

WARHAMMER
40,000

NICK KYME

TOME OF FIRE

EMPEROR'S DELIVERANCE



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By Nick Kyme

BLOOD. THERE WAS too much blood.

Athena's hands were slick with it, right up to the elbows. The crimson morass where she buried her fingers was a man's chest, the ribs splintered and the organs exposed. She was searching for an artery. It was hard to find in all the viscera and vital fluid. Flickering lumen-strips overhead were weak and ineffective. Athena could barely see the novitiate beside her, handing over surgical tools. Betheniel was almost apologetic - the blades and saws were crude, woefully inadequate, but it was all they had at Emperor's Deliverance. It was all anyone had in the shadow of Devil's Ridge on the war-torn world of Armageddon.

Athena held out a steady, blood-soaked hand. She'd tried to wipe it on her smock but the nails were red-rimed, the gore so deeply ingrained it was like her skin was swathed in a patina of rust. With her other hand, she pinched the spewing artery.

'Clamps, sister. Quickly now.'

An explosion overhead shook the roof of the infirmary, making the novitiate fumble. Some of the tools clattered noisily into the gloom but she found the clamps.

Athena staunched the bleeding, muttering as she tied off the vein. 'Fortunate that we don't require the rib spreaders.' Most of the man's chest cavity was gone, torn out by a greenskin bomb. Part of his jaw was missing too.

She addressed Betheniel directly. 'When a life is at stake we must show resolve, even in the face of danger. Those were Marauders overhead, our Imperial Navy bombers, heading for what's left of Hades Hive.'

The novitiate nodded, contrite. She recoiled a moment later when Athena threw down a ragged piece of cloth she'd been using to clean her instruments.

'Throne and Eye!'

'What is it, sister? Have I done something wrong?'

'Grant me the fortitude of Saint Katherine...' she whispered, making the sign of the aquila for the blasphemous outburst. 'No...' Athena wiped a hand across her brow, smearing an incarnadine line in the sweat. 'There's nothing more we could've done.' She deactivated the medi-cogitator next to the man's bunk. Cardiac response was negative, blood pressure flat-lined. 'He's dead.'

A grey-haired orderly, cheeks peppered with stubble, emerged from the shadows and caught Athena's attention. Sanson used to be a hiver, a low-labourer in the "sinks" who'd made machine parts all the way into his middle years until Hades was sacked. Calm headed and meticulous, he made a reliable orderly. He'd made his way quietly through the numerous groaning bodies, the blood and sweat-stained beds, the thousands of wounded that were pouring into the camp's infirmary every single harrowing day.

'They have arrived, sister.'

'At the perimeter?' Athena was removing her smock as she made for a small basin with its sub-standard sanitising spray and dermal-scrubbers. Two acolytes approached her from either side as she stooped to wash her grubby hands, and took off her medical fatigues. For a few moments, she was naked in the half-light - Athena had long since foregone modesty - until her handmaidens dressed her in white robes and gilded iconography.

When she faced Sanson she was a Sister Hospitaller again, officious and noble in the trappings of the Adepta Sororitas. She clutched a string of rosarius beads to her breast, the sigil of a burning candle swinging from the end. Ornamental armour clad her body, a slim silver breastplate and vambraces. Lastly, she drew a hood over her jet-black hair which was scraped back by scalp locks.

'Across from the Eumenidies River, yes,' replied the orderly. Sanson had kept his eyes low and his integrity intact.

A vox-radio was playing somewhere in the shadows. A trooper hunched over, listening to the propaganda messages with the volume turned low.

++... innocence does not exist, only degrees of guilt. Freedom must be earned, it must be fought for. Cowards, the weak and the impure do not deserve to live. Hades was lost on the backs of the craven. Armageddon will only be won by the strong. We of the Marines Malevolent will stand before this menace and we will—++

'Turn that tripe off,' Athena scowled at the trooper, a private called Kolber who was wise to do as she asked. 'I'd rather listen to Yarrick espousing the virtues of resistance than listen to him.' Captain Vinyar's rhetoric was fleeting on the vox-band but his propaganda was always directed at the disparagement of the weak and their worthlessness to war.

