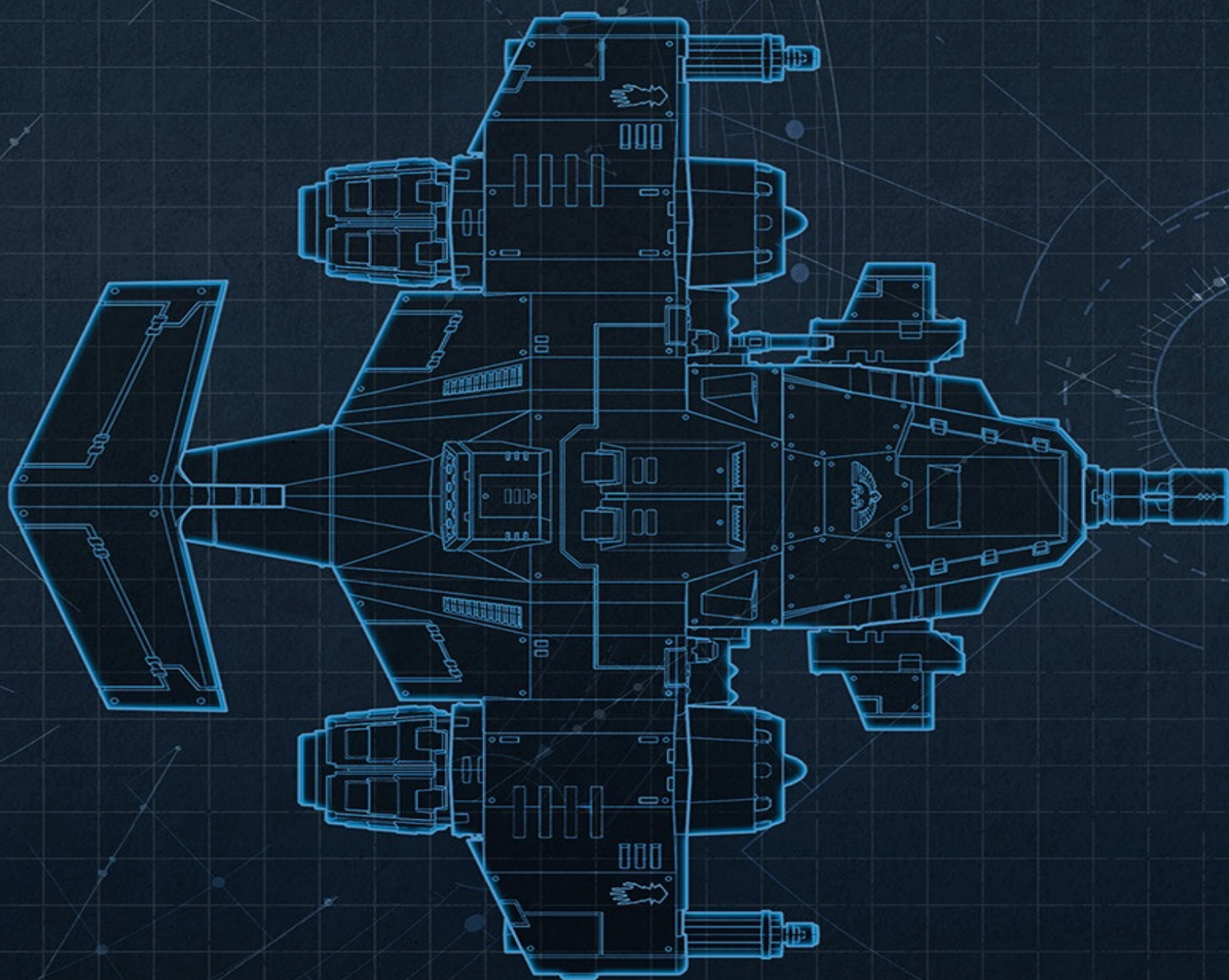


WARHAMMER
40,000

MEDUSAN WINGS

MATT WESTBROOK



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MEDUSAN WINGS

MATT WESTBROOK



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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 Astronom u i nonistantit e

‘Interred?’ asked Atraxii, his thoughts lingering upon his deceased squad brother.

‘Negative,’ replied Oblexus. ‘He succumbed to the weakness of his flesh, and ended. His progenoids are to be implanted in neophytes within the next cycle.’

The Iron Father’s grim revelation did not break Atraxii’s stride. Amongst all of his squad kindred, Irimas had most yearned for interment within the hallowed sarcophagus of a Dreadnought, to experience the heightened union with the machine that came with such entombment. It was an aspiration of nearly all Iron Hands to one day commit themselves to the transformation, to join with such a relic of the Chapter.

That Irimas had lost the battle waged by each of the sons of Manus against the imperfections of the flesh disappointed Atraxii, but the Techmarine cast the thought aside as an irrelevancy.

The silent squad of Iron Hands parted for Atraxii and Oblexus, forming a ring around the perimeter of the platform as it lowered into the fortress.

‘Let us go, now,’ said Oblexus as the wan light of Medusa disappeared from over their heads. ‘The castellan would look upon you.’

-03.0-

The lift ground to a halt with a clank of perfectly aligned machinery. The wide plate of a doorway slid ahead and to the side into the wall, revealing the orderly expanse of the fortress' hypogeum. Space Marines of the Iron Hands sat in silent contemplation, attended to their wargear and duelled in the shallow bowls of practice cages. The squad escorting Oblexus and Atraxii filed from the lift in silence, their duty done as the doorway sealed once again.

‘Much of the clan’s strength is here,’ remarked Atraxii.

‘Correct,’ replied Oblexus. ‘Patrols and system monitors are deployed, but the rest remain here. Clan Dorrwok arrives in twenty-six cycles to become sentinel, and soon Kaargul will return in full to resume its duties.’

Atraxii recalled the bustle of the hypogeum, the sense of eager tension like the moments before the breaking of a storm as brothers girded themselves for war. Kaargul was bound by oath to remain sentinel on Medusa while the other clans conducted campaigns across the Imperium.

‘Our brothers appear to be readying to depart,’ said Atraxii. ‘At least a portion of them.’

‘Keen, as you always were, my protégé,’ said Oblexus with as much warmth as his machine voice could convey. ‘A detachment is in readiness to depart, oath-sworn to aid the forces of the Astra Militarum in the Yandi Veil. I am designated

to lead the expedition.'

The lift rumbled to a halt once more, admitting the Iron Hands into a corridor of dark iron. The bright glow of lumen strips bathed the passage in sterile light as the footfalls of the Space Marines reverberated from the walls.

'Is there not concern that the other clans will learn of this?' asked Atraxii.

'The scale of the expedition is small, a brief engagement,' Oblexus replied. 'The portion of Kaargul remaining on Medusa is sufficient.'

'It is unexpected for the iron captain to accept such hazard. I would expect acting upon such obligations to be delayed in accordance with the pact between the clans.'

'Would that it were so simple.'

The voice boomed from the blunt boxes of speaker horns spaced at intervals along the corridor. It was a low, bass rumble, as much a physical sensation as an auditory one as it rattled the mesh beneath Atraxii's boots. It issued from the core of the moving citadel. It was the voice of the fortress itself, its every spinning cog and plate of armour. Its every missile silo and weapons blister. It was the ozone-wreathed thrum of its void shield generators, and the roar of the captive sun harnessed within its reactor. It was the voice of the custodian of Clan Kaargul.

'Brother,' said Oblexus.

'Come to me,' commanded the voice.

'Our arrival is imminent,' replied the Iron Father.

'Good,' the voice spoke, like the synthesised collapse of a fleeting Medusan mountain. *'I shall take the measure of this warrior returned from the Martian priesthood.'*

The two Iron Hands stepped down the darkened passage. They stopped at fifty-yard intervals before reinforced bulkheads flanked with slaved weapons pods and tracking augur arrays which played red and green targeting lights over their armour. As they passed through the last of them, the corridor opened to reveal a large sealed gateway, inscribed with the icon of the clan. Servitor-manned autocannons ground smoothly along their housings as they tracked the approaching figures of Atraxii and Oblexus. A pair of hulking guardians stood vigil, resplendent in the imposing protection of Tactical Dreadnought armour. Still as statues, the warriors of Averonii exuded menace, their peerless excellence in combat elevating them to the chosen few of the Chapter's veteran elite.

Atraxii understood awe at the sight of them. Terminator armour was desperately

rare for the sons of Ferrus Manus. It was a treasure beyond any other, except for what the Iron Hands champions had been tasked to protect.

Oblexus halted before the gateway and its brooding guardians. An aperture parted within the dense iron of the doorway. The air tingled as a beam of scarlet light swept over the Iron Father, and then Atraxii. The light winked out, and the aperture resealed.

With the rumble of great oiled cogs, the gateway parted, slowly grinding along tracks within the walls. The Terminators remained silent and unmoving as their kindred passed through the doorway to the space beyond.

Atraxii stepped down a short series of wide onyx steps into a large decagonal chamber. Banners hung from the walls, borne by Iron Hands of Clan Kaargul in wars across the Imperium. The dense black cloth rippled in the cold air. Many were tattered, singed by fire or dappled with human or xenos blood. Ancient relics of the clan, weapons, fragments of armour and other myriad antiquities hung above plinths of simple black metal, shimmering within stasis fields.

At the centre of the chamber, blurred by void shielding and flanked by an additional four First Company veterans in Terminator armour, was a rounded shape of pale stone, larger than Atraxii's helm.

Atraxii's step faltered. It *faltered*. It took him the entirety of point eight six seconds to regulate his respiration and still his secondary heart from beating. Miniscule beads of perspiration glittered from his brow as his brain struggled to process what lay before him.

What lay surrounded by the Chapter's finest, protected against anything short of orbital bombardment, was not stone. It was a skull.

It was the skull of Ferrus Manus.

Atraxii dropped to his knees, his head low in the presence of the remains of the being that had led tens of thousands of Iron Hands in the days when the Emperor of Mankind walked among mortals. The Terminators snapped from their stillness, levelling the barrels of their storm bolters and assault cannons upon him. Oblexus genuflected beside the Techmarine, his movements born more of practised reverence and expectation than by the shock Atraxii displayed.

'I am weak,' gasped Atraxii. He dared not lift his eyes to the plinth the skull rested upon. Disquieting spikes of awe, anger and shame surfaced, warring at his resolve in the presence of the felled primarch. 'I am unworthy to stand in the presence of the Gorgon.'

'As are all who seek to expunge the weakness that would see us brought as low,' a voice rumbled from the back of the chamber. 'And yet you will stand.'

Present thyself, Atraxii of Clan Kaargul, and account for the sanction of Mars.'

Slowly, the Terminators lowered their weapons in snarls of fibre bundles. Atraxii looked up, beyond the sacred remains of his slain primarch. The far wall was dominated by an elaborate bank of whirring machinery. Cogs ground against one another in smooth order. Lightning flickered between buzzing diodes, and steam shrouded the floor to knee-height.

Set within the machinery, ensconced and united with the beating heart of the Kaargul fortress, was Venerable Lochaar. The deep sable armour of his Dreadnought sarcophagus was inlaid with a legacy of war in sharp Ekfrasi runes, etched in shining platinum. The chassis was exquisite, a priceless relic of the Iron Hands, millennia old.

Even without arms, slotted into the core of the fortress, Lochaar exuded threat and domination, his shell bulked with dense layers of armour plating designed to spearhead sieges and withstand incredible fury. The armoured plug of a primary sensorium bundle peered over the lip of a high collar, rendered by artificers into a simulacrum of a Space Marine's helm. The eye lenses of the Dreadnought blazed with a furnace's crimson light, as Atraxii and Oblexus approached to stand before him.

Atraxii removed his helm with a hiss of air pressure, placing it before him as he lowered to one knee. It was customary within Clan Kaargul that a warrior reveal the flesh of his face when in the presence of the master of his clan, and while Lochaar was not an iron captain, Atraxii conducted the ritual nonetheless in deference. It was a symbolic submission, a presentation made not in disgust or shame for the biological material remaining, but as a solemn acknowledgement of what perfection the warrior had yet to achieve, and a vow that he would seek to remove the weakness from himself as he made war for the clan. Since the formation of the clan company, its commanders had watched as, with the procession of years, their warriors demonstrated the extent of their advancement towards union with the machine through the increasing levels of augmentation that replaced their flesh.

Oblexus knelt beside Atraxii, but did not remove his helm.

'There is nothing for the Iron Father to remove, brother,' boomed Lochaar, as if sensing the subject of the Techmarine's thoughts. 'That is his true face now.'

Atraxii processed the information. Oblexus' augmentations had surpassed even his expectations. The Iron Father's bionic ratio might be the highest within the Chapter, save for the ensconced Dreadnought looking down upon him.

'Rise.'

The Iron Hands stood. Atraxii took his helmet, placing it in the crook of his arm as he looked upon Lochaar.

‘Brother,’ said Atraxii. ‘Where is the iron captain?’

‘Iron Captain Rumann attends to the Eye of Medusa,’ said Lochaar in reply, referring to the subterranean vault that served as the seat of the Chapter’s ruling Iron Council. ‘In his stead I guide the watch of Kaargul over Medusa.

‘It is the most sacred of duties performed by the clan who stands sentinel over fair Medusa to safeguard our primarch,’ rumbled the Dreadnought. ‘This is the sixteenth such vigil that I have undertaken among Kaargul, and your first, young Atraxii. I look upon our father during my meditations. I think upon his teachings, joined with the noble spirit of this bastion, and contemplate the primarch from within the tomb that once fought beside him during the Great Crusade.’

The armoured death mask that served as Lochaar’s head panned on grinding servos to regard Atraxii.

‘Much expectation has been placed upon you,’ intoned the Dreadnought. ‘When the name of your flesh was purged and your clan name chosen to take its place alongside the blessed iron, your moniker was indicative of the capacity we recognised within you, even then. Atraxii, in honour of the noble clan lost to the fires of the Great Failing, in the time when we stood as a Legion. You were destined to stand apart from your brothers, and now, returning from sacred Mars garbed in the crimson, you have fulfilled those expectations to my satisfaction.’

‘You honour me, Iron One,’ said Atraxii, his modulated flesh-voice seeming thin and fragile in comparison to the Dreadnought’s.

‘Let these words be spoken once, and never repeated. While you shall walk all the days until your end in the crimson of Mars, your core is of Medusan iron. Ascension to the mantle of Techmarine did nothing to change this, as nothing ever shall. Never forget that, as you carry your blade for the clan, as you bless and sanctify our machines of war and guide them into battle’s crucible. Your core is of iron, and it shall never be broken.’

‘Praise be,’ said Oblexus, making the sign of the cog in a bang of his gauntlets against his armoured chest.

‘Praise be,’ echoed Atraxii.

A low rumble issued from Lochaar, perhaps the mechanical equivalent of a grunt of approval.

‘Iron Father,’ said Lochaar to Oblexus. ‘How go your preparations to depart for the Yandi Veil?’

‘They are efficient, Iron One,’ replied Oblexus, with a slight inclination of his

head. 'The Medusan Wing stands in readiness to—'

The Iron Father paused. Atraxii flicked his eyes towards his mentor, who stood in silence for the entirety of three seconds.

'There has been an unscheduled translation in-system,' Oblexus stated.

'I have detected it,' replied Lochar.

'It bears the noospheric sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus,' said the Iron Father.

'It is the *Priori*.'

-04.0-

The Adeptus Mechanicus frigate *Priori* translated from the warp like a knife withdrawn from a wound. It was a long, slender ship, its hull in alternating segments of bronze and rust-red. Its blunt, boxy prow angled towards Medusa as its plasma drives lit, the holy cog-and-skull icon it bore illuminated in the dim light of the system's star.

The *Priori* was a slight vessel, small and lightly armed. It was such attributes that saw its class designated for reconnaissance and light escort duties. The bulk of the powerful drives at the rear of the vessel provided it with a nimble aspect and granted it the speed to excel at the swift transmission of emissaries and envoys from Mars.

As Adept Wyn's ocular clusters whirred into life, pulsing with sharp emerald light, her limbs stirred from their prolonged inaction. She hung a few feet above the deck, on the command dais of the *Priori's* bridge, suspended by dozens of her mechadendrites like a marionette twisted in its strings. The segmented cables slotted into interface nodes and input plugs, allowing her utter control of the starship as it plied the stars.

A small army of lobotomised servitors laboured around her in recessed pits and consoles built into the walls. A scarce handful of tech-priests prowled the unlit bridge, their crimson robes rendered the hue of dried blood as they shuffled

about their tasks. It was silent, but for the muted clacking of runeboard keys and the muffled dialogue that passed between servitors and adepts in clicking bursts of binary.

Wyn parted the veil of noospheric chatter that encircled Medusa like a buzzing shroud. Defence platforms and system monitors lanced through to her consciousness, demanding that her progress cease and identification be transmitted. An Adeptus Astartes warship, designation *Corporeal Lament*, came about on an intercept vector. New data washed over Wyn in an urgent tide as she detected the frigate's weapons acquiring the *Priori* and priming to fire.

The faint stirrings of what could have once been amusement whispered through the scant biological remnants of Wyn's body beneath her voluminous robes. A section of her primary logic engine shivered for an instant. A surge of binary, bright and needle-fine, pierced the oncoming waves of menacing code. It would assail the ears of the uninitiated as nothing more than a blaring outburst of jagged, scraping noise. But to one joined with the noosphere, an elevated being with reverence for knowledge and the ways of the machine, it was something different entirely.

It was a song.

It was a magnificent symphonic clarion call, lighting the dark of the void with the history and nobility of hallowed Mars. It sang the praises of the Ommissiah, proclaiming the divinity and power of the Master of Machines who was the keeper of all knowledge. It was a beacon of wisdom amidst the desolate blackness of ignorance. It was a striking declaration of the prowess of the Cult Mechanicus, the equivalent of a rippling banner on the battlefield, or the godlike roar of the striding god-machines of the Titan Legions.

Wyn watched the complexion of the noosphere ripple with adaptation and change. The *Corporeal Lament* cooled its guns, altering its course to bear alongside the *Priori* and guide it to anchor at high orbit.

Wyn pulsed another message into the swirling clouds of information, as bright and clear as her proclamation of identity. It was a simple missive, easily translatable by any who wished to do so.

<In the name of the Ommissiah, blessed above all, Mars beseeches the Hands of Iron to take up their blades.>

Atraxii stood beside Oblexus upon the landing pad as the Adeptus Mechanicus shuttle approached. A howling gale ripped at the armour of thirty Iron Hands warriors that waited in silent ranks to admit the Martian emissary. Two columns

of fourteen Space Marines formed a corridor leading into the fortress of Clan Kaargul, bolters clasped to their chests. At their fore stood Atraxii and Oblexus.

The newly appointed Techmarine watched as the shuttle broke through the turbulent layers of storm cloud. Atraxii's attention locked to the pair of dark wedge shapes flanking it on either side.

The Stormhawk interceptor was a compact fighter craft of roughly avian aspect. Its main fuselage protruded from beneath angular, forward-swept wings, sandwiched between a pair of turbine propulsion drives that gave it the look of a pit hound, with shoulders packed with dense muscle. Twin assault cannons tipped the wings, and Atraxii saw missile tubes built into the fuselage, with a formidable las-talon slung beneath the cockpit. There was no armourglass on the fighter, no transparent canopy for the pilot to see through. In its place, a cluster of sensor nodes packed a narrow slit in the craft's armoured prow.

The two Stormhawks peeled away to either side as the shuttle descended, their escort duty done. Atraxii glimpsed a silver icon, a cog with bladed wings, glinting in the wan light from their flanks.

'Your squadron,' said Atraxii, nodding to the Stormhawks as they rapidly shrank from view.

'Affirmative,' replied Oblexus, also watching as the pilots of his elite unit departed. 'They are of the Medusan Wing.'

Engine wash buffeted the Iron Hands below, who remained impassive, still as statues. Thick landing claws clanked out from beneath the shuttle as it landed, sinking on hydraulics as they bore the small craft's weight. Thick jets of steam hissed from the shuttle, its fuselage ticking as it cooled, souring the air with the acrid, scorched scent of atmospheric re-entry.

A narrow ramp unfolded from an aperture beneath the shuttle's embarkation hatch. From the low vermilion light of the craft's interior, a shadowed form emerged. Stepping out into the intermittent light of Medusa, a skitarii ranger surveyed the landing pad before her from the whirring optics of her enclosed rebreather mask. Soft exhalations hissed from the mask beneath the crimson robes she wore parted over her battle armour. After a handful of heartbeats, she hefted the long barrel of her galvanic rifle, cradling it in bionic arms as she strode down the ramp.

A tall, spindly figure appeared behind the skitarii ranger. Swathed in the same rust-coloured robes as her bodyguard, Adept Wyn followed her protector down to the waiting Iron Hands. Her gait was smooth, consistent and precise, as if she floated in the air. Nothing of her body, augmented or biological, could be glimpsed

through the concealment of her robes. All that could be seen were the clusters of optical sensors that glowed like shining chips of jade from beneath the darkness of her hood.

Adept Wyn glided ahead of the skitarii ranger to a short distance before Oblexus. The Adeptus Mechanicus sniper stayed a pace behind and to the right of her charge, her rifle low across her chest with the barrel to the ground.

<Sister of Mars,> Oblexus sent in a burst of binharic. <Be welcome upon Medusa, and the hub of Clan Kaargul.>

The tech-priest inclined her head fractionally. <Gaarum Oblexus,> she replied. <I am Wyn, Adept Tertius of the forge refineries of the fourth world of Halitus.>

Adept Wyn's waif-thin form was a head taller than the Iron Father, even with her hunched posture. She bent down further, the lenses of her optical sensors ticking and rasping as they focused their lambent glow upon Oblexus.

<It is necessary that I entreat with the Voice of Mars and your master who directs your clan/maniple with immediacy.>

Oblexus' posture shifted, his prior welcoming openness knit closed. <You are mistaken. The one among us who leads Clan Kaargul is my brother, not my master.>

<Contrition,> canted Wyn, spreading her ghoulish arms to her sides. <I seldom converse with entities beyond the forge refineries. But it is the leader of your maniple/clan with whom I must entreat.>

'*Then you shall do so,*' the voice of Lochaar rumbled. A lift platform iris opened, and the hulking form of the Venerable Dreadnought appeared. He stomped forwards on thick armoured legs, his gait pounding resounding clangs into the landing pad's surface. Thick ribbons of chainmail hanging from plates of dense armour rattled with every step. The grasping fingers that made up his left fist clenched and unclenched with a whirr of servos. The storm-bolter built into his wrist clunked as it fed ammunition into firing chambers.

