



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# THE LAST HUNT

ROBBIE MACNIVEN



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# THE LAST HUNT

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

## **BACKLIST**

**More Warhammer 40,000 stories from Black Library**

### **The Beast Arises**

**1: I AM SLAUGHTER**

**2: PREDATOR, PREY**

**3: THE EMPEROR EXPECTS**

**4: THE LAST WALL**

**5: THRONEWORLD**

**6: ECHOES OF THE LONG WAR**

**7: THE HUNT FOR VULKAN**

**8: THE BEAST MUST DIE**

**9: WATCHERS IN DEATH**

**10: THE LAST SON OF DORN**

**11: SHADOW OF ULLANOR**

**12: THE BEHEADING**

### **Space Marine Battles**

#### **WAR OF THE FANG**

**A Space Marine Battles book, containing the novella *The Hunt for Magnus* and the novel *Battle of the Fang***

#### **THE WORLD ENGINE**

**An Astral Knights novel**

#### **DAMNOS**

**An Ultramarines collection**

**DAMOCLES**

**Contains the White Scars, Raven Guard and Ultramarines novellas  
*Blood Oath, Broken Sword, Black Leviathan and Hunter's Snare***

**OVERFIEND**

**Contains the White Scars, Raven Guard and Salamanders novellas  
*Stormseer, Shadow Captain and Forge Master***

**ARMAGEDDON**

**Contains the Black Templars novel *Helsreach* and novella *Blood and Fire***

**Legends of the Dark Millennium**

**ASTRA MILITARUM**

**An Astra Militarum collection**

**ULTRAMARINES**

**An Ultramarines collection**

**FARSIGHT**

**A Tau Empire novella**

**SONS OF CORAX**

**A Raven Guard collection**

**SPACE WOLVES**

**A Space Wolves collection**

**Visit [blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com) for the full range of novels, novellas, audio dramas and Quick Reads, along with many other exclusive products**

# CONTENTS

Cover  
Backlist  
Title Page  
Warhammer 40,000  
Prologue  
Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Epilogue  
About the Author

An Extract from 'Carcharodons: Red Tithe'  
A Black Library Publication  
eBook license



# THE LAST HUNT



**ROBBIE MACNIVEN**



BLACK LIBRARY



## **WARHAMMER 40,000**

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

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

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

*Coming events will always cast their shadows before them.*

– Ancient Chogorian steppe proverb

## CHOGORIAN LEXICANUM

*Ayanga* – the Lightning Tower, the White Scars Librarium

*Berkut* – a breed of raptor native to Chogoris

*Busad* – a White Scar's personal chamber

*Chinyua* – a type of Chogorian wine

*Kachan* – strange or uncanny

*Khoomei* – traditional Chogorian throat singing

*Emchi* – a White Scars Apothecary

*Guan dao* – a power lance

*Jazag* – the laws of the nomad tribes of Chogoris

*Kindjal* – a knife

*Khorchin* – the variation of Gothic spoken on Chogoris, sometimes known as Chogorian

*Khum Karta* – the mountain range where the White Scars fortress-monastery is based

*Ordu* – archaic term for a White Scars company

*Plain Zhou* – the Chogorian steppes

*Quan Zhou* – the White Scars fortress-monastery

*Tulan* – a training corridor

*Türüch* – a rank equivalent to sergeant

*Ulzi* – a knotwork pattern representing the Eternal Labyrinth, the inescapable nature of fate

*Yaksha* – daemon

*Zadyin Arga* – a Stormseer, the White Scars Librarians

*Zart* – human serfs serving the White Scars



## PROLOGUE

A figure sits atop a weather-beaten rock, clad in white, his legs crossed beneath him. He is alone. Around him, as far as consciousness extends, the steppes of the Plain Zhou stretch. The wind sighs over the tall grass, setting it rippling like the waves of an ocean. In the distance the tips of the Mountains that Scrape the Stars are just visible, giving the horizon a jagged, black-toothed edge.

The man is old. His hair, bound up around the crown of his head, is grey. His features are wizened, beaten and cured by three centuries of steppe sun and wind. He sees much, and is aware of even more. To the east a herd of wild ox horns is passing by, their lowing carried to him by the wind. Near the base of his rocky perch a vole is scampering between the stalks, scavenging for food. It is being hunted, though it does not yet know it. Far above, a berkut circles, waiting as it rides upon the currents of the sky.

The figure on the rock is also being hunted. He can sense the creature's presence, though he cannot yet see it. It is nearby, stalking him. It should not be here. He seeks it out in the twitch of the grass, in the shadow that creeps ever closer, slowly circling. But still, for all his perception, he cannot find it.

Darkness falls across him. A lesser being would have shivered. He looks up. Dusk is still many hours distant, but today it has come early. Today, the heavens are full of flesh. The figure reaches for the totemic staff set on the rock before him, his expression grim.

Hunger. The eternal constant, insatiable and vast. It floods the skies above the man, blocking out the sun, burning away the clouds. It reaches down towards the

steppes with a billion, billion shadowy tendrils, covering them in questing, hideous meat.

The Plain Zhou dissolves. The Khum Karta crumbles, the vast mountain range swallowed whole. As the world is consumed, the lone predator strikes. It comes at the figure in a blur of speed, all talons and hard, spiny carapace. The figure brings his staff up, but he is too slow. Too old.

He wakes. Shadows surround him. For a moment, he is filled with horror. For a moment he still sees his world swallowed up, consumed utterly. But no. It is dusk. The sun is sinking towards the mountain tips, a disk of blood-red that makes the steppe grasses look like a sea of flickering flames.

He takes one slow, shuddering breath, as the last of the nightmare vision disintegrates around him. His staff is still in his hand, his knuckles white. He stands slowly, bending limbs and cracking joints left inert for too long. He is old no more.

The vision has changed. He must take word of it to the Ayanga. He needs guidance. He drops down into the rock's lengthening shadow. There his bike stands, its smooth, white surfaces gleaming in the encroaching darkness. Slinging his staff across his back, he mounts it and guns the engine. He circles the rock once, the plain dust kicked up by thick tyres shrouding the erratic stone. Then he turns north, towards the distant mountains. The roar of his engine carries across the steppe until it is lost, swallowed up by the gathering night.

*On the burning winds they come,  
Warriors of the Sky,  
saviour and slaver both.*

– Traditional Darkand tribal poem



## CHAPTER ONE

### MASTER OF CEREMONIES

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK [TERRAN STANDARD]: 114 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 69 HOURS.

#### **Temple District, Heavenfall**

The Spur of Mankind Descended was hushed. Light flooded through the glassaic dome of the temple primaris, painting the swept flagstones and carved rustwood pews in vibrant shades of blue, green and gold. The air was heavy with dust motes and the silent expectations of threescore dignitaries, sweating in their yat wool gowns and broad-rimmed ceremonial caps. They were seated before the spur itself, tribal hetmen and Administratum adepts alike. Darkand's ruling elite, come to the slope-city of Heavenfall to observe the onset of the Furnace Season.

The rattle of beads disturbed the expectant silence. Wordlessly the High Enunciator, Septimus Traik, made his way between the pews, head bowed in supplication, features unreadable behind the thousand white beads of his traditional *shontii* veil. Only Governor Harren turned his head to observe the leader of the Church of the Emperor's Voice as he passed by. He wondered how Traik could withstand the heat in his impractical garments. Harren's own ageing flesh was slippery beneath the thick folds of red-dyed yat wool. Like Harren, Traik was an off-worlder, born not on Darkand's wind-whipped steppes, but amidst the upper-hive grav spires of Soltara. Traik, however, seemed unaffected

by the stifling nature of the local garb.

The governor felt Chancellor Tugan, seated next to him, shift and lean in. Unlike Harren or Traik, Tugan was Darkand born and bred, his dusky, weathered skin and stocky build speaking of decades hunting across the steppes beyond Heavenfall's Founding Wall.

'A message from Ganzorig,' the chancellor murmured in the governor's ear.

'What is it?' Harren hissed, fighting the urge to scratch at the sweat sliding its way down his sides. 'Does he not know it's Descent Day?'

'He knows,' Tugan said, lips so close they almost brushed Harren's aural augmetics. 'He says it's a high priority contact. Code aleph.'

'Aleph?' Harren said, voice spiking. One of the Administratum adepts seated in front glanced round.

'You think it's...' Harren began, lowering his tone.

Tugan simply nodded, dark eyes fixed on the governor. He didn't need to say what had triggered an aleph-level communiqué. It could only be one thing.

They were here, and they were early.

'Can you deal with it?' Harren asked. 'Placate them and brief me in the centrum dominus the moment this foolishness is over?'

'I can try,' Tugan said. 'The warp must have favoured their arrival.'

'Or they desire more from us than usual,' Harren said. 'Don't keep them waiting. Go.'

Tugan rose from the pews and slipped out of the temple, golden chancellor robes hitched around his ankles. Harren realised that Traik's stately procession had reached the ceremony's destination.

The Spur was the rock face that stood in place of one of the temple's walls. The craggy ochre cliff reached all the way to the wide chamber's glassaic dome, its natural surface untouched by the masons and artisans that had fashioned the place of worship around it. Its only blemish was at its centre – there the rock had been smashed and shattered, left scarred by plasma burns and blunt-force trauma. The blackened vents and exhaust chutes of a landing shuttle still protruded from the rock, where the craft had buried itself three millennia previously. This was the heart of the Spur of Mankind Descended, the sacred place where humanity had first set foot on Darkand.

Harren approached Traik. The High Enunciator waited beneath the shuttle in silence. The governor had never liked him, or the cultish offshoot of the Ministorum – the Church of the Emperor's Voice – that had held sway on Darkand since the purging of the Bor-tri cult. Given that he'd only been

planetside for eight years Terran standard, Harren had been surprised when the Congregational Ministers had voted unanimously for Traik to take the position of High Enunciator. He was the youngest off-worlder to have ever held the post. This was his first Descent Day.

It was the first Descent Day for all of them, Harren reminded himself. Furnace Season only occurred once a century, when Darkand's orbit dragged the planet close to the fixed stellar flare listed by the Adeptus Astro-cartograpae as Fury's Pillar. The climatological phenomenon left nine-tenths of the planet a scorched wasteland and drove the steppe tribes to the polar regions, while the citizens of Darkand's only fixed habitation centre, Heavenfall, sought shelter in the catacombs that riddled the slope-city's mountainside. The Furnace Season's start was heralded by Descent Day, when both tribal representatives and the planet's off-world Imperial elite came together to ceremonially re-enact the arrival of mankind's first colonists.

Harren joined Traik, and the two of them mounted the steps to the shuttle's rear hatch. There was a scrape of rustwood on stone and a scuffling of slipshoe-clad feet as the congregation rose.

The two came to a halt before the closed hatch. Traik raised his hand and splayed his long, pallid digits against the gene-lock pad. There was a whirring sound as the ceramite-plated hatchway slid open. The shuttle's interior was a lightless depth, the illumination of the temple picking out only a few feet of worn, rusty decking plates. A stench hit Harren, like the gaseous exhalation of a rotting cadaver – void mould, the musk of old rubber and mech lubricants, the sickly sweet stink of long-dead vermin. Despite the heat of his gown, he shivered.

Another few minutes and it would be finished. He only needed to take a few paces into the darkness of the shuttle with Traik and recite the Founding Canticle. The High Enunciator would hold a yellowing, jawless skull – said to have belonged to one of the very first human colonists – for Harren to place his hand upon while he rededicated the planet's government to the God-Emperor and their forefathers. That, along with a brief ceremonial confession of ritualised sins, and the governor's part in the Day of Descent would be over. He could re-emerge, ancient tradition observed, and be in the centrum dominus within half an hour.

So why was he hesitating?

Traik shifted next to him. It was a tiny movement, almost lost beneath the heavy folds of his gown, but it sent Harren's hesitation into flight. He was being

ridiculous. Head bowed and robes hitched, he stepped across the threshold and in through the shuttle hatchway.

The stink of the ancient, long-abandoned craft grew worse, and he fought the urge to bring a gold-embroidered sleeve up to his nose. He took another step into the darkness, just far enough to be hidden from the congregation below. Deep enough for three-thousand-year-old shadows to fully embrace him.

He heard a clicking noise, faint and regular. It made him frown. A moment passed before he could place it – it was the sound of the gene-lock pad engaging. He began to turn back towards the hatch just as the noise was replaced by the whirring of the door. The governor caught a split-second glimpse of Traik, still shrouded in his heavy ceremonial gown and veil, looming in the hatchway. Then the door sealed with a crump of locking bars, and Harren was plunged into the lightless depths of the shuttle.

For a moment, he didn't move. For a moment, he didn't breathe. For a moment he was angry and confused. He took a step towards the hatch, arms out in the darkness.

Then he heard a slow scraping sound, and the anger and confusion vanished, eaten up by sudden, heart-jolting terror. He wasn't alone. There was something else in here with him.

His angry words soon turned to screaming.

The Day of Descent was over. The ascent was only just beginning.

### **The Pinnacle, Heavenfall**

The door to the primary vox-hub's gene-lock read Chancellor Tugan's palm and slid open to admit him. A government landcar had taken the chancellor from Heavenfall's temple district to the administrative sector, then a grav-lift up to its central communications station nestled at the very peak of the city's cliff-like architectural strata. Vox Majoris Ganzorig, a skinny, myopic man, Heavenfall born and raised, met him at the main entrance.

'They're on channel eighteen-nine, chancellor,' the communications chief said as he walked Tugan into the chamber. The room was high-roofed and circular, with six tiered rows of wall gantries lining a central hub filled with brass-rimmed vox-relays and monitoring stations. Though filled with dozens of communications adepts, it was strangely subdued. The staff were all at their workbenches, reports reduced to low murmurs that competed with the fizz and crackle of the vox-horns. Ganzorig took Tugan into a substation sectioned off from the main theatre by more security panels.

This room was smaller, with only six adepts monitoring high-yield arrays. Like all the primary hub staff they were Heavenfall natives, their longer, leaner builds and paler features contrasting with the stocky breeding of the steppe peoples. Even after three decades serving Governor Harren at the heart of Darkand's government, Ganzorig still felt out of place at the Pinnacle, the nerve centre of Heavenfall's government. Bar the tribal representatives and steppe lobbyists, almost every non-Imperial member of Darkand's ruling elite had been born and raised in Heavenfall's steep, narrow streets. Compared to them Tugan struck a squat, bald figure whose heavy robes hid muscle hardened on the steppes and skin left darkened and cracked by wind and sun. He would never truly fit in with the Heavenfall elite, the mountainside politicians who ruled the planet's only fixed settlement. That, he suspected, was part of the reason for his appointment as chancellor. Divide and rule; it had ever been the Imperial way.

Ganzorig paused at the door to the smaller substation, one hand pressed against the bulky vox-array that had been grafted into his pale, balding skull. His worn expression grew even more distressed.

'They're requesting a direction transmission,' he told Tugan. 'Face to face.'

'We delayed too long,' Tugan said, his voice grim. 'It never pays to keep them waiting. Put me on the plate.'

'Right now?' Ganzorig asked, hesitating. 'You're sure?'

'Yes,' Tugan replied. 'If we wait for the governor the situation will only worsen. I'll offer them what assurances I can.'

Ganzorig nodded and gestured to one of his adepts.

'Activate the transmission plates.'

Tugan paused to check his robes, adjusted the golden yat-horn pin that was his badge of office, and then stepped onto one of the substation's six hololithic plates. He felt the surface underfoot vibrating up through his slipshoes, and the air filled with a low hum. The lumen strips overhead dimmed.

'We've accepted their transmission request,' Ganzorig said, hand pressed once more to his vox augmentics as he synthesised the information flow. 'Codes verified, establishing connection. Stand by, chancellor.'

The hololithic plate opposite his own came online. There was a crack of electrical charge, and the humming grew louder. The space above the plate before him flickered and shifted, pale luminescence filling the darkness. A white phantom materialised, a grainy image washed with pulses of static inference.

It was the ghost of a giant, clad in ethereal battleplate and thick pelts. One great white pauldron was emblazoned with a jagged lightning bolt crest. It wore no

helm, and the hololithic projection picked out sharp, proud features and a long, trailing moustache not dissimilar to the one affected by Tugan. Its high cheeks were disfigured by ritual scarring, three lines running down each, slicing towards a strong jaw. Even distorted and flickering, the giant's eyes had a piercing, hawkish quality, almost cruel. It looked down on Tugan imperiously as the chancellor held out both arms, palms face up and open in the traditional Darkand style of greeting.

'Hail and well met, Sky Warrior,' he intoned, fixing his attention on the single eye of the twin-headed Imperial aquila embossed on its vast breastplate.

The giant brought one clenched gauntlet – easily the size of Tugan's head – up to its breastplate. There was a click as the vox-speakers built into the hololithic plate's base came online.

*'Well met, Chancellor Shegai Tugan,'* said the giant. Its voice was deep but curiously melodic, lent poetic colour by the thickness of a flowing accent.

Tugan did not question how the Sky Warrior knew his name.

*'I am Joghaten, Master of Blades, Khan-Commander of the White Scars,'* the giant continued. *'I am accompanied to your system by the entirety of my brotherhood. We have come here with all haste.'*

'The tides of the empyrean have been kind, Great Hetman,' Tugan said, using the honorific applied by the natives of Darkand to the Sky Warriors. 'We did not expect your arrival for some time.'

*'Your assumption is wrong,'* Joghaten replied. *'We are not early. We are late, and grievously so.'*

'I... do not understand,' Tugan began, hesitating as he tried to process the giant's words.

*'It is not necessary that you understand,'* Joghaten said. *'An enemy is coming, a great and terrible xenos threat. My brotherhood's Zadyin Arga has seen it many times in his entrails and spirit-walks. Your world already feels the tremors of their approach. You must move the nomad tribes inside the capital's walls.'*

'I will inform Commander Harren of this,' Tugan said, fear warring with protocol as the enormity of what Joghaten was saying hit home. 'What manner of xenos? I-I will need authorisation—'

*'Why is Governor Harren not here to treat with me directly?'* Joghaten demanded. *'Do the White Scars not warrant his attention?'*

'We... we did not expect you so soon, Great Hetman,' Tugan said, forcing himself to turn back towards the giant. 'Today is the Day of Descent. He has been called away to the ceremonial start of the Furnace Season. I will fetch him

immediately.’

*‘Deliver this message to him,’* Joghaten ordered. *‘We are running out of time. You must begin the relocation of the tribespeople to the capital immediately. The Shadow in the Warp will soon be upon us.’*

‘The Shadow in the–?’ Tugan asked, trying to force his voice to stay level. He must not dishonour his post by panicking, even if it was in front of a Sky Warrior.

*‘You will be fully briefed when we make planetfall,’* Joghaten responded. *‘Go and begin preparations, chancellor.’*

Tugan nodded hastily before crossing his arms and bowing his head in a reverent expression of traditional Darkand compliance.

‘As you will it, Great Hetman,’ he said. ‘I shall return as swiftly as possible.’

*‘I pray you do, Chancellor Tugan,’* Joghaten said. For a moment the towering ghost form glared down at him, like a hawk eyeing its prey. Then the hololithic flickered, and was gone.

Tugan turned to Ganzorig as the lumens came back on.

‘Issue a code aleph alert to all departments, recall the cabinet and get me the governor. I don’t care if it interrupts the ceremony.’

‘Understood,’ Ganzorig said, signalling to one of his vox operators. ‘Open a secure channel to Commander Harren immediately, maximum priority.’

As the sound of fingers tapping at rune keys echoed through the substation, Ganzorig and Tugan both made for the doors. They never reached them. The hatchway slid open to admit half a dozen Pinnacle Guard in their ochre flak-plate. They were led by Nergüi.

Guardmaster Nergüi, Captain of the Watch, was head of security for Heavenfall’s government district. Like Tugan he was a rare beast, a steppe tribesman inducted into the capital’s inner circle. When seeing the chancellor and the guardmaster together, many assumed the two sons of the steppes shared a sort of native rapport. Nothing could be further from the truth – the two came from rival tribes, the Tug-ai and the Shontaj. Competition was bred into their every encounter.

Tugan paused as Nergüi and his security detail – fully armed and armoured – stepped into the substation.

‘What are you doing here?’ Tugan demanded.

‘There has been a security breach,’ Nergüi said, stopping in front of Tugan, flanked by his men. They wore their helmets’ blast plates down, the fanged images of the steppe canids carved into the visors snarling silently at the

chancellor. He noticed that the vox-adepts had also ceased transmitting, the rattle of fingers on rune pads suddenly silenced. They were all staring at him. The hairs on the nape of his neck bristled.

‘What manner of breach?’ he demanded. Ganzorig had started worrying at the collar of his robe, seemingly also unnerved by the sudden appearance of the Pinnacle Guard.

‘Tier one,’ Nergüi said, taking a step forwards and forcing Tugan back.

‘I must speak directly with Commander Harren,’ the chancellor said.

‘The commander is indisposed,’ said Nergüi. ‘He is being introduced to the Master of Ceremonies.’

‘The Sky Warriors are on their way,’ Tugan responded, forcing his voice to remain slow and level as he sought to regain control of the situation. ‘They’ll be here sooner than we anticipated.’

He’d hoped mention of the Sky Warriors would give Nergüi pause. It did not. The man simply smiled, the expression disconcertingly dead.

‘It is as the High Enunciator foresaw,’ he said. ‘Our salvation is finally drawing close.’

The guardmaster turned to his detail and gestured at Tugan.

‘Seize him.’

Tugan went for his concealed Drexian autopistol, but he was too slow. The Pinnacle Guard were on him, pinning his arms at his sides, his ageing muscle no match for their combined, armoured bulk.

‘The vox majoris too,’ Nergüi snarled. Ganzorig was making for one of the hub’s secondary exits, but the staff intercepted him. He didn’t resist.

‘Unhand me,’ Tugan snapped. His heart was pounding, and he strained against his captors. His anger was stoked. Chancellor, minister, councillor, it didn’t matter anymore. Tugan was a son of the steppes, proud and fierce. Whatever treachery was unfolding before him, whatever madness had gripped those around him, he would not surrender to it meekly. He spat at Nergüi.

Nergüi punched him. The blow thumped into Tugan’s gut. He gasped with pain, but the Pinnacle Guard kept him standing.

‘*We* are the security breach,’ Nergüi sneered, pressing his face against Tugan’s, filling the chancellor’s senses with the stench of rancid yat milk and the greasy reek of weapon oils. Tugan tried to headbutt him, but one of the guards snatched his grey topknot, pinning him back.

Nergüi laughed, and there was nothing but hunger in his black eyes.

‘I have waited a long time to do this,’ the guardmaster said, drawing his kindjal:

the long, razored knife all steppe tribesmen carried. ‘Tug-ai scum.’

He thrust the blade into Tugan’s stomach. The chancellor grunted, more with shock than anything else. A part of his mind still refused to accept what was happening.

Then the pain hit. His cry was muffled by a gloved hand as the Pinnacle Guards kept him pinned. Ganzorig’s yelp was also cut short as the vox-adepts struck his head against a transmitter node and began to violently kick him when he went down. They didn’t let up until the vox majoris stopped moving. It took a long time.

Nergüi twisted his blade in Tugan’s stomach, slowly. The chancellor’s robes were red and dripping. Nergüi held Tugan’s gaze as he murdered him, a grin splitting his blunt, dark features. This was not a cold-blooded assassination, not some coolly executed coup. The features of the men and women Tugan and Ganzorig had worked with for years were twisted with a vicious, inhuman mix of raw hatred and vicious glee. There was deep, abiding hunger in their manic gaze. Tugan, breathless with agony and weak from blood loss, could do nothing to break free. The other Pinnacle Guards had drawn their own ceremonial kindjals and were stepping in close, joining Nergüi. Those holding on to the chancellor released him.

Like many before him, Tugan had wondered what thoughts would occupy his mind at the point of death. He had always assumed it would be something relating to the beauty of the steppes, or memories of his family. It was not the steppes he thought of though, as the knives took him on the floor of the vox-hub substation. Nor was it the memory of uncles and sisters, mother and father and cousins. His only thoughts were of terror. Terror at having failed the white-plated giant. Terror at what was coming for his people, for his world, from the depths of the void.

Terror at what was already here, lurking in Heavenfall’s heart.

*You think you know what haunts the recesses of a broken man's mind? I tell you now, storm brethren, not all phantoms are conjured by the illusions of stress and sorrow. Some stand alongside us, wherever we are, wherever we go. Where past and future meet, here are the living, breathing ghosts of the present. Eternal possibility is theirs to command.*

– Targutai Yesugei, Chief Stormseer of the White Scars



## CHAPTER TWO

### GHOSTS

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK [TERRAN STANDARD]: 113 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 68 HOURS.

#### ***The Pride of Chogoris, the void, Darkand System***

The fleet of the Fourth Brotherhood of the White Scars made its way from warp exit on all ahead full, approaching the system's central planet, Darkand, on a war footing. On board the strike cruiser *Pride of Chogoris* the phantom of Chancellor Tugan flickered and died. The lumens came back up, illuminating the pelt-draped cogitators, vox-pits and the trophy racks that decorated the walls of the primary bridge dome, along with the zart serfs at their monitoring stations. Khan-Commander Joghaten stepped off the hololithic plate, his expression dispassionate.

'They will not be ready,' he said. 'They never are.'

'Give them some credit,' Tzu Shen said. 'They cannot possibly comprehend the nature of the threat that approaches. The sheer scale of it.'

Joghaten turned towards the blind voyagemaster seated on his throne mount at the heart of the bridge dome. There were few beings in the galaxy the Master of Blades would accept a rebuke from. Shen was one of them.

'Mankind's ignorance will ever be its undoing,' Joghaten said, his voice grim.

‘Then we must save them from it,’ Qui’sin interjected.

The Stormseer had watched the hololithic exchange between Joghaten and Chancellor Tugan without comment. Now he approached the khan of the Fourth Brotherhood and placed one gauntlet on his pauldron.

‘If the steppe tribes can be corralled in the designated safe zones, we may be able to contain this threat. We believe there are no more than fifty thousand tribespeople out on the plains during this phase of the planetary season.’

‘You think they’ll allow themselves to be moved?’ Joghaten asked, pulling away from the psyker’s touch. ‘Would we? Would the tribes of Chogoris cease their wandering at another’s command, even ones such as ourselves?’

‘I do not know. We have no recourse other than to try and move them to the capital. We are running out of time.’

‘What have you seen?’ Joghaten demanded.

Qui’sin shook his head, steppe tokens rattling, his youthful features pensive.

‘Hunger. The slaughter of cattle. A desperate hunt beneath dying skies. Worse. The Shadow in the Warp clouds everything.’

Joghaten did not respond. He paced over the patterned *yurut* rugs that decorated the bridge dome’s decking plates, stepping up to the primary operations hololithic chart. Qui’sin followed while the khan-commander activated the display with a flick of his vambrace’s encryption key. A sea-green reflection of the Darkand System swam into view above the chart’s glassy surface, washed with pulses of static. The display’s light threw the skull trophies surrounding the display into grim contrast.

‘There is still no word from the Imperium?’ Joghaten asked, while the chart updated with the latest augur readouts. Shen, bonded to the display via the cords trailing from his bald scalp to the data ports of his throne mount, shook his head, making the hardwired links rattle.

‘Fresh information is still sporadic, thanks to the dark influence of the Cicatrix Maledictorum. It appears fleet command for the subsector is still prioritising the defence of the Tarneth System. The local battlegroup remains anchored above the hive worlds of Verrun and Cana’s Rest. There is a squadron of light cruisers refitting at Port Garro, but even if they were redeployed to Darkand they’d likely take many weeks to arrive, even assuming a positive warp time variant approximation.’

‘Too slow,’ Joghaten growled, eyes fixed on the chart as more icons winked into existence across it. ‘How many billions have died down the centuries because the Imperium of Man is so damnably slow?’

‘The Imperial Navy is still uncertain about the fallout from Baal,’ Shen said. ‘Hive Fleet Leviathan’s fate remains... unclear. Until they know more, they will not move from their anchorages.’

‘Then we act alone,’ Qui’sin said. His psyber-hawk, Kemich, had swooped down from where she had been observing proceedings from one of the bridge yurut’s communication gantries. Now she settled on his shoulder, taking in the bridge with a twitch of aquiline disdain. ‘The Imperium will not divert resources to preserve an agri backwater like Darkand, not with the recent chaos. Yat wool, ux horn and gax meat exports aren’t worth the lives of warriors in times such as these.’

‘Backwater,’ Joghaten repeated with a snarl. ‘A backwater the White Scars have been honour-bound to protect for two thousand years.’

‘Our bonds make little difference to subsector command,’ the Stormseer pointed out.

‘Wind and fire take them,’ Joghaten cursed, slapping the palm of his gauntlet against the hololithic chart’s surface, disturbing the display. ‘It matters not. We fight alone.’

‘And we will die alone,’ Qui’sin added. ‘We are not enough to resist what is coming. Even without my visions the entrails have made that much clear.’

‘You would have us bring dishonour to the Chapter?’ Joghaten demanded. ‘You would have us abandon this fight? Abandon an honour world to annihilation?’

‘I would have us resume our hunt,’ Qui’sin said. ‘Not sacrifice our lives for the sake of tradition. The Khagan still calls to me. For all the importance of the honour world, we are needed elsewhere if we are to find him in time.’

‘I know of what you speak,’ Joghaten said, facing Qui’sin squarely. ‘You are wise beyond your years, young Zadyin Arga, but you are not as subtle as your more seasoned brethren. Others already hunt for the honoured primarch. I will not abandon human lives for the sake of old legends, no matter how dear. I will not abandon Darkand. We are sworn to protect its people. To the death, Qui’sin. The Khagan would understand that.’

The hololithic chart chimed, its updates completed. The White Scars fleet, represented by the Chapter’s lightning bolt sigil, blinked across the system display as it made its way towards Darkand: three Sword-class escorts, the *War Wind*, *Tulwar* and *Starsteed*, and the twin Cobras, *Falcon* and *Steppe Lord*, flanking the *Pride of Chogoris*, the Fourth Brotherhood’s venerable capital ship.

‘What are your orders, khan-commander?’ Shen asked, his blind eye sockets staring out over his bridge. Bar those overseeing the most vital vox and augur

systems, the dome's zarts stood waiting for their master's command. Joghaten gestured at the chart, Shen's hardwired consciousness detecting the contact with the hololithic projection.