Angry, she summoned Betheniel, who was attired in the less ostentatious garments of a novitiate. Head bowed, she followed her superior.

'Shouldn't this be brought to the attention of Colonel Hauptman?' Sanson inquired of Athena's back.

She paused momentarily. The colonel had been responsible for the protection of the camp. He was an officer of the Cadian Fifth a good soldier and an honourable man who understood the plight of those who couldn't fight for themselves.

'Tell him yourself,' she replied, disappearing into the dark. 'He's lying on that slab in front of you.'

WITH ELIAS HAUPTMAN dead, it would fall to others to protect Emperor's Deliverance. Athena saw them at the crest of a muddy rise, waiting at the perimeter of the camp. She tried not to think about the thousands of refugees from Hades Hive housed below her, the wounded and the inadequate block houses, the unsanitary conditions of her infirmary, the dead and the pits where she and the servitor units she was afforded had buried them. Disease and vermin were becoming a problem. She'd taken to carrying a shock maul with her when not in surgery and had a tally of bludgeoned sump rats to rival any hiver.

She felt Betheniel trembling beside her and briefly clutched her hand.

'Have courage, sister. They are here to keep us safe.'

But as she regarded the towering knights in front of them, their weapons low-slung and ready, the kill-markings and the battered armour, Athena

felt doubt... and fear.

There were two of them, both wearing the same gritty yellow and black battle plate, a winged lightning strike on their left shoulder guards. Both wore their battle-helms. One was beak-shaped and had been made to look like a shark's mouth with teeth painted on either side of the cone; the other was plainer, stub-nosed with a vox-grille.

As she bowed, Athena felt their baleful stare and fought to keep the tremor from her voice.

'I am Sister Superior Athena and this is my novitiate, Betheniel. I am pleased that such august warriors have deemed Emperor's Deliverance worthy of their protection.'

'We have not,' the shark-faced one replied. He spoke flatly, but with an edge like that of the serrated blade scabbarded at his hip. He stepped forward, looking down on the woman at a sharper angle. The pectoral on his plastron read Nemiok in archaic script.

'I don't understand.' There was steel in Athena's eyes and a defiance that suggested she wouldn't be cowed by these warriors.

The other spoke. His voice was grating but not as harsh as his comrade's. 'Our mission is to take and hold this river, the camp too. Nothing further.' According to his battle-plate, his name was Varik.

'So who is charged with defending the camp? I have over twelve thousand refugees, many of whom are wounded, not to mention another thousand Ministorum staff.'

Brother Nemiok leaned in, using all of his bulk and height to intimidate.

'Look to yourselves, if you're able.' He glowered into the distance, unwilling to speak further on the matter.

Athena was shaking her head. Betheniel desperately wanted to leave and even risked pulling at her superior's arm. She snatched her hand away again at the sister's scathing glance, which was then turned on the Space Marines.

'This is unacceptable. I will speak to Colonel Destrier about this—'

Nemiok swung his head around, the gears in his armour plate growling, 'Begone! And pray the orks do not come.'

Despite herself, Athena backed away. Her heart was pounding. She could barely breathe. 'I will at least know whom you serve.'

Varik replied before Nemiok decided to do something more than threaten.

'Captain Vinyar of the Marines Malevolent. Now return to your camp and consider this a warning.'

The discussion was over. If she lingered, there would be violence. It practically exuded from the Space Marines. Betheniel was sobbing, scared to lift her eyes from their boots.

Athena had to help her novitiate back down the muddy slope. Even when they'd reached the relative safety of the camp, the sister superior was still shaking.

While Betheniel sipped from Private Kolber's flask of grain liquor to steady her nerves, Athena listened to the vox-radio.

++...will not lie to you. We are experiencing Imperial losses in the Eumenidies region of the Diablo Mountains. But though we must surrender ground now, stand fast good citizens, for we shall gather our forces and reclaim it. Be vigilant. Greenskins are at the edge of the Diablo Mountains, but are unlikely to forge a crossing. Resist, fight and we shall win this war together.++

Yarrick's bombast meant more refugees would be coming in. Athena looked at the ranks of beds and the already overcrowded conditions. Their "protectors" were monsters, masquerading as heroes. She prayed to the Emperor for his mercy.