'We of Medusa hold the servants of sacred Mars in esteem, as we always have, and thus the Iron Council would grant you audience,' said Lochaar as he came to a halt. Oblexus and Atraxii stepped away to either side as the Dreadnought loomed over the Mechanicus adept. 'Tell me why you have come here unannounced. Now.'

-05.0-

The two parties stood apart, crimson and bronze against featureless black.

Lochaar looked down upon the Martian tech-priest, rendered in scarlet monochrome by the screeds of tactical data feedback that constituted his vision. He detected the adept's skitarii protector shifting, ready to bring her galvanic rifle to bear upon him, should the command come from her ward. His augurs hissed as targeting locks brushed over his ironform, questing for points of weakness.

The sparse biological components left of him, shrivelled and folded as they floated in the brackish fluid of his cramped sarcophagus, gave a fractional twitch. It was not a reaction to the cold – he had endured the marrow-deep chill of his coffin ever since he was interred. Nor was it anger. He knew objectively that each of the Iron Hands upon the platform had done the same, in readiness to destroy the envoy should she attempt any treachery.

It was amusement.

The idea that the lone skitarii ranger could threaten an ironform touched by the Gorgon himself was objectively, definitively, humorous. Lochaar savoured the rare stimulus for a fraction of a second. He had never regretted the degree of separation from his flesh. His interment within the blessed sarcophagus had been, and continued to be, the foremost distinction of his existence. Yet, as it had

been nearly one hundred and eighteen complete years, by the Terran standard, since he had experienced such a thing, he embraced the novelty of the sensation for a passing instant.

Adept Wyn raised the ticking lenses beneath her hood, as she finally answered the Dreadnought.

‘I have come,’ she said, her flesh-voice stilted and raw from lack of use, ‘in reference to the alloy between the sacred Adeptus Mechanicus and noble Medusa. Long has it been that the priesthood of the red forges has stood with the sons of Manus. Our forges have furnished the starcraft that bear your maniples. Our labours have armoured your warriors and crafted the weapons they bear to war.’

She regarded Atraxii. ‘We have passed our knowledge to your brethren, and allowed them deeper communion with the Omnissiah.’

Wyn turned back to Lochaar. ‘And in return, the Hands of Iron have stood in defence of the priesthood, and its labours, should circumstance demand it. Such a circumstance has arisen once again, and I have been dispatched to see that our convention remain solvent.’

A low rumble issued from Lochaar, like gears slipping.

‘Show me.’

Adept Wyn stepped within a pace of Lochaar, and raised a skeletal hand of brass. She did not touch the Dreadnought, her metal fingertips lingering just shy of brushing the ebon chassis of the ironform. Her eye lenses flickered, and a muted squawk of binharic warbled from beneath her cowl.

A concentrated databurst passed through the noosphere between the two as Wyn delivered the message she had been carrying across the stars from Halitus IV. Lochaar’s data feeds swelled with new information as the burst unpacked, showing him what had caused the Adeptus Mechanicus forge refinery to dispatch their Adept Tertius with such alacrity.

Lochaar was silent for three seconds, before turning and striding back towards the lift.

‘Come with me.’

The journey to the Eye of Medusa lasted two days. In that time, Adept Wyn had not paused in conveying her displeasure with what she deemed as an unacceptable length of transit. She had allotted an exact allowance for her time upon the surface of the Iron Hands’ world, and the time needed to reach the seat of the Iron Council had vastly exceeded her timetable. The Iron Hands had borne

her vexation in silence, adhering to their routines and protocols as normal until they arrived.

Through monolithic armoured gateways, vast conveyors carried the Iron Hands and the Cult Mechanicus adept down deep below the surface of Medusa. After hours of slow, grinding progress, the conveyor platform halted before a bulkhead emblazoned with the icon of the Iron Hands. Noospheric blurts were transferred, identities were confirmed and concealed weapons arrays returned to standby as the newcomers were admitted within the Eye of Medusa.

They passed through several more heavily defended hardpoints before arriving at their destination, on a path similar to that taken to the core of Kaargul's fortress but an order of magnitude more formidable. The Chapter had been defined by the death of its leader, and those who had built the Eye of Medusa had taken steps to ensure those who guided the Iron Hands would not fall to a similar fate within its walls.

The central chamber of the Eye was a sweeping space, built to gather the Iron Council who guided the Chapter. Comprised of the captains and Iron Fathers from each of the clan companies, the council would convene to coordinate the labours of the Chapter, plot crusades and cement their rivalries amongst each other.

A dome of hewn onyx swept overhead, enclosing a space built to hold gatherings far grander in scale than the small party assembled there. The Iron Council would rarely gather in its entirety, save for the momentous conclaves where historic courses that would affect the future of the Chapter were decided, such as the Tempering, where the Iron Council met to guide the shattered Legion out of the ashes of Isstvan V after the death of Ferrus Manus. Forty-one thrones of brushed steel towered around the perimeter of the chamber, yet only six bore the weight of a Space Marine upon them.

Among their number was Iron Captain Rumann, leader of Clan Kaargul. Mechadendrites and segmented cables wound over the Space Marine's artificer power armour, and though he sat as immobile as the others, the iron captain's presence rippled out over the noosphere as the newcomers arrived.

<Kindred.>

<Iron captain,> replied Oblexus as he approached his own throne beside Rumann.

Adept Wyn glided to stand at one end of the chamber, before the Voice of Mars.

A triumvirate of senior tech-priests had maintained a permanent envoy with the Iron Hands since the days of the Tempering, a symbol of the entrenched

covenant between the devotees of the Machine God. The adepts hung within a vertical dais of writhing cables and thrumming brass cogwork, heads lowered as if in contemplation.

Flickering bursts of binary cant linked between Wyn and the Voice of Mars. All of the adepts lifted their right arms in perfect synchronicity. Mechadendrites flashed from beneath their sleeves, snaking towards Wyn and embedding into her slight frame. Her skitarii guardian stood beside her, silently observing the other occupants.

Oblexus sat at his appointed place within the chamber, neural connectors binding him to the throne with a series of sharp clicks, while Atraxii stood below him. Lochaar stood at the fore of his throne, the presence of his venerable ironform dominating all others as the neural interface cables embedded into his sarcophagus.

Adept Wyn turned in a faint rasp of bionics and extended one of her too-long arms towards the centre of the council chamber. A mechadendrite darted from the sleeve of her robe, plugging into an interface node with a muted click.

A hololithic projector built into the floor sprang to life, and a star chart leapt into the air, bathing the occupants of the Eye of Medusa in pale blue light. A section of the star chart pulsed amber and magnified, swelling to fill the entire projection. The chart enhanced again, and again, until a single orb spun slowly beneath the dome.

The planet was a gas giant, a sphere of dense rolling cloud intermittently riven with lightning storms. Blocky shapes were picked out in amber on the projection, with Adeptus Mechanicus designation sigils and accompanying screeds of data scrolling beside them.

<Halitus Four,> canted Wyn, addressing the Iron Hands in binharic once more. The remnants of her throat, atrophied and irradiated from a lifetime in the forges, were incapable of sustained function over extended periods of time.

<Six point eight weeks ago, Terran standard, the forge refineries came under attack by an element of the ork xenos.>

A cluster of red icons blinked into being, massing towards one of the refineries. The icons surrounded it, and its amber light faded. The icons then spread in all directions, a rolling, disorganised advance that swept over the closest installations like a tide. Two more refineries winked out.

<We have posited that the xenos have targeted our installations for the promethium being refined. They have absconded with no less than eighteen per cent of the stores of refined fuel within the facility, which we have tracked being

transported to a starship beyond orbit, presumably to replenish their energy supplies. Deep augur scans and servo-probe dispatches confirmed a xenos starship drifting devoid of course or direction, lending credence to the aforementioned hypothesis that it does not have sufficient fuel to prosecute an orbital bombardment. The majority of their engagements have come via aircraft assaults and bombing raids, with limited deployment of ground troops.>

<Your defences?> asked Rumann.

<There is Skitarii Maniple Iota, of the Third Cohort, which has maintained sixty-two point nine per cent combat effectiveness as of my most recent data refresh. An indentured regiment of Vostroyan line fusiliers is present and in full deployment in addition, though their combat effectiveness has been lowered to forty-eight point seven per cent as of my most recent data refresh. The deployed forces are designated for internal security and counter-insurgency roles to maintain order and scheduled quotas. They lack capability to efficiently neutralise the aerial engagements instigated by the orks.

<Adverse impact upon efficient production has been severe. Quota achievement has failed. Delays have become unacceptable, and should the xenos presence continue, the entire facility risks being compromised.>

Adept Wyn withdrew the mechadendrite, which snapped back within the sleeve of her robes. The projection faded into motes of thin light.

Atraxii sensed a tremor through the noosphere as a secure binharic network channel opened.

<Iron captain,> canted Lochaar, his cranial sensor cluster tilting to regard Rumann. <What say you?>

<I am inclined to send a detachment in relief of the forge refineries, Iron One,> replied the leader of Clan Kaargul.

<We must be wary,> sent Oblexus, <that we do not overly weaken our watch over Medusa.>

<Quite so,> canted Rumann. <And if I should deem that the detachment be Medusan Wing?>

Oblexus was silent for a moment.

<Medusan Wing has already been tasked, brother-captain. We are in readiness to fulfil the oaths sworn to reinforce the Astra Militarum in the Yandi Veil.>

<That is so, Iron Father,> sent Lochaar. <But another element of Kaargul cannot be deployed without weakening the defences of Medusa. The Gorgon's hearth must be our priority, and our covenant with Mars supersedes that of the Astra Militarum.>

<I go where the iron captain commands, but I would not easily forsake an oath made.>

<Nor should you.> Atraxii felt Lochar's smouldering eye lenses settle upon him. <What of you, Brother Atraxii? What course would you elect?>

Atraxii responded immediately. <A statistical comparison of the calculated threat in both scenarios is valid. The escalating threat to multiple subsectors caused by the decommissioning or destruction of a forge refinery world supersedes the threat incurred by not intervening in the hive city revolts within the Yandi Veil. Such insurrections do not bear the wider effect that promethium deficits will cause. We must stand with Mars. As you have said, Iron One, upholding our ancient union with the Adeptus Mechanicus supplants any pact made with mortals.>

Another rumble issued from Lochar. The Dreadnought looked back towards Rumann and Oblexus, who held his gaze from their own iron masks.

<Spoken as a true wearer of the crimson,> Rumann canted. <So be it. Medusan Wing will go to the aid of the Adeptus Mechanicus in the skies of Halitus Four.>

<Excellent,> Adept Wyn canted, comporting her body language in an expression of satisfaction. <I must express contrition a second time for clandestinely monitoring your communications, but due to the severity of present circumstances, it is necessary that your forces consolidate for deployment immediately. Shall we begin?>

-06.0-

The *Corporeal Lament* shuddered around Atraxii as it carved through the warp. His metronomic stride set the deck plating clanging as he turned down a junction leading to the primary hangar bay.

The Techmarine could hear the Geller field. He could differentiate its unique timbre from the countless other noises made by an Imperial warship as it squealed against the daemon tides slaving to engulf them. The relatively small contingent of mortals aboard the frigate, save the ship's Navigator and a spare few others, had been sequestered upon translation to reduce the probability of warp-related madness. Such occurrences were common during prolonged travel within the ether, and this voyage had been no exception.

One of the gunnery thralls, a brutish vat-grown slab of a man, had cracked due to proximity to the warp. He had broken free of his confinement, butchering eight of his fellow ratings before the Iron Hands had hunted him down in the darkness of the ship's lower decks.

Atraxii had studied the frenzied serf, imagining how the warp must appear to him as it ravaged his anaemic mind. The man shrieked, frothing from the mouth as he moaned about the nightmare realm of daemons where the screeching of tortured anguish and howls of enraged bliss overlapped and interwove, swelling and separating and joining in the obscenely endless fluidity of chaos.

It was sickening. Oblexus had ended the thrall with the tightening of a gauntleted fist around his throat, crushing the man's vertebrae with a series of wet clicks. The body had been incinerated without ceremony.

Atraxii pondered the dead man's rantings as his flesh dissolved within the furnace. He dared not question the ways of the Ommissiah, but it was troubling that He should create beings of such power to forge a dominion for beings of such weakness. How could they do anything but squander the inheritance bought for them with Adeptus Astartes blood?

The Techmarine dismissed his banal musings, and made note to make penance for such flippancy later. He stepped forwards as the bulkhead at the end of the corridor rumbled open, and entered the hangar.

The aircraft of the Medusan Wing were spread out in an ordered chevron before Atraxii, and he canted a binharic psalm in humble reverence as he approached them. Five Stormhawk interceptors perched upon the hangar deck, forming an arrowhead of void-black armour. The hulls of the formidable fighter craft bore no trappings or pageantry, no sigils listing the foes slain by the venerable machines, no vain boasts of past victories. These were silent, noble war engines, craft that did their killing with ruthless, cold calculation, just like the pilots who flew them. Only the icons of Chapter and clan adorned their hulls, laser-etched onto the armour plating in bleached white.

A Stormraven gunship rested within the centre of the chevron behind the lead Stormhawk. It would be Atraxii's honour to pilot the Stormraven, supporting the two squads of Iron Hands aboard the *Corporeal Lament* near Halitus IV's forge refineries to engage the greenskins on the ground. Atraxii brushed his fingertips against the drop-ship's flank, sensing the venerable machine-spirit within stir as he made direct contact.

Atraxii passed the Stormraven, finally coming to a halt beside the lead fighter. Whispered benedictions to the Master of Machines passed from his lips as he beheld it. The Stormhawk exuded the same silent menace as its squadron kin. The only differentiation was the silver lacquer that had been reverently applied to the fighter's canopy and tail fins, in deference to its status as wing leader.

The fighter needed no sigils recording its conquests, for they were etched within the heart of every battle-brother in the Chapter. It had flown the skies of Mereglocious, scouring the skies of that world of the Archenemy. It was the scourge of the foul eldar, laying waste to their armies above Colocnoc. It had won victory upon victory, duel after duel, and had lain waste to champions and foes of every stripe across the span of the Imperium.

Every son of Ferrus Manus knew the name *Ironhawk*.

Atraxii reached out towards the Stormhawk's fuselage. He detected the slumbering machine-spirit within, felt it rouse as he drew close. His crimson fingertips touched the metal—

A tide of fury spiked through Atraxii's mind. *Ironhawk*'s spirit lashed out at his intrusion like a caged beast. Its power was unbelievably potent, more so than any Atraxii had encountered before. It clawed at his awareness with a singular need. The entirety of its existence slavered for it.

Ironhawk needed to hunt.

Atraxii snapped his hand back, breaking the contact with *Ironhawk*. He exhaled, feeling his heartbeat calm once more as the ancient spirit withdrew.

'*Ironhawk* has a ferocious spirit,' said Oblexus from behind Atraxii. The Techmarine turned, chastising himself for being so consumed by the legendary aircraft that he did not notice the Iron Father's approach.

'It is fierce,' replied Atraxii, keeping his voice even. 'I have known Titans with minds less savage.'

Oblexus gave a short bark in simulacrum of a chuckle. 'I am certain it would like to think so. It is a proud machine.' He ran a hand down its flank. 'Volatile, yes. But harnessed properly by one who possesses logic and control, there is little that flies which can stand against its fury.'

The Iron Father nodded to the Stormraven gunship. 'I remember how you flew a Thunderhawk as a neophyte. Your skill as a pilot elevated you to stand among those considered for the apprenticeship on Mars.'

'To serve with such treasured relics of the Chapter so young was a great honour,' replied Atraxii. 'As was your decision that I accompany you to Halitus Four.'

Oblexus nodded. 'The iron captain shared my assessment that you would be efficient in service to the Medusan Wing. After all, it was your logical threat assessment that influenced him to delay the fulfilment of our oaths in the Yandi Veil. Words must be followed with actions for those who are of iron.'

Oblexus turned away to leave the hangar. 'Come, the journey to Halitus Four may be brief and we must be prepared.'

Atraxii noted the contempt in the Iron Father's words when referring to warp travel, even through the implacable calm of his machine voice. The erratic and immeasurability of the immaterium was a plague upon the ships that travelled its dismal tides, and for none more so than the Iron Hands. The *Corporeal Lament* could arrive at Halitus IV hundreds of years after they had entered the warp, or a

decade before the plea for aid had been dispatched. The Iron Father's ire was reflected in all of the Chapter. The inability to measure the warp, to control it, made voyages a hated trial for even veterans of Oblexus' ilk. Atraxii looked back, sparing a final look at *Ironhawk*, and followed him.

Twenty-seven Iron Hands Space Marines filled a darkened chamber deep within the *Corporeal Lament*. The air was bitterly cold, and puffs of feathered breath hung before the hoods of the trembling serfs attending to the bulky cylindrical devices sunk into ornate alcoves lining the far wall, their gaunt faces lit by the spectral blue glow of electrocandles.

In contrast to the vast sepulchral chamber of the Eye of Medusa, the frigate's briefing area was a cramped, industrial room. Banks of cogitators lined the walls around the cylinders, tended by droning servitors and robed overseers more oblivious to the frigid conditions. Planetary scans of Halitus IV, schematics of the Adeptus Mechanicus forge refineries and the limited intelligence concerning the ork insurgency was represented in floating hololiths and reflected on transparent panels.

Two squads of Iron Hands stood in the centre of the chamber. The ten warriors of Assault Squad Vladoc stood in pairs, their dark armour gleaming with fresh repair yet still bearing the faint scars of the relentless close combat they so excelled in. Their left greaves bore the cross icon of Assault Squads, while on the right was a stylised number seven, showing their place within the order of the clan in chipped white enamel. The warriors shifted their weight from side to side, acclimatising to the decreased weight without their turbine jump packs. Some wore their helms, and those that went without them showed extensive bionic reconstruction. While they embraced the replacement of their flesh as zealously as any other of the Iron Hands, those serving in Assault Squads sustained the highest rates of grievous injury in battle, and thus often possessed the most augmentation.

Where Assault Squad Vladoc showed tension and eagerness to begin operations, the brothers of Tactical Squad Voitek were like statues. The left greave of each warrior was bare of any heraldry, while a three adorned the right in white enamel. All wore their helms, and remained unmoving and silent but for the thrum of their active power armour. These warriors showed significant bionic replacement as well, with gleaming mechanical arms and legs contrasting with the black of their armour.

Standing apart from the squads were the pilots of the Medusan Wing. Like

Atraxii, the five Techmarines wore crimson armour, modified to allow increased flexibility within the confines of a craft's cockpit. They stood behind Oblexus, while Atraxii stood a distance from the Iron Father on his left.

With a muted click, the cylinders within the chamber unlocked, their fronts swinging aside in a glittering tide of cracked ice that scattered over the deck plating. Atraxii stepped forwards with the other Iron Hands, and each Space Marine entered one of the cylinders. As they settled against the hardened plasteel and iron, a faint hum rippled through the devices as their machine-spirits were roused. Atraxii pulled down the restraint harness above him, locking it into place as interface needles and neural plugs entered connection ports along his spinal column.

Atraxii centred his mind as he began to enter the trance. The cylinder hatch swung closed, then the serfs secured it and bathed it with incense. It had been far too long since he had entered a simulacrum chamber, and he allowed himself a moment to enjoy the sensation as the machine absorbed him into its cold embrace.

Atraxii blinked, and with a sharp twitch of displacement he was beyond the Corporeal Lament. He found himself drifting among an indistinct swirl of racing code, riven with thunderheads of static and broken data. His form of flesh and iron was gone, replaced by an amalgamation of glittering runes of pulsing scarlet and non-reflective black. Fractals wound and branched over his being, springing to harden into being or disintegrate within the mathematical tempest that silently engulfed him.

Atraxii became aware of the others in a ring around him. Like him, his brother Iron Hands were gently shifting sheets of living data, black and silver and scarlet. Though they had no faces, Atraxii identified each of his brothers without effort. Their forms proclaimed their identities with a clarity that even their physical shells did not possess. Oblexus was an anchor, his form the least changing of the ring, while Vladoc and his warriors rippled with even waves of bladed code about their edges.

A remnant left from the Dark Age of Technology, the simulacrum chambers provided the Iron Hands with a means to quickly and efficiently upload vast quantities of data and disperse it to their warriors. Whether through the deployment and installation of mandated conditioning protocols, comprehensive debriefings following operations, or the provision of combat simulations, the apparatus allowed the Iron Hands to maintain an unrivalled consistency of

doctrine throughout their Chapter.

For Atraxii and the warriors with whom he formed the ring, the chamber would prepare them as one being for the battle to come.

Oblexus' dataform brightened slightly. With a jarring twitch, the light around the ring died, shifting to a simulacrum of the void. At the centre of the Iron Hands turned the ochre sphere of Halitus IV, its gentle rotation marred by occasional static and instability. Though the simulacrum chambers were powerful devices, the vast majority of their functionality was unknown to the Iron Hands, lost forever to ignorance in the battle against time's relentless march. What the sons of the Gorgon managed to achieve through their use was merely scratching the surface of a potential that would, as with so much within the Imperium of Mankind, never again be achieved.

<The Corporeal Lament will move from the translation point and make anchor at low orbit with all speed,> Oblexus' dataform pulsed with the sending. A likeness of the Iron Hands warship appeared, blinking into being and sliding to hang above Halitus IV.

<Once our strike force has launched, the Corporeal Lament will break off and maintain high anchor watching for signs of the xenos warships. It shall not engage unless fired upon or acting on my express orders.>

The view of the Adeptus Mechanicus planet swelled, and tactical diagrams displaying the primary forge refinery arrayed themselves before the communion of disembodied Iron Hands.

<The Vostroyan elements are unlikely to be combat effective by the time we translate in-system. We cannot depend upon their tactical viability, nor on the skitarii maniple present in theatre. Brother Atraxii will insert Assault Squad Vladoc here.> The Iron Father illuminated the foremost cluster of forge refineries, encroached upon by a crescent of pulsing red icons representing ork units.

<It will be as you have said, Iron Father,> Atraxii sent in reply.

<Assault Squad Vladoc will deploy across the front and conduct small-unit operations to disrupt xenos efforts on the surface and prevent them from mounting a massed assault. Tactical Squad Voitek will deploy behind them via drop pod and establish security around the primary forge refinery. You have leave to advance ten miles in any direction to provide fire support to Squad Vladoc, but no further.>

<Affirmative,> sent Squad Sergeant Vladoc, his and his warriors' forms buzzing. Squad Sergeant Voitek pulsed his acknowledgement once in silence.

