

WARHAMMER
40,000

NICK KYME

TOME OF FIRE

A SALAMANDERS COLLECTION



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A WARHAMMER 40,000 COLLECTION

TOME OF FIRE

Nick Kyme



WARHAMMER 40,000

IT IS THE 41ST MILLENNIUM. FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED CENTURIES THE EMPEROR HAS SAT IMMOBILE ON THE GOLDEN THRONE OF EARTH. HE IS THE MASTER OF MANKIND BY THE WILL OF THE GODS, AND MASTER OF A MILLION WORLDS BY THE MIGHT OF HIS INEXHAUSTIBLE ARMIES. HE IS A ROTTING CARCASS WRITHING INVISIBLY WITH POWER FROM THE DARK AGE OF TECHNOLOGY. HE IS THE CARRION LORD OF THE IMPERIUM FOR WHOM A THOUSAND SOULS ARE SACRIFICED EVERY DAY, SO THAT HE MAY NEVER TRULY DIE.

YET EVEN IN HIS DEATHLESS STATE, THE EMPEROR CONTINUES HIS ETERNAL VIGILANCE. MIGHTY BATTLEFLEETS CROSS THE DAEMON-INFESTED MIASMA OF THE WARP, THE ONLY ROUTE BETWEEN DISTANT STARS, THEIR WAY LIT BY THE ASTRONOMICAN, THE PSYCHIC MANIFESTATION OF THE EMPEROR'S WILL. VAST ARMIES GIVE BATTLE IN HIS NAME ON UNCOUNTED WORLDS. GREATEST AMONGST HIS SOLDIERS ARE THE ADEPTUS ASTARTES, THE SPACE MARINES, BIO-ENGINEERED SUPER-WARRIORS. THEIR COMRADES IN ARMS ARE LEGION: THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND COUNTLESS PLANETARY DEFENCE FORCES, THE EVER-VIGILANT INQUISITION AND THE TECH-PRIESTS OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS TO NAME ONLY A FEW. BUT FOR ALL THEIR MULTITUDES, THEY ARE BARELY ENOUGH TO HOLD OFF THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT FROM ALIENS, HERETICS, MUTANTS - AND WORSE.

TO BE A MAN IN SUCH TIMES IS TO BE ONE AMONGST UNTOLD BILLIONS. IT IS TO LIVE IN THE CRUELLEST AND MOST BLOODY REGIME IMAGINABLE.

THESE ARE THE TALES OF THOSE TIMES. FORGET THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE, FOR SO MUCH HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN, NEVER TO BE RE-LEARNED. FORGET THE PROMISE OF PROGRESS AND UNDERSTANDING, FOR IN THE GRIM DARK FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR. THERE IS NO PEACE AMONGST THE STARS, ONLY AN ETERNITY OF CARNAGE AND SLAUGHTER, AND THE LAUGHTER OF THIRSTING GODS.



VULKAN'S SHIELD

A dull explosion resonated through the hull of *Fire-wyvern*. The Thunderhawk gunship bucked against the resulting pressure wave, throwing up emergency icons inside the troop hold. Displaced shrapnel caromed off its armour in a burst of muffled *plinks*.

‘Another like that and we’ll be going the rest of the way on foot, if at all.’

Ko’tan Kadai smiled. His burning eyes flared with amusement in the gloom, limning his onyx-black skin in a visceral red.

‘Their aim is worse than yours, Fugis,’ said Kadai. ‘It’s nothing.’

Apothecary Fugis scowled at his captain, his thin face drawn so tight it was almost sharp.

‘It’s a needless risk.’

Kadai had stopped listening. His gaze travelled down the troop hold, along the grav-harnesses where the rest of his Salamanders were locked in. Armoured in green battle-plate, the snarling orange drake icon of 3rd Company upon their left pauldrons, they were Salamanders, the Fireborn. Like their captain, the eyes of his retinue glowed red behind their helmet lenses. The effect was almost infernal.

Despite the restrictive confines of the *Fire-wyvern*, they still managed to perform their pre-battle rituals. N’keln led them. It was his duty.

‘In Vulkan’s image are we crafted, our bodies are his immutable instruments...’

Kadai watched the veteran sergeant reach into a fiery brazier wrought into a support column and withdraw a fistful of burning coals. The others echoed him, Vek’shen and Shen’kar. Together, they crushed the coals into dust and used the

hot soot to anoint their armour.

‘What is that?’ remarked another warrior in the hold. This one was not a Salamander. He wore the black ceramite of the Raven Guard. His left pauldron carried his Chapter’s icon, a white raven with outstretched wings. Whereas Salamanders were onyx-black, the bare-headed Raven Guard was stark white with eyes like tiny shards of jet. Together, they were a contrast in chiaroscuro.

Vek’shen had scribed the effigy of a dragon’s head upon his forearm.

‘*Unguh’lar,*’ he said, ‘The great drake slain in ritual combat whose mantle I wear.’ The Company Champion touched the scaled cloak draped over his back and carefully fashioned around his power armour’s generator. ‘I carry this sigil to honour him and grant me fortitude in battle.’

‘Yours is a savage culture, Nocturnean,’ said another. The remark was directed at Kadai, who turned to face the speaker.

‘The Promethean Creed is not for everyone, Adrak.’

The Raven Guard stared through the dark lenses of his white battle helm. The bulky jump pack on his back made him lean forwards in his grav-harness. It gave a false sense of earnestness that Sergeant Adrak Vraver didn’t feel. He and three more of his battle-brothers had hitched a ride on the *Fire-wyvern*, pledging to aid Kadai in his extraction mission. The two went back a long way. Vraver was veteran of dozens of campaigns. Kadai had served in some of those in his two centuries and more of service.

‘And I suppose your stubbornness is kindled from the same embers?’

There was mirth in the Raven Guard’s tone that Kadai couldn’t see.

Outside, the explosions intensified. The interior shuddered constantly. Metal groaned in abject protest. They rode a storm of ordnance now.

‘Not too late to go back,’ Vraver added. ‘Our battle-brothers are pulling out, Ko’tan. This city is lost, but the war is won. There’s nothing for the Space Marines here. Let the Guard flatten it.’

Kadai laughed but it didn’t reach his blazing eyes.

Perhaps that was true for the Raven Guard. Prosecuting a guerrilla war behind enemy lines, they had crippled communications, sabotaged transport links and executed several insurgent officers, including the world’s corrupt lord-governor. For Kadai, however, the mission was not yet ended.

‘Months ago, before undertaking this mission,’ the Salamander said. ‘A neophyte remarked something to me on the Cindara Plateau back on Nocturne. Do you know what he said?’

Vraver relaxed his lightning claw in a gesture for Kadai to continue.

“My lord,” he began, “the Promethean Creed tells us that nothing is above the sanctity of human life, that we are Vulkan’s Shield, here to protect the innocent and defend the weak. But when I awoke in the solitorium after seven months of endurance and solitude I found I had become a monster...” Kadai touched his skin, dragging the eyelid down a fraction to show the red heat within “...How then,” he asked me, “can we be our primarch’s shield if we look like this?”

Fire-wyvern shook violently from another aerial bombardment, but Vraver and Kadai didn’t flinch. From the cockpit, through the internal vox, Brother He’ken relayed that they were closing on their objective.

++*Ninety seconds...*++

‘What was your answer?’ asked Vraver.

Kadai spread his hands as if it was obvious, “Because we must.”

‘As simple as that,’ said the Raven Guard. ‘I always admired your frankness, Ko’tan. You Salamanders are such pragmatists, even when your very appearance betrays your ideals.’

Fire-wyvern’s engines were screaming. The gunship was banking into a sharp dive. Kadai could feel the inertia even in his power armour. Heavy cannon fire boomed through the hull, muffled slightly by the gunship’s armour.

++*Sixty seconds...*++

‘It is *because* of what we are that we can *be* Vulkan’s Shield. Triumph over adversity, self-sacrifice and the capacity to endure comes from *this*.’ He gestured towards his diabolic features. ‘By being less human on the outside, we are made more human inside.’ Kadai touched his breastplate where a symbolic flame was rendered in gold. ‘The burning core of our righteousness and the belief in our duty and all the Promethean Creed comes from within.’

++*Ten seconds... nine... eight...*++

Kadai donned his helmet. Like his armour, it was finely artificed. It depicted a snarling drake head, its scales echoed in the captain’s battle-plate.

The deployment ramp of *Fire-wyvern* opened slowly. Heat and sound rushed in. Having disengaged his grav-harness, Kadai mounted the ramp first. Brother He’ken had brought them low. Thirty metres down, fire wreathed Echelon City in a crackling veil.

The once regal avenues burned. Plazas fluttered with the charred remains of anti-Imperial propaganda leaflets. Bodies of loyal citizens and cultists alike littered roads clogged with blood and rubble. One structure remained. Blasted ruins filled with Chaos insurgency troops surrounded it. Three battalions, over a

thousand troops, moved into position. Their heavy gun emplacements had taken a toll on the schola's marble walls. Columns were toppled. Statues of prominent alumni were beheaded and defiled. Soon it would be no more. The Space Marines had arrived just in time.

A comm-feed in Kadai's ornate helm revealed that Navy ordnance would be unleashed from sub-orbit in less than six point three minutes and counting. Only ash would remain afterwards.

He'ken drew them closer still. Heavy bolters from the Thunderhawk's wings and forward fuselage raked a cannon battery wheeling around to get a bead. Simple brown flak armour and the hoods of their debased cult availed them nothing. The heretics disappeared in a storm of blood and debris.

Kadai unhitched a pair of krak grenades mag-locked to his belt.

The roof of the schola hove into view. It had been damaged and would yield with little force. Kadai cast down the grenades, priming them with a three-second timer. Vraver loosed two more.

The detonation was fast and loud. In a cloud of smoke and flame, the schola roof collapsed. Several young faces and the older visage of an abbot peered up through the clearing dust at the angels in the war-blackened sky above. Salvation had come.

'Tell me, brother,' shouted Vraver, readying to drop then engage the thrusters of his jump pack, 'this precocious neophyte, what is his name?'

Salamander met the gaze of Raven Guard briefly. Kadai's eyes flared, his emotion unclear.

'Dak'ir,' he replied, leaping off the ramp and into the schola below. 'Hazon Dak'ir.'



HELL NIGHT

It can't rain all the time...

The trooper's mood was sullen as he helped drag the unlimbered lascannon through the mire.

The Earthshakers had begun their bombardment. A slow and steady *crump-crump* – stop – *crump-crump* far behind him at the outskirts of bastion headquarters made the trooper flinch instinctively every time a shell whined overhead.

It was ridiculous: the deadly cargo fired by the siege guns was at least thirty metres at the apex of its trajectory, yet still he ducked.

Survival was high on the trooper's list of priorities, that and service to the Emperor of course.

Ave Imperator.

A cry to the trooper's right, though muffled by the droning rain, got his attention. He turned, rivulets teeming off his nose like at the precipice of a waterfall, and saw the lascannon had foundered. One of its carriage's rear wheels was sunk in mud, sucked into an invisible bog.

'Bostok, gimme a hand.'

Another trooper, Genk, an old guy – a *lifer* – grimaced to Bostok as he tried to wedge the butt of his lasgun under the trapped wheel and use it like a lever.

Tracer fire was whipping overhead, slits of magnesium carving up the darkness. It sizzled and spat when it pierced the sheeting rain.

Bostok grumbled. Staying low, he tramped over heavily to help his fellow gunner. Adding his own weapon to the hopeful excavation, he pushed down and tried to work his way under the wheel.

'Get it deeper,' urged Genk, the lines in his weathered face becoming dark crevices with every distant flash-flare of siege shells striking the void shield.

Though each hit brought a fresh blossom of energy rippling across the shield, the city's defences were holding. If the 135th Phalanx was to breach it – for the

Emperor's glory and righteous will – they'd need to bring more firepower to bear.

'Overload the generators,' Sergeant Harver had said.

'Bring our guns close,' he'd said. *'Orders from Colonel Tench.'*

Not particularly subtle, but then they were the Guard, the Hammer of the Emperor: blunt was what the common soldiery did best.

Genk was starting to panic: they were falling behind.

Across a killing field dug with abandoned trenches, tufts of razor wire protruding like wild gorse in some untamed prairie, teams of Phalanx troopers dragged heavy weapons or marched hastily in squad formation.

It took a lot of men to break a siege; more still, and with artillery support, to bring down a fully functioning void shield. Men the Phalanx had: some ten thousand souls willing to sacrifice their lives for the glory of the Throne; the big guns – leastways the shells for the big guns – they did not. A Departmento Munitorum clerical error had left the battle group short some fifty thousand anti-tank, arrowhead shells. Fewer shells meant more boots and bodies. A more aggressive strategy was taken immediately: all lascannons and heavy weapons to advance to five hundred metres and lay void shield-sapping support fire.

Bad luck for Phalanx: wars were easier to fight from behind distant crosshairs. And safer. Bad luck for Bostok, too.

Though he was working hard at freeing the gun with Genk, he noticed some of their comrades falling to the defensive return fire of the secessionist rebels, holed up and cosy behind their shield and their armour and their fraggin' gun emplacements.

Bastards.

Bet they're dry too, Bostok thought ruefully. His slicker came undone when he snagged it on the elevation winch of the lascannon and he swore loudly as the downpour soaked his red-brown standard-issue uniform beneath.

There was a muted cry ahead as he fastened up the slicker and pulled his wide-brimmed helmet down further to keep out the worst of the rain – a heavy bolter team and half an infantry squad disappeared from view, seemingly swallowed by the earth. Some of the old firing pits and trenches had been left unfilled, except now they contained muddy water and sucking earth. As deadly as quicksand they were.

Bostok muttered a prayer, making the sign of the aquila. Least it wasn't him and Genk.

'Eye be damned, what is holding you up, troopers?'

It was Sergeant Harver. The tumult was deafening, that and the artillery exchange. He had to bellow just to be heard. Not that Harver ever did anything but bellow when addressing his squad.

‘Get this fraggin’ rig moving you sump rats,’ he barracked, ‘You’re lagging troopers, lagging.’

Harver munched a fat, vine-leaf cigar below the black wire of his twirled moustache. He didn’t seem to mind or notice that it had long been doused and hung like a fat, soggy finger from the corner of his mouth.

A static crackle from the vox-operator’s comms unit interrupted the sergeant’s tirade.

‘More volume: louder Rhoper, louder.’

Rhoper, the vox-operator, nodded, before setting the unit down and fiddling with a bunch of controls. The receiver was amplified in a few seconds and returned with the voice of Sergeant Rampe.

‘...Enemy sighted! They’re here in no-man’s land! Bastards are out beyond the shield! I see, oh sh–’

‘Rampe, Rampe,’ Harver bellowed into the receiver cup. ‘Respond, man!’ His attention switched to Rhoper.

‘Another channel, trooper – at the double, if you please.’

Rhoper was already working on it. The comms channels linking the infantry squads to artillery command and one another flicked by in a mixture of static, shouting and oddly muted gunfire.

At last, they got a response.

‘...aggin’ out here with us! Throne of Earth, that’s not poss–’

The voice stopped but the link continued unbroken. There was more distant weapons fire, and something else.

‘Did I hear–’ Harver began.

‘Bells, sir,’ offered Rhoper, in a rare spurt of dialogue. ‘It was bells ringing.’

Static killed the link and this time Harver turned to Trooper Bostok, who had all but given up trying to free the lascannon.

The bells hadn’t stopped. They were on this part of the battlefield too.

‘Could be the sounds carrying on the wind, sir?’ suggested Genk, caked in mud from his efforts.

Too loud, too close to be just the wind, thought Bostok. He took up his lasgun as he turned to face the dark.

Silhouettes lived there, jerking in stop-motion with every void impact flare – they were his comrades, those who had made it to the five hundred metre line.

Bostok's eyes narrowed.

There was something else out there too. Not guns or Phalanx, not even rebels.

It was white, rippling and flowing on an unseen breeze. The rain was so dense it just flattened; the air didn't zephyr, there were no eddies skirling across the killing ground.

'Sarge, do we 'ave Ecclesiarchy in our ranks?'

'Negative, trooper, just the Emperor's own: boots, bayonets and blood.'

Bostok pointed towards the flicker of white.

'Then who the frag is that?'

But the flicker had already gone. Though the bells tolled on. Louder and louder.

Fifty metres away, men were screaming. And running.

Bostok saw their faces through his gun sight, saw the horror written there. Then they were gone. He scanned the area, using his scope like a magnocular, but couldn't find them. At first Bostok thought they'd fallen foul of an earth ditch, like the heavy bolter and infantry he'd seen earlier, but he could see no ditches, no trench or fire pit that could've swallowed them. But they'd been claimed all right, claimed by whatever moved amongst them.

More screaming; merging with the bells into a disturbing clamour.

It put the wind up Sergeant Harver – Phalanx soldiers were disappearing in all directions.

'Bostok, Genk, get that cannon turned about,' he ordered, slipping out his service pistol.

The lascannon was well and truly stuck, but worked on a pintle mount, so could be swivelled into position. Genk darted around the carriage, not sure what was happening but falling back on orders to anchor himself and stave off rising terror. He yanked out the holding pin with more force than was necessary and swung the gun around towards the white flickers and the screaming, just as his sergeant requested.

'Covering fire, Mr Rhooper,' added Harver, and the vox-operator slung the boxy comms unit on his back and drew his lasgun, crouching in a shooting position just behind the lascannon.

Bostok took up his post by the firing shield, slamming a fresh power cell into the heavy weapon's breech.

'Lit and clear!'

'At your discretion, trooper,' said Harver.

Genk didn't need a written invitation. He sighted down the barrel and the

targeting nub, seeing a flicker, and hauled back the triggers.

Red beams, hot and angry, ripped up the night. Genk laid suppressing fire in a forward arc that smacked of fear and desperation. He was sweating by the end of his salvo, and not from the heat discharge.

The bells were tolling still, though it was impossible to place their origin. The void-shrouded city was too far away, a black smudge on an already dark canvas, and the resonant din sounded close and all around them.

Cordite wafted on the breeze; cordite and screaming.

Bostok tried to squint past the driving rain, more effective than any camo-paint for concealment.

The flickers were still out there, ephemeral and indistinct... and they were closing.

‘Again, if you please,’ ordered Harver, an odd tremor affecting his voice.

It took Bostok a few seconds to recognise it as fear.

‘Lit and clear!’ he announced, slamming in a second power cell.

‘Not stopping, sir,’ said Rhooper and sighted down his lasgun before firing.

Sergeant Harver responded by loosing his own weapon, pistol cracks adding to the fusillade.

Casting about, Bostok found they were alone; an island of Phalanx in a sea of mud, but the advanced line was coming to meet them. They were fleeing, driven wild by sheer terror. Men were disappearing as they ran, sucked under the earth, abruptly silenced.

‘Sarge...’ Bostok began.

Onwards the line came, something moving within it, preying on it like piranhas stalking a shoal of frightened fish.

Harver was nearly gone, just firing on impulse now. Some of his shots and that of Genk’s lascannon were tearing up their own troops.

Rhooper still had his wits, and came forwards as the heavy weapon ran dry.

‘F-f...’ Harver was saying when Bostok got to his feet and ran like hell.

Rhooper disappeared a moment later. No cries for help, no nothing; just a cessation of his lasgun fire and then silence to show for the end of the doughty vox-officer.

Heart hammering in his chest, his slicker having now parted and exposing him to the elements, Bostok ran, promising never to bemoan his lot again, if the Emperor would just spare him this time, spare him from being pulled into the earth and buried alive. He didn’t want to die like that.

Bostok must’ve been dragging his feet, because troopers from the advanced

line were passing him. A trooper disappeared to his left, a white flicker and the waft of something old and dank presaging his demise. Another, just ahead, was pulled asunder, and Bostok jinked away from a course that would lead him into that path. He risked a glance over his shoulder. Harver and Genk were gone – the lascannon was still mired but now abandoned – fled or taken, he didn't know.

Some of the Phalanx were staging a fighting withdrawal. Gallant, but what did they have to hold off? It was no enemy Bostok had ever seen or known.

Running was all that concerned him now, running for his life.

Just reach the artillery batteries and I'll be fine.

But then a hollow cry echoed ahead, and Bostok saw a white flicker around the siege guns. A tanker disappeared under the earth, his cap left on the grille of the firing platform.

The fat lump of numbing panic in his chest rose into Bostok's throat and threatened to choke him.

Can't go back, can't go forwards...

He peeled off to the left. Maybe he could take a circuitous route to bastion headquarters.

No, too long. They'd be on him before then.

In the dark and the rain, he couldn't even see the mighty structure. No beacon-lamps to guide him, no searchlights to cling to. Death, like the darkness, was closing.

The bells were tolling.

Men screamed.

Bostok ran, his vision fragmenting in sheer terror, the pieces collapsing in on one another like a kaleidoscope.

Got to get away... Please Throne, oh pl-

Earth became swamp beneath his feet, and Bostok sank. He panicked, thinking he was about to be taken, when he realised he'd fallen into an earth ditch, right up to his chin. Fighting the urge to wade across, he dipped lower until the muddy water reached his nose, filling his nostrils with a rank and stagnant odour. Clinging to the edge with trembling, bone-cold fingers, he prayed to the Emperor for the end of the night, for the end of the rain and the cessation of the bells.

But the bells didn't stop. They just kept on tolling.

Three weeks later...

‘Fifty metres to landfall,’ announced Hak’en. The pilot’s voice sounded tinny through the vox-speaker in the Chamber Sanctuarine of *Fire-wyvern*.

Looking through the occuliport in the gunship’s flank, Dak’ir saw a grey day, sheeting with rain.

Hak’en was bringing the vessel around, flying a course that would take them within a few metres of Mercy Rock, the headquarters of the 135th Phalanx and the Imperial forces they were joining on Vaporis. As the gunship banked, angling Dak’ir’s slit-view downward, a sodden earth field riddled with dirty pools and sludge-like emplacements was revealed. The view came in frustrating slashes.

Dak’ir was curious to see more.

‘Brother,’ he addressed the vox-speaker, ‘open up the embarkation ramp.’

‘As you wish, brother-sergeant. Landfall in twenty metres.’

Hak’en disengaged the locking protocols that kept the Thunderhawk’s hatches sealed during transit. As the operational rune went green, Dak’ir punched it and the ramp started to open and lower.

Light and air rushed into the gunship’s troop compartment where Dak’ir’s battle-brothers were sat in meditative silence. Even in the grey dawn, their bright green battle-plate flashed, the snarling firedrake icon on their left pauldrons – orange on a black field – revealing them to be Salamanders of the 3rd Company.

As well as illuminating their power armour, the feeble light also managed to banish the glare from their eyes. Blazing red with captured fire, it echoed the heat of the Salamanders’ volcanic home world, Nocturne.

‘A far cry from the forge-pits under Mount Deathfire,’ groaned Ba’ken.

Though he couldn’t see his face beneath the battle-helm he was wearing, Dak’ir knew his brother also wore a scowl at the inclement weather.

‘Wetter too,’ added Emek, coming to stand beside the hulking form of Ba’ken and peering over Dak’ir’s broad shoulders. ‘But then what else are we to expect from a monsoon world?’

The ground was coming to meet them and as Hak’en straightened up *Fire-wyvern* the full glory of Mercy Rock was laid before them.

It might once have been beautiful, but now the bastion squatted like an ugly gargoyle in a brown mud-plain. Angular gun towers, bristling with autocannon and heavy stubber, crushed the angelic spires that had once soared into the turbulent Vaporis sky; ablative armour concealed murals and baroque columns; the old triumphal gate, with its frescos and ornate filigree, had been replaced with something grey, dark and practical. These specific details were unknown to Dak’ir, but he could see in the structure’s curves an echo of its architectural

bearing, hints of something artful and not merely functional.

‘I see we are not the only recent arrivals,’ said Ba’ken. The other Salamanders at the open hatch followed his gaze to where a black Valkyrie gunship had touched down in the mud, its landing stanchions slowly sinking.

‘Imperial Commissariat,’ replied Emek, recognising the official seal on the side of the transport.

Dak’ir kept his silence. His eyes strayed across the horizon to the distant city of Aphium and the void dome surrounding it. Even above the droning gunship engines, he could hear the hum of generatoria powering the field. It was like those which protected the Sanctuary Cities of his home world from the earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that were a way of life for the hardy folk of Nocturne. The air was thick with the stench of ozone; another by-product of the void fields. Even the constant rain couldn’t wash it away.

As *Fire-wyvern* came in to land with a scream of stabiliser-jets, Dak’ir closed his eyes. Rain was coming in through the hatch and he let it patter against his armour. The dulcet ring of it was calming. Rain – at least the cool, wet, non-acidic kind – was rare on Nocturne, and even against his armour he enjoyed the sensation. There was an undercurrent of something else that came with it, though. It was unease, disquiet, a sense of watchfulness.

I feel it too, a voice echoed inside Dak’ir’s head, and his eyes snapped open again. He turned to find Brother Pyriel watching him intently. Pyriel was a Librarian, a wielder of the psychic arts, and he could read people’s thoughts as they might read an open book. The psyker’s eyes flashed cerulean-blue before returning to burning red. Dak’ir didn’t like the idea of him poking around in his subconscious, but he sensed that Pyriel had merely browsed the surface of his mind. Even still, Dak’ir looked away and was glad when the earth met them at last and *Fire-wyvern* touched down.

The cold snap of las-fire carried on the breeze as the Salamanders debarked.

Across the muddied field, just fifty metres from the approach road to Mercy Rock, a commissarial firing squad was executing a traitor.

An Imperial Guard colonel, wearing the red-brown uniform of the Phalanx, jerked spastically as the hot rounds struck him, and was still. Tied to a thick, wooden pole, he slumped and sagged against his bonds. First his knees folded and he sank, then his head lolled forward, his eyes open and glassy.

A commissar, lord-level given his rank pins and trappings, was looking on as his bodyguards brought their lasguns to port arms and marched away from the

execution site. His gaze met with Dak'ir's as he turned to go after them. Rain teemed off the brim of his cap, a silver skull stud sat in the centre above the peak. The commissar's eyes were hidden by the shadow the brim cast, but felt cold and rigid all the same. The Imperial officer didn't linger. He was already walking away, back to the bastion, as the last of the Salamanders mustered out and the exit ramps closed.

Dak'ir wondered at what events had delivered the colonel to such a bleak end, and was sorry to see *Fire-wyvern* lifting off again, leaving them alone in this place.

'Such is the fate of all traitors,' remarked Tsu'gan with a bitter tang.

Even behind his helmet lens, Tsu'gan's stare was hard. Dak'ir returned his glare.

There was no brotherly love between the two Salamanders sergeants. Before they became Space Marines, they had hailed from opposite ends of the Nocturnean hierarchy: Dak'ir, an Ignean cave-dweller and an orphan, the likes of which had never before joined the ranks of the Astartes; and Tsu'gan, a nobleman's son from the Sanctuary City of Hesiod, as close to aristocracy and affluence as it was possible to get on a volcanic death world. Though as sergeants they were both equals in the eyes of their captain and Chapter Master, Tsu'gan did not regard their relationship as such. Dak'ir was unlike many other Salamanders, there was a strain of humanity left within him that was greater and more empathic than that of his brothers. It occasionally left him isolated, almost disconnected. Tsu'gan had seen it often enough and decided it was not merely unusual, it was an aberration. Since their first mission as Scouts on the sepulchre world of Moribar, acrimony had divided them. In the years that followed, it had not lessened.

'It leaves a grim feeling to see men wasted like that,' said Dak'ir. 'Slain in cold blood without chance for reparation.'

Many Space Marine Chapters, the Salamanders among them, believed in order and punishment, but they also practised penitence and the opportunity for atonement. Only when a brother was truly lost, given in to the Ruinous Powers or guilty of such a heinous deed as could not be forgiven or forgotten, was death the only alternative.

'Then you'd best develop a stronger stomach, *Ignean*,' sneered Tsu'gan, fashioning the word into a slight, 'for your compassion is misplaced on the executioners' field.'

'It's no weakness, brother,' Dak'ir replied fiercely.

Pyriel deliberately walked between them to prevent any further hostility.

‘Gather your squads, brother-sergeants,’ the Librarian said firmly, ‘and follow me.’

Both did as ordered, Ba’ken and Emek plus seven others falling in behind Dak’ir whilst Tsu’gan led another same-sized squad from the dropsite. One in Tsu’gan’s group gave Dak’ir a vaguely contemptuous look, before turning his attention to an auspex unit. This was Iagon, Tsu’gan’s second and chief minion. Where Tsu’gan was all thinly-veiled threat and belligerence, Iagon was an insidious snake, much more poisonous and deadly.

Dak’ir shrugged off the battle-brother’s glare and motioned his squad forwards.

‘I could see his attitude corrected, brother,’ hissed Ba’ken over a closed comm-link channel feeding to Dak’ir’s battle-helm. ‘It would be a pleasure.’

‘I don’t doubt that, Ba’ken,’ Dak’ir replied, ‘but let’s just try and stay friendly for now, shall we?’

‘As you wish, sergeant.’

Behind his battle-helm, Dak’ir smiled. Ba’ken was his closest ally in the Chapter and he was eternally grateful that the hulking heavy weapons trooper was watching his back.

As they marched the final few metres to the bastion gates, Ba’ken’s attention strayed to the void shield on the Salamanders’ right. The commissar lord, along with his entourage, had already gone inside the Imperial command centre. Overhead, the skies were darkening and the rain intensified. Day was giving way to night.

‘Your tactical assessment, Brother Ba’ken?’ asked Pyriel, noting his fellow Salamander’s interest in the shield.

‘Constant bombardment – it’s the only way to bring a void shield down.’ He paused, thinking. ‘That, or get close enough to slip through during a momentary break in the field and knock out the generatoria.’

Tsu’gan sniffed derisively.

‘Then let us hope the humans can do just that, and get us to within striking distance, so we can leave this sodden planet.’

Dak’ir bristled at the other sergeant’s contempt, but kept his feelings in check. He suspected it was half-meant as a goad, anyway.

‘Tell me this, then, brothers,’ added Pyriel, the gates of the bastion looming, ‘why are they falling back with their artillery?’

At a low ridge, just below the outskirts of the bastion, Basilisk tanks were

retreating. Their long cannons shrank away from the battlefield as the tanks found parking positions within the protective outer boundaries of the bastion.

‘Why indeed?’ Dak’ir asked himself as they passed through the slowly opening gates and entered Mercy Rock.

‘Victory at Aphium will be won with strong backs, courage and the guns of our Immortal Emperor!’

The commissar lord was sermonising as the Salamanders appeared in the great bastion hall.

Dak’ir noticed the remnants of ornamental fountains, columns and mosaics – all reduced to rubble for the Imperial war machine.

The hall was a vast expanse and enabled the Imperial officer to address almost ten thousand men, mustered in varying states of battle-dress. Sergeants, corporals, line troopers, even the wounded and support staff had been summoned to the commissar’s presence as he announced his glorious vision for the coming war.

To his credit, he barely flinched when the Astartes strode into the massive chamber, continuing on with his rallying cry to the men of the Phalanx who showed much greater reverence for the Emperor’s Angels of Death amongst them.

The Fire-born had removed battle-helms as they’d entered, revealing onyx-black skin and red eyes that glowed dully in the half-dark. As well as reverence, several of the Guardsmen betrayed their fear and awe of the Salamanders. Dak’ir noticed Tsu’gan smiling thinly, enjoying intimidating the humans before them.

‘*As potent as bolt or blade,*’ old Master Zen’de had told them when they were neophytes. Except that Tsu’gan deployed such tactics all too readily; even against allies.

‘Colonel Tench is dead,’ the commissar announced flatly. ‘He lacked the will and the purpose the Emperor demands of us. His legacy of largesse and cowardice is over.’

Like black-clad sentinels, the commissar’s storm troopers eyed the men nearest their master at this last remark, daring them to take umbrage at the defamation of their former colonel.

The commissar’s voice was amplified by a loudhailer and echoed around the courtyard, carrying to every trooper present. A small cadre of Phalanx officers, what was left of the command section, were standing to one side of the commissar, giving off stern and unyielding looks to the rest of their troops.

This was the Emperor's will – they didn't have to like it; they just had to do it.

'And any man who thinks otherwise had best look to the bloody fields beyond Mercy Rock, for that is the fate which awaits he without the courage to do what is necessary.' The commissar glared, baiting dissension. When none was forthcoming, he went on. 'I am taking command in the late colonel's stead. All artillery will return to the battlefield immediately. Infantry is to be mustered in platoon and ready for deployment as soon as possible. Section commanders are to report to me in the strategium. The Phalanx will mobilise tonight!' He emphasised this last point with a clenched fist.

Silence reigned for a few moments, before a lone voice rang out of the crowd.

'But tonight is Hell Night.'

Like a predator with its senses piqued, the commissar turned to find the voice.

'Who said that?' he demanded, stalking to the front of the rostrum where he was preaching. 'Make yourself known.'

'There are things in the darkness, things not of this world. I've seen 'em!' A gap formed around a frantic-looking trooper as he gesticulated to the others, his growing hysteria spreading. 'They took Sergeant Harver, took 'im! The spectres! Just sucked men under the earth... They'll ta—'

The loud report of the commissar's bolt pistol stopped the trooper in mid-flow. Blood and brain matter splattered the infantrymen nearest the now headless corpse as silence returned.

Dak'ir stiffened at such wanton destruction of life, and was about to step forward and speak his mind, before a warning hand from Pyriel stopped him.

Reluctantly, the Salamander backed down.

'This idle talk about spectres and shadows haunting the night will not be tolerated,' the commissar decreed, holstering his still-smoking pistol. 'Our enemies are flesh and blood. They occupy Aphium and when this city falls, we will open up the rest of the continent to conquest. The lord-governor of this world lies dead, assassinated by men he trusted. Seceding from the Imperium is tantamount to an act of war. This rebellion will be crushed and Vaporis will be brought back to the light of Imperial unity. Now, prepare for battle...'

The commissar looked down his nose at the headless remains of the dead trooper, now lying prone.

'...and somebody clear up that filth.'

'He'll demoralise these men,' hissed Dak'ir, anger hardening his tone.

Two infantrymen were dragging the corpse of the dead trooper away. His bloodied jacket bore the name: Bostok.

‘It’s not our affair,’ muttered Pyriel, his keen gaze fixed on the commissar as he headed towards them.

‘The mood is grim enough, though, Brother-Librarian,’ said Ba’ken, surveying the weary lines of troopers as they fell in, marshalled by platoon sergeants.

‘Something has them spooked,’ snarled Tsu’gan, though more out of contempt for the Guardsmen’s apparent weakness, than concern.

Pyriel stepped forward to greet the commissar, who’d reached the Salamanders from the end of the rostrum.

‘My lord Astartes,’ he said with deference, bowing before Pyriel. ‘I am Commissar Loth, and if you would accompany me with your officers to the strategium, I will apprise you of the tactical situation here on Vaporis.’

Loth was about to move away, determined to send the message that he, and not the Emperor’s Angels, was in charge at Mercy Rock, when Pyriel’s voice, resonant with psy-power, stopped him.

‘That won’t be necessary, commissar.’

Loth didn’t look impressed as he stared at the Librarian. His expression demanded an explanation, which Pyriel was only too pleased to provide.

‘We know our orders and the tactical disposition of this battle. Weaken the shield, get us close enough to deploy an insertion team in the vicinity of the generatoria and we will do the rest.’

‘I– that is, I mean to say, very well. But do you not need–’

Pyriel cut him off.

‘I do have questions, though. That man, the trooper you executed: what did he mean by “spectres”, and what is Hell Night?’

Loth gave a dismissive snort.

‘Superstition and scaremongering – these men have been lacking discipline for too long.’ He was about to end it there when Pyriel’s body language suggested the commissar should go on. Reluctantly, he did. ‘Rumours, reports from the last night-attack against the secessionists, of men disappearing without trace under the earth and unnatural denizens prowling the battlefield. Hell Night is the longest nocturnal period in the Vaporan calendar – its longest night.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Yes.’ Loth’s face formed a scowl. ‘It’s sheer idiocy. Fearing the dark? Well, it’s just damaging to the morale of the men in this regiment.’

‘The former colonel, did he supply you with these... *reports*?’

Loth made a mirthless grin.

‘He did.’

‘And you had him shot for that?’

‘As my duty binds me, yes, I did.’ Loth had a pugilist’s face, slab-flat with a wide, crushed nose and a scar that ran from top lip to hairline that pulled up the corner of his mouth in a snarl. His small ears, poking out from either side of his commissar’s cap, were ragged. He was stolid when he spoke next. ‘There is nothing lurking in the darkness except the false nightmares that dwell in the minds of infants.’

‘I’ve seen nightmares made real before, commissar,’ Pyriel took on a warning tone.

‘Then we are fortunate to have angels watching over us.’ Loth adjusted his cap and straightened his leather frockcoat. ‘I’ll weaken the shield, be assured of that, nightmares or no.’

‘Then we’ll see you on the field, commissar,’ Pyriel told him, before showing his back and leaving Loth to wallow in impotent rage.

‘You really took exception to him, didn’t you brother?’ said Emek a few minutes later, too curious to realise his impropriety. They were back out in the muddy quagmire. In the distance, the sound of battle tanks moving into position ground on the air.

‘He had a callous disregard for human life,’ Pyriel replied. ‘And besides... his aura was bad.’ He allowed a rare smirk at the remark, before clamping on his battle-helm.

Overhead, the sky was wracked with jagged red lightning and the clouds billowed crimson. Far above, in the outer atmosphere of Vaporis, a warp storm was boiling. It threw a visceral cast over the rain-slicked darkness of the battlefield.

‘Hell Night, in more than just name it seems,’ said Ba’ken, looking up to the bloody heavens.

‘An inauspicious omen, perhaps?’ offered Iagon, the first time he’d spoken since landfall.

‘Ever the doomsayer,’ remarked Ba’ken under his breath to his sergeant.

But Dak’ir wasn’t listening. He was looking at Pyriel.

‘Form combat squads,’ said the Librarian, when he realised he was under scrutiny. ‘Tsu’gan, find positions.’

Tsu’gan slammed a fist against his plastron, and cast a last snide glance at Dak’ir before he divided up his squad and moved out at a steady run.

Dak’ir ignored him, still intent on Pyriel.

‘Do you sense something, Brother-Librarian?’

Pyriel eyed the darkness in the middle distance, the no-man's land between the bastion and the shimmering edge of the far off void shield. It was as if he was trying to catch a glimpse of something just beyond his reach, at the edge of natural sight.

'It's nothing.'

Dak'ir nodded slowly and mustered out. But he'd detected the lie in the Librarian's words and wondered what it meant.

False thunder wracked the sky from the report of heavy cannons at the rear of the Imperial battle line. Smoke hung over the muddied field like a shroud, occluding the bodies of the Phalanx troopers moving through it, but was quickly weighed down by the incessant rain.

They marched in platoons, captains and sergeants hollering orders over the defensive fire of rebel guns and the dense *thuds* of explosions. Heavy weapons teams, two men dragging unlimbered cannons whilst standard infantry ran alongside, forged towards emplacements dug five hundred metres from the shield wall.

Incandescent flashes rippled across the void shield with the dense shell impacts of the distant Earthshaker cannons and from lascannon and missile salvos, unleashed when their crews had closed to the assault line.

In the midst of it all were the Salamanders, crouched down in cover, at the edges of the line in five-man combat squads.

Librarian Pyriel had joined Dak'ir's unit, making it six. With the flare of explosions and the red sky overhead, his blue armour was turned a lurid purple. It denoted his rank as Librarian, as did the arcane paraphernalia about his person.

'Our objective is close, brothers. There...' Pyriel indicated the bulk of a generatorium structure some thousand metres distant. Only Space Marines, with their oculobe implants, had the enhanced visual faculty to see and identify it. Rebel forces, hunkered down in pillboxes, behind trenches and fortified emplacements, guarded it. In the darkness and the rain, even with the superhuman senses of the Astartes, they were just shadows and muzzle flashes.

'We should take an oblique route, around the east and west hemispheres of the shield,' Dak'ir began. 'Resistance will be weakest there. We'll be better able to exploit it.'

After Tsu'gan had secured the route, the Salamanders had arrived at the five hundred metre assault line, having stealthed their way to it undetected before the full Imperial bombardment had begun. But they were positioned at the extreme

edges of the line – two groups east, two groups west – in the hope of launching a shock assault into the heart of the rebel defenders and destroying the generatoria powering the void shield before serious opposition could be raised.

‘Brother Pyriel?’ Dak’ir pressed when a response wasn’t forthcoming.

The Librarian was staring at the distant void shield, energy blossoms appearing on its surface only to dissipate seconds later.

‘Something about the shield... An anomaly in its energy signature...’ he breathed. His eyes were glowing cerulean-blue.

For once, Dak’ir felt nothing, just the urge to act.

‘What is it?’

‘I don’t know...’ The psychic fire dimmed in the Librarian’s eyes behind his battle-helm. ‘Oblique assault – one primary, one secondary. East and west,’ he asserted.

Dak’ir nodded, but had a nagging feeling that Pyriel wasn’t telling them everything. He opened a comm-channel to the other combat squads.

‘We move in, brothers. Assault plan *serpentine*. Brother Apion, you are support. We will take primary. Brother Tsu’gan–’

‘We are ready, Ignean,’ came the harsh reply before Dak’ir had finished. ‘Assault vector locked, I am the primary at the western hemisphere. Tsu’gan out.’

The link was cut abruptly. Dak’ir cursed under his breath.

Taking out his plasma pistol and unsheathing his chainsword, running a gauntleted finger down the flat of the blade and muttering a litany to Vulkan, Dak’ir rose to his feet.

‘Fire-born, advance on my lead.’

Emek’s raised fist brought them to a halt before they could move out. He had his finger pressed to the side of his battle-helm.

‘I’m getting some frantic chatter from the Phalanx units.’ He paused, listening intently. ‘Contact has been lost with several secondary command units.’ Then he looked up. During the pregnant pause, Dak’ir could sense what was coming next.

‘They say they’re under attack... from *spectres*,’ said Emek.

‘Patch it to all comms, brother. Every combat squad.’

Emek did as asked, and Dak’ir’s battle-helm, together with his brothers’, was filled with the broken reports from the Phalanx command units.

‘...*ergeant is dead. Falling back to secondary positions...*’

‘...*all around us! Throne of Earth, I can’t see a target, I can’t se–*’

‘...ead, everyone. They’re out here among us! Oh hell, oh Emperor sa—’

Scattered gunfire and hollow screams punctuated these reports. Some units were attempting to restore order. The barking commands of sergeants and corporals sounded desperate as they tried to reorganise in the face of sudden attack.

Commissar Loth’s voice broke in sporadically, his replies curt and scathing. They must hold and then advance. The Imperium would brook no cowardice in the face of the enemy. Staggered bursts from his bolt pistol concluded each order, suggesting further executions.

Above and omnipresent, the sound of tolling bells filled the air.

‘I saw no chapel or basilica in the Phalanx bastion,’ said Ba’ken. He swept his gaze around slowly, panning with his heavy flamer as he did so.

‘The rebels?’ offered Brother Romulus.

‘How do you explain it being everywhere?’ asked Pyriel, his eyes aglow once more. He regarded the blood-red clouds that hinted at the churning warp storm above. ‘This is an unnatural phenomenon. We are dealing with more than secessionists.’

Dak’ir swore under his breath; he’d made his decision.

‘Spectres or not, we can’t leave the Phalanx to be butchered.’ He switched the comm-feed in his battle-helm to transmit.

‘All squads regroup, and converge on Phalanx command positions.’

Brother Apion responded with a rapid affirmative, as did a second combat squad led by Brother Lazarus. Tsu’gan took a little longer to capitulate, evidently unimpressed, but seeing the need to rescue the Guardsmen from whatever was attacking them. Without the support fire offered by their heavy guns, the Salamanders were horribly exposed to the secessionist artillery and with the shield intact they had no feasible mission to prosecute.

‘Understood.’ Tsu’gan then cut the link.

Silhouettes moved through the downpour. Lasgun snap-shot fizzed out from Imperial positions, revealing Phalanx troopers that were shooting at unseen foes.

Most were running. Even the Basilisks were starting to withdraw. Commissar Loth, despite all of his fervour and promised retribution, couldn’t prevent it.

The Phalanx were fleeing.

‘Enemy contacts?’

Dak’ir was tracking through the mire, pistol held low, chainsword still but ready. He was the fulcrum of a dispersed battle-formation, Pyriel to his

immediate left and two battle-brothers either side of them.

Ahead, he saw another combat squad led by Apion, the secondary insertion group. He too had dispersed his warriors, and they were plying every metre of the field for enemies.

‘Negative,’ was the curt response from Lazarus, approaching from the west.

Artillery bombardment from the entrenched rebel positions was falling with the intense rain. A great plume of sodden earth and broken bodies surged into the air a few metres away from where Dak’ir’s squad advanced.

‘Pyriel, anything?’

The Librarian shook his head, intent on his otherworldly instincts but finding no sense in what he felt or saw.

The broken chatter in Dak’ir’s ear continued, the tolling of the bells providing an ominous chorus to gunfire and screaming. The Phalanx were close to a rout, having been pushed too far by a commissar who didn’t understand or care about the nature of the enemy they were facing. Loth’s only answer was threat of death to galvanise the men under his command. The bark of the Imperial officer’s bolt pistol was close. Dak’ir could make out the telltale muzzle flash of the weapon in his peripheral vision.

Loth was firing at shadows and hitting his own men in the process; those fleeing and those who were standing their ground.

‘I’ll deal with him,’ promised Pyriel, snapping out of his psychic trance without warning and peeling off to intercept the commissar.

Another artillery blast detonated nearby, showering the Salamanders with debris. Without the Earthshaker bombardment, the rebels were using their shell-hunting cannons to punish the Imperials. Tracer fire from high-calibre gunnery positions added to the carnage. That and whatever was stalking them through the mud and rain.

‘It’s infiltrators.’ Tsu’gan’s harsh voice was made harder still as it came through the comm-feed. ‘Maybe fifty men, strung out in small groups, operating under camouflage. The humans are easily spooked. We will find them, Fire-born, and eliminate the threat.’

‘How can you be—’

Dak’ir stopped when he caught a glimpse of something, away to his right.

‘Did you see that?’ he asked Ba’ken.

The hulking trooper followed him, swinging his heavy flamer around.

‘No target,’ Ba’ken replied. ‘What was it, brother?’

‘Not sure...’ It had looked like just a flicker of... *white robes*, fluttering

lightly but against the wind. The air suddenly became redolent with dank and age.

‘Ignean!’ Tsu’gan demanded.

‘It’s not infiltrators,’ Dak’ir replied flatly.

Static flared in the feed before the other sergeant’s voice returned.

‘You can’t be sure of that.’

‘I know it, brother.’ This time, Dak’ir cut the link. It had eluded him at first, but now he felt it, a... *presence*, out in the darkness of the killing field. It was angry.

‘Eyes open,’ he warned his squad, the half-seen image at the forefront of his mind and the stench all too real as the bells rang on.

Ahead, Dak’ir made out the form of a Phalanx officer, a captain according to his rank pins and attire. The Salamanders headed towards him, hoping to link up their forces and stage some kind of counter-attack. That was assuming there were enough troopers left to make any difference.

Commissar Loth was consumed by frenzy.

‘Hold your ground!’ he screeched. ‘The Emperor demands your courage!’ The bolt pistol rang out and another trooper fell, his torso gaping and red.

‘Forward, damn you! Advance for His greater glory and the glory of the Imperium!’

Another Phalanx died, this time a sergeant who’d been rallying his men.

Pyriel was hurrying to get close, his force sword drawn, whilst his other hand was free. In the darkness and the driving rain he saw... *spectres*. They were white-grey and indistinct. Their movements were jagged, as if partially out of synch with reality, the non-corporeal breaching the fabric of the corporeal realm.

Loth saw them too, and the fear of it, whatever this phenomenon was, was etched over his pugilist’s face.

‘*Ave Imperator*. By the light of the Emperor, I shall fear no evil,’ he intoned, falling back on the catechisms of warding and preservation he had learned in the schola progenium. ‘*Ave Imperator*. My soul is free of taint. Chaos will never claim it whilst He is my shield.’

The spectres were closing, flitting in and out of reality like a bad pict recording. Turning left and right, Loth loosed off shots at his aggressors, the brass rounds passing through them or missing completely, driving on to hit fleeing Phalanx infantrymen instead.

With each manifestation, the spectres got nearer.

Pyriel was only a few metres away when one appeared ahead of him. Loth's shot struck the Salamander in the pauldron as it went through and through, and a damage rune flared into life on the Librarian's tactical display inside his battle-helm.

'*Ave Imp*—' Too late. The spectre was upon Commissar Loth. He barely rasped the words—

'*Oh God-Emperor...*'

—when a blazing wall of psychic fire spilled from Pyriel's outstretched palm, smothering the apparition and banishing it from sight.

Loth was raising his pistol to his lips, jamming the still hot barrel into his mouth as his mind was unmanned by what he had seen.

Pyriel reached him just in time, smacking the pistol away before the commissar could summarily execute himself. The irony of it wasn't lost on the Librarian as the bolt-round flew harmlessly into the air. Still trailing tendrils of fire, Pyriel placed two fingers from his outstretched hand onto Loth's brow, who promptly crumpled to the ground and was still.

'He'll be out for several hours. Get him out of here, back to the bastion,' he ordered one of the commissar's attendants.

The attendant nodded, still shaken, calling for help, and together the storm troopers dragged Loth away.

'And he'll remember nothing of this or Vaporis,' Pyriel added beneath his breath.

Sensing his power, the spectres Pyriel had seen had retreated. Something else prickled at his senses now, something far off into the wilderness, away from the main battle site. There was neither time nor opportunity to investigate. Pyriel knew the nature of the foe they were facing now. He also knew there was no defence against it his brothers could muster. Space Marines were the ultimate warriors, but they needed enemies of flesh and blood. They couldn't fight mist and shadow.

Huge chunks of the Phalanx army were fleeing. But there was nothing Pyriel could do about that. Nor could he save those claimed by the earth, though this was the malice of the spectres at work again.

Instead, he raised a channel to Dak'ir through his battle-helm.

All the while, the bells tolled on.

'The entire force is broken,' the captain explained. He was a little hoarse from shouting commands, but had rallied what platoons were around him into some

sort of order.

‘Captain...’

‘Mannheim,’ the officer supplied.

‘Captain Mannheim, what happened here? What is preying on your men?’ asked Dak’ir. The rain was pounding heavily now, and *tinked* rapidly off his battle-plate. Explosions boomed all around them.

‘I never saw it, my lord,’ Mannheim admitted, wincing as a flare of incendiary came close, ‘only Phalanx troopers disappearing from sight. At first, I thought enemy commandos, but our bio-scanners were blank. The only heat signatures came from our own men.’

Malfunctioning equipment was a possibility, but it still cast doubt on Tsu’gan’s infiltrators theory.

Dak’ir turned to Emek, who carried the squad’s auspex. The Salamander shook his head. Nothing had come from the rebel positions behind the shield, either.

‘Could they have already been out here? Masked their heat traces?’ asked Ba’ken on a closed channel.

Mannheim was distracted by his vox-officer. Making a rapid apology, he turned his back and pressed the receiver cup to his ear, straining to hear against the rain and thunder.

‘Not possible,’ replied Dak’ir. ‘We would have seen them.’

‘Then what?’

Dak’ir shook his head, as the rain came on in swathes.

‘My lord...’ It was Mannheim again. ‘I’ve lost contact with Lieutenant Bahnhof. We were coordinating a tactical consolidation of troops to launch a fresh assault. Strength in numbers.’

It was a rarefied concept on Nocturne, where self-reliance and isolationism were the main tenets.

‘Where?’ asked Dak’ir.

Mannheim pointed ahead. ‘The lieutenant was part of our vanguard, occupying a more advanced position. His men had already reached the assault line when we were attacked.’

Explosions rippled in the distance where the captain gestured with a quavering finger. These were brave men, but their resolve was nearing its limit. Loth, and his bloody-minded draconianism, had almost pushed them over the edge.

It was hard to imagine much surviving in that barrage, and with whatever was abroad in the killing field to contend with too...

‘If Lieutenant Bahnhof lives, we will extract him and his men,’ Dak’ir promised. He abandoned thoughts of a counter-attack almost immediately. The Phalanx were in disarray. Retreat was the only sensible option that preserved a later opportunity to attack. Though it went against his Promethean code, the very ideals of endurance and tenacity the Salamanders prided themselves on, Dak’ir had no choice but to admit it.

‘Fall back with your men, captain. Get as many as you can to the bastion. Inform any other officers you can raise that the Imperial forces are in full retreat.’

Captain Mannheim motioned to protest.

‘Full retreat, captain,’ Dak’ir asserted. ‘No victory was ever won with foolish sacrifice,’ he added, quoting one of Zen’de’s Tenets of Pragmatism.

The Phalanx officer saluted, and started pulling his men back. Orders were already being barked down the vox to any other coherent platoons in the army.

‘We don’t know what is out there, Dak’ir,’ Ba’ken warned as they started running in Bahnhof’s direction. Though distant, silhouettes of the lieutenant’s forces were visible. Worryingly, their las-fire spat in frantic bursts.

‘Then we prepare for anything,’ the sergeant replied grimly and forged on into the churned earth.

Bahnhof’s men had formed a defensive perimeter, their backs facing one another with the lieutenant himself at the centre, shouting orders. He positively sagged with relief upon sighting the Emperor’s Angels coming to their aid.

The Salamanders were only a few metres away when something flickered into being nearby the circle of lasguns and one of the men simply vanished. One moment he was there, and the next... gone.

Panic flared and the order Bahnhof had gallantly established threatened to break down. Troopers had their eyes on flight and not battle against apparitions they could barely see, let alone shoot or kill.

A second trooper followed the first, another white flicker signalling his death. This time Dak’ir saw the human’s fate. It was as if the earth had opened up and swallowed him whole. Except the trooper hadn’t fallen or been sucked into a bog, he’d been *dragged*. Pearlescent hands, with thin fingers like talons, had seized the poor bastard by the ankles and pulled him under.

Despite Bahnhof’s efforts his platoon’s resolve shattered and they fled. Several more perished as they ran, sharing the same grisly fate as the others, dragged down in an eye-blink. The lieutenant ran with them, trying to turn the

rout into an ordered retreat, but failing.

Emboldened by the troopers' fear, the things that were preying on the Phalanx manifested and the Salamanders saw them clearly for the first time.

'Are they daemons?' spat Emek, levelling his bolter.

They looked more like ragged corpses, swathed in rotting surplices and robes, the tattered fabric flapping like the tendrils of some incorporeal squid. Their eyes were hollow and black, and they were bone-thin with the essence of clergy about them. Priests they may once have been; now they were devils.

'Let us see if they can burn,' snarled Ba'ken, unleashing a gout of promethium from his heavy flamer. The spectres dissipated against the glare of liquid fire coursing over them as Ba'ken set the killing fields ablaze, but returned almost as soon as the fires had died down, utterly unscathed.

He was about to douse them again when they evaporated like mist before his eyes.

An uncertain second or two passed, before the hulking Fire-born turned to his sergeant and shrugged.

'I've fought tougher foes—' he began, before crying out as his booted feet sank beneath the earth.

'Name of Vulkan!' Emek swore, scarcely believing his eyes.

'Hold him!' bellowed Dak'ir, seeing white talons snaring Ba'ken's feet and ankles. Brothers Romulus and G'heb sprang to their fellow Salamander's aid, each hooking their arms under Ba'ken's. In moments, they were straining against the strength of the spectres.

'Let me go, you'll tear me in half,' roared Ba'ken, part anger, part pain.

'Hang on, brother,' Dak'ir told him. He was about to call for reinforcements, noting Pyriel's contact rune on his tac-display, when an apparition materialised in front of him. It was an old preacher, his grey face lined with age and malice, a belligerent light illuminating the sockets of his eyes. His mouth formed words Dak'ir could not discern and he raised an accusing finger.

