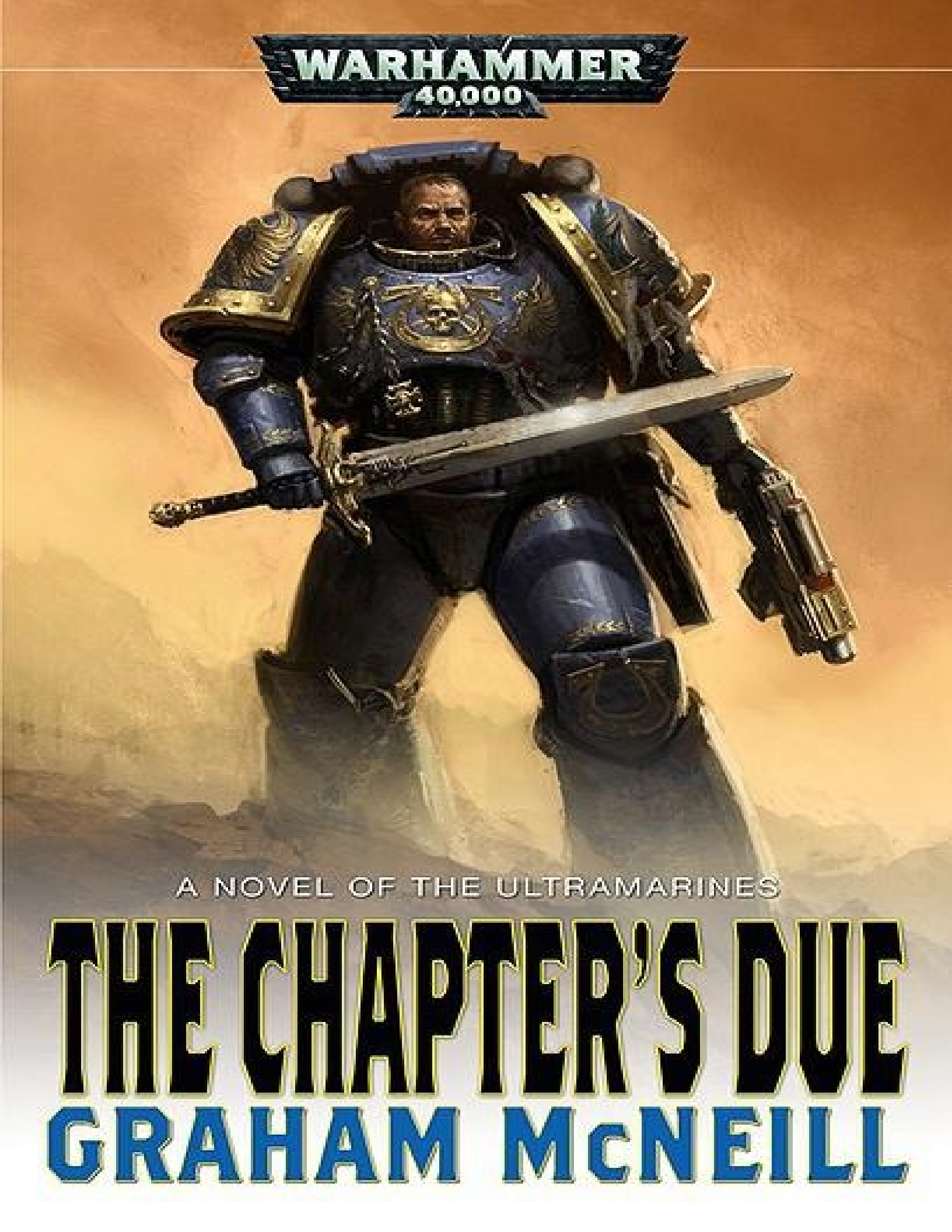
WARHAMMER 40,000



A NOVEL OF THE ULTRAMARINES

THE CHAPTER'S DUE

GRAHAM McNEILL

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

THE KILLING GROUND

Graham McNeill

'Regiments that have served for more than ten years are usually transferred from protracted war zones into armies of conquest. Not only are these the best troops, but they are also the oldest, having fought gallantly for the Emperor for a decade or more. Their reward is to take part in the conquest of a new world. If they are successful the entire regiment earns the highest honour the Imperium can bestow, the gratitude of the Emperor and the right to settle a new planet. All over the Imperium there are worlds that were originally populated in this way. Their people are the hardy descendants of victorious Imperial Guard regiments.'

Tactica Imperium - Commanders' notes on protracted service.

Sometimes the ghosts of the past won't let you go…

THE BAR WAS crowded and the simmering air of resentment that filled its smoky depths was like a current running through Hanno Merbal's body. He could sense the hatred of what he represented in every muttered syllable, every furtive glance and every hostile stare. He lifted the glass before him and knocked the harsh spirit back in one gulp.

The crude liquor burned his throat and he coughed, wondering for a moment if the sour-faced bastard behind the bar had simply served him a glass of promethium as some kind of sick joke. He slammed the glass down onto the beaten metal bar and looked into the man's yellow eyes, seeking confirmation of his suspicions.

Yes, the man wore a mask of ungrateful resentment etched into his face, just like all the other locals. Hanno wouldn't have put it past him to try and poison a decorated Imperial soldier of the Achaman Falcatas, but as the heat of the liquor spread through his gut, he smiled as the strength of the drink eased the frantic screaming inside his skull.

Hanno lowered his head until it rested on the cool metal of the bar.

'Another one,' he said, and another measure was duly poured and set before him. Hanno took a deep breath, inhaling the stink of his own sweat and guilt, and closed his eyes against the sight of his rounded belly and sagging chest.

He lifted his head, studying the bar and the drink that sat upon it.

From the pattern of the rivets and the faded markings along its length, Hanno could tell that the bar had once been the side of a Chimera. Slots that had once been fitted with integral lasguns were now repositories for spent and crushed lho sticks. The drink was a cloudy, gritty concoction distilled in a corroded drum that had once been a Hellhound's fuel tank. It was lethal stuff, but it was the only

thing that helped Hanno Merbal blot out the memories of the Killing Ground.

He lifted the drink and again drained it in a single swallow, coughing at its potency.

'Damn, but that's good stuff,' spluttered Hanno, tossing a crumpled handful of the new Imperial currency onto the bar. 'Give me the bottle, you robbing bastard.'

Hanno heard the rustle of conversation drop a notch and he looked around, a soldier's instincts for danger not yet completely obliterated by the alcohol he'd consumed. Through the haze of hookah smoke and stinging eyes, Hanno saw that virtually every face in the bar was turned towards him.

'What are you looking at?' he yelled, his resentment overcoming the deeper desire that gnawed at his sanity.

'I got every right to be here. We beat you. You lost. Deal with it.'

'Here's your drink,' said the barman, slamming an unlabelled blue bottle down beside him, 'and keep your damn cash, I don't want your blood money. Now get out.'

Hanno snatched up the bottle, but made no attempt to retrieve the notes from the bar. He pulled the cork from the neck of the bottle with his teeth and poured himself another drink.

'Why do you keep coming here?' asked a voice beside Hanno. He spun unsteadily on his stool to see a tall, rangy man with a shaved head and a long, forked beard tied in braids looming over him. A knot of pale scar tissue creased the left side of his head. Hanno knew enough veterans to recognise a las-burn when he saw one.

The man wore the same faded brown work tunic as everyone else, but where most others on this dismal world favoured ash-grey storm cloaks, this stranger wore the green and gold double wrapped cloak of the Sons of Salinas.

'I could have you arrested for wearing that,' said Hanno.

'I'd like to see you try,' said the man. Hanno's eyes focused as he took a closer look at the man. He was unarmed, but wore the threat of violence like a weapon and his eyes shone with controlled anger.

'What's your name?' asked Hanno.

'You know my name, I think.'

'I think I do,' said Hanno, seeing a number of men behind the stranger slide their hands beneath their storm cloaks. 'There's a reward for your capture, or death. I forget which.'

'Are you planning on collecting it?'

Hanno shook his head. 'Not tonight. It's my day off.'

'Very wise,' said the man, 'but you never answered my question. Why do you

keep coming to this place? I hear you come in every night and get blind drunk on raquir before insulting everyone and staggering back to your barracks alone.'

'Perhaps I like the company,' snapped Hanno, waving his hands at the walls, 'or perhaps I like the aesthetic of rusted battle tank interior.'

'Are you looking to get killed?' asked the man, leaning close and whispering.

'And if I was, would you be the man to do it?' Hanno whispered back. 'Would you?'

'I think you should go. A lot of people here want to kill you,' said the man, 'and I'm not sure I should stop them.'

'Then don't, please.'

The man leaned back with a curious expression on his face. 'Is that it?' he asked. 'Did Barbaden send you here to get killed so he can unleash Kain and her Screaming Eagles?'

'Barbaden?' spat Hanno. 'He's got nothing to do with me, not anymore.'

'No?' asked the man, reaching out and lifting a flap of Hanno's long trench coat to reveal the faded scarlet uniform jacket of a lieutenant in the Achaman Falcatas, the silver buttons straining to hold in his generously proportioned belly. 'Last I heard, the Falcatas were still Barbaden's old regiment.'

Hanno snatched his trench coat closed and returned his attention to the bar, rubbing a hand over his stubbled jaw and bleary eyes. He looked back at the man with the forked beard and said, 'I'm sorry. I… We never meant—'

'Are you apologising to me?' interrupted the man, his anger even more plain.

'I'm trying to,' said Hanno, but before he could say more a series of knocks sounded at the entrance to the bar and the man turned and ran for the back way out. Within moments it was as if the incident had never happened, the shadowy denizens of the bar returning their attention to their drinks and studiously avoiding Hanno's gaze.

He turned on his stool as the tall, stoop-shouldered form of Daron Nisato ducked under the iron girder welded to two wrecked tank chassis that served as a lintel and stepped into the bar with an expression of disappointment. He flicked a piece of floating detritus from the lapels of his enforcer's tunic and looked around the bar until his eyes fixed on Hanno.

'I thought I'd find you here, lieutenant,' said Nisato.

'What can I say?' replied Hanno. 'I'm a creature of habit.'

'Only bad ones,' said Nisato, and Hanno was forced to agree.

'You'll never guess who was just here,' said Hanno, by way of conversation.

'Who?'

'It doesn't matter,' giggled Hanno, looking over to the rear of the bar as Nisato took a seat next to him. 'No one important.'

Daron Nisato was a handsome man in his fifties with sharp features, quick eyes and dark skin. His hair was tightly curled and had turned to grey at the temples at an early age, giving him a distinguished look that had served him well when he'd been a commissar in the Achaman Falcatas.

'You want a drink?' asked Hanno.

'Of raquir? No, I think not. I don't think you should have any more either.'

'You're probably right, Daron, but what else is there?'

'There's duty,' said Nisato. 'You have yours and I have mine.'

'Duty?' barked Hanno, waving his hands around the bar. 'Look what duty's done for us. Made us the enemy on our own world, a world we fought and bled to win. Some prize, eh?'

'Keep your voice down, Hanno,' cautioned Nisato.

'Or what? You'll arrest me?'

'If I have to, yes. A night in the drunk tank might do you some good.'

'No,' said Hanno, 'there's only one thing that'll do me any good.'

'What's that?'

'This,' said Hanno, drawing an immaculately polished pistol from beneath his trench coat.

Nisato was instantly alert. 'What are you doing, Hanno? Put that away.'

Hanno reached into his trench coat again and pulled out something that gleamed gold beneath the flickering globes strung on looped wires from the corrugated metal roof of the bar. He tossed the object onto the bar, where it spun like a coin, rattling on the metal as the image of a fiery eagle wobbled on its golden surface.

'You still keep your medal?' asked Hanno.

'I never received one,' replied Nisato. 'I wasn't there.'

The medal ceased its rotation and lay flat on the greasy surface of the bar.

'Lucky you,' said Hanno, his eyes filling with tears. 'You don't see them then?'

'See who?'

'The burned ones… The ones… The dead?'

Hanno saw the confusion in Nisato's face and tried to speak, but the awful, unforgettable smell of seared human meat rose in his nostrils and the words died in his throat. He gagged, tasting ashen bone and smelling the acrid reek of promethium as though a soot-stained flame trooper stood right next to him.

You were there.

'Oh no… No, please…' he sobbed. 'Not again.'

'Hanno, what's the matter?' demanded Nisato, but Hanno could not reply. He looked around as searing flames leapt to life all around the bar, hot, yellow and unforgiving. As though fanned by some unseen wind, the flames displayed an

appetite beyond measure and greedily devoured everything in their path with a whooshing roar. Within moments the entire bar was aflame and Hanno wept as he knew what would come next.

The patrons of the bar rose to their feet, clothes ablaze and faces transformed from surly and hostile to molten and agonised. Like some monstrous host of fiery elemental, they marched towards him, and Hanno turned to Daron Nisato, hoping against hope that the former commissar was seeing what he saw.

Daron Nisato was oblivious to the flaming carnage filling the bar, looking at him with an expression of worried concern and pity.

Hanno cried out as black smoke boiled from the ground, choking and reeking with chemical stink. Shadows moved through the haze like fiery marionettes jerking to the dance of some lunatic puppeteer.

He heard Daron Nisato's voice, but the words were lost to him as he saw a horrifyingly familiar form emerge from the smoke and fire, a girl child, no more than seven years old.

Her dress was ablaze and her arms were, as always, held out to him, as if seeking his affection or rescue. Her skin bubbled and popped, meat and fat running from her bones like molten rubber as her limbs creaked and contracted in the terrible heat.

'You were there,' said the little girl, her face a searing mass of bright flame that ate through her skull and into her brain-pan. A dreadful, spectral light filled her eyes, all that the fire had not yet dared to consume.

'I'm sorry,' said Hanno, as a suffocating wave of guilty remorse clamped his heart.

He drew in a deep breath and in the blink of an eye the inferno of the bar, the melting child and the burning men vanished. All was as it had been moments before. Hanno snatched at the bar to steady himself as the world spun crazily around him, his senses trying to reorient to normality in the wake of such horror.

'What the hell was that?' demanded Nisato beside him, completely unaware of the nightmarish things that Hanno had just experienced for the thousandth time. The enforcer took hold of his arm and said, 'Let's get out of here. You're coming with me.'

'No,' wept Hanno, shrugging off Nisato's grip, 'I'm not. I can't go on like this.'

'You can't,' agreed Nisato. 'That's why you need to come with me now.'

'No,' repeated Hanno, snatching up his pistol and the medal from the bar. 'There's only one place I'm going: Hell.'

Hanno Merbal thrust the pistol into his mouth and blew the back of his head off.

PART ONE

REBIRTH

'I should never have believed that death had undone so many.'

ONE

DO PEOPLE SHAPE the planets they live on or do the planets shape them? The people of Mordian are melancholy and dour, the folk of Catachan pragmatic and hardy. Is this the result of the harsh climes and brutal necessities required for survival, or were the people who settled the planets in ages past already predisposed to those qualities? Can the character of a world affect an entire population or is the human soul stronger than mere geography?

Might an observer more naturally attribute a less malign disposition, a less frightful character, to those who walk unconcerned for their safety beneath the gilded archways of a shrine world than to those who huddle in the darkness of a world torn apart by war and rebellion?

Whatever the case, the solitary heaths, lonely mountains and strife-torn cities of Salinas would have provided an excellent study for any such observer.

* * *

RAIN FELL IN soaking sheets from the grey, dusky skies: a fine smirr that hung like mist and made the quartz-rich mountainside glisten and sparkle. Flocks of shaggy herbivores fed on the long grasses of the low pastures, and dark thunderheads in the east gathered over the looming peaks.

Tumbling waterfalls gushed uproariously down black cliffs and the few withered trees that remained on the lower slopes surrounding a dead city bent and swayed like dancers before the driving wind that sheared down from the cloud-wreathed highlands. A brooding silence, like an awkward pause in a conversation, hung over the dead city, as though the landscape feared to intrude on its private sorrow. Rubble-choked streets wound their way between blackened buildings of twisted steel and tumbled stone, and ferns with rust and blood-coloured leaves grew thick in its empty boulevards.

Wind-weathered rock and spars of corroded metal lay where they had fallen, and the wind moaned as it gusted through empty windows and shattered doors, as though the city were giving vent to a long, drawn out death rattle.

People had once lived here. They had loved and fought and indulged in the thousands of dramas, both grand and intimate, common to all cities. Great celebrations, scandalous intrigues and bloody crimes had all played out here, but all such theatre had passed into history, though not from memory.

Hundreds of streets, avenues, thoroughfares and roads criss-crossed the empty

city, wending their way through its desolation as though in search of someone to tread them once more. Open doors banged on frames, forlorn entreaties to a nameless visitor to enter and render the building purposeful once more. Rain ran in gurgling streams beside the cracked pavements, flowing from grates and gathering in pools where the land had subsided.

A tall church, its facade of stone scorched black and greasy, stood proud amid the ruins, as though whatever calamity had befallen the city had seen fit to spare the mighty edifice the worst of its attention. Tall spires cast long shadows over the city and the great eagle-winged pediment that had once sat proudly above the arched entrance now sagged in defeat, its wings dipped and streaked with green corrosion.

High windows that glorified the Emperor and His many saints were shattered and empty, fragments of coloured glass jutting like teeth in rotted frames. The heavy iron doors that had once protected the main vestibule of the church lay twisted and broken on the cracked flagstones of the esplanade. Shattered statues lay beside the doors, fallen from the roof and left to crumble where they lay.

The wind collected here, as though drawn by some unseen imperative to gambol in the open square before the church. Wisps of mist were dragged along with the wind and fluttering scraps of cloth, paper and leaves spun in miniature whirlwinds as the strength of the wind gathered force.

The gaping blackness of the church's entrance seemed to swallow what little light was left of the day, and though the wind pulled the leaves and debris of the city back and forth with ever-greater vigour, none dared violate the darkness within the abandoned building.

A hollow moaning issued from the church, though nothing lived within it - or indeed in the entire city - and a gust of air, colder than the depths of space, blew into the square.

Beginning as spots of brightness against the black, rippling streamers of light oozed from the arched entrance and flowed like ghostly lines of mercury along the ground in two parallel tracks. Before, the church had seemed relentlessly solid and immovable, now its fabric seemed to ripple and warp as though in the grip of a monstrous heat haze.

The moaning built, rising from a far distant sound to something much closer, a shrieking howl of a thing in agony that fought to hold itself together as though its very sinews were being unravelled with every passing second.

The darkness of the church's interior swelled, billowing outwards like an explosive ink stain. Then it retreated, spilling back over something that had violated time and space to enter this world, a churning, seething remnant of a thing first given form in another age.

It resembled a great juggernaut machine of pistons and iron, its brazen flanks heaving with unnatural energies as it thundered from the church. Steam leaked from every demented, skull-faced rivet as wheels of rusted, dissolving iron ground the mercurial tracks beneath it.

Deep within its fragmenting structure, it might have once resembled an ancient steam-driven locomotive, but unknown forces and warped energies had transformed it into something else entirely.

Whatever power had once fashioned the monstrous, terrifying amalgamation of machine and dark energy now appeared to be working to unmake it. Flaring whoops of light streamed from it, peeling back like the layers of an onion. The very air seemed toxic to its existence, hissing clouds of stinking vaporous light billowing from its every surface.

The terrible machine screamed like a wounded beast, but deep within the aching agonies of its dissolution, there was a keening note of welcome release, as though an eternity of torment had come to an end. Its passage slowed until it came to a halt, like a hunted beast that had reached the end of its endurance and could run no more.

Within the tortured end of the machine, there was the suggestion of voices, a hint of things within it that were not part of its decay. The sounds of the voices grew stronger with each passing second, as though their owners called out from some freshly unlocked, yet still impossibly distant chamber.

As a portion of the juggernaut dissolved, it revealed a dreadful glimpse of the machine's red-lit interior, a stinking meat locker that reeked of unnumbered slaughters and debaucheries, roaring fires and an eon's worth of bloodshed.

Shapes moved within the light, a handful of figures that stumbled like newborns or drunks as they spilled like entrails from the dying machine. Tall, broad and humanoid, they scrambled and crawled from the light as though in pain.

The figures emerged from the armoured leviathan that had brought them to this world, wreathed in coiling wisps of smoke. Their steps were feverish and unsteady, but even unsteady steps were welcome, so long as they carried them away from the dissolving machine.

As the figures put more distance between themselves and the heaving engine, their shapes resolved into clarity, though, had an observer been watching this incredible arrival, he might have wished that they had not.

They were monsters: the Unfleshed.

They were twisted freaks of nature, the bastard by-blows of hideous surgery, failed experiments and dreadful power of unnatural origin. No two were alike, their skinless bodies massive and grotesque, their heads swollen, encephalic

nightmares of distended eyes, ripped faces and gnashing fangs.

To see such things would have driven many a man mad with fear, but had anyone had the courage to look beyond the physical deformities and hideous malformations of bone and flesh, they would have seen something else, something that would no doubt have horrified them even more: the glimmer of human understanding and awareness.

Two other figures followed the monstrous creatures, as stumbling and as dazed as the monsters, but without the horrifying aberrations of the flesh that afflicted them. Both had the bulky, gene-built physique of Astartes. One was broader and more powerfully built than the other, although his right arm ended abruptly at the elbow.

One was clad in blue armour; the other in fragments of armour the same colour. The first wore his dirty blond hair tight to his skull, his features wide and open, while the other, dark haired, grey-eyed and wolf-lean, had a face that was stern and patrician.

Both warriors, for it was clear from the wounds and weapons they bore that these were men to whom the crucible of combat was no strange and unknown place, staggered away from the disintegrating machine, collapsing to the ground and heaving great draughts of cold air into their lungs.

With the disembarkation of its passengers, the mighty engine that had carried them squealed with the sound of metal grinding on metal as the burning wheels of iron dragged the strange and terrible machine away from the place.

Confined so long to realms beyond the material universe, its substance was unused to the assault of the elements that made up this existence, and the abrasive banality of reality was undoing its unknowable, warp-spawned structure as surely as a flame devours ice.

Its former passengers watched it gather momentum, moving slowly at first and then with greater speed as its form became ever brighter, as if some infernal power source within was drawing close to critical mass. Its brightness soon became too much to bear, even for those whose eyes were genhanced to withstand such things. With a tortured scream, though whether one of death or release none could tell, the living engine vanished in an explosion of light.

No violence or blast spread from this explosion, but a glittering rain of light fell and saturated the air with the sense of an infinite power having been released into the world.

With the final dissolution or escape of the great, immaterial engine, the gloom and dread of the dead city smothered the world once more, the rain bathing the bedraggled travellers in cold, clammy wetness.

The two Astartes warriors found each other in the rain, embracing like

brothers at the simple joy of having returned to a world where the air was not a toxic soup of pollutants, ashen bone matter and the hot, sad smell of burned iron and war.

The bigger warrior ran a hand through his hair, frowning as he took in the dismal nature of their surroundings.

'Thank the Emperor,' he said. 'We're not on Medrengard!'

His companion smiled and tilted his head back, letting the cold rain run down his face, as though such a sensation was a rare and precious gift. 'No, Pasanius,' he said, 'we're not.'

'Then where are we?'

'I think we are almost home, my friend,' said Uriel Ventris.

THOUGH IT WAS dusk, Uriel's eyes could easily pierce the gloom enveloping the city once the afterimages of the Omphalos Daemonium's departure or destruction had faded. No trace remained of its passing, and Uriel was grateful to be rid of the vile daemonic creation.

Once it had been the infernal conveyance of a mighty creature of the warp, an engine by which it could traverse the dreadful regions of warp, time and space to wreak havoc on mortals throughout the galaxy. That daemon was gone, destroyed by another of its diabolical kind, allowing Uriel and Pasanius to escape the daemon world of Medrengard in its blood-soaked interior.

'Where do you think it's gone?' asked Pasanius, his hand resting on the butt of a purloined boltgun. Though his right arm was gone below the elbow, Uriel knew that Pasanius was equally adept at killing with his left. Uriel too was armed, a golden-hilted sword that had once belonged to Captain Idaeus, his mentor and former captain of the Fourth Company of the Ultramarines, gripped in one fist.

'I don't know and I don't care,' said Uriel, breathing the crisp air and relishing the fresh, wild scents carried from the forests that circled the mountains towering over them. He saw flocks of grazing beasts on the rugged flanks of the peaks, and the sight of something so unthreatening was absurdly welcome. 'I am just glad we're free of it.'

'Aye, there's that,' agreed Pasanius. 'Now we just have to figure out where it's dumped us. I certainly wasn't steering, were you?'

'No, but I don't think the Omphalos Daemonium was ever meant to be steered by the likes of us.'

'So we could be anywhere,' said Pasanius.

'Indeed,' said Uriel, as curious as his friend to know where they had been

deposited. Though he had no idea why the daemon engine had chosen to end their journey upon this world, whichever world it was, he had spent the unknown period of time within its depths visualising Macragge and his home world of Calth, hoping against hope that thoughts of familiar places would somehow guide the mighty engine's course towards them.

It hadn't worked. This world neither looked nor felt like either of those worlds. The sky above was leaden grey, with brooding and dissatisfied clouds scudding around the peaks of the high, craggy mountains that looked down on the strange, abandoned city they found themselves within.

Uriel turned from the mountains to survey their more immediate surroundings, a wide, marble-flagged square choked with rubble and weeds. The buildings around the edge of the square had been cast to ruin by time and, unmistakably, the brutal effects of war. Bullet holes, laser scarring and promethium burns marked almost every inch of stonework and the cold sense of the lingering dead hung heavy in the air.

'So I wonder where this is?' said Pasanius, turning in a circle. 'It's Imperial at least.'

'How do you know that?'

'Look,' said Pasanius, nodding towards the building behind Uriel.

Uriel followed Pasanius's nod to see a double-headed, bronze eagle hanging at a forlorn angle from a tall building of blackened stone. The arched niches and statuary, though broken and in a state of gross disrepair, were unmistakably those of an Imperial temple. The Unfleshed gathered beneath the eagle, their heads craned back to stare in rapt adoration at the symbol of the Emperor.

'Or at least it *was* an Imperial world,' pointed out Pasanius. 'This place is dead.'

'Aye,' agreed Uriel. '*This* place is dead, but there will be others.'

'You sure?' asked Pasanius. 'I hope you're right.'

'I am,' said Uriel. 'I don't know how, but I just am.'

'Another one of your feelings?' said Pasanius. 'Emperor preserve us. That always means trouble.'

'Well, wherever we are, it has to be better than Medrengard.'

'That wouldn't be hard,' pointed out Pasanius. 'I don't know many places that wouldn't be a step up from a world in the Eye of Terror.'

Uriel conceded the point, trying to blot out memories of Medrengard's continent-sized manufactories, its impossible fortresses, the billowing clouds of hot ash that seared the throat with every breath and the vile, dead things that soared upon the thermals of hellish industry.

They had endured all manner of horrors on Medrengard in the service of their

Death Oath, but despite everything the home world of the Iron Warriors could throw at them, they had triumphed and escaped.

But where were they?

Uriel's thoughts were interrupted as those of the Unfleshed that could, dropped to their knees before the church of the Emperor. Those with anatomies too twisted to kneel simply bowed their heads, and a low, keening moan issued from their distorted throats. Uriel could only imagine what these poor, pitiful creatures might be feeling.

As if sensing his scrutiny, the largest of the creatures turned to face Uriel and shuffled over towards him, its steps heavy and its sheened body rippling with monstrously powerful muscles. A pungent, animal odour came with the creature, the Lord of the Unfleshed, his body raw and crimson, the soft rain dripping from him in red droplets.

As always, the sight of this creature brought a mix of feelings to the surface: horror, pity, anger and a protective urge to see that they were not treated as their appearance would suggest, for the Lord of the Unfleshed was, by any definition of the word, a monster.

Taller than Uriel, the Lord of the Unfleshed's body was grossly swollen and built beyond the power of a Space Marine. Once, not so long ago, he had been a child, a captive taken by the dreaded Iron Warriors to Medrengard, where daemonic magic and the cruel attentions of the Savage Morticians had wrought him into a freakish beast.

In an attempt to hothouse fresh warriors, the diabolical surgeon-creatures of the Warsmith Honsou had implanted stolen children in grotesque daemonic wombs and fed their developing anatomies a gruel of genetic material concocted from fallen Iron Warriors and captured Astartes gene-seed.

A capricious and unpredictable alchemy at best, this process resulted in far more failures than successes and those pathetic, mutant offspring deemed too withered or degenerate to be further transformed were flushed from the hellish laboratories like so much excrement.

Most such abortions died in Medrengard's nightmarishly polluted wastelands, but some did not, living as skinless monsters driven into the darkest abyss of madness and despair by the horror of their own existence.

Uriel and Pasanius had first seen the Unfleshed, as other inhabitants of Medrengard had dubbed them, as they slaughtered the degenerate prisoners of an Iron Warriors' flesh camp. He had been horrified by their savagery, but later came to realise that they were as much victims of the Iron Warriors as any of those lost souls whose bodies had been tortured beyond all endurance in the camps.

When Uriel had come to realise the truth of the Unfleshed's existence, he had been horrified and filled with pity for these towering monsters, for they were creations of flesh and blood that carried the essence of Space Marine heroes in their veins.

They all boasted physiques reminiscent of carnival grotesques in their unnatural anatomies, with flaps of dead skin pulled over their deformities as if such paltry disguises could hide their warped flesh. One creature's jaw was kept forever open by distended fangs like splintered bone, another was cursed with the withered, still living body of its conjoined twin fused to its chest, another's skeletal structure was so warped that it no longer resembled anything human and moved with a locomotion never before seen in man nor beast.

'This Emperor's world?' asked the Lord of the Unfleshed, his leathery tongue having difficulty in forming the words over thick, razor-edged fangs.

Uriel nodded, seeing the pain behind the creature's eyes, *yes*, it is. 'One of them anyway.'

'More worlds like this?'

'Millions,' agreed Uriel.

Seeing the confusion in the Lord of the Unfleshed's face, Uriel understood he probably had no concept of so vast a number. 'There are many worlds like this,' he said, pointing up to where hundreds of stars shimmered in the darkening sky. 'Each of those lights is a world like this.'

Uriel knew that wasn't exactly true, but as the Lord of the Unfleshed looked up, a slow smile spread across his face.

'Sky black.'

'Yes,' smiled Uriel, only now realising how much he had missed the natural diurnal cycle of a habitable world. 'The sky is black, and in the morning it will become light again.'

'Like world of Iron Men?'

Uriel shivered as he pictured the dead, unchanging skies of Medrengard and the unblinking, black sun that held sway over it all. 'No, not like Iron Men's world at all. The sun is golden and warm. You'll like it.'

'Good. Iron Men's world bad,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'This world smell bad too. Not bad like Iron Men's world, but still bad.'

Uriel's interest was piqued. 'This world smells bad? What do you mean?'

'Bad things happen here,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed, looking around the square with an apprehensive gaze. 'Blood spilled here, much blood. Not all gone yet. Making Unfleshed hungry.'

Uriel shared a look with Pasanius, both warriors all too aware of how dangerous the hunger of the Unfleshed could be.

The Unfleshed had fought alongside them on Medrengard through brutal necessity and desperate circumstance, but how long such an alliance would hold against their terrible appetites was something Uriel was not keen to find out.

He looked up into the mountains, where the faint outlines of herds of animals could still be seen. Uriel pointed upwards and said, 'You see those beasts on the mountain?'

The Lord of the Unfleshed nodded and Uriel was reminded that their physiques were, at least partially, made up from Space Marine gene-seed, which included superior eyesight to that of mortals.

'You can hunt them,' said Uriel. 'That is good meat, but only that meat. You understand?'

'Yes.'

'Human meat is bad meat,' said Uriel. 'You cannot eat it. The Emperor does not want you to eat human meat anymore.'

'We understand,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'No eat humans.'

'If you see any humans you don't recognise, hide from them. Don't let them see you,' added Pasanius.

The Lord of the Unfleshed bobbed his massive head, thick ropes of drool leaking from around his fangs, and Uriel knew he was already thinking of the taste of fresh meat and hot blood. Without another word, the mighty creature turned and barked a string of guttural commands to his fellow creatures, who rose from their obeisance below the temple's eagle and followed their leader as he set off in the direction of the mountains.

'Will they be all right left to their own devices?' asked Pasanius.

'I don't know,' admitted Uriel. 'Emperor help me, but I hope so.'

Uriel and Pasanius watched them as they vanished from sight, swallowed up in the darkness of the dead city.

'Now what?' asked Pasanius.

Uriel turned to his sergeant and said, 'Now we talk.'

TWO

NIGHT CLOSED IN on the dead city as Uriel and Pasanius sought shelter from the drizzling rain and biting wind. Pasanius was still clad in his stained blue power armour, albeit severed at the elbow, while Uriel's skin was largely bare to the elements. Portions of Uriel's armour had been stripped from his upper body by the brutal ministrations of the Savage Morticians, and though fragments remained of his breastplate, the armour was essentially useless.

Without power feeding the fibre bundle muscles that augmented the wearer's strength, it was heavy and cumbersome, impeding where it was designed to enhance. Without conscious thought, both Space Marines gravitated towards the Imperial temple. Of all the buildings around the square it was the most intact and therefore the most defendable.

The city felt dead and abandoned, but it did not pay to take such things at face value. A fuller exploration of the city could come when the sun rose, but for now, shelter and somewhere to lie low was Uriel's priority.

The doors lay twisted and melted on the ground, and Uriel recognised the telltale impact striations that spoke of a melta blast.

'Someone barricaded themselves in here,' said Pasanius, following Uriel's gaze.

'Looks like it,' agreed Uriel.

'Now why would someone do that?'

'If you were a citizen of this city and you were under attack, where would you seek refuge?'

'I wouldn't be seeking refuge,' said Pasanius. 'I'd be fighting, not hiding while others fought for me.'

Uriel said nothing in response to the simple, yet wholly understandable sentiment, recognising the same lack of empathy for the fears of mortals in Pasanius's tone as he had heard in so many others of his kind. To be so elevated above ordinary men brought the risk of arrogance and though he had heard that egotism given voice by many other Astartes warriors, he had never thought to hear it from Pasanius.

The temple's vestibule was cold, a chill that reached out to Uriel beyond the sensations pricking his skin. He had stood in many temples from the most magnificent to the most humble, but even the least of them had a sense of the divine in their architecture and sense of scale, but this building had none of that.

It felt empty.

Uriel pushed open the splintered remains of the doors that led to the nave, the echoes of his footsteps thrown back at him like those of a shadowing twin. Dust motes spun in the air, but his vision easily pierced the gloom of the temple's interior as he made his way inside. A vaulted ceiling arched overhead and thick pillars of fluted stonework marched the length of the nave towards a toppled altar.

Fallen banners that reeked of mould lay curled on the flagstones and broken wooden pews filled the floor between the vestibule and the raised altar. The walls were faced with dressed ashlar and the last of the day's light illuminated thousands of scraps of paper fastened to every square inch.

Intrigued, Uriel made his way towards this unusual sight, breaths of wind through the empty window frames making it seem as though the wall rippled in anticipation. The papers were old and faded and many had rotted away to fall on the floor, piled up like snowdrifts. Of those that remained, Uriel saw they were a mix of scrawled prayers for the dead, scraps of poems or simple lithographs of smiling men, women and children.

'What are these?' whispered Pasanius, his voice loud in the stillness of the temple as he made his way along the wall and peered at the sad pictures and words.

'Memorials,' said Uriel. 'They're prayers for dead loved ones.'

'But there're so many… Thousands. Did they all die at once?'

'I don't know,' replied Uriel. 'It looks like it.'

'Emperor's blood,' hissed Pasanius. 'What happened here?'

A cold breath whispered across Uriel's neck.

You were there.

Uriel spun on his heel, his hand reaching for his sword.

'What?' said Pasanius as Uriel's blade hissed into the air.

'Nothing,' said Uriel, relaxing when he saw there was no threat.

He and Pasanius were the only trespassers in the temple, but for the briefest second, Uriel could have sworn that there had been someone behind him. The temple's crepuscular depths were empty of intruders, and yet…

Uriel's warrior instincts had been honed on a thousand battlefields and he had not stayed alive this long without developing a fine sense for danger. Though he could see nothing and hear nothing within the temple, he had the definite impression that they were not alone.

'Did you see something?' asked Pasanius, bracing the bolter between his knees and racking the slide. The noise was ugly and harsh, and both warriors felt a ripple of distaste at the sound. The weapon was from the battiefields of

Medrengard and had once belonged to an Iron Warrior. Though he held it before him, Uriel saw that Pasanius was reluctant to employ a weapon of the enemy.

'No,' said Uriel. 'I felt something.'

'Like what?'

'I'm not sure, It was as if someone was standing right behind me.'

Pasanius scanned the temple's interior, but finding no targets for his weapon he lowered the bolter. Uriel could see the relief on his face and the sense that they were not alone in the temple receded.

'There's no one here but us,' said Pasanius, moving along the length of the wall towards the altar, though he kept a firm grip on the bolter. 'Maybe you're still a little jumpy after Medrengard.'

'Maybe,' said Uriel as he followed Pasanius, walking past a procession of smiling faces, votive offerings and fluttering prayer papers.

So many had died and been remembered on these walls. Pasanius was right, there were thousands of them and Uriel thought the scene unbearably sad. The opposite wall was similarly covered in sad memorials, and stacks of fallen papers clustered around the base of every column.

They reached the altar and Uriel sheathed his sword.

'We should study these papers,' said Uriel, pushing the fallen altar upright and beginning to unclip the few broken pieces of the armour encasing his upper body, not that there was much left of it. 'They might give us a clue as to where we are.'

'I suppose,' said Pasanius, placing the bolter on the ground and pushing it away with his foot.

'Are you all right, my friend?' asked Uriel, placing a shorn sliver that was all that remained of his breastplate on the altar. 'We are on our way home.'

'I know, but…'

'But?'

'What's going to happen when we get there?'

'What do you mean?'

'Think about it, Uriel,' said Pasanius. 'We've been to the Eye of Terror. No one comes back from there unchanged. How do we know we'll even be welcome back on Macragge? They'll probably kill us as soon as they see us.'

'No,' said Uriel, 'they won't. We fulfilled our Death Oath. Tigurius and Calgar sent us there and they will be proud of what we did.'

'You think?' said Pasanius, shaking his head. 'We fought alongside renegade Space Marines. We made a pact with cannibal mutants and freed a daemon creature. Don't you think Tigurius might take a dim view of things like that?'

Uriel sighed. He *had* considered these things, but in his heart he knew they

had made every decision with the best intentions and for the right reasons.

The Masters of the Chapter had to see that. Didn't they?

It had been Uriel's wilful deviation from Roboute Guilliman's Codex Astartes that had seen them banished from Ultramar in the first place. Penned by the Ultramarines primarch ten thousand years ago, the Codex Astartes laid out the precise organisational tenets by which the Space Marine Chapters would arise from the mighty Legions of the Great Crusade.

Everything from uniform markings, parade drill and the exact means by which warriors should deploy for battle was described within its hallowed pages, and no Chapter exemplified its teachings better than the Ultramarines.

To conform to the principles of their primarch was seen as the highest ideal of the Ultramarines and so to have one of its captains go against that was unacceptable. Uriel had willingly accepted his punishment, but having Pasanius condemned with him had been a shard of guilt in his heart for as long as they had marched across the surface of Medrengard.

In his time on that hell world, Uriel had often doubted his worth as a hero, but with the casting down of Honsou's fortress and the destruction of the daemon creatures that had birthed the Unfleshed, he had come to see that they had been instruments of the Emperor's will after all. Now, with their Death Oath fulfilled, they were going home.

How could such a thing be wrong?

'We have done all that was required of us,' said Uriel, 'and more besides. Tigurius will sense that there is no taint of the Ruinous Powers within us.'

'What about this?' asked Pasanius, holding up the severed end of his arm. 'What if there's some lingering remainder of the Bringer of Darkness left in me?'

'There won't be,' said Uriel. 'Honsou took that from you.'

'How can you be sure it's all gone?'

'I can't,' said Uriel, 'but once we get back to the Fortress of Hera, the Apothecaries will know for sure.'

'Then I will be punished.'

'Perhaps,' allowed Uriel. 'You kept a xenos infection from your superior officers, but whatever the senior masters of the Chapter decide, you will be back with the Fourth Company before long.'

'I wonder how the company is doing,' said Pasanius.

'Learchus promised to look after the men of the Company in our absence,' said Uriel. 'He will have done us proud, I'm sure.'

'Aye,' agreed Pasanius. 'As straight up and down a sergeant as you could wish for, that one. Bit of a cold fish, but he'll have kept the men together.'

'What few were left after Tarsis Ultra,' said Uriel, thinking of the terrible

carnage that had seen much of the Fourth Company dead as they defended the Imperial world against a Tyranid invasion.

'That was a tough one, right enough,' said Pasanius as Uriel placed the last of the broken pieces of his armour on the altar. His upper body was left clothed in a simple body sleeve of faded and dirty khaki, the toughened fabric pierced with holes where his armour's interface plugs had meshed with the internal workings of his body.

'I'm sure Learchus will have been thorough in raising promising candidates up from the Scout Auxillia,' said Pasanius. 'The Fourth will be back to full strength by now, surely.'

'I hope so,' agreed Uriel. 'The idea of the Ultramarines without the Fourth does not sit well with me.'

'Nor I, but if you're right and we get back soon, do you think it will be yours again?'

Uriel shrugged. 'That won't be up to me. Chapter Master Calgar will decide that.'

'If he knows what's good for the Chapter, he'll appoint you captain the day we get back.'

'He knows what's good for the Chapter,' promised Uriel.

'I know he does, but I can't help but feel apprehensive. I mean, who knows how long we've been gone? For all we know, hundreds or thousands of years could have passed since we left. And this place…'

'What about it?'

'The Lord of the Unfleshed… He's right, something bad happened to this city. I can feel it.'

Uriel said nothing, for he too could feel the subtle undercurrent in the air, a feeling that the imprint of terrible calamity had befallen this city, that it hadn't simply been abandoned.

'And another thing,' said Pasanius, 'just what in the name of the Primarch are you hoping to achieve with those monsters?'

'They're not monsters,' said Uriel. 'They have the blood of Astartes within them.'

'Maybe so, but they look like monsters and I can't see anyone with a gun not shooting as soon as they lay eyes on them. We should have left them on Medrengard. You know that don't you?'

'I couldn't,' said Uriel, sitting next to Pasanius. 'You saw how they lived. They may look like monsters, but they love the Emperor and all they want is his love in return. I couldn't leave them there. I have to try to… I don't know, show them that there is more to existence than pain.'

'Good luck with that,' said Pasanius sourly.

* * *

THE MOON HAD risen and pools of brilliant white light reflected a ghostly radiance around the temple's interior by the time the Unfleshed returned. Uriel was loath to use the memorials as fuel and thus they had built a fire from the kindling of the shattered pews in an iron brazier they discovered at the rear of the temple.

The Unfleshed dragged the carcasses of three of the mountain grazers into the church, each beast's body torn and bloodied with fang and claw marks. The dead beasts were covered in a coarse fur, with bovine heads and long, burrowing snouts of leathery hide. Their legs were slender and powerful looking and Uriel imagined they would be swift on the hoof.

'They've already fed then,' said Pasanius, seeing the bloody jaws of the Unfleshed.

'So it appears,' replied Uriel as the Lord of the Unfleshed dragged one of the larger kills over to the altar. The carcass was dropped before him.

'We eat meat on mountain,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'This meat for you.'

Without waiting for an answer, the hulking creature turned away, his eyes dull and lifeless. Curious as to what was the matter, Uriel reached up and placed a hand on the Lord of the Unfleshed's arm.

No sooner had Uriel touched the arm than it was snatched away and the Lord of the Unfleshed turned to face him with a hiss of pain. Uriel flinched at the suddenness of the reaction and the violence he saw in the Lord of the Unfleshed's eyes.

'Not touch me,' hissed the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'Pain. This world hurts us.'

'Hurts you? What do you mean?'

The Lord of the Unfleshed paused, as though struggling to find the words to articulate his meaning. 'Air here different. We feel different, weak. Body not work like before.'

Uriel nodded, though he had no real idea as to why the Unfleshed should feel different on this particular world.

'Try to get some rest,' advised Uriel. 'When the sun comes up we'll get a better look at the lie of the land and decide what to do next. You understand?'

'I understand,' nodded the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'Emperor happy with us?'

'Yes, he is,' said Uriel. 'You are in a place dedicated to Him.'

'Dedicated?'

'It belongs to him,' explained Uriel. 'Like where you lived before.'

'This house of Emperor?'

'It is, yes.'

'Then we stay here. Emperor take care of us,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed, and Uriel found the simple sentiment curiously touching. These creatures may be genetic aberrations, but they believed in the Emperor's divinity with a simple, childlike faith.

The Lord of the Unfleshed lumbered away to rejoin his fellows and Uriel turned back to the altar, where Pasanius was butchering the carcass they had been provided with in preparation for roasting it over the fire. Space Marines could, of course, eat the meat raw to gain more nutritional benefits, but after the deprivations of Medrengard, both warriors were in the mood for some hot food inside them.

Uriel watched the Unfleshed as they hunkered down before the walls, staring in fascination at the parchment scraps on the wall. Pasanius handed him a skewered hunk of meat and placed his own over the fire.

'It's easy to forget,' said Uriel.

'What is?'

'They are just children really.'

'The Unfleshed?'

'Yes. Think about it. They were taken as youngsters and twisted into these horrific forms by the Savage Morticians, but they are still children inside. I was placed inside one of those daemon wombs. I know what it tried to do to me, but to do that to a child… Imagine waking up and finding that you had been turned into a monster.'

'Do you think any of them remember their former lives?'

'I don't know,' said Uriel. 'In some ways, I hope they don't; it would be too awful to remember what they'd lost, but then I think that it's only the fragments of what they once were that's keeping them from truly becoming monsters.'

'Then let's hope more of their memories return now that they're away from Medrengard.'

'I suppose,' said Uriel, turning his skewer on the fire. 'I know they look like monsters, but what happened to them isn't their fault. They deserve more than just to be hunted down and killed because they aren't like us. We may not be able to save their bodies, but we can save their souls.'

'How?'

'By treating them like human beings.'

'Then I just hope you get to talk to people before they see them.'

'I plan to, eventually, but let's take things one step at a time.'

'Speaking of which,' said Pasanius, lifting his skewer of meat from the fire and taking an experimental bite.

'Oh, that's good. What's our next move in the morning?'

Uriel removed his skewer from the fire and bit into the meat, the smell intoxicating and the taste sublime after so long on ration packs and recycled nutrient pastes. The meat was tough, but gloriously rich. Warm juices spilled down his chin and he resisted the impulse to wolf down his meal without pause.

Between mouthfuls, Uriel said, 'Tomorrow we explore the city, get a feel for its geography and then work out where we might find a settlement.'

'Then what?'

'Then we present ourselves to whatever Imperial authorities we find and make contact with the Chapter.'

'You think it'll be that easy?'

'It will or it won't be,' said Uriel. 'I suppose we'll find out tomorrow, but we need some rest first. Every bone in my body aches and I just want one night of proper sleep before we get into things.'

'Sounds good to me,' agreed Pasanius. 'Every time I closed my eyes on that damn, daemon engine, all I saw were rivers of blood and skinned bodies.'

Uriel nodded, only too well aware of the nightmarish things that lurked behind his own eyes when he had tried to rest on the Omphalos Daemonium. Not since he had stood before the Nightbringer had he seen such horrors or believed that such terrible things could be dreamed into existence.

For the unknown span of time they had spent within its insane depths, both they and the Unfleshed had been plagued by these blood dreams and Uriel knew that his mind had been close to breaking, for who could be visited nightly by such phantasms and remain sane?

* * *

OF ALL THE nightmarish visions of death and bloodshed that plagued Mesira Bardhyl, it was the Mourner she feared the most. She never saw his face, she just heard his sobs, but the depths of agony and suffering encapsulated in those sounds was beyond measure.

It seemed impossible that anyone could know such pain and sorrow and live. Yet the mourner's dark outline, stark against the white, ceramic tiles of the empty room, was clearly that of a living person.

Tears coursed down her cheeks at the sight of the Mourner, a measure of his pain passing to her as her treacherous feet carried her towards the iron-framed bed he sat on, the only piece of furniture in this otherwise featureless room.

She knew she was dreaming, but that knowledge did nothing to lessen her terror.

Despite the *khat* leaves Mesira had mixed with the half bottle of raquir she'd downed before reluctantly climbing into bed, the nightmare of the Mourner had still found her.

Step by step, she moved closer to the Mourner, wracking sobs of anguish causing his shoulders to shake violently. As Mesira drew closer, she felt his grief change to anger, and though she tried to will her hand not to reach out, it lifted of its own accord.

As she touched the Mourner's shoulder, the stink of burned meat filled her senses and images danced behind her eyes: burning buildings, screaming people and a firestorm so intense it billowed and seethed like a living thing.

'No,' she whispered. 'Not again.'

The Mourner ceased his weeping, as though only now aware of her.

Without warning, flames suddenly bloomed into life across his body, engulfing his head and limbs with incandescent brightness.

'You were there,' said the Mourner, apparently oblivious to the fire that consumed him.

'No, I…' cried Mesira, falling back from the killing heat.

'You were there,' repeated the Mourner, his voice accusing as the flames slithered over him. In moments, his body was scorched black and the smell of his seared flesh made her gag.

'The dead are watching and you will all be punished.'

'Please,' begged Mesira. 'Why me?'

'You were there,' said the Mourner, as if that explained everything. 'You were there.'

'I didn't do anything. It wasn't me,' wept Mesira.

'You were there.'

'I—'

'You were there,' said the Mourner, turning towards her, 'and you will pay. You will all pay.'

MESIRA BARDHYL HURLED herself from her bed, screaming in terror and clawing at the sheets as she fought to free herself from them. She thrashed on the floor of the room, kicking and shrieking like a madwoman. Weeping, she curled into the foetal position, her palms pressed against the side of her head and her bitten-down fingernails clawing at her scalp.

She bit the flesh of her palm to stifle her screams, rocking back and forth on

the floor.

Her eyes were closed tightly and it took an effort of will to open them.

The room was dimly lit, a weak glow from the haphazardly arranged lumen globes on the street outside filtering through the thin curtains twitching at the window. A stainless steel sink and toilet unit gurgled behind a privacy screen and stacks of papers fluttered on the table in the centre of the room.

Mesira remained on the floor until her breathing returned to normal and her heart rate slowed, before picking herself up using the edge of the bed to steady her shaking legs. Her whole body was trembling and she bent to lift the fallen sheet and wrap it around her skinny, wasted frame.

The vision was still fresh in her mind and she wiped away tears as she made her way to the table and poured a tall glass of raquir. Loose papers lay strewn across the table, a half finished report for Verena Kain detailing - empathic readings she'd made at a meeting between Governor Barbaden and community leaders. It was a breach of security to have them lying out like this, but she had left the Imperial palace early that day, unwilling to spend any more time in Barbaden's presence than she had to.

The sounds of the city drifted in through her window: the clatter of ramshackle ground cars, the raucous sound of drunks pouring from the bars and the occasional violent oath. She could sense the feelings and emotions drifting in the air behind the sounds, but shut them out, blunting her powers with another shot of raquir.

She poured another, knowing she would get no more sleep tonight and unwilling to close her eyes again after the horrors the Mourner had shown her.

In her dream he had turned his face towards her, his flesh dripping from his blackened skull as the heat of the flames roared hotter and brighter. She had wanted to look away. She had known with utter certainty that to see his face would drive her to madness, but her head was fixed in place and when she saw his eyes, cold and white like the heart of a dead star, she had seen horrors that went beyond even those of the Killing Ground.

Sloshing, corpse-filled tenders shuddered and bumped behind a heaving daemon engine that spurted blood and travelled on tracks of bone. Forests of dead children were impaled on jangling meat hooks. Entire planets were laid waste before a tide of screaming daemons, and galaxies were extinguished by the power that poured into this world from the insane geometry of the monstrous engine.

Dead souls writhed in the depths of its awful, daemonic structure and she could feel the immense warp energy surrounding it, a flood of power saturating the air and earth and water of Salinas with its presence. Whatever this horrifying

machine was, it had seen unnumbered slaughters and brought with it the dread memories of every drop of blood spilled in its vile existence.

She had seen them all, every soul torn from flesh, every violation visited upon an innocent and every vile, unimaginable horror wreaked upon the living.

As clearly as if she had stood watching it, she saw the mighty daemon engine appear before the temple in the main square of Khaturian, its bronze, eagle-winged pediment sagging where the bombs had loosened it from the stonework: the building the Screaming Eagles had attacked with melta guns and then stormed with guns blazing and blades chopping.

Mesira closed her eyes, trying to block the memories of screams, the echoing bark of gunfire and the horrifying, unending whoosh of flamers. She moved from the table to stand at the window, looking over the cobbled streets of Barbadus and watching the few people that dared pass beneath her window. They walked by without looking up, for it was well known that Barbaden's pet psyker lived here, and no one wanted to attract her evil eye.

Anger touched her and she allowed her ability to reach out, feeling the ghost touch of the minds that filled the squalid tenements and ad hoc dwellings formed in the remains of a regiment's worth of vehicles that the Achaman Falcatas had abandoned to the elements.

Barbadus was a city built upon the bones of an Imperial Guard regiment's cast-offs.

With the conclusion of the campaign to quell the rebellious system, the planet Salinas had been awarded to the Falcatas, and the regiment had been permitted to keep the bulk of its armoured vehicles, for there had not been the means to transport most of them off world. However, without sufficient enginseers or tech-priests, most had swiftly fallen into disrepair and only a handful of companies were able to maintain their tanks and transports in working order.

Those that could not simply abandoned them, and it did not take long for the enterprising citizens of Barbadus to claim them. Families lived in and around these vehicles, making homes in what had once been instruments of war.

A Leman Russ battle tank could house a family of five once any unnecessary kit had been hollowed out, a Chimera even more. Many other vehicles had been cannibalised for parts and sheets of metal, and entire districts of Barbadus were constructed from the remains of those vehicles that had rusted solid, broken down or otherwise failed.

Her senses were filled with the simmering resentment that bubbled just below the surface of virtually every inhabitant of the city, and it was a resentment Mesira could well understand, for the invasion of the Achaman Falcatas had been brutal and bloody.

The new governor had even renamed their capital city after himself.

No wonder they hate us, she thought. I hate us too.

Though her empathic ability was normally confined to reading humans, Mesira could feel something very different tonight, as though she could sense the planet's deep anger. The air had a charged quality, a ripened sense of importance and impending confluence that she had not felt before and which frightened her a great deal.

Something profound had changed on Salinas, but the sense of it eluded her.

Were the images she had seen in the eyes of the Mourner real or allegories?

She was not skilled in interpreting visions and wondered if Governor Barbaden's astropathic diviners might know what to make of what she had seen.

No sooner had the thought of the Falcata's former colonel entered her mind than she felt a cold breath sigh across the back of her neck.

She shivered and spun around, her hand reaching up to her scalp.

A small figure of light stood in the far corner of the room, a young girl with her hands outstretched.

You were there.

THOUGH HE CRAVED rest, Uriel was unable to sleep, the persistent sense that they were not alone still lingering at the back of his mind. After eating their fill of meat, both he and Pasanius had explored the empty chambers of the church, a crumbling vestry, some abandoned supply rooms and a number of private chapels in the transepts.

They had found nothing untoward and had then made a patrol circuit of the exterior of the church, climbing tumbled masonry and crossing angled slabs of broken roadway as they scouted the area around the temple. With only the two of them, it was impossible to completely secure such a large area, but they had found nothing to make either of them think there was anything living in the city besides themselves.

Pasanius slept sitting upright with his back against the wall, his soft snores making Uriel smile as the cares his friend had carried since Pavonis seemed to melt from his face. Though he appeared to be deeply asleep, Uriel knew that Pasanius could switch from rest to full wakefulness in a second.

The Unfleshed huddled in a circle of bodies, curled together like pack animals with the Lord of the Unfleshed at their centre. Their breathing was a cacophony of rasping, hacking gurgles and whistles through the gristly slits that were their mouths and noses.

Knowing that sleep would not come, Uriel got to his feet and wandered down

the aisle of the church, pausing every now and then to examine one of the fluttering prayer papers or pictures stuck to the wall. Smiling faces stared back at him, men and women, the old and the young.

What had happened to these people and who had placed the memorials?

A number of the papers were scrawled with a date, and though the format of it was unknown to Uriel, it was clear that each one was the same. Whatever calamity had befallen these people had come upon them in one fell swoop.

Uriel moved down the aisle, unable to shake the feeling that he was, if not in the presence of another, at least being observed by someone or something. He kept a tight grip on the hilt of his sword, taking reassurance from the feel of the golden hilt and the legacy of heroism it represented. Captain Idaeus had forged the sword before the Corinthian campaign and had borne it to glory for many years before passing it to Uriel on Thracia as he went to his death. Uriel had vowed to do the sword and memory of his former captain honour, and the weight of that promise had kept Uriel true to his course through the long months of suffering and hardship.

Uriel emerged from the temple, his eyes quickly adjusting to the ambient light and enhancing it to the point where he could see as clearly as he would in daylight.

Where before the city had possessed a melancholy, abandoned feel, it now seemed altogether threatening, as though some buried resentment was allowed to roam freely in the darkness. Uriel's every sense told him that he was alone, but some indefinable instinct told him that there was more to this city than met the eye.

Dust scampered around the square as though disturbed by invisible footsteps and the wind moaned through shattered window frames and open doorways. Moonlight glinted on shards of glass and metal. Somewhere, a skittering of pebbles sounded like laughter.

Tapping his fingers on the golden pommel of his sword, Uriel set off at random into the city.

Crumbling buildings hemmed in broken streets littered with the detritus of a vanished populace: cases, bags, pots, keepsakes and the like. The more Uriel saw of such things, the more the analytical part of his enhanced brain that was trained to seek patterns in disorder realised that there was an underlying scheme to the placement of them.

These were not simply random scatterings of possessions forsaken by their owners. They were yet more silent memorials, arranged to look haphazard, but set with deliberate care: coins placed in identical patterns, ribbons tied on fire-blackened re-bars and pots stacked together as though waiting for their owners to

return.

It looked as though the people who had placed these things had not wanted someone else to know that the dead were mourned and remembered.

It was yet another piece of the puzzle, but without more information, Uriel could make little sense of it. The buildings to either side of him were scarred by small-arms fire and, here and there, Uriel saw the unmistakable impact of artillery and heavy calibre shells. An army had come through this city, firing at will and killing anything that lived.

Rust brown splashes on the walls could only be blood and Uriel stopped as he saw moonlight illuminate the white gleam of bone. He knelt beside a tumbled cairn of rounded stones that covered a small skull, no larger than a child's.

A faded picture had been set amongst the stones, encased in a clear plastic bag to protect it from the elements. Uriel wiped moisture and dirt from its surface, seeing a young girl with long blonde hair in a simple white, knee-length dress. She stood beside a tall man, presumably her father, who beamed with paternal pride. They posed before a building of plain stone with a pair of shuttered windows behind them.

Uriel turned the picture over. Scrawled in simple letters was the name Amelia Towsey.

'How did you die?' asked Uriel, his whisper echoing from the walls as though he had shouted the question. Startled by the volume, Uriel looked up and caught a glimpse of something at the end of the street: a small girl in a white dress.

THREE

URIEL BLINKED IN surprise, and the girl was gone, vanished as though she had never existed.

He surged to his feet and ran towards where she had been standing.

Uriel reached the end of the street and looked left and right. There was no sign of the girl and he began to wonder if he had seen her at all. The image had been so fleeting that he couldn't be sure he hadn't just imagined her there after seeing her in the picture, but she had been so *real*.

Even as he began to discount his sighting of the girl he heard a soft sigh, no more than a breath, from ahead and a flash of white. Cautious, his every sense alert for danger, Uriel drew his sword and advanced along the street in the direction of the sound. The buildings around him were dark and seemed to lean inwards.

He passed more of the cairns, but didn't stop to examine them as the sighing sound changed in pitch. Instead of a breath, it was a sob: a child's uncomprehending grief.

Uriel stopped as the sound faded away and he found himself before a building of plain stone with two shuttered windows. The shutters hung from rusted hinges and a portion of the building had been punched through with bullets and shell impacts, but it was unmistakably the dwelling from the picture.

Had he been led here?

The thought should have disturbed him, but he felt no fear of this place.

All sounds had ceased and even the wind had fallen silent as Uriel picked his way over the ruined wall and entered the building with his sword held at the ready. Part of him thought to go back for Pasanius, but he felt no threat from within, just an aching loneliness.

Once again, Uriel's eyes adjusted to the changing light conditions and he saw a shattered room with smashed furniture scattered across the floor. Broken chairs and a table lay in splinters, charred and blackened by fire. The room reeked of old smoke and Uriel ran his finger down the nearest wall, feeling the filmy residue of spent promethium jelly.

Uriel looked around the blackened room, seeing the sad remnants of lives obliterated in an instant. Two silhouettes were burned onto the far wall, their arms raised in terror or perhaps in a final, useless, gesture of protection from the flames that had killed them.

He could picture the room on fire and the terror and pain of those within as they burned, and he hoped their deaths had been swift. Glass and ceramic crunched underfoot and Uriel bent down to retrieve something metallic from the ashes and rubble: bullet casings, autogun rounds from the calibre, stamped with an Imperial eagle and a Departmento Munitorum serial code.

'Fired in attack or defence?' wondered Uriel, seeing the melted and blackened shape of the autogun lying in the corner of the room. The barrel of the weapon was straight and silver, though pitted with rust. How had it escaped the molten heat of the fire that had destroyed the rest of the dwelling?

Thinking back to the patterns of votive offerings he had seen scattered through the streets, Uriel saw meaning in the gun's placement, following the direction of the barrel and heading into a back room.

Like the main room, this chamber was blackened by fire damage, the walls peeling and bubbled where the heat had not quite reached to scorch. The room was empty and dark, a bedroom by the look of the rusted iron bed frame collapsed in one corner.

Uriel made a circuit of the room, looking for something that the autogun in the outer room might have been pointing at. Feeling slightly foolish, he was about to leave when he saw the words written on the wall.

Partially obscured by dust, the words were nevertheless clearly visible to his genhanced eyesight, hidden, but visible to someone who was looking for something.

The Sons of Salinas will rise again!

Uriel frowned as he read the words, wondering what they meant.

Who were the Sons of Salinas?

A cult? A resistance movement? A pro-Imperial faction?

Whoever they were, they had been careful to hide their imprecation to rebellion and that alone made Uriel suspicious of their allegiance.

Was Salinas a person or the name of this world?

Uriel turned as a shadow was thrown out on the wall before him. Crunching, heavy footsteps and a wet animal smell told him who had followed him and he lowered his sword.

He edged into the main room of the house, and as he cleared the doorway, he saw the Lord of the Unfleshed crouching beside the wall where the two silhouettes were emblazoned. The creature's enormous head lowered to sniff at the wall and his eyes widened as he took in the scent.

'These people…?' said the Lord of the Unfleshed.

'What about them?'

'This place… Many families?'

'Yes,' agreed Uriel. 'This was a city.'

'And these people?' asked the Lord of the Unfleshed.

'They lived here,' said Uriel.

'They died here.'

Uriel nodded, sheathing his sword. 'They did, but I don't know why.'

'This world feels wrong, sick. I not think that we be happy here,' whispered the enormous beast. 'Men that killed these people… They are bad men, like Iron Men.'

'How do you know that?' asked Uriel.

The enormous creature shrugged, as though the answer should have been obvious, and turned away from the wall, to where a collection of children's toys lay scattered in the corner of the room. The Lord of the Unfleshed crouched beside the toys, a melted doll with a scorched dress and a pile of blocks with the letters burned from them.

The beginnings of what might have been a smile creased the creature's face and Uriel felt his heart go out to the Lord of the Unfleshed, wondering what the future might have held for the child he had once been had the Iron Warriors not cruelly abducted him.

'Bad men will want to kill us,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed without looking up.

'Why do you say that?' asked Uriel, though he suspected the sentiment was accurate.

'I know we are monsters,' said the creature. 'A bad man that kills families will fear us.'

'No,' said Uriel, 'I won't let that happen.'

'Why?'

'Because you deserve a chance to live.'

'You think the Unfleshed can live here?'

'I don't know,' admitted Uriel, 'but what chance did you have on Medrengard? I don't know anything about this world, where it is or even what it's called, but I promise you I will do everything I can to make sure you have a better life here. What happened to you… It was monstrous, but you don't deserve to be condemned for it. You just have to be patient for a little longer and stay hidden until I can find the right time to tell people of you. Can you do that?'

'Unfleshed good at staying hidden. Not be found unless we want to be. Learned that on world of Iron Men.'

'Then stay here, stay hidden and when the time is right, Pasanius and I will come and get you. Then you will feel the sun on your face and not have to worry about Iron Men.'

'A better life,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'You promise?'

'A better life,' agreed Uriel.

'And the Emperor will love us?'

'He will,' said Uriel. 'He loves all his subjects.'

The Lord of the Unfleshed nodded and turned his massive head towards Uriel. Such a terrible, twisted face was incapable of guile and Uriel felt the responsibility of the creature's simple faith in him. He had promised them a better future and he had to make good on that promise.

The Lord of the Unfleshed's head snapped up and the folds of flesh above his jaws pulsed.

'Men are coming,' said the creature, 'men on machines.'

COLONEL VERENA KAIN stifled a yawn and rubbed a gloved hand across her eyes, her body naturally rolling with the motion of the Chimera armoured fighting vehicle she travelled in. Sitting high in the commander's hatch, she had a clear field of view across the rugged predawn landscape that followed the course of the river towards the ruined city of Khaturian.

She could see the jagged outline of the city ahead, stark against the bleak ruggedness of the mountains and a grim sight for this Emperor-forsaken hour of the morning. Moving with a unique, striding gait, six scout Sentinels darted ahead through the gloom, the bipedal machines ensuring that this fool's errand Mesira Bardhyl's warning had sent them on wasn't a Sons of Salinas ambush.

The scrawny psyker woman had arrived at the palace in the dead of night and demanded to see Governor Barbaden, which only served to prove her idiocy. Bardhyl had claimed she had something of great import to tell him, and once ushered into the governor's presence, she had sobbed out some nonsense about monsters and oceans of blood spilling out from the Killing Ground.

A slap to the face from Kain had halted her ramblings and she smiled as she remembered the look of shock on the woman's pinched face. Mesira Bardhyl had once been the sanctioned psyker attached to the Screaming Eagles, but was one of the cowards who had chosen to muster out of the regiment following the partial demobilisation of the Falcatas after Restoration Day. Kain had little time for such cravens and the chance to put Bardhyl in her place could not be passed up.

As a psyker, Bardhyl should have been handed over to the Commissariat following demobilisation, but, for reasons known only to himself, Barbaden had allowed her to quit the regiment without a fuss. Why he allowed Bardhyl to do so was beyond Kain, but she took great pains not to press him too hard on the

subject, for Leto Barbaden's cold, diamond-sharp mind was an icy thing that could end her career as surely as his patronage had advanced it to the position he had once held.

When Bardhyl had calmed enough to speak without gratuitous hyperbole, she spoke of a great surge in warp energy that had appeared in the ruined city of Khaturian. Consultation with the Janiceps had confirmed that, and Barbaden had ordered her to take a detachment of troops out to the Killing Ground and investigate.

Behind Kain's vehicle, a further eleven Chimeras spread out in a staggered arrowhead formation, filled with over a hundred of her Screaming Eagles. Veterans of a score of campaigns and the most feared and disciplined soldiers of the Achaman Falcatas, the Eagles were her favoured warriors when order had to be restored with maximum efficiency and speed.

As the outline of the dead city drew closer, Kain felt a shiver of apprehension, but shook it off. The last time she had seen this place it had been completely ablaze and the sights and sounds of that night returned with the force of a recently unlocked memory.

She realised she had not thought of that night in many years, but the recollection did not trouble her as it did some members of her regiment. They had done what needed to be done and the planet had been brought to heel. She had no regrets and unconsciously reached up to touch the eagle medal that hung from the left breast of her uniform jacket.

Her Chimera bounced over the uneven ground and she raised battered magnoculars to her face, scanning the outline of the city as the Sentinels drew near the razor wire fence that surrounded the ruins.

Tumbled buildings filled her view, rendered green and milky by the mechanics of the viewfinder, but there was precious little else to see. Their route was becoming rockier and cut through some wooded hills, so Kain pulled her arms in tight and slid back down inside the Chimera.

It paid to be cautious. The Sons of Salinas had stepped up their campaign of guerrilla attacks and, while it was unlikely they would attack such a well-armed force, it was possible that a number of snipers could be lying in wait within such terrain. This whole endeavour could simply be a ruse to lure out and kill an Imperial officer.

Inside the Chimera, it was noisy and dim. Engine noise roared from the back and the stink of oil and sacred unguents was thick in the air. Cramped and filled with solid iron and dangerous moving parts, it paid to be slightly built as she manoeuvred her body into the commander's seat.

'Anything, ma'am?' asked Bascome, her aide-de-camp, from his position by

the vox-gear.

'There's nothing there,' she said, shouting to be heard over the rattling noise of the engine.

'Any idea what we should expect?' asked Bascome.

Kain didn't know what to expect after the frustrating vagueness of Bardhyl's warning, but it did not become a colonel to admit ignorance in front of her junior officers.

'Possibly some Sons of Salinas activity,' she said. 'Or else more fools coming to place their trinkets on a pile of stones.'

Bascome shook his head. 'You'd think they'd learn not to come here, especially after the last lot we shot.'

Kain did not reply, remembering the sight of the three men put before the firing squad against the palace wall for breaking the cordon around Khaturian. Entry to the city was strictly forbidden and punishable by death, something that appeared not to deter the many numbskulls that regularly risked their lives to place memorials.

If Barbaden had listened to her, the ruins would have been obliterated by massed Basilisk fire the hour after Restoration Day, but the newly installed Governor had decided that such a move would only re-ignite flames of rebellion so recently extinguished.

Well, the last ten years had shown how well *that* had worked out: a decade of bombings, riots and discontent from a populace too stupid to realise that it was beaten. Imperial rule held sway over this world and the Sons of Salinas were a spent force, no matter how charismatic and cunning Pascal Blaise was said to be.

All sorts of wild rumours had grown up around the leader of the Sons of Salinas: that he had once served in the Guard, that he had once been Barbadus's chief enforcer before Daron Nisato had taken over or even that he was a rogue inquisitor. Whatever the truth of his former life, Kain had killed enough of his soldiers to know that he clearly wasn't *that* good a leader.

'I hope it is the Sons of Salinas,' said Bascome. 'It's been too long since we had a proper stand up fight.'

Kain echoed her aide's sentiment. Since Restoration Day, there had been precious little proper soldiering for the Falcatas. No intense firefights against xenos or the warriors of the Ruinous Powers, but plenty of civilian rioters and thankless patrols through districts of their own derelict war machines where improvised explosives waited to blow off limbs and snipers lurked to take pot shots at the patrolling Imperial soldiers.

The entire situation made no sense to Kain. Hadn't they liberated this system from the Ruinous Powers? True, there had been no overt outbreak of rebellion

on Salinas, but with three other worlds in the system already fallen prey to heresy, it had surely been only a matter of time before Salinas came under the sway of the Great Enemy. Didn't these people realise how lucky they had in fact been?

The Falcatas had arrived in a flurry of pomp and ceremony, an occasion demanded by the Master of the Crusade, General Shermi Vigo (a man who loathed Leto Barbaden and who was, in return, despised), but it had only served to inflame the people, leading to three years of grubby, inglorious warfare.

The result of the pacification had never really been in doubt, for the Achaman Falcatas had fought through the treacherous hells of two of the system's worlds already and were in no mood to offer mercy. As brutal and necessary as the fighting had been, there had been little glory in shooting civilians who thought that holding guns made them soldiers.

'Don't get your hopes up, Bascome,' warned Kain. 'This isn't likely to be anything out of the ordinary.'

* * *

'WHAT DO YOU think?' asked Pasanius.

'It sounds like Chimera engines, and Sentinels.'

'That's what I thought,' agreed Pasanius. 'Guard?'

'I think so.'

'Let's hope they're friendly.'

Uriel nodded and ran a hand across his scalp as the noise of the engines drew nearer. Uriel's superior hearing filtered out the distortions caused by the ruggedness of the landscape, allowing him to pick out the different engine noises and pinpoint their location.

The vehicles were perhaps two kilometres away and would be here in moments.

Uriel had raced back through the streets of the city, feeling its character change once more, the wind whipping through the streets as though bearing word of the approaching men with every gust. The Lord of the Unfleshed had long outpaced him, his lumbering gait and long, elastic limbs propelling him through the rubble-strewn streets with uncanny speed and grace.

Pasanius was waiting for him and the two gathered their meagre possessions before heading towards the southern edge of the city. Whoever these men on machines were, Uriel and Pasanius would meet them with their heads held high.

As they prepared to leave, Uriel turned to the Lord of the Unfleshed. He reached up to place his hand on the creature's arm, but remembered how such a

gesture had hurt it before and pulled his hand back.

'You understand what you have to do?' asked Uriel.

The mighty creature nodded, his brood of twisted followers echoing the gesture. 'Hide.'

'Yes,' said Uriel, 'you need to hide, but it won't be for long, I swear to you. Let us deal with these men and find out more about this world.'

'Then you come and get us? Tell men not fear us?'

Uriel hesitated before answering, unsure of what to say and loath to promise something he could not deliver. 'I'll come and get you as soon as it is safe, but until then you have to stay hidden. Move higher into the mountains. It looks like there's food and water there and you should be safe as long as you stay away from any settlements.'

The Lord of the Unfleshed took a moment to process all that Uriel had said, his massive form suddenly seeming to be much smaller than before. Uriel realised that the creature was feeling fear and as ridiculous as that thought was, it was completely understandable. Since their last days on Medrengard, the Lord of the Unfleshed had looked to Uriel as a child looks towards its father for guidance.

Now, that guidance was going away and Uriel saw the fear of abandonment in the creature's milky, bloodshot eyes.

'You will be safe,' said Uriel. 'I give you my word. I *will not* let anything happen to you. Now you have to go, quickly.'

The Lord of the Unfleshed turned and led his followers into the depths of the ruined city and as Uriel watched them go, he hoped they might have a chance of life on this world.

Now, as he stood before a long line of razor wire that appeared to encircle the city, he wasn't so sure. Their explorations of the previous night had not carried them this far south and to find that this dead city was cordoned off was a cause for some concern.

'They sound like friendlies,' said Uriel. 'Looted Guard vehicles don't sound as smooth. The engines are well cared for, I can hear that much.'

'Well, you always did have better hearing than me,' said Pasanius, affecting an air of casualness, but Uriel could sense his friend's unease. 'So, what do you make of this razor wire?'

Uriel looked left and right, following the line of tall wooden posts rammed into the ground and strung with looping coils of vicious, toothed wire.

'They didn't skimp on it, that's for sure,' said Uriel. 'Anyone caught in that fence would be torn to bloody shreds trying to cross it.'

'Aye,' agreed Pasanius, holding the bolter loosely at his side. 'From the scraps

of cloth and bloodstains on it, it looks like there's no shortage of people attempting to get through.'

They had reached the edges of the city and followed the road until reaching a wide gate, strung with coloured ribbons and garlands of faded flowers. More of the prayer strips hung from the wire and it had the effect of making the gate look almost festive.

'How are we going to play this?' asked Pasanius.

'Carefully,' said Uriel. 'It's the only way we can. I want to be honest with these people, but I don't want to be gunned down by some overeager Guardsman with an itchy trigger-finger.'

'Good point. Best we don't mention where we've been.'

'Probably not,' agreed Uriel. 'Not yet, at least.'

Pasanius nodded to the horizon. 'Here they come.'

Uriel watched as a trio of boxy, bipedal machines stalked through the landscape towards the city, moving with a wheezing, mechanical gait. Painted a deep rust red, each was, much to Uriel's relief, emblazoned with a golden eagle on their frontal glacis. Two bore side-mounted autocannons, while the third sported a lascannon that hummed with a powerful electric charge.

'There's more than these three,' said Pasanius, his head cocked to one side.

'I know,' said Uriel. 'There's one on our right and another two in the woods to the left.'

'Autocannons and a lascannon… They'll make a mess of us if they open fire.'

'Then let's not give them reason to, eh?'

'Sounds good to me.'

Uriel watched as the three visible Sentinels slowed and approached the gate with greater caution now that they had spotted the two of them. Guns were trained, hissing hydraulics powered up and arming chambers unmasked the war spirits within the weapons.

'Easy now,' whispered Uriel.

All three Sentinels had their weapons firmly aimed at them.

'If they open fire…' said Pasanius, his grip twitching on the grip of the bolter.

Uriel spotted the gesture and said, 'Slowly. Very slowly, put down that gun.'

Pasanius looked down at the weapon, as though he had forgotten he was carrying it, and nodded. With his truncated arm raised, he knelt and placed the bolter on the ground. The Sentinel armed with the lascannon followed his movements.

None of the other vehicles moved, content simply to cover them with their weapons.

'Why aren't they doing anything?'

'Communicating with their commanding officer I expect.'

'Damn, but I don't like this,' said Pasanius.

'Nor I,' said Uriel, 'but what choice do we have? We have to make contact with Imperial authorities sometime.'

'True. I just wish we weren't doing it with a company's worth of heavy weaponry pointed at us.'

The Sentinels before them didn't move, but Uriel could hear the sounds of the ones out of sight moving around to confirm that they were alone. He hoped the Lord of the Unfleshed had managed to get his followers clear of the city, for if the commanding officer of these soldiers was even halfway competent, he would order a search of the city to confirm that they were alone.

At last, Uriel heard the rumbling of tracked vehicles and a staggered column of a dozen Chimeras came into view. No sooner had the armoured vehicles appeared than the Sentinels opened up with dazzling searchlights. Uriel blinked away spots of brightness from his eyes as they adjusted to the blinding light.

Even though dawn was lighting the eastern skyline, the beams from the spotlights were intense and Uriel had to squint to make out any detail behind them. Mortal eyes would have been blinded, but those of a Space Marine could filter out all but the most searing light.

As Uriel's eyes focused, he saw the Chimeras spread out, a squadron's worth of heavy weaponry aimed squarely at him and his sergeant. Doors cranked open and scores of soldiers disembarked from the backs of the vehicles.

'They're good, I'll give them that,' hissed Pasanius, and Uriel was forced to agree.

The soldiers were clad in armour composed of gleaming red plate fringed with fur-edged mail and short, crimson cloaks tied over their left shoulders. Their rifles were aimed unwaveringly at the pair of them, each soldier advancing with a fluid motion that kept his weapon steady.

Their helmets were conical affairs of bronze metal with angled cheek plates and flexible aventails. Each warrior also carried a heavy sword with a curved blade, and nothing in their appearance gave Uriel the impression that they were simply for ornamentation.

'They've gone to a lot of trouble for just the two of us,' whispered Pasanius.

'I know, and how did they know we were here?'

'I suppose we'll find out soon enough,' said Pasanius. 'Looks like they're coming in.'

A sergeant with ocular implants integral to his helmet waved two squads forward. A heavy, square device was planted in the centre of the gate and a cable run back to the lead Chimera by a robed enginseer with a heavy backpack of

hissing cogs and bronze instruments.

A flickering glow built around the box attached to the gate and a crackle of electrical discharge flared along the length of the fence. Barely had the glow faded than the soldiers were coming through, the magnetically sealed gates swinging open with a booted kick.

The red-clad soldiers spread out, moving in pairs to expertly envelop them in overlapping fields of fire.

'Clear!' shouted one soldier, and the cry was repeated by his opposite number.

Up close, Uriel saw that they were professional soldiers indeed. They kept a precise distance from their targets, while still remaining close enough for it to be impossible to miss if this encounter turned violent. None even seemed fazed by the fact that their guns were aimed at warriors who clearly had the bulk of Astartes.

The sergeant with the ocular implants came forward with his curved sword drawn, and Uriel could see that the weapon was a form of falcata, a single-edged blade that pitched forward towards the point. Such weapons were heavy and capable of delivering a blow with the power of an axe, yet with the precision and cutting edge of a sword. The hilt was hook-shaped with quillons in the shape of flaring eagle wings.

Using the tip of his blade, the sergeant hooked Pasanius's bolter away from him and gestured a soldier behind him to carry it away. The soldier struggled under the weight of the gun and Uriel watched as it was handed off to the eager looking enginseer.

The sergeant looked Uriel up and down, his face invisible behind a combination vox/rebreather attachment and his bionics. With their only gun taken away, the soldiers relaxed a fraction and Uriel felt his respect for them drop a notch, for Uriel still carried his sword. In any case, the soldiers should know that a Space Marine was as proficient a killer with his bare hands as he was with a weapon.

No one moved until the top hatch on one of the Chimeras opened and a slender figure in the uniform of an officer emerged. Uriel saw that it was a woman, a tall, long-limbed woman who dropped to the ground with the assured movements of someone used to being in the field.

She pulled off her helmet and ran a hand across her scalp. Her hair was dark and cut short, her features angular and chiselled. She marched from her Chimera, trailed by a shorter man bearing a portable vox-caster on his back.

Like every one of her soldiers, she too bore a sheathed falcata. A golden eagle medal shone brightly on her uniform jacket.

The woman halted beside her sergeant, clearly surprised to see two such

warriors standing before her. To her credit, her surprise lasted for only the briefest of seconds.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'I am Uriel Ventris and this is Pasanius Lysane,' answered Uriel.

'You are Adeptus Astartes?'

It was asked as a rhetorical question, but Uriel nodded and said, 'We are Ultramarines.'

Again, Uriel saw surprise, but just as quickly it was masked. 'Ultramarines? You are a long way from home. How did you come to be here?'

'With respect,' said Uriel, 'we do not even know where here is. What planet is this?'

Ignoring Uriel's question, the female officer said, 'You are trespassing on prohibited ground, Uriel Ventris. To enter Khaturian carries a penalty of death.'

Uriel shared a shocked look with Pasanius. The sheer physical presence and legendary prowess of a Space Marine was enough to render most mortals speechless with awe and reverence, but this woman seemed unconcerned that she faced two of the Emperor's finest.

Anger touched Uriel and he took a step forward.

Immediately, a host of lasguns snapped up, and the soldiers' posture of vigilance was instantly restored.

'We are Space Marines of the Emperor,' snarled Uriel, the frustrations of the time they had spent exiled from the Chapter boiling to the surface. He gripped the hilt of his sword and said, 'We are warriors of the Fourth Company of the Ultramarines Chapter and you will show us some damned respect!'

The woman did not flinch from Uriel's outburst, but her hand flashed to her falcata.

'If you were to try to draw that weapon, I could cut you down before it was halfway drawn,' promised Uriel.

'And you would be dead a moment later,' she promised.

'Maybe so, but at least I would have silenced your insolent tongue,' snapped Uriel.

He felt a restraining hand on his arm and turned to see Pasanius, a look of resigned amusement in his eyes.

'Remember when I asked you how we were going to play this?' asked Pasanius 'You said, "Carefully". Does this fit any definition of careful?'

Uriel's anger vanished and he smiled at the absurdity of his behaviour in the face of so much firepower. He released his sword hilt and returned his gaze to the female officer, who glared furiously at him with her hand still held firmly on the grip of her weapon.

Pasanius stepped between her and Uriel. 'Look, before this gets out of hand and someone gets killed, let's everyone take a breath and we'll start again. We are strangers on this world and didn't know that to come here was forbidden. We're just trying to get back to our Chapter and could really use your help. Can you at least tell us what planet we're on and who's in charge?'

The woman relaxed a fraction and released her weapon. She took a deep breath, smoothed the front of her uniform jacket and laced her hands behind her back.

'Very well,' she said. 'I am Colonel Verena Kain, commanding officer of the Achaman Falcatas, and this world is called Salinas.'

'Who's in charge?'

'Governor Leto Barbaden is the Imperial Commander of this world,' said Colonel Kain.

'Can you take us to him?' asked Uriel.

'You'll have to travel under armed escort until your identities can be verified.'

'Verified?' asked Uriel. 'You don't believe we are Adeptus Astartes? Are you blind?'

'Trust me,' snapped Kain. 'I have spent decades fighting the Emperor's enemies, and some of them looked just like you, so you'll forgive me if I don't entirely trust that you are all you seem.'

Uriel was about to retort when Pasanius said, 'Colonel Kain has a point, Uriel. Come on, what does it matter anyway? We're going where we need to go.'

'I suppose so,' said Uriel.

'You'll travel in the back of a Chimera,' said Kain, gauging their bulk. 'It will be cramped, but you can squeeze in I'm sure.'

'Indeed,' said Pasanius, leading Uriel forward under the watchful gaze and lasguns of the Guardsmen.

As they marched towards the waiting Chimeras, Pasanius turned to address Colonel Kain one last time. 'One other thing,' he said. 'What year is it?'

FOUR

THE LIGHT COMING through his threadbare curtains and the sound of the city coming to life woke Pascal Blaise long before he heard the metal door to his home banging open. He rolled over and reached under his pillow for the pistol that was never more than an arm's length away from him. He checked the load and flicked off the safety catch as he heard excited voices from downstairs.

From the tone of the voices and the lack of further commotion, he knew it wasn't Daron Nisato's enforcers kicking down the door, but didn't put away his pistol just yet. These were uncertain times and the deadly games he and the Sons of Salinas were playing demanded caution.

He ran a hand over his shaved scalp and tugged at the twin forks of his braided beard, as he always did when thinking. He recognised the voices below; one belonged to Cawlen Hurq, his shadow and bodyguard, the other to Rykard Ustel, one of his intelligence gatherers.

Pascal rolled his head, loosening muscles that had cramped during the night. He was alone and the room smelled faintly of engine oil, but that was inevitable given that it was sheeted with plates cannibalised from the rusted hulk of a Leman Russ battle tank.

Satisfied that there was no immediate danger, Pascal slipped from the bed and pulled on his clothes, a faded grey work tunic and a wide leather belt. He pulled on his boots and was lacing them up when he heard a soft double knock at his door.

'Come in, Cawlen,' he said, his voice strong and authoritative. It was a voice used to giving commands, but had once been more used to calling out tithe numbers, accounts and scribe roll calls.

Cawlen Hurq pushed open the door and nodded respectfully towards him, his every motion controlled and unencumbered by unnecessary effort. He was a big man, broad of shoulder and threateningly built. Nature had made him unsuited for any role in life other than the infliction of violence. Like Pascal, Cawlen wore a simple tunic, but he also carried a short-barrelled lascarbine and bore a scabbarded blade at his hip.

'Rykard Ustel's here,' he said.

'I heard,' said Pascal. 'What does he want?'

'He's got word of troop movements.'

'And he has to bring it to me this early?' asked Pascal irritably.

'It's the Screaming Eagles,' said Cawlen, 'in company strength.'

Pascal's irritation vanished along with any lingering tiredness. The Screaming Eagles were the most hated of all the Imperial forces on Salinas. Their reputation for brutality and indiscriminate violence was well deserved and everyone on Salinas had cause to hate them for what they had done to Khaturian.

'It gets better,' said Cawlen.

'How?'

'Kain's leading them.'

Pascal finished tying his boots and rose from his bed. Verena Kain.

'Oh, but it would be sweet to take that black-hearted bitch down.'

'That's what I thought,' agreed Cawlen with a wicked grin. 'Where are they?'

'Rykard said they set off towards the north,' said Cawlen. 'Said it looked like they were heading towards the Killing Ground.'

'Do we have anyone there?'

'No; at least we shouldn't.'

'Then why is she leading a company there?'

'Who knows, but Rykard said they didn't have any supply vehicles with them, so they'll be back soon. We should get shooters in place.'

Pascal nodded. 'Send runners to the ambush cells. Six teams of missiles. We'll assemble at the Iron Angel and deploy from there. Go.'

Cawlen nodded and left the room, leaving Pascal alone once more.

Pascal felt his heart race at the thought of striking back at the Screaming Eagles. He fought to control his excitement, knowing that a cool head was needed here. Emotional men made mistakes and he was not a man given to displays of emotion, considering them a waste of energy.

He paced the room, thinking through the situation, unlocking talents for analysis that had once served him well in the ranks of the Imperial Administratum, a duty that seemed a lifetime ago.

Pascal Blaise had been a scribe overseer in the office of Governor Shaara, a cog in the ever-turning machine that was the Imperial bureaucracy of Salinas in the days before the Achaman Falcatas had come. Though other planets in the system had seethed with turmoil and unrest, Governor Shaara had kept Salinas free of malcontents and rabble-rousers in the belief that they could ride out this time of troubles.

How wrong he had turned out to be.

Tarred with the same brush as the system's other worlds, the hammer of the Imperial Guard had fallen, on Salinas with no less ferocity and force as it had on the others. Governor Shaara had been executed the day the Falcatas had landed and his officers rounded up in detention camps while the Departmento

Munitorum officials decided what was to be done with them.

Pascal Blaise had been part of the delegation chosen from among the surviving administrative personnel to approach Colonel Leto Barbaden, the commander of the Imperial forces moving across the surface of Salinas, to protest at the unnecessary nature of these measures.

The memories of that day were burned forever on Pascal Blaise's mind. No sooner had they spoken against the harshness of the Falcatas and the loyalty of their former governor than a detachment of soldiers, men and women that Pascal later learned were Barbaden's 8th Company known as the Screaming Eagles, had surrounded them.

Colonel Barbaden had spoken of the treachery that infected the system and of how he had heard the same protests of innocence from the lips of every leader on the rebellious worlds.

Then the shooting had begun.

Pascal reached towards the puckered scar tissue at his chest where the first las-bolt had struck him. A second had grazed the side of his head and he had fallen into a black pit of pain and unconsciousness. When he had awoken, he was in a long trench, freshly dug outside the palace walls, which was filled with corpses. He had recognised the faces of his fellow delegates and the horror and injustice of their murder allowed him to plumb reserves of strength and endurance that he had not known he possessed.

Bleeding and on the verge of collapse, he had climbed from the mass grave and lurched through the shot-and-scream-filled darkness until he found his way to the nearest house of healing, where his strength had finally given out.

He remembered nothing of the next few days except pain and the sedative highs of medication. A week after his shooting, he had risen from his bed to hear the sounds of Imperial Guard tanks rumbling through the streets of his city and the tramp of marching feet as red-clad soldiers of the Achaman Falcatas rounded up suspected traitors.

Hatred filled him and, in that moment, the administrative overseer he had once been died and the warrior he became was born. Within a month of the Falcatas arrival, the newly formed Sons of Salinas made its first gesture of defiance, planting a bomb that had killed several senior officers of the Falcatas.

Under the charismatic and fiery Sylvanus Thayer, the Sons of Salinas had enjoyed initial successes and had seriously hampered the work of the Falcatas in securing Salinas.

It couldn't last.

Against the relentless force of the Imperial Guard and the ruthlessness of Leto Barbaden, the Sons of Salinas could not hope to prevail. After the horror of the

Killing Ground, Sylvanus Thayer had led the vengeful Sons of Salinas into a pitched battle, a battle they could not hope to win, and the flower of their world's manhood had been wiped out.

Pascal had pleaded with Sylvanus not to meet the Falcatas in open battle, telling him over and over that the destruction of Khaturian had been designed to draw him into such a reckless act, but his leader's fury at the massacre could not be restrained.

And, they had died, pounded by artillery, ground over by tanks and finished off by infantry.

Men called Sylvanus Thayer a hero, but Pascal knew the man was a fool. Blinded by rage and the need for vengeance, he had not seen the trap that Barbaden had laid for him. Or if he had seen it, he had not cared.

Pascal Blaise had rallied the survivors and taught them the value of caution and secrecy. He had taught them that they were not the almighty avenging force that Thayer had told them they were, but the trickle of water that, over time, would split the rock.

Thus the war of the Sons of Salinas had continued.

There were no grand gestures of defiance, but small attacks that gradually wore down the soldiers who occupied their cities and whose former colonel sat in the Governor's palace.

A knock at the door drew Pascal from his bitter reveries and he looked up to see Cawlen Hurq standing at the door once again.

'You coming?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Pascal, lifting his ash-grey storm cloak.

He smiled and dropped the cloak, opening the gun-metal footlocker beside his bed and reaching for the cunningly disguised switch that opened the secret compartment at its base. Pascal lifted the false bottom and drew out a carefully folded bundle of green and gold cloth.

He swept up the double wrapped cloak of the Sons of Salinas and fastened it to the buckles at his shoulder and chest.

Cawlen nodded appreciatively.

Pascal bolstered his pistol and grinned to his bodyguard. 'If we're going to kill Verena Kain, it's only fitting she should know who her executioners are.'

HIGH IN THE mountains above the dead city, the Lord of the Unfleshed sat with the rest of his brethren in the midst of a forest of tall trees. Mist clung to the ground and the wet sensation of it around the exposed musculature was strange and unusual. The softness of the ground beneath him was a joy and the cold air

in his lungs the sweetest elixir.

He had never known such things, his every breath before now coated with toxic filth from the belching refineries that covered the desolate plains of the Iron Men's world.

They had brought down another two of the beasts that lived in the pastures below a towering escarpment of rock and dragged them into the concealment of the forest. The carcasses lay torn apart and bleeding in a ring of the Unfleshed. The Lord of the Unfleshed tore meat from the bone with his teeth, the hind leg of one of the animals clutched in one meaty fist.

The meat was like nothing he had tasted before, fresh, bloody and full of goodness. All he could remember eating was the spoiled meat of the dead or the chemically disfigured, the fatty bodies of the ones they had found in the flesh camps of the Iron Men.

The thought that there could be another way to live had never entered the Lord of the Unfleshed's mind, for what other life was there? Fragmentary visions of his life before, like images on the shards of a broken mirror pricked his mind from time to time, but he had always turned from them.

Sometimes, when the pain and exhaustion of his existence grew too great to bear, he would travel deep into the ashen mountains and bask in the smoggy peaks wreathed in caustic pollutants that would send him into the deepest slumbers, where he could cling to the last of his remembrances.

There his body would rest, and he could reach the dreams of another life, another way of living.

Were they memories? He didn't know, but he liked to think so.

He would see a woman's face, kind and full of unconditional love. He hoped she was his mother, but had no memory of her beyond this sight. She would speak to him, but he never heard the words. All he saw was how beautiful she was and how much she cared for him.

As the fumes carried him deeper into the tormented depths of his altered mind, he saw towering buildings of white stone, glorious windows of many colours and a host of statues depicting a golden warrior, his head haloed in stars and surrounded by angels of light.

Of all the fevered visions the Lord of the Unfleshed saw, this one had the most power and, more than that, it had an identity.

This was the Emperor and the Emperor loved him.

This love would never last and these golden memories would shatter, replaced by loathsome visions of horror and blood so terrifying that he would crush rocks with his fists in his dreaming frenzy.

He saw fire. He saw explosions and stuttering flickers of bullets.

In the bursts of light, he saw warriors in iron-grey armour fringed with chevrons of yellow and black.

Heavy, textured gauntlets reached for him, tearing him from the bloody corpse of the beautiful woman, his screams, falling on deaf ears as his world resolved into snapshots of horror: darkness and terror, the taste of blood never far from his mouth; slavering saw-carrying monsters and the giant, drooling faces of monstrous mothers.

Then only pain and emptiness as he felt himself enfolded by moist folds of flesh and dragged down into darkness.

Then, gloriously, light.

But the light was a lie and served only to reveal his hideousness.

A monster he was and a monster he became, flushed away with the rest of the rotten meat into the unforgiving wilderness beyond the Iron Men's citadel.

His revulsion at his own horrible existence would always break the grip of the toxic fumes and he would rise from the mountainside to make his way back down to his wretched band, the unwanted, the rejected and the unloved.

Many of the wailing masses of twisted meat and bone shat from above were howling things without form or mind.

These the tribe would eat, but those with enough semblance of form and strength would become part of the Lord of the Unfleshed's growing tribe.

This was the Lord of the Unfleshed's life and he had known of no other way to live, until the warrior had come.

The Lord of the Unfleshed had watched the latest outpourings from the Iron Men's citadel fall into the pool, imagining the taste of their meat as they struggled to the edge of the black water. Anticipation turned to puzzlement, for they were none of them monsters. His only thought had been to feast on them, but he had smelled the mother meat on the warrior who led the new arrivals.

The Lord of the Unfleshed had taken the new arrivals to the great cavern beneath the earth that was home and presented them to the mighty statue of the Emperor that they had built from the detritus flushed from above. The Emperor had judged the warrior, who called himself Uriel, worthy and so they had become part of the tribe and struck back at the Iron Men who lived in the fortress on top of the impossible mountain.

Much blood had been shed, many Iron Men killed and their fortress brought crashing down. Many of the Unfleshed had died also, but it was a good memory, one the Lord of the Unfleshed held fast to as they escaped the world of their monstrous birth in the bowels of the iron daemon's machine.

The Lord of the Unfleshed did not like to think of the time spent within the daemonic machine's reeking, blood-soaked depths, for it had taken all his power

and strength to prevent the tribe from turning on one another in a frenzy of gnashing jaws and taloned fists.

The journey had ended though and they had set foot on this world. The air was clean and the ground soft, but there was something wrong with it. He did not know what it was or how to articulate that wrongness, but a presence of great anger saturated the air of this place.

He could feel it as surely as he felt the blood running down his fleshless face.

The meat from the carcasses was almost gone. One of the tribe, a creature with glistening organs oozing at the edges of its bones and a hideously elongated mouth filled with serrated fangs, snapped bones and sucked the marrow from them. Another scraped the inside of the gutted beast's stomach for the last morsels.

'No,' growled the Lord of the Unfleshed, 'we not need to live like this.'

The tribe looked up at him, confusion twisting their mangled features.

'This a better world for us,' he said. 'Uriel promise us this. We not be feared and Emperor loves us.'

He could see the hope in their eyes, the first rays of sunshine diffusing through the treetops with a soft golden glow. The Lord of the Unfleshed felt it on his skin as a pleasant tingle and looked down as the warmth spread across the raw redness of his arm.

He rose to his feet and made his way from the shadows of the forest, ducking under branches as the sun rose higher over the mountains and spilled its golden light over the landscape. The tribe followed him, captivated by the glow building in the sky.

Walking like recently awakened sleepwalkers, the Unfleshed made their way from beneath the trees to stand in the open. Their faces were alive with wonderment, the sight of this bright orb in the sky incredible and new, yet strangely familiar.

Memories of happier times fought to reach the surface of the Lord of the Unfleshed's mind and he felt the beginnings of hope stir in his breast. Perhaps this *could* be a better place, a new beginning on a world where they were not hated and hunted.

The sensation of the sunlight on his body grew stronger, the tingling turning to something else, something painful. The tribe began to moan, rubbing their arms and bodies as though scratching at a persistent itch.

The Lord of the Unfleshed felt the musculature of his body begin to burn, the sensation like the angry heat that covered his body whenever he had ventured into the filthy waters of the Iron Men's world.

He growled as the burning sensation grew stronger, the meat of his body

unused to the strange sun's rays. Black patches began to form on his skin, spreading like droplets of oil on water. Pain grew as the black, blistering marks grew and the Lord of the Unfleshed roared as he scratched one and a viscous pus oozed from the wound.

On the Iron Men's world, the sun radiated despair and hopelessness, but this one… this one radiated pain.

The Unfleshed began to howl, clawing at the meat of their limbs and bodies as they struggled to understand what was happening to them. Their cries were piteous as the sunlight burned their bodies and the Lord of the Unfleshed roared in anger and hurt betrayal.

This world was no good. He had known it, but had allowed himself to forget that everything hated them.

Even the sun wanted to destroy them.

'Tribe!' he roared. 'Back! Back into shadow!'

He turned from the burning sun and ran back to the shelter of the trees, but even there the sunlight found them, slicing through the trees in deadly beams that seared the unprotected flesh of their bodies. The Unfleshed looked to him for guidance, but he had none to give.

There was no better life, not for the likes of them.

The Unfleshed bellowed and beat their chests in agony and the Lord of the Unfleshed cried his frustration to the heavens. Through the foliage he saw the rocky escarpment rearing above them, a vertical slab of glistening black rock with numerous waterfalls cascading from high above.

Against the blackness of the rock, the Lord of the Unfleshed saw a patch of deeper darkness, a cleft in the sheer surface: a cave.

'Tribe must run!' he cried. 'Find shelter in rocks! Follow!'

Without looking to see if any came with him, the Lord of the Unfleshed broke from the scant cover of the forest and ran uphill towards the cliffs. His powerful muscles easily carried him across the landscape, leaping over huge boulders and shutting out the burning pain that threatened to overwhelm him.

Behind him, he heard howls of pain, but also the sounds of the tribe following him, wet, meaty footfalls and the crack of malformed bones grinding together.

The black lesions spread across his body as he ran, but the Lord of the Unfleshed shut out the pain, his entire being focused on reaching the cooling darkness of the cave. He vaulted a fallen slab of rock and slowed his pace as he slid into the shadow. The immediate burning sensation subsided, but the crawling pain in his limbs and body remained.

He turned as the faster members of the tribe completed their mad dash to the cave, howling and gnashing their teeth against the pain. The Lord of the

Unfleshed turned to see others making their painful way over the open ground, the golden light searing and blackening the meat on their bones with every passing second.

One of the Unfleshed, a creature with stunted legs and an oversized upper body tripped on a loose boulder. It fell to the ground with a shriek of pain, viscous ooze seeping from burns that tore open as it landed. Its glistening, red body split apart where it was burned and it fought to right itself. Its body was out of balance and it could not get up. Powerful arms sought to haul it to its feet, but the pain and horror of what was happening to it were too much.

The creature collapsed with one final howl, and the Lord of the Unfleshed watched the blackness creeping across its body as the unforgiving sun burned away the last of its life.

'Dead now,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed and the others shuffled over to look at the blackening corpse. They could smell the meat on it and he could sense their confusion and hunger, but none dared venture out into the light.

The Lord of the Unfleshed turned away from the light of the cave mouth. Black, water-streaked, walls stretched off into the distance and the darkness was comforting after the pain of the light. The Lord of the Unfleshed lurched deeper into the cliff, his thoughts in turmoil at this new pain.

Once more they were monsters, lurking in the darkness of the cave, where all monsters should be.

Anger swelled within the Lord of the Unfleshed.

THE TROOP COMPARTMENT of a Chimera armoured fighting vehicle claimed to be able to convey twelve soldiers and their kit into battle. As was typical for spaces designed by the military, it assumed that the soldiers would not need to move so much as a muscle once they were packed in. With two Space Marines inside, that space became seriously confined and five soldiers had been displaced and forced to ride back on the roof of the vehicle.

'And I thought Rhinos were cramped,' said Pasanius. 'Remind me never to complain to Harkus again.'

Uriel did not reply, keeping his eyes fixed on the landscape coming into view through the scuffed vision blocks that punctuated the sides of the vehicle and allowed a little natural light to enter the compartment. Recessed glow strips ran the length of the roof, but their light was a sickly red.

Four soldiers of the Achaman Falcatas sat with them in the back of the Chimera, three helmeted warriors with their lasguns held across their laps and the sergeant who had removed Pasanius's weapon. He alone had removed his

helmet and Uriel saw that the ocular implants were integral to it and not part of him.

The sergeant was middle-aged, but had a weathered, deeply lined face topped by a shock of sandy hair. The man's eyes were hard, but not unkind, and he looked at Uriel and Pasanius with an expression that was part awe and part nervous excitement.

'So you're Ultramarines?' he said.

'We are,' nodded Uriel.

'I'm Sergeant Jonah Tremain,' said the man, extending his hand to Uriel. The hand beneath the gauntlet felt hard and inflexible to Uriel and he suspected that the sergeant's hand was augmetic.

His suspicions were confirmed when Tremain held up his hand and said, 'Lost it in a skirmish against eldar pirates. Caught a ricochet and a splinter of something got under the skin. Got infected and the medics had to take it right there and then.'

'I have fought the eldar before,' said Uriel. 'They are swift and deadly killers.'

'That they are,' agreed Tremain. 'That they are. But then the colonel was no slouch either. Outmanoeuvred them and none of their fancy tricks could save them when his Screaming Eagles had them locked in place.'

'His? I don't understand.'

'Ah, of course. Colonel Kain's only been in charge of what's left of the regiment since Restoration Day,' explained Tremain. 'Before that, Colonel Barbaden led the Falcatas.'

'The same Barbaden who is now governor?'

'The very same,' agreed Tremain. 'We won this world fair and square. Did our ten years of service, and after we'd fought through the hell of Losgat and Steinhold we were given the right to settle here once we'd won it back for the Emperor.'

Uriel glanced over at the silent soldiers who sat by the heavy iron assault door at the rear of the vehicle. They were hard, tough men and the notion that the sergeant would be so garrulous seemed out of character.

'So how did you pair come to be all the way out here?' asked Tremain.

'In that city or on this world?'

'Both,' said Tremain, smiling, but Uriel could see that the expression was forced. 'I'm sure it's an exciting story. We don't get many visitors here, let alone Space Marines. So come on, tell me how you came to be out here.'

Uriel could sense Pasanius's unspoken warning of saying too much and wondered if Colonel Kain was listening in. Had she placed Tremain in here to get them to talk unguardedly in front of a friendly sergeant?

'That is a long and… involved tale, Sergeant Tremain,' said Uriel.

'You must have a ship. I mean, how else would you have got to the surface?'

'No, we don't have a ship,' said Uriel.

'So did you just teleport down?' pressed Tremain. 'From a vessel in orbit? Or maybe a drop-pod? You Space Marines use drop-pods, don't you?'

'We do,' agreed Uriel, 'but we did not arrive in one.'

'Then how did you get here?'

'As I said, that's a long story, and one I think I'd prefer to tell Governor Barbaden. I will tell you this, though, we are loyal servants of the Emperor, just as you are. We have been on a mission for our Chapter and all we want is to go home to rejoin our battle brothers.'

'It's just that of all the places you had to turn up, it was there,' said Tremain.

'In Khaturian? That's what that place was called wasn't it?'

'Yes, that's what it was called,' said Tremain, and Uriel sensed the man's reticence to talk further of the dead city.

'What happened to it?' asked Uriel. 'Why does it carry a death penalty to go there?'

'It just does,' snapped Tremain. 'Now we'll have no more talk about the Killing Ground.'

'The Killing Ground?'

'I said we'd have no more talk about it,' warned Tremain, clearly not intimidated by the fact that he sat opposite a warrior who could kill him in the time it took to think it. Whatever the truth of Khaturian, or the Killing Ground as Tremain had called it, it was not a subject he was comfortable talking about.

Seeing he was going to get nothing useful from Uriel, Tremain's volubility evaporated and the next few hours of the journey were undertaken in silence, the sergeant offering no more insights to the world of Salinas or its inhabitants. Uriel made no attempt to engage him in conversation, and, instead, turned his attention to the slivers of landscape that he could see through the vision blocks fitted above the vehicle's integral lasguns.

What little he could see suggested a lush landscape of tall mountains, wide forests and clear skies. To see such things after the nightmarish landscapes of a daemon world in the Eye of Terror was a very real pleasure and Uriel looked forward to seeing more of this world before departing for Macragge.

The thought of seeing the home of his Chapter once more was like a balm on his soul and he could already feel the shadow that had fallen over his normal demeanour lifting.

They had completed their Death Oath and had returned to a world of the Imperium. True, they were little better than willing captives, but that would not

be the case for long and Uriel was willing to suffer a little indignity before reaching home. He could not fault the Falcatas for their suspicions, for had they not appeared unannounced and unexpectedly in the middle of nowhere? Had someone done the same on Macragge, they would have been hurled into the deepest dungeons of the Fortress of Hera before being mercilessly interrogated.

Ah… the Fortress of Hera: the great libraries of knowledge, the Temple of Correction where the body of Roboute Guilliman lay in stasis, the Hall of Heroes, the Valley of Laponis… So many wondrous places.

If given the chance upon their return to Macragge, Uriel decided he would visit them all.

A crackling voice from a battered loudspeaker cut through his reverie.

'All units, mount up,' said Verena Kain's voice. 'Everyone get on a gun, we're approaching the outskirts of Barbadus.'

Uriel returned his attention to Tremain. 'Barbadus?' he said. 'Is that a city?'

Tremain nodded, chivvying the four remaining soldiers onto the integral lasguns.

'Yeah, it's the capital,' said Tremain, pulling a periscope-like device with a scratched pict slate down from the metal roof of the compartment. The slate flickered to life, displaying a static-washed image of the approaching conurbation.

Its outline was blurred and the buildings at the edge of the city looked somehow strange to Uriel, but the resolution of the image was too indistinct for him to see exactly why.

Raised high above the outskirts of the city's edge was a tall structure or sculpture that, through the distortion of the pict slate, looked like a winged angel.

As the column of vehicles drew closer, Uriel asked. 'What is that?'

Tremain said, 'That? It's the Iron Angel.'

PASCAL BLAISE CROUCHED behind the low roof parapet of an adobe ruin as he watched the approaching Chimeras. He had given up trying to identify in which vehicle Colonel Kain would be travelling, for none had the distinctive whip aerials of a long range vox or bore any distinctive iconography that might indicate that a senior officer was aboard.

No, the Falcatas has learned not to make such elementary mistakes.

Three Sentinels roamed ahead of the column and another three brought up the rear and he had a moment's unease as he pictured the amount of firepower this force could pump out.

Beside him, Cawlen Hurq cradled a battered missile tube, the projectile

already loaded and primed. Across the street, on buildings to either side of him and within burned out chassis of tanks, were another five missile teams and thirty gunmen armed with a variety of ancient lasguns and simple bolt action rifles.

The men had been hastily assembled and though acting with such haste and lack of planning went against everything he taught his soldiers, the chance to take out Kain was too tempting to pass up.

The Chimeras were rumbling at speed through the ragged outskirts of the city, where the buildings became more decrepit and bled out into the landscape. Even now, Sons of Salinas sympathisers would be clearing the dwellings below him of innocents. Pascal Blaise was careful not to place the people of his world in any unnecessary danger, but the Falcatas would not be so careful when they retaliated.

Hopefully, by the time such retaliation was unleashed, he and his men would have vanished into the maze of ruins and abandoned vehicles that filled the city.

'Ready?' he whispered, the rumbling of the tracked vehicles growing louder with every passing second.

'Damn right,' said Cawlen.

'Let the walkers go past and then take out the lead vehicle,' said Pascal. 'The others are waiting for you to fire.'

'I know,' hissed Cawlen. 'Believe it or not, I have done this before.'

'Yes, of course. Sorry,' replied Pascal, fighting his instinct to micromanage.

Confident that Cawlen Hurq would unleash the ambush at the right moment, Pascal looked up at the Iron Angel, the guardian and lucky charm of the Sons of Salinas.

The great sculpture of scavenged parts towered above him. Her wings were those of a crashed Thunderbolt, her body shaped from the crumpled remains of its fuselage and her features formed from engine parts.

She was crude and unfinished, and she was beautiful.

'Watch over us today, fair lady,' he whispered.

Pascal slid his body up to look over the parapet.

The Chimeras had entered the killing box.

Cawlen Hurq rose to his knees and swung the missile tube over the parapet to point at the Chimeras on the street below.

'For the Sons of Salinas!' he yelled and mashed the firing trigger.

FIVE

URIEL HEARD THE explosion through the armoured skin of the Chimera as a dull whump, the concussion of the detonation rocking the vehicle back on its tracks. Bright light flashed through the vision blocks and a series of rattling pings sounded as blazing shrapnel smacked the hull.

Another explosion sounded, this time from behind and the internal speakers suddenly exploded with chatter and screams.

'Ambush!' he shouted, before the echoes of the first blast had begun to fade.

A tremendous impact hammered the side of the Chimera, tipping it up onto one track. The soldiers cried out and Uriel snatched for the grab rail as the vehicle slammed back down to earth. A portion of the Chimera's side bulged inwards. Smoke and sparks spewed into the compartment and Uriel smelled blood.

One of the soldiers was down, his neck clearly broken. Another was screaming, his face a mask of red where it had smashed against the interior of the hull. The others lay bruised, but unhurt and Uriel surged from his seat against the hull to hammer the release mechanism of the assault door. Immobilised, the Chimera was a death trap.

Hot fumes blew inside and Uriel caught the reek of burning propellant and scorched flesh. Outside, morning sunlight illuminated a blazing vehicle, flames spewing from its ruptured sides and thick, tarry black smoke billowing into the sky.

'Come on!' he shouted. 'Out!'

Pasanius grabbed the wounded soldier as Tremain helped the others escape the stricken Chimera. Bodies and shredded pieces of meat littered the ground, the exploded remnants of the soldiers forced to travel on the roof.

Another whooshing roar made Uriel look up in time to see a missile streak from its launcher and slam into the roof of another of Colonel Kain's Chimeras. This time the missile punched through the thinner armour of the vehicle's topside and it shuddered as the warhead exploded inside. Smoke ripped upwards and a rattle of gunfire barked from the rooftops as previously hidden gunmen revealed themselves.

Uriel dragged another wounded soldier away from the fire that was taking hold of their stricken vehicle. The engine was ablaze and it was only a matter of time before the ammo and power pack on board cooked off explosively.

Solid rounds and las-bolts smacked the earth and Uriel ducked as he and the wounded soldier made their way into cover. A hail of shots tore into the wall next to him. Fragments of rock billowed and he blinked dust from his eyes.

Pasanius joined him, propping the wounded soldier against the rough stone of a sagging ruin, and Uriel laid the man he carried next to him. Shots rattled from both sides of the street, a street that Uriel could see was composed of rough, adobe brick buildings and what looked like the shells of abandoned tanks.

Canvas awnings and corrugated iron porches had been built into the rusting hulks and these ad hoc dwellings outnumbered those constructed of more traditional materials.

'We should get into this fight,' said Uriel.

'With what?' pointed out Pasanius. 'Kain's lot seem like they know what they're doing.'

That at least was true. Colonel Kain's Chimeras were roaring forward to protect the damaged vehicles while spraying bright bolts of las-fire into the buildings on either side of the street.

The soldiers were fighting from their vehicles, letting the armour take the weight of small-arms fire while the turrets opened up with the snapping fizz of heavy las-bolts. A Chimera pulled ahead of Uriel in a skid of dirt and fumes as it sought to protect a damaged one.

Hard bangs of gunfire echoed from the turret-mounted heavy bolter, the rounds chewing up the stone parapets of the opposite buildings. Uriel saw puffs of red and heard screams over the incessant gunfire. The shooters had sprung their ambush well, but they were hunkered down behind a parapet that might as well have been fashioned from paper for all the protection it provided against bolter rounds.

Uriel watched as a loping Sentinel unleashed a torrent of autocannon rounds towards a group of men moving between the ruins. The heavy calibre shells exploded among them and they all fell, chewed up and unrecognisable, their blood spraying on the pale stone walls in looping arcs.

A shot rang out, distinctive and high pitched, and the Sentinel pilot's head snapped back, a ragged hole punched in the back of his head. Sniper.

Uriel glanced in the direction of the shot and saw the blurred outline of the shooter through the smoke of the battle. More of the Chimeras were pulling up to the damaged ones and soldiers were helping their comrades from the blazing wrecks to pull them inside those that had, thus far, escaped attack.

Uriel risked a glance around the bullet-chipped corner that he sheltered behind. To stand by and watch a battle being fought around him was anathema to him, and he knew he could not sit idly by while others were dying around him.

He turned to Pasanius, but before he could open his mouth, his sergeant said, 'You're going in, I know. Go. I'll cover you.'

Uriel nodded and slid from the alleyway, running towards a damaged Chimera that listed horribly to one side. Smears of blood and oil streaked its surfaces and smoke spat from its stinking interior. Its main gun was buckled, but Uriel had seen that its pintle-mounted weapon was still intact.

Bullets filled the air, the distinctive whine and buzz of them telling Uriel how close they were. Ricochets spanged from armour and he felt a burning line across his calf of something hot and sharp.

He dived into the cover of the listing Chimera and rolled to his feet in its shadow. He gripped the upper edge of the Chimera's hull and swung himself up onto its roof, scrambling across the upper armour towards the pintle-mounted gun. He snapped off the safety and swung the weapon around, his posture unsuited to firing it, but his strength more than able to bear the brunt of its recoil.

The sniper reared up to take aim at another Sentinel and Uriel pressed down on the palm triggers. The noise of the weapon was deafening, uncompromising, and designed to intimidate as much as wound. Heavy slugs spat from the barrel in a flaring burst. Uriel's target flew apart into flesh chunks and a fountain of blood.

He swivelled the weapon on its mount, raking the pounding thump of heavy bullets across the parapet line of the buildings opposite. Clay bricks dissolved under the impacts, blasted to powder by the high velocity slugs. The recoil was prodigious, but easily controllable by the strength of a Space Marine.

A las-bolt creased Uriel's shoulder and he flinched at the sudden pain, but kept his weapon trained on the roof-lines opposite. Arcs of bronze shells spewed from the smoking breech.

'Uriel!' shouted Pasanius from below. '*Your* left!'

He turned towards where Pasanius was gesturing with the stump of his arm, seeing a flicker of movement between two blackened hulks of tanks that were now homes. A group of three men were preparing to launch a missile, and Uriel pulled the trigger as he brought his weapon to bear.

The bullets described a curving line as the weapon discharged, the impacts ringing like the sound of a hundred bells as they ricocheted from metal hulls. One man was hurled from his feet, a hole the size of his torso blasted in his body.

To their credit, neither of the other two men balked at the horrific death of their comrade, but kept the missile tube aimed squarely at the Chimera that Uriel sat upon. He kept the weapon trained on them, but the gun coughed dry, the hammer snapping on an empty chamber.

Uriel could see triumph on the gunner's face as he closed one eye. Then his head exploded.

Uriel heard the distinctive report of a bolt weapon and saw Pasanius running towards him from the alleyway, the welcome sight of a bolt pistol bucking in his left hand. His sergeant fired again and the second man was pitched from his feet. A tremendous explosion mushroomed skyward as Pasanius's next bolt connected with the spare warheads in the canvas sack he wore.

The gunner's missile corkscrewed up from his fallen corpse, spinning wildly before exploding and smearing the sky with black tendrils of smoke.

More grinding sounds of tracks and the heavier, percussive thump of concentrated volleys of fire filled the air and Uriel released the grips of the heavy stubber. Colonel Kain's soldiers had the situation under control and Uriel could add little to the battle.

He saw a flash of green and gold and looked up to see a cloaked man with a shaved head and forked beard through a pulverised section of parapet. The man was shouting, but his words were inaudible over the roar of gunfire and the mad revving of engines.

Even Uriel's enhanced hearing could make out little of what the man was saying, but the sense of his words was clear as gun barrels vanished from rooftops. The weight of fire fell away as the ambushers disengaged and melted into the tumbled ruins.

The man risked one last glance from the rooftops and his eyes locked with Uriel's.

Uriel knew hate when he saw it. He had seen enough on Medrengard to last a lifetime.

This man hated him and wanted him dead, and not just him, but everyone in this bloody, smoke-filled street: the Falcatas, Uriel, Pasanius and every soldier who fought and shouted to their wounded comrades.

The man vanished from view and Uriel rolled from the roof of the Chimera.

He landed in the dirt beside Pasanius.

'Thanks for the warning,' said Uriel. 'That missile could have really spoiled my day.'

'No problem,' replied Pasanius. 'He'd have probably missed anyway. These idiots didn't know they were beaten until it was too late for them.'

Uriel had to agree with his friend's assessment of their opponents. The Falcatas had taken a serious hit when the ambush had been sprung, but had reacted with commendable speed and calm. The soldiers had followed their training and got into the fight without the confusion and panic that might have handed their attackers a victory.

Instead of retreating after their initial success, the ambushers had fought for longer than was sensible and had suffered the worst of the encounter, unable to match the discipline and firepower of a well-led force of Imperial Guard.

'Did you see the man with the green and gold cloak?' asked Uriel.

'I did,' said Pasanius, awkwardly trying to reload the bolt pistol. 'He looked like the leader. Stupid of him to wear something so noticeable though.'

'That's what I thought,' agreed Uriel, taking the bolt pistol from Pasanius and sliding a fresh magazine home. 'Where did you get this?'

'From him,' said Pasanius, indicating a dead sergeant of the Falcatas at the edge of the battlefield with a chunk of shrapnel the size of a shoulder guard buried in his face. 'Didn't think he'd be needing it again and thought it would be appropriate to use his own weapon to avenge him.'

'Very appropriate,' nodded Uriel.

'It means I don't have to use that other damned weapon…'

'Where is it now?'

'In there,' said Pasanius, pointing at the wreck they had clambered from what must only have been minutes ago. 'I'll let it burn.'

Uriel understood Pasanius's sentiment, for there was no honour and only risk in using a weapon that had been touched by the Ruinous Powers. Better to let it perish in the fire than risk it turning upon you.

Another Chimera pulled up beside them, the hatch in the turret open and Verena Kain leaning on the handles of a pintle storm bolter. The barrels smoked and Kain's face was black with dirt, pink lines streaking her features where sweat had run from her scalp.

'Get in,' she barked. 'They could be back.'

'Unlikely,' said Uriel, but he picked himself up and helped Pasanius to his feet. The armoured door at the back of the Chimera opened and Sergeant Tremain and two other troopers stepped out, their lasguns trained on the roof-lines.

Tremain beckoned them over and Uriel and Pasanius jogged over to the rumbling vehicle.

The street was filled with smoke and five blazing wrecks were abandoned where they had been destroyed. There were no bodies to be seen, the dead and wounded gathered up by the crews of the surviving vehicles. The Sentinel whose pilot Uriel had seen shot had collapsed, its leg broken by a careening Chimera. The pilot was nowhere to be seen.

Uriel shielded his eyes and asked Kain, 'Where to now?'

'To the barracks,' said Kain. 'It's closer and we have wounded.'

He had more questions, but the needs of the wounded took precedence and

seconds could make the difference between life and death for some of these soldiers. Tremain clambered inside the Chimera, but as Uriel gripped the sides of the door, he saw that the compartment was full to bursting with wounded men who groaned as they lay on the sloshing floor. Uriel knew that the other vehicles would also be like this, thick with the stench of fear and pain and blood.

Soldiers sat shoulder to shoulder, packed in more tightly than even the most ambitious vehicle designer could have hoped, and Uriel saw a respect and admiration in their eyes that hadn't been there before.

Soldiers shuffled as they made room for them, word of Uriel and Pasanius's involvement in the fight having spread to those who hadn't seen it. Corpsmen cared for the wounded as best they were able in the red-lit compartment and a sullen anger simmered below the surface of every man on board.

'We'll ride on top,' said Uriel. 'You need all the room you can get in here.'

THE CHIMERAS SPED onwards through the city of Barbadus, and Uriel was afforded his first proper look at this Imperial capital. It appeared to have grown up around the ruins of an ancient battlefield, such was the litter and detritus of warfare that lay strewn around. Entire graveyards of armoured vehicles had been abandoned and left for the elements to devour and the people of the planet to colonise.

Buildings of agglomerated stone, brick and metal leaned precariously, supported by iron buttresses that had once been the main guns of armoured vehicles. The further into the city the racing column of vehicles went, the more solid and conventional the structures became, high-walled towers of pink stone and bleached timber.

Buildings of dark iron and tempered glass that were of Imperial origin nestled uncomfortably amongst the pale stone and clay bricks of the city and Uriel saw evidence of the war that had been fought to win this world on every one of the older buildings: las-burns and bullet marks, the latter worn smooth by the elements.

Uriel caught glimpses of green and gold streamers wafting from high spires and sagging clotheslines, the same green and gold that the man with the forked beard had been wearing. Many of the memorials in the dead city had streamers of the same colours attached to them and Uriel wondered what they symbolised.

'Emperor's blood!' hissed Pasanius, looking towards a gently sloping hill that rose to the west of the city.

'What?' said Uriel, fearing another ambush.

'Would you look at that?' said Pasanius. 'I've never seen the like.'

Uriel followed Pasanius's gaze and saw a strangely shaped building on the plateau of the hill. There was a familiarity to its silhouette, but it took him some moments to realise why.

The inhabitants of the city had been thorough in their cannibalisation of the discarded armoured vehicles, rendering many of them into dwellings, but this act of refurbishment was surely the apex of the scavenger's art.

Three towering Capitol Imperialis, mighty leviathans of vehicles used for command and control of entire battlefronts, sat side by side and had been transformed into something else entirely. Hundreds of crewmen and officers could operate from within each of these incredible war machines, directing entire regiments of artillery, hundreds of thousands of men and entire companies of armoured vehicles. To see one such colossus on a battlefield was rare, but to see three, abandoned no less, was unheard of.

They were surely abandoned, for the rust and corrosion on their sides was clear proof that these machines were no longer in use. The Imperial eagles on the sides of the outer two were gone, though it was impossible to tell whether they had been erased by the elements or by design. Swaying walkways joined them and iron-sheathed tunnels connected them at lower levels.

'What do you suppose it is?' asked Pasanius.

Uriel had been wondering the same thing. As he looked closer, he saw what might have been a winged staff encircled by a pair of entwined serpents above the control bridge of the middle vehicle.

A caduceus?

'A medicae facility perhaps?' suggested Uriel. 'Seems a bit excessive to use Capitol Imperialis for that.'

'True, but perhaps that was all they were fit for.'

'What do you mean?'

'Look at everything else we've seen,' said Uriel. There is a whole army's worth of abandoned armour here. Half the city's built among the mined chassis of Imperial Guard tanks. When the Falcatas took this place, I think whatever Crusade force left them here didn't leave them with much to maintain their equipment.'

'Meaning it all went to wrack and ruin.'

'Eventually, yes.'

'Damn shame that,' said Pasanius. 'Not a good idea to show that lack of respect to something that would have saved your life in battle.'

'No, not a good idea at all,' agreed Uriel, remembering the harsh treatment meted out to his armour on Medrengard.

Uriel longed to be enclosed in the battle plate of the Astartes, to feel that he

was whole once again and a righteous servant of the Emperor, clad in the strongest armour and armed with the deadliest weapons. Uriel's battle gear was more than simply artefacts of war, they were instruments of the Emperor's will.

At the foot of the hill upon which stood the medicae facility was a multi tiered, colonnaded dome that could only belong to the roof of an Ecclesiarchy temple. The soaring grandeur of the building was no doubt designed to dominate the more lowly structures around it with its Imperial majesty. Its glories had not spared it the harsh ministrations of war, however, for two of the four spires that rose from the cardinal points of the dome were broken stumps of stone and steel.

Eclipsing even this temple in its display of Imperial power was a tall, grim-spired palace that towered over the ramshackle city spread around it like debris tumbled from a mountain. Stark against the sky, it was an austere structure, cold and bereft of the glorious ornamentation that Uriel had seen on many other such buildings.

'The Imperial palace?' he said.

Pasanius nodded. 'Certainly grim enough for this place.'

Uriel nodded at Pasanius's assessment. The forbidding aspect of the palace, with its brutal architecture of drum towers topped with hooded turrets, lightning-wreathed antennae and shuttered hangars was certainly in keeping with the sombre atmosphere of this world, but more than that, the building's architecture gave the impression of power without compassion.

Clearly, Governor Barbaden was not a man given to ostentation. That was a nugget of information to store for later and Uriel wondered what manner of man the Imperial Commander was.

He was certainly not liked, if the people on the streets of his city were anything to go by.

They were a handsome, tall people dressed, almost uniformly, in ash-grey coveralls and long cloaks.

The people hugged the buildings as the Chimeras rushed past, and Uriel saw the same sullen hostility in their eyes that he had seen on the faces of the Guardsmen in the Chimera.

The Falcatas victory in claiming this world as their own had obviously left scars: scars that had not yet healed.

Everywhere Uriel looked, he saw evidence of the peoples' cannibalisation of what the Imperial Guard had discarded: market stalls formed from the beaten sheet metal of tank hulls, carts and wagons dragged on wheels scavenged from supply trucks and barrows with handles fashioned from exhaust pipes.

Colonel Kain's column was travelling rapidly through the streets, taking sharp, veering turns at random.

'She's not taking any chances on a second ambush,' noted Pasanius, giving voice to Uriel's thought and gripping the edge of the Chimera as it skidded around another corner.

Uriel looked at the naked hostility that burned from every face.

'I don't blame her,' he said.

THE SCREAMING EAGLES' journey through the strange streets of Barbadus continued for another ten minutes, ten long minutes during which Uriel expected a shot or streaking missile with every breath. No such violence was unleashed, and each turn took them deeper into the warren of streets and further from the Imperial palace.

Eventually, the Chimeras increased speed as they surged towards a walled compound set apart from the buildings around it. Uriel had noticed the buildings becoming more widely spaced and less complete for a few moments, but only as they passed out into the open did he see why.

Rolled coils of barbed wire surrounded the compound and squat, unlovely bunkers of sandbags and timber flanked the heavy iron gate. A bronze eagle was stamped across both sides of the gate and the column of vehicles began to slow as they negotiated a path between great slabs of concrete laid to prevent any direct approach.

'They're cautious, I'll give them that,' said Pasanius, noting the way the guns at the corners of the compound walls followed the column in.

'They're scared,' said Uriel, thinking back to the hostility he had seen on every face they had passed on their journey towards this place. 'They've pulled back within their walls. I didn't see any patrols on the streets, did you?'

'No, but I wouldn't necessarily expect to see a military presence on the streets,' said Pasanius, 'Local enforcers maybe, but not Guard.'

'I didn't even see any of them,' said Uriel.

'No. Odd isn't it?'

'Very,' said Uriel.

Further conversation was halted as the gate rumbled open, sliding within the fabric of the wall, and the vehicles passed into the dusty courtyard of the compound. There were several barrack buildings inside, of basic Imperial design, portal framed sheds with corrugated iron walls and felt roofs. Similarly drab buildings were spaced at regular intervals around the compound: a mess hall, engineering sheds, fuel dumps, quartermaster stores and an infirmary.

A flag bearing a golden eagle with outthrust talons flew high over the compound and anxious looking soldiers ran from every building as the battered

Chimeras parked up. Shouts were exchanged between men spilling from the vehicles and medics bellowed at their comrades to give the wounded room.

Uriel vaulted from the roof of the Chimera, aware of the strange looks he and Pasanius were drawing. He saw Colonel Kain, her clipped tones easily cutting through the confusion and collective outrage at the attack. With calm efficiency, she directed the work of the medics, ignoring their expressions of irritation at her meddling.

Uriel nodded to Pasanius and they walked over to the colonel of the Falcatas.

'Anything we can do to help?' asked Uriel.

Kain looked up from issuing her orders, her face clean and pristine again.

'No,' she said, 'and I'll thank you to remain with Sergeant Tremain. You are still in our custody.'

'Even after what just happened?' said Uriel, as Sergeant Tremain and a trio of Guardsmen, resplendent in fresh uniform jackets and raised lasguns moved up behind them.

'Especially after what just happened,' said Kain. 'Your arrival and the Sons of Salinas attack coming so soon after… I would be remiss not to wonder what the connection is, would I not?'

'The Sons of Salinas?' said Uriel. 'Who are they? I saw that name scrawled on a building in Khaturian.'

'Another thing I am less than comfortable with,' said Kain.

'But who are they?' pressed Uriel.

'They are nothing,' snapped Kain, her eyes blazing with fury. 'They are traitors who cling to the notion that the forces of the Imperium are invaders and should be resisted at every turn. They are terrorists, murderers and heretics, deserving of nothing less than extermination.'

Uriel was not surprised at her vehemence, for she had just seen scores of her men killed or wounded. Even so, there was a hatred in her steely tones that ran deeper than simple anger at the violence done to her company.

Verena Kain hated the Sons of Salinas with the passion of a zealot.

'Have you any idea how they were able to attack you like that?' asked Pasanius.

Kain flashed him a bilious glance that spoke volumes of her frustration. 'This whole damn city feeds them information,' she said. 'Every move we make, there's someone with a portable vox passing word of it.'

* * *

IT TOOK ANOTHER thirty minutes to treat the wounded, secure the battered

vehicles and re-equip the soldiers, all of whom had expended a good deal of their ammo load in the battle. A nervous looking commissar took statements from soldiers, selected at random, as far as Uriel could tell, and Kain continued to bark orders with the vigour of someone who dared not stop for even a second in case she had time to dwell on what had just occurred.

Her every command was obeyed with an alacrity that suggested that to do otherwise would result in the severest consequences, and Uriel recognised an officer who knew her trade, and who would never allow others to forget it.

In that time, Uriel and Pasanius sat against the hull of one of the Chimeras, the metal ticking and groaning as it cooled. The sun was halfway through its ascent towards its zenith and Uriel closed his eyes and let its warmth bathe his exposed flesh.

With nothing to do but wait until Colonel Kain decided it was time to leave, Uriel revelled in this unaccustomed time to himself. A Space Marine on active duty had precious little time that wasn't spent in preparation for battle. Weapons practice, strength building, biochemical monitoring and all manner of training drills were the virtual be all and end all of his life.

It was a life of service, a life of sacrifice and a life of battle.

What servant of the Emperor could ask for more?

The question presented its own answer in the shape of Ardaric Vaanes.

Uriel's time on Medrengard had caused him to question his role as a Space Marine, but he had passed his own time of testing and come through it stronger.

Others on that damned world had not shown such strength of character, and Uriel bitterly remembered the sight of Ardaric Vaanes as he had turned his back on his duty to the Emperor.

Vaanes had once been a warrior of the Raven Guard, but had, for reasons Uriel never discovered, forsaken his Chapter and taken the path of the renegade. Uriel had offered Vaanes the chance to rediscover his honour and seek redemption, but the warrior had chosen dishonour and disgrace.

Uriel wondered what had become of Ardaric Vaanes. In all likelihood, he was dead by now, a bleached corpse lying in the ashen wasteland of that dreadful world.

Feeling himself becoming maudlin, he put Vaanes from his mind and turned his head towards Pasanius.

Neither man felt the need to speak to one another, the companionable silence of two old friends who had seen life and death and everything in-between allowing them the luxury of silence.

That silence was broken by the approach of Colonel Kain.

Uriel looked up as she approached. 'Governor Barbaden is ready to see you,'

she said.

'Good,' replied Uriel. 'I think I'm about ready to see him too.'

PART TWO

FLESHED

'From little spark should burst a mighty flame.'

SIX

VISITING THE IMPERIAL palace of Salinas was an experience Daron Nisato avoided whenever he could. The building was too cold and too blatant a symbol of Imperial power to be relished any more. It served as a focal point for the people's anger, and to see its stark, uncompromising lines against the blue of the sky was to understand your insignificance in the face of the Imperium, and more especially, your insignificance in the face of Governor Leto Barbaden.

Nisato allowed the duty officer of the checkpoint to relieve him of his weapons, though it irked him that the city's chief enforcer could not be trusted with firearms in the presence of the governor.

This was the third security checkpoint he had passed through this morning, a drab, prefabricated building that smelled of damp and neglect. The first checkpoint at the main gate had halted his Rhino APC and the second, barely twenty paces later, had confirmed his identity via a series of painful, blood-sampling gene-matchers. He smiled grimly as he wondered if the gene-matchers explained the pasty, ashen complexions of the staffers that worked within the palace.

'Something funny?' asked the duty officer as he locked away Nisato's pistol.

'No,' replied Nisato, aware that these men lacked anything approaching a sense of humour, 'just happy to see you're doing such a thorough job.'

The man looked askance at Nisato, searching for signs of mockery, but Nisato was a past master at keeping his thoughts to himself. Satisfied that his solemn duty was not being made fun of, the man nodded gracelessly and waved Nisato through the door that led into the palace's courtyard precincts.

Nisato was about to pass through when the door behind him opened and the unmistakable aroma of incense, sweat and guilt wafted in. He knew who had entered the room without turning.

'Cardinal Togandis,' said Nisato.

He heard the intake of breath and turned to see the rotund figure of the Pontifex Maximus of Barbadus in all his finery.

'Enforcer Nisato,' said Togandis, his skin sheened in sweat. 'How fortuitous we should find ourselves together at this juncture.'

Shavo Togandis had never been an impressive man, even when he had served with the Falcatas as its company confessor, his manner too brusque, his appetites too unsavoury and his language too florid. Nisato had never felt the need to avail

himself of the man's services, preferring to keep his confessions between the Emperor and himself in prayer.

The decade since Restoration Day had not been kind to Shavo Togandis's physique, his already doughy frame blooming to one generously proportioned in all directions.

'You are summoned also?' asked Nisato.

'Yes, yes,' said Togandis, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. 'We are all servants of our lord and master. Barbaden commands and we obey with alacrity. One does not like to keep the good governor waiting, does one?'

'No,' agreed Nisato, stepping aside to let the cardinal approach the unsmiling duty officer.

As Togandis went through the necessary formalities involved in passing through the palace's security, Nisato took a moment to study the senior cleric of Salinas.

He was not impressed.

Aside from his generously upholstered frame, Shavo Togandis had a nervous manner that, in any other man, would have seen him hauled into the interrogation cells below the enforcers' precinct and broken down for a confession.

The confessor confessing. The thought made him smile.

In addition to his shimmering chasuble of crimson and silver, Togandis wore a tall and elaborately worked mitre with long trailing cords of gold. He carried a long staff, which he was attempting to prevent the duty officer from impounding.

'Now see here, my good man,' began Togandis, 'this postprandial summons to the palace has inconvenienced me greatly and this staff is a sacred instrument of my most valued and not inconsequential status on this planet. You would be advised not to remove it from my personage.'

'No weapons or items that could be construed as weapons are allowed within the palace,' said the duty officer, as though reciting the words by rote, 'except by a member of the Falcatas.'

'Now you listen here, you pathetic little myrmidon, you must understand that there are exceptions to every rule and I refuse to truckle to your purblind devotion. Do you understand?'

'Frankly, no,' said the duty officer, holding out his hand, 'but it alters nothing. You'll need to hand over your staff.'

'I wouldn't bother arguing, Shavo,' said Nisato, adopting a tone as stuffy and self-important as the cardinal's. 'Even I, an upholder of Imperial Law, am forced to relinquish my symbols of office in the face of this panjandrum.'

Togandis looked down at Nisato's empty holster and smiled at the gesture of

solidarity, oblivious to the sarcasm in Nisato's voice.

'Well, indeed, one must band together in the face of adversity, what?' he said, turning and reluctantly handing over his staff to the duty officer. 'And if there is so much as a single imperfection visible upon that staff when I return, I shall deliver the fiercest commination upon your head!'

The duty officer took the staff and wearily waved the pair of them through.

Smiling, Nisato followed the cardinal into the courtyard, emerging into bright sunlight on the cusp of the transition from morning to afternoon.

The palace towered above them, dark and threatening. Its guns and defences, though angled to the sky, remained an impressive symbol of the power of the man who commanded them. Constructed from immense blocks of dark stone, the palace reminded Nisato of the great, cliff-top castles of his home world, brooding crags carved from the rock of the coastline.

Scarlet-clad soldiers patrolled the lower skirts of the palace, their falcatas unsheathed at their sides. Their red plate gleamed in the sun and the bronze of their helmets shone like gold, but even these men were not permitted to bear firearms as a matter of course.

Unlike many soldiers who looked ceremonial, the Achaman Falcatas were men he had once been proud to fight alongside. There was no give in these soldiers and they fought with a fire in their bellies that other regiments could only envy. That fire had died since Restoration Day, but its embers still smouldered.

A trio of Chimera transports emblazoned with the insignia of the Screaming Eagles were parked up before the palace, an unusual enough occurrence that it made Nisato wonder who had travelled in them to be afforded such a rare honour.

Once again, Togandis dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief.

'So, did your summons furnish you with any clue as to the nature of this audience?' he asked.

Nisato shook his head, slowing his normally long stride to allow the waddling cardinal to keep up. 'No, it didn't, but then Leto always was a man of few words, wasn't he?'

'Indeed he was,' agreed Togandis. 'Indeed he was. No inspiring speeches before a battle, just orders, precise, never to be meddled with, orders.'

That was certainly true, remembered Nisato. As a cadet commissar when Leto Barbaden had taken command of the Achaman Falcatas, Nisato had summarily executed a number of junior officers who had seen fit to exercise their own initiative in their interpretation of Barbaden's orders.

Leto Barbaden did not like to be second-guessed and nor did he expect his

orders to be carried out with anything less than total obedience. As far as Nisato knew, the years since Barbaden's relinquishing of command had not mellowed him and thus he had put aside his current investigations into Sons of Salinas activity and headed straight for the palace upon receiving his summons.

Until he had met Togandis, Nisato had assumed that it had something to do with this morning's attack on Colonel Kain's convoy as it had made its way back into the city. Seeing the Chimeras supported that, but the cardinal's presence suggested that some other business was afoot.

'Such a terrible business with Governor Barbaden's former adjutant, eh?'

'I'm sorry?' said Nisato, surprised at this sudden, unexpected, question.

'Hanno Merbal?' said Togandis. 'He shot himself right in front of you, I hear?'

'Yes,' replied Nisato, his interest piqued, 'he did.'

'He was a friend of yours, was he not?' asked Togandis and Nisato wanted to laugh at the cardinal's attempt at nonchalance.

'He was,' confirmed Nisato. Keep the answers short, he thought. Let Togandis do the talking.

'Hmmm, yes,' said Togandis. 'Have you any idea why he would do such a thing?'

'You tell me, Shavo,' said Nisato. 'You were his confessor, weren't you?'

'I was indeed, Daron,' replied Togandis, scorn dripping from the use of his first name, 'but the fact of which I am sure you are cognisant remains that the seal of the confessional is a sacred trust that cannot be broken.'

'Even in death?'

'Especially in death,' said Togandis. 'The sins of the confessed are in the hands of the Emperor. I can tell you he was having some issues with, shall we say, guilt, though.'

'Over this?' asked Nisato, pulling out the golden eagle medal that Hanno Merbal had shown him right before blowing his brains out all over the bar.

Togandis looked away from the medal and Nisato was enough of an enforcer to know guilt when he saw it. Once again Togandis dabbed at his moist forehead.

'I… I haven't thought of Khaturian in a long time,' said Togandis, and Nisato smelled a lie.

'You were there?' asked Nisato and Togandis flinched.

Nisato already knew the answer; Togandis wore an identical medal on the front of his chasuble.

'I was, yes,' agreed Togandis hurriedly, 'but I took no part in the fighting.'

'From what I gather there wasn't much fighting.'

Togandis did not reply at first and Nisato thought the cardinal was going to ignore the question, but the man whispered. 'No, there wasn't, but…'

'But?' pressed Nisato, eager to learn what he could of this most unspoken of battles.

Before Togandis had a chance to answer, a formal voice said, 'Enforcer Nisato, Cardinal Togandis, Governor Barbaden is ready to see you now. If you will follow me please.'

Nisato cursed inwardly and mustered a smile as he looked away from Togandis to the blandly smiling face of Mersk Eversham.

Eversham's face was thin and angular, but his body, beneath the elegantly cut frock coat, was solid and unbreakable. Nisato had seen Eversham in combat enough times to know that the man was a ferocious killer and he wondered how Barbaden had persuaded him to muster out of the regiment. He was an anomaly within the Falcatas, a man of culture and breeding who could have easily become an officer, but had chosen to enlist in the rank and file.

Now he served as Leto Barbaden's aide, attendant, personal secretary and bodyguard, having long ago replaced the now-deceased Hanno Merbal. Nisato had no doubt that Eversham was armed with a number of concealed firearms and blades.

'Mersk,' said Nisato, nodding. 'You're keeping well?'

'Well enough,' said Eversham. 'Now if you please.'

'Of course, of course,' fussed Togandis. 'Come on, Daron. We mustn't keep the good governor waiting, must we?'

'No,' said Nisato, 'we wouldn't want that.'

He saw the faint suggestion of a smug grin on Eversham's face and resisted the urge to wipe it off. Instead, he followed Barbaden's killer and the cardinal as a detachment of red-jacketed soldiers formed up around them, falcatas bright in the sunlight.

The symbolism was obvious and heavy handed, but Nisato paid it no mind as they were led into the palace, down twisting corridors, up cramped screw stairs and through echoing, cold chambers bereft of warming fires or laughter.

Eversham offered no more in the way of conversation and Togandis's normal extravagant garrulousness vanished in the face of the palace's austerity. They marched in silence until the soldiers halted at the end of a long, portrait-lined hallway. At the end of the corridor, Nisato saw the slight, stooped form of Mesira Bardhyl and felt a familiar protective urge towards the woman.

She had always been a nervous creature and had been treated foully when she had served as Barbaden's pet psyker.

The years since Restoration Day had been no kinder to her as far as Nisato could tell.

'This way,' said Eversham, though the route was familiar to both Nisato and

Togandis.

They followed Eversham along the hallway, Togandis making a show of admiring the portraits of previous colonels of the Falcatas, and Nisato wondering what the cardinal had been about to say before Eversham had interrupted.

Mesira greeted them with a shy smile and a nod, and Nisato saw dark hollows beneath her eyes and noted how the skin seemed to sag on her sparse frame. Togandis studiously ignored Mesira as Eversham knocked tersely on the wide wooden doors at the end of the hallway. Barbaden's equerry paused just long enough to hear an imperious command to enter before sweeping into the room.

Nisato, Togandis and Mesira followed Eversham into the room, a spacious and extensive library furnished with long tables and floor to ceiling bookcases.

Governor Leto Barbaden sat, perched on the room's central table.

Tall, lean and dark-haired, Leto Barbaden's ascetic frame was dressed in an immaculately cut suit that echoed the pomp of a military uniform in its brass buttons, lined trousers and gleaming boots, but which was undeniably civilian. A line of medal ribbons decorated his left breast, but they were understated and dignified.

Barbaden's face was handsome, his dark hair and neatly trimmed beard sprinkled liberally with silver, but his eyes were those of a predator.

As commanding a presence as Barbaden was, it was the two figures standing before him that completely captured Daron Nisato's attention. It was left to Shavo Togandis's surprise to give them name.

'Astartes,' breathed the cardinal.

Both were clad in pale robes with the hoods pulled back, the clothes looking absurdly small on their enhanced physiques. Both stood head and shoulders above Verena Kain and the armed soldiers who lined the walls of the library. One of the Space Marines was lean, if such a description could be applied to a two and a half metre-tall giant, while the other was a brute of a man whose arm was missing below the elbow.

To say Daron Nisato was astonished by this strange tableau was an understatement of colossal proportions.

'Ah, Daron, Shavo,' said Barbaden, his voice mellifluous, 'so glad you could join us.'

As if there was a choice, thought Nisato.

'We have guests,' continued Barbaden, 'and they claim to have a most fantastical tale.'

WITH EVERY PASSING moment, the sun had crept further and further into the

cave, pressing the Unfleshed back into its darkened depths. Bellowing roars and threatening demonstrations of their physical power had not halted its progress and neither had begging, pleading or wails of fear.

The Lord of the Unfleshed felt the anger that had been growing in him turn to rage as the hateful light encroached on their last refuge. There was nowhere to go, no last hiding place that would protect the tribe from the killing light.

Their betrayal was complete.

They huddled behind him, pathetic and afraid, their monstrous forms and mighty strength no defence against the sunlight that would kill their skinless bodies. Even with their limited exposure to it, their bodies were changing, the lesions across their limbs spreading and turning paler as they went.

As the light grew brighter, the Lord of the Unfleshed narrowed his eyes, feeling a tightness to his body, as though his limbs were wrapped in some invisible film.

His body itched all over and he raised his arm to his face, seeing a strange milky sheen where the sunlight had touched it. His arm had changed from the mottled red and grey of exposed musculature to a shimmering, oily white.

Though the terms were unknown to him, his metabolism had reacted to the sudden and shocking presence of ultraviolet radiation by activating the gene-memory of the biological hardware pressed into the service of his construction. In Space Marines the organ was known as the melanochrome, a biological device designed to darken the warrior's skin and protect him from harmful radiation.

Accelerated and altered beyond reason by the horrific nature of his gestation within the daemon wombs of Medrengard, the disparate fragments of the melanochrome were in overdrive, crafting the only defence its mindless biological imperatives knew: skin.

The Lord of the Unfleshed watched as the milky sheen spread still further, flowing like a rippling liquid as it oozed down the length of his arm, covering his fingers and tightening across the meat and bone of his body.

Amazed, the Lord of the Unfleshed took a step forward, easing his newly sheathed arm into the light that crept like an invader into the cave. His arm tingled, the skin darkening from a soft white to a fleshy pink. He withdrew his arm as he saw the same substance crawling over the bodies of his tribe.

Were they to be whole again?

The nature of this miracle was unknown to the Lord of the Unfleshed, but he dropped to his knees to give thanks to the Emperor for it, for what else could the source of this wonder be?

Emboldened by their leader's change, the rest of the tribe edged forward, their

glistening bodies following the example of the Lord of the Unfleshed.

They whooped and howled as the light touched them, for their bodies were more degenerate than their leader's and the light still burned them. They looked to him for guidance, but he had none to give them.

His body was changing, adapting, mutating. He did not know how or why, but the Emperor was giving him a chance to better himself, to become more than simply a monster. His anger, a fiery, volatile thing retreated within him, not gone, but kept in check.

The Lord of the Unfleshed turned his gaze upon his tribe. 'Wait. Changes coming. What happens to me will happen to you, not now, but soon.'

As if to prove his point, the Lord of the Unfleshed stepped into the sunlight to howls of fear and anguish. Step after step, he marched through the light until he stood at the cave mouth on the slopes of the mountain.

He felt the sunlight burning his skin, but it was a sensation to be rejoiced in, not feared. The forgotten memory of skin returned to him in all its glory: to be clad in flesh, to stand beneath the heat of a sun and know the feeling of it on his face!

Far below, he could see the ruins of the dead place, shadows criss-crossing its empty streets.

Except, now that he looked, they weren't empty were they?

URIEL STOOD BEFORE the governor of Salinas and knew he was in the presence of one of the most dangerous individuals he had ever met: Leto Barbaden, a man of whom he had heard only fragmentary pieces of information, a man who, until now, had been a cipher.

As a commander of a regiment and now a world, he had clearly not been a man to underestimate, but Uriel saw the truth of the matter as he looked into Barbaden's cold, pitiless eyes.

In his time as a warrior, Uriel had met all kinds of commanders, some good, some bad, but mostly just men and women trying to do their duty and keep their soldiers alive. Barbaden might be concerned with the former, but it was clear that he had no real interest in the latter.

With the wounded dealt with at the Screaming Eagles barracks, Uriel and Pasanius had once again embarked on a Chimera and been driven at speed through the city. A number of decoy Chimeras had also been despatched, but such precautions had, this time, proven unnecessary.

They had seen little of the city on the journey, simply flashes of brick and metal through the vision blocks. Uriel had tried to follow the sense of the route,

but had quickly given up after yet another confusing turn. Then there had been a series of stops and starts, no doubt checkpoints of some description, before they had disembarked within a large courtyard at the foot of the Imperial palace.

Seen up close, the building was even more impressive than it had first appeared, its defences and armaments the equal of many of the outlying fortresses in Ultramar. Colonel Kain had led them into a barracks unit at the base of the palace, accompanied as always by a detachment of her red-jacketed soldiers.

A man in a long black coat had met them, a man in whom Uriel saw the fluid movements and casual grace of a natural killer. This man was introduced as Eversham, personal equerry to Governor Barbaden. Uriel had shared a glance with Pasanius and was relieved ta see that his friend had also seen through the man's facade of bland functionary.

Clean clothes were provided and Uriel had gratefully stripped out of the remainder of his broken armour. Pasanius had been less keen, and made no secret of his reluctance to be parted from it. Uriel had displayed a similar reticence when a soldier had come forward to relieve him of his golden-hilted sword.

'This was an honour gift from a captain of the Ultramarines,' warned Uriel.

'Have no fear for your battle gear,' promised Eversham. 'It will be taken to the Gallery of Antiquities. Curator Urbican is no stranger to armour and weapons such as yours.'

It was clear that the matter was not up for debate and their equipment had been taken from them and carried away by a squad of sweating soldiers. Still under armed guard, the two of them had used the ablutions block to wash the accumulated filth of their travels on Medrengard from their bodies, though Uriel doubted that a simple cascade of heated water could ever achieve such a thing.

Their bodies cleaned, fresh robes were presented to them, simple things, hastily altered to fit their overlarge frames. Now considered presentable to the good governor, Eversham and Colonel Kain (also in a fresh uniform) had escorted them through the palace, a gloomy, spartanly furnished abode of wood panelled corridors with little in the way of personal decoration or anything approaching a stamp of the incumbent owner's personality.

That in itself was revealing, for it was a trait common to most people, Uriel had come to realise, that they wished to leave their mark on the world to show that they had existed and to prove that they mattered.

Uriel saw none of that in the cheerless chambers of the palace and he wondered what that said about the mindset of the man who called this building home.

At last they had been led through a portrait-lined gallery and into a large, well-stocked library with a score of soldiers standing to attention around the perimeter of the room. Seated before a roaring, crackling fire was a tall man with dark hair lined with silver. His bearing was stiff and unpretentious and he drank a tawny liquid from a curved snifter.

Eversham had departed, to fetch other arrivals, he claimed, and Uriel and Pasanius had been left in the company of Leto Barbaden and Verena Kain.

Kain had wordlessly taken up position with the soldiers at the walls and Barbaden regarded them coolly for several moments before rising from his chair and depositing his glass on the table next to it.

'I am Leto Barbaden, Imperial Commander of Salinas,' he said. 'Now who are you?'

'I am Captain Uriel Ventris and this is Sergeant Pasanius Lysane,' said Uriel.

'The man does not speak for himself?' asked Barbaden. 'Has he lost the power of speech?'

'I can speak well enough,' said Pasanius.

'Then do so,' suggested Barbaden. 'Never let others speak for you, sergeant.'

Uriel was surprised, and not a little angered, at the governor's tone, for, like Kain, the governor displayed none of the awe or reverence that usually accompanied the presence of warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. In fact, his bearing and body language suggested downright hostility.

'You said you are a captain, Uriel Ventris,' continued Barbaden, perching on the edge of the table, 'a captain of which Chapter?'

'We are proud warriors of the Ultramarines,' said Uriel, 'the Fourth Company: the Defenders of Ultramar.'

'Please furnish me with a concise answer when I ask a question, captain. I do so detest loquaciousness,' said Barbaden.

Anger touched Uriel, but he felt Pasanius willing him to remain calm, and he fought down his rising temper. 'As you wish, governor.'

'Excellent,' smiled Barbaden. 'Salinas is a simple world and I should like to keep it like that. I keep things simple because, as systems become complex, they have more chance of going wrong. You understand?'

Believing Barbaden's question was rhetorical, Uriel said nothing.

'Also, when I ask a question, captain, I expect an answer. I do not waste my breath asking questions to which I already know the answer.'

'Yes,' hissed Uriel, 'I understand.'

'Good,' continued Barbaden, apparently oblivious to Uriel's growing anger. 'Salinas is a world not without its problems, true, but none are of sufficient magnitude to trouble me unduly. However, when two warriors of the Astartes

suddenly appear on my planet without so much as a breath of notice, it strikes me as a complexity that could dangerously destabilise the workings of my world.'

'I assure you, Governor Barbaden, that is the last thing we wish to do,' said Uriel. 'All we want to do is return to Macragge.'

Barbaden nodded. 'I see, and this would be your home world?'

'Yes.'

'As I mentioned earlier, Captain Ventris, I dislike complexities. They add random variables to life that I detest. In all things, predictable outcomes are those upon which we rely to facilitate our passage through life. Known facts and predictable elements are the bedrock upon which all things are built and if we upset that, well, chaos ensues.'

'Of course, governor—' began Uriel.

'I have not finished speaking,' snapped Barbaden. 'It strikes me that your presence here is just such a random variable and that it would be better if I were simply to be rid of you.'

Barbaden snapped his fingers and the soldiers around the edges of the room suddenly lifted their rifles to their shoulders and aimed them at Uriel and Pasanius.

Uriel couldn't believe what he was hearing and seeing. Was this man simply going to gun them down? He quickly calculated the number and type of weapons pointed at him and the odds of their survival. Even the legendary physique of a Space Marine would not survive a well-aimed volley from these soldiers.

'You arrive on my world, unannounced and without permission,' hissed Barbaden. 'You trespass upon forbidden ground and you expect me to treat you as honoured guests? What manner of fool do you take me for?'

'Governor Barbaden,' said Uriel, 'I swear on the honour of my Chapter that we are servants of the Emperor. If you will allow me, I will explain how we came to be on your world.'

'Explanations are excuses,' said Barbaden. 'I'll have the truth from you. Now.'

Uriel saw anger in Barbaden's eyes, but saw that it travelled no further through his body.

The governor's anger was perfectly controlled, icy and supported by his internal logic, which made it all the more dangerous, as it was not fettered by other emotions.

With a gesture, Barbaden could destroy them without regret and Uriel found himself wondering at the irony of having survived everything the Eye of Terror could throw at them, only to be killed by a fellow servant of the Emperor.

'Of course,' said Uriel, his voice hardening at this boorish treatment. 'I will tell

you the truth of our arrival, and perhaps then we can come to some arrangement whereby we can leave.'

'That remains to be seen,' said Barbaden, 'but I will consider it upon hearing your story.'

Uriel nodded, unwilling to offer anything approaching thanks to Barbaden. 'I warn you that this is a fantastical tale, governor. Some of it you may find hard to believe, but I swear on my honour that it is all true.'

Before Uriel could say more, there was a knock on the door and Barbaden said, 'Enter!'

The door opened and Eversham re-entered the room, leading three others behind him.

Two of the new arrivals were men, the other a woman. One man was tall and ruggedly handsome, his skin as dark as the heavy, black body armour he wore. Uriel decided he must be some sort of local law enforcement.

The second man was grossly fat, to the point of obesity: a corpulent mass of flesh clad head to foot in lavishly ornamented robes of scarlet and silver. Uriel took him for a senior member of the Ecclesiarchy, a cardinal perhaps. The man mopped his glistening brow with a sodden handkerchief and Uriel could smell the rankness of his gushing pores.

The third member of the new arrivals was a spare, tired-looking woman with pensive features and a nervous disposition. Uriel could smell her fear, even over the cardinal's odour.

None of the three could hide their surprise at the sight of them.

'Astartes,' breathed the obese man.

'Ah, Daron, Shavo,' said Barbaden, 'so glad you could join us. We have guests, and they claim to have a most fantastical tale.'

SEVEN

INTRODUCTIONS WERE MADE perfunctorily: Daron Nisato, chief enforcer of the city of Barbadus; Shavo Togandis, Cardinal of Barbadus and Pontifex Maximus of Salinas; and lastly, Mesira Bardhyl, former sanctioned psyker of the Achaman Falcatas and private citizen. Uriel could not miss the contempt for all three written across Verena Kain's face.

Leto Barbaden retrieved his snifter and sat back down. He occupied the room's only chair and everyone else was forced to stand as he reclined and crossed his legs.

Barbaden waved the snifter towards Uriel and said, 'You may begin your tale, captain.'

Uriel swallowed his anger and simply nodded.

He began with the Fourth Company's mission to Tarsis Ultra and the battles against the tyranids, a race of extra-galactic predators who sought to devour all life on the world. Uriel's voice soared with pride as he told of the many battles fought before the walls of Erebus City and the courage of the Imperial Guard regiments tasked with its defence.

As he described the desperate fighting to save Tarsis Ultra, Uriel could feel the vicarious pride that the soldiers of the Falcatas felt in the achievements of their brother Guardsmen.

The Great Devourer's hordes were defeated on Tarsis Ultra, but the cost had been high.

Many of Uriel's warriors had died, and the Masters of the Ultramarines had not looked favourably on his cavalier methods of command. No sooner had the survivors of the Fourth Company returned to Macragge than Uriel and Pasanius had been charged with breaking faith with the Codex Astartes, the mighty tome that guided the Ultramarines in all things and which had been penned by their Primarch in ages past.

'What was the nature of your punishment?' asked Barbaden.

'We were exiled from the Chapter,' replied Uriel.

'To what purpose?'

'Lord Tigurius, the chief librarian of the Ultramarines saw a vision of great evil and sent us on a mission to destroy it: a Death Oath.'

'A Death Oath?' asked Barbaden. 'So, you were not expected to return?'

'Few have ever returned from such quests,' agreed Uriel.

'But you have completed your Death Oath?'

'We have. We travelled to a world taken by the Ruinous Powers and fought our way into the fortress of an enemy warlord and saw his citadel torn down.'

'And you did this all on your own?' asked Verena Kain.

'No,' said Uriel, choosing his words carefully, 'not quite. We made allies of some of the planet's inhabitants. Together we were able to complete our mission and now seek only to return to our Chapter.'

Barbaden appeared to consider Uriel's words and said, 'An intriguing tale, Captain Ventris, but it does not answer the question that has been vexing me ever since I was informed of your arrival. How did you get here?'

'I am not sure of the exact mechanics of it, Governor Barbaden,' began Uriel, understanding that he would need to tell at least part of the truth. 'Much of what has happened to us in recent times is beyond my understanding, but we were transported within a craft that somehow travels between this world and the Empyrean. It brought us here and left us in Khaturian. Where it is now or why it chose your world, I do not know.'

Barbaden glanced over to Mesira Bardhyl, who gave a curt, nervous nod, and Uriel understood that the governor was using her as some form of psychic truth-seeker. He was grateful he had chosen not to lie to Barbaden, as he suspected that the governor would order his soldiers to open fire at the first hint of falsehood.

'So here you are,' said Barbaden, 'two heroic Space Marines beginning their odyssey home. I admit, it has the whiff of the epic to it, Captain Ventris. What is it you require of me?'

Uriel let out a soft sigh of relief. While it wasn't acceptance or an apology, it was at least a step in the right direction.

'We ask for the chance to send an astropathic message to Macragge,' said Uriel, 'a message approved by you, obviously. We have completed our Death Oath and it is time for us to return home.'

Barbaden drained the last of the tawny liquid in his glass and set it down next to him.

'And if I agree to this request?'

'Then we are at your disposal until such time as our battle-brothers can bring us home.'

Though the offer was distasteful to Uriel, the idea of having two Space Marines at Barbaden's beck and call clearly appealed to the governor and he smiled. 'It is not often we can call upon the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes.'

The governor snapped his fingers and the soldiers around the edge of the room gratefully lowered their weapons.

'Yes, perhaps your presence here is just the thing we have been looking for in our recent troubles,' said Barbaden, 'troubles that Colonel Kain tells me you have experienced first hand.'

'Indeed,' said Uriel, although he knew fine well that Barbaden would already know every detail of this morning's encounter with the Sons of Salinas.

'I am sure your assistance was most welcome,' said Barbaden.

'We needed no help,' said Verena Kain and Barbaden smiled at her interruption. 'Pascal Blaise is no great commander and his insurgents are amateurs.'

'And yet he ambushed you and cost you several armoured fighting vehicles, Verena,' said Barbaden, 'vehicles we can scarce afford to lose.'

Colonel Kain wisely kept her mouth shut as Barbaden continued. 'Yes, I think it might prove advantageous to be seen as having the support of the Adeptus Astartes. The people of this planet need to see that they are part of the Imperium and that to resist the appointed commander will not stand.'

Barbaden stood and clasped his hands behind his back. 'I will set up a communion between you and my astropath and we shall see about getting you home. In the meantime, I insist you remain as my guests within the palace precincts. You will receive the very best hospitality, but for your own safety I shall have to ask that you do not venture beyond the palace walls without escort. As you have seen, the streets of Barbadus are not as safe as we might wish.'

Although he was surprised by Barbaden's reversal, Uriel wasn't about to reject his offer to help simply because he didn't like the man. He nodded graciously and said, 'That is acceptable to us, governor.'

'Of course,' said Barbaden, waving his arm around the room to encompass the others who had arrived before Uriel's tale had begun. 'Now that the matter is resolved, I have many other things to attend to, Captain Ventris, and I must speak with my senior advisors. Eversham here will find you suitable accommodation within the palace and I will send word when it is possible to transmit your message home.'

'Thank you, Governor Barbaden,' said Uriel, although he could see that the man had already effectively dismissed them.

Eversham appeared at Uriel's side and said, 'If you would follow me, please.'

Uriel nodded, casting his eye around the room one last time.

All through his tale telling, neither Togandis nor Nisato had said a single word and Uriel wondered why they had been summoned to hear it. Why had Barbaden gathered them here?

It was something to think of later, for Eversham was waiting expectantly at his side.

Uriel and Pasanius bowed to the Imperial Commander of Salinas and followed their escort from the room.

'WELL?' ASKED BARBADEN, the mask of civility falling from his face once the two Space Marines had been led away. 'What did you make of that?'

No one wanted to be the first to speak and Barbaden sighed. His reputation was such that no one dared to voice an opinion until they knew which way he was leaning. In no mood for games, he said, 'I believe there is more to Uriel Ventris and Pasanius Lysane than meets the eye, don't you?'

Surprisingly, it was Shavo Togandis who spoke first.

'They are Adeptus Astartes, my lord,' he said. 'What is it you suspect?'

'I was asking *you* that, Shavo,' said Barbaden. 'I do not like it when my questions are rephrased and asked back to me.'

'My apologies, governor,' said Togandis, clearly regretting his impetuous utterance. Barbaden paced among his subordinates, enunciating each word with deliberate clarity so that there could be no misunderstanding. His time in the administrative corps of the Achaman Falcatas, prior to his taking command, had taught him the value of clarity.

'Captain Ventris claimed to have come from a world fallen to the Ruinous Powers. Well, cardinal, might it perhaps be perspicacious to have the quarters assigned to him secured with holy scriptures, wards and the like? I would imagine that there must be some litany you could read that would discern any taint.'

'Ah, well, yes, I'm sure there would be some passage that would fit the bill,' said Togandis, 'perhaps in *Sermons of Sebastian Thor or Benedictions and Blessings*—'

'I don't need the specifics,' snapped Barbaden. 'Just find a suitable passage and see it done. If they have brought some taint with them, I do not want it loose on my world.'

Having dealt with Togandis, Barbaden turned his gaze on Daron Nisato, solid dependable Nisato. Barbaden could feel the man's dislike of him, but tolerated it, for he was good at what he did and had an honest soul.

That was why he had been transferred out of the Screaming Eagles.

Putting the thought from his mind, Barbaden asked, 'What of you, Daron? What did you make of Captain Ventris?'

Nisato stood a little straighten 'I don't believe he was lying.'

'No?' said Barbaden. 'Then your instincts are letting you down.'

Nisato shook his head. 'I do not believe so, my lord. While I don't think

Ventris was lying, there was definitely more that he wasn't telling you. He was vague about how they arrived on Salinas and what planet they'd just come from, and when a person is being vague, it's usually because they know that the specifics will hang them out to dry.'

'So you think we should press them for details?'

'That depends on whether you want to create a fuss,' said Nisato.

'No,' agreed Barbaden, 'a fuss is something I should like to avoid, Daron. Very well, look into the ambush this morning, make some arrests, shake the tree and see what falls out. I want some heads on spikes by this evening. I don't care whose, you understand?'

Nisato nodded and turned from him. As the enforcer left he whispered something to Shavo Togandis, but Barbaden could not hear what passed between them. The governor smiled. Poor old Nisato, always trying to tie up those loose ends, but never astute enough to realise that some loose ends didn't want or need to be tied up.

With Nisato gone, Barbaden turned towards Mesira Bardhyl, noting the shabbiness of her appearance and the haggard look in her eyes. He tutted. The least the woman could have done was make herself a little more presentable before coming to the palace.

Barbaden had seen the same look on the faces of many astropaths and wondered if such hangdog expressions of misery were common to psykers throughout the Imperium. He pushed the thought from his mind as irrelevant.

'And you Mistress Bardhyl?' he asked. 'Can you shed any more light on what was said here today?'

Mesira Bardhyl shook her head, keeping her eyes studiously fixed on a point of the floor between her feet. Barbaden reached out and lifted her chin until their eyes were locked together.

'When I ask a question, I expect an answer, Mesira,' said Barbaden. 'It would be such a shame if I was to suspect that your psychic ability had allowed a sliver of the warp to enter your pretty little head and I had to have Daron put a bolt round through it, wouldn't it?'

Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes and Barbaden's lip curled in distaste. Tears angered him, women's tears especially, and he leaned closer as she mumbled something inaudible.

He slapped her hard across the face.

'Speak up, Mesira,' said Barbaden. 'I thought you would have sense enough to know that your hysterics this morning had irritated me to the point where you would curb such theatrics in my presence.'

'Yes, governor,' said Mesira. 'Sorry, governor.'

'There you go,' said Barbaden, wiping tears from her hollow cheeks. 'Now that you are composed, can you tell me anything of value? And, please, spare me the hyperbole you were spouting earlier.'

Mesira Bardhyl composed herself with visible effort, reaching up to rub her eyes and take a deep breath.

'It's… It's hard to describe,' she said.

'Please try,' he said, leaving her in no doubt that this was not a request.

'Enforcer Nisato was right,' said Mesira. 'Captain Ventris wasn't lying, but nor was he telling you everything. He believes his truth, that much I can tell, and I sensed no taint to his words, but whatever he and his friend travelled on…'

'What about it?' asked Barbaden.

'I don't know what it was, but it was powerful, so very powerful,' said Mesira. 'It ripped its way through to this world and then tore a hole back through the gates of the Empyrean, and a lot of energy came through as it did so.'

'What does that mean? In real terms?'

'I don't know,' said Mesira, her entire body pulling in tight at this admission. 'I think that's why they appeared in the killing… in Khaturian.'

'Explain.'

Mesira looked up at the people around her, looking for support in their faces. Finding none, she pressed on, and Barbaden could see the resignation in her eyes as she spoke. 'We all know what happened at Khaturian, what we did… The scale of it… Things like that don't just get forgotten, in this world or any other. When a person dies, his… soul, for want of a better word, is released into the warp, and it usually dissipates into the maelstrom of energy there. Sometimes, though, when a person dies, their soul has enough rage, fear, anger or some other strong emotion to remain coherent in the warp, and that exerts its own attraction.'

'Attraction to what?'

'To wherever they died,' said Mesira. 'Whatever it was that brought Captain Ventris here was something terrible, something that feeds on death and bloodshed. Khaturian was like a magnet to it.'

'You say it's gone, this thing that brought Ventris here?'

Mesira nodded. 'Yes, it was barely even here, but its power was so great that the walls that separate us from the warp were worn much thinner, and they were already thin enough.'

'Superstitious nonsense,' blurted Shavo Togandis. 'This is a pious world, Mesira. Yes, we have our troubles, but we are conscientious in our suppression of psychics.'

Barbaden chuckled at Togandis's unspoken accusation.

'Our faith keeps the warp at bay,' said Togandis, 'as it always has and always

will.'

'You think so, Shavo?' cried Mesira. 'Then you are a fool. Why do you think this system is so fractious? What do you think brought us here in the first place? The warp bleeds into the nightmares of this system's people, stirs their sleep and twists their dreams with thoughts of death and war! And now it's in ours.'

Mesira was wringing her hands, as though desperate to scrape the skin from her bones or clean them of some imagined taint. Barbaden saw the light of madness in Mesira Bardhyl as fresh tears coursed down her cheeks.

'You must have felt it,' she wailed. 'We were there! Oh, Emperor save us, we were there!'

Barbaden stood before Mesira and took her shoulders in a tight grip.

Her words trailed off and she looked up into his eyes. 'I'm sorry… I'm sorry, please,' she whispered. 'I don't want to live like this, please… I can't.'

'Shhh,' he said. 'Be quiet now.'

She nodded jerkily, hugging herself tightly, and Barbaden shook his head at such a pitiful display of weakness. He returned to his seat and slid into the comfortable leather, a sure sign that the audience was at an end.

Verena Kain handed him a snifter of vintage raquir, the one thing on Salinas he had actually developed a taste for, her desire to please him as transparent as her desire to succeed him. He smiled and sipped the liquor, enjoying the biting crispness at the back of his throat.

'You are dismissed,' he said.

CHIEF MEDICAE SERJ Casuaban had spent so many years in the House of Providence that he no longer noticed the smell of blood. The very walls, though scrubbed regularly by rusting and wheezing servitors were so ingrained with the vital fluid that no amount of labour could completely erase it.

How many lives had ended in this wretched place, he wondered.

The answer leapt immediately to his mind: too many.

His boots rapped harshly on the grilled walkway as he made his way through the wards that ran the length and height of the central tier of the facility. It was a daily irony to Casuaban that three Capitol Imperialis, an example of the mightiest war machines ever created by the Imperium, should be shackled together to create a medicae facility.

He snorted at such a description. True, many people did leave the House of Providence alive, but they were shadows of their former selves, most with limbs missing, their bodies covered in hideous scars or otherwise disfigured by the infernal ingenuity of mankind in wreaking harm on one another.

Ten years of conflict between the administration of Leto Barbaden and the Sons of Salinas had cost the people of Salinas dear.

Casuaban was a tall man and was forced to stoop several times as he made his way through the facility, the sounds of people dying all around him. His hair was the colour of the iron walls and his face was craggy and lined, like worn leather left out in the baking sun. He had the bulk of a former soldier, but age and ten years without weekly fitness standards to meet had added flesh to his bones.

Orderlies and nurses worked the wards, tending to the hundreds of people who filled the place. They nodded to him as he passed. In some faces he saw grudging respect, in others wordless tolerance. He knew that he could expect no less.

He made his way into a side compartment, a room that had once housed the fire control systems of the war machine's defensive weapons. Iron sprung beds were packed in tightly, each one home to a pathetic, broken shape that only superficially resembled a human being.

He nodded to the orderly fitting a drip over the nearest patient. A box bleeped erratically and trailing wires ran from the cracked display to the heartbreaking shape that lay in the bed.

'How is she?' Casuaban asked.

'How do you think?' was the answer. 'She's dying.'

Casuaban nodded and stood at the end of the bed, trying to remain dispassionate as he lifted the girl's notes and read how her condition had changed during the night.

Her name was Aniq and what was left of her stirred on the bed. He had been forced to amputate both her legs above the knee and her left arm was missing from the shoulder down. Aniq's entire body was a mass of gauze and synth-flesh, a desperate attempt to keep her from death, an attempt Casuaban knew was doomed to failure.

Aniq and her family had been caught in the middle of a firefight between the Sons of Salinas and a patrol of Achaman Falcatas that had spilled into the dwellings on the southern edge of Barbadus. Solid rounds and las-bolts had torn through the Chimera chassis that Aniq's family called home, the ricochets killing her parents and ripping into both her legs and her left arm. A volatile mixture of home-distilled fuel had exploded in the fight and had bathed her body in chemical fire.

The girl would die tonight. She should have died days ago, but she was strong and Casuaban knew it was his duty, his penance, to fight as hard to save her as she was fighting to live.

'Increase her pain medication,' Casuaban told the orderly.

'It won't matter,' said the orderly. 'The girl won't live.'

Suddenly angry, Casuaban snapped, 'She has a name. It is Aniq.'

'No, she's just another salve to your conscience, medicae,' snorted the orderly and walked away. Casuaban ignored the man and went to the drip regulator, adjusting the flow of Morphia himself. He might not be able to save her, but he could ease her suffering at least.

Casuaban had seen enough of war in his service with the Falcatas to last any man a dozen lifetimes. He had hoped that when his time with the regiment was at an end he would be able to retire somewhere warm where he could spend the last of his days trying to forget man's capacity for violence. He had never dared dream that the Falcatas would earn the right to claim a world of their own. After all, what regiment ever really got to muster out?

You heard stories about worlds settled by heroic regiments of Imperial Guard, but no one ever actually got to do it, did they?

But the Falcatas had it.

Designated an army of conquest by General Shermi Vigo, they had claimed Salinas as theirs, but instead of an end to war and the establishment of a Falcatan dynasty, the conquest of Salinas had become a poisoned chalice.

And Casuaban's vision of a peaceful retirement had vanished like mist.

He remembered the day his dreams had died.

It had been upon the Killing Ground, amid the ashen wasteland of Khaturian.

In the aftermath of the slaughter, he had walked the hellish warscape in a numbed daze, the streets and few remaining buildings filled with bodies that had cracked and twisted into foetal positions such was the infernal heat that had engulfed the city.

That had been the day his world had turned upside down, when his every belief had been shattered and his quest to atone had begun. He looked down at the small girl once more, trying to stem the tide of regret that he felt every time he saw her.

What had she done to earn the wrath of Leto Barbaden and the Achaman Falcatas?

Nothing. She'd done nothing. She had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, like most of the people in the House of Providence.

'You didn't deserve this,' he whispered.

The girl's eyes flickered open at the sound of his voice and her mouth moved soundlessly, her eyes pleading for Casuaban's understanding.

He crouched beside the bed and leaned in close to her, her voice little more than breath on his cheek.

'You were there,' she whispered, and he flinched as though struck.

Casuaban rose stiffly to his feet, his heart hammering in his chest. He backed away from the bed, the girl's wasted form now unutterably dreadful to him. He turned and all but fled the chamber, moving as though in a fugue state.

Serj Casuaban made his way through the wards, adjusting drug levels, making notes on charts and burying himself in a hundred other tasks to keep his mind from dwelling on what he had heard.

Darkness was beginning to fall and exhaustion had all but claimed him by the time Casuaban finished his rounds, the little light that pierced the windows fading to twilight grey before he had noticed. Naked glow strips hung from cables screwed into the corridor roofs and the sickly glow made him feel faintly nauseous.

He made his way back through the central section of the House of Providence and climbed the stairs to the control bridge, where lord generals and warmasters had once plotted destruction on a massive scale. The almost bare room was home to a compact desk, a couple of chairs, the low cot bed where he had spent many an uncomfortable night and a wall of locked drug cabinets.

Casuaban dropped the notes he had made on his rounds onto his desk and slumped into the hard, iron chair behind it. The words he had heard from Aniq's mouth and in his darkest nightmares echoed in his skull and he knew that there was one sure method to dull the ache and pain of them. He opened the drawer and lifted out a tapered bottle without a label and a pair of shot glasses, both of which he set on the desk and filled.

'There's no point in hiding,' he said. 'So, join me for a drink.'

A shadow detached itself from the wall and Pascal Blaise took the seat opposite Casuaban.

'Hello Serj,' said Pascal. 'How did you know I was here?'

'Unlike everything else in here, you don't smell of death,' answered Casuaban.

'Ironic, don't you think?'

'Perhaps,' said Casuaban, 'if I gave it any thought. What do you want?'

'You know what I want,' said Pascal, lifting the glass of raquir and taking a sip.

'I can't spare you any more medical supplies, we're running short as it is.'

'So ask Barbaden for more.'

'He'll say no.'

'Not to you he won't.'

'You love this, don't you?'

'What?'

'The fact that the medical supplies your men use come from Leto Barbaden.'

'There's a certain poetic justice to it,' admitted Pascal, 'but that's by the by. We

took some casualties today.'

'I heard,' said Casuaban. 'You hit Verena Kain's Screaming Eagles.'

Pascal grinned. 'Aye, we did. She got away, but we hurt the bastards.'

'How many wounded do you have?' asked Casuaban.

'Too many: ten dead and another sixteen wounded. My men are hurting and we need fresh bandages, morphia and counterseptic.'

'I can't spare that much,' protested Casuaban. 'Bring your wounded here.'

'Don't be foolish,' warned Pascal. 'You think that Barbaden won't have Nisato and his goons watching this place for that?'

Casuaban laughed. 'You're here aren't you? You tell me who's being foolish.'

'I know how to make my way around without being seen,' said Pascal, 'and there's only one of me. I think they might notice sixteen wounded men being brought in.'

'I can't ask Barbaden for more,' said Casuaban, though he could hear the defeat in his voice. He knew he would give Pascal what he wanted, had known it the moment he had sensed the man's presence in his office.

'I know this sits badly with you, Serj,' said Pascal, offering some conciliatory words as he saw the defeat in Casuaban's face, 'but you know you're doing the right thing, don't you?'

'The right thing?' said Casuaban. 'I don't even know what that is anymore. I thought I did when I served with the Falcatas. I'd seen too many young men and women blown apart by your bombs, listened to them scream and cry for their mothers, to do anything but hate you. I hated the Sons of Salinas and everything you stood for. I had the certainty of hate.'

'Then came the Killing Ground,' said Pascal.

'Then came the Killing Ground,' repeated Casuaban. 'After that, I was lost. I watched Leto Barbaden order the attack and I knew it was wrong, but I didn't say anything, not until it was too late.'

Pascal drained the last of his raquir and placed the glass down on the desk.

'When you and Cardinal Togandis are ministering to the needy of Junktown tomorrow, leave the supplies in the marked Leman Russ. You'll see the signs.'

An awkward silence descended. 'You haven't asked about… him,' said Casuaban.

Pascal licked his lips. 'He's still alive?'

'He is,' confirmed Casuaban. 'Did you even doubt it?'

'Sylvanus Thayer always was a tough bastard,' said Pascal, glancing nervously towards the stairs that led back down to the wards.

'Do you want to see him?'

'No,' said Pascal, 'not even a little bit.'

Casuaban watched as Pascal made the sign of the Aquila across his chest.

He laughed. 'Now that's irony,' he said bitterly.

URIEL LOOKED OUT over the city as it slipped into darkness below. From this height, it looked peaceful, but the ambush this morning had given the lie to that impression. Barbadus was a city at war with itself, held by Imperial forces, but wracked by dissent and insurgents who fought their rightful rulers every step of the way.

Though Uriel did not like Leto Barbaden, he was the rightful ruler of Salinas and no amount of insurgency would change that. Salinas had been won for the Imperium by an army of conquest and the world was theirs to rule in the name of the Emperor.

Yet something nagged at the back of Uriel's mind, a suspicion that all was not as it seemed, that secrets lurked beneath the surface and would radically alter his view of this world's dynamic were he to learn them.

He turned from the shimmering, shielded window and returned to the quarters that had been assigned to them. As far as places of confinement went, it was a great deal more comfortable than some he had been forced to occupy. Two beds, large by any normal measurement, yet small in comparison to a Space Marine, occupied opposite walls and two footlockers sat empty at their ends, though neither he nor Pasanius had anything to put in them.

'You see anything interesting out there?' asked Pasanius.

His friend sat on the floor, idly rubbing the stump of his arm and watching him as he paced the length of the room. Pasanius appeared utterly calm and Uriel envied the sergeant's ability to find a place of stillness within himself, no matter what their circumstances.

'No,' he said, calmed by the very act of watching Pasanius. 'It all looks peaceful now.'

'Then sit down for the Emperor's sake, you'll wear a groove in the carpet,' suggested Pasanius, lifting a bronze ewer from the floor beside him. 'Have some wine. It's not as good as the vintages bottled on Calth, but it's eminently drinkable.'

Uriel lifted a goblet from a table beside the bed and sat on the floor opposite Pasanius. He held out the goblet and Pasanius duly filled it. He took a long drink, enjoying the taste, despite Pasanius's reservations.

'Not bad,' said Uriel.

'It'll do,' said Pasanius. 'Ah, but do you remember the Calth wines?'

'Some of them,' said Uriel. 'Why the sudden interest in my home planet's

wines?'

'A wonderful dialect they spoke in the caverns,' continued Pasanius. 'I remember the first time I spoke to you. I could barely understand a word you said.'

'It had its own character,' admitted Uriel, beginning to see where Pasanius was going.

'I remember it took years for you to shake that accent,' said Pasanius. 'Do you still remember any of it?'

'Some,' said Uriel, switching to the heavily accented dialect of the deep cavern dwellers of Calth. 'It's the kind of thing that never really leaves you.'

Uriel had been six years old the last time he had spoken like this, but his enhanced memory skills allowed him to access the language centres of his brain as though it had been yesterday.

'That's it,' laughed Pasanius, also switching to the same Calthian speech patterns, a dialect that no one outside Ultramar would have any hope of understanding. Certainly any eavesdroppers on this conversation would be lost and even the most sophisticated cogitating machines would struggle with so specific an argot.

'Subtle,' said Uriel, raising his goblet in a mock toast to Pasanius.

'I have my moments,' replied Pasanius.

'I remember the last time we sat with a drink like this,' said Uriel.

Pasanius nodded. 'Aye, on the *Vae Victus*, in the Tarsis Ultra system. A grand victory that was.'

'I suppose,' agreed Uriel, 'but won at a cost, and look where it got us.'

'There you go, always looking for the clouds instead of the silver lining,' said Pasanius. 'Look where it got us? We saved Tarsis Ultra. We saw the daemon creatures of Honsou destroyed and we're on the way home. Think of the good we've done, that we'll go on to do.'

Uriel smiled. 'You're right, as always, my friend. You have a rare gift for cutting through to the heart of things.'

'It's a well known fact that sergeants are the real brains in any army,' said Pasanius.

'Then what's so important that we switch to Calthian dialect?'

'We have things to talk about,' said Pasanius, suddenly serious, 'things best not heard by others, things we need to have clearly stated between us.'

'Very well,' agreed Uriel. 'Things like what?'

'Like the Unfleshed. When are you planning on mentioning them to Barbaden?'

'I don't know,' admitted Uriel. 'I had thought to say something once we'd

established our credentials, but having met the man, I'm not sure.'

'I know what you mean,' agreed Pasanius. 'I don't think Leto Barbaden would be too understanding.'

'He'll kill them as soon as look at them.'

'Then what do we do with them?' asked Pasanius. 'You can't just leave them out there. I know you're holding on to the hope that the blood of heroes in their veins will restrain their more animal qualities, but even if it does, it won't be forever. Sooner or later they'll become what they were on Medrengard.'

'Perhaps,' said Uriel, 'but I can't abandon them. They gave everything to help us against Honsou. Most of them died in that fight. We owe them.'

'Aye,' nodded Pasanius, 'that we do, but let's be sure we don't get them killed trying to repay that debt.'

'Perhaps we can make an approach through the cardinal?'

Pasanius looked sceptical. 'The fat man? I don't think Barbaden takes much notice of him. I don't think he takes much notice of anyone, if you know what I mean?'

'I do,' said Uriel, taking another drink. 'I've seen his kind before, commanders who divorce themselves utterly from the fact that they're commanding soldiers of flesh and blood. To men like Barbaden, notions of honour and courage are fanciful things, ephemera. To them war is about numbers, logistics and cause and effect.'

Pasanius nodded. 'Aye. Dangerous men.'

'The most dangerous. That kind of commander doesn't care how many men die to achieve his goals, so long as he gets a victory.'

'So how did a man like that get to be in charge of a planet?'

'The Falcatas were an army of conquest,' said Uriel. 'The right to settle a conquered world is the highest honour the Imperium can bestow upon a Guard regiment that's fought for decades. Barbaden was the colonel of the regiment, so the governorship would naturally be his, and I'd be surprised if the majority of the planet's hierarchy weren't ex-Guard.'

'Soldiers that fought in some of the most horrific war-zones in the galaxy year after year, and now they're in charge of a planet.'

'Exactly,' said Uriel, 'all those years of killing and suddenly it's all over.'

'Then you have to try to turn off the instincts that kept you alive all those years.'

'Except you can't,' said Uriel.

Pasanius sighed and shook his head. 'No wonder their planet's a mess.'

EIGHT

BEING ALONE IN his private library normally brought Shavo Togandis comfort and peace, but tonight he found his irritation growing with every page he leafed through. His books had always offered comfort in troubled times, but now they offered nothing beyond vague references to steeling one's soul with something an anonymous, and frustratingly incomplete, text called "the armour of contempt".

Quite how one girded one's loins with such armour went unsaid and Togandis pushed the manuscript away. Flickering electro-candles sent dancing shadows around the room, the air in the library stuffy and redolent with the lingering aroma of the sumptuous repast he had consumed barely an hour before, a roasted poultry dish with a spicy sauce and fragrant side plate of steamed vegetables grown in the cathedral gardens.

A hovering skull with glowing green lenses for eyes bobbed at his shoulder, drifting higher into the air as he sat back on his expansive and heavily padded chair. He waved at the skull and said, *'The Sermons of Sebastian Thor*, volume thirty-seven.'

The skull scooted over to the sagging shelves, a shimmering green light bathing the gold and silver leafed spines of the books, before a set of suspensor-enabled callipers reached onto the shelf and removed a heavy tome, bound in rich red leather.

Struggling under the weight of the book, the skull deposited it before the cardinal and resumed its position at his right shoulder.

Togandis rubbed his tired eyes and leaned forward to open the book, straining to read the tightly wound, cursive script that filled the pages. The blank book in which he wrote his notes for future sermons sat next to him, and Togandis rested his arm next to it as he scanned the text in the volume that the skull had just brought him.

A delicate arrangement of wires and metal rested on his forearm, and from this sprouted a lightweight, extendable armature of brass. At the end of this armature was a mnemo-quill, its nib twitching as it awaited his commands.

Fine silver wires ran from this attachment to something that resembled a portable vox-caster sitting on the desk before the cardinal. Togandis nodded as he recited lines from the book.

'The strength of the Emperor is humanity, and the strength of Humanity is the

Emperor. If one turns from the other we shall all become the Lost and the Damned.'

As the words left his mouth, the mnemo-quill twitched and copied the words onto the blank pages of the book. He had filled page upon page with such words, words which never failed to move him, but which he felt would be precious little use in warding the palace from the intrusions of any malicious entities.

He dreaded the thought of returning to the palace without something concrete to show for his efforts. Of course he could recite entire verses of scripture, but Leto Barbaden would sense the lie in him in a second. Togandis mopped his brow with the edge of his napkin at the thought of Leto Barbaden.

As colonel of the Achaman Falcatas, Barbaden had been a tyrant.

As Imperial Commander of Salinas, he was a monster.

He could still picture Barbaden riding tall in the turret hatch of the Hellhound as it rumbled through the burning streets of Khaturian. The Marauders had been thorough in their attentions and little of the city had been left standing by their bombs.

What was left was being finished off by the Screaming Eagles.

Togandis closed his eyes, remembering the feel of the pistol in his hand as he walked alongside Barbaden's vehicle. The sound of lasguns and the roar of flamers sounded impossibly loud to him, but he had not fired a shot. He remembered looking at the pistol, matt black in his pink, fleshy hand, and thinking it absurd that he of all people should be carrying a weapon at a time like this.

It was the screaming that returned to him the most, the awful, intolerable sound of another human being in agony. It seemed inconceivable that anyone could be in such pain, but these were commonplace noises in Khaturian.

As the Eagles completed the massacre, Togandis had stumbled from the carnage and voided the contents of his stomach over the brittle, tinder-dry ground. In the hours that followed, the Screaming Eagles had walked from the ruins, their cries of victory sounding hollow to the confessor.

In the weeks, months and years that followed, Togandis had seen many of those same soldiers in his cathedral, drawn by feelings that they dared not voice anywhere else, to speak of what they had seen and done on that Killing Ground.

Hanno Merbal had been one such soldier and Togandis vividly recalled the terrible things that had passed between them in the darkness of the confessional: awful sins, aching regret and unbearable guilt.

Hanno Merbal was dead, his brains plastered over the roof of a dingy bar in Junktown. Hard on the heels of Hanno Merbal came thoughts of Daron Nisato, the former commissar of the Falcatas and a man of honour and quiet nobility.

No wonder Leto Barbaden had transferred him out of the Screaming Eagles before the mission to Khaturian.

A guilty flush warmed his skin as he thought of how near he had come to telling Nisato everything about the Killing Ground earlier that day, the things Hanno Merbal had told him and the things he himself had seen.

Togandis knew he was a coward, and the thought of defying Leto Barbaden had so unmanned him that he could not unburden himself of the guilt and allow Nisato to bring the truth of the Killing Ground into the light.

He thought of Nisato's whispered words to him as the enforcer had been dismissed from Barbaden's presence: "To whom does the confessor confess?"

They were simple words, honestly spoken, but the consequences… Oh the consequences.

Togandis closed his eyes and fought the tears of guilt that threatened to spill unchecked down his face. If he wept now, he didn't think he'd be able to stop: tears for the dead and, selfishly, tears for himself.

He took a deep breath and once again scanned the pages of the book before him, concentrating on the millennia-old words of Sebastian Thor, a man for whom Togandis had nothing but admiration and whose writings had always inspired him.

A simple man, Sebastian Thor had stood against the tyrannies of the insane High Lord of the Administratum, Goge Vandire, and had cast him down in the fiery wars known as the Age of Apostasy. Thor had become Ecclesiarch and his sermons had always been favourites for Togandis to deliver to his congregation.

He wondered what Sebastian Thor would have made of events on Salinas and shuddered as he pictured himself being cast from his cathedral as Thor had cast the preacher from his pulpit on Dimmamar in the middle of a prayer session.

Pushing that image away, Togandis spent the next few hours reading passages aloud for his mnemo-quill to transcribe, steadily filling the pages of his prayer book with inspirational verses and catechisms of watchfulness against the daemon and the impure.

The glow of the electro-candles grew stronger as the light through the high windows dimmed. Togandis heard a noise through the door behind him and blinked in surprise as he looked up and saw the darkness beyond the stained glass.

It was later than he had imagined and he still had duties to attend to. His priests and vergers would be gathering for vespers and it would be unseemly for him not to join them. His library was just off the main body of the temple, and already he could hear insistent voices from the other side of the door.

They seemed to be calling his name, the sound muted by the heavy timbers so

that it sounded little louder than a whisper.

As he stood and wiped a hand across his mouth, he realised that the sounds he could hear were altogether too insistent. Shavo Togandis, a master of self-deception in many other regards, was honest enough to know that his sermons, while filled with relevance and poignancy, were hardly ones that people gathered to hear with excitement or called out to him to deliver.

Curious, Togandis slipped the mnemo-quill armature from his forearm and gathered up his prayer book. He made his way towards the door, but as he reached for the handle some unheard timbre in the voices on the other side of the door resonated with that portion of his mind that knew fear.

You were there.

With sudden, awful clarity, Shavo Togandis knew what lay on the other side of the door.

MESIRA BARDHYL FELT the power growing throughout the city, a malevolent vibration in the bones that grated along her nerves like nails down a blackboard. Her room was dark, yet silver threads of light, invisible to those not cursed with psychic abilities, wormed their way inside, pushing between the brickwork, oozing through the mortar and slithering beneath the doorjambs.

Ghostly frost limned the door and her breath feathered the air before her.

She closed her eyes. 'Please, go away. What did I do? I didn't do anything.'

Even as she said the words, she knew that was crime enough.

To stand by while such slaughter was enacted and do nothing about it was almost worse than pulling the trigger or slicing with the falcata. The dead were massing and whatever dreadful, terrifying thing had brought the two Space Marines to this world had forever altered the balance of power on Salinas.

Immaterial energies were part of the fabric of the world now, enmeshed in the very warp and weft of it, and things that had once been incapable of doing more than unleashing nightmares now had a very real, very dangerous wellspring of power to draw upon.

She could feel a dreadful force within the room, a solidity to the air that could only be caused by another presence.

'Please,' she wept. 'No.'

Open your eyes.

Mesira shook her head. 'No, I won't.'

Open your eyes!

Mesira cried out as her eyes were forced open and she saw him: the Mourner, his black outline a stark silhouette against the soft glow from beyond her

window.

Shimmering with spectral light, his blazing eyes fixed her in place and held her pinned like a moth in a display case. The stink of smoke and seared skin filled her senses and silver flames roared into life around her, cold and unforgiving.

In the icy light surrounding the Mourner, she saw the burned flesh of his body, the meat and fat of him running in yellow runnels from his bones.

You were there.

Mesira Bardhyl screamed and screamed until her mind detached itself from her senses and spun off into the darkness.

* * *

SHAVO TOGANDIS FELT the chill of the door handle before his skin made contact with it. His breath was mist before him and he could feel the sudden cold that engulfed the room through the thickness of his robes.

He could feel them on the other side of the door, willing him to come out, willing him to face them, to face his accountability.

Terror filled him, his legs feeling like they might give out at any moment.

Togandis whispered a prayer to the God-Emperor, closing his eyes and reciting verses that he had learned as a child when he had been afraid of the dark and his mother had told him that the Emperor would protect him.

In that moment, Shavo Togandis was four years old again, wrapped in blankets in the darkness as he rocked back and forth with the simple catechisms of a child spilling from his lips to hold back the monsters.

The words came easily, his terror reaching back over the decades to his youth and plucking the memories from the forgotten corners of his mind. With every word spoken, he felt the terror diminish and his hand gripped the frozen metal of the door's handle.

Togandis turned the handle and pushed, forcing his unsteady legs to carry him through the door. A wave of cold air, like a winter's breath, blew past him, questing around his body like eager hands that pulled him onwards.

He could feel the cold wind's exploration of him, but with each recitation of his childhood prayer, their ministrations grew lighter and less urgent. With his prayer book held outstretched, Shavo Togandis emerged from his library and into the temple proper.

His words faltered as he saw that the temple was full, but that none of those gathered before the magnificent golden statue of the Emperor at the end of the nave were parishioners or worshipers, or were even alive.

Little more than smudges of silver light, like candle flames viewed through misted glass, they had the semblance of human forms, but little more.

'Emperor protect me,' he whispered, unwilling steps carrying him along the transept towards the altar before the towering statue of the Emperor. The fragile courage that had bloomed briefly in the library deserted him, and cold, clammy terror seized his heart once more. His bladder loosened and he felt an almost uncontrollable urge to void his bowels.

With an effort of will, he kept control of his bodily functions, looking past the flickering lights of the intruders towards the altar, seeing his priests, vergers, confessora minoris and attendants huddled before it.

Their faces were alight with awe at the sight before them.

Could they not see that these figures of light were terribly, horribly wrong?

Did they not know that they were in the most terrible danger?

Something of the man Shavo Togandis had been before the horror of the Killing Ground stirred within his breast and he walked towards the great statue and the living people who gathered beneath it.

These were his people and he had a duty to them.

As he walked, he felt the heads of the ghostly intruders turn towards him, their stares accusing and their eyes filled with a newly awakened sense of malice.

One of his priests looked up as he approached. 'Can you see them?' cried the priest. 'Angels, your eminence! Angels of the Emperor!'

Togandis looked towards the spectral figures, horrified that such dreadful things could be mistaken for something as holy and reverent as angels. Though the meat and bone of their faces was obscured by the silver light that billowed outwards from their core, Togandis could see enough to know that these were no angels, but daemons in human form, fiends sent from the blackest pit of the abyss.

'Stay away from them!' shouted Togandis, hurrying his steps towards his priests. The sweat on his brow chilled him to the bone and his breath came in short, hot spikes in his chest. The priests looked at Togandis uncomprehendingly, not seeing what he was seeing, and he interposed himself between them and the figures of light.

Togandis was breathless with fear. He could feel their hunger and anger, knowing now that these were no daemons from the pit, but the vengeful dead, hungry and voracious souls come to take what was theirs by right of blood.

His recitation of the child's prayer seemed foolish in the face of such terrible evil and part of him knew that he should just lay down his prayer book and face the consequences of his actions. Togandis felt his grip loosening on the prayer

book.

The Falcata's previous confessor, a waspish old man by the name of Thorne, had given him the book the day before he had been killed, and as Togandis looked down at it he saw the words his mnemo-quill had written there only moments before.

He saw the strength in those words, a strength that fanned the last, defiant embers of his heart.

'Oh Emperor, merciful father that watches over us, send us your light that we might carry it into the dark places,' he said. 'In times of need, send us the courage that fires the hearts of all servants of righteousness. Be our strength and shield, that we might in turn be yours!'

Togandis felt the presence of his clerics gathering behind him, and their closeness gave him strength. He flipped the pages of his prayer book, reading each passage aloud with a power and clarity he had never before displayed in the pulpit.

Though the words he spoke were simple prayers and benediction, they carried his weight of belief and thus had strength. It was a simple revelation, yet a revelation nonetheless, and such things had power.

The cold wind that had pulled him into the temple blew again, stronger this time and without the gentle inquisitiveness it had displayed earlier. A gale blew from the end of the nave, howling and fierce, and Togandis felt his robes billowing around him, the pages of his prayer book flapping and tearing with its force.

His priests cried out as the ghostly shapes of the congregation were swept up in the maelstrom of bone-chilling light. Like wind-blown mist, the spectres dispensed with individuality and became one howling mass of gibbering faces.

'The Emperor protects!' screamed Togandis as the anguished phantoms screamed and wailed. The sourceless wind pulled the glittering, ghostly mass around the interior of the temple, slicing the air and twisting in coils of glittering silver light.

They gathered beneath the rose window at the far end of the nave, above the mighty bronze portals that led to the outside world, a roiling, tumbling, churning mass of light and mist. Silver tongues of cold fire burst into life around the edges of the temple, leaping from pillar to pillar and Togandis's eyes filled with tears at the sudden stench of burning flesh.

Frost was forming on the pews before him and a skim of ice crackled in the font beside him. The priests and vergers were on their knees, hands clasped in prayer. Still their eyes were full of adoration, and Togandis knew that the terror of the visions was meant solely for him.

Only he beheld the true face of the spirits, for they had come for him and him alone.

The mass of spirits shot down the nave towards the altar and Togandis felt their hunger for him in every agonised wail. The hundreds of mouths ran together and the billowing light flared outwards like the wings of some terrible, avenging angel.

'In Your eyes we are but humble servants,' screamed Togandis, the words snatched from his mouth by the cold air. 'Turn your face towards us and banish shadows, shield Your servants and protect them from the iniquities of the warp!'

The spirits were losing cohesion, skins of light peeling back from the angel of retribution as it came towards him. Togandis closed his eyes. He clutched the holy aquila that hung around his neck and lifted his prayer book high.

A blast of silver fire swept over Togandis and he felt the glacial cold of the dead pass through him. The ache of their pain and the horror of their existence suffused every molecule of his being, from his overburdened feet to his sweat-streaked pate, but, finding no purchase, they poured from him with a wail of frustration.

His heart creaked and bulged at the strain placed upon it, the valves and arteries pushed to their limits in keeping Togandis alive. Blood vessels strained and twisted, but whatever reserves of strength the cardinal's flesh possessed were up to the task of keeping him alive for a little longer.

Togandis kept his eyes closed for long moments, knowing that were he to open them he would gaze into the face of something so terrifying it would be the death of him. Sudden, unnerving silence descended on the church, the only sound the heave of his breath and the echoes of the departed.

A hand brushed his shoulder and he cried out, feeling a knot of pain in the depths of his chest and a tingling sensation in the tips of his fingers.

'Cardinal?' said a tentative, awed voice at his ear. Togandis recognised the speaker. It was one of the evening vergers, though he did not know the man's name.

Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, Togandis opened his eyes.

The temple was as it had always been at night: cool, shadowed and dimly lit by the stuttering glow of candles. No trace remained of the silver flames or the vengeful spirits, but a rime of melting ice dripped from the lip of the font.

Togandis waited until he was sure that his voice would not betray his earlier terror.

'What?' he asked at last.

'Was that an angel?' asked the verger.

Togandis looked beyond the verger to the enraptured faces of his priests.

What was he to tell them? The truth? Hardly.

The light of faith was in their eyes and he could not take that away from them.

'Yes,' nodded Togandis. 'That was an angel of the Emperor. Pray you never see another.'

* * *

NIGHT IN THE mountains north of Barbadus was absolute.

With the descent of the sun, the Unfleshed had tentatively ventured from the cave, their steps hesitant and wary as though they feared that the sun might return at any moment. Through the course of the long day, the Lord of the Unfleshed had felt his tribe's sense of hurt betrayal as the sunlight hovered on the brink of destroying them.

The cave stank of fear and only when the light ventured no farther did that fear turn to relief. They would be safe, for a time at least.

The Lord of the Unfleshed could taste the tribe's terror, a rank outpouring of chemicals that had once been a scent to be savoured in others, but which only made him angry now.

He was tired of fear, tired of having it as his constant companion.

Though he was powerful and strong, fear had nestled in his heart for as long as he could remember: fear of the Iron Men, fear of the Black Sun, fear of his own monstrous nature and fear of what the Emperor would make of it when he finally stood before Him.