<The Medusan Wing will escort Brother Atraxii to the insertion point. Once the squads are deployed, the Stormraven will remain on station to conduct fire support. The Medusan Wing will coordinate with auspex returns from the Corporeal Lament to identify the largest enemy concentrations and probe for weaknesses in the deployment of their command and control elements. Once a principal flaw has been identified, the Medusan Wing will launch a concerted strike to exploit it. The xenos will be cut off from their leadership elements, and once that occurs, their summary extermination will be swift.>

<Will we not devise supplementary contingencies?> asked Atraxii.

<Unnecessary,> Oblexus replied flatly, his sending cold but without malice. <Given the tactical doctrine on engaging orks, exploiting and crippling their leadership to disrupt their unit cohesion is the paramount consideration.>

<Nevertheless,> said Atraxii. <What of the ork warship? What of unforeseen variables? Iron does not take a single form whilst forsaking all others. The strength of iron is in its flexibility, its capacity to adapt to suit any situation.>

The communion was silent, hanging in the flickering datastream. Dektaan, Oblexus' lieutenant and wingman within the Medusan Wing, hardened his dataform with cold cubic fractals.

<Do not presume to instruct the Iron Father on the merits of Iron,> sent Dektaan, his transmission not as sanguine as Oblexus' had been. <This tactic was the result of the Calculum Rationale. It has succeeded in eighty-nine prior engagements and was rendered successful within acceptable casualty margins in ninety-nine point nine-eight-two per cent of performed tactical simulations.>

<Your statement is valid,> sent Oblexus, communicating to both Techmarines before casting his focus upon Atraxii. <The wisdom of your training is not without application. However, the Calculum Rationale has considered all relevant variables, and deemed this stratagem to be the most logical course. We shall not deviate from it.>

Oblexus' dataform flashed once, his judgement final. The ring echoed the spark of illumination, as the Iron Hands bound themselves to the doctrine. The datastream surrounding Atraxii became blurred and insubstantial. He experienced another pang of displacement as it fragmented, and his senses returned from his form of data and light to one of flesh and iron.

The translation bell sounded from the darkness in shrill, even chimes as the simulacrum chamber opened. Atraxii understood the sensations of the *Corporeal Lament* shivering beneath his boots as the vessel returned to reality from the

warp once more.

‘Prepare yourselves, brothers,’ said Oblexus. ‘We will attack as soon as we reach low orbit.’

-07.0-

The pilot's restraint harness locked around Atraxii as he surveyed the hangar bay of the *Corporeal Lament* through the armourglass canopy of the Stormraven gunship *Vengeance of Santar*. His hands danced over the control panels to ready the drop-ship for flight.

Within the crew bay of the gunship, the Iron Hands of Assault Squad Vladoc offered whispered benedictions to their wargear, made final adjustments to their equipment, or waited in silence. They donned their helms, their eye lenses glowing crystal-blue in the darkness as the optics connected to the power supplies of their suits. As the assault ramp folded up and sealed, the Assault Marines split into pairs.

'May my iron sharpen yours,' the Iron Hands chanted to one another in Ekfrasi as they exchanged weapons. Chainswords, power axes and boltguns were traded, stowed by their new owners in the crew bay compartments or mag-locked to armour plates.

'May its return find your iron sharpened,' came the ritualised reply, promising the return of the treasured armaments once the mission had concluded, as the Iron Hands locked themselves into restraint thrones.

Crimson light strobed in the cockpit as Atraxii spooled the Stormraven's engines into action. Their bass drone split the hangar, the noise muted to Atraxii

by his armour and the thick hull surrounding him, and the craft hummed as the drop-ship's venerable machine-spirit growled its readiness to begin.

Klaxons wailed in the hangar bay. Servitors and trained crew disconnected fuel lines, secured ammunition hoppers and offered final prayers over the blessed machines in their care as they hurriedly cleared the area.

It had been forty-eight years since Atraxii had piloted a Chapter aircraft into an active war zone, eighteen years serving with a tactical squad, and thirty spent training upon the surface of Mars. Though it was not an insignificant amount of time, the intensive training and experience gained guiding a Thunderhawk gunship in combat flowed back to Atraxii in an instant. The Stormraven was a smaller craft, and lacked the heavy armour and the devastating battle cannon possessed by the Thunderhawk, but it made up for it in manoeuvrability, and the Techmarine recognised many similarities between the two gunships. The touch of the controls, the reassuring weight of the fuselage around him and the array of formidable weapons at his disposal banished any doubt that he would achieve his mission directives.

He would be efficient.

The deck shuddered as the Stormhawks sat in formation around Atraxii came online. The Techmarine had cherished performing the rites of awakening and calibration over the fighter craft of the Medusan Wing, consecrating their engines and anointing their weapons with sacred oils. Their blackened forms vibrated as the hangar bay doors of the *Corporeal Lament* ground open.

A vista of swirling ochre cloud revealed itself to Atraxii through the open bay doors. The gaseous sphere of Halitus IV spun serenely in the void before him, its storm-clotted skies rippling with intermittent webs of lightning and conflagrations. Atraxii could see the small blocky shapes of the Adeptus Mechanicus' forge refineries hanging amidst the vast banks of orange vapour. He could not see any sign of the xenos, but was able to detect the wreckage of an Adeptus Mechanicus system monitor floating in orbit around the gas planet. He analysed the high degree of damage to the floating installations with his enhanced visor. While the central facilities were largely unharmed, the peripheral refineries surrounding them had sustained crippling damage, and the circle was growing smaller with each passing moment.

'*Medusan Wing,*' Oblexus' voice crackled across the vox network from the cockpit of *Ironhawk*. '*Convey your readiness.*'

'*Medusan Two, affirmative.*' Atraxii recognised Dektaan's harsh growl.

'*Medusan Three, in readiness,*' voxed Colnex, the longest-serving member of

the Medusan Wing, save for Oblexus.

'Medusan Four, at your command,' said Enych, his voice even and without emotion.

'Medusan Five, the flesh is weak!' growled Severus, the most recent Techmarine inducted into the squadron.

'Vengeance of Santar, affirmative,' said Atraxii.

'We embark, brothers,' said Oblexus. *'Our sworn allies of the Martian priesthood have called for our aid to overcome the xenos who have defiled the holy works of these machines, and we have answered their call. We shall honour the covenant made between the red planet and the blessed primarch. The Medusan Wing shall purge these greenskins and the obscenities they have built to oppose us. Their creations are abominations, affronts against the perfection of the Omnissiah. In the name of the Emperor and the Gorgon, let us visit annihilation upon all of their misbegotten kind. With wings of iron!'*

'No weakness shall bar us from our course!' responded the Medusan Wing as one.

The hangar filled with the cacophony of screaming turbine jets, then the craft of the Medusan Wing lifted in unison, blasting out and away from the *Corporeal Lament*.

The blurred orange of Halitus IV rushed up to meet Atraxii as the *Vengeance of Santar* plunged through its mesosphere. The gunship rattled and ribbons of flame flowed over the canopy as Atraxii guided the craft through atmospheric entry.

Atraxii checked his auspex, seeing the smear of the *Corporeal Lament* shrinking behind him, as well as the smaller outline of the *Priori* as it sheltered in the wake of the Iron Hands warship. The two vessels broke off almost immediately, rising to take up positions at high anchor. A small comet streaked down past Atraxii on the port side, as the drop pod bearing Tactical Squad Voitek slashed through the clouds to its landing zone. Atraxii and the Medusan Wing had conducted a wider circuit to remain clear of the drop pod's path, and now swung tighter towards the target in its wake.

The rumbling flames ceased as the Medusan Wing passed through the atmosphere. The *Vengeance of Santar* bucked in Atraxii's hands as the banks of swirling cloud and whipping air currents buffeted the gunship. Visibility for the unenhanced would be exceptionally poor, and Atraxii cycled through the vision filters of his augmetic eyes and retinal display in an attempt to pierce the tempest. Settling on a spectrum that rendered the cloud layers into a thin mist, the Techmarine watched as the principle forge refinery of Halitus IV swelled in

his visor display.

A floating city hung amidst the ochre skies like a blister of dark iron. Towering smokestacks and exhaust columns vomited gouts of toxic smog into the air, which wrapped around the installation as a dark shroud of dense pollution. Sprawling industrial complexes were heaped upon one another in the fashion of an insect hive. Reinforced ducts and fuel lines threaded the installation, bearing the refined promethium from processing facilities through to massive reservoir bladders and silo tanks. An enormous network of anti-grav arrays crowded beneath the entirety of the forge refinery, their cowlings flickering with chains of lightning from the supercharged veil of ozone and industrial pollution that surrounded them.

As Atraxii drew closer, he saw that not all of the smoke billowing from the forge refinery was from fuel production. Fire ringed the fringes of the floating city, and the Techmarine could begin to make out tiny shapes weaving through the installation like flies over a corpse.

Orks.

Hatred, that all-too-human of emotions, boiled up in Atraxii's heart at the sight of them. They had landed several war parties across the forge refinery city, which the Techmarine could just make out as they fought pitched battles against the Imperial defenders. There was no sign of the xenos warship that the aliens had issued forth from, but the skies were thick with their abominable, ramshackle aircraft diving through the sparking bursts of flak sent airborne by the facility's defensive batteries.

Atraxii hated the abused metal and tortured mechanical blasphemy that the greenskins might have called *technology*, had the vile savages been capable of stringing that many syllables together. Volatile and unstable, the fighters and bombers sowing destruction across Halitus IV were as much a threat to the xenos using them as they were to the Imperium. The ork war machines seemed to function solely out of spite for the perfect order of the Omnissiah's designs, and Atraxii had to devote a significant portion of his will to suppress the furious instinct to break formation and tear them out of the air.

The machine-spirit of the Stormraven sensed the ire emanating from Atraxii, feeding more fuel into the engines. It was an infinitesimal change, a nearly indiscernible increase in speed that would likely have gone unnoticed by Space Marines belonging to any other Chapter. Yet for a Techmarine of the Iron Hands, it was as apparent as the impatient growl of a leashed hound hunting beside its master.

‘*Focus,*’ Oblexus warned. Atraxii chastised himself – if he had noticed his lapse in discipline, then of course the Iron Father had as well. The communication was over a closed frequency, sparing Atraxii the shame of having his weakness exposed before all of the pilots of the Medusan Wing, though he was certain they had detected his imbalance just as Oblexus had.

‘*By the Machine,*’ voxed Severus. ‘*Look!*’

Atraxii saw it. There was nothing else that could have eclipsed it.

A chain of explosions rippled across a portion of the facility in a corridor of mushrooming flame. An entire segment of the forge refinery sagged. The lights went out in a wave across its sprawling maze of manufactorums and distribution centres. The anti-grav array keeping the section aloft shuddered and fell silent. In a deafening discordance of rending metal and snapping rockcrete, a fifth of the Adeptus Mechanicus city sheared away. Shrouded in a pall of dust and smoke, the island of disconnected cityscape tumbled down as if in slow motion, disappearing as it vanished within the clouds below.

‘*Squad Voitek?*’ asked Colnex.

Atraxii was close enough to pick up the ident-runes of the Iron Hands tactical squad on his enhanced visor display. The ten silver icons blinked steadily from their position in the refinery as the Iron Hands aircraft swept over them, the Tactical Marines spread in a crescent across the deployment line set by Oblexus’ orders.

‘Confirmed,’ replied Atraxii. ‘They were not in that section of the facility.’

‘*Then it changes nothing,*’ said Dektaan.

‘*Affirmative,*’ said Oblexus. ‘*Maintain formation. Atraxii, prepare Squad Vladoc for combat drop.*’

Assault Squad Vladoc rose as one from their restraint thrones as scarlet warning lights flashed on within the crew bay of the *Vengeance of Santar*, their insistent glow staining the dark armour of the Space Marines the hue of clotted blood. They took up their weapons in calm, practised grips, forming a column facing the rear assault ramp. They had leapt into hundreds of battles across hundreds of worlds, descending on columns of fire upon the enemies of the Chapter like the fist of the Gorgon himself. They were a devastating weapon, honed to a razor's edge and ready to slip from their sheath.

Atraxii punched in adjustments across the Stormraven's control panels as they neared the drop zone. He slowly bled power from the engines, slowing their approach as he edged the gunship down towards the industrial cityscape rushing up beneath him. He ran half a dozen diagnostics over various systems within the craft, ensuring that the array of weapon systems at his disposal were primed. The dorsal twin-linked lascannon turret behind Atraxii panned smoothly from side to side, the servitor hard-wired within its cupola scanning the skies for inbound threats.

Alarm klaxons rang in shrill tones within the cockpit as the Stormraven's auspex detected inbound contacts.

'Iron Father,' voxed Atraxii over the squadron frequency. 'Multiple contacts

approaching on intercept vectors, fighter-class.’

‘*I see them,*’ replied Oblexus. Atraxii looked to the dark form of *Ironhawk* ahead of him, its hull haloed in heat haze from its turbine engines. ‘*Medusan Five, hold course and remain with the gunship. Link with us once you have escorted them to the drop zone. Medusan Two, Three, Four – with me.*’

Affirmation runes blinked across Atraxii’s visor as the pilots of the Medusan Wing acknowledged their leader’s commands. *Ironhawk* dipped its starboard wing, peeling off towards the inbound contacts in a blast of engine flare. Three of its kindred broke off to join it, leaving a single Stormhawk interceptor holding the gunship’s flank.

A rune pulsed at the edge of Atraxii’s visor, displaying the Ekfrasi symbol for *stormfall*.

‘We have reached the drop zone,’ Atraxii voxed to Vladoc down in the gunship’s crew bay.

‘*Affirmative,*’ the sergeant replied, the fingers of his bionic hand clicking against the haft of his power axe. ‘*Squad Vladoc is ready to destroy the enemy.*’

Atraxii punched a command into a runeboard on his control panel. Runes lit up across the display as the rear assault ramp lowered on groaning hydraulics, and the warning lights in the crew bay shifted from scarlet to green.

‘You are clear to disembark,’ said the Techmarine.

‘*Affirmative,*’ came the sergeant’s calm reply.

The Assault Marines marched to the edge of the ramp in synchronised order, stepping off at intervals with the gunship fifteen thousand feet above the installation. A stream of black figures trailed out from behind the *Vengeance of Santar* as Atraxii delivered his kindred to the war beneath.

Assault Squad Vladoc hurtled through the gritty toxic smog shrouding the forge refinery. The sergeant’s brethren analysed the industrial labyrinth that spilled out below them, the tactical data uploaded to their minds from the simulacrum chamber highlighting key junctions and choke points from which the Assault Marines would focus their efforts to fragment the xenos assault and prevent a massed attack. The Iron Hands transmitted amongst their squad, identifying individual assignments and ensuring that their sectors overlapped to provide support to one another if necessary.

The refinery below rushed up to greet the Space Marines. The ground was alive with greenskins, thronging the streets and thoroughfares of the installation in their hulking, roaring masses. They whooped and fired their amalgamated junk

firearms into the air as they watched the Iron Hands fall towards them, revelling in the violence sure to come.

The squad hit like an artillery barrage. Firing their jump packs moments before impact, they ploughed into the braying mobs of orks like an ebon whirlwind of spinning blades and precision boltgun fire. The Iron Hands butchered the ferocious xenos in silence and spilled their foul gore over the paved streets.

A massive ork bellowed a challenge to Vladoc from a handful of paces away as the sergeant wrenched his axe free from the skull of a convulsing greenskin. Its smaller kin backed away as the hulking monster beat its axe against its barrel-chest and snapped at the Space Marine in an obscene collection of the guttural barks that passed for its mongrel tongue.

'Sergeant,' Atraxii's voice crackled within Vladoc's helm, *'are you clear?'*

The ork howled as it made ready to charge. Its thick lips rippled around its yellowed broken teeth, and Vladoc could smell the stink radiating off the xenos even from a distance. He drew his plasma pistol, snapped it up and fired. A miniature sun lanced into the ork's face, reducing its head to a steaming glut of greasy ash that cascaded across its twitching shoulders as its headless body toppled back and crashed to the ground.

'The squad has made contact with the enemy,' Vladoc replied, his even tone sounding almost bored. *'We are proceeding to secure our objectives.'*

Atraxii toggled Vladoc's vox-link to standby and banked the Stormraven in an arc as Severus broke from his flank to link back with the rest of the Medusan Wing. The control stick rattled in his hand as small arms fired pinged from the gunship's hull. Atraxii passed over a wide avenue choked with rampaging orks. Mobs of the brutish aliens were charging into a network of barricades. Walls of las-fire snapped out over the kill-zone from platoons of entrenched Guardsmen, and the streets were becoming carpeted with xenos dead.

Atraxii picked out the blocky forms of ork tanks rumbling towards the Imperial bulwark and angled the Stormraven down the avenue. He dipped the gunship low, and snapped a pair of switches over his head. Targeting reticules solidified over his visor display, tracking from the interface spikes linked to his helm and the ports that lined his spinal column. He popped the cover off the firing rune on his control stick with his thumb and punched down on it.

A withering stream of mass-reactive death slashed down onto the ork war party from the twin-linked heavy bolters mounted in the nose of the Stormraven. The pair of hurricane bolters mounted on each side of the fuselage fired, making a

noise like thick paper tearing as twelve linked barrels fired in perfect unity. Spears of migraine-bright energy lanced from over Atraxii's head as the lascannon turret targeted the greenskin armour.

The effect was devastating. Ork warriors were shredded, reduced to twitching ribbons of stinking flesh-mulch by the fusillade of bolter fire. Tanks split and detonated in mushrooming explosions as the las-bolts tore through their armour plating. The Stormraven carved corridors of ruin through the mob of howling xenos, the ship's hull sparking with the erratic impacts of greenskin small arms fire. The Guardsmen took the brief reprieve to bring up mortar teams and began shelling the disoriented orks with lethal barrages of airburst ordnance.

Atraxii brought up the Stormraven's nose and banked to make another pass. His vox chirruped with a hail coming from the bunker network below.

'That xenos armour was pushing for a breakthrough that would have lost us the city centre,' a voice said, heavily distorted by the turbulent atmosphere and the volume of flak in the air. *'In the name of the Omnissiah, you have our thanks, my lord.'*

'Identify yourself,' Atraxii said flatly.

'Colonel Galina Dionaki of the Vostroyan Four Hundred and Ninety-Eighth Fusiliers,' the voice replied. *'Commander of the Remnant of Fire, indentured in service to the noble lords of Mars and guardians of Halitus Four.'*

'How did the xenos destroy an entire section of the installation?' demanded Atraxii.

'They didn't,' answered Dionaki bluntly. *'We destroyed it.'*

Atraxii blinked. He ran his targeting reticule over the cityscape, searching for the Vostroyan commander's position. 'Explain the wilful destruction of the installation under your province to safeguard.'

To her credit, Dionaki did not hesitate to answer. She kept her tone measured and cold, despite the apprehension she might have felt addressing one of the Emperor's angels of death directly.

'The sector was in imminent jeopardy of being compromised, my lord. Six platoons were deployed to hold it and draw the xenos to them while our sappers rigged key junctions with melta charges. Thousands of the enemy fell with my men when we cut it away, consolidated onto a region our forces would have inevitably ceded to their advance.'

Atraxii heard the deep breath pushed through Dionaki's teeth as the colonel fought the fear assailing her composure. *'When a limb becomes infected and draws risk to the body as a whole, we will not shrink from our duty, my lord. It is*

to be amputated.'

Atraxii was silent for a moment. Perhaps the Iron Hands' prior estimation of the ineffectiveness of the local defences had been premature. Ident-runes representing the Vostroyan units were moving in disciplined order, conducting counter-offensives and holding key sectors with grim conviction. There simply were not enough of them to counter the swarms of orks smashing against them. He could not identify any elements of the planet's skitarii legions anywhere near his vicinity.

'Colonel, where are the skitarii maniples?' asked Atraxii.

'We have been requesting combined arms support from the skitarii for weeks,' came Dionaki's reply, tinged with bitterness. *'They have not responded and have pulled their forces back around the primary forge temple.'*

The Adeptus Mechanicus is concealing something of great value to them, thought Atraxii. Valuable enough to petition us and leave the Vostroyans to battle the orks alone to protect it. The Techmarine stored the thought in his memory for the debriefing aboard the *Corporeal Lament* once the operation had concluded, and focused on the task in front of him.

'Keep your units clear, colonel,' ordered Atraxii. 'I am coming around for another pass.'

Atraxii's vox pinged urgently. The Techmarine snapped a switch on his comms unit.

'Consolidate upon the Medusan Wing's position at once,' Dektaan growled, his voice distorted with interference and edged with anger and distraction. *'Ready your magna-grapple. The Iron Father is down.'*

Monolithic factories and smokestacks passed by Atraxii in a blur as he pushed the engines to their limits. Gauges flashed crimson as the systems they monitored ticked past acceptable tolerances. Continued output at the current level would result in catastrophic overload of the port engine at a probability of ninety-nine point zero-eight per cent. The probability of the starboard engine detonating and reducing the *Vengeance of Santar* to a cloud of twisting fragments was even higher than that.

Atraxii uttered a prayer to the Stormraven's spirit, beseeching the ancient consciousness of the gunship to hold a little longer. He bled power from any systems not immediately essential and fed it into the engines and their coolant modules. The fuselage rattled around him as the gunship tore through the industrial city towards the location of the Medusan Wing.

The Iron Father is down.

The very notion was unthinkable. It refuted statistical logic. Atraxii could not fathom a scenario where events would unfold in such a way. Oblexus was a veteran champion, a pilot without peer. *Ironhawk* was inviolate.

What could have arisen that would bring his master low?

Atraxii's eyes snapped to his auspex as the augur display blared an alert. Inbound contact. A xenos fighter was closing behind him, an angular smudge

ticking closer to him with each refresh of the auspex.

A sharp Ekfrasi invective hissed from the Space Marine as he opened the vox-channel to the Medusan Wing.

‘I have been engaged,’ said Atraxii. ‘I am making all speed to reach your location, and will arrive once the threat is neutralised.’

‘Do so quickly,’ Dektaan snarled. ‘We cannot afford to bide here while you tarry.’

The vox-link closed with a snap of static. Atraxii flicked his eyes back to the auspex screen. The ork was entering weapons range. As if on cue, a volley of tracer rounds scythed over the canopy of the Stormraven. The turret-mounted lascannons swung around to target the fighter as Atraxii banked sharply.