'Release him, hell-spawn!' Dak'ir lashed out with his chainsword, but the preacher blinked out of existence and the blade passed on harmlessly to embed itself in the soft earth behind him. Dak'ir raised his plasma pistol to shoot when a terrible, numbing cold filled his body. Icy fire surged through him as his blood was chilled by something old and vengeful. It stole away the breath from his lungs and made them burn, as if he had plunged naked beneath the surface of an arctic river. It took Dak'ir a few moments to realise the crooked fingers of the preacher were penetrating his battle-plate. Worming beyond the aegis of

ceramite, making a mockery of his power armour's normally staunch defences, the grey preacher's talons sought vital organs in their quest for vengeance.

Trying to cry out, Dak'ir found his larynx frozen, his tongue made leaden by the spectral assault. In his mind his intoned words of Promethean lore kept him from slipping into utter darkness.

Vulkan's fire beats in my breast. With it I shall smite the foes of the Emperor.

A heavy pressure hammered at his thunderous hearts, pressing, pressing...

Dak'ir's senses were ablaze and the smell of old, dank wood permeated through his battle-helm.

Then a bright flame engulfed him and the pressure eased. Cold withered, melted away by soothing heat, and as his darkening vision faded Dak'ir saw Pyriel standing amidst a pillar of fire. At the periphery, Ba'ken was being dragged free of the earth that had claimed him. Someone else was lifting Dak'ir. He felt strong hands hooking under his arms and pulling him. It was only then as his body became weightless and light that he realised he must've fallen. Semi-conscious, Dak'ir was aware of a fading voice addressing him.

'Dragging your carcass out of the fire again, Ignean...'

Then the darkness claimed him.

The strategium was actually an old refectory inside the bastion compound that smelled strongly of tabac and stale sweat. A sturdy-looking cantina table had been commandeered to act as a tactarium, and was strewn with oiled maps, geographical charts and data-slates. The vaulted ceiling leaked, and drips of water were constantly being wiped from the various scrolls and pictis layering the table by aides and officers alike. Buzzing around the moderately sized room's edges were Departmento Munitorum clerks and logisticians, counting up men and materiel with their styluses and exchanging dark glances with one another when they thought the Guard weren't looking.

It was no secret that they'd lost a lot of troops in the last sortie to bring down the void shield. To compound matters, ammunition for the larger guns was running dangerously low, to 'campaign-unviable' levels. Almost an hour had passed since the disastrous assault, and the Imperial forces were no closer to forging a battle-plan.

Librarian Pyriel surveyed the tactical data before him and saw nothing new, no insightful strategy to alleviate the graveness of their situation. At least the spectres had given up pursuit when they'd entered the grounds of Mercy Rock, though it had taken a great deal of the Epistolary's psychic prowess to fend them

off and make retreat possible.

‘What were they, brother?’ said Tsu’gan in a low voice, trying not to alert the Guard officers and quartermaster who had joined them. Some things – Tsu’gan knew – it was best that humans stayed ignorant of. They could be weak-minded, all too susceptible to fear. Protecting humanity meant more than bolter and blade; it meant shielding them from the horrifying truths of the galaxy too, lest they be broken by them.

‘I am uncertain.’ Pyriel cast his gaze upwards, where his witch-sight turned timber and rockcrete as thin as gossamer, penetrating the material to soar into the shadow night where the firmament was drenched blood-red. ‘But I believe the warp storm and the spectres are connected.’

‘Slaves of Chaos?’ The word left a bitter taste, and Tsu’gan spat it out.

‘Lost and damned, perhaps,’ the Librarian mused. ‘Not vassals of the Ruinous Powers, though. I think they are... *warp echoes*, souls trapped between the empyrean and the mortal world. The red storm has thinned the veil of reality. I can *feel* the echoes pushing through. Only, I don’t know why. But as long as the storm persists, as long as Hell Night continues, they will be out there.’

Only a few metres away, oblivious to the Salamanders, the Guard officers were having a war council of their own.

‘The simple matter is, we cannot afford a protracted siege,’ stated Captain Mannheim. Since Tench’s execution and the commissar’s incapacitation, Mannheim was the highest ranking officer in the Phalanx. His sleeves were rolled up and he’d left his cap on the tacterium table, summing the charts.

‘We have perhaps enough munitions for one more sustained assault on the void shield.’ The quartermaster was surveying his materiel logs, a Departmento Munitorum aide feeding him data-slates with fresh information that he mentally recorded and handed back as he spoke. ‘After that, there is nothing we possess here that can crack it.’

Another officer, a second lieutenant, spoke up. His jacket front was unbuttoned and an ugly dark sweat stain created a dagger-shaped patch down his shirt.

‘Even if we did, what hope is there while those things haunt the darkness?’

A patched-up corporal, his left eye bandaged, blotched crimson under the medical gauze, stepped forward.

‘I am not leading my platoon out there to be butchered again. The secessionists consort with daemons. We have no defence against it.’

Fear, Tsu’gan sneered. Yes, humans were too weak for some truths.

The second lieutenant turned, scowling, to regard the Salamanders who dwelt in the shadows at the back of the room.

‘And what of the Emperor’s Angels? Were you not sent to deliver us and help end the siege? Are these foes, the spectres in the darkness, not allied to our faceless enemies at Aphium? We cannot break the city, if you cannot rid us of the daemons in our midst.’

Hot anger flared in Tsu’gan’s eyes, and the officer balked. The Salamander snarled with it, clenching a fist at the human’s impudence.

Pyriel’s warning glance made his brother stand down.

‘They are not daemons,’ Pyriel asserted, ‘but warp echoes. A resonance of the past that clings to our present.’

‘Daemons, echoes, what difference does it make?’ asked Mannheim. ‘We are being slaughtered all the same, and with no way to retaliate. Even if we could banish these... *echoes*,’ he corrected, ‘we cannot take on them *and* the void shield. It’s simple numbers, my lord. We are fighting a war of attrition which our depleted force cannot win.’

Tsu’gan stepped forward, unable to abstain from comment any longer.

‘You are servants of the Emperor!’ he reminded Mannheim fiercely. ‘And you will do your part, hopeless or not, for the glory of Him on Earth.’

A few of the officers made the sign of the aquila, but Mannheim was not to be cowed.

‘I’ll step onto the sacrificial altar of war if that is what it takes, but I won’t do it blindly. Would you lead your men to certain death, knowing it would achieve nothing?’

Tsu’gan scowled. Grunting an unintelligible diatribe, he turned on his heel and stalked from the strategium.

Pyriel raised his eyebrows.

‘Forgive my brother,’ he said to the council. ‘Tsu’gan burns with a Nocturnean’s fire. He becomes agitated if he cannot slay anything.’

‘And that is the problem, isn’t it?’ returned Captain Mannheim. ‘The reason why your brother-sergeant was so frustrated. Save for you, Librarian, your Astartes have no weapons against these echoes. For all their strength of arms, their skill and courage, they are powerless against them.’

The statement lingered, like a blade dangling precariously over the thread of all their hopes.

‘Yes,’ Pyriel admitted in little more than a whisper.

Silent disbelief filled the room for a time as the officers fought to comprehend

the direness of their plight on Vaporis.

‘There are no sanctioned psykers in the Phalanx,’ said the second lieutenant at last. ‘Can one individual, even an Astartes, turn the tide of this war?’

‘He cannot!’ chimed the corporal. ‘We need to signal for landers immediately. Request reinforcements,’ he suggested.

‘There will be none forthcoming,’ chided Mannheim. ‘Nor will the landers enter Vaporis space whilst Aphium is contested. We are alone in this.’

‘My brother was right in one thing,’ uttered Pyriel, his voice cutting through the rising clamour. ‘Your duty is to the Emperor. Trust in us, and we will deliver victory,’ he promised.

‘But how, my lord?’ asked Mannheim.

Pyriel’s gaze was penetrating.

‘Psychics are anathema to the warp echoes. With my power, I can protect your men by erecting a psy-shield. The spectres, as you call them, will not be able to pass through. If we can get close enough to the void shield, much closer than the original assault line, and apply sufficient pressure to breach it, my brothers will break through and shatter your enemies. Taking out the generatoria first, the shield will fail and with it the Aphium resistance once your long guns have pounded them.’

The second lieutenant scoffed, a little incredulous.

‘My lord, I don’t doubt the talents of the Astartes, nor your own skill, but can you really sustain a shield of sufficient magnitude and duration to make this plan work?’

The Librarian smiled thinly.

‘I am well schooled by my Master Vel’cona. As an Epistolary-level Librarian, my abilities are prodigious, lieutenant,’ he said without pride. ‘I can do what must be done.’

Mannheim nodded, though a hint of fatalism tainted his resolve.

‘Then you have my full support and the support of the Phalanx 135th,’ he said. ‘Tell me what you need, my lord, and it shall be yours.’

‘Stout hearts and steely resolve is all I ask, captain. It is all the Emperor will ever ask of you.’

Tsu’gan checked the load of his combi-bolter, re-securing the promethium canister on the flamer element of the weapon.

‘Seems pointless, when we cannot even kill our foes,’ he growled.

The bellicose sergeant was joined by the rest of his brothers at the threshold to

Mercy Rock, in the inner courtyard before the bastion's great gate.

Behind them, the Phalanx platoons were readying. In the vehicle yards, the Basilisks were churning into position on their tracks. Anticipation filled the air like an electric charge.

Only two Salamanders were missing, and one of those was hurrying to join them through the thronging Guardsmen from the makeshift medi-bay located in the bastion catacombs.

'How is he, brother?' Emek asked, racking the slide to his bolter.

'Unconscious still,' said Ba'ken. He'd ditched his heavy flamer and carried a bolter like most of his battle-brothers. Dak'ir had not recovered from the attack by the spectre and so, despite his protests, Ba'ken had been made de facto sergeant by Pyriel.

'I wish he were with us,' he muttered.

'We all do, brother,' said Pyriel. Detecting a mote of unease, he asked, 'Something on your mind, Ba'ken?'

The question hung in the air like an unfired bolt-round, before the hulking trooper answered.

'I heard Brother-Sergeant Tsu'gan over the comm-feed. Can these things even be fought, brother? Or are we merely drawing them off for the Guard?'

'I saw the Ignean's blade pass straight through one,' Tsu'gan muttered. 'And yet others seized upon Ba'ken as solid and intractable as a docking claw.'

Emek looked up from his auspex.

'Before they attack, they corporealise; become flesh,' he said, 'Although it is flesh of iron with a grip as strong as a power fist.'

'I had noticed it too,' Pyriel replied. 'Very observant, brother.'

Emek nodded humbly, before the Librarian outlined his strategy.

'Our forces will be strung out across the killing field, four combat squads as before. I can stretch my psychic influence to encompass the entire Phalanx battle line but it will be a comparatively narrow cordon, and some of the spectres may get through. Adopt defensive tactics and wait for them to attack, then strike. But know the best we can hope for is to repel them. Only I possess the craft to banish the creatures into the warp and that won't be possible whilst I'm maintaining the psychic shield.'

'Nor then will you be able to fight, Brother-Librarian,' said Ba'ken.

Pyriel faced him, and there was an unspoken compact in his low voice. 'No, I'll be temporarily vulnerable.'

So you, brothers, will need to be my shield.

The severity of the mission weighed as heavy as the weather. Captain Mannheim had been correct when he'd spoken in the strategium: for all their strength of arms, their skill and courage, they *were* powerless against the spectres. Almost.

Pyriel addressed the group. 'Fire-born: check helm-displays for updated mission parameters and objectives.'

A series of 'affirmatives' greeted the order.

'Switching to tac-sight,' added Tsu'gan. A data stream of time-codes, distances and troop dispositions filled his left oculobe lens. He turned to Pyriel just as the great gates to Mercy Rock were opening. 'I hope you can do what you promised, Librarian, or we are all dead.'

Pyriel's gaze was fixed ahead as he donned his battle-helm.

'The warp storm is unpredictable, but it also augments my own powers,' he said. 'I can hold the shield for long enough.'

On a closed channel, he contacted Tsu'gan alone.

'My psychic dampener will be low,' he warned. 'If at any moment I am compromised, you know what must be done.'

If I am daemonically possessed by the warp, Tsu'gan read between the Librarian's words easily enough.

A sub-vocal 'compliance' flashed up as an icon on Pyriel's display.

'Brothers Emek, Iagon?' the Librarian asked with the gates now yawning wide. The gap in the wall brought lashing rain and the stench of death.

Emek and Iagon were interrogating overlapping scan patterns on their auspexes in search of warp activity in the shadows of the killing field.

'Negative, brother,' Emek replied. Iagon nodded in agreement.

The way, for now at least, was clear.

Despite the rain, a curious stillness persisted in the darkness of Hell Night. It was red and angry. And it was waiting for them. Pyriel was drawn again to the patch of wilderness, far off in the distance.

Just beyond my reach...

'Into the fires of battle...' he intoned, and led the Salamanders out.

Dak'ir awoke, startled and awash with cold sweat. He was acutely aware of his beating hearts and a dense throbbing in his skull. Disorientating visions were fading from his subconscious mind... An ashen world, of tombs and mausoleums lining a long, bone-grey road... The redolence of burning flesh and grave dust... Half-remembered screams of a brother in pain...

...Becoming one with the screams of many, across a dark and muddied field... The touch of rain, cold against his skin... and a bell tolling... 'We are here...'
'We are here...'

The first was an old dream. He had seen it many times. But now new impressions had joined it, and Dak'ir knew they came from Vaporis. He tried to hold onto them, the visions and the sense memories, but it was like clutching smoke.

With the thinning of the unreal, the real became solid and Dak'ir realised he was flat on his back. A wire mattress with coarse sheets supported him. The cot groaned as he tried to move – so did Dak'ir when the daggers of pain pierced his body. He grimaced and sank back down, piecing together the immediate past. The attack by the spectral preacher came back to him. A remembered chill made him shiver.

'You're pretty well banged up,' said a voice from the shadows. The sudden sound revealed just how quiet it was – the dull reply of heavy artillery was but a faint thudding in the walls. 'I wouldn't move so quickly,' the voice advised.

'Who are you?' rasped Dak'ir, the dryness in his throat a surprise at first.

A high-pitched squeal grated against the Salamander's skull as a Phalanx officer sitting in a wheelchair rolled into view.

'Bahnhoff, my lord,' he said. 'You and your Astartes tried to save my men in the killing field, and I'm grateful to you for that.'

'It's my duty,' Dak'ir replied, still groggy. He managed to sit up, despite the horrendous pain of his injuries and the numbness that lingered well after the preacher had relinquished his deathly grip. Dak'ir was gasping for breath for a time.

'Lieutenant Bahnhoff?' he said, remembering; a look of incredulity on his face when he saw the wheelchair.

'Artillery blast got me,' the officer supplied. 'Platoon dragged me the rest of the way. Took *me* off the frontline too, though.'

Dak'ir felt a pang of sorrow for the lieutenant when he saw the shattered pride in his eyes.

'Am I alone? Have my brothers gone to battle without me?' Dak'ir asked.

'They said you were too badly injured. Told us to watch over you until they returned.'

'My armour...' Dak'ir was naked from the waist up. Even his torso bodyglove had been removed. As he made to swing himself over the edge of the cot, enduring still further agonies, he saw that his battle-plate's cuirass was lying

reverently in one corner of the room. His bodyglove was with it, cut up where his brothers had needed to part it to treat his wounds. Dak'ir ran his finger over them. In the glow of a single lume-lamp they looked like dark bruises in the shape of fingerprint impressions.

'Here... I found these in a storage room nearby.' Bahnhof tossed Dak'ir a bundle of something he'd been carrying on his lap.

The Salamander caught it, movement still painful but getting easier, and saw they were robes.

'They're loose, so should fit your frame,' Bahnhof explained.

Dak'ir eyed the lieutenant, but shrugged on the robes nonetheless.

'Help me off this cot,' he said.

Together, they got Dak'ir off the bed and onto his feet. He wobbled at first, but quickly found his balance, before surveying his surroundings.

They were in a small room, like a cell. The walls were bare stone. Dust collected in the corners and hung in the air, giving it an eerie quality.

'What is this place?'

Bahnhof wheeled backwards as Dak'ir staggered a few steps from the cot.

'Mercy Rock's catacombs. We use it as a medi-bay,' the lieutenant's face darkened, 'and morgue.'

'Apt,' Dak'ir replied with grim humour.

A strange atmosphere permeated this place. Dak'ir felt it as he brushed the walls with his finger-tips, as he drank in the cloudy air.

We are here...

The words came back to him like a keening. They were beckoning him. He turned to Bahnhof, eyes narrowed.

'What is that?'

'What is *what*, my lord?'

A faint scratching was audible in the sepulchral silence, as a quill makes upon parchment. Bahnhof's eyes widened as he heard it too.

'All the Munitorum clerks are up in the strategium...'

'It's coming from beneath us,' said Dak'ir. He was already making for the door. Wincing with every step, he betrayed his discomfort, but gritted his teeth as he went to follow the scratching sound.

'Are there lower levels?' he asked Bahnhof, as they moved through a shadowy corridor.

'Doesn't get any deeper than the catacombs, my lord.'

Dak'ir was moving more quickly now, and Bahnhof was wheeling hard to

keep up.

The scratching was getting louder, and when they reached the end of the corridor the way ahead was blocked by a timber barricade.

‘Structurally unsafe, according to the engineers,’ said Bahnhoff.

‘It’s old...’ Dak’ir replied, noting the rotten wood and the gossamer webs wreathing it like a veil. He gripped one of the planks and tore it off easily. Compelled by some unknown force, Dak’ir ripped the barricade apart until they were faced by a stone stairway. It led into a darkened void. The reek of decay and stagnation was strong.

‘Are we going down there?’ asked Bahnhoff, a slight tremor in his voice.

‘Wait for me here,’ Dak’ir told him and started down the steps.

‘Stay within the cordon!’ bellowed Tsu’gan, as another one of Captain Mannheim’s men was lost to the earth.

An invisible barrier stretched the length of the killing ground that only flared incandescently into existence when one of the spectres struck it and recoiled. Like a lightning spark, the flash was born and died quickly, casting the scene starkly in its ephemeral life. Gunnery teams slogged hard to keep pace and infantry tramped hurriedly alongside them in long thin files, adopting firing lines once they’d reached the two hundred metre marker. Las-bursts erupted from the Phalanx ranks in a storm. Barking solid shot from heavy bolters and auto-cannon added to the sustained salvo. So close to the void shield, the energy impact returns were incandescently bright and despite the darkness, made several troopers don photoflash goggles. For some, it was just as well that their vision was impeded for shadows lurked beyond Librarian Pyriel’s psychic aegis and not everyone was immune to them.

The barrier was narrow, just as Pyriel had warned, and as the Phalanx had tried to keep pace with the Salamanders on the way to the advanced assault line some stepped out of it. A muted cry and then they were no longer seen or heard from again. By the time the firing line was erected, some several dozen troopers were missing. The Salamanders, as yet, had not succumbed.

Tsu’gan saw the flickering white forms of the warp echoes through the Librarian’s psychic shield. They lingered, angry and frustrated, ever probing to test the limits of Pyriel’s strength. Though he couldn’t see his face through his battle-helm, Tsu’gan knew by the Epistolary’s juddering movements that he was feeling the strain. He was a vessel now for the near-unfettered power of the warp. Like a sluice gate let free, the energy coursed through him as Pyriel fought

hard to channel it into the shield. One slip and he would be lost. Then Tsu'gan would need to act quickly, slaying him before Pyriel's flesh was obtained by another, heralding the death of them all, Salamanders or no.

One of the creatures breached the barrier wall, corporealising to do it, and Tsu'gan lashed out with his fist.

It was like striking adamantium, and he felt the shock of the blow all the way up his arm and into his shoulder, but did enough to force the creature back. It flashed briefly out of existence, but returned quickly, a snarl upon its eldritch features.

'Hard as iron you said,' Tsu'gan roared into the comm-feed as the weapons fire intensified.

Overhead the Earthshaker shells were finding their marks and the void shield rippled near its summit.

Emek battered another of the spectres back beyond the psychic cordon, the exertion needed to do it evident in his body language.

'Perhaps too conservative,' he admitted.

'A tad, brother,' came Tsu'gan's bitter rejoinder. 'Iagon,' he relayed through his battle-helm, 'what are the readings for the shield?'

'Weakening, my lord,' was Iagon's sibilant reply, 'but still insufficient for a break.'

Tsu'gan scowled.

'Ba'ken...'

'We must advance,' the acting sergeant answered. 'Fifty metres, and apply greater pressure to the shield.'

At a hundred and fifty metres away, the danger from energy flares cast by void impacts and friendly fire casualties from the Earthshakers was greatly increased, but then the Salamanders had little choice. Soon the bombardment from the Basilisks would end when they ran out of shells. The void shield had to be down before then.

'Brother-Librarian,' Tsu'gan began, 'another fifty metres?'

After a few moments, Pyriel nodded weakly and started to move forwards.

Tsu'gan turned his attention to the Phalanx.

'Captain Mannheim, we are advancing. Another fifty metres.'

The Phalanx officer gave a clipped affirmative before continuing to galvanise his men and reminding them of their duty to the Emperor.

Despite himself, the Salamander found he admired the captain for that.

The bells tolled on as the Imperial forces resumed their march.

The stairs were shallow and several times Dak'ir almost lost his footing, only narrowly avoiding a plunge into uncertain darkness by bracing himself against the flanking walls.

Near the bottom of the stairwell, he was guided by a faint smudge of flickering light. Its warm, orange glow suggested candles or a fire. There was another room down here and this was where the scratching sound emanated from.

Cursing himself for leaving his weapons in the cell above, Dak'ir stepped cautiously through a narrow portal that forced him to duck to get through and into a small, dusty chamber.

Beyond the room's threshold he saw bookcases stuffed with numerous scrolls, tomes and other arcana. Religious relics were packed in half-open crates, stamped with the Imperial seal. Others, deific statues, Ecclesiarchal sigils and shrines were cluttered around the chamber's periphery. And there, in the centre, scribing with ink and quill at a low table, was an old, robed clerk.

The scrivener looked up from his labours, blinking with eye strain as he regarded the giant, onyx-skinned warrior in his midst.

'Greetings, soldier,' he offered politely.

Dak'ir nodded, uncertain of what to make of his surroundings. A prickling sensation ran through his body but then faded as he stepped into the corona of light cast by the scrivener's solitary candle.

'Are you Munitorum?' asked Dak'ir. 'What are you doing so far from the strategium?' Dak'ir continued to survey the room as he stepped closer. It was caked in dust and the grime of ages, more a forgotten storeroom than an office for a Departmento clerk.

The scrivener laughed; a thin, rasping sort of a sound that put Dak'ir a little on edge.

'Here,' said the old man as he backed away from his works. 'See what keeps me in this room.'

Dak'ir came to the table at the scrivener's beckoning, strangely compelled by the old man's manner, and looked down at his work.

Hallowed Heath – a testament of its final days, he read.

'Mercy Rock was not always a fortress,' explained the scrivener behind him. 'Nor was it always alone.'

The hand that had authored the parchment scroll in front of Dak'ir was scratchy and loose but he was able to read it.

'It says here that Mercy Rock was once a basilica, a temple devoted to the

worship of the Imperial Creed.’

‘Read on, my lord...’ the scrivener goaded.

Dak’ir did as asked.

“...and Hallowed Heath was its twin. Two bastions of light, shining like beacons against the old faiths, bringing enlightenment and understanding to Vaporis,” he related directly from the text. “In the shadow of Aphium, but a nascent township with lofty ambitions, did these pinnacles of faith reside. Equal were they in their fervour and dedication, but not in fortification—” Dak’ir looked around at the old scrivener who glared at the Salamander intently.

‘I thought you said they were not fortresses?’

The scrivener nodded, urging Dak’ir to continue his studies.

“—One was built upon a solid promontory of rock, hence its given appellation; the other upon clay. It was during the Unending Deluge of 966.M40 when the rains of Vaporis continued for sixty-six days, the heaviest they had ever been in longest memory, that Hallowed Heath sank down beneath a quagmire of earth, taking its five hundred and forty-six patrons and priests with it. For three harrowing days and nights the basilica sank, stone by stone, beneath the earth, its inhabitants stranded within its walls that had become as their tomb. And for three nights, they tolled the bells in the highest towers of Hallowed Heath, saying, “We are here!”, “We are here!” but none came to their aid.”’

Dak’ir paused as a horrible understanding started to crawl up his spine. Needing to know more, oblivious now to the scrivener, he continued.

“Aphium was the worst. The township and all its peoples did not venture into the growing mire for fear of their own lives, did not even try to save the stricken people. They shut their ears to the bells and shut their doors, waiting for a cessation to the rains. And all the while, the basilica sank, metre by metre, hour by hour, until the highest towers were consumed beneath the earth, all of its inhabitants buried alive with them, and the bells finally silenced.”’

Dak’ir turned to regard the old scrivener.

‘The spectres in the killing field,’ he said, ‘they are the warp echoes of the preachers and their patrons.’

‘They are driven by hate, hate for the Aphiums who closed their ears and let them die, just as I am driven by guilt.’

Guilt?

Dak’ir was about to question it when the scrivener interrupted.

‘You’re near the end, Hazon, read on.’

Dak’ir was compelled to turn back, as if entranced.

“This testament is the sole evidence of this terrible deed – nay; it is my confession of complicity in it. Safe was I in Mercy Rock, sat idle whilst others suffered and died. It cannot stand. This I leave as small recompense, so that others might know of what transpired. My life shall be forfeit just as theirs were, too.”

There it ended, and only then did Dak’ir acknowledge that the old man had used his first name. He whirled around, about to demand answers... but he was too late.

The scrivener was gone.

The Earthshaker barrage stopped abruptly like a thumping heart in sudden cardiac arrest. Its absence was a silent death knell to the Phalanx and their Adeptus Astartes allies.

‘It’s done,’ snarled Tsu’gan, when the Imperial shelling ended. ‘We break through now or face the end. Iagon?’

‘Still holding, my lord.’

They were but a hundred metres from the void shield now, having pressed up in one final effort to overload it. Without the heavy artillery backing them up, it seemed an impossible task. All the time, more and more Phalanx troopers were lost to breaches in the psychic shield, dragged into dank oblivion by ethereal hands.

‘I feel... *something*...’ said Pyriel, struggling to speak, ‘Something in the void shield... Just beyond my reach...’

Despite his colossal efforts, the Librarian was weakening. The psychic barrier was losing its integrity and with it any protection against the warp echoes baying at its borders.

‘Stand fast!’ yelled Mannheim. ‘Hold the line and press for glory, men of the Phalanx!’

Through sheer grit and determination, the Guardsmen held. Even though their fellow troopers were being swallowed by the earth, they held.

Tsu’gan could not help but feel admiration again for their courage. Like a crazed dervish, he raced down the line raining blows upon the intruding spectres, his shoulders burning with the effort.

‘Salamanders! We are about to be breached,’ he cried. ‘Protect the Phalanx. Protect your brothers in arms with your lives!’

‘Hail Vulkan and the glory of Prometheus!’ Ba’ken chimed. ‘Let Him on Earth witness your courage, men of the Phalanx.’

The effect of the sergeants' words was galvanising. Coupled with Mannheim's own stirring rally, the men became intractable in the face of almost certain death.

Tsu'gan heard a deep cry of pain to his left and saw Lazarus fall, impaled as Dak'ir had been by eldritch fingers.

'Brother!'

S'tang and Nor'gan went to his aid as Honourous covered their retreat with his flamer.

'Hold, Fire-born, hold!' Tsu'gan bellowed. 'Give them nothing!'

Tenacious to the end, the Salamanders would fight until their final breaths, and none so fiercely as Tsu'gan.

The battle-hardened sergeant was ready to make his final pledges to his primarch and his Emperor when the comm-feed crackled to life in his ear.

'You may have cheated death, Ignean,' snapped Tsu'gan when he realised who it was. 'But then survival over glory was always your—'

'Shut up, Zek, and raise Pyriel right now,' Dak'ir demanded, using the other Salamander's first name and mustering as much animus as he could.

'Our brother needs to marshal all of his concentration, Ignean,' Tsu'gan snapped again. 'He can ill afford distractions from you.'

'Do it, or it will not matter how distracted he becomes!'

Tsu'gan snarled audibly but obeyed, something in Dak'ir's tone making him realise it was important.

'Brother-Librarian,' he barked down the comm-feed. 'Our absent brother demands to speak with you.'

Pyriel nodded labouredly, his hands aloft as he struggled to maintain the barrier.

'Speak...' the Librarian could scarcely rasp.

'Do you remember what you felt before the first assault?' Dak'ir asked quickly. 'You said there was something about the shield, an anomaly in its energy signature. It is psychically enhanced, brother, to keep the warp echoes out.'

Through the furious barrage a slim crack was forming in the void shield's integrity, invisible to mortal eyes but plain as frozen lightning to the Librarian's witch-sight. And through it, Pyriel discerned a psychic undercurrent straining to maintain a barrier of its own. With Dak'ir's revelation came understanding and then purpose.

'They want vengeance against Aphium,' said Pyriel, beginning to refocus his psychic energy and remould it into a sharp blade of his own anger.

‘For the complicity in their deaths over a thousand years ago,’ Dak’ir concluded.

‘I know what to do, brother,’ Pyriel uttered simply, his voice drenched with psychic resonance as he let slip the last of the tethers from his psychic hood, the crystal matrix dampener that protected him psychically, and laid himself open to the warp.

‘In Vulkan’s name,’ Dak’ir intoned before the link was overwhelmed with psychic static and died.

‘Brother Tsu’gan...’ Pyriel’s voice was deep and impossibly loud against the battle din. A tsunami of raw psychic power was coursing through him, encasing the Librarian in a vibrant, fiery aura. ‘...I am about to relinquish the barrier...’

Tsu’gan had no time to answer. The psychic barrier fell and the warp echoes swept in. Thunder split the heavens and red lightning tore across boiling clouds as the warp storm reached its zenith.

Already, the breach Pyriel had psychically perceived was closing.

‘Maintain positions!’ roared Mannheim, as his men were being taken. ‘Keep firing!’

Secessionist fire, freed up from mitigating the Imperial artillery barrage, was levelled at the Phalanx. Mannheim took a lucky las-round in the throat and was silenced.

Tsu’gan watched the officer fall just as Pyriel burst into violent conflagration. Running over to Mannheim, he scooped the fallen captain up into his arms, and watched as a bolt of flame lashed out from Pyriel’s refulgent form. It surged through the void shield, past the unseen breach, reaching out for the minds of the Librarian’s enemies...

Deep in Aphium rebel territory, in an armoured bunker sunk partially beneath the earth, a cadre of psykers sat in a circle, their consciousnesses locked, their will combined to throw a veil across the void shield that kept out the deeds of their ancestors. It was only around Hell Night when the blood storm wracked the heavens and brought about an awakening for vengeance, a desire for retribution, that their skills were needed.

One by one they screamed, an orange fire unseen by mortal eyes ravaging them with its scorching tendrils. Flesh melted, eyes ran like wax under a hot lamp, and one by one the psyker cadre burned. The heat inside the bunker was intense, though the temperature gauge suggested a cool night, and within seconds the psykers were reduced to ash and the defence of Aphium with it.

Upon the killing field, Tsu’gan detected a change in the air. The oppressive

weight that had dogged them since mustering out for a second time on Hell Night had lifted, like leaden chains being dragged away by unseen hands.

Like mist before the rays of a hot sun, the warp echoes receded into nothing. Silence drifted over the killing field, as all of the guns stopped. The void shield flickered and died a moment later, the absence of its droning hum replaced by screaming from within the city of Aphium.

'In Vulkan's name...' Tsu'gan breathed, unable to believe what was unfolding before his eyes. He didn't need to see it to know the spectres had turned on the rebels of Aphium and were systematically slaying each and every one.

It wasn't over. Not yet. Pyriel blazed like an incendiary about to explode. The Librarian's body was spasming uncontrollably as he fought to marshal the forces he'd unleashed. Raging psychic flame coursed through him. As if taking hold of an accelerant, it burned mercilessly. Several troopers were consumed by it, the mind-fire becoming real. Men collapsed in the heat, their bodies rendered to ash.

'Pyriel!' cried Tsu'gan. Cradling Captain Mann-heim in his arms, he raised his bolter one-handed.

...you know what you must do.

He fired into Pyriel's back, an expert shot that punctured the Librarian's lung but wasn't fatal. Pyriel bucked against the blow, the flames around him dwindling, and sagged to his knees. Then he fell onto his side, unconscious, and the conflagration was over.

'Tsu'gan. Tsu'gan!'

It took Tsu'gan a few seconds to realise he was being hailed. A curious stillness had settled over the killing field. Above them the red sky was fading as the warp storm passed, and the rain had lessened. On the horizon, another grey day was dawning.

'Dak'ir...'

Stunned, he forgot to use his derogatory sobriquet for the other sergeant.

'What happened, Zek? Is it over?'

Mannheim was dead. Tsu'gan realised it as the officer went limp in his arms. He had not faltered, even at the end, and had delivered his men to victory and glory. Tsu'gan's bolter was still hot from shooting Pyriel. He used it carefully to burn an honour marking in Captain Mannheim's flesh. It was shaped like the head of a fire Drake.

'It's over,' he replied and cut the link.

A faded sun had broken through the gathering cloud. Errant rays lanced downwards, casting their glow upon a patch of distant earth far off in the

wilderness. Tsu'gan didn't know what it meant, only that when he looked upon it his old anger lessened and a strange feeling, that was not to last in the days to come, spilled over him.

Rain fell. Day dawned anew. Hell Night was ended, but the feeling remained. It was peace.



FIRES OF WAR

‘Give me some good news, Helliman,’ growled Colonel Tonnhauser. The old soldier spoke out the side of his mouth, a cigar smouldering between his lips.

He ducked instinctively as another explosion rocked the walls of the workshop, sending violent tremors through the floor and chips of rockcrete spitting from the ceiling onto the map-strewn bench below.

‘That was closer...’ Tonnhauser muttered, blowing smoke as he brushed away the dislodged dust and debris for the umpteenth time.

It’s a hard thing for a man to lose his own city to an enemy. When that enemy comes from within, it’s even more repugnant. But that was the stark reality facing Abel Tonnhauser of the 13th Stratosan Aircorps. He’d given too much ground already to the endless hordes of insurgent cultists, and still they pushed for more. Soon there’d be nothing left. The defence of the three primary cities of Stratos was on the brink of failure. The cloud-and-bolt badge he wore, though tarnished by weeks of fighting, was pinned proudly to a double-breasted tan leather jacket. It was only made of brass, but felt about as heavy as an anvil.

The workshop structure in which he’d made his command post was full of disused aeronautical equipment and machinery, more or less a refit and repair yard for dirigibles and other flying craft that were a necessary part of life on Stratos. Air tanks, pressure dials and coils of ribbed hosing were strewn throughout the building. The one in which Tonnhauser conferred with Sergeant Helliman, while Corpsman Aiker monitored the vox-traffic, was broad and long with vast angular arches and tall support columns, all chrome and polished plasteel.

Typical of the Stratosan architectural style, it had been beautiful once but was now riddled with bullet holes and crumbling from shell damage. A demo-charge rigged by insurgents to a ballast tractor had taken out most of the south-facing wall, the bulk of the colonel’s command staff with it. With no time to effect repairs, a sheet of plastek had been piston-drilled to cover the hole.

This largely pointless measure did little to keep out the stutter of sporadic gunfire and incessant explosions from tripped booby traps and purloined grenade launchers. Sergeant Helliman had to raise his voice to be heard.

‘Three loft-cities remain under the control of the insurgents, sir: Cumulon, here in Nimbaros, and Cirrion. They have also collapsed all except the three major sky-bridges into these areas.’

‘What of our ground forces, any progress there?’ asked Tonnhauser, lifting his peaked cap to run a hand across his receding hairline and wishing dearly that the expulsion of the insurgents was someone else’s job.

Helliman looked resigned, the young officer grown thinner over the passing weeks, and pale as a wraith.

‘Heavy resistance is dogging our efforts to make any inroads into the cities. The insurgents are dug in and well organised.’

Helliman paused to clear his dry throat.

‘There must be at least ninety thousand of the cities’ total populations corrupted by cult activity. They hold all of the materiel factorums and are equipping themselves with our stockpiles. Armour too.’

Tonnhauser surveyed the city maps on the bench, looking for potential avenues of assault he might have missed. He saw only bottlenecks and kill-zones in which the Aircorps would be snared.

Helliman waited anxiously for Tonnhauser’s response, and the void in conversation was filled by the frantic chatter coming from the command vox. Corpsman Aiker, crouched by the boxy unit in one corner of the workshop, tried his best to get a clear signal but static ran riot over all channels in the wake of the destruction of the antenna towers. Tonnhauser didn’t need to hear the substance of the vox-reports to know it was bad.

‘What *do* we hold then?’ he asked at last, looking up into the sergeant’s tired eyes.

‘Our safe zones are—’

A shuddering explosion slapped against the workshop, cutting Helliman off. Fire spilled through the plastek towards the sergeant in a tide. It funnelled outwards, the plastek becoming fluid in the intense heat wave, and melted around the hapless Helliman.

Tonnhauser swore loudly as he was dumped on his arse, but had enough presence of mind to pull out his service pistol and shoot the screaming sergeant through the head to spare him further agony.

Ears still ringing from the blast, Tonnhauser saw a figure scuttle through the

fire-limned gouge in the plastek. It was a man, or at least a dishevelled interpretation of one, clad in rags and flak armour. His hair was sheared roughly all the way down to the skull. Hate-filled eyes caught sight of Tonnhauser as the wretch cast about the room. But it was the mouth of the thing that gave the loyal Stratosan pause. It was sewn shut with thick black wire, the lips and cheeks shot through with purple-blue veins.

At first, Tonnhauser thought the insurgent was unarmed. Then he saw the grenade clutched in his left hand...

‘Holy Emperor...’

Tonnhauser shot him through the forehead. As the cultist fell back there was an almighty thunderclap as the grenade went off, blasting the bodily remains of the insurgent to steaming chunks of meat.

The metal workbench spared Tonnhauser from the explosion, but he had little time to offer up his thanks to the Throne. Through the smoke and falling debris three more insurgents emerged, mouths sewn shut just like the first. Two carried autoguns; one had a crude-looking heavy stubber.

Squeezing off a desultory burst of fire, Tonnhauser went to ground behind the solid bench just as metal rain ripped into the workshop. It chewed up the room with an angry roar, tearing up the walls and disused machinery, perforating Corpsman Aiker where he crouched.

Crawling on his hands and knees, Tonnhauser pressed himself tighter into cover, discharging the spent clip from his pistol before reaching for another with trembling fingers.

No way could he kill them all...

Through the incessant barrage of gunfire, Tonnhauser first heard the *plink-plink* of a small metal object nearby, then saw the tossed grenade land and roll to within a metre of his foot. Survival instinct taking over, he lurched towards the grenade and kicked. It went off seconds later, heat, noise and pressure crashing over Tonnhauser in a violent wave, close enough for a shard of shrapnel to embed itself in his outstretched leg.

The colonel bit down so he wouldn’t cry out.

Won’t give this scum the satisfaction, he thought.

A sudden rash of las-fire spat overhead and abruptly the shooting ceased.

‘Colonel,’ an urgent voice called out from across the workbench a few moments later.

‘Behind here,’ Tonnhauser growled, wincing in pain as he saw the jagged metal sticking out of his leg.

Five Stratosan Aircorpsmen ran around the side of the bench, lasguns hot. Tonnhauser read the first man's rank pins.

'Impeccable timing, Sergeant Rucka, but aren't you supposed to be with Colonel Yonn and the 18th at the Cirrion border?'

A second corpsman carried a portable vox. Reports were drumming out on all frequencies, accompanied by a throbbing chorus of explosions and muted gunfire from across the length and breadth of Nimbaros.

'Colonel Yonn is dead, sir. And the 18th are pulling out of Cirrion. The city is totally lost, all safe zones are compromised,' Rucka told him. 'We've got to get you out.'

Tonnhauser grimaced as two of the other corpsmen helped him to his feet.

'What about Cumulon? Has that fallen too?' he asked, passing the dead bodies of the three cultists, and staggering out of the back entrance to the workshop.

The sergeant's tone was hollow but pragmatic.

'We've lost them all, sir. We're in full retreat, back beyond the city limits and across the sky-bridge to Pileon.'

Once out into the city streets the noise of the encroaching gun battle grew exponentially louder. Tonnhauser looked up to the dome roof of the city and saw a stormy sky through the reinforced plastek above him. Scudding smoke clouded his view as the upper atmosphere of the loft-city was lost from sight. As he fell back with Sergeant Rucka and his squad, Tonnhauser risked a glance over his shoulder. A mass retreat was in effect. Distant insurgents closed on their position en masse, clutching various guns and improvised weapons. Their battle cries were muted by the wire lacing their lips together – the effect was unnerving. Tonnhauser didn't need to hear them to tell the enemy was pressing a large-scale attack.

A gas-propelled rocket roared close by overhead, forcing Tonnhauser and the others to duck. It struck the side of a mag-tram depot and exploded outwards, engulfing an entrenched Aircorps gunnery position. The three-man team died screaming amidst brick and fire.

Rucka altered course abruptly, taking Tonnhauser and his men away from the destruction of the depot and down a side alley.

'Throne, how did this happen?' Tonnhauser asked when Rucka had them stop in the alley to wait for the all-clear to proceed. 'We were pressing them back, weren't we?'

'Took us by surprise,' said Rucka, ducking back into the alley as a bomb blast lit up the road beyond. 'Set off a chain of booby traps that decimated our troops

then launched a mass ground offensive. They're using advanced military tactics. No way can we retake the cities like this. We'll have to regroup. Maybe then we can get Nimbaros and Cumulon back, but Cirrion...' The sergeant's words trailed away, telling Tonnhauser everything he needed to know about the capital's fate.

'What about Governor Varkoff?'

'He's alive, bunkered down in Pileon. It's the nearest of the minor sky-cities that's still under our control. That's where we are headed now. He's enacted official distress protocols on all Imperial astropathic and comm-range frequencies, requesting immediate aid.'

'Do something for me will you, corpsman,' said Tonnhauser. The colonel had moved to the end of the alley and watched as another explosion took out a statue of the first Stratosan governor. It was a symbol of Imperial rule and order. It shattered as it struck the ground wrapped in fire.

'What's that, sir?'

'Get on your knees and pray,' Tonnhauser said. 'Pray for a bloody miracle...'

For the last forty years, the dream hadn't changed.

At first there was only a vague sensation of heat, and then Dak'ir was back in the hot dark of the caves of Ignea on Nocturne. In his dream he was only a boy, the rock wall of that hostile place coarse and sharp against his pre-adolescent skin as he touched it. Mineral seams glinted in the glow of lava pools fed by the river of fire that was the lifeblood of the mountain above him. Ignea then faded, and the light from the river of fire died with it, resolving into a new vista...

The Cindara Plateau stretched before Dak'ir's sandaled feet, its edge delineated by rock-totems, its surface the colour of rust and umber. Ash scudded in drifts across the Pyre Desert below, obscuring scaled saurochs as they hunted for sustenance amongst the crags. Above there came the sound of thunder, as if Mount Deathfire was about to erupt flame and smoke to blot out the heavens. But the great mountain of Nocturne slumbered still. Instead, Dak'ir looked up and saw a fiery blaze of a different kind, the engines of a vast ship slowly coming to land.

A ramp opened in the side of the vessel as it came to rest at last, and a warrior stepped out, tall and powerful, clad in armour of green plate and emblazoned with the symbol of the salamander, the noble creatures that lived in the heart of the earth. Others joined the warrior, Dak'ir knew some of them; he had worked beside them rebuilding and rock-harvesting after the Time of Trial. His heart

quailed at the sight of these giants, though. For he knew they had come for him...

The image changed again, and this time Dak'ir had changed too. He now wore the mantle of warrior, carried the tools of war. His body was armoured in carapace, a holy bolt pistol gripped in his Astartes fist, his onyx flesh a stark reminder of his superhuman apotheosis. Monoliths of stone and marble loomed above Dak'ir like grey sentinels, ossuary roads paved the streets and the acrid stench of grave dust filled the air. This was not Nocturne; this was Moribar, and here the skies were wreathed in death.

Somewhere on the horizon of that grey and terrible world Dak'ir heard screaming and the vision in his mind's eye bled away to be filled by a face on fire. He had seen it so many times, 'the burning face', agonised and accusing, never letting him truly rest. It burned and burned, and soon Dak'ir was burning too, and the screams that filled his ears became his own...

'We were only meant to bring them back...'

Dak'ir's eyes snapped open as he came out of battle-meditation. Acutely aware of his accelerated breathing and high blood pressure, he went through the mental calming routines as taught to him when he had first joined the superhuman ranks of the Space Marines.

With serenity came realisation. Dak'ir was standing in the half-darkness of his isolation chamber, a solitorium, one of many aboard the strike cruiser *Vulkan's Wrath*. It was little more than a dungeon: sparse, austere and surrounded on all sides by cold, black walls.

More detailed recollection came swiftly.

An urgent communication had been picked up weeks ago via astropathic messenger and interpreted by the Company Librarian, Pyriel. The Salamanders were heading to the Imperial world of Stratos.

A prolific mining colony, one of many along the Hadron Belt in the Reductus Sector of Segmentum Tempestus, Stratos had great value to the Imperium for its oceanic minerals as well as its regular tithe of inductees to the Imperial Guard. Rescue of Stratos, liberation for its inhabitants from the internecine enemies that plagued it, was of paramount importance.

Hours from breaking orbit, Captain Ko'tan Kadai had already assigned six squads, including his own *Inferno Guard*, to be the task force that would make planetfall on Stratos and free the world from anarchy. As Promethean belief dictated, all Salamanders about to embark on battle must first be cleansed by fire

and endure a period of extended meditation to focus their minds on self-reliance and inner fortitude.

All but Dak'ir had been untroubled in their preparations.

Such a fact would not go unnoticed.

'My lord?' a deep and sonorous voice asked.

Dak'ir looked in its direction and saw the hooded form of Tsek. His brander-priest was dressed in emerald green robes with the Chapter icon, a snarling salamander head inside a ring of fire, stitched in amber-coloured wire across his breast. Half-concealed augmetics were just visible beneath the serf's attire in the flickering torchlight.

The chamber was small, but had enough room for an Adeptus Astartes' attendants.

'Are you ready for the honour-scarring, my lord?' asked Tsek.

Dak'ir nodded, still a little disoriented from his dream. He watched as Tsek brought forth a glowing rod, white-hot from the embers of the brazier-cauldron that Dak'ir was standing in barefooted. The Astartes barely registered the pain from the fire-wrapped coals beneath him. There was not so much as a globule of sweat across his bald head or onyx-black body, naked but for a tribal sash clothing his loins.

The ritual was part of the teachings of the Promethean Cult, to which all warriors of the Salamanders stoically adhered.

As Tsek applied the branding rod to Dak'ir's exposed skin he embraced the pain it brought. His fiery eyes, like red-hot coals themselves, watched approvingly. First, Tsek burned three bars and then a swirl bisecting them. It conjoined the many marks he and other brander-priests had made upon Dak'ir's body where they'd healed and scarred into a living history of the Salamander's many conflicts. Each was a battle won, a foe vanquished. No Salamander went into battle without first being marked to honour it and then again at battle's end to commemorate it.

Dak'ir's own marks wreathed his legs, arms and some of his torso and back. They were intricate, becoming more detailed as each new honour scar was added. Only a veteran of many campaigns, a Salamander of centuries' service, ever bore such markings on his face.

Tsek bowed his head and stepped back into shadow. A votive-servitor shambled forward in his wake on reverse-jointed metal limbs, bent-backed beneath the weight of a vast brazier fused to its spine. Dak'ir reached out and plunged both hands into the iron caldera of the brazier, scooping up the

fragments of ash from the burned matter collected at its edges.

Dak'ir smeared the white ash over his face and chest, inscribing the Promethean symbols of the hammer and the anvil. They were potent icons in Promethean lore, believed to garner endurance and strength.

'Vulkan's fire beats in my breast...' he intoned, making a long sweep with his palm to draw the hammer's haft.

'...With it I shall smite the foes of the Emperor,' another voice concluded, letting Dak'ir cross the top of the haft with his palm to form the hammer's head before revealing himself.

Brother Fugis stepped into the brazier's light, clanking loudly as he moved. He was already clad in his green power armour, but went unhooded. His blood-red eyes blazed vibrantly in the half-dark. As befitted a Space Marine of his position, Fugis bore the ash-white of the Apothecaries on his right shoulder pad, though the left still carried the insignia of his Chapter on a jet-black field, the snarling salamander head there a blazing orange to match the pauldrons of his Third Company battle-brothers.

Thin-faced and intimidating, some in the company had suggested Fugis might be better served in a more spiritual profession than the art of healing. Such 'suggestions' were never voiced out loud, however, or given in front of the Apothecary, for fear of reprisal.

Dak'ir's response to the Apothecary's sudden presence was less than genial.

'What are you doing here, brother?'

Fugis did not answer straight away. Instead, he scanned a bio-reader over Dak'ir's body.

'Captain Kadai asked me to visit. Examinations are best conducted before you're armoured.'

Fugis paused as he waited for the results of the bio-scan, his blade-thin face taut like wire.

'Your arm, Astartes,' he added without looking up, but gesturing for Dak'ir's limb.

Dak'ir held his arm out for the Apothecary, who took it by the wrist and syringed off a portion of blood into a vial. A chamber in his gauntlet then performed a bio-chemical analysis after the vial was inserted into its miniature centrifuge.

'Are all of my brothers undergoing such rigorous conditioning?' asked Dak'ir, keeping the annoyance from his voice.

Fugis was evidently satisfied with the serology results, but his tone was still

matter of fact.

‘No, just you.’

‘If my brother-captain doubts my will, he should have Chaplain Elysius appraise me.’

The Apothecary seized Dak’ir’s jaw suddenly in a gauntleted fist and carefully examined his face. ‘Elysius is not aboard the *Vulkan’s Wrath*, as you well know, so you will have to endure my *appraisal* instead.’

With the index finger of his other hand Fugis pulled down the black skin beneath Dak’ir’s left eye, diffusing its blood-red glow across his cheek.

‘You are still experiencing somnambulant visions during battle-meditation?’ he asked. Then, apparently satisfied, he let Dak’ir go.

The brother-sergeant rubbed his jaw where the Apothecary had pinched it.

‘If you mean, am I dreaming, then yes. It happens sometimes.’

The Apothecary looked at the instrument panel on his glove, his expression inscrutable.

‘What do you dream about?’

‘I am a boy again, back on Nocturne in the caves of Ignea. I see the day I passed the trials on the Cindara Plateau and became an Adeptus Astartes, my first mission as a neophyte...’ The Salamander’s voice trailed away, as his expression darkened in remembrance.

The burning face...

‘You are the only one of us, the only Fire-born, ever to be chosen from Ignea,’ Fugis told him, eyes penetrating as he looked at Dak’ir.

‘What does that matter?’

Fugis ignored him and went back to his analysis.

‘You said, “We were only meant to bring them back”. Who did you mean?’ he asked after a moment.

‘You were there on Moribar,’ Dak’ir uttered and stepped off the brazier-cauldron, hot skin steaming as it touched the cold metal floor of his isolation cell. ‘You know.’

Fugis looked up from his instruments and his data. His eyes softened fleetingly with regret. They quickly narrowed, however, sheathed behind cold indifference.

He laughed mirthlessly, his lip curling in more of a sneer than a smile.

‘You are fit for combat, brother-sergeant,’ he said. ‘Planetfall on Stratos is in less than two hours. I’ll see you on assembly deck six before then.’

Fugis then saluted, more by rote than meaning, and turned his back on his

fellow Salamander.

Dak'ir felt relief as the Apothecary departed.

'And Brother Dak'ir... Not all of us *want* to be brought back. Not all of us *can* be brought back,' said Fugis, swallowed by the dark.

The surface of Stratos writhed with perpetual storms. Lightning streaked the boiling tumult and thunderheads collided in violent flashes, only to break apart moments later. Through these ephemeral gaps in the clouds tiny nubs of chlorine-bleached rock and bare earth were revealed, surrounded by a swirling maelstrom sea.

The Thunderhawk gunships *Fire-wyvern* and *Spear of Prometheus* tore above the storm's fury, turbofans screaming. They were headed for the conglomeration of floating cities in Stratos's upper atmosphere. Named 'loft-cities' by the Stratosan natives, these great domed metropolises of chrome and plascrete were home to some four-point-three million souls and linked together by a series of massive sky-bridges. Due to the concentrated chlorine emissions from their oceans the Stratosans had been forced to elevate their cities with massive plasma-fuelled gravitic engines; so high, in fact, that each required its own atmosphere in order for the inhabitants to breathe.

The words of Fugis were still on Dak'ir's mind and he willed the furore inside the Chamber Sanctuarine of the *Fire-wyvern* to smother his thoughts. The gunship's troop hold was almost at capacity – twenty-five Astartes secured in standing grav-harness as the Thunderhawk made its final descent.

Brother-Captain Kadai was closest to the exit ramp, his gaze burning with courage and conviction. He was clad in saurian-styled artificer armour and, like his charges, had yet to don his helmet. Instead, he had it clasped to his armour belt, a simulacrum of a snarling fire drake fashioned in metal. His close-cropped hair was white and shaven into a strip that bisected his head down the middle. Alongside him was his command squad, the Inferno Guard: N'keln, Kadai's second in command, a steady if uncharismatic officer; Company Champion Vek'shen, who had bested countless foes in the Chapter's name, and gripped his fire-glaive; Honoured Brother Malicant who bore the company's banner into battle, and Honoured Brother Shen'kar, clasping a flamer to his chest. Fugis was the last of them. The Apothecary nodded discreetly in Dak'ir's direction when he saw him.

It was dark in the chamber. Tiny ovals of light came from the Salamanders, their red eyes aglow. As Dak'ir's gaze left Fugis it settled on another's, one that

burned coldly.

Brother-Sergeant Tsu'gan glared from across the hold.

Dak'ir felt his fists clench.

Tsu'gan was the epitome of Promethean ideal. Strong, tenacious, self-sacrificing – he was everything a Salamander should aspire to be. But there was a vein of arrogance and superiority hidden deep within him. He was born in Hesiod, one of the seven Sanctuary Cities of Nocturne, and the principal recruiting grounds for the Chapter. Unlike most on the volcanic death world, Tsu'gan was raised into relative affluence. His family were nobles, tribal kings at the tenuous apex of Nocturnean wealth and influence.

Dak'ir, as an itinerant cave-dwelling Ignean, was at its nadir. The fact that he became Astartes at all was unprecedented. So few from the nomadic tribes ever reached the sacred places where initiates underwent the trials, let alone competed and succeeded in them. Dak'ir was, in many ways, unique. To Tsu'gan, he was an aberration. Both should have left their human pasts behind when they were elevated to Astartes, but centuries of ingrained prejudice were impossible to suppress.

The Thunderhawk banked sharply as it made for the landing zone adjacent to the loft-city of Nimbaros, breaking the tension between the two sergeants. The exterior armour plate shrieked in protest with the sudden exertion, the sound transmitting internally as a dull metal moan.

'A portent of the storm to come?' offered Ba'ken in a bellow.

The bald-headed Astartes was Dak'ir's heavy weapons trooper, his broad shoulders and thick neck making him ideally equipped for the task. Ba'ken, like many of his Chapter, was also a gifted artisan and craftsman. The heavy flamer he had slung on his back was unique amongst Tactical squads, and he had manufactured the weapon himself in the blazing forges of Nocturne.

'According to the Stratosan's reports, the traitors are dug in and have numbers. It will not be—'

'We are the storm, brother,' Tsu'gan interjected, shouting loudly above the engine din before Dak'ir could finish. 'We'll cleanse this place with fire and flame,' he snarled zealously, 'and purge the impure.'

Ba'ken nodded solemnly to the other sergeant, but Dak'ir felt his skin flush with anger at such blatant disrespect for his command.

An amber warning light winked into existence above them and Brother-Captain Kadai's voice rang out, preventing any reprisal.

'Helmets on, brothers!'

There was a collective *clank* of metal on metal as the Astartes donned battle-helms.

Dak'ir and Tsu'gan fitted theirs last of all, unwilling to break eye contact for even a moment. In the end Tsu'gan relented, smiling darkly as he mouthed a phrase.

'Purge the impure.'