The Lord of the Unfleshed lifted his arm and stared at the raw, pink newness of his flesh. The slick, sheen of his body had faded over the course of the day and as he tentatively explored the surface, he felt the new skin responding to his touch.

Instead of pain, he could feel the texture of his clawed fingers and the roughness of his hands.

Perhaps this place *would* be a new beginning for him and the tribe.

He looked over to where the tribe feasted on yet more of the fleshy creatures that grazed on the mountains.

Their meat was rich and tender, and their limbs no match for the ferocious speed of the Unfleshed.

The Lord of the Unfleshed wanted to be away from this place, but did not yet dare lead the tribe far from the cave for fear that the sun would catch them in the open again. Most of the tribe were growing new skin across their bodies, but at wildly differing rates, and those without a thick enough covering would die if the

sun found them without shelter.

Eventually they would have skin to match his, but it would take time for their more degenerate bodies to catch up to what his had already achieved. Rippling skirts of flesh took longer to cover than knotty lumps of bone, and fused craniums of meat that pulled and twisted as each mouth fed, tore and healed as their owner took wrenching bites of food.

The Lord of the Unfleshed glanced over his shoulder.

Though the night was dark, the dead city below was bathed in light.

To mortal eyes, the city was as empty and silent as ever, but to eyes fashioned with sorcerous engineering of the darkest realms and a mind grown to maturity within the womb of a creature saturated in chaos magic, the streets were alive with a cavalcade of shapes. Not the shapes of the living, but shapes of… something else.

Before now, the Lord of the Unfleshed had been aware of them as a glimmering presence on the edge of perception, but he saw they were gathering now, drawn to this place of death by the arrival of the Iron Men's machine.

Uriel and his companion had not seen these presences, or even been aware of them, but the dreadful energies washing from the terrifying machine had found common cause in the forgotten streets of the dead city, drawing back those that had once called it home and filling them with borrowed power.

He had kept the tribe away from the gathering strength of their unquenchable rage, knowing on some marrow-deep level that to disturb the pool of anger and pain would be to invite disaster.

As though his observation had given the lights notice of their presence, the Lord of the Unfleshed saw them drifting through the streets towards the metal barrier that surrounded the city. Where such a barrier would prevent creatures of flesh and blood from egress, it provided no such impediment to these beings of light and rage.

They came towards the mountains and the tribe feasting at the mouth of the cave.

The tribe felt them come, baring their fangs and unsheathing their claws.

The Lord of the Unfleshed stood and watched the approach of the light. He did not fear them, for the world of the Black Sun had vomited horrors worse than them from its smoky depths.

The tribe retreated within the cave and the Lord of the Unfleshed stood protectively before them, resplendent and magnificent in his new suit of skin. He felt the burning rage at the core of these strange beings of light, but more than that he sensed their hunger and their desire to wreak harm on those who had wronged them.

As he watched them approach, the mouth-watering flavour of burned flesh arose in the back of his mouth with the forgotten taste of human meat. He moaned and thick saliva gathered in the folds of his jaw.

He shook his head.

Uriel had forbidden them to taste the rich flesh of humans and drink their warm blood.

The Emperor did not want them to eat His subjects.

Behind him, the tribe grunted and worked their fanged mouths as the smell of cooked flesh filled the cave and they too recalled the taste of human meat. The smell was overwhelming and the Lord of the Unfleshed struggled to keep his mind on the approaching beings.

Without seeming to move, they gathered at the cave mouth, a jostling cascade of ghostly, heart-lit shapes. He saw the suggestion of human forms in their depths, men, women and children who looked upon him with expressions that ranged from pity to anticipation.

Their faces were blackened and burned, the flesh seared from bodies, and the Lord of the Unfleshed felt their pain, an eternal agony that could only be ended one way. He knew that these were no living things, but dead things that should not be.

They surged into the cave towards the Unfleshed, but instead of death they craved life.

The Lord of the Unfleshed felt the dead wash over him like a tide, a tumbling cascade of thousands of lives. The cave filled with light, burning, all-consuming light. It pressed against him, oozing into his body by some unknown process of osmosis.

A million thoughts, like a swarm of angry insects, roared in his head and his hands flew to his skull at the deafening noise. Thousands of voices echoed within him, each one clamouring to be heard over the others, each one begging, pleading and demanding to speak.

Pain filled him as he felt his body burning, the blood boiling in his veins, the meat of his body searing and his bones cracking in the fire. The walls of the cave seemed to twist and melt, as though fading away, only to be replaced by walls raised by human hands and cast down by the artifice of man's war machines.

Instead of rock above his head, he saw sky, clear skies filled with cruciform shapes shedding iron canisters that descended on vapour trails and exploded in sheets of white-hot flame. Fire surrounded him, leaping and dancing like a living thing as it consumed everything around it with gleeful abandon.

He knew he was seeing their deaths, these beings of light and anger, but could not force the images from his mind. He heard screaming: deafening, heart-

rending screaming.

'No!' bellowed the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'Get out of my head!'

He heard the terrified roars and cries of the tribe and surged to his feet, clawing at the new skin that clothed his face. Yellow talons tore great gouges in his cheeks and the pain was welcome for it was pain. Flaps of sliced skin hung down from his face and fresh blood pattered on the floor of the cave.

His limbs rippled with unnatural motion, convulsing and swelling with the presences that poured into him. His every muscle, fibre and cell was suffused with the energy and fury of the dead.

Only the pain remained his and he clasped his claws across his heart, tearing outwards in an upward fan, scoring a series of bloody grooves across his chest like the wings of an agonised, screaming eagle.

The Lord of the Unfleshed dropped to his knees with his clawed arms upraised as the dead of Khaturian filled him, pressing the last remnants of his pain and fear into a creaking corner of his cranium.

Instead of his own pain, he felt the entirety of theirs.

Their rage and their fury were his.

Only one thing could end it: death.

NINE

URIEL AWOKE FROM a deep slumber, surprised that he had fallen asleep with such ease and that his dreams had been untroubled by visions of blood and death. He had been so long away from the real world that he had quite forgotten what it was to sleep without fear of such things.

Pasanius slept soundly on the bed across the room, his eyes darting beneath his lids. Uriel frowned as a snatched fragment of the dream he had been having returned to him.

He had seen a cave and something bright and malevolent that had emerged from its depths. Uriel could not make out its shape or identity, but he knew that whatever it was, it had been something unutterably dreadful. He shook off the last vestiges of the dream and swung his legs from the bed.

As quietly as he was able, he poured a goblet of water and rinsed his mouth. He tasted ashes and a metallic flavour that reminded him of blood. He caught the tang of something burning nearby and wondered if the quarters they had been assigned were near a kitchen or mess hall.

Uriel rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyes, frowning at the sluggishness that seemed to afflict his limbs and thought processes. A Space Marine could normally go from sleep to wakefulness in the time it took to draw breath, but ever since arriving on Salinas he had felt a lethargy that seemed to leech his vitality.

Perhaps that explained the perpetually downcast faces he had seen on the streets and among the Falcatas. This was a grim world, but perhaps the melancholy he felt ran through the very fabric of the world and its inhabitants.

Pasanius stirred on his bed and sat up, reaching up to rub his scalp, a scalp that was now shaggier than it had been in a long time. Both arms came up, but only the left was able to make contact with his head.

'Damn, but I can't get used to that,' said Pasanius, looking at the red stump of his right arm. 'I hated it when I had that xeno-tainted arm and now I miss it. How's that for perverse?'

'It's only natural, I suppose,' said Uriel. 'I heard that some men who lose a limb claim they can still feel it itching, as though it's still part of them.'

'Who did you hear that from?'

'It was back on Tarsis Ultra,' explained Uriel. 'Magos Locard told me of an ancient Adept of Mars by the name of Semyon who developed a whole slew of

new forms of augmetic implantation. It seemed this Semyon claimed to be able to produce electrographic images of subjects that showed their limbs still in place, even after they had been surgically removed.'

'How could he do that?' asked Pasanius, rubbing at his stump, which Uriel saw was an angry red, with patches of raw scabbing where the skin had been worn down.

'Locard didn't know,' said Uriel, rising from the bed and beginning a series of stretches to loosen the muscles in his arms. 'He said that Semyon was part of something called the Dragon Cult and that no one really knew if he existed at all. His work is like some sort of myth on Mars. The story goes that he died during the Martian schism back at the end of Old Night.'

'Emperor's teeth, that's so long ago, who knows what's true and what's not?' said Pasanius, joining Uriel in stretching.

'That's kind of what Locard said,' replied Uriel. 'He said that so much of Mars was laid waste that any kind of history was as good as legend.'

'Legend is time and rumour,' nodded Pasanius. 'Isn't that what they say?'

'With enough time, everything becomes legend,' agreed Uriel. 'One day you and I might be legends. Perhaps there will be murals in the Temple of Correction.'

'Or statues on the Avenue of Heroes,' smiled Pasanius.

The two friends passed the early hours of the morning, reminiscing over Macragge and the beauty of the world they hoped to see again soon. Within a few hours, both had come to the realisation that it had been a long time since either of them had endured a proper Astartes strength and endurance test. Without their fellow battle-brothers to measure themselves against and to drive them onwards, their powers had waned. It was an unwelcome truth to learn.

As they finished their exercises, there was a polite knock on the door and Eversham entered, looking as dangerous and catlike as ever. The man's face was unreadable, though Uriel had never found it easy to read the emotions of mortals.

'Good morning,' said Uriel.

'Indeed,' said Eversham. 'I trust you rested well?'

'Well enough,' said Pasanius.

'What can we do for you, Mister Eversham?' asked Uriel.

'Governor Barbaden sends you his greetings,' began Eversham, 'and bids me inform you that he has arranged for you to consult with the Janiceps.'

THE SUNLIGHT ON Serj Casuaban's skin was welcome after the cramped,

claustrophobic interior of the House of Providence. Though the air in Junktown wasn't exactly fresh, it was certainly better than the stale aroma of death and desperation that saturated every breath he took within its metal corridors and wards.

Junktown was a somewhat obvious name for the largest district of Barbadus, but it was, Casuaban reflected, an apt one. Many of the original dwellings that had stood here were rubble, demolished in the original war of pacification and never rebuilt. Those that remained stood cheek by jowl with the detritus of that war.

A regimental graveyard of fighting vehicles had been abandoned here, the remains of a dozen armoured companies whose crews had mustered out of the Falcatas or which had broken down and could not be repaired. The ingenuity of the locals in rendering vehicles that had once borne their enemies into battle was little short of ingenious, and abandoned squadrons housed entire families, with engines serving as reconditioned heating units and ammo stowage as makeshift sleeping compartments.

Thousands of people lived here in cramped conditions until the work klaxons blared to summon them to work in the munitions forges or promethium refineries. A pall of ash and sullen melancholy hung over Junktown and Casuaban knew that his presence was only tolerated due to the medicines he was distributing and the treatment he was providing.

Casuaban sat behind a metal trestle table, applying a soothing bacitracin poultice to the arm of a male worker who had been burned while processing gel fuels for shipping off-world. The man had been lucky; a trained corpsman had been on hand to treat the wound at the site of the accident, yet the scarring was likely to be severe.

With the poultice applied, Casuaban sent the man on his way with a stern warning to keep his wound clean, even though he knew that such advice would be hard to follow in a place like Junktown. Behind him, an idling truck with a bored-looking orderly lounging in the driver's cab was filled with immunisation ampoules, sterilised needles, gauze, synth-bandages, vitamin supplements, water purification tablets and a host of other vital medical supplies.

Casuaban rubbed his hands over his face and took a deep breath. He stood from his trestle table and waved a hand at the people queuing to see him.

'I will be back in a few minutes,' he said, moving over to the truck and accepting a mug of lukewarm caffeine from the orderly. The drink was brackish and tepid, but welcome nonetheless.

Casuaban closed his eyes and sat back on the running board that ran the length of the engine housing of the truck. He let his tired eyes drift closed, his

body exhausted despite the few hours of disturbed sleep that he had snatched on the cot bed in his office.

He had been working in Junktown since the sun had risen and it would soon be time to move on to the next temporary medicae station. His eyes flickered to the truck, knowing he would have to find some way of distracting the orderly when he saw the Leman Russ that Pascal Blaise was going to mark for the drop of supplies.

'It doesn't get any easier does it?' said a nearby voice.

Casuaban jumped, a guilty jolt of adrenaline sending a shock through his system. Caffeine spilled onto his tunic.

Angry, he looked up to see Shavo Togandis, struggling to emerge from the comfort of an Ecdesiarchal palanquin like some overlarge butterfly from a stubborn chrysalis.

'What?' he snapped, grateful the caffeine was only lukewarm. 'What's not easy?'

'Ministering to the needy,' said Shavo Togandis. 'One feels one has accepted a never-ending task does one not?'

'Correct, Shavo,' agreed Casuaban, leaning back. 'It doesn't get any easier. Nor should it.'

'Quite,' said the cardinal. Togandis was sweating profusely, which wasn't unusual given his bulk, and Casuaban was forced to smile as he saw him use his staff to help propel him from the palanquin.

Free at last, Togandis made his way to the truck and shook hands with Casuaban, who fought the urge to wipe his sweat-slick hand on his trousers.

'Good morning to you, my friend,' said Togandis. 'Another day of serving the Emperor and his people.'

'Another day of putting right the wrongs of the past, eh?' said Casuaban.

Togandis shot him a strange look and nodded, indicating to the priests and servitors that made up his retinue that they should set up his mobile shrine against the hull of a burnt out Griffon mobile artillery piece that was missing its launcher.

Serj Casuaban and Shavo Togandis were an unlikely duo, but the years following Restoration Day had seen them become, if not friends, then at least comrades in shared atonement. They had never openly spoken of what they had witnessed at the Killing Ground, but both had recognised a shared need in the other and, almost without speaking of it, they had set out to repay their debt to Salinas, one person at a time.

Every week, they would tour the worst affected slums of Barbadus, Casuaban offering medical attention and advice to those that needed it, and Togandis

preaching the word of the Emperor to those who would hear it. Initially, Casuaban had the busier time on these expeditions, but as time passed and their hardships increased, more and more people turned to the word of the Emperor to see them through the years following Restoration Day.

No soldiers travelled with Casuaban, only a driver and a handful of servitors for lifting and basic security, a situation for which he had Pascal Blaise to thank. Togandis travelled with a little less austerity, riding in a palanquin of engraved wood and silver, followed by a chanting coterie of priests and lobotomised censer bearers.

'You're late getting here today,' said Casuaban without reproach.

'Yes,' said Togandis, 'my somnambulating was plagued with phantasmagoria.'

Casuaban threaded his way through the cardinal's words and nodded as he said, 'You had a bad dream?'

'That scarcely covers the details, my Hippocratic friend.'

'A nightmare?' asked Casuaban, as casually as he could.

'Indeed. Visions of such repellence to make a man believe he is going quite mad.'

'What did you dream?'

'I think you know, my dear Serj.'

'How could I possibly know, Shavo?'

Togandis leaned in close, so that no one could hear. 'I dreamed of the Killing Ground.'

'Oh.'

'An exclamation of one syllable,' said Togandis. 'Well, it will suffice.'

'What did you expect?' hissed Casuaban, taking hold of Togandis's arm and steering him away from the driver's cab of the truck. 'Keep your damn voice down. That's not a subject you should mention out loud, here of all places.'

'Are you saying you do not dream of Khaturian?' said Togandis. 'I fear you would be lying to me if you did.'

'You're not my confessor, Shavo,' said Casuaban, slipping a battered silver hip-flask from his jacket and taking a slug.

'Ah, I see now why you do not recall your dreams,' said Togandis.

'Don't you dare judge me,' snapped Casuaban, taking another drink. 'You of all people.'

'If a man of the cloth may not judge you then who can?'

'Not you,' said Casuaban. 'You don't have the right. You were there too.'

Togandis nodded and stepped even closer to Casuaban. The medicae could smell the cardinal's last meal and the stale odour of his sweat.

'I was there, yes, and not a rotation of this world goes by that I don't regret

that fact.'

'Really?' sneered Casuaban, jabbing his finger into the cardinal's chest. 'Then why do you still wear the medal? Pride?'

Togandis at least had the decency to look uncomfortable. 'No, not pride. I wear it because if I did not then what message would that send to Leto Barbaden? You think he would balk at sending Eversham for us if he thought we were plotting against him?'

Casuaban gripped Togandis's robes. 'Keep your bloody voice down!' he whispered. 'Or are you trying to get us killed?'

Togandis shook his head and reached down to prise Casuaban's hands from his chasuble with a grimace. 'I did not come here to fight with you, Serj,' said Togandis.

'Then why?'

'To warn you.'

'Warn me? Of what?'

'I saw them last night,' said Togandis, 'the dead of Khaturian.'

'In your nightmare?'

'No, in the temple.'

'What are you talking about?'

'They came for me,' said Togandis. 'They came for me, but they didn't take me, although I confess I do not know why. They have power now, Serj, real power. It is only a matter of time before they come for us all.'

Casuaban waved his hip-flask in front of the cardinal's face. 'I don't think it's me you need worry about, Shavo. Perhaps you should take a look at yourself first.'

'This is no joke, Serj,' said Togandis. 'Haven't you felt it? Something has changed, and not for the better. This world is different now. I can feel it in every breath I take.'

Serj Casuaban wanted to argue with Togandis, but the image of the small girl lying in his infirmary and the words she had said to him still haunted him. And hadn't he woken in the middle of the night with a pounding headache in the midst of a terrible dream in which a monster with burning eyes emerged from its cave to devour him?

But the dead?

'You have felt it!' said Togandis, seeing his expression.

'And if I have? What can we do about it? You and I both know what we did, what we allowed to happen. If the dead are coming for us then perhaps we should let them take us.'

'You want to die?' asked Togandis.

'No,' replied Casuaban, his shoulders slumping and looking at the hostile faces that called the wasteland of Junktown home. 'Death would be easy. It's living with what we did that's a punishment.'

'I'm not sure the dead see it that way,' said Togandis.

URIEL AND PASANIUS followed Eversham through the corridors of the palace, their austerity making more sense now that they had met Leto Barbaden. Red-jacketed Falcatas were stationed throughout, their breastplates gleaming and their curved blades shining like silver, though Uriel noticed that none carried a lasgun or so much as a pistol.

Eversham said little along the way, politely and concisely answering any questions put to him, but venturing no information beyond what was necessary. Of the Janiceps, he had said nothing more, simply that Uriel would understand when he saw them.

At last, they emerged on the other side of the palace from which they had entered. High buildings with saw-tooth ramparts stretched away at angles to the main structure to form a triangular courtyard area. Where the palace was constructed of dark, intimidating rock, these wings were fashioned from a smooth pink stone that shone like polished granite. Narrow windows pierced the outer walls of the plain west wing, but no doorways led within and the roofs bristled with antennae.

The eastern wing was of a different character altogether, its age obviously greater than the rest of the palace. The stonework of this wing was more ornate and a tribute to the craftsman's art: a building that celebrated the fulfilment of talent.

Where the rest of Barbaden's dwelling was clean and sharp, this wing had grown old and decrepit, the stonework cracked and weathered like the face of an elderly statesman, its windows grimy with dust and memory. Despite the disrepair, or perhaps because of it, Uriel immediately liked the building, feeling a strange sense of connection to it, or to something within it.

There was a bleak stretch of bare concrete in the space between the two wings, as large as the parade ground before the Fortress of Hera and large enough for the entire Chapter to assemble. Nothing disturbed the blunt uniformity of the space, no statues, no outbuildings and nothing to rescue the eye from the utilitarian nature of the ground save a drum tower that squatted, ugly and threatening, at the far end of the concrete.

'A parade ground?' asked Uriel, as Eversham led them straight across the middle of the open concrete space.

'Indeed,' said Eversham. 'This was the muster field where Restoration Day was declared.'

'Restoration Day?' asked Pasanius.

'When Imperial rule was officially restored to Salinas,' explained Eversham. 'A great day for the regiment.'

'Yet you felt the need to hide it away back here,' said Pasanius.

Eversham glared at Pasanius. 'The regiment died here also.'

Uriel seized upon this uncharacteristic display of emotion and said, 'Died here?'

'We were no longer an army of conquest,' said Eversham, the bitterness in his voice plain to hear. 'We were formally disbanded as a serving regiment and those that remained to bear arms were designated a Planetary Defence Force.'

'That cannot have been easy to bear,' said Uriel, knowing the disdain that most Imperial Guard forces, wrongly, held for PDF regiments. Guardsmen called them toy soldiers, but such bodies of men were often the first line of defence against invasion or uprising. Uriel had met many a courageous PDF trooper in his time, remembering Pavel Leforto of the Erebus Defence Legion on Tarsis Ultra, a man who had saved his life.

Simply because a soldier did not travel beyond the stars to make war did not lessen him in the eyes of the Emperor.

'It wasn't easy,' said Eversham, his pace quickening with remembered anger. 'To be part of something magnificent and then to be nothing; can you imagine what that's like?'

'Actually I can,' said Uriel.

Eversham looked over at him and, realising he had loosened his tongue, simply nodded and resumed his usual guarded expression.

Changing the subject, Uriel indicated the decaying east wing of the palace. 'That building? What is that?'

Eversham said, 'That is the Gallery of Antiquities.'

'A museum?'

'Of sorts,' said Eversham. 'Somewhere between a regimental museum and a repository for items that Curator Urbican believes should be kept and put on display. It's a waste of time. No one will ever see them.'

'That's where our armour is?' asked Pasanius.

'So I believe,' said Eversham.

'I think I should like to see this Gallery of Antiquities,' said Uriel and Eversham shrugged, as though the matter was of no interest to him, which it undoubtedly wasn't, thought Uriel.

There was no further conversation between the three of them and a palpable

sense of unease descended upon them. The feeling grew stronger as they approached the brooding grey tower at the far end of the parade ground.

Now that they were closer, Uriel could see that a series of recessed bunkers surrounded it. The flat, featureless walls were unpunctuated by so much as a sliver of a window, though a single portal sat incongruously open at the tower's base.

This was clearly their destination, the lair of the Janiceps, whatever they were.

Uriel did not like the tower and saw that Pasanius felt exactly the same.

An air of dread hung in the air and coils of razor wire surrounded it like thorn patches grown wild around the base of a dead tree stump.

'What is this place?' asked Uriel, the words lingering like dead things long after they were spoken. 'The lair of a psychic?'

'This is the Argiletum,' said Eversham, as though that were explanation enough, 'home of the Janiceps.'

'Nice,' said Pasanius, looking at the grim edifice without enthusiasm.

As they approached, a detachment of Guardsmen emerged from the nearest bunker and ran towards the edge of the razor wire. Now that he looked closer, Uriel saw numerous sheets of metal, which the soldiers manhandled with difficulty to drop over the wire until a clear path was created.

Eversham led the way across the flattened razor wire and Pasanius leaned close to Uriel to whisper. 'I can't help but notice that these Falcatas are armed with more than just blades.'

Uriel nodded. He too had seen the barrels of lasguns poking from the firing slits of the bunkers. The soldiers who had cleared them a path across the razor wire had been equipped with firearms. Was what lurked within this gloomy tower so potentially dangerous that Governor Barbaden felt the need to relax his policy of guns within the palace grounds?

Uriel stepped from the sheet metal bridge and no sooner had they set foot within the circuit of razor wire than the soldiers behind them began to remove it, leaving them trapped at the base of the tower.

Uriel saw it was formed from dark stone blocks inscribed with tightly wound warding script that ran the length, breadth and height of the tower. The portal that led within seemed to gape like the maw of some dreadful gateway to the nether-world, and for a moment, Uriel thought he could feel the breath of something ancient and malicious from within.

'They have that effect on everyone,' said Eversham, sensing Uriel's discomfort.

'Who?'

'The Janiceps,' said Eversham, heading towards the open portal. 'Come, Governor Barbaden is waiting for you.'

INSIDE, THE TOWER was scarcely any less welcoming, its structure hollow and rising into darkness. A single shaft of light descended from the centre of the floor above and a frost-limned screw-stair of dark iron rose within it.

The air was cool, like that of a meat locker, and the walls glistened with moisture. Uriel felt a strange sense of dislocation, for the curve of the walls seemed to stretch far into the distance in defiance of what the outer circumference of the tower should have been able to enclose.

Uriel could feel the bitter, metallic taste of psychic energy in the air, an unmistakable actinic tang that unsettled him to the very core of his being. It was an irony not lost on Uriel that the potential for psychic power should so unsettle humans, yet without it the very fabric of the Imperium would crumble in the face of the vastness of the galaxy's unimaginable scale.

Once again, Eversham led the way, although his stride was a good deal less purposeful as he made his way across the hard, reflective floor towards the stairs. Careful not to touch the handrail, Eversham began his ascent and Uriel followed him. The stairs were narrow and groaned under his weight, but Uriel's thoughts were focused more on what lay at their end than on any risk of them collapsing.

Onwards and upwards the stairs stretched and Uriel knew, knew for a fact, that they had climbed higher than the tower had appeared from the outside. He heard laughter, small and childish, yet old beyond words.

Whispers seemed to echo from the walls, but Uriel kept his mind on putting one foot in front of the other until, at last, there were no more stairs to climb.

Uriel found himself in a gloomy chamber, lit only by the diffuse glow of sunlight that filtered through darkened windows that had been invisible from the outside. The walls of the chamber were cloaked in shadow, although Uriel could make out indistinct forms against the chamber's circumference, hooded figures that muttered nonsensical doggerel.

Uriel's breath misted before him and the cold knifed into his bones. Once again, he wished he were clad in his Mk VII plate instead of this thin robe, which offered scant protection against the unnatural chill.

Eversham strode to the centre of the room, where Governor Leto Barbaden stood before a reclining couch upon which lay something obscured from Uriel's view.

Barbaden was speaking, his voice low and little more than a whisper. He

turned at Eversham's approach and impatiently waved Uriel over.

Uriel swallowed his anger once more and marched over to where Barbaden and Eversham stood, feeling the crackling psychic potential that emanated from the centre of the room. Barbaden moved to his left as Eversham stepped behind the reclining couch, and Uriel had his first sight of the Janiceps.

His first thought was that this was some sort of cruel hoax and that he had been brought before some hideous mutant. Uriel's hand clenched as he reached for a weapon he wasn't carrying. He fought down his horror at the… thing before him and looked more closely as he saw a glimmer of a smile on one of the faces that looked up at him from the couch.

She, or rather, they lay at a disturbing angle on the couch, a shapeless knotted mass of human flesh bound together in ways that anatomy had never intended. This was no mutant creature, but something conceived and grown within the womb as twin girls and upon which aberrant nature had played a cruel joke.

Their heads were fused along the rear quarter of the cranium so that neither could look upon the other. The poor, malformed girls had two mouths and two noses; in each face an eye, well conformed and placed above the nose with a third, milky and distended eye in the middle of the forehead common to both girls.

The brain of one girl was quite visible through a thin membrane of bruised skin that glistened and heaved in time with her breath. On the right side of her head was a rudimentary external ear, from which hung a golden earring, and their small, withered bodies lay in the grip of an embrace that their accident of birth had forced them into.

They were wrapped in dark green robes of plush velveteen, and Uriel saw an eagle head badge pinned there, the symbol of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. Was this the astropath who would transmit their message of return to the Ultramarines?

Uriel was horrified at the pitiful sight of the girls, seeing the light of intelligence in the single eye of each one. The milky eye in the forehead of the conjoined girls swam with patterns like droplets of coloured ink stirred into white paint.

Uriel had seen patterns like that once before, when he had looked through a crystal dome into the seething depths of the warp when the Omphalos Daemonium had seized the *Calth's Pride* in its grip.

'Welcome, Uriel Ventris,' said the left mouth. 'I am Kulla.'

'And I am Lalla,' said the other.

'We are the Janiceps,' they said in unison.

TEN

LALLA's VOICE WAS sweet and sounded like a carefree young girl who knew nothing of the cruelties of the world. Kulla's, on the other hand, was bitter and husky, as though she alone bore the full knowledge of what the vagaries of unthinking nature had wrought upon them.

Uriel stared in uncomfortable fascination at the conjoined girls, unsure of what to say.

Astropaths were often eccentric souls, cursed with the ability to hurl their minds across the vastness of the galaxy and communicate with others of their kind, thus allowing the Imperium to function.

Uriel had seen many astropaths, but none as physically tormented as the Janiceps, none so cursed by birth as to be better off dead than consigned to this fate. On ninety-nine worlds out of a hundred, the girls would have been killed, but whichever world had birthed them had obviously been a more tolerant place.

As much as Uriel felt sorry for them, he couldn't shake the sense that they were dangerous mutants and fought to get past that impression.

'Don't feel sorry for us, Uriel,' said Lalla. 'We like being useful.'

'Be quiet,' snapped Kulla. 'What do you know of useful? I do all the work!'

'Come now, girls,' said Barbaden, his voice unusually soft and yielding. 'You shouldn't argue. You know what happens when you argue.'

'Yes,' sulked Kulla. 'You have your damned warders tighten their noose on us.'

'And it hurts us so!' squealed Lalla.

'This is the astropath?' Uriel asked Barbaden.

'You can speak to them yourself,' said the governor, 'they're right in front of you.'

'He thinks we're mutants, Kulla,' said Lalla pleasantly.

'Well, aren't you?' asked Uriel.

'No more than you, Astartes,' sneered Kulla. 'What are you if not a freak? In fact your gene structure is more removed from humanity than ours.'

Uriel took a deep breath. From the precautions Barbaden had taken with their confinement, Kulla and Lalla were obviously powerful psykers and it would be foolish to needlessly antagonise them.

'Yes, it would,' smiled Kulla.

Uriel started and Lalla sniggered. 'She does that all the time, but don't worry, she can only read your surface thoughts, unless you want her to read more, and

then we'll know all your sins.'

'I am a Space Marine of the Emperor, I have no sins,' said Uriel.

'Oh, come now,' said Lalla, laughing, 'we all have our secrets.'

'No,' said Uriel, 'we don't.'

'He's got secrets to hide,' said Kulla, laughing with a cackling screech that stretched the membrane across her brain.

'Can we get on with this?' asked Uriel, uncomfortable in the presence of the Janiceps now that he knew they could read minds as well as communicate telepathically with other astropaths.

'Of course,' said Barbaden, amused at Uriel's discomfort. 'Simply kneel before the twins and do as they tell you. It will go much quicker if you do not question everything.'

'Both of us?' asked Pasanius.

'If you'd like to,' said Lalla. 'It wouldn't make any difference.'

'Then I think I'll sit this one out,' said Pasanius, gesturing to Uriel to step up.

'And you have awards for valour,' said Uriel.

'The burden of command is that you sometimes have to lead from the front,' replied Pasanius, 'and she said it wouldn't make a difference.'

'How convenient,' said Uriel, kneeling before the twins.

'Give us your hands,' said Lalla, 'and hold on.'

Uriel nodded, wondering at the necessity of Lalla's last comment, and lifted his hands towards the girls. He took their hands hesitantly, feeling the rapid pulse of blood in their tiny, delicate fingers.

'We're not made of china,' said Kulla. 'I thought you Astartes were supposed to be strong. Grip our hands.'

Lalla giggled and Uriel blushed as he tightened his hold.

'That's better,' said Kulla. 'Now we can control your mind.'

Uriel's eyes widened, but Lalla smiled. 'She's joking. We wouldn't do that, not without asking you first.'

His hands became cold and he felt the chill spread along his arms and into his chest. How much of the twins' banter was playful and how much was truth, he didn't know, but he had the feeling that were they of a mind to do him harm, there would be nothing he could do to prevent them from killing him with a thought.

'So what do I need to do?' asked Uriel, trying not to let his unease show.

'Where are you sending this message?' asked Lalla, her eye drifting shut.

'Who are you sending it to?' demanded Kulla.

'To the Ultramarines,' said Uriel. 'To the world of Macragge.'

'Open your mind, Astartes,' ordered Kulla, her voice rasping and harsh.

Uriel nodded, though the instruction was vague, and closed his eyes, slowing his breathing and awaiting the touch of the twins' mind. He felt nothing and tried not to get impatient.

'Your mind is closed to us,' said Lalla, 'like a fortress preparing to resist an invader.'

'I don't understand,' said Uriel.

'You Astartes, your minds are as rigid and unbending as adamantium,' said Kulla, and Uriel knew that her mouth was not moving. Her voice was arriving directly in his thoughts without recourse to speech. 'You are trained, conditioned and enhanced in so many ways, but your minds are like locked doors to a place of miracles and wonder. All the potential you are trained to access: memory, language, combat analysis, and yet your masters train you to close off the one part of your mind that might actually allow you to soar. You do not feel as others do, but we can open that door for you if you let us.'

'Stop it, Kulla,' said Lalla. 'You know that's not allowed. Leave him to his blindness.'

'Oh, all right,' sulked Kulla, with a sigh that Uriel heard in his mind. 'Very well, Astartes, picture your home world: its people, its mountains and its seas. Smell the earth and taste the air. Feel the grass beneath your feet and the wind on your face. Remember all that makes it what it is.'

Pleased to have an instruction he understood, Uriel pictured his last sight of Macragge, a beautiful blue globe turning slowly in the depths of space. The vast seas that covered much of its surface shone with an azure light and spirals of storm clouds, like miniature galaxies, spun lazily in the atmosphere.

Passing through the clouds, Uriel pictured the awesome marble colossus that was the Fortress of Hera upon the great peninsula. He saw the soaring fluted columns of its majestic portico, the colonnades filled with statues of heroic warriors. His mind soared onwards, over golden roofs, silver domes and towering spires of glittering light: magnificent libraries, halls of battle honours, and gilded halls of pilgrims and worshipers come to the Temple of Correction, where the body of the mighty Roboute Guilliman was held in stasis.

Beyond the Fortress of Hera, Uriel imagined the wild, untamed glories of the Valley of Laponis, its white cliffs towering above the achingly blue river that wound its way through the mountains to the plains below. As though a bird in flight, Uriel plummeted down through the valley, speeding towards a thundering waterfall cascading from the heights above.

Billowing clouds of spray boomed into the air, filling it with bitingly cold mist and Uriel laughed aloud as he tasted the crystal clear waters of his Chapter's home world. He soared from the valley, visualising the mountains and forests of

Macragge, the sweeping, rocky coastlines and vast, depthless oceans.

'Pasanius,' he breathed, 'I'm there.'

'Hold to thoughts of home,' said Kulla. 'Speak of your desire.'

'My desire?' asked Uriel.

'To return home,' said Lalla, a note of strain in her voice.

Uriel nodded in understanding. 'We have completed our Death Oath,' he said. 'It is time to return to our battle-brothers.'

'Show us,' said Kulla, 'all of it.'

Though he hated to return there, even in memory, Uriel summoned images of Medrengard, the ashen plains, the belching continents of manufactorum and the hellish, damned creatures that dwelt there. He pictured the nightmare fortress of Khalan-Ghol, the horrific daemon-wombs of the Daemonculaba and the final victory over Honsou.

Uriel felt the twins' hands shaking and opened his eyes as the awful stench of burning flesh arose in his nostrils. Ghostly flames swelled and billowed around the chamber, but its occupants appeared to be oblivious to them.

The flames bathed everything around him in light and Uriel had the distinct impression of hungry eyes watching him from the darkness.

The cold, heatless fire reflected a strange light from everyone gathered here and Uriel gasped as he saw a measure of what the twins saw.

A shadowy darkness surrounded Eversham, and a nimbus of silver, like a moonlight reflection on a stagnant lake, bathed Barbaden's features with a cold halo. Flickering arcs of golden lightning crackled around the twins' heads and a scarlet bloom like blood in the water surrounded Pasanius's outline. Uriel saw that the red glow extended past the stump of Pasanius's arm and formed the blurred outline of a hand.

Looking down at his own body, he saw that same red glow, like the embers of a smouldering fire, around his arms and torso.

'You are warriors,' said Kulla, her voice sounding as though it came from far away. 'What other colour would you expect your aura to be but that of blood?'

Pasanius said something, but Uriel could not understand the sense of it, his friend's voice sounding as though it came from an impossibly far-off distance. As the sound of Pasanius's voice faded even further, Uriel felt his gaze drawn to the swirling, milky eye in Kulla's and Lalla's cartilage-fused forehead.

Stars wheeled in the eye's depths, planets and the endless gulfs of trackless space that separated them. Uriel cried out as he was carried into that eye, a mote in the void of space. Distances so vast that the human mind simply had not the capacity to imagine them, flew past at the speed of thought. He was part of that thought, everything he had visualised and everything he had sought carried with

the psychic beacon of ideas and images that were cast across space by the power of the twins' mind.

The dizzying sense of vertigo was almost unbearable and it was all he could do to hold onto the twins' hands as they passed what he had given them to the void.

Then it was over.

Uriel gasped as the twins released his hands. He blinked rapidly, his normal sight restored, and all the colours he had seen earlier vanished like the fragments of a dream.

'Is it done?' he asked, the breath heaving in his chest.

'Your call will be heard,' said Lalla.

'By any with the wit to listen,' added Kulla.

WHEN EVERSHAM LED Uriel and Pasanius from the Argiletum, the sky was dark and painted with a scattering of stars. The sense of relief at leaving the presence of the Janiceps was total, and as Uriel took a cleansing breath, it tasted as sweet as the crisp mountain air of Macragge.

'How long were we in there?' asked Uriel, staring up at the stars.

'Too long,' answered Pasanius as the soldiers once again flattened the razor wire to allow them to cross. 'You crouched in front of those… girls for hours.'

'I did?' said Uriel. 'It felt like a few minutes at most.'

'Trust me,' said Pasanius, scratching at the raw flesh at the end of his arm. 'It wasn't. Barbaden left almost as soon as you started.'

'Is your arm hurting?' asked Uriel, following Eversham over the bridge of sheet metal.

'A little,' admitted Pasanius. 'It wasn't exactly removed with surgical precision.'

Uriel caught the anxiety in Pasanius's tone and knew that his friend was worried. Pasanius had lost his arm fighting an ancient star god beneath the surface of Pavonis, and microscopic slivers of the living metal of its blade had entered his bloodstream and incorporated its structure into the augmetic the adepts of that world had grafted to him.

The augmetic had developed regenerative powers and Pasanius had struggled with the guilt of that for long months until he had been forced to confess the truth to Uriel. The Savage Morticians, horrific torturer-surgeons of the Iron Warriors, had later amputated the arm and presented it to the Warsmith Honsou, but the guilt was still there.

'You are free of the xenos taint,' said Uriel, keeping his voice low. 'I am sure

of it.'

'What if something from Medrengard got into me?'

'You'd know if it had,' said Uriel. 'If the Ruinous Powers had corrupted your flesh, you would not be speaking to me like this. You would have turned that bolt pistol on me when we were in battle yesterday.'

'Would it be that quick? Maybe I've only taken the first steps on the path to evil.'

'I don't know for sure,' replied Uriel, hearing the fear in his friend's voice, 'but I believe that to question whether you are evil tells me that you are not. Those who have fallen to evil never question, never believe they are wrong and cannot see the truth of their actions. If you were on that path, I would see it.'

'I hope you're right,' said Pasanius.

'If you want to be sure, I will ask Governor Barbaden for a medicae scan.'

'You think that would find anything?'

'It would at least show any infection,' said Uriel.

Pasanius smiled in gratitude. 'Thank you, Uriel. Your friendship means a lot to me.'

'In these times, it's all we have, my friend,' said Uriel.

RYKARD USTEL WAS going to die, as sure as day turned to night. Pascal Blaise could see it in the boy's eyes, the look that said his body had already given up the fight to live and that it was just a matter of time before the biological machinery shut down. They had done what they could for him, but none of them were trained medics and their imperfect knowledge of how to treat battlefield injuries had been learned by seeing others die.

Serj Casuaban had delivered the medical supplies as promised and many of those who had been wounded in the attack on the Screaming Eagles would live: many, but not all.

Unfortunately for Rykard Ustel, he was not one of the lucky ones.

Cawlen Hurq sat by the boy's bed, holding his hand and speaking softly to him, the light from the two oil-burners casting a warm, healthy glow over Rykard's pale face that belied his prognosis.

Pascal rubbed the las-burn on the side of his head and took another drink of raquir, suddenly wishing that he could drain the bottle and fall into dreamless oblivion. He knew he couldn't; there were people who depended on him and he was grimly aware that the Sons of Salinas could not continue in this way.

He had known that stark fact for years, but his hatred of Leto Barbaden had blinded him to the simple reality of it. This was a war that could not be won with

violence, and the futility of the fighting and killing he had taken part in sickened him. Had it all been for nothing?

Pascal heard a soft curse and looked up.

'He's gone,' said Cawlen, his face a mask of anger as he slumped into the chair opposite Pascal. 'Rykard, he's dead.'

Pascal nodded and slid the bottle over the table to Cawlen, who took a long swallow of the powerful spirit.

'What did he die for, Cawlen?' asked Pascal. 'Tell me why he died.'

'He died for Salinas,' replied Cawlen, 'to defeat the Imperium.'

Pascal shook his head. 'No, he died for nothing.'

'How can you say that?' snarled Cawlen. 'He died fighting the oppressors. How can that be for nothing?'

'Because the idea of defeating the Imperium is ludicrous,' said Pascal sadly. 'I think I always knew that, but I just wouldn't admit it to myself. I mean, what can we do? Really? We fight with stolen weapons that are so old they're probably more dangerous to us than anyone we actually point them at. They have tanks and aircraft and now they have Space Marines.'

'Only two of them,' said Cawlen, 'and one of them is missing an arm.'

'Doesn't that tell you something? That we only merit the attention of two Space Marines? It tells me plenty.'

'So we can't win? Is that what you're saying?' demanded Cawlen.

'No. Yes… Maybe. I don't know any more,' said Pascal.

'Sylvanus Thayer would never have given up!'

'Sylvanus Thayer led the Sons of Salinas into a suicidal battle without hope of victory and I won't do that, Cawlen. I won't.'

'He died a hero,' Cawlen said defiantly.

For a brief moment, Pascal wanted to tell Cawlen the truth, that Sylvanus Thayer lay burned and horribly mutilated in the House of Providence, but fate had cast the former leader of the Sons of Salinas in the role of martyr and it seemed churlish to deny him that honour.

'Yes,' said Pascal, 'he did, but I don't want any more martyrs. I want people to live their lives. I want peace.'

'That's what we're fighting for.'

Pascal laughed, but the sound was bitter and harsh. 'Fighting for peace with acts of war?'

'If that's what it takes.'

'Thinking like that will get us all killed,' promised Pascal.

THREE FIGURES WERE arranged in a triangular pattern in a cramped chamber of heat-resistant tiles, each facing the centre of the room. The first of the figures was a young man who lay strapped to an upright restraint couch, his limbs bound by silver chains and his head held fast with clamps that prevented it from moving so much as a millimetre.

Hissing atomisers moistened gaping, empty eye sockets, the lids of which were held permanently open by ocular speculums, and gently swaying pipes fed him nutrients while others disposed of his bodily waste. Behind him, a clicking, whirring bank of machines monitored his vital signs, the rhythmic pulse and bleep the only signs that he lived at all, so shallow was the rise and fall of his chest.

A meshed vox-capture unit was fitted over his mouth, connected to a series of golden wires that coiled and looped across the floor before arriving at the second occupant of the room.

This figure was likewise restrained, though there was precious little need for it as every limb save his right arm had been surgically removed. He sat in a mechanical cradle of brass armatures and pulsating cables, and, like his opposite number, matter was delivered and retrieved through gurgling pipes. The golden wires from the room's first occupant ran across the room's floor and up over the back of his skull before dividing and plugging into iron sockets grafted where his ears had once been. His eyes had been sewn together and tiny script had been tattooed over the withered, sunken lids.

A wooden lectern sat to one side of this individual, upon which rested a sheet of yellowing parchment dispensed from a roll that sat below a glowing pict recorder. The figure's only remaining limb lay unmoving beside the parchment, a long, feathered quill held tightly between the forefinger and thumb of its spindly hand.

The room's final occupant was also a meld of flesh and machine, but where its fellows were bound to their task through restraints and wards, he was simply obeying orders hardwired into his brain through lobotomy and instruction wafers fed to him by his masters.

A gun-servitor, he had no mind left to call his own and was simply a living weapon-bearer with no will to perform any task other than that which was ordered. Though more humanoid in form than the other two occupants of the room, his body had been enhanced with bionics, muscle stimulants, balance compensators and targeting hardware to allow him to bear the weight of the enormous incinerator unit that replaced his left arm.

The weapon alternately tracked between the room's other occupants, the gun-servitor's brain primed for any of the warning signs that would trigger its attack

response and fill this chamber with blessed fire and immolate everything in it, including itself.

The incinerator swung to aim at the figure in the restraint couch as his chest began to heave with effort. The bleeping noises from the machine behind him increased in frequency, becoming shrill and warning.

A hissing blue flame sparked to life at the mouth of the incinerator's enormous muzzle.

The first restrained figure, though bound at every portion of his body capable of movement, stiffened, as though an electric current was discharging through him. His jaw worked up and down, although the vox-capture unit prevented any of the sounds from issuing into the air.

No sooner had this begun, than the quill-bearing figure jerked to life like a machine freshly supplied with power. The quill began scratching across the page, filling it with spidery script, the wiry limb snatching back and forth across the parchment. The glow from the pict reader flickered as the words passed beneath it, carried off to yet another secure room within the facility.

The incinerator filled the room with the hot hissing of its pilot flame, but the gun-servitor's parameters of action had not been fulfilled, and so it sat immobile as the process went on before it.

At last the restrained young man with the burned out eye sockets relaxed, the tension flooding from his body and an inaudible, yet wholly felt sigh escaped him. His colleague also relaxed, the withered arm returning to its place beside the now filled section of parchment.

Silence descended upon the room as the incinerator's blue flame was extinguished and the gun-servitor returned to its monitoring repose.

A recessed door opened in the wall, invisible from the interior of the room, and a series of robed thurifers entered. Each carried a smoking incense burner and their hooded faces were blind to the room's occupants. They made a number of circuits of the chamber, guided by questing hands on the wall while gently swinging their censers of blessed oils and fragrant smoke.

Mist like a morning fog filled the room, but this did not trouble the giant, armoured figure that followed the thurifers into the room. Enormous to the point of gigantic, the burnished, blue-steel silver of his armour seemed to fill the room. The smoke would have blinded any normal man, but this warrior made his way to the lectern table without difficulty.

A huge, gauntleted hand reached down and tore the parchment from the dispenser, holding it up to his helmeted head as he read the words written there.

He had heard them recited through the mouth of a vat-grown cherub, but he needed to see the words for himself, to know them and feel their truth with his

own eyes.

The signs were unmistakable.

The Great Eye had opened and the portents of the haruspex were coming to pass.

He heard heavy footfalls behind him as a figure clad in enormous plate armour, the equal of his own, entered the chamber. He clutched a heavy bladed polearm in one fist.

'Is it true?' asked the newcomer. 'A power stirs on Salinas once more?'

'It is true,' confirmed the warrior. 'Begin our deployment, Cheiron.'

'I already have.'

The warrior nodded. He had expected no less. 'Projected flight time to Salinas?'

'The planet's orbit closes with us. Five days at the most.'

'Good,' said the warrior. 'I want to get there while there is something worth saving.'

'That may not be possible,' said Cheiron.

'Then we must make it so,' said the warrior. 'I grow tired of extermination.'

PART THREE

NEMESIS

'On wrongs, swift vengeance waits.'

ELEVEN

DUST LAY THICK on hundreds of glass cabinets and the air within the Gallery of Antiquities was ripe with musty neglect and forgotten history. Of all the places he had seen on Salinas, this was the one that truly spoke to Uriel. The legacy of the past and sense of belonging to something bigger was strong and he was reminded of the many halls of ancient banners and honour trophies that filled the Fortress of Hera.

It was the day after their meeting with the Janiceps and the guilty taste of psychic contact had not yet left Uriel's mind. As dawn had spread its sour light over Salinas, Uriel sent a request to Governor Barbaden, via their ubiquitous shadow, Eversham, that they needed a trained medicae to examine Pasanius.

No reply was immediately forthcoming, and rather than simply sit and wait for a response, Uriel had decided they would use the time before their battle-brothers made contact to better acquaint themselves with this world.

The best way to do that, decided Uriel, was to learn of its past.

Having travelled through the palace corridors to the parade ground once before, the route was embedded in Uriel's memory and they found their way to the outer doors of the palace with ease.

The bare concrete esplanade and grey tower at its far end were no less depressing than they had been the day before and as he made his way towards the decrepit Gallery of Antiquities, Uriel couldn't help but feel as though he was being drawn to this place, that somehow this journey was *necessary.*

'Doesn't look like much,' Pasanius had said, looking at the neglected wing of the palace. Despite feeling that great things awaited in the gallery, Uriel had been forced to agree with him.

That feared disappointment was dispelled as soon as they had entered and seen the vast array of cabinets, packing cases and curios that filled the wing. Much of its depths were shrouded in darkness, and who knew what treasures awaited discovery farther in, for a planet's worth of battle honours and history filled the Gallery of Antiquities.

In charge of imposing order on this haphazardly collected memorabilia was Curator Lukas Urbican, a meticulous and proud man, who Uriel had immediately warmed to upon meeting.

'Ah,' said Urbican, looking up over his spectacles as they had pushed open the doors to the gallery. 'I was hoping you would feel compelled to visit my humble

gallery, although I must apologise in advance for the somewhat… random nature of the exhibits.'

Urbican was of average height and from his bearing he had once been a soldier. Though he wore the dark robe of an adept instead of a uniform, it was clear that he kept fit and healthy. Uriel guessed he was in his early sixties, his face lined and hard, and what little remained of his hair was shorn close to his skull and as white as powdered snow.

Urbican beckoned them in and marched over with a liver-spotted hand extended in welcome. Uriel took Urbican's proffered hand, the old man's grip strong and rough textured.

'Curator Urbican I presume?' said Uriel.

'None other, my friend, none other,' said Urbican with a disarming smile, 'but call me Lukas. I'm guessing you would be Captain Uriel Ventris, which, if I'm not mistaken, would make your one-armed friend, Sergeant Pasanius.'

'You're not mistaken,' said Pasanius. 'The arm is a bit of a give-away.'

'You have heard of us?' asked Uriel.

'I shouldn't think there are many on Salinas who haven't,' said Urbican. 'News of the arrival of Adeptus Astartes travels fast, though I must confess I was afraid that Leto would keep you all to himself. Our vaunted governor doesn't have much time for me, or the dusty old relics of the past. A waste of time, he'd say.'

'Actually, Governor Barbaden appears to want little to do with us,' said Uriel, surprised at his candour.

'Well, he has a lot on his plate, I suppose,' conceded Urbican, 'what with all the trouble the Sons of Salinas are causing.'

'Exactly,' said Uriel, sensing that he could learn much from Lukas Urbican. 'Thus, we find we have time on our hands.'

'And you use that time to visit my poor gallery of antiquities? I'm honoured,' said Urbican, beaming. 'I know how rare it is for a soldier such as yourself to have time on his hands, or any man of war for that matter. Of course, it has been some time since I could call myself a soldier of the Emperor.'

'You served with the Falcatas?' asked Pasanius.

'For my sins,' said Urbican, smiling, although the smile faltered for the briefest second. He waved a dismissive hand. 'Of course, that was many years ago. I mustered out after Restoration Day, though I think Colonel Kain would have retired me had I not. War is a young man's game, eh?'

Urbican suddenly paused and raised his hand with his middle finger exposed. 'Of course! Where are my manners? I know what you've come for, how silly of me.'

Uriel smiled as the aged curator bustled off into a chamber just off the main

hallway.

The interior of this wing of the palace had seen better days. The paint was peeling from the walls and spreading patches of damp rose from the floor and spread across the arched ceiling. Banners hung on the walls, red and gold guidons and rectangular standards emblazoned with a golden warrior with the head of an eagle bearing twin falcatas.

A long row of glass-topped display tables ran down the centre of the hall and the walls were stacked high with crates. Some of these were open and scrawled with illegible notations, with portions of uniform jackets and assorted pieces of battle dress hanging from them. Cracked glass cabinets stood between the packing crates and lifeless mannequins dressed in what looked like mismatched pieces of uniform and armour carried rusted lasguns that looked about ready to fall apart.

There appeared to be no order to the collection, and yet Uriel found it incredibly reassuring to know that at least one man of Salinas cared for the memory of those who had served in the regiment and who honoured the people of the planet they had claimed.

'How many years of service must be gathered here?' Uriel asked Pasanius, peering into a cabinet filled with medals and a variety of bayonets.

'Decades,' said Pasanius, lifting a falcata with a rusted blade, 'if not centuries.'

While Urbican rooted around for whatever it was he sought, Uriel wandered along one of the aisles between the display cabinets. The first cabinet he stopped at was filled with battered leather notebooks bound with rotted cord. Most were rotted to illegibility, but one was arranged proudly in the centre of the cabinet.

The gold leaf on its cover was faded, but Uriel could make out enough of the lettering to know that it was a copy of the Tactica Imperium, the mighty work by which the Imperium's armies made war. The date was worn away, but the edition number appeared to be in the low hundreds, making the book well over a thousand years old.

'Ah, I see you've found Old Serenity's copy of the Tactica,' said Urbican, his head poking from the doorway. 'Very rare piece, and said to have a personal note from Lord Solar Macharius on its inner cover, but the book's so fragile I don't dare open it.'

'Who was Old Serenity?' asked Pasanius.

'The Colonel of the Falcatas before Leto Barbaden,' shouted Urbican, 'a grand old man indeed, a gentleman. Never lost his cool in battle, even when things went awry. When we were set to be overrun at Koreda Gorge he turned to his adjutant and said, "I shall never sound the retreat, never. Warn the men that if they hear it, it is only a ruse on the part of the enemy". Stirring stuff, eh?'

'Is that true?'

'I have no idea,' said Urbican. 'Old Serenity was killed an hour later, but it sounds good, eh? Ah! Here we are.'

Urbican emerged from the back room, carrying a long, cloth-wrapped bundle, which he reverently laid on the table before Uriel. Even before Urbican unwrapped it, Uriel knew what it was and felt his pulse quicken as the sheathed sword of Captain Idaeus was revealed.

'Eversham brought your sword here, Captain Ventris,' said Urbican, 'and I have kept it safe for you.'

Uriel drew the golden-hilted sword from its scabbard, his fingers naturally slipping around the wire-wound hilt and the quillons fitting neatly against the top of his fist. To hold his blade once more and feel the connection to his heritage as a Space Marine was a sublime sensation, another sign that their exile from the Chapter was almost at an end.

He turned the blade in his hand, the pale light of the gallery reflecting along its gleaming, unblemished surface. 'Thank you,' he said. 'This blade means a lot to me.'

'A fine piece,' said Urbican, 'although I feel the blade is perhaps not the original.'

'You have a good eye, Lukas,' said Uriel. 'The blade was broken on the world of Pavonis. I forged a new one on Macragge.'

'Ah, that explains it. Still, it is a fine weapon,' said Urbican. 'Perhaps you could tell me of its illustrious history sometime?'

'I would be proud to,' nodded Uriel, attempting to buckle the sword around his waist, but finding that without the bulk of Astartes plate, the belt was too large. Seeing the difficulty Uriel was having, Pasanius said, 'Is my armour here also, curator?'

Urbican smiled. 'Indeed it is, sergeant, Mk VII if I'm not mistaken, Aquila pattern?'

'That it is,' confirmed Pasanius. 'You know Astartes armour?'

'Only a very little,' admitted Urbican. 'It is a passion of mine to study the battle gear of our most heroic protectors, although I confess I have only ever had the chance to study armour and weapons of a far greater age than yours.'

'You have studied Space Marine armour?' asked Uriel. 'Where?'

'Well, here of course,' replied the curator, with an expression of puzzlement, which suddenly turned to one of unalloyed joy.

'Ah, I see! Oh, you must come with me,' said Urbican, setting off down an aisle leading deeper into the gallery.

'My friends,' said Urbican, 'you are not the first Astartes to come to Salinas.'

FOR SOMEONE WHO had faithfully served Leto Barbaden in the Achaman Falcatas, Mesira Bardhyl had fared particularly poorly in the years following Restoration Day, thought Daron Nisato. Many times while the regiment had fought through some tough campaigns, Nisato had seen the shivering form of Mesira next to the colonel, her stooped form lost in the Guard-issue greatcoat, and felt a stab of sympathy for her.

He'd known it was wrong to feel like that, for, as a company commissar, it could easily have fallen to him to put a bullet through her brain in the event of her psychic powers becoming dangerous.

For all her apparent frailty, however, Mesira had served the regiment and never once faltered in her duty.

And this was her reward upon mustering out: a roughly built, brick and timber structure on the outskirts of Junktown; anti-Imperial slogans painted over the walls and crude representations of horned monsters on the door. The street was empty in both directions, but that was no surprise; the arrival of a growling Chimera in the black and steel livery of the Barbadus Enforcers had a way of emptying streets like no other.

Nisato pulled himself up from the commander's hatch of the vehicle and slid down the armoured glacis to drop to the hard-packed, sandy ground. His armour weighed heavily on him, but it would be foolish to come this close to Junktown without it. He scanned the street again, his eyes flicking from rooftops and windows to recessed doorways where an opportunistic gunman might wait.

He turned back to the growling vehicle and said, 'I'm going inside.'

'You want backup?' asked a voice in his helmet: Lieutenant Poulsen.

'No, wait here, I'll only be a few minutes.'

'We'll be ready if you need us,' said Poulsen and Nisato heard the man's eagerness. Poulsen had been a junior commissar at the outset of the Salinas campaign and took Nisato's lead in all things, following him into the Enforcers after the muster out after Restoration Day.

It hadn't offered much in the way of advancement, but at least they were not as hated as the men and women who had chosen to remain with the Falcatas. At least as keepers of the peace and upholders of the law, they could be seen to be doing some good.

At least that was what Daron Nisato told himself before he went to sleep each night.

'Stay alert,' ordered Nisato, 'and if I'm not out in ten minutes, come in and get me.'

'Understood, sir.'

A squad of five enforcers sat in the baking confines of the Chimera, armed

and armoured for combat, but Nisato did not think he would need them. Mesira was a lonely, afflicted woman, but she wasn't dangerous. When he had seen her at the palace, he had seen the desperation etched into her face and although it fell somewhat beyond his remit of upholding the law to check on her like this, he felt he owed her a duty of care.

For, if not him, then who?

Nisato rapped his gauntlet against her door, hearing the empty echoes of it up the stairs and feeling the give in it that told him it wasn't locked. He pushed the door open, not liking the stale, abandoned air he felt from the dwelling. Dozens could live in a place like this, but fear of Mesira's abilities had kept her isolated, for who wanted to live with a witch?

His hand went to his bolt pistol as he slid through the door, keeping his steps as light as he was able. Inside the door was a narrow vestibule with boarded up doors and a staircase that led up to a landing. Weak light filtered down the stairs from a skylight above and dust motes spun in the air where his opening of the door had disturbed them.

'Mesira?' he called, deciding that there was no need for stealth after having knocked. 'Are you in here?'

There was no answer. Nisato drew his pistol, his instinct for trouble warning him that all was not right. Carefully, knowing that Mesira lived on the first floor, Nisato climbed the stairs, keeping his pistol trained on the space above him. Keeping his breathing even, he eased onto the landing, seeing an open door along a wooden floored corridor with flakboard laid along its length in lieu of carpet or tiles. The reek of *khat* leaves was strong, telling him that this was Mesira's home; many psychics turned to narcotics to allow them to sleep without dreaming.

Checking both ways along the corridor, Nisato called Mesira's name once more, again receiving no response. He swept along the corridor until he reached the door and pressed himself against the wall beside it. Reaching up, Nisato snapped his helmet's visor down and reached up to amplify the aural gain on its auto-senses.

Amid the crackling static, he listened for the tread of footsteps, the rasp of frightened breath or the sound of metal as a pistol was cocked. Nisato remained motionless for several minutes until he was sure there was no immediate threat.

Taking a deep breath, he spun around and kicked the door inwards, moving swiftly inside, twisting this way and that to cover his blind spots and check the dead zones where an assailant might be lurking.

With quick, professional skill, Nisato moved from room to room, seeing no evidence of a struggle or any sign of Mesira.

He did, however, see plenty of evidence of a lost, desperate soul in need of a friend. Rumpled, dirty sheets covered a threadbare mattress in the corner of one room. Empty bottles of raquir lay scattered everywhere and the air reeked of *khat* leaves. Food wrappers lay where they had been thrown and Daron Nisato felt a terrible regret at not reaching out to Mesira.

Something told him that, as was often the case, regret only came when it was too late to do something about it. The place was empty and he lowered his pistol, saddened at the waste of a life that was laid out before him.

Nisato moved into the main room and walked over to the grimy window that looked out over the city of Barbadus. Sprawling and ugly, it simmered in the heat of the day, fumes and smudges of smoke staining the sky from the distant manufactories. Enforcing Imperial Law in a place like this wasn't how Daron Nisato had imagined ending his career with the Achaman Falcatas, but then life very rarely took you down the paths you imagined when you were young.

He remembered leaving the Schola Progenium on Ophelia VII, thinking of the plum assignments that would be his and the great things he would achieve in the service of the Emperor. For a time, it had been as he'd imagined. His service in the Falcatas had been honourable and he was, if not liked, (what commissar was ever really liked?) respected.

Then Colonel Landon, Old Serenity the men called him, had been killed at Koreda Gorge along with his senior officers and Leto Barbaden had assumed command. Nisato had met Barbaden only once before then and had not been impressed. The man was a quartermaster and regimental logistician, a man who dealt with absolutes and to whom men were simply numbers in a ledger.

Nisato shook off such thoughts, not liking where they were leading, and turned to face the room, seeing scattered papers on a leaning desk, a dark pile of clothing and a rumpled greatcoat.

Even as he took in the details, his attention snapped towards the wall opposite the window, where five words had been daubed in what he knew instantly was blood.

Help me… I was there.

Below that was a gleaming medal depicting a screaming eagle.

THEY WERE BEAUTIFUL.

Uriel had scarce seen anything that had filled him with such a welcome sense of return. Hidden at the back of the Gallery of Antiquities, they stood in serried ranks and gleamed in the dim light. The blue and white paint of their elongated helmet muzzles was scraped and every breastplate was dented or cracked from

long ago impacts.

Under normal circumstances, they would be considered horrifically damaged or, at the very least, grossly neglected, but to Uriel's eyes, these suits of armour were the most perfect things he had ever seen.

There were nineteen of them, each painted in quartered blue and white, the left shoulder guard a studded auto-reactive plate, the right stamped with a golden "U" over a pair of white wings. In each fist was clutched a bolter, some damaged, some gleaming as though fresh from the armoury.

'You recognise the Chapter symbol?' asked Uriel.

Pasanius nodded. 'The Sons of Guilliman,' he whispered, 'a founding of the thirty-third millennium. Unbelievable.'

'I know,' said Uriel, reaching to run a hand over the eagle emblazoned upon the nearest suit's breastplate. 'Mk VI, Corvus-pattern power armour.'

Uriel turned to Lukas Urbican, and the curator took a step back as he saw the anger in his face. 'How did this armour come to be here? How did the Falcatas come to be in possession of Astartes power armour? These should have been returned to their Chapter!'

'Oh no!' said Urbican quickly. 'These aren't battle trophies or spoils of war. These suits of armour were here in the gallery when I took on its upkeep, I assure you.'

Uriel saw the truth in the curator's fear and raised his hands in apology. 'I am sorry, I should have thought before I spoke, but to see Astartes armour paraded by mortals like this is… unusual. No Chapter would willingly leave such a precious legacy of their history behind.'

'I understand,' said Urbican, but Uriel saw that he did not and the curator was still shaken by his earlier anger. Uriel took a deep breath and said, 'Allow me to explain, Lukas. To a Space Marine, his armour is more than just plates of ceramite and fibre-bundle muscles, more than simply what shields him from the bullets and blades of his enemies. The armour becomes part of the warrior who dons it. Heroes have fought the enemies of mankind wearing this armour and upon their death, it is repaired and given to another warrior to fight in the name of the Emperor. Each warrior strives to be worthy of the hero before him and earn his own legend to pass on.'

'I think I understand, Uriel,' said Urbican, moving forward to place his hand on the scarred vambrace. 'You're saying that it is more than just a functional piece of battle gear, that there's living history in every plate. Legends are carved in every scar upon its surface and a life of battle encapsulated in its very existence. Yes, I see that now.'

'So how did they come to be here?' asked Uriel again.

'Well, as I said, you are not the first Astartes to come to this world,' said Urbican, 'although I believe it was many centuries before the Falcatas arrived that these warriors fought here.'

'Who were they fighting?'

'Ah, well, there things tend to get a bit hazy. The record keepers of Salinas were somewhat vague on that account, although there are veiled references to great beasts without skin, red-fleshed hounds that could swallow a man whole, and armoured warriors who could bend the very nature of reality. All lurid stuff, to be sure, and no doubt magnified by the writer, but whatever they were they were serious enough to warrant the attentions of Space Marines.'

Uriel recognised warriors of the Ruinous Powers from Urbican's description and shared an uneasy glance with Pasanius at the mention of great beasts without skin as the curator continued with his tale. Uriel had not forgotten that the Unfleshed still roamed the hills around Khaturian and knew he could not afford to leave them alone for much longer.

'There was talk of a great battle near an abandoned city in the foothills of the northern mountains.'

'I think we know that city,' said Pasanius. 'Khaturian isn't it?'

'Ah, yes, I believe that was its name,' said Urbican. 'Anyway, these Sons of Guilliman, as you call them, fought the enemy, but were, unfortunately, wiped out.'

'So where are the rest of the suits of armour?' asked Uriel.

'These are the only ones we have. The texts of the time talk of other Astartes coming to Salinas in the aftermath of the battle, warriors who were able to defeat these beasts.'

'Do your texts say who these warriors were?'

'No, although they were described as "giants in silver armour who smote the vile foe with lightning and faith". Apparently, they defeated the enemy and left immediately after the victory was won. I have always presumed they took whatever armour the Sons of Guilliman left behind.'

'Then why did they not take these?'

'According to the archive labels, they were discovered buried in the ruins of a collapsed building in Khaturian many decades later, by servitors hauling stone to build the new temple by all accounts. I suppose these silver giants must have missed them when they left.'

'What of the bones?' asked Pasanius. 'The warriors who wore this armour.'

'I'm sorry, I don't know. There was no mention of bones, just the armour.'

Uriel turned back to the silent warriors and walked along the line of Mk VI plate, now knowing that brother Space Marines had died fighting the great

enemy of mankind on this world in ages past. The dim light of the gallery seemed to shine in the depths of the eye lenses of the helmets, as though some flickering ember of the warriors who had worn this armour remained within.

'They were waiting,' said Uriel, and no sooner had he spoken the words than he felt the Tightness of them on a deep, instinctual level.

'Waiting for what?' asked Pasanius.

'For someone to find them and reawaken their glory,' said Uriel, the words leaping unbidden to his lips, as though spoken by another, 'to fight their enemies once more, and to bring them home.'

He stopped before a suit that had been punctured through the gorget by some unknown weapon, the plates, seals and inner linings of the armour buckled inwards. Dark stains striated the inner surfaces and, although centuries old, Uriel could smell the ancient hero's blood.

As he stared at the blood, Uriel felt the kinship he shared with this warrior on a level he could not articulate. This was a legacy of heroism that stretched back thousands of years, and even over the aeons of time and distance that separated them Uriel knew that this armour had not just been waiting: it had been waiting for *him*.

NO WORD WAS forthcoming from Governor Barbaden regarding the possibility of a medicae examining Pasanius's arm, so Uriel spent the next two days working on his suit of armour, working with craftsmen from the palace forges to restore it to functionality.

Pasanius had been reunited with his own armour, and soon Uriel no longer thought of this armour as belonging to another warrior.

It was his, though he knew that it would be his for only a limited time.

The armour belonged to the Sons of Guilliman and it would dishonour their warriors to wear it for any longer than was necessary. After a thorough inspection, it was clear that the damage was largely superficial, but with broken parts replaced with components from other suits, it was not long before Uriel stood before a fully restored suit of Mk VI plate.

Palace artificers were already attempting to modify the cable heads of their generators in an attempt to recharge the internal power of the armour, and they confidently predicted that they would have the armour fully functional within the day.

In the meantime, Uriel and Pasanius explored the Gallery of Antiquities with Curator Urbican. The gallery held many fascinating treasures, although none was as magnificent as the nineteen suits of Corvus-pattern power armour they had

discovered on their first visit.

Urbican was a genial host and a garrulous orator, endlessly pleased to have someone to whom he could hold forth on the history of the Falcatas and the world they had conquered.

On the eastern edge of the Paragonus sub-sector, a lynchpin of Imperial defences of the coreward approach to Segmentum Solar, the Salinas system was one of a dozen that had felt the wrath of an Imperial Crusade some thirty-five years ago. The core worlds of the sub-sector had fallen prey to agents of the Archenemy, and the forces of Warlord Crozus Regaur had begun to swallow up the outlying systems, one by one.

Before the enemy forces had gained an unbreakable hold on the sub-sector, the Imperium had retaliated, raising regiments from the oudying systems to fight the threat. Such measures held the enemy in check, but had not the strength to dislodge him from the sub-sector, and thus regiments from beyond the immediate sphere of the conflict were dragged into it.

The Falcatas had been one such regiment and had been tasked with cleansing the outer systems of taint. For the first planets of the Salinas system, it had already been too late, their governors overthrown and their populace in thrall to the enemy.

Along with a dozen other regiments and a demi-legion of titans from the Legio Destructor, the Falcatas had fought for two decades upon the blasted surfaces of these planets to drive Regaur's forces off-world. Urbican's voice choked as he told of the campaigns, and Uriel could only guess at the horrors and bloodshed he had seen in the liberation of the planets.

Salinas had been the third world in the system and when the Achaman Falcatas had made planet-fall, they had come as an army of conquest. Despite pleas of loyalty to the God-Emperor from the populace, the battle-hardened veterans of the Guard, men and women who had waded through blood and the dead for most of their adult lives, were in no mood for half measures.

The planetary governor had been executed and when his forces had taken arms in response to this, Barbaden had unleashed the full horror of the Falcatas' experiences of the last two decades.

Men and women who had desperately tried to minimise civilian casualties in their first months as soldiers, soon cared little for the collateral damage caused by their assaults and the local PDF regiments had been obliterated within months of planet-fall.

Although organised forces had been defeated, there remained a powerful core of resistance and, for many years, the Falcatas had fought a dedicated and utterly ruthless insurgent army named the Sons of Salinas that murdered Imperial

soldiers and bombed their bases.

All that had come to an end with the Khaturian Massacre.

Uriel saw that Urbican was reluctant to speak of this, but gently pressed the old curator over the course of their second day of exploration of the galleries.

'It was close to the fourth year after we arrived,' said Urbican. 'I wasn't there, of course, so I have this only secondhand. Well, the insurgents were getting out of hand and not a day went by without a bomb going off or a patrol being ambushed and slaughtered. We couldn't keep the peace; we were too few and our equipment was beginning to fail. Without re-supply and a corps of trained enginseers, tanks were getting a bit thin on the ground. We were getting weaker and they seemed to be getting stronger.'

'So what did Barbaden do about it?' asked Pasanius. 'He was still colonel then wasn't he?'

'He was,' agreed Urbican. 'He said that Khaturian was a base of operations of the Sons of Salinas and led the Screaming Eagles to surround it. Apparently, Barbaden gave the city fathers two hours to hand over the leader of the insurgents, a man named Sylvanus Thayer, or else he would order his men to attack.'

'I'm guessing they didn't hand him over,' said Uriel.

'They said they couldn't,' explained Urbican. 'They said he wasn't there, that he never had been. They begged Barbaden to call off his attack, but once Leto has his mind set on something, there's nothing anyone can do to dissuade him.'

'So what happened?'

Urbican shook his head. 'You must understand, Uriel, this is hard for me. The Killing Ground Massacre is not something I am proud to have associated with my regiment. All the good we did, all our honour and our glory died that day.'

'I know this is hard for you,' said Uriel. 'You do not have to go on if you do not wish to.'

'No,' said Urbican, 'some shames need to be told.'

The curator drew a breath and smoothed down his robes before he continued. 'Well, the deadline for the people of Khaturian to hand over Thayer came and went, and for a time they thought that Barbaden's threat had been a bluff.'

'But it wasn't, was it?'

Urbican shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'it wasn't. Marauder bombers flew in over the mountains and dropped a dreadful amount of bombs. They blew the city apart. You could see the fires from Barbadus. It was as if the whole sky was aflame, a terrible sight, just terrible, and, well, after that reports are somewhat confused.'

'Confused how?' asked Pasanius, scratching at his arm.

'No one I've spoken to seems to be able to agree on exactly what happened next or even how it happened, but Colonel Barbaden ordered the Falcatas into the ruins of Khaturian and when they came out six hours later, there wasn't a single soul left alive in the city.'

'He killed the entire city?'

'Yes,' nodded Urbican, 'seventeen thousand people in six hours.'

'What happened after the attack?' asked Uriel. The sheer scale of the dead was staggering.

'The Sons of Salinas, what was left of them, came down from the mountains,' said Urbican, shaking his head. 'Supposedly Sylvanus Thayer and many of his followers' families lived in Khaturian and, mad with grief and rage, he led them in one last glorious charge.'

'And they were destroyed,' said Uriel, guessing the outcome of that charge.

'They were, but what a magnificent, if futile, way to die: fighting the enemy with the green and gold of their cloaks flying out behind them as they charged,' said Urbican. 'But what chance did they have? They were guerrillas, not an army. Thayer and his men were pounded to ruin by artillery and then shot to pieces before noon. And that was the end of the resistance of Salinas. By the end of the week, we'd had Restoration Day over on the esplanade and that was that.'

'Except that wasn't the end of the resistance, was it?' asked Uriel, remembering the graffiti he had seen that said the Sons of Salinas would rise again.

'No, would that it had been,' said Urbican. 'The brutality of the Falcatas subjugation of Salinas is a matter of great shame to many of its former soldiers and the scars of that war are far from healed, Uriel. Thayer's second-in-command, a man named Pascal Blaise, took up where his friend had left off, although he doesn't have the weapons or training to be anything like as dangerous as Sylvanus Thayer.'

'Pascal Blaise?' asked Uriel. 'What does he look like?'

Urbican shrugged. 'I don't know, I've never seen him, but I'm told he's a shaven-headed man with a forked beard. Why do you ask?'

'I think I saw him during the attack on Colonel Kain's force when we arrived.'

'That wouldn't surprise me. The Sons of Salinas have an especial hatred for Verena Kain.'

'Why?'

'Well, she led the Falcatas into Khaturian,' said Urbican. 'Barbaden gave the order, but I believe it was her that went into the flames and carried it out.'

TWELVE

THE BAR WAS busy tonight. Cawlen Hurq had made sure of it. The buzz of conversation filled it and the smell of sweat and stale alcohol was powerful. Almost a hundred people filled the bar with noise, their conversations blurred into a raucous babble. Cawlen had six men with guns among the patrons and, as far as any place in Barbadus could be called safe, this place was safe. Pascal Blaise sat in a booth at the back, nursing a glass of raquir and wondering what had made him think this was a good idea.

'He won't come,' said Cawlen, 'not if he's got an ounce of sense.'

'He'll come,' replied Pascal. 'We have something he wants.'

'What makes you think he has any interest in her?'

'He was at her house,' said Pascal, taking a drink. 'He was looking for her.'

'So? That doesn't mean anything.'

Pascal knew Cawlen was right. There was no reason to think that Daron Nisato would come to the bar, except Pascal knew that he would. Daron Nisato, out all the men and women who had mustered out of the Falcatas, was the one person he credited with a shred of honour. He knew for a fact that Nisato had not been present at the Killing Ground massacre and had done all he could to learn the truth behind it.

Pascal scanned the faces that filled the bar, remembering the last time he had come here and the soldier of the Achaman Falcatas who had eaten the barrel of his pistol. The bloodstains had been cleaned from the roof, but Pascal could still see the impact the bullet had made on the roof beam.

'Guilt can be a great motivator,' he whispered.

'What?' asked Cawlen. 'Did you say something?'

'No, just thinking aloud,' replied Pascal.

Cawlen looked around the bar, his nerves jangling on the surface of his skin. 'I don't like it. What if Nisato comes here with a dozen enforcers? Everything we've done over the last ten years would be for nothing.'

'He won't.'

'You don't know that,' said Cawlen. 'It's too much of a risk.'

Cawlen was right, this was risky. He was exposed here. There was an undercurrent of fear and resentment in the bar; he could hear it in the too boisterous conversation and ever so slightly forced laughter. He could feel the peoples' fear and knew that part of that fear was thanks to him.

They were afraid of what might happen because of him being there.

Time was, these people would have done anything for him: helped his freedom fighters, provided them with food, shelter and information, but times had changed and ten years of misery and hardship had hardened a lot of hearts and eroded a lot of the goodwill he'd inherited from Sylvanus Thayer.

People were tired of war and he didn't blame them.

He was tired of it too.

The ironic thing was that he didn't hate the Imperium. For most of his adult life he had faithfully served the Golden Throne, making his own small contribution to the welfare of mankind. Then the Falcatas had come with anger in their hearts and blood on their blades and cut themselves into the flesh of the world.

A decade later, Pascal Blaise had lost the best years of his life fighting soldiers of an Emperor he had sworn to serve, but he was fighting them, not what they represented.

Pascal was not naive enough to think he could win, but he had come to realise that his fight had nothing to do with winning, and everything to do with justice. The guilty had to pay. It was as simple as that. The guilty had to pay and the natural order of justice had to be restored. He realised that none of the killing had been about anything other than that.

Yes, Cawlen was right, this was risky, but he was tired of killing and if this gesture could be the beginnings of an end to it, then it was worth a little risk.

'There he is,' said Cawlen, stiffening in his seat, his hand sliding to the pistol concealed beneath his storm cape.

'Ease up, soldier,' warned Pascal. 'We're not here for violence, and by the looks of it, neither is he.'

Daron Nisato had just entered the bar, his expression guarded and wary. The conversation dipped in volume as he ducked under the iron girder that served as a lintel and approached the bar. Pascal watched as the enforcer's eyes scanned the patrons with a lawman's gaze, sorting the threats from the chaff.

The enforcer could not know for sure what Pascal looked like, but his eyes settled on him and stayed there.

'He's good,' said Pascal as Nisato began to thread his way through the bar towards the booth. 'You've got to give him that.'

Cawlen grunted and rose from the booth as Nisato approached. The enforcer stopped at the table and said, 'I'm presuming it was you that sent the message to me.'

'It was,' confirmed Pascal. 'Sit down.'

Nisato glanced at Cawlen. 'Maybe I will, if you send your goon away. He's

making me itchy and if his hand moves any closer to the weapon he's got under his cloak, I'll break it off.'

'You can try,' growled Cawlen.

'Just give me a reason,' responded Nisato, squaring off against the big man.

Pascal clinked his glass against the bottle on the table. 'Can we just assume that we've passed through the pointless threats stage of this conversation please? Cawlen, back off. Mister Nisato, sit.'

Reluctantly, Cawlen Hurq backed away from the booth and Nisato slid onto the bench seat opposite Pascal. The enforcer stared at him and Pascal couldn't decide which emotion was uppermost in the man's features. Nisato was a handsome man, dark-skinned and with a prominent nose. His eyes were old, decided Pascal, but who on Salinas could say otherwise?

'Finished your inspection?' asked Nisato and Pascal smiled.

'My apologies,' said Pascal. 'It's not often I sit this close to a man who'd like nothing better than to put a bullet in me.'

'Is that what you think?'

'Don't you?'

'Not at the moment, but the night is young.' Pascal poured a glass of raquir for Nisato and slid it across the beaten metal table. 'I wasn't sure if you'd come,' said Pascal. 'I didn't think I would.'

'So why did you?'

'Because…' began Nisato and Pascal saw that he was struggling to rationalise to himself why he had come. 'Because someone had to. Mesira's got no one else.'

'Mesira? Is that her name?'

'Yes. You didn't know?'

'No,' said Pascal. 'She hasn't said much that's made sense since we found her.'

'Found her? You didn't take her from her house?'

'No, she was wandering the streets of Junktown, screaming and tearing at her body.'

Nisato frowned, clearly not having considered the possibility that the woman had wandered off by herself. His first thoughts had been of kidnap.

'Her mind's gone if you ask me,' offered Pascal.

'If you've hurt her…'

Pascal waved a placatory hand. 'Of course we didn't hurt her. Any hurt that's been done, she did to herself.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just what I say,' replied Pascal. 'She was in a pretty bad way when we found her.'

Nisato leaned back and took a drink of his raquir. 'How did you know I was

looking for her? Your message was pretty specific.'

'Come on, this was my city before it was yours. People tell me things. The head of the enforcers going to visit the witch woman doesn't go unnoticed. Why were you looking for her?'

'None of your business.'

'Is she your woman?' asked Pascal. 'Does the chief enforcer like getting his ya-yas from dangerous women?'

Nisato sneered. 'I told you, it's none of your business.'

'Fair enough,' said Pascal, holding up his hands.

The enforcer was visibly struggling to hold onto his cool and Pascal decided it was time to end this period of baiting. He took a deep breath and said, 'You want the truth? The woman means nothing to me. On any other day, I'd have left her in the street to die, but I knew she meant something to you.'

'So you want a favour, is that it? Blackmail?'

'No, nothing like that,' said Pascal.

'Then what?'

Pascal leaned over the table and placed his hand on Nisato's arm. The enforcer looked down at his hand as though it was a poisonous viper.

'I want the killing to end,' Pascal said. 'I want to end this grubby, dirty war with honour and if helping you out buys me a little goodwill, then it's a trade I'm willing to make.'

Nisato tried and failed to hide his surprise. 'This is a gesture of goodwill?'

'Exactly,' said Pascal, leaning back.

Nisato took a moment to consider what he had heard and Pascal could see that the idea was appealing to him. He remained silent, sensing that to intrude on the enforcer's thought processes would be a mistake.

At last Nisato leaned forward and said, 'Take me to her.'

* * *

'I DON'T LIKE this,' said Verena Kain. 'Not one bit.'

'Governor Barbaden does not share your misgivings,' said Uriel.

'Governor Barbaden,' she said, placing undue emphasis on his tide, 'no longer commands the Achaman Falcatas. The regiment is mine to command and it is my right to decide what is acceptable and what is not.'

'It was my understanding that the Achaman Falcatas were no longer a serving regiment, that they were now designated a Planetary Defence Force,' said Uriel, unable to resist the barbed comment. 'As such, they are Governor Barbaden's to command.'

Kain glared at him and Uriel felt a guilty satisfaction at her anger. Beside him, he could feel Pasanius's grim amusement at Colonel Kain's discomfort.

'It is *my* understanding that you were exiled from your Chapter.'

'Ah, but we are going home,' said Pasanius. 'The Falcatas will always be PDF.'

Uriel tried, unsuccessfully, to hide a smile as Kain angrily turned on her heel and stalked away to join her adjutant, a put-upon looking man named Bascome. Ever since Uriel had met Verena Kain, she had been bitter and spiteful, as though he somehow wronged her by his very existence. Since hearing of the slaughter that had taken place at Khaturian, the Killing Ground as it was known, he had little time for Kain or her ill-temper.

Uriel put Kain from his mind as he watched a number of servitors and the few remaining enginseers of the Falcatas prepare the coupling heads of the generators.

The air in the Screaming Eagles' vehicle hangar was cool and stank of metal and electricity. A pair of parked Leman Russ battle tanks sweated oil and fumes, with coiled and ribbed cables snaking from beneath their hulls to a coughing generator.

Uriel paid no heed to the powerful war machines, his attention firmly fixed on the suit of armour that stood in the centre of the hangar. Its surfaces had been cleansed and returned to their former glory by Leto Barbaden's craftsmen and, like the last warrior standing after a battle, the armour stood immobile, its joints locked and its strength existing only as potential.

The armour's backpack was bereft of power and no solution the palace adepts could devise would restore it. Pasanius had suggested that perhaps the military grade generators and couplings might have a better chance, and, after a petition to Governor Barbaden, a convoy of vehicles had traversed the city to the Screaming Eagles' barrack compound.

The enginseers there had jumped at the chance to work on the problem and their solution had been elegantly ingenious. The chargers for the onboard electrics of a Leman Russ had been adapted to run a powerful generator's output through a manually calibrated transformer, which would allow an enginseer to adjust the power supply to a level that the armour's backpack could use.

At least that was the theory. Whether or not it would work, was another matter entirely.

Uriel forced himself to be calm as he watched the enginseers work, taking solace in their apparent relish for the task. He could only hope that their competence matched their enthusiasm.

Pasanius stood beside him, resplendent and towering in his cleaned and

polished armour, a bolter held tightly in his gauntlets like a talisman. The palace artificers had done a magnificent job in undoing the damage that had been done on Medrengard and Uriel felt a surge of pride as he looked at the gleaming plates of his friend's armour.

His left shoulder guard had been repainted with the symbol of the Ultramarines and a laurel wreath. He looked every inch the Ultramarines hero he was.

The armour in the centre of the hangar had also been repainted in the colours of the Ultramarines, although Uriel had been careful to leave the helmet in the original colours of the Sons of Guilliman. To do otherwise would insult the heritage of the warriors who had worn it before him and Uriel had no wish for the armour to fail him in battle through any lack of respect done to it.

'You think this will work?' asked Pasanius.

Uriel considered the question before answering. 'It will,' he said.

'You sound awfully sure.'

'I know, but I can't believe the armour would have drawn us to it if this wasn't going to work.'

Pasanius simply nodded and Uriel could tell that his friend had felt a similar pull towards the armour in the Gallery of Antiquities. Some things were just felt in the bones and although it went against Uriel's training to believe in things he could not see and touch and know were real, he felt sure that he was meant to wear this armour.

'We are ready to begin,' called Imerian, one of the enginseers, a hybrid being of flesh and metal who was swathed in red robes and whose arms were partially augmetic. Uriel felt his muscles tense and walked over to the armour, placing his hand in the centre of the golden eagle upon the breastplate.

'You will live again,' he said.

'Captain Ventris,' said Imerian, 'you might want to step away from the armour. If we are unable to calibrate the energy flows correctly then it would be advisable to be some distance from the backpack. Ceramite makes for deadly shrapnel.'

Uriel nodded and stepped away from the armour, moving to join the rest of the personnel within the vehicle hangar behind a hastily erected bulwark of sandbags. Imerian unspooled a length of cable from a heavy, brass-rimmed wooden box carried by a serious-faced servitor and made a number of complex, last minute adjustments to the dials on the front of the box.

At last he appeared to be satisfied with the arrangements and his finger hovered over a chunky black dial in the centre of the transformer.

'Colonel Kain?' asked Imerian. 'We are ready.'

Kain shot Uriel a bitter look of resignation and nodded curtly, saying, 'Proceed.'

The enginseer waved his hand at a crewman who sat upon the upper hull of one of the Leman Russ tanks and its engine roared to life with a thumping bass note that shook the dust from the roof of the hangar.

A crackling, electric sensation danced on the air and a rising hum, like the throbbing beat that filled the heart of a starship built from the box carried by the servitor.

Imerian furiously worked the dials as needles jumped, snapping into the red sections on the far right of the displays.

Arcs of lightning sparked from the transformer and Imerian flinched. The hum from the box became a whine and Uriel felt a moment's fear as he wondered if something had gone horribly wrong with the process.

He looked around the edge of the sandbag barrier, seeing the red lenses of the helmet glowing brightly with power.

'It's working!' he cried.

A subtle vibration was passing through the armour, a miraculous sense of reawakening that made Uriel's heart sing. He stepped from behind the sandbags and marched across the hangar over the warning shouts of Imerian.

Uriel knew he had nothing to fear from this armour's rebirth, for it mirrored his own.

In the time he had spent away from the Ultramarines, he had been less than whole, a shadow of his former self, but as the armour was reborn to its sacred purpose, so too was he.

Uriel smiled, and the glow in the helmet's lenses was mirrored in his own.

DARON NISATO FOLLOWED Pascal Blaise up a set of metal stairs towards the bar's upper rooms. His footsteps echoed loudly on the metal and he found himself wondering at the strangeness of fate that found him breathing the same air as Pascal Blaise and not hauling him back to the enforcer's precinct house.

If Blaise was serious about opening a dialogue between the Sons of Salinas and the Imperial authorities, it could signal an end to the bloodshed that plagued the streets of Barbadus and a new beginning for Salinas.

Blaise pushed open a rusting iron door and beckoned Nisato into a long room with a handful of beds along one wall and a desk on the other. A single window looked out over the city of Barbadus. Mesira Bardhyl was sitting on one of the beds, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms hugged around her shins. She wore a shapeless, white robe and her arms were bound with bandages.

Nisato took a seat next to Mesira on the bed and lifted her chin, seeing that her eyes were glassy and far away.

'Emperor's blood, what happened to her?' he asked.

'That's pretty much how we found her,' said Pascal Blaise, 'except that she was naked.'

'Naked?'

'Like I said, I think her mind's gone.'

Nisato had seen the same blank look in many a soldier's face, the shattered mind behind the eyes no longer capable of dealing with whatever trauma had broken it open, and was forced to agree.

'Mesira?' he said. 'Can you hear me? It's Daron Nisato. I'm here to take you home.'

She rocked back and forth, shaking her head. 'No,' she said. 'Can't go home. No home to go back to. We burned it. We burned it all. He's coming for us. Won't let us go. Must punish us for what we did.'

'Mesira, what are you talking about?'

'The Mourner… He's coming for us,' sobbed Mesira, tears spilling down her cheeks, 'for all of us who were there.'

Nisato looked helplessly at Pascal Blaise. The man was pale and his eyes were wide.

'Do you know what she's talking about?' demanded Nisato. 'Who's this Mourner?'

'The Mourner,' said Mesira. 'I see him all the time… He's burnt, black and dead. His eyes though… His eyes are fire and he burns. No! Not with fire, no, not with fire, but with rage.'

'Damn you, Blaise,' snapped Nisato, rising from the bed and moving towards the leader of the Sons of Salinas. 'Tell me what you know. Who is the Mourner?'

Pascal Blaise swallowed heavily, looking over at Cawlen Hurq who stood at the doorway.

'It's what we used to call the old man,' said Blaise, 'Sylvanus Thayer.'

'The leader of the Sons of Salinas before you?'

'Yes,' said Blaise, nodding.

'But he's dead isn't he?' said Nisato. 'He was killed after the Khaturian massacre.'

Blaise didn't answer immediately and Nisato said, 'Wasn't he?'

'No,' said Pascal, 'he wasn't.'

SERGEANT TREMAIN PACED the walls of the Screaming Eagles' compound,

nodding and passing a word with the sentries as he went. His rifle hung loosely over his shoulder and his falcata was a reassuring presence at his hip, the sheath slapping against his thigh with every long stride he took. It felt good to be armed like an ordinary soldier, the familiar weight of the weapon he had first been issued with back on the old home world of Achaman. The old home world…

Tremain could barely remember the world of his birth, save that it was more temperate, more beautiful and more interesting than this ugly rock. His memories were rose-tinted, he knew. Every soldier's memory of home was, but even allowing for that, he still missed the spiced hint in the air and the golden sunsets in the russet skies.

He smiled at his unusually poetic turn of thought and paused beside a corner turret, a boxy construction of reinforced concrete, further protected by a layer of steel mesh to defeat shaped warheads. The turret scanned across the dead ground before the compound, twin autocannon protruding from the firing slit to cover the roadway that led from the urban sprawl of Barbadus.

The night was quiet, although the rumble of engines and a teeth-numbing hum of electrics coming from one of the vehicle hangars against the far wall was an unaccustomed disturbance. The two Space Marines they had found, Tremain didn't like to use the word detained, were in there with Colonel Kain. There was something about recharging a suit of armour, although he didn't really understand what was going on.

All he knew was that he didn't like it. Sergeant Tremain didn't like anything that upset the status quo-and he'd suspected those two warriors were trouble the moment he laid eyes on them within the fenced off area of the Killing Ground.

He'd known for certain when Uriel Ventris lied to him in the back of the Chimera.

Tremain shifted the rifle's weight on his shoulder and leaned out over the parapet to look at the smoky outline of Barbadus, squatting like a diseased tumour on the landscape. Of all the worlds they had been given to conquer, why did it have to be this one?

It was foolish to expose himself like this, but it enhanced his reputation amongst the men as a man who didn't care overmuch for the threat posed by the Sons of Salinas.

'Better watch out, sergeant,' said one of the wall sentries. 'You don't want to get your head shot off by a sniper.'

Tremain shook his head. 'Don't you worry about me, lad,' he said. 'The Sons of Salinas might be hard fighters, but they're not soldiers and they don't have a marksman worthy of the name to worry about.'

The sentry smiled and continued on his rounds, and once Tremain was

satisfied that he had waited long enough, he leaned back. It was all very well being blase about the Sons of Salinas, but fate had a strange sense of humour when it came to hubris, and it would be just his luck to make a crack like that and have a sniper blow his head off.

Tremain continued his rounds, finding that his gaze was continually drawn to the mountains that were little more than a jagged dark line on the horizon. He remembered the same mountains lit by the flames of Khaturian and shivered. He hadn't thought of the Killing Ground in many years. He tried to keep his thoughts away from that day as far as possible, but there was a strange sense of unease in the air tonight, an unease that made him think of past shames and which had driven him from the warmth of the barracks to wander the walls of the compound.

Perhaps it was simply the presence of the Space Marines that was unnerving him, for there could be no doubt that Sons of Salinas informers would have passed word of their arrival to enemy combatants, but something told him that whatever he was feeling had more to do with the past than what was transpiring here tonight.

Tremain paused on his rounds, looking up at the flag that billowed and snapped high above the walls, the golden screaming eagle, resplendent against a crimson field. The sight of the fiery eagle used to fill Tremain with pride, but every time he looked at it now, he felt a curious mix of sadness and regret.

The turret at the north corner of the compound wheezed as its hydraulics moved it around and Tremain slung his rifle about and quickly checked the charge. He set off at a casual pace, not wanting to seem too concerned, but anxious to know what had alerted the gunners.

The back of the turret was supposed to be sealed, but parts had been cannibalised to repair a damaged Leman Russ and thus Tremain was able to lean inside. Two gunners sat in uncomfortable metal seats before a chunky fire-control console and flickering pict screen. Waves of static rippled over the screen, intermittently spiking with a juddering image of the weapons' killing zone.

'What have you got?' he asked. 'Something moving?'

One gunner remained hunched over the screen, while the other turned to face him, a look of confusion plastered across his features.

'We're not sure, sergeant,' said the gunner. 'It looked like there was a crowd gathering at the edge of our range, but then…'

The man's words trailed off and when he didn't continue Tremain said, 'But then what?'

'Then they vanished,' said the gunner helplessly. 'One minute they seemed to

be there, the next they were gone, and then the targeters went to hell.'

That was certainly true. The pict screen was a hash of grainy nonsense, the speakers buzzing with static howls that sounded like a wounded animal.

'Probably a surveyor malfunction,' said the other gunner. 'They're getting worse every day.'

The soldier's sense for danger that had kept Tremain alive all these years was yelling in his ear that this was not some equipment malfunction, but something far, far worse.

'Keep at it,' he said, 'and sing out the moment you get a solid return.'

The gunner nodded and Tremain ducked back out of the turret and waved over a number of wall sentries. He toyed with ordering an alert, but Colonel Kain would have his balls in a sling if he took such drastic action without proof that something was really wrong.

Half a dozen soldiers joined him, their weapons at the ready, and bolstered by their presence, Tremain leaned over the wall again, sliding down his helmet's visor and allowing the optical augmetics to adjust to the darkness.

The lurid green of the night vision made everything blurry and ghost-like, and at first he wasn't sure what he was seeing, for it seemed too ridiculous to be true.

The ground before the walls was filled with people, thousands of shining, glowing people that drifted like wisps of wind-blown cloud. They fled in and out of focus, as though they weren't really there, but were simply impressions on the surface of the world.

There were things moving amongst them, though, horribly fast things that used the shifting, glowing mass as a shroud by which to approach. Tremain blinked as he caught a glimpse of one of the things moving below him, the breath catching in his throat at the horror of it.

He reeled back from the wall, tripping and falling on his backside as it leapt upwards.

Something slashed past Tremain. He heard a muffled grunt and his visor suddenly flared with brightness as something hot and wet splashed his face. Blinded, he staggered against the wall and wrenched the visor up in time to see a hulking monster squatting on the wall. It held the head of one his soldiers in its hands. The body this trophy had once belonged to was on its knees, jetting a vigourous fountain of arterial blood into the air.

The killer glistened in the reflected light of the compound, its flesh the hideous, slick blue and pink of a stillborn child. Its head was an elongated, twisted mass of molten flesh and bone, the eyes like hot coals placed in two wounds gouged in the meat of its face. Chisellike teeth unsheathed from its jaws and Tremain scrambled back on his rump, desperate to be away from this

abomination.

More were joining it, half a dozen and more, their elastic limbs hauling their vile bulks easily onto the walls. Tremain's terror soared and threatened to unman him as he saw their unnatural bodies, the nightmarish creations of a demented anatomist, all knotted masses of bone, flesh and muscle combined in unreasoning, lethal forms.

Shots were fired, bright in the half-light, and screams soon followed them.

Claws and teeth flashed. Blood squirted and men died.

Tremain scrambled for his rifle, but it was already too late.

The Lord of the Unfleshed reached down and tore him in two before his finger even slid through the trigger guard.

THIRTEEN

THE ARMOUR WAS coming alive before him. Uriel could feel the power coursing around its ancient machinery as surely as he could feel the blood in his veins. The subtle vibration of life was returning to the armour and the sense of approbation he felt from this rebirth was palpable.

Uriel could almost see the lighting running through the armour, strength returning to the long-dormant muscles that would give the wearer the power to smite his enemies and the protection to suffer their violence. To wear such armour was an honour few were worthy of and one Uriel knew he would have to earn.

Pasanius had joined him standing before the armour, and Uriel was again thankful for the loyalty and friendship his comrade offered him.

'How long now, Enginseer Imerian?' called Uriel, raising his voice to be heard over the threatening roar of the Leman Russ's engines and the throb of power.

Imerian risked sticking his head out from behind the sandbag barrier. 'I have the correct frequency, Captain Ventris, so it should only take another few hours for the backpack to become fully charged.'

Uriel did not reply, for he had seen the mask of battle drop over Pasanius's face. A second later, he knew why. Over the rumble of tank engines, his enhanced hearing picked out the sounds of gunfire.

'Colonel Kain!' he shouted, pinpointing the sound. 'Weapons fire! At your perimeter.'

Verena Kain emerged from the sandbagged barrier and placed her hand to the side of her head. Uriel saw her expression transform from one of irritation to one of cold, hard anger.

'Shut this down,' she ordered Imerian, before turning to draw her pistol and falcata, which she pointed at the Leman Russ, 'and fire up those tanks.'

'Let's go,' said Uriel, drawing his sword from its sheath.

Pasanius followed him, the borrowed boltgun clutched in his left fist, as a detachment of soldiers formed up on Colonel Kain. The commander of the Falcatas jogged over to the main doors of the hangar as they began to rumble open.

Uriel reached the doors at the same time and Kain favoured him with a withering expression of scorn.

'If this has something to do with you…' She left the threat unfinished.

'Then you can berate me for it later,' said Uriel.

The doors opened wide enough to allow egress from the hangar and Colonel Kain slipped through, her soldiers swiftly following her outside. Uriel let her go first; this was her command after all, but he made sure he caught up to her quickly.

No sooner had he emerged onto the open ground in the centre of the compound than a screaming siren split the night open. With a snap and an actinic clash of circuits, blinding arc lights flared to life, dispelling the night's darkness and bathing everything in bleaching brightness.

'Oh no,' said Uriel as he saw the carnage at the walls.

Monsters were loose in the compound.

The Unfleshed ran rampant through the soldiers of the Screaming Eagles, tearing limbs from torsos and undoing human forms with crushing blows or snapping bites. Their forms were huge and swollen, their previously exposed organs and meat now sheathed in slimy layers of new skin.

The Lord of the Unfleshed roared as the lights came on, towering, magnificent and unspeakable, as though his veins ran with light instead of blood. His tribe poured into the compound like an army, although less than a dozen of them remained alive. Men fled before them, only to be plucked into the air and casually dismembered. Las-bolts flashed and burned the air, but the flesh of these monsters was impervious to such inconsequential energies.

'What are they doing?' hissed Uriel.

'Killing,' replied Pasanius, reproach heavy in his voice.

Colonel Kain and the Falcatas that surrounded her watched in dumbfounded horror at the bloodshed being unleashed within their sanctum. Soldiers were beginning to emerge from one of the barracks, but a grotesque beast with reverse jointed legs and a hideously curved spine of knotted cartilage, hacked them down as they emerged. A sandbagged gun position opened up on the walls, the gunners knowing that killing their own men would be a kindness. Heavy calibre rounds hammered the inner face of the concrete walls, tore through the bloodied flesh of the dead soldiers and smacked wetly into the bodies of the Unfleshed.

The Lord of the Unfleshed leapt from the wall, his strength and power carrying him through the air to land on the roof of the second barracks building. His enormous weight smashed through the corrugated tin roof and he vanished from view, although his bellows of rage could still be heard.

Uriel ran towards the violated building, Pasanius hot on his heels as Colonel Kain fought to impose some kind of order upon her command. Screams and roars filled the air, the Unfleshed bludgeoning their way through the Screaming Eagles without mercy.

A beast with two fused heads and elongated arms that ended in stump-like claws sawed its way through the red-armoured soldiers, its flesh peppered with bullets and scorched by las-bolts.

One with a monstrous twin bulging from its flesh, slaughtered men and women and fed them to the ravenous growth, its lunatic hunger uncaring whether the meat was alive or dead.

Uriel tried to ignore the horrors around him, vaulting a metal girder fallen from the roof of the barracks. Inside, he could hear frantic screams, random bursts of las-fire and a terrible roar of pure hatred. He kicked aside the buckled door and pushed his way inside.

The interior of the barracks was an abattoir, worse than anything Uriel had dreamed while in the depths of the Omphalos Daemonium. Blood sprays coated every wall, broken bodies and shredded limbs lay scattered like debris from an explosion in a mortuary, and it seemed impossible that so many men could have died in so short a time.

'Emperor's blood!' he swore as he saw the Lord of the Unfleshed bend a man in half until his spine snapped and jagged bone erupted from his belly. Blood sprayed the giant creature and Uriel felt an almost physical hurt at this betrayal.

'Stop!' he shouted, raising his sword before him. He knew the weapon was scant defence against so colossal a creature. Had this weapon not been wrested from his hands in the belly of a lesser member of the tribe than its master?

'What in the Emperor's name are you doing?' demanded Uriel.

The Lord of the Unfleshed's head swung towards him, ponderous and dripping with blood. Scraps of meat and cloth hung from his jaws and Uriel saw a dull light in his eyes, a light that spoke of a thousand minds behind it.

'These men deserve to die,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'They were there.'

Uriel knew something of the history of the world and of the regiment that had claimed it, but how could the Lord of the Unfleshed?

'That is not for you to decide,' he yelled. 'Why are you doing this?'

'Because someone must,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'The dead must be avenged.'

Screams and the rattling bark of gunfire sounded from beyond the walls of the barracks, although a curious peace reigned within.

'Put that man down,' ordered Uriel. 'The Emperor will be angry if you hurt him.'

The Lord of the Unfleshed threw his head back and let loose a terrifying roar that encompassed a lifetime's worth of anger, hurt and self-loathing.

'The Emperor does not care for him,' said the Lord of the Unfleshed, displaying an eloquence that belied his previous utterances. 'He forsook this

vessel a long time ago, just as he forsook us.'

The words were spoken with a human mind, but a monster's mouth, and they came out sopping and malformed, cruel and bitter. Uriel heard the ache of loss in every mangled syllable and felt the pain behind the words, but whoever he spoke to was not the being whose flesh he addressed. Whatever intelligence-dwelled behind those burning eyes was not the creature that had set foot on Salinas with him.

'Enough,' said Uriel, turning and nodding to Pasanius, who aimed his bolter towards the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'You have to stop this, now!'

Seeing the weapon raised, the Lord of the Unfleshed lifted the weeping soldier high and plunged him, head first, into his enormous maw.

'Imperator, no!' cried Uriel. 'Pasanius, shoot!'

The air was filled with the distinctive bangs of bolter fire and mass-reactive shells stitched a path across the Lord of the Unfleshed, each one detonating within his body. New skin and old meat erupted from him, but not before the soldier was bitten in two. Uriel leapt forward, but the lower half of the dead man was hurled into him and he crashed to the ground.

More bolter shots ripped out, but the Lord of the Unfleshed was on the move once again. Uriel rolled to his feet as he saw the Lord of the Unfleshed crash through the outer wall of the barracks, smashing the cinderblock walls to powder as he went Pasanius was already outside, following the creature with barks of bolter fire, and Uriel clambered over the rubble to reach the inner compound.

Uriel saw that Pasanius was as accurate as ever, but that his bolts were having little effect on the Lord of the Unfleshed beyond the cosmetic. Blood and light streamed from the Lord of the Unfleshed, but what, if any, harm these wounds were causing was hard to tell.

Soldiers fought in tight groups, overlapping fields of fire spraying the Unfleshed with controlled volleys. Heavy weapon teams were setting up their guns to support their quicker comrades. As she had when the Sons of Salinas had ambushed her forces, Verena Kain was rallying her soldiers quickly and effectively.

It wasn't nearly enough.

Against other men, even other soldiers, her masterful leadership and the courage of the Screaming Eagles would easily have won the day, but they were fighting a foe beyond any they had fought before. Explosions burst among the Unfleshed, but neither fire nor shrapnel nor bullets could bring them low.

They shrugged off wounds that would have killed even the largest tyrannic beast thrice over, smashing through entire platoons and killing every soldier in the time it took to scream. Wounded light flowed from them as they were hit, the

glow knitting solid over the wound like a bandage.

The monsters were unstoppable, killing with a demented frenzy of rage.

Uriel's heart turned to ice as he saw the savage joy in the faces of the Unfleshed.

Whatever hopes he had held of their redemption, or for a new life, were being dashed before his eyes. There could be no atonement or forgiveness for relish taken in wanton slaughter.

Even as he ran to join the battle, a missile skewed in flight as its firer was disembowelled by a hooking punch from a clawed fist. It slashed through the air in a wild, spiral pattern before impacting on the compound's main generator building.

Uriel dived forward as the warhead punched through the lightly armoured door of the building and exploded, destroying the generator in a mighty blast that lifted the roof hundreds of feet into the air on a column of fire and demolished a portion of the outer wall.

The compound was plunged into darkness.

'WHAT DO YOU mean, Sylvanus Thayer's still alive?' demanded Cawlen Hurq.

'Just what I said, Cawlen,' said Pascal. 'Although he might as well be dead.'

Daron Nisato was as shocked as Hurq at the revelation that the old leader of the Sons of Salinas was alive, but the anger in Pascal's bodyguard was raw and in need of venting.

'You told us he was dead!' said Hurq, and Mesira put her hands over her ears at the noise. Nisato put an arm around her, but she flinched at his touch, moaning in anguish.

'And he was, to all intents and purposes,' said Pascal, trying to defuse Cawlen's anger. 'I found him on the battlefield the day after the fighting. There was almost nothing left of him, Cawlen, just scraps of flesh and blood. I don't know how he was still alive, but he was. I couldn't help him, so I took him to Serj Casuaban at the House of Providence.'

'To Casuaban?' said Cawlen. 'He's a Falcata!'

Pascal shook his head. 'No, he's been helping us since the Killing Ground Massacre.'

'He's been helping us? How?'

'Where did you think our medical supplies were coming from?'

Daron Nisato tried to concentrate on what the two men were saying, but Mesira was rocking back and forth with ever greater urgency.

'Why didn't you tell us?' asked Cawlen. 'We could have let the people know?'

'What good would it have done? Sylvanus was already a martyr. He had done more for us by dying than he ever could again,' said Pascal. 'Besides… He's… He's not the same man he was before.'

Nisato caught the strangeness of Pascal's tone and looked up from the weeping Mesira Bardhyl. 'What do you mean? How is he different?'

Cawlen Hurq glanced around at him and said, 'Stay out of this, enforcer. This doesn't concern you.'

Nisato stood and spun Hurq around. The big man looked set to go for his gun, but Nisato deftly plucked the weapon from the man's holster. He jammed the barrel in Hurq's belly and said, 'Sit down and shut up.'

Reluctantly, Hurq did as he was ordered and Nisato turned to Pascal Blaise. 'What did you mean he's not the same man? I've had to shoot men who woke from comas or serious injuries with latent abilities that they did not possess before. Is that what you mean?'

'Something like that,' agreed Pascal. 'He couldn't speak or move. There wasn't enough left of him to do either, but… you could feel it when you were around him.'

'Feel what?'

'His anger,' said Pascal, 'his unquenchable anger.'

A scream made both men flinch and Nisato turned to see Mesira Bardhyl standing by the window, looking out into the night's darkness with her arm extended. Her face was lit by the soft glow of the city beyond, but as they watched a brighter glow from beyond the glass illuminated her face with hot, orange light.

Nisato rushed to her side. 'What is it?' he asked.

'The Mourner,' hissed Mesira.

Daron Nisato and Pascal Blaise watched as a blooming pillar of fire lifted from beyond the edges of the city. Seconds later, the rumble of the explosion rolled over them, accompanied by the popping crack of small-arms fire.

'That's the Screaming Eagles' compound,' said Nisato. 'Your handiwork, Blaise?'

'No,' said Pascal, and Nisato believed him, 'not mine, I swear.'

'It's the Mourner,' said Mesira Bardhyl. 'He's found one. He's killing them all to get to her.'

She turned to face him and Nisato saw that she was smiling with calm serenity.

'He's coming for me next.'

URIEL HAD NO weapon but his sword, and this he put to good use as he fought his way into the mass of struggling bodies. The Unfleshed were stronger than ever, their bodies filled with a power they had not possessed before, and they had been horrifically powerful then.

A towering shape rose up before him, a monster with lumpy stumps for legs and a frill of flesh that hung from its chest and rippled with life. Unnatural bone structures beneath the skin lashed out at Uriel, but he parried desperately as taloned hooks sought the soft meat of his throat.

He rolled beneath a lashing bone hook and slashed his sword through the beast's flesh. The blade cleaved through its body, but no sooner had it torn clear than the strange light that filled the beast restored the flesh whole.

The creature howled, despite the healing effect of the light, and it backed away from him, seeking easier prey among the Screaming Eagles. Uriel let it go as he sought out Colonel Kain in the confusion of the battle.

With the generator destroyed, the conflict was being fought in the strobing darkness of muzzle flashes, las-bolts and the diffuse glow of reflected starlight. Struggling knots of soldiers ran from cover to cover as the Unfleshed tore through the compound, demolishing barricades, gun emplacements and buildings as they went.

The fuel store erupted in a great mushroom-cloud of fire as a stray round punctured its skin and the reek of promethium filled the air. Burning clouds billowed upwards and burning streams of promethium spilled through the compound.

Uriel ran through the chaos of the battle to join Pasanius, his friend firing the last of his bolt rounds at a monster with swollen arms that pounded its way through the medicae building and butchered the wounded with great, clubbing sweeps of its iron-hard fists.

'How many rounds do you have?' shouted Uriel over the din of battle.

'One magazine left,' said Pasanius, 'but it's tricky to reload.'

Uriel swapped his sword for the bolter, ducking behind the cover of an avalanche of sandbags as he quickly and expertly reloaded the weapon.

'Thanks,' said Pasanius, as Uriel returned the weapon and took his sword back. 'Now what? What in the name of the Emperor is going on? Why are they doing this?'

'They're not,' said Uriel, finally catching sight of Colonel Kain.

The bark of heavy weapons joined the fight as soldiers clambered up to the hatches of parked Chimeras and unleashed torrents of las-fire from muld-lasers or hails of shells from heavy bolters.

'What do you mean?' demanded Pasanius, firing over the sandbags into the

monster attacking the medicae building. 'I'd say they are.'

'This isn't them,' persisted Uriel. 'I don't know what, but there's something controlling them, I'm sure of it.'

Pasanius shrugged, and Uriel realised that, at this moment, it didn't matter why the Unfleshed were attacking the Screaming Eagles, just that they were. The Lord of the Unfleshed was killing men by the dozen with every roar and swing of his massive fists, his flesh an impregnable fortress and proof against all weapons.

'Then I hope you have a plan,' said Pasanius. 'Otherwise they're going to kill everyone here, including us.'

Uriel had no answer for Pasanius, but then the roar of engines sounded from the hangars as a trio of Leman Russ battle tanks rumbled from within. The main guns would be useless within the compound, but each vehicle carried a host of support weapons and their bulk alone could turn the tide of the battle.

A great cheer went up from the Screaming Eagles as the tanks emerged, and Colonel Kain lifted her sword high for all to see. A soldier unfurled a banner and the sight of the crimson emblem of the Achaman Falcatas gave the soldiers heart.

Uriel watched the lead tank, the vehicle that had begun to power his armour, split the night with an incandescent spear of light from the lascannon mounted on its hull. A beast with scything limbs fell, sheared in two by the beam, its entrails cooked and its blood boiled to steam. The other tanks sawed the bullets of their sponson weapons across the Unfleshed, the creatures driven back from the fight by the sheer weight of fire.

The great metal beasts did not cow the Lord of the Unfleshed, however. He cast aside the body of the soldier he had just killed and charged the tank with his head lowered and his fists balled at his side.

Just as it seemed he would run headlong into the vehicle, the Lord of the Unfleshed leapt into the air and landed on the tank's frontal section. Bullets ripped across his body, but slowed him not at all. Monstrously powerful hands closed on the foreshortened barrel of the tank's main gun and inhumanly strong arms ripped upwards.

With a screech of tortured metal and a fountain of sparks the entire turret was wrenched clear. The turret gunner fell from the ruin of the main gun's housing, only to be crushed by the treads of his tank. The Lord of the Unfleshed slammed the twisted wreckage into the side of the tank, crushing the side guns and buckling the hull inwards with tremendous booms of metal.

The tank's engine howled in protest, jetting filthy blue oil-smoke as it seized and died. Flames erupted across its rear quarter and with his foe defeated, the

Lord of the Unfleshed hurled the buckled and twisted mass of the turret across the compound and vaulted to the ground.

With a rousing battle cry, Colonel Kain led the charge of the Screaming Eagles.

Uriel rose from cover as they charged, admiring their courage while cursing the futility of the gesture. These men could not triumph against the Unfleshed, not while some dark power worked their bodies like marionettes and healed killing wounds.

'Come on!' he shouted, and Pasanius rose with him.

He charged through the blazing compound, the reek of burning promethium filling his senses and the thick pall of black smoke making his eyes water and his throat burn. The heat was incredible, leaping flames devouring the compound with a furious appetite.

The Unfleshed and the Screaming Eagles clashed in the centre of the compound, a battle fought in the bright heat of the fires. It was a battle that could only end one way, but the Screaming Eagles fought with a fatalistic fervour that spoke volumes of their involvement in the Killing Ground Massacre.

Uriel swept his sword out as a beast with arms like pistons and a hunched spine loped towards him through the smoke and flames. Its mouth was a lopsided horror of broken teeth and rotted gums, its eyes a gelatinous mess of run-together pupils and milky irises. Its flesh was glistening and new, but rotten and slick, as though grown from diseased cultures.

It spat a mouthful of obscenities, its fist thundering towards him as it screamed. Uriel turned the blow aside and spun around the creature, driving his sword down into its back. The blade grated on a malformed spine and Uriel twisted the sword as he thrust it deep into the monster's body.

It shrieked and dropped to its knees as Pasanius ran up and hammered his armoured boot into its face. Fangs snapped and bloody phlegm sprayed the air.

Uriel wrenched his sword free in a wash of light and frothing blood. Pasanius jammed his bolter into the beast's mouth and pulled the trigger. Light exploded in its skull and the back of its head mushroomed outwards.

The monster collapsed, steaming brain matter leaking from the opened lid of its skull, and Uriel saw a mist of light follow it into the air. He cried out as he felt the enraged frustration within the light and dropped to his knees as the force of it threatened to overwhelm him.

Uriel dropped his sword as his vision blurred and he saw the compound and the walls surrounding it thronged with observers, spectral figures who watched the carnage enacted in their name dispassionately. Hundreds of figures jostled for position on the walls and Uriel shook his head as he fought to free his

thoughts from their desire for vengeance.

'Uriel!' cried Pasanius, and the spell was broken.

The creature they had fought was dead, the healing light having fled at its demise, but Uriel saw that this was the only triumph in the battle so far.

Flames had claimed those the Unfleshed had not. Men of fire screamed as they were consumed and Uriel felt a horrible sense of vindication from the invisible voyeurs who had set this slaughter in motion.

'We have to get out of here,' said Pasanius. 'We can't win this.'

Uriel nodded, sweeping up his sword. 'I'll try to reach Kain.'

He rose to his feet and sought the banner of the Screaming Eagles, catching sight of it through the flames as Colonel Kain fought a losing battle against the monsters butchering her soldiers.

'Over there!' said Uriel. 'Come on.'

They set off through the flames towards the beleaguered warriors, and Uriel could feel his skin blistering from the heat. He could only imagine the pain the mortal soldiers must be feeling.

Uriel saw Verena Kain fall, bleeding from a deep wound to her shoulder. The creature closed on her for the kill, but her men valiantly formed a line before her, guns rippling with fire and curved swords ready to defend their colonel.

In the face of their firepower, the beast fell back and Uriel skidded to a halt beside Kain.

The woman was tough, Uriel had to give her that. Her left arm hung uselessly at her side and her face was a fire-lit mask of blood. She looked up at Uriel and her face was wretched with anger.

'My men are dying because of you!' she shouted over the gunfire and roar of flames. 'I don't know how, but I know this has something to do with you.'

'Colonel Kain,' began Uriel, 'you're right, but deal with it later. We have to get out of here, now. This isn't a fight we can win.'

'Never!' said Kain. 'The Screaming Eagles never sound the retreat.'

'I know,' snapped Uriel. 'I heard Old Serenity's saying, but he died, and so will you if we stay here.'

He thought she was going to refuse, but saw the spark of anger fade from her eyes to be replaced by the weary resignation of acceptance. Uriel nodded and turned to Pasanius as an enormous shadow blotted out the light of the fires. The bearer of the Screaming Eagles' banner was killed as his head was ripped from his shoulders and a steaming pillar of blood erupted from his shorn neck.

Uriel spun around as the banner fell. The Lord of the Unfleshed towered over him, his form impossibly massive and swollen since Uriel had last laid eyes upon him. Light shone beneath his skin, too bright to look upon where it oozed

from his wounds, and his muscles were aflame with borrowed power.

A fist like a boulder slammed into Uriel, hurling him through the air to land in an ungainly heap against the hull of the wrecked Leman Russ. Bright lights danced before his eyes and he fought for breath, hearing the bark of bolter fire as Pasanius opened fire.

The Lord of the Unfleshed smote Pasanius with a terrible blow that crushed him to the ground, and then reached for Verena Kain. The colonel of the Screaming Eagles had lifted her regiment's banner from the earth and the rippling silk of the flag was on fire. Uriel cried out and pushed himself to his feet, swaying as he lurched towards the Lord of the Unfleshed.

Colonel Kain hacked at the Lord of the Unfleshed with her falcata as she was lifted from the ground in his enormous fist. Blood and light seeped from the wounds, but she could not break the hold the enormous creature had on her.

Uriel saw the anger on the Lord of the Unfleshed's face, an anger that was so distilled and overwhelming that it halted him in its tracks, so singular was it. This was no anger the Unfleshed possessed, this was the anger of those without voice, the anger of those who had only this last revenge left to them.

The Lord of the Unfleshed carried the struggling colonel over to the blazing plume of promethium that was all that remained of the fuel store. Uriel tried to keep up, but his limbs were leaden and the breath burned in his lungs.

'No,' he hissed through gritted teeth as he realised what must come next.

The Lord of the Unfleshed paused, as though to relish what he was about to do. He leaned in close to Verena Kain and though he whispered the words, they echoed in the skulls of everyone within the compound.

'You were there.'

Then he hurled her into the white heat of the flames.

Uriel cried out, a wordless exclamation at the horror of this murder, and the Lord of the Unfleshed tipped back his head to let loose a terrible, roaring howl of desperation. The creature turned his wounded, blistered, face to Uriel and the look that passed between them was intimate, a moment of shared repulsion.

The Lord of the Unfleshed dropped its face and the moment of connection was over as the multitude of minds that had taken over the workings of the Unfleshed tightened their grip.

There was no gunfire anymore. The compound was silent, but for the anguished cries of dying soldiers. The Lord of the Unfleshed roared and called his tribe to him as Uriel staggered through the bloody debris of the battle.

'Why?' he shouted. 'Why did you need to do this?'

The Lord of the Unfleshed looked up and the white light of vengeance burned there like fiery comets in his eyes.

'Because they were there,' he said. 'All must be punished.'

With that dreadful pronouncement, he turned away, leaping through the gap in the wall blown by the explosion of the generator building. The remaining Unfleshed swiftly followed him, and Uriel saw that they were moving towards the simmering city of Barbadus.

With awful certainty, Uriel knew that this night's bloodshed was not over.

FOURTEEN

LETO BARBADEN WATCHED the fires raging to the north of his city from the highest garret of his private library. He knew the source was the Screaming Eagles' compound, but he felt nothing for the men and women he knew must be dying beneath the pall of smoke, a dark smudge against the night sky.

He knew the reasons for the attack, but cared little for them. The people of Barbadus were venting their aggression against their conquerors. It was the only reaction the corpse of a beaten populace could make against their rulers, the last, spastic, gasps of a body that did not yet know it was dead.

That it was only natural was no excuse, however, and he had already ordered more units onto the streets to keep the peace, with force if need be. He would have order, even though blood would be spilt and lives lost to enforce it.

Barbaden turned away from the shielded window and laced his hands behind his back as he descended the iron screw-stair to the main floor of the library. He had known that the early years of his governorship would be difficult; it was the lot of great men to deal with difficult times, but it was a measure of their greatness how they dealt with them.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and crossed the marble floor of the library, taking a deep breath of the musty odour of his books, papers and manuscripts. He had painstakingly assembled the books over decades of war, transporting them from campaign to campaign. The solid, reassuring feel of the facts and figures bound to their pages were a constant comfort to him and he slid a gold-spined volume from the shelf, a biography of Solar Macharius, as he made his way to his drinks cabinet.

He had always admired the great Lord Solar, a man of singular vision and determination who was only undone by the cowardice of lesser men. It was the curse of genius that, so often, their greatness was thwarted by the shortcomings of their contemporaries. Lord Solar Macharius had reached the edge of known space, had stood at the very edge of the galaxy, and had dared to meet the gaze of the halo stars.

Only tremulous men who laughingly called themselves warriors had prevented him from conquering those stars for the Emperor. Only the weakness of spirit of his followers had prevented Macharius from achieving his true potential. Leto Barbaden had long ago decided that no such weakness, in him or others, would hold him back from achieving his greatness.

He poured a generous measure of raquir before sitting in the room's only chair and opening the smooth, vellum pages of the book. His beloved words stared out at him, their beauty containing immutable facts and the course of history in every cursive line and illuminated letter.

Leto Barbaden loved to read volumes of history, the more detailed the better, for he was a man to whom the minutiae of history were the choicest sweetmeats. History was written by the victors, an aphorism as old as time, and thus Leto Barbaden knew that his position in history was assured, at least on this world.

Where others might see cruelty, he saw strength of will.

Where others saw coldness and lack of emotion, he saw resolve.

Leto Barbaden knew he was humanity without the drag of conscience or emotion.

He embodied reason and logic uncluttered by emotion, for emotion was a failing of those without the courage of their convictions.

Some might call him a monster, but they were fools.

This was a harsh, grim galaxy and only those who could detach themselves from the ballast of emotion could rise above such petty concerns as morality or right and wrong to do what needed to be done.

He had known that since Colonel Landon had been killed at Koreda Gorge along with his senior officers. The men had called him Old Serenity, a name Barbaden found absurd. How could a name like that be suitable for a man who made war his profession?

Landon would not have had the stomach for the conquest of Salinas. His passions were too close to the surface and he cared too deeply for his men to have succeeded. To Landon, bringing his men back alive in the face of the steel teeth of war was all important, but Leto Barbaden knew that if there was one resource the Imperium was not short of, it was manpower. Machines and weapons were precious commodities, but soldiers could always be replaced, and so too could populations.

It was a truth Barbaden had come to early in the war against the Sons of Salinas, realising that no matter how many people he killed, there would always be more. People were ugly, brutish confections of meat, bone and desires, living sordid little lives and breeding like flies as they went about their pointless lives.

It seemed inconceivable that no one else was able to see this, that life was nothing to be valued so highly.

He alone had understood this stark fact when he had ordered the destruction of Khaturian, knowing that the scale of such killing would so inflame his enemy's passions that they would have no choice but to meet him in battle.

Sylvanus Thayer, who had proved to be a worthy adversary until the death of

his family, had led his warriors into an unwinnable battle, and Barbaden smiled as he remembered the sight of the scorched battlefield that had seen the Sons of Salinas destroyed.

Once again, emotion had destroyed a potentially great general.

He read for another hour, sipping his raquir and flipping to quotes from Solar Macharius that he had long ago memorised. His finger trailed down the page until he found his favourite.

'There can be no bystanders in the battle for survival,' he read aloud. 'Anyone who will not fight by your side is an enemy you must crush.'

Barbaden smiled as he read the quote, recognising the genius inherent in those few words.

Brevity and clarity were traits he admired and attempted to emulate.

A knock came at the door and he said, 'Enter.'

The doors opened and the frock-coated Eversham entered, his face pale and his steps hurried. Barbaden lifted his head from his book, seeing that his equerry carried an encrypted data-slate and noting his unkempt appearance.

'Your formal attire is somewhat dishevelled, Eversham,' said Barbaden. 'Smarten up before I have you broken down to kitchen scrubber.'

Eversham looked set to speak without smartening up, but had the sense to pause and fasten his collar and straighten his coat first. As the man opened his mouth to speak, Barbaden cut him off.

'Are you familiar with the works of Lord Solar Macharius?' he asked.

Eversham shook his head, and Barbaden saw that it was taking all his iron control not to speak out of turn. 'No, my lord. I regret I am not.'

'This is one of my favourite quotes, "The meaning of victory is not to defeat your enemy but to destroy him, to eradicate him from living memory, to leave no remnant of his endeavours, to crush utterly his every achievement and remove from all record his every trace of existence. From that defeat no enemy can ever recover. That is the meaning of victory". Rather inspiring isn't it?'

'Yes, my lord,' said Eversham, 'very.'

'You are sweating, Eversham,' noted Barbaden. 'Are you unwell?'

'No, governor,' replied his equerry, holding out the data-slate, as though anxious to be rid of it.

'Tell me,' began Barbaden, ignoring the slate, 'what is the nature of the trouble at the Screaming Eagles' barracks?'

'We don't know yet, my lord. There are reports of gunfire and several explosions, but we have been unable to make contact with Colonel Kain or any of her staff.'

'Very well, order two companies of palace guard to find out what is happening

and to secure the site.'

'Of course,' said Eversham, once more offering him the data-slate.

'What is this?' asked Barbaden.

'An astropathic communication,' said Eversham. 'The Janiceps received it earlier this evening and the Diviner Primaris has just finished his interpretation.'

'A communication from whom?'

'I don't know, my lord,' replied Eversham. 'It came in with the highest priority prefix. It is evidently for your eyes only. No sooner did the diviner transcribe the words than a telepathic mnemo-virus implanted within the message erased his mind, completely.'

Curious, Barbaden took the proffered slate and slid his finger into the reader, wincing at the pinprick of the gene-sampler. With his identity confirmed, the slate flickered into life and the words of the brain-dead diviner scrolled down the screen in silver letters.

He read the body of the message and his eyes widened in surprise.

Slowly, and with deliberate care, Barbaden handed the slate back to Eversham. He closed his book and laid it on the table next to the chair. He rose to his feet and smoothed the front of his tunic, struggling to control a rising panic that stirred in his breast.

'Prepare my private embarkation deck on the upper spires,' he said. 'We are about to receive some important visitors.'

THE TRAIL OF the Unfleshed was not difficult to follow, for they had not been careful in their passage. Their tracks were easy to see, but even had they moved without leaving imprints on the ground, the debris of their course would have been easy to recognise.

Uriel rode in the commander's hatch of a Chimera, its width only barely able to accommodate his genhanced girth. He had been forced to leave his armour in the care of Enginseer Imerian back at the compound, for there was no time to encase himself within it and no telling how long the charge in the backpack would last. If he survived the night, he would return for it in the morning.

Beneath him, Pasanius and five soldiers rode in the Chimera's troop compartment, bloody and in shock at the ease with which their fastness had been breached and their colonel slain.

Two more Chimeras, laden with those soldiers still fit enough to fight, followed behind Uriel's, racing through the dim light of the city's outskirts as they followed the trail of destruction unleashed by their quarry.

In truth, Uriel didn't know exactly what he hoped to achieve by following the

Unfleshed. If the entire company of Screaming Eagles could not defeat them, what chance did this ragtag assembly of force have?

He only knew that he had to catch them, if for no other reason than to salve his own conscience. The destruction wrought at the Screaming Eagles' compound was his fault, and the guilt of what his foolish trust had allowed to happen weighed heavily on his soul.

How could he have been so blind to the bestial core of the Unfleshed? Yes, their outward appearance was that of monsters, but Uriel had seen past that to what he had believed was the human nobility at their heart.

Though he felt sure that some darker power was at work within them, he knew it would have found no purchase in souls that were pure. Some rotten canker must have lurked at the heart of the Unfleshed for this power to latch onto, and Uriel cursed himself for a fool for not seeing it.

The deaths of these soldiers were on his conscience, no matter what they might have done in the past to be deserving of retribution. Uriel pushed such thoughts from his mind, forcing himself to concentrate on the task at hand.

The Chimeras rumbled through the streets of the city, the buildings around them tall and metallic, squat and brick-built. The variegated architecture of Barbadus sped past them, flickering faces at shuttered, window-, less openings watching them fearfully as they passed. That death was abroad on the streets of Barbadus was common knowledge, the breath of its passing emptying the streets of all but the most curious. Even those few lingering pedestrians quickly abandoned whatever task they were about to be clear of the streets as Uriel's desperate procession sped past.

Death was hunting tonight and it would take whoever called its name.

THOUGH IT WAS too far away and too dark to make out any details, it was clear that a tremendous battle was underway at the Screaming Eagles' compound. Flames licked the sky and the rattle of gunfire had ceased.

'Whatever was going on over there's over now,' observed Pascal.

Nisato did not reply, staring into the distant flames as if to discern some answer from the darkness. Pascal Blaise claimed not to have any knowledge of what had happened, and, much as Nisato wanted to disbelieve him, he knew in his gut that the man was telling the truth.

This had nothing to do with the Sons of Salinas, but if not them, then who?

'We should get out of here,' said Pascal Blaise. 'If she's right and whatever hit the Screaming Eagles is coming here…'

Nisato nodded and turned back to Mesira. She had resumed her earlier

position on the bed, knees drawn up to her chest and arms wrapped around them.

'Mesira?' he said. She looked up, her tear-streaked face no longer drawn into the scrunched expression of fear and guilt it perpetually wore. 'What happened out there tonight? Do you know?'

'It's the Mourner,' she replied. 'He's killed her and now it's my turn.'

'Killed who?'

'Colonel Kain. I felt her die. It was painful.'

'For you?' asked Nisato.

'For both of us.'

Pascal Blaise joined him at Mesira's side. 'Kain's dead? You're sure?'

Mesira nodded and Nisato saw the hollow satisfaction in Blaise's eyes.

The leader of the Sons of Salinas looked up and met his gaze. 'Don't expect me to shed any tears for that bitch,' he said. 'Kain led the Screaming Eagles into Khaturian. She had the blood of thousands on her hands. She got what she deserved.'

'And what do you deserve, Pascal?' said Nisato. 'What do any of us deserve? Haven't we all got blood on our hands? Do we all deserve to die?'

'Maybe,' shrugged Blaise. 'Maybe we do. I've killed men, yes. I've shot them and blown them up, but I don't feel any remorse. The men I killed came as invaders to my homeland. What else could I have done? If soldiers with guns attack the people you love, you'd fight them, wouldn't you?'

'I suppose,' said Nisato, 'but—'

'But nothing,' snapped Pascal. 'This was our world. We were loyal to the Golden Throne, but Barbaden wouldn't listen to us. He killed our leaders and butchered our soldiers. What kind of people would we have been if we hadn't resisted? And don't pretend you're better than me, enforcer. I can't imagine that your hands are any less bloody than mine. How many terrified soldiers have knelt before you, begging for their lives before you shot them in the name of the Emperor? Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands even?'

Nisato rounded on Pascal Blaise, his anger rising with every accusation hurled in his face.

'Yes, I've killed men too,' he snarled, 'and every one of them deserved his fate. They had faltered in their service to the Emperor.'

'Then perhaps we are not so different after all,' said Pascal. 'Perhaps right and wrong are just matters of perspective.'

Nisato sighed, the anger draining from him as the truth of Pascal Blaise's words sank in. He sighed and sat next to Mesira, running a protective hand through her hair.

'There is no right or wrong in our professions,' said Nisato. 'The present

changes the past from moment to moment. We can only pray for the future to vindicate our actions.'

Mesira looked up at him, smiling. 'I'm not afraid any more,' she said.

'No?'

She shook her head. 'No. All these years I've lived with what I saw, what I allowed to happen. Now it's over. He's coming for me and I'll be at peace.'

'I won't let anyone harm you,' said Nisato, 'I promise.'

Mesira smiled and Daron Nisato had never seen her more beautiful. The cares and troubles she had worn like a second skin fell away, leaving her luminous, as though a gentle light shone within her bones.

'You don't have to worry about me, Daron,' said Mesira. 'It's going to be all right.'

'I hope so.'

She leaned over and kissed his cheek, the touch of her lips on his skin electric, sending a pleasurable, warm sense of peace through him. 'You are a good man, Daron, better than you know.'

Mesira Bardhyl stood, taking his hand, and he allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. She reached out to take the hand of Pascal Blaise and said, 'If this world is to survive, then it will be men like you that will save it. You have both done terrible things in your lives, but they are in the past. All that matters now is the future. Old hatreds must be put aside and new bonds forged between the people of this world. Do you understand?'

Nisato looked from Mesira to Pascal. Her words were like a cool stream that washed him from his decaying suit of skin to the very core of his marrow. Was this some psyker magic? Had whatever madness possessed her to wander naked from her home unlocked yet more powers within her?

Whatever flowed from Mesira, he could feel no evil within it and let its healing light bathe him with its restorative powers.

'I understand,' he said, seeing the same illumination within Pascal Blaise. Without knowing how, he knew that they would both be changed forever by this contact.

Mesira released their hands and Nisato felt a sting of disappointment at the withdrawal of her touch.

The door opened behind her and Cawlen Hurq reentered the room, a rifle slung over his shoulder, and the pistol, which Nisato had returned to him before he'd left, clutched in his fist. Nisato felt nothing for Hurq; not hate, not fear, nothing. It was as if all the rancour and posturing that had passed between them had been erased.

'Cawlen,' said Pascal, taking a moment to recover from the contact with

Mesira. 'How many men have we got here?'

'Including us, eight,' said Hurq, 'but I've sent the word out and there'll be others arriving soon. What are we expecting? Falcatas?' The man's tone was eager and Nisato felt pity for him, so caught up in his hatred was he.

'No, I don't think so,' said Pascal. 'I'm not sure exactly, but stay alert.'

Nisato took Mesira's hand and followed Pascal Blaise as he made his way towards the door. She took his hand willingly and together they descended the stairs he had climbed earlier that evening.

Cawlen Hurq pushed open the door to the bar and they entered the smoky, sweat-pit of the common area. The heat and stench of the place took Nisato's breath away, despite him only having left it recently.

Heads rose from drinks as they entered the room, and Nisato felt acutely vulnerable, more than he had when he'd first arrived. Then he only had his own safety to worry about, but now he had to keep Mesira safe from whatever force she believed was coming to claim her. Beyond that, he now felt responsible for Pascal Blaise's safety, which was stupid, for he had armed men in the bar and, if Hurq was to be believed, there were more on the way.

The armed men he had spotted on his arrival made their way through the bar towards them, and the crowded drinkers made way for them without complaint. Nisato caught snatches of conversation as they made their way through the throng.

News of the attack on the Screaming Eagles' compound had reached the bar and Nisato was surprised to see fearful looks being cast towards Pascal Blaise.

'What's going on?' he said, drawing level with Blaise. 'Why do I get the feeling these people would as soon lynch you as look at you?'

'They're afraid,' said Pascal over his shoulder.

'Of what?'

'Reprisals,' replied Pascal. 'They think we hit the Screaming Eagles and they're afraid of what Barbaden will do in response. I told you I was tired of the killing. Well, I'm not the only one.'

Nisato saw it now, the fear and tiredness in every face. It was a tiredness he could understand. He looked back into Mesira's face and smiled. She moved gracefully through the crowded bar and all who looked upon her seemed touched by the same balm that had eased their troubled souls upstairs.

She was a calming ripple in a pond, the soothing wind that cools the day.

Nisato reluctantly tore his gaze from her as Pascal Blaise placed a hand on his shoulder.

'Wait. Let Cawlen's men check outside first.'

Nisato nodded and pulled Mesira close. Over the hushed babble of

conversation, he could hear strange sounds from beyond the steel door of the bar, a mingled din of distant rumbling engines and heavy thuds.

He started as he heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire and an awful, blood-chilling roar of animal hunger. The sound echoed inside the bar and every head turned towards them.

'What the hell was that?' said Cawlen Hurq. More gunfire sounded, followed by shrieks: horrible, agonising shrieks and bellowing roars, and wet sounds like tearing cloth and snapping wood.

Hurq backed away from the door, his face fearful. That fear was contagious. People began to shout and, as yet another monstrous roar echoed within the bar, panic took hold. Men and women pushed one another aside in their haste to escape the bar, heading for back doors or windows that led away from the source of the terrible roars.

Nisato drew his pistol as another roar sounded, this time from right on the other side of the door. The noise was deafening and a sickening, rotten meat smell was forced inside the bar by a heaving, noxious breath.

'Let's find another way out of here,' hissed Pascal.

'Yes,' agreed Nisato, pulling Mesira with him.

Cawlen Hurq followed them and as Nisato risked a glance over his shoulder, the front of the bar was ripped upwards. Corrugated sheets of metal flew off into the night and the door crumpled inwards under a terrifyingly powerful impact. Metal screamed and buckled, and the iron girder that served as a lintel was ripped upward and tossed away as easily as a dog would discard a chewed bone.

Hot air blasted into the bar and the animal reek of spoiled meat became unbearable.

Nisato looked up into the face of a nightmare.

It was a monster, a bloodied, burnt and fanged nightmare with sick coals for eyes. Its monstrous proportions were beyond any measure of sanity or belief, its appearance that of a malformed giant that had suffered unimaginable torments.

'Emperor save us!' cried Pascal Blaise, his face slack with horror as he saw that the beast had not come alone, but with a pack of equally horrific monsters at its heels. The panic that had seized the crowds exploded in a stampede of utter terror. Bodies slammed into Nisato and he fought to hold onto Mesira as the tide of screaming people sought to part them.

Cawlen Hurq raised his rifle and Nisato wanted to laugh at the absurdity of fighting beasts of such terrible appearance with so paltry a weapon. The man screamed an oath as he opened fire, bright bolts of energy spitting from the barrel to explode harmlessly on the creature's chest.

Casually, as though swatting an irritant, the beast batted Cawlen Hurq across

the room. The man slammed head first into the beaten iron bar top and even over the sound of tearing metal and screaming crowds, Daron Nisato heard his neck snap with an awful, brittle crack.

Nisato tried to drag Mesira away from the ripped open entrance to the bar, but she released his hand and he was carried away from her, watching helplessly as the monsters tore their way inside the bar.

'It is time,' she said, her voice sounding like a clear bell in his head, 'time to die.'

FIFTEEN

URIEL HEARD THE screams and the sound of tearing metal. The rumble of the trio of Chimeras echoed from the ramshackle walls of the street and curious onlookers were beginning to spill from their homes to see what drama was being played out on their doorstep.

From his vantage point in the commander's hatch, Uriel could see light spilling into the sky and could hear screams that were issued in terror of the monstrous. Whatever bloody task the Unfleshed were about was in full swing by the sounds of it.

A smashed building on the corner of the street provided another sign as to the passing of the Unfleshed and the Chimera's driver expertly guided the heavy vehicle around the cascaded tumble of timber, stone and steel.

Beyond the corner, the street widened out into a stone-paved square, and the few onlookers that had been driven into the street by the noise, sensibly retreated into their homes at the sight that greeted them.

'Guilliman's oath!' swore Uriel as he saw the spectacle before him.

It looked like a brightly lit pyramid of wrecked tanks, their innards hollowed out and reshaped by hammer and welding torch to form a structure with internal spaces, rooms, corridors and low-ceilinged chambers. Light and people spilled from the shuddering building, its structure and fabric under siege by the Unfleshed.

The Lord of the Unfleshed led the attack, his massively muscled arms peeling back steel as he forced his way into the structure. Myriad neon lights spat fat sparks and bathed the square before the building, surely some kind of drinking den, as well as the monsters in lurid greens, shocking pinks and deathly blues. They capered and howled as the leader of their tribe smashed a path through steel and timber like an animal breaking open a nest to devour the prey within. If the Lord of the Unfleshed was aware of their arrival, he gave no sign, but continued with his destruction of the building's frontage.

Fleeing people were snatched up by the Unfleshed and snapped and twisted until they broke, and their agonised screams ceased. Uriel heard gunfire from inside the building and wondered what the Lord of the Unfleshed could want in a place like this.

The Chimeras slowed as they entered the square, but Uriel yelled down to the driver. 'No! More speed. Use the vehicle!'

Understanding Uriel's order, the driver opened up the throttle and the Chimera roared as its speed increased. Uriel braced himself as one of the Unfleshed turned at the sound of the madly revving engine, its face seeming to split in two, such was the width of its fanged jaws.

Its skeleton was visible through the sickly, pallid skin that draped it, yet this new covering could only hope to cover a portion of its malformed anatomy. Long limbs, spidery and clawed, dragged on the ground and short, muscular legs drove it forwards with an ape-like gait.

Beast and machine charged towards one another until they met in a howl of flesh and machinery. The Chimera ploughed into the creature, its understanding of the power and momentum of the tank existing only for the fraction of a second before it was crushed beneath the tracks. Liquid light spurted from its pulverised carcass, blood, meat and bone ground to a paste on the paved square.

The vehicle skidded on the square as the driver instinctively feathered the throttle and applied the brakes. The engine revved one last time and died, mushrooming clouds of stinking, acrid smoke belching from the exhausts as the driver fought to restart the engine.

'Pasanius! With me!' shouted Uriel, pulling himself up from the commander's hatch. He vaulted to the hard ground as the assault door on the back of the vehicle opened and Pasanius led the warriors out onto the strangely lit battlefield.

Uriel's other two Chimeras screamed to a halt on either side of his and the warriors disembarked with practiced efficiency. No matter the losses they had taken and no matter what they may have done in the past, these men and women were soldiers first and foremost, and had learned their lessons well.

They formed up in squads and Uriel felt a forgotten sense of pride at the idea of leading men into battle once more. No matter that these soldiers were not Ultramarines of the Fourth Company, they were warriors of the Emperor and that made them mighty.

'Together! We finish this together! Are you with me?' yelled Uriel, holding his golden-hilted sword up for all to see.

The soldiers unsheathed their falcatas and roared their affirmation as Uriel turned and charged towards the devastated bar.

THE MONSTER'S THICK, veined arm reached into the bar, questing for Mesira. She seemed to welcome the creature's attentions, for she ignored Daron Nisato's shouted pleas to flee from it and make her way through the mob towards him.

Blinded by panic, many of the bar's patrons stumbled into the path of the enormous creature. The lucky ones blundered past it into the night and safety, the less fortunate were torn to fleshy rags or bitten in two.

The press of the crowd was preventing Mesira from approaching the monster any closer, for it seemed that such was her goal. The terrifying creature was utterly fixated upon her, only prevented from reaching her by what strength remained in the collapsed frontage of the bar. For once, Nisato had cause to be thankful that this part of Junktown was comprised of the debris of his old regiment, for it was all that was preventing the creature from gaining access.

Had the bar been constructed from traditional building materials, the beast would even now be feasting on Mesira's bones and wrapping her entrails around its neck. Only the steel girders and beams looted from abandoned tanks had thus far prevented it from simply bludgeoning its way inside and devouring her and everyone else inside.

The structure of the bar groaned and heaved as load bearing members were smashed asunder. Metal ground on metal as lintels were compressed and weight was redistributed to portions of the structure never meant to carry such loads.

The gunmen that the late Cawlen Hurq had placed in the bar fired on the monster with their pistols, emptying magazines' worth of rounds to little or no effect. Where punctured by a bullet, the beast dribbled light and a syrupy ichor, but such wounds troubled it not at all.

The monster howled in frustration, a searing, hungry light roasting in the gouges of its eye sockets. Daron Nisato was paralysed by his fear of it, seeing a primal hunger and anger such as he could barely contemplate existing in any sane universe.

'What in the name of the warp is it?' cried Pascal Blaise, shouting to be heard over the din of the creature's assault on the building.

'I have no idea,' said Nisato. 'We have to reach Mesira and get out of here!'

'You think?' snapped Pascal Blaise, looking in every direction for a means of escape. The press of bodies was too tight and the settling of the structure had wedged many of the doors fast in their frames. Grunting men heaved their shoulders against them, but no amount of human force could overcome the incredible weight keeping the doors shut.

Nisato saw the girder trapping the beast's shoulder twist and buckle until the weld holding it fixed to the upturned chassis of a Chimera finally gave in to the pressure and snapped. The monster roared in triumph and hauled a portion of its vast bulk into the bar.

Its roar galvanised Nisato, and his limbs found strength.

'I've got to get Mesira!' he shouted.

Blaise nodded and said, 'I'm right behind you. Go!'

Nisato lowered his shoulder and began pushing his way through the trapped, terrified crowd, using skills honed in a dozen riots to force himself a path with fist, foot and gun butt.

His progress was slow, but steady, and he could distinguish Mesira easily enough from the grimy, unwashed faces of the factory workers. Her face was serene amongst a sea of panic, beatific and calming those nearest her.

Nisato finally reached Mesira, his powerful grip closing on her thin upper arm.

'Mesira!' he yelled. 'We have to get out of here!'

She turned to face him at his touch.

'No, Daron,' she cried in alarm, '*you* have to get out of here.'

Then the frontage of the bar finally gave way with a tortured scream of metal.

URIEL HEARD THE bar front collapse and thumbed the activation stud on the hilt of his sword. The blade leapt to life with crackling energies and he felt the power of the weapon travel up his arm. The Unfleshed had turned to face them and six of the enormous creatures stood between him and the bar.

Pasanius stood next to him, his bolter held at his side.

'So what's the plan?' asked Pasanius.

'I need you to lead the soldiers,' said Uriel. 'Protect the innocent.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going inside,' said Uriel. 'I've got a feeling there are answers within.'

'There you go again,' groaned Pasanius as a beast with elongated jaws and a distended belly that glistened with writhing motion broke from the pack of beasts towards them. 'You and your damn feelings.'

A volley of las-fire peppered the creature and it screeched in pain. Hissing, steaming light erupted from its swollen limbs and gut.

'Go,' said Uriel, slapping a palm on Pasanius's shoulder guard. 'Lead them.'

Pasanius nodded and marched to join the red-jacketed soldiers, who advanced with their rifles blazing. Individually, lasguns were a poor man's weapon, but gathered en masse, they were formidable and only a fool would underestimate the effect of a massed volley of fire.

The Unfleshed roused themselves from the wanton slaughter of the bar's patrons at these attacks, their howls of anguish at odds with the purposeful light that surrounded them. The creatures writhed in the glow that spilled from their wounds, as though their own ambitions were at odds with the purpose to which they were being driven.

The Lord of the Unfleshed pushed his way inside the bar and Uriel ran towards him, leaving Pasanius to lead the Falcatas in battle. His friend could inspire warriors of the Astartes to undreamed of valour and these soldiers had the honour of being commanded by one of the Ultramarines' finest.

If they survived this night, they would be feted for the rest of their lives.

Uriel quickly made his way around the fighting, heading for the frenzied fury of the Lord of the Unfleshed. The creature had torn its way into the bar. Screams and the bark of pistols sounded from within.

Portions of the structure were beginning to buckle and groan, and it wouldn't take much for the whole thing to come crashing down. Whatever he could do here, he would have to do fast.

The Lord of the Unfleshed pushed his way fully into the bar and Uriel vaulted a fallen piece of masonry as he found an open section of wall where iron panelling had come away from the structure.

Even without his armour, his physique was almost too broad to fit and he felt the metal tear at his tunic. He ducked his head and the smell of the bar hit him. It stank of sweat, raw meat and strong liquor, but most of all it stank of fear.

The Lord of the Unfleshed towered at one end of the bar, his form monstrous and swollen. Whatever had happened to him in the mountains had seen him become more terrible than Uriel could ever have imagined, for mixed with the terrifying power that surged through him, Uriel saw the humanity of him, the skin, the anger and the fear.

All the things that made a person human were distilled and magnified within his breast, but whatever daemons drove the Lord of the Unfleshed to this killing rage were of an order of magnitude greater than any human could ever aspire to.

A woman in a pale robe stood before the Lord of the Unfleshed, her expression serene, in complete contrast to the horror on every other face in the bar. Uriel's memory quickly cast up her name: Mesira Bardhyl, Governor Barbaden's psychic truth-seeker.

In the space of a heartbeat, Uriel also saw the enforcer, Daron Nisato and a man who must surely be Pascal Blaise. Both men fought to reach Mesira, but he could see they would be too late.

'Over here!' he shouted, his voice easily cutting through the din of the bar's collapse. Glass smashed, timber cracked and metal groaned, but every head in the bar turned towards him.

The Lord of the Unfleshed looked up and its eyes burned with a mixture of anger and loathing. The light that bathed him spilled from its mouth like droplets of molten gold and Uriel felt a wave of pity for him. The core of the Lord of the Unfleshed remained his own, but was goaded to slaughter by some outside

presence.

Uriel dropped into the bar, its terrified patrons backing away from him as much as they did the Lord of the Unfleshed. The creature seemed momentarily confused, as though it was fighting a battle within itself.

Its confusion gave Daron Nisato the time he needed, and he wrapped his hand around Mesira Bardhyl's arm, pulling her away from the hulking monster. Her cry broke the deadlock within the Lord of the Unfleshed's body and it reached towards her with a clawed hand extended.

Pascal Blaise fired his pistol at the Lord of the Unfleshed, one bullet finding its mark in the creature's eye. Viscous fluid spurted and the Lord of the Unfleshed howled, not even the healing light that filled him able to blot out the pain of the wound.

The Lord of the Unfleshed snatched for Mesira again and Uriel leapt to intercept him. Knowing he had no choice, he swung his sword down on the Lord of the Unfleshed's arm. The blade's energies bit through the meat of the arm, but juddered to a halt and slid clear on the creature's bone.

The Lord of the Unfleshed roared and snatched the arm back, lashing out with his other. Uriel ducked and another portion of the bar was destroyed, bottles and mirrored glass crashing to the floor.

Uriel rose to his feet and the Lord of the Unfleshed followed him as he backed away to the tear in the wall through which he had entered the bar.

'Go!' he shouted. 'Nisato, get these people out of here!'

The enforcer nodded, still holding Mesira to him. Her face was twisted in anguish, but in the brief moment Uriel had before the Lord of the Unfleshed came at him, it seemed as though it was due to her rescue rather than the danger.

As the Lord of the Unfleshed followed Uriel, the panicked crowds pressed into the back wall of the bar broke for freedom, fleeing through the enormous hole the monster had torn in the bar's outer wall.

Uriel continued backing away from the Lord of the Unfleshed, giving Nisato enough time to get the people clear. The enforcer handed off Mesira Bardhyl to Pascal Blaise just as the Lord of the Unfleshed grew tired of his prey backing away and charged.

The Lord of the Unfleshed's bulk was too enormous to dodge, so Uriel leapt towards him. His sword slashed at his foe's chest, the blade easily parting skin and flesh, but unable to work deeper into the meat of the body. A thunderous fist slammed into Uriel's side and he was hurled backwards.

He slammed into a steel column, his body flaring in pain at the impact. Uriel fought for breath and staggered upright as he saw the Lord of the Unfleshed turn from him and haul his bulk across the bar with horrifying speed.

Once again the creature was fixated on Mesira Bardhyl and Uriel watched as Pascal Blaise attempted to protect her. He fired his pistol, but it was wasted effort and the Lord of the Unfleshed hurled the leader of the Sons of Salinas aside with contemptuous ease.

Uriel pushed himself across the wrecked bar and Daron Nisato cried out as he saw what was happening. Once again, Mesira stood before the Lord of the Unfleshed and this time there was no one to save her.

The mighty creature reached down and his hand closed on her skull.

'No!' screamed Daron Nisato, but the Lord of the Unfleshed cared nothing for his plea.

One quick squeeze and Mesira Bardhyl was dead, her corpse flopping to the floor as the Lord of the Unfleshed released her limp body.

With his murder done, the Lord of the Unfleshed turned from the carnage in the bar and made his way quickly to the hole torn in the structure's frontage. Uriel limped after the towering engine of flesh and blood, horrified at the casual ease with which the Lord of the Unfleshed had snuffed out Mesira Bardhyl's life.

'That was not punishment!' shouted Uriel. 'That was murder!'

Daron Nisato rushed to Mesira's body, weeping as he cradled her lifeless form. Pascal Blaise fought to stand as he saw what had been done to his charge, but the Lord of the Unfleshed ignored them all as he clambered over the rubble of the bar's destruction and fled the scene of the crime.

From outside, Uriel could hear gunfire: the hard, heavy bangs of bolters and the snap of lasguns. Roaring jets and the scream of powerful down-draughts billowed choking clouds of dust into the air, and Uriel could see stabbing beams of light from the skies.

Had Pasanius managed to call in air support?

He heard more gunfire and bellowing roars, but beyond that, he could hear the screech of buckling steel and the groans of a structure no longer able to support the weight settling upon it. Uriel looked up as a snaking line of cracks burst across the ceiling, ripping their way from left to right and back to front.

'Run!' he shouted.

Pascal Blaise dragged the protesting Daron Nisato from the bar and Uriel struggled to reach the front of the collapsing building. Lumps of plaster and splintered timber crashed down around him and long spars of metal clanged together as portions of the roof caved in.

Uriel fell as a roof beam crashed into his shoulder and he sprawled onto his front as the rear portion of the bar collapsed entirely. More metal broke and twisted, and he scrambled forwards as the building started to collapse in earnest.

Choking clouds of dust and ash obscured Uriel's vision, but he was guided by

the blinding beams of light that came from outside. Half running, half crawling, Uriel forced his way onwards. Torn chunks of concrete struck him and he staggered as an enormous, final groan shook the structure of abandoned tanks.

Uriel dived clear of the bar as the entire assembly of tanks, plaster and timber slammed down, the lowest regions of the structure crushed beneath thousands of tonnes of iron. He rolled as enormous pieces of tanks fell from the building: turrets, doors, iron wheels and lengths of track.

A girder the length of his body slammed down next to him and he scrambled away as it toppled onto its side. Debris and rubble fell in an avalanche of metal and Uriel cried out as more and more of it struck him.

He was forced to his knees by the impact of something heavy and metal. A twirling shard of glass sliced his cheek and a panel of sheet metal slammed into his side, driving the breath from him and pinning him to the ground with its weight.

Dust blinded him and the roar of the building's collapse was deafening.

Uriel struggled against the weight of the metal as yet more debris spilled down from the building's demise. The metal was groaning and heaving and Uriel coughed as he felt the weight pinning him to the ground grow heavier.

He tried to bend his legs beneath the metal to gain some leverage, but his body was wedged solid. The strength of the Adeptus Astartes, normally so prodigious and able to meet any challenge, was powerless to prevent the weight of iron from crushing him to death.

With his armour, he could have escaped, but without it…

Suddenly the weight lessened and through the swirling clouds of blinding dust, Uriel saw huge shapes around him, silver light reflecting from their outlines.

Uriel heard the click of vox-units and the tread of heavy feet around him.

He smelled the distinct and wholly welcome scent of oils and lapping powder that could mean only one thing: Astartes armour.

He saw gauntleted hands heave the sheet metal, and the debris that held him pinned to the ground was lifted clear as though it weighed nothing at all. Hands dragged him from the ground and he heard chanting behind the warriors who had saved him. Amongst the smells he associated with Space Marines, he smelled strong, choking smoke, cloying and reeking of the interior of temples.

'Who—' was all he managed before a heavy silver gauntlet fastened around his throat with a grip of unbreakable iron. Uriel was hauled from the ground, his feet dangling in the air as he was brought before an oversized silver helmet with an angular visor and blazing red lenses.

A high gorget protected the warrior's neck and the plates of his armour were

massively exaggerated, thick and awesome in their intricacy. A heraldic shield was fitted in the crease between the warrior's enormous shoulder guard and carved breastplate, half in crimson and half in white. The colours were divided down the middle with the image of a black sword, its tip pointing downward.

Uriel knew that this was no ordinary warrior, this was a Terminator, one of the elite, a veteran. No finer warriors than those deemed skilful enough to wear such armour existed in a Chapter.

The Chapter symbol on the warrior's left shoulder guard was a mighty tome, its pages pierced by a sword and set among golden scrollwork. Uriel's eyes widened at the sight of the symbol, for it was an ancient device worn only by humanity's greatest protectors, greater even than the Adeptus Astartes.

The giant who held him helpless leaned in close.

'I am Leodegarius of the Grey Knights,' he said, 'and you are my prisoner.'

PART FOUR

DISSOLUTION

'Yet from those flames, no light, but rather darkness visible.'

SIXTEEN

URIEL'S ARMS BURNED with pain and his wrists were chafed bloody by the silver manacles that held him suspended above the cold, hard floor of the darkened chamber. Its exact dimensions were unknown to him, but he had formed a mental map of the chamber from the echoes of his shouts for answers.

It had been days since the battle with the Unfleshed, but how many he could not say with any certainty, for the darkness was unchanging and his captors had given him no clue as to the passage of time.

His captors… The Grey Knights…

These warriors of legend were spoken of in hushed whispers, for the foes they faced in battle were the most terrifying of all: daemons and unclean creatures from beyond the gates of the Empyrean. Of all the Emperor's servants, they were the most honoured, the most revered, and the most deadly.

Now, their attentions were turned upon Uriel.

It seemed inconceivable to Uriel that he should suffer like this; that fellow warriors of the Adeptus Astartes should inflict such punishments upon him. Yet he could not find it in his heart to blame them, for had he and Pasanius not returned from the most dreaded place in the galaxy, a lair of abominations and monsters?

As much as he railed against what was happening to him, he knew he could have expected no less. From here on out, Uriel was at the mercy of those who knew the threat of the daemonic better than he.

In the time since the Grey Knights had taken him, he had known only darkness. No sooner had Leodegarius hauled him from the rubble of the collapsed bar than a host of powerfully muscled servitors had closed in, carrying extendable poles that terminated in thick metal collars with inward pointing blades.

The restraint collars had fastened on his neck and Uriel knew that to resist would open his throat on the razor-sharp spikes. A robed acolyte had lifted a hood, fashioned from what appeared to be coarse sackcloth weave. Just before it had been fastened over his head, Uriel saw another Grey Knight with Pasanius similarly restrained before the open ramp of a silver Thunderhawk gunship.

The hood had been more than simply fabric, for it had utterly blocked Uriel's perception of the world around him. His five senses were rendered useless and he felt a curious deadness to everything, as though suddenly and completely cut

off from the realm of perception.

He had been guided to the interior of the Thunderhawk and flown to the gaol that currently confined him. Uriel had no idea where he was, and what was to happen next was similarly a mystery.

Unkind hands had manacled him and then removed the perception-deadening hood before his skull had been shaved and he had been hauled from the ground and left suspended in the darkness.

A murmur of chanting drifted on the incense-scented air, a maddeningly constant refrain that lurked just beyond the range of comprehension. Uriel could see no source for the voices, but he could sense figures moving through the darkness, darkness so impenetrable that not even his genhanced sight could penetrate its depths.

He knew he was being observed and he had spoken aloud of his innocence and his loyalty to the Emperor, but they would have heard such things a hundred times or more, most often from the mouths of heretics and those who consorted with daemons. After a while, he gave up and concentrated on blocking out the pain in his shoulders.

His weight was pulling his arms from their sockets and the sinews were straining and twisting as he hung in the darkness. The metal of the silver manacles bit into the meat of his wrists and congealed blood clotted on his forearms.

Uriel heard heavy footsteps coming towards him through the darkness. A flaming torch sprang to life and the silver giant that had pulled him from the wreckage of the bar approached.

Firelight reflected from the burnished plates of his incredible armour, the vast plates indestructible and magnificent.

Terminators were warriors capable of awesome destruction, trained to be masters of the killing art and unstoppable human tanks. Astartes in Mk VII plate were well-armoured and retained their lethal speed, whereas a warrior clad in Terminator armour sacrificed that mobility for almost complete invulnerability.

As the Terminators of the Veteran company were above Uriel in skill and lethality, so too was this warrior above even them. To be in such a warrior's presence, even as a prisoner, was an honour.

Leodegarius had removed his helmet and Uriel saw that his face was finely sculpted and almost angelic in its symmetry. Silver eyebrows framed clear blue eyes and his white hair was pulled back in a short scalp lock. The warrior's physical perfection matched his assuredly perfect soul, and Uriel was put in mind of warriors from the Blood Angels Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, such, was his beauty.

A group of hooded acolytes followed Leodegarius, one reading from a heavy book supported on the back of a hunched dwarf with a golden lectern fused to its exposed spine, and another carrying a silver aquila, from which issued puffs of scented smoke. Others carried a variety of items on plush velvet cushions, some of which were clearly items of excruciation, while others were devices beyond Uriel's understanding.

Another Grey Knight, clad in gleaming silver power armour, stood at Leodegarius's shoulder and carried the awesome warrior's helmet. Behind him, a pair of sweating servitors dragged a smoking brazier, from which protruded a number of glowing irons.

Uriel felt the chains supporting him go slack and he descended to the floor. The loosening of the chains continued until he was able to lower his arms to his sides.

He rolled his shoulders to flex the muscles there and work the balls of his joints back into their sockets. None of his captors made any move to remove or loosen the manacles that still bound his wrists.

'Tell me why I should not kill you,' said the Grey Knight.

For a moment, Uriel was dumbfounded. The bluntness of the question was such that he had no immediate answer.

'I am a loyal servant of the Emperor,' he said at last.

'I have heard that before,' replied Leodegarius, his disbelief plain, 'so I am going to open you up and examine the farthest reaches of your soul. I will know everything about you, Uriel Ventris, and if I find you to be pure you may yet earn the Emperor's forgiveness, but if I find any hint of corruption or filthy secrets, your body will be purged with fire.'

'I understand,' said Uriel. 'I have nothing to hide.'

'A common declaration of the corrupted,' said Leodegarius. 'You would be surprised how many times I hear it from the mouths of those with a great deal to hide.'

'I am a servant of the Emperor,' repeated Uriel. 'I am not corrupt.'

'That is for me to decide,' said Leodegarius. 'Now be silent.'

Uriel nodded, fully aware that his life was in the hands of the warrior. With a gesture he could end him and erase him from the Imperium. All that he had ever done, all the heroic deeds he had accomplished in his life, would be expunged as surely as if he had never existed.

'State your name and rank,' said Leodegarius, 'for the record.'

'I am Uriel Ventris, former captain of the Fourth Company of the Ultramarines Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes.'

As Uriel spoke, a clattering stenolyte behind Leodegarius scrawled his words

on a leaf of parchment, each of his fingers ending in an inky quill-tip. This would either be his vindication or his valediction.

Leodegarius nodded and reached out to twist Uriel's shoulder towards him. Uriel gritted his teeth, the bones of his shoulder twisting painfully in the socket.

'Your Chapter and company tattoos have been burned from your body.'

'Yes,' said Uriel. 'Our Chapter and company markings were removed before we left Macragge on a Death Oath. For all intents and purposes, we were exiled. It would not have been fitting to continue to bear our Chapter's heraldry.'

'Why were you sent on this Death Oath?' asked Leodegarius, and Uriel saw a servitor remove one of the irons in the fire with thick, insulated gloves. The brand was held out towards Leodegarius, but the Grey Knight ignored it for the time being.

'For breaking with the Codex Astartes.'

Leodegarius nodded, as though he was aware of this. Had Pasanius already been interrogated for this information?

Thinking of his friend, Uriel decided to risk a question of his own. 'Where is Pasanius?'

A silver gauntlet seized Uriel's throat and Leodegarius reached back to take hold of the glowing branding iron, its head in the shape of a haloed skull. With a fluid economy of motion he reversed the brand and stamped it down over the place where an Imperial aquila had once been tattooed on Uriel's shoulder.

Agonising pain coursed through Uriel's body as the red-hot iron seared his flesh. His knees buckled and he bit back a cry as Leodegarius kept the burning metal pressed against his skin. Smoke and the horrific smell of blackened, charred flesh filled the air. The pain was intense, but Uriel closed his eyes and focused his mind on blocking it out.

At last the brand was removed and Uriel gasped. The pain was still there, raw, hot and intense, but compared to the agony of the continued burning, it was as though his upper arm were bathed in cool water.

A pair of robed chirurgeons stepped from the darkness behind him and the pain was replaced by a cool, clear sensation of relief as counterseptic was applied to the wound and burn gauze bound to his shoulder.

'That is the first lesson,' said Leodegarius, handing the brand back to the servitor. 'When we begin, you are to speak only when I permit you to speak. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Uriel, nodding, 'I understand.'

'Then you are ready for the first ordeal,' said Leodegarius, 'the Ordeal of Inquisition.'

'What are you going to ask me?'

'Ask?' said the Grey Knight. 'I am not going to *ask* you anything.'

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES WERE inscribed on the floor around Uriel and Leodegarius, cut by hooded servitors with acetylene torches for arms, and the grooves filled with bubbling lines of molten silver dispensed from golden urns upon their backs. Strange sigils that were incomprehensible to Uriel were cut in the space between the two circles, which were likewise filled with silver.

Steam billowed from the design as the servitors finished the last of the silver sigils.

'The Ordeal of Inquisition,' said Leodegarius, 'is as old as my order. My mind's eye will see into every darkened corner of your soul. I will know your every thought. You will be able to hide nothing from me. Understand that and you may save yourself a great deal of pain. If you have evil within you, confess it and your death will be swift. Deny it, and if I find any trace of corruption, your death will be agonising and long.'

'I have nothing to confess,' said Uriel. 'I am not corrupt.'

Leodegarius nodded, as though playing out a familiar drama. 'We shall see.'

At last the design on the floor was complete, and the servitors vanished into the darkness, leaving Uriel and Leodegarius alone. As the servitors withdrew, seven other acolytes approached, each carrying a torch, their hoods drawn back. The firelight danced on their faces,, and the withered horror of their hairless heads made Uriel long for the darkness again.

Their faces were those of corpses found in the desert, drawn and desiccated as though drained of all vitality and animation. Their eyes had been burned from their sockets, although whether by deliberate artifice or by nightmarish sights, Uriel could not say.

As a Space Marine in the service of the Emperor, Uriel had seen his share of terrors: ancient star gods, the face of the Great Devourer and the abode of daemons, but to see these pitiful beings was to know that there were more terrible things still in the galaxy.

The dreadful acolytes took up positions around them, forming a protective circle, and began to chant with a barely audible, static-like screech. Their low voices set up an atonal wall of sound without rhythm and Uriel felt the same deadening of the senses that he had felt when hooded.

'The Null-Servitors create a barrier of psychic feedback,' explained Leodegarius. 'Together with the lines of power inscribed in the floor, it will prevent any corruption from leaving this circle should I falter in my inquisition of your body and soul.'

'I understand the precaution,' said Uriel, 'but I keep telling you it is unnecessary.'

'Be silent,' instructed Leodegarius, stepping forward and placing his hands on either side of Uriel's face. 'The Ordeal of Inquisition has begun.'

The metal of the gauntlets was cold and Uriel felt their chill spread down through his skin, into the muscles of his face and past the bone of his skull. Cold, questing fingers prised open the lid of his mind and delved inside.

Uriel's immediate inclination was to resist and the mental barriers of his will began to erect in response to the invasion. He looked into Leodegarius's icy blue eyes and the world seemed to contract until all he could see were those glacial orbs, as though crackling lines of power that could never be broken connected them.

Uriel felt his entire body grow numb as the Grey Knight's psychic essence forced its way through his defences and into his thoughts.

'Why do you resist?' asked Leodegarius, the implacable force of his mind pressing on Uriel's thoughts. 'Do you have something to hide after all?'

Uriel tried to reply, but his tongue would not obey him. He tried to lower his defences and allow his interrogator access to his thoughts, but the natural reaction of a human mind is to protect its secrets and internal workings.

Yet even as the defensive architecture of his brain buckled under the strain of resistance, Uriel knew that such a struggle would be futile in the face of the Grey Knight's power. With that realisation came the will to allow another being access to the hidden fortress of his mind: the guarded place where he kept his doubts, his fears, his hopes and his ambitions.

Everything that made him Uriel Ventris would be laid bare for Leodegarius to see, to know and to understand. Every virtue and every vice was open to scrutiny and if Uriel were found wanting in any regard, his life would be forfeit. Curiously, he felt no fear, now that the last barrier between him and Leodegarius was removed.

He felt the Grey Knight's colossal presence within his skull, the warrior's essence blending with Uriel's and learning in a moment what had forged him into a warrior of the Ultramarines. Everything from the blue-lit caverns of Calth of his earliest childhood memories to the fight with the Lord of the Unfleshed became part of the Grey Knight's understanding and in the space of a breath, it was as though they had become one soul.

As Leodegarius learned of Uriel, so too did Uriel learn of Leodegarius, or at least as much as the Grey Knight wanted him to know. He saw the decades of battle, the years of study and solitude, and the complete and utter devotion to his sacred duty.

Leodegarius was a hero in the truest sense of the word, a warrior who fought for no reward, no acclaim and no reason other than that he knew he was one of a select brotherhood that was all that stood between humanity and destruction. Uriel saw unnumbered and unknown battles where the fate of worlds hung in the balance.

He saw triumphs and he saw losses. He saw victories and unimaginable sacrifice.

This was what it took to be a defender of the Imperium and Uriel's own achievements paled in comparison to what this great hero had accomplished.

Their lives intertwined in the space of a moment and the connection was so profound that Uriel began to panic as his sense of self was swallowed by the overwhelming presence of the Grey Knight's mind.

Then it was gone.

Like a sword pulled from a wound, the Grey Knight's power withdrew from Uriel's mind and he sagged against the chains that supported him. He dropped to his knees, suddenly feeling alone, so very alone, within his skull, as if a vital piece of him had been torn out.

In the face of the horrors Leodegarius had defeated, what did the life of a pair of Ultramarines matter? In the grand tapestry of the galaxy, Uriel's life was meaningless and he would welcome Leodegarius ending him now.

'Be at peace, Uriel Ventris,' said Leodegarius. 'A mind will always quail before its insignificance following union with a power greater than itself. Your warrior's pride will restore your sense of self-worth soon enough.'

Uriel looked up into Leodegarius's face, his handsome, perfect and magnificent face. The look of a great hero of mankind was etched into every shimmering line and curve of his skull.

'You saw inside me,' gasped Uriel, every word an effort. 'You know I am not corrupt.'

'You are not knowingly corrupt,' agreed Leodegarius. 'I sense no evil in you, but there are many forms of corruption. You may yet be a herald of wickedness and know it not.'

'I don't understand,' said Uriel, painfully lifting himself to his feet.

'The strands destiny weaves around you are soaked in blood, Uriel Ventris, and times of great danger will forever shadow your life. Your arrival on Salinas is but the latest in a chain of events that may doom this world to exterminatus. Where you walk, it is dangerous to follow.'

'Dangerous for my enemies,' snarled Uriel.

Leodegarius smiled. 'Your spirit is returning, I see. That is good.'

'It is?' said Uriel.

'Of course,' said Leodegarius. 'It means you are ready for the second ordeal.'

ACRID FUMES BILLOWED upwards from the iron cauldron, its contents bubbling and popping as Uriel was led before it. The sides were embossed with a ring of linked eagles and the smell of the boiling oils made. Uriel's gorge rise as he suspected what might be asked of him.

The manacles had been removed and he had been permitted to clean the blood from his arms before being marched through the darkness of the chamber to the cauldron. By the light of the burning torch, Uriel was able to make out more of his surroundings: a great open space of soaring arches and thick pillars. The air was thick and cold, leading him to believe that he was below a great building, possibly the palace or the cathedral.

Leodegarius turned to Uriel and said, 'Since earliest times we have used the Ordeal of the Holy Oils to test the flesh of those brought before us. Too often the question of guilt is unnecessary, for actions speak louder than words, but you are a curiosity to me, Uriel Ventris. This ordeal will be painful, but if you have the light of the Emperor within your body you will not falter and you will be borne up by His glory.'

Leodegarius moved to stand opposite Uriel, with the cauldron between them. 'Should your flesh prove true and you pass through this ordeal, you will stand before me at the end and face the *Judicium Imperator*. Only then will your soul be deemed pure.'

'But the Ordeal of Inquisition?' said Uriel. 'I thought you sensed no evil in me?'

'Nor do I,' said Leodegarius, 'but you have travelled to a realm where nothing that is good or pure can live, and your soul has been exposed to corruption that would burn the flesh from your bones were you to know but a fragment of its true horror. You have walked in that world and it falls to me to determine whether any of its corruption has returned with you, hidden within the meat and bones of your flesh. Do you have anything to say before this ordeal?'

Uriel considered his words carefully. 'I ask the same question I asked before. Where is Pasanius?'

'He undergoes ordeals as you do. His fate is his own and he will stand or fall as you will stand or fall: alone.'

'Then I am ready,' said Uriel. 'Yes, we have walked in the realm of the damned, but we faced its temptations and resisted them.'

'Do you think that is enough?'

'I do not know whether it is enough,' admitted Uriel, 'but it must count for

something, for only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. You measure the strength of an enemy by fighting against him, not by giving in. You find out the strength of the wind by walking against it, not by lying down.'

Leodegarius nodded. 'There is truth in that. A man will never discover the strength of the evil impulse inside him until he tries to fight it. The Emperor is the only being who never yielded to temptation, and thus he is also the only man who knows to the full what giving in to that temptation means.'

'Then by any measure of reckoning, Pasanius and I have matched our strength against the foulest beings imaginable.'

'Then this ordeal should be no ordeal at all,' said Leodegarius, pointing to the bubbling cauldron. 'Have you heard of Saint De Haan of the Donorian sector?'

Uriel shook his head. 'No. Who was he?'

'He was an inquisitor who served the Emperor for over two centuries,' explained Leodegarius, 'a man who rooted out heresy and corruption on over a thousand worlds. Tens of thousands of heretics and evildoers perished before him, and his shining vision of a pure Imperium was a beacon to all whose loyalty to the Golden Throne was unwavering.'

'What happened to him?' asked Uriel.

'He was martyred at the battle of Kostiashak,' said Leodegarius. 'Warriors of the Ruinous Powers captured him and portions of his anatomy were nailed to the defiled cathedral of Trebian. De Haan's loyal acolytes recovered their master's remains and many of the relics are stored in scented rosewood boxes on the worlds he cleansed.'

'Many, but not all?' asked Uriel.

'Correct.'

Uriel looked into the bubbling, viscous liquid. At the bottom of the hissing, spitting oil he could make out the wavering outline of what looked like a dagger.

'You will reach in and lift out the dagger,' said Leodegarius.

'What will that prove apart from the fact that my flesh will burn?'

'Shards of the armour belonging to Saint De Haan are worked into the metal of its handle and only those whose flesh is unsullied by the taint of the great enemy may grip it.'

Uriel took a deep breath and nodded. 'Then I have nothing to fear.'

'I hope that is true,' said Leodegarius, and Uriel was surprised to hear sincerity in the Grey Knight's voice. 'Now, take the dagger.'

Before he could picture images of seared flesh and the skin boiled from his bones, Uriel closed his eyes and plunged his left hand into the cauldron. White-hot agony engulfed his forearm. He gritted his teeth against the pain, an all-consuming fire that sent bolts of screaming white light bursting behind his

eyelids.

His legs buckled and he reached out to steady himself with his free hand. His other palm hissed as it came into contact with the cauldron's side and Uriel bit back a scream of agony. He could feel his skin blistering and melting in the oil as his fingers sought out the hilt of the dagger. The pain was unbelievable, almost too much for him to stand. It felt as though his arm was dipped into the heart of a volcano and he almost wished for the oblivion of unconsciousness to spare him from enduring it for a second longer.

But then, wasn't that as much part of the ordeal as being able to grasp the weapon?

Wasn't his ability to overcome such pain further proof of his innocence?

Uriel fought through the pain, embracing it, welcoming it, and he opened his eyes to see Leodegarius staring at him. He felt the Grey Knight's approval and knew with utter certainty that Leodegarius *wanted* him to succeed in this ordeal. He *wanted* to find a reason not to kill him.

His fingers brushed metal and Uriel closed his grip on the wire wound hilt of the dagger. Though he could barely feel the apparatus of his hand any longer, the tendons and muscles of his wrist obeyed him enough to hold the weapon firm.

With his grip secure, Uriel lifted the dagger from the oil and held it before him, his breath coming in hot spurts from the heart of his chest. His hand was a raw, red thing, the meat boiled and layers of oily skin dripping from him in glistening, jellied strings. The pain was like nothing he had known before and the sight of his ruined flesh made it even worse.

Though every nerve in his body told him to release the burning weapon, Uriel held it out towards Leodegarius.

'There,' hissed Uriel. 'Is this what you wanted?'

Leodegarius nodded and took the weapon, his armoured gauntlets protecting him from the blazing heat of the dagger.

'It is indeed,' said Leodegarius, sheathing the weapon at his side and taking Uriel's wrist.

Leodegarius examined the wound and Uriel flinched, gritting his teeth against the pain, but willing himself to remain standing.

'So?' asked Uriel. 'Is my flesh pure?'

'Maybe,' said Leodegarius, releasing Uriel's hand. 'In three days I shall return and we will examine your wound. A warrior whose flesh is pure will have begun to heal, whereas one whose flesh is unclean will have begun to fester. We will know then whether you are ready to face the final ordeal.'

'The final ordeal?' asked Uriel, wondering what could be worse than the ordeals he had already endured.

'Your mind is free of taint and I believe your flesh to be pure,' said Leodegarius, 'but ordeals devised by Man can tell us only so much, so we must now allow the Emperor to judge the strength of your soul.'

'How do we do that?'

'In the *Judicium Imperator*,' said Leodegarius. 'In three days you will fight me, and on the outcome of that shall final judgement be made upon you.'

SEVENTEEN

OVER THE NEXT three days, the pain in Uriel's hand pulsed steadily at the edge of endurance. With the Ordeal of the Holy Oils complete, he had been returned to the darkness and isolation of the cold, underground space.

Except, it wasn't really isolation, not when the maddening chants and low level buzzing that kept him from sleep were his continual companions. He had been left alone, as far as he could tell, though he knew there must be weapons trained upon him and armed gaolers standing ready to obliterate him should he make any attempt to escape.

Escape was not on Uriel's mind, however, not when his loyalty and faith were in question.

Time passed slowly in the darkness, and Uriel's thoughts turned from his own predicament to that of Pasanius and events in the world at large. What had become of his friend? Had he suffered through the two previous ordeals as Uriel had?

Uriel had no reason to suspect that Pasanius would fail the ordeals. He only hoped that when the dark surgeons of Medrengard had taken the xeno-infected arm from his body, they had taken the full extent of its taint.

If any lingering trace of the Nightbringer's essence remained within him, would that be enough to condemn Pasanius in the eyes of the Grey Knights?

He tried to put such doubts and worries from his mind, wondering what was happening on the streets of Barbadus. His chronology of events from the bar's collapse onwards was piecemeal and he could not say for certain what had occurred. Had the Grey Knights killed the Unfleshed or were they still at large?

Barbadus was such a warren of twisted paths and darkened hiding places that it was entirely likely that the Lord of the Unfleshed and his tribe could have evaded capture or destruction. If that were the case what would their next move be? To hide and lie low? To kill again?

In the space of a single night, the Unfleshed had butchered most of the Screaming Eagles, Colonel Verena Kain and Mesira Bardhyl. Who would be next to die?

It all came back to the Killing Ground.

Those who had taken part in the massacre of the people of Khaturian were being killed and a chain of events had been set in motion that might see Salinas engulfed in flames of battle. Worse, Leodegarius obviously thought that

whatever had possessed the Unfleshed might be serious enough to warrant the destruction of Salinas.

Uriel had watched one world burn at the hands of the Inquisition and was in no mood to see another die. Whatever the truth of what was happening on Salinas, he would fight alongside the Grey Knights to prevent further death, assuming he passed the *Judicium Imperator*.

His very soul rebelled at the idea of fighting Leodegarius, but what choice did he have? To refuse to fight would condemn him, but to take arms against a fellow warrior of the Imperium was anathema to him.

To even fight such a sublime warrior was galling, but the idea of besting him seemed inconceivable, ludicrous even. Uriel was wounded, battered and drained, where Leodegarius was in peak condition. It would not be a fight; it would be a shaming defeat.

Uriel Ventris, however, was not a warrior who gave up easily.

On Pavonis, when faced with the awesome, star-destroying, power of the Nightbringer, he had stood against it and denied it a vessel that would have magnified its powers a hundredfold. He had faced the might of a Norn Queen in the depths of a hive ship and defeated her. He had marched into battle on the blasted surface of a daemon world and defeated the daemons and devils that populated its blasted hinterlands.

He would face this challenge and meet it head on.

It was the only way he knew.

Questions of the outside world were irrelevant, for he could do nothing to alter the outcome of what was happening beyond these walls. He could do little enough to alter his own circumstances, but he settled himself upon the cold stone floor and began to prepare for the coming fight.

Uriel closed his eyes and controlled his breathing, directing his body's energies into healing and restoration. Time slowed to a crawl and Uriel felt every muscle, bone and hair on his body as his awareness turned inwards.

He could not actually heal his wounded flesh in the manner of some psykers, but the mental energies of a Space Marine were such that with carefully directed thought patterns, learned over decades of study and application, he was able to focus his energies in replenishment.

Uriel's throat ached where a blade had pierced it on Medrengard, the wound long since healed, but the scar and memory of it remaining. The burning ache in his hand where the holy oils had scalded him terribly faded to a dull ache. His chest tightened where a vengeful spine of the Norn Queen had pierced his flat, ribless torso, and amongst all these hurts, he recalled the memory of a hundred others.

Each would have killed a mortal, but his Astartes frame was proof against such injuries and he had survived them all, coming back stronger from each one. He would come back stronger from this as well.

Uriel knew in his heart that he was no traitor and that his flesh was not corrupt. This was not hubris or overweening pride; it was something he just knew, deep in his soul. The very idea that he could be corrupt was intolerable and even had Leodegarius not required this final test, Uriel would have demanded it, for how else could all others know for certain that he had returned from the Eye of Terror with his soul still his own?

Only approbation by a body as august and respected as the Grey Knights would erase any doubt as to his fidelity in the minds of his battle-brothers.

To return to Macragge without such a seal of approval would be unthinkable, and Uriel suddenly saw how naive he had been to think he could just walk through the gates of the Fortress of Hera without it. While his fellow battle-brothers would accept his word as true, (for what Ultramarine would ever countenance lying to his fellows?) Uriel knew that he would be forever suspect in the eyes of others without the Grey Knights' acceptance of his purity.

Yet, how could he hope to prevail against the might of Leodegarius?

Uriel allowed himself a moment of martial pride as he saw again the mighty foes he had bested in combat, the enemies who were dust in the wind while he was still alive and able to fight.

So long as there was life, there was hope, and while there was hope, Uriel Ventris would fight.

TIME PASSED, THE darkness flowing around Uriel like a living thing. When he judged that his mind and body were as ready as they could be for the coming fight, he stood and allowed the blood to flow around his body at an accelerated rate.

Though he could see nothing around him, Uriel moved through the basic martial exercises of the Adeptus Astartes, working each of the muscle groups to empower them for combat. Uriel stretched and tensed in long, slow moves, gearing his physique for the stresses and demands of killing.

If anything, the darkness enhanced his exercises, forcing him to rely on his other senses as he spun and advanced, his hands and feet, knees and elbows killing weapons. The pain of his hand was forgotten, the rotten stink of the burned meat a distant memory.

His lungs burned and his heart beat a furious tattoo against his ribs as his body changed from its meditative state to that of a deadly fighting machine. With

the basic exercises complete, Uriel moved into more exotic manoeuvres, leaping and twisting in the air as he fought imaginary foes from memory.

At last he dropped to one knee, his fist a millimetre from the ground and released a pent up breath. Uriel stood and ran his hands across his skull, the feel of the brisdes unfamiliar, but welcome.

'Light,' said a voice in the darkness and Uriel shielded his eyes as blue fire sprang to life around him. His eyes quickly adjusted to the light and he saw that he was surrounded by a host of silver-armoured warriors. Each warrior carried a tall polearm, the blades sheathed in a haze of energies that were the source of the blue fire.

Twenty-five Grey Knights stood to attention in a circle around him, the plates of their gleaming armour flickering with a shimmering blue-steel glow. Leode-. garius marched from the circle of warriors. The leader of the Grey Knights had stripped from his armour and wore a loose-fitting chiton of white, a training uniform similar to that worn by the Ultramarines when not in armour.

'You have put your time to good use, Uriel Ventris,' he said.

'Time spent not honing my skills is wasted time,' replied Uriel.

'Just so,' agreed Leodegarius. 'It has been three days. Let me see your hand.'

Uriel had all but forgotten the pain of his wounded hand, but nodded and lifted it towards Leodegarius without breaking eye contact. A chirurgeon followed the Grey Knight, hissing pipes and gurgling tubes looping from beneath his robes. A brass armature emerged from the chirurgeon's sleeve, bearing a clicking device similar to an Apothecary's narthecium. The device extended towards Uriel's hand, bathing it in a golden glow that felt like warm honey was being poured over his skin.

The light vanished and the chirurgeon nodded to Leodegarius before backing away.

Uriel looked down at his hand and was amazed to see that virtually all trace of the horrific wounding was gone. The flesh was pink and new, raw and tender to be sure, but unmistakably whole once more.

Leodegarius reached out and turned over Uriel's hand, carefully inspecting the flesh. Uriel could tell that the Grey Knight was pleased by what he saw.

'The flesh heals well,' said Leodegarius. 'I do not believe I have ever seen anyone recover from the Ordeal of the Oils as quickly as this.'

'Then, we are ready to fight?' asked Uriel, stepping back.

'You sound eager,' said Leodegarius.

'I am,' replied Uriel, 'not to fight you, but to prove myself.'

Leodegarius nodded. 'I understand,' he said, turning away, 'but we will not be fighting here.'

'Where will we be fighting?'

'Where all can see the Emperor's judgement upon you,' said leodegarius. 'Follow me.'

URIEL SET OFF after Leodegarius as the Grey Knight led him from his place of confinement. An arched tunnel of dressed ashlar led through what Uriel guessed was the bedrock of the palace. Their route twisted through ancient tunnels, cut in ages past, and adapted by the later builders of the palace.

Rough-hewn tunnels became iron-framed corridors before blending into ceramic-walled chambers with high domes and glaring lights. There appeared to be no sense of order to the subterranean architecture, with passages meandering off at odd angles and the same tunnels returning after too short a time to have led to anything useful.

The Grey Knights marched in perfect step, their pace unhurried, but covering the distance with a kilometre-eating stride. A detachment of warriors went before Uriel, nine behind him and the remainder at his sides. Leodegarius led them and a host of censer bearing acolytes created a living fogbank that moved ahead of their procession.

Storerooms, forgotten chambers, armouries and barracks passed and as they entered a low corridor, Uriel heard a number of voices raised in agitation coming from somewhere ahead.

The tunnel opened up into a wide, circular space with a high ceiling and a grey drum tower in the centre of the chamber. The walls were lined with cells that all faced the circular building and Uriel instinctively recognised this place as a kind of prison.

'It is a Panopticon,' said Leodegarius, guessing Uriel's thoughts. 'Guards are positioned in the building at the centre and the prisoners have no way of knowing when they are being watched, because they cannot see inside. They have no way to avoid being seen, so must control their baser impulses lest they suffer punishment.'

'So fear of retribution, not devotion to the Emperor ensures obedience?'

'Just so,' agreed Leodegarius with distaste. 'Something that might very well be said for this entire planet.'

'Why are we here?' asked Uriel.

'To gather your companion.'

'Pasanius?'

'Yes, he has been kept here since he too passed through the ordeals.'

'He's going to fight you too?'

'He will fight alongside you,' nodded Leodegarius, crossing the chamber to stand before a cell where the welcome sight of Pasanius greeted Uriel.

His friend was unbowed and Uriel saw that his remaining hand was as raw and pink as his own, but clearly healed from its immersion in the boiling oils.

'Uriel!' cried Pasanius, his relief obvious. 'Your hand?'

'Almost as good as yours,' said Uriel as the door slid open and Pasanius stepped from the cell. The two warriors embraced, relieved beyond words to find each other alive, and Uriel released his friend from a crushing bear hug.

'Are you ready for this?' asked Uriel.

'You're damn right I'm ready for this,' said Pasanius, angling his head towards Leodegarius. 'No disrespect intended, but these bastards questioned our loyalty. I'm ready for whatever it takes to prove we're not traitors.'

'Your sergeant has been fiercely loyal to you, Captain Ventris,' said Leodegarius, and Uriel couldn't help but notice that his name had now been prefixed by his rank. That had to be a good sign.

'He is my friend,' said Uriel, 'and that is what friends do.'

Leodegarius turned towards the chamber's exit, a tall arch of black stone that led upwards.

'Then let us hope that is enough.'

Flanked by the Grey Knights, Uriel and Pasanius followed them through another series of winding tunnels that eventually opened up to a fortified gateway lined with gunports and which ended at a tall bronze gate.

The gate was open, daylight streaming inside, and Uriel remembered his joy at seeing true light when they had arrived on Salinas. The feeling of being outside again after so long, although it had only been for a few days at most, was sublime and as he marched down a sloping causeway, he was filled with a sense of hope.

That hope was snatched away as soon as he set foot outside and felt the crushing weight of gloom that filled his lungs with each breath. The air was leaden and heavy, the sky pressing down like a monstrous weight upon the day. Threatening clouds scudded above and Uriel was filled with a dreadful sense of melancholy that put him in mind of the ruins of Khaturian.

Once again, he and Pasanius were in the vast flat space where Restoration Day had been declared. The inhospitable parade ground was filled with at least two hundred soldiers and a tight knot of the planet's dignitaries.

A gleaming silver Thunderhawk gunship sat with its assault ramp open behind the dignitaries and Uriel smiled at the sight of such a reassuringly familiar object. Even though the gunship was not in the colours of the Ultramarines, the potent symbol of the power of the Adeptus Astartes lifted

Uriel's spirits from the ugly atmosphere saturating the day.

Uriel saw the tower of the Janiceps at the far end of the space and on his right was the decrepit, yet wondrous, Gallery of Antiquities. Craning his neck over his shoulder, he saw the high towers and bleak spires of the Imperial palace.

'Never liked this place,' said Pasanius. 'Now I like it even less.'

'We are to fight here?' Uriel asked Leodegarius. 'What has happened to this place? It feels… dead.'

'The fight will be held before the proper planetary authorities, both secular and holy,' said Leodegarius. 'In order for the *Judicium Imperator* to mean anything, it must be witnessed. As to what has happened since your incarceration… We will speak of it if you survive.'

On that grim pronouncement, they followed Leodegarius into the centre of the parade ground and Uriel saw many familiar faces gathered to witness the fight. Cardinal Togandis sweated beneath his ceremonial robes of office and Daron Nisato was resplendent in his gleaming black enforcer's armour.

Leto Barbaden was seated on a tall podium, looking simultaneously bored and angered by the proceedings, despite the fact that the fate of two of humanity's greatest protectors was to be decided before his very eyes.

Leodegarius halted before the podium and gave a curt nod of acknowledgement to Leto Barbaden before turning to Uriel and Pasanius.

'Governor Barbaden, these two warriors have passed through the trials of purity as determined by my order and I present them before you that you might bear witness to the Emperor's judgement upon them. No higher authority than the Emperor exists and thus He will have the final say in their fate.'

Uriel blinked in surprise at the Grey Knight's choice of words, recognising in them an implicit threat that Uriel's fate was not Barbaden's to decide. Had the governor demanded their execution in the last few days? Given their previous dealings, it was not beyond the realms of possibility, but Leodegarius's words suggested that such a decision was not Barbaden's to make, not when the Grey Knights were involved.

The Adeptus Astartes stood apart from the rigid hierarchy of the Imperium in a way that some found distasteful, but the Grey Knights were an authority beyond even the autonomy of most Chapters. Their authority was absolute and no one who valued their life would dare to go against their dictates.

It seemed that Leto Barbaden was no exception to this, and Uriel could see that it sat ill with the governor to have to bow before the authority of what he no doubt saw as interlopers.

Barbaden nodded and said, 'These two have brought nothing but trouble to my world, but if your order decrees this combat to be a just and proper trial then

I will bear witness to it.'

Uriel hid his amusement at Barbaden's transparent ill-grace, meeting his hostile gaze and returning it with one of his own. His dislike for the governor of Salinas had intensified the more he learned about him. Barbaden's disregard for human life and his actions during the conquest of Salinas were unconscionable and Uriel knew that his crimes must be addressed in the fullness of time.

Leodegarius turned to him and said, 'Follow me to the place of battle.'

Uriel nodded and both he and Pasanius followed the Grey Knight to the centre of a circle that had been etched in silver, like the protective one carved in the stone chamber where he had undergone the ordeals, albeit this was considerably larger. Grey Knights in power armour took up positions around the circle, the shimmering blades of their tall polearms crackling in the sunlight.

'We fight hand-to-hand, no weapons,' said Leodegarius, 'the two of you against me.'

'That's it?' asked Pasanius.

'What more did you expect?'

'I don't know,' admitted Pasanius. 'I just thought there would be a lot more… ritual.'

'Rituals are for heathen corpse-whisperers and sorcerers,' said Leodegarius, assuming a fighting pose. 'I prefer more direct action.'

Uriel let his mind and body slip into the rhythm of combat, allowing his metabolism to speed up and heighten his senses and reaction times.

'So what are the rules?' he asked.

'You are such an Ultramarine,' grinned Leodegarius, launching a thunderous jab at Uriel's face. The Grey Knight's fist was like a steel piston, bludgeoning Uriel backwards as though struck by a dreadnought.

Blood arced from his split cheek and stars exploded behind his eyes at the force, but Uriel had been hit before and he knew how to ride with the pain of impact. He lowered his shoulder and rolled his neck, twisting his head out of the way of Leodegarius's follow-up hook.

His arm came up of its own accord, blocking a right cross and he launched an uppercut into his attacker's torso. His other fist slammed into the Grey Knight's side and he heard a satisfying whoosh of breath. His burned hand was bathed in fiery heat, the flesh split where it had not fully healed, but Uriel pushed the pain to the back of his mind.

Pasanius swung with his left, but Leodegarius easily dodged the off-balance blow. Leodegarius's elbow hammered into Pasanius's side and his fist slammed like a club into his midriff, driving the sergeant to his knees.

Uriel surged forwards, his fist arcing towards Leodegarius's head, but the

Grey Knight had been expecting his attack. With a speed that seemed impossible for such a huge warrior, Leodegarius swayed aside and seized Uriel's wrist. He pivoted smoothly and slammed his hip into Uriel, using the momentum of the charge to hurl him from his feet.

The ground came up hard and Uriel slammed into it with pile-driving force. The breath exploded from his lungs and he looked up in time to see a slashing foot descending on him. Uriel rolled aside as the heel smashed down and split the stone. He twisted to his feet as Pasanius took another punishing blow to the head.

Uriel shook his head clear of the ringing impact with the ground and spat a mouthful of blood. He knew he had underestimated his opponent's resolve. Leodegarius might have wanted to show that they were innocent, but he wasn't about to compromise the integrity of the *Judicium Imperator* to get his way.

Leodegarius turned from Pasanius as Uriel circled around to his left and the cheering soldiers looked on. The officials of Salinas watched the fight with studied interest, but the soldiers of the Falcatas were showing no such restraint. Uriel risked a quick glance down at Pasanius, who reeled on the ground, as though still dazed from the blow to the head.

Uriel caught a glimmer of guile from his friend and reversed his circling, bringing Leodegarius back closer to Pasanius. The Grey Knight glanced down, unconcerned, at the groggy, struggling form of Pasanius as Uriel feinted left and punched right.

The blow caught Leodegarius on the shoulder, not hurting him, but putting him off balance for the briefest of seconds. Uriel quickly followed with a series of high jabs, one of which penetrated Leodegarius's defences to open a cut above his right eye.

A slashing riposte thundered into Uriel's jaw, but he had seen it coming. He let his guard drop a fraction and Leodegarius stepped off lightly to deliver a crushing blow.

Before the blow landed, Pasanius pushed himself onto his side and delivered a slashing, scissor kick to Leodegarius's leg, just above the knee. Pasanius's foot was like a steel club, hammering the Grey Knight's peroneal nerve and chopping the leg out from under him.

Leodegarius collapsed and Uriel surged in, pounding his fists against the warrior's face, hating the fact that he was drawing the blood of an Imperial hero, but knowing that he had no choice but to fight with all his strength.

He drew back his fist to strike again, when Leodegarius surged to his feet and slammed the heel of his left hand into Uriel's solar plexus. Almost in the same motion, his right chopped down on Pasanius's neck.

Pasanius gave a strangled cry of pain and his eyes rolled back in their sockets.

Uriel staggered back, struggling for breath as his diaphragm went into spasm and pain from the strike to his solar plexus almost blinded him. He could not draw air into his lungs.

Leodegarius rose to his feet, like a colossus from the depths, and Uriel was amazed that he had recovered so quickly from Pasanius's strike. A blow of such power would have shattered the leg of a mortal warrior and rendered even a Space Marine immobile for several minutes.

Leodegarius fought as if the blow had never landed and Uriel knew that they were fighting one of the mightiest warriors of the Imperium. Uriel raised his fists, but he was too hurt and too slow to avoid the hammer-blows that rang from his skull as Leodegarius closed on him. He desperately circled in an attempt to put some distance between him and his opponent.

Uriel could not resist the fury of the attack and he saw the blow that would finish him a split second before it landed. The Grey Knight's fist arced around his guard and smashed into his face with the power of a thunderbolt.

Uriel was hurled backwards and landed in a heap next to Pasanius, his face a bloody ruin and his torso a mass of ugly bruises that were already swelling and purpling.

He knew he had to get to his feet, but the strength had been battered from him and he slumped back, unable to rise or fight or do anything other than lie bleeding. His breath came in short, painful gasps and he tasted blood and defeat in his mouth.

Was this how his life was to end? Beaten to a bloody pulp by a warrior he should be fighting shoulder to shoulder with? The indignity and horror of it was unbearable.

Uriel looked up through a mist of blood and swellings to see Leodegarius standing over him. 'Kill us and be done with it,' he snapped, 'but you are only helping the Emperor's enemies by doing so.'

Leodegarius shook his head and offered Uriel his hand. 'No,' he said, 'I am not going to kill you. The *Judicium Imperator* is over and you have proved to me that you are loyal servants of the Imperium.'

Uriel took the proffered hand and drew himself unsteadily to his feet. 'But we lost.'

'The *Judicium Imperator* is not about winning or losing,' said Leodegarius, 'it is about the struggle. I am a warrior of the Grey Knights and I carry the Emperor's fire into the dark corners of the galaxy. Only a servant of the Ruinous Powers can defeat me. Had you bested me, it would have shown that you were an enemy of the Emperor and my warriors would have gunned you down.'

'Then we were meant to lose?' asked Uriel, horrified at the implication.

'Meant to?' shrugged Leodegarius. 'No, but the Emperor was with me and I was confident I could defeat the pair of you, thus proving that you were not servants of evil.'

Pasanius pushed himself up onto his elbow. 'What happened?' he asked groggily. 'Did we win?'

'I think we did,' said Uriel.

'Good,' said Pasanius, sliding back down into unconsciousness. 'I knew we could take him.'

THE FEEL OF the fresh bodyglove against his skin was sublime and the sense of anticipation was almost unbearable. Uriel felt his heartbeat quicken as the Grey Knights' artificers lifted the blue breastplate of the power armour from the battle flag and manoeuvred it towards his chest.

The movement was accompanied with solemn chants from the hooded acolytes, who, since Uriel and Pasanius's vindication, had taken on an altogether less threatening aspect.

Uriel and Pasanius stood on a raised dais before the assembled warriors of the Grey Knights and Curator Lukas Urbican in one of the grand halls of the Gallery of Antiquities. The Grey Knights were clad in their battle gear, each plate and vambrace garlanded with purity seals.

With Uriel and Pasanius's loyalty to the Golden Throne established by the *Judicium Imperator*, the Grey Knights had borne them into the Thunderhawk, where chirurgeons and Apothecaries had treated their wounds. No words were spoken and Leodegarius refused to answer any questions until they were fit to stand before him as fellow Astartes.

The already healing burns on their hands were cleaned with sterile jellies and repaired with synth-skin bandages, the swelling bruises and lumps earned in the *Judicium Imperator* with ice and pain medication.

Where Uriel had been branded on the shoulder, the clicking mechanisms of a reconstruction servitor implanted in the wall of the Thunderhawk's medicae bay rapidly removed the burn scars and rebuilt the underlying tissue and epidermis.

Within the space of an hour, both Uriel and Pasanius were declared fit for service and had been issued with fresh under-suits for power armour. Leodegarius had marched them from the Thunderhawk and, together with an escort of Grey Knights, crossed the empty parade ground towards the Gallery of Antiquities.

Curator Urbican had been waiting for them, a broad smile plastered across his

open features as he welcomed them back into the gallery. Once again they made their way through the shadowed halls until they found themselves before the suits of power armour belonging to the Sons of Guilliman.

Eighteen of the suits were arranged in battle formation behind a dais. The nineteenth, the armour Uriel had chosen, or which had chosen him, was broken down into its component parts and arranged on one of the great battle flags of Salinas taken down from the walls. The armour was exactly as Uriel remembered it, freshly painted in the colours of the Ultramarines, with only the helmet remaining in the blue and white of the Sons of Guilliman.

Arranged beside this suit of armour was another, this one in the familiar livery and iconography of the Ultramarines. Uriel had seen Pasanius's pride at the restoration of their Chapter symbols earlier, but his joy at seeing them again was no less dimmed.

'Prepare to receive your armour, warriors of the Emperor,' said Leodegarius.

Uriel and Pasanius had mounted the dais, and the artificers lifted the first plates of the armour towards their bodies with great reverence. First came the greaves, cuisse and knee guards, followed by the power coils of the midsection.

Piece by piece, the armour was layered upon them and as each segment was fastened into place, Uriel felt as though his soul was being rebuilt. Segments of his armour were fixed in place over his upper arms and then came the vambrace and gauntlets.