NEMIOK WAS SCOURING the mountains for any sign of the orks, one hand on the stock of his combi-bolter as it hung by a strap from his shoulder.

'Do not do that again, brother.'

Varik was cleaning the dirt from his chain-blade and looked up. 'Do what?'

'Pander to that woman. She must be made to know her place. Remember your Chapter and duty...!' Nemiok paused to turn and meet his battle-brother's fierce gaze, '...or I shall remind you of it.'

Chastened, Varik only nodded.

Nemiok went to the comm-feed in his ear and listened.

'Mobile artillery is being moved in on the opposite side of the camp,' he said a minute later. 'It seems Captain Vinyar is planning on starting that push a little early.'

He smiled when he saw the tank column emerging from the cloud of dust opposite their sentry position, missile points glistening in the pale sun, but there was no mirth in it, no humour at all.

* * *

RAIN AT EMPEROR'S Deliverance was only good for washing away the blood. Even then it coalesced in the sink holes and basins of the camp, making the ground muddy and hard to traverse on foot or track. Ravines of the grisly matter ran thick and red, gumming up boots and thickening the air with a metallic smell.

Athena was out in the downpour wearing medical fatigues, having abandoned ceremony in favour of pragmatism. Betheniel was lagging behind on the slope, a storm cloak clutched tight around her tiny frame.

'I need your help,' she said to the Space Marine sentries, hoping her directness would get their attention.

Nemiok deigned to look at her. 'Go on.'

'The Salvation, it's a medical transport, has broken down. They're mired in the earth and have over five hundred wounded aboard. I need to get them to the infirmary as soon as possible. You are stronger than anyone in camp and could get us back on the road quickly. Not protection,' she explained, showing her palms, 'just saving lives.'

Nemiok waited. The rain drizzled down Athena's face, saturating her clothes. She was shivering; so too was her half-drowned novice.

'Please... I know I spoke out of turn yesterday, but it would not take long. I'm begging you. Help us.'

Slowly and deliberately, the Marines Malevolent removed his battle-helm and attached it to his belt by the neck strap. His eyes were pitiless, his mouth sneering. The rain lashed his horrible, scarred face and he did not move, he did not feel. It was like speaking to a slab of granite.

'No. You can manage without us.'

'Over five hundred wounded!' she pleaded. 'You can save them by doing this, at least give them a chance.'

The sneer turned into a scowl on Nemiok's face. He drew his spatha. The jagged blade was almost black. No amount of scrubbing would remove the murder stains.

His voice lowered with implicit threat. 'I abhor weakness.'

Beside him, Varik kept his helmet on and his eyes forward.

'What about you?' Athena asked, 'Won't you help us, either?'

Nemiok snapped, snarling, 'Don't look to him! I speak for the Marines Malevolent. Go back and pray my mood stays this sanguine.'

Athena stormed off into the rain, catching up to Betheniel several metres farther down the slope.

SHE RETURNED ALONE several hours later, bloodied and ragged with fatigue, but kept her distance. It was still raining, though the deluge had lessened.

'You were right,' Athena said, without emotion. 'I dug out the Salvation. It took six labour servitors four hours to do it. We also lost over half the wounded by the time it reached the infirmary.' Her eyes were like chips of ice, dark as coal in the gloom. 'I wanted you to know that, to know that a mindless flesh-mech slave showed greater compassion for humanity than the Emperor's Angels.'

Nemiok said nothing. He didn't even acknowledge her presence.

Only Varik betrayed his shame with a slight awkward shift in his posture. He was about to tell her to leave, but Athena had already gone.

A blurt of comm-static got Nemiok checking the feed in his ears.

His tone with Varik was like stone. 'We're moving.'