'Cumulon in the east and Nimbaros in the south are still contested, but my troops are taking more ground by the hour and have managed to secure the sky-bridges that link the three cities,' explained a sweating Colonel Tonnhauser over the crackling pict-link of Kadai's Land Raider Redeemer, *Fire Anvil*. 'We're using them to siphon out civilian survivors. There are still thousands trapped behind enemy lines though, my men amongst them.'

'You have done the Emperor's work here, and have my oath as a Salamander of Vulkan that if those men can be saved, I will save them,' Kadai replied, standing inside the hold of his war machine as it shuddered over the sky-bridge to Cirrion. Four armoured Rhinos rumbled behind it in convoy, transporting the rest of the battlegroup.

Once the Salamanders had made planetfall outside Nimbaros, Kadai had ordered Brother Argos, Master of the Forge, to make a structural assessment of the approach road to Cirrion. Using building schematics from the Stratosan cities inloaded to the *Vulkan's Wrath's* cogitators and then exloaded back to a display screen on the *Fire-wyvern*, the Techmarine had determined the sky-bridges were unfeasible locations for the gunships to land and redeploy the Astartes.

Less than twenty minutes later, three Thunderhawk transporters had descended from orbit and deployed the Salamanders' dedicated transport vehicles.

Kadai had held his Salamanders at the landing zone in squad formation, ready for the arrival of the transports. There had been no time for a tactical appraisal with the Stratosan natives. That would have to be conducted en route to Cirrion.

'I pray to the Emperor that some yet live,' Tonn-hauser continued over the pict-link, network-fed to all of the Astartes transports. 'But I fear Cirrion is lost to us, lord Astartes,' he added, lighting up a fresh cigar with shaking fingers. 'There's nothing left there but death and terror now.' He seemed to be avoiding eye contact with the screen. Kadai had taken off his helmet during the ride over the sky-bridge and the human clearly found his appearance unsettling.

'Wars have been won on the strength of that alone,' he remembered the old

Master of Recruits telling him almost three hundred years ago when he had first been given the black carapace.

‘Tell me of the enemy,’ Kadai said, face hardening at the thought of such suffering.

‘They call themselves the Cult of Truth,’ said Tonnhauser, the pict-link breaking up for a moment with the static interference. ‘Until roughly three months ago, they were merely a small group of disaffected Imperial citizens adept at dodging the mauls of the city proctors. Now they are at least fifty thousand strong, and dug in all throughout Cirrion. They’re heavily armed. Most of the Stratosan war-smiths are based in the capital, as are our dirigible fleets, our airships. They carry a mark on their bodies, usually hidden, like a tattoo in the shape of a screaming mouth. And their mouths...’ he said, taking a shuddering breath, ‘their mouths are sewn shut with wire. We think they might remove their tongues, too.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Tonnhauser met the captain’s burning gaze in spite of his fear.

‘Because no one has ever heard them speak.’ Tonnhauser paled further. ‘To fight an enemy that does not cry out, that does not shout orders. It’s not natural.’

‘Do they have a leader, this *cult*?’ said Kadai, showing his distaste at such depravity.

Tonnhauser took a long drag on his cigar, before crushing it in an ash tray and lighting another.

‘Our gathered intelligence is limited,’ he admitted. ‘But we believe there is a hierophant of sorts. Again, this is unconfirmed, but we think he’s in the temple district. What we do know is that they call him the *Speaker*.’

‘An ironic appellation,’ Kadai muttered. ‘How many troops do you have left, colonel?’

Tonnhauser licked his lips.

‘Enough to hold the two satellite cities. The rest of my men in Cirrion are being pulled out as we speak. Civilians too. I’ve lost so many...’ Tonnhauser’s face fell. He looked like a man with nothing more to give.

‘Hold those cities, colonel,’ Kadai told him. ‘The Salamanders will deal with Cirrion, now. You’ve done your duty as a servant of the Imperium and will be honoured for it.’

‘Thank you, my lord.’

The pict-link crackled into static as Kadai severed the connection.

The captain turned from the blank display screen to find Apothecary Fugis at

his shoulder.

‘Their courage hangs by a thread,’ he muttered. ‘I have never seen such despair.’

‘Our intervention is timely then.’ Kadai glanced over Fugis’s shoulder and saw the rest of his command squad.

N’keln was readying them for battle, leading them in the rites of the Promethean Cult.

‘Upon the anvil are we tempered, into warriors forged...’ he intoned, the others solemnly following his lead. They surrounded a small brazier set into the floor of the troop hold. Offerings to Vulkan and the Emperor burned within the crucible, scraps of banners or powdered bone, and one by one the Inferno Guard took a fistful of the ash and marked their armour with it.

‘Guerrilla warfare is one thing, but to defeat an entire Imperial Guard regiment... Do you think we face more than a cult uprising here?’ asked Fugis, averting his gaze from the ritual and resolving to make his own observances later.

Kadai brought his gaze inward as he considered the Apothecary’s question.

‘I don’t know yet. But something plagues this place. This so-called Cult of Truth certainly has many followers.’

‘Its spread is endemic, suggesting its root is psychological, rather than ideological,’ said the Apothecary.

Kadai left the implication unspoken.

‘I can’t base a strategy on supposition, brother. Once we breach the city, then we’ll find out what we’re facing.’ The captain paused a moment before asking, ‘What of Dak’ir?’

Fugis lowered his voice, so the others could not hear him.

‘Physically, our brother is fine. But he is still troubled. Remembrances of his human childhood on Nocturne and his first mission...’

Kadai scowled, ‘Moribar... Over four decades of battles, yet still this one clings to us like a dark shroud.’

‘His memory retention is... *unusual*. And I think he feels guilt for what happened to Nihilan,’ offered Fugis.

Kadai’s expression darkened further.

‘He is not alone in that,’ he muttered.

‘Ushorak, too.’

‘Vai’tan Ushorak was a traitor. He deserved his fate,’ Kadai answered flatly, before changing the subject. ‘Dak’ir’s spirit will be cleansed in the crucible of

battle; that is the Salamanders way. Failing that I will submit him to the Reclusiam and Chaplain Elysius for conditioning.'

Kadai reactivated the open vox-channel, indicating that the conversation was over.

It was time to address the troops.

'Brothers...' Dak'ir heard the voice of his captain over the vox. 'Our task here is simple. Liberate the city, protect its citizens and destroy the heretics. Three assault groups will enter Cirrion on a sector by sector cleanse and burn – *Hammer*, *Anvil* and *Flame*. Sergeants Tsu'gan and Dak'ir will lead *Anvil* and *Flame*, into the east and west sectors of the city respectively. Devastator heavy support is Sergeant Ul'shan's Hellfire Squad for *Anvil* and Sergeant Lok's Incinerators for *Flame*. I lead *Hammer* to the north with Sergeant Omkar. Flamers with all units. Let nothing stay your wrath. This is the kind of fight we were born for. In the name of Vulkan. Kadai out.'

Static reigned once more. Dak'ir cut the link completely as the convoy rumbled on slowly past sandbagged outposts crested with razor wire. Weary troops with hollow eyes manned those stations, too tired or inured by weeks of fighting to react to the sight of the Astartes.

'This is a broken force,' muttered Ba'ken, breaking the silence as he peered out of one of the Rhino's vision slits.

Dak'ir followed his trooper's gaze. 'They are not like the natives of Nocturne, Ba'ken. They are unused to hardship like this.'

A lone file of Stratosan Aircorps passed the convoy, marching in the opposite direction. They trudged like automatons, nursing wounds, hobbling on sticks, lasguns slung loose over their shoulders. Every man wore a respirator, and a tan stormcoat to ward off the chill of the open atmosphere. Only the cities were domed, the sky-bridges open to the elements, though they had high walls and were suspended from rugged-looking towers by thick cables.

The gate of Cirrion loomed at the end of the blasted road. The way into the capital city was huge, all bare black metal, and hermetically sealed to maintain its atmospheric integrity.

'I heard a group of corpsmen talking before we mustered out,' offered Ba'ken as they approached the gate. 'One of them said that Cirrion was how he imagined hell.'

Dak'ir was checking the power load of his plasma pistol before slamming it back into its holster. 'We were born in hell, Ba'ken... What do we have to fear

from a little fire?’

Ba’ken’s booming laughter thundered in the Rhino all the way up to the gate.

Deep within the bowels of Cirrion the shadows were alive with monsters.

Sergeant Rucka fled through shattered streets, his pursuers at his heels. His heart was pounding. Cirrion’s principal power grid had collapsed, leaving failing back-up generators to provide intermittent illumination for the city via its lumelamps. With every sporadic blackout, the shadows seemed to fill with new threats and fresh enemies. It didn’t help matters.

Rucka had been at the front of the second push in the capital city. The attack had failed utterly. Something else was stalking the darkened corridors of Cirrion, and it had fallen upon his battalion with furious wrath. It was totally unexpected. In strategising his battalion’s assault Rucka had deliberately taken an oblique route, circumventing the main battle zones, to come through the northern sector of the city.

All Stratosan-gathered intelligence had suggested that insurgent resistance would be light. It wasn’t insurgents that had wiped out five hundred men.

Rucka was the last of them, having somehow escaped the carnage, but now the cultists had found him. They were gaining too. His once proud city was in ruins. He didn’t know this dystopian version of it. Where there should have been avenues there were rubble blockades. Where there should be plazas of chrome there were charred pits falling away into stygian darkness. Hell had come here. There was no other word to describe it.

Rounding another corner, Rucka came to an abrupt halt. He was standing at the mouth to a mag-tram station; on one side a stack of industrial warehouses, on the other a high wall and an overpass. The trams themselves littered the way ahead, just burnt out wrecks, daubed in crude slogans. But it was the tunnel itself that caught the sergeant’s attention. Something skittered there in the abject darkness.

Behind him, Rucka heard the pack. They’d slowed. He realised then he’d been steered to this place.

Slowly the skittering from the tunnel became louder and the pack from behind him closer. The cultists scuttled into view. Rucka counted at least fifty men and women, their mouths sewn shut, blue veins threading from their puckered lips. They carried picks and shards of metal and glass.

It wasn’t the end that Rucka had envisaged for himself.

The sergeant had picked out his first opponent and was about to take aim with

his lasgun when a piece of rockcrete clattered down onto the street. Rucka traced its trajectory back to the overpass and saw the silhouettes of three armoured giants in the ambient light.

The brief spark of salvation given life in Rucka's mind was quickly crushed when he realised that these creatures were not here to save him.

Thunder roared and muzzle flares tore away the darkness a second later.

Rucka read what was about to happen and went to ground just before the onslaught. The deadly salvo lasted heartbeats, but it was enough. The cultists were utterly annihilated – their broken, blasted bodies littered the street like visceral trash.

Rucka was on his back, still dazed from the sudden attack. When he couldn't feel his legs, he realised he'd been hit. Heat blazed down his side like an angry knife ripping at his skin. His fatigues were wet, probably with his own blood. A sudden earth tremor shook the rockcrete where Rucka lay prone, sending fresh daggers of pain through his body, as something large and dense smashed into the ground. More impacts followed, landing swift and heavy like mortar strikes.

Vision fogging, the sergeant managed to turn his head... His blood-rimed eyes widened. Crouched in gory armour, two bloody horns curling from its snarling dragon helm, was a terrible giant. It rose to its feet, like some primordial beast uncurling from the abyss, to reveal an immense plastron swathed in red scales. Heat haze seemed to emanate from its armoured form as if it had been fresh-forged from the mantle of a volcano.

'The vault, where is it?' the dragon giant asked, fiery embers rasping through its fanged mouth-grille as if it breathed ash and cinder.

'Close...' said another. Its voice was like cracked parchment but carried the resonance of power.

Though he couldn't see them in his eye-line, Rucka realised the secondary impacts had been the giant warrior's companions.

'We are not alone,' said a third, deep and throaty like crackling magma.

'Salamanders,' said the dragon giant, his vitriol obvious.

'Then we had best be swift,' returned the second voice. 'I do not want to miss them.'

Rucka heard heavy footfalls approaching and felt the ominous gaze of one of the armoured giants upon him.

'This one still lives,' it barked.

Rucka's vision was fading, but the sergeant could still smell copper coming off its armour, mangled with the acrid stench of gun smoke.

‘No survivors,’ said the second voice. ‘Kill it quickly. We have no time for *amusement*, Ramlek.’

‘A pity...’

Rucka tried to speak.

‘The Empe—’

Then his world ended in fire.

The black iron gates of Cirrion parted with slow inevitability.

The armoured Astartes convoy rumbled through into the waiting darkness. After a few moments the gates shut behind them. Halogen strip lights flickered into life on the flanking walls revealing a large metal chamber, wide enough for the transports to travel abreast.

Abandoned Stratosan vehicles lay abutting the walls, dragged aside by clearance crews. Caches of discarded equipment were strewn nearby the forlorn AFVs. Webbing, luminator rigs and other ancillary kit had been left behind, but no weapons – all the guns were needed by the human defenders.

Hermetically sealed from the outside to preserve atmospheric integrity, the holding area had another gate on the opposite side. This second gate opened when the Salamanders were halfway across the vast corridor with a hiss of pressure, and led into Cirrion itself.

The outskirts of the benighted city beckoned.

Deserted avenues bled away into blackness and buildings lay in ruins like open wounds. Fire seared the walls and blood washed the streets. Despair hung thick in the air like a tangible fug. Death had come to Cirrion, and held it tightly in its bony grasp.

Akin to a hive, Cirrion was stacked with honey-comb levels in the most densely packed areas. Grav-lifts linked these plateau-conurbations of chrome and blue. Sub-levels plunged in other places, allowing access to inverted maintenance spires or vast subterranean freight yards. Above, a dense pall of smoke layered the ceiling in a roiling mass. Breaks in the grey-black smog revealed thick squalls of cloud and the flash of lightning arcs from the atmospheric storm outside and beyond the dome.

Tactically, the city was a nightmarish labyrinth of hidden pitfalls, artificial bottlenecks and kill-zones. Tank traps riddled the roads. Spools of razor wire wreathed every alleyway. Piled rubble and wreckage created makeshift walls and impassable blockades.

The Salamanders reached as far as Aereon Square, one of Cirrion’s communal

plazas, when the wreckage-clogged, wire-choked streets prevented the transports from going any further.

It was to be the first of many setbacks.

‘Salamanders, disembark,’ Kadai voiced sternly over the vox. ‘Three groups, quadrant by quadrant search. Vehicles stay here. We approach on foot.’

‘Nothing,’ Ba’ken’s voice was tinny through his battle-helm as he stood facing the doorway to one of Cirrion’s municipal temples. It yawned like a hungry maw, the shadows within filled with menace.

From behind him, Dak’ir’s order was emphatic.

‘Burn it.’

Ba’ken hefted his heavy flamer and doused the room beyond with liquid promethium. The sudden burst of incendiary lit up a broad hallway like a flare, hinting at a larger space in the distance, before dying back down to flickering embers.

‘Clear,’ he shouted, stepping aside heavily with the immense weapon, allowing the sergeant and his battle-brothers through.

Sergeant Lok and his Devastators were assigned to the rearguard and took up positions to secure the entrance as Ba’ken followed the Tactical squad inside.

Dak’ir entered quickly, his squad fanning out from his lead to cover potential avenues of attack.

They’d been travelling through the city for almost an hour, through three residential districts filled with debris, and still no contact with friend or foe. Regular reports networked through the Astartes’ comm-feeds in their helmets revealed the same from the other two assault groups.

Cirrion was dead.

Yet, there were signs of recent abandonment: lume-globes flickering in the blasted windows of tenements, sonophones playing grainy melodies in communal refectories, the slow-running engines of dormant grav-cars and the interior lamps of mag-trams come to an all-stop on the rails. Life here had ended abruptly and violently.

Numerous roads and more conventional routes were blocked by pitfalls or rubble. According to Brother Argos, the municipal temple was the most expedient way to penetrate deeper into the east sector. It was also postulated that it was a likely location for survivors to congregate. The Techmarine was back in Nimbaros with Colonel Tonnhauser, guiding the three assault groups via a hololithic schematic, adjusting the image as he was fed reports of blockades,

street collapses or structural levelling by Salamanders in the field.

‘Brother Argos, this is *Flame*. We’ve reached the municipal temple and need a route through,’ said Dak’ir. Even through his power armour, he was aware of the dulcet hum of the plasma engines keeping the massive city aloft and reminding him of the precariousness of their battlefield.

Putting the thoughts out of his mind, he swept the luminator attached to his battle-helm around the vast hall. Within its glare a lozenge-shaped chamber with racks of desks on both flanking walls was revealed. Overhead, exterior light from the city’s lume-lamps spilled through a glass-domed ceiling in grainy shafts illuminating patches on the ground. Lightning flashes from Stratos’s high atmosphere outside augmented it.

Parchments and scraps of vellum set ablaze by Ba’ken’s flamer skittered soundlessly across a polished floor, or twisted like fireflies on an unseen breeze. More of the papers were fixed to pillars that supported the vaulted roof above, fluttering fitfully – some stuck with votive wax, others hammered fast with nails and stakes. The messages were doubtless pinned up by grieving families long since given in to despair.

‘These are death notices, prayers for the missing,’ intoned Brother Emek, using the muzzle of his bolter to hold one still so he could read it.

‘More here,’ added Brother Zo’tan. He panned the light from his luminator up a chrome-plated staircase at the back of the room to reveal the suited bodies of clerks and administrators entangled in the balustrade. Torn scrolls were pinned to the banister, and gathered over the corpses on the steps like a paper shroud.

‘There must be thousands...’ uttered Sergeant Lok, who had entered the lobby. The hard-faced veteran looked grimmer than ever as he surveyed the records of the dead with his bionic eye.

‘Advance to the north end of the hall,’ the Techmarine’s voice returned, cracked with interference as it called the Salamanders back. ‘A stairway leads to a second level. Proceed north through the next chamber then east across a gallery until you find a gate. That’s your exit.’

Dak’ir killed the comm-feed. In the sudden silence he became aware of the atmospheric processors droning loudly in the barrier wall around the city, purifying, recycling, regulating. He was about to give the order to move out when the sound changed abruptly. The pitch became higher, as if the processing engine were switched to a faster setting.

Dak’ir re-opened the comm-feed in his battle-helm.

‘Tsu’gan, are you detecting any variance in the atmospheric processors in your

sector?’

Crackling static returned for a full thirty seconds before the sergeant replied.

‘It’s nothing. Maintain your vigilance, Ignean. I have no desire to haul your squad out of trouble when you let your guard slip.’

Tsu’gan cut the feed.

Dak’ir swore under his breath.

‘Move out,’ he told his squad. He hoped they’d find the enemy soon.

‘He should never have been chosen to lead,’ muttered Tsu’gan to his second, Iagon.

‘Our brother-captain must have his reasons,’ he replied, his tone ever sinuous but carefully neutral.

Iagon was never far from his sergeant’s side, and was ever ready with his counsel. His body was slight compared to most of his brethren, but he made up for sheer bulk with guile and cunning. Iagon gravitated towards power, and right now that was Tsu’gan, Captain Kadai’s star ascendant. He also carried the squad’s auspex, maintaining a watch for unusual spikes of activity that might prelude an ambush, walking just two paces behind his sergeant as they stalked through the shadows of a hydroponics farm.

Tiny reservoirs of nutrient solution encased in chrome tanks extended across an expansive domed chamber. The chemical repositories were set in serried ranks and replete with various edible plant life and other flora. The foliage inside the vast gazebo of chrome and glass was overgrown, resembling more an artificial jungle than an Imperial facility for the sector-wide provision of nutrition.

‘Then that is his folly,’ Tsu’gan replied, and signalled a sudden halt.

He crouched, peering into the arboreal gloom ahead. His squad, well-drilled by their sergeant, adopted overwatch positions.

‘Flamer,’ he growled into the comm-feed.

Brother Honourous moved forwards, the igniter of his weapon burning quietly. The Salamander noticed the blue flame flicker for just a moment as if reacting to something in the air. Slapping the barrel, Honourous muttered a litany to the machine-spirits and the igniter returned to normal.

‘On your order, sergeant.’

Tsu’gan held up his hand.

‘Hold a moment.’

Iagon low-slung his bolter to consult the auspex.

‘No life form readings.’

Tsu’gan’s face was fixed in a grimace.

‘Cleanse and burn.’

‘We would be destroying the food supply for an entire city sector,’ said Iagon.

‘Believe me Iagon, the Stratosans are long past caring. I’ll take no chances.

Now,’ he said, turning back to Honourous, ‘cleanse and burn.’

The roar of the flamer filled the hydroponics dome as the sustenance of Cirrion was burned to ash.

‘They are drawing us in,’ said Veteran Sergeant N’keln over the comm-feed. He was in the lead, tracking his bolter left and right for any sign of the enemy.

‘I know,’ Kadai agreed, trusting his and N’keln’s warrior instincts. The captain held his inferno pistol by his side, thunder hammer crackling quietly in his other hand. ‘Remain vigilant,’ he hissed through his battle-helm, his squad treading warily with bolters ready.

The city loomed tall and imposing as the Salamanders advanced slowly down a narrow road choked with wreckage and Stratosan corpses – ‘remnants’ of the battalions Tonnhauser had mentioned. The hapless human troopers had erected sandbagged emplacements and makeshift barricades. Habs had been turned into bunkers, and bodies hung forlornly from their windows like rags. The defences had not availed them. The Stratosan infantry had been crushed.

Fugis was crouched over the blasted remains of a lieutenant, scowling.

‘Massive physical trauma,’ muttered the Apothecary as Captain Kadai approached him.

‘Colonel Tonnhauser said the cultists were heavily armed,’ offered N’keln alongside him.

Fugis regarded the corpse further. ‘Ribcage is completely eviscerated, chest organs all but liquefied.’ Looking up at his fellow Salamanders, his red eyes flared behind his helmet lenses. ‘This is a bolter wound.’

Kadai was about to respond when Brother Shen’kar called from up ahead.

‘I have movement!’

‘Keep it tight,’ warned Dak’ir as he advanced up the lobby stairs towards a large chrome archway leading to the second level of the municipal temple.

The igniter on Ba’ken’s heavy flamer spat and flickered furiously until he reduced the fuel supply down the hose.

‘Problem?’

‘It’s nothing sergeant,’ he replied.

Dak’ir continued up the stairway, battle-brothers on either side of him, the Devastators still in the lobby below, ready to move up if needed. When he reached the summit he saw another long hallway beyond, just as Brother Argos had described. The room was filled with disused cogitators and other extant machinery. Sweeping his gaze across the junk, Dak’ir stopped abruptly.

In the centre of the hall, surrounded by more dead Administratum workers, was a boy. An infant, no more than eight years old, he was barefoot and clad in rags. Dirt and dried blood encrusted his body like a second skin. The boy was staring right at Dak’ir.

‘Don’t move,’ he whispered to his battle-brothers through the comm-feed. ‘We have a survivor.’

‘Mercy of Vulkan...’ breathed Ba’ken, alongside him.

‘Stay back,’ warned Dak’ir, taking a step.

The boy flinched, but didn’t run. Tears were streaming down his face, cutting through the grime and leaving pale channels in their wake.

Dak’ir scanned the hall furtively for any potential threats, before deeming the way was clear. Holstering his plasma pistol and sheathing his chainsword, he then showed his armoured palms to the boy.

‘You have nothing to fear...’ he began, and slowly removed his battle-helm. Dak’ir realised his mistake too late.

This infant was no native of Nocturne. One look at the Salamander’s onyx-black skin and burning eyes and the child yelped and fled for his life back across the hall.

‘Damn it!’ Dak’ir hissed, ramming his battle-helm back on and re-arming himself. ‘Sergeant Lok, you and your squad secure the room and await our return,’ he ordered through the comm-feed. ‘Brothers, the rest of you with me – there may be survivors, and the boy will lead us to them.’

The Salamanders gave chase, whilst the Devastators moved up the stairs behind them. Dak’ir was halfway across the hall with his squad when he felt the tiny pressure of a wire snapping against his greave. He turned, about to shout a warning, when the entire room exploded.

‘Dead end,’ stated Brother Honourous, standing before the towering barricade of heaped grav-cars and mag-trams.

Tsu’gan and *Anvil* had left the hydroponics farm a smouldering ruin and had advanced into the city. Directed by Brother Argos, they’d passed through myriad

avenues in the urban labyrinth until reaching a narrow defile created by tall tenement blocks and overhanging tower-levels. A hundred metres in and they'd rounded a corner only to find it blocked.

'We'll burn through it,' said Tsu'gan, about to order Sergeant Ul'shan's Devastators forwards. The multi-meltas would soon—

'Wait...' said Tsu'gan, surveying the tall buildings reaching over them. 'Double back, we'll find another way.'

At the opposite end of the alleyway a huge trans-loader rolled into view, cutting off their exit. Slowly at first, but with growing momentum it rumbled towards the Salamanders.

'Multi-meltas now! Destroy it!'

Sergeant Ul'shan swung his squad around to face the charging vehicle just as the cultist heavy weapon crews emerged from their hiding places in the tenements above and filled the alleyway with gunfire.

'Eyes open,' hissed Captain Kadai.

The Inferno Guard, together with Omkar's Devastators, were crouched in ready positions spread across the street. The dangers were manifold – every window, every alcove or shadowed corner could contain an enemy.

Kadai's gaze flicked back to Fugis as the Apothecary hurried, head low, towards a distant gun emplacement. A Stratosan lay slumped next to its sandbagged wall, alive but barely moving. Kadai watched the trooper's hand flick up for the third time as he signalled for aid.

Something didn't feel right.

The trooper's movements were limp, but somehow forced.

Sudden unease creeping into the pit of his stomach, Kadai realised it was a trap.

'Fugis, stop!' he yelled into the comm-feed.

'I'm almost there, captain...'

'Apothecary, obey my ord—'

The roar of a huge fireball billowing out from the emplacement cut Kadai off. Fugis was lifted off his feet by the blast wave, the slain Stratosans buoyed up with him like broken dolls. Chained detonations ripped up the road, rupturing rockcrete, as an entire section of it broke apart and fell away creating a huge chasm.

Flattened by the immense explosion, Captain Kadai was still struggling to his feet, shaking off the blast disorientation, when he saw Fugis lying on his chest,

armour blackened by fire, gripping the edge of the artificial crater made during the explosion. Kadai cried out as the Apothecary lost his hold and slipped down into the gaping black abyss of Cirrion's underbelly, vanishing from sight.

From the hidden darkness of the city, the depraved cultists swarmed into the night and the shooting began.

Shrugging off the effects of the explosion, Dak'ir saw figures moving through the settling dust and smoke.

One loomed over him. Its mouth was stitched with black wire; blue veins infected its cheeks. Eyes filled with fervour, the cultist drove a pickaxe against the Space Marine's armour. The puny weapon broke apart on impact.

'Salamanders,' roared Dak'ir, rallying his squad as he pulverised the cultist's face with an armoured fist. He took up his chainsword, which had spilled from his grip in the blast, eviscerating three more insurgents as they came at him with cudgels and blades.

Reaching for his plasma pistol, he stopped short. The atmospheric readings in his battle-helm were showing a massive concentration of hydrogen; the air inside the dome was saturated with it.

To Dak'ir's left flank, Ba'ken was levelling his heavy flamer as a massive surge of cultists spilled into the hall...

'Wai—'

'Cleanse and burn!'

As soon as the incendiary hit the air, the weapon exploded. Ba'ken was engulfed in white fire then smashed sideways, through the rockcrete wall and into an adjoining chamber where he lay unmoving.

'Brother down!' bellowed Dak'ir, Emek offering suppressing fire with his bolter as he came forwards, chewing up cultists like meat sacks.

More were piling through in a steady stream, seemingly unaffected by the bolt storm. Picks and blades gave way to heavy stubbers and auto-cannons, and Dak'ir saw the first wave for what it was: a flesh shield.

Another Salamander came up on the sergeant's other flank, Brother Ak'sor. He was readying his flamer when Dak'ir shouted into the comm-feed.

'Stow all flamers and meltas. The air is thick with a gaseous hydrogen amalgam. Bolters and secondary weapons only.'

The Salamanders obeyed at once.

The press of cultists came on thickly now, small-arms fire whickering from their ranks as the heavy weapons were prepared to shoot. Dak'ir severed the

head from one insurgent and punched through the sternum of another.

‘Hold them,’ he snapped, withdrawing a bloody fist.

Ak’sor had pulled out a bolt pistol. Bullets pattered against his armour as he let rip, chewing up a bunch of cultists with autoguns. The dull *thump-thud* of the heavier cannons starting up filled the room and Ak’sor staggered as multiple rounds struck him. From somewhere in the melee, a gas-propelled grenade whined and Ak’sor disappeared behind exploding shrapnel. When the smoke had cleared, the Salamander was down.

‘Retreat to the lobby, all Salamanders,’ shouted Dak’ir, solid shot rebounding off his armour as he hacked down another cultist that came within his death arc.

The Astartes fell back as one, two battle-brothers coming forward to drag Ba’ken and Ak’sor from the battle. As Dak’ir’s squad reached the stairs and started to climb down, Sergeant Lok rushed in. Due to the presence of the explosive hydrogen gas the Incinerators were down to a single heavy bolter, strafing the doorway and ripping up cultists with a punishing salvo.

There was scant respite as the enemy pressed its advantage, wired-mouthed maniacs hurling themselves into the furious bolter fire in their droves. Brother Ionnes was chewing through the belt feed of his heavy bolter with abandon, his fellow Salamanders adding their own weapons to the barrage, but the cultists came on still. Like automatons, they refused to yield to panic, the fates of their shattered brethren failing to stall, let alone rout them.

‘They’re unbreakable!’ bellowed Lok, smashing an insurgent to pulp with his power fist, whilst firing his bolter one-handed. A chainsaw struck his outstretched arm seemingly from nowhere and he grimaced, his weapon falling from nerveless fingers. Red-eyed eviscerator priests were moving through the throng, wielding immense double-handed chainblades. Dak’ir crushed the zealot’s skull with a punch, but realised they were slowly being enveloped.

‘Back to the entrance,’ he cried, taking up Lok’s fallen bolter and spraying an arc of fire across his left flank. The ones he killed didn’t even scream. Step by agonising step, the Salamanders withdrew. There was a veritable bullet hail coming from the enemy now, whose numbers seemed limitless and came from every direction at once.

Inside the comm-feed it was chaos. Fragmented reports came in, plagued by static interference, from both *Anvil* and *Hammer*.

‘Heavy casualties... enemy armour moving in... thousands everywhere... brother down!’

‘Captain Kadai...’ Dak’ir yelled into the vox. ‘Brother-captain, this is *Flame*.

Please respond.’

After a long minute, Kadai’s broken reply came back.

‘Kadai... here... Fall... back... regroup... Aereon Square...’

‘Captain, I have two battle-brothers badly injured and in need of medical attention.’

Another thirty seconds passed, before another stuttering response.

‘Apothecary... lost... Repeat... Fugis is gone...’

Gone. Not wounded or down, just gone. Dak’ir felt a ball of hot pain develop in his chest. Stoic resolve outweighed his anger – he gave the order for a fighting withdrawal to Aereon Square, and then raised Tsu’gan on the comm-feed.

‘Vulkan’s blood! I will not retreat in the face of this rabble,’ Tsu’gan snarled at Iagon. ‘Tell the Igean I have received no such order.’

Anvil had, under Tsu’gan’s steely leadership, broken free of the ambush without casualties, though Brother Honourous was limping badly and Sergeant Ul’shan had lost an eye when the trans-loader hit and the drums of incendiary heaped onboard had exploded.

Without use of their multi-meltas, Tsu’gan had torn through the vehicle wreckage himself, scything cultists down on the other side with his combi-bolter. They were falling back to defended positions in the wider street beyond when Dak’ir’s message came through.

At some point during the fighting, Tsu’gan had damaged his battle-helm and he’d torn it off. Since then he’d been relying on Iagon for communication with the other assault groups.

‘We are Salamanders, born in fire,’ he raged zealously, ‘the anvil upon which our enemies are broken. We do not yield. *Ever!*’

Iagon dutifully relayed the message, indicating his sergeant’s refusal to comply.

Further up the street, something loud and heavy was rumbling towards them. It broke Tsu’gan’s stride for just a moment as a tank, festooned with armour plates and daubed with the gaping maw symbol of the Cult of Truth, came into view. Swinging around its fat metal turret, the tank’s battle cannon fired, jetting smoke and rocking the vehicle back on its tracks.

Tsu’gan had his warriors in a defensive battle line, strafing the oncoming cultist hordes with controlled bursts of bolter fire. The tank shell hit with all the force of a thunderbolt, and tore the ragged line apart.

Salamanders were tossed into the air with chunks of rockcrete chewed out of

the road, and fell like debris.

‘Close ranks. Hold positions,’ Tsu’gan snarled, crouching down next to a partially destroyed barricade once occupied by Stratosan Aircorps.

Iagon shoved one of the bodies out of the way, so he could rest his bolter in a makeshift firing lip.

‘Still nothing from the captain,’ he said between bursts.

Tsu’gan’s reaction to the news was guarded, his face fixed in a perpetual scowl.

‘Ul’shan,’ he barked to the sergeant of the Devastators, ‘all fire on that tank. In the name of Vulkan, destroy it.’

Bolter fire *pranged* against the implacable vehicle, grinding forwards as it readied for another shot with its battle cannon. In the turret, a crazed cultist took up the heavy stubber and started hosing the Salamanders with solid shot.

‘You others,’ bellowed Tsu’gan, standing up and unhitching something from his belt, ‘grenades on my lead.’ He launched a krak grenade overarm. It soared through the air at speed, impelled by Tsu’gan’s strength, and rolled into the tank’s path. Several more followed, *thunking* to earth like metal hail.

At the same time, Iagon’s bolter fire shredded the cultist in the stubber nest, whilst Sergeant Ul’shan’s heavy bolters hammered the tank’s front armour and tracks. An explosive round from the salvo clipped one of the krak grenades just as the armoured vehicle was driving over it. A chained detonation tore through the tank as the incendiaries exploded, ripping it wide open.

‘Glory to Prometheus!’ roared Tsu’gan, punching the air as his warriors chorused after him.

His fervour was dampened when he saw shadows moving through the smoke and falling shrapnel. Three more tanks trundled into view.

Tsu’gan shook his head in disbelief.

‘*Mercy of Vulkan...*’ he breathed, just as the comm-link with Captain Kadai was restored. The sergeant glared at Iagon with iron-hard eyes.

They were falling back to Aereon Square.

Dak’ir had been right. Tsu’gan felt his jaw tighten.

‘Hold the line!’ Kadai bellowed into the comm-feed. ‘We make our stand here.’

The Salamanders held position stoically, strung out across the chewed-up defences, controlled bursts thundering from their bolters. Behind them were the armoured transports. Storm bolters shuddered from turret mounts on the Rhinos and *Fire Anvil*’s twin-linked assault cannon whirred in a frenzy of heavy fire,

though the Land Raider's flamestorm side sponsons were powered down.

The Salamanders had converged quickly on Aereon Square, the fighting withdrawal of the three assault groups less cautious than their original attack.

The slab floor of the square was cratered by bomb blasts and fire-blackened. Fallen pillars from adjacent buildings intruded on its perimeter. The centre of the broad plaza was dominated by a felled statue of one of Stratos's Imperial leaders, encircled by a damaged perimeter wall. It was here that Kadai and his warriors made their stand.

The cultists came on in the face of heavy fire, swarming from every avenue, every alcove, like hell-born ants. Hundreds were slain in minutes. But despite the horrendous casualties, they were undeterred and made slow progress across the killing ground. The corpses piled up like sandbags at the edge of the square.

'None shall pass, Fire-born!' raged Kadai, the furious zeal of Vulkan, his progenitor, filling him with righteous purpose. *Endure* – it was one of the central tenets of the Promethean Cult, *endure and conquer*.

The bullet storms crossed each other over a shortening distance as the cultist thousands poured intense fire into the Salamanders' defensive positions. Chunks of perimeter wall, and massive sections of the fallen statue, were chipped apart in the maelstrom.

Brother Zo'tan took a round in the left pauldron, then another in the neck, grunted and fell to his knees. Dak'ir moved to cover him, armour shuddering as he let rip with a borrowed bolter. Insurgent bodies were destroyed in the furious barrage, torn apart by explosive rounds, sundered by salvos from heavy bolters, shredded by the withering hail from assault cannons whining red-hot.

Still the cultists came.

Dak'ir gritted his teeth and roared.

'No retreat!'

Slowly, inevitably, the hordes began to thin. Kadai ordered a halt to the sustained barrage. Like smoke dispersing from a doused pyre, the insurgents were drifting away, backing off silently into the gloom until they were at last gone from sight.

The tenacity of the Salamanders had kept the foe at bay this time. Aereon Square was held.

'Are they giving up?' asked Dak'ir, breathing hard underneath his power armour as he tried to slow his body down from its ultra-heightened battle-state.

'They crawl back to their nests,' Kadai growled. His jaw clenched with impotent anger. 'The city is theirs... for now.'

Stalking from the defence line, Kadai quickly set up sentries to watch the approaches to the square, whilst at the same time contacting Techmarine Argos to send reinforcements from *Vulkan's Wrath*, and a Thunderhawk to extract the dead and wounded. The toll was much heavier than he had expected. Fourteen wounded and six dead. Most keenly felt of all, though, was the loss of Fugis.

The Salamanders were a small Chapter, their near-annihilation during one of the worst atrocities of the Heresy, when they were betrayed by their erstwhile brothers, still felt some ten thousand years later. They had been Legion then, but now they were merely some eight hundred Astartes. Induction of new recruits was slow and only compounded their low fighting strength.

Without their Apothecary and his prodigious medical skills, the most severe injuries suffered by Kadai's Third Company would remain untended and further debilitate their combat effectiveness. Worse still, the gene-seeds of those killed in action would be unharvested, for only Fugis possessed the knowledge and ability to remove these progenoids safely. And it was through these precious organs that future Space Marines were engineered, allowing even the slain to serve their Chapter in death. The losses suffered by Third Company, then, became permanent with the loss of their Apothecary, a solemn fact that put Kadai in a black mood.

'We will re-assault the city proper as soon as we're reinforced,' he raged.

'We should level the full weight of the company against them. Then these heretics will break,' asserted Tsu'gan, clenching a fist to emphasise his vehemence.

Both he and Dak'ir accompanied Kadai as he walked from the battle line, leaving Veteran Sergeant N'keln to organise the troops. The captain unclasped his battle-helm to remove it. His white crest of hair was damp with sweat. His eyes glowed hotly, emanating anger.

'Yes, they will learn that the Salamanders do not yield easily.'

Tsu'gan grinned ferally at that.

Dak'ir thought only of the brothers they had already lost, and the others that would fall in another hard-headed assault. The traitors were dug-in and had numbers – without flamers to flush out ambushers and other traps, breaking Cirrion would be tough.

Then something happened that forestalled the captain's belligerent plan for vengeance. Far across Aereon Square, figures were emerging through the smoke and dust. They crept from their hiding places and shambled towards the Salamanders, shoulders slumped in despair.

Dak'ir's eyes widened when he saw how many there were, 'Survivors... the civilians of Cirrion.'

'Open it,' rasped the dragon giant. His scaled armour coursed with eldritch energy, throwing sharp flashes of light into the gloom. He and his warriors had reached a subterranean metal chamber that ended in an immense portal of heavy plasteel.

Another giant wearing the red-scaled plate came forward. Tendrils of smoke emanated from the grille in his horned helmet. The silence of the outer vault was broken by the hissing, crackling intake of breath before the horned one unleashed a furious plume of flame. It surged hungrily through the grille-plate in a roar, smashing against the vault door and devouring it.

Reinforced plasteel bars blackened and corroded in seconds, layers of ablative ceramite melted away before the adamantium plate of the door itself glowed white-hot and sloughed into molten slag.

The warriors had travelled swiftly through the mag-tram tunnel, forging deep into the lesser known corridors of Cirrion. None had seen them approach. Their leader had made certain that the earlier massacre left no witnesses. After almost an hour, they had reached their destination. Here, in the catacombs of the city, the hydrogen gas clouds could not penetrate. They were far from the fighting; the battles going on in the distant districts of Cirrion sounded dull and faraway through many layers of rockcrete and metal.

'Is it here?' asked a third warrior as the ragged portal into the vault cooled, his voice like crackling magma. Inside were hundreds of tiny strongboxes, held here for the aristocracy of Stratos so they could secure that which they held most precious. No one could have known of the artefact that dwelled innocuously in one of those boxes. Even upon seeing it, few would have realised its significance, the terrible destructive forces it could unleash.

'Oh yes...' replied the eldritch warrior, closing crimson-lidded eyes as he drew upon his power. 'It is exactly where he said it would be.'

Desperate and dishevelled, the Stratosan masses tramped into Aereon Square.

Most wore little more than rags, the scraps of whatever clothed them when the cultists had taken over the city. Some clutched the tattered remnants of scorched belongings, the last vestiges of whatever life they once had in Cirrion now little more than ashen remains. Many had strips of dirty cloth or ragged scarves tied around their noses and mouths to keep out the worst of the suffocating hydrogen

gas. A few wore battered respirators, and shared them with others; small groups taking turns with the rebreather cups. The hydrogen had no such ill-effects on the Salamanders, their Astartes multi-lung and oolitic kidney acting in concert to portion off and siphon out any toxins, thus enabling them to breathe normally.

‘An entire city paralysed by terror...’ said Ba’ken as another piece of shrapnel was removed from his face.

The burly Salamander was sat up against the perimeter wall, and being tended to by Brother Emek who had some rudimentary knowledge of field surgery. Ba’ken’s battle-helm had all but shattered in the explosion that destroyed his beloved heavy flamer and, after being propelled through the wall, fragments of it were still embedded in his flesh.

‘This is but the first of them, brother,’ replied Dak’ir, regarding the weary passage of the survivors with pity as they passed the Salamanders sentries.

Aereon Square was slowly filling. Dak’ir followed the trail of pitiful wretches being led away in huddled throngs by Stratosan Aircorps to the Cirrion gate. From there, he knew, an armoured battalion idled, ready to escort the survivors across the sky-bridge and into the relative safety of Nimbaros. Almost a hundred had already been moved and more still were massing in the square as the Aircorps struggled to cope with them all.

‘Why show themselves now?’ asked Ba’ken, with a nod to Emek who took his leave having finally excised all the jutting shrapnel. The wounds were already healing; the Larraman cells in Ba’ken’s Astartes blood accelerating clotting and scarring, the osmodula implanted in his brain encouraging rapid bone growth and regeneration.

Dak’ir shrugged. ‘The enemy’s withdrawal to consolidate whatever ground they hold, together with our arrival must have galvanised them, I suppose. Made them reach out for salvation.’

‘It is a grim sight.’

‘Yes...’ Dak’ir agreed, suddenly lost in thought. The war on Stratos had suddenly adopted a different face entirely now: not one bound by wire or infected by taint, but one that pleaded for deliverance, that had given all there was to give, a face that was ordinary and innocent, and afraid. As he watched the human detritus tramp by, the sergeant took in the rest of the encampment.

The perimeter wall formed a kind of demarcation line, dividing the territory of the Salamanders and that held by the Cult of Truth. Kadai was adamant they would hold onto it. A pair of Thunderfire cannons patrolled the area on grinding tracks, servos whirring as their Techmarines cycled the cannons through various

firing routines.

Brother Argos had arrived in Aereon Square within the hour, bringing the artillery and his fellow Techmarines with him.

There would be no further reinforcements.

Ferocious lightning storms were wreaking havoc in the upper atmosphere of Stratos, caused by a blanketing of thermal low pressure emanating off the chlorine-rich oceans. Any descent by Thunderhawks was impossible, and all off-planet communication was hindered massively. Kadai and the Salamanders who had made the initial planetfall were alone – a fact they bore stoically. It would have to be enough.

‘How many of our fallen brothers will be for the long dark?’ Ba’ken’s voice called Dak’ir back. The burly Salamander was staring at the medi-caskets of the dead and severely wounded, aligned together on the far side of the perimeter wall. ‘I hope I will never suffer that fate...’ he confessed in a whisper. ‘Entombed within a Dreadnought. An existence without sensation, as the world dims around me, enduring forever in a cold sarcophagus. I would rather the fires of battle claim me first.’

‘It is an honour to serve the Chapter eternally, Ba’ken,’ Dak’ir admonished, though his reproach was mild. ‘In any case, we don’t know what their fates will be,’ he added, ‘save for that of the dead...’

The fallen warriors of Third Company were awaiting transit to Nimbaros. Here, they would be kept secure aboard *Fire-wyvern* until the storms abated and the Thunderhawk could return them to the *Vulkan’s Wrath* where they would be interred in the strike cruiser’s *pyreum*.

All Salamanders, once their progenoids had been removed, were incinerated in the *pyreum*, still wearing their armour, their ashes offered in Promethean ritual to honour the heroic dead and empower the spirits of the living. Such practices were only ever conducted by a Chaplain, and since Elysium was not with the company at this time, the ashen remains would be stored in the strike cruiser’s crematoria until he rejoined them or they returned to Nocturne.

Such morbid thoughts inevitably led to Fugis, and the Apothecary’s untimely demise.

‘I spoke to him before the mission, before he died,’ said Dak’ir, his eyes far away.

‘Who?’

‘Fugis. In the isolation chamber aboard the *Vulkan’s Wrath*.’

Ba’ken stood up and reached for his pauldron, easing the stiffness from his

back and shoulders. The left one had been dislocated before Brother Emek had righted it, and Ba'ken's pauldron had been removed to do it.

'What did he say?' he asked, affixing the armour expertly.

Not all of us want to be brought back. Not all of us can be brought back.

'Something I will not forget...'

Dak'ir shook his head slowly, his gaze fixed on the darkness beyond Aereon Square. 'I do not think we are alone here, Ba'ken,' he said at length.

'Clearly not – we fight a horde of thousands.'

'No... There is something else, too.'

Ba'ken frowned. 'And what is that, brother?'

Dak'ir voice was hard as stone. 'Something worse.'

The interior of the *Fire Anvil's* troop hold was aglow as Dak'ir entered the Land Raider. A revolving schematic in the middle of the hold threw off harsh blue light, bathing the metal chamber and the Astartes gathered within. The four Salamanders present had already removed battle-helms. Their eyes burned warmly in the semi-darkness, at odds with the cold light of the hololith depicting Cirrion.

Summoned at Kadai's request, Dak'ir had left Ba'ken at the perimeter wall to rearm himself, ready for the next assault on Cirrion.

'Without flamers and meltas we face a much sterner test here,' Kadai said, nodding to acknowledge Dak'ir's arrival, as did N'keln.

Tsu'gan offered no such geniality, and merely scowled.

'Tactically, we can hold Aereon Square almost indefinitely,' Kadai continued. 'Thunderfire cannons will bulwark our defensive line, even without reinforcement from the *Vulkan's Wrath* to compensate for our losses. Deeper penetration into the city, however, will not be easy.'

The denial of reinforcements was a bitter blow, and Kadai had been incensed at the news. But the granite-hard pragmatist in him, the Salamanders spirit of self-reliance and self-sacrifice, proved the stronger and so he had put his mind to the task at hand using the forces he did possess. In response to the casualties, Kadai had combined the three groups of Devastators into two squads under Lok and Omkar, Ul'shan with his injury deferring to the other two sergeants. Without reinforcements, the Tactical squads would simply have to soak up their losses.

'With Fugis gone, I'm reluctant to risk more of our battle-brothers heading into the unknown,' Kadai said, the shadows in his face making him look haunted. 'The heretics are entrenched and well-armed. We are few. This would

present little impediment should we have the use of our flamers, but we do not.'

'Is there a way to purify the atmosphere?' asked N'keln. He wheezed from a chest wound he'd sustained during the withdrawal to Aereon Square. N'keln was a solid, dependable warrior, but leadership did not come easily to him and he lacked the guile for higher command. Still, his bravery had been proven time and again, and was above reproach. It was an obvious but necessary question.

Brother Argos stepped forward into the reflected light of the schematic.

The Techmarine went unhooded. The left portion of his face was framed with a steel plate, the snarling image of a salamander seared into it as an honour marking. Burn scars from the brander-priests wreathed his skin in whorls and bands. A bionic eye gleamed coldly in contrast to the burning red of his own. Forked plugs bulged from a glabrous scalp like steel tumours, and wires snaked around the side of his neck and fed into his nose.

When he spoke, his voice was deep and metallic.

'The hydrogen emissions being controlled by Cirrion's atmospheric processors are a gaseous amalgam used to inflate the Stratosan dirigibles – a less volatile compound, and the reason why bolters are still functioning normally. Though I have managed to access some of the city's internal systems, the processors are beyond my knowledge to affect. It would require a local engineer, someone who maintained the system originally. Unfortunately, there is simply no way to find anyone with the proper skills, either alive amongst the survivors or amongst those still trapped in the city.' Argos paused. 'I am sorry, brothers, but any use of incendiary weapons in the city at this time would be catastrophic.'

'One thing is certain,' Kadai continued, 'the appearance of civilian survivors effectively prevents any massed assault. I won't jeopardise innocent lives needlessly.'

Tsu'gan shook his head.

'Brother-captain, with respect, if we do not act the collateral damage will be much worse. Our only recourse is to lead a single full-strength force into Cirrion, and sack it. The insurgents will not expect such a bold move.'

'We are not inviolable against their weapons,' Dak'ir countered. 'It is not only the Stratosans you risk with such a plan. What of my battle-brothers? Their duty ended in death. You would add more to that tally? Our resources are stretched thin enough as it is.'

Tsu'gan's face contorted with anger.

'Sons of Vulkan,' he cried, smacking the plastron of his power armour with his palms. 'Fire-born,' he added, clenching a fist, '*that* is what we are. Unto the

Anvil of War, that is our creed. I do not fear battle and death, even if you do, Ignean.'

'I fear nothing,' snarled Dak'ir. 'But I won't cast my brothers into the furnace for no reason, either.'

'Enough!' The captain's voice demanded the attention of the bickering sergeants at once. Kadai glared at them both, eyes burning with fury at such disrespect for a fellow battle-brother. 'Dispense with this enmity,' he warned, exhaling his anger. 'It will not be tolerated. We have our enemy.'

The sergeants bowed apologetically, but stared daggers at each other before they stood down.

'There will be no massed assault,' Kadai reasserted. 'But that is not to say we will not act, either. These heretics are single-minded to the point of insanity, driven by some external force. No ideology, however fanatical, could impel such... madness,' he added, echoing Fugis's earlier theory. The corner of Kadai's mouth twinged in a brief moment of remembrance. 'The hierophant of the cult, this Speaker, is the key to victory on Stratos.'

'An assassination,' stated Tsu'gan, folding his arms in approval.

Kadai nodded.

'Brother Argos has discovered a structure at the heart of the temple district called Aura Hieron. Colonel Tonnhauser's intelligence has this demagogue there. We will make for it.' The captain's gaze encompassed the entire room. 'Two combat squads made up from the Devastators will be left behind with Brother Argos, who will be guiding us as before. This small force, together with the Thunderfire cannons, will hold Aereon Square and protect the emerging survivors.'

Tsu'gan scowled at this.

'Aereon Square is like a refugee camp as it is. The Air Corps cannot move the survivors fast enough. All they are doing is getting in our way. Our mission is to crush this horde, and free this place from terror. How can we do that if we split our forces protecting the humans? We should take every battle-brother we have.'

Kadai leaned forwards. His eyes were like fiery coals and seemed to chase away the cold light of the hololith.

'I will not abandon them, Tsu'gan. We are not the Marines Malevolent, nor the Flesh Tearers nor any of our other bloodthirsty brothers. Ours is a different creed, one of which we Salamanders are rightly proud. We will protect the innocent if--'

The *Fire Anvil* was rocked by a sudden tremor, and the dull *crump* of an

explosion came through its armoured hull from the outside.

Brother Argos lowered the ramp at once and the Salamanders rushed outside to find out what had happened.

Fire and smoke lined a blackened crater in the centre of Aereon Square. The mangled corpses of several Stratosan civilians, together with a number of Aircorps were strewn within it, their bodies broken by a bomb blast. A woman screamed from the opposite side of the square. She'd fallen, having tried to flee from another of the survivors who was inexplicably clutching a frag grenade.

Tsu'gan's combi-bolter was in his hands almost immediately and he shot the man through the chest. The grenade fell from the insurgent's grasp and went off.

The fleeing woman and several others were engulfed by the explosion. The screaming intensified.

Kadai bellowed for order, even as his sergeants went to join their battle-brothers in quelling the sudden panic.

Several cultists had infiltrated the survivor groups, intent on causing anarchy and massed destruction. They had succeeded. Respirator masks were the perfect disguise for their 'afflictions', bypassing the Stratosan soldiery and even the Adeptus Astartes.

Ko'tan Kadai knelt with the broken woman in his grasp, having gone to her when the smoke was still dissipating from the explosion. She looked frail and thin compared to his Adeptus Astartes bulk, as if the rest of her unbroken bones would shatter at his slightest touch. Yet, they did not. He held her delicately, as a father might cradle a child. She lasted only moments, eyes fearful, spitting blood from massive internal trauma.

'Brother-captain?' ventured N'keln, appearing at his side.

Kadai laid the dead woman down gently and rose to his full height. A thin line of crimson dotted his ebon face, the horror there having ebbed away, replaced by anger.

'Two combat squads,' he asserted, his iron-hard gaze finding Tsu'gan, who was close enough to hear him, but wisely displayed no discontent. 'Everyone is screened... *Everyone.*'

'Now we know why the survivors came out of hiding. The cultists wanted them to, so they could do this...' Ba'ken said softly to Dak'ir as the two Salamanders looked on.

Kadai touched the blood on his face then saw it on his fingers as if for the first time.

'We need only get a kill-team close enough to the Speaker to execute him and

the cultists' resolve will fracture,' he promised. 'We move out now.'

Five kilometres filled with razor wire, pit falls and partially demolished streets. Cultist murder squads dredging the ruins for survivors to torture; human bombers hiding in alcoves, trembling fingers wrapped around grenade pins; eviscerator priests leading flocks with wire-sewn mouths. It was the most expedient route Techmarine Argos could find in order for his battle-brothers to reach Aura Hieron.

Only two kilometres down that hellish road, after fighting through ambushes and weathering continual booby traps, the Salamanders' assault had reached yet another impasse.

They stood before a long but narrow esplanade of churned plascrete. Labyrinthine track traps were dug in every three or four metres, crowned with spools of razor wire. The bulky black carapaces of partially submerged mines shone dully like the backs of tunnelling insects. Death pits were excavated throughout, well-hidden with guerrilla cunning.

A killing field; and they had to cross it in order to reach Aura Hieron. At the end of it was a thick grey line of rockcrete bunkers, fortified with armour plates. From slits in the sides constant tracer fire rattled, accompanied by the throbbing *thud-chank* of heavy cannon. The no-man's-land was blanketed by fire that lit up the darkness in gruesome monochrome.

The Salamanders were not the first to have come this way. The corpses of Stratosan soldiers littered the ground too, as ubiquitous and lifeless as sandbags.

'There is no way around.' Dak'ir's reconnaissance report was curt, having tried, but failed, to find a different angle of attack to exploit. In such a narrow cordon, barely wide enough for ten Space Marines to operate in, the Salamanders' combat effectiveness was severely hampered.

Captain Kadai stared grimly into the maelstrom. The Inferno Guard and Sergeant Omkar's Devastators were at his side, awaiting their rotation at the front.

No more than fifty metres ahead of them Tsu'gan and his squad were hunkered down behind a cluster of tank traps returning fire, Sergeant Lok and his Devastators providing support with heavy bolters. Each painful metre had been paid for with blood, and three of Tsu'gan's troopers were already wounded, but he was determined to gain more ground and get close enough to launch an offensive with *krak* grenades.

The battle line was stretched. They had gone as far as they could go, short of

risking massive casualties by charging the cultists' guns head on. The insurgents were so well protected they were only visible as shadows until their twisted faces were lit by muzzle flashes.

Kadai was scouring the battle line, searching for weaknesses.

'What did you find, sergeant?' he asked.

'Only impassable blockades and un-crossable chasms, stretching for kilometres east and west,' Dak'ir replied. 'We could turn back, captain, get Argos to find another route?'

'I've seen fortifications erected by the Imperial Fists that put up less resistance,' Kadai muttered to himself, then turned to Dak'ir. 'No. We break them here or not at all.'

Dak'ir was about to respond when Tsu'gan's voice came through the comm-feed.

