brother Space Marine, but he did not. What he felt was greater ambivalence, as though along with his body he had been dissociated from everything of his own experience that could have made him care. He was not Orvid Stenn, and the dissonant notion arose that he might equally not be Kardan Stronos. He was nobody, and anybody had the potential to be him.

He was simulus – the collective.

<Ares!> Junk data flowed through him in maddening hue, a hyper-density of code-dialects that had never been meant to passage an unaugmented cortex. Remembering Ares' last words of warning, Stronos focused on the last vestiges of himself he could identify amidst the boiling mind-static. <Ancient, are you there?>

<We are here.>

<This is... astounding.>

<Simulus draws upon engrammic reconstructions of the deceased, witness testimony, after-action exload from those participants capable. We have even known simulus code to be extracted from objects touched by a psychic presence, though minds of that power are blessedly rare, and the technology to retrieve such imprints rarer still. We live the Raven Guard's memories, so in the eyes of the Ommissiah we are indeed Shadow Captain Stenn. But simulus is not real. We are not Stenn. Neither are we Artex or Dortmund or Sentar. We are Stronos and Ares. Above all, that is the most crucial knowledge to be taken from this chamber.>

<I am familiar with the Columnus campaign,> Stronos canted. <I was a neophyte when the fleets returned to Medusa, but all heard of the crushing victory won by Clans Raukaan and Garrsak. It was a triumph of logic over a vastly superior adversary, the template to which all future engagements should be designed.>

Snow enfolded Ares' coded presence, and for what felt to the world of the binharic like an age, Stronos' mind faced the data storm alone.

<Then let us return.>

>>>

>>> **SIMULUS INLOAD**

>>> **SOURCE >>> URDRI FORTRESS FACTORY, COLUMNUS**

>>> **ORIGIN >>> ENGRAMIC RECONSTRUCTION OF ORVID STENN, SHADOW CAPTAIN, METACHIRURGEON TALOS EPSILI SUPERVISING**

>>> **DATESTAMP >>> 999100.M41**

>>>> **SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>**

The Raven Guard were spread along the length of the thigh-height rockcrete wall that demarcated the bombed-out lot of haulage depot 764 from the

adjoining premises. It wasn't much, but it was something. With the exception of some minor damage, it had weathered the destruction of the outer defences relatively intact, a credit to the Administratum clerk that had overseen its construction, and ran roughly parallel to where the curtain wall had been until ten minutes before.

‘Reinforcements to the south wall. Repeat—’

Even Stenn didn't hear the rest of what he yelled into his vox, the sound-deadening crump of a missile shrieking from its launch tube mere metres from where he knelt. The fine structures of his inner ear self-protectively dampened his hearing, the solid bangs of his brothers' bolter-fire suddenly muffled as though they defended an oceanic trench. Several hundred lasrifles of the Imperial Guard made a tremendous show of light and noise, the hard stitching of their more serious firepower growing incrementally louder as his hearing returned.

‘—too close!’

Stenn couldn't pick out the source of the shout from the general confusion, but could see a maniple of vanguard skitarii laying down fire as they withdrew to secondary positions, dropping like electro-stunned marionettes as the orks opened up with their own pistol sluggers. The Guardsmen in that section simply broke. Stenn saw a sentinel scout walker in the navy blue and grey camouflage markings of the Conurbis XI attempt to follow them, only to tangle legs in its pilot's haste and fall in an inelegant heap of helpless metal.

‘Tanks forward!’ Stenn roared into the bedlam, voice hoarse from smoke and shouting, as bare-chested greenskins as big as power-armoured Space Marines piled over the abandoned stretch of wall. He raised his plasma pistol and fired.

A tendril of blue-white transitional matter linked his sidearm to an enormous brute plastered in war paint for the merest fraction of a second before the ork exploded in a muddy green mushroom cloud of vaporised xenos flesh. Bullets thunked his armour as the orks spilled over the wall and into the defenders' lines. If there were a breach here where the Raven Guard held the centre then the rest of the line was as good as finished. Stenn liquefied another with a snarl, this one with a face covered in arcane sigils and glowing with rapturous frenzy. His pistol hissed off heat as three more bulled through the mess.

The Rhino hit at speed.

The rockcrete wall that the orks had been climbing over exploded along

fracture planes into shards, those not immediately crushed under the tank hollering and coughing as the withering pall crashed over them. The Rhino's storm bolter spat into the blinded horde, and Stenn saw the skitarii immediately switch protocols and advance again, exploiting the armoured transport as a firebase as they had the wall before it. The Conurbis XI, however, were thoroughly broken. Stenn could still see them, disappearing into Urdri's industrial sprawl. He paid them no further mind. They would show up eventually, if the city survived that long. He checked the power to his lightning claw, then thumbed his plasma pistol to open vent as he turned back to the orks.

Having harried these orks for every metre they took towards Urdri, Stenn knew that this was no ordinary invasion.

He had heard in dispatches of the psychic energies that flowed through their Gargants – weapon grids, shields and piercing uncanny augurs – and that brought their lumpen drop ships to ground still. He had heard too of the court of warpheads with which the self-styled warboss, Zagdakka, surrounded himself, and had lost two squads of his most experienced Scouts in a failed attempt at thinning their numbers. He saw now with his own eyes the weird energy that flowed through these greenskins in their battle-madness like some manner of psychic connective tissue, the brawn and sinew of some gestalt *ork* that drove them unto death with a single, overriding will. The fire discipline of the Raven Guard and their mortal allies slaughtered greenskins every minute by the hundred, but they didn't seem to care, hurling themselves recklessly against the Imperial guns as though possessed.

Not that the blasted Iron Hands would allow for the slightest deviation from their precious calculus. Stenn sneered, his pistol emitting a final hiss as coolant jets sprayed from the weapon's muzzle and the vents locked. He thumbed off the safety and selected rapid fire.

He could teach the Iron Hands a thing or two about logic.

'Kristos, you honourless shell, I'm talking to you.' He raged into the vox as he seared the heaving mass of orks with plasma. Too soon, heat warnings blinked red on the pistol's side and he was forced to flick back to vent. 'I need reinforcements and I need them now. Now, Kristos! I want a creeping artillery barrage walking outwards from the outer wall over the southern highway and I want aeronautica backup. Kristos!'

'Captain,' shouted Yavid. His company standard-bearer was on one knee behind the low wall and blazing into the horde with tight semi-automatic bursts

of his pistol. He jerked his beaked helm towards the wrecked loading yard to the northeast of haulage depot 764. Stenn looked to where his brother pointed.

A squad of Iron Hands Centurions, almost as well camouflaged as the Raven Guard themselves in their huge black warsuits and perfect stillness. Their hurricane bolters were unloaded and pointed at the ground or at walls, whichever direction they had happened to be facing when the strange malaise of inaction had taken them. Stenn regarded them with fury. The few Iron Hands he had seen had been that way, ever since the unexpected psychic onslaught had levelled the south wall outright. At first he had wondered if it was a secondary effect of Zagdakka's powers, but the Raven Guard and their mortal allies were unaffected. Yavid had a replacement eye as well as a bionic arm and he remained functional, as did the crew interfaces of their vehicles. As did the damned skitarii.

'Kristos!' he roared down the vox again, knowing he wasn't going to be answered, but determined that his last words be heard just the same, even if it were only by a comatose machine. 'And he had the nerve to tell me that the Raven Guard dragged his primarch down,' he growled to Yavid. 'Corvia, but I hate them. You hear that, Kristos? You think it was coincidence that found us both in the vicinity of this world? We too heard Dawnbreak's mortis cry. The second one, the one they sent after you abandoned their world to the eldar!' An ork ran at him. He tore its head from its shoulders with a slash of lightning claw, then incinerated two more with precise blasts from his pistol.

With the meaty clash of butcher's work, the bangs of bolter-fire diminished as orks thundered into the thin line of Space Marines. The Rhinos' storm bolters flashed; the thudding reports dissolved into the meat of chainblades and knives and primal screams. Assault Marines leapt into the air on bursts of thrust, flung back to earth as though on elastic cords to send orks flying. Lightning claws sizzled and cracked. He was aware of men fleeing, skitarii jerking as they were cut down, but the melee had swallowed him whole. All the feints and tricks and stratagems that had delayed the Weirdwaaagh thus far were done. Now it came down to the strength of his arm, the artifice of his armour – kill orks until there were no orks left and pray to the Throne that enough men survived to hold this line when it was done.

It was what failure looked like.

He trapped the whumping chain edge of an ork axe between the talons of his lightning claw, but the muscle behind the blow drove him back. The ork's arm

swelled as it sought to break the lock, its tusked visage sweating under the energy sheath that crackled about Stenn's talons. With a growl, he pushed the ork back and turned it, enough to bring his pistol to the ork's stomach. A beam of superheated plasma exploded from the ork's back, and he let it thump to the ground with a howl as it came to terms with its vaporised intestines. He stomped on its leg, tension bleeding out of him in a chuckle as he beheld the swaying gantries of the northeast loading yard.

The Centurions moved!

There they were, silent as the blown-out repair shops through which they came, ghosts of the machine bound forever to a doomed cycle of destruction and repair. The firepower of the Centurions alone would have ripped a hole into the ork horde as wide as the gates of the Ravenspire, but six full squads of Tactical Marines also moved up through the rubble behind them. They spread out, taking fire-positions just beyond the chokepoint where Stenn's efforts held the orks at bay. What were they waiting for? He saw a pair of hellfire Dreadnoughts lumbering into position either side of the smaller Centurions, and then heard the weary collapse of a pockmarked stretch of rockcrete as the glacis plate of a Redeemer pattern Land Raider drove through it. Its sponson flamestorm cannons traversed to track the flows of the ork horde, liquid promethium dribbling to the rubble floor.

Stenn cursed as he punched his lightning claw through a charging ork's ribs. Never expect an Iron Hand to commit until he was good and ready.

'What are you waiting for?' He shot an ork in the face as it made to barrel towards Yavid, and found himself in the sights of the nearest Iron Hands squad. They had bolters locked and aimed, but for some reason held their fire. Their eye slits shone an ephemeral white, but they could have been decoy suits for all the urgency they showed. 'Shoot, curse you!'

A horrible sense of premonition grew under his skin like a worm. Stenn looked over his shoulder and >> **RESTRICTED DATA** >>

>>>

The migranious sensation of access denial flared up in Stronos' brain. <What was that?>

<Simulus cannot be falsified,> Ares replied. <But it can be doctored. This has.>

<Why?>

The alteration of precious data in its vault felt to Stronos like a personal act of apostasy, no less than if someone had deliberately failed to bless his bolter prior to a deployment.

<To diminish aspects of truth. To highlight others.>

<Pertaining to Kristos.> It was not a question. Stronos was already certain that he, that *Stenn*, had been about to see Warleader Kristos standing behind him. It was a boiling in his gut, the hot reaction of his skin, everything that told him a man he despised was there but for the sight of the Iron Father himself. It was disconcerting. <Why not lock the entire file? He is mentioned by name many times, so why not expunge all reference to his presence?>

<Too many still know that it was Kristos who led the Iron Hands on Columnus. Stronos is but an aspirant at this time and he knows. And like Stronos, how few access the simulacrum chambers? How few challenge orthodoxy, and ask how the actions of one Iron Father on a distant world can result in two hundred years of schism. And thus the simulacrum is amended, detail by detail, decade by decade. And what then remains? A collective memory. In our time we have seen many truths erased, and many later untruths become inviolate. For data speaks no lies.>

>>>

>>> **SIMULUS INLOAD**

>>> **SOURCE >>> URDRI FORTRESS FACTORY, COLUMNUS**

>>> **ORIGIN >>> ENGRAMIC RECONSTRUCTION OF ORVID STENN, SHADOW CAPTAIN, METACHIRURGEON TALOS EPSILI SUPERVISING**

>>> **DATESTAMP >>> 999100.M41**

>>>> **SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>**

‘Artillery inbound!’ Yavid cried, hoarse from yelling out warnings, and Stenn turned from the waiting Iron Hands to look up. Horror at the calculated callousness of the xenos wrote itself in streaks of reflected green into his visor.

Zagdakka was shelling them, his own fighters be damned.

‘Down,’ Stenn yelled, and tried to disengage to find cover, only for the ork that faced him to bellow in his face and take the opening to trap his arms and grapple with him. He shouted in frustration, power-enhanced musculature

warring with cable-thick alien sinew. The ork's eyes were filled with psychic fire, but Stenn doubted whether the greenskin would have broken off the fight to save its own life even if its mind had been its own.

The air sizzled. There was a whine like that of an arcing firework, only these rockets fell like the emerald tears shed in the laughter of an inhuman god, and then the ground bucked as the first searing bolts hit.

They exploded amidst the melee, vaporising orks and Raven Guard with such indiscrimination that it was frightening. Not artillery, Stenn realised. He could taste the familiar aberrant foulness of a psyker's touch. Zagdakka and his retinue pressed the breach themselves.

An ectoplasmic limb twice the girth of an armoured Space Marine manifested from the random snaps of energy and smacked down on a Raven Guard that had been about to deliver the kill shot to the ork at his feet. Stenn strained as his own adversary's brute strength slowly pushed him towards his knees. The ork gave a roar of surprise as another great fist snatched it away and hurled it through a rockcrete wall. Stenn too cried out as, for the first few seconds of flight, the ork's grip on his arms took him with it. He hit the ground like a grenade dropped from a Land Speeder, and clattered through wreckage until his helmet smashed into the keystone at the base of an ablutorial block and he was lumped bodily against the wall.

He groaned. Gauntlet fingers crunched through the rubble as he drew his hands under him and began to push. Then he looked up. He swore as the confusion of contradictory threat markers suddenly parted around the black shape of the Rhino that was somersaulting towards him. He dropped back to the ground, body flat, feeling the tremendous shift in air pressure as the tank turned overhead and smashed through the ablutorial wall like a rock launched from a trebuchet.

'Kristos,' he coughed. His helm's respirator seals were damaged and blast debris from the demolished building was making his breath catch. 'Engage, damn it.'

Screams penetrated the death haze. Urgent signals through vox and data-link lent it a crackling, chopped-up dimension: red lit, threat markers circling with malign intent. He discharged his pistol, full charge, then screamed aloud as *something* grabbed his ankle and dragged him through what was left of the ablutorial. He bumped and slid over broken tiling and then put another wild shot through a standing column as he was turned upside down and pulled into

the air. A greenish coalescence had him by the leg. A flurry of short-lived plasmic tendrils burst from his pistol, and through the force that held him as though it were a hallucination. He fired until the weapon emitted shrill overheat tones and then he fired once more.

The pistol exploded in his hand, a newborn star about half a metre across that turned his arm to a crisp and buckled his plastron with the ferocity of its birth. Yelling in delirious fury as bio-implants flooded his bloodstream with clotting factors and powerful neuralgics, he activated his jump pack. It roared, shuddered madly for several seconds, then burned out, having moved him nowhere.

The force around his ankle hardened into the clear form of a fist as it dragged him over the battleground until he hung upside down in front of an enormous greenskin wreathed in psychic flame. The ork regarded him quizzically through a pair of green-tinted goggles. It was encased in war plate of white bone, arcane sigils of alien design daubed in pink using, or so Stenn's Scouts had reported, the mashed brains of its human captives. Its helmet was made of scrap metal and buckled tightly under its chin, a single massive spike coiled with razor wire rising from the crown like some breed of antenna. Green energy spat from the coils and swirled in the lenses of its goggles. It watched him writhe as it would a worm on its claw.

Stenn gave a grunt of pain as psychic fingers tightened around him and squeezed. 'Damn you >> **RESTRICTED DATA** >> Just kill me yourself.' His armour cracked like a sea-crustacean's shell, blood spurting from ruptured seals as his body was crushed. He screamed, genhanced anatomy fighting a battle with pain that had been stacked well against it from the outset. 'Emperor forgive you!'

With every scrap of conscious thought locked away in hardened centres of his brain structure he *cursed* the Iron Hands. He cursed the casual brutality, the bare calculation of risk versus reward. His last thoughts before those final redoubts succumbed to braindeath were not of the pain, nor of his brother Raven Guard that fell to the mind-blasts of the warboss' retinue, nor even of the Iron Hands themselves as they finally descended on the fray. With the enemy leaders bottled up with the last of the Raven Guard, the Iron Hands opened fire. Tactical Marines, Centurions, Land Raiders, each warrior a cog in a war machine that sprayed fire to a perfectly choreographed maelstrom that consumed Warboss Zagdakka, his retinue, the Raven Guard, and Stenn

himself.

But he was not thinking about that. He was thinking about Dawnbreak.
Because Iron Hands did not make mistakes.

>>> TERMINATING SIMULUS.

Stronos opened his single eye to find himself looking into the lidless, expressionless grey eyeball of a servitor. He winced in pain as the unit unplugged the optical feed from his bionic and wrenched its spidery wire attachments from his nerve axons. He did not react. His hearts, however, thumped as if he had just been in a battle for his life and it was through an act of self-control that he did not tear the servitor's head from its shrivelled neck.

He was furious, horrified, sickened – to the point that he could no longer discriminate between the three and could not say which emotion disgusted him more. Nor was he sure whose mind was responsible: Stronos, Stenn, or even meme-leachate from some cross-networked simulcus file, but he also began to feel... doubts.

He had never thought himself Kristosian. He abhorred the labels of disunity, and he despised the man, but he had always accepted the inherent 'rightness' of the former warleader's interpretation of the Creed. But now? Now he thought he saw what Ares had wanted him to see. This, here, was the ultimate consequence of a calculus that placed value only on outcomes, and measured only against the cost in Iron Hands resources of achieving them. From a position of such cost-benefit objectivity, Stronos could see that the defence of Urdri had indeed been the crushing victory that he had learned of as a neophyte.

And it had been wrong. The lives of his gene-cousins had value of their own.

It was with some discomfort that he realised that this thought was now incontrovertibly his own.

Drawing in a lungful of sub-zero gases, he slumped exhausted to the chamber floor. Cold gases welled up against his broad shoulders and spilled over them. Brittle hairs rose along the exposed flesh of his face and neck, his skin responding with a wave of goosebumps and a shiver that he barely noticed.

'I had... no idea how... inefficient... my... lungs... could be.'

'We said that it was powerful.'

Stronos could not tell just by looking whether Ares had been fully unplugged.

Disconnected cabling hung off him like netting from a high-atmosphere trawler, servitors and adepts crawling over his armoured bulk to free cables that had been caught on the ancient Dreadnought's gothic trim. Coolant vapours hissed around his legs.

‘It... certainly... is.’

‘With proper usage it is an invaluable tool, a treasure of our ties with the Adeptus Mechanicus. But Stronos feels already how it dilutes oneself into the many, how its returns diminish. Perhaps the priesthood of Mars welcome such a trajectory towards the hardness of the machine, but we are crafted in the Father's likeness. We are gifted with the Emperor's flesh, and with it comes a burden of responsibility that the machine cannot embrace. Stronos sees. Simulus breeds reliance. It embeds the tried and the tested over the innovative. It becomes a blinker. He sees how our brothers freeze in the face of the unprecedented.’

Not for the first time, Ares' misuse of the present tense for events centuries past left Stronos momentarily confused. ‘You do not trust the Mechanicus. Why?’

‘We do not distrust, but Mars has its interests as we have ours. To think that they align in all things is irrational, and yet we do so anyway.’

Stronos frowned. ‘Stenn spoke of Dawnbreak. That is another world I have heard of, though I am unfamiliar with it. What happened there? I heard that it was where Lydriik was sent with the Deathwatch though he tells me he may not speak of it.’ He worked at the punctured skin around his bionic eye with gauntleted fingers. It ached. ‘Why does the Ordo Xenos now turn its attentions to Thennos?’

‘Another question. One we cannot answer. The relevant simulus is more thoroughly redacted, with little at all from the Raukaan that took part. And we should know, for we have had to inload it all.’

Stronos took hold of a plug-in socket set proud of the bulkhead and used it to pull himself to his feet. He had been about to ask Ares another question – what he was expected to do with this knowledge, perhaps – when an alert klaxon broke out into keening yips of warning. Cycling red lights splashed the vaporous clouds that hung amidst the girders and piping, automated alert protocols dimming the lumens and powering down ancillary systems, the simulus banks included. As much a part of the *Commandment's* workings as cogitation and illumination, the servitors and engineers immediately ceased

whatever work they were doing and hurried to find their allocated battle stations. Stronos looked to Ares, but the ancient simply stood there, patiently, as though content to await the question that Stronos had been about to pose.

Stronos gave Ares one more second to show that he was aware of the sudden disappearance of his attendants or the alarm peal splitting the air.

‘Ancient?’

Bracing himself against the bulkhead, he walked to the internal comms panel bolted to the bulkhead beside the door. He punched in his sergeant’s authorisation key. ‘Command deck,’ he ordered the operating system as it blurted acceptance of his credentials.

‘*Command,*’ came the stressed reply from, Stronos assumed, the ironbarque’s master of vox. There were some functions that a servitor simply could not perform.

‘Battle stations have been called,’ said Stronos. ‘There is nothing on my display. Explain.’

‘The shipmaster has been attempting to install an interlink buoy low enough in the Thennosian atmosphere to interface with the Rule of One. He’s just succeeded. Captain Draevark has held the Amadeus bastion as ordered, but there have been further skitarii incursions and he has suffered losses. Lord Verrox has transmitted a fleetwide instruction for expedited deployment.’

‘Where is the Iron Father?’

‘I believe he is already in the embarkation deck, lord.’

Stronos removed his gauntlet from the panel. There was no need for an acknowledgement and so he did not give one, and the communication hardlink clicked off.

An unexpected sense of frustration tightened through his chest as he began the mental litanies and purges that preceded a return to combat. He had always seen the time expended on mobilisation and demobilisation as an inefficiency, an unavoidable waste product, like the heat put out by a lumen lamp, but now it felt too brief a time. The nagging concern that he was an individual, flawed like their father, with no right to challenge the collective wisdom of the Iron Council remained with him, but the stimulus he had just experienced could not rationally be ignored.

Ares posed a question that had stricken the Iron Council for two hundred years. Kardan Stronos alone could not find a resolution to it in the minutes

stolen below decks. And on some level, he understood that it had always been this way. He sighed, his hand going unbidden to the flesh housing of his organic eye. Klaxons wailed their urgency.

It would have to wait.



CHAPTER TEN

“For some this is your first mission, others have waited years for acceptance by the battle clans. Know that I care not.”

– Veteran-Sergeant Maarvuk

I

Dust and grit spanked off the rigid black fuselage of the Land Speeder Storm, sulphurous yellow flares sputtering from the exhaust chutes every time the ramjets sucked up something larger than a grain of sand. The combination of non-complementary roles of mobile weapons platform, scout transport and fast attack vehicle had left something boxy and inelegant, its forward plates angled for deflection rather than aerodynamics. But it was still fast.

The tufts of hair that Arven Rauth had left on his head tore in the wind. He hung by one hand from the crew rail, one foot inside the cabin compartment, the other on the footstep, and watched the vista of actinic dunes streak by. They were so bright a yellow it was almost as if they had been painted. The sky was a similar, albeit thinner colour, the stars hazed out by the radioactive glow of the dust clouds that churned through the narrow atmospheric band. Only a handful of shiplights twinkled. The Thennosian clouds might have had the tiniest of niches in which to persist, but their life cycles were vicarious and

brutal. Vast rolling banks tore themselves apart, differentials of density and charge roiled and pressed. Chemical lightning rippled out in sheets. Xanthous streamers swirled and frayed, merged, split again, for brief seconds at a time laying infinity bare before great scuds pressed together in a clash of thunder.

Distinctions of earth and sky were semantic. Dust blew across the dunes like chimerae of wave and cloud. Tornados swelled from nothing and swept over the cratered landscape at speeds that would have outpaced the shuddering Land Speeder with ease, travelling a few kilometres before gusting out and disintegrating into dust and wind. Rauth could see tiny flashes in the storm, like light signals from a lantern, engine burn and flare-offs from Clan Dorrwok's other Land Speeders.

They were arrayed in herringbone formation, scouring the wastes for enemy survivors left behind Clan Garrsak's forward push. Khrysaar and Borrg were out there. He spared them a moment's thought. *I'm here. At last. Now I'll make them all pay.* He could have laughed with excitement. He wanted to kill something, *anything*, and a cold, bitter rage the like of which he had never felt before and did not know what to do with grew within him with every bump of turbulence. Against that basal fury, the absence of a beat from his cold metal heart felt at once giddy and terrifying. As though he were by some innate reckoning unalive.

He turned his attention inward for a moment, heeding the efficient continuous flow of blood through the mechanical pump that Dumaar had stapled into his chest. His grip tightened on the crew rail, and he revelled in the grip-strength of his bionic left arm. The pull of flexsteel tendons on the muscles of pectoral and shoulder was as near as he would get to a sensation of actual physical pleasure.

He took a draught of concentrated oxygen from the plastek breather mask that he held to his face with his organic hand. It was connected by a transparent hose to a gas canister buried in the fuselage at the back of the cabin. He looked back to the wastes, thinking he saw the blunt glimmer of the locis-theta test complex ahead. The air smelled of depleted uranium. Rad alerts blinked across his visor, a wraparound sheath of impregnated plastek that extended from the side of his helmet armaplas and over one eye as far as his nose. Smiling tightly, he watched the engagement alerts ping and vanish, and followed the binharic data-chatter of the clave commanders with half an ear. He tightened his grip on the rail still further, testing its strength, his curiosity

over how far the metal could be stressed outweighing any vanishing concern he might have held for his personal wellbeing.

‘Would you all look at the novitiate?’ Maarvuk cackled. ‘Look at him and remember what it was to be a child.’

II

‘I am Veteran-Sergeant Maarvuk,’ the human breacher suit that towered over the mustered Scouts had announced on their arrival.

His face was adamantyclad, plated like an armoured reptile. His eyes were small and red, buried under a mass of cutaneous shielding. His mouth was a polyp of rebreather and feed tubes. He didn’t wear a helmet. He hardly needed to. His ‘voice’ came from a grille sliced into the side of his throat. Sectional plates had been pulled apart to make way for augmented musculature, the widened separations in the power armour stitched with layered synthskin and flexsteel.

Every Iron Hands brother took his own route to perfection, and from that first meeting it had been clear to Rauth that Maarvuk’s was a fundamentalist view of strength.

‘I was with the company that held Shreevon Ceti starfort for eighteen months against the dark eldar of Archon Faer. I prosecuted the purge of the Jova.’ He indicated the trio of century cog-studs worked into his metal dermis. ‘For one hundred and seventy years I led a clave of Clan Avernii to victory on thirty-nine separate worlds, until I discovered that there is but one thing that still brings me joy.’ His gimlet stare swept the Scouts. No one asked the question he was waiting for. He glared at Rauth. *No chance*. Then, as if Rauth had imagined the pause, Maarvuk went on. ‘It was during the razing of Farfaron that I learned the simple pleasure of bringing suffering and misery upon the weak. Now I am first sergeant of Clan Dorrwok. That is not a coincidence.’

Rauth glanced sidelong to Khrysaar and Borrg. Along with Jerec and Praal, the other two surviving recruits that had been brought into Clan Dorrwok on the Iron Moon, the neophytes were distinguishable at a glance from the older Scouts. They lacked the heavy augmetics and scarred carapace of their veteran brothers, the grim set to their eyes, the unblinking arrogance that Rauth could

only mimic. He despised them that. The evidence of their rebuilt bodies and patched wargear was enough for him to know that the selection for full battle-brother status would be as merciless as novitiate training had been. Only Borrg still looked keen. His face was drawn, but stretched by an eager, unconscious smile that was masked only partially by the blank half-visor they all wore.

Maarvuk had gathered them on a strike platform on the roof of the *Rule of One*. It didn't look like much of anything, no antennae or vanes or anything that could be ripped off in a gale.

The coarse brush of wind Rauth felt against his cheeks was nothing compared to a calm day on the plains of Medusa. He felt his skin begin to warm, slow radiation burn, but it was in large part psychosomatic. The temperature was eighty degrees below freezing, the surface pressure so low that water would have boiled at his own body temperature had his augmented metabolism not run on a more reduced core temperature than a standard warrior of the Adeptus Astartes. But in every measurable sense Medusa was worse and he wore the mantle of his birthworld like a skin of iron: he was proof against the universe, and his blood almost did boil as he contemplated the prospect of grinding this small part of it under his boot. He didn't know where the anger came from. He didn't care. With both hands, he gripped his shotgun.

He could see signs of activity from the sandy outline of Amadeus bastion, but could not make out anything in detail. His visor was blank. Maarvuk had yet to link them.

'Do not falter. Do not waver. Be as iron. For some this is your first mission, others have waited years for acceptance by the battle clans. Know that I care not. The first five brothers to achieve two hundred kills will receive demi-clave command and priority placement in the ascension lists. Two hundred thousand confirmed killed by Clan Garrsak in Port Amadeus. An estimated civilian population of two million remains in Locis Primus.' The sergeant turned towards the waiting Land Speeders.

'Two hundred should be easy.'

III

A leaden pall hung over locis-theta, dense enough to hold its own against the

worst of the wind. One of the bunkers still burned: the shell that had cracked it protruded from its roof, pumping a heavier-than-air toxic smog into the network of service trenches like water into a channel. Efficient. At first and even second glance the trench system resembled any long-held line in Imperial sand, the shelled-out demarcation between order and annihilation. It was only on closer inspection – or with the hindsight of a mission inload packet – that one noticed the lines of defensive spikes were in fact data-harvesters, weatherproofed cable bundles running through heaped sand towards the bunkers.

The Land Speeders of Clan Dorrwok set the Scouts down about fifty metres from the access trench. The vehicles whined like dray beasts driven uphill as they disabled grav-plates and alternated to landing thrusters, lowering towards the ground and allowing the Scouts to safely disembark. Rauth took a last draw on the speeder's oxygen pipe before switching to his own tank as heavier and more determined men pushed past him to get out.

They mustered up in a mature crater as the Land Speeders powered back up, listing crazily as they lifted and turned back for the Amadeus bastion. The Scout detachment numbered twenty-five in all and they fell neatly, by some unconscious rationale, into five demi-claves of five. Letting his shotgun hang in one hand, Rauth brought up the other to acknowledge the rad-warning in his visor display.

‘Eight kilo-rads. Do you read the same?’

The Scout beside him performed a mirror action with his own visor controls. ‘Eight kilo-rads. Confirmed. The crater provides some protection from wind-borne particulates. Levels will be higher in the wastes.’

Glorious.