'Set a course for Darkand,' the Master of Blades commanded. 'With the haste of the racing stallion. We have no time to lose.'

The auto door hissed shut behind Qui'sin, sealing the Stormseer in the darkness of his scrying chamber. The only light came from the electro candles, their glow flickering across the ancient bones and faded rags that adorned the room's walls.

Most of the relics that surrounded the White Scar were many millennia older than he. Of all the Chapter's psykers – the brotherhood of the Zadyin Arga – he had most recently completed the initiation rites. He had finished his study of the Arts of Heaven only five years previously, in his initiation in the high caverns of the Khum Karta and the stone-clad walls of Ayanga, the Lightning Tower. It was rare for one so young to be assigned as the sole Stormseer to a brotherhood, especially one as famously fractious as the Fourth.

But in those five years, Qui'sin had seen much. Much of the mortal plain, and even more of the immortal, where spirits walked and daemons toyed with the souls of men.

He relit one of the electro candles that had gone out, before setting himself on the prayer rug at the centre of the room. The shadows seemed to dance and slither around him, glinting off old bone and gleaming fangs. Apart from the low hum of his active power armour and the distant, dream-like throb of the *Pride's* plasma drives, all was silent. Even Kemich, his bonded psyber-hawk, had been banished to her roost near the ship's navigation blister. He inhaled, deep and slow, filtering the scents of the psychically charged room.

He smelled the cloying, sickly sweet incense of the tapers clustered beside the trophy racks, their smoke coiling languid and wispy in the dark air. He picked up the musk of old pelts and dry bones, the oily scents of his own power plate, and the underlying smells of the *Pride of Chogoris* – the chemical tang of the ship's systems and drives, and the chlorine aftertaste of the recently deactivated Geller field.

Most of them were alien smells to Qui'sin. Like all sons of the storm, he felt confined in the claustrophobic corridors, stairwells and chambers of void-faring vessels. It was difficult to imagine an existence further removed from the open plains of the Empty Quarter of Chogoris. Here the air was a stale, dead thing, the biting wind of the steppes reduced to a memory. The familiar smells of spilt gax

blood and burning yat dung, freshly cured hides and wet horse pelt, all were absent. Qui'sin wondered how Tzu Shen had endured it for so long. To be a White Scar in the depths of the void was to be a stallion confined to a stable.

Shen had told him his discomfort would pass, eventually. At least Darkand would offer some solace. When war against the heretical sect of the Bor-tri had brought the White Scars to Darkand two thousand years ago, they had immediately recognised the similarities between the planet's steppe peoples and their own home world. After the heretics had been purged, the White Scars had taken the tribe's supplication and moulded them after their own image, granting Darkand the title of honour world. Every century the blood oaths had been remade and the Chapter returned to the agri world, to ensure its safety and take a tithe of tribesfolk to supplement its fleet's serf crews.

This time there would be no tithing, Qui'sin reflected. Only blood and death. Only hunger. He fought back a shudder as his visions returned. It was drawing nearer with every breath he took. The quakes and storms besetting Darkand, all so-called natural disasters, already heralded it. He could see it now, at the back of his mind's eye – the flesh-filled sky, the stalking, alien predator, prowling amidst the steppe grasses. They were coming, unnumbered killers consumed by a ravaging hunger.

Qui'sin unclamped one gauntlet and settled himself properly on the worn flax of the prayer rug. He'd woven it himself during his lessons in the high caverns of the Khum Karta, and had carried it with him ever since. It was second in importance only to his force staff, the shamanic totem that now lay on its purple velvet cushion before him. Both the mat and the cushion were surrounded by sigils, chalked into the decking plates in *Khorchin*, the native tongue of Chogoris. For a moment Qui'sin admired the way the light played across the worn yat skull that tipped his staff, the way it cast the scrimshawed bone into deeper shadows, and how it gleamed on the ulzi knotwork, the Endless Labyrinth, inscribed upon the horsehair-hung haft. He let out another slow breath and, carefully, reached out with his one bared hand.

At first the change was almost imperceptible. The candles around him shuddered, as though tugged at by a ghostly wind. Qui'sin felt it too, teasing at his unclasped topknot. His senses filled with the scents of the steppes.

Thunder crashed, violent and sudden. A gust moaned through the chamber, making the bone trophies clatter and snatching the light from the electro candles. Qui'sin needed them no longer. He was already elsewhere.

A new chamber, dark and cold and filled with the fury of the mountains.

Thunder crashed and shuddered like a dispute between gods, shaking the desolate space. The walls were of stone, carved with hundreds of niches that reached towards a domed vault. The tiered alcoves were filled with scrolls, tens of thousands, fashioned from ancient, cracked leather and bound with horsehair knots. Interspersed between the alcoves were vision slits, slender jags of open air fashioned like the symbols on each White Scar's pauldron. Beyond them, the Mountains that Scrape the Stars loomed. It was dark, and snow swirled in great eddies, gusting occasionally in through the opening slits. The lightning that pounded and beat the night air lit up jagged, white-headed peaks, so high and so serrated they seemed cast adrift from the world below.

Qui'sin was in the Ayanga, the Lightning Tower, tip of the world. Here, where past and future met on heaven's doorstep, the ghosts of the present conferred.

Five figures stood in the chamber, facing inwards to where Qui'sin still sat, cross-legged on his prayer rug. They were fellow Stormseers, clad in white plate and grasping bone-tipped staffs, but to Qui'sin's gaze they were insubstantial, ethereal, their armour and tanned skin glowing with faint, other-worldly luminescence. The snow that reached in through the wall slits with chill, white fingers could not touch them.

Qui'sin knew that, to the assembled psykers, he was the one that looked like a revenant.

Thunder boomed once more beyond the Ayanga's ancient stonework, each great blow echoing away down the mountainside and sending shivers through the high tower. Qui'sin took another cold breath and settled his mind, hand clutched tightly around the psy-reactive haft of his force staff. He took in the scrolls on the niches surrounding him, the countless thousands of documents that constituted the White Scars' librarium. Many of them belonged to the Jazag, the laws of Chogoris, as laid down by the Khagan and primarch, Jaghatai, ten millennia earlier. Others belong to *The Veiled History of the Talskars*, the text written by the first Great Khan documenting the founding of the V Legion.

Qui'sin had studied them for many years as a junior Lexicanium, learning to use his Lyman's ear to shut out the eternal pounding of the thunder while he had absorbed his Chapter's sacred doctrines and the history of his people. The Lightning Tower was the White Scars' Librarius, the heart of the Chapter's Librarium, seat of its culture and the headquarters of its Stormseers. Even among their brethren in the Quan Zhou – the fortress-monastery sprawling among the lesser peaks below – the lead-tipped spire of the Ayanga was a place of myth and legend.

The phantoms that regarded Qui'sin in silence were part of that legend. All were more venerable than he. All had guarded the Chapter's legacy and taught its honoured history for many centuries. Not for the first time, the young Stormseer felt the weight of responsibility.

He spoke.

'Hail, brethren of the lightning. My thanks for this haven amidst the storm.'

'Hail and welcome, brother,' said one of the phantoms. His name was Dayir Jenkshin, and he was Master of the Arts of Heaven, one of the oldest and most scar-honoured of all the Zadyin Arga. He stood with a slight stoop, the tips of his long moustache trailing all the way down to his breastplate. The gold-plated gax skull that topped his force staff glowed with other-worldly power.

'You have reached the Darkand System,' Jenkshin said, more statement than question.

'Yes, honoured brother,' Qui'sin said. His words felt disconnected and distant, as though his mind floated in a dream. He knew that the reality of his situation was more terrifying. For the briefest moment, he thought he felt a presence behind his seated form – unholy, vile breath, and the questing slither of dark tentacles.

'Focus,' Jenkshin snapped, his words underlined by a vicious thunderclap. Qui'sin clutched his staff harder, the reactive bone throbbing in his bare palm.

'The visions continue,' he said. 'As clear as ever. The Great Devourer comes, though the rest of the Imperium does not yet acknowledge it.'

'And what of the Master of Blades?' Jenkshin asked. 'Does he still heed your guidance?'

'Sometimes. His mind is shattered by a hundred considerations, and he fears returning to Darkand. He fears the memory of death and defeat that came so close to overtaking him last time he fought upon that world. He appears ever more harried.'

'His own visions weigh heavily on his mind,' Jenkshin said. 'He has always been a warrior, not one born to ponder the ulzi of fate. The Endless Labyrinth will confound him if you do not focus his thoughts, Qui'sin.'

'He is torn by his urge to honour our pledges to Darkand, a place he hates, and the visions calling upon him to seek out the Khagan.'

'And the desire that pulls at his heart the strongest?'

'Darkand is the immediate priority, for now. But if the spirits are willing, the two needs will not exclude one another. I understand the importance of the honour world in the Endless Labyrinth. If it was not vital, you would not have

permitted the dispatch of the Tulwar Brotherhood there.'

'You speak the truth,' Jenkshin allowed. 'But still, you must not let him die needlessly in the coming conflict. Even were it not for the needs of our great hunt, the realms of man face the darkest of days ahead. The Imperium has need of warriors like Joghaten more than ever before.'

'I will curb his slaughter-lust as best I can,' Qui'sin said. 'I fear his late uncertainties will manifest in a great fury when battle is joined. Especially given that Darkand is to be the battlefield. Few places resonate as deeply with him.'

'See that he does not act out the part of the young headstrong warrior. Old Qan'karro continues to agitate here on behalf of the Master of the Hunt. He would have us deploy our might to ancient Terra, rather than continue seeking the Khagan. I fear his influence with Jubal Khan will bend his mind soon enough, and see the Chapter focus itself on the Segmentum Solar rather than the completion of our long hunt.'

'Has there been any new word from Baal?' Qui'sin asked. 'Any more certainty on the nature of the returned primarch?'

'We are still unsure. The best of rumours combined with our scrying lead us to believe the master of the Thirteenth Legion may have awoken from his long-wounded slumber, but the entrails are rancid and ill-formed. We shall continue to seek answers, and you shall continue to preserve Joghaten and guide him down his fated path.'

'I understand,' Qui'sin said, inclining his head.

'Go now, quickly,' Jenkshin urged. 'The Shadow is almost upon you.'

'May the spirits of earth and water, wind and fire guide you, venerable brothers,' Qui'sin intoned, as the apparitions before him started to fade.

'May they be with you too,' Jenkshin replied, his voice now distant. 'We shall need them all before the end.'

The vision dissolved and the Lightning Tower was gone. Qui'sin's eyes started open, though he did not remember closing them. The scrying chamber on board the *Pride of Chogoris* remained undisturbed, though all but one of the electro candles had gone out. For a moment the paralysis that sometimes followed him from his visions gripped his transhuman body. Then it was gone and he was on his feet once more, force staff still in one hand.

There was even less time than he had imagined.

There was never a moment during transit when the sparring *ger* did not echo with the clash of blades. The domed space occupied the *Pride of Chogoris*'

upper aft deck level, clad like the insides of one of the Quan Zhou's training arenas. The walls were hung with countless trophies – hunting pelts and scaled hides, the faded, ragged remains of a Cadian regimental standard, gifted to the brotherhood a millennium before, bestial skulls and even the broken, tarnished battleplate of a Traitor Space Marine. The floor space was divided by lengths of tasselled red cord, demarking the well-worn flaxen training mats that covered the decking plates.

Although it was the night cycle and the lumens above were dim, most of the cordoned arenas were still full. Even by the standards of the Adeptus Astartes the White Scars were a warlike and restless brotherhood. Waiting left them fractious at the best of times. Since leaving Chogoris a month earlier half a dozen tulwar brothers had been censured for various misdemeanours, mostly inter-squad feuding. Joghaten had left the disciplining to the türüch, his sergeants and squad leaders, but the unrest lingered on.

In order to fill the vacuum of void travel, the türüch drilled their squads. Most welcomed the distractions of the training decks, even if the routines of building clearance and target extraction, outpost infiltration and strongpoint defence had long grown stale. Most popular of all was the sparring ger, where tulwar brothers were free to test their mettle as they pleased. All brotherhoods of the White Scars emphasised skill with a blade, but in the Fourth it had been raised to an art form.

Lau Feng, türüch and steedmaster of the Third Assault Bike Squad, stood on the wooden boards between the cordoned mats, watching. Before him two of his hunt-brothers, Oda and Jakar, duelled. Like the other Space Marines engaged across the room, they were stripped down to loose silk trouser fatigues, their upper bodies glistening with sweat that dripped around the neural ports studding their hard, scarred flesh. Both warriors wielded tulwars, the short, curving swords so favoured by the Fourth Brotherhood. The dim lumens made their vicious edges glitter as they inscribed deadly arcs around the two warriors.

Feng had not crossed blades on one of the ger mats since the start of the voyage. He did not have the taste for it, not since word had first reached the Fourth Brotherhood of their new destination – the honour world of Darkand. The name alone was enough to make the White Scar clench his teeth, lest he snarl at the cruelty of fate. Darkand, a world bound to the Chapter by sacred rite and ritual. A planet moulded, in part, after the very culture of Chogoris. For two thousand years the White Scars had watched over it, protecting its nomad tribes from external threats whilst tithing its population for serf-hands to crew the

Chapter fleet.

Feng had been to Darkand once before, years previously. Xenos eldar had been using the planet as a staging post for piracy throughout the subsector – there had been traces of eldar activity on the world even before colonisation. Unable to ignore a plea from their protectorate, the White Scars had deployed in force. Fighting free of a xenos ambush around the rocks known as the Gates of Eternity and then carrying the battle to their webway portal had cost the Fourth Brotherhood dear. Their khan-commander, Arro'shan, as well as all Feng's tulwar brethren – Ajai, Tenjin, Oyuun and Tayang – had been slain.

Feng kept his eyes on his other brothers, on Oda and Jakar as they circled one another, teeth bared and blades gleaming. In truth he did not see them. His thoughts strayed, as they had done for so long now, towards the pained memories of Darkand.

It was not just restlessness that had filled the ger with sparring partners this night. The khan-commander himself was present. He stalked between the sparring mats, saying nothing, hawkish gaze stopping only briefly when it came to a pairing of clashing warriors, before wandering again. Occasionally the Master of Blades would pause, arms folded across his silk-clad breast, brow - furrowed as he watched two of his White Scars trade blows. He said nothing. Nothing until he reached Feng's side.

'They are slow.'

Feng started. He'd been so lost in memories of the honour world that he'd failed to notice the khan-commander's presence. He refocused once more on Oda and Jakar. Joghaten was correct. Oda, the big Lau tribesman from Choq-tan, was lagging, his strikes unfocused and predictable. The duel should have been over minutes earlier, but Jakar – the wiry former heir to the hetman of the Shorchji, was making little effort to take advantage of his partner's flat-footedness. They knew each other too well, had fought this battle too many times. They were toying with each other, bored.

'When did you last fight?' Joghaten asked Feng.

'My khan?' Feng responded, trying to ignore the hideous, dripping visage of Ajai, standing just behind Joghaten.

The khan-commander elaborated. 'When did you last challenge your brethren on the sparring mats?' His tone was accusatory.

'I haven't since leaving Chogoris, my khan.'

'Step onto the mat.'

Oda and Jakar had paused, panting as they looked at their türüch. Joghaten

gestured for them to step aside. They offered one another a curt bow and sheathed their blades. Joghaten lifted the cord and ducked into the arena. He was wearing a silk shirt and trousers, his topknot let down over his shoulders. His tulwars were buckled around his waist. He drew each in turn, the monomolecular hypersteel blades letting out barely a whisper as they slipped from the oiled leather. He tossed the empty scabbards and belt aside, and turned to face Feng. His eyes, hooded by the dim lighting, had the cruel gleam of the berkut, the greater Chogorian hawk, about them.

After a moment, Feng ducked into the arena and slipped his guan dao over his head. Like Joghaten's enhanced weapons, the wicked blade of the power glaive remained inactive. Its long haft felt curiously unfamiliar in Feng's grasp as he took up his combat stance. The realisation shamed him.

Joghaten gave a terse bow, the motion mimicked by Feng. For once, the ger was silent. Everyone had stopped to stare at the two new combatants. It was not often that the Master of Blades trained before the eyes of his brotherhood.

Joghaten struck. Even for a Space Marine, the speed with which he went from statuesque stillness to serpent-like blows was astounding. Feng was immediately forced back onto the defensive, heel brushing the mat edge as his secondary heart kicked in with an uncomfortable jolt. Joghaten's tulwars came at him, one stabbing up towards his eyes, another slashing low, at his thighs. He managed to parry both with his guan dao's haft, the force of the blows ringing up the blade. The third strike would have opened Feng's gut had Joghaten not pulled it at the last moment.

'Again,' the Master of Blades said, his eyes hard. Feng reassumed his stance, legs planted wide, glaive held horizontal and low.

This time when Joghaten came at him he countered. It made little difference. The Master of Blades let Feng's lunge slide past and was inside his guard in a heartbeat, a tulwar slicing for his throat. Feng, with the reflexes enjoyed only by the Emperor's finest, managed to twist backwards far enough to avoid the strike, but it left him off balance. A clumsy swing of the glaive just about succeeded in keeping Joghaten at bay long enough for him to regain a defensive stance. The khan-commander didn't pause to reassess, however, but kept coming, still twinning his strikes, high and low, high and low. After four narrow parries Feng felt as though he'd found his combat rhythm, only for Joghaten to change the order and pace of his strikes. A deft flick of his wrist and Feng's guard was open once again. He was toying with the steedmaster.

'Use your weapon's length to your advantage,' Joghaten snapped, speaking as

though to an unscarred Tenth Brotherhood initiate. ‘Your reach is your best hope.’

Feng gritted his teeth and resumed his stance. This time he stayed on his toes, moving around the edge of the mat, guan dao extended protectively. Joghaten made two gauging attacks, ending both as Feng gave ground and used his power lance’s length to keep him at bay.

Feng’s defence faltered when he sensed Tenjin behind him. For a split second he thought he could feel icy breath on the nape of his neck, and in his mind’s eye he saw the long-dead White Scar’s innards oozing from the hideous splinter wounds blown in his torso.

He misstepped. It was enough. The khan-commander was on him again, a flash of wicked steel. One blade knocked Feng’s glaive from his hands while the other nicked at his throat, drawing forth the tiniest bead of blood. It fell, perfectly formed, to stain the türüch’s white silk shirt.

‘That’s enough,’ Joghaten said, lowering his blades and kicking the guan dao to the edge of the mat. Feng made no move to try and retrieve it.

‘We are hours from deployment, and still you do not fight,’ Joghaten said.

‘When the time comes I will be ready, khan-commander.’

‘You are slow and distracted. It is turning your hunt-brothers into lesser warriors. Find your centre, Lau Feng, before we make planetfall, or Darkand will extract the same price from you that it took last time.’

Feng could only nod, bitterness choking his throat. Joghaten bent and retrieved the glaive, as oblivious as everyone else to the four bloody revenants passing their eternal, silent judgement on Feng. The khan-commander spun the long weapon deftly and slammed it into the deck, the wicked head slicing through the training mat and the plates beneath to leave the weapon quivering and impaled before Feng.

‘Prepare for deployment,’ Joghaten said, addressing the entire sparring ger. ‘We make planetfall within the hour.’

Timchet flexed his fingers around the twin grips of his Godwyn-pattern heavy bolter and checked his visor’s chrono display. Thirty seconds. He knew that his Land Speeder co-pilot and wind-brother, Hagai, would be doing the same at the other end of the tulan, the long, narrow service corridor running between the *Pride*’s level 13 aft and foredecks. The entire length had been converted by Techmarine Khödö upon departing Chogoris, weaponised into a training sector – a tulan – that would better prepare the White Scars for what they would face on

Darkand.

*‘Perhaps I won’t have time to polish my kindjal before you reach me, brother,’* the voice of Hagai crackled over the vox.

*‘Perhaps I won’t have to save you from the servitors this time,’* Timchet replied, suppressing a smile. An alarm chimed and the ship’s corridor was bathed in red light. The blast door before the White Scar rolled open.

He advanced at a slow jog, his heavy weapon up and ready, servos whirring as they took the worst of the bolter’s weight. The corridor beyond the blast doors had been transformed by sheets of mould-blotched plastek and ugly low-level lighting, its pipe-and-cable-clad walls made irregular and claustrophobic. The intention was to give the space a degree of alien otherness, and change the dynamics of what would usually have been a simple building clearance run.

Timchet made it fifteen paces before the first trap was sprung. A concealed orifice in the sheet coverings spat a gout of low-burn proto-plasma. The mechanical whirr of the ejection motor gave the White Scar just enough warning to drop one shoulder, taking the spray of what was supposed to pass for bio-acid on his left pauldron.

*‘Non-fatal,’* crackled an automated voice in his ear. *‘Proceed.’*

He carried on, twin hearts pounding as he sought the balance so often espoused in White Scars combat philosophies – speed without undue recklessness. He detected another faux-orifice just before it spat a flurry of plastek spines across the corridor, then flung himself forward as a cloud of noxious vapour burst from a mesh decking grille underfoot.

The chrono display in his visor was still ticking over.

There was a ripping sound to his right and the wall covering gave way to reveal a combat servitor set to assault mode. The fusion of plasteel and pale synth-skin had been modified to better represent their new enemy – hunched over, with grafted-on mechanical scythe-limbs, reprogrammed for speed. Timchet caught it in a burst of heavy bolter electro-blanks as it lunged at him, blades clacking. The modified rounds struck the servitor and immediately deactivated it with a burst of charge, its weapon limbs freezing inches from Timchet’s armour. Another came at him just a few paces down the corridor, too close for him to bring his heavy weapon to bear. The White Scar smashed it back against the wall with the bolter’s stock, letting it waste its blows against his armour, before smashing its head against a metal coolant valve. It went limp and crumpled.

*‘Proceed,’* instructed the servitor-overseer’s voice in his ear. He was almost out of time. He sprinted for the finish, another shower of barbs clattering off his

armour. The doors ahead slid open at his approach, and he came to a sharp halt in the space beyond the training corridor.

What had once been a turning bay for the haulers used to transport sheets of adamantium to the *Pride's* outer corridors had been transformed by the drill türüch into an extra fighting arena. It was now filled with broken scrap, scrap that had once taken the form of over a dozen modified combat servitors. They'd been smashed into deactivation by the tulwar and bolt pistol of Hagai who now sat atop a heap of the pretend-xenos. His helmet was off and he was grinning as he wiped oil and synthetic fluids from his blade's wicked edge.

'Too slow by well over five seconds,' the White Scar taunted. 'I could have gone a whole other bout before you broke through to me.'

'One caught me at close range,' Timchet complained, mastering the urge to kick out at the closest servitor remains.

'They're meant to be tyrannids, that's what they do,' Hagai responded, rising and mag-locking his weapons.

'It won't be so easy when we face the real thing,' Timchet responded.

'I pray to the Khagan that you are right,' Hagai replied, still grinning. 'After such a wait, I would fight every xenos in the galaxy.'

The vellum scroll lay on an angled wooden board before Joghaten. The Master of Blades lit the last lumen stick and settled himself on his rug, legs crossed, stretching his back and arm muscles as the shuddering ache of combat adrenals left him. It seemed to take longer now than when he was a youth. When he had first joined the Fourth Brotherhood his ability to go from a state of calm to darting, razor-tipped blows, and back again, had immediately drawn the attention of the then khan-commander. Now it was a struggle to unclench his fist from the hafts of his tulwars, to let his pulse decelerate until his secondary heart ceased, to quell the feral instinct to slash and cut and gouge after the moment of danger had passed.

He had fought too long and too hard to let go of such urges easily anymore. It was part of who he was. But, as Qui'sin often reminded him, it was not all he was.

He focused on the vellum parchment. There was less than an hour left before the fleet reached stasis-anchorage in high orbit above Darkand. Not long, but long enough. His tulwars had been returned to their slots at the heart of the wooden trophy rack that dominated one wall of his personal busad. He had wiped the sliver of Lau Feng's blood from the edges – he had not meant to cut

the steedmaster. For the briefest second when he had done so the urge to follow through – to saw and cut his way through flesh and tendon, to open the warrior’s throat to the sparring ger’s humid air – had been almost overwhelming. The realisation had shamed him. It was a savagery he could never admit, not to young Qui’sin, not even to the brotherhood’s Chaplain, the venerable and much-scarred Changadai.

He shook the memory off and reached for the brush and pot of soot-bound ink set beside his rug. There were few other Chapters in the galaxy that would devote time to brushwork, even fewer with a combat insertion imminent. Most would have busied themselves with weapons rituals and armour rites, strategic overview briefings and councils of war. But there were few Chapters like the White Scars. Joghaten had spent the past month, voyaging through the empyrean’s haunted depths, venerating his arms and armour. He had consulted and briefed his tulwar brothers extensively. He had conferred with Qui’sin, Changadai and Voyagemaster Shen when they had first broken in-system, back into real space. The khan of the Fourth Brotherhood did not need another strategic algorithm analysis or xenos threat profiling. He needed his brush and ink and vellum.

He picked up the former and dipped it in the pewter ink pot beside him, careful to drain the excess before easing it to the bare white of the scroll. The thick *aduu*-hair brush did not fit particularly well in his large, transhuman grasp, but he had long ago mastered the technique of grasping it. Without hesitation, he applied it to the vellum with one long, smooth stroke.

Poetry, painting, calligraphy, all were common forms of expression for the sons of Chogoris, whether they were the Sky Warriors that dwelled amidst the tallest peaks of the Khum Karta, or humble herders travelling the steppes below. Joghaten began to paint the Khorchin symbol for prescience and understanding. That was what he sought now. More so than ever before, he felt as though the path before him was shrouded and uncertain. Returning to Darkand, a place that haunted his memories, was not making that path any brighter. Shadows lurked amidst the darkness encroaching either side, full of the wicked gleam of murderous eyes and sharp claws. Once that same path had been open and untangled. He fought for the Great Khan and the Emperor. He brought heads back to the White Road and filled the Ayanga with tales of victory and heroism. In a little less than two hundred years he had not suffered a single scar that was not an honour marking or victory notch. In battle, an opponent’s blade had never marked him deeper than his transhuman physiology’s ability to heal.

That had all changed with the coming of the Dark Imperium. The Cicatrix Maledictorum, the vast warp storm that had torn mankind's domain in half and plunged countless systems and sectors into madness and war. Even before his ascendance to the ranks of the White Scars, Joghaten had been born to fight. All Chogorians steppe tribes were. If the horrors that had beset the Imperium of late – the failing of the Astronomican, the fall of Cadia, the near-annihilation of Baal – had merely meant that the White Scars were required to fight harder, that would not trouble the Master of Blades. He would fight every day, every moment, to his last drop of blood and his final breath, in defence of humanity, Chogoris and the Imperium.

But the Cicatrix Maledictorum had heralded not just more slaughter. It had brought questions too, and rumours. Tales abounded of the return of the primarchs, of the gods of old bestriding new battlefields. Such uncertainties, wrapped up in falsehood, exaggeration and embellishment, were impossible for any White Scar to ignore. All knew the tale of their own primarch, the Khagan, Jaghatai, who had stood against traitors and daemons ten thousand years before and saved humankind from certain annihilation on distant, holy Terra. All knew also of his disappearance, of how he had quested into the mysterious, alien realm of the eldar, the webway, and never returned. The legend of his eternal hunt resonated with the Chapter, was built into the very fabric of its being.

The knowledge that the Khagan may have returned haunted all White Scars. It challenged their very perception of themselves. Though they desired nothing more than to be reunited with him, the idea that their hunt might have come to an end – or been in vain – was one few could entertain. Surely the rumours were just that? Rumours. Such uncertainties created unrest, and that unrest was, in the case of Joghaten's brotherhood, being amplified by the confinement of warp travel. Being trapped on board the *Pride of Chogoris* was creating discipline problems, and worse. The khan-commander had never enjoyed voyaging through the empyrean but, since the coming of the Cicatrix Maledictorum, time spent in the Sea of Souls had become ever more harrowing. He was haunted by nightmares, his sus-an meditation plagued by visions and memories that were not his own.

He could see them now, in his mind's eye. A palace of insurmountable splendour and glory, ravaged by darkling hordes of daemonkind. An open steppe, shrouded in pulsating, hideous flesh. A mountain on fire. Legions of silver warriors collapsing in on themselves. A dark cavern, full of horrors, and the gaping maw of a great, serpent-like beast. Worst and greatest of all, a voice

issuing from a corona of blinding light. It spoke in ancient, broken Chogorian riddles. Was it his own voice, or another's? Somehow, it was impossible to say.

He had spoken of the visions only to Qui'sin. He knew the young Stormseer passed word of them to his more venerable brethren on Chogoris. He knew they believed him touched by destiny. That did not worry Joghaten. Every warrior had his own path, no matter how dark it became, and he would not have risen to command of the Tulwar Brotherhood if fate's will did not sit easily enough on his shoulders. What plagued Joghaten, what ate away at his thoughts and turned his moods sour, was the fear that he would never realise the destiny expected of him. He would not find the purpose to walk the path to completion.

Joghaten blinked. His right hand ached. Slowly he raised it, seeing how his fingers gripped the brush shaft, the knuckles white with strain. The black-stained aduu-hair bristles were bent and abused, and ink had splattered up his arm. After a moment's effort he let go, the brush falling to the rug, staining the intricately woven Chogorian patterns. He looked down and noticed the vellum sheet for the first time.

If there had been any Khorchin script on the page at any point during Joghaten's fugue state, it was now gone, swallowed up by the harsh, broad strokes he had dealt while consumed with thought. Now, instead of the symbol for understanding, he was looking at a brutally rendered image of a Space Marine. The painting was too crude to decipher the Chapter or allegiances, but the armour seemed archaic, of no discernible mark or pattern. Strangest of all was the fact that the figure had no head. In its place was a jagged black smudge.

Joghaten started at the unsettling image for a moment. Then, features twisting into a snarl, he snatched the still-wet vellum, crumpled it in both fists, and flung it away. The screwed-up ball struck the far wall of the busad and fell, in amongst a pile of twenty or thirty similarly crushed scrolls and splattered ink.

Each ruined sheet bore on it the vision-scrawl of the Space Marine with no face.