'Captain, we can make five more metres. Requesting the order to advance.'

'Denied. Get back here, sergeant, and tell Lok to hold the line. We need a new plan.'

A momentary pause in communication made Tsu'gan's discontent obvious, but his respect for Kadai was absolute.

'At once, my lord.'

'We need to get close enough to attack the wall with krak grenades and breach it,' said Tsu'gan, having returned to the Salamanders' second line to join up with Dak'ir and Kadai, leaving Lok to hold the front. 'A determined frontal assault is the only way to do it.'

'A charge across the killing ground is insane, Tsu'gan,' countered Dak'ir.

'We are wasting our ammunition pinned here,' Tsu'gan argued. 'What else would you suggest?'

'There must be another way,' Dak'ir insisted.

'Withdraw,' Tsu'gan answered simply, allowing a moment for it to sink in.

'Loath as I am to do it. If we cannot break through, then Cirrion is lost. Withdraw and summon the *Fire-wyvern*,' he said to Kadai. 'Use its missile payload to destroy the gravitic engines and send this hellish place to the ocean.'

The captain was reticent to agree.

'I would be condemning thousands of innocents to death.'

'And saving millions,' urged Tsu'gan. 'If a world is tainted beyond redemption or lost to invasion we annihilate it, excising its stain from the galaxy like a cancer. It should be no different for a city. Stratos *can* be saved. Cirrion

cannot.'

'You speak of wholesale slaughter as if it is a casual thing, Tsu'gan,' Kadai replied.

'Ours is a warrior's lot, my lord. We were made to fight and to kill, to bring order in the Emperor's name.'

Kadai's voice grew hard.

'I know our purpose, sergeant. Do not presume to tell me of it.'

Tsu'gan bowed humbly.

'I meant no offence, my lord.'

Kadai was angry because he knew that Tsu'gan was right. Cirrion was lost. Sighing deeply, he opened the comm-feed, extending the link beyond the city.

'We will need Brother Argos to engage the Stratosan failsafe and blow the sky-bridges connecting Cirrion first, or it will take an entire chunk of the adjacent cities with it,' he said out loud to himself, before reverting to the comm-feed.

'Brother Hek'en.'

The pilot of the *Fire-wyvern* responded. The Thunderhawk was at rest on the landing platform just outside Nimbaros.

'My lord.'

'Prepare for imminent take off, and prime hellstrike missiles. We're abandoning the city. You'll have my orders within—'

The comm-feed crackling to life again in Kadai's battle-helm interrupted him. The crippling interference made it difficult to discern a voice at first, but when Kadai recognised it he felt his hot Salamanders blood grow cold.

It was Fugis. The Apothecary was alive.

'I blacked out after the fall. When I awoke I was in the sub-levels of the city. They stretch down for about two kilometres, deep enough for the massive lifter-engines. It's like a damn labyrinth,' Fugis explained with his usual choler.

'Are you injured, brother?' asked Kadai.

Silence persisted, laced with static, and for a moment he thought they'd lost the Apothecary again.

'I took some damage, my battle-helm too. It's taken me this long to repair the comm-feed,' Fugis returned at last. In the short pauses it was possible to hear his breathing. It was irregular and ragged. The Apothecary was trying to mask his pain.

'What is your exact location, Fugis?'

Static interference marred the connection again.

‘It’s a tunnel complex below the surface. But it could be anywhere.’

Kadai turned to Dak’ir. ‘Contact Brother Argos. Have him lock on to Fugis’s signal and send us the coordinates.’

Dak’ir nodded and set about his task. All the while heavy cannon were chugging overhead.

‘Listen,’ said Fugis, the crackling static worsening, ‘I am not alone. There are civilians. They fled down here when the attacks began, and stayed hidden until now.’

There was another short silence as the Apothecary considered his next statement.

‘The city is still not ours.’

Kadai explained the situation with the hydrogen gas amalgam on the surface, how they could not use their flamers or meltas, and that it only compounded the fact that the cultists were well-prepared and dug in. ‘It is almost as if they know our tactics,’ he concluded.

‘The gas has not penetrated this deep,’ Fugis told him. ‘But I may have a way to stop it.’

‘How, brother?’ asked Kadai, fresh hope filling his voice.

‘A human engineer. Some of the refugees were fleeing from the gas as well as the insurgents. His name is Banen. If we get him out of the city and to the Techmarine, Cirrion can be purged.’ A pregnant pause suggested an imminent sting. ‘But there is a price,’ Fugis explained through bursts of interference.

Kadai’s jaw clenched beneath his battle-helm.

There always is...

The Apothecary went on.

‘In order to cleanse Cirrion of the gas, the entire air supply must be vented. Its atmospheric integrity will be utterly compromised. With the air so thin, many will suffocate before it can be restored. Humans hiding in the outer reaches of the city, away from the hot core of the lifter-engines, will also likely freeze to death.’

Kadai’s brief optimism was quickly crushed.

‘To save Cirrion, I must doom its people.’

‘Some may survive,’ offered Fugis, though his words lacked conviction.

‘A few at best,’ Kadai concluded. ‘It is no choice.’

Destroying the city’s gravitic engines had been bad enough. This seemed worse. The Salamanders, a Chapter who prided themselves on their

humanitarianism, their pledge to protect the weak and the innocent, were merely exchanging one holocaust for another.

Kadai gripped the haft of his thunder hammer. It was black, and its head was thick and heavy like the ready tool of a forgesmith. He had fashioned it this way in the depths of Nocturne, the lava flows from the mountain casting his onyx flesh in an orange glow. Kadai longed to return there, to the anvil and the heat of the forge. The hammer was a symbol. It was like the weapon Vulkan had first taken up in defence of his adopted homeworld. In it Kadai found resolve and, in turn, the strength he needed to do what he must.

‘We are coming for you, brother,’ he said with steely determination. ‘Protect the engineer. Have him ready to be extracted upon our arrival.’

‘I will hold on as long as I can.’

White noise resumed.

Kadai felt the weight of resignation around his shoulders like a heavy mantle.

‘Brother Argos has locked the signal and fed it to our auspex,’ Dak’ir told him, wresting the Salamanders captain from his dark reverie.

Kadai nodded grimly.

‘Sergeants, break into combat squads. The rest stay here,’ he said, summoning his second in command.

‘N’keln,’ Kadai addressed the veteran sergeant. ‘You will lead the expedition to rescue Fugis.’

Tsu’gan interjected.

‘My lord?’

‘Once we make a move the insurgents will almost certainly redirect their forces away from here. We cannot hold them by merely standing our ground,’ Kadai explained. ‘We need their attention fixed where we want it. I intend to achieve that by charging the wall.’

‘Captain, that is suicide,’ Dak’ir told him plainly.

‘Perhaps. But I cannot risk bringing the enemy to Fugis, to the human engineer. His survival is of the utmost importance. Self-sacrifice is the Promethean way, sergeant, you know that.’

‘With respect, captain,’ said N’keln. ‘Brother Malicant and I wish to stay behind and fight with the others.’

Malicant, the company banner bearer, nodded solemnly behind the veteran sergeant.

Both Salamanders had been wounded in the ill-fated campaign to liberate Cirrion. Malicant leaned heavily on the company banner from a leg wound he

had sustained during the bomb blast in Aereon Square, whereas N'keln grimaced with the pain of his crushed ribs.

Kadai was incensed.

'You disobey my orders, sergeant?'

N'keln stood his ground despite his captain's ire.

'Yes, my lord.'

Kadai glared at him, but his anger bled away as he realised the sense in the veteran sergeant's words and clasped N'keln by the shoulder.

'Hold off as long as you can. Advance only when you must, and strike swiftly. You may yet get past the guns unscathed,' Kadai told him. 'You honour the Chapter with your sacrifice.'

N'keln rapped his fist against his plastron in salute and then he and Malicant went to join the others already at the battle line.

'Make it an act of honour,' he said to the others as they watched the two Salamanders go. They were singular warriors. All his battle-brothers were. Kadai was intensely proud of each and every one. 'Fugis is waiting. Into the fires of battle, brothers...'

'Unto the anvil of war,' they declared solemnly as one.

The Salamanders turned away without looking back, leaving their brothers to their fate.

The tunnels were deserted.

Ba'ken tracked his heavy bolter across the darkness, his battle-senses ultra-heightened with tension.

'Too quiet...'

'You would prefer a fight?' Dak'ir returned over the comm-feed.

'Yes,' Ba'ken answered honestly.

The sergeant was a few metres in front of him, the Salamanders having broken into two long files on either side of the tunnel. Each Space Marine maintained a distance of a few metres from the battle-brother ahead, watching his back and flanks in case of ambush. Helmet luminators strafed the darkened corridors, creating imagined hazards in the gathered shadows.

The Salamanders had followed the Apothecary's signal like a beacon. It had led them south at first, back the way they had come, to a hidden entrance into the Cirrion sub-levels. The tunnels were myriad and did not appear on any city schematic, so Argos had no knowledge of them. The private complex of passageways and bunkers was reserved for the Stratosan aristocracy. Portals set

in the tunnel walls slid open with a ghosting of released pressure and fed off into opulent rooms, their furnishings undisturbed and layered with dust. Reinforced vaults lay unsecured and unguarded, their treasures still untouched within. Several chambers were jammed with machinery hooked up to cryogenic flotation tanks. Purple bacteria contaminated the stagnant gel-solutions within. Decomposed bodies, bloated with putrefaction, were slumped against the glass, their suspended existence ended when the power in Cirrion had failed.

Kadai raised his hand from up ahead and the Salamanders stopped.

Nearby, one step in the chain from Tsu'gan, Iagon consulted his auspex.

'Bio-readings fifty metres ahead,' he hissed through the comm-feed.

The *thud-chank* of bolters being primed filled the narrow space.

Kadai lowered his hand and the Salamanders slowly began to proceed, closing up as they went. They had yet to meet any cultist resistance, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

Dak'ir heard something move up ahead, like metal scraping metal.

'*Hammer!*' a voice cried out of the dark, accompanied by the sound of a bolt-round filling its weapon's breech.

'*Anvil!*' Kadai replied with the other half of the code, and lowered his pistol.

Twenty metres farther on, a wounded Salamander was slumped against a bulkhead, his outstretched bolt pistol falling slowly.

The relief in Kadai's voice was palpable.

'Stand down. It's Fugis. We've got him.'

Banen stepped from the shadows with the small band of survivors. Short and unassuming, he wore a leather apron and dirty overalls that bulged with his portly figure. A pair of goggles framed his grease-smearred pate.

He didn't look like a man with the power to wipe out a city.

The gravitas of the decision facing Kadai was not lost on him as he regarded the human engineer.

'You can vent the atmosphere in Cirrion, cleanse the city of the gas?'

'Y-yes, milord.' The stammer only made the human seem more innocuous.

The Salamanders formed a protective cordon around the bulkhead where Fugis and the survivors were holed up, bolters trained outwards. The Apothecary's leg was broken, but he was at least still conscious, though in no condition to fight. With the discovery of the Apothecary an eerie silence had descended on the tunnel complex, as if the air was holding its breath.

Salamanders encircling them, Kadai stared down at Banen.

I will be signing the death warrant of thousands...

‘Escort them back to Aereon Square,’ he said to Brother Ba’ken. ‘Commence the cleansing of the city as soon as possible.’

Ba’ken saluted. The Salamanders were breaking up their defensive formation when the held breath rushed back.

A few metres farther down the tunnel, a lone insurgent dropped down from a ceiling hatch, a grenade clutched in her thin fingers.

Bolters roared, loud and throaty down the corridor, shredding the cultist. The grenade went up in the fusillade, the explosion sweeping out in a firestorm. The Salamanders met it without hesitation, shielding the terrified humans with their armoured bodies.

Hundreds of footsteps clattered down to them from the darkness up ahead.

‘Battle positions!’ shouted Kadai.

A ravening mob of insurgents rounded the corner. Further hatchways in the walls and ceilings suddenly broke open as cultists piled out like fat lice crawling from the cracks.

Kadai levelled his pistol.

‘Salamanders! Unleash death!’

A team of cultists brought up an autocannon. Dak’ir raked them with bolter fire before they could set it.

‘Iagon...’ shouted Tsu’gan over the raucous battle din.

‘Atmosphere normal, sir,’ the other Salamander replied, knowing precisely what was on his sergeant’s mind.

Tsu’gan bared his teeth in a feral smile.

‘Cleanse and burn,’ he growled, and the flamer attached to his combi-bolter roared.

Liquid promethium ignited on contact with the air as a superheated wave of fire spewed hungrily down the corridor.

Shen’kar intensified the conflagration with his own flamer. The cultists were obliterated in the blaze, their bodies becoming slowly collapsing shadows behind the shimmering heat haze.

It lasted merely seconds. Smoke and charred remains were all that was left when the flames finally died down. Dozens of insurgents had been destroyed; some were little more than ash and bone.

‘The fury of fire will win this war for the Salamanders,’ said Fugis, as the Astartes were readying to split their forces once again. Ba’ken supported the

Apothecary and was standing with the others that would be returning to Aereon Square.

Kadai was adamant that Fugis and the human survivors be given all the protection he could afford them. If that meant stretching his Salamanders thinly, then so be it. The captain would press on with only Tsu'gan, Dak'ir, Company Champion Vek'shen and Honoured Brother Shen'kar as retinue. The rest were going back.

'I am certain of it,' Kadai replied, facing him. 'But at the cost of thousands. I only hope the price is worth it, old friend.'

'Is any price ever worth it?' Fugis asked.

The Apothecary was no longer talking about Cirrion. A bitter remembrance flared in Kadai's mind and he crushed it.

'Send word when you've reached Aereon Square and the gas has been purged. We'll be waiting here until then.'

Fugis nodded, though it gave the Apothecary some pain to do so.

'In the name of Vulkan,' he said, saluting.

Kadai echoed him, rapping his plastron. The Apothecary gave him a final consolatory look before he had Ba'ken help him away. It gave Kadai little comfort as he thought of the thousands of innocents still in the city and their ignorance of what was soon to befall them, a fate made by his own hand.

'Emperor, forgive me...' he whispered softly, watching the Salamanders go.

Aura Hieron hung open like a carcass. It had been austere beautiful once, much like the rest of Cirrion, stark silver alloyed with cold marble. Now it was an abattoir-temple. Blood slicked its walls, seeping down into the cracks of the intricate mosaic floor. Broken columns punctuated a high outer wall that ran around the temple's vast ambit. Statues set in shadowy alcoves had been beheaded or smeared in filth, their pale immortality defaced.

Crude sigils, exulting in the dark glory of the Cult of Truth, were daubed upon the stonework. A black altar, re-fashioned with jagged knives and stained with blood, dominated a cracked dais at the back of the chamber. Metal spars ripped from the structure of Cirrion's underbelly had been dragged bodily into the temple, tearing ragged grooves in the tarnished marble. Blackened corpses, the remains of loyal Stratosans, were hung upon them as offerings to the Chaos gods. A shrine to the Emperor of Mankind no longer, Aura Hieron was a haven for the corrupt now, where only the damned came to worship.

Nihilan revelled in the temple's debasement as he regarded the instrument of

his malicious will from afar.

‘We should not be here, sorcerer. We have what we came for,’ rasped a voice from the shadows, redolent of smoke and ash.

‘Our purpose here is two-fold, Ramlek,’ Nihilan replied, his cadence grating. ‘We have only achieved the first half.’ The renegade Dragon Warrior overlooked the bloodied plaza of Aura Hieron from a blackened anteroom above its only altar. He was watching the Speaker keenly, beguiling and persuading the cultist masses basking in his unnatural aura with his dark-tongued rhetoric.

The brand Nihilan had seared into the hierophant’s flesh over three months ago, when the Dragon Warriors had first come to Stratos, had spread well. It infected almost his entire face. The seed the sorcerer had embedded there would be reaching maturation.

‘A life for a life, Ramlek; you know that. Is Ghor’gan prepared?’

‘He is,’ rasped the horned warrior.

Nihilan smiled thinly. The scar tissue on his face pulled tight with the rare muscular use. ‘Our enemies will be arriving soon,’ he hissed, psychic power crackling over his clenched fist, ‘then we will have vengeance.’

Eyes like mirrored glass stared out from beneath a mausoleum archway, no longer seeing, unblinking in mortality. Tiny ice crystals flecked the dead man’s lips and encumbered his eyelids so they drooped in mock lethargy. The poor wretch was arched awkwardly across a stone tomb, his head slack and lifeless as it hung backwards over the edge.

He was not alone. Throughout the temple district, citizens and insurgents alike lay dead, their breath and their life stolen away when the atmospheric processors had vented. Some held one another in a final desperate embrace, accepting of their fate; others fought, fingers clutched around their throats as they tried in vain to fill their lungs.

The ruins of the temple district were disturbingly silent. It was oddly appropriate. The quietude fell like a shroud over broken monoliths and solemn chapels, acres of cemeteries punctuated with mausoleums, sepulchres and hooded statues bent in sombre remembrance.

‘So much death...’ uttered Dak’ir, reminded of another place decades ago, and glanced to his captain. Kadai seemed to bear it all stoically, but Dak’ir could tell it was affecting him.

The Salamanders had passed through the city unchallenged, plying along the subterranean roads of the private tunnel complex. Though he had no map of the

underground labyrinth, Techmarine Argos had extrapolated a route based on the position of the hidden entrance and his battle-brothers' visual reports, relayed to him as they progressed through its dingy confines. After an hour of trawling through the narrow dark, the Salamanders had emerged from a shadowy egress to be confronted with the solemnity of the temple district.

Kadai had told his retinue to expect resistance. Truthfully, he would have welcomed it. Anything to distract him from the terrible act he had been forced to commit against the citizens of Cirrion. But it was not to be – the Salamanders had passed through the white gates of the temple district without incident, yet the reminders of Kadai's act lurked in every alcove, in each darkened bolthole of the city.

Mercifully, Fugis and the others had arrived at Aereon Square without hindrance. Kadai was emotionally ambivalent when the Apothecary's communication had reached him over the comm-feed. It was a double-edged sword, salvation with a heavy tariff – annihilation for Cirrion's people.

'Aura Hieron lies half a kilometre to the north,' the metallic voice of Argos grated over the comm-feed, dispelling further introspection.

'I see it,' Kadai returned flatly.

He cut the link with the Techmarine, instead addressing his retinue.

'The people of Cirrion paid for a chance to end this war with their lives. Let us not leave them wanting. It ends this day, one way or the other. On my lead, brothers. In the name of Vulkan.'

Ahead, the temple of Aura Hieron loomed like a skeletal hand grasping at a pitch black sky.

Dak'ir crept through the darkened alcoves of the temple's west wall. Opposite him, across the tenebrous gulf of the temple's nave, Tsu'gan stalked along the other flanking wall.

Edging down the centre, obscured by shattered columns and the debris from Aura Hieron's collapsed roof, was Kadai and the rest of his retinue. They kept low and quiet, despite their power armour, and closed swiftly on their target.

Ahead of them cultists thronged in hundreds, respirators fixed over their sewn mouths, prostrate before their vile hierophant. The Speaker was perched on a marble dais and clad in dirty blue robes like his congregation of the depraved. Unlike the wire-mouthed acolytes abasing themselves before him, the Speaker was not mute. Far from it. A writhing purple tongue extruded from his distended maw, the teeth within just blackened nubs. The wretched appendage twisted and

lashed as if sentient. Inscrutable dogma spewed from the Speaker's mouth, its form and language inflected by the daemoniac tongue. Even the sound of his words gnawed at Dak'ir's senses and he shut them out, recognising the mutation for what it was – Chaos taint. It explained at once how this disaffected Stratosan native, who, up until a few months ago, had been little more than a petty firebrand, had managed to cajole such unswerving loyalty, and in such masses.

Surrounding the hierophant was the elite of those fanatical troops, a ring of eight eviscerator priests, kneeling with their chainblades laid out in front of them in ceremony.

It left a bitter tang in Tsu'gan's mouth to witness such corruption. Whatever foul rite these degenerate scum were planning, the Salamanders would end with flame and blade. He felt the zeal burn in his breast, and wished dearly that he was with his captain advancing down the very throat of the enemy and not here guarding shadows.

Let the Ignean skulk at the periphery, he thought. I am destined for more glorious deeds.

A garbled cry arrested Tsu'gan's arrogant brooding. Spewing an unintelligible diatribe, the Speaker gestured frantically towards Kadai and the other two Salamanders emerging from their cover to destroy him. His craven followers reacted with eerie synchronicity to their master's warning, and surged towards the trio of interlopers murderously.

Shen'kar opened up his flamer and burned down a swathe of maddened cultists with a war cry on his lips. Vek'shen charged into the wake of the blaze, the conflagration having barely ebbed, fire-glaive swinging. The master-crafted blade reaped a terrible harvest of sheared limbs and heads, spurts of incendiary immolating bodies with every flame-wreathed strike.

Kadai was like a relentless storm, and Tsu'gan's warrior heart sang to witness such prowess and fury. Channelling his fiery rage, the captain tore a ragged hole through one of the eviscerator priests with his inferno pistol, before crushing the skull of another with his thunder hammer.

As the wretched deacon went down, his head pulped, Kadai gave the signal and enfiling bolter fire barked from the alcoves as Tsu'gan and Dak'ir let rip.

As cultists fell, shot apart by his furious salvos, Tsu'gan could contain his battle lust no longer. He would not be left here like some sentry. He wanted to be at his captain's side, and look into his enemy's eyes as he slew them. Dak'ir could hold the perimeter well enough without his aid. In any case, the enemy

was here amassed for slaughter.

Roaring an oath to Vulkan, Tsu'gan left his post and waded into the battle proper.

Dak'ir caught sight of Tsu'gan's muzzle flare and cursed loudly when he realised he had abandoned his orders and left the wall deserted. Debating whether to press the attack himself, his attention was arrested when he noticed Kadai, having bludgeoned his way through the mob, standing scant metres from the Speaker and levelling his inferno pistol.

'In the name of Vulkan!' he bellowed, about to end the threat of the Cult of Truth forever, when a single shot thundered above the carnage and the Speaker fell, his head half-destroyed by an explosive round.

Kadai felt the meat and blood of the executed Speaker spatter his armour, and started to lower his pistol out of shock. A strange lull fell over the fighting, enemies poised in mid-attack, that didn't feel entirely natural as the Salamanders captain traced the source of the shot.

Above him there was a parapet overlooking the temple's nave. Kadai's gaze was fixed upon it as a figure in blood-red power armour emerged from the gathered shadows, a smoking bolt pistol in his grasp.

Scales bedecked this warrior's battle-plate, like those of some primordial lizard from an archaic age. His gauntlets were fashioned like claws, with long vermillion talons, and eldritch lightning rippled across them in crackling ruby arcs. In one he clutched a staff, a roaring dragon's head at its tip rendered in silver; in the other his bolt pistol, which he returned to its holster. Broad pauldrons sat like hardened scale shells on the warrior's shoulders, a horn curving from each. He wore no battle-helm, and bore horrific facial scars openly. Fire had blighted this warrior's once noble countenance, twisting it, devouring it and remaking his visage into one of puckered tissue, angry wheals and exposed bone. It was the face of death, hideous and accusing.

A chill entered Kadai's spine as if he was suddenly drowning in ice. The spectre before him was a ghost, an apparition that died long ago in terrible agony. Yet, here it was in flesh and blood, called back from the grave like some vengeful revenant.

'Nihilan...'

'Captain,' the apparition replied, his voice cracked like dry earth baked beneath a remorseless sun, burning red eyes aglow.

Kadai's posture stiffened as the shock quickly passed, subjugated by righteous anger.

'Renegade,' he snarled.

Wracking pain gripped Dak'ir's chest as he beheld the warrior and was wrenched back into the otherworld of his dream...

The temple faded as the grey sky of Moribar engulfed all. Bone-monoliths surged into that endless steel firmament, ossuary paths stretched into endless tracts of cemeteries, mausoleum fields and sepulchral vales. Through legions of tombs, across phalanxes of crypts, along battalions of reliquaries sunk in earthen catacombs, Dak'ir followed the grave-road until he reached its terminus.

And there beneath the cold damp earth, boiling, burning, its lambent glow neither warm nor inviting, was the vast churning furnace of the crematoria.

Pain lanced Dak'ir's body as the vision changed. He gripped his chest, but no longer felt his black carapace. He was a scout once more, observing from the edge of the crematoria, the massive pit of fire large enough to swallow a Titan, burning, ever burning, down into the molten heart of Moribar.

Dak'ir saw two Astartes clambering at the edge of that portal to fiery death. Nihilan clung desperately to Captain Ushorak, his black power armour pitted and cracked with the intense heat emanating from below.

The terrible conflagration was in turmoil. It bubbled explosively, plumes of lava spearing the air in fiery cascades, when a huge pillar of flame tore from the crematoria. Dak'ir shielded his eyes as a massive fire wall obliterated the warriors from view.

Strong hands grasped Dak'ir's shoulder and wrenched him away from the blaze as the renegades they had come to bring to justice, not to kill, were immolated. Barely visible through the solid curtain of flame, Nihilan was screaming as his face burned...

Dak'ir lurched back to the present, a sickening vertigo threatening to overwhelm him, and he reached out to steady himself. He tasted blood in his mouth and black spots marred his vision. Tearing off his battle-helm, he struggled to breathe.

Somewhere in the temple, someone was speaking...

'You died,' Kadai accused, looking up at the warrior on the parapet. He fought the invisible pressure stopping him from striking the renegade down, but his

arms were leaden.

‘I survived,’ returned Nihilan, the effort to maintain the psychic dampening that held the battle in stasis against the Salamander’s will creasing his scarred face.

‘You should have faced justice, not death,’ Kadai told him, then smiled vindictively. ‘Overloading the crematoria, stirring up the volatile core of Moribar, you provoked it in order to escape and kill me and my brothers into the bargain. Ushorak’s destruction was your doing, yours *and* his.’

‘Don’t you speak of him!’ cried Nihilan, red lightning coursing through his eyes and clenched fists, writhing around his force staff and spitting off in jagged arcs. Exhaling fury, the Dragon Warrior recovered his composure. ‘*You* are the murderer here, Kadai – a petty marshal who’d do anything to catch his quarry. But perhaps you’re right... I did die, and was *reborn*.’

Kadai raised his inferno pistol a fraction. Nihilan’s grip was loosening. He was readying for it to slip completely, and slay the traitor where he stood, when the Speaker’s body started to convulse.

‘It doesn’t matter any more,’ the Dragon Warrior added, stepping back into the shadows of the parapet. ‘Not for you...’

Kadai fired off his inferno pistol, melting away a chunk of parapet as Nihilan released his psychic hold. The Salamander was about to chase after him when a terrible aura enveloped the Speaker, lifting his prone corpse inexplicably so that it dangled just above the ground like meat on an invisible hook.

Slowly, agonisingly slowly, he raised his chin to reveal a ruined face destroyed by the bolt pistol’s explosive round. Slick red flesh, wrapped partially around a bloody skull, shimmered in the ambient light. What remained of the Speaker’s cranium was split open like an egg. Luminous cobalt skin was revealed beneath. Cracking bone gave way to a leering visage called forth from a dark unreality as something... *unnatural*... pulled itself forth into the material plane.

A lidless eye of fulgent black glared with otherworldly malevolence. The eight-pointed star, once burned into the Speaker’s forehead, was now glowing upon this new horror. It was raw and vital, pulsing like a wretched heart as the warp-thing grew hideously. Bulbous protrusions tore from mortal flesh, spilling out with thickets of spines. Fingers splayed as if pulled taut by unseen threads, talons rupturing from them, long, sharp and black. The thing’s distended maw, in mimicry of the Speaker’s original mutation, stretched further and wider until it was a terrible lipless chasm, the lashing tongue within three-pronged and spiked

with bloodied bone.

Cultists shrieked in fear and adoration as the Speaker's corpse was possessed. Eviscerator priests pledged their mute allegiance, turning their chainblades towards the Salamanders once again.

The creature was primal, wrenched from ethereal slumber and only partially sentient, a deep soul-hunger driving it. Roaring in fury and anguish, it surged forwards, devouring a pair of eviscerator priests closing on Kadai. Like some terrible basilisk, it consumed them whole, bones crunching audibly as it dragged the prey down its bulging gullet.

'Abomination...' Kadai breathed, gripping the haft of his thunder hammer as he prepared to smite the daemon. Nihilan had given his soul over to the dark powers now, and this was but a taste of his malfeasance.

'Die, hell-beast!' cried Vek'shen, stepping between his captain and the unbound daemon. Whirling his fire-glaive in a blazing arc, the Company Champion crafted an overhand blow that would've felled an ork warlord. The daemon met it with its talons and the glaive was held fast. Its tongue slid like lightning from its abyssal mouth, oozing swiftly around Vek'shen's power-armoured form. The Salamander gaped in a silent scream, breath pressed violently from his body, as he was crushed to death.

Kadai roared, launching himself at the beast, even as his battle-brother's flaccid corpse, dented where the daemon's tongue had clutched him, crashed to the ground.

Dak'ir was recovering his senses. Though he hadn't seen how, the Speaker was dead, shot in the back of the head, his body lying at Kadai's feet. It wasn't all that he'd missed while he was under the influence of his memory-dream. In the time it had taken for his Adeptus Astartes constitution and training to override the lingering nausea the remembrance had caused, Nihilan was already retreating into the shadows. Leaving his flank position, Dak'ir ran towards the nave determined to pursue, when a swathe of cultists impeded him.

'Tsu'gan!' he cried, gutting an insurgent with his chainsword and firing his bolter one-handed to explode the face of another, 'Stop the renegade!'

The other Salamander nodded in a rare moment of empathy and sped off after Nihilan.

Dak'ir was battling through the frenzied mob when he saw the Speaker's corpse rising and felt the touch of the warp prickle his skin...

Tsu'gan bolted across the nave, pummelling cultists with his fists, chewing up packed groups with explosive bursts of fire. Shen'kar was just visible in his peripheral vision, immolating swathes of the heretical vermin with bright streaks of flame.

Smashing through a wooden door at the back of the temple, Tsu'gan found a flight of stone steps leading up to the parapet. He took them three at a time with servo-assisted bounds of his power-armoured legs, until he emerged into a darkened anteroom.

Something was happening below. He heard Vek'shen bellow a call to arms and then nothing, as if all sound had fled in a sudden vacuum.

Burning red eyes regarded him coldly in the blackness.

'Tsu'gan...' said Nihilan, emerging from the dark.

'Traitorous scum!' the Salamander raged.

But Tsu'gan didn't raise his bolter to fire, didn't vanquish the renegade where he stood. He merely remained transfixed, muscles clenched as if held fast in amber.

'Wha-' he began, but found his tongue was leaden too.

'Sorcery,' Nihilan told him, the surface of his force staff alive with incandescent energy. It threw ephemeral flashes of light into the gloom, illuminating the sorcerer's dread visage as he closed on the stricken Astartes.

'I could kill you right now,' he said levelly. 'Snuff out the light in your eyes, and kill you, just like Kadai killed Ushorak.'

'You were offered redemption.' Tsu'gan struggled to fashion the retort, forcing his tongue into compliance through sheer willpower.

The sinister cast to Nihilan's face bled away and was replaced by indignation.

'Redemption was it? Spiritual castigation at the hands of Elysus, a few hours with his chirurgeon-interrogators, is that what was offered?' He laughed mirthlessly. 'That sadistic bastard would only have passed a guilty judgement.'

Stepping closer, Nihilan took on a sincere tone.

'Ushorak offered life. Power,' he breathed. 'Freedom from the shackles forcing us to serve the cattle of men, when we should be ruling them.'

The Dragon Warrior clenched his fist as he said it, so close now that Tsu'gan could smell his copper breath.

'You see, *brother*. We are not so dissimilar.'

'We are nothing alike, traitor,' snapped the Salamander, grimacing with the simple effort of speaking.

Nihilan stepped back, spreading his arms plaintively.

‘A bolter shot to the head to end my heresy then?’ His upturned lip showed his displeasure. ‘Or stripped of rank, a penitent brand in place of my service studs?’ He shook his head.

‘No... I think not. Perhaps I will brand you, though, *brother*.’ Nihilan showed the Salamander his palm and spread his fingers wide. ‘Would your resistance to corruption be stauncher than the human puppet, I wonder?’

Tsu’gan flinched before Nihilan’s approach, expecting at any moment for all the turpitude of Chaos to spew forth from his hand.

‘Cull your fear,’ Nihilan rasped, making a fist as he sneered.

‘I fear nothing,’ barked Tsu’gan.

Nihilan sniffed contemptuously. ‘You fear everything, Salamander.’

Tsu’gan felt his boots scraping against the floor as he was psychically impelled towards the edge of the parapet against his will.

‘Enough talk,’ he spat. ‘Cast me down. Break my body, if you must. The Chapter will hunt you, renegade, and there will be no chance of redemption for you this time.’

Nihilan regarded him as an adult would a simple child.

‘You still don’t understand, do you?’

Slowly, Tsu’gan’s body rotated so that he could see out onto the battle below.

Cultists fell in their droves, burned down by Shen’kar’s flamer, or eviscerated by Dak’ir’s chain-sword. His brothers fought tooth and nail, fending off the horde whilst his beloved captain fought for his life.

Kadai’s artificer armour was rent in over a dozen places, a daemon-thing that wore the flesh of the Speaker assailing him. Talons like long slashes of night came down in a rain of blows against the Salamanders captain’s defence, but he weathered it all, carving great arcs in riposte with his thunder hammer. Vulkan’s name was on his lips as the lightning cracked from the head of his master-forged weapon, searing the daemon’s borrowed flesh.

‘I was devoted to Ushorak, just as you are to your captain...’ Nihilan uttered in Tsu’gan’s ear as he watched the battle with the hell-spawn unfold.

Kadai smashed the daemon’s shoulder, shattering bone, and its arm fell limp.

‘...Kadai killed him,’ Nihilan continued. ‘He forced us to seek solace in the Eye. There we fled and there we stayed for decades...’

Ichor hissed from the tears in the daemon’s earthly form, its hold on reality slipping as Kadai punished it relentlessly with fist and hammer.

‘...Time moves differently in that realm. For us it felt like centuries had passed before we found a way out.’

A chorus of screams ripped from the distended throat of the daemon-thing, as Kadai crushed its skull finally and banished it back into the warp, the souls it had consumed begging for succour.

‘...It *changed* me. Opened my eyes. I see much now. A great destiny awaits you, Tsu’gan, but another overshadows it.’ Nihilan gave the faintest inclination of his head towards Dak’ir.

The Ignean was fighting valiantly, cutting down the last of the cultists and heading for Kadai.

‘Even now he rushes to your captain’s side...’ Nihilan said, insidiously, ‘Hoping to gain his favour.’

Tsu’gan knew he could not trust the foul tongue of a traitor, but the words spoken echoed his own long-held suspicions.

And so, unbeknownst to the Salamander, Nihilan *did* plant a seed. Not one born of daemonic essence. No, this came about through petty jealousy and ambition, through the very thing Tsu’gan had no aegis against – himself.

‘This cult,’ the Dragon Warrior pressed. ‘It is *nothing*. Stratos is nothing. Even this city is meaningless. It was always about *him*.’

Kadai was leaning heavily on his thunder hammer, weakened after vanquishing the daemon.

Nihilan smiled, scarred flesh creaking.

‘A captain for a captain...’

Realisation slid like a cold blade into Tsu’gan’s gut.

Too late he saw the armoured shadow closing in. The Dragon Warriors springing their trap at last. By leaving his post, he had let them infiltrate the Salamanders’ guard. The cultists were only ever a distraction; the true enemy was only now revealing itself.

He had been a fool.

‘No!’

Sheer force of will broke Nihilan’s psychic hold. Roaring the captain’s name, Tsu’gan leapt off the parapet.

Hoarse laughter followed him all the way down.

Dak’ir had almost reached Kadai when he saw the renegade hefting the multi-melta. Shouting a warning, he raced to his captain’s side. Kadai faced him, hearing the cry of Tsu’gan from above at the same time, and then followed Dak’ir’s agonised gaze...

An incandescent beam tore out of the darkness.

Kadai was struck, and his body immolated in an actinic flare.

An intense rush of heat smashed Dak'ir off his feet, backwash from the terrible melta blast. He smelled scorched flesh. A hot spike of agony tortured his senses. His face was burning, just like in the dream...

Dak'ir realised he was blacking out, his body shutting down as his sus-an membrane registered the gross trauma he had suffered. Dimly, as if buried alive and listening through layered earth, he heard the voice of Sergeant N'keln and his battle-brothers. Dak'ir managed to turn his head. The last thing he saw before unconsciousness claimed him was Tsu'gan slumped to his knees in front of the charred remains of their captain.

When Dak'ir awoke he was laid out in the Apothecarion of the *Vulkan's Wrath*. It was cold as a tomb inside the austere chamber, the gloom alleviated by the lit icons of the medical apparatus around him.

With waking came remembrance, and with remembrance, grief and despair. Kadai was dead.

'Welcome back, brother,' a soft voice said. Fugis was thin-faced and gaunter than ever, as he loomed over Dak'ir.

Emotional agony was compounded by physical pain and Dak'ir reached for his face as it started to burn anew.

Fugis seized his wrist before he could touch it.

'I wouldn't do that,' he warned the sergeant. 'Your skin was badly burned. You're healing, but the flesh is still very tender.'

Dak'ir lowered his arm as Fugis released him. The Apothecary injected a solution of drugs through an intravenous drip-feed to ease the pain.

Dak'ir relaxed as the suppressants went to work, catalysing his body's natural regenerative processes.

'What happened?' His throat felt raw and abrasive, and he croaked the words. Fugis stepped away from Dak'ir's medi-slab to check on the instrumentation. He limped as he walked, a temporary augmetic frame fitted over his leg to shore up the break he had sustained in his fall. Stubborn to the point of bloody-mindedness, nothing would prevent the Apothecary from doing his work.

'Stratos is saved,' he said simply, his back to the other Salamander. 'With the Speaker dead and our flamers restored, the insurgents fell quickly. The storms lifted an hour after we returned to Aereon Square,' he explained. 'Librarian Pyriel arrived twenty minutes later with the rest of the company to reinforce N'keln, who had taken the wall and was already en route to Aura Hieron...'

‘But too late to save Kadai,’ Dak’ir finished for him.

Fugis stopped what he was doing and gripped the instrumentation panel he’d been consulting for support.

‘Yes. Even his gene-seed was unsalvageable.’

A long grief-filled silence crept insidiously into the room before the Apothecary continued.

‘A ship, Stormbird-class, left the planet but we were too late to give chase.’

The rancour in Dak’ir’s voice could have scarred metal.

‘Nihilan and the other renegades escaped.’

‘To Vulkan knows where,’ Fugis replied, facing the patient. ‘Librarian Pyriel has command of Third Company, until Chapter Master Tu’Shan can appoint someone permanent.’

Dak’ir frowned.

‘We’re going home?’

‘Our tour of the Hadron Belt is over. We are returning to Prometheus to reinforce and lick our wounds.’

‘My face...’ Dak’ir ventured after a long silence, ‘I want to see it.’

‘Of course,’ said Fugis, and showed the Salamander a mirror.

Part of Dak’ir’s facial tissue had been seared away. Almost half of his onyx-black skin had been bleached near-white by the voracious heat of the melta flare. Though raw and angry, it looked almost human.

‘A reaction to the intense radiation,’ Fugis explained. ‘The damage has resulted in minor cellular regression, reverting to a form prior to the genetic ebonisation of your skin when you became an Astartes. I cannot say for certain yet, but it shows no sign of immediate regeneration.’

Dak’ir stared, lost in his own reflection and the semblance of humanness there. Fugis arrested the Salamander’s reverie.

‘I’ll leave you in peace, such as it is,’ he said, taking away the mirror. ‘You are stable and there’s nothing more I can do at this point. I’ll return in a few hours. Your body needs time to heal, before you can fight again. Rest,’ the Apothecary told him. ‘I expect you to be here upon my return.’

The Apothecary left, hobbling off to some other part of the ship. But as the metal door slid shut with a susurrus of escaping pressure, Dak’ir knew he was not alone.

‘Tsu’gan?’

He could feel his battle-brother’s presence even before he saw him emerge from the shadows.

‘Brother,’ Dak’ir croaked warmly, recalling the moment of empathy between them as they’d fought together in the temple.

The warmth seeped away, as a cold wind steals heat from a fire, when Dak’ir saw Tsu’gan’s dark expression.

‘You are unfit to be an Astartes,’ he said levelly. ‘Kadai’s death is on your hands, Ignean. Had you not sent me after the renegade, had you been swift enough to react to the danger in our midst, we would not have lost our captain.’ Tsu’gan’s burning gaze was as chill as ice. ‘I shall not forget it.’

Stunned, Dak’ir was unable to reply before Tsu’gan turned his back on him and left the Apothecarion.

Anguish filled his heart and soul as Dak’ir wrestled with the terrible accusations of his brother, before exhaustion took him and he fell into a deep and fitful sleep.

For the first time in over forty years, the dream had changed...

Sitting in the troop compartment of the Stormbird, Nihilan turned the device stolen from the vault in the depths of Cirrion over and over in his gauntlet. His fellow Dragon Warriors surrounded him: the giant Ramlek, breathing tiny goutts of ash and cinder from his mouth grille as he tried to calm his perpetual anger; Ghor’gan, his scaled skin shedding after he’d removed his battle-helm, cradling his multi-melta like a favoured pet; Nor’hak, fastidiously stripping and reassembling his weapons; and Erkine his pilot, the other renegade left behind to watch the Stormbird, forearm bone-blades carefully sheathed within the confines of his power armour as he steered the vessel to its final destination.

The Dragon Warriors had risked much to retrieve the device, even going as far as to establish the elaborate distraction of the uprising to cloak their movements. Kadai’s death as part of that subterfuge had been a particularly satisfying, but unexpected, boon for Nihilan.

The Stormbird had been primed and ready before the trap in Aura Hieron was sprung. With eager swathes of suicidal cultists to ensure their escape, the renegades had fled swiftly, leaving the atmosphere of Stratos behind them as the engines of their extant craft roared.

‘How little do they realise...’ Nihilan rasped, examining every facet of the gilt object in his palm. Such an innocuous piece of arcana; within its twelve pentagonal faces, along the geodesic lines of esoteric script that wreathed its dodecahedral surface, there was the means to unlock secrets. It was the very purpose of the *decyphrex*, to reveal that which was hidden. For Nihilan that

enigma existed in the scrolls of Kelock, ancient parchments he and Ushorak had taken over forty years ago from Kelock's tomb on Moribar. Kelock was a technocrat, and a misunderstood genius. He created something, a weapon, far beyond what was capable with the crippled science of the current decaying age. Nihilan meant to replicate his work.

Over a thousand years within the Eye of Terror, patiently plotting revenge, and now he finally was closing on the means to destroy his enemies.

'Approaching the *Hell-stalker*,' the sepulchral voice of Erkiner returned over the vox.

Nihilan engaged the grav-harness. As it crept over his armoured shoulders, securing him for landing, he peered out of the Stormbird's vision slit. There across a becalmed and cobalt sea, a vessel of molten-red lay anchored. It was an old ship with old wounds, and older ghosts. The prow was a serrated blade, ripping a hole in the void. Cannons arrayed its flanks, gunmetal grey and powder-blackened. Dozens of towers and antennae reached up like crooked fingers.

Hell-stalker had entered the Eye a mere battle-barge and had come out something else entirely. It was Nihilan's ship and aboard it his warriors awaited him – renegades, mercenaries and defectors; pirates, raiders and reavers. There they gathered to heed of his victory and the slow realisation of their ambition – the total and utter destruction of Nocturne, and with it the death of the Salamanders.



FIREBORN

Though it was forbidden, Evangeline ran through the Chapel of Divine Sanctuary.

She ran as if the hounds of Chaos were behind her.

Votive candles lit the way through one of the transepts of remembrance, guttering faintly as she swept by. Statues of martyred saints glared at her disapprovingly from shaded alcoves. As she passed through the holy narthex, Evangeline was trying to piece together what she'd seen. Her sandalled feet rapping on the cold convent floor, louder than incendiary blasts in the silence, muddled her thoughts.

Blood.

She'd seen blood, like red rain coming from the sky.

All shall bleed, the voices had said. Skulls for the throne of—

The last part made her dizzy. She smelled oil, tasted iron and heard the harsh *clank* of machinery though the convent was quiet as the void.

In the Devotional Gallery, she found Father Lumeon.

'My child, what in the Emperor's name is wrong?'

The breathless specimen, a waif of a girl in pale unadorned robes, could only pant.

Father Lumeon, officious in his priestly vestments, drifted from behind his blackwood desk. He'd been labouring over parchments and data-slates, a mechanised lexicanum savant scribing his dictations with a neuro-quill. *Sublimation of native belief cultures into the auspices of the Imperial Creed* – it was heavy work, gratefully postponed, even for a devoted man like Father Lumeon. Dismissing a pair of cyborganic cherubs who had descended on angelic wings to investigate the sudden fuss, he came before Evangeline and gently lifted her chin.

'Be at peace...'

Evangeline's frenzy lessened to an insistent ache.

‘And tell me what the matter is.’

The Sister Hospitaller had tears in her eyes and a tremor in her body.

An answer wasn’t forthcoming.

‘Come with me.’ Father Lumeon led her slowly to an ornate balcony which looked out over all of Sepulchre IV.

Chapels and cathedra stretched into the distance, castellated bell towers touched the heavens, pilgrims marched over chasm-spanning ornate bridges, fluttering cherub-servitors flocked the skies. Armies of the righteous, adepts of the Ecclesiarchy and its most zealous defenders populated this shrine world. The sight of it gladdened Father Lumeon whenever he beheld it.

Sister Evangeline’s reaction was not as beatific. She wept and shook and looked away, pointing to the sky.

When Father Lumeon followed her gesture he noticed Sepulchre’s sun. It was red, where once it had been yellow. It was red and drenched the pale stone of the cathedrals so they looked as if they’d been fashioned from incarnadine bone.

‘What did you see?’ He seized Evangeline by the shoulder. He was hurting her and knew it. ‘Tell me now!’

Their eyes met, Evangeline’s full of fear and foreboding; Father Lumeon’s red-ringed and fervent.

What had she seen in the dark of the abyss? Why was the sky bleeding?

She confessed everything.

Pinching her under the arm to keep her close, Father Lumeon hurried Evangeline through the quiet corridors of the convent-bastion. Their passage was met by furtive glances from the other Sister Hospitallers of the Order of the Inner Sanctum. Some carried votive candles or pungent censer burners. They kept their eyes low but were obviously dismayed that one of their Order, even a lowly novitiate, was being led off so urgently. Lumeon bustled past them, scarcely stopping as he activated gilded blast doors and mechanised arch-gates. Artefact chambers, stasis-locked reliquary vaults, beautifully illuminated vaulted ceilings and finely sculptured columns went by in a blur of insignificance. Father Lumeon ignored them all.

He said nothing, only frowned with the furrowed expression of a man who’d asked and received an answer he wished to return. He half-glanced at Evangeline. Her face was grey as ash.

Within the Order, it was unprecedented.

Slowly the religious austerity of the convent-bastion gave way to military

functionality. Slab-like walls of gunmetal grey rose around them like bulkheads. Steam-stamped barrack markings and warning chevrons provided direction. The distant ring of combat training became a muffled refrain to their softer footfalls.

Evangeline had only ever roamed in the Chapel of Divine Sanctuary and its annexes that included her dormitory. She had never been to this part of the sprawling convent-bastion. It was cold and harsh. Percussive weapons fire from some distant armoury hurt her ears. The clash of blades sent unpleasant jolts down her spine.

Father Lumeon sensed her reluctance to proceed and had to march Evangeline the rest of the way. At the end of a long, stark corridor their journey ended. Before them, a single figure stood silhouetted in the light from overhead lumen-globes.

She had the cut and form of a Crusader. Her robes were red to resemble the blood of martyrs running in her veins. Her silver helm occluded her face completely, though her stance suggested it was severe beneath the mailed mask. One gauntleted fist gripped a vast Crusader shield almost the size of her entire body. Only with the augmented strength from her silver armour, which was also swathed with purity seals, devotional chains and holy parchments, could she wield it. The same was true of the Crusader sword in her other hand. Its blade was etched with tiny inscriptions and crackled with energy from an unseen source.

Father Lumeon found it levelled at him when he approached her.

He held up the aquila icon, suspended around his neck by a string of beads. Each one had been fashioned from a saint's knuckle bone. It was a potent symbol and the staff of his office.

'In the Emperor's name, I must speak with Canoness Ignacia immediately. It is a dire matter.'

The slightest inclination of the formidable Crusader's head suggested she regarded Evangeline cowering beside Father Lumeon. The warrior didn't move and for a moment the venerable priest feared she might strike them both down.

At a silent command, the blast doors behind the Crusader broke open as if cracked by a bolt of invisible lightning. Lowering her sword, she backed off into the escaping pressure mist.

Wiping his brow with his sleeve, already knowing there'd be more grey in his temples come the morning, Father Lumeon started to drag Evangeline through after him.

The scream of warning klaxons brought them both to an abrupt halt.

The convent-bastion was on sudden alert.

‘It’s already here...’ he breathed.

Heavy-booted feet were hammering down the corridor towards them.

Canoness Ignacia was marshalling her troops.

Sepulchre IV was under attack.

A mass evacuation was under way. Fleets of ships – lighters, ark-cruisers, speeders, freight-haulers, clippers and gunships – were deserting Sepulchre IV in their droves, like insects fleeing a forest fire. On the ground, those without vessels to ferry them to the starships anchored in low orbit around the planet had to run. Masses of people clogged the roads. Some clung desperately to one another for succour, others screamed for deliverance. The few that had mechanised walkers or personal half-tracks were soon mired in the throng. Horns blared frantically like the wailing of the already damned.

‘Pandemonium reigns.’ Tsu’gan was unable to keep the sneer from his face. It was black. Not dark-skinned but *really* black, like onyx, and just as hard. The red spike of beard on his chin jutted like an accusing finger as he stared through one of the *Implacable’s* vision slits.

‘They want to live.’ Praetor’s deep voice was matter-of-fact, but dominated over the Thunderhawk gunship’s engine noise. ‘It’s not so weak to cherish your own life,’ he added, guessing what the other Space Marine was thinking.

Tsu’gan turned – his heavy Terminator armour whirred and clanked as the hidden servos went to work shifting his bulk – and his red eyes blazed in the gloomy hold. He found the cumbersome suit a challenge, but relished the power it gave him. Tsu’gan valued strength above all else.

He appraised the rest of his squad in a glance.

Ankar and Kai’ru were as still as sentinels, their grav-harnesses locked and widened to accommodate their bulk.

Gathimu, the ‘spear’, was anointing his heavy flamer with ash. He drew a wide slash with his armoured finger then followed it with a drake’s head. It was Kalimar, the creature he’d slain below Mount Deathfire and whose flesh he now wore as a mantle on his left pauldron. So focused, so honed was Gathimu.

Praetor was his sergeant, a veteran of over a hundred campaigns, a hero of the Chapter. Apart from Tsu’gan, he was the only one yet to don his helmet. Praetor’s face and scalp were bald, polished to mirror sheen by his brander-priest. The scars upon his cheek and the three platinum service studs above his left brow were marks of honour and service. His Terminator armour was more

ornate than Tsu'gan's. Fashioned by a master artificer, it bore the heraldic devices of dragon heads and gilded laurels. It came with a cape of salamander hide that went almost down to the floor.

Praetor glowered.

'To your harness, brother. It's not much farther.'

Tsu'gan obeyed, still finding the unfamiliar sensation of walking in Tactical Dreadnought Armour unsettling. Once he was mag-locked and secured by thick metal bracers, he relaxed.

These men, these super-men, were his brothers. Not by blood but by battle. Born in Vulkan's forge, their bond was stronger than adamantium. They were Salamanders, Fire-born. No, they were more than that. They were the Chapter's First Company, to which their armour and its proud iconography testified, their Firedrakes.

As Praetor leaned forwards to look through one of the vision slits, the green of his Terminator suit caught a shaft of light from outside and turned a lurid purple.

'The sky is red as blood.'

'Yet we defy it, going against the tide.' Gathimu had finished his rituals and looked over at Tsu'gan through the cold lenses of his battle-helm. Ornate drakes' teeth gave the helm a feral snarl. 'Flex your muscles, cycle through your pre-battle physical routines. It will help.'

'I am ready,' Tsu'gan snapped, a little too quickly.

'You are untempered.' Gathimu's even tone suggested he meant no offence.

Tsu'gan bit back a reply. He glared through the vision slit and saw again the red sky of the shrine world. Fat clouds gorged on blood smashed against the gunship's hull, painting it crimson and riming its edges with a visceral gum. Escaping ships sped past them too, headed away from the battle towards the hopeful salvation in low orbit.

A blockade of enemy starships was already forming around the planet. They planned to slaughter everyone on this world, a glorious sacrifice to their violent potentate. Soon, no one would be getting off alive. It leant the Salamanders' mission a certain... *urgency* that Tsu'gan felt more acutely as he looked outside.

Fire wreathed the horizon, casting a ruddy glow on the ruins of chapels and cathedra. Flaming bell towers had crumpled, like broken fingers reaching for the earth. Collapsed bridges were clogged with the dead and the sky blossomed with explosions from faraway aerial battles.

Tsu'gan clenched his power fist. The servos whined within and he thought of the distant war he would not be part of. He'd seen enough. Eyes back in the

hold, he saw his battle-brothers felt his frustration too.

The Red Rage had come to Sepulchre IV, and its blood-lust was not easily sated.

Roaring afterburners announced their arrival at the docking pad. Landing stanchions extended quickly as the *Implacable* touched down. The Salamanders disembarked from the rear hatch, green-armoured giants ploughing through the pneumatic pressure cloud.

An Ecclesiarchy representative met them with two of her fellow Battle Sisters. Backwash from the Thunderhawk's half-powered down engines tossed her white hair, revealing a jagged scar that made her appear more severe.

Though they came from the Order of the Ardent Veil, these warrior-fanatics looked anything but peaceful. Their white power armour was studded with silver spikes, concomitant bodices drawn tight over their taut muscles. They were akin to the suits worn by the Firedrakes' battle and reserve company brothers, only slighter but still potent. Holy signifiers – purity seals, rosarius beads and icons of the Emperor's aquila – bedecked the armour, defining the Battle Sisters' purpose and zealous determination. They held bolters low-slung at their hips. The sister superior with the white hair also carried a flanged power mace. Her helmet, mag-locked to her belt, was silver. Whatever force of Chaos had come upon Sepulchre IV must have been dire that these soldiers of faith could not defeat it.

Praetor bowed his head before the Battle Sisters to show his respect. It had not been easy for them or the Ecclesiarchy to ask for help. The veteran sergeant had no wish to make it any more difficult.

The white-haired superior nodded then turned her back on the Salamanders, leading them away from the docking pad towards a thick perimeter wall crowned by razor-wire. Two watchtowers with mounted heavy bolters overlooked a reinforced gate on either side, the docking pad's only access point. Hard-looking female faces regarded the strangers from within, their mood unreadable.

The docking pad doubled as a barracks and chapel, too. Tsu'gan noticed much of its religious statuary had been ripped down and replaced by ablative armour, sandbags and rockcrete barricades. Anything of significance to the faith of the Order was gone, leaving a blank echo on a wall or a denuded alcove. The fleeing ships transported not only people but Ecclesiastical artefacts too.

'I've had warmer welcome on Fenris.' Kai'ru kept his voice low.

A glare from Praetor silenced him, before they were led towards the gate.

Tsu'gan had to agree with his battle-brother. A cold wind was blowing through

the Order of the Ardent Veil and the white of their battle sisters' armour reminded him of frost. Salamanders fought with a core of fire in their breast; these warrior-maidens harboured a spike of ice.

Once past the docking pad, Praetor chose to enlighten his brothers over a closed comm-channel.

++Use the senses our father gave you. The Order is mute. They cannot acknowledge you even if they wished to.++

Kai'ru found suddenly that he was similarly afflicted.

'Deeds not words are the speech of angels.' Gathimu was quoting from some philosophical treatise he'd read.

Any reply was forestalled as a pair of Immolator battle tanks reversed from the gate, allowing the Salamanders through. Their turret-mounted inferno cannons swivelled as they moved, constantly trained on the gate. One trigger pull from the gunners would engulf the entranceway in a conflagration of burning promethium.