The damaged section of Pasanius's armour had been repaired with an end cap to seal his armour at the elbow. His friend had declined the Grey Knight's offer of a temporary augmetic, sheepishly saying that he would rather have one fitted by the Techmarines of Macragge.

Adjustments were made, pieces added and each facet of the armour polished and anointed with sacred oils and unguents until all that remained was the final piece. The artificers slotted the breastplate into position and Uriel felt the familiar hiss and whir of the armour coming to life around him.

Fur-lined cloaks of purest white were fastened around their shoulders and secured with golden eagle clips to their breastplates as the gorget clamped around his neck, tight, but not restricting. As the pressure seals engaged, Uriel could feel the internal workings of the armour revitalise his physique, thrumming with incredible potential energy.

Questing bio-implants unwound from inside the armour and connected with the sockets in his body, meshing his organic structure with that of the ceramite plates and indescribably complex workings of Space Marine armour.

Uriel felt the power of wearing such a magnificent suit of armour, his strength boosted, his endurance enhanced and his ability to smite the enemies of the

Imperium increased exponentially.

With Uriel and Pasanius's armour in place, Leodegarius stepped forward and handed them gleaming bolters. The flat plates of the weapons were etched in gold and their length was worked with incredibly detailed lettering. The weapons were freshly oiled, each with a magazine of bolter shells fitted snugly into the space before the trigger.

Uriel nodded as he hefted the bolter, the weapon feeling as though it weighed nothing at all. Strength coursed through the armour and he could feel the channels of energy running through it as surely as though it was a second skin.

A Space Marine was more than any one thing, however, more than his armour, his weapons or his training and dedication. Each of these things combined to create something greater than the sum of its parts.

A warrior without a weapon or armour could be killed by his enemies and a warrior without faith and training would fall to petty vices that led to gross treachery.

Uriel had seen, first hand, what a warrior who was not fully equipped, physically and spiritually, could become, and he had walked perilously close to the precipice that others had fallen from. Images of the Warsmith Honsou and Ardaric Vaanes drifted across his mind, but they were fleeting, ghost images, reminders of a dark time that was now passed.

Uriel turned his head to look at the armour, seeing a thick wad of crimson wax attached to the edge of his shoulder guard. A fluttering length of parchment hung from the wax seal, and written upon it in a fine, cursive script was a line from a sermon familiar to Uriel:

He must put a white cloak upon his soul, that he might climb down into the filth, yet may he die a saint.

Leodegarius stepped back and bowed to them both.

'Welcome back, warriors of Ultramar,' he said.

EIGHTEEN

FURY BLAZED IN Leto Barbaden's eyes as Uriel and Pasanius marched into his private library alongside Leodegarius and a robed acolyte bearing a scented rosewood box. The Grey Knight was clad in a pale cream tunic, over which he wore a shirt of silver mail trimmed in ermine, yet he was no less impressive for lack of his armour.

At the heels of the Space Marines came four others, hastily assembled by the orders of Leodegarius. Cardinal Shavo Togandis came first, sweating beneath his robes of office, which hung loosely on him where they had been fastened incorrectly in his haste to obey the immediate summons to the palace.

Serj Casuaban walked alongside the cardinal, his expression betraying a mix of irritation and curiosity at having been dragged from his works at the House of Providence. The medicae wore a long, dark coat over his functional clothes and his grey hair was combed neatly for perhaps the first time in years.

Daron Nisato and Pascal Blaise walked behind Casuaban, the latter looking deeply uncomfortable in a set of iron restraint cuffs and the former uncomfortable at the idea of them being there, while knowing that they had to be for now.

The governor of Salinas sat in his chair nursing a large glass of port as this procession invaded his inner sanctum, and Uriel felt a flutter of satisfaction at the man's annoyance. He could see the effort of will it was taking the governor to keep a civil tongue in his head, but not even Leto Barbaden would openly risk the wrath of the Grey Knights by refusing an audience.

There was no denying the sense of renewed purpose that filled Uriel. Now that he was once again armoured as a Space Marine, he was ready to stand alongside such heroic warriors as Leodegarius and Pasanius in defence of the Imperium. Though he had no idea what Leodegarius was to say to the assembly, Uriel could feel the tension in the air and the unbearable sense of expectation.

In the wake of the Unfleshed's rampage through Barbadus, the citizens had taken to the streets to variously demand action, recompense or retaliation. Quite who any such action was to be taken against wasn't clear, but the need for something to be done was reaching critical mass. Several buildings had been burned to the ground and widespread looting had gripped the entire northeast quarter of the city.

Daron Nisato's enforcers had taken to the streets in whatever armoured

vehicles remained to them, supported by the few soldiers who were willing to patrol the streets after the massacre at the Screaming Eagle's barracks.

The mood on the streets of the city was ugly and all it would take to ignite a city-wide epidemic of bloodshed was a single spark.

Events of great import were in motion and Uriel knew that many of the players in this drama would not live to see its end were they to misstep but a little. The acolyte with the box placed it on the table in the centre of the room and Barbaden spared it the briefest glance before saying, 'Brother Leodegarius, are you sure that this gathering is absolutely necessary? There is chaos on the streets of my city!'

'You are more right than you know, governor,' said Leodegarius darkly, 'and yes, I am sure that this is necessary. Believe me, things are likely to get worse before they get better.'

'Very well,' muttered Barbaden, taking a sip of his port and sending a poisonous glance towards Pascal Blaise. 'Since this… motley band has assembled, might I enquire why you required the presence of a known terrorist, Brother Leodegarius?'

'I'm no terrorist!' snapped Pascal Blaise. 'You're the terrorist, Barbaden.'

'Whatever,' said Barbaden. 'I'll have you executed before the day is out.'

'No, you won't,' said Daron Nisato, resting his hand on the butt of his pistol. 'If we are ever to have peace on Salinas, we will need this man alive.'

Barbaden ignored Nisato, as though he were not even worth bothering with, although Uriel saw his face darken at the unaccustomed sight of a weapon in his presence.

'I will get to that in good time, Governor Barbaden,' answered Leodegarius, looking into the face of every man present, and Uriel had the distinct impression that the Grey Knight was seeing beyond their physical appearance to some hidden quality that only he could discern.

'This motley band, as you call it, is a very singular body, and you are all here because I have seen that you all have a part to play in this planet's future, or rather, whether it has one at all.'

'That sounds like a threat,' observed Barbaden.

'Perhaps it is, governor,' admitted Leodegarius, lifting the rosewood box from the table. 'I am well aware of the unrest in your city, but it can wait, for a potentially far greater threat to your world builds unseen in the darkness.'

'What threat?' demanded Barbaden.

'In time,' said Leodegarius, and Uriel heard the unmistakable tone of one who is growing weary of answering questions. Barbaden heard it too and wisely kept his mouth shut as the Grey Knight opened the box and removed what looked like

a pack of cards.

'The art of cartomancy is ancient,' began Leodegarius. 'It predates the Imperium and has been used as a tool of divination by the earliest tribes to crawl across the surface of Old Earth.'

'Are we to receive a history lesson while my city burns?' sneered Barbaden and Uriel was again struck by the man's bravery or stupidity in the face of so mighty a warrior as Leodegarius.

Leodegarius displayed no irritation at the interruption and said, 'Everything comes back to history, governor. What is happening now is a direct result of mistakes made in the past. Only by studying the past can we learn from it.'

Barbaden appeared far from convinced, but nodded as Leodegarius continued. 'I have gathered this group together because you are all intimately linked with what is happening on Salinas. I know this because the cards tell me it is so. Gather round.'

Uriel and Pasanius stood at either shoulder of the Grey Knight as the others approached the table. Predictably, Barbaden was last to arrive, casting a hostile stare at Uriel as he did so.

'Observe,' said Leodegarius, selecting cards at random from the deck and setting it before Daron Nisato. The card was that of a robed man sitting upon a throne. In one hand he carried a sword and in the other a set of golden scales. On the base of the card was written, "Justice".

'This is you, Enforcer Nisato,' said Leodegarius. 'Whatever your past has been, the time has come to reflect on the choices you have made along the way. There are wrongs you plan to make amends for and there are people who have brought you distress, but you are wise enough to deal with them in an intelligent way. Your only thought is of making things better and this card shows that those wrongs will be put right.'

'You can get all that from a card?' asked Daron Nisato.

'From the card and from you,' answered Leodegarius, drawing another card and laying it before the man standing next to Nisato. This card depicted a man hung by his ankles from a gibbet attached to an Imperial temple.

'That doesn't look very encouraging,' said Pascal Blaise. 'Is this going to be some kind of justification for executing me?'

'We need no justification for that,' hissed Barbaden. 'The lives you took in your pointless, silly resistance are all the justification I need.'

Leodegarius spoke again before Blaise could reply. 'Things have not reached fruition in your life and you must be patient. Keep your own counsel, let go of your hate, and trust your instincts in the days ahead. They will serve you well.'

Another card was turned up: a robed man sitting between two pillars with a

pair of keys lying crossed at his feet.

'Cardinal Togandis, this is you, the Hierophant,' said Leodegarius. 'He symbolises the ruling power of religion and faith, the teachings that are palatable to the masses. This represents your love of ritual and ceremony, but also your need for approval from others. The Hierophant indicates the importance of conformity.'

The sweating cardinal did not answer, and Leodegarius went on.

The next card showed an old, grey-haired man on the edge of a snow-capped cliff, looking out upon the world. In one hand he carried a lantern and in the other, a winged, snake-wrapped staff.

'The Hermit,' said Leodegarius, looking at Serj Casuaban. 'On the long dark nights of the soul, the Hermit is there to guide us towards wisdom and knowledge. From the Hermit we can receive wisdom from the Emperor. The Hermit can guide us in our upcoming endeavours. He reminds us that our goals can be attained, but that the journey will not be smooth or easy.'

'I suppose I have a card?' asked Barbaden, affecting an air of studied boredom, but Uriel could see that he was intrigued to see which card would represent him.

'Indeed you do, governor,' said Leodegarius, slapping another card on the table.

The man on the card wore a long robe and stood before a table, upon which lay a cup, a wand, a sword and a pentacle. Flowers surrounded him, and above his head was a symbol that Uriel recognised as that representing Infinity.

'The Sorcerer,' said Leodegarius.

'A sorcerer?' snorted Barbaden, although there was a hint of unease in his tone. 'I may be many things, Brother Leodegarius, but I am no sorcerer. I can assure you of that.'

Leodegarius shook his head. 'You misread the card, Governor Barbaden. The Sorcerer is not literally a wielder of magic. He represents a man always in control of the choices that surround him. He holds his wand up to the heavens, and yet the opposite hand points to the earth. The Sorcerer is a warning of opportunity and, reversed like this, it indicates a person who is a perfectionist, a man who handles every situation calmly and coolly, but who uses power for destructive and negative purposes.'

'That is absurd,' said Barbaden, although from the look of those around him it was clear that they agreed with the Grey Knight's reading of the card.

'There is one final card to be dealt,' said Leodegarius, 'and that it yours, Captain Ventris.'

Uriel nodded. He had expected this, but he didn't know whether to anticipate

or dread the card that Leodegarius would draw.

The card placed before Uriel displayed a tower standing high on a mountain, its structure blown apart by a lightning bolt from the heavens. A pair of figures fell from the tower.

'What does it mean?' asked Uriel.

'The fall of the tower reminds us that if we use our knowledge and strength for evil purposes, then destruction will be wrought upon us,' explained Leodegarius. 'When the Tower appears, it indicates changes, conflict and catastrophe. Not only that, but there will be an overthrow of existing ways of life.'

'Sounds just like you,' observed Pasanius dryly.

Uriel scowled as Leodegarius continued his reading. 'However, with destruction comes enlightenment. The Tower shows us that selfish ambition and greed will ultimately bring us nothing of value.'

Uriel released the breath he was holding and looked at the faces around the table. He knew them all, with the exception of Serj Casuaban, and he could see that the cartomancy had unsettled them all, even Governor Barbaden.

'So you see that you are all necessary to the coming conflict,' said Leodegarius. 'How, I do not yet know, but your destinies are linked to the fate of this world.'

'What did you mean that there was a greater threat to Salinas?' asked Uriel. 'It sounds like you are saying that what's happening now is a symptom of something more serious.'

'It is indeed, Captain Ventris, but to answer that I will need to instruct you in the history of Salinas.'

'We already know the history of Salinas,' said Leto Barbaden. 'We have a Gallery of Antiquities devoted to it should anyone feel the need to be bored rigid.'

'I meant the history of Salinas as it is known by *my* order,' said Leodegarius.

BEFORE LEODEGARIUS BEGAN his tale, he spoke into a wrist-mounted vox-unit and would say nothing until the seven Null-Servitors entered and took up positions around the edges of the room. They began their droning chant and Uriel saw that their dreadful appearance was a shock to everyone in the room. Even Barbaden recoiled in loathing at the sight of them.

'There are truths that must be spoken here,' said Leodegarius. 'And truth is powerful, it can reach beyond the realms of Men. I must speak words that should not escape into the world beyond this chamber.'

Uriel felt his skin crawl at the sight of the blank, empty-faced servitors, feeling the familiar dullness blunt his senses as their chant continued and Leodegarius began to speak.

'To understand what is happening on Salinas, you must understand a measure of the foe ranged against us. In this region of space, the walls between the material realm and the heaving madness of the Warp are thin. The currents within the Sea of Souls are felt in this world and stir the dreams and nightmares of mortals, goading their fractious hearts to discord. Voracious predator creatures lurk in the depths of the warp, and in most places, such creatures cannot force themselves from their abode of the damned to our world without willing conduits or debased followers to ease their passage. But here… here daemonic beings of great power can force themselves through on their own.'

Leodegarius paused and Uriel felt the skin beneath his armour crawl at the thought of the denizens of the warp. He had faced such creatures and knew well the havoc they could wreak. One such being was able to manifest on Salinas just over four thousand years ago, a fell Daemon Prince of Chaos named Ustaroth; a thousand curses upon its damned name. This prince of mayhem was a creature of almost limitless power and incalculable malice, and the stress of its passage from the warp allowed others of its kind to follow in the froth of its immaterial wake. Great was the slaughter unleashed, and hundreds died in the first hours of their arrival, thousands in the days following. In desperation, the Imperial Commander called for aid and a detachment of warriors from the Sons of Guilliman heard his plea. Though they knew there was little hope of victory, they diverted to provide what aid they could, for what warrior of honour could stand idly by while the forces of the Archenemy made sport with loyal servants of the Emperor?'

Uriel's heart filled with pride at the heroism of his brothers of the blood and he made a solemn vow that he would do honour to this armour, which had belonged to one of those heroes of long ago.

'The Sons of Guilliman fought alongside the planetary armies, but they were no match for the host of the Daemon Prince, who swept them aside and slew them in a great battle fought within a city in the shadow of the mountains.'

Uriel and Pasanius shared a glance with one another, and they could see that everyone in the room knew, without knowing how they knew, that the Sons of Guilliman had died in Khaturian.

The Killing Ground was, it seemed, a magnet for death.

'Death, unimaginable bloodshed and slavery followed for a decade before warriors from the Grey Knights arrived at the head of a crusade force. My order met the Prince of Chaos in battle and the great Ignatius defeated it, hurling its

unclean flesh back to the hell from whence it had come. Salinas was cleansed of taint and displaced peoples from across the sector were brought in to repopulate the planet. Within three generations, what little evidence remained of the invasion had been eradicated and the planet was on its way to becoming a world of the Emperor once more.'

Leodegarius paused, his eyes closed as though remembering and doing honour to the brave hero who had defeated the mighty daemon prince. The Grey Knight opened his eyes and took up the tale once more.

'Salinas was freed from the grip of the daemonic, but great was the damage done beyond the merely physical. Though no trace of the warp remained, the very presence of so powerful a creature is anathema to the fabric of reality, and the invisible walls that separate our realm of existence from that of the immaterium were worn dangerously thin. And the daemonic will always seek to return to the places they once trod.'

'So you've been watching Salinas ever since?' asked Pasanius suddenly. 'That's why you're here now, isn't it?'

'Indeed,' said Leodegarius. 'Since that great victory, we have maintained a secret outpost, hidden from all, that we might stand vigil on Salinas and watch for the return of the daemon prince banished by the great Ignatius.'

'You intercepted our astropathic message,' said Uriel, understanding how the Grey Knights could have known of their whereabouts. 'You heard the call of the Janiceps.'

Leodegarius nodded. 'We did and our warp-seers felt the surge in the warp caused by your arrival. Vast quantities of dangerous energies were released by the machine that brought you here and they have been seized upon by a dark presence lurking on this world.'

'Dark presence?' asked Cardinal Togandis, his voice trembling. 'The daemon prince?'

'Thankfully not,' said Leodegarius, and Togandis visibly sagged against the table, 'but there are powers at work on Salinas that are drawing on that energy and that is further weakening the barriers between us and the warp.'

'What are these powers?' asked Daron Nisato. 'And how do we stop them?'

'We all know what it is,' blurted Togandis, his eyes filling with tears. 'Don't we? Come on, admit it, we've all seen them, haven't we? Daron? Leto? Serj… I know you have!'

'What are you babbling about, Shavo?' snapped Barbaden.

'The dead!' shrieked Togandis. 'The dead of Khaturian! They won't let go of their anger! They want to punish us for what we did… for what we allowed to happen.'

TOGANDIS FELL TO his knees, and Uriel reached out to grab him. The cardinal held onto Uriel's arm for support, fat tears streaming down his glossy cheeks.

'We were there,' whispered the cardinal. 'We were there.'

'Shavo, shut up,' said Barbaden.

Shavo Togandis looked up at the governor, and Uriel was surprised at the steel he saw in the cardinal's eyes. 'No, Leto,' said Togandis, 'not any more. You did it. You doomed us all that day. I must confess. I have to speak!'

Before Togandis could say more, Eversham moved from behind Barbaden with his pistol drawn. Uriel was too far away to react, but there was a flash of silver mail followed by a heavy crunch and Eversham dropped to the floor.

'Emperor's blood!' swore Uriel as he saw Barbaden's equerry lying crumpled on the carpet, blood leaking from the enormous crater that Leodegarius had punched in the side of his head. The man's legs twitched and his eyes fluttered as though he couldn't quite comprehend that he had been killed.

Everyone backed away from the corpse and Leodegarius loomed over Leto Barbaden.

'What has to be said here will be said,' commanded the Grey Knight.

'Of course,' replied Barbaden, looking down at the corpse and for once appearing to be cowed by the warrior.

Leodegarius turned back to the shaking cardinal and took hold of his shoulder, lifting him to his feet as though he weighed no more than a child. He marched the unresisting Togandis towards the room's only chair, and the sweating cardinal gratefully sank into the plush leather.

'Was… Was he going to kill me?' asked Togandis, his gaze switching between the corpse and the warrior who had spilled its blood and brains over the floor.

'He was,' nodded Leodegarius, 'to protect his master.'

All eyes turned on Leto Barbaden and the governor drew himself up to his full height, pulling his coat tightly around him and folding his arms.

'I apologise for nothing,' he stated. 'I did what I had to do. Any commander would have done likewise.'

'No,' said Uriel, rounding on the governor, 'they would not. You murdered the population of Khaturian just because it was the quickest and easier solution. A whole city, tens of thousands dead just to get to one man.'

'Khaturian was a legitimate military target,' said Barbaden.

'Military target?' exclaimed Pascal Blaise, his face purpling with rage and only prevented from launching himself at Barbaden by Daron Nisato's restraining hand. 'There were never any weapons or supplies in Khaturian! We deliberately kept it out of the troubles so there would be somewhere safe for our

families to live. You murdered them all!'

'The city was harbouring wanted terrorists and its people shot at my soldiers, so I don't know why you're throwing words like murder around.'

'No!' cried Togandis, rising to his feet. 'You knew, Leto. You knew that many of the Sons of Salinas had families in Khaturian. That was why you picked it. You knew before the first tank rolled that you were going to raze the city to the ground. You sent in Verena Kain and she killed them all. Just to drive Sylvanus Thayer mad with grief and rage and draw him into battle.'

'It worked, didn't it?' snarled Barbaden. 'Why don't any of you see that? We destroyed him and the Sons of Salinas. We brought peace!'

'Brought peace?' laughed Serj Casuaban bitterly. 'You are a fool if you think that, Leto. Spend a day in the House of Providence and you will see what your "peace" has brought to Salinas.'

'So that's it,' laughed Barbaden. 'This is all some grand charade to condemn me, is that it? Gather up all the weaklings who didn't have the spine or will to do what needed to be done and have them all point their grubby little fingers at me?'

Leto Barbaden moved to his drinks cabinet and poured a fresh glass of port. 'We were at war with these people,' he said, carefully enunciating every word, as though speaking to a roomful of simpletons, 'and people die in wars.'

'That's your excuse for mass murder?' asked Uriel.

'Mass murder, military necessity, genocide,' said Barbaden, shrugging, 'it's all the same thing, isn't it? The great Solar Macharius did not shy away from tough decisions that needed to be made, Captain Ventris. He left worlds burning in his wake and entire planets were destroyed in his campaigns, and he is a hero. His name is lauded throughout the Imperium and his generals are revered as saints. Would you have levelled the same accusations at him? Wars are won by the side that is willing to go the furthest, to take the decisions their foes are too squeamish to take. Or have you been so long away from your Chapter that you have forgotten that elementary fact?'

'You are wrong, governor,' said Uriel. 'I have seen my share of death, both honourable and despicable, and yes, I know that war is a brutal, bloody business capable of bringing out the best and worst in men. This is a harsh, dangerous galaxy, with untold terrors lurking in the dark to devour us, but the minute we turn on our own kind and murder them, we might as well take a blade to our throats.'

'I never thought to hear one of the Adeptus Astartes say something so naive,' spat Barbaden. 'We were at war with an enemy that fought in the shadows with the tactics of terror. How were we to win the war if not by using their own methods against them?'

'You were once a man, Leto, but you are a monster now,' said Shavo Togandis. 'I was once proud to serve you, but what we did that day was wrong, and we have to pay for it.'

'Pay for it?' said Barbaden. 'And who is there to make me?'

'I told you, the dead seek their vengeance.'

Barbaden laughed. 'The dead? Frankly I don't think I need fear them. I think I'm somewhat beyond their jurisdiction.'

'You're wrong,' said Togandis. 'I've seen them. I've felt their cold breath and the touch of their dead hands. They want us all to pay for what we did. Hanno Merbal couldn't take it any more and took his own life right in front of Daron, and I wish I had his courage. For the love of the Emperor, the dead have already killed Mesira and Verena and the Screaming Eagles! And we're next, you, me and Serj. We're all that's left.'

Leodegarius lifted a hand, stopping Barbaden's reply. 'The cardinal is correct, the dead are here. I have felt them and one does not need to be a psychic to feel the dread presence of their spirits. This planet is rank with them.'

'How is that possible?' asked Uriel. 'How can the dead remain after they are gone?'

'Each of us has a spark inside us, a spirit or soul, call it what you will, and when we die it is released from our bodies to dissipate into the warp,' said Leodegarius, 'but when so large a number of people die, gripped by such rage and terror as must have been felt by the people of Khaturian, their spirits can remain coherent.'

'What happens to them?' asked Pascal Blaise.

'Normally nothing, for such spirits are as swirling embers in a hurricane, but when there is a focus for them, something to direct their energies, they can influence the realm of the living. Even then, it is usually no more than phantasms and does not last for long, but something or someone is directing the power of these spirits and they are growing stronger with every passing moment.'

'Is that what those monsters were that killed Mesira?' asked Daron Nisato. 'The dead?'

'No, they are creatures of flesh and blood,' said Uriel. 'We encountered them in our travels and were bringing them home. Once they were human children, but they were twisted by the Ruinous Powers into…' Uriel struggled for the right word.

'Into monsters,' said Nisato.

'No, not monsters,' said Uriel. 'They are innocents. The spirits of the dead have taken their bodies for their own. What is happening is not their doing.'

Leto Barbaden laughed. 'So am I to understand that these creatures came to

Salinas with you, Captain Ventris? Oh, this is too rich. Then the deaths of the Screaming Eagles, Colonel Kain and Mesira Bardhyl are your fault.'

'No, governor,' said Uriel icily. 'Their deaths are on your head. The Unfleshed could have lived their lives out in peace somewhere safe, if it hadn't been for the horror you unleashed on Khaturian. Now they are pawns in the bloody revenge of your victims.'

'Worse, they may see this world destroyed,' said Leodegarius.

All recriminations stopped.

'Destroyed?' asked Casuaban. 'In the name of all that's holy, why?'

The stronger the dead become, the more they draw the power of the warp to themselves, further weakening the walls that keep the immaterium from engulfing this world. If we do not stop this soon, the walls will collapse and the entire sector will become a gateway to the realm of Chaos. I will destroy this world before I allow that to happen.'

A heavy silence descended as all gathered suddenly realised the scale of the danger.

'So how do we stop it?' asked Uriel.

'We find what is holding the ghosts here and destroy it,' said Leodegarius.

'What is holding them here?' asked Togandis.

When Leodegarius didn't answer immediately, Barbaden said, 'You don't know, do you?'

'No, I do not, but one of you does.'

'One of us?' asked Uriel. 'Who?'

'Again, I do not know, but the cards have gathered you here for a reason,' said Leodegarius. 'The energy of these spirits must have a focus that binds them here, someone with psychic ability, who is so consumed by rage that he has the power to wield such monstrous energies.'

Again, silence fell, until Pascal Blaise said, 'I know who it is.'

'Who?' demanded Leodegarius. 'Tell us.'

'It's Sylvanus Thayer.'

'Nonsense,' snapped Barbaden. 'That stupid bastard is dead. The Falcatas destroyed him and his traitorous band after Khaturian.'

Serj Casuaban shook his head. 'No, Leto,' he said, 'he's alive. What's left of him is hooked up to machines in the House of Providence, though to call what he has "life" is stretching the term somewhat.'

'You knew Thayer was alive and you kept this from me?' stormed Barbaden.

'I did,' admitted Casuaban. 'It was my penance for what we did. He was one man I would not let die through my cowardice.'

Leodegarius interrupted, turning Serj Casuaban around and saying, 'This

Sylvanus Thayer? Tell me of him.'

'What do you want to know?'

'You said, "What's left of him", what did you mean by that?'

'I meant that the Falcatas were thorough; they thought they'd killed him and they very nearly did. When Pascal Blaise brought him to me, I thought he was already dead, but he held on to life and just wouldn't let go of it. He'd sustained burns to almost ninety percent of his body and had lost both his legs and one of his arms. His eyes had burned away and he'd lost the power of speech. I think he can hear, but it's hard to tell. A machine breathes for him and another feeds him, while a third takes away his waste. Like I said, it's not much of a life.'

'Imperator, you'd be better off letting him die!' said Pasanius.

'I know,' said Casuaban, his voice close to breaking, 'but I couldn't. After the Killing Ground Massacre, I stayed sane by telling myself that I hadn't killed anyone, hadn't even fired a shot, but if I killed Sylvanus Thayer or just let him die, I'd be as bad as those who had burned Khaturian.'

'If anyone would have enough rage within him it would be the man whose family was killed in Khaturian,' nodded Leodegarius. 'Being trapped in the flesh of his destroyed body… that could have been the catalyst that allowed latent psychic powers to develop.'

Leodegarius gripped Casuaban's shoulders tightly.

'You say this Sylvanus Thayer is in the House of Providence?'

'Yes,' said Casuaban.

'Take us there,' said Leodegarius, 'before it's too late.'

NINETEEN

THE LAND RAIDER'S engine was loud and the stink of its fuel was an acrid, yet amazingly welcome smell to Uriel. Clad in his borrowed armour and riding to battle in one of the most powerful vehicles in the Space Marine inventory was a tangible sign that their enforced exile was at an end.

Pasanius sat next to him, his attention fixed on a pict-slate displaying a grainy image of the Land Raider's exterior, while five other Grey Knights in burnished silver-steel power armour sat opposite him.

Standing at the frontal assault ramp was Leodegarius, who was once again clad in his colossal Terminator armour. The Grey Knight stood with his long polearm clutched tightly in his enormous fist. In place of his wrist-mounted storm bolter, he bore a weapon that he had informed Uriel was a psycannon. Instead of bolt shells, this weapon fired consecrated bolts of purest silver that were the bane of the daemonic and unnatural.

Uriel held the bolter that Leodegarius had given him tightly, the fine lines and exquisite workmanship far exceeding anything he had ever seen. It was a gift of incalculable worth and Uriel hoped he would prove an honourable bearer of such a fine weapon in the coming fight.

He was under no illusions - blood would be spilled tonight.

No sooner had Uriel stepped from the palace and into the dusk of evening than he had felt the smothering gloom of the looming threat. The presence of the vengeful dead saturated the air and scraped along the nerves like a discordant vibration.

With no time to waste, Leodegarius had mustered his warriors and, together with Uriel and Pasanius and Serj Casuaban, they had set off through the streets of Barbadus towards the House of Providence. Two Rhinos followed behind the Land Raider and despite the sheer bulk and terror a Land Raider inspired, it was slow going, for the streets of Barbadus were thronged with people: shouting, agitated and scared people.

'It's a mess out there,' said Pasanius, looking at the pict-slate.

'No one knows what's happening, but they know that something is terribly wrong,' said Uriel.

'Aye, you're right, you *don't* need to be psychic to know that,' agreed Pasanius, looking towards Leodegarius's vast bulk. The warrior's blade gleamed red in the light of the troop compartment and Uriel shivered as he felt its potency

as a shrill prickling along the length of his spine.

'It is a Nemesis weapon,' said Leodegarius, as if sensing Uriel's scrutiny, 'a blade forged by the finest artificers of Titan and quenched in the blood of a daemon.'

'The Unfleshed?' asked Uriel. 'Will it kill them?'

'It killed two of them in the plaza before the building I pulled you out of.'

'Two,' said Uriel sadly, 'that leaves maybe five or six left.'

'*You* feel sympathy for them?' asked Leodegarius.

'I do,' agreed Uriel. 'They didn't deserve this.'

'Perhaps not, but few people in this galaxy get what they deserve.'

'He will,' said Pasanius, jerking his thumb at Serj Casuaban, looking wretched and miserable in the far corner of the compartment.

Pasanius turned away from the dejected medicae and addressed Leodegarius. 'I still say we should bomb this place from orbit. You've got a ship up there, haven't you?'

'I have,' said Leodegarius without turning, 'and if we cannot stop Thayer then I will order a lance strike from orbit.'

'No, you can't!' cried Serj Casuaban. 'There are innocents in the House of Providence, not to mention all the people you'd kill and maim in the city with a strike like that! Give that order and you're no better than Barbaden.'

'Or you,' said Pasanius. 'You were at Khaturian as well.'

'I killed no one,' said Casuaban defensively.

'You let Barbaden give the order,' said Pasanius. 'Did you even try to stop him?'

'You don't know him. Once Leto has his mind made up, there's not a thing in the world can make him change it.'

'Fine,' said Pasanius, turning to Uriel, 'then why don't we give these dead folk what they want? Barbaden and Togandis are locked up in the cells and we have this one here, so why not just put a bullet in the backs of their heads? Wouldn't that solve the problem?'

'You'd kill me in cold blood?' demanded Casuaban.

'If it would save the planet, aye,' nodded Pasanius, 'in a heartbeat.'

'Pasanius, enough,' snapped Uriel. 'We're not shooting anyone. This is about justice, not revenge. We stop Sylvanus Thayer and then the three of them will face a court martial for war crimes.'

Uriel paused as a sudden thought came to him and turned to face Leodegarius. 'Is it safe to keep Barbaden and Togandis in the palace cells? Won't the dead be able to get to them there?'

'No, I am maintaining an aegis sanctuary over them,' said Leodegarius. 'No

power of the warp will be able to touch them.'

Uriel wanted to ask more, but the Grey Knight held up his hand. 'We are here,' he said.

'How does it look?'

'Bad.'

DESPITE THE FACT that he was languishing in a cell beneath the rock of the Imperial Palace, Shavo Togandis was more at peace than he had been in the last ten years. All the guilt was, if not gone, at least less of a burden now that the truth of the Killing Ground was known.

The air in the circular prison complex was cold, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, Togandis was not sweating. Stripped of his ceremonial robes, he had been permitted to retain the undergarments of his vestments, as none of the prison issue tunics were large enough for him.

He knelt before the bars of his cell, facing the featureless guard building in the centre of the chamber, his hands clasped before him, reciting prayers that rushed to fill the void in his mind that had been left by the fear of discovery.

'You think praying will do any good?' asked Leto Barbaden from the cell next to his.

Togandis finished his prayer and turned his head to face the man who had lived in his nightmares for the past decade. Looking at him now, he wondered what he had found so terrifying. Leto Barbaden might be a monster on the inside, but to look at him he was just an ordinary man. Not too strong and not too clever, just an ordinary man.

Just as he was an ordinary man.

Which only made the scale of their crimes all the more horrifying.

How could anyone believe that such evil could come from such unremarkable specimens?

Surely the slaughter of so many innocent lives could only have been at the behest of some winged, fire-breathing daemon or undertaken by a host of bloodthirsty orks.

No, it had been done by men and women.

They had done it, and the nearness of the punishment was a blessed relief to the former cardinal.

'I think prayer can't hurt, Leto,' he answered. 'We are going to pay for what we did and I need to get right with the Emperor before then.'

'They can cook up a farce of a trial, but I won't apologise. They'll get nothing from me.'

'Even now, with everything in the open, you still don't think we did anything wrong?'

'Of course not,' snapped Barbaden.

'Then you are truly lost, Leto,' said Togandis with a shake of his head. 'I always knew you were a very dangerous man, but I don't think I realised why until now.'

'What are you babbling about?'

'You are the dark heart of man, Leto,' answered Togandis. 'You are the evil that can lurk in any of us, the potential to commit the most heinous acts and do it with a smile on our faces. There is a wall of conscience between acts of good and evil inside most of us, but that's missing in you. I don't know why, but for you there is no concept of evil, just results.'

The words flowed from Togandis and he felt the catharsis of them as he spoke.

He closed his eyes and smiled as he smelled the faint, but distinct aroma of burning flesh.

'They're coming, Leto.'

Togandis turned his head and looked out beyond the bars as he heard shouts and cries of alarm from the other prisoners.

A mist of shimmering light was forming in the chamber, as though some ductwork had split open and was pouring hot steam into the gaol. Togandis knew it was no such thing and smiled as he saw a host of jostling, ghostly forms in the mist.

First to emerge from the acrid smoke was a small girl, her dress blackened and smouldering. Her flesh was burned and hung from her body in melted strips.

Other forms joined the girl: men, women and more children. On they came until it seemed as though the chamber was filled with the dead.

They moved as though blown by a gentle breeze, drawing near to the cells. Togandis welcomed them, knowing that neither he nor Leto Barbaden would ever stand before a court martial.

Togandis looked over at Leto Barbaden and didn't know whether to be impressed or revolted at his lack of emotion. The former governor of Salinas appeared as unmoved by these apparitions of death as he did by everything else in life.

How grey life must be to him, thought Togandis.

The young girl turned her face to Barbaden and said, 'You were there.'

'Damn right I was,' snarled Barbaden. 'I killed you and I am not sorry.'

The girl's face twisted, the flesh of her face rippling with light and undulant motion as she launched herself towards Leto Barbaden.

Searing blue lightning flashed from the bars of the cell and Togandis blinked in surprise as the girl was hurled back. Her substance faded and vanished into the mist as though she had never existed.

Barbaden laughed. 'It seems these phantoms of Thayer's are not so powerful after all.'

'What do you mean?' gasped Togandis, willing the spirits of the dead to come for him and end his miserable existence.

'I think Leodegarius really wants us alive to stand trial.'

Then Togandis understood.

BAD DIDN'T EVEN begin to cover it.

The House of Providence was aflame, streamers of cold fire billowing like blazing shrouds from every opening and around every rivet, as though the interiors of the three mighty vehicles were full to bursting with light.

Howling winds, like the shrieking cries of the damned, swirled around their destination carrying tormented screams of anguish so intense that it seemed impossible that they could be wrung from a human throat. Arcs of pellucid lighting crackled and rippled over the metal surfaces of the colossal war engines and a creeping sickness oozed down the hill.

'Still think we shouldn't bomb this place from orbit?' asked Pasanius.

Serj Casuaban looked at what had become of the House of Providence with sick horror, and Uriel could only begin to imagine what he must be feeling. A place of healing had become a place of death and vengeance, and the physician in him rebelled at such a perversion.

Uriel and Leodegarius led the way uphill on foot, the Land Raider's passage onwards blocked by a multitude of burnt out tank chassis dragged onto the road. The Grey Knights followed in five-man combat teams, and Pasanius helped Serj Casuaban to keep up.

'How did these tanks get here?' asked Casuaban. 'They weren't here before.'

'The Unfleshed,' said Uriel, pointing upwards to where five hulking shapes were silhouetted at the ridge of the plateau. No more than midnight-black outlines, their veins ran with light and Uriel saw that the Lord of the Unfleshed had grown more powerful since their last encounter, his flesh monstrously swollen and seething with angry souls.

The creatures vanished from sight behind the ridge and a wave of black despair engulfed Uriel as he knew he would have no choice but to aid the Grey Knights in their destruction. Whatever he had hoped for the Unfleshed was lost. The brutal reality of the galaxy was that there was no place for them, no happy

ending, only death.

The winds howling around the House of Providence were getting stronger and the screaming was growing louder. Lightning arced from the middle Capitol Imperialis with a deafening thunderclap, exploding against the hull of a hollowed out Chimera.

'Something's definitely trying to keep us out!' shouted Uriel.

Serj Casuaban clamped his hands over his ears and a hard rain pounded the ground.

Their path wound up the hill, the pace slowed by the need to thread through the maze of burnt and abandoned tanks. Leodegarius hauled those that couldn't be got round out of the way, the incredible power of his Terminator armour able to push tanks from their path as though they weighed nothing at all.

The ridge was approaching and Uriel racked the slide on his bolter, the very notion of going into battle as a Space Marine of the Emperor once more filling him with pride. The Grey Knights spread out, their halberds thrust forward into the storm of light and rain.

Uriel's bolter snapped left and right as he caught fleeting glimpses of darting, ghostly figures at the edge of his vision. A thousand whispering voices rustled like a forest of fallen leaves, the words unintelligible, but all filled with anger.

'You hear them?' asked Leodegarius over the vox.

'I do,' said Uriel, 'but I'm more worried about the Unfleshed.'

'They will be inside,' said Leodegarius, 'waiting for us.'

With that thought uppermost in his mind, Uriel jogged over the ridge, his neck craning upwards as he stood in the enormous shadow of the House of Providence.

Seen from a distance, the three Capitol Imperialis had been hugely impressive symbols of the Imperium, but up close, they were incredible, towering visions of the power to destroy. Their rusted metal flanks soared into the battered sky, the lightning that surrounded them flaring into the heavens as though it was a reactor on the verge of meltdown.

The image was not a comforting one.

As they approached the House of Providence, Uriel's every instinct told him that he was surrounded by foes, yet he could see nothing, nothing solid anyway, for the shrieking winds carried hints of floating phantoms, wisps of bodies as insubstantial as smoke, yet with the presence of a living, breathing being.

Moving towards the House of Providence was proving difficult, as though every step was taken through sucking mud. Even Leodegarius's pace was slowed and Uriel did not want to think of the power that could slow a Terminator.

'How do we get in?' shouted Uriel, looking along the length of the structure

for an opening.

'Over there,' said Leodegarius, pointing towards the shadowed form of an arched entrance, partially hidden by mists and unnatural blackness. Uriel peered into the gloom, barely able to discern its outline.

Leodegarius turned to face Serj Casuaban. 'You will lead us to Sylvanus Thayer, medicae. Identify him and then keep out of our way, understand?' he said, his voice easily cutting through the howling gale of the psychic storm.

Casuaban nodded, Uriel gripped his bolter tightly as Leodegarius said, 'Let's get inside.'

* * *

OUTSIDE THE HOUSE of Providence, all was storm-tossed madness, while inside was frozen stillness. No sooner had Uriel entered the towering structure than the noise and light vanished.

Sputtering glow-globes strung from the iron mesh of the ceiling bobbed overhead and steam vented from the backpacks of their armour like breath. The walls were cold iron, streaked with lines of frost, and pools of ice cracked underfoot. Uriel and Pasanius made their way along the narrow entrance corridor, the shoulders of Leodegarius's armour brushing the walls with his every step.

Shadows grew and receded on the glistening walls and Uriel could hear a maddening buzz just below the threshold of hearing. The Grey Knights spread throughout the structures, moving off in teams of five, securing as tight a perimeter as they could around their leaders.

As well as four Grey Knights in power armour, Uriel's group was made up of Leodegarius, Pasanius and Serj Casuaban. The man was shivering, his face pale and his eyes wide. He scratched at the side of his face, shaking his head as though seeking to dislodge something in his ear.

'So many voices,' he whispered, the sound echoing in the cold corridor.

'You can hear them?' asked Uriel.

Casuaban nodded, tears glistening on his cheeks. 'All of them. They're frightened of him. The Mourner, that's what they used to call him.'

'Who?'

'Sylvanus Thayer,' said Casuaban, 'after the massacre.'

'They're frightened of him?'

'Yes… They want to leave, to go to their rest, but he won't let them, not until he's had his vengeance.'

Uriel filed that fact away and set off after Leodegarius.

Their path took them along corridors, through wards filled with terrified people and along open hallways. Wisps of light gathered in the ceiling spaces and the howls of the wounded echoed strangely in the confusing internal architecture of the place.

Desperately injured men, women and children stared at them, some with terror, some with hope, but the Space Marines could not stop to help them. This was a truly wretched place, Uriel thought, the wounded of the decades old conflict left to rot with only the skill and dedication of one man to help them rebuild their lives.

No matter what happened, Uriel vowed that he would do what he could for Serj Casuaban. The man might be guilty, but it was clear that he at least felt some remorse for what he had allowed to happen.

At each junction of corridors, the medicae would point and then set off once more, alert for any sign of the Unfleshed or any other enemy.

Though he saw no threats, Uriel could sense a fearsome potential building, as though a great power was even now gathering its strength. He cursed his vivid imagination and shook off such morbid thoughts as Leodegarius halted.

They had come to a junction with two passages stretching off into the darkness, left and right, while a wide set of iron stairs led up into sputtering, fitful light. Frozen stalactites of ice hung from the brass balustrade.

'Which way, medicae?' demanded Leodegarius.

'Up, we need to go up.'

WHEN THE ATTACK came, it was with a precision that caught everyone by surprise.

The warriors on the right flank came under attack first; a beast with a hunched spine and long arms wrapped in muscles like steel hawsers tore the head from the warrior on point and hurled it back at his comrades.

A creature with a fused exoskeleton like armour barrelled into the warriors on the left, scattering them and crushing two warriors to death with the sheer force and mass of its charge.

As they reached a ramp that led further upwards, Uriel saw a great shadow detach itself from an alcove in the wall ahead, its body pulsing with light as it came at them. This creature was a hybrid of two forms fused into one, a union of flesh that could not possibly be alive, yet had somehow found a way to exist.

Uriel saw the creature's internal twin oozing beneath its newly formed skin, a howling face pressed against its pallid sheath of flesh. Its muscles seethed with light and its fist caved in the helmet of the Grey Knight nearest Uriel in one

quick motion.

Blood squirted from the headless corpse and the silence of the House of Providence was brutally ended.

The Grey Knights reacted with all the speed and ferocity that Uriel expected. No sooner had the beast appeared in their midst than every halberd was swinging for it. Storm bolters opened up in a coordinated volley of fire. Blazing light and deafening noise filled the space and sprays of light and flesh flew from the Unfleshed as it shuddered under the impacts.

A fist with the mass and force of a lump hammer swung out and smashed the breastplate of a Grey Knight, exiting from the warrior's back in an explosion of blood and ceramite. Uriel ducked the return stroke and opened fire, the bark of his weapon adding to the din.

Serj Casuaban dropped to his knees, his arms pulled in tight as Pasanius stood over him.

Too close to use his psycannon, Leodegarius thrust with his polearm, the glowing blade hammering into the back of the creature. It roared in pain, the shimmering, fiery tip of the blade erupting from its swollen chest. The creature tried to spin around to face its attacker, but Leodegarius's strength and mass was too great and he held it fast.

'Hurry!' shouted Leodegarius. 'Kill it!'

The two surviving Grey Knights moved in, firing as they went, and Uriel was struck by their utter fearlessness in facing this terrifying creature. More bloody craters were gouged in its flesh by a host of mass-reactive shells, yet it appeared not to feel them.

Leodegarius dragged the beast to its knees with a heaving twist of his polearm and Uriel ran to join the Grey Knights, his sword leaping to his hand. Their blades stabbed the creature and its roars of pain echoed from the walls, shaking icicles from the ceiling.

The creature's oozing twin erupted from the Unfleshed's chest in a monstrous parody of birth, its vile, putrescent form slathered in blood and its grasping claws reaching for the nearest warrior. Its claws were sheathed in light and they parted the Grey Knight's armour and flesh as if they were wet paper. The parasitic twin tore through the muscle and bone of the warrior's chest, sundering his heart and ripping the mass of his internal organs to bloody ruin.

The Grey Knight dropped to the ground, breaking the neck of his killer as he fell.

The Unfleshed was weakening and Leodegarius was finally able to bring his psycannon to bear, unleashing a hail of psychically impregnated bolts into the beast.

The effect was instantaneous, and the creature toppled over, a ruined mass of shredded flesh that could not have endured such horrible damage without the power of the dead to sustain it.

Uriel felt no glory at the kill, only regret, but he did not have time to wallow in it.

Fresh foes were upon them.

They came in scads of light from the wards all around them, their shrieking howls of pain screeching along Uriel's nerves. Looking deeper into the light, he saw a host of horrific figures sweeping towards them as though driven by some powerful wind.

They were diseased figures, crippled figures, gaunt, emaciated and burnt forms in billowing surgical gowns: amputees, men with no eyes and women with hideous scars all over their bodies. Every hand was extended as though pleading for alms, and those with eyes were haunted with the angry memory of pain and suffering. A bow wave of frost cracked the walls before them, crazed patterns spreading in waves of white.

'What in the name of the Emperor are they?' screamed Casuaban when he looked up.

'Phantoms,' said Leodegarius, 'the tormented nightmares of the wounded you care for. The power of the warp is getting stronger and they are becoming real.'

'I take it they are dangerous?' said Uriel, raising his sword.

'Lethal,' said Leodegarius. 'Do not let them touch you. They will feed on your life to ease their suffering. Medicae! Which way?'

Casuaban looked around, as though his surroundings were suddenly unfamiliar to him.

'Quickly, man!' shouted Leodegarius.

'Up! Up another level!'

Leodegarius turned away from them and stood in the centre of the corridor directly in the path of the seething horde of nightmares. 'Cheiron, with me! Uriel, get behind us!' he cried. 'Onto the ramp!'

'What are you going to do?' cried Uriel.

'We're going to stop them,' said Leodegarius.

Uriel backed away from the Grey Knights as he tasted the actinic tang of psychic energy and his sword sparked and fizzed in the presence of such power. Hurriedly, he gathered Pasanius and Casuaban and backed onto the ramp that led up to who knew what.

Gunfire roared from the Grey Knights' weapons, Cheiron's bolts appearing to have little effect, but those of Leodegarius tearing through the figures like fire through cloth. As the ghostly nightmares drew ever closer, however, Uriel saw it

wouldn't be enough.

'I have to help them!' cried Uriel.

'Wait!' shouted Pasanius, pointing towards the two Grey Knights.

Uriel looked over his shoulder and watched the silver-armoured warriors seem to swell as crackling arcs of lightning flared from the leading edges of their armour.

Both warriors held their polearms upright and their free hands were extended as they chanted the same mantra. 'Foul conjurations of the warp, we know thee. Unclean power from beyond the veil we abhor thee. Fell daemons of the Empyrean we defy thee.'

Leodegarius slammed his polearm onto the metal deck. 'Thrice cursed you are and thrice damned be thee.'

Serj Casuaban cried out and Uriel felt the rush of power as an enormous white fireball exploded into life around the Grey Knights. Wreathed in the flames, Leodegarius and Cheiron shone like angels of the Emperor, the roaring power contained around them by sheer force of will.

'Spawn of evil I cast you from this place!' cried Leodegarius and the blazing white fireball filled the corridor. Billowing flames exploded outwards from the Grey Knights, and the screams of the ghostly figures were swallowed in the seething roar of the fire.

Uriel shielded Serj Casuaban from the flames as their power swirled around them. Metal groaned and hissed under the assault of Leodegarius's purity, the very essence of his soul poured out in the cleansing fire of the Emperor.

In little over a few seconds it was ended, the nightmare howls silenced, and the terrifying roar of the fiery holocaust the two Grey Knights had unleashed at an end.

Uriel looked up to see Leodegarius and Cheiron still standing in the middle of the corridor, their silver armour streaming with scraps of light that faded even as he watched. Leodegarius turned to face him and even though he was clad head to foot in Terminator armour, Uriel could see that he was exhausted.

'Come,' he hissed. 'They will be back. We must move on.'

Uriel nodded as Pasanius dragged Serj Casuaban to his feet. 'Up you said?'

'Yes, Emperor protect me,' said Casuaban, making the sign of the aquila.

Uriel led the way up the ramp, with Pasanius dragging the reluctant medicae behind him. Leodegarius and Cheiron brought up the rear and Uriel could already hear the building screams and howls of more enemies closing on them.

He switched to an internal vox-channel within his helmet, hearing shouted commands and the bark of gunfire. Shots sounded in his helmet, throughout the House of Providence, their source impossible to pinpoint as they echoed from

the maze-like corridors.

How the other Grey Knights fared, Uriel could not tell, for their commands were spoken in a battle cant unknown to him, but every order was delivered clearly and calmly. To hear warriors in battle communicating with such cool determination under fire was inspiring and Uriel felt a renewed sense of honour to be fighting alongside them.

'This way,' said Serj Casuaban, leading them through a series of low doors that led deeper into the heart of the House of Providence. Some of the doorways proved too small for Leodegarius, but quick, efficient strokes of his Nemesis weapon soon opened a hole large enough for him to squeeze his enormous, armoured bulk through.

At last their route took them into the highest ward in the converted Capitol Imperialis, a long, metal-walled chamber crammed with iron beds arranged along the walls and a wide central nave. Each of the beds was home to a writhing figure, their mouths twisted in rictus grins of pain.

The air was filled with screams and scraps of light, ghostly forms of howling figures that orbited a bed near the centre of the right-hand wall.

There could be no doubt that this was Sylvanus Thayer.

The Lord of the Unfleshed towered over his bed, his mighty form awesome and unbearable to look upon.

TWENTY

URIEL, LEODEGARIUS AND Cheiron slowly made their way down through the ward between the rows of beds. Pasanius left Serj Casuaban beside a medical station by the door and followed them. The Lord of the Unfleshed watched them approach, his eyes glowing with fiery light that burned like dead stars.

'So what are we going to do?' asked Uriel over the vox.

'First we fight the beast,' said Leodegarius, 'and then we get to Thayer.'

'Then what?'

'We kill him.'

Uriel nodded. He didn't like the idea of killing a man lying on his deathbed, but Sylvanus Thayer was no innocent, and his unchecked power would kill millions more if they did not stop him. He had kept the dead from their rest and bound them to his hatred, and that was unforgivable.

The Lord of the Unfleshed lowered his head, the jaw working in unfamiliar ways, strings of bloody drool leaking from the corners of his mouth.

'You come here to stop me?' said the Lord of the Unfleshed, in a voice not his own.

'Do I speak with Sylvanus Thayer?' demanded Leodegarius.

'Aye, warrior, you do.'

'Then yes, we come to stop you,' said Leodegarius, taking another step towards the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'Your hatred will doom this world if we do not.'

The creature laughed, the sound barren and repulsive. 'Why would that be a bad thing? Salinas has nothing good left. Barbaden and the Falcatas saw to that.'

'Barbaden is under arrest,' said Uriel at Leodegarius's side. 'Those you haven't already killed will pay for their crimes, I promise you.'

'Pay?' sneered Sylvanus Thayer with the Lord of the Unfleshed's body. 'To languish in a jail cell and live out their lives? That is not nearly enough pain for what they did.'

'Maybe not,' agreed Uriel, 'but it is justice.'

'Justice!' roared Thayer. 'Where was justice when Barbaden's tanks burned my family to death? Where was justice when his soldiers shot fleeing women and children? Where was the justice when he shelled my men to oblivion when we fought to avenge their deaths? Answer me that, warrior!'

'I have no answer to give you,' said Uriel. 'What happened to you and this

planet was wrong, but more death is not the answer. Hatred breeds hatred and your actions have only made things worse.'

Serj Casuaban spoke up from behind them, and Uriel turned at the sound of his voice.

'He's right, Captain Ventris, that's not justice,' said the medicae. 'Only our blood will be payment enough. We all know that.'

'Be silent,' ordered Leodegarius. 'I told you to stay out of the way.'

Serj Casuaban lifted his hand and Uriel saw something shining there.

'I did that once before and look where it got me,' said Casuaban, placing a long-bladed scalpel at his throat. 'It's time to pay for what we did, and for what it's worth, I'm sorry.'

'No!' cried Uriel, but it was too late.

Casuaban slashed the blade across his throat, digging deep to sever the jugular. Blood spurted in a crimson fountain and Serj Casuaban dropped to the decking.

Uriel ran over to where he lay, but the medicae had been precise in his cutting and a vast pool of blood already gathered around him. Uriel placed his hands on the wound, but it had been cut too wide and thoroughly to staunch. Blood squirted from between Uriel's fingers and spattered his armour.

Casuaban's eyes were glassy with death and Uriel knew that the man's life was gone. There was no saving him now.

Uriel stood and saw that Leodegarius was within five metres of the enormous form of the Lord of the Unfleshed. The creature stood tall and Uriel was amazed at how powerful his physique had become. The Lord of the Unfleshed had suffered terribly in the fighting of the last few days, but there could be no underestimating the power that still resided in his frame.

Searing lines of light rippled beneath his ashen skin and his mutated flesh was redolent with warp-born power. The Lord of the Unfleshed roared and the ward echoed to the sound of his pain and Thayer's anger.

'Enough blood has been shed,' said Leodegarius, raising his psycannon. 'This ends now.'

'Aye!' bellowed the Lord of the Unfleshed. 'One way or another.'

Before Leodegarius could fire, the Lord of the Unfleshed reached down and heaved, hurling a pair of heavy, iron beds towards them. Consecrated bolts blasted the beds apart and tore their unfortunate occupants to shreds, but were deflected away from their intended target.

The beds crashed down in a heap of twisted iron. A mist of bloodied feathers from the ruptured mattresses filled the air. Uriel ran forward as the Lord of the Unfleshed leapt, his enormous fist smashing into the ward's floor and buckling

the metal plates.

Leodegarius took aim once more, but the Lord of the Unfleshed was upon him, towering over the Grey Knight and bathing him in the light that shone beneath his flesh. A backhand blow sent Leodegarius spinning and a hail of bolts from Cheiron's weapon stitched their way up the Lord of the Unfleshed's back.

Pasanius and Cheiron circled behind the towering monster, which battered clubbing fists against the plates of Leodegarius's armour.

Leodegarius fought to keep his attacker at bay, but Terminator armour was designed for protection, not speed, and he could not avoid the Lord of the Unfleshed's savage blows. One shoulder guard was already hanging from sparking cables and torn fibre-bundle muscles, and his breastplate was cracked and leaking fluid.

Uriel vaulted the remains of the shredded beds, offering a silent prayer for the souls who had died upon them. His sword shimmered in the swirling light of the ward and he gripped it two-handed as he joined the fight.

Pasanius fired and Uriel swung his weapon at the Lord of the Unfleshed, the sword a shimmering arc of silver as it struck. The blade scored across the creature's hard body, but no sooner had the blade parted its flesh than the light raced to mend it.

The Lord of the Unfleshed spun and swung his fist at Uriel.

He ducked and rolled beneath the great beast, stabbing his sword up into its groin. The fiery blade bit into the Lord of the Unfleshed's body, and a strike that should have cut the leg from any normal opponent slid clear.

Pasanius and Cheiron kept up a steady barrage, but their weapons were having little effect. The roar of the bolters mingled with the howls of the ghosts and the bellowing of the Lord of the Unfleshed to form one, savage cacophony of battle.

It seemed inconceivable that one opponent could stand before four Space Marines and live, but the Lord of the Unfleshed was not just surviving, he was winning.

Leodegarius fell beneath a crushing blow that tore the Nemesis weapon from his hands. The Grey Knight lifted his other arm, but the Lord of the Unfleshed took hold of it and ripped it from his body with a ghastly tearing sound. Blood jetted from the wound and Uriel heard Leodegarius's bellow of pain over his armour's vox.

Uriel was amazed to see Terminator armour ruptured with such apparent ease, for such revered protection was said to be virtually indestructible. Leodegarius fell back, the pain of his wounding and the exhaustion of his psychic assault below draining him of almost the last of his strength.

Cheiron leapt in, ramming his Nemesis weapon into the Lord of the Unfleshed's back. The creature spun quickly, wrenching the weapon from Cheiron's hands, and smashed the warrior from his feet. The Grey Knight flew across the ward and slammed into the steel wall, falling in an ungainly heap and leaving a huge dent in the metalwork.

Pasanius swept up Leodegarius's fallen Nemesis weapon. Together, he and Uriel circled in opposite directions around the Lord of the Unfleshed. The creature's body was a mass of cuts and bolt impacts, its back horrifically cratered and running with blood and light.

Uriel could only imagine the pain the Lord of the Unfleshed was feeling, but he knew that he had to suppress any notions of humanity in his opponent.

Pasanius feinted with his polearm, but using such a long, heavy weapon with only one arm was difficult and the Lord of the Unfleshed batted the blade aside. Uriel darted in and hacked his blade down at the Lord of the Unfleshed's knee, hoping to at least slow him down.

Before the blade connected, the Lord of the Unfleshed twisted and clubbed Uriel savagely with an arm like a tree trunk. He flew though the air to land beside the twisted bed frames, the plates of his armour buckled, but unbroken.

He rolled to his feet in time to see Pasanius smashed from his feet. His friend crashed down beside Serj Casuaban's corpse as Leodegarius struggled to pull himself to his feet and Cheiron began to rouse himself from where the Lord of the Unfleshed had hurled him.

* * *

URIEL LOOKED OVER at Sylvanus Thayer. The swirling ghosts howled around the man's bed and Uriel could hear the indescribable pain in their agonised utterances. A core of light, white, yet without any purity, was building around his bed. Screams and monstrous shrieks issued from the light and Uriel knew that he was looking at a tear in the very meat of reality, a wound through which all manner of horrors might pour.

He tore his gaze from the burning light, as the Lord of the Unfleshed's roars echoed from the walls, the sound a heartbreaking mix of agony, triumph and regret.

Uriel leapt torn and scattered beds. It went against his every instinct to leave his comrades in battle, but he knew that this fight could not be won through strength of arms as he scrambled over the debris of the chamber towards the bed where Sylvanus Thayer lay.

'I'm with you!' shouted Pasanius, rushing over to join him.

Uriel heard the roar of the Lord of the Unfleshed as Thayer felt his approach, and the howling of the ghosts grew ever louder. A din of battle sounded behind him and Uriel heard the unmistakable sound of something huge coming towards him.

Thayer's bed was just in front of him and Uriel saw the man's body beneath the filmy surgical gauze was as wrecked as Serj Casuaban had said.

His skin was raw and red, wet and horrific. Both legs ended in cauterised stumps in mid-thigh and one arm was missing from the shoulder down. What was left of Thayer's face was a molten ruin of dead flesh. Both eyes were unseeing and useless, artificial lids sutured over the sockets to keep them closed.

Uriel lifted his sword, the blade poised to split Thayer's skull open and end this horror.

There was no glory in this killing, no honour and no reward, only duty.

'Do it!' shouted Pasanius. 'Kill him!'

Then Sylvanus Thayer's eyelids flew open, a fierce light burning within the ravaged sockets, as though every ounce of his hatred of the living had ignited within them.

'Know what I know,' hissed the voice of Sylvanus Thayer in his skull, 'and then judge me.' Then the world vanished in a searing wall of flames.

URIEL THREW UP his hand as the flames roared over him, expecting his armour's cooling systems to activate in response to the attack, but as he lowered his arms he was amazed to see that he was no longer within the House of Providence. The ruined ward had vanished.

Instead of the grey, metal walls, he and Pasanius stood in a busy city street beneath a warm, spring sun. Hundreds of people thronged the streets, their eyes worried and their movements agitated.

Fear was on the move and the people moved in time with its dance.

Pasanius turned with his borrowed Nemesis weapon at the ready.

'What in the name of the Emperor?' he hissed. 'What just happened? Where are we?'

Uriel had been wondering the same thing, but as his gaze alighted upon a familiar temple with a bronze eagle hanging above the arched entrance, and he suddenly knew.

'Khaturian,' whispered Uriel.

'The Killing Ground,' said Pasanius. 'How is that possible?'

No one appeared to notice them and Uriel said, 'This is not real. It's a memory.'

'A memory? But Thayer wasn't at Khaturian when it was destroyed,' said Pasanius.

'No,' agreed Uriel, indicating the fearful people that filled the streets, 'but they all were.'

A panicked cry went up from somewhere nearby and Uriel looked to the sky as he heard a droning rumble from the direction of the mountains. A trio of cruciform shapes emerged from the clouds, flying low and slowly towards the city.

Uriel's enhanced sight quickly resolved the shapes into flights of Marauder bombers, each cruciform shape comprising of six aircraft.

The people of Khaturian began screaming, even before the first bombs were dropped and Uriel could feel their terror at the sight of the aircraft. Here in the mountains, they had thought themselves safe from the fighting and death that was engulfing the rest of their world.

This day would show them how naive that belief had been.

'Should we be worried?' asked Pasanius, looking up at the approaching bombers.

Uriel shook his head. 'I do not think so, my friend. Thayer wants us to see what happened here.'

Pasanius looked doubtful, but shrugged. 'Fine. Not a lot we can do anyway.'

Although Uriel knew that what he was seeing was not real and had already happened, the emotions filling the air, panic, terror, disbelief and anger were very real indeed. People ran screaming to their homes, gathering up children and loved ones as they took shelter.

Uriel knew that it would do them no good, as he watched the first clusters of bombs detach from the bellies of the Marauders. Tiny black dots, it seemed inconceivable that they could be the cause of so much misery and death, but as they grew larger their warlike shape became apparent, the snub-nosed warhead and guidance fins spinning them to deliver their payload with greater accuracy.

The first bombs hit in the north of the city, and the ground trembled at the impact. Whooshing shoots of fire erupted skyward and a dark-edged mushroom cloud of smoke billowed upwards. More bombs hit within seconds of the first and a rolling thunderstorm of detonations marched through Khaturian.

Flames and hurricane winds swept over the city, the sound of the explosions merging into one enormous roar of destruction. Buildings collapsed and searing walls of flame roared along the streets. Burning tornadoes seethed like angry elementals, the power of the winds sweeping up those who had not yet found shelter and sucking them back into the burning buildings.

The bombs continued to fall, the destruction wrought around Uriel and

Pasanius leaving them untouched. The ground heaved and bucked like a living thing, the pounding of the earth seeming to go on forever as the bombs continued to fall.

The entire city was an inferno, ablaze from its centre to its outskirts. Howling winds carried the flames in every direction, the destruction total and unforgiving. Uriel felt somehow dirty to be immersed in this carnage while immune to it.

For thirty minutes the bombs continued to fall and the city's death scream of collapsing buildings and burning humans seemed never-ending. Uriel felt utterly drained and wished this vision of the apocalypse would end.

'I've seen enough, Thayer!' Uriel shouted into the burning skies.

Everywhere was flames. The sky was ablaze and everything flammable in Khaturian was on fire. Nothing could live in the inferno.

'Emperor's blood,' whispered Pasanius, watching people on fire run screaming from their devastated homes. Burning bodies filled every street and the shriek of the firestorm began to fade as the bombardment finally ended.

'Madness,' hissed Uriel. 'All this for one man.'

Pasanius said nothing, too choked with emotion to speak. Mutilated bodies lay in the wreckage: entire families twisted into grotesque shapes by the heat of the fires.

Though it was surely impossible that people could have lived through such a raging hellstorm, there were, it seemed, survivors. From basements and shelters beneath the city, shell-shocked groups emerged, weeping, into what was left of their city.

Uriel saw that they were bloodied and battered, the skin raw and heat-burned. None had escaped injury and with the noise of the bombardment over, the screams of the citizens of Khaturian began.

'There must be something we can do for them,' said Pasanius, as a man with his arm missing wandered past them in a daze.

'No,' said Uriel. 'They are long dead. The only thing we can do is remember them.'

'I won't forget this,' swore Pasanius.

'Nor I,' agreed Uriel.

'They're getting off easy,' said Pasanius, 'Barbaden and Togandis. You don't have a part in slaughter like this and get to live.'

'They won't,' promised Uriel, his heart hardening to the fate of those who had seen this murder enacted and had either done nothing to stop it or had done nothing to make amends for it.

As they made their way through the devastation, Uriel looked along a rubble-strewn street as he heard the sound of iron treads crushing stone to powder. A

dull grey tank in the livery of the Achaman Falcatas rounded the corner. From the burning nozzle protruding from the turret, Uriel recognised it as a Hellhound.

Sheets of flame spouted from the tank, setting ablaze those few parts of the city that had somehow escaped the incendiary bombs dropped by the Marauders. Battle tanks followed in the wake of the Hellhound, spraying bullets indiscriminately along both sides of the street.

Soldiers followed the battle tanks, warriors in red plate armour, who marched beneath a bright banner depicting a screaming, golden eagle against a crimson field. Their guns barked and spat, driving the few survivors into the flames or against the walls where they were executed without mercy.

Uriel could see Leto Barbaden atop the first Leman Russ, his helmet's visor pulled up as he shouted orders to his soldiers. Uriel could see the relish in Barbaden's face, the righteous notion that he was doing the Emperor's work butchering these people. Verena Kain and Sergeant Tremain marched before Barbaden's tank, and Uriel saw the same zealous gleam in their eyes. Uriel wished that Kain's death had been more painful.

He hated himself for such a visceral reaction, but the emotions stirred within him by the knowledge that Barbaden had not only ordered the killings, but had taken such pleasure from them was too powerful to be ignored.

'How do we end this?' asked Pasanius.

'I don't know,' replied Uriel, 'when Thayer thinks we've seen enough.'

'Then I've seen enough,' said Pasanius, 'enough to know that a bullet in the head's too quick a death for Barbaden.'

'Agreed,' said Uriel, 'and I know how this has to end now.'

With those words, the sight before them blurred and shifted, transforming from the burning heart of Khaturian to the devastated House of Providence.

Uriel blinked as his eyes adjusted to the gloom, and he saw the Lord of the Unfleshed towering over him. The killing light in his eyes was undimmed, yet there was no hatred in them, only a sense of profound sadness. Behind the mighty creature, Uriel saw Leodegarius climb to his feet, the entire right-hand side of his armour drenched in blood.

'You know how this has to end?' asked the Lord of the Unfleshed.

Uriel looked down at the ruined, mutilated body of Sylvanus Thayer and nodded. 'I do.'

'How?'

Uriel looked past the mighty creature towards Leodegarius.

'Brother Leodegarius, are you still maintaining your aegis sanctuary over Barbaden and Togandis?'

'I am,' said Leodegarius, and Uriel could hear the exhaustion in the warrior's

voice. This hero of the Imperium was wounded nigh unto death and yet still he stood tall. 'What of it?'

'End it,' said Uriel.

THE PRISON WAS in uproar.

Prisoners screamed and shouted for guards, but if any heard their pleas, none dared show their faces in the prison complex. For now, the spirits of the dead ruled the Panopticon.

Shavo Togandis stood before the bars of his cell, mouthing prayers and confessing every base, petty thing he had done in his life. He spoke in words barely above a whisper, knowing that the Emperor would hear them, but unwilling to share them with Leto Barbaden.

The ghostly figures heard his confession in silence and he hoped they understood his regret and pain. They had made no attempt to come closer since the spirit of the young girl had been hurled back by the psychic barrier erected by Leodegarius, but had simply watched, and waited.

His confession done, he said, 'I tread the path of righteousness. Though it be paved with broken glass, I will walk it barefoot. Though it crosses rivers of fire, I will pass over them. Though it wanders wide, the light of the Emperor guides my step.'

'Can't think of words of your own, Shavo?' sneered Barbaden. 'Whose are those? And don't try to tell me they're yours, I know you better than that.'

'They were said by Dolan of Chiros, the man who helped bring down Cardinal Bucharis.'

'Ah, the confessor who stood before the tyrant during the Plague of Unbelief. Is that it? Do you think men will remember you in the same breath as Dolan? You may have been a confessor, Shavo, but you're not a tenth of the man Dolan was,' said Barbaden, lounging unconcerned on his bunk. 'You were always too much of a worm to be granted a place at the Emperor's side.'

'And you think there's a place for you? A murderer?'

Barbaden laughed. 'I'm no murderer, and as soon as this farce of an incarceration is over, I'll be back in the palace. I have the right of appeal to the Sector Governor, and do you think he's going to let me swing for killing a few terrorists?'

'If there is an iota of justice in this galaxy, then yes,' said Togandis, closing his eyes and wishing Leto Barbaden would shut up.

'There is no justice, Shavo. Don't be so foolish. There's no room for justice in this galaxy,' said Barbaden, 'and if you'll permit me to quote back to you, I think

you'll find this one illuminating: "When the people forget their duty they are no longer human and become something less than beasts. They have no place in the bosom of humanity nor in the heart of the Emperor. Let them die and be forgotten".'

Then it shall be so.

The voice had sounded right in his ear.

Togandis opened his eyes and he cried out as he saw that their cells were filled with the ghostly figures who had stood, silent and unmoving, beyond the bars, waiting.

Fear clutched at his heart, but it was instantly replaced by a wash of relief. It was over, the waiting, the fear of humiliation and the dread that they would somehow escape retribution.

'Get away from me, damn you!' shouted Barbaden. 'Get away from me, I said!'

Togandis watched as the dead crowded in around the former governor of Salinas, eager to be part of his unmaking. Though they had been called ghosts, they were no phantom apparitions of mist; their nails could tear skin and their teeth could rip flesh from bones.

Barbaden screamed as they plucked at the soft meat of his face, bearing him to the ground and clawing his flesh. His eyes went first, torn from their sockets with a swift jerk of cold, dead hands.

They tore the skin from his face, ripping the muscles from his skull and peeling him back to the frame of bone beneath. His limbs bent and snapped and his screams filled the cells as the dead fought to bloody their hands in his entrails.

Togandis watched in horrified fascination as Leto Barbaden was torn apart before his very eyes, the meat and bone of his existence ripped asunder in a frenzy of vengeance.

In moments it was over and there was nothing left in the cell that even remotely resembled what had once been a human being. All that remained was a jumble of torn offal and a vast lake of blood and snapped bone.

The dead turned their faces to Shavo Togandis. 'Do what must be done,' he said. The dead came at him and as he felt their hands reach for his eyes, he said, 'I forgive you.'

URIEL KNEW IT was over.

The dead light in the eyes of the Lord of the Unfleshed faded and sudden silence fell upon the House of Providence. The howling of the ghosts ceased and

the filmy scraps of light began to fade. Uriel felt a tremendous wave of relief pass through him as the dead began their final journey, their spirits finally allowed to disperse into the warp.

The gloom that had settled upon Salinas was gone in an instant, and Uriel had not fully realised how oppressive it had been until it was removed.

Uriel heard a rasping sigh from the bed next to him and looked down at Sylvanus Thayer as the machine maintaining his life hiked and stuttered. The rhythmic machine noise of his life slowed until it became a single, shrill note that could mean only one thing.

Sylvanus Thayer was dead, and with him the threat to Salinas.

The wound in reality was gone, sealed up without the link between worlds that the former leader of the Sons of Salinas had provided.

Uriel took a deep, cleansing breath, looking around to make sure that he was not imagining things: that it was truly over. Pasanius stood next to him and the injured Leodegarius held himself upright with his one remaining arm.

Cheiron staggered over to his commander and Uriel turned his attention to the Lord of the Unfleshed. The last of the Unfleshed swayed on his feet, unsteady and uncertain, his head turning this way and that as though awakening from a deep slumber.

His eyes, milky and rheumy, focused on Uriel and he dropped to his knees, his massive clawed hands coming up to his face as a heartrending moan of self-loathing issued from deep inside him. Great, wracking sobs burst from the Lord of the Unfleshed's chest and Uriel felt deep sorrow that it had come to this.

Cheiron made his way across the chamber towards the Lord of the Unfleshed with his storm bolter raised, but Uriel shook his head.

'No,' he said, 'you don't need that anymore.'

Cheiron looked down at the hunched, sobbing form of the Lord of the Unfleshed and then back at Uriel. He nodded and returned to Leodegarius.

Uriel knelt beside the Lord of the Unfleshed, whose body had diminished to its former proportions. His flesh was torn with bolter craters and slashes from blades and Uriel was amazed that he was still alive. The creature was still massive, but without the enormous power of the dead, he seemed somehow smaller, more vulnerable, and infinitely sad.

'What do we do now?' asked Pasanius.

Uriel looked up at Pasanius. 'Go with Leodegarius and Cheiron,' he said. 'I have something to do here first.'

'Are you sure?'

Uriel nodded. 'I'm sure, yes.'

Pasanius looked set to argue, but he heard the firmness in Uriel's tone and

turned away.

Uriel reached out and placed his hand on the Lord of the Unfleshed's arm. Too late, he remembered that the Unfleshed did not like to be touched, but there was no reaction.

Uriel knelt beside the Lord of the Unfleshed and let him weep.

'Captain Ventris,' said a voice behind him, and he turned to see Leodegarius. The Grey Knight had removed his helmet and his face was pale and wan, drained by the fury of battle and the pain of losing a limb.

Leodegarius said, 'Come to the palace when you are done. Then we shall see about getting you back to Macragge.'

'I will,' promised Uriel.

The Grey Knight held out his hand and Uriel looked down at what he held.

'I think you will be needing this,' said Leodegarius and Uriel nodded.

'Thank you, Brother Leodegarius,' said Uriel. 'It was an honour to fight alongside you.'

'No,' said the Grey Knight, 'the honour was mine.'

LEODEGARIUS, PASANIUS AND Cheiron left, leaving Uriel and the Lord of the Unfleshed alone in the ward. The creature he had attempted to rescue from a hideous life of death and misery knelt before the bed of the man who had enslaved him and his tribe and wept.

Uriel could not begin to imagine the horror the memory of what it had been forced to do would be like, and did not intrude on the Lord of the Unfleshed's grief with mere words.

At last, the creature looked up and his gaze fastened on Uriel.

'Unfleshed did very bad things,' he said.

'No,' said Uriel. 'All that hatred arid killing, it was not you.'

'Yes, it was. We did it. My hand bloody. Tribe's hands bloody. I saw blood and I tasted blood. Unfleshed bad.'

'No,' repeated Uriel. 'Unfleshed not bad. You were used. It wasn't your fault.'

'Emperor must hate us even more now.'

'He does not hate you,' said Uriel. 'The Emperor loves you. Look.'

Uriel pointed to an aquila fashioned from beaten steel hanging on the wall, the earliest dawn light from a window opposite shining upon it and making it gleam like silver.

The Lord of the Unfleshed looked up at the gleaming eagle, his reflection thrown back at him. As Uriel looked at the distorted image, it appeared to ripple like the surface of a lake, and he found himself looking at the reflection of a

handsome young boy, his face alight with youthful mischief.

The Lord of the Unfleshed gave a cry as he too saw the image. 'Emperor loves me!'

Uriel moved to stand behind the Lord of the Unfleshed and raised the psycannon Leodegarius had given him.

'Yes, the Emperor loves you,' said Uriel, and pulled the trigger.

Long is the way, and hard, that out of hell leads up to light.

THE THUNDERHAWK BANKED as it followed the flight-path the ground controllers had indicated. Uriel looked out of the vision port on the side of the roaring gunship, watching as the dazzling white mountains sped by, their soaring, jagged tops wreathed in clouds.

It had been weeks since the battle in the House of Providence and his body and spirit still ached from the time spent on Salinas. Though Uriel's wounds had healed, he could not shake off the melancholy that had settled on him since he had pulled the trigger of the psycannon.

He knew it had been the only option open to him, and if the Lord of the Unfleshed was going to end his days on Salinas, then it was only right that it be at the hands of the man who had led him there.

With the passing of Sylvanus Thayer, the pressure of the dead upon the minds of the living vanished and a strange sense of calm descended upon Barbadus (though *that* name was sure to change). With the announcement of Leto Barbaden's death, that mood of calm had been replaced with one of celebration.

As things turned out, the day after the battle was to be a day of announcements.

Under the supervision of the Grey Knights, an interim governorship was to be formed with Daron Nisato as the new Imperial Commander. While this announcement was greeted with rather less enthusiasm than Leto Barbaden's passing, word that Pascal Blaise supported the former enforcer in his leadership generated a quiet acceptance from the populace.

The days of trouble were far from over for Salinas, but Uriel knew that the planet's course had been turned from disaster, and that its people had a chance to cast off the old hatreds that had almost destroyed them.

It was more than most people got.

Upon the restoration of Imperial control, Leodegarius had walked them to a waiting gunship as it growled on the esplanade before the palace and bid them farewell.

'Remember the Tower,' the Grey Knight said. 'It reminds us that if we use our knowledge and strength for evil purposes, then destruction will be wrought upon us.'

They had said their goodbyes to Lukas Urbican and Daron Nisato and marched aboard the gunship, never to see Salinas again.

Uriel leaned back against the Thunderhawk's fuselage, feeling the power of the engines in the thrumming beat in the metal. He had not dared believe that he would ever make this journey and he kept his eyes shut, as though the reality of it might be snatched away at any moment.

He shared the troop compartment of the gunship with nineteen suits of armour, those belonging to the Sons of Guilliman. Uriel wore a chiton of pale blue and carried his sword across his lap. He had not worn his borrowed armour since the battle in the House of Providence, for he had known that it was not his to wear beyond that immediate need.

Like ghosts, the suits of armour had been strapped into the bench seats in the Thunderhawk as carefully as if they had each contained a living, breathing Space Marine. A message had already been sent to the Sons of Guilliman and the suits of armour would return to their Chapter to protect their battle-brothers once more.

The door to the gunship's cockpit opened and Pasanius emerged. Unlike Uriel, Pasanius was fully clad in armour and his face was alight with pleasure.

'You'll want to come up front,' said Pasanius.

Uriel smiled as he rose from his seat and made his way along the troop compartment. He ducked beneath the door to the cockpit, the interior filled with bright sunlight and shadows that moved as the pilots began the gunship's descent into a steep-sided valley of glittering, quartz-rich rocks.

'Look,' said Pasanius, pointing through the armoured glass of the cockpit.

There it was, shimmering atop the mountain like a castle of gold and silver on a cloud.

Uriel found he could barely control his breathing and tears ran unchecked down his face at the sight of the marble towers, mosaic domes and high walls of luminescent stone.

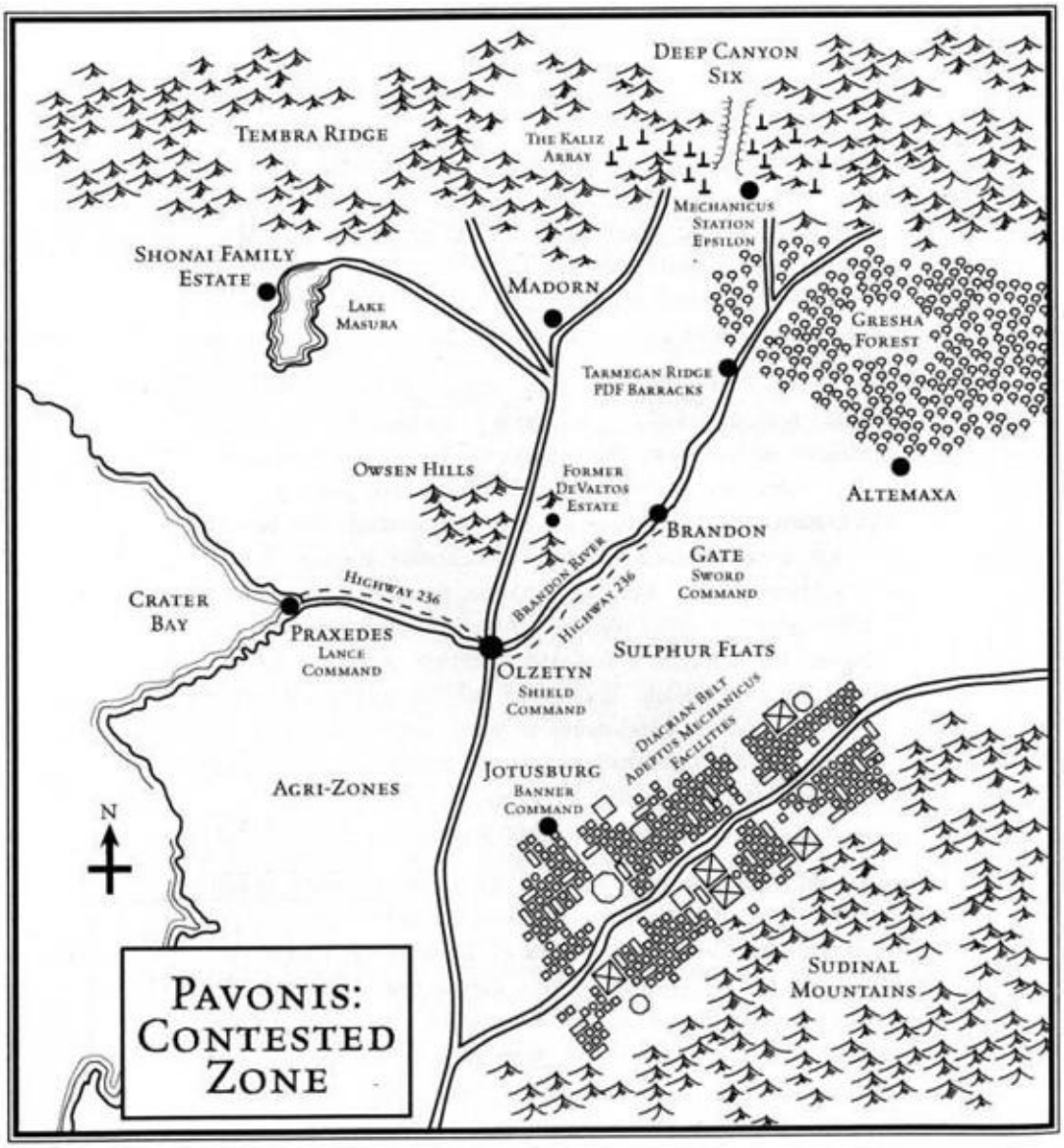
'The Fortress of Hera,' said Pasanius, also in tears.

'Home,' said Uriel.

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

COURAGE AND HONOUR

Graham McNeill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The Kaliz Array
Mechanicus Station Epsilon
Shonai Family Estate
Lake Masura
Madorn
Gresha Forest
Tarmegan Ridge PDF Barracks
Owsen Hills
Former DeValtos Estate
Altemaxa
Brandon Gate Sword Command
Brandon River
Highway 236
Highway 236
Crater Bay
Praxedes Lance Command
Olzetyn Shield Command
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Diacrian Belt Adeptus Mechanicus Facilities
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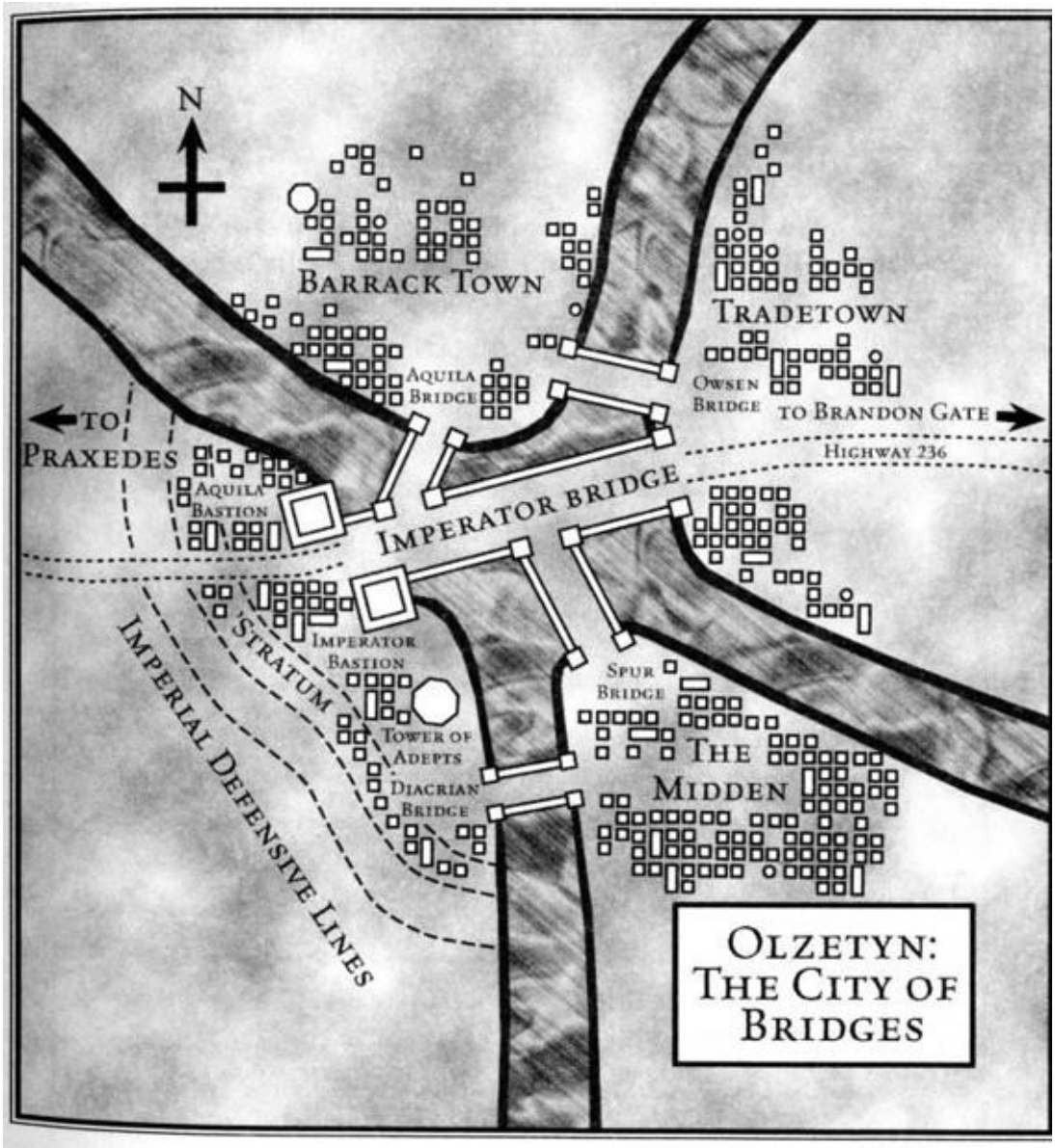
Pavonis: Contested Zone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Owsen Bridge
To Brandon Gate
To Praxedes
Highway 236
Aquila Bastion
Imperator Bridge
Imperator Bastion
Stratum
Imperial Defensive Lines
Spur Bridge
Tower of Adepts
The Midden
Diacrian Bridge
Olzetyn: The City of Bridges

Planetary Designation: Pavonis

Imperial Reference: *AD Terra IOI.OI [M/FW - Industrial World: Ultima Segmentum]*
Cross Ref: *Tarsis Ultra, Taren IV, BX-998*
Population: *Eleven billion*

Military and Governance
Aestimare: *B350 Governor's*
Capital: *Brandon Gate*
Planetary Garrison: *44th Lavrentian Hussars - Reduced Strength.*
Planetary Draft: *On hold, pending Administratum review and sanction.*
Prefix Inquisitoria: *Pax Bellum Vigilatus.*

Production
Tithe Grade: *Exactis Particular*
Chief Exports: *Tank chassis, engines and ordnance. Local liquor known as Uskavar.*

Compiler's Notes:

Pavonis is a world typical of the Eastern Fringe, productive, hard-working and, previously, able to function with minimal intervention from the Administratum. However, such independence can foster a dangerously independent 'frontier spirit' that often manifests in worlds distant from Terra. Virgil de Valtos, head of one of the planet's major industrial cartels, sought to subvert Imperial rule on Pavonis with the aid of xenos pirates, and dragged the planet into a brief but brutal civil war for reasons beyond the Inquisitorial clearance of this document to record. Only the timely intervention of my former master, Inquisitor Barzano, and Captain Uriel Ventris of the Ultramarines halted the planet's slide into anarchy. Order was restored to Pavonis, and the previous Planetary Governor, Mykola Shonai, was allowed to serve out the remainder of her term of office under the auspices of the Administratum. Imperial Guard units from the 44th Lavrentian Hussars, together with emissaries from the Adeptus Terra and Adeptus Ministorum have been put in place to bring a measure of Imperial stability to the planet. Governor Shonai's nephew, Koudelkar, now commands Pavonis, though I fear he is not the administrator his aunt was.

Lortuen Perjed – Permanent Administratum Observer to Pavonis.

PART I

PURE OF HEART, AND STRONG OF BODY

ONE

A TRAITOR HAD once made his home among the tumbled slopes of the Owsen Hills. The late Kasimir de Valtos had dwelt in a lofty, marble-fronted villa, finely constructed and lavishly appointed with every amenity his wealth and position could provide. His extensive estate ran with game, servants attended to his every need, and the thousands of workers that slaved in his many weapon mills, engine assembly yards and artillery manufactorum could only dream of their master's luxurious lifestyle.

Wealth, position and power had been his, but now the traitor was dead and his estate was overgrowing, his palatial demesne little more than stumps of stonework scattered throughout waving fields of untended grass. Vengeful workers had looted his villa of anything worth stealing in the wake of the civil war that his schemes had unleashed. They had cast its walls to ruin and set fires where once he had plotted to become an immortal god.

Such were the dreams of men, grandiose and fleeting.

AN ORNAMENTAL LAKE rippled in the sunlight before the ruined villa, fed by an underground aqueduct linked to the wide river that flowed south from Tembra Ridge in the north. The river cut a path through the de Valtos estate, splitting into dozens of narrow watercourses as it threaded its way through the undulant terrain. Eventually, these smaller rivers came together and meandered southwards to join the Brandon River on its journey to the ocean in the west.

Though the de Valtos lands were abandoned, the landscape silent and the forests growing wild, they were far from empty. Scattered throughout the Owsen Hills, stealthy observers patiently kept watch on the many sharp-sided gullies and shallow valleys.

The traitor was dead, but his lands were still important.

A tremor in the grass was the first sign of movement, a barely discernible bow wave as a stealthy humanoid figure in olive-coloured armour ghosted slowly from the trees at the base of a low hill. It moved gracefully, crouched over, its every step carefully placed as its helmeted head swung back and forth, scanning the terrain with the patient eye of a hunter.

Or a scout, thought Uriel Ventris from his position of concealment in a tumbled fan of rocks on the slopes of the hill above the ruined villa.

Soon, other scouts followed the first from the trees, moving in pairs as they

eased towards the fallen stones of the de Valtos villa. There were eight in total, their movements slick and professional.

Though the scouts advanced with a smooth, precise gait, there was something fundamentally wrong with their movements, something inhuman. Their posture was subtly different, as if their bone structure wasn't quite right or their feet were shaped differently to those of humans.

The Ultramarines had learned much of the ways of the tau and their rapidly expanding empire on the killing fields of Malbede, Praetonis V and Augura.

That experience was being put to good use here on Pavonis.

The lead scout reached the edge of the ruins, and placed a gloved hand to the side of its helmet, a tapered dome with a vox aerial on one side and a gem-like optical device on the other.

Watching the scouts spread out, Uriel saw that they had read the ground well.

Just as he had done earlier that day.

A flashing icon lit up on the inner surface of Uriel's helmet visor, an insistent urging from his senior sergeant to release the killing precision of his warriors. He ignored it for the time being. Instincts honed on a hundred battlefields were telling Uriel that the prey was not yet fully in the killing box, and the risk of their target detecting vox-traffic was too great.

No sooner had the scout finished his silent communication than a prowling vehicle with curved flanks emerged from the trees. It had the bulk of a tank, but hovered just above the ground, bending the stalks of grass as it drew close to the scouts. A rotary-barrelled cannon spun lazily below its tapered prow, and flaring dorsal engines kept it aloft with a barely audible hum.

The tank was unmistakably alien, its curved lines and silent menace putting Uriel in mind of a shark prowling the seabed.

From the intelligence files Uriel had read en route to Pavonis from Macragge, he recognised it as a Devilfish, a troop carrier analogous to the Rhino. It was fast, agile and armoured to the front, but vulnerable to attacks from the rear. Codex ambush tactics would serve them well here.

The alien tank came to a halt, and a pair of flat discs with under-slung weapon mounts detached from the vehicle's frontal fins. They hovered just above the tank, twitching sensor spines rotating on their upper surfaces.

Sniffer dogs.

Uriel glanced anxiously towards the grassy mounds spread throughout the ruins of the de Valtos villa.

Apparently satisfied that there was nothing in the immediate vicinity, the hovering discs returned to their mounts on the Devilfish, and the lead scout unsnapped a device from the rigid backpack he wore. Uriel watched as a pair of

thin legs extended from the device and the scout planted it in the ground in front of him.

Lights flickered on the domed surface of the device, and Uriel's auto-senses detected a low-level pressure pulse sweep over the landscape.

Some kind of three-dimensional cartographic device? Imperial forces that had fought the tau before had christened these warriors Pathfinders, and the name was an apt one. These troops were thrown out ahead of an army to reconnoitre the ground before it and plot the best routes of advance.

The Pathfinders were working quickly, and every second Uriel delayed gave them more time to detect his warriors. The Ultramarines were in place, and, as Uriel watched the enemy scouts at work, he knew it was time to unleash them.

'Primary units, engage,' he whispered into his throat mic, knowing it was the last order he would need to issue in this engagement.

The Pathfinder's head snapped up as soon as the words left Uriel's mouth, but it was already too late for the tau.

Two Space Marines from Uriel's Devastator section rose from the rocks to the east of the ruined villa, carrying bulky missile launchers on their shoulders. The tau scattered, and the Devilfish's engines rose in pitch as the driver angled his frontal section towards the threat.

Uriel smiled grimly as the Devastators fired their weapons, the missiles swooshing through the air on arcing contrails of smoke.

The first detonated above a pair of Pathfinders as they sought to reach the cover of the trees, shredding their bodies into torn masses of butchered meat and shattered armour plates. The second slammed into the frontal armour of the Devilfish with a thunderous bang followed by a smeared explosion of black smoke and shrapnel.

The Devilfish rocked under the impact of the missile, but its armour remained intact. Its rotary cannon spooled up, and a burst of heavy-calibre shells blitzed from the weapon, tracing a blazing arc between the tank and its attackers. The ground above the villa exploded as the hillside disintegrated under the blizzard of impacts, but Uriel's warriors had already ducked back into cover.

The roaring of the cannon was tremendous, but Uriel still heard the metallic cough of two more missiles being launched. He glanced over to the west, where the other half of the Devastator section opened fire. The tank tried to reverse its turn, but the missiles were faster.

One punched through the rear assault ramp as the other slammed into the left engine nacelle. The back of the Devilfish exploded in a spray of red-hot fragments, scything down another Pathfinder. A secondary blast completed its destruction, and the blazing vehicle crashed to the ground.

Uriel rose from the rocks, and locked his bolter in the crook of his arm. Behind him, a ten-strong squad of blue-armoured Space Marines rose with him, matching his pace as he set off towards the killing ground.

The surviving aliens made for the cover of the villa, but Uriel knew they wouldn't reach it.

As the Pathfinders reached the ruined dwelling, the grassy mounds within its fallen walls shifted, and a combat squad of Ultramarines scouts cast off their camo-cloaks.

The scouts opened fire, bolter rounds punching through the lightly armoured Pathfinders, and hurling them from their feet. Two were killed instantly, and a third screamed in agony as the explosion of a mass-reactive shell ripped his arm from his shoulder.

The two remaining Pathfinders returned fire, their rifles spitting bright bolts among the scouts in dazzling bursts of light and sound. The aliens fired a last defiant burst before fleeing for the trees, all pretence of stealth forgotten in their desire to escape the trap that had been set for them.

Uriel dropped to one knee and swung his gleaming, eagle-plated bolter to his shoulder. The weapon's targeting mechanism was synced to his helmet, and he tracked the zigzagging pattern of an enemy warrior for a moment before pulling the trigger.

His bolter slammed back with a fearsome recoil, and the Pathfinder dropped, the bottom half of his right leg pulped by the shell's detonation. Seeing that escape wasn't an option, the last tau warrior halted and threw down his weapon. He turned, and began walking back towards the blazing wreck of the Devilfish with his hands in the air.

'You've gotten rusty with your targeting rituals,' said a voice at Uriel's side. 'You were aiming for the middle of his back, weren't you?'

Uriel turned, and slung his bolter. Then he reached up to disengage the vacuum seals at his gorget. Pressurised air hissed, and he lifted his golden-winged helm clear. He turned towards the speaker, a Space Marine in the livery of a veteran sergeant of the Ultramarines, his red helmet encircled by a white laurel wreath.

'I was,' admitted Uriel, 'and you're right about the targeting rituals, I fell out of the habit while I was away.'

'Best get back into the habit then, quickly.'

'I will,' said Uriel, surprised at the sergeant's caustic tone.

'We should get down there. The scouts are securing the prisoner,' said the sergeant before making his way downhill.

Uriel nodded and followed Learchus.

IT FELT GOOD to lead warriors in combat, even if his involvement had been minimal once the planning had been done. Smoke from the smouldering Devilfish caught in the back of Uriel's throat, the trace chemicals triggering a number of sensory impulses within him. He tasted the abrasive compounds used to etch the insignia on the vehicle's hull, the alien lubricants used on the engine mounts, and the coarse, roasted scent of the seared crew.

Uriel ran a hand over his scalp, the dark hair cut short. A band of silver had developed at his temples, though his grey, storm cloud eyes were as sharp as ever. Cut from a classical mould, Uriel's features were angular and sharp, without the distinctive flattening common to some members of the Adeptus Astartes.

His physique was lean for a Space Marine, although, cloaked in his new armour, he was as bulky and fearsome as the rest of his warriors. The sword of Idaeus was belted at Uriel's waist, and a green cloak hung from his shoulders, secured with a pin in the shape of a white rose that recalled his last journey to Pavonis.

Uriel surveyed the utter destruction of the enemy as Learchus formed the warriors of the 4th Company into a perimeter around the site of the ambush.

Two Space Marines guarded the tau prisoner, the only survivor of the ambush, who knelt facing an upright slab with his hands on his head. A pair of Rhino APCs idled on what had once been a wide gravelled driveway. Their side doors were open, and a Space Marine gunner manned the storm bolter mounted on the vehicle's forward cupola. The kill-team of scouts gathered their photo-absorptive camo-cloaks from the ruins, cloaks that ensured the first inkling most targets had of the scouts' presence was the sound of the shot that blew their head off.

Watching Learchus issue his orders, Uriel was struck by how his friend had changed since he and Pasanius had marched from the Fortress of Hera and into exile.

Learchus had promised to look after Uriel's warriors, and he had done a fine job, rebuilding the company after the losses taken on Tarsis Ultra, and leading its warriors in battle against a host of orks on Espandor. The sergeant's orders were obeyed with alacrity and respect, and, though Uriel was sure it was just his imagination, it was as though Learchus carried himself a little taller than before.

Command had been good for him, it seemed.

Uriel beckoned to Learchus, walking towards the wreckage of the Devilfish.

'Sergeant,' said Uriel as Learchus approached and snapped to attention. Learchus hammered his fist against his breastplate, and then reached up to remove his helmet.

Learchus was everything a Space Marine should be: tall and proud, with a regal countenance that was the image of the heroes carved in luminous marble upon the steps of the Temple of Correction on Macragge. His blond hair was cropped tightly to his skull, his features wide and clearly of the most illustrious lineage.

Each of the worlds of Ultramar had differing quirks of genetics that no amount of genhancement could eradicate, making it an easy matter to identify from where a warrior hailed. Learchus was unmistakably a native of Macragge, fortress-world of the Ultramarines, and a planet from which the greatest of heroes had marched onto the pages of legend.

'Captain,' said Learchus.

'Is everything all right?'

'Everything is in hand,' said Learchus. 'Sentries are in place, enemy weapons are gathered, and I have deployed long-range pickets to watch for follow on forces.'

'Very good,' said Uriel, keeping his tone light, 'but that's not what I was asking.'

'Then what were you asking?'

'Are you planning on leaving me anything to do?'

'Everything that needs attending to is being done,' replied Learchus. 'What orders are left to give?'

'I am the captain of this company, Learchus,' said Uriel, hating that he sounded so petulant. 'The orders are mine to give.'

Learchus was too controlled to show much in the way of emotion, but Uriel saw a shadow cross his face, and guessed the reason for his stiff formality. He decided not to press the point. The company's leaders had to be seen to display unity of purpose, especially now, so soon after Uriel's return.

'Of course, sir. Sorry, sir,' replied Learchus.

'We'll talk about this later,' said Uriel, turning and marching towards the captured Pathfinder. 'Now, let's see what our prisoner has to say for himself.

The alien heard their approaching steps, and turned his helmeted head to face them. One of the Space Marine guards delivered a sharp blow to the alien's neck with the butt of his bolter, and it sagged against the stub of broken wall with a shrill yelp of pain.

The captive gripped the stonework, and Uriel saw that he had only four fingers on each hand.

'Get him up,' said Uriel.

Learchus reached down and hauled the prisoner to his feet, and Uriel was impressed by its defiant body language. This creature was from an alien species,

a race utterly apart from humanity, yet the hostility in its posture was unmistakeable.

'Take it off,' said Uriel, miming the act of lifting off a helmet.

The alien didn't move, and Uriel drew his bolt pistol, tapping the barrel against the side of the alien's helmet.

'Off,' he said.

The tau reached up, unsnapped a trio of clips and a cable-feed where it attached to his armour, and lifted clear the helmet.

Learchus snatched it from the alien, and Uriel found himself looking down at the face of the prisoner.

The creature's skin was the colour of weathered lead, grey and textured like old linen, with a sheen to it that might have been perspiration. It had a curious odour, a pungent mix of smells that Uriel found impossible to place: part animal, part burned plastic and hot spices, but wholly alien.

A glossy topknot of white hair trailed from the top of its scalp to the base of its neck, held in place by gold bands studded with gems.

The alien looked up at Uriel with eyes of dull red, set deep in a flat face without any visible indication of a nose. A curious vertical indentation, like an old surgical wound or birth scar, sat in the centre of its forehead, and the cast of its features, though alien and strange, suggested that their captive was female.

The alien's amber pupils burned with hostility.

'This is a world of the Imperium,' said Uriel. 'Why are you here?'

The alien spat a brief torrent of language, a lyrical stream of unfamiliar tones and exotic multi-part words. Uriel's enhanced cognitive faculties were able to sort the streams into word groupings, but he could make no sense of them. He hadn't expected to understand the alien's language, but had held out a vague hope that it might have had a grasp of Imperial Gothic.

'Do. You. Understand. Me?' he said, slowly and carefully enunciating each word.

Once again, the captive spoke in her singsong language, and Uriel knew that she had simply repeated the words she had already spoken.

'Do you know what it's saying?' asked Learchus.

'No,' said Uriel, 'but I don't need a translator to understand the sense of it.'

'So what's it saying?'

'It sounds like name, rank and number to me. I think she's called La'tyen.'

'She?'

'Yes,' said Uriel. 'At least, I think it's female.'

'So, what do you want done with her?'

'Cuff her and stick her in one of the Rhinos. We'll take her back to Brandon

Gate and put her in the Glasshouse,' said Uriel. 'I'll have a Xenolexicon servitor brought down from the Vae Victus to enable an interrogation. We need to find out how many more of her kind are on Pavonis.'

'Now think there are more?'

'Probably,' said Uriel, moving away from the prisoner. 'Brandon Gate is only sixty kilometres to the east over flat and open terrain. These hills are a logical spot for an enemy force to scout with a view to attacking. Pathfinders are the eyes and ears of a tau battle force, and I'd be surprised if her unit was operating alone.'

'If there are other units, we'll find them,' said Learchus. 'The afteraction telemetry from the Zeist Campaign helped us find this one, and if this battle is anything to go by, we shouldn't have much trouble finishing them off.'

'This wasn't a battle,' said Uriel.

'No?' asked Learchus, marching in step with Uriel. 'What was it then?'

'For all my adrenal system reacted once we engaged, it might as well have been a training exercise,' said Uriel. 'Everything about this fight was textbook, from the diversionary shot to the concealed kill-team and the fire support group.'

'And that is a bad thing?' asked Learchus. 'We executed a perfect Codex-pattern ambush; the tau were caught completely off guard. We fooled their tank crew into making a rudimentary manoeuvring error, and then we gunned down the survivors. Would that all engagements were fought with such precision.'

'I agree, but the Pathfinders were incredibly lax in their advance. From what I've heard of the battles the Chapter has fought against the tau over the last few years, it's a trait I'm surprised to find in warriors with such a reputation for being careful.'

'Perhaps they were new troops, yet to be tested in combat,' suggested Learchus.

'That's certainly possible,' conceded Uriel. 'Although it still feels strange that we destroyed them so easily.'

'We fight with the Codex Astartes as our guide precisely because the order it brings to our battles makes them seem easy to those who are not schooled in its ways.'

'I know that, Learchus. You don't need to remind me.'

'Don't I?' asked Learchus. 'You were exiled once already because you failed to heed its teachings.'

'Aye, and I saw the error of my ways on Medrengard,' said Uriel, fighting down his irritation at Learchus's words, even though he knew they were justified.

'I hope that is true.'

'I swear to you it is, my friend,' said Uriel. 'I suppose it's been so long since I

fought with such sublime warriors under my command, I'd almost forgotten what it is to have the advantage in a tactical situation. For so long it was just Pasanius and myself against impossible odds.'

'Clearly not that impossible,' noted Learchus. 'After all, you both made it back.'

THE FORTRESS OF Hera. Uriel had not dared believe he would once again stand before its glittering, marble immensity for fear that the more he wanted it the more if would fade away.

Soaring walls of purest white towered above them, crowned by majestic towers capped with golden weapon-domes and lined with adamantine siege-hoardings that were as beautiful as they were deadly. Like a living structure of indescribably beautiful coral, the fortress appeared to grow out of the very rock of the mountains, a mighty edifice conceived by the genius of the Ultramarines primarch in a long-forgotten age.

It stood on the mightiest chain of mountains, a testament to one man's genius and legendary vision. As wondrous and colossal a structure as it was, the Fortress of Hera was no monument to arrogance. Rather, it was a masterpiece of design and construction that lifted the soul and reminded all who looked upon it that they could aspire to great things. It was a creation of visual poetry and magnificence that spoke to the heart and not the ego.

Uriel and Pasanius stood alone in the wide, statue-lined plaza at the end of the Via Fortissimus, the grand processional road that wound from the lower reaches of the mountains all the way to the Porta Guilliman. The great gate of the fortress was a towering golden slab engraved with the ten thousand deeds of Roboute Guilliman, and Uriel vividly remembered the awful sound of it closing behind him.

The dolorous crash of adamantium had sounded like the final sound at the end of all things, and now, as the gate slowly began to open, the illumination that shone from within was like the first light at the dawn of creation.

Behind them, the hull of the Thunderhawk that had brought them from the Grey Knight vessel in orbit creaked and popped as it cooled after its rapid descent through the atmosphere. Lifter-servitors were already unloading the power armour of the Sons of Guilliman they had brought back from Salinas, and, within moments, the gunship would depart for the cold dark of space once more.

'We're home,' said Pasanius, but Uriel was too choked with emotion to reply.

His closest friend and battle-brother was crying, tears of joy falling unashamedly from his eyes as he swept his gaze over the high walls and

glittering ramparts of the fortress.

Uriel reached up and touched his face, not at all surprised to find that he too was weeping with the sheer, boundless sense of homecoming that threatened to unman him with its intensity.

'Home,' he said, as though afraid to give voice to the idea.

'Did you ever think we'd see it again?' asked Pasanius, his voice wavering and brittle.

'I always hoped we would,' said Uriel, 'but I tried not to think about it too much. I knew that if I dwelt on what we'd lost I wouldn't have the strength to go on.'

'I thought about home all the time,' confessed Pasanius. 'I don't think I'd have made it back without the hope we'd see it again.'

Uriel turned to Pasanius and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder guard. Pasanius was a giant of a Space Marine, by far the biggest Uriel had ever known, and, fully armoured, he towered over Uriel. Pasanius's right arm ended abruptly at the elbow, the limb shorn from him beneath the surface of another world by a creature from the dawn of time.

His armour had been repaired and renewed by the artificers of the Grey Knights, and, with its restoration, a piece of Pasanius's soul that had been rent asunder by his exile was made whole once more.

'We each hold on to what keeps us going, my friend,' said Uriel. 'For you it was the idea of home, for me it was the quest itself. Without that balance between us, I don't think either of us would be standing here now.'

Pasanius nodded, and swept Uriel into a crushing, one-armed bear hug. The big warrior's emotions were raw and wounded, but they were healing. They had shared adventures and horrors on their journey, and, to come through it alive, let alone whole in spirit, was a miracle of which both were suddenly and acutely aware.

Uriel felt Pasanius's massive strength and laughed.

'You're crushing the life out of me, you fool!' he gasped.

Uriel's armour had been destroyed on their quest for redemption, and he wore a simple chiton of pale blue with the sword his former captain had entrusted to him belted at his waist. Pasanius joined Uriel's laughter, the last of the darkness that had cloaked his soul banished by the bright sun of Macragge and the gift of friendship freely given.

Pasanius released Uriel as the Porta Guilliman opened further and the light from within the fortress grew in intensity.

Both warriors stood proudly to attention, their backs ramrod straight and heads held high.

They had endured their quest into the darkness at the heart of the galaxy and within the souls of men, each trial bringing them closer to this final redemption. The end of that quest was at hand, and Uriel felt his heart pound within his ribless torso as it would at the moment of battle.

Three warriors stepped from the dazzling brightness of the fortress, three giants who lived in the legends of the Ultramarines, and whose names stood for courage and honour the length and breadth of the Imperium.

Leading the trio, resplendent in the vast and terrible Armour of Antilochus, and bearing the Gauntlets of Ultramar, was Marneus Calgar, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines. A warrior without peer and strategist beyond compare, Calgar was the epitome of what it meant to be a commander of the Adeptus Astartes.

At Calgar's side marched a towering warrior clad in lustrous blue armour, his head haloed with a crystalline hood. This was Varro Tigurius, Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines, and Uriel felt the power of the mighty warrior's gaze upon them, a bright light that would seek out any darkness and expunge it without mercy.

To Calgar's right was the most venerable member of the Ultramarines still on active duty, Chaplain Ortan Cassius, the Master of Sanctity and keeper of the Chapter's soul. Unlike his battle-brothers, Cassius wore armour of deepest black, and where his comrades were warriors of fair countenance, the Chaplain's face was a nightmarish patchwork of scarred flesh and bionics.

As these incredible, legendary warriors marched towards them, Uriel and Pasanius dropped to their knees, their heads bowed. To stand in the presence of one of these warriors would have been an honour unmatched, but to be greeted by three such giants amongst the Astartes was truly incredible.

'You return to us, Uriel Ventris,' said Lord Calgar, and Uriel's heart soared to hear the welcome and respect in his voice. 'I had not thought to ever lay eyes on you again.'

Uriel looked up into Lord Calgar's face, revelling in the sight of so perfect a warrior. Marneus Calgar's features were as hard as granite hewn from the deepest quarry, yet there was wisdom and nobility within them, his eyes cold as steel and yet filled with humanity.

'Nor I you, my lord,' said Uriel, unable to keep his tears from falling.

'Varro here said we would see you again, but I didn't believe him,' said Calgar. 'I should have known better.'

'Yes,' agreed Tigurius, 'you should have. Did I not say the Sentinel of the Tower would fight alongside us when the Thrice Born is clad in flesh once more?'

'Aye, that you did, Varro,' said Calgar, 'and one day you will explain what that

means.'

Calgar turned from his Chief Librarian, and placed the open palm of his heavy gauntlet upon Uriel's head. The Chapter Master's grip could crush the hardest metal, yet could cradle the most delicate glass sculpture without fear of its destruction. Uriel's life was in his lord and master's hand, yet he could think of no one to whom he would more gladly entrust his fate.

'What say you, Uriel?' asked Calgar. 'Do you return to us in glory?'

'We return to our Chapter having completed our Death Oath,' replied Uriel.

'Then you will be welcomed,' said Calgar.

'The creatures I saw in my vision,' said Tigurius, and Uriel sensed his words were laden with meaning beyond his understanding. 'The daemonic brood creatures… you found them?'

'We did, my lord,' confirmed Uriel, 'on a world taken by the Ruinous Powers. We found them and destroyed them. Our journey has been long and hard, and we have seen much that is terrible, but also much that is glorious and inspirational. I have seen men become monsters, and monsters that became heroes.'

'And you will stand with this, Pasanius?' asked Cassius with a grimace that appeared sardonic, but which was simply a fact of the hideous scars he bore. 'You did so once before, and were cast from your Chapter. That must have been a wound as grievous as the loss of your arm.'

Pasanius shrugged. 'I am whole within, my Lord Chaplain.'

'That remains to be seen,' said Tigurius, addressing them both. 'You have returned to us as brothers, but you have trodden the soil and breathed the air of a damned world. Brother Leodegarius of the Grey Knights vouches for the purity of your flesh, and his word is all that allowed you to descend to the surface of Macragge alive.'

Tigurius loomed over Uriel and Pasanius, the crystalline matrix of his hood leaping with shimmering wych fire.

'You will tell me all that occurred on your journey,' stated Tigurius, the dark pupils of his eyes crackling with the light of ancient powers, 'and woe betide you if I discover any taint in your souls.'

TWO

THE ENFORCERS WERE closing in on her, and she didn't have many places left to run. Her legs were tired, the air burned in her lungs, and her shoulder-length blonde hair was damp with sweat. She'd been on the run for nearly three hours, but Jenna Sharben wasn't going to be brought down without a fight.

She blinked dust from her eyes, wishing she hadn't lost her helmet in that tussle with the slab of muscle who'd tried to pin her to the wall with a net-caster. Jenna had dodged the projectile net and busted her pursuer's ribs with two quick blows of her shock maul. She'd put his lights out with a swift blow to the throat. Amateur.

Their orders were to take her alive, and that gave her the advantage.

The black of her armour was grey with dust, and she pressed herself flat against a tumbled wall as she heard a pair of enforcers run past the roofless portion of the collapsed structure she was sheltering in.

This had once been the Imperial Armoury and Arbites Precinct, but little survived save for crumbling ruins, fallen slabs of rockcrete, and precariously balanced walls and twisted gantries.

Jenna shifted into position beside the doorway and reached down to grab a handful of rock chippings. She skidded them across the ruptured floor timbers. Instantly, she heard the enforcers turn and make their way back towards her hiding place.

Jenna heard the clicking of their micro-bead vox and waited.

A grey-uniformed figure darted through the doorway, and Jenna let him go. The second enforcer immediately followed the first, and she surged to her feet, slamming her shock maul into the side of the enforcer's thigh. The man yelled in pain, and dropped to the ground, losing his shotgun and clutching his deadened leg. A second blow put him out of the fight.

Jenna followed up her attack by diving forwards as the first enforcer brought up his shotgun. She rolled beneath his shot, and slammed the butt of her shock maul into his groin. He grunted in pain, but stayed upright, which was more than she'd expected.

Jenna sprang to her feet, agile even in armour, and whipped her shock maul around and into the mirrored faceplate of the enforcer's helmet. The metal crumpled, but held, and the man dropped. Without power, the shock maul was simply a solid lump of plasteel, but there were worse things to have in your hand

when trying to put someone down.

Jenna heard the sound of a shotgun being cocked, and looked up to see a lithe enforcer in a grey body-jack kneeling on a splintered stub of floor slab a few metres above her. Even with the reflective visor of the helmet down, Jenna knew the identity of this enforcer.

'Clever,' said Jenna.

She tightened her grip on the shock maul, her muscles tense and ready for action.

'You always run here,' said the enforcer. 'Why is that?'

Jenna didn't answer, twisting and hurling her shock maul at the enforcer as the barrel of the shotgun erupted in flames.

A shock maul wasn't designed with aerodynamics in mind, and her missile flew wide of the mark. Jenna tensed in expectation of pain, but she laughed as she realised that the enforcer had also missed. The solid shot had blasted into the creaking wooden floor.

The slide of the combat shotgun racked once more.

'You missed,' said Jenna, raising her hands in surrender. 'Going to have to work on your aim, Enforcer Apollonia.'

'I wasn't aiming at you,' said the enforcer, lowering the shotgun.

Jenna looked down, seeing where the impact of solid shot had destroyed the end of the joist supporting the portion of the floor she was standing on.

'Oh, hell,' said Jenna as the splintered timbers cracked and gave way beneath her.

She dropped through the floor, crashing down onto a pile of fallen stone and smashed plaster-work. Her armour took the brunt of the impact, but the breath was driven from her as she rolled over onto her side.

'Don't move,' said a breathless voice beside her, and Jenna looked up to see a tall, powerfully built enforcer standing over her, his shotgun pointed at her chest. Blinking away the lights in front of her eyes, she looked up through the billowing cloud of dust her fall had thrown up to see another weapon aimed at her through the hole in the floor.

'Nicely done, Enforcer Dion,' said Jenna, between heaving gulps of air. 'I had a feeling it would be you two that caught me.'

She pushed herself to her knees, one hand pressed to the old gunshot wound in her stomach.

'Are you all right, ma'am?' asked Dion, flicking up the silvered visor of his helmet.

'Yeah, I'm fine,' said Jenna, reaching up and unclipping the vox-mic attached to her armour's gorget, 'just a bit winded is all.'

The enforcer nodded and made his weapon safe.

'All units,' said Jenna Sharben, Commander of the Brandon Gate Enforcers, 'the exercise is over, I repeat, over. Everyone assemble in Liberation Square for debrief.'

Jenna led her trainees from the ruins of the Arbites precinct, following a winding route through mossy piles of fallen plasteel and granite facing stone towards Liberation Square. A high wall of reinforced rockcrete, topped with razor wire and studded with gunports had once surrounded the precinct, a grim, foreboding edifice in the heart of Brandon Gate that served to remind the populace of their duty to the Imperium.

Clearly, it had not been a strong enough reminder, thought Jenna.

Those were bloody days, when the influence of the cartels that were the industrial backbone of Pavonis had reached a critical mass of power and ambition, and Virgil de Valtos had attempted to overthrow Imperial rule.

Jenna had only seen the opening shots of that revolution fired.

While attempting to evacuate Governor Mykola Shonai from the Imperial palace, an aide in the pocket of de Valtos, a worm named Almerz Chanda, had shot and almost killed Jenna. An Astartes healer had saved her, and, though she had fully recovered, the phantom pain of it still troubled her, now and again.

Jenna climbed over the fallen slabs of masonry that were all that remained of the wall. A shiver passed through her as she thought back to the sight of squadrons of tanks blasting their way through the wall, their guns mowing down the surviving Judges as they crawled from the wreckage of the bombed structure.

No one had ever figured out how the agents of de Valtos were able to smuggle an explosive device inside the Arbites precinct, but however it had been managed, the resulting blast devastated the entire building, effectively ending any meaningful resistance to the de Valtos coup from the ranks of the Adeptus Arbites.

Virgil Ortega, her former mentor, had died in the fighting; a Judge of rare courage and honour, and a man whom she felt could have taught her a great deal. She dearly wished he were here now, for the training of an entirely new cadre of enforcers was not something she had anticipated when she had been posted to Pavonis.

In the days before the rebellion, each of the cartels had raised and trained its own corps of enforcers, resulting in numerous private armies that were loyal only to the cartel that paid them. These enforcers were little more than corporate sponsored thugs, who enacted the will of the cartels with beatings, coercion and scant regard for the rule of Imperial Law.

One of the first acts of the Administratum, upon establishing its presence on

Pavonis following the coup, had been to disband these private militias, putting thousands of men out of work. Mykola Shonai had protested at such drastic measures, but she had been serving out the last months of her term of office and her concerns were ignored.

As the last remnant of an Adeptus Arbites presence in Brandon Gate, the task of recruiting and training a new breed of enforcer had fallen to Jenna Sharben, a task she had quickly realised was more complex and demanding than anyone had imagined.

Anyone with strong cartel affiliations was suspect in the eyes of the Administratum, and Jenna had been forced to turn away many promising recruits for past associations with blacklisted cartels. Such restrictions were galling, and cared nothing for the fact that anyone who wanted employment before the rebellion had to have been attached to one of the cartels.

Despite such setbacks, Jenna had persevered. With help from Lortuen Perjed, the Administratum aide to the governor and former acolyte of the late Inquisitor Barzano, she had managed to recruit nearly two hundred enforcers, secure them weapons, uniforms and training, and had established a headquarters in a secure facility on the edge of the city.

Their base of operations was a rundown prison facility that had been burned out and looted in the wake of the rebellion, but which had been brought back to basic functionality in the last year. Its official name was the Brandon Gate Correctional Facility, but it was known locally as the Glasshouse.

It was a far from perfect base from which to police an entire city, but it was a beginning, and every endeavour had to start somewhere.

Jenna shook herself from her gloomy thoughts as she and her trainees gave a wide berth to the blue walls of the Ultramarines battle fortress. Under the watchful gaze of its guns, they approached a checkpoint manned by Guardsmen of the 44th Lavrentian Hussars. Each of the approach routes leading into Liberation Square had such a checkpoint, a staggered emplacement of piled sandbags and rockcrete beams that housed a squad of Guardsmen in polished silver breastplates and emerald green breeches.

Banners depicting a heroic golden soldier on a rearing horse hung limply above each checkpoint, and a Chimera AFV was parked threateningly behind it.

Jenna knew the Lavrentians were tough soldiers, hardened fighters who'd spent the better part of the last seven years fighting greenskin marauders on the Eastern Fringe. Being rotated to Pavonis, far from the front lines, was a cushy number for them, yet Jenna had seen no let up in their training regime or discipline.

She heard the cocking of heavy bolters as they approached the checkpoint.

The turret-mounted multi-laser on the Chimera tracked her every move, despite them having passed the same checkpoint only four hours earlier en route to their hunt/capture exercise. A captain and protection detail emerged from the emplacement, and Jenna knew he would be as thorough in his ident-checks and counts as before.

The captain, whose name was Mederic, scanned her transit tags with a wave of a data wand, and repeated the procedure for each of the enforcers as they passed beneath the watchful gaze of the gunners manning the heavy bolters.

'Good exercise?' asked Mederic, as the last enforcer was cleared.

'Could have been better,' admitted Jenna. 'It took them three hours to run me down, but they got me in the end.'

'Three hours,' said Mederic with a roguish smile. 'If I set the Hounds of the 44th on you, I'd have you bound, gagged and at my mercy in three minutes.'

'You wish,' said Jenna, reading Mederic's lingering glance at her athletic figure, which her Arbites armour did little to conceal. 'I'd have your Hounds chasing their tails.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'I'll have to put that boast to the test sometime, Judge Sharben,' said Mederic, waving her through. 'Our scouts are the best in the sector.'

'That's pride, Captain Mederic,' said Jenna defiantly. 'It doesn't suit you.'

She turned and made her way past the Chimera to catch up with her enforcers.

'I'll be in touch,' chuckled Mederic. 'Count on it.'

Mederic had irritated her, having done little to conceal his attraction to her. She told herself it was his obvious desire and disparaging of her skills that had annoyed her, but it was more than that. It was the fact that he didn't belong here. He was an outsider.

Never mind that she too was not native to Pavonis, this was her world because she had fought to defend it. Though the Lavrentians were here to safeguard her adopted home world, their presence was a visible symbol that the Imperium did not trust the people of Pavonis.

'Everything all right, ma'am?' asked Apollonia, glancing back down the street.

Apollonia was a petite woman, with cropped dark hair and wide, almond shaped eyes, who had proved to be one of Jenna's finest recruits. Many people, including Jenna, had underestimated her, but she had proven to be an object lesson in not judging people by their appearance. She was tougher than she looked, and had excelled in every area of training.

'Yes, it's fine,' replied Jenna. 'Just Guardsmen being Guardsmen.'

'The sooner they're gone the better,' said Dion, dropping back to walk

alongside them.

'Secure that talk, Enforcer Dion,' warned Jenna. 'That's the kind of sentiment that will keep them here longer. Understood?'

'Understood, ma'am,' said Dion with a crisp salute.

'Apollonia?'

'Yes, ma'am. Understood.'

Jenna nodded, putting the incident from her mind as the approach road widened out and she stepped into the central plaza of Brandon Gate.

Liberation Square had once been a meeting place popular with the wealthy of Brandon Gate, a place to gather, perambulate and gossip, but since the uprising it had largely been forsaken.

Too many memories, Jenna supposed. Too many had died here.

Even now, she sometimes woke with the hate and fear-filled shouts of the Workers' Collective ringing in her ears, the sounds of booming shotguns, the screams of the wounded and dying, or the urgent sound of her pounding heartbeat.

Instead of a gathering place for the people of the city, Liberation Square was now a symbol of the planet's past failures. Some citizens still passed through it, but not many, although Jenna saw a few hundred people gathered at the centre of the square.

Looking closer, she saw why.

The crimson-painted Rhino of Prelate Culla was parked at the foot of the great statue of the Emperor from which the traitor Vendare Taloun had been hanged. Braziers burned from ebony skulls fitted to the glacis of the tank, and curling bronze organ pipes rose from behind an onyx pulpit, broadcasting hectoring words to the crowd gathered before him.

Standing tall atop his mobile shrine, Culla was a fearsome-looking preacher with an enormous fiery chainsword and bolt pistol raised to the heavens. Robed in the emerald chasuble of a predicant of the Lavrentian 44th, Culla trained for battle with the soldiers to whom he daily preached. He was a man whose appearance looked quarried from rock instead of crafted by birth, and his forked beard and tattooed, shaven head gave him a threatening appearance that was entirely deliberate.

Choral servitors in hooded smocks sang uplifting hymns, as golden-skinned cherubs, trailing prayer banners, hovered in the clouds of devotional incense that billowed from the Rhino's smoke dispensers.

In the wake of the rebellion, ships from the Ministorum and Administratum had brought hosts of new clerks, scribes and preachers to restore spiritual and bureaucratic stability to Pavonis, but none had been zealous enough for Culla,

who had taken to the streets to preach his own fiery brand of the Imperial Creed.

From the sound of the crowd, Culla was already in full swing, and Jenna paused to listen.

'It behoves us all to cast out the unbeliever. Such creatures have no value whatsoever as human beings. In fact, you must not even consider them human, but as inhuman animals, since they are nothing but miserable liars, cowards and murderers!'

Culla's devotees, mainly indigent workers and itinerant labourers, were cheering at his words, and Jenna couldn't deny that the prelate's words were affecting.

The preacher swept his arms out, the fiery sword leaving bright afterimages on Jenna's retinas. 'Do not cry for the unbeliever who lives amongst you, though they may be your friend or a member of your family. No one should weep over the rotting corpse of a worthless unbeliever! What else is there to say? Nothing at all. There should be no last words, no rites and no remembrance. Nothing. Every time an unbeliever or alien dies, the Imperium is better off, and their Emperor-forsaken souls will burn forever in the depths of the warp!'

'Looks like we'll need to find another place for debrief,' noted Dion.

'Yeah, we'll head back to the Glasshouse, do it there,' said Jenna, the words of Prelate Culla and the cheers of his audience ringing in her ears.

THE TWO RHINOS travelled south as far as Olzetyn, the City of Bridges, before turning eastwards, and then following Highway 236 northwards along the river towards Brandon Gate. The highway was well-maintained, since it was the major arterial route connecting the planetary capital and the coastal port-city of Praxedes, and the Ultramarines made good time as they completed their patrol circuit. What traffic there was on the highway gave the Rhinos a wide berth, the cupola mounted storm bolters tracking any vehicle that came too near until the driver hurriedly pulled away.

The outer suburbs of Brandon Gate were heavily industrialised belts of manufacture, sprawling districts of production, assembly and distribution, a great deal of which was now sitting idle. Some of the manufactorum still churned with the sound of machines, but many more sat empty and abandoned, their workers deprived of employment thanks to their previous cartel affiliations.

Stopping only to transfer the tau prisoner to the custody of the enforcers at the fire-blackened compound of the Glasshouse, the Ultramarines drove swiftly onwards. They passed the sheet steel walls of Camp Torum, the headquarters of the 44th Lavrentian regiment, before entering the city proper via the northern

Commercia Gate.

The manufacturing hub of Pavonis had changed a great deal since Uriel had last seen it.

The city walls were reinforced with Lavrentian Hydra flak tanks, and armed patrols of green-jacketed Guardsmen in silver breastplates roamed the streets to keep the peace that Uriel and his warriors had won.

Their route took them through the financial heart of the city, where much of the trading that had made Pavonis one of the economic powerhouses of the sub-sector had been done. Uriel had time to admire the elaborate architecture of the Carnelian Exchange House, with its high towers and gilded arches, before it was lost to sight as they crossed Liberation Square.

Imperial Guardsmen controlled entry to the vast space, but the Ultramarines vehicles were not stopped, rumbling past awed soldiers making the sign of the aquila. They skirted around the giant statue in the centre of the square, where a preacher atop a crimson Rhino hectored a gathering of the faithful. Uriel's heart sank as he saw that this place, which had once been dedicated to the glory of the Emperor, was now home to the ugly practicality of roadblocks and checkpoints.

The Ultramarines had set up their base in Belahon Park, a once pristine area of greenery, lakes and rarefied beauty, but which was now an overgrown wasteland with a stagnant lake at its heart. On the park's southern edge, the spires of the iron-sheened Templum Fabricae dominated the skyline, overshadowing the more modestly constructed Library of Deshanel.

The Rhinos drove towards a modular defensive fortress of high blue walls, angled bastions and defensive turrets. Designated Fortress Idaeus, it had been constructed by the company's Techmarines and servitors next to the ruins of the former Arbites precinct. As the Rhinos approached, codex-pattern recognition protocols passed between the vehicles and the gun towers before the gate rumbled open.

The two Rhinos swept inside the fortress, and no sooner had they ground to a halt beside a trio of massively armoured Land Raiders, the most powerful battle tank in the Space Marine arsenal, than the assault ramps dropped. The drivers revved out the last of the journey from the engines, and Uriel stepped from the vehicle, rotating his head on his shoulders to loosen his muscles.

Prefabricated structures were spaced at regular intervals within the compound, the basic necessities of a Space Marine battle company at war: command centre, armoury, apothecarion, refectory and barracks. Groups of Space Marines practiced targeting rituals, while others trained in close-quarters combat in small groups under the supervision of their sergeants. Techmarine apprenta worked on the engine of a Land Raider, while tower-mounted

Thunderfire cannons scanned the surrounding urban landscape for threats.

In the centre of Fortress Idaeus, held by an unmoving warrior wearing the full battle dress of the Ultramarines and a cloak of brilliant green, the 4th Company banner flapped in the wind. Depicting an iron gauntlet clutching the icon of the Ultramarines against a golden laurel, it was a symbol of courage and honour to all who fought beneath it, and Uriel felt great humility at the sight of so noble a standard.

An immaculately maintained Chimera, painted in the colours of the Lavrentian 44th, was parked beside the command centre, together with an altogether less impressive half-track, emblazoned with the white rose of the Pavonis PDF.

'Looks like we have guests,' said Learchus, coming over to join Uriel, his stride sure, and looking like he'd just stepped from the parade ground.

'Looks like,' agreed Uriel. 'Lord Winterbourne and Colonel Loic by the vehicles.'

'Do you wish me to join you?'

'Eventually,' said Uriel, 'but we must honour the banner first.'

Uriel and Learchus marched towards the centre of the company fortress, and stood before the warrior who bore the standard. His name was Peleus and his title was Ancient, a rank only ever given to those who were pure of heart and soul, and who had won the right to bear the company's banner through the fires of countless battlefields.

Peleus had carried the banner of the 4th for over thirty years. The eagle on his breastplate shimmered, and the white wings of his helmet were dazzling. Scarlet cords secured the cloak around Peleus's shoulders, and a host of oath papers and purity seals were affixed to his shoulder guards. Sunlight caught the silver and gold threading on the banner, and the pride that filled Uriel as he took hold of the fabric was like a panacea.

'The banner is a credit to you, Ancient Peleus,' said Uriel. 'It has never looked so good.'

'Thank you, my lord,' replied Peleus. 'I am honoured to bear it.'

The Space Marines Uriel had led on this latest patrol mission formed up behind him without any orders needing to be given. Uriel dropped to one knee before the banner, and his warriors followed suit, heads bowed as they acknowledged the awesome weight of its legacy. Never in its history had the banner been allowed to fall, though enemies of every stripe had sought to bring it low.

'In the name of the Emperor and primarch, whom we serve, I offer you my life and the lives of these warriors,' said Uriel, his hands clasped across his chest

in the sign of the aquila. 'I offer our devotion, our skill and our courage. To the service of this banner, our Chapter and the Emperor, I offer you our lives.'

The warriors behind him spoke their own oaths, each one personal to the man that gave it, and Uriel waited until the last had finished speaking before rising to his feet. As Uriel gave his oath to the company standard, he felt a warm sense of acknowledgement swell within him, as though everything it stood for welcomed him back into the ranks of 4th Company.

He turned to Learchus. 'Set the men on their post battle ministrations and join me in the command centre when you're done.'

'Yes, sir,' replied Learchus with a crisp bow.

Uriel turned on his heel, and made his way towards the oblong structure that served as the command centre for the company. Its sides were deep blue, and a surveyor dish rotated amid a bristling forest of vox aerials on its armoured topside. The symbol of the Ultramarines was stencilled on its side, and two Space Marines with their blades unsheathed stood at attention to either side of the entrance.

Both warriors hammered the hilts of their swords against their chests as Uriel punched in the access code and entered the command centre.

The interior was lit with a soft, green glow from the numerous data-slates fitted to the walls. Cogitators hummed with power, and, though spinning fan units on the ceiling dissipated the heat from so many machines, it was still uncomfortably warm. Binaric cant chattered in the background, a companion to the hiss of machine language burbling from the mouths of output servitors.

Techmarine Harkus sat upon a silver-steel throne at one end of the command centre, connected to the workings of the various logic-engines via hard-plugs in his arms, chest and cranium. Flickering light pulsed behind his eyes as he collated the myriad data streams being gathered by the surveyor gear on the roof and the Vae Victus in orbit.

A handful of Chapter serfs attended to incense burners, anointed the guardian of the company's technology with sacred oils and recited mantas pleasing to the spirits of the machines.

At the hub of the command centre, a hololithic projection table of dark stone was lit by the translucent holo-map that bathed the three figures gathered around it in a lambent glow.

The nearest figure to Uriel was Colonel Adren Loic, commander of the local defence forces. Since the rebellion, partial control of the armed men of Brandon Gate had fallen to an officer chosen by the Administratum, a man selected as much for his lack of cartel affiliations as for his competence as a soldier. That he was a political appointment was clear to Uriel, but what was less clear was

whether he had any merit as a leader of fighting men.

The collar of Loic's cream uniform jacket was open, and his florid skin was beaded with perspiration. The man's bullet scalp was shaved bald, and he dabbed at his forehead with a wadded scarf before standing to attention at Uriel's arrival. He carried a pistol and duelling sabre at his side, though Uriel doubted he knew how to use the latter with any real skill.

Beside Loic stood two senior commanders of the 44th Lavrentians. Uriel had met them on a number of previous occasions, and both officers had impressed him. Their first meeting had been when the Ultramarines had made planetfall, the second when formalising the chain of command, and the latest when delineating sectors of responsibility.

The regiment's colonel, Lord Nathaniel Winterbourne, was a flamboyant nobleman with genteel manners and a respect for etiquette that at first made him appear effete. After their first meeting, however, Uriel quickly realised that there was a core of iron to him. Winterbourne was a commander who demanded and got the best from his Guardsmen, no matter that there was precious little glory or honour to be gained on this assignment.

Tall and rakishly thin, his emerald green frock coat seemed too large for his spare frame, yet there was an undeniable strength to the man that Uriel liked. His features bore all the hallmarks of good breeding, careful juvenat work and the eager hunger of a career soldier.

Two richly dressed aides stood discretely behind Winterbourne, one holding the colonel's emerald-plumed helmet, the other the long leashes of two wolf-like creatures: slender beasts with glossy black and gold fur, vicious looking jaws and predators' eyes. One of the creatures was missing its left foreleg, yet appeared no less aggressive for its loss.

Winterbourne was the fiery heart of the regiment, but his second in command, Major Alithea Ornella, was all business. Unsmiling and hard to warm to, Ornella was meticulous and precise, as dedicated as her colonel in ensuring that the regiment's soldiers upheld the fine tradition of the Imperial Guard. Like her superior officer, she was dressed in a long frock-coat, though she came without pets or an aide to carry her helmet.

'Lord Winterbourne, Major Ornella,' said Uriel, unconsciously addressing the soldiers in order of respect, if not proximity. 'Colonel Loic.'

'Ah, Uriel, my good man,' said Winterbourne. 'Damned sorry to drop in on you like this, but we got word that you'd had something of an encounter with alien trespassers.'

'That's correct, Lord Winterbourne,' said Uriel. 'Tau Pathfinders and their vehicle.'

'Call me Nathaniel,' said Winterbourne with a dismissive wave of the hand. 'Everybody does. Or at least I tell them to, but they never listen.'

The three-legged hound nuzzled the colonel of the 44th, and he stroked its ferocious-looking head, which was more than Uriel would have done had it come near him.

'Anyway, to business, to business,' continued Winterbourne, patting the beast. 'The damned tau infest the Eastern Fringe like burrow-ticks on old Fynlae here's hide. We've fought them before and they're slippery buggers, got to keep an eye on them or they'll be behind you in a flash. I remember once on Ulgolaa they—'

'Perhaps we should concentrate on the matter at hand?' suggested Major Ornella, smoothly forestalling her colonel's reminiscence.

'Of course, yes,' agreed Winterbourne, shaking his head. 'Talk the hind leg off a grox if Alithea didn't bring me to heel every now and then. So, these tau, where did you encounter the scoundrels, Uriel?'

Winterbourne appeared to take no offence at his underling's intervention, and Uriel stepped up to the hololith table that was projecting an image of the environs around the command centre to a radius of three hundred kilometres.

The major cities were shining blobs of light, the geographical features projected as stylised representations of mountains, rivers, forests and hills. Brandon Gate sat in the centre of the map, with Praxedes on the western coast and Olzetyn roughly at the midpoint between the two cities. Madorn lay just south of the Tembra Ridge Mountains, a great saw-toothed barrier three hundred kilometres to the north.

Further east, Altemaxa nestled amid the sprawling Gresha Forest. The Abrogas cartel had once maintained sizeable estates in this area, but a malfunctioning magma bomb from the Vae Victus had fallen there during the rebellion, obliterating many of them, along with whole swathes of forest that burned in the subsequent fires.

To the south, the slum city of Jotusburg sat isolated from the other conurbations, shunned like a reeking plague victim. The city was a blackened sump that housed the tens of thousands of Adeptus Mechanicus labourers who toiled in the Diacrian Belt, a hellish region of smoking refineries and drilling rigs that blackened the eastern and southern reaches of the continent. Where other cities had ghettoes, Jotusburg was a ghetto.

Uriel detached a light-stylus from the table, and drew a holographic circle around the Owsen Hills, sixty kilometres west of Brandon Gate. 'Right here,' said Uriel.

'Damn, that's close,' said Colonel Loic. 'That puts them practically right on our doorstep.'

'You're not wrong, Adren,' agreed Winterbourne, ignoring or oblivious to Loic's discomfort at the more senior officer's familiarity. 'Damned aliens will be sitting at our dinner table soon. What do you make of it, Uriel?'

'I think Colonel Loic is correct,' he said. 'The tau are too close and too bold for my liking. Given what I observed, they appeared to be plotting a route for a larger force.'

'Preliminary groundwork for an invasion, eh?' said Winterbourne. 'Think they can just take a world of the Emperor from us, do they?'

'We've heard nothing from sector command about a renewed offensive,' said Alithea Ornella. 'After your Chapter's victories at Zeist and Lagan, Imperial Strategos are of the opinion that the tau have withdrawn to their previous holdings.'

'The Masters of the Ultramarines came to the same conclusion,' said Uriel, 'but the fact that tau forces are on Pavonis is undeniable and unacceptable. If they are scouting routes for an army, then it follows that they are planning to invade. Perhaps not soon, but eventually. It is our duty to deny them any intelligence that will aid them in any aggression towards this world, whether the threat is imminent or merely theoretical.'

'Of course,' agreed Ornella. 'So that's what you think this is, a scouting mission?'

Uriel considered the question. 'No, I think there's more to it than that.'

'Oh?' said Winterbourne. 'So tell me, Uriel, what do you think these xenos are up to?'

Uriel looked back at the hololithic projection and said, 'I think they are here in far greater strength than encountered numbers might otherwise suggest. It wouldn't surprise me if the tau have been on Pavonis for quite some time.'

'I assure you, Captain Ventris, my PDF long-range patrols have found nothing to support that suspicion,' said Colonel Loic.

'I'm sure they haven't, colonel,' said Uriel. 'I'd be surprised if they had.'

Loic's face reddened, but Uriel held up a placating hand. 'I mean no disrespect to your men, colonel. Even we were only able to locate the tau thanks to information gained at the cost of Astartes lives on Augura.'

'I'm all for soldier's intuition, Uriel,' said Winterbourne, 'but you'll have to do better than a suspicion. Lay it out for me. Why do you think the tau are here when cleverer thinkers than us all say they've gone home to lick their wounds?'

'It's this world,' said Uriel.

'What about it?' asked Loic defensively.

'I think the nature of Pavonis makes it an attractive prospect for the tau,' said Uriel, circling the table as he gathered his thoughts. 'Before the de Valtos

rebellion, it was the hub of the sub-sector trade networks. As much as the cartel system placed a dangerous amount of power in the hands of individuals unsuited to wield it, those individuals were formidable merchants as well as producers. Trade is in the blood of this world. Look at how it's ruled; the central hall of governance is called the Senate Chamber of Righteous Commerce and its chief official is the Moderator of Transactions.'

'So, how does that make it a prime target for the tau?' asked Loic.

'It fits how these aliens work,' said Uriel. 'In practically every instance where Imperial forces have fought the tau, it has been on worlds where xenos diplomats or traders have first made secret overtures to the planetary leadership through its mercantile concerns, offering co-operation and commerce. If the planet's leaders are foolish enough to accept this offer, trade links are quickly forged, and the tau influence grows as the planet's rulers become wealthy. Soon after, the tau establish a military presence, which transforms into a full-scale occupation within the space of a few months. By the time the populace realise what is happening, it is already too late, and an Imperial world has become part of the tau empire.'

'Despicable,' said Winterbourne, shaking his head in disbelief. 'To think that Imperial citizens would lower themselves to treat with xenos.'

'The tau aren't like other races you've fought, Lord Winterbourne,' said Uriel, choosing his words carefully. 'They are not like the green-skins or the hive fleets. They do not lay waste to worlds indiscriminately or seek destruction for destruction's sake. Their entire race works for the good of the species, and, in fact, there is much to admire about them.'

'But they are aliens,' protested Winterbourne, 'degenerate xenos with no regard for the sanctity of human life or our manifest destiny to rule the stars. Intolerable!'

'Indeed, and any world the tau set their sights on that does not welcome their advances will be attacked with all the fury their armies can muster. The tau offer a simple choice: either join their empire willingly, or you will be conquered and made part of the empire.'

'And you think that's what's happening here?' asked Winterbourne.

'Yes. The tau will believe that the commercial mindset of this planet's leaders makes them receptive to their advances when the time comes to begin the assimilation of Pavonis.'

'If it hasn't already begun,' pointed out Ornella.

'Exactly,' said Uriel.

THREE

ALONE IN HIS arming chamber, Uriel allowed the simple act of caring for his battle gear to set his mind at ease. Honouring the memory of the warrior who had last borne these weapons and armour into battle came as naturally to Uriel as breathing, and helped him to better process his thoughts. He worked a finely textured brush across the breastplate, taking care to work the red dust of Pavonis from between the carved feathers of the golden aquila.

As captain of a Space Marine battle company, Uriel was permitted his own chamber in the modular barracks structure: a three metre square, steel-walled cell with a compact bunk and weapons shrine on one wall, and a reversible ablutions cubicle on the other. A gunmetal grey footlocker at the end of the bed contained Uriel's few personal belongings: his training garments, his hygiene kit, a sharpening block for his sword, the glossy black claw of the stalker creature he had captured on Tarsis Ultra and a ragged fragment of an enemy battle flag he had taken on the battlefields of Thracia.

A Space Marine had no great need for privacy in the normal run of things, and shared virtually every moment of his life with his battle-brothers. Such unbreakable bonds of brotherhood allowed the Adeptus Astartes to fight as one, and to make such war as was unthinkable to mere mortals.

The rest of Uriel's armour stood in the corner of the chamber, each plate having been removed from his enhanced body and placed reverently upon a sturdy frame by a company serf an hour before.

The Savage Morticians had brutally cut the bulk of Uriel's original armour from him on Medrengard, and he had been forced to discard the few remaining fragments on Salinas. Necessity had seen him don power armour belonging to the Sons of Guilliman Chapter for a short time, but now he had another suit of battle plate to call his own.

Before leaving Macragge, when the time had come to renew his Oaths of Confraternity, the Master of the Forge had escorted Uriel into the vast, torch-lit vaults of the Armorium to choose his new armour.

Scores of armoured suits stood in the sacred repository of the Chapter's wargear like warriors on parade, and Uriel had the powerful sense that these vacant suits were simply waiting for warriors of courage to bear them into battle once more. Firelight danced upon the polished plates as Uriel reverently made his way through their ranks, knowing that the spirits of fallen heroes were

silently, invisibly, judging his worth as a warrior.

Each suit was creation of forgotten science and art, any one of which it would be an honour to wear. The unique bond between armour and warrior went beyond anything that could be understood by those without the depths of faith of a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes.

No sooner had Uriel set eyes upon the gleaming plates he now polished than he had known it was the armour for him. He reached out and placed his open palm on the golden breastplate, and felt a connection to the armour on a level that he could never fully explain.

'The armour of Brother Amadon,' said the Master of the Forge approvingly, his voice little more than a hoarse croak, as though coming from a forgotten place deep within the towering warrior's chest. Only rarely did the warden of the Armorium deign to use his flesh-voice, and Uriel was savvy enough to know that the honour was not for him, but for the armour.

'Brother Amadon fell during the storming of the breach at Corinth, brought low by a barbarian greenskin warlord as he fought alongside our beloved Chapter Master.'

'Corinth,' said Uriel, unwilling to desecrate the echoing silence of the Armorium with anything above a whisper. 'The battle that took Ancient Galatan from us.'

'The same,' agreed the Master of the Forge, watching as Uriel circled the armour, feeling as though Brother Amadon's soul was speaking to him from across the gulf of centuries that separated them.

'It's magnificent,' breathed Uriel. 'I felt something similar on Salinas when I saw the armour belonging to the Sons of Guilliman, but this is so much more. It's as if… it needs me to wear it.'

'The heroic deeds of every warrior to wear a suit of armour adds to its legacy, Captain Ventris. Only when the souls of armour and bearer are in accord will each be able to achieve true greatness.'

Uriel smiled at the memory as he set the breastplate aside, satisfied that he had removed all evidence of the last few days in the field. He hung the breastplate back on the frame, and drew his sword from its battered and stained leather sheath. He supposed he could have requisitioned a new scabbard, but this was how his former captain had given the sword to him, and he was loath to change any aspect of the weapon that did not require it.

He lifted the sharpening block from his footlocker and worked it along the length of the blade, closing his eyes and feeling more alone than he could remember.

Sometimes, solitude was to be cherished, and many a warrior had found

illumination within one of the Chapter Solitoriums to be found in the furthest reaches of Macragge.

This was not one of those times.

Even before his elevation to captaincy of the 4th Company, Uriel had fought shoulder to shoulder with Pasanius, one of the finest sergeants to be found within the ranks of the Ultramarines. Together, they had faced down an ancient star god, defeated a tendril of the Great Devourer, and brought down a fell champion of the Ruinous Powers.

Pasanius was his oldest and dearest friend, a brother who stood at his side through all the battles and tribulations they had faced since their earliest years.

Now, even that was gone from him.

THE COMPLETION OF their Death Oath was, as it turned out, simply the first step on the road to rejoining the ranks of their illustrious Chapter. Their courage and loyalty were not in question, and never had been, but they had broken faith with the Codex Astartes, and had travelled to worlds polluted beyond redemption by the foul and corrupting touch of Chaos. Uriel had fought enough of the servants of the Ruinous Powers to know that a man might earnestly believe himself free of taint, and yet carry a hidden canker in the dark corners of his soul.

No sooner had the gates of the Fortress of Hera closed behind them, than a fifty-strong escort of warriors from the 1st Company had marched them directly to the Apothecarion.

Uriel and Pasanius had been subjected to punishing procedures designed to test the purity of their flesh and detect any abnormalities in their gene-stock. Every aspect of their physical makeup was examined with greater thoroughness than that endured by potential recruits, whose bodies were examined down to the cellular level for any latent weaknesses.

Such tests were gruelling and painful, and lasted many weeks, but both warriors endured them willingly.

Eventually, the Chapter's Apothecaries declared Uriel free of corruption, his flesh as pure as it had been on his induction to the Ultramarines over a hundred years ago.

Pasanius was less fortunate.

The veteran sergeant had lost the lower half of his arm on Pavonis in combat with a diabolical alien creature known as the Bringer of Darkness, though he had fought on as Uriel faced the creature down and forced it to flee. Adepts from Pavonis had replaced his missing limb with a bionic arm, which had proved

almost as effective as the one he had lost. Only later, when a greenskin warrior had smashed its monstrous blade into his forearm in the depths of a space hulk, had Pasanius realised the nature of the hideous change wrought upon him.

The silver-skinned Necrontyr warriors that served the Bringer of Darkness were fashioned from an alien form of metal that could spontaneously self-repair, undoing even the most catastrophic damage. By some dreadful transference, a measure of that power had passed into the augmetic arm grafted to Pasanius, enabling it to perform similarly impossible feats of metallic regeneration.

Ashamed, Pasanius had kept this secret from Uriel until his arm's miraculous power eventually came to light in the damned fortress of Khalan-Ghol, domain of the Warsmith Honsou. The surgeon creatures of Honsou had cut the arm from Pasanius for their dark master, taking the taint of the Necrontyr with it, but that did nothing to change the fact that Pasanius had lied to his captain - an infraction of the utmost seriousness.

Once declared free of physical taint, Uriel and Pasanius were transferred to the incense-wreathed Reclusiam, and the care of the Chapter's Chaplains. In the Temple of Correction they relived every moment of their ordeals since leaving Macragge before the magnificent, immobile form of Roboute Guilliman. Both warriors told of their adventures, time and time again, and every tiny detail was exhaustively picked apart and retold, until the guardians of the Chapter's sanctity were satisfied that they knew every detail of what had transpired during the fulfilment of the Death Oath.

Many aspects of Uriel's tale: the Faustian pact with the Omphalos Daemonium, the freeing of the Heart of Blood and the alliance with Ardaric Vaanes's renegades had raised damning eyebrows, and, though such devil's bargains were unwholesome, none doubted the noble intent of Uriel's motives in making them upon hearing the outcomes.

Uriel haltingly spoke to Chaplain Cassius of the Unfleshed, and of his failure to honour his oath to keep them safe and offer them a better life. Of all the tales Uriel told, the death of the Lord of the Unfleshed caused him the most pain. Though its eventual fate had been the only possible outcome to the creature's wretched, blighted life, the sadness of its ending had lodged in Llriel's heart and would never be forgotten.

Many aspects of their Death Oath were fantastical and beggared belief, but an Ultramarines truth was his life, and not even Uriel's detractors, Cato Sicarius of the 2nd Company being the most vocal, doubted his word or honesty. Despite this, Uriel and Pasanius had consented to truth-seekers from the Chapter's Librarius Division verifying every aspect of their odyssey at every stage of their testing.

Satisfied that their hearts were still those of warriors of courage and honour, the Chaplains sent Uriel and Pasanius onwards for the last, most crucial, stage of their testing.

THE LIBRARY OF Ptolemy was one of the marvels of Ultramar, a repository of knowledge that stretched back tens of thousands of years to a time when fact and certainty blurred into myth and fable. Legend told that it had been named for the first and mightiest of the Chapter's Librarians, and the breadth of knowledge contained within its sprawling depths was greater than the Agrippan Conclaves, more diverse than the Arcanium of Teleos and, it was said, contained practically every word crafted in all human history.

An entire spur of the mountain range upon which the Fortress of Hera was constructed was given over to the library. Its many wings, archives, colonnades and processionals formed a manmade peak of gleaming marble and granite to rival the highest mountains of Macragge.

The tops of soaring columns were lost in the deep shadows of the distant roof, and the floor of veined green marble gleamed like ice. Towering bookcases of steel and glass rose to unimaginable heights to either side of a central nave, each stacked with an impossible number of chained books, scrolls, info-wafers, maps, slates, data crystals and a thousand other means of information storage.

Graceful marble arches spanned the chasms between the mighty bookcases, forming separate wings and kilometres of stacks that required detailed maps or guide-skulls to navigate. Only the Chapter Librarians fully understood the layout of the library, and much of its twisting depths and dusty passageways had remained untrodden for centuries or more.

Wordless servitors clad in long cerulean robes ghosted through the echoing silence of the library, some on wheels, and some on telescoping legs that allowed them to reach the higher shelves, while other, more specialised retrieval drones floated on individual grav-plates. Servo-skulls trailing long parchments and carrying quills in clicking bronze callipers floated through the air, the glowing red orbs of their eyes like drifting fireflies in the sepulchral gloom.

Uriel had spent a great deal of time within the Library of Ptolemy in his years of service to the Ultramarines. Here, he had learned the legacy of his Chapter and its heroes as well as the broader scope of Imperial history and politics. However, the majority of his time had been spent memorising the tenets of his primarch's greatest work, the Codex Astartes.

Such thoroughness was at the heart of Astartes training. Though bred and equipped for war, a Space Marine was not simply a thoughtless killing machine

wrought from the bones of ancient science. His decades of training enabled him to become more than simply a warrior. Each Astartes embodied the finest qualities of humanity, courage, honour and a capacity to fight not simply because he was ordered to, but because he knew why.

Uriel's sandalled footsteps echoed on the floor, disturbing both the dust and the reverent silence that filled the library with a heavy quality all its own. Pasanius walked beside him, likewise stripped of his armour and dressed identically to Uriel in a chiton of deepest black that was secured around his waist by a belt of knotted rope.

These were the robes of the penitent, yet the knotted belt was that of an aspirant, signifying that their trials were almost at an end. The Apothecarion had decreed their bodies free from corruption, and the Chaplaincy had found their hearts to be pure.

The final decision as to whether their names would be entered once more into the honour rolls of the Ultramarines rested upon the shoulders of Marneus Calgar, and the Chapter Master's decision would be based on the word of his Chief Librarian.

The Arcanium was the heart of the library, its approaches guarded by silver-armoured warriors who bore long polearms with shimmering blades, and whose helmets were high hoods veined with psi-disruptive crystalline webs. None had challenged them as they approached, but Uriel was not surprised, for these guardians would already know of their purpose, and could divine any ill-intent.

The interior of the Arcanium was a twenty metre square cube with an arched doorway in each wall, softly lit by thick candles held aloft in iron sconces worked in the forms of eagles and lions rampant. Its walls were constructed from bare timbers, weathered and bleached, as though reclaimed from a distant shoreline, and the floor was made of dark slate. The character of the room was quite out of keeping with its surroundings, having the appearance of a far more ancient structure that had existed long before the arrival of the library.

A heavy table of dark wood filled the centre of the chamber. Upon this table were four enormous tomes, their spines a metre long and thick enough to enclose a book a third of a metre deep. Each book was secured to the table by a heavy chain of cold iron through the faded gold leaf edging of their leather bindings, and the pages were off-white vellum that had yellowed with the passage of millennia. Tightly wound script filled each page, each letter precisely formed and arranged in perfectly even lines of text.

Uriel took a deep breath at the sight of these books, letting the myriad aromas settle in the back of his throat and transport his mind back to the age of their creation. He tasted the tannic acid, ferrous sulphate and gum arabic of the ink,

the warmth of the hide used in the vellum and the chalk used to prepare the surface to accept the ink. But most of all, his senses conjured the image of the singular individual that had penned these mighty tomes, a god amongst men, and a figure to whom uncounted billions owed their lives.

These works of genius had lived in Uriel's dreams for decades during his training, but until now, he had only been allowed within the presence of copies.

'Is that what I think it is?' began Pasanius.

'I think so,' said Uriel, stepping towards the books with an outstretched hand.

Both men stared at the enormous books, too lost in their reverence for the instructional words that had guided the Ultramarines for ten thousand years to notice that the door behind them had shut and another had opened.

'I wouldn't touch that if I were you,' said a resonant voice. 'It would be a shame if the Arcanium's defences killed you before I could pass my recommendation to the Chapter Master.'

Uriel snatched his hand away from the book, and looked up into the hooded eyes of the Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines, who stood on the other side of the table, though neither he nor Pasanius had been aware of his arrival.

Varro Tigurius was an imposing figure, though he stood no taller than would Uriel were he clad in his armour. Rather, it was the depth of knowledge and immense stature his rank and power conferred upon him that made Tigurius so vast and terrible.

Uriel felt a tremor of fear down his spine at the sight of the Librarian, his heavily ornamented armour bedecked with wax seals and carved script-work. Wards and sigils of unknown origin spiralled around his gauntlets and across every facet of his battle plate. A set of bronze keys hung on a thick chain around his neck, and his skull-topped staff of office seemed to glitter as though fashioned from corposant made solid.

Tigurius's eyes were infinitely deep pools, bright and glittering with wry humour, though only the Librarian ever knew the source of that amusement. His pale skin and sunken cheeks gave his features a sharp, angular edge uncommon amongst the ranks of the Astartes.

The Chief Librarian stepped towards them, and Uriel felt his skin crawl at the nearness of the mighty warrior. Though Tigurius had fought with courage and honour for the Ultramarines for hundreds of years, and had saved the warriors of the 4th Company on the desolate heaths of Boros, he was no brother as other Space Marines were brothers.

His powers and wealth of hidden knowledge ensured that he remained an outsider, even within a Chapter of warriors bound by oaths of brotherhood stronger than adamantium. To some, Tigurius was little better than a warlock, a

wielder of powers more commonly ascribed to worshippers of unclean spirits or warp wyches, while to others, he was a warrior guided by the Emperor himself.

Tigurius's prescient warnings had saved the Ultramarines from destruction at the claws of hive fleet Behemoth, had predicted the approaching war fleet of Warmaster Nidar, and had sent Uriel and Pasanius to Medrengard.

As much as Uriel honoured the might, power and rank of Tigurius, he had been through too much, due to this warrior's visions, to ever truly like him.

'Centuries of wisdom are contained within these hallowed pages,' said Tigurius, circling the table, and turning a page of the nearest tome without touching it. 'Our beloved primarch wrote much of its earliest passages here as a boy. Did you know that?'

'No,' said Uriel, surprised that he did not, for every warrior of the Ultramarines studied the history of the Chapter's gene-father, memorising his life, his battles and his teachings as part of his intensive training on the road to becoming a Space Marine.

'Few do,' said Tigurius. 'It is a small part of the primarch's story, and not one I am keen to promulgate, for I enjoy the solitude of this place and do not wish it to become a lodestone for pilgrims. Could you imagine this place with thousands traipsing through it like the Temple of Correction?'

Uriel shook his head, and glanced over at Pasanius. His friend was similarly close-mouthed, the sergeant's innate understanding of when to speak and when to shut up allowing Uriel to do the talking.

'I think it would be crowded,' said Uriel.

'Crowded, yes,' agreed Tigurius, as though the idea had only just occurred to him. 'As a youth, the primarch would come here with his books to read when he wished to escape the politicking of Macragge City. Hundreds of kilometres from the nearest settlement and higher than any man had climbed upon Hera's Peak, it was the perfect place to find peace. It still is, and I intend to keep it that way.'

'Then why summon us here?' asked Uriel, surprised at the tone of his question, which bordered on the disrespectful.

'Why do you think?' countered Tigurius.

'I don't know.'

'Then think harder,' snapped the Chief Librarian. 'You are a warrior with a modicum of intelligence, Captain Ventris. I expect more from you.'

'Because of these,' suggested Uriel, pointing towards the enormous books.

'Just so,' agreed Tigurius. 'The Codex Astartes. Tell me, what do they represent?'

Uriel looked down at the books, feeling humbled and awed once again that he was in the presence of artefacts touched by the hand of Roboute Guilliman.

'They are what makes us who we are?' ventured Uriel.

'Why?'

'Why what?' asked Uriel.

Tigurius sighed. 'Why does the Codex Astartes make us who we are? After all, it is just a book is it not? What makes it different to any other text penned over the millennia?'

In that sigh, Uriel understood with sudden clarity that his fate was hanging in the balance.

The instinctive, marrow-deep, detachment most warriors felt from Tigurius as a brother was blinding Uriel to that stark fact, and he forced down his impatience at the Librarian's obtuse nature. If he failed to convince Tigurius that he and Pasanius were worthy of reinstatement, then their lives were forfeit, with only the prospect of execution at Gallan's Rock awaiting them.

He stared down at the volumes of the Codex Astartes, letting the honour of standing in their presence flow through him. He had memorised entire tracts of his primarch's works, an amount of knowledge beyond even the most gifted of mortal savants, but even that was but the smallest fraction of knowledge contained within their pages, for no one without the magnificent cognitive faculties of one of the Emperor's lost sons could ever hope to memorise its entirety.

'It is more than just a book,' said Uriel. 'Its teachings were the building blocks that laid the foundations for the Imperium in the wake of the Great Heresy. Its words were the glue that held the forces loyal to the Emperor together when the rebels were defeated.'

'Good,' said Tigurius, nodding eagerly, 'and what does it teach us, the Ultramarines?'

'It sets out the tenets by which a Chapter should be organised,' said Uriel. 'Before the Heresy, the Legions were autonomous fighting formations, equipped with their own ships, manufacturing capabilities and command authority. The Codex broke that up and set out how the Space Marines should be organised so that no one man could ever hold such power again.'

'A Space Marine learns that on his first day within the walls of his Chapter House,' spat Tigurius. 'A novice could tell me that. That is what the Codex is, but I want you to tell me what it means, what it means to you, right here, right now.'

Uriel struggled to imagine what the venerable Librarian wanted to hear, thinking back to the times he had fought with the Codex as his guide, the times its teachings had saved his life and the terrible, aching absence torn in his heart when he had forsaken it.

'Think, Uriel,' hissed Tigurius, his eyes seeming to flicker with hidden fires.

'To be in the same room as these relics of a time long gone is to be standing in the presence of history itself. Through these works, a man can reach back to a time when gods of war walked amongst men, and the founder of our Chapter led the Ultramarines in battle.'

'It is the keystone of what makes the Space Marines so formidable,' said Uriel with sudden clarity. 'Without it, we are nothing but gene-bred killers.'

'Go on,' said Tigurius.

'Without the Codex Astartes, the Imperium wouldn't have survived the aftermath of the Great Heresy. It binds every one of the thousand Chapters of Space Marines together, and gives us a common cause, a connection to the past and to one another. Every Chapter, whether they acknowledge it or not, owes its very existence to the Codex Astartes.'

'Exactly,' said Tigurius. 'It is living history, a tangible link to everything we are.'

'And that's why you summoned us here,' said Pasanius. 'To know where we come from is to know who we are and where we are going.'

Tigurius laughed. 'You do not say much, Pasanius Lysane, but when you speak it is worthwhile to listen.'

'I'm a sergeant, my lord,' said Pasanius. 'It's what I do.'

Tigurius turned another page of the Codex without touching it, and said, 'This mighty work, this legendary connection to our past and our brothers, guides us in all things, yet on Tarsis Ultra you saw fit to disregard its teachings. You broke faith with what makes us Ultramarines, and left your warriors to fight without you while you took command of the Deathwatch and flew into the heart of a tyranid bio-ship. Was that arrogance or merely hubris?'

'It was neither, my lord,' said Uriel. 'It was necessary.'

'Necessary? Why?'

'The Deathwatch commander, Captain Bannon, was dead, and his squad needed a leader.'

'Any one of Bannon's warriors could have taken command. Why did it have to be you? What makes you so special?'

'I fought with the Deathwatch before,' said Uriel.

'Could the mission have succeeded without you?'

Uriel shrugged, looking over at Pasanius.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Maybe. I know I should have stayed with my company, but we succeeded. Does that count for nothing?'

'Of course it counts,' stated Tigurius with solemn finality. 'Yes, you saved Tarsis Ultra, but at what cost?'

'Cost?' asked Uriel. 'I don't understand.'

'Then tell me of Ardaric Vaanes.'

'Vaanes?' asked Uriel, surprised to hear Tigurius mention the renegade warrior of the Raven Guard. 'What of him? I am sure you have read the transcripts from the Reclusiam. You must have heard everything about him by now.'

'True,' said Tigurius, 'but I want to hear it again. What did you offer him on Medrengard?'

'A chance to regain his honour,' said Uriel, 'but he did not take it.'

'And what became of him?'

'I do not know,' said Uriel. 'I imagine he is dead.'

'Dead,' repeated Tigurius. 'And what did you learn from him?'

'Learn from him? Nothing,' said Uriel, tiring of Tigurius constantly meeting his answers with further questions.

'Are you sure?' asked Tigurius. 'If not from his words, then by his poor example.'

Uriel thought back to Medrengard, though the memories were painful and unpleasant. The renegade Space Marines he and Pasanius fought alongside had, for a brief, shining moment, embraced their cause and journeyed into the heart of the Iron Warriors' citadel. But Ardaric Vaanes had, in the end, forsaken them, and left them to their fate.

Suddenly, it was clear to Uriel.

'Vaanes's fate could have been my fate,' he said, with the growing confidence of epiphany. 'He let ego blind him to his duty and shared brotherhood. He believed he knew better than the teachings of his Chapter.'

'Ardaric Vaanes is a classic example of a fate that can overcome even the best of us if we are not vigilant,' said Tigurius, and Uriel heard the warning in the Librarian's tone. 'Every one of us constructs self-enhancing images of ourselves that make us feel special, never ordinary, and always of greater stature than we are. This is at the core of what makes a Space Marine such a fearsome opponent, the complete and utter belief in his ability to achieve victory no matter the odds against him. It boosts his courage, his self-esteem, and protects him from the psychological tribulations of being surrounded by death and forever immersed in battle. After all, every one of us thinks we are better than the average. Isn't that so?'

Uriel nodded, though the admission was uncomfortable. 'Perhaps I once thought like that.'

'I know I did,' admitted Pasanius sourly. 'There wasn't a task I delegated that I didn't feel I'd have done better.'

'As much as they help us, these egocentric biases can be maladaptive,' said Tigurius, 'blinding us to our failings and obscuring the awful truth that people

exactly like us behave just as badly in certain evil situations. You assume that other people will fall to their vices, but not you, and do not armour your soul against temptations, believing that nothing bad can affect you, even when you know how easily it can happen.'

Tigurius placed an open palm on the table, and bade Uriel and Pasanius approach.

'When you were an aspirant and you learned of the Great Heresy against the Emperor, I imagine you concluded that you would not do what the forces of the Warmaster had done. You shook your head and wondered how anyone could have travelled such a road. Am I right?'

Uriel nodded as Tigurius continued. 'Of course. I am sure you felt you simply could not have done what they did, but experience has shown that to be a lie, you can do such things. That belief is what makes us all vulnerable to such temptations, precisely because we think ourselves immune to them. Only when we recognise that every one of us is subject to forces beyond our control does humility take precedence over unfounded pride, and we can acknowledge our potential to tread the path of evil and engage in shameful acts. Tell me what that teaches you, Uriel.'

'That in the right circumstances, any one of us can fall.'

'Or the wrong circumstances,' added Pasanius.

'I fell once, because I believed I couldn't,' said Uriel, 'but on Medrengard I saw where that path ultimately leads: degradation and damnation.'

'Is that a fate you wish for?'

'No,' said Uriel with utter finality, 'absolutely not.'

'Then you have learned something of value,' said Tigurius.

FOUR

IMPERIAL COMMANDER AND System Governor of Pavonis, Koudelkar Shonai was not, at first, an impressive sight, with his soggy physique, weak chin and receding hairline. A warrior he was not, though, as Lortuen Perjed had come to learn in the last year, his appearance was deceptive and there was a clever mind and hard heart concealed behind Koudelkar's unimposing appearance.

The second of two sons, it had been Koudelkar's brother, Dumak, who had been widely tipped to succeed Mykola Shonai as the next governor of Pavonis. However, Dumak had been slain by an assassin's bullet during one of the many worker riots in the days before Virgil de Valtos's attempted coup. In the wake of that rebellion, when Mykola Shonai's term of office was approaching its end, Lortuen had had swiftly groomed Koudelkar to take his aunt's place.

It was a far from ideal situation, but as the senior adept of the Administratum on Pavonis, Lortuen had made the best of what was left to him. Most of the cartels were tainted with affiliations to traitors, and his masters had only accepted the scions of the Shonai as candidates for the role of Imperial Commander once they had agreed with his recommendation that no outsider be appointed to the position.

It was a recommendation that Lortuen had come to regret many times, but his former master had been fond of saying that regrets were like weights; they were only a burden if you held on to them. Ario Barzano, Inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos, had been full of such aphorisms, but he had died at the hands of a malevolent eldar warrior beneath the northern mountains, depriving Lortuen of a thoughtful master and trusted friend.

Since then, it had been a thankless task to restrain the policies of the young Shonai governor, whose idea of careful reconstruction was to aggressively pursue trade links with off-world conglomerates and merchant houses. With little infrastructure left in place, the planet's economy was fragile at best, but Koudelkar was not a man given to timidity, and the newly reconstructed palace was forever host to delegations from nearby systems, each seeking exclusive trading rights with Pavonis.

It made for a heady, cosmopolitan atmosphere and had certainly brought revenue to Pavonis. None of which would be a problem were Lortuen not tasked with keeping track of the young governor's comings and goings. Appointed permanent Administratum observer to Pavonis after the rebellion, Lortuen was

finding this assignment almost as exhausting as travelling the stars in service to an Imperial Inquisitor.

Lortuen Perjed was not a young man anymore, his body aged well past the time when juvenat work would have done him any good. His mind was as sharp as ever, but his wrinkled flesh was liver-spotted, and even a brisk walk with his ivory-topped cane would tire him out. Had there been any justice, he would have been allowed to spend the rest of his days sequestered in some distant library with nothing but the study of dusty books and quiet contemplation to occupy his time.

Lortuen closed his eyes and smiled at the prospect, but the sound of angry voices brought him back to reality with a jolt. He opened his eyes and swept his gaze around the governor's expansive meeting chamber.

He sighed, realising that his dream of a quiet retirement was an ever more distant prospect.

The Senate Chamber of Righteous Commerce was the heart of Pavonis's traditional governorship, but with the dismantling of the cartels' power it had fallen into disuse. In lieu of a formal debating chamber, Koudelkar Shonai had constructed a long, glass-panelled atrium in the heart of the Imperial palace from which to conduct his gubernatorial duties.

Though open to the skies, thanks to rotating louvres in the curved roof, mast-borne voids secured the room from attack and wall-mounted vox-dampers prevented eavesdropping. Two gene-bulked skitarii in archaic-looking breastplates, hung with fetishes and carved with binaric oaths, provided more immediate protection for the governor.

The skitarii had been a gift from High Magos Roxza Vaal, the highest-ranking Mechanicus adept of the Diacrian Belt, for the swift restoration of machine imports to the refinery belt of the south-east.

Their swollen, bio-mechanical bodies and weapon implants were capable of immense violence, harking back to a barbarous age of gladiatorial combats, and truth be told, they scared Lortuen more than the Space Marines. You knew where you stood with the Adeptus Astartes, but these cybernetic monstrosities were a law unto themselves. Both were heavily scarred and tattooed, looking more like deep-sump hive-world gangers than guards appropriate for a Planetary Governor.

A long, reflective table of polished wood from the fused remains of the Gresha Forest filled the centre of the room, and brass cogitators softly chattered along the entire length of one wall, with ticker-tape data-streams of the sector markets fluctuations, raw material prices and system currencies.

Liveried servants, for Koudelkar would not consider something as prosaic as servitors when there were men standing idle, stood holding silver ewers of wine

with their heads bowed at the mirrored doors, ready to respond to their master's dictates.

The meeting, requested by Lord Winterbourne of the 44th Lavrentians, started poorly when Clericus Fabricae Gaetan Baltazar pre-empted the order of business by immediately demanding that Governor Koudelkar have Prelate Culla arrested, or, at the very least, prevented from spreading his fiery rhetoric through the streets of Brandon Gate. As highest-ranking representative of the Adeptus Ministorum on Pavonis, Baltazar objected to the stirring up of the populace at a time when unity and rebuilding were the order of the day.

Lord Winterbourne responded with a scathing remark concerning the insipid nature of the preachers within the walls of the Templum Fabricae, who seemed more inclined to preach a doctrine of introspection and quiet industry than the persecution of the Emperor's enemies.

Lortuen sat to the right of Governor Koudelkar, who seemed content to let the two men vent their frustrations. Heated words passed back and forth between the Lavrentian colonel and the Clericus Fabricae, but Lortuen let the words wash over him as he accessed his augmetic memory coils to consult the data he held on the various luminaries attending the governor.

The senior Imperial Guard commanders sat to the governor's left, formally clad in full dress uniforms, gleaming plumed helmets and scarlet capes. Lord Winterbourne had the lean, pinched look of a man used to campaigning, and Major Ornella faithfully transcribed the furious words passing between her colonel and the Ministorum priest.

Across the table from Winterbourne, and on Lortuen's right, sat Colonel Loic, commander of the Brandon Gate PDF, who in deference to his commander in chief had come unarmed. Loic observed the argument with grim stoicism, and Lortuen knew that behind the purely political appointment, Adren Loic was a dependable, if unimaginative, soldier. Which, he recalled, accounted for his selection to the post.

The ochre-robed Gaetan Baltazar sat beside Loic, resplendent in his chasuble and tall, gilded mitre. As he argued with Lord Winterbourne, Baltazar constantly worked prayer beads between his fingers.

Beside the Ministorum priest, Jenna Sharben of the Brandon Gate enforcers sat with her hands clasped tightly before her. Lortuen liked Sharben. She had been Ario's guide in the days when he had been investigating the cartels, and had proved to be a resourceful, determined woman. It had been Lortuen's directive that had seen her begin the establishment of a new cadre of enforcers, and, looking at the sunken hollows beneath her eyes, he saw the strain that role was placing on her.

As important and impressive as these individuals were, they were nothing compared to the dominating presence of the three Space Marines, who sat at the end of the table. Captain Uriel Ventris, a sergeant named Learchus, and a brutish warrior in gleaming black armour filled the room with their armoured bulk. The third warrior's helmet was worked in the form of a grinning skull, and his bellicose body language spoke volumes of his impatience and desire to be elsewhere.

Lortuen had met Uriel and Learchus before, though the other warrior was unknown to him. As pleased as he was to see Captain Ventris, Lortuen was surprised at the change he saw in him.

In Lortuen's time with Inquisitor Barzano, they had cause to fight alongside several Space Marines, many of whom had become staunch allies over the years. One facet that always amazed Lortuen was the apparent unchanging physicality of Space Marines. Though decades might pass between meetings, the genetic superiority of the Adeptus Astartes rendered them functionally ageless to the perceptions of most humans. Not so Uriel Ventris, who now carried hard-won wisdom in his eyes that spoke of horrors endured and lessons learned in blood.

Lortuen knew that look; he had seen it in his master's eyes in the months before his death.

Eventually, the argument between Winterbourne and Baltazar ended when Koudelkar slammed his palm down on the table.

'Enough!' snapped Koudelkar. 'Your prattle is hurting my ears. I have better things to do with my time than listen to you two argue.'

Gaetan Baltazar looked set to answer the governor's outburst with one of his own, but wisely kept his counsel, and simply nodded his head. Lord Winterbourne, clearly not used to anyone coming between him and a good argument, also bit his lip, and laced his hands together before him.

'Thank you,' said Koudelkar, his tone more even and placating. 'We are reasonable men, are we not? I am sure that between you, this issue can be resolved. After all, we each wish for a secure, stable world where trade can flourish and the teachings of the Imperial Creed are heard by all.'

'Of course,' said Baltazar, 'but all this predicant Culla preaches is hatred. He forgets the guidance and protection the Emperor represents. He fans the flames of fear, and that is not conducive to the stability you crave, my lord.'

'Culla is a scrapper, and a damn fine one too,' said Winterbourne. 'I've seen him go toe to toe with greenskins, come out on top, covered in blood, and then go back for more. We're out on the Eastern Fringe, Baltazar, and in case you hadn't noticed, we're a long way from Terra. The only protection we can rely on are our guns, tanks and swords.'

'Heresy!' spat Baltazar. 'The Emperor protects! A soldier like you should appreciate that.'

'Oh, be quiet, man,' said Winterbourne. 'The Emperor indeed protects, but I don't expect Him to do it all for me. What you need is a good—'

'Be silent!' barked the black-armoured Space Marine. His voice was deep and authoritative, a voice used to giving orders and having them obeyed without question. 'Did you not hear your commander? You should be ashamed of yourselves, arguing petty points of jurisdiction when you are gathered to discuss a deadly threat to your world. Captain Ventris?'

The gathering was suddenly cowed, the skull-faced warrior's outburst silencing them all in an instant. Uriel Ventris nodded his thanks to the warrior and rose to his full height, which towered over the gathered officials, and even the two skitarii.

Uriel folded his arms across his wide chest. 'Chaplain Clausel speaks bluntly, but he is right to do so.'

'A deadly threat?' demanded Koudelkar, leaning forwards and steepling his hands before him on the table. 'To what does your comrade refer?'

'There is a xenos presence on Pavonis, Governor Koudelkar,' said Uriel. 'Yet your senior officials argue and bicker while an enemy plans routes of invasion through your lands.'

Lortuen's eyes widened at Uriel's statement, shocked that such a threat had only now come to light.

'Are you sure?' he asked. 'We have seen nothing to suggest such a thing.'

'Adept Perjed,' said Uriel with a nod of respect, and Lortuen was a clever enough orator to recognise that Uriel was pausing to gather his thoughts in the face of uncertain facts. 'We ambushed a forward reconnaissance unit of tau Pathfinders in the Owsen Hills recently. It is my belief that these aliens were scouting routes towards Brandon Gate, possibly for a larger force to advance along.'

'Saints preserve us,' gasped Gaetan Baltazar, turning to the governor. 'We must mobilise all reserve units of the PDF, and deploy the 44th immediately!'

Koudelkar held up a hand and took a deep breath before answering the dismayed Clericus Fabricae. 'Calm yourself, Baltazar. A full deployment of our armed forces would achieve little save to cause panic.'

'If we are under attack, then—'

'Do we appear to be under attack?' snapped Koudelkar, rapping his fingertips on the smooth surface of the table. 'If what Captain Ventris says is true, and these are merely scouts, then we have some time to formulate an appropriate response.'

'An appropriate response would be to authorise a deployment of the 44th and

to raise your alert level,' said Winterbourne. 'Then activate the Secondary and Tertiary Reserves.'

Koudelkar shook his head. 'These are delicate times for Pavonis, Lord Winterbourne. I do not expect a fighting man like yourself to understand the subtleties of planetary rule, but I am engaged in complex negotiations with several powerful subsector trading conglomerates to assure this planet's future prosperity. It would seriously jeopardise, if not utterly wreck, those negotiations were we to suddenly turn our world into an armed camp on the strength of one encounter with some easily bested aliens.'

Lord Winterbourne bristled at Koudelkar's words, his spare frame shaking with anger.

Uriel saw that anger and said, 'Governor Koudelkar, it would be a mistake to underestimate the tau. Their technology is highly advanced, and their warriors are skilful enemies.'

'So I have heard, but I notice that you choose words that suggest you are not certain of your conclusion, Captain Ventris,' said Koudelkar. 'Aside from the presence of this one unit of aliens, what proof do you have of your suspicions?'

'Nothing concrete,' said Uriel, 'but where Pathfinders are found, others are sure to follow.'

'But you have seen no sign of any others?'

'That is correct,' admitted Uriel.

'Lord Winterbourne? Colonel Loic?' asked Lortuen, 'Have either of your forces discovered any sign of these aliens?'

'We have not,' said Loic crisply. 'My long-range patrols have seen neither hide nor hair of any alien presence.'

'Nor have mine,' said Winterbourne, in control of his anger now, 'but, my lord governor, I am inclined to agree with Captain Ventris. His Chapter has experience in fighting the tau, and if he believes there are alien forces on Pavonis, then I concur that we should prepare for battle.'

'If the threat becomes credible, we will act upon it, I assure you,' said Koudelkar.

'What will it take for it to become credible?' demanded Chaplain Clausel, and even Koudelkar flinched from his razor tone. 'A tau honour blade opening your throat? An enemy battle flag planted atop the palace?

The governor composed himself in the face of the Chaplain's anger, and squared his shoulders. 'Would I be correct in assuming you killed all the tau you encountered?' he asked.

'No, there was one survivor,' said Uriel. 'We transferred her to the custody of Judge Sharben's enforcers at the Brandon Gate Correctional Facility.'

Koudelkar turned his attention to Jenna Sharben. 'And has this prisoner furnished us with any actionable intelligence or the location of any others of its kind?'

Sharben shook her head. 'No, my lord. The xenolexicon servitor has enabled us to communicate with the alien, but it has so far refused to give us anything beyond its name, rank and designation.'

'Then you must be more forceful in your questioning, Judge Sharben,' said Koudelkar, staring hard at Sharben. 'Find out what it knows, and do it quickly. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, my lord,' said Sharben with a curt nod.

'Are you going to mobilise our armed forces?' pressed Adren Loic. 'Given the Administratum restrictions we are under, any order to take up arms must come from the Imperial Commander and be ratified by the Administratum.'

This last, barbed, comment was directed squarely at Lortuen, and he smiled benignly.

'You sound entirely too eager for war, Colonel Loic,' said Lortuen. 'I assume you remember that those restrictions were put in place to ensure there is no repetition of the de Valtos incident.'

'De Valtos was a madman,' barked Loic. 'This is completely different.'

'Maybe so,' said Lortuen, 'but I will only ratify any deployment order if further indications of xenos presence come to light, or if Judge Sharben informs us that the tau prisoner has furnished useful information. Governor Koudelkar is entirely correct not to risk this planet's recovery and future prosperity on a suspicion unsupported by evidence.'

Uriel leaned over the table, his brow thunderous at what he would no doubt be seeing as a betrayal by a former ally. 'My warriors are not subject to the authority of the Administratum, Adept Perjed. Therefore I respectfully inform you, Governor Koudelkar, that the Ultramarines shall be assuming a war footing. I urge the armed forces of Pavonis to do likewise before it is too late.'

'Duly noted,' said Koudelkar, rising to his feet and ending the audience. 'We will reconvene in a week to discuss any further developments, but until then there will be no overt military operations beyond current deployments.'

Flanked by his towering skitarii, Koudelkar made his way from the audience chamber. As the chamber's door slid open, he turned to address the room.

'Now, if you will excuse me, gentlemen, I am late for an appointment with my aunt, and those of you acquainted with her will know that Mykola Shonai is not a woman who likes to be kept waiting.'

URIEL SAT ON a marble bench in the gardens of the Imperial palace. Its surface was worn and pitted, and he remembered the last time he had sat here. Nothing much had changed, which, having met Koudelkar Shonai, surprised him, since the new governor seemed like a man not given to sentiment. The grass was freshly cut and the flowers of the garden well cared for, the scent of their blossoms providing pleasant counterpoint to the ubiquitous, burnt metal aroma of Brandon Gate's industry.

A high wall enclosed the garden, one of the few areas of the palace to have escaped extensive damage during the rebellion, and Uriel felt more at peace than he had in a long time. This was where his last expedition to Pavonis had ended, sitting before the grave of Ario Barzano, a brave man who had died to save it from a madman's nightmarish plot.

The simple headstone in front of Uriel was a plain oblong of pale stone quarried from Tembra ridge, the words carved by Uriel's own hand:

Each man is a spark in the darkness. Would that we all burn as bright.

Barzano had been a garrulous, charismatic individual, but also a dangerous one. His word and Inquisitorial authority might have seen this world destroyed, but he had been willing to take a chance to save it, and for that reason alone deserved Uriel's respect.

'I never thought I would return,' said Uriel, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, 'but it seems appropriate that we talk here, don't you think?'

'Indeed it does, Captain Ventris,' said Lortuen Perjed, appearing from an arbour behind Uriel. 'How long have you known I was there?'

'Since you entered the garden. Your cane and stoop give you a distinctive sound when you walk, adept.'

Lortuen awkwardly lowered himself to sit beside Uriel.

'I suspected I might find you here.'

Uriel shrugged. 'It seemed like the right thing to do.'

'It was.'

'You keep the garden well-tended.'

'It seemed the right thing to do,' replied Lortuen with a smile. 'After all, this world owes its survival to Ario, and to you.'

Uriel said nothing and studied Lortuen Perjed more closely, shocked by how different he appeared from the last time he had come to Pavonis. Adept Perjed had been old then, but now he seemed little more than a breath away from his grave. His skin was mottled and leathery, his hair ghostly wisps of silver clinging to his skull, and Uriel could clearly see the dull gleam of his savant augmetics behind his ear.

'You look much older than when last we were here,' said Uriel.

'These have been trying times since you left, Captain Ventris,' said Lortuen. 'The rebuilding of a planet so recently in rebellion is… exhausting work. While we're on the subject, I could say the same for you. I didn't think Space Marines aged, but time has caught up to you. I mean no offence.'

'None taken,' said Uriel. 'We age, but at a much slower rate than mortals.'

'So what happened to change you so much?'

'Things I would prefer not to talk about.'

'Ah, fair enough. I apologise for prying,' said Lortuen, resting his hands on the ivory pommel of his cane. They sat in companionable silence for a few moments before Lortuen said, 'So what do you make of Governor Koudelkar?'

Uriel looked away, clasping his hands and staring hard at Barzano's grave before answering.

'I think he is being naive, and governorship of a world on the Eastern Fringe is no place for naivety,' said Uriel. 'The tau are on Pavonis right now, and we must act expeditiously to stop them, or more lives will be lost when Koudelkar finally wakes up to the fact that the tau empire does not scout worlds without purpose.'

'You may be right, Uriel, but we are trying to rebuild this world. We are on the verge of securing a number of lucrative contracts with nearby systems. To jeopardise that would condemn Pavonis to ruin and its people to poverty for centuries to come.'

'To do nothing will condemn them to slavery,' pointed out Uriel.

'If you are right,' countered Lortuen. 'You must admit that you have not given us more than a vague suspicion that the tau plan anything immediate. Koudelkar is a businessman, and he is thinking of the future of his world.'

'Wrong,' said Uriel, rounding on Lortuen. 'He is an Imperial governor of a world of the Emperor, and he should be thinking of the danger facing his world right now.'

Uriel pointed at the gravestone and said, 'Do you think Ario would have hesitated to act? Imagine he were here right now. What would he do?'

'Ario was always one for spur of the moment decisions,' said Lortuen. 'I, on the other hand, am more considered in my deliberations. I believe we must proceed with caution, but I will meet you halfway, Uriel. I will issue readiness orders for the Secondary Reserve of the PDF.'

'And the 44th?'

'For now, their orders remain the same,' said Lortuen, pushing himself to his feet with the help of his cane. 'Foot patrols only and garrison duty. No active deployments. I do not wish to cause panic in the streets of our cities.'

'I'm sure the sight of a tau hunter cadre will do that for you,' said Uriel.

A HUNDRED KILOMETRES north of Brandon Gate, high upon Tembra Ridge and far above the cloud layer where the air was thin, the Kaliz Array spread itself over the tallest peaks on Pavonis, like a vast forest of pollarded trees constructed of latticework steel. The array was a jagged spine often thousand vox-masts, none less than five hundred metres high, secured by wire-wound guys anchored deep into the rock of the mountain.

It allowed long-range vox-units to function, gathering, relaying and transmitting communications traffic across the surface of the planet.

Such was its power that even interplanetary communication was facilitated, albeit with a significant time lag.

The Kaliz Array had been constructed by the Vergen cartel nearly eight centuries ago, and its structures were sheened with verdigris and required constant maintenance. The hundred adepts, techs, maintenance workers and servitors tasked with keeping the array functional were housed at Mechanicus Station Epsilon in a collection of boxy structures huddled together in the lee of a sheer cliff far below the swaying masts.

Topped with leisurely rotating dish antennas and sheltered from the worst of the biting winds, the structures were nevertheless draughty, damp and cold. Even in such uncertain times, where money and employment were scarce, rumours of brain malignancies caused by vox radiation and the inhospitable conditions ensured that only the very desperate volunteered for duty at the Kaliz Array.

Workers stationed here did their best to stay indoors at all times, but as a particularly fierce squall blew in from the north, a trio of dejected figures made their way towards a malfunctioning series of masts in a region known simply as Deep Canyon Six.

Third Technician Diman Shorr pulled his glossy slicker tightly around himself and cursed the names of everyone he knew back at Epsilon who'd managed to dodge this duty. He'd reached thirty names when Gerran tugged at his sleeve to let him know they'd finally arrived at the end of the Deep Canyon Six chain.

The mountain paths were lined with steel posts connected by jangling chains, which were notched with angular markings that allowed a tech to find his way around without the aid of a map or the need to remove his helmet. Such chain paths allowed maintenance workers to navigate the myriad routes that twisted and curved through the array without getting hopelessly lost.

Hissing rain, solid enough to almost be considered hail, battered him, and crazed the visor of his helmet in streaming patterns of dirty water as he looked into the stepped gully that wound down into the canyon. Rainwater poured down its length in a tumbling waterfall, and they were going to have to be careful not to slip and break a leg. Getting med-evac out here would be next to impossible.

His hood billowed, and the icy wind bit into his body like a scavenger worrying a bone, threatening to toss him back down the slopes they'd spent most of the day climbing. His foul-weather slicker was old and thin, and he was tired, cold and wet through. He couldn't afford to replace the slicker, and the adepts of the Machine-God seemed disinclined to care overmuch for their techs by issuing heavy-duty ones.

For the better part of ten hours, he and Gerran had slogged along the chain paths through the wind and rain from the Mechanicus Station towards Deep Canyon Six in the company of a silent pack servitor with an elongated spine, gene-bulked shoulders and a simian posture that enabled it to carry huge loads across rugged, mountainous terrain unsuitable for vehicles. The servitor carried all their food and water, as well as basic medicae kit, ropes, an all-weather vox and a pair of battered lascarbines.

'My bones are getting too old for this,' he muttered, stepping into the torrent of icy water pouring down the gully. The breath hissed from his mouth at the jolt of freezing cold.

'Did you say something?' asked Gerran, and Diman knew he'd forgotten to switch off the inter-helmet vox.

'Nothing,' he said. 'It doesn't matter. Come on, let's see what the hell's wrong with these damned masts. See if it's something that needs an adept to repair. Sooner we're back inside the better. I don't want to die of exposure out here.'

'How come we had to do this anyway?' grumbled Gerran. 'I just finished an inspection shift over on Topper's Ridge.'

'Because we're just lucky, I guess,' replied Diman, carefully picking his route downwards.

'Lucky?' asked Gerran, missing Diman's sarcasm. 'Don't feel lucky to me. I tell you, Adept Ithurn has it in for me. She knew I'd just come off a shift and she still sends me out. It ain't fair, it just ain't.'

'Well you can always quit,' said Diman, weary of the younger man's carping. Things were miserable enough without him making it worse. 'Plenty of others be willing to step into your boots. You ought to be thankful you was part of the Shonai before the fighting. Only reason you were able to keep working for the Mechanicus.'

'Yeah, well, I might just do that,' said Gerran.

Diman was about to tell Gerran not to be so foolish, but he looked through the driving rain and saw a faint glow coming from the bottom of the gully.

'Damn it all,' he hissed. 'Looks like Ithurn's already sent a crew out to fix the masts. Bloody woman doesn't know one end of a work order from the next.'

Diman let Gerran squeeze past him, and waved the pack-servitor over, the

lumbering beast oblivious to the heavy rain and freezing temperatures. He rummaged in one of the panniers for the battered vox, and extended its aerial, though it was doubtful the reception would be up to much in the narrow gully. A hissing burp of static issued from the speakers, and Diman turned the volume way up to try and pick out anything resembling a Mechanicus signal.

'Typical,' he said, when all he was rewarded with was white noise. 'A thousand vox masts and I can't get nothing. Bloody thing needs junking, not a blessing.'

'Diman?' said Gerran, and he turned to see the younger man standing at the mouth of the gully, illuminated by the faint glow he'd seen earlier. 'You're gonna want to come see this.'

'What is it?' he asked. 'Another work crew?'

Gerran shook his head, and Diman sighed, turning the vox off and stowing it back in the servitor's panniers, before descending the last steps to the end of the gully and the entrance to Deep Canyon Six.

The planed rock floor stretched out for hundreds of metres in all directions, rising to steep cliffs on either side of a dark valley filled with humming generators and silver steel vox-masts. A hundred or so filled the canyon, but it wasn't the masts that caught Diman's attention.

It was the group of alien soldiers.

'I don't think that's another work crew,' said Gerran.

FIVE

THERE WERE ABOUT forty of them, a mix of armoured soldiers in olive-coloured plates of armour with long, rectangular-barrelled weapons, and others dressed in the heavy-duty coveralls of engineers or labourers. A pack of fierce-looking creatures with wiry physiques and glossy pink skin stood apart from the soldiers. Flexing crests of spines sprouted from the backs of their beaked skulls, and they carried long rifles that looked almost primitive.

The glow Diman had seen from the gully shone from a handful of flattened discs hovering above the aliens, but he was more concerned by the boxy devices the alien engineers were carefully wiring between the generator relays.

A trio of vehicles with curving sides and enormous engine nacelles hovered behind the group, blurring the air, and turning the rainwater to hissing spray with anti-grav fields. The soldiers were helmeted, but the flat, grey and utterly alien faces of the engineers were clearly visible. They worked with swift precision, and Diman saw that whatever they were doing, they were almost finished.

None of the aliens had noticed them. The warriors were too intent on the progress of the engineers and the heavy rain helped to obscure the two Mechanicus techs, but such luck couldn't hold forever.

Diman immediately recognised the significance of what this act of sabotage could mean to Pavonis, and began backing slowly towards the pack servitor and the all-weather vox.

'Come on,' hissed Diman, 'we need to get out of here.'

Gerran stood, open-mouthed, at the entrance to Deep Canyon Six, transfixed by the sight of the aliens.

'What are they,' he asked, 'and what are they doing?'

'I don't know, but it's sabotage of some kind,' replied Diman urgently. 'You want to stick around and find out? Come on, let's go.'

'Sabotage?' said Gerran, horrified. 'Why?'

'Why the hell do you think?' snapped Diman, trying to keep his voice low, even though their words were spoken over their helmet-mics. That, combined with the noise of the wind and rain, would mean it was next to impossible for the aliens to hear them. 'If they take out the DC6 generators and masts, overload traffic will clog the rest of the network in a few hours.'

Diman reached the pack servitor, and hurried to slip the lascarbine from its waterproof holster with fumbling fingers. He slung the weapon over his shoulder

and unbuckled the snap fixings of the pannier, hauling on the aerial of the vox-set.

Gerran joined him and lifted the second lascarbine from its holster before setting off up the foaming, water-slick steps out of the gully. He'd climbed six metres before realising that Diman wasn't following him.

'What the hell are you doing?' asked Gerran. 'You said we had to go!'

'We do, but we need to call this in.'

'Do it when we're away, for crying out loud.'

'Shut up, Gerran.'

Diman flicked the toggle to transmit, and an angry burst of feedback squealed from the handset, deafeningly loud in the confines of the gully.

'Shit!' he cried. 'The volume!'

He mashed the power switch to the off position, but the damage had been done. 'You bloody idiot!' shouted Diman. 'Run!'

Almost immediately, the diffuse glow from the end of the canyon surged in brightness, and spots of light blazed down into the gully. Diman looked up through the rain to see a pair of the floating discs bobbing in the air above him. Lights flickered around their circumferences, and Diman knew their luck had run out.

'Sweet Capilene, mother of mercy!' cried Diman, turning and sprinting as fast as he could up the steps after Gerran, leaving the hulking pack servitor behind.

The lights followed them up the gully, and Diman felt his heart hammer like a rapid drumbeat in his chest as he fought his way through the foaming waterfall pouring down the gully. His work boots felt as though they had weights attached to them, and he fell to his knees as a blistering pulse of light flashed above him and impacted on the wall of the gully.

A blizzard of light and noise washed over him, momentarily blurring his vision, and sending a spasm of nausea through him. Diman stumbled as glowing splinters of rock showered him like grenade fragments. The wind snatched his hood away, and cold darts of air stabbed the skin of his face through the cracked plastic of his visor.

Diman threw a panicked glance over his shoulder in time to see the pack servitor brought down by a pulsing volley of blue-hot beams of light. Smoking holes were blasted clean through its meaty bulk, and Diman didn't want to think about the kinds of weapons that could inflict such damage on a pack servitor or what they would do to his body. Scrambling forms darted into the gully, but the rain and mist of blood obscured them from clear sight.

Whatever they were, they were fast.

Diman scrambled to his feet, and snapped off a couple of shots down into the

gully before pushing onwards. He didn't think he'd hit anything, but perhaps his fire might keep their heads down for a while.

The flying discs still floated above the gully, and Diman fired wildly into the air, hoping to bring one down, but the damned things seemed to anticipate his aim, and flew erratic, zigzagging patterns in the air.

'Move yourself!' shouted Gerran from the entrance to the gully, and Diman almost laughed with relief. He slipped and scrambled upwards as he heard a strange sound, a clicking, scratching noise like flint on stone.

He was no more than three metres from Gerran when a blurred creature of pale pink flesh, like a giant flightless bird stretched out into the semblance of a humanoid form, rose up behind the other man. Its limbs were lean and sinewy, and its monstrous head was crested with a mass of rigid spines. The creature's arms whipped up, almost too fast to follow, and Diman saw a jagged blade erupt from Gerran's stomach.

A screeching, squawking war cry ululated from the creature's beaked maw, and it wrenched the blade from Gerran's body with a brutal twist of its wrists. Gerran collapsed, his spine severed by the blow, and the water pouring down the gully was turned red with his blood.

Twin bandoliers crossed the creature's chest, and its patterned loincloth put Diman in mind of the pictures he'd seen of feral world predators. It carried a long barrelled rifle with a cruelly curved blade fitted to either end.

Long ago training from his days in the Tertiary Reserve kicked in, and Diman dropped to one knee with his lascarbine pulled in tight to his shoulder. The creature let loose another screeching cry, and spun its rifle to a firing position.

Diman fired first, and Gerran's killer was punched from its feet, a ragged, smoking hole blasted in its chest. The ancient lascarbine hissed in the rain as it fired, and Diman hurriedly cycled the firing mechanism as he heard the strange clicking, scratching sound once more.

Beams of light swept over him from above, but he ignored them and carried on, the breath heaving in his lungs at this rapid exertion. A stuttering volley of solid rounds blasted into the rock beside him, and he ran crouched over, emerging from the gully as a shot creased his shoulder and sent him sprawling.

Diman lost his grip on the lascarbine as he was spun around by the impact. He hit the ground hard and rolled, feeling the sharp rocks tear up his overalls. His helmet was smashed from his head, and the impact left him dazed as the cold hit him like a blow.

Bright lights danced before his eyes, and Diman lifted his head, feeling blood pouring from a gash on his forehead. He tried to push himself from the ground, but his limbs were leaden and uncooperative. Screaming pain in his thigh told

him he'd broken his femur.

A pack of the skinned-looking creatures emerged from the gully, and gathered around the creature Diman had shot, their movements inhumanly quick and bird-like. Their quills stood on end, with colours rippling down their lengths. One of the creatures was of greater stature than the others, with powerful muscles and a crest of bright red quills. It carried a weapon of obvious sophistication, with a short-barrelled, under-slung launcher of some kind.

At its side was a hideous trio of quadrupeds that must surely have escaped from a realm of nightmares. They resembled nothing so much as skinned wolves. Their pink flesh glistened in the rain, and manes of spines stood erect on their powerfully muscled shoulders. Diman whimpered in fear as he saw that they shared evolutionary roots with their masters, having the same spine of rigid quills and jagged, beak-like jaws.

The red-quilled leader emitted a series of high-pitched squawks and whistles.

In response, two of its pack knelt by the body of the dead beast, and began attacking it with long-bladed knives, carving off strips of flesh and gulping them down. Within moments, they had efficiently butchered the body, and passed out dripping chunks of their former comrade's flesh to each member of the pack.

Diman felt his gorge rise at the sight, the blood of the slain beast drooling from their beaked jaws as they threw back their heads and screeched to the sky. He sobbed as the alien hounds joined the macabre chorus.

Redquill barked something in his vile alien language, and the three hounds sprinted over the rocks towards Diman.

He tried to pull away, but knew it was hopeless as his leg flared in unbelievable agony. The monstrous hounds screeched at him as they bounded over the rocks, their jaws frothing with thick saliva.

Diman expected the searing pain of their bites, but, instead, they circled him with their heads low and their jaws wide, hissing and spitting. Their breath was hot, and reeked of dead flesh and rancid milk. He closed his eyes and curled himself into a tiny ball, prayers he'd learned as child spilling from his lips.

'Emperor, who act with me in all things, protect your humble servant…'

A powerful hand flipped him over onto his back and seized him by his neck. The reek of alien flesh caught in the back of Diman's throat, and he gagged at the pungent, oily sweat of the creature.

He opened his eyes and found himself staring into a pair of milky white eyes without pupils, set deep in an alien skull topped with spines that had deepened from red to crimson. Fear like nothing he had known seized him.

'Redquill,' he said.

The creature cocked its head to one side, a thin membrane nictitating across

its eye. Its jaw worked, and a grating, clicking sound emerged from its beak. It repeated the sound several more times until Diman realised that it was trying to repeat what he had said.

He nodded and smiled through the pain, hoping and praying that this moment of connection might save his life. At last, the monster seemed to have mastered the vowel sounds, and it croaked, 'Radkwaal…'

'Yes,' nodded Diman. 'You. Redquill.'

'Radkwaal,' said the creature again.

It turned its head towards its fellows, and squawked the name Diman had given it, followed by a further series of clicks and whistles.

Any hope that Diman's fleeting communication might have saved his life was snatched away as the creatures drew their butcher knives.

BRANDON GATE CORRECTIONAL Facility covered a square kilometre and had a total of twenty guard towers encircling its perimeter. Within its boundaries, it was a small city, partitioned into five walled enclosures, each designed to hold a particular kind of prisoner, but which presently served as vehicle pools and firing ranges.

Only a thousand prisoners were held here, although the facility had once held close to twenty thousand unfortunates within its hellish interior. Though much had changed since the rebellion, the prison was no less horrendous a place to be sent, either as a guard or as a prisoner.