*'Khan-commander, we are thirty minutes from anchorage.'*

The voice of Tzu Shen tore Joghaten from his thoughts. He pressed the rune panel inset next to the chamber's door, then scrubbed the ink from his thick, dark-haired forearms in the ambulatory basin. The door slid open and his two zarts entered with their shaved heads bowed.

'Prepare me,' Joghaten commanded.

In the corner, beside the trophy rack, the khan-commander's armour waited. The great plates of plasteel and ceramite gleamed as white as the snows that

capped the Khum Karta, except where they were slashed across by jagged dags of brightest red – the honour markings that echoed the ritual scars all members of the Chapter marked their bodies with. Joghaten bore his on his armour's right greave, along with his brotherhood marking, and on his left vambrace and gauntlet – blood-red to denote his status as Master of Blades. His left knee plate also bore the vertical red jags of the Fourth Brotherhood, while his helm's right side was slashed with more vicious crimson, in memory of his time among Khan Arro'shan's personal bondsmen. The armour's pauldrons were draped with the thick mottled black-and-white fur of a Chogorian *lar'ix*, while the lush hairs of a *torandor* pelt were tied up in a topknot atop his helmet. Mounting the armour's backpack were three spikes upon which were impaled six skulls – xenos and -heretic alike, the only ones to have come close to scarring him with a blade that was not his own. The golden glory of the twin-headed Imperial aquila gleamed across the armour's breastplate.

Reverently, the zarts began to dismantle the armour, lifting it piece by piece from its wooden frame. Joghaten stood at the centre of the room and removed his kaftan; he spread his arms, allowing the serfs to ready him. First they plugged neural links and mem-circuitry spikes into the dermal ports that dotted his muscled flesh. The largest, inserted into the base of his skull, made him shudder slightly. To the links they added the under-armour of servo bundles and flesh-tight, responsive auto sinews. With the sealant clasps covering his joints and his black carapace fully interfaced, the two sweating serfs began to add the armour proper. The breastplate went first, front and back sealed with a thud of magnetic clamps and a faint whirr as the servos activated, linking the ancient battleplate to its wearer. Joghaten's limbs were likewise soon sheathed in cold, unyielding ceramite, and his backpack clamped and activated, its power core lending the armour a throbbing, tooth-juddering vitality. He raised one hand and flexed his gauntlet. The reaction levels were still as good as ever.

Last of all, his auto-responsive pauldrons were fitted into place, and the *lar'ix* pelt was draped across his back, hanging from his shoulders and down either side of his backpack like a cape.

One of the zarts offered him his helm, eyes averted. Joghaten took it and mag-locked it to his belt. Like most White Scars, he preferred not to wear the constricting piece of wargear until combat made its protection an absolute necessity. He wanted nothing between his senses and those of his prey when the time came to kill.

The armour was linked and fully functioning. Wordlessly, Joghaten nodded his

thanks to the zarts, who withdrew to the edges of the room. The khan turned and paced to his trophy rack, his freshly donned battleplate whirring. His tulwars gleamed before him, drawing a tight, hawkish smile from the khan's thin lips. They were hungry. He lifted both in turn and, without ceremony, slipped them into the soft, gold-tipped red leather scabbards that were then mag-locked to his hips, crossed over.

He was prepared, a khan armed and armoured, a tribal chieftain ready for war. For a moment his gaze lingered on the crushed scraps of vellum and their foreboding scrawls, heaped against the wall. Once he would have filled a shelf with the calligraphy painted on his voyages between the stars. What had laid claim to his thoughts, had captured them so entirely as to bend his mind only to visions of annihilation? What called to him from oblivion's depths? He shook his head and dismissed the serfs with a wave of his hand.

Nightmares and prophecies could wait. It was time for war.

*The gods are coming to our world. Representatives and servants of His will, warriors crafted and fashioned after divine might, by a power far beyond our comprehension. They have been born to conflict, born to victory, all in His name! We will live to see what so many of our blessed forebears did not – these children of the heavens bestriding the grasslands of our steppes and the cloisters of our temples. Rejoice!*

– Septimus Traik,  
High Enunciator of the Emperor's Voice,  
to the congregation of the Spur of Mankind Descended



## CHAPTER THREE

### PLANETFALL

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK [TERRAN STANDARD]: 109 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 64 HOURS.

#### ***The Pride of Chogoris, the Void, Darkand System***

The entirety of the Fourth Brotherhood's leadership had gathered in the primary yurut dome of the *Pride of Chogoris*' bridge. They stood in order of seniority – Joghaten overlooking the main hololithic chart, leaning against the inactive display's edge, arms spread, flanked by Qui'sin and the brotherhood's Chaplain, Changadai. The ageing reclusiarch had already donned his leering skull helm. Behind them were Joghaten's bondsmen, his personal honour guard. Khuchar, the brotherhood's champion, the only member of the Fourth whose curved dao had managed to draw Joghaten's blood during a duel. Jubai, who carried the brotherhood's standard, a long pole hung with horsehairs and clattering foebeast skulls. Dorich, the emchi healer. Tamachag, the riddle-loving veteran türüch, and Bleda, the brotherhood's keen-eyed storyteller and wind whisperer. Behind them were the ten türüchs of the brotherhood's squads, masters of the individual warrior bands that fought for their khan and the Emperor. Voyagemaster Tzu Shen presided over them all from his throne mount, seeing much despite his scarred eyes, a slight smile playing on his twisted lips.

Joghaten and his bondsmen were silent, eyes on the oculus displays that charted the fleet's final approach to Darkand's high anchorage. Behind them the türüch talked. It was idle, boastful stuff, gruff words cut across by barks of laughter and crude jests, but the truth of it rang hollow. The past month had been difficult for the Fourth Brotherhood's sergeants. The infractions and unrest among their warriors had in turn strained relations between them. Old tribal loyalties and feuds had been given time to fester. Joghaten knew that there could be no cure for the ailment besides the blade-glory and blood-fury of battle.

The best of the türüchs had channelled their warrior's passions between training bouts, focusing them on the arts all the peoples of Chogoris held dear – poetry and word craft, painting and calligraphy. Others, like Gerel and Feng, had withdrawn to fight their own personal battles. Joghaten had seen it a thousand times before. Only Changadai had voiced concern at the khan-commander's own apparent withdrawal. He was not privy to the visions and doubts that Joghaten had confided to Qui'sin. The khan had assured the old Chaplain that xenocide would bring his warriors back to their senses. The quicker they reached Darkand the better.

The planet loomed now in the yurut's vision port, a curve of russet browns and yellows dashed with whorls of atmospheric white, dominating the lower half of the display. Nearer, Joghaten's genhanced eyesight could pick out the shapes of satellites, merchant cutters and monitoring stations. The Imperium's government planetside was confined to Heavenfall, but it maintained a stronger presence in orbit, high above the oblivious nomadic tribes. System augurs and tithing stations clustered the agri world's approach, their transmission acknowledgment rubrics shying away from the White Scars' bursts of data code as the fleet neared high orbit.

In Joghaten's experience, unless the enemy was visible and tearing at the gates, the arrival of the Adeptus Astartes was always greeted with ill-disguised fear.

'Hail them again,' the khan-commander ordered, the words silencing his türüch. Tzu Shen transmitted the command to the vox-pits with a sharp wave of his sensor wand. The White Scars had been attempting to raise Heavenfall for the last fifteen minutes. The message request was transmitting and showing as received, but nobody was responding.

'They'll be panicking,' Khuchar observed dryly.

'We can only hope,' Jubai responded. 'Maybe it will sharpen their wits.'

'Does this wait speak of a sharpened mind to you, brother?'

'Quiet,' Joghaten snapped. Shen had raised his wand once more.

‘They are responding,’ the voyagemaster said, one hand going up to the vox augmetics studding the left side of his skull.

‘Patch through to my personal link,’ Joghaten ordered. ‘Responses over the main vox.’

‘Understood, brother.’

A moment later the domed space was filled with the hiss of static.

‘A moment to clean up the atmospheric,’ Shen said, passing on a string of terse commands to the vox-pit serfs. After a few heartbeats the static discord faded away. A voice spoke over the brass-wired vox-horns strung along the communications gantry overhead.

*‘Hail and well met, Adeptus Astartes. This is Governor Harren, Imperial Commander of the world of Darkand.’*

‘Hail, Commander Harren,’ Joghaten said, speaking into his own vox, linked to the ship’s powerful transmitter spine via the command uplink. ‘I am Joghaten Khan, Master of Blades and commander of the Fourth Brotherhood of the White Scars.’

*‘We are honoured by your presence, lords. We... did not expect your arrival so soon. The Furnace Season is only just underway.’*

‘Your chancellor, Tugan, has already informed you of our arrival?’

There was a moment’s pause and the connection dipped.

‘He’s holding the link,’ Shen said. A moment later, Harren’s voice returned.

*‘I was not informed of your arrival in-system, lords.’*

‘Tugan did not tell you?’ Joghaten asked. ‘I spoke to him not four hours ago via hololithic transmission. Where is he?’

Again, the connection dipped as Harren paused it, clearly conferring in private with someone else.

*‘Chancellor Tugan’s whereabouts are currently unknown,’* the governor said eventually. *‘We are... extremely busy with preparations for the—’*

‘Are you telling me he informed no one of our arrival in-system?’ Joghaten demanded. ‘That no preparations have been made for the evacuation of the steppe tribes or the defence of your capital?’

*‘We were unaware any such actions were necessary, my lord. I have only just this moment returned from the Spur of Mankind Descended, where—’*

‘Be silent,’ Joghaten snapped. ‘We do not have time for excuses. There is a xenos threat, vast beyond imagining, approaching this system. They could arrive from deep space in a matter of hours. You must prepare your peoples for total war. Bring the steppe tribes to the capital, and ready it for defence.’

*‘The tribes are just ceasing their annual migration,’* Harren said. If he was worried, his voice didn’t show it – the tone remained completely level. *‘Locating and contacting them all would take days, and it would require even longer to bring them to Heavenfall. I doubt many would come at all.’*

*‘We will discuss that in person,’* Joghaten said. *‘We are making planetfall immediately. You are to make preparations for a full-scale planetary invasion. Enact all pre-coded Imperial protocols for a primary grade xenos threat.’*

*‘Of course,’* Harren said. *‘I am transmitting landing coordinates for the Pinnacle’s main skyshield landing platform to your capital ship immediately. I shall meet you there.’* There was a moment’s silence before the governor spoke again.

*‘May I ask what xenos threat in particular we are to prepare for?’*

*‘The Great Devourer,’* Joghaten said, his grip on the edge of the hololithic chart tightening fractionally. *‘The tyranids are coming, Commander Harren. Pray to the Khagan and the Emperor that we have the strength to meet them.’*

### **The Pinnacle, Heavenfall**

For the first time in many years, the White Scars fell upon Darkand. They made planetfall as night encroached, while the sun’s last rays were spilling out over the golden grasslands. The darkening arch of heaven’s vault was slashed by fiery contrails as heavy gunships and faster escort flyers made their approach to the city on the mountainside. The stars themselves had increased in number with the coming night, the White Scars fleet presenting six new points of shining light as the warships moved into low orbit. Out on the steppes the tribes huddled around freshly kindled yat dung fires and stared up at the strange portents, muttering to one another in low, fearful voices.

Joghaten watched the descent from the vision port of the Thunderhawk gunship *Wind Talon*. White cloud cover gave way to a vast expanse of yellow-and-green grassland, a rolling sea interspersed with jagged gullies, small valleys and rocky outcrops. As the gunship turned, a great mountain range swung slowly into view, its snow-capped peaks like a spiny ridge bisecting the plains. It was towards the edge of those peaks that *Wind Talon* soared, its engines vibrating the plasteel walls and restraint harnesses around the khan and his seated honour guard.

A city materialised from the distant haze. At first it looked as though the slope of the final mountain in the great, jagged range ahead had suffered a landslide that had left its flank craggy and deformed. As the gunship drew closer, however, the regularity of the shapes covering the slope became more apparent.

A city was nestled into the steep flank, thousands of buildings cut from yellow Darkand stone forming dozens upon dozens of tiers that laddered the mountain almost all the way up to its peak.

Joghaten picked out structures he already knew from the briefing bursts – the great dome of the Spur of Mankind Descended, surrounded by the spires of the lesser basilicas and devotariums. The jagged administrative towers of the government district, the Pinnacle, opposite the temple district, and the squat, fortified bulk of the centrum dominus alongside the clustered antenna of the primary vox-hub, set high up near the mountain's peak. Lower down were the red-tiled roofs of the Old Town, and the more modern, unlovely hab blocks near the base of the city. The entire precarious collective was ringed by a band of dark rockcrete, from the upper slopes all the way down around the outer hab blocks. Joghaten recognised the Founding Wall, the encircling line of bastions, bulwarks and parapets that marked the edge of the great slope-city and the start of the steppes.

As *Wind Talon* passed over Heavenfall the khan got a better view down into the city. With the exception of a central thoroughfare leading to the Founding Wall's main gate, the streets were tangled and narrow. Old Town was a veritable warren, although the government area and temple district afforded slightly wider colonnaded walkways and squares. The gradient for the whole city was incredibly steep – cabled landcars, gleaming silver in the sunlight, transported people to the upper slopes, though the less affluent areas nearer the base had no such luxuries when it came to climbing the streets. Such a place would be a nightmare to assault. A nightmare, at least, for any enemy not as numerous and relentless as the tyranids.

The Thunderhawk gunship almost filled the skyshield landing pad as it completed its final descent towards the Pinnacle, the harsh light from the strip lumens surrounding it making its thick white armour plates and red jags gleam in the gathering twilight. The other space port landing zones, sited close to the peak of Heavenfall's mountain, were also receiving White Scars arrivals, while the brotherhood's complement of armour – Predators, Land Raiders and a Whirlwind – were deploying to the plains beyond the Founding Wall. *Wind Talon's* plasteel-and-adamantium bulk dwarfed the gaggle of Pinnacle dignitaries come to greet it.

Joghaten stepped out through the steam venting from the flyer's hydraulic fore hatch, his pace brisk. There was no time for ceremony. Before him an array of heavily robed officials stared up in palpable shock. Some gasped audibly when

Qui'sin and the rest of his bondsmen emerged from the gunship behind him, heavy boots clanking on plasteel and ferrocrete. Joghaten had long ago stopped caring about the fear and awe that accompanied a human's first encounter with a Space Marine.

He picked out the face of Governor Harren from the briefing logs. The man was short and ageing badly, his rejuves beginning to fail. He was clad in the thick ceremonial gowns the Darkand government affected, apparently in an inaccurate mimicry of the kaftans worn by the White Scars. Alone among his flunkies, Harren did not appear overawed by the transhuman warriors towering over him. He met Joghaten's gaze blankly for a second, before bowing his head and making the sign of the aquila.

'Welcome to Darkand, lord,' he said. His cultured Imperial accent was heavily at odds with the thick native Darkand drawl, itself the ugly bastard of the fast-flowing beauty of Khorchin. It bore a monotonous drone that seemed to match the governor's dull look.

'Earth and air be with you, governor,' Joghaten replied brusquely. 'We require a private audience, immediately.'

'Of course,' Harren responded. He gestured towards his dignitaries and they scattered before him, making way for the governor and the gods that accompanied him.

The White Scars followed Harren and three of Darkand's highest-ranking officials as he led them through the cloistered government district. The evening air was humid, and though the lichen-clad squares and statue-lined walkways were quiet, the discord of the city slope below drifted through the heavy atmosphere. Robed clusters of shaven-headed adepts and ministers in their gowns and broad-brimmed hats grew quiet or paused their hurrying progress to stare at the entourage as they passed by. Only the ochre-armoured guards seemed capable of indifference, holding post at door arches and besides the ceremonial bust alcoves crafted into the sand-coloured walls.

Harren delivered a series of code locks and identification cants at the top of a set of wide stone steps outside a heavily-guarded entranceway. Either side of the servitor-manned portcullis two great statues loomed, towering over even Joghaten. It took the Master of Blades a moment to realise they were both renderings of Space Marines, cast in alabaster; two vast White Scars set to guarding Darkand's heart for eternity. The symbolism was unambiguous.

'Where are we?' Joghaten demanded as they passed beneath the portcullis and entered a wide, high antechamber. The ornate lumen orbs in their wall niches

had yet to activate, and the last rays of light beaming in through the glassaic dome above were not enough to ward off the shadows creeping in from every corner. The sound of the Space Marines' boots echoed off the polished flagstones underfoot.

'These are the central government buildings,' Harren responded. 'The heart of the Imperial presence on Darkand. The centrum dominus is almost directly above us.'

The governor's words were heavily stilted, overly formal. Joghaten assumed the man was simply overwhelmed, yet alone among the humans the Master of Blades had seen so far on Darkand, Harren didn't seem to exude terror at the presence of the Adeptus Astartes. Apart from the need to match the stride of the towering warriors, his pace was unhurried and his speech curiously droning and precise.

One of the other officials accompanying the governor seemed similarly disengaged from the moment – a gaunt-faced, pallid Ministorum cardinal, wearing the heavy ceremonial robes of Darkand's esoteric version of the Imperial cult. Joghaten had identified him from the briefings as Septimus Traik, High Enunciator of the Emperor's Voice.

'Where is Chancellor Tugan?' Joghaten asked as they entered a large grav-lift platform. Harren shook his head.

'The chancellor is still missing,' he said. 'A section of the Pinnacle Guard's security detail have been sent to search for him.'

'We spoke less than five hours ago,' Joghaten said. 'This is irregular.'

Harren shrugged. 'We are doing all we can, given the current strain on our resources.'

Joghaten shared a look with Qui'sin. The weathermaker's expression remained inscrutable.

The grav-lift chimed as it clattered to a stop, its mesh doors sliding open. The entourage stepped out into the heart of the Imperial government on Darkand. Harren had sent word ahead to have the centrum dominus cleared. It lay deserted as the White Scars entered, its cogitators still chiming and clattering as they turned over in standby mode. Its stone walls were reinforced with thick slabs of rockrete, while the structure itself was round and multi-tiered, clusters of vox-gantries surrounding a central floor filled with cogitator banks. At the top of the room, near the ceiling's plasteel reinforcement beams, an observation platform looked out through an armourglass screen. Even from the lower deck level, Joghaten could see enough to realise that the platform provided incredible views

of Darkand's steppes, stretching out as far as the eye could see before the steep mountain slope into which Heavenfall had been carved.

'Only the primary vox-hub sits at a greater altitude than this chamber,' Harren said, following the White Scar's gaze. 'These are the highest permanently inhabited points on the planet.'

Joghaten said nothing, and Harren descended a short set of spiral stairs into the heart of the room. At its centre lay a stone-finished hololithic chart. The device was already beaming a three-dimensional representation of Darkand into the air, throwing the depths of the centrum dominus into deep blue contrasts. It was clearly an older model than the chart on board the *Pride of Chogoris*, its display washed with heavy patches of static and prone to intermittent flickering. The White Scars and the three other officials followed Harren down to the railings lining the edge of the projection, where the governor was retrieving a sensor wand from its slot beneath the display.

'Show me the current distribution of the steppe tribes,' Joghaten said. The governor nodded. A twitch of the wand caused the display of Darkand to change, flickering into a flat representation of a continental shelf. The static-washed plains before Joghaten were dominated by a rugged spine, a mountainous range that reminded the khan-commander of the great Khum Karta. Another flick of Harren's wand highlighted the tip of the range, jutting out into the surrounding steppes.

'We are here,' the governor said. 'Heavenfall, planetary capital and seat of the Imperial government on Darkand.'

'I know,' Joghaten said, not attempting to hide his impatience. 'Show me where the tribes are to be found during this seasonal cycle.'

'These are their traditional migratory patterns,' Harren said as the hololithic shifted with another wand flick. The steppes became segmented and their colours changed, each part now highlighted with tribal markers and projected trail routes. 'But their current exact locations are unknown.'

Joghaten spent a moment scanning the data before speaking.

'These figures indicate far greater population masses than we were aware of. Our last data put tribal numbers around fifty thousand in this district and during this phase of the season.'

Harren was silent for a moment before responding.

'The numbers are far more substantial than that, lord. We estimate almost five hundred thousand tribespeople are currently travelling the steppe-paths. It has been a very successful season as far as the city bartering is concerned.'

‘Then how can you contact them all?’

‘We cannot, lord, except by sending outriders along the trails. It is rarely done. If they have issues they send representatives here, and their produce is brought to the capital for trade only during the Golden Season.’

‘We do not have time for this,’ Joghaten said, voice rising a fraction. ‘We require the tribes to be brought to Heavenfall immediately.’

‘Let the brotherhood find them,’ Qui’sin interjected. ‘Split and deploy the bike squads and the berkut along the trails. The tribespeople will obey them where they would ignore a representative from the slope-city. We can have the word spread to them within the next day, and start to bring them in towards the Founding Wall.’

‘Disperse across the steppes on the cusp of a full planetary invasion?’ Joghaten responded. ‘Your counsel is a strange one, weathermaker.’

‘We will be faster and surer than any local outriders dispatched from here,’ Qui’sin said. ‘And we all know the way of the nomad. How many of them do you think would obey a summons to Heavenfall? How many would abandon their migration to the colder regions now that the Furnace Season has begun? They would not do so for any government messenger, but they would for us. They all but worship us. We will have a better chance of convincing them than anyone else in this city.’

Joghaten nodded. Qui’sin’s words rang true. Scattering the brotherhood to the four winds was not ideal, but there would be little point in anchoring a defence on Heavenfall if most of Darkand’s populace was still trapped out on the plains when the xenos made planetfall.

‘You will provide us with this location data?’ Joghaten asked, gesturing at the tribal markers on the hololith. Harren turned to an Adeptus Mechanicus magos overseeing the table, who bobbed his coiled mechadendrites in assent.

‘I will create a data burst package, lords,’ the machine-man said, his voice surprisingly human for one of his kind. ‘And upload it via the noosphere to your marker designates within the hour.’

‘Very well,’ Joghaten said, focusing back on Harren. ‘Now, what of logistics? What is the protocol for this city’s defence in the event of a full-scale xenos threat?’

‘The civilian population will be shifted into the catacombs,’ Harren said. ‘In that regard we are fortunate. The Furnace Season has already caused the process of relocation from the surface to the underground to begin.’

‘And in the event of a siege how long do you have before reserve supplies are

fully depleted?’

‘With maximum rationing enforcement, the projected holdout time is just over one month, Terran standard.’

Joghaten exchanged another look with Qui’sin. The Stormseer was doubtless thinking the same as him. A month was long enough – either the xenos threat would have expended itself, or they would all be dead and Darkand would be a lifeless rock, stripped of every scrap of biomass. The exodus of the tribes, however, could complicate things.

‘What of the steppe peoples?’ Joghaten said. ‘Will there be sufficient space in the catacombs to accommodate them along with the city’s inhabitants?’

‘The tribal community of Darkand is not factored into our defensive algorithms,’ Harren said in his blunt, dead voice.

‘You’re telling me your projected holdout time is only applicable to the population of Heavenfall?’

‘Yes, lord. Protocol in the event of a maximum priority xenos threat is to seal the Founding Wall and hold out until relief arrives in-system.’

‘There will be no relief,’ Joghaten said. ‘Let me be clear, Commander Harren. The Imperium is beset. There are greater threats than this hive splinter, and more vital worlds than yours that require protection. We have come here because we are honour-

bound to do so, because your world and mine share a pact two thousand years in the making. Such things matter to us. They are woven into the fabric of our being. They are what gives our society purpose. In times of threat, when the night is at its darkest and things prowl beyond the edges of the camp-fire, we come with torch and with blade. We protect our kin. As I expected you to protect yours.’

If Harren was moved by the White Scar’s words, his expression didn’t show it.

‘The logistical difficulties involved in bringing the tribes within the Founding Wall are almost insurmountable,’ the governor said. ‘There will be massed overcrowding, and that will lead to unrest, riots and possibly even xenos infiltration. If only half of the steppe population is brought to Heavenfall, vital supplies will not last long, even if maximum rationing protocols can be enforced. Maintaining order will also drain the resources of the Pinnacle Guard and distract them from combating the invaders.’

‘We came here to protect all of this world’s inhabitants, not just its Imperial government,’ Joghaten said. ‘If you do not comply with our demands I will have you removed from office. Things will likely run smoother at my directive until a

new government is decided upon, after the threat has passed.’

‘That will not be necessary, sire.’

It was the first time the Ecclesiarchy official, Traik, had spoken. Joghaten met his gaze. The priest held it, black eyes unflinching. He was as pale and gaunt as one of the revenants that legend said haunted the Plain Zhou during the Night of the Yaksha, when the moons were full and strange, formless things moved in the long grass. Joghaten disliked him instinctively.

‘My priesthood and I will not abandon our duties,’ the pallid man went on.

‘If resources are at a premium, I will not waste them on defending enrobed clergymen,’ Joghaten said. ‘Unless you know how to load and fire a lasrifle.’

‘This city is sacred to us,’ Traik said. ‘Sacred to the Emperor. The temple district is where mankind first settled, overlooking the high plains. If we are not here to tend to the Spur of Mankind Descended, we have lost the spiritual heart of this world.’

‘You say such things now, with no threat apparent. But when you see what is coming to this world I do not doubt you will sing a different song. It is easy to have faith in the quiet days of peace. When the Great Devourer arrives, we shall see how strong your faith really is.’

‘There will be riots if we are removed,’ Traik said.

‘Is that a threat, priest?’ Joghaten snarled. Qui’sin placed a hand on his pauldron. In the moment’s silence that followed, Chaplain Changadai spoke, his words scraping from the vox-grille of his skull helm.

‘We will not permit the shrines of this world to be desecrated, High Enunciator. If the threat makes it that far, I will fall in their defence. In the Emperor’s name.’

‘Regardless, the Priesthood of the Voice will stay,’ Traik said, apparently unplacated by the Chaplain’s assurances. ‘We did not overcome the heresies of the Bor-tri alongside your Chapter to simply abandon these venerated places of worship. Xenos monsters will not move us, Space Marine.’

‘So be it,’ Joghaten said. ‘But when the storm comes I will see you confined to your devotariums. Likewise with you and your government officials, Commander Harren. We do not have the time or resources to see to your personal safety and, as you say, it will be difficult enough maintaining order in the streets once the tribes are brought in. Stay away from the front lines, or I will have my brothers remove you.’

Harren said nothing, and for a moment Joghaten caught the flash of an internal struggle behind the governor’s expression. Eventually he responded, his tone almost recalcitrant.

‘We understand.’

‘My brotherhood are assembling on the plain beyond the Founding Wall,’ Joghaten went on. ‘Once I have dispersed my bike squads and flyers to make contact with the tribes I will need to review your defence plans in detail. Where are the local military commanders?’

‘Overseeing preparations at the wall and throughout the city,’ Harren said. ‘I shall recall them immediately.’

‘And what of this system’s deep-space augur arrays? Have their probes detected anything?’

‘Not to my knowledge, lord. I will see that you are notified the moment any contact is made.’

‘Make sure of it, commander,’ Joghaten said. ‘The earlier the warning, the better chance we all have of living to see out this season.’

### **The steppes, Darkand**

Out on the plains, the sunset was glorious. The sky was a firmament of burning golds and reds, the clouds spread in splendour and cast against the inky backdrop of encroaching night. Beneath the blazing arch the plains were a tapestry of copper and bronze, stretching away all around, seemingly without end. Only the distant mountaintops pierced the dusky ocean, the edge of the range where Heavenfall sat. The day’s dying light still touched the slope-city’s peak, not yet dragged away by night-time’s embrace.

Lau Feng dragged his gaze from the distant Pinnacle and focused on his tactical display. New orders. They winked across his visor as he placed a boot on Darkand soil for the first time in years, using it to balance his assault bike as it came to a growling halt.

The steedmaster reviewed the new commands with genhanced efficiency, blink-clicking through each at a speed no human could match. The objectives had changed. The holding pattern around Heavenfall’s outer curtain wall was now of secondary importance. The fastest elements of the brotherhood – the assault bike squadrons, the Land Speeders and the Stormhawk and Stormtalon flyers – had been issued with a long string of coordinate feeds. According to the data burst that came with them, they were the traditional migration trails favoured by the disparate nomad tribes of Darkand’s steppes. The White Scars were to ride to each tribe in person and direct them to Heavenfall, before the xenos made planetfall. Speed was everything. That last directive made Feng smile coldly.

It was a race then.

‘We are to separate, brothers,’ he said over the inter-squad vox-net. ‘You each have your own coordinates. See that the tribes are warned of what is coming, but note the time for your return. I will see you in forty-five Terran hours, in the shadow of the slope-city.’

The visor display designates of his squad brethren – Oda and Jakar, Sauri and Eji – blinked green in acknowledgment. Feng settled himself on his mount, taking a moment to appreciate the potency of the beast of metal and promethium he rode. Feeling the thrill of the hunt finally building with him. Trying to ignore the revenants of his dead brothers, casting their long shadows across the steppe behind him.

‘We ride,’ he said, and gunned the engine.

With a roar, each white-armoured warrior tore away through the tall grass, hunched low in the saddle, their topknots snapping. Each going their own way, out into the gathering night.

*It hungers! It hungers! It hungers! It hungers!*

- Final transcription of astropath primaris 715-Davin, Darkand System, prior to a type A critical meltdown



## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SHADOW IN THE WARP

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK [TERRAN STANDARD]: 89 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 44 HOURS.

#### **The centrum dominus, Heavenfall**

Qui'sin knew of the enemy's appearance before word came down from the main vox-hub. He could sense the anguish of Darkand's twin astropaths emanating from the Pinnacle's choristorum, the psy-sealed chamber buried deep in the bedrock of the mountainside below the government district. The Shadow in the Warp, the suffocating psychic void that accompanied the hive fleets wherever they went, had fallen across the system. From now on astrocommunication – the one link to the rest of the Imperium – would be impossible. It was just as it had been when the Cicatrix Maledictorum had first blazed with all its hateful fury across the galaxy, stifling the guiding light of the Astronomican. They were alone.

'They are upon us,' Qui'sin said to Joghaten. 'The star-speakers have turned deaf and dumb.'