With the churn of hidden gears, the gate cracked and slid open. As they had seen from the air, the carnage of burned-out tanks and twisted corpses lay beyond it. Sepulchre IV was a place of ruins and shades, of scorched earth and blood-tainted air. Some of the fires still flickered in the hollow shells of the broken basilica.

Several Battle Sisters flanked the gate, bolters aimed into the killing ground before them.

The sister superior looked expectantly at Praetor. She wanted to seal the compound again quickly.

Tsu'gan detected no enemies nearby. He scowled behind his battle-helm at what he saw as fear.

Fear is the province of the weak.

'Ave Imperator,' he heard Praetor say to the Battle Sister.

She slammed her gauntleted fist against her pauldron in salute as the Salamanders sergeant led his Firedrakes out.

Deeds not words.

Once outside, the gate ground shut behind them. The gaze of the Battle Sisters in the towers was still upon them, though. Tsu'gan felt their heavy bolter sights like an itch at the back of his neck.

Gathimu released a spit of promethium from his heavy flamer to test the igniter on the nozzle, interrupting Tsu'gan's thoughts. 'This place reeks of death.'

Tsu'gan estimated over a thousand dead bodies strewn throughout the perimeter. 'The battle moved elsewhere?'

'To the convent-bastion.' Praetor had donned his battle helm and was consulting a data feed running across his left lens. 'Our destination.' Topographical and geographical schemata spooled across his iris at rapid speed. Praetor's oculobe implant absorbed the information in a single beat, storing it in his eidetic memory for later use. He'd locked in the route to the convent-bastion and was mission ready. He led them to a patch of open ground.

'How many did they lose trying to get in?' Ankar took his place in a ritual circle with the others.

Praetor paused to blink the relevant data onto his inner helm lens. 'Nearly a quarter of their garr-ison – over a thousand battle sisters. Though I'd suggest that's a conservative estimate.'

'And within, defending the bastion?'

'Celestians, mainly. They may have a few hundred troops inside. There are more beyond its walls. Holding firm... for now.'

'Such a waste of lives,' said Kai'ru. 'No wonder they're so aggrieved.'

Tsu'gan's servos protested as he moved towards Praetor, his armour as belligerent as his mood. 'They're fools. Mute or not, they should've summoned us sooner.'

Gathimu was standing next to him. 'Would your pride have allowed that, brother? Asking for help?'

'We need none, we are Adeptus Astartes.' He stamped heavily into position beside his sergeant. His uneven gait was obvious, especially to Gathimu.

'Your anger weighs you down more than that armour ever could. Let go of it.'

It's not anger, thought Tsu'gan. It's hate.

And it went deep, into his flesh where he'd tried to have the brander-priest's iron remove it. But no burning, however invasive, could go far enough. Not when the hate and anger were turned inwards...

Behind them, the burst of engine noise signalled the *Implacable's* take-off from the docking pad. The gunship had brought them as close as it could without risking being downed by enemy flak. Several Ecclesiarchy craft littered the killing field outside the fortified compound, testament to the wisdom of a foot approach. The rapid deployment of the Terminators to Sepulchre IV prevented any other kind of insertion.

'And so we are alone.' Kai'ru lifted his head to watch the slowly vanishing outline of the Thunder-hawk. Headed for Sepulchre IV's spaceport, it would aid

the evacuation effort until summoned again by Praetor.

Gathimu was philosophical. 'In the end brother, we are always alone.'

Praetor looked to him now the Salamanders had formed the ritual circle.

'Ignite the flame.'

A burst from Gathimu's heavy flamer lit a column of fire in the wasteland, like a beacon torch.

'Vulkan's fire beats in my breast,' Praetor intoned.

'With it I shall smite the foes of the Emperor,' they concluded as one then each thrust their fists into the blaze, allowing their armoured fingers to blacken at the tips before withdrawing them.

'We are born in fire,' the sergeant continued, 'so do we wage war with it clenched in our mailed fist.'

'Unto the anvil!' bellowed the Terminators.

Praetor unslung his thunder hammer and storm shield. 'Firedrakes! In Vulkan's name!'

The ritual circle broke apart and the Salamanders fell into combat-march formation, Praetor at the front and the others forming a two by two square behind him.

Tsu'gan's lens display showed ten kilometres to the convent-bastion. The land between them and it was fiercely contested by Ecclesiarchy and enemy troops. The war was close by. There was no way could they reach their destination without encountering it.

It would be a long walk.

Sister Evangeline prayed. She was in one of the convent-bastion's sanctums kneeling before an icon of her Order's patron, the martyred Sister Uthraxese. Silver-armoured Celestians surrounded her with ready bolters. Despite their experience and status, the elite Battle Sisters looked edgy.

Father Lumeon was conversing with Canoness Ignacia at the back of the small chamber. The Celestians were Ignacia's personal guard. She also wore silver armour but of a more ornate design. An antique power sword was sheathed at her hip, next to her battle-helm. Oil censers and a book of scripture hung from her belt by a pearled rosarius string, whilst the scars of battle mapped the Canoness's face like a continent of past glories.

Father Lumeon looked calm but the way he worried at his aquila betrayed his concern. 'We could hide.'

Ignacia gave him narrowed eyes.

‘In the Chapel of Divine Sanctuary,’ the priest added.

The Canoness shook her head. The notion of hiding was anathema to her. She wanted to wait. Perhaps with reinforcements from the Space Marines they could break through to the gunships.

In a bout of frustration, Father Lumeon pointed to where Evangeline was praying before the icon. There was a finger bone of the great martyr herself within its coffin-like confines. Some, the particularly devout, suggested some spirit essence still existed within the calcified remains.

‘The relic must be taken from this place. It cannot fall to the enemy. Even now they seek it!’

Ignacia was about to admonish him, when he held up his hand contritely. ‘Our forces dwindle by the minute. Soon there’ll be none left and the Ruinous Powers will not stall long at our barred gates. The Adeptus Astartes are on the way, canoness.’

She scowled at this, ever prideful.

‘If we hide, it might give us more time. We might—’

The hard *clang* of Ignacia slamming her fist against the wall stopped Father Lumeon mid-plea. Evidently, signing would not convey her meaning accurately enough.

Evangeline didn’t start at the interruption, though it was loud enough. She stayed calm, channelling an inner peace as taught by the sister superior of the Hospitaller.

Anger serves only to promote further anger. Guidance is only found when the mind is still. Serenity breeds truth.

Before the Canoness could go further, a pair of Crusaders from the convent-bastion’s outer wall arrived at the sanctum’s force-shielded doorway.

Both had removed their helmets in the presence of their holy mistress. There was news from the battlefield. From their expressions, it wasn’t good.

The chains tightened around the sorcerer’s torso, forcing him awake. The iron links burned white-hot and sent needles of agony across his bare flesh where his power armour had been removed. Were it not for his enhanced constitution, he’d be dead.

Dreghgor knew that, just as he knew how far he could push his captive. The warlord of the Red Rage was a tyrant and a butcher but he was also wise. Khorne loathed magic, as did he. The collar of black iron around Dreghgor’s neck was inimical to sorcery, but he was not beyond using sorcerers as a tool to

further his own ends.

The bitch-maidens of the False Emperor held his warrior legions at bay. No matter how many he threw against their defences, the spiteful whores would not break. Dreghgor knew what lay within their disgusting temple; the sorcerer had scryed its presence after the knives had gone in. Khorne wanted it. Dreghgor would not fail his master, who had seen fit to grant him an armada of ships to bring forth a bloody reign upon the sub-sector. Seven worlds already burned in the wake of his red crusade. He only needed one more... The Eye of the Gods was upon him. He felt it like razorblades under his changed skin.

From the burned-out shell of a shrine, Hagtah Dreghgor had fashioned an arena. The remains of its millennia-old reliquaries were scattered about the bloodied floor like carrion bones. Priceless relic-statues lay broken and beheaded on a carpet of stained-glass fragments. The blood of innocents anointed the shrine's walls from where they hung impaled on hell-barbs. A Chaos star delineated the battlefield with a freshly flensed skull at each of its eight points.

Two of Dreghgor's champions clashed within it, chainblade to chainblade. They wore sanguine power armour, chased with brass. Reinforced ribbing between the armour's plates was as black as sackcloth, and each donned a skull-faced battle-helm in honour of their bloody god.

Dreghgor's own helm was fashioned into the visage of a snarling hound, a dark iron echo of one of his master's many forms, and had a single brass horn jutting from its left temple. His armour, scarred from numerous battles, was riddled with studs and barbs. Chains bearing eight skulls from his finest kills hung from plate to plate. He'd scrimshawed marks to represent the lesser 'achievements'. The tallies resembled little more than deranged scratches, there were so many of them. Rib bones were engineered into his vambraces. Alien teeth turned his gauntlets into spiked fists.

Slayer Lord, Ender of Lives – just two of Dreghgor's well-earned honorifics.

The warlord watched his champions intently from a pile of ruined stone. Something was still twitching beneath him, mewling for a merciful death. He paid it no heed. Let the weak suffer. While the blood flows, Khorne's will be done.

His warriors fought fiercely, hacking at each other with abandon. Every drop of spilled blood hissed as it touched the unholy circle. Dreghgor saw dark energy coursing through the lines he had carved in the shattered flagstones.

With a grunt, one of the champions severed the head of the other and roared. Though his armour was cut and his body bleeding from countless wounds, the

warrior exulted in triumph.

Dreghgor smiled beneath his helm. Khorne would be satisfied. The bloodletting had been prodigious. He turned his gaze upon the shackled sorcerer, who looked on meekly from the opposite end of the arena, caged in an iron gibbet.

The warlord's eyes burned like balefires, and he nodded.

As the sorcerer began to incant, blood from his ruptured organs flecked the inside of the cage. The victorious champion clutched his chest and went down on one knee.

Vokrhan was a mighty warrior; he would make a strong vessel.

Dark tendrils, like strands of hyperactive electricity, crackled around the circle. When the champion tried to rise, a black bolt felled him. He tried again, and this time the dark energy was more potent. Vokrhan's roar of triumph had turned into a wail of agony. Despite all of his strength and fortitude, he collapsed and shook.

'Take his flesh,' Dreghgor uttered like a curse. 'Bind it to the engine.'

From below Dreghgor's 'throne' of sundered stone, a suit of dark mechanical armour was wheeled forth by Kharthak the Blood-wrought.

By now the champion's body was ravaged by daemon-change. Something dark and abyssal had crept into his soul. The essence of the thing manifested in his tortured and mutated flesh. Claws and monstrous faces stretched it as they fought for release, whilst screams heralded every agonised jerk of Vokrhan's body.

Kharthak released the ribcage of the engine, which sprang open like a fanged maw. Chains spilled from within like hungry tentacles, driven by a smoke-spewing, oil-spattering device on the back of the armour that also colonised its joints and limbs.

Hooks fashioned at the end of the chains found purchase in the terrified meat-puppet and dragged Vokrhan thrashing into the engine's iron embrace.

After the ribcage slammed shut with a hard *bang*, the screaming stopped. A dull glow smouldered in the eyes of the engine's banded war-helm. Its studded torso, made to resemble bone, heaved as if with a first breath.

Dreghgor leapt from his rocky vantage point and landed in front of it, stone splintering beneath him.

Dominance had always been one of the warlord's chief credos.

'Who is your master?'

With a creak of shifting iron, the daemon-engine went down on one knee in

front of the warlord and lowered its head.

Dreghgor smiled... then struck it, hard across the temple. Even bowed, the daemon-engine was a head taller than the warlord, but his blow was fearsome enough to send it reeling to its feet and back a step.

Its eyes flared with red-hate and an array of weapons – sharp, spiked and bladed things, festooned with chains and dripping oil – snapped from its arms, greedy for blood. Dreghgor fed it his rage and his fury, it boiled within him like a tempest. He sensed the thing that had hollowed out his champion's corpse for its own, slaved to the engine. It struggled against its bonds. Let slip, it would devour him and all of his warriors.

Dreghgor liked that. The daemon-engine would cause such carnage. His smile became a snarl.

'Slay our enemies. Bleed them. Bring me what I seek.'

The streets of Sepulchre IV were drowning in blood. Ecclesiarchy troops lay tangled in the rubble like broken alabaster dolls. Survivors fell back by degrees, sloshing through vital fluids and avoiding the corpses choking up the once proud avenues.

Despite their defiance, the shrine world's defenders were wilting before the Chaos battalions. The Battle Sisters were losing. Several combat squads were trying to hold their ground in Unity Square of Monast, Sepulchre's capital. All other cities had been evacuated or overrun. Here in Monast, the Red Rage fell hardest. Here in Monast they bracketed the defenders' escape routes, destroyed the bridges before reinforcements could be brought in and ensured dominance of the blood-soaked skies. Here in Monast they sought something, a relic to satisfy their warmongering god. The Red Rage surrounded the convent-bastion but, as of yet, hadn't broken through.

But time, Tsu'gan was acutely aware, was running out.

'Enhance magnification.'

The image resolved itself in his occulobe.

A bare-headed Battle Sister was holding her power sword aloft, rallying the troops, when she took a round to the neck. She fell seconds later as the mass-reactive shell exploded, staining her skull-white armour crimson.

Sustained bolter fire met her demise.

Tsu'gan was reluctantly impressed. The Battle Sisters had adopted a long firing line and kept it steady in spite of casualties. He watched another sister superior step into the dead one's place and try to anchor the defenders.

No war cries, nor screams. It was... *unnerving*. At first, Tsu'gan thought it was pique at having to call on the Adeptus Astartes to retrieve their holy artefact. Now, he wasn't so sure. The Battle Sisters were almost automatons.

A few shattered rockcrete barricades and a pair of half-destroyed tanks stood between them and the enemy. Red Rage Traitor Marines wielding boltguns and chainblades, their power armour baptised in arterial blood, came at them in a mob. Cultists, those they had brought upon their graven ships and desperate converts, former natives now driven insane by the carnage, ranged ahead of them like pack dogs.

Tsu'gan sneered contemptuously.

Weak.

++*Your orders, brother-sergeant?*++ Ankar's voice came across the comm-link.

The Firedrakes were a hundred metres or so from the battle-site, having penetrated Unity Square and approached down its flank. They could avoid this fight, continue on to the convent-bastion and the mission.

Praetor ignited his thunder hammer. Energy crackled along the head and haft, stirring the weapon's machine-spirit.

'Combat formation.'

Tsu'gan rejoiced. Battle at last!

As the Firedrakes advanced, a missile scudded overhead and tore apart one of the immobilised tanks. It detonated the fuel reserves, slinging the warrior-maiden who'd been firing its turret-mounted heavy bolter to the ground where she lay bleeding.

Flamers were brought up, and bathed the onrushing Red Rage with super-heated promethium. The cultists died immediately, like pathetic candles withered by a blow-torch. The Traitor Marines were not so easily felled. One collapsed to a knee, shimmering in the heat haze, his armour wreathed by fire, but the others drove through it. Emerging from the smoke, they looked like demons born from the fiery hells of the warp. Tendrils of licking flame trailed off their battle-plate.

Chainblades screeching for blood, the Red Rage were about to tear into the Battle Sisters when a second flamer blast smashed into them from the flank, spilling bodies unprepared to meet it.

'Into the fires of battle!' Praetor thundered towards the Traitor Marines like an armoured bull.

Tsu'gan was behind him. He felt the resonance of his heavy footfalls through his armour, and those of Kai'ru and Ankar to either side. Gathimu was at the

rear, slow enough to scorch the Red Rage with his heavy flamer. Tsu'gan felt him too, saw his ident-rune on the grainy tac-display imposed on his helmet lens.

Advance three steps – fire. Advance three steps – fire.

Gathimu was unfaltering.

Running in Terminator armour was difficult, but not impossible. Unused to the manoeuvre, Tsu'gan found his enhanced physiology stretched but he soon compensated. His breath sounded harsh and reverberant inside his helmet. The enemy were getting closer through the yellow-orange optic lenses.

A spray of blood cascaded from the shattered skull of a Traitor Marine as Praetor connected with his thunder hammer. A second red slash tore from the warrior's stomach as the Salamanders sergeant used his storm shield to open him up.

Tsu'gan triggered his storm bolter, the hard *crash-bang* staccato that followed filling his heart with righteous anger.

'In Vulkan's name! Glory to Prometheus!' He strafed a fresh line of cultists rushing to intercept the Salamanders.

The Terminators barrelled through them like they were nothing. One crumpled against Ankar's armoured bulk. Another disappeared in a visceral mist, torn apart by Kai'ru's chainfist.

Ahead of them, the Battle Sisters were rallying. But further enemy forces were coming, Havoc squads armed with heavy weapons and a Rhino APC carrying another battle squad. A wall of fire whickered from their ranks. It *pinged* off the invulnerable Terminators but scythed into the Battle Sisters brutally. Bodies were spun and tossed by the fusillade. They fell in silence despite their wounds.

A trio of Ecclesiarchy tanks rolled up the street to meet the enemy's secondary force, two Battle Sisters squads running alongside them. Unity Square was packed with troops. A short range fire-fight had erupted across a small patch of open ground. Frantic melta beams stabbed across the debris, generators screaming. Heavy bolters added a grunting chorus to the orchestra of war.

The skirmish was escalating.

In the middle of the storm, the Firedrakes met the enemy proper.

Cracking ceramite, the sound of sundered power armour, accompanied Tsu'gan's bludgeoning of one of the Traitor Marines. Another came in his wake, firing his combi-bolter point blank into the Salamander's torso. Tiny insect-like stings were no more than an annoyance.

Tsu'gan's power fist crushed him into paste.

Buoyed by the sudden appearance of heavily armoured reinforcements, the

Battle Sisters advanced beyond their barricades to link up with the Space Marines. Gathimu had reached his battle-brothers too, and sent a plume of burning promethium into the Chaos Rhino. Destroyed tracks and a badly scorched hull brought the vehicle to a skidding halt.

Keeping up the pressure, Gathimu engulfed the stricken Rhino. Smoke-shrouded figures stumbled from its hatches, before the hold ignited and blew out the rear door in a deep *foom* of exploding incendiary.

The muzzle-flare from Tsu'gan's storm bolter lit up his armour in a stark glow. Already ablaze, the Traitor Marines from inside the vehicle bucked and spasmed against the bolt storm. Three survived, staggered by shell impacts but unbowed in their durable power armour.

Praetor's thunder hammer showed no such mercy as he waded in and crushed them.

Emboldened, the Battle Sisters advanced ahead of the more cumbersome Terminators to establish a fresh strongpoint beyond Unity Square. Further squads were moving in from the avenues of broken temples and collapsed spires. Rubble provided a natural cordon in which to funnel the Chaos renegades.

Tsu'gan noticed the sister superior he'd seen earlier give a curt nod of thanks to his sergeant before pressing on.

Praetor's voice rumbled over the comm-link a moment later.

++Fire-born, converge on my position.++

A series of affirmation runes flashed up on Tsu'gan's helmet lens as the squad tightened its coherency.

++Do we advance?++ Kai'ru sounded eager for more.

He wasn't alone. Tsu'gan was getting ready to head after their allies when Praetor spoke again.

++Hold position.++

++Brother-sergeant--++

Gathimu cut Tsu'gan off before he made a mistake he'd regret.

'Be patient, brother. This isn't over yet.'

Tsu'gan followed his eye-line. A pair of Immolator battle tanks spearheaded the Ecclesiarchy counter-assault. Their inferno cannons were short-ranged but deadly. Shooting gouts of intense fire ahead of them, they laid a path for the warrior-maidens behind. Some rode inside the Rhino APC that followed. Others hung on to its outer rails, holding their bolters one-handed.

Tsu'gan's eyes narrowed. His oculobe filtered out smoke graining and sharpened the image despite the distance and the heat haze. Something was

coming, heralded by a squall of blood-crazed cultists. What was left of the Havocs and the few Traitor Marines from the battle squads retreated to consolidate with it.

++Massive heat signature, brother-sergeant.++ Gathimu was calm, the blind sword of utter stillness to Tsu'gan's font of reckless anger.

++I read++

Threat icons in Tsu'gan's helmet array flashed insistently.

++Looks like some sort of machine. Dreadnought?++

Tsu'gan locked onto it with his targeter. His tac-display spooled down the metres rapidly.

It was speeding up, and no Dreadnought.

Ankar cranked fresh rounds into his storm bolter. *++An Adeptus Astartes?++*

A dense but distant *thunk* of metal against metal arrested Praetor's reply. A dark shape was crashing out of the sky towards the Firedrakes. It took Tsu'gan a few seconds to realise it was one of the Immolators.

They were already moving when Praetor bellowed. *++Disperse!++*

A hunk of flaming tank landed between them, like so much burning shrapnel. It had literally been torn apart.

++Forwards on me, brothers!++ Praetor circled the wreck quickly, overcoming the weight of his armour with sheer strength.

Tsu'gan was first behind him, but Praetor already had a lead. 'What is that thing?'

It resembled a suit of mechanised armour, a simulacrum of a man, something that might once have been part of the long defunct Legio Cybernetica. And though it had pistons and cogs, wheels and chains, and vented steam and oil like a mag-lev train, it was no robot. Something lived and drew breath in those dark iron confines. Tsu'gan felt it.

'Unnatural...' Gathimu sounded almost haunted. 'It's possessed.'

Tsu'gan's teeth clenched. It was a daemon that had a hand in the death of his former captain, Ko'tan Kadai. His ire grew as he vowed this one would be banished back into the warp without taking anyone with it.

A short distance away, the Battle Sisters were levelling everything they had at it. Bolter fire, even melta blasts rolled off like they were nothing. Another Immolator crumpled like parchment when the daemon-engine shoulder-barged its hull. Fuel and ammunition exploded in a vast fireball that Tsu'gan felt in the resulting heat wash.

'Emperor's name... It's strong.'

Praetor was swinging his thunder hammer in a slow but steady arc. ++*We are stronger.*++

The daemon-engine was relentless. It tossed Battle Sisters like limp marionettes. White-armoured bodies fell like rain, eviscerated by its blades and saws.

Tsu'gan heard Praetor mutter when the Firedrakes charged.

++*Vulkan guide me in my hour of doom.*++

Up close, the daemon-engine was massive. It reeked of blood and oil. Smoke and heat exuded off its dark iron flesh in a pall. But it was the eyes that Tsu'gan really noticed. With every blow, as the carnage increased, they blazed brighter with a malign light.

Praetor swung. It was like lightning from the sky when he struck. Tsu'gan expected to see the daemon-engine crumble but instead his sergeant's battle cry became a roar of agony as he was punched off his feet several metres through the air.

To see the mighty Praetor so humbled made the Firedrakes falter.

Kai'ru recovered quickest, getting ahead of Tsu'gan to ram his chainfist into the daemon-engine's torso.

'Taste Vulkan's wrath, warp spawn.' The oath died on his lips when one of the thing's hell-blades punctured his Terminator armour as if it were tin. With his aegis broken, Kai'ru could only watch as the saw-teeth churned his innards to mulch.

Gathimu was advancing fast, Kai'ru's name a cry of anguish on his lips. The igniter on his heavy flamer was already burning when the daemon-engine levelled its wrist-mounted cannon and unloaded. Dozens of armour-piercing shells, jacketed with hellfire, peppered his armour and detonated the promethium tanks on his back.

Blinded by the sudden explosion, Tsu'gan waited a few seconds before his oculobe implant compensated. Gathimu was burning.

++*Ankar.*++

The other Firedrake nodded. They would attack the daemon-engine together. Tsu'gan's tac-display recorded five metres until engagement when a transmission icon flashed urgently on his helmet lens. It had an Imperial signature, emergency coded. The message spooled as rune-text across the display:

Incoming. Fall back five metres and stand fast.

A high-pitched whine broke overhead. No time to retreat. Tsu'gan and Ankar

locked their bodies as the ordnance hit. It struck the daemon-engine squarely and it disappeared in a storm of fire and shrapnel.

The explosion billowed outwards, engulfing the Terminators who weathered the blast like a cliff against the tide. When the dust dispersed, the daemon-engine was crouched almost fifty metres away but still intact. It rose slowly. Its dead eyes blazed brighter.

Behind the Salamanders, Ecclesiarchy troops were advancing in force. A stern-faced sister superior appeared from the roof hatch of an Exorcist. It looked more like a grotesque church organ than a battle tank, but there it was, auto-loaders priming for another missile launch.

Another pair of Immolators flanked it, heavy bolter turrets rattling. High velocity, mass reactive shells stitched a thick line all the way to the daemon-engine. The dense impacts never even scratched it. The tanks rolled on past the Salamanders, determined to block it. Two Rhinos sped after them, fully loaded with engines screaming.

‘See to your battle-brother.’ Praetor was on his feet. His battle-helm was shattered and he’d torn it off. He was bloodied, still groggy from the blow. It was incredible he lived, let alone stood.

Praetor scowled when it didn’t happen immediately. ‘Get Gathimu up.’

With some effort, Ankar and Tsu’gan hauled the Firedrake to his feet. His armour was badly damaged, blackened by burns, but he nodded his willingness to fight.

Tsu’gan was ready to go again. ‘How do we kill it?’

‘We don’t.’

‘But Brother Kai’ru—’

‘Is gone.’ Praetor’s face was grim. This wasn’t an easy decision. ‘We make for the convent-bastion. They have given us that chance.’ He gestured to where the Battle Sisters fought and died furiously.

Incomprehension and anger warred in Tsu’gan’s burning eyes. ‘What of vengeance? Our brother’s death demands it!’

Praetor snarled, thrusting his thunder hammer in Tsu’gan’s direction. ‘I’ll fell you where you stand. Obey my orders.’

He showed them his back and stalked away. ‘On my lead.’

Despite himself, Tsu’gan was about to protest again, when Gathimu touched his arm.

‘We’ll win no honour for Kai’ru by dying here, our oaths unfulfilled. Sacrifice is not always physical, brother.’

Grief softened Tsu'gan's face briefly, before the mask returned and his impotent wrath dominated.

The Firedrakes left the battlefield. The convent-bastion wasn't far. Tsu'gan knew, in their wake, the daemon-engine would be close.

The heavy drumming of explosions outside sounded muffled through the thick convent-bastion walls.

Father Lumeon was pacing.

Why don't they feel thick enough?

Since departing with the Crusaders, Ignacia had not returned. Five Celestians remained, a full half of her bodyguard, led by Sister Clymene. They eyed the long corridor beyond the force-shield nervously. It was dark, its emergency lighting low.

He looked away when the shadows started to grow and coalesce in his mind. His heart was racing and he gripped his aquila for support.

Evangeline showed no such anxiety. She was kneeling before the reliquary, serene, bereft of all doubt. Though her lips moved in prayer, she made no sound.

Sister Clymene hunched over a tactical console fashioned like a shrine in one corner of the chamber. She turned to Father Lumeon, who then went over to her.

A grainy pict-viewer displayed the situation beyond the convent-bastion's walls. Flaring bolter fire polluted the image with bright flashes, overloading the external pict-viewer. Static from comm-link chatter obscured it further. But the picture was painfully clear to Father Lumeon. There was no escape. They would all die here. All that mattered was the relic.

He was muttering a prayer to the Emperor when four armoured forms came into view at the edge of the pict. Lumeon had never studied the Adeptus Astartes in any great detail but he recognised the insignia of the Salamanders and offered up his profound thanks.

Despite their bulky armour, the Adeptus Astartes progressed steadily through the Chaos picket lines, shredding foes with their holy bolters and bathing the heinous masses with cleansing flame. Father Lumeon was transfixed as a bald-headed giant smashed his way to the gate, his warrior brothers behind him. As the barrier wall began to open, a force of Celestians came out to meet the Adeptus Astartes. Desperate to get inside, the Red Rage couldn't get close. The defenders were just too fierce to breach.

Once the Salamanders were through, the Celestians retreated and the gate banged shut again. Pintle-mounted fire from the towers intensified and a battle

tank was rolled into the small outer courtyard to watch the gate.

The vox-unit on the tactical console crackled to life.

++This is Sergeant Praetor of the Salamanders First Company Firedrakes – acknowledge.++

Father Lumeon looked to Sister Clymene, who gestured for him to answer.

His relief was almost palpable. ‘Lords, the Emperor’s blessing you have come. I am Father Lumeon, Missionary High Priest attached to the Orders.’

++We are sealing the inner doors now.++

Father Lumeon’s tone betrayed his surprise.

‘Ah... But how will we get out? The relic–’

++Is in safe hands. Be more concerned that the enemy doesn’t get in.++

There was a short pause that filled the priest’s gut with lead.

++Something is following us. There is little time. Ready the relic, we will be with you soon.++

The vox-link died and silence returned.

Something is following us.

Something.

The words replaying in Lumeon’s head chilled him before he found some resolve.

‘Sister Evangeline.’ She was praying in front of the reliquary and looked up. ‘It’s time.’

The force-shield shimmered once then dissipated before Praetor and his Firedrakes stepped into the sanctum. It was quick to resolve itself again, the waft of ozone from its reactivation souring the air.

Tsu’gan scowled at such fear.

‘That won’t save you,’ said Praetor, looking down at the frail, old priest in front of him.

‘Then we shall have to rely on the Emperor’s grace to protect us.’

If Praetor had an opinion about this, he kept it well hidden.

The priest bowed. ‘I am Father Lumeon.’

The Firedrake sergeant kept the introductions brief. He showed him a small, cylindrical device mag-locked to his belt. ‘Teleport homer. Once locked onto its signal, my ship will transport us and the relic aboard.’ Praetor’s expression became regretful. ‘Its localised field is too small for all of us. Besides, you would not survive translation intact. I am truly sorry.’

Lumeon was already resigned to his fate. He had no fear of death, only of

losing the relic.

Praetor's gaze alighted on the reliquary of Sister Uthraxese where a slim novice was kneeling.

'Brothers, make way.' The Firedrakes standing behind him spread out. A gap for Praetor and the relic formed between them.

'When translation occurs, there will be a massive exothermic reaction. Stand well back. Better still, leave the chamber.' Praetor had moved into position. When he turned the novice was standing downcast before him.

'I am tempered in Vulkan's forge, sister. I have no need of benediction.' Praetor looked up. 'Priest, bring forth the relic. Our time is almost up.'

A dull explosion echoed through the convent-bastion walls all the way to the sanctum. Luminal red bathed the chamber from the tactical console. The outer wall had been breached.

Tsu'gan had a decent view of the screen from where he was standing. The ensuing fire-fight was brutal. A familiar form appeared through the carnage of bolter fire and smoke. Celestians fell like porcelain statues, shattered by its irresistible force.

'The machine has broken through.'

It scythed through the defenders, crushing tanks and swatting Battle Sisters aside, until it reached the inner gate. Flamers and melta guns were brought up, but nothing fazed it. If anything, the daemon-engine looked bigger, a mutating hulk whose unnatural flesh strained at its corporeal bonds. Tsu'gan's eyes narrowed when he caught something through the melee. Before he could analyse it further, a stray explosion killed the pict-feed and the tactical console went dark.

Tsu'gan's eyes met his sergeant's.

It will be here soon.

Already, the heavy thump of the daemon-engine's feet could be heard hammering up the corridor towards them.

Praetor's face was solemn. None would survive. But retrieve the reliquary and it would all be worth it.

'Now, priest.'

Father Lumeon looked nonplussed. 'It is before you, Astartes. Sister Evangeline is the relic.'

What might have been anger crossed Praetor's face. 'Don't mock me, priest. If you've lost your mind to Chaos, I'll vanquish you here... now.'

'Evangeline is the relic, a *living* relic! She beheld a vision from the Emperor

on Earth and it has awoken her grace.’

Praetor saw the truth in the priest’s eyes, and beseeched Vulkan for his strength.

‘Then we have a problem.’

Father Lumeon was shaking his head. ‘No, no. You’re here now. Rescue Evangeline. The rest of us do not matter. You must do this, lord. I beg of you!’

Praetor ignored the priest’s pleas, addressing his Firedrakes instead. ‘Secure the corridor. Firepoints at every ingress.’

Gathimu and Ankar waited for the force-shield to deactivate again then lumbered through the doorway.

‘Astartes, what are you doing? The living relic—’

‘Is a girl, and thusly will not survive teleportation to my ship.’ Praetor spoke harshly. He wasn’t angry at Lumeon, thrusting the serene-looking novitiate towards him desperately. He was angry at the situation and the fact they faced a foe he knew they couldn’t best with strength of arms. Herculon Praetor was not used to such impasses.

Father Lumeon seemed to shrink with despair. Evangeline, by contrast, was utterly calm. Her serenity and grace emanated outwards. It was slow, but even Tsu’gan was beginning to feel his choler lessen just by being near her.

Praetor felt it too. He reached out to touch Evangeline’s cheek but stopped short.

‘I can see why the Red Rage wants you so badly, child. Have no fear, they won’t claim you.’

Judging by his ambivalent demeanour, Father Lumeon was unsure if that was a good or a bad thing given the circumstances. He looked askance down the corridor where the sounds of battle were growing louder.

‘What do we do?’

Praetor regarded the priest sternly.

‘Return to your reliquary, both of you, and pray.’

Tsu’gan couldn’t avert his gaze from Sister Evangeline as she knelt in prayer. Such poise and calm. She radiated tranquillity. Peace threatened to overcome his rage. Tsu’gan had not experienced such a feeling in a long time.

The din coming from the corridor had lessened in the last few minutes. It could mean only one thing. The Celestians had been defeated.

A ring of explosives rigged from the Battle Sisters’ frag and krak grenades booby trapped the entrance to the sanctum. When the daemon-engine breached

the force-shield, it would set them off. By then the Firedrakes and their ward would be withdrawing into the room behind it. Tsu'gan had performed the short reconnoitre himself: from the sanctum to a long gallery, which then led to a transept and finally a chapel. Cloisters and dormitories bled off from this chamber, but the daemon-engine would have caught them at that point and have to be fought.

Tsu'gan didn't fear it, but nor did he wish to be found wanting when the time came. A desire for flagellation at the brander-priest's rod had welled up in him during the tour. Upon returning to the sanctum and Sister Evangeline, that masochistic urge had ebbed.

Gathimu's voice came through on the comm-link. He and Ankar were at the opposite end of the corridor.

++*It comes.*++ Harsh-sounding bolter fire broke the feed. ++*Glory to Vulkan and the Emperor, brothers. I go to them now.*++

Gathimu disappeared, wading into the battle that Tsu'gan could only imagine beyond the corridor.

Ankar was behind him.

++*Unto the Anvil, brothers.*++

Even Evangeline's presence couldn't quell Tsu'gan's anger. He fist was clenched. 'I will carve their names into its hell-bound flesh.'

Praetor hefted his thunder hammer. 'Honour their sacrifice with victory, brother.'

Tsu'gan was in no mood for pragmatism.

'I hope their blood is worth this human's *grace*. We don't even know why she is so important to the Ecclesiarchy.'

Father Lumeon rose from the reliquary where he prayed with Sister Evangeline to approach the Firedrakes.

'Do you know what *true names* are, Astartes?'

'They are a daemon's weakness, words of power that can banish them into the warp.'

Lumeon faced Praetor. 'Yes, they are. Sister Evangeline *knows* true names.'

'What do you mean, priest? Speak plainly.'

'By being close to a daemon, she can hear their true names. She can banish the denizens of the warp with but a word! That is why she is so valuable. That is why you must save her.'

Only Evangeline's presence kept Tsu'gan's rage from boiling over. He wrenched off his battle-helm. He was livid. Praetor's outstretched hand warned

him to be still.

‘A pity you did not mention this before.’ The sergeant leaned in closer. ‘But what of the fact she is mute? How can she even utter such a word?’

Father Lumeon followed the Firedrake’s gaze to Evangeline then back again.

‘The Emperor’s divine will is not for us to question, it just is. I do not know how.’

Praetor slammed his fist into Tsu’gan’s chest to hold him. ‘Go back to your prayers, but be ready to move.’

He sighed, turning to Tsu’gan as the priest sloped away again. ‘Vulkan give us strength.’

‘There is no way to defeat this thing.’

Praetor’s brow furrowed. ‘Not with the weapons we have here at least.’ He paused, deciding on their final strategy. ‘We hold it as long as we can. Then do what must be done. The enemy must not claim her. Whatever vile sacrifice is in mind for this child will be far worse than death, for her and the sub-sector.’

‘I will do my duty.’

Praetor nodded. ‘If we still live, I will engage the beacon and pull us back to the ship.’

The two ident-runes on both Firedrakes’ tac-displays blinked out.

Tsu’gan’s face was grim. Their brothers were dead. He checked the load on his storm bolter. It was getting low. As Praetor backed away, gesturing for the priest and his novitiate to get up, Tsu’gan stomped into position in front of the force-shield. The five Celestians, including Sister Clymene, formed a firing line with him.

Silence flushed the corridor. Unseen fires sent flickering fingers of dusk across the metal walls. Smoke drizzled outwards like a carpet of fog. The heavy *clank* of the daemon-engine’s footfalls beat in time with the defenders’ hearts.

Tsu’gan aimed at the end of the corridor. ‘Brace yourselves.’

Five boltguns locked and loaded beside him.

‘Lower the force-shield.’

The energy veil flickered and dissipated at Tsu’gan’s command.

A large silhouette bled onto the gunmetal floor. The daemon-engine lumbered into view.

It was much larger than before. Its flesh strained against the machine shackling it. Blood and oil seeped from every cleft in its armour. Long, hell-runed chains scraped along the floor as it moved. Steam and smoke spewed from the engine on its broad back. And the eyes... the eyes burned with a baleful fire,

stoked by the fear and rage of its enemies.

Tsu'gan hesitated for a second.

'Fire!'

An incandescent bolter storm roared from the sanctum archway. For a few moments the daemon-engine took it, even staggered as the mass reactive shells exploded against it. Then it charged.

Its bulk had slowed it and it took a few seconds to overcome inertia but then it was moving, like a battle tank with engines screaming.

Tsu'gan estimated it would clear the corridor in approximately five more seconds.

'Back into the sanctum. Now!'

The force-shield was reactivated in their wake.

Reunited with Praetor, Tsu'gan was retreating into the long gallery when the daemon-engine hit the force-shield. The energy veil stretched and crackled, sending jolts of electricity through the abomination's metal frame. As if it was wading through bands of viscous light, the daemon-engine pushed and strained against the field. Then like rubber put under too much stress, the bands snapped and the veil shut down for the last time.

Tsu'gan's storm bolter was already blazing halfway down the gallery when the daemon-engine stepped across the sanctum's threshold and tripped the grenades.

Intensified by the close confines of the chamber, the explosion was deafening and blew smoke and fire in both directions. Shrapnel careened off Tsu'gan's armour, embedding itself in the walls and floor.

Laying down suppressing fire all the way, Tsu'gan and the Celestians reached the chapel. Nothing stopped the daemon-engine. They didn't even slow it down.

Three of the Celestians rushed forward, bolters flaring at close range, righteous fury in their eyes.

They were scattered in seconds, smashed and broken against the walls.

'Protect them, brother!' Praetor led with his storm shield, the daemon-engine looming ahead.

It went against Tsu'gan's every instinct to leave his sergeant. But, shielding the non-combatants with his body and backing off from the battle, he obeyed. He was her last defence. Sister Evangeline needed him.

Expecting to slow, rather than smite it, Praetor was lasting longer against the daemon-engine this time. Its bulk actually worked against it, and the Firedrake was able to get in beneath its guard and land a few blows.

Bolter fire raked down the machine's torso before the last Celestian was

impaled on a hell-blade. Transfixed, she shuddered once and then died.

Sister Clymene made the most of her comrade's sacrifice by attaching a melta bomb to the daemon-engine's blind side. Too close to withdraw, she was cooked in her armour while the abomination was rocked but stayed standing.

Only Praetor remained.

Tsu'gan and the others had almost reached the end of the chapel when he saw the sergeant smashed aside. Praetor was lifted off his feet and left a ragged hole in the wall where he'd crashed through it. His thunder hammer was sent spinning loose, embedding itself in the chapel floor just a metre from Tsu'gan's grasp.

They'd reached the door to one of the dormitories. The daemon-engine had slowed, sensing its prey was near and at its mercy.

Tsu'gan's storm bolter was empty. He'd have to crush her neck.

'Shut your eyes.'

He struck Father Lumeon, as hard as he dare without killing him, knocking the priest unconscious before he could protest.

'Shut your eyes, Evangeline.'

Tsu'gan reached around her tiny neck, sensed the warmth of her skin against his gauntleted fingers... and stopped. He thrust Evangeline into the centre of the chapel, where she stumbled and fell.

As he dragged Father Lumeon and closed the dormitory blast door behind them, he saw the daemon-engine close on Evangeline.

By Vulkan, I hope this works...

Alone, Evangeline faced the daemon-engine. She quietened her fast-beating heart and recovered from her stumble into a kneeling position. She began to pray.

With each silent benediction, the abomination that had been summoned to sacrifice her soul to Khorne slowed. Whereas before, brute force and fury had driven the daemon-engine to impossible feats, now every step was an effort. The closer the machine came to Evangeline, the more it began to shrink. Its grotesque musculature withered and atrophied. The baleful lights in its eyes started to fade, like a candle starved of oxygen.

This was the Chapel of Divine Sanctuary – its borders were anathema to rage and fear. Here, peace and tranquillity held sway. Sister Evangeline was the paragon of that fundamental truth. She was order in place of chaos, serenity opposed to anger. There was nothing in this place or in her for the daemon-engine to feed upon. She had disarmed it, and by the time it reached her it had

returned to its former size, hell-blade poised above her bowed head but unable to strike. Ichor was drooling from between the daemon-engine's armour plates, its body seized as if fossilized. Impotent, dwindling rage smoked away to almost nothing in its eyes.

The blast door opened and in stepped Tsu'gan. His eyes were closed. He felt Evangeline's aura brush against him, and envelop him, like a cool breeze. Reaching out, he found the thunder hammer in his grasp. He could hear everything, every heart beat, every shallow breath.

A spark ignited in the daemon-engine's eyes. Hellish hope became neutered fury as it found nothing but calm in the warrior before it.

In a pure moment of awakening, Tsu'gan hurled the thunder hammer.

It spun, end over end, until his righteous blow broke open the machine chassis that bound but also *girded* the abomination within.

Free of its fetters, fire surged into the now unbound daemon's eyes. Hellish claws reached out from the shattered rib cage as it pulled loose.

I will feast upon this world.

Evangeline opened her eyes and uttered the first and last words she would ever speak. A true name...

Khartak-shek-hlad-bahkarn...

The daemon shrieked before a harsh corona of light engulfed it. Hot winds, the stench of ash and blood tainted the air, then was gone, the daemon with it. The banishing spilled outwards like a droplet expanding in a massive pool, beyond the chamber, beyond the convent-bastion walls, across all of Sepulchre IV.

In the chapel, only a smouldering hunk of machine metal remained. The scorched remnants of the engine were lifeless and inert.

Praetor staggered in, bloody but with storm shield in hand.

It was over.

Father Lumeon had roused too and stumbled in behind Tsu'gan. What he saw made him weep.

Evangeline's aura had almost faded.

'Her grace is spent. By speaking, she violated the most sacred credo of the Order. Her unique gift is lost.' The priest was distraught, but glad Evangeline was alive.

Tsu'gan saw it differently. 'A daemon is banished and the Red Rage has been dealt a severe blow.'

Reports were flooding in through his comm-link. He read them aloud. 'Their

forces are in retreat. The skies are clearing and the blockade lifts.'

Praetor scowled. 'It will not last. We have only a short opportunity.'

Going to the comm-bead in his ear, he contacted the *Implacable* with extraction coordinates. Praetor turned to the priest and novitiate. 'You will ride with us.'

Father Lumeon nodded, holding Evangeline close like a child.

'Brother-sergeant.'

Praetor took his thunder hammer from Tsu'gan and nodded.

'A worthy blow.'

Tsu'gan saw the respect in his eyes and made the most of it. With Evangeline's grace gone, the old anger was returning. He'd been a fool to believe it was anything more than a temporary reprieve.

'What's wrong, brother?'

'Nothing,' he lied. By the time the sound of the *Implacable*'s engines were overhead, his inner pain, his rage, had returned.



PROMETHEUS REQUIEM

The hangar gaped like an open wound in the side of the ship, festering with rust and warp corrosion. It belonged to the *Glorion*, an ancient vessel from the long-dead Kapp Frontier Wars and was just one in a conglomeration of almost a hundred. Ruined cathedra, mashed together in the violent act of joining, jugged alongside broken spires, shattered domes and the cleaved remains of many-tiered decks. The union of once-disparate vessels was as incongruous as the product of their fusion. Now a single drifting mass, such abominations were commonly referred to as ‘hulks’.

The *Implacable* was an insect compared to this behemoth and its landing stanchions touched down on an area of deck plating capable of harbouring an entire fleet of gunships. Ten armoured figures stepped out from the embarkation ramp. They moved slowly. Not because of the massive Terminator suits they were wearing or because of the inertia of the zero-gravity, nor was it because their boots were mag-locked to the deck plating. They were wary.

Hulks had ever been the province of alien creatures, hiding in the dark forgotten recesses, stirring from a deep-space slumber. But it was more than that. This amalgam, its many-hulled body ravaged by claw marks, colonised by strange bacterial growths and seared by solar wind, had been to the Eye. Spat from the warp like a birth mother expelling its nascent spawn, it had emerged back into the realm of realspace after almost a century’s absence.

‘I can smell the reek of the warp.’ Praetor’s voice came through the comm-feed in Tsu’gan’s helmet. Though he couldn’t see his face, Tsu’gan could tell his sergeant was scowling.

More than smell alone, the hangar walls bore visual evidence of the hulk’s taint. In the glare from the halo-lamps spearing out of his armour, Tsu’gan picked out traceries of void-frozen veins and oddly shaped protuberances. Gaps in the bizarre growths resembled mouths, flash-frozen in distended hunger. The aberrations stained every vertical surface and ended in slurries of fossilised

biomass that collected against the edges of the deck.

‘Flamer.’ Praetor’s order was clipped, undercut by barely checked disgust.

Brother Kohlogh stepped out of formation and doused the wall in purifying fire. Like a match held to a stack of oiled timber, the flames raced across the tainted mass, devouring it to the eerie report of sibilant howling, just discernible above the heavy weapon’s roar.

Tsu’gan watched Emek make the sign of Vulkan’s hammer across his breast. None of the Firedrakes did it, but then the Apothecary was not one of them and more superstitious than most. He caught Tsu’gan’s gaze briefly, held it, then looked away as Praetor drove them on. It was obvious he wanted to be off this ship as soon as possible. He had good reason.

The empyrean was a shadow realm, a world overlaid on reality like a dirty film of plastek. Fell creatures swam its tides, given form by fear, envy and a desire for power. They were parasites that preyed on the weaknesses of man. An old word gave them substance. *Daemons* they were called. No ship, hulk or otherwise, that had plied the warp could ever be wholly untouched by the experience. Daemons and their influence had a way of lingering...

‘Makes your skin crawl, eh, little wyrm?’ asked Hrydor over a closed channel.

Tsu’gan’s jaw clenched and he bit back his anger.

‘Address me as Tsu’gan or brother,’ he hissed.

Hrydor laughed loudly for everyone to hear. A giant, even amongst Terminators, he carried their squad’s heavy weapon, a brutal assault cannon etched with kill-scars.

Praetor sent a crackle of energy up the haft of his thunder hammer to better survey the darkness. It also lit the green of his battle-plate and deepened the shadows in the folds of his drakescale cloak.

‘Keep it down, brother,’ he said.

Hrydor nodded but wasn’t done.

‘Stay eager, little wyrm. You and I shall fight together very soon.’

The magma lakes below Mount Deathfire on Nocturne were cooler than Tsu’gan’s ire at that moment.

Aside from the tainted growths, the hangar was empty.

‘How far to the *Proteus*?’ asked Praetor.

‘She’s close. I can feel her.’

A flashing rune on Tsu’gan’s retinal display identified the speaker.

Brother-sergeant Nu’mean. His impatience, uncharacteristic of a Salamander, was obvious even in his implacable Terminator suit.

Praetor turned, shifting his bulk.

‘Are you a Librarian now, brother?’

‘I am a Firedrake.’ Nu’mean answered curtly. Not as deep-voiced as Praetor, but with an edge that could cut ceramite. ‘And I know my own ship. She is near.’

He stomped ahead as the already freezing temperature dropped further.

‘Emek,’ Praetor ignored his fellow sergeant for now, ‘how far?’

Unlike his predecessor who’d been all thin-faced cynicism, Emek was optimistic and curious.

After you’ve pulled a few more gene-seeds from your dead and dying brethren, your mood will change, brother, thought Tsu’gan, his voice bitter even inside his head.

Emek was consulting an auspex array built into the gauntlet of his smaller power armour. ‘Based on ship schematics, approximately five hours through the *Glotion*’s tertiary decks until we reach fusion-point and the *Protean*’s aft section.’ He looked up from his calculations. ‘That’s dependent on a straight route through the vessel – no encounters, clear terrain and re-establishing gravity.’

‘Soon as we locate an active console you can set to work on that third condition, brother,’ said Praetor. ‘The other two we’ll deal with as necessary.’

Every Terminator had a chainfist on his left hand, invaluable when exploring hulks where bulkheads and debris could make progress difficult. That was for condition two.

‘Thermal scans from the *Implacable* suggest resistance will be light. The xenos are still largely dormant.’

Storm bolters, an assault cannon and the heavy flamer in Nu’mean’s squad dealt with condition one.

‘Then let us hope that remains the case.’ Praetor’s attention switched back to Nu’mean, who’d taken up an advanced position with his squad. For the moment Praetor was in command, but as soon as they reached the *Protean* the other sergeant would take over. It had been agreed. Nu’mean had his atonement and would bear the responsibility of it alone. It was the Promethean way. ‘You are certain he’s here?’

‘I know it in my blood.’ There was a growl to Nu’mean’s voice. ‘He is here, still inside the ship.’

‘A century drifting the warp tides, he might not have survived.’ Praetor’s normally booming voice softened. ‘We may be searching for a corpse, brother... or something worse.’

Nu'mean let the words hang in the air then stared beyond Praetor, his gaze alighting on Emek.

'He is alive, held in cryo-stasis just as I left him.' He paused, about to add something. The hard veneer almost cracked when he turned away again.

Praetor gave a final glance to Emek, flanked by two green bulwarks of armoured ceramite – they were two of Nu'mean's squad, Mercurion and Gun'dar. Power armour was formidable protection on most battlefields, but this drifting space hulk was no ordinary battlefield.

'Keep him safe.' Praetor didn't bother to hide it in a closed channel. The Apothecary knew the risks. Praetor glared again at Nu'mean.

Subtlety was not a trait that Herculon Praetor held in any great regard. The mission was still his for the moment. His voice was thunderous and commanding as he took the lead, '*Firedrakes, advance on me.*'

The muzzle flare from three storm bolters fired in unison lit the grimace on Praetor's face as he threw the xenos off his storm shield. Acidic vital fluids hissed against his armour as he crushed the creature against the wall.

The corridor was tight. Pipes and thick cabling hung from the ruptured ceiling where the genestealers had clawed through. Deck grating, half corroded by xeno-blood, clanked underfoot. At least the warp taint was no longer present. At least... it was not *visible*. Hard gravity from the *Glorion's* malfunctioning systems kept the Firedrakes grounded. Recently revived air-scrubbers re-oxygenating the deck allowed Praetor to remove his battle-helm. Suspensor readings in retinal displays showed maximum lift capacity. Manoeuvring was tough. Tsu'gan tasted salt on his lips, his face covered in battle-sweat, secondary heart pumping to cope with the additional physical stresses.

The xenos showed no such difficulty.

Two bounded up the short corridor, jostling for position. Three Terminators faced them – Tsu'gan, his sergeant and Vo'kar – two more including the assault cannon were staggered behind them. Though Hrydor's heavy weapon was silent, Invictese's storm bolter barked between the front line's shoulder plates. Nu'mean's squad clustered behind them, guarding the rear.

Tsu'gan sent a burst into the creatures, rupturing the ribcage of the leader and ripping off a limb. The second got close enough to leap, its long muscled legs propelling it easily off the deck plate and into the air. The chainfist embedded in its torso cut its screeching to a strangled mewl and the genestealer's clawing lacked strength and purpose as it raked Tsu'gan's armour.

‘Good little wyrm!’ said Hrydor. The flare from the storm bolters lit up the corridor like a tongue of fire. Tsu’gan felt their heat. Three xenos exploded against the fusillade. ‘But look, there are more!’

Hrydor gestured with his chainfist. Roughly thirteen xenos corpses lay scattered around the Terminators for no losses or injuries. It was a vanguard, nothing more. The beasts were half slumbering, still not fully out of hibernation. Up ahead, a high-pitched keening presaged another wave.

The genestealers scurrying across the deck were easy kills. They bucked and jerked against the combined fire. Too late, the Firedrakes realised these were just sacrificial. Others – clinging to the ceiling and walls, bodies low to present a smaller target – reached them in force.

Tsu’gan staggered as he took a glancing blow to his battle-helm. The internal display crackled with static for a second then returned. The beasts were fast, much faster than the others. He swept his chainfist around, hoping to connect, but the genestealer had scurried over him and onto his back.

Pain sensors in his suit flared an angry red and Tsu’gan cried out. Flesh hooks from the ‘stealer’s maw punched against his armour joints, seeking a weakness. He couldn’t reach to grab it, so thrust backwards instead. A satisfying crunch of bone resounded when he made contact with the wall. Barely recovered, his enhanced body pumping pain-regressing chemicals into his bloodstream, another sprang at him from its perch on the ceiling. In the darkness, despite his oculobe implant, he only just saw it.

Praetor’s thunder hammer shattered it in mid-flight, the electrical discharge shocking the air and illuminating the xenomorph’s death scream like a frozen pict-capture.

‘Firedrakes, advance!’ he boomed, mashing another with a punch of his storm shield.

Staccato bangs of bolter fire told Tsu’gan his brothers were with him as he raked the corridor ahead. Through combined effort, the Firedrakes had almost wiped out the second wave and used the brief respite to gain some ground. A wider corridor section loomed ahead, some kind of maintenance bay with old machinery strewn about like metal carcasses. The extra room allowed Nu’mean’s squad to rank up alongside Praetor’s.

Praetor raised his fist as they fanned out: three in front, sergeants to the centre with two behind, including heavies. ‘Halt here.’

The dying echoes of gunfire faded until a tense silence, undercut by the dulcet movements of the *Glorion*’s extant systems, resumed.

‘We should proceed,’ said Nu’mean, making his impatience obvious.

Praetor nudged one of the ’stealer corpses over. Feeder tendrils lolled from its mouth cavity like ribbed tongues. Before the sergeant went to his comm-feed he noticed a faint light dying in the creature’s eyes. It could’ve just been an illusion, brought about by the intense conditions of the ship. Praetor activated the feed.

‘Apothecary?’

‘Still here, my lord.’

‘The xenos are done,’ Nu’mean persisted. ‘Why delay?’

‘He’s been waiting for almost a century, brother – a few more hours won’t make any difference,’ Praetor countered. ‘Besides, they are still here. Waiting.’

It was obvious the other sergeant didn’t like it.

Tsu’gan remembered Nu’mean from before when he’d first teleported to Prometheus, the lunar space station and domain of the Firedrakes. The brother-sergeant had been the first to meet him. He had a weathered face with a long scar running down the right side that tugged at his lip and pulled it up into a permanent snarl. The right eye was slightly dimmed, and a small well of black infected the blazing red. A blade of red hair, shaved into an arc, fed across the right hemisphere of his skull. It put Tsu’gan in mind of a streak of flame. Despite the heat of the proving-forge and the gate of fire, the welcome had not been warm. Judging by Nu’mean’s present demeanour, the years inbetween had not softened him.

Praetor turned his halo-lamps to full glare and aimed them at the corridor section ahead. Ragged hoses hung down like vipers. Somewhere out of sight a steam valve vented. According to Emek, they were maybe an hour from the fusion-point and the *Protean*.

Like his battle-brothers, Tsu’gan followed his sergeant’s example. At first, he saw nothing except ravaged metal, broken pipes and cables like spewed intestines rudely lit in harsh magnesium-white. Then something stirred at the edge of the cone of light, creeping slowly along the penumbra.