A circular tower stood in the centre of its open yard, ringed with mosaics and bas-reliefs of uplifting scripture and religious imagery intended to inspire the rehabilitation of its inmates, but which only served to give them a focal point for their hatred. Atop this tower was a polarised glass dome, from which the enforcers could command a panoramic view of the city, and which gave the facility its more usual name of the Glasshouse.

Stuck on the edge of Brandon Gate beyond the Commercia Gate like an afterthought, the facility had an unsavoury reputation, even before the de Valtos rebellion, as a place of torture and execution. It had been a favourite dumping ground for undesirables rounded up by the cartel's enforcers for any activity deemed a crime by their paymasters.

Those unwise enough to demand rights for workers injured in the line of duty, or to voice any opinions on the cartels deemed subversive, would soon find their doors smashed down in the middle of the night. Squads of enforcers would drag them from their beds and toss them into the hellish confines of the Correctional Facility.

In the wake of the rebellion, many of its former inmates had escaped when vengeful relatives and friends attacked the prison complex, and looted it of anything of value. The prison had been brought back to operational use by Jenna Sharben's newly established enforcers in lieu of any other facility capable of handling criminals. Conditions within its mouldering cells and debris-strewn enclosures made it resemble something from an active warzone instead of a functioning centre of law enforcement.

The corridor Jenna Sharben walked along was dim and thick with dust, the sputtering lumen strips set into glass blocks in the wall barely providing enough illumination to avoid the tangled piles of inert cabling and debris. Water pooled on the floor, and the stench of mould and a thousand filthy cells hung like a miasma upon the air.

Enforcer Dion walked alongside her. Jenna suspected that, in time, he would make an enforcer of which Brandon Gate could be proud. He was cut from a rugged cloth, his manner powerful yet fair and even-handed. Like her, he carried his helmet in the crook of his arm and had his shock maul strapped across his back. Dion and Apollonia were the best she had trained, and, by their example, the tarnished reputation of the enforcers would be restored to one of honesty, integrity and justice.

'So, what's the word from on high?' asked Dion as they drew near the cell where the alien captive was being held. The Ultramarines had deposited the prisoner a couple of days ago, and a xenolexicon servitor the day after, though it hadn't helped with getting any actionable intelligence from the prisoner. 'The word is that it's time to get tough,' said Jenna. 'What does that mean, exactly?' asked Dion. That was the big question, thought Jenna.

'It means that Governor Koudelkar wants information from the prisoner,' she said, leaving out the part where she felt that the governor wasn't too interested in how that information was obtained. That didn't seem like a message that ought to be literally carried down the chain of command.

'So what sort of information are we after?' asked Dion.

'Anything we can get,' said Jenna. 'If the Ultramarines are right, and the tau are on the verge of invasion, then we need to bring the governor some hard evidence of that.'

'And you know how we do that?' asked Dion. 'I suppose you had training in interrogation techniques in the Adeptus Arbites.'

'I did,' agreed Jenna, 'but those techniques require time and the eventual co-operation of a prisoner. One we don't have, and the other, we're not likely to get any time soon.'

'Then what's our game plan?'

'We go in hard and see what we get,' said Jenna, turning a corner and halting before a steel door fitted with a mag-lock that was obviously new. Two enforcers stood outside, and both snapped to attention when they saw Jenna.

She pulled on her helm and said, 'Put your helmet on, and slide the mirror visor down.'

'What for?'

'Just do it,' said Jenna. 'It makes it easier.'

'For the prisoner?'

'No,' said Jenna, 'for us. And once we're inside, no names.' She turned to the guards at the door. 'Open it up,' she said.

The door was opened, and Jenna and Dion stepped through into a windowless room that reeked of stale sweat and a pungent, alien smell that was deeply unpleasant for its very unfamiliarity. The cell was bare rockcrete, the walls scratched and defaced by the hundreds of lost souls held there over the years. Incense burners sat in each of the cell's four corners, emitting aromatic smoke inimical to xenos creatures, though they did little to counter the noxious odour of the room's occupant.

Enforcer Apollonia stood at the back of the cell with her hands behind her, the mirrored visor of her helmet pulled down. The tau sat on a stool with her strange, four-fingered hands laced before her in her lap.

Sitting opposite, its hands laced in front of it in imitation of the prisoner's posture, was the xenolexicon servitor the Ultramarines had provided. Robed in a pale blue chiton with gleaming implants and a well-maintained flesh tone, the bio-mechanical hybrid was a fine example of the Mechanicus's skill.

Its ears had been replaced by broad-spectrum receptors, and the lower half of its face was a nightmarish melange of moving parts formed from brass and silver. Designed to mimic the mouth shapes of a dozen different alien races, its jaw was a bulbous mass of constantly rotating, shifting metal with artificial mandibles, teeth and a multitude of artificial tongues that could adapt its structure to match that of the subject.

Jenna stood beside the xenolexicon servitor and addressed the prisoner. 'I am going to ask you some questions. It would be better for you if you were to answer them truthfully. Do you understand me?'

The servitor's mouth clicked and whirred as it formed the internal anatomy of a tau mouth and repeated the words she had said in the alien's language, a language that was strange, and bore little resemblance to any human tongue. Briefly, Jenna wondered how the builders of the servitor had known what structure to construct in order to form the word groups and syllables of the tau language.

Study and dissection of tau skulls, she supposed, untroubled by the thought.

Although the flat features and lack of a nose made it difficult to read the tau female's facial expression, Jenna thought she detected a faint revulsion on her face. Was the servitor's rendition of its language so bad?

The prisoner said the phrase she had been saying since they'd put her in the cell, the words rendered tonelessly by the servitor.

'My name equals La'tyen Ossenia. Shas'la of Vior'la Fire Warrior team Kais.'

Jenna circled the prisoner, drawing her shock maul from the sheath on her back. 'I see. You think you're being a good soldier, but all you're doing is making this harder for yourself. You're going to tell us what we want to know, and, the sooner you do, the easier this is going to be for you.'

Once again, the servitor relayed her words, and once again it repeated the phrase the prisoner had said countless times before.

'My name equals La'tyen Ossenia. Shas'la of Vior'la Fire Warrior team Kais.'

Jenna slammed her shock maul against the prisoner's lower back, and she fell to the floor with a wordless cry of pain. Another couple of swift strikes to the shoulder and hip had the tau prisoner curled up in a tight ball of pain.

Jenna rolled the tau female onto her back with her boot, and planted the tip of her shock maul against her throat. She took no pleasure from such violence, but such was the role in which she had been cast, and she would play it to the best of her ability.

'That's a taste of how bad things are going to get for you if you don't co-operate.'

She heard the servitor translating her words, and pressed down harder on the captive's chest. 'That was without the shock field activated. Imagine how much pain you'll be in when I turn it on.'

Three times more, Jenna asked the tau questions, and each time received the same answer.

'My name equals La'tyen Ossenia. Shas'la of Vior'la Fire Warrior team Kais.'

Each obstinate refusal to answer only infuriated Jenna more. Didn't the creature realise that she was trying to spare it pain? She delivered stinging blows to the captives knees, stomach and ribs, each carefully weighted to cause extreme pain but no long term damage.

After half an hour of beatings, Jenna hauled the prisoner to her knees, and thumbed the activation stud on her shock maul. She held the humming weapon in front of the prisoner's face, and was gratified to see a trace of fear enter her amber eyes.

'Still won't talk, eh?' said Jenna, nodding to Dion and Apollonia. Then it's time for the gloves to come off.

The screams of the tau prisoner echoed throughout the Glasshouse long into the night.

THE TWO AIRCRAFT banked around a jutting headland of rock, hugging the mountainside, and flying high across the craggy landscape in a roar of engine noise. Nap of the earth flight was impossible so close to the Kaliz Array, for vox-masts appeared over the horizon without warning, and could easily tear a wing from an unwary aircraft.

One of the flyers was a bulky gunship, its wings bristling with missiles, and a multitude of guns studding its frontal sections and upper deck. This was a Thunderhawk, the workhorse of the Adeptus Astartes, and an aerial chariot without equal. Its armoured skin was a vivid blue, the glacis beneath the pilot's compartment emblazoned with a brilliant white inverse omega symbol of the Ultramarines with a golden eagle set upon it.

The second aircraft was a smaller Aquila-class lander, its swept forwards, eagle-wing design giving rise to its honourable name. Its wings and side panels bore the golden horse heraldry of the 44th Lavrentian Hussars, and its pilot was careful to keep close to the larger Astartes gunship.

Both bled speed as they drew near a wide canyon cut in the rock, and set down in a wash of flaring retros and rock dust. The landings were difficult, the aircraft buffeted by high winds blowing over the mountains from the north, but these pilots were the best, and within moments, both gunship and lander were safely down.

The assault ramp on the front of the gunship dropped, and a host of Space Marines emerged, dispersing swiftly from the troop compartment, and assuming defensive positions around the aircraft. Nearly thirty warriors of the Ultramarines fanned out from the gunship, forming up in a Codex deployment pattern.

Uriel jogged down the ramp of the Thunderhawk, his bolter held loosely at his side, and his sword a reassuring presence at his hip. A light rain pattered his armour, but he didn't feel the cold or wet.

'Looks quiet,' said Learchus at his side.

'It does indeed,' replied Uriel, scanning the ground before him and forming a mental map in his head, 'but I'd expect that.'

Learchus nodded, and set off to join the scout squad forming up on the western edge of their deployment zone without another word. Uriel stepped from the ramp of the Thunderhawk onto the Tembra Ridge Mountains, his enhanced faculties for spatial awareness identifying the best positions to occupy; from

where an effective assault could be launched or defence mounted.

Without orders needing to be issued, each squad of Ultramarines was already positioning itself correctly, and Uriel felt proud to be part of such an awesomely effective fighting machine.

Chaplain Clausel took up position with his assault squad, warriors who went into battle with bulky jump packs fitted to their armour. These allowed them to take the fight to the enemy and descend upon them from the skies on wings of fire. They were Astartes of the highest calibre, warriors who excelled in the brutal whirlwind of close-quarters fighting. As ferocious as they were, assault troops were not mindless killers, but carefully chosen fighters with an innate understanding of the ebb and flow of battle.

An Assault Marine knew when to smash the enemy with force, and when to withdraw.

Clausel had said little to Uriel since his return from his Death Oath, and every now and then he would catch the Chaplain's stern, uncompromising glare upon him. Which, he supposed, was entirely fair. After all, this mission was as much to test Uriel's ability to command his warriors as it was to ensure that the hard-won peace was holding.

Techmarine Harkus, detached from the command centre and incongruous in his red armour and hissing servo harness, ministered to the Thunderhawk, ensuring that the rough landing had not offended the aircraft's spirit. The black and white of the Icon Mechanicus stood out on Harkus's right shoulder guard, while the blue of the Ultramarines remained on his left. The sight of an Ultramarines warrior in armour that bore another's heraldry sat ill with Uriel, but the union of the Adeptus Astartes and the Mechanicus of Mars was an ancient one.

Uriel set off towards the canyon ahead of him, as the Aquila lander lowered its internal compartment to the ground and Lord Winterbourne emerged, resplendent in his green frock coat, high boots, golden helmet and ebony walking cane. Growling and pulling urgently on their leashes were the two hound creatures that accompanied the colonel everywhere he went. Uriel had learned that they were called vorehounds, and their noses darted from side to side as they sniffed the wet rocks.

Four Lavrentian storm-troopers, in gleaming golden breastplates and carrying bulky hellguns, shadowed their colonel, followed by a robed scribe with clicking quill-armatures and a glassy-eyed vox-servitor.

'Uriel,' said Winterbourne, 'good of you to help out. My lads were itching for some action, but it would take us quite some time to get up here, what? You and your fancy gunship are a real boon.'

'Happy to help, Lord Winterbourne.'

'Nathaniel,' said Winterbourne automatically. 'Damned unusual business this.'

'Yes,' agreed Uriel, enhancing the thermal imaging display of his visor to better penetrate the shadows of the mountain. 'Unusual and conspicuous.'

'Seems to support your suspicions, does it not?'

Uriel nodded. 'If you're going to attack someone, first knock out their communications.'

Reports had come to the Ultramarines command centre of a system-wide failure in a great many of the planetary vox-networks. Such glitches in the system were common enough not to raise immediate suspicion, but the timing of such a failure immediately raised a red flag in Uriel's mind.

The Kaliz Array was hundreds of years old, and the Adeptus Mechanicus and local technicians had their hands full maintaining its venerable generators and relays. It would take days for PDF units or Guard forces to reach Deep Canyon Six, the location the Adeptus Mechanicus had identified as the source of the initial system failures. Uriel had immediately offered the services of the Ultramarines.

'So, how do you want to do this?' asked Winterbourne.

'We go in expecting a fight,' said Uriel. 'We will take one approach down, you and your men will take the other. If there are any enemy units there, we destroy them and see what damage they have done.'

'Simple. I like it,' said Winterbourne, fighting to hold the vorehounds at his side. 'Damn it! Germaine! Fynlae! Heel!'

The beasts paid their master no heed, and continued to tug at their leashes, foam gathering at the corners of their mouths and their desperate barking echoing from the mountainside.

'What is the matter with them?' asked Uriel.

'Damned if I know,' cursed Winterbourne. 'Heel! Heel, I say!'

With a final surge, the vorehounds broke free of Winterbourne's grip, and bounded across the rocks towards the nearest gully leading down into Deep Canyon Six. Uriel and Winterbourne set off after them, with the storm-troopers hot on their heels.

It didn't take long to catch up to the hounds, one of which sniffed the ground and growled at the entrance to the gully. The three-legged beast circled a patch of rocks downhill, eagerly barking with feral hunger. Winterbourne caught up to his pets, and struck at their flanks with his walking cane.

'Damned unruly beasts!' he shouted, gathering up their leashes and hauling their choke chains tight. 'No discipline, that's your problem. I ought to have you shot.'

Uriel knelt by the ground the vorehounds had been sniffing, and ran his fingers over the slick rocks. His enhanced vision and auto-senses could already detect the lingering residue and aroma of an all too familiar substance.

'Blood,' he said.

'Human?' asked Winterbourne, and Uriel nodded. 'Yes, and no more than a day or so old.'

'How do you know that?'

'The smell's too fresh. Any longer and the rain would have washed away all traces of it. Your hounds aren't the only ones with sharp senses, Lord Winterbourne.'

'That bodes ill,' said Winterbourne, handing the reins of his vorehounds to the vox-servitor, and drawing his sword, a magnificently fashioned sabre with a curved blade and a network of crystalline filaments worked along its length that crackled with fire.

Uriel passed the word of what the hounds had discovered to his warriors, and there was a noticeable shift in the posture of the Ultramarines, each warrior now expecting battle instead of merely anticipating it.

'I suggest you join your soldiers, Lord Winterbourne,' said Uriel. 'It is time to move out.'

'Just so,' said Winterbourne, unsnapping the catch on the holster at his hip. The colonel of the Lavrentians drew his sidearm, a simple laspistol with a matt black finish. The weapon was standard issue and old, very old, but clearly well cared for. Uriel was surprised at the lack of ornamentation on the weapon, having seen many a colonel seek to impress with the ostentation of their battle gear.

Winterbourne saw his look and smiled.

'It was my father's pistol,' he explained. 'Got me through a few damned tight scrapes, let me tell you. I look after it, and it looks after me.'

Uriel nodded to Winterbourne's storm-troopers and left the colonel to their care. He jogged over to his squad, and quickly ran through the pre-battle ritual of preparedness. Each warrior inspected the battle gear of one of his brothers, checking armour and weapons that had been checked thrice already, but which were checked again because that was the Ultramarines way.

When the icons for each of his squad members flashed green on his visor, Uriel broadened his scope of view, seeing icons flashing to life for every warrior under his command. All were ready.

Chaplain Clausel approached, and Uriel offered his hand.

'Courage and honour, Chaplain Clausel,' he said.

'Courage and honour, Captain Ventris,' replied Clausel, leaving Uriel's hand

unshaken.

'My warriors will go in through the gully,' said Uriel, masking his irritation at Clausel's manner. 'Your assault troops will await my signal to manoeuvre.'

'Remember the teachings of the Codex,' said Clausel. 'It will guide you in all things.'

'I will, Chaplain,' promised Uriel. 'You do not need to worry about me. Librarian Tigurius reminded me of my duty to the teachings of our primarch.'

'Aye,' agreed Clausel. 'I'm sure he did, but Tigurius cannot see everything.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means he wanted you back within the ranks of the Ultramarines,' said Clausel, 'for his own reasons as much as for the good of the Chapter.'

'You doubt me, Chaplain?' asked Uriel. 'My honour is intact, my loyalty undoubted. The senior masters of the Chapter agreed on it.'

'Not all of them,' said Clausel, turning away. 'Just know that I remain to be convinced that your return is a good thing. Fight well and you may yet persuade me that one who fights within the Great Eye can come back unchanged.'

'I am not unchanged, Chaplain,' whispered Uriel as Clausel rejoined his warriors.

Uriel put the grim Chaplain's words from his mind, and issued his orders. The Scouts would remain with the Thunderhawk while Uriel would lead one squad through the southern gully towards the base of the canyon. Lord Winterbourne and his storm-troopers would take the northern approach. Chaplain Clausel and his assault troops would climb to the top of the cliffs that overlooked the base of the canyon and await Uriel's order to deploy.

Uriel drew his warriors close, Learchus at his side, and stared into the darkness of the gully that led down through a narrow cleft in the rocks to shadow. He remembered the last time he had travelled into these mountains with war in his heart.

He and his warriors had dropped thousands of metres into a deep core mine, and had faced the Bringer of Darkness in a forgotten tomb built when the galaxy was young. Ario Barzano had died there, and Pasanius had lost his arm, a grievous wound that had brought him nothing but pain and punishment.

A punishment that had seen Uriel go to war without his dearest friend.

SIX

A COLD WIND blew down from the east, the bite of a harsh Macragge winter easing up now that spring was breaking and the snows on the lower slopes were melting. The landing platforms sat near the foot of the mountains upon which Ptolemy's Library and the Sword Hall were built, the eastern winds an omen of changing times and good fortune.

Uriel did not feel fortunate as he marched from the upper cloisters to a flight of marble steps that led down to where the 4th Company stood in ordered ranks before five Thunderhawk gunships. Steam rose from the edge of the platforms, the aircraft growling as the Techmarines feathered their engines. The banner held proudly aloft by Ancient Peleus flapped noisily in the wind.

Over a hundred warriors in the dazzling blue of the Ultramarines stood as still as statues on the platform, their arms locked by their sides and their heads held high as they awaited the order to embark on this latest mission. The Chaplain, Techmarines, Apothecaries, artificers, drivers and pilots, and ancillary company staff had gathered for the official Company Commencement. Not since the 4th Company had deployed to Tarsis Ultra had its duly-appointed captain led it into action, and such a moment demanded recognition.

Uriel had dreamed of this ever since he and Pasanius had been banished from Macragge, and now that it was here, he found that redemption tasted bitter. For this new beginning marked the first time he had been forced to leave a battle-brother behind.

ESCORTED BY FOUR armed Vanguards, Pasanius had come to bid Uriel farewell in the company chapel the previous evening as he prepared to don the armour of Brother Amadon for the first time. Uriel was clad in a form-fitting under-suit, and was surrounded by four red-robed artisan-apprenta from the Armorium.

Uriel had prepared his flesh with fasting, oils and physical exertion.

His soul was steeled with reflection and speaking the catechisms of battle.

He was ready to be clad in the armour of a Space Marine, and the apprenta recited binaric cants pleasing to the Machine-God as they applied sacred oils to the hard plugs that allowed the armour to interface with his body.

The chapel was a long, vaulted space of silver stone, brightly lit with a dozen flaming brands and the glow from a rose window set high on the western wall.

Firelight reflected from the walls, and from the burnished battle-plate that hung on a sturdy frame before a great statue that stood in the curved chancel. Rendered in polished bronze by the hand of Mellicae, the greatest warrior artificer of the Ultramarines, the towering form of Roboute Guilliman stared down at Uriel with eyes fashioned from sapphires the size of a Space Marine's fist.

The Vanguards led Pasanius into the chapel with their weapons bared, and it broke Uriel's heart to see his friend so ignobly treated. The apprenta backed away from Uriel with their heads bowed as Pasanius halted before him, still dressed in the black chiton of the penitent. Like Uriel, he had been found free of corruption in flesh and soul, but, for the crime of failing to disclose the truth of his infected arm, he had been judged guilty of breaking the Chapter's Codes of Rectitude.

'You can go,' Uriel told the warriors escorting Pasanius.

'We are ordered to remain with the prisoner at all times,' said one of the Vanguards, a black-bladed sword held across his shoulder. 'He begins his sentence at sunset.'

Each of the Vanguards was clad in armour forged by masters of their craft, decorated with gold and silver trims, and polished to a reflective finish. No two were alike, yet each warrior had earned the right to wear such armour on uncounted battlefields, through acts of valour that would be unbelievable were any save a warrior of the Ultramarines to relate them.

'This man is a hero of courage and honour,' said Uriel. 'You will not address him as "prisoner" in my presence again. Is that understood?'

'Yes, my lord,' said the Vanguard. 'Our orders come from Chaplain Cassius himself.'

'I am sure Pasanius is not going to try and escape,' said Uriel dryly. 'Are you?'

'No,' said Pasanius. 'I'm in enough trouble as it is without adding attempting to escape to my list of crimes.'

For breaking the Codes of Rectitude, Pasanius had been sentenced to a hundred days in the Chapter cells and to endure exclusion from the ranks of the 4th Company for the time it took Macragge to orbit its sun. In addition, he had been reduced in rank from sergeant to battle-brother. To be kept apart from his brothers for even a day longer than necessary was a punishment as severe as any that could be meted out to a warrior of the Ultramarines.

'We will wait for you outside, brother,' the Vanguard told Pasanius as they withdrew from the chapel.

'I'm obliged to you, and I'll be with you directly,' Pasanius assured them as the heavy wooden doors of the company chapel closed behind the veteran warriors.

'You'll want help with that,' said Pasanius, nodding towards the armour.

'I have the apprenta from the Armorium,' said Uriel, indicating the robed acolytes who waited at the foot of the statute.

'Apprenta?' scoffed Pasanius. 'What do artisans know about the wearing of battle plate? No, you need a brother warrior to fit you into that armour. It's only right and proper. After all, this is the nearest I'll get to power armour until you get back.'

Uriel turned towards the apprenta and said, 'Leave us.'

The robed acolytes bowed and made their way from the chapel of the 4th Company.

'A hundred days,' said Uriel when they were alone. 'It's not right.'

'Don't be soft,' chuckled Pasanius. 'I'll do a hundred days no problem; it's no more than I deserve. I lied to my brothers, and more importantly, I lied to you. It's a just punishment. You and I both know it, and I'm not going to complain about it.'

'You're right, I know,' said Uriel. 'You'll be missed within the ranks.'

'I know,' said Pasanius without arrogance, 'but you've good men there as sergeants. Venasus, Patrean… Learchus.'

'I've heard good things about Learchus from the men,' said Uriel. 'You read the honour rolls after the 4th's deployment to Espandor?'

'I did,' confirmed Pasanius, kneeling to remove the first section of the armour from the rack. 'A gargant and a greenskin horde. Not bad.'

Uriel laughed at the understatement in his friend's tone. 'It was a grand achievement, Pasanius, as you well know.'

'Yes, but it galls me we weren't there for it,' said Pasanius. 'It feels wrong, knowing our warriors went into battle without us. It feels like we let them down.'

'We did, but the past is done with, and I have a company to lead. When this expedition to Pavonis is over, you'll be reinstated to the ranks, and we'll fight side by side once more.'

'I know that, Uriel,' said Pasanius. 'Just…'

'Just what?' asked Uriel when Pasanius didn't continue.

Pasanius looked uncomfortable, and glanced towards the sealed doors of the chapel.

'Come on,' pressed Uriel. 'Out with it.'

'It's Learchus.'

'What about him?'

'Watch him.'

'Watch him?' said Uriel. 'Why? Because his accusations saw us condemned? You know he was entirely correct to speak up.'

'Yes, and I hold no grudge against Learchus for that,' said Pasanius. 'It took courage for him to do the right thing, I see that now.'

'Then what?'

Pasanius sighed. 'Learchus promised he would look after the company until our return, and by the looks of things he's done a grand job: fine recruits, hard training and warriors we can be proud of. Not only that, he led them all into battle on Espandor against a horde of greenskins that would have tested the mettle of a veteran battle company.'

'Then what troubles you?'

'No one expected us to come back alive, Uriel,' said Pasanius. 'Learchus was one of the few who did, but even he had begun to believe us dead. On Espandor, he got a taste of proper command and he liked it. I'm thinking that with us long gone, he figured he'd be the logical choice to take command of the 4th.'

'And then we returned,' finished Uriel.

'Exactly,' said Pasanius. 'Now don't get me wrong, Learchus is a great warrior and I trust him with my life, but he'd be less than human if there wasn't some part of him that didn't resent your reinstatement.'

'I think you are wrong, my friend,' said Uriel.

Pasanius shrugged. 'I hope so, but enough talk, let's get this armour on, eh?'

Uriel nodded, and, piece by piece, Pasanius clad him in the armour of Brother Amadon. He began with the boots, and worked up to the greaves on Uriel's shins and the cuisse plates protecting his thighs. The locking belt snapped together around Uriel's hips, and, once the power coils were attached, Pasanius reverently lifted the eagle and skull-stamped breastplate and fitted it over his chest.

As each segment of armour was fitted to Uriel's body, Pasanius recited the actions the armour had been part of, speaking the names of heroes long dead and battles long since fought. Every honour won and every plaudit earned was spoken, and, soon, both warriors were giving voice to the armour's illustrious heritage.

The plates protecting Uriel's upper arms came next, together with the pauldrons, vambraces and gauntlets. With his arms sheathed in plate, Pasanius lifted the heavy, auto-reactive shoulder guards, and allowed the armour's fibre-bundle musculature to mesh with the internal gyros and motors within.

Lastly, Pasanius hefted the heavy backpack that provided power to the armour, and the heat exchangers that allowed it to function. Uriel felt its immense weight, and tensed his muscles, but no sooner was the backpack mounted than the armour hummed with life, and energy flowed through Uriel.

He felt the bio-monitoring dendrites link with the hard plugs implanted in his flesh, and his muscles swelled with power. His awareness of his body's subtle

rhythms heightened, and he became one with the armour. It was an extension of his flesh that enabled him to fight and move as though clad in the lightest chiton, yet would protect him from the slings and arrows of a hostile galaxy.

Uriel remembered a similar sensation when being clad in the armour of the Sons of Guilliman on Salinas by the artificers of the Grey Knights, but that was a pale shadow of this experience. The battle plate that had protected him during the fighting within the House of Providence was merely borrowed and no bond had formed between him and the armour.

This was different. This was a level of connection that Uriel had not felt since he had first been honoured with his own armour many decades ago. That sense of unity was like a forgotten golden memory coming to the surface, made all the sweeter for its sudden reappearance.

As the armour came to life around him, Uriel felt light-headed as the legacy of heroic endeavours, of which it had been part, filled him. The expectation of honourable service and duty applied to them both, and Pasanius took hold of his shoulder to steady him.

'How does that feel?' asked Pasanius.

'Like I've come home,' said Uriel.

Pasanius nodded, and looked up past the mighty figure of Roboute Guilliman to the fading red glow shining through the rose window. Uriel watched his friend's face harden as the sun set over the distant mountains.

'It's time?'

'It is,' said Pasanius.

Uriel extended his hand, and Pasanius shook it, wrist to wrist, in the grip that symbolised the bond between warriors who had fought and bled in defence of the human race. Pasanius pulled Uriel into an embrace, his enormous frame almost a match for Uriel in his armour.

They had been friends even before their ascension to the Ultramarines, and the bonds of loyalty between them were as enduring as any the legends told of the long lost primarchs.

They were closer than friends, closer than brothers.

They were Astartes.

'I'd better go,' said Pasanius, nodding towards the chapel doors. 'They'll be waiting.'

'I'll bring the 4th Company back soon,' said Uriel, his voice choked with emotion. 'We'll hardly be gone. It's only a short tour to Pavonis to make sure the peace is holding.'

'I know,' laughed Pasanius, 'and I'll be waiting.'

'Courage and honour, my friend.'

'Courage and honour, Uriel.'

URIEL STEPPED ONTO the landing platform, and marched to stand before the warriors of the 4th Company. His warriors were armoured in their battle plate, their faces hidden by their helmets, yet each was known to him.

Space Marines might look faceless and identical to mortal eyes, but nothing could be further from the truth. Each warrior was a hero in his own right, one who had his own legends and a roll of honour that was as magnificent as anything that could be invented by all the poets and taletellers of the Imperium.

It was an honour to stand before them as their captain, and Uriel recognised that this moment was one he would never forget. To have travelled to the places he had seen, and to have survived the horrors he had endured was an achievement few could match, and the pride he felt was for himself, too.

Uriel stood erect as another figure descended the steps that he had just come down, a giant of a man clad in armour of brilliant blue from which a golden cloak billowed like a great wing in the wind.

Marneus Calgar, Lord Macragge, marched towards Uriel with his normally stoic and craggy features open and filled with joy. The Chapter Master of the Ultramarines halted before Uriel, and looked him up and down with a critical eye.

Calgar's legendary deeds were known across all human space, heroic battles that painted him as a mighty warrior who crushed entire armies before him and toppled the mightiest of foes with but a glance. Truth be told, Marneus Calgar was no taller than Uriel, though his shoulders were broader and his waist thicker.

The Chapter Master was a brawler to Uriel's swordsman.

Marneus Calgar was a giant, but it was the sheer power and dynamism within him that made him so. Vitality and strength seemed to ooze from his pores, and just being near Marneus Calgar energised those around him with surety of purpose and determination.

Daemons of the eldar and the Ruinous Powers had fallen before Calgar, and some, jealous of his stature and tally, called him proud, but Uriel knew that was not so. The pride that drove Calgar was that which drove all warriors of noble virtue to war, the defence of those who could not defend themselves.

'Brother Amadon's armour,' said Calgar, his voice rich with approval.

'Yes, my lord,' said Uriel, standing tall and with his shoulders back.

'It looks good on you,' nodded Calgar, reaching out to touch the brilliant white "U" on Uriel's shoulder guard. 'The last time I saw you armoured thus it was without heraldry, and you were leaving to an unknown destiny.'

'That was another life,' said Uriel. 'I see now why we have our code.'

'I know you do. Varro told me of your words within the Arcanium, and he is a good judge of the hearts of men. He says you have learned what you needed to learn.'

'I have,' agreed Uriel. 'Some lessons are learned the hard way.'

'Some men need to learn their lessons that way or they're not lessons at all.'

'And what lesson will this mission teach?' asked Uriel.

Calgar smiled and leaned in close so that only he could hear his words. 'It will teach those who watch from above that you are a true warrior of Ultramar.'

Uriel nodded, and looked over Calgar's shoulder towards the gallery where the Masters of the Chapter currently on Macragge had gathered to watch the 4th Company's departure. Here were the warriors who had once sat in judgement of him, but who now gathered to see him become one of them again.

Agemman of the veterans stood at the forefront of the masters, his noble features brimming with pride, and Uriel gave an almost imperceptible nod of respect to the Regent of Ultramar. This great warrior had spoken to Uriel the night before judgement was pronounced upon him. It had been Agemman who had convinced Uriel to accept his punishment for the good of the Chapter, and for that he would forever be in the First Captain's debt.

Beside Agemman were three of the battle captains of Macragge, Masters of the Ultramarines and guardians of the Eastern Fringe. Their names were legend, their deeds mighty and their honour boundless: Sicarius of the 2nd, Galenus of the 5th and Epathus of the 6th.

Of all the warriors here gathered, only Sicarius's eyes were as cold as a winter sky, his unflinching gaze never leaving Uriel as the 4th Company snapped to attention in unison, the sound like a hundred hammers slamming down.

'Lead with courage and honour, and you will win over your doubters,' said Calgar, following Uriel's gaze.

Uriel hammered his fist against the eagle upon his breastplate.

'Permission to depart Macragge, my lord,' he said.

'Permission granted, Captain Ventris,' replied Lord Macragge.

The roar of the Thunderhawks' engines surged in volume, and Uriel gratefully took the hand his Chapter Master offered him.

'It is fitting that this mission should be to Pavonis,' said Marneus Calgar.

'I remember,' said Uriel, 'my first mission as captain of the 4th Company.'

'Let us hope that this tour is not as eventful.'

'As the Emperor wills it,' said Uriel.

THE BASE OF the canyon was planed smooth, and Uriel recognised the application of Mechanicus scale meltas in the rippling, liquid texture of the rock. Lingering rain pooled in the darkness of Deep Canyon Six, and shadows from the high cliffs kept the temperature low. Patches of thick scrub, and wiry clumps of overgrown mountain gorse clung to the edges of the canyon. Tendrils of clammy fog drifted through the upper reaches of the forest of vox-masts that filled the canyon.

Uriel kept still and scanned the canyon. Nothing moved save streams of water pouring from cracks in the rock and the windblown undergrowth, yet Uriel had the acute feeling he was being watched.

Every one of his senses told him that this canyon was deserted, yet ones he could not name told him just as clearly that he and his warriors were not alone. He eased from the stepped gully that had brought them from the Thunderhawk's landing site, and the rest of his squad moved out with him. Two hundred metres to the north, he could see Lord Winterbourne's green frock-coat emerge from a narrow gap in the rocks, his storm-troopers forming a protective cordon around him. Uriel shook his head as he saw one of the storm-troopers holding the leads of the vorehounds. Taking unruly pets like that into a potential firefight was madness.

Uriel held his bolter out before him, scanning left and right, and allowing his auto-senses to gather information on his surroundings. The air had an electrical tang to it, which wasn't surprising, but it also had a strange, meaty aroma that the softly falling rain couldn't entirely mask.

'Combat formation,' ordered Uriel over the internal vox-network. 'Primus envelop right, Secundus left. Nice and slow. Harkus, you're with me.'

Proximity to the huge mast array was degrading communications, and his words were overlaid with squalls of biting static. To ensure there were no misunderstandings, Uriel placed his right fist in the centre of his chest and moved it in a slow outwards arc. He transferred his bolter and repeated the gesture with his left fist, slowly advancing towards the vox-masts.

The Space Marines spread out, Uriel and five warriors curving their route to the left as Learchus led the others along the contours of the canyon walls. Uriel advanced with Harkus at his side. The Techmarine had a bolt pistol drawn, and carried a cog-toothed axe, reminding Uriel that, despite his loyalty to Mars, Harkus was a warrior of the Ultramarines first and foremost. The armature limbs of his servo-harness were drawn in tight, soft spurts of gas venting from exhaust ports on his back.

'What can you make out?' asked Uriel, knowing Harkus would see the terrain in a very different way to the rest of the formation.

'The arrays are non-functional,' said Harkus, his voice flat and devoid of tone. A whirring lens apparatus clicked into place over the Techmarine's right eye. 'The residual flux readings tell me the generators are still functional, and…'

'And what?' said Uriel, holding up an open palm and pulling it down to his shoulder.

Instantly, his warriors halted and dropped to their knees with weapons trained outwards.

'I can see a number of attached devices that do not belong on this equipment,' said Harkus, scanning his head from side to side.

'What kind of devices?'

'Unknown, but they are not of Imperial manufacture.'

'Tau?'

'The energy patterns match previously encountered xenotech,' confirmed Harkus.

Uriel passed the word to Clausel and Winterbourne. 'Looks like the tau have definitely been here.'

'We have the northern approach covered,' said Winterbourne.

'In position on the ridge above,' reported Clausel. Uriel looked over to Learchus and nodded.

Both combat squads moved out, advancing carefully towards the array of vox-masts. The air snapped and fizzed with discharge, and Uriel's auto-senses were fluctuating wildly with the distortion and interference generated by the masts. An army of greenskins could be hidden within a hundred metres of him and he wouldn't know it. With a thought, he disengaged all but the most basic of his auto-senses, knowing that his instincts for danger would serve him better.

Step by step, they drew closer to the array. Uriel could see the devices that Harkus was talking about attached to the base of around fifty of the vox-masts and a few of the generators. Rectangular in shape, they were about the same size as a Space Marine backpack and formed from a hard, plastic-looking material. Etched into the surface was a circle that encompassed a smaller circle drawn from the larger circle's apex.

Uriel recognised it as a tau icon that represented one of their settled worlds, but he had no idea which one. 'What are they?' asked Uriel.

'I cannot answer that with certainty, Captain Ventris,' replied Harkus, the arms of his servo-harness unfolding and flexing like a collection of scorpion tails. 'Not without disassembly and study.'

'Then give me your best guess.'

Harkus didn't move, but the arms of his servo-harness seemed to shrug, as though the very idea of an acolyte of the Machine-God guessing at something

was abhorrent. The light behind the lenses of Harkus's helmet flickered as the Techmarine accessed the vast wealth of knowledge implanted in his augmetics.

'Assessment: the interference in the vox networks suggests they are jamming devices, which would explain the build up in unknown spectra of wavefronts I am detecting.'

'Can you disable them?'

'Potentially,' replied Harkus, 'if I can ascertain the power source of the devices.'

'Do it,' said Uriel.

Harkus crouched before the nearest of the devices, the servo-arms of his harness extending a number of strange devices and tools. Uriel left the Techmarine to his work, and moved to where Learchus held his combat squad in readiness for action.

'Re-form the squad,' ordered Uriel. 'Set up a perimeter and hold at a hundred metres.'

Learchus nodded and asked, 'What are those things?'

'Harkus thinks they're jamming devices.'

'Tau?'

'Yes. I recognise the markings on them.'

'This should be all we need to make Governor Shonai mobilise his armed forces,' said Learchus. 'Not even he can ignore this.'

'I hope so,' said Uriel. 'I just pray we're not too late.'

No sooner were the words out of Uriel's mouth than the devices attached to the vox-masts exploded.

Fire and light surged out and upwards in a series of percussive detonations. Uriel was hurled from his feet by the blast wave, and slammed into Learchus. The two of them were smashed to the ground, and Uriel felt the breath driven from him. He lost his grip on his bolter and tasted blood.

A handful of red icons flashed to life as his armour registered breaches. His visor was opaque, an automatic reaction to the blinding light, but it was already returning to normal.

He was lying on his back, looking up at the high cliffs of the canyon and the flaring remnants of a blooming cloud of debris. Shards of broken metal and rock were raining down, and he could hear a terrible groan of tortured metal.

Uriel quickly checked the status icons of his squad, and was relieved to see that everyone was alive. Shaking off the disorientation, Uriel rolled to his feet and saw his bolter a few metres away. He retrieved it quickly, and checked for the rest of his warriors.

Pulverised rock dust billowed around Uriel, and he heard a sharp snapping

sound, like the crack of a whip, which was quickly followed by a succession of identical sounds.

At first, he thought they were gunshots, but a second later he realised what he was hearing.

'Move!' he shouted. 'Get to the canyon walls!'

The smoke twitched in front of him, and he threw himself flat as a whipping guy wire slashed through the air above him like a scythe blade. Another sliced past, and then another. Uriel pushed himself to his feet, and ran towards the edge of the canyon as metal buckled and the towering vox-masts began to fall.

The huge towers twisted as the high winds and gravity did their work, tonnes of metal crashing down in a graceful, almost leisurely fashion. Height and proportion rendered the vox-masts slender and delicate, but they were incredibly solid pieces of engineering, and slammed down with the force of artillery strikes.

One after another, the masts thundered to the ground amid the noise of snapping wires and screaming metal. The canyon shook with the power of the impacts, and Uriel staggered like a drunk as he fought through the chaos of destruction. Something struck his shoulder-guard, and he stumbled, dropping to one knee under the weight of the blow.

A snapped spar of metal hammered into the rock beside him, like a spear hurled by a vengeful god, followed by chunks of spalled metal and shattered rock. Uriel swore and pushed onwards, weaving a Codex evasion pattern before realising that it would be ineffective against randomly falling debris.

He felt the presence of others around him, but could only identify them through the icons on his visor, such was the thickness of the dust thrown up.

At last, Uriel reached the edge of the canyon and pressed his body against the rock wall. Looking around, he could see other members of his squad. They were battered and scarred by the explosion, but appeared otherwise unhurt.

'Rally on me!' ordered Uriel as the destruction of the vox-masts continued unabated.

His warriors formed up around him, and Uriel whispered a quick thank you to his armour as Chaplain Clausel's voice came urgently over the helmet vox.

'Uriel! Uriel, are you reading me? What happened down there?'

'Devices attached to the vox-masts,' said Uriel. 'Turns out they were explosives as well as jammers.'

'Casualties?'

'No one is hurt,' said Uriel. 'Though I cannot see Techmarine Harkus yet.'

'We shall drop into the canyon with you.'

'No. Remain where you are, Chaplain,' ordered Uriel. 'I don't want to bring anyone else in until we're sure there are no secondary charges.'

'Very wise,' conceded Clausel. 'Very well, I shall await your orders.'

Uriel shut off the link as Learchus edged towards him along the canyon wall. The sergeant looked as though he'd been through a boarding action, the frontal plates of his armour dented and scarred from multiple impacts. Blood leaked from a gash in his armour somewhere below his right shoulder. 'You're hurt,' said Uriel.

'It's nothing,' said Learchus. 'What in the name of Guilliman just happened?'

'I'm not sure. Harkus was examining the devices and, well, you saw what happened after that.'

'They must have had anti-tamper traps worked into them,' said Learchus.

'No. Harkus would have found them,' said Uriel, as a new and unwelcome thought arose in his mind. 'They were detonated manually.'

'That means the enemy is close.'

Uriel nodded. 'Take your section and see if Harkus is still alive.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to link with Winterbourne.'

Learchus passed the word, and, as his combat squad formed up, yet more sharp cracks echoed from the sides of the canyon. This time, Uriel was sure it was gunfire.

SEVEN

KOUDELKAR SHONAI LIKED to think of himself as a direct man, a man who could take action when it was needed and who could be trusted not to vacillate needlessly. It was a character trait he expected in others, and his temper frayed when those around him did not meet such expectations.

His temper was fraying now. It had been two days since he had arrived at Galtrigil, the sprawling ancestral home of the Shonai family, and his aunt's promised business venture had yet to materialise.

The Shonai estates nestled in a basin of undulant hills at the western end of Tembra Ridge on the shores of Lake Masura, comprising over five thousand hectares of ornamental gardens, forests and hidden follies. The magnificent house, all turrets, towers and arches, had been built nearly a thousand years ago by the founder of the Shonai Cartel, Gait Shonai, and was an opulent palace of marble, steel and glass. It had been a wonder of its day, a monument to wealth and status, but it now felt like a prison.

His mother and aunt dwelt here, and the friction their relationship generated made a house that had once been bright and full of laughter feel like a mortuary. Koudelkar had spent the better part of the last two days promenading the lakeside gardens and terraces in order to escape. The fresh air was invigorating, the scenery spectacular, and, best of all, it kept him from the frosty atmosphere within the house.

Though he was patently in no danger at Galtrigil, protocol, and that damned old fool Lortuen Perjed, demanded that he be accompanied at all times by his brutish skitarii and a squad of heavily armed Lavrentian soldiers. His mother hated having armed men in the house, and even his normally unflappable Aunt Mykola seemed nervous around the skitarii. Given the internecine strife that had torn at Pavonis some years ago, he supposed that was understandable.

Koudelkar stopped beside a carved wooden bench that looked out over the lake, a glittering expanse of frigid water fed by glacial melt-water that poured down the flanks of Tembra Pudge. The sun was midway through its descent into the west, and the surface of the water foamed with whitecaps. A stiff wind sprang up as he took a seat, carrying the bite of cold from mountains that reared like jagged fortress walls to the north.

He remembered golden summer days, running through the gardens and swimming in the lake with his brother, but that was a long time ago, and

Koudelkar forced the memory from his mind. Dumak was dead, killed by an assassin's bullet intended for his aunt, and the pain of his murder was still strong. His mother had never really recovered from the loss, and a seed of resentment had built in her heart towards her sister.

More than the solitude and respite from his relatives' carping, the spectacular vista afforded Koudelkar the opportunity to process the multifarious transactions and business deals he was negotiating.

Many of the deals were with off-world clients, powerful guild entities in nearby systems, and even one in a neighbouring sub-sector. He had come to Galtrigil at the behest of his Aunt Mykola, who had promised him a meeting with a representative of powerful business interests with a great desire to work with the Shonai and assure Pavonis a prosperous future.

Koudelkar had been sceptical, and had the proposition come from anyone other than the former Planetary Governor of Pavonis, he would never have agreed to meet with this man. The meeting had been scheduled two days ago, but the representative had failed to arrive at the appointed time, much to Koudelkar's chagrin.

He had been on the verge of returning to Brandon Gate, but Aunt Mykola had persuaded him to stay, reminding him that no one could predict exactly when a ship might arrive from a distant world.

Reluctantly, he had agreed to stay, and had spent the last two days taking the air and restoring his soul in the sculpted wilderness of his family's estates. Truth be told, he was glad to be away from Brandon Gate. The city had become more of a barracks than the thriving metropolis he fondly remembered from before the troubles. The Administratum's policy of branding those with suspect cartel affiliations had put a great many people out of work, and resentment towards the planet's new masters was simmering beneath the surface.

Naivety and false expectations had squandered many of the opportunities that had arisen in the wake of the de Valtos coup, and it would not take much to reignite the flames of rebellion. It astounded Koudelkar that supposedly intelligent people couldn't see that. The populace were hungry and frightened, which made for a potent mix of discontent. People without coin in their pockets and food in their bellies were capable of almost anything.

As much as he had berated Gaetan Baltazar and Lord Winterbourne concerning the fiery rhetoric of Prelate Culla, he knew that he would need to order the colonel of the 44th to restrain the man. He was stirring up a hornet's nest of unrest, and that could only end badly.

The business deals he was attempting to put together would bring much needed employment to Pavonis, and the personal esteem that came from earning

a living would ease much of the building pressure amongst the populace.

Aunt Mykola promised that this deal could ease the suffering of the people and bring undreamed of prosperity to Pavonis. It sounded like grand hyperbole, but his aunt had always had a silver tongue when it came to swaying people to her cause.

His ruminations were interrupted when he heard the familiar shuffle, click, shuffle of Lortuen Perjed. The old man was wrapped in the thick brown habit of an adept of the Administratum, yet still seemed troubled by the mildness of the early evening, and the hand that grasped the top of his cane was white.

'What do you want?' asked Koudelkar, not bothering to hide his irritation at this interruption. 'Can't you see I'm busy?'

'Your aunt sends for you,' said Perjed.

Koudelkar sighed. 'What does she want now?'

'She says that the representative you are here to meet is on his way.'

* * *

URIEL JOGGED THROUGH the smoke and dust of the vox-masts' destruction, his bolter held loosely across his chest. He could pick out little through the haze, but the snapping exchange of gunfire was getting louder, as was a high-pitched, skirling screeching sound. Amid the after-echoes of the detonations, Uriel could pick out the heavy bark of hellguns, as well as the sharper crack of a weapon type he didn't recognise.

He saw shadows moving in the clouds of dust ahead, and caught a flash of light reflecting from a gold breastplate. He angled his course towards it. The strange screeching sound came again, louder this time, and Uriel swung his bolter up, moving forwards and the weapon's barrel scanning in tandem with his gaze. A man screamed in agony, a horrible shriek that was abruptly cut off.

The warriors accompanying Uriel spread out, their weapons raised. Four were equipped with bolters similar to his, while the fifth carried a bulky flamer, its wide nozzle hissing with a cone of heat.

A shot ricocheted from Uriel's armour, a solid round, but he continued without a break in his stride. He didn't think the shot had been aimed at him.

Emerging from the dust of the explosions and into the smoke of battle, Uriel saw that Winterbourne's scribe and vox-servitor were dead, killed by the explosion or mangled in the cascade of falling debris. Uriel was relieved to hear the clipped tones of Lord Winterbourne directing the fire of his soldiers. His storm-troopers were still fighting, trading shots with a swarming pack of pink-skinned aliens, whipping spines trailing from their bizarre avian skulls.

'Kroot,' snarled Uriel, recognising the aliens as a mercenary race in thrall to the tau.

They moved as though their muscles were rapidly uncoiling springs, bounding and leaping with a hideously unnatural gait. The horrid screeching sound was coming from them, and they wielded long rifles shaped like black-powder weapons used by feral world barbarians.

Nathaniel Winterbourne fired his battered laspistol from behind the cover of a tangle of fallen metal. His frock coat was in tatters, and his helmet had been torn from his head. Blood coated the right side of his face and streamed from a long cut on his arm, but the wiry colonel still raged at the foes before him. His hounds stood beside him, barking furiously at the kroot.

One of the kroot vaulted the debris sheltering Winterbourne, the jagged blades fixed to the ends of its rifles slashing for his head. Winterbourne shot the creature square in the face, the blast tearing away most of its skull. The momentum of the kroot's leap carried it onwards, and it's corpse bore the colonel to the ground.

The vorehounds savaged the body, and Uriel moved on as he saw Winterbourne pick himself up, his jacket stained with the alien's blood. The distinctive hard bangs of bolter-fire joined the cacophony of battle, and a handful of kroot were instantly cut down, blown in half or simply exploding under the impact of the shells. Dozens more survived the fusillade, their squawking war cries rising in urgency and ferocity.

A storm-trooper dropped as a solid shot took him low in the gut, and another fell as a kroot fighter slammed a serrated blade into his chest. Uriel drew a bead on the killer, a heavily-muscled beast with a flaring crest of red quill-spines, but it bounded clear of its victim with a throaty screech, and Uriel lost sight of it in the billowing dust.

The intensity of gunfire was building, and Uriel felt a trio of impacts on his armour, but none were serious enough to trouble him. Kroot were swarming over the storm-troopers, and yet another was brought down, hacked down by four kroot with bloody beaks and stabbing knives. A shadow moved beside Uriel, and he swung around as a hissing kroot warrior hurled itself at him.

Uriel caught it in midair, his iron grip closing around its throat as its blade scored down his breastplate. One swift twist and its neck snapped. It died without another sound. A second beast came at him from his right. Uriel dropped the dead kroot, spinning and drawing his sword in the same motion. The blade sang out in a golden arc and neatly beheaded his attacker.

Uriel quickly scanned the combat, his enhanced battle-sense reading the ebb and flow of the fight in a moment. Liquid fire bloomed from the flamer, and a

host of alien warriors shrieked in pain as they were immolated. Bolter-fire beat a merciless, relentless tattoo, and only occasionally did the sharper crack of the alien weapons pierce its symphony of destruction.

'Forward!' shouted Uriel. 'Take the fight to them! Chaplain Clausel, we need your warriors! To me! Now!'

His Space Marines were shooting and killing with methodical precision, moving and firing with the practiced ease of the galaxy's finest warriors. The surviving storm-troopers were fighting hard, but the kroot were too many for them to contain.

The commander of the Lavrentians was fighting a pair of kroot warriors blade to blade, and though the wiry colonel was holding his own, Uriel saw that he wouldn't last much longer. Uriel ran through the fighting to join Winterbourne, cutting down the first of the colonel's opponents with his sword, and putting a bolt-round through the other's chest.

Winterbourne swept his sword around and gave Uriel an elaborate bow, his face breaking open in an expression of relief.

'My thanks, Uriel,' gasped Winterbourne. 'I'm obliged to you. I don't think I could have held them much longer.'

'We're not out of this yet,' said Uriel as a handful of kroot came at them. Uriel scooped up the corpse of one of the aliens and hurled it at the charging beasts. One was tripped by the body, but the others easily sprang over it. Uriel surged to meet them.

A blade snapped against his armour, and he smashed his shoulder-guard into the kroot's chest, pulverising its ribcage and hurling it back. He felt a rifle blade hook around his leg, and stepped into the attack, stamping down on the weapon. It snapped, and he thrust his sword into the kroot's belly, tearing it upwards and out through its collarbone.

It fell with a horrendous screech of pain as the kroot Uriel had tripped with the corpse sprang to its feet. Winterbourne's sword lanced out and tore through its chest, but no sooner had he delivered the deathblow than he was punched from his feet by a powerful beast with foaming jaws and slashing claws.

At first, Uriel thought one of the colonel's hounds had turned on its master, but then he saw that the creature was lithe and wrought from the same stock as the kroot. Its jaws snapped shut on Winterbourne's arm, and the man's scream of pain was hideous.

Uriel had no time to aid the colonel as the remaining two kroot attacked. One fired its rifle at point-blank range, the round impacting on Uriel's breastplate and leaving a perfectly round dent in the centre of the eagle. Uriel's sword swept up and hacked the alien's weapon in two as the second monster, the heavily-muscled

creature with the crest of red quills, slammed the butt of its weapon against Uriel's helmet.

* * *

THE ALIEN HOUND'S eyes were like cloudy pearls, and they locked with Nathaniel Winterbourne's as it bit through the heavy fabric of his uniform jacket. Blood streamed down his sleeve, and he felt its fangs close on the bones of his forearm. He kicked out at the vile beast through the haze of agony as he fumbled for his pistol.

The weapon had fallen from his grip when the creature bore him to the ground and might as well have been a hundred kilometres away. His sword was buried in the chest of another alien and just as far out of reach. He kicked and punched, but the beast was oblivious to his attacks. Winterbourne cried out as he saw another two alien hunting beasts barrelling through the smoke and dust of battle towards him, their jaws wide and ready to tear him apart.

They never reached him.

Two black and gold bullet-like forms intercepted them in a flurry of snapping fangs and tearing claws. Winterbourne's heart swelled as his faithful vorehounds, creatures he'd acquired during a deployment to Vastian's World, leapt to his defence. Germaine rolled in the dust with one of the hounds, while Fynlae, scrapper Fynlae who'd lost his leg in the storm of an artillery strike on Boranis, faced off against the other.

Fresh agony coursed down Winterbourne's arm, and he reached up with his free hand to jab his fingers into the eyes of the attacking beast. It yelped in pain, and relaxed its grip a fraction. He tore his limb from its jaws in a welter of blood, and scrabbled over the rock towards his fallen laspistol. His hand closed on its grip as an immense weight landed on him, pinning him to the ground.

He smelled the hot, rank breath of the creature on his back. Saliva sprayed from its jaws and spattered the back of his head. He tried to roll the beast off, but it was too heavy. Before it fastened its jaws on his neck, the weight was suddenly gone, and he felt a growling, howling scrum of fur and flesh thrashing behind him. Winterbourne propped himself up on his good arm, seeing Fynlae locked in a battle of fang and claw with the alien beast.

His vorehound's missing leg had not dimmed its ferocity, and it fought in a frenzy to protect him. Bared teeth flashed, and blood sprayed into the air. The alien hound gave a screeching yelp of pain, and Winterbourne let out a wordless shout of pride as Fynlae ripped its throat out.

Winterbourne glanced over his shoulder, and his heart sank.

Germaine was dead, her belly torn open and her eyes staring glassily at the sky, but so too was her killer, the vorehound's jaws locked around its throat. The beast that Fynlae had faced earlier was dead, its face a mask of blood where the old, war-scarred hound had crushed its skull in his jaws.

Behind the dead animals, Captain Ventris was on his knees, struggling with a pair of kroot fighters. One circled the combat, darting in to stab at Uriel's armour with a long-bladed knife, while a brute of a monster with a crest of flaming red spines attempted to drive its rifle-blade into Uriel's neck.

Uriel's bulk was so much greater than the kroot's, that it should have been a mockery of a competition, but the alien's powerful physique was proving to be a match for that of the Space Marine.

Winterbourne raised his pistol, fighting to hold it steady as the creature forced its long blade towards Uriel's throat.

MYKOLA SHONAI HAD aged in the years since Pavonis had been saved from the insurrection of Kasimir de Valtos. Her grey hair had turned white, and, though the sharpness of her green eyes was undimmed, a genetic defect in her retinal structure meant that she was an unsuitable candidate for ophthalmic surgery, and was now forced to wear eyeglasses to see much beyond her immediate surroundings.

In her long cream robes, she looked like a matronly famulus, but Koudelkar knew her well enough not to let her appearance fool him into underestimating her intelligence. She had once ruled a planet of the Emperor and such an achievement was not to be taken lightly.

His aunt was pacing along a marble flagged path in the south arboretum when he found her. She claimed she did her best thinking when she paced, and when she turned to face him, the excitement that radiated from her was palpable. The air in the arboretum was hot and humid, and Koudelkar could see his bodyguards sweating in their heavy armour, though the skitarii seemed unaffected. He wondered if they could alter their metabolism to better cope with changing environments.

Evening sunlight shone through the treated glass walls and ceiling, creating a sweltering environment better suited to raise the plants cultivated from the few stems recovered from the wasteland of the Gresha Forest.

She rushed over to him and looked him up and down. 'You'll be changing into your dress uniform, won't you?'

The words were phrased as a question, but Koudelkar knew his aunt's mannerisms well enough to know that it was actually a statement. Mykola

brushed at his shoulders and shook her head.

'Yes, I think so. You'll want to make a good impression,' she said.

'A good impression on whom?' asked Koudelkar, stepping away from her fussing.

'The representative, who else?' she said, as if he were being obtuse, and began straightening his hair with a moistened palm.

Koudelkar threw Lortuen Perjed a confused glance. 'Adept Perjed told me he was just about to arrive.'

'Hmm… oh, yes, of course,' said Mykola, straightening his jacket. 'Oh well, this will serve, I suppose.'

'You want me to make a good impression on a man I don't even know,' said Koudelkar, prising away her hands. Aunt Mykola always fussed over him, more than his mother ever did, but this was extreme, even for her. 'Does he even have a name?'

'Of course he does.'

'Then what is it?'

Mykola hesitated, looking away for the briefest moment, but Koudelkar read the unease in her body language. 'He's called Aun.'

'Aun?' asked Perjed, with a sharp intake of breath. 'What manner of name is that?'

Mykola shrugged, as though the nature of the representative's name was a matter of supreme indifference to her. 'It's an off-world name, Adept Perjed. It's strange, I know, but no stranger than ours are to him, I expect.'

Koudelkar decided he'd had enough of his aunt's evasive answers and looked her straight in the eye.

'Well, does he have a last name? And who or what does he represent? You know, you've told me next to nothing about this person or how you know him. You've spun me a grand tale of how he can offer Pavonis great things, but unless you tell me who he is and what organisation he represents, then I am leaving right now.'

Mykola folded her arms and turned away from him. 'You're just like your grandfather, do you know that?'

'If you mean I'm not about to put up with vague answers to specific questions, then I suppose I am. Don't change the subject or try and make me feel guilty. If I am going to do business with this person then I need to know more about him. I cannot negotiate from a position of ignorance.'

Mykola turned to face him, and he almost backed away from the steely resolve he saw in her eyes.

'Very well, you want to know the truth?'

'I do.'

'You'll see it's for the best,' said Mykola, glancing over at his bodyguards and Lortuen Perjed, 'but you're not going to like it at first.'

'I assure you, Aunt, I like lies even less.'

She nodded and said, 'I've never lied to you, Koudelkar, but I've deliberately shielded you from some knowledge until the time was right.'

'That sounds like more evasion,' said Koudelkar. 'The right time is now, so get to the point.'

'I'm getting there if you'd let me,' snapped Mykola, walking towards him. 'Aun represents a collective from the Dal'yth sept.'

'Dal'yth?' hissed Adept Perjed. 'Emperor's tears, what have you done, woman?'

'Be quiet, you insolent little man,' snapped Mykola.

'Never heard of them,' said Koudelkar, alarmed by Perjed's exclamation.

'That shouldn't surprise you,' said a voice behind him, and Koudelkar recognised his mother's caustic tones.

'Keep out of this, Pawluk,' said his aunt.

Koudelkar sighed in exasperation. His mother and aunt sharing the same room was like putting two hungry tigers in a cage. Why they insisted on living in the same house, even one large enough for them to avoid each other, was a constant puzzle to Koudelkar.

Pawluk Shonai's face was as pinched and hostile as ever, her lifeless grey hair pulled back in a tight bun. He felt the tension ratchet up a notch. Despite the warmth of the arboretum, a distinct chill entered with his mother.

For an amused moment, Koudelkar wondered if the plants would suffer from the chill. 'Hello, Mother,' he said. 'Won't you join us?'

His mother linked her arm with his and glared at his aunt. 'Well?' she asked.

'Well what?' asked Mykola.

'Aren't you going to tell him? About this Aun?'

'Tell me what?' asked Koudelkar.

His aunt pursed her lips, and Koudelkar could see her anger threatening to boil over. 'I was just about to tell him, Pawluk.'

'Governor,' said Lortuen Perjed urgently, 'we must get you out of here.'

'Why, what's going on?'

Before Perjed could answer, Koudelkar heard the approaching thrum of engines from outside the house. He looked up and saw three aircraft swoop over the glass roof of the arboretum. Waving fronds, leaves and climbing flowers obscured the details of them, but it was clear that they were of a design he had never seen before.

'What manner of craft are these?' he asked. 'I don't recognise the pattern.'

'Governor,' repeated Perjed. 'We have to go. Now.'

The aircraft were a drab olive colour and striped with camouflage patterns, but Koudelkar could make out little else of their shapes. Two appeared to be smaller, wedge-shaped fighters and the third was a four-engine transport craft of some sort. Each was gracefully proportioned and flew with a grace and an agility that was quite out of keeping with any Imperial aircraft in which Koudelkar had flown.

As the smaller fighters circled overhead, the transport craft rotated on its axis and descended through the growing dusk towards the stone terrace beyond the arboretum on a rippling column of distorted air. Mykola threw open the large doors leading to the terrace and beckoned him to follow her.

His aunt's evasive answers, and Adept Perjed's insistence that he leave, gnawed at his resolve. He looked down at his mother, alarmed at the panic he saw there.

'I didn't know until today, I swear,' she said. 'She made me promise not to tell you.'

Deciding that it was time he find out what was going on, Koudelkar walked out onto the terrace, warm gusts from the aircraft's descent billowing his coat and hair. Perjed, the Lavrentians and skitarii followed him, and he spotted that they carried their weapons to the fore with the safeties off. He shielded his eyes from flying grit as a wide ramp lowered from the transport craft's rear and an armoured machine stepped from its brightly lit interior.

It was humanoid, standing at least twice the height of a man and was a thing of beauty. Fashioned from plates of what looked like olive green ceramics, it was constructed with a fine sense of craftsmanship as well as aesthetics. Its rectangular head mount turned towards him, and, though it resembled nothing so much as a remote picter, Koudelkar felt sure there was intelligence lurking behind the blinking red light of its lens.

Was this a machine at all, or was it crewed by a living creature? It was certainly large enough for someone to pilot. At first glance, the machine looked like an automated loader servitor, but the lethal-looking weapons mounted on each arm told Koudelkar that this creation was not designed for labour, but for battle.

His appreciation of the machine's construction evaporated, and his mother's grip on his arm tightened. Koudelkar felt some of her fear transfer to him as he saw that the Lavrentians had their hellguns aimed squarely at the machine's chest, and that the implanted rotary cannons of the skitarii were spooling up.

Koudelkar realised that the situation could turn ugly very quickly, and

struggled to project an air of calm authority. Two identical machines followed the first, each moving with a smooth grace and autonomy not normally found in mechanised creations, finally convincing Koudelkar that the fighting machines were crewed by living pilots.

His mouth was dry with tension, but he turned to his bodyguards and said, 'Hold your fire, but be ready.'

The three machines stepped to the right of the aircraft and another three emerged from its interior, taking up position to the left. Koudelkar knew nothing of their capabilities, but felt sure that, in a firefight, he and his men would come off worst.

'Mykola,' he hissed, 'what have you done?'

'What needed to be done to save our world from being taken from us by outsiders,' said his aunt, sending a withering glance towards Adept Perjed as she strode towards the aircraft. Its rear engine nacelles rotated into a lateral position in line with the running lines of the hull, and his aunt halted at the bottom of the ramp as a slender figure appeared at the top.

The figure was clad in long robes of white and gold with a shimmering crimson weave, and its head was framed by a high collar of enamelled silver and crimson. It carried a short, caramel-coloured baton topped with a glinting gem in each hand, holding them crossed over its chest. Its face was grey, the colour of a winter sky at dusk, and its flat, alien features were devoid of expression.

His aunt bowed to the figure, and then turned towards him.

'Koudelkar, allow me to introduce Aun'rai of the Dal'yth sept and envoy of the Tau Empire,' she said.

PART II

UNTAINTED BY DOUBT AND UNSULLIED BY SELF AGGRANDISEMENT

EIGHT

THE KROOT WAS a monster, its strength phenomenal. Uriel's helmet had saved him from the worst of its blow, and he fought to hold its heavy blade at bay as another beast stabbed at him with a long knife. His armour was holding, but it wouldn't take much for the alien to get lucky and find a weaker spot. Though the blows weren't penetrating his armour, he could feel the pain of each impact.

The creature's muscles bunched and swelled in unnatural ways, somehow able to meet the genhanced strength crafted into Uriel's body and that of his power armour. It squawked and spat in his face, its breath reeking of meat and blood. Uriel heard the snapping discharge of a laspistol, and a flaring bolt of light slashed across the kroot's shoulder. It screeched in pain, and Uriel rammed his helmet into its face. In the moment of respite, he hurled himself backwards, pulling the creature up and over him.

Its blade stabbed into the ground and snapped as it sailed over his head with a surprised squawk. Uriel rolled onto his side and swept up his sword. The knife-armed kroot came at him, its blade slashing for his face. Uriel swayed aside and hammered his blade into its belly, almost cutting it in two.

Lord Winterbourne staggered over to him, cradling his bloody arm tucked into his uniform jacket and holding onto his laspistol with the other. The three-legged vorehound padded alongside him, its flanks heaving and furrowed with bloody gouges.

Winterbourne nodded, but Uriel had no time to thank him for his aid as yet more kroot came at them, a pack of screeching fighters with rifles held like quarterstaffs, their blades glittering in the weak light. He risked a glance behind him to check what had become of the red-quilled monster, but it was nowhere to be seen.

'Come on then, you whoresons!' shouted Winterbourne, emptying the last of his laspistol's powercell into the charging aliens. One kroot fell with a chunk blasted from its stomach, and another came on, despite a dreadful wound to its shoulder.

Then the heavens blazed with light, and a host of screaming angels of death dropped into the fight on wings of fire. They bore roaring swords of silver, and were led by a black-armoured avenger in a bone-white death mask. This mighty apparition carried a winged golden staff, and slew his enemies with brutal sweeps of its crackling fiery edge.

Chaplain Clausel and his Assault Marines slammed into the battle with a searing flare of howling jump packs and the hammering of boots on rock. The kroot scattered like pins as the furious slaughter began, and their screeching filled the air.

Uriel pulled Winterbourne clear of the swirling melee as pistols boomed and chainswords bellowed. In moments, the kroot were butchered, the ferocity and suddenness of the assault leaving only torn carcasses in its wake.

Clausel hacked down the last of the kroot, standing tall amid the carnage, and never had the Chaplain looked so mighty and terrible, his weapon coated in blood and his skull-faced helmet red with the stuff.

The noise of battle changed in an instant. No longer did the sound of kroot weapons punctuate the roar of bolter-fire. Even the actinic crack of hellgun-fire had ceased. The dust thrown up by the collapse of the towers and the fighting settled, and a curious calm descended upon Deep Canyon Six.

'All forces, rally on me,' ordered Uriel, retrieving his bolter and replacing the spent magazine with a fresh one. He sheathed his sword as Clausel strode towards him.

'We should pursue,' said the Chaplain. 'Kill them all.'

'No,' said Uriel. 'These were nothing. A token force to kill any who survived the blasts.'

'Nevertheless, we should finish them,' urged Clausel.

Uriel shook his head. 'I won't go charging blindly into the unknown against an enemy skilled in evasion, who has a greater knowledge of the local terrain.'

Clausel bowed. 'That is, of course, the correct course of action, captain.'

'We will secure the battlefield and return to the gunship,' said Uriel warily. 'Governor Shonai needs to know what happened here.'

'As you wish,' said Clausel, turning away as Uriel let out a deep breath. His racing metabolism had begun to slow as Lord Winterbourne and his vorehound approached. Uriel removed his helmet, and ran a hand over his scalp and chin.

'Thank you for saving my life,' said Winterbourne, holding out his hand.

'I should say the same, colonel,' said Uriel, taking the proffered hand and nodding towards the vorehound, which snarled and bared its teeth at the kroot corpses.

'That is a fierce beast, colonel,' he said. 'Proud and loyal.'

'Indeed he is,' agreed Winterbourne through a mask of blood. 'Once a vorehound has adapted to its new master, it will protect him unto death. That alien monstrosity almost had me back there, I don't mind telling you. Bugger would have done for me if it weren't for old Fynlae here. Earned himself a commendation for valour, and no mistake. Didn't you, lad?'

'I think they both did,' said Uriel, spying the body of the other vorehound.

'Yes,' sighed Winterbourne, patting the head of his hound. 'Poor Germaine. It's a shame, but then I suppose they're fighting beasts. It's what they do. One mustn't get too attached to them, you know, but it's hard. Still, I suppose we've got more important things to worry about now.'

'It certainly looks that way,' agreed Uriel.

THE SPACE MARINES and surviving storm-troopers began securing the battlefield with practiced efficiency, treating wounds and gathering the bodies of the honoured dead. The wounded were carried from the gully to the Aquila lander and med-evaced back to Brandon Gate, while the dead aliens were unceremoniously dumped on a pyre and set alight by a sustained burst of promethium from an Astartes flamer.

None of Uriel's warriors had fallen in the fight with the kroot, and Learchus and his combat squad found Harkus alive, buried amongst a huge pile of wreckage at the base of a fallen vox-mast. His servo-harness had taken the full force of the blast, but both his legs were crushed beyond repair, and much of his torso had been burned away. Only the superlative endurance of a Space Marine had kept him alive, and Uriel immediately despatched four warriors to carry Harkus back to the Thunderhawk for emergency medicae treatment.

His armour's systems would keep Harkus alive for now, but his body would require the ministrations of Apothecary Selenus back at Fortress Idaeus if he were to survive. He and Harkus were not close, but Uriel felt a profound sadness as he watched his battle-brothers carefully lift the wounded Techmarine and bear him away. Harkus would probably live, but his time as a warrior was over. His body had suffered too much damage, and, even with replacement limbs, he would never be fit for frontline duty again. Uriel wondered if Harkus would mind that much of his body would now be artificial, or would he view that as becoming closer to the Machine-God?

With the battlefield secured, Uriel was the last to leave the canyon, climbing back the way they had come, and leaving the devastation of the array behind. He reached the top of the cut stairs and emerged onto the plateau above.

The engines of the Thunderhawk rumbled and strained, as though eager to be away from this place, and Uriel didn't blame it. The mountains were dismal and forsaken, and he wondered if some part of that was due to the monstrous creature that had been buried beneath them for uncounted eons. Even with it gone, perhaps the echoes of its imprisonment were strong enough to taint the world with the memory of its bleak and horrifying presence.

Uriel put such morose thoughts from his mind as Learchus emerged from the Thunderhawk, his manner brisk and his face grim.

'What's wrong?' asked Uriel, already sensing something awry.

'A communication from Admiral Tiberius,' said Learchus. 'He tried to reach your armour's vox, but the distortion of the array prevented direct communication.'

'What's the message?'

'He reports numerous contacts matching previously encountered energy signatures appearing across the surface of the prime continental mass,' said Learchus.

'Tau?'

Learchus nodded. 'It would appear so.'

'Then the destruction of the array has acted as an attack signal,' said Uriel, running for the Thunderhawk. 'Where is Governor Shonai? Has he been secured?'

'Lord Winterbourne has contacted Major Ornella at Brandon Gate,' said Learchus. 'She says that Koudelkar Shonai is still at his family estates on the shores of Lake Masura.'

Uriel climbed the ramp to the Thunderhawk's interior as the last of his warriors embarked and took position in the bucket seats along the fuselage of the aircraft.

'What protection does he have?'

'A squad of Lavrentian storm-troopers and a pair of skitarii,' said Learchus, consulting a wall-mounted data-slate. 'Plus, whatever personal bodyguards and security measures are in place at his aunt's estates.'

'That won't be much,' said Uriel.

'No. A basic surveyor/alert system and few armed retainers at most.'

'How far is Lake Masura?' asked Uriel urgently. 'Can we reach it?'

Learchus bent to consult a glowing map on a nearby screen. 'It is a hundred and fifty kilometres west, in the foothills of these mountains. We are carrying enough fuel to get there, and back to Brandon Gate, but that's about it.'

'I'll bet that was one of the first places to register a signal.'

'It was,' said Learchus. 'How did you know?'

'Because that's what I'd do,' said Uriel. 'First you cut off communications, and then you cut off the head of the command structure.'

AN ALIEN WAS standing before him. Of course, Koudelkar had heard of the tau, who on the Eastern Fringe did not know of this expansionist xenos species?

But being introduced to one while standing at his family's estates on a chilly evening was unexpected to say the least. He had always hoped he might one day see a xenos creature, but had imagined it would be down the barrel of a gun or as he gazed at its preserved corpse in a museum.

The robed figure descended the ramp from his ship, and Koudelkar was struck by his grace and poise. Aun'rai moved as though he floated just above the ground. Keeping the batons crossed over his chest, Aun'rai bowed to him and then to his aunt.

'Greetings, Guilder Koudelkar,' said Aun'rai, his voice soothing and flowing like honey.

'Don't speak with it,' hissed Lortuen Perjed. 'Xenos filth!'

Koudelkar said nothing, more because he did not know what to say than through any desire to follow Perjed's advice. The alien took no notice of Perjed's hostility.

He glanced over his shoulder at the Lavrentian soldiers and his skitarii. His confusion mounted. The tau were their enemies. Shouldn't these men be shooting at them? Even as the thought formed, he arrived at the conclusion his soldiers and the skitarii defence protocols had reached long before him.

If shots were fired, they would all die. The giant fighting machines standing to either side of the humming aircraft would kill them in a matter of moments, and, looking beyond Aun'rai, Koudelkar could see at least a score of armed xenos soldiers inside the aircraft.

As much as he knew he should order his men to open fire, Koudelkar was not so far removed from his mandatory service in the PDF that he didn't appreciate the difference between courage and suicide.

'Welcome to our home, Aun'rai,' said his aunt, when Koudelkar did not speak. 'You are most welcome, and may I say what a pleasure it is to finally meet you in person.'

'The honour is mine, I assure you,' replied Aun'rai smoothly, uncrossing his arms and sliding his batons into ceramic sheaths at his side. 'To meet one of such wisdom and foresight is a rarity in these troubled times. It is my fervent hope that we can begin a new phase in our relations that will allow peaceful trade and co-operation to flourish. Such relations will prove to be for the greater good of both our peoples, I am quite certain.'

'You are too kind,' said Mykola. 'Please, will you join us for some refreshments?'

'Thank you, no,' said Aun'rai. 'We have taken sustenance already.'

'Of course,' said Mykola. 'Koudelkar? Would you escort Aun'rai within?'

'I will not,' he said at last. 'It's a xenos. Here. At our house.'

'Koudelkar,' said his aunt, and he recognised the icy threat thinly concealed by her tone. 'Aun'rai is our guest.'

Anger rose within him at her presumption of superiority, and he turned to his aunt. 'I think you're forgetting who's governor, Mykola. Contact with aliens is a crime, have you forgotten that? Sharben will toss you in the Glasshouse for this, and that will be the end of you. Even I can't overlook this, for heaven's sake!'

'I thought you of all people would be more open-minded, Koudelkar,' said his aunt with what he knew to be contrived disappointment. 'After all, aren't you always the one complaining about how the Administratum is keeping your hands tied?'

This last comment was directed at Lortuen Perjed, who looked fit to burst a blood vessel, such was the hue of his skin.

'Have you lost your mind, Mykola?' spat Perjed. 'You'll be shot for this, you know that, don't you?'

'This is a chance to rebuild Pavonis,' she continued, ignoring Perjed's threat. 'You just have to be willing to take a small step beyond your comfort zone.'

'Comfort zone? This goes way beyond a "small step". This is treason,' said Koudelkar.

'Don't be dramatic,' scolded his aunt. 'This is just a business negotiation. The tau can offer us technology that makes the Mechanicus gear look like tinker toys. They're willing to locate a great many of their most dynamic industries on Pavonis, Koudelkar. Think of what that could mean for us and our people: employment, currency, trade, and a position of leadership in the sector markets. Isn't that what you've been striving for these last few years?'

Before Koudelkar could reply, the tau envoy reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. His first instinct was to shrug it off as repugnant, but he did not, and he felt a curious feeling stirring within him, not acceptance, per se, but interest. If there was even a grain of truth to what his aunt was saying, perhaps it was worth hearing what this alien had to say.

After all, Koudelkar had broken no laws. If there were any price to be paid, it would be borne by his aunt. She had set up this meeting. She had brought the aliens here. Koudelkar was blameless, and if he listened to what the creature had to say, well, what was the harm?

'I will hear him out, but I make no promises,' said Koudelkar, amazed that he was actually saying the words, but feeling wholly natural in doing so.

'Koudelkar!' cried Lortuen. 'Don't be a fool. This is wrong and you know it.'

His aunt glared at the adept of the Administratum, and Koudelkar felt his irritation grow at the wizened old man who had held him back from fully realising his potential as governor of Pavonis. Perjed had worked with him to

pull his world back from the abyss of rebellion into which it had almost plummeted, but now all Koudelkar felt towards him was antipathy. The feeling was strange, and he wondered how he had not realised the true scale of his dislike for the man until now.

'Be silent, adept,' said Koudelkar. 'Know your place. I am governor, and I will decide who I talk to and who I do business with. I will listen to Aun'rai, and if, at the end of our discussions, I do not wish to deal with him, he will be free to leave and things will continue as they have always done.'

'If you believe that, you are a fool,' said Perjed. 'This can only end in blood.'

MAJOR ALITHEA ORNELLA rode across the brightly lit parade ground of Camp Torum on a chestnut gelding named Moran, accompanied by her command squad. Riding was Ornella's passion, and, though her rank normally precluded her from charging into battle on the back of such a fine beast, she took the opportunity to saddle Moran whenever the chance arose.

She slowed the horse with a gentle pull on the reins and a light pressure of her thighs, watching the purposeful activity around her with a satisfied eye. Blazing arc lights on the edges of the camp dispelled the gloom of gathering night and illuminated the preparations of a regiment of the Emperor's Imperial Guard as it made itself ready for battle.

Armoured vehicles lined three sides of the parade ground: Leman Russ Conquerors, Hellhounds, Basilisk artillery pieces and row upon row of Chimeras. Each mighty vehicle swarmed with mechanics and enginseers as their crews went through pre-deployment checks and blessings. Ornella felt a curious mix of excitement and tension at the thought of going into battle once more; excitement because she would have the chance to serve the Emperor, and tension because who relished the thought of going into harm's way?

It had been good to rest the regiment on Pavonis after sustained front-line operations, for the strain had begun to tell in the number of disciplinary infractions and combat fatigue citations sent up the chain from platoon commanders.

Pavonis had been a relatively easy deployment, a chance to ease down from the stress and exhaustion of combat operations, and an opportunity to refresh the soldiers in urban pacification duties. Such work was inglorious, but necessary, and Ornella ensured that any duty given to the 44th Lavrentian Hussars was completed to the highest standards.

Camp Torum was home to Sword Command of the 44th Lavrentian Hussars, the largest and most heavily armed of the four commands deployed to Pavonis.

Of the other commands, Lance were based on the coast at Praxedes, Shield at the bridge city of Olzetyn, and Banner on the outskirts of the Jotusburg slum, each comprising three thousand mechanised infantry, light armour units and mobile artillery.

Named for the first colonel to take command of the regiment at its founding on the great steppe plateau of Lavrentia, Camp Torum spread out on the northern fringe of Brandon Gate, close to the arterial route of Highway 236. It was a sprawling complex of utilitarian structures, uniformly constructed with only functionality in mind, which was just how Ornella liked it.

Portal-framed hangars clad in ochre sheets of corrugated iron were scattered throughout the camp, medicae stations and barracks separated by sand-filled barriers that could take a hit from a missile launcher and remain unbreached. Some eight thousand soldiers were based at Torum, nearly half of the regiment's strength on Pavonis.

Their few super-heavies sat in hardened shelters originally designed for aircraft, but with the heavy fighting further out on the fringe, most of the planet's air power had been stripped by Battlefleet Ultima. Sentinels patrolled the edge of the camp, a high berm of bulldozed earth, reinforced with segmented plates on both sides. Hardened watchtowers were set at regular intervals around the circumference of the wall, and six Hydra flak tanks scanned the heavens for aerial threats.

Over the clatter of tanks, shouted orders and marching Guardsmen, Ornella heard a sound like a sheet of cloth flapping in the wind, but dismissed it as she and her horsemen rode across the parade ground. Ornella was pleased at the sense of urgency that invested the Guardsmen. As demanding as urban operations were, an inevitable sense of complacency soon set in. Patrols became routine, boredom crept up and patterns became predictable. Though no professional soldier relished the thought of being shot at, they soon began to chafe at the forced idleness of garrison duty and actually longed to get back to an active warzone.

The communication from Lord Winterbourne had come as a welcome shock, and Ornella was pleased to have the opportunity to test her new rapid reaction procedures. So far, they appeared to be working like clockwork, Guardsmen forming up outside their barracks before moving out to their transports, and tank crews prepping their machines for a pre-battle blessing from the regiment's preachers.

Prelate Culla's Rhino rumbled up and down the parade ground, his strident tones blaring from the augmitters on the upper deck of his vehicle. Culla stood atop his pulpit, his fiery sword cleaving the air to punctuate his words. Ornella

smiled as she saw him, pleased that the 44th had such an inspirational figure to put fire in the bellies of the regiment's soldiers.

She rode down the line of tanks, her mounted command squad following behind her as she turned towards the centre of the parade ground. One of her squad eased his horse alongside hers.

'All looking good, major,' said Captain Mederic.

'Yes,' she agreed, trying not to sound too pleased. Mederic was a good officer. He was intelligent, seasoned and a hell of a fighter, although he clearly disliked being on horseback. Mederic commanded the Hounds, the 44th's Scout Platoon, and was a man used to operating on his own initiative. Despite that, he was also a man who could be trusted to follow orders.

'So what's the word, ma'am? This a real deployment or an exercise?'

'It's real, captain,' she said. 'Lord Winterbourne and the Ultramarines have engaged the enemy in the mountains to the north.'

'Is it tau? That's what the scuttlebutt's saying.'

She nodded. 'Yes. It looks like they've taken out a significant amount of the vox-network, and we're going on alert to secure the major cities once confirmation comes in from the Administratum.'

'We still have to wait for that? Even now?'

'I'm afraid so,' said Ornella. 'It's frustrating, but given what happened here, I understand the need for such controls.'

'Not me,' said Mederic. 'This planet's about to be hit by xenos raiders and we need to wait for some form-stampers to give us the go ahead to defend it? Begging your pardon, ma'am, but that's just grade A bull.'

'Maybe so, captain, but those are our rules of engagement, and we must abide by them.'

'Any idea when we're gonna get that confirmation?'

'Not yet, no.'

Mederic grunted in disgust, but Ornella left him to his misgivings. Privately, she shared them, but if Alithea Ornella had learned anything in her ten years of active service it was that only by following explicitly worded orders could a regiment function. She and Lord Winterbourne had inculcated the 44th to function as a well-oiled machine whereby orders were issued with alacrity and obeyed without delay.

With clear orders, the regiment functioned. Without them, it did not.

She glanced upwards as she heard the sound of flapping cloth again, but the lights blazing on the edge of the camp compromised her night vision and she could see nothing in the darkness. She turned in the saddle. The rest of her command squad sat in a loose semicircle around her: two Guardsmen with

lasguns slung over their shoulders, a vox-operator and the regimental banner-bearer.

She was about to write the noise off as the banner flapping in the wind, before realising that there was no wind. Puzzled, she looked up once again.

'Everything all right ma'am?' asked Mederic.

'Hmmm? Oh, yes, captain,' she said. 'Just thought I heard something.'

THE TEMPLUM FABRICAE was busy, even though there was no public service until the morning. Hard times had a way of bringing out the devotion in people, and Gaetan Baltazar struggled not to feel contempt as he made his way through the devotees kneeling in the pews and praying to the anthracite statue of the Emperor at the end of the nave.

To see so many people crowding his temple should have brought him joy, but such conditional devotion was abhorrent to Gaetan. In times of plenty, people would attend the bare minimum of mandatory prayers, but in times of woe and destitution, everyone came to prayers morning, noon and night to ask the Emperor for a boon.

Gaetan knew he should be thankful for so many eager worshippers, but it was difficult when he knew they came for personal salvation, not the glorification of the Emperor.

Clad in his ochre vestments and carrying his broad-bladed eviscerator before him, he made his way to the altar to recite the Prayer of Day's Ending before retiring for the night. Though skilled in the use of the monstrous, chainblade sword and the heavy inferno pistol buckled at his waist, he did not like to carry them at worship. Their presence made a mockery of his belief in the Emperor's power of forgiveness and mercy, but they were as much part of his robes of office as the aquila, and could not be discarded.

The acolytes in steel-dust robes that followed him bore similarly enormous blades, and even the chittering prayer cherubs that floated above him carried small daggers and implanted laser weaponry. The scent of their anointed skins was a sickly sweet fragrance that caught in the back of Gaetan's throat, and, not for the first time, he wished that the vaunted tech-priests of Pavonis would fix the ventilation systems of the templum.

A tall building of exposed structure and machined parts, the Templum Fabricae was a monument to the Emperor in his dual aspect of Master of Mankind and Omnissiah, though the priests of Mars would have a hard time rationalising the constant machine failures that were its bane. Given the planet's troubled history, perhaps they wouldn't, he reflected sourly.

The walls were adorned with sheet iron sculptures and welded plates with etched scripture. Private side chapels had once been dedicated to the Emperor by the cartels, each paying a substantial tribute to the templum's coffers to secure a burial place for their departed leaders. Gaetan had thought the practice repugnant, but Bishop Irlam, the templum's former master, had been little more than a mouthpiece for the cartels, and his pockets had been lined with their silver.

In the wake of the rebellion, Irlam had been disgraced, and the Administratum had decreed that the chapels be re-consecrated to the glory of the Emperor without favour to any one organisation. Gaetan had taken great pleasure in instructing the templum servitors to remove any indication that the chapels had once been devoted to private citizens.

That had been the only time the directives of the Administratum had proven to be helpful, and Gaetan railed against such interference whenever he could. It was difficult when bureaucrats controlled every aspect of the planet's workings, men with no understanding of faith and the importance of devotion. For the sake of unity, Gaetan reluctantly obeyed their directives, and continued to preach his doctrine of quiet industry and devotion to the Emperor.

He knew it was not a doctrine that found much favour on the Eastern Fringe, but it was one that had served him well over the years, and he was too set in his ways to change. Out here, preachers who bellowed for war and filled the hearts of men with hatred were the norm.

The confrontation with Lord Winterbourne over the zealot Culla had only served to reinforce that view, and, while he could appreciate the value of such doctrine on this frontier of mankind's dominion of the galaxy, it was not a creed he would willingly preach. Hatred and violence only bred more of the same, and to oppose such things with the light of the Emperor's wisdom was the lonely path trodden by Gaetan Baltazar alone.

He remembered the day he had taken his final vows at the Temple of the Blessed Martyr on Golanthis nearly two decades ago. Abbot Malene, his spiritual mentor and friend, had spoken to him the night before he took ship to the Eastern Fringe.

'I fear you will have a hard time convincing people of your beliefs where you are going,' the venerable abbot had said, sipping a honeyed tisane. 'The Eastern Fringe is a place of war.'

'Then it is exactly the right place for me,' he had countered.

'How so?'

'How better to end war than by preaching peace?'

'The Emperor's creed is war,' Malene reminded him. 'His doctrine was spread

from Terra through the barrels of guns and on the blades of swords. It has survived because we defend that faith. That's not just a flowery term, Gaetan. It has meaning. You think the Ecclesiarchy schools you in the arts of war for no reason?'

'No. I know why we are trained to fight, but I do not believe that violence is the key to the Emperor's wisdom. There is much to His teachings that are beautiful, and have nothing to do with war and death. Those are the parts of His word I wish to take to the people of the Imperium.'

'Aye, there is beauty,' agreed Malene, 'but even a rose needs thorns to defend it. How will your doctrine of hard work turn aside an enemy intent on slaying you? How will it give those to whom you minister the faith to stand against the many threats that lurk in the darkness? There are vile foes in the galaxy that care nothing for our teachings, races that will meet your pretty words with murder. I fear you have set yourself an insurmountable task, my friend.'

'I know, but even an avalanche begins with a single pebble,' said Gaetan.

Those words seemed now foolish to him, yet he held to them as a dying man would cling to his last breath of life. Gaetan reached the altar and set his enormous sword upon it before lifting his robes to kneel before the polished anthracite. He worked his prayer beads between his fingers, and lifted his head towards the reflectively black statue of the Emperor.

Beyond the statue, the chancel was a long, tapered vault with exposed ironwork, and supports from which hung gilded lanterns, incense burners and silken devotional banners. Shadows flickered and danced in the swaying lantern light, and Gaetan blinked as he saw a ripple of movement in the upper reaches of the chancel.

The opening words of his prayer faltered as he saw the blurred distortion of incense on a wide, horizontal girder. For a moment, it had looked as though a human shape had been standing there looking down at him. He peered into the upper reaches of the chancel, shielding his eyes to better penetrate the shifting and uncertain light.

There was something there, but he couldn't make out the details. It was as if the light was somehow distorting around something unseen, which did not wish to come into view.

Gaetan had heard tales of priests who claimed that angels of the Emperor watched over them from on high, but he hadn't taken such stories literally.

He turned to his acolytes and pointed to the chancel roof.

'Do you see that?' he asked.

NINE

URIEL STALKED THE length of the Thunderhawk, his metabolism moving into readiness for combat once more. His armour monitored his heart rate, blood flow and oxygen levels, ensuring his entire body was optimally primed for the business of killing. Learchus moved along the fuselage, checking that every warrior was equipped with a full load of ammunition and had observed the correct pre-battle rituals. His warriors had fought well against the kroot, but if Uriel's suspicions were correct, they would soon be in battle with more technologically advanced foes.

Chaplain Clausel stood by the assault ramp, feet planted firmly on the deck and his crozius arcanum held lightly at his side. The towering warrior-priest recited the catechisms of battle, his booming voice cutting cleanly through the roaring of the Thunderhawk's engines. Dried blood coated his skull-faced helmet, and, though rough thermals from the mountains caused the gunship to buck alarmingly, he neither held to the ready line nor the walls to keep steady.

They were ten minutes out from Lake Masura, flying low and keeping hard to the mountain's flanks. Flying like this cost precious fuel, but it was the only way to avoid detection by enemy countermeasures. As yet, there was no response from the governor or Lortuen Perjed, despite repeated attempts to reach them. Presumably, the jamming technology the tau employed at Deep Canyon Six was being used to keep the governor in the dark as to the presence of aliens on his world.

Uriel hoped he would not find out the hard way.

Lord Winterbourne's Aquila lander was already en route back to Brandon Gate, despite the colonel's bluster that he was fit enough to fly into battle with the Ultramarines. After a brief, but one-sided, discussion, Uriel had convinced him of the need to evacuate his wounded, and to return to his regiment and oversee its mobilisation. Harkus had been placed within the Aquila, and Winterbourne promised that the bloodied Techmarine would be taken to Fortress Idaeus as soon as they landed.

Uriel cleaned the congealed blood of the kroot he had slain from his sword, knowing that soon it would probably be coated in the vital fluids of another living being. Learchus marched down the length of the gunship, and took his seat opposite Uriel. The sergeant's face was serious and drawn, dried blood caking one side. He drew his weapon, a sword similar in design to Uriel's, and

began reciting a prayer to honour its war-spirit.

Uriel let him finish before speaking. 'This will be a tough fight, sergeant.'

'I expect so,' agreed Learchus. 'Any word on support from Brandon Gate?'

'Ancient Peleus was all set to prep the other Thunderhawks, but he will need his warriors in place to defend the city if this is the first stage of an attack. In any case, they would not reach us in time.'

'So we are on our own for this one?'

'We are,' said Uriel, 'but we're not going in on a full engage and destroy mission.'

'We are not?' asked Learchus.

'No, we're going in to retrieve the governor and get out.'

Learchus rubbed a gauntlet over his chin. 'We are only a few squads and a gunship, potentially going up against an enemy of unknown strength and deployment that may be dug in at a fortified location. I hope you have a plan?'

'I do. We make a single pass in the Thunderhawk to ascertain what we can of any enemy presence in and around the Shonai dwelling. Then we execute a hot landing at the weakest point of their perimeter. If they have taken refuge within the building, we do a standard room by room clearance, killing any tau we find.'

'It is a sound plan, but if there are hostages, they may be caught in the crossfire.'

'Our priority is to retrieve the governor,' said Uriel, 'nothing more.'

'Understood,' said Learchus, checking their time to arrival. 'Five minutes out,' he said.

'Are the men ready?' asked Uriel.

'Yes,' said Learchus, sheathing his sword and laying his bolter across his lap. 'They were ready the moment they boarded the gunship.'

'Good. They are a credit to you, Learchus. The entire company is a credit to you.'

'Thank you, captain,' said Learchus, a familiar shadow passing over his features. 'I promised I would look after the men of the company while you were… away.'

'And you have done a grand job,' said Uriel. 'I could not have wished for finer recruits to be raised to the 4th. Captain Idaeus would have been proud.'

Learchus nodded stiffly, and Uriel leaned forward. 'We have a few minutes until Lake Masura, and we need to clear the air between us before we go into battle.'

'What do you mean?' asked Learchus, his blue eyes wary.

'The fact that I am here troubles you, that much is obvious,' said Uriel, 'as does the fact that I am captain again. Part of you wishes I had not returned.'

'That is ridiculous,' snapped Learchus. 'You completed your Death Oath and returned to Macragge with your honour restored. There is nothing else to say.'

'I think there is,' pressed Uriel. 'You feel no bitterness at my return?'

'None.'

'Are you sure?'

'I am sure.'

Uriel leaned back in the shaped metal chair and paused before saying, 'I wish Pasanius were here.'

Surprised at Uriel's change of tack, Learchus nodded slowly. 'His strength would be of great value in the coming fight.'

'It would, but that is not what I mean,' said Uriel.

'Then what do you mean?' asked Learchus, clearly exasperated.

'I mean that I wish he were here, but I understand that it is right he is not.'

'He broke the Codes of Rectitude and is being punished for that.'

'He broke those codes by lying, Learchus,' said Uriel, 'as you are lying to me now.'

Learchus's face flushed. Uriel saw his jaw tighten as anger rose within him, only to be swiftly quelled.

'What am I lying about, captain?' demanded Learchus.

'About your ambitions.'

'What ambitions?'

Uriel leaned forwards, resting his forearms on his knees. 'I know you led the 4th Company to Espandor in my absence. I know of the battles you fought there, the victory of Corinth Bridge and the defence of Herapolis. You destroyed a gargant, a war machine with the power to level cities, and you saved that world from the orks. You led our company to Espandor a sergeant, but in your heart you returned as a captain. Tell me I'm wrong.'

'You are not wrong,' snarled Learchus. 'Am I to be dishonoured now for having ambition?'

'Of course not. A warrior must always test himself, seeking new foes and new challenges against which to fight. Without ambition, we would never achieve anything of greatness. A Space Marine needs ambition, it is what drives him to be the very best he can be. You have been a loyal sergeant and a proud warrior of the 4th, but this company is mine to lead.'

Learchus looked down at the deck, and to Uriel, he seemed to shrink a little in his armour.

'You were gone so long,' said Learchus eventually. 'Everyone believed you were dead. Even I had begun to lose hope that you would ever return to the Chapter.'

'But I did,' said Uriel. 'I am captain once more, and you must accept that.'

'I rebuilt the 4th, I trained it and I fought as its commander,' said Learchus. 'I grieved for the dead and carved their names on the wall of the Temple of Correction. I earned the right to lead it.'

'And in time you will receive a captaincy, of that I am certain.'

'But not now, and not the 4th?'

'No,' said Uriel with a wry smile, holding his hand out to Learchus. 'But who knows, I might die in this coming war. If that is to be my fate, then I could imagine no finer warrior to take my place. I need you with me, Learchus. The 4th Company needs you. Are you with me?'

Learchus stared at Uriel's hand for a long moment, but, at last, he nodded and took it. 'I am with you,' he said.

THOUGH KOUDELKAR FELT much calmer now that his aunt had explained her motives in inviting the tau delegation to Galtrigil, a nagging sense of unease gnawed at his veneer of calm. Try as he might, he couldn't quite identify its source, even though he felt it should have been obvious to a man of his insight and perspicacity.

'I think we might be able to do business,' he said, smiling at the grey-skinned tau.

Aun'rai took his hand from Koudelkar's shoulder and bowed.

'That is a wise decision, Governor Shonai,' said the tau. 'You will not regret it.'

'Damn you,' hissed Lortuen Perjed, pushing between Koudelkar and Aun'rai.

The old man had his stick raised, and was poised to strike the alien when one of the giant fighting machines took a step forwards. Standing apart from the others, Koudelkar now saw that it was etched with different markings. Its head unit was pale blue with a striped pattern on its left side, and there was a flaming sphere painted in the centre of its chest panel and upon one shoulder guard.

The machine raised its weapons, one a huge cannon with multiple barrels, the other a thick tubular gun with a hemispherical muzzle. Naked fear rose in Koudelkar as the lenses on the battle machine's head whirred and a thin beam of targeting light reflected from Lortuen Perjed's glistening pate.

Lortuen slashed his walking cane at Aun'rai, but the alien's batons flashed into its hands, and the cane was knocked from the adept's hand.

Koudelkar was impressed. The tau envoy was faster and more skilled than he looked. The battle machine leaned down. 'Step back or die, Gue'la,' it told Perjed.

The voice was mechanically rendered, though it still carried the resonance of the speaker's voice superbly. Even though he was deathly afraid of the machine, Koudelkar wondered why the Adeptus Mechanicus could not develop something similar. Surely, if these aliens could invent such technology, the priests of the Machine-God could as well.

Koudelkar took hold of Lortuen's arm and held the adept tightly.

Aun'rai waved the battle machine back, and Koudelkar thought he saw a trace of anger in the envoy's features.

'My apologies, Governor Shonai,' said Aun'rai. 'The noble El'esaven is very protective of me and sometimes forgets himself.' The alien then turned its amber eyes on Lortuen Perjed and said. 'And you should know that the silent alarm signal in your cane is being jammed.'

'Filthy creature!' shouted Lortuen, shrugging off Koudelkar's grip. Aun'rai stepped back to avoid his outburst. 'How dare you?'

'There's someone inside that?' asked Koudelkar, indicating the tall machine, though Aun'rai had as good as confirmed his earlier suspicion that each one was crewed by a living pilot. The notion that the tau were jamming an alert signal registered as strange, but the thought vanished as Aun'rai spoke again.

'There is indeed a pilot within,' said Aun'rai. 'El'esaven is a commander of great repute and skill.'

'And that machine is his… armour?'

'In a way, yes, but it is so much more than merely armour. In your language, the best translation of its name would be "battlesuit".'

'Stop talking to it!' demanded Perjed. 'Don't you see what's happening here?'

'Adept Perjed, control yourself!' shouted his aunt. 'Your behaviour is unconscionable.'

Perjed spun on his heel, rage lending his aged limbs strength. 'My behaviour? You have made pacts with xenos creatures, you stupid, stupid woman! They are not here to negotiate; they are here to take over! Open your eyes, damn you!'

Koudelkar felt Lortuen's words tugging at his mind, and he turned back to Aun'rai. 'My military advisors tell me you have other soldiers on Pavonis, is this true?'

The tau smiled, or at least that was what Koudelkar assumed the movement of its features signified. 'We do have some… lightly armed reconnaissance troops on Pavonis, yes. Purely as a precaution, you understand? Given your society's intolerance of other species, I felt it was prudent to ensure that Pavonis was ready for my arrival.'

'I am not sure I am comfortable with your armed forces on my world,' said Koudelkar as a powerful feeling of revulsion and anger began taking shape

within him.

Aun'rai stepped towards him once more, but his mother put herself in his way.

'Don't you touch my son,' she said. 'Don't you lay a finger on him, I'm warning you.'

'Mother!' hissed Koudelkar, but the implications of what Aun'rai had said were worming their way through the haze surrounding his thoughts with ever greater force. The nagging sensation of something being horribly wrong was growing in strength, and he looked up at the threatening bulk of the battlesuit warrior that threatened Adept Perjed.

This was an alien soldier, one of high rank if he was a noble, and businessmen did not bring armed men to a negotiation. His anger rose in a tide, and Koudelkar felt the desire to talk with these aliens fade like a half-remembered dream. He shook his head. What had he been thinking? Dealing with xenos creatures? The very idea was ludicrous.

With that thought, the last of whatever subtle manipulation had been worked upon him vanished and he saw the truth of Lortuen's words.

'In fact,' he continued, 'I find the notion of your troops on Pavonis a gross insult. This is an Imperial world of the Emperor, and your presence here constitutes an act of war.'

'Koudelkar!' cried his aunt. 'No! Think of what you're saying. Think of Pavonis!'

'Oh, I am, Mykola,' he said. 'I'm saying what you should have said long ago and what I would have said had this bastard not influenced me with some form of xenos mind control!'

Koudelkar drew himself up to his full height and pushed out his thin chest. 'Aun'rai, you are an enemy of the human race, and you are in violation of the Emperor's will, by whose glory and beneficence is the galaxy ruled. You must leave this planet and never return, or else face the full might of the Imperium's wrath.'

Aun'rai sighed. 'This is most regrettable. I was led to believe you would be willing to enter into a partnership with us for the greater good of all.'

'Then I am happy to disappoint you,' said Koudelkar, shooting a poisonous glance towards his aunt.

'I have come to expect such narrowness of vision from your species, but I hoped this time would be different,' said the alien envoy. 'But make no mistake; Pavonis will be part of the Tau Empire. It would have been better if you had embraced the idea and become part of this planet's future, but I see now that you are just as blinkered and hate-filled as the rest of your selfish race.'

'You see, Mykola?' hissed Lortuen Perjed. 'See now the true face of these

xenos! They come not with co-operation in mind, but conquest.'

'You are wrong about us, Adept Perjed,' said Aun'rai, with a faint trace of regret, 'but it is too late for a peaceful resolution.'

As if to confirm that statement, one of the circling tau aircraft exploded, tumbling from the sky in a flaming cartwheel until it slammed into the lake with an almighty splash.

The sudden violence of the explosion acted like a flamer to a drum of promethium.

Koudelkar looked up to see a thundering blue craft, boxy and ungainly, scream overhead. Its guns blazed with light and noise, and he knew he'd never seen a more welcome sight.

THE BLOODSHED SIMMERING just beneath the surface of this encounter erupted in a crescendo of violence. Koudelkar's skitarii, who had been itching to wreak harm on the tau, finally gave in to their warlike urges, and a number of things seemed to happen at once.

The battlesuits cycled their weapons up to fire, and the bronze-armoured skitarii with an implanted cannon and grenade launcher opened fire. One of the Lavrentian soldiers barrelled Koudelkar and his mother to the ground, and a hurricane of gunfire erupted all around him.

Koudelkar jammed his palms over his ears at the deafening, terrifying volume of it. One of the battlesuits collapsed, its upper half a smoking ruin where a series of grenades had blown it apart. Both skitarii were firing, howling and exultant, their guns roaring as they unleashed the full fury of their maker's lethal skills.

Koudelkar rolled as barking hellguns opened up and squalling bolts of las-fire flashed overhead. His mother screamed in fear, and Koudelkar saw Mykola throw herself to the ground and crawl in panic towards the house. Lortuen Perjed was curled into a tight ball, covering his ears and keeping as low to the ground as possible.

Then the battlesuits opened fire.

Three of the Lavrentians were immediately slain, shredded in a blitzing storm of fire. Their bodies literally ceased to exist as limbs were torn from bodies and torsos were vaporised in the relentless hail of shells. The survivors scattered, but, to their credit, they were still fighting, snapping off shots at their attackers as they ran for cover. Another battlesuit was brought down by their fire, its chest punctured and cratered with las-burns.

'Come on!' screamed the soldier that had borne him to the ground. 'Move it!'

'What?' cried Koudelkar. 'I can't hear you!'

The man dragged the collar of his frock-coat and pointed. 'Get to the house! Go!'

'Get Lortuen,' shouted Koudelkar over the din of firing. The soldier looked set to disobey him, but nodded and crawled over to the venerable adept.

Koudelkar put an arm across his mother's back, and together they began crawling towards the house. The walls of the arboretum blew out and fell to the ground in crashing panes of glass as the trees within splintered under the storm of fire. Shards of glass sliced Koudelkar's palms as he crawled, and he gritted his teeth against the pain.

One skitarii dropped to its knees with a smoking, fist-sized hole blasted in its chest. Even as it died, it sent a string of grenades sailing into the troop compartment of Aun'rai's drop-ship. Flames and smoke erupted from within the aircraft, and Koudelkar heard horrifying screams of pain from the tau soldiers within. Flaming bodies tumbled from the craft, which sagged on its skids as secondary explosions blew out its sides and an engine.

Screams and smoke filled the air, and Koudelkar felt sure the shot that was going to kill him would come at any second. He heard another explosion, but couldn't tell where it had come from. All was chaos: las-bolts, alien weapons' fire and cries of pain. It was impossible to tell what was happening. Koudelkar's terror rose to new heights at the thought of dying like this.

'They'll think I'm a traitor,' he said. 'If I die here, they'll think I'm a traitor.'

'What?' cried his mother, her face streaked with tears. He shook his head. They were almost there. Ignoring the pain of his gashed hands, Koudelkar reached the door to the arboretum and almost wept with relief. Fresh shots echoed from the walls of the house, some high-pitched and whining, others booming like distant artillery fire.

A huge shadow enveloped him, and Koudelkar looked up to see the battlesuit with the flaming sphere device worked onto its chest.

It towered over him, and he cried out as it reached for him with mechanised gauntlets.

URIEL DROPPED FROM the assault ramp of the Thunderhawk. The howling gale of its engines as it hovered behind the tau craft was like a fiery hurricane blast, the grass flattened and burning beneath the gunship. Smoke boiled from the stricken tau vehicle, some kind of drop-ship by the look of it, and enemies poured from its interior. Some were ablaze and dying, others were burned, but fighting.

Learchus and a squad of Ultramarines dropped to the ground and began shooting. Behind them came Chaplain Clausel's assault troops as the scouts fanned out behind the battle squads, positioning themselves to deliver covering fire.

'Are we too late?' shouted Learchus.

'I think we arrived at exactly the right moment,' answered Uriel. 'Let's go!'

As the Thunderhawk had passed overhead, Uriel scanned the dynamics of the firefight, mapping out the shape of the battle in a second. A furious exchange of fire was underway on a stone-flagged terrace. Tau infantrymen, flying discs with under-slung weapons, and tall battle machines like elongated Dreadnoughts traded shots with a few Guardsmen and what looked like one of Governor Shonai's skitarii.

Gunfire fizzed past Uriel, streaking darts of light that hissed and spat as they struck the armoured hull of the Thunderhawk. Tau warriors, around a dozen of them, were forming up in the shadow of the wrecked drop-ship. An enemy soldier in a pale red helmet was directing their fire, and two of the battlesuits turned from the firefight on the terrace to add their support.

'Chaplain, the terrace!' bellowed Uriel. 'Learchus, your squad with me. We take those tau at the drop-ship, and then hit them in the flank!'

Clausel and his warriors powered away on columns of fire, the roar of their jump packs cutting through the stuttering cacophony of gunfire. Uriel set off towards the downed drop-ship, his Space Marines following behind him through the torrents of fire, their bolters locked before them.

Searing beams of pulsing weapons fire slashed the air as Uriel and his warriors charged towards the slumped drop-ship. He heard impacts of hard energy against ceramite plates as several shots struck home. One pulse hit the curve of his shoulder-guard and ricocheted past his helmet, another struck his greave. Neither was powerful enough to stop him.

His bolter bucked in his hand as he fired. One of the tau pitched backwards, his chest and shoulder blown out by the mass-reactive bolt. Another volley flashed, and Uriel felt one tear through the weaker joint at his waist. Even as the pain registered, balms dulled it, and medicae systems began treating the wound.

A volcanic blizzard of fire streaked above Uriel, and the tau drop-ship bucked and heaved as the frontal guns of the Thunderhawk tore it apart. Uriel emptied the last of his magazine before slinging his bolter as the gunship's suppressing fire was shut off.

He reached the blazing drop-ship's perforated remains, and slammed his back against it.

'Frags!' he shouted, unsnapping a pair of textured discs from his belt harness.

Uriel lobbed the grenades over the drop-ship and counted three seconds as he drew his sword. Other grenades followed his, and a series of dull bangs rocked the drop-ship. Uriel heard the ringing impacts of razored fragments pinging from its hull.

Uriel swung around the drop-ship with his blade raised at his right shoulder. Behind the drop-ship, a dozen or so tau warriors picked themselves up from the horror of the grenades' detonations. Their fatigues were torn and bloodied, but, more importantly, the blasts had broken their readiness to fight.

Uriel's golden blade leapt with azure fire, and he drove it through the chest of the nearest tau warrior. His victim fell without a sound as Uriel stepped over his body and took the fight to his foes. The aliens were bloodied and disorientated, but Uriel gave them no chance to recover their wits, cleaving his blade through another warrior's armour, and tearing it free in a wash of blood.

The tau rose to meet his charge, and, though full-enclosing helmets obscured their faces, Uriel saw the panic in them. They had come here expecting an easy mission, but were now in a fight for their lives. A few snap shots flashed past him. Uriel's squad followed him into the fight, but this moment was his and his alone.

He hammered his boot into the chest of the next tau, and smashed his sword through the armour of the warrior behind him. More tau turned their weapons on him, but he was already among them, and it was too late for guns. This was a close-quarters fight that required the brutal skills of a killer, and there were no finer killers than the Space Marines. Uriel fought with total economy of motion as he struck the tau like a thunderbolt. No blow was wasted, and, each time his sword or fist connected, an enemy fell.

The tau were helpless against him, for he was a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes and he was fighting for more than just victory, he was fighting for the glory of his Chapter. For too long, Uriel had fought for redemption or simply for survival.

This fight was for the honour of the Ultramarines.

Learchus stood next to him, his sword cleaving a bloody path through the tau. Side by side, they fought like the mighty gods of battle they were. Uriel was always on the move, slaying his foes without mercy or fear. He swayed aside from knives and rifle butts, smashing skulls and slicing open armour with every blow. Decades of training and a century of war had moulded him into a warrior without peer. He was a killing machine that had never tasted defeat, and he fought with all the skill encoded into his flesh by the most fearsome training regime imaginable.

Shots banged around him, blades tore flesh, and blood flowed in rivers.

Within moments the tau were dead. Nearly a score of enemy warriors lay scattered on the ground, scorched black by fire, cut to pieces by blades or blown apart by explosive bolts. Uriel registered the deaths without emotion, and drew close to the drop-ship.

'Precious little glory in this,' sneered Learchus. 'They have no stomach for a real fight.'

Uriel nodded, kicking one of the tau rifles. 'They rely too much on their weapons and not enough on blade-work.'

'How does our Chaplain fare?'

Uriel looked over towards the terrace where Clausel's assault warriors fought. Smoke and flames obscured much of the battle, but the sound of shooting and the clash of blades told him that there was still a fight to be won.

'Let's go and find out,' he said, hefting his bloodied sword once more.

TEN

BLOOD SWILLED AROUND his feet, and the stink of seared flesh filled the cramped transport compartment of the Aquila lander. Nathaniel Winterbourne took shallow breaths as he tried to focus on the streams of data flowing over the slates fitted around the circumference of the observation canopy's circular cupola. Alithea had outdone herself, and operational readiness icons were flashing to life for virtually all units of Sword Command.

He drew in a sharp breath as the pain of his wounded arm flared again. The kroot hunting beast had bitten deep and, now that the adrenaline of combat was draining from his system, his arm felt like it was on fire. He'd accepted a shot of morphia to dull the pain and had swabbed the wound with half a bottle of counterseptic. Hopefully, that would be enough to counteract any xenos toxins that the beast's bite might have carried.

Beneath him, in the passenger compartment, injured men groaned in pain, their wounds far more severe than his. Three of his soldiers were dead as well as his vox-servitor and scribe. Germaine too had been killed, and he grieved for her loss keenly. She would receive a commendation along with the soldiers who had fought so valiantly beside him. He stroked Fynlae with his uninjured hand, careful to avoid the gouges torn in the vorehound's flanks during his fight with the alien beast.

The wounded Ultramarines warrior lay unmoving. For all the life he displayed, he could have been dead. The man's wounds were horrific, and it was a source of amazement to Winterbourne that anyone, even a Space Marine, could suffer such hideous trauma and live. Truly, the Adeptus Astartes were a race apart, and Winterbourne gave a short prayer of thanks that they fought for the divine Emperor of Man.

The commander's seat of an Aquila was mounted above and behind the pilot's cockpit, and Winterbourne had a panoramic view of the moonlit landscape below him. Behind him, the dark wall of Tembra Ridge serrated the horizon, and the diffuse glow just ahead was the city of Brandon Gate. A ribbon of light stretched away from the city, curving in a concave arc as it made its way south-west towards Olzetyn before reaching Praxedes on the coast. Beyond Brandon Gate, the horizon was a glowing line of fire, the skies stained with light and fumes from the unceasing labours of the Adeptus Mechanicus within the Diacrian Belt.

The lander dipped its wings and began its descent to Camp Torum on the

northern edge of the city. Winterbourne looked down into the passenger compartment once more, relieved beyond words that his men were soon to receive proper medical treatment. It had been foolish to travel to Tembra Ridge without a full medicae team, but he'd been so damned insistent about going with the Ultramarines that he hadn't prepared properly.

Without warning, the aircraft banked sharply to the right, and his wounded arm slammed against the sharp metal rim of the cupola. Hot pain lanced up his arm, and he roared in anger.

'Emperor's wounds, man!' he shouted at the pilot. 'Watch what you're doing or I'll have your damn wings!'

The man didn't answer, and Winterbourne was about to rebuke him when he saw the streams of fire blazing into the sky from below. Ribbons of light spat upwards, almost lazily, and painted the heavens with blooms of light. Nearby, explosions cracked and spat, the sound of them rolling over the aircraft seconds after the flash. The sky above Torum was thick with waving streams of tracer fire. Winterbourne recognised it as flak from Hydra tanks. His tanks.

And they had been on the verge of flying into it.

The pilot's quick reactions had undoubtedly saved their lives, and Winterbourne made a mental note to apologise for his stern rebuke once they were safely on the ground.

'What in the name of Torum's balls is going on down there?' he yelled.

'I don't know, my lord,' said the pilot, pulling the Aquila in a wide, anticlockwise circle around the southern reaches of the city. Winterbourne attempted to raise someone on the ground, but every channel either hissed static or binaric interrogation cants.

Winterbourne recognised them as Hydra targeting logisters checking to see if they were a friendly or a hostile contact. Glancing at the slate to his left, he was relieved to see that the transponder was broadcasting his personal ident-code. He reached out to touch the black and white cog symbol etched into the metal rim of the cupola, and whispered a quick prayer of thanks to the spirit of the Aquila.

Satisfied that he wasn't about to be blown out of the sky by his own flak tanks, Winterbourne peered through the darkness to try and make some sense of what was happening below. His practiced eye quartered the city, scanning back and forth to spot anything out of the ordinary.

He didn't have to look for long.

Something was burning in the southern wedge of the city, a large structure with tall, metallic spires and iron flanks. The rippling glow of the flames illuminated the structure, and Winterbourne's eyes widened as he realised that the Templum Fabricae was ablaze.

'Merciful heavens,' he hissed. 'Are we too late already?'

He quickly scanned the rest of the city, but could see nothing else amiss.

'Get us on the ground,' he said. 'Now.'

'Where, my lord?' asked the pilot.

'Camp Torum, where do you think?' snapped Winterbourne. 'And make it fast. Men will die if you don't get us down quickly.'

'Yes, my lord,' replied the pilot. 'The sky's too hot for a normal descent, so we're going to have to come in from the city side. We'll be low and fast, so hold onto something.'

The pilot immediately pulled the Aquila into a sharp downward arc, angling the nose to the north-west and losing altitude rapidly as he flew over Brandon Gate. The aircraft shot over the ruins of the Arbites precinct, and across the open expanse of Liberation Square, before pulling into a screamingly tight turn over the Commercia Gate. The wings of the aircraft spread, and the nose came up alarmingly, as the pilot threw the aircraft into its landing mode and rapidly bled off the last of its forward momentum.

Winterbourne was hurled forwards; only his restraining harness and a firm grip prevented him from smashing his skull against the toughened glass of the observation dome. Even so, the rapid deceleration was blindingly painful on his torn up arm. Fynlae yelped as he was thrown around, and cries of alarm came from the passenger compartment.

The Aquila levelled out, and Winterbourne saw that it wasn't just the Hydras that were firing into the sky. Tank commanders were shooting their turret-mounted guns upwards, and even Guardsmen on the ground were aiming their lasguns towards the heavens. A few even turned their guns on the Aquila as it roared into view, but held their fire as they saw their regiment's heraldry on its wings and fuselage.

The lights of Camp Torum were blazingly bright, and Winterbourne saw no evidence of damage or signs of attack as the lander skimmed over its vast hangars and barrack buildings. Just what the hell had happened here, and why was the sky above the camp awash with exploding flak?

'Set us down over there,' ordered Winterbourne, spotting a knot of Guardsmen in the centre of the parade ground, clustered around a horseman holding the emerald and gold banner of the 44th aloft.

The pilot brought the Aquila in low, and set it down hard in a billowing cloud of engine smoke. Even before the forward skid was down, Winterbourne slammed his palm against his harness release, and pulled the lever to lower his command chair from the observation dome. Fynlae jumped down, and Winterbourne slid from his seat as the passenger compartment descended.

Guardsmen with raised rifles awaited him as he stepped onto the parade ground, and their expressions told him that something serious was afoot. Medicae staff ran towards him, but he waved them away.

'There are men in there need help more than me,' he said. 'See to them first.'

Winterbourne pushed through the scrum of soldiers surrounding him, and stalked towards the horseman with the banner. Any senior officer would be there. Heated voices were raised and he sensed panic.

'Can someone please inform me why I was almost shot out of the sky above my own damn base?' he shouted, the years of authority in his voice cutting through the babble.

Heads turned to face him.

'Make a hole!' he bellowed, and the soldiers parted before him to reveal a scene of carnage. Dead men and dying horses lay in spreading pools of blood as medicae in red-spattered uniforms fought to save the wounded.

'Oh no,' he said, and his heart sank as he saw Captain Mederic cradling the body of Major Alithea Ornella. Her uniform coat was sticky with blood, and black where it had been burned by weapons fire. He dropped to his knees beside her, and reached out to touch her cheek. It was still warm.

'Mederic? What happened?' he asked.

'We were attacked,' said his captain of scouts, 'by those.'

Winterbourne looked over to where Mederic was pointing, and saw a host of dead creatures with leathery skin of mottled blue chitin and wide wings of what looked like textured silk. They were repulsive beasts, hybrid by-blows of reptiles and insects, and they leaked a viscous yellow sap-like blood from scores of las-wounds. Strange-looking weapons with oddly-angled grips lay beside them, and dead, multi-faceted eyes stared glassily out over the parade ground.

Winterbourne's lip curled in distaste.

'Stingwings,' he hissed.

'They came out of nowhere,' said Mederic. 'One minute we were supervising the mobilisation, the next we were under fire. Two dozen of them dropped out of the sky and tore into us. We got them all, but not before…'

His words trailed off as he indicated the dead body of the 44th's second in command.

'Alithea will be avenged, captain,' said Winterbourne. 'Make no mistake about that.'

'I believe you, my lord,' said Mederic.

Winterbourne stood and drew himself up to his full height and addressed the Guardsmen around him with the full weight of his authority.

'Right, let's get this army ready to fight,' said Winterbourne. 'I want us ready

to roll out of here and fit to fight within the hour. Is that understood? Now go!'

Mederic saluted as the Guardsmen of the Lavrentians rushed to obey Winterbourne's orders.

'What about the Administratum?' Mederic asked. 'We're still awaiting their authorisation.'

'To hell with that, son,' said Winterbourne. 'We're at war, and I'm not waiting for some damn pencil pusher to tell me I can march out with my soldiers. Now make it happen!'

THE FIGHT, AS it turned out, was brief. Chaplain Clausel's warriors had been thorough in their destruction, and only a handful of the flying discs and a single battlesuit had still been functional by the time Uriel and Learchus led their squad into the battle. With the last of the tau machines brought down, a curious silence fell over the battlefield.

Glass and bullet casings crunched underfoot, and the moans of wounded tau were the only other sounds to disturb the quiet. As Uriel's scouts secured the few alien prisoners, the assault troops gathered up their fallen brothers. Three Space Marines were dead, and Uriel stood aside to allow Clausel's warriors past as they were borne towards the Thunderhawk.

Uriel approached Clausel. The Chaplain's face was a mask of blood, red droplets falling from the eye sockets of his death mask like ruby tears.

'Well met, Chaplain,' said Uriel, gripping Clausel's wrist. 'Who did you lose?'

'Brother Phaetus, Brother Ixios and Brother Ephor,' said Clausel. 'They will be remembered.'

'That they shall,' Uriel assured him. 'I will carve their names myself.'

Clausel moved away, and Uriel turned his attention to the aftermath of the fighting, angered at the deaths of the three warriors. Stepping carefully through the detritus of battle, he saw half a dozen of the automated flying drones the tau employed lying scattered like dented silver mirrors. The drones lay amid the bloodied remains of a handful of Lavrentian Guardsmen, and, such was the destruction wreaked upon their corpses that Uriel found it next to impossible to tell exactly how many had died.

His anger built at the sight of their bodies. It was obscene that the lives of warriors should be ended by an enemy without feelings, emotions or a spirit. Machines that killed were anathema to the Imperium, and even the death-dealing technology fabricated by the priests of Mars was imbued with a fragment of the machine-spirit or crewed by a living, breathing human being.

Two skitarii, the ones Uriel had seen during the audience with Koudelkar

Shonai, were also dead, their heavily augmented bodies burned and cratered by multiple gunshot wounds. Brutal and animalistic killers they might be, but they had died in defence of their master.

Uriel counted four destroyed battlesuits, their armoured casings broken open and leaking hydraulic fluids onto the bloodied stone of the terrace. Through the cracked plating, Uriel could see torn grey flesh, and he could smell the strange, musky odour of alien blood. He walked through the scene of slaughter, coming at last to the splintered doors and smashed glazing of a botanical hothouse.

'Looks like it was quite a fight before we got here,' said Learchus, appearing at his side.

'Aye, that it does,' said Uriel, 'but I do not see the body of the governor anywhere.'

'Maybe he got inside,' suggested Learchus. 'I think these doors were open before they were shot out.'

'Possibly,' said Uriel, his eyes narrowing as he spotted something out of place beneath one of the battlesuits. He stepped over a pool of congealing blood, and knelt beside the blackened shell of one of the tau armoured fighting suits.

'Over here,' he said. 'Help me with this.'

Learchus joined him, and together they heaved the wrecked battlesuit onto its side. The machine was startlingly heavy, a solid, immobile hunk of metal now that whatever power source drove it was inactive.

'Guilliman's oath,' hissed Learchus at the sight of what was revealed.

Beneath the battlesuit lay the body of another tau, but one that was clearly not a warrior. Its robes were stained with blood, though none appeared to be its own. Its robes were white and gold, embroidered with a shimmering multi-coloured thread. A high collar of polished gems and enamelled chips was crushed beneath its head and its eyes flickered with life.

'Looks like someone important,' said Learchus.

'Yes,' agreed Uriel, 'one of their leader caste. A diplomat or some kind of noble perhaps.'

The fallen alien groaned, and his chest rose and fell with breath now that the pinning weight of the battlesuit had been removed. Learchus took hold of the alien, his massive gauntlet easily able to encircle its neck. 'Do you think he's the one in charge of them?'

'Given that he's here at the governor's residence, that seems possible.'

'Then his death will greatly hinder them,' said Learchus, tightening his grip. The tau reached up with thin arms and weakly pulled at the sergeant's wrists.

'No, do not kill him,' ordered Uriel. 'Secure him and get him onto the gunship. If he is a senior commander, we could learn a lot from him.'

Learchus nodded and hauled the tau to his feet. 'I will personally keep this one secure. What do you want to do now?'

'Search the grounds and the house,' ordered Uriel. 'Find any survivors.'

IN THE END, the search of the house revealed fifteen servants, who had gone to ground when the fighting had started, but Governor Shonai was not amongst them. Of the survivors, none were of especial note save for Mykola Shonai, the governor's aunt, whom Uriel had previously seen on his last expedition to Pavonis at Ario Barzano's grave. The scouts had found her hiding in the shredded ruin of the arboretum, curled under a stone bench with her eyes closed and her hands pressed firmly against her ears.

Uriel was pleased Mykola was alive, but this pleasure soured as he saw the guilty fear in her eyes as she was brought before him. If Uriel had been shocked by the change in Pavonis, it was nothing compared to the change he saw in Mykola Shonai.

Gone was the confident, strong-willed Planetary Governor, who had faced down an Imperial inquisitor over the fate of her world, and in her place was a weeping, mud-stained woman with thinning grey hair and a deeply lined face. Tears and snot mingled on her face, and Uriel felt a stab of sadness that she could have fallen to such a level.

'Uriel…? Oh, Emperor protect me,' she whispered. 'Oh, no… I'm sorry. No, no, no.'

Mykola looked away, and dropped to her knees as she saw the bodies strewn across the bloodstained terrace. Uriel shot Learchus a confused look as she covered her eyes and wept.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry… I never meant for this to happen,' she cried. 'I didn't know they'd take them, I swear.'

Uriel dropped to one knee before her. Gently, he raised her head. 'What happened here, Mykola? Where is Koudelkar?'

Mykola shook her head. 'No, I can't. It's too much.'

'You have to tell me everything,' pressed Uriel, 'and you have to do it now.'

'They said they came to negotiate,' cried Mykola, 'to do business. They said they could help bring prosperity back to Pavonis, and that's what I wanted. That's all I've ever wanted.'

The implications of her words were clear, and Uriel's heart sank. 'You invited the tau here, didn't you? They approached you with offers of trade and you listened to them. That's what happened, isn't it?'

Mykola nodded. 'You don't understand, Uriel. We'd won our world back from

the brink of damnation. We were saved, but it was being taken away from us piece by piece by bureaucrats who had never even heard of Pavonis, let alone knew how bad things had gotten. The tau offered us a way out.'

'That is not what the tau offer, Mykola,' said Uriel. 'They offer you slavery and call it freedom, a prison you do not know you are in until it is too late. They offer a choice that is no choice at all.'

Something Mykola had said earlier now registered, and Uriel gripped her shoulder tightly. 'Koudelkar, they took him. The tau have your nephew, don't they? Is that what you meant when you said, "I didn't know they'd take them"?'

Mykola didn't answer at first, but she nodded between sobs. 'Yes. One of the battle machines took him and my sister. Another took Lortuen… I mean Adept Perjed.'

Uriel looked over his shoulder at the smouldering wreckage of the tau drop-ship, matching its shape and features with the knowledge he'd assimilated from the myriad briefing files and after-action reports collated by the Ultramarines in the wake of their battles against the tau.

Such drop-ships were designated Orcas by Imperial Lexicographers, and Uriel quickly ran its troop capacity against the number of tau corpses he'd seen. The numbers didn't add up.

'Learchus, count the number of enemy dead,' he ordered. 'All of them: warriors, battlesuits and drones.'

'What for?'

'Just do it,' snapped Uriel, although he feared he already knew the answer. Learchus turned to the task with alacrity, and within the space of a minute, he had returned.

'Well?' asked Uriel.

'Four destroyed battlesuits, twenty-four dead soldiers and eight drones accounted for. Looks like three crew on the drop-ship that were killed when the Thunderhawk opened up.'

Uriel swore. 'An Orca can carry six battlesuits. Are you sure there are only four here?'

'Absolutely,' said Learchus. 'I'd stake my honour on it.'

'Damn it, Mykola, where have they taken him?' asked Uriel.

'I don't know, I swear on my life! Once the shooting started, I didn't see much of anything. I saw one of the battlesuits, the one Aun'rai called El'esaven, lift Koudelkar and Pawluk. Then another one picked up Lortuen, but then I got inside the arboretum, and I didn't see anything after that!'

'Aun'rai and El'esaven?' said Uriel. 'Who are they?'

'Aun'rai was the envoy,' said Mykola, wiping her face with the hem of her

robe, 'the lying bastard who set this all up.'

'A tau in robes, not armour?' asked Uriel.

'Yes, uh… creamy white robes and no armour,' agreed Mykola.

'And El'esaven?' said Learchus. 'Is he a warrior?'

'I think so,' said Mykola between heaving gulps of air. 'He was wearing a battlesuit. I never heard of him before today, but I got the feeling he wasn't happy about what was happening, like he wanted to just open up on us instead of talk.'

'Did you see where they took the governor?' demanded Learchus. 'It is imperative that we retrieve your nephew. The fighting forces of Pavonis need a figurehead.'

Mykola shook her head.

'I didn't see,' she said with complete and utter self-loathing. 'I was too busy keeping my head down.'

Uriel sighed, saddened to see a once-noble servant of the Emperor brought low by her own flawed character. Though Mykola Shonai was now a traitor in the eyes of the Imperium, Uriel could well understand how she had come to this place, having walked a similar path not so long ago. Any censure heaped upon her would be nothing compared to the crushing anguish she would be lavishing on herself, though that fact would carry no weight with those who decided her punishment.

Uriel wanted to hate Mykola Shonai for what she had done, but found he could not. All he felt towards her was pity. He nodded to the scouts. 'Take her onto the Thunderhawk and secure her with the rest of the prisoners for transfer to the Glasshouse.'

The two scouts lifted the distraught Mykola and dragged her away.

'We're not taking her to Fortress Idaeus?' asked Learchus. 'She needs to be interrogated.'

'Fortress Idaeus is now our base of operations for war,' said Uriel, 'and that is no place for prisoners. Judge Sharben's enforcers will undertake the interrogation.'

Learchus nodded. 'Very well. And the governor? What do we do about Koudelkar?'

'You are going to get him back,' said Uriel.

'Me?' said Learchus. 'Surely we should follow their trail in the Thunderhawk.'

'No. With the prisoners and survivors of this attack aboard, we don't have enough fuel to mount an aerial pursuit and get back to Brandon Gate. I need you to take the scouts and find the trail of this El'esaven. Machines that big should be simple enough to track. Follow them, find them and kill them. Then bring the

governor back.'

'Very well,' said Learchus, slamming a fresh magazine into his bolter. 'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going back to Brandon Gate,' said Uriel. 'The fighting is only going to escalate, and the warriors of the 4th Company need their captain to lead them.'

Learchus smiled and said, 'Perhaps you did learn something on your Death Oath after all.'

'So it would seem,' agreed Uriel, gripping his sergeant's wrist.

'Courage and honour, captain.'

Uriel nodded.

'I want the governor back,' he said. 'Find him for me.'

'We will find him,' vowed Learchus. 'On my honour, we will find him.'

ELEVEN

THE FIRST ATTACK came at Praxedes in a blaze of light, and the first warning the port city's defenders had was the booming metallic cough of shells detonating above them. Sentries turned their gazes upwards, Hydra flak tanks swivelled their quad-mounted cannons to the heavens, and, a moment later, the warm glow of the sun was eclipsed by a sky-wide explosion of incandescent fire. Targeting auspex fused and shorted out, retinas were irreparably damaged, and delicate surveyor gear was instantly obliterated.

Where some enemies of the Imperium attacked under the cover of darkness, the tau came in the searing glare of a thousand stars.

A host of wedge-shaped craft flew in from the western ocean in the wake of the blinding detonation. Launched from floating platforms, brought to the surface in secret and concealed with alien technologies, they had awaited the execute order from El'esaven for many months. Caught unawares and blinded by the blazing skies, the air defences of the coastal city had no time to engage the attacking aircraft. The first wave began their attack runs as alert sirens roused the majority of Lance Command's Guardsmen from their bunks.

Twenty-five Barracuda air-superiority fighters of the Burning Star Hunter Coalition screamed over the airfields of Praxedes with their chin-mounted cannons blazing. It was the largest port facility on Pavonis, and the majority of its structures were built on the slopes of an ancient crater that was now open on its western edge to the vast expanse of the cold black ocean. Its sprawling landing fields and jib-platforms jutted out to sea like branches of a silver tree stripped of its leaves.

Some of these jibs were laden with freighter craft and bulk-lifters used to ferry cargo to orbiting mass conveyors, but many more were empty. Precious few of the city's flyers were combat aircraft, and those few that were able to get airborne were blown out of the sky within minutes of the first warning.

Explosions mushroomed skywards as fuel bays were hit, and stuttering pulses of light stitched across the vast hangars and container lines of the port. Panic gripped the city. Lance Command was based in a fortified enclosure on the side of the docks, and interceptor guns began opening fire as the Barracuda came in for another pass. Blazing tracer fire lit the sky, and a few tau aircraft tumbled downwards, torn in two, or their engines blown off by the barrage from below. No sooner had the tanks opened fire than invisible beams of laser light from

teams of spotters concealed on the bluffs overlooking the city were painting their flanks.

Shoals of missiles detached from the wings of the surviving aircraft, and, like hunting hounds with the scent of blood, they roared towards the Imperial guns. Within moments, Lance Command was a scene of carnage as no fewer than four missiles slammed into the topside of each of its six anti-aircraft batteries.

Percussive detonations rolled over the base as each flak tank was silenced, and blazing plumes of thick, tarry smoke boiled skyward from the wrecks. Flames and explosions lit the night with a hellish orange glow as the Barracuda circled overhead like carrion birds.

With the city's air-cover stripped, four enormous aircraft with wide wings, like those of a great undersea monster that had forsaken the depths for the air, flew in low from the ocean. Flaring bow waves of frothing dark water travelled before them, rocking the platform jibs and throwing out great breaths of hot, magnetised air.

These giant aircraft were known and feared by Imperial forces as Mantas, monstrously powerful carrier aircraft that bristled with weaponry, and which could transport the equivalent of a battle company. Streaking bursts of explosive shells swept across the landing platforms, clearing them of any last defenders.

Each of the alien craft swooped in low over an empty platform and rotated on its axis before smoothly setting down amid sprays of ionised water and debris. A lower deck opened up, and each carrier disgorged four graceful skimmer tanks that moved on rippling cushions of anti-grav energy. The tanks were a mix of lightly armoured Devilfish, more heavily armed Hammerheads and missile-laden Sky Rays. No sooner were the armoured vehicles disgorged than ranks of battlesuits marched behind them. Each hulking war machine was heavily armed and followed the tanks as they swiftly pushed into the landing facility.

With their heavy payloads deployed, telescoping ramps slid down from upper decks, and squad after squad of armoured warriors hustled from the enormous bays. A handful of drones flew above the soldiers, hardened fighters from the world of Sa'cea, who called themselves Fire Warriors. The sensor spines of the drones tracked left and right, relaying their findings to each squad leader.

The entire deployment had taken less than a minute, and, as the first Manta pulled away, another four flew in to set down yet more troops. Within ten minutes, over thirty armoured vehicles, sixty battlesuits and four hundred infantry were pushing out through the buildings and command structures of the port.

Support tanks showered the interior of Lance Command's fortifications with barrage after barrage of lethally accurate missiles, each one guided to its target

by the unseen observers on the cliffs. Barracks buildings were reduced to rubble, defence emplacements flattened and vehicle hangars set ablaze as underground fuel bunkers were breached by perfectly coordinated strikes.

Hundreds of Lavrentian Guardsmen died in the opening moments of the attack, shredded by shrapnel from the exploding missiles or crushed to death as their base collapsed around them. Hundreds more were killed as a wave of olive-coloured battlesuits dropped from the sky on streaking plumes of jet fire. Cycling cannons strafed the esplanades and eye-wateringly bright bolts of blue fire exploded among knots of panicked soldiers.

Shouting captains tried to organise a coherent defence, but engaging the battlesuits at close quarters was like trying to grip smoke. Heavy weapon teams set up and opened fire, but their targets were like flitting inserts, darting through the air on precisely controlled bursts of jets. Weapons fire blazed through the interior of the Lavrentians' compound, criss-crossing in webs of light. A number of battlesuits were brought down, but casualties amongst the Guardsmen were far more numerous, and panic began to turn to terror.

Of the armoured strength of Lance Command, barely a handful of Leman Russ Conquerors rolled out from the hellish firestorm of the camp. They emerged from the roiling clouds of acrid smoke to take the fight to the enemy, with Chimera transports following in their wake. Such defiance was noble and courageous, but the Imperial forces were pitifully few compared to the full strength that had been deployed to Pavonis months before.

In the battle that followed, the hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned Imperial tanks were blown to pieces by hyper-velocity slugs that ripped their guts out and reduced them to smouldering piles of twisted metal.

Within the hour, the tau had secured their hold on Praxedes, and the coastal spaceport was now a bridgehead for invasion. In addition, over a thousand Lavrentian Guardsmen were taken prisoner, making the city's fall the worst defeat the regiment had suffered in its long and illustrious history.

The fall of Praxedes, however, was just the beginning of a night of bloodshed.

WITH THEIR BRIDGEHEAD secure, the forward elements of the tau army moved out from the coast in a swift advance. Yet more armed forces were ferried to the docking jibs of Praxedes by the giant Mantas, and every hour brought hundreds of Fire Warriors, battlesuits and armoured vehicles to the surface of Pavonis.

Under a thin curtain of Barracuda fighters, tau recon forces pushed along Highway 236, the arterial expressway that followed the line of the river towards

Olzetyn. Second only to Brandon Gate, Olzetyn was a magnificent city, built upon a host of mighty bridges spanning great chasms carved in the earth by the confluence of three mighty rivers that merged into one mighty watercourse that flowed west to Praxedes. Its structures were clustered like miniature hives upon the bridges, the largest and most ornate of which was the gold and marble majesty of the Imperator Bridge.

Colonel Loic commanded the PDF forces stationed at the mighty city of bridges, bolstered by nearly three thousand Guardsmen of Shield Command. Alerted to the danger facing them, Colonel Loic and Captain Gerber of the 44th rallied their soldiers to face the tau with commendable speed, and the first attacks were beaten back with only minor losses.

The rest of the night was spent in hard-fought skirmishes as tau scout teams probed the outer defences of the city, but the assault on Olzetyn was only one of the tau offensives.

THE SLUM-CITY OF Jotusburg eternally sweltered beneath a hot roof of rank smog. The teeming slums and wretched hives were home to the millions of Mechanicus labourers that toiled in the forges and weapon shops of the Diacrian Belt. Hundreds of miles of silos, ore barns, milling hangars, generator stations and smelteries covered the foothills of the Sudinal Mountains, a vertiginous barrier that kept the cities safe from the howling, polluted winds of the southern wastes.

The south-eastern haunches of the continent were sprawling anthills of iron-sheathed forges and stone chimneys that produced much of the energy and raw materials for the manufactorum of Pavonis. But those anthills had been roused to swift action. As alert bells chimed through the squalid alleys and rat-runs of the reeking city, flickering ether-lamps were lit, and grimy units of dirt-stained PDF hurried to their muster stations. Units of tech-guard and skitarii efficiently mobilised and took up their posts, yet they were a small fraction of the defences. Guardsmen of Banner Command went to high alert as word came from Lord Winterbourne that they were to stand ready for combat operations.

The first warning that the enemy were inbound came, once again, from the Hydra flak tanks. The combat-logisters of each vehicle swiftly registered multiple solid returns from high-altitude flyers moving in from the west. With a weapons free order from their commander in chief, the flak tanks opened fire, and bright streams of shells and explosions burst within the smog above Jotusburg in diffuse yellow flares of igniting gasses.

The defenders of Jotusburg watched the strobing skies as ominous shapes

twitched the fog above them, waiting with fear-taut nerves for the high-pitched shriek of descending bombs or screaming drop-ships on attack runs. The tension was unbearable, but as minute after minute passed, it seemed the tau craft might simply be flying on a reconnaissance mission.

That hope was cruelly dashed when the smog was split by hundreds of glittering discs falling from the sky like a rain of silver coins dropped from a giant's hand. The sky was thick with the falling shapes as nearly a thousand gun drones dropped en-masse from converted Tiger Shark bombers.

The drones slashed downwards, weapon pods slung beneath the upper disc sections firing indiscriminately at whatever targets presented themselves. The drones split into roaming hunter-killer squads, zipping through the warren of twisting streets, arched processionals and darkened hubs with their weapons blazing.

They moved without pause, strafing assembling tech-guard, ambushing running PDF units before vanishing into the fume-laced shadows. Power relays, vox-masts and transit hubs were attacked, as well as anything else that could be destroyed to hamper Imperial response.

The streets of Jotusburg echoed with screams and bellows of confusion as the drones infested the city like a virus, never stopping, always hunting, and the mobilisation that had begun with such speed ground to a virtual halt as the city's defenders turned inwards to purge the enemy from their midst.

ALL HE HAD known since waking was pain, excruciating, maddening pain that threatened to send his mind screaming into a dark corner of madness to escape it. Even with the morphia, his body was one seething mass of agony. No corner of his flesh was exempt, and he wept bitter tears from lidless eyes.

Gaetan Baltazar stared unflinchingly at the ruin of his body. His chest, torso and limbs were wrapped in swathes of burn dressing, his hands little more than fused claws of bone enclosed in sterile gel packs. Any semblance of humanity had been burned away in the fires that had destroyed the Templum Fabricae.

Though he couldn't see his reflection, he knew his head too was a scarred mess of blackened tissue, one eye a dribbling, glutinous mess. Through the fog of pain and medication, he knew he was lying supine on a soft bed within a vaulted chamber of pale stone.

Devotional banners depicting armoured warrior-women protecting a shining candle hung above him. The air reeked of incense, counter-septic and death.

The Hospice of the Eternal Candle…

How had he come to this place?

His memory was like a fractured pane of glass, each shard reflecting a different aspect of the horror that saw him confined to a bed within the hospice and tended by white-robed Sisters Hospitaller with expressions that alternated between horror and pity.

Gaetan remembered the flames and the screams. He remembered the shimmering invisible forms of the daemons that ran riot through the Templum Fabricae.

Most of all, he remembered the fire of the terrible weapons mounted on their arms.

No sooner had he seen them gathering, than they dropped from the iron girders of the chancel. Slivers of refracted light gave them a semblance of form: broad, hunched and heavy enough to smash the marble slabs of the nave as they landed. Gaetan had blinked furiously until their shapes finally resolved, and he saw the armoured daemons as they opened fire.

Blazing tongues of fire ripped through the templum, and screams of panic and pain soon followed them. The unrelenting echoes of gunfire formed a brutal hymnal of death as the hundreds gathered in the Templum Fabricae sought to escape the deadly salvoes, running for the wide doors at the end of the nave or hurling themselves beneath the splintering pews.

Escape was impossible as the invisible daemons moved through the templum with methodical remorselessness, walking streams of explosive shells through the panicked mass of fleeing worshippers. Braziers, lamps and candles were overturned in his congregation's desperation to escape, and flames licked at the walls. The statue of the Emperor rocked under a series of impacts, and shards of burning anthracite fell from His splintering form.

Furious rage built within Gaetan, and he swept his eviscerator from the altar. He could not tell how many daemons there were, but he had to fight them, and he hurled himself at the nearest blurred outline.

'In the Emperor's name, I smite thee hip and thigh!' he screamed, bringing the monstrous eviscerator down on the daemon's head. Adamantine teeth ripped into the daemon in a flaring shower of sparks, hydraulic fluids and spraying blood. It fell to the ground, and, as it did so, the veil of illusion that kept its repulsive form concealed was dispelled.

Its cloven body was armoured in olive-green plates, its bulbous, elongated head like the carapace of some hideous insect. This was no daemon; this was some form of tau warrior, a trespasser and defiler of this holy place. Captain Ventris had been right after all, the warriors of the tau were on Pavonis, and they sought to tear the heart of its faith from its people.

Blood poured from the beast, and Gaetan looked up to see sheets of flames

ripping through the templum, consuming worshippers, pews and the silken banners with equal hunger. Gaetan dragged his eviscerator from the corpse of the tau warrior, and set off towards the nearest blurred outline of his enemies as hot chips of stone fell around him in a black rain.

The aliens saw him coming and turned their guns upon him, but Gaetan had no thought for his survival. All that mattered was that the vile xenos be made to pay for what they had done. Time compressed, and Gaetan knew he would never reach the alien warriors before they cut him down.

Then, the head of the Emperor's statue fell from its shoulders and exploded into shards of hard, hot coals as it struck the altar. The alien warriors were swept away in the explosion of razor-sharp fragments. The impact hurled Gaetan from his feet, and he landed on the soft and yielding flesh of dead bodies. He rolled from them in horror as flames bloomed around him, the heat of them scorching his skin and burning the hair from his scalp. He surged to his feet, the fabric of his robes ablaze and the pain unimaginable.

In moments, he was a living torch, a burning fury of insensate agony. He ran, his limbs obeying the instinctual urge for self-preservation as they carried him along the nave towards the golden doors that led to the cold night beyond. Gaetan felt the skin slough from his shins, the fabric of his robes searing to his flesh and the skin of his face peeling back under the awful, intolerable heat of the merciless flames. His temple burned behind him, but he had no thought but survival now, and even that seemed certain to be denied.

He knew not how long he had run for, but he remembered screams of fear and horror, blessed cool air on what remained of his skin, and the twin joy and pain of fire suppressants bathing his body. Then he knew darkness, agonising pain beyond imagining and almost beyond sanity. He knew shouts, lights and stinging needles, faces peering at him, and voices calling his name.

Hymns. He remembered hymns.

He woke to pain, and wept as it bathed his entire body, knowing that, beneath the counterseptic-soaked bandages that wrapped him he was barely alive, that his life hung by the thinnest of threads. Pain balms allowed his mind to wrench itself free of physical sensation, retreating into the furthest corners of his mind, but, as the agony overcame each dose, he would be dragged back to his misery.

Rows of beds stretched out either side of him, their wretched, miserable occupants filling the echoing chamber with their cries. The Sisters of the Eternal Candle that tended to his ruined flesh mouthed banal platitudes, but he had long since stopped listening to them, repulsed by the pity in their eyes. All they saw was a ruined preacher, a man destined to spend the last breaths of his life in terrible, unendurable agony. They sought to ease him into his death, thinking

they did him a mercy.

Only one visitor to his bedside had come without pity in his heart.

'Truly you endure the price of peace and forgiveness,' said Prelate Culla, standing above Gaetan with a copy of the Imperial Creed held close to his chest. The predicant of the Lavrentian regiment was a towering presence, an emerald-robed warrior priest with a red chainsword sheathed over his shoulder.

Culla's shaven head reflected the weak light of the hospice chamber, and his beard had been braided into two forks, one silver and one black. Golden flecks in his eyes glittered with faith, and Gaetan winced as he pictured the fire that had crippled him.

His blistered tongue licked the lipless gash in his face that was all that remained of his mouth, and he heard the hiss of the atomiser as it puffed a mist of sterile moisture over his eyes.

'Culla,' he said, his voice cracked and little more than a rasping hiss, 'if you have come to gloat, leave me be. I am dying.'

'Aye,' agreed Culla, 'you are, and I come to you as a fellow keeper of the flame.'

Gaetan searched Culla's face for mockery, but finding none said, 'What do you want?'

'You are a defender of the faith, Gaetan Baltazar,' said Culla. 'Though ye walk through the fires of the iniquitous, ye shall rise again to smite the blasphemer, the heretic. Aye, and the alien too. Truly, I envy you, Clericus Fabricae.'

'Then you are a fool. I am dying,' hissed Gaetan. 'Why would you envy me?'

Culla reached down and placed his hand on Gaetan's chest. He winced at the pain as Culla said, 'Suffering brings us closer to the Emperor. We are clothed in His image, yet we walk freely beneath the sun while He suffers in our name upon the Golden Throne. In pain, we draw closer to Him and know a measure of his sacrifice. All men of faith should rejoice in such a fate. You will live to fight again, my friend.'

'We are not friends, Culla,' gasped Gaetan. 'All you preach is death and hatred.'

'That is all there is, Gaetan,' pressed Culla: 'Can you not see that? Hatred is what keeps us strong, what gives us the strength to defeat our enemies. Surely you now see the deception of tolerance? The evil of acceptance? There must be no peace amongst the stars, Gaetan, not while unclean xenos species and unbelievers are allowed to exist. Rejoice, for an eternity of carnage and battle awaits us. Embrace your hatred, for it is necessary. Hatred is good. You cannot tell me that you do not hate the tau for what they have done to you.'

Culla's words were like whips of fire on his soul, for he felt the pain of them

even beyond that of his burned flesh. He did hate the tau. He hated them for the agony he suffered with every last shred of his life. He tried to hold onto his belief in redemption, forgiveness and brotherhood amongst the stars, but a tidal wave of bile and venom washed it away.

Gaetan wept at the ease with which his convictions crumbled before this hatred, and Culla smiled as it took shape in his heart. The Lavrentian preacher bent and lifted something heavy from beside the bed, placing it next to his hand.

'You understand at last, my friend,' said Culla.

'Yes,' said Gaetan, curling his clawed, burned hand around the blackened grip of his eviscerator, 'I do, and it breaks my heart.'

'OLZETYN IS SURE to be next,' said Lord Winterbourne, cradling his wounded arm in a sling as he stared at the gloomy projection on the hololithic table. The Lavrentian colonel had changed out of his bloodied shirt and uniform jacket, but was otherwise as Uriel had last seen him in the mountains. 'Jotusburg is infested with those damn drones, and Praxedes is… well, it's just gone. Damned if I thought I'd see the day a Command of the Lavrentians would be taken so easily.'

Uriel sympathised with Winterbourne, having learned of the death of Major Ornella and the night of fighting on the west of the continent. The morning had brought little respite for the Imperial forces. The 4th Company were ready to go to war, and the remaining Commands of Lavrentians had assumed a defensive posture in response to the tau invasion, but there was no doubting they were still reeling from the speed of the attack.

Winterbourne, Uriel and Clausel gathered in the command centre of Fortress Idaeus, watching as hazy icons flickered on the surface of the projection table. The wounded vorehound sat at its master's feet, gnawing on a bone that didn't look as though it came from any livestock Uriel knew.

The data-slates embedded in the command centre's walls streamed with what information the surveyor gear on the roof could gather, and Chapter serfs passed it to the Techmarine hard-plugged into the throne at the end of the command centre. Harkus was fighting for his life in the Apothecarion, and Techmarine Achamen had taken his place. Binary code whispered from his lips as he sifted through the data being fed to him, and relayed it to the hololithic table.

'None of us expected it. That was our first mistake. Let us make sure it is our last,' said Uriel. 'But Praxedes did fall, and we need to get our forces moving to meet the tau advance. The xenos fight a rapid war, and, unless we act now, we will be too late to stop them.'

Clausel said, 'Then we must take the fight to them, immediately.'

'And we will, but not without first planning that fight,' said Uriel, indicating the table. 'These are the last plots we received from the Vae Victus, before Admiral Tiberius had to pull back to the Caernus asteroid belt.'

'Pull back?' said Winterbourne. 'Damn, but I was counting on your vessel to pull our backsides from the fire, Uriel. Why the devil has she pulled back?'

'The tau have a number of ships in orbit more powerful than the Vae Victus, at least two carriers, a warship and a number of escorts.'

'A small fleet for a planetary invasion,' noted Clausel. 'Even a system patrol fleet could defeat that. Would that we had one!'

'Agreed,' said Uriel. 'Admiral Tiberius postulates that this is an explorator expedition, not a full invasion fleet, perhaps a probe to test the defences of this arc of the Eastern Fringe in preparation for a renewed assault.'

'Then it is even more imperative we defeat it,' said Clausel.

'How recent are these images?' asked Winterbourne, looking down at the host of red and blue icons on and around the representations of the cities.

'They are around three hours old,' said Uriel.

'Then they are as good as useless,' snapped Winterbourne. 'The tau move at speed, and this will bear no resemblance to the situation on the ground.'

The vorehound's head snapped up at Winterbourne's angry tone, a low growl building in its throat.

'True enough,' said Uriel, 'but it is all we have, and, if nothing else, it may give us an indication of our own dispositions and plans.'

'Plans? How can we plan to fight without knowing the disposition of the enemy?' shouted Winterbourne. 'We should be hammering that tau you captured at Koudelkar's estate for intelligence. He'll know what their game is. Him and that traitor, Mykola Shonai, they'll have information we can use, I'll warrant.'

'I have faith that Jenna Sharben will get them to talk,' said Uriel.

'Pah! Sharben is an amateur,' said Winterbourne. 'I've sent Culla to get the truth. He'll break them, and then we'll learn something of value.'

'Perhaps,' said Uriel, but Winterbourne wasn't finished yet.

'The tau have us on the back foot, Uriel. The initiative lies with them, how do you propose we get it back?'

'We fight,' said Uriel, leaning over the plotting table. 'We meet the invaders head-on, and we wrest the initiative from them at the end of bolter and the edge of a chainsword. The loss of Major Ornella was a blow, but you need to control your grief, Nathaniel.'

Winterbourne looked set to retort angrily, before realising that Uriel had called him by his first name. He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

'Yes, of course, of course, you're right, Uriel,' sighed Winterbourne. 'I'm sorry, I'm just a bit shaken up, you understand. Alithea dying, Praxedes falling… it's a lot to take in.'

'That is no excuse,' said Clausel, towering over the colonel. 'You command a regiment of the Emperor's soldiers. You do not have the luxury of grief while there is a war yet to fight. Mourn the dead after the songs of victory are sung.'

Uriel locked his gaze with Winterbourne's. 'Now that we understand one another, let us look at what we have available to fight.'

For the next hour, Uriel, Winterbourne and Clausel discussed the strategic situation as best they could. Communication was the key to any response, and with the Kaliz Array down Lavrentian techs had rigged a linked series of encrypted master vox-units to allow coordination of the various commands.

Convoys of armoured vehicles were, even now, en route to Olzetyn, Jotusburg, Madorn and Altemaxa to deliver the cryptographic codes to allow coordination of forces. A few had already reached their destinations, and information was slowly beginning to flow between Imperial forces on the status of the defences.

Praxedes was clearly in enemy hands and was no doubt acting as a bridgehead from which the tau carriers could freely drop fresh troops and supplies to the planet's surface. If the invasion were to be defeated, Praxedes would need to be taken, but before any such assault could be launched, the tau had to be contained. Initial attacks against the redoubts at Olzetyn had been beaten back, but it was unlikely the tau could be held there for long without support.

'What about your forces at Jotusburg?' asked Uriel.

Winterbourne flipped through a plastek binder. 'There's still fighting in the streets, but it's a warren down there. It's pretty confused, but I'm getting reports of sporadic ambushes and power disruptions. Banner Command is under Captain Luzaine, and he has three thousand men and six hundred armoured vehicles. Factor in some six thousand PDF and maybe a skitarii legion and you're looking at close to ten thousand soldiers at full alert. Aside from the kill teams hunting drone infiltrators, Luzaine hasn't yet reported any significant contact with the enemy.'

'And what of the Mechanicus facilities?' asked Clausel.

'They've suffered damage,' said Winterbourne, 'but Magos Vaal assures me that supplies of ammunition and weapons will be unaffected once the Hundred Rituals of Reparation are complete.'

'The war could be won or lost by then,' protested Clausel.

'I thought you of all people would understand the importance of ritual,

Chaplain.'

Clausel did not reply, but Uriel sensed his grudging acceptance of Winterbourne's words.

'Then we will plan our fight accordingly,' said Uriel. 'What is the strength of Shield Command, Nathaniel?'

'Captain Gerber has two and a half thousand soldiers and four hundred tanks,' replied Winterbourne. 'Colonel Loic is there too, with perhaps five thousand PDF. They're good lads, but I can't vouch for them in a fight. Only a few of them saw action during the rebellion, the rest are boys and old men who've never fired a rifle in anger.'

'Then we need to reinforce Olzetyn,' stated Uriel. 'It is the main route to Brandon Gate, and the tau appreciate the symbolism of capturing a planetary capital as well as any foe. I think you are right, colonel, they will seek to smash through Olzetyn and seize it as soon as possible, hoping that its capture will break the will of Pavonis to win.'

'They might be right,' said Clausel. 'The fighting spirit of this world is lacking. Its people are more concerned with making money than doing battle, but why would the tau bother to fight their way through Olzetyn? Surely with their skimmer tanks they don't need to capture the bridge city? They can cross the rivers anywhere.'

'To attack on such a wide front will take time and numbers,' said Winterbourne. 'It means spreading their forces, and, if your Admiral Tiberius is correct, and this is an explorator fleet, they probably don't have the numbers to mount such an offensive.'

Uriel nodded. 'And if they can break through quickly they will split our forces in two.'

'We can't allow that to happen,' said Winterbourne. 'If it does we are lost.'

'I will lead the bulk of the 4th to Olzetyn,' said Uriel. 'It is imperative the city holds. The tau need to win quickly, and we need to hold them for long enough for reinforcements to arrive.'

'And how long will that be?'

'I am not sure,' admitted Uriel. 'Admiral Tiberius will have sent word to Macragge and sector command. Help will be on the way. We just have to hold on long enough for it to get here.'

'What do you require of me, Uriel?' asked Winterbourne, standing to attention.

'Guard our flanks. I believe the tau will seek to make a decisive thrust through Olzetyn, but it is also likely they will try to encircle us and trap us in a pocket. If they succeed, this war is over.'

Winterbourne saluted with his good arm. 'You can count on the 44th.'

'I know I can, Nathaniel,' said Uriel.

At that moment, Techmarine Achamen emitted a blurt of binary code that cut across their words. The augmitters fitted within the hololithic table crackled to life as they translated the binary into Imperial Gothic. The artificially rendered voice was devoid of any sense of urgency, but the words galvanised everyone who heard them.

'Incoming enemy aircraft,' said the voice. 'Multiple target tracks inbound on this location. Assessment: altitude, bearing and formation consistent with airborne assault patterns.'

TWELVE

THOUGH KOUDELKAR HAD no frame of reference by which to judge its merits, the prison camp on the shores of Praxedes was certainly more comfortable than he had been led to believe such institutions were typically appointed. He and his mother had been given a private chamber within a smooth-walled structure containing another fifty prisoners, though the soldiers shared one long dormitory room and a single ablutions block.

Built on one of the vacant landing platforms that jutted out to sea, the structure was clean and comfortable, blandly furnished, softly lit and apparently impervious to graffiti or carving. Along with another twenty such structures, Koudelkar's new home sat within an enclosure bounded by thin posts topped with domed discs and patrolled by armoured squads of what he learned were called Fire Warriors.

Some Guardsmen had tried to escape on their first day of imprisonment, but painful jolts of invisible energy coursing between the posts had hurled them back. Koudelkar sat on the steps of his structure, looking out to sea and enjoying the warm sunlight as it tanned his skin. His mother was inside, lying on her back and staring at the featureless ceiling, almost catatonic in her resignation.

'How can you just sit there?' asked Lortuen Perjed, limping unsteadily now that the tau had taken his walking cane. 'We should be planning our escape.'

'Escape? To where?'

'It doesn't matter where, Koudelkar,' said Lortuen, sitting beside him. 'And it doesn't even matter if we succeed. All that matters is that we try. I've been speaking to some of the senior sergeants and they agree that it is our duty as Imperial citizens to inconvenience these xenos scum any way we can.'

Koudelkar looked over at the rippling force barrier that surrounded their enclosure. Beyond the unseen energy field, a number of heavily armed battlesuits moved through the subjugated port city as yet more of the wide-winged craft descended from orbit with fresh supplies and soldiers.

'I don't think we'd inconvenience them that much, Lortuen.'

'So we just sit here, meek and compliant?'

He sensed Adept Perjed's steely glare and shrugged. 'What would you have me do, Lortuen? Organise a revolution? We are surrounded by an enemy army, and I don't think we'd last too long if it came down to a fight.'

'It doesn't matter,' pressed Lortuen. 'You are the Planetary Governor and these

men look to you for leadership.'

'These men?' hissed Koudelkar. 'These men are Lavrentians, they think of me as little more than a puppet ruler that they're here to watch as much as to serve. They don't need me for leadership, but if you want to foment rebellion, then go ahead and die for it.'

'A man should have the courage to die for what he believes is right, and fighting these aliens is what's right.' Perjed waved a liver-spotted hand at the tau warriors. 'We don't know what's going on beyond Praxedes. By sitting here and doing nothing, more and more of these abominable Fire Warriors might be freed to fight on the front lines. If we cause trouble, then they have to stay here and guard us. That could make all the difference in the war.'

'You don't know that.'

'No, I don't,' agreed Lortuen, 'but I could not live with myself if fighting men died because I did nothing. How will you look yourself in the mirror every day with those deaths on your conscience? Think of your honour!'

'We are prisoners of war,' said Koudelkar. 'What honour do we have?'

'Only what we bring with us,' said Lortuen wearily, lapsing into silence.

Lortuen's words struck a chord within Koudelkar, and he knew he should be filled with righteous anger and hatred for the aliens. But instead of anger, all he felt was fear and a growing sense of abandonment. He looked away from Lortuen, gazing out to sea once more.

The awful carnage at Galtrigil was still fresh in his mind: the spraying blood, the torn up bodies blown apart from the inside by superheated plasma, or cut in half by sawing blasts of bullets. He could still smell the stench of blood and emptied bladders. He could hear the frantic screams of the dying men before more bullets had silenced them.

Though battle still raged, the battlesuit with the flaming sphere insignia had carried him and his mother from the fighting, before heading south in a series of running bounds, while its companion carried Lortuen. His mother had screamed nearly the entire journey south to Praxedes, and while Koudelkar had been frightened, he had not been unduly worried. If this El'esaven planned to kill them, he could have simply gunned them down when the bullets started flying.

Clearly, the tau recognised some worth in having him as a captive, and now, a few days after their arrival at the Praxedes camp, Koudelkar had begun to form an idea of what his value might be.

'I wonder if my aunt is still alive,' he said apropos of nothing. 'Perhaps she is in some other prison camp. Or maybe the Ultramarines rescued her.'

Lortuen grunted. 'I know which fate will be worse for her.'

'You must hate her,' said Koudelkar.

'Don't you? She consorted with xenos, and, thanks to her, we are in their prison camp.'

'I am angry with her, yes, but try as I might I can't hate her. It must have been galling to see everything she and others had worked for over the years taken from them like toys from an unruly child.'

'Pavonis had rebelled,' Lortuen said, as if Koudelkar needed reminding. 'It was only my recommendation that allowed Mykola to retain her role as governor. Look where that got us!'

'Yes, but for the remainder of her term of office as Planetary Governor, Pavonis was, for all intents and purposes, under martial law, with the governor relegated to a figurehead role.'

'You tried to change that, I know,' said Lortuen. 'Perhaps I should have let you.'

Koudelkar sighed. 'I believe I was making some progress too, but all that good work has been undone by my aunt's meddling. This will never be our planet again, will it? Not now.'

'No, it won't,' agreed Lortuen, shaking his head. 'Even if the tau are defeated, Pavonis will be turned into a garrison world. One incident might be forgiven in time, but two?'

Koudelkar had known that would be Lortuen's answer, and he fought against the bitterness that was taking root within him at the unfeeling, heartless bureaucracy of far distant Terra, a world he had never seen and probably never would.

'Tell me,' said Koudelkar, wishing to change the subject, 'have you seen any sign of Aun'rai since we were brought here?'

'No.'

'Nor have I. Strange, don't you think? I have come to the conclusion that he was more than simply an envoy. In fact, looking at our guards, it seems as though they are beside themselves at his absence. I believe that Aun'rai is a personage of some importance, perhaps even of a similar rank to me.'

'It's possible,' said Lortuen. 'El'esaven deferred to him, so I imagine he is important.'

'Perhaps the Ultramarines captured Aun'rai and they will use him as a bargaining chip to secure our release.'

Lortuen laughed, though Koudelkar heard precious little humour in the sound.

'What?' he asked. 'Did I say something funny?'

The old man shook his head sadly. 'No, quite the opposite in fact.'

'Explain.'

'If Captain Ventris did indeed capture Aun'rai, then exchanging him for us

will be the last thing on his mind, I assure you. In any case, we have been taken prisoner by xenos and our lives are forfeit.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't you see?' explained Lortuen. 'We are tainted by contact with these aliens, and even if we are rescued we will probably face an executioner's bullet.'

'You're joking, surely?'

'No. Remember, I served an inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos. I know how these things work.'

'But I am a Planetary Governor!' protested Koudelkar.

'And you think you are not expendable?' asked Lortuen sadly. 'Trust me, Koudelkar, the Imperium will shed no tears for us if we die here.'

URIEL WATCHED FROM the commander's hatch of his Rhino as flocks of wide-bodied tau aircraft swooped in over Brandon Gate. Five Rhinos had surged from Fortress Idaeus, racing to plug the biggest gap in the city's defences. A pair of Predator battle tanks completed Uriel's armoured convoy, one on each flank with their turret-mounted auto-cannons traversing as the gunners searched for targets.

Imperial Guard Hydras filled the air with explosive flak, and a number of tau craft vanished in clouds of fiery debris. They tumbled from the sky, but many more came in their wake. This was no bombing raid or show of force. This was an assault, and only the timely warning from Techmarine Achamen had given the Ultramarines time to deploy.

The tactical feed from the command centre was projected on Uriel's visor, and he followed the spinning dance of hostile icons as they circled the city, before separating in a graceful ballet that would have been admirable had it been an Imperial display of prowess. The larger of the tau craft were flying in low along Highway 236 on a course for the southern Commercia Gate. Winterbourne's tanks and Guardsmen were ready to meet any force that deployed against the city's main approach, and Uriel had faith in their ability to stand.

'Echelon formation,' he ordered, and the trailing Rhinos fanned out smoothly behind his. Fire and noise filled the air, and, though his attention was fixed firmly ahead of him, Uriel saw more tau aircraft spinning downwards and trailing thick plumes of smoke.

A thudding series of booming explosions sounded behind him, and Uriel risked a glance over his shoulder in time to see a monstrously large pillar of smoke and fire rising from the south wall. Streaking arcs of missile fire pounded the gate, and strange, insectlike creatures dropped from the sky on wide, flaring

wings, but Uriel could afford to spare the devastation no more attention.

His vehicle halted on the reverse slope of a ridge of crushed stone. Uriel hauled himself from the command hatch and dropped to the ground, running, crouched over, to the crest of the ridge to stare down into the latest battleground of the war. The south-eastern wedge of the city looked much as it had during the latter stages of the rebellion, a desolate hinterland of collapsed structures, rubble and heaped debris. The walls by the Justice Gate had been blown down in the de Valtos rebellion, leaving a readymade access point into the heart of Brandon Gate.

If an enemy were to hold this region, they would be able to infiltrate the entire city.

Uriel scanned the ground, forming a three-dimensional map of the area in his head. Jenna Sharben had told him it was a favourite training ground for her new cadre of enforcers, and he could see why.

Plenty of places to hide and lots of cover.

Minefields, razor wire and Thunderfire cannons had blocked entry through this breach, but smoke billowed from deep craters where compact grid formations of missile impacts had cleared a path. Huge gaps had been torn in the lines of razor wire, flattened areas of molten ground showed where mines had been detonated, and the shattered remains of a number of the automated weapon systems littered the wasteland.

The tactician in Uriel was forced to admire the methodical precision of the tau forces' preparatory bombardment, even as he knew it would make this battle more difficult. Supporting forces were already en-route from Fortress Idaeus to refortify the area, but Uriel's warriors would have to deny it to the enemy first. A number of tau skimmer tanks were already riding over the twisted remains of the shattered wall, while dismounted Fire Warriors darted through the rubble.

The sheer amount of debris would make it impossible to hold this area simply with guns; the tau would need to be pushed out with blades and brute strength.

'Disembark!' yelled Uriel. 'Assault pattern Konor!'

GAETAN WAS WOKEN by the brutal thump of explosions and the crack of small-arms fire. At first, he thought he was reliving the horror of the attack on the Templum Fabricae, but dismissed that thought as he realised the city was under attack.

Rising from a drug-induced slumber, his gaze was drawn towards the gentle light of the stained glass windows that ran the length of the ward, each brightly coloured and depicting the Emperor in his role as a healer and saviour,

ministering to the sick, dispensing alms to the needy and welcoming the dispossessed to his mercy.

Foolishness, he now knew. Mercy and forgiveness had no place in the Imperial Creed, such things were for those cosseted in far off shrine worlds, where the threat of the xenos, the heretic and the mutant were shadowy bogeymen to cow the weak-minded.

Bright light flashed behind the windows, and they blew out in a storm of whirling fragments. Hot winds of explosions billowed into the Hospice, and Gaetan screamed as flying shards of glass sliced his face. Fragments lodged in his skull, but the pain only served to fuel his anger and strength. Hate swelled in his breast as fighting sounded from somewhere within the walls of the Hospice. The screams of wounded men and women echoed through the ward, but Gaetan paid them no mind. Another explosion sounded nearby, and the great doors to the ward were smashed asunder.

Flames billowed from the chamber beyond, and he finally understood what was happening.

The daemon creatures had come to finish him off.

Part of him recognised how unlikely that was, but the pain and trauma of his wounds had driven the rational part of Gaetan's mind to the furthest corners of his skull. In his mind, the tau were coming to finish him off, but he swore that the hateful xenos creatures would not find him meekly awaiting his fate. He was Gaetan Baltazar, Clericus Fabricae of Pavonis, and a warrior of the Emperor.

If the tau wanted him dead, they would find him on his feet with a weapon in hand.

He gritted his teeth as he pushed himself into a sitting position. Fire screamed along every nerve-ending in his body, but he fought against it as the sound of screams and gunfire sounded even louder than before.

Gaetan ripped away the wires and tubes attached to his body with his free hand, and the machines next to his bed warbled with alerts. He roared in pain as he swung his legs to the floor and saw a neat pile of dark clothing sitting on a stool next to his eviscerator. Gaetan's lipless mouth pulled back over his teeth as he saw that they were fresh vestments. He guessed that Culla had brought them for him, and swiftly dressed, the pain of the rough fabric on his burned skin a blessed reminder of his duty to the Emperor.

The robes were those of a Mortifex, and Gaetan tied them at his waist with a jagged belt of iron hooks that pierced the black robes and pricked his flesh. Until now, he had always looked upon the cult of the Mortifex with distaste, thinking of them as deranged lunatics who sought only to die in the service of the Emperor. Culla had chosen well.

His fused fingers reached for the handle of his eviscerator.

Gaetan looked at the flaring eagle wings that formed the hand-guard of his weapon, and his mouth opened wide in a skeletal grin. Just holding the weapon gave him strength, and he pushed himself to his feet, the pain vanishing in the time it took to notice its absence. He took a deep breath, feeling hot air rasp in his tortured lungs. The burnt iron taste of war came from beyond the windows, and Gaetan rejoiced in the bark of gunfire echoing through the city's canyons of stone and steel.

War and death were calling to him, and he could no more resist their siren song than he could stop the beat of his heart. This was the reality of faith on the Eastern Fringe, and, though he grieved at the realisation, he knew it was by such faith that his race endured amongst the stars.

He set off towards the ruined doors, and passed through them in time to see a host of armoured warriors pushing into the Hospice. Their armour and weapons were unmistakably alien, and he squeezed the activation trigger of his eviscerator. The weapon roared to life with a throaty growl, its adamantium teeth a deadly cutting edge that could shatter steel and tear through the thickest armour.

The aliens saw him, and he relished their cries of terror. Weapons turned on him, but he was already amongst the tau, hacking left and right with his terrible blade. Blood sprayed the walls of the chamber as he cut through them, the roar of his eviscerator drowning out their death screams.

The battle was over in seconds, the blood of his victims soaking his robes and gleaming wetly in the firelight from outside. Gaetan lifted his eviscerator to the heavens.

'The Emperor set a fire in their hearts that they might burn the iniquitous and the impure from his sight!' he screamed. 'And the light of that flame shall be a beacon to the faithful, a light that shines in the darkest places!'

The words he had rejected as a novice were now the sweetest clarion call in his soul, and he recognised the truth of them even as he despaired. Beyond the walls of the Hospice, Gaetan could hear the sound of battle, the hungry scream of war: the voracious predator ever eager for flesh and bone to grind to dust, and eternally hungry for souls to send to their ending.

This was the reality of life.

This was the essence of death.

Gaetan Baltazar hefted his eviscerator, and went out into the maelstrom of battle with a song of doom on his lips.

A GROUP OF Fire Warriors huddled in the cover of a wide crater that had once been a minefield, firing over the crater's lip of compressed rubble and dirt. Behind them, a blackened Devilfish lay on it side, black smoke spewing from its shattered engines. Burning lines of tau rifle-fire hammered the knotted mass of rusted girders that Uriel and his squad sheltered behind, and he ducked back as white sparks flared from the impacts.

Uriel slammed a fresh magazine into his bolter and racked the slide. He rose to a crouch, ducking his head quickly around his cover to appraise the course of the battle as the tau attempt to force a path through the breach continued.

Gunfire pulsed and roared across the wasteland in withering streams, the killing ground between the walls and the city ablaze with wrecked vehicles and tau corpses. The Fire Warriors wore substantial armour, but it was no match for disciplined volleys of bolter-fire.

Behind Uriel, the Predators poured fire into the battlefield, their lascannons hurling unimaginably powerful spears of energy to obliterate enemy tanks, while their autocannons chewed up Fire Warriors in roaring salvoes of high-velocity shells. Both had taken hits, their armoured hulls dented and burned, but both were still shooting. Between them, they had already claimed nearly a dozen skimmer tanks, each of their kills spewing smoke and flames as the warriors they carried burned to death inside.

Spread across the crest of the ridge, Devastator Squad Aktis fired deadly accurate missiles into the enemy: whickering, explosive storms of frags keeping the enemy pinned down as Uriel's squad advanced directly towards the breach in the walls. Tactical Squads Theron and Nestor pushed out on Uriel's flanks, relentless volleys of bolter-fire raking the rubble-strewn ground before them. Sporadic fire lanced out to meet them, and, though a few warriors had fallen, Uriel saw that none had been killed.

The warriors Uriel led were normally designated Squad Learchus, but while their sergeant hunted for Governor Koudelkar, they had temporarily been renamed squad Ventris. Learchus had insisted on the change, and Uriel recognised the honour for what it was. These were Learchus's men, and it was Uriel's duty to watch over them until such time as the sergeant returned.

As Learchus had done for the 4th Company, so Uriel would do for his squad.

The Fire Warriors had been held so far, each alien APC blown apart before it could reach a position of cover. Two of the heavier tau tanks sheltered behind the wrecks, darting out to shoot under the cover of salvoes of missiles launched from support tanks beyond the walls. Explosions shook the ground, and piles of debris rained down from the sagging structures around the edges of the battlefield, but the strikes were undirected, thanks to the pinpoint accuracy of Uriel's

Devastators in taking out the enemy artillery spotters.

Uriel's visor darkened as a blazing rod of molten light stabbed overhead and struck one of the Predators on its armoured front glacis. The hyper-velocity slug tore through the tank's hull as though it were as insubstantial as mist. Uriel watched as a plasma trail of kinetic energy ignited the weapon charges inside the Predator, and its turret blew off with a thunderclap of electrical discharge and fire. The top half of the tank spun ten metres into the air before slamming down to earth with a dreadfully final clang. Uriel knew that no one inside could have survived such terrible violence.

As the smoke from the explosion cleared and Uriel fought his shock at the destruction of the battle tank, he looked up to see a pair of bobbing silver-skinned drones hovering a few metres behind his position. He swung his bolter around, before seeing that neither drone appeared to be armed. Each flying disc sported a bulbous device slung on a rotating gimbal mount that looked more like a picter than a weapon. Were the tau recording the battle for study?

Then, he saw a faint cluster of concentric circles of light projected onto the girder next to him and realised the threat these devices represented.

'Valkyrie's Mark!' he shouted, vaulting the iron girders towards the Fire Warriors in the crater. 'With me!'

His warriors obeyed instantly, surging to their feet, and following him over the top as a screaming roar of guided missiles streaked from beyond the walls and slashed downward. Barely a second later, a pounding series of impacts slammed into the ground. Uriel was hurled from his feet as the shock wave of the detonation obliterated the girders and blasted a six-metre crater in the earth.

Uriel felt the heat of the blast wash over him, keeping his bolter pulled in tight to his chest. Smoke obscured his vision, and the ringing echoes of the detonation pounded within his helmet. He rolled to his feet, instantly regaining his sense of spatial awareness as his auto-senses picked up the crunch of earth underfoot, and shouted, 'Incoming. On my mark.'

Figures moved in the billowing cloud of dust and falling debris, and he pulled the trigger, firing off a rapid volley into the emerging shapes. He heard screams and three of them dropped instantly. A blazing beam of light punched into his chest, and he staggered as his breastplate hissed and spat bright gobbets of molten ceramite.

He fired another burst, and ducked beneath a spray of gunfire as the Fire Warriors advanced under the shadow of the bombardment. Uriel slung his bolter and drew his sword, the rest of Squad Ventris following his example. The tau expected to find them battered and disorientated, and Uriel relished the chance to make them pay for that error.

He lifted his sword to his shoulder and shouted, 'Into them!'

Uriel saw a Fire Warrior ahead of him, and swung his sword in a two-handed blow that split him from collarbone to pelvis. The alien soldier fell without a sound, and Uriel dropped to his knees as another white-hot bolt slashed the air above him. Space Marines fanned out around him, shooting as they charged, and each round blasted through olive green armour plates with a resounding crack.

A shadow loomed over Uriel, and he dived to one side as a pair of heavy, mechanical feet slammed down with a terrific crash of alien armour on stone. A battlesuit with a tubular cannon on one arm and a crackling khopesh blade mounted on the other towered over him, a rippling heat haze shimmering above its rear-mounted jets.

The khopesh slashed down, and Uriel blocked the blow with his sword. The impact was tremendous, and sent the sword spinning from his grip. Uriel was driven to his knees by the force of the blow as his warriors turned to face this new threat in their midst. More explosions rocked the earth, the deafening crescendo punctuated by barks of heavy gunfire and the sound of shells on armour.

An alien blade flashed, and two Space Marines went down, their armour cloven by the energy field sheathing the blade. Another warrior was clubbed down by the battlesuit's heavy fist, his helmet a crumpled mass of shattered plate and bone.

Another battlesuit hammered down, and then a third. Uriel scrambled back as the battlesuit turned to face him, and a blinding stream of light erupted from the tubular weapon. He rolled again, trying to put one of the other battlesuits between him and the plasma weapon as a second white-hot blast turned the ground molten. The third battlesuit stepped in towards Uriel, and he kicked out, hammering his boot against its knee joint.

The machine staggered, but it didn't fall. Uriel's instinctive reaction had bought him a few seconds, but it was all he needed to retrieve his sword. As it came at him again, he swung the blade at its thigh, the energised blade hacking the lower half of the battlesuit's leg from its body.

The alien battle machine collapsed, and Uriel sprang to his feet as the second stepped in. Space Marines swarmed the battlesuits, firing their bolters at point-blank range. Another Space Marine was pummelled to the ground as yet more Fire Warriors charged into the fight. Uriel swayed aside from a roaring blast of heavy calibre shells, and spun inside the battlesuit's guard to ram his sword up into its torso.

He buried the blade up to its eagle hilt, and wrenched it out through the machine's hip. A wash of sparks, hissing black hydraulics and blood flowed from

the crackling wound, and the battlesuit fell to its knees, the light in its helmet lenses dying along with its pilot.

Uriel turned from the destroyed machine in time to see the lead battlesuit's khopesh slash towards him. Desperately, he tried to block, but the blade slammed into his shoulder-guard, and tore through the exterior plates before sliding up over his helmet and slicing through the upper layers of protection.

Red light flooded Uriel's vision, and he threw up his sword to block the reverse cut he instinctively knew would be coming to finish him. He angled the blade to direct the impact away, but was driven to the ground by the force of the impact. The battlesuit lashed out with its heavy foot, and Uriel was hurled back, the plates of his armour buckling in protest.

Uriel rolled onto his back as the battlesuit loomed over him, its khopesh poised to deliver the deathblow.

A deafening roar, like tearing steel, sounded, and a blazing plume of sparks obscured the top half of the battlesuit. A flaring line drew across the machine's midriff, as if a monstrous buzz-saw was slicing through it. Uriel saw the angular form of an armoured giant standing behind the battlesuit as its top half was smashed from its lower half. The machine's legs crumpled, and Uriel saw the welcome sight of Brother Zethus standing before him.

The Dreadnought stood with the barrels of its assault cannon still spinning and fragments of the battlesuit's armour falling from its enormous power fist. Behind the Old One, Uriel saw a pair of Whirlwind support tanks appear alongside the massively powerful form of a Land Raider. A rippling salvo of multiple rocket launches streamed from the Whirlwind's missile rack as the Land Raider began systematically destroying the tau vehicles still fighting.

'Supporting forces on station as ordered, Captain Ventris,' said Brother Zethus.

THIRTEEN

PRIDE. CERTAINTY. EXCITEMENT. These emotions were uppermost in Nathaniel Winterbourne's mind as he watched his forces ride to battle. Leman Russ Conquerors and Vanquishers rumbled through the wide, fume-choked streets of Brandon Gate's outer fabriks.

Within the star-shaped city, the buildings were fine edifices of stone, steel and marble, but beyond the rarefied atmosphere of the walls, the blackened reality of the industry that lay at the heart of Pavonis reasserted itself.

Tangled warrens of giant, portal-framed hangars, towering ore silos, hammering weapon shops and thousands of kilometres of hissing pipe-work spread out from the oasis at the centre of the industrial hinterlands.

It was, thought Winterbourne, a lousy place to fight a battle.

Tanks were never safe in such an urbanised landscape, where a single infantryman armed with a rocket launcher could disable or kill an armoured vehicle. This landscape was the domain of the foot soldier, but Winterbourne wasn't about to let that fact of war dissuade him from meeting the tau offensive head-on.

The 44th's tanks within Brandon Gate - fifteen Leman Russ Conquerors and half a dozen Chimeras - had rendezvoused in Liberation Square before rolling south-west along the gilded streets of the Via Commercia towards the city's southern gateway. PDF vehicles were assembling at road junctions, as heavy earth movers formed berms of rubble and Lavrentian combat engineers unspooled barriers of razor wire.

Winterbourne had little faith that these PDF units would hold against a concerted push by the tau, but if the enemy reached this far into the city, the fight was already lost. A few outraged civilians argued with PDF officers about the destruction of the roadway, but the majority of the city's populace were barricading themselves in their homes, desperate to protect what few possessions remained to them.

He felt a moment of contempt for these people. Any Imperial citizen able to hold a gun ought to be on the streets and manning a barricade. The Eastern Fringe was no place for shirkers, and to sit idly by while others fought an alien foe at their very gates spoke of the lowest cowardice.

Winterbourne's armoured convoy passed through the Commercia Gate, a solid portal of bronze-sheathed adamantium engraved with the transactions of the

founding members of the cartels. An enormous circular tower of polished grey granite flanked the gate. Its curving walls depicted scenes of trade and commerce, and was intended as a monument to their guiding principles of integrity, philanthropy and resolution.

Too bad their descendants didn't match up to those ideals, thought Winterbourne.

Beyond the city, tank squadrons surging from Camp Torum assembled and deployed in the concrete ribbon that partitioned the inner city from the industrial heartland that surrounded it. Much of the region was in ruins, decimated in the fighting during the de Valtos rebellion.

Carried from Fortress Idaeus in a Chimera AFV, Winterbourne had disembarked with his new protection detail and marched towards Father Time.

The scale of it was enormous, and it never failed to amaze Winterbourne that such a colossal mass of iron could even move, let alone fight.

Father Time was an immense Baneblade that had served as Winterbourne's command vehicle since his promotion to colonel.

It was one of the mightiest tanks ever to roll off the Martian production lines, a vehicle so powerful that nothing short of an engine of the Titan Legions would dare to stand before it. Winterbourne's tank was one of a handful of these incredible war machines that could trace its pedigree back to the assembly yards of the Tharsis Montes, its honour roll and legacy of battle inscribed on the inner faces of its turret ring.

A pitiful few of the Mechanicus forge worlds could still manufacture these behemoths to such an exacting standard, their inferior copies regarded by the priests of Mars as second generation war machines at best.

Now, sealed within the belly of his magnificent vehicle, he stared in frustration at the auspex display as it bounced and squalled with interference.

'Can't you clean this damned image up, Jenko?' he demanded. 'Can't see a bloody thing.'

'Trying to, sir,' said Jenko. 'It's all the damned metal structures around us. The composition and conductivity is messing with the returns. There's so much bloody interference, the auspex signal's bouncing around like a sand-raptor on a griddle.'

Despite the tension, Winterbourne smiled at the boy's unconscious mimicking of his speech patterns and colourful metaphor. Father Time's target acquisition officer was barely out of his teens, but the lad could send an armour piercing shell up the arse of an enemy tank before veteran gunners with decades of experience even noticed it. The lad had an affinity with the venerable tank, and that made him an integral part of the crew.

'Hurry it up, lad,' said Winterbourne. 'We can't fight an enemy we can't see.'

'I've almost got it,' said Jenko. 'It's just a matter of syncing our auspex to filter out certain frequencies.'

'I don't care how you do it,' said Winterbourne, 'just get me a clear view.'

Winterbourne's command chair sat high in the main turret, behind the crew of his vehicle: nine highly trained soldiers, hand-picked to serve him on board. The interior of a Baneblade, like any Imperial tank was a cramped, oily, noisy and dangerous place, which had apparently been designed at a time when only midgets and famine victims were picked to be crews.

Winterbourne looked back down at his auspex reader as Jenko said, 'Got it, sir! Signals coming in, sir. Approaching vehicles. Signature matches say enemy.'

Rippling contours of static hazed the auspex panel, but they faded into the background as a host of hostile contacts lit up the threat board.

'Hell and damnation,' swore Winterbourne. 'They're almost on top of us!'

He flipped his toggle over to the squadron vox-net. 'All vehicles, be alert for imminent contact,' ordered Winterbourne. 'Lavrentia expects every man to do his duty. Fight like your fathers are watching!'

Winterbourne switched back to his internal channel and said, 'Raise the flag!'

'Aye, sir,' confirmed Lars, the Baneblade's vox operator.

Though he couldn't see it, a telescoping antenna had just risen from the tank's hull bearing the green and gold banner of the 44th Lavrentian Hussars. Winterbourne knew it was foolhardy to mark himself out, but he would never dream of going into battle without the regiment's colours flying above Father Time.

He leaned forward to stare through the vision blocks above the main gun, seeing a slice of the outside world through the scuffed and crazed armaglass. Darting armoured shapes were moving through the tangled mass of structures ahead. A graceful tau tank slid from behind a blackened refinery structure, and in its wake came a host of skimming vehicles with heavy guns or racks of missiles mounted on their turrets.

'Enemy in sight,' shouted Winterbourne. 'All tanks engage!'

Something slammed down onto the hull of his Baneblade with a resounding clang of metal on metal, and Winterbourne jumped back from the vision blocks in surprise. Incredibly, he saw what looked like a pair of armoured legs, as of some bipedal war machine, and recognised them as belonging to a battlesuit. A flare of blinding light filled the turret as a weapon discharged, and a host of alarm bells began chiming.

'Contact!' he yelled, gripping the commander's turret controls and wrenching them to the side. The metal of the turret squealed, and the motors roared at such

harsh treatment. Winterbourne's view spun as the turret slewed around. He felt the impact of the main gun striking something, and when he looked back through the vision block, the battlesuit was gone.

'Get me a target, Jenko!' he shouted.

'Hammerhead, ten o' clock. Six hundred metres!'

'I see it!' said Winterbourne, swinging the turret to bear. 'Acquiring target. Loader, anti-tank!'

'Anti-tank, aye!'

Ancient mechanisms no longer understood by any save the priests of Mars whirred and hissed as they aligned the Baneblade's main gun with the target. It swam into view on Winterbourne's threat board, a brass panel with two enamelled pistol grips to either side.

Winterbourne gripped the handles as a green bulb lit up on the threat board.

'Up!' called the loader. 'Fire!'

'On the way!' yelled Winterbourne squeezing the triggers.

Such was the power of the main gun that even the incredible weight of the Baneblade rocked back under the force of the recoil. Despite layer upon layer of armour and acoustic damping material, the booming crack of the shot was deafening, and acrid fumes seeped into the crew compartments from the huge gun's breech as the spent shell-casing was ejected.

'Got you!' shouted Winterbourne, seeing the tau tank reduced to pulverised metal by the force of the impact.

'Multiple Devilfish,' snapped Jenko, 'on our eleven, twelve and one!'

'Loader! High explosive rounds! Sponson gunners engage!'

THE MISSILE ARCED up, then down, slamming into the thinner topside armour of the Devilfish. The vehicle exploded with a booming crack. Flames and smoke billowed, and the floating tank ground its nose into the dirt as its engines blew out.

'That's for Alithea,' hissed Captain Mederic, slithering back down a slope of twisted metal and crumbled stonework, and handing the smoking missile launcher off to his loader, a new inductee to the Hounds by the name of Kaynon.

Mederic wiped sweat from his eyes as Duken, his secondary shooter, dropped from the edge of the berm to join him.

'Hit?' he asked.

'Yeah,' nodded Duken, 'Sky Ray. It's dead.'

'Outstanding,' said Mederic, slapping a hand on Duken's shoulder, where the insignia of the Hounds, the 44th's scout company, was emblazoned. 'Now let's

get out of here.'

'No arguments from me,' agreed Duken.

'Displace!' yelled Mederic, chopping his hand along the length of the berm of rubble. He scrambled along the debris crouched over, knowing that, even now, a tau tank would be drawing a bead on the origin point of their shots. His six-man squad of Hounds needed no instruction to relocate after shooting, but Major Ornella had drilled them in the proper procedures, and the soldiers of the 44th were nothing if not well-drilled.

A blast of ionised air rolled over them as the area behind them erupted with violet fire and a hot, electrical discharge of alien weapons' fire.

'Too slow,' he chuckled as he dropped to his knees, and peered through a gap in the piles of shattered rockcrete and steel.

The battlefield before the walls of Brandon Gate was a hellish vision of shattered buildings, blazing plumes of fire and roiling banks of stinging smoke. Imperial tanks duelled with those of the tau in the warrens of the industrial belt that encircled the city - a raging hell-storm of shellfire and actinic energy beams.

Mederic and his Hounds were right in the thick of it, helping to even the odds by getting around behind the tau. Five other squads were pushing through the ruins to wreak havoc within the enemy lines. Being in the middle of a tank battle on foot was not generally where Mederic liked to deploy, but it was sure as hell keeping his survival instincts honed.

Tanks burned, their crew dead, and dismounted Guardsmen fought Fire Warriors from the charred wreckage of their former transports. This wasn't a glorious tank charge as told in the regimental records, but a down and dirty brawl of armoured units, hunting each other through obscuring banks of black smoke.

The circular tower that had once flanked the gate now lay in pieces before the shattered remains of the great bronze gate and a sizeable portion of the walls. A coordinated missile strike had smashed much of this section of the city's perimeter to ruins, and the tau were pushing hard for the breach.

The 44th were holding firm, with Lord Winterbourne's Father Time in the thick of the fighting, destroying all that came near it with relentless precision and ferocity. The Baneblade was the anchor of the Imperial defence, with the Leman Russ and Hellhounds that fought alongside it like armoured bodyguards.

Tanks fought through the ruins at close range, kills made with snap shots and point-blank volleys that tore through armour and exploded with fractions of seconds between launch and impact. Basilisk and Medusa artillery pieces within Brandon Gate pounded the rear elements of the tau advance, but the gunners dared not fire too close to the walls for fear of shelling their own men.

Mederic saw a scarred and pitted Leman Russ - he thought it was Thunder Runner - sweep past in a blur, quickly followed by the dark forms of Terra Volla and Star of Lavrentia. He had no idea where they were going, but wished them good hunting.

Blinding streaks of impossibly bright light speared from the roof of a nearby ore barn, and Star of Lavrentia exploded. The tank rocked up onto its right track with the force of the impact before toppling over. Bright streaks of ignited air drifted along the flight path of its killers' weapons' fire, and Mederic looked up to see a trio of thick-shouldered battlesuits silhouetted against the smoke and flames of battle.

Each bore a pair of enormous weapons like flattened battle cannons mounted on huge rigs fitted to their backs. They cycled through a sophisticated motion that could only mean they were readying themselves to fire again. Another volley like that and they'd reduce the other two Imperial tanks to scrap metal.

'Targets!' Mederic shouted. 'On our high six! Take 'em out!'

His loader handed him the launcher tube, and he pressed the targeter to his eye, seeing the three enemy units in stark monochrome. He pressed the range-finding stud on the back of the firing grip and was rewarded with a warbling tone in his ear.

'Lock on!' he cried.

The battlesuit in the centre of the group immediately turned its head towards him. The battlesuits' arms snapped up, and Mederic saw racks of warheads cycling in launchers.

'Crap!' shouted Kaynon. 'They made us! Shoot!'

'Clear!'

The missile leapt from the tube, ejected to a safe distance before the rocket motor ignited and hurled the projectile upwards. Two others joined it and slashed through the air on a path towards the tau battlesuits.

'Move!' shouted Mederic.

He didn't bother handing off his launch tube to Kaynon, but simply sprinted towards the nearest cover he could see. His men followed him, arms pumping as they sought to escape the tau retaliation. The ground behind them heaved as a flurry of anti-personnel rockets slammed into the ground with a roaring string of thudding detonations.

Mederic was hurled to the ground, a drizzle of rock dust and earth falling around him in a rain of debris. He coughed smoke and dirt, and shook his head clear of the ringing echoes of the nearby detonations, rolling onto his back to throw off rock fragments. Behind him, he saw that a pair of his soldiers were dead, lying in mushy piles that were all that remained of their lower extremities.

He looked up to see that one of the battlesuits was gone, but two were still standing. One had lost a gun from its shoulder-mount, but the other appeared to have escaped the worst of the missile impacts. The battlesuits trained their enormous shoulder-weapons on them, which meant that he and his men were as good as dead.

Then, like a long-dormant volcano suddenly returned to life, the top of the ore barn vanished in a searing fireball as a pair of high explosive shells slammed into it, and the unmistakable echo of cannon-fire rolled over Mederic.

He propped himself up on one elbow in time to see Thunder Runner and Terra Volta rumble away, the barrels of their mighty guns returning to their centre positions now that the threat had been neutralised.

'If we get out of this alive, remind me to buy those guys a drink,' said Duken, crawling towards him.

'I don't think they even knew we were here,' replied Mederic, taking the buckled and bloody dog tags from the dead soldiers. Each tag was shaped like the head of a snarling hound, and they were worn proudly by all the 44th's scouts.

'Maybe not, but I'll take whatever help I can get.'

'I hear that.'

'Where to next?' asked Kaynon, shouldering his satchel of rockets.

'We move out,' said Mederic lifting the dusty missile launch tube from the ground. 'They ain't paying us to bring missiles back with us.'

BLOOD RAN DOWN Winterbourne's cheek from where his head had struck the inner face of the turret after a particularly fearsome barrage of fire from a formation of Hammerheads. A trio of hyper-velocity slugs had slammed into the side armour of Father Time, tearing off the side gunner's compartment and throwing the rest of the crew around the interior.

Winterbourne had blacked out for a moment, and when he'd come to, all three tau tanks were dead. Terra Volta had killed the first, Pride of Torum another, and a series of missiles from one of Mederic's Hound squads had taken out the last one.

Spalled fragments from the impacts had shredded his vox-operator and one of the loaders. The interior of the vehicle stank of blood and oil and sweat, and Jenko was now doubling as his link to the rest of his fighting vehicles as well as his target acquisition officer.

'Any word from Uriel?' asked Winterbourne.

'None, sir,' replied Jenko, pressing the sticky vox-set to the side of his head.

Winterbourne swore softly to himself, returning his attention to the threat board.

The battle was a confused mess of wreckage, gunfire, moving armour and explosions. Imperial casualties were mounting fast. It was impossible to tell exactly how many tanks had been destroyed in the fighting, but each loss was a grievous blow. Winterbourne did not relish examining the butcher's bill at the end of this engagement.

Crater Maker rolled past his flank, its battle cannon roaring, and a segment of a milling shop disintegrated ahead of it. At first, Winterbourne thought the tank had missed its target, but then the upper storeys of the building came crashing down on a Sky Ray tank sheltering behind a ramp of collapsed slabs of rockcrete. Gematria and Thunder Runner displaced as their turrets rotated and fired into a mass of oncoming tau tanks, two Hammerheads and a Devilfish.

'Targets right!' he shouted, slewing the turret of the Baneblade around. 'Gunner, high explosive and keep them coming!'

'High explosive, aye.'

'Range two hundred metres!'

'Up! Fire!'

'On the way!' shouted Winterbourne as Father Time shuddered with the recoil from the main gun. The clanging of the breech opening and closing was lost in the deafening roar coming through the breach in the hull where the side gun had been torn off, and Winterbourne knew it would be days before the ringing echoes faded from his hearing.

One of the Hammerheads was dead, ripped apart by the heavy battle cannon shell, its turret torn from its hull and nowhere to be seen. The other was fighting a losing duel with Gematria and Thunder Runner, its engines burning and its hull broken open by armour piercing rounds. The Devilfish had sensibly taken cover and debussed its troops before fleeing from the vengeful guns of the Imperial tanks.

Hundreds of Fire Warriors darted through the ruins, and Winterbourne was forced to admire their courage. Advancing into the teeth of an armoured engagement required no small amount of bravery, and their guns, while no threat to the tanks, were reaping a fearsome tally amongst his dismounted Guardsmen.

Zipping drones sped through the battle, marking out targets for tau support tanks, and the air was filled with sparking las-bolts and solid rounds as Imperial soldiers sought to bring them down and give them some respite from the constant rain of missiles.

Loping Sentinels stalked the rubble and ruin of battle, duelling with agile battlesuits through the fallen remains of the industrial suburbs of Brandon Gate.

Though outnumbered, the Sentinels fought hard, their autocannons raking the ground and chewing up enemies with every salvo. It was an unequal struggle, and, together with missiles guided in by the drones, the battlesuits eventually brought them down.

'We can't go on like this,' he whispered to himself, turning his attention to the threat board. The readings were confused, but it seemed as though the two sides were evenly matched. The tau seemed not to have the will to enforce their advance through the gap in the walls, while Winterbourne's force was holding its position without being able to push them back.

It was a deadlock that would only end when both forces had ground each other to dust.

'Sir?' said Jenko.

'This is wrong,' said Winterbourne, 'They're not pushing hard enough, and we're just letting them keep us engaged.'

Fierce yellow light shone through the vision block, and Winterbourne looked out to see the Hellhound Emperor's Light bathing a choked ruin of a processing plant in searing flames. A host of kroot were flushed from their hiding place, and Winterbourne relished their obvious pain. Only a single kroot warrior, one with a flaring crest of red quills, avoided the lethal spray of promethium to vanish into the rubble.

'That's the thing,' he said. 'Take the fight to them. We're just reacting to them.'

'Sir?'

'Damn me, Jenko, but they've got me dancing a jig to their tune,' cursed Winterbourne. 'Whatever game they're playing, they've got us to play along with it. Well, Nathaniel Winterbourne dances to no man's tune but his own. Send word to all our tanks! Full advance! Break their centre and push these bastards back down the highway!'

A nearby explosion rocked Father Time, but Winterbourne felt nothing, having come to that place in a warrior's mind where all fear is subsumed in the utter belief in his chosen course of action.

'All vehicles acknowledge your orders, sir!' shouted Jenko.

Father Time's engines roared, and coughed a filthy cloud of exhaust smoke before lurching forwards in a spray of rock dust. The armoured behemoth crushed iron and stone, churning the ground beneath it to powder on its unstoppable advance. Its main guns spoke with booming reports, each monstrously powerful shell obliterating whatever it was aimed at.

Its array of anti-personnel guns cleared the ground before it in scything bursts of heavy calibre gunfire, driving Fire Warriors before it in a bow wave of terror. Those not quick enough or sensible enough to retreat went under the Baneblade's

tracks, pulped by its unimaginable bulk. Nothing could harm so mighty a war machine. The bright streaks of light from the guns of the Fire Warriors were doing little more than peeling the paint from its impenetrable armour plates.

In the wake of the huge tank came the charging armour of the 44th Lavrentian regiment: Conquerors, Vanquishers, Executioners, Hellhounds and Chimeras. Each tank commander followed the example of their leader, driving hard for the enemy lines, their guns roaring in a relentless barrage of shells.

A wedge of Hammerheads sought to intercept Father Time, but Winterbourne's driver saw them coming, and revved the engine as he turned his armoured charger towards them. Hyper-velocity slugs slammed into the frontal glacis of the Baneblade, tearing great gouges in the armour, but failing to halt its advance. One alien tank spun on its axis and fled, but the others stood their ground.

Father Time slammed into the first, its hull coming up as it mounted the tau vehicle. The armour of the alien tanks was strong and light, but it was no match for the three hundred tonnes of a Baneblade. Like a tin can crushed beneath the foot of a soldier, the tau vehicle was flattened in a blinding explosion of flaring electrical discharge.

The second vehicle fired one last shot before attempting to escape, but its crew's bravery had cost them their lives, and Father Time slammed into it side-on. The Hammerhead flipped onto its side, and was driven before the Baneblade for ten metres before finally going under the leviathan.

It was a glorious charge, but not one without cost. Steppe Hunter, the ambush predator that had broken the enemy line at Charos, vanished in a searing fireball as a close range burst from a battlesuit blew out its fuel tanks and ignited its magazine. Crater Maker took a direct hit that tore open its armour and killed its engine. No sooner had the crew bailed out than they were set upon by a host of kroot warriors, led by the red-quilled leader that Winterbourne had seen earlier.

The kroot ripped the crew of Crater Maker apart, but as they completed their slaughter, a lone figure in the black robes of a Mortifex emerged from the fire of battle with an enormous eviscerator held out before him. The howling priest hacked into the kroot, but was soon lost to sight amid the smoke and confusion of the armoured charge.

Winterbourne's charge was driving the tau back, but the aliens were making them pay a fearsome toll in blood for every metre reclaimed. A second line of tau tanks rallied at the south-eastern reaches of the burning ruins, and, as the Imperial tanks drove towards them, it was clear that it would be a bloody business to push them from these ad hoc redoubts.

Then the first of the tau tanks exploded, a searing lance of bright laser energy

sawing through its vulnerable rear armour and detonating its energy core. Explosions mushroomed from the ranks of Fire Warriors, and stuttering bursts of perfectly coordinated gunfire brought down those few battlesuits still standing.

Emerging from the flaming wreckage of the tank assembly yards, the Space Marines came with fire and thunder. Whirlwind support tanks rained volleys of rockets down on the tau, while a trio of Land Raiders smashed into the rear of the tau formation, their side-mounted lascannon arrays tearing through the armour of the enemy tanks, and blitzing storms of bolter-fire adding their horrendous accompaniment to the battle.

Behind them came the Space Marines, warriors in ultramarine whose weapons were hymnals to war and whose gold and blue flag was a beacon of righteousness among the slaughter. Mighty Dreadnoughts stomped through the wreckage, weapons blazing and power fists crushing the life from anything that could not escape their inexorable advance.

Caught between two such implacable foes, the tau broke and fled for the safety of the highway south, but it was an illusory safety.