The two were standing on the viewing gallery of the centrum dominus' uppermost tier. The vista beyond the window held no interest for the two Space Marines. Darkand's steppes, and the view from Heavenfall, were nothing compared to the sight of the Plain Zhou, sweeping away from the Khum Karta's

jagged flanks in all of its primal, rugged glory. The White Scars had occupied the gallery simply so that they could converse privately.

‘There has been no word from Tzu Shen,’ Joghaten said. He turned his back on the view, looking down into the command pit below. The centrum dominus was filled with the clatter of cogitators and the crackle of vox-systems as the governor’s staff sought to facilitate the massed movement of Heavenfall’s citizens into the catacombs, while at the same time deploying the Pinnacle Guard to the Founding Wall. At the chamber’s heart, gathered around the main hololithic chart, Harren was briefing a gaggle of his robed cabinet ministers.

‘I do not trust the governor,’ Joghaten went on. ‘There is something... *kachan* about him.’

‘I agree,’ said Qui’sin.

‘You think him compromised? Could there be xenos infestation here already?’

‘I do not yet know. If there is, it masks its psychic presence well.’

‘You are wise as ever, weathemaker,’ Joghaten conceded. ‘It is unlikely the xenos have had this world seeded for long. Nevertheless, there is something odd about the man.’

‘There is something unusual about the entire situation,’ Qui’sin admitted. ‘But we need the recruits afforded by the tribes more than ever before. We have committed – we cannot now abandon Darkand to a weakened splinter like Hive Fleet Cicatrix.’

‘That is even assuming the tribes can be brought within the wall in time. If not our defence will be for nothing.’

‘We shall find out soon enough. Our outriders cannot be far away from the closest ones.’

‘My lord,’ called Harren. Joghaten realised he was gesturing up at them. A pale-faced staffer in the uniform of a vox primary was standing at his shoulder.

‘What is it?’ Joghaten called back, his bass voice cutting easily across the chatter of the command centre.

‘A message from the augur stations watching over the rimward edge of the system. They are reporting contacts. Something... vast is arriving in-system from deep space.’

‘Then your faith and your abilities are about to be tested as never before, Commander Harren,’ Joghaten replied. ‘Has the wall been fully manned?’

‘Soon, lord,’ Harren said. ‘My generals estimate the final battalions will be in place by nightfall. The reports from the augur arrays estimate the xenos will reach upper orbit in around forty hours. They move slowly. The choristorum is

also reporting that our astropaths have lost contact with the Imperium at large. The primaris has suffered a fatal stroke.'

'The Shadow in the Warp,' Qui'sin responded. 'The psychic darkness these xenos always bring with them. Do not let it trouble you, governor. In times such as these, none were coming to your aid anyway. Your champions already stand with you.'

### **The Chamber of Seers, Iyanden Craftworld**

The high, wraithbone chamber echoed with the sound of mourning. The seer council of Iyanden was remembering its dead, the cost a dying race had paid and would pay again. Lillen, the most youthful warlock to have taken a seat among the council of seers, sung for the souls of Alnoth and Murai, just fallen in battle with their dark cousins. Their passing had left Farseer Yenneth feeling hollow. Even now their spirit stones were communing with the infinity circuit, seeking their final rest.

Understanding as she did the threats that faced the craftworld, Yenneth suspected that any rest they did find would be very far from final.

Little time had passed since the farseer and a detachment of wraithguard had returned from the webway. The City of Pillars, that long-abandoned portal to the material plane, had once more been the scene of desperate fighting against Archon Skalorix and the Kabal of the Pierced Eye. The cursed drukhari were refusing to abandon the ancient aeldari city and the portal which led to the monkeigh world beyond. Unless they could be dislodged, Yenneth and her kindred would not be able to seal the entrance off before the bio-monstrosities of the Devourer arrived.

Despite their withdrawal, the spirits powering the wraithguard detachment had not been released. Another farseer, Venerable Hildar, had proposed requesting the assistance of more before returning to the City of Pillars. The council had urged caution before moving the proposal forward. The craftworld was already on a war footing, beset by a dozen threats. What craftworld wasn't, now that Biel-Tan was shattered and darkness had blanketed half the galaxy? The loss of venerable council members like Alnoth and Murai were but the latest of many tears.

'The drukhari humiliated us,' said Farseer Galoran after the mourning song had faded into silence. The fragment of the council that had been dedicated to the expedition to the City of Pillars sat in a circle, cross-legged, around the

shimmering stones of the seeing chamber. The precious vision shards were hovering a foot above the smooth surface of the floor, moving in slow, ever-changing patterns. Their depths glowed, casting twinkling patterns across the slender, curving wraithbone arches high overhead. They were the only source of illumination in the chamber, and they gave it an aquatic, submerged feel.

‘The portents did not predict the drukhari would be so numerous,’ said one of the council’s warlocks, Yetoc.

‘A wrong path was taken,’ Yenneth admitted. They were the first words she had spoken since Lillen had finished her song. She felt the weight of expectation in the chamber pressing down upon her, distracting her, like a buzzing in her ears. At times like these she suspected taking up her position among the current council had been a wrong path as well. Fate could be confounding, even for one who walked the lonely way of the Seer.

‘Sometimes the most obvious route is the right one,’ Hildar intoned. He was old, even by the standards of the eldar. The crystalline curse that beset all farseers now forced him to use his wraithbone staff as a walking cane. It would not be long before he withdrew into the Dome of the Crystal Seers, to become one with the craftworld and guide it from the beyond.

‘Can we afford to awaken more of our sleeping kin though?’ Yenneth asked, letting the truth of her words work for her. ‘How many more sections of the infinity circuit are we willing to disturb in our quest to oust Skalorix?’

‘We are all in agreement that the portal must be sealed,’ Hildar said. ‘If we do not use force to drive away the drukhari, then how do you suggest we stop the Devourer from breaching the webway? It is a risk we cannot afford to take.’

‘There are other ways,’ Yenneth said slowly. ‘Other... allies we might seek.’

‘You are right to speak with caution,’ Hildar said slowly, his piercing gaze not leaving Yenneth. ‘You refer to the mon-keigh, yes? The ones that infest the surface of the portal world. The place they call Darkand.’

The last word, delivered in the mon-keigh’s barbaric tongue, sounded like a wracking cough. The council’s sense of discomfort filled Yenneth. She pressed on regardless.

‘We know how the immediate paths before us play out. We can change them. Bring some together, and seal others off. Engineer success from many possible futures.’

‘You have already proposed this,’ Hildar said. ‘The council voted unanimously against it. It is too dangerous.’

‘I would have the council reconsider,’ Yenneth said. ‘Awaking a further phalanx

of our slumbering kin is not feasible. We cannot countenance the price Skalorix demands in her bargains, but we must seal the portal. We all know the threat the Devourer poses, more so than any of our kin. If the hive mind senses the portal's presence and succeeds in penetrating it, half a dozen craftworlds will find themselves directly threatened. The mon-keigh are our best hope now.'

'But the distortion you suggest,' Farseer Galoran said, speaking for the first time. 'Is it even possible?'

'Yes,' Yenneth replied, masking her uncertainty with firmness. 'I can tread the path to its completion. There will be no missteps.'

'You have done it before?'

'I have not.'

'There is nothing more difficult or deadly than what you propose,' Hildar said, leaning heavily on his staff. Unlike the other seers he'd remained standing, unable to sit due to the slow crippling of his lower limbs.

'One wrong turn, one false step, and you could cause infinitely more damage than even the Devourer is capable of.'

'I understand the risks,' Yenneth said.

'But what of the realities?' asked a warlock, Druai. 'How can you even go about reaching the mon-keigh if the drukhari control the City of Pillars?'

'Skalorix holds the gate,' Yenneth said. 'But a palace has many other doors. I have scryed them all, and I will use them to reach those who may prove most malleable to our suggestions.'

'You think you will find any among that blind race that can fulfil the role we require?'

'If the plan is adhered to, we will require only slaughter. The mon-keigh have shown themselves perfectly capable of that. With Ynnead's blessings they will be our instrument of destruction. Darkand holds great meaning, and even greater purpose, for many of them.'

'What do you mean by that?' Hildar asked when Yenneth paused.

'The runes are unequivocal about certain matters,' Yenneth continued. 'Observe.'

She drew her sheaf of wraithbone rune sticks from her robes, and cast them across the floor beneath the seeing stones. As they slid to a halt her long, slender fingers were already indicating the salient patterns, her mind inching ahead of present reality.

'There, see how the runes representing the Upstart fall upon the marker of the Home world?'

‘That much is true,’ Hildar allowed. ‘But I see precious little certainty in anything else. All about it is flux.’

‘Watch again,’ Yenneth said, gathering up the sticks and casting them once more. As they clattered to a stop they again settled in a similar pattern – at their centre, the Upstart and the Home world met.

‘The mon-keigh’s tie to Darkand is a fixed point,’ Yenneth explained. ‘That is why I have proposed this plan. All paths lead to their involvement.’

‘But what of the other runes?’ Galoran asked, leaning forward. ‘I see not only uncertainty, I see gravest danger. The Wrath of Khaine has fallen inverted twice. The Tears of Isha lie crossed with the Cosmic Serpent. And Ynnead is ascendant.’

The farseer indicated the rune stick that topped the scattered pattern. Yenneth felt the psychic flicker of unease from those around her.

‘I take that as a good portent,’ she said. ‘We are all Ynnead’s servants now.’

‘It is a bleak time, when all of the aeldari have been reduced to the service of Death,’ Hildar said quietly.

‘Yet these are the times dealt to us,’ Yenneth replied. ‘You can see the runes, how they have fallen. Few are within our power to change now. Too many paths have already been set. For this reason, I petition the council once more.’

None of the assembled seers raised the tokens that indicated opposition. After a moment’s silence, Yenneth bowed her head in formal thanks.

‘Take the outcasts with you,’ Hildar said. ‘We can ill afford to lose another of our Venerable Seers, not during times such as these.’

‘Very well,’ Yenneth said. ‘I shall seek out Pathfinder Roneth in person.’

‘You know the routes you must take to reach Darkand?’

‘I have foreseen them, honoured farseer. That will have to be enough.’

‘It will,’ Hildar agreed. ‘Ynnead guide you, my sister. Much hangs upon the thread of your existence.’

*You cannot engage these monsters as you would a conventional xenos threat. They are unlike any other enemy this damnable galaxy has to throw at us. They fight not as a gathering of sentient warriors, but as the billion-strong extensions of a single mind. They are the ultimate predator. But gentlemen, having said all that... how many predators have we hunted, trapped and killed on Myralis when we were last on leave? I assure you, this one will be no different.*

– Admiral Golkin Vatt, Imperial Navy battlefleet  
472-Pacificus, to his assembled deck officers  
prior to his victory over the Great Devourer  
at the battle of High Anchorage, 997.M41



## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE FLESH NOOSE

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 88 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 43 HOURS.

#### **Augur Void Station JUF-D19/Rimward, Darkand System**

They were all going to die. Augur station Vox Primary Ankum had admitted as much before the station's commander, Sensorium Master Crasus, had ordered him to be silent. None of them needed the vox primary's analysis to know what was about to happen.

Augur analyst Davrick's main viewscreen had just come back online. It had shorted out three times in the last hour, overloaded by the sheer weight of returns it was getting from the augur arrays that monitored the edge of the Darkand System. The counter for his sector had stalled at 1314 and was simply blinking on and off, its red digits throwing Davrick's face into light and dark, light and dark. The displays all around him were now a morass of unidentified, organic returns, rendered all but useless by the weight of data appearing across the screens.

Augur Station JUF-D19/Rimward's processors were unable to comprehend the sheer size of Hive Fleet Cicatrix as it arrived in-system.

Tech-adept Groll seemed to have gone into some sort of standby, cortical plugs still linking him to the deep-space station's drives. He sat bound in his binary communion chair, eyes glazed, pale lips quivering. Crasus had given up trying to bring him back online.

'Estimated time to contact?' the sensorium master asked, voice hoarse. He was watching the external pict screens.

'Unknown,' another of the void station's six-man crew, Sreen responded. 'My systems are all glitched, but running off the last speed and trajectory readings we managed to file, I estimate no more than ten minutes.'

Nobody replied. Everyone's eyes were on the pict-feed.

The external recordings had managed to pick out their doom. The view of real space in the station's immediate vicinity was a grainy, static-washed green, but the resolution was enough to make out the thing approaching them through the void. The augur's systems had been constructed to collate and analyse nonvisual data – such clinical information was of far more use than the scant things that could be detected through the naked eye, watching viewscreen images of distant objects. In a twist of cruel irony, JUF-D19/Rimward's grainy old pict recorders were the only pieces of data collection equipment not overloaded by the sheer size of the xenos fleet.

Now that fleet's vanguard was visible. Something was nearing the station, drawing towards it with a silent, eerie inevitability. Its form defied easy definition. Davrick, born to a middle-ranking ash hiver family on Colaris Prime, had never seen the ocean before, but he'd witnessed the strange, frilled creatures imported as foodstuffs for Colaris' teeming hab blocks from harvest worlds like Aquim and New Haven. The thing approaching JUF-D19/Rimward looked like one such creature, albeit far larger and cast out into the void. Its back was a gnarled, curling hump of scarred bone plating, while its underside was a mass of dozens of limb-like tendrils that waved back and forth with a lazy synchronisation, as though powering it forward through the depths. Streamers of void-frozen fluid clung to its fronds, while its head constituted nothing more than a fleshy maw. Orifices in its spine shell occasionally gouted bursts of bio-effluvium that crystallised in the void.

'Vanguard organism,' Analyst Korday said, as though to break the awful silence that had fallen over the station. 'No specific class or designation.'

'Estimated time to contact less than five minutes,' Sreen added quietly.

'We're about to be boarded, or God-Emperor knows what else,' Crasus snapped, trying to wake up his stunned crew. 'I want everything wiped, *now*.'

Follow your damned protocols.'

The icy, expectant stillness that had settled over the station dissipated as they all hurried to comply. Davrick began to wipe his core cogitators and processor units, inserting a series of codes that were authorised by Crasus' gene stamp. The hurried activity helped draw his mind away from the cold sweat slicking his body, the throbbing in his skull and the base, panic-stoked fear churning in his stomach.

'Systems are beginning to go offline,' he confirmed. 'Criticals multiplying, chief.'

Crasus didn't respond. He was too busy giving authorisation to Ankum to scramble the vox-systems. Sereen was wiping data-slates while Korday was dumping sheaves of paper backcopies and data readout chits into the vacuum chute. Only Groll was motionless, still staring into nothing.

'Tech-adept, respond,' Crasus said, turning his attention to the Adeptus Mechanicus acolyte. The coghead remained unmoving.

'Maximum priority response override,' Crasus snapped. 'Look at me, Groll.'

The adept blinked once, slowly.

'He's gone, chief,' Korday said, glancing over from the chute. 'You gotta unplug him from the dataframe.'

For a moment Crasus looked as though he was going to reply. Then, instead, he reached down to the base of the adept's mem-unit, sutured into the pale flesh at the base of his skull. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled. There was an instant of resistance, then the unit disengaged with a click. Groll didn't react, though a line of saliva escaped his sagging lips. Crasus reached up to the heavy cortical plug inserted into Groll's cranium, near the surgery-scarred crown of his white scalp.

'God-Emperor forgive me,' the sensorum master muttered, before yanking the plug free. Systems across the station's remaining displays began to chime and flash, as though the machine-spirits were calling out in shock. Groll spasmed violently for a moment, held in check by his binary chair's restraints, then slumped back. A single hand continued to twitch and clench.

'Eyes on your stations,' Crasus ordered, though the surety in his voice was gone.

'Contact,' Sereen said.

The void monster filled the pict screen. Up close its form was even more nightmarish – Davrick could see the spine growths that lined its motion frills, and the scarring on its curled shell where debris had lashed it during its long

voyage between the stars. As the station crew watched, its maw distended, pulling apart. Contrary to Davrick's horrified imaginings, it did not possess row after row of snapping lock-teeth. Instead, its mouth was a fleshy morass of feelers, disgusting tendrils trailing icy slime. They extended as it came blindly upon the station, reaching out past the pict screen's pan. A proximity alarm bell started to clatter, and Davrick felt the decking beneath him shudder.

'It's... it's going to eat us,' Ankum stammered, looking as though he was about to be sick. 'Oh, Throne, it's—'

'Silence!' Crasus snapped, though he too was visibly shaking.

More tendrils reached ponderously out, questing around the station's flanks. Secondary alarms activated, and the adamantium around the crew shuddered and groaned.

Was it going to crush them? Tear them open and expose them to the void? Suck them into the vile, drooling orifice now practically pressed up against the pict display? Davrick found himself staring at the terrifying image, unable to shift away from his workbench, unable to look at anything other than the unnatural, pulsating flesh that now filled the screen.

And then it shifted. The screen blurred, lost for a moment to static. For a second Davrick assumed one of the monster's tendrils had knocked out the external pict-feed. But when the viewscreen came back online the image was still present. What was more, the maw was receding. The xenos beast was reversing away from them.

The station shuddered again as the tendrils that had latched around it released their snaggle-toothed grip, sliding back into the monster's depths as its maw constricted. It pulled away from them and then went upwards, displaying its fleshy lower fronds as it slipped over the augur masts and vox-beacons. The pict-feed on the other side of the station caught its trailing rear as it passed back down the other side, floating on in-system past the little monitoring platform.

For a moment, nobody spoke. Davrick, like the others, simply stared after the xenos creature's languid, receding form. It was Crasus who snapped them out of it.

'Turn off those damned alarms!' he ordered. Korday hit the overrides, one after the other. Silence flooded the space left by the clattering emergency systems. Even the hum of the cogitators and vox-banks, now deactivated, had gone. Davrick had never heard the little station so silent before.

'What do we do now?' Sreen breathed. All eyes turned to Crasus. With what was clearly an immense effort, the old sensorum master stilled his shaking

hands. The ugly emergency lighting made him look even more wizened and gaunt than usual.

‘We wait,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing else we can do. The distress beacon is still transmitting. One of the system defence cutters will pick us up.’

It was a lie and they all knew it. A vast xenos threat had just arrived in-system. The last considerations for the captains of Darkand’s handful of combat-worthy void craft would be the salvation of the augur stations on the system’s fringes. Nor were there any shuttles or salvation pods to facilitate an evacuation. The crew were delivered to the station and then, after six months, rotated off for a week’s leave. According to the cycle logs there was still a full Terran month to go before they were to be replaced. There was no way for any of them to abandon the station.

‘Why did it leave us?’ Korday wondered out loud, staring after the receding alien bio-ship. ‘It had us.’

‘We were... no threat to it,’ Crasus said slowly. ‘No threat to its fleet.’

‘Chief,’ Sreen interrupted. ‘Chief, look.’

The augur analyst was pointing back at the pict screens. It took a second for Davrick to realise what it was he was looking at. When he did, the reason for their survival became clear.

The vanguard xenos bio-ships had passed by. JUF-D19/Rimward was now at the heart of their fleet. And, compared to the organic drones that quested ahead of the main swarm, the true organisms of the hive fleet were behemoths. Davrick’s mind struggled to comprehend what he was seeing as he took in sheets of pockmarked chitin the size of small continents and toothed orifices the size of cities. The thick clusters of tendrils along its flank and underbelly writhed in the solar winds while its maw was encompassed by two great, wicked, beak-like bone plates that looked as though they could have sheared an Imperial capital ship in half.

And the worst thing about the nightmarish leviathan was that it was coming straight towards the augur station.

‘Oh God-Emperor,’ Ankum stammered, over and over. Korday was quietly sobbing, his head in his hands. Sreen just stared, the image on the viewscreen reflected in her wide, dark eyes. Only Crasus turned away from the display. He walked over to the worn leather of his command chair, paused, tugged his dark blue sensorum master’s uniform straight, and sat down. His expression was unreadable, jaw locked, though in the harsh emergency lumens he looked more haggard than ever.

‘Crew members,’ he said, his words cutting through Ankum’s and Korday’s despair. ‘In the past decades of service, it shames me to admit that I have not said this enough. Regardless, if there was ever a time, Throne knows it’s now. It has been an honour to man this station with all of you.’

‘And with you, chief,’ Davrick said. He was the only one to respond. His own words felt distant, disconnected, as though he was speaking to himself from somewhere far away. His mind was sluggish, unresponsive. His breathing felt laboured. A strange, detached part of his mind supposed that he was probably having a panic attack.

Crasus had no more orders to give. He simply sat, watching the viewscreen. Davrick reached out towards his little pict capture of Amilia and Drui, his wife and son, tacked to the side of his monitor. He would see them again, some day. He was sure of it. A fresh surge of stuttered oaths from Ankum distracted him before he could pull the pict off the side of the display.

The tyranid bio-ship had filled the viewscreens. Even as the stunned crew watched, the monstrosity’s great, hooked chitin beak split apart. The maw yawned wide, impossibly wide, wide enough – Davrick was sure – to swallow one of Darkand’s moons. Its shadow fell across the augur station, blotting out the light of the stars. The structure around them seemed to shudder, as though its terror matched that of its crew. The viewscreen now showed nothing but static-washed darkness. It had swallowed them whole.

Korday had slumped on the deck, shaking and weeping uncontrollably. Crasus was looking down into his lap, knuckles white where he gripped the arms of his chair. Ankum had finally stopped gibbering.

‘Sreen,’ he managed to say, looking over at the augur analyst. ‘Sreen, there’s something I need to tell you...’ She continued to stare at the now-blank viewscreen.

A sudden impact threw them all. Davrick found himself sprawling across the deck, almost on top of Korday. The station shook violently, tremors dislodging rune banks and audio systems and sending Davrick’s empty recaff tin bouncing across the deck. The alarms triggered again across the cramped station. Crasus, who alone had managed to stay in his seat, deactivated them without comment. The viewscreen had gone offline completely, showing nothing but grey static.

‘Th-they’re going to board us?’ Ankum stammered as they picked themselves up. Any response was lost in another jarring impact. The station’s frame shrieked in protest at the stresses put upon it. With their systems scrambled and broken it was impossible to tell exactly where they were, or what was happening outside.

The station seemed to settle slightly, the sounds of tortured metal reduced to a low creak. They all scanned the ceiling, looking for any sign of a breach.

‘Do you hear that?’ Sreen said. It was the first time she’d spoken since seeing the bio-ship. They all listened, breath held, straining to hear over the groan of adamantium and Korday’s muted sobs. Eventually Davrick caught what Sreen had detected, a faint scratching, scrabbling noise, as though someone – or something – was scraping across the outside of the hull. It mirrored the scratching tormenting all of them from inside their own skulls.

‘They’re on the hull,’ Davrick said. Before he could go on, a crash shattered the breathless quiet. The section directly above Crasus’ chair, in the centre of the station’s cockpit, collapsed. With it came a flood of broiling green liquid that struck Crasus just as he looked up.

If the old sensorum master managed to draw breath to scream, the bio-acid flooded his mouth, throat and lungs before he could make a sound. Davrick caught an impression of his death as he was lost entirely in the torrent – flesh sloughing from bones, organics consumed in a heartbeat. The rest of the crew recoiled, but too slowly – Sreen, nearest to the centre of the cockpit, was struck by the acidic spray. Her hands went up to her exposed face, and her screaming filled the claustrophobic space.

‘No!’ Ankum wailed, lunging across his bench to catch the augur analyst as she collapsed. He managed to drag her hands away from her face, then recoiled. Her features had already been reduced to pockmarked bone, her eyeballs running like liquid from their sockets, meat and tendon slipping away with her fingers. Still she screamed. Ankum doubled over and was sick.

Davrick, whose station was furthest from Crasus’ chair, scrambled back on top of his bench as the flood of acid spread across the decking plates. Sreen had collapsed into the rising swill, her body coming apart. Ankum tried to push himself against his vox-banks but was sick again, and collapsed. The bugs got to him before the acid.

There were insects in the hissing, steaming slime – writhing, sightless maggot-things with hard black shells. They swarmed from the discoloured, vomit-like bio-matter, the air full of the susurrations of their passing as they swiftly covered the deck and then the cogitator stations, workbenches and walls, riding the rising tide of acid. First hundreds and then thousands of them reached Ankum, swarming over his boots and knees and up his arms where he was crouched against the vox-systems. He tried to scream, but choked on his own bile. His eyes rolled back into their sockets as the alien swarm began eating him alive.

Korday killed himself. Face still streaked with tears, he leapt directly from his bench into the stream that had consumed Crasus and his command chair. He was gone in an instant, as the breach in the station hull was burned wider.

As Ankum's eaten-out remains collapsed into the bio-organics sloshing about the cockpit's deck, Davrick stood rooted to the top of his bench. He couldn't think, couldn't move. He was in the throes of panic – a part of him realised he should end it quickly like Korday, but another part was desperate for another way out, any way out that avoided the nightmare bile that was burning away everything. It was digesting them whole. Even as the terror kept him in place Groll's binary chair collapsed, pitching the unresponsive tech-adept into the effluvium. His red cloak billowed for a moment before he was lost, coming apart amidst the steaming clouds of liquefied organics.

For a moment, Davrick was alone. For a single, ludicrous second, everything felt surreal, ridiculous, almost calm. It had to be a nightmare. None of this horror could possibly be real.

Then his bench collapsed.

'Oh, God-Emperor, no!' he screamed, trying to scramble back onto the plasteel's disintegrating remains. 'No, no, no!'

The bio-acid caught him, sloshing around his boots and his lower fatigues. His panicked wails quickly turned to screams of agony as the material was eaten away, exposing flesh that in turn began to slough off. Muscle and sinew became grey, organic paste, that revealed bone that gave way and splintered beneath its own acid-gnawed weight.

Davrick died slowly, on his knees, eaten up inch by inch by the bile and the sightless, burrowing things that swam in it. Eventually the insects flooded his raw throat, choking and suffocating him as they ate out his eyes and bored through his nose and ears and into his brain. The acid took what remained.

As another section of the hull caved to emit a fresh gout of vicious toxins, the picture of Amilia and Drui fell from the side of Davrick's primary viewscreen into the flood. In an instant, the smiling wife and son were gone, consumed entirely.

### ***The Pride of Chogoris,* high orbit, Darkand**

The sensorium gantries edging the bridge of the *Pride* lit up with fresh augur reports, underlining the strained features of the crew zarts working to transcribe the scanned outputs.

*'We've lost contact with the last of the system's rimward augur stations, voyagemaster,'* one reported, the words clicking in Tzu Shen's ear.

*'Acknowledged,'* he responded. He was already aware of the station's loss. The data cables linking his throne mount to his cranial nodes and black carapace fed him constant updates from across the ship's systems – scanner arrays, vox-clusters, the enginarium, the weapons decks. The sigil representing Augur Station JUF-D19/Rimward had blinked from existence in his mind's eye moments earlier. The only thing that surprised him was that it had remained online and transmitting for so long, surrounded as it was by the spreading stain representing Hive Fleet Cicatrix.

*'Bring us to a fresh heading,'* the venerable voyagemaster ordered over the short-range vox. *'Point two-four starboard. Level speed.'*

A flurry of acknowledgments clicked back over the link. Shen let out a slow breath and settled himself on the ship's throne mount, feeling his flesh twitch where the cables and subdermal implants snagged. The slight change in the ship's stance was unnecessary, but it did not sit well with a White Scar to remain stationary, whether upon the Plain Zhou or in the void's depths. They had been locked in position, stasis-anchors dropped, for almost six Terran hours. He knew that the rest of the Fourth Brotherhood's fleet would be responding to the fractional change he'd ordered, adjusting their own headings to maintain the *an-chi* – the holding formation adopted in Darkand's high orbit.

He ran through the deployments one more time via his mind links, one hand subconsciously stroking the long, white hair of his forked beard. The *Pride of Chogoris* sat at the heart of the Fourth Brotherhood's ships, in the place of honour. To its starboard, and a little lower on the atmospheric plain, was the Sword-class escort squadron, three vessels: the *War Wind*, *Tulwar* and *Starsteed*. To port, anchored slightly higher, were the twin Cobra escorts, *Falcon* and *Steppe Lord*. The formation was loose, flexible, and offered the maximum capacity to both hold and attack. It was a typical pattern, adopted by Shen and his escort voyagemasters a thousand times.

It was the waiting formation. It meant nothing was happening. And that never sat well with any of them.

With a thought-impulse the White Scar cast the net of his consciousness wider, tapping into the analysis scans of the system's rimward edge and the final data packets delivered by the augur stations before they'd gone offline. The transmissions had been vital – they'd been able to map out the extent of the xenos fleet before contact had been lost. The entire swarm had now translated in-

system, clustered around the primary hive ships. They were making their way ponderously – though, according to the latest long-range detection by the *Pride*'s own augur probes, with increasing speed – towards Darkand, bypassing the system's uninhabited worlds, a trio of gas giants, and a radiation-scorched wasteland labelled on the star charts as Tachi's Folly. Assuming their pace continued to increase, estimates saw them contesting high anchorage in around forty hours' time.

As far as Shen was concerned, there would be no contesting at all.

The space above Darkand was almost clear, bar the White Scars fleet and the planet's unmanned communications satellites. The meagre defence gunboats and fast cutters responsible for guarding the planet's orbital anchorages and shipping lanes in the absence of the Imperial Navy had been ordered away, along with the commercial freighters and merchant vessels clustered in low orbit. Shen had provided them with coordinates to the system's coreward edge, away from Darkand. If the worst happened and the planet was lost, they would be able to translate into the empyrean while the xenos were still feeding. The undermanned defence ships would only get in the way of the White Scars fleet, and it made sense to salvage what they could while there was still an opportunity.

Shen was aware that Joghaten had already made it clear to Darkand's leading dignitaries that the White Scars had no intention of safeguarding any ranking Imperial assets, or accommodating them on board the *Pride*. The governor and his ministers would stay on the planet, along with the rest of the planet's inhabitants, and live or die there, as the fates willed. All that concerned Shen now was having a clear orbit space. The next few hours had to play out exactly as planned if the Fourth Brotherhood was to have any hope of survival, let alone victory.

Shen pulled his consciousness back in, momentarily syphoning out much of the vast flow of information filling his thoughts. The *Pride of Chogoris* and its small attendant fleet was far removed from the panic besetting Darkand's exospheric shipping lanes. The yurut bridge was a quiet, calm place, thick with the sweetness of burning incense sticks and undercut by the gentle throb of the idling plasma drive and the click and tap of cogitator cores and rune boards.