Atraxii looked through the perspective of the servitor gunner operating the turret, the feed beamed onto his left eye. The lascannons fired disciplined bursts, and Atraxii watched as the ork fighter deftly rolled and swayed aside of the deadly energy bolts. The vile creature within the junkyard fighter was a skilled pilot. Half a century of war had taught Atraxii that while he must hate the enemy, he would never underestimate them. Failure to respect the prowess of Mankind’s enemies had sent more than one of Clan Kaargul to an ignominious end.

Atraxii stomped down on the rudder pedal as he neared an intersection. The Stormraven veered to port, narrowly avoiding smashing into the towering structures filling the area. The force of the manoeuvre crushed Atraxii against the control throne with enough force to liquefy the organs of an unaugmented human. The ork fighter hurtled past, missing the turn. Atraxii made a snap turn to starboard, bringing the Stormraven back on course.

The gunship raced between towering structures resembling mechanical termite hives, approaching another broad intersection. Atraxii pushed forwards on the control stick as a rust-red blur screamed across his path. The Techmarine corkscrewed down around the ork aircraft as it hurtled past. The xenos pilot pushed his fighter into a steep dive, tipping the nose of the craft back towards the ground and rolling to starboard to bring it back behind the Stormraven.

The gunship bucked around Atraxii, and alarm klaxons wailed as a volley of cannon fire struck the fuselage. He weaved the Stormraven through the maze of buildings, cutting as sharply as the bulky craft would allow in the hope that the erratic greenskin pilot would hesitate for an instant and smash against one of the monolithic towers.

The ork fighter clung relentlessly to his tail. Rockets corkscrewed around Atraxii in contrails of dirty smoke, detonating against the facades of buildings

and filling the air with smoke and clouds of obliterated rockcrete. The Techmarine jinked the gunship out of the path of another volley of missiles, hauling the Stormraven back out into the wide thoroughfare.

The Stormraven rocked as cannon fire stitched across its port wing, and the lascannon turret responded with a direct hit against one of the ork fighter's engines. The xenos craft became sluggish as the damaged turbine vomited a trail of smoke and flame behind it.

Atraxii took the opportunity. He threw the Stormraven into a steep dive, simultaneously braking the main drives and firing the retro rockets in the gunship's nose. Atraxii's momentum hurled him forwards, snapping a strap of his crash webbing as the craft abruptly arrested its speed.

The ork fighter slashed overhead. Atraxii fired the engines, pulling the gunship up behind the xenos. Smoke from its damaged engine buffeted the Stormraven, showering the cockpit canopy with soot and flecks of scorched engine oil.

Atraxii activated the target designator for the stormstrike missile pods mounted beneath the Stormraven's wings. Scarlet brackets locked over the ork fighter. Atraxii depressed the firing rune, and a missile popped from the tube. Its internal engine screamed to life, hurling the missile at the xenos.

With its engine damaged, the ork pilot failed to avoid the missile. The warhead smashed into the spine of the greenskin fighter, detonating the craft in a ball of red flame and greasy smoke and sending wreckage lancing down into the throngs of orks below.

Atraxii chanted a prayer of thanksgiving to the *Vengeance of Santar's* spirit, and clicked open the vox network.

'Threat neutralised,' said Atraxii. 'Medusan Wing, I am inbound to your location.'

Sergeant Voitek blew an ork apart with a burst of fire from his boltgun. The Ekfrasi rune for *starved* pulsed on his visor display in insistent amber. His bolter's slide locked back, the chamber hollow and issuing twisting curls of fyceline smoke. The Space Marine let the weapon fall, its sling binding it to his side as he drew his bolt pistol.

He fired twice. Two orks died, neat entry wounds creating horrific exits as the mass-reactive ammunition detonated within the xenos' brainpans. A third ork bulled into him, smashing the bolt pistol aside with a spiked cudgel.

Voitek's heart rate did not alter. In a single smooth motion, he pulled the combat blade from his hip, pushed it across his body and punched it up in a

reverse grip through the ork's jaw. The monomolecular edge lanced into the creature's brain, bifurcating the pulsing grey matter into ruin. Voitek withdrew the blade as the hulking greenskin sank convulsing to its knees. He smoothly spun the stinking alien blood from the combat blade, returned it to the mag-lock hard point on his waist and slapped a fresh magazine into his bolter.

Voitek had responded to the Medusan Wing's distress beacon, pulling two of his line brothers away from securing the perimeter to strike out towards the crash site with him. They had progressed efficiently, navigating through the forge refinery, only engaging the enemy when necessary and being swift in the extermination of the orks when they did.

The trio of Iron Hands arrived at the source of the beacon, moving silently through the ruins of the Adeptus Mechanicus city towards the crashed form of *Ironhawk*. The Iron Father had managed to bring the Stormhawk down in a controlled manner, and aside from a destroyed engine and the damage riddling its cockpit, the venerable fighter remained intact.

The Tactical Marines formed a triangular perimeter around the downed fighter. Voitek moved to the Stormhawk and pulled the Iron Father clear. Their commander was alive. His left leg was gone, much of the bionics in his torso were inoperable and the trauma of his flesh had driven him into sus-an stasis. The sergeant hauled Oblexus behind the cover of a mound of wreckage, feeling silent disdain that the noble Iron Father's flesh had so subdued him. He made note to conduct penance for such insubordinate thought and returned to securing the perimeter around *Ironhawk*. That was when the orks came.

The greenskin advance was slight at first, nearby bands of roaming xenos happening upon their location as they tore through the streets. Voitek and his brothers dispatched them quickly, but now the small city square was beginning to fill with the obscene creatures. Second by second, the ring of greenskins surrounding the Iron Hands grew tighter and tighter.

The skies above Voitek burned with fire and wreckage as the Medusan Wing encircled their fallen commander. The Stormhawk squadron had driven off the xenos in the air, and Voitek hunkered down into cover as they awaited the *Vengeance of Santar* to extract Oblexus and *Ironhawk* from the crash site.

Voitek snapped off single shots from his bolter, taking care to conserve his remaining ammunition. He pivoted behind the slab of rockcrete he was using as cover as a whistling rocket exploded against it, wreathing him in sparking smoke and dust. He pivoted back out and killed the ork who had fired the missile with a clean shot that tore its head from its shoulders in a puff of blood and skull

fragments.

Gunfire stitched up Voitek's side, throwing him off balance. He recovered, killing the pair of orks who had rounded on his flank. He saw Ibrov's ident-rune blink amber, and then scarlet. The warrior's biometric read-out flatlined on Voitek's retinal display. He opened a vox-link to Kuurox, his remaining brother.

'Ibrov has ended,' said Voitek flatly. 'Adjust formation primary, retrieval of his stillform secondary.'

Kuurox's ident-rune blinked once as the warrior acknowledged the command, shifting his alignment to cover the one hundred and eighty degrees directly across from Voitek. The sergeant lobbed a frag grenade into a knot of charging orks, the blast scything down the aliens and rendering their bodies into oozing chunks of broken flesh.

More took their place.

The machine is perfect, thought Voitek, but here, the flesh will soon see me ended.

-10.0-

Atraxii slowed the *Vengeance of Santar* as it approached the Medusan Wing, and his eyes confirmed what his mind could not comprehend. *Ironhawk* had been brought low. The venerable Stormhawk interceptor had carved a furrow in the rockcrete of a square courtyard. A trio of ident-runes flickered around it, among them the Iron Father. Oblexus yet lived.

The Stormraven strafed over the closing mobs of orks assaulting the crash site. Mass-reactive death roared out from the barrels of its hurricane bolters. Atraxii squeezed a withering deluge of fire from his heavy bolters, blasting the hordes of xenos apart. The orks returned fire, but their junkyard firearms were incapable of piercing its ebon hull. Their rust-armoured tide broke against the Techmarine's wrath, and rolled back as the war parties began to break from the square or died where they stood.

Atraxii brought the Stormraven down in a hover, opening the forward assault ramp beneath his cockpit. He threw off his restraint harness and extracted himself from the spinal link with a series of deep clicks.

The crimson-armoured Techmarine stomped down the ramp, *Sufferentium* grasped in his fists. His servo-arms unfolded, twitching with Atraxii's anger as they sought flesh to destroy. The scent of promethium in all stages of processing filled his nostrils from the surrounding refineries. The ochre sky of Halitus IV

cast everything in a rusted orange hue. Targets resolved around him, his retinal display bracketing orks in haloes of dark scarlet.

Sufferentium swept out in a blistering arc. Three orks died, riven in half by the artificer-wrought cog axe. The weapon's power generator flared as it carved through their vile flesh, the blood coating its edge popping as it cooked off the toothed blade. Atraxii felled another ork, splitting it from shoulder to groin. The xenos' entrails slopped onto the broken rockcrete of the square, crushed under Atraxii's boots. His servo-arms lashed out as extensions of his hatred. His claw collapsed ork skulls into pulp. Swathes of the howling brutes were immolated by his flamer or bisected by his plasma torch. His drill cored through alien heads and torsos, its mechanisms gumming with rancid xenos gore.

Sergeant Voitek approached, carrying Oblexus' inert form upright with one arm and firing his bolt pistol with his free hand. A second of his squad, Kuurox, dragged a fallen brother behind him by the high collar of his Mark VIII armour. Atraxii recognised the ended battle-brother as Ibrov. A jagged hole pierced the warrior's left eye lens, and the back of his helm was blown out, the ceramite cracked and curled outwards like a broken flower in bloom.

Kuurox dropped Ibrov's corpse with a dull clang as a pair of orks rounded on him. A burst of bolter rounds tore the legs from the first, and Kuurox raised his knee to deliver a brutal front kick to the chest of the second. The ork's ribcage collapsed, pulping its internal organs and dropping it face-first onto the ground without a noise. He took hold of Ibrov's collar once more as the first ork seized hold of his boot with grasping claws. Kuurox levelled his bolter at the greenskin, shot it once in the head and carried on towards the Stormraven.

Voitek passed Atraxii, hauling Oblexus up the assault ramp and into the gunship's crew bay. Kuurox did the same with Ibrov's corpse. The Tactical Marine stripped the body of ammunition and grenades, and marched without ceremony back out onto the square.

Atraxii met Voitek at the foot of the assault ramp as the sergeant descended, while Kuurox took up a kneeling overwatch position nearby, his bolter panning for targets.

'The Iron Father is in sus-an stasis,' said Voitek over the percussive bang of Kuurox's bolter. 'Engage your magna-grapple and extract *Ironhawk* back to the *Corporeal Lament*.'

'It will be done,' replied Atraxii. 'What of you and Kuurox?'

Voitek caught a fresh magazine from Kuurox and locked it into his bolter. 'We will return to the squad, do not be concerned.'

Atraxii heard the strained rasp in the sergeant's voice. He was unaccustomed to speaking so frequently.

'Ibrov has ended,' said Voitek. 'See to it that his bionics are salvaged and his gene-seed extracted once you return to the *Corporeal Lament*. Do not dishonour his end by meeting your own getting there.'

Voitek did not wait for Atraxii to reply, turning away towards the heart of the forge city. Kuurox rose as his sergeant passed him, and the pair trotted away into the smoke until they were lost from sight.

Atraxii turned and hurried back up the assault ramp. As the ramp rumbled up behind him, the Techmarine spared a glance towards Oblexus, lying motionless on the deck of the crew bay. Atraxii ran a rapid diagnostic over the wounded Iron Father. The sus-an coma had stabilised him when the bionics that had replaced many of his internal organs had been crippled. An unwelcome thought materialised in Atraxii's mind as he watched – it was Oblexus' flesh that was keeping him alive.

A resounding detonation just beyond the Stormraven jarred Atraxii from his reflection. The Techmarine climbed up into the gunship's cockpit and secured his crash webbing. He primed the *Vengeance of Santar*'s engines as the spinal interface spikes snicked back into place. He raised the gunship up, bringing it to a hover over the prone *Ironhawk*. Atraxii lowered the Stormraven, just inches from the interceptor's hull, and engaged the magna-grapple.

A marrow-deep thrum rippled through the Stormraven. The polished silver of Atraxii's teeth ground together and his gums ached from the powerful magnetic field being generated. *Ironhawk* began to tremble, shaking the dust and debris from its hull. There was a sonorous groan of protesting metal, then the interceptor locked to the magna-grapple with a heavy *thunk*.

'Medusan Wing,' said Atraxii as he powered the engines to begin lifting the gunship. 'I have *Ironhawk* and the Iron Father aboard. I require escort bearing them back to the *Corporeal Lament*.'

The vox clicked. '*You shall have it,*' came Dektaan's reply. '*Medusan Wing, form up around the Vengeance of Santar. Engage attack pattern Fortitude.*'

The four Stormhawks of the Medusan Wing formed a box around the Stormraven. Atraxii struggled against the controls, fighting to keep the gunship from listing. The magna-grapple was designed to transport Dreadnought walkers and smaller armoured vehicles to and from war zones. *Ironhawk*'s weight was significantly higher, and the Stormraven's superstructure groaned under the strain.

Atraxii lifted the gunship into formation, and the Iron Hands blasted towards the horizon. They passed through the dense bursts of flak thrown up by the forge refinery's defences.

'Brother Dektaan,' Atraxii voxed on a direct channel. 'What happened?'

'The stratagem failed,' growled Dektaan, his voice bitter and tinged with shame. *'Their attack was erratic, unbound by logic even for the greenskins. They outnumbered us, and we came close to depleting our ammunition keeping the swarms from crashing into us. Their numbers and suicidal tactics broke our formation and scattered us. There was an ork pilot, one of their elite by the graffiti covering its fighter. While its cohorts attempted to ram our interceptors, it separated the Iron Father from us and defeated him.'*

Atraxii had never known of an ork pilot in possession of such skill. An incredible thought presented itself. Could a greenskin be an ace?

'Auspex return!' called out Severus from the rear port corner of the formation. *'Multiple contacts inbound on an intercept vector.'*

Blips appeared at the top corner of Atraxii's auspex, closing rapidly. How could they get in front of us?

'Brother,' voxed Colnex to Dektaan. *'Their alpha is leading the formation.'*

Atraxii detected the tense resolve rolling off the voice of the Medusan Wing's de facto leader as he responded.

'Vengeance of Santar, maintain course and speed to rendezvous with the Corporeal Lament,' commanded Dektaan. *'Medusan Three and Four, realign to attack pattern Vigilance. Medusan Five, with me.'*

A chorus of affirmations rippled across Atraxii's vox as the Techmarine pilots followed Dektaan's orders. Colnex and Enych guided their Stormhawks to the forward port and rear starboard of Atraxii, while Dektaan and Severus accelerated away from the formation towards the oncoming ork fighters.

'Weapons range in eighty seconds,' said Colnex. Atraxii did not have visual of the ork squadron, still concealed by the lightning-riven clouds of Halitus IV.

'Weapons range in twenty seconds,' said Colnex. Dektaan and Severus' Stormhawks plunged into the storm clouds and disappeared from sight.

'Weapons range in three seconds,' said Colnex. *'Two seconds. One. Engage.'*

The two Stormhawks unleashed volleys of fire from their wing-mounted assault cannons into the wall of seething cloud. Erratic chains of tracer fire slashed out towards them. Atraxii swung the Stormraven aside, narrowly dodging a salvo of cannon fire aimed for his cockpit, and opened up with the heavy bolters in the gunship's nose.

The jagged red shapes of ork fighters breached the storm bank like deep-sea predators leaping from an ocean's murky depths. Enych's las-talon slashed out with a blinding energy beam. An ork fighter exploded, and shrapnel plinked against Atraxii's canopy as he hurtled through the fireball.

The converging fighters rolled and weaved past each other at break-neck speed. Colnex and Enych held their formation around Atraxii, straying just far enough to fend off xenos pilots moving to attack the gunship. Atraxii pushed the engines to their limits, and sensed the *Vengeance of Santar's* spirit snarl as it fought to bear *Ironhawk's* weight. He whispered a benediction to placate the weary animus and watched as a blast from the Stormraven's lascannon turret split a greenskin fighter into a pair of fiery detonations haloed in oily smoke.

An ork rocket exploded just behind the Stormraven. Atraxii was thrown forwards in his control throne. The interface spikes ground against the ports in his spine, combining with the sympathetic pain he experienced while in union with the gunship's machine-spirit. Atraxii snarled, hissing an ancient Ekfrasi prayer beseeching the Gorgon to grant him strength.

Klaxons wailed as an ork fighter closed behind Atraxii. He manoeuvred the belaboured gunship, evading the ribbons of tracer fire slashing over and around him. The superstructure rocked as cannon rounds struck the hull. One of the fuel lines was severed as a section of armour plating sheared away, leaving the tanks of promethium exposed to the maelstrom of flak scything through the air.

The ork fighter exploded as a stream of assault cannon fire blasted it apart from above. Severus dived his Stormhawk through the explosion in an ebon blur, rolling to destroy another fighter with his interceptor's las-talon.

'Stay sharp, Atraxii,' called out Severus. *'We are nearly clear of—'*

The vox-link cut, and Severus' biometric feedback vanished as the Stormhawk burst into a blinding ball of expanding flame.

A brutish ork fighter rolled aside from the cloud of spinning wreckage that was all that remained of the Iron Hands fighter. Its rust-red hull was decorated with jagged tongues of orange and yellow paint in a crude depiction of flames, while the emblem of a fanged sun adorned the black stripe running down both wings. A series of rough gouges were scratched into the side of the fighter in uneven rows, announcing the number of kills committed by the pilot. It was the ork ace.

'Severus is ended,' called out Atraxii.

'We are near the atmospheric boundary,' barked Dektaan. *'Accelerate to maximum – they cannot follow us into the void.'*

Atraxii pushed the rattling Stormraven harder as rockets and bombs exploded

all around him. Dektaan shot down a pair of ork fighters and swept down above the rest of the Medusan Wing as they rocketed to the edge of Halitus IV.

A strobing rune pulsed on Atraxii's visor. Missile lock. The ork ace flashed behind the Stormraven and unleashed a pair of missiles, lancing through the clouds on billowing contrails of greasy smoke. Atraxii's hands ran over his console as he fired countermeasures.

The Stormraven discharged an arc of flares behind the gunship. One of the missiles curled towards the countermeasures and exploded. The second avoided the flares, its propulsion jets hurtling it unerringly towards the *Vengeance of Santar*.

Alarms filled the cockpit with their shrill overlapping cries. Atraxii felt the gunship shaking itself apart as it launched into the searing blaze of Halitus IV's atmosphere.

The ork missile trailing behind Atraxii was enveloped in the fire of the atmosphere and detonated. The greenskin fighters, not equipped for void war, were forced to peel away in frustration, their quarry denied to them. A handful barrelled on in reckless pursuit regardless. Their ships were vaporised as the heat of the planet's thermosphere ignited their fuel tanks.

Atraxii zeroed in on the bladed silhouette of the *Corporeal Lament*, hanging dark in the void as he left the last of Halitus IV's atmosphere behind.

With a low hum of coursing power and clicking cogwork, the eye lenses of Oblexus' iron mask flickered to life. The Iron Father's hands flexed and slowly drew into fists before flexing again. A faint growl scratched out from the vox-grille of Oblexus' matte-black death mask.

'How long?' came the question from the prone Iron Hands commander.

'Fifty-six hours, twenty-two minutes and eighteen seconds,' replied Atraxii from where he stood over Oblexus. 'Per the Terran standard. The damage to your internal augmentations was substantial. Were we on Medusa, it would have fallen to the Iron Council to consider interment.'

'You effected these repairs?' asked the Iron Father.

'Yes,' replied Atraxii. 'Apothecary TARTHIX is on the surface of the forge refinery. The majority of your wounds were to bionics, however, which I was able to repair, or replace.'

Oblexus looked down at his left leg. It was no longer there. In its place was a lean segmented limb of dark iron, terminating in a broad claw at its base. He recalled the pain of its injury when *Ironhawk* had taken direct fire to its cockpit. Oblexus felt the chafe of raw flesh where the bionic meshed with his hip. He flexed the prosthetic, watching pistons and cogwork slide together in mimicry of a musculature to allow full range of motion. The design of the augment was

familiar to him. He ran a brief self-diagnostic, satisfied with the functionality of his internal bionics and the extensive repairs Atraxii had made to them.

‘Your skill is exemplary,’ said Oblexus as he swung his legs over the edge of the slab. ‘You have my thanks, brother.’

‘Your thanks should be to Brother Ibrov,’ replied Atraxii. ‘The iron which has restored you was taken from his stillform.’

The Iron Father’s new bionic leg clanged against the medicae slab. ‘Ibrov is ended?’ he asked, and then was silent for a moment. A short growl, like gears slipping, issued from his mask. There was anger in the noise. Atraxii sensed it. Hatred, spiking with white-hot intensity but instantly subdued so as not to dull the Iron Father’s logic.

‘A grave loss to clan and Chapter. There was much iron in him.’

Atraxii hesitated.

‘Speak,’ said Oblexus.

‘Severus has ended as well.’

The Iron Father was silent once more, but for the overlapping thrum of his active power armour and bionics. Atraxii set about replacing the tools he had been using to repair Oblexus, his servo-arms setting complex probes and las-cutters into cases spread about the chamber.

‘And *Ironhawk*?’

‘Recovered,’ replied Atraxii. ‘As I restored you, the pilots of the Medusan Wing labour to restore *Ironhawk*. It will soon be ready for you to take flight once more.’

‘No.’

Atraxii stopped. He abandoned his labours, turning to Oblexus.

‘I do not understand.’

Oblexus levelled the scarlet gaze of his death mask at Atraxii. ‘I will not pilot *Ironhawk* again.’

A muscle in Atraxii’s face spasmed involuntarily, causing a single, nearly imperceptible twitch in his left eye. ‘My ignorance remains unchanged, Iron Father.’

‘I have failed,’ said Oblexus simply. ‘The weight of the ends of our brothers rests upon my shoulders. My stratagem was rigid, unaccommodating for the disorder of the conflict here. The irregular nature of the foe had been accounted for during the Calculum Rationale, and I executed tactics according to what was the most logical course of action. Yet against this foe, logic failed.’

The Iron Father held Atraxii’s gaze. ‘It was you who spoke wisdom of the

versatility of iron. In my intransigence, I refuted that wisdom, and now two brothers shall never witness the skies of Medusa again.

‘I speak not from melancholy or defeatism,’ said Oblexus. ‘We will prevail here. Our brothers shall be avenged. It is evident to me now that, when faced with an opponent that is by its very nature unpredictable, the most logical course is to be illogical. Where my logic failed, instinct may prevail, and my instincts tell me that it should be you, Atraxii, who pilots *Ironhawk* as the Medusan Wing returns to war.’