‘In Vulkan’s name!’ Tsu’gan roared and his battle cry became a chorus with his brothers.

Like limpets attached to the hull of an ancient ship, the genestealers broke off from the walls and fell into a loping run. At the same time the grates in the ceiling crashed down and a steady stream of creatures poured out.

As Tsu’gan swung his storm bolter around, he was reminded of Nocturnean lava-ants mustering from their hive to repel an invader. Except here the lava-ants were larger than a man and their nest was a rotten hulk floating in the depths of

space.

Every shell struck a xenos body. Limbs and gore exploded outwards in a series of ghastly blossoms, but the genestealers kept on coming.

‘Something drives them!’ Tsu’gan snarled, and went to take a back step when he felt a pauldron locked against his, stopping him.

Praetor was beside him, a ceramite rock in the face of the advancing alien tide.

‘Only forwards, brother. Resist. Our will is greater.’ Then he turned to another Firedrake. ‘Hrydor, give us some breathing room.’

Moving from Praetor’s right, Hrydor stepped forwards and triggered the assault cannon.

The air was instantly filled with the whine of its spinning barrel, spitting high-velocity shells at a phenomenal rate. Strafing left and right, Hrydor rejoiced loudly, singing litanies of the Promethean Creed as he eviscerated clusters of genestealers starting to clog the corridor.

‘Seems we’ve stirred the nest, brother-sergeant,’ he said.

Tsu’gan heard Praetor mutter. ‘And I know of only one way to cleanse it... Nu’mean.’

The other sergeant nodded, gesturing to Brother Kohlogh.

‘Burn it!’ cried Nu’mean, and the Firedrake brought his heavy flamer to bear.

Liquid promethium ignited on contact with the weapon’s burner, engulfing the corridor section ahead.

Despite the heat, some of the xenos were still determined to attack.

‘Ve’kyt, Mercurion!’

Two more Firedrakes stepped to at Nu’mean’s order, exploding the flame-wreathed bodies staggering from the conflagration with precise bolter rounds. In a few more moments, it was done.

The sounds of screaming persisted long after all the genestealers were dead, rendered to ash in the heat of the flamer’s irresistible blaze. Smoke palled the air like a death shroud.

‘What’s that noise?’ asked Emek. He’d moved up to the rear rank and no longer needed the comm-feed to be heard.

‘Have you ever broiled crustacid or chitin?’ asked Hrydor, allowing the barrel on his assault cannon to spin and cool before shutting it down.

The Apothecary shook his head.

‘It’s air, brother,’ Tsu’gan snapped, a little impatient at Emek’s apparent naivety, ‘escaping from between the joins in the carapace.’

‘Well, little wyrm, it appears there is more to you than wrath and thunder.’

Tsu'gan wanted to smash the front of Hrydor's battle-helm into his face but resisted. Instead, he walked slowly to Praetor who pressed his hand against the wall while two of Nu'mean's squad checked the way ahead was actually now clear.

'Brother-sergeant?'

'Do you know what I feel when I touch the wall of this ship?'

Praetor's eyes were hard like granite. Since joining the Firedrakes, Tsu'gan had seen a different side to the sergeant. On Scoria, fighting against the orks he had been almost ebullient, bombastic. Now, he was dour and withdrawn. N'keln dying on the cusp of victory had changed him, just as Kadai's murder had changed Tsu'gan. Dead captains had a way of doing that to their fellow brothers-in-arms, even those not of the same company.

'I feel *sorrow*.' Praetor frowned. 'Something lives inside this ship, in its every fibre. It is neither Salamander nor genestealer, nor any physical thing I can touch or slay.' The sergeant kept his voice low. 'That bothers me, greatly. Place your hand against the wall, brother, and feel it,' he added, stepping aside.

Tsu'gan's reply was barely a whisper. 'I do not wish to, my lord.'

On their previous mission to the shrine world of Sepulchre IV the Firedrakes had faced an almost invulnerable foe. Fighting it had cost lives: brothers. The weight of that loss, futile as it had been, hung around Praetor's neck as tangibly as the gorget of his armour.

'Very well,' he said. His gaze lingered on Tsu'gan a moment longer before he lumbered away to convene with Nu'mean.

'Pain is everywhere, brother,' he added, his back turned. 'Embrace it in the fires of war or run and let it be your master. I can't make that choice for you.' Then he was gone, leaving Tsu'gan to ponder his wisdom.

The fusion-point was where an old enginarium deck had breached what sensors and ship schematics suggested was the *Protean's* medi-deck. That was good. It meant the cryo-stasis chamber would be close by upon entry. Not so good was the several thousand kilograms of debris preventing a direct burn, hull-to hull, through to the next vessel.

Such a problem might prove an impasse to common explorators or even fellow Space Marines. Terminators had no such issue.

'Heavies guard the rear,' said Praetor, 'Everyone else... cut her open.'

The sound of revving chainfists ground the air before the two squads went to work hewing and sawing.

‘Apothecary, stand clear,’ he added. ‘Don’t risk your cargo, brother.’

Emek nodded, checking the vial embedded in his gauntlet. The chemical solution sloshed benignly within.

‘If we can locate a blast door or even a sealed bulkhead, I might be able to unlock it from here. It’ll make our progress swifter.’

Praetor nodded to the Apothecary before wading in with his thunder hammer.

Emek looked again to the vial. A small injector needle on the end would guarantee delivery of the solution, which was red and faintly luminous. Emek knew little of its origin, but he knew it was potent. Scarcely fifty millilitres resided in a clear armourplating tube the size of the Apothecary’s thumb.

So much, resting on so little a thing.

They found the door. It was a disused service hatch in the *Protean*’s aft that led to a short maintenance conduit and the ship’s medi-deck. Only wide enough for one Terminator at a time, entry was fairly slow. It did give Tsu’gan and the others first in the line a chance to reconnoitre their surroundings though.

Unlike the *Glorion*, the old Salamanders strike cruiser still maintained a flickering power grid. Lume-lamps cut up the dark in trembling flashes, revealing a gloomy interior. Gunmetal was scorched black in places from an old fire, long dead. Soot carpeted the deck underfoot and shifted like a torpid sea every time one of the Firedrakes moved. Ash clung to rafters and crossbeams like grey fungus.

They had emerged into a large, hexagonal room. Five of its sides branched off and terminated in a console, making the room some kind of hub. There were glyphs and icons crafted into the walls. Sigils of the Salamanders – the flame, the serpent and the drake’s head – glittered wanly against the Terminators’ halo-beams. The light above was hexagonal too and its design echoed outwards concentrically.

Emek was poring over a green-lit console as Tsu’gan approached him.

‘Don’t wander too far.’

‘You worry too much, brother. I can look to my own protection.’

Tsu’gan snorted derisively. ‘Did the *Ignean* breed that insolence into you?’

The Apothecary had once been one of Dak’ir’s troopers, the one that Tsu’gan referred to as the *Ignean*. A snarl at the thought of the former sergeant sprang unbidden onto the Firedrake’s face.

Emek declined to answer. Even now, engaged with new assignments, there was still acrimony between the battle-brothers from the old tactical squads.

‘What are you doing?’ Tsu’gan snapped when he realised the Apothecary wouldn’t be baited.

‘Checking emergency systems are online.’

‘And?’

Emek turned. ‘Even after a century, everything seems to be working. The cryo-stasis chamber is intact. Ships like the *Protean* were built to last.’ He paused, looking Tsu’gan in the eye. ‘Does it annoy you that I am privy to elements of this mission that you are not?’

Tsu’gan clenched a fist and the servos in his gauntlet seemed to growl.

‘Your curiosity will get you killed one day, brother. Or perhaps worse... perhaps it will dent your optimistic spirit and break you.’

Tsu’gan was walking away when Emek spoke to his back.

‘Is that before or after you’ve burned yourself to ash in the solitorium?’

‘What do you know of it?’ Tsu’gan stopped, and snapped at the darkness.

‘When I took on Fugis’s mantle, I took on his notes and data from the Apothecarion too. Your name is mentioned.’

Tsu’gan appeared to stiffen, but then Emek’s voice softened. ‘There’s no shame in grief, but it’s dangerous if channelled inwards.’

Tsu’gan didn’t turn, though he wanted to. Finding out what Emek knew of his pain addiction would have to wait – something else had caught his attention.

‘What do you know of grief?’ he muttered instead, and walked over to an archway leading from the room into a wide gallery.

The long chamber was lined with doors on either side. It looked like some kind of isolation ward for patients receiving intensive treatment. The floor was partially tiled, some of the white smeared grey and cracked or chipped away. The doors too, plasteel with a single porthole window, were white. Some carried faded marks that in the half-light looked almost brown or black.

A smell, like ozone and burning meat, made Tsu’gan’s nose wrinkle. The dull report of his footfalls thumped in time with his heart. A faint tapping became a chorus to these louder beats, like a finger on glass. Tsu’gan followed it. His auto-senses came back with no threats. Gravity and oxygen were at stable and acceptable levels. All was well on the *Protean*. And yet...

It was coming from one of the doors. An image flashed across the surface of Tsu’gan’s memory but discerning it was like grasping mental smoke. His heart quickened. He approached the door, closer with every step. He realised he was reluctant, and chided himself for being a weakling. And yet...

Tsu’gan’s retinal display was still reporting zero threats. No heat-traces, no

kinetics, no gas or power surges. The long chamber was clean. And yet...

He reached the door, fingers to his chainfist outstretched and probing towards the glass. Tsu'gan was a few centimetres away when the lights flickered and he gazed upwards at the lume-lamps. When he looked back a face regarded him through the porthole. Partially dissolved flesh and sloughed muscle revealed more of a skull than any recognisable human visage. And yet, Tsu'gan knew exactly who it was.

'*Ko'tan...*' His dead captain glared at him through the glass. Tsu'gan was horrified when he saw bony fingers reaching up to match the position of his own, as if he were staring into some grotesque mirror and not glass at all.

Another smell quashed the stink of burning meat and melta discharge. There was heat and sulphur, the sound of cracking magma and the redolence of smoke. A hazy figure was reflected in the glass behind him.

Red armour the hue of blood, festooned with horns and scale...

Dragon Warrior...

Tsu'gan whirled around as fast as his cumbersome suit allowed, triggering his storm bolter as he let out a roar of anguish.

Praetor parried the gun aside, directing the explosive salvo harmlessly into the ground.

'Brother!' he urged.

Tsu'gan saw only foes. Heat shimmered off the Dragon Warrior's armour, hazing his outline. These were the renegades who had killed Ko'tan Kadai. How they came to be upon this ship mattered not. All that concerned Tsu'gan was the manner of their deaths at his hands – the bloodier the better. He gave up on the storm bolter and activated his chainfist instead. More were coming. He could hear them, pounding towards him across the deck. He had to finish this quickly.

Praetor braced the chaintooth against his shield. Sparks cascaded down onto his face as he deflected the blow upwards.

'Brother!' he repeated.

Spat through clenched teeth, it was a declaration of disbelief as much as it was anger.

Tsu'gan pressed the churning blades against the shield, his rage lending him the strength to overpower his enemy. The bastard was grinning – he could see fangs beneath the mouth grille of the Dragon Warrior's battle-helm.

I'll rip them out...

Then the red fog before his eyes faded and Praetor was revealed. A moment's distraction was all that the sergeant needed to land a blow from the thunder

hammer's haft against Tsu'gan's chest. A jolt of energy shocked the Firedrake and put him on one knee.

The whine of the chainfist died and Praetor let his hammer fall to his side with it. But then he moved in close, ramming the cleaved edge of his storm shield under Tsu'gan's chin and bringing him to his feet.

'Are you with us?' Praetor asked.

Tsu'gan's tongue was paralysed. The world around him was only just making sense again. The others were looking on, weapons primed.

Praetor pressed the shield up harder, lifting Tsu'gan's head. 'Are you with us?'

'Yes...' It was a rasp, but the sergeant heard and believed it.

Nu'mean was not so quick to stand down. He levelled his storm bolter.

'It's finished,' Praetor told him, stepping into the other sergeant's firing line.

'The warp—'

'Infests this ship, this entire hulk, Nu'mean. It's done.' Praetor ushered Tsu'gan away to be cursorily examined by Emek. A side glance at Hrydor told the Firedrake to go with him and keep watch.

Nu'mean lowered his weapon.

'How can you be sure?' he asked, when Tsu'gan had moved away.

Praetor leaned in close.

'Because I saw things too,' he whispered. 'This floating wreck is alive with the sentience of the warp. Something is channelling it, into our minds. Tsu'gan was taken off guard, that's all.'

Nu'mean fashioned a snarl. 'He is weak, and not to be trusted.'

'He passed through the gate of fire and endured the proving-forge – he is one of us!' Praetor asserted. 'Can you say this mission, this ship, has not influenced your behaviour in some way? I have seen it plainly but will you admit it, Nu'mean?'

Nu'mean didn't answer him. He eyed Tsu'gan as their Apothecary conducted a bio-scan instead. By now the other Firedrakes were securing the chamber, checking each of the cells in turn and the hub annexe. 'You made a mistake with that one, brother.'

'There was no mistake. Guilt masters him for now. Know this: his destiny is with the Firedrakes. I won't abandon him—'

Nu'mean spat back with anger. 'As I abandoned others, is that what you are driving at, brother?'

Praetor moved in close. 'Get a hold of yourself, or I shall assume command of this mission. Are we clear on that, sergeant?'

Though he simmered with rage, Nu'mean conceded and gave the slightest nod before stalking away.

Praetor let him go, using the few seconds to gird his own emotions. He looked back at the portholes that lined the infirmary and his ire bled away, replaced by regret.

'I won't abandon him,' he repeated solemnly to himself.

There were faces staring at him from the portholes that only he could see. Gathimu and Ankar, slain on Sepulchre IV; Namor and Clyten, killed on Scoria, and a dozen others whose names blended into memory but were still his charges.

'We've already lost so many.'

'It is nothing, little wyrm...' Hrydor was at Tsu'gan's shoulder as Emek examined him for injury. After releasing the pressure clasps, the Apothecary then carefully removed Tsu'gan's helmet. Immediately, the unfiltered atmosphere washed in. Despite the years, the air still stank of ammonia and counterseptics. The sanitised aroma made Tsu'gan's skin itch and he found himself yearning for the touch of fire. But there was no rod, no brander-priest's iron to slake his masochistic urge.

'What is "nothing"? Speak plainly, brother. You sound like a Dark Angel,' Tsu'gan shot back venomously.

'Hold still,' said Emek, seizing Tsu'gan's chin and shining a light in his eyes. They burned suddenly brighter. He reviewed the readings on his bio-scanner, logging the data for later analysis.

'I am myself.' Tsu'gan glared at the Apothecary, daring him to arrive at any other conclusion. The memory of Kadai's face still lingered like an old dream in his subconscious though, and he wondered what had triggered it.

'Physically, I can discern no adverse effects. Mentally, I cannot—'

'Then release me.' Tsu'gan jerked his chin away and took back his helmet.

Emek left with a parting remark. 'Your demeanour certainly remains as *amenable* as usual.'

'Are you sure you're a warrior, Emek?' Tsu'gan sneered, before ramming on his battle-helm. The pressure clamps cinched into place automatically as Tsu'gan went to Hrydor. 'Now, explain yourself.'

The other Firedrake didn't look intimidated. If anything, he was pensive. 'The bulk and the strain of the great armour you wear – they are difficult burdens, little wyrm. It once belonged to Imaan. His aegis is woven into that of the suit.'

'I know that. I was at the ritual. I stood before the proving-forge and crossed

the gate of fire. I carry Imaan's icon upon my flesh alongside many other honour scars, given unto me for the deeds I performed in battle. It's the reason I am beside you now. I am Zek Tsu'gan, former brother-sergeant of Third Company and now Firedrake. I am not your *little wyrm!*'

Hrydor looked blankly at his battle-brother for a moment before laughing loudly.

'I can handle the suit and the mission,' Tsu'gan protested, earning a backwards glance from Praetor. It would be a few more minutes until they were done searching and securing the gallery. Then they could move on. Tsu'gan had that long to re-prepare himself. He lowered his tone in response to his sergeant's scowl. 'I saw... *something*. A relic of the past, nothing more. Old ship, old ghosts – that's all it is.'

Hrydor became suddenly serious. 'Perhaps you're right.' His voice took on a brooding tone. 'On Lykaar, before I became a Drake, I fought with the Wolves of Grìmhildr Skanefeld. It was a bitter campaign warred over winter-fall, and the ice upon Lykaar was thick. We Salamanders brought fire to counter the ice; the Wolves brought fury. It was a good match. Greenskins had invaded the planet, making slaves of its people and siphoning from its promethium wells like common pirates.'

Tsu'gan interrupted. 'What's the purpose of all this?' he hissed. 'If you must watch me, then do it in silence and spare us both this doggerel. Allow me to re-consecrate my arms and armour without your endless chatter.'

'Listen and you may just hear the purpose of it, brother.'

Yes, thought Tsu'gan, the Fenrisians have much to account for. They too are fond of overlong sagas.

'We were few,' Hrydor continued, 'but the orks and their stunted cousins had been fighting indentured men with picks and ice-nailers. They were ill prepared to face Space Marines. But, there was something we did not know. A creature, a kraken, slumbered under the ice. Our warring disturbed it and brought it forth.' Hrydor's voice darkened. 'It took us by surprise. I was among the first. Before my bolter could speak, the beast seized me, swept me up in its tentacles. A lesser man would've been crushed, but my armour and Emperor-given fortitude saved me. Had Grìmhildr not intervened, casting his rune axe to sever the creature's hold, I doubt I'd have survived. Others on the field that day were not so lucky.'

'A stirring tale, I am sure,' said Tsu'gan, sarcastically, 'but we are ready to depart.'

'As always, you fail to see what is before you, Tsu'gan,' Hrydor replied. 'I see

the kraken still. I will it to find me in my solitorium chamber, to face it and conquer it.'

Tsu'gan didn't move, still not understanding.

Hrydor rested a hand on his pauldron. 'Harbouring ghosts doesn't make you unique. All warriors have them, but it is the manner of how we deal with them that defines us as sons of Vulkan.'

Tsu'gan shrugged Hrydor's hand away and went to find Praetor. He was eager to move on. 'Whatever you say, brother.'

Having dispersed around the infirmary, the Firedrakes were forming back into squads and preparing to advance again. Hrydor was about to fall in when he caught a glimpse of something slithering away in his peripheral vision. His auto-senses came back with nothing and when he tried to follow it, the thing, whatever it was, had gone. Only the scent of the ocean, of ice and the deep reek of something ancient and long forgotten, remained.

'It's nothing,' Hrydor said to himself. The ship had begun to affect them all. 'Just an old ghost.'

According to the ship schemata, following the medi-deck's south-east access conduit would lead them first to an emergency hangar and then to the cryo-stasis chamber. After reviewing the other options in the infirmary, this was determined the most expedient route and therefore sanctioned by Nu'mean as their best method of approach. Though it mattered little to the other sergeant, who'd become increasingly driven ever since they'd boarded the *Protean*, Praetor had concurred with this assessment. He led his squad separately to Nu'mean's, this time taking the rearmost position, whilst the other sergeant had the scent and the lead.

'Steady your pace, brother. The ship is badly damaged and may not stand up to such rigours.' Praetor said through the comm-feed.

Nu'mean replied on the same closed channel. 'It's not *your* conscience, though, is it, Praetor?'

'You'll make less ground if--' A flash of something in the shadows of the access conduit – which was long, narrow and badly lit – made Praetor stop. 'All squads, halt.'

A chorus of clunking feet gave way to the low murmurs of the ship as the Firedrakes stopped.

'What is it? 'Stealers?'' Nu'mean sounded irritated.

Praetor's sensors came back empty. If the xenos were present, they were

invisible to all mundane methods of perception.

‘What’s happening here...?’ he whispered to himself. He noticed Hrydor eyeing the shadows keenly as well.

‘Are we safe to proceed or not? I’m getting nothing on my scanners,’ said Nu’mean.

Praetor looked at the Firedrake to his left. ‘Tsu’gan?’

Tsu’gan had his eyes fixed forwards. He kept his voice low. ‘I can smell burning flesh and ozone.’

Nor any physical thing I can touch or slay. Praetor’s own words came back to him. ‘Give me the status of the cryo-chamber.’

There was a pause as Emek checked his data.

‘Fully functional, my lord.’

‘Proceed or not?’ Nu’mean didn’t bother to mask his impatience.

Praetor hesitated. The sealed doors of the emergency hangar were less than a hundred metres away. Nothing but darkness ahead of them.

Something wasn’t right, but what choice did they have?

‘Lead on, Nu’mean.’

The hangar was massive. Several bays, consisting of antechambers, refuelling stations and maintenance pads, comprised the vast space. The bulk of it, however, was taken up by the landing zone itself, which sat directly under a segmented, adamantium-reinforced ceiling. There was evidence of force-shielding too, a last failsafe to keep out the ravages of realspace when the roof to the chamber was open to the void. Six vessels were in dock, all Thunderhawk variants with stripped-down weapon systems, sacrificed for greater troop capacity. They were arrayed, one per docking pit, in two rows of three, noses angled inwards so the line of the ships crossed at diagonals and pointed towards the approaching Firedrakes.

Unlike the other doors in the *Protean*, Emek had been unable to open the one to the emergency hangar via its external console. They’d had to breach it. The air inside had escaped like a death rattle. Suit sensors revealed it was heavy in carbon dioxide and nitrogen.

The modified gunships were not alone. The dead kept them company.

‘This is no gunship hangar, it’s a morgue,’ said Hrydor, panning his suit lamps into some of the darker recesses.

Skeletons in scraps of uniform – some in fatigues, others wearing what was left of their robes – were clustered against the dust-clogged landing stanchions of

the vessels in dock. A few were strewn in the open, rigor mortis having curled their limbs grotesquely. Some carried lasguns and other small arms, or once had. There were other weapons, too, of non-Imperial design.

Nu'mean showed no respect for the dead, ploughing straight into the room, intent on crossing the four hundred metres of the hangar deck to the cryostasis chamber beyond as quickly as possible.

I've waited a century for this.

'Move out. We can do nothing for—' He stopped short when his boots brushed a corpse he had not expected to see.

'Xenos?' Tsu'gan saw it too, noticed several alien bodies in fact. He recognised the lithe forms and segmented armour of the eldar. They were less badly decomposed than the humans, resembling desiccated corpses rather than fleshless skeletons. The eldar were grey and shrunken, their eyes dark hollows and their hair thin like gossamer. Some wore helmets of a conical design with angled eye slits to match their alien physiognomy.

Emek stooped by one of the bodies. Wiping away a veneer of dust, he found a strange sigil he didn't recognise. 'Some kind of advanced warrior caste? What were they doing here?'

Praetor appraised the scene. 'Fighting against us at first then fighting for their lives. There are claw marks here in this wall, too large and broad for any of these bodies.'

He shared an uneasy glance with Nu'mean.

'There is little time,' the other sergeant muttered in a small voice.

Swathes of diffuse light, scything through the dust-fogged air from above, flickered once and died. The power cut out, plunging the room into sudden and total darkness.

Tsu'gan felt his massively armoured body start to rise. Gravity, as well as the lights, had failed.

Lances of magnesium-white from their halo-lamps stabbed into the gloom, criss-crossing as the Terminators began to float around. Despite their bulk, they were lifting steadily. So too were the gunships. Untethered in their docking pits, the Thunderhawks rose as if in a slow-motion launch, like heavyweight dirigibles set loose on a skirling wind. Silently they pulled free of their landing stations, the slightest change in the air influencing their laboured trajectory.

Tsu'gan was trying to engage the mag-clamps on his boots but a *system failure* message scrolled across his retinal display in icon-code.

‘Mag-locks are down,’ he growled to his brothers. The lances of light issuing from his suit flickered intermittently. ‘Halo-lamps failing too.’ A final burst before the light died completely lit the broadside of a Thunderhawk, groaning towards him like a gunmetal berg.

‘Vulkan’s anv– *gnrrr!*’ He crashed into the side of the vessel and rebounded. The impact was harder than expected, and his body railed against it painfully.

‘Steer clear of the gunships. Use your proximity sensors.’ Nu’mean’s warning came too late for a rueful Tsu’gan.

‘Expel gas from your pneumatics for guidance until locking cords are fixed,’ he added.

Tsu’gan was already spiralling, waiting until he was more or less upright before evacuating a portion of the gas that fed some of the systems in his suit: oxygen, propulsion, motion – they were all vital to a lesser or greater degree but had a certain level of redundancy that made voiding a small amount of them non-critical.

In a matter of seconds, ghost-like plumes of gas were venting across the chamber as the Firedrakes fought to organise themselves. One of the drifting gunships collided with another of its fleet and the report was deafening. It didn’t prevent Tsu’gan from hearing Hrydor cry out, though.

‘The beast! I see it! Engaging!’ A burst of assault cannon fire shredded the air, lighting up the dark with muzzle flare. It sent Hrydor surging backwards, where he spun and struck one of the chamber walls.

‘In Vulkan’s name,’ he drawled, still groggy from the impact, and triggered the cannon again.

‘Cease and desist. Power down – all weapons!’ Praetor was floating towards him as fast as he could while staying out of Hrydor’s deadly fire arc.

Tsu’gan was close by too and moved to assist. He could hear his sergeant muttering.

‘Leave me, brothers. Leave me. You are at Vulkan’s side, whose fire beats in my breast...’

He had no idea who Praetor was talking to. The rest of the Firedrakes were dispersed around the chamber. Some were trying to attach locking cords to anything stable. Others were acting... *strangely*. A rash of reports came over the comm-feed in rapid succession.

‘...cannot move... my armour... like stone...’

‘...systems failing... oxygen tainted...’

‘...xenos! ’Stealers in the hold! Permission to engage...’

The last one Tsu'gan recognised as Nu'mean.

'All dead... abandon ship... all hands... dead...my brothers...'

Emek, who Tsu'gan caught a glimpse of in the corner of his eye, was disappearing below, heading for something on the deck but otherwise faring much better than the heavier Terminators. He was also one of the few unaffected by whatever was assailing them.

Then he saw him.

Face a patchwork of scar tissue; eyes crimson-lidded and burning with hate; armour of red and black with scales swathing the battle-plate; horned pauldrons and long vermilion claws upon his gauntlets. There was no mistaking it.

It was Nihilan.

The leader of the Dragon Warriors was here and his thrice-damned warp-craft was afflicting them all. Tsu'gan would cleanse the *Protean* of the renegades. He would end them all.

Nihilan's lips were moving. A voice like cracked parchment resonated inside Tsu'gan's head.

'I fear nothing! Nothing!' he spat back against the accusation only he could hear.

The renegade smiled, baring tiny fangs.

'I'll slay you now, sorcerer...' Tsu'gan sneered, aiming his storm bolter towards his hated enemy.

Tsu'gan stopped dead. His weapon, his gauntlet and vambrace, his entire arm...

'No...'

So wretched was his dismay that he could barely give it voice.

Armour of red and black covered Tsu'gan's body, usurping the familiar Salamanders green. Small flecks of dust cascaded through the cracks in the joints as he felt his skin shedding like a serpent's beneath it. The reek of copper filled his nostrils, emanating from his own body. He knew that stink. It haunted his dreams with the promise of blood and prophesied treachery. Tsu'gan's battle-helm was no longer fashioned into the image of drake: it was bare and came to a stub-nosed snout rendered in bone. Skulls hung from bloody chains wrapped around his body.

'Arghh!' His anguish was louder this time as a Thunderhawk floated by, obscuring Nihilan from view for a moment. On its flank a face was impossibly reflected. Tsu'gan beheld his form and saw Gor'ghan there instead, the renegade that had slain his captain. It was he, he was it. Failure. Murderer.

The gunship passed. Nihilan was laughing, standing on the deck below.

Tsu'gan clawed his way to the sorcerer, grasping whatever he could to propel himself, using up the pneumatic pressure in his suit.

A pair of clashing gunships narrowly missed him, but Tsu'gan barely noticed in his determination to reach Nihilan. Around him, his brothers struggled against their own phantoms. Hrydor's belligerent wailing became as white noise. Tsu'gan ignored it all. They didn't matter. A glancing blow struck his pauldron, resonating agony through the suit that he bit down and endured. Only vengeance mattered.

A life for a life. Those were the words he'd used to justify murder.

Tsu'gan came close enough to reach his prey.

Locking hands around the renegade's neck, he squeezed.

'Laugh now, bastard! Laugh now!'

And Nihilan did. He laughed as blood spilled from his mouth, as the veins burst on his forehead, as his neck was slowly crushed.

Emek's voice broke through the veil that had fallen across the chamber and across the Firedrakes.

'Restoring power now. Brace yourselves.'

Gravity returned along with the lights.

The Terminators fell. So too did the gunships, like asteroids from the sky.

A piece of Thunderhawk fuselage missed Tsu'gan by less than a metre.

Chunks of debris broken off from the gunship's body during the impact rained against his armour, but he weathered it. In his hands, he was holding a corpse. Its neck was crushed and when he loosened his fevered grip, the head fell off.

Tsu'gan let the wretched body of a dead serf go. Disgust became relief as he saw the reassuring green of his battle-plate. The hallucination had passed. He was himself again, although the trauma of it still lingered as if waiting to be rekindled.

'What happened?'

Praetor was releasing his hold on Hrydor, who had also recovered but was shaken by his experiences, when he answered.

'There is something aboard this ship. Something kept quiescent by its systems,' he admitted. 'Like a healthy body rejects foreign invaders, so too does this vessel.'

'How is that possible, brother-sergeant? It's just a ship.'

Nu'mean came up alongside him. The Firedrakes were converging, finding strength in proximity and all wanting to know what the phenomenon was

plaguing the corridors of the *Protean*. Mercifully, the Terminators had escaped being crushed to death by the plummeting Thunderhawks.

‘A ship that has been to the warp.’ He regarded Praetor. ‘Its stench is redolent with every rotation of the life support systems. And that is not all.’

The moment was pregnant with anticipation, as if a terrible revelation was at hand. In the end, it was Praetor that broke the silence.

‘Seeing will make an explanation easier.’

‘Seeing what?’ asked Hrydor, his composure returning. So powerful, so mentally invasive had their ordeals been that an ordinary man would be rendered a gibbering wreck. As it was, Space Marines were hewn of sterner material and found their faculties stressed but were otherwise not lastingly affected.

‘In the cryo-stasis chamber,’ said Nu’mean. ‘We go there now. Come on.’ He was leading them out across the bay, now trashed with the wreckage of the downed Thunderhawks and littered with small fires, when Emek spoke up.

‘Something on the power fluctuation readings is wrong,’ he said to no one in particular. The Apothecary was standing before the room’s main operational console and had accessed a data stream concerning the recent power outage.

‘It wasn’t caused by a sporadic energy surge?’ asked Praetor.

Emek turned.

‘No, my lord. The power from the ship’s systems was *diverted* to another section. It looks like it was used to open a previously sealed bulkhead door.’

‘Genestealers don’t do such things. They nest, confined to whatever area they’ve colonised. It’s not in their nature to explore,’ said Nu’mean.

Tsu’gan stepped forwards into the circle that had developed between the two sergeants and the Apothecary. His tone was mildly annoyed.

‘Meaning what, exactly?’

Praetor answered without looking at him. His eyes were on the distant blast door and the way ahead to the cryo-stasis chamber.

‘It means we are not alone on this ship. Someone else has boarded the *Protean*.’

The rest of the journey to the cryo-stasis chamber was conducted in silence. There was no way of knowing who or what else was aboard the *Protean* or their relative location to the Firedrakes. They exercised extreme caution now. Every junction, every alcove was checked and double-checked.

It took them several minutes, through several tracts of closely confined corridors, before they reached the area of the ship designated for cryo-stasis. A

four-way junction led up to the chamber. The way behind them, they knew. Turning left and right were another two corridors. According to Emek, the right as the Firedrakes faced it went to a bank of saviour pods. The left went deeper into the *Protean* and a maintenance sub-deck. A short strip of corridor approximately a metre long continued ahead and brought them to the cryo-stasis chamber itself.

The room was heavily locked down. An almost impervious bulkhead door cordoned it off and kept it sealed from idle explorers. Formerly, the *Protean* had been Nu'mean's ship. The brother-sergeant possessed the access codes that would open up the chamber and reveal whatever it was they had ventured this far for, and with an Apothecary in tow.

The bulkhead retracted into the thick corridor walls on either side, slipping into previously unseen recesses that closed themselves off once the procedure was complete.

Cold air, charged with liquid nitrogen mist from inside the chamber, beckoned them closer. The room was not especially large or remarkable. It was square and held twenty banks of clear, cylindrical coffin-like receptacles capable of housing a Space Marine in full armour. This was where crew-members could go during a long space journey. It was also a place to keep the badly wounded until a space station or dock could be reached which had superior medical facilities to those of the cruiser.

At that moment, as the Firedrakes entered and dispersed around the room, it had but one resident.

'We didn't bring you here to save anyone, Brother Emek,' said Praetor as he stood before the only occupied cryo-tank.

Within, a crystallised frost veneering the glass, was an alien figure. Peaceful, as if in death, its helmet had been removed. The eldar's almond-shaped eyes were closed. Its long angular face was androgynous and oddly symmetrical. It wore robes over segmented armour inscribed with peculiar, alien runes. Hands folded over its chest, it took on the semblance of a bizarre, sleeping child, disturbing and beguiling at the same time.

'No, not a saviour at all,' uttered Emek, regarding the serum within his gauntlet with fresh understanding. 'I am here as an executioner.'

'So now you know,' Nu'mean broke in, unwilling to wait a moment longer. Pipes fed down into the cryotank, pumping in the solutions and gases needed to keep the subject in suspended animation. It also had a console, as they all did,

which controlled the tank's operation. A small port, ringed invitingly by brass, enabled *additions* to be made to the liquid nitrogen amalgam and the fluids that kept the occupant of the tank alive.

Praetor put his hand on Nu'mean's shoulder.

'Prepare him for what must be done. We will guard the entrance. If these interlopers are close...' He let the implication hang in the air for a moment, before ordering the other Firedrakes out, leaving Emek and Nu'mean alone with the frozen xenos.

Tsu'gan retired from the scene reluctantly, eager to know just why this one alien was so important and why they hadn't simply thrust chainfists through the glass and killed it without all the needless ceremony.

'Death to the alien,' he spat under his breath as he was leaving.

'The nerve agent will render the creature brain-dead,' Nu'mean explained. 'It is virulent and fast acting but must be applied through the brass receptor port.' He gestured to the ring on the console.

'I had thought my mission here was to revivify one of our lost brothers,' said Emek, unaware of his impropriety and eyeing the still, alien body of the eldar. He knew a little of the race and recognised it as a farseer, some kind of eldar witch. 'Its psychic emanations have been affecting us since we boarded the *Protean*.'

'Yes,' Nu'mean answered calmly, rarely, now at peace with closure so close at hand. 'Warp exposure has bonded him to the ship, for it is a *he*. Praetor felt it, so too did I but didn't voice it. The cryo-process is the only thing keeping the wretch down. Without it, even the slightest breach, we would be exposed to his witchery. I lost over three thousand hands on this ship to capture this creature. Cruel fate threw us into a warpstorm just as his xenos kin fought to free him. I could do nothing for the men and women of this vessel. I lost battle-brothers, too. My order to curtail the evacuation condemned them all.'

Even with all the years now having passed, all those lives... all the ones the Salamanders had sworn to protect, were felt keenly by Nu'mean. A prisoner of war the farseer might no longer be, but he was still an enemy.

Emek's posture hardened noticeably. 'What must we do to kill it?'

Nu'mean began the procedure to open up the receptor port for the vial. He removed his battle-helm to do it, to better see and manipulate the controls.

'It will take only a moment. Prepare the vial,' he said.

Emek ejected it from his gauntlet and engaged the syringe at the end.

‘Ready, my lord.’

‘Almost there...’ Nu’mean began before all power feeding the cryo-chamber cut out completely.

Outside, the lights died.

Praetor was turning, heading back into the chamber when he saw the Apothecary recoil from the cryo-tank, a bolt of arc-lightning ripping him off his feet. It had come from the stasis tank. His cry echoed around the chamber as he spun and lay prone on the ground.

Another lashed out like a whip, ripples of psychic power coursing over the cryo-tank’s surface in agitated waves. Nu’mean staggered as the bolt struck him but stayed standing, protected by his Crux Terminatus.

‘Get back!’ Nu’mean, not wishing to test the limits of his personal ward again, seized Emek by the ankle and proceeded to drag him bodily across the floor.

‘Storm bolters!’ yelled Praetor.

Tsu’gan stepped inside and unleashed a salvo. The explosive shells stopped a few centimetres from the frozen cryo-vessel, detonating harmlessly in mid-air. The impacts blossomed outwards, as if striking some kind of miniature void field, and dissipated into nothing.

It saved Nu’mean from another bolt of arc-lightning as he almost threw Emek through the doorway and then barrelled out of the chamber himself. The bulkhead slammed shut after him, Praetor on hand to seal it.

At least the doors were still working, evidently controlled by a different part of the vessel’s internal power grid.

Even with the chamber sealed, with the power still out Tsu’gan could feel the hallucinations returning. Though his logical mind told him they were not real, his senses railed against it. They told him he could smell copper, see shadows coalescing into foes in the long corridor ahead of them, taste the bitter tang of sulphur stinging his palate.

‘Be strong of mind, brothers,’ Praetor told them, even as Nu’mean was attending to Emek.

‘He is badly wounded,’ he said, all the old guilt and sense of impotence rushing back in a flood.

A large crack parted the Apothecary’s plastron. Blood was welling within it. There were scorch marks too, a long gash of jagged black infecting the armour like a wound itself. Part of Emek’s helmet was broken away. An eye awash with crimson blinked back tears of blood.

‘I am wounded...’ he rasped. He tried to look around but found he could not. Vital fluids bubbled in his throat and he could hear the slow rhythm of his secondary heart kicking as it attempted to cope with the trauma.

Tsu’gan looked on and found his anger towards the Apothecary had fled, to be replaced by concern. He was his brother and now, faced with seeing his potential death, realised he had acted ignobly towards the Apothecary. It was not behaviour worthy of a Salamander of Vulkan. Once tied to the Ignean Emek might have been, but he was not the one that Tsu’gan hated.

‘He’s dying,’ he uttered.

Nu’mean ignored him. ‘We must restore power to the cryo-chamber,’ he told Praetor. ‘I won’t leave this unfinished.’

Praetor nodded. The Firedrakes were clustering the corridor. They’d set up a defensive perimeter, responding to their conditioned training routines. If there was one thing Salamanders knew how to do, and do well, it was hold ground.

‘Stay here,’ he said, ‘and be ready to move in again on my signal. I have the schemata of the ship. I’ll take my squad and find the central power room.’ He glowered meaningfully. ‘Then I’ll find whoever shut it off and do the same to them. Bloodily.’

‘In Vulkan’s name, brother,’ said Nu’mean as they departed.

‘We’ll need his will in this,’ was Praetor’s response as he clanked away down the corridor. A short distance, and a junction led them away from the medical deck and deeper into the *Protean*’s cold heart.

Tsu’gan scanned the shadows warily. This part of the *Protean* was largely untouched and possessed an eerie quality, as if all life in its empty corridors had simply ceased. No struggle, no damage, just *absence*.

‘I’m detecting no signs of stealer habitation,’ reported Brother Vo’kar. He partnered Tsu’gan as they advanced towards the central power room under Praetor’s instruction.

‘Keep a wary eye,’ the sergeant advised. Behind them, Hrydor swept the darkness with his assault cannon. The last member of the squad, Brother Invictese, was a half-pace ahead of him. ‘It’s not the xenos we face here,’ Praetor concluded.

Distance from the cryo-chamber helped. The mission chrono told the Firedrakes they had left Nu’mean’s squad exactly thirty-three minutes ago. Tsu’gan estimated with some accuracy that they had travelled several hundred metres in that time. But despite the distance, he still felt the same old feelings

from before tugging at his resolve.

A shadow darted ahead of them but before he had aimed his storm bolter it disappeared, seemingly into smoke. Copper was heavy on the recycled air. Psychic fabrication or real, Tsu'gan had no way of telling. He saw Praetor eyeing the dark, too, finding apparitions in the deepest alcoves before deliberately looking away.

Hrydor's heart rate and respiratory functions relayed on Tsu'gan's tactical display were elevated.

Praetor had seen them too.

'Gird yourselves, brothers.' He didn't single any one of them out, but Tsu'gan knew to whom he was really speaking. 'Our minds are our enemies. Rely on your instincts. Use your mental conditioning routines to find balance. We were born in Vulkan's forge. We all crossed the gate of fire and were tested before the proving-forge. Our mettle is unbendable, as Firedrakes it must be so. Remember that.'

A series of solemn affirmations answered the brother-sergeant but all felt the uneasiness in the atmosphere, like a serpent crawling beneath the skin. Hrydor gave his last of all.

So far, they had encountered no resistance. According to the schemata, the central power room was not much further.

But, even as his halo-lamps strafed the dark, Tsu'gan couldn't assuage the uneasy feeling in his gut.

At the bulkhead door to the cryo-chamber, Nu'mean waited impatiently.

Emek was slumped against the back wall, still bleeding. He was conscious but not entirely lucid. He'd used whatever medical unguents and salves he had in his narthecium kit to do what he could. His brothers, under his faltering instruction, had done their best to aid him. He was in Vulkan's hands now. Either he would endure the anvil and emerge reforged or he would break against it. In any event, Nu'mean had taken the vial in its brass partial outer casing and mag-locked it to his vambrace. Though small, the device was not so delicate that he couldn't apply the serum himself. It would be difficult and better handled by an Apothecary but that option was no longer viable.

'Sergeant Nu'mean.' The comm-feed address came from further up the long corridor, where Brothers Mercurion and Gun'dar guarded the junction Praetor and his squad had taken to reach the central power room.

'Report, brother.'

‘Contacts on my scanners. Closing quickly.’

Nu’mean went to his own bio-scanner, one of the concomitant systems of his Terminator armour.

Several heat traces, distant but very real, were approaching. He deduced their origin from a section of the ship that had previously been sealed.

‘Maintain defensive cordon,’ he said to Brothers Kohlogh and Ve’kyt beside him.

‘Hold position. Fall back only on my order,’ he told the advance line.

Something is wrong, he thought. With the farseer active, he had expected to be assailed with visions and mental tortures by now. He had expected the screams of the dying, to witness the burning faces of the thousands he had condemned to death. But there was nothing, just the nagging sense of something out of kilter.

‘Hold position,’ he repeated and felt his unease growing.

Hrydor whispered something, but not loud enough for Tsu’gan to hear. The Terminators moved in close formation through the final few corridors like the Romani legionnaire formations of old, some of Terra’s battle teachings having permeated Nocturnean culture. Only Hrydor was lagging at the rear.

Several junctions went by, each leading off into another area of the ship, each a darkened recess that needed to be scanned and checked before they could proceed.

Tsu’gan was about to send Praetor a sub-vocal warning about his troubled battle-brother when a moment of revelation struck him. The nagging at the back of his skull, the itch he felt upon his neck and shoulders, the invisible tension that charged the air, he knew it. He’d felt it before. Watchers. Watchers in the shadows.

Something scuttled almost imperceptibly through the darkness. Tsu’gan got the impression that the shadows and it were one, blended as night on top of night.

The figures he’d dismissed earlier were not hallucinations – they were real. Nor had Praetor witnessed and refuted apparitions in the gloom but something very tangible and very dangerous; dangerous enough to foul the Salamanders’ auto-senses.

Tsu’gan’s warning came too late as something else set its influence against them and fell hardest on Hrydor.

‘I see it!’ he cried out, breaking squad coherency and clanking off back the way they’d come.

‘Grimhildr...’ he waved the imaginary Space Wolf over his shoulder in a bid to follow, ‘the kraken... Bring your axe and bond-brothers. I have it in my sights!’

How long poor Hrydor had been quietly under the farseer’s influence, they’d never know.

Praetor turned and saw him disappearing down one of the other junctions into an unknown part of the ship. ‘Brother!’ he called, but Hrydor was lost to his own version of reality.

Assault cannon fire echoed back to them loudly as he engaged the imaginary beast of the deeps.

Praetor was already moving. ‘After him.’

‘Where is he going?’ asked Tsu’gan.

‘To his death, if this continues. We are not alone here.’

Tsu’gan nodded and followed his sergeant.

The junction Hrydor had chosen led to a long corridor. He was still visible as the others reached it, firing bursts from his assault cannon before stomping ahead again.

‘I can clip him, maybe take a piston out in his leg.’ Tsu’gan was already taking aim. ‘It will slow him.’

Praetor shook his head.

The scuttling sound returned. They all heard it this time, as well as a high-pitched keening as if issued by a flock of mechanised birds.

‘Name of Vulkan...’ The sergeant scowled, trying to track the source of the raucous noise as a bulkhead door slammed down to impede them. They lost sight of Hrydor, though Tsu’gan swore he noticed the shadows closing in on him just before they did, as if detaching from the very walls.

‘Hold the junction,’ Praetor told Invictese and Vo’kar. They assumed defensive firing positions at once. He turned to Tsu’gan. ‘Get it down, now!’

Tsu’gan plunged his chainfist into the metal and cascading sparks lit the corridor.

It took several minutes to tear through the bulkhead.

Tsu’gan was the first to see to the other side.

‘Gone,’ he snarled, but then detected blood traces on the grated floor. The corridor had a vaulted ceiling, littered with pipes and narrow vertical ducts. Chains hanging down from the gloom jangled faintly. Praetor and Tsu’gan pulled at the gap in the bulkhead with their hands until it was wide enough to traverse. More precious seconds were lost.

Hurrying now, Praetor and Tsu'gan cleared the corridor in another two minutes. Leaving the others behind and rounding a tight corner, they found Hrydor's body.

The xenos were coming fast, dozens and dozens of them.

The long corridor afforded a decent fire point for Nu'mean's squad and the ceiling was solid enough that they didn't have to worry about ambushade from above.

If the genestealers came from the *Protean's* aft they could hold them off.

A few metres from the cryo-chamber's door was the cross-junction bleeding left and right. Nu'mean had positioned himself, Emek and the other two Firedrakes in his squad here.

To the left was the chamber housing the bank of saviour pods. An incursion from that direction was unlikely. But if the xenos came from the right-hand corridor at the same time as the aft-facing one, the fight would likely be a lot shorter. Already, he could hear them: chittering, scuttling, loping. It would not be long.

Approximately fifty metres separated them and Brothers Mercurion and Gun'dar at the next junction. Another hundred or so and the long corridor terminated in a patch of darkness their halo-lamps were too far away to penetrate.

'Wait until you have a target then lay suppressing fire to slow their ranks.' Nu'mean ordered down the comm-feed. 'Let's see if we can clog the way ahead with xenos corpses, brothers.'

A belligerent 'affirmative' delivered in synch told him he'd been heard and that the Firedrakes were making their final oaths.

The door behind him, where his prey partially slumbered, felt hot against Nu'mean's back.

All of this for vengeance.

Nu'mean crushed his doubt in a clenched fist.

No price is too steep.

'Here they come!' The corridor ahead was suddenly lit by the muzzle flare of crashing storm bolters.

Fleetingly, through the press of bodies and gunfire, Nu'mean saw the rabid xenos exploding.

They were relentless. Even at a distance, he noticed a fervent glow in their eyes. It gave the beasts aggression and awareness. Nu'mean realised then why

they'd barely felt the farseer's psychic emanations. He was part of the ship and that extended to the denizens aboard. The eldar was channelling his power *through* the 'stealers, animating and guiding them like a substitute Hive Mind.

The bolter fire from Gun'dar and Mercurion lasted another few seconds before they began to fall back. They loosed in sporadic bursts after that, one then the other, overlapping their salvos.

Nu'mean could barely discern whole alien bodies, such was the gore and dismemberment wrought by the guns.

'Running low,' said Mercurion.

'Aye, brother,' Gun'dar replied.

Nu'mean started forwards, but discipline took hold and he stopped. He went to the comm-feed instead.

'Fall back. Rejoin the line, brothers.' There was an urgency to the sergeant's tone that suggested he knew what was coming.

Genestealers were everywhere, clambering over the dead, clawing their way over wall, floor and ceiling.

Such fury...

'Vulkan's fire beats—' Mercurion began. He was snapping a fresh load in his storm bolter, Gun'dar covering him, when a 'stealer got close enough to tear off half of his helmet and face. Brother Mercurion staggered, sputtering a few more rounds from his storm bolter, before another xenos punched a hole through his chest. A third leapt on his back. Then they engulfed him and a Firedrake was lost to the swarm.

'Rejoin the line! Rejoin the line!' But Nu'mean's imploring was for nothing.

Gun'dar fell moments later. Surrounded, he could not hope to hold out for long. His storm bolter lit up the corridor for another six seconds before it fell silent.

Nu'mean held on to his anger, prevented it from sending him crashing into the onrushing 'stealers to his doom and vainglory.

'Brother Kohlogh...'

The Firedrake took a step forwards to brandish his heavy flamer.

Nu'mean's voice was hollow. 'Burn it.'

Hrydor had been hacked apart. Chain-toothed weapons left scars across his armour. The cuts were heaviest at the weaker joints. His Terminator suit was badly rent and scorch marks suggested close-ranged plasma. Sections of partially dissolved ceramite, which left gaping crevices in Hrydor's sundered flesh, had

been made by a melta gun. His assailants had set upon him from all sides and took him apart, piece by piece. Blood painted a grisly scene that glowed a deep, visceral red in the starkness of the halo-lamps.

A solitary figure stood mockingly at the end of the next corridor, poised at the junction. It was clad in archaic power armour, dark like twilight or deeper; it was hard to tell precisely. A battle-helm, morphed into the graven visage of some howling daemon, its crude mouth grille locked in a silent scream, looked stretched, almost avian, as did its clawed feet and gauntlets. Tilting its head on one side, the hideous thing clicked. The motion was strange, slightly syncopated, and its clawed foot grated the metal in time.

Tsu'gan's mouth curled into a snarl behind his helm. 'Raptor...'

Then he barrelled headlong down the corridor, storm bolter crashing.

Screeching in bird-like, mechanised monotone, the Raptor leapt into the air, the densely throated thrusters on its back coughing out plumes of smoke and fire to lift it.

Tsu'gan cursed. He missed.

Above them, the chains and pipes clanked noisily. Tsu'gan fired into the darkness of the vaulted ceiling where he thought he'd detected movement.

Cruel laughter, like a vulture's cawing and impossible to pinpoint, greeted his failure. Then came another blast of bird-like screeching, synthesised through a vox-grille mouth.

'Chaos Traitors!' he snarled to Praetor, scything chain links with another salvo and sending them cascading like iron rain onto his armour.

His sergeant's reply was cut off by the bulkhead door slamming down between them. He'd been caught. Tsu'gan spat another curse as several armoured figures, the first Raptor's kin, descended from above on bladed wings. Freefalling, they seemed to melt out of the shadows, and only engaged their jump packs to arrest their flight at the last moment.

Ozone from the melta stink and the reek of blood-laced, oiled chaintooth filled the air. The blades were buzzing already, growling for prey.

'You'll not kill me so easily, hellspawn,' he vowed, trying to shut off the other sensations pressing at the edge of conscious thought, the copper stink, the veil of sulphur...

These foes were real. Night Lords – terror-mongers and cowards, unworthy of the name Space Marine, even when they'd been loyal to the Throne.

Raptors were pack-hunters and he had sprung their trap. The blades came in quick. Tsu'gan barely had time to see, let alone defend them.

It took Praetor three blows from his thunder hammer to batter the bulkhead door down and send it screeching from its moorings into the corridor at speed. Like most sons of Vulkan, his strength was prodigious, but even amongst the Fire-born Praetor had a reputation for incredible feats. Brought on by fury and determination, this one ranked amongst the toughest.

The closest Raptor didn't see it coming. Six thousand kilograms of half-metre-thick metal took the renegade down, slamming into its torso and nearly cutting it in two. A death rattle escaped from its skulled faceplate before it died.

Tsu'gan saw the improvised missile in time, twisting aside, but the flying bulkhead still grazed the front of his plastron and left a groove in the ceramite. The rents in his armour from the chainblades were light. The Firedrake took advantage of his assailants' shock, albeit a few seconds in duration, to gut one at close range with a burst of his storm bolter.

Crushing the Raptor's pauldron in his fist, he rammed the muzzle hard into its stomach and pulled the trigger. Tsu'gan was throwing the body aside as another tried to leap into the air to regroup. It got so far, arching its body to draw a bead with its plasma gun, when Tsu'gan reached out and seized its ankle. With barely a portion of his strength, he sent the Traitor smashing to the deck. It slid, claws scratching at the deck for purchase, in front of Praetor. The sergeant severed the creature's head with the edge of his storm shield.

'Feel Vulkan's wrath!' he bellowed, battering another Raptor aside that sprang over to engage him.

Tsu'gan was free of the flock and laid about him with controlled bursts. Warning icons blazed across his retinal display, intense thermal temperature spikes. The meltagunner weaved out of his initial salvo, firing small bursts of its jump pack to stay aloft, before Praetor blindsided it and slammed the Raptor into the wall.

By now, Vo'kar and Invictese had been summoned from the strongpoint and were placing careful blasts into the melee from the end of the corridor.

Like weird, metal dolls, the Raptors jerked and shuddered as they died.

Facing almost a full Terminator squad, they couldn't hope to win.

What had begun as a cynical ambush had turned into a bitter and desperate defeat before the might of the Firedrakes.

Barely four of the Traitors remained. The Salamanders were in the ascendancy. Two, blazing contrails from their jump packs, made for the vaulted roof. Combined storm bolter fire – so concentrated, so close – shredded their armour like tin.

A third lashed out at Praetor, but the chainblade it wielded ran afoul of the sergeant's sturdy armour. Broken metal teeth rattled the deck, followed swiftly by the Raptor's sundered corpse.

Tsu'gan came face-to-face with the lone survivor, their leader and the one who wore the daemon's distended face. It angled its head, fibre bundle cabling at its neck sparked as its body spasmed. Then the wretched, avian creature screeched at him. The goad forced Tsu'gan to swing – he wanted to feel its flesh and bone churning against his chainfist – but the Raptor leader had banked on this and avoided the blow, snatching up the fallen meltagun instead.

It looked like it was about to turn the weapon against the Firedrake before the creature boosted its jump jets and soared into the vaulted ceiling, burning through metal sheeting as it went, fashioning an escape route. Tsu'gan's bulk blocked a clear shot for the others and storm bolter rounds tore up the pipes above harmlessly before the Firedrakes were alone again.

'Night Lords,' spat Tsu'gan. 'Craven whelps and molesters. What are they doing aboard the *Protean*?'

Praetor couldn't answer. He was listening to the comm-feed.

'Nu'mean is in trouble,' he said when he was done. 'The Traitors will have to wait—'

Tsu'gan bristled. 'Hrydor's vengeance!'

'Will have to wait,' Praetor repeated firmly. 'Our brothers, those who yet live and breathe, need us to breach the central power room now.'

They were about to retrace their steps when an explosion, loud enough to resonate through Tsu'gan's armour, rocked the corridor. Metal debris fell in thick chunks. Dust and fire billowed out ahead of them in a blackened plume.

Praetor glared through the smoke and carnage, filtering out the interference from the explosion's aftermath. He muttered something. The rest of the squad had assumed battle positions, expecting another ambush. The sergeant consulted the scanner of his retinal display. He did this several times before he swore, an old Nocturnean curse.

'Brother-sergeant?' asked Vo'kar.

'Our way back is closed.'

'Lord?'

Praetor rounded on him, his fury affecting the burning embers in his eyes and setting them ablaze.

'We cannot proceed, brother! The Traitors have collapsed it. And unless we find another route to the central power chamber, Nu'mean and his squad are

dead!’

The respite would not last. The cleansing fire of Brother Kohlogh’s heavy flamer had done its work well. Ashen genestealer bodies littered the corridor ahead, but more were coming, many more.

Nu’mean had his ear to the comm-feed, listening to Praetor’s grim report. The conversation ran in several one-sided bursts.

‘I understand, brother.’

‘Do not attempt it. Cutting through will take too long.’

‘Another route? There is none that will get you here fast enough.’

‘You must. I can get Brother Emek off the hulk. His life is the only one you can save now.’