It had always been a place of order and measured calm, even before Shen had taken the throne mount from his predecessor, almost four centuries ago. The *Pride of Chogoris* was what White Scars voyagemasters referred to as a harmonious ship. When the peoples of Mundus Planus had first ventured into the star-seas, they had carried many of their cultural cues with them. Chogorian

captains identified the state of their vessels in terms of balance. Each ship possessed its own *jingshén* – spirit – and each was different in nature.

Some traversed the endless void and the depths of the empyrean with a heavy weariness, made old and staid through many millennia of service. Many others hungered for the rush and release of battle, their plasma drives and warp engines always biting a little closer to the limit, their augur clusters probing for new, worthy foes. Still others sought to battle against the constraints placed upon them by their voyagemaster, especially if he had only recently taken his throne mount, or the ship was particularly venerable. The ship might drift off course unless constantly monitored, or it might stubbornly keep its shields raised long after the start of the deactivation protocols.

The bond between the *Pride* and the voyagemaster had only grown stronger down the centuries, especially after Shen had lost his natural-born sight. They had caught a fleeing tyranid splinter fleet off the spiral arm of the Nebrison Cluster in late 970.M41. The xenos had turned at bay, and proved stronger than had been anticipated. Bio-warrior organisms had succeeded in boarding the *Pride* and penetrating the primary yurut. The zarts, fighting bravely with what they had to hand, had held the shrieking swarm long enough for Joghaten and his brothers to arrive – Shen's last sight had been of the Master of Blades falling in amidst the hissing xenos, his twin tulwars a storm of striking silver, face a mask of controlled, icy fury. Then an alien's claws had raked Shen, and taken his eyes.

The xenos' skull was now yellowing on a spike above his throne mount. Shen still bore the wicked white scars all down his face, a counterpoint to the ritual markings of his tribe and Chapter. He had refused the offer of augmetics, preferring to see only through the ship's senses. The *Pride of Chogoris* likewise remembered that last, brutal engagement. Though new sheets of adamantium had been bonded to its hull, and old scars painted fresh and white, Shen could still feel the vessel's hunger for vengeance, a rare spike of discord amidst its ordered thoughts. That flash had been growing stronger and more frequent since the first detection of Hive Fleet Cicatrix's vanguard organisms, making their way in-system from the void's depths. Shen knew he would have to monitor it closely if he were to ensure the *Pride* did not lose its harmony in a blood-fuelled hunt for revenge.

The old voyagemaster reached out once more with the *Pride's* augurs, scanning the xenos fleet that was spreading like some vile, void-borne cancer from the system's edge. The hive swarm would be filling the yurut's oculus displays and viewscreens, a morass of hostile returns, rendered not in armaplas, plasteel and

adamantium, but in ugly, leathery flesh, craggy asteroid-scarred chitin and throbbing, toxic ichor. The number of contacts was far in excess of any enemy fleet the Fourth Brotherhood's vessels had faced since they last encountered the Great Devourer off Nebrison. But Tzu Shen had seen worse.

'Send this information to the Master of Blades as a data burst,' he ordered one of the yurut zarts over the vox. 'Along with the following analysis. Xenos threat gauged to be level three or four, no higher. Progressing in-system, standard pattern. The bio-ships at the formation's heart seem uncommonly large for such a comparatively small splinter, possibly indicative of a lack of bio-fodder or recent hostile action. Estimated time to arrival in Darkand's high orbit, forty-two hours, Terran standard. Will move to the second phase unless otherwise notified.'

After a moment the primary vox zart confirmed that the burst had been delivered, logged and auto-acknowledged, with Shen's addendum attached. The voyagemaster thanked the Chapter-serf, his mind still focused on the approaching swarm.

As far as hive fleets went, Cicatrix was small, a ravaged remnant from Baal's fallout. That being said, the swarm approaching Darkand was still more than sufficient for the task of engulfing the White Scars and consuming the honour world. If it could feed off poorly guarded outlying planets and systems like this one, it could take advantage of the Imperium's overtaxed defences to regain its strength.

That, surely, was what Qui'sin's visions had been referring to. That was why they had hastened here, to catch the xenos at their weakest, and exterminate them before their filth had an opportunity to spread between the stars once more. Cleanse and purge; despite his centuries of service, the opportunity still brought a slow smile to Shen's scar-twisted lips.

'We have an preset message response from the khan's personal vox-uplink, voyagemaster,' the primary vox zart said. 'Message reads, "Proceed at personal discretion."'

'Acknowledge it, and good hunting to the Master of Blades,' Shen replied. 'Helmsman, prepare a new fleet heading, and issue a preparatory formation change directive. The wait is nearly over.'

*When the skies of Heavenfall are filled with fresh constellations – that is when we shall know that our salvation is at hand.*

– Septimus Traik,  
High Enunciator of the Emperor's Voice,  
personal writings (redacted)



## CHAPTER SIX

### NEW STARS

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 68 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 23 HOURS.

#### **The steppes, Darkand**

Lau Feng rode through the night. It brought him joy. After a month of confinement on board the *Pride of Chogoris*, to be free again, to ride the steppes unfettered and alone, gave him a sense of release he had not experienced for a long time. His auto-senses guided him in the darkness; the rugged bulk of his assault bike steered firm and true across the rolling hills and plateaux that stretched away from Heavenfall. He had found himself riding into the sunrise, red light bleeding life back into the steppes around him. Even if it was nothing compared to a true Chogorian dawn, such a sight was a far cry from the cramped hallways, briefing yuruts and sparring gers of the brotherhood's strike cruiser.

Despite the undeniable beauty, the sense of kachan emanating from the world around him was strong. Feng had heard other members of the brotherhood talking about it on board the *Pride*. The kachan, the uncanniness, was typified by the legend of the *örchölt*, an ancient Chogorian city tale that had eventually bled out into the culture of the steppes. In the story a steppe spirit would delight in swapping a child from the plains with one from the city. Neither sets of parents

would be aware of the trickery of the örchölt, until it became apparent how out of place the child was. The household's lineage thus ruined, the örchölt would then switch them back. Feng had once heard an anthropologist from the Imperial scholam on Rondaris claim that the tale grew from the city-dweller's ancient fear of interbreeding with the steppes tribes of Chogoris, and their efforts to explain away affairs. Such cynical analysis seemed to miss the point, as far as Feng was concerned. In this life, there were those who were alike, and those who were unlike – the kachan.

Many White Scars believed Darkand and its people to be akin to the tale of the örchölt. As a world it was alike and unlike, a planet that at a glance bore undeniable similarities to Chogoris. Warzones classified by the Adeptus Munitorum as geo-gradient aleph five through to sigma three – open plain battlefields – were the favoured hunting grounds of the Khagan's sons. Feng had seen many an alien grassland in his century and a half of service to the khans, but Darkand was something different, something closer to Chogoris than all the others. In the way the winds twitched the grass, the manner in which the sun slid lazily towards the distant mountain peaks, how the raptors circled slowly overhead, watching and waiting. All these things were like an eerie memory, as though the steedmaster was lost deep in meditation in his busad, remembering the Plain Zhou as though with the disjointed surrealism of a dream.

And yet, Darkand was not home. It could never be Chogoris. The scents on the wind were different, and the land lay in a curious fashion, its low, rolling hills and rises falling in patterns his own Chogorian mind found strange. The birds high above were not the majestic golden-feathered berkut of the Khum Karta, but dark, fork-tailed creatures with ignoble, hungry countenances.

The people were different too, a short breed, weathered and toughened like native Chogorians, but without the upright noble bearing. They were quick to scorn and sneer, and held grudges beyond the limits of an honourable debt. To the White Scars they seemed mean-spirited and cruel when squabbling among themselves. They rarely smiled, the ones from the slope-city even less so. They would never hesitate to take up arms against anyone outside their tribal groupings. To an off-worlder the peoples of the steppes might have seemed similar, but between them the differences were as clear and vast as the open skies of their respective home worlds.

A little after sunrise, the White Scars steedmaster reached his first objective. The Ukit tribe had spent the night encamped around one of the rock formations that broke up their traditional migration route. Darkand's plains were dotted with

such outcrops, the strange, elegant stones not quite ordered enough to appear intelligently designed, yet too out of place to seem wholly natural.

The Ukit were breaking camp when Feng arrived. Lookouts had spotted him from the top of the rocks minutes before his bike roared past the scouts on their tough steppe ponies. When he rode into the circle of tents and wagons the tribe had already reacted the only way it knew how – taking up arms, each tanned expression emblazoned with a mixture of fear and awe.

The White Scar set his engine to idling and placed one boot on the dry Darkand soil. The squat steppe people surrounding him scrambled to get as far away from the white-armoured giant and his growling beast as possible, mothers snatching children up in their arms and young men trying to shield their stumbling elders. The warriors stood their ground, composite bows and spears raised.

Feng assessed the entire scene in a single double beat of his hearts, feeling his mood darken. It was not only the mixture of panic and defiance he saw before him – steppe warriors were closing in around him, brandishing their crude weapons, their fear at the giant warrior's presence clashing with their instinctive desire to face down any challenge. More were appearing with every passing second from the encampment's gers and yuruts to join the circle tightening around the White Scar.

And in among the masses, seemingly invisible to those teeming around them, the bloody spectres of Feng's dead brothers watched him still.

He swung his other leg over his bike's saddle and locked the kickstand, looking for somebody to address. The tribal warriors around him came no closer, but did not back down. The dawn appearance of a figure that until then had only been half-believed legend was enough to test the reactions of the most stoic people, yet it was clear that they would not hesitate to attack him if he so much as reached for his dao. They had a fighting spirit worthy of Chogoris, that much was true.

Thankfully, not quite all the Ukit seemed intent on assaulting Feng. There was a bastion of order amidst the sea of confrontation. A dozen big, broad men carrying antique laslocks and clad in red-dyed leather plates and cap-helmets had formed an avenue outside a particularly large yurut, sited near the centre of the encampment. As Feng approached a family emerged from the yurut's entrance flap. They were led by an elder and a father, followed by a gaggle of wives and offspring, all clad in the hastily donned finery of tribal leaders. They were unmarked, as the Chogorian saying went – the Darkand natives had never adopted the ritual scarification culture of Mundus Planus. The flattery of

impersonation, it seemed, only ran so far.

Feng halted before them, towering over the whole family. The elder snapped orders to one of the red-armoured guards flanking the yurut's entrance. The man raised his laslock and discharged it into the dust-shrouded air. The sudden shock of the snap-crack report finally brought a degree of calm to the wider assembly.

'Hetman,' Feng said to the elder, inclining his head slightly. The sound of his voice had as much of an effect as the las-shot. A hush fell, all eyes fixed on the impromptu meeting.

'Great khan of the skies,' the elder said in the heavily bastardised Chogorian spoken by the steppe peoples of Darkand. 'I am Tach-Tachii, of the Swifthorse, Master of the Ukit. This is my family, and these are my people. We humble ourselves before your long-awaited coming.'

At the elder's words his family bowed. Taking the cue, the rest of the tribe, from Tach-Tachii's guards to those peering over the heads of their kin from the back, knelt. Even before the last had got down, Feng was motioning for them to rise.

'You need not bow, children of the Swifthorse,' he said. 'There is neither time nor reason. A terrible foe is coming here to destroy you all, and you must make haste if you are to escape it.'

'You have come back early,' Tach-Tachii said, still on his knees, apparently oblivious to what Feng had just said. 'Sky Steed bless my soul, I did not think I would live long enough to see the day spoken of by my forefathers.'

'I am here with a hundred brothers,' Feng went on. 'We have come this Furnace Season not for the trials, but for war. You and all your people must go to the slope-city of Heavenfall immediately.'

The White Scar's words finally registered. The elder's joyful expression became overcast.

'The city of the off-worlders? But we have not long returned from there. The Golden Season has passed. If we do not make for the far snows, we will all perish from firethroat.'

'You will all perish if you make for the snows,' Feng said, not bothering to hide his rising frustration. 'There are monsters coming here, inhuman hunters from beyond the veil of stars. They will consume every man, woman and beast if you do not seek out shelter in the slope-city.'

Feng could see confusion and uncertainty still writ large across the elder's face.

'Yaksha,' the White Scar said, raising a fist skywards to emphasise his point. *Daemon*. An inaccurate description, all things considered, but it had the desired

effect. The assembled crowd gasped, and a child began to cry.

‘They will tear you all apart,’ Feng pressed on. ‘We are not enough to protect you all here on the steppes, but in Heavenfall you shall be safe. We will preserve you there. We ride to all the tribes of Darkand this day, warning them to go to the slope-city with all speed. The monsters from the void may be here tomorrow, if not then the day after.’

‘Sky fathers preserve us,’ Tach-Tachii said quietly. ‘If you advise it, then we shall make haste, great hetman.’

‘Take the shortest path to the city,’ Feng said. ‘Carry on through the night. If you stop, none of you will make it. My brothers will be waiting for you at the end. They will protect you.’

‘We shall protect ourselves,’ Tach-Tachii said, his steppe pride overcoming his awe at the Sky Warrior’s presence. ‘You will not find us wanting, great hetman.’

‘I must ride on. There is another tribe I must warn, the Beged. Do you know if they are near?’

At the Beged’s mention Tach-Tachii’s expression soured. Feng had expected nothing less – the tribes of Darkand had little love for one another.

‘I cannot know for certain, but at this time in the cycle of seasons it is likely they will have reached the spring at the Gates of Eternity. You know of it, Sky Warrior?’

‘I know it,’ Feng said darkly. He did not need the briefing docket to recall the site of the brotherhood’s clash with the drukhari, a decade earlier. ‘Now go, all of you, with the speed of the western winds. We shall meet again at Heavenfall.’

### **The steppes, Darkand**

Timchet and Hagai received new orders as they turned north from the encampment of the Tan’chi, spread across the bottom of the Gorskin Valley.

*‘Brother Chyen’s vitae link has gone offline,’* Steedmaster Gadi reported over the vox. *‘You are the closest to his last point of contact, wind-brothers. The coordinates have been uploaded to your tactical feeds.’*

‘Affirmative,’ Hagai said, triangulating the new objective. ‘Sector six-six. Out towards the Hachi Peninsula.’

*‘Correct. Be cautious, Wind Tamer.’*

The Land Speeder shot across the plains, hugging the lie of the land, its passage whipping up a cloud of dust in its wake. They’d already warned two steppe tribes, the Oyega and the Tan’chi, urging them to turn back along the trails towards the slope-city, before hell descended from the heavens to consume them.

They still had one more tribe, the Gorik, to reach before sunset. Chyen's disappearance was a complication, but one the wind-brothers would treat as a challenge.

'Knowing Chyen, he probably got in a fight with some dune bandits,' Timchet said as they dropped towards the Hachi Peninsula, an area of low-lying land that gave way to the bitter waters of the Sea of Tears. The sea was on the edge of Darkand's habitable continent, where the rad-wastes and dust bowls, scorched by the Furnace Season's full might, made living impossible for the steppe tribes. The nomadic peoples of Darkand confined themselves to the more northerly grasslands for most of the planet's seasons, and the poles when the heat of Fury's Pillar became too much. Chyen had been straying dangerously close to the dust wastes.

'Last known coordinates coming up,' Hagai said as *Wind Tamer* dropped over a rise. The Sea of Tears lay before them, a glittering horizon of cold blue, contrasting sharply with the arid expanse between them and the craggy shoreline. Hagai banked right while Timchet maintained visual scanning, gauntlets resting on the pintle of his sponson heavy bolter.

'He must be close,' Hagai said, checking his instruments. 'We're practically on top of his last reported location.'

'The shifting dust will have hidden his tracks,' Timchet observed, then twisted in his harness as something caught his attention. 'Wait... There.'

The earth racing past below had been uniformly cracked and ochre, but there was a blemish three or four hundred yards off to their left. Hagai too had noticed it – a twist of the Land Speeder's control stick brought the skimmer round and cut its speed, so that it came to hover close to Timchet's discovery.

Part of the ground had given way. A hole about forty yards long and twenty yards wide had appeared, and as *Wind Tamer* slowed to a hover the gap widened further, the edges crumbling in.

'The earth here is weak,' Timchet said. 'Is it some sort of sink hole?'

'The soil is different,' Hagai said, highlighting a section on their linked pilot display. 'Look at the discoloration.'

Timchet realised his wind-brother was correct. There was a scar of lighter earth running from left to right, seemingly for over a half a mile either side of them.

'Darkand's surface is unstable,' Hagai said. 'Especially in the zones more heavily affected by the rad-heat during the Furnace Season.'

'It could be some sort of subterranean tunnel or gorge,' Timchet suggested. 'Chyen could be down there.'

‘There’s only one way to be sure.’

*Wind Tamer* descended steadily into the darkness of the sink, careful to avoid the jagged walls around them. The Land Speeder’s stab lumens confirmed Timchet’s hypothesis. The surface soil was just a crust, a bone-dry layering concealing a hidden gorge. At the bottom of it they found Chyen.

The biker had fallen through, the great weight of his power armour and steed breaking the crust before he’d realised what was happening. If the fall hadn’t killed him, the reptors had. The hissing of the vicious lizards was audible even over the sound of the *Wind Tamer*’s engines. The buried gorge was their nest, and the fact that so little remained of Chyen’s bloody corpse was testament to their savagery and strength. They skittered along the stone flanks of the gorge, snapping their vicious maws at the interloper in their midst.

‘Gene-seed lost,’ Hagai surmised as he focused a lumen on Chyen and his shattered bike. ‘Equipment unsalvageable. We must go, before we share his fate.’ His words were underlined by the reptor hissing, and the thud of the auto feed for Timchet’s heavy bolter. It looked as though the nearest lizards were about to leap.

*Wind Tamer* climbed up out of the hidden gorge and into the burning light of Darkand’s merciless sun. Hagai turned them left, towards the route being taken by Chyen before his death. There was a tribe still to be warned, the Jebig. Timchet opened a link to Steedmaster Gadi to report Chyen’s loss.

‘He underestimated this place,’ Hagai said darkly as Timchet waited for the steedmaster’s response. ‘Let us hope he is the last of our brotherhood to do so.’

### **The scriptorium, Heavenfall**

The outriders were beginning to return. Joghaten received the news in a transcription chamber located in the draughty halls of a scriptorium perched high up on the mountainside, near the upper edge of the temple district. He and Qui’sin had chosen the gothic stone structure as their initial base of operations in the city. It was near enough to the primary vox-hub and the Pinnacle’s centrum dominus to ensure direct communication, while being sufficiently removed to afford a degree of security. Joghaten had deployed Delbeg and the brotherhood’s First Tactical Squad in and around the building’s immediate vicinity, with orders that no one was to be allowed in.

Timchet and Hagai, the pilots of the Land Speeder *Wind Tamer*, were the first of the outriders to make it back to Heavenfall. The two White Scars had put aside their seemingly endless critiques of each other’s poetry and their discourse

over the best *chinyua* vintages for long enough to reach four Darkand tribes before the second dawn since planetfall. Three long, winding caravans were now approaching the Founding Wall, hastened by dire warnings of the predators that stalked the stars. Timchet and Hagai had also located brother Chyen of the Second Bike Squadron, who'd run foul of Darkand's natural dangers and fallen to his death through the crust of a dust-concealed canyon. The warning the two wind-brothers bore had been circulated to the rest of the brotherhood – Darkand was not Chogoris, and even the most experienced White Scars ignored its dangers at their own peril.

Others had started to return now as well. Bleda and most of his hunt-brothers, Khuchar and Omni, Jelmar of the Khitan. The brotherhood's Stormhawks and Stormtalons had also arrived back with the early dawn, like berkut to their mountain nests, refuelling on Heavenfall's skyshield landing plates high up the slope. Their pilots brought with them reports of being able to see dozens of steppe tribes turning back to Heavenfall from across the plains. It seemed the terror and awe the people of Darkand reserved for the Sky Warriors was sufficient to break their migratory cycles and overcome their dislike of the slope-city and its inhabitants.

'Not all will make it,' Qui'sin said, looking down at the maps spread before the two White Scars. They were standing over a wide secondary workbench near the centre of the scriptorium's transcription chamber. It had been cleared of heavy leather tomes and the data-slates they were being transferred onto, and replaced by a spread of cartographic sheets and zonal charts. Joghaten had requisitioned them from the commander of the Darkand Pinnacle Guard, an overweight, pugnacious off-worlder who seemed far out of his depth.

'Is that a prophecy or an opinion, weathermaker?' Joghaten asked. He'd been brusque ever since leaving the company of Commander Harren. Qui'sin did not begrudge him his mood. The idea that xenos taint may already have infiltrated the city – indeed, may have been lurking right before their very eyes – vexed them both. Joghaten was a hunting hawk that had caught its prey's presence, and yet remained hooded and tethered.

'It is an opinion,' Qui'sin clarified. 'The bartering of the Golden Season has just finished and the tribes are laden with goods. Their progress will be slow. Even if they can be convinced to abandon what they are carrying and make all haste, those farthest out will take at least three days to reach the Founding Wall.'

'Then we must slow the xenos down,' Joghaten said. 'Protect the convoys as they come in.'

‘We will be stretched thin,’ Qui’sin warned, gesturing at the maps. ‘The migratory routes are far from our base of operations, and I assume we will be without fleet support.’

‘It depends how the Devourer chooses to attack us,’ Joghaten replied. The words started to come more readily, the surly edge lost as his mind turned to the art of war, a practice that had been denied to him for long months.

‘The strongest hive fleets are unafraid to strike directly at the heart of a world’s defence. But going off our analysis Cicatrix is not strong, not yet. It is unlikely to be able to rain bioforms down on our heads here. Protocol suggests it will seed the swarms far out, in the areas of least resistance, where they are safe. Only once they’ve gathered their initial strength will they strike. That should give us a few more hours.’

‘A few, but not enough,’ Qui’sin mused. ‘You know as well as I how fast the swarms move when they have the scent and are coordinated by the hive mind.’

‘So we shall contest their planetfall,’ Joghaten went on with a tight, hungry smile. ‘As soon as we’re able to triangulate the landing sites of the first swarms we will ride from Heavenfall and strike while they are still scattered and uncoordinated. Collect their leader-beast’s heads. First blood for the Khagan. That will give us more time and bleed their numbers before the main swarm can gather.’

‘You have been waiting for this, khan-commander, haven’t you?’ Qui’sin said, shaking his head and matching Joghaten’s smile with a wry one of his own. ‘If we catch them on the plains, scattered to deal with their multiple seedings, we run the risk of being caught and overwhelmed when the swarms start to converge. It is a high-risk strategy.’

‘The best kind of strategy,’ Joghaten corrected, a note of relish now colouring his voice. Despite his best efforts, Qui’sin felt himself getting caught up in Joghaten’s bloody enthusiasm. It had been too long since he had seen the khan with fire in his words and killer’s steel in his eyes.

‘It may give Heavenfall’s populace longer for the evacuation into the catacombs,’ the Stormseer allowed, tapping one of the subterranean charts. ‘But it will take discipline and timing if we are not to be swept away by the rising tide.’

‘The Khagan watches over us,’ Joghaten said, with the dismissive flair that had seen some question his suitability for khan-commander. Qui’sin knew better – he had learned that such an apparently arrogant statement was more a reflection of his faith in the primarch than a dismissal of potential difficulties. Beneath

Joghaten's obvious hunger for a challenge was the shrewd and calculating mind of a true and seasoned steppe hetman. For all the apparent new-found fire, Qui'sin knew the plan settled on by the Master of Blades would be sound in concept and effective in execution.

'What of the tribal exodus into Heavenfall?' Joghaten went on, pulling a street plan of the city's upper slope districts to the top of the pile. 'You have spoken with the ministers leading the operation to move the city-dwellers below ground?'

'I have,' Qui'sin said. 'They reek of uncertainty and confusion. The movement of people into the underground zones is slow. Right now there are still tens of thousands who have not left their dwellings, mostly in the poorer hab blocks at the bottom of the slope. The shift from the Old Town is progressing at a quicker pace, but the priesthood of the Emperor's Voice that controls the temple district is refusing to abandon their devotariums. Thank the Khagan most of the citizens had already begun moving before we arrived, otherwise I doubt many of them would be below ground before the xenos made planetfall. As it stands, I expect around three-quarters of the city populace will be secure within the next twenty-four Terran hours. Of the remainder, we will assist the Pinnacle Guard in relocating as many as possible. They at least have worked hard to assist the shift underground.'

'And what about the tribespeople when they reach Heavenfall?'

'The ministers were resistant to even allowing them within the Founding Wall, let alone giving them access to the evacuation catacombs.'

'If they are not allowed below ground they will perish when the Furnace Season reaches its peak. I trust you made it clear they are to be admitted into the relocation zones, weathermaker?'

'Of course. Whether there will be sufficient room for them all is another matter though. If the xenos draw their invasion out they will all perish.'

'The invasion will not last long, one way or another,' Joghaten said. 'This hive splinter is weak and desperate for fodder. It must feed as quickly as possible, and it cannot do that until the surface has been fully seeded. They will seek to overwhelm us as soon as the swarms have gathered. We must be ready for them.'

'The Pinnacle Guard units not assisting the relocation of the citizens into the catacombs are assembling along the Founding Wall,' Qui'sin continued. 'I am reviewing their First Regiment soon, but I doubt many will be properly prepared for what is coming.'

'We will do what we can to bolster them. I will inspect the defences along the

Founding Wall before sunfall.’ Joghaten leaned in closer to his Stormseer across the table, the heavy frame creaking. ‘And what of the taint, weathermaker? Have you sensed anything more?’

‘It is still impossible to say. The xenos is cunning. It hides its trail well. I still believe the government district is the root of the potential infestation, but if we seek to purge it we will derail the entire catacomb relocation operation at a crucial time. I mentally probed several of the ministers, cautiously. I am confident at least some are uncorrupted, and the operations they are overseeing are proceeding as quickly as can be expected.’

‘They have us in a dangerous position,’ Joghaten muttered. ‘If we trigger any potential uprising now it will be beyond our current capabilities to suppress, but the longer we allow them to fester the more powerful they will become. They must not be allowed to strike when they are fully prepared. We need more information, swiftly. If the corruption runs deeper than we suppose it could turn into a massacre.’

‘I agree,’ said Qui’sin. ‘They may already be in the catacombs, but beyond providing extra internal defences there is little we can do for the time being. Our focus should be on the relocation of both the city’s populace and the steppe tribespeople.’

‘We must be ready, all the same. The xenos may strike from anywhere.’

Qui’sin inclined his head. What Joghaten said was true. He could practically sense the taint, even here. It was like a scratching in his mind, scraping against the inside of his skull, more bothersome and insistent than the numbing horror generated by the impending hive fleet. Something was festering in Heavenfall.

‘I will dedicate two tactical squads to the city’s inner defence,’ Joghaten continued. ‘They will assist in the city’s preparations, at least until the xenos make planetfall.’

‘I understand,’ Qui’sin said. Joghaten didn’t respond. His eyes had become distant, and his hand had gone up to his vox earpiece. After a moment he nodded, and looked again at Qui’sin.

‘You must hurry, weathermaker. Tzu Shen reports that the Great Devourer has just attained high orbit.’

### **High orbit, Darkand**

The *Pride of Chogoris* hung like a dart above Darkand, flanked by its escorts as it awaited its commander’s orders. Shen leant forwards in his throne mount, hands clutching the yellowing ork skulls that constituted its sides. His head

twitched back and forth sightlessly, as it was prone to do when his neural nodes came close to information overload.

‘The rest of the fleet is standing by, voyagemaster,’ a vox zart reported over the link. Shen didn’t respond. He already knew. He had seen the confirmation runes flash in his mind’s eye, and knew that his escorts were ready on either side. All waited on his word. And he waited on the xenos. The timing had to be perfect.

‘Boost the sensorium magnification,’ he ordered. ‘Apply focus on sector two-eight.’

The serf crew hurried to comply, focusing the *Pride*’s primary augur spike and external pict-feeds on the designated area of voidspace. Shen saw, through his ship’s eyes, the images channelled directly to his brain via the cortical plugs and the data links that studded his flesh.

Hive fleet Cicatrix was close. Its horror filled the viewscreens and oculus stands, and flooded the pict images. A sea of a thousand bio-ships, from minnows barely larger than a Space Marine Thunderhawk to a trio of leviathans that dwarfed the largest Imperial Navy battleship. They were closing on Darkand in a broad spread, the smaller scout vessels on the flanks of the swarm edging ahead so that their forward crescent moved to engulf the planet’s upper hemisphere.

In the decades since he had last witnessed the Great Devourer, Shen had not forgotten the strange, alien majesty that best described its movements. The entire fleet made its final approach to Darkand with a level of coordination and grace that would have been far beyond the clumsy efforts of even the most experienced human admiral. In his four centuries Shen had witnessed the reaper pirates of the eldar off Gorisel Prime, the well-drilled slaver fleets of the Sheltiel at Drusus and the grand armada of the renegade Lord Praxis, but he had never seen any gathering of ships, human or xenos, deploy with the coordinated surety of the tyranids. It was just another example of how wholly unnatural they were, a signifier of the single, terrible consciousness that controlled each and every one of them. It made Shen hate them even more.

‘Hold the scan,’ he ordered. The images channelled into his thoughts froze, locked on the sector he had picked out. He reviewed them for a moment, speeding through each still with an accuracy only a transhuman mind could enjoy.

There it was. Near the vanguard, innocuous but for the protection it was being afforded by a thick screen of drone vessels. The narvhal. It was small, smaller even than the drones clustered around it, plated as they were in heavy sheets of

scarred chitin. It was both unarmed and unarmoured, a slip of pallid void flesh, remarkable only inasmuch as it bore a thick cluster of spines across its slender bow. Those spines seemed to twitch and shudder as Shen replayed the captured image, as though aware of his scrutiny.

‘Gunnery, I have a firing solution,’ Shen said into his vox. There was no time to waste. He thought-pulsed the coordinates to the gunnery section, who passed the sector provided on to the bombardment cannon’s control deck.

‘You may fire when ready,’ Shen said to gunnery. The swarm was drawing close, almost too close. They were reaching the critical engagement threshold. A few minutes more and they would trigger a direct response from the xenos vanguard. Shen could sense the *Pride*’s burning desire to engage. Or perhaps he was simply confusing its ancient spirit with his own. Hatred for the xenos coursed through him, causing his secondary heart to kick in and launching his transhuman physiology’s potent mix of chemicals and hormones.