Shredded in the deadly crossfire, only two-dozen enemy vehicles survived to reach the highway, but within minutes they had been bracketed by artillery fire and reduced to blackened hulks littering the roadway. Their crews burned to death or scrambled from their blazing vehicles, only to be hunted down and killed by the pursuing Space Marines.

The engagement ceased to be a battle and became a massacre.

Lavrentian and Space Marine forces linked up in the glare of a burning weapons shop, the flames lighting up the sky with a hellish orange glow. Father Time, battered, gouged and war-scarred rumbled to a halt with a sigh of its engines, and Lord Winterbourne climbed down from his commander's hatch.

The colonel of the Lavrentians was smeared with oil and blood, but his eyes were bright and his stride sure as he marched over to meet the leader of the Space Marines. Like Winterbourne, Uriel was streaked with blood, though little of it was his own.

The two leaders met and shook hands, each man pleased to see the other alive.

'You're a damn welcome sight, my friend,' said Winterbourne, rubbing his hands on his uniform jacket in a vain attempt to clean them.

'As are you, Nathaniel,' said Uriel.

'A decisive blow, wouldn't you say?'

'The victory was decisive, yes,' agreed Uriel, 'but I do not believe this assault was ever expected to take and hold Brandon Gate.'

Winterbourne ran a hand through his hair and nodded. 'I know what you

mean, Uriel. As fierce a fight as this was, there was no heart to it. They came with plenty of armour, but there weren't enough forces to hold an entire city.'

'Exactly. It fits with what we saw at the Shonai estates. This has all been part of the tau's attempt to decapitate the leadership of Pavonis. Communications have been disrupted, the governor has been captured, and they have tried to kill senior figures of the planetary leadership.'

'So this attack was what, a diversion?'

'I think so,' agreed Uriel. 'A blow to weaken us and divert our attention from where the real hammer blow will fall.'

'Olzetyn,' said Winterbourne.

'Olzetyn,' agreed Uriel.

FOURTEEN

LEARCHUS PRESSED HIS body into the dry soil of the undergrowth, pulling the camo-cape over his bulky shoulders. The urge to look up was almost overwhelming, but he knew that to expose any part of his armour to the tau drones would only invite discovery.

He and his scouts sheltered in an undulant dip filled with the umber gorse that hugged the coastline southwards from Lake Masura towards Crater Bay. The ground between here and the Shonai estates was rugged and spectacular, easily the equal of many of the worlds of Ultramar. Where those worlds had a wildness to their geography, this landscape was clearly managed, the trees growing in regimented lines that appealed to Learchus's sense of precision, but seemed at odds with the natural order of things.

They had made good time in their pursuit of Koudelkar Shonai, easily able to follow the trail left by the two battlesuits as they moved south to the coast with their captives. Moving with the jet packs on their armour, the tau warriors had followed the coastline, making little effort to conceal their route. That spoke of arrogance, and Learchus was pleased to know that their foes had at least one weakness that might be exploited.

Learchus had set a punishing pace, marching his scouts hard through the sweeping terrain of the western coastline, through sprawling forests, over high ridges of granite and along sheer cliffs that plunged thousands of metres towards the dark waters of the ocean.

In the first few days of their pursuit, they had met no sign of the tau, but in the hours following the mighty burst of light that had exploded over the southern horizon the day before, that had begun to change. Learchus's scout sergeant, Issam, sent the team to ground when he spotted a number of small vehicles, like bulkier versions of the skimmer-bikes used by the eldar, darting across the landscape in pairs.

'Reconnaissance vehicles,' said Learchus, watching the light craft flit over the landscape in over watching bounds, 'working in pairs.'

'Do we ambush them?' asked Issam as the vehicles drew closer.

Learchus hesitated before answering. His every instinct and every tenet of the Codex Astartes was to order his warriors to attack the aliens, but to do so would effectively end their pursuit of Koudelkar. As much as he knew he should engage the enemy, the mission came first. It was the first and most important

lesson learned by any initiate of the Ultramarines.

'No,' said Learchus, and the tau skimmers turned east and vanished over the horizon.

As he watched them go, Learchus felt a knot in the pit of his stomach, and he had a glimmering of how Uriel had come to choose the path that led to his expulsion.

For the next two days, they had evaded detection by yet more of the tau light skimmers, seeing that there appeared to be two versions. The first occupied a similar role to the Astartes Land Speeder as a light attack vehicle with a minimal weapon load, while the second appeared to be a purely scout vehicle.

None of the tau vehicles detected the presence of the warriors in their midst, for Ultramarines scouts were second to none in their abilities. The punishing landscape and unimaginably harsh training regime of Macragge schooled them in the lore of virtually any terrain, and Issam had a preternatural sense for danger that gave them plenty of time to take cover and deploy their camo-capes.

But now, sheltering in the dip of landscape with nothing but patches of wiry, rust-coloured gorse and their camo-capes to conceal them, learchus felt acutely vulnerable as a flight of silver-skinned drones flew lazy spirals in the air above them. The drones had appeared out of nowhere, and only Issam's last minute warning had given them time to conceal themselves.

Learchus could feel the ripple in the grass nearby from the drone's anti-grav generators, and, though he told himself it was ridiculous, he swore he could feel the crawling sensation of their augurs hunting him. If the drones found them, they would have no choice but to fight. Such a fight would be short and easy, but it would undoubtedly alert the tau to their presence.

As much as it irked Learchus to allow the alien devices to remain unmolested, he knew it was the right thing to do. Not for the first time since they had left the Shonai estates, Learchus wished that his fellow battle-brothers were alongside him, for he felt adrift without them. Such were the bonds of brotherhood between the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, that to be deprived of them felt like a piece of his soul was missing. Uriel and Pasanius had travelled to far distant worlds and fought the enemies of mankind with such a void within them, and Learchus knew then that to have done so made them true heroes of the Chapter.

He held still as he felt one the drones fly over him, the gentle pressure of its propulsion mechanism flattening the camo-cape across his wide back. His finger tensed on the trigger of his boltgun, but he fought the urge to roll over and send a shell into the drone's underside.

Learchus waited, the seconds stretching out before him, until he heard the

buzz of the drones moving away. He let out a breath and eased his head up, watching as the pack of drones skimmed over the ground and vanished into the forested landscape further east.

Satisfied that they were in no danger of discovery, Learchus stood and shook the leaves from his camo-cape. The scouts gathered around him, and he could feel their frustration. Infiltration and destruction wreaked behind the lines was part of the scouts' purpose, and to have come this far and inflicted no damage upon the tau was anathema to these warriors.

'My lord,' said Issam, 'how much longer must we hold our force in check?'

'As long as it takes,' said Learchus.

'We could have taken those drones out in seconds,' pressed Daxian, one of Issam's youngest scouts. 'There would have been no warning sent back.'

'And when they are noted as being missing?' demanded Learchus. 'What then? This region would be flooded with tau scouts looking for what killed them. You are all fine scouts, and I have no doubt you would have the tau chasing their tails, but this is not a normal scouting mission.'

The scouts nodded, though Learchus could see the disappointment in their eyes as they gathered around him. Was this how Uriel felt when Learchus had called him to account for his actions?

'The Codex Astartes tells us that wherever possible we must discomfit the enemy,' said a scout by the name of Parmian.

'Our mission is to rescue Koudelkar Shonai,' said Learchus. 'Nothing must distract us from that purpose. Is that understood?'

'Yes, my lord,' said Parmian, 'but while we hide from the enemy, our brothers earn glory on the field of honour.'

'There is glory in all things, Parmian,' said Learchus, 'and not all of it is earned facing the enemy guns. Each of us must play our part in this drama, be it standing in the battle lines with bolter and chainsword in hand or behind the lines serving the greater good of the war.'

Learchus turned on his heel and began marching south once more. 'Fear not, my young brothers,' he said, 'you'll have your chance for glory soon enough.'

SCREAMS OF PAIN echoed from the filthy walls of the corridors, and Jenna Sharben felt each one as a knife to the chest as she made her way towards the Intelligence Room. The screams were alien and should have been music to her ears, but the sheer misery and horror in the sound tore at the essence of her soul that sought justice and craved nobility of spirit.

Every step was an effort, for there had been precious little sleep in the days

since the tau attack on Brandon Gate. Flocks of the tau's winged auxiliary troops infested the city, and sniping attacks from above were a daily occurrence at the Glasshouse. Nerves were stretched taut and resentment towards the invaders was high. Added to that, resupply was late, and the enforcers stationed at the prison were deemed of lower importance than the soldiers fighting across Pavonis.

Jenna couldn't fault the logic, but it made it no easier to explain to her enforcers why they were going to have to continue on ration packs and recycled water. Forced to exist in the squalid barracks of the Glasshouse on a diet of freeze-dried food and brackish water that had passed through who knew how many digestive tracts wasn't a situation likely to ease tempers any time soon.

Tensions were high, but the enforcers had the perfect targets in their grasp to vent many of those frustrations. Since the prisoners had been deposited in the Glasshouse by the Ultramarines, the enforcers had found new and ever more inventive ways to harass, torture and discomfit them.

Each tau prisoner had their topknot cut, and any other identifying apparel or pieces of jewellery removed, before being hosed down with high-pressure water blessed by Prelate Culla. Dressed in identical smocks, they were herded like beasts into their overcrowded cells, forced to wear fetters that chafed their legs raw, and deprived of food and sleep for days on end.

And the net gain of actionable intelligence from this?

Nothing.

Pretty much all any of the prisoners had said since they had been brought here was their name and what was presumed to be a serial number, not that Jenna had expected much. A prisoner subjected to physical torture would say anything to have his ordeal end, and any intelligence gained from such torture would have to be treated as suspect.

Jenna had come to this realisation after her first, fruitless interrogation of La'tyen, feeling strangely shamed by the level of violence she'd employed. After all, she had confined her interrogations to strictly verbal encounters.

She, however, was the only enforcer to do so…

She rubbed a hand across her face, feeling the dryness of her skin and the hollows of her cheeks from a diet of dried food sachets. Her blonde hair was dirty and unkempt, and she knew she looked nothing like the clean cut Arbites Judge who had come to Pavonis full of idealism and fiery thoughts of justice.

Where was justice in this hellhole?

She passed cells where mirror-masked enforcers beat tau prisoners with their shock mauls, held them in stress positions for hours at a time or forced them into degrading positions with their cellmates. Worse even than the screams were the sounds of laughter that came from her enforcers. Despite the tension and food

shortages, and the threat from the alien invaders, the enforcers she had tried to train as a cadre of honourable upholders of Imperial Law were actually enjoying their work.

The notion of it sickened her, but since the arrival of Prelate Culla there was little she could do to stop it.

The man had rolled through the prison gates in a glorious fanfare of hymnals, booming from the augmitters on his ridiculously ostentatious Rhino. Choking clouds of incense churned in the vehicle's wake, and half a dozen golden-skinned cherubs floated overhead, perusing the interior of the Glasshouse with doll-eyed expressions of distaste.

'I am here to interrogate the traitor!' Culla had declared upon climbing down from his fire-wreathed pulpit, a red-bladed sword of enormous proportions sheathed across his shoulders. The man towered above Jenna, his powerful physique muscular and intimidating. Culla's beard was waxed into two forks, one jet black, the other silver.

'Interrogating prisoners is our job,' Jenna had replied. 'You have no authority here.'

Culla drew the vast chainblade from across his shoulders and planted it in the hard ground before him. Resting both hands upon the skull pommel, he leaned forwards.

'I have the authority of the Emperor, girl,' boomed Culla. 'No traitor dares stand before me, and only traitors seek to bar me from my holy work. To know that one who has betrayed the Emperor still breathes within these walls is a sin, Judge Sharben, a sin that will not go unpunished.'

A sizeable crowd of enforcers had gathered, and, as distasteful as it was to allow the zealot within her walls, she did not relish a scene between her and the 44th's predicant. Reluctantly, she stood aside and allowed Culla into the prison, and for days he had been a fiery presence within its walls. When not washing the blood of prisoners from his muscular frame, Culla preached his credo of persecution to the enforcers, filling their hearts with fresh hatred for the tau and traitors.

Jenna absented herself from his sermons, trying in vain to catch up on her sleep or attempting to re-establish her command of the Glasshouse. Ever since Culla's arrival, the enforcers of Brandon Gate had turned to him for guidance, and her authority had eroded like sand before the sea.

She turned into the corridor that led towards the Intelligence Room, hearing Culla's shouts from beyond the iron door at the far end. Enforcers Dion and Apollonia stood to either side of the door, the mirrored visors of their helmets pulled down to cover their faces. Jenna didn't need to see their faces to know it

was them, months of training had rendered their physiques and postures as familiar as her own.

'Open up,' she said when she reached the door.

'Prelate Culla doesn't like to be disturbed when he's questioning the traitor,' said Dion.

Jenna looked into his visor, seeing her own haggard reflection looking back.

'I don't give a crap what Culla wants,' she said. 'Open the door. This is still my prison, and you're still my damned enforcer, Dion. Now do as you're damn well told!'

Dion looked over at Apollonia, and Jenna said, 'Don't look at her. I'm your commanding officer, not her. Now open the door.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Dion, standing aside to let Jenna past. She pushed open the door and entered a small room of bare concrete. A plain table sat in the centre, and a large window of one-way glass looked into an interrogation cell entered through a featureless steel door in the wall next to it. A bronze eagle was set high on the far wall, a symbol of the Imperium for the condemned to gaze upon as they contemplated their fate.

Jenna saw Culla through the glass, standing in the centre of the room, stripped to the waist with his fists balled before him. He was shouting, but this was the one area of the prison with soundproofing, and she could not hear his words. Jenna punched the code into the door keypad and entered the room. The reek of blood, human waste and terror hit her like a blow.

Culla turned to face Jenna, and his face was a mask of righteous fury. Given what she had seen of him, it was impossible to tell whether it was at her interruption or simply his normal state of being. Blood dripped from his knuckles, his body gleamed with sweat, and his chest heaved with exertion.

As she entered the room, Jenna saw the object of Culla's violent attention secured to a chair bolted securely to the floor.

Jenna was no stranger to the harm that could be wrought upon a human body, but even she blanched to see the violence done to this pitiful wreck of a person. Matted wisps of hair clung to a partially shaven scalp, and blood caked the side of a face blackened with bruises and ruptured with impacts.

One of the wretch's eyes was filled with blood, the other virtually closed over with swollen flesh. Both locked with Jenna, and despite everything she knew of this prisoner, Jenna felt nothing but pity.

Mykola Shonai whispered, 'Help me.'

CULLA SLAMMED THE door shut behind him as he joined Jenna in the

anteroom, giving the broken and bleeding Mykola Shonai a moment's respite. He lifted a long cloth from his belt and wiped his forehead of sweat.

'Why do you interrupt me?' he demanded. 'I have work to do.'

'What kind of work demands that kind of abuse?' demanded Jenna, pointing through the one-way glass.

'The Emperor's work,' said Culla. 'You have sympathy with a traitor, Judge Sharben? It would be unfortunate if I had to bolt a second chair to the floor.'

'Of course I don't have sympathy with traitors.'

'Then why do you object to my right and proper treatment of this filthy collaborator?'

'She was once governor of this world,' said Jenna.

'And she betrayed her people the moment she consorted with xenos creatures,' pointed out Culla. 'What kind of craven wretch would do such a thing? Only a degenerate creature unworthy of inclusion in the human race. Only a disgusting, filthy xenos-loving animal.'

Jenna pointed towards the glass. 'Just what are you hoping to gain from this? If she knew anything of value don't you think she would have told you?'

'The ways of the xenos-lover are cunning,' said Culla, massaging his knuckles. 'Only through the purification of pain will they give up all their secrets.'

'Not if you kill her first.'

'Then I will have learned everything I wish to know,' said Culla, 'and the galaxy will be better for her death.'

'You are treating her worse than any of the tau prisoners.'

'The tau are xenos and do not know any better,' said Culla dismissively. 'They are simply ignorant beasts, responding to base desires and needs. They are vermin who should be hated and feared as imperfect creations. It is humanity's right and duty to cleanse such creatures from existence with fire and sword. Shonai should have known better.'

'I agree the tau need to be fought,' said Jenna, 'but like this? If we behave like this we'll lose our humanity, our honour.'

'That thing in there doesn't deserve to be called human.'

'Is that how you do it?' asked Jenna, leaning forwards over the table.

'Do what?'

'You don't even think of Mykola Shonai as human, do you? That's how you're able to do these things to her, isn't it?'

'Choose your words carefully, Sharben,' warned Culla. 'My army of the righteous does not tolerate dissenters in their midst. They know that the work they do is necessary.'

'Your army?' hissed Jenna. 'Last I checked I was still in command here. *I* am in charge of the Brandon Gate Enforcers, not you.'

'Cross me and you will find out if that is still true,' said Culla with a smile.

FROM HIS POSITION in the command hatch of his personal half-track, Colonel Loic watched the people of Olzetyn moving steadily eastwards across the Imperator Bridge as his driver slowly eased the rumbling vehicle through the crowds towards the western end of the bridge. Night was several hours old, but the span was still thronged with frightened people making their way from 'Stratum to Tradetown.

They travelled in ancient trucks, in wagons or on foot, carrying what possessions could be borne with them to safety. Or, at least, what they hoped was safety. The western reaches of Olzetyn on the far side of the gorges were considered too dangerous for civilians, which was a fair assessment, thought Colonel Loic.

Though a great host of people were on the move, the main thoroughfare over Imperator Bridge was by no means clogged. As colonel of the Pavonis PDF, Loic had imposed strict controls to guide and direct the flood of civilians crossing the river gorges. Some were diverted onto the Aquila Bridge to Barrack Town and then funnelled over the Owsen Bridge to Tradetown. Others were diverted across the Diacrian Bridge further south into the Midden and onwards east. Once across the bridges, some optimistic souls were remaining in Tradetown, but most continued onwards along Highway 236 to Brandon Gate.

There was fear, but little panic. The tau invaders were reported to have captured Praxedes, but had so far confined themselves to skirmishes and probes against the defenders of Olzetyn. Such caution was only natural, given the fearsome strength of the great bastions that protected the western approaches to the bridge city.

Imperator Bridge itself was the creation of engineering genius, a wondrously ornate suspension bridge spanning the gorges that marked the confluence of the main rivers of Pavonis. Marvellously tall towers of marble, adamantium and gold pierced the clouds at either end of the bridge, and cables wrought from some ingenious material supported the five kilometre span of the bridge in an elegant latticework arrangement that was immensely strong, yet also graceful and airy.

For centuries, it had been the wonder of the world, a single elegant structure that stood in splendid isolation upon the gorges, but over the last thousand years, the four main conurbations that made up Olzetyn, 'Stratum, Midden, Tradetown

and Barrack Town had grown to the point where other, more prosaically designed bridges were required.

The Aquila and Owsen Bridges connected east and west via Barrack Town on the northern spur, while the Diacrian Bridge crossed the southern gorge into the sprawling slums of the Midden. The aptly named Spur Bridge jutted from the tip of the Midden to link with the Imperator Bridge in the middle of its span, and what was once a graceful demonstration of ingenuity was soon little more than a monument to necessity.

But the final degradation of the Imperator was yet to come. As the city grew in importance, the once elegant structure of the bridge became home to the city's ever-expanding population. Sprawling habs, little better than garrulous shantytowns, began springing up along its length like fungal growths, faster than they could be removed, and tens of thousands now called the bridge home.

Despite such colonisation, it was still possible to see the towering bastions constructed on the western side of the bridge through the tangle of suspension walkways and drifting banks of smog.

Constructed from titanic blocks of glassy black stone hewn from the Sudinal Mountains by the great mining machines of the Mechanicus, each bastion was a magnificent structure, fully six hundred metres high and twice again as wide. To the left of the bridge stood the Aquila Bastion, its upper ramparts fashioned to resemble a pair of mighty pinions, while on the right was the might of the Imperator Bastion.

The wind whipped over the bridge, but with his cream uniform jacket pulled around him and a heavily padded fur chapka pulled down tightly over his head, he didn't feel the cold. Instead, he felt exhilarated at this chance to prove his mettle as a fighting soldier, for though he had trained as hard as any Guardsman, Adren Loic had never fired a shot in anger.

Few of the soldiers of the PDF had fought in actual combat since the de Valtos rebellion, and any of the men who had experience, kept quiet about it. No one who wanted a quiet life boasted of their actions during that shameful part of the planet's history.

He knew his appointment to the post of senior PDF officer was a political decision. Adren Loic was a man few could object to, since few had heard of him. All his life he had been undistinguished in his military endeavours, yet he had a sharp mind that made him uniquely appealing to the Administratum adepts who approved his appointment, for he was one of them.

In the years before his service in the PDF, Colonel Loic had served as a senior adept on the PDF Logistical Corps, and his understanding of the administration of a military force was faultless. He had never been tested as a warrior, but he

knew how to organise and run a planet-wide force of armed soldiers better than anyone on Pavonis.

While Pavonis had been at peace, that had been enough.

Now he would be tested in war, and the thought of proving his worth galvanised him like nothing else in his career ever had.

The half-track emerged from the busy thoroughfares of the bridge into the wide, statue-lined esplanade between the two western bastions. Just being in the shadow of such colossal structures gave Loic a sense of calm, for who could imagine that two such powerful redoubts could ever be cast down?

Ahead, he saw Captain Gerber of the 44th Lavrentians, poring over a map unfolded on the front glacis of a green and gold Chimera. A number of junior officers and a commissar in a long black greatcoat clustered around him, and they bantered back and forth with the ease of professional soldiers who had fought together for many years.

Gerber was a rough type, brusque and to the point with his assessments and decisions. Had they met in the draughty chambers of.

'Stratum's Tower of Adepts, Loic had no doubt they would have been at loggerheads, but as fellow warriors, they had unexpectedly (to both of them, he suspected) found a mutual respect for one another.

Loic dropped from his vehicle and marched over to Gerber's Chimera.

'Gentlemen,' he said as he reached the ring of officers. He received nods of acknowledgement from them all, but the earlier familiarity he'd seen amongst them vanished in an instant. The commissar, a quiet man named Vogel, shook his hand. Loic wondered, as he did every time he met Vogel, how many Guardsmen he had shot for cowardice. Having served with the Lavrentians for some time, Loic suspected that the number was very low.

'Busy night?' he asked.

Gerber looked up as Loic joined him. He shook his head. 'No, just the usual harassing attacks on the forward outposts, nothing my lads couldn't handle.'

'Where?' asked Loic, pointing at the map. 'Show me.'

Scribe logisters with telescoping arms held the ancient plans of the city, drawn by hand on wax paper, steady as quill-callipers sketched out what Gerber was saying.

'They're probing the defences at these points south of the river,' said Gerber as the logisters indicated a number of points on the map. 'Fire Warrior squads in Devilfish mainly, with skirmish screens of recon skimmers. Some of those bloody kroot are trying to get behind us, and there's always a flock of Stingwings overhead somewhere.'

'No heavy armour?'

'Not yet, but it's only a matter of time,' said Poldara, Gerber's lieutenant. The sandy-haired young man seemed absurdly youthful to be a soldier, let alone an officer. Upon first meeting Poldara, Loic had suspected nepotism or a bought commission, but he had quickly learned that the young man's rank was a reflection of his ability as a soldier. 'The attack at Brandon Gate shows they can move armour quickly, and it's Lord Winterbourne's belief that the tau are going to come against us in force, sooner rather than later.'

Loic nodded. 'That makes sense. Well, my lads are itching to get their hands bloody.'

He saw the doubt in their faces, recognising it as the Guardsman's instinctive mistrust of soldiers who never left their home world and who were tarred with the brush of treachery from the de Valtos rebellion. Indignation stirred in his heart, and he steeled his spine.

'Need I remind you that my men are fighting to defend their home-world?' asked Loic. 'I know you think of us as less capable soldiers, but I assure you we won't let you down, gentlemen.'

Gerber searched his face for bravado and said, 'You'd better not, Adren. Your men are green and they've never been at the sharp end of a fight before. At least, not enough of them have. My men can't do this on their own, your PDF units are going to have to do their part too.'

'I assure you, we have been training harder than ever,' said Loic.

'That's all well and good, but it's no substitute for the real thing. I've fought the tau before and when they come at us it'll be with everything they've got. I still don't rate our chances better than one in four that we can hold them without reinforcements.'

'One in four?' asked Vogel. 'That sounds like defeatism, Captain Gerber.'

'It's not. It's realism,' said Gerber. 'Oh, we'll fight like the tough sons of bitches we are, but the numbers aren't on our side.'

'Surely these tau are no match for us?' said Loic. 'I've heard they're quite weak in fact.'

'Then you haven't fought the tau or seen how they make war,' replied Gerber. 'The most successful armies are the ones that coordinate their forces the best, the ones that know what force to apply where and for how long. Some might say it's also the force that makes the least mistakes. The tau don't make mistakes. Every soldier in their army is utterly dedicated to their goal and fights for his commander because he knows, knows, with utter certainty that he's fighting towards something greater than himself.'

'They sound almost like us,' joked Loic, then wished he hadn't when no one laughed.

'Without reinforcements, we don't have a prayer of holding for any significant length of time,' said Gerber. 'It's that simple.'

'Then I think those prayers have just been answered,' said Poldara, pointing back down the length of the bridge.

Loic turned and saw a convoy of blue armoured vehicles rumbling along the bridge: APCs, battle tanks and a host of Space Marines, who marched beneath an azure banner of a mailed fist. A pair of towering Dreadnoughts flanked the armoured giants, and darting blue speeders flashed overhead. A warrior in a billowing green cloak, secured with a pin in the shape of a white rose, marched over to them, one hand gripping the handle of a sheathed sword.

The Space Marine captain reached up and removed his helmet.

Uriel Ventris said, 'The 4th Company stands ready to defend Olzetyn.'

PART III

BRIGHT STARS IN THE FIRMAMENT OF BATTLE

FIFTEEN

THE ATTACK ON Olzetyn began in earnest as dawn painted the sky with the first smudges of light in the east. Forward augers detected the presence of numerous aerial targets, yet none of the gunners in the Imperial interceptor guns switched their targeters to acquisition mode. Alert klaxons blared, and tired soldiers pulled themselves from their bedrolls, but none turned their gaze upwards.

Forewarned by those few units that had escaped the fall of Praxedes, the defenders of Olzetyn kept their heads down as a blaze of pyrotechnics scorched the sky with blinding, searing light.

As the heavens burned with deadly radiance, a host of tau armoured vehicles surged forwards. Scores of Devilfish and Hammerheads pushed towards the bridges, while packs of Stingwings swooped and dived overhead. If the tau hoped to catch the defenders of the bridge city with the same ploy as had worked at Praxedes, they were to be sorely disappointed.

The terrible illumination faded from the sky, and the order to open fire was given.

Flak tanks and static interceptor guns filled the skies above Olzetyn with explosive ordnance, and brought down dozens of tau aircraft. Shattered Barracuda and enormous Tiger Sharks were blown out of the air, their sleek and graceful hulls torn apart by the churning maelstrom of whickering shrapnel and fire.

Nor was the carnage restricted to the tau aerial forces. Expecting the Imperial defenders to be blinded and disoriented, the tau vehicles were advancing without caution. A withering salvo of heavy weapons fire and precisely directed artillery hammered the advancing foe without mercy. Tau transports were shattered, the warriors they carried immolated without firing a shot, and tanks were destroyed without their guns ever having found a target.

Within moments, the thrust of the tau attack had been blunted, the shock value of the Imperial response like a sucker punch to the guts of an overconfident boxer. Scores of armoured vehicles were destroyed, and hundreds of Fire Warriors slain before the battle had even begun, and what was hoped to be a decisive blow turned out to be anything but.

Without panic, the tau commander reacted to the changing circumstances of battle with frightening speed. Tanks peeled away in formation, using the

contours of the ground and local cover to advance in bounding leaps, one group shooting while another darted forwards.

The Stingwings dropped from the sky en-masse to hamper the efforts of the defenders, and a glittering host of drones zipped around their flanks. Within moments, salvos of missiles were raining down, exploding with pinpoint accuracy and killing dozens of Guardsmen and PDF troopers with every blast.

With battle well and truly joined, the shape of the tau attack became clear, and while every portion of the Imperial lines came under attack, it was the trenches, redoubts and pillboxes protecting the approach to the Diacrian Bridge that bore the brunt of the assault.

THE BOOMING REPORTS of massed Thunderfire cannons were deafening, echoing from the far sides of the gorge. Some shells arced downwards and detonated among the tau, while others burrowed through the earth to explode beneath the delicate grav plates that kept the tau skimmer tanks in the air.

Armour cracked open and bodies were burned, but still the xenos force advanced. This close to the bridges, there was precious little cover to be had, and the enemy were forced to come at them head-on. Missiles streaked overhead and slammed into the raised bulwark protecting the Imperial troops, but without guidance, they were simply blasting earth.

Pushing into the teeth of guns manned by a prepared and determined enemy was the least desirable tactical situation for a commander to find himself in, and Uriel hoped to make the tau pay for their overconfidence. The majority of the 4th Company's squads protected the southern bridge of Olzetyn, for it was clearly the weakest part of the defence. Knowing the tau would come at it in force, Uriel had deployed his warriors here to bolster the ranks of the 44th and potentially drive the tau onto the western bastions, where Chaplain Clausel and his assault squads awaited them.

Uriel climbed onto the firing step of the raised earthen berm behind which he and the defenders sheltered. He raised his bolter high for all to see, and shouted, 'Stand to! For Pavonis with courage and honour!'

The hundreds of soldiers within earshot echoed his cry as they rushed from their dugouts to join him. That Space Marines from such an illustrious Chapter stood with these men was a potent symbol of their determination to resist the enemy at all costs, and Uriel knew that his very presence would be inspirational to them. Not a man among the 44th or the PDF wanted to be seen as weak before the Emperor's finest warriors, and they would fight to their last breath to prove their courage.

Uriel swung his bolter over the lip of the earthwork, his practiced eye taking in the details of the tau assault in the time it took to rack the slide. His Space Marines took up positions next to him as the hundreds of Guardsmen stationed to defend the Diacrian Bridge deployed with a clatter of boots on duck-boards. Banners waved, and the shouts of sergeants and officers cut through the crash of explosions and the crack of tau weapons' fire.

'We're slaughtering them!' cried Colonel Loic, clambering to the firing step beside Uriel.

'For now,' agreed Uriel, 'but they'll adapt soon enough and try something different.'

'They'll try to pin us in place with expendable troops while they advance.'

Uriel was surprised at Loic's insight and nodded. 'Any moment now I suspect.'

'I think you might be right,' said Loic, looking up.

Uriel followed the colonel's gaze as he heard a flapping, tearing noise, like a swarm of bats erupting from a cave mouth. High above, the sky was filled with a host of chitinous blue creatures with narrow wings and hideous insect like features. They dropped hard and fast, lightly armoured assault troops set to disrupt the Imperial defences long enough for their tau masters to reach the lines.

'Stingwings!' shouted Uriel. 'Reserve squads, drop them!'

Fire support groups stationed further back from the front lines opened fire, their weapons aimed at the sky for just such an eventuality. Las-bolts streaked upwards, and the cries of the wounded xenos creatures could be heard over the volleys, until the interceptor guns and the heavy stubbers mounted on the cupolas of PDF Chimeras joined in.

'That won't stop them all,' said Loic.

'Probably not, but it should stop enough of them.'

Uriel was pleased to see a lack of fear on Loic's face. Political appointment he might be, but the man had courage. He returned his attention to his front as the Imperial guns continued to wreak havoc amongst the tau vehicles. Realising their transports were death traps, most of the tau squad commanders debussed their troops to advance on foot. Uriel saw darting tau warriors moving forwards in the cover of craters and wrecked tanks. Rolling banks of propellant smoke drifted across the battlefield, twitched by solid rounds and burned away by tau gunfire.

Behind the Fire Warriors, the bulkier forms of battlesuits moved through the smoke, the blue glow of their jet packs flaring and marking their passage. It was impossible to count them, but Uriel saw a worrying amount drawing close.

'Battlesuits coming in behind them,' he said, passing the word to the

Ultramarines over the vox. 'Take out the heavier units where possible.'

Acknowledgements came through from his warriors, and the hard noise of bolters erupted as contact was made further down the lines. As the gap between the two forces shrank, withering storms of gunfire and explosions erupted along the Imperial defences. Tau shots fused the earth of the berm and punched Imperial soldiers backwards with the impacts, their armour offering no protection against the powerful energies.

Screams punctuated the din of battle, the dreadful pain of human beings and the welcome agony of their alien foes. Both Ultramarine Dreadnoughts, Brother Zethus and Brother Speritas, stalked the length of the redoubts, lending their incredible firepower to sections where the tau pressed hardest. The noise of their weapons' fire was like the thunder of the gods, their lascannons like bolts of lightning from the heavens.

Corpses littered the ground before the defences, and flames ripped through the battlefield from ignited fuel lines and cooking ammunition. Uriel fired streams of explosive shells into the ranks of the tau, each volley dropping a handful of enemy warriors, though many more forged on towards the defences.

This was what he was crafted for, this righteous slaughter of the foes of mankind, and Uriel felt a savage pride in his ability to deal death. He spared a glance to either side, seeing Space Marines firing with grim, remorseless accuracy into the tau. They fought like heroes, each one a warrior worthy of being immortalised in song and verse. Yet none looked for glory for its own sake, only for the Emperor and for the Chapter.

Amongst them, the soldiers of the 44th Lavrentians and the Pavonis PDF were fighting with equal fervour. As Colonel Loic had predicted, the fire of the reserve squads and interceptor guns had not been enough to prevent the Stingwing assault from hitting home, and a brutal, short-range firefight spilled out from the rear of the Imperial defences.

Even as he saw the spreading battle, so too did Colonel Loic. The PDF commander fired his pistol into the blue-winged xenos species, and led a savage countercharge into the midst of the aliens. Contrary to Uriel's earlier assessment, Loic was indeed proficient with his power sabre, and the energised blade clove a bloody path through his enemies. Loic caught sight of Uriel and raised his sword in salute to him before pressing onwards into the bloody melee.

What Space Marines brought to any fight was not just their awesome skill at arms; it was the idea of what they represented in the minds of those that fought with them and against them that made them so formidable. The Adeptus Astartes were symbolic of Imperial might, symbolism with the means to enforce the will of the Imperium wherever the Emperor demanded it.

That was what made the Space Marines a force beyond anything their numbers might represent. A man could be defeated, but a Space Marine was invincible, indomitable and unstoppable. The tau had learned this in the Zeist campaign, and they were about to learn it once again on Pavonis.

Uriel bent to swap out his bolter's magazine, the process completed with a practiced economy of motion. A bright bolt of superheated plasma exploded further along the line, showering him with glassy fragments of fused earth. Two Space Marines fell from the firing step, hurled back by the powerful blast, and a war-scarred battlesuit forced its way through the ruined parapet, its weapons trailing a glowing fuzz of smoke as they recharged.

A wedge of battlesuits followed behind it, blazing cannons clearing whole swathes of the berm of defenders as they began to spread out. Fire Warriors gathered around them, and Uriel saw the danger immediately. He slung his bolter, looking around to see what aid he could call upon. Drawing his sword, he charged along the firing step towards the battlesuits.

'Squad Ventris, with me!' he yelled. 'Brother Speritas, I need you at my location!'

LEARCHUS HUGGED THE ground as the convoy of tau tanks passed so close to his position that he could have run forwards and planted a melta charge on the nearest vehicle before its pilot would have a chance to react. The wake of the skimmers' anti-grav engines sent a warm ripple of air over his camo-cape as well as an unpleasantly alien reek of burnt metal. The proximity of the aliens threatened to get the better of him, but he viciously quelled his rising anger and disgust.

He knew they had a mission, but the further he and his scouts pressed south, the slimmer it seemed their chances of completing it became. They could travel barely a kilometre without a warning burst on the vox from Sergeant Issam sending them to ground. It had been many years since Learchus had been a scout, and with every enemy unit they concealed themselves from, he remembered why he had been so glad to be elevated to full Astartes status.

The tanks passed out of sight, and Learchus once again threw off his cape and pushed himself to his feet. His armour was filthy, and he brushed leaves and mud from the burnished plates with a grimace of distaste. Was this Uriel's way of punishing him for his ambitions?

Learchus immediately discarded that thought as unworthy, and took a deep, calming breath, silently reciting the catechisms of devotion to soothe his ragged temper as Issam ghosted through the long ferns towards the assembling scouts.

Learchus looked up at the sky. Clouds were drawing in from the ocean. A stiff breeze was building, and Learchus could taste the promise of lightning on the air.

'Stay down,' hissed Issam, running, crouched over.

Learchus dropped to his belly and pulled the cloak back over his armoured body. Issam dropped to the wet earth next to him, squinting out to sea and tugging Learchus's cloak to fully cover his body.

'Don't worry,' said Learchus, 'they're gone.'

'Storm coming in,' said Issam, ignoring Learchus's words. 'A big one by the looks of it.'

'I think so,' agreed Learchus sourly. 'Yet more joyful news.'

'It will help us move forward undetected.'

'There is that I suppose,' said Learchus. 'Then let us continue.'

Issam pressed his hand over Learchus's forearm and shook his head. 'No, we wait here in this hollow for a few minutes before pressing on.'

Learchus rounded on Issam angrily. 'We have a mission, Issam, and we cannot afford to spend time resting. We need to complete our mission and return to our battle-brothers.'

'We're not resting,' said Issam. 'We're waiting in case there's a rearguard.'

Learchus cursed softly, but said nothing, waiting in silence as a soft rain began to fall. At length, another Hammerhead tank, escorted by a pair of the nimble scout vehicles, slipped past their hiding place on the same route as the heavier convoy.

Once Issam was satisfied there were no more tau forces, he issued orders to his scouts with a series of chopping hand motions. Learchus rose and squatted on his haunches, wringing his hands as he looked towards the south.

Learchus looked up at Issam, angry with himself for not thinking of a rearguard and angry at his exclusion from the fighting.

'How far to Praxedes do you think?' he asked without apology.

Issam drew a folded map from a pouch at his waist. The map was laminated and printed with contours, colours and symbols that Learchus knew he should recognise, but the meaning of which eluded him. Issam pointed to Praxedes and traced his finger northwards.

'Based on how far I believe we've come, I'd say another two days, but maybe longer if we have to keep taking refuge from the tau.'

'Three days,' said Learchus. 'The war might be lost by then!'

'Nevertheless, that's how long it will take.'

'That is too long,' said Learchus. 'We must be there quicker.'

The scout sergeant squared his shoulders. 'How long has it been since your

elevation to full Astartes?'

'Ninety years, give or take,' answered Learchus. 'Why?'

'Some warriors relish the game of stealth, matching their wits against a foe in shadow games behind the lines, but not you. Scouting doesn't suit you, not any more.'

'No, it does not,' stated Learchus. 'I am a far more straightforward warrior. I desire only to meet my foes face-to-face and blade-to-blade where courage can be tested and honour satisfied. This mission flies in the face of everything that makes me who I am.'

'You are forgetting your earlier lesson about the mission,' said Issam. 'You long to take the fight to the tau.'

'I do, with every fibre of my being,' said Learchus. 'The desire to attack those tanks was almost overpowering, but if Uriel's exile and return has taught me anything, it is the folly of abandoning the teachings of the Codex Astartes.'

'It reminded you of that, Learchus,' said Issam, 'but you never forget that lesson as an Astartes Scout. Abandoning the Codex when you're cut off from your brothers is a sure-fire way to end up dead. Had you attacked those tanks or moved out we would all be corpses by now.'

'I know that,' snapped Learchus. 'I am not an initiate, fresh from the recruitment auxilia.'

'A fact of which I am acutely aware,' said Issam. 'If you were, you would listen to me and show me a bit of damn respect. I think you forget that I too am a sergeant.'

Learchus felt his already frayed temper threaten to get the better of him, but once again his iron control clamped down on it. He was being ridiculous. Issam was right.

'I am sorry, brother,' said Learchus. 'You are, of course, right. I apologise.'

'Accepted,' said Issam graciously, 'but I think our getting to Praxedes to rescue to the good governor is the least of our worries.'

'Those tanks that passed,' said Learchus.

'Indeed.'

'How many did you make it this time?'

'Including the rearguard, thirteen vehicles,' replied Issam, 'four Hammerheads, three Sky Rays and six Devilfish. The formations are getting larger each time.'

'Aye,' agreed Learchus, 'and heavier. What do you make of it?'

'Too many for a scouting or harrying force,' said Issam. 'This is a full flanking thrust.'

'That is what I was afraid of. We have to send word to Uriel.'

'The Codex states that to remain undetected Scouts should maintain vox-

silence when behind enemy lines,' Issam reminded him.

'I know that too, but if we do nothing our brothers will be outflanked and surrounded. They will be destroyed, and this war will be over whether we get the governor back or not.'

Issam nodded. 'The tau will almost certainly pick up such a signal.'

'That is a chance we have to take,' said Learchus, feeling the certainties that underpinned his life melting away one by one.

THE LEAD BATTLESUIT stepped down from the firing step, and a Chimera exploded as a plasma bolt punched through its hull just beneath the turret ring. Colonel Loic and men of the 44th were reacting to the threat, but they would not be able to plug the gap. Only the Space Marines could do that. Uriel and his warriors fought their way through the fury of battle towards the breach as Fire Warriors clambered up the earthen bulwark.

The battlesuits had seen them and were turning to face them. All it would take would be for them to hold the Space Marines for a moment and it would be too late to seal the breach.

A voice laden with ancient wisdom and clinical detachment came over the vox. 'I am with you, Captain Ventris. Commencing hostile engagement.'

A searing blast of light came from behind Uriel, and the upper section of the first battlesuit exploded as though struck by a bolt of horizontal lightning. Its smoking shell remained upright for a few seconds before toppling over the parapet. Another flashing shot blew the head and shoulder mount from a second battlesuit, and yet another punched a ragged hole through the chest of a third.

Uriel's sword tore through the chest carapace of the nearest battlesuit, and he ducked below the slashing fist of its neighbour. A heavy calibre round nicked his hip and spun him around. He dropped to one knee as his attacker was slammed back against the berm by a ferocious impact that caved in its chest.

'Careful, Captain Ventris,' said Brother Speritas, his voice booming from his sarcophagus-mounted augmitters. 'You have not the armour to match mine.'

Brother Speritas, whose mortal flesh was all but destroyed on the daemon-haunted world of Thrax, towered over Uriel, the Dreadnought's armoured frame like a great slab of iron given shape and form to make war.

Tau weapons fire spattered from Speritas's hull without effect, and his monstrous, crackling fist smote another battlesuit to destruction as he waded into the tau armoured suits. Too close for weapons fire, the tau were no match for the up-close and personal fury of an Astartes Dreadnought.

Uriel ducked and wove his way through the combat, using the massive form

of Speritas to weave a deadly path through the wedge of battlesuits. His warriors fanned out around him, shooting into the breach, and driving back the Fire Warriors using the battlesuits' assault to force their way in. Close-range bolter-fire turned the breach into a blitzing hurricane of explosions and ricochets through which nothing could live. Tau screams and the wet smacks of solid rounds on flesh punctuated the staccato barks of gunfire.

All Uriel could hear were explosions and the furious clang of metal on metal. He hacked the legs from another battlesuit, and spun his sword around before stabbing it down through its chest. Experience had taught him that the head section of these suits did not actually contain the wearer's cranium, and as he twisted his sword clear, its blade was stained red with tau blood.

As last there were no more foes, and Uriel swiftly scanned the battlefield. Colonel Loic and his men had taken up position on the firing step and poured volley after volley into the tau. A green and gold banner flew proudly above the fighting and Uriel nodded to the PDF colonel as Brother Speritas crushed the life from the last of the battlesuits.

Space Marines secured the breach as earth-moving dozers moved to seal it once more.

Uriel switched back to his bolter, and checked the load as he climbed back to the firing step. Loic greeted him with a wide grin, his bald head streaked with sweat and blood. The man's chest heaved with excitement, and he slapped a gloved hand on Uriel's arm.

'By the Emperor, we did it!' he cried. 'I didn't think we could do it, but damn me if we didn't just give them a bloody nose they won't soon forget.'

Looking out over the battlefield, Uriel had to agree. Dawn's light was spreading across the wreck and corpse-choked wasteland, though drifting clouds of smoke obscured the full scale of the fighting. The first battle for the Diacrian Bridge had been won, but the cost had been high. Hundreds of the defenders were dead, but the tau had suffered the worst of the fight. Uriel estimated nearly fifty tanks were burning and that at least a thousand or more tau had been killed.

Colonel Loic wiped the blade of his sword clean on the tunic of a fallen tau soldier before sheathing the blade. He followed Uriel's gaze over the battlefield.

'They'll come at us again soon, won't they?'

'Yes,' said Uriel.

'Then we need to be ready for the next attack,' said Loic, waving over a vox-operator. 'I'll get extra ammunition distributed and have food and water brought.'

'That will take too long,' said Uriel. 'We need to make do with what we have.'

'No, I had supply stations set up just behind our lines,' explained Loic, between issuing orders over the vox. 'They're manned by PDF non-combatants,

and they can have supplies to us inside of five minutes.'

'That was perceptive of you,' said Uriel, impressed at Loic's thoroughness.

'Simple logistics, really,' said Loic modestly. 'Even the bravest soldier can't fight if he's got no ammo or he's dehydrated, now can he?'

Uriel nodded. 'I underestimated you, Colonel Loic, and for that I apologise.'

Loic waved away his words, though Uriel saw that he was inordinately pleased with them.

'So how do you think they'll come at us this time, Captain Ventris?

'Cautiously,' said Uriel. 'They were over-confident before, and they won't make that mistake again.'

'Captain Gerber said the tau don't make mistakes,' said Loic.

'They do,' said Uriel, 'but they don't make the same one twice.'

JENNA WATCHED AS Mykola Shonai was dragged from the cells, her bare and broken feet leaving glistening trails of blood on the wet floor. The woman's body was no more than a whipped and beaten mass of dead meat, and whatever secrets remained within her skull were going with her to the grave.

Two enforcers with their mirrored visors drawn down over their faces took her away, and Jenna felt a leaden weight settle in her stomach at the sight of the former governor's corpse, knowing that she bore a share of responsibility for Mykola Shonai's death.

She saw Culla through the door of the cell, naked to the waist and dousing his sweating torso with water from a battered copper ewer. Anger overtook her, and she stormed into the cell, her hands itching to reach for the predicant's throat.

Culla smiled as she entered the cell, his face serene and beatific in its sense of accomplishment. His beard was matted with dried blood and his fists were smeared with the stuff.

'You killed her,' said Jenna. 'You beat her to death.'

'I did,' said Culla, 'and the warp will devour her filthy soul forever. Rejoice, Judge Sharben, for one less heretic besets the Imperium. By such deeds are we made safe.'

'Safe are we?' hissed Jenna. 'Did you learn anything from her? Anything that will help us fight the tau armies?'

'Nothing she did not confess upon her arrest,' admitted the preacher, towelling himself dry with a linen cloth, 'but such wickedness ensured her a long and painful ending. Would that it had been longer and more agonising. Do you not agree?'

Jenna saw Culla's face transform from serenity to something loathsome and

reptilian. His eyes glittered with a predatory hunger, aching for Jenna to say something foolish that would see her taking Mykola Shonai's place upon the chair bolted to the floor.

'She deserved death, that much we agree on,' said Jenna, choosing her words carefully, 'but a death decreed by Imperial justice. She should have been declared guilty by a conclave of Judges and executed by the proper authorities.'

'I already told you, Sharben, I have the authority of the Emperor,' said Culla, pushing past her and leaving the cell. 'What higher authority is there?'

Jenna let him go and sank to her haunches, letting her finger trace spirals in the blood on the floor. It was sticky and still warm. A human being had died here, a woman she had respected and admired. Mykola Shonai's actions had damned her, and there was no doubt in Jenna's mind that her crime not only warranted, but demanded, a death sentence.

Had she deserved to die like this, beaten to the bone by a madman who claimed a highly dubious direct connection to the Emperor? Imperial law was mercilessly harsh, but with good reason. Without such control, humanity would soon fall prey to the myriad creatures and dangers that pressed in from every side. Such harshness was necessary and vital, but Jenna had always believed that the law could also be just.

The blood on her fingertips gave the lie to that notion, and she felt her anger at Culla scale new heights. The preacher had violated the core of her beliefs and notions of the world, but that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was that she had let him.

She hated Culla, but she hated her complicity in his actions more. He had dragged her into his barbarity, and she had stood by and done nothing, even when she had known it was wrong.

Jenna took her fingers from the floor, rubbing the sticky blood between her fingertips. She lifted her head and looked up at the bronze eagle set high in the far wall of the cell. The symbol was supposed to remind the condemned what they had forsaken and who stood in judgement of them.

It served to remind Jenna who and what she served.

Culla claimed he worked with a higher authority, well, so too did Jenna.

She stood and turned in one motion, marching from the cell with a hard, jagged anger crystallising within her. Jenna slid her shock maul from its sheath on her shoulder, and strode through the dank corridors of the Glasshouse towards the sound of Culla's booming voice. He was in the section occupied by the tau prisoners, and Jenna felt a curious calm descend as the sound of his voice grew louder.

At last, Jenna emerged into the wide chamber that served as the holding pen

for the tau, where a group of eleven of the dejected aliens were kept locked in cells two metres by three that were illuminated every hour of every day. The prisoners' effects, such as they were, were kept in the guardroom opposite the cells, as were the guards' myriad devices of torment.

Standing before the cells, Culla was being robed in his emerald chasuble by Enforcer Dion, while Enforcer Apollonia brought a number of items of excruciation from the guardroom. Knives, saws, pliers, devices of scarification and implements of burning were laid out on a long metal tray attached to a surgical table fixed to the floor. Culla's eviscerator sword was propped against the table like a favourite walking stick, and Jenna was struck by the random nature of her observation.

A third enforcer, rendered anonymous by his mirrored visor, held one of the prisoners. The remains of a shorn white topknot told Jenna that it was the tau female named La'tyen, the first captive brought to the Glasshouse. The tau's hands were bound before her, and Jenna saw that her defiance and hatred were undimmed. In the corner of the chamber, the xenolexicon servitor the Ultramarines had provided stood as an unmoving witness to events.

Culla sighed as he saw Jenna enter. 'Unless you have come to aid me in delivering the Emperor's wrath upon these degenerate animals, you have no place here. Be gone, woman.'

'I'm here to stop you, Culla,' said Jenna, her voice calm and controlled.

'Stop me?' laughed Culla. 'Why in the world would you want to do that? These are a filthy xenos species. You can't tell me you believe the likes of them deserve mercy.'

'You're right, I don't, but you violated Imperial Law with what you did to Mykola Shonai, and I am here to see justice done.'

'Justice?' sneered Culla. 'A meaningless concept in the face of the enemies our species faces. What does the xenos or the heretic know of justice? Save your petty notions of justice for children and simpletons, Sharben. I deal in harsh realities, and I have work to do.'

'Not any more,' said Jenna, moving to stand between the preacher and the cells. 'Dion, Apollonia, step away from Prelate Culla.'

Both enforcers hesitated, torn between loyalty to their commander and their recently engendered fear and awe of Culla. Jenna felt the moment stretch, her thumb hovering over the activation stud of her shock maul. Part of her recoiled at facing down an Imperial preacher with a weapon in her hand, but the core of what had driven her to become a Judge in the Adeptus Arbites knew that this was the right and just course of action.

Neither Dion nor Apollonia moved, and Culla's lip twisted in a sneer.

'The enforcers are mine now,' he said. 'I warned you not to cross me.'

'And I told you I was the commander here.'

Jenna's thumb pressed down, and she slammed the crackling shock maul into Culla's face.

SIXTEEN

THE LAVRENTIAN PREACHER dropped, reeling from the unexpected blow, and Jenna stepped in to deliver a second. She could not afford to give Culla an opening for retaliation, and her weapon arced around to render the man insensible. The blow never connected.

Enforcer Dion slammed into her, knocking her from her feet and driving the breath from her. She rolled with him as he took hold of her wrist and tried to smash the shock maul from her hand. Jenna squirmed from his grip and drove her knee up into Dion's groin. He hissed in a breath, but kept hold of her, using his weight to keep her pinned to the ground.

'What the hell are you doing?' Jenna yelled at him. 'I'm your commanding officer!'

Dion didn't answer, which was smart, saving his breath for the struggle. He smashed his forehead into her nose and she felt it break. Blood filled her mouth and bright lights burst before her eyes. Dion tried the same move again, but she twisted out the way and his head cracked against the floor.

He yelped in pain, and Jenna freed her left arm. She hammered her fist into Dion's throat. He grunted in pain, and his grip loosened on her other wrist. She heard a shout of alarm and sounds of a struggle behind her, but couldn't spare a second's focus to see what was happening around her.

Though she hated to do it, she swung the shock maul and slammed it against the side of Dion's skull, finally dislodging him. Breathless, Jenna struggled from beneath his suddenly prone form as she heard the angry bellow of an eviscerator roaring to life. She froze for a moment, the innate fear of such a painfully lethal weapon like a bucket of freezing water to the senses.

How had Culla recovered so quickly? The man must be possessed of superhuman resilience to even be conscious after a shock maul to the face. A dreadful scream filled the chamber, louder and more agonised than it was possible to imagine. It was the sound of a human being in the most insufferable pain, the sound of raw, naked terror. A sound that was abruptly cut off and replaced by an even more hideous noise.

Jenna rolled to her knees. Dizziness swamped her and she fought to keep from vomiting. She saw Culla was still on the ground, the skin of his temple burned by the energy field of her weapon. Who had activated the eviscerator?

Blood sprayed the air in an arcing fountain, and Jenna felt it spatter her face.

She blinked it away, and saw the source of the horrific screaming through a blur of tears and red liquid. The enforcer that had been holding the tau prisoner was on his knees, and he had been virtually split in two.

The roaring chainsaw blade of Culla's eviscerator was buried in the middle of his stomach, having ripped downwards through collarbone, ribs and sternum. Jenna screamed as the weapon was torn free, removing the upper quadrant of the man's torso.

She caught motion from the corner of her eye. Apollonia was bringing her shotgun to bear. The eviscerator swung around and hacked through the weapon before she could fire. The blade bit into Apollonia's shoulder, and the jagged teeth of the sword chewed through plasteel, mesh, meat and bone to saw her arm from her body in a vile spray of mangled flesh.

Apollonia fell, blood squirting from her shoulder like a ruptured hydraulic line.

The enforcer was dead before she hit the ground. Jenna pulled herself unsteadily to her feet and yanked the alarm pin on her belt. Blaring klaxons erupted throughout the Glasshouse.

La'tyen advanced towards her. Jenna circled around the surgical table, keeping it between them, and trying to buy some time. The gigantic weapon looked absurd in the tau warrior's hands, almost too heavy for her to lift, but Jenna didn't doubt that hatred would give her the strength to wield it.

Her eyes flicked towards Culla and Dion, but both men were out of the fight for now. Jenna was on her own until more enforcers responded to her alarm.

She and the tau continued circling the surgical table, the room filled with the deafening roar of the enormous chainblade. Jenna tried not to think of how painful it would be to die being carved up by such a horrific weapon.

'It's over,' said Jenna. 'Put the weapon down.'

From the corner of the room, the xenolexicon servitor repeated her words.

Instead of attacking, La'tyen backed towards the cells and brought the giant sword down on the locking mechanism of the nearest door. It exploded in a shower of sparks as the adamantine teeth tore through the metal as though it were pulped wood.

The cell door swung open and one of the captive tau emerged. The eviscerator swung down again and another door was carved open. Jenna's eyes snapped towards the chamber's main entrance but there was no sign of other enforcers.

Once more the eviscerator tore through a door lock, though the tau that stepped from this cell was clearly no warrior. Taller than the others, he was possessed of a serene poise that the others lacked. This tau spoke a few words to the others, and Jenna saw the effect his words had on them. The warlike cast of

their features softened, and their eyes grew a little wider, as though hearing the words of a revered saint or a god made flesh. The servitor repeated the words in Imperial Gothic, but the roar of the eviscerator drowned them out.

One of the tau swept up Apollonia's shock maul, and, as Jenna watched, another alien warrior lifted Dion's weapon. They began to spread out, intending to surround her, and though their features were alien and unnatural the hatred in their eyes was plain to see.

The odds were already against her taking out La'tyen, but with yet more tau against her, she was dead if she stayed to fight.

Jenna turned and ran from the chamber.

* * *

LA'TYEN WATCHED THE female torturer flee and made to pursue, but a restraining hand took hold of her arm. Angrily, she turned to rebuke the owner of the hand, but the angry words died in her throat as she saw Aun'rai.

'Let her go,' said the Ethereal, and La'tyen immediately deactivated the blade she had taken from the shouting gue'la who had taken such relish in their humiliation and pain. 'Our first priority is escape, not vengeance. Revenge is pointless, and only serves to divert us from our service to the Greater Good.'

'Of course, revered Ethereal,' said La'tyen, bowing her head, 'for the Greater Good.'

Aun'rai turned to those tau who were free and said, 'Our captors will be back soon, and we must return to our comrades. Fetch my honour blades.'

Though none of their number were singled out by Aun'rai's command, a warrior named Shas'la'tero moved towards the room opposite the cells, all of them knowing without any words being spoken which of their number was singled out. A tau warrior gathered a set of keys from one of the dead torturers and began opening those cells that remained locked.

Within moments, fifteen tau were gathered in the chamber, and Shas'la'tero returned with a pair of short, caramel-coloured batons, each topped with a glinting blue gem. Aun'rai received the batons with a quick nod of the head.

Aun'rai twisted each of the gems and pressed them into the body of the batons. They began flashing in a regular pattern, before suddenly blinking urgently in an answering sequence.

'Secure that door,' said Aun'rai, indicating the chamber's entrance. 'Fellow servants of the Greater Good are on their way to us.'

'What do you require us to do with them?' asked La'tyen, pointing to where one of the mirror-helmeted captors lay next to the unconscious form of the

shaven-headed torturer with the forked beard.

'Kill them,' said Aun'rai.

SEVENTY KILOMETRES NORTH, Captain Mederic ran for his life. Some preternatural sixth sense made him duck behind a tree trunk the instant before he heard the sharp, whining crack of a kroot rifle. A portion of the tree exploded next to his head, and only his goggles kept him from losing an eye as razor splinters of wood and sap sprayed his face.

He ducked down and checked the charge of his weapon. Half-full. Enough to give his pursuers cause to keep their heads down. Keeping low, Mederic rolled around the tree and let loose a series of shots. Aiming quickly towards the flashes of movement he saw in the long grasses and bushes of the hills, he didn't expect to hit much, but hopefully the threat of his weapon would give the aliens pause.

Men and women in the drab green scout uniforms of the 44th's Hounds darted through the hills and trees in their desperate bid to escape the trap the kroot hunters had set for them.

He should have known it was too good to be true, a forward observation post in the Owsen Hills that was strung just a little too far ahead of the advance forces to be safe.

After the warning from the Ultramarines that the tau were trying to hook around the hills north of Olzetyn, the 44th had rolled from Camp Torum to meet the threat head-on.

The heavy armour was some way behind the infantry, and Mederic's Hounds were first in the fight. The tau were moving swiftly, but the Hounds had blunted the thrust of their advance, lying in ambush for Pathfinder teams, and leaving cunningly hidden booby traps in their wake to target enemy tanks. Enemy squad leaders and commanders were singled out with deadly accurate sniper fire, and the tau advance slowed to a crawl as each potential ambush site had to be scouted thoroughly.

Pathfinders sent to engage them and bring them to battle were outmanoeuvred or ambushed and killed. The Hounds were like ghosts, moving through the mist-shrouded hills with all the skill and stealth learned the hard way on the battlefields of the Eastern Fringe. Mederic had trained his men well, and that sublime skill bred a confidence unmatched in any other soldier in the regiment.

That had been what had done for them, thought Mederic gloomily. Nothing could touch them, no force the tau had sent after them had come close to catching them, and no foe was beyond the reach of their weapons. How easy it

was, he reflected, for confidence to slip into arrogance. Mederic knew they should have left the observation post unmolested, it had been too easy, too tempting.

Despite his misgivings, he had led the assault only to find themselves under attack.

Dropping from the trees and rising from concealed pits, the kroot were like feral barbarians or the forest itself coming to life. Raw, pink-fleshed monsters with savagely erect quills appeared from nowhere, smeared in mud and earth, and armed with bladed rifles.

Ten men had died in the first moments of the ambush, six more in the following seconds of stunned disbelief that the Hounds could have been tricked. Training and instinct kicked in after that, and, realising that standing and fighting was hopeless, Mederic had ordered his men to fight clear of the trap. Blood, bayonets and raw courage punched a hole in the kroot noose, and sixteen hours later they were still running.

Mederic scanned the undergrowth, remembering to keep one eye on the upper reaches of the trees. He saw movement ahead and swung his rifle to bear. A howling brute of a beast with a crest of vivid red quills vaulted from branch to branch, its ululating war cry taken up by a hundred other bestial throats. The creature halted, squatting easily on a high branch, and Mederic squeezed off a shot before it moved again.

His lasrifle cracked and spat a bolt of hard energy, but the kroot was already moving, its spring-like limbs pushing off the branch before his shot connected. More shots filled the air as his soldiers followed his example. Return fire splintered trees and ricocheted from rocks.

But the Hounds were too good not to have displaced after firing.

Mederic swung back around the tree as a trio of enormous creatures crested the hillside below him. Larger than the biggest grox he'd ever seen and looking like something an ogryn might ride into battle, the creatures were like thicker, quadruped versions of the kroot. Lumbering forwards on limbs as thick as Mederic's chest, they were enormous beasts of burden, though from the size of their fists and roaring, beaked maws, he didn't fancy his chances if it came to going toe to toe with such a monster.

A robed kroot stood tall on the back of each one, manning a heavy, long-barrelled gun fitted to the beast's enormous saddle arrangement. The kroot screeched and hollered as they moved with the motion of the enormous beast, and the others squawked frenziedly at the sight of them.

Mederic didn't need any specialised scout training to know these were bad news, and he bolted from cover as the red-quilled leader barked a shrill order.

'Down!' shouted Mederic, hurling himself flat.

The air split with booming cracks, like the rifles the kroot carried, but a hundred times louder. Flashing bolts of energy speared through the forest, turning the daylight blue. One beam struck a boulder and blasted it to fragments, each one a deadly bullet that cut down half a dozen of Mederic's men. Another struck a thick tree trunk and toppled a tree that had taken centuries to grow so tall and broad in an instant.

Mederic rolled as the tree crashed down, eating dirt and twigs as other soldiers were brought down by its fall. He didn't see where the third shot impacted. Another three shots banged and he heard the screams of Guardsmen in pain.

'Tylor, Deren, Minz!' he yelled, rolling to his feet. 'With me! Form a line on me and take out those gunners.'

Three of his scouts immediately turned and took up position with him, rifles going to their shoulders and scopes pressed tightly to their eyes. Minz took the first shot, her bolt punching one of the kroot gunners from its perch atop the muscular beast. Deren shot the kroot that attempted to climb up and take its place.

Tylor and Mederic both put las-bolts through the chest of the middle gunner, and the fire from the kroot's big guns slackened. They needed to displace, but even as he drew a bead on the kroot climbing to take his place, Mederic saw that it wouldn't matter. The red-quilled leader was moving his warriors around to flank them. There was nowhere to displace to, and he hoped that this last defiant stand had bought the rest of his men time to make good their getaway.

'Keep firing!' he ordered. 'We're only going to get a few shots, so make them count!'

He put down another kroot and turned to slam in a fresh clip. The trees to his right exploded, and Mederic was slammed into the ground. He tasted blood and dirt, and looked through the haze of smoke and dizziness to see Minz and Deren lying dead in a pulped mess of blood and shattered timber.

His rifle was useless, the stock shattered and the barrel warped beyond use. He reached for his pistol and knife, but his sidearm was gone, the holster empty.

Only his blade was exactly where it was meant to be.

Something moved through the haze of smoke, and he surged to his feet as he saw a crest of red quills go past him. Mederic staggered and lurched through the haze of gun-smoke, his blade bared and his heart thudding with the need to kill this enemy. He slashed his blade though the mist, screaming for the kroot to face him.

'Come on, you alien bastard!' he yelled. 'You wanted a fight, well fight me,

damn you!'

There… a glimpse of mottled pink flesh and a flash of vibrant red. Mederic set off towards the sight, his blade held before him. He drew closer and prepared to strike. Then the mist cleared and he saw Tylor pinned to a tree with his combat knife. His chest was cut open and a fan of blood from his skull patterned the pale bark of the tree.

'Emperor's grace,' hissed Mederic, dropping to his knees. He could still hear the whooping squawks of the kroot, but they sounded distant and muted, as though coming from far away. Was that an acoustic trick of the hills' geography or had that last explosion damaged his hearing?

Then he heard another sound, a throaty rumble from over the hillside. It was deep and shook the earth, travelling along his bones and through his body like the beginnings of an earthquake. Mederic snatched up Tylor's fallen rifle and marched uphill towards a sound he knew well.

As he reached the top of the hill, the mist and smoke thinned, and he emerged from the forest to see the most beautiful thing he could have imagined; scores of armoured vehicles in the livery of the 44th Lavrentian Hussars. The battered remnants of his Hounds clustered around the regiment's tanks, bloody and exhausted, but unbowed.

Leading the armoured convoy was the mighty form of Father Time, and riding high in the Baneblade's cupola was Lord Nathaniel Winterbourne. The colonel's arm was bandaged and his skin had the unhealthy pallor of a veteran tanker, but his uniform was immaculate, and shone with all the pride and honour it represented. The gold and green banner of the 44th, with its proud golden horseman reflected the sunlight, and Mederic felt tears pricking at the corners of his eyes at the sight of it.

'Captain Mederic?' called Winterbourne, and he straightened his spine. Mederic marched over to where the colossal tank idled, the bone-shaking rumble of its engine like a force of nature.

'Sir,' said Mederic, holding onto the skirts of the tank to stop from falling over. He noticed that someone had written Meat Grinder on the skirt, and smiled despite his utter exhaustion.

'Damn fine job you did here, captain,' said Winterbourne. 'Slowed them up long enough for us to get the heavy stuff over from Brandon Gate. The savants said you couldn't do it, but I told them to go to hell. If anyone was going to hold the tau back it would be Mederic's Hounds.'

'Thank you, my lord,' said Mederic.

'Now get your men some food and water, captain,' said Winterbourne. 'If the report from Sergeant Learchus is right, we're going to see a lot more action here.

These hills and forests aren't our kind of terrain, so I'm going to need your men sharp to keep the armour safe from those damn kroot and drone spotters. Are you up to the task?'

Mederic thought back to the red-quilled kroot leader and snapped off a salute.

'The Hounds don't leave a fight once it's started,' he said.

JENNA RACKED THE pump of her shotgun and nodded to the enforcers who waited at her back. She eased along a walkway that opened on one side, towards the door to the chamber in which the tau had barricaded themselves. Behind her, fifteen men in black body armour and mirror-visored helmets came similarly armed.

On the opposite side of the door, another ten armed men carefully edged forwards, knowing that a number of armed alien warriors were behind it. The tau had a few weapons at best, but after Apollonia's death, Jenna was in no mood to take chances. She knew in all likelihood that Culla and Dion were also dead. She cared nothing for Culla, but Enforcer Dion's deaths sat like a lead weight in her stomach, and she knew she would have to deal with the guilt later. But for now, she had to restore order.

She glanced down into the courtyard of the Glasshouse, empty of prisoners now that a lockdown had been declared. The tower in the centre, normally a symbol of Imperial justice, seemed to be staring at her, the polarised glass dome at its summit mocking her with its unblinking gaze.

Jenna had gathered her enforcers immediately after fleeing the detention block, and their response times had been admirably swift. In less than ten minutes, two strike teams were assembled and mustered for action. She waved a two-man team equipped with a breaching ram and shaped charges.

'Enough to take the door off in one blast,' she ordered. 'No mistakes.'

With the order given, she waited a frustrating minute while the charges were rigged on the hinges. At last, the charges were ready to go, and Jenna took up position next to the door.

She opened a channel to all the enforcers under her command.

'No survivors. These bastards killed Culla and two of our own,' she said, neglecting to mention that she bore a measure of responsibility for those deaths. 'I want them all dead. Understood?'

Her enforcers acknowledged the order, and Jenna flattened herself against the wall.

Seeing that the men on the other side of the door had done likewise, she cocked her elbow and pumped her fist down twice in quick succession.

Two things happened at once.

The door hinges blew out with a dull whump and a clang of metal.

And hot propellant fumes filled the courtyard as an Orca drop-ship blasted the full force of its jets downwards to arrest its screaming descent.

Jenna covered her eyes as grit and acrid exhaust gasses billowed outwards. Through the haze and dust of the howling aircraft's engines she could see it rotating on its axis in midair, and hear the whine of a powerful motor spooling up.

'Oh hell,' she said, and dropped flat to the ground.

A sheeting storm of supersonic shells ripped along the length of the walkway, sawing through the waist-high barrier and turning its entire length into a hellstorm of explosions and death. Ten enforcers died in the opening second, cut apart and reduced to shredded mists of blood and pulped bone.

Jenna covered her ears, but the noise was too great to be blocked out. Shrieking detonations blew chunks of stone and rebar from the walls, and she felt a burning line across her back where a fragment of red-hot shell casing embedded itself in her shoulder. Something exploded behind her, and her leg spasmed as hot metal ripped into the meat of her thigh. Desperately, she pulled herself along the walkway, ignoring the pain in a frantic bid to escape the slaughter.

The cannons worked their way back and forth across the walkway until nothing was left alive. Bright lights flared in the smoke, and blazing darts of fire streaked away from the gunship, each swiftly followed by a booming explosion.

Guard towers. They're taking out the guard towers with rockets…

She thought the cannons stopped firing, but it was impossible to tell. The ringing echoes of the shooting and explosions were deafening. Jenna tore off her helmet and reached around to her shoulder, scrabbling for the hot shrapnel. She could feel its heat even through her gloves and gritted her teeth against the pain as she dug it from her flesh.

Gasping with effort and soaked in sweat, Jenna blinked away tears of pain and confusion. What was going on? Where had the tau gunship come from? She was sure the guns weren't firing anymore, and she tried to roll onto her side to see what was happening.

Thick clouds of smoke and dust obscured much of the walkway, but it was clear that there was nothing left alive. All of her enforcers were dead. Was this what mercy and notions of justice achieved? She screamed with frustration and looked around for a weapon. Her shotgun was lying a few metres away at the edge of a pool of glistening blood. The stabbing pain in her leg flared as she moved towards it, and she craned her neck to see how badly she was hurt.

The breath caught in her throat at the appalling mess. Spinning shrapnel had ploughed a wide furrow through her right thigh, leaving a gristly horror of rubbery-looking meat and exploded bone.

Her breath came in panicked hikes, but a cry of pain died in her throat as she saw the tau prisoners emerge onto the walkway. They had all looked the same to her before, but now it was abundantly clear which one was the leader. Nothing in their garb appeared to differentiate them, but the xenos she had instinctively known was not a warrior stood apart from the others. His bearing and stature were subtly different in ways that Jenna could not appreciate on a conscious level. She just knew that this one was special.

The drop-ship had stopped firing, and even the roar of its jets seemed to ease down in the presence of the tau leader. Jenna watched him move, her pain forgotten in the strange calm that enveloped her at the sight of so noble a being. It seemed strange she had not felt it in any of the others.

She crawled towards her shotgun, sweat running in rivers down her dust and tear-streaked face. Her skin felt cold and her vision was blurring. She guessed she was slipping into shock.

The instant the gunship opened fire, the dynamic between her and the tau shifted from prisoner and captor to enemies at war, and Jenna had no compunction about killing an enemy in battle.

Slowly Jenna pulled herself over to her weapon, determined to get one shot off at the murderous aliens. All her attention was fixed on the matt black finish of the shotgun's pistol grip, the gleam of reflected light on its trigger and the textured surface of the pump action. Her world shrank to the distance between her and the weapon. Only by focusing her entire will on this one task could she fight down the pain.

Her fingers brushed the stock of the shotgun, and she wept at this little victory. Galvanised by this success, she made one last effort and pulled the weapon towards her. Jenna knew that she would only get one shot, and her hand eased around the grip.

Before she could prop herself up to fire, a blue-skinned foot stepped onto the barrel.

She felt figures around her, and looked up through her tears to see the tau leader standing over her, staring down with an expression that might have been pity or regret. Beside the leader was the tau whose white topknot she had cut. La'tyen. It was her foot that rested on the shotgun and prevented Jenna from shooting. In contrast to the leader's face, La'tyen's expression was all hate.

Jenna had failed, and the weight of that failure stole what little strength remained to her. Her head dropped to the concrete floor, and she could feel its

coldness against her clammy skin.

The tau leader knelt beside her and placed a hand against her forehead. His skin felt smooth and warm to the touch. It was comforting and the pain retreated, yet Jenna wanted to pull away from the alien.

'My name is Aun'rai, and I can ease your suffering,' said the tau in flawless Imperial Gothic. His pronunciation was perfect, though there was a lilt common to dwellers on the Eastern Fringe.

'You have an accent,' said Jenna, her voice faint.

The tau looked puzzled. 'I do?'

'Yes,' nodded Jenna. 'Whoever you learned from had one, and now you do too.'

'That is likely,' agreed the tau with an amused glint in his eye, as though only just coming to the realisation. 'Raphael's pronunciation seemed often to not match his written words. Still, it is not important.'

'If you're going to kill me, do it and go,' hissed Jenna. 'Or just let me die.'

Aun'rai shook his head. 'Kill you? I am not going to kill you. I heard what you said to the gue'la who was intent on wreaking agonising pain upon me. I wish you to know that we are not what he thinks we are. I want you to know that we are not your enemies.'

'You killed my enforcers,' spat Jenna. 'That makes you my enemy.'

'That was regrettable,' agreed Aun'rai, 'but it was necessary. Now we must be away before your aerial forces respond to the presence of my drop-ship.'

Aun'rai spoke a few words in his own language to La'tyen, who looked surprised and almost offended by them, but knelt to obey the tau leader's command nonetheless.

'What are you doing?' gasped Jenna as La'tyen lifted her onto her shoulder. Unimaginable pain flared briefly in her leg, but once again Aun'rai's touch lessened the agony of her wound. As much as she was repulsed by his alien touch, Jenna was pathetically thankful for the absence of pain. Her eyes fluttered and she felt her consciousness fading.

'My healers are going to make you whole again, gue'la,' said Aun'rai, 'and then I am going to offer you a place within the Tau'va.'

SEVENTEEN

FOR THREE MORE days, the defenders of Olzetyn endured punishing attacks against their lines, tau missiles falling like rain on their fortified positions and gradually breaking up the defences. After the first attacks had been beaten back, the alien commander quashed thoughts of rash heroics, and every assault was planned with a thoroughness that would have made Roboute Guilliman proud.

The front lines of battle became a meat grinder where men and machines were chewed up in the constant storm of fighting. 'Stratum, once the jewel in the Administratum's bureaucracy, was now little more than a shelled ruin. The dwelling places of the adepts were flattened by tau missiles, and the debris hauled to the front line to build barricades. On the third day of the fighting, the Tower of Adepts was brought down, the austere structure collapsing into the gorge, taking with it thousands of years worth of tax and work records.

Perversely, its destruction gave rise to a huge cheer from the ranks of the defenders, proving that even faced with alien invasion, there were few more hated individuals than those who levied taxes.

The tau continued to attack along the length of the defences, but the twin bastions protecting the end of the Imperator remained impervious. For all that the tau continued to send tanks and missiles against the bastions, the main thrusts were intended to take the Diacrian Bridge. It was clearly the weak point in the western defence, and drew the lion's share of tau attention.

By such logic are battles won, but what an attacker can reason, a defender can anticipate.

Tau aircraft attempted a bombing run along the length of the Imperator Bridge, but Uriel had foreseen such a manoeuvre, and staggered lines of interceptor guns blew them from the sky with their payloads undelivered.

A massed cadre of battlesuits launched an aerial drop on the Midden to seize the rear defences of the Diacrian Bridge and open the flank of the Imperator. Five hundred tau warriors armed with the latest and deadliest weapons their armourers could provide dropped from the night skies amid the reeking shanties of the Midden, only to find seven squads of the 4th Company waiting for them. Supported by Land Raiders and Thunderfires, the Ultramarines turned the landing zone into a killing ground. Lavrentian heavy mortars pinned the survivors in place while Imperial forces withdrew to allow the massed squadrons of Basilisks on the eastern banks of the river to fire.

As though a thunderstorm had been plucked from the heavens and dropped on the Midden, the Spur promontory vanished in a firestorm of such epic proportions that when the sun rose, it was as if the conurbation had never existed. Few bemoaned its demise, for it had long been evacuated and its cramped, over-populated streets had been rife with disease, poverty and crime.

Colonel Loic was proving to be a more than capable soldier, a man who fought with the heart of a warrior and the mind of a scholar. Even the battle-hardened soldiers of the 44th, men to whom the PDF were little more than dangerous amateurs, came to regard the stocky commander as a true comrade-in-arms.

The tau were having the worst of the battle, but each day saw the Imperial lines forced back towards the bridges. Casualties on both sides were horrific, with thousands wounded and hundreds dying every day. Neither force could break the other, yet neither could afford to pull back from the relentless killing. Both defenders and attackers were fighting bravely, but Uriel knew the outcome of the tau attack was as inescapable as it was inevitable.

The defences of Olzetyn were holding, but the defenders were at breaking point.

It would take only the tiniest reversal for the balance of the war to change.

URIEL WIPED A hand across his forehead, smearing the blood he hadn't had time to clean from his face. He saw Chaplain Clausel looking at him and shook his head.

'It is not mine,' Uriel said, marching through the controlled anarchy of the Imperator Bridge. Damaged tanks were drawn up to either side of the street, Lavrentian and PDF enginseers working side by side to get them operational again. Supply clerks and lifter servitors thronged the thoroughfare, ferrying ammunition, food and water to the troops fighting to defend the bridges.

'I know,' replied the Chaplain, moving aside to allow a flatbed truck laden with Guard-stamped crates to pass. 'The colour is too dark. Where did it come from?'

Uriel thought back to the last attack on the rapidly shrinking defence lines, sorting through the strobing images of killing filed in his memory, the stuff of nightmares yet to come.

'I am not sure,' he said. 'Maybe the Guardsman whose head exploded next to me during the last assault on the trenches thrown out before the Diacrian Bridge? Or maybe the Fire Warrior I gutted when he leapt from a crippled Devilfish?'

Clausel nodded in understanding. 'Battles like this blur together into one

seamless horror of blood and killing. It is war at its most brutal and mechanical, where the skill of a warrior counts for less than where he happens to be standing when a missile impacts.'

'I am bred for battle, Chaplain,' said Uriel. 'My every muscle, fibre and organ was crafted by the Master of Mankind for the express purpose of waging the most brutal war imaginable, yet this unrelenting, daily carnage is alien to me. We should not be here, yet we cannot abandon the men giving their lives to defend this place.'

'Look to the Codex Astartes and you will find your answer,' advised Clausel. 'We Astartes excel at the lightning strike, the dagger thrust to the heart and the decisive, battle-winning stratagem, not this prolonged, static slaughter. For us to leave Olzetyn will almost surely mean its fall, yet might we not be better employed elsewhere?'

'We must be able to do something that will serve this war better, but I do not yet know what it is,' said Uriel. 'All I know is that it sits ill with me to stay and die here, where a hero's life can be ended by something arbitrary. It is anathema to me.'

'Indeed,' agreed Clausel. 'Every Space Marine hopes for an honourable death in battle, one the Chapter's taletellers will speak of for centuries to come. To face death holds no fear for us, but to meet it without honour is something to be dreaded.'

'Then what do you suggest?'

'It is for you to say how we fight, not I,' said Clausel, 'but I suspect you already have a plan in mind, do you not?'

Uriel nodded. 'The beginnings of one, but our allies will not like it.'

'Their likes or dislikes are immaterial to us,' said Clausel. 'You are a captain of the Ultramarines, and the decision of how best to defend Olzetyn and Pavonis is yours to make.'

'I know,' said Uriel.

URIEL AND CLAUSEL emerged into the widest section of the Imperator Bridge, which currently served as the triage station for the Imperial wounded. Uriel could never get used to the scale of the bloodshed endured by the Imperial Guard. Row upon row of body bags covered in long tarpaulins awaited removal, and long pavilion tents were filled with screaming men and overworked medicae as they tried to keep the number of dead from growing even larger.

In the aftermath of battle, Space Marine dead could normally be counted on one hand, but the dead of the Guard ran to thousands. It was a scale of slaughter

that horrified Uriel, and served, once again, to remind him of the mortal soldier's courage and the honour he earned just by standing before the enemy with a gun in his hand.

Colonel Loic and Captain Gerber were already here, and the two Astartes warriors marched towards them as they conferred over a series of makeshift maps chalked on the side of a ruined structure.

The two soldiers turned at the sound of their armoured steps, and Uriel was struck by how much they had changed in the last few days. He and Clausel were still functioning at the peak of their abilities, but for mortals the strain of battle was all too evident. Both men were exhausted and had slept little since the fighting began. Loic had shed weight, and looked like a solider now, not like an adept playing at being a soldier.

Uriel had only met Gerber briefly before the first attack, but the man's no-nonsense attitude and charismatic leadership had impressed him. Both officers had served their men faithfully, and Uriel was proud to have led them in battle.

'Uriel, Chaplain Clausel,' said Loic by way of a greeting, 'good to see you again.'

Uriel acknowledged the greeting with a short bow and turned to Captain Gerber. 'Any news from the other Commands?'

Gerber nodded, absentmindedly rubbing a fresh scar on his neck. 'Yeah, but they're patchy and hours old, so who knows how up to date they are. Captain Luzaine reports that Banner Command have Jotusburg under control, and that his forces are ready to ride out.'

'Excellent,' said Uriel, glad to hear some good news, 'and Magos Vaal? She claimed the supplies of weapons and ammunition would be flowing in three days, and that time has already passed.'

Loic looked uncomfortable and shrugged. 'She says they're still not ready,' he said, 'something about the machine-spirits of the forge hangars being difficult or being interfered with by some heretical tau wizardry, I'm not sure.'

'We need their ammunition and we need it now!' snapped Uriel. He took a deep breath to calm his rising anger. 'Does Vaal not realise that if she fails to get those supplies to us we may lose this world?'

'I rather think the Adeptus Mechanicus see that as secondary to offending the machine-spirits. Rest assured, Uriel, I have expressed our need in the most strenuous language.'

'Tell me of Sword Command,' said Uriel, nodding towards the maps. 'Tell me that Lord Winterbourne fares better than we do.'

Gerber pointed with the tip of his sword to one of the maps and said, 'Lord Winterbourne and Sword Command are currently engaged in the Owsen Hills.

The tau have been halted for now, but they're pushing hard for a breakthrough.'

'Learchus took a great risk in breaking vox-silence behind enemy lines,' said Uriel.

'Good thing he did. His warning came just in time,' said Gerber. 'Thanks to him, our flanks are safe for the moment.'

'That's something at least,' said Uriel, looking at the map of Olzetyn the two men had been studying. 'Now to the matter of our own situation.'

'Of course, Captain Gerber and I have come up with a plan we believe is workable.'

'Tell me,' said Uriel.

'Of course,' said Loic. 'We believe that if we re-task men from the Imperator bastions, we can hold the Diacrian Bridge for at least another week.'

'It's possible,' allowed Uriel. 'Then what?'

'Then we think of some other way to stymie them,' put in Gerber. 'Do you have a better idea?'

Uriel decided there was no point in wasting breath and time with pointless softening of the blow, and said, 'We will not be re-tasking anyone from the Imperator bastions. The bastions will be reinforced and every other bridge will be destroyed. If we try and hold the southern bridge we will fail and the flank of the Imperator will be turned. The tau know the other bridges are the key to the defence of Olzetyn. Truth be told, we should have destroyed them as soon as the fighting started.'

'Destroy the bridges?' said Loic. 'But they have stood for centuries. We can't!'

'The decision has already been made, colonel,' said Uriel. 'I am not here to debate the point, merely to inform you of your new orders. We cannot continue fighting like this. We need this to happen now or we are lost.'

'But with the extra week we could buy, who knows what might happen,' protested Loic.

'The Ultramarines do not make war on the basis of what might happen,' said Clausel. 'Only on what will happen. If we continue this fight as it is, we will lose, and that is not acceptable.'

'Of course not,' said Loic, 'but there must be another way!'

'There is not,' said Uriel in a tone that brooked no disagreement.

Gerber glanced at the map chalked on the wall, and nodded. 'Honour has been satisfied, Adren, and we have shed enough blood for this city. The time to make the hard choice is here and we cannot be afraid to follow it through.'

Loic saw that he had no allies in his attempt to prevent the destruction of the bridges, and Uriel saw the resignation in his eyes.

'Very well,' said Loic. 'You're right, of course, it's just hard seeing great

landmarks of your homeworld destroyed in order to save it.'

'We are like the surgeon who amputates an arm to save his patient,' said Clausel.

'I understand that,' said Loic, 'I just worry what will be left of any worth on Pavonis if we destroy it all to defeat the tau.'

Loic's words were like a light of revelation in Uriel's mind, and a plan that had been nothing more than half-formed ideas in his mind suddenly crystallised.

'What?' asked Loic, sensing that he had said something important.

'I know how we can win this war,' said Uriel.

THE CHASE WAS over.

Hot bolts of pulsing energy stitched a path towards Learchus, and he hurled himself behind a boulder as the two remaining scout skimmers streaked past and arced around on another strafing run. He rolled, and slammed his back against the boulder, bringing his bolter to bear in case the opportunity for a snap shot presented itself.

It had been a risk, sending the vox-signal bearing news of the tau flanking move, and Learchus only hoped that Uriel had made use of the information. Xenos electronic surveillance equipment had clearly detected their brief transmission, and criss-crossing teams of scout skimmers gradually tightened the net on Learchus, Issam and the scouts.

Their pursuers knew there was prey nearby, and had swiftly cut off all avenues of escape, hounding them towards the very edge of the coast. With Praxedes achingly close, it was galling to have to forsake their mission, but the time for stealth was over.

It was time to fight.

They had waited in ambush for their pursuers, and downed one of the skimmers with their first volley of bolter-fire. A second was blown from the air by a lethally accurate missile from Parmian's launcher. The remaining skimmers broke left and right, streaking up and around at amazing speed. They dived back down, pulsing energy weapons ripping through the scouts' position before they could find fresh cover.

Two of Issam's scouts were killed instantly. One died as his head vaporised in a superheated mist of blood and brains when the white heat of the skimmer's fire caught him full in the face. The second was cut in half at the waist by a rapid series of shots that sawed through his torso. Parmian took a hit on the shoulder, and cradled his mangled arm as he took shelter in a cleft in the rocks. Twisted molten metal was all that remained of the missile launcher, and now the last two

skimmers dived back down to finish the kill.

'Why only two teams?' wondered Learchus as he watched them separate. An answer presented itself a second later. The tau obviously thought the transmission had come from a spotter team in their rear echelons, two or three men at most, and certainly nothing that required the attention of more than a handful of scout skimmers. Not for a moment had they suspected that the enemy in their midst was far more dangerous than that.

Once again, the tau had underestimated their foes, and they would pay for that mistake.

Behind Learchus, the ocean spread out like a dark mirror, while, to his right, the rocky landscape fell away in a series of graben-like shelves for three kilometres towards the ancient crater in which lay the port city of Praxedes. Learchus heard more shots and saw Sergeant Issam running for cover, firing from the hip as he went. He had no time to aim, and the scout skimmers were moving too fast for such hasty shots.

'Issam! Down!' shouted Learchus.

The Scout-sergeant dived to the side and darted between two tumbled columns of bleached rock as the second of the two skimmers streaked over his place of concealment. They were nimble vehicles, dart-shaped with what looked like a curving roll bar running from the engine nacelles at their prows to their tapered rears. Two tau warriors sat in the cockpit, only their shoulders and heads visible.

Learchus watched the first skimmer's velocity bleed off as it arced up on its turn, and dropped to one knee. He pulled his bolter in tight and sighted along the length of the weapon. A boltgun was no one's idea of a sniper weapon, but a Space Marine made do with whatever armaments were at his disposal. He let out a breath, and waited until the skimmer was at the apex of its turn, its speed greatly reduced.

He pulled the trigger, feeling the enormous kick of the weapon. The mass reactive projectile streaked through the air, its tiny rocket motor igniting as soon as it left the barrel. The shot was true, and no sooner had Learchus fired than he was running towards his target.

The pilot's head exploded as the bolt-round punched through his helmet and detonated within his skull. The skimmer dropped to the ground with a thump of metal on rock, and the co-pilot struggled to release his restraints as he saw Learchus bearing down on him.

A burst of blue bolts streaking past his head told Learchus that the last skimmer had seen him. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw it arcing towards him. Stuttering blasts of gunfire fizzed through the air, and one struck

him low on the hip. Learchus staggered, feeling the heat of the impact burning his skin, but kept running. 'Cover fire!' he yelled.

Issam broke from behind the fallen columns of rock and unleashed a hail of shots at the approaching skimmer. It broke off its attack run and heeled over as it pulled away from the lethal volley. The tightness of the turn bled speed, and the wounded Parmian fired his bolt pistol one-handed at the vehicle's exposed underside. The shot penetrated the lighter armour of its fuselage, and exploded upwards through the pilot's body, exiting in a spray of bone from his chest.

The co-pilot of the skimmer Learchus had brought down was free of his harness, but it was too late for escape. Learchus wrapped a hand around the tau's neck and dragged him from the vehicle. With the bare minimum of effort, he crushed the alien's neck and dropped him to the ground.

The second skimmer came down with a jolt, but surviving the death of his comrade only delayed the co-pilot's demise by moments. The alien expertly disembarked from the skimmer, and drew his sidearm, but it was a futile act of defiance. Issam put two expertly aimed shots through his chest, and he fell back.

Learchus let out a long shuddering breath as Issam jogged over to him, his bolter cradled close to his chest. Parmian followed him, and the last surviving scout, Daxian, formed up on their sergeant.

The battle had lasted seconds at most, but it felt like longer.

'We were lucky,' said Learchus. 'If they had come with the proper amount of force we would be dead.'

'This is simply a reprieve,' said Issam. 'These scouts will be missed soon, and future hunters will not come so ill-prepared.'

Learchus turned his gaze to the south, to where lines of smoke and a haze of energy hung over the horizon. The gleam of the port city's towers was so close that he felt he could reach out and touch them.

'Praxedes is only three or four kilometres away,' he said. 'It is so close.'

'It might as well be on Macragge for all we can get near it,' said Parmian, pointing to where the sunlight glinted on what looked like leafless ceramic trees in the distance. 'There are ring upon ring of drone sentry towers guarding every approach, and our camo-capes won't fool them.'

Learchus looked down at the corpse of the tau co-pilot at his feet. Then he looked at the skimmer vehicle. An idea began to form in his mind.

'You are correct, Parmian,' said Learchus. 'We cannot get through as Space Marines, but the onboard systems of these skimmers are no doubt equipped with the correct identity codes to pass between the sentry towers unharmed.'

Parmian frowned. 'But how can you retrieve the codes? You don't know how these machines work.'

Learchus dropped to his knees and removed the tau warrior's helmet. The alien's features were twisted with the pain of his last moments of life. Learchus turned the head onto its side and took the combat blade a grim-faced Issam handed him.

He placed the long, serrated edge against the skin of the tau's temple and began sawing.

'Not yet I don't,' he said.

KOUDELKAR SHONAI POURED another glass of the warm tisane from the plain cylindrical pot his tau facilitator had provided him with that morning. The drink was sweet and had a deliciously fragrant aftertaste, about as far removed from the bitter taste of caffeine as it was possible to get. He set the pot down on a round tray, and settled back in the contoured plastic of his chair to read.

Like everything in his quarters, from the bed to the ablutions cubicle, the chair was simply and functionally designed, moulding its form to match his seated posture. It provided comfort that the most gifted human ergonomic designers could only dream of producing.

Koudelkar sipped his drink and returned to the device he had been studying all morning.

It was a flat rectangular plate, not unlike an Imperial data-slate, though it was far lighter and didn't keep shorting out every ten minutes. A wonderfully crisp display projected picter images of people at work and at play. They were ordinary men and women, and though there was nothing special about what they were doing, where they were doing it was quite remarkable.

Everyone in the moving images inhabited wondrous cities of clean lines, artfully designed boulevards, parks of vibrant green and russet brown, all set amid gleaming spires of silver and white. Aun'rai had told him that this was Tau, cardinal world of the empire and birthplace of the tau race. To see human beings in such a place was incredible, and although Koudelkar knew that images could be manipulated, this felt real and had a ring of truth to it that he felt was totally genuine.

Every man, woman or child in the films was dressed in more or less identical clothing that bore various insignia of the tau empire. Koudelkar had heard the rumours of defections to the tau empire; such stories were told in hushed whispers, for to entertain any notion of aliens as anything other than vile, baby-eating filth was punishable by death.

Everything Koudelkar had seen since his capture gave the lie to the idea of the tau as murderous aliens hostile to humanity. He had been treated with

nothing but courtesy since his arrival, and his daily discussions of the Tau'va, the Greater Good, with Aun'rai had been most illuminating.

Each morning, Aun'rai would join Koudelkar in his quarters and they would speak of the tau, the Imperium and a hundred other topics. Much to his surprise, Koudelkar had warmed to the tau ambassador, discovering that they had much in common.

'The Greater Good is a fine idea in theory,' Koudelkar had said upon first hearing Aun'rai talk of it, 'but surely unworkable in practice?'

'Not at all,' said Aun'rai with a soft shake of his head.

'Surely selfish desires, individual wants and the like would get in the way.'

'They did once,' said Aun'rai, 'and it almost destroyed our race.'

'I don't understand.'

'I know you do not,' Aun'rai had said. 'So let me tell you of my race and how we came to embrace the Greater Good.'

Aun'rai had placed his staffs of office beside him and wove his hands together as he began to speak, his voice soft and melodic, laced with a wistful melancholy.

'When my race took its first steps, we were like humanity: barbarous, petty, and given to greedy and hedonistic impulses. Our society had branched into a number of tribes, what you might call castes, each with its own customs, laws and beliefs.'

'I'd heard that,' said Koudelkar, 'four castes, like the elements; fire, water and suchlike.'

Aun'rai smiled, though there was something behind the expression Koudelkar could not divine. Irritation or sadness, he couldn't tell.

'Those are labels humans have applied to us,' said Aun'rai at last. 'The true meanings of our caste names carry much complexity and subtle inferences lost in such prosaic terms.'

'I'm sorry,' said Koudelkar. 'It's what I've been told.'

'That does not surprise me. Humans have a need for definition, for yourselves and for the world around you. You struggle with concepts that do not easily sit within defined boxes. I know something of your race's history, and with everything I learn of you, I grow ever more thankful for the Greater Good.'

'Why?'

'Because without it, my race would be just like yours.'

'In what way?'

Aun'rai raised a hand. 'Listen well and you will learn why we are not so different, Koudelkar.'

'Sorry,' said Koudelkar, 'you were speaking of the castes.'

Aun'rai nodded and continued. 'The tau of the mountains soared on the air, while the plains dwellers became hunters and warriors of great skill. Others built great cities and raised high monuments to their craft, while those without such skills brokered trade between the different groups. For a time, we prospered, but as time passed and our race grew more numerous, the various tribes began to fight one another. We called this time the Mont'au, which in your language means the Terror.'

Aun'rai shuddered at the memory, though Koudelkar knew he could not have been there to see any of this. 'The plains dwellers allied with the tau of the mountains and took to raiding the settlements of the builders. Skirmishes became battles, battles became wars, and soon the tau race was tearing itself apart. The builders had long known how to fashion firearms, and the traders had sold them to almost all of the tribes. The bloodshed was appalling, and I weep to think of those days.'

'You're right, that does sound familiar.'

'We were on the verge of destruction. Our species was sliding towards a self-engineered extermination when we were saved on the mountain plateau of Fio'taun. An army of the air and fire castes had destroyed vast swathes of the land, and now laid siege to the mightiest city of the earth caste, the last bastion of freedom on Tau. For five seasons, the city held against the attacks until, at last, it was on the verge of defeat. This was the night the first of the Ethereals came.'

'The who?'

'I have not the words in this language to convey the true meaning of the concept, but suffice to say that these farsighted individuals were the most singular tau ever to walk amongst my people. All through the night, they spoke of what might be achieved if the skills and labours of all castes could be harnessed and directed towards the betterment of the race. By morning's light, they had brokered a lasting peace between the armies.'

'They must have been some speakers,' observed Koudelkar, 'to halt a war like that so quickly. How did they do it?'

'They spoke with an acuity that cut through the decades of bloodshed and hatred. They showed my people the inevitable result of continued war: species doom and a slow, moribund slide into extinction. None who heard them speak that night could doubt the truth of their words, and as more of the Ethereals began to emerge, the philosophy of the Greater Good was carried to every corner of the world.'

'And that was it?' asked Koudelkar. 'It just seems, well, a little too… easy.'

'We had a choice,' said Aun'rai, 'to live or die. In that respect, I suppose it was

an easy decision to make. Your race has yet to face that moment, but in that one night, my people saw the truth of the Ethereals' words with total clarity. Almost overnight our society was changed from one of selfish individualism to one where everyone contributes towards our continued prosperity. Everyone is valued and everyone is honoured, for they work towards something greater than they could ever achieve alone. Does that not sound like what happened when your Emperor emerged and took the reins of humanity? Did he not attempt to steer your race's path from destruction to enlightenment? That he failed in no way diminishes the nobility of his intent. What he tried to do is what the tau have managed to do. Now, does that not sound worthwhile, my friend?'

'Put like that, I suppose it does,' agreed Koudelkar, 'and it really works?'

'It really does,' said Aun'rai, 'and you could be part of it.'

'I could?'

'Of course,' said Aun'rai. 'The Greater Good is open to all who embrace it.'

That thought was uppermost in Koudelkar's mind as he set the display unit down and sipped his tisane. The idea of renouncing the Imperium sent a chill down his spine and made his hands tingle. Men had suffered the torments of the damned in the dungeons of the Arbites for far less, and Koudelkar's mind recoiled from the thought, even as he relished the idea of a society where he was not constrained by petty bureaucrats and restrictive legislation: a society where he was valued for his contribution, not held back from advancing a better world for his people.

His good mood evaporated as the door to his quarters slid open and Lortuen Perjed entered. The adept wore a serious expression, and Koudelkar crossed his legs and folded his hands in his lap as he waited for him to speak.

'Good afternoon, Lortuen,' he said.

'I'll keep this brief,' said Lortuen.

'That will be a refreshing change,' replied Koudelkar.

Lortuen frowned, but pressed on. 'I have news of the progress of the war, and we need to talk about fighting the tau. The men are ready and we have a plan.'

Koudelkar sighed. 'Not this again. I told you before that you were wasting your time. There's nothing we can do, we cannot escape.'

'And I told you that it is not about escape. Damn it, Koudelkar, you have to listen to me!'

'No,' said Koudelkar, 'I don't. My eyes are open now, and I think I misjudged the tau. As matter of fact, I think we all did.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I mean that for all your fine talk of the Imperium, it is clear to me that it is a corrupt institution that no longer even remembers why it was created or the

ideals for which it once stood.'

'You have gone mad,' said Lortuen. 'It's that Aun'rai! Every day he fills your head with lies. And you're falling for them.'

'Lies?' said Koudelkar. 'You were the one that told me the Imperium would not mourn our passing. We are already dead men, Lortuen, so what does it matter what we do?'

'It matters even more, Koudelkar,' said Lortuen. 'If we can abandon our beliefs in the face of adversity, then they're not beliefs at all. Now, more than ever, we have to fight these degenerate xenos!'

'I will tell you what is degenerate,' snapped Koudelkar, surging from his seat. 'Even as we face enemies from all sides, our race still fights amongst its own kind. We are told that the galaxy is a hostile place, and everywhere we turn there are foes, but does this unite us or bring us together? No, for we are so self-absorbed that we forget what it is to belong to something greater. Mykola was right, she knew that—'

'Mykola is dead,' said Lortuen.

Koudelkar felt like he'd been punched in the gut. He sank back into his chair and struggled to think of what to say. 'What? How do you know?'

'The same drop-ship that brought Aun'rai back also brought Jenna Sharben in.'

'The enforcer chief?'

'Yes. She was badly hurt, but the tau have treated her wounds and she's conscious again. She told me what happened.'

'Does my mother know?'

'No, I thought it would be best coming from you.'

Koudelkar nodded absently. 'How did my aunt die?'

'Does it matter?' asked Lortuen. 'She is dead. She paid the price for her treachery.'

'Tell me how she died,' demanded Koudelkar. 'I will find out, so you might as well tell me now.'

Lortuen sighed. 'Very well. She died in the Glasshouse. Prelate Culla beat her to death to learn what information she had given the tau.'

'Culla murdered her? I knew that bastard was insane!'

'If it's any consolation, Culla's probably dead too,' said Lortuen. 'The tau killed him before they escaped from the prison.'

'The Imperium killed Mykola,' said Koudelkar with an awful finality.

'No, her choices killed her,' said Lortuen.

'Get out!' roared Koudelkar. 'Get out and never speak to me again. I will have nothing more to do with you or your petty plans of resistance, and I will have

nothing more to do with the Imperium!'

'That's the grief talking,' said Lortuen. 'You don't mean that.'

'I mean every word of it, Perjed!' shouted Koudelkar. 'I spit on the Imperium, and I curse the Emperor to the warp!'

EIGHTEEN

THUNDEROUS EXPLOSIONS LIT up the dawn as the charges placed by the combat engineers went off one after the other in quick succession. Throughout the night, the centre spans and supports built into the gorges of the Aquila, Owsen, Spur and Diacrian Bridges had been rigged for destruction, and as sunlight threw the defenders' shadows out before them, the word was given to destroy the crossings.

The bridges had stood for hundreds of years, though there was little sense of history to them. They had not the pedigree of the Imperator, and the lost secrets built into its structure that made it virtually indestructible had no part in the construction of those around it.

Rock blew out as gigantic stone corbels were destroyed, and the supports built deep into the walls of the gorges blasted free. Spars of metal that had not seen sunlight for centuries tumbled to the rivers far below, trailing tank-sized chunks of reinforced plascrete and rebars.

The Owsen Bridge was the first to fall, the eastern end giving way and tearing from the rock. The roadway crazed and buckled as the metal beneath snapped, and the immense weight of it all ripped the supports from its other end. Within moments, the entire span was tumbling into the river. The Aquila soon followed it, its structure twisted and blackened by the explosions. When the dust cleared, the engineers saw that the thoroughness of their labours had not been wasted. Nothing remained of either bridge, and the route across the gorges through Barrack Town had been obliterated.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said of the charges laid upon the Diacrian and Spur Bridges. As the echoes of the northern bridges' destruction faded, it was clear that something had gone terribly wrong with the demolition of the southern bridges.

The correct rites of destruction were observed, the proper sequence of buttons pressed and levers pulled, but none of the charges positioned to destroy the crossings detonated. Frantic vox-traffic passed back and forth between the engineers and force commanders as each diagnostic test insisted that every charge was primed, the detonators were functional and the signal strength was optimal.

Even as the engineers and tech-priests struggled to divine what had gone wrong, the tau surged forwards and seized the western end of the Diacrian

Bridge.

FOLLOWED BY THE warriors of squad Ventris, Uriel leapt from the assault ramp of Spear of Calth, the Land Raider that had carried Marneus Calgar into battle during the final storming of Corinth. Behind him, the smoke from the destruction of the northern bridges was blowing south, and a layer of dust coated everything from the roofs and sills of leaning hab-blocks to the roadway that led onto the Spur Bridge.

Shouting units of PDF scrambled to deploy from battered Chimeras as Colonel Loic positioned his men to hold the end of the bridge. Captain Gerber's Lavrentians were already in place, fire-teams setting up heavy weapons to repulse the assault that was sure to come.

Ultramarines debussed from their Rhinos, and moved into positions covering the approaches without needing any orders. Uriel climbed onto the parapet wall of the Imperator, and looked out over the gorge between the Midden and the southern edge of Tradetown. Information on the current state of battle was scarce, and the defenders needed to know what the tau were planning, although it wasn't hard to guess how the alien commander would exploit this shift in his army's favour.

The Midden was wreathed in flames and smoke, and the air crackled with what looked like miniature fireworks detonating every few seconds. Uriel had no idea what they were, but suspected the defenders would find out all too soon. From his vantage point on the parapet, he could see lancing beams of blue light stabbing out from the ruins at the northern edge of the Midden. Explosions rippled from Tradetown where those beams connected with targets.

From the location of the detonations, Uriel guessed the Imperial artillery positions were being attacked. Somehow, the tau had managed to deploy heavy weapons into the Midden without alerting the defenders, and the guns covering the approach to the Spur Bridge were being taken out.

Uriel dropped from the parapet and ran over to the PDF colonel. 'What have you got?'

Loic looked up, and the relief in his eyes at the sight of Uriel was plain.

'Tau tanks and infantry moving across the Diacrian Bridge. Lots of them.'

'How many?' pressed Uriel. 'And be more specific than "lots".'

'Hard to tell,' said Loic. 'Lots is the best I can do. Something's playing merry hell with our augurs and surveyor gear. The tech-priests say it's most likely some xenotech interference.'

'We don't have any eyes on the ground over there,' cursed Uriel. 'The

Basilisks and Griffons are being taken out, so this will be an all-out assault.'

Captain Gerber emerged from a knot of Lavrentian soldiers, his helmet jammed in the crook of his arm as he wiped a dirty rag over his forehead. Commissar Vogel came with him, his uniform jacket dirty and torn.

'Damn pioneers,' said Gerber by way of a greeting. 'Why the hell didn't the charges blow?'

'I don't know, captain,' said Uriel, 'I suspect the same xenotech blocking Colonel Loic's surveyors prevented the charges from blowing.'

'But why just here? Why not the Aquila and Owsen bridges too? Doesn't make sense.'

'Who knows,' said Uriel. 'Perhaps their technology could not prevent all the bridges from being destroyed? In any case, the southern bridges are the ones that really matter.'

'True,' noted Gerber. 'We won't hold them long if they make a push along both bridges.'

'We'll damn well hold them here,' promised Loic.

'No we won't,' snapped Gerber. 'With this force, we can hold the end of the Spur for a time, but now that we're forced to fight on two fronts, it will probably be a very short time.'

'There's that defeatism again, captain,' said Vogel. 'It is becoming a habit.'

'Call it defeatism if you like, Vogel, and just shoot me,' responded Gerber, 'but Captain Ventris knows I'm right, don't you?'

'I am afraid Captain Gerber is correct,' said Uriel. 'A determined enemy will soon force us back, and the tau have shown themselves to be very determined.'

'Then what do you suggest?' demanded Vogel.

'Pull your men further back down the Imperator,' said Uriel. 'The Ultramarines will hold the bridge approaches until you are in position.'

'I thought you had someplace else to be,' said Gerber.

'We do, but it will avail us nothing if Olzetyn falls now,' replied Uriel. 'We will push the tau back, and then pull back to join you. Then your artillery will execute Fire Plan Eversor.'

'Eversor?' said Gerber. 'You can't be serious?'

'Deadly serious,' said Uriel.

FLAMES LICKED AT the clouds as Tradetown burned. Tau guns in the Midden pounded the Imperial positions, taking out any tank or artillery piece that dared unmask itself in a searing blast of blue fire. What had once been an unassailable position from which to rain down fire and ruin upon the tau was now a killing

zone for alien gunners. Tau drones buzzed over the town, and Uriel just hoped the Lavrentian artillerymen were as good as Gerber claimed. There would be precious little room for error in the execution of Fire Plan Eversor.

The world was bathed in a hellish orange glow from the firestorm raging through the cratered eastern districts of Tradetown, and gritty ash blew in from the north.

Uriel felt as though Pavonis itself was ablaze.

He smiled grimly, hoping the tau were thinking the same.

The Ultramarines set off down the Spur Bridge at a rapid jog. The quicker they threw the enemy back the better.

The voice of Sergeant Aktis, leader of one of the 4th's Devastator squads, sounded in Uriel's helmet. 'Possible targets ahead. Two hundred metres from your position.'

Uriel acknowledged the warning, and his fighting squads fanned out.

Squads Theron, Lykon and Nestor swept out in an echelon to the left, with Dardanus, Sabas and Protus taking the right. Squad Ventris held the centre. Clausel stood with Sergeant Protus, and Uriel saw the pride in the posture of his squad at the Chaplain's presence.

The Ultramarines advanced with slow, steady strides. Bolters held before them, they marched in serried ranks of shimmering blue ceramite. The firelight glinted on the polished blue plates of their armour, and Uriel's green cloak billowed behind him in the hot air that swept over the bridge.

Uriel scanned the cratered and debris-choked length of the bridge. If Aktis was right, then the tau were almost on top of them.

'I don't see anything,' he said. 'Confirm enemy sighting, Aktis.'

'Possible false positive, captain,' said Aktis, an edge of self-reproach to his voice. 'The auspex picked up a reading, but I have no confirmation as yet.'

'But you think there is something there?'

Aktis hesitated. 'I believe so, but I can offer no corroboration, captain.'

'Understood,' said Uriel. Aktis was a good, steady leader of heavy gunners and if he suspected the enemy was close by, then that was good enough for Uriel. 'All squads, be advised of possible hostiles at close range to our front.'

No sooner was the warning articulated than a hail of shots ripped from the smoke and tore through Squad Theron. Two warriors went down, but both climbed to their feet as their squad-mates found cover. Chattering heavy bolter-fire from the covering Devastators slashed down the length of the bridge, which was closely followed by lascannon shots and missiles.

Uriel dived into the shelter of a smoking crater, rising to his knees at its forward lip. He scanned the ground before him, switching from one vision mode

to the next as he tried to spot the tau. He saw nothing definite, just blurred disturbances in the smoke that seemed to bend the light around them.

'Stealth teams!' he shouted, raising his bolter to his shoulder. Even knowing what to look for, it was hard to draw a bead on the armoured tau. Just as he thought he had a fix on one, it would vanish or blur to the point where he might as well be firing blind.

Distance was the enemy in this engagement, and Uriel knew there was only one way to drive the tau from the bridge.

'All squads tactical assault!' he ordered. 'On me!'

The Devastators' covering fire ceased as Uriel scrambled from the crater and led his warriors forwards at battle pace. The Ultramarines' advance into combat was swift and sure, faster than a jog, yet slower than a run. It enabled a warrior to cover vast distances without tiring, and allowed him to close with enemy forces quickly while still shooting accurately. Where the Space Wolves charged with the fury of the berserker, and the Imperial Fists fought with a meticulously orchestrated precision, the Ultramarines took the fight to the enemy efficiently and directly.

As Uriel led his squads into battle, he heard the triggering of jump packs. Swooshing blurs of blue armour arced overhead as Squad Protus led the assault. At the forefront of Protus was Chaplain Clausel, a battle prayer bellowing from his helmet augmitters.

More gunfire snapped from the haze ahead, and Uriel saw more of the blurred silhouettes. He returned a hail of shots towards the closest, and one of the light-refracting shapes fell back, its armour punctured by the mass-reactive shells. As it fell, the concealing technology failed, and Uriel saw the tau warrior clearly.

Broader than a Space Marine, yet bulbous and with an insect-like carapace, the stealth battlesuits were unmistakably alien in their design. They carried long-barrelled rotary cannons on one arm and moved in almost complete silence.

The tau guns opened fire, a roaring burst of shots that tore into the ranks of the Ultramarines. An answering volley ripped into the tau, and for a few brief seconds the space between the two foes was filled with flying metal. A withering storm of gunfire shot back and forth, a no-man's-land where any but the most heavily armoured would perish in a second.

Uriel felt a trio of impacts, two on the chest and one on the shoulder. None penetrated the layered ceramite of his armour and he gave silent thanks to the soul of Brother Amadon for keeping him safe. The distance between the two forces was closing, and Uriel slung his bolter before drawing the sword of Idaeus. This was a chance to hone the skills he would need for the final part of his plan.

The Ultramarines fired a last volley, and the two forces clashed in a clatter of armour plates, short range gunfire and slashing blades. The assault warriors of Protus were first into the fight, dropping from above like a lightning strike. They hit like a hammer of the gods, unstoppable and invincible, their warriors fighting with the same implacable fervour of Chaplain Clausel.

A tau warrior stepped towards Uriel, its gun spinning up to fire. He dived forwards and rolled upright, slashing his sword in a sweeping arc as he rose to his feet. The blade clove through the bulbous carapace of a tau warrior, and Uriel relished the powerful surge of strength-enhancing stimms injected into his bloodstream. The enemy warrior dropped, and Uriel spun on his heel to hack the legs from another. This close, the tau stealth technology was useless, and Uriel pushed deeper into their ranks, his sword a blur of silver and gold.

As unequal a struggle as it was, the tau were warriors of courage and strength, and several Ultramarines were shredded by close-range cannon fire or clubbed to the ground by augmented limbs. Another tau fell before Uriel's blade, and the noose of the Ultramarines closed in on the surviving stealth warriors.

As the fighting continued, a towering mushroom cloud of fire and smoke suddenly erupted at the western edge of the Imperator. Seconds later, a thunderous booming explosion rolled over the landscape, and Uriel knew the bombs in the armoury of the western bastions had finally blown. While Uriel and the Ultramarines had advanced down the Spur Bridge, Lavrentian combat pioneers had been setting powerful explosives in the magazines of the Aquila and Imperator bastions.

Even from a distance of several kilometres, the collapse of the bastions was a spectacular sight, the cyclopean blocks of masonry tumbling down as though in slow motion. Anything unfortunate enough to be in the immediate vicinity of the bastions would be utterly destroyed, and though Uriel regretted their destruction, he knew there had been no choice. As though in reverence for the demise of so mighty a fortification, both forces paused in the struggle to watch their spectacular ending.

In the moment's respite, Uriel looked down the bridge, and he knew that this fight was over.

The tau were pushing out from the Midden and onto the Spur Bridge in force. A picket line of scout skimmers darted ahead of a wedge of Devilfish that were closely followed by a host of Hammerheads and Sky Rays.

'Chaplain!' called Uriel.

'I see them,' confirmed Clausel. 'Time to go?'

Uriel looked back at the smouldering ruins of the two bastions, and nodded. 'Time to go,' he said.

CAPTAIN MEDERIC AND his six-strong squad of Hounds dropped into a crater and pressed their backs against the forward slope. Lavrentian tanks in staggered formation boomed and roared to either side of them, firing into the hills where the sleek forms of tau armoured vehicles pressed home their assault.

This latest engagement was fought in the ruins of what must have once been an impressive estate. Ruined marble walls and stubs of fluted columns were all that remained, and soon even they would be crushed or blown apart by shellfire. Hundreds of hastily dug-in Guardsmen fired from the ruins in a bid to stall the latest tau attack. Somewhere behind him, a Lavrentian tank exploded, but Mederic couldn't see which one or what had killed it.

'Kaynon, watch our backs!' shouted Mederic over the din of battle cannon and heavy bolter-fire. 'I don't want to get rolled over by our own bloody vehicles!'

'Aye, sir,' called back the youngster. The fighting retreat through the Owsen Hills had made a man of Kaynon, and if they survived this battle, Mederic would see to it that the boy's courage was recognised.

'Reload!' he shouted. 'They're all over us, and I don't want anyone with an empty mag.'

The order was unnecessary, for the Hounds knew their trade and were already refreshing their power cartridges. Mederic slammed his power cell home, checking he had a full load before crawling to the lip of the crater.

The fight to halt the left hook of the tau advance was amongst the bloodiest and yet most clinical actions the 44th had fought in recent memory. Such was the strength of the tau forces that halting them was impossible, but the 44th were leaving nothing but ashes and blasted wasteland in their wake. Day after day, the tau pushed forwards, their advance relentless and coldly efficient in the face of the 44th's guns. Without the savagery of the greenskin or the terror of the devourer swarms, it gave the Lavrentians nothing to latch onto emotionally.

All Mederic saw in the faces around him was sterile dread, the fear that at any moment an unseen missile might end dreams of glory and service. The tau made war with such precision that it left precious little room for notions of honour or courage. To the tau, war was a science like any other: precise, empirical and a matter of cause and effect.

Mederic knew that was the fatal flaw in their reasoning, because war was never predictable. Unknown variables and random chance all played their part, and it was a foolish commander who fought with the belief he could foresee every eventuality.

A vast shadow eclipsed Mederic, and he looked up to see the skirts of an enormous armoured vehicle grind past their fragile cover. He smiled as he saw Meat Grinder crudely scrawled on the vehicle's skirts, and knew it was Lord

Winterbourne and Father Time.

A searing beam of energy slammed into the scarred glacis of the Baneblade, but so thick was the super-heavy tank's armour that it left barely a mark. Father Time's cannons roared in reply and an enemy tank exploded, pulverised by the mass of the enormous shell as much as the explosives.

'Support fire!' shouted Mederic, and his scouts joined him on the lip of the crater. Lethally accurate sniper-fire picked off tau squad leaders darting through the smoke, while Duken's missiles lanced out to disable enemy vehicles with relentless precision. It was risky, staying to shoot from one location, but settling smoke from the Baneblade's guns was helping to conceal their exact location. In any case, displacing in the middle of a tank battle was a sure-fire way to get crushed beneath sixty tonnes of metal.

Lord Winterbourne's command vehicle continued to wreak havoc amongst the tau armour, reaping a fearsome number of kills, while withstanding countless impacts that would have reduced most tanks to molten slag. Wherever Father Time fought, the tau advance would falter, and this latest engagement looked like being no exception.

Then Mederic heard a sound that chilled him to the bone, a high, ululating, squawking sound that could mean only one thing.

Kroot.

He looked up to see a host of the pink-skinned creatures crawling over Father Time. The kroot carried a device that Mederic knew was a bomb even before they bent to fix it to the honour-inscribed turret ring of Lord Winterbourne's Baneblade.

'Targets right!' he yelled, swinging his rifle to bear. His first shot punched one of the kroot from Father Time's upper deck, his second blew the arm off the creature attempting to affix the explosive charge.

Las-bolts whickered around the huge tank as the Hounds turned their fire upon it. A pair of kroot fell from the vehicle, though Mederic saw others taking cover behind the enormous turret. It felt unnatural and faintly heretical to be shooting at an Imperial tank, but Mederic knew they could not possibly do any damage to it.

'Unless we hit the charge…' he whispered, seeing a shot ricochet from the turret ring, no more than a few inches from the explosive device. Without thinking, Mederic pushed himself to his feet and ran towards Father Time, clambering up the rear crew ladder inset on the cliff-like sides of the Baneblade.

The Baneblade's turret was in motion, the autocannon blazing a stream of large-calibre shells at the enemy. Heavy bolter shells streamed from the guns mounted on the tank's frontal section, and Mederic tried not to think of how

insanely dangerous it was to climb onto a moving, fighting tank.

A solid round spanked the metal beside him, and he threw himself onto the deck of the Baneblade. Something moved beside him and he rolled onto his back, firing his rifle. A kroot warrior fell back with its chest blown out, and Mederic scrambled to his feet as another alien fighter reared over him. A las-bolt from his right blew out the back of the kroot's head.

His Hounds were watching over him.

Keeping low, Mederic made his way towards the tau device, keeping clear of the discharging flares of actinic energy crackling around the one remaining lascannon sponson. He knelt by the turret, a hundred battles and campaign honours inscribed there in gold lettering. Mederic slung his rifle over his shoulder, and examined the device the kroot had fastened to the turret. The bomb was oblong, about the size of a fully-loaded Guardsman's pack, and Mederic had no doubt it would end Father Time's contribution to this battle. With no time for anything sophisticated, Mederic simply took hold of the device and hauled with all his might.

It didn't move so much as a millimetre.

Whatever technology held the bomb to the Baneblade was beyond his strength to defeat. 'Step away from the bomb, captain,' said a voice behind him.

Mederic turned to see a tall, hideously disfigured preacher in the black robes of a Mortifex standing above him on Father Time's rear deck. The man's face was burned, blackened and scarred with embedded fragments of coloured glass. Mederic had heard of the wounded preacher that had joined the fighting men of the 44th after the battle of Brandon Gate, but he had never laid eyes on him until now.

Campfire scuttlebutt had it that it was Gaetan Baltazar, the former Clericus Fabricae, but such was the horror of his injuries and permanent grimace of agony that it was impossible to tell who this wild-eyed preacher had once been. How could anyone have survived such dreadful wounds?

The Mortifex bore a giant eviscerator, the roaring blade throwing off smoke and sparks.

'Oh hell,' hissed Mederic as he realised what the Mortifex was about to do.

He rolled aside as the blade came down. Flaring light spilled from the device, but to Mederic's amazement it didn't explode. The tearing teeth of the eviscerator easily ripped through the metal and ceramic of the device until it fell from the turret ring in two halves.

He let out a shuddering breath as the Mortifex lowered his smoking blade.

'And so the workings of the foes of mankind shall be rendered unto dust and memory,' said the preacher.

'Holy crap,' hissed Mederic, staring at the pile of inert material that was all that remained of the bomb. 'How the hell did you know it wasn't going to go off when you did that?'

'I did not,' said the Mortifex through a mouth burned lipless. 'In truth I did not care.'

'Well *I* bloody care, and I won't have some madman taking me with him,' said Mederic. 'So just keep the hell away from—'

Mederic's words were cut off as a hand-span of serrated steel erupted from the Mortifex's chest. Blood squirted, and, as the long blade tore out the preacher's heart in a flood of crimson, Mederic saw the man's expression change from one of agony to one of peace.

'My life is a prison and death shall be my release,' said the Mortifex as he toppled from Father Time's deck. Mederic didn't watch the Mortifex fall.

His attention was fixed on the monstrous kroot with vivid red quills that had killed him.

ENERGY BLASTS HISSED past Uriel's head as he backed onto the ruined thoroughfare of the Imperator towards the collapsed buildings where their transport vehicles awaited them. His bolter kicked in his grip, and as each magazine clicked empty, he smoothly replaced it without taking his eyes from the approaching tau. Flames licked at the plates of his armour from fires the debris from the flaming bastions had touched off. Once again he gave thanks to the ancient builders of the bridge that they had thought to make it so strong.

The Ultramarines retreated in good order from the Spur Bridge, falling back by combat squads, firing into the tau as they went. Missiles streaked from launch tubes and lascannons pulverised anything that might serve the enemy as cover. The Space Marines were retreating, but they were leaving nothing but destruction behind them.

Missiles from the Lavrentian support teams further down the bridge slashed overhead, punching spiral contrails through the smoke. The blooms of their detonations echoed distantly down the span of the bridge.

Fire Warriors and battlesuits darted through the flames and smoke, firing at the retreating Ultramarines as they abandoned the crossing to the Midden, but their pursuit was half-hearted, and Uriel could sense their dismay at the devastation.

'This world will burn before we let you have it,' whispered Uriel as he looked around to ensure that all his warriors had escaped. Chaplain Clausel was to his right, his Crozius Arcanum held high while he bellowed the Battle Prayer of the

Righteous.

More rockets and gunfire filled the air above them, and Uriel heard the furious revving of engines over the destruction raging all around him. Brothers Speritas and Zethus, the company's Dreadnoughts, marched backwards along with their battle-brothers, the boom of their weapons punctuating the din of battle.

Uriel looked over his shoulder, seeing plumes of exhaust smoke billowing over the escarpment of a fallen hab structure.

'Fall back by squads to transports!' he ordered. 'Withdrawal pattern Sigma Evens.'

The Ultramarines moved smoothly into formation, Squads Theron, Lykon and Nestor taking up covering positions, while Dardanus, Sabas and Protus turned and ran for their previously designated lines of retreat. Punishing volleys of bolter-fire filled the ground before the Ultramarines with explosive death as more missiles arced overhead, curving up into the air before slashing down like hunting raptors to explode amongst their prey.

'Aktis, Boros, suppressive fire!'

As the order was given, the covering squads pulled back from their positions as a deafening crescendo of fire bloomed from the Devastator squads behind.

'Captain Gerber,' said Uriel, walking backwards alongside his warriors, 'commence Fire Plan Eversor.'

'Understood, Captain Ventris,' replied Gerber. 'Sending rounds down now.'

Uriel heard the solitary boom of a basilisk artillery piece, which was quickly followed by another and then another. Soon, the sound of the guns was a continuous, thudding drumbeat.

'Everyone back, now!' shouted Uriel, turning and running to where the 4th Company's vehicles awaited them. He leapt broken spars of adamantium and ducked down through a gap torn in an angled slab of rockcrete. Ahead, he could see four Rhinos and a pair of Land Raiders, their engines coughing exhaust smoke and their assault doors open. Space Marines clambered on board while the vehicles' auto-systems fired their machine-guided weapons down the length of the bridge.

Arcing streaks of dazzling light flashed overhead, and Uriel felt the first of the artillery shells detonate on the bridge behind him. Pounding hammer-blows struck the structure again and again, the percussive impacts shaking the very foundations of the bridge, until if felt as though the heavens themselves had fallen.

'Emperor bless you, Gerber!' cried Uriel as he saw that virtually every shell was landing exactly where it was needed. The Lavrentian gunners were

justifying their captain's faith in them.

Uriel stumbled and fell to his knees as the titanic forces pounded the Spur Bridge to ruins. The noise was deafening, even through the protective dampening of his armour's auto-senses. Those hab-blocks that had not already been destroyed in the fighting vanished in the searing detonations, whole districts wiped out in an instant as hundreds of shells landed on target. Nothing could live under such a thunderous bombardment, and the tau pursuit was annihilated in moments.

High explosives and incendiaries bathed the entire span of the bridge in a living typhoon of flames and debris. The point where the Spur and Imperator were joined suffered worst under the sustained bombardment, the steel connections of the newer bridge obliterated and tearing loose. Shells with armour piercing warheads penetrated deep into the roadway junction of the Imperator and Spur Bridges, before exploding with unimaginable force to leave thirty metre craters in their wake.

Following shells impacted in those craters, burrowing ever deeper and further weakening the connection, until the weight of the Spur Bridge completed the job begun by the barrage of explosives. Buckling and shearing under loads it was never built to endure, the Spur tore from the Imperator, falling away and twisting like wet paper.

Thousands of tonnes of stone and steel dropped into the gorge, and those few Fire Warriors that had survived the bombardment fell with it. Infantry and armour tumbled downwards, and, although a few skimmer tanks were able to control their descent, they were smashed to ruins by the crushing torrent of debris.

The route from the Midden onto the Imperator was utterly destroyed, and, as the last shells fell, little remained to indicate that there had ever been a bridge between them. Billowing clouds of dust and smoke rolled towards the Ultramarines position, and Uriel picked himself up as the cataclysmic echoes of the massed artillery bombardment faded.

Clausel awaited him by the forward ramp of the nearest Land Raider and waved him over. Uriel ran towards the Chaplain and hammered the door closing mechanism once he was inside.

The red-lit interior of the battle tank reeked of oils and incense smoke, and Uriel pressed a fist to the black and white cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus etched into the wall beside him.

'And the Emperor shall smite the iniquitous and the xenos from his sight,' said Clausel, slapping a palm on Uriel's shoulder-guard. The destruction of the Spur and the tau pursuit force had put the Chaplain in good spirits.

'With a little help from the hammer of the Imperial Guard,' said Uriel.

He opened a channel to Gerber once more. 'Captain, the Spur is down. Pass your compliments to your gunners, their fire was dead on.'

'Will do,' answered Gerber. 'We ran through damn near our entire stockpile of shells to lay down that barrage.'

'It will be worth it, I assure you, captain,' promised Uriel.

'It had better be,' said Gerber. 'When they come at us again, all we've got left to throw at them are rocks.'

'Understood,' said Uriel, 'but I do not believe it will come to that.'

Uriel shut of the vox and turned to Clausel. 'What news from Tiberius and the Vae Victus, admiral?'

'He can do as you ask,' said the Chaplain, his skull-faced helmet the very image of death, 'though it will be very dangerous. If we are delayed so much as a minute, we will miss our launch window.'

'Then we had best not be late,' said Uriel.

'And Learchus?' asked Clausel. 'Has he responded to your communication?'

'No,' said Uriel, 'but he might not be able to.'

'He might be dead.'

'That is possible, but if anyone can do what must be done, then it is Learchus.'

'There's truth in that,' agreed Clausel. 'You are sure this is the only way?'

'I am,' said Uriel. 'You said it yourself, Chaplain, this isn't our kind of fight.'

Clausel nodded, and Uriel saw that the prospect of taking the fight to the enemy appealed to the venerable warrior.

'We will show the tau exactly what kind of fight we were built for,' promised Uriel.

NINETEEN

THE RED-QUILLED KROOT lunged at Mederic with its knife outstretched, the Mortifex's blood whipping from the blade as it slashed for his neck. Instinctively, he threw up his rifle to block the blow. The knife, a sword more like, smashed into the stock of Mederic's weapon, and he fought to hold the creature at bay. The kroot's strength was incredible, and, with a savage twist of the blade, it wrenched the rifle from Mederic's grip.

He slid to one side, and the kroot's fist slammed down on Father Time's battle-scarred topside. He wondered if anyone inside knew of the life and death struggle being played out above them.

Mederic kicked out at the kroot, his boot connecting solidly with its shin. The beast went down on one knee, and Mederic seized the opportunity to push himself backwards along the upper deck of the Baneblade.

Father Time's main guns fired, and the crash of displaced air plunged Mederic into a world of silence as the deafening sound of the Baneblade's cannons reverberated in his skull.

He scrabbled for his knife, knowing it would probably do him no good, but finding reassurance in having the edged steel in his hand. A las-bolt flashed past the kroot, but the clouds of acrid propellant smoke obscured his Hound's aim.

Mederic got his feet beneath him, still dazed by the violence of the Baneblade's firing. The kroot loped towards him with its oddly spring-like gait. Its milky, pupilless eyes bored into him with an expression that Mederic couldn't read, but which looked like feral hunger.

The beast stood to its full height, which was at least a head higher than him, and the bulging cables of its muscles were taut and sharply defined. A bandolier, hung with all manner of grotesque trophies, was looped diagonally across its chest, and Mederic saw that human ears and eyes hung there on thin metal hooks. Its bright red crest seemed to pulse with an inner blood-beat, and a loathsomely moist tongue licked the toothy edge of its beaked maw.

The kroot took a step forwards, its quills flaring in challenge as it cocked its head to one side. It hammered the hilt of its knife against its chest, and said, 'Radkwaal.'

Mederic thought the sound was simply animal noise, but, as the creature repeated the word, he realised it was saying its name.

'Redquill?'

The creature nodded and screeched its name once again. 'Radkwaal!'

'Come on then, Redquill!' yelled Mederic, brandishing his combat knife. 'Come and get me if you want me!'

Redquill sprang forwards without apparent effort, and Mederic was almost gutted before he even knew he was under attack. More by luck than skill, he threw up his knife and deflected the kroot's blade. Sparks scraped from the knives, and Mederic doubled up as the kroot's fist slammed into his stomach. Knowing a killing stroke wouldn't be far behind, Mederic threw himself to the side. He landed on the Baneblade's co-axial mounted autocannon and spilled over it onto the track-guard beside the heavy bolter.

Heavy calibre shells pumped from the stubby barrels, each noise a harsh bang followed by the whoosh of a tiny rocket motor. Redquill vaulted the turret guns and landed lightly beside him, its blade slashing for his head.

Mederic deflected the blow, and twisted his knife around Redquill's, slicing the blade down the kroot's arm. The beast snapped back in pain, and Mederic didn't give it a second chance. He rolled over the bucking heavy bolter and slashed his blade at Redquill's guts. It was a poor strike, and it left him off-balance, but he was out of options.

Redquill's clawed hand snapped down on his wrist, Mederic's blade a hair's-breadth from burying itself in the kroot's belly. Redquill's knife stabbed towards him, and Mederic knew he couldn't block it. Instead, he gripped Redquill's bandolier and hauled the kroot towards him. Off-balance and perched precariously on the track-guard, the two fighters rolled over the heavy bolter's housing, and landed on the buckled metal of the enormous tank's leading edge.

Mederic hit hard, the weight of the kroot driving the breath from him and sending the combat knife tumbling away. Redquill reared up, holding its knife in two hands, ready to drive it down into Mederic's heart. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop it.

Then the heavy bolter fired again, and the top half of Redquill's body disintegrated.

Mederic was drenched in blood, spitting and coughing mouthfuls of the stuff as the shredded remains of the kroot war leader fell across him before slipping from the Baneblade.

He lay unmoving for some moments until he realised that the battle tank was no longer firing any of its guns. Slowly, he rolled onto his front, keeping clear of any of Father Time's myriad weapons systems and wiping as much of Redquill's blood from his face as he could.

Guardsmen were emerging from foxholes and ad-hoc dugouts, their faces bloody and grimy with las-burns. They were elated at having survived the latest

engagement. The hillsides were thick with smoke from burning vehicles and tau corpses. Mederic smiled in weary triumph. Once again, Father Time had steadied the line and held the tau at bay. Would that they had an army of Baneblades!

He heard the sound of a hatch opening behind him, and climbed to his feet, using the warm barrel of the demolisher cannon to pull his battered frame upright. Mederic turned and saluted a bemused Nathaniel Winterbourne, who stood tall in the turret.

'Is there some reason you're on my tank, captain?' asked Winterbourne.

Mederic laughed, an edge of hysteria to the sound. 'You'd never believe me,' he said.

THE COASTAL CITY of Praxedes was laid out before them, and Learchus could barely credit that they had reached their destination. To have come so far through enemy territory was nothing short of miraculous, tau territory even more so, but Learchus knew of no finer scouts in the Imperium than those of the Ultramarines.

Taking care to expose only a fraction of his head, Learchus scanned the enemy activity in the city below. He and his fellow warriors were concealed in a warehouse perched on the cliffs above the landing platforms, and, while Issam changed a field dressing on Parmian's arm, Daxian kept watch on the building's only entrance.

The cavernous structure was stacked high with crates stamped with tau markings, and the Ultramarines had been thorough in searching for anything of use. Most of the crates were filled with tau ration packs, none of which the Space Marines deigned to eat, though Issam found fresh dressings and sterile counterseptic to treat Parmian's wound.

The two skimmers they had taken from the Pathfinders lay in one corner, and Learchus tried to block the memory of how they had come to make use of them. Impossible, he knew, for the genetic imprint of the xenos warrior that had crewed it was now part of him.

Even after armour-administered emetics and purgatives, he could still feel nebulous alien emotions and thoughts scratching in his mind. The rank, oily taste and rubbery texture of the tau's brain was repulsive, but it held the information they needed to safely negotiate the drone sentry towers scattered around Praxedes. Learchus had been able to access that information, thanks to a highly specialised organ, implanted between the cervical and thoracic vertebrae, known as the omophagea.

Though situated within the spinal cord, the omophagea eventually meshed

with a Space Marine's brain and effectively allowed him to learn by eating. Nerve sheaths implanted between the spine and the preomnoral stomach wall allowed the omophagea to absorb genetic material generated in animal tissue as a function of memory, experience or innate ability.

Few Chapters of Space Marines could still successfully culture such a rarefied piece of biological hardware, but the Apothecaries of the Ultramarines maintained their battle-brothers' gene-seed legacy with the utmost care and purity. Mutations had crept into other Chapters' genetic repositories, resulting in unwholesome appetites and myriad flesh-eating and blood-drinking rituals. To think that he had indulged in flesh eating in the manner of barbarous Chapters like the Flesh Tearers and Blood Drinkers was abhorrent to Learchus, and he had confessed his fears to Issam as the moon rose on the night they reached Praxedes.

'We had no choice,' said Issam.

'I know,' said Learchus. 'That does not make it any easier to stomach.'

'When we get back to Macragge the Apothecaries will swap your blood out and cleanse it of any taint. You'll be yourself soon enough, don't worry.'

'I will not be tainted,' said Learchus angrily. 'I will not stand for it. Look what happened to Pasanius, stripped of rank and disbarred from the company for a hundred days!'

'Pasanius kept his… affliction from his superior officer,' said Issam. 'That is why he was punished. Listen to me, you need to be calm, brother.'

'Calm? How can I be calm?' cried Learchus. 'You are not the one who ate an alien brain.'

At first, he had thought the tau brain too alien, too far removed from humanity to allow him to absorb anything of value, but, within moments of swallowing his first bite of the moist chewy meat, Learchus had felt the first stirrings of the alien's thoughts. Not memories as such, but impressions and inherited understanding, as though he had always known the abhorrent things that crowded his mind.

Though he could not read the symbols on the control panel of the scout skimmers, Learchus had known their function and instinctively accessed the inner workings of their cogitators. The others had watched as he tentatively piloted the tau skimmer around the rocks, taking note of how to control it without crashing or activating unknown systems.

Within the hour, they had been on their way, travelling across the rocks towards Praxedes on the scout skimmers, and no sooner had they dropped down into a rocky canyon than a pair of the slender remote sentry towers confronted them. The drones telescoped upwards upon detecting them, but without thinking,

Learchus pressed a series of buttons on a side panel and the domed tops of the towers sank back into their housings.

The skimmers were swift, and the Ultramarines had soon reached the outskirts of the coastal city. The towers were more thickly gathered around Praxedes, but, armed with the correct access codes, the Ultramarines penetrated the screen of remote sentries and secreted themselves within the warehouse without alerting their enemies to their presence.

Issam joined him at the window, and Learchus acknowledged the sergeant with a curt nod of the head. Since eating the tau's brain, he had found himself needlessly prickly and prone to a sharpness of tongue. More so than usual, he reflected with uncharacteristic honesty.

'You should rest,' said the scout sergeant. 'You've been staring out of that window for nearly ten hours. Daxian or I can watch for enemy activity.'

'I cannot rest. Not now. Captain Ventris is depending on us.'

'I know, but he asks a lot of us,' said Issam. 'Perhaps more than we can give.'

'Do not say that. We are Ultramarines. Nothing is beyond us.'

'We are four warriors, Learchus,' pointed out Issam, 'and one of us is badly wounded.'

'With four warriors, Chapter Master Dacian took the pass at Gorgen against five hundred.'

'Aye, that he did,' agreed Issam. 'All 1st Company veterans in Terminator armour.'

'You do not think we can do it?'

Issam shrugged. 'As you say, we are Ultramarines. Anything is possible.'

Learchus grunted and turned his attention back to surveying the city below. He had seen little activity to suggest that Praxedes was anything other than a garrison town, which meant that most of the tau's strength was probably deployed in theatre. The presence of so many remote sensor towers around Praxedes seemed to support that conclusion. No matter the sophistication of automated surveyor gear, nothing could surpass eyes-on intelligence from a living being.

Learchus estimated the tau presence in Praxedes to be around five hundred infantry, with perhaps fifty battlesuits. He had seen a few Hammerheads parked in the shadow of the loader derricks clustered at the water's edge, but few other armoured vehicles. More importantly, a thousand or so Lavrentian Guardsmen were being held prisoner on one of the vacant landing platforms jutting out to sea.

That was the key, and if Uriel's plan was to work, Learchus and his warriors had to prepare the way by sowing confusion and mayhem. During a brief

communications window, Uriel had outlined his plan to Learchus in Battle Cant, impressing upon Learchus the importance of his part in its success. This was all or nothing, and though Uriel's plan was incredibly risky, Learchus could find no fault in his captain's reasoning in regards to the Codex Astartes.

Learchus and the scouts were in position, but with zero hour for the assault into Praxedes imminent, they could not report their readiness for fear of giving away their position once more.

'Look,' said Issam, nodding towards the prison facility. 'Is that who I think it is?'

Learchus followed the direction of Issam's nod, and smiled. 'Indeed it is. We might get to fulfil our original mission brief after all.'

His enhanced eyes easily picked out Governor Shonai, strolling through the prison in the company of a tau, robed in cream and red and gold. Learchus's expression darkened the more he watched the tau and Koudelkar Shonai. Their body language spoke of an easy rapport, like two old friends out for a morning constitutional.

'Who's the governor's companion?' asked Issam.

The tau all looked the same to Learchus, but this one had a hint of familiarity to his features.

'Guilliman's blood,' exclaimed Learchus as he realised the tau's identity. 'That's the bastard we captured at Lake Masura. How in the name of the warp did he get here? We stuck him in the Glasshouse with the enforcers!'

'However he did it, he must be important, judging by the number of guards he has.'

'Captain Ventris said he was one of their leader caste, a noble or something.'

'Most likely,' said Issam. 'What do you suppose he and the governor have to talk about?'

'I'll be sure to ask him before I break his damned neck,' said Learchus.

THE IMPERIAL COMMANDERS of Olzetyn gathered beneath the great triumphal arch at the eastern end of the Imperator Bridge. The destruction of the Spur Bridge had bought the Lavrentian Pioneers time to construct the eastern defences thoroughly, and they had not wasted the time the Ultramarines had bought them. Coils of razor wire, stoutly-walled redoubts and armoured bunkers were efficiently and cunningly constructed before the archway, a defence in depth that would exact a fearsome toll in attackers' blood.

A cold wind whipped along the length of the bridge and over the defences. In the bunker serving as the Imperial command post, Colonel Loic shivered in his

cream greatcoat as he poured himself a measure of Uskavar from a silver flask. The flask was emblazoned with the white rose of Pavonis, and had been a gift from the men under his command.

Emperor alone knew where they'd sourced such a thing in the midst of all this fighting, but wherever they had found it the gesture had touched him deeply.

'Chilly today,' he noted, offering the flask to Lieutenant Poldara.

Poldara was gracious enough to accept, and took a polite sip of the potent liquor. 'Thank you, colonel. If you are cold I can fetch you a cloak.'

'No need,' replied Loic. 'I expect the tau will make it hot enough for us in due course.'

The first time he had met Gerber's lieutenant, he remembered thinking that he looked absurdly young to be a soldier. The fighting at Olzetyn had changed that. Poldara now looked as weathered as any seasoned infantryman.

'War ages us,' said Loic, wondering how worn out he must look to the young lieutenant.

'Sir?'

'Nothing, don't mind me,' said Loic, realising he'd spoken aloud.

He was so tired he couldn't tell what he was saying.

He took a deep breath to gather his thoughts. The defence of Olzetyn was in its final stages, that much was obvious to everyone. All stratagems were exhausted, and all war-tricks had been employed. The Ultramarines were gone, and all that stood between the tau and Brandon Gate were the courageous soldiers of the Pavonis PDF and the Lavrentian Imperial Guard.

Watching the Space Marines embarking on their gunships, Loic had felt a dreadful sense of loss. He knew Uriel and his warriors had a vital, potentially war-winning mission to attempt, but he couldn't shake the feeling that, with their departure, something fundamental had been lost from the hearts of the defenders of Olzetyn.

He'd heard that a single Astartes warrior was worth a hundred mortal soldiers, but Loic knew their real worth could not be measured by simple arithmetic. Space Marines were inspirational figures, warriors that every man dug deep into his soul to emulate. Their courage and honour was immeasurable, and to fight with them was to fight with the gods of battle themselves.

It would be a shame to die without such companions at his side.

Loic shook off gloomy thoughts of death and returned his attention to the present. Captain Gerber and Commissar Vogel pored over a series of consoles embedded in the forward wall of the bunker, the screens illuminating them with a soft green glow. Both men were examining schematics of the defences, pointing at various features along the length of the ruined bridge.

Loic joined Gerber and Vogel at the sandbagged loopholes of the bunker.

'You're wasting your time,' he said. 'Everything that needs to be done is already done. Supplies are in place throughout our position. Caches of ammunition, food and water are set up, medicae triage stations are ready to receive wounded. All that's left to do now is wait.'

'There's always something left to do,' said Gerber, 'something we should anticipate.'

'Maybe so, but if there is I don't think it will make much of a difference.'

Loic took out the silver flask and offered it to his fellow officers. 'Uskavar? It's a good blend, nice and smooth, and I think we deserve it, eh?'

Gerber nodded. 'Might as well. We're on our own now, so where's the harm?'

'Commissar?'

Vogel accepted the flask and took a hit, his eyes widening at the strength of the drink.

'Told you it was a good blend,' said Loic, taking the flask back.

The three officers shared a companionable silence as they looked over the bridge. Many of the teetering structures were gone and the bridge was carpeted with ruins of hab-blocks and temples, battered down by tau missiles or pulverised by Imperial shelling.

'Any word from Captain Luzaine and Banner Command?'

'They're on the march from Jotusburg, but they won't get here for at least another six hours,' said Gerber.

'Too late for us then?'

'Except to avenge us,' said Gerber, and this time Vogel said nothing.

'Look!' said Gerber, pointing down the bridge. 'Here they come.'

At the far end of the bridge, Loic saw the sleek shapes of tau vehicles moving through the ruins. Devilfish and Hammerheads slid over the rubble of the destroyed habs, and Loic blanched at the sight of so many armoured vehicles. Battlesuits and darting Stingwings arced through the air above the host.

'Emperor's mercy,' whispered Vogel. 'There are so many.'

'Now who's being defeatist?' chuckled Gerber.

A line of light lit up the horizon as a hundred streaking missile launches painted the sky with bright contrails. Loic watched them arc upwards, as though on a ballistic trajectory.

'Incoming!' shouted Gerber as the missiles streaked down towards the defences.

Loic finished the last of the Uskavar.

'To victory,' he said.

URIEL AND CHAPLAIN Clausel stepped from the Thunderhawk and onto the steel-grille embarkation deck of the Vae Victus. Beside them, a long line of gunships growled as servitors and crew chained them to locking spars while ordnance officers rearmed them. Fuel lines were connected and lifter cranes swung out with fresh loads of missiles and shells for their guns. Flashing lights spun above recently closed airlocks, and the air was redolent with the actinic charge of integrity fields and void chill.

Admiral Tiberius was waiting for them, and clasped Uriel's hand in the warrior's grip.

The commander of the Vae Victus was a giant Space Marine of nearly four hundred years with skin the colour of dark leather. A golden laurel encircled a shaven scalp that bore scars earned during the Battle of Circe, and the moulded breastplate of his blue armour was adorned with a host of bronze honour badges.

'Uriel, Clausel,' said Tiberius, 'by the primarch, it's good to see you both.'

'And you, admiral, but we have no time to waste,' said Uriel, jogging towards the far end of the embarkation deck. 'Is everything prepared?'

'Of course,' said Tiberius, though Uriel already knew that the venerable admiral would not let him down. 'Now get your men locked in so we can launch. Those tau vessels are closing fast, and, if you're not gone inside of five minutes, you'll be looking for a new battle-barge for the 4th Company!'

'Understood,' said Uriel.

Ultramarines moved rapidly through the embarkation deck to their assigned rally points, where armoury serfs passed out fresh bolter ammunition and powercells for chainswords. Uriel and Clausel made their way along the deck, ensuring that their warriors were ready for the fight of their lives.

Chaplain Clausel stood beside him and said, 'You are once more on the path of the Codex Astartes, Captain Ventris. It is good to see.'

'Thank you, Brother-Chaplain,' he said. 'It means a lot to hear you say that.'

Clausel nodded curtly, and made his way to his designated position without another word.

A series of green lights lit up along the embarkation deck. They were ready.

With no time for inspiring words or the proper rites of battle, Uriel simply raised the sword of Idaeus for every warrior to see. 'Courage and honour!' he roared.

KOUDELKAR SHONAI STOOD in the doorway of his quarters, looking out over the dark waters of Crater Bay and sipping his tisane. The morning sunlight glinted from the dark expanse of ocean, and a bitter wind whipped cold salt

spray into the prison facility. Koudelkar had thought it beautiful, but today it seemed like a thing of menace.

He looked over his shoulder to where Aun'rai sat inside, accompanied by three armed Fire Warriors. Mostly, they ignored him, but a female tau with a scarred face and the beginnings of a white topknot glared with undisguised hatred. He didn't know what he'd done to offend her, and didn't feel much like asking for fear of what the answer might be.

'Will I ever see Pavonis again?' he asked.

'Perhaps in time,' answered Aun'rai. 'Though given your past association with this world, it might be better if you did not. Will that be a problem for you?'

Koudelkar thought about that question for a moment, looking at the hostile faces of the soldiers milling around the prison compound.

'No. I thought it would, but the notion of seeing new horizons, new seas and new worlds appeals to me immensely.'

'Good,' said Aun'rai, sounding genuinely pleased.

'Of course there will be things I'll miss,' he said, 'but I expect I'll get over that.'

'You will,' promised Aun'rai. 'You will want for nothing in your new life as a valued citizen of the Tau Empire. With everyone working towards the Greater Good, no one goes hungry, no one lacks shelter and everyone is afforded the opportunity to contribute.'

'It almost sounds too good to be true,' said Koudelkar, only half joking.

'It is not,' said Aun'rai. 'You will be welcomed into our empire, valued for the skills you possess and honoured for your contribution to the Greater Good.'

Koudelkar took one last look at the bay before heading back into his quarters. He set down his glass on the plain oval table next to his bed and sat on the chair opposite Aun'rai.

'But what exactly will I do?'

'You will work with others of your kind to spread the word of the Greater Good,' said Aun'rai. 'You will be a shining example of what we can offer your people, a bridge to cross the gulf of misunderstanding that exists between your race and mine.'

'You mean I'd be an ambassador?' asked Koudelkar.

'Of sorts, yes,' agreed Aun'rai. 'With your help, we can avoid bloodshed when the Third Expansion reaches other human worlds. If humanity will accept the teachings of the Ethereals and become part of our empire, there is no limit to what we might achieve.'

'You know, before talking with you I would have been repulsed by thoughts of working with an alien race,' said Koudelkar.

'And now?'

'Now I look forward to it, though I wonder if the same can be said for your followers.'

Aun'rai followed his gaze and nodded in understanding.

'La'tyen was taken prisoner and suffered greatly at the hands of her captors. She was tortured and beaten, as I would have been had we not escaped.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' said Koudelkar, hiding his sudden fear of the warrior, knowing that she had been tortured on his orders. He looked away from her scars to hide the guilt that he felt sure was written all over his face.

'It is of no consequence,' said Aun'rai, and Koudelkar wondered if La'tyen felt the same. Somehow he doubted it.

He saw a sudden stiffening in the posture of Aun'rai's guards, and turned his chair to see Lortuen Perjed standing in the doorway. Koudelkar's mother stood beside him, and an ashen-faced Jenna Sharben supported herself on a set of metal crutches. Koudelkar felt a rush of unease at the sight of the Chief of Enforcers, suddenly remembering that she was, first and foremost, a judge of the Adeptus Arbites.

'Adept Perjed,' said Aun'rai smoothly, 'would you care to join us? There is enough tisane to go around. I am told it is quite pleasant to human tastes.'

'I have nothing to say to you, xenos,' said Perjed.

'What are you doing here, Lortuen?' demanded Koudelkar. 'I have nothing to say to you.'

'Then listen,' snapped Sharben, her voice a mix of controlled fury and pain as she awkwardly limped on her crutches into the centre of the room. 'Koudelkar Shonai, by the authority of the Immortal God-Emperor, I hereby relieve you of Imperial command of Pavonis and all its domains. This I do with the full support of this world's senior Administratum adept. From this moment onwards, you pass from the protection of the Imperium, and are numbered amongst its enemies.'

Koudelkar shrank before Sharben's steely glare, her words like a knife in his guts, until he remembered that he had already forsaken this world for a new life amongst the tau.

'You think I care about that?' he asked, rising to his feet as a simmering anger swelled within him. 'The Imperium gave up on Pavonis long ago and I welcome your censure. It only proves I have made the right decision.'

'Oh, Koudelkar,' said his mother, tears running freely down her cheeks. 'What have they done to you to make you say these things?'

Koudelkar pushed past Sharben and embraced his mother.

'Don't cry,' he said, 'please. You need to trust me, Mother. I know what I am

doing.'

'No,' she said, 'you don't. They've used some sort of mind control on you or something.'

'That's absurd,' he said.

'Please,' she begged, holding him tightly to her. 'You have to come with us. Now.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You know what she's talking about,' said Perjed, and Koudelkar looked over his mother's shoulder to see a group of Lavrentian soldiers gathering outside. It was impossible to miss the threat of violence they wore, and Koudelkar felt a hot flush of fear as he realised that Adept Perjed's threatened uprising was at hand.

'It is time to fight,' said Perjed, 'and you had your chance to stand with us.'

Koudelkar turned to shout a warning to Aun'rai, but before the words could leave his mouth, the noise of an explosion sounded from somewhere nearby. From his position at the door, Koudelkar saw pillars of flame and smoke rising from the towers on either side of the prison gates. A deafening boom sounded an instant later as crackling lightning ripped around the circumference of the camp and fizzing sparks fountained from the pylons of the perimeter force barrier.

Alarm klaxons sounded, and Koudelkar heard the bark of gunfire. He rounded on Perjed. 'What have you done? You have killed us all!'

But as the sounds of fighting grew more intense, Koudelkar saw that Adept Perjed was just as surprised.

TWENTY

LEARCHUS SHOT A Fire Warrior through the chest, and then ran from the wreckage of the burning guard tower towards a low structure that might have been a power generator. Its sides were cream coloured and marked with a number of tau symbols. Issam covered him with a series of well-aimed bolter shots into a knot of assembling Fire Warriors, and they scattered, leaving two dead in their wake.

Learchus hammered into the structure, and leaned out to fire into the tau warriors reacting to the sudden invasion of the prison. He put one down with a snap shot and blew the leg off another who was too slow to find cover.

Daxian fanned out to the other side of the smashed gate as Parmian fired his bolt pistol from behind the second skimmer. The remains of the first skimmer burned just beyond the gateway in the midst of a pile of tau corpses.

The opening moments of their assault had been more devastating than Learchus could have hoped, and he knew they had to maintain their momentum and keep the tau off-balance. The shock and awe of their sudden assault was forcing the tau to dance to their tune, but as soon as they realised just how few in number were their attackers and fought back…

Using the scout skimmers to speed through the streets of Praxedes, they had swiftly made their way to the landing jibs, and Learchus had felt his fingers moving across the vehicle's armaments panel of their own volition. He had no idea what he was doing, yet a targeting matrix had projected onto the canopy of the skimmer and seemed to acquire targets one after another. He expected the front-mounted rifles to shoot, and had been disappointed when they stubbornly refused to open fire at their targets. That disappointment had been short-lived as he heard rapid whoosh, whoosh, whoosh sounds from behind, and a series of streaking missiles leapt from a tall sentry turret.

The missiles impacted on the guard towers on either side of the prison entrance and they exploded in blistering fireballs. Both collapsed into piles of twisted metal, taking out the tau guards and a number of the humming pylons surrounding the camp. Bolts of jade lightning arced between the pylons, and a thunderclap of electrical discharge boomed like an enormous whip-crack.

The skimmers plunged through the smoke of the destroyed gateway, but the tau were quick to recover from their surprise, and a hail of gunfire shot out of the skimmer carrying Learchus and Daxian. Both warriors leapt from the stricken

vehicle as it tumbled end over end and exploded, showering the Fire Warriors who had shot it down with whickering fragments of red-hot metal.

Issam and Parmian skidded their vehicle to a halt, azure bolts of energy spitting from their skimmer's weapons. Before the prison guards could react, Issam leapt from the pilot's seat, and began firing his bolter as he ran towards cover. Parmian clambered from the vehicle, and took up position behind it, sniping at enemy soldiers from behind the hovering skimmer. 'Issam!' shouted Learchus. 'We need to keep pushing on!'

'Understood,' replied the scout sergeant. 'Going to be tough though.'

That was an understatement. The structure Learchus was sheltering behind was rapidly disintegrating under repeated impacts, and, despite Parmian's covering fire, there was no way Learchus could move without being cut down. A firing line of Fire Warriors was systematically destroying his cover, and there was nothing he could do to stop them.

Then Learchus heard a roaring howl of rage, and the fire pounding his cover slackened. He risked a glance around the structure, and saw something that filled him with exultation. Unarmed prisoners were swarming from their barrack buildings to attack their guards, dragging them down with their sheer weight of numbers and fury. Dozens were dead, for they had no weapons save their fists, but these men were hungry to expunge the stain of their earlier humiliation, and nothing was going to keep them from their vengeance.

All across the camp, the Imperial prisoners were rising up and attacking their captors. Mobs of imprisoned Guardsmen hurled themselves at the tau, tearing them apart with their bare hands or clubbing them to death with whatever blunt objects came to hand. Others tore the weapons from the dead Fire Warriors and turned them on their captors with savage glee.

Learchus had seldom seen a more inspiring sight, and, though he wanted to punch the air in triumph, the very gaucheness of the gesture restrained him. He spun from cover, and surged forwards into the melee, seeing Issam break from cover at the same instant.

Daxian moved out to join his sergeant, and the three Space Marines were a wedge of fighting fury that plunged deep into the tau. Learchus felt a savage sense of release as he shot another Fire Warrior in the chest. After so long avoiding contact with the enemy, to release the controlled aggression of the Astartes in close-quarters battle was as cathartic as it was exhilarating.

He turned to wave Parmian forwards with them, to join in the slaughter, but the joy of battle drained from him as he saw that the tau forces beyond the camp were finally reacting to the enemy in their midst.

At least two-dozen battlesuits were jetting through the air towards the prison,

closely followed by three Hammerheads, moving swiftly towards the burning gateway. Learchus's assault was pushing deep into the camp, and the inmates were rising up, but a rabble of prisoners with a handful of rifles and four Space Marines could not hope to face such a force and live.

Seeing the tau reaction force, Parmian tried to find cover, but he was spotted by the lead battlesuit team and had nowhere to run. The first battlesuit landed just behind Parmian and unleashed a searing blast of fiery plasma at point-blank range. The wounded scout had no time to scream as he was instantly incinerated, leaving nothing but the blackened shreds of a corpse.

Learchus and his fellow warriors ducked into the cover of one of the barrack buildings. A flurry of shells shredded the ground where they had been standing.

'COME ON, URIEL,' he hissed. 'Where are you?'

At the sound of the first explosion, Jenna Sharben leapt into action. Her burst of movement caught Koudelkar's eye, and he watched in horror as she spun her crutch around and stabbed it into the belly of one of Aun'rai's bodyguards. Only then did he notice that the bottom of each crutch had been sharpened to a lethal point.

The Fire Warrior screamed foully and collapsed, blood pouring down his legs from the terrible wound. Clearly the chief of enforcers was not as debilitated by her wounds as she had led the tau to believe.

Sharben swung her other crutch around in a short, brutal arc, the heavy end hammering into another bodyguard's helmet with a solid crunch. The warrior went down heavily as Sharben turned to face the last of Aun'rai's protectors.

Koudelkar made to go to Aun'rai's aid, but his mother gripped his tunic tightly. Her eyes pleaded with him not to go, but, for better or worse, Koudelkar had made his choice, and he had to live up to his end of the bargain.

He threw off her grip, though it broke his heart to hear her despairing cry.

'Koudelkar, no!' shouted Perjed. 'Don't.'

Though Sharben had fooled them with her display of weakness, the element of surprise could only see her so far, and La'tyen leapt on her with an anguished cry of hatred. Arbites Judge and Fire Warrior rolled on the ground, punching and clawing at one another.

The chief enforcer's elbow slammed into La'tyen's midriff, but the Fire Warrior's flexible body armour bore the brunt of the blow. La'tyen hooked her arm around Sharben's throat and dug her fingers into her neck. Sharben slammed her head backwards into La'tyen's face, and Koudelkar heard the crack of a cheekbone breaking. Sharben rolled from her opponent with a grunt of pain,

scrabbling for a weapon as La'tyen drew a glittering knife from her belt.

Koudelkar had heard that they were called honour blades, and were ceremonial weapons used to symbolise fraternity amongst the tau, though there was nothing ceremonial about its viciously sharp edge.

The blade slashed towards Sharben, who leapt back to avoid being gutted. She cried out in pain as her weight came down on her injured leg. The Arbites Judge was not as badly hurt as she had made out, but she was still hurt.

Koudelkar wanted to intervene, but knew La'tyen would as likely gut him as Sharben. The bleeding Fire Warrior continued to cry out in pain as his blood spilled from his wound, but his dazed compatriot was rising unsteadily to his feet with a rifle held before him.

La'tyen feinted with her honour blade, and Sharben fell to one knee as her wounded leg gave out beneath her. It was the opening that La'tyen needed, and she plunged the blade of her knife into Sharben's chest.

The combatants crashed to the floor, and La'tyen stabbed the mortally wounded enforcer again and again in a frenzy of grief, anger and hatred. Blood spurted, and sprayed the walls in spattering arcs as La'tyen let the horror of her torture in the Glasshouse pour from her in a frenzy of savage violence.

Koudelkar recoiled from the awfulness of Sharben's death, horrified at the animal savagery of the killing. La'tyen looked up, and through the mask of blood coating her twisted features, Koudelkar saw the true nature of the tau race, the darkness they kept hidden behind their veneer of civilisation and fantastical notions of the Greater Good.

Lortuen Perjed ran forwards as Sharben died, desperation lending his aged limbs strength. He bent to retrieve the short-barrelled weapon dropped by the Fire Warrior Sharben had first attacked, and fumbled with the firing mechanism.

'Don't be an idiot, Lortuen! Put the gun down!' shouted Koudelkar, having no wish to see Lortuen killed in this terrible folly. The adept was not to be dissuaded from his course, however, and he and the dazed Fire Warrior pulled the triggers in the same moment. Koudelkar flinched as volleys of searing blue energy beams sprayed the room.

The Fire Warrior went down in a crumpled heap, his chest a cratered ruin, but he had taken his killer with him. Lortuen Perjed was punched from his feet, his fragile body torn virtually in two by the flurry of high energy bolts.

As terrible as was Lortuen's fate, the true horror was behind the murdered adept.

Koudelkar's mother slid down the pristine walls of his quarters, leaving a bloody smear behind her. Pawluk Shonai's eyes were wide with pain, and her prison-issue tunic was soaked with an expanding red stain.

'No!' cried Koudelkar, running over to his mother. He gathered her up in his arms as tears blurred his vision. He put his hand on her stomach, trying in vain to stem the flow of blood from her body.

'Emperor save her, please, oh please no!' wailed Koudelkar, desperately pleading with the only god he knew to save his mother. 'Oh God-Emperor, no, don't let this happen!'

Koudelkar watched the life drain from his mother's eyes, and gave a terrible, aching cry of loss. His eyes filled with tears, and he sobbed as he held her lifeless body tight.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he wept. 'It's all my fault. I betrayed you, oh Emperor forgive me, please forgive me…'

Koudelkar felt a presence near him, and looked up from his grief to see Aun'rai standing over him, his expression one of profound disappointment.

'You call to your Emperor for aid?' asked Aun'rai. 'After all we have discussed, you still turn to your distant Emperor for solace? No matter what your intellect might say, you look to gods and spirits in times of trouble. How pathetically human of you.'

'She's dead!' wailed Koudelkar. 'Don't you understand? She's dead.'

'I understand all too well,' said Aun'rai coldly, as La'tyen appeared at his side, her face and armour drenched in Sharben's blood.

Koudelkar fought to cling onto his sanity in the face of this horrific bloodshed. In a matter of seconds, his bright future of importance and luxury had turned to horror and grief. He shook his head, and gently laid his mother down on the cold, hard floor of his quarters.

He stood and faced the two tau. One desperately wanted to kill him, the other to enslave him, and Koudelkar wasn't sure which fate he dreaded more.

'It does not have to end here,' said Aun'rai. 'You can still be part of the Greater Good.'

'I think not,' replied Koudelkar, backing out of the doorway, through which the crack of gunfire and the boom of explosions could be heard. 'I want nothing from you or your race. If I am to die, then I will die among my own kind.'

Koudelkar turned and walked down the steps to the landing platform. He could taste the smoke in the air and the crackling electric charge of the downed security fences. Shouting soldiers and the bark of weapons' fire surrounded him, but Koudelkar had never felt more at ease with himself.

He remembered a conversation he'd had with Lortuen Perjed not long after they had arrived at the prison camp.

'We are prisoners of war,' Koudelkar had said. 'What honour do we have?'

'Only what we bring with us,' was Perjed's reply, and only now did Koudelkar

understand what the adept had meant. He lifted his head and looked into the achingly blue sky, taking a deep breath of the ocean-scented air.

Koudelkar frowned, and raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he saw a number of falling objects that looked out of place in the heavens. He smiled as he recognised them for what they were.

Aun'rai appeared in the doorway of his quarters, seemingly unconcerned with the fighting that raged through the prison complex.

'This foolish uprising will be quashed,' spat the tau. 'And nothing will have changed.'

'You know, I think you're wrong about that,' said Koudelkar, pointing towards the sky where a host of Space Marine drop-pods streaked towards the ground on blazing lines of fire.

URIEL'S DROP-POD HAMMERED down in a blazing flare of rockets and pulverised metal decking. Explosive bolts blew out the heat-shielded doors, and the locking harnesses securing the Space Marines within snapped upright. What had been a hermetically sealed environment for travel through the cold of space and the heat of re-entry was now open to the elements and the reek of propellant and scorched metal filled the air.

'Go! Everyone out!' shouted Uriel, and the warriors who had endured the thunderous ride from the embarkation deck of the Vae Victus with him leapt instantly to obey. Uriel led them from the drop-pod, taking in the ebb and flow of the battle in a moment.

Learchus had done his work well.

The Praxedes detention camp was in uproar, with desperate Fire Warriors in combat with hordes of equally desperate prisoners. The fighting was ferocious, but it was clear that the tau had the upper hand. Though considerably outnumbered by their captives, the Fire Warriors were highly-trained and had no give in them.

Numbers and courage could carry any assault far, but against disciplined soldiers armed with powerful weapons, it was never going to be enough, and the Lavrentian prisoners were being slaughtered. Uriel saw Learchus and two scouts firing on a battlesuit squad from the cover of a barrack building. While the weight of fire kept Learchus pinned in place, two other battlesuits were moving to encircle him.

Chaplain Clausel's voice sounded in his helmet. 'Our arrival is most timely.'

'So it would appear,' said Uriel, quickly identifying the key points of resistance. 'Secure the gate. I will link with Learchus.'

'Understood.'

The tau forces were reacting swiftly to the arrival of the Astartes, turning their guns on the new threat in their midst. Flurries of blue energy beams slashed towards the Space Marines, but they were answered by a weight of fire greater than isolated bands of infantry could hope to muster.

Landing seconds before the main assault, drop-pods equipped with automated heavy weapon systems instead of troops unleashed furious barrages of missiles upon the tau. Following preset logic parameters, they engaged targets with merciless precision, and explosions ripped through the greatest concentrations of Fire Warriors.

The tau reeled from the shock of the sudden violence of the assault, but Uriel knew from past experience that they would recover quickly. To win this fight, the Ultramarines would need to keep the tau on the back foot, never allowing them to regain the initiative.

Two further drop-pods slammed down, buckling the metal of the landing jib's deck and scorching it black with the fire of their retros. Sequential bangs sounded like a string of firecrackers, and the wider doors of these drop-pods fell open to reveal the ancient and revered Dreadnoughts of the 4th Company.

Brother Speritas stepped into the battle with his assault cannon roaring, and a string of missiles leaping from the armoured rack mounted at his shoulder. Zethus followed his brother Dreadnought's example, opening fire on the tau the instant his fiery chariot's doors were opened. Twin beams of incandescent laser energy blew the turret from a Hammerhead as it turned to face the Dreadnoughts, and a tongue of blazing promethium jetted from beneath his monstrous crackling fist.

The tau fell back from the two Dreadnoughts in disarray, leaving dozens afire behind them. Powerful though the Fire Warriors' guns were, they could not hope to defeat the armour of such mighty war engines.

Clausel's squads arced on fiery jump packs towards the entrance of the prison complex, gunning down those Fire Warriors that had disembarked from their Devilfish transports. Hammerhead battle tanks floated gracefully through the fires of battle, their enormous guns tracking around to unleash their fury upon the Space Marines.

Chattering cannons and blisteringly bright spears of high energy tore into the Space Marines alongside Clausel, and Uriel saw that not all would be getting to their feet. He grieved for the fallen, but the assault had always carried the risk that many of the 4th Company would be returning to Macragge as honoured dead.

A drop-pod exploded behind Uriel, the Ultramarines it had carried swatted to

the deck by the blast. Most climbed swiftly to their feet, but three remained on the ground. Barely seconds had passed since the thunderous arrival of the Ultramarines, yet the tau had already realigned their defences to meet the threat.

A warrior in brilliant blue armour emblazoned with a glittering golden eagle, and who wore a white-winged helmet, stood next to Uriel. His cloak billowed in the thermals of the drop-pods' descent, and he carried a long pole of black adamantium topped with a crimson crosspiece.

Ancient Peleus unfurled the banner of the 4th Company, and the power of its magnificence was akin to the sight of a hundred other Space Marines. The gold leaf and silver threading of the clenched gauntlet glittered in the sun, and its sacred fabric was a beacon to every warrior of courage and honour who beheld it.

'The banner of the 4th flies above us!' shouted Uriel. 'Let no warrior falter in his duty to the Chapter!'

His warriors answered with a cheer of pride and love, their devotion and faith in the power of the banner pushing them to new heights of courage. To fight beneath the company standard was an honour, and every warrior knew that the heroes of the past were watching them, standing in judgement of their courage. The Lavrentian prisoners had been on the verge of breaking when the tide had turned against them, but, with the arrival of the Ultramarines, they surged from their bolt-holes to once again attack the tau. Though the standard of the 4th was not their own, it represented centuries of courage that spoke to the heart of every warrior who beheld it.

Uriel led squad Ventris and the standard towards the barrack building where Learchus and his warriors fought. He fired as he ran, for there was no shortage of targets. Fire Warriors dropped with every volley, as shots flashed past Uriel's head and skidded from the deck around him. Running battles between prisoners and Fire Warriors filled the compound, and Uriel was forced to weave a path through the struggling combatants.

Hot air blasted downwards, and Uriel looked up to see a tau aircraft roar overhead. Bulky and oblong, he recognised it as an Orca, and he knew exactly why its pilot dared risk flying over such a hostile environment.

The craft was soon lost to sight, and Uriel pounded onwards through the warzone of the camp. Learchus looked up as Squad Ventris drew close, and Uriel saw the swell of pride in his sergeant as he caught sight of the banner they carried.

'Squad Ventris!' shouted Uriel. 'Combat squads. Hold and engage left!'

His warriors smoothly split into two units, one bracing and opening fire on the Battlesuits pinning Learchus and the scouts in place. Rippling volleys of

bolter-fire hammered the battlesuits, a pumping barrage of shells that detonated within the armoured chest cavity of the first enemy warrior and sent the other into cover.

The second combat squad followed Uriel to join Learchus and his ragtag scouts, but there was no time for greetings, for the two flanking battlesuits roared over the roof of the barrack building. They landed in a flurry of exhaust gasses and gunfire. One of the scouts screamed and went down, his kneecap a pulped mess. Another, a sergeant, dropped as a shell clipped his shoulder and spun him around.

A white-hot lance of plasma bored through the chest of an Ultramarine, and the warrior fell, dead before he hit the ground. Uriel and Learchus charged the battlesuits as the second unleashed a seething torrent of fire from its weapons. Uriel felt the heat of the fire wash over his armour, and red warning icons flashed up on his visor. Coolant gasses vented from his armour's backpack as it fought to counteract the heat, and Uriel heard cries of pain behind him as the lightly armoured scouts scrambled back from the killing flames.

Uriel emerged from the inferno, his cloak a blazing ruin, and the eagle of his armour blackened as tiny flames guttered and died on his chest. The battlesuits braced to meet their charge as bolter shells sparked and ricocheted from their armoured hulls.

Learchus ducked beneath a roaring cannon and shoulder-charged the nearest battlesuit. Its legs crumpled under the sheer mass of Learchus's frame, and it fell backwards into a crumpled, helpless heap. Uriel swung the sword of Idaeus at a descending fist the size of his head, and hacked the limb from the battlesuit facing him. Hydraulic fluids sprayed from the neatly severed machinery, and the battlesuit reared away from his deadly blade.

Uriel leapt forwards, and took hold of the battlesuit's armoured carapace as it activated its jets and powered upwards. The ground spun away, but Uriel wasn't about to let his foe escape so easily. He rammed his sword through the battlesuit's chest, and its jets cut out almost immediately. The battlesuit dropped through the roof of the barrack building, and Uriel kicked himself away from the dying Fire Warrior.

He twisted in the air as he fell to land on his feet with a slamming thud.

Learchus stood with one boot resting on the chest of the downed battlesuit as he ripped his chainsword from its body. Torn metal and blood came with it, and the armoured suit convulsed as its occupant died. Learchus spun his sword and brought the blade down across the battlesuit's neck like an executioner's axe.

'Nicely done,' commented Uriel. 'A bit over the top though, don't you think?'

'Says the man who killed his foe in midair,' grunted Learchus, though Uriel

heard the amusement behind the seargeant's brusqueness.

'It is good to see you, my friend,' said Uriel.

'Aye, good indeed,' agreed Learchus, 'but save your heartfelt gratitude for later, we're on the hunt!'

'He is here?'

'He is here,' confirmed Learchus, pointing through the maze of barrack buildings.

Uriel ducked his head around the corner of the building in time to see Koudelkar Shonai being dragged towards the Orca drop-ship he had seen earlier. A bloody-faced Fire Warrior held a knife to the governor's throat, and hurrying alongside him was a figure Uriel recognised immediately. The tau noble they had captured after the battle at the Shonai.

The tau leader whose Orca drop-ship the Vae Victus had tracked to Praxedes after his escape from the Glasshouse. 'Let's go,' said Uriel.

TWENTY-ONE

COLONEL LOIC BLINKED away the afterimages of the missile's explosion, and coughed up a mouthful of blood and dust. His ears were still ringing from the deafening bang, and he felt warm wetness on his face. He rolled onto his side, dislodging the timber, stone and flakboard that covered him in a mini avalanche. Dust and smoke obscured his view, but sparks fizzed from broken cables. The solitary data-screen that remained unbroken hissed with glowing static.

He groaned in pain, feeling as though he'd been run over by Lord Winterbourne's Baneblade. He coughed another mouthful of blood, and felt a twitch of concern as he noted its brightness. Had he punctured a lung or nicked an artery somewhere inside?

It didn't feel like he'd been too badly hurt, but you never knew with combat injuries.

He looked around, waving a hand in front of his face to clear some of the dust. Ahead was a wall of bright daylight, which was odd considering there had been a solid barrier there only moments ago. What little that remained of the roof groaned ominously, and dust drifted down from cracks in the ceiling.

The rest of the bunker was a slaughterhouse, the remaining walls coated in blood from the ruptured corpses that lay in mangled piles of shredded limbs. Data-servitors still sat at their posts, or at least pieces of them did. Bloody flesh and cybernetic augmentations were scattered around the bunker's wrecked interior like torn rags.

'Oh Emperor's mercy,' he hissed, seeing Captain Gerber and Commissar Vogel buried in a pile of cracked rockcrete and roof timbers. The sound of explosions and gunfire still came from beyond the bunker, but it was muted, as though coming from the bottom of a deep chasm, and Loic wondered if his eardrums had burst. Probably not, he surmised, thinking that he'd be in a lot more pain if they had.

Strange what random thoughts were coming to him now. Was it shock? Some post-traumatic reaction to a near-death experience?

'Pull yourself together, man,' he chided himself, clambering over piles of debris to reach the fallen Lavrentian captain. He stumbled over a collapsed roof spar and fell onto all fours. His hands landed on something soft and warm that gave way beneath his weight. Loic recoiled, horrified as he realised that his

hands had landed in the ruptured stomach cavity of Lieutenant Poldara. The young man's face was peaceful and serene, youthful again, and Loic felt a terrible, wrenching grief. Poldara was dead, and he would never have to worry about the ravages of war and time.

'Age shall not weary you, nor the years condemn,' he whispered, the words clearly audible even over the faraway crackle and boom of gunfire and explosions. He wiped his hands on his greatcoat, leaving long crimson smears on the cream fabric. Watching for any more gory pitfalls, he finally reached the two Lavrentian officers.

Vogel was clearly dead, half his skull missing and his brains leaking out over the debris-strewn floor. Loic reached out and placed his fingers on Gerber's neck, and was rewarded with a pulse, weak and thready, but indicative of life.

Carefully, he removed the debris covering the captain, tossing chunks of smashed stone and sandbags to the floor. Gerber coughed and groaned in pain, his eyelids flickering open as he felt Loic's ministrations.

'What… what happened?' asked Gerber.

'I'm not entirely sure, captain,' said Loic, 'but I think we were the target of a well-aimed missile barrage.'

Gerber tried to push himself onto his elbow, but he fell back with a yelp of pain.

'Don't move,' advised Loic. 'I think your arm's broken.'

'I've had worse,' said Gerber. 'Help me up.'

Loic helped Gerber into a sitting position, both men struggling with pain and the sight of so many dead comrades around them. They had thought themselves secure in the bunker, but within moments of the initial tau barrage, the world had exploded in noise and fire.

'Are we still in the fight?' gasped Gerber, his eyes clenched shut with pain.

'I don't know,' said Loic, looking out into the hellish maelstrom of battle beyond.

Gerber took a moment to get his breath, wiping dust and blood from his face with his free hand. A fresh rain of dust and rubble fell from the ruined ceiling as an explosion rocked the Imperator Bridge nearby.

'We need to get out of here,' said Loic. 'Re-establish command and control of what's left.'

'Agreed,' hissed Gerber through gritted teeth as he tried to stand.

Loic bent to help him, and hooked Gerber's arm over his shoulder.

The rear door of the bunker was blocked with tangled steel beams and slabs of fallen masonry, so the two soldiers limped and hobbled towards the open front of the bunker. The dust was settling, but the view from outside was not

encouraging.

The tau were all over the defenders, Fire Warriors swarming the outer defences and pushing hard for the second line as heavy tanks provided covering fire and destroyed the redoubts and bunkers one by one. The Imperial lines were bending backwards, and it was clear to both men that they would break in moments.

'It's over,' said Gerber.

'Surely not,' protested Loic. 'We can still win this!'

No sooner were the words of out his mouth than a towering battlesuit slammed down on the rubble before them. Its armour plates were scarred and its head unit was pale blue with a striped pattern on its left side.

A flaming sphere was painted in the centre of its chest panel and upon one shoulder-guard. Two other battlesuits landed a second later as the first raised its weapons, a huge cannon with multiple barrels and a thick tubular device with a hemispherical muzzle.

'It's over,' repeated Gerber.

* * *

URIEL BOLTED FROM cover with Learchus right behind him. The scout sergeant, whose name Uriel remembered was Issam, ran alongside Learchus, coagulated blood patterning his shoulder where a shell had clipped him. Their quarry was making a swift retreat to the Orca drop-ship, and Uriel cursed as he saw that they would probably make it before the Ultramarines could catch them.

Koudelkar Shonai was being dragged without ceremony by a single Fire Warrior, while the tau noble jogged alongside him.

'Hurry,' said Uriel. 'All this is for nothing if that noble gets away.'

'You think I don't know that?' hissed Learchus.

A flurry of shots engulfed the three Space Marines as a group of eight Fire Warriors ran from between one of the barrack houses and opened up with a volley of close range fire. Uriel felt the impacts, and pain flared in his midriff as the coolant coils below his breastplate ruptured. He dropped to one knee as howling gales of sonic energy and a swirling blast of light erupted before him. His auto-senses fought to filter out the aural and sonic assault, but it was impossible to filter out the hash of interference completely.

Something smashed into his helmet, and he felt a sharp object stab into his side. The blow didn't penetrate, but Uriel rolled away and came to his feet in one motion, sliding his sword from its sheath as his vision began to clear. The tau warriors threw themselves into the Ultramarines, attacking in a frenzy of

clubbing blows and point-blank shots of their stubby carbines. Uriel killed the first with a powerful lunge, dragging his blade back and decapitating another as he came at his flank. Another alien ran at him, and Uriel saw that these tau wore a lighter armour variant to the others.

These warriors were Pathfinders, and it was a measure of the tau's desperation to protect their leader that such lightly armoured warriors were being sent to stop them.

Learchus killed an enemy soldier with his fist, and smashed another's face with the butt of his boltgun. Issam slid between the enemy warriors with his combat knife, opening bellies and throats with every deft and deadly slash.

The fight was brutal, but one-sided. The tau fought with frenzied courage, but they could not hope to best three such professional killers.

'No stomach for a real fight, you said,' said Uriel, cutting down a screaming Fire Warrior as he ran at him with his weapon held like a club.

'I thought the tau preferred not to engage in close combat,' said Issam, gutting another.

'They really do not want us to capture their leader,' said Learchus, putting the last Fire Warrior down with a brutal chop from the edge of his fist.

'Damn it,' said Issam, setting off after the tau once again. 'They're just trying to delay us.'

'And it has worked,' cursed Uriel, heading after the Scout-sergeant. He glanced over his shoulder as he ran, seeing Learchus lifting one of the tau carbines. 'Come on, sergeant!'

Uriel ran as fast he was able, but there was no way he or Issam were going to reach the tau noble before he boarded his transport and escaped. Uriel's gamble had failed, and he had probably doomed the defenders of Olzetyn for nothing.

The rear ramp of the Orca cycled open, and a pair of slender tau in flight-suits emerged, beckoning hurriedly to the running noble and his Fire Warrior escort.

Suddenly, a slashing shape came out of nowhere, and Uriel ducked as a missile blazed a path overhead. It streaked towards the Orca, and, in the fraction of a second before it impacted, Uriel was shocked to see that it was a tau missile. It slammed into the side of the Orca's hull, and punched through the lightly armoured skin of the drop-ship before exploding. A jet of fire erupted from the rear of the Orca, and it cracked at its middle as the blast split the aircraft's spine.

Secondary explosions ripped along the hull of the drop-ship as the weapons and ammunition carried inside cooked off. Thick smoke boiled from the stricken craft, and sudden hope flared in Uriel as he saw their targets sprawled on the ground before the blazing wreck.

Issam looked back at Uriel. 'Where in the name of the primarch did that come

from?'

Uriel suspected he knew the answer, and looked back the way they had come to see Learchus holding one of the tau carbines at his shoulder. The weapon looked tiny in his hands, yet it had undoubtedly saved their mission.

'How did you know how to use the Valkyrie's Mark?' shouted Uriel as Learchus tossed the weapon aside.

'I will tell you later,' said Learchus. 'Now let's get that bastard.'

The tau were beginning to pick themselves up from the ground, and Uriel could almost feel their dismay at the sight of the wrecked drop-ship. The Fire Warrior with the knife turned, saw the Ultramarines bearing down on them, and dragged Koudelkar Shonai to his feet. As Uriel closed, he saw the remains of a white topknot, and realised that he recognised her.

She was the warrior he and his brothers had captured in the ruins of the de Valtos estate.

Her name was La'tyen, and Uriel felt the hand of synchronicity at work.

She shouted something at the noble, who was climbing unsteadily to his feet, but it was already too late for him. Issam reached the tau leader and hauled him upright. Issam's combat blade pricked the skin of his captive's neck, and Uriel held up his hand as Issam looked to him for the killing word.

Learchus marched up with his bolter aimed at La'tyen, and Uriel held his breath, recognising the brittle nature of this moment. He could see the hate in La'tyen's eyes, and he knew that Koudelkar Shonai's life hung by a thread. Uriel reached up and removed his helmet, the sounds of the battle raging through the camp surging in volume.

'Uriel!' cried Koudelkar. 'Don't let her kill me! Please.' Uriel nodded and turned to the tau noble. 'Do you understand my language?'

The tau hesitated, and then nodded. 'I do, yes.'

'I am Uriel Ventris of the Ultramarines. Tell me your name.'

'I am Aun'rai,' said the tau.

'And you are the leader of this invasion force?'

'I am the Ethereal of the Burning Star Hunter Coalition.'

'Then you will end this war,' said Uriel, stepping close and looming over Aun'rai. 'Now.'

'Why would I do such a thing?' said Aun'rai. 'My forces are on the verge of overrunning Olzetyn and there is little left to stop us from taking this world.'

'You will do it because I will kill you if you do not.'

'My death matters little,' said Aun'rai, but Uriel saw the first chink in the tau's outward cool. Uriel was no interrogator, but he knew the tau noble was lying.

'Let me tell you what I know,' said Uriel, conscious of the fact that the longer

this confrontation went on without resolution, the more men and women would die. 'I know this invasion was a gamble for you and that you needed to defeat us quickly. I know that you have not the resources in place to defend this world against a counterattack, a counterattack that I assure you will happen. I know that even if Olzetyn has already fallen, the rest of this world will be ashes before we let you have it. You will have to kill every single human on this planet to hold it, and even then the Imperium will not let you keep it. Forces from neighbouring systems are already en route to Pavonis, and you won't have a strong enough grip on this world by then to keep them at bay.'

La'tyen shouted something angry, but Uriel ignored her.

Aun'rai's eyes flickered towards La'tyen, but Uriel waved a hand before the Ethereal's face. 'Do not look at her. Look at me, and listen to what I am saying. You have fought well, Aun'rai. Your warriors have earned themselves much honour, but you will gain nothing by continuing this fight.'

'And why is that?' asked Aun'rai, a hint of arrogance in his tone, the same arrogance Uriel had recognised in all his encounters with the tau in this war.

'Because my starship carries weapons that can reduce a world to a barren airless rock in moments,' said Uriel, 'and if you do not order an immediate withdrawal, I will order those weapons deployed.'

'You are lying, Uriel Ventris of the Ultramarines,' sneered Aun'rai. 'Just to prevent us from taking this world, you would see it burned to ash?'

'In a heartbeat,' said Uriel, surprised to find he actually meant it.

How far he had come since his last time on Pavonis…

Aun'rai saw the truth of his words, and the moment stretched as the sheer bravura of Uriel's demand sank in.

'You are a barbarous race, you humans,' said the Ethereal. 'To think we were once like you fills me with shame.'

'Then you agree to end the fighting?' asked Uriel.

'If I order a withdrawal, you guarantee the safety of my warriors?'

'Every one of them,' said Uriel. 'I am a man of honour and I do not lie.'

Once again, La'tyen shouted something at her leader, and Aun'rai closed his eyes. Uriel could feel his despair, yet took no pleasure in the Ethereal's defeat. What he had said was true. The tau had fought with honour, and were a foe worthy of recognition.

Uriel nodded to Issam.

'Release him,' he said.

'You sure, captain?' said Issam. 'I don't like the look of that one with the governor.'

'Do it.'

Issam removed his blade from around Aun'rai's throat, and stepped back with his weapon raised. The Ethereal rubbed his neck, shaking his head sadly as his fingers came away sticky with red droplets.

'Captain!' shouted Learchus, and Uriel turned in time to see La'tyen's anguished face twist with rage and hatred. Whether it was the agreement her leader had made, or the sight of the Ethereal's blood, Uriel couldn't say, but, even as Aun'rai started to speak, it was too late to stop the inevitable.

La'tyen's honour blade sliced across Koudelkar Shonai's throat at the same time as Learchus shot her in the head. The Fire Warrior pitched backwards, the top of her skull blown away, but it was too late for Koudelkar. Arterial blood sprayed, and Uriel rushed to the governor's side.

He knelt beside Koudelkar, pressing his gauntlet to the ghastly wound, though he saw that it would do no good. The governor tried to speak, his eyes desperate with the need for a valediction, but La'tyen had cut deep and his life slipped away before he could form any words.

Issam took Aun'rai by the throat once again, but Uriel shook his head.

'Let him go, Issam,' said Uriel. 'This changes nothing. Aun'rai and I have made peace.'

The Scout-sergeant reluctantly released the Ethereal, and Uriel saw that he was itching to avenge the death of the Planetary Governor.

'I did not mean for that to happen,' said Aun'rai. 'Truly.'

'I know,' said Uriel.

'La'tyen suffered terribly while she was held prisoner.'

'I do not doubt it,' said Uriel without apology.

Aun'rai shook his head at Uriel's apparent indifference. 'You are a doomed culture, Uriel Ventris of the Ultramarines. You thirst for personal gain and glorification while your Imperium rots from within. Such a society cannot, ultimately, survive.'

'It has survived for ten thousand years since its inception,' pointed out Uriel.

Aun'rai shook his head. 'What you have is not survival, it is merely a slow extinction.'

'Not while warriors of courage and honour stand to defend it.'

'No such warriors exist amongst your race,' snapped Aun'rai. 'You are gue'la barbarians, and you delay the inevitable, nothing more. The frontier of our empire moves with the turning of the planets, and it will push you before it until there is nowhere left for you. Then your race will be no more. The frontier is for those unafraid to face the future, not for those who cling to a forgotten past. I am done speaking with you, Uriel Ventris of the Ultramarines, and if this war is over, then let me go.'

'When you order your forces to stand down,' said Uriel.

'It is already done,' replied Aun'rai.

THE TOWERING BATTLESUIT stood immobile before them, its weapons poised to destroy them. Colonel Adren Loic stood tall in the face of the alien war machine, ready to face death with a comrade-in-arms and with his head held high. A crackling nimbus of plasma played over the muzzle of the long tubular weapon, and Loic hoped his end would be swift.

'What the hell are you waiting for?' shouted Gerber. 'Do it!'

'Shut up, Gerber,' hissed Loic.

The battlesuit didn't move, and only then did Loic notice that the sounds of battle had ceased.

The sky was empty of the continual rain of missiles, and the high-pitched electrical noise of their battle tanks' main guns was strangely absent.

Loic shared a sidelong glance with Captain Gerber. 'What the hell's going on?' he asked.

'Damned if I know.'

The silence enveloping the battlefield was unnerving and unnatural. Loic had lived with the continuously droning rumble of war for so long that he had forgotten what silence was like. He heard the soft sound of the wind passing through the bridge's suspension cables, the distant rush of the rivers in the gorges below them, and the eerie sound of a silent battlefield.

Guardsmen and PDF troopers were emerging from their dugouts and bunkers, shock and confusion at the sight of the unmoving tau army overcoming their natural caution.

Then the scarred battlesuit with the blue helmet and flaming sphere emblazoned on its chest took a step forwards, its weapons powering down with a diminishing hum.

Loic flinched, and Gerber reached for a sidearm that wasn't there.

The red lens of its head-unit whirred as it focused on them, like the microscope of an inquisitive magos closing in on a specimen dish.

'I am Shas'El Sa'cea Esaven,' said the battlesuit, 'Fire Warrior of the Burning Star Hunter Coalition.'

Captain Gerber made as if to say something hostile, but Loic shook his head. 'Allow me, captain.'

Loic pulled his bloody and torn greatcoat tighter, attempting to straighten it and make himself more presentable.

'I am Colonel Adren Loic of the Pavonis Planetary Defence Force.'

'You command these warriors?'

'I am one of their commanders, yes,' said Loic, turning to face his fellow officer, 'and this is Captain… er… I'm sorry I don't know your first name, Gerber.'

'It's Stefan.'

'And this is Captain Stefan Gerber of the 44th Lavrentian Hussars,' said Loic, smoothly returning his attention to the tau. 'What's happening? Why have you stopped attacking?'

'My forces are standing down and leaving this world,' said the tau commander.

'Why?' asked Gerber. 'You had us beaten.'

'I am withdrawing because I have been ordered to withdraw by Aun'rai of the Ethereal caste, and warriors from Sa'cea do not disobey orders,' said the battlesuit, turning and marching away.

'You mean that's it?' demanded Gerber. 'All this killing and you're just walking away as if it never happened?'

'The Ethereals have spoken, and for the Greater Good, I must comply,' said the battlesuit, though Loic could sense the deep frustration in its voice. Like any warrior, the tau commander wanted to see the job done. As the battlesuit commander reached the edge of the ruins, he turned to face them once more.

'You were correct, Captain Stefan Gerber of the 44th Lavrentian Hussars,' said the tau warrior. 'You were beaten, and when the tau return to Pavonis, we will beat you again.'

IN THE LAST undulant slopes of the Owsen Hills, Lord Winterbourne watched through the vision blocks as the line of Hammerheads and Devilfish pulled back behind the ridge above his forces. The ferocity of the fighting had raged undimmed through the hills for days, and now, with Winterbourne on the verge of ordering a full retreat to Brandon Gate, the tau had ceased their assault.

'What the hell?' he muttered as the last of the tau spearhead vanished from the threat board.

'Sir!' cried Jenko. 'Vox-net has just cleared. I've got the captains of every Command on the horn trying to get hold of you! Every frequency that was jammed has just come back online!'

Winterbourne wiped a hand across his forehead, hardly daring to believe that the fighting might be over or that Uriel's plan could have succeeded.

'Any hostile contacts?' he asked. 'This could be a ploy.'

'None, sir,' confirmed Jenko, his voice rising with excitement. 'All tau forces

are withdrawing further into the hills. They're going home! We saw the bastards off!'

Determined to see for himself, Winterbourne hit the hatch release and spun the locking wheel, opening Father Time's turret. He pushed his body upright, standing on his commander's chair as he looked along the line of dug-in tanks and fighting men of Lavrentia.

His fellow tank commanders had popped their hatches, and were watching in disbelief at the empty, shell-cratered wasteland ahead of them. Smoke from burning Leman Russ tanks and Chimeras drifted across the battlefield, and Winterbourne smelled the reek of scorched metal. Guardsmen in their foxholes were looking over to him to confirm what they were all hoping, that the fighting was over.

Captain Mederic of the Hounds, Father Time's guardian angel since the attack of the kroot, slung his rifle and said, 'So that's it then?'

Winterbourne was at a loss. 'So it would appear, Mederic.'

Mederic nodded. 'Good. Maybe I can get some sleep now.'

As Winterbourne watched the man turn from the hills, he felt incredibly proud of what his soldiers had achieved. They had fought courageously, and had done everything he had asked of them. Once more, the honour of the regiment had been tested, and, once more, the men and women of Lavrentia had risen to the challenge.

To think that he had been about to order the retreat…

'Contact all Commands,' said Winterbourne. 'Tell them that the war is over.'

AFTERMATH

WITHIN TEN HOURS of the truce being brokered between tau and Imperial forces, an armada of Mantas was rising into the air above Praxedes. Cheering Lavrentian Guardsmen watched them go, and Pavonis heaved a sigh of relief at its reprieve from invasion. Under the watchful gaze of the Vae Victus, the Mantas were recovered by their fleet, which turned and departed for the Tau Empire.

The aftermath of any fighting is always costly, and, though the tau had been defeated, the price of victory had been high. Thousands were dead, and many thousands more would forever bear the horror of their wounds. Scars, both mental and physical, would be borne by every man and woman who had resisted the alien invaders.

Much of Pavonis was in ruins, and yet again the loyalty of its leader had been found wanting. No longer could the people of Pavonis be trusted to guide their destiny, and though the yoke of alien overlords would not descend, the full might of the Imperium was sure to take Pavonis in an unshakeable iron grip.

In years to come, many would believe that the wrong army had won.

* * *

URIEL WATCHED AS the lifter servitors collapsed the last of the structures that had made up Fortress Idaeus, and loaded them into steel-skinned containers on the backs of heavy flatbed crawlers. Three Thunderhawk transporters sat on the wasteland of Belahon Park on the edge of the stagnant lake, ready to clamp the containers to their bellies and carry them to the hold of the Vae Victus. Warships from nearby systems, and a rapid strike cruiser from Macragge, had translated from the warp at the system jump point an hour ago, and were even now drawing near. Their might was no longer needed, but the threat of their arrival had won the day for the Imperial forces.

The Ultramarines presence on Pavonis was almost at an end, and, as the last of the containers was sealed, the time had come to return to Macragge.

The honoured dead and wounded were already ensconced within the Apothecarion at the Vae Victus, including the terribly wounded Techmarine Harkus, whose tenacity had kept him alive throughout the fighting.

Seventy-one members of the 4th Company, all those fit for duty, stood in ordered ranks before their captain and their Chaplain. Ancient Peleus stood at

the centre of the warriors, the standard of the 4th Company flapping in a stiff wind blowing in from the south. Just beyond the Ultramarines, a deputation from the senior commanders of Pavonis waited a respectful distance from the Astartes ritual of closure.

Ancient Peleus lowered the standard towards Uriel, and he dropped to one knee before it. The fabric of the standard was blackened and tattered around its edges from the fighting at Praxedes, though Uriel would swear it was nowhere near as damaged as it had been when he had last seen it.

He took the heavy cloth in his hands, and touched it to his forehead before rising to his feet. Chaplain Clausel also knelt and touched the standard to his forehead before taking up position beside him once more.

Ancient Peleus lifted the standard, and reverently rolled the fabric around the banner pole before securing it with a soft rope of blue and gold velvet.

With the lowering of the banner, the Ultramarines were no longer on a war footing, and the sergeants turned and marched their squads away to their transports.

Chaplain Clausel said, 'It is done,' and Uriel felt a curious blend of sadness and relief wash over him.

'Yes,' agreed Uriel, 'although I cannot help but feel that we leave with a job half-done.'

'What do you mean?' asked Clausel.

'We drove the tau from Pavonis, but I fear we will have to fight those same warriors again.'

'If the Emperor wills it.'

Uriel nodded, knowing that there was no more to be said. As he made to follow his men to their transports, Clausel said, 'I meant what I said before we launched the drop assault. I truly believe you have paid the price for your transgressions against the Codex Astartes.'

The Chaplain paused, and Uriel could see that the skull-faced warrior was struggling for words, something he had never expected to see.

'It seemed impossible that a man who had abandoned the teachings of the primarch could ever find his way again, but you have proved me wrong,' said Clausel.

'Thank you, Chaplain.'

'I shall be sure to tell the Chapter Master upon our return home,' said Clausel, 'and any who doubt your loyalty or fidelity to the Ultramarines shall answer to me.'

Clausel hammered his fist against his breastplate, and bowed to Uriel before turning and following the rest of the Ultramarines.

Uriel watched him go, feeling a wholeness in his heart that came from knowing that he was truly home. Though he had felt welcome upon his return to the Fortress of Hera, only now did he fell fully accepted once more.

He heard footsteps approaching, and smiled at the sight of Lord Winterbourne and Colonel Loic. Both men wore their finest dress uniforms, a vivid panoply of gold and green, cream and bronze. The three-legged vorehound padded alongside the Lavrentian colonel, and Uriel saw a glittering medal hanging from its collar.

Winterbourne saw his glance and said, 'Old Fynlae deserved a medal as much as anyone. Saved my life back in Deep Canyon Six, after all.'

'I could not agree more,' said Uriel, shaking hands with Winterbourne. 'He is a credit to your regiment.'

'Farewell, Uriel,' said Winterbourne. 'If you ever find yourself in Segmentum Solar, you'll be assured a place of honour at the regimental mess on Lavrentia.'

'Thank you, Lord Winterbourne,' said Uriel with a short bow.

Winterbourne turned to Loic. 'I keep telling him to call me Nathaniel, but he never listens.'

'It was an honour to fight alongside you, Captain Ventris,' said Colonel Loic as Winterbourne led Fynlae away. 'I'm sure my lads will be speaking of this campaign for decades. That's twice you've saved this world.'

'I hope there will not be a third time,' said Uriel, and Loic chuckled.

'You and me both, but I think we'll be fine from here.'

Uriel nodded. 'I hope so. You have come a long way since we first met, Colonel Loic. You and your soldiers have proved to be warriors of courage and honour, let no man tell you otherwise.'

Loic beamed at Uriel's words and gave him a crisp salute. 'Farewell, Uriel. Courage and honour!'

Uriel smiled and made his way towards the waiting gunships.

Courage and honour indeed.

ADMIRAL TIBERIUS WAS waiting for Uriel when he stepped from the ramp of the Thunderhawk that had brought him from Pavonis.

Straight away Uriel saw that something was terribly wrong.

The embarkation deck was strangely quiet, the crew standing with their heads bowed, as though in mourning. An atmosphere of anger and loss pervaded the ship, and Uriel marched straight over to the venerable Tiberius.

'Admiral? What has happened?'

'News from Macragge,' said Tiberius. 'It's Tarsis Ultra.'

'Tarsis Ultra? Where we fought the Great Devourer? What of it?'
'It's gone, Uriel,' said Tiberius. 'Destroyed.'

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

THE CHAPTER'S DUE

Graham McNeill

“Pain and death are illusions of the weak mind.

While his gene-seed returns to the Chapter, a Space Marine cannot die.

Without death, pain loses its relevance.

He that may fight, heal him.

He that may fight no more, give him peace.

He that is dead, take from him the Chapter’s due.”

- Master of the Apothecarion, Aslon Marr

PART 1

Revelations

On the Pilgrim Trail of Roboute Guilliman

ONE

IN AN IMPERIUM of a million worlds, what matters the loss of one? The Emperor’s realm stretches to the furthest extent of each spiral arm of the galaxy, his numberless armies holding dominion over them by the might of courage and devotion. To know them all is an impossible task, yet the billion scribes toiling in the dusty, candlelit gloom of the Imperial Aexactory care nothing for the futility of their task. Centuries-old records are updated as scraps of information are drip fed into the blind machine, yet even amid the benighted sepulchres of the Emperor’s counting houses, some worlds shine brighter than others.

Armageddon, the world named for the end of days; Fenris, home of the savage Space Wolves; Cadia, fortress world at the gateway to the Ocularis Terribus; Catachan, deathworld and home to the hell-fighters.

Even held against such esteemed names, there are planets whose legacy outshines such heroic worlds. These worlds are known and revered throughout the Imperium, by the nobles of the patrician guilds on Terra to the sump-scum of Necromunda.

These are the worlds of Ultramar, glorious beacons of illumination that bring the light of civilisation to the furthest corner of the Imperium. Where the Emperor’s radiance grows faint in the darkness, the worlds of Ultramar renew it. Where the frontiers of the Emperor’s realm are weak, they strengthen it.

Storm-wracked Tallasar; the parched troika of Quintarn, Tarentus and Masali; rugged Espandor and the garden of Ultramar that is Iax. The blasted surface of Calth hides an incredible underground network of caverns as light and airy as any landscape open to the heavens.

Systems and worlds glitter in the darkness of space, but all are beholden to the glittering jewel at Ultramar’s heart, the azure and emerald orb to which all others owe fealty. Alone amongst the worlds of the Imperium, this world holds dominion over its brethren, its master the ruler of a stellar empire of his own. No other world in the Imperium can lay claim to such status, and only by virtue of secret origins unknown even to the Emperor can such a singular entity exist.

It is called Macragge, this jewel in the darkness that alone holds sovereignty over others.

Its glittering seas are as clear as glass and teem with life, though the vast majority of its surface is covered in jagged, upthrust mountains of pale stone that claw the sky. So inhospitable are these mountains that Macragge’s population,

hardy as they are, cannot live in them. Instead, they duster close to the fertile lands around the Valley of Laponis and the towering fastness of this world's masters.

The Fortress of Hera is carved from the tallest mountains, seven peaks levelled and rebuilt to house the Emperor's greatest Legion, the Ultramarines. Even among the Adeptus Astartes, the names of Ultramarines heroes are bywords for courage and honour: Ancient Galatan, who raised the Chapter's colours in the breach of Corinth; Captain Ventanus of the lost 6th Chapter, who held Calth against the forces of the Arch-Traitors of the Word Bearers; doomed Invictus of the 1st who died defending his home world from the Great Devourer.

The Primarch Roboute Guilliman built Ultramar in ages past, and his warriors hold the frontier of the Imperium against every enemy, hurling them back with bolt and blade to preserve that which their gene-father created from the darkness.

In an Imperium of a million worlds, what matters the loss of one?

That depends very much on the world.

SELF-SUFFICIENT AND prosperous, the worlds of Ultramar are as far from the industrial hells typically found throughout the Imperium as is possible to imagine. Its people are clean-limbed, well-nourished and content. Raised in a warrior society, there is no room for those who do not pull their own weight. Though each world is quite different, each shares an ethos with Macragge a hardy determination to be a valued, industrious contributor to the greater good of humanity.