‘In Vulkan’s name,’ he echoed the last transmission under his breath after he’d cut the feed.

He consulted the bio-scanner on his retinal display, looked at the lethal vial of toxin mag-locked to his armour. His enemy was within metres. He should be able to kill it. In any other circumstance, a sergeant of the Firedrakes should have been able to kill it.

The noises from the gloom ahead were getting louder.

It would be soon.

Act!

Nu’mean addressed Brother Ve’kyt. ‘Get the Apothecary to the saviour pods. Ensure he is on his way and return here to the line. I will need you and Brother Kohlogh before the end.’

It was a risk, putting Emek in one of the pods, which was not guaranteed to function. Nor was his rescue assured once he was adrift in the void of space. And with his injuries... This was the only choice. Nu’mean knew what was expected.

Ve’kyt had gone, taking the groggy, half-comatose Apothecary with him.

Nu’mean rested his gauntlet on Kohlogh’s shoulder plate.

‘None shall pass, brother.’

Kohlogh nodded. The ’stealers sounded closer than ever. Vague shapes could be seen in the darkness ahead.

Nu’mean turned and approached the bulkhead door. The activation codes were on his lips.

‘Seal it behind me,’ he said quietly. ‘Do not open it again. Whatever happens.’

‘In Vulkan’s name,’ Kohlogh intoned.

‘Aye for Vulkan...’ Nu’mean answered, the chittering of the approaching beasts rising to a crescendo as he opened the door and entered the cryo-chamber.

He was barely across the threshold, the door sealing shut behind him, when the arc-lightning struck. It was a dull pain at first, intensifying into something much more invasive and burning as Nu’mean took each agonising step.

His Crux Terminatus gave him some protection, but it was his Salamanders tenacity that kept him moving across the fog-shrouded floor.

Like white-hot fingers running across his armour, the psychic lightning probed for flesh and for weakness. Slowly, the joints in Nu’mean’s once-impervious suit were eased apart.

Above the crack of energy, he heard the battle outside. Bolter fire and flamer bursts mingled with the war cries of his brothers and the shrieking of the xenos. It was a fitting requiem to their last stand in this hellish place. This was not the ship of his memory. This abomination was the *Protean* no longer. Only wraiths lingered here, best forgotten. Nu’mean had learned that too late, but now he would at least finish his mission.

Merely steps away from the cryo-tank, he saw the farseer slumbering, as serene as he had ever been. To look upon the alien, one would not know of the turmoil in his mind as he fought the invader that sought to kill him.

But kill you I will, Nu’mean vowed.

The horrors and cerebral tortures returned when the psychic lightning failed. Faces, rotten and withered by decay, glared at him with accusing eyes. Suddenly, there were hundreds, clogging the path to the cryo-tank, their zombified talons clawing at the Firedrake sergeant. Serfs and crewmen, brander-priests and even fellow Space Marines held Nu’mean at bay with their anger and his guilt.

Nu’mean gritted his teeth. The pain in his body was incredible, as if his nerve-endings were being stripped and immolated, one by one. He couldn’t see through the throng but felt the console. It was still primed for the lethal serum’s delivery.

The farseer redoubled his efforts, sending wave after wave of arc-lightning cracking into the Salamander.

Nu’mean screamed with every blast, the flesh peeling from his bones. His gauntlets were on fire but he saw his purpose clear enough through the bloody haze.

‘I am your death...’ he rasped, and slammed the vial into the receptor ring. The toxin emptied quickly, feeding into the mechanism like an eager parasite. At once, the farseer convulsed. The tremors looked incongruous when matched

against the calmness of his expression. In a few seconds he became still.

The battle beyond the door had fallen silent long ago. The genestealers couldn't get through, reduced to scratching the dense plating with their claws until they became bored and moved on.

Nu'mean was fading. Somewhere deep down he heard the clanging of the forge, of the anvil at the hammer's touch.

I will be there soon, he thought. I will be joining you all soon, my brothers.

Tsu'gan nursed bitter wounds, as he stood silently harnessed in the *Implacable's* Chamber Sanctuarine.

The mood was maudlin in the troop hold. No fewer than six Firedrakes had died trying to wreak century-old retribution. Somehow, the scales did not feel balanced.

He craved the burning of the solitorium, for the heat to purge the pain and impotent rage he harboured. The voice of Volkane, their pilot, interrupted his dark thoughts.

After escaping the wreckage of the *Protean* and returning to the *Glorion's* hangar deck via another route, they had attempted to re-establish communication with Nu'mean. It was to no avail. Apothecary Emek might yet have lived, however, and so they'd trawled the immediate area of space from where his saviour pod had been ejected.

Now, two hours later, they'd found him.

'Emergency ident-rune matches the *Protean's* signature.' Brother Volkane's voice was grainy through the comm-link.

Praetor spoke into the bulkhead's receiver unit.

'Conduct bio-scan and bring us in close.'

There was a pause of almost a minute before Volkane replied.

'Life readings affirmative.'

Tsu'gan saw Praetor shut his eyes briefly. It was as if a weight had lifted from his back.

'How long, brother?' he asked the gunship pilot.

'Approximately three minutes and seventeen seconds, my lord.'

'Bring our brother back to us, Volkane. Bring him back to the forge.'

'In Vulkan's name.'

'In Vulkan's name,' Praetor repeated, cutting the link. His eyes met with Tsu'gan's as he turned. A slight nod from the sergeant told the Firedrake all he needed to know.

Emek, at least, had lived. After being recovered from the saviour pod, he was laid prone in a medi-casket, strapped down to the hold floor like a piece of cargo. The Apothecary's face and much of his left side was badly damaged. Tsu'gan regretted his earlier remark to Emek about him one day being broken. He had not intended for it to be prophecy.

Praetor watched him keenly. The sergeant's eyes blazed without his helmet on. They matched the fury of Tsu'gan's own.

So much death in the name of something so futile and transient... Vengeance was not a filling meal; it left you cold and empty. Yet, Tsu'gan's desire for it still burned like an all-consuming flame. At that moment, it burned within them all.

They had given a name to their pain. Tsu'gan knew that name without the need for it to be spoken.

Night Lords.



THE BURNING

First there was heat, then a sense of dislocation and a curious weightlessness as his body was propelled through humid air. It lathered his skin in a feverish steam-sweat that condensed into vapour as he moved. Pain followed swiftly, focused in pins of agony impaled into his face, setting every nerve aflame. Reality was a series of flashes: light then dark, then hot and red.

Groggy, he lolled on his back. Ash, kicked up from the hard fall, billowed up in a grey pall. Coughing, he tried not to choke on it. Fire, fire in the eyes. Cinder flecks made them itch and sting. Scratch it out. Muffled voices spoke without meaning. The smell was potent, though. It was...

Burning.

A stark moment of revelation, and he realised it was his own flesh. His fingers...

They don't feel like my own... smaller, not as strong.

...were just millimetres from the charred edges of his skin when a strong hand seized him.

'Don't...' a voice warned. The faded quality dampened the sense of urgency it tried to convey. The accent was deep, thick. It had a silken tone that was instantly recognisable yet somehow incongruous.

'What- what happened?'

My voice... strange, as if from someone else's throat. No power, no resonance.

'Dusk-wraiths,' the other replied – he still couldn't see him, his eyes registered only blurs of light and heat – as if that was explanation enough. 'We must move. Come on, get up.'

'I can't see.'

So craven, so weak and... and... mortal. This is not my voice.

'You will. Give it a moment.'

Strong hands gripped him again, hooking under the arms and hoisting him up. Sulphur tanged the breeze, acrid on his tongue. Sight returned slowly.

On the horizon stood a mountain of fire, its peaks wreathed in pyroclastic cloud as it spoke with a voice from the depths of the earth.

I know it. Was I born...?

A great plain of ash spread before him, grey like a tomb, flaking like cremated skin. In the distance, the mountain, imperious over its smaller brothers and sisters, reached up with craggy fingers to rake the incarnadine sky. Hot clouds billowed in the visceral firmament like blots of dissolute blood. Veins of lava bled down the mountain face, trailing to a vast lake of fire many kilometres away.

Ash, rock, flame – this was a hellish place, somewhere the damned came to suffer eternal torment. It was a red world, a world of magma rivers and razor-edged crags, of sulphuric seas and gorges of flame. It was beyond death.

One foot went in front of the other.

I used to be stronger than this...

His legs worked of their own volition, rather than through an effort of will. They were running when he spoke again, though he didn't know from what.

'Am I dead?'

Was I reborn?

The other turned, resolving through a milky film of slowly regained sight. He was tanned, etched with tribal scars and carrying a long spear. Even with the scaled hide draped across his body and the rough sandals on his feet, the man had a feral but noble bearing.

'No, Dak'ir,' he replied, nonplussed. 'This is Nocturne.'

Home...

Behind him, Dak'ir heard the scrape and whirr of the turbines slowly closing on them. He dared not look back. Half-glances, snatched during the panicked flight, had revealed dark weapons and a long droning engine. Its nose ended in a jagged barb, its flanks were bladed and it *hovered* as if held aloft by the very air hazing around it. A metal stink, wet and hot, followed it in a thick miasma. Platforms either side of its black fuselage carried... *daemons*, black-skinned daemons.

The other had led them into a narrow gorge, scurrying down volcanic scree and through venting geysers of steam. It was hard going, even on foot, even unencumbered by armour or machineries...

I remember my armour.

...yet the turbine whirr followed.

Dusk-wraiths were dogged hunters.

I know them by another name.

Dak'ir heard their shrieking – an unnatural, eldritch clamour – grow with anticipation of the kill.

'Follow!' the other cried. Dak'ir lost him briefly in the smoke rolling across the crags. He fought to maintain pace, heart hammering in his chest...

Why do I only have one?

...but the other was too swift. He knew this plain. Dak'ir felt he should know it too, but it seemed distant in his memory, as if the sights were not his own to recall.

Keeping low, aware of the jagged bursts of displaced air overhead caused by weapons fire, Dak'ir barrelled around a twist in the rock.

Reaching the other side, he found the other was gone. He'd entered a belt of smoke, exuded from some venting crater, and did not appear again. Dak'ir fought his panic, held it at bay.

But I should know no fear...

Panic now and he was dead. He'd not even seen his predators clearly, yet knew in his core the sharp tortures they'd visit on his flesh.

I've seen their victims flayed alive, impaled on spikes...

Crashing through the ring of smoke, Dak'ir closed his eyes. Rough hands dragged him aside and into the shadow of a deep and hidden spur.

The other was there, a finger pressed tightly to his tanned lips.

Something large and fleet skidded past them, impossibly aloft on the hot air, breaching the smoke bank like a serrated knife through skin.

Three seconds lapsed before the whine of engines became the roar of explosions as the skimmer-machine was torn apart, its hellish riders thrown clear or devoured by fire.

An ululating war cry ripped from the other's lips as he hefted his long, hunting spear.

Dak'ir found a recurve bow suddenly in his hands. He knew its contours well. This was his weapon.

And yet, it isn't.

Nocking an arrow, he followed the other to the site of the wreckage.

More tanned warriors were emerging from the smoke and displaced ash. Some carried finely-wrought swords. A number of them even had long rifles, braced to their shoulders and spitting shot.

Dusk-wraiths lolled in the tortured remains of their skimmer-machine. Up close, it reminded Dak'ir of an Acerbian skiff but longer and infinitely more

bladed. Skulls and other grotesque fetishes hung from spiked chains looped around its metal hull.

Its riders were armoured in a sort of black carapace reminiscent of an insect's segmented outer shell. Not daemons at all, but still daemonic in their own depraved way. They were tall and lithe, cruelly barbed like their ship. Murderous coals burned in their eyes, like the embers of trapped hate.

I know these creatures, and yet they are not...

Several were dead, even before the spears, bolts and blades cut down the rest. The slain rotted and festered before Dak'ir's eyes, their armour corroding on the arid breeze like metal rusting impossibly quickly until flaking almost to nothing. Their bodies became ash, meeting the grey patina of the plain and disappearing. By the end, there was nothing to suggest they'd ever been there.

Dak'ir lowered his bow, too stupefied to loose. The slaughter was over anyway.

The other approached him, wiping black ash and rust from his spear, and frowned.

'Brother...'

Yes, I have many brothers, but you are not they.

'Are you all right?' The other came closer. Dak'ir felt the other's hand upon his shoulder and only just realised he himself was similarly attired in sash and sandals.

'I- I don't...'

This is not my armour.

The other gestured for him to sit on a nearby rock. 'Still dazed from the blast,' he said mainly to himself. 'It's me, N'bel.'

I've heard that name before. It's very old.

Dak'ir looked up, his eyes and senses suddenly sharp. The name resonated but he didn't know why.

'Brother...' he echoed, and clasped N'bel's arm in a warrior's greeting. 'I know you.'

It was called a *drygnirr*, a fire-lizard, one of many that stalked the volcanic plains of Nocturne. It was a kind of salamander, the lesser kin of the monstrous firedrakes that dwelled deep in the mountains near to the magma's warmth. Dak'ir remembered this much of his surroundings as he awaited the metal-shaper.

Scurrying over the scattered rocks, the creature regarded him intently. A fire

burned in its eyes, casting a glow about its onyx face. Barring a thin spine of blue, its scales were utterly black.

‘What do you want, little lizard?’

‘Don’t let the others hear you talking to yourself.’ N’bel appeared, carrying something in his hands. ‘They already doubt an Ignean’s mettle in battle.’ N’bel leaned in close and clapped a strong palm on Dak’ir’s shoulder. ‘Not I though, brother.’

Dak’ir nodded at the other Nocturnean’s camaraderie, so familiar and yet so strange to him at the same time. He had felt the prejudice at his Ignean heritage before, too.

That was another time, spoken by another’s lips.

When he glanced back towards the rocks, the drygnirr was gone. Perhaps it was just a figment of his imagination, and he wondered briefly if his doubters might be right.

‘Here.’ N’bel proffered a silver mask. ‘*Pyrkinn* flesh,’ he explained as Dak’ir took the mask. ‘It’ll quicken healing.’

The metal-shaper, a bald-headed, broad-shouldered warrior with folded arms like bands of iron, nodded sagely behind him. Unlike the other tribal warriors, the metal-shaper carried a stout hammer across his back. White ash marked his body in sigils representing the anvil and the tools of the forge. His skin was even darker than N’bel’s and his glossy eyes captured the fire of the overhead sun and blazed.

Eyes of fire... Skin as black as onyx...

Dak’ir put on the mask. It only covered half of his face, the wounded part, but he felt the pain ease immediately.

My face was burning when I heard them cry out his name.

‘My skin...’ he said, realising for the first time that it was much lighter than N’bel’s.

‘Ha! Ignean-ash. A cave-dweller sees less of the Nocturnean sun, Dak’ir.’ N’bel looked concerned. ‘Are you sure you’re well?’

‘Just a little disorientated. What happened to the wraiths?’

N’bel became pensive. ‘Gone.’ He gestured to the plain beyond where several warriors assembled. One of them wore scaled robes and a snarling lizard mask.

He waved a crooked staff threaded with curving fangs and desiccated reptilian tails. A chest-plate of saurian bones armoured his muscled torso. The others watched him intently as he padded the earth: taking up handfuls, tasting, scenting, releasing and finally repeating all over again.

‘The shaman will find their trail, though,’ he added sternly. ‘The earth never lies.’

On Nocturne, the earth and its people were one. She was a cruel mother, the world of fire, capable of terrible destruction and death uncountable. During the Time of Trial, she would crack and tear, spill her blood and weep tears of lava that threatened to consume the land and the very people scratching an existence on her rocky flesh. The earth gave as it took, however. It was part of the great cycle of birth, death and rebirth. She would take you back, the fire-mother, volatile Nocturne, take you back into her heart and her bosom. Life ended in fire; so too was it begun.

Resurrection was merely an aspect of tribal culture, of Promethean Creed.

Nothing that ever came to live and die on Nocturne was ever truly gone. It was simply *changed*, reborn into something else.

Am I ‘else’, am I reborn into this unfamiliar flesh? My bones were like iron, my skin as strong as steel. I was invulnerable. And now... now... just the burning.

The shaman’s bond with the earth was great, certainly stronger than any in the modest war party. Ash flakes, smouldering craters, the very grains of the earth spoke to him in a voice only he could understand.

Dak’ir had ridden with them, a long file of tribal warriors mounted on the backs of sauroch.

Scaled, bull-like creatures, the sauroch were known neither for speed nor ferocity. But they were strong and tenacious, their hides thick, and capable of bearing great burdens over long distances. Ash nomads, the transient tribes who shunned the Sanctuaries, travelled the Scorian Desert on their broad backs.

I have soared through the skies on wings of thunder...

In the blood-red of Helldawn, dactylids circled. The winged lizards, combined with the whispers of the earth, had brought the shaman to a rust-red ridge veined with iron-grey. Slowly, the saurochs had followed him and there at a rocky summit the hue of old blood, they found the rest of the dusk-wraiths. Shrieking, screaming, laughing that hollow sound from throats of dust; it was a cacophony. A heavy and oppressive shroud laid upon them all, the sauroch riders.

Dak’ir could not remember the journey, though he did recall the drygnirr watching from the darkness of caves or the peaks of volcanic hills. It shadowed him, neither guide nor predator, merely an observer only he could see. It was as if the creature’s eyes could burn right into his soul and strip away the innermost

secrets of his mind.

A scryer, psyker... I know you, brother. Your gaze... it burns. I burn.

‘We attack from three sides,’ N’bel was outlining his plan to the others. He’d dismounted and carved a crude map of the camp with a stick in the dirt, less than twenty warriors gathered around him. He beckoned Dak’ir closer into the circle.

‘Brother?’ The concern etched N’bel’s face as clearly as his honour scars.

I wear them too, burned into my flesh. They are a record of my deeds.

‘I’m fine.’ Dak’ir nodded for him to continue.

N’bel gave him one last look, before he went on. ‘Three prongs,’ – he made a trident from his fingers – ‘two from the east and west as a diversion. A third, much smaller, party will enter from the north where we are now.’

Dak’ir’s gaze strayed to the deep valley below the ridge as he imagined the route N’bel had inscribed with his stick. The path was strewn with crags and sulphur pits. The cinder and ash blown from the nearby caldera of slumbering volcanoes would render the ground red-hot underfoot.

I have walked across fire. I have felt it beat inside my breast. With it I shall... The rest of the litany is lost to me. The burning... it clouds my mind and thoughts.

At the nadir of the valley was a camp of wire and blades. Sharp structures, little more than metal pavilion tents like spikes, carried markings in a strange script. Even the alien letters were edged, as if merely speaking them could cleave your tongue. More skimmer-machines, like the one lying broken on the ash plains, hovered languidly nearby. Some were tethered to bloodied staves of iron; others roamed the perimeter for the entertainment of their riders. Distant figures fled before those machines, pursued by a savage pack.

One, a dark-skinned Nocturnean limping badly, was skewered by a dusk-wraith’s spear and Dak’ir averted his gaze. The riders screamed mockingly in tune with their victims, parodying their agony.

It was a slave camp this place and, judging by the sheer number of metal tents dotting the ground below, the flesh-tally was high. Dak’ir counted fifteen of the ‘tents’. No telling how many were clustered in those metal cages. A larger one at the centre of the camp drew his eye.

N’bel meant to free his people. The skimmer-machine ambushed on the ash plain had been drawn into a trap so they could follow its trail along the earth and find this graven place. He and Dak’ir had been the bait, the wound upon his face...

The burning.

...was the price of such bravery.

Dak'ir knew this, despite his fragmented memory, the sense of *otherness*, not just about this place, but also this time.

'Dak'ir...'

He turned and caught a flash of lightning on the sun. It was a sword, its blade serrated and gleaming.

I know this blade... No. I know of one much like it. Its chained teeth sing a symphony of death.

'You lost it on the ash plain. A warrior is only as good as his weapon, brother.'

You sound like someone I knew, someone I fought with a long time ago... or will a long time from now.

Dak'ir nodded and looked down into the valley. The slavers' depraved revels were painting the earth a deep, visceral red. The heavy scent of fresh copper tainted the sulphur breeze.

'With whom do I ride, N'bel?'

That was better. I sound something like myself, the old strength returning...

N'bel brought his sauroch up alongside Dak'ir's. They were both so close to the edge. Another step and they'd be charging down the scree.

'You are with the northern party.' He smiled, but there was no mirth to it. 'You ride with me, brother.'

They abandoned the saurochs a hundred metres from the camp, going the rest of the way on foot. The valley was littered with rocks and deep crevices thick with sulphurous smoke. There were plenty of places to hide from the dusk-wraith sentries. The earth and Nocturne's people were one. They could blend together as fire blends with rock.

Dak'ir sent a whickering metal shaft through the creature's neck. It crumpled, clutching its punctured throat. By the time he and N'bel had reached it, the dusk-wraith was already an emaciated husk.

'Why do they wither to ash like this?' he hissed.

Because they aren't really here... 'Focus on the burning. Use it.' These are not my words inside my mind...

N'bel shook his head. 'No matter how many we kill, there is always the same remaining at the camp. If I believed in it, I would say they cannot die because they are not truly alive.'

And neither are you, my brother...

A second sentry fell to a hurled spear. Another Nocturnean pairing appeared

briefly before becoming lost again in the rocks and smoke.

The heart of the slaver camp was close. They'd penetrated the outer ring and were moving into the vicinity of the metal tents. The sun was still low, low enough to cast long, red shadows across the desert.

Dak'ir was about to advance when he saw the drygnirr again. It crouched atop the shell of a dusk-wraith's corpse, blinking with eyes of flame.

'Why do you watch me?'

He sees into your mind... my mind. I feel it... the burning... Vulkan, give me strength.

The drygnirr was occluded by a sudden stream of smoke. Once it had cleared, the creature was gone again.

Another shaft nocked to his bow, Dak'ir moved on.

Six of them crept silently into the dusk-wraiths' camp, slaying sentries invisibly as they went. The rest of the slavers were swollen on carnage, in a drug-induced soporific slumber brought on by the brazier pans blazing lambently around the camp.

Upon reaching the first of the tents, a warning cry rang out.

The others had launched their attack. East and west, sauroch riders drove at the slavers to steal their attention.

'Swiftly now,' whispered N'bel, up off his haunches and running low to the first of the tents.

Dak'ir was right behind him.

N'bel ushered him on to the next tent, but gripped Dak'ir's arm before he could go.

'What?'

'That's where you'll find what you seek.' N'bel was pointing to the larger structure, the one at the heart of the camp. '*He awaits.*'

'Who, brother? Who awaits?'

I can smell his decaying breath, feel it against my cheek, despite the burning...

'Your enemy is there.'

'My enemy? But what about the people?' Dak'ir was struggling but N'bel would not let him go. Dusk-wraiths had noticed the commotion. Their forces were moving through the camp.

N'bel smiled. 'We are already dead, Dak'ir. We've been dead for aeons, brother. Now, go!' He pushed Dak'ir off, who stumbled and almost fell.

He was about to turn, to demand the truth, when a burst of rifle fire sliced overhead. Shard ammunition tore up the earth and shredded the flank of a tent.

Dak'ir was about to loose when he saw another dusk-wraith, then a third and a fourth, heading towards them.

The large tent was near. He dropped his bow and ran.

The whine of automatic fire from the dusk-wraiths' weapons hurt his ears. They merged with the baying of the saurochs as they were slaughtered. Somewhere a skimmer-machine exploded.

'We are dead, Dak'ir, but you still live. Go!' N'bel's final words were a shout. Dak'ir didn't look back.

Crashing bolter fire rings my ears. I am within my gunmetal cocoon, surging to the planet below.

His path to the large tent was suddenly blocked by one of the dusk-wraiths. She was masked, the face long and elongated to tapered spikes at chin and forehead, and grinned evilly. The sun glinting off her wicked blades, held in either hand, turned the metal to the colour of blood. She was lithe and deadly, with the body of an athlete and a torturer's confidence.

She rushed Dak'ir, a murderer's snarl pulling at ruby lips visible through a slit in the mask.

He scraped his sword along the ground, kicking up a line of cinder-flecked dust into her face. She hissed as the hot flakes stung her, but drove on.

Dak'ir felt a cut to his ribs, then the warm splash of blood down his side. They'd crossed each other, like duelling riders, blade to blade.

I must control my breathing, remember the routines learned in the solitorium. My hearts beat with the thrill of battle.

She came again, the dusk-wraith witch, slashing down with her blades as a pair. Dak'ir parried, sparks spitting off the metal of his sword. A kick to his stomach sent him sprawling across the hot sand and into the tent.

Pain lanced his body. It was like he was on fire.

Must... fight... it... The burning... will consume me if I don't.

Dak'ir waited several moments in the dark, watching the slivered entrance, waiting for his assailant. But she never came. He was alone.

The air smelled strange, like being underground, and the scent of soot and ash was redolent. As his eyes slowly adjusted, Dak'ir reached out a hand to touch the walls of the tent. Half expecting a barb or spike, he was cautious, but instead of a cut, all he felt was stone. The walls were rough and craggy, and hot against his tentative fingers.

The sensation was momentary. As he felt his way ahead in the dark, the walls changed again, smooth and cold as metal should be.

There were no captives, nor any dusk-wraiths. Yet, N'bel had mentioned an enemy.

The tent was larger within than it appeared on the outside. At the end of its gloomy length, Dak'ir saw a figure seated upon a throne. It was a silhouette, a veritable giant, and armoured unless he was mistaken.

'Come forth!' Dak'ir challenged, brandishing his sword.

The figure did not answer, did not even flinch.

'If you are my enemy then face me.'

Still nothing.

Dak'ir crept closer.

From the corner of his eye he thought he saw movement... a flash of reptilian eyes, a streak of blue on black. But when he looked, the drygnirr wasn't there.

He watches, even now... even as I burn.

The figure on the throne was mocking him, Dak'ir was certain. He would cut the—

A thrown spear tore into the side of the tent and a shaft of light spilled in. It lit the figure, a silhouette no longer. His armour was pitted and broken, as if it had been corroded by time or—

The melta's beam cutting across the temple. There is nothing I can do, even when it touches my face...

Though badly damaged, much of the paint chipped away, Dak'ir saw the armour had once been green. A pair of wings with a flame in the centre emblazoned the warrior's shattered breastplate. Fingers of bone poked out from his ruined gauntlets. A chest cavity of dust-choked ribs yawned through the ragged gaps in his plastron. A skull, locked in a rictus-grin, regarded Dak'ir where a battle-helm had long ceased to be.

A word, a name, trembled on Dak'ir's lips as he approached the armoured cadaver.

'Ka... Ka...'

He was my captain. My guilt gives him form in this place.

Dak'ir was less than half a metre away – 'Ka... Ka...' – when the corpse-warrior reached out with his deathless hands and seized Dak'ir by the neck.

'Diiiiieeee...' it hissed, naming itself and damning Dak'ir in one word, though its rictus jaw never moved.

Yes, that was his name. I cannot forget.

Dak'ir was choking. He scrabbled at the bony fingers but they wouldn't relent. Blood pulsed in his ears and he felt his eyes bulging as his brain was starved of

oxygen.

The burning... Use it!

He had to drag some breath into his lungs or be strangled by the terrible undead thing before him. That was when he noticed the air bleeding out of the room, devoured hungrily by the flames wreathing his body. It burned, a flame so invasive it went to the nerves and threatened to overwhelm Dak'ir.

The skeleton's grip loosened.

Dak'ir choked through fire-cracked lips.

'What is happening?'

Let it burn us. Embrace the flame. It is yours to mould...

The fire became an inferno. It roared outwards in a wave, cascading from Dak'ir's body, exploding the skeleton to ash with its fury, yet he was untouched.

Pain wracked him, bringing him to his knees as the fire rolled out, devouring the tent, sloughing the metal. It boiled outwards in a white-hot tempest. Blinking against the rising sun, Dak'ir watched the rest of the camp as it was consumed. His brothers fled before the flame but none could outrun it. N'bel fell last of all, screaming as the burning stripped flesh from bone and turned a man into a dark shadow upon the scorched earth.

It was out of his control now, a fiery maelstrom engulfing all upon the plain, consuming all of Nocturne in a relentless wave.

Dak'ir threw his head back, as the fire turned on him at last, and screamed.

Pyriel staggered as the blast wave struck him. He was standing in the pyre-chamber below Mount Deathfire. Crushing the totem creature of the drygnirr in his fist, now little more than a simulacra wrought of flame, he hastily erected a psychic shield against which the waves of conflagration broke eagerly. He could barely see the figure crouched at the eye of the flame storm, but heard Dak'ir's screaming clearly.

White fire lit the Librarian starkly, flickering across the blue of his power armour and the many arcane artefacts chained about his person. The drakescale cloak Pyriel wore on his back snapped and curled with the tangible heat.

Sweat beaded the Librarian's forehead. He felt it running down to the nape of his neck. Never before had he been so tested, never before seen such a potent reaction to the burning. To his horror, the edges of his psychic barrier were cracking against the fire tide. He tried to reinforce them but found he had neared his limits.

'Vulkan's strength...' he gasped, beseeching his primarch, and was answered.

Master Vel'cona emerged from a cascade of flame into the room, his eyes ablaze with cerulean power. His armour, only a suggestion through the heat haze, was more ancient than Pyriel's. Akin in some ways to the earth shamans of old Nocturne, it was festooned with reptilian bones and dripped in scale.

Together, the two Librarians pushed the fire tide back until it was nought but wisps of smoke. A blackened crater outlined Dak'ir's crouched position. He was naked, steam and fire exuding from his scarred flesh. The searing legacy of the melta beam he'd suffered on Stratos flared angrily on the side of his face, a physical reminder of how he was different to his fire-born brothers. The burning had destroyed his armour, rendering it an ashen patina shrouding his body.

Though he remained still and upright, his head tucked into his chest, arms drawn up around his legs protectively, Dak'ir was unconscious.

The entire pyre-chamber was a charred, soot-stained ruin. It was little more than bare rock, its entrance sealed by a pair of reinforced blast doors, but fire-blackened wall to wall. The only void was where Pyriel had been standing. The air was so hot it hazed, and reeked heavily of sulphur.

The ash cocoon encasing Dak'ir cracked and he slumped to the earth.

Vel'cona regarded the would-be Lexicanum impassively. 'He has survived the burning.'

It wasn't a question, but Pyriel answered it anyway.

'Yes.' He was still breathless from his exertions but recovering.

'And?' Vel'cona turned his penetrating gaze on to the other Librarian. The fuliginous darkness of the room seemed to coalesce around him, rendering him indistinct and shadowed.

'Incredible power, like nothing I've ever seen.'

Vel'cona's eyes flared like blazing blue sapphires in the gloom. 'Can it be controlled?'

Pyriel removed his battle-helm, revealing a sweat-swathed face. His scalp was excessively damp. Only now was the cerulean fire in his ember-red eyes fading, such was the power he'd been forced to call upon. He delivered his answer in a low voice.

'On this occasion, he could not.'

'Saviour or destroyer...' Vel'cona muttered. 'Nocturne in the balance... A lowborn, one of the earth, will pass through the gate of fire.'

Pyriel was confused. 'Master?'

'The Tome of Fire reveals much,' said Vel'cona on his way out of the chamber. He had to use a bolt of psychic force to open the metal blast doors.

They were fused together. 'But it does not tell us everything. Who can say what the Igean's role will be in the turning tide? His flame may flicker and die, it may roar into a conflagration. Much is not yet known, but I sense a visitor approaching who may help us in our understanding.'

Pyriel had been hoping for a more straight-forward explanation, but he had learned long ago not to question the vagaries of the Chief Librarian of the Salamanders.

'What is your will, master?'

'Keep training him.'

'And if he loses control again?'

'Do what you must,' Vel'cona's voice echoed from the darkness beyond the fire-smote room. 'Destroy him.'



ONLY ASH REMAINS

The mag-lev descended in slow, jerking spasms and groaned in machine-like cadence against the weight of the three hooded figures riding on it, struggling to bear them despite the regular shipments of ore and freight it carried to the Deeps.

Emitting a high-pitched squeal, the lifter stopped dead, stranding the figures in abject darkness halfway to nowhere.

‘Get us moving,’ uttered the one standing in front. His arms were folded across his chest as he glared imperiously from within the confines of his heavy hood into the shadowy underhive below.

‘Immediately, sir.’ A second, loitering at the rear of the group, knelt down to examine the mag-lev’s protesting engine. There was a little smoke, even the flicker of flame. It briefly lit up the figure’s face, whose eyes flashed fire-red as if in empathy.

After a few seconds of tinkering and muttered imprecations from the second, the first spoke again. ‘How long?’

A hard strike with the flat of an armoured palm brought the engine sputtering back to life.

‘Immediately, sir,’ answered the second.

The first hid a wry smile.

Descending again, it wasn’t long before the mag-lev was bathed in the low-grade phosphor lamps of the Deeps. Much like the upper world, the lower hive was heavily industrialised. But unlike the city above, order was far from certain, or even common, down below. Here, there were monsters. The three looked for one in particular. They had tracked it to this benighted place.

The shrieking mag-lev came to rest with a final lurch, booming noisily as it touched down. Five miles up to the surface, the sound carried just like it did throughout the Deeps.

Dregs stirred in their warrens, alerted by the sudden clamour.

It was to be expected. The three knew this and had prepared accordingly. For

now, the dregs kept to the shadows, lurking at the periphery of vision, pretending to be anonymous.

Striding down a broad concourse, a steel-gridded gantry underfoot and a nest of steam-spewing pipes overhead, the three paid them no heed.

After several minutes and several hundred metres, a voice called out to them.

‘This area’s restricted.’ It had a drawl to it, as if even the owner’s voice was lazy.

The three turned as one to regard a bizarrely dressed human and a cohort of fifteen others. Every one of the gangers was armed with an array of weapons ranging from the mundane to the exotic. They all wore leather and coloured bandanas; the leader wore his around his wide-brimmed hat.

‘Move on,’ the first told him, keeping his hood low to cover his eyes.

‘Can’t do that,’ said the gang leader. His cronies had begun to circle. ‘Y’see, there’s a toll needs paying.’

The third, the one yet to speak since they had boarded the lifter, tensed to attack but the first held up a hand that stopped him.

‘We have no money for you. I advise you once more – take your people and move on.’

The gang leader was belligerent. He was also clearly an idiot.

‘Don’t want money, hulk,’ he said, referring to the first’s massive size. If it daunted him, the ganger didn’t show it. Perhaps it was his fifteen friends, or the fact that three of them were bulky chrono-gladiators, lumbering into the phosphor light. ‘We want your weapons, your blood and your organs. Hand ‘em over quiet, and I’ll make the transfer less painful.’

‘You have made a mistake,’ said the first, his two companions angling to each face a different aspect of the closing net of gangers. One protected the back of the other, and so the web of steel was forged.

‘You’re the one don’t appreciate simple arithmetic. Sixteen against three is bad odds.’

‘For you, yes,’ muttered the first.

‘Let me gut them!’ snarled the third, his voice an angry rasp.

The first looked about to protest, hand straying to the blade beneath his cloak, but then relented and stepped back.

‘Quick and quiet.’

The gang leader uttered a command word and the three chrono-gladiators roared into action, arco-flails and electro-whips crashing.

Sweeping between them, low and faster than he had any right to be wearing

full armour, the third cut off their arms in a welter of blood and oil. A bleating sound escaped the scarified lips of the gladiators, who collapsed and died from chronic blood loss, time still on their clocks.

Terrified, dumbstruck, it took a few seconds for the rest of the gangers to realise what was happening. The leader opened up first, his pump-action taking the third in the chest but scarcely stalling him. He balked when he saw what was beneath the cloak, but had no time to shout a warning when a long bone claw punched into his sternum and went right through his back.

The others did not last long. One or two got off a las-round. A bulky-looking ganger even managed to crank up his autocannon before it was shredded, and him with it. In just under nine seconds, all sixteen of the dregs were dead, their blood and viscera painting the Deeps.

When it was done, the first asked, 'What happened to quiet, Brother Zartath?' 'You also said "quick", Brother-Captain Agatone.'

Agatone sighed. If not for the fact that the ex-Black Dragon was a consummate hunter, he would have remained on the *Vulkan's Wrath* with the rest of Third.

'They were protecting something,' the second called from off in the darkness.

Agatone and Zartath joined him. 'What have you found, Brother Exor?'

The Techmarine didn't need to answer. It was plain to see, surrounded by rubble and months-old debris, veiled in a thick patina of dust.

A gunship. It carried the winged lightning bolt insignia of the Marines Malevolent.

Agatone nodded to Zartath, who scurried inside through a ragged tear in the fuselage with the apparent agility of a spider.

It took a few minutes for him to reappear.

'Well?' asked the Salamanders captain.

'Lots of bodies, all Malevolents. Looks like he killed them all.'

Agatone stiffened uncomfortably. 'And our quarry?'

Zartath shook his head. 'He's in the wind. Tsu'gan is alive, but he's not here. Only ash remains.'



THE FIREBRAND

A baggage train of Ignean nomads resolved through a cloud of skirling dust. Fifteen men and women with their beasts of burden in tow toiled through grey, undulating dunes. Two outriders mounted on sauroch-bulls ranged ahead of the main group trying to find safe passage for the rest, except there was no safe passage through the endless tract of ash and death.

Most were dressed in rags tightly bound around their limbs and bodies, sand cloaks to ward off the sun. Six guards, armoured in light flak, carried spears and carbines. Not there for the people, they protected the wagons and the hydro-oxygen coolers harboured under leather tarps, the life expectancy of the travellers expressed in litres. None of the Igneans went without rebreathers, though the equipment was crude and wouldn't last more than a few hours. Heat and thirst were the slow killers but there were many and entirely more aggressive ways to die out on the Scorian Plain.

Ba'ken knew of several and thought the nomads looked ill-prepared to survive any of them as he watched them from a high ridge of sun-baked rock. Below and all around him, the landscape was almost featureless, a veritable ocean of undulating ash-sand that stretched as far as a red horizon. Here the flat plain changed, growing into rugged mountains, the highest of which was a brooding, black colossus of intemperate humour. Mount Deathfire. How any man, even one such as he, could endure that fount of rage when fully roused was a question to which Ba'ken had no answer. Nor did he know the purpose of the stalwart Igneans attempting to brave it. This was the fifth such pilgrimage he had seen since entering the desert. He had heard talk from his brothers on sentry duty of considerably more.

Entire tribes, whole settlements, generations of Igneans.

He had yet to see a single one coming back.

The proud Nocturneans slogged through a nascent storm that was growing into a tempest. They weren't moving on or seeking refuge in one of the

Sanctuary Cities as some did when the rigours of living in the desert beyond the void shields became too much. Rumours had compelled them to leave whatever safety and solace they had found on this most inhospitable world. They were pilgrims in search of a myth.

‘Do you think he’s really out here somewhere?’

‘No,’ Ba’ken told Va’lin flatly.

‘The native Nocturneans must believe it, or else why would they turn out in such droves?’

Ba’ken turned his slab-like face to glower at the Scout.

‘And they are fools for doing so. He’s dead.’

Realising his error, Va’lin apologised. ‘I meant no offence, brother-captain. My intention wasn’t—’

Ba’ken turned away. ‘Forget it,’ he said, but he hid his grief poorly. Va’lin was an asset to the Seventh, remarkable in many ways, but possessed of a credulity that his captain was determined to train out of him.

If he could.

Ba’ken went on. ‘Like all on Nocturne, they harbour the knowledge that death is seldom far away and seek meaning before it claims them. Weakness and desperation make them do it, not truth.’

A tower of ceramite and stony hard will, Ba’ken dwarfed the much slighter Scout. Thick pauldrons sat like chunks of smoothed granite on his vast shoulders. His muscled neck was cable-thick, taut sinews suggesting strength. Green armour plate, the hue of the Salamanders Chapter, encased his imposing frame and only made him more intimidating. Head shorn to a glabrous scalp, the rest of his features were craggy like a rockface. Physically massive, Ba’ken had been ideally suited to his former role as a heavy weapons trooper. Those days were ended long ago, and the now captain of the Seventh missed them, as he missed a great many things he had lost.

‘I heard the Igneans raised some kind of shrine,’ said the Scout standing at Ba’ken’s opposite shoulder. ‘Dozens die every day in search of it, and the ones who built it are no longer alive to tell of its existence either. Myths can be dangerous. They’re the province of the gullible and desperate.’

Exor was much more pragmatic and a little thicker set than Va’lin. There was a hard streak in him that reminded Ba’ken of someone else he once knew, also now believed dead, although his brothers still searched. But there was no arrogance. He was simply blunt, like a hammer. That too reminded him of someone, and he wondered where the Chaplain was at that moment. Exor

believed in what he could see and touch, qualities Ba'ken respected. But Va'lin... Ba'ken had saved his life when the Scout was just a boy and not the transhuman he was rapidly becoming now. It felt like an age ago. During their trials, back in the time of dragon-strife, as some of the Chapter and the Creed were calling it, he had been exceptional. Then again, so had another and his legacy was still talked about darkly by some warriors of the Chapter.

Old wounds, Ba'ken reminded himself, were often slow to heal.

Both Scouts, not far from receiving their black carapace, were here on the Scorian Plain to heed a final lesson before going to the ranks of the Devastators.

'Eyes front,' Ba'ken told his charges. 'We are not here for pilgrims, and there is still much I can teach you before you ascend to full battle-brothers and join one of the battle companies.' He squinted through a monocular lens past kilometres of dirty smoke and acres of cloud washing low over the dunes, filling the deep canyon that sank into the desert before them with slate-grey. 'See here and attend,' said the captain. 'Aspirants fresh into the forge.'

Four figures could be discerned through the murk, fighting their way through a dark gloom many hundreds of metres below. Over fourteen had begun the trial. In truth, Ba'ken was surprised at how many had made it this far. He wondered if perhaps he was asking too much. Certainly, the inductions into Seventh Company had dwindled in the past few years. Humanity – his humanity – was getting in the way of clear thinking. Break them now, destroy them against the anvil and no bond would be formed, no room for grief later. If they survived, they were obviously strong enough to last as a Scout and go on to join the battle companies, where Ba'ken would no longer be responsible for them. But so few did, so few became Scouts at all. Was he building a stronger Chapter or merely insulating himself against further pain of loss? Ba'ken decided he would speak to Chaplain Elysus about it and seek his Chaplain's counsel.

'We are here for them,' Ba'ken said, putting his thoughts aside, then asked, 'Tell me, what do you see?'

He passed the monocular to Exor, servos growling in the captain's scarred power armour as if in empathy with its wearer. A mantle of drake hide fluttered in the wind behind him, pinned to his shoulder guards by gilded clasps. He noticed that Va'lin eyed the skin enviously.

Exor observed the scene instead, and gave a quick appraisal. 'They adopt formation. One ranging ahead, functioning as a vanguard...' He paused. 'A leader gives orders. Another acts as rearguard, but they are not all in accord.'

'Your assessment?' invited Ba'ken.

Exor lowered the scope and gave it to Va'lin.

'They are in trouble.'

Ba'ken nodded slowly. 'This is one of the fire canyons,' he said, gesturing to the monolithic chasm, several hundred metres wide but filled with narrow gorges in some places and razor-edged crags. Even at distance, it was massive. And behind, far away to the north but still imposing, loomed the cyclopean Mount Deathfire. Without climbing tools the flanks of the canyon were unscalable; the only way to escape it was to pass through it. A walk of fire in all respects.

Lava channels threaded the canyon floor like pulsing hot veins, and where it dipped into shallow basins the lava pooled and caught fire. Smoke thronged the air in a choking fog, stinging the eyes and dulling all other senses until only instinct could be relied upon for guidance. Geysers spewed scalding steam in spastic fits and starts, the pattern of their expulsions unpredictable.

'Its savage geography is obvious,' Ba'ken explained, pointing to a rolling bank of cloud obscuring the canyon's summit, 'but its indigenous predators are not...'

Exor followed his captain's lead and found shadows prowling the smoke and fog.

'What are they?' The Scout's tone was inquisitive, not apprehensive. The shadows were hulking, easily twice the mass of the largest aspirant, and there was the suggestion of chitinous body plating, but they moved swiftly with the cloud and were gone from sight before it passed.

Ba'ken smiled. 'Monsters. And they crawl within the canyons like lice.'

Har'gaan shielded his eyes from the spit of flame erupting from a crack in the hard earth of the canyon. It was red like blood, sharp as all hell and hot to the touch. A place of death, a final rest for the dead.

How many have gone to their dooms in this dire place?

Illion was briefly obscured from sight and Har'gaan's heart quickened as he thought they had lost him to the fire, but the pathfinder emerged from behind a pall of smoke very much alive.

'Here,' he called, hurriedly waving the others on. 'A route through the fire chasms.'

Har'gaan grinned ferally. He had never met a pathfinder as gifted as Illion, or as fearless.

Smoke and flame were everywhere, yet Illion trod with the certainty and courage of one who had lived his entire life in such places. Nocturne was harsh;

it bred strong people, hardy people – they had to be – but the canyon was an extreme. He supposed for the vaunted warriors of the Fire-born, it was merely practice.

‘I am relieved,’ Har’gaan confessed when he caught up, clapping Illion on the shoulder. ‘The longer we stay here, the worse our chances of survival become.’ Both took a breather in the lee of an overhanging crag, waiting for the others. The air was harsh and hot, and stung the throat, but at least it was air.

‘Thought you’d appreciate the shade,’ said the pathfinder with good humour. Illion was the youngest of the aspirants but had a hawkish look that made him seem older. A ragged scar cut into the left hemisphere of his skull from when he had been maimed by a sa’hrk as a child. Some would grow weak from such an ordeal, retreat within themselves and be devoured by the harsh Nocturnean landscape. Illion had turned it into strength and a wariness that he wouldn’t be caught like that again. Har’gaan respected him for that.

‘I admit,’ said Har’gaan, ‘for a moment back there I thought the earth had claimed you, brother.’

Illion laughed, an utterly incongruous sound in the fire canyon. ‘Not yet. My tribe knows earth and stone. I reckon I could tread this path blindfold if needed.’

‘How are we not doing that already?’ A harsh voice cut in, Za’tenga making his presence felt. The noble son from Hesiod had a thin face like a dagger’s blade and it sharpened further as he jabbed a finger skywards, ‘Boast later, Illion, we are not alone.’

All three craned their necks towards a roiling bank of cloud above. Dense thunder pealed across it and there were flashes of crimson lightning that cracked between the sonorous booms like a refrain. Something flew within the fire-tinted smoke, occluded by shadow, revealed by the blood-red jags of angry light. It was winged and gave a deep, screeching cry that ululated throughout the canyon.

‘Sounds like a big one,’ muttered Kade. By the time the burly Themian reached them, he had removed the rest of his damaged carapace. It was acid-burned when a hydrochloric vent had erupted in their midst and nearly taken off his face. As it was, the tribal tattoo across his eyes survived, even if one of his comrades had not. Ven’gar had been standing next to him and died mouthing a silent scream as his vocal cords were cooked. Kade lived but now wore a burn across his muscular torso. An occasional grimace was the only betrayal of the barbarian’s resolute facade.

‘They’re carrion-eaters,’ said Za’tenga, letting his mind wander. ‘Feasters of the dead. My first sight from the womb was of such creatures. Born in blood, I

arrived in this world hearing their cries and the screams of the dying as they were picked apart.' He scowled, as if the pain of it were still fresh. 'Even as an infant, I can still remember it.'

Har'gaan reached out to him. 'It's all right, brother—'

Za'tenga recoiled, barking, 'It is far from all right. They see prey before them. We are carrion now.'

'I doubt they'll have had a feast that'll fight back as fiercely as us,' said Kade, with a belligerent look. Other than in battle, the Themian's eyes were cold fires that burned away all warmth and hope. His enemies in the tribe had seen that look. It was often their last sight, for Kade had never been defeated in ritual combat. No less than three leonid pelts hung from his trophy spike back in the city.

'Give them a few rounds,' suggested Za'tenga, letting a vengeful snarl curl his upper lip. He'd watched Runial carried off by one of the creatures as he had tried in vain to stop it from ripping his fellow tribesman apart. That was when the cracks in the aspirants' brotherhood had begun. Za'tenga blamed Har'gaan for Runial's death.

Har'gaan pushed down Kade's combat shotgun, spoiling his aim. It was actually two weapons, liberated from fallen comrades, strapped and taped together to make a side-by-side. The others carried carbines and short hunting knives. Not enough to worry the creatures, but the Themian's cannon would have made quite the mess of them.

Kade frowned, rippling the short strip of hair bifurcating his forehead, but didn't protest beyond that. His comrades all had shaven heads, the sigils of their tribes shorn into them, down to the dark scalp. The melanochromatic defect common to all Salamanders was yet to manifest, though in time it would blacken their tanned skin to the colour of onyx.

'We'll bring them down on us,' Har'gaan said, glaring at Za'tenga. His reddish irises seemed to flash with embers of anger. 'You were born into war, but that doesn't mean you understand it, Za'tenga. They're circling because they are looking for us. Shoot now and you might as well send up a flare.'

Za'tenga's retort was barbed. 'Then what do you suggest? Let them stalk us, wait until we are vulnerable and carry off another like they did Runial? Or shall we cower here, under this rock, until the heat kills us?'

'I don't like either of those paths,' declared Kade, 'so we had best find another.'

Smoke was thickening in the fire canyon, and flames licking at the edges of

Illion's discovered route were creeping closer.

Har'gaan choked back a wad of sooty phlegm before answering. 'We advance, reach the edge of the canyon. Illion has got us this far.'

Za'tenga scowled. 'You'll kill us all, Har'gaan. Then who will join the ranks of the Fire-born?' he said, and tramped off after Illion who was already on the move again.

Har'gaan didn't answer. He had noticed Kade looking at the smoke-wreathed summits of the canyon that flanked the party to either side.

'What are you staring at?' he asked, keeping his head low against the choking fog.

The Themian peered intently, but Har'gaan could not see what his keen eyes had picked out.

Kade's response was to prime his shotguns.

Har'gaan saw only smoke at first, but then he caught the flicker of something through the grey. Heat haze was spoiling focus but a slithering torso, long and segmented, appeared before burrowing out of sight. In the brief reveal, Har'gaan counted four creatures. They were moving down the canyon wall, digging right through it. He knew what they were and the thought chilled him despite the heat inside the fire canyon. Years ago he had watched a herd of sauroch moving through the Pyre Desert, their drovers wrangling the beasts from the back of grav-wagons. Eight men and fifteen sauroch died in minutes, dragged under the sand and devoured. Har'gaan had watched his uncle try to fight one of the creatures off. It coiled its viperous body around a sauroch first, crushing its ribcage, lungs, internal organs, and then bit off the man's arm before it took him screaming into the dirt and the dark. Har'gaan alone survived.

The drovers never returned to that same patch of desert again.

Serrwyrms, the creatures were called.

'Monsters,' Kade answered at last, snugging the cannon into the crook of his arm and raising the twinned muzzles.

Har'gaan shouted up to Za'tenga and Illion.

'Run!'

But his voice was eclipsed by tectonic thunder.

Ba'ken's grim humour faded when he saw Va'lin had not trained the monocular on the canyon wall as instructed. 'Va'lin,' he said.

The Scout seemed not to hear. He had the lens aimed at the distant horizon line and the chain of volcanoes that towered across it. Largest of them was

Deathfire, and she looked angry.

‘I see something...’ Va’lin began.

Ba’ken followed the Scout’s gaze. His eyes widened. ‘It’s a helstorm.’

Nocturne was a volatile world, the overbearing gravity exerted by its larger moon created an environment of tectonic fragility. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and pyroclastic storms were all common. Helstorms were amongst the worst of those devastating natural events. It was not the potentially world-ending Time of Trial but it was destructive, deadly to any caught without shelter, and it was happening. Now.

Deathfire vented spears of cloud and gouts of debris from the caldera at her peak. Heartblood, the life of Nocturne, was running down her flanks in runnels of fire. A sudden explosion shook the summit, rippling outwards in a shockwave. It began as motes of sand-ash, vibrating against one another and grew into a temblor several minutes later that trembled the earth beneath Ba’ken’s feet. In the same moment, a great spume of pyroclastic gas and smoke erupted as Deathfire roared into the flame-scarred heavens, nearly blotting out the sun. She was not finished, not nearly. She was merely warming up, fashioning an altogether more violent encore to the first refrain.

It hit seconds later, though Ba’ken and the others had to wait minutes to feel the effects, an immense quake that cracked the Scorian Plain in chasms, the fractures many and wide-ranging. Flame, intense and angry, spewed up from every fissure and the view down into the canyon was lost behind a sudden wall of conflagration.

Ba’ken sent the Scouts back. Hot hail was raining from the rapidly blackening sky, deadly to warriors only armoured in carapace. He grimaced as he opened the comm-feed in his gorget, pulling a chunk of rock from his vambrace and wincing at the burning line scorched across his cheek at the same time.

‘Forge Master,’ he said into the feed, attempting to raise the Techmarine monitoring their progress in the Prometheus moon far above Nocturne’s turbulent atmosphere.

Behind him the two Scouts were regaining their feet but stayed low and wary as the hail continued. They were right at the edge of its destructive fury.

Ba’ken stabbed out a finger. ‘Into the speeder,’ he said, gesturing to a squat, boxy vehicle hovering just above the desert floor on anti-gravitic motors. Exor was up and into the gunner’s seat to man the pintle-mounted heavy bolter. Only a step behind, Va’lin vaulted into the open-topped troop hold and strapped in. The Storm-variant Land Speeder was designed for troop transport and could carry up

to five easily, but Ba'ken had stocked it with equipment: phosphor flares, grapnels and rappelling wire, as well as spare ammunition and a modest weapons cache.

Enough for a rescue mission.

Va'lin began tooling up his webbing.

Another tremor, harder and louder than the previous one, shook the Scorian Plain. A column of fire soared from the mountain in a coruscation, tearing into the smoke and igniting the ash in the air. The effect was mesmeric as a chain reaction of blood-red flame rolled across the sky in a tsunami wave.

An echoing cry across the ruddy clouds answered. Helstorms were not only flame and ash; they disturbed the beasts of the deep desert, forced them to the surface, emboldened them even as the earth itself grew more volatile.

After a few tense minutes, Va'lin gestured to the sky. 'Incoming,' he warned, taking up a bolter and aiming along its stock as he pointed the weapon at the silhouettes moving amongst the clouds.

'Tracking engaged.' Exor brought the heavy bolter up, peering down its sight as he cranked the cannon to its highest elevation.

Something pierced the cloud... Sickle-bladed wings, a feral snout, blind but with deep nasal pits akin to knife slashes and gaping auditory canals like gills ridging its neck. Skin like dirty pearl took on the fire of the mountain and seemed to burn.

Exor unleashed a salvo but the creature pinwheeled, rolled and avoided every shell.

Va'lin's aim was better, firing into its predicted trajectory. The first bolt clipped it, staggering the creature, and the second and third took out its torso and blew it apart. Spreading cloud swallowed it whole, obscuring its fall to earth.

'More,' Exor warned, hitting the twin triggers.

Six more flyers plunged, wisps of smoke trailing off the razor-edges of their pinions.

They were carrion-eaters, not prone to attacking armed prey, but forced from the sky in panic.

Recoil from the heavy bolter made the speeder jerk, but its suppression systems absorbed the worst of it. Exor's second salvo was better. Combined with another accurate three-round burst from Va'lin, the sleek mantarids disengaged in search of easier pickings and clearer skies. The creatures flew under the worst of the storm, calling to one another, arcing and wheeling in a loose predatory formation. Though imperilled, Nocturne's native fauna was always hungry.

‘We’ve driven them into the canyon,’ said Va’lin, his concern for the aspirants obvious.

Exor said, ‘We don’t know that.’

Chunks of stone were hammering down now, and the Scouts had taken what cover they could inside the vehicle. It too was taking hits, weathering dents.

Ba’ken climbed into the speeder. They were at the very edge of the helstorm’s fury but still being peppered with hail. ‘Forge Master,’ he repeated down the feed, then a moment later shouted, ‘Argos!’

A crackle of static presaged a response as Ba’ken took up the pilot’s position and gunned the engines. After a guttural roar and a belch of flame the speeder was moving.

‘Seismic data suggested you would have several more hours of dormancy,’ a mechanical voice returned on the other end of the feed.