‘*Breach voided and charge ready, voyagemaster,*’ crackled the voice of the chief gunnery zart in Shen’s ear. A few seconds later and he felt his throne mount shudder. The sound of the *Pride*’s mighty bombardment cannon was lost in the vacuum of space, but the whole vessel felt its discharge.

Shen unpaused the sensorium images, features twitching involuntarily as he took in every scrap of information the *Pride* could give him. Long seconds passed. Then, finally, there was a flash. A section of void space amongst the leading edge of the swarm ignited for a heartbeat, a single, silent white burst that heralded the detonation of the bombardment cannon’s vast shell. It had hit the knot of bio-ships clustered around the narvhal. Shen saw immediately that the shot, made at extreme range, had failed to penetrate the protective shield provided by the outer ships. One of the vanguard bioforms fell away, its shell split and shattered, spinning slowly out of the perfect formation adopted by the rest of the swarm. Another slipped in to take its place, the ponderous advance unfaltering. On the formation’s flanks smaller, faster drones started to draw inwards, moving towards the White Scars ships on a clear attack course. The narvhal remained untouched.

It didn’t matter – the shot’s purpose had been fulfilled. The narvhal, though physically innocuous, was one of the most vital ships in any hive fleet. Tyranids were incapable of warp travel; however, the monofilament spines of the narvhal allowed it to harness the gravity of a target system to create a corridor of space-void compression. The xenos could travel faster through such a corridor, compensating for their inability to traverse vast distances via the warp. Striking a

blow against it was a statement of intent. Shen was showing that he knew these xenos, and now they knew him.

The time had come. The vanguard ships had launched spores, trailing, membranous things that could splash ships with virulent acids – or worse – on impact. It was time to disengage, while they still could.

‘Transmission to the rest of the fleet,’ Shen voxed to the communication pits sited around his throne mount. ‘Enter stage two. Commence full orbital withdrawal, mark three-four. There is to be no speed or propulsion variation. Maintain tight control, and keep the formation.’

He knew his secondary directives were unnecessary given the experience of his escort commanders, but such orders came from habit. Close disengagement from an enemy as dangerous as the tyranids was one of the most fraught manoeuvres a captain could order.

The White Scars fleet turned its back on Hive Fleet Cicatrix and pulled up out of the exosphere, weighing stasis-anchor and leaving Darkand behind. Shen switched his views to the aft pict-feeds and augurs, watching the glittering alien swarm receding behind him. The xenos fleet did not shift its angle. They would not pursue. Instead, they continued to fall upon Darkand, a shroud of alien flesh that tightened around the world’s upper curve. Shen thought of the planet, of its tribespeople, and of his own hunt-brothers, scattered across the surface of its only stable continent.

He would return for them, he swore. He would return, and the xenos would burn.

### **Tashagari Barracks, Heavenfall**

Qui’sin entered the barrack complex with the türüch of the two tactical squads detailed to assisting the city’s preparations, Jeddah and Zabeg. The parade square at the blocky building’s heart resounded with the crash of thousands of combat boots as the regiment assembled on the warm flagstones came to attention. Qui’sin halted, Kemich perched and hooded on his outstretched gauntlet, as a gaggle of men in brocaded officers’ uniforms approached.

‘Lord, we are honoured by your presence,’ said the foremost, a shaven-headed man with the tanned, hardened look of the steppes about him. He bowed low, an affectation that was hurriedly mirrored by the subalterns at his back.

‘I am Colonel Uygur Tchek, officer in command of the First regiment, Pinnacle Guard,’ the man went on, straightening. ‘My men are present and ready for inspection, great hetman.’

‘Very good, colonel. I am Qui’sin, Stormseer and White Scar, attached to the Fourth Brotherhood. Your men honour me with their readiness.’

Such humility from the white-armoured giant clearly caught the humans by surprise. Uygur blinked and bowed again hurriedly.

‘The honour is all ours, great hetman. We await your inspection.’

Qui’sin smiled inwardly as he reached up to unhood Kemich. Too often the Adeptus Astartes allowed their obvious superiority to breed fear and intimidation among those who would be their allies. He had no doubt Joghaten would have simply brushed by the pleasantries with Uygur and conducted a brisk review of his men, likely followed by some speech about gathering xenos skulls that was ill-suited to soldiers who had never fired their weapons in anger. That was the key difference between Qui’sin and Joghaten, despite the latter’s greater age and experience: as a seer who read men’s minds every day, Qui’sin appreciated tact.

The hood slipped from Kemich and, with a cry, the psyber-hawk took wing. Qui’sin could sense the mental effort required by the soldiers around him to continue facing front and not follow the berkut’s flight as it slipped into the hot thermals above the city, circling slowly.

‘Carry on, colonel,’ Qui’sin said, allowing Uygur to lead him to the first company, ranked two deep along the barracks’ armoury wall. The Space Marines checked their stride to match that of their human counterparts, Qui’sin’s gaze falling on Heavenfall’s defenders. They were clad in black fatigues and ochre flak-plate, their lascarbines slung across their chests. Their equipment was uniformly well maintained, but likewise bore the marks of fresh issue – machine stamps unblemished by repeated cleanings, megathule nodes and power packs clips clearly not worn by intensive use. Nor did the faces of the soldiers imply any degree of experience. They were young, the vast majority of them bearing the lighter skin tone and greater height of Heavenfall natives, as opposed to the swarthy, stocky pedigree of the steppes. None seemed to have been visibly marked by combat.

Such observations came easily to all three Spaces Marines as their great shadows passed along the silent ranks. Even more apparent to Qui’sin, however, were the emotional echoes reverberating from the close-packed mortal soldiers. They were amplified by Kemich, the psyber-hawk’s keen senses probing the thoughts far below as it soared through Darkand’s cloudless skies. Qui’sin let the invisible psychic manifestations wash over him as he went down the line, filtering through the strongest reactions.

The overriding imperative was fear. It was present on two levels – immediate

fear at the sight of the three White Scars and their silent appraisal, and a deeper-seated terror of the events that had befallen their home world over the last day. They had heard rumours, it was clear, about what was coming. Their imaginations were burdened with the most terrible ideas they could conceive of. Even their darkest guesses didn't come close to the true horror that Qui'sin knew was approaching. When the tyranids arrived he feared few of these boys would stand.

There was hope as well, though, hope inspired by the sight of the towering White Scars. That was the key, Qui'sin knew. It was the shard of hope he had to grasp and craft into a weapon that could yet be used to hold back the coming darkness.

The Stormseer completed his tour and took post at the centre of the parade ground, arm outstretched for Kemich. The great raptor swooped back down to alight on his gauntlet with unerring precision, ruffling its golden feathers, and let out a cry that echoed shrilly around the sweltering, sun-baked enclosure.

Qui'sin spoke.

'Soldiers of the Emperor, defenders of Darkand, heroes of the Imperium. Hear my words, and heed them, for I speak the Emperor's truth. In a matter of days you will face two terrible trials at once – the height of the Furnace Season, and a xenos invasion the likes of which none of you have ever seen, or likely will ever see again. The former is a hardship you will be forced to endure, but it will be of little concern when weighed against the ravenous, alien hunger that is approaching. You have heard stories, I am sure. Perhaps you have even been briefed in full. I am here to tell you that everything you have been told so far is as nothing compared to the true terror of the tyranids.'

The ranks before Qui'sin remained unmoving, sweating into their flak-plate and fatigues, but the Stormseer could sense their fear spiking. He went on.

'They are monsters bred for one single purpose – to wipe us out. Not only us, but life itself. They would leave our galaxy a graveyard of a billion barren, dead worlds. We are a morsel to them, a single stalk of grass before the reaper's scythe. And when I say these words, I truly mean "we".'

He paused for a moment, allowing the suggestion to settle in the minds of the humans.

'I am a Stormseer of the White Scars,' he reiterated. 'An adept of the Lightning Tower. The elements themselves obey my command. I commune with ancient powers, and read the hearts and minds of men. I know that you, Lieutenant Senga–' he gestured at one of the Pinnacle Guard officers, who broke his eyes-

forward stance in shock ‘–are worried about your sister, due to give birth any time now. I know that you, Trooper Chakta–’ his gaze swept round to meet that of another wide-eyed soldier ‘–regret lying about your age to enlist. I know also that your commander, Colonel Uygar, is an honest man and a brave officer, and that you respect him greatly. All this I know, and even more have I seen. I have battled yaksha and greenskins and vile heretics, from the open steppes to the void between the stars. I have even faced the Great Devourer before, and defeated it.’

He paused once more. The clack of Kemich’s beak echoed over the flagstones. She was hungry. Qui’sin went on.

‘I know your thoughts. You think I am something akin to a god, a saviour, though a fearful one at that. But I am a warrior-servant as much as the rest of you, a bondsman for the Great Khan and the Emperor. Were I to face the tyranids alone, I would die. I could not stem their ravenous tide for a moment. Nor could the two warriors behind me, my brothers in a hundred wars. Nor even could our entire brotherhood, a hundred such champions of Chogoris, who have torn down alien empires and slain false gods. When the Great Devourer comes, in a day or two, every Space Marine on this world will die. Without you.’

Qui’sin didn’t need his abilities to sense the shock that rippled through the assembled ranks.

‘The Adeptus Astartes are the greatest warriors the galaxy has ever known,’ he continued. ‘Yet without the unaugmented men and women in the ranks I see standing here, humanity would long ago have been hounded to extinction. Mankind is borne up not on the shoulders of genetically enhanced warriors like myself, but on the bent backs of those who volunteer to do as you have done, to defend your homes and your families from creatures with no concept of mercy. None of you have ever encountered xenos before, let alone a species as supremely deadly as those that approach, yet when you do I know that you will stand your ground, and you will kill, as a billion others have done before you. So, look to your leaders, to men like Colonel Uygar and Lieutenant Senga. They will stand with you, and you must stand with them. Chakta, no matter what comes at you, remember your fire drills, and stay with the man to your left and your right. The enemy is a terrible one to face, but soldiers just like you have defeated them a thousand times before. And when it is all over, and the last filthy alien is purged from the surface of this world, we shall still stand side by side, as true battle-brothers. For the Khagan and the Emperor. For Chogoris and Darkand.’

Qui'sin finished. Silence settled across the square, before the three White Scars turned and departed. As they reached the square's gateway, someone began to cheer. Within seconds the sound had been taken up on all four sides, ringing out through the hot Darkand air. As they passed through the gateway, Jeddah triggered his helm's internal vox-link, addressing his two brothers privately.

'Do you think they are ready?' he asked.

Qui'sin responded without hesitating.

'No.'

### **The Mountain Gateway, Heavenfall**

The Founding Wall. According to legend, the first colonists had constructed an earthen rampart to protect the settlement that would become Heavenfall from the predations of the steppe canids and reptors that hunted the plains. Three thousand years on and earth had become rockcrete and plasteel. The wall ran from the pinnacle of Heavenfall's mountain down to the open steppe, encircling the slope-city in a ring of bastions and weapons turrets. Its reinforced parapets stood forty feet high, its sloping outer flanks snared with continuous coils of razor-wire and fixed caltrops. In all, it stretched for over twenty-five miles.

Joghaten was unimpressed. He stood atop the main gatehouse at the end of the Slope Road, the primary thoroughfare running between Heavenfall's government and temple districts. Beside him was the brotherhood's Techmarine, Khödö, and the city's Wallmaster, an officious and sallow-faced Heavenfall native named Gorri. A gaggle of gown-clad flunkies hung further back, taking stilo-notes on their data-slates and trying not to stare at the Space Marines. To their backs the slope-city rose, tier upon tier of red-tiled hab blocks, yellow stone collectives and cliff dwellings, clustering up towards the mountain's jagged peak. Before them, beyond the edge of the wall's black parapets, the steppe stretched, an undulating patchwork cast in shades of red and gold by the evening sun.

The khan looked from the city to the open plains, and was displeased. He'd spent hours since the centrum dominus briefing on a tour of stretches of the wall. Now the sun was lowering towards the steppe horizon, the red flare of Fury's Pillar glowing like a fiery lance, and the master of the Fourth Brotherhood was less confident of Heavenfall's defences than he had been when he had started.

'The Founding Wall has preserved us for three thousand years,' Gorri was saying, his dull voice caught somewhere between fear at the Space Marine's displeasure and anger at the fact that his ancient, august post was being called into question.

‘And how many times has the wall been attacked in those three millennia?’ Joghaten asked. Gorri dared let a frown cross his face.

‘Thrice, lord. In 891.M41. the hetman of the Bozari led a great uprising in which—’

‘How many times has the wall been subjected to an attack by xenos invaders?’ Joghaten snapped. ‘You are being wilfully dismissive of the weaknesses in your city’s defences. The artillery redoubts are understocked and the forward bastions are ill-maintained. The parapets between sectors five and eighteen are half-eroded. Resupplying protocols from the rear sections are inefficient, and the stockpiles you have ready will not be enough to last through more than three hours of full contact. The city will fall before the end of the first day.’

‘We have had no time—’ Gorri began to say, but Joghaten cut him off.

‘My Techmarine, Brother Khödö, will assume responsibility for preparations over the next day. He will reroute your supply runs and bring forward fresh stockpiles. I will have a new tactical layout downloaded to Pinnacle Guard protocol logs by tomorrow morning, outlining withdrawal zones and hold points. The White Scars will make this place defensible, wallmaster, and you shall defer to us in all things.’

‘As my lord wishes,’ Gorri said, his voice strained.

‘I will also be contacting city suppliers about bringing food stockpiles from the catacombs to the outer habitation areas, just within the wall. The victuals you have there are insufficient for supporting the nomad tribes, even for a few days.’

‘Nomad tribes, lord?’ Gorri said, his expression growing even darker. ‘They will not be a burden on us, I assure you. They remain beyond the wall.’

There was a moment of silence before Joghaten responded.

‘And you imagine they will be left there, to be slaughtered when the xenos make planetfall? Why do you think my brotherhood have come to this world? Heavenfall means little to the Imperium, but the tribes of these steppes are of our blood. I would sooner sacrifice the city than see them wiped out.’

‘This is unheard of,’ Gorri spluttered, grasping the edges of his gown sleeves in distress. ‘The Wall has separated us from them since it was first built. To allow the tribes to migrate within en masse... There will be riots! We cannot hope to house them all in the catacombs once the Furnace Season reaches its peak. We will be fortunate if they do not attack us as soon as they pass through this very gate! The stench of them alone would turn your stomach, great hetman!’

‘The tribes have not sought to overthrow this city for centuries,’ Joghaten answered, struggling to keep his tone in check. ‘Any that disrupt it or take up

arms against those already living here will face my wrath.'

'And what of the problems of supplying them? Of overcrowding?'

'The xenos invasion, when it comes, will be like a summer storm – swift and terrible. One way or another, it will have passed in a few days. We shall do what we can until then. The tyranids are no more able to resist the height of the Furnace Season than we are.'

Gorri turned to his aides, seeking even the slightest hint of support, but they all fixed their eyes on their data-slates. Eventually the wallmaster bowed towards Joghaten and Khödö, his face red.

'I await your instructions, great hetman,' he said.

'Khödö,' Joghaten said, turning towards his red-armoured brother.

'We will begin with the outer bastions,' the Techmarine said to Gorri. 'My servo-skull's scanning has identified an unacceptable degree of weakness in section aleph-nineteen. Bring three of your work details with all possible speed.'

Joghaten remained on the gatehouse as the others departed to their work. His gaze lingered on the steppes beyond the wall, bathed in the red of the dying sun. As much as he denied it, they reminded him of home. How many times had he watched a similar sunset – certainly more glorious, but related all the same – from the great towers of the Quan Zhou? Soon, he knew, the rolling red-and-gold plains before him would be a black morass of xenos bioforms, defiled with organic capillary towers and digestion pools. The thought alone made his fists clench around the hilts of his twin tulwars.

Qui'sin's vision had been clear enough. Stop the Great Devourer here, or the same fate would befall Chogoris.

### **Near the Gates of Eternity, Darkand**

Darkness was falling. Feng carried on. He was out on the plains, somewhere south of the Gates of Eternity. His armour had logged their location – it remembered the coordinates from before. Nothing about Feng had been able to forget what had befallen the brotherhood in the battle around those ancient rocks. It was only natural that he should find himself drawn back. He had no doubt his fallen brothers would be waiting for him.

His auspex was picking up traces, lonely and isolated, but there all the same. The Gates, listed on his visor's cartographic display, were now less than five miles distant. The Beged had to be close.

The steedmaster had travelled on from the Ukit encampment, riding further out into the plains. He knew he should turn back. The plains were not to be

underestimated, especially at night. Packs of steppe canids, dirt-dwelling rector carnivores, treacherous *karst* uplands with rockfalls and sinkholes, and *fech-fech* sands that could drag a Space Marine bike down with ease. The constantly updating route mapped out on his display took him first westwards and then north, curving back round along the edge of an expanse of jagged canyons and rocks that disturbed the plain's gently undulating grass sea. It didn't take him further from Heavenfall – if anything, the detour brought him in an arc back round towards the slope-city – but it still meant he would be overdue.

His sense of urgency was heightened further when word came over the long-range vox from the khan, the clipped message transmitted to the entire brotherhood. Old Tzu Shen had yielded orbit to the xenos. Alien vanguard incursions upon the surface were now imminent, and were expected to be followed by a full-scale planetary invasion within the next six Terran hours.

Feng auto-acknowledged the message, but didn't respond. He stuck to the route map, gunning the engine. Overhead the coming dusk glittered, shot through by the thousand new stars that had recently appeared in Darkand's skies. The Great Devourer had come.

Feng's auspex, set between his two throttle grips beneath the bike's blast shield, pinged again. The returns were closer. The nearest hadn't stirred. The topographic lines scrolling alongside the sigil representing his bike indicated a ridge line ahead. It was vaguely visible in the gathering dark, a black rise edged with silver starlight, and the merest crimson hint of firelight. Feng nudged his speeding mount towards the auspex return sited just below the ridge's crest. The estimates put him less than a minute away from contact. He bared his teeth, and hunched low in the saddle.

Overhead, the new stars glittered.

Senari heard the beast before he saw it.

Tribal legend had spoken of the roar for centuries uncounted. Senari's own father's father had claimed that his brother had even seen it with his own eyes once when the Three Moons were aligned – two sickles and a full orb – and the New Stars had glimmered in-between. As a child Senari had spent long, cold nights watching the flock, wondering how he would react if he ever heard its howl or saw its monstrous form. Now that his time had come, fear rooted him to the spot.

The New Stars had returned. His father's father had spoken of six, but more than six had come tonight. Many, many more. There had been dark mutterings

among the tribesfolk, and the elders had shut themselves away with Colek in the seer's tent, while the aged shaman read the entrails. Many had gathered outside, waiting anxiously to hear whether the omens were benign, or presaged some other-worldly horror. Senari was not lucky enough to be among them. It was his duty to watch his father's flock, this night of all nights. He would have argued that since departing the slope-city he had shepherded the yats more nights than two of his five brothers, but he had seen the gleam in his father's eye. This was a night to obey, not wrangle.

So Senari had sat, hunched in his blanket, trying to coax the dry plains grass he'd uprooted into some semblance of a fire. Occasionally he would snatch glances up at the New Stars scattered across the firmament, glinting in the gathering dark. And that was why, of all the Begeg tribe, he heard the beast first.

The yats were distressed, their bleating and the clatter of their bells drifting across the ridge line. The distant grumble that had first made Senari stand and peer out into the gloom had built to a roar that seemed to vibrate through the entire world around him. He snatched the short spear he kept by the fire – its edge wicked enough to gut a steppe canid – and stared out into the gathering dark, tense with expectation.

And that was when he saw it. The beast. It was just an impression at first, a dart of movement out in the long shadows that were stretching and lengthening across the steppe. It swiftly grew though, resolving itself in the last of the day's red light as it tore towards him. It was fast, so impossibly fast. Attempting to flee never even occurred to him.

A god rode the beast. It was clad, like its mount, in thick plates of white, the dying light sliding like fresh blood across the broad, gleaming surfaces. The pair came straight at Senari, as though it had always been aware of his presence and was purposefully seeking him out. The yats panicked and broke, fleeing in a lowing stampede up and over the crest. Senari was too overwhelmed to even feel distress at the herd's flight. The terrible roaring of the beast filled his senses, setting his teeth chattering and vibrating through his bones. It was mounting the lower slope of the ridge, coming too fast to avoid. It was going to strike him. The gods had come for him, and his time among his tribe and his kinfolk was at an end.

Then, at the last moment, the beast turned. A deft jerk of the god's left wrist caused it to slew to one side, coming to a juddering halt just before its metal-plated snout struck Senari. Ash and embers flew as the meagre fire he'd been tending was scattered by the thing's armoured bulk. The god on its back set one

heavy boot down to steady itself, crunching amidst the remains of the fire. It was huge, its bulk combining with that of the metal beast to make Senari feel like a wide-eyed, shaking child.

The beast's roar had dropped to a deep, rumbling growl. It seemed to shudder and twitch beneath its rider, as though eager to race off once again. If the white-clad god felt any discomfort at its straining, it was impossible for Senari to tell – its face, if it had one, was concealed by a great helm, its crimson lenses locked on the shepherd. For a moment, he knew how the plains vole felt beneath the cruel, swift eyes of the hawk.

‘You are of the Beged?’

The giant's voice crackled and snapped up from its helm like great branches breaking in a storm. The words sounded stilted and ill-formed to Senari, but he understood them nonetheless. He managed to nod.

‘Show me the direction of your tribe,’ the god demanded. ‘How far?’

As he struggled to find an answer, movement caught his eye. He looked up, mouth agape, in time to see the impossible. The stars above were falling.

He counted maybe half a dozen. Half a dozen streaks of light, dashes against the deepening night sky. They darted across the firmament, left and right, falling individually towards the darkening expanse of the plains. The closest passed right overhead, a soundless flash of brilliance that caused Senari to turn, half stumbling as he sought to follow it with his eyes. It vanished somewhere over the far side of the ridge. After a few moments there was a distant boom.

The giant had seen it too. As Senari turned back to face it the god drew a massive, wicked glaive from a strap across its back. The shepherd cowered before the mighty weapon, but the giant showed no inclination to use it.

‘Your people are beyond the ridge?’ it demanded. ‘Where the falling star struck?’

Senari managed to nod. It was enough. The giant removed its boot from the ground and twisted its grip on its mount. The great beast roared furiously once more, and in the blink of an eye had shot away past Senari, carrying its inscrutable rider on up and over the ridge line.

A strange and sudden passion drove Senari after it. Choking and coughing on the dust kicked up by the beast's passing, he made it to the crest of the ridge. There he stood and stared, long after the night had swallowed up the giant, and its mount's roar had grown distant.

A part of him wondered whether he had dozed off beside the fire, and this was all some myth-spawned dream. But he knew it was not. The New Stars were

falling, and gods stalked the plains. The legends were true. Senari knew what he had seen this night.

A Sky Warrior.

‘Possible xenos vanguard contact, surface sector three-nineteen, one mile out. I will have its head soon.’

Feng sent the transmission as he reached the outskirts of the Beged encampment, double blink-clicking the icon on his visor display’s long-range uplink. There was no time to check for any response besides the auto log. The first Beged yuruts loomed up out of the darkness ahead, lit by the flames of torches and campfires. People were scattering, alerted by the throaty bellow of his bike at full throttle.

He tore into the encampment, jinking between fleeing tribesfolk, animal pens and lodge tents. The heart of the Beged encampment had been abandoned, and there was steam or smoke rising from the area a hundred yards to the right of the chieftain’s yurut. Feng turned his bike in a tight circle in the cleared space at the encampment’s heart, easing the brakes and angling back round towards where the smoke was coming from.

He saw immediately that he’d been right. The shooting star that had darted over the ridge line was no star at all. Instead of void-scarred rock, something fleshy and chitinous had impacted into Darkand’s soil. It had burrowed into the dirt between two ux horn pens – the beasts were going wild, battering at their wooden enclosures and tethering pegs and lowing desperately. Steam was coiling from the thing’s outer shell, its unnatural surface blackened and fused by the force of atmospheric entry.

It was a mycetic spore. Worst of all, it was already open. One side of the roughly spherical shell had burst and was oozing stinking purplish sludge and amniotic fluids.

Whatever had been inside was now free and hunting.

Feng loosed his bike’s kickstand and dismounted, unclamping his bolt pistol in one hand, guan dao already in the other. His secondary heart had kicked in, flooding his body with jagged combat adrenaline and stimms. His helmet was hunting, the visor display seeking out hostile targets amidst the flickering firelight. He turned in a low crouch, dao not yet activated, gripped high on its haft with his pistol extended, tracking left, right, left.

The tribe, panicked by the spore, were doing what they always did when threatened by a force they did not comprehend – vanishing into the tall grasses

of the steppes. Some warriors remained behind, armed with spear and bow, watching the Sky Warrior from the shadows of their tents and wagons.

Feng snatched a moment to read the snap-reports filtering in over his visor's uplink. His own visuals had combined with those of the other remaining outriders to confirm the planetfall of a handful of xenos pods, scattered in a radius dozens of miles wide across the steppe. The mycetic spores contained the vanguard organisms, the first creatures the tyranids seeded a planet with. They were scouts and infiltrators, deposited by the hive fleet to gauge the location of the greatest centres of biomass and the level of opposition. The quicker they could be eliminated, the less information Cicatrix would have to act on when it came to the next phase – full-scale invasion.

A shriek disturbed Feng's thoughts, piercing the quiet that had settled across the encampment. The White Scar spun in time to see a young tribeswoman, her black hair wild and her dress torn, stumble from the flap of one of the smaller yurts. She was splattered with blood.

'Yaksha, yaksha!' she shrieked, before collapsing. *Daemon.*

Feng advanced over her unconscious form, switching his visor display to heat-tracing. There were no signatures coming from within the yurt, but that meant little – the deadliest tyranid xenofoms were capable of masking themselves on even the most advanced augur systems. He switched back to standard visuals and triggered his guan dao. Lethal energies crackled into life across the long blade as its disruptor field activated. The onlooking steppe warriors gasped.

He ducked under the flap, dao raised, a snarl of readiness on his lips. For a split second he thought he saw Tenjin in the tent's fire-shot darkness, blood oozing from his splinter lacerations, staining his white battleplate bright red. The heart-stopping apparition was gone the moment Feng focused on what lay beyond the entrance flap, but the blood remained. The inside of the yurt – sleeping rolls, patterned rug-weave, an open chest of yat gowns and shawls, a small, foldable table and seating cushions – were splattered with gore. However, beyond a single dismembered arm lying in the yurt's centre, there were no bodies. The trail of blood led to the tent's rear, where a jagged rent had been torn in the coarse hide fabric.

Feng passed through the yurt, silent but for the low hum of his power armour and the occasional snap-crack of his dao's disruptor field. His every transhuman sense was on edge, the genhanced power of his modified physiology beating through his veins and throbbing in his tensed muscles. Time seemed to slow down as he neared the rip in the yurt's far side. His auto-senses were fixed on

the darkness beyond, tracking phantoms, seeking a physical return to lock on to.

He passed through the rip, bolt pistol raised. Nothing. The darkness of the camp's outer edge lay before him. The grass underfoot was sticky with blood, the trail leading off into the shadows that clustered, thick and black, between two parked wagons. Overhead the thousand new stars of the tyranid hive fleet glittered.

He went further, following the trail. His auto-senses could find nothing in the darkness, every spectrum sending back blank returns. Suppressing a snarl of frustration, the White Scar unclamped his helmet and mag-locked it to his belt. Free from constraints, he caught the scents of the night breeze – blood, woodsmoke, cooked meat, animal dung and the underlying, sickly reek of the xenos. It had to be close.

He passed between the two wagons, his ignited dao offering a pallid luminescence. Near the other side of the wheel spokes he found two bodies. A glance told him they were likely the girl's parents. They'd been hideously dismembered, both now little more than vivisectioned pieces of bone and meat, laid out side by side. Judging by the lack of blood on either of the wagons it looked as though they'd been dragged all the way from the yurut after they'd been killed, and left deliberately between the wheels.

They were bait. Feng spun, dao glaive raised. Something impossibly fast and silent had reared up behind him from amidst the rug rolls in the bed of one of the wagons. Feng caught an impression of a chitin-plated exoskeleton, vast bony blade-limbs and a maw of writhing feeler tendrils, crouched up on the wagon's side. Even as the creature's silent presence registered he felt impacts against his left pauldron and the side of his breastplate.

A dozen stiff tendons had burst from the thing's chest carapace, their wicked hook-tips punching into Feng's armour and lodging there. He saw its upper blade-limbs arch back to strike as the tendons contracted, the flesh hooks dragging him off balance. He snarled viciously and swung his dao, pulling back against the creature's murderous embrace. The angle was a difficult one, the xenos assassin too close for him to use the power lance properly, but the snapping energies of the blade's disruptor field were enough to slice through the tendons that had latched on to Feng's armour. He stumbled back, his auto-stabilisers preventing a fall as the scything talons carved the night air where he'd stood a double heartbeat before.

With a hiss the thing launched forward before he could recover, pushing off the edge of the wagon. The impact slammed the White Scar back into the second

cart, wood splitting. The xenos was big – almost twice an unaugmented human’s height – yet it moved with a speed even Feng’s genhanced abilities could not match. The claws of its two middle limbs scraped his breastplate and pauldron, diamond-hard chitin biting into white-painted ceramite as it tried to reach up towards his unprotected face. Its unnatural alien stench filled Feng’s senses. It was too close for him to use his weapons, but at the same time it couldn’t plunge down with its upper scythe-limbs without lodging them in the timber of the cart to Feng’s back. His own arms were pinned by his side by the thing’s wiry, carapace body, but he fired his bolt pistol anyway, the booming report echoing out across the encampment. The round hit one of the creature’s backjointed legs, blowing away a shard of chitin and a bloody chunk of purplish flesh. It recoiled from Feng as he fired again, loosing an eerie, ululating shriek.