At the heart of Macragge, in the most awe-inspiring shrine ever constructed, lies the body of Roboute Guilliman, whose mortal remains sit unmoving within a stasis field that simultaneously preserves his life while preventing any continuation. Droplets of blood from the fatal wound inflicted by a fallen brother hang suspended like the brightest rubies, and eyes that once beheld the Emperor when he walked amongst his people are now stilled and lifeless. Objects of wonder inspire devotion, and ever since the primarch's body was interred in the Temple of Correction, thousands upon thousands of pilgrims have come to prostrate themselves before him and do honour to his memory. Without Guilliman there would be no Ultramar. Without Guilliman, there would be no Imperium.

Such a debt of gratitude can never be fully repaid, and so tens of thousands travel the Pilgrim Trail of Roboute Guilliman, walking in his footsteps and breathing the air of worlds he saved. A thousand times a thousand shrines dot the routes through Ultramar, and pilgrims come from all across the galaxy to display

their devotion to the legendary warrior who stood against the encroaching darkness when the light of the Emperor was laid low by the Great Betrayer.

Hundreds of chartered vessels ply the transit routes between the worlds of Ultramar every day, bringing thousands of devotees to pray at the feet of the primarch. To stand in the presence of one of the Emperor's sons is an honour few will ever equal in their lives, for many will have spent their last credit just to reach this place. Many never leave again and die on Macragge, having fulfilled their life's dream to bathe in the golden light that fills the glorious sepulchre.

Every world of Ultramar has its own legends, shrines and reason for pilgrims to descend to its surface. Tallasar, for the majestic ruin of Castra Tanagra; Calth for its wondrous caves and ancient battlegrounds from the time of the Great Betrayal.

The dry, sirocco-swept surface of Tarentus was no different, but the vast star fort entering its orbit had not come to pay homage.

NOTHING EVER HAPPENED on Tarentus. That universal truth had held true for the six years since Rufus Quintus had been appointed to the post of Praefectus orae Tarentus, and the sixty before that, but if the frantic summons from his Orbital Command Centre was even halfway as serious as Nkiru suggested, the years of peace could be at an end.

Quintus made his way swiftly along the cloistered walkway that encircled the great Prosperine Tower at the heart of the prefect's palace on Tarentus, his steps heavy and ever so slightly off centre. Behind him trotted Nkiru, his Quaestor and Master of the Treasury, a stoop-shouldered man with sun-darkened skin who was surely born to be a master of numbers and statistics.

Quintus wore a heavy blue robe over his gene-bulked frame, complemented by the gold and silver rosette of a Praefectus. The robe was voluminous and exquisitely tailored, yet could not conceal his Astartes physique, nor the limp when he walked. His manner was that of a warrior, though there was a faded quality to his bearing that suggested it had been many years since he had faced the Emperor's enemies with a bolter in his hands.

"Any further word on what has Master Unathi so alarmed?" asked Quintus.

"No, my lord," said Nkiru, consulting his ever-present data-slate. "He was unspecific as to the nature of his alert. But from his tone, I suspect it may be something serious."

"His tone?" queried Quintus. "He doesn't *have* a tone. Does he?"

"He did this time, my lord. That's what makes me think this is something serious."

Quintus cursed. Unathi wasn't given to issuing false alerts, but he was terse when it came to providing any details regarding them. Succinctness was a trait Quintus admired, but in this case, Unathi's alert could mean anything from a space hulk to nothing more than unexpected debris.

He paused in his walk and leaned out over the cloister's balustrade.

The city of Axum spread out around him, a wonder of geometric precision, colourful buildings and pleasing lines. Planned out by Roboute Guilliman, it was located at the confluence of three rivers and surrounded by millions of hectares of arable land. High above, the great dome stretched over the city and hundreds of kilometres beyond, shielding the farmland around the city from the arid climate and parched earth that sucked all moisture from the land.

It was a pleasant enough place, with its people as handsome and industrious as any of Ultramar, but six years was a long time to spend dealing with farmers and civilians. Quintus looked up through the shimmering dome into an ochre sky of sunset, looking to see if there were any signs as to what had caused the alert. He saw nothing, but then he hadn't expected to see anything.

So enormous was the dome that it had its own internal climate, and warm zephyrs blew in from the east, honeyed by their journey across the great grain fields. He let the subtle mix of flavours mingle in the sense gland at the back of his throat.

"Pass word to the Masters of Irrigation that the soil of the eastern reaches is slightly acidic," said Quintus. "Their chemical additives are too strong. It will reduce the harvest."

"Of course, my lord," said Nkiru, pulling a stylus from the data-slate and making a notation.

Quintus shook his head with a wry smile.

"Something funny, my lord?"

"No, Nkiru," said Quintus. "Just thinking how quaint it is to be worried about soil acidity instead of the disposition of the enemy or the litanies of battle before strapping myself into a drop-pod."

"We all serve the Emperor in our different ways," said Nkiru dutifully.

Rufus Quintus had served as a combat sergeant in the veterans' company of Captain Agemman for over a century, fighting alongside his battle-brothers until the fateful moment on Ichar IV when a tyranid spore mine exploded in the midst of his squad. Virulent bio-acids had eaten away his armour and destroyed his legs while its poisons burned the inner surfaces of his lungs with each pained breath.

That he had lived at all was a miracle, but live he had, and though his service as a front-line warrior was at an end, he was still able to serve his Chapter. Too

whole to be interred in the armoured sarcophagus of a Dreadnought, too damaged to serve as a warrior, Quintus had been restored as well as the Chapter's Techmarines and Apothecaries could manage. His lower limbs and lungs were replaced with augmetics, and his long service had been honoured with the position of Praefectus orae Tarentus.

One of three worlds orbiting a common centre of gravity, Tarentus was an agri-world and part of the breadbasket of Ultramar. Billions of tonnes of foodstuffs were produced on Tarentus, and only by such planetary-scale agriculture could many other worlds of the Imperium flourish.

That his praefecture was a vital cog in the machine gave Quintus no comfort, for he was a man who longed to serve his Chapter in battle. The finest minds of ancient times had crafted the science that elevated him beyond human limits, yet the purpose for which he had been created was denied him.

Yet for all that, he was still a warrior of the Ultramarines and a man who could be counted on to fulfil his duty and rule with a studious mindset.

"Come, Nkiru," he said. "Let us see if Master Unathi can be made to elaborate on why he has called this alert."

THE INTERIOR OF the Orbital Command Centre was dry and parched, filled with cloying scents from the recessed cog shrines to the Machine-God. A bank of humming machinery filled one wall, with a row of hardwired servitors plugged into each station. A battered command throne sat in the corner of the chamber, linked to the wall of machinery by a host of cables running across the floor. From here, Master Unathi of the Adeptus Mechanicus kept watch over Axum and Tarentus.

Unathi commanded the orbital defences of Tarentus, a series of geostationary missile stations, gun batteries and a small fleet of system monitors. Each of these vessels made elliptical patrol circuits of the triple planets, but none were to be seen on the orbital plot displayed on the main picter. Instead, a hazy image of what looked like a fortress of spikes and hateful donjons swam in the sea-green display. Quintus knew of no such fortifications on Tarentus, and wondered where this vile structure was located and why it was displayed on his command centre picter.

The interior security door slid shut behind him and he said, "Very well, Master Unathi, what has you all riled up?"

"That," said Master Unathi, pointing with a waving, snake-like mechadendrite towards the image of the fortress. Quintus returned his gaze to the picter, now seeing a familiar outline amid its jagged crenellations. As

disturbing as it was, Quintus saw the outline of something that had once been magnificent and honourable buried beneath the layers of obscene embellishments.

“Emperor’s blood,” hissed Quintus. “It can’t be.”

Quintus had longed for something, anything, to remind him of what it meant to be a warrior of the Ultramarines, but this was more than he’d bargained for. A phrase that had been a popular saying of Sergeant Patrobus of the 5th came back to him, a phrase Quintus had never really understood until this moment.

Be careful what you wish for.

“My lord?” said Nkiru, seeing the blood drain from his face.

“Is that what I think it is?” he said, afraid of the answer.

“Clarification: what do you think it is?” replied Unathi, and Quintus was reminded of the literal-mindedness of the Martian priesthood.

“Is that the *Indomitable*?”

“Affirmative,” said Unathi.

QUINTUS MARCHED THE length of the city walls with Nkiru at his side. His Quaestor jogged to keep up with him, dodging in between the hurried preparations that had turned Axum from an industrious agricultural centre of trade into a defensive bulwark. Thousands of men and women manned the walls, each clad in the blue uniform jackets marked with the three bound corn sheaves heraldry of Tarentus. The city’s defence auxilia had responded in record time, the citizen militia answering the call to arms with alacrity and determination.

Such was the norm on worlds governed by the Ultramarines.

Quintus wore his battle armour, the plates polished and gleaming blue. The ivory of his shoulder guards and the gold of his chest plate glittered in the sunlight and though his legs were a dull iron colour, he was no less magnificent sight. His bolter was damped to his thigh and an ebonite-hilted sword was slung at his back beneath a cream cloak edged with repeating geometric motifs.

Word had been passed to the other cities of Tarentus and an astropathic alert hurled through space towards Macragge. Quintus stopped by a projecting redoubt and watched as the gunners spun the cranks to elevate the barrel of a defence turret heavenward. Falling sparks of light dropped through the evening sky, like a distant meteor shower sparkling over the mountains of the north. On any other day Quintus would have enjoyed such a sight but this was no meteor shower.

The orbital defences were destroyed, blasted to destruction by the unimaginable firepower of the *Indomitable*, the shattered wreckage falling to the

planet below and burning up as it hit the atmosphere. The remaining system monitors were being recalled even now, though Quintus had no expectation that they would make any difference to the conflict he knew was coming. The two monitors in orbit around Tarentus had been hunted down and destroyed by the fleet of vessels that swarmed around the gargantuan star fort.

With the destruction of the planetary defences, Quintus had no doubt an assault was coming. But whoever these attackers were, they would find that every city of Ultramar had teeth and knew how to fight.

He gave a nod of acknowledgement to the gunners and looked up through the shimmering haze of the dome arcing overhead.

"Will it protect us?" asked Nkiru, following his gaze.

"The dome is strong, and protected by layers of voids, but against the weapons of a Ramilies-class star fort I fear it will be battered down in moments."

"Then we are doomed?"

"If destruction is our enemies' only thought, then we have little hope of surviving a bombardment."

"Then why do we stand the defences to arms?" asked Nkiru, and Quintus was pleased to note the absence of fear in his Quaestor's voice.

"Because we are in the presence of the enemy and the Codex Astartes tells us that is what we must do," said Quintus.

"Of course," said Nkiru.

"But beyond that," elaborated Quintus, "the star fort above us is the *Indomitable*, which was lost with all hands six months ago. Ever since Lord Calgar defeated an infernal lord of the Ruinous Powers it has been hidden within the wilderness space of Ultramar. If it is back, it is certain those who command it seek to humble us beyond simple destruction from orbit."

"Do you know who commands it?"

"Not for certain," said Quintus, reaching up to touch the eagle on his breastplate, "but after seeing the corruption of the *Indomitable*'s character I fear the worst."

THE PLANET ON the viewscreen was a shimmering orb of pale yellow and soft blue, its outline hazed by the warmth of its temperate climates and near-constant weather systems. It had been simplicity itself to overwhelm the planet's orbital defences and though the power of the *Indomitable* was such that its guns could reduce its cities to ashen cinders, Honsou knew a far worse fate awaited its defenders.

He stood in the command chapel of the Basilica Dominastus, the vast citadel rearing from the heart of the star fort that had, until recently, been the command centre for the Ultramarines garrison. Those Ultramarines were now all dead, slain in the siege fought to capture the *Indomitable*.

In the crew pits below him, the warriors who had followed him from Medrengard eagerly awaited the unleashing of the star fort's new power. Cadaras Grendel, the horribly scarred killer, clenched and unclenched his fists in anticipation of violence. The Newborn watched with the interest of a student, while Ardaric Vaanes stood apart from his fellow warriors.

Honsou turned from his inner cabal towards the molten alcove behind him where a Techmarine might once have linked with the star fort's weapon systems and surveyors. Instead of a Techmarine, a monstrous form—part organic, part machine, part warp-matter—held court over the modified slaves and warriors filling the corrupted chapel.

A diabolical hybrid of Dreadnought and warp-spawn, the daemon lord M'kar was a hulking mass of dark iron and fluid flesh that seethed with immaterial energies and aeons-old malice. Its splay-clawed feet burned the deck where it stood, and its hideous bulk rippled with unnatural life where the armoured plates of the Dreadnought's sarcophagus no longer held sway. Its horned head was bestial and raw, like burned meat left to spoil, and its fangs were cruel and hooked like barbs. Two arms of inconstant form hung from its wide, armoured shoulders. Powerfully muscled with warp-spawned power, dark pistons and chains, they slithered like the limbs of Adept Cycerin. Glossy and black, one arm terminated in an enormous mechanical piston hammer, the other in a rotary cannon of fearsome calibre.

Eyes alive with unholy light regarded the planet on the viewscreen with a hate of such purity that it was almost physical. This creature had trod the worlds of men when the Legions had carved the Imperium from the raw meat of the galaxy, and had spent millennia honing that hatred. It was a creature of ultimate darkness, a chosen avatar of the primal gods of the empyrean.

To Honsou, M'kar represented a weapon to bring about the destruction of all his nemesis cared for. The worlds of Ultramar were dear to Uriel Ventris, the only warrior ever to defy him and live, and that made them targets for Honsou's rage. He cared little for the Long War, that aeons-long conflict waged by the followers of Horus Lupercal ever since their defeat in a time so long ago that it might as well have never existed.

M'kar, however, still carried that bright torch of hatred for the Ultramarines, and that was all that mattered to Honsou.

He had learned of the daemon lord's existence from ancient texts he'd

salvaged from the ruined fortress of Khalan-Ghol, and had set out to bend the daemon lord to his will.

With the help of Moriana, the damned seer who guided the wars of the Despoiler, Honsou had unlocked the secret of M'kar's fate. Imperial propaganda told that Marneus Calgar of the Ultramarines had defeated M'kar and torn the daemon limb from limb, thus banishing it back to the warp, but Moriana had told Honsou the truth of that encounter. M'kar had been defeated, this much was true, but it had not been destroyed. Unable to unmake the daemon's essence, Marneus Calgar had imprisoned it within the *Indomitable*, a Ramilies-class star fort that roamed the forgotten places within the darkest corners of Ultramar.

The daemon's power was bound with hateful incantations and sigils, and the more it struggled, the tighter they pulled. And there it had remained for decades until Honsou had set his course upon freeing it. The Iron Warriors and the thousands of soldiers Honsou had rallied to his banner during Huron Blackheart's Skull Harvest laid siege to the star fort and released the daemon lord from his incarceration.

Now his vengeance upon Uriel Ventris and the Ultramarines was within Honsou's grasp.

"Tarentus," hissed M'kar, its voice a hideous mélange of depthless echoes from another world and a grating mechanical growl. "I remember this world as it was when the Imperium was young. Nothing has changed."

The words were spoken with a disgusted hiss, as though the idea that such places could endure without change was anathema to the daemon lord.

"Do you need the *Indomitable* to break the dome open first?" asked Honsou.

The daemon lord turned its smouldering eyes upon him, and Honsou felt the full force of its spite, an age of hatred for the scions of Guilliman that had gone unquenched for ten thousand years. The daemon shook its head with a sucking sound of wet meat and the clatter of corroded gears.

"You think such a paltry barrier can withstand my daemon army?"

"I don't know, can it?"

The daemon laughed, the sound like a consumptive's death rattle.

"You have a need to flirt with death, Halfbreed," hissed M'kar, pointing an outstretched talon towards Honsou. "One day you will go too far."

"So people keep telling me, but here I am."

"Defy me and I will tear your soul apart," promised M'kar.

Honsou shook his head and turned away. "No, you won't. You need me."

"We shall see," spat the daemon.

Honsou nodded towards the planet in the viewscreen.

"I'm waiting," he said. "Let's see what you can do."

QUINTUS LISTENED TO the streaming vox updates from Master Unathi with a growing sense of unease. Despite his earlier confident words to Nkiru, there was no indication that any assault was inbound. Darkness had fallen and the night air smelled of turned earth and harvested crops. Blazing arc lights swept the ground before the high walls of Axum and stabbed into the sky to unmask enemy fliers.

Every gun in the city was trained on the sky, and the tension hung on a knife-edge. This level of readiness could not be maintained for long, and Quintus was on the verge of ordering a relaxation of the city's defensive posture when he tasted something rank on the wind blowing in from the east.

It began as a foulness that reminded him of the blazing fields of dead xeno organisms on Ichar IV when the killing was done. Vast, city-sized pyres of alien corpses were burned to ashes in the aftermath of the fighting, and the stench of charred alien meat was a rank aftertaste that no rebreather could completely dispel.

Quintus tasted something similar, a horrid reek of dead things and corruption; a foulness that was unnatural and unclean. It was the antithesis of all that was good and pure in the world, and Quintus gagged as it swept over the ramparts.

He turned his gaze to the east, the autosenses of his visor easily penetrating the gloom of the far-off fields. His heart lurched as he saw hectare upon hectare of rotted vegetable matter, hundreds of kilometres square of mulched crop and decayed fields. The entirety of the east was lost, a swelling sea of rotten vegetation and sterilised earth.

An arc light next to Quintus blew out in sprays of fat orange sparks, and he turned his attention back to the city as the dark wind surged like a swirling miasma. He tasted ashes and the sour bile of despair, a bleak hopelessness that swept through him like a virus. Quintus angrily shook himself free of the sensation, gritting his teeth as he focussed on his duty as commander of this world.

Marneus Calgar had handed Quintus the Praefecture Staff, charging him with the defence of Tarentus, and he'd be damned before he failed in that duty to his Chapter Master.

Lights began failing throughout the city and a grotesque buzzing swelled on the edge of hearing, like a static-filled picter with a billion signals shrieking and screaming all at once.

Soldiers dropped to their knees as the sourceless sound blared. No decibel meter would have registered more than background noise, for it resonated in the mind, the sound of madness and pain combined. Soldiers fired their rifles at unseen enemies, their shots stabbing wildly into the darkness. Cries of fear

turned to terror and pain as screaming defence auxilia fighters turned their swords and pistols on each other, fighting as though confronted by their worst nightmares made real.

The dark wind blew ever stronger and the air beneath the dome seethed with light as storms of unnatural colours blew to life with unnatural swiftness. Shapes moved in the clouds, like sharks through a billowing cloud of blood in the ocean. Quintus felt a host of hungry eyes looking down upon his city, mountainous creatures with bodies so vast they could not exist in this world, slavering beasts of hideous appetite and aeons-old lust for the souls of mankind. Unearthly laughter drifted on the wind and the clouds gathered together in one giant thunderhead.

An arcing bolt of lightning lanced from the clouds, flashing into existence with impossible brightness. It slammed down in the centre of the city but instead of a fleeting blaze of light, the lightning remained in place. Like a frozen pict image, the lightning bolt connected the sky and the earth in a looping, twisting tracery of energy.

Quintus felt the air grow thin, as though reality had become membranous and a multitude of hitherto unseen worlds pressed in from all around. He stared at the impossible lightning bolt, watching in horror as it seemed to unfold like a tear ripped in the curtain of night.

He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but it was already too late.

The tear opened wider and an unstoppable army of nightmares poured from the lightning.

“THIS,” SAID CADARAS Grendel, “is impressive.”

Honsou had to agree with his lieutenant, watching the scenes of carnage unfolding on the planet below. Flayed beasts with obsidian horns and claws ripped flesh from the bones of the city’s defenders, while formless things of jelly-like ooze with teeth devoured the corpses of the fallen. Winged bat-creatures of utter darkness capered in the air, filling the city with their apocalyptic shrieking.

A violent tide of warp-spawned abominations filled the city, killing and destroying without mercy. Towering juggernauts of brazen flesh demolished entire buildings with their bulk, while howling pack hunters with raw meat skin dragged weeping victims from their hiding places. A riot of horrific forms rampaged below, and there was nothing the defenders could do to stop it.

“That must be their leader,” said Honsou, pointing to the image of a warrior in blue armour fighting against the hordes with an energy-sheathed sword. “One

of Calgar's lackeys."

"A veteran," said Ardaric Vaanes, the renegade Raven Guard warrior Honsou had recruited prior to leaving Medrengard. "And a broken one at that."

Honsou looked closer, now seeing the ivory trims on the warrior's armour and the dull gleam of bionics beneath the swarming monsters that beset him. The veteran's sword plunged into the body of a wiry daemon with skin the colour of an infected wound. Black ichor sprayed, but before the warrior could withdraw his blade, a scaled minotaur creature with russet skin and crackling horns gored him and hurled his body from the walls.

Honsou lost sight of the veteran as his body broke on the ground and the pack predators fell upon him with claw and fang.

"Is this how we are going to conquer Ultramar?" asked the Newborn, its dead skin bathed in the reflected light of the city's death. "It doesn't seem very… honourable."

"Honourable?" hissed Grendel with a bark of bitter amusement. "What the hell's honour got to do with anything?"

"And who said anything about conquest?" said Honsou.

"So what are we doing here?" asked Vaanes.

"We're here to destroy," said Grendel with relish, the scars around his mouth and eyes weeping infected fluid. Vaanes grimaced in disgust, and not without reason.

Grendel's face was a horrific mask of poorly-healed scars, his Astartes ability to survive mortal wounds tested to its limit by the damage done to him in the closing moments of the battle to take the *Indomitable*. An Imperial agent had shot Grendel with an archaic melta pistol and though his armour and sheer venom saved his life, his face was horribly burned. To see him with the Newborn was like seeing two twins standing together, for its face was as dreadfully malformed as Grendel's.

A patchwork mélange of stolen skin sewn together from the corpses of Medrengard, the Newborn's face was a hideous fleshmask through which its all too familiar stormcloud grey eyes stared with pain-filled innocence. Honsou almost laughed at the thought, knowing of the slaughters and murder it had done in his name. Crafted by daemonic womb-mothers, torn into existence by the Savage Morticians and clad in the armour of the Iron Warriors, there was nothing innocent about the Newborn.

Alone of Honsou's followers, Ardaric Vaanes had come through their many conflicts without disfigurement, save the ritual cuts on his angular cheeks and a trio of scars above his left eye where long service studs had been removed. The plates of his battle armour were black, its shoulder guards without any heraldic

devices. Scouring winds on the planet where Honsou had consulted Moriana had stripped his armour bare, and Vaanes had chosen not to renew them.

"Is that right, Honsou?" demanded Vaanes. "Are we just here to serve your vengeance?"

"What if we are?"

Vaanes shrugged, as though the matter were of no real import. "I need to know what I'm fighting for. It's been a long time since I've known."

"You fight because that's what he damn well tells you to do," spat Grendel. "That's a good enough reason to kill Imperials, isn't it?"

"Good enough for you, Grendel," snapped Vaanes.

Honsou let them spar, knowing that a little dissent in his underlings was never a bad thing. Fight amongst themselves and they couldn't unite to unseat him. The Newborn watched impassively, its loyalty to Honsou won through months of indoctrination and psycho-conditioning. Even the latest bouts of seizures, lunatic ravings and visions of a life unlived hadn't dented *that* devotion.

"We're here to kill Uriel Ventris and hurt him where it matters most," said Honsou.

"No," said a voice from above, as a shadow fell upon them, its touch icy and unclean.

Honsou turned his head and saw the dread form of M'kar standing over them, its armoured skin alive with traceries of warp energy. Traces of the Dreadnought it had possessed were still visible beneath its undulant warp-flesh, and Honsou saw the burned remnants of the Ultramarines inverted omega symbol at its shoulder.

"Your vengeance means nothing, Halfbreed," hissed the daemon. "The heart of Guilliman's empire must burn. The Eternal Powers require it. All else is irrelevant."

The daemon turned away, its every step like the hammer of a coffin nail.

Honsou bit back a venomous comment, feeling his warriors' eyes upon him.

"What next?" said Grendel.

"Let the monster have its moment and destroy this world's cities," said Honsou, nodding towards the viewscreen. "This planet means nothing to us, it's just the lighting of the fuse."

"And then?" asked Vaanes.

"Then we wait for the Ultramarines to react," said Honsou.

"They'll come here in force," promised Vaanes.

Honsou grinned. "That's what I'm counting on."

TWO

IT'S MORNING, BUT it's still dark and he can't stifle a yawn as it surfaces with the inevitability of a buried secret. He steps onto the high ramparts of the Scelus Progenium, and the cold hits his thin body like a blow. He lets out a soft gasp and follows Commissar Coehoorn onto the ice-slick ramparts, keeping his eyes glued to the frozen stones to avoid slipping. Coehoorn had flogged the last boy who'd slipped and allowed the scholam's flag to touch the ground. His breath mists as Coehoorn walks towards the heavy blast door of Ursakar's Tower, and he trots after him with careful steps.

Junior cadets aren't permitted to wear winter coats yet, and his body is shivering uncontrollably. His fingers grip the flagpole tightly and he clamps his jaw together to stop his teeth chattering. The senior cadets manning the walk are bundled in fur-lined greatcoats, stamping around the ramparts with lasrifles slung at their backs and gloved hands tucked in their pockets. No sooner has Commissar Coehoorn appeared than those hands are withdrawn from pockets and the rifles are returned to the shoulder arms position.

Stars twinkle in the pre-dawn sky, and he recalls how unusual it is to see lights above that aren't orbital defences or starships in low orbit. He likes looking at the stars, but life at Scelus Progenium leaves little room for stargazing. Little room for anything fun for that matter.

It's only been a week and he hates it already. Cadet Miklo has established his dominance of the new class with a vicious display of strength, and the swelling above his right eye is still tender to the touch. He wishes his mother had never sent him here. He wishes his father hadn't been killed in the wars raging around Fortress Cadia, thus dooming him to this frozen hellhole. His mother claims it will make a man of him, but he curses the ill-luck that has seen the premature end of his youth. Only twelve Terran standard and his life as a child is over, or so the commissar instructors are fond of telling them every day.

Coehoorn has reached the tower's door, but it's limned with ice and wedged shut. The commissar wraps the metal fingers of his augmetic arm around the handle and tugs sharply. The door opens outwards with a crack of breaking ice and crystal shards fall to the steps.

"Hurry up, Cadet Samuquan," snaps Coehoorn. "If that flag isn't raised by oh-five-hundred hours, you'll feel the bite of my lash."

He nods and through chattering teeth says, "Yes, Commissar Coehoorn!"

The leather-tough commissar looks his scrawny body up and down, as though wondering whether to take the flag from him, but contents himself with a dismissive shake of his head and leads the way inside.

The tower is, if anything, colder than the outside, but before he can contemplate this apparent contradiction, Commissar Coehoorn tramps up the spiral steps towards its summit. Stuttering lumen globes fizz with the dimmest illumination, and he quickly follows his class instructor, grateful to be out of the bitingly sharp wind raking the cold granite walls of the scholam. The rest of his class will still be asleep, but not for long. As soon as the aquila flag is raised over the battlements, the blaring reveille call will echo through the bare dormitories at deafening volume.

Strange… he never thought he'd miss the sprawling stacks and towers of Thracian Primaris, the noise and the stink and the masses of people. As the son of an officer, it was his right to be educated at the scholam, and his mother kept telling him how he should be grateful for such an honour. Some honour, he thinks as he climbs the cold, slippery steps.

The route upwards is narrow and he has to concentrate to avoid scraping the flag's finial on the dripping walls. The last boy to do that was flogged. A lot of boys are flogged at Scelus Progenium.

He reaches the top of the tower without damaging the flag and lets out a misty breath as he emerges onto its crenellated roof. Despite the horribly early hour and the bone-deep tiredness in his limbs, he is stunned at the vista before him. Icy mountains sweep into the sky, taller than the highest stack back home, and utterly white, as though painted with a fresh coat of anti-blast wash.

A hundred kilometres to the south, a haze of sulphurous fog and smeared light marks Scelium, the nearest city to the gambrel-roofed fortress he now calls home. New cadets pass through Scelium on their way to the scholam, and though it is nowhere near as vast as the cities of Thracian Primaris, it is an impressive place, with ice-locked hive stacks and cliff-like Titan fabriks.

"This isn't a scenic tour, cadet," barks Coehoorn. "Attend to your duty."

He nods and marches to the centre of the tower, where he's been told there will be a slot for him to place the flag. The aquila flag is taken down every night and raised every morning. Why they don't just leave it up is a mystery to him, but even after only a week he knows the likely fate of any boy who might suggest leaving the flag in place overnight.

He looks down and sees there's no slot in the stone. Ice has formed over the ground and he looks desperately for somewhere to place the flag before the first rays of sun break across the mountains. He feels Commissar Coehoorn's eyes boring into his back and knows this will be his only chance to avoid a flogging.

He spots what might be a slight depression and uses his boot heel to scrape away the top layer of ice. Taking the flagpole in both hands he thrusts the pointed tip of the base downwards. Ice cracks and he lets out a pent-up breath as the flagpole sinks into the slot. He steps back and salutes as the wind catches the flag and billows its red and black length out above him. The first sunrays peek over the mountaintops and catch the gold-stitched eagle with a crisp yellow light.

He looks up at the flag, pleased beyond words he has managed to raise the flag without incident. Beyond its rippling fabric, he sees fiery lights and his eyes narrow as he sees that, instead of moving across the sky, they look as if they're getting bigger. A meteor shower?

Before he can say anything, the first notes of reveille sound, stirring blasts of a recorded triumphal band that echo through the draughty hallways and icy cloisters of the scholam below. He tilts his head to the side as he sees the lights above are leaving bright afterimages in the sky, as though they're falling at great speed.

"Come on, cadet," snaps Coehoorn. "No dawdling."

He points to the sky and says, "Commissar?"

One look at Coehoorn's face is enough to tell him that this is something very bad.

Coehoorn bolts for the stairs, but by now the streaking objects are close enough to see that they are not meteors. They are bare metal seedpods, streaking towards the scholam at incredible speed and leaving burning contrails in their wake. He follows Coehoorn's dash down to the ramparts.

By the time he gets there, the reveille notes have been replaced by alert klaxons. Tower-mounted turrets are unmasking and power-shielded mantlets are deploying. Acrid fog billows over the ramparts and he can't see Commissar Coehoorn. For the first time, he feels real fear and looks up to reacquire the falling seedpods.

One slams into the far end of the rampart with a thunderous impact and he slips on the ice as the Shockwave spreads. Fire and smoke wreath its landing, but he still can't see what it is. He hears shouting and the snapping fire of lasrifles. Booming roars bounce around the stone ramparts as more of the metal seedpods slam down.

He scrabbles to his feet, hot fear pumping around his system as screams and hard bangs roar from the smoke. Man-shaped shadows move in the haze, but something must be distorting their size, because they're far too big to be men. He runs for the blast door that leads to the safety of the scholam's interior as more stuttering blasts of gunfire tear through the early morning.

Commissar Coehoorn staggers from the smoke. The cadet cries out in terror as he sees his instructor's chest is a deep crater of exploded bone and dripping red matter. The commissar grabs his shoulder and sinks to his knees with a look of incredulous pain. Blood pours from his mouth and his face is a clenched fist of effort as he speaks.

"Run, Cadet Samuquan," commands Coehoorn. "Run for your life."

He needs no second telling, and abandons the dying commissar. Tears of terror freeze on his cheeks as he slips and slides across the ramparts. More fiery seedpods batter the ramparts and the tramp of heavy feet crunch through the ice. Fizzing las-blasts crisscross the ramparts and he jumps every time he hears the booming detonations of the attackers' guns.

He runs blindly, not knowing where he's going, but knowing he needs to run. It doesn't matter where he is heading. That he runs is enough for his panic. Sulphurous smoke renders everything blurred and he can't see anything. He risks a glance over his shoulder and runs headlong into a wall that wasn't there before. It's a wall of iron and yellow chevrons, and he flops onto his backside, his face stinging from the impact.

Looking up, he sees it's not a wall, it's an enormous person.

Surely this towering slab of iron and yellow armour is too big to be a person. The shoulders are far too wide and he carries a smoking gun that's surely heavier than any normal man could lift.

But this is no normal man. This is a nightmare from the cautionary vids come to life.

A horned helmet looks down at him, its eyes a shimmering red. There is no emotion in those eyes, only a blank, soulless emptiness. He is beneath this warrior's notice, unworthy of being killed.

"Who are you?" he weeps, feeling his control of his bodily functions surrender to the overwhelming terror.

The warrior does not answer, but reaches down and lifts him from the ground as easily as though he weighs nothing at all. With a casual flick of the warrior's wrist he's flying through the air. He lands heavily and skids across the ice, coming to rest at the edge of the blood-soaked ramparts. He sees he's not alone. The warriors in the armour of iron have gathered up perhaps thirty other cadets.

Looking at their tear- and snot-streaked faces, he sees none are over thirteen. Older cadets are tossed from the ramparts like waste. He closes his eyes, curling into a foetal ball and crying for his mother.

CAPTAIN URIEL VENTRIS gasped as his eyes snapped open. The breath

caught in his throat as he let out a pent-up gasp of fear. The sensation was so alien to him that he felt a moment's dislocation as he saw he was no longer in the arming chambers of the 4th Company barracks. He looked down at his hands, where moments before—at least as far as he could remember it had been moments before—he had been cleaning his bolter.

The iron-armoured warrior… Commissar Coehoorn… the blood-freezing terror…

The sensation of cold and fear drained from his body, the last lingering traces of the… not vision, but *experience*, fading from his consciousness. He hadn't been a passive observer of this youngster's fate; he had *shared* it, as though he had actually lived it. He dimly recalled a name, the last, shouted imprecation of the dying commissar. Was that his… the boy's name?

"Cadet Samuquan," whispered Uriel. "That was it."

The image of the young boy was so strong in his mind that he stared at his hands as though amazed they were so huge. Uriel lifted his eyes and saw a wall of black marble before him, its surface inscribed with a long list of names inlaid with gold leaf. As he read the first name, he knew without counting them that there were seventy-eight. He knew this because he had carved them himself, a lifetime ago.

This was the Temple of Correction, the sepulchre of Roboute Guilliman and most revered place in all Ultramar. The walls of this vast circular pantheon were lined with slabs of black marble hewn from the airless quarries of Formaska, each one chiselled with the names of Ultramarines warriors who had fallen in battle.

Uriel was kneeling before the bronze-edged slab dedicated to the dead of Tarsis Ultra, a desperate war fought to save an Imperial world from the jaws of the Great Devourer. Though the cost had been high, victory had been won, but now that victory had been snatched from the Chapter.

Tarsis Ultra was gone, its once industrious heart now stilled by an unknown force that had rendered it as desolate and lifeless as Prandium. No one yet knew what had destroyed this world that Roboute Guilliman had liberated during the heady days of the Great Crusade, and the ache in Uriel's heart was as fresh and raw as it had been on the day Lord Admiral Tiberius had told him of the planet's doom. The Ultramarines had been oath-sworn to defend Tarsis Ultra, and its death was a stain on their honour that could only be erased by the destruction of the nameless foe that had murdered an entire world.

Was this why he found himself before the names of the dead? Was he here to reassure them that their sacrifice had not been without merit, that they *had* died for something worthwhile? Or had he been led here to remind him of his duty?

The living endure, but the dead have long memories.

Uriel stood as sensory input around him pushed the vicarious sensations of another's life from the rear portions of his brain. A swelling murmured shuffling came to him, the sound of thousands of sandaled feet on marble from the mass of pilgrims thronging the Temple of Correction. Uriel heard their gaps of awe, mixed with the sound of weeping, a common enough response to the sight of Roboute Guilliman's magnificent form.

It was said that no one could gaze upon one of the Emperor's sons without feeling inadequate, but to look upon the serene form of Roboute Guilliman was to be judged worthy of the gift of humanity. None who made the arduous journey to Macragge left without a profound sense of humility and peace.

Finally daring to turn around, Uriel looked up into the perfect features of his gene-sire.

Unchanged since the day he had been dealt a mortal wound by a warrior he had once called brother, Roboute Guilliman sat unmoving upon his pale throne atop an enormous plinth of golden marble, a faint shimmer surrounding his armoured body. Frozen in time, the primarch of the Ultramarines stood sentinel over his adoptive home world and regarded those who had come to pay him homage with a serene, impassive gaze. Uriel wished, as did all Ultramarines, that he could have fought alongside the heroes of those long ago days, when the Imperium battled for its very survival against the Arch-Traitors. The Library of Ptolemy was replete with stirring tales of that legendary aeon, though the Ultramarines role in that titanic conflict was so shrouded in veils of secrecy and myth that not even Librarian Tigurius himself knew the whole truth of it.

Uriel turned his gaze from the primarch, for one cannot long look upon the sun. Instead, he turned his attention to the mighty structure that housed the primarch. It was a magnificent edifice, a marvel of construction so singular that even the most gifted magi of the Adeptus Mechanicus came to wonder at its secrets. Legend told that the tallest peak of Macragge had been quarried for the marble of its construction and an entire warfleet had been dismantled to provide the plasteel. Such hyperbole was, of course, untrue, but served to convey the proper sense of reverence the sepulchre demanded from its visitors.

Open-mouthed pilgrims wandered the interior precincts of the temple, shepherded by blue-jacketed soldiers from the Macragge Defence Auxilia, who stood guard at each entrance to the primarch's resting place. These men were not the primarch's only defence, for hand-picked warriors of Captain Agemman's 1st Company watched over this sacred temple, their armour bone white and trimmed with gold.

Helots in grey chitons escorted groups of pilgrims through the temple,

pointing out the many architectural wonders of the building, though it would take a lifetime to catalogue them all. Heads craned upwards as the rapturous pilgrims were shown the Primarch's Arch, which was bathed in intertwined beams of spectral light from the Crystal Dome. Weeping men and women were led through Orphul's Gate, along the Triumphal Colonnade and finally shown the majesty of the Gallery of Ice and its forest of white and gold.

None who set foot in the Temple of Correction were ever the same again, whether mortal or Astartes, and though Uriel had visited this place many times, he was changed each time he walked within its memory-haunted precincts.

Uriel felt a presence next to him and turned to see a man clad in ragged, travel-stained clothes. Unshaven and painfully thin, he was the very image of a pilgrim who had spent every last scrap of his wealth to come to Macragge and stand in the primarch's presence. A dirty knapsack was slung over one shoulder, and the man reached inside to withdraw something that reflected the light from the Crystal Dome as he held it out to Uriel.

A small carving cut from steatite lay in the man's palm, fashioned to resemble a tower with an eagle atop its ramparts. The work was of exquisite quality, easily the equal of anything produced by the artisans of Ultramar, its every carved line worked with infinite care and polished to a smooth finish.

"Thank you," said Uriel, touched by this simple gesture, but the man was already turning away. Uriel was about to go after him, to learn this craftsman's name and where he had come from, but the sound of footsteps behind him pulled him up short as he recognised the heavy tread of Space Marines.

"We've been looking all over for you," said a gruff voice that suggested it was Uriel's fault the seekers hadn't found him until now.

"You were supposed to be in the company arming chambers," said another voice, clipped and with the unmistakable sharpness of a native of Macragge.

Uriel turned from his anonymous benefactor to see two warriors armoured in polished battle armour painted with the colours of 4th Company sergeants. It had been too long since these warriors had stood together, and Uriel's heart swelled with pride to see the renewed bond of brotherhood between them.

Learchus, once Uriel's nemesis at the Agiselus training barracks, but now his loyal supporter, was the quintessential warrior of the Ultramarines. The starched tones of a Macragge native belonged to Learchus, a warrior within whose veins ran the blood of ancient heroes. Though it had been Learchus that saw Uriel sent on his Death Oath, the war on Pavonis had given his veteran sergeant a unique perspective on the circumstances that had forced Uriel to make the decisions that had led to his exile. Learchus' unbending adherence to the ways of the Codex Astartes had been tempered by fighting behind enemy lines on Pavonis, and

Uriel now counted him as a true brother.

Learchus' companion, Pasanius, was Uriel's oldest friend. They had grown up together, and Pasanius had helped Uriel when many others had turned their back on the taciturn and brooding recruit from Calth. Such was Pasanius' bulk that he wore a suit of battle plate that incorporated elements cannibalised from a suit of Terminator armour. Half a head taller than Learchus, his shoulders were broader and his chest wider than even the veterans equipped to wear such blessed suits of armour.

Uriel smiled to see Pasanius clad in blue and returned to his rank of sergeant once more, for he had been forced to go to war on Pavonis without him. Pasanius now sported a bronze and iron augmetic arm, fashioned to his precise specifications by Techmarine Harkus in his newly adapted forge, one rebuilt to accommodate his extra bulk now that his mortal remains were interred within a Dreadnought.

Pasanius came forward and shook Uriel's hand. The augmetic arm was a work of art, a powerful yet delicate mechanism that enhanced Pasanius' already fearsome strength. Its surfaces glittered in the temple's multicoloured light, the metal gleaming and pristine, but Uriel caught sight of a series of short grooves cut into the metal by an Astartes combat blade.

"Harkus will have your hide if he sees that," said Uriel, nodding towards the grooves.

"He'll understand," said Pasanius. "I had to be sure the Bringer of Darkness was out of me."

Uriel nodded, understanding the source of his friend's caution.

"Well?" asked Learchus. "Why were you not in the arming chambers?"

"Look where we are, Learchus," said Pasanius. "Do any of us need a reason to be here?"

"I suppose not," replied Learchus, the ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"I *was* in my arming chamber, attending to my battle gear," said Uriel, unsure how much he wanted to tell his sergeants of how he had come to this place, "but then I had a powerful sensation that I had to come here."

"That's a good omen, see?" said Pasanius. "A black aircraft arrives in the dead of night without so much as an alert bulletin passed down the chain, and then we find our captain in the Shrine of the Primarch? I'm telling you it's a sign. We'll be getting a tasking order soon."

"You do not know that for certain," said Learchus. "You are jumping at shadows."

"Am I? We'll be readying the 4th for war within the day, you mark my

words,” Pasanius promised, turning to Uriel. “Have you heard any news? Do you know who has come to Macragge?”

“Not yet,” said Uriel. “I am in the dark as much as you.”

At the loneliest hour of night, a midnight-black Thunderhawk had flown down to the Fortress of Hera, shrouded in mystery and without the fanfare that usually accompanied the arrival of fellow Adeptus Astartes. Normally any traffic to the surface of the Ultramarines home world would merit a bulletin, but the vox-channels were silent, as though this craft had never arrived. Warriors of the 4th Company on sentry duty had logged the arrival of the gunship, but no word had filtered down from above. It reeked of mystery, but one that had no official answer as yet.

“Not for much longer, I suspect,” said Learchus, as though anticipating Uriel’s thought. “You have been summoned to the top of the mountain. That is why we were looking for you.”

“The top of the mountain,” said Uriel, heading towards the temple’s western gateway. “The Chapter Master’s chambers?”

“Aye,” said Pasanius, following at his right shoulder. “We’ve been summoned.”

“The captain has been summoned,” corrected Learchus at his left.

“And his senior sergeants, I’d warrant. Stands to reason they’d want us there too.”

Uriel smiled. “Nothing irks you like a mystery, eh, Pasanius?”

“Just looking forward to getting back into action,” said Pasanius brightly. “It’s been too long since I’ve taken the field with the 4th.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” said Learchus, and Uriel shivered as a cold breeze blew through the Temple of Correction.

A THOUSAND STEPS led from the last plateau to the top of the mountain, a thousand steps worn smooth by the passage of countless supplicants to the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines. Winding up the rugged height of the Valley of Laponis, the stepped flanks of the great canyon were shawled in highland fir and glistened with sprinklings of quartz. Intertwined rainbows arced across the valley as glacial water thundered from the top of the mountain and fell in misty sheets to the rocks below.

Uriel, Pasanius and Learchus ascended the last stair and stared out over Macragge from the roof of the world. White mountains stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions, though the western horizon glittered with the distant hint of ocean.

The vast body of the structure of the Ultramarines fortress-monastery was built around the mightiest peaks of Macragge, a gigantic, columned masterpiece of grace, strength and artful wonder. Its eternal surfaces were white and pristine, yet within its spacious chambers and mighty androns it was colourful and vibrant, each wall decorated with mosaics and murals so lifelike it felt like they were windows into wondrous realms of light and marvel.

Golden geodesic domes topped miniature fortresses crusted with graceful balconies, and slender glass walkways stepped down towards the low foothills of Macragge, while slender silver-steel buttresses gave the impression of great strength and light, airy weightlessness. Yet for all its apparent lightness of form, there was no stronger fortification or more solid structure in all the Imperium. Every building within its high walls was a citadel in its own right, capable of being held by only a small number of defenders against a far larger force.

"It never gets any less beautiful," said Learchus with feeling. "I could stay here all day."

"Aye, it's a grand view right enough," agreed Pasanius. Uriel had to agree with his sergeants, for the view was one of stunning magnificence, a continent-sized fastness so massive that only one other manmade structure in the galaxy could compare to its grandeur—the Imperial Palace.

"I have never been to Terra," said Uriel, running with the thought, "but from what I hear of its forgotten, benighted streets, abandoned wings, collapsed structures and pilgrim shanty towns I suspect the Fortress of Hera to be the more impressive."

Learchus gave him a sidelong glance, and Uriel smiled. "I know," said Uriel. "To suggest that Macragge outshines Terra is mildly heretical."

"It is not that," said Learchus. "I am just surprised you would not immediately think Macragge superior. Roboute Guilliman himself designed and built the Fortress of Hera."

Pasanius laughed. "Just like he built every other incredible structure in Ultramar."

"You don't see the hand of the primarch in this place?" asked Learchus.

"Of course I do, but for him to have designed and constructed everything folk claim he did, he'd need to have spent the Great Crusade building instead of fighting."

Uriel left his sergeants to their amiable banter and cast his gaze out over the Valley of Laponis. It had been little more than a narrow cleft in the mountain when Roboute Guilliman had first come to Macragge, but within a decade it had been transformed into a soaringly deep canyon of stepped galleries. The great slabs of marble that made up the bulk of the fortress' structure had been hewn

from its sides, and though time and water had softened its quarried edges, it was still a thousand-kilometre-long gouge in the planet's surface.

"Come," said Uriel, turning from the view. "I have kept Lord Calgar waiting long enough."

Uriel marched towards the highest structure on Macragge, the Chapter Master's Chambers—the top of the mountain. Though it was the inner sanctum of a warrior who commanded no less than eight systems, it was a simple, open-toped structure, modestly appointed and clad in white marble veined with gold. Two warriors in Terminator armour guarded the bronze gate at its entrance, armed with long-bladed polearms and storm bolters.

Uriel nodded respectfully as they entered the shadowed portico and passed into a terrazzo-floored vestibule where blue-robed helots waited with platters bearing goblets of aromatic wine. Uriel took one as he recognised the distinctively ripe aroma of Calthian wine, and Pasanius and Learchus did likewise.

Emerging into the sunken inner courtyard, Uriel felt an unfamiliar swell of wariness as he saw the assembly awaiting his arrival. Not since he had stood before the Chapter Master accused of heresy had he been part of so august a gathering of heroes.

Mightiest of them all was the giant warrior who stood in discourse with a figure robed in white who had his back to Uriel. He towered over the robed man, his armour the brightest blue imaginable, and every plate gleaming with a fresh application of lapping powder and sacred unguents. The polished quartz of his inverted omega captured the sunlight and the trims of his shoulder guards shone like molten gold. This warrior's skill at arms had broken entire armies and enemy worlds had surrendered at the mere mention of his name, for it was a name that stood for courage and honour, strength of character and nobility of purpose.

Marneus Augustus Calgar, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines.

Adamant rings hung from his right ear and his left eye was a crimson, gem-like bionic with the finest copper wire linking its mechanics to the back of his skull. Marneus Calgar's granite-carved face had lost none of its cunning or insight in the centuries he had led the Ultramarines to victory after victory, and the vitality of his enormous presence was palpable.

Attending this mortal god were his captains of battle, the mightiest warriors of Ultramar and each one a hero in his own right.

There, lounging next to the great statue of the first Battle King of Macragge at the heart of the courtyard was Captain Sicarius. The 2nd Company captain shared a joke with his sergeants, the ribald hero of Black Reach who some called

reckless. Beside him, yet subtly apart, was the immense presence of First Captain Agemman of the Veteran Company. The title of First Captain was an old one, yet it was a perfect fit for the Regent of Ultramar, his brooding countenance and hoary wisdom known only too well to Uriel.

Galenus of the 5th paced at the edge of the courtyard, his face etched with anger and his fists tightly clenched. Across from Galenus were Epathus of the 6th and Sinon of the 9th. Both looked anxious at this summons, for they were captains of the reserve companies, not front-line battle leaders. Though both were as brave and capable as any Ultramarines warrior, only in times of great need were the reserve companies called to war.

Lastly, Captain Antilochus and Torias Telion of the 10th stood in the shadows of the cloister, as though unwilling to expose themselves to the light of Macragge's sun.

Marneus Calgar looked up and Uriel saw his expression was serious, bereft of the great warmth Uriel had last seen upon his return from the war against the tau on Pavonis. Calgar's eyes were cold flint, and he nodded curtly as Uriel and his sergeants entered.

"Captain Ventris," said Calgar, beckoning them into the courtyard. "Our council is almost assembled."

"My lord," said Uriel with a crisp bow of acknowledgement.

"Every captain on Macragge," whispered Pasanius as they stepped down into the courtyard, "Must be serious."

Before Uriel could answer, three warriors in shadow-black armour stepped from the rear cloisters of the courtyard. They had been standing in plain sight, but Uriel had not seen them, as though the darkness cloaked them more thoroughly than any camouflage. Torias Telion's hand flashed to his sidearm, and Uriel realised with a start that even the legendary Scout-sergeant had been completely unaware of these warriors' presence.

Their shoulder guards bore the image of a pale white bird and Uriel remembered fighting alongside a warrior who bore identical heraldry once before. The lead warrior wore a cloak of iridescent black feathers, and his helmet was an older Mark VI variant with dark wings sweeping back from the faceplate. The fluidity of his movements was incredible, as though his feet barely touched the ground.

The warrior gave Uriel an almost imperceptible nod.

"Raven Guard," said Learchus.

"I told you this was serious," added Pasanius.

Uriel nodded. "I think you might be right," he said.

THREE

LORD CALGAR BEGAN by introducing the non-Ultramarines that joined their council upon Macragge, but Uriel already recognised one of the guests. The white-robed priest of Mars was already known to the warriors of the 4th Company, for they had fought alongside his master on the battlefields of Tarsis Ultra.

“This is Vianco Locard of the Adeptus Mechanicus,” said Calgar as the robed priest gave a precisely modulated bow. The magos wore a cog-toothed medallion of gold and, save for the whirring augmetic that covered his right eye, his hairless features were bereft of anything obviously artificial. Hinged lenses of varying size were attached to a whirring device perched on his shoulder, each capable of sliding forward to drop before his glowing red bionic eye.

As Locard stepped down into the courtyard, Uriel was reminded of his first meeting with the magos; in the chamber of the Tarsis fresco, as they planned how to fight the incoming tyranid splinter fleet. Locard moved on metallic caliper-like legs that protruded from the bottom of his robes.

He clasped metallic hands that clicked with tiny internal movements, and a thin smile creased his pallid features.

“Captain Ventris, it is good to see you again,” he said, his voice a rich baritone and surprising everyone with its richness.

“I would say the same, but I fear you come with ill-tidings,” said Uriel.

“Regrettably so, but I shall leave such tidings for your master to deliver.”

Uriel nodded as the Raven Guard warrior in the winged helmet joined Locard in the courtyard and unsnapped the airtight seals at his gorget. Puffs of old air gusted out softly, like that from a locked tomb, and Uriel tasted dust and darkness in the vapours.

His gaunt face was that of a dead man, his skin pale as alabaster, his lips cyanotic blue like a drowning victim’s. His eyes were yellow and cat-like, but his dark hair was glossy and pulled in a tight scalp lock bound with a silver circlet at his temple.

Marneus Calgar placed his hand upon the warrior’s shoulder, and Uriel caught the slightest flash of irritation on those pale features.

“Not a man used to the company of others, methinks,” whispered Pasanius.

“No,” agreed Uriel quietly as Lord Calgar addressed his warriors.

“Captain Aethon Shaan of the Raven Guard, commander of that illustrious

Chapter’s 4th Company,” said Lord Calgar. “He and one of their finest squads have come to Ultramar to seek our aid in a most delicate matter, so I expect your full cooperation.”

The Ultramarines captains nodded in respect, and the synchronicity of Shaan’s company affiliation was not lost on Uriel. He began to suspect there was more to his summons that simply his rank of captain.

A door opened behind Uriel and he turned to see Varro Tigurius, Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines, lead a slender woman with caramel-coloured skin and flowing hair of purest white. She was clad in an ankle-length stormcoat, beneath which Uriel saw an armoured corslet of bronze and a form-fitting bodyglove.

“Our guest from Talasa Prime has arrived,” said Tigurius, indicating the woman and her entourage of savants, logi and soldiers clad in identical stormcoats. None of the soldiers were armed, and Uriel saw the awkwardness of fighting men forced to attend their master without weapons.

Tigurius swept past Uriel with only the briefest glance of acknowledgement, and Uriel was glad of its swiftness, for Varro Tigurius was a hard man to like. Deep-set eyes, gaunt cheeks and angular features already marked him out as different, but it was his prodigious psychic talent that set him apart from his battle-brothers. No matter that his loyalty and courage were beyond question or that he had saved the Chapter many times over with his gifts, his ability to wield the power of the warp would forever keep him aloof from those without such talents.

Uriel examined the woman as she made her way towards Lord Calgar. Like the Raven Guard, her movements were sinuous and graceful. A long, slender-bladed sword was slung at her back and the slit in her stormcoat revealed a pistol at her hip as she took her seat. Tigurius had deliberately mentioned Talasa Prime, which marked the woman as a member of the holy ordos and put everyone on their guard.

Uriel had worked with the Inquisition before and each instance left conflicting emotions. Though they were zealous servants of the Imperium who faced foes too terrible to contemplate, their methods were too absolute, too black and white for Uriel’s liking. Inquisitor Barzano had almost destroyed Pavonis to deny the Bringer of Darkness its ancient vessel, and Locard’s former master, Kryptman of the Ordo Xenos, had burned the world of Chordelis and all its people to prevent it from falling to the tyranid swarms.

“Inquisitor Namira Suzaku,” said Lord Calgar as the woman swept her gaze around the assembled warriors. To her credit, she seemed unfazed by the illustrious company she was keeping, an assembly that would have overwhelmed

most mortals.

Uriel suspected Suzaku was not like most mortals, catching sight of a tiny hammer tattoo on the underside of her wrist.

She inclined her head, and Uriel caught the glint of artificial light within her eyes.

With the last of their company arrived, Lord Calgar strode to the centre of the courtyard, and the only sounds disturbing the silence were the water gurgling in the fountain and the rustle of the gold-stitched battle honours hanging from the courtyard's upper balconies.

"I will keep this brief, as time is against us," began Lord Calgar. "Our enemies have already struck the first blow against us, and there is no telling where they may strike next."

"Enemies?" cut in Sicarius. "What enemies?"

"The forces of the Ruinous Powers," answered Inquisitor Suzaku. "An arch prince of the empyrean has returned from his banishment and laid waste to Tarentus."

Uriel felt the astonishment that swept the chamber, his heart thudding in his chest with the shock of it. The idea that a world of Ultramar could be attacked without the captains of the Ultramarines being aware of it was unheard of.

"Ridiculous," snapped Agemman. "Praefectus Quintus would have sent word they were under attack. We have heard nothing of the sort. Your information is incorrect."

"I'm afraid it isn't, my friend," said Calgar, turning to Suzaku. "Show them Tarentus."

Suzaku nodded to one of her savants, an ascetic with a projection wand that plugged into an edit-engine strapped to his back like the ammo hopper of a Devastator. The savant swept the wand through the air, charging the particles and leaving a crackling haze in its wake. At a nod from his mistress, the image changed from one of grainy static to one of slaughter.

The quality was poor, the source of the recording clearly in orbit around Tarentus and working at maximum magnification. Yet despite the grainy nature of the scenes being played out before them, there was no mistaking their horror.

A city built along the clean lines of an Ultramarian plan was engulfed in battle. Uriel's jaw dropped as he saw monsters swarming the streets: horned and clawed beasts of multitudinous forms too outlandish to have come about by any process of evolution. These were monsters of madness, and there was only one place such abominations could have spawned.

"Daemons," hissed Uriel.

"Just so," agreed Inquisitor Suzaku. "A daemon army that broke through the

gates of the empyrean without any hint of a weakness in the dimensional matrix. Only a being of immense power could achieve such a thing.”

“How were these images captured?” asked Tigurius.

“The Inquisition does not reveal its information sources,” said Suzaku archly.

“Every world of Ultramar has at least one Inquisition capture-drone in orbit,” said Lord Calgar, and Uriel was pleased to see Suzaku’s eyes narrow in annoyance. Lord Calgar met her angry stare. “Did you really think I wouldn’t know?”

he asked.

“I had thought our veils too subtle,” said Suzaku, unashamed at such blatant violation of trust. The Ultramarines permitted the Inquisition to maintain a base within Ultramar, but such an agreement was supposedly based on the premise that neither organisation would interfere with the other’s business. The atmosphere in the courtyard changed in a heartbeat. Where before Suzaku was someone to be wary of, now she was someone to be viewed with outright suspicion.

“You are spying on our worlds?” stormed Agemman.

“We were doing our job,” returned Suzaku.

“It does not matter,” said Calgar, ending the confrontation. “A world of Ultramar has been attacked, keep *that* as your focus.”

“Do we know how it happened?” asked Uriel. “How did the daemons get to Tarentus?”

“Keep watching,” advised Suzaku.

The view on the electrostatically charged air altered, and the edit-engine snapped into sharper focus as it shifted its aim back into space with a series of shuttered clicks. The sandy curve of Tarentus filled the lower portion of the image, but in the top corner, a vast structure was just visible, the edge of something so huge that it seemed inconceivable that it was not anchored to the surface of a world.

Its lines were brutally angled, jarring and cloaked in a veil of crystallising gasses. It had the suggestion of a castellum wall or an enormous earthwork covered in forests of razorwire. The shutter snapped one last time and the entirety of the structure was visible for a fraction of a second before the image froze in place, hissing and jerking with static.

“What is that?” asked Epathus. “A space hulk?”

“No,” said Marneus Calgar, and Uriel detected a hint of remorse in the Chapter Master’s voice. “It is something altogether worse.”

“Worse than a space hulk,” said Sicarius. “That’s something I’d like to see.”

“No you wouldn’t,” said Uriel, remembering the horror of razored claws

reaching out of the darkness of the *Death of Virtue.* “Trust me.”

Sicarius gave him a bitter stare, but said nothing. The captain of the 2nd had been one of the most vocal in condemning Uriel after the Tarsis Ultra campaign, and also the most reluctant to accept him back within the fold of the Ultramarines after the completion of his Death Oath. The recent war on Pavonis had fully restored Uriel’s captaincy, but there were some who still felt his return was something to be regarded with suspicion.

“It’s not a space hulk,” said Captain Galenus of the 5th, his anger simmering just beneath his skin. “It’s the *Indomitable*!”

“The *Indomitable?”* said Epathus. “How is that possible?”

“It is possible because I was forced to make a dreadful decision,” said Lord Calgar, holding his head high as he spoke. “You all know of the Daemon Prince M’kar.”

“Aye, the daemon whelp whose fleet I destroyed at the Halamar Rift,” said Sicarius, hammering a fist on his breastplate. “You bested him too, my lord. On the *Indomitable*.”

“That I did, Cato,” said Lord Calgar, turning to Agemman. “I led the warriors of the 1st, reborn after the Battle for Macragge, onto the *Indomitable* and defeated him.”

“Tore him limb from limb!” roared Sicarius.

“No,” said Calgar. “I did not.”

TIGURIUS STEPPED INTO the courtyard, his eyes unfocussed as he looked at the twisting image of the *Indomitable.* He reached out with one gauntlet, as though to touch the image, but curled his fingers back at the last moment. He twisted around, and Uriel quailed before the pellucid light he saw in the Librarian’s eyes.

“The Thrice Born, I see it now,” he hissed. “Defeated once at Halamar, broken again on the *Indomitable.* Now returned to wreak havoc on the sons of Ultramar. The Sentinel of the Tower is restored to us and the Thrice Born is clad in flesh once more…”

“This is that time, Varro?” asked Calgar, as though afraid of the answer.

“Aye, my lord,” nodded Tigurius.

Uriel’s blood chilled at Tigurius’ words. On Salinas, Brother Leodegarius of the Grey Knights had performed cartomancy and drawn the Tower for Uriel, a card that symbolised change, conflict and catastrophe; an overturning of the existing order of things. Coupled with Tigurius’ words, it boded ill for the future. “The Thrice Born?” said Galenus. “It is the Daemon Lord M’kar?”

“It is,” said Tigurius, his eyes returning to their normal hue. “Aye, it has always been thus. Trapped on the *Indomitable* for sixty years, bound to the warp core with eldritch wards and set adrift in the heavens on an unknown course.”

“How can that be?” demanded Galenus. “Lord Calgar, you returned from the *Indomitable* with tidings of the daemon’s death. My men garrisoned that star fort!”

Lord Calgar slowly nodded. “To my eternal shame, I fear they must be dead. Olantor, Decimus, Sabbatina and even Venerable Brother Altarion,” he said, turning to address his captains. “With the aid of the Inquisition I was able to defeat M’kar, but I could not destroy its essence. To do so would have required strength not even I possess. In the end, all that could be done was to bind its essence to heart of the star fort’s warp core, a prison that pulled tighter with every raging attempt to break it open. The *Indomitable* was set to hurl itself into oblivion, to vanish forever in the depths of the warp, but so strong was M’kar’s hatred that no matter the course its Navigators plotted, it was forever bound to Ultramar.”

“That’s why it was always guarded,” said Galenus, the loss of half his company almost too much to bear. “You couldn’t get rid of it, so you had to keep watch on it.”

Lord Calgar nodded, and Uriel felt the rock upon which he had built his every belief being chipped away with every word the Chapter Master spoke. The destruction of M’kar was part of Lord Calgar’s legend, an inspirational tale told to recruits to fill their hearts with fire and ambition. To learn that Uriel, and the entire Chapter, had been lied to was a blow to rock the certainty of even the strongest character. Looking around the courtyard, Uriel saw the hurt in every warrior’s face. The notion that an Ultramarines warrior as revered as Lord Calgar could have broken faith with truth was as shocking as it was unimaginable.

“Then someone has found the *Indomitable* and freed the Thrice Born,” said Tigurius.

“It is the only explanation,” agreed Calgar sadly.

“Who?” demanded Sicarius. “Who could have known where to find it?”

“I believe I may shed some light on that matter,” said Magos Locard.

LOCARD CLICKED OVER the marble flagstones towards Suzaku’s savant. “If I may?” he said.

Suzaku nodded and Locard swivelled upon his central axis to pass an information wafer to the pict-savant. The man fed the waver into the edit-engine

and waved the projection wand again. Immediately, the image of a planet appeared, complete with streams of biometric, geographic and cartographic data. The view zoomed into the planet's surface to reveal a verdant world of bright jungle flora and vast agricultural holdings spread across its fertile regions.

Uriel saw nothing unremarkable in the imagery until the view focussed in on a facility of obviously Imperial design. Only then did he realise the scale of the forests and jungles surrounding it.

"The Golbasto Facility," began Magos Locard. "An isolated research outpost set up fifty-three point nine Terran standard years ago to study the effect of various growth exacerbators on basic foodstuff crops. The research was only moderately successful at first, but two years ago Magos Szalin reported promising results with a new viral agent he named the Heraclitus strain."

The view swept over the planet, and now that Uriel knew what the Adeptus Mechanicus had attempted, he saw the vast scale of production on Golbasto. Enormous forests with fruit the size of a man's torso, crops with seeds like grenades, and grain fields taller than a Warhound. The potential of such work was incredible, but its significance to the current crisis was lost on him.

"What has this to do with anything?" demanded Agemman, echoing Uriel's confusion.

"Everything, Captain Agemman," assured Locard. "Everything is connected and all the pieces matter. Allow me to demonstrate."

The view shifted back to the Golbasto Facility, but this time it was in ruins, smoke from numerous fires curling into the sky and spreading to the nearby forests.

"What happened?" asked Uriel.

"The facility was attacked and destroyed, and its entire stock of the Heraclitus strain was stolen. These images are all the data-sifters could retrieve from the shattered memory coils of Magos Third Class Evlame, the only body recovered from the site."

Once more the view changed, but this time it was a series of static-washed still images: a view of the burning silver dome at the heart of the facility; a blurred impression of a corpse-face held together with wire stitching; and lastly a distant group of armoured warriors who were surely Space Marines. Most wore armour of bare metal plates, but one stood out from the others by virtue of the glossy black of his armour.

"Who are they?" asked Uriel, as a dreadful suspicion began to form in his gut.

Locard waved an augmetic limb and haptic receptors manipulated the image to zoom in on the figures. Too blurred and indistinct to recognise individual faces, the image was clear enough to identify their markings.

Yellow and black chevrons edged the plates of their armour and one shoulder guard bore a hateful iron skull set within an eight-pointed star.

“No!” hissed Uriel. “Iron Warriors. It can’t be.”

“But who’s the other one?” asked Learchus. “The one in black.”

Uriel didn’t answer, but the posture of the warrior in black seemed oddly familiar, his body language speaking volumes about his strength, skill and fighting style. This warrior was an ambush killer, a hunter who struck from the shadows and Uriel was certain he knew from where he recognised him.

“I suspect there is a more personal note to these events than simply the wrath of a daemonic entity,” continued Locard. “I postulate that the originator of the assault on Tarentus has a personal stake in this that centres upon Captain Ventris.”

“How so?” asked Calgar.

“I was led to the Golbasto Facility by an attack on another world. One that had been destroyed by the Heraclitus strain.”

“Tarsis Ultra,” said Uriel, already knowing where this was leading. “I am right, am I not?”

“You are,” confirmed Locard with all too human remorse. “I discovered trace elements of the Heraclitus strain in what little vegetation was left on Tarsis Ultra. It appears that enemy raiders took control of an orbital missile silo and launched a series of warheads armed with the virus.”

“This virus was that dangerous? You said it was supposed to enhance crop growth. How could it wipe out an entire world?” asked Lord Calgar.

“It could not, unless that world was tainted by the residue of a tyranid invasion, my lord,” explained Locard. “Though the tyranid fleet was defeated, much of the bio-matter already deposited on Tarsis Ultra remained, despite the best efforts of the slash and burn programs we instituted in the wake of victory. What you must understand is that the biological impetus of tyrannic organisms is to endlessly propagate, which is a hyper-evolutionary trait designed to smother a world in spore growth that chokes the life from it in order to allow easier digestion by the bio-harvesting organisms. The Heraclitus strain sent the tyrannic organisms into overdrive and no one could stop them. They carpeted the land in corrosive algae, infected every molecule of oxygen and burned away the atmosphere. Within days the entire planet was consumed and laid bare to the star’s radiation. It is a barren rock now.”

Locard looked over at Uriel and made his way back to the statue of Konor, where he bent to retrieve a silver-sided box. “But in the midst of that destruction we found one thing we did not expect. A missile launched from the orbital platform without a warhead, one that was used to carry something else to the

planet's surface. It had a locator signal, so it was clear that someone *wanted* us to find it."

"That contains what the missile was carrying?" asked Uriel.

"Yes," said Locard, opening the box and removing a battered Mark VII, Aquila-pattern helmet. The paint was peeling, but there was no mistaking the colouring or the inverted omega of the Ultramarines just visible beneath the paint on the forehead. Locard turned the helmet around and read the armourer's mark inside the rim.

"Six Epsilon Gladius," he said.

"My helmet," said Uriel. "The one I wore on Medrengard. The one I left behind."

"It seems you are linked to this coming war in a manner more personal than most," said Lord Calgar. "Why should that be so?"

"There can be only one explanation," said Uriel. "Honsou."

URIEL SPENT THE next hour retelling the epic tale of his Death Oath. He told how he and Pasanius had been carried halfway across the galaxy by the Omphalos Daemonium to Medrengard, a forsaken world in the Eye of Terror, and how they had been drawn into a war between rival Iron Warriors' Warsmiths. He told of their meeting with the renegade Astartes and their leader, Ardaric Vaanes of the Raven Guard, at which point Captain Shaan's interest was clearly piqued.

Though many of the gathered Ultramarines had heard this tale before, they listened attentively to this new rendition. Uriel was unflinching in his recital, telling how he and Pasanius had infiltrated the dread fortress of the Warsmith Honsou in the midst of a hellish siege and their subsequent capture by the creature Onyx.

Honsou had believed them to be renegades like Vaanes and offered them a place at his side, a notion that horrified the Ultramarines. Even Sicarius smiled when Uriel spoke of how they had spat his offer back in his face. Those smiles fell away as Uriel described the macabre lair of the Savage Morticians, his imprisonment within one of the Daemonculaba womb creatures and the horror of his escape.

More than a few raised their eyebrows anew when Uriel told of his alliance with the Unfleshed, and hissed with disgust at hearing of how Vaanes rejected the chance for redemption Uriel had offered him.

When Uriel explained how he had engineered the destruction of Honsou's fortress, a heavy silence descended, but no one dared speak out, for no less a

force than the Grey Knights had declared Uriel and Pasanius untainted. Upon their return to Macragge, the Chaplaincy and Apothecarion carried out exhaustive tests of physical, mental and spiritual purity, and that declaration was confirmed.

Uriel and Pasanius had returned to their Chapter pure.

“What I can’t understand,” began Captain Galenus, “is how this Honsou knew to strike at Tarsis Ultra. How could he have picked one world with such a precise connection to Captain Ventris? How could he possibly have done that?”

“I do not know,” replied Uriel, stepping down into the courtyard. “But he did and he *wanted* us to know it was him. This attack is not just directed at me, it is directed at all of us. Our Chapter swore the Warrior’s Debt to defend Tarsis Ultra, and the honour of every one of us is stained by this base act of murder. Yet if Honsou has come to Ultramar, it falls to me to face him and kill him. My actions have drawn his vengeance down upon us, and however he has managed to do the things he has done is immaterial. He is here and he needs to be put down like the rabid dog he is.”

Uriel felt the his heart pulse with the excited urge for action that presaged going into combat, and looked around the Chapter Master’s chambers at the warriors he called brother and those who had come to Ultramar to fight alongside its guardians. The battle captains were on their feet, ready to go to war, while Librarian Tigurius regarded him coolly and with an intensity he found unsettling.

Marneus Calgar stepped towards Uriel and placed one enormous gauntlet upon his shoulder. The Chapter Master looked deep into his soul, seeing the strength that lay at his core, a strength that would stand against this upstart foe and see him defeated.

“Varro told me that you would prove key to the coming conflict,” said Lord Calgar.

“But for good or ill?” asked Sicarius.

“Who can know for sure?” said Tigurius, circling Uriel with an appraising glare. “Our salvation or the bringer of our doom? Either way, the fate of the Ultramarines is bonded to the blood feud this enemy has brought to our realm. Whatever else happens next, Captain Ventris must be at its heart.”

Uriel read the acknowledgement in the Librarian’s words and turned to Captain Shaan. He stared into the Raven Guard’s hooded eyes, so like those of the renegade warrior he had fought alongside on Medrengard.

“You came here for Ardaric Vaanes, didn’t you?” he said.

“I did,” agreed Shaan. “The traitor has the blood of my kin on his hands, and the Raven Guard do not forget those who have wronged them.”

Uriel held out his hand and said, “Then come to Tarentus and we will make him pay.”

Shaan nodded, his gaunt features sombre and unforgiving.

The Raven Guard shook Uriel’s hand with a crooked smile and said, “We will end these traitors together. The old-fashioned way.”

FOUR

SCOUT-SERGEANT ISSAM panned the polarized lenses of the magnoculars over the darkened ramparts of Axum once more, checking his earlier count. He knew there were five of them, but there are only two kinds of Scouts, those who are thorough and those who are dead. He could see in the dark almost as well as he could during the hours of daylight, but the magnoculars registered the heat signature of their targets' poorly maintained power armour.

"I make it five," he whispered over the squad-vox.

"I concur," said Daxian, his second. Of the four Scouts in his squad, Daxian had the most experience and had fought alongside Issam on Pavonis. With Sergeant Learchus leading them, they had penetrated deep behind the tau lines and proven key to the final victory. It had earned Issam and Daxian an Imperial Laurel, but three others hadn't made it back alive from that mission.

Janek Lycean and Uriel Dios won their laurels with Learchus on Espandor against the greenskins, and had earned his approbation, which was enough of a recommendation for Issam. His last Scout was a new arrival, a native of Iax named Aurelio. Issam hadn't yet judged Aurelio's worth, but so far he had kept up with the rest of them and hadn't put a foot wrong.

Issam slung his magnoculars, and secured them to his belt, making sure they wouldn't rattle or bang on his equipment. The last thing he needed was to give their, position away, though the odds of their being heard were minimal given the raucous blare of horns and random gunfire coming from the city. But their targets were equipped almost as well as his Scouts, and it didn't pay to be careless. The five Scouts lay in a field of rotted vegetation, a mulchy carpet of decaying matter that looked like the aftermath of the Life Eater virus. Issam had seen the effects of that planet-killing weapon, and it was not a fond memory.

As unpleasant as it was, the lingering heat of chemical reactions in the rotting soil would conceal their body heat, which would make all the difference in their approach.

"Let's move," he whispered, crawling on his elbows with smooth, unhurried movements. He went forward slowly, halting any time he caught a flash of movement from the walls. With five targets and five Scouts, they needed an optimum firing position to ensure each target was eliminated without noise or commotion.

His squad weren't the only warriors on Tarentus; several other teams of

Scouts were tasked with infiltrating the devastated city, but Issam wanted the honour of taking out the city's aerial defence guns himself. The augurs of the *Vae Victus* had detected only one source of activity on Tarentus, a base set up in the ruins of Axum, which was occupied by a sizeable force of enemy warriors. Heat signatures also revealed that the guns of the city were still functional, and Captain Ventris had tasked the Scouts with their elimination.

The ground squelched underneath them, its sticky matter pulling at the deep blue plates and darkened canvas of his uniform. After thirty minutes, they had advanced a hundred metres, and Issam spotted an irrigation channel with machine-finished sides and a frond-choked lip; the perfect place from which to shoot.

He and his Scouts slithered forward, easing themselves into the channel and swiftly unlimbering their sniper rifles from the camo-slings on their backs. Issam pressed his body to the rockcrete channel and gave his rifle a thorough check. The action was clear, the energy cell fully charged and the sights clear.

Daxian performed a ranging check with his magnoculars.

"Two hundred and fifteen metres," he said.

"Just like being on the range at Agiselus," said Uriel Dios, dialling in the range on his rifle's sights.

Issam shook his head. "It's nothing like being on the range, Dios," he said. "These targets will shoot back if you miss. One shot, one kill. No exceptions."

His Scouts understood, and Issam slid his rifle through the fronds. He rested the barrel on the rockcrete lip and closed one eye, pressing the other to the rubberised end of the sight. His breathing deepened and he relaxed his body, letting it mould to the flat sides of the channel and pressing the rifle to his cheek. The stock was warm wood, crafted to the contours of his features from a highland fir he'd felled over sixty years ago on the flanks of the Valley of Laponis.

His vision through the sight was a pale blue. The angles of the wall were dark and cold, the outlines of the figures walking this segment of the ramparts a soft, glowing white. A Mark V helmet drifted through the crosshairs, but this was no warrior of the Adeptus Astartes he had slotted in his sight. This was a traitor. This was a warrior who had betrayed everything Issam and the Ultramarines stood for. He deserved to die.

"Fire on my shot," he said. "Take them down."

Issam let the sensors from his sight tell him the wind velocity, ambient temperature and relative humidity. He followed the winking icon to compensate for the local conditions and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly and curling his finger around the trigger.

Before he could shoot, his target vanished from sight as through dragged to the ground. A squirt of glowing light spurted upwards. Issam kept his aim for a few seconds then swept his rifle along the length of wall his squad had chosen as their entry point to Axum.

The wall was empty, no trace of the enemy Astartes to be seen.

“What just happened?” hissed Daxian, sliding back into the channel and unslinging his magnoculars.

Issam didn’t answer and kept scanning the ramparts. They were empty, no sign of occupation and certainly no sign of the sentries.

“We happened,” said a soft voice at Issam’s shoulder, and he jerked back, the rifle falling from his hands as he scrabbled for his combat blade.

A fluid shape rose from the darkness of a shadowed culvert.

“The way into Axum is clear, Sergeant Issam,” said Captain Aethon Shaan with a hint of amusement. “Your approach was made with great skill, but this is Raven Guard work.”

Issam swallowed his pride, recognising that Shaan’s stealth skills made him look like a stumbling recruit.

He nodded. “Then let’s get this done,” he said.

THE ULTRAMARINES SCOUT and the Raven Guard entered Axum without difficulty, and Issam was impressed at how efficiently Shaan’s warriors had slain their targets. To get close to a target as well equipped as a Space Marine, even one branded a traitor, required an incredible gift of stealth.

He knelt by one of the dead bodies. The head was severed, cut cleanly from the neck with an energised combat blade. He had no doubt the other sentries had been killed by similar killing blows. To inflict such grievous wounds in complete synchrony required incredible skill and perfect coordination.

“Your warriors are good,” whispered Issam as Shaan knelt beside him.

“I know,” said Shaan.

Issam examined the renegade warrior carefully. He was encased in a poorly maintained suit of Mark V armour, breaches in its cabling crudely repaired with patches of liquid sealant. He scanned the armour pattern and turned the shoulder guard around with a grimace of distaste. To touch the body of a traitor was unpleasant, but a good scout gathered intelligence where he could. After all, know thine enemy was one of the cardinal rules of warfare.

The ceramite plates were painted with vivid slashes of black and orange, like the stripes of a tiger. The shoulder guard was without insignia, simply a repetition of the same slashed pattern.

“You recognise the markings?” asked Shaan.

“I think so,” replied Issam, thinking back to the infrequent alerts on Chapters declared Excomunicatus. “The Claws of Lorek.”

“They are a long way from the Maelstrom.”

“That they are,” said Issam.

They concealed the bodies and ghosted over the ramparts, making their way into the remains of the city. Lights blazed in the distance and blaring warhorns spat foul imprecations to dark and bloody gods into the night sky.

“Makes our job easier,” said Issam, as Shaan appeared next to him.

“Almost too easy,” said Shaan, and Issam wasn’t sure whether the Raven Guard was irritated or suspicious of such ease.

Before Issam could reply, the warrior slid into the shadows and it took all Issam’s considerable skill to keep up with him through the darkened, corpse-strewn streets of Axum. The bodies of those slain in the city’s fall lay where they had been butchered, and the air reeked of decay. Ripened bodies bloated with noxious gasses rotted in the warm climate, and buzzing clouds of carrion flies grew fat on the human bounty.

“Guilliman’s oath,” hissed Janek Lycean. “They just left them to rot!”

“Quiet,” hissed Issam, catching Shaan’s glance of disapproval. “Control yourself, Lycean.”

Despite his rebuke, Issam shared his Scout’s outrage, but kept that anger bound with iron control. This mission required clinical detachment, but that was asking a lot when you were confronted by an entire city of Ultramar’s dead.

Shaan bunched his fist and made a series of quick chopping gestures. The Raven Guard moved out, ten of them, each advancing with smooth steps and flowing movements that were simply breathtaking.

They moved through the city, keeping to the shadows and avoiding any signs of activity. Orbital surveys had detected that the bulk of the enemy presence was located within the ruins of the Prosperine Tower, and the Imperial troops gave the main entrance of that structure a wide berth, heading towards the generator compound located towards its rear.

Within the hour, they reached the edges of a vile fortification built around the generator. Bathed in the stark glow of a score of arclights, it was an unlovely creation of rectangular blocks adorned with bloody spikes of sharpened metal. Corpses hung from every spike, and Issam felt his control slipping as he saw the violations inflicted on the bodies.

Atop the highest spike was the desecrated corpse of Rufus Quintus. The wounded veteran had been stripped of his armour and crucified on a pair of crossed girders, his arms spread-eagled and pierced by bolts fired from a heavy-

duty rivet gun. His legs were missing and the angle of his neck told Issam that the hero of Ichar IV was unquestionably dead.

Issam tore his gaze from the horrific mutilations and forced himself to take stock of the defences. The sounds of shouting, gunfire and revving chainswords came from the Prosperine Tower, eclipsed by the intermittent squalling of a warhorn ripped from a Titan. Mortals in scavenged armour and fright-mask helmets sat on the walls with their rifles held loosely over their shoulders. What they wore couldn't be called uniforms, but there was cohesion in the blood staining their right shoulder guards.

"This is it," said Issam, hugging the cover of a claw-scarred buttress. "The generators are inside. Take them out and the defence turrets will go offline."

"How long until the reserve generators take over?" asked Shaan.

"They won't if that machine of Magos Locard's works like it's supposed to."

"And if it doesn't?"

"About two minutes."

"Will that be enough time?"

Issam smiled. "For Captain Ventris? More than enough."

"Are the rest of your squads in place?" asked Shaan.

Issam flipped down his visor lens and sent a rapid data squirt on a prearranged frequency. A series of icons flickered to life on the lens, each representing one of the four Scout squads that had made their approaches from different sectors.

"In place and ready to shoot," he confirmed.

"Then I'll see you on the inside," said Shaan, and Issam heard the relish in his voice.

The Raven Guard vanished into the shadows, what few there were in the harsh glare of the arc lights, and Issam drew a bead on an enemy soldier whose face was obscured by an iron mask in the form of a snarling bear.

"All units, fire on my shot," he commanded.

He counted to ninety, keeping his target locked in his crosshair as it made an all too predictable traverse of the wall. On the ninetieth second he squeezed the trigger, and the warrior pitched backwards, the shot going through the eyeslit and blowing out the back of his helmet in a near soundless explosion of blood and bone.

Others dropped in concert with Issam's target, and he expertly shifted aim and took out another target. Masked faces stupidly looked out from the wall, and Issam took them down too. Three more enemy soldiers fell to Issam's lethally accurate fire as they milled in confusion, but the rest had learned their lesson and kept their heads down.

Issam watched as the Raven Guard quickly scaled the blocky walls and slid over the ramparts, killing the warriors who cowered behind the walls with brutally efficient sweeps of blade and lightning claw.

“Go!” ordered Issam, running bent over with his rifle clutched tightly to his chest.

He reached the walls and slung his rifle, vaulting onto the uneven blocks and scrambling up with practised ease. Within seconds he was at the top with his combat blade unsheathed, but there was nothing left to kill. His squads were merciless in the accuracy of their sniper fire and the Raven Guard had been equally thorough in their close-range killing.

All around the crude fortress, Ultramarines Scouts were swarming over the walls, rifles poised to take down any last resistance, but what little was left was being quickly and efficiently ended by the claws of the Raven Guard. Issam and the Ultramarines moved down into the space enclosed by the tumbledown walls, despatching any wounded enemy soldiers with quick slashes of their combat blades.

“Daxian,” hissed Issam, waving his second towards the main generator building. “Get the charges planted and rig the disruption pod to the reserve generator trunk cabling.”

“Yes, sergeant,” said Daxian, running for the columned portico of the generator building.

Magos Locard had provided the Ultramarines with an experimental disruption pod, a device that would register any break in the power supply to the aerial guns. If it functioned as the magos claimed, it should prevent the reserve generator from kicking in once the main power supply was taken out.

While Daxian completed his part of the mission, Issam deployed the Scout squads into covered positions on the walls. Their rifles were aimed outward for any sign their swift assault had been detected, though this seemed unlikely since it had only taken twenty-six seconds from his first shot to the capture of the position.

Something wasn’t right, but Issam couldn’t put his finger on what was bothering him, so he climbed the rugged slope of tumbled blocks and glanced up at the flame-lit grace of the Prosperine Tower. Named for an ancient god of fertility, the tower’s name was in somewhat poor taste, but it had been in use since the earliest days of Ultramar and the Ultramarines were great respecters of tradition, so it had stuck.

Uriel Dios watched his sector beside the dead man Issam had shot in the opening salvo of the attack and nodded to him as he squatted beside the corpse. Issam pulled off the blasted remains of the corpse’s iron mask. The man’s face

was gone, punched inwards by the shot and there was nothing left to tell where he had come from or what he had looked like. Dressed in combat fatigues and a padded jacket with circles of loose stitching where Issam guessed rank and insignia badges had been torn off, the dead man was clearly a deserter from an Imperial Guard regiment. How he had come to be in the service of the Archenemy, Issam couldn't begin to guess.

He looked along the length of the crude defences, seeing more of the dead men and wondering at the stupidity of its defenders.

"Sergeant?" said Uriel Dios.

"What is it, Dios?"

"This doesn't make any sense," said Dios, tapping the body with his boot.

"What doesn't?" replied Issam, though he was pleased the young Scout shared his sense of something being *off* about this whole set up.

"This," said Dios, jerking a thumb back towards the power generator. "The enemy must know this is the most vulnerable part of the defences, so why are there only mortals on these walls? Why are there no traitor Astartes around the generators?"

Issam cursed himself for not seeing it earlier, but before he could answer, a perfectly controlled blast destroyed the defence guns' generator, the noise of the detonation swallowed by the screaming klaxons and gunfire echoing from within the Prosperine Tower. The building was undamaged, and Magos Locard's disruption pod functioned perfectly, feeding a power signal to the reserve generator and fooling its cogitator into thinking the main generator was still functioning.

Ninety seconds later, the Ultramarines assault began in earnest.

URIEL'S THUNDERHAWK SWOOPED in from the east and blasted its way over the walls in a roar of jet engines. Two others followed it, their battlecannons pummelling the Prosperine Tower, reducing its upper section to flaming debris and collapsing the bulk of its structure into itself.

Seconds later, the lead gunship hammered down in the main plaza before the tower, its assault ramp slamming down and Ultramarines warriors fanning out in precisely orchestrated manoeuvre patterns to seize pre-selected objectives.

Uriel dropped to the surface of Tarentus, his bolter pulled in hard to his shoulder as he led his warriors towards the hellish, molten crater of fire and smoke which was all that remained of the Prosperine Tower. A gnawing sense of deep unease pervaded his entire body, and it wasn't just because he had opened fire on an ancient building that had stood proud on a world of Ultramar for

thousands of years.

No, something else sat ill with Uriel, but its source wouldn't coalesce in his mind.

A flickering tactical overlay appeared on Uriel's visor, displaying the location of his forces. Issam's Scouts were picked out in green along the ramparts of a crude and hastily assembled bulwark, which had all the hallmarks of the Iron Warriors' brutal simplicity.

"Issam, report," said Uriel.

"Traitor Astartes on Axum's outer walls, but only rebel mortals here. All are dead, but I have no count on enemy forces within the tower."

"Understood. Maintain overwatch."

"Affirmative," said Issam. "Though I suspect there will be little left to oppose you."

"I hope not," snarled Uriel. "This enemy has killed citizens of Ultramar and defiled a world of Roboute Guilliman. I want them to feel the severity of our retribution."

The two follow-on gunships landed in a storm of dust and billowing engine smoke. More warriors charged out, and Uriel saw Learchus and Pasanius at the head of their squads. Together with the Scouts, this force represented the entirety of the 4th Company's strength, and as Ancient Peleus unfurled the brightly coloured company banner, he felt that familiar pride that came from leading the greatest warriors in the galaxy into battle once again.

There was no need to issue orders; the assault had been planned out according to the dictates of the Codex Astartes, and every Ultramarines warrior knew his place. Devastator squads found cover, as Assault squads moved alongside the Tactical warriors, ready to follow up any gunfire with a furious charge of chainswords and pistols.

Flaming debris fell from the tower, tumbling down in an avalanche of sparks and obscuring smoke.

And Uriel's desire to lay the wrath of the Ultramarines upon his enemies was realised.

Warriors in ancient battle plate stained with the blood of ten thousand victims staggered from the wreckage, axes raised and vile war shouts shrieking from helmet vox. Many were horrifically injured, missing arms or bearing wounds that should have crippled even the toughest Space Marine, but Uriel saw that these were no ordinary traitors.

These were berserkers, mindless killers who fought without heed of pain or fear of death. In any fight, a skilled warrior would seek to kill his opponent without suffering any wounds in return, but the berserker cared nothing for his

own survival. Killing was all that mattered to such ferocious warriors, and their survival was irrelevant.

They came in a rushing mass of screaming faces, horned helmets and scarred horror, their weapons a hideous mix of swords, axes, monstrously toothed cleavers and barbed meat hooks. Uriel counted around a hundred before the first shots rang out.

A warrior with a face covered in old blood pitched sideways as a sniper round punched through his temple and evacuated his skull. Another fell with his throat shot out, as the Ultramarines Scouts picked off enemy warriors through the gaps in their armour.

Uriel squeezed off a short burst of bolter fire, dropping a red-armoured warrior with a leering skull branded into his plastron. Streaking lines of bolter fire hammered the charging berserkers, dropping scores, but barely slowing the rest. Pasanius sprayed a streaming burst of promethium into the berserkers, but none of the enemy fell, and flaming warriors hurled themselves towards the Ultramarines with even greater ferocity. Warriors charged with arms blown off or hanging by meaty sinews of ruptured flesh. One berserker ran ten metres with half his head missing, only collapsing when the rage-fuelled vitality finally bled out of his system.

Uriel fired a last burst of shots, then slung his bolter. He drew the golden-hilted sword of Idaeus and his pistol. The blade flashed to life, its edge fizzing with killing light.

“Into them!” he yelled as the lines of blue and crimson met in a brutal clatter of armour.

Screaming ferocity met clinical precision as the Ultramarines’ parade-perfect formation smashed into the charge of the berserkers. Axes rose and fell, pistols boomed and chainswords tore through armour in flaring bursts of sparks like angle-grinders in an armourer’s workshop.

Uriel shut off his tactical overlay, the icons of friendly and enemy forces too hopelessly intermixed for it to be of any use. No sooner had the icons faded from view than a sweeping axe blade flashed towards him. He ducked and thrust his blade into his attacker’s exposed midriff, a warrior with skull-stamped plates and a daemonic helm. Uriel felt his blade slice cleanly through armour, flesh and bone, and dragged it to the side, almost cutting his foe in half.

Another came at him with a huge iron hook swinging for his neck. Uriel turned the blow aside, but the warrior slammed into him, driving the hook under his shoulder guard. They spun around, locked together like dancers as the warrior repeatedly slammed a spiked cestus gauntlet against Uriel’s side. Driven with such force and hate, the blows cracked the plate and Uriel felt stabbing pain

in his ribs.

He locked his elbow around the traitor's arm and spun around, using the berserker's momentum to hurl him to the ground. Quick as a feral beast, the warrior found his feet, but before he could pounce, a black shape flashed past and a warrior armed with twin lightning claws cut the maniacal killer apart with a flurry of slashing blows.

Aethon Shaan and his squad of Raven Guard swept through the desperate melee with smooth and seemingly casual motion, as though the berserkers were moving in slow motion. They swayed aside from killing blows, lopped heads and limbs with elegant sweeps of claws and swords, turning their enemies fury into clumsy, blind rages.

The Ultramarines way of war was professional, disciplined and utterly without mercy, but the Raven Guard fought with a sinuous grace that was unlike anything Uriel had seen before. Captain Shaan moved as though guided by preternatural senses, striking enemies down without effort, and anticipating attacks before they were unleashed.

A howling, axe-wielding warrior hurled himself at Uriel, and he lost sight of the Raven Guard captain. Uriel rolled beneath the attack, slicing his sword in an overhead arc, opening the berserker from groin to sternum. He rose to his feet, taking in the nature of the fight in a snapshot appraisal of the battle.

Though they were horribly outnumbered, the forces of the Archenemy were fighting with the killing fury of warriors who lusted only after death, be it theirs or their enemies. Learchus and Pasanius fought with controlled aggression, drawing the berserkers into isolated pockets of resistance that could be destroyed piecemeal. The berserkers could not win, but that was of no consequence. That blood was spilled was all that mattered to such bestial killers, and Uriel could not conceive of how so noble a warrior as a Space Marine could fall to such degraded depths.

Uriel killed another berserker and kicked the body from his sword as he felt a powerful sense of danger. He spun on his heel, sword raised to strike. No berserkers were close, yet the sense of impending doom would not leave him. He scanned left and right for threats, but could see nothing to explain such a feeling of dread.

He saw twin points of gleaming light reflected on the blade of his sword and looked up to see two glowing embers in the sky, like a pair of malevolent eyes staring down at him.

Fast-moving and brighter than the pre-dawn stars, the image reminded Uriel of the shared memory he'd lived before arriving at the Temple of Correction. Without quite knowing how, he knew that these were harbingers of destruction.

Uriel called up his tactical plot and opened a channel to every warrior under his command.

“All Imperial forces, emergency withdrawal!” he said, shocked to be issuing such an order when victory was moments away. “Command prefix omicron!”

It was an easy order to issue, but a harder one to obey. Withdrawing from a close quarters battle was a horrendously dangerous manoeuvre, but against a foe such as this it was nearly impossible. The Ultramarines pulled back in disciplined groups, one combat squad breaking off the fight and running for cover as their fraternal unit kept the enemy in the fight.

Accurate sniper fire from Issam’s Scouts provided openings for retreat, and as Assault squads fell back, Devastators raked the enemy warriors with heavy calibre shells or sent booming missiles into their midst. Uriel jogged back with his warriors in a textbook manoeuvre of withdrawal that might have been executed on the parade ground, such was its efficiency.

Pasanius ran over to him, the nozzle of his flamer copper brown from the many gouts of promethium he had unleashed.

“What’s going on? Why are we pulling back? We have them!”

“We need to get away,” said Uriel. “Something is desperately wrong here.”

Pasanius started to ask more, but Uriel held up his hand as he heard a desperate voice calling for his attention in his earpiece. A blast of static resolved into the voice of Lazlo Tiberius. The Lord Admiral was aboard the strike cruiser *Vae Victus,* the grand old dam of the Ultramarines fleet that had carried the 4th Company into battle for decades.

“Captain Ventris receiving,” he said, finding some space. “Repeat last transmission.”

“Uriel, thank the Emperor!” said Tiberius. “Get out of there. *Now.* Fall back to the gunships and get as far from Axum as you can.”

“I have already issued the order,” he said. “We will be airborne momentarily.”

“How did you know?” said Tiberius. “We only just picked them up.”

“Picked what up?”

“An orbital torpedo battery launched two warheads at the surface. Space is lousy with electromagnetic radiation, and we didn’t see them through the clutter of the debris up here.”

“Trajectory?” asked Uriel, though he already knew the answer.

“On Axum,” said Tiberius. “You’ve got a minute at best.”

“Understood. Ventris out.”

The Thunderhawks were already spooling up their engines and Uriel glanced up to see the two specks of light in the sky drawing closer with every passing second.

Disciplined volleys of bolter fire punished the last of the berserkers as the Ultramarines fell back by squads to their gunships. Learchus' aircraft lifted off as soon as the last warrior was aboard and Pasanius' was hot on its heels. Both gunships were overloaded with personnel. Issam's Scout squads had deployed via Land Speeder Storms, but there was no way they could reach them in time.

Though it went against Codex doctrine to abandon such valuable equipment, they had no choice. Only Uriel's gunship remained on Tarentus, but it was the most heavily loaded, for Issam's squad and Aethon Shaan's warriors had to squeeze on board also.

Uriel fired single shots from the assault ramp of the Thunderhawk as Issam and Shaan ran back to the gunship, firing from the hip as they went. The berserkers were a howling mob of killers, driven mad with killing fury and heedless of their impending doom. The Thunderhawk's guns added to the din as the berserkers surged forward in one last futile attempt to claim their blood victims.

"Ramp up!" shouted Uriel, hammering the closing mechanism as the Raven Guard and the Scouts dashed on board. Only Issam remained on Tarentus, picking off berserkers with snap-fired shots of his bolt pistol.

"Get in!" cried Uriel.

The hammer on Issam's gun slammed down on an empty chamber, and he vaulted onto the rising ramp of the gunship. An instant later, a howling killer with a serrated dagger leapt onto his back and plunged the blade into the Scout-sergeant's shoulder. Issam cried out and was borne to the deck.

The assault ramp closed and Uriel heard furious clanging on the outside as the berserkers tried to batter their way in.

He hit the intercom to the pilot and shouted, "Go!"

The gunship lurched and the enemy warrior was thrown from Issam's back. He rolled upright, a maddened savage with a face so scarred with self-inflicted wounds that barely any trace of humanity remained. The berserker spat a mouthful of blood, his wetted blade raised to kill more of his enemies.

Uriel swung his bolter round, but before he could take the shot, a black-clad warrior flashed before him and a spray of hot arterial blood arced over the fuselage like a ruptured hydraulic.

The berserker dropped to his knees, and where his head had been there was simply a neatly severed stump that pumped blood energetically onto the ribbed flooring of the gunship.

Aethon Shaan spun around, dropping into a predatory stance, but there was no need for further violence.

"That was fast," said Uriel, lowering his bolter.

“Not fast enough,” said Shaan, helping Issam to his feet.

The Scout-sergeant grimaced in pain, his shoulder a mass of bright blood and torn armour plates.

“How’s the shoulder?” asked Uriel.

“Painful, but I’ll live,” replied Issam. “Bastard was fast.”

“Not fast enough,” echoed Uriel, watching as Shaan returned to his warriors.

SECONDS LATER, URIEL watched from the pilot’s compartment as the two warheads impacted in the centre of Axum. The cockpit canopy had been dimmed, and a blinding light flashed into existence just before a second detonation. By the time the canopy cleared, twin mushroom clouds clawed their way into the sky with dreadful finality.

Axum was gone, a city that bore the hallmarks of all that was good and noble in Ultramar, reduced to ashes in a microsecond. All trace of the battle they had just fought was obliterated by warheads designed to cripple starships. A shuddering blast wave shook the Thunderhawk roughly, but as the pilot gunned the engines the vibrations in the fuselage lessened.

But for a moment’s lucky premonition, Uriel and the 4th Company would be dead.

“It was a trap,” said Aethon Shaan, appearing at his shoulder.

“Yes,” said Uriel. “They knew we would come in force.”

“They baited it with their own warriors,” said Shaan. “Ones who wouldn’t care about being left to die.”

“It sounds like you admire that,” said Uriel.

“No, but it tells of a singular lack of conscience in their leader. To know him is to know his weaknesses, but such a warrior will be a dangerous foe.”

“You have no idea.”

“Truly this Honsou must hate you.”

Uriel watched the flaming remains of Axum and clenched his fists.

“Not as much as I hate him,” he promised.

FIVE

WARBREED'S SUPERSTRUCTURE GROANED under the pressure of so sharp a turn, but Honsou knew the ship well enough to be confident she could handle it. An alarm sounded from one of the servitor-stations, but Adept Cycerin silenced it with a dismissive wave of an organic mechadendrite. Enmeshed within a pool of sluicing amniotic gel, the corrupt magos of the Mechanicus had evolved his internal mecha-organic workings to no longer require him to move from station to station.

The Titan they had destroyed on Majaax had furnished Cycerin with bio-conductive gels, and technology stripped from the Basilica Dominastus of the *Indomitable* had allowed him to fashion this disgusting means of more effectively linking with the mechanisms of the *Warbreed.* The smell was horrendous and the undulating shapes moving beneath the sludgy pink fluid filled the bridge of the battle-barge with the reek of sour milk.

"Gods of the warp, that stuff is rank," said Cadaras Grendel. Honsou thought his lieutenant was grimacing at the slopping pool in the centre of the bridge, but it was hard to tell what expression Grendel was making these days.

"If it helps him carry out my orders then it could smell like a cultist of the Plaguefather for all I care," said Honsou. "Now be quiet."

Grendel shrugged and returned his attention to the viewing bay.

Honsou kept his gaze fixed on the swirling images on the plotting table, a cracked slate edged in battered steel with a projected field of red-washed static. Searing icons representing the dancers in this deadly ballet moved slowly through the hash of interference, with the largest being the glaring eye that was the *Indomitable.*

While the makeweights of Honsou's fleet battered themselves against Talassar's screen of orbital torpedo silos and the relentless broadsides of hundreds of geostationary gun platforms, the ships of his warlords fought the real enemy—the Ultramarines fleet.

It was a small fleet, three frigates and a destroyer attended by a host of rapid strike craft and a pair of aging system monitors, yet its strength was not to be underestimated.

A distant explosion flared in the distance and Grendel laughed.

"One for Kaarja Salombar," he said. "That's the *Moonblade.* It's got to be."

Honsou glanced down at the images.

The Corsair Queen's ships ranged far ahead of the Iron Warriors vessels, recklessly dashing off to provoke the Ultramarines ships to battle. As expected, the enemy ships had taken the bait, working to their predictable Codex. The fighting had been fierce, with the Ultramarines vessels taking out three of Salombar's ships without loss. Yet Salombar was no slouch when it came to void war, and her captains were fast and unpredictable.

And that played havoc with the Ultramarines' rote battle plans.

Salombar's flagship, the *Moonblade,* was a sleek dart of a ship, long and graceful, with a host of delicate solar sails descending from her underside. Multiple broadside batteries pummelled the Ultramarines ships, raking a Nova-class frigate from prow to stern.

Then the *Farsider* had joined the fight.

One of the vessels Huron Blackheart had presented Honsou, the venerable Apocalypse-class battleship was ready for the scrapyard, with more than half its weapon systems non-functioning. The old beast still had teeth, however, and its nameless spawn-captain knew how to use them.

The *Farsider*'s lance batteries were defunct, but its main gun could still fire and it unleashed a searing blast from its frontal cannon, a weapon whose barrel ran almost the length of its keel. Graviometric impellers hurled the deadly projectile towards the Ultramarines ships at close to light speed. The resulting implosion obliterated three rapid strike cruisers and sent a system monitor limping for the dark side of the planet.

More and more ships moved to engage the Ultramarines, attacking from almost every axis to pin them in place.

Except the Ultramarines weren't cooperating and staying locked in battle; they were breaking through the Corsair Queen's battle lines.

"She's lost them," said Grendel, watching the dance of icons. "She went in too thin and left them a way out. Obvious really."

"Yes," agreed Honsou. "But look where that way out leads."

Grendel followed the path the Ultramarines breakout would take and grunted with dark amusement. "You planned this?"

"Of course," said Honsou. "You didn't think we'd fight this on their terms did you?"

Honsou turned his attention back to the plotter, watching as the Ultramarines punched through the weakness in Salombar's attack, destroying another corsair vessel as they surged through the gap their weapons had created.

"Too bad their way out is towards the *Indomitable,"* said Honsou.

"Can they hurt it?"

"Unlikely, but one of the frigates is armed with lance batteries," said Honsou.

“And that could do some real damage if it gets through. Maybe even to the Basilica Dominastus.”

“And that would be a terrible shame, eh?” laughed Grendel.

“It won’t be pleasant,” said Honsou with a smile, “but at least it’ll show M’kar how much it needs us if it wants to bring Ultramar to its knees.”

“You think that’s what it wants?” said Grendel.

“Of course, don’t you?”

Grendel shook his head. “No, it just wants to kill Ultramarines. It doesn’t care about revenge. It even told you vengeance was irrelevant.”

Honsou took a long look at Grendel’s disfigured features, unable to tell whether or not he was being serious.

“How do you know? Since when did you become confidante to a daemon?”

“It’s as plain as day,” said Grendel, as though amazed Honsou hadn’t seen it. “It doesn’t matter how this ends. It’s a creature of the warp. It will endure, but the Ultramarines will be a spent force when the dust finally settles. It’ll see us all dead by the end of this, if we let it.”

“Once Ventris has been made to suffer and all he holds dear is in ashes, I am done with Ultramar,” said Honsou as the *Warbreed’s* vast manoeuvring jets fired and forced its enormous bulk around. “M’kar can get itself destroyed killing Ultramarines, but I won’t go down with it.”

Grendel tapped the plotter screen and said, “You won’t need to worry about that if the Ultramarines break through.”

Honsou had no intention of allowing the *Indomitable* to suffer any real damage, but it would do no harm to remind M’kar that it relied on its mortal allies. Yes, the star fort was a potent weapon, almost impregnable and capable of unleashing a fearsome amount of destruction, but without the attendant fleet, it was a static weapon. And if his time as master of Khalan-Ghol had taught him anything, it was that static targets would eventually find themselves brought to ruin.

++Notification: incoming vessels,++ said the grating, wet noise of Adept Cycerin’s voice. It was without definite source, simultaneously appearing from every vent and vox-grille and bubbling up from the depths of his grotesque, scum-frothed pool.

“Identify!” barked Honsou.

++Engine signatures, displacement and inter-ship vox protocols identify incoming vessels as follows: vessel on bearing zero-one-nine is Gladius-class frigate, *Sword of Ultramar*. Vessel on bearing zero-three-seven is Gladius-class frigate, *Grand Duke of Tallasar*. Vessel bearing zero-two-six is Nova-class frigate, *Guilliman’s Spear*. Vessel bearing zero-four-one is Hunter-class

destroyer, *Hera's Wrath*.++

"That's a lot of firepower," noted Grendel.

"Not as much as *Warbreed,"* promised Honsou.

++Warning: external augurs detecting torpedo launch.++

"Now it begins," said Honsou with relish. "Ready close-in defence guns."

++Status: all guns armed and acquiring target information.++

"Increase speed to full," ordered Honsou, the words barely out of his mouth when he felt the vibration in the deck plate change in response. As repugnant as Cycerin's transformation had made him, Honsou couldn't argue with the results.

"Launch counter-spread. Target *Hera's Wrath*, she's the only one with torpedoes."

Though he couldn't feel it, Honsou knew the torpedoes were already blasting from their prow launch bays. Sure enough the plotter came alive with a squall of light, though it was impossible to pick out how many weapons had been launched.

++Picket screen of rapid strike vessels manoeuvring to intercept torpedoes.++

"Let them," said Honsou. "Enough will get through."

THE ULTRAMARINES RAPID strike vessels flew into the path of the incoming torpedoes and unleashed a withering storm of gunfire into the path of the warheads. The odds of actually hitting an object as slender and fast as a torpedo were infinitesimally small, but the captains of the rapid strike vessels knew that, and filled space before them with expanding storms of whickering explosive shrapnel and scrambling flurries of electromagnetic radiation.

Thirteen torpedoes detonated prematurely as their machine spirits registered false signals and the expanding clouds of spinning debris shredded another dozen. The rapid strike captains dived into the midst of the surviving torpedoes to rake their appointed sector with battery fire. Such a reckless manoeuvre caught yet more of the torpedoes, but not all of them.

Of the fifty torpedoes launched, barely a handful breached the picket screen, and the close-in defences of *Hera's Wrath* blew all but one to pieces. Efficient damage control kept the ship in the fight, with only a barely noticeable loss in performance.

Together with the other vessels in the Ultramarines fleet, *Hera's Wrath* punched through the Iron Warriors' first line of defence, with Kaarja Salombar's corsair fleet regrouping in its wake and setting off in pursuit.

While the bulk of Honsou's fleet completed the destruction of Talassar's orbital defences, the gap between the Ultramarines fleet and the *Indomitable*

closed with every passing moment.

Only one vessel lay between the Imperial ships and the *Indomitable.*

The *Warbreed.*

FAR BELOW HONSOU, in the shadowed halls of *Warbreed's* lower decks, Ardaric Vaanes moved through the darkness with a predator's silence. He was an oil-black shape in the deeper darkness, his movements swift and measured. Honsou's flagship was not a populous ship; barely a hundred Iron Warriors filled its bare metal corridors, its crew a mélange of slaves, servitors and disfigured creatures of indeterminate origin.

It was easy to move unseen through the ship, yet Vaanes moved as though an army of hunters pursued him. He passed through the cavernous armaments decks where thousands of slaves hauled on chained block and tackle to load the vast torpedoes onto their launch rails. He ghosted through the crackling capacitor bays that powered the sustaining mechanisms of the ship, avoiding detection by the corrupted magos hardwired into its beating heart. His course took him through the crew decks, past sparring warriors and cruel practices designed to attract the favour of the fickle gods of the warp.

Vaanes felt a subtle pull as he watched these votive rituals, a beguiling and insistent tugging at his soul that he had once welcomed, but now dreaded. Fickle they might be, but the gods that haunted the swells and currents of the warp had long memories and did not lightly take rejection. He turned away and slid into the darkness once again, letting the pungent aroma of oil, hot metal and dust take his mind from vivid splashes of blood, scented incense and the taste of warm flesh on the tongue.

Such thoughts came to him in the night, reminding him of sensations that could be wrung from each moment: a million ecstasies that could be his were he to once again acknowledge the possessor of his soul.

Vaanes shook off those thoughts and focussed his will on remaining unseen as he moved from one end of the ship to the other. He heard the groans and creaks of its superstructure as it turned and its master drove it to war. Honsou was a decent enough ship's captain, but he was no expert in void war. Vaanes doubted the Ultramarines presence around Talassar was enough to seriously threaten the *Warbreed,* but part of him hoped for that microsecond of fire and light of a torpedo or lance strike nearby that would suck him into space and end his miserable servitude to Honsou.

That wasn't going to happen. His experiences with Honsou had shown him the underlying cosmic order to the galaxy. There were no coincidences in events

of great moment, and this was one of those moments. Though he was not an arrogant man, Vaanes knew he was too important in these unfolding events to have his life ended by something so arbitrary.

He eased from the darkness, allowing his oneness with the shadows to bleed away until he stood revealed in the bare-lumen glow of the iron-plated decking. Two serfs robed in bleached grey robes started in shock as he emerged, a towering warrior in black battle plate with the hint of razored claws extending from his gauntlets.

“My lord,” said one, bowing before him.

“Don’t call me that,” snapped Vaanes, striding past them and moving into the arched vault of the training decks. He had trained the Newborn here, letting it kill Jeffar San and Svoljard to prove a point. Vaanes moved to the edge of the half-lit chamber beside the weapon racks and swiftly removed his armour.

Once he had worn this armour with pride. He had a host of personal armourers and squires to attend upon him then, ensuring that every plate was removed and oiled and treated with reverence. Every identifying mark had since been scoured and filed from his armour, leaving nothing to give any clue to its origin, yet no matter how hard he tried to erase his past he could not erase his memory.

Beneath the heavy plates, Vaanes wore a faded bodyglove, its fabric stretched and torn in places. With his armour discarded around him, he stripped this from his body as well, leaving him naked in the centre of the training hall. Vaanes resisted glancing down at his shoulder, where Shrike himself had inked a tattoo to mirror the insignia his armour’s shoulder guard once bore. He’d gouged the winged image from his deltoid a long time ago and the pale patch of scar tissue was all that remained of that once proud mark.

His disrobing complete, he moved through the training hall at speed, performing unarmed combat drills, leaping into the air and twisting with savage chops of his hand and feet. His every extremity was a killing weapon, his every slashing blow a lethal strike. Though a battle was being fought around him in space, he cared only for the fluid perfection of his attacks.

At last he slammed down on one knee, fist punching the deck where a crippled opponent would be choking on their lifeblood had this been a real fight. He let out a shuddering breath, his entire body taut and his breathing laboured.

He felt the Newborn’s presence like an infectious itch, and looked up to see it watching him from the chamber’s entrance.

“How long have you been there?” asked Vaanes, rising to his feet and letting the tension drain from his body.

“Long enough to see that you are troubled,” said the Newborn with disarming

clarity.

“I am not troubled,” lied Vaanes.

The creature cocked its head to the side, no doubt trying to figure out why he was lying. It was an incredibly powerful creature, hot-housed in the daemonic wombs of Medrengard and imbued with unnatural potency by its warp-spawned birth. Despite the stolen genetic legacy of Uriel Ventris encoded in its genetic structure, the Newborn had been, in many ways, a blank canvas. Its impressionable mind had been moulded by its creators into something monstrous, a spoonfed soldier of disorder. Vaanes had seen its cruelties and savagery, and knew they had their origins in Honsou’s brainwashing.

“What might you be if left to your own devices?” he wondered aloud.

“I don’t understand.”

“No, you probably don’t,” said Vaanes.

“Then tell me,” snapped the Newborn. “You are supposed to train me, remember?”

Vaanes shook his head, irritated at the Newborn’s lack of guile. Everything it was had come from Honsou. Even its anger was fraudulent and unconvincing.

Vaanes moved with his customary grace towards his armour, hearing the ship groan as it executed another sharp manoeuvre.

“There’s nothing left for me to show you,” he said, pulling the bodyglove over his legs and setting the rubberised loops over the input ports implanted in his thighs. “You’re already a more deadly fighter than I ever could have trained you to be.”

The Newborn joined him at the weapon racks and gestured towards the centre of the training area.

“The fighting style you employed. Can you teach me how to kill like that?” it asked. “I have never seen you fight in that manner.”

“Even you cannot master that,” said Vaanes, with more than a hint of pride.

“Why not?”

“It is a secret fighting style known only to a few select warriors trained by the masters of the Raven Guard. Few can master its subtlety, and you, my friend, are not subtle.”

“I can learn,” said the Newborn.

“Not this, you can’t,” promised Vaanes.

“I could try.”

“No damn it!” snapped Vaanes. “I said no!”

“You are unsettled,” said the Newborn. “Is it this war with the Ultramarines? Do you regret that you will have to fight warriors you might once have fought alongside?”

“You’re full of questions today,” said Vaanes. “Why so curious?”

The Newborn shrugged, though the gesture was unconvincing. “I… feel as though I have been here before. I know I have not, yet I have a fondness for many of the worlds we are destroying.”

“That’s Ventris,” said Vaanes. “It’s his memories you’re experiencing.”

“I am aware of that, but still…”

“You don’t want this?”

“I am not sure,” said the Newborn, rubbing the heel of one palm against its temple. “All I know is hatred for the Imperium and Ventris. Everything I have been taught tells me he is the enemy, yet everything I *feel* tells me of his nobility and the grand ideals that drive him. I will kill him eventually, but I wonder what I might make of him were I not part of this army.”

“You can’t fight what you are,” said Vaanes. “You’ve been bred for this fight ever since you were… hatched, born, or however you came into this world. You are what you are because they made you that way, but who knows what you *could* have been.”

“But does that mean this is all I am capable of being?”

“Who knows?” said Vaanes. “Honsou and Grendel are relishing this chance to fight the Ultramarines, but this war holds no glory for me. The idea that I might face Uriel Ventris fills me with nothing but dread.”

“You fear he will slay you?”

Vaanes laughed. “No, I can kill Ventris easily enough.”

“Then what?”

“He reminds me of what I used to be,” said Vaanes. “He reminds me of what I could have been, but turned my back on.”

“Then maybe it isn’t the thought of facing Ventris that makes you so uneasy, perhaps it is the thought that your former Chapter has sent the hunters after you.”

“Perhaps,” said Vaanes, turning away. “Or maybe I’m afraid of what I might become if they *don’t* catch me.”

“Maybe it is not too late,” said the Newborn. “For both of us.”

“What are you talking about?”

The Newborn reached out and tapped his shoulder, and Vaanes looked down.

Beneath the pale knot of scar tissue on the rounded curve of his deltoid a tattooed black raven could clearly be seen.

ONCE IT HAD been a grand muster hall for the garrison of the *Indomitable*, but the pale stone walls and grand marble columns of the Hall of Ancients now sheltered warriors of a very different stripe. Blue and gold banners had once

hung from adamantine flagpoles, but they had been torn down and those that hadn’t been burned were now bedrolls for kroot mercenaries. Bronze statuary of Ultramarines banner bearers lay shattered on the inlaid terrazzo floor and the air reeked of alien excrement where fonts of water filled from the rivers of Macragge had been defiled.

Honsou smiled to see the icons of his enemy cast down, relishing this chance to bring the hated Ultramarines low. Grendel, Vaanes and the Newborn followed him into the vast chamber. He held his head high, as befitted the master of this fleet, walking with earned arrogance through the ranks of warriors towards the grand plinth at the far end of the chamber.

As he had promised, the incoming Ultramarines vessels had nowhere near enough firepower to match *Warbreed*, and she had crippled the smaller vessels in the opening moments of the firefight. Even now, all three were being repaired and reconfigured in the dock facilities of the *Indomitable*, and it gave Honsou no small amount of satisfaction to be turning these vessels against their masters.

“What’s so important our new… *ally* needs to call us all together?” asked Vaanes, and Honsou caught the careful choice in his words.

“The next stage of our attack on Ultramar,” he said. “The Ultramarines know what we can do now, and it’s time to keep them on the back foot.”

“What does that mean?” said Grendel.

“They’re used to us going after one world at a time, so we have to step up a gear.”

Honsou strode off before anyone could ask him anymore. M’kar had summoned every warlord to the *Indomitable* in the wake of ravaging the surface of Talassar. Honsou hadn’t bothered to watch the destruction this time, already bored with the tens of thousands of daemons rampaging through the cities of the great continent that was the sole landmass standing proud of the planet-wide ocean.

Talassar’s cities were now tombs, graveyards of torn flesh and blood, though not a single structure had been toppled or reduced to flattened rubble by siege artillery—a notion that troubled Honsou’s Iron Warrior soul. There was joy to be had in watching the precisely applied mathematical force of bombardments, approach trenches, saps and countermines. A siege was as much science and art as it was blunt force, and after the thrill of taking the iron to the stone in the battle for the *Indomitable*, Honsou felt as though he were leaving a crucial aspect of this war undone.

He marched past Ekoh’s host of stinking kroot, their skin oily and reeking of biochemical sweat. Their crests were a mix of vivid greens and yellow, their beaks mottled black and purple. Across from them were the reptilian forms of

Xaneant's loxatl warband, and Honsou saw that even among this assembly of pirates, rogues and renegades there was a hierarchy. The xenos species were forced to the back of the chamber, while the grander warlords took centre stage before their daemonic patron.

Kaarja Salombar sketched him a roguish salute, her wild blue hair swirling around her thin features. Honsou supposed that she was beautiful, with pale skin and warm, almond-shaped eyes of striking violet. There were some who said there was eldar blood in her veins, and Honsou would be hard pressed to disagree. Her tall, slender frame and inhuman grace certainly suggested an affinity with that ancient race. Clad in brightly coloured fabrics that rippled in an unseen breeze and armoured with strips of lacquered leather, she cut a fearsome figure, and her lips eased apart in a smile that was at once repellent and alluring.

Closer to the plinth was Votheer Tark, the master of a host of battle engines crafted on a world once sacred to the priests of the Mechanicus, but now taken by their dark kin. Its foundries crafted cursed iron tempered with the souls of a thousand sacrifices, and machines fed on the ground-up bodies of slaves shaped them with bloodstained hammers into dread vehicles for their dark master. Tark himself was little more than a fragmented scrap of meat and brain hung together in a sloshing amniotic tank. The last time Honsou had seen him, he was marching up the rubble slope of a breach in the Gauntlet Bastion as part of a monstrous spider-like machine with mortar spines. His organic components were now fitted to a long, multi-limbed chassis of blades and stalk-like claw-arms that looked absurdly fragile, but probably wasn't.

Honsou passed through ranks of pirate captains and renegades of no particular note, paying them no mind until he reached the Blade dancers once led by Notha Etassay. The champion of the Dark Prince had fought his last battle on the *Indomitable* against an Imperial assassin, an incredible fight of deadly blades that ended badly for Etassay.

Honsou won Etassay's warband on New Badab, and had found his addiction to sensation irritating, but now that the champion was gone, he found he actually missed the lightness of his words. Before he could pass the Blade dancers, a woman in rippling silver armour that covered her entire body stepped from their ranks with a graceful pirouette.

Her helmet, which was moulded in a perfectly androgynous fashion, unfolded with liquid sweeps, as though it were not truly solid, and Honsou was reminded of the gleaming texture of the arm he had stolen from the Ultramarines sergeant. The woman's features were black and finely sculpted, like a perfect statue of onyx. Incongruously yellow eyes met his stare, and as her helmet smoothly retracted into the armour at her shoulder, her cropped golden hair was revealed.

“Honsou,” said the woman, and her voice was like a breath of perfumed air.

“Who are you, and why should I care?” he answered.

“I am Xiomagra,” said the warrior woman. “I am the new blademistress.”

“Good for you,” said Grendel, pushing past her. Without seeming to move, the woman was suddenly holding a pair of blades, one silver, one black across Grendel’s throat. One twist of her wrists would see him decapitated, and Honsou was almost tempted to let her.

“Those are Etassay’s swords,” he said, recognising the ornate, inscribed blades and decorative pommels.

“They are the Blade dancers’ swords,” corrected Xiomagra. “When one master dies, the next takes up the blades. Etassay died at your side, and the Law of the Swords compels me to be your shadow until such time as I can repay that debt.”

“I already have a bodyguard,” said Honsou, jerking his thumb at the Newborn.

Xiomagra sneered. “That bastard by-blow? I should kill the abomination now.”

“I really wouldn’t,” advised Honsou. “It’s tougher than it looks.”

Xiomagra released Grendel and Honsou grabbed his lieutenant’s arm before he could reach for his pistol.

“Not now,” said Honsou, and Grendel gave him a stare of such ferocity that he felt sure the warrior was going to strike him down. Grendel shrugged off his arm and turned to Xiomagra, drawing a finger across his scarred throat.

Honsou caught up with him and said, “Kill her later, but for now we need her.”

“Fair enough,” said Grendel, glancing back at the warrior woman. “I can wait.”

With the mortal champions behind him, Honsou finally reached the plinth where the elite of this gathering were waiting.

The Iron Warriors had the honour of standing closest to the wide plinth, and Honsou felt a strange sense of pride in their upright bearing and the proud swagger of their status. These were the pre-eminent warriors of this host, though many jostled for that position. Skull-visored helms turned to him as he approached and he felt the wary respect of his warriors.

Iron Warriors seldom loved their commanders, and a leader’s death often came at the hands of his subordinates. Bitter jealousy and twisted ambition was endemic to the Iron Warriors, but Honsou wouldn’t have it any other way. Such violent competition bred ruthless warriors to whom the notion of conscience and honour were utterly alien.

Alongside the Iron Warriors were the warlords and champions of the renegade Astartes who had joined his swelling army en route to Ultramar: Neshan Voor's Claws of Lorek and Muscara's Skulltakers. Lacking the cohesion of the Iron Warriors, Honsou had little respect for them, fierce fighters though they undoubtedly were. Individuals from numerous renegade Chapters bulked out their numbers: the Apostles of Mithras, the Death Shadows and even a few of more illustrious pedigree. Honsou spotted three warriors who were clearly Space Wolves, perhaps those selfsame traitors who had turned on their brethren aboard the *Wolf of Fenris.*

He smiled to think of treachery in such a Chapter and mounted the steps to the plinth as the air grew dense and scratchy, like old pict film dredged from a forgotten basement and streamed on a broken player.

The heavy tread of iron feet cracking marble announced the arrival of M'kar and a palpable sense of excitement filled the chamber as the daemon-Dreadnought emerged from the darkness to preach to its followers.

"SONS OF CHAOS, we have taken the first steps on a glorious road!" began M'kar, its arms raised in the air. Dark radiance sweated from its form, mighty and swollen with warp energy, as the daemon's true form flickered in and out of focus, as though seeking to overwhelm the mechanical shell it had been forced to occupy.

Honsou watched it speak, the rasping, deathly tones crashing together like rusted iron bars. Looking out over the adoring faces of warriors, killers, monsters and xenos creatures, he was momentarily taken aback as he realised the churning sensation in his gut was hatred for the daemon-thing he had freed from the warp-core of the *Indomitable.*

He had thought to use it as a weapon, but the weapon turned out to have its own agenda, and had more or less taken over his army without him even being aware of it. He shouldn't have been surprised, for it was a prince of the immaterium, a being older than any living thing in the galaxy, and the simple-minded would always see such beings as objects of worship. Not only that, but a daemon prince would always seek to be the master of whatever host it was summoned into.

A being of such power could no more be a follower than Honsou.

He was not normally given to jealousy, for he had no need of his warriors' love. A commander could be hated or loved, but never both, and Honsou would far rather be hated. So long as his warriors killed the enemy, he cared nothing for their affections. That was the Iron Warriors' way and he saw no need to change

it, but to have his own army stolen from under him was something he had never considered.

Did it matter though? Two of Guilliman's worlds were bloody charnel houses, which was better than any foe had managed in ten thousand years, even the Great Devourer. More would fall before M'kar's daemonic army and the power of Honsou's warriors.

So did it matter whose hand was on the tiller?

Absolutely. This was his army, *his* dark crusade and *his* vengeance.

Honsou felt his emotions threatening to get the better of him, and he bit the inside of his mouth bloody to control his rising fury. He forced himself to listen to the daemon prince's proselytising, feeling his contempt for it as acrid bile in the back of his throat.

M'kar spoke with the passion of a zealot with utter faith and certainty in its words. It spoke with a fervour Honsou found distasteful. He had never felt any overwhelming urge to pray to any of the warp gods, save for the power they could grant. Pacts were made and deals were struck, but worship… leave that to fools and the desperate.

"The worlds of Ultramar are ripe for the warriors of the Eternal Powers to sweep the infidels to their doom!" bellowed M'kar. "For too long the scions of Guilliman have flaunted their superiority over their fellows, for too long have they held a place of pre-eminence they do not deserve. You are all warriors chosen by powers greater than you can comprehend to do their bidding. You shall march upon the silver citadels of the unclean and purge their worlds with fire and the unbridled majesty of the warp!"

M'kar's seething red form billowed, and dark wings of shadow flared at its back, smoking and leaving the reek of burned air in their wake. Its bestial face twisted in rage, a boiling light surging in its maw as its hatred tainted the air with the taste of hot metal.

"You are soldiers on a holy war, warriors tasked to bring the true powers of the universe to those who have turned their back on what it means to be alive. Trapped in lives of one dimension they deny those who would hear the holy word of Chaos and hunt them down. Which of you has not felt the heat of their unholy pursuit? Which of you would not turn your blades and guns upon your persecutors? The universe belongs to the Eternal Powers and all who do not praise their glory and sacrifice unto them what is their right and proper tribute are heretics whose only fate is to die screaming in torment!"

The gathered warlords waved a thousand blades in the air and answered with a mix of howling machine voices, alien screeches and human bellows of fealty. The Hall of Ancients shook with the violence of their affirmation, and its walls

had never known such venom.

“I didn’t think warp creatures were big on inspiring speeches,” hissed Ardaric Vaanes, leaning in close to Honsou. The howling almost swallowed his words.

Honsou shrugged. “Not any I’ve known. The legends tell that M’kar was once mortal, an Astartes some say. Perhaps it was some kind of fire and brimstone preacher in its previous incarnation.”

“You sound bitter.”

“I don’t care for speeches,” said Honsou. “In my experience, warriors are either going to fight for you or they are not. Fancy words won’t change that.”

“I think M’kar would disagree,” said the Newborn, its eyes fixed on the daemon prince as it held its blurred, machine-flesh arms out for silence.

“We have stirred the Legion of Guilliman to action, and they will fight to protect that which they believe is theirs, but they will find us scattered to the corners of their realm, taking the cleansing fire of Chaos to every one of their worlds! Leave no heart beating, no stone upon another and render every field of turned earth to scorched wasteland. Only when Ultramar is a tomb, and all the sons of Guilliman are dead, will our task be complete.”

The daemon raised its arms and darkness swept out from its monstrous form, filling the chamber with crackling shadows as they spread from its exhaling form. Every warrior enveloped by the darkness gasped, honoured by the touch of a daemonic lord of the warp.

“The inferno of my vengeance fills you!” roared the daemon. “It will burn you, my bearers of the holy word, it will fill your veins with power and fire until Ultramar is in ashes. As my power flows in you, so too will I see what you see, feel what you feel and know what you know. With each death I will grow stronger. With every fortress burned my reach will stretch further. You will be my army of dark righteousness. You will be the Bloodborn and your name shall strike terror into the hearts of men!”

The daemon’s eyes shone with the light of its infernal fury, a hatred born thousands of years ago when the galaxy was a place of wonder and possibility.

“Spread throughout Ultramar and take my fire to the Ultramarines! Burn them from their fastnesses until no trace remains. This is my holy word!”

SIX

TIGURIUS CLOSED HIS eyes, letting his breathing deepen and his concentration focus as he entered his trance. He sat within his private chambers within the Library of Ptolemy, that mountainous repository of knowledge that bore the name of the first and greatest Librarian of the Ultramarines. Little was known of Ptolemy, though some said he had been present at the trial of Magnus the Red. Whether he had stood as an accuser or one of the forgotten Librarians who had rallied to his defence was unknown.

Magnus was a figure of fascination to Varro Tigurius. Where he could understand the fallen primarch's thirst for knowledge, he could never imagine what had driven him to wield the foulest arts and think they would not taint him. Such power was corrupt and no one, not primarch or mortal, could touch it without blackening their soul. The Imperium's distrust of the psyker was one of the crucial hypocrisies that kept it from total unity, yet the solution to that dichotomy was beyond Tigurius.

How could any society preach intolerance of that which allowed it to function?

What was the difference between sorcery and psychic power? Did it depend on the wielder, or did it depend on the outcome? Or was it the means employed to gain the power what mattered? It was all in the definitions, knew Tigurius.

Votive candles burned in the corners of his chambers and incense tapers filled the air with mandragora essence. A fug of vapours hung beneath the Imperial eagle cut into the stonework of the ceiling, and the psychically-attuned hellfire crystals woven within the fabric of his armoured hood chimed in sympathy with his heartbeat.

This ritual of divination he was attempting could be achieved without such props, but Tigurius found they aided his concentration, and in matters concerning the warp, concentration was key to survival.

He put the matter aside for now, already thinking of a lesson for the Codicers and more advanced Lexicani. Tigurius took a deep, cleansing breath and let his body relax, drawing the power of the warp into the protected conduits within his flesh. Its touch was cold, like liquid mercury flowing through his veins, and he shivered at its touch.

One by one the sensations of the world around him faded away, his perceptions of mundane reality overtaken by a rushing cascade of white noise.

He let it come, allowing his consciousness to be borne along by the tides and ever-shifting currents of the fluid realm beyond the gates of the empyrean.

Some men could free their souls from their flesh, but to fly the depths of the warp was to invite disaster or worse. Ultramarines Librarians understood that to risk their immortal souls with such reckless leaps into the unknown were foolhardy, though Tigurius couldn't deny he had been tempted to venture beyond the confines of his flesh to feel the rushing currents of the warp flowing around his subtle body.

Tigurius dismissed the petty blandishments of the warp, recognising the impulse for what it was. How easily men's souls were tempted!

He smiled and felt the first stirrings of the vast web of the future coalescing around him, its shivering cords visible as the finest golden lines. All existence was embodied within this web, an unimaginably complex and interwoven lattice that constantly sang with the impacts mortals made upon it. The vast majority of individuals were so insignificant to the grand parade of history that even the mightiest among them sent only the tiniest shiver along its fibres, but every now and again…

The cords around Tigurius were singing and he felt the confluence of destinies in this moment. Lives of consequence were coming together, and such was the force of the vibrations running along the web that Tigurius knew that many would soon be stilled forever. Dozens of the golden lines around him were in motion and he followed the nearest, letting the subtle shifts of its temporal frequency guide him to a potential future.

He followed it until the world splintered around him as the future took on too many aspects to see any with any degree of clarity. The future of Ultramar hung on a million different threads, each one pulled taut in myriad different directions.

Tigurius saw a host of threads knotted together, each vibrating with desperate urgency as events impacted upon them. Worlds of Ultramar burned with daemonic fire upon some, while in others they bloomed as verdant as Prandium had once burst with life.

A rocky world of forest-shawled mountains was engulfed in battle, a world Tigurius recognised as Espandor. He saw the great city of the river, the place named for Ancient Galatan's fall. Its once proud triumphal ways and processionals were now thronged with the forces of the Archenemy as they closed in upon a wedge of blue-armoured warriors. Their flag was falling and amid the carnage, Tigurius saw a shining warrior beset by all manner of foes. The red cloak identified him as Cato Sicarius.

A half-breed witch woman with blue hair and colourful robes launched herself at him, but the threads sang and Tigurius was hurled from Espandor. His

spiralling vision settled upon a forsaken world of the dead, its cities lifeless tombs and its people exterminated. He saw a citadel of ancient days restored to glory, its marble walls defended by a host of warriors in enormous suits of armour. The Chapter banner of the Ultramarines flew from its tallest tower, and the light of glory shone from this heroic flag, a light that was all that stood between inevitable decline and glorious resurgence.

He saw familiar faces upon the citadel's cracked ramparts, but before he could see more, the threads sang again and he was hurled onwards to a world of darkness, a world of caverns that had never known the sun. Yet within the warren of tunnels, humanity thrived in enormous caves so vast that they were as grand as any fertile valley of Quintarn. Four underground rivers fed the largest cavern, and though Tigurius knew the surface of this world was more lethal than any deathworld, its people were as contented and fortunate as any of Ultramar.

Of all the worlds Tigurius had seen, he knew with utter conviction that this was the point upon which all things revolved. This world held the key to Ultramar's salvation, but equally it was also the source of its doom.

With that realisation, his perception of the web of possible futures fell away and Tigurius was seized with a lurching sense of vertigo. He closed his eyes and allowed the senses of his body to reacquaint themselves with the material world. He recited the books of the Codex Astartes and allowed the soothing rendition of his primarch's greatest work to soothe his soul before opening his eyes.

Though he hadn't been aware of moving, he was holding his staff out before him and the fingers of his right hand were resting upon the symbols representing the four ethical cords.

"Incorruptibility, modesty, duty and the proper observation of ceremony," said Tigurius, reciting them from rote. He spun the staff and smoothly rose to his feet, turning towards the great desk carved from a single piece of Iaxian goldwood. Instantly his eyes fell upon his *Duanshi* ink-stone, his calligraphy brush, a sheet of parchment and the metal-gall ink itself.

"The four scholarly treasures," he said, pleased that at least one aspect of his vision was making sense. While the visions were still clear in his head, he sat behind his desk and began to commit all he had seen to the parchment It took him two hours to recall every nuance and feeling, and four sheets of paper, which didn't surprise him.

"Always the symbol of four…" he whispered.

When he had finished, Tigurius left the library and made his way to the top of the mountain, where he found Lord Calgar in conference with First Captain Agemman and Sicarius of the 2nd. The sun was low in the sky, throwing long shadows throughout the courtyard. Calgar looked up as he entered, his face set in

a mask of controlled aggression.

Waves of fury radiated from Sicarius, and Tigurius was surprised to realise the captain's anger was directed at him.

"You heard what happened on Talassar?" said Sicarius.

"I did," said Tigurius. "I grieve with you, my friend, but the people of Talassar will be avenged."

"Avenged?" snapped Sicarius. "They would not need avenging if you had read the portents! You saw Behemoth, you saw Nidar and you saw the arrival of the greenskins fleet. Why did you not see this?"

"Tell me, Captain Sicarius," said Tigurius, carefully modulating his tone to be both soothing and sympathetic. "Is it truly me you are angry with? Or am I just a convenient target for your rage?"

Sicarius looked set to spit a caustic reply, but his jaw tightened and he bowed to Tigurius.

"I apologise, my lord. You are, of course, correct. I am Grand Duke of Talassar, I should have been there to defend my people. I failed them."

"We all failed them," said Marneus Calgar. "Our enemies took us by surprise and we reacted as the Codex dictates. Perhaps that was our error."

"*Our* error?" said Agemman. "I do not follow."

"If you know both yourself and your enemy, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss," said Calgar, quoting from the Codex Astartes. "Our enemies clearly know our methods. They know us well enough to know how we will react to any given circumstance, and what makes us predictable makes us vulnerable."

Tigurius was impressed. For any Ultramarines warrior, especially the Chapter Master, to admit that their adherence to the Codex Astartes might have left them open to this attack spoke volumes of his humility and willingness to adapt.

"The clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but does not allow the enemy's will to be imposed on him," said Tigurius, completing the Chapter Master's quote.

"Just so," said Calgar, waving Tigurius over to a rolled parchment map of Ultramar. Tigurius scanned the parchment, seeing the dispositions of Ultramarines fleet assets and military deployments. The bulk of the fleet was based around Macragge, with elements scattered throughout Ultramar on patrol circuits and garrison duties. Likewise, the warriors of the Ultramarines were primarily based on Macragge, though numerous squads were assigned other duties throughout the realm.

"I have tasking orders for every portion of our strength, Varro," said Calgar, tapping the finger of his heavy gauntlet onto the map. "I have recalled the 3rd

and 7th, but I suspect events will unfold before they can reach us. But Ultramar is a vast empire, so tell me your divinations revealed some aspect of our enemies' plan."

"It did, my lord," said Tigurius, laying the four sheets of parchment upon the map.

Patiently, he explained all that he had seen and what he believed it meant, seeing the sceptical glances exchanged between the war-captains as he spoke.

"It's not much," said Calgar, when Tigurius had finished.

"There are gaps," admitted Tigurius, "but any plan is better than no plan. These are not set futures, nor are they even probable futures. What is yet to come is like water and flows where it will, yet as the worker of the land can know which way the water will run, a canny practitioner of the subtle arts can read the likely paths of the future."

Marneus Calgar smiled. "And there are none cannier than you, Varro."

"You honour me, my lord," said Tigurius. "I believe what I saw to be true, and I urge you to trust me, Marneus."

He saw Agemman and Sicarius flinch at his use of the Chapter Master's given name, but he needed to impress upon him the seriousness of his urging.

"Your visions have served us well before, Varro," said Calgar, staring at the map. "Without your prescience, Behemoth would have overwhelmed us and countless other threats might have sorely tested us. So I will trust that what you say now is no less accurate."

"So we base our deployments on… psykery?" said Sicarius. "I mean no offence, Lord Tigurius."

"None taken, I assure you," replied Tigurius. "It is often hard for warriors to understand the complexities of the subtle arts. I mean no offence, of course."

Sicarius blinked, unsure if he were being insulted, but he could only meet Tigurius' stare for a few moments before the awesome weight of knowledge in the Librarian's eyes forced him to look away.

"And Calth," said Agemman. "You say it is the key?"

"I believe so," said Tigurius, looking away from Sicarius.

"Then surely that should be the focus of our deployment?" said Agemman. "If the key to victory lies beneath its surface, then I will take the 1st Company there to fight in its defence."

Calgar shook his head. "No, you and your warriors are to be despatched to Talassar."

Agemman began to protest, but Calgar cut him off. "You heard what Varro said. You and I will be fighting together, but it will not be on Calth. If I read the omens in these visions correctly, another will have the heavy burden of

defending that world, eh Varro?”

“Aye, my lord,” said Tigurius. “The Sentinel of the Tower.”

“REMEMBER THE LAST time the four of us walked like this?” said Pasanius, as they marched along the shadowed corridors of the *Vae Victus.*

Uriel remembered well when it had been, but it was Lord Admiral Tiberius who answered.

“I remember,” said Tiberius, sourly. “When we went to meet the Mortifactors on the Basilica Mortis. The scars those damned pilot ships left have still to be repaired.”

“The shipwrights didn’t get to them after the damage taken at Espandor?” asked Uriel.

“No,” said Tiberius. “There wasn’t time between fighting the greenskins and then heading off to fight the tau.”

“Damned inconsiderate these xenos species, eh?” said Pasanius.

Tiberius didn’t answer and they continued on their way to the embarkation deck, past softly-lit shrines to the Emperor of Mankind and reliquaries containing ancient battle trophies of the Ultramarines. From time to time they would pass a Chapter serf in a blue chiton, hard-wearing fatigues and combat rig, but for the most part they made their way without meeting another soul. Given the nature of the individual coming aboard the *Vae Victus*, Tiberius had restricted the movements of his crew.

Tiberius was a bald giant in power armour, one side of his leather tough face gruesomely scarred and his craggy features perfectly matching the character of his ship he had commanded these last three centuries. The *Vae Victus* had taken part in some of the most heroic actions in the Ultramarines history, and wore its scars with pride, no matter that Tiberius complained bitterly about the lack of care she received in Calth’s orbital docks. He wore his green ceremonial cloak of office at his shoulders, and though the foxbat fur at its collar was a constant irritation to him, it symbolised his role as Master of the Fleet. By rights that title should have fallen to Uriel, but there was no shame in passing it to a warrior like Tiberius. There was little Lazlo Tiberius didn’t know about void war, and he had accepted the role with honour.

As they took the elevator to the embarkation deck, Pasanius said, “I hear Sicarius and the 2nd are setting off for Espandor. He won’t be happy about that after what happened to Talassar.”

“I don’t blame him,” agreed Uriel. “I know how I would feel if something happened to Calth and the 4th Company were not being sent to avenge its

people. I understand Sicarius' disappointment completely."

"Lord Calgar and the 1st Company are going to Talassar," said Learchus. "Surely Sicarius should be pleased at so powerful a response to the attack."

"Then you don't know Sicarius," grunted Tiberius. "The idea that Agemman will get the chance to fight alongside the Chapter Master and save Sicarius' home world will not sit well with him. He is Grand Duke of Talassar, and it is his duty to fight for his people. And Sicarius will not like anything that sidelines the 2nd and boosts Agemman's standing."

"You really think Sicarius has his eye on Captain Agemman's position?" said Pasanius.

"Cato has his eye on a greater prize than Regent of Ultramar," replied Tiberius.

"Enough," said Uriel. "Cato Sicarius is a warrior of great honour and it does not become you, *any of you,* to be talking about him in this way."

Suitably chastened, the subject of Sicarius' ambition was dropped and the talk moved to the other deployments throughout Ultramar.

Lord Calgar and the 1st Company made for Talassar in answer to the murderous attack, while the 2nd Company were en route to Espandor. Elements of the 5th and 6th travelled to Quintam with Chaplain Cassius, and in response to Tigurius' vision, Antaro Chronus had been attached to their armoured elements.

Uriel and the 4th Company were ordered to Calth, but they would not be travelling alone.

Several ships of the Ultramar fleet had been tasked to accompany the *Vae Victus,* a small assembly of frigates, destroyers and rapid strike vessels, each a craft with a legacy of honour that was the envy of most other Chapters.

Anchored in the midst of these ships was a Gothic-class cruiser that had taken part in the war that bore its name, though little remained of its exterior silhouette to reveal that proud heritage. Emblazoned on the ship's blade-like prow was a mechanised skull on a black and white cog symbol, and the vessel's flanks bristled with augmentations its original builders could never have envisaged.

This was the *Perpetuum Cogito,* flagship of Magos Locard, a vessel that radiated such strange energy signatures that the deck crew of the *Vae Victus* could barely register them.

The remaining strength of the Chapter garrisoned Macragge under the command of Captain Sinon, for the Fortress of Hera required defending by more than just the Defence Auxilia and Chapter serfs. Captain Antilochus and Torias Telion of the 10th had deployed in secret, letting none save the Chapter Master know of their ultimate destination, but such was typical of these masters of the

Scouts' art.

"There's one thing I don't understand," said Pasanius, as they reached the blast doors leading to the embarkation deck.

"Just one?" said Learchus with a smile.

Pasanius ignored the jibe and continued. "After what happened on Tarentus, why would the Chapter Master bother going to Talassar? He could be walking into another trap."

"Lord Tigurius saw him on Talassar," said Learchus. "Just as he saw Sicarius on Espandor. You can't fight the future."

"Since when did you become an expert on causality, Learchus?" asked Tiberius.

Learchus shook his head. "I am not, but it makes sense that if Lord Tigurius saw the Chapter Master there then that is where he will be."

"I do not think the powers of a Librarian work that way," said Uriel. "What Lord Tigurius has seen is only one *possible* future. Perhaps the most likely but still not certain."

"Is that why we have to have *her* on board?" asked Pasanius. "To make sure the future plays out the way it's meant to?"

"That's what we'll find out," said Uriel as the blast doors opened.

THE EMBARKATION DECK was unusually quiet. Normally a frenetic hive of activity, with Chapter serfs, Techmarines and armourers working to ready the 4th Company Thunderhawks or drop-pods for launch, its gothic immensity felt eerily silent as the four warriors made their way towards the blinking lights of the recovery platform, a long rectangle of blast-scorched steel that sat before the shimmering starscape of the integrity field.

Chaplain Clausel was waiting for them at the platform's edge, the black of his armour blending with the darkness filling the embarkation deck. The gold of his crozius and the bone white of his death mask shone brightly, and the ferocious solidity of his presence reassured Uriel that they would meet their guest with a united front.

"Chaplain," said Uriel. "It is good to have you back."

In the weeks since the 4th Company's return from Pavonis, Chaplain Clausel had spent much of his time in Macragge's most isolated solitarium, fasting and meditating on his duty to the Chapter. He had returned only moments before the last Thunderhawk had left Macragge for the *Vae Victus*, and Uriel was glad to have him aboard. The 4th never fought harder than when Clausel led them into battle.

“It is good to be back, Captain Ventris,” said Clausel. “I felt the call to arms and knew my presence was required.”

“You felt that all the way up in Illyrium?” asked Pasanius.

“I did,” said Clausel. “Didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did,” said Pasanius, taking Clausel’s proffered hand. “It will be good to fight alongside you, Chaplain.”

“It is good to have you back with us. I trust your exclusion from the war on Pavonis has taught you the value of honesty in all things?”

“Aye, it has,” Pasanius assured him. “You have nothing to worry about on *that* score.”

Clausel nodded and greeted his fellow warriors of the 4th. Uriel felt a bittersweet finality to this assembly of heroes, a strange unease that felt like the moment before a doomed charge. As he listened to their words of renewed brotherhood, he wondered that no one else could feel the charged air between them.

Was this another moment of prescience, such as had saved them all on Tarentus?

“She’s late,” said Learchus, his low voice sounding like a shout in the dimly lit deck.

“It’s her prerogative,” said Uriel, rubbing a hand over his jaw to mask his consternation.

“As what? A woman or an inquisitor?” quipped Pasanius.

“As an inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus,” replied Uriel.

“Malleus?” said Learchus. “How do you know that?”

“I saw the tattoo on her wrist when we met with the Chapter Master,” said Uriel. “Do not underestimate her, and cooperate with her in all things, but have no more dealings with her than are necessary. Understood?”

Both his sergeants nodded, all too willing to keep their dealings with an inquisitor, especially one who dealt with the daemonic, to a minimum.

“Here she comes,” said Tiberius, nodding towards the integrity field.

An angular wedge of a ship slid through the darkness of space towards the *Vae Victus,* its lines clean and its non-reflective surfaces seeming to swallow the light. It was a small ship for an inquisitor, but Uriel suspected there was another, larger, ship concealed somewhere in orbit with Macragge.

The ship passed through the field, and Uriel felt the cold of space radiating from its hull as it settled to land with a bass thrumming of powerful engines. Decontaminating blasts of superheated steam washed over the craft, and no sooner had they ended than a ramp extended from the side of the vessel and a door slid open.

Inquisitor Namira Suzaku emerged and made her way down the ramp towards them with her stormcoat billowing in the venting gasses of her ship. Her strides were long and assured, her bearing that of a woman who knew exactly which path to follow. Her coterie of acolytes came after her. Most Uriel recognised from the meeting with the Chapter Masters, but one he didn't stood out from the others, a man with dark skin and pure white hair pulled in a long ponytail. He too was clad in a black bodyglove and long stormcoat, identical to the Inquisitor, and Uriel wondered if his mirroring of his master's appearance was an affectation or a uniform.

Suzaku halted before Uriel and gave him a curt nod of acknowledgement.

"Captain Ventris," she said, her voice edged like glass and every syllable sharp. "I have heard a great deal about you. Your achievements are impressive. Few can return from the Eye of Terror and remain uncorrupted. I would be interested in hearing how you achieved that remarkable feat."

"Thank you," said Uriel, keeping his voice even at the mention of his ordeals. "I kept true to the teachings of the Codex Astartes and its words were our guide."

"Interesting, given it was your deviance from its words that saw you exiled in the first place. Most intriguing."

Suzaku's eyes flicked over to Uriel's left. "And this must be Pasanius Lysane. Such a shame you did not return with the augmetic tainted with the necrontyr living metal. I know of many of my brethren who desire to study such artefacts. Much can be learned from the perusal of the weapons of the enemy."

"I was glad to be rid of it," said Pasanius. "Though it hurt like the fires of damnation, I thank the Emperor every day those monsters took it from me."

"An interesting metaphor," noted Suzaku. "You are acquainted with the fires of damnation?"

"A colourful turn of phrase," said Pasanius smoothly. "Nothing more."

Suzaku shifted her gaze to Learchus.

"Sergeant Learchus," she said. "The hero of Herapolis who led the 4th Company of the Ultramarines to Espandor and defeated the greenskin hordes. To single-handedly destroy a gargant is a great achievement."

Uriel smiled as Learchus actually blushed. "Hardly single-handedly. Chaplain Clausel and many other Space Marines fought at my side. Governor Saul Gallow is also to be commended. His defence force troops fought with great courage."

Suzaku nodded, as though she already knew every detail of the campaign, and turned to Chaplain Clausel.

"Chaplain," said the inquisitor. "Your litany of honours speaks for itself."

Suzaku then turned to Admiral Tiberius, and Uriel masked his surprise at the

deferential tone of the inquisitor's voice in her words to Clausel.

"Spare me a recitation of my battle honours," said the venerable admiral. "I know them better than you, and I don't need reminding. You are welcome aboard the *Vae Victus*, but I'll thank you to keep to your assigned areas of the ship. The fighting decks of a vessel of the Adeptus Astartes are no place for anyone not trained in Ultramar."

Suzaku smiled and tilted her head coquettishly to one side, as though deciding whether to remind the Lord Admiral that she was an agent of the Inquisition, an organisation with carte blanche in its remit of protecting the Imperium. With a word, an inquisitor could requisition armies and fleets, depose planetary rulers or condemn entire star systems to death. Only a very brave or very foolish individual dared stand in their way.

Inquisitor Suzaku looked like she hadn't yet made her mind up into which category Lord Admiral Tiberius fell.

"You are bold, Lord Admiral," said Suzaku. "But I would expect no less from a veteran of the Battle of Circe. I will accede to your request."

"It's not a request," said Tiberius.

Suzaku nodded and turned to the white-haired man beside her.

"This is my interrogator acolyte, Soburo Suzaku," she said. Seeing the Ultramarines' questioning looks, she added. "Suzaku is a common name on our home world."

Uriel looked for any familial resemblance between the two, but the extent of Suzaku's subtle augmetics made any examination pointless. He placed a hand on the Lord Admiral's shoulder and said, "Inquisitor Suzaku, Sergeant Learchus will show you and your retinue to the quarters we have assigned you. They should be sufficient to your needs."

"I am sure they will," said Suzaku. "When do we translate into the warp?"

Tiberius answered her. "We'll reach the fringeward jump point in two days, then it shouldn't take us more than a week, warp-willing, to reach Calth."

"And then we see how accurate your Librarian Tigurius is at reading the fate lines," said Suzaku.

"He has never been wrong before," said Uriel.

A shadow passed over Suzaku's face. "There is always a first time," she said.

SEVEN

THE CONVOY EMERGED from the tunnel and thundered along the wide roadway that curved over the flanks of the mountains. A Salamander Scout vehicle led the way, its main gun traversing to cover the bend ahead, a constant relay of surveyor chatter passing between it and the Chimera troop carrier following behind it.

A second Chimera followed the first, and a Salamander command tank was sandwiched between it and a third armoured carrier. Eight heavily laden trucks marked with the winged skull and crossed pistol symbol of the Munitorum drew up the rear, and a final Chimera took on the role of tail-gunner.

Two aircraft flew in overlapping figure of eight formation overhead, a Valkyrie assault carrier and a Vulture gunship, both painted in the pale blue and silver of the Espandor Defence Auxilia.

The convoy moved at speed, for the highways through the Anasta Peaks had proven to be a dangerous route for Imperial forces. Many convoys travelling from the planetary capital of Herapolis to the outlying cities of Espandor had come under attack within its narrow canyons and undulant slopes. The landscape was primal in its rugged splendour, high waterfalls and sprawling forests carpeting the jagged spire-like hills in swathes of green and crystal.

No sooner had the lead vehicle rounded the bend when it tripped a remote sensor and a dull cough of an explosion flipped it onto its side, a smoking hole punched in its underside. Rock dust and debris fell in a burning rain as the first Chimera gunned its engine, intending to punch through the ambush. Its tracks churned the road as it slewed around the deep crater torn in the roadway. A flurry of gunfire erupted from the timberline, sparking from its hull as the gunner providing top cover in the cupola swung his heavy stubber to bear.

Heavy calibre gunshots ripped uphill, tearing off branches and splintering ancient trees. Another explosion boomed and the surface of the road shuddered in a sine wave like a cracked whip. Cracks split the black surface and a huge section of road heaved upwards before plunging down into a giant sinkhole. The Chimera’s tracks bit the road, but it was too close and too fast to avoid falling into the giant crater the underground detonation had blown. It teetered on the edge for a moment before falling in, skidding over onto its side and coming to rest upside down.

Raiders swarmed from the trees, a mismatched host of savage kroot and

corsairs in brightly patterned cloaks, ragged plates of armour and elaborate fright masks. Vile battle flags bearing a curved tulwar were carried by whooping warriors in tattered, patchwork uniforms, each bearing a bright blue headband, sash or belt. Hundreds of them spilled from the trees, firing wildly from the hip or hurling disc-like grenades into the battle. Heavy barks of powerful lasers stabbed out, slamming into the flanks of the remaining tanks in the convoy.

Defence force troops debarked from their Chimeras and began returning fire, filling the space between the two forces with sizzling blades of light and ricocheting hard rounds.

A bass thrumming filled the air as three heavily-laden skiffs swung around the bend in the road, skimming on rippling curtains of charged air. A cackling warrior in a grinning skull mask manned a heavy cannon on each prow. Streams of fire blitzed from the cannons, filling the air with a whickering storm of explosive rounds. Streams of shell casings spewed onto the roadway in a musical rain.

The first skiff exploded as a pair of missiles from the Vulture slashed downward and impacted in the centre of its deck. Its nose came down and ploughed a gouge through the road, spilling bodies and weapons as it rolled onto its side in a shower of bright sparks and flame.

No sooner had the gunners on the Vulture congratulated themselves on their kill when a trio of missiles spiralled up from the trees. The pilot wrenched his aircraft to the side and one missile arced over his canopy. Blisteringly hot flares popped from its rear quarter, decoying a second missile away, but the third flew straight into the intake on its port side and exploded.

The aircraft lurched and dropped almost straight down. One wing dipped and the burning aircraft slammed into the roadway with a thunderous explosion. Blazing fuel sprayed over the roadway, sending up sheets of flame. The Imperial vehicles began turning, but they weren’t trying to escape.

THE COVERINGS OF the trucks dropped. Instead of revealing tightly-packed crates of ammunition and war supplies, they were laden with a far more deadly cargo. The second and third trucks carried the ten warriors of Assault Squad Ixion, the fourth and fifth the gunners of Devastator Squad Tirian. With swift economy, the Devastators hefted their heavy guns and began shooting into the charging mass of enemy warriors.

Missiles and heavy bolter shells exploded amid the corsairs ranks, scything down a score of warriors in the blink of an eye. A warrior in a scarlet cloak and clad in armour of brilliant blue edged in gold leapt from the back of the lead

truck and drew his Talassarian Tempest sword. Cato Sicarius vaulted to the road and raised his shimmering blade over his head.

“For Talassar and the Second!” he shouted, as his command squad landed next to him. Vandius unfurled the company standard as Prabian drew his power sword and Malcian fired up his flame weapon. A ragged mob of corsairs and kroot were advancing through the smoke, and Sicarius chose a kroot with a thick crest of yellow head spines as his first kill.

Without waiting for his warriors, Sicarius charged toward the thickest wedge of enemy as Ixion’s fighters clambered from the back of the truck and triggered their jump packs.

Gunfire reached up to them, but so fast and so unexpected was their assault that none of it came near. The unexpected presence of the warriors from the Ultramarines 2nd Company threw the enemy into disarray, but they were quick to recover and swiftly hurled themselves at this newly-revealed enemy.

The lines of Ultramarines and xenos warriors met in a roar of hatred, and Sicarius clove the Tempest Blade through the chest of the yellow-spined kroot, splitting him from neck to hipbone, before spinning and putting a plasma round through the face of another squawking kroot fighter. He grimaced with distaste as he dragged the blade free of the xenos creature. He had fought this mercenary species before, yet the stink of their vile bodies and grotesque appearance was no less repulsive. Prabian fought at his side, slashing and cutting with brutal strikes. No cunning or finesse in his blows, Prabian was a killer, pure and simple.

Scores of kroot surrounded them, a howling, shrieking mass of avian-featured savages. Their limbs were like whipping cords, and they wielded their bladed rifles and hunting swords with unnatural swiftness. One launched itself at him and its beak snapped on his sword arm as it rammed its blade into his chest. The metal shattered on the Eternium Ultra and Sicarius rammed his helmet into its face.

The beak crumpled and the creature fell away, but five more pressed in. His pistol took one down, his sword a second, but before he could kill again, Prabian was at his side. The company champion’s sword clove into a kroot warrior’s skull and before the dead xenos fell, the blade was ripped clear and beheaded another. Maldan cleared some space with precise gouts of ignited promethium as Sergeant Daceus drove the rest back with controlled bursts of bolter fire.

“Trying to win this without us?” said Daceus, his augmetic eye seeming to wink at him.

Sicarius grinned and shook his head. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“Damn right,” said his sergeant, speaking with the easy informality of warriors who have fought side by side for decades.

Booming explosions and thudding beats of heavy bolter fire ripped through the enemy ranks and a strafing hail of shots sawed through the wrecked skiff as enemy warriors took cover behind it. Sicarius looked up in time to see the Valkyrie swoop down, its engines transitioning from conventional flight to hover mode. Storm-troopers armoured in blue stood in the open hatches, itching to take the fight to their enemies.

A slender man in black armour with an eagle-visored helm stood in their midst, a combat shotgun slung around his shoulders. “Looks as if Governor Gallow wants to get in on the action,” said Daceus.

“Learchus said he was game,” replied Sicarius.

“Looks like he was right.”

Howling gales of downdraft sent up clouds of dust and cleared the smoke from the burning vehicles. Sicarius saw the surviving two skiffs easing themselves from the cover of the wrecked skimmer, bringing their main cannons to bear on the aerial assault carrier.

“Sergeant Tirian, take out that damn skiff before the good governor gets his backside shot out from under him.”

“Targeting now,” replied Tirian, and, moments later, a pair of missiles streaked overhead to slam into the prow of the skiff. Blooms of fire punched into the vehicle’s hull and it slewed to the side, a rippling line of tracer fire zipping wildly from its prow cannon and going wide of the governor’s aircraft. The vehicle sank to the road’s surface, its hull crumpling as its keel broke in two.

“Ixion,” said Sicarius. “Get aboard that skiff and get me survivors.”

“Understood,” responded Sergeant Ixion.

THE BATTLEFIELD WAS secure, the renegades dead and their corpses piled high on makeshift pyres. The kroot were disposed of downwind, the stench from their burning bodies too alien and too rank to be tolerated. Two skiffs were broken-down hulks, their hulls peppered with bolter craters and missile impacts. Defence Auxilia dragged the bodies of the enemy soldiers who’d tried to flee from the woods and flame units burned them to cinders.

No trace of such unclean warriors would be allowed to remain on Ultramar’s soil.

The third skiff had fled after witnessing the horrendous destruction wrought upon the second at the hands of Ixion’s assaulters. Dropping onto its buckled decks with roaring chainswords and booming pistols, the Assault Marines had made short work of the surviving crew, killing all but two warriors in a bloody melee that lasted just seven seconds.

“You were right,” said Governor Saul Gallow, a handsome man with an unruly shock of sandy brown hair and a winning smile. “They couldn’t resist such a juicy target.”

“Their commander was reckless,” said Sicarius. “They had attacked the same way the last three times and were sloppy.”

“Sloppy?” said Gallow. “They fought hard. We lost twenty men and several vehicles.”

“Acceptable losses,” said Sicarius. “The enemy now know we are not afraid to take the fight to them, and that will make them wary. And wary enemies are already beaten.”

Gallow shouldered his shotgun. “I hope you’re right,” he said. “We’ve lost six cities already, and they don’t seem beaten.”

“That’s because you are thinking of mortal warfare,” said Sicarius. “The Adeptus Astartes are fighting alongside you now. We do not fight like you.”

“I remember,” said Gallow, “I fought alongside Sergeant Learchus and the 4th Company.”

“Against greenskins. This is warfare of a very different kind.”

“I know that. I am not a fool, Captain Sicarius,” said Saul Gallow. “I am a planetary governor of a world of Ultramar, appointed by Lord Calgar himself.”

“Be that as it may, your forces are subordinate to mine. This world is an Ultramarines world. Understand your place.”

“I understand it well enough, Captain Sicarius,” Gallow assured him, an edge of steel to his voice. “But this ambush has cost lives, Cato, my people’s lives. I want to know they are not dying in vain. Lord Calgar would not want that.”

“Lord Calgar wants victory,” said Sicarius, irritated at the governor’s use of his forename. He made his way to where Sergeant Daceus had secured the two prisoners, and Gallow had to jog to match his strides.

“What is it you hope to get out of talking to these wretches?” asked Gallow.

“I want to know their leader,” said Sicarius. “Slay the beast and the horde will die. It worked on Black Reach and I see no reason it won’t work here.”

“I thought you said this was a different kind of warfare to fighting greenskins,” pointed out Gallow.

“It is, but that principle never changes,” said Sicarius, regarding the two bound captives.

Both wore patchwork uniforms of vividly coloured cloth, a riot of pinks, blues, greens and gold. It was offensively bright, and Sicarius’ lip curled in distaste. To fight such abominations was bad enough, but to talk to them…

One man had been wearing a helmet fixed to his skull by bone hooks driven through the skin of his temple, and his head was covered in blood where it had

been torn off. A strip of flesh hung down on his cheek with a stained hook dangling like a piece of vile jewellery. The other was similarly attired, yet his weapons and adornments were of superior quality. The defiance in his gaunt features marked him as some kind of officer. Both wore brilliant blue sashes, the only unifying aspect of their attire.

"Before I kill you, I want to know the name of your commander," said Sicarius.

"Voshad nether yousan pothai!" spat the first and Sicarius backhanded him across the jaw with enough force to shatter teeth, but leave the jawbone intact.

"Understand this," said Sicarius, kneeling beside the prisoner and placing the barrel of his plasma pistol under his chin. "You are going to die. Speak words like that again and your death will be slow and painful. Now I ask again, what is the name of your war leader?"

"We is Bloodborn. We tell to you of nothing," hissed the officer, his words halting and unfamiliar, as though it had been many years since he had spoken Imperial language.

"Then you are no use to me," said Sicarius. His pistol flared, and the top of the officer's head vaporised, spraying his compatriot with boiling blood and brain fragments. The man cried out and struggled uselessly in Daceus' grip as Sicarius turned towards him.

"Ustras mithoryushad merk!" he babbled, the words spilling out in a terrified babble.

"Gothic!" thundered Sicarius. "I know you understand me, now speak!"

"I serve the Corsair Queen," cried the man. His face crumpled in terror, and Sicarius smelled the acrid reek of urine. He shook his head at the man's craven soul. "Does this *Queen* have a name?"

"Salombar," sobbed the broken soldier. "Kaarja Salombar. She commands the Bloodborn host sent to despoil this world."

"Bloodborn? What is that?"

"The holy army of the Eternal Powers," spat the man, some of his courage returning. "The Corsair Queen is our prophet, and she will see you burn in the fire of our master's wrath!"

"Don't count on it," said Sicarius. "And she is what? Human, xenos?"

The man hesitated. "Human," he said at last.

"Don't you know?" said Sicarius, pressing his gun to the man's temple. The barrel fizzed as the weapon recharged.

"No one knows for sure! Some say she's part eldar. She's quick like them, but strong."

Sicarius stood up straight. "Tell me more of this Corsair Queen. How many

warriors does she have? What are her strengths and weaknesses?”

“She’s clever,” laughed the Bloodborn soldier, resigned to the fact of his death. “Cleverer than you if you think she’ll face you in a straight-up fight.”

“Who said I was going to face her in a straight-up fight?”

“You’re Ultramarine, that’s what you do,” hissed the man. “That’s all you ever do.”

“Shows what you know,” said Sicarius, and sent a searing lance of plasma into the man’s brain.

SYSTEM SPACE AROUND Talassar was thick with electromagnetic debris and blistering spikes of residual radiation as the *Caesar* eased its way towards the latest world to feel the invaders’ wrath. Accompanying the enormous battle-barge was a small fleet of frigates and destroyers, clustering close, like cleaner fish around an ocean predator. In the prow of the battle-barge’s strategium, Marneus Calgar tried to take in the scale of the battle fought around Talassar.

Crippled hulks drifted in high orbit in a decaying trajectory, and the flaring bursts of damaged reactors bled into the surveyor readouts, filling them with hissing washes of static. The deck crew and augur servitors fought to clean the imaging, but a lot of firepower had been unleashed, and such weapons left a brutal afterburn in their wake.

“Damn, but this was a fight and a half,” he said, more to himself than any of the warriors behind him. Varro Tigurius and Severus Agemman stood at parade rest on the hardwood decking, each with their arms crossed across the plates of their armour. Both knew their Chapter Master well enough to know when his statements were rhetorical, and neither intruded upon his grieving anger.

Calgar scanned the debris fields, seeing the remains of at least thirteen ships, four of which were Ultramarines vessels. Such was the dreadfully abused nature of the enemy vessels, it was impossible to know for sure how many wrecks littered this sector of space.

“Reading residual engine signatures,” said Vibius, the *Caesar’s* deck officer.

“No need,” said Calgar. “I can see well enough which vessels we have lost. *Hera’s Wrath, Guillitnan’s Spear, Sword of Ultramar* and *Grand Duke of Talassar*.”

“All four…” hissed Agemman.

Calgar shook his head. “I never thought to see such loss in my time,” he said. “And the planet? Tell me there are life signs.”

Vibius shook his head. “I am sorry, my lord. I detect nothing, but I cannot be certain. The after-effects of the fighting are creating too much interference to be

certain.”

“There’s nothing left alive, Marneus,” said Tigurius sadly.

“You’re sure?”

“No, but I’m sure enough,” said his Chief Librarian.

“We will avenge them, my lord,” added Agemman. “On my honour, the 1st will reap a fearsome tally of enemy dead in return.”

“I know you will, Severus,” answered Calgar. “Well, Varro, you said you saw a battle here, but there is no one here to fight. How do you explain this?”

“I do not know, my lord,” said Tigurius. “Divination is not an exact science, but I believe what I saw will come to pass. We *will* fight for Talassar and we will avenge its dead. Of that I am certain.”

“How can that be so?” demanded Calgar. “Look! All I see is wreckage. Honourable ships of the Ultramar fleet and the blasted hulks of the enemy.”

Tigurius looked deep into the viewer and Calgar was on the point of rebuking him for failing to answer when the Librarian shook his head.

“No,” he said. “The enemy is still here. Hidden and wounded, but still here.”

Calgar turned his gaze back to the viewer as Tigurius rushed over to the surveyor stations and gripped the edge of the plotter table. He saw nothing more than he had seen before, the wrecked and drifting shells of gutted enemy vessels and crippled ships bearing the Ultramarines inverted omega upon their broken, eagle-winged prows.

He joined Tigurius and Agemman at the plotting table, casting his eyes over the shifting patterns coming in and out of focus. Tigurius flipped through varied spectra of search parameters, increasing magnification and zooming in on portions of the celestial battlefield.

Energy spikes registered in the low end of the detection window, little more than the bleeding background radiation one might expect after such a furious exchange of weapons.

“What do you see?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

“They’re here,” hissed Tigurius, a faraway light in his eyes. “Oh, they’re cunning, but I’m wise to them.”

Calgar looked over at Agemman, but his first captain merely shrugged, as in the dark as he was. Tigurius flashed through a dozen images, the flat of his palm pressed to the slate of the glowing display, before finally coming to rest on a sector of space hashed with blizzards of nuclear radiation, the fallout from a nova cannon burst. Vast clouds of gently spinning debris filled this area, a virtually impenetrable mist of physical and electromagnetic static that hung like a wedge of impenetrable fog.

“There,” said Tigurius triumphantly. “Vibius, filter out the echo-band rad-

spikes and send an active surveyor scan through that cloud. As strong as you can make it."

"If there's anything in there, they'll know we looked for them," Vibius warned him.

"I know, just do it," ordered Tigurius.

Vibius looked over to Calgar, who nodded and said, "Do as he says."

The tension in the strategium ratcheted up as the *Caesar's* surveyors sent a surge of reflective energy into the cloud. Much of the energy was scattered by the debris, but enough returned to paint a blurred outline on the plotter table. Though its lines were shimmering and unclear, there was no mistaking the shape that lay behind it. Calgar drew in a breath at the hideously familiar sight and Agemman issued ready orders to his warriors.

"The *Indomitable*," said Calgar, seeing a dreadful familiarity in the crenellated lines of the star fort. It had changed since he had seen it last, its once proud and regal form now embellished with brutal redoubts, high towers of fearful aspect and every hateful killing trap known to the military architects of the Iron Warriors.

Vibius studied the returns in more detail. "Energy signatures suggest heavy damage. I'm reading numerous spikes indicative of multiple reactor breaches and warp core damage."

"They almost got it," said Agemman. "Damn me, but they almost did it."

"Then we can finish what they started," hissed Calgar, his heart a searing furnace of anger. "All ships form on the *Caesar*, we're going to take the fight to these bastards and make sure they pay for every life they've taken."

Agemman held out his hand, and Calgar took it. "The 1st Company stand with you, my lord. We'll finish this together."

"Aye," agreed Calgar, feeling the *Caesar* increase speed, as though eager to be in the fight.

He looked over to the smear of displaced light and radiation, feeling the familiar excitement of going into battle once more.

He would finish a job he should have completed a long time ago.

"This time there will be no stay of execution," Calgar told the daemon-haunted star fort.

THE *CAESAR* PLUNGED into the debris surrounding Talassar, cutting through the swirling radiation storms and electrostatic clouds. It passed the derelict vessels crippled in the furious battles, their sad, cratered hulls grim testament to the uncompromising nature of war in space.

Lord Calgar's mission was vengeance, and nothing would come between him and that sacred duty. Fresh from a refit in the surface shipyards of Calth, the *Caesar's* systems were operating at optimal efficiency and her crew were trained more intensely and thoroughly than any Naval ship of the line. The lights in the strategium burned red, the colour of war, as every weapon system came online.

Far beneath the strategium, Captain Agemman readied his warriors for the fight to come, the Terminators of the 1st Company running the last of their pre-battle drills as Techmarines prepped the Thunderhawks and intoned the ritual blessings upon their hulls and armaments.

Marneus Calgar watched the image of the *Indomitable* as it drew closer. He remembered leading the 1st Company aboard the star fort sixty years ago. It was a battle he would never forget, much as he wished to, for its outcome had been the one stain on his honour. M'kar had proven impossible to destroy, so he had made the devil's bargain with Inquisitor Mazeon to trap it instead. What had seemed like the best solution at the time had now come back to visit its terrible wrath upon his sons.

"You endured once," he whispered, clenching the mighty Gauntlets of Ultramar. "You will not endure again."

Clad in the Armour of Antilochus, Calgar towered above even the mightiest of his warriors, the enormous plates of his Terminator armour thick and impenetrable. Its every surface was engraved with minute lettering, almost too small for the naked eye to see, the lessons of the Codex Astartes. Hundreds of thousands of words were etched into his armour, but it was still only a fraction of the entire tome. The teachings of Roboute Guilliman could not so easily be rendered by mortals, even one as mighty as Marneus Calgar.

"Approaching outer edges of *Indomitable's* range," said Vibius at the tactical plotter.

"Understood," said Calgar. "Any change in its posture?"

"Negative, my lord. It's still haemorrhaging energy and its warp core readings are fluctuating wildly. Give it enough time and it will probably tear itself apart."

"Not a chance," said Calgar. "This time I will make no mistakes. I will see the body and I will crush the life from it myself."

"Aye, my lord," said Vibius. "We're all with you," and a ripple of assent swept around the bridge. Calgar smiled, seeing the same determination to strike back at this diabolical foe in every face. Even the servitors hardwired into the automated systems of the ship seemed energised by the nearness of battle.

Calgar stepped over to the plotting table, watching the feeds from the *Caesar's* many surveyor systems merge with the current tactical globe. The display was cluttered with rad-flares and washed with static from atomic

detonations, but the Ultramarines fleet was clearly picked out in pale blue darts arcing their way towards the red shimmer that represented the *Indomitable.* It reminded Calgar of images he had seen in the Apothecarion of bacterial invaders in a patient's bloodstream being targeted by white blood cells.

The metaphor was an apt one, he thought.

"Detecting weapon level ordnance drifting in the debris clouds," warned Vibius, cycling through the surveyor feeds. "As per Codex manoeuvre protocols, I recommend increasing fleet spacing, my lord."

"Agreed," said Calgar automatically. "I don't want multiple vessels caught by any unexploded warheads before we get there. Issue the alert, and have all captains verify."

Moments later, the blue darts moved apart on the plotter and crackling confirmation icons flashed next to them. An Ultramarines fleet was a well-oiled machine, one that could be relied on to function exactly in battle as it would in any simulation or battle drill. No sooner had he formed the thought than he knew his order was a mistake.

Reliable was just another word for predictable, and their foes had already shown they knew how to exploit predictability.

"Belay that order!" he yelled as a series of icons blossomed to life across the plotter table.

Incongruously, a number of them were the pale blue of friendlies, and it took him a second to realise why. The Ultramarines vessels crippled in the fighting were not crippled at all, they were in enemy hands!

"All ships, enemy close!" warned Calgar, as yet more icons winked into existence on the plotter table. These were very definitely hostiles, the red of their threat unmistakable. What the surveyors had read as crippled derelicts were coming back to life and plotting firing solutions on the *Caesar.*

"Torpedo launch!" shouted Vibius, and. "Coming in on bearing one-nine-three. Range six thousand kilometres. Emperor save us, but they're from *Hera's Wrath*!"

"All ahead full, fire manoeuvring thrusters and get us out of their path," ordered Calgar, though he knew they would be too close to evade. He knew he should rebuke Vibius for his exclamation, but his horror at one vessel of the Ultramarines fleet firing on another was perfectly understandable.

"Plot a firing solution on the return trajectory," said Calgar, working out the permutations of this unfolding battle. In any normal engagement, the opposing fleets jockeyed for the perfect firing positions, running broadside with guns blazing or crossing the T of an opposing battle line to bring all their weapons to bear while minimising the return fire of the enemy. Such battles were fought at

enormous ranges, giving each commander ample time to plot their stratagems and best utilise the strengths of his ships.

This battle was fought at what was, in void war terms, point-blank range, and the enemy had taken the first shots. This was going to get nasty, bloody and messy very quickly.

“Incoming torpedoes now at two thousand kilometres,” cried Vibius. “Close-in defence turrets engaging now.”

“It won’t be enough,” said Calgar, gripping the edge of the plotter table and buckling the metal as the force of his grip increased. “Launch all countermeasures and take us into the upper atmosphere. All vessels follow on.”

“More launches! *Indomitable* has launched a spread, range sixty thousand kilometres. At least fifty warheads!”

Calgar looked back at the plotting table, seeing the fresh torpedo launches as an incoming wall of red blotches. “Launch counter spread,” he ordered. “Disengage all safeties.”

“Aye, my lord,” intoned the Master of Weapons. “All safeties disengaged.”

Ultramarines vessels could not normally fire upon one another, but with the safety mechanisms removed, any ship was now a target. Though it broke his heart to fire on vessels he had sailed into battle upon, the destruction of yet more Ultramarines ships was the only possible outcome of this fight.

“Escort craft engaging now. *Konor’s Gulf* taking hits, *Ultramar Endures* engaging three escort-class vessels, and *Prandium Memoriam* reports catastrophic engine damage. She’s out of the fight.”

“Brace for impact!” shouted Calgar as the proximity alarms blared throughout the strategium. High up in the bridge, the impacts were felt merely as a faint, shuddering vibration in the deck plates, but the damage to the vessel’s rear quarter would be significant.

“Damage report.”

“Starboard engines took the brunt of the impacts,” said Vibius. “Hull breaches on decks six through seventeen and multiple pressure losses throughout the engineering decks. We’re losing power and the manoeuvring systems are offline.”

“Get them back, Vibius,” said Calgar, with a calm he did not feel. “We’re dead in space without them.”

“Aye, my lord. Damage control teams are already on the scene and all bulkheads to vented compartments have been sealed. Losses estimated to be in the region of six hundred dead.”

Calgar nodded, filing that bleak statistic away for now. Mourning the dead could wait, or else they would all be numbered amongst them.

The enemy ships clustered around them, like wolves around a cornered stag, but their eagerness to strike the deathblow had made them careless. A vessel identified as *Sword of Ultramar* was coming about before the *Caesar*'s prow and Calgar smiled grimly as he saw the correlation to the vessels approaching on either flank. From their positioning, he saw they were moments from launching devastating broadsides of raking fire.

"You might have my ships, but you're not Ultramarines," he said. His fingers danced over the controls, far more delicately than should have been possible with such cumbersome-looking gauntlets. Centuries of experience, an innate grasp of the vagaries of void war and his enhanced cognition allowed him to plot out the movements of his enemies in seconds.

"Passing multiple firing solutions to you, Master of Weapons," said Calgar. "Execute them on my mark, if you please."

"Aye, my lord," responded the Master of Weapons, a Techmarine named Estoca. "Solutions received and plotted. Vessels to our port and starboard are firing."

"Vibius, increase bow angle thirty degrees and send as much power as you can to the engines," said Calgar. "And make it soon."

"It will be done," Vibius assured him.

Seconds later, the lights in the strategium dimmed as power diverted to the straining ship's damaged engines. This time the ship's protests were felt keenly by the bridge crew as the superstructure groaned with the strain of the manoeuvre. Pressure lines ruptured and emergency sirens blared as the toll taken upon damaged engines rippled outwards, blowing pressurised bulkheads and ripping open its already ravaged hull.

But his ploy worked. None of the incoming fire touched the *Caesar,* the explosive projectiles passing-harmlessly beneath the venerable warship and hurtling onward. Calgar followed the plots of the shells, and gave a triumphant yell as he saw them impact on the vessels to the *Caesar's* flanks.

"They have the ships, but they don't know how to use them except by hurling them at us in great numbers," he said, storing that morsel of knowledge for another day. He glanced down at the plotter and judged his moment.

"Master Estoca," he said. "Open fire with the prow bombardment cannon."

"Firing now," said Estoca.

Vast projectiles launched from the battle-barge's main cannons, and the ships to its fore were too close and too committed to the attack to avoid them. One, a sword-class frigate that had seen service in Battlefleet Pacificus, was obliterated almost immediately, torn open from prow to stern by a series of catastrophic secondary explosions. The second, a frigate of unknown provenance, was struck

repeatedly and broke into three distinct sections, each one trailing a spray of short-lived flames and freezing oxygen. The power of the blasts combined and magnified as venting plasma and warheads exploded, forming an expanding cloud of explosive debris and a blooming vortex of radiation.

Calgar watched the trajectory of the incoming torpedoes from the *Indomitable,* holding his breath as the spinning cloud of wreckage and radiation from the two frigates they had destroyed grew to encompass them. The plotter table blurred the whole region of space as the torpedoes flew into the mass of volatile gasses, plasma and debris, but as the seconds passed, he released his breath as he saw that none of the torpedoes had survived their journey through the soup of interference and debris.

“Incoming torpedoes,” shouted Vibius. “It’s *Hera’s Wrath* again!”

“Damn it,” swore Calgar. “She was a tenacious attack dog when she was ours and has lost none of her fury. Range?”

“Point-blank!” said Vibius. “She’s right on top of us!”

Once again the *Caesar* shook as a host of torpedoes slammed into her engines and flanks. Consoles erupted with sparks and flames, and a station towards the fore of the strategium exploded, consuming the servitor wired to it in seconds. Calgar felt the protests of his ship and knew that she could not survive much longer.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

Vibius scanned down the long list of winking emergency lights and shook his head. “The engines are gone and we’ve lost pressure to the lower decks completely. Hull breaches all over the ship and the weapons are offline. Manoeuvring functions are restored, but that’s all we’ve got!”

Calgar nodded and scanned the plotter, looking for a way out, a way to salvage this ambush from becoming a massacre. Three of his escorts were gone, crippled and drifting, while another two fought on, though ravening packs of hunters surrounded them with punishing broadsides. They wouldn’t last much longer.

It had been an unequal fight from the start, but it was one his pride and anger had led them into. Calgar cursed himself for missing so obvious a trap. His anger had blinded him to the signs. M’kar or Honsou were cunning enough to exploit their innate trust in the Codex, but they also knew that they fought from a place of emotion.

Most galling of all was the knowledge that the ships lost in this engagement would likely be recovered and repaired in the docking piers of the *Indomitable.* Such ships would be unreliable and ramshackle, but they could carry guns and that was all these invaders seemed to care about.

“My lord,” said Vibius. “What are your orders?”

“Contact the Master of Engineering,” he said. “See if there’s any way to get the engines back online. Even for a moment.”

“My lord,” said Vibius, incredulous at having to relate such terrible news. “The engines are gone! We’re dropping into Talassar’s atmosphere, and nothing is going to change that. The *Caesar* is lost.”

“You say we have the manoeuvring engines?”

“Barely.”

“Then get us through the atmosphere in one piece, Vibius,” said Calgar “That’s all I ask.”

“We won’t be able to land the *Caesar,”* pointed out Vibius.
“I know,” said Calgar. “We’re abandoning her.”

EIGHT

SHE WASN'T HERE. Sicarius had examined every corpse, and she wasn’t here. Disappointed, he dropped the last body back onto its front and stood, wiping his gauntlets on a rag he kept specifically for the purpose. The ruined town smoked in the pre-dawn light, its once proud structures now tombs of the dead.

Sicarius gripped the hilt of his Tempest Blade. It had reaped many of the Bloodborn soldiers—they did not merit being called warriors—this day, but it could never be enough. This small settlement had once been Olynthus, a prosperous trading post in the south-eastern reaches of Espandor’s great forests. Its buildings were simple and rustic, emblematic of the rugged character and earthy lifestyle favoured by this planet’s natives.

Espandor had a primal, unspoiled beauty few other worlds could match, but Sicarius was a son of Talassar and preferred his worlds to have a modicum of culture. Olynthus looked dreadfully dull compared to the majesty of Talassar’s wondrously uplifting architectural styles.

Where on Espandor was there anything to match the magnificence of the Reef Towers, the great golden spires that rose out of the waters on Glaudor’s northern coastline? What on this frontier world could hope to rival the marble citadels of Perusia’s consul guilders? Sadness touched him as he wondered how much of that beauty survived.

In the distance, tall mountains reared over the forest, rugged and untamed. Portions of the forest were ablaze, sending tall pillars of grey smoke into the sky. Praxor Manorian had detached men from the Shield Bearers to douse the fires on the edge of the settlement, and Ixion’s men were cutting down trees to form a makeshift firebreak.

He turned back to Olynthus, the white plasterwork on many of its buildings daubed with unclean runes by the enemy soldiers who’d occupied them. *Cato’s Pride*, the Land Raider that carried Sicarius into battle, had demolished these buildings, its adamantine dozer blade making short work of the defiled structures.

What little was left standing was either ablaze or so punctured by bolter impacts and Thunderfire fragments as to be almost unrecognisable as manmade structures. Nearly a thousand corpses were piled like cordwood in the centre of the town, the vile enemy soldiery that had been garrisoned here. Sergeant Tirian’s men were rigging the Bloodborn vehicles for destruction, and within the

hour, nothing would be left of this force.

“Did you find her?” asked Sergeant Daceus, picking his way through the fallen rubble. Daceus carried his bolter across his chest, the silver steel of its barrel and the bronze of its cheek plates pristine, as though it had come fresh from the armourer.

“No,” said Sicarius. “She’s not here. A thousand bodies and she’s not here.”

Daceus shook his head. “I told you she wouldn’t be. Anyone who calls themselves a queen wouldn’t surround herself with such rabble.”

“Six of these advance forces we’ve hit and there’s no sign of her,” said Sicarius. “I am beginning to suspect she does have eldar farsight.”

“Or perhaps she’s just been lucky?” suggested Daceus, kneeling beside the body Sicarius had been inspecting.

“I don’t like lucky opponents.”

“Who does? But we should be pulling out, captain,” said Daceus. “All this smoke will surely bring reinforcements.”

“You’re right,” said Sicarius. “We need to recon our next target.”

Daceus didn’t answer immediately, and turned back to the ruins of Olynthus. “Did you know this town once housed nearly six hundred people?”

“I saw the bodies,” said Sicarius, recalling the hideous sight of the butchered inhabitants.

“Some of its people fled to Herapolis, but most refused to retreat,” said Daceus. “They took up their rifles and stayed to defend their homes.”

“I would expect no less of Ultramar’s citizens,” said Sicarius. “What’s your point?”

“It was a noble stand, but ultimately futile,” said Daceus. “We need to return to Herapolis.”

“Retreat? Not when there are enemies still to destroy.”

“There is no choice, captain,” said Daceus firmly. “We are already overextended. Ammunition stocks are lower than I would like and our transports are almost at the end of their limits of fuel. If we press on much longer, we will not have enough to return to Herapolis. We need to go and we need to go now.”

Sicarius bit back his frustration, wanting to argue, but knowing that Daceus was right. This far out, they were dangerously exposed and far from help. He smiled, his decision made.

“I am what I am, Daceus,” said Sicarius at last. “I can’t change that.”

“Nor would I want you to.”

“Some call me vainglorious, I know that. But I am not,” said Sicarius, casting his gaze out over the forest. “I serve the Chapter to the best of my abilities. My way is to move fast and never give my enemies a static target. And the best way

to do that is to kill the Corsair Queen. She's the key, Daceus, I know it."

Sicarius kicked the dead body at his feet. "Look at this scum," he said. "You think his kind will fight on without the strength of this Salombar holding them together? If there's one truth of warfare I believe in the most, it's that if you kill the head, the body will die."

"We'll find her," said Daceus. "And then you'll kill her, I know it."

Further discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Gaius Prabian, his power sword and shield slung across his back. The company champion had slain over a hundred enemies today, and Sicarius marvelled at the apparent ease of his killing.

"What is it, Gaius?" asked Sicarius, sensing his champion's urgency.

"Word from Scipio Vorolanus," said Prabian. "Bloodborn forces are on the move."

In the absence of Scout forces, the warriors of Squad Vorolanus often acted as recon units for the 2nd Company. Deployed in the hills to the west, they had acted as Sicarius' eyes and ears for this engagement.

"Where?" demanded Daceus, as Sicarius set off for the ruined town.

"There's two distinct groups. The largest is coming straight for us, about six kilometres to the east. Heavy armour and traitor Astartes. Greater than company strength."

"And the other?" asked Sicarius.

"Five kilometres north, but cutting south-west towards the bridge over Actium Gorge."

"They're trying to cut our line of retreat," said Daceus.

"We need to go," said Sicarius. "Now."

URIEL REGARDED THE warriors before him with a critical eye and found much to his liking. These were the best and bravest of the 4th Company, warriors who had, time and time again, proved their valour and honour in the face of the most horrific foes imaginable. Each was a heroic warrior of noble aspect and legendary exploits, with entire volumes within the Library of Ptolemy dedicated to their mighty deeds.

Uriel had never felt the need to lead a command squad before now, preferring to fight within the ranks of his line forces, but Chaplain Clausel had urged him to assemble one for this latest conflict.

"They will have need of a hero to lead them," said Clausel. "And a hero needs his lancers around him. Choose these warriors well and the men will fight all the harder as they seek to emulate them and earn a place at your side."

Uriel had seen the sense of this, and had chosen the warriors to form his retinue on the journey to Calth after long deliberation, for every warrior of the 4th was worthy of a place. Learchus had helped him with the selection, and Uriel was grateful for the assistance.

Ancient Peleus bore the company standard, a rippling icon of the 4th's glorious legacy that had been carried into the most violent conflicts and which had never yet fallen in battle. Only the best and bravest were entrusted with such a sacred duty, and Peleus had more than justified his selection, defending the banner against foes of every stripe with a skill that was truly exceptional.

Apothecary Selenus had saved every warrior in the 4th Company's life more than once, the ivory plates of his armour gleaming and pristine. Though his duties as an Apothecary were of vital importance in maintaining the physical integrity of the company, Selenus was, first and foremost, a warrior, and Uriel had seen how deadly his knowledge of a body's weak points could be in battle.

Uriel had selected Petronius Nero to be his company champion, a warrior he had always known was skilful with a blade, but had only come to appreciate *how* skilful in the drop assault on the tau internment camp on Pavonis. He wielded a slender blade he had forged to his precise measurements, exquisitely balanced and weighted to be the perfect killing weapon. Likewise, his combat shield was a bespoke creation, lightweight and as much a weapon as the blade.

Rounding out the command squad were Livius Hadrianus and Brutus Cyprian, warriors who had excelled in the war against the greenskins of Espandor and on Pavonis. Uriel knew both from the battles on Tarsis Ultra, and their courage was like tempered steel. Hadrianus carried a meltagun, and Uriel remembered him bringing down an entire tau tank squadron with one well-placed shot after another. Cyprian was a warrior of great strength, almost as large as Pasanius, though his physique did not require parts from Terminator armour. Uriel had seen him grapple a tau battlesuit, smashing it open with his bare hands and throttling the life from the xenos creature within.

"You are to be my lancers," said Uriel, proud to lead these warriors into battle against this most hated of foes. "And as such you shall be known as the Swords of Calth."

Uriel had chosen the name to honour the world they fought to defend, and from the straightening of their spines, he saw that his warriors approved. Clausel was right: every warrior in the 4th Company would strive to equal these warriors' deeds.

He let a slow smile creep onto his face as he dismissed the squad and turned to watch the preparations for war filling the enormous structure in which he stood. Cold blue light spilled through distant skylights, and the sound of

marching feet, shouting stevedores and honking power rigs as they unloaded hundreds of cargo lifters echoed from its cavernous sides.

It had been many years since Uriel had set foot on the world of his birth, but upon taking his first breath of its air, albeit the recycled air of Assembly Hangar Septimus Oravia, he felt a potent sense of homecoming, as though Calth itself were welcoming a favoured son. Assembly Hangar Septimus Oravia was just one of a thousand construction yards, nestled cheek by jowl in Calth's largest surface metropolis. Its official designation was Ultimus Prime, but everyone of Calth knew it as Highside City.

The last of the 4th Company's supplies, equipment and war machines were being unloaded from Thunderhawk transports by massively-muscled dock servitors and directed to their staging areas by Techmarines. Thousands of soldiers and labourers filled the hangar, a vast mechanised space of heavy machinery and overhead construction rigs.

The glow of welding torches and sparking plasma cutters normally flickered in the assembly hangar as naval shipwrights and Mechanicus tech-adepts worked on the hulls of enormous starships. Assembly Hangar Septimus Oravia was a facility for the construction of star-faring vessels, a kilometres-long structure that now served as the mustering area for an army.

The air reeked of oil, burnt metal and incense, for the building of so complex a machine required more than simply knowledge, it required ritual and incantation. The shipyards of Calth were justly famous throughout the Imperium, and the skill and craftsmanship of their artificers was beyond compare. Unusually for a facility devoted to crafting such colossal vessels, it was not located in orbit, but upon the smooth, flat surface of Calth.

Beyond the armoured, pressurised walls, the planet's surface was cold and deadly, utterly lethal to all life, even Space Marines. An ancient enemy had bombarded Calth's sun with deadly poisons that stripped the planet's atmosphere away and swept its surface with lethal radiation. Calth's population now lived below the surface, far from the sun's deadly rays.

The Ultramarines had been first to deploy, alongside Inquisitor Suzaku's small assembly of savants, warriors and other, less easily identifiable servants. The rest of the newly arrived forces were now disembarking within the cavernous assembly hangar. Boxy dropships from *Perpetuum Cogito* unfolded rotating racks from within their holds to deploy rank after rank of Mechanicus Protectors, cybernetic soldiers with the look of martial tech-priests fitted with numerous weapon augmentations. Magos Locard oversaw clattering maniples of weaponised servitors as they marched in perfect synchrony, little more than mechanised torsos fitted to numerous means of locomotion: multiple legs,

tracked units or heavy, off-road wheels.

Behind them came thousands of skitarii, feral, brutish warriors clad in hide and reptile skin with gleaming battle augmentations surgically implanted in their flesh. They marched beneath a flapping banner of mottled green skin, branded with the cogged skull of the Mechanicus, and bore a multitude of weapons; heavy cannons, wide-barrelled rifles and a glittering forest of long polearms, axes and toothed eviscerators. The savage-looking warriors chanted a repeating binaric war-shout, and but for the plethora of Imperial icons dotting their armour Uriel might have thought them creations of the enemy.

The Raven Guard deployed to the surface of Calth in a single Rhino, and though it was no structurally different to those of the Ultramarines, it possessed a shadowed quality that made it seem somehow sleeker, darker and less bulky.

“Quite a force we’ve assembled, eh?” said Pasanius, strolling over from the inspection of his squad. Learchus walked alongside him, though he looked singularly unimpressed with his first impressions of Calth.

“It is impressive,” agreed Uriel. “I have fought alongside the Adeptus Mechanicus before, but never in such numbers. It makes me glad they are on our side.”

“Aye,” said Pasanius, watching the battle march of the skitarii. “I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of that lot.”

“Are your warriors ready?” asked Uriel.

“The Firebrands are ready,” confirmed Pasanius. “Just let these bastards try and take this world from us.”

The 4th Company did not normally bestow martial names upon its squads in the manner of some captains, but many had earned unofficial titles during the Pavonis campaign. Uriel suspected the name of Pasanius’ squad had more to do with its sergeant than any specific battle in which they had fought.

“Learchus?”

“The Guardians stand ready,” said Learchus. While Learchus had hunted the captured governor of Pavonis behind enemy lines, Uriel had led Squad Learchus, and he had been more than a little flattered to know they had become known as the Guardians, in honour of the drop assault that broke the back of the tau invasion.

“Swords of Calth,” said Pasanius, nodding towards Uriel’s dismissed command squad. “I like it. It has a nice ring.”

“Thank you,” said Uriel. “It seemed appropriate given the world we are to defend.”

“Feels good to be back, doesn’t it?”

“That it does,” agreed Uriel, taking his friend’s hand.

“So this is where you both came from before you got to Agiselus?” asked Learchus, looking up at the deadly light of Calth spilling in through the armoured skylights.

“Yes,” said Uriel.

“I am beginning to see why you were such a belligerent cadet. This is a bleak place.”

“You have never been here before, have you?” asked Uriel, with a sly grin.

“No,” said Learchus. “Though I have, of course, read of the cavern cities.”

“Ah, well then you’re in for a treat, my friend,” said Pasanius as a colossal rumbling filled the assembly hangar. Uriel and his veteran sergeants turned to see a towering vehicle emerge from the cliff-like flanks of a Mechanicus lander. Taller than a hab-block, it was a colossal behemoth on tracks wider than three Land Raiders side by side. Oblong and graceless, it was an enormous mobile fortress that dwarfed even the battle engines of the Legio Titanicus. Its massively thick hull could transport several companies worth of soldiery as well as their attendant armoured vehicles.

“A Capitol Imperialis,” hissed Pasanius. “I haven’t seen one of them in action since Tarsis Ultra. Colonel Rabelaq commanded it, remember?”

“I remember,” said Uriel, picturing the colonel’s desperate sacrifice against the tyranid Bio-titan on that snow-locked battlefield. “And to think they had three on Salinas and just abandoned them.”

A Capitol Imperialis was more commonly deployed behind the front lines where it would act as a command and control base for an army’s senior officers, as well as providing emergency medicae facilities.

“Is that going to fight on the surface?” asked Learchus.

Uriel and Pasanius shared a puzzled glance.

“No,” said Uriel. “Of course not.”

“Surely that thing will be too big to fit within the caves beneath Calth.”

Uriel smiled. “Not even a little bit.”

His vox-bead chirruped, and Uriel pressed a hand to his ear as the voice of Lord Admiral Tiberius sounded.

“Uriel, we have company,” said Tiberius. “I don’t know how they’ve done it, but we’ve picked up enemy ships well within the system reaches and moving into attack formation. A battle-barge and at least fifteen other ships, destroyers and frigates mainly, but some others we’ve never seen before.”

“Can you hold them?”

Tiberius hesitated. “Together with the orbital defences, I can buy you some time, but we won’t be able to stop them from reaching the surface, that’s a certainty.”

“Understood,” said Uriel. “Do what you can, but keep the *Vae Victus* safe.”

“I will, Uriel,” said Tiberius. “Courage and honour!”

“Trouble,” said Pasanius, reading his expression. “How bad?”

“Bad enough that we need to hurry up,” said Uriel. “Pass the word that we make for Guilliman’s Gate within the hour.”

HONSOU WATCHED THE Ultramarines fleet break into battle formation. Lines of howling scrapcode trickled down *Warbreed’s* viewing bay, obscuring much of the view with gibberish. The symbols were meaningless to Honsou and the rest of the crew, but with Cycerin controlling virtually every aspect of the ship now, there was little was need for mortal crew members to understand them.

The feeling that his ship was becoming a living entity, with Cycerin at its heart, was unsettling, though the warpcraft of the rapidly evolving magos had kept their enemies blind to their presence long enough for the fleet to reach the innermost regions of the Calth system. But for a hidden picket line of augur buoys, they might have reached the blue planet’s orbit in complete secrecy.

“So this is where Uriel Ventris is from?” said Cadaras Grendel, staring hungrily at the cold planet gently revolving before him.

“Yes,” said Honsou, glancing over his shoulder at the shuddering form of the Newborn as Cycerin plumbed the depths of its mind with invasive mechadendrites.

“It doesn’t look like much.”

“It’s a poisoned rock,” said Honsou, keeping his tone even. “Uninhabitable unless you live like a troglodyte in a cave deep underground, but there is something here we need to destroy, an ancient shrine from the days of Horus Lupercal.”

“A shrine? What shrine?” demanded Vaanes.

Honsou hesitated before answering. “M’kar told me of it before the fleet dispersed. It’s a reliquary shrine to some lost Chapter of the Ultramarines. I figure it’s something symbolic from the days of Horus. Whatever it is, M’kar wants the shrine and everything in it destroyed.”

“So we’re acting on the daemon lord’s orders now, eh?” smirked Grendel.

“No,” snapped Honsou. “Calth and Ventris are our priorities.”

“If this shrine is so important to M’kar, why isn’t it here destroying it?” asked Vaanes.

Honsou gave him a cold glance, trying to hide his own interest in the shrine. Vaanes had always been the cleverest of his lieutenants. Honsou had asked that same question of M’kar, but the daemon lord had been cryptic in its response.

“That world is anathema to me,” was all it had said.

Honsou turned away, ignoring Vaanes’ question, and marched to the edge of Cycerin’s vat of gelatinous amniotic fluid. Pulsing tendrils like fat, oily snakes writhed from the pool, twisting across the deck and plugging into warp-knew-what. Each was wreathed in flickering green light, sickly and rotten.

One dripping tendril waved in the air, the sharpened interface spike buried in the back of the Newborn’s skull. Like the rest of them, the Newborn was clad in its armour, though whether or not it would be fit for battle was another matter entirely. Emerald light bled from beneath its eyelids and sweated from the joints of its armour.

Grendel and Ardaric Vaanes followed him, watching the distance between the two fleets of ships wind down. To have approached so close to Calth without detection was no small achievement, and Grendel knelt beside the vat containing Cycerin’s essence.

“Not bad,” said the disfigured champion, begrudging even that faint praise for the magos.

“I’ll be more impressed if he’s able to do what he says he can do,” said Honsou.

“Will it be a problem if he can’t?” asked Vaanes, looking over at the approaching Ultramarines ships. “These aren’t just picket ships, they’re Adeptus Astartes ships of war.”

“It won’t be a problem, it’ll just take longer,” said Honsou, pushing Grendel out of his way. He felt foolish at addressing a bloated shape in a gelatinous pool, but Cycerin never emerged from his sunken vat now.

“Are you ready?” he said.

++Affirmative++ said the magos in his vile, bubbling cant.

“Then let’s get this started,” said Honsou.

Emerald columns of corrupt scrapcode flooded the main viewscreen.

ABOARD ORBITAL DEFENCE Platform Heliotropus Three-Nine, Magos Secundus Lacimae ran through his pre-battle system checks. Launch algorithms were checked a thousand times a second by the machine spirits, and remote telemetry feeds from the augurs reported a margin of error in the region of 0.00000034, which was well within acceptable tolerances.

Around his circular command throne, twenty mono-tasked servitors oversaw the proper maintenance rituals of the ten macro-cannon batteries mounted on Heliotropus Three-Nine, each attending to the rites necessary to effect the swift loading and accurate firing of such complicated and fractious weapons. Gusts of

incense filled the command centre and rites of accuracy and destruction scrolled over the targeting cogitators in binary and hexadecimal.

The hololithic globe floating over the surveyor station displayed the precisely aligned formation of the Ultramarines fleet, though Lacimae noted that the *Blue Sun* was out of position by nine point four kilometres. A negligible amount in spatial terms, but a significant one to a priest of Mars.

He factored the captain's misaligned vessel into his firing solutions, knowing that anything daring to come within the lethal envelope of his guns would soon be reduced to a blasted hulk, blazing from end to end.

One of his servitors twitched at its station, its head and shoulders convulsing as green sparks flashed from its console. Like a deadly infection, the green lighting arced from console to console, spitting and fizzing as it wormed its way into every system.

Ladmae turned his noospheric senses inward, tracing the source of the intrusion. Fields of binaric code overlaid his vision, endless streams of ones and zeroes arranged with fluid grace in a seamless ballet of mathematics. But something black and oozing was spilling out, like oil from a sinkhole.

He tried to isolate the corrupt code, but with every shunt and code-blocker he erected, more of the impure numbers would spill into the operating systems of the machine spirits. He felt their pain as beautiful lines of code became twisted and ugly, endlessly replicating their incorrect formulae until he knew there was no way he could stop it.

"Notification: Defence platform Heliotropus Three-Nine, Magos Secundus Lacimae reporting hostile code attack. Unable to maintain operational readiness."

The vox system burbled, spitting an angry growl of static back at him, and he had no way of knowing if his warning had been heard. Lacimae withdrew his senses from the internal systems and saw the green lightning flowing throughout the command centre.

He felt it probing his own defences, and steeled his aegis barriers to keep it out.

Though many of his emotional responses had been removed in his progression through the ranks of the Adeptus Mechanicus, he was not so far gone down the route of mechanisation that he did not feel fear as he saw the corrupt scrapcode realigning the weapons of the defence platform Heliotropus Three-Nine.

He extended a mechadendrite spike into the input port, but no sooner had he done so than a vicious bark of green lightning fused it in place. Unable to break his connection to the defence platform's systems, he could only watch in horror

as his wondrously crafted firing solutions began changing.

"LORD ADMIRAL," SAID Philotas, the deck officer of the *Vae Victus*. "I'm picking up some disturbing signals passing between the enemy fleet and the orbital defence platforms."

Tiberius stood at his hardwood command lectern, his fingers dancing over the embedded hololithic slate he used to send his orders around his ship. The softly-lit command bridge of the *Vae Victus* was a place of quiet efficiency, the deck crew well-trained and motivated, the servitors regularly maintained and serviced.

The addition of servitors was a change for the venerable ship, the conflicts with the greenskins and tau having proven their use to Tiberius in no uncertain terms. Though he preferred a living crew capable of functioning under their own initiative, he grudgingly admitted that servitors were at least efficient.