Rauth had only been an initiate of Clan Dorrwok for a matter of hours before he had first been let into the pool as to whether Gorgorus would receive his first century cog-stud before or after attaining full battle-brother status. He hadn't yet mustered the courage to ask his new supposed brother how old he was, and as ever with the near-immortal Space Marines it was impossible to make a guess by visual clues alone. The absence of power armour aside, Gorgorus was certainly big enough, and remodelled sufficiently, to be called an Iron Hand. His customised stalker-pattern bolter looked well used, and was carried with a confidence that suggested its looks told no lies. A metal plate replaced one cheek and the opposite eye was a low-powered bionic. Both

arms were huge, almost industrial, replacements that looked powerful enough to tie his bolter into a knot should he so desire.

Rauth flexed the fingers of his own virgin augmetic, torn somewhere between hatred and envy. Sergeant Maarvuk stalked towards the access trench where another Iron Hands commander was waiting.

He was ancient. A long row of cog studs ran across the fusion of helmet and bionics that served function as a face. The centuries they commemorated had seen the colonisation and near total conquest of his armour with gunmetal bionics. That which was still black fluttered with oath papers, bonded to the ceramite with black-petalled rosaries bearing the clenched fist of Ferrus Manus at their centre. They wafted in the poisonous breeze that blew in over the trench behind him. As Maarvuk approached, the two veterans engaged one another in wordless communion.

Rauth couldn't draw his eyes away.

'Sergeant Drath of Clan Avernii,' Gorgorus grunted. 'He must be in charge here.'

'Only sergeant?' said Khrysaar, also in Rauth and Gorgorus' demi-clave. He ran his hand admiringly, apparently unconsciously, over the rivets of his new bionic hand. His pearl white optic purred as it focused on the sergeant's studs. 'He's five hundred years old.'

'Almost six hundred,' Gorgorus corrected.

Leaving his clave for a moment, Rauth climbed the wall of the crater until he had gone far enough to satisfy his curiosity. He looked over the crater's lip, and shielding his exposed eye with one hand allowed his gaze to pan.

It was too much to take in at one glance.

Cyborgised remains in varying states of intactness littered the trench's plastek parapet. It was impossible to distinguish those that had been blown to pieces by bolter-fire from those that had been ripped apart in the hand-to-hand fighting that had followed. A skitarii legionary jerked spasmodically amidst a tangle of wires strung between the data-harvester spikes, electrochemical residual in his spinal implants causing him to wriggle like a moth in a spider's web despite the loss of his limbs. Another piece of the enemy hung from an overhead line and dripped. But he felt nothing, just a numb awareness of where an emotion he could no longer identify might once have been kept.

And anger.

This, here, was how the Iron Hands made war.

There were no adepts amongst the dead. Rauth presumed they had been gassed in the trenches or butchered elsewhere once Clan Averonii had fought through to their bunkers. The occasional bang of bolter-fire rang from farther flung redoubts to inform that the purge remained ongoing. Drath's battle group could not have made this position long before the Scouts had caught up to them. The massacre of a few hundred priests and their garrison did not strike Rauth as work the veteran-sergeant would find taxing.

A plume of dust coughed skyward as Rauth watched, followed by a faraway explosion. Another article of unexploded ordnance uncovered by the minesweeper servitors. With a grumble of annoyance at Drath's obvious efficiency, he turned his face from the wind to look back the way they had come.

The faintest thickening in the haze of dust on the horizon was all the evidence he could make out of the road that the Adeptus Mechanicus were digging this way from the Amadeus bastion. Rauth snorted. *I hope they enjoy disposing of corpses. That's all that'll be left by the time they get here. Another glorious addition to the honour rolls of the Thennosian macroclades.*

A blinked summons from Khrysaar lit up his half-visor display, and he looked back to see Drath return to his trenches while Maarvuk marched stolidly towards his Scouts.

Half walking, half skidding on bright yellow sand, Rauth hurried down the crater wall to rejoin his clave.

'Drath and his battle group push north and east towards Locis Primus.' The sergeant blinked a topographical overlay onto the Scouts' visors. Rauth noted the inexplicable, zigzagging route and then subconsciously expelled the thought from his mind. 'This is a Mechanicus world, so the position of traitor skitarii installations is known to us. Your function is to determine which of these bases, if any, still harbour traitor skitarii. If they are weak then we will cleanse them. If they are not then we will call in Sergeant Drath or whomever is nearest to deliver them, and you, an object lesson on the true nature of strength.'

Priority ident runes scrolled across Rauth's display. Iron Fathers Ares and Verrox, Captains Draevark and Raan, Sergeant Drath, Fabricator-Locum Hyproxius Velt: all commanded independent battle groups, as if in competition for the prize of being first to reach Locis Primus' walls. The fabricator-locum was going to be the winner. Only his skitarii pushed for it directly whilst the

Iron Hands took their convoluted paths around the red-hatched interdiction zones.

Odd.

Again something bade him hold his tongue and in reward the uneasy feeling subsided.

‘You have oxygen for twenty hours of operation, but do not concern yourselves with that. The radiation will kill you in ten. Slowly.’ Maarvuk’s vastly augmented frame wheezed like an iron lung. *A radiation proofed iron lung.* The sergeant’s thin red eyes found Borrg. He pointed. ‘This one will perish first. Let that encourage the rest of you to move swiftly.’

IV

Stronos could not help but think about it.

He studied his cartographic overlay as though expecting the underlying mathematics to expand into epiphany if he could only stare at it for a sufficient length of time. Static washed intermittently through the display like a continually aborted system reset, increasing in energy and frustration as the battle group pulled further ahead of the *Rule of One*. The Razorback rocked from time to time. Something pelleted its armour. Stronos’ initial gut response to such episodes was always the same: the column had come under fire. Only the steady stream of inload/exload to the Predator vanguard, bike outriders and Tubriik Ares’ command Land Raider assured his flesh it was not so. Ten millennia of proxy war had engineered a terrain as hostile as any real battlefield, steep radioactive dunes, deep craters and vast debris fields through which the battle group’s vehicles clattered as if through hail.

Ignoring the distortion to his inload signal, he studied their route to Locis Primus for the thousandth time. It was highlighted, an oblique angled triangle absent its hypotenuse. He frowned at that unfilled direct line, thinking again of what Epistolary Lydriik, and in his own way, Ares, had said to him about the motives of the Adeptus Mechanicus in this matter. And Kristos. What was his stake in this? With a thought, he called up the position of Hyproxius Velt and his forces. The fabricator-locum’s twenty thousand and ordo reductor heavy support gave him the primarch’s share of the force that had been committed

against Locis Primus. Despite that, they were well ahead. The skitarii cohorts were already slowing down and spreading out as they neared the facility's walls and adopted siege protocols.

Stronos knew there were more efficient uses for his spare mental processivity, but he could not help but think about it.

'What concerns you, brother-sergeant?' Lurrigol was plugged into the cleft in the spall lining immediately opposite Stronos'. Despite the motions of the tank he barely moved, perched rigidly on a metal shelf and secured by spinal plugins directly to the Razorback's systems. Their knees touched.

'Nothing of consequence,' he answered.

'Inefficient.' Lurrigol produced a small, self-consciously errant smile.

Stronos frowned back, unsure why, but feeling better. He glanced to the others. None of them had noticed the exchange.

Kardaanus, Trellok and Burr were plugged into their slots, Kardaanus' lascannon stowed in the underfloor compartment, each in their own noospheric space. They would be collating engagement reports, trawling Clan Garrsak's vast data tranches for similar encounters against similar adversaries, collating that information amongst their networked minds to assemble a prefabricated common strategy. It was... efficient. Stronos frowned. For all that his synopsis had craved the surety of the manifold link during his absence on Medusa, the thought of linking his mind to the clan disturbed him now. He thought of his experience in the *Commandment*'s stimulus chamber. It had been as far beyond what his brothers were going through now as closing one's eyes and imagining a firefight would be to an unaugmented mortal, transcendental and yet at the same time coldly reductive, in ways that he still did not fully understand.

Nerves itched where metal touched, and he found himself scratching the oculus of his augmetic eye as he regarded his brothers' near-comatose compliance to the spirit of the machine. The Razorback was a noble fighting beast, much prized for its mobile firepower by Verrox and Clan Vurgaan, who had spent several millennia converting their Rhino pool to Razorbacks, and yet.

'*Simulus breeds reliance*,' Ares had told him.

Was efficiency worth the price? Did they even know what the price was? Stronos didn't, but he felt he was only just beginning to realise that there *was* a price to be paid.

'Nothing of consequence,' he said again, and the tank rumbled on.

V

Gorgorus hauled back the bunker doors, metre-thick plasteel squealing as the Scout's industrial strength limbs peeled them apart and, with one final pull, dislocated them from their hinges. One grip at a time, he released the handles. The metal groaned, ready to confess, and the other Scouts shunted the doors aside and charged inside.

Rauth swept the vestibule chamber with his shotgun, then peeled left, sprinting on ahead while Khrysaar and the other members of his demi-clave found walls to hug and covered his advance with bolters. He dropped to one knee and brought his shotgun to his cheek. He activated his beacon pack and light speared the emergency-lit gloom. The demi-clave's multiple beams strayed over the walls and ceiling. Rauth saw decontamination showers. Life support pipes. Storage lockers. One of them hung open. It contained an environment suit. The door winked across his beam as it banged shut, then squeaked open, the glittering fabric inside ruffling in the gale that blew in through the forced outer entrance. Rauth blink-sent an action rune to the demi-clave and a Scout called Sarrk walked towards it, bolter locked, and tore the locker out of the wall. Rauth grimaced, and swung his beam back ahead.

An airlock, plastered with arcane hazard sigils, a black fan on a yellow background. Warning lights were inert. The intercom panel was unpowered. Khrysaar advanced ahead of Rauth's overwatch to tap at the keypad that hung from the panel on a handful of wires, but nothing happened. Rauth kept his breathing slow, even, but breathing through a pipe was dehydrating, and his throat was desert dry. He tried to work some saliva into it and swallow, but could do neither particularly well with the air pipe in his mouth.

Come on, brother. Let me kill something.

'Clear,' said Khrysaar, face pressed to the airlock glass, hands spread out from his temples like a dish to blot out the demi-clave's light.

The same call came back from the demi-clave that had gone right.

Rauth buried his frustration.

Gorgorus called it in.

'Understood,' Maarvuk voxed back. *'One demi-clave to sweep armoury and*

data processing. The other, habitation. Muster in ten.'

'Compliance.' Gorgorus deactivated his vox and waved them forward.

Khrysaar and Sarrk forced the airlock and Rauth led them through. The others bore bolters, powerful weapons, but his short-ranged combat shotgun made him the unspoken choice to take point through the narrow, sparsely lit corridors of the Mechanicus' test bunker. This part of the facility was unpowered too. Presumably the entire complex had been shut down. Emergency lighting cast long, bruising shadows, elongated stretch marks on the cold metal walls that never wavered, even as the Iron Hands walked through. The wind groaned through the doors left open behind them.

'Beacons off,' said Gorgorus. 'Light levels are adequate.'

Rauth, with his flesh eyes, was rotated from point, while Sarrk unholstered a bolt pistol and moved to take his place. It was a logical move, but the demotion stung. His shotgun drifted across Gorgorus' back as the clave senior pushed ahead of him. He frowned, imagining. For a moment the weapon refused to move, then Gorgorus loudly shouldered open a side door and cleared whatever mental block had caused his aim to seize.

'Clear.'

With Sarrk now in the lead, the demi-clave passed through chambers that looked more like the workshops of artisanal scribes than shrines to data collection, great scaffolds of brass from which servo-quills sketched squiggled lines onto parchment reams. Or had done. The arms were still now, silent; parchment scrolled over the floor, the rollers empty. Other chambers were indecipherable in their function, vast spaces in which tanks of water stood, suspended from floor and ceiling on collimated coils. The water remained uncannily still even as the Iron Hands walked past and caused the tank's spring mounts to creak. The body of water deadened the sound. But they saw nothing.

Beyond the harvesting shrines they came to a long, hemispherical chamber where broken formations of workstation chairs were scattered amongst several banks of slumbering consoles. They flickered green, standby script filling half of one line ready for their reawakening. Every screen gave the same message. Rauth couldn't read it. He gave the back of a workstation chair a push with his shotgun and it squeaked on stiff wheels for a few centimetres until it bumped another. Then it was quiet again.

'Indications are that the last recording was made three months ago,' said Gorgorus.

‘Agreed,’ said Khrysaar. The others nodded.

‘Was it abandoned?’ said Rauth, tracking his shotgun warily over the unquiet terminals. Dry air rasped in and out of his breather pipe. ‘Or did they simply cease work?’

And what caused a skitarii legion to turn renegade anyway? Why did I not ask myself this until now?

‘Insufficient data,’ said Gorgorus. ‘Supposition.’ The old Scout pushed open the doors at the far end of the console chamber.

Their allotted search path terminated in what the ghost schemata drawn over Rauth’s half-visor lens described as an armoury. But there were no weapons here. The lockers had been emptied. Sweeps of the adjoining chambers failed to turn up a single charge cell. The five Scouts gathered again in the modest vehicle bay at the bunker’s rear. The exterior doors were open, wedged with miniature dunes of blinding yellow dust. A huge-wheeled truck bristling with specialist auspex gear was still parked in the middle of the bay, but the surrounding spaces allotted to the garrison’s half a dozen armoured transports and scout vehicles were all empty. The Scouts converged on the remaining truck, Gorgorus ripping open the cabin door while Rauth pushed his shotgun inside.

Throne curse it!

Empty.

‘The traitor skitarii withdraw their forces from peripheral facilities,’ Rauth observed.

‘They must know by now which way the battle groups approach,’ replied Khrysaar. ‘Why not make us fight for it?’

Rauth shouldered his shotgun and backed up, frowned at the oily promethium slick on the body of the truck and on the floor around the inlet valve. ‘They consolidate their strength.’

‘Then we are wasting our time here,’ said Khrysaar. ‘It will be a fight to take Locis Primus, and we should be there.’

Because the arm of Khrysaar is so mighty. ‘Indeed, brother.’

Gorgorus silenced them with a gesture, and ordered them through the rear doors. Sarrk kicked out the built up sand, and Rauth burst through, sweeping his shotgun side to side through the swirl of luminous yellow. His armour’s rad-counter clicked. He squinted up into the storm. The ionising atmospheric made playthings of augurs and visuals both, and it was difficult to be certain of

much, but he thought he spotted the reassuring glint of a servo skull whispering overhead. He reached up one-handed to his visor controls, dialled the frequencies to pick up the drone's beam back, but got nothing. The atmosphere was too much.

Or it wasn't one of theirs.

'...*habitation... clear.*' Voices emerged, streamed in static, then sank into others as he played the frequency dial. '*...perimeter... no contacts... grid two-one/two-seven/phi... interdiction zone... acceptable losses.*'

'Guerrilla strikes,' grunted Gorgorus.

'A logical strategy, given their disadvantage,' Rauth returned.

And one therefore that the Iron Hands battle groups should have been better prepared to counter. Again, the anti-logic of the Iron Hands' convoluted advance was impossible to ignore, but again, somehow he managed it. He saw the same cognitive dissonance struggle behind Khrysaar's eyes and resolve itself the same way.

'It makes no sense, does it?' Gorgorus muttered, an observation that the younger Scouts pointedly did not hear.

'*Locis-beta confirmed clear.*' Maarvuk's voice crackled over the group frequency. '*All claws reconvene in the vestibule chamber for decontamination and resupply. Five minutes, then on to locis-alpha.*'

The veteran-sergeant killed the link, and then Gorgorus issued a terse order for them all to get inside.

Rauth crouched down where he was. There was another splash of promethium on the ground here, sand accumulating on its oily surface as though worn as camouflage. He frowned. He was no tracker. It was not a skill that one developed on a world as aggressively changeable as Medusa, but it occurred to him that a spill like this would not have been left exposed for long under these conditions. Not three months. Not three hours. He walked a little way until he felt the wind fall off, blocked by a high dune. He dropped to his haunches again and reactivated his light beacon, turning it to the ground. *As I thought.* He grunted in satisfaction.

Tyre tracks.

Now that he looked, he felt sure there were the tracks of several vehicles here, driven in convoy and so overlaying one another. How many, he couldn't tell, which perhaps had been the point. He looked up in the direction the tracks seemed to be heading and covered his eyes. A tangled line of instrumentation

splayed from the rockcrete trench lines and their embankments, flattened in a spot where something large and careless – *several somethings* – had gone through it.

He was about to rise when someone grabbed his arm.

‘We have been ordered back,’ said Gorgorus.

Rauth shook his head and shone his beam over the tracks. ‘Decontaminate and resupply. The skitarii knew they couldn’t hold these bunkers. They’re keeping mobile, using them as strike posts, stepping stones across the wastes, as we do.’

Gorgorus let go of Rauth’s arm and plotted the tracks’ vector onto his visor overlay. He nodded. ‘Heading towards Battlegroup Ares,’ he said, half his face lit up with cart-lines. ‘Calling it in.’



CHAPTER ELEVEN

'1 + 1 = 0'

– Sergeant Kardan Stronos

I

'Repeat.'

The Razorback's grinding forward motion rattled him against his shelf, as hard and as far as his various plug-ins would allow. There could have been no outward sign of his alarm, and yet Lurrigol expediently began to file the engagement reports he had been inloading from the other battlegroups. Trellok, Burr and Kardaanus too were coming around, the basal interlink that tied their systems alerting them to his urgency. Stronos spoke levelly into his helmet vox.

'Iron Father. Repeat.'

His faceplate masked his grimace as the meaningless response came again, verbatim.

'Ares to all Garrsak. The Sapphire King is here. He comes in force, brothers, eighteen degrees. Stand to repel. The Sapphire King is here!'

For no discernable cause, Stronos felt his skin prickle. For once there could be no faulting the signal. Clan Garrsak's proven boast of being the best equipped clan of the best equipped Chapter in the Imperium of Man had been

given a stiff test by the conditions on Thennos, but they could still punch a signal two hundred metres. It was the Iron Father himself who spoke no sense.

‘What is it?’ said Lurrgol. ‘I can tell that you have a channel open.’

On this one occasion, Stronos was glad of the code-walls that separated his battle-brothers from all but their immediate superior. ‘Hostile force incoming. Numbers unspecified.’

‘Direction?’

Stronos thought a moment. ‘Unspecified.’

Kardaanus pulled the release hatch on the underfloor compartment and fed out his massive lascannon, stock first. It whined hungrily as he plugged it in to his power pack. The others were already prepared. ‘Why are we still moving?’ Kardaanus asked. The barrel of his bulky weapon was still half stowed; there was not room to remove it with the five of them crammed inside. ‘Precedent dictates disembarkation. Defensive posture.’

With a cautious nod, Stronos blink-sent an instruction through his spinal connection to the Razorback’s single mind-slaved operative to reduce speed and free its turret gun. The spirit intermediary fuzzed belligerently back at him, but issued a blurt of what Stronos imagined to be its compliance. Then he sat forward, roughly severing the short interface flexers that connected his armour’s ports to the tank with a string of hisses and pops. There was a moment’s disorientation as his mind adapted to the reduced input. His thighs tensed, the coils in his leg bionics winding to full tension, ready to propel him forwards the instant the rear hatch blew.

‘Contact Jalenghaal.’ He looked across at Lurrgol. ‘Instruct them to do the same.’

Lurrgol’s silence was interrogative. It asked why Stronos did not go to full battle-readiness, tether his systems to the clave and transmit his orders as he thought them.

That would have been efficient.

A clatter of rapid-fire against the side plating made Stronos tighten his grip on his bolter, and the Razorback roared through the crest of a steep dune. There was a moment of quasi-weightlessness, then the g-force as the laden tank slewed full-speed down the windward side. Just more debris. He did not loosen his grip.

When he had been separated from the clave and ordered to Medusa he had wanted nothing more than to lose himself again in the unity of the clave. The

discord of the homeworld had added to his yearning.

Now he wondered whether the collective could survive his doubts.

‘We are not slowing,’ Lurrgol observed.

Stronos looked up and frowned as they passed over a hump.

‘Thirteen traitor squads. Confirmed. Light vehicles inbound, attempting to flank. They will fail. For the Primarch, opening fire!’

The muffled but familiar drum of assault-cannon fire beat through the Razorback’s hull and the roar of her power plant. A long burst. Confused bursts of fire echoed it, short, staccato volleys from perhaps half a dozen tanks. The clave sergeants must have been as confused as Stronos, but Garrsak meant unity and Garrsak obeyed.

‘Sergeant?’ Kardaanus looked at him, expectant.

More heavy cannon fire. *‘Swinging to twenty-nine degrees. Deccus, they are yours. I am falling back to your perimeter—’*

Stronos gestured his brothers to remain seated, then cut Ares off mid-rant and switched channel. ‘Yolanis, Stronos. Tell me something that I can understand.’

‘Sergeant!’ the engineeer cried out, as though the Ommissiah had reached down and touched her whilst she prayed. Assault-cannon fire hammered in from her end of the line. *‘Praise the Cog. Patch me through to Naavor. Or Braavos. Velt even. Anyone at all, damn it, I need help over here!’*

‘Talk to me, adept.’

‘I’m sorry, lord sergeant, I—’

The adept carried on speaking, Stronos was sure, but he heard no more of it.

There was an apocalyptic shriek as something struck the nearside tracks, a metal-on-metal bang loud enough to hoist the Razorback from its treads even without the explosion that followed. Stronos heard a female voice scream as up and down inverted. He crashed into Lurrgol. Trellok half fell behind him. The Razorback continued to roar on one track.

And then with a terrific crash, the five of them all flew forwards.

II

Melitan screamed as the explosion lifted the Razorback from the desert, fire streaming from its tracks, and drove it up the back of the one in front. They

skidded apart, the rear hatch of the latter shearing away on the ‘dozer blade of the former, and one of the black-armoured Iron Hands rolled loose down the dune.

‘Sergeant!’ The open channel popped and fizzled, like an electrical fire.

The rest of the column at least began to slow, the tanks bunching together. Those that had turrets – Predators, Razorbacks and the solitary Whirlwind the Garrsak clan armoury had spared – tracked them left. The smoke from that first missile had dispersed quickly in the Thennosian winds, and Melitan saw leggy shapes crest the dune that crossed the boundary of the interdiction zone. She was no Auxilia Myrmidon, but she knew her tools of war.

They were Sydonian Dragoons, heavier fire coming from the Ironstrider Ballistarii that followed in behind, the smaller war-forms of Sicarian Ruststalkers scuttling with ease over the rad-sands ahead of the walkers’ fire. Guided by uncannily perfect protector imperatives, their optimised fire patterns raked the column of tanks with las-flechette and auto-fire. Too empty to scream any more, Melitan sucked urgently on her plastek mask and ducked under the Land Raider Anvilarum’s adamantine sidewall as hard rounds sprayed the command tank.

Her brother and sister adepts cried out in panic, flaps of crimson as they leapt from the crosswalks into the gut cabling of Ancient Ares’ interface stage. A handful spat back at the dunes with sidearms that Melitan had managed to forget they carried, extremis training kicking in for them as it stubbornly failed to do for her. The head of one such scholar dissolved into red mist as autocannon-fire traced through his meat and banged against the hull he’d been standing next to. She saw Callun, blood on his face, fall clumsily into the relative safety of the tank’s innards with a clang, losing his gamma pistol unfired amongst the conduits. Another priest pitched over the side, scream muffled by his rebreather, radium burn blackening his exposed shoulder. Melitan reached for her own flechette blaster, but couldn’t seem to pull it out.

To hell with extremis training anyway.

‘Stop firing and take cover!’

Mouthing a prayer for forgiveness, Melitan hunch-ran around the crosswalk that circled the Anvilarum’s rampart and found shelter behind the adamantine-clad bulk of Ancient Ares.

Bullets spanked harmlessly off the Dreadnought’s thick armour and that of his transport as he rotated his stage to face the loping Sydonian walkers. ‘Take this

message to your overlord, spawn of Fulgrim. Flesh. Is. *Weak!*' The barrels of his assault cannon howled like jet engines and something far away exploded.

He bellowed in fury. Another roar of cannon fire, and Melitan clapped hands to the sudden pain in her ears and slid to the gantry, screaming. Her eyeballs thumped with the shocking recoil of every spent round as she crawled to the vehicle's armoured sidewall and pulled herself up.

She could see a ten-man squad of Iron Hands spilling out of the Rhino just ahead of them. They fired loosely into the swirling yellow dust, their tactical protocols asynchronous. She saw others simply stall as they stumbled down the ramps of their transports, small arms sparking harmlessly off their imposing battleplate as they fought to resolve the logic conflict generated by the dissonance between their Iron Father's orders and their own senses.

Garrsak obeyed, but they weren't stupid.

Staggering about, she rounded on Ares, resorting to the Last Rite of Compliance, and kicked the Dreadnought below the breast aquila. His armour responded with a hollow clang. She whimpered, then drew her bruised foot back for another attempt when she felt a tug on her sleeve. She turned.

Callun's bloody mouth moved like a massively slowed-down friendly fire accident, and it was only then she realised that Ares' assault cannon had burst her eardrums. She looked down at the hands she had tried to protect them with and almost toppled under a wave of dizziness.

Who would have thought so much blood could pass through one set of ears?

The pull on her arm again.

'He's trapped in simulacrum,' she mumbled, hearing herself via the vibrations her own vocal cords pushed through her skull.

'He has had these episodes before,' Callun yelled back at her. He held her face in his hands, the skin slick with blood and slippery with it. They were both shaking, but shaking together made the condition seem less terrifying. She felt her body respond to his, and her lungs pull a proper quantity of air through her mask.

'Momentary lapses. Nothing like this.'

'Something must have set him off.'

'We can't just wait for him to snap out of it.' Ommissiah alone knew what sort of orders were being passed down to the Iron Hands. No wonder they couldn't muster a coherent response. 'Isolate the Ancient's vox-caster,' she yelled down into the interface pits where the surviving adepts hid. 'Re-route incoming

signals to my frequency.’ Little things, insignificant things, but immediately she started to feel better for it. ‘Now!’ Stung, the adepts started to move, and Melitan turned back to Callun.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

‘We should consider a purge of his meme-core,’ Callun said, and pointed to where the Dreadnought’s lower body was connected to the Land Raider’s innards.

‘No.’

‘It might be the only way.’

‘Never!’

‘Your worlds will be scoured!’ Ares roared. Flexmetal squealed and rivets began to pop loose as the sleepwalking Ancient pulled on the datacords that held him to the floor of the tank. Something twanged loose. The adepts trapped down there with him wailed in terror as the awesome war machine they had been sworn to blindly trod on one of their number, crushing him instantly.

‘Drop the hatch!’ Melitan screamed.

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> BLAST WASTES, THENNOS

>>> ORIGIN >>> JALENGHAAL, SERGEANT PERFUNCTIS

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

Illogical.

Jalenghaal turned his head by increments to shield the vox pickup in his ear from the incoming fire. Multiplex optics returned grizzled reports of green and white, fire pattern tracers visualised by the infinitesimal electromagnetic signature of radium decay and then enhanced. Shrugging off the insignificant patter of radium rounds, he walked around the rear of his vehicle and attempted to refresh his overlays. Contingency code-strings scrolled down his display, switching it, inverting; target icons disappeared while his armour’s spirit instigated a cold restart.

Sapphire King. Illogical. The Iron Father was in error.

‘Brother... respond.’

Morthol, Govall and Ruuvax were clustered around the front and rear corners of the Razorback. Separated by codewall from the Iron Father and thus

protected from logic conflict, they fired on the ambushing skitarii. The Razorback's turret-mounted heavy bolter added its own heavy chatter. In the absence of specific instructions, they acted out default defensive protocols, basic fire drills to which the skitarii adapted swiftly.

The speaker, however, had been Vand.

Jalenghaal looked disdainfully along the gauntlet that held his pauldron mid-shake. He expected better from a dutiful brother of Kristos.

'Orders?' Vand said, removing his gauntlet without apology. A bullet screamed a few centimetres past his helmet.

Jalenghaal isolated the Iron Father's channel and sealed it shut with a blunt code-command. 'Stand by.'

Shutting down external feeds, he squirted his consciousness through the clave link.

His clan brethren appeared to him as dense regions in a bright, ever-changeable sea of code, sergeants superimposed where they, as he, adhered to precedent and sought solution in the manifold. The skitarii were a loose swarm of red, auto-strategos units continuing to compile and disseminate even if the warriors that carried them embedded in their systems had ceased to function. One demi-clave alone drew his attention.

In delayed response, the battlegroup's noospheric generators lagged with the surge in demand on its cogitation power, their icon highlighted in his mind, cleaving like a perfect mechanism into five flawless sub-signatures. He focused on one, mentally establishing a connection via their bridging data-tether. A codewall interrogated his authorisations, but they were meticulous, and he was not challenged again as his overlay slurred into a rushing datastream of indecipherable binharic screech.

He opened his brother's eyes.

Or, more accurately, hijacked his visual feeds.

A squall of radiation static filled the lagged noosphere between them, and the view from his brother's optics was poor. It was enough to see the smoke that poured in through a twisted panel between the rear compartment and the operator's cabin. Four armoured figures were sprawled across one another, unmoving, unresponsive to his noospheric probes. Jalenghaal had no control over his host, and he received no sound. He could only watch as the flames flickered over the Razorback's ammunition hoppers in grainy silence. He remained in situ long enough to transmit override codes to his host's

battleplate, and remotely activated a diagnostic routine.

As he suspected. Trellok was dead.

He calculated an even probability that the entire demi-clave was dead or soon would be.

Pushing against the tide of data, he returned to his own mind and re-sanctified its seals. His optics chirruped as they powered back online. Helmet chrono indicated he had been absent for ninety-two seconds. He appeared undamaged. Vand was still beside him.

‘Orders?’ he repeated, as if the intervening ninety-two seconds had been scrubbed from their meme-logs.

‘Stronos is disabled, probably dead. The possibility of retrieval is negligible. I am sergeant.’

‘As it should have been.’

‘Ambition is weakness. As is discontent.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant.’

Jalenghaal’s battle systems built to full purr as he started forwards, asserting battlefield authority over Stronos’ defunct codewalls to furnish himself with temporary sergeant’s protocols. The firepower impacting on his front armour intensified as he strode into it and narrowed its angles. If he still felt the stirring that he might have called pride in the ticking metal of his breast then he might have smirked. If he had ever felt such a thing. The slow awakening of a long dormant gestalt from within his iron core, however, was something that even he could not wholly ignore.

‘Exterminate,’ ordered Clave Jalenghaal.

And to a man they obeyed.

>>> TERMINATING SIMULUS.

III

The hatch hit the sand with a muffled clang, flame roaring briefly through the open space before an armoured figure stepped through. Sand turned to glass and then shattered as, with mechanical precision, Kardan Stronos turned towards the blip of hostile markers, raised his pistol and fired. Thunder on

dead ears. Again.

It was well known that the ships and vehicles of the Iron Hands were capable of limited autonomy, but that was just the beginning.

Stronos' power armour unleashed another burst and then, detecting no further hostiles within a pre-coded perimeter distance, delivered him a powerful electric shock that jolted his body out of its sus-an state and jerked his flesh eye open.