The White Scar used the second his desperate shooting had bought. He swung his dao in a choke-grip with vicious speed, up towards the xenos’ chitin-plated skull, the air igniting around the lance’s crackling blade. The xenos, still unnaturally fast, darted backwards, and Feng let out a cry of fury as he saw his blade pass by the leathery flesh of its throat.

Except, not quite. The feeder tendrils that constituted the creature’s maw were caught by Feng’s slash, a dozen of them bisected at a single stroke. The worm-like appendages flopped to the ground, writhing, and a flow of hissing purple ichor burst from the sliced stumps.

The creature shrieked again – this time a more high-pitched, painful note – and turned on Feng, darting back up onto the wagon. The White Scar raised his pistol and fired three shots after it, but none seemed to connect; before the steedmaster’s very eyes, the creature seemed to disintegrate. It melted from reality, swallowed up by the night.

Feng didn’t hesitate. He shouldered his way past the wagon and back towards the centre of the Beged camp, keying his vox earpiece as he went.

‘This is Lau Feng, previous coordinate lock. I have engaged a vanguard organism, xeniform “lictor”. It’s using its damned chameleon abilities.’

He didn’t wait for a response. He knew there was little hope of assistance – he was the only White Scar for many miles. A hiss from ahead drew him on. The acidic ichor spilling from the lictor’s wounds had left a trail of withered dead grass in its wake. He had to find it before whatever regenerative properties it possessed stemmed its wounds and made it untraceable.

There was a creak of timber to his right. He turned, bolt pistol raised. For a second all he saw was another Beged wagon, heaped high with sacks of meal.

Then one of the bags shifted. The air around it shimmered.

Feng fired, filling the night with his bolt pistol's roar. A salvo of rounds punched harmlessly into the meal, blasting the sacks of grain apart. The wagon shuddered, and he caught an impression of a gnarled black carapace and hungry, alien eyes. Then the thing was gone again, melting away like a nightmare. He ran to the wagon, reloading as he went, but there was no sign of the lictor. The wounds he had given it before must have already clotted.

Screaming broke out again from the heart of the camp. Feng turned, muttering an oath to the primarch. The thing was too damned fast. He broke into a run, the servos in his power armour whirring. The dark shapes of tribesfolk that cowered in the shadows of the outer yuruts and wagons cringed away at his passing. In seconds he was back in the torchlight of the encampment's centre.

It seemed as though the xenos had been attempting to cut through the camp and out into the darkness beyond. The Beged, terrified by the noises coming from the outer yuruts and wagons, now clustered like their own terrified cattle in the trampled dirt at the centre of the camp. Slowed by its wounds, the lictor had been unable to pass through them unnoticed. It had dropped its chameleon trickery and lashed out. Now it was loose, at the heart of a mob of terrified, screaming tribespeople. Feng saw it as a blur of scythe-limbed movement over the heads of the jostling mass. Blood arced into the air, followed by the disembowelled body of a tribal elder. The screaming redoubled.

'For the Khagan!' Feng roared, and charged. The battle cry was more to alert the Beged than anything else. The tribespeople in front of him pushed and shoved frantically as they tried to get out of the giant's way. Before him the lictor turned, hunched over, its form revealed in the firelight. Blood dripped from both its foretalons and upper scythe-arms, running in rivulets between the gnarled ridges of its black carapace. Bodies lay at its feet – half a dozen, maybe more – all dismembered in a few frantic seconds of animalistic, alien savagery. Time seemed to slow as the xenos reared, shrieking again. Feng's battle cry became a bellow of effort as he slung his arm forward, flinging his activated power lance. The thing was quick, quick enough to melt back into the shadows if Feng tried to reach it, but not quick enough to avoid a guan dao flung at its heart. A last-minute twist of its lean, hard body avoided certain death, but the powerblade still ploughed into its flank, slamming all the way up to the gold-edged crossguard.

Feng was already firing his bolt pistol as he closed the last few yards. Explosive rounds blasted gaping holes in the creature's torso and drove it down onto its

wounded knee, even as it tried to twist away. Its body shimmered and flickered, synapses attempting to trigger its camouflage, but it was too weakened to maintain the illusion. As he ran the last few steps, Feng's kindjal was in his fist, firelight reflected in the naked razored steel.

The thing was bloodied, but far from beaten. As Feng fell upon it, the lictor snatched the long haft of the impaled dao in one taloned hand and, in a motion that was disturbingly human, wrenched the crackling weapon from its side. At the same time it swung its upper scything talons at the White Scar, forcing him to arrest his charge. There was no way his kindjal, trusty though the combat knife was, could parry the thing's vast chitin blades.

The moment's hesitation gave the lictor the chance it needed. It darted left, still lithe despite the terrible wounds riddling its body. It would have broken back into the darkness beyond the centre of the encampment were it not for the Beged. A dozen of the tribe's warriors had rallied, and now they charged the thing they called yaksha from all angles, screaming with equal amounts of fear and defiance. The lictor snapped two of the spears reaching for it with a contemptuous swipe, but a third jarred off the chitin plating of its left thigh, while a scattering of arrows clattered off its carapace. A laslock banged, its crimson bolt darting harmlessly away into the night.

One of the Beged warriors managed to get behind it, stabbing a spear into the small of the xenos' back. A twitch of its thick tail sent the man tumbling, but Feng followed up. He snatched his dao from the ichor-slashed dust where it had fallen and reactivated its disruptor field. The lictor had caught one of the Beged, its claws raking his stomach and leaving him screaming and haemorrhaging into the dirt. A second man was almost cleft in half by a downward swipe of a scything talon. But, though horribly outmatched, the Beged had delayed it for long enough. With a shout Feng slammed his dao into the lictor's wounded leg. The power weapon flared brilliant; Feng gritted his teeth and kept the swing going, shearing through alien chitin, meat and bone. With a gout of stinking fluids the limb came away, and the lictor toppled, shrieking.

The humans redoubled their attacks, raining down blows with their crude weapons. Even crippled and savagely wounded, the xenos was still not done. Its talons sliced the legs out from under one of its attackers, and its claws ripped away the face of yet another. Amidst the screaming, bloody mess, Feng mounted the thing's writhing body, using his power-armoured weight to pin it as much as possible. Then, with a single, furious blow, he cut the alien's twitching head from its shoulders. The Beged recoiled from the hissing gout of ichor, and Feng

snatched at the severed head, hauling it into the air by the stubs that had once been its feeler tendrils.

‘In the name of the Khagan and the Emperor,’ he shouted, brandishing the trophy before the Beged, his armour steaming where acidic ichor ran off it. But the Beged weren’t watching him. Even the remaining warriors that had helped him fell the xenos terror were now staring skywards, their expressions wide with awe. Feng followed their gaze.

Overhead, the night sky was lit by a thousand thousand stabs of light. A constellation was falling upon Darkand, glittering and vast, and in its belly were the hungry seeds of death.

*There is a cancer eating at the Imperium. We have given the horror a name to salve our fears; we call it the Tyranid race. If it is aware of us at all it must know us only as Prey.*

– Inquisitor Czevak



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### INVASION

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 45 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The scriptorium, Heavenfall**

The commanders of the Fourth Brotherhood – Joghaten, Qui’sin, Chaplain Changadai and those squad leaders not riding among the tribes – watched the beginning of the alien invasion from the arching windows of Heavenfall’s primary scriptorium, seated high on the upper slopes of the temple district. The night sky was filled with falling stars: the contrails of a thousand xenos spores, each packed with ravenous warrior organisms. The sight would have been beautiful had it not presaged such horror.

Barely an hour had passed since reports from the brotherhood’s outriders about encountering vanguard organisms had started to filter in. From the contact zones and the approximation of the primary xenos landing sites, relative to the contrails streaking overhead, Joghaten had located the nearest likely swarm clusters. For now they would be assembling out on the plain, forming a horde with which to overwhelm the slope-city and its defenders.

The White Scars would strike before they were ready.

‘Brother-Chaplain Changadai,’ Joghaten said, breaking the scriptorium’s

silence. Changadai's grim death's head visage swung to face him.

'Go with Steedmaster Chokda and the demi-ordu. Strike out towards the Hills of the Broken Bones – that is where the nearest swarm is gathering. I will have exact coordinates uploaded to the tactical displays as our wind-brothers triangulate them. Slaughter all that you find. I will take the other half of the brotherhood and make for the Yellow River. I suspect there is another swarm forming there. They are still weak and scattered immediately after planetfall. If we strike hard and fast, we will cut away some of their numbers before the main brood can gather.'

'What of the city's preparations?' Qui'sin asked. 'The populace has not yet been fully relocated underground and the wall is still being prepared.'

'The squads assigned to Heavenfall will continue assisting the preparations,' Joghaten said. 'But you will ride with me, weathermaker. If our strikes are successful, we will buy enough time for the final defensive efforts and give hope to the tribes still coming in from beyond the Founding Wall.'

For a moment it looked as though Qui'sin was going to debate his commander's strategy, but instead he bowed his head.

'As you will it, my khan.'

Joghaten's gaze turned back to the window arches, and to the thousands of twinkling lights falling with distant, silent grace from the firmament. How strange the irony, he thought, that the galaxy's horrors could arrive clad in such beauty. After a moment more, he turned abruptly back to his brothers, his face set, eyes burning with determination in the dull light of the scriptorium's ancient lumen orbs.

'The hunt calls us,' he said. 'We wait no more. To war, brothers.'

Qui'sin remained in the transcription chamber after the khan had departed, looking out at the glittering lights of the slope-city below, and the utter darkness that had now swallowed up the plains beyond. Apart from Kemich, the young Stormseer was alone. Dawn was approaching, and there was a strange sense of disquiet hanging over the city, something more than the fear that came with an alien invasion. Qui'sin could not quite place it, and so he waited a little longer while his brothers assembled along the Slope Road, preparing to ride from the city and out onto the plains.

It was a bold plan, typical of the Master of Blades. Qui'sin would have disapproved of it, if he could see any viable alternative. He had witnessed the unpreparedness of Heavenfall and its human defenders with his own eyes. If the

swarms could amass and attack in full, the city would fall in a matter of hours, even with the help of the White Scars. Bleeding the tyranids while they were at their most vulnerable was the only viable strategy until Shen and the fleet could drive the aliens from orbit, or the Furnace Season burned them all.

Kemich let out a cry, shuffling along the perch she had adopted on the raised edge of one of the scriptorium's data-slate lecterns. The psyber-hawk's wicked talons clacked on the polished rustwood. She was growing restless. She needed to hunt. Qui'sin soothed her with a low, soft voice, the flowing words of native Chogorian momentarily quelling the augmented bird's agitation.

The Stormseer shared the raptor's urge to hunt, to succumb to the rush of the chase and the kill. They all wanted to be out there on the steppes, not overseeing the ponderous behemoth of a city-wide relocation and defensive preparations. Yet still Qui'sin did not depart. The night air, which once would have been chill this high on the mountainside, was balmy, the effects of the Furnace Season's height obvious. A low wind moaned about the window slits and flagstones underfoot, tweaking the Stormseer's totemic charms. His expression grew darker. Something was coming, he was sure of it.

Kemich let out her shrill cry once more, beating her great wings. She was disturbed. Perhaps she should be fed after all. She had always hated void travel, and her enhanced physiology was likely still adjusting to being planetside once again. He reached for the pouch where he kept the strips of cured meat she fed on between hunts. For once, however, Kemich did not move for the dangled morsel.

Qui'sin frowned. He had been holding a strip of flesh before the raptor's hooked beak for long seconds. The bird wasn't moving at all. After a moment the Stormseer realised that his familiar was totally motionless. There was not even the tremor of a heartbeat. For a second that seemed to stretch out into eternity, Qui'sin took in his surroundings. Even the motes of dust, caught in the light of the inscription chamber's ancient lumen orbs, had frozen, like a pict-feed put on pause.

Too late, Qui'sin realised what was happening. Too late, he snapped a string of arcane syllables, smashing the base of his force staff into the flagstones underfoot. A bow wave of psychic energy, blindingly bright, burst from the staff across the floor, then stopped, frozen like everything else. Qui'sin found the breath catching in his throat, and his lips locked, his entire body snared in a vice of unyielding mental strength. For a moment, he was neither living nor dead, present nor absent. For a second, he did not exist.

Only a creature of immense psychic power could have approached through the alternative plain unnoticed by the Stormseer. Only Kemich had sensed it. Now it had them both at its mercy.

It seemed to take a long time for Qui'sin to focus on it, or perhaps it happened instantaneously. It was impossible to say. Time was meaningless while they remained trapped, locked in such a bubble of unreality. The creature before him was the only one capable of breaking it.

+Sharai Qui'sin Xaoin,+ it breathed. It was tall, slender, clad in robes of blue and yellow and hung with gemstones that glittered in the frozen light. In one hand it held a bone staff, its top woven into a complex spider's web of arcane patterns.

+It is dangerous to stand here alone, mon-keigh,+ the creature said.

Its features were obscured by a tall, crested helm of blue, but the words seemed to slip directly into Qui'sin's thoughts. He willed his own words back, his jaw still locked.

+*Eldar*.+

+So you call us,+ the xenos witch responded. +And so we are.+

+Release me.+

+Once you have heard my thoughts, mon-keigh, and given them proper consideration. Time is short.+

Qui'sin's mind railed against the xenos presence, but his body could not respond to its blasphemous invasion. He cast his thoughts wide, searching for any weakness in the witch's curse. It was flawless, however, a trap woven with a mastery no human psyker could ever hope to emulate. The xenos had literally frozen time.

+Your struggles will only prolong this encounter,+ the eldar willed. +You may know me as Yenneth. I am a farseer of the ancient craftworld of Iyanden. I have come here both to offer assistance, and to seek it.+

+The sons of the steppes do not consort with xenos, regardless of what form they take,+ Qui'sin responded, channelling his impotence into a spike of anger that he directed at the eldar. If Yenneth even felt the attempt at a psychic counter-thrust, her relaxed stance didn't show it. The powers she was utilising would have burst the brain and ravaged the flesh of even the most gifted human psyker, and yet she began to pace around Qui'sin's trapped form as though unaware she was caging a Space Marine Librarian.

+Your doctrines are as stubborn as they are idiotic,+ Yenneth said from behind Qui'sin, before pacing back into his locked field of view. +This is well known. It

is also known that some among your kind are pragmatic enough to set aside their hatred when faced with annihilation, at least momentarily.+

Qui'sin tried to respond, but the xenos continued.

+The presence of the monster you call the Great Devourer on this world is as much a threat to my people as it is to yours. Neither of us can defeat it alone, but together, utilising my abilities, there is cause for hope. To do that, however, we too need assistance. Our dark kindred have struck up a feud that can only end in blood. Theirs, or ours. By helping us overcome them, you will help yourselves.+

+Your race does nothing but lie and manipulate,+ Qui'sin responded. +My brothers and I will not be used as tools for whatever schemes you are embroiled in.+

+There is more to consider,+ Yenneth added. +This is not your brotherhood's first time on this world. The souls of many of your kindred cry out for vengeance against those who slew them here. I can give you that vengeance. The very dark ones we fight, the drukhari, are the same that slew your previous chieftain.+

+Arro'shan,+ Qui'sin thought, unable to keep the shock from his mind.

+His killer yet lives,+ Yenneth replied. +She is named Skalorix, and she is an archon, leader of the drukhari. She still keeps Arro'shan's helm on her hip as a trophy.+

+You lie!+ Qui'sin snarled.

+See for yourself, mon-keigh,+ Yenneth replied. She reached out one slender finger. Qui'sin redoubled his efforts to escape, mind an angry roar, but it was futile. The alien's finger brushed his brow, and suddenly he was elsewhere.

He saw images. Visions, too quick for even his enhanced mind to process properly. A strange city, wreathed in mist. Broken pillars. Eldar warriors, clad in dark, barbed battleplate. A female with a wicked grin. Khan Arro'shan's helm, broken, one eye-lense cracked. Cruel laughter, drifting through the ancient, shattered colonnades.

Yenneth withdrew her hand, and the frozen scriptorium rushed back around him.

+That means nothing,+ he snapped mentally. +You conjured those images. Wove them from falsehoods.+

+And what if I did?+ Yenneth demanded, an angry edge finally breaking into her serene tone. +You will all die here if you do not accept my aid, and I will not give it unless you swear to strike down these traitors.+

+You yourself said the tyranids are as much a threat to you as they are to us,+ Qui'sin replied. +So why should we help you? You need us.+

+Regardless of the danger posed to the aeldari, you will all die by the claws of this monster. It is already among you, among the ones you seek to protect, worming itself into this city. If you refuse to help us, your fate is set, a path to destruction that cannot be deviated from. But if you do aid us in our struggle, we will intercede. We will uproot its evil together.+

+How? How can you have the strength to help us, yet not overcome your own feuding cousins?+

+You can see for yourself. I could crush you right now, mon-keigh. Take each of your memories and tear them apart. I could leave you a drooling, dull-eyed wreck, unable to recall your own birth name.+

+This is xenos trickery, and well you know it. We have the powers of earth and sky, wind and fire. We are the Khagan's will made manifest, warrior-sons of the steppes, and we will not be beholden to your treacherous, murderous kind.+

+You call yourselves great warriors, and yet you will not avenge the sire whose genes you bear, the leader of your brotherhood?+

+I will not parlay with you. Release me, or kill me.+

+I had hoped one who wielded the powers of the Maddening Sea would understand the depths of my offer,+ Yenneth responded. +I see now that I misjudged. If you cannot be of assistance, I will find one who can.+

And, in an instant, time no longer stood still. Kemich shook her head and shrieked loudly. The dust continued to drift lazily through the wan light of the lumens. The inscription chamber stood empty. The witch was gone.

Qui'sin fell to his knees, ceramite cracking on stone, his force staff clattering down beside him. He gasped for breath, his twin hearts a double-thunder in his breast, his brow throbbing. Before his eyes blood pattered onto the cold stone floor, dripping from his nose to run slowly between the flagstones.

He stayed there for what felt like a long time, head throbbing and body aching as it tried to recover from the psychic pressure placed upon it. To struggle mentally for so long, all the while being physically frozen and trapped, left behind a terrible aftershock. Kemich swooped from her perch and landed on his fallen staff, wings beating agitatedly. It wasn't until he heard the thump of footfall and the whirr of servos that the Stormseer managed to push himself back up onto his feet. He sensed the presence of Türüch Jeddah entering the chamber a moment before seeing him.

'Stormseer,' the leader of the Fourth Tactical Squad exclaimed, and rushed to Qui'sin's side. 'Have you been attacked?'

'It is nothing,' Qui'sin said, struggling to master his breathing. He cuffed the

blood from his nose, smearing his white gauntlet, and bent to retrieve his force staff. Kemich took flight, circling the chamber's vaulted ceiling with a loud shriek.

'Has the khan departed yet?' he asked.

'No,' Jeddah replied. 'But he rides soon. You are sure you are unharmed?'

'By the Khagan's will,' Qui'sin said. 'I must be on my way. Let us speak no more of this.' The witch had caught him off guard, and the memory of the effortless extent of its psychic power would have made a lesser mind quail. The Stormseer pushed the eldar's intrusion to the back of his thoughts, seeking the balance, the focus that he always aimed for when troubled.

'Be on your guard,' he told Jeddah as he left the scriptorium. 'There are more threats in this place than even I had first imagined.'

### **Near Yellow River, Darkand**

A tainted dawn heralded first contact with the main swarm. The sun was rising as Joghaten's strike force closed on its primary objective, two bike squads and two supporting Land Speeder Tempests scattered in a rotating skirmish chain around three Rhinos. The ubiquitous Space Marine armoured personnel carriers had been forced to go off-track over the rugged grasslands, but the biker squadrons found their speed barely hampered while keeping pace – all White Scars Rhinos had exchanged most of their ablative armour plating for greater engine capacity. The roar of the speedy transports echoed out over the steppes, competing with the biker squads that raced back and forth around them.

They were riding for the Yellow River, a dried-up basin where the augurs had triangulated one of the nearest tyrannid swarms. Going off vid recordings of the xenos planetfall taken during the night, Joghaten didn't anticipate the brood being more than his demi-ordu could handle. Wipe them out, while the other half of the brotherhood slaughtered a second brood at the Hills of the Broken Bones to the south, and they would have bled potentially vital numbers from the main swarm as it gathered further out on the plains.

The khan pulled his own bike – *Whitemane* – to a juddering stop on a gentle rise overlooking their route. He was giving Qui'sin and his bondsmen a chance to catch up, knowing Jubai would be complaining once more that he should not leave his honour guard behind. He refused to apologise. They all felt it; out here on the open plain, unconfined and free, the urge to roam sung through his veins. It had been a part of him, a part of them all, from the moment they had been born, an instinct that transcended even their new lives as servants of the Khagan

and the Emperor. It was a passion that all the gene enhancement, hypnotherapy and chemical indoctrinations could not overcome. Before and after every other consideration, a White Scar was a son of the steppes, a warrior born to the saddle and the hunt. To experience it was to know the greatest joy in existence.

He looked up at the sun, not long risen above Heavenfall's receding mountain range. It was not the bloody red dawn of a new Chogorian day. Nor was it even Darkand's pale imitation any longer. The sun that now climbed through the corrupt sky was infected, an ugly orange sphere shot through with buzzing darts of shadow. Darkand's atmosphere was clouded, already infested with uncounted trillions of alien spores. They would clog the air, beginning the horrific subversion of the planet's entire ecosystem. The light that reached Joghaten was tainted, unable to pierce the fug of seedlings that now choked Darkand's heavens.

He looked away, hawked and spat. His bondsmen roared up on their heavy, low-set assault bikes, growling to a halt beside their khan. Qui'sin was with them, his blue-edged power armour marking him out. The Stormseer had been strangely withdrawn since they had departed Heavenfall together, remaining silent where the khan would have expected his strategic advice. He wondered whether the presence of the Shadow in the Warp was weighing heavily on the weathermaker.

'Orders?' Khuchar asked as the khan's honour guard killed their engines. Even more so than the rest of the White Scars, the brotherhood's champion was eager to be released to the hunt. Joghaten said nothing at first, looking from Qui'sin up at Jubai's lodge pole, at the horse hair tokens snapping in the breeze, and then at the dark shapes wheeling in the spore-choked sky beyond. Too big to be mere seeds, they flocked together with a dire, vulture-like purpose, over and above the next grassy rise.

'We are close,' Joghaten said, gesturing at the airborne shapes that surely marked the leading edge of the swarm.

'Vermin,' Dorich the emchi spat. 'Their mere presence is an affront to the honour world.'

'Them, and all like them,' Tamachag said.

'We must be swift,' Joghaten said, before opening a channel to the rest of the column.

'This is the khan-commander, I am advancing to the next crest. The xenos are near, brothers. We engage with the speed of the racing stallion.'

He broke the link, not waiting for confirmations. His blood was up. He held his

arm up, one finger pointing skywards.

*Ride.*

The Fourth Brotherhood's command squad raced to the next rise, Khuchar whooping battle-boasts and Bleda canting the ordu's war song. Joghaten led them, not because the others deferred to his honoured place at the tip of their spear, but because none could keep pace with him. He was the Master of Blades, Khan of the Tulwar Brotherhood, and today he hunted.

The things in the sky had sensed their approach. A gaggle peeled away from the main flock, rising on leathery pinyons to better observe them. The khan and his bondsmen rode on regardless, gears shifting as their bikes effortlessly took the gentle slope leading up to the next rise. Joghaten was the first to crest it, easing the brakes as he did so.

Beyond the slope the xenos threat was finally laid bare. The plain before the khan was studded with hundreds of large egg-like spheres, half buried in the Darkand dirt. Their shells were gnarled, formed from leathery flesh and chitin left blackened by the red-hot fury of atmospheric penetration. Some were riddled with fluted chitin chimneys that churned out the clouds of microorganisms polluting the atmosphere. Others had burst. Viscous purple sludge oozed from cracks torn from within by diamond-hard claws. Their former occupants now roamed the plain – packs of gaunts, tyranid foot-soldiers, hunched over killer-beasts with crustacean-like chitinous armour and limbs that ended in scything talons or fleshy ranged bio-launchers. After a second's calculation, Joghaten's auto-senses read back over a thousand returns.

The creatures were still disorganised, moving in sluggish swarms around the mycetic spores that had given birth to them, alien amniotic fluids dripping thickly from black carapace and purplish flesh. Further out, towards the heart of the fresh seeding, Joghaten could see larger spore pods. There, protected by the screen of smaller creatures, the leaders of the first invasion wave were ripping their way into existence, taking their first shuddering breaths of prey-world air. Tyranid warriors, bigger creatures with thicker shells and a synapse link to the hive mind, and the queen of the swarm itself – a hive tyrant, a towering monster with a ridged crest of chitin around its skull and four limbs each ending in wicked organic alien weaponry. The creature dragged itself from the ruin of its mycetic spore, shaking broken shell and globules of birthing slime off its armoured back. As it rose to its full height it let loose a shrilling alien shriek, the disturbing sound rolling out over the plain.

The call had an instant effect – immediately the leaderless swarms of gaunts

became more coordinated, sweeping out from the landing zone in all directions, their hooves drumming the trampled earth. A few minutes more and the entire brood would be ready to move off, guided to the first concentration of prey by the synapse signals and pheromone traces of the previous night's vanguard infiltrators.

Joghaten's bondsmen had caught up. They sat atop their idling mounts, each one looking out upon the alien invasion with undisguised expressions of disgust.

'We should wait for the rest of the demi-ordu,' Tamachag said. Joghaten twisted in *Whitemane's* saddle to look at him.

'You think I will, brother?' A grin split the veteran's ugly, scarred features.

'No, khan-commander.'

Joghaten glanced towards Qui'sin. His expression was unreadable behind his helm, but he inclined his head, once.

'For the Khagan,' Joghaten said, his twin tulwars whispering free from their red leather sheaths. The sound was mirrored as his honour guard drew blade and bolter, and clamped on their helmets.

No further words were needed. With a shriek and a roar of engines, Joghaten kicked his steed down the slope and directly into the heart of the tyranid swarm.

### **The Hills of the Broken Bones, Darkand**

To the south, around the Hills of the Broken Bones, the other half of the Tulwar Brotherhood were engaging a swarm of their own. *Wind Tamer's* twin AS 9-60 ramjets were screaming as the Land Speeder came around for its attack run, the air around it shimmering with the furnace heat. Timchet triggered the Godwyn-pattern heavy bolter's auto feed, helmet display lighting up with targeting reticules as his auto-senses locked with dozens of rapidly closing contacts.

'Don't miss this time,' his co-pilot, Hagai, said over the vox.

'Try steering straight then,' Timchet responded, and opened fire. The pintle-mounted heavy bolter bucked against its railing as the big weapon launched a stream of .998 calibre explosive rounds into the flock of gargoyles sweeping towards them. Timchet controlled the stream and bent it towards the heart of the shrieking swarm, guided by darts of crimson tracer. Aliens squealed and howled as they were blown apart, purple flesh and ichor painting the sky.

'Braking,' Hagai said tersely, and *Wind Tamer* slewed hard to the left. Timchet cursed his brother-pilot as he sawed his weapon to the right to compensate, the heavy bolter scraping around on its open cockpit railing.

A second later the return fire started to come in. The gargoyles – spindly tyranid

creatures borne aloft on bat-like wings – were armed with organic weapons melded to their lower limbs. The flock, still closing on the White Scars Land Speeder, had unleashed a hail of crackling purple bio-plasma from their flesh-fused weaponry.

‘Brace,’ Hagai said as the utility skimmer took a flurry of hits to its right side. Alarm bells started to ring in the cockpit, deactivated immediately by a flick of Hagai’s gauntlet. One plasma bolt seared away the white paint of the support stanchion just above Timchet’s head, leaving the heavy plasteel twisted and deformed.

‘They’re coming around,’ he said, the angle making tracking the xenos flyers impossible.

‘Karro’sai has them,’ Hagai responded, easing back on the controls as he took the skimmer into an engine-shrieking climb. Timchet grunted, feeling the G-forces dragging at his restraint clamps and power armour.

‘Since when has Karro’sai had anything,’ he managed to growl.

‘True enough, brother,’ Hagai said as he levelled out a hundred feet above their last position. A moment later and the angle *Wind Tamer* had been shooting across was lit up by a fresh hail of fire. *Spear of the Khagan*, coming in at ninety degrees to *Wind Tamer* and fifty feet below it, struck the gargoyle swarm in mid-turn, as the xenos attempted to wheel up and around to pursue Timchet and Hagai. *Spear*’s assault cannon was a clacking, fire-studded blur as it unloaded into the tyranids, tens of thousands of rounds churning the alien flock to a gory shower of ruin. The Land Speeder Tornado carried right on through the disintegrating flock, Karro’sai’s sponson gunner adding the weight of his heavy bolter to the fusillade. By the time he ripped out the other side his skimmer’s white plating was splattered with sizzling ichor and smears of pulverised xenos meat.

Hagai turned *Wind Tamer* round in support. Timchet opened up again, auto feed rattling fresh bolts home as the Land Speeder swooped down on the pickings left by its brother. Another hail of mass-reactive rounds riddled the airborne flock, but the pickings were thin now – the combined firepower of the two skimmers had decimated the swarm and left it scattered.

‘He will want us to congratulate him,’ Timchet said, watching as *Spear of the Khagan* banked around. ‘Even after we were the ones who set him up. Again.’

‘He can boil his arse,’ Hagai said, opening the ramjets and letting the wind take them.

Below, the Fourth Brotherhood’s second strike force was beginning its assault.

Steedmaster Chokda had ordered Subodak's Devastator squad to take post on the low grassy rise overlooking the tyranids' main landing zone, covered by Anunga's Tactical Marines. The gargoyles, circling above the assembling xenos swarm, had attempted to attack while the base of fire was still being set up. The strike force's two Land Speeders had swiftly halted their pre-emptive effort. Now the second phase was proceeding.

*'The sky is ours, Steedmaster Chokda,'* Karro'sai's voice crackled across the net.

*'First to claim the glory, as ever,'* Timchet observed.

Chokda's reply to the Tornado pilot cut in over the vox before Hagai could respond to his gunner.

*'Good hunting. Bring your skysteeds in support of the main strike.'*

Hagai acknowledged wordlessly, blink-clicking *Wind Tamer's* confirmation rune. Ahead of them Chokda was taking his assault bike squadron in a straight race down the slope and into the midst of the xenos swarm. They were scattered across a shallow valley at the edge of the Hills of the Broken Bones, the grassy slopes studded with their spore pods. The gaunts that constituted the main mass of the swarm were still sluggish from their recent birth.