"What kind of signals?" he asked. "Send them to my lectern."

"These," said Philotas, transferring the surveyor data to the Lord Admiral.

Tiberius watched as a stream of unintelligible machine code scrolled across the slate, bile green and somehow *wrong,* as though these numbers violated all sane mathematical laws.

"What is this?" demanded Tiberius. "We're about to get into a fleet engagement here, Philotas, I don't have time for random data curios."

"My lord, this is scrapcode!" said Philotas with sudden, horrified recognition. "The language of the Dark Mechanicus!"

Tiberius reached the same conclusion as the unclean numbers seemed to clump together on the slate. Dread touched him, for he had seen firsthand how much damage scrapcode attacks could do to the delicate logic engines of a starship. A number of warning icons flashed to life on his slate and he shut off the flow of hissing, angry numbers.

"What in the name of the Holy Throne…" he said.

"Weapons lock!" called the Master of Weapons as the bridge lights switched to the blood red hue of battle stations. "Defence platform Heliotropus Three-Nine has a locked firing solution on us."

"Torpedoes in the void!" cried Philotas. "Defence Platform Arklight Seven-Seven has fired a full spread of hull-piercing warheads at us. I read a minimum of nineteen inbounds."

Tiberius descended the steps of his lectern and rushed over to the stone-rimmed plotter table, watching as the zipping icons of the torpedo spread closed the distance between Calth's defence platforms and the Ultramarines fleet.

Six more platforms winked as the augurs detected launches, and alarm

klaxons blared as fresh target locks were detected.

“Launch countermeasures!” ordered Tiberius. “Evasive manoeuvres! Get us out of here!”

“Aye, my lord,” answered Philotas, issuing the necessary commands. The deck plates groaned as the ship’s engines fired up and the atmospheric manoeuvring thrusters roared to life. A Space Marine strike cruiser was far more agile than its vast size would suggest, but it could not turn and evade as quickly as it now needed to.

Proximity alarms chimed as the torpedo spreads raced towards them. Whoever had taken control of the orbital defences knew their craft, and every vessel in the Imperial fleet faced a host of incoming warheads.

“Brace for impact!” shouted the Master of Weapons. “Battery fire incoming!”

The bridge shook as building-sized explosive shells impacted on the shields, and Tiberius knew they would be collapsed in moments by the multiple batteries at their rear.

“Are we betrayed?” demanded Tiberius.

“No, my lord,” said Philotas, running over and pulling out a brass jackplug from the plotting table and slotting it into a socket behind his ear. “Not betrayed, compromised. The enemy must have a data-savant with knowledge of Ultramar’s command protocols.”

“How in the nine hells would they get something like that?”

“I don’t know, my lord.”

Tiberius dismissed the question as irrelevant, cursing himself for wasting time when there were more pressing matters to hand. He returned his attention to the plotter table, despairing as he saw the enemy vessels surge forward in the wake of the explosions and crippling damage cutting through the Imperial fleet.

He’d promised Uriel more time, but as more and more damage reports from his fleet appeared on the plotter, Tiberius saw that was a promise he wouldn’t be able to keep. His fleet was crippled, six ships already out of action and another three drifting away from the battle lines. This fight was lost, and they hadn’t even fired a shot. Tiberius opened a fleet-wide vox-channel.

“All ships, this is Admiral Tiberius on the *Vae Victus,*” he said, affecting an air of calm he certainly didn’t feel. “Every captain who is able is hereby ordered to disengage, I repeat, disengage. Remove your vessel from the fight and regroup at rally point Ultima Six-Eight. Tiberius out, and may the Emperor guide you!”

He closed the channel, his heart heavy at having to issue such an order.

Tiberius looked over at Philotas and tapped the image of Calth on the plotter.

“Contact all ground forces,” he said. “Warn them they’ll have the enemy

dropping on them any moment.”

PART 2

FORTRESS ULTRAMAR

NINE

THE ASSAULT ON Calth began with a thorough bombardment designed to strip away the air defences of Highside City. As the Imperial ships withdrew, Honsou's fleet dropped into low orbit to more precisely aim their weapons, and lancing bolts of vertical light winked into existence as gun batteries flashed like strobes. Their accuracy was undiminished by thermal blooming since Calth had no atmosphere and the results were devastating.

Warbreed's bombardment cannon, guided by Cycerin's absolute knowledge of ballistic trajectories, slammed high explosive shells on their targets with a precision not even the greatest gunners of the Imperial Navy or Adeptus Astartes could match. The Iron Warriors would have need of Highside City, and the destruction was wrought with surgical precision.

Highside City was now open to the air, its defences stripped by the accuracy of the bombardment, and in the wake of the barrage from space, drop-pods fell towards Calth without the fiery contrails normally associated with such assaults. With no atmospheric friction, the iron missiles slashed down at terrifying speeds, a host of aircraft following in their wake. Heavy landers, bulk carriers and vessels that could not normally pass though the atmosphere without burning up dropped to the surface of the planet, all bearing warriors of the Bloodborn and everything they needed to prosecute the attack on Calth.

The majority of the city's defenders were no longer there, already making best speed for Guilliman's Gate. Any units left to defend Highside City would not survive, and Uriel was unwilling to ask any man to make such a sacrifice when there were greater battles still to come. Yet the city was not undefended, far from it.

Magos Locard volunteered a regiment of weaponised servitors to defend Highside City, hurriedly inloading basic hunt and eliminate wet-ware into their biomechanical cortexes. They wouldn't be able to adapt to any changing battlefield circumstances, but they would never retreat and would never stop fighting until they were destroyed. Five hundred skitarii volunteered to remain behind and further delay the attackers.

The first drop-pods smashed through the skylights of Assembly Hangar Septimus Oravia, hammering down on the exact spot where the first Thunderhawk of the *Vae Victus* had landed, The weaponised servitors could not appreciate the synchronicity of the moment, and simply opened fire at the first

iron-plated warriors to emerge.

HONSOU FELT A delicious thrill as he leapt from the drop-pod, tasting the caustic bite of the lethal atmosphere mixed with the burned stone and metal taste surrounding the drop-pod. To set foot on a world of Ultramar with carnage in mind was a feat few had achieved, and he wondered what Kroeger and Forrix would have made of his achievements.

Twelve drop-pods were scattered through the vast hangar, each one spilling warriors in burnished plates of iron with yellow and black chevrons into the thick of battle. Bolters roared in a near-continuous cacophony, filling the hangar with muzzle flashes. Eight warriors followed him onto the segmented decking of the drop zone, the most brutal and zealous of his army. The Newborn dropped to the ground next to him, its bolter firing with practiced ease and unerring accuracy.

Honsou's artificial eye fuzzed with static as he saw Ventris in the creature's easy movements, remembering the shot that nearly killed him and left him with the crude augmetic in the first place.

Grendel led the initial landing, his lieutenant's temperament ideally suited for the thundering violence of such battles. There could be no subtlety in a drop assault; the defenders needed to be smashed aside with speed and ferocity, pushed back from the landing zone with brute force to allow follow-on units to land in safety. The enemy they were facing was no ordinary foe, but the Iron Warriors had weapons of such bludgeoning power that their foe's lack of fear was of no consequence.

Two Dreadnoughts emerged from heavily armoured drop-pods, slamming down and unleashing mechanised howls of insane bloodlust from their sarcophagus-mounted augmitters. Towering giants of blackened iron, these killers of men were little more than psychotics chained within an armoured shell and fitted with the most destructive weapons imaginable. That these sometimes turned upon their allies was a small price to pay for such powerful linebreakers. Hooked chains swung from their shoulders and blazing light suffused the horned heads carved on the glacis of their sarcophagi. Gunfire pattered from their armour and they crashed with stomping footsteps toward their enemies. Honsou jogged into the smoke of battle with his bolter pressed tightly to his shoulder in search of targets.

There was no shape to a drop assault, simply a swirling mass of fighters struggling for the upper hand. Strategy was nonsensical and tactics useless. All depended on simple ferocity and the will to win. Augmented Mechanicus

soldiery clad in armour as outlandish as any of Kaarja Salombar's corsairs swirled in bloody close quarters battle with Iron Warriors. Battle servitors stalked through the smoke, their presence announced by blazing gouts of fire and streams of gunshots. The battle was a seething mass of screaming warriors, slashing blades, snap-shots and thudding explosions.

Fizzing blasts of superheated plasma streaked past Honsou, and he felt the burn of their passing through the plates of his armour. If the siege to capture the *Indomitable* had rekindled his love of taking the iron to the stone, this fight was a reminder of the savage joy that could be had in the fiery cauldron of combat. He saw the glimmer of a targeting laser on his breastplate, and spun on his heel towards its source.

Someone barrelled into him, and Honsou was thrown to the ground as a roaring blizzard of heavy calibre shells sawed the air above him. Three of his Iron Warriors were hurled back, all but one pulped to shredded meat and bone by the barrage.

He craned his neck to see the Newborn lying on top of him, its helmet a blasted ruin on one side where a shell had torn the ceramite. One of its stormcloud eyes stared through the mass of twisted metal, blinking in the sudden light.

The Newborn reached up and tore off the useless helmet, revealing its loathsome patchwork skin. Blood and oily light seeped from its head, but as Honsou watched the leathery skin began to knit together until only the bloodstain remained. The Newborn's regenerative powers seemed also to stretch to allowing it to breathe in this toxic environment.

"You are being careless," said the Newborn over the remains of its gorget vox, sounding like a drill instructor admonishing a particularly stupid cadet. "Did you not see the danger?"

"Get off me!" yelled Honsou. Figures moved in the roiling smoke banks, but where their allegiance lay was impossible to tell.

"Gun servitors," said the Newborn, pointing into the smoke as it rolled clear. "Praetorian class. Assault cannons."

Honsou swung his bolter around as three clattering machine warriors emerged from the haze. Each was taller than a Space Marine, the hard grey flesh of their torsos fused with a heavy track unit, like a mobile artillery piece. Their skulls were black and white death masks and the musculature of their upper bodies was massively exaggerated, swollen with gene-bulking and enhanced with cybernetic augmentations to carry the implanted assault cannons that replaced their forearms. Enormous ammo hoppers spewed copper-jacketed casings as their weapons sprayed lethal fire.

He squeezed his trigger, pummelling the nearest Praetorian with shots. It rocked back, chunks of dead meat and armour blasted clear, but such machines were built to last. Targeting lasers flickered in the smoke and fastened on Honsou and the rest of his squad.

Before the Praetorians could open fire, a dark shape flashed through the smoke and landed on the ammo hopper of the leftmost machine. Lightning-wreathed claws slashed down and a heavy arm clanged to the floor as it was neatly severed. Sparks and oil-dark blood sprayed from the wound as the black shape drove his claws down through the machine's neck and bisected it from collarbone to stomach.

Ardaric Vaanes vaulted over the second machine, his claws sweeping out to decapitate it as he kicked off from its chest to land on the shoulders of the third Praetorian. Silver steel flashed and the machine collapsed as the renegade Raven Guard tore out its heart and throat with a series of quicksilver slashes. It had taken less than five seconds.

Despite himself, Honsou was impressed. He'd known that Vaanes was a superlative ambush predator, but to see this up close was a stark reminder of the fact.

"That was careless," said Vaanes, stepping forwards and offering Honsou a hand up. Honsou ignored it and stood with an insouciant shrug.

The Newborn nodded. "That is what I said."

"I thrive on danger," he said. "What you see as careless, I see as daring."

"Daring will get you killed," said Vaanes. Honsou laughed. "And you'd grieve for me, would you?"

"Hardly, but that's not the point. Without you there is no army here, just a bunch of killers on the rampage. You keep reaching for the victory that's as likely to see you dead as triumphant and this whole enterprise is as good as over. Don't you care about that?"

Honsou rammed a fresh magazine into his bolter, feeling the axe on his back awaken with the scent of blood on the air.

"That's what you never understood about me, Vaanes," said Honsou. "I *don't* care. I do what I want because it is who I am. Anything else is a lie and if there is one thing I can say of myself, it is that I will never compromise who I am. Not for the powers of the warp, not for the M'kar and certainly not for you. When death is a heartbeat away, I am truly alive."

Honsou turned away, uncomfortable with such honesty. "That's the only way I know how to live," he said. "What else is there?"

LEX TREDECIM, THE immense, cliff-sided Capitol Imperialis, rumbled through a high-sided gorge at the centre of a great convoy of armoured vehicles and troop transports. The roadway led through the Mountains of Twilight towards Guilliman's Gate, the vast portal fortress that led down to the network of caverns beneath the surface. Only this route through the mountains would allow the Imperial forces to reach their destination in complete safety.

Within the command bridge, Uriel watched the feed from Highside City on the holo-globe hovering in the centre of *Lex Tredecim*'s long bridge. The interior of the Mechanicus vehicle was unlike any other such command leviathan Uriel had travelled within, its fittings alien to him with their bizarre, inhuman machine parts. Nothing within the enormous vehicle looked designed for use by unaugmented mortals. Every command station was manned by a servitor or a tech-priest so far removed from humanity that it was difficult to tell them apart.

The panels of its logic engines and drive controls were machined bronze and steel, gleaming with fresh coatings of sacred oils and impossible to use without cybernetic enhancement. An acrid haze of incense sympathetic to the machine spirits caged within each terminal drifted from the recyc-vents, and Uriel tasted oil and metal in the back of his throat.

Pasanius and Learchus stood to either side of him, as Shaan paced the command deck like a stalking predator. Inquisitor Suzaku watched the carnage within the globe impassively, her hands laced behind her back and her white hair scraped back in a severe ponytail.

Magos Locard's limbs clicked on the brushed steel decking as he altered position, a number of extruded mechadendrites plugged into the projection unit below the shimmering holo-globe. They gathered around the shimmering sphere, watching through the gun camera of a heavily armoured Praetorian, catching fragmentary, juddering images of the fighting.

The targets of the battle servitors' guns were obscured by blazing muzzle flashes the instant they were revealed, but the stark contrast of their iron armour and yellow and black trims was impossible to mistake. Though Uriel had known the nature of the foe they would face on Calth, it was still a shock to see the Iron Warriors at war on a world of Ultramar.

"How much longer can your forces give us?" asked Uriel, his voice hard as stone.

"Projection: at current rate of attrition, there will be none left alive within twenty-seven point three minutes," answered Magos Locard.

A flickering bar of light appeared at the base of the globe, diminishing with every passing moment, and Uriel realised it was a measure of the number of warriors left in Highside City.

“Turn that off,” he said. “I will take your word for it.”

“Ah, you find the numerical visual rendition of life distasteful.”

“We do,” said Shaan. “These warriors are giving their lives so that we may get below. They should be remembered as more than just numbers.”

Locard looked askance. “They shall be, Captain Shaan. Their designations will be stored within the memory coils of *Lex Tredecim*, and the Mechanicus never deletes anything.”

“That’s not what he means,” said Pasanius.

“I apologise,” said Locard, “but do the Ultramarines not record the designations of your dead upon the stone of the Temple of Correction?”

“We do,” agreed Uriel, seeing where Locard was going.

“This is no different,” said the magos. “Save that the Mechanicus way is more permanent.”

Uriel could see his veteran sergeants about to take offence at the notion of Macragge’s impermanence, but forestalled their outrage by saying. “We each remember our dead in our own way, magos, and who is to say which method is superior?”

Locard looked to be on the verge of answering that question, but whatever humanity was left within his skull wisely decided to interpret it as rhetorical.

“As you say, Captain Ventris, remembrance of the dead takes many forms.”

Satisfied he had made his point, Uriel watched impassively as the battle servitors and skitarii fought their desperate battle against the Iron Warriors. Aethon Shaan looked over and said, “Will twenty-seven minutes allow us to reach Guilliman’s Gate?”

“No, but it will get us close enough that we will reach it before any pursuit can catch us.”

“Good enough,” said Shaan, returning his attention to the furious battle on the holo-globe.

A group of Iron Warriors emerged from the smoke, their leader running towards the machine bearing the gun camera. Uriel immediately saw a dreadful familiarity in the arrogant swagger of the warrior’s movements.

“Hera’s bones!” swore Pasanius, recognising the warrior’s gleaming silver arm, an artificial limb that owed nothing to the ministrations of a tech-priest. Blazing muzzle flare obscured the Iron Warriors, and Uriel took an involuntary step towards the shimmering globe, his hand reaching for the hilt of his sword.

“Honsou,” hissed Uriel, staring at the warrior within the crackling image. “Damn it, but I hoped we were wrong. Even after everything, I didn’t really think it could be him.”

“That’s him all right,” said Pasanius, with a glance over to Learchus. “I’d

recognise that cursed arm anywhere."

The image blurred as something dark flashed in front of the gun camera. Sparks flew and arcing traceries of lightning slashed across the image as it skewed sideways.

"What happened?" demanded Uriel.

Darting light flickered behind Locard's eyes and a series of flashing red icons streamed over the curved display. "The servitor has been rendered inactive by lethal damage that exceeds its ability to retain functionality," he said.

"Someone killed it," translated Learchus. "Who?"

The image hissed with static, jerking and washing in and out of focus, as a warrior in black armour walked into shot. Broad-shouldered and moving with a grace that reminded Uriel of Shaan's supple ease, the figure bore a set of long claws on each gauntlet.

"Him, I'm guessing," said Pasanius.

Uriel recognised the warrior with a jolt of sick horror, but it was left to Aethon Shaan to name the killer of the battle servitor.

"Vaanes," spat Shaan, his own claws snapping from his gauntlets with a sharp, metallic click of sliding steel. The image flashed with static and rippling lines of interference as black engine fluid seeped over the image before it crackled one last time and froze.

The wavering tableau remained on the holo-globe, framing the architects of this bloodshed. Pinpoints of light flashed over the black-armoured warrior, mapping out his body mass and indexing it against supplied records.

"Adeptus Astartes records match biometric analysis," confirmed Magos Locard. "Ardaric Vaanes, battle captain, 4th Company of the Raven Guard Chapter. Declared Excomunicatus Mortis 934.M41."

"I need no machine to tell me that," hissed Shaan. "I would know that traitor anywhere."

Learchus leaned forward as the afterimages of the muzzle flare faded. "If that is Honsou, then who is that with him?" he asked.

Uriel peered at the fuzzy image and the breath caught in his throat as he found himself looking at a dead-featured reflection of himself. Locard froze the image and the Imperial commanders stared in open-mouthed horror at the dead skin mask looking back at them.

Its face was unmistakably that of Uriel Ventris.

HARD-EDGED MOONLIGHT sheened the jagged granite mountains of Talassar, imparting a shimmering, blushed texture to the bands of azurite that

flecked every rock. On any normal night, Varro Tigurius would have found the view quite beautiful, worthy of rendering in a wild and tempestuous painting, where the cold blues and vivid purples of the sky would contrast starkly with the paleness of the mountain stone.

But on this night, there was no beauty: there was only blood and death.

The ocean planet's only continent was named Glaudor, and the survivors of the *Caesar's* destruction climbed through the foothills of the Lirian Mountains, close to where Roboute Guilliman had broken the greenskin horde in the years following the Great Betrayal.

Abandoning the *Caesar* had cut every warrior deeply, but grief would have to take second place to survival. The enemy would be upon them soon, and to remain in the open was to die. Just over two thousand of the *Caesar's* crew escaped the dying battle-barge, borne to the surface of Talassar in saviour pods or Thunderhawk gunships. There was no panic, for these were citizens of Ultramar. Though only a hundred were Ultramarines, the Chapter serfs, helots and Defence Auxilia were men and women who trained every day to be worthy of Roboute Guilliman's legacy.

Yet as stoic and controlled as every heart undoubtedly was, there was not one amongst the survivors who could fail to be moved by the *Caesar's* death.

The mighty battle-barge had streaked towards the ground like a glittering comet, its hull ablaze with the fire of atmospheric entry. Tigurius had forced himself to watch its final flight as it vanished over the horizon to plunge into the vast ocean that covered the bulk of the planet's surface.

"We will never see her like again," said Marneus Calgar, and First Captain Agemman had wept to see so mighty a vessel destroyed.

Moments later, the daemons attacked.

Unfolding from the air like bloodstains on a blank canvas, they fell upon the survivors in a fury of fang and claw. Scores had died before anyone realised what was happening, but the iron discipline of the 1st Company crushed any panic before it could take hold and slew the vanguard of M'kar's daemon host with disciplined volleys of gunfire.

The only hope of survival lay in the mountains, and so had begun this gruelling march into the high peaks, with packs of snapping daemon creatures harrying them at every turn. The column of survivors trudged into the high peaks on limbs weary beyond imagining, but each man and woman was determined to survive and avenge the death of their beloved vessel.

This latest attack was the sixth they had endured since landing on Talassar, and as the mortals climbed higher, the Ultramarines veterans turned to fight.

Relentless volleys of storm bolter fire echoed from the sides of the canyon,

hammering blasts that pulped scaled flesh and exploded within immaterial bodies with explosive fury. Arcing jets of promethium sprayed from heavy flamers and streams of missiles from cyclone missile pods hammered the narrowest point of the canyon, where a host of warp-spawned abominations surged in a tide of inhuman bloodlust.

Beasts conjured from the darkest nightmares of mankind shrieked and howled as they clawed their way over the rocks. Sinewy daemonic hunters with twisting horns and reptilian bodies scaled the rocks with hooked talons and whipping tails. Monstrous creatures with elongated skulls and grotesquely fanged jaws bounded over the rocks with surging leaps as powerfully muscled spawn creatures with grasping limbs of claw and sucker slithered towards the Ultramarines battle line.

None could survive the punishing barrages laid down by Captain Agemman's 1st Company veterans.

Marneus Calgar stood in the centre of the battle line, torrents of gunfire blasting from the bolters worked with great cunning into the underside of his famous gauntlets. The Chapter Master picked his targets with rapid precision, and such was his skill that not a single shell was wasted.

Tigurius felt the courage of the warriors around him as a physical force, a resolute strength that was stronger than adamantium and could never be broken. The warriors of the 1st Company stood shoulder to shoulder with their captain and the master of their Chapter. No force in the galaxy could break their resolve.

Tigurius hurled arcing bolts of coruscating fire into the daemons, his power inimical to the unclean existence of the horde. Warp flesh melted at its touch and Tigurius relished the screams of the damned creatures as they were hurled back to their infernal realm.

With every volley, the daemonic horde melted away until the sound of gunfire diminished and silence descended on Talassar.

Without any words needing to be spoken, the Ultramarines turned and plunged deeper into the mountains, climbing through winding canyons and over great chasms. Agemman led the way at the head of the column.

Tigurius matched step with Marneus Calgar, who favoured him with a nod of acknowledgement. "Once again your prescience has saved lives," he said.

Tigurius accepted the compliment gracefully and said, "Are we headed where I think we're headed?"

Calgar nodded. "It is our only hope of life, Varro. It galls me that I must lead our enemies there too, but where else is there?"

"It is a good choice," said Tigurius. "It is a place of Ultramarines legend, a grand tale of impossible victory told to the Chapter's neophytes to instil the

proper appreciation for our primarch's glory."

"It's a risk, and you know it."

"True, but it is our best chance of survival. And if I may be blunt, my lord, you must survive. If you fall, Ultramar will fall."

"Then do your best to keep me alive," said Calgar. "It's still a hard climb away."

"Count on it, my lord."

Calgar looked up into the starlit peaks and said, "First we have to reach it, and that in itself will be no small achievement."

"We will reach it," said Tigurius. "I have seen you at its walls, fighting with courage and honour. You will face the daemons and you must hold them here long enough for the Sentinel of the Tower to fulfil his destiny."

"How long will that be?"

"I do not know, but if Uriel Ventris has proven anything since he took command of the 4th, it is that he is resourceful in the face of adversity."

"Then there is hope yet, my friend," said Calgar with a wan smile.

Tigurius grimaced and felt a familiar sickness in his gut that could mean only one thing.

"Daemons!" he yelled.

THE FLICKERING IMAGE of the warrior with Uriel's face danced and jerked on the frozen holo-globe. Magos Locard had zoomed in as much as the captured image allowed, and the interpolation matrices within *Lex Tredecim's* cogitators sharpened the image as best they were able. There was no mistaking the aquiline cast of these lean, patrician features or the grey stormcloud eyes.

But for the armour and corpse pallor of the face, they could be looking at Uriel.

"I don't understand," said Suzaku, looking at Uriel and the image within the globe. "You have a twin?"

"No," said Uriel, horrified at this violation of his identity. "Absolutely not. I do not know what that is."

Yet even as he said the words, he suddenly knew what this abomination was, how it bore his face and how it had come to be here. Once again he pictured the vision he'd had while immersed in the vile fluids and fleshy embrace of the daemonic womb-creature of Medrengard. Sinking fast within its amniotic suspension, his mind had fled to the idyll of his youth. He'd walked the caves of Calth, relived old glories and conversed with the image of his former captain.

Even then, he'd known it could not have been Idaeus, but now he was not so

sure.

“The Dark Son…” Uriel whispered. “Idaeus tried to warn me.”

“Idaeus,” asked Suzaku, the merest flicker of light behind her iris telling Uriel she was accessing implanted memory coils. “The previous captain of the 4th?”

“Aye,” said Pasanius with a nod. “What are you talking about, Uriel? Idaeus is long dead.”

“I know that, but I saw him,” said Uriel. “On Medrengard, when the monsters put me in the daemonic incubator creatures. I don’t know; it was like a vision or a fever dream. I think he was trying to warn me of this, but I did not understand what he meant. I clawed my way free of the monster I was trapped within, but while I was in there, it felt like…”

“Like what?” asked Locard, always eager to hear tales of such aberrant xenobiology.

“Like there was something else in there with me,” finished Uriel, horrified at the implication. “I felt it next to me and I felt it reaching into me. I did not understand what was happening, but Emperor save me, it must have been that… *thing*.”

“Interesting,” said Locard. “A warp-spawned gestation creature that bio-samples the superior specimen and implants the lesser with its enhanced genes. In all but the literal sense, this creature is your brother, Captain Ventris.”

“Never say that,” snapped Uriel. “These are my brothers, not that freakish monster.”

“I apologise for my choice of words,” said Locard. “But for all intents and purposes, this being is real and shares a rudimentary genetic link to Captain Ventris. I believe I now know how our enemies have managed to overcome the defences of Ultramar with such ease.”

The magos extended a series of wand-like probes from his back and slotted them home into a console behind him with gem-like buttons and numerous binaric displays.

“What do you mean?” asked Suzaku.

“One moment, inquisitor,” said Locard. “I am exloading the telemetry from the conflict in space, which I believe will confirm what I suspect to be the answer.”

A binary string column scrolled across the surface of the holo-globe, unintelligible to Uriel, but which appeared to mean something to Locard.

“Ah, yes, it is as I feared,” said the magos.

“What?” demanded Uriel.

“The orbital defences were infected by a scrapcode attack,” explained Locard. “A corrupt and debased version of the blessed Lingua Technis, one of the

Mechanilingua family of languages used in servitorware scripts. This is a nasty one, very advanced, but they could not have breached the aegis code without knowledge of Ultramar's defence protocols."

"And you think this clone creature knows those codes?" asked Suzaku.

"It knows them because Captain Ventris knows them."

"Are you saying that everything I know it now knows?"

"No, that seems unlikely," said Locard. "I imagine it would have absorbed random portions of your brain chemistry and memory. And by the principle of exchange, it is possible you would have absorbed some of *its* past existence. Is that the case?"

All eyes turned to him, and Uriel hesitated before answering. "Perhaps," he said. "I have been having strange dreams of late."

"What manner of dreams?"

Uriel shook his head. "Nothing I can truly remember, just flashes. More than a dream, it is like memories of events that happened to someone else. I suppose that is exactly what it is."

"What happens in these visions?" asked Locard. "It could hold the key to unlocking what this creature is and how it is able to function."

Uriel cast his mind back to the Temple of Correction, reliving the terror of the attack on the frozen castellum and the capture of the young cadets.

"I am a young boy," he began. "A cadet at a scholam, I don't know where. It is attacked by Iron Warriors, and they capture me… him. I do not see any more than that."

"Fascinating. You may have experienced the child's memory of its abduction prior to its implantation in the womb creature you were later sealed within."

"That makes a kind of sense," said Shaan, his pale features tinged green with the light from the holo-globe. "A cadet of that age would be a suitable candidate for gene-seed implantation."

"A crude method to be sure," said Locard. "I would imagine a dreadful rate of mortality in such a procedure, but the Archenemy cares little for such things."

"So why have I not experienced these visions before now?" asked Uriel.

Locard disconnected himself from the console and circled the info-globe on his clicking, calliper legs to stand before Uriel. "Your cognitive architecture was fully formed by the time you were imprisoned, so your dominance of your psyche was complete. This child's was malleable and easily reshaped into something monstrous. Its own memories and personality will be fighting for dominance with everything it took from you, which I imagine would be enough to drive anyone to madness."

"You call it a child," said Shaan, jabbing a finger at the image. "But that is no

child.”

“Once he was,” said Locard, his tone sympathetic. “Once he had a name and a life ahead of him, but now he is a monster, his mind filled with the indoctrinations of the Ruinous Powers. Who knows what he might have been with only Captain Ventris’ genetic influence?”

“A creature grown within such an abomination can only ever be a thing of darkness,” said Inquisitor Suzaku. “Chaos corrupts all it touches.”

“Be that as it may,” said Locard. “Clearly this requires further investigation.”

“Indeed it does,” agreed Suzaku, turning to Uriel. “Why did you not mention this before, Captain Ventris? This could very well have a bearing on the coming conflict. If this link can work both ways, then clearly it is something we must endeavour to exploit.”

“Now just wait a minute,” said Pasanius, stepping between Uriel and Suzaku.

“Captain Ventris was declared pure by the Grey Knights,” pointed out Learchus, also moving into a blocking position. “Our own Apothecaries and Chaplains confirmed that.”

Suzaku looked amused at their display of solidarity, but Uriel saw past her mask of acquiescence. The inquisitor saw potential in his connection to this monstrous clone, and, if he were honest, he knew she was right.

“Stand down, sergeants,” said Uriel. “If I can unlock more of this creature’s memories then perhaps there might be a something that will help us fight the Iron Warriors. Can you do that, Magos Locard? Can you get these memories out of me?”

Locard nodded, his expression alight with anticipation. “I have neuro-invasive equipment on board that should be able to pluck any residual traces of your clone from your mind,” he said with a gleeful smile. “Of course, that equipment was designed for xenos creatures, but it should still be reasonably safe.”

“Reasonably? That sounds somewhat imprecise for you, magos,” said Uriel, folding his arms across his plastron. “Define reasonably.”

“You will have a sixty-seven point six three four nine per cent chance of survival,” said Locard.

TEN

THOUGH THE NEWBORN had told Honsou of Guilliman's Gate, its mighty scale and incredible power, it was still a shock to see how massive a structure it was. Visible from fifty kilometres away as a bronze gleam in the face of indigo-sheened mountains, its size wasn't apparent until the army of the Bloodborn climbed into the rugged slopes of the Mountains of Twilight.

An entire flank of the mountain had been sculpted into a mighty gateway, a vertical chasm crafted into the rock with the inner faces carved with tens of thousands of statues, reliquaries, shrines and decorative arches. Greatest of these was the golden statue of Captain Ventanus, the saviour of Calth, fully a hundred metres high. The gateway sat atop a wide causeway of polished granite that led up from the desolate wastelands of the surface. Built two thousand metres high and the equal of any of the great gates of Terra, it was a monumental piece of defensive architecture. Ultramarines heroes stood atop ouslite plinths in heroic poses all along the length of the causeway with their shields and heads lifted towards the deadly sun.

Kroot warriors glistening with oily secretions that allowed them to breathe climbed the statues and smeared excrement over the pallid marble faces. The alien mercenaries squawked with raucous amusement at their vandalism, their alien skin darkened under the influence of Calth's poisonous sun. Mortal soldiers took pot shots at the statues with primitive bolt-action lascarbines, while armoured vehicles sideswiped them and sent each one tumbling to the plains below.

The gate itself stood on the far side of a bottomless chasm, its twin leaves formed from a pair of towering slabs of bronze and adamantium locked together at their centre by a pair of intertwined Ultramarines symbols. Divided into coffers, each panel depicted some ludicrously overblown image of Ultramarines heroes, slaying dragons, greenskins and horned daemons. Projecting bunkers and gun bastions studded the inner faces of the cave, creating a deadly killing ground from which little would emerge alive. To reach the gate would be no mean feat, but to breach it would require more than brute force.

Honsou rode in the open cupola of his Land Raider, the pistol grips of its heavy bolter grasped lightly in his gauntleted hands. He rolled with the motion of the tank, relishing the sense of power such a vehicle conferred. He had crushed Ultramarines beneath its tracks already and looked forward to hearing

the death screams of many more before this conflict was done. Though it was unwise, his vehicle was part of the Bloodborn van, a chaotic mixture of powerful battle tanks, troop carriers and bizarre hybrid machines fabricated by Votheer Tark and his coterie of lunatic magos.

As powerful as Honsou's mighty tank was, it was like an ant before a grox compared to the vehicle crunching over Calth's quartz desert behind him, a vast, tracked leviathan of steel and dark iron. A hundred metres high, its core structure bore the design hallmarks of a race that once counted the Imperium as an ally until it was betrayed and allowed to fall into extinction. Once, this mobile fortress had fought for the Corpse-Emperor, but now it was a dark cathedral of destruction that served the warriors of the Dark Gods.

It was the Black Basilica, and those Bloodborn without rebreathers travelled within its armoured, oil-soaked hull. An enormous cannon projected from its steep-sided glacis, and its lower reaches were swathed with filth-encrusted barbs and looping coils of energised razorwire. This was a thunderous symbol of bloody destruction that had ended wars, as much a dark idol of adoration and a temple to the Ruinous Powers as it was a weapon.

Adept Cycerin travelled within the Black Basilica, his stinking vat of conductive fluids transported from *Warbreed's* strategium to its converted bridge, where his oozing mechadendrites meshed with its systems until there was little to separate magos and machine.

Tens of thousands of Bloodborn followed the Black Basilica, a host unlike any of Honsou's Legion had commanded since the defeat of Horus Lupercal. Thousands of mutants, xenos mercenaries, pirates, renegade Astartes, outcasts, monsters, degenerates and criminals stood ready to do his bidding and unleash hell upon the greatest symbol of the Imperium that had rejected them.

Even when Abaddon led his host from the Great Eye, the Iron Warriors had fought in isolated warbands, fearful of being drawn into another disastrous conflict that would see them broken on the wheel of Imperial retribution.

Now Honsou would see one of the pillars of that Imperium torn down.

URIEL LAY ON the silver gurney within the medicae bay of *Lex Tredecim*, staring at the stark lumen strips of the ceiling as Magos Locard busied himself with a host of open-sided metal frames that bristled with machine parts that looked as though they belonged to a dozen different branches of xenos technologies. A ribbed length of cable emerged from one box as Magos Locard's mechadendrites machined its connector plug to allow it to slot into the input socket at the back of Uriel's neck.

Normally, this socket allowed his armour's autosenses to mesh with his genhanced physique, providing Uriel with a more intuitive situational awareness and a faster reactive instinct for danger.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Pasanius, leaning over the table to look down at him.

"The enemy is at the gate," said Uriel emphatically. "Against any other foe, I would not fear for it, but the Iron Warriors are masters of siegecraft and Honsou is driven by hate and the lust for vengeance. So, yes, I am sure."

Pasanius glanced at Learchus, and Uriel was touched by their concern, but what he had said was true. If risking his life in this manner would help in the coming fight, then he was only too willing to allow Locard's attempt to reach any inherited memories buried within his brain.

"I don't like it," said Pasanius. "It's not natural."

Trying to sound at ease, Uriel said, "I will be fine."

"But what if you're not?" said Pasanius. "Who'll command the 4th?"

Uriel twisted his head to look at Learchus. "Learchus did it once before, and if need be, he will do it again."

Learchus shook his head. "I want my captaincy," he said. "But not like this."

"I said the same thing when Idaeus died," said Uriel, "but I have learned that life cares little for what we want or what we deserve."

Pasanius grunted and jerked a thumb towards the humming boxes of circuitry. "It doesn't look safe to me," he said. "It looks alien."

"It is," said Magos Locard without turning around. "Much of it employs technology recovered from the ruins of Golgotha in the wake of the routing of the greenskins."

"This is greenskin technology?" hissed Pasanius. "See, I told you it wasn't safe!"

"No, Sergeant Pasanius," said Locard. "It is older than that, remnants of the race the greenskins exterminated to claim Golgotha for themselves. Calm yourself, your captain is in safe hands."

Uriel hoped Locard was right, for the mechadendrites had finished their tooling of the connector socket and curled through the air towards him as the magos approached him.

"Are you ready, Captain Ventris?" asked Locard.

"I am," said Uriel. "How long will this take?"

"Speculation: not long," said Locard, as the connector slotted neatly into the socket in his neck. "The other subjects experienced memory recall in seconds. I suspect this will be little different."

The plug in his neck felt cold and there was a moment of metallic taste in his

mouth, like a low-level current of electricity running through him. He heard the *snick* of connection and the whirr of locking bolts screwing home in the threads cut in his skull. A numb sense of cold spread through him as invasive fibres meshed with his brain stem and infiltrated his skull.

Inquisitor Suzaku appeared in his peripheral vision. Uriel hadn't heard her enter the medicae bay.

"I shall be observing," she said. "In case anything should manifest other the creature's memories."

"I understand," said Uriel, seeing the stark purpose in Namira Suzaku's eyes.

Locard leaned over him, what was left of his organic features struggling to conceal the excitement at utilising his technology is such a unique way.

"Shall we begin?" he asked.

"Do it," said Uriel.

He heard a faint click, and searing pain stabbed up into his skull as repressed horror rushed to fill the spaces of his mind.

THE PAIN IS intense, a shooting spike of eye-watering agony. He closes his eyes and tries to remember something good, something pleasurable, but there is nothing left. All he remembers now is pain and degradation. He remembers cages, whips and casual brutality that cheapens life until those he shares his cage with sometimes turn on one another.

All he knows is pain, hunger and sickness.

The starship was a metal coffin, its translations unshielded, and the nightmares drove dozens to madness and suicide. Barely a handful remain, though he cannot now remember how many began this dreadful journey. They live in darkness, are fed scraps and subsist on condensate licked from the cold iron walls.

Yet for all its horror, the starship was paradise compared to the sweltering hell of the cavern. He toils day and night in this charnel house of corpses, feeding mangled limbs and bloated bodies to the grinding machines that howl for blood and sift the valuable morsels from the gruel of flesh. His masters whip him and chastise him with razors, flensing the skin from his back and licking the blood from their blades.

They tower over him: hideously warped creatures with skeletal bodies so mutilated with surgery that they are little more than patchwork creations of their own making. They stalk the cavern on blade-like limbs, their heads encased in brass armatures, rasping in their broken dialect of machine-hash and fragmented Gothic.

Their eyes are cold and to attract their notice is death.

They call themselves the Savage Morticians.

He knows they will kill him soon, just as he knows he will welcome that day.

He pushes a heavy gurney loaded with bodies towards the churning machines. Other boys have been dragged into the machines and killed, and he thinks that some jumped in deliberately. He thinks of doing the same. Anything would be better than this nightmare.

Another boy pushes the gurney beside him, but he doesn't know his name. He thinks he might have known it once, but nothing now remains of his memory beyond this blood-soaked existence. They push the gurney towards the chute above the grinding pits and lift it until the body parts slide off and vanish into the pounding hammers of the machines. Flesh explodes and bone splinters and the manglers growl in pleasure at the feast.

The other boy turns to look at him and says something, but he's too numb to hear it.

"Samuquan," says the boy.

Samuquan? Is that his name?

Thinking it might be, he turns to the boy, seeing a mirror of his own numb desperation in his eyes.

"What?" he says.

"Come on," says the boy, nodding to the chute. "I can't take this no more."

"What?" he says again, his brain too slow to process the words he's hearing.

"Let's do it together," weeps the other boy, holding out his hand.

He looks at the hand dumbly, not really seeing it, and unable to grasp the other boy's meaning. The boy looks at him pleadingly but he can't move, he can't do anything.

Then, over the grinding of meat hammers there comes the sound of stabbing steps, the clanking, metallic grinding of spidery legs. The boy looks up in terror and takes a step towards the chute.

"They gonna put you in this time," says the boy and jumps into the grinding pit.

He watches the boy fall, feeling nothing as he hears the monstrous noises of a human body being ground up by daemonic machines. He knows this should horrify him, but he can feel nothing but irritation that he will have to push the gurney back without help.

A shadow envelops him, all angles and blades and hissing breath that reeks of rotting insides. He looks up, though he has been warned many times not to do so, and meets the gaze of a creature with a face swathed in blood-soaked bandages and bronze eyepieces. Robed in black, and with a misshapen skull icon sewn into

its exposed flesh, its mantis-like limbs sway above him, a multitude of rusted blades scraping together like broken fingernails.

A vicious slash of a lipless mouth filled with needle-like teeth and exposed gums leers down at him. A black tongue emerges from behind the teeth and tastes his fear on the air.

"Flesh-thing make new body," it said, its words like chittering insect noise.

He doesn't answer, hoping against hope that it means the other boy. Tears spill down his cheeks as he prays that they will take the other boy. Shame and fear burn in his heart. Please, he thinks, please take him and not me. Then he realises that the other boy is gone. He is alone, and there is no one else to take.

He drops to his knees, terror of this new fate overtaking the automatic reactions that have allowed him to keep putting one foot in front of the other all this time. Bladed pincers reach down and lift him from the ground, and he is carried, almost tenderly, through this vision of hell, all molten lakes, chained daemons and howling machines that feast on flesh.

He senses the presence of others nearby, but all he hears are his own strangled sobs.

The claws lower him to the ground, but he cannot move. He has no energy to run, to even pick himself up. Something huge and reeking of weeping, ulcerated sores looms over him, and he hears a sopping wetness spill onto the floor as blades slice flesh. He turns his head and sees a vast body, grossly swollen yet familiar in its original shape. It has a woman's face, a bloated and hideously disfigured woman, but a woman nonetheless.

He thinks it is his mother and he cries for her as the claws reach for him and lift him towards her. Blood stink fills his nostrils, nothing new in this place, but this is warm, fresh, and wet. Hot, moist flesh enfolds him and he hears a contented sigh from the woman's blubbering mouth, as though she welcomes this addition to her daemonic womb. She needs this child to nurture and develop, though he knows there will be no wondrous birth for him.

He has seen the wretched offspring of these womb creatures. He has flushed their mutant corpses from this hall many times, sweeping their mewling, twisted carcasses from the fortress like garbage. This will be his fate; he will become a monster, and everything he was will be perverted into something dreadful.

Heavy sheets of ruptured flesh are lifted over him, swaddling him in darkness, and he finally gives voice to the scream that has been building within him for the last six months. Stinking amniotic fluid fills his mouth, rank and frothed with corruption. His lungs fill with it and he struggles as he feels himself drowning.

But he does not drown, and he floats in the warmth of the daemon's belly for what seems like an age. He is alone. With every passing moment, his body is

changing and growing as his vile mother feeds him the hideous brew that will transform his body into a thing to be hated or a thing to be thrown away in disgust.

He is alone, his bones lengthening and his physique swelling, but there is something missing, some essential element yet to be added to his pupating form to make it complete.

Then, as the daemon mother's body is opened once more, that element is added and he is no longer alone.

The new flesh fights as it is implanted, and he wants to tell it not to bother.

Death will be swifter that way.

But they do not die.

"SO HOW ARE we supposed to get through that?" asked Cadaras Grendel as another barrage of shells impacted on the earthwork mantlets. Debris rained down upon Honsou's makeshift command post, but this far back from the shelling it was simply dust and pebble-sized fragments of marble. "Even Perturabo would have his work cut out to break open that gate. And where does it even go? Through the mountains?"

"It leads below the surface," said the Newborn, sweeping the dust from the highly detailed map it had drawn on a sheet of wax paper. "The population of Calth live in vast, underground caves. They are so enormous they have their own weather patterns, and some are so verdant that you could wander for days in their ecologies and forget you were underground."

Honsou already knew that, but it was unnerving to hear the Newborn talk as though it had walked beneath their stone ceilings and lived a life within them. The map it had drawn them showed the layout of the cave systems beyond the gate, as thorough as any drawn by precise measurement. This was better than any such map, as this was drawn from personal experience, albeit experience inherited from another. Though the Newborn had perfect recall of the terrain, Honsou had made the creature draw it out, preferring the reassurance of a map he could hold in his hands.

The ground shook as another pounding barrage slammed down. The guns on Guilliman's Gate hammered the end of the causeway, but the Iron Warriors were experts in withstanding such fire. Three shots from the Black Basilica's great cannon had cratered the end of the causeway enough for the Iron Warriors to bulldoze the rubble into a series of earthworks behind which a heavily armoured pontoon roadway was extending over the chasm beneath the guns of the gateway's angle of fire.

“Are there any other ways in?” asked Ardaric Vaanes, looking up from his careful study of the wax paper. “Something you missed off this map?”

“There are other ways in, yes,” nodded the Newborn.

“Then why can’t we use *them* to get below?” asked Grendel, ever the warrior of direct action. “Be a damn sight easier than trying to blow these bloody doors off.”

The Newborn sneered, and Honsou caught the flash of the pain and madness simmering behind its eyes. Magos Cycerin’s last round of tortuous mental interrogation had stripped away more of its control, and it was only a matter of time until the continual pain of its existence drove it utterly insane.

“You think the Ultramarines would make it that easy to bypass their greatest defence?”

“You tell me,” hissed Grendel, his hand reaching for the pistol at his hip.

“Can you two stop fighting for two seconds?” snapped Vaanes. “I can’t think with your incessant nonsense.”

The renegade Raven Guard was looking up at the immense gates as he spoke, and Honsou knew he was plotting angles of approach, dead zones and a hundred other stratagems other than going head on into the gateway.

Grendel glared at him, but the Newborn simply nodded. “There are other ways in, but none that would allow the Bloodborn army to pass,” it said, missing the threat in Grendel’s words and the exasperation in the Raven Guard’s.

“Don’t use that word,” snapped Honsou. “Bloodborn. Don’t use it.”

“Why not?” chuckled Grendel, his animosity towards the Newborn forgotten. “Don’t you like it? I think it sounds good.”

“That’s M’kar’s name, not mine,” said Honsou. “This war is ours and I won’t have it co-opted by some damn daemon just because it decides to give the warriors waging it a name.”

“To name something is to have power over it,” said the Newborn.

Honsou put his fist down on the map table and said, “Then that’s another good reason not to use it.”

“I have no name,” said the Newborn absently. “Though I think I did once.”

“You don’t remember it?” asked Vaanes.

“No,” it said, before slumping its shoulders. “I am not sure I want to. If I remember who I was, what will I make of who I am now?”

“Who cares?” said Grendel. “You don’t need one. You are what you are, and nothing will change that, name or no name. Now, like I said, how the hell do we get through that gate?”

“Don’t worry, Grendel,” said Honsou. “This gateway won’t be a problem.”

A COLD WIND funnelled down the length of the Valley of the Sun, sweeping over the flood plains and bending the newly-planted saplings on its sloping sides. A wide river flowed from the head of the valley where the seat of Imperial power rested on Espandor, the marble-spired city of Herapolis.

A curved wall of pale stone ran the width of the valley, its towering height rounded out by silver-capped towers, projecting ramparts and gun batteries. Yet for all its formidable appearance, it was a city of great beauty, like a vast glacier of silver, gold and marble set forever at the end of the valley. Enduring and immovable.

It had survived one invasion in recent times. Now it would have to survive a second.

Praxor Manorian and Scipio Vorolanus climbed the steps cut into the rear of the wall towards the ramparts, giants in brilliant blue armour edged with gold. Behind them came Iulius Fennion, and Scipio saw his gaze continually drawn to the soldiers drilling in the wide training grounds behind the city's defensive wall.

"Better than the ones at Ghospora," said Iulius, approvingly.

"This is Ultramar," said Scipio, which was explanation enough. "You'd be down there with the Chaplain breaking heads if it were not so."

"True," agreed Iulius. "Gallow has done his duty adequately."

"Steady, brother," said Scipio. "Be sure not to shower the man with too much praise."

Iulius Fennion grunted and shook his head. "Always room for improvement, especially with mortal forces. I'll fight alongside them, but don't leave them behind me."

"Then perhaps you should assign the Immortals to the defence of the city," said Praxor Manorian, trying and failing to keep the self-interest from his voice. Both Scipio and Iulius shared a look that took them back to Black Reach.

"That's not up to me, brother," said Iulius diplomatically, and Scipio was surprised, for the sergeant of the Immortals was not known for his sensitivity. Blunt and pugnacious, Iulius Fennion was a plain-speaking warrior whose devotion to duty and the Chapter were well known. "That's for the captain to decide."

Praxor nodded, but said nothing, knowing that to antagonise Fennion would only begin another argument. Scipio had seen the melancholy settle upon Praxor's shoulders like an ever-increasing weight since Black Reach. Never mind that nearly half a century had passed since that great victory, or that a score of campaigns had been fought since, always Praxor Manorian's mind was mired in his slighting during that brief war. Ordered to defend Ghospora instead of following Sicarius to glory, Praxor had never forgotten the moment he had been

left behind, a garrison soldier instead of a crusader.

"As you say, Brother Fennion," said Praxor. "As the captain wills it."

A bellowing roar, like the drakes' said to inhabit the seas of Talassar, boomed overhead, and Scipio looked up to see one of the 2nd's Thunderhawks pass overhead, banking around the high towers of the Domus Invictus, the palace of the Imperial Governor, as it came in to land.

"The *Gladius*," said Iulius proudly, for this was the assault craft of Captain Sicarius.

"Look how the sun shines on the gold of her wings," said Scipio. "As though she is afire."

"Aye, like the Firebird of the Old Earth," agreed Iulius.

"Firebird?" said Praxor.

"Yes, a legendary bird that would be reborn from the ashes of its own death to rise again and be even more glorious than before. 'Tis a good omen, brother."

"If you say so," replied Praxor as the gunship vanished from sight.

The 2nd Company's Thunderhawks were berthed in hardened shelters within the Domus Invictus, but their battle tanks and transports sat in ordered ranks to either side of the wide gate that led within the killing ground of the inner courtyard.

Only eight Rhinos were present instead of ten, for two had been lost in the race to cross the Actium Gorge. Traitor forces had almost cut them off from the bridge and a short but brutal firefight had erupted as the Ultramarines fought their way across the gorge. Though the warriors within had escaped with their lives, two vehicles had been lost in the fighting, much to Techmarine Lascar's chagrin.

They climbed the rest of the way in silence, finally reaching the ramparts, where they found Captain Sicarius and the Lions of Macragge gathered on one of the out-thrust barbicans above the gateway. Sicarius' command squad was a gathering of heroes that had amassed a legacy of victories the envy of any such squad in the Chapter.

From this high vantage point, the Valley of the Sun was well named, for golden light streamed down its length as the sunset blazed on the far horizon. The valley sides were bare stone, the forests stripped by the invading greenskins to feed the furnaces of their ramshackle war machines. Careful cultivation was bringing the trees back, but the taint of the xenos was in the earth, and it would take time to restore the valley's former glory.

Sicarius turned as he heard them approach, and the three sergeants snapped to attention as they stood before him, hammering their fists against their chests.

"Greetings," said Sicarius, returning their salute. "There's not a moment to be

lost.”

Iulius spoke first. “Has something happened? Did the *Gladius* bring news of the Corsair Queen?”

“No,” said Sicarius with a smile. “Not as such, but if you and your warriors are up for some action, then I think we shall have her soon enough.”

“Always,” said Praxor Manorian, a little too swiftly.

“We stand ready to serve the Chapter,” said Iulius.

“And you, Scipio?” asked Sicarius. “Will you join your brothers on this mission?”

“It might help if I knew the nature of the mission, my lord.”

“Ah, Scipio, you always were the cautious one,” said Sicarius, making it sound like an insult. “But that’s why you are so good at what you do.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Scipio. “I live to serve the Chapter, and whatever the mission, I will join my brothers.”

“Good man,” said Sicarius, beckoning them to join his command squad. In the centre of the barbican was a wide table, upon which was a map of Espandor’s western continent, showing the main agri-settlements and centres of habitation. They were few and far between, for Espandor was not a populous world.

“Here we are,” said Sicarius, pointing towards the icon representing Herapolis. “The largest settlement on Espandor, and centre of Ultramarines rule. If this city falls, Espandor falls, so we are not going to let that happen. The city’s wall is high and strong. Even the portions knocked down by the gargant during the last war appear to be as strong as before.”

“With respect, my lord, a siege?” said Scipio. “We are all ready to serve, but skulking behind the walls is not the warfare we were built for.”

“Exactly!” said Sicarius, jabbing his finger down on the map. “We are the Adeptus Astartes. We do not wait for the enemy to come to us, we take the fight to him and rip out his throat before he even feels our hands at his neck. Look at this map, study the dispositions of the Bloodborn forces and tell me what you see.”

Scipio’s eyes ranged over the map, seeing a dashing flair for manoeuvre warfare that Sicarius so loved. He glanced up and saw an expression on his captain’s face that wasn’t exactly admiration, but wasn’t exactly loathing either. Could it be that he was actually glad to be facing a foe this cunning?

“We’ve slowed them, but we’ve not stopped them,” said Praxor.

“They are marching on Herapolis,” said Iulius. “That’s clear enough to see.”

“That much is obvious,” said Sicarius. “Look closer, look with the eyes of the enemy.”

As distasteful as that was, Scipio put the thought that this was a world of Ultramar from his mind and imagined that Espandor was a world to be conquered. As though the red arrows and timing markers were his own forces, he plotted what had been done and what he would do next. The shape of the invasion became fluid in his mind, his intuitive grasp of infiltration stratagems allowing him to look upon the map with eyes that saw beyond the most advantageous battlefields or ambush sites. He saw the mind behind the army, comparing the timing of each assault with plotted rates of movement of each division.

"She moves between her forces," he said. "That's why we've never found her. She issues her orders then moves to the army with the most difficult task. She's a glory-seeker."

"Scipio has the truth of it," said Sicarius, clapping a hand on his gold-edged shoulder guard. "She's a cunning one, this Kaarja Salombar. Oh yes, she's a cunning one, but she's used to dealing with plodding amateurs. Cato Sicarius has her measure, but I need to know where she is if I'm to put a blade to her neck."

"And that's where we come in," said Praxor.

"Indeed, Sergeant Manorian," said Sicarius. "I cannot kill what I cannot find, and as Gaius here is always teaching me, I should not launch a blow until I am sure it will land where I intend it to land."

"What would you have us do, my lord?" asked Scipio.

"Take your squads out into the wilds and be my silent hunters in the darkness. Find me the Corsair Queen and send word of her whereabouts. I will bring the wrath of the 2nd down upon her and we will have her head on a spike before that day is out."

Scipio hammered his fist against his breastplate, pleased to have a mission in which he knew his warriors would excel. "We will find her for you, my lord," he promised, and his brother sergeants echoed his forceful declaration.

"Find her soon," said Sicarius as the sun dipped below the horizon and darkness fell.

ELEVEN

WITH ONE CLAW wedged in the rock, Ardaric Vaanes swung out from his perch, a corbel in the shape of an eagle's head nearly eighteen hundred metres above the ground. The blades of his right fist hammered into the rock and he released his other hand's grip, swinging around and latching onto the wall with his feet. He held himself rigid as he felt the augur sweep of the nearby gunport pass over him, moulding his body to the inner face of the gateway and cutting all but the most essential power emissions of his armour.

Around him, the loxatl of Xaneant's kinband went perfectly still, following his lead and altering their body chemistry to perfectly blend with the mountain stone and reduce their body heat to almost nothing. The reptilian aliens were lethal killers, and with their chameleonic hides, made superlative stealth operatives. The weakest link in this approach was the Newborn, but it had proved itself capable on the *Indomitable*, so he had allowed it to come on the mission.

Twenty metres above him and ten to the right, the Ultramarines gunport above the vast bronze gate thundered as it unleashed another salvo of shells on the Iron Warriors encampment below. The muzzle flash of the guns was blinding and the noise deafening. The recoil dissipated through the mountain and Vaanes clenched his fist and braced himself as the juddering vibrations tried to shuck him off. The sound of these guns from the camp below was incredible, but this close it was next to unbearable.

The shells hammered down on the elaborate earthwork built at the end of the shattered causeway, sending up plumes of fire and pulverised stone, but doing little damage to the edifice. It was wasted effort; once Honsou's men were dug in, it would take more than artillery to shift them. Vaanes was sure that Ultramarines doctrine allowed for sallies only under specific conditions, and this wouldn't match any such conditions.

Using the booming echoes of the guns to cover his movement, Vaanes fed power back into the fibre-bundle muscles of his armour and clawed his way over the gnarled cliffs. With fluid motion, he eased himself towards the battery's embrasure as the long barrels withdrew and its blast shield came down. His movements were sure and swift, an indistinct black shape moving over the rock face like a shadow at twilight.

It had taken his team of killers four hours to climb this far, but Vaanes would

not be rushed. This was *his* area of expertise, and though he now questioned why he even fought with Honsou's army, the chance to put his lethal talents into action was too good an opportunity to pass up. Besides, it was the only way they were getting through this gate, and Honsou knew it.

He had chosen his approach with great care, climbing through the areas of the gateway where the sensor shadows of the giant statues provided the most cover from augurs and anti-personnel guns placed to stop an enemy from doing what he was attempting.

Vaanes smiled to himself. Against any opponent save one schooled at the Ravenspire, it might actually have provided security. As it was, this was little more than an exercise for one such as he. It had been many years since he had trained with his brethren, but he had lost none of his expertise. He hugged the rock face below the gunport as the loxatl spread out to encircle it. The Newborn clung to the rocks behind him, its body trembling with the effort of holding itself still.

He nodded to the Newborn and jerked his head towards the blast shield and held up three fingers. He counted down with his digits, and as the last one curled back into his fist, the blast shield began rising with a pneumatic whine of gears and pistons.

Vaanes waited until the blast shield had risen enough to allow entry and swung himself up and over the lower lip of the gunport. He rolled onto his side, skidding along and over the greased rails of the recoil compensators. Four gun barrels, each a metre and a half across, were sliding down the rails into the firing position. He had to move fast. If the guns fired before he was fully inside, the pressure wave would rupture every organ in his body and shatter his bones to powder.

The Newborn crawled alongside him, and he heard the chittering motion of the loxatl as they followed them in. The rumble of heavy motors and chains grew louder as Vaanes reached the exhaust ports that would vent the enormous amount of propellant gasses. The bulky form of the breech was just ahead, a flickering series of warning lights winking through the clouds of hissing steam.

Vaanes rose to his knees and vaulted straight up, hauling himself onto the top of the nearest gun barrel and scooting forward until he reached the louvered shutters that separated the guns' fire control from the weapon itself and prevented the vast amounts of vented propellant fumes from blowing back onto the gunners.

"Follow my lead," he said. "Kill anyone you see, and do it fast. No survivors and no alarms. Understood?"

The Newborn nodded and the loxatl sent a rippling pattern of violet and gold

through their scaled bodies. Vaanes had come to recognise that as assent, and extended the claws of his gauntlet. The sound of a muted siren came from beyond the louvers, and the guns reached their firing position with a heavy boom of locking clamps.

Two rapid slashes of his claws and the louvers were reduced to torn strips of metal. Vaanes launched himself through the hole and dropped into the fire control of the mighty guns. The loxatl swarmed after him, spreading over the walls and ceiling like insects from a kicked burrow.

Two dozen or so operatives filled the fire control centre, servitors and Defence Auxilia mainly, but a single Ultramarines warrior with a partially augmented torso was plugged into the command console to authorise each firing. Surprised faces turned towards him, and Vaanes relished the moment those mortals realised their terrible danger.

He launched himself towards the Ultramarine, his claws extended before him. The warrior swung his bolter up, but Vaanes slashed it in two with a casual flick of his left wrist. His right claw punched through the warrior's neck. Blood squirted around the blades of his gauntlet and he twisted his arm to tear the wound open wider. Gunshots burst around him, and Vaanes kicked himself free of the corpse and spun away from the las-fire.

Streams of flechettes shredded the enemy soldiers before they could fire again, and yet more whickering darts ricocheted around the control room as the alien killers rooted out those enemies who had gone to ground. The Newborn smashed a soldier from his feet with a thunderous kick and backhanded another with its fist. A volley of solid rounds hammered its armour, but it seemed oblivious.

Vaanes ran towards the source of the shots, diving forward as a spray of bullets raked overhead. He rolled to his knees, punching out to either side and skewering the shooters on his claws. The bodies slumped to the ground and it was over, the gun battery was theirs.

Vaanes stood and turned to the Newborn.

"You can do what you need to from here?"

"I can," it said, pushing the dead Ultramarine from the console. "Send the signal."

FROM THE SOARING height of the upper observation deck, Uriel watched the damnable progress of the Iron Warriors with a mixture of dread and anticipation. As horrific as it was to have the servants of the Ruinous Powers treading the soil of Calth, he longed for the confrontation that would end this war.

The images he'd seen while hooked up to Locard's machines haunted him with their potency. As much as he wanted to hate the creature that bore his face, he found he could not, having lived through agonised moments of its life. Locard's words had resonance, and Uriel wondered what the boy might have grown into had he been given the chance of a normal life.

A commissar? A general? Or perhaps he was destined for a life of soldiering in the ranks? It was impossible to tell, but the Iron Warriors had taken away all the boy had ever had and all he was ever going to have. It would have been better to have killed him.

"Has anything else returned to you?" asked Inquisitor Suzaku, approaching from the rear of the observation deck. Her acolyte followed her. Uriel remembered his name was Soburo, and he sensed the man was some way from becoming a full member of the ordos. Suzaku had spoken to Uriel at length following Locard's procedure, and he had elaborated parts of the memory with his own recollections of the halls of the Savage Morticians. "No," said Uriel without turning. "I have told you all that I know." Suzaku joined him at the polarised glass wall, staring down at the siege-works below. From the outside, the observation deck would be invisible, and they stood in silence for a moment as they studied the enemy. Clouds of dust obscured the siegeworks as Honsou's artillery began a fresh barrage, but the hateful form of the corrupt battle fortress behind it could clearly be seen. To look upon it for too long gave Uriel a sense of cold dread, and he averted his eyes from its unnatural shape.

Beyond the dread leviathan, the wilds of Calth spread out in undulant dunes and petrified forests of sheared rock. An army of conquest traversed that bleak landscape, travelling from the captured landing fields and assembly yards of Highside City to Guilliman's Gate in their thousands. Somewhere out there, Learchus led an armoured spearhead of tanks and Defence Auxilia. Codex protocol was to detach a number of units to harry the enemy line of advance, to work in the shadows destroying supply convoys, ambushing reinforcements and disrupting communication. Such a task would normally have fallen to Issam and his Scouts, but the deadly light of Calth's sun made it impossible for anyone not clad in Astartes battle plate or sealed within an armoured vehicle to survive.

Fresh from his disruptive activities behind the tau lines on Pavonis, Learchus had immediately requested to lead the many volunteers ready to embark upon this dangerous mission. As Learchus' tank force peeled away from the main column en route to the gate, Uriel had impressed upon him the critical nature of the mission, knowing he might never see his comrade again.

Learchus' voice had been proud as he said, "I will not fail you."

"I know you will not," said Uriel, before adding. "Come back safe. The 4th

needs you.”

“Count on it,” said Learchus, and the vox-link shut off.

“Will the gate hold?” asked Suzaku, startling Uriel from his reverie. He was surprised to hear a note of unease in her voice. He studied the workings of the Iron Warriors and folded his arms across his chest.

“Yes. Even the Iron Warriors cannot breach this gate with a direct assault.”

“I am sure Rogal Dorn said the same thing at the walls of Terra,” said Suzaku. “Did you know his Legion were tasked with the fortification of the Emperor’s palace? As it exists today, the palace bears little resemblance to its former glory. It was a wonder, you know, a landmass of architecture and an object of awe from one side of the galaxy to the other.”

“It still is,” said Uriel.

“Have you seen it?” she asked, before adding, “No, of course you haven’t. I have. The orbis and lazulite carvings on Dhawalagiri elevation took Menzo of Travert thirty years to complete, and now they gather dust in the vaults. I saw two golden beasts, each a hundred metres tall, locked together in frozen dispute. I believe they once formed part of the Lion’s Gate, but it’s hard to be certain.”

“You are a student of history?”

“Of sorts,” said Suzaku. “I study the ancient times to learn how to avoid the mistakes of the past.” She smiled wanly and raised a hand to her face. “It has had mixed results.”

Uriel studied Suzaku’s profile, taking in the elegant sweep of her jaw line and the sculpted cheekbones that spoke of augmetic surgery. A faint glimmer of metal at the corner of her eye was all that could be seen of the mechanisms behind her retina.

“I lost the eye on Medinaq,” she said. “Along with most of my face.”

“The reconstruction work is exceptional.”

“I am worth it,” she said without trace of arrogance.

“Are you that good at what you do?”

“Since Medinaq I am,” said Suzaku. “I was trained by Mazeon, and his death taught me a valuable lesson in the price of hesitation.”

As Suzaku spoke, she absently stroked her cheek, as though reliving the injuries that took her eye. Uriel didn’t think she was even aware of the gesture. He returned his gaze to the attacking army and the vast black temple that held court over the host of the damned.

“All this for me,” said Uriel softly. “It beggars belief that anyone could hate so deeply.”

“You think this is all about you?”

“Everything Honsou has done has been in service of his vengeance,” said

Uriel. “The destruction of Tarsis Ultra was all about letting me know that he was coming. And that he is here on Calth, the world of my birth, speaks volumes. Why? What do you think he is here for?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Suzaku, turning to face him at last. “I have found that the Ruinous Powers rarely confine their designs to the fate of one mortal. There is always a darker purpose behind their actions.”

“With Honsou behind this army, I am not sure you are correct. He has followed me all the way from the Eye of Terror for the sake of vengeance.”

“In a galaxy where the fate of a single life is irrelevant, do you really think a warlord in command of such a host would care about one death?”

Uriel nodded, picturing the last time he had seen Honsou in the caverns beneath the blasted fortress of Khalan-Ghol. Such hatred would cross a dozen galaxies to be sated.

“I do. I brought down his fortress and walked away from his offer to join him. He hates me like no other. And you are wrong.”

“About what?”

“That the fate of a single life is irrelevant. Every life is vital, no matter how seemingly insignificant. If we forget that then we are no better than the scum out there.”

Suzaku smiled. “Spoken like a true hero,” she said.

Uriel tuned out the rest of her words as a sudden, lurching sense of vertigo seized him. His vision blurred, and for a moment it seemed as though he were on the other side of the armoured glazing. He reached out to steady himself, seeing through another’s eyes as he stared at the ground, thousands of metres below.

As though he clung to a precarious perch on the inner face of the gateway.

“Something’s wrong,” he said as another thudding barrage fired upon the Iron Warriors encampment. From within the observation deck, the noise was muted, but Uriel’s enhanced hearing picked out a subtle difference in the sound.

“What?” said Suzaku, instantly alert.

“One of the gun batteries is not firing,” he said, understanding what his strange sensation of vertigo implied. “The enemy is within!”

THE NEWBORN'S HANDS danced over the command console, its fingers moving by rote rather than knowledge. With every passing second, Ardaric Vaanes grew more and more uneasy. He had enjoyed the killings, feeling the anticipation of the lingering presence that had been his constant companion since joining Honsou’s army. It revelled in his joy, but Vaanes forced its insidious whisperings down.

The killings were a measure of his skill. He had taken no pleasure in the deaths.

Keep telling yourself that the whispers seemed to say.

“How much longer is this going to take?” he demanded. “It won’t take the Ultramarines long to realise one of their guns has stopped firing.”

The Newborn shrugged, its face a mask of incomprehension. Its eyes were shut and a green glow seeped from beneath the lids, as though lambent emerald light shone from within. Vaanes had seen light that colour before, and he shuddered at the thought of the bloated monster Adept Cycerin had become.

“Genetic markers confirmed,” said a toneless voice from the command console.

“You’re in,” said Vaanes, coming around the console to see the slates come alive with targeting information and data on the gun they had captured. The scrolling numbers flickered and distorted as the Newborn’s fingers flashed over the input slate.

And the gate’s systems opened up to it.

FROM THE BRIDGE of *Lex Tredecim*, Magos Locard’s eyes flickered and danced behind the synthskin lids. The mechanical torso with which he achieved locomotion sat at rest behind him, his body held suspended on a host of copper wires. A thick trunking cable rose from the floor and plugged into his spinal network through his artificial pelvis.

His body twitched, as though in the grip of a nightmare and his mouth opened in a silent gasp. Spreading his noospheric consciousness throughout the Imperial network was draining work, and tested even his formidable resources. There were other magos based on Calth, of course, and he piggybacked on their reach into the network, travelling the golden highways of data and information as easily as a transit train might cross the surface of Blessed Mars.

It began as a tiny blip in one of the logic engines controlling the guns of Guilliman’s Gate, an erratic systemic fault that almost escaped his notice until he recognised a distorted frequency in the *Mechanilingua* bandwidth. He had seen such aberrant code before, in the scrapcode attack on Calth’s orbital defences. Adrenal shunts deployed in his spine and cognitive enhancers pumped into his floodstream, heightening his awareness and honing his already fearsome analytical powers.

He inloaded the recordings of this data into a secured memory coil, a data prison to store dangerously unstable code, and began running every purgative in his arsenal. At the same time, he erected aegis Mockers in an attempt to prevent

the infection from spreading.

“Gate command,” he said, opening a channel to the buried command centre that oversaw every operation within Guilliman’s Gate. “This is Magos Locard aboard *Lex Tredecim.* Advisement: isolate all linked fire control cogitators from battery three-ultra-nine. Its codeware has been infected.”

“Infected?” said a voice his pattern recognition buffers identified as Magos Ultis.

“Indeed,” said Locard as he watched one aegis blocker fall after another, overwhelmed in moments by the rapidly replicating and mutating code. “Repetition/Clarification/Emphasis: shut down and isolate *all* linked fire control cogitators.”

“Understood,” said Ultis. “Shutting down now.”

Locard immediately saw it wouldn’t be enough. The aggressiveness of the scrapcode was unbelievable, like the most virulent plague imaginable. He linked directly to the infected systems, copying and buffering his active systems into a disposable data intercept before immersing himself in the stream of corruption.

The code swirled and howled around him, its chaotic randomness offensive in its assault on the Euclidian laws of mathematics. It bore all the hallmarks of the Dark Mechanicus, the random destructiveness of the code in violation of every one of the sixteen laws of the Mechanicus. It seethed like a living thing, but it was not living; it was artificial, and nothing artificial was ever truly random.

He blocked it, shunted it to redundant systems and directed it into self-destructive cycles, but for every strand he destroyed, another rose up from the numerical debris. Like the hydra of old, it renewed itself with viral rapidity, and no sooner had he purged one system than another infection would arise.

It infected the gateway’s systems at a geometric rate, spreading to the life support mechanisms, the power relays, the ventilation and every other linked system. With mounting horror, he saw its ultimate goal—the systems that controlled the gate itself. So massive was Guilliman’s Gate that no mere manual means of opening it existed. Machine-driven pistons and engines drove the mechanisms that opened the gate, and even now those systems were falling under the control of the code’s originator.

Locard knew he could not defeat this attack, but with every thrust, parry and riposte of data, his understanding of the code’s methodology grew, stored away in the isolated and warded memory coils for future study.

“Magos Ultis,” he said, reading the confusion and panic within gate command. “The operating systems controlling the gate’s opening mechanism are compromised. Alert all stations to fall back immediately.”

“Magos Locard,” replied Ultis, his augmitted voice unable to conceal his fear.

“I cannot issue such a command. I do not have the authority.”

Locard shut down his link with gate command, already hearing the burbling corruption in Ultis’ voice. The gate was lost, and he broadcast a vox-wide evacuation signal. Every Imperial vox-unit in the vicinity of Guilliman’s Gate would receive the order to fall back, and he only hoped he was in time.

There had been a malign consciousness behind this attack, an augmented mind swollen with forbidden knowledge and tainted with the deceits of Chaos. It had once been a mind much like his own, shaped by the greatest cognitive architects of Mars, but unlike other tainted minds Locard had encountered, this one was not nearly as experienced. There was newness to this mind that spoke of an originating source far younger than any of the fallen tech-priests who had sided with the Arch-Traitor Horus.

“You are skilful,” he said, utilising his fleshvoice for fear he might repeat elements of the corrupt code. “But you are impetuous, and I am a quick study. I know you now, and knowledge is power.”

He shut off his link with the gate, breaking off all connections with the corrupt data he had recorded and stored in his secure memory prisons. He would study it later, but for now, his contribution to the defence of Calth would need to take on a more martial nature.

With a hissed cant of binary, Magos Locard powered up *Lex Tredecim’s* weapon systems.

HONSOU WATCHED AS the green light spread from Cycerin’s pool to the organic-looking orifices in the wall of the Black Basilica. This chamber had once been its command deck, but was now a temple of dark stone and iron. Cowled acolytes of the Dark Machine-God tended to its workings, each without a face, simply a black void beneath their hoods. A vast altar of red-veined bloodstone pulsed like a slow heartbeat, and its surface ran with emerald lightning.

“I don’t believe it,” said Grendel. “They did it.”

Honsou smiled and opened a channel to his army, but he saw no order would be necessary, for every warrior had seen what Grendel had seen.

Guilliman’s Gate was opening.

URIEL POUNDED ALONG the wide passageways within the gate, desperation lending his limbs extra strength and speed. The gate was opening, and its guns had fallen silent. Of all the stratagems he had thought the Iron Warriors might use, subtlety had not been one of them, and he cursed himself for not anticipating that Honsou would surprise him.

The evacuation of Guilliman's Gate was already underway, a thousand vehicles of all descriptions falling back in good order along the Underway towards the first of the great caves. *Lex Tredecim's* frontal section blazed with light as its multitude of weapon systems engaged the enemy warriors spilling through the opening gate. Nothing could survive such a blitzing hurricane of las-fire and hard rounds, but as the gate opened ever wider the enemy storm would soon become an unstoppable tide.

The Swords of Calth ran with Uriel, and soldiers of the Calth Defence Auxilia had been despatched to the location Magos Locard had identified as the source of the infiltration. Petronius Nero had his sabre drawn and a haze of nascent heat built around the barrel of Hadrianus' melta gun. More useful for killing armoured vehicles, the melta was nevertheless a fearsome weapon for building clearances. Fired in a confined space, a blast would burn away the oxygen and suck and the air from the lungs of anyone within it.

The curved passageway was formed from prestressed permacrete, its walls machined smooth and stamped with bas-relief Ultramarines symbols and devotional frescoes. Armoured doors led off its length into armouries, shrines, firing ports and defence galleries.

An overlaid schemata described the route to the enemy's point of entry, but Uriel needed no such guide, for he was following an altogether more primal instinct. Though he couldn't explain it, he knew exactly where the enemy had breached the gate, just as he knew who was within; the bastard offspring of the Daemonculaba.

It had been its eyes he had seen through, and he could feel its presence as surely as he could feel the thunder of his own heartbeat. Gunshots sounded from ahead, the actinic crack of las-rounds smacking permacrete and the deafening bangs of bolter fire. Uriel's squad rounded a bend in the passageway to see a furious exchange of weapons fire and smoke.

Troopers in the blue and silver of the Defence Auxilia fired at a partially opened blast door that gave entry to one of the gate's many defence batteries. Under the cover of his fellows, a brave trooper surged forward with a satchel charge to blow the door all the way open. A withering salvo of flechettes flashed towards him from within the gun battery. The instant before they struck, the darts exploded into a blizzard of razor fragments and the trooper was shredded into a confetti of blood and flesh.

A controlled burst of bolter fire felled three more troopers and the rest dived for cover.

"Get me close to that door and I'll kill everything in that room," said Hadrianus.

Uriel nodded, but before Hadrianus moved, he said. “Just get the door off. I want whoever is in that room alive.”

Hadrianus nodded and spun around the bend in the passage, running bent over towards the door. Uriel and the rest of the Swords of Calth followed, spaced to avoid attracting a concentrated burst of fire with their bolters wedged in tight to their shoulders. Uriel drew his pistol and sword as a storm of flechettes spun out to meet his squad, but the splintering fragments were no match for power armour. Brutus Cyprian and Peleus fired towards the gap in the door, both warriors’ shots drawing screeching cries of alien pain.

Uriel saw a grey fleshed creature fall back, and slapped a palm down on Hadrianus’ shoulder guard.

“Now. Livius, Brutus!” he ordered. “Take that door down.” Hadrianus fired two quick bursts from his melta and the hinges of the door vanished in a flash of instantaneously molten steel. Gobbets of orange metal streamed down the edges of the blast door and Brutus Cyprian ran at it with a roar of ursine power. He slammed his boot into the heavy door, and it bucked inwards with a boom of ruptured metal. It toppled inwards as Cyprian spun away. Uriel and Peleus stood to either side of the door, firing across each other into the room as the enemy soldiers scattered from the breach in their refuge. Uriel saw darting, reptilian creatures bounding towards the massive, boxy shape of the silent gun battery, each with long dewclaws and hissing, draconic faces. Their skin rippled in a rainbow of colours and fresh storms of their dart-like projectiles slashed towards them.

Uriel ducked back as the doorway filled with slashing shrapnel. Peleus swung low and snapped off three precisely aimed shots, felling an alien with each one. To the untrained eye, it appeared Peleus hadn’t even aimed, but Uriel had seen him on the firing ranges of Macragge and knew that his banner bearer was a superlative shot, perhaps the best in the Chapter.

“Go!” he shouted, surging through the door, his bolt pistol bucking in his hand as he shot down another of the alien creatures. Its flesh exploded into wet grey fragments and it died with a brittle screech of pain. Another leapt at him, but his sword swept through its thorax and tore off its limbs in a hissing shower of slithering organs.

Petronius Nero moved through the leaping, darting mass of aliens like a dancer, his blade a slashing blur of silver as he wove an intricate path through his foes. Xenos claws raked at him, but he swayed aside with apparent ease, lopping sinewy limbs with every graceful blow of his sabre.

Peleus and Hadrianus fought with disciplined bursts of fire, fighting in mutual support of one another as they methodically cleared sector after sector. Brutus

Cyprian clubbed xenos killers to the ground with his fists as they leapt at him, their hind claws tearing at his armour and jaws snapping at his visor. Another warrior might have panicked, but Cyprian calmly tore each attacker from his body and crushed its neck, stamped on its chest or bludgeoned its skull to destruction on the walls.

More flechettes sparked and ricocheted around the battery as the last of the reptile creatures fought to the death. They weren't even trying to escape, realised Uriel as he killed another with a brutal lunge: they're a rearguard. With that thought, he sheathed his swords and leapt onto a projecting stub buttress on the wall. From there he leapt for the breech of the great guns and hauled himself onto its upper surfaces.

Two individuals scrambled over the huge gun battery towards the wedged open blast shield.

One wore the burnished plates of the Iron Warriors, the other the midnight black of what had once been Raven Guard. The figure in black looked over its shoulder and their eyes met through the lenses of their battle helmets.

"Vaanes," hissed Uriel and swung his pistol to bear.

He slotted the renegade Raven Guard between the open sights of his gun, and Ardaric Vaanes paused in his escape.

The moment stretched, but Uriel did not fire. He couldn't see Vaanes' face, but felt his desire to remain behind and face him. No, not face him… face his own forsaken redemption. The sensation was like nothing Uriel had ever experienced. This was an enemy who had betrayed everything the Adeptus Astartes stood for, yet still he did not take the shot.

The claws slid from Vaanes' gauntlets and he launched himself at Uriel with a shrieking howl. Uriel fired, and the shot shattered the claws of the Raven Guard's right fist. He threw himself back as the warrior barrelled into him. One claw lanced for his side, and Uriel rolled to avoid it. Energised blades scraped his armour and he slammed the butt of his pistol into Vaanes' head.

They rolled like common brawlers in the confined space, their fists, knees and elbows weapons as they battered each other with the fury of old comrades that now found themselves to be enemies. Uriel slammed his boot against Vaanes' hip. The warrior flinched and slammed the flat of his hand into Uriel's helmet, snapping his head back with a sharp crack. Once again the crackling blades slashed for Uriel, but he rolled aside and launched himself at Vaanes' legs.

They crashed together and fell from the breech of the great guns, slamming to the floor of the battery chamber with a crack of ceramite. Uriel hammered his elbow down on Vaanes' throat, but the Raven Guard squirmed free of his grip and the gauntlet blades snapped from his knuckles with a hiss of fizzing energy.

Uriel had kept a grip on his pistol and swung the weapon up, once again slotting Vaanes between his sights.

“Go ahead, Ventris,” said Vaanes with his fist poised to deliver the killing blow. “Get it over with.”

Brutus Cyprian slammed into Vaanes and bore him to the ground, pinning him with his incredible strength. Vaanes struggled in his grip, but against such power, his efforts were wasted. Uriel picked himself up as Livius Hadrianus stepped in with his melta gun raised. “No,” he said. “Shaan will want him alive.”

Hadrianus nodded and Petronius Nero helped Cyprian lift the struggling Raven Guard to his feet. As Uriel let out a pent-up sigh, he looked up towards the top of the gun as he remembered the second figure he’d seen.

The Iron Warrior was crouched on the edge of the gun, its head cocked to one side in rapt wonder. Uriel needed no vision of its disfigured face to know that this was the creature that bore his likeness and carried his genetic material within its abused body. It had its weapon raised, but it did not fire.

“You are Ventris?” it said, with a voice that was at once grating and vile, yet had a horrid familiarity to its tones.

“I know you,” said Uriel. “I know what they did to you.”

“You know nothing,” hissed the Iron Warrior and shot Uriel in the head.

THE CAVE MOUTH beyond the open gate was impassably blocked, a mass of collapsed boulders and fallen debris from the cavern roof. Millions of tonnes of rock had been blasted from the ceiling of the cave by the Imperial battle fortress, blocking the route down into Calth as surely as it had never existed. Wrecked tanks and bodies were mixed with the rubble, the ruin of those too eager in their pursuit of the Ultramarines as they fled deeper into their catacombs.

“How long will it take to get through that?” asked Grendel.

“Through it?” said Honsou as the ground rumbled with the approach of five mighty vehicles. “We’re not going through it, we’re going under it.”

Emerging from the oil-soaked holds of the Black Basilica like fat, cone-mouthed maggots, the five war machines were cylindrical and fully twenty metres in diameter with a multitude of conical drills, laser cutters, melta borers and conversion beam augers mounted on their frontal sections.

“Drilling rigs like these brought down the walls of Hydra Cordatus and a thousand fortresses before that,” said Honsou. “They’ll have little trouble in clearing a path through the rock of Calth. We’ll be on course inside of a few hours.”

Grendel nodded as the Iron Warriors directed the enormous, iron-sheened rigs

towards the rubble-strewn ground before the avalanche. Hydraulic pumps lifted their rear sections into the air with grinding squeals of greased metal and the conical cutting sections spooled up in a blaze of noise and light.

As the first rig powered into the ground with a juddering roar, Honsou turned to the Newborn, seeing a faraway look in the eyes of his grotesque champion. It had returned from the mission to open the gateway with the loxatl, but Ardaric Vaanes had been taken prisoner by the Ultramarines. Honsou hadn't yet decided whether that was a bad thing or not.

"You saw him?" asked Honsou. He didn't need to qualify the question.

"I saw Ventris," confirmed the Newborn, watching as hundreds of Bloodborn soldiers crawled away from the dust-filled cavern mouth the avalanche had blocked.

"And you didn't kill him?" sneered Grendel. "You're getting soft in your old age."

"There wasn't the chance," said the Newborn. "Vaanes got in the way."

"I never thought they'd capture a Raven Guard," said Grendel, jerking a thumb at the Newborn and staring straight at Honsou. "I thought they'd get that thing first. Or is there something you're not telling us?"

Honsou didn't answer and the Newborn turned to Grendel. "You suspect Vaanes allowed himself to be captured?"

"Maybe," agreed Grendel. "I'm just not sure whose idea it might have been."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe Vaanes allowed himself to get captured because he still thinks he can be saved," said Grendel. A sly look spread across his scarred features. "Or maybe Honsou here had Vaanes get himself captured to have a man on the inside?"

Honsou ignored the insinuation and said, "Or perhaps Vaanes might be hoping for mercy. After all, if there's one thing we know about Ventris, it's that he always thinks the best of people. He thinks sinners might still be saved and that makes him weak."

"If he's even still alive," pointed out Grendel. "The Newborn shot him at point-blank range with a bolt round."

"He's alive," said the Newborn, crouching on the ground behind their group with its head cast down. "I can feel it. I want him to be alive."

"So where did you take that shot?" asked Grendel. "It seems a strange thing to do for someone who says they want to meet their maker."

"I want to meet him, but I want him to suffer first," said the Newborn. "Without him I would not exist. Without his genetics, I would have been one of the Unfleshed, an aborted monstrosity left to die on Medrengard."

“Sounds like you should be grateful to him,” sneered Grendel.

“Grateful?” roared the Newborn, surging to its feet. “My life is fragments. I am the broken shards of two people and I live in pain with every moment that passes. Grateful? No, Ventris cursed me to the agony of a life I didn’t ask for. He made me what I am and there is not enough pain in the world for what he will suffer in return.”

“That’s my boy,” said Honsou with a crooked smile.

TWELVE

THE LAST RAYS of afternoon lit the distant fortress with a golden light, and though its walls were centuries old and all that remained of its gateway was a torn breach of collapsed stonework, Tigurius had never been happier to look upon the ancient shrine fortress of Castra Tanagra.

Raised when Roboute Guilliman was young, its walls had withstood the fury of a greenskin invasion in the aftermath of the Great Heresy, and the primarch himself had stood upon its walls in defiance of the savage invaders. Built in a circular fashion, with one of its four towers built into the cliff-face, Castra Tanagra was an elegant structure, its curving walls twenty metres high and built from blocks of black marble quarried from the canyons of Prandium.

Marneus Calgar led the survivors of the *Caesar* along the rocky valley towards the breach, the place where legend told that Roboute Guilliman had faced the brutish, ogre-chief of the greenskins and bested him with his bare hands.

“Castra Tanagra,” said Severus Agemman in wonder. “I haven’t been here since I was young.”

“You were never young, Severus,” replied Lord Calgar. “You were hewn from the rock of Macragge and given life in a thunderstorm.”

Agemman smiled, the fatigue of the climb into the mountains falling away from him at the sight of the ancient fortress. “Aye, that’s true enough, my lord,” he said. “Just as you were there to put the bolter and blade in my hands.”

Tigurius smiled to see the wonder on their faces, like children on the anniversary of their birth. Every neophyte of the Chapter was expected to make the pilgrimage to Castra Tanagra before his elevation to the fighting ranks, but the demands of war meant that few ever returned to study its majestic form.

Its walls were carved with images from the first days of the Imperium, glorious, heroic frescoes depicting Astartes in their thousands crusading across the heavens with the Emperor at their head. Whatever images had been carved at the feet of these Astartes had long since been hacked away, and none now lived who recalled what had been removed. Tigurius remembered touching the defaced marble, seeing a faint echo of row upon row of robed mortals. Each had borne an item of artistic endeavour—a quill, a paintbrush, a scroll, a sculptor’s chisel or a composer’s baton.

Why anyone would feel the need to remove such carvings was beyond

Tigurius, but he remembered a potent sense of shame as he had visualised the now invisible rows of artists, writers and chroniclers.

The pace of the march increased at the sight of the fortress, and within thirty minutes its walls loomed above them, gleaming like oil-sheened marble. Weeds and mountain gorse grew thick around the base of the walls, but none grew within the shrine fortress, as though an invisible barrier traversed the threshold. Darkness was drawing in, and the mountains were bitingly cold at night. They had precious little in the way of blankets or shelter, and though the Space Marines would need no such protection, the crew of the *Caesar* required protection from the elements.

Though Castra Tanagra was a holy place to the Ultramarines, the damage done to it during its last battle had never been repaired, for Roboute Guilliman had decreed that it forever stand untouched as a memorial to those that had lost their lives here.

Agemman cast a critical eye over the breach in its walls.

"We'll have a devil of a time defending this place," he said. "That breach is too wide, and I'll wager none of the tower guns function."

"I think you might be right," agreed Calgar. "Yet we have the veterans of the 1st to stand upon its walls. What force in all creation could storm such a fastness?"

"Spare me the flattery, my lord," said Agemman. "We'll hold the daemons at bay, but there is no way out of this valley if we should be overrun. We will either triumph here or we will all die. There is no middle ground."

"Then we had best not falter," said Marneus Calgar, stepping over the tumbled rocks of the breach. Agemman went after him, and Tigurius followed the First Captain into the fortress. He clambered over the cyclopean blocks, feeling the weight of ages and history woven within them, but no sooner had he set foot within its walls than he felt a powerful sense that they were not the first to reach Castra Tanagra. "Wait," he said, holding up a raised palm. "We are not alone."

WITHIN THE WALLS, Castra Tanagra was much as Tigurius imagined it had looked back in its heyday. The smooth marble walls of the inner keep were untouched by the passage of centuries, and the shimmering stained glass in its high towers shone vividly in the late sunlight. While the mortals gathered by the breach, 1st Company Terminators moved through the wide esplanade with their storm bolters at the ready, scanning for any threat and ready to eliminate it without mercy.

“What do you feel?” asked Calgar, the ammo feeds on the Gauntlets of Ultramar clattering in readiness. “Who else is here?”

Tigurius stretched out his consciousness, finding it difficult to gain a clear impression of anything within the walls. The gilded door to the main keep was shut fast; its brazen surfaces acid-etched with heraldic symbols of the ancient Legion’s many heroes.

“It’s hard to be sure, my lord, but I sense the pulse of many souls within the keep.”

“The enemy?”

“I do not know,” said Tigurius, “but I do not believe so.”

Calgar nodded to Agemman, who slammed a booted foot against the door. It slammed open, and a Terminator stomped through, a walking tank with his head lowered and his weapon raised. Another followed him, and another. Then Agemman went in, followed by Lord Calgar. Gunshots echoed within the keep, and Tigurius identified the weapons as Mark IV Konor-pattern lasrifles. A storm bolter fired, deafening compared to the lasrifle, and Tigurius heard screams. These were not battle shouts or the howls of daemons, but the terrified voices of mortals. Before any more shots could be fired, Tigurius pushed inside the keep, his enhanced vision easily piercing the darkness within.

“Hold!” he shouted, his staff flaring with a brilliant white light. “Ultramarines! Stand your weapons down.”

The first to reach the sanctuary of Castra Tanagra were not the enemy. They were citizens of Talassar.

THE TWO RHINOS were halted in the shade of the trees at the edge of a deep gorge, their engines growling in protest. Clogged oil smoke jetted from their exhausts, a toxin-laden breath that reeked of impurities and particulates. Scipio Vorolanus caught the tang of burning fat and oil in the mix, and knew these engines wouldn’t last long suffering such abuse.

He could feel the prickling anger of Laenus beside him. The youngster had a gift for machines, and to see warriors who should have known better treating a precious Rhino with such disregard angered him greatly. Laenus was a fine warrior, but Scipio knew he was likely bound for the forge and a new career as a Techmarine.

“Can’t they see the engines will seize up like that?” demanded Laenus, shaking his head.

“We can only hope the rest of their discipline is as lax,” pointed out Scipio, watching as the crew doors in the side of the vehicles slid open and a squad of

Space Marines emerged. Their armour was a vivid orange, slashed with tiger stripes and Scipio felt his lip curl in disgust at the sight of them.

"The Claws of Lorek," he hissed to himself. "Renegades."

He felt the same anger in the warriors of the Thunderbolts, their posture in the thick gorse surrounding the tumble of boulders becoming more taut and poised. Their hatred of these warriors was tangible, and Scipio saw more than one finger slide around a trigger.

Hate could be a useful emotion in battle, empowering a warrior with strength and determination, but it was a careless master.

"Hold," he said, keeping his voice low and authoritative. "Wait until my signal. We do this as the Codex dictates."

At the mention of their primarch's holy tome, his squad members released their triggers, and Scipio relaxed a fraction. Since leaving Herapolis thirteen days ago, they had moved directly eastwards, following the course of the Konor River as it flowed from the mountains onto the verdant forest plains of Espandor.

Thin lines of smoke ran from one line of the horizon to the other. Iulius Fennion had led his men north-east, Praxor Manorian south-east, and Scipio had taken the direct route into the heart of enemy territory. The Bloodborn forces of the Corsair Queen were numerous and fierce, but they were incautious, and advanced as though they had already conquered the planet. Their armies were without vanguards, outriders or rearguards, simply a mass of soldiers, vehicles and nameless horrors moving toward Herapolis.

The Thunderbolts had avoided conflict until now, for Scipio could not afford to draw attention to their advance until the Corsair Queen's location was positively identified.

His warriors were eager to be unleashed, and Scipio didn't blame them; the behaviour of these fallen Adeptus Astartes spoke of colossal arrogance.

Scipio and the Thunderbolts would make them pay for that arrogance.

The Space Marines below had patrolled this way before, one of the few units based in the great river city of Corinth that behaved with a modicum of tactical sense. Yet they had allowed their routes to become predictable, for this route through the foothills around the city was the most obvious and least difficult to traverse. These warriors had made this circuit three times already in the past four days, always stopping here to indulge in some unclean ritual at a makeshift shrine they had set up inside the first Rhino's hull.

Eight warriors gathered around the open ramp at the rear of the Rhino, and a dark light, blood-red and somehow unclean, spilled out, bathing their armour in a russet glow.

Scipio nodded towards Brother Helicas, who shouldered his missile launcher

and eased himself around a boulder. The rest of Scipio's warriors pulled their bolters in tight and braced themselves, left foot forward and right foot back, turned ninety degrees to their bodies.

"Now!" cried Scipio, and Helicas stood to his full height to fire his missile launcher.

The warriors below turned at the sound of the weapon, but by then it was too late. The missile's motor ignited with a dazzling flare as it slashed downwards and slammed into the plastron of a tiger-patterned warrior. The warhead detonated within his chest cavity with a thunderous crack, hurling him into the Rhino and smashing the shrine to shards. Another warrior was cut down by the shrapnel of the dead man, his throat opened by a lethal fragment of armour.

The other warriors scattered as the muffled echoes of the detonation faded.

A precisely delivered volley of bolter fire hammered the six surviving warriors, and another two fell, cut apart by the explosive shells. Scipio revved his chainsword and burst from cover as another missile streaked downhill, exploding in the midst of the enemy. None were killed, but three were hurled from their feet by the blast.

The warriors they had fought on the Anasta Road were corsairs, poorly armoured and badly led, but these warriors, for all their faults, were Space Marines. They began returning fire immediately, suppressive bursts on the timberline. One of Scipio's warriors fell, his shoulder exploding in bloody shards as a round impacted beneath the protective pauldron.

A dart of blue-hot plasma seared out from Coltanis' weapon and burned through another enemy warrior, his body flopping to the gorse in two barely connected halves. The others ran for the cover of the Rhinos, but Scipio had anticipated that and angled his course to take him around the back of the nearest vehicle. Its engine rumbled as though enraged, gouts of reeking chemical smoke spitting from its corroded exhaust vents.

Gunfire spat back and forth, and Scipio spun around the Rhino and all but collided with an enemy warrior. They stared at one another for a fraction of a second before Scipio brought up his pistol and put a round through the warrior's eye lens. He fell back, but another was right behind him and swung a viciously toothed axe for Scipio's neck. He ducked and the chainaxe bit into the iron hide of the Rhino.

Scipio shot the warrior in the kneecap. The bolt ricocheted clear, but it staggered the renegade. He drove his sword up into the traitor's gut, the adamantine teeth screaming as they tore through armour and bit the soft meat beneath. Blood sprayed around the blade as Scipio drove it deeper into the renegade's body, feeling the spine within split.

The warrior sagged against him, and Scipio hurled the body away. The last renegade threw himself at Scipio, but a withering storm of bolter fire blasted away his head and most of his torso as the Thunderbolts closed the noose on the Claws of Lorek.

Scipio turned and nodded his thanks to his squad, ripping up a clump of grass to wipe the renegade's blood from his sword blade. When the blade was clean, he sheathed it and removed his helmet to take a deep breath. The sooty, chemical stench of the Rhinos tainted the air, but it felt good to taste Espandor's atmosphere once again.

Swiftly, he set sentries around the engagement site and called Laenus over.

"Did they broadcast any form of signal?" he asked.

"No, my lord," said Laenus. "None I could detect anyway."

"Good enough," said Scipio, turning towards the Rhinos. One was a wreck, black smoke belching from its opened hatch, the other seething and rumbling like a bull facing the slaughterman. He ordered the destroyed Rhino pushed into the gorge, and beckoned his warriors over to him.

The wounded warrior, Brother Nivian, had cut his mangled limb from his shoulder with a combat blade and carried it slung under his other arm.

"Are you combat fit?" asked Scipio.

"I can fight," asserted Nivian. "Just give me a pistol or a sword."

Scipio nodded and handed over his pistol, taking Nivian's bolter in return.

"Laenus," said Scipio, indicating the surviving Rhino. "Can you drive that thing?"

Laenus stared at the Rhino, loathing written all across his face, as though Scipio had asked him to deface a statue of the Emperor himself.

"It's unclean," he said. "But yes, I can drive it."

"Good, because we're going to need it if we're to stand any chance of getting any closer to Corinth."

He could see the distaste among the Thunderbolts at the thought of travelling within a vehicle of the enemy, but he cut off any objections by saying, "The Codex Astartes tells us that all warfare is based on deception, so we will make use of whatever opportunities the enemy provides us."

He could tell they still didn't like the idea, but their likes and dislikes were immaterial. They had a mission, and if finding the Corsair Queen quickly prevented any rash decisions on the part of Captain Sicarius, then this was a discomfort he and the Thunderbolts were going to have to suffer.

He chided himself for the disloyalty of the thought, and hammered a fist on the Rhino's side.

"Mount up," he ordered. "We need to be in position by nightfall."

THE LEADER OF the civilians was a stocky man named Maskia Volliant, the praefectus of a small mining community named Tarentum. A gruff man wrapped in tough-wearing leather and furs, Tigurius thought he looked like a man used to hard work, his face deeply lined and his hands callused from years of manual labour.

He had led his people to Castra Tanagra after witnessing the destruction of the lowland cities at the claws and fangs of the daemonic hordes, nearly six hundred men, women and children. They huddled in the shrine temple's keep, hoping against hope that this nightmare would end.

"We thought you were the daemons," said Maskia. "We heard your approach and thought they'd come to finish us off."

"We are no daemons, fool," snapped Agemman, angry that one of his suits of Terminator armour had fresh las-burns from the first volley of fire. "We are the very salvation you sought by coming here."

"I apologise, my lord," said Volliant, cowed by the First Captain's anger.

"An understandable mistake," said Marneus Calgar, placing a hand on Agemman's shoulder guard. "And no harm has been done."

Agemman looked ready to dispute that, but a stern look from the Chapter Master stilled his tongue. The same Terminator whose armour bore a burn scar had been assigned penitential duties for lax targeting discipline. Fortunately his shot had been pulled wide at the last moment, and no one had been killed, but it was a shot that should never have been fired in the first place.

Calgar dropped to one knee before Maskia Volliant, bringing himself level with the man's face, and said, "Tell us how you came to be here, Master Volliant. When we reached Talassar we detected no life signs. How is it that all of Talassar has been devastated and yet you live?"

"I don't know what to tell you, my lord," said Maskia. "We're just a small settlement in the high plateau around the Capena Spire. About a thousand souls, all told. We saw the lights in the sky a few weeks back, and when we lost contact with Colonia Serdica—that's the refinery city we send all our ores to—we tried to contact Perusia."

"Perusia," said Agemman. "That's where Sicarius is from."

"I know," replied Calgar. "Go on, Maskia. What happened next?"

"We kept hearing things over the vox, dreadful things. We heard alerts had been called all over Talassar that we were under attack. We couldn't believe it at first. I mean, who in their right mind would attack a world of Ultramar? We'd heard the rumours about Tarentus, but nobody really believed them. There was all this talk of monsters and daemons, but we couldn't get a straight answer from anyone. No one seemed to know what was happening, and after a while all the

relay stations went quiet and we couldn't raise nobody on the vox. Perusia was the last to go dark, and we figured that they was too busy fighting to answer our calls, but when day after day went by we knew they weren't busy, they were dead."

"That doesn't answer why you're here," said Agemman with a scowl. "This is a holy site of the Ultramarines. You shouldn't be here."

"Begging your pardon, my lord," said Maskia. "We didn't have nowhere else to go. About a week after Perusia went dark, we saw the same lights in the sky and our surveyors plotted out where they were. All the other settlements along the Capena gorge were going dark one by one, so we knew it was only a matter of time until we were next."

"So you came here," said Marneus Calgar.

"Yes, my lord," said Maskia. "Some folk didn't want to go, and there wasn't anything I could say to make them. Their families had claims there going back thousands of years and they weren't about to give them up, not for daemons or nothing."

"Then they will be dead by now," said Agemman.

Agemman's hostility towards the civilians irritated Tigurius, and he made his way outside. The night air was crisp and the wind blowing down from the south had a fearsome bite to it. Some of the *Caesar's* survivors had taken refuge within the keep, but many others had joined the warriors of the 1st Company on the walls of Castra Tanagra, armed only with lasrifles and courage.

He climbed the worn marble steps to the ramparts and made his way along the fighting men of the 1st Company. Looking out over the darkness of the mountains, he was reminded of the high peaks of Iax, the world he once called home. Known as the Garden of Ultramar, it was a bountiful world that was said to have been a favourite of Roboute Guilliman.

Tigurius nodded to a Terminator sergeant, but said nothing as the man turned back to watching the approaches to the fortress. Tigurius knew he was not well-liked, for his powers forever set him apart from his battle-brothers. He had long ago made peace with his isolation from the shared brotherhood of the Chapter, finding his own place within its ranks and allowing his duty to define him.

He paused beside a curved embrasure, resting his hands upon the cool marble of the merlon, feeling the ancient power within the stonework. Until now he had always attributed that to the craft of its builders and the legacy of the primarch, but now he wasn't so sure. He hadn't been able to tell that there were survivors within the keep until he had set foot within the fortress' walls. Even then his powers of discernment had been dulled, as though an enemy psyker was disrupting his abilities.

Tigurius placed his other hand on the stonework and let his consciousness flow out into the stones of the fortress, sinking down through the heavy weight of its body and into its ancient foundations.

He heard footsteps behind him, and returned to his mortal senses.

Marneus Calgar stood beside him, his iron gaze cast out over the magnificent vista of the high, snow-shawled mountains.

“I should come here more often,” said Calgar.

“When we drive off the daemons I will come with you,” said Tigurius.

“Tell me, Varro,” said Calgar, suddenly serious. “What do you see?”

“I see that we are trapped in a valley with no way out, awaiting an army of daemons to descend upon us. And there is little hope of relief.”

“I wish I hadn’t asked,” said Calgar.

“Yet as grim as things are, there is a remarkable lack of fear amongst the new garrison of the shrine fortress. These are the finest warriors of Ultramar, my lord, and there is power here, wrought into the very bones of the fortress. It is no accident that we have come to this place.”

Calgar said nothing, his gaze drawn to a wavering tear of lightning that had appeared at the end of the valley. It drew wider with every passing second, and they smelled the rank stench of the daemonic on the wind.

“I hope you are right,” said Calgar.

WHEN URIEL OPENED his eyes, he felt as though the world had lurched out of focus. His right eye burned with fire, a hazy rippling static filling his head with a noise like a thousand angry wasps. He sat up, suddenly aware he was lying on a metallic slab like a mortician’s table. Bright light speared into his eyes and he swung his legs out.

“Easy there!” said a gruff, comradely voice.

Uriel shook his head, and immediately regretted it. Hammer blows of pain and bright lights exploded within his skull and he reached out to steady himself. A strong hand grabbed him, keeping him upright. He held on to it, feeling as though his balance were shifting in and out of kilter.

“Be still,” advised another voice, one with a soft mechanised burr to its syllables. “It will take a moment for the ocular implant’s nerve fibres to mesh with your own organic tissue. Be not afraid, the discomfort and nausea will pass.”

“What is happening to me?” demanded Uriel, fighting down a wave of sickness. Shapes moved around him, but he couldn’t make any of them out. They were familiar, but what they were took a moment to return to him, as

though the vast amounts of information required to process his visual input were somehow blocked. He leaned against the slab, taking shallow breaths to calm himself.

“You took a bolt pistol round to the head,” said the voice. “Fortunately the angle at which your helmet was positioned as the round struck deflected much of the kinetic energy.”

Uriel reached up to his right temple, feeling cold metal where he expected flesh. He recoiled from the touch as his balance returned. He remembered fractured images of facing the creature that wore his face, its words of hate and the booming thunder of a gunshot.

After that, all was confusion. His vision flooded with red, then grey, then black. He remembered shouting voices, desperate cries and blaring warning bells. Selenus’ voice cut through it all, the crisp declarative commands of the Apothecary bringing order to the chaos. Soothing warmth seeped into his limbs and he remembered the soporific effects of a strong pain balm spreading through his system.

Then this. Grainy static-laced vision and a numbing loss of awareness. He gasped as the floor suddenly snapped into focus and he saw the cracked tiling clearly, every split in the ceramic and every imperfection in the mortar bedding as clear as though he studied it through a microscope.

He reached up again, this time more carefully, and explored the side of his head with his fingertips. His close-cropped hair had been shaved on the right side and he could feel a number of raw scar sutures running from the edge of his eye socket to his ear.

Uriel looked up to see Pasanius, Magos Locard and Apothecary Selenus standing before him. He was in a long medicae bay of some kind, one dedicated to augmetics by the look of the patient stations, workbenches, tools and half-built limbs lying scattered around.

“How much do you remember?” asked Pasanius, his friend’s face in sharp focus, as though he had been looking at him through misty glass until now.

“I remember the fight to retake the gun battery,” said Uriel. Suddenly animated, he said, “Vaanes! I fought Ardaric Vaanes! Is he…?”

“In a holding cell that even a Callidus couldn’t escape,” Pasanius assured him. “Shaan and Suzaku are interrogating him now.”

“He will not talk to them,” said Uriel.

“He isn’t,” said Pasanius. “He says he’ll only talk to you.”

Uriel nodded. He should have expected no less from the renegade, yet he wasn’t sure how he felt about confronting a warrior he had once called a battle-brother and who had gone on to abandon him to his fate. Yet Vaanes was here,

and his last words haunted Uriel.

“I will deal with him later,” he said, putting the matter aside for now. “We have more pressing concerns just now.”

Pasanius appeared to accept this, and Uriel shuddered as a snapshot of the battle in the gun battery flashed into his mind.

“I saw that thing, the warrior with my face,” he said. “It was him who shot me.”

“Just as well he’s as lousy a shot as you are,” said Pasanius, and Selenus grunted in displeasure at the easy familiarity.

“This doesn’t feel like he was a bad shot.”

“You’re alive aren’t you?” pointed out Pasanius. “You were too close for the bolt to arm fully, but you’ll have a nasty scar, mind.”

“The scarring will fade,” said Locard, irritated that his work was being impugned. “Apothecary Selenus and I tried to save your eye, but the damage was too extensive. I have replaced it with a superior implant, one of my own designs in fact.”

“Show me,” said Uriel.

Locard held out a mirror, and Uriel stared at the pale, aquiline countenance looking back at him. The features were thinner than he remembered, the one eye remaining to him hooded and filled with a heavy burden. Locard’s work was good, the augmetic moulded within his eye socket to match the shape and positioning of his left eye. Where one eye was stormcloud grey, the other shone with a cold, metallic blue.

“This is fine work,” said Uriel, though the idea of losing an eye pained him.

“It is,” agreed Locard, “and far more efficient than its predecessor. You now have access to a wide variety of visual spectra, heightened spatial awareness, a more efficient bolter-link targeting mechanism, and best of all, visual image capture and storage capability.”

“My thanks,” said Uriel, trying not to sound ungrateful. As he became more aware of his surroundings, he realised he was within the lower decks of *Lex Tredecim.* The vehicle was moving, and his enhanced balance told him they were moving down at an angle of four degrees. No sooner had he formed the thought, than a stream of information scrolled into view on his right eye.

Three thousand five hundred and seven metres beneath mean surface level.

Local Positioning: Four Valleys Gorge. Accuracy level 94%.

Ambient External Temperature: 23 degrees Celcius.

Ambient External Light Level: 85 Lux.

Contour Gradient—

Uriel shut off the stream of information with a thought, without even knowing

he could. He knew the Four Valleys Gorge well enough. One of the largest underground vaults in this region of Calth, it was an artificially created compartment that linked to the Cavernas Draconi, a natural cavern system believed to be the oldest on Calth. Local legends told that the Cavernas Draconi caves were the first hewn by the mythical serpent said to have honeycombed the bedrock of Calth in ancient days.

"Four Valleys Gorge," he said. "We are pulling back. The gate fell?"

"It did," said Pasanius wearily. "They used some machine infection to turn its systems against us."

"A somewhat simplistic explanation," added Locard, "but it will suffice for now."

Uriel took Locard's word for it and turned to Pasanius and Selenus. "What is the status of our forces? Are we in any shape to fight?"

"We are, right enough," said Pasanius. "We hold the high ground in the valleys, as well as all the strong-points. Those bastards will be walking into a killing ground when they get through the avalanche the *Lex's* big gun brought down. The Defence Auxilia are prepped, we've got our warriors and those of Captain Shaan deployed where they're likely to hit us hardest, and Inquisitor Suzaku says she has a specialised pair of savants who'll be able to warn us of any warp trickery."

Pasanius paused and glanced towards Magos Locard. "And the magos has his battle servitors and skitarii poised to take the brunt of the hard knocks."

Uriel frowned and said, "The enemy turned our machines against us at the gate. Can they do that again? Your servitors and Praetorians are not going to attack our warriors are they?"

Locard rubbed his hands together, as though relishing the opportunity to expound on his ingenuity. He shook his head and a pict screen illuminated with a squalling blurt of interference that roiled like a caged raptor. Locard studied it for a moment before shutting off the volume and turning to Uriel.

"There is a priest of the Dark Mechanicus amongst the enemy, a skilled one to be sure, but I have his measure now," said Locard. "I have some of his tainted code to study, and if he comes at us again with his debased infections, he'll have a nasty surprise."

"Can you guarantee that?" said Uriel. "I will not place your forces in the battle line if you cannot say for sure that they will fight for us and not the enemy."

"The machines are safe," said Locard. "I give you my word as a priest of Mars."

Pasanius held out Uriel's weapons, and he gratefully took them, buckling on

his sword belt and holstering his pistol. Armed once more, he felt like a true warrior of the Emperor, and he ran a hand across his close-cropped scalp.

"We will not have much time before the Iron Warriors attack," he said, heading for the medicae bay's doors. "I need to get out there and see the ground."

Pasanius and Selenus followed him, and Uriel paused as a stray thought occurred.

"Any word from Learchus?" he asked.

Pasanius shook his head. "No," he said. "Nothing. We've heard nothing."

THIRTEEN

THE DAEMONS ATTACKED as the sunlight began to set over the Lirian Mountains, bathing the Capena Gorge in a ruddy glow. Tigurius fought down the sickness in his gut and forced himself to concentrate on the surging horde. They came from the motionless bolt of lightning in a tide of daemonic flesh, a host of bestial monstrosities of all description.

“Front rank, open fire!” came the shout from the walls, and Tigurius looked up to see the strained faces of the mortal defenders of Castra Tanagra. A haphazard mix of civilians and Chapter serfs, they stood shoulder to shoulder, united in the defence of this world, and he took heart from their courage. Their lines were bolstered by the presence of veteran Space Marines and First Captain Agemman. The Regent of Ultramar was a thunderous presence, a rock upon which the defence of the walls rested.

A synchronous volley of gunfire reached out to the daemonic horde. Bolter shells, las-fire and hard rounds ripped through their enemies, but for each monster destroyed, there were many more to take its place.

Tigurius moved to the centre of the great breach, where Marneus Calgar and his honour guard had positioned themselves. The Chapter Master was a magnificent sight in the Armour of Antilochus, with the Gauntlets of Ultramar wreathed in killing fire at his sides.

“Ready to do this again?” asked Calgar, as Tigurius took his place at his side.

“I am,” replied Tigurius, through in truth he was bone weary. The past two weeks had been gruelling for all of them, but Tigurius had felt the exhaustion more keenly than most. His powers were anathema to the daemons, but every usage took more and more out of him, more than even his prodigious physique could easily restore. Denied the meditative calm of the Librarius, each battle took longer to recover from, and the daemons were giving them little enough time between each attack.

“I know that is a lie,” said Calgar. “But you are needed. Now more than ever.”

Tigurius nodded. Hundreds had already died in defence of Castra Tanagra, and scores of wounded filled the keep, which had become a makeshift Apothecarion. Those too old or too young to fight tended to the injured soldiers, but without much in way of medical supplies, most would likely die.

It was a depressing thought, and Tigurius returned his attention to the daemons.

They were scaled and hideous, howling with maddening hunger and lust, their bodies lambent and filled with unnatural energy. They were wasted, wind-borne things, sustained by the energy of the daemon lord that dwelled in the corrupt star fort above them. Some were armed with black bladed swords that could cut flesh and armour with equal ease, but most needed only their claws and warp-strength to tear and rend.

But facing them were the greatest warriors in the galaxy.

A solid wall of Ultramarines filled the breach as surely as any barrier of stone, each warrior clad in fabulously ornate armour and bearing a glittering blade of antiquity.

No two of these weapons were alike, for each had come from the most hallowed reliquaries of Macragge. Such weapons had been crafted by master artificers and borne by the greatest heroes of the Ultramarines. Tigurius counted two weapons from the days of Apostasy, and at least one from the age in which Roboute Guilliman walked among his warriors.

The daemons charged through the withering hail of gunfire, leaping and bounding over the rocks to reach their victims. Most headed to the breach, but thousands more scaled the marble wall with vorpal talons piercing the rock. The power woven into the walls burned them, but still they climbed. Their unclean flesh sizzled and melted, but the pain only seemed to drive them to greater heights of fury.

“Warriors of Ultramar!” cried Marneus Calgar, his head bared to the elements. “Courage and honour!”

Every defender took up the defiant war shout, and the honour guard braced themselves for the charge of the daemons, lowering their weapons to face their enemies. A pack of ravening hounds bounded over the rubble stacked in the breach and a blazing torrent of bolter shots plucked three from the air as Marneus Calgar opened fire. His gauntlets swept left and right, weaving a pattern of destruction that left little unscathed.

Only six hounds survived to reach the interior of the breach and Tigurius thrust his staff towards them, chanting the Litany of Hatred as he did so. Forking blasts of azure lightning leapt from the horned skull at its tip, and three of the beasts vanished in explosions of black ash. Another died as a golden-bladed lance plunged into its chest, a second as a silver polearm clove its spine.

The last beast leapt towards the Chapter Master, but it met Lord Calgar’s fist in midair. The flickering, energy-wreathed gauntlet smashed its face and powered on through its body. The beast was ripped asunder, its howl ringing in Tigurius’ ears as its essence was destroyed. Monstrous pack-masters scrambled over the barricades, scaled daemons with blunt, wedge-shaped heads and

vicious, fanged gashes for mouths. They bore black swords and fell upon the honour guard with piercing shrieks of hatred.

Tigurius smashed his staff into the nearest. Blue fire spread from the wound, and the creature howled as its dissolution consumed it. Lord Calgar smashed his fists into the daemons, each blow precisely weighted and delivered with a fluid economy of motion. For a man encased in bulky plates of Terminator armour, Marneus Calgar moved like a warrior clad in only his training robes. Swords swayed past his head, and claws snatched at empty air, where moments before his body had been vulnerable to attack.

Tigurius was a sublime warrior, his instincts honed by his formidable psychic powers, but even he could not match the Chapter Master's preternaturally swift reflexes. As though he moved a heartbeat ahead of the rest of the battle, Marneus Calgar was the greatest warrior imaginable. No weapon could touch him, no beast could wound him, and those that tried were destroyed. His fists were weapons of ultimate destruction, and they pummelled daemons with every blow.

Nor were his honour guard any less lethal. Their skill had been forged over centuries of warfare, tempered in the most vicious conflicts and honed by the greatest warrior masters in the galaxy. Only to such superlative warriors would the safety of the Chapter Master be entrusted. They fought as a cohesive unit, advancing and killing as one. Decades of training together had created a killing machine that was as efficient as it was deadly. Their ancient blades clove into the daemons, pushing them back with every counterattack.

Hissing daemons with leathery skin the colour of drowned flesh swarmed through the breach. Their elongated arms were tipped with claws like blades and they moved in loping bounds that carried them easily over the tumbled blocks of marble. Horned beasts with hideously distended jaws followed them. Their speed was incredible, like flickering ghosts that shifted in and out of focus and moved from place to place in the blink of an eye.

They swarmed Marneus Calgar and his honour guard in a frenzy, and warp-tainted fangs snapped against Astartes-forged armour. Plates buckled and crumpled, but held. Marneus Calgar hammered the daemons, arcing flares of energy erupting from his fists as he smote them hip and thigh. One honour guard was dragged down, a daemon snapping its jaws over his helmet and shearing the faceplate and the front half of his skull from his body.

Tigurius lanced his staff into the daemon's back and its flesh erupted in fire as he sent a pulse of psychic power along its length. He spun away from a leaping daemon, twisting his staff and striking left and right. Each impact saw a daemon destroyed, but his strength was fading and each kill took more out of him. Yet, imperceptibly, Tigurius could feel the tide of the battle turning in the favour of

the Ultramarines.

The daemons could not gain a foothold, and with every passing moment, their power ebbed; leeched away by the effort of sustaining their presence in the face of the defenders' implacable courage. Marneus Calgar could sense it too, and he surged into the daemons with a roar of hatred, a living battering ram of destruction and desolation.

The honour guard followed their master, forming a spear with him as its point. Tigurius drew upon his deepest reserves to keep pace with the Chapter Master and his warriors, hurling the monsters back with withering bolts of lambent fire. Together, they clove into the daemons and drove them back from the breach until not a single creature remained.

Tigurius drove his staff into the ground, as much to hold himself upright as it was a gesture of defiance. His strength was all but gone, and weariness swamped him. His eyelids drooped and a grey haze gathered at the corner of his eyes.

He saw Marneus Calgar walking back towards him, his armour splashed with black ichor.

The Chapter Master had his fist in the air, and Tigurius heard cheering. "We did it, Varro," said Calgar, and Tigurius could see the powerful life energies radiating from him. Where Calgar was triumphant, men would feel their hearts lifted and their courage swell. His presence was worth a thousand men on the battlefield and Tigurius tried to smile in response. "We have survived this attack," he said, his voice little more than a whisper, "but they will be back tomorrow."

"Let tomorrow look to itself," said Calgar as the cheering grew louder. "Tonight we are alive and the moon is shining down upon us. Every attack we turn back leaves us stronger, and every defeat weakens our enemies."

"These monsters are just the daemon lord's chaff," said Tigurius. "When we are at our lowest ebb, that is when M'kar will come for us."

"And when he does I will kill him," said Calgar.

"It's not that simple," said Tigurius.

"Yes, Varro, it is," said Calgar, throwing an arm around Tigurius. "The daemon lord will come and either I will destroy him or he will kill me. It is that simple."

"No, my lord," insisted Tigurius. "It is not."

A RHINO WAS never a comfortable vehicle to ride within, but the one Scipio Vorolanus and the Thunderbolts had captured from the Claws of Lorek was especially hateful. Its innards reeked of pollutants and lack of cleaning, and its

air filters coughed out fumes that had passed over the engine block. Not only that, but the floor was awash with spent casings, discarded ration packs and bones.

All that they could cope with, but where an Ultramarines Rhino would bear reliquaries and shrines to the Emperor and primarch, the Claws of Lorek bore daubed crude sigils of unknown provenance that Scipio had ordered burned from the metal. Despite Laenus' misgivings, the Rhino's engine had not failed, though it was surely only a matter of time.

They had crossed the mountains, skirting the more heavily travelled highways, and made their way along shadowed logging roads that drove through the timber lines of the high valleys. They had met no other enemy forces, but that was about to end.

The road they were following was paved, but much to Scipio's disgust, it had been allowed to fall into disrepair. It wound downwards through the trees, and, if his directional awareness had steered them true, leaving this stretch of road would bring them almost to the gates of Corinth.

"Remember," he said, turning towards the Thunderbolts, who sat on the crew benches along the sides of the Rhino. "This is not a mission of aggression, but one of intelligence gathering. We're here to ascertain if the Corsair Queen is here. Nothing more."

They muttered their assent, though Scipio saw reluctance in their stiff posture and slow response. He understood, for he no longer looked like one of them. His armour was stacked in the weapon stowage bays, and he wore a scabrous collection of rags pulled together to form a loose robe of sorts that covered his Ultramarines and 2nd Company tattoos. His head was bare and he had removed the long service studs from his forehead. Their reluctance was understandable, for who among them did not want to bring the fire of the Ultramarines down upon these invaders?

Scipio grabbed a stanchion as the Rhino lurched sideways, its tracks biting the roadway as it cleared the trees.

"Sergeant Vorolanus," said Laenus through the grille separating him from the crew compartment. "Corinth ahead."

Scipio nodded and swung himself over to the commander's hatch and twisted the locking wheel. It was stiff and rusted, but soon budged and began turning. He climbed out, bracing himself on the top armour and looked out over the great river city of Corinth.

"Guilliman's Oath!" he swore, seeing the smoke-wreathed ruin of what had once been Espandor's second city. Named for the great victory won by the Ultramarines against the greenskins, Corinth had once been a golden city of

culture and learning. As rustic as Espandor’s inhabitants were sometimes perceived, Corinth gave the lie to that cliché, with many fine temples of silver marble, bathhouses, thriving markets and wondrous theatres. It had produced some of the finest architects of Ultramar, and many of the structures within the Fortress of Hera boasted Corinthian design flourishes.

All that was gone now, for Corinth had burned.

The sky above the city was stained with ash and smoke, the clouds weeping a soft rain upon the city that had hosted Marneus Calgar for a month in the days following his inauguration as Chapter Master. Its once mighty temples had been cast down, razed to the ground by those who hated the Emperor, and its fine counting houses, palaces and exquisite mansions were hollowed-out ruins, their magnificent interiors gutted by fire and looted by Bloodborn warriors.

Hatred filled Scipio, for this was not the wanton destruction wrought by the savage greenskin or mindless beasts, this was methodical vandalism and pillage. People who should know better had done this.

A sweeping bow of the River Konor bisected the city, its glittering waters now fouled with slicks of oil and nameless pollutants spilling from the banks. Three bridges had once spanned the mighty river, but stumps of blackened stone now jutted from the water like jagged sandbars. Sergeant Learchus of the 4th Company had blown these bridges to stall the advance of a greenskin invasion, a stratagem that had saved the citizens of Corinth, but cost the city part of its heritage. Lashed to the remains of the centre span, a wide pontoon bridge swayed in the current, supported on hollow promethium drums, and it was towards this temporary structure that Scipio’s captured Rhino drove.

The Rhino skidded and revved its way downhill, passing the last of the trees as the logging road approached a junction with a much wider highway. Hundreds of soot-coughing trucks and troop carriers made their way along the road, but Scipio could see no order or purpose to the traffic, just a honking mass of armour, looted vehicles and columns of infantry jostling for position on the road.

“What do you want me to do, sergeant?” said Laenus from below.

“Get on that road,” said Scipio. “I have a feeling they’ll make way.” He was proved right, as the Bloodborn trucks slowed to allow him to join the flow of traffic. Bloodborn soldiers quickly ran from the road, dropping to their knees and drawing their combat blades in salute. Scipio stared with hatred at his mortal enemies, men daubed in colourful war paint and dressed in outlandish, garish costumes more suited to the Theatrica Imperialis than a field of battle. They mistook his hate for contempt and lowered their gaze.

Clearly the Astartes were to be feared, even among the Archenemy. The Rhino rumbled along the road, moving against the flow of traffic, but making

better time than those going with it. Trucks moved aside, infantry scurried away and armoured vehicles revved their engines furiously as they fought to clear the way for them, believing them to be champions of their foul gods.

Laenus turned them onto the pontoon, and Scipio's stomach flipped as the bridge creaked alarmingly at their weight. Timber spars and lengths of flakboard had been lashed and nailed to the drums, and he could see spumes of water through the wide gaps. Moving with the flow of the water and the sway of the bridge, their Rhino ground its way across the bridge, reaching the halfway point and approaching one of the ruined gates of Corinth.

He had begun to allow himself a morsel of hope that they might make this crossing without incident, when he saw two Rhinos come through the gate and turn onto the pontoon.

Their hulls were dull, reddish brown, but it was impossible to tell whether it was paint or blood that coated their surfaces. The engines of both tanks growled like a hungry predators, and a warrior in armour the same colour stood tall in the commander's hatch of the lead Rhino. His armour glistened with fresh-spilled blood and he carried an axe in one heavy gauntlet. Thankfully, the warrior was wearing a helmet, Scipio didn't think he could face seeing one so like him, and yet so corrupt, face to face. To look a fiend like that in the eye and not kill him would be beyond him. "Sergeant?" asked Laenus.

"I see him," said Scipio, keeping his voice low. "Just keep driving," The Rhino drew level with them and the warrior of the blood god held his axe out towards Scipio in a gesture of salute. Scipio responded in kind, holding his clenched fist out and slamming it to his chest with what he hoped was a suitably bestial roar. His roar was answered and the enemy Rhinos passed onwards.

Scipio closed his eyes and let out a breath as they disappeared into the juddering stream of traffic. It had taken all his determination not to pull his pistol from beneath the hatch and put a bolt round between the traitor's eyes. He looked up as he felt the Rhino's tracks bite onto solid ground once more. Gravel and broken stone crunched under the tracks as they pulled uphill towards the shattered gatehouse. The Rhino passed beneath its broken archway and drove into the enemy-held ruins of Corinth.

A shiver travelled the length of Scipio's spine.

"The belly of the beast," he whispered, seeing heavily-armed Bloodborn warriors filling Corinth's streets and thoroughfares. "The Emperor watch over us all."

THOUGH CALTH, ESPANDOR and Talassar saw the brunt of the Bloodborn

invasion, the battles being fought across Ultramar were not simply confined to those worlds. On Quintarn, the 5th and 6th Company clashed with the battle engines of Votheer Tark and a thousands-strong Bloodborn army. Where other planets would have their destinies decreed by the champions, fate had chosen to turn the wheel of the galaxy on its endless cycle. The war raging across the fertile plains of Quintarn was made up of grinding clashes that saw armies hammer one another and withdraw without any clear victor emerging.

Votheer Tark was no general, more a mass of furious neural connections welded to a fragmentary artificial consciousness infected with scrapcode and a minor daemonic entity. As such, the Ultramarines captains had little difficulty in outfighting his battle engines. But where the Ultramarines had a clear edge in tactical nous, Tark had a scavenger-like ability to turn almost anything into a deadly machine of war.

The Ultramarines were superior fighters, but Tark's quantity had a quality all of its own.

Tark's Dark Mechanicus adepts plundered entire agri-cities of their machinery, turning devices of cultivation and growth into weapons of destruction and eradication. Vast threshing machines were up-armoured and fitted with all manner of weapons and sent into battle alongside stalk-legged tanks with flame units that had once been pesticide sprayers slung under their distended bellies.

There was no shape to the battles on Quintarn, simply a heaving mass of bizarre hybrid tanks clashing with the orderly battle lines of the Ultramarines and what remained of the Quintarn Defence Auxilia after Tark's initial invasion. Such brutal battles won little glory and made few heroes, for who would later boast of the artificially-motivated machine tank they had brought down? Galenus and Epathus led perfectly coordinated battles, fighting in complete accord with the Codex Astartes, but against such a monstrous foe, their stratagems left little room for retaking the initiative.

Despite that, some warriors found themselves in their element.

Antaro Chronus, Brother-Sergeant of the Ultramarines Armoury excelled in armoured warfare, and led numerous countercharges in the midst of battles in danger of becoming bloody stalemates. Though he had four tanks blown out from under him, each one was able to slay its killer and several more before finally giving out.

Despite such valour and fortitude, the war on Quintarn was going badly for the Ultramarines. While Tark's losses could be easily replaced, every Imperial vehicle put out of action greatly lessened the Ultramarines strength. As galling as it was to admit, the enemy force on Quintarn was too strong.

Only when three of Votheer Tark's forge-complexes were destroyed did the

tide turn in favour of the Ultramarines. These hideously transformed agri-cities were the assembly yards of the Dark Mechanicus, and it had been assumed that these nightmarish forges had fallen victim to their creators' dark practices.

That notion was overturned with the arrival in the heart of the Imperial fortifications of Torias Telion and forty-three Ultramarines Scouts.

Neither captain had been aware of Telion's presence on Quintarn, but the grizzled Scout-sergeant stayed only long enough to replenish his warriors' supply of ammunition, food and explosives before setting off into the wilds of Quintarn once more.

The sudden appearance of Telion's Scouts divided the Ultramarines commanders. Some welcomed his presence, while others demanded he attach himself to the order of battle. Captain Galenus wanted to admonish the grey-bearded Telion for failing to acknowledge the chain of command, but the cooler heads of Chaplain Cassius and Captain Epathus won out.

As the tanks of the 5th and 6th Companies made ready for war once again, they went knowing that Torias Telion was watching over them.

FOURTEEN

FOUR VALLEYS GORGE was bathed in stark light from the solumen generators worked into the roof, casting deep shadows and illuminating the vast cavern mouth that led back to Guilliman's Gate and the surface of Calth. This giant compartment was a place of transit, where voyagers from the surface would descend into the rock of the planet and begin their journey onwards into the Cavernas Draconis.

Three wide valleys led from the gorge, one each to the west, south and east. Castra Occidens barred the western valley, Castra Meridem the southern, and finally Castra Oriens the eastern. Before them, numerous graceful structures had sprung up along the wide roads to offer the myriad services travellers into Calth might require. Hostelries, accommodation, fuel and shrines dotted the gorge, a pastoral landscape at odds with its subterranean location.

Forests sprawled over the northern expanse of the compartment and a waterfall tumbled from a cleft in the rock below its vaulted roof, nearly seven hundred metres above the cavern floor. On any normal day, the gorge was a wondrous meeting place of travellers, friends old and new, or pilgrims making their way to pay homage at one of the many secluded shrine temples carved into the tunnels of Calth's depths. Soon it would be a battlefield.

Uriel watched the cohorts of skitarii from the cupola of his Rhino as they took up dug-in positions to the west of the main entrance of the compartment. These savage servants of the Machine-God would be invaluable when the Iron Warriors attacked. He and the Ultramarines held the centre of the valley, deployed in the hills and fortified structures before Castra Meridien. The great fortress was built of green marble, its walls smooth and lined with black veins, its gate a layered portal of dark armaplas and steel.

On the ridges between the fortresses, numerous artillery pieces in the colours of the Calth Defence Auxilia were primed and ready to fire, while the slopes beneath them were thronged with blue-jacketed soldiers in prepared positions and backed by scores of armoured vehicles. Four Valleys Gorge was a death trap, the roads covered by intersecting fields of fire and the avenues and intersections between the structures transformed into killing grounds. The mighty form of *Lex Tredecim* hunkered in the dead ground before Castra Meridem, hidden from view to offer unprecedented levels of battlefield coordination.

Pasanius and Clausel stood beside his command Rhino, each with their arms

folded and surveying the battlefield with practiced eyes. Clausel had attached himself to the Firebrands, and Pasanius had welcomed the addition.

“We’re as secure as we can make this place,” said Pasanius. “Though we’ve said that before. We’re all ready, and awaiting your orders.”

Ultramarines squads had dug in next to their Rhinos behind raised banks of earth, ready to sally out and face the invaders. Stark light dappled the ground through the canopy of trees, and Uriel found the absence of bird-song unsettling, as though the creatures of Calth knew well the terrible foe set to unleash hell upon this place.

“I keep thinking there is something I have missed,” said Uriel scanning the ground.

“I have reviewed your deployment plans,” said Chaplain Clausel. “All is in accordance with the Codex.”

“That is what worries me,” said Uriel. “Honsou has shown us that he can think like us, and if he can think like us, he can pre-empt us.”

“You doubt the wisdom of the Codex?” asked Clausel. “I thought you had learned to trust its teachings on Pavonis. Was I mistaken?”

“No, Chaplain, not at all, but it is never good when the enemy knows how we will react to any given situation.”

“True enough,” said Clausel. “Then perhaps it is time to think like the enemy.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Custodes of the Emperor once practised a form of internal security known as Blood Games, where warriors of their own brotherhood would attempt to breach the security of the Imperial Palace,” said Clausel. “Having his own Praetorians hunting for weaknesses or breaches in his defences pulled the web of security ever tighter around the Emperor.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Clausel swept his arm out over the layered defences of Four Valleys Gorge and said, “That you look at these defences and ask yourself how *you* would defeat them.”

Uriel studied the overlaid fields of fire, the defence in depth and the numerous enfilading positions. Nothing was out of place, everything was in its proper position, and the layout of the thousands of defenders could have come straight from a field instruction manual.

“That’s just it,” he said. “I don’t know how I would do it. These defences should be impossible to breach through any standard doctrinal approach.”

And that was the problem. Honsou paid scant regard for any doctrinal approach to warfare, fighting from the hip and with a frighteningly intuitive

grasp of the nature of any combat. His situational awareness of the *shape* of a battle was unmatched, and he could read its ebbs and flows better than anyone Uriel had met. To know when to consolidate, to advance, to flank and when to gamble; these were the qualities most leaders of men had to learn in the bitter fires of bloodshed, but which Honsou possessed innately.

However Honsou gave battle, it would be in a manner none of them could foresee.

IT BEGAN WITH screaming artillery shells arcing from the great tunnel of Guilliman's Gate. It had taken the Iron Warriors a day to get through the rubble brought down by *Lex Tredecim's* guns, but now the fight for Calth was well and truly underway.

The shells impacted in the centre of the cavern, falling amid the forward positions of the Defence Auxilia. Earth boomed upward in a series of percussive explosions that marched outwards in waves. Heavily dug in within foxholes and redoubts, few were killed by these blasts, the thick layers of packed earth dispersing the force of the explosions. Only those positions unlucky enough to be struck by a direct hit were pounded into the earth.

Even as the first echoes faded, a second and third volley of shells slammed down, spreading the destruction wider and fanning outward in an explosive arc. Smoke and incendiary shells were mixed with the high explosives, and the valley began to fill with choking grey banks. Uriel blinked his vision into thermal imaging, and saw the landscape laid out in sweeping patterns of heat traces. The valley was an almost uniform grey, with only minor temperature gradients except where the shells had landed, but he saw the bright heat traces of enemy infantry moving from the mouth of the valley under cover of the smoke.

"Incoming infantry," he said over the artillery vox-net. "Set fire to target grid rows Primus and Secundus. Set warheads for airburst."

No sooner was the order issued than the guns of the Defence Auxilia opened fire with a thunderous volley. Whirlwinds concealed in banked up berms below let loose rippling salvoes of rockets that fell upon the valley mouth and wiped out the enemy soldiers in a flashing series of air-splitting detonations. The shells burst thirty metres above the ground, sending an expanding cloud of razor shrapnel slicing down onto the Bloodborn warriors. Scores died instantly, shredded into bloody rags by the slicing clouds of fragments.

The artillery duel continued for several minutes, with Honsou's warriors unable to gain a foothold in the cavern or push out further than a hundred metres. Where the Iron Warriors artillery was restricted to a narrow field of fire, the

defenders of Calth had no such problem and they pounded the invaders remorselessly.

“It seems you overestimated this Honsou’s ability,” said Clausel, watching the bombardment of the enemy forces with righteous relish.

Uriel nodded absently. This direct assault wasn’t what he’d expected at all. It was too obvious, too unimaginative and too lacking in flair for a warsmith like Honsou.

“That is what worries me,” he said.

OVER THE COURSE of the day, the Iron Warriors pushed out further with each passing hour. Though it cost them hundreds of warriors for every foot gained, their bridgehead at the mouth of the valley was getting wider and wider. In the gaps between shelling, heavy diggers drove the vast piles of debris and loosened earth into heavy berms, behind which increasing numbers of warriors took shelter.

Mobile artillery pieces rumbled from the tunnel and rucked up behind prepared positions, and the arcs of enemy fire widened to encompass the entire gorge. It was warfare at its most brutal and methodical, pushing forward and winning ground without care for the number of lives it cost. The bravura of the strategy was fearsome, and only the most determined of wills could force men to march into the teeth of such withering enemy fire without protest.

High berms curved in a wide arc from one side of the tunnel mouth to the other. Hundreds of heavy, rectangular blocks formed from mesh-wrapped canvas and containing rubble dug from the floor of the gorge were slid over the lip of the earthworks to form an irregular covering that was as impervious to artillery strikes as it was hideous to look upon. Vile banners were planted on the ridge and molten metal poured down its slopes to form armoured plates of brazen iron. Uriel looked at the sloping line of ugly blocks and realised with horror what the Iron Warriors were building.

“It’s a fortress wall,” he said. “They’re laying siege to us.”

ON THE WALLS of Castra Occidens, Inquisitor Suzaku watched the intricate ballet of military manoeuvres below with a mix of professional interest and studied boredom. As a warrior of the holy ordos, she had, of course, been schooled in the art of war, but so much of her work was done in the shadows that such obvious displays of power were almost alien to her. She disliked working in the open, knowing that a great deal of her organisation’s power rested in the fear of its unknown nature.

The stares she was attracting standing on the firing step were curious and respectful, but there was none of the fear she was used to seeing. Beside her, Soburo sensed her unease, turning towards her with a slight smile on his face.

Soburo was an empath, and a good one too.

“They don’t fear you,” he said. “That must be unusual.”

“It is,” confessed Suzaku.

“Perhaps Ultramar’s citizens are truly innocent and have no need to fear the Inquisition.”

“That would make it a *very* unusual place indeed.”

“Unique, I would have said,” replied Soburo, adjusting the holster at his hip. Like Suzaku, Soburo was dark skinned and white haired, though he was considerably taller and more solidly built. He had the makings of a good acolyte, but Suzaku didn’t think he had the steel to be a full inquisitor. His empathic skills gave him compassion and understanding, traits not always desirable in an inquisitor. This campaign would answer many of Suzaku’s questions regarding her acolyte’s suitability.

A cold wind whipped across the walls of the fortress, a bulwark of black stone and high walls, and Suzaku pulled her stormcoat tighter about herself. The fortress was typical Ultramarines architecture: strong, stolid and unchanging. Suzaku had seen mason’s marks dating back to the years following the Great Betrayal.

Her entourage clustered around her, a motley assembly of robed savants, calculus-logi and armoured warriors. Her bodyguards had once been storm-troopers of the Jacintine Marauders, but had since been augmented with numerous bio-warfare implants to turn them into fearsome cybernetic killers. They had names, she presumed, but Suzaku knew them only by their call signs. Her stunted savant Milotas studied a data-slate worked in the form of a mirror, a streaming flow of paper unfolding from its base as he muttered catechisms pleasing to the statistical spirits within.

Only the twins stood apart, a pair of abnormally tall and slender males, with reed-thin limbs held fast by leather straitjackets secured with silver buckles and locks of cold iron. Both were albinic, with translucent skin and eyes the colour of winter. Suzaku had rescued them from their home world, where their disorder had seen their kind hunted almost to extinction by superstitious savages who sought to slaughter them for the supposedly medicinal effects their internal organs could produce when ingested.

Given the mental torments they had endured in Suzaku’s service, Soburo had often remarked that it might have been a kindness to let them die. In her more reflective moments, Suzaku was inclined to agree, but their prodigious psychic

abilities were too useful to waste with mercy. Carefully controlled, the twins could read the twisting currents of the immaterium and warn of impending warp intrusion. But, like all psykers, they needed to be watched for signs of corruption, and her fingers flexed on the butt of her pistols.

"They've been twitchy ever since we got here," said Soburo.

"Stop doing that," said Suzaku. "Don't read my thoughts."

"I'm sorry, but it's hard not to," said Soburo. "You don't cover your feelings well."

"Then steel yourself against them," warned Suzaku. "Concentrate on the white eyes. Guide them and read their emotions."

"Of course," said Soburo, suitably chastened.

Suzaku looked up as she saw a cloud pass beneath the roof of the giant cavern. The weather below Calth could change in moments, and it was a common saying among the populace that if you didn't like the weather, wait five minutes and it would change. She still found it strange that clouds could form within such underground spaces, but Locard had told her that the weather patterns were enhanced by technology crafted in a more ancient time. Some, he had whispered, were rumoured to be of xenos manufacture, but no member of the Martian Priesthood had ever been permitted to examine them.

She pulled the collar of her stormcoat up and shivered, feeling her teeth tingle with the cold. The temperature had dropped significantly, and her breath feathered the air as crackling frost formed on the marble of the ramparts.

Realisation hit her like a blow. This was no natural change! Suzaku looked over to see Soburo trying to form words though a mouth frozen rigid with cold.

"Soburo!" cried Suzaku.

"Warpcraft…" hissed Soburo through teeth cracking with the baleful energies filling his body. "Powerful. Dark! Oh no… it's blood magic. Here!"

He dropped to the ground, his eyes misting over and a deathly cold enveloping his body. Suzaku dropped to the ground beside her acolyte, and reached out to touch him. She flinched from the freezing air surrounding him. A shadow loomed, and she looked up to see the twins standing over her.

"We sense all, mistress. All the currents," said one.

"Flow like a river through our mind," finished the other. "The blood of innocents runs."

"Like rain in the streets."

"Like a surge tide in spring."

"It comes to wash away the enemies of the Bloodborn."

"No riddles," demanded Suzaku. "What manner of warpcraft do you sense?"

"The gates of the empyrean open."

“The terrors of the beyond answer the summons.”

“What was dreamed of in nightmares past.”

“Will bear bloody fruit in the minds of the living.”

Suzaku saw all trace of whiteness vanish from the twins’ eyes as their irises filled with blood. Soburo cried out in pain.

“And the dead shall outnumber the living,” said the twins in perfect unison.

The silver buckles securing their arms blazed with heat, running molten down the leather straitjackets and the iron locks shattered with a sharp crack. The twins’ skin blackened and their faces twisted into daemonic masks of bloodlust. Their restraints peeled away from their bodies like a pair of serpents shedding their skin to reveal the monsters beneath.

Suzaku’s pistol was in her hand a second later and she put a bullet through the first twin’s howling features without blinking. The second tore free of its straitjacket and reached for her with skeletal arms that now ended in elongated talons. She swung her weapon around, but before she could fire, a roaring chainblade implant in the fist of one of her Jacinitine bodyguards erupted from its chest.

The blade tore up and out through its collarbone, and the pale-skinned psyker fell in a gory heap to the ramparts. The frost on the battlements faded, and Suzaku swiftly opened a vox-channel to the Ultramarines.

“Captain Ventris,” she gasped, her lungs still aching with the bitter cold. “Be on your guard, the enemy are employing powerful sorcery. The mortal soldiers are the least of your concerns. In all likelihood, you will be facing warp creatures drawn from beyond the veil.”

“Daemons?” asked Captain Ventris, his voice distorted by a sudden swirl of static.

“More than likely,” said Suzaku. “Blood magic summons only the very worst creatures.”

“Understood. Ventris out.”

Suzaku shut off the link as Soburo climbed unsteadily to his feet. Suzaku was about to offer him a hand up when she saw the lingering redness in her acolyte’s eyes. The taint of the warp was insidious, and even the slightest trace would grow to consume one touched by its corruption. She stepped back and raised her weapon.

Soburo saw the pistol and read Suzaku’s feelings of regret and cold necessity in an instant. His open features fell, but he had been schooled well by the adepts of Talasa Prime, and nodded in weary acceptance.

“Do it,” said Soburo. “You know you have to.”

Suzaku nodded and eased back the hammer of her pistol with her thumb.

“*Now* they will fear you, sister,” said Soburo.

SUZAKU'S SHOT WAS swallowed by crashes of thunder as seething clouds of darkness swelled in the air of the gorge. Changing weather patterns on Calth were nothing new, but the speed with which the darkness grew overhead was far from natural. Crackling thunderheads boiled into existence, trailing sickly light back to the hideous wall and Bloodborn icons.

The solumens were snuffed out one by one and the vast compartment was plunged into near darkness as icy squalls howled from the northern tunnel, like the frozen winds of an ice-locked deathworld. Phantom shapes, glimpsed only from the corner of the eye, moved in the winds and cloud, reptilian and winged with pale skin and slitted yellow eyes.

Bolts of lightning leapt between the clouds and the air of the cavern filled with a sickening, actinic frisson. Fear spread like a contagion, the howling clouds awakening phobias, repressed terrors or forgotten fears long thought banished in childhood.

Booming drums echoed from the compartment’s walls, like a diseased heart gasping for its last futile beats of life. A hideous chanting joined the drums, a low, rhythmic utterance that swelled in volume in time to the booming heartbeat echoing from the clouds. It cut through the thunder, now accompanied by the clash of swords on shields and the scrape of combat blades affixed to rifle barrels. No man or woman in the Defence Auxilia failed to imagine those grisly blades plunging into their bellies or tearing out their throats.

Sergeants and captains sought to steady their warriors with words of duty and courage, but their words were laden with fear and only served to drive icy splinters deeper into the hearts of the Defence Auxilia.

With a titanic crash, the clouds overhead unleashed their fury. A deluge of black rain fell and surging flares of lightning slammed down on the ridges between the three fortresses. Like hammer blows from orbiting warships, the ridges vanished in sheets of fire as a dozen artillery pieces exploded. Secondary detonations swiftly followed as magazine stores were touched off. Corkscrewing shells arced up over the battlefield, falling randomly amid the defenders as yet more forking blasts of light hammered the defenders.

Battery commanders ordered their mobile artillery into the shelter of hardened hangars cut into the rock, but it was too late for many of them.

Twisting bolts of fire made a mockery of thick plates of armour and plasma jets filled each tank with searing fire that incinerated their crews in a heartbeat. No sooner had much of the Imperial artillery been effectively silenced than the

booming chants from beyond the wall rose to new heights.

With rabid yells and a blare of discordant war horns, thousands of Bloodborn soldiers and battle tanks surged over the wall into Four Valleys Gorge.

FIFTEEN

URIEL WATCHED THE sheeting flames engulf the artillery positions. Their defences had been planned out with the expectation of facing a conventional army, one that fought with logical tactics and which reacted to changing circumstances with reasonably predictable methods. That had been a mistake, for the forces of the Ruinous Powers were anything but predictable, their very existence derived from the fluid chaos of the immaterium.

Lit by the fires of burning tanks and the strobing flashes of lightning, the Bloodborn charged down the slopes of the gorge towards the Imperial defenders. Uriel had expected a riotous mob of ill-disciplined rabble, but straight away he saw that these were trained soldiers, not simply piratical killers. They moved from cover to cover, one group advancing as another fired suppressive bursts of automatic gunfire.

Tanks crashed through unmanned barricades and opened fire on Defence Auxilia positions with their main guns crashing back on recoil compensators. A rippling series of explosions erupted from the defenders' lines. Weapon fire answered the charge of the Bloodborn, but it was uncoordinated and desultory. The soul-crushing despair conjured by the enemy's warpcraft and the black rain still held many in its paralysing grip, and only slowly could its claws be torn free of the heart.

To their credit, the Defence Auxilia troops were recovering their wits and courage far quicker than most mortals afflicted by such sorcery, but Uriel saw it wouldn't make any difference unless he acted now.

"Ultramarines!" ordered Uriel, standing tall in the Rhino's cupola. "Forward. General advance. Gladius formation."

His Rhino reversed from its sheltering berm and gunned its engine, throwing up clods of dark earth and water as its tracks fought for purchase on the sodden ground. The vehicle surged forward, picking a swift path through the trees towards the forward lines of battle. Uriel had hoped to keep his warriors in reserve long enough to pinpoint the weakest point in the attack and split the enemy advance, but events were moving too fast for that now.

The Rhinos of the 4th Company smoothly moved into position behind him, the blade of the gladius, with two Land Raiders forming the quillons and the company's Thunderstrikes the hilt. Uriel gripped the handles of the storm bolter, allowing the mechanisms of his new augmetic eye to link with the machine

spirits of the vehicle.

“Exceptional work, magos,” said Uriel as a targeting reticule appeared in the centre of his vision, the eye’s internal mechanisms compensating for the movement of the tank and the low light conditions. He squeezed the trigger, working the weapon over a group of enemy soldiers running for the cover of a ruined wayshrine. Two bursts cut them down and he swung the weapon to bear on another group. Guided by the reticule, another precisely-aimed burst killed six enemy warriors.

The Defence Auxilia were firing back in earnest now, and not a moment too soon; the enemy were almost upon them. Gunfire blazed back and forth in desperate bursts, splintering timber and tearing through sandbags. The Bloodborn were an army of monsters, their bronze and iron masks rendered into screaming daemonic horrors. Those that eschewed helms had disfigured their features with blades and claw into grotesque visages worse than any mask.

No two were alike, yet for all their individuality, they fought as a cohesive whole. They were well led and had been trained for just this sort of fight. Uriel worked the storm bolter over a dashing group of enemy soldiers, dropping them with one pull of the trigger as his Rhino slewed to a halt in the shadow of an empty tank berm.

He dropped into the Rhino, pulling the hatch shut behind him as the armoured doors on the side of the vehicle slid open. Petronius Nero was the first out, followed by Ancient Peleus, who immediately unfurled the banner of the 4th Company. The Swords of Calth debarked from the Rhino with speed and efficiency, and Uriel led them towards the nearest barricade as he took in the flow of the battle.

He was aware of the precise locations of every one of his warriors, their arcs of fire and the position of the enemy forces within range. Information gathered by his new eye was filtered through his enhanced mind to provide him with the most precise tactical appraisal of the battlefield imaginable. In seconds he had mapped out the fluid lines of combat.

“Sergeant Aktis, suppressive fire on the ruined wayshrine to the east, the enemy have heavy guns set up there. Nestor and Theron, hold the barricades to your front and keep pouring fire on those woods. Pasanius, push forward on the left. There are Bloodborn massing in the ruins to your front. Drive them out and push east to force them into the fire arcs of Aktis. All other squads support Defence Auxilia forces and be ready to plug any gaps.”

Uriel switched networks and said, “Land Raiders *Artemis* and *Capitalinus*, ignore the infantry. Target enemy battle tanks. Split them down the middle.”

“And what of us?” asked Brutus Cyprian, tapping the Ultramarines icon on

side of his bolter. “Are we not to get into the fight?”

“Far from it, Cyprian,” said Uriel, risking a glance over the top of the barricade as a flurry of wild shots sparked from the metal. Thunderous, volleys strafed the hillsides and slashing missiles exploded amid the blackened stumps of brickwork and steel on the eastern slopes. Uriel saw Pasanius and Chaplain Clausel leading their warriors through a storm of gunfire towards the ruins sheltering a fifty-strong platoon of Bloodborn.

“Incoming armour,” said Livius Hadrianus, hefting his melta gun to his shoulder.

Enemy tanks, bastardised machines of leaking oil and iron spikes, ground over the torn earth of the hillside, their heavy guns traversing to target the Ultramarines positions.

“Forget them,” said Uriel, seeing a mass of Bloodborn soldiers advancing alongside the tanks. “We take the infantry.”

Driven from their original course by the gunfire of Tactical Squads Nestor and Theron, the Bloodborn soldiers thought to advance under the protection of their heavy armour. That was a foolish mistake.

Uriel watched a corrupted Leman Russ explode as a searing las-bolt punched through its turret and blew the weapons from its sides. A dozen Bloodborn were cut down by scything shrapnel, and the ground shook as two Ultramarines Land Raiders swept through the gaps in the defences torn by the artillery duel to engage the enemy tanks. Thunderous streams of shells flew back and forth between them, but the armour of the Land Raiders was proof against all but the most lethal impacts. “Now,” shouted Uriel. “Swords of Calth! With me!” Uriel scrambled over the barricade and leapt forward with his sword sparking to life and hissing in the black rain. The ground underfoot was sludgy and slick, but with the new systems incorporated in his eye he found he could keep his balance as easily as if he was marching across a parade ground. Storm bolter fire from the Rhinos slashed overhead, suppressing the enemy while the Ultramarines moved to attack.

The rain dulled everything to shadows lit by strobing flashes of gunfire and explosions. Burning tanks and blooming flares of missile detonations lit the unnatural twilight, but the senses of the Space Marines easily penetrated the hellish inferno. Bolter fire cut down four Bloodborn soldiers who emerged from the cover of a burning tank, and a searing tongue of flame engulfed the rear of the pack. Perhaps twenty or so of the Bloodborn survived to fall upon the Ultramarines.

Viewed from a distance, the Bloodborn were hideous travesties of soldiers, but up close they were much, much worse. They stank of sweat and grease, their

tattered uniforms stiffened with ordure, as though they deliberately tried to make themselves as repugnant as possible. Yet for all their disgusting masks and filth-encrusted uniforms, they were mortal. Inquisitor Suzaku's warning had led him to expect the very worst the Ruinous Powers could hurl at them, but these warriors were mortal and fragile. When the daemons came, and he had no doubt they would, that would be a different matter.

A warrior with a snarling daemon mask hurled himself at Uriel. A serrated bayonet slashed at him, but Uriel blocked it easily, rolling his wrist and plunging his sword into the man's throat. He spun low and slashed his blade through the legs of another, rising up to backhand another with his fist.

Enemy warriors surrounded them, but the Swords of Calth fought in a wedge that pushed hard into their ranks. Their presence was like a lode-stone, attracting more howling killers with every moment.

"So many of them!" shouted Livius Hadrianus.

"Just more for me to kill!" replied Brutus Cyprian, crushing a Bloodborn warrior's face with the butt of his pistol.

"Would that it were more," answered Hadrianus.

"They will have a bounty on every one of us they kill," said Uriel.

"How do you know?" asked Petronius Nero, his sword cutting down Bloodborn warriors with graceful strokes. Where Nero was an artist, Cyprian and Hadrianus fought without finesse, bludgeoning the enemy with hacking swipes of their chainswords and pistols.

"Because that is what I would do if I were their commander," answered Uriel, taking Clausel's last words to him to heart.

Selenus fought beside Uriel, firing short bursts of pistol fire in support of the rest of the squad. The Swords of Calth moved as one, pushing forward and killing everything in their path with grim efficiency. Uriel lost count of how many enemy soldiers he had killed, his sword red from quillons to tip. The line had held, and the Bloodborn were battering themselves to destruction against Uriel's warriors.

Booming detonations echoed from the sides of the compartment as enemy vehicles exploded, picked off by Aktis' Devastators or the powerful guns of the Land Raiders. Hot winds blew through the cavern compartment reeking of burned metal and cooking meat. The thick smoke made it hard to see much of anything. The tide of this engagement was turning, and Uriel felt the will of the Bloodborn to push into the teeth of the Ultramarines defence eroding with every passing second.

"Ancient!" he shouted. "Lift the banner high!"

Peleus nodded and sheathed his pistol, lifting the company standard high in

both hands for all the defenders to see. Even in the dark rain, the banner of the 4th caught the firelight and a great cheer burst from the Defence Auxilia at the sight of it. In a lull between kills, Uriel looked over his shoulder, heartened to see the ranks of mortal soldiers once again manning their positions and firing into the enemy with their customary diligence.

A huge fireball rose from the ruins to the east. Uriel saw burning bodies tumble from the shattered towers and ramparts. Above him on the hillside, Bloodborn warriors were falling back from the forests and onto the road. Behind them, Pasanius, Clausel and the Firebrands took up firing positions at the timberline and began picking them off with carefully aimed shots. Not that there were many left. Pasanius' warriors had driven the Bloodborn into the sectors of Theron and Nestor, and withering flanking fire had left few alive.

"The enemy retreats!" shouted Nero.

"Do we pursue?" asked Hadrianus, eager to be unleashed.

Uriel dearly wished to finish the enemy, to take this opportunity to drive them from Calth once and for all, but to recklessly pursue the foe was not something the Codex Astartes favoured. In any case, the question was rendered moot by what came over the crude fortress wall built at the end of Four Valleys Gorge.

A host of mechanised cyborg machines armed with revving chainblades, heavy calibre weaponry and protected with thick plates of armour. Nightmarish howls of scrapcode spewed from splintered augmitters affixed to their chests and heads. They moved like chittering insects on multiple legs, a hideous blend of organic and machine parts animated by daemonic wills into hellish living weapons.

This was the daemonic threat of which Suzaku had warned him.

Like a plague of locusts, they swarmed towards the Ultramarines in their thousands.

HONSOU PULLED THE bars of the restraint harness down over his head and locked it in place with a hard snap of metal on metal. He disliked being so confined, especially when Cadaras Grendel hadn't yet pulled his harness down, but he was the leader and a leader had to lead. All around him, Iron Warriors followed his example, and in moments forty of his best fighters were arranged around him. He didn't like the idea of going into battle like this, confined in a long metal tube, but supposed it was no different to a boarding torpedo or a dreadclaw assault pod. Nor were the Iron Warriors alone, for the Blade dancers of Xiomagra came on this mission too.

Grendel and the Newborn took their places opposite him, and he nodded to

his lieutenant and champion as they locked themselves in place. Grendel wasn't wearing his helmet and his scarred face glared at him across the compartment.

"I don't like this," he said, looking over at the Blade dancers. "Bad enough that we're errand boys for M'kar, but do we have to take these effetes with us?"

Honsou leaned forwards. "Say that to their faces," he said. "I dare you."

Grendel said nothing, remembering his earlier humiliation at the hands of Xiomagra. Truth be told, Honsou wasn't keen on them coming along either, but there was space for them, and it was likely their extra blades would come in handy.

The Blade dancers sat silently at the rear of the compartment, heads bowed and their long swords held, point down, before them. Honsou thought that looked dangerous, given the vibration and rumbling this journey would entail, but smiled at the idea of one of Xiomagra's warriors getting their head cut off by accident. He'd keep his eyes on them in case that happened.

He shook his head and returned his attention to the fore as the Newborn spoke.

"I agree with Grendel, but not because I do not trust the Blade dancers," it said.

"Oh, then why?" asked Honsou.

"It feels… wrong to quit the field of battle like this. To leave the fighting when the outcome is not decided."

"There's the Ultramarine in you again," laughed Grendel.

"The outcome doesn't matter," said Honsou. "It never did. Not yet, anyway."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Grendel, as the whining roar of the vehicle's engines and main generators powered up. "I thought you said this mission was secondary."

"I lied," said Honsou, "It needs to be done, the sooner the better. While the Ultramarines attention is fixed on this gorge, we can be elsewhere."

"And you know where this shrine is?" Grendel asked the Newborn.

"I do," said the Newborn. "In a cave of dragons. The walls are covered with murals and mosaics of them. They're crude, like children's paintings. There's a wall of rock and a secret way through to another cavern beyond. No one knows it's there, at least not anymore."

"And that's how we're going to find it?" said Grendel with a sneer. "It's hardly exact coordinates is it?"

"It's close enough," said Honsou. "We'll tunnel down into the caverns below and take it from there. See where fate leads us."

"Great," snapped Grendel. "And here was me worried you didn't have a plan."

“I always have a plan,” smiled Honsou.

With a grinding rumble of greased runners and a shrieking whine of hydraulics, the back of the compartment began rising and red lights began flashing along its length, Honsou felt the familiar excitement of going on a mission where the odds were stacked against success. Whining, high-pitched shrieks of drill bits and lasers biting rock echoed through the troop compartment as the burrowing war machine tore into the rock of Calth. Far beyond the tunnel mouth, the battle of Four Valleys Gorge raged on, but Honsou and his warriors would play no part in it.

“No doubt Obax Zakayo would have said this mission was foolhardy and reckless,” shouted Honsou as the compartment shook violently with the force of their descent.

“And he would have been right,” said Grendel.

“Aye, maybe so,” said Honsou. “But it feels good to be doing it.”

THE HOLO-SPHERE LIT up with traces of enemy movements and troop dispositions as Magos Locard processed the thousands of inputs he was receiving from the myriad augurs and surveyor equipment available to him through the surfaces of *Lex Tredecim.* A Capitol Imperialis was a vast network of command and control capabilities, but one crafted by the Adeptus Mechanicus was far more.

Equipped with machines designed to detect elements, wavelengths and physical phenomena far beyond anything required by the Imperial Guard, its sensor feeds would have overwhelmed such mortal strategos or military adjutants. Thirty multitasked servitors moved through the command bridge of *Lex Tredecim,* gathering information and feeding it directly into the holo-sphere.

Right now he was tracking the movement of the thousands of bastardised Praetorian battle servitors pouring over the makeshift fortress wall the Iron Warriors had erected. Though many of the emotions mortals took for granted had been supplanted with superior logical faculties, he still felt deep and bitter loathing for the corrupted magos who had so perverted these perfect specimens of the Omnissiah.

Only a sputtering fragment of the once mighty fire of the Machine-God flickered dully within these aborted nightmares. A parasitic will drove their fibre-bundle muscles and gave animation to their mechanised frames. What were once beautiful and magnificent in their logical arrangement were now aberrations to be hated and, most importantly, destroyed.

Locard opened a vox-link to Commander Trejo, master of the skitarii host he

had brought to Calth. Positioned to the west of the main entrance to the gorge, they were ideally placed to counterattack.

“Commander Trejo, are you seeing this?”

“I am, magos,” growled Trejo, his thick down-hive accent still discernable even after extensive augmetic surgery to his jaw. “Unleash us, I beg you.”

“Consider yourself unleashed,” he said. He didn’t need to add against which force. The hate the Adeptus Mechanicus had for these corrupt machines was felt no less keenly by its servants. “Serve the will of the Omnissiah.”

“Understood. Trejo out.”

No sooner had the link shut off than the gold icons representing the skitarii host moved eastward, accompanied by its supporting battle servitors. The Ultramarines were already embroiled with the enemy machines, and as much as he wished to see the corrupted engines destroyed, it was more fitting that it be at the hands of a righteous servant of the Machine-God.

And there were none more thorough in their righteous vengeance than Trejo.

A warning icon flashed on the holo-sphere, a seismic tremor surveyor, and Locard swept a haptically-enabled hand over the display, bringing the readouts to the fore. Regular bursts of energy spiked in the rock. That, in itself, was nothing unusual, especially in a planet so riddled with caverns and tunnels, but these readings were too regular and too artificial than any general movement he might have expected during the course of a battle.

With swift gestures, he refined the search parameters of the seismic surveyors, filtering out local movement of tectonic plates and the impacts of heavy artillery. Five traces were moving from within the tunnel at the far side of the gorge, and there could only be one explanation for such specific tracks.

“Identify,” he said, running the seismic traces and vibration analysis through *Lex Tredecim’s* logic engines. “Refine to error margin of no less than ten per cent.”

As he suspected, the answer was not long in coming, the traces so specific and unmistakable that he hadn’t really needed the cogitators to tell him what he was looking at.

A fresh pane opened in the holo-sphere, filled with a glowing image that slowly rotated in three dimensions. Long and cylindrical, its entire length was hooked and barbed, like a vicious undersea predator with a conical beak.

He dismissed the pane with flick of his fingers and called up a ghostly topographical representation of Four Valleys Gorge. Defence Auxilia units were picked out in white, Ultramarines in blue and Adeptus Mechanicus forces in gold. Locard had assigned the Raven Guard green icons, but, for reasons he could not fathom, they did not appear on the holo-sphere. Curiously, the lone

silver icon representing Inquisitor Suzaku was moving from Castra Meridem towards the front lines.

The seismic traces were moving deeper into the planet's bedrock, but Locard knew that wouldn't last long. His fingers danced in the air as he inloaded numerous likely scenarios for their movement patterns based on the rock density of Four Valleys Gorge.

"Project probable emergence points based on current trajectory of incoming tracks," he hissed. "Interrogative: where are they going to surface?"

FLICKERING LIGHT ILLUMINATED the horror of the death machines, the fright masks of the daemon-possessed Praetorians and the hideousness of their mutant flesh. Organic and artificial components blended together in a grotesque fusion that reminded Uriel of gangrenous wounds.

The black downpour was unending, and the ground was a quagmire through which every step was an effort. Hundreds of bodies lay in stagnant pools of oil-like rain, and the mud was slippery with blood from the slaughter. Thunder crashed overhead and visibility was cut to a hundred metres or less. Juddering shapes moved in the shadows, hunting packs of weaponised servitors armed with shock prods and electrified shears that crackled and fizzed in the rain. Others fired clattering weapons like energised rivet guns, while yet more were armed with blazing las weapons that fired stuttering bursts of wild energy.

The daemon machines stalked the ruins and burning forests of Four Valleys Gorge, darting between cover as they advanced on the Imperial lines. Hundreds of them littered the muddy ground, their armoured bodies pounded to ruin by artillery rounds landing dangerously close to the Imperial lines, but hundreds more came on in a mad rush.

The Rhinos spat bolt rounds towards the enemy and both Land Raiders fought on despite heavy damage. Their armoured hides were scored and burned, *Artemis* limped on a damaged track unit, and *Capitalinus* had lost one of her side sponsons. Both still engaged the enemy, but their ammo and power reserves were dangerously low. Daemon engines broke against the Ultramarines lines in a storm of blades and machine curses. Explosions, gunfire and mechanised howls of bloodlust blended into a terrible, drawn out scream of eternal hatred.

Uriel swept his sword through what little flesh remained of a corrupt battle servitor, spilling a foul-smelling ichor that reeked of engine oil and infected blood. The machine screeched with a crackling blurt of pain and collapsed, its grossly swollen limbs falling limp as it died. An explosion and discordant burst of static further along the Ultramarines lines signalled the death of another

machine. Uriel didn’t need to see the status icons at the edge of his visor to know that Ultramarines were dying too. The Swords of Calth fought at his side, close combat weapons sheathed in favour of bolters. Coordinated volleys of bolter fire were all that could bring down these monstrous engines. They were heavily armoured and could take horrendous amounts of punishment before going down.

“Enemy, right!” shouted Apothecary Selenus, as a screaming pack of hulking beetle-like machines burst from the cover of what had once been a Hellhound, but was now simply a blazing wreck. Their carapaces were glossy and slick with rain, their shark-like heads bullet-shaped and sheathed in horned metal.

Ancient Peleus levelled his pistol and put two swift rounds through the visor of the nearest daemon engine, and it crumpled without a sound. Cyprian and Selenus took out the next, firing sustained bursts into its chest until its armour caved and the mass reactive rounds cut it in two. A third fell to Hadrianus’ meltagun, and Uriel emptied his bolt pistol into the chest of a fourth. It staggered, but kept coming, its body a mass of bloody craters where his bolts had detonated. Three others survived to reach the Ultramarines, and Nero switched to his sabre in a heartbeat.

The daemon machines clashed with the Swords of Calth and Livius Hadrianus was punched from his feet by a crushing sweep of a bulky chainsaw arm. Sparks flew from his armour in an orange fan as the teeth bit into his chest, but before the blade could penetrate, Brutus Cyprian blew it apart with a controlled burst of fire.

Petronius Nero ducked beneath its flailing limbs, seeming to anticipate its every move as he rammed his blade between a slender gap in its armour. He twisted the blade and the monster dropped with a strangled cry. Hadrianus rolled onto his back and vaporised a screeching machine with a snap shot of his meltagun.

Cyprian dragged him to his feet as the battle swirled around them. Uriel and Nero closed on a monster with the face of a snapping wolf, its silver mask animated with a baleful light. Unfettered bloodlust burned in its red eyes, and it howled with an artificial voice that was utterly inhuman in its hatred.

“Go left,” said Nero, and Uriel obeyed the swordsman’s command instantly. It slashed with a pneumatically-powered hammerfist, and Uriel ducked beneath the blow, rolling to his feet and slashing his sword at the cables connecting the fist to the crackling generators on its back. Nero deflected a sweeping blow from a set of enormous shears and drove his sword up into the soft tissue beneath the monster’s shoulder. His blade tore up and out, cutting the metal-sheathed tendons motivating the arm. The weapon fell limply to its side and it stabbed at Nero with one of its spiked legs.

The swordsman swayed aside, and Uriel took advantage of the distraction to leap onto the beast's carapace. It bucked and tried to throw him off, but Uriel gripped its horned spine and swept his blade down, cleaving the daemon from brainpan to clavicle with one blow. The beast flopped onto its front in the mud, and Uriel jumped clear before it hit. Nero looked over at him and shook his head. "That was a risky manoeuvre," he said. "What if it had rolled when it fell? You would have been crushed *and* impaled."

Uriel nodded and said, "I know, but it is dead, and that is all that matters."

He regrouped with his squad, pleased that everyone had made it through the attack unhurt. Even Livius Hadrianus had escaped serious injury, though blood pulsed weakly from the gouge torn in his plastron. The rest of his command squad were spattered in mud, but were magnificent in their defiance. Though the black rain had been unceasing since the battle's opening, the fabric of the 4th Company banner was unsullied by so much as a single stain.

Ten Ultramarines warriors were out of action, and three of those would never fight again. Their line had held the first surge of the daemon engines, but looking out into the rain- and lightning-filled gorge, he saw them massing for another attack.

"They'll be back at us before long," said Nero, echoing his thoughts and swinging his blade to loosen the muscles of his shoulders.

"Let them come," answered Cyprian, punching a fist into his palm, "I could use a fight worthy of my strength. The Bloodborn are no sport. Thank the primarch for that, but still…"

"Even you have your work cut out with these creatures," said Hadrianus, fitting a fresh power cell into his melta gun. "Care to wager on that?"

"No. I'd hate to see one tear your head off just to be proved right."

"They wouldn't dare," warned Cyprian.

"No one could pull your head off, Cyprian," said a voice. "You've no neck to tear it from."

Uriel knew that voice well, and smiled to see Pasanius lead the Firebrands alongside the Swords of Calth. Tactical Squad Nestor held position to Uriel's left, and Chaplain Clausel led Pasanius' squad into position on the right. His friend's warriors were battered from their fight against the Bloodborn and the daemon engines. None had fallen, though all now sported impressive gouges torn in their amour.

"Good to have you with us," said Uriel, surprised at how much he missed having Pasanius at his side in battle. As coordinated a fighting unit as the Swords of Calth were, they had not the decades of familiarity shared by Uriel and Pasanius.

“You need me here,” said Pasanius. “You’d miss my earthy counsel and sage advice. After all, this is no different to the Guard. It’s the sergeants who really run things here, eh? Isn’t that right, Nestor?”

Sergeant Nestor nodded and said, “As you say, Sergeant Pasanius.”

Pasanius gestured out into the shell-cratered wasteland and said, “Looks like this is where they’re going to hit us hardest when they come at us again, so I rounded up some help.”

Three towering shapes marched between the Rhinos, armoured behemoths of ceramite and steel and flesh, with an arsenal of deadly weapons carried in their mighty fists.

“I brought Dreadnoughts,” said Pasanius.

THUS FAR IN the battle, the 4th Company’s Dreadnoughts had fulfilled a fire support role, but this fight was sure to get up close and personal very quickly. Having their ancient strength in the battle line would bolster the resolve and courage of every warrior who fought in their shadow.

The 4th Company had once boasted four Dreadnoughts, but Brother Barkus had been lost on Espandor in the defence of Corinth. His death had been a grievous blow, for he had served the Chapter faithfully for nearly a thousand years and carried wisdom and courage within his breast that would likely never be seen again.

Brother Speritas and Brother Zethus dwarfed the Space Marines, their armoured sarcophagi emblazoned with golden laurels, mailed fists and Ultramarines icons rendered in glittering quartz. Both had swapped their weapon loads to ones designed for close quarters battle. Speritas mounted a vast flamer on one fist, its burner nozzle flickering with blue fire, while on the other was a crackling pneumatic hammer weapon capable of pounding its way through metres of adamantium in seconds.

Zethus, always the subtler warrior, mounted a crackling energy fist and an assault cannon.

Both Dreadnoughts had fought alongside Uriel in the Pavonis campaign, though he had never known them in life. The 4th Company’s final Dreadnought, however, was one Uriel had known for many years.

Techmarine Harkus had been mortally wounded on Pavonis, but his grim determination to live had seen his wrecked body held in stasis and returned to Macragge where he had been accorded the honour of being interred within one of the Chapter’s most sacred relics. His forge had been rebuilt on Macragge, and one arm had been replaced with a multi-functional servo-arm equipped with

lethal drills and energy cutters.

“Brother Harkus,” said Uriel with a bow. “You honour us with your presence.”

“It has been too long since I fought with my battle-brothers,” said Harkus, marching past Uriel to take his place in the battle line. Uriel watched him go.

“Talkative as ever I see,” said Pasanius.

“Harkus was never the most forthcoming of warriors,” said Uriel. “Even when he walked among the 4th in the flesh.”

“Aye, well it seems his interment has done nothing to change that,” observed Pasanius.

“No, but I do not value him for his loquaciousness,” said Uriel.

“True enough. That drill arm looks handy,” said Pasanius. “And his plasma cannon will do some real damage.”

Uriel looked out over the ruins and blasted wasteland of the gorge, as the maddening drums sounded from behind the wall the Iron Warriors had constructed. Its builders had not been idle during the fighting. Fresh bastions and redoubts had been built into its structure, and his enhanced vision saw that it had been pushed out from the tunnel mouth, swallowing yet more of Calth’s precious land.

Bilious anger rose in Uriel’s throat at the sight of so much destruction on a world he had naively assumed was proof against all attacks. The fire-blackened ruins wept black tears from broken windows and the burning forests threw up sparks as the daemon machines burst from the tree line. At the same instant, a line of banners appeared at the ramparts of the walls and a host of Bloodborn warriors charged from the gates.

The ground shook with a bass rumbling, like the first tremors of a violent earthquake, and Uriel gripped the exhaust vent of the Rhino next to him. Warriors looked around in shock, casting anxious glances towards the cavern’s ceiling as splintered stone and dust drifted downwards. Cave quakes were not unknown on Calth, but the sustained rumble and deep vibration told him this was no natural earth tremor.

“Guilliman protect us!” hissed Brutus Cyprian, and Uriel saw the vast shadow of the Black Basilica loom over the walls, its enormous bulk a deeper darkness than the bleakest night. Streaking shells arced overhead from those few Defence Auxilia artillery pieces that had survived the sorcerous lightning, but bursts of crimson lightning flared with every impact and obliterated each warhead without effect. Its frontal cannon thundered and a hundred-metre section of the defence line vanished in a blazing tsunami of fire.

The vox-bead in his ear chirruped, and Uriel recognised the cog icon of

Magos Locard in his visor. The message icon blinked a furious red, and he opened the link.

“Magos,” he said, “this is not the best time.”

“Captain Ventris, I must inform you that five enemy war machines are tunnelling beneath your position right now,” said Locard. “My projection is that they will emerge some three hundred metres behind your current location. I cannot discern their payload, but from the weight to speed ratio, I suspect traitor Astartes.”

“As though this battle isn’t going to be hard enough to fight on one front,” cursed Uriel.

“I have despatched Commander Trejo’s skitarii to your location,” said Locard. “They should be with you momentarily.”

“Understood. Ventris out.”

Uriel turned and said, “Ultramarines, stand to! Even squads pull back two hundred and fifty metres and watch for emerging underground transports in our rear echelons. Odds maintain position and stand ready for battle. Courage and honour!”

And the slaughter began anew.

PART 3

THE CHAPTER’S DUE

SIXTEEN

THOUGH ARTILLERY HAMMERED them and the Defence Auxilia shredded hundreds with flanking fire, the charge of the Bloodborn and the daemon engines could not be stopped. Unleashed with disciplined precision, the host of enemy crashed into the Ultramarines lines with a booming of thunder that rang in time with the drums. The 4th Company braced to receive the charge, and their line bent back like a bowstave pulled to the point where the heartwood snaps.

Barking guns, shrieking saws and crackling blades lit the conflict with a stuttering, flickering light, like welding torches in a shipwright's yard. Daemon engines let loose whooping alien squeals and howls, gouging a path through the centre of the line, hurling men aside like straw dolls. Each breakthrough was met by a fluid reserve, a battering ram of shield-bearing veterans who marched into the teeth of every assault with stoic courage.

Shredding gunfire swept across the front lines from the scores of weapons mounted on the Black Basilica: thumping automatic cannons, explosive shells and dancing arcs of sheet lightning, A hellish wall of fire leapt from the ground like a great curtain, burning armour and flesh alike. The booming grind of its tracks split the air as it pushed up to the arc of the fortress walls; a black behemoth crawling forward with relentless, grinding inevitability.

The Bloodborn swarmed through the conflict like ants in the midst of a battle between giants. These mortal warriors could not hope to best the Ultramarines in contests of skill or strength, but they mobbed them like hounds attacking a bear, hoping to drag their foes down by weight of numbers.

And it looked like it was working.

Uriel held the Ultramarines together in the face of a furious storm of blades and daemonic fury, but ultimately there was little that could be done to stem the blood-hungry tide.

Then the skitarii came.

YESYL TREJO HAD led the skitarii of Magos Locard's expeditionary forces for nearly a decade, and had risen through the ranks for another twenty-two before that. In that time, his body had been augmented, up-armoured and weaponised thirty-six times. Little now remained of his original body, but he cared nothing for that. All that mattered was that he was bigger, faster, tougher and meaner than ever before.

He and a thousand warriors swarmed over the mud-slick western slopes of Four Valleys Gorge, a surge tide of screaming killers as outlandishly attired as anything in the army they charged. They wore a riot of gleaming plates buckled over engorged musculature, with alien pelts and skulls adorning the shoulder guards of their armour. Each man was a feral killer, honed with technological mastery and bred to be a superlative taker of lives.

Trejo's steel jaw foamed with alchemical anger, the red mist of the berserker shackled to the rigidly logical thought processes of a Mechanicus warrior. For all its wildness, his was no rampaging mass of warriors. Mixed in with the skitarii were hundreds of Praetorians, tracked battle servitors armed with the deadliest weaponry known to the Martian Priesthood.

Streaming lines of vivid fire lashed the enemy flanks, tearing great gouges in the body of the Bloodborn. Banners telescoped from backpacks and a forest of firearms lowered towards the enemy, a mix of plasma weapons, rotary cannons and laser lances. Swords and axes blistering with blue light were unsheathed and implanted high-energy beamers unleashed a blizzard of energy and solid rounds that ripped through the Bloodborn in a murderous storm.

The enemy reeled from this sudden thrust into its vitals, but the Bloodborn were trained soldiers led by cool-headed officers, and they realigned their flanks to meet this new attack with commendable speed. They moved swiftly, but not swiftly enough, and Trejo's enhanced tactical awareness immediately saw the weakest point of the new formation. He had no need to issue orders; a neural command unit linked his mind with the cortical subnet of every warrior in his force, and the fiercest warriors of his host smoothly moved into a lethal speartip the instant before they hammered home into the mass of enemy.

Stimm dispensers and adrenal shunts flooded their bodies with volatile chemical fuel, heightening aggression and reflex speed to levels almost the equal of the Adeptus Astartes. Screaming blades tore through the Bloodborn as the skitarii force smashed home, a mechanised host of savage fighters who killed without remorse, without fear and without pause. The wedge of skitarii punched deep into the Bloodborn, the fight a seething mass, thousands deep, that tore at one another with mechanised weaponry, unbridled ferocity and clinical precision.

The mud sucked and clung to his feet, and the rain washed his body of blood as Trejo hurled himself into the nearest mass of enemy warriors, las-rounds spanked from his armour and a solid round ricocheted from his jaw. He gave a bark of laughter, harsh and merciless, as he landed in their midst.

Trejo slammed his steel mask face into the nearest Bloodborn soldier, shattering the man's skull as he shot another three dead with his shoulder-

mounted plasma gun. His sword plunged through the chest of another as his weaponised arm barked and cut down another handful with explosive rounds. He let loose a howl as he moved deeper into the enemy ranks, his Praetorian escort blazing with rapid streams of solid rounds that hurled enemy warriors in all directions.

The dispenser on his other shoulder coughed a handful of grenades over the heads of the enemy in front of him, and he saw a pair of daemon engines vanish in a sheet of white-hot fire. Eye-watering squalls of dark energy shot skyward, and Trejo relished their deaths as much as he mourned the corruption and loss of once-proud mechanisms. The bloodshed raged around him, impossible to read without specialised vision implants, and Trejo knew his charge had torn a bleeding chunk from the enemy. He grimaced at the vulgarity of his viscerally biological metaphor. The Bloodborn fled before him, trampling one another in their haste to be away from his bloodstained glory. He laughed his harsh grating laugh as he watched them go. A vile machine squirt of corrupt binary made him spin as his sensor-sphere registered the presence of three daemon engines behind him.

Two of his Praetorians exploded and the third was hacked in two by a chainblade as long as two large men. A titanic daemon engine reared up behind him, four metres tall and crafted like a giant metallic scorpion. Its tail lashed over its back and he swung his sword up in time to block the downward slash of its lightning-sheathed stinger. His blade spat bright sparks and a squall of discharge.

His shoulder gun punched a bolt of plasma into its guts, and a looping coil of machine parts and cabling flooded out in a wash of cauterised metal and plastic. The beast seemed not to care, and another machine slammed a metal leg into his side. Trejo felt his reinforced ribs shatter. Pain balms flooded his system, not swiftly enough to spare him the agony of jagged metal puncturing his plasteel lung, but quick enough to keep him on his feet. He rolled aside as the third machine came at him, and he cursed as his internal heat gauges told him his plasma gun hadn’t yet cooled down enough to fire safely.

“The hell with that,” he said and fired a sustained burst anyway.

Four blue-hot darts sawed through the machine’s body, and it blurted its mechanical death scream in a hash of binary. Scalding steam vented from the plasma gun and three of its coils exploded, bathing his shoulder in searing plasma. His armour melted under the intolerable heat, and he staggered away from the machines as they came for him.

A furious blizzard of gunfire bisected a daemon engine, and Trejo flinched as a burning piece of shrapnel sliced the skin of his forehead. Blood spilled into his

eyes and the giant scorpion engine roared with daemonic fury as a blaze of gunfire enveloped it. Sparks flew from its armoured carapace, but this only drove its unnatural rage to new heights.

Trejo backed away, and felt a sudden presence beside him. Only a split-second reading of its Imperial biometrics kept him from cutting it down with his sword.

He wiped the blood from his eyes and saw it was a woman in a dark stormcoat, its long tails whipped by the wind so that it looked as though she wore a billowing cloak of midnight velvet. Her hair was pure white, blown out behind her in a howling wind that had nothing to do with the unnatural storms conjured by the enemy.

Imperial storm-troopers flanked her, shooting the daemon engine with implanted weaponry at least the equal of that carried by Trejo's skitarii. He didn't recognise the insignia on their shoulder guards, but the multi-spectral grafts in his eyes saw the invisible electoos beneath the woman's skin.

"Inquisition," he growled.

She heard him even over the thunder and drums and rain, meeting his augmetic gaze with ice blue eyes that brimmed with barely-contained power. She said a single word that sent a jolt of fear into Trejo's flood-stream.

"Malleus," she hissed.

She carried an ivory staff veined with green like marble, and jabbed it towards the daemon machines. "Keep them away from me," she said. "It will make your job easier."

Trejo racked the arming mechanism on his implanted arm-cannon and nodded, unwilling to speak to an agent of the holy ordos any more than was necessary. He summoned more Praetorians and skitarii huscarls with a terse data burst as two storm-troopers with long barbed mancatchers pushed a pair of chanting acolytes towards the woman.

Swathed in robes belted with knotted silver cords, their heads were bare to the elements. Rain poured over their shaven scalps and ran down their upturned faces like black tears. Trejo saw their eyes were sealed, sutured and las-burn closed, and collars of cold iron crackled and fizzed with chained energies about their necks.

He backed away from the woman as the collars popped from the acolytes and a biting metallic flavour flooded his mouth, filling it with acrid saliva. He spat, but couldn't get rid of the taste, and sent a coded squirt of data to his warriors to keep away from this witch woman.

The scorpion creature loomed over her, but she didn't flinch.

She spared Trejo a quick glance as her staff flared with aetheric fire.

“Best keep your distance,” she said, her eyes weeping blue fire. “This won’t be pretty.”

VAST GEYSERS OF molten earth erupting skyward announced the emergence of the drilling rigs Locard had warned him about. Uriel had felt the thunderous tremors of their imminent penetration of the ground, but wasn’t prepared for the sheer violence as they burst through. Like enormous artillery strikes, the ground heaved and bucked before finally imploding downwards as the supporting bedrock was pulverised.

A shooting spume of rock and dust exploded outwards as four conical snouts emerged from beneath the ground and the Shockwaves of their arrival flattened everything for a hundred metres in all directions. The one nearest Uriel ripped upwards through a burning supply station, its iron skin blackened, dented and scored after its journey beneath the surface. Superheated steam vented in scalding jets from its sides, boiling alive those unfortunate enough to be too close.

The tunneller reared up like a missile emerging from an underground silo, throwing off clods of rock and dirt and dust as it leaned like a foundation-sick tower. It wobbled for a moment, before passing its centre of gravity. The tunneller fell slowly and without grace, slamming into the ground with a thunderous reverberation of metal on stone as it demolished the vast supply station. “Quick!” shouted Uriel. “Before they debark!”

The Ultramarines had turned to meet this new threat at the appearance of the skitarii. Leaving a token force of Space Marines to bolster the flood of Defence Auxilia soldiers, Uriel led the Swords of Calth and the Firebrands towards the tunneller. Raking blasts from the guns of the Black Basilica were gouging great holes in the defence line, and its main gun was pounding the walls of Castra Occidens with murderous bombardments that had already flattened one portion of the wall and would soon reduce the entire fortress to rubble. *Lex Tredecim* had not yet entered the fight, but Uriel wasn’t surprised. The Mechanicus were loath to commit such precious items of technology to battle without overwhelming support, and Locard, for all his past affiliation with the Ultramarines was still, first and foremost, a priest of Mars.

The rain was dispersing the clouds of steam and Uriel’s guts tightened at the sight of the yellow and black chevrons on its leading edges. There could be no mistaking the brutal practicality of the Iron Warriors iconography, and he felt a knot of apprehension at the thought of coming face to face with Honsou once again.

One of the tunnellers exploded as a particularly accurate salvo of armour-penetrating shells ripped through its armour and blew it apart from the inside. The pressurised air of its interior caught light and vaporised its occupants in a raging firestorm that left nothing but ashes and fused bone in its wake.

The assault doors blew down with a dull bang and deployment ramps extended to the ruins on the ground. Raking blasts of las-fire blistered the side of the tunneller and a missile exploded against its armoured plates. A company of Defence Auxilia were closer than the Ultramarines, and a captain in a white cloak and bronze breastplate led a charge of blue-jacketed soldiers onto the ramp to meet the invaders.

Assault launchers fired and swept the ramp with whickering blasts of fragmentation bursts. The captain was the first to die, shredded to torn scraps of meat, and a dozen others perished with him. A secondary wave of explosions tore up half his company and the rest fell back amid streams of gunfire from automated turrets.

Squads of enemy infantry poured from the interior of the underground transport, but they weren't Iron Warriors. A hybrid mix of traitor Astartes and xenos mercenaries fanned out onto the soil of Calth, firing as mismatched an array of weaponry as Uriel had ever seen. He recognised carnivorous kroot mercenaries and yet more of the Bloodborn, but leading the assault were warriors from at least two Chapters of fallen Astartes.

"Emperor's mercy," hissed Livius Hadrianus at the sight of them, "I see them, yet I can still barely believe such a thing."

First down the ramp were warriors in the blood-red armour of the same berserkers they had fought on Tarentus. Librarius records had identified them as the Skulltakers, a renegade Chapter last seen in the vicinity of the Ghoul Stars. The Claws of Lorek in their tiger-striped armour advanced behind them, firing into the Defence Auxilia as they came. Deadly accurate bolter fire turned men into hollowed-out sacks of blood, and the berserkers scooped up handfuls of viscera as they charged past glistening piles of remains.

"The Emperor has forsaken them," snarled Brutus Cyprian, hefting his boltgun and slamming home a fresh clip. "And don't speak of mercy this day."

Uriel's warriors were itching for this fight, but even as he drew a bead on the lead berserker, he knew this assault made no sense. Sudden, devastating surprise attacks were just the kind of shock tactics the Space Marines excelled at, so why send such dross as xenos mercenaries to do the job?

That was a question for another time, and he pulled the trigger. A berserker dropped, the side of his helmet blown off, but it was the last shot Uriel would get.

The berserkers fell upon the Defence Auxilia in a frenzy of chopping blades. It wasn't a fight, it was a slaughter of children before a rampaging tide of killers. Though scored, dented and ill-kept, the armour of the Skulltakers was proof against most weapons the Defence Auxilia could bring to bear at close range. Revving chainaxes tore off mortal arms at the shoulder and ripped through pelvises and spines with equal glee. Blood sprayed and guts were spilled to the ground, mixing the death-stink of opened bellies and bowels.

"Squads, brace for firing," ordered Uriel.

Petronius Nero said, "Captain, the risk of collateral damage is high."

"I know," said Uriel. "But the Auxilia troops engaged with the Skulltakers are already lost. Death at our hands will be a blessing upon them."

Nero nodded and pulled his bolter tight in against his shoulder.

"All squads, fire!" shouted Uriel and a wall of bolter fire hammered the ongoing slaughter. A handful of berserkers dropped, as did many of Calth's defenders. It pained Uriel to give such an order. His whole life had been spent in the defence of humanity, but what he had told Nero was true; this was a far easier death than any the berserkers would offer.

The Swords of Calth ran towards the enemy survivors as the xenos mercenaries began spreading out and the Claws of Lorek pushed into the ruins.

Pasanius ran over to him, the black rain streaming from the dulled metal of his arm. His flamer tank was dented with bullet impacts and the burner nozzle was sticky with oil-dark blood and skull fragments.

"Where do you want the Firebrands?" asked Pasanius.

"I want you and Clausel to hook right," said Uriel. "Keep those kroot contained. If we lose them, we will forever be looking over our shoulders."

"Done," said Pasanius, loping off with his fist raised to shoulder height to rally his squad.

Uriel turned towards his standard bearer. "Ancient, make sure none of those bastards gets anywhere near our banner," he said.

"Not while I draw breath," Peleus assured him.

Uriel nodded. "Let's go," he said.

GUNN SLAV WORKED the chain to the magazine, hauling on the rusted block and tackle to raise another crate of shells for the gatling cannon on the starboard cliff of the Black Basilica. His hunched back and grossly swollen shoulder muscles gave him a simian stature that kept him from the battle lines, but made him an ideal loader for the diabolic guns. It was a task he relished, for it allowed him a chance to strike back at the Imperium that had cast him out as a mutant

and wanted nothing more than to see him burn. His physique was massively out of proportion, twisted and ungainly, but incredibly powerful and enhanced by muscle boosters and a hissing, pneumatic lifter harness.

It had been so long since he had escaped from the gibbet outside Confessor Malachai's temple that he no longer remembered how long he had served in the armies of the Eternal Powers. He remembered the long flight into the wilds of his home world and the baying of his hunters, but beyond that, there was little other than their vengeful shrieks turning to terrified screams as the star warriors descended from the skies to butcher them.

He'd almost died too, but one amongst the star warriors had seen a use for him, and he had served them with absolute loyalty ever since the day they had reduced his home world to a smoking wasteland. His old name was a thing to be shed, like a diseased skin, for it was an Imperial name. His masters hadn't deigned to give him a new one, and simply called him gun slave. In their guttural accent, the second part of his name was rendered as *Slav,* and that had become his new identity; one he bore with perverse pride.

Cowled in dark robes, he moved back and forth across the upper ramparts of the Black Basilica with a shuffling gait. The thunder of the clouds and the hot rain were a benediction upon him, the booming echoes of drums the sound of joy unfettered. It was his duty to ensure that every one of the Basilica's tier guns was supplied with ammunition.

He clamped his misshapen fingers around the edge of the ammo crate and dragged it towards the blackened machine creatures that were as much part of the guns as any of its moving parts. Skull-faced, gibbering things, they leered at him as he eased the gleaming belts of shells into the clattering feeder breech. Each shell was as long as Slav's forearm, touched by the gods of the warp and an instrument of vengeance. The breech snapped shut, nearly taking off his fingers, and Slav grinned.

"Not this time, my bonny," he gurgled through a toothless, malformed mouth.

He half-limped, half-slithered back to the blast shield covering the magazine chute at the rear of the Basilica's upper tier. The vast cathedral was moving again, crushing the land beneath it as it advanced with inexorable inevitability. The flanking guns were howling for more ammo, crackling bursts of impatient binaric squalls.

An armoured trapdoor in the armoured decking of the tier, the blast shield was secured by thick bolts and a heavy locking wheel. So vast was the door, that not even the enlightened Astartes who served the true gods could open it without specialised lifter equipment. Yet to Slav, lifting the door open was as effortless as breathing.

He hauled the door open and looked down into the blackness of the Basilica's interior. A powerful stench of nameless odours drifted up to him, a noisome mix of stagnant oils, sour milk and burned meat. To some it was unpleasant, but Slav had become used to it over the years he had served as crew. He never stopped to wonder what that stench might be. It just was.

He heard a muffled thud of something heavy landing on the deck behind him, but didn't pay it too much attention. There were always strange noises here, and it didn't pay to seem too keen on what was causing them. Besides, the ammo elevator was grinding its way up the shaft, laden with fresh crates of copper-jacketed shells, high-yield energy batteries and concentrated promethium canisters.

Then he heard the gurgling screams of the skull-faced things. Slav turned around, shifting his entire bulk to do so. He frowned. Things were not as they ought to be. For one, the guns on the upper tier weren't firing. That fact was easily explainable.

Warriors in black armour, like shadows come to life, were carving them up with gleaming bone-white claws of shimmering light. More were climbing over the high ramparts of the Basilica's upper tier. Slav's mind couldn't process what he was seeing. How could they have climbed the sides of the Basilica? It was impossible for numerous reasons, not least of which was that its sides were blistered with defensive guns and it was behind the wall the Bloodborn's masters had built.

There were ten warriors, powerful and clad in armour of such blackness that they were like the basalt statues that stood at the mouth of the temple of the Encarmine Abyssal.

These were Adeptus Astartes. The enemy. The hated. Slav's blood ran hot, his stunted cognitive functions finally processing that he was faced with an enemy he could kill. He didn't have to watch as the skull-faced gunners killed with the shells he delivered to them.

He roared with hatred and lumbered across the deck, but before he had taken more than half a dozen steps one of the black figures turned and aimed a weapon with a dull black and non-reflective surface towards him. It spat bolts of fire, each one of them punching though his chem-bulked body and ripping bloody chunks of meat from his flesh. He felt the pain, but didn't care. His nervous system was so dulled with implants and booster-drugs that his pain response was almost nil. He charged into the warriors, but they were slippery like the shadows he had first taken them for, easily evading his clumsy rush.

Their claws slashed at him, pecking like carrion birds at a fresh corpse. Polluted blood frothed from his wounds, but he had enough to spare. Let them

take all the blood they wanted, Slav would kill them all before they could drain him. His powerful limbs found one of the pecking birds and pummelled it with a fist like a boulder. The warrior flew back, slamming into the parapet of the upper tier and flipping over the edge.

Something landed on his shoulders. A heavy weight and a sudden sensation of tearing blades and burning skin. The pain was meaningless, but he reached up to grasp its source. He felt his hands close on hard plate and squeezed, feeling it crack beneath his grip.

Then, a pain he couldn't ignore.

Stabbing claws punched down into his neck, tearing down through the multiple layers of fat, muscle and sinew to the hard bone of his spine. He twisted his entire body, clawing at the black figure crouched on his shoulder and cutting him over and over.

"Slav kill you!" he shouted, but then he felt one last white-hot snap, like stretched elastic pulled past its breaking point. He had a split second of tortured anguish before the snap rendered everything moot as the pecking bird's claws finally sawed through his spine.

CAPTAIN AETHON SHAAN dropped lightly to the decking as the hulking ogre mutant died, its spinal cord sheared between the bone fins of its shoulder blades. It had taken effort to cleave through the bone, and even then the creature had taken its own sweet time to die.

He sheathed his lightning claws and watched as his men finished the job of killing the enemy gunners. The task was inglorious but necessary, as time was now of the essence. It had taken them no small amount of time to work their way through the shell-cratered ruins, past the hordes of Bloodborn and daemon engines and over the wall.

The daemon engines had been the hardest part, the time when they had come closest to detection, for the entities animating the hybrid machines perceived the world with senses beyond the mortal five. Shaan smiled at the thought of utilising only five senses.

Fereld Laotz swung himself over the iron rampart, his movements sheepish as he rejoined his fellows after almost being knocked flying by the monster's fist.

"That was careless," said Shaan. "When we return, assign yourself a measure of penance."

Laotz bowed. "How long, my lord?"

"I leave that to you," he said, knowing Laotz would assign himself the correct amount of penance, and a little more just to make sure.

The matter of his warrior's laxity dealt with, he turned back to the opened hatch at the rear of the decking. Revys Kyre, his senior sergeant, approached him, staring down into the ink-black shaft.

"Drop the charges down and let's be on our way," said Kyre. "It won't take long for the masters of this abomination to realise their guns have gone silent. A counterattack is surely only minutes away at best."

"I know," said Shaan. "But who knows what's down there; another blast door, an energy shield. Some infernal warpcraft protection. No, we need to do this the old fashioned way."

"You always want to do things the 'old fashioned way', captain," grumbled Kyre.

"Then you should know better than to try and dissuade me," said Shaan, dropping into the darkness of the magazine chute.

SHAAN FELL. HE fell until he felt as though he was falling into an abyss so deep that it had no bottom. That was impossible of course—the Black Basilica was no more than a hundred metres high, yet still he fell. The blackness was absolute, impenetrable and solid, like a living thing enfolding him in its warm embrace.

He was used to darkness, but this sensation was unpleasant and alien. Shaan endured it until his spatial senses found solid ground. He tucked his legs under him and rolled as he hit an angled blast deflector, coming to rest on one knee with his lightning claws deployed. Reflecting traceries of energy illuminated the chute, a strangely angled shaft that reached up into impossible darkness, though its opening must surely be just above him.

A pneumatic elevator was limned in blue white light, greased rails carrying it at right angles to the verticality of the shaft. It passed through a fire-lit opening in an iron wall, and a heavy adamantium blast shutter clattered downward to seal off the magazine from the outside world. Quick as thought, Shaan ghosted over the rails towards the shutter and leapt forward onto the rattling elevator platform, pressing himself flat and bringing his legs around as the shutter slammed down.

He slid from the platform, finding himself in a wide chamber reminiscent of the hell-forges that had once held the people of Deliverance in thrall to their slavemasters of Kiavahr. In such a place had the Primarch Corax learned his craft as a silent killer, a hunter in the shadows. Bellowing furnaces roared and seethed with crimson light and the walls were lined from floor to ceiling, stretching for hundreds of metres above him in defiance of what logic told Shaan should be possible.

Malformed lifter servitors and scabrous slaves ferried iron crates of munitions while hissing gorgon-like overseers in hooded cowls of black directed their labours. Enforcing the will of the overseers were black-armoured templars bearing crackling energy whips. Curved tulwars were sheathed over their shoulders and they screamed from faces that were composed entirely of vox-augmitters.

Presiding over this hell was a monstrous face made up of cables and pallid flesh that seemed to have grown out of the far wall. Bloated and monstrous, what humanity was left to its features was blubbery and childlike. Screaming binaric hymnals spewed from its flabby lips and streams of polluted data streamed across the ceramic orbs of its eyes.

Shaan took in this horror in a heartbeat, but there were no shadows to be found here and he was starkly visible in this sweltering munitions factory-cum-armoury-cum-magazine. The fleshy face worked into the wall let loose a screaming blare of binary and every denizen of this fiery chamber turned towards him. The templars howled with every one of their multi-cadenced voices and the gorgon priests extended hooking blades from the wide sleeves of their robes.

As one they surged towards the captain of the Raven Guard.

SEVENTEEN

BLOOD SQUIRTED AROUND the blade of Uriel's sword as he tried to wrench it from the breastplate of a frothing berserker. He twisted the weapon, slicing off the warrior's fingers as he pulled himself along the blade. Uriel had already cut one of the berserker's arms from his body, but that hadn't stopped him. Only the destruction of his primary heart had slowed him down, and even then the berserker's second heart and distilled hate had sustained him.

Silver flashed past Uriel's head and Petronius Nero's blade neatly lopped the berserker's head from his shoulders. The berserker fell and Uriel slid his sword clear, pushing onwards through the rain and gunfire surrounding him.

"Incoming!" shouted Ancient Peleus, jabbing a fist to the south-east.

Uriel spotted it a second later. Streams of fire were converging on their advance from the tunneller's automatic gunports. Explosive gouges punched up from the ground as heavy, pounding shells tore through the rock towards them.

"Swords of Calth!" he shouted, angling his charge towards a derelict shrine with thick marble walls. He dived into cover as the shells sawed through, feeling the pummelling impacts even through a metre of stonework.

Locard's warning and the arrival of the skitarii had come on the verge of being too late.

The Defence Auxilia were struggling to realign their defences to ring fence the threat, but it was too late for those units closest to the threat. With the plethora of shattered buildings and wrecked tanks, the Skulltakers and the Claws of Lorek had cover enough to reach striking range of three platoons of Defence Auxilia. They had torn through them in a matter of minutes, punching a hole through the battle line and exposing the guts of Four Valleys Gorge.

Uriel had seen the danger and led his warriors into the fire of that crucible.

It was a confused mass of tar-black smoke, howling fires lit by incendiaries and horizontal streams of gunfire. The ruins of this battle were an inferno as nightmarish as any conjured by the poets of old. Uriel risked a glance around the edge of an intricately carved quoin, and even with his newly implanted eye, it was difficult to make much sense of this fight.

"What do you see?" asked Pasanius, leading the Firebrands into cover with the Swords of Calth, his flamer slung and his chainsword bared. His friend loved the primal destruction wrought by the flame unit, but relished the total destruction of a killing blow even more.

“Hard to say,” said Uriel. “The Claws of Lorek have torn through the closest units of Defence Auxilia troops, and the berserkers are spilling out like termites from a kicked-over nest.”

“Nice image,” said Pasanius. “What about the berserkers?”

“Who knows?” said Uriel contemptuously. “They are attacking at random and killing whoever gets in their way. I cannot see what their plan is in order to devise a means of countering it.”

“You’re assuming they *have* a plan.”

“True.”

“And the xenos? Where are they?”

“Gathered in the ruined arboretum with the Claws of Lorek. I think.”

“Our forces?”

“Squads Nestor and Dardanus are shooting from the east and west, pouring suppressive fire onto the enemy. Protus are ready to launch a counterattack if I can figure out where to unleash them.”

“And you have Zethus,” said the Dreadnought’s booming voice as it emerged from the smoke. Its power fist was smeared in blood that sizzled on its oversized chisel-like digits, and acrid smoke billowed from the slowly rotating barrels of its assault cannon.

“Brother Zethus,” said Uriel. “I would value any tactical insights you might offer.”

“Captain Ventris,” answered the Dreadnought. “Our Tactical squads have the enemy suppressed for now. The charging berserkers will soon force their fire to be redirected. When that happens, the Claws of Lorek will roll up the Defence Auxilia line. They must be broken before than can happen. Give them a target that will allow Nestor and Dardanus to pick of the berserkers.”

“A target?” said Uriel.

“Me,” answered the Dreadnought.

Uriel nodded and said, “As always, brother, your subtle wisdom is a joy to behold.”

The Dreadnought had no mode of expression other than its artificially rendered voice, but his humour was evident as his booming augmetic laughter echoed from the remains of the shrine.