Five hook-limbed skitarii infiltrators lay ruined at his feet, their cyborgised remains torn apart by bolter-fire. It was reasonable to conclude that he had killed them.

Through the incessant swirl of dust, sand and micrometallics he could see huge black warriors advancing into the skitarii's heavy guns, the cohesive perfection of Clan Garrsak broken down into a dozen or more firefights between independent demi-claves and Sicarian infiltrators. Stronos saw one infiltrator clade sprint from one firefight to another and scatter into the cover of an ork battlewagon that looked as though it had been deliberately driven over a mine a thousand years before. Stronos was the nearest warrior. Still operating semi-autonomously he began to turn towards the decaying truck, just as an ethereal ribbon of plasma bled out of the air in an unbroken line between the vehicle and a Rhino to the fore of the column, and the entire area mushroomed into blue-white fire.

Cooked shrapnel, millennia old, and acid-yellow glass rained over Stronos' armour. The restorative chemicals in his blood and charge residuals on his nerve axons made him feel sick.

Anger and confusion passed through him like a cold transfusion of blood. He frowned in consternation. The interlink. His armour must have connected him while his mind had been shut down. For a moment, he thought to resist, but it would have been as easy to seal his brain's left hemisphere from his right. He could feel the bitterness of his brothers, amplified a hundred-fold by the buried rage of so many, and yet at the same time disseminated evenly amongst them all. It was the same logic discontinuity as simulcus.

$$1 + 1 \neq 2$$

He should have felt more, but he felt less.

$$1 + 1 = 0$$

He felt nothing. Illogical, but there it was, and he dealt with it accordingly.

The crunch of boots on sand brought Kardaanus, Lurrigol and Burr to his side.

Trellok was dead. The three Iron Hands radiated heat. Lurrgol and Burr both exhibited extensive surface damage, the multiple breaches to Kardaanus' armour enough to overwhelm his autorepair and fry the systems thus exposed to the radiation. He was already walking with the shamble of an end-of-life servitor. His left arm hung at his side, its control systems locked down.

'My function is impaired.' With difficulty, the giant Space Marine disconnected his lascannon's power leads, then let the weapon thump to the ground. 'Direct me, sergeant. I will draw the enemy fire.'

'No,' said Stronos, feeling a portion of his brother's confusion before it could be dispersed and repressed.

'I can be of no further use to the clave.'

Stronos turned his bolt pistol so he held it by its brick-like barrel, the grip extended towards Kardaanus. 'You have one hand. Use it.'

Kardaanus looked at the weapon as though its like appeared nowhere in his memory. 'Illogical,' he managed to grind out. 'Now you are disarmed.'

'Momentarily.' Stronos bent and collected the discarded lascannon. His suit suspensors swiftly adapted to its weight, but the familiar *mass* of a real weapon in his hands was pleasing. For a moment, at least, until the interlink spread the emotion thin. 'Plug me in,' he said to Burr. Ordinarily, a servitor would perform the function, but in its absence his Iron Hands brother dutifully connected the cannon's power leads to Stronos' backpack. His plant's output was not equivalent to Kardaanus' but it would suffice for half a dozen shots.

'This is...' Kardaanus still looked as though he would protest.

'Errant,' Lurrgol finished for him.

Hefting the lascannon in both hands Stronos pointed it towards the reverse-jointed silhouette of a Sydonian walker, waited for the green rune as his optics sought to lace with the weapon's targeting hardware. A sudden burst of bolter-fire distracted him from his shot, and he glanced sideways as Sergeant Artex and his clave emerged from behind the Rhino immediately ahead in the convoy and marched across him, laying down fire as they went. Stronos grunted and pulled his shot before he immolated one of his brothers. The Sydonian picked off one of Artex's clave with a volley of auto-fire, but the rest continued remorselessly on the vector they had set for themselves. Neither sergeant acknowledged the other.

Once the clave had passed, Stronos lined up his target again, hard bangs of bolter-fire as his own clave began to advance.

It briefly occurred to Stronos that Artex could have helped him and his brothers from the wrecked Razorback, and he wondered why the other sergeant had not thought to try.

Had Stronos been unable to free himself then his value to the current engagement could have been presumed to be minimal. Better to let him burn, enact recovery and repair in the aftermath provided the damage was not too severe.

And now Trellok was dead, a brother, part of his system, an arm he could still feel even though it was no longer there.

A green rune. The Sydonian walker collapsed into steaming slag before his finger had released the trigger.

Despite everything, he felt... angry. It was a sensation he was determined to share more widely than the interlinked battle group.

‘We should re-link with Jalenghaal,’ said Kardaanus. Now that a role had been foisted upon him he acted as though determined to fulfil it. His pistol worked with accuracy and haste, and though his left leg dragged a furrow in the rad-sand he had not yet slowed his brothers down.

‘I cannot,’ said Stronos. The denial migraine from his data-tether told him what must have happened while he had been functionally dead. ‘The interlink has been locked down.’

‘Orders,’ Burr demanded.

‘Ares is no longer transmitting. I do not know why.’

‘Perhaps he is disabled?’ said Kardaanus.

‘Perhaps.’

But unlikely. Anything so prosaic and Artex, as senior sergeant, would have immediately assumed command.

‘Brother!’

It was Lurrigol who called out, but he and Kardaanus opened fire together as aclave of Sicarian Ruststalkers split off from the larger maniple that had effectively drawn Clave Artex out and bogged them down in crossfire. The combat builds tore towards them, shockingly fast, shifting easily between biped and quintaped and every integer between as if they had been rolled downhill towards them like grenades. The two Iron Hands’ bolters tore through their spidery frames, but they were too many, and too quick. A split-second later, too short a time to be anything but co-ordinated, a second splurge of hostile markers appeared from the opposite direction. Burr opened fire on

them and Stronos thumped his helmet. Either the skitarii had somehow modified their exoskeletons to mask themselves from the Iron Hands' auto-strategos or someone had failed to upload their tracking data. Neither solution was satisfying. Stronos overkilled one with a blood-red blast from his lascannon, then dropped it to drag by its cables and drew his power-axe.

The Ruststalkers seethed into close combat range like a riled nest of spiders. Barbs and hooks tore through ceramite as if it were putty; transonic blade-limbs flashed faster than bionics could keep pace, forcing Stronos to rely on his imperfect organic eye as he parried and moved. He had never seen such vicious mobility. The cyborgs' humanity had been little more than a distant starting point. Lurrgol took a mindscrambler device square in the face and shuddered to his knees. Kardaanus caught the twitching cyborg by the throat before it had a chance to deliver a killing blow. The towering Space Marine wrested it off the ground, then without trace of effort or emotion began to tighten his grip.

Something in the Ruststalker's throat clicked and initiated a whirling rotation about the neck, propeller-like blade-parts shredding Kardaanus' plastron to rags. With a machine roar, the Space Marine hurled the skitarius off him, then fell to the ground with the lack of care peculiar to men who do not expect to rise.

There was something about these skitarii, the uncanny speed with which they reacted, as if augmented to prognose the actions of the Iron Hands before they were made, the way their armour gleamed in spite of dust, as though treated and polished far beyond the demands of function.

Stronos sent one sprawling with a sidelong swipe of his lascannon, then swung for another with his axe. He had meant to split the construct's head, but fighting these Sicarians was like grappling with a greased cable: it slipped away from the blow, but gave the bladed extremities of two appendages in exchange for its life. The remainder of its irrational bodyplan spun, clicked, and reformatted into a defensive ball as it crashed to the dust and rolled clear. Stronos lifted his boot to stamp after it, then grunted as another leapt for him with a scream of explosively-boosted spring.

It arced towards him, hindblades drawn, back and up, foreblades angled down, mid-blades parted like the mandibles of a mechanical predator. Stronos raised an arm to take one, his axe another. Both were irrational gestures.

1 + 1 ≠ 5

A barrage of heavy assault cannon fire shredded the Ruststalker just as its weapons pierced the outer protective layers of Stronos' armour. The construct disintegrated under the sudden imposition of firepower and Stronos' pauldron did not come off much better. He hit the ground on his side, at least one severed blade that he could see sticking out of his thigh plate. He felt a hiss of caustically ionised air burn his face until his suit effectively sealed the hairline crack. His vox crackled.

'Lord sergeant. Stronos. Is that you?'

Stronos looked up, eyes protectively filling up with mucranoid tears, to see a muddle of red approaching from the line of black Clan Garrsak tanks like a mirage. Ares towered above like a monolith to all that was brutal, four metres tall, power built into every etched facet of his armoured frame. The sacred schemata worked into his warplate appeared to pulse as the unrelenting output of his assault cannon lit them with red fire. To see him was to see the Ommissiah's wrath incarnate, an avatar that men had raised up, a god of war that time had thought lost and now returned to them with a vengeance.

Some gods were like Iron Hands. They just could not die.

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> PULUS, PRIME WORLD ULMETRICAN REACH

>>> ORIGIN >>> ARES, TUBRIIK

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 903807.M31

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

His rib plate ached with rage as he sprayed the melee with bolter-fire, picking off the runny, fleshmetal aberrations that threatened to swarm his brethren. Blood ran down his face. His chest heaved, his dark carapace vest creaking as it rose and fell. He could feel his heart beat against it as though he had enemies inside and out. **>> CURATE'S NOTE >> IT IS WELL DOCUMENTED THAT THE IRON HANDS OF THIS ERA HAD YET TO FULLY EMBRACE THE RATIONALISATION OF THE UNIVERSAL LAWS. NEVERTHELESS, FEW SIMULATED REMEMBRANCES OF SUCH AGE EXIST AND CIRCUMSPECTION MUST BE EMPLOYED IN THEIR EXPERIENCE >>** A machine-daemon *thing* slithered leglessly towards him, trailing spinal ichor. He detonated its face with what was left in his magazine and splattered it across the flagstones. His entire body trembled

with fury, as if he were a weapon building to charge, or a voidship priming for warp translation. Every square centimetre of flesh stood desperate to oppose the gargantuan wrongness of the Reach.

The structure through which the embattled Iron Tenth currently fought had once been the home of a grand palladium, a devotional construct to the Machine God of the >> **DATA CORRUPTED** >> Transparent conduits pushed blood through metallic walls that shivered like naked flesh, came out in pimples when brushed by the quasi-mechanical processes that Pulus passed as wind, and shrieked when burned. Cables wound around columns like veins around muscle, slippery, alternately tensing and relaxing to reveal tormented, half-human faces fused to the metal, issuing dense binharic screams before being smothered again in ichorous paste.

Ignore it.

He made the repetitive punch of his bolter into his chest carapace his centre, willed his genhanced hearing to render everything else gone. For the first time in his new life, the gifts of the Emperor proved unequal.

‘Death to the Sapphire King!’

A cyborgised horror of pink metal and lopsided, melted, human aspect shuffled towards him with sickening speed. It raised a carbine of lights and colour, and before he could react unleashed a volley of hyper-accelerated glass. Ares dropped to one knee, raised an open hand to shield his face, and returned fire beneath the improvised faceshield. Unable to see, he missed, but something hit it, and the onslaught died with a squeal of metal and the sigh of a machine.

Breathless, he smothered the pain of his ravaged left hand and nodded thanks to the power-armoured veteran who loomed over him, crackling power-axe embedded in the perversion’s spinal column.

‘My gratitude, sergeant.’

>>>

‘Gratitude?’ Stronos clasped his ruined pauldron with his iron hand, creating an air seal to aid his armour’s repair mechanisms in their work, and looked up at the towering, gore-slicked Ancient. Crimson vapour wheezed from the disruption field that enveloped the Dreadnought’s power fist like incense from a chaplain’s censer and blessed Stronos’ damaged wargear. The imperative to

give up the shoulder for lost and instead take up his lascannon was powerful. Some fell technourgy of the Thennosian Mechanicus had clearly unbalanced the Ancient's mind. 'Gratitude for what?'

'The abominations pour from the old palace. There is a gate to the north east, not six kilometres from here.' Ares' voice boomed, but Stronos did not think the Dreadnought sought to shout over the bolters of any brother he could see. 'No, sergeant,' he thundered in answer to no question asked. His vocabulisers affected a mangled attempt at sorrow. 'I am the only one. We must raze the city as we advance, tear down everything the daemon has touched, or he will use it against us. By the Father's iron, let the warper of steel be there when we arrive.' With a redoubled whine of his assault weaponry, the Iron Father stomped ninety degrees on the spot to face the skitarii infiltrators that were still sniping from the dune, then opened fire on the move.

Stronos let him go.

It was not as if he could possibly have stopped him, even had he a reason to.

A few metres upslope, Burr harried the withdrawing Ruststalkers with bolter-fire. Even some of the adepts that had escorted Iron Father Ares took pot-shots. Their combined contribution was insignificant even against Burr alone, but would factor into the Sicarians' calculus before they decided where to strike again. Lurrgol was conscious, but immobilised; eyes trapped inside a paralysed head tracked furiously towards every report of bolter-fire. He was recoverable, however, thanks to Kardaanus' intervention.

Of Kardaanus, there was little left to be recycled.

Stronos gritted his teeth. The pain in his chest was one he did not want the interlink to take from him. But it did anyway. The hole it left behind was somehow bigger than what had occupied it, the knowledge of its loss making it ache all the more.

'The Ancient's strength has failed him,' he muttered. 'He is no longer iron.' As he watched, anger rising faster than it could be exloaded, Ares shredded a walker with a prolonged burst of his assault cannon, then scattered an infiltrator clade with a spread of grenades. The skitarii's superior analytics were already leading them to adapt their approach: the infiltrators scattered before the Dreadnought's rampage, and, unheeded, an Ironstrider Ballistarii riddled his flank with autocannon-fire. Damaging hits.

'Is he blind too, or merely broken?' With a curse, Stronos opened a data-link to the receding Dreadnought. <Control yourself, Tubriik. Act like an Iron

Father!>

No reply.

‘He can’t help himself.’ Yolanis came to him. The bloodied lascannon that hung from his power pack and that he held in his iron hand took her aback for a moment, her eyes widening. ‘He... he’s reliving some prior memory. Or possibly one of the million or so simulacra inloads he’s experienced over the past days.’

‘That damns you, adept. It does not absolve him.’

‘I know that! Most damning of all, I don’t even know how *exactly* this is my fault.’

She was so small. Stronos could have broken her with a look. He glanced over the adept’s cohort, frightened figures all, garbed in red like insects intent on appearing poisonous.

‘Could another of your engineers do better?’

Yolanis did not answer straight away. She looked up at him defiantly. ‘No.’

Stronos felt his anger ebb. His armour seemed to shrink about his frame, and suddenly he did not tower above the mortal female as he had. ‘What do you see out there?’ He gestured towards the hazing wind, the pockets of gunfire that splintered the dune.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Out there, adept. I will not say that you look upon the most implacable warrior collective ever forged – I am not the Ommissiah – but if such a force exists anywhere then it has yet to do battle in this galaxy. You look upon Iron Hands, and what began as an attempt to delay us an hour is going to become a massacre because Ares has taken from them what made them strong. For the protection of themselves and their clans my brothers have codewalled themselves. They act on independent imperatives now and will listen to no one until the field is cleared. But the skitarii have already adapted. See how they work to isolate individual clans or demi-clans, bringing them down one at a time before engaging another.’

‘Can the next in line not take over? What if the Iron Father had been disabled in battle?’

‘Then the clans would not have isolated themselves against his madness, and command protocols would have been instantaneously transferred.’

‘Could you take over?’

‘I would be last in the chain. I have held my rank a matter of days. And you

continue to neglect the principle issue. The claves are codewalled.'

'There must be some way to override.'

'If that were so then the action would make an ineffective defence, would it not? The lockout can only be disabled from—' Words failed him abruptly, as if power had been cut to his vocal cords. Somewhere deep in his subconscious, a mortal voice laughed at his stupidity. Had Ares himself not tried to warn him? So habituated had he become to the efficiency of interlinks and noosphere tethers, he had managed to neglect the obvious. He turned to Yolanis. 'I may require the Iron Father's command protocols.'

'I think I can retrieve them.'

'Be certain, adept. Can you retrieve them?'

'I can get them.' More firmly. 'Anything else?'

Stronos tapped his helmet. 'Just this.'

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> BLAST WASTES, THENNOS

>>> ORIGIN >>> JALENGHAAL, SERGEANT PERFUNCTIS

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

Jalenghaal pinned the Ruststalker under his boot while Morthol put two rounds between its optic dishes. He was otherwise engaged. The second melee construct thrashed at his head with blades and filament wires. He let it. He kept nothing there that he could not spare. When it was close enough he clubbed it down with the stock of his bolter. The weapon massed more than most men could lift, and with the strength of something more than mere transhuman behind it, it was always going to be a disabling blow. His voxware grizzled in his ear as he returned the acid-whitened gun stock to his armpit. Auto-identifiers assigned the incoming signal a name.

He surprised himself with a grunt. The name meant nothing to him. Emotion was a weakness, and Jalenghaal had no weakness.

'Stronos,' he answered, even as he resumed firing. Not that he was entirely surprised his sergeant had survived. He had calculated his death an *even* probability, after all. 'Orders.'

>>>TERMINATING SIMULUS.

IV

In a contest between two evenly matched cogitators, the ability to be irrational became an advantage. Verrox had taught him that on Battakkan. No one had verbalised the thought, but everyone there accepted that the tau's cogitators, for all their alienness, had been superior to theirs. It was equally clear to Stronos now that the skitarii's were better too. That it made no sense did not invalidate the reality, and if the enemy could not be out-cogitated then it would simply need to be outfought. Verrox had crushed the tau on Battakkan utterly, combining a relentless ferocity with a preparedness to suffer casualties on a scale that the alien tau were not. Stronos would not have won that war had he been Iron Father, not with the resources that Verrox had been given, but he did not feel guilty about placing value on his brothers' lives or those of the mortals under his command. It was irrational. It was unpredictable. And it was his advantage.

Of the twenty-one surviving sergeants, demi-clave commanders and tank-servitors only Jalenghaal accepted his authority and voluntarily disabled his codewalls without demanding confirmation of Ares' codes. Of the remaining twenty, only Sergeant Artex refused to acknowledge those authorisations. To Stronos' mind, that put the lie to the concept that the Iron Hands were incapable of error. Either it was Artex making one or everyone else, but *someone* had to be.

Stronos shook his head. When had he started to think like that?

If anything, it was Jalenghaal's swift compliance rather than Artex's intransigence that surprised him more.

Guided now by a single authoritative will, it became a straightforward act to manoeuvre the Predator tanks at vanguard and rearguard out of the confusion of vehicles and onto the rising dune. At Stronos' order the two groups converged, adopting a wedge formation with an armoured Vindicator siege variant at point, the Whirlwind in the protected hole within, loosing hissing missile volleys into skitarii positions as the tanks ground upslope. Bike outriders drew in tight to the flanks to harry any Sydonian walkers that might attempt to encircle them and get at the tanks' thinner side and rear armour, and the Iron

Hands claws pushed in hard behind, scouring the dune with ordered fire patterns as they went.

Only Stronos, Burr, the adepts and the stalled Land Raider Anvilarum took no part in the advance. Even Artex and Ares moved with it, after a fashion. Their actions were erratic, but Stronos quickly saw that distracting the skitarii with something that would not easily cogitate was only to his advantage. On a basic level, commanding a demi-clan was little different from commanding a clave, an expansion rather than a transformation, the increase in complexity arithmetic rather than logarithmic. Stronos found the step up a smaller one than he had expected.

A blast at the extreme range of his lascannon melted the cover of a skitarii sniper, enabling the sponson heavy bolter of the passing Predator, holding its fire for that precise moment, to mow down the infiltrator's entire clade.

The rational action for a commander in Stronos' situation to have taken would have been to consolidate his remaining assets and then repel. The skitarii would certainly have been taken aback by such an action after facing a previously disordered foe, but an irrational offensive action, coupled with the twin incalculables of Ares and Artex would take longer to cogitate. Longer than they had. Because, when all the complexities and calculi were balanced out and boiled down to their solution, whatever adaptations these skitarii had somehow accrued, the Iron Hands were superior in every sense.

As the Predator wedge drove the skitarii clear of his weapons' range and bike outriders roared out to stymie their attempts at circling back, Stronos lowered his borrowed lascannon.

He considered the skitarii. Sensing connections that for the moment did not require the force of proof, his mind turned towards the Devilfish and the other alien vehicles he had seen in Port Amadeus. Verrox had said that Thennos had special license to dissect xenotech, something that Lydriik and his commander, Harsid, had confirmed. As Verrox had stated, and as the Father himself had warned in the *Canticle*, the potential for corruption was endless. Could the skitarii have somehow incorporated something akin to tau prognosticators into their hardware?

Or technology more alien and perverse even than that?

'They are withdrawing,' said Yolanis, at his side, taking relieved gasps on her rebreather. 'Praise the Ommissiah.'

She was probably gladdened that her failures had not cost them as highly as

they could have. But her superiors would be informed. Stronos would see to it that Nicco Palpus himself was told personally. ‘Praise him by fulfilling your function. Take your adepts and reassume control of the Anvilarum. Go after Ancient Ares and retrieve him... somehow.’

‘Yes, lord sergeant.’ She bowed, then started off through the thick rad-sand towards the Land Raider. After a few paces she turned back. ‘Aside from my adepts, no one knows about Ares’ breakdown. What should we tell them?’

As Stronos thought on it, the Ancient smashed in a crest of sand and bathed an empty wreck in flame from his underslung assault weapon, all the while delivering a howl of fury from his augmitter pipes. Stronos felt himself recoil from the bared emotion.

To lie outright to his own brothers felt alien to him, but the truth, that a machine as venerable as Tubriik Ares could falter, would be devastating. Though he loathed it no less, he began to understand the motives that must have driven the one who had ordered the doctoring of the Columnus simulus files.

‘I will make a decision when I have to.’

The eyes behind the woman’s mask expressed surprise. He was getting better at reading them. It was unlike one of the Iron Hands to prevaricate; before he was forced to repeat himself, however, she bowed again and hurried off into the blowing sands to carry out her orders, summoning her staff to her.

‘The skitarii flee over the interdiction line,’ observed Burr. Stronos’ battle-brother betrayed no emotion at being compelled to sit this particular fight out. Battle was a function; pride and glory were weaknesses that served it no advantage. ‘We can press them no further.’ Even as he spoke, pre-embedded command protocols from higher authorities than Ares were causing the battle tanks to break off their assault on the dune. Their rearguard taking pot-shots at the decelerating armour wedge, the skitarii disappeared over the other side of the crest.

With the expanded tactical overlay conferred to him by Ares’ protocols, Stronos could see the skitarii’s exit vector as plotted by the auto-strategos units, extrapolated by noospherically interlinked cogitators and plotted graphically to his visor display. It took a few seconds. They were making a direct line for Locis Primus, and if they did not alter course between here and there then they were going to hit the rear echelons of Fabricator-Locum Velt’s force in a few hours. He knew that he could not trust vox over that kind of range, not under the current conditions, and he had seen for himself just how

fast these skitarii builds could move. Stronos was facing a journey at least five times that of the skitarii's along their prescribed course.

'There are no blast facilities between our present location and Locis Primus. Any secrets that the Adeptus Mechanicus do not want shared will not be imperilled by our crossing at this point.'

'None that you know of,' Burr corrected. 'For a cult so dedicated to the accrual of information they display a singular recalcitrance in its dissemination.' There was no censure in his tone. Merely an expression of proven fact.

'It is time to be adaptable. Is that not the cornerstone of the Iron Creed?' Burr offered up no response either way, and Stronos opened a clan-wide channel, not just to his immediate subordinates, but to every battle-brother in range.

'Until Iron Father Ares is fully restored, I remain in command. All brothers to return to transports and maintain full battle readiness. We are crossing.'

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> LOCIS PRIMUS, THENNOS

>>> ORIGIN >>> TRAITORIS PERDITA >>ERROR>>

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>

>> RESTRICTED DATA >>

'Hail the Ommissiah. With each aborted step are we brought closer to his perfect design.'

>> RESTRICTED DATA >>

'Data is the indestructible unifier. It is data that will reveal the implicit schematic, synchrony of metal and flesh, for all are equal in their potential before the Machine, and equally abhorrent to Him in our transitory imperfection.'

>> RESTRICTED DATA >>

'So portends the prophet-alpha, *i*. Hail the Ommissiah. The time of His revelation is at hand.'

>> RESTRICTED DATA >>

>>> TERMINATING SIMULUS.



CHAPTER TWELVE

'A bolt-round to the back of the head will end a fight as surely as a power sword to the front. Outcome is all. Consideration of anything more is pride, and pride is weakness.'

– Veteran-Sergeant Maarvuk

I

Arven Rauth could not see the wing of Mechanicus fighters until they passed out of a band of starry black sky and across a swell of sickly yellow cloud. A wink of crimson became several, growing larger with distance-dilated slowness to become a formation of blunt, wedge aspect Avenger strike fighters. The air rumbled after them as the aircraft lashed overhead. Rauth watched them go, and seconds later saw explosions prick the towering adamantine shard of Locis Primus.

The bulk of the capitolis facility was subterranean, the surface superstructure merely a nigh indestructible hardpoint for a blister of comms vanes, antennae and auspectoriae. Its thick walls were a super-solid adamantine-duracrete composite, cross-bonded to shock-reductive layers, and with a glassy external sheeting of some energy-dissipating meta-metal, the name of which had been redacted from Rauth's inloads.

The Avenger wing banked and scattered, flak spitting after them as they jinked through the guy wires and pylons that forested the structure's base. The explosions of their boltcannon and lascannon fizzed out to reveal a structure unmarred by so much as a scorch mark. Rauth shook his head as more earthshattering blows from Ordo Reductor artillery tanks pounded the Primus shard to similar effect. *I'm glad the calculus logi are on our side.* A direct lance strike from the *Commandment* would not have cracked those walls.

He turned as he felt Khrysaar tap him on the shoulder and took the offered magnoculars. *Five Scouts and one pair of magnoculars. It sounds like a joke.* Bringing them to his eyes, the lingua-technis chattering from his vox scanner dialled down to a cursive click indistinguishable from that of his rad-metre, he scanned the terrain.

It was a nightmare.

Vehicle wrecks ranging from sentinel scout walkers to alien superheavies of impenetrable design formed a shapeless outer wall, their crushed remains mortared and partially camouflaged with yellow sand. There were clearings. Bombed-out test silos in shallow craters. Long-disused trenches. Avenues of sorts where data ran from peripheral stations to the Primus through corroded metal pipes. The occasional rusty plume marked the position of Fabricator-Locum Velt's legios as they advanced through minefields or discovered abandoned ordnance. Fireteams duelled with bunkers that, it turned out, were not so abandoned after all, while bulldog Triaros Armoured Conveyers snarled in tank traps as they strove to forge ahead. Siege tanks and Ordinatus superheavies sought to clear space with mixed success.

This was galactic war, rendered down to a planetary scale, *and a small planet at that*, a panorama of entropy and destruction on a scale that, if they allowed themselves to dwell on it at all, would have kept lord generals up at night.

To state it plainly, it was a mess. Rauth yearned to get his hands on it and impose order. To his surprise his flesh hand was sweating, the cold *whoosh* of his bionic heart accelerating to meet his body's crude demands for blood.

'The Mechanicus are in a hurry to kill one another,' he muttered. 'They hardly need us.'

'Then maybe we should go home?' Khrysaar twisted his body in order to squeeze it up to the angle made by the alien tank's roof hatch and the ground. Further from the shard, the wrecks got younger, the obliteration between them

more widely spaced. The upturned carcass of a heavy skimmer, its light-repellent alien design belonging to no race Rauth could identify, currently provided shelter to his clave. Its hull plate creaked to the futile endeavours of the Ordo Reductor.

‘Maybe you should.’

‘Pass me the magnoculars,’ said a brooding slab of grit-alloyed yellow called Suforr. ‘Before they become bonded to your hand.’

Rauth handed them up and the bigger Scout snatched them. Rauth suppressed his indignation as Suforr crunched onto his belly and peered through the scuffed magnoculars. While he waited for the older Scout to get his look and for Maarvuk to bring up the others, he turned up the volume on his vox receiver and listened to the chatter. Most of it was in coded binharic, but he could pick out one back-and-forth that appeared to be in Reket Medusan.

‘I gave you an order, sergeant. Stand down. Iron Captain Draevark will relieve you when he arrives. ETA in approximately seven hours.’

‘No. I consider that order to be illogical and will therefore proceed to disregard it.’

‘You have no authority here, sergeant! You will commit where you are told, when and if you are told.’

Rauth listened a little longer, appalled and yet guiltily amused in equal measure, as if he had just overheard two adoptive parents fighting. ‘Does anybody know a Sergeant Stronos?’

Khrysaar and Sarrk shook their heads. Suforr ignored the question.

‘There are but one hundred sergeants in your Chapter,’ Veteran-Sergeant Maarvuk’s voice growled from behind them, causing Khrysaar to bang his head on the alien tank and silently curse. ‘Most of them have held that rank for your entire lives and you cannot memorise the names even of the score in your deployment? Your failure disgusts me. I demand two hundred and fifty kills from you four before I will sully my name by submitting yours for elevation.’

The truck the clave had commandeered at locis-beta to arrive so far ahead of the calculus was caught in a rubble wall and some wire, and no amount of strain from Maarvuk or Gorgorus or its own engines had been able to force it another centimetre towards Locis Primus. The last of the ten Scouts were jumping out of the stricken vehicle now, and picking across the detritus towards Rauth’s hide.

The other clave of fifteen would be about ninety minutes away from locis-

alpha by now, assuming they had not been delayed or killed. Rauth did not much care either way. As he saw it, halving the competition doubled his chances of elevation to battle-brother status.

Maarvuk placed one hand to the smoothly alien contours of the skimmer's upturned underside and whined down to his bulked haunches to glower at the quartet under its carcass. 'What do you see?' he asked Suforr, the demand in his tone leaving no doubt that there was a correct answer and that he knew exactly what it was.

Glad of the magnoculars, brother?

'Velt has not the strength to envelop the Primus,' said Maarvuk, impatiently answering his own question. 'They assault from two hundred and eighty degrees only, which leaves a potential avenue if the facility's defenders are suitably distracted by the main offensive. Those of you that have data-tethers, disable them. Silence from here on.'

If the sergeant disapproved of the sudden thrill that rushed through Rauth's cold steel heart at the promise of violence, then it was with a sour glare he shared evenly amongst them all.

'This is a time of great challenge for any of the Iron Hands,' he said, gravely. 'You bear the Medusan fury of Ferrus Manus, but without the iron yet to temper it. You will be tested as never before.'

'Unyielding mind, unyielding body,' Rauth murmured, his mind already half on the punishment he intended to mete out upon the traitorous Thennosian skitarii.