Atraxii questioned for a moment whether there had been a malfunction in the auditory systems of his helmet. He ran a flash diagnostic, but found no deficiencies. The Techmarine reached up, unclasped the seals at his collar and pulled the helm free.

‘Iron Father,’ Atraxii knelt against the cold white tile of the chamber. ‘I am not worthy of such an honour. Surely there are others more deserving.’

Oblexus reached down and pulled Atraxii to his feet. ‘No. It must be you, brother. The Medusan Wing is broken, and you shall be the one to join with the others to mend it. Adversity does not call at the hour of our choosing, Atraxii, but it calls to you. And it calls now.’

Atraxii struggled to comprehend the enormity of what was transpiring. *Ironhawk*, a Chapter relic revered beyond measure, passed to him. The mantle of the venerable Stormhawk, the legacy it held, the ferocious spirit which dwelt within it.

Slowly, Atraxii lifted his eyes, meeting the lambent gaze of Oblexus’ death mask.

‘What will you do, Iron Father?’

Oblexus looked down at his bionic leg. ‘I will go to the surface, to our brothers fighting against the enemy there. I have a debt which I must repay.’

Dektaan could not understand the illogic assailing him. The Iron Father had forsaken the Medusan Wing, the entire squadron he had forged over a century of elite combat. He had abandoned *Ironhawk*, passing the mantle of its mount to the Techmarine Atraxii, mere moments returned to clan and Chapter after his ordainment on Mars.

It was not covetousness that motivated his ire. Nothing so lowly and organic as petulant envy. Dektaan had been given command of the Medusan Wing by Oblexus, as was his right, but he had no desire to pilot *Ironhawk*. He had spent decades in union with his own Stormhawk, and the bond he had forged with the

fighter's spirit was something he would not break away from.

No, it was not envy. It was duty.

A commander did not abandon his post. He did not step down when challenged in battle. A commander fought, and continued to do so until he was victorious or dead upon the field of battle. For all of the countless oaths Dektaan had sworn in service to the Iron Father, to follow him into the darkest reaches and carry out his orders without question, doubt had etched itself into his mind, and would not be dislodged.

Had the Iron Father fallen to the weakness of his flesh?

Dektaan allowed logic to sweep over his mind in calming tides. If the Iron Father was indeed compromised, then it was efficient that he assume command. If Oblexus were to survive this campaign, Dektaan would see that he stood before the Iron Council and accounted for the decisions he had made. It was not treachery, not in any overt sense, but it was counter to logic. It was weakness, and for the sons of the Gorgon, such a thing could be held as a betrayal.

But that eventuality must not dominate his focus at the expense of the moment, over which he could exert control. Succumbing to distractions that were beyond his influence was weakness. Dektaan stepped back from the gleaming hull of *Ironhawk*, repaired and eager to carve through the skies once more. The actions of the Iron Father could not deter him from the prosecution of this war. As logic's soothing influence focused Dektaan's mind to a razor's edge, the Iron Hands Techmarine resolved that it would not.

-12.0-

Atraxii clambered up into the cockpit and lowered himself down into the control throne. He experienced an abrupt fluttering sensation which, if queried, he would have most accurately described as unease. The discomfort was not a response to physical stimuli – there were no defects in the dense padding and gel layers of the throne which cradled him against the crushing gravitational force that would assail him during flight, and it had been designed specifically to accommodate the bulkier power pack of his Techmarine armour.

The sensation, to his shame, was purely a fabrication of his mind. He breathed deeply, marshalling the will to banish the psychosomatic shivers that crept down his spine. Atraxii was sitting in *Ironhawk* for the first time, and the Space Marine made himself ready for his initial communion with the Stormhawk interceptor's machine-spirit. It was another sort of gravity that beset the Techmarine, one which no amount of crash padding could alleviate.

Atraxii struggled to settle his mind as he secured his crash webbing. The cockpit was an utterly dark sphere with the control throne at its centre. As he aligned his armour with the interface sockets of the throne, Atraxii sensed the spirit of *Ironhawk* stirring.

The venerable Stormhawk had scarcely been brought up to efficient functionality when the command had come to scramble. Transmissions from

Squads Voitek and Vladoc on the surface of Halitus IV had confirmed sightings of ork bombers massing towards the forge refinery. Dektaan, now bearing the silver of squadron leadership upon his own Stormhawk, had ordered the squadron to make ready for immediate launch. While the Iron Father would travel in the *Vengeance of Santar* to join the surface forces, the Medusan Wing would intercept and destroy the xenos bombing raid before it could reach its target.

Atraxii had followed his brother's orders without question. He had wanted more time to ease the transition of *Ironhawk's* animus from union with Oblexus to union with himself before taking the fighter into combat. He had scarcely begun the prescribed litany of rituals to ease the burgeoning joining, and with their launch imminent, he had been forced to abandon the process before its completion. The Techmarine brushed aside the frustration of leaving a task unfinished, sealing it away beneath the implacable iron of his trained resolve. He knew that Dektaan did not approve of his elevation to the Medusan Wing, and viewed him as an outsider. Atraxii would not compound that view by challenging his authority during his first operation.

With a wave of icy clicks, the interface needles connected along Atraxii's spine. He experienced *Ironhawk* awaken, a furnace heat of leashed rage that was powerful enough to be confused as physical sensation. It had been the same fiery spirit he had experienced for an instant when last he had made contact with the Stormhawk, but of a far greater magnitude. He sensed its anger at his intrusion curdling their union, but also, buried deep within the machine-spirit's tides of rage, there was shame.

Shame at defeat. Shame at leaving the air in failure and being stripped of the silver lacquer that had signified its stature as alpha. Shame at glorious triumph, denied to it for the first time.

The sphere around Atraxii flickered to life as banks of viewscreens came online. Viewed from the banks of sensor node clusters throughout the Stormhawk, the hangar of the *Corporeal Lament* materialised around him, as if the control throne were hanging inert in the air above the deck. He saw the powerful plasma turbine engines on either side of him, and the short bent wings tipped with assault cannons. The fighter's underslung las-talon protruded beneath him, like the lance of an ancient knight levelled to charge.

Atraxii's console pulsed to readiness, auspex, fire control, and the myriad other systems monitored and subject to his touch. His visor refreshed, adding relevant diagnostics and vox frequencies to his retinal display in panels of transparent

ice-blue. Engine read-outs glowed steady and green as the turbines spooled up.

‘*Brothers.*’ Dektaan’s voice carried the weight of command with ease as he addressed the Medusan Wing. ‘*Be in readiness. Our brothers have called for us to cleanse the skies of the xenos filth encroaching upon them. We strike the abominable greenskins, who believe they will stop us, that our iron cannot withstand their repulsive plague upon the Imperium. Let us punish them for that error. Convey your readiness.*’

‘*Medusan Two, affirmative,*’ reported Colnex.

‘*Medusan Three stands ready, brother,*’ Enych replied.

Atraxii gripped the twin control sticks of *Ironhawk*. ‘*Medusan Four, in readiness.*’

‘*Let us bring down the retribution of Medusa upon this blight,*’ said Dektaan. ‘*With blades of iron!*’

‘*No weakness shall bar us from our course!*’ chorused the Medusan Wing.

The hangar bay doors of the *Corporeal Lament* ground open and the Medusan Wing blasted out to descend upon Halitus IV once more.

Oblexus watched as the Medusan Wing launched into battle. The biological components remaining to him, scarce as they were, experienced a pang of forlorn sensation for a brief instant. The Iron Father guided the *Vengeance of Santar* beyond the *Corporeal Lament*, streaking like a comet through the atmosphere of Halitus IV. He watched the ident-runes of the Medusan Wing blink off his retinal display as they passed beyond the grasp of his sensors.

As the Stormraven cleared the fires of re-entry, Oblexus rocketed down towards the Adeptus Mechanicus forge refinery. The vast floating monolith was shrouded in smog and lit by the brief flashes of exploding flak from the installation’s defence platforms and gun towers.

Oblexus zeroed in on the crescent of ident-runes representing the Iron Hands ground forces. They had established a perimeter outside of the primary Adeptus Mechanicus facilities, but as he drew closer, the Iron Father could see the hordes of xenos massing against their lines like a swelling tide of ochre-green flesh. There were fewer active ident-runes than before Oblexus had crashed. Both Squad Voitek and Squad Vladoc had sustained casualties. The Iron Father’s bionic leg ticked as he absently ground its broad claw into the deck plating of the cockpit.

With a significant effort, Oblexus passed over the lines of his brothers, quickly leaving them to shrink into the distance behind him. Atraxii had spoken with the

Iron Father of the efficiency of the indentured Vostroyan units in combat against the xenos, and how the combat maniples of the forge refinery's skitarii legions had withdrawn to around the forge temple primus and denied any support to their allies without pretence.

As the cyclopean shape of the Adeptus Mechanicus temple swelled in his view like a vast insect hive, the Iron Father made ready to seek out Adept Wyn. The Martian priesthood was hiding something of great value on Halitus IV, and if such secrets impacted the parameters of defeating the xenos, Oblexus intended to discover what they were.

The halls of the temple shivered with humming machinery. Silent queues of tech-priests padded to and fro in silent prayer, while techno-cherubs flitted about the rafters, filling the air with sugary incense from censer orbs held in tiny, consumptive hands.

The skitarii ranger strode down the centre of the hall, her boots clicking against the polished stone floor. Her robes rippled over her battleplate, torn and singed by a thousand wars upon a thousand worlds. The long, slender barrel of her galvanic rifle was held low across her chest in an easy, yet vigilant grip.

A bulkhead rumbled open before her as she was admitted into the chamber. The ranger looked up through the tinted goggles of her augmetic mask, through eyes that would never be closed, upon her master.

Adept Wyn hung suspended by her mechadendrites, much as she had when she had plied the void aboard the *Priori*. Her physical form was slack and inert, yet she did not rest. Much as she commanded the Adeptus Mechanicus starship, the adept exerted her influence over the forge temple, and the skitarii legions protecting it.

The ranger canted a short burst of binary to announce her presence.

<I know you are there,> replied Wyn. <Even you cannot stalk so well as to avoid my eyes, ranger.>

<The Adeptus Astartes commander designated Oblexus has arrived in search of you.>

The cluster of jade lenses pulsed to life beneath Wyn's heavy red cowl. <Of this, I am also aware,> she canted in reply.

The ranger shifted slightly. Wyn focused her whirring eye lenses down upon her guardian. Like all her kin, radiation haloed the skitarii huntress in a shroud that was invisible to the naked eye but easily detectable to the adept's enhanced gaze. The energies that provided the ranger with the means to dispatch the

enemy with such skill were slowly devouring her. She was an efficient guardian, thought Wyn. It would disappoint her when she finally succumbed.

<Is the knowledge that I have given unto you insufficient?>

<What does he seek?> canted the ranger.

Wyn tilted her head. It was rare to hear queries from her protector.

<It is of no consequence to you,> Wyn canted sharply. <The integrity of myself, and of this installation are your paramount concerns. Your *only* concerns. The vaults must not be breached, by the xenos or the Adeptus Astartes, or we shall all be undone.>

Atraxii heard the soft creak of the control throne as it compressed under gravity's crush. *Ironhawk* screamed through the skies of Halitus IV, its spirit slaving like a hound straining against its leash. Diving through the banks of boiling cloud, Atraxii was reminded of the endless rust storms that clawed over the surface of Mars. It was nearly impossible to pierce the veil swirling about *Ironhawk*, and the sphere of space around the Techmarine became dimmed by an accumulated film of grit and oily micro-droplets from the world's polluted smog.

It had taken the majority of Atraxii's focus just to keep the volatile Stormhawk in formation with the rest of the Medusan Wing. The Iron Hands pilots had adopted attack pattern Indomitable as they closed upon the projected flight path of the ork bombers. Dektaan led the squadron, forming the tip of a triangular formation with Enych on his rear port flank and Atraxii at starboard. Colnex held at rear starboard of Atraxii to complete the formation. It was a versatile pattern, able to quickly project a front of three fighters, or have Colnex peel away from his tailing position to offer support, should the situation call for it.

It was imperative for the formation's effectiveness that Atraxii maintain consistent spacing from the other Stormhawks of the Medusan Wing. Yet *Ironhawk's* machine-spirit railed against his influence. It could not wrest control of the fighter from Atraxii, but it bucked his hold, delaying responses by

milliseconds or performing them in excess, making the Stormhawk jink and drift erratically.

‘Medusan Four,’ said Dektaan over the squadron vox. *‘Tighten your position and stabilise your flight pattern immediately. Contact with the enemy is imminent.’*

Atraxii blink-clicked an affirmation to Dektaan and tightened his grip on the control sticks. The Iron Father had bound the spirit of *Ironhawk* to his command through ironclad logic and sheer force of will. The Techmarine resisted his temper’s rising call, suffocating it beneath logic’s glacial touch. He was of iron – cold, calculated, and resolved. The animus of the Stormhawk would be brought to heel like a wild beast, and logic would be its muzzle.

Voitek sprinted through the packed rubble filling the street. The undisciplined gunfire of the mob of orks pursuing him buzzed past the Space Marine, sending up bursts of dust as the solid rounds struck debris and the pavement beneath his boots. There were nearly a hundred of the howling xenos as Voitek skidded around a corner, barking in their harsh mongrel tongue and waving their brutish weapons in the air.

Voitek increased his pace, his legs a dark blur beneath him as he charged towards a waist-high mound of rubble one hundred feet distant. The sergeant ate up the distance with his rapid tread. The orks filled the street as they charged after him. With three yards separating him from the mound, he leapt into the air, clearing the debris and rolling over his shoulder into a crouch.

‘Now!’ Voitek hissed. A pair of lights blinked on his visor display.

A battle-brother rose from beside Voitek, bracing in a wide stance as he levelled a heavy bolter at the oncoming xenos. The noise of the weapon was deafening. The roar echoed off the towering structures that surrounded the forge refinery’s centre. Greenskins ceased to be, reduced to puffs of stinking blood and gobbets of ragged flesh. The battle-brother swept the devastating chain of bolter fire across the front of the orks, who held their charge. The xenos whooped in harsh laughter at their kindred’s slaughter, before they joined them in decorating the pavement like an abattoir. Bits of meat and orphaned limbs carpeted the street, and beady red eyes stared vacantly at the Space Marine from the remains of blown-apart skulls.

The heavy bolter exhausted the last of its ammunition, and Voitek snapped up from cover. The handful of surviving orks leapt into the oblivion issuing from the barrel of his bolter, as precise shots cored torsos and obliterated heads. The

last of them met its end from the veteran warrior's combat blade, an efficient thrust through the eye and into the brain. Voitek whipped the blade free, and the ork dropped dead without a sound, its foul blood emptying out from where its eye had been in thick pulsing spurts.

Voitek's comrade knelt, stripping the depleted belt of high-calibre shells from the heavy bolter and feeding a new one in. The sergeant glanced down.

'Baanoth, ammunition?' asked Voitek.

Baanoth did not look up. 'This is the last for the heavy bolter.' The Space Marine chambered a round into the bulky cannon and hefted its weight as he stood.

'The smell,' Baanoth said bitterly. 'I shall never rid myself of their stench.'

'Embrace its repugnance, brother,' replied Voitek. 'Let it bolster your devotion for the purity of the machine.'

Baanoth nodded sharply. The two Iron Hands could already hear the clamouring din of more orks advancing their way.

Voitek tilted his head slightly as his vox-bead clicked. He turned to Baanoth. 'Vladoc is pulling his squad back to the Vostroyan lines. The xenos are extending on our flanks. We must withdraw before they encircle us.'

Baanoth turned back, hearing the growing alien howl that was coming, and shouldered his boltgun.

Voitek stepped forwards. 'Logic calls for tactical withdrawal according to protocol. Do not repeat the Great Failing by sacrificing rationality upon the altar of pride.'

'Affirmative,' Baanoth replied, turning and lowering his weapon. The pair of Space Marines began to proceed back through the streets, but Voitek halted, tilting his head once again.

'Brother-sergeant?'

'It is the Iron Father,' said Voitek, his bionic voice box failing to render the puzzlement in his words. 'He is marching to our lines, at the head of a maniple of skitarii.'

Colonel Dionaki watched the procession of skitarii marching towards her forward operations bunker through the crystal-blue lenses of her magnoculars. After weeks of petitioning the Adeptus Mechanicus forge temple to reinforce her frayed and depleted ranks, her wish had been granted. In the end, all it had taken was the influence of the darkly armoured warrior striding at the head of their column.

Contact between the Iron Hands and the Vostroyan 498th Fusiliers had been minimal to the point of nonexistence. Aside from a brief exchange with the pilot of one of their gunships, the Space Marines had operated independently of Dionaki's forces, engaging the xenos ahead of her entrenched positions. The effect the small number of transhumans had made upon the battleground was staggering, giving Dionaki time to reorganise units that had been cut to the bone from weeks of sustained fighting against the orks.

Dionaki strode to the bulkhead of her command bunker on black iron legs. She had lost both limbs on Quelx, when her command tank had been blown apart by the guns of eldar raiders. Her left arm was gone from the elbow down, amputated while quelling seditionists in the Fyrian Belt, replaced with further augmentation. She epitomised the Remnant of Fire, the unsanctioned name of her fighting unit. It was cobbled together from the ashes of dozens of regiments lost in combat. Lone survivors, handfuls of squads that were all that remained of the thousands they had once fought alongside, this was the substance of the 498th. Every one of them bore limbs of cold metal, a tangible representation of wounds that only existed behind their eyes. Sons and daughters of Vostroya, they revered Mars, and the exchange of high-functioning bionics for their service as defenders was mutually beneficial. They served with fanatical devotion, unafraid to face the death that they knew so intimately.

In spite of the loyal defence of Halitus IV by the Vostroyans, the Adeptus Mechanicus had refused to draw any of their skitarii from the defence of the forge temple. Dionaki's troops had been ground to mulch by the crushing waves of xenos without the support of the Adeptus Mechanicus' battle cohorts, pushed back across the forge refinery in a mass tactical withdrawal. It seemed as though the techno-magi were content to watch from their spires as the Vostroyans died.

Until the Space Marines had arrived.

Did the Adeptus Mechanicus now see that conditions on the ground were as critical as Dionaki had maintained all along, or was it the actions of the Iron Hands that compelled them to dispatch some of their forces? She did not imagine that the methods of negotiation employed by the Iron Hands had been congenial, even with the priests of Mars. Conviviality did not seem to be a priority for them.

Scaling the rockcrete steps of the command bunker, Dionaki walked from the squat enclosure and stood waiting. Columns of skitarii marched in perfect synchronicity, flanked by the tall, stalking forms of Ironstrider Ballistarii and Sydonian Dragoons. The ponderous bulk of Onager Dunecrawlers brought up

the rear of their formation, resembling mechanical crustaceans. Bulky eradication beamers protruded from the sides of their chassis, rippling with caged energies. Their stalwart armour and devastating weaponry was sorely needed.

Activity buzzed around Dionaki. Sub-commanders hurried from station to station while directing their soldiers with shouted commands. Heavy weapons and ammunition crates were hauled into recessed firing pits. Trenches filled with the remaining able-bodied soldiers under her command, while the wounded were pulled back to medicae tents or given the Emperor's Mercy if too far gone.

This was the final line. Dionaki and her troops had withdrawn again and again, each time their territory swallowed by the orks. The Adeptus Mechanicus forge temple rose behind the Vostroyans. If it fell, the entire installation would fall with it. If that eventuality did come to pass, Dionaki would not be alive to witness it.

The other Iron Hands emerged in silence from the smoking ruins, like revenants answering a call only they could hear. They came in pairs, their dark armour rent and pitted, their extensive bionics spraying sparks in flickering flashes. Their heavy boltguns were slung, starved of ammunition, and the blades they wielded in their place were blunted from mass killing at close quarters. Some came back alone. Some didn't come back at all.

Sparing a glance at the Space Marines who gathered with their leader in silent congress, Dionaki turned back to the trenches, and heard the skies began to churn with the laboured buzz of xenos aircraft. Air raid sirens began to wail across the front, and Dionaki could see the dust churned by the plodding footsteps of thousands of greenskins rise in the near distance.

'Air batteries, prepare to fire. All units stand ready,' Dionaki ordered into the vox-bead taped to her throat. 'Enemy contacts are inbound.'

The ork bombers were disgracefully ugly things. They bore some crude similarities in design with the fighters deployed by the greenskins, with long tubular fuselages and pairs of rattling, angled wings. The prow of each bomber was a gaping ramjet intake, rimmed with jagged scrap armour like broken teeth. The craft sagged and jinked sluggishly, weighed down with dozens of rockets and bombs that clung to the undersides of their fuselages like bloated ticks. Like their lighter kin, the bombers left trails of thick, caustic smoke behind them. This made their dishevelled chain formation, a dense smear of black across the sky, exceedingly simple to track, a tactical weakness their pilots were likely oblivious to as they charged headlong towards their targets.

The Medusan Wing hurtled towards the xenos formation, angling to strike them at their port flank. On Dektaan's command, the Stormhawks had reformed into the Omniscience attack pattern. The fighters formed a row, wingtip to wingtip, presenting their full forward firepower to the crowded column of ork bombers. The Iron Hands would fire a barrage into the xenos, then break to weave through the enemy formation and curl back upon it to strafe again.

Atraxii tightened his grip on *Ironhawk's* twitching control sticks, whispering Chapter maxims and battle meditation protocols to lock his frustration with the fighter's intransigence away beneath logic and discipline. Its spirit was fighting

him, still balking at his usurping of its reins from Oblexus. Read-outs flickered intermittently, and false returns blinked over his auspex.

Atraxii would not cede control to the spirit. He would not cast reason aside and perpetuate the failures that had defined his brotherhood. He aligned his thoughts with the tactical doctrines and protocols of the squadron. He measured distances between his comrades and *Ironhawk*, and calculated the projected inbound vectors of the xenos targets they would imminently face. His mind computed the algorithms effortlessly to divide the potential number of enemies with the ammunition remaining to him, the time needed to engage each foe, and adjusted his tactics accordingly to prescribed contingencies to balance his approach.

'I have visual,' said Enych. At that moment, Atraxii rattled through a dense bank of cloud, seeing the ork formation as a thin vibrating line ahead in the distance.

'I do not see any fighter escorts,' said Colnex. *'Though the ground below us is heaving with enemy hosts.'*

'They are both targeting the forge temple,' replied Dektaan. *'The skitarii are moving to reinforce our lines – we must focus on the bombers.'*

'What was it that provoked the Adeptus Mechanicus into parting with troops now?' asked Atraxii.