Zethus angled his sarcophagus down towards Uriel and said, “Be ready.”

The Dreadnought reared up, and its assault cannon roared to life, the barrels spinning in a blur as its power fist blazed with killing light. Zethus didn’t move from cover, he moved two steps forward and smashed straight through the shrine’s walls with a thunderous jab of his fist. Marble blocks tumbled to the ground as he strode towards the swelling wedge of traitor Astartes.

“Time to die, rebel dogs!” blared Zethus, the assault cannon unleashing a hurricane of solid shot towards the enemy. Shell casings fell in a glittering rain from the weapon’s ejection port and the arboretum exploded in a blizzard of impacts. Deafening cracks rang from shattered armour plates and stone walls disintegrated under the punishing volume of fire. Zethus strode onwards, raking a solid wall of shells over the enemy position. Smoke and dust billowed from the razed ground as Claws of Lorek scattered before the Dreadnought’s advance.

Kroot warriors fled, hugging the ground or seeking cover in the trees, their flimsy bodies bursting apart in the storm. The Claws of Lorek weathered the inferno of shells, their armour able to withstand a measure of Zethus’ fire, and Uriel saw a number of the orange- and black-armoured warriors taking aim at the Dreadnought with weapons capable of breaching its armour.

“Peleus!” shouted Uriel. “Heavy weapons.”

“I see them,” confirmed his standard bearer, resting his bolter on the edge of the breach torn by the Dreadnought’s advance. Peleus sighted along the top of the weapon and pulled the trigger six times. Five warriors pitched backwards. The sixth ducked back into cover, taking his tankbusting weapon with him. It was an impressive display of skill, but Peleus had been tutored by Torias Telion, and Uriel expected nothing less.

Then Zethus was amongst the enemy, his power fist slamming left and right and hurling broken bodies through the air. The integral storm bolter filled the space around it with explosive impacts, and its augmitters blared with the Battle Hymn of the Imperium as it fought with merciless precision.

“That’s it,” said Uriel. “Swords of Calth, with me!”

Uriel’s command squad rose and charged from the ruins, pushing forward alongside Pasanius’ Firebrands. They moved swiftly, taking shots of opportunity as they arose, picking off lone berserkers drunk on slaughter. Uriel saw the kroot pressing forward, slinking away from the fight with the Dreadnought. His warriors needed no encouragement to rake their taut xenos bodies with gunfire. Only a scant few escaped into the burning woodland.

Zethus was surrounded by enemy warriors who stabbed and shot him with desperate fury. Most of their weapons were useless, but Uriel saw one of the traitors was armed with an oversized fist that could tear through Zethus’ armour. The warriors fighting to reach the Dreadnought turned at the sound of Uriel’s charge, and the two forces met with bludgeoning force. Uriel’s sword cut a traitor in half as Nero lanced his sabre through another’s throat and expertly tore it up through his skull.

Pasanius hit the enemy like a blow from a thunder hammer, scattering warriors with the force of his charge. His sword swung out and hacked one of

the Claws of Lorek in two. His new arm drove his blade with greater force than even Uriel could muster, and though its edge was nowhere near as lethal as the blade of Idaeus, it tore through armour with equal savagery.

Uriel shoulder charged his way through the Claws of Lorek. They fought back with strength born of desperation. They knew their surprise assault was in danger of collapsing, and fought to regain the initiative. With Pasanius on one side and Petronius Nero on the other, Uriel cut a path through the enemy towards the melee swirling around Brother Zethus.

The warrior with the power fist drew back his arm to strike Zethus as Uriel slashed his sword across the small of his back, the blade cutting deep and separating the upper half of the warrior's body from his lower. Zethus spun to face Uriel; his own fist raised, but dismissed him in an instant as he registered the colour of his armour.

The battle raged on for several brutal minutes, but with the charge of Uriel and Pasanius, the fate of the Claws of Lorek had been sealed. Relentless volleys of bolter fire from beyond the fight told Uriel that his Tactical squads had contained the threat of the berserkers. Newly realigned artillery batteries dropped shells on the tunnellers. In moments, all four were gutted hulks, blazing from their powerful drive engines to their blackened drilling rigs.

Uriel's visor streamed status updates from his squads, confirming what his instincts had already told him. He shook his sword clear of blood as the Swords of Calth set about executing any surviving enemy warriors with quick, efficient slashes of their blades. Despite this portion of the battle having been won, furious exchanges of gunfire and blades still echoed from the fighting further north.

The Battle for Four Valleys Gorge was far from over.

Pasanius approached Uriel and removed his helmet. Uriel saw he was beaming with undisguised pleasure at the devastation they'd wrought. His armour was scored and slowly coagulating blood flowed from a deep cut on his thigh.

"A hard fight, my friend," said Uriel.

Pasanius chuckled. "I've known tougher," he said. "Remember the fight to get into Honsou's fortress?"

"I would rather not."

"Ah, but it's been too long since I swung a blade," said Pasanius. "I know it's my own fault, but that *felt good.* Every day I spent in penance, knowing I was missing the fighting on Pavonis, was torture."

"I am sure it was. And what better way to end that penance by killing traitors."

“Ach, these lads? They aren’t first generation,” said Pasanius kicking a dismembered corpse at Uriel’s feet, a warrior he didn’t remember killing. “They’re a founding from way down the line. Copies of copies of copies. You don’t dilute Astartes blood for thousands of years without seeing it become thin and weak.”

Uriel wanted to say that Pasanius was wrong, that the dead didn’t care whether they were killed by inferior copies of the first Astartes or the genuine article. He looked away, watching as the structure of the nearest tunneller finally gave out under the punishing barrages of artillery. Sparks and blazing wreckage lit the walls of the cavern with a brilliant orange glow, and Uriel saw smoke rising from each one of the wrecks.

He took a deep breath, knowing how close they had come to losing this fight, when a sudden thought caused his skin to grow clammy and sticky. He scanned the scarred battle lines where the tunnelling war machines had emerged and pressed his hand to his ear.

“Magos Locard, confirm how many incoming tracks you were reading,” he demanded.

The vox-bead in his ear hissed until Magos Locard answered.

“The seismic augurs detected five tracks, Captain Ventris,” said Locard.

Uriel shut off the vox-link and said, “Pasanius, come on!”

He set off at a run towards Castra Meridem where the massive form of *Lex Tredecim* was concealed in a patch of dead ground.

“Where are we going?” shouted Pasanius.

“Five tracks!” cried Uriel. “Locard detected five incoming tunnellers!”

“And?”

“I only count four wrecks here,” said Uriel. “So where in Guilliman’s name is the fifth?”

AETHON SHAAN LEPT for the far wall of the Black Basilica, dispensing a magnetic charge from the dispenser on the upper surfaces of his gauntlet.

He kicked off the wall, somersaulting over the heads of three of the whip-armed templars as the crackling barbs lashed out at him. Shaan landed behind them, punching his claws through the back of the first and breaking the spine of another with a thunderous kick.

A tulwar arced towards his head as the templar creatures swarmed him. He swayed aside and deflected the return stroke with a graceful backhanded blow that shattered the blade and sent fragments into the augmitter face of the warrior. Its permanent scream was instantly cut off as Shaan dropped below their

slashing blades and jabbed out at groin height with his tearing claws.

Enemy warriors fell and he launched more magnetised grenades from his gauntlet.

A whip cracked and Shaan's right arm was jerked back, pulling him off balance. One of the black-armoured templars darted in to stab him, but Shaan lowered his shoulder and the blade shattered on his pauldron. Another whip snagged his left arm, pulling his limbs wide, but Shaan flicked his wrists and sliced through the energy whips.

Shocking, electric feedback surged along Shaan's arms and he gritted his teeth against the pain as his nervous system overloaded. He dropped to one knee as two of the templars rushed in, their vox-augmitter faces blaring unintelligible hatred. Powerful arms encircled him, the grossly swollen musculature of a lifter servitor, but before they could close, he vaulted upwards, pushing up with all his strength and cracking the top of his helmet into its jaw. The cybernetic slave's head snapped back with a horrid crack and it toppled back with its neck broken by the force of the blow.

Shaan squirmed free of its grip and dived to the side as yet more templars and lifter servitors closed in. He launched a flurry of grenades deep into the depths of the ammunition racks, and leapt from crate to crate as he made his way towards the end of the chamber and the bloated, screaming face meshed with the iron wall.

It screamed in debased binary, but whether it was a warning or scream of fear was impossible to tell. A whip slashed his side and he bit back a scream as it hissed through his armour and bit deep into his pale flesh.

Shaan landed lightly and rolled to his feet on the iron plinth before the oversized face in the wall. The gorgon overseers had rallied around it, their arms transformed into blades. They stabbed at him with blinding speed. They were fast, but Shaan was faster, and he met their every thrust and lunge with powerful ripostes. One by one, he cut them down, fighting his way through them with a skill known only to those trained on the Ravenspire.

The last of the gorgon priests died with a squeal of scrapcode. Shaan leapt over its corpse towards the face. He punched his clawed gauntlet through the bridge of the nose and tore upwards. The entire structure of the armoury shook and bilious white fluid erupted from the ruined face. The templars shrieked in harmony with the death of the face and two dropped dead on the spot. The lifter servitors halted in their tracks.

He'd killed the master of the armoury, but he'd boxed himself in. A cardinal sin, he knew, but he had gambled in the timing of his attack and that calculated risk was about to pay off.

As the remaining templars closed in, precision bolter fire cut them down from behind. Each shot was taken with great skill, for a single rogue shell would be the death of them all. The walls still shook with the agonised death throes of the face, and Shaan retracted the claws on his gauntlets.

Revys Kyre and the rest of his Raven Guard spread throughout the armoury, needing no direction in how best to plant their own charges.

"You took your time," said Shaan. "Another few seconds and I might actually have been in danger."

"The blast shutter was tough to cut through," said Kyre.

Shaan turned towards the racks of shells, power packs and canisters of fyceline and promethium.

"Right, let's get the charges set," said Shaan. "The old fashioned way, eh?"

"The old fashioned way is messy," said Kyre, seeing the gash in Shaan's side. "I prefer clean and quick. In and out before the enemy even knows we're here."

"That wasn't going to happen this time."

"I suppose not," agreed Kyre. "But we should get done here before it gets messier."

Shaan grinned. "Oh, it's going to get a whole lot messier before we're done."

LOCARD WATCHED THE lines of battle ebb and flow across the holo-sphere, staring into the confused morass of icons as though willing the blue and white icons to push the hateful red of the enemy back. The gold of Trejo's skitarii were so hopelessly embroiled with the daemon engines and Bloodborn that it was next to impossible to tell what was happening. Even real-time pict-imagery was useless. Locard was no warrior, and could not tell which force had the upper hand in the seething brawl of machines.

"Add encrypted Mechanicus layer," he commanded, and one of the data servitors on *Lex Tredecim's* command bridge chimed as it confirmed his order.

A soft static burr overlaid the battle imagery on the outside of the holo-sphere, noospheric data streams passing back and forth at incredible speeds between the skitarii, Praetorians and *Lex Tredecim's* battle cogitators. Passing information in this manner allowed a level of coordination unimaginable to any other armed force in the Imperium. Locard processed the information in his hindbrain implants, but kept himself aloof from the myriad communications passing between the Praetorians and skitarii. Lingua-technis battle-cant was a robust, belligerent machine language and was painful to those unused to such primal binaric arrangements.

Beyond the layer of Mechanicus control, more easily accessible information

was displayed on a lower layer of the sphere, and Locard focussed his attention on this. Ultramarines forces made surges into the mass of enemy forces, but were more often than not forced to pull back for fear of being encircled and cut off. The one beacon of light in the midst of the daemon engines was the pulsing silver icon of Inquisitor Suzaku. She and her acolytes were emptying machines of their daemonic hosts with powerful psychic mastery, and Locard swung his imagers to watch her.

Guarded by her augmetic storm-troopers, Suzaku directed the energies of two bound battle-psykers with shimmering bursts of pyrotechnics that even his multi-spectral picters couldn't interpret without hazing the sphere with static. Gunfire and chattering machines with slashing blade limbs came for her, but those soldiers nearest her had quickly recognised the value of her presence. Ad hoc squads of Defence Auxilia had formed on her flanks to protect her.

"Keep her safe," whispered Locard, though there was no need to keep his voice low. The ordos and the Adeptus Mechanicus had a relationship that could best be described as prickly, but Locard would have gladly seen an entire cohort of inquisitors coming over the hill right now.

The Raven Guard had finally appeared on the holo-sphere, on the Black Basilica of all places, but where else should he have thought to look save where he had least expected to see them?

"I should be quite interested in how you avoided detection," he said, knowing the Raven Guard would never divulge such secrets.

Yet the more he watched, the more it seemed like as though the tide of battle was, ever so slowly, turning in favour of the Imperial forces. Trejo's stabbing wedge of skitarii and Praetorians were pushing deeper into the mass of Bloodborn, while platoons of Defence Auxilia began forcing the enemy back over the original front line. Each foray of the Ultramarines cut deeper into the daemon host and within moments it seemed a statistical probability that they would link with the Mechanicus forces.

Every arm of this Imperial defence was working together, and a probability curve of victory appeared on the holo-sphere as the variables in its calculation became more manageable.

When the counterattack came, it was so sudden that Locard almost missed the first signs.

The constant stream of noospheric data streams suddenly doubled in its intensity as a stabbing lance of scrapcode flooded the weave of the network. Bleeding red streams of corrupt data packets exploded in the noosphere, non-Euclidian geometries and unnatural integers fouling the speedy transfer of information and sending infected data shrapnel deep into the network.

The attack surged with bludgeoning force, invading the network in a blitzkrieg fashion, seeking to overwhelm the Mechanicus network with its sheer bulk and strength. Several servitors began convulsing, as though in the grip of mechileptic fits, tearing themselves free of the network in their struggles. Emerald light erupted from a number of work stations, and warning streams of binary streamed across the holo-sphere.

Locard shifted his internal consciousness to the blaring cants of the Praetorians. One by one they halted in their tracks, guns falling silent and crushing weapons locking in place as they attempted to process the conflicting instructions flooding their cyborganic brains.

“Cleverly done, my friend,” said Locard, shutting down the active receptor feeds to the Praetorians and activating his specially designed data purgatives. “But unsubtle.”

Locard’s hands danced across the surface of the holo-sphere, calling up his researches into the corrupt scrapcode from the data prisons in which he had contained some of the original infection.

“Your structure is chaotic and primal, but the code isn’t entirely random. Nothing ever is. There is an order to the universe that not even the Primordial Annihilator can undo,” said Locard. He unlocked the info-emetics he had crafted from the original scrapcode attacks on the defence platforms and starships in orbit, allowing it free rein in the noosphere.

Immediately it fell upon the attacking waves of scrapcode, golden lines of pure data slicing through the fog of infected binary and collapsing entire swathes of corrupt data. Locard let out a relieved breath, though he had no real need to intake oxygen through such a primitive method. His blood filtration systems and augmetic lungs could supply him easily enough.

“Strange how easily we revert to our primal biologies,” he said with a nervous bray of artificial laughter. “Addendum for further study.”

Then the scrapcode fought back.

Like a brawny axeman fighting a duellist, the scrapcode retaliated with a brutal flex of muscular code. Though Locard’s info-emetics were landing graceful blows, the scrapcode’s strength was greater. The leading edges of its corruption flared and died in the face of Locard’s designs, but there was simply too much force and will behind it.

Locard glanced nervously at the holo-sphere, diving down through the layers to the crudity of the pict feed. The Praetorians were shutting down in the face of the cyber-attack, their aegis shields protecting them from the infection, but forcing them to inaction.

Already those shields were collapsing, eroding with horrifying swiftness in

the face of such hideously powerful infection. The let-up in the attack had given the Bloodborn the lull they so desperately needed and they hurled themselves at the Imperial forces like cornered wolves.

Locard glanced at the graph of victory probability. The projected line was curving towards defeat, its projection becoming ever more unsound with this new variable dragging it down. Without the heavy firepower and monstrous combat prowess of the Praetorians, it was unlikely the Imperial forces would prevail, but should the scrapcode turn them into corrupt warriors of the enemy, the consequences would be disastrous.

"Come on, come on…" he hissed, watching the dance of numbers as his info-emetics did battle with the scrapcode. His designs were working as he had known they would, but there were simply too many streams of bad data to purge for them to be effective.

As galling as it was to admit, it seemed his promise to Captain Ventris that he could guarantee the loyalty of the Praetorians would prove to be a costly error in judgement.

USING THEIR LIGHTNING claws as friction brakes, the Raven Guard slid down the high flanks of the Black Basilica, leaving torn gouges and fans of sparks in their wake. Aethon Shaan dropped lightly to the ground amid a cluster of debased machine priests. He killed the first and second with flicks of his razored gauntlets as the rest of his warriors landed behind him with heavy splashes in the sucking quagmire surrounding the monstrous behemoth.

Thunder crashed overhead and a streak of vivid lightning cast a flickering glow over the nightmarish landscape around the Black Basilica. At the edge of the wall, scores of heavy-limbed ogre creatures beat the stretched skin of giant steel drums with iron bars. Blasted craters filled with promethium blazed with orange light and sent up tar-black columns of smoke that reeked of burnt fat. Capering monsters in bloody armour danced to music only they could hear, and black-robed priests cursed weapons with dark rituals.

A trio of machine priests with monstrously oversized shoulders and overgrown augmentations like black angels' wings swung to face them. Their eyes blazed with jade light, and a horrific scream, deafening beyond all measure erupted from their forms.

"So much for getting out the way we got in," said Kyre.

"I said this would get messy," said Shaan.

"I thought you meant for them."

"I did," said Shaan.

This was a land of the damned and, like airborne troops landing in the middle of an enemy force, the Raven Guard needed to maintain the initiative and prevent their foes from getting off the back foot. They had hit hard, but with the enemy now aware of their presence, they needed to keep hitting hard to get out of here alive.

“Egress in force,” ordered Shaan. “Do as much damage as you can on the way out. Go!”

Like a flock of startled crows, the Raven Guard split apart and dispersed into the darkness of the unnatural storm cover. Each warrior would make his own way out, moving from shadow to shadow and always choosing his path with an eye to the damage he could cause. They had come in with the darkness as their ally, but that was now stripped from them as the lightning flashed again and again, as though conspiring to unmask them in retaliation for the havoc they had wreaked here.

Shaan set off towards the wall, weaving in and out of cover. He lobbed a grenade into an ammo pile and it exploded in a blaze of light, scattering the men reaching for the weapons stacked there. They flew through the air and Shaan fired a burst of shots from his pistol into a pack of pursuing Bloodborn hunters. Two fell and the rest went to ground.

He broke left, diving behind a bullish earth-moving machine, its flanks oily and streaked with blood where it had rolled over something living. Shots sparked from the track guards and he rolled aside, leaving a grenade planted on the engine block. It detonated with a dull *whump* as he darted from cover, heading straight for a pack of soldiers with their lasrifles raised. Another grenade zipped from his gauntlet and burst in the air before them, felling those at the front with a scything blast of fragments. He leapt toward the dazed survivors, unsheathing his gauntlet blades and tearing them up with three crosswise strokes.

Their bodies hadn’t even fallen when a spraying burst of las-fire pummelled his side. Pain flared as one particularly lucky shot struck the gap torn in his armour by the templar’s electro-whip. His skin burned and he felt the organ beneath cauterise. He stumbled, narrowly avoiding a chattering blast of solid rounds that ripped through a timber structure filled with building materials.

He skidded around its remains, falling to one knee and pulling himself upright with a grunt of pain. The Iron Warriors’ wall was less than thirty metres away, but the ogre-creatures now turned from their drumming and formed a solid wall of muscle and iron between him and escape. The drumming stopped, but that was the only good news. Speed and space were his weapons in this raven’s flight, and he was rapidly running out of both.

Fortunately he had another weapon he could use.

Shaan stopped moving and walked calmly towards the brutish creatures, his hands raised in surrender.

“You really are extremely ugly things,” said Shaan. “Quite repulsive in fact.”

One of the creatures said something in its debased tongue, but to Shaan it was little more than a guttural drawl of meaningless syllables. He glanced over his shoulder. Thirty Bloodborn soldiers advanced towards him. They weren’t shooting, which was stupid of them. They wanted a prisoner, but that wasn’t going to happen.

“The thing about finding enemies in your midst is that you can never really be sure how long they’ve been amongst you,” said Shaan. “You just don’t know what they might have sabotaged before you caught them.”

As the last word left his lips, he sent the detonation pulse to the explosives planted throughout the magazine of the Black Basilica.

DESPAIR SWAMPED MAGOS Locard. His info-emetics were working, they were doing what they were designed to do, but they were a guttering candle holding back a blizzard. Within minutes, the aegis barriers of the Praetorians would fall and they would turn their guns upon their erstwhile allies. The four valleys of the gorge would fill with blood and the way into Calth would be wide open.

He uncoiled a mechadendrite from his torso and plugged into the vox-net, ready to warn all Imperial forces that the Praetorians should be considered as enemy combatants, when the darkness of the cavern was banished in an instant of vapour-white brightness. Blinding light washed every colour from existence and a thundering vibration passed through the rock.

The seismic reader went off the scale for a second. “What new warpcraft are you to plague us with now?” he demanded, frustration and desperation breaking his last veneer of control.

He looked at the holo-sphere, but quickly realised he didn’t need remote picters to see what had happened. A searing column of fire rose from behind the Bloodborn wall, sucking up debris, enemy soldiers and loose rock into a billowing mushroom cloud of superheated vapours and fire.

“The Black Basilica,” hissed Locard. “The Raven Guard!”

Behind the wall was an inferno of cataclysmic proportions, the fireball sweeping out over the walls like a raging ocean impacting a wholly inadequate sea barrier. The battle raging throughout the cavern ceased as the force of the blast threw down men and machines, and the Shockwave pummelled the earth. Chunks of rock dropped from the roof and billowing clouds of dust gusted

outwards from the explosion.

Turning from Shaan’s handiwork, Locard saw the power of the scrap-code die away, like a burning refinery pipe with the supply of promethium shut off. In contrast, his info-emetics surged to life, burning away the corrupt code infesting the operating systems of the Praetorians.

Locard brought up the noospheric layer of the holo-sphere and closed his eyes as he saw how close the aegis barriers had come to failing. Less than three per cent of their integrity remained, which equated to little more than fifteen seconds of resistance to the infected lines of code. Then, like a chrono-gladiator whose death-clock had just been extended by a last-minute kill, the aegis barriers began to rebuild as Locard’s emetics began systematically purging the infernal code of the dark magos.

When the barriers had rebuilt to fifteen per cent, Locard sent a manual reactivation code to the Praetorians. In moments, every one of those battle servitors would, once again, be killing the enemy with relentless, mechanical efficiency.

“Emperor bless you, Captain Shaan!” said Magos Locard.

EIGHTEEN

NIGHT WAS FALLING, and the traitor's screams had ceased. That meant he'd either passed out from the pain or was dead. Scipio Vorolanus didn't much care which, but it was getting tiresome hearing their bastard tongue crying out to their fallen gods to save them. He looked up into the darkening sky seeing the starlight through the clouds and wondering how his battle-brothers fared.

How went the war on Calth? Had the Chapter Master destroyed the daemon lord? Were five companies of Ultramarines even now racing towards Espandor to end this threat once and for all? Scipio idly traced patterns in the dust, battle formations and defence layouts as prescribed by the Codex when facing an enemy of superior numbers and inferior quality. He drew the diagrams without thinking, so ingrained in his consciousness that they were second nature.

The bombed-out fabrik in which the Thunderbolts sheltered was located in an unfrequented quarter of the city, one that had suffered badly during the invasion. Most of the structures had no roofs or basic amenities left to them, and were thus unsuitable billets for the Bloodborn. The captured Rhino sat beneath a flapping sheet of tarpaulin, with Laenus trying to coax some life into the tortured engine. His warriors sat cleaning their weapons or eking out the last of their rations. One way or another, they were going to have to end this soon, for Scipio would not have his warriors eating food from the cesspool Corinth had become.

Each warrior was stripped of his armour and wore only their khaki undersuits, over which they draped ragged clothing taken from the dead or those they had been forced to kill. It had been a week since they had come to this conquered city though it felt like a lifetime. In that time, they had killed twenty-seven Bloodborn soldiers in their attempt to determine whether or not the Corsair Queen was based in Corinth.

The Bloodborn warriors they had captured all seemed to believe she was here, gathering her forces before launching her attack on Herapolis, but none of them had seen her. Even if one had claimed such knowledge, Scipio wasn't sure he could trust their word. Only after seeing Kaarja Salombar with his own eyes would he risk contact with Captain Sicarius.

To that end, he and Brother Nivian, who had lost his arm in the fight to capture the enemy Rhino, had ventured out into the city. Posing as renegade Astartes, they had walked the thoroughfares of the captive city, appalled at the degradation, needless vandalism and disrespect. Silver-skinned temples were

now latrines, and civic buildings of law, justice and commerce were hung with corpses tortured for the fleeting amusement it would bring.

Yet it was the wanton lack of discipline among the Bloodborn offended Scipio the most. He knew this aspect of the enemy should have cheered him, but it was galling to see that the armed force holding Ultramar in its grip was so slovenly. Drunkenness was epidemic, and infighting was rife. Brawls broke out every hour and the streets were littered with dead bodies, their throats cut or faces shot out.

“How can anyone wish to live like this?” Nivian had asked, as they watched a group of masked Bloodborn set upon two of their own number for no apparent reason. Scipio had no answer, and they had turned a corner as the drunken Bloodborn stamped their former friends to death.

The city had fallen to wrack and ruin, its streets littered with debris and the detritus of an army that cares nothing for its billet. The stench rising from the river was appalling, and it took every ounce of Scipio’s willpower to keep himself from drawing his sword and killing every Bloodborn he saw.

How could such a force be so great a threat to the Imperium? It was beyond Scipio’s understanding. Where was the infrastructure, the organisation and the routine that would allow an army to function? On worlds taken by the Ruinous Powers, how could any society function without rules? Surely the worlds of the Archenemy must have some form of order imposed from higher echelons of command. How else would their armies be fed, equipped and mobilised for war? All the drunken debauchery Scipio saw only convinced him that there was an organising level of command of which he was not yet aware.

Nivian’s injury allowed them to more convincingly portray themselves as part of the host, and wherever they went they were accorded the respect of the Bloodborn. Shouted oaths and cursed blessings were heaped upon them, and each one made Scipio feel unclean and tainted. Every time they saw another Astartes, they hid, ducking into the tumbled remains of a ruin or along a filth-choked alleyway.

Yet their efforts had, thus far, been in vain. They had seen signs of higher command structures, but no sign of any overall commander. Nivian, Laenus and Helicas had urged him to move on, but there was something to the energy of the Bloodborn that convinced Scipio that Salombar was here. He had nothing to base that on save suspicion, for why else would so many enemy units be gathered here?

Yet a suspicion wasn’t enough to send word to Captain Sicarius.

The nagging fear that he had failed in this mission tore at him. Scipio Vorolanus had never failed at anything in his life. From the recruitment tests on

Tarentus to the fires of Black Reach, he had excelled in every task. His status as a veteran sergeant was unquestioned, and many had tipped him to rise further in the ranks of the 2nd Company. All that could be jeopardised by this mission's failure, though Scipio hated the ambition he now recognised in himself.

Anger touched him, and he rose from the packing crate he sat upon and made his way over to where Helicas held the captive. The man was slumped on his side, blood pooling around his head with a speed that told Scipio he wouldn't be getting up again. His body was dressed in a patchwork uniform of many colours, looking more like a court harlequin than a soldier. A bright blue sash was tied around his waist, an affectation Scipio had learned denoted an officer, or as the corsairs called it, a Haexen.

"Any word from the other sergeants?" asked Helicas.

Scipio shook his head, irritated that he had been asked this question yet again. He took a deep breath and said, "No. It's too dangerous to make contact now we're in the city. Too easy for the enemy to triangulate our position."

"Of course, it's just that we're not getting anywhere with these prisoners. And your foot recon doesn't seem to be getting us any closer to the Corsair Queen."

Scipio ignored the unsaid wish for action. "He didn't tell you anything before you killed him?" asked Scipio, though he already knew the answer. If Helicas had learned anything, he would have told him.

"Useless bastard," hissed Helicas, as though offended at the dead man's obstinacy. He turned away from the body and wiped his bloodied fists on a dirty rag soaked in counterseptic. "Just like all the others, sergeant. Kept telling me that the Corsair Queen's here, but that he didn't know where. Never seen her and wished me a thousand deaths in the same hell as my mother, where she's apparently burning for mating with dogs."

"Lovely," said Scipio, keeling beside the dead man. In death, his features had softened, the lines of hatred fading from his face to leave it almost serene. But for the hateful icons burned into his cheeks, now obscured by caked blood and bruises, he could have been one of any number of Imperial citizens.

"Take off the uniform and he could be a citizen of Ultramar," said Scipio.

"Empathising with the enemy, sergeant?" chuckled Helicas. "Never a good sign."

"I'm not empathising, I'm lamenting," said Scipio. "He could have been one of us, but he took a different road and now he's dead."

"Then he made poor life choices."

"That he did," agreed Scipio. "But I wonder was he corrupt from birth or did he grow to become a traitor? Where was that one moment when he decided that he was no longer a servant of the Emperor and pledged his life to the Ruinous

Powers?”

“Does it matter?”

“I think it does, Helicas. To recognise that moment would allow us to prevent it. The Bloodborn are damned beyond redemption, that much is certain, but how many others, right now, are teetering on the brink of loyalty and treachery? How many of these men were born evil, and how many were made evil by the worlds around them?”

“I’m just a line warrior, sergeant,” said Helicas. “It’s the job of captains and Chapter Masters to think like that.”

“It’s everyone’s job to think like that,” snapped Scipio. “Or at least it should be.”

He shook his head, seeing that Helicas didn’t understand. As a gunner and soldier Helicas was efficient and thorough but, by his own admission, he was no thinker.

“Sorry, sergeant,” said Helicas.

Scipio felt ire and sadness blend in the forefront of his mind, and said, “An Astartes *should* be a thinker, for our bodies and minds have been crafted to be superior to mortals. It is a waste for any of us not to try and achieve our full potential as individuals. Isn’t that what Ultramar offers its inhabitants, a chance to better themselves and thrive in an environment that fosters productive people?”

The Thunderbolts turned their attention upon him, and Scipio warmed to his theme. “I have fought on hundreds of different worlds and seen a thousand different cultures. On the worst worlds, I was struck by the impossibility of change, of the wasted potential I saw in the abject poverty and desperation of the populace. The Imperium has billions of lives to spend in its betterment, but most people simply rot away in the forgotten reaches of ash-blown, oil-stained worlds of wretched despair. What chance do those people have? How many people are driven into the arms of the Archenemy by the grinding horror of their daily lives?”

“I don’t know, sir,” answered Helicas, missing the rhetorical nature of the question, and Scipio saw the man’s discomfort at being spoken to like this.

Scipio rose to his full height, looking hard at his warriors. He saw their frustration and felt their desperate need for action. He recognised it because he felt it too. A plan began to form in his mind, and though it bore all the hallmarks of one hatched by Captain Sicarius, he relished the idea of fighting back. And he knew just how to do it.

“We have been passive for too long,” he said, marching over to the Rhino and pulling the tarpaulin clear. “But that is over now.”

Nivian took a step forward from the Thunderbolts, Scipio's bolt pistol clutched in his one remaining hand. "What are you suggesting, sergeant?" he asked.

"If we cannot find the Corsair Queen, then we will make her come to us."

THE WALLS OF Castra Tanagra were quiet. Death had a habit of making it so. Tigurius walked along the walls of the shrine fortress, weary beyond words and soul-sick from the ever-present daemons. They gathered like a fog on the edge of sight, bathed in the energising light from the hateful, ever-present bolt of lightning that crackled on the horizon. A capering miasma of hideous forms and reptilian hunger, the daemons stared hungrily at the defenders within the fortress.

"You shouldn't be here," he said. "This is all wrong."

Men and women huddled in the lee of the ramparts, wrapped tightly in their cloaks and blankets. The mountains were cold and an icy wind was blowing down from the Capena Spire. Winter on Talassar was harsh, and the cold weather was coming earlier this year. Flecks of snow floated in the air, and puffs of breath could be seen before every face.

Thirteen hundred souls filled Castra Tanagra, just over half that had begun this fight. Hundreds more were dead or too wounded to fight. Yet those who remained on the walls fought with defiance and courage. They were magnificent, but with every attack, the numbers defending the walls diminished and the spectre of defeat loomed ever larger.

Tigurius glanced over towards the drum-tower keep, its many halls filled with wounded and dead. He felt the pain bleeding from its interior like a black fog, and tried to shut out the despair it carried as he continued onwards.

Soldiers nodded to him as he passed, but none spoke to him, for he was Adeptus Astartes, and he was touched by the same powers that assailed them daily. Even the Ultramarines spoke to him only when they needed to, and loneliness touched Tigurius. He had long ago accepted that he would walk a solitary path in life, but to be facing his end in a forgotten citadel with few men he could call friend touched a raw nerve in the Librarian, and a spike of resentment flared momentarily.

He glanced down into the courtyard, seeing Marneus Calgar surrounded by the company sergeants of the 1st Company tasked with defending the eastern curve of the walls. The Chapter Master had been instrumental in the continued resistance of Castra Tanagra, fighting the daemons with such furious courage that any who saw him redoubled their efforts. Calgar looked up and waved, the Gauntlets of Ultramar cracked and dulled after so many blows. Tigurius returned

the gesture and turned away, a bilious wave of nausea rising in his throat.

It was cold here, and though his battle plate protected him from the environment, an icy chill reached deep into his heart. He turned away and made his way further along the wall towards Agemman. The First Captain shared easy banter with one of his veterans, but that ended the moment he saw Tigurius.

“Librarian,” said Agemman, his face hardening to granite as Tigurius reached him. “What brings you to this section of the wall?”

“The psychic wards require strengthening,” said Tigurius, tapping golden carving worked into the sloping edge of the parapet. Its lustre was now dulled and almost invisible. “Every time the daemons attack, they sap the power from the wards the fortress’ builders wrought into its bones.”

Agemman looked at the golden sigil with a frown.

“I had assumed it was simply decorative.”

“Not so, First Captain,” said Tigurius. “They are vital to our continued survival.”

Agemman shrugged and turned away.

Anger touched Tigurius at Agemman’s boorish behaviour, and though he knew it was his exhaustion talking, he couldn’t help the barb that flew from his lips. “Without these psychic wards sapping the strength of the daemons, this would be a much harder fight.”

“What are you saying?” demanded Agemman, turning back to him.

“I am saying that we must pull back to the keep. The wall is too long to hold with so few men. The Codex says—”

“I know what the Codex says,” snapped Agemman. “I wrote enough of it.”

“By Codex principles, you don’t have enough warriors to defend a wall this long,” said Tigurius, as though Agemman hadn’t spoken. “Logic says you must pull back to the keep.”

Agemman looked set to argue, but he knew the teachings of the Codex backed Tigurius.

“Does Lord Calgar give this order?”

“Not yet, but he will.”

“Then I will wait for his order to withdraw. It sits ill for the 1st to retreat.”

“Would defeat sit better?”

Agemman scowled at him and waved a gauntleted hand towards the sigil inscribed on the merlon. “Do what you must, Librarian, and then begone. I tire of your company.”

“If you do not retreat, this wall will fall,” said Tigurius as the temperature plummeted once again. Tigurius’ breath misted before him and he tasted metal. Angry voices rose from the courtyard, and Tigurius saw several fist-fights erupt

among the mortal soldiers.

“What?” said Agemman, turning back with a furious look on his face.

“Without my powers you will not hold this wall,” repeated Tigurius. “You should be begging me for my help.”

“I beg of no man, warlock,” hissed Agemman, his face inches from Tigurius and bristling with barely-restrained aggression. “This wall is held by warriors of the 1st Company, and there are no better fighters in the galaxy,”

“That will not matter. If you fight you will fail.”

“You insult the honour of the 1st!”

“There is no honour in stupidity,” said Tigurius.

Agemman’s hand stabbed out and took Tigurius by the throat, his fingers closing like a Dreadnought’s claw upon his windpipe. Tigurius expelled a gust of misty breath and clenched the muscles in his neck as frost limned the edges of Agemman’s pauldrons. A killing light glittered in the eyes of the First Captain. A raging fury that sought only to destroy.

Tigurius felt as if his entire body was immersed in an icy lake, his limbs leaden and numb. His thoughts were gelid, slow and dull-witted. So strange that his life would be ended at the hands of one of his battle-brothers; *that* was a future he had never suspected. Agemman forced him to his knees, choking the life from him with every second.

Gunshots echoed from the walls, and the bloodshed in the courtyard spread from the epicentres of violence like an airborne infection. Tigurius dropped his staff and clamped his hands on Agemman’s wrists as the crystals woven into his armour’s hood pulsed with life.

Warmth flowed into his mind, melting the cold grip of unreasoning anger that held him in its grip. He saw with total clarity, and his body threw off the unnatural belligerence driving him to violence. Tigurius opened his mind to the psychic light around the fortress, seeing a red mist seeping into the shrine fortress through the cracks in the stonework and pouring over the walls like a creeping fog. Wherever it touched, it lit the fires of resentment, jealousy and bitterness. It withered the nobility of humanity and fanned the flames of anger and hatred.

Tigurius pushed against the red mist, driving it out of his own body and sending golden light into Agemman, purging his spirit of the enemy’s warpcraft in a heartbeat.

The First Captain sagged against Tigurius, the furious light in his eyes replaced with horrified understanding. His grip slackened and Tigurius pushed himself to his feet as Agemman slumped against the wall for support.

“Varro…” said Agemman. “I… Emperor’s blood, forgive me! I…”

“Apologise later,” rasped Tigurius. “The daemons will be coming.”

Agemman nodded, recovering his composure with a speed that reminded Tigurius why he was the Regent of Ultramar and Captain of the 1st Company. Tigurius reached out and placed his hand on the dulled sigil on the wall, feeling its strength eroding in the face of the enemy warpcraft.

Barely any hint of power was left.

“Stupid,” he hissed. “Should have felt it, should have known. Too tired…”

Tigurius closed his eyes and allowed his consciousness to flow into the sigil, spreading through the walls to the others worked into the stonework. He poured his energy into the wards, replenishing them with power and strengthening them against attack. All along the wall, the sigils blazed with light, and the red haze over the fortress faded like morning mist.

Lingering traces of it remained, but Tigurius knew they were few and far between, remaining only as long as it took the more aggressive mortals to realise the horror of their behaviour. The icy temperatures retreated, and Tigurius let out a shuddering breath as he felt the malign power of the enemy dissipate. Confusion and shame filled the fortress, but Tigurius forced himself to ignore it as he felt a wave of revulsion fill his belly with bilious acid. He opened his eyes and his heart lurched at the sight before him.

Thousands of daemons, horned, blood-hued and scaled, charged towards Castra Tanagra with smoking black swords carried over their shoulders. Capering monsters with livid skin and pincer arms followed them, and in their wake came lumpen monstrosities that looked like corpses fresh from a plague pit. Daemonic vigour empowered them, and Tigurius saw they would never be able to hold the wall against such a horde.

“First Company,” shouted Agemman. “Stand to! Courage and honour!”

“No,” said Tigurius, recovering his staff from the ramparts. “Be ready to fall back.”

Agemman’s jaw clenched, but he nodded curtly, and Tigurius hauled himself along the wall towards the edge of the breach. Marneus Calgar had already marshalled his warriors and a wall of lowered blades stood ready to face the daemons. Tigurius leapt from the ramparts and landed behind the breach with a thunderous crack of stone. He ran over to the Chapter Master and said, “You aren’t seriously going to face this charge are you?”

“What else is there?” said Calgar. “I did it at Zalathras, and I can do it here. You remember that battle? Day and night I fought the greenskins and not one of them got past me.”

“This is not Zalathras, and these are not greenskins,” said Tigurius. “You must withdraw to the keep. It is the only way.”

Calgar glanced at the walls, thinly held by the warriors of the 1st Company and those few mortal soldiers from the *Caesar* and a handful of civilians. He saw the truth of Tigurius' words in an instant.

"Can you give us the time we will need?"

"I can," promised Tigurius. "Now go!"

Calgar nodded and broadcast a force-wide communication. "Everyone back to the keep! Fall back by squads, but leave no man behind. Courage and honour. Calgar out."

All along the length of the wall, men and women streamed back towards the safety of the keep while the warriors of the 1st remained on the walls. Crisp volleys of bolter fire boomed and missiles streaked from their launch tubes.

"Go, my lord," said Tigurius. "I will keep the daemons at bay long enough."

The Chapter Master placed a hand on his shoulder. "I will stand with you, Varro."

Tigurius took a deep breath and strode into the breach, planting his staff in the ground beside him. Its power was enormous, with a connection to the immaterium that was unmatched by any other such talisman. He would need all the help he could get. The daemons were almost upon the fortress, a raging tide of nightmares made real and dragged from the warp by a power beyond comprehension. To maintain a horde such as this required a vast reservoir of power, and Tigurius knew that when the Thrice Born chose to take the field of battle, there would be a slaughter unlike anything the Ultramarines had witnessed since the Battle for Macragge.

Tigurius hoped this battle would not have the same consequences for the 1st Company.

He drew upon his every reserve of power, using his staff to drink deeply of the warp's energies. Strange tides flowed into him, cold and deep, but he welcomed the surging power, shaping it into lambent fire that lit his flesh and blazed from the skull atop his staff.

The daemons were almost upon him. He could see the dead lights in their eyes and feel the furnace heat of their unnatural bodies. Darkness empowered them, but the light would destroy them. The fire raged within Tigurius, a seething conflagration that would consume him if left unchecked.

Tigurius raised his staff as the daemons scrambled towards him and slammed it down.

White fire exploded from the impact, and a searing wall of white flame erupted from the rock of the mountains. Those daemons closest to Tigurius were blown to cindered ash, their forms utterly destroyed without hope of renewal. Like a match dropped in a ditch of promethium, the flames raced around the

circumference of Castra Tanagra billowing over the walls like a living thing. The gold sigils blazed with light, magnifying the killing power of the brilliant fire. Its touch was death to the daemons, and they screeched and howled in rage as its cleansing fires burned with blinding light. The mindless things of the horde hurled themselves at the walls, only to shriek in deathly agony as the fire burned them and spread across their bodies to devour them.

Tigurius fought to hold onto the power flowing through him, feeling the fire draw upon his own vital essences as it burned. He looked up at the walls, seeing the warriors of the 1st Company falling back. Agemman was the last to quit the walls, and Tigurius felt his shame.

The daemons hurled themselves at the fire, and the mountains shook with their death screams. As each was destroyed, Tigurius felt his grip on the energy empowering it falter. He could not hold onto it much longer without dreadful consequences, and he felt the enormous power in orbit around Talassar turn its baleful gaze upon him.

It was as though he looked into the darkest abyss, a vast emptiness from which there could be no return. Tigurius quailed before the horror of ultimate oblivion, and knew there could be no victory against such power.

The last of his strength was gone, and Tigurius felt himself falling into the abyss.

Powerful hands caught him, and he felt himself being carried away. Blades were clashing and bolters were firing, but all Tigurius could feel was the cold emptiness of the void.

His eyes slowly closed and he heard a voice calling to him.

“I’ve got you, Varro,” said Marneus Calgar. “I’ve got you.”

THE RHINO GROUND its way through the streets of Corinth, its hatches shut tight and its engine belching what must surely be its last, consumptive exhalations. Scipio touched a beaten iron plate on the back of the driver’s compartment. Laenus had scratched a crude representation of the Mechanicus cog, swearing it was all that kept the vehicle running.

Scipio wasn’t about to contradict him, and gave thanks to whatever power was at work.

He looked out through the commander’s periscope. The glass on the outside was scuffed and cracked, though they had cleaned it as best they could. The Bloodborn soldiers were few and far between, most lying in drunken stupors in their billets or slumped against walls daubed in profane graffiti. Those soldiers still on their feet gave them a wide berth, bowing and hammering their fists

against their chests.

Scipio saw only a few traitor Astartes, but even they appeared distracted.

Yet for all the disorder, there was a definite shift towards a more sophisticated layer of organisation the deeper into the city they penetrated. The praetor of Corinth had dwelled in a utilitarian structure of understated grandeur, its columned portico and domed roof rearing up in the distance. Sunlight gleamed from the silver ramparts of its gatehouse, and Scipio hoped that Salombar might be vainglorious enough to make her lair within, as it was certainly the grandest structure still standing.

The arterial roads leading into the heart of the city were patrolled, and a number of timber sawhorses were set up to block the approaches to the inner precincts. Only Bloodborn warriors manned these checkpoints, and at the sight of an Astartes Rhino, the sawhorses were quickly moved off the road.

“Slovenly,” said Scipio as they passed through. “They don’t even check who’s inside.”

“I’ll take slovenly enemies over efficient ones any day,” said Helicas. His missile launcher was standing upright between his knees, the blue and red warhead already loaded. It was a violation of every safety protocol in the Codex, but when the time came to fight, Scipio didn’t want any delay in getting support fire laid down.

“You’re sure this is a good idea, sergeant?” asked Coltanis, his plasma gun held across his lap. Scipio turned to face the warrior. Clad in his full battle armour, Coltanis was every inch a warrior of Ultramar. The gold of his pauldron trims gleamed in the unkind light of the troop compartment, but the lustre of his plate was clear.

“No, but I’m all out of other ideas, and it’s time we took charge of this situation. I’m tired of skulking in the shadows. That’s a job for Scouts,” He was met with growls of approbation, for his words reflected every warrior’s sentiment exactly. They were the best fighters in the galaxy in a city full of enemies. It was time to let slip these dogs of war. Though he and his squad often acted as the eyes and ears of the 2nd Company, it was in the crucible of combat they were at their best.

Each of the Thunderbolts was clad in his power armour, and Scipio felt renewed to once again be encased in plates of ceramite and armaplas. To be an Ultramarines warrior did not require armour, but to be clad in the blue and gold gave Scipio a sense of purpose and belonging that he lacked whenever he went without. He touched the skull icon upon his plastron, closing his eyes and offering a benediction to the warrior spirit within his armour.

None of the prisoners they had taken had given them any hint that the Corsair

Queen was in Corinth, but that very absence of corroboration gave Scipio hope that his suspicion was correct. Kaarja Salombar *was* in Corinth, he was sure of it.

Now he would put that theory to the test.

"Sergeant, you might want to take a look at this," said Laenus from the driver's seat.

Scipio pressed his eyes to the periscope once again.

He saw another roadblock, but this one was manned by traitor Astartes in the orange and black of the Claws of Lorek. Six of them, each with a weapon slung at the hip. Their leader marched into the centre of the road and held up his hand for them to stop.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Laenus.

Scipio spun the locking wheel on the commander's hatch and said, "Punch through, and if you can crush any of those bastards underneath, so much the better."

He pushed open the hatch and activated the power feed to the pintle-mounted bolters.

"This is it, Thunderbolts," he said. "Time to strike."

STRIPPED OF HIS armour and bound to a bare steel excruciation chair, Ardaric Vaanes was a pitiful sight. His body was pale, bleached of all colour by virtue of his Chapter's heritage, and Uriel found himself unable to think of anything to say that wouldn't sound trite.

"They say you will only speak to me," he said at last.

Vaanes looked up, and Uriel tried to read his expression. Part hate, part relief, and part… part some other emotion he couldn't identify. So swift did it cross the renegade's face that he wasn't even sure he'd seen it, but there had been something he had tried to hide.

"They were right," said Vaanes. "I know there will be others listening, but I wanted to speak to you face to face once again."

The interrogation chamber was a square box deep inside *Lex Tredecim*, four metres by four metres, with a wide spectrum of recording devices invisibly incorporated into its walls, floor and ceiling. Nothing the captive said, did or felt would be missed.

"Where are Honsou and his Iron Warriors?" said Uriel, stepping in close to the renegade Raven Guard. "They did not take the field of battle, and Honsou is not a man to miss such slaughter."

"The battle's over?"

"This stage of it," answered Uriel. "The Black Basilica is gone and with it

your corrupted magos. He tried to take control of the Praetorians, but he was defeated, and your forces were pushed back to their bridgehead."

"Of course you realise that the battle was just a sideshow?"

"The fifth tunneller," said Uriel. "Honsou and the Iron Warriors are in it, are they not?"

Vaanes nodded. "Him and Xiomagra's Blade dancers. Honsou wasn't even sure you'd notice it."

"He always was good at underestimating me."

"We all were."

"So where is he going? Do not lie to me, or I will hand you over to the people beyond that door. They want you executed right now," said Uriel.

That was only partly true. Namira Suzaku had pushed for Vaanes' execution, but Aethon Shaan, battered and burn-scarred from his battle aboard the Black Basilica, had been adamant. Vaanes was to be returned to Deliverance for judgment by the Raven Guard.

"That doesn't surprise me," replied Vaanes. "The Imperium has always been pretty unimaginative with its punishments. You should see the many and varied ways a warlord of Chaos keeps order. It's not pretty but it keeps the underlings in line."

"And that is to be admired?"

Vaanes shook his head. "You're not listening to me. You're just hearing what you want to hear, so if you're going to kill me, just do it and stop wasting time. I thought I could talk to you because you might actually use your brain instead of jumping for the nearest executioner's spike."

"Then tell me where the fifth tunnelling machine has gone." Vaanes said nothing, and Uriel stepped towards him.

"I'll tell you, but first you have to offer me something," said Vaanes.

"You are a traitor," spat Uriel. "Why should I offer you anything?"

"How can you ask me that?" said Vaanes. "Aren't we old comrades in arms? Didn't we cross a world of the damned together? Didn't we storm a fortress of the Iron Warriors? Do you know how many people can say that who are still breathing?"

"Aye, we did all those things," said Uriel. "And I offered you a chance for redemption once the foe was defeated, but you refused it."

"Redemption? It's not for the likes of me, Uriel. I tried it, but it didn't take."

"So you chose damnation instead?"

"I thought I had, but turns out that's not for me either."

"What are you talking about?"

"This," said Vaanes, twisting in the steel chair to show the curve of his deltoid

muscle. Uriel leaned down, seeing a stark black raven tattooed on Vaanes' skin. "This is why I surrendered to you."

"A Chapter tattoo you're not fit to bear," said Uriel. "What of it?"

"You don't understand, I know. I'm not sure I do either."

"And what do you mean you surrendered? We captured you."

"You think you could capture a warrior trained on the Ravenspire?" laughed Vaanes. "I *let* you take me."

"Say I believe you, and I do not, why would you do that?"

Vaanes looked away and sighed. "I don't know that either, not for sure, but when I saw you I knew I didn't want to go back to the Iron Warriors."

"So why did you fight so hard?"

Vaanes shrugged. "I couldn't let the Newborn see me go down without a fight."

"The Newborn?"

"The thing they made out of your genetic material on Medrengard."

"It doesn't have a name?"

"It never seemed to want one," said Vaanes. "I think it had a name once, but it doesn't want to remember it. We never gave it one, because… well, no one cared enough to."

"I know its name," said Uriel. "I've seen what they did to it. I felt its fear and its pain."

"So it wasn't all a one way street after all," said Vaanes. "It learned of you too. How do you think the Iron Warriors have been one step ahead of you all this time?"

"It knows my thoughts?"

"Something like that. It thinks like you, straight up and down, and no matter how much Honsou and Grendel fill its head with their talk of Chaos, it can't escape what you gave it."

"And what's that?"

"Nobility," said Vaanes, and Uriel saw the earnest need to be believed on the renegade's face. "It wants to be better than it was created to be, but everything around it beats it and crushes any attempt it makes to lift its head out of the horror. If I'd thought about it at all, I'd have felt sorry for it, but I've seen the things it can do, and pity is the last thing the Newborn needs. It's a monster, but it didn't have to be."

"And what about you?" asked Uriel. "Are you still a monster?"

"I don't know, probably," said Vaanes, nodding towards the tattoo on his shoulder. "But maybe not. I gouged that tattoo out a long time ago. But now it's back. You tell me what that means."

“It means nothing,” said Uriel, gripping Vaanes beneath the chin and tiling his head back. For a split second he wanted nothing more than to wrench it to the side and snap the renegade’s neck. He could do it, he could kill this enemy before him right now, but he did not. Killing a prisoner was without honour, and was beneath him.

He released Vaanes and turned away. “What is it you think it means?”

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t there until we made for Calth. Perhaps it’s a sign I’m not beyond redemption. Perhaps its Corax making sure he leaves his mark on my corpse. Who knows for sure?”

“Redemption isn’t something you get offered more than once,” said Uriel. “You made your choice and now it’s time to face the consequences. We caught you, and now you are going to pay for all the lives you have ended. On Tarsis Ultra, on Tarentus.”

As Uriel spoke, Vaanes looked away, unable to look him in the eye as he listed his crimes. Perhaps this was merely guilt, not remorse. Was there a difference?

“What is it that you want, Vaanes?” said Uriel.

“I want to die,” said the renegade. “I’m not strong enough to walk the path of righteousness, and I won’t damn my soul to the warp. There’s no middle ground for the likes of me, so when this is done, promise you’ll kill me and I’ll show you where they’ve gone.”

Uriel looked deep into the hooded eyes of the man he had fought beside and watched turn his back on all that he once stood for. Within Vaanes there was the core of a great man, but one cursed with some deep-rooted flaw that had seen him undone.

“What happened to you?” said Uriel.

“I’ll never tell you,” said Vaanes. “Now do we have a deal?”

Uriel considered lying to Vaanes, after all, what was a promise made to a traitor? No oath could be considered binding made to one such as he, but even as he formed the thought, he knew that to lie to Vaanes was to diminish himself.

He nodded. “Tell me where Honsou has gone.”

Vaanes saw his truth and nodded gratefully. He let out a long, shuddering breath, and to Uriel it seemed as though a great and terrible burden was suddenly lifted from his shoulders. Vaanes sat up straighter in the chair, looking more like a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes than ever before.

“No,” said Vaanes. “I’ll show you.”

NINETEEN

BOLTER SHELLS AND las-rounds smacked off the armoured flanks of the Rhino, ringing from its armour like steel rain. One shell had punched through a corroded track guard and ricocheted around the interior of the troop compartment, but most of its force had been spent and the armour of the Thunderbolts protected them from harm.

Scipio worked the twin bolters in the cupola from side to side, only shooting when he was sure of taking down multiple foes. Not that there was any shortage of targets since they had blown through the roadblock. Scipio had taken down three of the enemy warriors with concentrated bursts of fire, and Laenus had crushed another beneath the Rhino's tracks.

No sooner had they penetrated the inner precincts of the city than Scipio had been forced to revise his earlier opinion of the Bloodborn army. The central plaza of Corinth was now packed with prefabricated structures laid out with military precision. Colourful pennons flapped in the wind, and a garish blue banner trailed from one of the palace towers. What had once been an open space where the citizens of Corinth had taken the air, visited a museum or gallery, was now an armed camp. Almost every square metre was taken up with ammo stores, weapon dumps, barracks or training facilities.

Here was organisation and discipline to rival any Imperial Guard regiment. *This* was an army of conquest, and the sight of such logistical competence chilled Scipio to the bone. Their battered and smoke-belching Rhino crashed through barracks tents, shooting ranges and mess halls, leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. Burning canvas from crushed tents trailed behind them like the sail of an ancient fire ship sent out to its doom amid an enemy fleet.

The metaphor was an apt one, thought Scipio.

Bloodborn warriors spilled from a barracks building, men and women clad in a riot of colours and armour. Scipio spotted several blue sashes of officers and he felt a surge of exultation. These were corsairs of Kaarja Salombar!

Scipio turned the bolters on them, firing a long burst of explosive rounds. Seven men dropped, torn up by the volley, and the others scattered. Surrounded by so many temporary structures, the Bloodborn were finding it hard to draw a bead on the Thunderbolts' Rhino, but those that could were unstinting in their return fire.

A las-round grazed Scipio's shoulder and a hard round spanked from the

hatch rim on his left. Zipping tracers whipped past his head, and Scipio swung the bolters around, sending a series of sawing blasts through a row of Bloodborn tents as their occupants ran for weapons and armour.

“For Guilliman and the Emperor!” he yelled, working the fire of his guns over the enemy. It felt good to be fighting again, to be taking a measure of revenge for the suffering these warriors had inflicted on the people of Espandor. The Rhino lurched forward and Scipio heard the awful squeal of grinding mechanisms and the unmistakable sound of an engine seizing up.

He risked a glance over his shoulder to see flames and thick ropes of black smoke pouring from the rear of the Rhino. Laenus had worked wonders coaxing every last shred of life from the vehicle, but its spirit was done and could go on no more. That it had taken them this far was a miracle. It was time to disembark and continue the fight on foot.

Scipio scanned the terrain, modified as it was by the Bloodborn constructions and additions. He already had a destination in mind, but whether the captured Rhino would reach it was another matter entirely.

“Laenus, point us towards the gatehouse before the praetor’s palace!”

“I don’t know it’ll get that far, but I’ll try,” shouted Laenus.

A line of colourfully-clad Bloodborn warriors had formed a firing line ahead of the Rhino, and Scipio dropped inside as a volley of las-fire hammered the front of the Rhino. A missile slammed into the Rhino’s glacis, but Helicas and Coltanis had fixed sheet steel plating over the vehicle’s front and the missile corkscrewed away without detonating. More fire teams were preparing to shoot, and the Thunderbolts had seconds at best before the Rhino was reduced to a smouldering wreck.

“Everyone out!” shouted Scipio.

Nivian hauled open the door and Coltanis leapt out of the moving vehicle. Scipio followed, and the rest of the Thunderbolts hit the ground running right behind him. Laenus was last to exit, but the Rhino kept going, spewing smoke and flames as it careened towards the Bloodborn. The enemy parted to let it roll through, but no sooner had the Rhino ground to a halt when its engine block exploded, cutting down the Bloodborn and shooting plumes of burning fuel in all directions.

Perhaps the Emperor was watching, perhaps it was simply a fortuitous coincidence or perhaps the warrior spirit of the Rhino was exacting a measure of revenge for its harsh treatment. Scipio would always believe it to be the latter.

Using the smoke and confusion as cover, Scipio led the Thunderbolts through the crowded mess of burning tents and timber-framed barracks. Fires were spreading through the plaza, and screams echoed from the buildings on the edge

of the plaza. Amid the grey and brown of canvas and prefabricated steel, the brilliant blue of the Ultramarines armour was a blaze of colour amid the drabness.

A volley of shots reached out to them, and Scipio felt the impacts on his back and shoulders. He swung to face the source of the shots and sighted down the length of the gun at a group of corsairs led by a woman with crossed blue sashes across her chest and a cockaded bicorn hat. Ludicrously impractical on a battlefield, it gave Scipio a point of aim.

“Mark your targets,” he shouted. “Ammo is scarce, so make every shot count.”

He fired and the corsair woman pitched backward, her shoulder and head vanishing in an explosion of bone fragments and red mist. A quick burst of fire killed half a dozen more and sent the rest diving for cover. “With me!” shouted Scipio. “Make for the palace gatehouse.” Scipio set off towards their objective, running with his bolter at his shoulder.

Its golden roof shone like the brightest sun, and the colourful facade of its painted stone seemed like the grandest most magnificent thing Scipio had ever seen. Though the Bloodborn had defiled its lower reaches, it was easy to imagine the building in its prime.

A high wall of polished grey granite surrounded the palace, embellished with high towers of fluted marble and statues of heroic Ultramarines whose lineage could be traced back to Espandor. At the southernmost curve of the wall was a gatehouse flanked by two drum towers. The silver-topped ramparts of these towers were now home to grotesque anti-aircraft guns with multiple black steel barrels aimed skyward.

Bloodborn warriors were moving to intercept them, but again the crowded nature of the plaza was Scipio’s ally. The Thunderbolts formed a fighting wedge on Scipio, and they plunged into the heart of the enemy with unmatched fury. Masked warriors came at them with bayonet-tipped rifles or curved swords and pistols. Scipio switched to his chainsword, cutting through the Bloodborn with brutally mechanical strokes of his roaring blade.

Nivian fired the pistol Scipio had given him, while Coltanis targeted enemy support teams and destroyed them with controlled bursts of plasma fire. They forged a path through the enemy, never stopping and never allowing the Bloodborn to steal the momentum of their charge.

Scipio saw six Rhinos and a Land Raider thunder into the plaza, garishly painted vehicles in orange and black. Another two in the rust-brown blood of the Skulltakers kept going, crushing Bloodborn soldiers in their desire to reach Scipio’s warriors.

The plaza was in uproar now, flames and gunfire and the screams of the dying filling the air. The gatehouse had once boasted an armoured portal of banded Espandor oak and iron, but nothing now remained of it save twisted hinge mechanisms and blast marks. A corsair skiff was manoeuvring through the gateway, its gunners turning the prow cannon on the Thunderbolts.

“Coltanis,” shouted Scipio. “Take it out!”

“Plasma’s still charging,” came the terse reply from his specialist gunner.

There was no avoiding the cannon, and Scipio just hoped its gunner was too hurried, too unskilled or too inaccurate to prove a threat. The weapon blazed with light and noise, and Scipio hurled himself to the side as a hurricane of high-energy las-bolts tore up the cobbled plaza. Stone fragments pinged from Scipio’s armour and he felt a fiery pain down the side of his thigh where a beam had struck him and melted part of his armour.

He rolled to his side, seeing that two of his warriors were down. Seius and Asellio, their amour rent by molten gouges from which no one, not even a Space Marine, could survive. Howling Bloodborn warriors and corsairs were charging towards them, and the skiffs gunner was lining up another shot.

A blue-white bolt of energy shot up from the ground to punch through the underside of the skiff. It blazed up into its body and struck the energy cells at the heart of its anti-grav mechanisms. A seething plume of fire exploded out of the gateway, funnelled into a cone of orange flame that rolled over the Ultramarines and set nearby Bloodborn warriors aflame.

Scipio pushed himself to his feet, knowing they had been handed another boon.

“Good shooting, Coltanis,” said Scipio, running into the flame-wreathed gateway. He vaulted the wreckage and stepped over a dozen charred and blackened bodies. The Thunderbolts followed him, their armour protecting them from the lethal flames as Scipio kicked down the door to the leftmost tower. Ten corsairs filled its lower chamber, but Scipio’s first volley cut down four of them. They fired back, and he grunted in pain as one shot penetrated his chest armour. Then Laenus and Nivian were at his side.

The Bloodborn died in a hail of shots, and Scipio pounded up the stairs of the tower, making his way towards the roof. A mix of Bloodborn and Corsairs filled the tower, forty in all, but in the cramped confines of the stairs and side chambers, they were no match for the Space Marines, who slaughtered them all with grim efficiency.

Scipio heard shouts from below, but by now they had reached the roof of the tower. The gunners manning the anti-aircraft batteries had depressed the barrels of their quad-guns, but too late to make any difference to their fate. The pursuers

below could only be traitor Astartes. Who else could survive the flames in the gateway?

Scipio looked out over the chaos of the plaza. Fires raged unchecked through the centre of the city, and though it grieved him to set a city of Ultramar ablaze, he knew it was in service of a greater good. Thousands of Bloodborn and corsairs garrisoned the city. More were pouring into the plaza with every passing moment.

“Coltanis, Helicas,” he said. “Watch the doorway to the stairs. We’re going to have enemy Astartes coming through there any moment.”

Scipio pointed to the giant anti-aircraft guns and said, “Laenus! Take Natalis, Isatus and Bradua and get those guns turned around. We’ll be needing them before long.”

Laenus nodded and set to work on the big guns. “Sergeant!” cried Nivian. “You’re going to want to see this,” Scipio ran over to the palace side of the towers and followed Nivian’s extended arm.

Surging from the palace were three heavily laden skiffs, up-armoured from the one they had destroyed in the gateway and adorned with streaming banners, gilded decorations and outrageously flamboyant iconography. They offended the eye with their lurid colours, but it was the figure standing on the command deck of the centre skimmer that caught Scipio’s eye.

It was a woman, barely clad in strips of lacquered leather and vivid fabrics that caught the light and made her shimmer with colour. With more than a hint of inhuman eldar to her lithe frame, and a wild mane of azure hair flowing around her shoulders, there could be no mistaking the identity of the woman.

“Kaarja Salombar,” hissed Scipio. “The Corsair Queen.”

Nivian stood alongside him. “Looks like we’ve got her riled up, sergeant.”

Scipio smiled. “I think you might be right, Nivian.”

His helmet vox, so long inactive while they hunted their prey, crackled as he activated it once more and broadcast on the emergency frequency Captain Sicarius had chosen for the execute signal.

“This is Scipio Vorolanus,” he said, ducking down as a blizzard of gunfire struck the parapet. “Location: the centre of Corinth. Code Suzerin! Code Suzerin! I have a visual on the Corsair Queen. Repeat, I have a visual on the Corsair Queen.”

The vox fizzed and popped, and Scipio feared that his message hadn’t got through when a voice he recognised as Sergeant Daceus of the Lions of Macragge broke through the static.

“Acknowledged,” said Daceus. “Hold position and be ready. Out.”

“Here they come!” shouted Helicas as the traitor Astartes burst onto the roof

of the tower.

THE CAVERNAS DRACONIS cut through the upper mantle of Calth in a warren of tunnels that no one had yet fully mapped. New tunnels were being cut every year and, since cave-ins were far from uncommon, most maps were obsolete within a few years of their commissioning.

Four Rhinos descended into the heart of Calth, delving into this labyrinthine network of caves with a traitor as their guide. The battle to take Four Valleys Gorge had fallen silent for now, the Bloodborn forces content to lick their wounds and regroup after the devastating destruction of the Black Basilica. Chaplain Clausel commanded the Ultramarines forces, a role he had accepted with stiff formality after Uriel had transferred command.

Two Ultramarines Rhinos led the way, one containing the Swords of Calth, the other Pasanius' Firebrands. Following them was a liquid black Rhino in the livery of the Raven Guard and a maroon coloured vehicle with the skull-stamped "I" of the holy ordos emblazoned on its side. Namira Suzaku preferred to work in the shadows, but when she operated in the open, she wanted it known.

Ardaric Vaanes was secured in the lead vehicle, sitting next to Uriel and chained to the bulkhead stanchions with unbreakable fetters. Two of Suzaku's acolytes sat opposite Vaanes, each holding a man-catcher fixed around his neck. With a flick of a switch, the spiked collars would contract and crush the renegade's throat, and their thumbs hovered eagerly over those switches. Uriel's higher self told him not to trust Vaanes, but his gut was telling him that the warrior might yet be seeking to salvage what shreds of honour were left to him.

Captain Shaan and Inquisitor Suzaku had been hard to convince, but with time against them, they had reluctantly concluded that there was no choice but to accede to Vaanes' demand that he lead them into the depths. They had set off immediately, driving through the shattered remains of Castra Occidens and into the softly-lit tunnels that led deep beneath the planet's surface.

They travelled for nine hours, stopping only once to refuel in one of Calth's cavern cities, a sprawling agricultural community named Apamea Ragiana. Set within a range of rolling hills and thick forests, the town nestled in the lee of a towering cathedral of the Emperor, its spire a mighty representation of a soaring eagle.

Journeying onwards, the small convoy left the main thoroughfares through the caverns and split off onto the side tunnels more commonly frequented by mining rigs and prospecting teams. Ever onwards they travelled, and the temperature slowly climbed the deeper they went, each turn of a passage or

corkscrewing loop downwards taking them further and further away from signs of civilization.

The tunnels became progressively more rugged the deeper they went, eventually casting off all signs of artificial construction and resembling clefts split in the rock by tectonic movement. Something about these tunnels was familiar to Uriel, as though he had travelled these ways before. His eidetic memory sifted through the times he had returned to Calth since becoming a warrior of the Ultramarines, but he could recall nothing save blurred memories of clambering over rocks and across treacherous ledges. “Take the right-hand tunnel and follow it for three kilometres,” said Vaanes, his voice strained with the effort of speaking.

“Where are you taking us?” said Uriel, watching the pict-slate display of the caverns beyond the armoured hull of the Rhino. “These caves have been abandoned for centuries.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said Vaanes.

“If you think you are leading us into a trap—”

“You’ll what? Kill me?” laughed Vaanes, though the effort made him wince. “If that’s all I wanted, I’d have had you kill me up on the surface. Why bother with this charade?”

“To help Honsou kill me?” suggested Uriel.

“He doesn’t need my help for that,” said Vaanes. “And it’s not just about you, Ventris. Honsou wants to destroy everything you love, and he doesn’t care how it happens. There’s a daemon lord that thinks it’s running the show, but that’s only because Honsou’s letting it think that. It wants to destroy Ultramar just as much as he does.”

“Why?” said Uriel. “I mean, why specifically Ultramar?”

“You think it confides in me?” snapped Vaanes. “It’s a daemon lord, what other reason does it need?”

Uriel shook his head. “I do not pretend to know the minds of daemons, but this is the third time it has attacked Ultramar. There must be a reason it hates us so much.”

“Perhaps Roboute Guilliman looked at him the wrong way.”

“Don’t say his name,” hissed Brutus Cyprian. “You’re not fit to speak of the primarch.”

“Touchy, isn’t he?” smirked Vaanes.

“He is right,” said Uriel. “You are not worthy to speak his name.”

Vaanes shrugged and lapsed into silence. The journey continued for another hour, taking numerous turns down into the rock until the Rhinos emerged into a wide, cylindrical cavern some three hundred metres wide with ridged, volcanic

walls of glistening black rock. The heat was incredible, and steam gusted from cracks in the glassy floor. Moisture dripped from the ceiling and walls, pooling in sinkholes and running along heat-carved channels.

Vaanes leaned down to study the pict display, noting the childish representations of dragons on the walls, murals hacked into the rock or painted with broad sweeps of blue and green paint.

The renegade sat back and said, “We’re here.”

Uriel frowned and popped the hatch of the Rhino, climbing out to survey the cavern in which they found themselves. Moisture immediately beaded on his armour and he felt the awesome humidity on the skin of his face.

“I know this place,” he said, his mind opening up with childhood memories.

He climbed out and dropped to the rock of the cavern, remembering running through here as a youngster with his friends. The walls were covered in images of dragons, large and small, elaborate and simple. From where they had entered the cavern to beyond sight, every square metre of wall was covered in them.

The passengers of the Rhinos debarked and gathered around Uriel, looking to him to explain why they had stopped.

“What is this place?” asked Suzaku, looking at the thousands of carved and painted dragons. Uriel turned to the inquisitor. She had changed since the battle of Four Valleys Gorge. Her acolyte had been killed during the fighting, and he supposed they must have been closer than he had imagined. Perhaps she wasn’t as cold and aloof as she made out.

“The Dragon’s Gullet,” explained Uriel. “That is what we used to call this place.”

Pasanius smiled, looking up at the ceiling, a look of forgotten wonder creasing his open features in a wide smile.

“We thought this place was the mouth of a buried dragon,” said Pasanius. “It became kind of a dare for children to come down here and paint a picture of what they thought the dragon looked like on the walls. Calth’s children have been doing it for centuries.”

Pasanius gave Uriel a knowing look. “And if I remember right, you got the highest one.”

“It’s probably been bettered since,” said Uriel.

Vaanes laughed. “I can’t imagine you as a child, Ventris. I just bet you were a barrel of laughs with that oh so serious manner of yours.”

“Shut your mouth, Vaanes,” said Pasanius.

“As much as I enjoy reminiscing over childhood memories, I don’t see how this gets us closer to defeating Honsou,” said Aethon Shaan.

Uriel walked away from the group, casting his mind back over a hundred

years ago to when he ran these caves as a youth. He remembered the games, the dares and the contests of strength, speed and endurance played by the boys and girls of Calth in preparation for the selection games when warriors from the Ultramarines would judge who was worthy to be taken to Macragge.

"It was a test of courage to see how high up the walls you could get your dragon," said Uriel, letting the trickle of memories build as they seeped from his life before the Adeptus Astartes. Shaped before his cerebral architecture was remade by ancient science, these memories came slowly, only gradually coalescing in his mind.

"I wanted to be the dragon painter everyone talked about for years to come and climbed over a hundred metres up the wall with two pots of paint hanging from my belt."

"Here?" said Suzaku, looking up at the walls. "Which one is yours?"

"Mine is about three kilometres further in," said Uriel, waving down the tunnel. "It was insane: the rocks were slick with water and razor sharp. If I had fallen it would have killed me, but I saw a jutting corbel of rock I thought it would be a safe perch to paint from. I almost fell three times, but I made it, though my hands were raw and bloody with the effort. My arms were shaking and I could barely hold the brush, but I painted a red-gold dragon with wide wings and a barbed spine higher than anyone else had ever managed. I finished my dragon, and was getting ready to climb down when I saw a deft in the wall that led deeper into the cavern, a lightless tunnel that twisted into the rock for hundreds of metres until…"

"Until what?" said Shaan.

"Throne of Terra!" hissed Uriel, running back to his Rhino. "I know why Honsou is here."

THREE KILOMETERS FURTHER along the tunnel, they came upon a scene of devastation. The floor of the cavern had collapsed in a vast sinkhole and portions of the wall had fallen inwards, forming a steep, nibble-strewn slope that led up to a scorched wound torn in the rock. A giant tunneller reared from the sinkhole, its iron flanks buckled and dented. Steam and hot gasses vented from its blunted snout and pulverised rock dust cascaded from its body.

Its hull doors hung open. Whoever had penetrated this deeply into Calth was long gone.

And Uriel knew exactly where they'd gone.

The Rhinos slewed to a halt at the base of the rubble slope and Uriel vaulted from the troop compartment with the Swords of Calth behind him. The Raven

Guard were already ahead of him, ghosting up the rubble towards the gouge in the rocky walls. Uriel scrambled up the slope towards the corbel of rock he had once clung to as a young boy.

“What is beyond here?” demanded Shaan, as Uriel reached the rock face.

“Something forgotten,” said Uriel, twisting to look at Vaanes as Suzaku’s acolytes laboured to manoeuvre him up the slope. “Something I never told anyone.”

“You didn’t need to,” said Vaanes. “You knew it, so the Newborn knew it, even if it didn’t know why.”

Uriel almost smiled as he saw the faded image of a red-gold dragon painted on the walls next to the hole blasted in the rock. Pasanius knelt beside the painted dragon.

“Not bad,” he said, tapping the rock. “Looks like yours is still the highest.”

“Calth must not breed them as tough as you anymore,” said Vaanes.

Uriel ignored him and examined the blasted hole in the rock. Shaped charges had blown the cleft wide enough for three Space Marines to walk abreast. He took a step towards the cave mouth, but before he could enter the tunnel, Aethon Shaan took hold of his arm.

“Let us go first,” he said. “Walking the darkness is Raven Guard work.”

Uriel wanted to tell him that this was Calth, which made it Ultramarines work, but he saw the sense in Shaan’s words. Reluctantly, he nodded.

“Very well,” he said. “Go.”

Shaan turned to his immediate subordinate and said, “Kyre, wing left, claw low. Raven’s shadow, high and dark.”

Kyre nodded, though Uriel had no idea what Shaan had just ordered.

The dark-armoured warriors slid into the tunnel, and within moments Uriel had lost them in the gloom. He blinked, enhancing the vision mode in his augmetic eye, but the Raven Guard were invisible.

“How do they do that?” said Pasanius at his side. “Even old Telion isn’t that good.”

“I’ll tell him you said that,” replied Uriel, setting off after the Raven Guard.

He entered the tunnel, with Inquisitor Suzaku and her retinue sandwiched between his Swords of Calth and the Firebrands. The glow of Pasanius’ flamer bathed the black walls in a bruised colour, flickering from the humid moisture dripping from the walls and throwing their shadows out before them.

Uriel remembered scrambling along this tunnel in the dark, and the thrill of exploration returned to him, though a hundred and sixteen years separated him from that young boy. He remembered returning home, filled with pride at his achievement, yet knowing that to boast of it would lessen the accomplishment.

What he had seen beyond the walls of the Dragon’s Gullet was his secret and his alone. Or so it had been until his enemies had wrought that abomination with his gene-seed.

The tunnel narrowed, its sides tapering inwards and smooth, sheared apart thousands of years ago by the awesome underground forces that shaped Calth’s subterranean world. Then, like stepping from a darkened room into the light, Uriel emerged from the tunnel. As it had one hundred and sixteen years ago, the breath caught in his throat.

The cavern was lit with a bioluminescent glow like a forgotten seabed, jade green and misty. Hundreds of metres wide and tall, it was no natural formation, but a compartment hewn from the rock nearly ten thousand years ago by artificers with great skill and even greater determination.

In the centre of the cavern was a building of pale, polished marble. It was a magnificent structure, square in shape and topped with a glittering dome apparently fashioned from a single vast sapphire. Each, facade of the building was reached via a triumphal set of steps carved from the rock of the cavern floor, and entrance was gained through vast porticos supported by pillars as thick as the legs of the largest Mechanicus battle engine. Each pediment was carved with colourful murals that had survived the passage of centuries without the lustre of their imagery diminishing. The murals were broken up into panels, each depicting a noble Ultramarines captain leading his warriors in battle against wicked, red-armoured foes.

The eastern facade was smashed and broken where a portion of the cavern roof had collapsed. Cyclopean blocks larger than a Land Raider were strewn like child’s bricks and two of the pillars lay tumbled like fallen giants. As magnificent as it was, there was an air of melancholy to the building that had nothing to do with its ruin. Sadness hung over its sepulchral architecture like a mourning shroud or unending grief.

Though he hadn’t appreciated it as a child, Uriel now knew why this should be so.

This was a tomb, the resting place of a great hero.

Pasanius squinted at the murals, matching the imagery to his knowledge of the Chapter’s history. Uriel saw the realisation of what he was seeing in his friend’s eyes.

“Is this what I think it is?” said Pasanius.

“The lost tomb of Ventanus,” said Uriel. “The Saviour of Calth.”

LOOKING DOWN FROM the shadows of the giant portico, Cadaras Grendel

watched the Ultramarines and their mortal helpers enter the huge cavern. He grinned, imagining the despair that must have seized them knowing they were too late.

Grendel shouldered his melta gun and spoke into the vox-mic at his throat.

“He’s here,” he said. He didn’t need to elaborate.

“Ventris?” asked Honsou, his voice grainy with fuzzy static.

“Who else do you think I mean?” snapped Grendel. “Him and that big sergeant. Sixteen of them, all told. There’s some mortals with them, and… damn me… they’ve got Vaanes too.”

“Vaanes? Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” said Grendel. “You think I wouldn’t recognise that arrogant bastard when I see him? He’s here, but he’s a captive.”

“Don’t be too sure about that,” said Honsou. “Send Xiomagra’s Blade dancers to take the Ultramarines, but I want you to kill Vaanes.”

“I can do that,” chuckled Grendel. “How are you getting on in there?”

“We’re still setting the charges to blow this place off the map, but we’ll be done soon.”

Grendel nodded and shut off the vox, turning to face the lithe warrior woman in rippling silver armour standing behind him. She and her fifteen warriors had their swords drawn, long, elegant blades with subtle curves to their length.

“You heard the man,” said Grendel, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “Go kill them.”

Xiomagra glided past him, her movements so supple that Grendel wasn’t consciously aware of her moving her limbs. He glimpsed her cat-like yellow eyes flash with anticipation for the fight to come before the liquid metal of her helmet rose up to swallow her features. She held the black bladed sword up before Grendel.

“The Law of Swords compels me to obey,” said Xiomagra, “but know this: if your master falls, yours will be the next soul claimed by this blade.”

“I’ll be waiting,” said Grendel, aiming his meltagun at her. “I’m not frightened of you.”

“You should be,” said Xiomagra.

Before Grendel could answer, the Mistress of Blades leapt gracefully down the steps of the tomb with her troupe of Blade dancers flowing behind her.

“Time to kill me a Raven Guard,” said Grendel.

TWENTY

HELICAS SENT A missile though the doorway, and it exploded in the chest cavity of a warrior in the rust-red of the Skulltakers. Bone and armour fragments scythed down the warrior behind him, and the Shockwave of detonation hurled the rest down the stairs. The explosion had bought them a few seconds more, but with no time to reload, Helicas discarded the launch tube and took up his bolter.

Scipio fired his bolter into the doorway, hearing the cracking echoes of booming detonations as his shots found targets. Coltanis held his fire until another hulking form threw itself through the doorway. The berserker died with half his torso missing as a blinding dart of plasma obliterated his body with a hiss of boiling blood and melting ceramite.

More warriors pushed up through the shattered remains of the passageway onto the tower's roof, only to be met with a storm of bolter fire and sword blows.

Scipio swapped weapons and drove his chainsword through the neck of a berserker, wielding the weapon two-handed to ensure the wound was fatal. He wrenched his blade free and kicked out at the warrior behind his victim, pushing him back down the stairs.

"This tower will forever be Ultramar!" he shouted.

Furious volleys of gunfire from below aimed to prove him wrong as the Bloodborn surged and broke around the gatehouse like a garish tide. Hurled grenades exploded against the tower's silver ramparts, and hundreds of lasrifles chipped away at the stonework as the enemy sought to unseat them from their pedestal. Fragments of stone filled the air and the sound of gunfire was a constant roar in his ears.

Scipio thrust his sword at a charging berserker. The blade lanced into the warrior's throat and a fan of arterial blood sprayed out. He hurled the dead traitor back, tripping another enemy who was promptly shot by Helicas. The narrow stairs were hampering the enemy's attempts to reach them, but such was the weight of numbers pushing up from below that there was a desperate inevitability to their battle. Another plasma blast tore through the attackers, and the reek of burning meat caught in Scipio's throat.

A pall of black smoke hung over Corinth's central plaza, the flames from their assault still spreading and taking more of the Bloodborn encampment with it. Though they numbered only ten warriors, they had cut a devastating swathe through the enemy.

Nivian fired the pistol Scipio had given him, using it as a club when the hammer clicked down on an empty chamber. With only one arm, it was impossible for him to reload. The four Ultramarines fought with all the strength bred into them by the Chapter's gene-smiths and the courage that came naturally to every warrior of Ultramar. They fought harder than any of them had fought before, digging deep into their inner reserves of strength to hold the foe at bay.

Time and time again the traitor Astartes came at them, and time and time again they hurled them back. Bloodborn soldiers with grapnels and ladders attempted an escalade, but Nivian, even with one arm, had the strength to cast them down. Scipio lost track of how long they had fought, but the sun was setting as the last berserker fell to a combined pummelling of bolter shells. Behind the dead warrior, Scipio saw the orange and black Claws of Lorek falling back down the tower stairs.

"For courage!" shouted Scipio.

"For honour!" cried Helicas.

"For Ultramar!" bellowed Nivian and Coltanis.

Scipio had never been prouder to be their sergeant. Fresh waves of gunfire drove them into the cover of the parapet, but Scipio knew they would have to weather that fire in moments when the traitor Astartes tried to force their way onto the tower once again. He glanced at the chronometer in his visor, amazed to find that nearly thirty minutes had passed since they had taken the gatehouse.

"Helicas, get that missile launcher ready to fire again," he ordered. "Nivian, give me that pistol so I can put a fresh magazine in for you, they'll be back at us soon."

"Let them come," said Nivian, handing over the weapon.

"Damn, you've made a mess of my gun," said Scipio. "The armourers will have my hide for this."

"Sorry, sergeant, those berserkers have got hard heads. Took a bit of cracking open."

Scipio smiled and reloaded the pistol, as a deafening roaring cut through the protective autosenses of their armour to eclipse the constant snap and rattle of gunfire. Like stuttering blasts of lightning on a clear day, the top of the tower was suddenly illuminated by blazing tongues of fire from the anti-aircraft guns.

A thousand shells a minute roared from each gun's quad-mounted barrels, ripping great gouges in the enemy clustered around the tower. Hundreds died as Laenus and Bradua rotated the turret of their gun, whole sections of the camp disintegrating under the furious storm of fire. Explosions erupted in parallel lines throughout the Bloodborn encampment as the fire of weapons designed to bring down armoured flyers was turned on soft, fleshy bodies.

Natalis and Isatus worked the fire of the second gun over the Bloodborn, cutting two skiffs in half in a whickering storm of shells. The heavier skiff of the Corsair Queen slewed away from the collimated lines of fire, turning its prow and aft guns on the tower. Whickering shells ripped through the stone of the parapet and tore through the anti-aircraft gun's mantlet. Natalis died instantly, his body obliterated in a blaze of fire and blood. Isatus was blown from his perch on the gunner's seat and flew through the air to land in the midst of the Bloodborn.

Scipio cried out, but there was nothing to be done for his two warriors.

Laenus turned his fire to intercept the Corsair Queen's skiff, but she had anticipated such a response and swept towards the tower, into the dead zone below the gun's angle of declination. Denied his original target, Laenus turned his fire on the ammunition stores at the edge of the plaza. Blooms of bright fire erupted from the smashed structures and the explosions consumed a score of fire teams nearby. Scipio's heart lurched as he saw dozens of other fire teams readying large-calibre mortars. Behind them, half a dozen mobile artillery tanks were moving into position on the edge of the plaza.

"Emperor's blood," he swore, now understanding why the traitor Astartes had pulled back from the roof entrance. The mortars boomed with metallic coughs and Scipio heard the whining screech of their shells.

"Incoming!" shouted Scipio.

He rolled onto his front and pressed himself tight against the inner face of the parapet as a wave of mortar shells screamed down. Most of the first volley was too long, coming down on the inner face of the palace walls. Thunderous impacts threw up bodies and cobbled stone and the tower shook with the force of the detonations.

Two shells scored direct hits on the tower, and Scipio was thrown into the air by the percussive blasts. His vision crazed as his helmet cracked against the rampart, and shards of armoured glass embedded in his face. Shrapnel whickered through the air and he grunted as a palm-sized fragment of red-hot metal lodged in his arm above the elbow. He wrenched it out as another shell exploded, sending a fan of metal ball bearings slashing downward.

Laenus screamed as his armour was perforated, and he fell from his perch on the gun. He crawled to the edge of the parapet, leaving a trail of bright blood behind him. Nivian and Coltanis cried out as their armour was battered by a blizzard of shrapnel.

Scipio's armour registered multiple breaches and he felt his skin burn from sizzling fragments. He tore off his shattered helmet and hurled it aside. Acrid smoke wreathed the gatehouse and the air reeked of burnt propellant. Blood stained the dressed stone of the ramparts, and Scipio coughed a mouthful of red-

frothed spit.

Another shell slammed into the roof, punching into the guts of the tower and a blazing plume of fire and smoke geysered skyward from the detonation. Stone fell from the gatehouse and the structure groaned alarmingly as another shell slammed down on the second tower. Shell after shell arced down onto the tower, most blasting through to explode inside, but some detonating above it and tearing it apart. Incendiaries exploded over the roof, and Scipio dived beneath a tilted slab of cracked stone as the fireball swept over him.

Scipio lost sight of his men, knowing they were either buried in the rubble or vaporised in the firestorm of explosions. He rolled out from cover, drawing his sword as a thunderous roar sounded above him.

"If I am to die, it will be on my feet," he snarled, clambering onto the tilted slab and raising his sword high. Choking clouds of smoke obscured the sunset, but a hot wind was punching a hole between the ground and sky. And in that hole, Scipio saw a sight that could have come straight from Chapter legends.

Four Thunderhawk gunships in the livery of the 2nd Company *Gladius, Spatha, Pilum* and *Xiphos.*

They swooped in like avenging angels in Ultramarines blue, and Scipio Vorolanus had never seen so sweet a sight.

Sicarius.

DESPITE THE FACT that this was a shrine dedicated to a hero of the Ultramarines, Honsou was impressed by the monolithic character of Ventanus' tomb. From the outside it was impressive, but its designer—no doubt the Ultramarines would claim it to be their primarch—had known that the true measure of a building was in its interior functionality.

Though a portion of its supporting facade had collapsed, the great gem of a dome remained intact, its roof unbowed. The interior floor plan of the tomb was circular, laid out like a grand amphitheatre or council hall. Though instead of steps or seats, the tiers around the central open space were for the dead.

Hundreds of stone sarcophagi were laid out in concentric circles around the central floor of the tomb, each one a member of some lost Chapter of the Ultramarines back when they were organised as a Legion. In the centre of the tomb, directly beneath the dome's cupola was a gleaming sarcophagus of black marble, machine-finished and miraculously free of dust after centuries of isolation.

Bare of ornamentation apart from a silver plaque bearing the name of the warrior entombed within, this was what M'kar had sent them to destroy. This

was the final resting place of Captain Ventanus of the Ultramarines. M'kar hadn't elaborated much when it had told Honsou that this shrine was to be cast to ruin, only that he was to ensure that the body of Ventanus and all his wargear were consumed utterly.

"It seems a shame to destroy this place," said the Newborn, following Honsou's gaze towards the Iron Warriors spread throughout the structure. Demolition teams wired massive amounts of explosives together in chains that would bring the structure crashing down in an avalanche of fire and debris.

Honsou shrugged. "What do you care?"

"I don't, not really. I just appreciate the architectural splendour of this place."

"You are a judge of architecture?"

"No, but I can still know a harmonious space when I see it."

Honsou laughed. "Listen to yourself. You're a creature of the warp and a killer, yet here you are lamenting the destruction of an enemy structure because it looks pretty?"

"I suppose I am. Is that strange?"

Honsou didn't answer, returning his attention to the demolition teams. Rigging the building for destruction was taking longer than he would have liked. The architect, Guilliman or not, had known his trade. This was a damnably stable structure.

But there were no better artists of demolition than the Iron Warriors, and one thing Honsou knew was that any building would come down if you packed it with enough explosives.

"Aren't you concerned that Uriel Ventris is outside?" asked the Newborn.

"Should I be?" asked Honsou. "I think the Blade dancers and Grendel can handle his motley band of brave heroes."

"What if they cannot?"

"Then I have you to protect me," said Honsou.

The Newborn cocked its head to one side and looked at him quizzically. "I think you want Grendel and the Blade dancers to fail."

"Maybe I do," admitted Honsou. "It does seem a shame to come all this way and not kill Ventris myself. Anyway, why the concern? I though you wanted to face your maker again?"

"I do," said the Newborn.

"Then let's hope we both get what we want."

VAANES HAD CALLED them Blade dancers, and the name was an apt one. Uriel watched the enemy flow from the tomb like a troupe of acrobats. His eye

designated seventeen individual threats. Slender of limb and clad only in loose plates of silver and lacquered leather, it seemed an absurd force to send against twenty-seven Astartes and an inquisitor of the holy ordos. A mix of sexes, each blade dancer carried a glittering sword, while their leader, an androgynous figure in silver armour, bore swords of dark and light.

A warrior in the burnished iron and scratched yellow of the Iron Warriors came too, moving slowly compared to the sword troupe. There was a familiarity to his movements, but Uriel saw immediately that it wasn't Honsou. He didn't know the warrior, but intended to kill him just the same.

"Swords of Calth, fire right!" ordered Uriel. "Firebrands left."

Bolters were raised in unison as the Ultramarines advanced. Shaan split his Raven Guard, leading one squad over the blocks to the right. Revys Kyre led a second group behind and further out from his captain's squad.

"Fire!" shouted Uriel, and the bolters of his warriors thundered.

Not one of the troupe was felled.

Their shots had missed, and Uriel was astounded. The dancers moved like quicksilver, flowing out of the path of the shells as though they moved in slow motion. Another volley was similarly ineffective, but the third put down two of their lithe foes. Their shots echoed from the walls of the cave, but then the dancers were among them.

Swords flickered like steel tongues of striking snakes, lashing out with the speed of whips and slicing into armour with terrible ease. Two of the Firebrands fell, their heads sliding neatly from severed necks, and Uriel saw Livius Hadrianus drop his melta gun as a whipping blade cut into the meat of his shoulder. Brutus Cyprian roared and put his fist through the face of Hadrianus' attacker, spinning on his heel and ramming his elbow into the chest of another dancer, pulverising her ribcage and hurling her back through the air. Uriel deflected a blow meant to open his jugular and desperately fended off a blistering series of ripostes and counter-strikes that left him in no doubt that he was monstrously outclassed. Ancient Peleus planted the banner beside him, firing precise shots into the swirling melee. Only a superlative marksman would dare to take such shots, and each one dropped a sword dancer.

Inquisitor Suzaku danced through the battle, as elegant as any of her foes. She fought with an ivory staff lined with green threads, and its tip crackled with arcs of psychic energy. With the exception of her warrior bodyguard, the remainder of her retinue stood clear of the battle. The acolytes with Vaanes secured by the mancatchers kept a wary distance, unwilling to let a traitor anywhere near this desperate struggle for survival.

Selenus ducked and wove a path through the fighting to reach the fallen

warriors, killing a sword dancer with a spray of automatic bolter fire as he dropped to his knees beside the Ultramarines wounded. Two of Pasanius' squad stood over him as he ensured the gene-seed of the dead warriors was retrieved.

Alone of the Swords of Calth, Petronius Nero could match the skill of their attackers. Hadrianus and Cyprian fought back to back to fend off the swordsmen, but Nero slid through their ranks, his sword as much of a blur as those of his opponents. Where he normally fought with an element of showmanship, there was none of that now, only the efficient kill strokes of a master bladesman. No sooner was one foe slain than Nero had moved onto the next.

Uriel was in awe of the warrior's skill, fighting with every ounce of his ability just to stay alive. He ducked a decapitating sweep and slammed into the warrior, taking them both to the ground. It wasn't finesse, it wasn't a move taught by the sword masters of Macragge, but it did the job. He smashed his helmet into the face of the sword dancer, pulverising the features beneath the silver mask. He scrambled clear as another dancer landed lightly next to him and plunged a sword into his chest.

Uriel rolled before the tip could penetrate more than a handspan, slamming the flat of his palm against the blade and snapping it off at the hilt. He kicked out, shattering the swordsman's kneecap and gripped his lacquered straps as he dropped. He dragged the warrior down and pounded his head on the rocks, hearing the wet crack of a skull shattering.

Quickly, Uriel got to his feet as the Iron Warrior reached the fight. At first Uriel thought he was wearing a monstrous fright mask, then realised the man's face was hideously burned and blackened by fire. He carried a melta gun and fired it into the mass of fighting warriors with a gleeful bellow of hate. A thunderclap of superheated air boomed in the midst of the battle, and two of the Firebrands fell with half their bodies blasted to stinking vapour.

Pasanius roared in hatred and fought his way towards the Iron Warrior, clubbing sword dancers out of his way with his bare hands in his fury to reach this scarred killer. He hurled himself at the Iron Warrior, and Uriel lost sight of them as two sword dancers came at him. One was the silver-armoured leader, a woman of such repulsive beauty that Uriel could barely look at her. Twin swords wove a dazzling pattern of light in the air above her, and right away Uriel knew he couldn't fight her and win.

No sooner had he formed the thought than the Raven Guard struck.

Though they had made no overt attempt to hide, Uriel had quite forgotten they were there, like shadows blending with the gathering darkness. Black lances thrust into the vitals of an unsuspecting foe; they struck from the flank and rear, clawing their way into the sword dancers with glittering gauntlet blades. Shaan

moved like a predatory hunter, all jerks and stabs and quick barbs. Warriors fell around him, mortally wounded and maimed.

Revys Kyre fought with more refinement, directing his blows with carefully measured precision, always aware of the space around him and where his next step would carry him. The sword dancers died in droves as the Raven Guard cut through their ranks and the Ultramarines capitalised on the suddenness of the flank attack. Within moments the momentum of their graceful attackers had been crushed, and they were fighting for their lives. There could be no surrender, and only annihilation would end this fight.

Uriel threw himself at the two sword dancers before him, hoping his sudden leap might surprise them. They merely sidestepped, their swords licking out to caress his breastplate and shoulder. Blood welled from the slashes, and Uriel felt the hot sting shoot into his limbs, as though the blades themselves were burning. He blocked a sword thrust to the groin and rolled his wrists over the blade, lancing its tip through the eyes of one attacker.

“You are the leader,” stated the remaining sword maiden, swirling her blades above her head in what Uriel supposed was a ritual of challenge. “Uriel Ventris?”

“I am,” he said, pulling his own blade high and stalling for time. “Who are you?”

“Xiomagra, Mistress of the Blade dancers,” she said. “The swords require your name before you die.”

THE GLADIUS TOUCHED down just over the blasted wreckage of the gatehouse, its jets screaming and its guns battering a bloody path through the Bloodborn. The assault ramp slammed down hard and there he was. Sicarius. Regent of Talassar and Knight Champion of Macragge. His scarlet cape swirled around him in the hot thermals of the Thunderhawk’s landing, and the gold of his armour glittered like morning sunlight. The Lions of Macragge followed him onto the ground, their guns firing into the mass of Bloodborn soldiers surrounding the landing zone.

Scipio leapt from the tilting perch of the slab and clambered over the rubble and debris from the artillery impacts. Helicas lay face down over his missile launcher, the tube crumpled and useless. Coltanis was next to him, and Nivian sprawled over the remains of the parapet.

“Up! Up!” he shouted. “Sicarius is here.”

Helicas was first to rise, dragging himself free of the rubble and helping Coltanis to his feet. His weapon specialist retrieved his plasma gun, checked its

mechanisms, then pulled the groaning Nivian back over the parapet.

“I’m not dead,” said Nivian, as if unable to believe the fact without hearing the words.

Scipio looked over at the anti-aircraft gun, its wreckage sagging and blackened where a high explosive shell had struck. As much as he wanted to look for Laenus and Bradua in the wreckage, it seemed impossible that they could have survived.

Spatha, Pilum and *Xiphos* roared as they slammed down next to the *Gladius,* and Scipio’s heart filled with pride as the warriors of the 2nd Company charged into battle. Nearly a hundred warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, a force unlike any in the world, thrust into the Bloodborn mass and the slaughter was glorious.

“Come on,” yelled Scipio. “This is our moment! We earned this fight!”

With the remnants of his squad, Scipio ran back down the tower they had fought so hard to capture. The steps were littered with broken bodies and the walls smeared with bright blood. They met no resistance on the way down, and emerged from the shattered doorway at the bottom to a scene of magnificent carnage.

The 2nd Company was pushing a fighting wedge into the shocked Bloodborn troops. The sight of so many Astartes had thrown the enemy, though they were regrouping faster than Scipio would have believed had he not seen it with his own eyes.

“Thunderbolts, on!” he cried, fearful of missing out on fighting alongside the entirety of his company. Not since lost Damnos had the 2nd had fought as one, and such battles were the stuff of Chapter legend. To miss such a conflict would be a burden a warrior would carry for the rest of his life.

Twin roars of assault cannon fire announced the presence of Brothers Agnathio and Ultradus, the two Dreadnoughts emerging from the belly of *Pilum* and forging a second front with Tirian and Atavian’s Devastators following behind.

The tip of the spear was Sicarius, the magnificent warrior slaying foes by the dozen with his tempest blade. Ixion’s assault squad formed his right flank, Strabo his left. Together they were a lethal arrowhead of blades cutting through the Bloodborn towards the domed palace and their prey. Mortar shells landed amid the assault, but they were poorly aimed and only a handful of warriors fell. All but one returned to the battle, and the assault cut deeper and deeper.

The Corsair Queen’s forces regrouped around her, a mass of soldiers formed up in close order with their weapons raised in disciplined lines. As ferocious and shocking as Captain Sicarius’ assault had been, Kaarja Salombar’s forces were ready for him.

Scipio saw her armoured skiff take a direct hit from one of Tirian's las-cannons, but a pulsing wave of energy dissipated its power enough to render the impact meaningless. The skiff darted into cover, but not before its prow cannon unleashed a withering hail of high-energy bolts. A dozen Space Marines went down, and none of them got back up again.

Scipio and his squad reached the *Spatha,* and his face lit up as he saw Iulius Fennion forming up the Immortals. They marched down the assault ramp, bolters at the ready. Scipio called out to Iulius, who turned at the sound of his name.

"Scipio!" said Iulius. "Damn me, but you've outdone us all with this."

"If you want a job done right, you send for the Thunderbolts."

"Then call in the Immortals to finish it off," laughed Iulius.

"Where's Manorian?"

"Praxor? The other side of the gatehouse," said Iulius. "Keeping the rest of these bastards from stopping us killing the bitch."

"One squad against a whole city?"

Iulius shrugged. "I know, it's Ghospora all over again. Almost seems unfair to our enemies. But enough of Manorian, Captain Sicarius is calling for you to join him. He says he has a queen to kill and wants you beside him when he takes her head."

XIOMAGARA CAME AT Uriel in a blur, her twin swords raining blow after blow upon him. He blocked and parried desperately, knowing he was hopelessly outclassed. Twice he attempted to counterattack, but each time she contemptuously flicked his attack aside and plunged a blade into his flesh. Uriel bled from a dozen wounds, yet the sword maiden was untouched. They traded strikes back and forth, none of Uriel's connecting, all of hers drawing blood. She was toying with him, savouring his slow death and relishing the growing desperation in his technique.

Anger filled Uriel, and he thrust his blade towards her heart.

It was the move she had been waiting for and she swayed aside, flicking his sword from his grip with a casual flick of her silver blade. Uriel turned in time to see her black-bladed sword arcing towards his neck and knew her playing with him was over.

A curved sabre alive with flickering energies flashed in front of him, intercepting the blade in a shower of azure sparks.

"I've got you, captain," said Petronius Nero, rolling his blade around and cutting away one of Xiomagra's shoulder guards. Uriel watched as the Mistress

of the Blade dancers took the measure of his champion, her eyes widening in surprise.

“I am Petronius Nero,” said the swordsman. “You tried to kill my captain. Prepare to die.”

Nero and Xiomagra flew at each other in a dazzling display of sword-play, each a master of their art. Xiomagra fought with her twin blades as fluid extensions of her limbs, Petronius Nero with his sword and shield working in perfect harmony. They came together, clashed in an unimaginably quick flurry of blades that was too rapid to follow, then broke apart. It was impossible to see who had the upper hand, but just as suddenly as the bout had begun, it was over. Nero, calm and icy in the face of Xiomagra’s flourishes, swept his blade over Xiomagra’s and slashed the tip across her throat.

Blood arced in a jetting spray as Nero swung his sword in a curt salute to his foe, and Xiomagra collapsed, hands clawing at her throat as she vainly tried to stem the gushing flow of her lifeblood. Nero turned away and rejoined the battle, not even bothering to watch Xiomagra’s last moments.

Before Uriel could set off after his champion, he was smashed from his feet by a blur of iron and yellow. A heavy figure in armour bore him to the ground and a fist cannoned into his helmet. Uriel’s head slammed against the rocks. The vision in one eye blurred momentarily.

He put his arm up to ward off another blow and saw the scarred Iron Warrior kneeling over him. The warrior’s melta gun was gone, and he pummelled Uriel with his spike-knuckled fists. A hammerblow of a right hook smashed the front of Uriel’s helmet and a swift jab splintered its lenses. Another cracked the gorget seals around Uriel’s neck and the warrior tore off his helmet to look him in the eyes.

“I’ve heard all about you, Ventris, but you’re not so tough,” spat the warrior as he kept up his barrage of punches. Blood burst from Uriel’s cheeks and lips as he fought to get his hands up to block the hail of strikes. The warrior had his arms pinned by his sides, and Uriel couldn’t shift his weight. His hand found the combat blade at his hip, and his hand curled around the textured grip of its hilt.

“Grendel!” shouted a voice, and the warrior looked up, his eyes widening in surprise.

Uriel took advantage of the momentary distraction to haul his combat blade clear of its sheath. He plunged it into the joint between warrior’s thigh and calf as a swift-moving shape slammed an open palm into the hideously scarred face.

The warrior his saviour had named Grendel pitched backwards and Uriel scrambled clear. With a brawler’s speed Grendel rolled upright and blocked a downward slash of an elbow, leaning low to punch his attacker in the gut. Uriel

came to his feet as the warrior sent a thundering right cross into his attacker's jaw.

Ardaric Vaanes rode the punch and spun inside Grendel's guard, locking his arm around his opponent's neck and twisting. Grendel's armour and powerful neck muscles were too strong and he easily threw Vaanes off.

Uriel stared open-mouthed at the renegade Raven Guard as he fended off brutal chops of Grendel's hands. Any one of those blows would break a limb, even a steel-strong Astartes one. The spiked collar was gone from Vaanes' neck, yet it had left its mark. A bloody ring of puncture marks dotted his throat and dried blood coated his neck and the shoulders of his prison-issue uniform. Suzaku's two acolytes lay sprawled unconscious behind him, and Uriel cursed, knowing he should not have expected any warrior of the Adeptus Astartes to be held by such tinker toys.

Grendel landed a blow on Ardaric Vaanes and drove him to his knees with its power. Uriel heard the dry-wood snap of bone and saw Vaanes grimace in pain as ribs broke.

"I always wanted to kill you, Vaanes," roared Grendel.

"The feeling's mutual," retorted Vaanes.

Though faced with two warriors who were enemies, Uriel knew there was only one way to intervene in this fight. He ran in and threw himself at Grendel, slamming an elbow into the side of his head. Grendel staggered, but swung around and drove his fist into Uriel's jaw. Uriel rolled with the punch, but the impact was enormous, like being hit by a siege hammer. He ducked a hooking follow-up punch and moved to the left as Vaanes circled to the right.

They came at him together, Uriel sending a flurry of blows towards Grendel's midriff as Vaanes attacked high with graceful fist strikes and slashing elbows. Grendel blocked them all, sending hammering blows back in return. He grabbed Uriel's arm and twisted, driving him to his knees and slamming his thigh into his face. Uriel tumbled away, just managing to grab hold of the combat blade's hilt. It came free in a wash of blood as Grendel blocked a roundhouse kick from Vaanes, twisted his leg and flipped him over onto his back. Vaanes landed on the balls of his feet and grunted as the splintered ends of his ribs ground together.

Grendel laughed. "I knew you were always going to be trouble. Bad enough I have to fight alongside a bastard half-breed, but a renegade? You're just an Astartes too damn stupid to choose who you fight for."

"I know who I fight for," snarled Vaanes, leaping into the air and sending his fist slashing towards Grendel's throat. The Iron Warrior batted the blow aside, but Uriel watched amazed as Vaanes' entire body seemed to bend around Grendel and he drove his fist down into the Iron Warrior's temple. Every ounce

of Vaanes' hatred and self-loathing was bound to the blow and Uriel saw Grendel's skull shatter, blood squirting from his mouth and nose as his head snapped sideways with a sickening crack.

The Iron Warrior crumpled, dropping to his knees and falling flat onto his face with a heavy slam of metal on rock. Vaanes slumped over the corpse, breathless and his ashen face streaked with sweat. Uriel retrieved his bolter, and swung it round onto Ardaric Vaanes.

"Why?" asked Uriel.

Vaanes looked up, his face anguished and shorn of its mask of arrogance.

"You can't fight what you are," whispered Vaanes, and Uriel knew those words were not spoken in answer to his question.

"The question Grendel asked?" said Uriel. "You didn't answer him. Who *do* you fight for?"

Vaanes smiled weakly. "Not for Honsou."

"That's not good enough," said Uriel as the battlefield fell silent.

"No? Very well. I fight for myself," said Vaanes. "I suppose that's why I didn't make a very good Astartes. I never felt it, you know? The brotherhood you need to be part of something bigger than yourself. Even surrounded by my battle-brothers I always felt alone."

"What happened to you, Vaanes?" said Uriel. "You could have been one of the greats."

"I'll never tell you," he said. "It's the Raven Guard way."

"You know nothing of the Raven Guard," spat Aethon Shaan, appearing at Uriel's side. Shaan's surviving six warriors surrounded Vaanes, like carrion birds around a fresh corpse.

"Kill me," said Vaanes. "It's what you promised."

A booming detonation sounded from inside the tomb of Captain Ventanus, and a cloud of smoke blew out through the collapsed facade. The noise rolled around the cavern, and Uriel turned back to look at Vaanes.

"No," said Uriel. "This isn't over yet."

TWENTY-ONE

BLASTED SHARDS OF fire-blackened stone tumbled from the shattered pediment of the eastern portico. Smoke hung low on the marble-flagged steps as Uriel made his way between the two vast columns that were all that remained of the tomb's facade.

The Saviour of Calth was venerated in hundreds of temple shrines throughout Calth, but this was the lost resting place of Captain Ventanus himself. The symbolism of what Honsou was attempting was not lost on Uriel.

Honsou needed to be stopped, though Uriel had precious few warriors remaining to him to do it. Though none of the Swords of Calth had fallen, only five of the Firebrands had survived the fight with the Blade dancers.

Fortunately Pasanius was one of those survivors, though the breastplate of his armour was now little more than molten scraps dripping ceramite to his skin. All the signs pointed to a direct hit from a melta gun, and that Pasanius was still alive spoke volumes of the sergeant's legendary resilience.

"Take more than that toy to put me down," was all Pasanius had said when Apothecary Selenus had attempted to treat him. "Now leave me be. You heard the captain, this fight's not over yet."

Inquisitor Suzaku was alone, for the warriors charged with her protection had been slain at the hands of the Blade dancers. She bled from a terrible wound in her side, her dark skin ashen from blood loss, but she had pressed on regardless. Uriel was impressed at her determination to see this through.

Six Raven Guard still followed Captain Shaan, and Revys Kyre escorted Ardaric Vaanes. Uriel had expected Shaan to kill Vaanes, but the Raven Guard captain had surprised him.

"His fate is not for me to decide," he said. "The Master of Shadows, it is for him to choose the fate of fallen ravens."

"And what if he tries anything?" asked Pasanius.

The claws snapped from Shaan's gauntlets. "Then I'll take his head myself."

"Good enough," replied Pasanius. "I can live with that."

Uriel led the way into the tomb, its interior filled with settling clouds of dust. Shafts of bioluminescence filtered through cracked walls of the tomb, catching the glittering fragments of rock dust floating in the air. Soft light from the cracked dome bathed everything in a pale blue glow.

The tiered interior of the tomb was laid out like an assembly chamber, with

the tiers filled with the tombs of the slain. Those closest to the centre were broken open, while looping coils of copper wiring connected the others to what were unmistakably demolition charges.

Rubble and shattered stone filled the open space at the centre of the tomb. A once-mighty sarcophagus lay broken in a scattered heap of debris. Two score Iron Warriors surrounded its remains, like statues of brazen metal automatons with bolters held at their sides. The hideous creature cloned from his stolen genetics stood with clenched fists at the base of the rubble. Uriel felt its curious mix of hatred and awe.

“Hold fire,” ordered Uriel, keeping his voice low. He felt the instinctual aggression of his warriors come to the fore at the sight of the Iron Warriors, but the traitors outnumbered them two to one. They made no aggressive moves, and Uriel was content to let that continue for now. “No one fires except on my say so. That goes for you too, Shaan.”

Shaan nodded, though Uriel shared his distaste for this course of action. It felt unnatural to see traitors before them and not to be firing a bolter or drawing a sword, but this moment had been coming for too long to be ended without some form of reckoning.

A warrior in iron armour squatted atop the pile of rubble, and Uriel felt his heart quicken at the sight of him. Honsou.

Uriel marched between the concentric rows of tombs and halted at the edge of the central floor space. Honsou turned to face him, and Uriel saw sections of deep blue armour at his feet, plates of ancient ceramite and gold. His anger grew hotter as he realised whose tomb Honsou squatted upon, The Iron Warrior looked up and quickly scanned their numbers, grinning with a sardonic upturn to the corner of his mouth.

“I see you brought Vaanes back to me,” said Honsou. “I thought you’d have killed him.”

The last comment was addressed to Aethon Shaan, who glared at Honsou with undisguised hatred. The Raven Guard held a deeper enmity than most for the Iron Warriors, for their earliest Chapter history bore grim testimony to the betrayal of Corax’s Legion at the hands of Perturabo’s.

Shaan didn’t waste words on Honsou, but the Warsmith wasn’t done yet. “Vaanes betrayed you once, and he betrayed me too,” said Honsou. “Inconstancy is in his blood, so what makes you think he won’t betray you again?”

“He won’t get the chance,” snapped Shaan.

“We’ll see,” replied Honsou with a wry chuckle. He turned his attention back to Uriel and said, “Ah, Ventris. I’ve waited a long time to see you again.”

“I hoped I’d killed you on your daemon world,” said Uriel.

Honsou laughed and tapped the side of his head, where crude augmetic work covered a hideous knot of scar tissue.

“Better men than you have tried,” he said. “But you’re the only one who came close.”

“And this is you returning the favour?”

“Hardly, though your death will be a bonus,” said Honsou, rising from the wreckage of the shattered sarcophagus. He descended to the floor of the tomb, holding something in his hand, something stolen from Ventanus’ resting place, but Uriel couldn’t see what it was. He heard Pasanius gasp, now seeing that Honsou’s silver arm was no normal bionic replacement. It was the hideous arm of living metal that had been sawed from his friend’s shoulder in the caverns of the Savage Morticians.

Honsou saw their recognition and lifted his arm. “I never thanked you for this. It’s saved my life a number of times.”

“Just another reason to kill you,” snapped Pasanius.

“That’s the arm?” said Suzaku. “The one tainted with the necrontyr living metal?”

“Is that what it is?” said Honsou, as though they were not mortal enemies, but friends sharing a spirited debate. “I always wondered how it worked. Even Cycerin couldn’t fathom it, and he used to be a priest of Mars.”

“Why are you here?” demanded Uriel, fighting for calm as memories of all the destruction Honsou had unleashed flooded his consciousness. “Why this place?”

“Honestly? A daemon sent me to destroy it, though for the life of me I can’t think why. I mean it’s not as though there’s anything useful here. Just some bones, some broken plates of armour… and this.”

Honsou held up the item he’d taken from the tomb of Ventanus. It was a dagger, a long-bladed poniard with a golden hilt. Its blade was triangular in section and fashioned from some strange stone, like chipped flint with a glitter sheen to its edge.

“It’s a pretty enough piece,” said Honsou, turning the weapon over in his hands. “Nice hilt, though the blade looks like something cave-dwelling savages might make. Curious, is it not?”

“Fascinating,” hissed Pasanius. “You’re going to pay for all the lives you’ve taken.”

Uriel placed a restraining hand on Pasanius’ shoulder. With the odds stacked against them, he needed Honsou’s warriors to lower their guard before making any hostile move.

“Why Tarsis Ultra?” he asked.

Honsou looked confused for a moment, as though the name were unfamiliar to him.

“Ah, the world we used the virus on,” he said. “One *your* Mechanicus devised I might add. Very nice work too. Did a thorough job from what I understand. I needed to get your attention, didn’t I? After all, what’s the point of wreaking havoc if the person you want to suffer doesn’t know why they’re suffering?”

“You are a monster, Honsou,” snarled Uriel, drawing the sword of Idaeus with cold deliberation. “And I will relish cutting you down.”

Honsou laughed and gestured to the Iron Warriors arrayed around him. “Why is it you always think we’re going to duel? I have you outgunned and outnumbered, and every square inch of this tomb is wired to blow it back to the age of the Warmaster.”

“You are a coward,” said Uriel, hoping to anger Honsou to rashness, but instead the Warsmith gestured to the warrior next to him, the thing Vaanes had called the Newborn.

“Why should I fight you when I have a champion to do it for me?”

The Newborn removed its helmet, and Uriel felt a sickening repulsion at the sight of the dead face before him. Its skin was a leathery and inflexible mask, but there was no mistaking the bone structure beneath that gave it the lie of resemblance. Nor was there any doubt as to the heritage of the stormcloud eyes that smouldered with hatred and desperate need.

It took a step forward and cocked its head to one side.

“Your face is different,” it said. Uriel saw its fleshless lips moving behind its dead skin mask, feeling his gorge rise at the sight.

“Thanks to your bolt round.”

“Did it hurt?”

“It did,” confirmed Uriel.

“Good,” said the creature. “Since I was spat out in that cavern I have lived with pain. My life is broken memories sewn together, my body a monstrous thing neither alive nor dead.”

Petronius Nero drew his blade and said, “Let me kill it, captain. Champion to champion.”

Uriel shook his head. “Not this time, Petronius. This is a battle I must fight on my own.”

Honsou pressed the poniard he’d stolen from the tomb into the Newborn’s hand. “Here, use this. Seems appropriate that he dies with his hero’s blade in his heart.”

The Newborn looked at the weapon and nodded. “I never asked for this,” it said. “I should have died, and that would have been a mercy. But you breathed

life into my broken form. And for that I will kill you."

Uriel felt the anguish in its words, the tortured pain of a monster set to kill its creator.

"You don't have to do this," said Uriel.

"Yes," said the Newborn, walking towards him. "I do. I end your life and then my own."

"You were a young boy once," said Uriel, stopping the Newborn in its tracks. "I know because I lived your memories. As you saw mine, I saw yours. I saw it. You were training to be a commissar. You were taken by the Iron Warriors and turned into a monster, but that's not what you *are*. They twisted your outward form, but they can't change what you are inside, no matter how much they try and fill your head with their warped thoughts."

"You saw my life?"

"Parts of it, yes," said Uriel.

The Newborn stared at him, as though trying to decide if he were lying.

"It doesn't matter what you say to it," said Honsou. "It doesn't matter what it was, it's a thing of the warp now."

The Newborn reversed the blade Honsou had given it and dropped into a fighting crouch.

"Come, father," it said. "Come and die with me."

THE PALACE GROUNDS had become a bloodbath. Desperate Bloodborn soldiers were fighting for their lives as the 2nd Company cut into their numbers with all the brutal efficiency for which the Ultramarines were famed. Tactical squads advanced in rigid echelon formation, firing on the move with relentless barrages from their weapons. Assault squads struck into the gaps, tearing them wider and breaking the Bloodborn into isolated pockets to be slaughtered piecemeal.

Scipio Vorolanus led Coltanis, Helicas and Nivian through the raging battle, firing his bolt pistol in economical bursts. He'd picked up a new weapon from the *Spatha*'s stowage racks, and it felt good in his hands. Helicas had procured a heavy bolter, and whenever their advance stalled he unleashed a sawing blast of shells into the enemy. Nivian held onto Scipio's battered pistol and fired one-handed while Coltanis had replenished the energy cells of his plasma gun.

Explosions burst amongst the Bloodborn and the Ultramarines, for the enemy soldiers beyond the walls and gatehouse were fighting furiously to come to their queen's aid. Scipio had no fear that any would get through, for Praxor Manorian always seemed to feel the need to prove his worth over and above anyone else. If

there was any squad that could hold the gatehouse, it was the Shield Bearers.

The Corsair Queen's skiff was trying to retreat to the palace, but in their desperation to save her, the Bloodborn forces inside the walls had hemmed her in. Wedged in place by the press of bodies, the skiff fired over their heads into the Ultramarines, but so thickly enmeshed with the Bloodborn were they that it was impossible to avoid hitting their own men.

Traitor Astartes were battering their way through the Bloodborn to take up position with Kaarja Salombar, and Scipio saw the vivid blue of her hair through the blazing muzzle flashes and explosions. To see the object of their quest so close was intoxicating, and he led the Thunderbolts on with even greater vigour.

Scipio saw a flash of crimson ahead, and the sight of Captain Sicarius lifted his heart. The captain of the 2nd was an unstoppable force, a sublime warrior beyond compare whose blade seemed able to find the weak point in any armour, the vulnerable point in any defence. Every stroke of his tempest blade and every shot from his plasma pistol saw a host of Bloodborn soldiers killed.

He fought with a wildness that many found unsettling in a captain of the Ultramarines, but the more Scipio studied his swordplay the more he saw a studied precision to every blow. The Lions of Macragge fought beside their captain, a fighting unit without equal in a Chapter of heroes. Daceus protected the captain's right flank, while Prabian secured the left. Vandius carried the company standard, its blue, gold and green snapping proudly in the wind.

Sicarius paused to recharge his pistol and saw Scipio's men approaching.

"Sergeant Vorolanus. By the four winds it's good to see you!" cried Sicarius, taking Scipio's hand. "You've won me a great victory here, Scipio. A great victory for the 2nd!"

"Thank you, my lord," said Scipio.

"You've taken some losses, but by the Emperor I'm proud of you. All of you!"

"The Thunderbolts never fail, my lord," said Scipio proudly.

"No they don't," agreed Sicarius. "Now, you've done us a damn fine turn, Scipio, but this fight's not done yet. Are you with me?"

"Always, my lord," promised Scipio, and his men echoed his sentiment.

"Then follow me!" shouted Sicarius, plunging once more into the fray.

To fight alongside Captain Sicarius was a great honour, for this was the warrior who had saved Black Reach, who had defeated the reavers of the Halamar Rift and freed the Zeist sector from the insidious domination of the tau. He was, by any definition, a hero, and Scipio felt guilty for ever having doubted his course.

Their advance was unstoppable, but as the last of the Bloodborn melted away

in the face of their rigid ferocity, the Lions of Macragge reached the point where they were faced with tougher opposition than mere mortals.

Just ahead, within twenty metres, was Kaarja Salombar, standing atop her beleaguered skiff with a gold-plated pistol and long curved sabre raised overhead. A host of traitor Astartes, thirty berserk Skulltakers and tiger-striped Claws of Lorek, stood between her and the Ultramarines.

Salombar saw Sicarius and smiled in genuine pleasure. She aimed the tip of her sword towards him, and the brazen nature of the challenge was unmistakable.

“Now I get to kill a queen,” hissed Sicarius.

THE NEWBORN LEAPT for Uriel, faster than he would have believed possible for a warrior in power armour. The blade of the poniard slashed for his throat, but Uriel swayed aside, bringing his sword up to block the reverse stroke. The Newborn’s face was a blank mask and as Uriel backed away, it reached up to tear it off.

Its patchwork covering had been hideous, but the vile, skinless face beneath was even worse. It glistened with exposed musculature, wet and raw. It stared at Uriel with eyes bleeding madness, pain and a lifetime’s worth of suffering. Its mouth pulled wide in a grimace of a trapped animal. As much as Uriel wanted to lower his blade and reason with the Newborn, he knew there was no way he could reach it. Events on Salinas had shown him the impossibility of trying to save warp-touched creatures.

The Newborn came at him again, slashing with the flint-bladed dagger and scoring the surface of Uriel’s armour. He heard bolters pulled into shoulders and shells racked into breeches with Ultramarines precision.

“No!” he said. “This is between us.”

The Iron Warriors watched with their bolters still slung insouciantly at their sides. They knew they had the upper hand and were dismissive of the ragtag force arrayed before them. They had also seen the Newborn in action and knew the contest before them could only end one way.

Uriel sent a long, slashing blow towards the Newborn’s side, but it swayed left and rolled beneath his guard to thrust its dagger at his groin. Uriel spun to the side and the blade skidded from his thigh. He hammered his elbow down, thundering it into the Newborn’s face, Blood burst from its cheek and it fell back, vaulting to its feet as Uriel stamped down.

In a contest between a swordsman and a knifeman, the advantage lay with the warrior bearing the longer blade. Yet that advantage counted for nothing against

the Newborn’s speed. Time and time again, Uriel thought he had a killing stroke, but each time his opponent would somehow manage to avoid the deathblow.

“Stop playing with him!” ordered Honsou. “Finish him.”

The Newborn nodded and closed on Uriel with the poniard held out before it.

Uriel raised his sword, but before he could raise his guard, the Newborn was upon him, ripping the sword from his grip and slamming the dagger’s pommel into his cheek. He tumbled backwards, hearing a commotion from behind him. He hit the ground hard and rolled, but before he could move, the Newborn was on top of him with the grey dagger held above him.

“Now the pain ends,” said the Newborn, its voice choked with emotion.

Two bolter shots broke the sepulchral hush of the tomb and a pair of explosions punched through the Newborn’s chest. Bloody craters big enough for an Astartes fist blew its body open, and Uriel could see Pasanius and a smoking bolter through the exit wounds. The Newborn shuddered, but didn’t fall. The dagger slipped from its hand, landing with a clatter of stone on stone beside Uriel.

Bright blood and sickly yellow light oozed from the wounds. As Uriel watched the horrific injury, new ribs formed and slithering organs, arteries, sinews and muscle grew around them.

“You see the pain I am in?” it said. “The memory of every wound stays with me.”

Uriel swept up the fallen dagger as the Newborn’s hands closed on his throat.

“Samuquan!” gasped Uriel. “That was your name. You were called Samuquan!”

The Newborn’s grip slackened a fraction and its eyes widened in horror as a flood of memories were unlocked in a single, tumultuous moment. Its hands fled to its face and a strangled sob tore from its throat, but instead of freeing it from its domination, Uriel saw only fresh fury in its eyes. The realisation of what it was and what had become of it.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Uriel, and rammed the dagger into the Newborn’s chest.

He drove the blade up into its innards, through the knitting flesh of the bolter wounds, with all his strength. As the blade struck, Uriel felt a hideous sensation of finality flow from the weapon, an awful sense of a thread being severed between the material world and whatever realms lay beyond. The Newborn howled and fell back, pulling itself off the blade.

It climbed to its feet and then dropped to its knees, clutching its head and screaming. Uriel felt its pain as a piercing ache in his head, knowing in that instant of connection it was reliving every degradation since its capture. The

young boy he had been now saw the monster he had become, and its already fragile mind collapsed under the weight of shame and horror. The light oozing from its body vanished, and the regeneration of its wounds abruptly halted.

The child that had been Samuquan looked at Uriel and said, “Thank you,” It slumped onto its side, its legs curling up and hands folding inwards into a foetal position. Its eyes closed and a soft death rattle issued from its lips. Uriel stared at the dagger in amazement, not knowing how it had cut the life-thread of the Newborn or how Captain Ventanus had come to own such a weapon.

He heard the clatter of Iron Warriors bolters and rolled to the side as a roaring volley blasted from two score weapons. With the death of the Newborn, the uneasy and unnatural truce between the Ultramarines and Iron Warriors was ended in the thunder of bolters.

THE TOMB WAS filled with barking echoes of gunfire as the Iron Warriors and Imperial forces opened fire. Uriel scrambled back to his warriors as shells tore up the ground towards him. He jinked right, keeping low to avoid the streams of fire, and rolled into the cover of a cracked sarcophagus as its corner exploded into fragments of pulverised stone.

He risked a glance around the edge to see the Iron Warriors fanning out to surround them.

“Shaan!” shouted Uriel, gesturing to the flanking forces.

“We’re on it,” said the Raven Guard, leading his warriors into the lines of sarcophagi.

Pasanius dropped into cover beside Uriel, now armed with his flamer.

“Thank you,” said Uriel, loading a fresh clip into his bolt pistol.

“Someone’s got to look out for you every time you do something foolish.”

Pasanius leaned over the edge of the sarcophagus and sent a blazing gout of promethium into the Iron Warriors. Three of the enemy set alight, but only one fell, the others walking through the fire unscathed.

The Firebrands and Swords of Calth returned fire from cover as best they could, but this was an unenviable tactical situation. Sheer weight of enemy fire was keeping most of his men pinned down while the Iron Warriors moved to flank them. Their enemies were risking nothing in such tactics, and were giving the Ultramarines no chance to heroically charge or meet them in close combat.

“Come and face us like men, you cowards!” shouted Pasanius, but Uriel knew Honsou would never rise to such bait. He looked for his nemesis through the blazing storms of gunfire, finally spotting him behind a sarcophagus twenty metres to the right. Seven warriors flanked him, and there was no way to reach

him alive.

Uriel's frustration was almost unbearable. To have come this far and have everything ended in such ignoble defeat! More of the Firebrands went down, felled by a methodical burst of overwatch as they tried to return fire. Brutus Cyprian grunted as a bolter round blew out his kneecap, and Ancient Peleus fell back as a round clipped the side of his shoulder guard. Selenus low-crawled over to them, but Peleus waved him off. Their circle of resistance was shrinking with every passing second as the Iron Warriors closed in.

Inquisitor Suzaku crawled through the smoke and dust towards him. Blood soaked her side and a fresh cut on her forehead bled onto her face.

"If your Codex has any plan for dealing with this, I'd love to hear it," she said.

"Nothing springs to mind," admitted Uriel, snapping off a shot toward Honsou. It was hastily taken and poorly aimed, flying wide of the mark and ricocheting from the shoulder guard of the warrior to Honsou's left.

"So what now?" asked Pasanius.

Uriel had no answer for him, but then the Raven Guard struck with their last stab of defiance. Screams of pain echoed from the walls as Shaan's Raven Guard tore through Iron Warriors flanking squads. Yet as devastating as these strikes were, the Iron Warriors were no fools, and reserve squads gunned down the black-armoured warriors before they could make their escape.

Uriel saw Revys Kyre go down with three bolt impacts blowing open his plastron and throwing him back over a sarcophagus. Aethon Shaan fell as a bolter round pulped his hip, but even carrying such a grievous wound, he managed to throw himself into cover. Crimson blood spilled down the carven faces of the sarcophagus, flowing around the images of heroic Ultramarines facing their damned foes and pooling on the cracked floor.

It was a noble attempt to break the enemy, but against such numbers it never really had any chance of success. Uriel wracked his brains for a way to turn this battle around, but he could think of nothing.

Gunsmoke filled the tomb, a choking acrid fog through which blocky shapes moved and spears of fire lanced back and forth. Glittering motes of light danced in the smoke, and Uriel caught an actinic, greasy sensation in the back of his throat, like the instant before a lightning strike. He pulled away from the sarcophagus as the blood-spattered carvings of Ultramarines in battle seemed to shimmer with the same bioluminescence as the cave beyond.

He reached out, feeling the marble of the sarcophagus grow warm to the touch. A spectral mist oozed from the cracks in the stonework, pouring out as though a canister of blind gas was contained within.

“What the—” began Pasanius, seeing the same thing.

“What is this?” hissed Uriel. “Warpcraft?”

“I don’t think so,” said Pasanius. “Look!”

Uriel glanced around the edge of their cover, squinting through the smoky fog filling the tomb as every one of the sarcophagi pulsed with the same light. Wisps of ghostly mist poured from the damaged tombs like steam, twisting in the air like insubstantial tendrils.

A thunderous gunshot ripped through the sound of bolters, and an Iron Warrior vanished in a fiery explosion of ceramite and flesh. Louder than any boltgun, the shot had the weight and echo of something much larger. Another shot rang out, followed by another, and two more Iron Warriors disintegrated in bloody explosions.

A dozen shapes moved in the upper reaches of the tomb, obscured by the strange mist, yet with the unmistakable broad-shouldered bulk of Astartes. Uriel’s first thought was that these were Ultramarines reinforcements, but these half-glimpsed warriors were armoured in sable black ceramite, their plates bedecked in shimmering images of bones and skulls. The blue haze of the dome’s light made it hard to be certain, but Uriel swore that ethereal fire crackled around the feet of these warriors as they marched with funereal slowness down the tiered steps towards the battle.

Their guns fired again, hurling blazing comets from their barrels and leaving bright contrails in their wake. Each shot saw an Iron Warrior slain, and Uriel’s heart leapt as the tide of the battle had suddenly changed. The enemy were taken by surprise, but they still had the edge in numbers. The outcome of the battle now hung on a knife-edge. All it needed was a push to tip it over.

“This is our moment!” shouted Uriel. “For the Emperor and Roboute Guilliman!”

Uriel vaulted the shimmering sarcophagus, his sword flaring to life as he charged towards the stunned Iron Warriors. Petronius Nero, Ancient Peleus and Livius Hadrianus followed him, and Pasanius led his remaining Firebrands. Inquisitor Suzaku, too badly hurt to charge, fired her pistol from behind the sarcophagus as Captain Shaan and three Raven Guard plunged into the shimmering fog pouring into the tomb.

Uriel pounded across the tomb to where he had last seen Honsou, losing sight of his fellow warriors in his haste to confront his most hated foe. He blundered through the mist, colliding with an Iron Warrior in a clatter of armour. Uriel reacted first and swept his sword down through the traitor, cleaving him from shoulder to hip. The Iron Warrior fell, and Uriel saw a bolter gouge in his right shoulder. This was one of Honsou’s bodyguards, and as the mist parted for an

instant, he saw the master of the Iron Warriors before him.

Their eyes met, and Honsou gave him another of his infuriating grins.

Before Uriel could make his move, a shape flowed from the shadows behind Honsou and leapt at the Iron Warrior.

Even as the attacker struck, Uriel knew who it was.

Ardaric Vaanes slammed into Honsou and bore him to the ground.

The renegade Raven Guard spun to his feet, faster and more agile without his armour, yet horribly vulnerable in the face of Honsou's lethal power. Honsou got to his feet just as Vaanes sent a lethal chopping blade of a hand to his face. Honsou lowered his head and turned to the side. Vaanes' blow struck the mass of metal on the side of his face. Rolling with the impact, Honsou went low and drove a thunderous uppercut into Vaanes' belly.

Vaanes bunched the muscles in his stomach enough to keep his internal organs intact, but was still driven staggering back by the force of the blow. Honsou followed up with a brutal kick to the thigh that drove Vaanes to his knees in pain.

"What did you think, Vaanes?" roared Honsou, driving a fist into Vaanes' spine. "That you could just turn your back on me?"

Vaanes pulled himself along the floor, but Honsou followed him, driving kicks into his ribs and fists into his head. Honsou's fury was monstrous, and Uriel was tempted to leave Vaanes to his fate, but that was not the Ultramarines way.

Vaanes had saved his life in the fight with Grendel, and even if he were to meet his end at the hands of his former battle-brothers, it was a better death than this.

"I made you!" roared Honsou. "I should have killed you when I found you skulking in that shithole you called sanctuary. Grendel wanted to do it, and I should have let him."

Uriel dropped to the ground behind Honsou and said, "Grendel is dead."

He swung his sword for Honsou's neck, but the Iron Warrior was quicker than Uriel expected. The silver arm he had taken from Pasanius came up and Uriel's blade cut into its brilliantly reflective surface. It bit a handspan, but no further. Honsou met Uriel's angry gaze with one of wry amusement.

"So Grendel's dead?" said Honsou. "Saves me the bother of killing him."

He wrenched his arm back, taking Uriel's sword with it and slammed a brutal jab into Uriel's face. It was like being hit by a Dreadnought, and Uriel staggered back from the blow. Honsou pulled the sword from his arm, which rippled like mercury and closed up over the wound as though it never existed. He hurled Uriel's sword away to the back of the tomb.

“Always with the duel,” said Honsou. “I told you I don’t fight like that.”

“No, you get others to fight for you. Others to die for you,” said Uriel through broken teeth and blood.

“Best way to stay alive,” said Honsou slamming a fist into the weaker armour at Uriel’s stomach. The plate cracked, but the ancient armour of Brother Amadon held firm. “You should try it sometime, except there won’t be any other times for you.”

An arm curled around Honsou’s throat thick and powerfully muscled. Honsou was hauled back, and Uriel recognised the raven tattoo on the deltoid muscle of his attacker. Honsou easily tore Vaanes’ arm from around his neck, hauling the battered warrior around before him. Holding onto Vaanes’ arm, he pushed the Raven Guard to the ground and planted his foot in his chest.

“This is where we part company, Vaanes,” said Honsou. “Let’s see you fly away now.”

With horrifying ease, Honsou ripped Vaanes’ arm from its socket. Blood poured from the torn shoulder, a spray of crimson arcing across the remains of Ventanus’ tomb. Vaanes roared in pain, but that was cut short as Honsou stamped down on his bare chest. The ossified shield protecting Vaanes’ internal organs shattered and long, dagger-like shards of bone pierced his heart and lungs.

Uriel threw himself at Honsou, but the Iron Warrior had been expecting the move. He grabbed Uriel and spun around, using his own momentum to slam him against a nearby sarcophagus. He felt his body break, and bit back a scream of pain.

Honsou loomed over him as the booming echoes of the mysterious attackers’ weapons felled another group of Iron Warriors. An explosion slammed into the tomb next to Uriel and Honsou flinched as a blizzard of stone fragments sprayed them. A giant figure in blue-black armour emerged from the smoke, a giant bearing a golden bolter and with an emerald cloak billowing behind it.

It fired once, and Honsou raised a warding arm as he was punched from his feet by the enormous impact. He slammed into the ground and skidded over onto his side. Blood poured from a great gouge torn in his chest. Uriel tried to get to his feet, but the pain was too great. The giant figure reached down and Uriel felt the heat of its nearness, as though the flames slowly appearing on the plates of his armour were those that had escaped the inferno raging within his flesh.

Uriel looked into the visor of this giant, seeing an azure light burning there that spoke of ancient heroism and noble deeds of valour beyond anything Uriel could comprehend. This warrior was unlike the others that had come to their aid, for his armour retained traces of its former allegiance, gold trims, a pale eagle on the shoulder and a faded, barely legible, inverted omega symbol. In the centre of

the “U” was the symbol for a captain, but it was old, ancient even, a standard of rank insignia that had not been used for ten thousand years.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” said Uriel. “I mean…”

The figure leaned into him and a ghostly whisper passed between them, a word or a name, Uriel couldn’t be sure. He didn’t even know if it had been said aloud or whether it simply appeared in his mind. Whatever it was, it meant nothing to him, but when the figure pressed the dagger with which he’d killed the Newborn into his hand, Uriel realised what he had been told.

“I understand,” he said, now knowing the real reason M’kar had sent Honsou to this place.

The spectral figure nodded, and Uriel felt its potent sense of a duty discharged, a burden and a responsibility passed on, as though it had been waiting for this since the moment of its death.

Uriel pushed himself onto his side, grimacing as torn muscles pulled and cracked bones protested. Pasanius and his two surviving Firebrands marched towards him, while Apothecary Selenus tended to a terrible wound in Livius Hadrianus’ stomach. Brutus Cyprian watched over his friend, clutching his own shattered kneecap while Peleus helped him remain upright. Petronius Nero propped Inquisitor Suzaku against a sarcophagus and bound her wounds as best he was able. The inquisitor’s skin was ashen, and she looked around the tomb as though unable to believe what she had just witnessed.

Aethon Shaan limped onto the floor of the tomb, and Uriel nodded his thanks and relief to the captain of the Raven Guard. He looked to the upper reaches of the tiers, searching for any sign of their spectral allies. There was no sign of them, nor had he expected to find any. They had vanished as suddenly as they had arrived, leaving only ruptured Iron Warriors corpses behind, and that was good enough for Uriel.

He turned back to the giant warrior, and wasn’t surprised to find him gone. The words he had spoken remained indelibly etched in Uriel’s mind, impossible to forget and laden with echoes of ancient days. He looked at the flint-bladed dagger in his hand and knew what he had to do with that knowledge.

Pasanius gave him a hand up and nodded to the far side of the tomb.

“One last thing left to do,” he said.

Uriel nodded and turned to face Honsou. The Warsmith of the Iron Warriors hauled himself upright, his chest plate cracked and blackened, and his skin ravaged with scars from the blast that had felled him.

He looked up at the warriors facing him and grimaced.

“You look as bad as I feel,” he told Uriel.

“This is where you die,” said Pasanius.

“Perhaps,” agreed Honsou. “But if you think I’m going to let you kill me, think again.”

“Your warriors are dead,” said Uriel. “There is no escape for you. It’s over.”

“Maybe so,” said Honsou, holding up the detonation trigger for the demolition charges wired throughout the tomb. “But who said anything about escape?”

And the world lit up in fire and thunder.

TWENTY-TWO

SCIPIO HURLED HIMSELF into the traitor Astartes, his sword chopping through a howling berserker's breastplate as his pistol blew out another's helmet. Coltanis unleashed a blinding streak of plasma, and Helicas let loose a blazing volley of heavy bolter shells before slinging the weapon in favour of his combat blade. Nivian fought at Scipio's side, keeping his vulnerable flank towards his sergeant.

The warriors of the 2nd Company slammed into the enemy with the cold fury reserved only for traitors. These warriors represented the very worst of what had become of the Astartes since the dark days of the Great Betrayal. Worse than the traitors who fell to darkness in those times, these warriors knew the cost of what they embraced, yet took that road anyway.

They deserved no mercy, and they would receive none at the hands of the Ultramarines.

Captain Sicarius led the way, hacking a path through the mass of ceramite-clad warriors with the passion of a zealot. His blade was a crimson slash in the world, reaping souls with every sweep. Only the berserkers stood in his way, too blinded by their rage and frenzy to know better. The Claws of Lorek and those few Bloodborn warriors not quick enough to flee the charge of the Ultramarines moved aside for Sicarius, knowing better than to stand before him when he had been marked for death by the Corsair Queen.

She leapt from the prow of her skiff as a slew of missiles slammed into it. The first three exploded against the energy field. It blew out with a squealing bang of overload, and the remaining warheads punched through the thin skin of the skiff and ripped it apart from the inside. The wreckage collapsed to the cobbled ground, a twisted mess of mangled metal with the prow section jutting up towards the sky like the last sight of a sinking ship.

Kaarja Salombar turned in a graceful somersault, firing her pistol as she pirouetted gracefully through the air. Two Ultramarines went down, molten craters where their faces used to be. Salombar's pistol was of antique design, but fired lethal bolts of bright green energy. She landed before Sicarius, an exquisitely curved and graceful woman clad in lacquered leather armour, coloured plates and spiked shoulder guards. Her blue hair swept out behind her like a comet's tail, and her heart-shaped face was feline and graceful.

A host of warriors in brightly coloured, patchwork uniforms rushed to her

side, each armed with a crackling sword with a curved blade and combination punch dagger and pistol.

They were big, fast men, gene-bulked for strength and augmented for resilience. Writhing tattoos covered every portion of their skin, and Scipio saw the rippling haze of energy fields clinging to their bodies.

“I’ve waited too long for this,” said Sicarius, and hurled himself towards the Corsair Queen. She met him, blade to blade, and right away Scipio saw she was the faster. The tip of her sword slipped around the tempest blade and buried itself in the gap between Sicarius’ breastplate and pauldron. She spun away to avoid his return stroke and ducked a riposte meant to remove her head, It was like trying to catch smoke, her movements so inhumanly swift that not even Astartes reflexes could match them.

She danced around Sicarius, and though he was a superlative swordsman, she made him look clumsy and uncoordinated, like the rawest recruit ever to come to Macragge. Scipio tore his gaze from the duel as one of the Corsair Queen’s followers came for him.

He turned aside the slashing sabre and spun away as the punch dagger followed it up. He fired his pistol into the man’s face, but a blaze of light erupted from the impact point, leaving his target unharmed. Scipio’s momentary surprise almost cost him his life, as the punch dagger stabbed into the weaker, damaged sections of his armour and ripped into his side. He twisted away before the pistol element could fire, and the bullet was deflected away. Scipio slammed his weapon into the man’s face, a pugnacious and scarred mess of tattoos and steel piercings. Energy shield or not, the powerful impact hurled him back and Scipio took a two-handed grip on his pistol and unloaded a full clip into the man.

Furious energy squalled from his shield with each bolt, but eventually its protection was stripped away and Scipio’s bolts perforated the corsair and tore his upper body to shredded chunks. All around him, the corsairs and traitor Astartes were swarming over them with passionate war cries, but the Ultramarines were continuing their push. Passion was all very well, but it met its match in the disciplined, unbending precision of the Ultramarines.

Nivian kept back from the swirling melee, knowing he could not hope to survive with only one arm and no blade. Coltanis fired short bursts of his plasma gun, the coils now close to exhaustion, and Helicas simply bludgeoned his enemies with the solid mass of the heavy bolter. Scipio had never been prouder of his men, though it grieved him that so few had survived to see victory within their grasp.

He reloaded his pistol and glanced over to where the Lions of Macragge fought in the orbit of their captain. Prabian cut down enemies without effort, his

blows clinical and cold and lethal. Daceus fought with his dogged determination never to fail, while Malcian kept the corsairs overwhelming numbers back with controlled bursts of his flamer.

Vandius fired his pistol while keeping the banner of the 2nd flying, and Scipio saw the blow that would fell him a moment before it landed. The Corsair Queen vaulted over Sicarius' head, firing her pistol into his back and driving him to his knees. Salombar landed beside Vandius, and before the standard bearer could turn to face this new enemy, she slashed her sword clean through his shoulder.

She scissor kicked him in the chest and spun away to face Sicarius, who had risen to his feet in a rage. Scipio saw them throw themselves at one another, but his attention was fixed on the banner. Vandius recoiled from the Corsair Queen's sudden assault, watching in horror as the arm clutching the banner fell away from his body.

"No!" yelled Vandius, his voice brittle with horror.

Scipio understood in a heartbeat that his anguish was not for his injury, but for the fact he had lost his grip on the banner.

Its ebony haft and rippling fabric fell as though in slow motion, and Scipio was moving even before he was consciously aware of it. A corsair moved to intercept him, but he battered him out of the way and skidded under a sword blow as he slid across the ground towards the falling banner. His fingers gripped the pole and he rolled onto his side, whipping it upright as the fabric came within millimetres of touching the ground. A trio of corsairs ran at him, realising the prize he bore, but Scipio was on his feet now, taking aim at the closest. A bolt blew out the back of the corsair's skull, but his pistol jammed before he could fire again.

A searing plasma shot vaporised the torso of the second corsair and a hammerblow from a heavy bolter wielded like a giant club bore the last to the ground. Before the felled warrior could rise, Nivian stamped down on his chest and put three shots into his skull.

"Nice catch," said Coltanis as Helicas and Nivian surrounded their sergeant in an ad-hoc honour guard. Scipio held the banner high, overwhelmed by the honour of bearing so sacred a relic into battle. Such a responsibility came with duty, and Scipio felt a wave of determination sweep through him.

"Onwards, brothers!" he shouted, lowering his head and setting off at a jog to where Sicarius and the Lions of Macragge fought the chosen warriors of the Corsair Queen. Daceus was down, a short blade jutting from his chest and terrible las-wound in his thigh. Apothecary Venatio fought to save him as Malcian fought three corsairs with his bare hands. They bore him to the ground, stabbing with energy-sheathed daggers, but still he did not give up.

Prabian fought at Sicarius' side, keeping the corsairs at bay with lethal cuts, wide slashes and sudden lunges. None dared come too close to his blade, for it bore death on its edges. Sicarius fought with growing desperation and fury against the Corsair Queen, his armour awash with rapidly-drying blood.

Scipio and his men slammed into the corsairs attacking Malcian and killed them in a flurry of stabbing blades and gunshots. More and more Ultramarines were pushing into the fight, galvanised by the sight of the freshly risen banner and driven into paroxysms of rage at the nearness of its fall. Men had willingly given their lives for centuries to protect this symbol of all it meant to be an Ultramarine of the 2nd Company, and there was no greater honour than to fight beneath its gold and blue iconography.

Scipio ran towards Sicarius as the Corsair Queen spun in to deliver her coup de grace. The tempest blade deflected the first and second blow, but could not hope to block the third. Salombar's sword plunged into Sicarius' chest, and the captain of the 2nd cried out in pain as his heart was split in two. The tempest blade tumbled from his grip, but as Salombar drove him down with the force of the blow, Sicarius saw Scipio coming and gripped the straps of her armour in a death grip.

"Now, Scipio!" shouted Sicarius, holding the Corsair Queen fast.

Scipio held the standard high and brought the sharpened end of the banner pole down between Salombar's shoulder blades. The swirling haze of energy that had protected her from blade and bullet could not save her against a weapon touched by the hand of Marneus Calgar and empowered by the Emperor himself. Scipio drove the banner pole through Kaarja Salombar's body, the golden tip bursting out between her breasts in a wash of thin blood.

Sicarius pulled her close and slammed his helmet into her face as Scipio wrenched the banner free. The Corsair Queen slumped against Sicarius, who recovered his tempest blade and rose to his feet over his vanquished foe. He gripped her by the liquid blue of her hair and she looked up at him, defiant even in death.

She spat on his feet and the tempest blade came down in an executioner's arc, cutting her head from her neck in one blow.

"So perish all enemies of the Second!" shouted Sicarius and the wave of panic at her death spread like a stone dropped in a still lake. Sicarius lifted the head of his vanquished foe and nodded at Scipio.

"With me, Sergeant Vorolanus!" he snapped. "Hurry!"

Sicarius loped through the remains of the battle and clambered onto the wreckage of the Corsair Queen's downed skiff. The gold was melting from its hull and purple flames bellowed from its crackling energy cells and ammo

canisters. Scipio followed him up the ramp of wreckage as the bloodied Lions of Macragge formed a protective ring around the hulk, though there was precious little in the immediate vicinity to protect it from. The death of their queen had sent the corsairs fleeing, and the traitor Astartes who still fought were being isolated and destroyed by newly arrived assault squads.

Thousands of Bloodborn warriors remained in Corinth, but Sicarius looked set to take them all on himself as he climbed to the tapered prow of the skiff. Scipio stood behind Sicarius, the intense heat billowing up from the flames below him making the banner flap and furl in a glorious fashion.

With the fires and the banner behind him, Sicarius held the head of Kaarja Salombar for all to see. Her blue hair streamed out from the grisly trophy, unmistakable to all who saw it, and the effect was palpable as a wave of disbelief spread through the surviving Bloodborn.

“Your queen is dead!” bellowed Sicarius, lifting the shimmering blade of his sword over his head. “This is a world of the Ultramarines, and this is where you will all die. I, Sicarius of Talassar, swear this upon the head of your slain queen!”

Sicarius looked down at Sergeant Daceus and said, “Contact Governor Gallow, Daceus. Tell him we need him now.”

Daceus nodded, and within moments, thunderous explosions bloomed in the outskirts of Corinth, mushrooming clouds of fire and smoke that could only have come from Imperial artillery. Scipio watched as those explosions marched deeper into the city, the hammerblow of multiple artillery impacts shaking the ground underfoot. The skiff groaned as the vibrations threatened to topple them from their perch.

“Best get down, Sergeant Vorolanus,” said Sicarius. “Wouldn’t want to spoil the glorious memory of this moment by falling, eh?”

Scipio nodded, turning and making his way carefully to the ground.

“My lord, I don’t understand,” he said to his captain. “Governor Gallow’s forces are here?”

“Of course, you don’t think I’d attack on my own, did you?”

“But how? I sent the execute signal to you no more than an hour ago.”

“Even before you, Fennion and Manorian set off into the wilds, I’d suspected it would be Corinth you’d find the Corsair Queen. I had Saul Gallow deploy his forces from Herapolis a week ago and ordered him to push towards Corinth. All I was waiting for was final confirmation from you.”

Scipio was amazed at the daring of the manoeuvre, but also the danger of it.

“What if you’d been wrong?” he asked, aware of the risk he was taking in second guessing his captain. “What if she’d been at Actium or Nova Ala or even Montiacum?”

Sicarius stepped close to Scipio, and he felt the simmering ire of his captain.

“The question is irrelevant, sergeant,” said Sicarius, taking the banner from him. “I was not wrong, and I have won a great victory for the Second and the Ultramarines. *That* is all that matters, do you understand?”

Scipio’s face hardened. “Yes. It was a great victory, captain.”

ALL WAS DARKNESS. No, not quite darkness. Winking red warning runes and a filmy, sea-green illumination swam at the edge of his vision. Uriel blinked the dust and blood from his face. The darkness slowly resolved into blocky shapes and jagged edges of boulders and fluted carvings piled around, on top of, and beneath him.

A smooth face stared back at him, pale and unblemished, its eyes blank and expressionless. It took a moment to realise the face was carved from marble, its immobile features regarding Uriel and his plight impassively. He twisted his neck as his augmetic eye adjusted to the gloom, amplifying the bioluminescent glow from the cavern and gradually lightening his surroundings.

A solid slab of marble pressed down on him, its edges sheared in the fall from the roof. Chunks of blue stone lay strewn around him, the remains of the dome no doubt. Uriel flexed his limbs, relived he could feel and move his extremities. His spine was still intact at least.

He remembered looking into Honsou’s eyes as the Iron Warrior triggered the demolition charges, but nothing beyond that save the brightest flash in the world and a titanic cascade of roof coffers and structural members.

A thin slice of light angled from above his head, and he twisted in the grip of the tonnes of rubble, gradually working his arms loose and flexing his legs to gain purchase. He pushed up on the slab pinning him to the ground and felt it shift a fraction. Bunching his muscles, he pushed with all his strength, feeling the slab grind against others as it shifted. Rubble creaked and groaned around him, and Uriel kept his movements slow for fear he might bring more down on himself.

Gradually the slab moved enough for him to free his legs, and he manoeuvred himself into a sitting position. His armour was terribly damaged, but it had held against the enormous pressure threatening to crush him to death.

“I am in your debt, Brother Amadon,” he said, thanking the spirit of the warrior who had worn the armour before it had chosen him. But for its protection, he would have been flattened to a red paste. Lying on the ground beside him was the napped-flint dagger, and Uriel tucked it into the empty sheath of his combat blade. Though his normal blade was much larger, the slender

poniard slotted home perfectly.

Dust trickled down from above and he heard the clatter and rumble of settling stone. How long had he been trapped beneath the ruins of the tomb, and how many others had survived? Was he the only one to live through the tomb's collapse, or were there others even now desperately scrambling to reach the surface?

Slowly Uriel eased himself into a void within the rubble created by two sheer sided panels of engravings that had landed at an angle to one another. A breath of air touched him, and he walked in a stoop towards its source, seeing another teasing beam of light filtering down into the dust-filled wreckage. He reached the light and looked up, seeing a crooked chimney of rock that led up to an opening in the vast pile of rubble that had once been a tomb.

"Is anyone else alive?" he shouted. There was no answer, but the debris groaned at the sound and a fresh rain of pulverised rock fragments fell upon his face.

Gingerly testing each handhold, Uriel climbed the rock chimney, pulling himself slowly towards the surface. It took thirty careful minutes, but eventually he was able to throw an elbow over the edge of the rubble. A metallic hand reached down to him and he froze as he thought Honsou had waited on the surface just to finish him off.

"Didn't think that would kill you," said Pasanius, gripping the edge of his shoulder guard and hauling him all the way out. "I told them you were too stubborn to die under there."

"Pasanius," gasped Uriel, embracing his old friend in relief. "You're alive."

"Of course I'm alive," said Pasanius, as though any other notion was foolishness of the highest order. "What? You think all it takes to kill me is someone dropping an entire tomb on my head? What do you take me for?"

Uriel nodded, spitting a mouthful of dust. "Indeed, what was I thinking?"

"We'd about given up on you, but I told them you'd be too stubborn to let that bastard get you like this."

"Them? There are other survivors?"

"Of course there's others," said Pasanius, shaking his head at Uriel's question. "You're the last one out."

"Thank the Emperor," said Uriel, letting out a relieved breath.

"Come on, let's get off this ruin before fate runs out of a sense of mercy."

They made their way down from the piled heap of broken marble, glass and steel that was all that remained of the once mighty structure. It seemed inconceivable that a building that had stood for ten thousand years could be destroyed, but the evidence was right before Uriel's eyes.

Only when he reached the solid rock of the giant cavern did he start to feel safe. His fellow warriors were gathered in a small group, with Selenus working on Brutus Cyprian and Livius Hadrianus. Peleus looked remarkably unscathed, as though he had just walked from the ruins instead of being nearly buried alive in them. Petronius Nero paced in a tight circuit, the broken stub of a sword clutched in his hand, and Uriel left him to grieve the loss of so fine a blade. Captain Shaan sat apart from the Ultramarines, kneeling beside a shattered body whose identity was all too clear from its wounds.

Inquisitor Suzaku lay on her back next to Cyprian, her limbs and body restrained with makeshift splints formed from sword sheaths and snapped weapons stocks. Her face was ghost-like and gaunt, her eyes sunken in their sockets.

"How are they?" asked Uriel.

Selenus looked up. "Hadrianus will require extensive internal surgery to live and Cyprian will likely lose that leg."

"And Suzaku?"

"She'll probably die before we can get her to a medicae facility."

"Maybe she'll surprise you," said Uriel. "I think she's tougher than she looks."

"She'd better be," said Selenus. "I don't think there's a bone in her body that isn't broken."

Uriel turned back to Pasanius and asked the question he had been afraid to voice.

"Any sign of Honsou?"

Pasanius looked away and shook his head. "No. We've scanned the ruins with bio-sensitive auspex and residual heat augurs, but there's nothing in there."

"He could be dead."

Pasanius shook his head. "You know him better than that."

"I suppose I do," agreed Uriel.

"In any case, I took a look into the Dragon's Gullet. That tunneller machine the Iron Warriors came in is gone. Someone took it back through the rock, and it wasn't any of us."

Uriel nodded and said, "Get them ready to move, Pasanius. We need to finish this."

"The war for Calth?"

"No, for Ultramar," said Uriel.

Ignoring Pasanius' quizzical look, he turned and walked over to Aethon Shaan. The captain of the Raven Guard knelt beside the corpse of Ardaric Vaanes. The renegade's body was a mess, bloodied and crushed by his killer and

the colossal forces unleashed by the collapse of the tomb. Yet for all the destruction wreaked upon him, there was something to the cast of his aquiline features that Uriel had never seen before.

Peace.

"I am sorry for the loss of your warriors," said Uriel, placing a hand on Shaan's shoulder.

Shaan nodded, but didn't reply, and Uriel sensed the confusion in him.

"I hated Ardaric Vaanes," said Shaan without looking up. "Every day I dreamed of seeing him brought back to face his crimes, but now that he's dead I don't feel anything. I… I feel sad. Why do I feel sad that a traitor's dead?"

Uriel knelt beside the body and pressed his fingers into the blood-spattered raven tattooed on Vaanes' shoulder.

"Because in the end I do not think he died a traitor," said Uriel. "I think he was Astartes once again."

"Is that even possible?"

"I think so," said Uriel, looking into the face of a man who had once fought beside him across the face of a daemon world in search of redemption. "I hope so."

"The Master of Shadows will demand to know what happened here," said Shaan. "I don't know what I'll tell him when I return to the Ravenspire."

"Tell him Vaanes gave his life in the eternal fight against the Ruinous Powers," said Uriel.

"I think that I will, Uriel," said Shaan, looking up as Apothecary Selenus approached, the mobile scalpels and vacuum seals of his reductor ready to receive that most precious resource of the Space Marines. Shaan nodded and placed a hand on Vaanes' chest and recited the words spoken by Apothecaries down the centuries over the bodies of the fallen.

"He that is dead, take from him the Chapter's due."

THE BLOODBORN ARMY on Espandor did not long outlive the Corsair Queen. Without centralised leadership and bereft of the influence of the Thrice Born, the different factions within the Bloodborn fell to infighting. None would accept the leadership of any of the others, and with Corinth and Herapolis in Imperial hands, the Bloodborn were cut off from any re-supply. Under the inspirational leadership of Captain Sicarius, most of these isolated factions were surrounded and destroyed by strike elements of the 2nd Company. After the bloodbath of Corinth, these engagements were, by Adeptus Astartes standards, little more than skirmishes.

Within nine days, the Bloodborn threat on Espandor was defeated and Saul Gallow's Defence Auxilia were deployed in mopping up the last elements of resistance.

The Ultramarines regrouped and took their Thunderhawks back into orbit to board *Valin's Revenge.* The strike cruiser had taken its fair share of damage, but like the Space Marines it carried within, it remained unbowed and unyielding.

Once aboard, Scipio Vorolanus rested with the rest of his surviving Thunderbolts and began the process of evaluating novitiates with a view to replacing his losses. Nivian now sported a fresh augmetic arm and Coltanis a wide scar that ran across his cheek and forehead. Helicas had come through the fighting largely unscathed and even Laenus had survived.

They had found him clinging to life amid the ruins of the anti-aircraft gun next to the mangled corpse of Bradua. Broken in body, but resolute in spirit, Laenus' flesh was badly damaged, but the Apothecaries and Techmarines were even now rebuilding his body with flesh grafts and bionic replacements. Scipio didn't think he'd mind too much.

Valin's Revenge broke orbit and made best speed towards the coreward jump point.

Scipio asked Iulius Fennion their destination and was not surprised when his gruff-voiced friend told him where Sicarius was taking the company.

"Talassar," said Iulius. "We're going to Talassar."

WAN LIGHT FILLED the chamber of the warp core, a pale, bleaching light that sapped the colour from everything it touched and rendered everything monochrome. The air tasted bad, though M'kar had no need to breathe. Ice formed on the edges of metal stanchions, though M'kar had no need of warmth. The waves of raw warp energy pouring into the *Indomitable* empowered it and filled its limbs with strength. Overhead lumens flickered and buzzed as the power supply surged and faded erratically. A mortal had once dared approach it to say that systems were failing all across the *Indomitable* without regular maintenance, bleating that that the star fort would soon become indefensible.

M'kar had eviscerated the fleshy servant for daring to approach it without first making the nine sacred obeisances of the Eternal Powers, feasting on its soul morsel without even noticing. The fear was a brief moment of pleasure, but the sheer vitality of the wars being waged across the battlefields of Ultramar was the most flavoursome sweetmeat.

M'kar paced the chamber, flexing the hybrid musculature of its borrowed flesh. Somewhere deep inside it, the soul of Altarion still raged against its fate,

but the Dreadnought's former identity was awash in a sea of swallowed souls.

The daemon lord's anger grew with every step. It had escaped the prison the Lord of the Ultramarines had crafted for it, but its confinement was no less. Ever since its brethren had been driven from the blue world, the planets of Ultramar were anathema to it, and treading their surfaces was like walking on broken glass. The Lord of the Ultramarines was within its grasp, but the air of Talassar was a poison to it, the light of its sun the deadliest radiation while Calgar's pet seer still lived and empowered the wards of Castra Tanagra.

Its daemon army raged against the fiery walls of the shrine fortress below, leeching the strength of the wards with the force of their own deaths. Thousands were consigned to oblivion with every passing day, their bodies drained to nothingness by the flames conjured by Calgar's warlock. Their deaths were in service of their infernal master, and each spark of existence was surrendered willingly.

The *Indomitable* might be falling apart, but M'kar cared nothing for the weapons of its mortal followers. The half-breed dreamed of seeing Ultramar in flames, but M'kar wished only to see Calgar destroyed. Ultramar was nothing but the faded remnant of an empire that had shone brightly an aeon ago in defiance of Terra, insignificant in itself, but representative of an old wound that M'kar could not help but pick.

The tides of the warp sang to M'kar through the rift torn in the heart of the star fort, and it could sense the soulfires of the Bloodborn across the vast gulfs of space that separated the daemon from its followers. On the desert world of the triple system, mighty daemon engines did battle with Ultramarines tanks and infantry. The soulfires of the dead found their way to him, and he tasted their growing desperation as the enemy slowly gained the upper hand. On the forest world, the fires of the Bloodborn no longer burned as their master's ancient enemies wiped them out.

Yet it was on Calth where it sensed the greatest confluence of life threads. Many lives had come to their end, itself nothing unusual for a conflict of such scale, but many of these were the bright lines of those marked by fate. M'kar shuddered as it recalled the final days of its last battle on Calth, the sight of its former master being cast down by Ventanus, the very weapon charged with his destruction being turned on he who had borne it to Calth.

The worlds of Ultramar were anathema to its presence, but M'kar had a special hatred for Calth. This world had humbled his Legion. It had resisted the coming of the Word, fought against the true powers of the galaxy and defeated them. The father of the Ultramarines had waged an underhand war with Ventanus at his side and driven the scions of the storm from Calth. M'kar would

never again descend to Calth, for that world was the final resting place of its nemesis.

When Calgar was dead, M’kar knew that Honsou would need to be destroyed, for it had seen the power lurking in the half-breed’s heart, the potential that could be unleashed were he to attract the attentions of a daemonic patron.

A sudden wave of power surged through the warp, followed immediately by a cold emptiness. M’kar halted its pacing and turned its senses outward, descending through the aetheric layers of the planet below to witness the battle raging in its name.

Castra Tanagra was wreathed in fire, as it had been for weeks. The flames were of such purity that it burned to look upon them, driving the daemons back and destroying their forms and souls with every second it burned. The walls were empty of defenders, but it made no difference. While the fire burned, nothing warp-spawned could draw near.

M’kar drew as close to the fortress as it dared, feeling the desperation and fear within the keep. Doom hung over the hearts of its defenders like a smothering shroud, but beneath that was a shining light of brighter emotions. Hope, courage and nobility of spirit. Though M’kar could approach no closer, it saw the brightest light burning in the heart of the fortress, and its joy soared as that light gave one last flare of illumination before fading like a dying ember in a fire.

And as it diminished, the fire surrounding the fortress vanished.

TWENTY-THREE

MARNEUS CALGAR KNELT beside Varro Tigurius and watched the colour drain from his face. For three weeks, his Chief Librarian had hovered close to death, but now it looked as though his invisible struggle was at an end. Agemman looked enquiringly at him, and he shook his head.

"My lord," said his First Captain, nodding towards the firing slits cut into the walls of the keep. "The fire at the walls. It's dying."

"I know," he said, holding tightly to Varro's hand. It was cold and grey, lined and thin, like an old man's. "That's not all that's dying."

"The daemons will be coming again. We need to get onto the ramparts," pressed Agemman. "The gunports need manning. If this is the end, then we should face it head on."

"Do it," said Calgar. "I will be with you presently."

Agemman nodded. "He was a good man," he said at last.

"He's not dead yet, Severus," pointed out Calgar.

"Of course," said Agemman, bowing and moving away.

Calgar had carried Varro Tigurius from the breach in the walls with the daemons snapping at his heels. In their hunger to slay him they had hurled themselves through the fire, but its pure light had consumed them instantly. The fire had burned for three weeks, and they had used the time wisely, further strengthening the defences, resting and practising quick reaction drills for the reserve forces. Varro had remained in his deathly state throughout, unmoving and with his pulse slowly weakening as he slipped ever closer towards death.

"You have to live, Varro," he whispered. "We can't do this without you."

He held his Chief Librarian's hand tightly willing him to live and wishing he could gift him a portion of his own strength. Calgar remained at his Chief Librarian's side for several minutes until he felt the presence of several people behind him. He looked up from Tigurius, blinking back the tears that threatened to come as he saw nearly a hundred of the civilians they had discovered in Castra Tanagra.

"Maskia Volliant," said Calgar. "Praefectus of Tarentum, what do you want?"

"Will he live?" asked Volliant. "Lord Tigurius? Will he live?"

Calgar sighed and stood. "I don't know, Master Volliant. He is slipping away from us, and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

"What can we do to help?"

Calgar shook his head. “Nothing, unless you have an extensive knowledge of Astartes physiology and psychic mastery.”

“I can’t say as we have, my lord, but we can keep him warm and stay with him so he don’t die alone,” said Volliant.

The honest sincerity of Volliant’s words touched Calgar and he saw the same desire to help on the faces of everyone around him. *This* was the nobility of spirit that made mankind great, the strength in solidarity that made Ultramar a shining beacon of the very best humanity could achieve.

“I’m sure he would appreciate that,” said Calgar. “I know I shall.”

“Way we figure it, we’d be dead long since if not for him,” said Volliant, as the crowd surrounded the pallet bed upon which Tigurius lay. Calgar moved aside to let them gather, knowing that Tigurius would approve of this spontaneous gesture of gratitude.

“Goodbye, Varro,” he whispered, turning away and making his way to the ramparts of the keep where Agemman and thirty warriors of the 1st Company awaited him. As Agemman had said, the fire with which Varro had kept the enemy at bay was gone, and the daemons were massing at the edge of the cracking gouge of lightning at the end of the valley.

Cold winds blew over the fortress and the first rays of dawn spilled over the mountains.

“The last dawn,” said Calgar. “Reminds me of the final canto of the *Lament of the First.* ‘Praise the sun that brings the dawn of our final doom.’”

“Now there’s a depressing thought,” replied Agemman. “Saul Invictus’ last speech before the tyranids overran them.”

“Sorry, just thinking aloud.”

“I hope that’s not the inspiring speech you’re planning to give.”

“I’m all out of speeches, Severus,” said Calgar.

Agemman nodded and said. “Good. I don’t much care for speeches before battles.”

They lapsed into silence, watching as the new dawn grew bolder, painting the mountains in vivid gold and purple. Calgar thought it beautiful and knew Tigurius would have loved to capture such a scene in water-colours.

“What are they waiting for?” demanded Agemman, gripping the parapet tightly. “Why aren’t they attacking?”

Calgar had been wondering the same thing, but his answer came a moment later as the shimmering rift in the sky suddenly stretched and twisted as though something monstrous were pushing itself through. A swelling roar of terrible adulation swept through the daemonic horde and Calgar’s heart was seized in a clammy grip as he saw a monstrous form—part machine, part monster—force its

way onto the surface of Talassar.

Grossly swollen and fused with mechanised parts, the daemon lord M’kar towered above its host, a mighty fusion of daemon and Dreadnought. The core of its form was unmistakable, the fused remnants of a granite sarcophagus hewn from the rock of Castra Magna clear for all to see. Calgar saw with a sinking heart whose body provided the host for the Thrice Born.

“Brother Altarion,” he whispered. “Forgive me.”

Though dawn had been spreading across the heavens, the sky now darkened and cold winds from the dead of night blew over the ramparts with the reek of seared flesh. M’kar roared and the daemon host charged towards the fortress. They surged without any semblance of order, a riotous mix of scaled beasts with swords, multi-limbed spawn creatures that howled with insatiable hunger and loping hounds with flayed-skin flesh. Pallid creatures with dead eyes and glistening bodies of lacquered armour slithered through the horde, alongside cackling, winged beasts of utter darkness.

The entire valley was filled with daemons, a host pouring from the rift in reality and fed by the vile energies spilling into the world. This was an army like no other they had faced.

This was a tide of daemons to drown worlds.

Calgar took Severus Agemman’s hand. “Courage and honour, brother,” he said.

“Courage and honour, my lord,” replied Agemman.

TO BE CLAD in flesh once more, albeit this cumbersome meld of machine and its daemonic form, was sublime. The air and sunlight were vile and painful, but that was nothing compared to the sheer joy of existence in the material plane. To know the sensation of flesh tearing, blood drinking and the suffering of mortals was a priceless boon worth any price.

The shrine fortress was wide open, the breach in its walls torn wider in the weeks of battle, and its pitiful defenders were as good as dead. The wards that had once formed a web of inviolable protection more impenetrable than any wall of stone were little more than faded memories. The daemons swarmed around it, a snapping, roaring, screeching horde of mindless killing organs.

Gunfire from prepared positions constructed within the walls cut down the first daemons over the walls, but no matter how many had their forms blasted apart, scores more scrambled over the dissipating corpses to attack. M’kar shrugged off a dozen impacts, its baleful aura spreading before it like the bow wave of a starship and sweeping over the defenders.

Fear and despair flowed from the fortress, and M’kar bathed in such potent blights swirling in the aetheric winds. Civilians fled their positions, running in blind panic for concealed sally ports. Blue-clad Astartes stood their ground and maintained their fire, but even they were forced to withdraw in the face of overwhelming numbers.

M’kar let them go. They were an irrelevance. It could sense the soulfire of its nemesis within the keep and drank deep from the well of power flowing from the *Indomitable*. Its arms were swirling masses of light and flesh and metal, inconstant fluxes of potential. With a thought, one arm became a claw sheathed in dark, glittering metal, its edges toothed with tearing barbs. The other became a ferocious siege hammer, a twisted parody of the weapon its Dreadnought host had once borne.

Apt that it should be the weapon to destroy Calgar.

The daemons surged towards the keep, nothing now keeping them from the meat-prey within. Astartes on the ramparts of the keep’s roof fired relentless barrages of solid rounds and hurled grenades that exploded in the midst of the daemons. The entire length of the tower erupted in flames as its defenders fired from hundreds of new loopholes and gun-ports.

Scores of daemons were cut down, their warp-spawned flesh torn apart and undone. Some even struck M’kar, insect bites against a Titan. Heavy guns sought it out with powerful las-blasts or missile impacts, but M’kar shrugged them all off.

With the power flowing from the rift aboard *Indomitable* it was as good as invulnerable.

Winged daemons swooped down onto the roof of the keep, clawing at the Astartes there and screeching in delight as they flocked like hunting birds. The top of the keep was obscured by the sheer mass of winged monsters, a darkened umbra lit from within by stuttering blasts of gunfire.

The great door of the keep was fashioned from adamantium and steel, a flat arch with scenes of ancient battles carved into its frame. M’kar smashed it and the surrounding stonework apart with one blow. The door exploded into lethal splinters of razored metal and whole swathes of the keep’s walls collapsed around it. The daemon lord forced its way inside the keep as fresh volleys of gunfire ripped into its flesh. Some shots even stung, but the wounds reknitted almost as soon as they were inflicted.

The interior of the keep was a wide open space, filled with confections of angled walls and redoubts, all freshly built and constructed with an order and rigour that could only have come from the scions of Roboute Guilliman. Terrified mortals and blue-clad Astartes huddled behind these barriers, and

M’kar laughed at these pathetic attempts to bar its slaughter.

“You cannot hide from me, Calgar!” it roared, and a dozen mortals dropped dead at the damned sounds issuing from its artificial throat. Daemons swarmed over the barricades, tearing at the defenders with yellowed claws and ichor-dripping fangs. Groups of Astartes counterattacked, driving the daemons back and buying the mortals time to regroup, but these were the desperate last twitches of a dying beast.

M’kar smashed through a heavy barricade of stone blocks, scattering mortals and Astartes alike. Ten of the Emperor’s lackeys came at it, each with a long-bladed polearm on a golden haft. They circled it and stabbed like savages hunting a plains-dwelling leviathan, and M’kar laughed at the absurdity of their defiance.

Its claw arm snatched three from the ground and snapped them in two as its hammer pulverised another’s chest to ruin with a single blow. The other warriors didn’t run, but M’kar didn’t want them to flee. Its claw arm twisted and reshaped itself into a colossal rotary-barrelled cannon. A two-metre tongue of black fire gouted from the weapon, ripping the Ultramarines to shreds and obliterating the flesh within their ruined armour. There would be no genetic descendants for these warriors.

One warrior had escaped the slaughter and M’kar stepped forward to slam its hammer arm into the Astartes. The body was hurled it across the heavily modified entrance hall, breaking into pieces with the impact. A storm of shots struck its body, but it ignored them as irrelevant. M’kar roared and a blast wave of warp energy exploded outwards, disintegrating those mortals closest to it, and driving hundreds of others insane as their minds collapsed.

The screams of madness and fear rang deep in M’kar’s body, empowering it with the suffering it was causing. Its daemonic horde spread throughout the tower, spilling up hastily blocked stairwells and taking the slaughter to the heart of the keep. Already M’kar felt the rich seam of life being extinguished, murder by murder.

Nothing could match its power, and a dozen more Astartes died before any foes of merit dared stand against it. Two warriors surrounded by blazing auras emerged from the wide stairs at the rear of the chamber. One was bathed in the red of anger and determination, the other in shimmering gold and white. A host of warriors wreathed in shimmering silver light stood at their sides.

“Calgar,” hissed the daemon with unadulterated relish. “I am Thrice Born, and the prophecy of Moriana speaks of your death by my hands at this time.”

“That will not happen,” said the red-haloed Astartes. “I am Severus Agemman, daemon. First Captain of the Ultramarines, and you will go no

further.”

MARNEUS CALGAR'S BLOOD chilled at the sight of the Thrice Born, knowing the deaths it had caused throughout Ultramar were his fault. To know that had he been strong enough to destroy the daemon aboard the *Indomitable* all this could have been prevented would be a burden he would carry for the rest of his life.

Right now it didn’t look like that would be a long period of penitence.

Clad in the Armour of Antilochus and bearing the Gauntlets of Ultramar, no one stood a better chance of destroying M’kar, yet still he hesitated. The daemon had resisted him once before, and he had had the backing of the holy ordos that time. Without them, what chance did he now have?

Casting off such doom-laden thoughts, Calgar and Agemman marched towards the daemon lord with weapons raised. The interior of the keep reeked of burned flesh, a hideous stench that conjured unbidden images of corpse worlds and hellish regions of space where carrion eaters dwelled in blood.

Angrily he shook off the taint of the daemon’s presence, and forced himself to concentrate on all that would be lost should he falter. Centuries of progress, the ideals that humanity stood for something greater than barbarism, and the last chance of salvaging the dream that almost died ten thousand years ago.

“Fight well, Severus,” he said.

“That’s the only way I know how to fight, Marneus.”

“Then let’s see this done.”

They charged the Thrice Born with their honour guard at their flanks, plunging into the daemonic host with the last hope of Ultramar resting on their blades. Severus Agemman was a warrior almost without equal within the ranks of the Ultramarines, and he clove a path through his foes with strength and skill the envy of any warrior of legend. His blade sheared daemonic flesh and his gun blazed with the righteousness of his cause. Claws raked his armour, but he moved with the grace and speed of a warrior clad in thin vestments. There was no warrior Calgar would rather have at his side.

Daemons surrounded Calgar, tearing at the enormous plates of armour encasing him. The Gauntlets of Ultramar pulverised any foe within reach, each punch like the hammer blow of a mighty god as he battered an ichor-spattered path towards the daemon lord.

M’kar was just as eager for this reckoning and crushed its minions as it came towards him, its bulks swelling and billowing with a dark corona of poisonous energies. Black light swam around its monstrous form, the machine parts of

Brother Altarion disappearing beneath the swell of unnatural flesh.

A clawed arm snatched for him, but Calgar ducked, no mean feat in Terminator armour, and slammed his right fist into M'kar's body. Where other daemons had simply exploded into their constituent parts at such an impact, the Thrice Born was unmoved. Calgar followed up with a thunderous jab, to similarly little effect, and lurched back as M'kar's clawed arm swept down. Vorpal talons cut through the shoulder guard of his battle plate, tearing through the ceramite, armaplas and fibre-bundle musculature to gouge the flesh beneath.

Calgar gritted his teeth against the fiery agony searing from the wound and unleashed a series of punishing blows against the daemon lord's midriff.

M'kar bellowed with laughter and a Shockwave of invisible energy pummelled Calgar's body, slamming him down with irresistible force. The daemon's horns curled out from its skull, arcing lightning leaping between their brazen, iron-sheathed tips. Its mouth yawned wide with the fire of destroyed suns shining behind its dagger-like fangs, and Calgar knew these were worlds it would end if he fell here.

His honour guard rushed to protect their fallen lord. M'kar plucked one from the ground and his body vanished in a searing explosion. Another met the daemon lord's gaze and his armour fell to the ground as the flesh within withered to dust in an instant. Three more died as its hammer arm swept out, crushing bodies and splintering limbs.

Agemman appeared at his side and helped Calgar to his feet.

"The keep is all but lost," he said. "The upper floors are overrun!"

Calgar nodded and flexed his fists once more. "Then we take as many of the bastards with us before we fall."

"My thoughts exactly," said Agemman.

Ultramarines were pouring into the lower hall of the keep, bolters firing in a near-constant barrage to keep the daemonic minions from spilling out into the rest of the keep. Though most of the civilian populace of Castra Tanagra had chosen to fight, there were hundreds of youngsters and ancients too young to take up arms. The Ultramarines would protect them as long as they could, even at the cost of their own lives.

M'kar crashed through the warriors of the 1st Company, ending lives with slashes of its daemonic claws and slamming blows of its hammer. This was a monster they could only defeat together, and both Agemman and Calgar braced themselves for the fight of their lives.

Agemman fell first.

The First Captain's armour split apart under a ferocious blow that smashed him to the ground with the force of a meteor strike. His head lolled back on his

shoulders, and blood filled his eyes. Agemman tried to rise, but his body was broken into pieces and he had nothing left to give. His gaze locked with Calgar's, and the Chapter Master saw the anguish of his failure.

"Forgive me, my lord…" hissed Agemman as he rolled onto his back.

Calgar threw himself at the daemon in a frenzy of grief and anger. The Gauntlets of Ultramar were blurs of blue ceramite, slamming into the body of the daemon like the thundering pistons of a mighty engine. Light bled from the daemon's body with every blow, and Calgar knew this was his last and only chance to defeat M'kar.

The daemon lord snatched Calgar from the ground, the touch of its claws like acid in his veins. The Armour of Antilochus burned beneath its foulness, scorch marks blistering its surface and reducing it to ashes around the daemon's grip. Calgar felt the ancient armour's anger and struggled to free himself.

M'kar had him firm and the blazing light of murder in its eyes shone with triumphant vindication. Calgar saw his death in those soulless eyes, the death of all he held dear and the end of the last great bastion of humanity's better angels. His strength was leeched from him with every passing second, and though it was futile, he drew back his arm for one last strike.

Then the world was swept with cleansing fire that roared from the rear of the chamber and flooded out into the courtyard. It filled the keep with its living fury, roiling like a surge tide and howling like a maddened beast. Where it touched the Ultramarines it gave them strength, and where it touched the daemons it consumed them utterly. Red-scaled beasts with black swords vanished in howling gales of ash, and leaping beasts with fish-belly white bodies climbed the walls to avoid its touch, Nothing escaped. Nothing warp-borne could survive, and the tempestuous firestorm utterly obliterated every daemon within the keep.

M'kar howled in fury, its body burning in the flames. Any hint of hue was seared away but no fire, no matter how powerful could end so exalted a daemon lord. Its grip spasmed, and Calgar's fist struck its fanged mouth with every ounce of strength he could muster behind it.

The daemon lord bellowed in pain and released its grip, turning and fleeing from the agony of the flames. It smashed through the walls of the keep and over the breach, its daemonic horde gathered around it as it drew on their power to sustain itself.

Calgar dropped to the floor of the chamber as the fire died, unable to believe what had just happened. He turned to see what had saved him, and his heart leapt to see so magnificent a sight before him.

Varro Tigurius stood at the far end of the chamber, gaunt and hollow-cheeked, with the pallor of a corpse, but still alive and still breathing. A dozen civilians

held him upright between them, bearing the weight of his arms and body as the Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines swayed unsteadily on his feet.

Maskia Volliant, Praefectus of Tarentum, held Tigurius' staff though it was almost too heavy for him to bear. Calgar had never been so proud of his people than at that moment.

"I have severed the link between the daemon lord and the *Indomitable,"* said Tigurius. "It will not be able to draw power from the warp rift anymore."

"Emperor's grace, but you are a wonder to me, Varro," said Calgar.

"I had help," said Tigurius modestly, looking around at the courageous civilians who held him upright. "The Thrice Born will be able to renew the connection to its power source soon. You do not have much time."

"I understand," said Calgar. "Remain here and do what you can to keep that link closed."

"I will, my lord," said Tigurius, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper. "Courage and honour."

"And to you, my friend," replied Calgar, kneeling beside the body of Severus Agemman.

The First Captain was alive, but he would fight no more this day. The survivors of the 1st Company gathered around their fallen captain, and Calgar sensed the iron resolve of their controlled fury. He counted forty-nine warriors, most bearing a grievous wound of some description. It was a force of warriors with which worlds could be conquered, rebellions brought to heel and battles won. It was a force of warriors that could now only be wielded in one way.

"You all heard Varro's words," said Calgar. "The daemon is vulnerable, exposed, and we have one chance to end this. Right here and right now, the fate of Ultramar is in our hands. You are the best and bravest of your Chapter, and though we may die in these mountains, we will die in service to something greater than blood, something greater than land. We fight for what we know is *right.* I will lead you in that fight, and all I ask is that you fight like the heroes you are!"

The Ultramarines cheered and Calgar turned towards the gaping hole torn in the keep.

Though his body was near the end of its endurance, the pride in his warriors and the people they defended was a bottomless well of strength. The 1st Company formed up around him, and as they marched out into the courtyard and through the breach, every mortal capable of firing a rifle or wielding a sword was drawn towards them like iron filings towards a lode-stone.

Unnatural darkness still held sway over the valley, but high above a bright light was burning through the clouds, and Calgar took solace in the symbolism

of the sight.

Ahead, the daemon horde massed before the crackling tear of light in the sky, and the blackened silhouette of M’kar towered over them all. Calgar quickened his march, clenching his fists and lowering his shoulders. All around him, warriors both mortal and Astartes matched his pace as they went into the last battle for Castra Tanagra.

“For Ultramar!” shouted Calgar. “Charge!”

TWENTY-FOUR

THE ULTRAMARINES HIT the daemon horde, punching deep into the mass of scaled, slime-covered and rugose-fleshed beasts in an unstoppable mass of power armoured fury. A wordless shout of anger, loss and determination drove them on, their blades, bolters and fists wreaking a fearsome slaughter. And with M’kar’s link to the star fort denied him, there was no reservoir of power to renew them.

Calgar’s fist slammed back and forth with relentless force, slaying a daemon with every blow. A tide of monsters threw themselves upon him, slashing with claws, swords and bladed appendages, each cutting through his armour and scoring his flesh. Blood spilled down the plates of his armour, yet the pain of his wounds was dulled, as though they bled from another’s body.

The thin spear of defenders plunged into the body of the daemons, but like infectious cells within a body, they were quickly surrounded and attacked from all sides. The seething horde of daemonic monstrosities fell upon the last defenders of Castra Tanagra, cutting them down like flames attacking the last remnants of a defiant glacier.

Calgar fought his way through the daemons towards M’kar, its midnight form utterly black and without shadow or feature. All that gave its form shape and proportion were the burning furnaces of its eyes and mouth. The air shimmered around it, a rippling heat haze of the material world trying to eject an unnatural presence in the warp and weft of its structure.

M’kar did not belong here, and this was Calgar’s last chance to make good on his promise to destroy the Thrice Born.

Daemon and Chapter Master met in a tremendous crash that shook the snow from the highest peaks and spread across the surface of the world like the mightiest peal of thunder. Calgar’s fists pummelled the daemon lord and in return its claws tore chunks from his armour and lacerated his flesh with butcher’s blows.

All around him, screams and gunfire split the cold, morning air. The light from above grew brighter and Calgar felt a hot wind blowing over the high peaks. He smelled scorched metal and a powerful electric haze filled the air with crackling static. He couldn’t afford to pay the strange sensation any mind. Every facet of his concentration was focussed on the desperate fight for survival before him.

He and M’kar traded blow for blow, killing each other by degrees and tearing at one another with the single-minded purity of purpose that only true hate can breed. Calgar knew he was weakening, his reflexes slowing and his strength fading with every blocked attack, every missed strike. He saw triumph in the daemon lord’s eyes and its mouth gaped wider in anticipation of devouring his soul.

“No more life left to you,” hissed the daemon.

Calgar didn’t reply. He had no energy for words. He raised a fist to block a downward sweep of the daemon’s claws, knowing as he did so that he was too slow. The claws ripped into his chest, tearing the breastplate from his body and exposing his bare flesh. A sweep of the daemon’s hammer arm smashed Calgar to the ground, and he rolled onto his side as the fiery agony of his shattered ribcage threatened to plunge him into unconsciousness.

The sky was a shimmering vault of purple, red and gold, the heavens alive with colour as something broke through the clouds in a fiery wash of unimaginably bright light. He blinked at the sight, unable to process what he was seeing. It was too awesome, too unbelievable and too magnificent to be real.

Yet it *was* real.

It was real and it was the most wondrous thing imaginable.

Two Ultramarines strike cruisers falling from the heavens like fire-wreathed comets.

Streamers of fire and molten metal trailed from the enormous vessels as they plunged headlong through the lower atmosphere. Their shields and hulls screamed in protest as forces they were never designed to endure threatened to tear them apart. It was the most reckless, gloriously insane piece of flying Calgar had ever seen.

Flocks of Thunderhawk gunships erupted from the cruisers’ launch bays, and for one beautiful moment, the fighting in the valley ceased. Calgar’s face lit up with renewed hope as he recognised the blocky, angular shapes of these mighty vessels.

Valin’s Revenge of the 2nd, and the *Vae Victus* of the 4th.

HOT, METAL-TASTING air roared through the troop compartment of the Thunderhawk as the assault ramp opened, and Uriel gripped the crew rail as he stepped towards the brink. Far below, the ring of Ultramarines fought the daemonic horde. This was their chance to end this once and for all.

He saw a loathsome wound in the world and the towering form of the Thrice Born before it. Marneus Calgar lay at the daemon lord’s mercy, and the words

Varro Tigurius had spoken upon Uriel's return to Macragge echoed within his mind.

The Sentinel of the Tower will fight alongside us when the Thrice Born is clad in flesh once more.

Leodegarius of the Grey Knights had named him the Sentinel of the Tower, a warrior who could overthrow existing ways of life for good or ill. Uriel had not known what that meant until this moment. To use the knowledge he possessed for evil purposes would destroy everything he held dear. What Uriel had learned from the revenant of Captain Ventanus was a potent weapon with which he could save all that he loved from destruction.

"Ready?" said Captain Shaan, stepping onto the ready line next to him. Like Uriel, Shaan wore a bulky jump pack across his shoulders. Behind him were Pasanius and Learchus, also bearing jump packs, though they looked less than thrilled at the idea of this jump. Filling out the rest of the troop compartment of the Thunderhawk were the Guardians and the restored Firebrands. The Swords of Calth were there too, renewed and healed after the high-speed run from the defeat of the Bloodborn on Calth.

"Ready," confirmed Uriel, and leapt from the belly of the Thunderhawk.

AFTER THE DESTRUCTION of the Tomb of Ventanus, Uriel and his companions returned to Four Valleys Gorge, expecting to find a raging battlefield. To their surprise, they had found it much as they had left it. Since the destruction of the Black Basilica, the Bloodborn had hunkered down behind their fortress wall and kept their heads down. Only later did it become clear that without Honsou or whatever commanders had made their lair within the leviathan Captain Shaan's Raven Guard had destroyed, the Bloodborn were utterly leaderless.

The Imperial defenders had been debating how to take advantage of the enemy's lethargy when the decision was made for them. Attacking from the surface, Learchus had led a ragtag column of armoured vehicles and rallied Defence Auxilia through Guilliman's Gate to attack the rear of the Bloodborn army.

Caught between the hammer of Learchus and the anvil of the gorge's defenders, the Bloodborn were doomed. What had begun as a battle ended in slaughter as the Bloodborn were crushed without mercy. Resurgent Imperial forces pushed out onto the surface of Calth and recaptured Highside City, driving the scattered Bloodborn forces before them.

Magos Locard reclaimed the orbital defences, purging their systems of the

scrapcode and returning them to Imperial control. With methodical, mathematical precision, he turned the formidable geostationary batteries and missile silos upon the enemy fleet at high anchor, destroying a dozen vessels in under an hour.

Led by the *Vae Victus*, the Imperial fleet that had rallied at Ultima Six-Eight surged back into the fight, and at the end of a six-hour battle, only a single enemy vessel escaped the carnage. No sooner was the battle for Calth won, than Uriel gathered his forces and set a course for Talassar, encountering *Valin's Revenge* en route.

Captain Sicarius brought word of the great victory he had won on Espandor, together with news of the hard-won triumph on Quintarn, where the 5th and 6th Companies had eventually broken the back of the Bloodborn invasion. The battle-barges *Octavius* and *Severian* were already approaching Talassar, and the synchronicity of their arrival was lost on no one.

Even as Uriel and the warriors of the 4th and 2nd Company dropped out of the skies above Talassar, the two Ultramarines battle-barges were battering down the *Indomitable's* defences.

If this was to be the battle to save Ultramar, it would be won by the entire Chapter.

IT HAD BEEN a long time since Uriel had deployed from a flying Thunderhawk, yet he moved smoothly into the optimal drop position: head down, arms tucked in and legs straight out behind him. The valley rushed up to meet him, a patchwork of grey and brown with the last of the 1st Company painted a vivid blue at its centre. All around him, armoured warriors fell from the sky the combined might of the 2nd and 4th Companies. It was a sight to lift the hearts of all who saw it, and Uriel could not recall a time when two battle companies had gone into the fires of combat quite like this.

He saw the billowing red cape of Sicarius to his right, and though they had never been friends, Uriel recognised the greatness of his fellow captain. Hearing of his incredible victory at Corinth had served to remind Uriel how fearsome a warrior Cato Sicarius really was.

He returned his attention to the ground, adjusting his descent with a twist of his shoulders.

To reach the desired landing point was no mean feat, especially when launched from so high and so fast a vessel. Uriel angled his descent to send him arcing towards his Chapter Master, twisting his body around so that he was falling feet first.

This was as dangerous a combat drop as he had ever attempted, and the shrill warning in his helmet told him he was leaving it dangerously late to fire his jump pack. The warning rune was blinking furiously as he triggered the jets at his shoulders and his rapid descent was brutally arrested in a blazing eruption of jetfire.

Uriel slammed onto the surface of Talassar with a stone-cracking thunder of broken rock. Smoke wreathed his landing and the stone beneath his feet vitrified in the intense heat. His sword leapt to his hand as monstrous creatures with blunt, tapered skulls and curling ram's horns threw themselves at him. Thudding impacts nearby told him the warriors of the 4th and 2nd had joined the fight, and the battle for Talassar rapidly changed character.

Uriel cut his way through the horned daemons with wide sweeps of his sword, aided by roaring blasts from Pasanius' flamer and deadly accurate bursts of Learchus' bolter. Uriel's command squad fought with a fresh sense of purpose and cohesion, welded into a tight-knit fighting unit by the battles on Calth.

Any normal foe would have been broken by so sudden an attack, but daemons were no normal foe. They fought with as much fury and vigour as ever, unperturbed by the sight of nearly two hundred armoured Astartes landing in their midst and two enormous starships overhead, so close it felt like you could reach out and touch them.

Uriel saw the Thrice Born looming over Lord Calgar and leapt to his Chapter Master's defence. He threw up his sword and turned aside a sweeping blow that would surely have disembowelled Marneus Calgar. The daemon lord turned its searing gaze upon Uriel, and he felt the awful power of its ancient malice. It had dwelled in rage for ten thousand years, sustained by its hate for the worlds and warriors of the Ultramarines.

He now understood the core of that malice, for he knew his Chapter history as well as any warrior of the Ultramarines. He knew of the cowardly attack of the Word Bearers Traitor Legion on Calth in the days of the Great Betrayal of Horus, the battles fought by Roboute Guilliman and Captain Ventanus to save that world after its sun was poisoned for all time.

What the legends hadn't related, what none of the Chapter had known, was what had become of one of the Word Bearers' mightiest Dark Apostles, a dread figure of dark legend named Maloq Kartho. Though no trace of that warrior's former appearance now remained within the body of the Thrice Born, Uriel saw clearly how Maloq Kartho's dark patrons had rewarded his hateful deeds on Calth.

That had been Captain Ventanus' last gift to Uriel: the true name of M'kar.

The daemon that had once been Maloq Kartho of the Word Bearers loosed a

soul-hungry bellow and swept its clawed arms down to lift Marneus Calgar from the ground. Lord Calgar struggled in the grip of the daemon lord, but he was powerless to resist being drawn up towards its blazing fangs. Uriel saw the Thrice Born had cast off any notions of a grand victory here, and was contenting itself with the murder of the warrior who represented its most hated foes and had thwarted its insane ambitions for centuries.

Uriel snatched the flint-bladed dagger from the sheath at his side.

“I name thee Maloq Kartho!” he shouted. “Your true and mortal name!”

The daemon lord threw back its head in pain as a paroxysm of rage shook its body from the tip of its blackened horns to its splay-clawed feet. The dagger grew warm in Uriel’s hand, as though recognising a target for the lethal malice bound within its blade by unknown smiths of long ago. A shudder of unadulterated terror passed through the M’kar as it turned its gaze upon Uriel and saw the glinting dagger he carried. Its eyes widened in recognition.

“The shard of Erebus!” cried the daemon lord.

As much as Uriel wanted to strike back at the daemon lord for all the suffering and death it had caused, he knew that was not the role fate had assigned him.

He was the Sentinel of the Tower, not its Master.

Uriel hurled the dagger, hilt-first, towards Marneus Calgar.

The Chapter Master caught it deftly, the slender weapon absurdly small in his mighty gauntlets. But just as the Gauntlets of Ultramar were capable of great destruction, so too were they capable of feats of great dexterity. Held less than a metre from the daemon lord’s face, Lord Calgar lunged forward and plunged the ancient dagger into M’kar’s throat.

The effects were instantaneous and incandescent.

Blazing starfire spewed from the mortal wound dealt to the daemon lord, a flood of immaterial energy that raged in the air like a slick of polluted light. M’kar released its hold on Lord Calgar, who landed heavily on the ground before the dying daemon lord. Uriel ran to the wounded Chapter Master and, with the help of Pasanius and Learchus, dragged him away.

“What was that blade?” gasped Marneus Calgar.

“I do not know,” said Uriel. “It came from the tomb of Captain Ventanus.”

“Ventanus? The Lost Chapter?”

“The same,” confirmed Uriel.

The fighting in the valley had ceased as the daemon lord wrestled with its undoing, fighting with the last of its strength to withstand the alien sentience of the ancient dagger. Against the craft of its unknown makers and the revelation of its true name, there was nothing it could do, and every attempt to maintain its

existence was for nothing.

All around them, the daemon host howled in mindless rage as M'kar drained them of their essences in its attempt to fight its own dissolution. One by one, the daemons disintegrated as their hold on the material world was broken and they were cast back into the warp. Within moments, the valley was empty save the for defenders of Castra Tanagra.

M'kar's form shrank, its outline blurring and compressing as every shred of its existence was consigned to destruction. This was true death: oblivion and the terror of non-existence. And the daemon lord knew it. With a last shriek of terror, M'kar's body exploded outwards in a wash of light scraps and horrified awareness of the nothingness that awaited it.

In the same instant, the vertical tear in the fabric of the world disappeared with a thunderclap of displaced air. The darkness obscuring the mountaintops and snow-shawled valleys of Talassar was dispelled, and the sun shone down on a world freed from the clutches of the daemonic. A cleansing wind blew down from the eastern peaks, carrying with it the promise of new days, fresh hope and the sweet beauty of lives lived on the edge of death. No sun was brighter, no wind as fresh and no day would ever be as memorable.

"It's over?" said Pasanius, looking at the scorched rock where the daemon had met its end.

"Yes," said Uriel, his heart lighter than it had been in many a year. "It's over."

THE BATTLE-BARGES *Octavius* and *Severian* completed the victory on Talassar, destroying the *Indomitable* in a series of furious barrages from their bombardment cannons. Volleys of torpedoes from the combined Ultramarines fleets hammered the corrupted star fort, tearing it apart in thunderous blooms of fire-venting plasma. Smaller vessels added their own broadsides to the assault, reducing the once-mighty structure from a miracle of engineering to a twisted mass of molten wreckage.

The star fort's warp core collapsed and its reactors went critical as systems already on the brink of failure finally gave out and turned the *Indomitable* into a miniature supernova. Blasted from its position in the heavens, the star fort fell from orbit, spiralling lower and lower until the gravitational pull of Talassar ensnared it and dragged it to its final doom.

Like the brightest star falling from the heavens, the *Indomitable* plunged through the atmosphere, trailing scads of molten metal and burning oxygen. All traces of its corruption were burned away as it plunged downwards, gathering speed and growing in brightness until the skies above Talassar were shining with

its dying radiance.

The victors of Castra Tanagra watched it fall, silent in the face of such an awesome sight.

The remains of the *Indomitable* plunged into the sea of Talassar, sending up a kilometres-high plume of water. The impact created a monstrous tsunami, but such was the scale-defying vastness of Talassar's world-ocean, that it was little more than a series of harsh breakers by the time it reached the cliffs of Glaudor.

As Uriel watched the *Indomitable* vanish over the horizon, a memory of words spoken by someone impossibly distant and unimaginably old surfaced in his mind.

His destiny is woven into the tapestry of a great hero's death, the fall of a star and the rise of an evil long-thought dead.

It was a memory he knew did not belong to him, and Uriel recognised the sensations of his link with the Newborn, the boy Samuquan. He would never know where those words had been spoken, but as Uriel felt the ghostly shade of a dark-armoured figure at his side, he knew whose death had been foretold.

His name had been Ardaric Vaanes.

IT TOOK ANOTHER six months to completely purge the taint of the Bloodborn from Ultramar, the last remnants of the invading armies fighting to the end even though their infernal master was no more. Uriel led assaults on Quintarn alongside Galenus of the 5th and fought alongside Sicarius in numerous strikes against enclaves of Bloodborn corsairs that had gone to ground in the forests of Espandor. Many were the battles fought to carve the last traces of the Bloodborn infection from the flesh of Ultramar, and only when Marneus Calgar led the last assault on Tarentus against a coven of Bloodborn cultists alongside Varro Tigurius and Severus Agemman was the invasion finally ended.

It had been the most devastating attack on Ultramar since Hive Fleet Behemoth, and many were the names to be carved in gold upon the slabs of Formaskan marble in the Temple of Correction. Across the Chapter, three hundred and forty-seven Ultramarines had fallen in battle with the armies of the Thrice Born.

Their memories were honoured at a ceremony held six months to the day after the final defeat of M'kar on Talassar.

THEY ASSEMBLED IN the shadow of the great primarch, every warrior of the Ultramarines declared fit to stand by the Apothecarion. Six hundred Astartes gathered before the shimmering form of Roboute Guilliman, enthroned within

his golden sepulchre and held in stasis for all time. The golden doors of the temple had been shut to the thousands of pilgrims beyond, for this was a ceremony for the Chapter only, a private affair, though some non-Ultramarines were accorded the honour of being present.

Inquisitor Suzaku was one of the few mortals in attendance, the soldier of the holy ordos having survived her ordeal in the depths of Calth. She had yet to fully recover from the grievous wounds she had suffered at the hands of the Blade dancers and Honsou's Iron Warriors, but she had graciously welcomed this opportunity to remember the dead. Magos Locard and Commander Trejo of the skitarii stood at her side, these servants of the Adeptus Mechanicus honoured for their part in the defence of Calth. Both wore golden "U" stamped medals to forever remind them of their friendship with the Ultramarines.

Captain Aethon Shaan of the Raven Guard stood next to Uriel, symbolically taking his place alongside the 4th Company of the Ultramarines. A number of black flags, each one a dead son of Corax, were placed in line with the ranked-up warriors. For their service to Ultramar, these heroic warriors were granted a place of honour in the battle formation.

Marneus Calgar stood on a plinth of dark marble below the father of the Ultramarines, his armour restored to its former glory by the very best of the Chapter's artificers and hammered anew in the Dreadnought forge of Techmarine Harkus. The Chapter Master was now a solemn figure, one of greater humility than before, yet one uplifted by the courage and honour shown by his warriors and people in the defence of their home.

Gold-armoured Terminators flanked him and an honour guard bore flickering torches that bathed the interior of the Temple of Correction with a warm glow that made its vastness seem somehow smaller, more intimate and more personal.

Lord Calgar lifted his voice so that all could hear his words.

"They shall be pure of heart and strong of body, untainted by doubt and unsullied by self aggrandisement. They will be bright stars in the firmament of battle, angels of death whose shining wings bring swift annihilation to the enemies of man. So it shall be for a thousand times a thousand years, unto the very end of eternity and the extinction of mortal flesh."

Uriel's heart stirred at the ancient words of Roboute Guilliman, words that had stood as the bedrock of the Adeptus Astartes since the earliest days of the Imperium.

"Comrades, we have won a great victory and we gather here to honour the dead, to remember the sacrifices they made and ensure their legacy is not forgotten. It has been a long and painful fight, with much blood shed in the defence of our way of life. We are unique in Ultramar: we are a brotherhood of

warriors and mortals, bound together by chains stronger than adamantium. But Ultramar is more than just the strength of its blades. The strength of Ultramar is humanity, and the strength of humanity is Ultramar. If one turns from the other we shall lose all that makes us strong.

“Three hundred and forty-seven Ultramarines lost their lives in this war, but this victory is theirs, for what is the terror of death? That we die with our work incomplete. The joy of life is in knowing that our task is done.”

Calgar nodded to each of his company captains, and Uriel bent to lift a cloth-wrapped bundle at his feet. The captains of battle marched from their companies towards the gleaming black walls of the temple as the Chapter Master spoke again.

“The warrior who acts out of honour cannot fail. His duty is honour itself,” said Lord Calgar as Uriel unwrapped a rock hammer, a chisel and numerous sheets of gold leaf from his bundle. “Even his death is a reward and can be no failure, for it has come through duty. We remember the dead, but we are Adeptus Astartes, and we do not waste our tears. We were not born to watch the world grow dim, for our lives are not measured in years, but by our deeds.”

Marneus Calgar lowered his head as each captain knelt by a blank area of the marble slabs and began to carve the names of the fallen.