Maarvuk dipped his head. 'Whatever command I give, you will comply.'

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> LOCIS PRIMUS, THENNOS

>>> ORIGIN >>> VELT, HYPROXIUS, FABRICATOR-LOCUM

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>>

The scrivener cherub fluttered out from under a toppling stanchion, parchment whipping about its flight as it dutifully recorded the exact quotient of irritation that had gone into Hyproxius Velt's facial expression as he hurled the object from his path.

With a blurt of annoyance Velt guided his massive, arachnid-like battle

chassis towards the towering Primus shard, las-bolts and gamma bursts from dozens of independent weapon mounts off-handedly spraying the wreckage as he willed the war machine to walk. One multiplyarticulated limb stabbed forwards, mag-clamped to the drum torso of an ork Dreadnought and hauled it up, instigating a mini-collapse that Velt dismissively crunched through. He tossed the Dreadnought over his murky armourglass pod as though it were repurposed plastek, a cherub flying back to make note of where it fell and into how many pieces it shattered.

Data could be mined from the most obscure of troves. It was through unexpected correlations such as the year-on-year increases in salinity of the Rakka Basin on Mars matching precisely the fatality rates of skitarii forces on Scipio IX, or the Moirae Schism lasting the exact number of hours as the decimal value of one over the Gellar Constant, that the Ommissiah revealed His universality.

Not that Velt was paying any more than basic diligence to His glory just then, and only that much because he was prominent enough for his simulated remembrances of the Thennos compliance to be subject to re-examination by his superiors one day.

His skitarii escort traded fire with their renegade counterparts in the ruins. It was difficult to tell that they had once been loyal skitarii. The uninitiated might have struggled to tell the two sets of combatants apart, but to Velt the difference was as clear as that between zero and one.

They were over-fleshed, their oiled, iridescent armour painful to his autosensors and yet allowing his human perceptions to view their subtle flights of colour with only mild fascination and loathing. Most odd. His forelimbs engaged with clearance work; successive volleys of fire from autonomous pintle-mounts drove the aberrant warriors into deeper cover and allowed his own forces to push on. Returning cherubs fluttered over the abandoned corpses to tally their losses and to record the full extent of their moral decay. With the largest wrecks cleared from his path, Velt bulldozed through.

Pure-code vanguard skitarii assaulted through the breach and immediately entered a firefight with a pair of bunkers on the other side, new imperatives disseminating through their tethers and guiding them to take cover behind enormous half-exposed tyres and bent sheets of vehicle armour.

Velt backed through the breach, more of his warriors pouring around and through his armoured legs, as a radium bullet disintegrated against the

conversion field that enveloped his module. The magos calculi had assured him that his levels of personal risk were close to zero, but being cornered into the position of pressing the offensive in person felt like punishment for other men's sins.

He had known from the beginning that the >> **RESTRICTED DATA** >> technology exceeded Thennos' allowances. Despite what the Medusans thought of him, he was no fool, and neither had he been in shutdown at his post. But who was he to overrule the decisions of >> **RESTRICTED DATA** >>?

Once again it fell to Hyproxius Velt to face down the consequences.

<Tenth Sergeant Stronos communicates his position, thirty degrees east, ahead point-three kilometres.> Theol Quoros followed in his own hardened armature, a set of armoured tracks from which rose a pyramidal derrick; swaying sensors emitted fumes exciting to the war-like instincts of the skitarii machines and a quartet of multilaser cradles jerked back and forth over his sloping angles. The steel-chrome core of the technologist, minus his regular motive assembly, was installed at the heart of the incense-shrouded gantry.

Velt was far too important to handle his own communications.

<Why does he insist on maintaining contact?> he mused aloud. <I have told him what I want from him and he ignores me.>

<Protocol,> Quoros canted.

<In any event, it is beneath my position to deal with a mere sergeant. And a tenth sergeant, you say? You have repeated your inquiry as to the whereabouts of Iron Father Ares?>

<Prefixed to each return transmission.>

<And?>

<I am told only that Stronos speaks with his voice at this time.>

The engineer assigned to Ares' service was unquestioning in her faith, albeit in an ambitious sort of way that Velt had found rather cloying, but she was too inexperienced to have been rewarded with such a service. The Iron Father's deterioration had been instigated the day that her reassignment orders had been stamped. Velt grimaced.

That, at least, should make >> **RESTRICTED DATA** >> happy.

<Instruct the CX, CXI, and CCLIV maniples to disengage. Their withdrawal will draw additional enemy units onto the Iron Hands flanks. That should blunt their advance.>

<At once,> Quoros returned, without needing to ask why.

Velt did not have to retake the facility before the Iron Hands did, and for that he was grateful because he had overseen the installation of a large part of its defensive infrastructure himself and it would be a pity to have to dismantle it. He simply had to ensure that no one *but* him was able to do so before >> **RESTRICTED DATA** >> arrived to finish the task.

The magos calculi had determined that there would be plenty of time.

<Status?> he canted at Quoros, coding his data-blurt urgent.

<Imperatives dispatched.>

<Keep me apprised of Sergeant Stronos' status updates.>

<As you will, fabricator.>

There was a terrific bang, and one of the two bunkers exploded in a geyser of rockcrete. Blast debris showered the area as, acting on adaptive imperatives, the vanguard fireteams that had successfully knocked out the fortification moved to flank the remaining bunker. Judging the immediate situation to be as pacified as it was going to be, Velt picked his way over the deep piles of skitarii dead towards the blasted bunker and adjusted his sensoria.

The Primus was a chiselled shard of yellowed silver that struggled to impose itself against the intervening skyline, a manic tangle of scaffolding and power transfer coils.

The ring of arcana, he knew, was in support of a network of blast bunkers like those his forces worked so hard now to destroy. Gantry-mounted casemates spilled over with heavy-duty tolerance cabling and analytica devices, surrounded by electrified sigils of subjugation and warding. The flash-outlined silhouettes of large, xenos-design gun barrels were all directed towards the castellated derelict at the crux of the test bed.

Even shorn of its legs, its fortress torso buried under stratified layers of successive annihilation events, and trussed with cabling like a wayward initiate bound for electro-coercive treatment, the ancient Emperor Titan, *Pax Medusan*, towered over all. Its own goliath weapons loadout remained in situ – several xenos species had devised tank-killing weaponry that circumvented heavy Imperial armour by disrupting a target's power transfer systems. This therefore required the complete suite of power sources and sinks to be available in order for simulated engagements to offer reliable data. However, they had not been blessed or loaded in millennia.

It was dead, standing only by the artifice and need of the Adeptus of Mars, and yet Velt could not explain the shiver of unease that passed into him from

his battle-chassis as he stepped into the Titan's broken shadow.

>>> **TERMINATING SIMULUS.**

II

Rauth looked up at the fallen god-machine, wondering what it could have done in its former life to be so forsaken now at its end. Even from behind, the wreck's majesty was arresting. Mothballed batteries bristled from its crenellated shoulders and from the gun tiers of its upper back, its windswept skeleton standing in pyrrhic defiance of time and damnation. Angry streaks of las, red-shifted, high energy, rained from its shoulder bastions, not the Titan's own batteries of course but rogue fireteams ensconced within their protected casemates, painting the Titan's hull plating with lurid smears of less than natural colour. None of it fell anywhere near Rauth and his clave.

An upraised hand, a solid outline of black ceramite against the twisted spurs and debris char, and Maarvuk signalled a halt. Rauth had detected nothing, but the auspectoriae of the sergeant's power armour was more powerful than his. The veteran-sergeant was not stealthy in any recognisable sense, appearing to rely more on towering self-belief and superior data to remain undetected. He squatted down.

The Scouts immediately stopped moving and sought cover.

The vast block supports encasing the girdered feet of the pylon through which they moved was thick with accumulated rubbish, and no sooner had Maarvuk sunk to his knees than the Scouts had hidden themselves amongst the detritus. Rauth crouched in a tangle of sheet metal under a cannibalised engine housing with his back to the rockcrete foundation block. He laid his shotgun on the fissured metal and strained his senses for signs of movement.

The cry of the wind became increasingly disturbed the closer one came to the Titan. Every fractured plate and empty crenel harboured a ghost, distant gunfire echoing dolefully from the teetering array of gantries and pylons. Rauth could hear the hum of power that flowed through the coils above their heads, the occasional crack as voltage arced from one to another, loud enough to obscure even the unsubtle movements of the Iron Hands Scouts. Irritably, he readjusted

his rebreather, temporarily breaking the clammy seal around his face and delivering the scent of ozone on a knife blade of sub-freezing air.

He pressed the mask firmly back into place to remake the seal as Maarvuk crunched forward on his haunches, into the partial cover of what looked like a fan engine. The sergeant brought up his bolter and peered through the scope at something in the wreckage ahead. Rauth could see nothing. Feeling the vacuum suck the mask's plastek into his face, he brought his shotgun round until it was aimed between Maarvuk's shoulders. His breathing began to normalise. *This is strength. See how I take it.* He smiled, his near-perfect memory calling back every one of a thousand insults and petty acts of cruelty he had endured, as far back as that memory went. He stroked the trigger. Part of him desired nothing more than to demonstrate to Maarvuk just how weak he was in that moment.

He could not say why he did not.

'I see it,' Khrysaar hissed, optics burning a pearlescent hole in the murk, and Rauth pulled his aim from his sergeant's back.

The first thing Rauth noticed was a tramp of feet on loose metal, still barely audible over the background commotion, when the sentinel servitor shambled out from behind another pylon's block support.

It was powerfully armed for its size, a hotshot volley gun built into its right arm and belted into a power pack in its guts. It also mounted a flare gun on its left shoulder, presumably in case of an encounter with anything its primary armament could not put down. Its ears had been bio-augmented, like transceiver dishes, its eyes drawn apart to give it an expanded visual field and a cadaverous, ichthyic appearance. Ethereal green light beamed from its eyes as it scanned the darkness under the pylons, drawing flickering lines over Maarvuk's rotor housing and then over his armour. Rauth held his breath. The servitor's optics appeared to map the unmoving veteran-sergeant's battleplate in exquisite detail, before shuffling about and moving on.

Only then did Maarvuk move, relieving some knot of stiffness in his neck with an audible crack. No one could hold still or fool a bio-augur like an Iron Hands Space Marine. Rauth let go his breath.

He could see now the rut in the servitor's path, a path that had not been deviated from in a long time, since well before Locis Primus' fall. That infuriated Rauth. It had been assigned a duty to defend the Primus, and even if the taint had arisen from within, it was culpable for its failure. Seeing Khrysaar flex the hard bionics of his hand around the stock of his bolter, he

knew he was not alone in wishing to rip off the servitor's head in punishment for its weakness. *And yes, to see what damage this arm can do.*

'I know what you are thinking,' said Maarvuk, not whispering, but at an unwavering pitch that barely climbed above the hum of the power coils. 'Never forget from whence those thoughts arise – they are of the flesh, the traitor within, telling you that you are strong when you are weak, urging you to attack when the logician would defend. Ignore it. You are nothing, until I tell you that you are otherwise.'

His harsh words were heeded unquestioningly, in a way that kinder ones never would have been, and Rauth felt something coiled and angry inside loosen its grip just a little. There was more to it than just words; Rauth could feel it, some interplay of code and conditioning inside his head that compelled him to obey.

Maarvuk gave the sentinel servitor five minutes before getting powerfully to his feet and waving the Scouts back on their way. The crackle of gunfire, of explosions, the buzz of chainblades, grew louder as they skirted around the back of the Titan.

It was far enough away and indistinct enough to be ignored after a while, and yet unmistakably still the sound of men and machines inflicting bloody harm upon one another. A combination of his conditioning and brutal training kept his senses trained to his particular patch of rubble as they picked their way painstakingly through the debris without incident. They encountered no more servitors, nor any further evidence of the tracks such sentinels might have left behind them. Nor did they pass any sign of 'living' skitarii forces: if there had been any stationed in this area then their overseers had redeployed them to where the fighting was heaviest, much as it caused Rauth physical pain to acknowledge that Maarvuk might have been correct.

'Only the weak demand opportunities to prove their strength,' Maarvuk announced at one point, stood on a scrap of high ground, speaking as if to whatever shade he uncovered through his bolter's scope. 'A bolt-round to the back of the head will end a fight as surely as a power sword to the front. Outcome is all. Consideration of anything more is pride, and pride is weakness.'

To the many things that they did not see, Rauth could add any clear means of forcing access to the Primus subplex.

Maarvuk had proposed that those skitarii forces on the surface might be

moving back and forth via subterranean service tunnels too small or too recent – the cart-file Rauth had inloaded was last amended nearly seven hundred years ago – to appear on the Adeptus Mechanicus’ charts. The Scouts had offered no alternative proposal. *Who are we, to have opinions of our own?* Regardless of whose hypothesis it had been, the evidence appeared to bear it out with a number of what appeared to be service hatches located throughout the area.

In many cases, efforts had been made to obscure the entrances under debris, and they had all been found firmly locked, warded beyond the Iron Hands’ abilities to beseech the servile machine within and open. They had quietly abandoned the attempt to force entry and mined the hatches instead. The entrances had been tiny, anyway, designed for slavish human workers rather than Space Marine warriors. Rauth could have made it through, but Gorgorus and the more heavily refashioned Scouts would have found it dangerously tight. Maarvuk wouldn’t have stood a chance.

They would find another way.

By un-voiced command, Maarvuk rotated Rauth from point, sending Sarrk ahead to scout the groaning frame support of the next pylon while Rauth and his shotgun covered those that followed.

The dark, the muffled disquiet, it was like walking through an ancient forest, something Rauth had once experienced and found disturbingly alien. The ‘trees’ hummed dully as though populated with hidden things, the canopy one of tangled wires, the litter scrap metal and waste munitions. And over every aspect loomed the Titan’s broken skull, like the dark face of a fortress moon.

‘Something.’ Sarrk’s warning drew Rauth from his reverie, scowling to find his ability to maintain focus so obviously flawed.

The Scout crouched behind an escarpment of larger metallic debris. It concealed a sharp decline towards a bunker complex, a triptych of conjoined rockcrete polygons spread through the scrap defile in a U shape. Carapace clacked together, inaudible over the powered susurrus of the overhead feed coils and the commotion below, as the other Scouts joined him. Rauth peered over the wall.

Mixed clades of unorthodox skitarii warrior-builds passed in and out of the bunker. It made it difficult to guess at their numbers. An endlessly reiterative cycle of polished chrome, smouldering vents and cosmetic cyborgs, each individual skitarius drew the eye like a gaudy piece of art. Some were draped

in soft pink cloaks of unblemished human flesh. *Vat grown, like iron from a mould, as if that makes it less foul.* An ingrained desire for pattern and order wanted to identify these as alphas but Rauth could find no corroborative evidence to justify doing so. Others had replaced parts of their exoplate with reflective surfaces, or sheathed it in new skin, modified themselves with haptic sensors or unbalanced full-body sensoria, which at least brought the consolation of an identifiable function, even if that function was nonsensical.

‘What’s been done to them?’ muttered Sarrk.

‘What have they allowed to be done?’ Khrysaar countered with venom.

Gorgorus, Suforr, and the more ancient Scouts simply stared, mute, variable optics frozen as if in horror, leaving it to the neophytes to express their revulsion.

‘Do we go around?’ said Rauth. *Obliterate them,* his mind spat even as he spoke in more balanced terms. *Break them. Bleed them. If the abomination desire a return to flesh then let them suffer for it. Rend them limb from deviant limb.*

Visibly emerging from some bruising inner conflict between his emotional buffers and the contrarian constructs arrayed before them in inglorious imperfection, Maarvuk’s systems whined a little harder than they had a moment before. His voice came out a strained rasp.

‘Exterminate.’

Something in Rauth flipped. Some deep conditioned denial was knocked away, and in its place he found rage, a decade of repressed Medusan fury that poured into his veins. With a howl of anger and revulsion he vaulted the escarpment, wielding his shotgun like a club, even as the first rad-rounds punched, unfelt, into his chest carapace. Maarvuk shouted further instructions, but if Rauth heard them then it was no longer on a conscious level, just a wrathful red thought-rune in his mind.

Compliance!

III

This was not Stronos’ first time through a minefield. His right leg above the knee was a grey slab of stiff, bifurcating scar tissue. Beneath it was a rugged

cybernetic, solid enough to break an ork's chest or withstand the blast equivalent of the plasma pulse device that had claimed the original flesh. With shrapnel protruding from the crumpled plate of his legs and their hard-wearing hydraulics hissing with every step, he drew his right boot out of Locis Primus' newest crater and advanced relentlessly towards the next, wherever it might form. Nearby, another buried charge drove a geyser of shrapnel and debris high into the air. The overhanging cable lines were shredded, but Brother Burr strode through the maelstrom scorched but uncompromised.

They were anti-personnel devices, small explosive charges packing just force enough to turn the very ground they waded through into a primed frag grenade. The skitarii defenders had rightly reasoned that an armour assault through such uncompromising terrain would have been near impossible, but what was a power-armoured Iron Hand but a walking tank?

Withering las-fire from an inclined vector punched into his battleplate and tore indiscriminately into the surrounding metal. He walked through it for a few metres until the sheer energy of the impacts forced him to turn away from it. He tried to pinpoint the source of the incoming fire, but could not. The thin air had swiftly been transformed into a pseudo-plasma of ash, fragmentation shards and splitting energy beams, the world's low gravity coupled with the sheltered environs of Loci Primus' surface precincts keeping the after-effects of the ongoing battle aloft.

Still advancing, but at a tangent now that bled the incoming las-bolts of some of their energy, he performed an unconscious mental triangulation using his prior and present position and fired his bolter into the murk. A muted crump and the shredding of metal were his calculation's rewards. A fixed sentry gun.

As his advance slowed, others pushed theirs at the same unwavering pace. Periodic bangs of bolter-fire and buried explosions illuminated their forward positions, clearing the field of enemy ordnance by the simple expedient of walking through it. Their very tenacity drew enemy fire, predominantly automated or servitor-mounted, betraying their own positions to the infinite patience of the Iron Hands' guns.

No other force could have had the durability to conceive of such a direct assault, even less the cool discipline under fire to carry it through.

Stronos saw the beauty laid out for him in the vivid network of las-beams and nodal explosions. Not in the way that Iron Father Verrox would have, delighting in his superiority over others and his capacity to inflict crushing,

effortless defeat upon them, but in the more abstract, loftier appreciation of a simple task meticulously observed. He suspected that Lydriik, at least, would have approved even if he doubted that his friend would understand.

A vox-cast bellow shook the ash plume like a depth charge, and Stronos followed the blinking markers of his helmet overlay to where Ancient Ares tore into a pair of Kataphron Breacher units armed with siege drills and power hammers, reducing them to scrap metal and twitching flesh parts before unloading his assault cannon into a barricade. There was a scream of perforating metal and then the ribboned leftovers collapsed. The Dreadnought crashed through, bellowed challenges to entities long dead causing the ground beneath his feet to shake, to engage the clade of nacreously armoured skitarii vanguard and hyper-modified Ruststalker clones that had been exploiting the barricade's cover to flank the Iron Hands advance. It was good to see that the Ancient retained at least some of his senses, if not the full complement of his wits.

Adept Yolanis and her acolytes chased after their berserk charge, escorted, at Stronos' order, by a demi-clave of Eighth Sergeant Ankaran's Assault Marines. The bodies of agile combat-adapted warrior-forms were already beginning to fly as the demi-clave, chainblades gunning to full speed, got stuck in alongside their venerated Iron Father. In contrast to Ares' naked cholera, Ankaran and his brothers' battle wrath was well shackled behind blade routines and doctrinal imperatives.

Stronos feared that Ares was getting worse, and watching the Dreadnought lead the red-robed adepts a merry chase as it walked through a metal block wall in order to get at the skitarii heavy gunner that had been sheltering there only added to his own simmering anger. His plan to assault Locis Primus and pin its forces inside until Draevark and the others could arrive to relieve Velt's floundering advance and deliver the hammer blow was an imperfect response to an imperfect set of conditions. Most of those inherent imperfections arose from the impositions of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and so to see their chosen representatives now succeeding only in upsetting what little order he could bring to their battlefield irked him doubly.

The warriors of Clan Garrsak had a deserved reputation for uncritical loyalty, but they were neither stupid nor blind – the Ancient's deterioration would eventually be noticed.

'The fabricator-locum's skitarii should be covering that flank,' said Lurrgol,

opting to overlook the rampaging Dreadnought in that direction. He was largely recovered from the effects of the mindscrambler device, aside from a lisp that the attending Apothecary had warned would likely be permanent for which was advised a complete relaying of the neural pathways. He blamed himself for the death of Kardaanus, Stronos could tell, and it felt odd to hear his brother speak without the usual hard undercurrent of bleak sarcasm. ‘Does he reply to your transmissions?’

‘The usual.’

With a grizzle of displeasure, Lurrigol blazed into the fug until something exploded. ‘You would think he would thank us, for eliminating the Sicarians harrying his Ordo Reductor contingent.’

‘What about Draevark? Or Drath and the other battle group commanders?’ Govall was the farthest out, his armour taking a battering from automated defence positions as he methodically returned fire.

Stronos considered while he blink-sent a command to reinforce Ankaran’s flank. ‘For a moment I thought I had something. A weak identifier signal, but it is gone now.’

‘A blip,’ said Burr, his bolter kicking back hard into his plastron. ‘There is enough electrical cross talk from these power lines to insert ghost signals into our augurs. Not to forget the radiation.’

‘Perhaps we should bring a few down?’ said Stronos.

‘Kardaanus would have known,’ added Lurrigol sourly, walking into a stream of stubber-fire that had been targeting Stronos and turning his bolter into it. A sequence of hard bangs later and the gun servitor ensconced in a hollowed-out Chimera sixty metres ahead dissolved into a spray of bloodless meat. He lowered his bolter until it hung like a weight in his hands. ‘I miss them both,’ he managed to mutter.

For a long minute, the clave struggled to repress their brother’s admission in its collective memory, focusing instead on the less threatening difficulty, that which could be solved with logic, bolter and blade.

The apothecaries had stripped Trellok and Kardaanus of salvageable bionics along with their gene-seed, but not before Stronos and the others had set aside a few prized components for their own. They had been connected, closer than brothers, and through the bionics they passed on, their strength and experience would live on within the clave. Kardaanus had always been exceptional in his strength. His right arm currently clanked against Stronos’ thigh plate as he

advanced.

‘I agree,’ Stronos said. ‘It cannot be wrong to lament the absence of the strong.’

‘I miss Kardaanus’ lascannon,’ said Vand, his bulk anchoring the rear while his plasma cannon vented heat.

‘As do I,’ said Stronos. His power pack could not sustain the heavy weapon indefinitely and he had reluctantly left it in the transport.

‘When we are beaten we rebuild, stronger than we were before,’ said Jalenghaal, his synthesised voice achieving a degree of harshness that Stronos would not have reasoned it capable. ‘That is the Creed. Our brothers will be replaced, as was your eye, or my hand. Clan Dorrwok has toughened their selection process considerably since you or I were inducted into our clan companies. They will make us stronger, as does your eye or my hand, inured against the weakness and disunity that afflicts the Chapter.’

Lurrgol’s acid response was buried under a torrent of bolter-fire.

It was hardly Stronos’ place to question actions that did not directly pertain to the battles he fought and the clan he fought within, but an intensified regimen of psyk-conditioning and even more brutal programme of training did not seem to him the best way to correct the disunity that crippled the Iron Council.

It might work, in time, but at the cost of... He loosed a snapshot at a brief glimpse of skitarii exometal behind a break in a partitioning wall, and tried to summon a word that did not exist in his first or even his second languages. *Praalek*? In Juuket it meant ‘machine-spirit’. Close, but not quite right. The skitarius appeared further along the artificial barrier and swung its carbine over the top. Soul? A short burst of bolter-fire ripped open the skitarius’ cover and explosively contributed its bizarre augmetics to the ground’s collection. Stronos weighed the unfamiliar Gothic term in his mind.

Yes. That was it.

It would be centuries before today’s intake of new battle-brothers took their places amongst the Iron Council, and centuries before they became the dominant presence. Perhaps these were the timescales that beings such as Kristos or Castron Fel worked within. But even if it were, and they aimed towards a future that Stronos, his scope restricted to the level of battlefield or, perhaps in time, warzone, could not envisage, was the elevation of forty-one robotic approval-engines to supplement the Voice of Mars really what the Iron Hands required from their leaders?

A terrific explosion suddenly tore out of the ground, jaws of corroded iron snapping over Jalenghaal and swallowing him whole. While his Iron Hands brother ground through the frag mine's disintegrating aftermath, power blistering from yet another jagged bite mark in his armour – this time the hip – Stronos' interlink feed buzzed with an update from Sergeant Hadruul.

<Another of the access hatches identified, brother-captain,> the sergeant canted, employing the rank identifier that Ares' authorisations appeared to have conferred. That he was not a captain did not appear to figure in Hadruul's thinking. Deferring to a tenth sergeant was counter-logical and thus plainly could not be. *<A ranger clave retreated within. We pursued, but found the entrance sealed. A krak charge should be sufficient to bring down the entrance, but the tunnel appears too small for an armoured battle-brother.>*

Stronos commanded the interlinked spirits of the demi-clan's armour systems to flag Hadruul's find in their overlays. Then he transmitted updated instructions to the Devastators, for the dedicated heavy gunners in his command to keep half an eye over the entrances.

He may have left his old clan allegiances behind him in the forgechain, but he could not help but see the battlefield as an ordnance specialist would, a network of firing lines, high ground and kill zones. He just wished he had the Anvilarum or the other vehicles of the convoy to call upon, but they were stranded half a kilometre back into the blast wastes.

<Mine it,> he canted back, *<and then increase speed to catch up.>*

Hadruul dissociated his tether from the one-to-one connection. Stronos did not need the spoken confirmation to know that his orders would be followed to the decimal point.

'It would be advisable to withdraw,' said Burr. 'If the Adeptus Mechanicus cannot secure our advance then we cannot win and this assault serves no purpose.'

'The assault is its own purpose,' said Stronos. 'If the fabricator-locum wishes to prevent it that only makes me want to push it all the harder.'

'That sounds...'

'Errant,' supplied Lurrigol. Stronos could not tell if it was a joke.

'Perhaps it is.'

'The ambush,' said Jalenghaal, apropos of nothing, as he strode to catch up. His damaged plate appeared to steam as bits of hot metal from the exploded frag mine accumulated to his gargantuan centre of gravity. 'You think that our

response reveals some disguised weakness in the Creed, do you not?’

‘What makes you believe that I would think such a thing?’

Jalenghaal made a disgusted sound and indicated his blast-ravaged girdal plate and the integrated data-tether it contained that he had exchanged with Stronos. ‘Because against my will, I feel it too.’

In spite of his prodigious advantages, both genic and mechanic, Stronos felt sick. He had infected his brothers with his doubts, as efficiently as Ancient Ares had infected him with his. Perhaps that was why the master of the forge and the fabricator-locum had been so reluctant to awaken the Iron Father until now.

Shrugging off Jalenghaal and his brothers, he increased his pace.

The ominous wreck of *Pax Medusan* loomed over him now, his push on Locis Primus having taken him across the Titan’s unpowered gaze, the inward-leaning nest of pylons to his right. He could see the array of alien weapon platforms that had been rigged around it, the apologetic flicker of what appeared to be a single candle flickering in the murk pinpointing the crown of the condemned machine like a lighthouse beacon. Las-bolts stabbed down from it, extreme range robbing them of both accuracy and power, and singed the blackwork over a wide swathe of terrain. None of the Iron Hands wasted a bolt-round to returning fire.

He could also see what appeared to be a well-fortified bunker complex, earthed up with scrap plates and bits of tank, just under the web of overhead lines that enshrouded the Imperator Titan’s half-buried body and snaked around its far side. It was connected to the weapons’ test grid by buried trunk lines, and hooked into the overheads by scores of redundant reinforced cables. A hub facility of some sort. The static defences appeared to have been set up specifically to defend that position.

As he held the bunker in his gaze his view of it began to clarify, his bionic applying successive code-scrubbers to artificially filter it of dust and debris.

<Quoros. This is Stronos.>

He could see a full cohort of traitor skitarii. And a single clave of Clan Dorrvok.

For as long as he could remember, Rauth had known little beyond anger and hate: of his superiors and their callous sadism, of rivals that, had they been born to another world, he might have called brothers, and then of everyone else. The symptoms of humanity's enfeeblement were spread across the galaxy like stars, twinkling ignorance, goading him that he hadn't the strength or the reach to extinguish them all. Conditioning and a harsh regime of discipline had beaten his molten iron core into a more malleable form, but it remained hot, an ever-present and self-perpetuating pit of bitterness and frustration. But a crust-splitting, earth-shattering, tectonic eruption of Medusan rage, was that not what a decade of psyk-conditioning and neuroenhancement had been designed to suppress? He had not felt such an outpouring during his field trials on Scaxxus, nor on the Oraanus Rocks. Even fighting for his life against the death cult assassin aboard the *Broken Hand* he had retained control.

But there was something about these skitarii.

The veil had been snatched from his eyes and what he saw was red. This was how it was meant to feel to be the offspring of Medusa, a son of Ferrus Manus.

A skitarius with clicking face parts flashed before his eyes, there then gone, the insectoid head ripped from its neck in a shriek of bonded metal fibres. Blood and bio-acid jetted from the ruin of its neck, its body spasming to the ground and spraying Rauth's carapace with gore as it went down. Swinging his arm like a mace, he smashed the severed metal head through the temple of another. The living skitarius' head caved in around the improvised weapon, sparks rearing up at Rauth's bloody arm as the follow through sheered the skitarius' face from its skull. Shorn electrics spat at him. A minimal optic diode glared hotly from its bed of gold wiring and macrofluidics. And it didn't die.

Rauth heard the sharp tear of punctured carapace, what felt like a punch to the gut. He ignored it, and punched his bionic fist through the skitarius' armoured chest and clear out the other side. He gave a roar in exultation of his power, even as the still-living skitarius closed its hands around his throat and sought to choke it off. Dying servos screamed, shuddered, bled off power as the muscles of Rauth's neck bunched in opposition. Rauth dropped the mangled head from his hand, then forced his fingers into the hole his bionic had punched into the skitarius' chest. With a howl of exertion, he ripped the skitarius up the middle.

Noticing the transonic knife stuck in his gut, he tore it out, rasping hard on his thinning oxygen supply, and hunted for more victims.

The ground was strewn with leaking body parts. Destroyed skitarii units death-jerked like dismembered worms in barren soil. Men he hated no less than his enemy butchered whatever they could reach. Weapons were forgotten. Wounds were neglected. One warrior ploughed into a retreating clade, dragging the torso of another by the arm-spike lodged in his back. Another beat a skitarius to death against the wall of the bunker even as his skin turned black where rad-bullets had penetrated his armour. Others were missing fingers, hands, entire limbs, transhuman not only in their will and capacity to enact violence but the ability to receive it in turn. They were well practiced in pain. A brother he could not in the furnace of the moment put a name to lifted two densely built skitarii off the ground, then ignored the electrified bayonets thrust again and again into his torso to smash them together until they came apart in his hands and showered him in their workings like rain.