'The Iron Father,' replied Dektaan.

Atraxii frowned. He had told the Iron Father of his suspicions about the Mechanicus on Halitus IV, and Oblexus had shared the logic of them.

'Approaching maximum weapons range,' called out Colnex.

'Begin lacing target locks on those bombers,' ordered Dektaan. *'Open fire as soon as we are in range.'*

Had the tech-priests revealed to the Space Marine commander what they were hiding? The thought buzzed in Atraxii's mind. Or were the skitarii they dispatched to support the Iron Hands on the surface a concession to turn him away? Knowing the zealous guard the adepts placed over their secrets, the latter seemed the far more likely scenario.

Ironhawk began to pull ahead of the formation.

Focus. Atraxii chided himself for his lapse in concentration. He levered down his engine output, falling back in line with the rest of the Medusan Wing. Targeting reticules crystallised over the nearest ork bomber, bonding one of *Ironhawk's* krak missiles to each bloated aircraft. Screeds of data appeared beside each bracket, counting the range until the target locks solidified.

Ironhawk's machine-spirit flooded Atraxii with a deluge of hot rage. The

Stormhawk's engines flared, blasting it ahead of the rest of the Medusan Wing towards the xenos formation.

'Medusan Four, what are you doing?' snapped Dektaan. *'Reduce speed and return to formation immediately.'*

Alarms cried in shrill tones as multiple auspex returns appeared on Atraxii's scopes.

'Multiple contacts,' said Colnex as they appeared on his screen as well. *'Enemy fighters coming in.'*

'They are above us,' called out Enych.

'Scatter!' shouted Dektaan.

The craft of the Medusan Wing peeled apart as ork fighters dived into their midst. Flak and cannon fire filled the air with concussive blasts and streams of lashing tracers. Atraxii rolled aside as an ork fighter screamed past. He drew it in his sights and blew it apart with a searing blast from his las-talon. Another greenskin pilot rushed towards him like a missile. Atraxii punched *Ironhawk* into a dive as proximity warnings filled the cockpit with their urgent screams.

The ork hurtled overhead, and Atraxii hauled *Ironhawk* into a snap turn, doubling back to come up behind his opponent. Missile locks danced across the Techmarine's visor.

'No,' he snarled, blinking the insistent runes away and bringing up the assault cannons. *'We need them for the bombers.'*

Atraxii opened up with the wing-mounted rotary guns, their high-velocity rounds lancing into the xenos fighter. The ork pilot lost its left wing, causing the aircraft to pinwheel and spin in a pall of smoke. Another burst from the assault cannons shredded the cockpit, leaving the wreckage to dive through the clouds and smash against the façade of a refinery station.

'Medusan Four,' said Enych calmly. *'Enemy fighter has come in behind me. Move to assist.'*

Atraxii spotted Enych's Stormhawk from below, rolling and weaving to buck an ork pilot off him. Pulling *Ironhawk* in a swift turn followed by a dive, Atraxii swept down from above. He fired his las-talon. Withering streams of blinding energy slashed out, piercing the xenos fighter's armour and cooking off the unstable energies within its fuselage. The craft detonated in a spray of fire and shrapnel.

'Well met, Medusan Four.' Enych's vox transmission warbled with the interference of the debris between their Stormhawks.

Atraxii snapped his head around, searching for the ork bombers. They were

entering maximum range of Imperial lines.

‘Squadron lead,’ said Atraxii. ‘The bombers.’

‘*Affirmative,*’ replied Dektaan. ‘*Go with Medusan Three and make your attack run. We will follow suit once these fighters are neutralised. Go.*’

Atraxii and Enych sent their affirmations to Dektaan, and rocketed towards the chain of bombers. Clouds of stubber fire zipped past and clanged off *Ironhawk*’s hull as the bombers’ defensive guns angled towards them. Atraxii felt resistance in the control sticks. The Stormhawk’s animus wanted to continue hunting the fighters, seeking more agile prey than the slow-moving craft now framed in its crosshairs.

Atraxii dipped low, setting himself on an approach vector that placed him at an angle beneath the ork formation. He tagged a bomber for each missile he had at his disposal, targeting every other craft and transmitting the information in a databurst to Enych. Atraxii’s wingman reciprocated, locking onto the ships between his own targets.

‘Missiles, then strafe the survivors with assault cannons,’ said Atraxii.

‘*Affirmative,*’ responded Enych.

The pair of Stormhawks ate up the distance between them and the ork flyers. The targeting reticules blinked as they entered missile range.

‘Firing.’ Atraxii depressed a rune on his control stick. Six krak missiles screamed out from pods mounted on each side of *Ironhawk*’s fuselage on contrails of silver exhaust. The projectiles peeled off towards their targets as Enych’s barrage joined them, twisting and spiralling as they arrowed towards the greenskins.

The bombers’ defensive guns clipped three of the missiles, their warheads detonating harmlessly in the air. The others found their targets. In a ripple of cacophonous explosions, a third of the bombers were vaporised. The others, alerted to the oncoming Stormhawks, began to dive and release their payloads.

Streams of high-explosive munitions fell down upon the surface of the forge refinery, tumbling through the bursting clouds of flak thrown up by Imperial weapons emplacements and Hydra anti-air tanks. They landed like whips of fire along the surface of the forge refinery. Bombs exploded with thunderous detonations, sending smoke and dust mushrooming into the sky. The ork gunners had dropped their bombs too early, and as a result, the majority of them landed amongst the greenskins advancing upon the Imperial lines. Hordes of bellowing orks were obliterated as their fellows dropped indiscriminate death upon their heads.

Those bombs that did reach the Imperial lines were equally devastating. Explosions blasted craters into crowded trenches, scattering waves of severed limbs and bits of flesh in all directions. One of the magazines storing shells for the artillery pieces was struck, annihilating everything within a three hundred-foot radius. Seeing their advantage, mobs of roaring orks punched through the smoke and ruin to exploit the freshly hewn gaps in the lines of the Vostroyan and skitarii defenders.

‘Prioritise the targets that have yet to begin their attack runs. Target their payloads,’ barked Atraxii, his veneer of logical calm cracking as Imperial casualties mounted below. He opened fire with his assault cannons, raking his aim across the ventral arming racks of the ork bombers still clustered with munitions. High-velocity rounds shredded the unstable ordinance clutched beneath the ork craft, destroying the bombers in blossoming fireballs. Stuttering fire from his las-talon obliterated another of the bloated ork flyers, filling the air with smoke and twisting scrap.

Atraxii broke off his strafing run, firing his engines in a quick burst to gain distance as stubber fire buzzed around him. He came about in a tight turn, the G-force compressing him against the control throne. Firing his las-talon, Atraxii sheared the wing off a bomber, and watched as the craft spun to the ground in cascading flame. The remaining ork bombers were peeling away after dropping their payloads, boosting towards the safety of their fighter squadrons.

‘*Medusan Three and Four.*’ Dektaan’s voice crackled with distortion over the vox. ‘*Rally on my position. Priority target inbound.*’

Oblexus swung his cog-toothed axe into the ork’s face. The ancient weapon’s disrupter field flared as it made contact, liquefying the greenskin’s skull with concussive force as the honed blade carved clear through from cheek to temple. The top half of the alien’s head was gone, the lower half a fused stump of gurgling black fluid.

The Iron Father barged the dead xenos aside, bearing down on another ork encased in primitive power armour. A pneumatic claw locked around Oblexus’ forearm, halting the downswing of his axe. The Iron Father primed his plasma pistol and jammed it into the claw’s elbow joint.

The blast sheared the limb in half in a sapphire sunburst that scorched the lacquer of Oblexus’ armour down to the bare ceramite. His arm came free, still clutched by the severed ork claw. As the greenskin howled in shock and pain, the Iron Father tore the claw loose and smashed it into the ork’s face. The alien

crashed to the ground, and Oblexus struck it again and again until the scrap metal claw shattered. He dropped the broken tangle of metal beside the equally broken skull of the ork it had struck.

Chaos reigned all around Oblexus. He saw Vostroyan infantry valiantly holding strongpoints in the line. They blasted mobs of greenskins to ribbons of stinking meat, and then charged screaming into the throng with bayonets fixed or wielding lasrifles like cudgels once they exhausted their ammunition. Skitarii units performed coordinated manoeuvres orchestrated by neural commands from their primes and princeps, forming red-cloaked islands around Onager Dunecrawlers. The hulking walkers fired their eradication beamers into the ochre-green mass. Corridors were seared into the greenskin tide as whole swathes of the xenos simply ceased to be. The gaps were filled almost instantaneously, as more and more of the orks crushed their wounded to death in their blood-maddened desire to close with their enemy.

An ident-rune vanished on Oblexus' retinal display. Another warrior lost. His command shrank to twelve, twelve remaining from twenty. Assault Squad Vladoc had borne the brunt of the casualties, smashing down like mailed fists into the densest knots of resistance before blasting back out again. The Assault Marines were reduced to half-strength.

Sergeant Voitek shouldered a rocket launcher, emptying the tube into the base of a nearby tower. The rocket's blast set off the explosives the Tactical Marines had planted at the foundation of the structure prior to the battle. Smoke boiled out from the bottom of the tower as the building began to list.

A titanic groaning howl of rending metal filled the air as support columns snapped under the strain. The greenskins packed closer as they fought to reach the front line, oblivious to the leaning spire looming over their heads. The spine of the tower broke, and thousands of tons of rockcrete and metal came crashing down into the greenskin host.

The dust cloud from the collapsing tower blocked out the sky, and tremors shook the ground like an earthquake. Humans and orks were thrown from their feet, or disappeared into the gaping fissures that split out from the site of the crash. A wall of crushed rockcrete now separated the orks from the Imperial lines.

The Imperials seized the advantage, turning their guns upon the mobs of dazed greenskins trapped between them and the ruined tower. Heavy weapons fire mowed the xenos down, while precision barrages from siege mortars and short-range artillery pieces slaughtered the rest in exploding geysers of alien gore.

‘Rearm,’ ordered the Iron Father, receiving a chain of acknowledgement runes from his remaining brethren. He watched their ident-runes shift across his retinal display, consolidating on the ammunition caches he had dropped from the *Vengeance of Santar*. Setting off towards the nearest cache, Oblexus whipped his axe through the air, shaking loose the ork blood cooking off on its power field. He thumbed the release on his plasma pistol’s exhaust vane, which shrieked as the weapon bled out the accumulated heat generated by sustained fire.

Voitek sat upon an ammo crate as Oblexus arrived, slotting bolter rounds into magazines.

‘Well met, sergeant,’ said the Iron Father, reaching for a bandolier of krak grenades. ‘That manoeuvre will stall their advance and give the mortals time to consolidate.’

Voitek inclined his head, accepting the praise in silence. The air was filled with the stench of spilled fuel and charred flesh, saturated by the ever-present reek of the greenskins.

Oblexus turned his head, hearing a low rumble in the distance. Voitek got to his feet, taking a step forwards to stand beside the Iron Father.

Thin columns of black smog began to snake up from behind the fallen tower as the rumbling grew louder.

‘Get back to your positions,’ Oblexus ordered over the vox-net. He blink-clicked a rune on his retinal display.

‘Colonel Dionaki.’

Static filled the channel for a handful of seconds, before the interference-laden voice of the Vostroyan officer replied.

‘We hear it too.’

‘Get your weapon crews ready immediately,’ said the Iron Father as the first blocky red shape leapt from the fallen tower on thick screaming wheels.

‘Ork bikes are incoming.’

Atraxii rolled aside from the cluster of rockets that ripped past mere yards from *Ironhawk's* hull. He banked, setting the Stormhawk on its starboard wing as the aircraft turned tightly. The ork fighter tailing the Space Marine followed suit, pulling the same manoeuvre and spraying at the Space Marine with cannon fire.

With chains of flickering tracer fire filling the air around him, Atraxii increased speed, tightening the loop as the two fighters spun around each other. Atraxii's opponent, flying a craft that was larger and less manoeuvrable than his agile Stormhawk, began to lag behind, unable to keep the pace in its ramshackle scrap-iron fighter. The distance between the prow of the ork and Atraxii's tail grew, and slowly Atraxii began to edge closer to pulling behind his assailant.

Whether it realised the attack was imminent or was operating under some bestial instinct, the ork pilot blasted out of the loop in a spray of fumes. Atraxii levelled out behind the greenskin flyer, and took aim with his assault cannons. The twin-linked barrels screamed as they spun, drowning the ork in a fusillade of high-velocity shells. Rounds perforated the wings of the xenos fighter. Twitching and fighting to stay airborne, the ork ship bucked as a volley lanced through the oversized ramjet that comprised its fuselage.

The chassis of the ork fighter glowed with internal detonations, and a broad tongue of dirty fire sprayed out from its nose, as though it were some mythical

firedrake. The body of the aircraft peeled apart into a storm of fragments, which Atraxii dodged as he rolled beneath the explosion.

Warmth flooded Atraxii's mind. He flinched, resisting the ferocious influence of *Ironhawk's* machine-spirit. The fighter's animus slavered for combat, pushing the Stormhawk beyond its mechanical tolerances to achieve victory. It savoured each sprinting blast of its thrusters, each defiant roar of its weapons systems, the acrid musk of a shattered foe as the Space Marine fighter soared through the fires of its prey's demise.

Ironhawk loved this. It seeped into Atraxii's mind, little by little. It manifested subtly at first, as his lips peeling back over his silver teeth. The Techmarine's vision narrowed to the enemy in his crosshairs, blocking out all distractions. A feeling of savage triumph pulsed from his hearts and swept through his bloodstream as he left another xenos aircraft as wreckage tumbling from the sky.

No.

Atraxii gritted his teeth. He defied the obscene impulses of his biology, the anathema of the cold constancy of logic. *He* was in control, not *Ironhawk's* primeval intelligence.

Yet, Atraxii's mind expressed doubt. Not from his union with the volatile Stormhawk, but from experience. Logic alone had failed the Iron Father against these vile xenos. Oblexus had espoused that Atraxii rely on his instincts – not in place of his logic, but rather alloyed with it. It rankled the Techmarine, going against the doctrines of his clan, his Chapter, and the decades of rigorous training on Mars. How could he reconcile that which seemed so disparate?

A spike of adrenaline flashed up Atraxii's spine. He wrenched the control sticks to starboard, narrowly avoiding the blazing wreck of an ork bomber as it tumbled into the forge refinery below. Miniscule beads of perspiration bloomed on the Techmarine's brow as the sharp sensation withdrew.

Perhaps there was a place for instinct.

The greenskin bikes packed the narrow streets with their dishevelled bulk as they charged, throwing up curtains of dust and smoke in their wake. Their riders whooped and hollered in their croaking tongue, while gunners straddling buggies behind them opened fire with junk cannons and sent rockets corkscrewing into the air to fall well ahead of the Imperial lines they surged toward. More of the garish vehicles leapt down from the crumbling ridgeline formed by the collapsed tower, and bands of infantry began to pick their way through the rubble behind them.

Oblexus divided his remaining brethren across the front, stationing them where they would face the sternest attack and anchor the resolve of the mortals around them. Laden with grenades and ammunition bandoliers, the Iron Hands acknowledged the command of the Iron Father and marched to their positions.

The skitarii detachment fanned out in orderly firing lines above the trenches, clustered in crescent formations moored around their Dunecrawlers. Dust rattled from the vibrating hulls of the walkers as they continued to fire. The red-robed warriors of the skitarii Vanguard knelt in ready silence, plasma calivers and galvanic rifles locked to shoulders. From elevated perches, rangers steadied the long barrels of transuranic arquebuses on spikes sunk into the broken rockcrete, taking aim through the optics of the heavy, radiation-soaked rifles.

The Vostroyans slammed down against the walls of their trenches, taking aim with battered lasrifles. Blood and ash caked their faces. Men and women who had recently lost limbs still gripped laspistols, knives and grenades, dire resolve sketched across their weathered features. The Remnant of Fire had all died once before – they would not shrink from their duty with its return.

Oblexus leapt up onto the rampart, in full view of the Imperial forces spread around him. His scarlet gaze swept over the storm of xenos vehicles closing upon them, then across the patchwork of allies waiting to repel it.

‘Stand ready!’ the Iron Father roared, levelling his axe at the charging greenskins. ‘Reload and prime weapons. Maintain proper spacing. Consolidate overlapping fields of enfilading fire to ensure optimum kill-ratios.’

The ragged ranks of the Remnant of Fire readied themselves, grim resolve etched upon their weathered and soot-blackened faces. Hands of dark metal clicked against clutched lasguns. Bionic limbs ground and wept trails of sparks from damaged servos.

‘The Emperor does not issue salvation to those who forsake their duty,’ continued Oblexus. ‘Fight and survive, fight and die. Duty is the imperative. Nothing less is acceptable.’

The remaining Iron Hands, spread along the front line, stood upon the ramparts in union with the Iron Father. The skitarii remained silent, though Oblexus’ visor display blinked with affirmations from the Adeptus Mechanicus force’s princeps and primes conveying their readiness.

Oblexus thumbed the activation rune of his power axe, throwing a halo of stark illumination into the wan, dusty air as lightning shivered across its relic blade.

‘Fire!’

The air filled with the whistling hiss of artillery as the Imperials shelled the

oncoming xenos. Bikes were upended as high explosives struck, spinning them end over end through the air before smashing down onto their fellows. Eradication beamers fired from the Dunecrawlers swept across their rumbling ranks, erasing the greenskin bikers in balls of fragmented light.

‘Bring those guns to bear, now!’ barked Oblexus to the crew of a Hydra flak tank.

The Hydra’s chassis groaned as its crew directed the vehicle’s quad autocannons down from targeting the skies to ground level. Vostroyan infantry scattered as the tank’s guns opened fire in a deafening roar. Brass casings the length of a man’s forearm streamed from the Hydra to clatter in a spread around it, while robed tech-priests swung incense over its pitted hull, oblivious to the din.

The Hydra sowed red ruin through the charging orks. Clouds of blood and smoke filled the path of the autocannons as the flak tank’s crew dragged their fire across the greenskin advance. Bikes were blown apart, their crews shredded. More vehicles took their place, bikes and four-wheeled buggies that were little more than iron cages studded with oversized weapons. The ork riders, their faces daubed in scarlet paint, roared with wild laughter amidst the pandemonium as they increased their speed.

Oblexus glowered at the xenos’ glee as they approached. This was the epitome of life to a greenskin, a savage melee with a hardened foe to fight, a sublime and rapturous act committed almost as worship to their heathen deities. Riding upon their godless abominable machines, they were the antithesis of everything the Iron Father represented – uncontrolled, illogical and obscenely biological. The sting of combat stimulants flooded Oblexus’ remaining flesh, and his bionic fists clicked as he tightened his grip on his axe and plasma pistol.

By the Gorgon, he would savour their extermination.

-16.0-

From above and below, the central forge refinery of Halitus IV was a war zone. Aircraft twisted and dived through shrouds of smog and exploding flak, the defeated raining down broken onto the heads of the warriors wading through the churning melee beneath them. Vast stores of refined promethium burned in towering infernos, drowning the installation in caustic, combustible rain. Detonations ripped through entire sectors of the floating structure as storage facilities exploded. The banks of anti-grav arrays supporting the forge refinery laboured to keep it afloat, tilting the installation haphazardly as the immense plasma drives faltered and stuttered intermittently.

Carving through the tortured skies, Atraxii peeled away from an ork fighter as *Ironhawk's* las-talon blasted it to splinters. The Stormhawk interceptors of the Medusan Wing hung close together in the battle sphere, combining their fire against enemies and coming to each other's aid when they fell under attack from reckless ork pilots. The airspace was filled with the xenos aircraft, and though the Iron Hands proved to be the superior pilots in their dogfights, the numerical advantage, as it had ever been when confronting greenskins, was strongly against them. The ebon hulls of the Stormhawks became pitted and scorched as the effects of sustained battle began to mount against the Medusan Wing.

Atraxii's eyes flicked over a dozen read-outs as he blasted into a dense veil of

fog, seeking to shake a greenskin fighter from his tail. Fuel was fast becoming a serious concern, as was his dwindling ammunition supply. The reserves for the assault cannons were down to twenty per cent, and the capacitor on *Ironhawk's* las-talon was in danger of overloading from prolonged firing. If he pushed it much further, the energy cannon would burn itself to slag. He had a pair of krak missiles remaining, held back as a precaution.

Cannon fire slashed around *Ironhawk*. The ork fighter held steadily on Atraxii's rear scopes, tenaciously clinging to him. The Techmarine scanned his forward auspex and, finding what he was searching for, broke to port. The greenskin followed suit, continuing to spray fire down at *Ironhawk*.

Once he had accepted the utility provided by melding his tactical doctrines with his natural instinct, the fiery defiance exhibited by the machine-spirit of *Ironhawk* had ebbed. Atraxii had ceded no control or influence to the savage animus, but allowing forces beyond logic to guide the Stormhawk in battle appeared to kindle a fledgling bond between it and the pilot. The fighter ceased to rail at Atraxii's commands, giving him the focus needed to tear xenos squadrons from the sky.

Atraxii hauled back on the control sticks, pulling *Ironhawk* up into the path of a distant ork fighter. Spinning up the assault cannons, Atraxii fired a pair of short bursts at the greenskin. The volleys zipped over and around the xenos aircraft, but failed to score any damage other than a glancing hit against its prow. The Techmarine had succeeded in attracting the attention of its pilot.

The ork fighter rocketed towards Atraxii on a waving contrail of oily exhaust. The Space Marine could practically see the crazed pilot of the fighter slaving and barking challenges from the open cockpit as it hurtled closer. Fire blazed from its wing-mounted cannons, poorly aimed and erratic. Furious to have its prey set upon by a usurper, the ork behind *Ironhawk* redoubled its efforts, blasting closer.

A round skittered over *Ironhawk's* starboard wing, bucking the fighter and tearing a deep furrow down the ceramite. Atraxii could not tell if the shot had come from the enemy in front of or behind him. The Stormhawk shivered, and urgent proximity alarms began to blare as the two aircraft blasted towards each other on a collision course. Atraxii loathed the greenskins. He hated them with every drop of his blood, every plate of iron. But his hatred did not blind him to what the xenos were capable of, or what they were going to do.

Atraxii was close enough now to see the ork ahead of him clearly. The brute had smashed the canopy of its cockpit open, punching a meaty fist through the

gap to fire a crude pistol at *Ironhawk*. Atraxii's eyes flicked to the proximity warning, watching the runes rapidly spool down in blinking ruby text.