‘She’s just stirring in her sleep,’ said Ba’ken, slewing the speeder into a wild turn to elude a piece of falling debris the size of his torso. He eased down the throttle, jinking again as a crack split the ground beneath and vented flame a second later, then boosted the engine to pull them out of the immediate blast zone. The storm was expanding.

Argos replied, ‘From the readings I am getting, I would conclude she is having a nightmare, brother.’

Va’lin leaned forwards in his harness.

‘There’s no way the aspirants can survive in that.’

Ba’ken shook his head, muttering, ‘It’s the will of the anvil.’ He pulled further out, trying to ride around the maelstrom of smoke, ash and debris. Heat was slapping against the sides of the speeder, crinkling the paint, warming the metal.

Va’lin hung to the speeder’s rollcage, despite his burning skin.

‘We cannot abandon them. We must—’

Ba’ken half turned, glancing sidelong at the Scout behind.

‘The circle of fire burns, Va’lin. It is the Promethean Creed, life necessitates death. It is Nocturne, it is Fire-born.’

Some of Ba’ken’s doubts resurfaced, the harshness of the induction into Seventh. He crushed them, poured on the power to get them clear.

In a few more seconds they were out of the worst of it, and the speeder’s engines cycled down to a low vibrational burr. A lull in the helstorm, the briefest cessation in its fury, allowed a glimpse into the canyon.

Exor pointed over the heavy bolter’s firing rail.

‘I think I see them...’ he said. ‘They are still alive!’

Ba'ken looked through the monocular, holding it one-handed whilst steering the speeder with the other. A pack of serrwyrms had got the aspirants' scent – lathing the air with dagger-thin tongues, sniffing at the hot earth – and were closing. Lowering the scope, he re-opened the feed.

'Argos, how long will this break last?'

A short pause, then the Forge Master replied. 'Not long... Inloading seismic data to your scanners now.'

'Read it,' Ba'ken ordered Exor, nodding to an auspex mag-locked to the speeder's control console. Releasing the heavy bolter, Exor interpreted the data inload from Master Argos.

'There's some deep subterranean activity developing,' he said, gauging the spikes and fluctuations in tectonic motion displayed on the auspex screen.

'Looks slow, but when it hits, the tremor will be potent.'

'And likely collapse most of the canyon,' Ba'ken concluded grimly.

Exor looked up. 'We have minutes, no more than that.'

Even at cruising speed they had pulled ahead of the aspirants now, riding a high ridge with the fire canyon plunging down to the left.

Ba'ken could see the young warriors running even without the scope. Wounded but resolute, they were fighting hard to survive. Arkhan Land had designed the speeder to be fast but it couldn't run that gauntlet. Not even the Dark Angels Ravenwing with their considerable piloting skill could do that. It was impossible. Ba'ken's mouth hardened to a thin line, and he spoke through clenched teeth as he shook his head.

'We can't help them.'

Va'lin reached over, put his hand on Ba'ken's shoulder guard.

'Get me in front of them,' he urged. 'I know a safe route through the canyon, it's imprinted on my memory. I can lead them out.'

Ba'ken was blunt. 'No. This is the nature of the trial. Tempered against the anvil, emerging stronger, or crushed against it. That was the way with you, Va'lin, so shall it be with them.'

'It's certain death if we don't intervene.' Va'lin knew he was bordering on insubordination, but his conviction overruled it. 'That's not a trial, it's an execution.' He tried reason. 'Fate, not weakness, has condemned these warriors. They've endured this far. Doesn't the Promethean Creed also preach self-sacrifice? Let me help them, captain.'

Va'lin was already an expert at navigating the harsh terrain of Nocturne. During the dragon-strife, in the defence of Hesiod City, he had displayed

courage and tenacity too. Ba'ken knew he would only stop arguing when he got his way or his captain was forced to reprimand him.

The problem was, Ba'ken agreed with him.

In the end, the captain merely growled and yanked up the speeder.

As they burst along the ridge, Va'lin sat back and started to prepare for the rescue mission.

'I'll put you down near the lip of that low ridge, two hundred and thirty-six metres out,' said Ba'ken, scanning the pict-screen of the speeder's control console and reading the contours of the canyon.

Accessing his eidetic memory, Va'lin recalled the specific location. There was a sharp slope that dipped down into the canyon's basin, but he could rappel it quickly. From there, a short sprint of one hundred and fifty-three metres to a narrow aperture, where he would intercept the aspirants.

As Va'lin was getting equipped, Exor turned his head to speak over the back of the gunner's seat. 'Serrwyms are weak under their natural carapace, and their eyesight is poor.'

'So I wait until I can smell them.'

Va'lin smiled, but Exor was stony faced.

'And they you. Once that snout has distended, give them something to chew on that isn't flesh and bone.'

'Your tactical acumen never fails to astound me, Exor.'

'And you are always surprising me with your recklessness, brother. Anyone would think you had something to prove.'

'I do.' Punching the release clamp of his belt harness, Va'lin stood up and gripped the speeder's rollbar. They were slowing down. The cleft in the rock that led to the low ridge was in sight. 'That Salamanders protect their own,' he concluded, leaping from the speeder. Sand and ash were kicked up where he landed, crouched on the desert floor. Then he was running.

Ba'ken watched him go, all the way to the ridge until he secured his rappelling wire and disappeared over the edge.

'Is he going to make it?' asked Exor, glancing down at the seismic returns coming through the auspex. They rippled like Doppler waves.

Ba'ken grimaced. 'If Vulkan wills it.'

Gunning the engines, he raced towards the end of the canyon.

Za'tenga took it as a bad sign that he could no longer hear the monsters behind them. Billowing smoke, streaking down over the ridge line into the canyon

dulled the senses, though. It was hard to hear much of anything through the violent rumble of the mountains, the roar of fire and the harsh rasp of steam venting from clefts in the ground.

The earth trembled beneath them, spitting out columns of fire, thronging the air with heat and the smell of burning. Za'tenga stumbled, losing his footing as a piece of rock speared up from the ground, the fragility of the canyon exposed by the seismic forces threatening to tear it apart.

Since the storm hit, the fire canyon had become even more hazardous.

Za'tenga cried out, 'Kade!'

It was tough to see the burly warrior. His outline rippled through a veil of heat haze, obscured further by the scudding drifts of ash. Za'tenga thought he saw him turn...

A hand seized his forearm, hauled him up. Har'gaan's soot-smearred face was determined.

'We stay together,' he told Za'tenga, who nodded.

'Gratitude, brother.'

'Come on, Illion is not far ahead. Kade too.'

Za'tenga couldn't see the pathfinder any more, he was lost to the encroaching darkness spewing from the clouded peak of Mount Deathfire.

His route through the fire chasms had evaporated with the arrival of the helstorm, its violent eruptions swallowing the narrow passages of rock Illion had identified in the swathes of lava. Adapting, they went around it, through a claustrophobic warren of roofless tunnels before emerging into a wider plain where the flames were not so fierce.

A shuddering crack, the sound of the earth being sundered, resonated right and left as slabs of rock broke away from the flanks of the canyon and crumbled down into a miasma of occluding, grey smoke.

Fissures became chasms, splitting apart in savage wounds to reveal the magma within.

One opened up in front of Har'gaan so he leapt over it, not breaking stride.

Za'tenga followed, strong and sure-footed, though he felt a twinge in his ankle from when he had stumbled and prayed it was nothing more than a light sprain. Injury now would be certain death.

'I thought you left him,' said Za'tenga, shouting up to Har'gaan.

'Left who?'

'Runial. I thought you left him behind and that was why he died. But you came back for me.'

Har'gaan's reply was a little breathless with exertion. 'No more of us are dying here.'

'I was wrong about you, Har'gaan,' said Za'tenga. 'I'm sorry.'

If Har'gaan heard the other aspirant's admission, he didn't show it. Instead, he was looking ahead, trying to find the pathfinder.

'Illion!' Even a few metres away, Har'gaan's voice was muffled and distant.

An explosive roar hit the canyon like a god's hammer blow and they stumbled again.

'Kade!' cried Za'tenga, fearful to stay still for too long but wary about advancing blindly through utter blackness. Another burst of fire, an orange-red smear against the smoke, speared from the canyon floor.

Har'gaan was spun by it, limned in a ruddy glow. He staggered, tried to say something then collapsed to one knee. Flames were licking his arm and back. Still he tried to speak. Za'tenga realised he was actually trying to scream.

Diving on Har'gaan, he slapped at the flames, beating them down.

Tendrils of smoke were still rising from Har'gaan's body as Za'tenga rolled him over. He cried out in agony as he went onto his right side. The skin was blistered around his face and neck, his entire left shoulder burned black.

'Get up,' Za'tenga snarled, putting Har'gaan's arm around his shoulders. 'No more of us are dying, remember?'

Shadows were scurrying to the right and left, lingering at the very edge of peripheral vision.

'I see them too,' said Har'gaan in a pained whisper. At least that's what Za'tenga thought he said. With all the noise he just saw the other warrior's lips moving and guessed at their meaning.

Something darted in from the right, and Za'tenga swung around, triggering his carbine. Solid shot raked a black, glossy carapace at the same time a shell-burst peppered the creature's snout. It was sniffing the air, tasting burned flesh and human sweat, the copper stink of blood.

Za'tenga only got a glimpse, the twin attacks enough to keep the serrwurm at bay for a few more seconds. It was long, with segmented chitin encasing its back and torso. Low to the ground, it almost slithered but actually had six short legs, reverse-jointed and with long curved claws for burrowing. Earth or flesh, those claws would ruin either.

Not far ahead, Kade had reached another bottleneck in the canyon and was waving them towards it. He cranked the spent shells from his double shotgun burst, the extra incentive that had dissuaded the serrwurm.

‘I counted six whilst I was standing here,’ said the burly warrior, straining to see through the smoke. ‘But with all of this,’ he gestured to the grey miasma now smothering the canyon, ‘there could easily be more.’ He glanced at Har’gaan, how he leaned so heavily against Za’tenga, but said nothing.

‘Where’s Illion?’ asked Za’tenga, setting Har’gaan down against the flat wall of the narrow gorge. It was no more than six metres across, tight enough to defend, and provided a little shelter with its overhanging crags.

‘Not far,’ said Kade, holding his side.

Za’tenga saw the dark patch across his skin. ‘Are you wounded too?’

‘Just a scratch,’ he said. ‘We need to go.’ He pointed down the gorge, the end a mystery swathed in soot-black smoke. ‘It runs for another eighty metres.’

Za’tenga saw the danger. ‘And we don’t want to be down there when the beasts come again.’

Kade nodded. ‘Can he even walk, let alone run?’ he asked, gesturing to the stricken warrior.

‘I’ll bloody walk through that,’ Har’gaan snarled, but his pugnacity cost him as he went to rise.

Za’tenga caught him, put out a hand to let Kade know it was fine.

‘Don’t worry about us. I can carry him.’

Kade looked like he wanted to say something but decided against it.

With the Themian in the lead, they headed off down the narrow gorge.

Va’lin descended into hell. When he hit the ground, the heat was like a slap across the face. Fire and smoke were everywhere, rippling across the canyon floor, spewing across its crags, draping pitfalls in an impenetrable miasma of grey. Ash was falling like rain. It covered his shoulders and the top of his head, and flecked his armour. Va’lin let it. The natural camouflage might prove useful.

He took a few seconds to get his bearings. By his reckoning, the aspirants were south-east of his position, between two and three hundred metres behind him. He needed to move quickly. Seismic body blows were reshaping the nature of the canyon all the time. If fortune didn’t favour him, the landscape might be very different from the one he expected by the time he reached them.

Va’lin was on the move again when he detected his shadow. A pair of serrwyrms, broken off from the pack pursuing the aspirants, had discovered his scent. Deadly to Nocturnean natives, they would find a Scout of the Adeptus Astartes a much tougher prospect.

Not breaking stride, Va’lin kept the creatures in the periphery of his vision,

content to let them roam and prowl. Unable to discern transhuman from human, the serrwyrm only perceived lone prey and began to close.

As they crept closer, slithering through the sharp rocks, Va'lin thumbed the catch off his pistol holster. He had a bolter too, strapped around his torso, but couldn't shoot it one-handed and run at the same time, plus the harder recoil might spoil his aim and he wasn't planning on missing.

'Wait until they can smell you,' he echoed some of Exor's advice from earlier.

As the first serrwyrm pounced, Va'lin turned and unleashed a three-round burst.

Muzzle flare lit up the shadow caused by occluding ash overhead. For an instant the creature was frozen in it, the last inexorable seconds of its existence captured in monochromatic chiaroscuro. That was before its head exploded, taken apart by mass-reactive fury. The torso followed, jerking as the head was struck, a ripple of hard kinetic bangs first buckling the natural carapace and then shredding it.

Viscera laced the front of Va'lin's armour in a trio of gory tracts. A fourth licked his face and he spat out the serrwyrm's foul, acerbic blood.

The second creature was more cunning and stayed behind the Scout, in his blindside.

Va'lin's hearing was acute enough to detect the rapid motion and disturbance that preceded an attack. He ducked, allowing the serrwyrm to pass over his body. Claws flailing, the creature managed to snag Va'lin's shoulder and brought him down.

It took seconds for the Scout to regain his feet, leaving the pistol where he'd dropped it and pulling out a monomolecular combat knife. He held it low, blade down, hooked up next to his forearm as the creature uncoiled and showed its own fangs.

As he glared the serrwyrm down, Va'lin got a good look at it.

Long-bodied, armoured in plate, it had a head like an arrow tip, albeit stitched with four rows of razor-pointed teeth. Emitting a low, reverberant hiss which could have been a warning or a challenge, its mouth unpicked itself and opened up like a fleshy bloom. Three tendril-like tongues, barbed at the tips, writhed within a purple and foul-smelling maw.

It hissed again, coiling and uncoiling, preparing to spring.

'Challenge accepted,' muttered Va'lin, and lunged with his knife.

He rammed it straight into the serrwyrm's mouth, grimacing as the poison from its tongue-barbs flared nerves. It thrashed, gagging on a length of steel that

Va'lin only pushed further until the buried blade punched out through the serrwurm's back. He yanked, dragging it along its spine, tearing open the rugged armour plating and spilling what was inside, out.

Done with the grisly butchery, he jabbed a phial of anti-toxin into his thigh and hurried on.

Stopping to retrieve his pistol, he returned the weapon to its holster and shook off a bout of vertigo. His metahuman resilience to poison was still developing, but he hoped the anti-toxin would boost his biology enough to overcome it.

It would have to, Va'lin told himself. Lives, and not just his own, depended on it.

Illion met the aspirants on the other side of the gorge.

From the expression on the pathfinder's face, Za'tenga could tell their situation wasn't good. Looking past Illion's shoulder, he could see why.

A tempest of fire rolled ahead of them, swathing the canyon and spitting out waves of heat that were already biting their skin. The tightest aperture through the flames revealed steadier ground beyond and another narrow gorge where they might find further shelter, but to reach it they would need to run a gauntlet only a fully armoured Salamander would survive. Even then, the ground was webbed with lava streams. One slip, a moment of ill-footing, and it would be over.

'Can we get through it?' asked Kade, glancing behind them to see if they were being followed.

Illion shook his head.

Har'gaan murmured something, but his voice was lost in the roar of fire. He spoke louder, his face etched in pain from the effort. 'How far have we got to go?'

'Looks bad for him,' said Kade, coldly appraising the burned aspirant.

Har'gaan glared at the Themian. 'I can still hear you.' He turned back to Illion, repeating, 'How far?'

The pathfinder was resting on his haunches, coughing up ash and smoke. He shook his head. 'Another four hundred metres, give or take.'

Kade grunted. He was the only one who seemed untroubled by the fire and darkness. 'He won't make that.' The Themian was referring to Har'gaan. 'I could carry him.'

'Then we won't make it, none of us,' said Za'tenga, adding, 'He stays with me. If those creatures are out there in the flames we'll need that cannon of yours

to fight them off. You stand a better chance of achieving that unburdened.'

Another grunt from Kade. 'Agreed.'

Ahead, the fire tempest was thickening, the narrow avenues through it closing.

Illion ventured forwards. 'Let me try it first.' He ran on, was lost and then revealed again through the smoke.

Anxiously, the others watched and waited.

The pathfinder crouched low beneath the belt of smoke, keeping his body tight to stay away from the worst of the fire. He only got a few metres before the others heard him cry out.

'Is he dead?' Har'gaan muttered, biting back the pain.

Za'tenga was looking, but could not see the pathfinder.

Kade stood impassively, emotions unreadable. 'There.' He pointed a thick, meaty finger at a silhouette emerging from the darkness.

Illion was alive, but clutching his wrist. His right hand was burned, the skin black and blistered. Through gritted teeth he said, 'There's no way through that. Fire... too unpredictable.'

'So we're dead then.' Za'tenga was resigned.

Once again, Kade was unreadable but for a tremor below his right eye which betrayed his annoyance.

Illion shook his head a second time as he began to bind his hand with strips of cloth torn from his sleeve.

'I saw a cliff face. There was a path around the sea of fire, far enough at the edges that we won't burn.'

'You're certain we can endure it?' Kade was staring into the roaring flames and didn't make eye contact at first. When he did, his eyes spoke of the Themian's deep determination for survival.

It chilled Za'tenga despite the rising heat.

Illion nodded. 'As certain as I can be. I only caught a glimpse, but the path is treacherous.'

'I would be disappointed if it were anything other,' uttered Har'gaan, standing up without Za'tenga's help. 'Lead us then, pathfinder.'

Za'tenga gave him a concerned look, but Har'gaan waved it away.

'I can make the climb.'

He did not look convinced, nor did Kade.

Pulling his knife from the serrwurm's corpse, Va'lin wondered how many more of the creatures he would need to kill before he found the aspirants. Together

with the one festering in his wake, this made four he had killed since entering the fire canyon. A few stragglers roused to the surface by the quakes he could cope with, an entire herd might prove fatal. He needed to move faster but the air was thoroughly clouded with smoke now; it was a struggle to see let alone get a bearing. Weaponry was something else he had to consider. The last pair of serrwyms were caught unawares, gutted to conserve ammunition, but once the creatures realised there was another predator in their midst they might be more cautious, even gang up. They were hunting, but not for him. Following a trail left by their kin, Va'lin reasoned. That rationale brought some hope. The aspirants must be close.

If this rescue was going to succeed they would have to be. Conditions were worsening by the minute. Great sections of the canyon were shearing off and collapsing, sealing off routes but creating others. The tectonic shifts were often seen rather than heard, as the smoke occluded everything except for what was right in front of him. After every step Va'lin strained to hear the cracking of rock that presaged another landslide or chasmal split in the earth underfoot, that deepening report of thunder too sustained, too heavy to be the storm overhead. It was an ever-changing labyrinth filled with fire and smoke.

For the first time, Va'lin considered the fact he might have made an error. Even with a Scout's enhanced senses, navigation was proving difficult. Soon it would be impossible. If that happened before he and the aspirants were out of the fire canyon, they would all be dead. So much for reckless heroism.

Va'lin was not a Nocturnean, not by birth. He had become one, a colonist in many ways, rescued from the world of Scoria by Ba'ken and the Third Company. Those warriors had changed much in the intervening years between then and now. Many were dead, killed on Va'lin's birth-world or lost to the dragon-strife that came after. He had always felt himself inferior because of that, because he wasn't Nocturnean. His skin was not as dark, nor would it ever be, and his eyes would not burn as fiercely as his battle-brothers'. Va'lin had resolved that his spirit would have to blaze brighter to compensate. His deeds would have to be greater. But as he knelt by the serrwurm carcass, trying to draw breath, failing to get his bearings, he wondered at the folly of those convictions.

Doubt is the enemy of action.

Va'lin recalled the words from one of Chaplain Elysius's sermons, a mantra often echoed by his sergeant and captain. Despair now, falter even one step, and the fire canyon would claim him. No cremation in the pyreum, no ceremony at Mount Deathfire. The Circle of Fire would be broken and Va'lin lost to the earth

like ash carried away on a bitter breeze.

It could not happen that way. He could not believe he had been saved all those years ago to die such an ignominious death now.

Another tremor shook the earth.

Va'lin took it and rose up.

Ahead, flames crackled and roared in a fog of smoke and drifting ash that layered the ground in a false wintery shroud. White above, white below, like an artist's canvas that had no borders or end. As the ash rain continued to fall, coating Va'lin and his armour, he considered that soon he would be part of the endless white, subsumed into the fire canyon and never seen again.

Ask for forgiveness later.

That was one of Captain Ba'ken's favourite phrases. It meant that it was better to act in error than not act when action was required.

Surrounded by the white, action was definitely required.

Trusting to instinct, Va'lin hurried on through the farinaceous haze.

It wasn't long before he was rewarded for his boldness as a monolithic pillar, blackened by fire but still standing, resolved through the perfect gloom. Recognising the rock, Va'lin realised he had veered off course, but only slightly. The aspirants were heading north, and he had planned on intercepting them on a south-west heading. The rock was a nodal point, a milestone at which he could rally and strategise his next move. What was more, there were handholds and, about a hundred metres up, a short ledge where he could better survey the canyon. It rose above the cloud layer, beyond the grasp of the flames. A hard climb up a razor-edged cliff, but the vantage he would gain would be worth the effort.

It took several minutes for Va'lin to scale the flank of the pillar, the tectonic booms of thunder, the shifting of the rock his constant companions and a stark reminder of how close death really was. A single slip and it would all be over. Swinging up to the last handhold, Va'lin clambered onto the ledge. The storm raged overhead, splitting the clouds above with eldritch-looking lightning that formed shapes of monsters and daemons in his mind's eye. They were neither, and Va'lin shook his head to banish the apparitions plaguing him. As he stooped low to secure his footing and stabilised his centre of gravity, the reek of soot clung to his nostrils and made him gag. After hacking up a black, phlegmy gob, he peered into the smoke.

It was burning beyond the white of the canvas. A billowing grey sea, lit by flares of fire, spread out in all directions. Where he caught the impression of a

throbbing red-orange smear, Va'lin knew there was a lava chasm. Fingers of rock, not unlike the one on which he perched, stabbed up from the fog but were little more than sharp peaks gesturing accusingly at a careless sky. The aspirants could not have climbed them.

Reaching into his webbing, Va'lin took out a pair of folded scopes. He extended them, snapped on the activation rune and began cycling through the ocular settings. There was too much visible light to make night vision useful and thermal imaging would prove difficult given the waves of heat coming off the canyon, but with some adjustment Va'lin could at least penetrate the smoke layer. The rock formations below the grey fog resolved in a ruddy blur allowing Va'lin to trace a route through them. He found the bottleneck where he was originally going to intercept the aspirants below, but the route was blocked by a shelf of collapsed rock.

Va'lin cursed loudly. His task had just become many times more difficult.

He retrained the scopes, panning them farther back, trying to imagine the alternative path the aspirants might have taken. A vast lake of fire was burning in a wide basin that stretched the length of the canyon at one of its widest points. Temperature readings were spiking into the red zone of his scopes. There was no way they could have taken that route.

He went back farther still and after a few seconds found a narrow channel running up one side of the canyon to the west. It was a short climb up onto a ledge that looked as if it wound all the way around the flames until it reached the other side. If they were alive, that was where the aspirants would have gone.

Snapping the scopes shut, Va'lin secured them back in his webbing and was about to retrace his steps when something hit the tower of rock. It shuddered as if it had been smacked by a mortar barrage. Va'lin stumbled and fell into a deeper crouch so he didn't come off the ledge and plummet to certain doom on the crags below. The pillar trembled as a dull cracking sound presaged its collapse. A subterranean tremor must have dislodged it, compromised its integrity like a tree severed at its base. Even as he wracked his brain for an escape plan, the angle was shifting, tipping to the left as gravity exerted its will upon Va'lin's now precarious vantage point. He went against it, running up the ledge that was now a steep incline, getting steeper by the second.

Hurling himself over the edge that up until that moment had been the pillar's flat summit, Va'lin found whatever handholds he could, half scaling, half falling. He had not scrambled far when he lost his grip, the rock disintegrating in his grasp, and he fell. Something sharp pierced his lower back as he bounced off the

side of the pillar, and he cried out. Thrusting up a hand, he arrested his descent for a second before losing his grip again. He tumbled, pinwheeling as his axes became inverted and then righted themselves again.

Another hard jolt. Pain flared in his side. Part of his carapace armour was ripped off as his shoulder was raked against crags of jutting rock. He rolled, smacked against the crumbling pillar and tasted blood in his mouth, his world a kaleidoscope of smoke and fire. Briefly, he found some purchase under foot. Stumbling and staggering as the vertical plane he had scaled rapidly became horizontal, Va'lin tried to make what ground he could before even that disappeared beneath him and he was cast down into abyssal darkness and consuming flame.

Ba'ken saw the pillars collapse from the pilot's seat of the speeder. They had slowed to cruising speed and were coming around to the northernmost edge of the fire canyon at last, the one that faced Mount Deathfire in the distance. Over twenty kilometres wide, the edge of the slowly crumbling chasm had several exits that led into the deeper Scorian Plain beyond. With their instrumentation ruined by the storm, it would be impossible to know which, if any, Va'lin had taken.

'Something in the dunes, captain,' Exor said, pointing, failing to keep the alarm from his voice.

Ba'ken hadn't been looking farther out, his attention was focused solely on the fire canyon itself. Now he shifted his gaze, he saw what Exor had discovered.

He counted three bodies, barely visible, half buried in the sand.

Without a word, he pulled the speeder into an aggressive turn, belatedly muttering, 'Hold on,' as Exor was almost thrown from his seat and into the rollcage above.

As they got closer, Ba'ken eased the throttle. The pitiable corpses were too slight, too small to be Fire-born.

'Pilgrims,' said the captain, uttering a quiet benediction. It was no more than he had suspected when none of the baggage trains had returned. Casting his eye farther still, he found the rest, not far ahead but their bodies were sunk deeper.

'They were fools,' said Exor, rueful.

Ba'ken replied, 'The earth will reclaim them and the Circle of Fire will turn.'

'Into fire and ash...' said the Scout, his voice trailing off with his thoughts.

'As we'll all become in the end,' added Ba'ken fatalistically, turning them around so they faced towards the fire canyon again.

Close up it was impressive, almost god-like in its power and violent majesty.

Huge plumes of smoke, ash and fire were billowing from the mouth of the gorge like hot breaths exhaled by some monster of Nocturnean myth. The shattered spines of rock were its broken fangs, the canyon itself its belly, thrashing in its death throes. If Emek had lived, Ba'ken believed the Apothecary would have found something poetic about its self-destructive beauty.

The four aspirants were suddenly of much lesser concern. Somewhere in the darkness and conflagration was Va'lin.

'What could live in that?' asked Exor, the implication obvious.

Ba'ken answered with an order: 'Hand me the scope.'

Even with its enhanced magnification and visual filters, the captain could see little beyond the canyon's maw.

He dared not get too close, the speeder was already taking hits from the debris kicked up by the storm. Within its immediate radius, there was no way of telling where another quake might split the earth or if a giant tremor was about to sunder the entire canyon and consume it whole. He smashed his fist against the console making the seismic returns shudder, crackle out of focus and then fizzle back again.

Ba'ken opened up the comm-feed. 'Argos, how long will this helstorm last?'

There was a short delay before the Forge Master replied, 'Impossible to predict with any certainty. It could be hours or even days, but that is the nature of the trial and the anvil upon which would-be Fire-born are tempered.'

'One of my Scouts is in there. Va'lin.'

'The Scorian?' It was more of a statement than a question but Argos phrased it like one anyway.

'Yes.'

'There are no search teams, no reinforcements close enough to assist you in time, brother-captain.' Another statement as Argos did the only thing he really could, relate facts. His last comment was knowingly facile. 'You are on your own.'

Ba'ken laughed ruefully, 'We've been on our own since Isstvan, Forge Master. Every fire-born son of Nocturne knows that. Surviving on our own with our guts ripped out is what we Salamanders do best.'

'You have a certain way of expressing yourself, Sol.' Though he couldn't see him, Ba'ken thought he detected a rare smile in Argos's voice as he used the captain's given first name. It fled quickly as he gave his final statement.

'The chances of Va'lin's survival are minimal according to the readings I am

seeing. So too your aspirants.’ Another pause, this time not caused by static but by the Forge Master’s desire to find the appropriate emotional response. ‘I am sorry, brother-captain.’

‘No you’re not, Argos, but the gesture is appreciated nonetheless. Ba’ken out.’ He cut the feed, let the speeder idle along in silence for a few more seconds.

‘I should not have let him go,’ Ba’ken berated. ‘A death sentence, he said it himself.’

‘Va’lin is the most resourceful warrior I know in the Seventh,’ said Exor. ‘If there is a way to make it out of the fire canyon, he will find it.’

The speeder came to a halt, hovering just beyond the storm’s edges and minimum safe distance.

‘And that is the problem, Exor.’ Ba’ken glowered and the hard crags of his face bunched together in a fist of black rock. He paused for a beat, thinking. ‘Phosphor-flares. Now. Stake them as close as you can and at every possible aperture out of that hell hole.’

Exor unclipped his gunner’s harness and climbed over into the speeder’s troop hold. A satchel of flares was slung over his shoulder when he touched down on the plain.

‘Plant them deep. Do it fast,’ snapped Ba’ken, watching the Scout go to work. ‘I’ll drive around, see if the view is any better farther along.’

As the speeder started up again, he snarled, angry. At the wastefulness of it all, at Va’lin, at himself.

‘Impetuous fool. If he does live through this, I’ll bloody kill him myself.’

Gunning the engines, Ba’ken drove the speeder around the other side of the canyon in the desperate hope of finding a way through.

Illion’s wounded hand made the climb more difficult. It was tough already but the pathfinder was determined not to let something as inconsequential as pain slow him down. His bindings, laced with morphia gel from his modest field kit, took the edge off but only so he wouldn’t pass out. Slight, perhaps; young, most certainly, Illion had survived against the odds – his facial scars were a daily reminder of that – and he wasn’t about to relinquish the life he had been given easily.

‘Which way?’ he heard the Themian ask from below.

Illion was barely holding on with both hands, so he nodded up to the natural causeway he had found in the canyon’s flank and hoped Kade would catch on.

He did. The Themian ate up the ground like a rathlyd, except where the lizard

would have employed its subcutaneous hook-talons, Kade used hands the size of spades to make his ascent. Prodigious climbing ability was not the only thing he had in common with that saurian species, Illion decided as he climbed up after the barbarian. The Themian was cold-blooded too. Yes, he had undeniable fire, the kind of focused rage and overconfidence that all great warriors possessed, but Illion reasoned he would find a fount of ice running through Kade's veins if he were ever cut deep enough.

The pathfinder was still considering that when he saw a brawny hand outstretched above him, offering aid. The grip around his good wrist that seized him a moment later was like a manacle of iron.

Kade hauled him up the rest of the way as if he weighed no more than a child.

'Good, pathfinder?' the Themian asked, crouched on haunches like girders of plasteel.

Illion nodded, grateful for the assist.

Perhaps he isn't cold as nuclear winter after all...

A few minutes later, Har'gaan and Za'tenga reached the summit.

Illion could perform very basic battlefield surgery but it didn't take a medicae to know that Har'gaan was in a bad way. The blisters on his back and shoulder were red-raw and seeping. Infection was almost certain, though the worst of it was obviously cauterised by the heat. Sweat, and not from the external heat, was beading Har'gaan's brow and his eyelids flickered. He was barely on the edge of consciousness.

A rough hand seized Illion's shoulder, the manacle becoming a clamp that bit down with iron fingers.

'We follow it, then where?'

Kade had entered a sort of catatonic survival mode. He was so calm, it was actually terrifying. They would need that impervious strength and resolve to make it the rest of the way out of the fire canyon.

Illion dared not make him wait for an answer.

He nodded. 'Follow the causeway,' he confirmed. 'In about thirty metres it hooks to the left and then angles downwards another ten or so. Keep flat to the wall and be mindful of your footing, the ledge is very narrow in places.'

'Then where?' It came out as a demand not a question. Kade's fists bunched around the stock of his combat shotguns but he had at least released his grip on Illion's shoulder. If not, he might have crushed his collar bone.

'Keeps descending, down into a shallow basin of rock, I think. Couldn't read it that well through the smoke.'

Kade regarded the pathfinder for a few more seconds, as if gauging whether he was satisfied with his guide's assessment. In the end he turned away and started off down the causeway. 'Follow, pathfinder,' he called behind him.

'Something has happened to him,' said Za'tenga in a low voice.

Illion nodded to the other warrior at his shoulder then asked, 'Har'gaan?'

Za'tenga was about to shake his head when Har'gaan staggered past them both.

'Come on,' he said, grimacing. 'We are not dead yet.' Har'gaan glanced over his shoulder, but his gaze went beyond the other two aspirants and he scowled. 'We need to move. Now.'

Illion turned.

Fear had spurred Har'gaan's limbs into a final desperate act of motion.

The aspirants were not the only ones seeking a way around the sea of fire. Three sinuous bodies, low against the sheer rock and climbing swiftly, followed them. The serrwyms had caught up with their prey.

'Down!' Kade's shout was almost as loud as his twin shotgun blasts as a storm of shrapnel erupted from their mouths. The muzzle flare was brief but sharp, so too the lead serrwurm's death scream as it plummeted off the fire canyon's flank with only half a head.

The big Themian racked another shell into the breech. He was stalking forwards along the causeway, the others flat against it, advancing on the creatures.

'Fight or die!' he roared, triggering the cannons again, this time at a second pair who were scaling down the canyon's summit from above.

Three las-carbines answered as the rest of the aspirants combined their fire to take down a third creature. Throughout the barrage, the serrwyms slithered and weaved, and the fire canyon continued to break apart.

'We cannot stay here and fight them all off.' Illion had adopted a kneeling stance with the end of the carbine's stock tucked into his armpit, up into the shoulder to better absorb recoil. Every shot was accurate, he had some skill as a marksman, but the serrwurm's chitinous armour was thick. Most of his shots were ineffective.

Behind him, Kade grunted.

'How many left?' he growled between shotgun blasts.

'At least three, but there could be more,' shouted Illion.

Za'tenga slammed home a fresh clip. 'Last one,' he said, reading off the dwindling ammo count. 'Not enough to fend them off. We need a different

strategy.'

'I would suggest running,' said Illion.

A few short metres separated them from the serr-wyrms now. Only the fact that the canyon was shaking so violently had prevented the creatures from springing at the aspirants, and bearing them down to feast upon.

'Agreed,' said Kade.

Before he turned, Illion caught the look in the Themian's eyes and perceived the cold survival logic there. From this point, whoever was the fastest would live. Stronger, uninjured, more sure-footed than the rest, Kade was in the best position.

But despite the pathfinder's expectations, the Themian didn't take the lead. Instead he went to Har'gaan who was barely holding himself upright against the trembling canyon wall.

'Go!' Kade barked at the others, 'I will carry him.' He heaved Har'gaan up one-handed, keeping his other hand free to fire the shotgun. His aim was wild but the large bursts compensated. 'Go!'

Illion ran, Za'tenga, who seemed reluctant to leave Har'gaan behind, in front.

'Don't look back,' he shouted ahead, but risked a glance over his own shoulder.

For the second time in almost as many minutes, Illion's expectations were confounded. He thought he would see Kade's back, the Themian manfully retreating along the causeway by degrees, Har'gaan slung over his shoulder like a sandbag.

Har'gaan wasn't slumped over Kade's shoulder. He was kneeling in front of him, the big Themian's arm around his neck. He was whispering something to him. That struck Illion as odd; he didn't think Kade was capable of whispering.

Just as he began to turn away, Illion saw movement. A savage twist, Kade releasing Har'gaan's limp body to the ground where he kicked it forwards like an offering.

Then he ran.

Illion fought every instinct to cry out Har'gaan's name for to do so would only seal his own fate. Something cold crept into his gut as he looked away at last, Kade leaving behind a feast for the serrwyrms after all. Before the Themian caught up, Illion gripped Za'tenga's arm. As instructed, he had not looked back but needed to be warned about what the pathfinder had witnessed.

'Keep your eyes ahead,' Illion hissed, as loud as he dared, maintaining pace with Za'tenga so as not to throw them both off balance. 'Har'gaan didn't make

it.'

Za'tenga almost turned out of shock but stopped just short. He stumbled but only a little, and kept his footing.

'What? How?'

Kade provided the answer, bellowing from close behind.

'Make haste. Our brother's sacrifice will only buy us a little time.'

Illion felt Za'tenga stiffen in his grasp. He let go, numb at what the Themian had done to ensure their survival.

'He killed him, didn't he,' said Za'tenga.

'Yes.'

They reached the first descent, scurrying on hands and knees through the smoke-choked causeway. The second descent was sharper. At the front, Za'tenga nearly fell but Illion grasped the strap of his chest armour and righted him enough so the aspirant could regain his balance.

'Gratitude, brother.'

'Just keep going.'

Shuddering cracks, the wrench of stone splitting apart pursued them like a vengeful spirit as the causeway and the entire flank of the canyon started to disintegrate.

'Move!' Illion almost screamed, his eyes on Za'tenga's back, feeling burning heat prickling the skin of his own. Lava crackled, the slow, deep snap of sloughing rock as it was dissolved in a glowing soup of immolation. A thick sheaf of the canyon wall slid away, crashing down amidst a rapidly expanding pall of smoke and blazing debris.

Illion was heading down, risking sure footing for a better chance of escaping the dissolution of the earth behind him. An ululating screech pierced the volcanic thunder and he stooped, not slowing, fearing a return of the mantarids. But the flyers were gone, fled beyond the storm and the hellish red clouds enveloping the canyon. It was the serrwyrms, burned away despite their chitinous armour. From his father Illion had heard of creatures on Nocturne, those of the low earth who could survive the lava lakes, even live in them, but serrwyrms were not that enduring. He gave brief praise to the Throne and Vulkan that at least one terror had been vanquished by another.

Now they merely had to survive the wrath of the mountain itself.

A second prayer of deliverance was quick to pass his lips.

After another fifty metres it appeared his supplication was answered when the aspirants reached a basin of ash and smouldering cinder, the pyroclastic leavings

from the volcano venting above.

Kade was last to arrive, defying Illion's hope that he had perished with the other predators. Behind him, most of the canyon wall had collapsed into a fresh sea of lava but the destruction had abated. Revelling in his survival, the Themian angled his head up to let the drifting flakes of grey-white touch his face. His laughter then was booming and terrible. As he looked down to regard the others, he looked like a ghost swathed in powdered bone.

'I snapped his neck,' he told them, the shotguns hanging by a strap over his shoulder an unspoken threat. There was no remorse in his expression, all the humour had faded too and a face of ice looked on at them. 'Har'gaan was a dead man walking. His sacrifice meant we could live.'

For a moment no one moved or spoke, despite the fact that any delay could mean their deaths, and the rumble of the storm persisted violently in the void they had left.

Za'tenga's teeth were clenched. His fist wrapped around the hunting knife sheathed at his belt. The carbine was dry, clutched by the stock in his other hand like a club.

Kade took a step forwards in a very deliberate, silent challenge. The hot coals crunched underfoot. He gestured to the knife Za'tenga was obviously thinking about drawing.

'Do you know where that knife was made, where it comes from?' he asked calmly, then without waiting for an answer, he continued. 'I shall tell you. It is Themian, from the City of Warrior Kings.' Kade bowed his head just slightly and his eyes seemed to darken. 'My city.'

Za'tenga pulled the knife a thumb width from its sheath, exposing the silver of the blade. It shone red against the flames as if already blooded.

In the end, Illion put out his hand and laid it on top of Za'tenga's.

'No, brother,' he told him simply.

It took a few seconds, but Za'tenga let go.

Kade didn't smile, satisfied he had convinced the other man to back down; he didn't do anything until Za'tenga's back was turned. Then he raised the shotguns.

'I only need you, pathfinder...'

Illion flung his knife. He threw it as hard and fast as he could, spinning it tip over hilt in little blinding circles of fiery silver.

Kade saw it late, not predicting that the pathfinder had the guts to turn and fight him. He cried, twisting too slowly as the knife found the meat of his thigh

and dug deep. A second later, the shotguns went off but Za'tenga had gone to ground and the blast only peppered air, not flesh.

'Murdering bastard!' Za'tenga was scrabbling to his feet, half slipping on ash and cinder. His wounded leg wasn't helping. With blackened knuckles, he gripped his knife hilt and yanked it free... Then stopped. Two barrels from a conjoined combat shotgun were staring him in the eyes.

Illion was halfway to them when he saw the moment and froze. He held out his hand, so did Za'tenga.

'Enough blood,' said the pathfinder, his tone pleading. 'Enough has been shed already. Why can't we all live?'

Za'tenga put the knife down. He did it slowly, careful to show Kade the blade.

'Only the strong will live,' said the Themian, 'the weak will perish against the anvil.' He looked down at Za'tenga's leg. 'And you are weakened, my friend.'

Kade looked up. 'I need only you, pathfinder.'

As the shot sounded, Illion closed his eyes tight. When he opened them again the Themian's body was a ragged, half-destroyed mess. Most of his legs were intact, the shell had hit him in the torso, pushing him back with the sheer force of the impact and then detonating inside his body. Internal organs, bone, it was hard to discern amidst the ruddy pile of viscera Kade had become. His head was several metres away, torn off his neck during the explosion.

Illion fought down an urge to vomit.

Za'tenga had already been sick all over the front of his fatigues.

Both turned to see a tall figure emerging from the smoke and drifting ash. The warrior looked battered, his armour broken and his trappings torn. He held a stocky looking pistol in his outstretched hand and his eyes were like two burning coals.

'Come with me and you'll live,' said the newcomer, looking past them. Illion turned to see several slithering bodies, just burrowed up from the earth.

But this time the serrwyrms were not hunting. They were fleeing.

Above, the mountain roared, unhappy the insects scurrying in its fire-wreathed canyons had survived its wrath. It vented harder, as if trying to redress the oversight.

'You know what this is?' Va'lin asked one of the aspirants whilst on the move, a hawkish-looking boy with an old scar across his face.

He nodded. 'A bolt pistol.'

'Very good,' Va'lin handed the weapon to him. 'Keep it close and shoot two-

handed. Try it in one and you'll dislocate your shoulder, at best. It's not meant for normal humans.'

Normal humans.

The expression had come unbidden and even though Va'lin's transhuman apotheosis was in its relative infancy he could no longer be classed as merely 'human'. The realisation was as chilling as it was empowering.

'It will kick,' he warned. 'Use it to kill those bastards if they get too close.'

The fleeing serrwyrms were shadowing them, trying to escape the fire canyon's fury just like their former prey. Shadows, all sinuous and fleet of claw, appeared sporadically through the ash drifts, a reminder that they were not alone.

'Are they still a threat?' asked the other aspirant. 'I thought you said they were running, like us?'

This one was taller, stronger, though not nearly as big as the Themian Va'lin had been forced to put down. He would have to explain that to Ba'ken later, why he had shot dead one of his fellow tribesmen. The other aspirant had the regal bearing of a noble; he was definitely from Hesiod.

A bark of fire ripped from the bolt pistol's muzzle and the lead serrwurm backed off.

'There's your answer,' said Va'lin, glad to see the slighter aspirant was still on his feet and still running.

'If they want to get ahead of us, they won't go around,' Va'lin told the other. 'They'll come through us with tooth and claw. Try running with a maimed leg or your guts hanging from your stomach.'

That silenced the noble. He carried a knife, Va'lin had nothing else to spare. His bolter was the last of his weapons that had survived the fall and he wasn't about to part with it. He doubted the boy could fire it and not cave in most of his ribcage with the recoil anyway.

Again, Va'lin was reminded of his enhanced physiology. Soon it would be strengthened further, by the black carapace and the fusion of flesh to power armour. That was if they could escape the storm.

Darkness was gathering thickly, the smoke almost impenetrable. Breathing was difficult, even for Va'lin. The aspirants suffered badly. In a few short minutes, they had lost sight of the serrwyrms. Dead or fled elsewhere, it didn't matter. The mouth of the canyon could be mere metres away, but they would never know. From his eidetic memory of its original geography, modified by what little information he had gleaned whilst crouching on the pillar of rock, Va'lin knew there were several routes out of the fire canyon. Even if, by some

freak of fortune, Ba'ken found the right one there was no guarantee they would see his signal.

Kilometres across, swathed in ever expanding black, they might as well have been in an ocean.

Slowing down, beckoning the others to do the same, Va'lin pulled three phosphor-flares from his webbing. When broken off at the tip, they burned magnesium-white and were the best chance they had of someone seeing them from beyond the storm.

'Can you throw?' he asked the Hesiod noble.

'With a javelin, at gnaw-squid in the Acerbian Sea. But yes, I can throw.'

Snapping off the end where it blazed in a riot of pellucid white, Va'lin handed him one of the flares and pointed to the east. 'As far and deep as you can.'

The noble was true to his word, the flare cutting through the smoke in a dazzling parabola, landing somewhere just beyond the sixty-metre mark where it continued to burn and became a beacon in the smog.

The other two flew farther, cast by Va'lin. One disappeared, swallowed by lava or simply plunged into a gaping crevice. The other flickered briefly and died.

'We follow yours, aspirant.' Va'lin nodded, indicating the wan magnesium glow in the distance. 'And hope for solid ground between us and it.'

'I am Za'tenga,' said the noble, holding out his hand.

Briefly they had stopped running. Not to catch a breath, for there was precious little of that remaining, but to try and get some kind of bearing. It was like running in the void with only the illusion of solidity beneath them to tell up from down.

Va'lin looked down at the aspirant's hand. It was bloody, soot-smearred and painfully small compared to his own. So used was he to only being with his battle-brothers, even as a Scout, he had forgotten some of the simple interactions that came with dealing with mortals. He clasped the human's forearm and held it firmly.

Za'tenga reciprocated. 'If we are to live or die here,' he said, coughing hard through his words but determined to say them, 'then I would prefer you to know my name.'

'Va'lin,' the Scout replied, releasing his grip.

Za'tenga half turned, 'And he is... Illion!'

The hawkish aspirant had collapsed, his lungs finally giving in to the soot and smoke.

Za'tenga tried to help his comrade before he too was overcome by the fumes.

Va'lin was impressed they had lasted this long. To have endured such a trial of fire and lived to almost the end of it.

He fell to one knee, his wounds getting the better of him or perhaps some latent effect of the serrwyrn venom his immune system had failed to fully neutralise.

'Vulkan...' he snarled, getting to his feet and staggering over to the aspirants.

He hauled them both onto his shoulders, carrying them like ammo drums for an autocannon.

'Don't let go,' he told them through a cage of teeth.

Weak beyond the facility to walk, both aspirants had enough presence of mind left to seize the straps of the Scout's armour with every last iota of strength they possessed.

The glow of the phosphor-flare was dwindling, but Va'lin was fading too. He tried to deny it but the fall, his wound, the endless smoke and ash were all taking a toll.

'I must endure...' Va'lin muttered, trudging weary steps towards the slowly dying light.

If he could just reach it, find a way out.

'Vulkan...'

The flare died, the last of its fire sucked away on the breeze and obliterated by thickening smoke.

He had been so close. Va'lin could almost see the edge of the fire canyon but now it was lost to him, so too his sense of direction. Like a drowning man in the mist, metres from a shore he couldn't see, Va'lin was lost.

He trudged on a few more steps as the last vestiges of his defiance bled from him leaving a well of pain, rage and anguish.

Throwing back his head, he roared to curse the heavens. 'Vulkan!'

Something blazed in the darkness, scarcely bright enough to see at first, let alone follow.

Va'lin squinted, dredging up every last mote of concentration and presence he had left.

The flare brightened. It became a surging flame, a firebrand guiding him towards safety.

'Ba'ken.' His mountainous captain had found him. In spite of all the odds, he had located Va'lin and come into the fire canyon to drag him out.

As he came closer, Va'lin could just about make out a shadowy silhouette

through the smoke. It was beckoning, urging the Scout to move faster.

‘You may be able to haul two dead weights and still sprint across the Scorian,’ Va’lin muttered breathlessly, ‘but I am not fashioned like a slab of the mountainside.’

Every step he took brought him out of the grey dark. Smoke thinned, tectonic thunder lessened, left behind in the fire canyon’s death throes, the ash rain faded.

Vision dimming, the figure in front of him resolving in a green and blue haze before fading again, Va’lin slumped first to his knees and then fell forwards, gratefully kissing the earth. A different kind of blackness took him then, one born of exhaustion and pain.

‘Rest,’ he heard Ba’ken say in a voice that was not entirely the captain’s.

Va’lin opened his eyes and found he could breathe. Sitting up sharply, he went to his weapons, drawing his bolter, but he found no enemies nearby. Smoke thronged the air, tinged with orange and red from the still burning fire canyon. It had collapsed into a massive sink hole of lava and ash, but the worst of the helstorm was over and they were away from danger.

There was no sign of the speeder, Exor or Ba’ken. He was alone with the two aspirants.

Getting up to check on them, Va’lin found they were still unconscious but alive.

Standing from a crouched position, the Scout looked around. He was in some kind of shallow sand basin, the edges of which were delineated by stone totems etched in Nocturnean script. Channels of lava threaded the desert surrounding it and a strange katabatic wind, redolent of soot and ash, rolled around the landscape with the basin at the heart of this bizarre maelstrom.

‘What is this place?’ he asked himself.

Even with the absence of any other statuary or altar, Va’lin saw enough to know he was in a shrine.

His twin hearts produced a hard single beat that sent a tremor of realisation through his body.

Frantic now, he searched the entire basin. It was more than thirty metres across in all directions. At the approximate centre he found a sigil scorched into the earth. Though the ash drifts and dunes of sand spilled across the plains with great regularity, this patch of the Scorian remained untouched and unsullied. Belatedly, Va’lin realised the mark was not a sigil at all but a silhouette of a human body, a Salamander to be precise.

He knelt down, stretched out a trembling hand to touch the mark.

There was heat, a dense throb of heat but a coldness too in spite of it, endless as the stars themselves. Va'lin was no psyker, his training and relentless mental conditioning had revealed nothing of the warp within him, but he felt... a presence here. An undeniable sense of spirit and existence dwelled within that mark.

He stood up, looked around, surveyed the edge of the sand basin but could see no farther than the totems. Smoke surrounded them on all sides, occluding the desert beyond. It was like being trapped beyond time.

'Da-' he began to call, but then thought better of it.

Something was burning. He heard the crackle of fire, the snap of smouldering wood. Ahead, in place of one of the totems, was a firebrand, the one they had followed to this place which had led them safely from the canyon and saved their lives.

Va'lin was about to go to it when he heard Illion stirring. Za'tenga alongside him coughed up a wad of black phlegm and the Scout was reminded that the survival of the aspirants was even now not guaranteed.

For the second time, he hauled them up onto his shoulders. As he trudged from the shrine circle, pausing briefly at the flickering brand, scared to touch it should it be proven false and Va'lin's mind broken, Za'tenga muttered, 'Are we dead?'

'No,' Va'lin told him, eyes forward as they parted the veil of smoke. 'Not yet, at least.'

For several minutes, Va'lin walked through a grey miasma, not knowing where he was going but somehow assured he was on the right path. And as mist parts from the surface of a cooling lake, the veil thinned and they returned to the Scorian Plain. Over a shallow rise they found the speeder. Captain Ba'ken was standing in the pilot's seat, panning the length of the desert with his scope.

When he saw them, he dropped back down and the guttural engines revved hard. Within a few seconds, he and Exor were with them, rushing from the transport to take Va'lin's mortal burden and secure them in the troop hold.

While Exor provided what little medical attention they had packed with them in the speeder, Ba'ken stood with Va'lin a few metres from where they had set down.

'I thought the earth had claimed you,' he said without emotion, though Va'lin could tell he was holding back his anger and his relief.

'For a few moments back in the canyon, I thought it had too.'

A minute of silence passed between them with the dull throb of the idling Land Speeder the only sound.

‘You should not have lived,’ Ba’ken said. He was stating a fact, based on the evidence of his eyes and his knowledge as a captain of the Salamanders. ‘When that canyon collapsed, you should not have lived. It isn’t possible.’

Va’lin opened his arms. ‘And yet here I stand. Alive.’

Ba’ken’s gaze flicked to the back of the speeder where Exor was engrossed in his work.

‘I cannot decide whether it was recklessness or insane bravery,’ admitted the captain. ‘But they too will probably live,’ he turned to face Va’lin again, ‘thanks to you.’

The Scout bowed his head.

‘You are leaving my company,’ said Ba’ken.

‘Yes, brother-captain.’

‘And you will join the Devastators, along with Exor. Can I be certain you won’t be as reckless again?’

Va’lin opened his mouth to speak but Ba’ken raised his hand to prevent him.

‘No need to answer. I already know you will. In donning the black carapace you’ll become a battle-brother, one knuckled finger of two clenched fists.’

‘I will serve with honour and duty until death, captain.’

Ba’ken nodded but his thoughts had strayed to other matters as he turned away to face the now quiescent Mount Deathfire.

‘What happened out on the plain? Where did you go, Va’lin?’

The Scout looked up to find his captain looking straight at him.

‘I don’t know.’

He was tempted to try and retrace his steps, to locate the shrine for some kind of answer that made sense, but a part of Va’lin realised it would not be there, that hours of searching would not reveal it.

‘We were rescued,’ he conceded. ‘I was dying, and the smoke gathered so thick I couldn’t see. There was no way out and suddenly I saw it.’

‘Saw what?’

‘A firebrand. A flame to guide us out of the darkness and back into the desert.’

Ba’ken shook his head, denial and incredulity etched upon his features as if they had been chiselled there by Va’lin’s words.

‘I thought it was you, captain, come back to get us out, but it couldn’t have been.’

Ba’ken was staring, his mouth a hard line across his face as he clenched his

teeth until the bone ground together.

‘Don’t say anything more,’ he told the Scout. ‘We’ll return to Hesiod, where you’ll be properly debriefed then the brander-priests will score you and prepare you for your apotheosis. That is all.’ He turned away and marched back to the speeder, a cloud thicker than the smoke of the fire canyon upon his face.

Va’lin met Exor as he was stepping out of the troop hold.

They embraced briefly, one glad to see the other alive and well.

‘I’ve made them comfortable,’ said Exor. ‘I assume you’ll want to ride back with them.’

Va’lin nodded, regarding the two slumbering aspirants he had risked so much to rescue.

‘Their life signs are good,’ Exor went on. ‘You saved them, brother.’

‘No I didn’t,’ Va’lin replied, ‘not really.’

Exor frowned. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I don’t know, brother. Define “all right”.’ He looked at him, and knew it was the hollowness in his eyes that Exor reacted to.

‘It is not unusual to be shaken after so close a brush with death.’ But Exor knew that wasn’t it. His face gave the assumption away immediately. ‘Did something happen in the fire canyon?’ he asked.

Va’lin nodded slowly, remembering but not understanding. The silhouetted figure holding the firebrand, its body clad in power armour. The shrine and the mark emblazoned in the earth.

‘It was the place where he died, Exor.’

‘What?’

‘Where he sacrificed everything for us.’

‘I don’t understand, Va’lin. What exactly did you see?’

‘A miracle, I think. Come back from the dead.’

EMPEROR'S DELIVERANCE



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 chainblade 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 novitiate.

‘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 forwards.

‘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 who were able 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 chainblade. 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 super-heated 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 unclipped 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?'

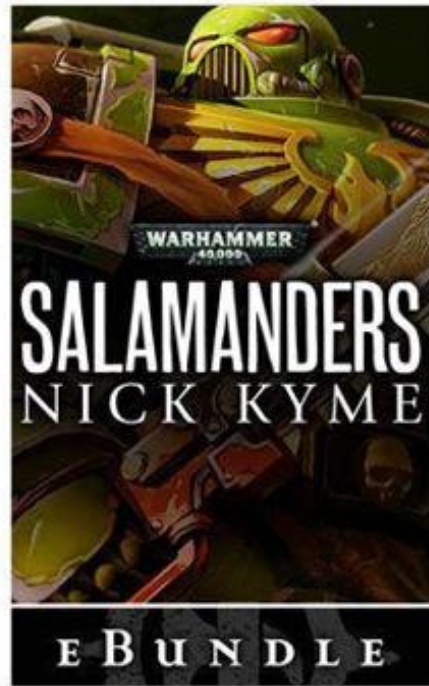
'Penance and restitution,' said the Chapter Master of the Salamanders. Bones cracked in his neck as he loosened them.

'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.

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