‘—!’

A giant encased in black ceramite and cruelty shouted at the fighting Scouts. Rauth could not make out the words through the swaddling red haze. The giant plucked wounded warriors off the ground as if they were magazines found amidst the ruin of the slain, good still for at least one shot more. Others, still raging over beaten foes, he practically threw in the direction of living enemies. He passed a twitching skitarius that the Scouts, in their frenzy, had failed to fully extinguish, and, without pausing to look down, delivered the Ommissiah’s mercy on the back of a bolt-round. He must have felt the heat of Rauth’s stare through Thennos’ empty chill, because he turned to meet it, and Rauth felt his wrath gutter in the face of the mirror that those smouldering red eyes held up to it.

You feel it, don’t you, liar? spoke a familiar, resentful voice with the calming of the violent tremors. *Bury it in as much metal as you want, but it never goes away.* Suddenly, he felt a second eruption building. *Do they know and continue the same flawed procedure out of obduracy, or have they just forgotten how to recognise the anger they feel?*

Maarvuk shouted at him again, this time emphasising the unheard words with a jab of his gauntleted fingers to something behind Rauth’s back. A deep-coded instinct to obey and a resurgent need to pulverise the inferior spun him round, hands called into fists.

And into the muzzle of a boltgun.

Rauth had not felt anything like it since Tartrak had lain him out on the sands

of Oraanus. He had been remade stronger now than he had been then, but the power behind the swing still cracked his jaw and knocked him onto his back without a grain of resistance from him. Anger opened up a second fissure in his conditioning's crust and found, for the first time in a long, long time, that the pressure keeping it molten and hot had been spent. He slumped to the freezing ground, the taste of blood sweet in his mouth, almost laughing aloud about the inconceivable sensation of lightness he was left with.

‘Control your charges, sergeant,’ said the colossus of armour and powered cybernetics that towered over him. His suit transponder identified him as Iron Captain Stronos and he looked down on Rauth with clear distaste. *At least he feels something.* ‘I have witnessed enough failures of self-control to last my lifetime. The skitarii at least are guided by reason, and a reasonable foe would not have sought to defend this position without cause.’

**>>> SIMULUS INLOAD
>>> SOURCE >>> LOCIS PRIMUS, THENNOS
>>> ORIGIN >>> TRAITORIS PERDITA >>ERROR>>
>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41
>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>**

**>> RESTRICTED DATA >>
>> RESTRICTED DATA >>
>> RESTRICTED DATA >>
>> RESTRICTED DATA >>
‘Let it commence.’**

>>>

>>> >>> COMMENCING NEW SIMULUS

**>>> SOURCE >>> SARDONIS
>>> ORIGIN >>> ARES, TUBRIIK
>>> DATESTAMP >>> 002013.M32
>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>**

The sinusoidal brasswood effigy rose from the bowels of the governor's fastness. It was knotted with power, whorled, great wings folded around its muscular promise and dripping with moisture as though in a fever. The last few cultists, semi-augmented *things* of neither flesh nor metal, had retreated to foxholes and prepared gun nests where the disciplined fire patterns of his battle group calmly mowed them down. Space Marines in black Mk IV armour pounded over the dead to bring weapons to bear on the soaring profanity of living wood and writhing bronze. The Adeptus Astartes, many of their commanders veterans of the Scouring of the Ulmetrican Reach two centuries past, did not waver.

'Vindicators to the gate,' called Ares, iron captain of Clan Garrsak, speaking into his gorget vox. He waited a moment, then put a hand to his ear, a habit he had consciously retained and come to shamelessly exaggerate, purely to spite the younger generation of apothecaries who felt that such individualisms warranted only eradication. 'Say again, commander. I didn't catch that.' The unit produced a white hiss. Almost words. He frowned, and collared a warrior as he ran by. 'Brother. Are you familiar with a Sergeant... Stonas?'

The Iron Hands brother gave him a disquieting look, and hurried on without answering. Shaking off the nascent chill that look gave him, Ares turned to bark for missiles and meltaguns to start bringing down the pillars of flesh that grew out of the floor like toes.

They surrounded the hellish idol in no particular arrangement, spasming with their own innate impurities and electrical barbs supplied from the wiring that crawled up the walls and along the floor. Special weapons troopers ran up and down the perimeter line to his order, and the siege tanks responded to his call.

The governor of Sardonis had maintained an official residence that was as large as it was opulent, gaudier and more grandiose by far than the governor of a client world of Mars could warrant. Even its corridors were palatial, but the lead Vindicator still made an almighty mess as it roared down the parquet and through the forced entrance to the old governor's hidden fane. The remains of tastelessly adorned automata lay tangled in the gold wire that had been ploughed up by the Vindicator's massive 'dozer blades during its passage through the inner palace. Every so often, one of the tainted robots gave a twitch that owed nothing to the reckless forward plunge of the tanks. They accelerated. Some urgency in their machine-spirits located an extra few kilometres an hour over their maximum combat speed and used it.

As they came, so Ares felt the ground begin to shake.

It would have been easy to ascribe the phenomenon to the tanks' rapid approach, but he had felt that particular set of vibrations a hundred times before. What he felt now seemed to shake right out of the air, as if the very materium of Sardonis Hive had felt the touch of something toothsome and set to trembling. It transcended time and dimension. He could feel it on his flesh, in the cell nuclei of his bone marrow, on the cold iron of his far future.

'Be as iron!' Ares called, but the words rushed out of him in a maddened peal.

The pillars began to spin around him, faster, faster, *faster*, so fast that in the blur of flesh and energy he could almost *see* the warp. He closed his eyes, but continued to spin. Most disorienting of all, he could feel his bionics spin in the opposite direction.

Ares roared defiance, the empyrean responding with a moan from the throats of five hundred fleshmetal corpses and a dozen of their obligingly servile automata. He opened his eyes, arms out to steady himself, as the bodies of those they had slain lifted up off the ground. They hung there bonelessly and then, as the flesh pillars shrivelled and peeled with the expenditure of their energies, began to thrash about one another. Even veteran Iron Hands recoiled from them as desperately flailing limbs struck their helmets and pauldrons. Ares heard bones shatter and rebars snap, but the puppets were beyond feeling.

'Flesh is weak,' Ares shouted over the din of rubbing flesh and snapping bones, and raised his pistol.

Bolt-rounds splattered dead flesh, his brothers joining him, but the speed with which the universe spun around them only intensified. Ares saw a Vindicator drawn off the ground by the crazed efforts of the robots trapped in its 'dozer blade. The cybernetics of hardened warriors fought bitterly against the centrifugal force that pulled their bolters out towards the walls of the spinning fane.

'*Imperator, adiuva me,*' he cried, as the brasswood idol cracked open, disgorging a light and sound of such brilliant density it was as though ten thousand machines all tried to conjoin with him at once.

His optics burst into sapphire flames, his entreaty becoming a wordless scream as flesh and metal became one.

>>> TERMINATING SIMULUS.

V

Power flowed downhill, light to dark, high potentiality to low, streaming through cables, vaulting junctions, regulators – accustomed by the unchanging millennia to a far lesser flow – heating through until they glowed. Those with the augments to perceive the flow of electrons would, had they also possessed the basic human curiosity to look up and see, have noticed the mat of overhead wires grow bright. And then something without precedent happened. Gates were opened that had never been opened before, power surging in an entirely new direction to infuse circuits that had not borne charge in five thousand years. Like blood forced into starved or deceased tissue, the influx of vitality brought the machine-spirit. Sparks fountained from the pylons’ insulators, and all, curious or no, would have noticed the hum that crescendoed in the titanic roar of a god-machine jolted from an unrestful sleep. Amber warning lights flashed from gothic spires and crenellations. The slow creak of armaplas and plasteel groaned over the battlefield, cables flexing violently as something colossal haltingly rediscovered that it could move.

And a single candle blew out.

>>> SIMULUS INLOAD

>>> SOURCE >>> LOCIS PRIMUS, THENNOS

>>> ORIGIN >>> VELT, HYPROXIUS, FABRICATOR-LOCUM

>>> DATESTAMP >>> 101412.M41

>>>> SIMULUS COMMENCING >>>>>

A shower of electrons over the shrivelled receptors of Velt’s pleasure centres conferred a passable facsimile of unfettered elation as he glimpsed the Primus entrance. As with most of Thennos’ permanent structures, defensibility had not been the overriding design principle. Covered by a hood of metal such as that which would shelter a minehead from the elements, it was firmed into its foundations by guy rods and surrounded with shockboards and by heaped cages packed with metallic debris. The doors were rolled steel, reinforced with adamantium bars and shock dispersive meme-foam. They were tough. Against

a blast occurring several kilometres into the wastes they were inviolate. A few minutes against the Ordinatus Medusa would show how tough they really were.

One of the trio of cherubim faithfully made note of the tonal oscillations of his gurgle of pleasure.

<The renegades fall back from the Primus,> canted Theol Quoros. <They move to fortify positions deeper into the debris field.>

<Explain. I prognose their current strength sufficient to delay a breach of the Primus facility for a further ninety minutes.>

<The assumptive baseframe of their calculus is flawed by their heresy. Such is to be the downfall of the apostate and the traitor.>

‘Ave Ommissiah,’ Velt intoned, then summoned a brass-winged scrivener to check that it had properly recorded his devotion. He caught the trail of parchment as the cherub fluttered about his battle chassis. ‘*Ave Ommissiah!*’ it read. ‘*The Legiones Skitarii are visibly empowered by their leader’s proclamation.*’ Satisfied, Velt shooed the cyborg off to rejoin its brethren.

<Status of the tenth sergeant and his Iron Hands?> he asked. Sensors in his chassis’ joints picked up a shaking under the ground.

‘*The seismographers read a magnitude nought-point-eight Regulus ground tremor. The fabricator-locum proceeds boldly forward...*’

<Beset, as predicted,> Quoros canted.

<Praise the holy calculus.>

<Praise it.> The technologist waved his censer to create the smoke form of a cog. <His last communiqué stated that he moved to reinforce a Scout clade at the test bed.>

Velt focused his targeting protocols on a retreating skitarius, zapped it with a pair of arc beams that left it cooked and thrashing on a blackened sheet of metal. Better. <How did two groups of Iron Hands independently make the Primus so far ahead of the timetable?>

<Unknown, fabricator.> Quoros appeared momentarily flustered by the gap in his knowledge.

<Make entry into the meme-scrolls. A full explanation is demanded of the magos calculi at the operation’s conclusion.>

<It is so logged, fabricator.>

<Beset or not, we must accelerate the attack lest they find means to intervene still further. Call the Ordinatus engines to forward placements.>

‘*Ambulation increases three per cent. Like a crusading dominus, the*

fabricator-locum presses the assault...'

Finish this before it can escalate further, he thought. And perhaps there will not be such a high price to be paid after all.

<Praise be!> canted Theol Quoros on wide band.

A shockwave of astonishing magnitude crashed over them as Velt directed the final advance. His right side sensoria went instantly blind, his legs buckling at the articulation, causing him to wobble like a spider exposed to zero *gravity* while his chassis' spirit re-established equilibrium. Cherubs were blown aside, parchment ripping and fluttering. '*Vector, forty-seven point three degrees, estimated two million megathule blast, seven point six on the Regulus scale, the fabricator-locum weathers the onslaught while all about him fall into disarray...*' He pivoted about. Half his vision had been stripped down to emergency screed, but he could see the test bed, the way the immense pylons had been bent out at the middle as though by a giant with a sudden demand for freedom, the tsunami of vehicle wrecks and debris hurtling towards him. And a searing flash, plasma blue.

'*Hail to the Omnissiah,*' wrote the last cherub.

>>> END OF DATA.

VI

The shockwave threw Stronos sideways, as if physically tearing him and the Clan Dorrwok Scout apart. He saw the Scout dashed against the rugged bunker wall, but Stronos, being heavier, fell onto his side after about half a metre and slid through the dust until he'd ploughed up enough of it to break his slide. He moved his head painfully. His audial baffles had blown out, and the sound of tumbling wreckage and pop of cooling atmosphere came through loudly. Static drizzled through his helm display, intermittent outages blacking him out entirely as he shifted upright and stood.

A shuddering groan passed through the air, as if the sky were being bent. Stronos looked up, his optics slowly resetting and reasserting to take in the mountainous war machine, *Pax Medusan*. Hazard lights flashed ruddy amber from its turrets, arms moving stiffly as if to pull itself free of the cables and

colossal steel brackets that held it in place. Yellowish steam gushed from the vents of its plasma annihilator, shrouding the god-machine in a dense radioactive fog.

The discharge of the superheavy weapon alone had been enough to flatten Stronos and his brother Iron Hands. The miniature sun it had birthed about four kilometres away was turning white and dying, leaving a blasted void of vitrified ash and atomised metal in its place. The Hellstorm cannon on its other arm was making a choking noise, but smaller calibre ordnance rained down from its turrets. Stronos saw an Ordo Reductor Ordinatus struggling to find room to turn itself, only to be destroyed under a pounding of krak missiles and earthshaker shells.

In a matter of moments, Velt's assault had simply disintegrated.

Stronos thumped his head to clear his helm of static, if only for a few seconds, and looked around. Jalenghaal was staring up at the stirring Titan, processing hard, even as its lighter lateral armaments, battlecannon and heavy bolters amongst others, ranged in. Other Iron Hands stumbled into cover.

‘Vand. Return fire, brother.’

The Iron Hands ordnance specialist dropped to one knee, plasma cannon across one shoulder, and pointed his weapon upwards. There was hardly any need to aim, but he did so anyway. A wavering band of blue-white plasma briefly connected the weapon to the towering god-machine, followed by a powerful explosion about two thirds of the way up its height. It achieved little. Stronos wished he could have handled the weapon himself, though he knew the result would have been the same. Until the Adeptus Mechanicus forces could regroup they had nothing to contend with an Emperor-class Titan. Perhaps even then.

‘All claws converge on my location,’ he spoke, still calm, into his gorget vox-bead. Interference from the plasma wash had hashed up the interlink signal, and he resorted to physically directing the individual Space Marines he could see towards new positions.

The *Pax Medusan* had no legs. Unnecessary for its new role, they would have been scrapped for parts millennia ago, and Stronos thanked the Ommissiah for that merciful act of foresight as his brother-sergeants found themselves pockets of cover outside the arcs of its primary weapons systems. He was about to shout further instructions when the Hellstorm cannon cleared its blockage.

Without audial baffles the sound was godly, millions of las-bolts per second

spraying from hyper-rotating firing cylinders and mowing through the wreckage field as if it were strimming grass. Small secondary explosions pockmarked the devastation as the energy rain clipped a minefield or took out a Centurio Ordinatus tank.

‘Ankaran!’ he yelled, his armour’s augmitters producing a whining feedback as they struggled to make him heard over the roar of the Titan. ‘Prepare your assault clave. Approach from the rear and cut your way inside.’

Even the mightiest war machine needed a crew, and a crew could be killed, but even as he gave the orders he felt an insidious intuition that even if Ankaran could get near enough to breach the Titan’s hatches he would find nothing living inside. Its machine-spirit had been goaded to this act of violence, tortured, its malevolent instruction administered by the masters of Locis Primus through the overhead lines. He felt the nascent stirrings of an idea.

He looked up and about. The pylons were built like miniature fortresses, designed to withstand a lot worse than what Stronos had to throw at them, and though the recoil from the plasma annihilator had bent them they did not look as though they would fail any time soon. The cables themselves could have been a weak point, but the sky was black with them, and they would have to cross the Imperator’s fire arcs as well as tens of kilometres of intensely difficult terrain to reach every last stretch of cabling. It could take hours.

He turned around.

The bunker.

It was thoroughly integrated into the test bed by buried trunk lines, hooked into the overheads by scores of hardened cables, and the skitarii had made the effort to hold it even after the likelihood of success had shrunk to zero. And the skitarii were logical. Perhaps something could be done from there.

‘Devastators,’ he called, turning to face the wrathful god-machine and walking backwards to the bunker. ‘Target weapons systems and power inputs. Clave Stronos to secure the bunker. All others to submit to Sergeant Ankaran and commence ground assault on the Titan.’

It was not standard protocol. Ankaran was eighth sergeant, so by transferring authority to him Stronos was overlooking Artex once again, but experience of close assault struck him as more crucial qualification than long service.

When he ducked inside the bunker he found a number of Scouts already there. They were spattered with blood and battery acids, grumbling like a clave of attack bikes run to fumes. Unidentifiable bits of skitarii were strewn over

command consoles and chairs. Something made of wire and bone broke under Stronos' boot as he walked in, struggling to control his disgust at the Scouts' savagery. He doubted that Jalenghaal would be as satisfied with the new indoctrination regime once his brother had taken time to process what he had witnessed here. Stronos would certainly not consider any one of these warriors a fair exchange for Trellok or Kardaanus.

Ignoring them for the time being, he turned to the control systems banked against one wall. Lights blinked amidst clusters of dials. Brass knobs and sliders glinted in the green-tinted illumination emitted by a hololith of the Cog Medusa, stuttering beneath the ceiling. The projection fluctuated as Stronos' battered helmet passed through it, half a metre higher than the most massive skitarii construct. He flattened a command chair that had been bolted to the ferrocrete under one boot, and then swept radium casings from a terminal.

He was beginning to understand what he was seeing.

His finger traced a geometric ring that appeared to correspond to the power and transmission lines that surrounded *Pax Medusan*. Power usage nodes marked the eight points of the octagon with runes in lingua-technis, with which Stronos was passably fluent. The superheavy weapons platforms he had seen arrayed around the Titan test bed. They were weapons identifiers, though not all described systems he recognised. In fact, most did not. He held his finger over one that did look familiar, and the rune expanded into several blocks of informative scree. A cold smile moved the lower half of his face. Pulse ordnance multi-driver. The rune was a bastardised tau symbol.

It was an errant thought, but he had always wanted to get his hands on one of those.

The smile disappearing after its brief, illicit life, he looked over the wider set of controls. Everything was coded in lingua-technis or even binharic info-runes, but he thought he recognised the sliders involved in power regulation. The large dials, eight of them in sets of three, would be for targeting. The complicated-looking board of clasps and toggles in the centre of the operations wall could only have been for programming fire sequences.

A near miss from what sounded like a battlecannon shell brought a shower of dust over the controls.

He could do this.

'Have you not accrued enough penance duties to keep you from disturbing technologies you do not know how to master?' Jalenghaal had stepped in

behind him. Taller than Stronos, he looked over his shoulder at the array and somehow understood what his sergeant was planning. Perhaps he was more empathetic than he realised, or did all of Ferrus Manus' sons feel the same intuitive draw towards overkill?

Another shake brought a squirt of blood from a body part caught in the ceiling rebars, which splashed over Stronos' faceplate. He wiped it off on his arm. 'Have you never acted simply as you thought right?'

Jalenghaal stood silent.

'I... *feel*... that you have,' Stronos said.

'We were all once less than we now are. You are a sergeant of Clan Garrsak.'

'Until Ares is recovered I am acting captain of Clan Garrsak.' Stronos waited a moment but Jalenghaal offered nothing further, as if Stronos had just made his point for him. 'But if it will salve your conscience, brother.' He opened a vox-link to Adept Yolanis. The plasma distortions had faded quickly, but Stronos could still hear the surge and swell of energetic static interfering with the frequency. 'Yolanis, Stronos.'

'*Yolanis here,*' crackled the fraught reply. '*I have the Ancient in sight, lord. Our prayers go with him.*'

'This is not about the Iron Father. I require one of your adepts.'

'*Lord?*'

'One of your adepts. Urgently. Whomever you can spare.' He severed the connection before she could query him further. Then he turned to the entrance. 'Vand. Your skills are required.'

After a few moments, the Iron Hands battle-brother entered, his plasma cannon hanging by one hand and a bundle of power cords at his side. The Dorrwok sergeant, Maarvuk, and the last of his Scouts entered with him. The young warriors carried a look of shell shock in their drawn faces and cracked half-visors, more at their own actions in the clearing of the bunker than the suddenly belligerent god-machine less than half a kilometre away. Stronos turned to his own brother.

'Ankaran and the others make slow progress,' Vand reported. 'The cover is good but the fire is heavy, the emplacements too high and too well shielded to be efficiently targeted by Devastators on the ground. And both Velt and Quoros are dead. I overheard vox confirmation. The skitarii are not regrouping, brother, they are falling back, looking to withdraw from *Pax Medusan's* weapons range and target it with Ordo Reductor artillery. We should withdraw.'

There will be nothing left of this site once they commence firing.’

‘No. We stay.’

‘We have nothing that can hurt an Emperor Titan.’

‘We do.’

Stronos turned to Jalenghaal for support; his brother emitted a grunt and turned infinitesimally towards the operations wall. Vand looked it over in a few seconds.

‘The weapons’ test array,’ he surmised.

‘Can you assist me?’ Stronos asked him.

‘Perhaps.’ Vand crunched forward, his bulk scattering the ceiling hololith, and passed his fingers from control set to control set as if inloading some insight through direct contact with the metal. ‘The spirit sleeps. It will need to be awakened, and its wrath soothed when it does.’

‘Adept Yolanis sends one of her engineers to assist.’

Vand nodded. He bent to inspect the power usage nodes and their accompanying identification runes when a Scout in dust-bronzed carapace and rebreather mask burst in from one of the bunker complex’s adjoining compartments. The Scout scanned the hulking shapes of the gathered Iron Hands, before locating the bleak form of Sergeant Maarvuk. The others, he ignored.

‘There is a passageway. It appears to run towards Locis Primus but I only explored a short way. It is large enough to admit power armour, but barely.’

‘If it gets me under the Primus shard, then I will make space. Rauth.’

The Scout whose face Stronos had needed to break to bring him back to his senses turned obediently towards his sergeant. His nose and mouth were badly bloodied, his face a mass of bruise, but his Larraman cells had staunched the bleeding. There were welts around his throat from a skitarius’ death grip and his visor was bleeding sparks. Beneath the sputtering device was a look of such embittered fury and aggression that Stronos momentarily felt pity for him.

He still remembered what it had been like for him at that age, to be so recently human, the raw impulsiveness and rage of his gene-seed fuelling a body that was already stronger than he could understand or control. Minor disagreements amongst fellow neophytes quickly became brawls, often to the death, and indeed such outcomes were hardly discouraged, disobedience was rife and summary battlefield execution regrettably commonplace. By comparison the current intake were, for the past ten minutes at least, paragons

of self-discipline.

It was skin deep.

Stronos could see the resentment bubbling up under the surface without outlet. The Scout, Rauth, may have been responding to his master with the obedience of a beaten animal, but the slightest push and he would have gladly savaged the sergeant's hand. As he had the skitarii, and would Stronos too had he the strength to back up his fury.

'Take point,' Maarvuk told the Scout. 'I will be slower so I will go last. Any that fail to better my pace I will not hesitate to crush and spare the clave your weakness.' He turned to Stronos. 'Father's strength.'

'Father's strength,' Stronos replied, crossed his arms, and waited for Yolanis.

VII

Rauth tore from the mouth of the tunnel and into a sparingly lit corridor, punching out a chunk of rockcrete and packed earth from the wall with his elbow as he went. He pumped his shotgun's action, teeth bared, swung it one way, then the other. Nothing there. He swallowed his disappointment. After five hundred metres of cramped tunnels, having to widen the walls with his own shoulders at times, he could feel his choler rising. His explosive loss of control in the face of the deviant skitarii mortified him, and he was reassured to sense such emotion safely locked away behind doctrina blocks and implanted codewalls. And yet.

And yet.

He badly wanted something to hurt.

Rasping on his rebreather he pushed down one arm of the corridor while Sarrk, behind him, went down the other, those coming after alternately peeling off to follow them.

Fiddling with the side controls of his damaged visor he attempted to match their position to a schematic of the base. Emergency lighting from greasy lumen sources cast the smooth, metallic walls in a weak red light. Pink, almost. The walls trembled with a soft hum, separate from the faraway rumour of bombardment. Listening intently, he thought he could hear a voice speaking but could not pinpoint a direction. He touched the walls and his carapace gloves

came away damp. His expression soured. Even through his mask's filters he was getting a repulsive odour, muggy and thick, like a blend of animal musk and oils.

A spray of fat sparks rewarded Rauth's attempts to bully his visor back online, and shocked his fingers even through their protective carapace and undermesh. He swore at it and snapped it from his face at the arm. Then he crushed it underfoot.

Better.

'Quiet,' whispered Khrysaar, directly behind him.

Anger swelled in Rauth, swiftly recognised, blocked and buried, there to boil away unregarded. *He's right.* 'I acted rashly. It will not happen again.'

'See that it does not.'

'Is the air breathable?' Rauth asked. Khrysaar's visor remained operative.

'From the state we left the tunnel in, I would guess not.'

'And the odour is offensive,' added Suforr.

'Rebreathers stay on,' ordered Gorgorus, and the masked Scouts spread out along the corridor to make room for the last of their number.

Maarvuk walked through in an explosion of rockcrete dust. He looked left, then right, powdered stone pouring off his massively bulked-out frame. Finally, he looked up. There was a small black globe set into the ceiling, an angular slit in the casing blinking red whenever one of the Scouts moved. Apparently satisfied, Maarvuk holstered his pistol, reached up to that black globe, and calmly ripped it out of the ceiling in a shower of sparks and severed wiring.

'A picter device,' he said, sparks running down his adamantine-scaled features like raindrops. 'Next time I will not correct your error.'

'Which way?' asked Rauth.

Maarvuk responded by turning motionless and unspeaking for several seconds; runes and schemata flowed rapidly across his helmet display. 'Location verified and locked. The central authorisation nexus is not far from here. It will be well defended, even if the renegades are as yet unalerted to our incursion, and that risk increases with every second we are here. You will seize it or perish for your failure.' *You don't say 'we'*. 'From there you will override the primary entrance and sever the Titan's power supply.'

The veteran sergeant recognised no *if* or *maybe*.

He pointed in Rauth's direction.

'Go.'

With barely a passing concern for discretion, Rauth charged down the corridor. In truth he was little more adept in stealth than Maarvuk, for all that he benefitted from a lighter frame, but what he had was speed, power and a determination to prevail. Something oozed from the knife wound in his belly with every pound of his feet and slurped through the gash in his carapace. He ignored the pain and ran. *Complete the mission and I will be remade. Better than I was before.* Although he cared little for those left behind on the surface, the urgency of the situation was not lost on him. If the Titan were left to obliterate Fabricator-Locum Velt's and Captain Stronos' commands then the eradication of Thennos might be delayed. Iron Father Verrox might be forced to beg the other clans for reinforcement. *And that, he thought with vehemence, cannot be.*

The corridor carried a notable curve towards the right and Rauth realised that it was a circuit pathway, running the outer edge of the entire Primus shard. *Strange that there are no guards.* He heard the voice again.

Signalling back that he could see a light ahead, he slowed down to approach an open door, for the first time since he had entered the facility taking care to muffle his steps. It was a set of swinging double doors on the right hand side of the corridor, the inside of the curve, slightly ajar. The crackly artificial voice was coming from inside. He slammed through it, shotgun to his shoulder.

Men and women in red Mechanicus robes screamed, falling off workstation chairs or scrambling from positions of prayer as they sought cover under the sturdy diagnosticae tables that filled most of the room. Like the skitarii outside, the adepts were clad in oddly beguiling augments, sympathetic to the flesh in both colour and contour. Flowing electroos covered what remained of their skin, tracing the outlines of future implants, scabbed and burned as if imprinted in great haste. He wanted to look away, but forced himself to face them. They were far more highly cyborgised than any mere engineeer or mechanician should be, and the writhing, organic form those augments took was like a knot in his bleeding gut.

'The machine does not have to be cold and unfeeling.' The voice Rauth had heard. It was emerging from a speaker tube near to where many of the adepts had been kneeling. *'The purpose is enhancement, not diminishment, so why give away what makes us most human, most alive? The art of the machine can enhance emotion and sensation as well as take it away, and the Omnissiah desires this gift be bestowed equally upon all, low and high...'*

Rauth dragged his attention back to the whimpering civilians behind the tables.

They were frightened, defenceless, weak. They were culpable. He wanted to start killing, but some mental block kept his finger from pulling any tighter on the trigger. He remembered the promise he had once made to himself, to be better than those that trained him, and he lowered his shotgun. Just as he did so Khrysaar pushed in behind and brought up his bolter, only for Maarvuk to grab the barrel and force it down.

‘No,’ Maarvuk said. ‘Is Rauth the only one amongst you with a clear head? Do it quietly.’

Mouth dry, Rauth wordlessly accepted the sergeant’s interpretation of his inaction. Maarvuk clumped past him, unstoppable, the visible bionic sinew in his massive arms clicking as he closed his fingers around the underside of the diagnosticae table and wrenched it from its floor fittings. The adepts barely had time to cry out as several tonnes of subtle technologies were lifted above their heads. Some of the adepts gave gurgling spasms as the table rediscovered the floor and crushed them in half. Whirring with pleasure, Maarvuk then put creaking gauntlets to the table again and, deaf to the desperate wails of those who had managed to crawl out from under it, pushed it over once more.

Khrysaar and the others strode past Rauth and into the instrumentarium with mechanical precision. No inefficiency was allowed, including dulling blades, not when the bludgeoning might of their fists was perfectly sufficient to demolish mortal skulls, augmented or not. That such insignificants as these could have had no role in introducing their tainted doctrine had, by their inaction, become irrelevant. Their crime was one of permission. When it was done, the only noise was that of the voice coming through the augmitter. Gorgorus put one wrecking fist through it, knuckle deep into the backing plasteel.

The ensuing quiet was, in its own way, as deafening as a fusillade of bolter-fire would have been.

Sickened, as much with himself as with the callous ruin left by his brothers, Rauth reassured himself of his grip on his shotgun and looked around.

His first impression that this was an ancillary diagnosticae suite, part of Locis Primus’ data-harvesting operations, appeared to be borne out by the myriad arcana on display. Even Rauth, his experience of such temples to science minimal, could see that it had been superficially altered. Oil burners smoked

from workstations, balanced in cup holders, giving off an acrid pheremonal scent that was that same sickly blend he'd smelled earlier. Halting images of the Machine God had been drawn on screens, but man and machine halves had been inverted from the standard imagery. It was subtly, profoundly wrong.

The alien technologies that had been under analysis were hooked up through convoluted interface set-ups, so numerous and bulky that they almost filled the room. They looked ancient, inhuman, eldar perhaps or something akin to them, but Rauth was no expert. Nevertheless, something about them made his flesh want to crawl into his augmetics. The expressions on his brothers' faces showed they felt it too.