0600.00 feet.

0450.00 feet.

Atraxii gritted his teeth, holding course as the ork fighter filled his entire viewscreen.

0300.00 feet.

The control sticks compressed, buckling slightly in his grip.

0150.00 feet.

Atraxii roared, punching *Ironhawk* down into a spiralling dive. The hull shuddered in the jarring wake of the xenos ramjet as it rocketed overhead, close enough to scorch the lacquer from the Stormhawk's tail. So consumed with their frenzy to destroy the Space Marine, the ork pilots were blind to one another's screaming, unstoppable advance, until the very last moment.

The ork fighters collided in mid-air in a blooming fireball of expanding shrapnel. The shock wave swept out in all directions, throwing *Ironhawk* end over end. Bits of jagged metal clawed across the hull, tearing tracks like silver tears down the matte-black armour. A section of Atraxii's panoramic viewscreen blanked as a sensor cluster sheared away. He fought to regain control of the Stormhawk and pull it out of its tumbling dive.

'*Medusan Four.*' Atraxii could barely hear Dektaan's voice over the disjointed chorus of conflicting alarms. '*What is your status? Are you hit?*'

Atraxii clenched his teeth hard enough to feel them shift in his jaw. He fired a burst from the Stormhawk's thrusters, slowing his tumbling cartwheel. Wrenching the control sticks to starboard, he stomped down on the tail rudder pedals at his feet. *Ironhawk* blasted sideways, robbed of its momentum as it began to level off.

'*Medusan Four, respond.*'

Atraxii pushed a breath through his teeth as he brought *Ironhawk* back under control. 'I have not been seriously damaged.'

'*Confirmed,*' Dektaan replied. '*Rally on my position immediately. Auspex is detecting a massed anomaly, closing fast.*'

With a mechanical roar, Oblexus sidestepped the ork bike as it cleared the ground, simultaneously slashing down with his power axe in a two-handed grip. The energised blade sheared through the torso of the xenos rider, splitting it from collar to hip. Oblexus continued his follow through, driving the axe through the

ramshackle chassis of the warbike and bisecting it into twin mounds of sparking scrap metal and spurting fuel lines.

The Iron Father flung himself to the side, rolling away from another ork biker swinging a rattling flail. He came up in a crouch and drew his plasma pistol. A precision blast vaporised the greenskin's head. The bike careened on, smashing its front tyre down into a trench and pitching the headless corpse through the air to vanish amidst the calamity of the battlefield.

All semblance of order had disintegrated. The Imperial forces had mounted a ferocious defence of the trench line. The kill-zone before them was a scrapyard of broken ork vehicles and broken alien bodies. Disciplined fusillades of las- and solid-shot fire scythed down the pressing greenskins, making them pay dearly for each bloody yard they gained.

But onwards the orks came, frothing over yellowed tusks, and beady red eyes blazing with frenzy for the slaughter. The greenskins began to punch holes into weakened portions of the trench line. They flooded into the industrial earthworks of broken rockcrete. The Vostroyans began to separate, cut off into shrinking islands of defenders to be butchered by the xenos.

The skitarii commanders had altered their stratagems, dividing their forces and forming lines of warriors designated for close combat. The red-robed infantry engaged the xenos hand-to-hand, slicing their foes apart with transonic swords and pulping bodies with arc mauls. Rangers stood behind them firing volleys from galvanic rifles, coring torsos and blasting apart ork skulls.

Oblexus and the Iron Hands waded through the clash reaping a devastating tally but without the numbers to hold back the tide. He watched an Ironstrider struggle as a mob of greenskins crawled up its legs, dragging the spindly walker to the ground to disappear under the clamouring hordes. A crippling blast threw dozens from their feet as a Dunecrawler exploded, brought low by massed detonations from the bombs of ork sappers.

The ground beneath Oblexus' boots quaked, and he turned his head as a deafening roar filled the air.

The banks of ochre cloud ahead of the battle glowed with a point of growing light like a miniature star. The light punched through the boiling cloud, arcing down towards the surface on a column of fire. Magnifying the image with his enhanced visor, Oblexus glimpsed a black dot at the centre of the light, and a shudder rippled over his remaining flesh.

'Incoming!' he barked, the words booming like a loudspeaker from his snarling iron mask. 'Orbital round, incoming!'

The collapsed tower vanished in a blinding flash of nuclear fire. Hundreds of orks were incinerated in the searing blast, others further out crushed to ruin by the shock wave that followed. A colossal mushroom cloud the colour of bruised flesh unfolded from the blast crater, blooming into the ravaged sky on tendrils of irradiated smoke.

Oblexus' visor tinted, and his audio systems dampened the din to compensate for the blast. The shock wave was strong enough to hurl men and xenos from their feet even where he stood at the fore of the trench line three hundred yards away, as dust and rock slashed against the battered ceramite of his armour.

The orks cheered in savage revelry as the fallen tower was blasted to dust and broken glass. They began to shout, a rhythmic guttural bark that repeated again and again. The Iron Father realised that the orks were chanting, as a gargantuan shape slowly darkened the clouds above the battlefield, its prow still glowing from the ruin it had just unleashed. The tortured skies and atmosphere of Halitus IV had plagued long-distance scans and communications since before the Iron Hands had made planetfall, but could such distortion truly mask such a colossal arrival?

'Brothers,' said Oblexus over the Iron Hands' vox-channel. 'Withdraw to the forge temple. The xenos have brought their starship into the atmosphere.'

It materialised from the churning shrouds of toxic cloud like a deep-sea leviathan rising from the darkness of an ocean's depths. Waves of incinerated atmosphere rippled out from it as it ploughed down from the void. A protruding prow parted the nimbus veil, fashioned into a scrap-iron jawline, as if come to devour the forge refinery hovering before it. The misshapen barrels of cannons filled the space between the warship's jaws, the one at its centre a smouldering red from firing upon the installation.

Atraxii recognised the looming vessel as it edged over the forge refinery. He had participated in void skirmishes against its like before. Though he did not know the mongrel title given to this type of vessel by the greenskins, in the Imperium of Mankind, it bore a name.

Terror ship.

The Iron Hands Techmarine realised how the orks had been capable of fielding so many fighters. Where other ork warships were packed with as many weapons batteries as their crews could bolt and solder on to their superstructures, huge sections of the terror ship's rust-eaten hull had been cut away, the space utilised instead to house squadrons of xenos fighters. The ship lumbered on flickering engines, drifting precariously over the lip of the forge refinery.

'The ship barely reached the installation under its own power,' said Atraxii.

‘The greenskins launched this raid for fuel,’ said Enych. *‘The promethium they stole was sent to power this monstrosity.’*

‘Typical,’ scoffed Colnex. *‘They use the entirety of their pilfering to bring the warship into the fray.’*

‘Look,’ called out Atraxii, skirting *Ironhawk* below the terror ship but keeping his distance from its guns and swarming fighter escorts. Ork landers were hurtling down upon a promethium storage facility. Thick lengths of segmented hose and piping trailed from the landers, connecting them to the terror ship like the strings of crude puppets. Teams of greenskins leapt from the landers, tearing through plasteel containment blisters and sinking the hose lines into the silos of fuel within.

‘One of the refinery’s primary reservoirs,’ replied Colnex. *‘The orks seek to siphon that promethium.’*

Atraxii’s glowing eyes narrowed behind his helmet visor. ‘That is enough fuel for the xenos to launch raids against any of the surrounding systems.’

‘Then it must be destroyed,’ said Dektaan with finality. *‘Medusan Wing, form up on my lead. We are tearing that abomination out of the sky.’*

Oblexus chanted a prayer to appease the spirit inhabiting his plasma pistol as he adjusted the weapon’s sizzling focusing rings. He swung out from cover, firing into a knot of roaring orks charging his barricade of broken rockcrete. Three died, their flesh blackened and seared away, shoved aside by their frenzied kin.

The Iron Father’s backpack-mounted pincer claw shot out, seizing one of the greenskins by the throat. The claw closed, snapping the ork’s neck with a series of wet pops. The claw flung the corpse into the alien’s howling fellows, bowling them to the ground. Oblexus leapt forwards, butchering the thrashing beasts with his power axe.

Oblexus’ visor display beeped twice in rapid succession. He turned, sprinting down the street. Orks pursued him, oblivious to the darkening shadow looming over them.

Vladoc smashed down into the orks, leaving a crater of shattered rockcrete and broken bodies. The Assault sergeant tore into the rampaging aliens as Oblexus reached the next cover point. The Iron Father skidded behind an overturned Vostroyan troop transport, and sent a databurst to Vladoc, who promptly blasted into the air, scorching nearby greenskins with the flames of his jump pack.

The Iron Hands had been engaged in running battles since the ork terror ship had bombarded the Imperial lines into ruin. They moved back in a staggered

advance leading back to the forge temple at the centre of the floating refinery city, covering one another as they withdrew from the xenos. Looking up, Oblexus saw that the monolithic structure now hung over them, a colossal pyramid of brass and cogwork spires.

A thunderous detonation shook the ground beneath Oblexus' boots, nearly causing him to stumble in spite of his armour's stabilisers. Whipping tides of dust shot through the gaps between buildings as fire leapt up into the sky. The ork ship had continued its bombardment of the surface, firing a creeping barrage towards the temple. Whooping with cruel laughter in the shadow of their warship, the greenskins attacked with redoubled ferocity, despite losing swathes of warriors in each of the terror ship's blasts.

Oblexus charged to the rallying point, twisting and firing his plasma pistol behind him at the pursuing xenos. Seeing a firing line of skitarii ahead, he broadcast his ident-burst across the noosphere. The skitarii re-aimed their weapons, allowing the Iron Father to pass.

Coming to a halt, Oblexus crouched next to Voitek, who was busily stripping a track of ruined, gore-gummed teeth from his chainsword. His other brethren knelt in firing positions around him, forming a crescent before the central avenue leading into the forge temple behind them. Nine were left standing. The tactical withdrawal to this position had cost much Medusan blood. Vladoc landed in a crunch of fractured rockcrete beside Oblexus, catching a spare bolt pistol magazine from a brother and reloading his weapon.

The Iron Father looked up as his vox crackled. The voice was distorted, thin and flawed by static, but Oblexus heard it clearly.

'This is Dionaki, respond.'

Oblexus had not expected there to be any survivors from the shattered Astra Militarum lines. He had witnessed almost the entire force of skitarii obliterated by the terror ship's bombardment and had assumed the mortals had shared their fate. This Vostroyan was more resourceful than he had anticipated.

'Oblexus of the Iron Hands,' he replied. 'Acknowledging your transmission.'

'My lord, I am moving my surviving elements to your position. Do not fire upon us.'

'Colonel, do you require assistance?'

'Negative,' Dionaki replied flatly. *'We can reach you without intervention.'*

Oblexus shot a sidelong glance at Voitek, who shrugged indifferently as he laid a fresh track of teeth into the battered chainsword.

'Acknowledged, colonel.'

Within the hour, Oblexus spotted a pair of ragged columns moving swiftly through the ruins towards them. The black fatigues of the Remnant of Fire were torn and clotted with dust and blood. The soldiers carried as much ammunition as they could salvage during their withdrawal, even managing to haul a pair of siege mortars with them.

Oblexus noticed that there were no wounded. Dionaki had been logical to leave them behind to stall the xenos advance, buying her viable elements a window to rendezvous at the forge temple. The Iron Father had seen many a commander lose their resolve under such conditions, and the stern efficiency with which the Vostroyan had conducted this war had earned her his respect.

‘Well met, colonel,’ said Oblexus, thudding a fist against his chest.

Dionaki ran a gloved hand across her face, wiping grime from the network of scars that covered it.

‘We are a shadow of our former strength, my lord. There is little we can do against a void ship, but we will hold until we fall.’

‘As if simply dying were your purpose,’ uttered a modulated voice from behind them.

Oblexus turned to see the cowed form of Adept Wyn striding towards them with her gliding gait. The clawing wind and smoke rippled across her heavy robes. The tech-priest’s ranger bodyguard followed in her shadow, the air around her thick with ozone as the skitarii’s internal auspex scried the area for threats.

Wyn’s optics panned to Dionaki, and the adept released what might have been the mechanical equivalent of a sigh.

‘I shall refrain from binharic communication,’ she rasped in her flesh voice. ‘For the sake of those incapable of comprehension.’

Dionaki made a show of unclipping the restraint strap on her holstered laspistol, before crossing her arms in a buzzing snarl of damaged servos. The adept’s ranger guardian twitched the barrel of her galvanic rifle in the Vostroyan’s direction, centring it over her chest.

Wyn continued, as if oblivious or simply above concern. ‘The forge temple and its vaults are now in jeopardy. Your inability to restrict the progress of the xenos is most unacceptable.’

‘What are you keeping here?’ Dionaki demanded. ‘What are you hiding that has drawn the greenskins here in such force?’

‘No,’ said Oblexus, stepping forwards to within a pace of the adept. ‘The xenos came here to steal promethium, that much is true.’

The Iron Father’s snarling mask turned to the hooded tech-priest. ‘Yet you *are*

hiding something within these vaults.’ He pointed to the hazy gargantuan outline of the ork terror ship hanging in the blazing sky behind them. ‘Keeping your skitarii from engaging the enemy has cast our efforts to pacify this assault, and the survival of this installation, into jeopardy. Tell me what is here that would cause such illogic, or I shall take my brothers and depart this world. We can still withdraw to orbit, but you will burn with this temple.’

‘That course of action would not serve your interest,’ rasped Wyn.

‘Then we are in agreement,’ replied Oblexus, his eye lenses like smouldering coals. ‘Take me to the vault. Now.’

The interceptors of the Medusan Wing burned their engines hot, reforming into the Indomitable attack pattern as they hurtled towards the ork terror ship. Atraxii snarled as he glimpsed the xenos fighters hovering around its bulk like flies circling a beast. Targeting reticules snapped into focus around them, tagging each scrap-fighter in scarlet brackets. As if sensing the target locks, the xenos craft peeled away from the terror ship towards the Medusan Wing on an intercept course.

‘Fighters, coming in!’ Atraxii called out. ‘Three marks at two-ten, six others behind them.’

‘Spool up assault cannons and las-talons,’ barked Dektaan. ‘Reserve missiles for the terror ship, designated Primary Target.’

Ironhawk’s spirit loosed a silent roar of predatory fury through its iron bones, prompting a rush of battle stimulants through Atraxii’s bloodstream. The ork scrap-fighters closed, already firing undisciplined volleys of rockets and cannon rounds that dropped ineffectually before the Medusan Wing. Atraxii silenced the chorus of chimes and alarms ringing through the cockpit, running scans of the airspace to his left to compensate for the blanked viewscreen caused by the destroyed sensor bundle.

The Techmarine’s focus shrank to a single craft at the head of the xenos squadron. The ork ace blurred towards him. It lacked the recklessness to fire its weapons prematurely, saving its payload for the dogfights rapidly coming its way as the two forces collided.

The air within the Adeptus Mechanicus vault was frigid. Breath feathered out from between Dionaki’s clenched teeth, and she shivered, clearly unaccustomed to the icy conditions after years amid the sweltering forges and refineries above. Oblexus registered the change in temperature via his armour’s diagnostics, though it had no perceptible impact upon the bionics and genehanced physiology

of the Space Marine.

The catacombs lay deep beneath the surface of the forge temple, buried under thundering foundries resounding with the toll of a thousand hammers. The party passed through sealed bulkheads and past the unblinking gaze of robotic sentinels and automated laser turrets. As a final, densely armoured gateway parted before them on grinding tracks, Adept Wyn led the party into the vault proper.

They moved down an unlit corridor of dark metal, the vault's walls sloping up at the sides to render it into a hexagonal aspect. The ceiling was threaded with thick, segmented cables, and a thin carpet of mist drifted lazily over the floor plating. The cog-and-skull icon adorned the walls in laser-etched bronze, and Oblexus detected the energy signature of stasis fields from concealed partitions behind the icon.

'The majority of the treasures contained here are devoid of physical form,' rasped Adept Wyn as she glided ahead of Oblexus and Dionaki. 'Knowledge, greatest of the gifts from the Omnissiah, cannot be broken, or have its grandeur abraded away to dust by the relentless march of time. Only when it is forgotten is it truly, definitively lost.'

The wraith-like magi stopped, mist spilling around the hem of her robes like ripples over still water. The skitarii ranger clanked to a halt beside her. While the sniper may have seemed calm to the unenhanced, Oblexus could detect the heightened battle protocols buzzing through her and smell the acrid sharpness of stimulants racing through her base organics. She was tense, as much as a vaunted skitarii sharpshooter could be.

'And yet, there are occurrences when relics are discovered across the void. This installation's vaults have served on eighteen such instances since its inception, as a way station protecting such items for transit to sacred Mars, so that the secrets they contain may be unlocked.'

Slowly, Adept Wyn turned to face Oblexus, her movements so smooth and silent that it was as if she had no weight at all. 'Son of Medusa, are you certain of the path you walk upon?'

Dionaki's eyes flashed up at the Iron Father, her jaw set.

'Events such as these have the potential to result in repercussions of adverse consequence. This bears your consideration.'

'Enough posturing.' Oblexus' mechanical voice was rendered even harsher within the close confines of the vault. 'Repetition of what I have said will serve no purpose.'

‘Very well, but regardless, the relic contained within is bound for Mars, and cannot be diverted from its course.’

The cowl of Wyn’s robes twitched slightly. ‘A commonality.’

Oblexus and Dionaki remained silent.

‘Contrition,’ said Wyn quietly after a moment. ‘An attempt at humour.’

The Cult Mechanicus adept raised a robed arm. A pair of serpentine mehadendrites slithered from the sleeve, undulating through the air before coming to rest over the cog-and-skull icon set into the wall beside them. A tiny aperture iris peeled open in the centre of the icon. The mehadendrites slipped into the aperture with a sharp click. Adept Wyn gave a brief shudder and drew them back within her robes.

For several moments, nothing happened. Dionaki flexed her hands, the metal fingers slipping against one another like dry leaves dancing over stone. Oblexus considered the bronze icon on the wall, before he detected a power surge from behind it.

With a gasp of thin vapour, the outline of a panel appeared in blue light around the cog-and-skull icon. With a muted clunk of concealed machinery, the panel opened outwards, exposing a rectangular stasis chamber behind it. The object within the crackling stasis field hung suspended in pale azure light. Oblexus took three full seconds to observe the object, to verify what it was.

Wyn took a gliding step forwards, freezing as the Iron Father’s power axe blurred into her path.

‘Take another step, adept,’ growled Oblexus, ‘and I will leave precisely enough of you alive to watch the xenos burn this temple to cinders.’

-18.0-

The air between the Medusan Wing and the squadron of ork scrap-fighters exploded with detonating ordnance. Fighters twisted through the burning pall, seeking each other's ruin at blistering speed. Blazing chains of tracer fire linked them for heartbeats, before the fallen vanished in clouds of vaporised metal.

Atraxii wove through the chaos of the battle, pushing his skill as a pilot to the limit and relying on his burgeoning union with *Ironhawk's* primal machine-spirit to sharpen his abilities. The Stormhawk interceptor flew faster, turned sharper and was more devastating with its weapons now that the craft and its pilot were in sync. It was clear to the Techmarine how the Iron Father had so dominated the skies with the venerable machine.

Through the blur of duelling fighters and curtains of exploding flak, the Techmarine sought out his target. The ork ace was easy enough to recognise from the garish flames crudely daubed on the hull of its scrap-fighter, but even such a provocative target was difficult to locate amidst the battle.

As he dived down to tail a xenos fighter from above, Atraxii's bionic eyes traced the targeting reticule for *Ironhawk's* underslung las-talon as he swung behind his target. The brackets weaved over the tail of the rattling aircraft, piercing through the thick plume of exhaust it left in its wake. Atraxii tightened his grip on the control sticks, thumb hovering just above the firing rune.

The reticule strobed, emitting a low chime as the weapon's targeting lasers made contact. Atraxii punched down on the rune. A stuttered pair of energy blasts lanced out from the las-talon and into the ork fighter. The craft's rust-eaten armour boiled away to slag as the bolts burned through its superstructure, detonating its fuel tanks with a *krump*. The fighter disintegrated, its wreckage spinning down through the dense clouds of Halitus IV.

'Medusan Four.' Dektaan's voice filled Atraxii's helm. *'Rally on my location.'*

The lead fighter of the Medusan Wing's ident-rune leapt up onto Atraxii's retinal display. He pulled *Ironhawk* into a climbing turn in Dektaan's direction, keeping his flight path serpentine to shake loose any enemy pilots. Atraxii saw the ident-runes for Colnex and Enych spin about his display, staying in close contact to support one another.

Atraxii pulled *Ironhawk* alongside Dektaan's port flank, dipping his wing in salute.

'Follow me in, Medusan Four,' said Dektaan. *'We are engaging Primary Target with an attack run while Medusan Two and Three hold its escorts.'*

'Affirmative,' replied Atraxii.

The two Stormhawks dived below the storm of battling fighters and blasted towards the massive ork warship. Atraxii's eyes flicked over his scopes and auspex. For the moment, no enemy fighters had peeled off to intercept them.

'We should come in low,' called out Atraxii. He pulled up a hololith schematic of the ork vessel and the promethium reservoir it had moored itself to. *'If we strike the fuel intakes, it may be enough to disrupt or potentially destroy Primary Target.'*

'Show me.'

Atraxii blink-clicked an icon on his retinal display, transmitting the hololith to Dektaan. The squadron lead was silent for a heartbeat as he analysed the data.

'Granted. With our limited ordnance, it is the course with the highest probability of success. Prepare to engage.'

A freezing blade stabbed into Atraxii's mind. He banked, rolling *Ironhawk* aside as a volley of rockets screamed past. A pair of missiles smashed into Dektaan's Stormhawk, kicking the fighter into a flaming tailspin. The garish silhouette of the greenskin ace ripped past Atraxii, closing on Dektaan's reeling fighter to claim its kill.

'Brother!' Atraxii broke from targeting the fuel lines tethered to the terror ship to come to the leader of the Medusan Wing's aid.

'No!' Dektaan's voice could barely be heard over a buzzing squall of distortion.

‘Stay on your target. I will draw it off as long as—’

The vox-link severed in a burst of static. Atraxii shunted down the snarl of rage bubbling up from his chest and hauled *Ironhawk* back on course for the attack run. His instruments strained to parse through the tempest of flak and exploding fighters filling the air, rendering his scopes and auspex effectively blind. He did not see Dektaan fall, but lost his ident-rune as it vanished from his retinal display. Neither could Atraxii see the ork pilot that had killed him.