SMOKE FROM DISTANT fires smudged the sky above the Diablo Mountains a dirty orange. Burning resolved on the breeze, the stench of munitions, wood and human flesh. There was another odour too, something stagnant, earthy and fungal.

Betheniel huddled her legs close to her body, relieved that her sister superior had returned unharmed.

'And they said nothing?'

'Like statues, sister.' Athena was weary, bone and spirit. 'I've never felt coldness like that before.'

They were sitting outside the infirmary, getting some air.

The vox-radio hummed in the background.

++Efforts to repel the orks at the Diablo Mountains have failed. Imperial Guard regiments are already in place on Devil's Ridge and will halt the greenskins there. Solely as a precaution, civilians south of the River Eumenidies are advised to head away from the mountains and seek shelter. Trust in the Emperor.++

A grim silence fell for a few moments.

A fearful Betheniel, staring up at the crags, interrupted it.

'That's close to camp.' She bit her lip as the years drained off her, leaving behind a little girl afraid of the darkness. 'Shouldn't we try to move the injured?'

Athena was resigned. 'There are too many. We'll have to make a stand and hope the Guard blockades stop them.'

'And if they don't?'

Echoing from the mountains, there emitted such a roar that it swallowed Athena's response with its fury.

'WAAAAAAGGH!'

Athena was up on her feet. Her tone was urgent.

'Back inside.'

After their sojourn outside, the heady stink of sweat, blood and piss hit them like a hammer when they rushed into the infirmary.

Sanson looked up from a tray of bandages and medical gauze.

'What's happening?'

Private Kolber was hobbling over to where his sidearm hung from a wall hook.

'The greenskins are here, aren't they? The blockade didn't stop them.' Only a young man, the trooper had aged a decade in the week he'd been in the infirmary.

Athena had no time for explanations. 'Lock all doors and shutters,' she told Sanson. 'No one goes outside.'

A pair of her fellow Hospitallers began to pray at a small shrine.

Overhead, a piercing whine made them all look up; nearly three thousand heads turned to the sky, pleading for salvation.

'More bombers?' asked Betheniel. She was watching the juddering lumen-strips, the dust motes cascading from the ceiling picked out in their flickering light.

The sound was decreasing in pitch.

Athena was slowly shaking her head. 'Hide! Get to cover!' she cried, just as the first shells fell.

The ceiling crashed down with an awesome, terrifying din. The praying Hospitallers disappeared under a mountain of debris, rewarded for their piety. Those able to pressed their hands over their ears. A massive explosion blew out the walls and sent bodies flailing. A second later, the lights went out and panic rushed in along with the dark.

Having survived the initial blast, Athena was staggering through the carnage. Poor Sanson was dead, riddled with shrapnel. It had almost cut him in two. She clung to Betheniel, the only person she could realistically still save, and tried to find a way out.

Another incendiary burst tore across the sister superior, forcing her to the ground as it swept away a host of screaming silhouettes. Something hot splashed across her face. It stank of copper. There was grit too from the churned up earth, some of it too hard and sharp to be mud. She hauled her body up, dragging Betheniel.

Belatedly, she noticed her ears were bleeding. A perpetual monotone deafened her, so she failed to hear the piercing shriek presaging another blast.

It landed further out, throwing up corpses like flesh-rain. Bodies hit the ground bent and broken, entangled with their bunks.

Somewhere, a fire had started. Athena saw the ruddy glow that suggested the twisted remains of men and women strewn about the infirmary floor; she could smell the smoke. It mixed with the reek of cordite from the heavy mortars.

The orks in the mountains don't use mortars.

Horrorified, she realised what was happening. They were in the midst of an Imperial barrage.

Blundering in the darkness, clambering over the dead and dying, her fingers found the edge of a hatch to the outside.

Athena was about to yank on the handle when a thunderous boom filled her senses and she was lofted into the air.

Betheniel was screaming.

NEMIOK WATCHED THE shells fall with immense satisfaction. As they poured down from Devil's Ridge, the greenskins were blasted apart. Behind him, the Whirlwinds kept up a relentless barrage, but it was indiscriminate. Structures in the refugee camp were flattened. Some of the humans had taken to running outside as soon as the shelling began.