And that smell.

Rauth's nose wrinkled in disgust. 'Can we do anything from here?'

'No,' Gorgorus replied. 'This is a diagnosticae ward, nothing more.'

'Then let's move on.'

'Wait, look at this.' Suforr called them over to the wall on the opposite side of the upended table. It was curiously unmarked by illicit imagery or blemishes, and as Rauth drew nearer he saw why. It was not a wall, but a window, the plastek formulated so that it became transparent only from within a certain distance. It was to here that the priests had been directing their prayers when Rauth had first entered.

He soon saw the reason for that too. And why they had encountered no guards.

In line with his assessment that the outer circuit pathway circumnavigated the core of the shard, the window looked down over the core. At the bottom was an auditorium, long and narrow as the shard was wide and high, surrounded by thirty to forty metres of tinted glass, coiled wires and girdered plasteel. Directly beneath the slanted ceiling's highest point was a podium upon which stood the single most spectacularly invidious skitarius that Rauth could have tried and failed in his most disturbed Catalepsean cycles to imagine.

Its limbs were elongated, its hands golden and immaculate. The integration between body and armour was phased and perfect, presenting a rainbow composite of metallic shades from mirrored silvers to deep lustrous coppers, all overlain and subtly accentuated by a gauze of alchemical sprays and crimson. For the high-purity quartzes and gemstones that decorated the skitarius' armour Rauth could name dozens of practical applications, but they had been duplicated to such extravagant extent that the intent could only have been morbidly decorative. It paced about the podium with a fluid, languid

stride, gesticulating as it moved.

A bodyguard of hyper-augmented skitarii alphas made a cordon around the dais, reinforced considerably by the presence of a trio of horrifically debased Kastelan battle robots. The irreplaceable Legio Cybernetica relics had human features etched onto their bulb heads, their large rounded shoulders draped in cloaks of vat-grown human flesh. More disturbing still, Rauth could see that their doctrina wafers had been removed, cut out by men with neither the blessing of the Ommissiah nor the skill, and replaced with something delicate and organic that Rauth could not make out. Logic told him that the maligned battle robots would not function at all, but there was precious little logic to take solace in here.

Despite being physically incapable of biological sickness, he felt something in his stomach turn at the display.

So intent was he on the grotesquery on the podium, that he had given no thought to the podium itself, thinking it another rushed assembly of spare parts and scrap metal, until he noticed it move. This time he felt his throat tighten, a remembered impulse bringing his hand to his mouth.

The princeps, or whatever it was, walked on a pulpit made from the bent backs of his own bionically mangled faithful. There were many layers of them, joyously on all fours to raise their glittering princeps high above the heads of his congregation. And of them there were many, tens of thousands of malformed bio-constructs packed into the auditorium below, and perhaps as many again watching and listening from galleries like this one. Rauth realised that the princeps was delivering a sermon, or an address of some kind to rouse his legion followers to war, but without the augmitter that Gorgorus had destroyed it was impossible to know. Perhaps that was for the best. In fact he knew full well that it was, but a terrible curiosity made Rauth stretch out his hand and touch fingers to the plastek.

The vibrations ran up his arm and into his Lyman's ear like a half-felt sense of unease.

'What basis in logic can there be for an imperfect being, however exalted over fellow imperfect beings, to judge the worth or unworth of you, or you, or you. Or I? This is how I see the lie in the source code of the great algorithm of Mars. It is for the Machine God alone to decide who is worthy of His perfection and who is not. Let them take our gifts away. Let them try. They cannot but fail because it is we who are perfect...'

With a shiver of horror and the still powerful urge to damn his anatomy and vomit, he drew his hand back and looked away. He blinked, his breathing hoarse and hot in his throat, elated almost at the intensity of the sensation, and turned to Maarvuk. He had been expecting censure for exposing his soul to the ramblings of the apostate, but what he received was an expulsion of turgid fluids from the veteran-sergeant's feed hoses and rebreather. 'Father!' Rauth reeled as organoserum sprayed his face and Maarvuk crashed to the floor.

Rauth wiped his face and looked around to see the other Scouts seizing madly. All except Khrysaar, who gave him a look of horror and revulsion that Rauth could well imagine his own face returning.

'What on Terra!' Khrysaar cursed.

'Don't just stand there. Get them away from the window.'

Khrysaar hauled ineffectually on Gorgorus until the bulkier Scout's random spasms sent an elbow crashing into his forehead. He fell on his back with a grunt of anger and immediately went for his knife.

Kill him!

Rauth blinked back the sudden compulsion. 'For once in your existence, don't be an idiot.'

Gorgorus' strike hadn't been deliberate, that much should have been obvious. Gorgorus' face was a contortion of badly suppressed, contradictory emotions: hate, wonder, repugnance, awe, fury, transfixed on the view of the auditorium. Foam bubbled from his mouth as he stutteringly drew a fist to smash out the transparent plastek; blood wormed out of some remnant capillary to trickle from the corner of his eye, then the whole neuro-mechanical conflation surrendered to the pressure. The force of the aneurysm smashed Gorgorus' face into the workstation.

'Throne!'

Rauth leapt away from him. Khrysaar crawled on his back. He wasn't sure which of them had spoken.

Sarrk screamed in surreal, bloody outrage and began to head-butt the transparency, the plastek splintering with every successive blow. Suforr merely stared into empty space until smoke curled from his mouth.

'What's got into them?' yelled Khrysaar.

Why not us? 'Do I look like the Ommissiah to you?'

Gorgorus' bionics continued to feed him with pulses of disgusted fury, standing him up only to pitch him over soon after as outraged systems tried to

make him climb up onto the workstation. Sarrk's skull had cracked open, but he continued to smash it witlessly into the plastek.

'Witchcraft.' Khrysaar. 'We have to kill them all.'

'Put down the knife.'

'It's the Ommissiah's mercy. They'll thank us for it. I'll not have my strength judged lacking.'

Rauth laughed. Suddenly, bizarrely. It felt... good. 'It already is.'

The shadows around Khrysaar's facial augmentations deepened. His creamy optic glinted blindly as he pointed his knife at Rauth. Rauth's heart whooshed frantically, as though pursued by something abhorrent and wondrous. *I love you, brother.*

'As if I ever cared what *you* thought,' Khrysaar said.

The click and scrape of an unholstered bolt pistol drew their attention apart, Khrysaar's blade holding the place between them. They looked to the ground, at Maarvuk, his immovable metal-scaled features locked in a non-expression of irresolvable emotion. *The machine does not have to be cold and unfeeling.* The words of the traitor princeps ran around and around and around in Rauth's head as the veteran-sergeant drew his bolt pistol and pushed it up under his own chin.

Imperfect.

'No!' Rauth and Khrysaar yelled together.

'Weak,' Maarvuk muttered.

And fired.

VIII

Melitan could not move.

She had never thought herself a coward. She had braved the horrors of Dumaar and his apothecarion almost every day for seven years. She had faced Iron Chaplain Braavos and Sergeant Stronos, with trepidation, yes, but not with fear. And considering that she had never faced down a lasrifle in her life, she could convince herself that she had acquitted herself well and gone some way towards justifying the logi-legatus' faith in her.

But now, for no reason at all, she could push herself no further.

A torrent of heavy bolter-fire drove her deeper into cover, an old foxhole ringed with barbed wire, partially roofed by a fallen stanchion and a sheet of rad-blackened armourglass. She could see Ares ahead where he stood in the middle of the no-man's-land. Explosive plumes tore up out of the ground around him, tracers strafing past and across but never quite hitting. She was watching a miracle in microcosm. As if the Ommissiah could not bear to lay a finger upon His own.

But still she could not move.

Feeling a hand on her back, she started, took an ill-advised gulp of upcycled oxygen and began to cough. The high concentration, low moisture air of her rebreather was technically efficient, but hell on her parchment-thin throat-wall and ruined lungs.

‘We have to get to him,’ said Callun. Of all the adepts, he was the only one still standing. Even after a twenty hour double shift, he never had been able to sit down.

They had been trailing Ares’ advance on the god-machine, *Pax Medusan*, for the last half hour, logging his bellowed imprecations against his ‘Sapphire King’ for later cross reference against the simulacrum archive, but now he had stopped. No more shouting, no more firing. Just stopped. And as soon as he had, Sergeant Ankaran and the other Iron Hands she had thought to be her escort had wasted no time whatsoever in pushing on with their own objectives, abandoning Melitan and her charges to their hole in the ground.

She looked up at the Titan, concussive explosions rippling through her flesh and bones, as if she had come face to face with a new and greater deity than she had previously known. Tears forced their way from her eyes as she struggled to separate her faith, loyalty, devotion to Ares and hatred of the Iron Hands generally from her spiritual love for the majesty of the Machine. For some reason she thought of Stronos, their conversation aboard the *Onslaught*.

They were not all alike.

‘Melitan.’ Callun shook her again, this time urgently. ‘Someone has to go out there and bring him back.’ She regarded him as if he had suddenly started to speak a different language. He gave her a moment to answer, and when she struggled to find one he gave her shoulder an understanding squeeze. A faint smile creased his eyes, as full of life and energy as she had always known them. ‘Wait here. I’ll see what I can do for him and then come straight back.’

Melitan opened her mouth to countermand him, but nothing came out. She

hated herself. ‘A-all right,’ she managed as Callun took her blessing rod, her pabulum and oils, and she offered only mute protest as he checked back with a fleeting peck on the forehead, then wriggled under the barbed wire fencing and began to run towards Ancient Ares.

>>> **SOURCE** >>> **SARDONIS**
>>> **ORIGIN** >>> **ARES, TUBRIIK**
>>> **DATESTAMP** >>> **002013.M32**
>>>> **SIMULUS COMMENCING** >>>>

He forced his sensors >>> **eyes** >>> **FILE CORRUPTION** >>> to open, allowing in a confusion of stimuli. He could smell burning flesh and baked ceramite. He had no olfactory sense. He could see a riot of sound and colour. He could not see >>> The Sapphire King remained nearby, screams and bolt hails bleeding through the twin streams of contradictory inputs.

‘We have to get you out of here.’

Someone was trying to move him. He could feel manual override jacks being plugged into his central nexus >>> pulling on his arms and dragging him from where he remembered seeing the daemon manifest. It was Darvo >>> **Darrvo** >>> Apothecary Darrvo.

Clan Garrsak had no Apothecary by that name. They must have been reinforced. That made no sense either. Last report had Clans Raukaan and Sorrgol more than a day away.

‘I am finished, brother. Tend to those that can still use your aid. I promise to still be here when you return.’

‘Please. We are in danger.’

‘Leave me. That is an order.’

The Apothecary began to mutter a prayer to the Omnissiah >>> to the Emperor, and Ares felt something in him drawn forth by the words. The parallel streams of consciousness began to run together, the burnt, charnel stink of Sardonis receding into ancient memory to be replaced by... by...

Nothing.

>>> ‘No. I choose the Emperor’s mercy, as is my right. I will not become the iron.’

‘Please.’ Urgent now.

‘No! I have seen our future and it is beyond saving. I refuse to persist in a

shell and watch all around me perish.’

‘That is simulacrum corruption >>> the daemon talking. You are Ancient >>> Iron Captain Tubriik Ares. Do not surrender to it.’

‘Let us all perish,’ he said, ignoring the Apothecary >>> the adept’s struggles, and allowed his life support systems to fail.

>>> FILE CORRUPTION
>>> TERMINATING SIMULUS
>>> TERMINATING...
>>> END OF DATA.

IX

Stronos came off the vox, the bunker shaking under a direct hit. *Pax Medusan* was finding its range.

‘How long before we can expect reinforcement?’ said Vand, looking up from his study of the operations board.

‘Indeterminate. But not long. For now, keep working.’

‘Yes, brother.’

Leaving his brother to his labours, Stronos ducked outside and into the low gravity particle shower the last impact had made fall. Shielding the workings of his bionic eye under his gauntlet, he zoomed in on Adept Yolani’s coordinates, scanning the crushed terrain for any sign of the promised priest. He caught a flutter of crimson, auto-centred and focused – a running man – a split-second before the wreckage he was tearing through exploded.

X

Melitan screamed as Callun, Ares, and everything in a radius of about fifty metres disappeared in the dust-wash thrown up by the shell that had landed right on top of them. She could still feel Callun’s unmasked lips on her forehead, and screamed even as dust began to encrust her goggles and the

world turned yellow. She had done this. Her ambitions. Her failures. She screamed Callun's name until she began to weep and found she hadn't breath enough to scream Ares'. She didn't know who she expected to hear her. She could barely hear herself, the plink of raining armour muffled by the thin atmosphere and a wall of sand.

And *then* she moved.

Ignoring the hands that grabbed after her robes and the cries of fear and concern that followed them, she struggled through the barbed wire, coughed blood into her mask, and ran.

XI

Rauth was not sure what he had been expecting to happen. He was no romantic; he knew that people, even Space Marines, did not tend to walk away from a bolt-round to the head, but Maarvuk had been a thing of such solidity and power. Rauth had genuinely believed him indestructible.

As it transpired, nothing happened. Nothing unexpected. The mass-reactive detonated inside the veteran-sergeant's thick iron skull and blew open his head from the inside.

Khrysaar lowered his knife, panting, dripping with gore and neural adhesives. He stared at Rauth in shock, the uncanny spark of loathing that had inflamed him stunned back to wherever it had come from.

'Now what?'



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'Even the Cog Mechanicus is half human.'

– *i*

I

'What do we do?' Khrysaar asked the question more loudly than before, to be heard over the increasingly wet sounds of Sarrk's forehead hitting the transparent plastek. The distant shriek of tocsins sang through the fractured window. Rauth had no reason, as yet, to think that Maarvuk's noisy suicide had alerted the base garrison to their presence, but it was an urgent distraction he was finding difficult to ignore. He tried to think on his options, but whichever way his mind tried to go he found it – armed and fuelled, ready to go – in the exact same place.

The objective was all-important. He said as much.

'Agreed,' said Khrysaar. They were both caked in their brothers' flesh, but Rauth felt a hateful pride in the fact that they were both still Iron Hands. He stood a little stiffer. 'But how?' Khrysaar went on in a low voice. 'Maarvuk's last order was for us to breach the central authorisation nexus and assume control. We can't do that with just two of us.'

Rauth concurred. *Never commit unless certain that defeat is impossible:*

that is the lesson Sergeant Tartrak drilled into me. He clenched his bionic shoulder, felt the absence of a beating heart. *Literally.* ‘Barricade the door. We need time to think.’

The other Scout obeyed without question. Rauth was older, better, more completely mechanised, and Khrysaar recognised that implicitly. While Khrysaar squatted down by the diagnosticae table that Maarvuk had flipped over and attempted to drag it towards the door, Rauth went back to the window, bracing himself against whatever horror had overtaken the veteran-sergeant and his older brethren. After a few seconds in which nothing more malign than the steady slap of Sarrk’s bloody head on the plastek impinged on his senses, Rauth let go of the breath he had been holding.

Red lights flashed over the auditorium below, along with an energetic discordance that someone sufficiently lacking in understanding of order might have classed as music. He could dimly hear it through the spider-web fractures that Sarrk had butted into the plastek, a base thrum, and he could see as well that the auditorium was emptying. Men and women surged towards the exits, civilian workers with ungainly augmentations and a jarringly low-tech armament of stubbers, autoguns and repurposed tools such as arc welders and diamantite drills. They were escorted by the similarly hyper-modified skitarii alphas. Despite their ‘improvements’ the civilian soldiers were repulsive but unimpressive, though a force anywhere near to Locis Primus’ estimated population of two million would overrun Stronos’ command easily, and Velt’s too, if the Legiones Skitarii were caught unprepared. He looked back to Khrysaar.

The other Scout had given up the attempt to shift the table. The two of them together hadn’t a fifth of Maarvuk’s strength, and so Khrysaar instead dragged the veteran-sergeant himself in front of the swinging doors. Then he pried the bolt pistol from the sergeant’s grip and, in what struck Rauth as a grisly move in the circumstances, ejected the sickle magazine and jammed it through the loop handles, barring the doors from swinging inwards or out.

Watching his brother work, Rauth attempted to raise Sergeant Stronos on the vox. He had no magos calculi with whom to confer, but it seemed to him that the benefits of vox silence were now outweighed by the costs. Denial static blanketed the open channel, the sermons of someone calling himself *i*, the prophet-alpha, on loop. Rauth closed the channel quickly. He had no idea if he could reach Stronos through the interference, but he suspected not.

He tried again to think, finding himself wishing for a superior officer to issue an order that he could simply obey. Part of him actually envied Khrysaar. He pushed the yearning aside. There was still a good chance that they could exit the facility by the same route they had entered and bring warning of this new force to Stronos before it emerged. If they were to do that though, they would have to hurry. They had entered through one of Locis Primus' own access tunnels and Rauth didn't doubt that, several thousand skitarii and traitor militia would be on their way there right now. He turned to the viewing plastek as the last acolytes filed out. Only the prophet-alpha and one of his perverted Kastelan bodyguards remained behind, even his human-podium dismantled, pacing the auditorium and looking up at the surrounding windows as if waiting on a portent of victory.

As if inloaded to his mind, an alternative course of action presented itself.

The objective is all-important.

'With me,' he said, and remembering Khrysaar's unintended altercation with Gorgorus, levelled his shotgun at Sarrk. A solid blast from both barrels blew out the older Scout's softened skull and threw him out of the way. *My first shot on Thennos. Ironic. But he's not moving if he doesn't want to.* Khrysaar didn't bat an eye. Then Rauth ran at the fractured plastek at its weakest point and hurled his body at it.

II

Stronos felt a moment of grief for the Ancient's passing before the interlink to his brothers snuffed it out, as efficiently as the oxygen-poor atmosphere of Thennos snuffed out the explosion. He could appreciate the efficiency, if nothing else.

'A Demolisher shell,' Vand observed without emotion, passing under the bunker's low entrance to stand by Stronos' side. The battle-brother knew ordnance. But then so did Stronos. 'A good hit. Well placed. Anyone in that area?'

'Yes,' Stronos replied.

'Who?'

Stronos hesitated. If it was noticed then it was not remarked upon. The clan's

compartmentalised command systems ensured that only he had access to every warrior's position and status. He did not like to keep secrets – they felt like poison in his stomach that needed to be expelled – but despite all that secrets had brought on the Iron Hands, he could see the virtue in keeping this one. The efficiency. The destruction of a living relic like Tubriik Ares would destabilise a finely balanced situation. The clan interlink allowed him to even out emotional fluctuations by spreading the variations across his brothers; he had not tested the premise, but it would cease to be of benefit if all experienced the same discord.

‘Adept Yolanis has suffered some losses,’ he said.

Vand accepted that without comment. He did not care about Yolanis or her adepts. He pointed to the engineer that Stronos had earlier seen fleeing the target area, his red-robed body now in a tangle where he had flung himself. Vand turned to where Jalenghaal and the remainder of Clave Stronos stood sentry around the bunker. Despite the ranging fire that fell around them, they remained utterly still.

‘Go fetch him,’ Vand said.

Jalenghaal gave Stronos a long look, then in a dull glint of optics moved off into the Titan's killing field, noospherically calling up half the remaining brothers to cover him.

Fire from the Titan stitched the landscape. It seemed undirected, as if the tactical withdrawal of any worthwhile targets had infuriated its injured spirit and led it simply to vandalise the terrain in which it was trapped. Toxic yellow fumes billowed from its waist where it was buried in the ground, cables drawn tight around its crenellated shoulders as, using its superheated plasma annihilator as a shovel, it managed to twist itself another few degrees towards the bunker complex. A blistering volley of las from a Hellstorm cannon at full stretch chopped up the ground barely a hundred metres from where Jalenghaal dragged the wailing tech-priest from his hiding place and swung him over one shoulder. It was as if *Pax Medusan* knew what they were planning. Superstition. Stronos shrugged it off.

‘We are losing,’ said Vand, as Jalenghaal strode measuredly back towards his brothers' covering bolters. ‘I lack your privileged access to the manifold, but I can see it with my eyes. Even if Kardaanus were here or Ares' Anvilarum could make it through the wreckage field we have nothing that can hurt that.’ In a great shriek of metal and a twang of ripping cables, the Titan dragged itself a

little further around. ‘We need the Ordo Reductor, but I can see for myself that they are not coming. And as for Ankaran fighting his way inside, any novice to the calculus logi would say that is a slim chance.’

Another wail of butchered adamantine and Stronos found himself staring up into the barrels of a Hellstorm cannon. They took on a low amber glow as the mega-weapon built to charge. Stronos heard a rumble, like thunder.

‘Get inside,’ he said.

Vand did not move. ‘The structure will not withstand a direct strike from a weapon of that grade. Defensive action is pointless.’

‘That is my judgement to make,’ Stronos snapped. ‘Inside the bunker. Obey!’

A muted umber flash from the direction of the Titan nullified all prior argument. Stronos turned to face and log his instant of death, shocked instead to see the dying flares of a massive explosion that had knocked back the Emperor’s fortress head. The rumble grew louder, apocalyptically so, rattling the debris underneath Stronos’ boots, culminating in a great avalanche of metal falling from the path of something massive that crashed through the wreckage field on the Titan’s far side.

‘What is that?’ asked Vand.

Stronos felt himself smile.

‘Reinforcement.’

III

The wall of wreckage that surrounded Locis Primus was several metres high and centuries deep. It had stymied the efforts of Clan Garrsak’s armour to approach and had driven even the superheavy siege engines of the Ordo Reductor to seek clearer avenues of approach, but the fortress-monastery *Rule of One* had not stopped in over ten thousand years. It would not be stopped now.

Tanks tumbled through the thin air and rained down from the sky as the plough-fronted, uncompromisingly armoured forward drive module smashed through the outer ring of wrecks. Closer towards the Primus shard the vehicles became more ancient, more tightly packed, the layering of ages thicker, but the drive module wasn’t blocked. Instead it mounted the wall of vehicles and

drove on without slowing, crushing it further, the weight and power of the scores of rattling adamanti clad modules running behind forcing it through. The crawler's arsenal traversed to lock onto their target as it cut across its back.

The *Rule of One* was primarily a support installation, albeit a mobile one, its armament principally defensive. Never before in recorded history had it been employed to spearhead an assault, but given enough time even a once-in-a-trillion event went from infinitesimal to a certainty.

In other words: there was a first time for everything.

With a thunderous boom and a rocking of the crawler's connected midsections onto their left-side tracks, the quake cannon that protruded from a blister of similarly extreme-range artillery guns on the centre module hurled a block of molten rock several kilometres over ashen waste to explode under the Emperor's fortress jaw ridge. Its defensive armament was formidable, more than a match for anything that walked or crawled under the auspices of the Ommissiah, and as serried scores of battlecannon, boltcannon, plasmic blastguns, missiles of every colour contrail and warhead, and immense triple-barrelled turbo-laser destructors roared into range, *Pax Medusan* screamed under her namesake world's wrath.

IV

The window shattered.

Rauth plunged through a blizzard of plastek daggers, and then began to fall. The distance to the ground was staggering, but he had been aware of that before he jumped, calculated for it. This was a small world. He could take it.

He hit the electrum-chased flagstones like a quarter tonne weight dropped from a great height onto a very, very small world, plastek rain clattering around him.

Semi-transparent shards splintered and popped under his stomach, ground plastek dust sprinkling from the creases in his chest carapace as, ignoring the flash tear of pain in his ribs, he eased himself off the ground. His rebreather hung from his face on one frayed strap. He choked for a moment before the asphyxiation markers in his blood signalled his multi-lung to kick in, hard rhythmic draws flooding his bloodstream with oxygen.

The prophet-alpha turned towards him with a languid swing, an exaggerated sway of its golden hips, the upper body counterpoised on an abdominal gimbal of perfectly spherical diamantite, and its elaborate masque-face dipped to acknowledge his arrival. Plastek tinkled to the ground. The light threw a patina across its features, the photons themselves ecstatic at voyaging to the system's outermost reaches to fall on something so transcendent. Coloured lenses shuffled over its optics, a concertina of yellows, pinks, greens and sapphire blues, neither eye even remotely alike to the other. Its stare was both repellent and hypnotic, as though he were being dissected alive, and not for any relatable purpose other than to marvel at the colours he bled.

'I was wondering when you would come.' The prophet-alpha, *i*, spoke in contrived tones, the voice of one struggling to hold back its excitement. 'What did you think of my message?'

It was waiting for me.

A sudden hatred of this twisted profanity gripped him, overriding any attempt to buffer or deny it. It was at the level of the codewalls themselves that it worked. He could feel his bionics seize, recursive illogic loops of resentment and loathing causing them to tense, untense, tense again, and if not for Medusan fire coursing through his living veins he knew he would be bleeding smoke out of his ears right now, just like Suforr.

'What happened to you?'

The skitarius spread its elongated limbs, a gurgling semi-synthetic laugh. 'Perfection happened.'

The ground shook. Rauth reluctantly tore his gaze from *i*'s as the Kastelan strode towards him.

It was as massive as a Dreadnought, but more graceful, less single-minded in its construction. Its flesh coat rippled as it swallowed up the ground at an alarming rate. Its painted features stared through him, the depiction childishly disproportionate, and yet as piercing and disturbing as any work of ironglass. The crackle-hum of disruption sheaths enveloping its power fists shocked Rauth from his fugue in a way the defiled robot itself had not. He rolled clear, the robot's foot splitting the flagstone he had been lying on, then used his momentum to roll to his feet.

Soundlessly, the Kastelan rotated on the spot. Rauth could feel those swirly, badly rendered eyes seeking him out as it clenched its power fists and came again.

He looked for cover, any kind of defensible position, but found none. The walls were high and smooth, rockcrete ribbed with metal, the hanging cables that were in profusion higher up disappearing closer to the floor in favour of clean scoured austerity. There were alcoves between the metallic braces but they were far too small to be useful. Rauth assumed they had once housed Thennos' relics; some still did, many now smeared with old blood, displaying severed heads that implanted electrodes bade leer, wink and gape as Rauth's retreat crossed their glassy stares.

He pumped his shotgun, spitting out a pair of spent casings, then fired at next-to-point-blank into the Kastelan's bulb helmet. The shot scattered on the robot's refractor field and burned up.

Rauth cursed.

A double explosive report and silvery gases and sparks suddenly sizzled from a rupture in the Kastelan's elbow joint. Rauth saw Khrysaar standing amidst the scattered plastek pieces in the middle of the auditorium, braced against his bolter's recoil, in broad-shouldered silhouette behind the vapours streaming from the robot's arm. The battle robot pivoted towards whatever abhorrent doctrinals it was running perceived as the greater threat.

With me, I said. Rauth swallowed an insult. He could see that his brother already had a magazine of armour-piercing vengeance rounds slotted into his bolter. 'You have the Kastelan. I will take the traitor.'

'You are too good to me, brother,' Khrysaar spat back, muzzle flare painting his face with a snarl of bolter shadow as he backed off from the robot. Bolt-rounds occasionally elicited wildfire surges of energy as the refractor field soaked up the kinetic impact, every so often breaking through to rip out great chunks of hyperdense ceramic to ultimately similar effect. *After all, there's nothing in there to kill.* Taking advantage of Khrysaar's distraction, he sought out the prophet-alpha.

It was a brief search.

The transformed skitarii was in his face the second the Kastelan's back was turned, a red-shifted band of gold plate and glittering melee augments. A flurry of blows he could barely even see carved his carapace like diorite under a sculpting laser. A transuranic saw whined shrilly in place of the prophet-alpha's left hand. A spring-locked monofilament blade snapped from the wrist of the right. Rauth wove between them, always back, his mind already placing him into a protective battle-trance, buying him every nanometer between a lost

limb and another slash across his body armour with blood, sweat, and precious oxygen that Thennos could ill afford to replace. His shotgun was ribboned from blocking the hyper-tech weaponry before he even managed to draw his knife. He hurled the shorn-off stock at the gyrating alpha, watched it disintegrate under a clean hit from the skitarii's transuranic sawblade.

'Something miraculous has occurred here. Wondrous.' The prophet-alpha leapt through splinters, fainted once, twice, again, forced Rauth onto the back foot and into a lunging parry, then followed up with his nanolayer blade. Rauth caught it on the thick housing of his augmented arm, snarled in fury, and hurled the skitarii off him with hydraulic force. The alpha ran backwards, as easily as he would go forwards, bleeding off momentum. 'I waited for you, iron princeling, both of you, not because you are special but because *all* are special. All are potentially perfect in the eyes of the Ommissiah.'

'You are an abomination.'

'I am equilibrium. Even the Cog Mechanicus is half human – did you never wonder at that? You have been shown the first steps on a road that will lead you nowhere. Your chance at perfection everlasting is still ahead of you.'

Rauth looked around for another weapon, but there was only his knife. If he could have gunned *it* down from afar then he would have done so. Honour killed more men than traitors' blades.

Across the auditorium, Khrysaar had run out of bolt-rounds and was locked in a desperate dance with the Kastelan. From above, the crunching sound of auto rounds and rad-fire spoke of the discovery and execution of the remainder of his clave. *No matter. They were weak.*

Tearing his mask fully off, he spat on the ground. 'You were skitarii. How did you manage to turn against your masters?'

'Curious?'

Rauth snarled, and the prophet-alpha laughed.

'I was not skitarii. I was lead diagnostician assigned to cache zero-seven-seven-four-obscura, the so-called Dawnbreak Technologies. How prophetic that name proved to be.' He closed his eyes in remembered rapture and touched his monofilament edge to his chest. 'My heart beats again. Does yours? I am not skitarii, child, I am my own perfect form, as only the Ommissiah had seen it before now. You too can be remade, perfect, naught but your own ambition and the favour of the Ommissiah to set you limits.'

Rauth felt the power in his bionic arm as the urge to batter the creature to

death drew on the tendon attachers in his shoulders. Then he remembered how Tartrak and Dumaar had forced him, crippled, practically begging, to prove his worth of the iron before it had been bestowed.

‘You see the truth. I see it in your eyes.’

With a roar, Rauth surged forwards, throwing a punch at the alpha’s ecstatic masque. A blur of gold and it scissored his bionic wrist between its arms. Its strength was as incredible as its speed. The transuranic saw screamed centimetres from Rauth’s jaw, super-fast, radioactive blades causing his skin to blister and slough. He bent his neck back and groaned. ‘Do you know what the first people called Dawnbreak?’

‘First... people?’

‘They called it Ayoashar’Azyr. It means Bluestone.’ Rauth screamed as the saw ripped into his cheek. Optic lenses clicked and reshuffled as blood sprayed *i*’s golden masque, the eyes taking on a darkling red hue. ‘But the eldar recognise the universe’s duality. Materium versus immaterium, matter versus antimatter, man versus machine – all in opposition and balance. Their language is replete with double meaning. Do you know what Ayoashar’Azyr *really* means?’ Blood and air frothed from the new hole in Rauth’s face; the alpha gurgled with laughter. ‘It means Sapphire King.’