Atraxii pushed a deep breath through his teeth. He blink-clicked away his overloaded instruments, leaving nothing in his visor but the targeting systems for his two remaining krak missiles. He glared down at the juddering fuel intakes connected to the xenos warship, sunk into the promethium reservoir to syphon its fuel. Atraxii laced the targeting reticule over the first of them.

Screeds of data from *Ironhawk*’s rangefinders scrolled beside the terror ship in neat lines of Ekfrasi runes. Atraxii pushed the engines to full power, rapidly closing to maximum range for a firing solution as the distance between them quickly evaporated. The brackets flashed into deep crimson, and the Stormhawk’s machine-spirit sang with a ringing chime. Atraxii fired.

The krak missile leapt free of the pod mounted on *Ironhawk*’s fuselage, roaring on a column of white-hot flame. It tore towards the ork warship, blistering the air around it into shimmering heat haze. Within the armoured nose cone of the missile, the weapon’s crude animus primed its explosive payload. It was ready to hurl itself into oblivion and drag the enemy down into the blackness with it.

A buzzing storm of metallic splinters tore into the krak missile from above. The warhead detonated, scattering flame and shrapnel harmlessly across the terror ship’s scrap-iron hull.

Fury pulsed in insistent chains down Atraxii’s spine as the ork ace intercepted the missile. *Ironhawk*’s spirit howled in silence. Atraxii blinked the targeting data for his last krak missile into transparency on his peripheral vision and spun up his assault cannons.

The Techmarine was finished playing games with the abominable greenskin pilot. The ork needed to die, and it needed to die now. He felt the spirit of *Ironhawk* howl its assent through the fighter’s bones as the engines burned hotter. Atraxii scanned through the miasma of smoke and dense cloud, and spotted his target.

The ork ace blasted past Atraxii, pulling its nose around in a skidding flip to come up behind him. Missile warnings blared in the cockpit as Atraxii fired the infernum halo launcher, catching the lethal projectiles in a cloud of blinding

countermeasures that obscured him from his pursuer. The Techmarine blasted ahead of the trailing xenos scrap-fighter, gathering distance before executing a wing-over.

Bracing for the G-force, Atraxii rolled *Ironhawk's* wings as he banked the fighter into a sharp turn. The Stormhawk rattled as momentum clawed at its superstructure. Slashing through a cloudbank, Atraxii pulled the nose of the fighter around, now set head on against the greenskin.

Both fighters opened fire simultaneously. Assault cannon fire met the fusillade from the ork's high-calibre guns to form a firestorm of high-velocity death. Atraxii swayed and rolled *Ironhawk* through the storm, keeping the ork in his crosshairs. Impacts hammered across the hull, bucking the craft and shearing away plates of ablative ceramite armour. Atraxii maintained his fire, dragging it across the greenskin's left wing in a burst of flame and smoke.

The ork banked, fleeing for the security of the terror ship's point defence guns. Atraxii surged after it, following the juddering trail of smoke the xenos left in its wake. He blink-clicked a rune on his retinal display, re-engaging the targeting system for his last krak missile. The targeting reticule danced over the ork fighter. Atraxii gripped the control sticks tighter, lacing the brackets over the labouring craft's tail.

Alarms sang as balls of exploding smoke erupted in a wall around the fighters. Atraxii had entered the range of the terror ship's guns. While inaccurate, the sheer volume of shots fired from the side of the ork warship guaranteed that staying this close would see Atraxii dead.

The missile lock chimed. A thin smile ghosted across Atraxii's face. He fired the missile and peeled away, rocketing out of the range of the terror ship's guns.

The krak missile smashed into the ork ace's tail, sending the fighter tumbling end over end beneath the terror ship in a whirlwind of smoke and flame. Unable to control the scrap-fighter, the ork within was helpless as it rocketed straight into one of the pulsing fuel intake lines.

The fighter exploded, setting the promethium within the fuel line alight in both directions. Ignited fuel blasted from the cable like a chain of fire. The terror ship rocked as its fuel detonated, listing as if struck by a torpedo.

The fire raced down the intake line, burning everything in its path before it reached the promethium reservoir.

A blinding flash filled the sky. A searing column of screaming fire blasted up through the ork terror ship, splitting the vessel in two. Secondary detonations blasted up across the surface of the forge refinery for miles. A towering

mushroom cloud bloomed as the severed halves of the ork warship fell away in ruin. Shock waves tore across the floating platform, thundering like the pounding fist of an enraged god.

The Medusan Wing raced from the blast wave, a trio of dark shapes darting away from the expanding ball of hellfire. Ork fighters were vaporised. The Iron Hands rode the edge of the concussion, their hulls jarred and rattled, but inviolate.

Atraxii released a breath and sensed the warm pulse of satisfaction from *Ironhawk* as its prey burned. He ran an auspex sweep and opened a vox-channel.

‘Medusan Wing, form up on me. We have cut the head from the beast. Now we must complete the purge.’

-19.0-

The greenskins watched the terror ship die in the skies above them, speared by a column of blinding fire. An ork exists to fight, to make war, and there is no other acceptable way for one to meet its end than in battle. The xenos arrayed across the surface of the forge refinery were no different, but as their flagship burned, their cohesion perished with it.

The hordes devolved into a senseless, directionless mob. Orks tore each other apart as fledgling tyrants fought to cement themselves and assume the mantle of control. The assault against the forge temple faltered, breaking like a filthy green tide against the last bastion of Imperial resistance.

Seeing their opening, Colonel Dionaki and the commanders of the skitarii battle-maniple launched a blistering counter-attack. Though their forces were reduced almost entirely to battered, exhausted infantry, the Imperials leapt upon their invaders with vindictive fury. Marching at the tip of the spear, implacable in scarred black armour, strode the Iron Hands. The Space Marines advanced in unison, their gait metronomic. They did not slow. They did not charge. They marched, even and silent, their boltguns bucking in bionic fists as they blasted the vile aliens into ruin. They would sweep across the face of the foundry city that hung in the clouds of Halitus IV, and they would not leave a single one of the greenskins alive.

Oblexus brought a hand up to the hull of the *Vengeance of Santar*, brushing its ebon hull with silver fingertips. The sensors within his bionic limb detected the baking heat radiating from the dark plating. The Iron Father had taken to the skies in the Stormraven during the final cull of the xenos, purging their last remnants with salvos of rockets and walls of mass-reactive death unleashed from the barrels of its hurricane bolters.

Oblexus watched Voitek stride down the gunship's assault ramp, the plate ringing with his heavy tread. The Iron Father turned to the sergeant as he came to a stop at the ramp's base.

'It is secured,' said Oblexus. It was not a question.

Voitek was silent, a simple fist brought to his chest all the answer needed. Oblexus nodded once.

'Prepare our brothers. We are returning to the *Corporeal Lament*.'

The veteran sergeant turned, marching back up the assault ramp without a word.

Oblexus heard the thin rasp of bionic footsteps behind him. He turned to regard Colonel Dionaki as the Vostroyan commander approached. She came to a halt before him, standing straight yet still daunted by the Space Marine towering over her.

'Well met, colonel,' said Oblexus.

'And to you, my lord.' Dionaki made the sign of the aquila across her chest with a clinking of dark iron limbs. 'The Remnant of Fire burns still, and for that we give thanks.'

'Your warriors acquitted themselves efficiently,' replied the Iron Father. 'You have brought distinction to your world.'

'We fight for the lost, my lord. We are but an echo of the dead, seeking their vindication until the last of us falls silent.'

Oblexus looked down at the Vostroyan for a moment. 'I understand.' The Space Marine turned away, striding up the ramp of the Stormraven.

<Son of Medusa.>

Oblexus stopped.

<You must deliver the relic to sacred Mars.>

The Iron Father pictured the slack form of Adept Wyn, hanging within her web in the darkness at the centre of the forge temple.

<Mars will know if you defy it.>

Oblexus marched up the ramp, punching a control panel at its apex, and it rose

to seal on grinding hydraulics. The *Vengeance of Santar* lifted from the landing platform, surging into the air above the forge refinery. A trio of black shapes swung down towards the Stormraven. With Atraxii in the vanguard, the Medusan Wing formed up around Oblexus as the Iron Hands departed Halitus IV.

<Mars will know.>

The Iron Hands gathered in a small reliquary deep within the heart of the *Corporeal Lament* and sealed the bulkhead behind them. The twelve Space Marines stood in silence, their gaze locked upon the shape hanging suspended within a humming stasis field. A barrage of sensations rippled through their biological components – shock, wonder, awe, anger, reverence and a dozen more emotions assailed the base flesh and blood of their organics. In any other circumstance, the assembled brothers would crush these reactions beneath logic and will, and placate their shame with ritual sacrifice and penance.

Here, the warriors allowed themselves the emotions rushing through them. For they stood in the presence of a treasure thought lost to oblivion for ten thousand years, never to be seen again.

To the unenlightened, the collection of chips of dark armour plate and webs of dense mail links did not appear significant. The utterly exquisite skill of its craftsmanship was plain to see, even broken away and abraded by the ravages of one hundred centuries. The mailed fist of the Iron Hands glittered in the pale light of the stasis field, proud and unbroken by the millennia spent in darkness.

‘You are certain?’ Atraxii whispered, cautious awe sketched across his porcelain features.

‘I am certain,’ answered Oblexus. ‘This is a fragment of the Medusan Carapace. The battle armour worn by the Gorgon himself, crafted by his own hand. It adorned him in his last days, during the Great Failing.’

Without a word, the Iron Hands sank to one knee. Helms clanged to the deck plating as the Space Marines bared their faces before the remnants of the armour of the demigod who had fashioned it and baptised it in the crucible of war when the Emperor walked among mortals. Armour that had failed to protect their primarch from his own passions. Oblexus knelt beside Atraxii, the light glinting dully from his iron mask. The words of Clan Captain Bannus echoed through the young Techmarine’s head as he thought of his mentor.

This is his face now.

The Iron Hands remained in genuflection for several minutes, contemplating

the example of the primarch, their father's weaknesses and strengths, before they stood as one.

'Mars sought to keep this from us,' said Atraxii.

'Indeed,' replied the Iron Father. 'Even now, they demand its delivery to Mars, so that whatever knowledge it contains can be gleaned from it in service to the Adeptus Mechanicus.'

'Will you surrender it?' asked Atraxii, turning the shining sapphires of his eyes upon his mentor.

'Mars does not suffer the forfeiture of such a relic to anyone, nor shall they, even to our Chapter. If we defy them, there will be a cost.'

'It is logical,' said Vladoc in the muted tones of his bionic larynx. 'Surrendering the carapace to the Adeptus Mechanicus avoids strife with Mars, and its secrets would be used to strengthen the armies of mankind.'

Some of the Space Marines nodded at this.

'In this,' said Oblexus, 'we must divorce ourselves from the emotions of the flesh, and the weakness they tempt us to succumb to. We must act according to logic, to the ironclad will of the machine.'

'Must we?'

The Iron Hands turned. For an instant, confusion clouded Atraxii's mind. He had not realised that the one who had spoken the words was him.

'Brother?' asked Oblexus.

Atraxii was silent for a moment, his eyes lingering on the Medusan Carapace hanging suspended at the centre of the chamber.

'In our zeal to purge the weakness of our flesh, to be replaced with blessed iron, we must take care not to forsake the strengths of our blood.'

Atraxii looked to each of his brothers. 'It is true, the flesh is weak – but not all of it. The machine, for all its power, cannot fashion courage, honour or loyalty. It bears no instinct, and it cannot hate our enemies. We must strive with every moment to plane away our frailties, but we must also seek to elevate the strength already within us, for such an inheritance cannot be replaced. Once this is alloyed with the machine, we will face no foe that can break us.'

Atraxii looked to the Iron Father. 'Is the logical course to cede our primarch's wargear to Mars? Perhaps. But has this war not shown us that there are eventualities where the most logical course is to be illogical? Carrying this sacred item, our father's inheritance to us, back to the hearth of Medusa to be safeguarded by his sons may not be logical, but it is right.'

Silence reasserted itself within the chamber. The gathered Iron Hands cast their

glances upon one another, and upon the treasure floating before them. Oblexus stepped forwards, feeling the eyes of his brothers settle upon him.

‘There is wisdom in your words, brother,’ said the Iron Father. He looked to each of his brothers. ‘We set course for Medusa.’

Across the *Corporeal Lament*, serfs and robed adepts hurried to their tasks, preparing the Iron Hands vessel for warp translation. Bridge crew attended to their stations, and servitors murmured in their hard-wired sconces as they readied the warship’s Geller field. Standing upon the command dais, Iron Father Oblexus watched the void disappear as slabs of dense armour descended over the armourglass viewports.

Within the primary hangar bay, the spirit of *Ironhawk* snarled as it was coaxed into slumber by a flock of robed menials, locked securely into its cradle alongside the other Stormhawks of the Medusan Wing and the *Vengeance of Santar*.

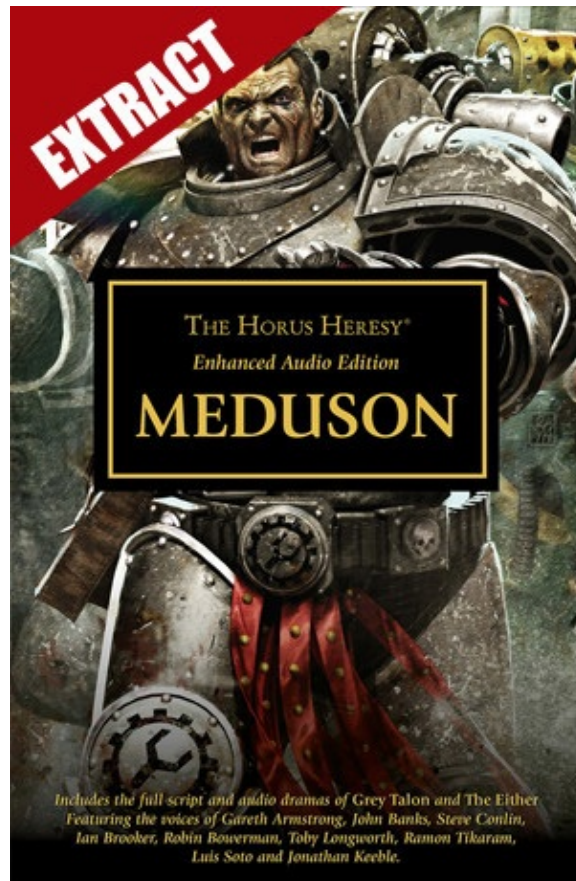
Alone in the chamber at the vessel’s heart, Atraxii knelt before the Medusan Carapace, hands raised as he chanted canticles in praise of Ferrus Manus.

As the fabric of reality tore to admit the *Corporeal Lament* into the warp’s dismal tides, the Iron Hands began the voyage to Medusa, bearing the mantle of the Gorgon back to its home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Westbrook is one of Games Workshop's newest authors. He has written *The Realmgate Wars: Bladestorm* for Age of Sigmar, and *Medusan Wings* is his first Warhammer 40,000 novel. He lives and works in Nottingham.

An extract from [*Meduson: Enhanced Audio Edition*](#).



‘Blood of Medusa!’

Mordan was seldom given to such outward expression, but our path to the *Retiarius* was proving volatile.

Harnessed in the assault ram’s dual prows, my brothers were giving off the same, albeit unspoken, sentiment.

Katus gripped his breaching shield double-fisted and held it across his chest like a totem. The bionic eye he wore in his right socket flared with nerve-induced auto-calibration.

Sombrak ground his teeth. He was my shield-brother and did it before every battle. It was loud and discordant because his jaw was cybernetic. Most of us were patched up thusly, our broken bodies rebuilt so that we could wage war one final time.

This was my eighth ‘final time’. Fate could be cruel like that.

Azoth was the last brother I knew well, though in all there were ten souls armoured in Medusan black in the hold. The rate of attrition was grievous amongst our ranks, and I soon found little need to learn names.

Of all my brothers, those known and unknown, Azoth was the most prone towards rhetoric. When we were made Immortal, our father stripped us of rank and title. Reforged, our new calling was a badge of shame to all in our Legion, and we lost our old identities. I believe that Azoth had been a *Frater Ferrum* – an Iron Father – before he fell from grace. He still had the gaps in his armour where they had unbolted his servo-arm. Whatever he had been before, now he was our sergeant.

He called out to us, bellowing against the tumult within the hold. ‘Forlorn hope! Our ranks have never been breached. Be steadfast.’ I could hear the servo-grind of his gauntlet as he gripped the haft of his thunder hammer. ‘Be resolute. Our dishonour demands it of us. Death awaits. We do not fear it! For what is death...?’

‘*To those who are dead already!*’ I roared in unison with my brothers.

He had a way with words, old Azoth. I think I will miss him the most.

Warning klaxons sounded, coinciding with a rush of crimson light flooding the low ceiling above us. We were close, but that was no guarantee of us reaching the *Retiarius* intact.

Over thirty assault rams were cast out into the void, all ridden by Medusan Immortals. I doubted that even half would make it through.

A Caestus was a durable vessel, fashioned specifically for this purpose. It was fast too, but the sheer amount of weapons fire erupting between the two larger vessels across the gulf of space was intense.

Great tracts of the void separated the *Gorgonesque* and the *Retiarius*, littered with silent explosions like scarred nebulae, and immense clouds of rapidly dispersing shrapnel. To us, aboard our diminutive assault ram, it was a long and perilous journey. To those two great behemoths, it would be regarded as close range.

As our hull shuddered with every close impact, the inertial suppression clamps held us steady. I closed my eyes and imagined our destination.

I had seen the *Retiarius* before, during the Great Crusade. Back then it had been an ugly, hulking vessel, well-suited to its brutish occupants. Its flanks were stained azure and dirty white, the echo of legionary war-plate. Slab-nosed and upscaled with muscular fighter bays and ablative armour plating, it was reminiscent of a pugilist in the form of a starship.

I felt our punch resonate through the Caestus’s hull, a glass fist striking a jaw of steel. Were it not for the magna-meltas burning furiously to soften the *Retiarius*’s formidable hide then we would have been dashed to wreckage in an eye-blink.

As it was, we bit deep. Our glass fist had shards, and these had cut the outer flesh of the much larger vessel.

We broke through amidst an evaporating cloud of ferric smoke, our small assault ram having bored through the starship’s hull and clamped securely in place. Disgorged onto a dark, semi-lit hangar we had little time to get our bearings before counter-boarding troops arrived to try and repel us.

‘Lock shields!’

Azoth bellowed out the command, but we had already begun to form up.

It was an archaic tactic, reminiscent of the Romanii or Grekans of Old Earth, but it was effective. Much about war endures, fraternal conflict being foremost in my mind as we breached a vessel that we had once considered to belong to our allies.

But it was mortal armsmen and not our erstwhile brothers in arms, the World Eaters, that we faced upon that deck.

A strong, determined fusillade hit us first, hot las raining in from hastily erected weapon teams and broken firing lines. We held, soaking up their fire, taking everything they threw at us without flinching. Then we pushed on, moving as one, the aegis of our breacher shields impenetrable to the brave men and women who had come to stop us.

Despite their obvious disadvantage, the *Retiarius*'s mortal troops went in close. Three further assault rams had struck this section of the ship and all four squads came together before the armsmen hit us. Their solid shot weapons and mauls proved fatally ineffective.

The feeble momentum of their attack was dispersed when they shattered against our shield wall, and we absorbed the impact before returning it tenfold. Medusan war-oaths cut the air as cleanly as any blade.

And almost as deadly.

The mortals quailed before our seeming inviolability and fury.

I battered my first opponent, letting the blood from his broken skull spray against my shield before I finished him. The stomp of my foot was all it took, and suddenly I was pushing forwards with my immortal brothers. I shot a second through the cheekbone, his face erupting into mist as the mass-reactive shell exploded. I barged a third, splitting ribs. A fourth fell back in front of me against our advance and I severed his neck with the edge of my breacher shield, barely noticing the blood wash against my armoured boot.

Our purpose made us ruthless. A blockade around Isstvan's upper atmosphere was preventing the X Legion from reaching its father, with the *Retiarius* just one of the vessels impeding our path. Our mission was simple. Our Iron Fathers had been clear. Destroy the ship by any means possible. If that meant our deaths, so be it.

Inexorable, inevitable, we crushed the counter-assault forces from the *Retiarius*. Then we cut down the weapons teams, then the deckhands, until every crewmen in sight was slain. It was an honourless but necessary act.

After this, we broke ranks to quickly neutralise the rest. The deck was slick with enemy blood, but it was hard to discern in the dull light.

'Where are we?' asked Mordan.

'Aft of the enginarium, I think,' I replied. I knew a little of the vessel's layout, in so far as it would adhere to extant expeditionary fleet schemata. 'In one of the smaller hangar bays, near the ship's outer skin.'

A relatively small chamber with a low ceiling and bare deck plate underfoot, the hangar would have been used to cloister the *Retiarius*'s various smaller interdiction craft. For now, it was empty of starfighters and assault craft, the World Eaters having disgorged their entire complement to duel with the Iron Hands vessels attempting to break through the blockade. Instead, ammo hoppers and riggers crowded the narrow space. Rigging chains hung down from overhead pulleys, gently swaying in the aftermath of the battle. Steam plumed from vents in the walls, and it was sweltering. A pervasive, animal heat lathered every surface in a fine veneer of sweat. It stank.

The vox-feed in my ear crackled. Communal channel. As expected, the voice of Brother-Captain Udris of the *Gorgonesque* came through the void-static.

Azoth told him that we had successfully made ingress and were moving deeper into the vessel. Resistance had been minimal.

We all knew that would change.

'The blockade?' asked Sombrak, when Azoth had finished receiving his orders from the *Gorgonesque*.

'Still intact,' Azoth replied. 'We'll know if it isn't. These halls will be filled with fire, the walls will shatter and we'll be cast to the void. For now, they stand. So we must sunder them. The Avernii are dying below us, brothers.'

'I would have liked to stand with the Gorgon one last time,' said Katus, his head bowed.

Azoth clapped a gauntleted hand on his shoulder. There was an underlying anger in the former Frater's tone. At the betrayal unfolding on Isstvan or the stripping of his rank, it could be either or both.

'Aye, Katus. So would I, but we have our lot and it is here aboard the *Retiarius*.'

We moved out, leaving the dead to fester in the heat.

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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2016.

This eBook edition published in 2016 by Black Library, Games Workshop
Ltd,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-510-4

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