'Fools,' he muttered.

Those not sundered in the bombardment were picked off by the orks that made it through the gauntlet. A horde of the beasts was gathering, returning fire, attempting to mass for a counterattack.

Nemiok racked the slide of his combi-bolter to full auto.

'Ready, brother?'

'There are people down there,' said Varik.

Nemiok was dismissive. 'There are greenskins too.'

Varik nodded, thumbing the activation stud of his chain-blade. They'd been joined by a Marines Malevolent vanguard attached to the armoured column.

Together with their battle-brothers, they descended into the camp.

ATHENA WOKE, COUGHING up blood. Pain sent hot knives down her right side where she'd fractured her ribs. Internal bleeding explained the ruddy sputum. She was groggy as if just punched. Light was filtering in from above. It took her a few seconds to realise it was because the infirmary roof was gone, shredded to nothing. It revealed a grisly scene of prostrate bodies and dismembered limbs. Some were still moving and groaning. Most were still and silent.

She'd been blown several metres from the hatch, which now hung open like a torn scab. Betheniel was nearby, alive but in shock. Her soot-smearred face was fixed in a catatonic grimace of terror.

'Come on,' Athena said, soothing. 'Follow me, sister. Here...!' She held out her hand but had to grasp Betheniel and pull her up. The novice

staggered, moving warily as if blind.

Together they made it through the ragged hatch, stumbling outside.

Smoke wreathed the camp. A fog thickened it, rolling down from the mountainside and across the river, creating a murky pall that rested over Emperor's Deliverance like a shroud. Gunfire and screaming raked the breeze, so loud that it made Athena cower at first. There were more of the dead in the muddied, blood-drenched streets. She saw a mother and daughter slumped cold and lifeless, their fingers barely touching. Inside a shattered blockhouse a Guardsman hung over a window lip trying to get out. A broken helmet sat on the ground just below him and a lasgun dangled from his grasp. Dozens of her fellow sisters, pious women she had known for many years, lay red and open; she had to avert her gaze.

Monsters emerged through the smog with leathern, gnarled green skin. Huge and brutal, they stank of cloying earth and spoiled meat. One with a fat-bladed cleaver, its left arm missing from elbow down and carrying a gash to its forehead, saw them through the carnage. Violence radiated off it so powerfully that it made Athena dizzy.

'God-Emperor...' she breathed. The beast roared, tasting prey, and stumbled into a loping run. Armour plates clanked against its muscular body, as did the bones and flesh-trophies it had taken.

Private Kolber was lying in the street too. Athena saw his corpse resolve through a passing belt of smoke.

'Stay here,' she said to Betheniel, who nodded dumbly, and rushed towards the dead trooper. It brought her closer to the ork, but also to a gun. She wrenched Kolber's sidearm from its holster. Backing off until she reached Betheniel, she took aim.

'Stop,' she yelled at the beast, more to charge her courage than in any real attempt to stall it. As predicted, the ork kept coming.

Athena fired. The first shot went wide; the second struck the greenskin's torso. It grunted but didn't slow. She fired again and again, venting the laspistol's power pack and praying to hit something vital.

The ork was bleeding and burned, but not dead. The gun whirred, temporarily drained. Athena threw it down and drew her shock maul. Now in killing range, the ork lunged, its cleaver swinging down to cut off her head. Desperately, she threw herself clear and smashed a blow against its knee.

The beast was laughing, about to slay them both when a shadow loomed out of the smog behind it. Athena saw the muzzle flare in slow motion, realising that the bolter's salvo would hit them too.

'Throne, no!' she screamed, diving to the ground and praying her novitiate would do the same.

She heard a cry just after the bolter's retort and knew it was Betheniel.

'ENGAGING LEFT!' A bark of fire erupted from Nemiok's bolter, chewing up an ork crawling from a crater. He followed up with a grenade from an under-slung tube launcher, slinging a charging truck tailgate over axle and cooking the driver in the fiery aftermath.

Another, running out of the incendiary smoke, went down missing half of its skull.