Over the juddering shriek of transuranium teeth on bone Rauth heard a tinkling on the flagstone by his feet. Eyes filmed with red mist rolled down to see an asymmetric metal cylinder bounce and clatter to a halt between the alpha’s legs.

Khrysaar. You bastard.

The frag grenade gave the prophet-alpha full force, gold, then steel, then bone shredding from the skitarii’s legs. Its body sheltered Rauth from the worst of the detonation and the resultant frag storm, but the force of the blast hurled him off his feet and smacked him down onto his back.

He groaned, his multi-lung and augmetic stubbornly holding onto the air that had been driven out of his human original. Half his face hung off his jaw like an open flap. His skin and what was left of his armour was bristled with bent nails and thumb-sized bits of metal from Khrysaar’s frag grenade. The grabbing pain in his gut told him that the blast, the fall, or something in between had re-opened the stab wound. He felt dead.

I will be remade. Better than I was before. The mantra gave him the strength to get up again, despite the full knowledge that movement of any kind just then

would be haemorrhaging blood into his insides. Stay still and his enhanced clotting factors might just stabilise him enough to be recovered, but try to fight... *Better than I was before*. He could still hear gunfire from the galleries above, pounding on the superstructure from without, the stomping movements of the Kastelan, and he ignored it all, staggered instead towards the shattered alpha.

The prophet's legs had been obliterated, its arms spasmodically functional. The monofilament blade had been snapped. The transuranic saw remained fixed in place but unpowered, whining slowly down. Rauth stood on it. The skitarius' eyes flicked up to him. Iron was not so easily killed.

'Erasure is imperfect. Ideas are not so easy to destroy.' The alpha's voice was weak, but unbroken, none of the gasping or rattling that Rauth would have expected of a mortal in its condition. 'It is a contagion in the base code. How do you think it was passed to me?' The skitarius laughed, the same short burst caught and looped over and over. 'I was waiting for you, iron prince.'

Feeling his spirit darken at the alpha's words, Rauth drove his knife into its masque and kept on stabbing until there was nothing left.

V

For the longest time there was little to do but watch the apocalypse fall. After the shock of the initial bombardment, *Pax Medusan* had not taken her punishment lightly. Disgraced and degraded she may have been, but the god-machine retained an iota of pride. Heavy weapons fire the equal of everything else on Thennos combined burned back and forth between the Imperator Titan and the *Rule of One*. A massive explosion lifted the roof off a power module, an unoccupied section of the superheavy vehicle train crewed by servitors and the *Rule of One*'s own ancient spirit, and Stronos winced to see her burn. Less than a kilometre from his position, he could feel the planet itself shake under the onslaught. No one spoke. Nothing passed through vox or permeated the clave link except a sense of awe magnified eight-fold.

'Incredible,' said Vand, saying what they were all thinking.

Lurrgol grunted acknowledgement.

Jalenghaal crunched through the debris field surrounding the bunker with the

engineer slung over one shoulder. Stronos turned towards him while the rest of his brothers continued to stare up at the warring behemoths. The adept's robes flapped in the overpressure thrown down by overlapping, successively mightier explosions. Electroos glimmered mutely under a bronzing of blood and sand; blood trickled from his ears. Stronos examined him, then turned angrily to Jalenghaal.

'He is damaged.'

'What did you expect? Mortals are fragile.'

'You should have demanded more than one,' Lurrgol muttered, darkly.

The engineer stirred under Stronos' prodding, groaned.

'Are you well, adept?'

The engineer did not even look up, and with a scowl Stronos realised that he must have been deafened by the god-war going on above his head. Iron Hands had no body language to interpret, no lips to read – the adept had no way of knowing he was being addressed at all.

'Give him to me,' Stronos said to Jalenghaal, extending his arms. His brother draped the adept across them. He was practically weightless. 'As you were,' he said to the warriors who had escorted Jalenghaal out, then turned back to Jalenghaal. 'I need you to manage the vox on my behalf – Vand and I must concentrate on what we are doing here.'

'Agreed,' said Jalenghaal.

'Attempt to assert authority over the loyalist skitarii remnants. And now that the *Rule of One* is here, try to re-establish contact with Verrox, Draevark, Drath and Raan.'

'Agreed,' said Jalenghaal. Stronos turned away, only for Jalenghaal to summon him back with a scratch of audio code. 'Bringing the *Rule of One* into a combat zone was a great risk, one I should have been told of before you took it. If it should suffer permanent damage...'

Stronos dismissed his brother's concerns, turned his back, and passed under the bunker's rockcrete lintel. The rippling cracks and booms of the battlefield were muted by the thick walls, but dust rained from the ceiling girders in a near-constant stream. He sat the adept into one of the intact workstation chairs as if he were lowering an infant in its crib. Not that he had ever, nor would ever, have the opportunity to do any such thing. As he did so, Vand moved to the operations bank, his heavy gauntlets hovering over dials and sliders, plotting a sequence in his mind. The adept gazed gormlessly up at the blinking

diodes and twinkling controls, eyes glazed with shock. Stronos took a long, considered breath, and mentally braced himself for what he was about to do.

He unclasped his helmet seals, the burn in his mouth immediate, even as cranial bionics were still being reluctantly detached and the helmet drawn from his head. His throat tightened, chest constricting as his lungs equalised to the lower pressure and were forcibly deflated. His multi-lung took over, but Thennos did not have a liveable atmosphere in any sense, and the gene-engineered organ was barely able to scavenge enough of what the skitarii and servitors had exhaled to keep him conscious.

He began to speak, purposefully exaggerating the shape of his words.

‘Bless us. Adept.’

Just that left him light-headed, and Vand had to assist him in lifting his helmet back over his head. He sucked on air as his helmet seals re-pressurised and the hiss of renewed oxygen circulation filled his ears. He gave his brother a silent stare of gratitude. <Continue preparing the weapons,> he canted, too out of breath still to speak.

Vand did so, turning back to the operations bank, as the engineer, uncertainly at first, began to chant. Stronos was somewhat surprised. His experience of the Cult Mechanicus thus far had been of wizened clergy telling him things that he or they, or someone else, could not do. The engineer, however, was again cut off from Stronos’ reactions by his helmet and continued his verse.

‘We are ready,’ said Vand, stepping back from the operations bank. Stronos error-checked his brother’s work, the lingua-technis of the adept’s mask-muffled chant working through him as he dialled down a power gauge here, altered a targeting solution there. An Iron Hands Space Marine might not readily acknowledge his capacity for honest error, but he could certainly harbour a difference of opinion. Then Stronos too stepped back, satisfied, nodded to the engineer, who hesitated for a moment before continuing to sing, then to Vand.

‘Give the *Pax Medusan* something else to think about, brother.’

‘The honour should be yours,’ said Vand.

‘Iron brings victory alone, not honour,’ said Stronos, firmly, struggling with a hidden grin as his gauntlet nevertheless moved to the trigger rune for the pulse ordnance multi-driver, positioned serendipitously at the beginning of the fire sequence.

He had always wanted to get his hands on one of these.

The adept lifted his hands in the air as his song climbed the scales.

<Brace. Audial dampers to maximum. Weapons firing,> Stronos canted to his slave.

He flicked the array of safety catches, surety against all but the most improbable of accidental firings. The rune blinked under the spread fingers of his gauntlet.

‘Sergeant!’

Stronos gritted his teeth against his frustration as Jalenghaal strode through the entryway. He straightened and turned to him, new data splurging across his overlays as he did so. Hostiles, lots of them, markerless red blips spilling from the underground access tunnels he had flagged on his approach as well as several score more he had failed to spot. He felt his hearts quicken, his breathing deepen, his physiology responding to the second-hand threat level he experienced through the interlink. Tactical runes showed the Devastators he had marked to watch those locations returning fire. It was satisfaction that he felt then, watching red icons obliterated by the ticking ammo counters of heavy bolter and plasma as quickly as they could appear on his screen. Every clan had their strengths, that was what Verrox always preached, and as the Iron Father typified, indiscriminate slaughter was certainly that of the Vurgaan.

Perhaps he had not severed all ties when he had joined Clan Garrsak.

Perhaps that was no bad thing.

‘Traitor skitarii and a horde of augmented facility workers assault our forces from an unspecified number of underground sally holes,’ Jalenghaal explained, judgement in the chill dispassion of his delivery. ‘The attack of *Pax Medusan* allowed us to become fragmented. We are vulnerable. The Adeptus Mechanicus retreat rather than engage. They are broken and reject your authorisations.’

Stronos heard a rumble from somewhere within the walls. He glanced up, expecting another deposit of powdered rockcrete, but got none.

‘I see it, brother.’

‘Ankaran is dead. With the arrival of the *Rule of One* he drew his command from the fire zone, towards the primary facility access. His mortis log was exloaded prior to his armour’s shutdown. It should be of interest to you.’

Stronos felt a squirming itch of disgust as the helmet pict-capture of a defiled battle automata stampeded towards the helmet wearer, lit up by field discharge and mass-reactive explosion. He let the feeling work itself out, then when it

was done cast it aside. ‘This, then, is the fate of the logi-legatus’ precious Kastelan robots. I doubt that he still wants them returned.’

‘You do not know that,’ said Jalenghaal. ‘The robots are irreplaceable relics. Perhaps the skills of the Mechanicus can see them restored? I remind you that with regards to the Kastelans we have strict no-fire orders that have not been rescinded.’

‘Did Ankaran fire?’

Jalenghaal hesitated. ‘He did not.’

Another disturbance from deeper inside the bunker, a scuffle of stone on stone, reminded Stronos of the widened tunnel within the bunker complex itself. Giving the chilling vid-capture of the heinously graffitied Kastelan one last look before permanently expunging it, he called in Lurrigol and Ruuvax.

‘Cover Sergeant Maarvuk’s tunnel – ensure nothing comes back through it,’ he said, his helmet vox-synthesisers code-stamping the command for Lurrigol. And then for Ruuvax, ‘Ensure there are no others they did not find. The Scouts are not as experienced as you, brother.’ He turned his attention back to Jalenghaal as the two Iron Hands departed.

‘I have also managed to raise Draevark,’ his second reported.

‘And you leave this until last?’

‘Expediency. The traitors are upon us. The iron captain’s battlegroup is still thirty minutes away.’

‘And?’

Another hesitation. ‘He wants to know what you have done with half his clan.’ It sounded like something Draevark would say, but with Jalenghaal’s fierce monotone it sounded wrong, less embittered badinage, more implicit threat.

‘Is he coming?’

‘He is coming.’

‘And the others?’

‘Drath appears to be the nearest – I could not raise him without the interlink, and forward only what Draevark could tell me. Verrox and Raan are further away, maybe over an hour behind.’

Stronos indicated the cloud of hostiles building up around the unattended sally holes. ‘There may still be a fight for them when they arrive. I would not wish to face Iron Father Verrox if there is not.’ Jalenghaal regarded him blankly. ‘Instruct the *Rule of One* to engage the main force at the gate, deploy praetorian servitors and prepare to receive Sergeant Artex and his survivors. I will send

them and Artex a field override to the logi-legatus' no-fire order myself. Tell them that we will finish *Pax Medusan* from here.'

'I have tried to raise them, but they are no longer responding. They are breaking off.'

'On whose orders?' asked Stronos, taking a step towards Jalenghaal.

'As I said,' Jalenghaal replied, unflinching. 'They are no longer responding.'

Stronos intended to press the point further when a hard bang rang out from Lurrgol's bolter, followed shortly after by the muffled burst of a smoke bomb. The inside of the bunker filled up with smoke. Stronos' augurs quickly redrew the bunker in spectral lines, his enhanced hearing isolating the rapid burst of Lurrgol's bolter and the sound of tissue exploding in a confined space from the muffling effect. Explosions became deadened bursts as bolter-rounds stopped blowing apart human bodies and started slapping into a plug of annihilated parts.

'I have found some use for flesh after all,' Lurrgol muttered, drily, continuing to pump unnecessary rounds into the semi-solid wall of viscera he had made across the tunnel.

His brother's black humour left as bad a taste in Stronos' mouth as the massacre itself. They were civilians, once loyal men and women of the Ommissiah. What could have driven them to this level of insanity? Confusion threatened to overwhelm him, to an extent that it took him several moments to realise that the sensation emanated from the interlink manifold. He turned to Vand through the lingering smoke, his brother delineated in augur-drawn white.

'Hold fire on my order. I am going to see what is happening out there.'

Vand nodded, and Stronos stepped outside.

The wreckage field was bathed in a sickly yellow-red light, the Titan burning like a dying star. The creaks, groans and pops of battered metals echoed out over the skyline; molten adamantine dribbled from battlements to hang like stalactites. And yet there it stood, towering, haloed in guttering flame, as defiantly immortal as the God-Emperor himself. A titanic groan emanated from somewhere within the Emperor's power plants and a feeble tendril of plasma flashed across the battlefield, instigating a new stellar birth several kilometres distant, the last known position of the shattered Ordo Reductor. Stronos shielded his eyes from the flash and looked up, above the *Pax Medusan*'s blazing turrets, his vision readjusting from the various sources of glare to the near-black of the Thennosian sky and the source of the interlink's uncertainty.

The sky was streaked with shooting stars, intensely radioactive trails of burning ochre billowing out behind a dozen black-armoured comets as they plummeted towards Locis Primus. Stronos' hearts missed a beat.

They were drop pods.

Clan Raukaan drop pods.

VI

Ships crowded Thennos' anchorages. Hundreds of sanctioned container vessels in the myriad colours of chartist and independent captains, as well as specially repurposed Departamento Munitorum hauliers, hung at anchor above the clouded worldlet, more cruising ignorantly towards the blockade by the hour. A dozen warships of Clans Vurgaan and Garrsak enforced their stay, the silence of the void bristling with their unsubtle threat. Vox silence was maintained on pain of immediate obliteration. Multiple overlapping augur fields, more powerful and accurate than anything in service outside of the Iron Hands clans, parsed the near-space region several times over. The possibility of passing a landing craft unnoticed through the detection net had been calculated to the *n*th degree and proclaimed impossible.

Duly, as the vessel slowed to approach velocity, the eyes of the blockade fleet looked straight through it.

To the extensive orbital customs and quarantine stations, never fully gripped by the enfolding insurrection on the surface and reinforced now with loyal Adeptus Mechanicus personnel, it was as if it wasn't there.

To the more esoteric augur technologies aboard the chartist conveyancer *Lady Grey*, under the command of Inquisitor Talala Yazir, it appeared for a moment, a ghost, a sensor impossibility of tonnage equivalent to the mighty Garrsak flagship *Commandment*, only to be scrubbed before it ever reached human eyes.

It was only when the ghost burst into a blaze of shield flares, the heat of atmospheric entry shunted into the warp, that the hull of a vast, perfectly dark ship became clear to those same human eyes. By then, of course, it was already too late. The silvery paint of clan symbols blazed with the reflected purples and greens of the empyrean, sharing equivalent hullspace with the Cog

Mechanicus. Dark nodules of unspecified design bulged from the gothic profusion of steeples and spires, hoary with void frost, deflecting scans and attempted hails alike. Even as the immense craft burned up atmosphere and disgorged its complement of drop pods, many of the warriors on the ground refused to acknowledge this gross invasion of accepted reality.

Through closed vox loops and one-to-one neural links, networks that none beyond the hermetic hierarchy of Clan Raukaan could have detected or heard, a single voice spoke with the force of a hundred. ‘By priority order of the one true warleader of the Iron Hands, Locis Primus is to be secured for the Adeptus of Mars. The compliance order has been given. Any force that remains in the designation area is to be considered traitor and engaged without hesitation. *Ave Ommissiah.*’

‘*Ave Ommissiah,*’ came the slavish orison of connected minds as they hurtled through Thennos’ scorched and embittered clouds. ‘We comply.’

VII

Wreckage scattered high into the air on a toxic plume as the enormous weight of the Clan Raukaan drop pod hammered through it and into the ground beneath. It disappeared from view behind the intervening wrecks, but Stronos could clearly hear the chatter of its bolters, the explosive clang as its assault hatches blew. And then screams, carried on the air like smoke. Another drop pod crashed into the thick of the fighting by the Primus entrance, and Stronos could well imagine the effect that its impact would have on several thousand tightly packed, lightly armoured mortal combatants. Had he not personally checked over Draevark’s calculus prior to a near-identical insertion over Port Amadeus? Watching the skyline turn red as pod after pod smote Locis Primus’ wreckage field, he remembered Ares’ rebuke, castigating the rote application of the tried and tested over the truly innovative, but he could not argue that the strategy was any less devastating for its prior usage.

‘*Sergeant Stronos,*’ came the voice of Iron Captain Draevark, looped to his helmet vox through the *Rule of One*’s booster sets and doubly warped for the roundabout transmission. ‘*You are ordered to disarm and disengage. I firmly advise you to comply.*’

‘Orders from whom?’ Stronos demanded. He looked up; a wing of Storm Talon gunships broke the cloud layer and swept towards the listing inferno of *Pax Medusan*, a formation of Avenger strike craft in Mechanicus red flying escort.

‘From me. I command Clan Garrsak, not Tenth Sergeant Stronos. You have exceeded your authority to a staggering degree. Ares’ command codes have now been rescinded on my order.’ A mechanised growl crackled through the looped feed. *‘I promise you this, Kardan, you will be tending meme-files in some Thennosian dungeon for a thousand years in penance for your actions here. You put the clan monastery itself in danger.’* The fury in the iron captain’s voice was palpable, and physical distance did little to diminish its effect.

‘You ordered the crawler to disengage.’

‘I did.’

‘But why?’

‘Why? Stronos asks why? Because Iron Father Kristos orders it and Clan Garrsak obeys. Disarm and disengage, sergeant,’ Draevark repeated. *‘Any forces within a three-kilometre perimeter of Locis Primus not transmitting Clan Raukaan or Adeptus Mechanicus identifiers are to be considered non-compliant and fired upon.’*

A sudden, bursting anger grew in Stronos’ chest then, too violent by far for him to suppress. The destruction of Ancient Ares, Lydriik’s warnings, the whole secretive nature of this campaign, and now this, at the very end – it all pointed back to Iron Father Kristos and Columnus. No, before that. Dawnbreak. Rivalries between clans could often flare up into open conflict, Stronos knew; the stories told that the Father encouraged such competition between his sons, but this felt like something altogether darker.

His gauntlets creaked as they tightened their grip on his bolt pistol.

He hated to be played. The mortal Vurgaan of pre-history had forged their reputation in the crucible of ancient Medusa, turning their artisanal weaponscraft and mastery of ranged warfare to the extermination of monsters that no other dared to stalk.

He was still Vurgaan, and he did not fear Iron Father Kristos.

‘I am going nowhere,’ he said. ‘I have a clave of Scouts already inside Locis Primus, and enough warriors to make Kristos fight for the shard if he wants to take it by force.’

‘You have nothing. Your borrowed authorisations have been rescinded, new ones generated and transferred to Second Sergeant Artex. He now has command and follows the fortress-monastery in withdrawal. You have nothing but your own clave. Stand down, accept your punishment. Do not compound your sin by robbing your clan of more assets than one errant sergeant.’

‘Assets?’ Stronos glanced at Jalenghaal, who stood beside him, looking back at him impassively, at Burr, Morthol and Govall, all positioned with bolters ready in a defensive half-circle in the wreckage nearby. His men. His brothers. ‘I do not comply. And I do not believe that Verrox accepts this either.’

‘Verrox is far away and of no immediate consequence. Argue further if it pleases you, but you are out of time. Comply or perish, the choice is yours – make it quickly or Clan Raukaan will make it for you.’

With that, Draevark brusquely severed the connection. For a moment, Stronos felt unable to move, experiencing a perverse kinship with *Pax Medusan* in his towering fury.

‘What has happened?’ asked Jalenghaal.

Stronos turned to face his brother’s pitiless mask, wondering how to respond. To his shame, he considered simply ordering the clave to follow him, knew that they would, but rejected it out of hand. They deserved better than another Kristos.

As concisely as he could, he told Jalenghaal everything.

Jalenghaal remained silent, long after Stronos had finished. ‘There is nothing to be gained from fighting Clan Raukaan alone,’ he said, just as Stronos had begun to doubt he would receive an answer at all. ‘There is no honour in defeat and conflict would be a waste of both sides’ resources.’

‘I am not ordering you to fight with me,’ said Stronos, clasping his brother’s pauldron and drawing him close. ‘Not this time. Do as *your* conscience tells you.’

To Stronos’ surprise, Jalenghaal actually sighed. ‘I would secure the bunker, two warriors as rearguard – the rest would follow Sergeant Maarvuk into Locis Primus. They cannot be raised through the structure’s scatter field so they will not yet be aware of Iron Father Kristos’ new orders. We cannot fight Clan Raukaan so we should claim their objective before they can.’

Stronos smiled, unguarded. He liked it. ‘I was told that you were a supporter of Kristos’ teachings.’

Jalenghaal glowered. 'I am Clave Stronos.'

A fleshy prickling, warm and pleasantly indistinct worked its way outward from Stronos' primary heart.

He released his brother and turned towards the bunker, squinting momentarily in the burst of thruster flare that ignited the sky above as a drop pod swerved mid-descent towards the exact same destination. He cursed, throwing himself and Jalenghaal flat to the ground as the entire triplet complex was simply demolished, the roof collapsing as though flattened under the ceramite boot of a giant, the walls exploding into rubble. The runes for Vand and Ruuvax winked out instantly; Lurrgol's guttered in view, a warning amber. 'Lurrgol.' He coughed, a broken seal letting dust into his respirator. 'Brother, respond.' Rockcrete powder ran off Stronos' back in sheets as he pushed himself up, armour whining, mingling with a ringing tinnitus as he saw the drop pod's hatches explosively blown. He blinked his eye, drawing himself up to his knees as the heavy tramp of Terminator armour bowed the assault ramps under its weight.

The figure was exceptionally bulky, three times Stronos' size, old and rune-encrusted augmetics plugged into an assault cannon in the left arm and a heavy flamer in the right, a cyclone missile launcher mounted across the solid breadth of its shoulders. Even an ordinary Terminator could not have supported such an array of firepower, but this was no mere Terminator. His armour was black, without trim; no clan sigil or clave number marked it. Tremendous age had turned his extensive suite of bionics black. He strode through the yellow haze, the empty flicker of his lenses finding Stronos where he knelt and delivering in that instant of eye contact such an abhorrent chill that Stronos was certain he had been struck by some optical weapon.

The Helfather stood inanimate.

'I understand that you have penance outstanding, Sergeant Stronos.'

In a beetling whirl of rancorous machine-spirits, Iron Father Kristos crunched through the demolished bunker. The reddish light of *Pax Medusan's* burning gun decks glinted from his weapons harness. His lenses shone like void ice.

'Brother Ares has been remiss. Permit me to rectify his final error.'



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'I am flawed.'

– Iron Father Kristos

I

Anger burned in Stronos' breast. He felt his lungs awash with it, his hearts pushing molten fire through his muscles to bathe their appended bionics with smoke. The interlink had rejected him, and this time his wrath was all his, his own to keep. His was the wrath of his birthworld, everything he had been bred to be, everything he had been painstakingly re-engineered to be *not*, as by some mimesis of ungodly pressure his pistol rose, his hand attached. There was nothing he had to say to Iron Father Kristos.

Nothing at all.

Bolts exploded against the rosarius field of the Iron Father's Mechanicus protective, the ruby embedded in his pectoral plate lashing out with every fiery rebuttal. Shrapnel from eviscerated bolt-rounds pattered harmlessly off Kristos' heavy armour as he strode pitilessly through them. Stronos scrambled back. Kristos' servo-arm punched the ground where he had been kneeling, ripper-claw drilling to the arm's first articulation, and ripped up a clot of rusty earth. It showered Stronos as he crawled away, hand over hand, propped

himself up on his elbow and slotted a clip of vengeance rounds into his pistol's magazine. Communing with his armour's spirit, he summoned the status runes of Jalenghaal and his surviving brothers and squirted a code-command through the clave interlink.

<Engage.>

Jalenghaal and the others opened up in unison. Bolter fire banged off the Iron Father's Terminator plate and blossomed spectacularly against his energy field.

'Your dishonourable conduct does you credit,' Kristos said. 'But it would have been better for you to have faced me alone.'

At an unspoken command, the Helfather whirred to life.

Lights flickered on within the Terminator's ancient bionics. His armour hummed. Promethium gurgled through intake hoses as he turned towards the warriors of Clave Stronos, then jetted from the nozzle of his heavy flamer, igniting, dousing the overhead power lines with flame. Burning cables lit the fighters on the ground like an aerial flare, casting the hellishly one-sided contest in guttering yellows and reds as the Helfather's assault cannon shrieked, shredding Morthol and Govall like paper dolls. Burr rolled for cover, cannon rounds striking sparks from the crumpled moulding he found shelter behind. Even as the Helfather turned ponderously after Burr, missiles whistled from his cyclone shoulder launcher. Several corkscrewed into the wreckage field, detonating seemingly at random. One took out the ammo hopper of the nearest test derrick, some manner of ork railgun, blasting it apart and burying Burr under an avalanche of twisted metal. Another took Jalenghaal through the chest plastron, lifting him off his feet and driving him several metres into the haze before exploding. His rune in Stronos' overlay turned red.

'You would have made an exceptional sergeant,' said Kristos, crunching through the rubble towards him, his pace unvarying. Like the second hand of a ticking chrono, his power-axe came up above his helmet. It was not the mighty Axe of Medusa with which the Iron Father was more commonly paired in the etchings, but it was a fearsomely constructed weapon nonetheless, double-bladed, crowned by a spitting disruption field. 'A future Reclusiarch, Verrox once said to me. And Verrox is not always wrong.'

The axe came down.

It was a perfect stroke, straight to Stronos' centreline, negating any possibility there might have been of avoiding it. Stronos' own axe was flat against his

chest. Wedging the ferrule against his breastplate, he levered the double-edged blade to trap Kristos' mid-stroke.

The energy fields nullified one another with ceramite-splitting force, fracturing Stronos' plastron and flaring off against Kristos' Mechanicus protective, leaving only Kristos' awesome strength to hammer Stronos' axe butt into his breastplate like a nail into a coffin. Stronos grunted. The two axes locked. Stronos twisted his, tried to turn the Iron Father's aside, but the power in Kristos' torso was immense. Kristos bore down, grinding the iron ferrule through ceramite and armaplas until it dug through the armourflex underlayer and bled Stronos' chest. Stronos rammed his heel into Kristos' shins. It was like kicking a tank.

A flurry of ruby discharge from the Iron Father's rosarius field distracted Kristos for the split second Stronos needed to crawl back and recover his feet. He kept on backing off, pulled up his bolt pistol, explored the hole that had been drilled into his plastron with his little finger and scowled. The Iron Father's armour continued to bathe him intermittently in red light, and Stronos looked around to see Jalenghaal approach the tangle of spurs, pumping the Iron Father's battleplate with rounds. Stronos smiled to see him and struck his helm with a flat palm. Red and amber runes re-assorted themselves.

His brother was not so easily dispatched.

'Eyes on the Helfather,' Stronos called, trying to keep Jalenghaal's amber-red status rune in his eye as Iron Father Kristos forced him to focus on his own battle.

Powered blades kicked sparks off each other as blow met parry, but Stronos did not trick himself into thinking of this as an even contest. Kristos was no mere Space Marine. He was not just a warrior in Terminator armour, fearsome a prospect as even that would be; he *was* Terminator armour, and with it brought a durability and power that Stronos could not hope to rival. It was as much a duel of the warriors' on-board battle cogitators as it was of their blades, every parry a ringing censure for being improperly positioned to evade or failing to predict the giant's move as he should have.

With each exchange Stronos' combat algorithms worked to cancel out his opponent's, as Kristos' did his, and Stronos came quickly to the conclusion that the Iron Father's systems were superior.

Stronos leapt back as Kristos' boot sank into a gravelly patch of ground and caught on a root of buried cabling. With raw power the Iron Father tore his foot

free, but the momentary loss of balance was enough for Stronos to swing around Kristos' back and hack at the fibre bundles that ran behind the Terminator suit's underarms.

With a series of wrenching clunks, the Iron Father's joints reversed, and Stronos' axe met a parry that numbed his gauntlet servos. For a sickeningly brief sequence of exchanges Stronos traded blows with Kristos' back, until a wide horizontal sweep of the Iron Father's axe forced him to leap clear. His joints cracking back into position, the Iron Father turned slowly around. To Stronos' awe, the Iron Father's helmet did not turn with the rest of him. It remained locked in place, lenses as evenly spaced and bitterly cold as those to the front, as the rest of his battleplate rotated under it. With a horrified realisation, Stronos saw that Kristos did not even possess a face. His head did not have a 'front' and 'back'.

Stronos' cogitator revised his prospects downwards.

'You think yourself perfect,' he said. 'But you are not.'

'You understand little, child. I am flawed. We are all of us flawed. I seek the same perfection as do we all.'

Stronos roared, emptying another clip into the Iron Father, spreading superficial damage through his massive harness and spasms of crimson arctricity through the air. Kristos built speed as he came towards him, like a Baneblade running to combat power. He backed up towards the metal leg of a leaning pylon and braced himself against it, more certain than ever that his one chance lay in using the terrain against his heavier opponent.

'You are not like your brothers,' said Kristos, slamming into the pylon like an assault ram and breaking it in half. Stronos rolled around it at the last second, ducking behind another support strut to reload. 'You remember how to think. I approve of that, in moderation.' The Iron Father's servo-arm clamped over the girder frame of the second strut and dragged it from its rockcrete foundation with a protesting wrench. Stronos looked up as the one-legged pylon groaned and fell, dragging a pulse-ordnance multi-driver and a hundred square metres of burning cabling crashing to the ground.

Stronos looked over the bloodily obscured skyline. The yellow haze was blotted with occasional weaponsfire. The ground flickered where promethium-coated cables now lay, the Helfather moving through it as though the fell champion walked on fire. He traded shots with a pair of indistinct targets amidst the mess of wreckage. By correlating the positions with his tactical

overlay, Stronos assumed the two combatants to be Jalenghaal and Burr, and arrived at that conclusion just as a third burst of fire trisected the lumbering Helfather. A storm bolter, by its weightier report. The Helfather turned to track it. A well placed and – Jalenghaal would chide him for thinking it – lucky shot shattered its eye lens, the ensuing mass reaction peeling open its grotesque helmet from the inside.

Stronos looked in surprise to where the Helfather had been turning, as Drath and a demi-clave of Clan Avernii strode onto the carpet of fire.

The five-century veteran would have been the very last that Stronos had expected to take up arms against Iron Father Kristos.

‘You signalled compliance,’ Kristos intoned without turning from Stronos, without needing to.