'Threat eliminated,' uttered Varik, swinging his weapon around as he sought a fresh target.

They were advancing through the camp, methodically gunning down any greenskins in their path. After the bombardment, Emperor's Deliverance was to be cleansed. No restraint. The order came from Captain Vinyar.

From the left, a burst of heavy bolter fire ripped up a mob of stunted greenskin scavengers, turning them into a visceral mist. Brother Drago was heedless of the humans scurrying into his firing line as he opened up on an ork vehicle wreck and the greenskins trying to liberate a heavy stubber from the rig's flatbed. Everything disappeared in a massive explosion and the angry flare of the belt-fed cannon.

Out of the smoke clouds a land speeder descended. It hovered in low, engine wash kicking up dirt, aiming its nose-mounted heavy flamer at a ruined blockhouse.

A female refugee, cut up and hobbling, shouted at it to turn around.

'There are people trapped inside!'

'Step aside,' growled the pilot, unleashing a jet of superheated promethium into the ruin. Burning orks and humans staggered out as the structure burned. Any last resistance was dealt with when the gunner swung around his rail-mounted assault cannon and thumbed the triggers. A salvo of high velocity shells spat from the rotating barrel that blew out the

blockhouse's windows in a glassy storm, killing everything left inside. Then he turned their wrath on the flaming survivors.

Laughter made an ugly sound through Nemiok's battle-helm as he hailed the gunner's kills.

'Wipe them from existence!' he roared, sighting a group of orks that had escaped the fusillade. He undipped a grenade and tossed it towards them.

As the greenskins were engulfed by explosion, he called to Varik. 'Brother, I wish to anoint my blade with their xenos blood!'

Varik nodded, his drawn chainsword burring in his iron grip.

Though battered, the orks charged, cleavers and cutters swinging. Varik sliced the head off one as his battle-brother impaled another. Nemiok then eviscerated a third before Varik finished the last, bifurcating the beast from groin to sternum.

Sheathing his chainsword, Nemiok headed down a narrow street that led into a larger plaza.

'Hold!' Varik's cry fell on deaf ears as he rushed to catch his brother.

Emerging from between a pair of smouldering blockhouses, Nemiok drew a bead on a greenskin's back. It was already wounded, missing half an arm and badly shot up. It was rushing at a kill the Marines Malevolent couldn't see and didn't care about. He scythed the ork down, opening up its back and spine as the mass reactive bolter shells exploded. As it fell, Nemiok saw two females he recognised through his blood-flecked crosshairs. He pulled his finger from the trigger, but it was too late.

BETHENIEL WAS DEAD. Her eyes were open as she lay on her back in a growing pool of blood. The shell shrapnel had only clipped her, but it was enough for a killing blow. Athena held the novitiate in her arms, muttering a prayer.

'Saint Katherine, I beseech you, bring this faithful soldier to the side of the Emperor. Protect her soul for the journey to the Golden Throne...'

She did not weep. Her resolve was hard as marble. Athena tightened her grip around Private Kolber's sidearm and stood up. She wasn't unsteady, nor did she feel any fear or doubt as she approached the armoured giant in yellow and black.

'You are a disgrace to the aquila,' she spat, bringing up the laspistol.

The shot was almost point-blank. It made Nemiok grunt and stagger but otherwise left him unscathed. He tore off his helm, uncaring of the battle around them. Underneath, he wore a mask of pure hatred.

'For that show of strength, I will let you see my face before I execute you,' he snarled, letting the bolter drop to its strap and drawing his spatha. 'This will really hurt,' he promised.

The punch to his unarmoured jaw sent Nemiok reeling and the spatha spiralling from his grasp to land blade down in the earth.

'You've shamed yourself enough.'

Nemiok looked like he was about to reach for another weapon but stopped when Varik shook his head.

'Killing innocents in cold blood, there is no honour in that.' Varik turned to Athena.

'Get out of here. A warzone is no place for a sister of mercy,' he told her. 'Stay alive and do some good at least.' He took the pistol, crushed it. 'Draw on my brothers a second time and I won't stay my hand.'