‘I did,’ Drath confirmed. ‘But new facts demanded my reconsideration.’ He gestured, precisely, to the prior coordinates of Fabricator Velt’s broken Legiones Skitarii, the direction by which the veteran had come. ‘The data transmissions of routed skitarii are not as secure as they should be, Kristos. Though they know as little of their masters’ ambitions here as would be expected, they know more than I.’ He and his clave simultaneously turned bolters on Kristos. Stronos took his opportunity to reload and did likewise. He looked to Drath, waiting on the veteran’s lead. ‘What is the Dawnbreak Technology?’

‘The Iron Hands falter,’ Kristos growled. ‘The strength of our Father wavers year by year. What the Imperial Guard found on Dawnbreak was a new direction, a path to perfection.’

‘A path laid by whom?’ demanded Stronos.

Kristos glared at him.

‘Answer him,’ said Drath.

‘It is of no consequence. The weaknesses of those that passed before are not my weaknesses.’

‘I remember you as a mortal, Kristos,’ said Drath, coolly. ‘Headstrong and without heart, much as you remain. Do not speak to me as though I am a child.’

‘I speak as I see.’

Parchment strips brushed Drath’s armoured thighs as he held still. ‘Part of me is gladdened. Having no basis for my dislike of you troubled me.’

‘The flesh is weak,’ Kristos returned, as something stirred black through the flames behind him. ‘You are old, but you are still so very weak.’

In a gearing whine of power servos, the Helfather's headless frame turned its weapons on Drath. Stronos cried out a warning as the unsuspecting veteran was cloaked in shot and flame. It took more than a casual assault to put down a construct of Drath's years, and the Helfather filled him with more. Stronos' throat was raw by the time the veteran's cooked and bullet-riddled harness collapsed to the floor. Five hundred years up in smoke; it was almost impossible to believe. Stronos locked down the urge to disregard the self-evident truth of the veteran's destruction as the battered Helfather set about dismantling the elite warriors of the Iron Hands. Watching it bludgeon and crush the power-armoured veterans, Stronos had the dread sensation that what he was seeing was a breed of foe that physical weapons could not destroy. He realised then what it was that had always unsettled him, every time he had laid eyes on the Iron Council's sinister guardians.

They were empty. As if there was nothing inside them that was alive at all.

'What is he?' Stronos demanded, turning to Kristos just as the Iron Father's open fist smashed across his faceplate.

His head snapped around and he crashed to the ground in a heap of ceramite. Kristos trod on his axe hand and Stronos' vision wavered at the sudden rush of pain blockers that fled the crushed bones. He was lying across his other arm, tried to move to bring up his pistol, but the Iron Father's servo-arm pushed down on his shoulder and pinned his face to the ground.

'Your failure is one of calculus. You must have known that you could not prevail and yet you fought anyway. Disappointing.'

'You taunt a beaten foe. Does that sound any more logical?'

Kristos' lenses shone cruelly, the sounds of Drath's warriors being mechanically dismembered ringing from the dusty yellow. 'You misunderstand my parameters of victory. A failure of inference, based on an incomplete understanding. I do not want to beat you, Kardan.' The power of the servo-arm alone sufficient to pin Stronos down, Kristos knelt to swallow Stronos' helmet in both gauntlets. 'I want to remake you. Better than you were before.'

The helmet seals resisted, but only for a moment before Kristos' boundless strength tore the helmet from Stronos' gorget ring. Bio-lubricants trickled from the tear, fizzled with electricity, wisps of purified oxygen puffing from savaged life support systems.

Stronos choked on arid toxicity, his eye and mouth burning up as he watched Kristos drop the ruined helmet on the ground. Stronos tried to make a grab for

it, could have reached it easily had Kristos not been holding him down. He clenched his eye shut, but could already feel the radioactive burn moving down his throat and into his lungs. He held his breath, but even a battle-brother of the Iron Hands could only go without for so long. He gasped, gurgled, writhed under Kristos' servo-appendage like a fish whose lungs had been filled with concentrated hydrochloric.

After what felt like an eternity without breath, the weight was removed. He flapped an arm for his helmet, knocked it, but was already too weak to pull it to him.

'You have the makings of an exceptional warrior,' came Kristos' voice, fading into dust. 'You will come around.'



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘What part of this nightmare are you?’

– Arven Rauth

I

‘Breathe, lord.’

A female voice, familiar. There was a crinkling of plastek as a rebreather mask was pressed over the overlarge spread of his nose and mouth. It was still warm from a mortal’s breath. The taste of the condensed exhalation brought flashes of recent memory: bombardment, as if the sky were falling in, the certainty of death, a limping run through the wreckage field, a friend sprawled in the ash, terror, the determination not to lose another.

The remembrances were fragmentary and painful. He could feel the cells of his omophagea organ dying, the mushy quiver of his tattered lungs as they tried to process what they were being given. He had never felt such pain. He sought to turn his head away from the mask, but in a cruel reversal of their fortunes the emaciated adept held him down, making a soothing noise.

‘They are coming, lord. Just breathe.’

‘I... thought... you... hated... us.’

‘Sshhh.’

A dark, reddish form blurred the gel of light and dark that had become his vision, an oblique blemish that could have been a servo-arm, or something else entirely. He tried to blink the gum from his eye, but his eyelid was gelled half open with a layer of protective fatty acids. His optic was off. Everything he could discern felt strangely slowed down.

Sus-an coma. In response to its injuries, his body was beginning to shut itself down. It was making it harder and harder to think clearly, but he was certain that there had been no time for such a measure. He could remember Kristos standing over him, his lungs melting.

He should be dead now.

Lips cut off from central control by powerful neurasthetics struggled to form a word. *Thankyou*. They did not move a millimetre.

He heard the rustle of plastek and felt Thennos' frigid wind on his mouth as his rescuer drew the mask from his face to take a breath of her own. By the time she returned it he had stopped breathing.

'How far from our Father's likeness we have both fallen,' said Tubriik Ares, and to Stronos' diminished and ill-valued mortal soul the presence of this young neophyte in his torpor was entirely natural.

'I will return for you,' Stronos promised, closing his eyes. He felt cold, so cold. When had his body become so cold? 'Stronger than I was before.'

II

Arven Rauth sat forward, his elbows on his knees, watching the soapy mixture of blood and cleanser drip from his brow to the tiled floor. He had no idea how he had come to be here.

The last thing he could remember was kneeling over the prophet-alpha, the feeling in his wrist and arm as his knife had gone in and in and in and...

He closed his eyes as a servitor emptied a pail of cold water over his bowed head. He stared into the bloody whorls that drained from his bare feet, down the inclined floor towards the centre of the chamber. He tried to remember what the skitarii leader had said to him before the end, but it evaded him, assured him it was not worth his notice. He gritted his teeth and concentrated.

He. Had. Said...

With a gasp he relinquished the act of defiance and slumped deeper towards his thighs. Uncaring of his pathetic paroxysms, a servitor roughed down his back with a towel.

Head pounding, Rauth spat a goblet of fresh blood onto the steel tiles to be rinsed away.

The ablutorial was utilitarian, unwarmed and barely lit. Beads of condensation clung to the iron walls like the aroma of counterseptic on the air. From somewhere amidst the honeycomb of chambers came the slosh of a pail being plunged into water. In the centre of Rauth's chamber, delineated by a drain, was a font presumably very much like the one he could hear being used elsewhere. The susurrations of a voidship at low, sub-warp velocity rippled the black water. It made Rauth realise that he had no idea what ship this was, or even what class, but from the spartan iconography and brutalist weapon displays he assumed he was on a Clan Vurgaan vessel.

Khrysaar was on the bench opposite.

The cold dimpled his impressively muscular frame, a sodden loincloth provided for the Iron Hands brother's meagre needs regarding modesty. Rauth's eyes were drawn to the folded scar tissue that abutted his brother's left hand. *I did that. It feels like another life.* An uncertain flicker of warmth struck in Rauth's breast at the sight of his brother alive and well. Khrysaar glanced up from the pattern of ripples disturbing the water in the font, and then looked back down. Neither said a word.

As Rauth regarded him, dwelling on the curious sense of... *affection* that he seemed to be harbouring for his brother, he became aware of the sound of whispered voices in an adjoining chamber.

Neither voice was familiar. Most of the words were being spoken with the cultured authority of one accustomed to having his words pass without challenge. The other was harsher, speaking little, but rang through the metal walls like the idle snarl of a chainblade. This was the voice of one accustomed not only to speaking unchallenged, but needing rarely to debase himself with the custom at all. Rauth turned to the intervening wall to listen, but could make out little enough to string together anything that made sense. Something about the Ordo Xenos, a mission to a Knight World of some kind; Clan Raukaan and the Mechanicus were both mentioned several times. It occurred to him that if he were to walk to the wall then he would have no difficulty making out what was being said, but for some reason he could not make himself care enough to

do so. He felt sluggish.

The servitor began to dry his hair.

With the clump of armoured feet, the whispered conversation broke up. Rauth looked up as the owner of one of the two voices walked through the frigid gloom into the chamber.

The likeness of a warrior in nightshade blue armour, the emblem of Clan Raukaan on his pauldron, lanced through Rauth's mind. He grunted, pinched his eyes. The newcomer was an Epistolary of Clan Borrgos, his armour filmed by condensation and only recently painted, judging by the smell and the shine. He was unhelmed, his head backed instead by the velveteen whisper of a psychic hood. His dearth of augmetics would have put him of an age with Rauth, but his eyes were *old* and two century cog-studs pierced his brow.

He sat down on the bench between Rauth and Khrysaar, then leant forward to dip a bare hand in the water. He swirled it a moment, saying nothing. Rauth stared at him.

What part of this nightmare are you?

'The Dawnbreak Technology,' he said after a time. The cultured voice. Rauth felt relieved. 'When you saw it, what did you feel?'

Rauth's mind was a blank.

'The what technology?' said Khrysaar, slowly.

The Epistolary looked from one to the other, his eyes an uncanny blue, bright enough to bear a light to the deepest reaches of a man's soul. He nodded, as if hearing only what he had expected. 'Their minds are guarded by a decade of indoctrination. Kristos' Librarian would possess the suggestive keys to manipulate their defences or subvert them entirely if he so wished. It is apparent that he saw to these two before we could.'

The sound of splashing water made Rauth start, and he turned from the concerned Librarian to where an alabaster-faced warrior with full red eyes squatted by the font. He had the pail half submerged in the water. Rauth blinked, certain that he must be suffering another unaccounted lapse in memory, for there was no way a power-armoured warrior could have entered the chamber unseen.

'This water is freezing,' he murmured. 'How does it remain liquid?'

'Chemicals,' the epistolary answered, which seemed to satisfy the ghoulish warrior in black. 'I believe that I can unlock their minds, Harsid, given time,' he continued.

Rauth's bare skin crawled, and not with cold.

'Your tithes of service is paid, Lydriik. You do not have the time.' The Epistolary bowed his head in acknowledgement. 'But Inquisitor Yazir knows other, more powerful minds that have been waiting two hundred years for such a chance.' The Space Marine's red eyes looked up from his pail. Without pupils, it was impossible to tell whether he was looking at Khrysaar or Rauth. Perhaps both. 'Lydriik tells me that the Iron Hands make their recruitment programme deliberately lethal. I have often wondered why.'

'So that only the strongest prevail,' Rauth answered automatically.

'Or is it to ensure that not too many do? You Iron Hands are particular about the wars you involve yourselves in, and I have never seen as many service studs in one place as I have during my short stay on your world.' A nod towards the Epistolary, Lydriik, watching patiently, his pair of cog-studs white with a cold film of moisture. 'Thennos has proven costly, but it would surprise me if more than a score of your brothers are permanently out of action.'

Rauth thought of Maarvuk, a bolt pistol to his jaw.

'Everyone is dead,' said Khrysaar, echoing Rauth's thoughts. 'Whatever we have been through to now, we are certain to be elevated to battle-brother status.'

Harsid nodded. 'If more of the same is what you wish, but Brother Lydriik's secondment to the Deathwatch is at an end, and while you are both too raw for the same service, Inquisitor Yazir has a place in her retinue for warriors of your talents.'

Khrysaar just sat there, tight-lipped.

'To what end?' Rauth asked, haltingly.

Lydriik turned to him then, and Rauth felt the full weight of the Librarian's mind behind his gaze. He felt his own opened, just a crack, and after a moment Lydriik smiled and the instant of violation passed. 'Our brothers took something from Dawnbreak that they should not have. The wrongdoers must be punished. Do you want to pay back the people who have hurt you, brother?'

Thoughts of Maarvuk ran to those of Tartrak, Dumaar, and a long litany of petty outrages. He saw his knife cutting Khrysaar's wrist, in the flesh of the young aspirant, Morvox. He turned to Khrysaar, not at all guiltily. Even now the recollection fed him a tiny morsel of pleasure.

Hate, I know.

'What does she need us to do?'

‘Let us speak for a moment unheard,’ said Lydriik, reaching out and placing the palm of his hand on Rauth’s forehead.

>>> END OF SIMULUS.

III

Nicco Palpus slumped over the lectern of the warleader’s podium and reached up behind his head. With a sucking, absorbing pain in his scalp, the simulcus helmet came loose. Blood dribbled from the neural input rods that protruded from the inside of the cap as the helmet swung on its cables, bronze cladding winking at the dark as it swayed through the shaft of light that poured into the Eye of Medusa. Wincing in pain, he drew up his hood, then stared into the chrome-chased cog that ornamented the lectern beneath his shaking hands. He had not expected the meme-file to terminate so abruptly.

This Lydriik would require watching.

The Iron Hands were like children, dependent on the guiding hand of Mars even if in their ignorance they thought themselves ready to walk alone. They considered themselves mighty, and like any virile adolescent they could certainly lay claim to the physical potency of an adult, but they were one world. One empty, impoverished, underpopulated world. Mars was an interstellar empire of a trillion souls, the armoury of the entire Imperium of Man, a repository of such knowledge as would addle the mind of Kristus as it had, alas, poor Ares.

The logi-legatus permitted himself a moment’s grief for the passing of the venerable machine.

He just needed a moment. There was so much to be done. So much to be ordered.

Ares’ spirit was with the Ommissiah now; renewal was an intractable constant of the Universal Laws that the great works of preservation and accrual conducted by the priests of Mars could only mitigate. Nicco Palpus looked at his hands. He knew about renewal. He felt no great sadness, in truth. There were other Dreadnoughts of equal to or greater age than Tubriik Ares; it had only been the warrior inside the sarcophagus that had been uncommonly

ancient and that did not impress Nicco Palpus as it did the Iron Hands.

But then children will become attached to their comforts.

The cawing of a psyber-bird somewhere in the cable-rafters distracted him from his spiritual convalescence and drew his attention towards the shuffling approach of a lexmechanic with the rank of locum overseer. The adept prostrated himself before the dais.

‘Rise, Danneil,’ he said. He enjoyed near-instant access to the names and records of every one of the millions of Mechanicus assets situated in the Medusan system or attached to the armies, fleets and vassal holdings of the Iron Hands.

The adept stood, eyes to the floor, hood over his face, but beaming at the illusion of recognition. Palpus’ mimetic features altered to match.

‘You summoned me, legatus.’

‘I did. I require a small expeditionary fleet to be dispatched to Fabris Callivant.’

There was a pause as the lexmechanic consulted his implants. ‘A Knight World, legatus, straddling the boundary of the Astronomican at the outer rim of Segmentum Obscura. I will arrange it. Do you have orders for them?’

Palpus’ expression shifted into a frown before working back into something more neutral. ‘The orders will be delivered to the archmagos commanding directly.’

‘I will be sure to inform them, legatus. Have you any further requirement for me?’

‘Yes.’ He steepled his fingers across the lectern, calculating. What to do? Medusa and Fabris Callivant were not the only worlds to receive a portion of the Dawnbreak Technologies for study. He held his head in his hand, calculating, calculating, and shut the infinite number string down, unresolved. There was only one option.

‘Arrange a transport to Mars.’

‘When do you intend to depart, legatus?’

The expected smile. ‘Not I. As soon as a ship can be prepared and adept Yolanis put on it. Make sure that it is a fast ship.’

To his credit, the adept did not ask any further questions, though the requisition of a dedicated transport for the carriage of a single mid-ranking enginseer must have raised more than its share of red flags. In Palpus’ mind, Yolanis bore no blame for Ares’ demise. Ares was a relic of another time, a

faithless time, when the Iron Hands had not heeded the universal schematic that the Ommissiah had laid out for them as they did today. The Iron Hands' interconnectedness was a blessing of the machine, but such false and outmoded dogma could have spread like a scrapcode contagion had it been left unresolved. Yolanis had served her purpose there as he had known she would. One did not escape destitution and drudgery simply to then risk it all on a point of faith. Yolanis had proved herself morally adroit, and would do so again if the offer were correctly tuned to her sensibilities.

Which it would be.

'It will take at least a day to prepare a ship of the desired specification and to requisition the necessary supplies for a lengthy transit.'

'Very good,' said Palpus, injecting his voice with dismissal tones, and looked back to the lectern beneath his hands. The spiralling pattern of chrome lines, despite their apparent individual randomness, as a whole united to form the symbol of the Medusa Mechanicus. It struck him as an apt analogy. There was a complicated network of components before him and many operations in flux, but through faith in the Ommissiah there was only pattern.

'Danneil.'

The adept turned on his way out.

'The vote on Kardan Stronos' submission to join the Iron Council is scheduled for the next lunar transit. Arrange it to be held tomorrow. He and Yolanis can share a transport. That would be efficient.'

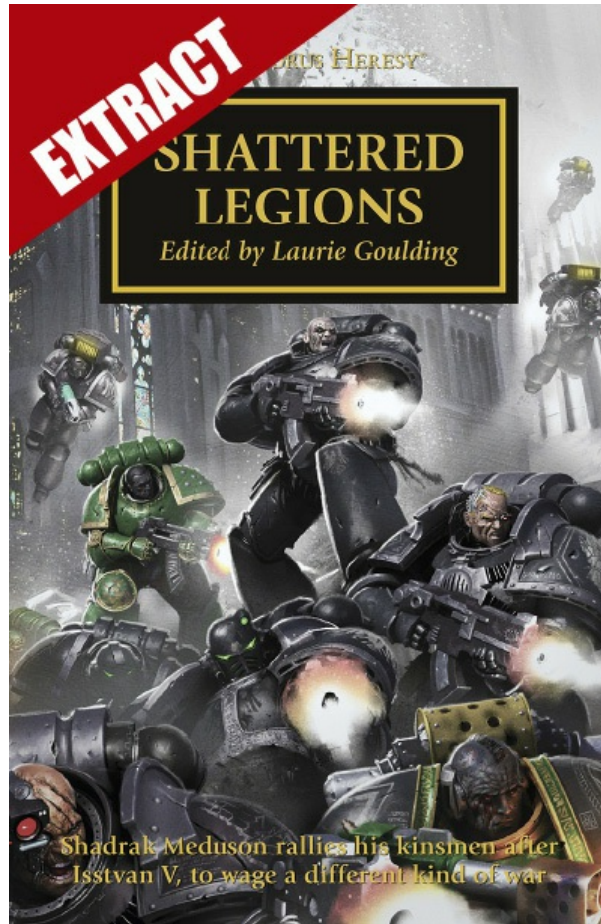
The adept dipped his head, a habit born of repetition, but looked troubled. 'Will the Iron Fathers not need to be present?'

Palpus' mask shifted to become one of reassurance, his smile quite genuine though not, he could objectively state, his best. It would be useful to be rid of the would-be Iron Father for a decade or two. 'Do not concern yourself with that, Danneil. I believe I know how they would intend to vote.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Guymer is the author of the Gotrek & Felix novels *Slayer*, *Kinslayer* and *City of the Damned*, along with the novella *Thorgrim*. He has also written The Beast Arises novel *Echoes of the Long War*, and a plethora of short stories set in the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding, and was a finalist in the 2014 David Gemmell Legend Awards for his novel *Headtaker*.

An extract from *[Shattered Legions](#)*.



There were no surgical lasers available.

A clustered missile strike over Isstvan V had blown out the *Ionside's* flank from the lateral exchangers aft, voiding eight deployment bays and the port-side apothecarion chambers. The smaller medicae annex on the ship's starboard side was overwhelmed with life-critical cases. Dying legionaries on stretcher boards were lined up along the hallway.

Shadrak had only lost a hand. He reported instead to a makeshift triage station set up in the forward hold. Most of the staff there were frightened serfs drummed up from the ship's crew. Gorgonson of the Lokopt Clan was the only Apothecary present, the only one that could be spared from the chaos of the medicae annex. He looked at the hand.

'Excise,' he instructed the human attendant waiting nearby. 'Clean down to the forearm bones. Leave some tissue for conjunction and graft. I'll be back to fit the augmetic.'

Gorgonson didn't say anything to Shadrak. There was nothing to say.

No. There was a great deal to say – just no words with which to say it.

He treated Shadrak like a piece of broken machinery presented for repair, not as a brother, an old friend or a fellow son of Terra. He didn't even make eye contact. He just moved on to the next case, a battle-brother whose helm had been fused to his cheek by a melta burst.

The human was a young ensign, freckle-faced and red-headed. His anxiety made him seem like a small boy compared to Shadrak's bulk. 'Seat yourself, lord,' he stammered, gesturing to a commandeered suit-room recliner that had a metal service trolley positioned beside it.

Shadrak didn't much care for the term 'lord'. He was a captain, and that word alone was more than sufficient. But he was too tired to correct the serf, too

empty. He felt like the tombs of Albia that he had visited as a child: vast and enduring, but long since robbed of the precious things they had once contained.

Using his good hand, he took off his helm and placed it on the deck. Then he unstrapped his weapon belt, so that the harnessed gladius and bolt pistol would not encumber him when he sat. The belt had loops for reload clips. They were empty.

The recliner creaked under his armoured weight. He set his boots on the foot rest, leaned back and placed his ruined left arm on the trolley. It would have been palm up, if he had still had a palm.

The attendant stared at the wound. The hand was missing most of the fingers. It was a bloody mitten of blackened meat, with broken knucklebones protruding like twigs. The wrist was misaligned. The composite ceramite sleeve of Shadrak's iron-black armour was mangled at the cuff, the torn ends stabbing into his flesh.

'Is there pain?'

Truth be told, Shadrak hadn't been aware of any pain – not physical pain, anyway. The *other* pain was too immense, too entire.

Surprised, he answered, 'No.'

'I have no anaesthetic,' the man added reluctantly. 'I have some numbing agents, but resources are so—'

'Just do it,' said Shadrak. His body had autonomically shut down a great number of his neural receptors at the moment of injury. His left hand didn't feel much of anything anymore. It was just a dead weight, like a piece of kit he couldn't unbuckle and remove.

'There are no surgical lasers either,' the serf apologised. Shadrak saw he was wiping a manual bone-saw with a sterile swab. The man's hands were shaking.

Under other circumstances, in other wars, Shadrak would have been amused by the sheer pathos of the situation. But his capacity for amusement was as empty as the tombs of Albia too.

He sighed.

'You'll never get through the vambrace with that,' he said. The man looked as though he was about to panic. 'Do you have medical training?'

'I am a junior gunnery officer, lord,' the man replied. 'But I have my corpsman certificate.'

Again, the 'lord'...

Shadrak reached over with his right hand, unclasped the elbow guard and let

it fall to the deck. Then he unfastened the clamps in the crook of his elbow and mid-forearm, and tugged the composite plasteel-and-ceramite sleeve off. Parts of the gauntlet were still attached, flapping loose. The buckled wrist seal was impacted into his flesh, and it took a little more effort to wrench it clear. Fluid and flecks of meat spattered the deck.

He stripped away the undersleeve, tearing the fabric. His exposed skin looked as pale as bone, in stark contrast to the mauled mess of his hand.

‘How did this happen?’ the man asked, eyes wide at the fully exposed damage.

‘Horus happened,’ said Shadrak.

He rested his arm back on the trolley. The man approached, gingerly, puffing counterseptic onto the wound from a flask, his hands still shaking. He took a grip on the bone saw, and consulted an anatomical diagram he had called up on the display of his data-slate. Shadrak knew that the man was dying to ask what he had meant, but didn’t dare.

He rested the saw’s serrated edge against Shadrak’s flesh just below his torn wrist. The skin was covered in spots of fast-clotted blood. The serf swabbed them away, and then made the first draw.

There was pain, of course, but it seemed minor and distant.

Shadrak sat back and let it pass over him. He stared at the hold’s gloomy roof, into the darkness beyond the hanging lumens. He let his mind fill with memories – memories from before the pain. He tried to recollect something as far from it as possible. Before this minor discomfort, before the greater injury of the dropsite, before Medusa, before the Gorgon, before the Great Crusade...

He thought of Terra, and the last years of the Unification Wars. He thought of his first days as a Storm Walker, serving under Lord Commander Amadeus DuCaine in the theatres of Afrik and the Panpacific. Back then, justly proud of their fresh, gene-herited might, none of them had known what the Storm Walkers would become, or what revision of structure and loyalty they would have to undergo. And even once they had known, they had embraced it wholeheartedly. It had not been a matter of reformation or repair, though fates knew that the X Legion were especially resilient when it came to repair.

It had been a matter of ascendancy.

It had been a blessing. To be called to your primarch’s side, to become one of his. Shadrak had cast off his Terran surname, a mortal vestige that had fallen into disuse anyway, and taken the name Meduson to demonstrate and affirm his

allegiance to his new home world.

He had become Shadrak Meduson of Clan Sorrgol, Captain of the Tenth Company. The Storm Walkers of Unification had become the Iron Hands. They had expected nothing but glory in their future. Even if calamity chanced to overtake the Iron Tenth on the field of war, it would be a glorious calamity in the Emperor's service.

None of them had ever anticipated this inglorious ruin. None of them could ever have imagined such a measure of raw treachery.

None of them could ever have expected this scale of loss and pain.

'I'm sorry,' the man said.

Shadrak opened his eyes.

Despite his clotting factors and vascular shunts, the top of the trolley was running with blood. It was dripping off the edges and making a rectangular, splatter-pattern halo on the deck. The flesh of his wrist was marked with several bloody hesitation wounds. When the young serf had finally found some confidence and purpose, he had opened a gash like a gasping mouth, but the bone was barely nicked.

The man's hands were shaking more than ever. 'Your bones are very... very strong, lord.'

Shadrak saw that he was sweating.

'They were made that way,' he replied, sitting up. 'Give me that slate.'

The serf handed him the data-slate, and Shadrak reviewed the anatomical graphic as dispassionately as he might check a mechanical diagram. He made a note of the bone formation, compared it with what remained of his wrist, took note of blood vessels and tendon assembly and paid heed to the recommended link points for structural and neural grafting.

'I'll do it,' he said, handing the slate back. 'It'll be quicker.'

The man slowly offered him the bloody saw, but Shadrak had already leaned over the side of the recliner and drawn his gladius. He set the edge of the blade along the clumsy guide cut that the bone saw had scored, paused, and struck his ruined hand off with a single, swift blow. It bounced off the side of the trolley and landed in the pool of blood on the deck. The serf hesitated, as though he felt it would be polite to pick the severed hand up and return it to Shadrak. Then he remembered himself, dropped the saw, and hurried forward to attend with clamps and wadding.

'If it's going to hurt anyway,' said Shadrak as the man worked, binding the

stump tightly, 'it's better that it doesn't linger too.'

Good advice, he thought. *Applies to so damned much.*

Gorgonson returned an hour later and inspected the wound.

'Do this yourself?'

'It seemed for the best,' Shadrak replied.

'You're no surgeon,' said Gorgonson.

'Never claimed to be. But your man there was intent on whittling me down until I was nothing but a spinal column and a rictus.'

Gorgonson frowned. 'We're doing the best we can, given the circumstances.'

'Well, he made more of a mess of me in ten minutes than the damned Sons of Horus could manage in a week.'

Gorgonson glared at him. 'Don't even joke,' he hissed. 'Damn you, Shadrak. Don't even say the words aloud.'

'You don't think I'm angry?' asked Shadrak. 'I'm beyond rage. I'm in another place entirely. White heat and boiling blood. I'm going to butcher and burn every one of the bastards. Give me my new hand so I can get on with it.'

Gorgonson hesitated. They had known each other for twenty-four decades. Like Shadrak, Goran Gorgonson had been a Storm Walker, a son of Terra. They had fought through the Unification Wars side by side. At their ascendancy, Goran had elected to join Lokopt, the clan that most remembered and celebrated the Terran aspect of the founding. But he had changed his name to Gorgonson in honour of the primarch.

'Anger's not going to get us anywhere, earth-brother,' Shadrak said quietly, 'except deader than we are already. Anger's a blindfold, a fool's motivation. I reserve it only for killing blows. We need cool heads and clear minds. This is survival, repair, rebuilding. Terra only knows, we're good at repair – we excel at it, so this should play to our strengths.'

'They're calling a council,' said Gorgonson.

'Who's they?'

'The clan-fathers.'

'A Clan Council?' Shadrak asked. 'What in Terra's name for? This isn't a matter of bloodline and heritage.'

'Isn't it?'

'The clan-fathers are proposing to assume command? *Collective* command?'

'I suppose so. In the absence of...' Gorgonson paused. There were words that

were going to be too hard to say, names that were going to be too hard to utter. ‘The clan-fathers take control, for now. Isn’t there comfort and assurance in that? They are veterans who understand—

‘A Clan Council is the last thing we need,’ said Shadrak. ‘Command by committee? Pointless. We need positive, singular leadership.’

‘I didn’t know you had aspirations of command,’ Gorgonson remarked.

Shadrak thought about that for a moment. The notion came as a surprise.

‘I don’t,’ he replied. ‘I’ve never considered it. I just know we need something now. *Someone*. We’re dead without it. Just a shattered rabble.’

Gorgonson sighed. ‘Any Apothecary, even the best of us, will tell you that you can graft on a new hand, but you can’t graft on a new head.’

‘Then we’ll have to learn how,’ said Shadrak.

A servitor beside Gorgonson was holding the augmetic on a tray.

‘Nothing fancy,’ said the Apothecary, reaching for a scraper and a neuro-fuser. ‘I have no juvenat packing left either, so you’ll have to let it bond by itself. Don’t test it. It’ll be weak. For months, probably. Let it bed in and heal.’

Shadrak nodded.

‘Just fix me up,’ he said. ‘I’m sure I’ll have many weeks of calm and leisure to get the healing done.’

Gorgonson started working. ‘Is he dead?’ he asked quietly.

‘Yes.’

‘You know this?’

‘Amadeus told me,’ said Shadrak. ‘It was confirmed from the surface.’

‘Lord Commander Amadeus is dead too,’ murmured the Apothecary.

‘Yes. I saw it. But his word lives. The Gorgon is dead, and our stepfather Amadeus is gone too. So we can lie down and die with them, or we can learn to graft heads.’

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