She nodded, realising what Varik had sacrificed so that she could live.

Athena rushed to Betheniel's side. Another group of refugees had found them and helped lift the body onto an Imperial Guard half-track. They drove off south, away from Devil's Ridge and the orks. There were still more greenskins thronging the edge of the camp, coming down from the mountains.

She didn't know what had made Varik intercede. Perhaps there was more compassion in the Space Marines than she realised. It didn't matter. Compassion wouldn't win this war. Only Yarrick could do that.

Overhead the barrage began anew, stealing away her thoughts and keeping the orks pinned. It would be several hours before the battle was done. Many more civilians would die. Only a few would know the Emperor's deliverance.

VARIK KEPT HIS brother in his sights until he was sure his ire had cooled.

'You'll regret that,' Nemiok told him.

'You go too far.'

The dense throb of heavy engines interrupted and they looked up to see a squadron of gunships coming down to land in the distance.

'Now there'll be trouble,' Varik muttered.

The gunships were forest green, emblazoned with the snarling head of a fire Drake. They belonged to the Salamanders.

VINYAR YANKED OFF a gauntlet as he reclined on his throne in the Marines Malevolent barrack house. It was gloomy within the boxy ferrocrete structure, furnished with all the austerity expected of his puritanical Chapter. The captain kept banners and trophies close at hand. It was the only ornamentation he allowed in the stark chamber, except for a broad strategium table where a host of maps and data-slates were strewn.

He reviewed one, a report of the bombing at Emperor's Deliverance, not deigning to look at the two warriors standing silently in his presence.

'How many human casualties?'

'Around four thousand, sire.'

'And the orks?'

'Total annihilation.'

Vinyar set down the slate, smiled at the two warriors.

'Acceptable losses.'

'There was also significant structural damage.'

'Negligible,' Vinyar waved away any concerns. 'The greenskins are in retreat, the Marines Malevolent are victorious.'

'What of Armageddon Command? I have heard talk of sanctions against us.'

Vinyar's laugh was derisive. 'Destrier has been reminded of his place and purpose in this war, Brother Varik. There'll be no further repercussions from him.'

The warriors lingered, prompting the captain to ask, 'Was there something more?'

Varik awaited Nemiok's damning account of what had happened with Sister Athena, but his response was surprising.

'No, sire,' he rasped, jaw tight.

'Then you're dismissed.'

Both warriors saluted, turned on their heel and left.

Vinyar was poring over the maps on his strategium table, planning the next assault, when he heard the barrack house door opening again.

'Changed your mind, Nemiok?' he asked, looking up but finding someone else in his chambers. Vinyar sneered. 'You.'

An onyx-skinned warrior was standing before him, armoured in forest green. A scaled cloak hung from his broad shoulders, attached beneath gilded pauldrons. Iconography of drakes and fire, hammers and anvils emblazoned his battle-plate. His voice was abyssal deep.

'I have spoken with Colonel Destrier,' he said. 'I have also witnessed the excessive force used at Emperor's Deliverance and been told of the civilian casualties.'

'There is collateral damage in any war,' protested Vinyar. 'If I had not acted as punitively as I did, there would still be orks roaming that camp. Besides, cowards are unworthy of being spared.'

The green-armoured warrior had unhitched a thunder hammer from his back and slammed it on the strategium table, cracking data-slates and tearing maps. He was unbuckling a holstered pistol when he said, 'You misunderstand the purpose of my visit, Vinyar.' He looked up and his eyes flashed fire-red. 'This isn't a discussion.' He glanced at the gauntlets the Marines Malevolent captain had discarded. 'Put those back on. I want this to be even.'

Vinyar was belligerent, but reached for his gauntlets anyway. 'What are you talking about, Tu'Shan?'

'Penance and restitution,' said the Chapter Master of the Salamanders. Bones cracked in his neck as he loosened them.

'I'll give you one piece of advice,' he added, clenching and unclenching his fists to work the knuckles. 'Don't go for a weapon.'

Then he closed the barrack room door.