*'The leader-beast,'* Karro'sai said to Timchet and Hagai over the vox. *'We should move against it now, while their sky swarms are scattered.'*

*'It will defend itself,'* Hagai warned. *'Better to open a path for Chokda's charge, and let him strike the surest blow.'*

*'Chokda has enough heads for the lodge pole,'* Karro'sai responded. *'I am going.'*

*Spear of the Khagan* accelerated, pulling away from *Wind Tamer*. Karro'sai's target was visible at the heart of the swarm, a great, lumpen beast weighed down by its own thick black carapace. After a moment's analysis Timchet's tactical readout lit up with the moniker assigned to it by the Ordo Biologis.

*'Maleceptor,'* he growled, fingers unconsciously tightening around his pintle weapon's grip. Orifices in the swollen creature's broad flanks were studded with pulsing, glistening brain sacs, the gelatinous grey mind-nodes visibly snapping and crackling with the power of the hive mind. Ethereal tendrils snaked from the lobes, pseudopods of psychic energy that waved around the huge beast like the feelers of some oceanic horror. It was a control hub for the gestalt consciousness that drove the aliens, and killing it would throw the swarm into confusion. That was exactly what Chokda intended to do. Karro'sai wanted to get there first.

*'Damn the fool,'* Hagai said, opening the throttle. The *Wind Tamer* accelerated

in the wake of *Spear of the Khagan*. Beneath, a sea of upturned xenos heads raced past, a blur of thousands of hissing fang-maws and ravenous eyes. Timchet didn't waste bolts on them. They'd need every round if they were going to help slay the maleceptor.

*Spear of the Khagan* had opened fire, the chatter of the Tornado's underslung assault cannon rising above the shrieking fury of the swarm. Karro'sai's gunner had clearly locked the automated weapon on the mind-nodes embedded in the giant alien's sides, but for all their apparent fragility the brains were well protected. Actinic energy flashed around the throbbing grey matter, robbing the thousands of rounds fired at them of their kinetic energy. Shots from the Tornado's heavy bolter added to the barrage, blasting jagged shards of carapace from the maleceptor's shell but otherwise doing the beast no harm.

'Pull left,' Timchet said as *Spear of the Khagan* dragged itself up at the last minute, only just avoiding the psychic pseudopods that waved around the alien's heavy bulk. 'If those tendrils reach us they'll tear us apart.'

For once Hagai didn't counter his co-pilot's advice. He slewed *Wind Tamer* to one side, while Timchet opened fire on the beast. Like *Spear* before, his shots had almost no visible effect. The thickness of its shell and the strength of its psychic defence were too powerful a combination.

'We need bigger guns,' Timchet said as the Land Speeder arced back round for another run.

'Subodak looks a little busy,' Hagai said humourlessly. Timchet saw that he was right. Half of the swarm had finally found its coordination and launched itself at the slope being held by the strike force's dismounted section. Subodak's heavily armed Devastators and Anunga's supporting Tactical Marines were holding them back with a storm of firepower. Heavy bolters, missile launchers and plasma cannons were creating a tidal mark of broken and torn gaunts around the base of the slope, but the weight of the horde was too much for them to shift fire from their immediate vicinity. That meant Chokda's assault bikes were going in alone against the half of the swarm still clustered around their leader-beast.

'*We need support,*' the steedmaster snapped over the vox. '*Break off your attack runs and open a corridor for us.*'

If Karro'sai had heard the order it was too late, anyway. *Spear of the Khagan* was swooping down once more on the maleceptor, this time from the opposite side, guns blazing.

'He's leaving it too late,' Hagai said, switching vox frequencies. 'Karro'sai, pull up!'

‘Watch the tendrils!’ Timchet added as he saw the phantom-like pseudopods lash out towards the oncoming Land Speeder.

Too slow, Karro’sai tried to pull to one side. The skimmer cleared the tyranid, slicing mere feet past its carapace ridges. It did not, however, succeed in avoiding the psychic appendages lashing from its bared brain lobes. Two of the tendrils caught the Speeder, seeming to pass right through its white-plated frame. Karro’sai and his gunner did not survive the ethereal passage of the translucent strands. Timchet bit back an oath as he saw both White Scars’ helmets explode in a shower of bloody matter, their brains ruptured by the sudden and direct contact with the raw power of the hive mind. *Spear of the Khagan* dipped immediately, plummeting into the swarm around the malceptor’s cloven hooves. The skimmer’s front buckled and its fuselage gave out in a gout of flames and sparks. Seconds later the entire vehicle, along with its pilots, was lost beneath an undulating tide of lesser tyranid killer organisms.

‘The riders,’ Hagai snapped to Timchet. ‘Or must I take control of the heavy bolter as well as the steering stick?’

Timchet responded to his co-pilot’s directive, snapping out of the horror that *Spear*’s annihilation had brought and swinging his pintle weapon in an angle around and down towards Chokda’s advance. The steedmaster and Chaplain Changadai were racing one another towards the heart of the xenos swarm, the glowing golden aura of the Chaplain’s crozius arcanum competing with the actinic blue of Chokda’s power lance. The rest of the assault bike squadron were close on their treads, twin-linked bolters hammering, but none of them had got far. Progress was slowing visibly as swarms of gaunts threw themselves suicidally at the White Scars’ lance formation. Hundreds had likely already perished, ground apart beneath spinning tyre treads, smashed to pieces on armoured engine housings and blast shields or cut apart by bolters and blades. Still they came, utterly devoid of fear or independent consideration, driven to self-sacrifice by the overriding imperatives of the hive mind. The White Scars were becoming weighed down, slowed by the sheer weight of bodies pressing in on them from all sides.

Timchet cleared them a path. Hagai brought *Wind Tamer* in low and hard over the bike squadron’s advance, allowing Timchet to hammer the xenos ahead of Changadai and Chokda with a barrage of heavy bolts. The White Scar’s jaw was locked, finger stiff on the firing stud as he dragged the bucking weapon back and forth, clearing a bloody channel ahead of the bikers’ advance.

Their progress barely increased. The part of the swarm attacking Subodak’s

Devastators had peeled away, disengaging under fire with an ease and surety that would have been impossible for any other species in the galaxy. Identifying the bikers as the greatest threat to their leader, the entire weight of the freshly birthed swarm was now being directed at Chokda's riders. Even with the support of *Wind Tamer*, the xenos' numbers were too great. As Timchet lined up his heavy iron sights once more after another pass, he saw one of Chokda's hunt-brothers fall, his bike stalling beneath the weight of bodies heaped around it. He was dragged from the saddle, stabbed through again and again by talons as long as a man's arm, before being lost beneath the mass of hard black carapace. A second rider followed soon after, a clutch of borer beetles fired from a termagant's bio-weapon finding the weak electro-sealant strips over his armour's joints. His bike ploughed on for twenty more yards, thudding and jarring over scuttling xenofoms before finally tumbling to a wheel-spinning halt.

*'We are overrun,'* Chokda's voice came back over the link. Timchet could see him, power lance a lightning blur as he scythed through one lunging gaunt after the next, his white armour and bike plating befouled by xenos ichor. *'Subodak, rejoin the khan-commander. We cannot afford to lose more brothers here. Commend myself and the brother-Chaplain to the wind and earth.'*

*'That may not be necessary, steedmaster,'* Hagai cut in over the link. *'There is still time to disengage.'*

*'You dream, wind rider,'* Chokda replied, voice strained as he fought. *'We cannot turn back in this press.'*

*'Not back,'* Hagai said. *'Turn to your right. Ride south now, with all haste.'*

Timchet twisted in his restraining harness to see what his co-pilot was suggesting. As the Land Speeder banked sharply round, he understood.

*'We will all be wind-brothers today,'* he said.

### **Juben's Gorge, Darkand**

The Begeg turned east. They had broken camp during the dark hours, at Feng's urging. The steedmaster had told them, in no uncertain terms, that they would all die if they did not leave behind their most overburdened wagons and take the track back to the slope-city immediately. If the presence of the lone, ichor-splattered Sky Warrior towering in the light of the camp's fires was not enough to make them obey, the severed head of the monster grasped in one of his ceramite-clad fists certainly was.

Feng had mounted the lictor's head on the front of his bike's shield guard, lashing it between the twin bolters. He'd cut out the creature's eyes with the

hooked tip of his kindjal, so that the creature could not find its way and continue to hunt in the afterlife. After that he'd ridden on ahead of the Beged column, scouting the route. Word was coming in over the uplink – reports, orders, confirmations. The brotherhood was riding to war, and he had still not returned. Jakar had taken command of the squadron while Feng remained absent. The urge to race away and rejoin his squad was curiously muted – the ghosts of his true brothers were with him still, even out here.

The White Scar had turned back towards the column. Now he eased on the brakes, scraping his bike to a halt alongside a cloth-draped carriage at the convoy's centre. One of the curtains twitched back, revealing the scarred face of the tribe's hetman, Jara.

'The path enters a gorge half a mile ahead, does it not?' Feng asked; Jara nodded, and he continued. 'The cliffs will hem the wagons in single file for at least two hundred yards. We will be vulnerable until the whole column has passed out the other side.'

Jara nodded once more and vanished from the window for a moment, doubtless speaking with the rest of his family. He reappeared a moment later.

'We will carry on as swiftly as possible,' he said. 'I will have my outriders secure the far side of the gorge as well.'

'Yes,' Feng said. 'We are still far from the Founding Wall. My brothers are even now engaging great swarms of void-yaksha north and south of here, and there are doubtless more crossing the low hills around us. Every second is precious. Ride on, at least for the moment. I will safeguard the rear of the column.'

The Beged passed on, drivers cracking their whips and issuing their shrill steppe whistles. Feng rode to the rear of the column, signalling for the tribe's rearguard to close on him. Two dozen riders, clad in leathers and furs and mounted on stocky plains steeds, drew in from the column's flanks as Feng killed his engine.

'It is likely that your tribe will be trapped in this gorge,' he said, speaking slowly and clearly so that the Beged, with their thick, bastardised Chogorian dialect, could understand him. 'The column can only go forward or back. If the void-yaksha strike, it will be from behind. We must protect your people.'

The warriors muttered their agreement. Some among them were young, but most of the rearguard consisted of the older, steadier tribesmen, their flesh beaten and dark from years riding the steppe. The fear they felt in the presence of the huge Sky Warrior was less palpable than in the wide-eyed stares of the thin-bearded youths. Khagan alone knew how they would react if the tyrannids

caught them though.

‘Stay close,’ Feng told his two dozen-strong retinue, turning back towards the column’s rear. The head of the caravan had reached the entry to the gorge, the harnessed mounts snorting and tossing their heads as they were urged into the long shadows of the cliffs. Feng drew up at the edge of the gorge, eyes on the track leading back to the Gates of Eternity. He had seen the rock formation behind them in the dawn light as the Beged departed, six columns of strange slender stone, like earthen fingers reaching towards the steppe sky. There had been an eerie bleakness to them, an otherness that sent a chill creeping across Feng’s shoulders. He had felt the gaze of his dead brothers on him as he had turned away.

They were still with him now, as he waited. He ignored their dire, bloody presence as best he could. The Beged tramped past, most on foot, the elderly and the infirm mounted on those few wagons not abandoned. Nearly everyone who passed stared at him, and the warriors gathered alongside him couldn’t resist furtive glances. Feng did his best to quell the annoyance simmering beneath the surface of his thoughts. He was nothing short of a miraculous vision to these simple people, a being that far transcended the definition of either human or mortal in their minds. After so many decades, such a reaction should not surprise or discomfit him.

‘How many times have you drawn an enemy’s blood in battle?’ the White Scar asked the tribesmen, seeking to break the aura of silent awe that appeared to have settled over him.

‘We are warriors,’ said one of the rearguard eventually. ‘We have all fought many times. Even the youths here, Yesui, Lao and Taichh, all took scalps two seasons past, when we forced the damned Agari to pay in blood and yat wool for the many slights they committed against our elders.’

The speaker’s name was Gochet, and from what Feng could discern he was one of the oldest and most experienced fighters in the tribe, second only to a handful of Hetman Jara’s personal bondsmen. He bore a long beard, pepperpotted black and silver and split into three spikes using yat grease. A livid pink scar ran down the left side of his face, curling at the corner of his mouth. Feng recognised a bone-deep blow when he saw one. It was amazing the strike hadn’t split his skull.

‘An az,’ Gochet had said when he’d first noticed Feng’s gaze lingering on the old wound. ‘Some big bastard Drongian. I still have his hair in my scalp bag.’

The Beged, it seemed, were frequent rivals with the Drongians, whether in

bartering, fighting, drinking or copulating. Feng found approval in that – they were not so unlike the tribes of Chogoris, at least in a few respects – but it did make him wonder what would happen when Darkand’s steppe population was brought together and confined within Heavenfall. During the Golden Season the tribes tended to arrive at the slope-city at different times, and were confined to different bartering zones by Imperial authorities all too aware of the dangers of having rivals and their wares living together within a city’s walls. There would be no opportunity for such careful demarcation once the exodus was complete, and certainly neither the brotherhood nor the Pinnacle Guard could afford to spare manpower to keep the peace. Their best hope, Feng suspected, was that the gravity of the threat would keep them compliant.

‘We have all taken scalps for the tribe,’ Gochet went on. There were murmured affirmations from the others.

‘You saw the beast that struck at your families last night,’ Feng said, addressing them all. ‘Your brothers who fell by its talons fought bravely.’

‘My brother, Tamar, was among them,’ Gochet said, almost matter-of-factly. ‘Will he join the Sky Warriors in the eternal hunt through the void-between-stars, great hetman?’

‘I cannot say,’ Feng said bluntly, in no mood to pander to their bastardised beliefs. He’d caught movement on the nearest ridge line.

‘Do you see them?’ he asked. The Beged peered in the direction he pointed, but none could discern what the White Scar’s genhanced vision had picked out.

‘They are coming,’ Feng said. He looked towards the caravan. The final wagons were clattering into the gorge, their wheels jarring over broken stone and shale.

‘They have found us?’ one of the other warriors, Damur, asked. ‘In all the vastness of the steppes, how can it be so?’

‘They are more deadly and vicious than the most powerful predator,’ Feng said, though in truth he had been wondering the same thing. He had expected a minor swarm to pick up their trail, but he had hoped it would take them longer than this.

Abruptly, he realised how they were tracking them, and cursed. Lictors were the hive fleet’s ultimate vanguard organisms, excreting a pheromone that attracted other tyranids from hundreds of miles around. He had assumed by killing the one attacking the Beged he had ended its threat. He now realised, however, that it was entirely possible the hyper-evolutionary species had the ability to continue passing its scent even after its death. The severed head lashed to Feng’s bike was what had drawn the swarm to them.

‘May the earth strengthen us,’ Gochet said as he finally caught sight of the approaching xenos. Now there was fear in the veteran’s eyes.

‘Follow the track a little further,’ Feng said. ‘Draw them into the gully, where their numbers mean nothing, rather than let them go around and cut us off, or strike down the cliff sides. That is our best hope of survival.’

None of the Beged cavalrymen questioned him. They followed as he turned his bike into the gorge after the last wagon, their horses made nervous and skittish by the beast-like roaring of the metallic mount’s great engine. The younger warriors snatched nervous glances back over their shoulders. The distant ridge line was now covered in a glittering carpet of black carapace spreading down onto the track. The susurrations of chitin and thumping hooves carried to them on the steppe wind.

‘We stop them here,’ Feng called out, easing to a stop a hundred paces into the gorge. The cliffs either side reached their narrowest point, just wide enough for three horsemen to pass abreast. The White Scar gestured at the youngest-looking tribal cavalryman.

‘You, ride back to the column and tell the hetman to keep going, no matter what. He must not stop. If he stops, he and all his people will die. Is that clear?’

The boy nodded before sinking his heels into his mount’s flanks. Feng signalled to the other riders.

‘Gochet and Torman, with me, either side. You should dismount – your horses will panic when they catch the yaksha’s scent, and they are too easily struck anyway.’

‘What of you, great hetman?’ Gochet, apparently the only Beged who dared address Feng directly, asked.

‘My steed fears nothing,’ Feng said. ‘The rest of you, order yourselves behind us. When one falls, fill the gap. Aim for their throats and underbellies – their backs and heads are well armoured.’

The tribesmen stayed close to the great Sky Warrior, nodding with each new instruction and gripping their spears tighter. They were merely humans, and primitive ones at that, but Feng was not so removed from reality to have forgotten that it was men who held the galaxy for the Imperium, regardless of the super-soldiers who had founded it. Some, like Gochet, would have made fine hunt-brothers if they’d been inducted early enough. The pride and strength of Chogoris was not wholly lost in the distant peoples of Darkand.

‘Sell your lives dearly,’ Feng said. ‘Every second wins your family a few more paces, a few more moments of hope. While one of us lives to defend this

passage, they will not pass.'

*No good plan is without great risk.*

– Surek Khan, hetman of the Ko-cha



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### GAMBITS

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 31 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **Yellow River, Darkand**

Smile while you killed. That was what the great Khagan had taught his children, the White Scars, when he had still walked among them. Smile while you fought, and while you died. Smile in victory, and in defeat. There was much in a smile. Far more than in a snarl, or a scream, or even icy stoicism. That was something the other Chapters had forgotten. To see an enemy smile as he died was to know true defiance, to understand that even in death a warrior could retain pride and dignity. To see your killer smile was to know a final shame, for a smile was rarely worn by a man who was troubled or threatened. The smiling warrior showed an unsmiling galaxy that, in all things, he was triumphant, and delighted in his victory.

Joghaten Khan had not smiled for a long time. Not truly, not the infectious, aching grin that came alongside an unfettered surge of emotion. He smiled now though, as he led his demi-ordu into the swarm clustered on the dry banks of the Yellow River. The hive tyrant was ahead, at the swarm's heart. The first dozen gaunts protecting it were crushed by *Whitemane* before Joghaten had even

swung a blade. His assault bike slammed into the edge of the swarm like a bolt of lightning from the spore-choked heavens, flinging broken bodies from its path as xenos skulls and spines cracked against his shield screen and front tyre tread.

Eventually, the sheer weight of hissing, snapping bodies pressing in on him slowed the attack. The khan-commander lashed out with one tulwar, only glancing at where the blow fell, striking on instinct and allowing the weight and speed of *Whitemane* to see the blade through chitin, flesh and hideous alien organs. He brought his right hand back to the bike handle, steering with the ball of his fist while striking out with his left tulwar. Another gaunt fell, headless, lost instantly in the press. So Joghaten fought from the saddle, guiding his steed with his legs and twitches of one hand and then the other, always moving, always cutting. A lesser rider, even a Space Marine, would likely have already become unseated, jarred by the continual crunching impacts of the bike into and over squirming, writhing meat and bone, but the White Scars had long ago mastered such combat. Joghaten's honour guard fought with near identical finesse, forming a wedge of white ceramite and flashing blades that parted the churning xenos horde before them.

Progress, of course, could not be maintained indefinitely. Joghaten's bike began taking harder and heavier hits, and there was growling reluctance in it now – the rear wheel was struggling to chew over the thick carpet of mulched alien corpses, and the density of the swarm was growing. Joghaten hit the firing stud for *Whitemane*'s twin bolters, opening a brief channel through the swarm and giving himself enough time to blink-click his visor's vox-transmission rune.

'*Red Berkut,*' he said. 'In the name of the Khagan, part this vile sea.'

A green affirmative icon blinked at him over the display. Joghaten kicked forward, *Whitemane*'s forewheel spinning wildly as it mounted a heavier xenos corpse and ploughed through a clutch of snapping termagants. Behind and to his left and right his bondsmen were also still struggling on, bolters hammering and charged blades running with smoking xenos ichor. Hawk-eyed Bleda was chanting the *Tale of Stars Descended*, the ancient White Scars poem about their old affinity with their honour worlds. Khuchar was shrieking like a spitted yaksha, the brotherhood's champion unable to contain his delight as he sliced apart leaping hormagaunts with his crackling power dao. In the centre of the wedge, Jubai held the brotherhood's lodge pole high, horse hair plumes whipping in the wind. Veterans though they were, the honour guard was barely even aware of the rest of the strike force deploying across the rise to their backs, or the supporting fire that was keeping the bike assault from being enveloped

and overwhelmed. They were the greatest warriors in the brotherhood, heroes of the blades, each with a dozen scrolls of poetic verse describing their deeds for the Khagan and the Emperor. Today, for the first time in many weeks, they carved deeds afresh.

*Red Berkut* added a kill tally of its own. The Stormtalon gunship fell from the heavens, the spore-polluted sunlight glinting from its red-and-white-dashed armour as it streaked down on Joghaten's advance route. Its screaming afterburners carried it between the circling flocks of gargoyles from where it had been holding off at high altitude, leaving the leathery-winged creatures unable to react in time as it opened up on the ground swarm.

The effect was immediate. *Red Berkut's* twin underslung assault cannons caused the gaunts ahead of Joghaten to simply disintegrate, tens of thousands of rounds shattering chitin and bone, pulping flesh, liquefying organs and churning up Darkand dirt. In just a few seconds the creatures the khan had been swinging for became nothing more than a haze of mulched organics, their vile stench penetrating even the filters of his armour recyc units.

*Red Berkut* came around. Its pilot, Dren-cho, vectored the engines and left the gunship hovering barely a hundred feet above the tip of the White Scars' charge. It opened up again, now firing ahead of Joghaten, hundreds of hot brass shell casings cascading down to clatter from the onrushing honour guard's helmets, pauldrons and bike frames. The space ahead of Joghaten opened up, a corridor of ichor-soaked earth and shuddering, unrecognisable alien remains. At the end of it the hive tyrant towered, guarded by three larger warrior xenofoms.

'Glory to the Khagan!' Joghaten roared, and twisted the right-hand throttle forward. *Whitemane* responded to his battle cry with one of its own, tearing through the corridor of annihilation ploughed by *Red Berkut's* murderous salvo. A mist of xenos body parts splattered the khan and coated his white armour in a sheen of slime, but he was far beyond caring – the culmination of this first fresh hunt was laid out before him.

The tyranid warriors shielding their tyrant moved to intercept his charge, organic bio-weapons rising. For a split second Joghaten found himself staring down their hideous contracting orifices, and saw his own death, burned through by sprays of bio-acid or riddled with borer beetles. The premonition died like the warriors – in a flash of fire – as three rockets from *Red Berkut's* skyhammer missile launcher streaked over Joghaten's head and slammed into the xenos. As the flames roiled away into nothingness all that remained were three burnt-out alien husks splayed across the blackened earth.

For a moment, the hive tyrant was alone. Joghaten struck.

The White Scar jinked his bike to the left as the towering beast lunged into his charge. It was fast, far faster than its size should allow, but Joghaten was faster. One of its upper scything talons buried itself impotently in the dirt where *Whitemane* had been a second earlier, while a set of claws raked the air above Joghaten. The White Scar bent low in his saddle to avoid the vicious swipe before rising on the bike's running tread stirrups, momentarily leaving the saddle as he slashed back across the angle he'd taken around the tyrant's right side. His tulwar kissed flesh, and then bone. With a snap the wicked blade's disruptor field sliced through one of the tyrant's four upper limbs, sending the snapping claw-hand tumbling in a gout of hissing acidic ichor.

For all its speed, the tyranid monster's size still worked against it. The bellowing xenos attempted to turn with Joghaten, but the White Scar's tight second jink left it floundering. At the same time fire from the rest of the oncoming honour guard started to batter at its left side, a hail of twin-linked bolter rounds chewing through the creature's gnarled black carapace. It shrieked with frustration as Joghaten turned around it once again, this time aiming a blow at its tail. Chogorian metal flashed, disruptor light flared, and the thick appendage was left flopping grotesquely on the trampled grass.

Joghaten's bondsmen split as they reached the combat, racing left and right to intercept the wall of gaunts now turning inwards in a frenzied effort to save their beleaguered leader. *Red Berkut* had been forced to pull away, climbing to higher altitudes as it was beset by screeching flocks of gargoyles. Their gambit had left the heroes of the Fourth Brotherhood surrounded and alone at the heart of the swarm. Joghaten knew he had a minute at most to kill the hive tyrant before its minions overran and slaughtered his honour guard, and buried him beneath an avalanche of stabbing talons and scrabbling claws.

He hit *Whitemane*'s brakes hard, auto-stabilisers compensating for the harsh jolt as he twisted the handles left, completing a full dust-streaked circuit around the tyrant. The bike's wheels gouged great furrows in the ichor-slashed Darkand soil as the bike came around, finishing with its front facing the looming monster barely half a dozen paces away. The creature stumbled slightly as it completed its own turn to face Joghaten. The khan-commander was grinning as he hit the bike dashboard's firing studs.

*Whitemane*'s twin bolters blazed, blink-locked through Joghaten's auto-senses onto the tyrant's overextended left leg. The bolters' auto-loaders rattled as they churned fire into the alien leader-beast at point-blank range; in just a few

seconds, the explosive rounds had sawed through iron-hard alien muscle and thick chitin. The tyrant let out a soul-shuddering screech as it began to topple, and there was a wet splitting sound as its fatally weakened limb snapped beneath its own weight.

Joghaten kicked his feet out of the running tread stirrups and approached the thrashing, roaring monstrosity. It was gouging great rents in the earth as it tried to drag itself towards the khan-commander, its spiny carapace and blade-claws churning up Darkand's defiled soil. There was no pain in its yellow alien eyes, nor fear, nor even fury. Only hunger. The world around Joghaten, shot through with the hammer of bolters, the shrieks of gaunts and the clash and clang of chitin and ceramite, faded away as he broke into a run.

The first of the tyrant's upper scythe-limbs was met by one of the khan's tulwars, an explosive discharge of the disruptor field jarring up Joghaten's arm and almost cutting the alien's chitin blade in two. His momentum carried him on past the downward stroke of the creature's second scythe, bringing him inside its thrashing guard. Without hesitation the khan slammed the tip of his second tulwar through the xenos' right eye, crunching through its distended skull and into its swollen brain. The beast's roar faltered and it twitched, its cranium impaled by Joghaten's blade. He thumped his second sword into its other eye, two lengths of Chogorian metal meeting in the nexus of the beast's mind. The shrieking of the swarm reached an agonising crescendo around the sphere of bloodied, churned earth. The tyrant let out one more rattling breath, and went still.

The disruptor fields on both of Joghaten's tulwars had shorted out. The khan spat and planted a boot at the base of the single wicked spike that crowned the tyrant's scalp. Then, with a grunt, he dragged both swords free, their wicked edges trailing cranial fluids and pulverised eye matter. Both blades ignited once more.

The khan's thoughts thrilled with victory. At least, to have foe-blood running from his blades, to have their corpses laid out on the dirt before him, to have smashed this first wave of the xenos invasion – there was no greater joy. Joghaten let out a whoop as his brothers finished the slaughter.

Around the leader-beast's carcass the battle had turned. The wall of stabbing talons and snapping maws that had been slowly constricting against the tight perimeter established by the honour guard had gone, the pressure abruptly easing as the xenos plunged their claws into one another.

'They've gone feral,' Dorich called, the emchi's white armour so befouled by

ichor it looked as though he'd been stained head to foot by purple *chinyua*.

'Ajinai,' Joghaten voxed, turning in a slow circle as he surveyed the scattering horde around him. 'What do you see?'

'*The swarm is breaking apart,*' the tactical squad türüch replied, surveying the plain from the slight rise where his brethren had been laying down supporting fire. '*It seems like every beast for itself, khan-commander.*'

'Dren-cho?' Joghaten asked, patching the Stormtalon pilot in over the net.

'*It's true, khan-commander,*' Dren-cho replied. '*Even their sky flock is scattering.*'

Joghaten looked up, and saw his wind-brother was right. Like the gaunts on the ground, the gargoyles had lost all the single-minded coordination that had made them so deadly. Now they were starting to spread across the heavens in all directions, *Red Berkut* picking off individuals with chattering bursts of assault cannon fire.

'The synapse link is broken,' Joghaten said. 'They will become disorganised.'

A stray hormagaunt leapt at the honour guard and was tackled by Khuchar, the champion physically bearing the hissing alien to the ground and snapping its neck. Another tried to dodge past, heading for the open steppe beyond Yellow River's dry basin. Joghaten beheaded it with a contemptuous swipe.

'Consolidate on my position,' he ordered. 'Brother Hobgetur, bring your flamer to the fore.'

As the strike force advanced down from the rise and the honour guard bent to wipe clean blades, armour, gears and treads, Joghaten switched vox frequencies. He had to find out how the second strike force was faring to the south, at the Hills of the Broken Bones.

### **The Hills of the Broken Bones, Darkand**

It was a pitched battle. The demi-ordu commanded by Chokda and Changadai was fully engaged, and close to being overrun by the second xenos swarm. Only Hagai, considering his Land Speeder's height, had spotted their potential salvation – a long scar of yellowing earth and dry grass running along the right of the tyranid flank.

Timchet shifted his arc of fire right, catching a group of hormagaunts as they leapt for Chaplain Changadai's bike. The xenos came apart amidst the flurry of heavy bolts, their remains splattering the skull-helmed White Scar's left side. Changadai didn't notice – he was swinging right, his crozius arcanum a golden blur as its blunt mace head pulverised one snapping, lunging gaunt after another.

Although they were on different vox frequencies, Timchet fancied he could hear the Chaplain roaring the name of the Chapter's long-lost primarch, even over the shriek of *Wind Tamer's* turbofans.

'If you're wrong about this, they'll all die,' he said.

'When was I last wrong about anything,' Hagai said, as he pushed the skimmer's acceleration to its edge, the powerful Gs battling with the twin pilots' armour and restraint harnesses.

'You were wrong about Konchen losing to Surii's dice,' Timchet said as he dragged the heavy bolter round to compensate for the increased speed. 'And you were wrong about Boral beating Uygur on the sparring mats. And this time you were wrong about the warp jump's time approximation variance.'

'You fire the bolter,' Hagai said. 'And I'll fly the skimmer, understood, wind-brother?'

Timchet didn't respond, already firing once more in support of the assault bikes below. In advising them to turn right, Hagai had likely saved the lives of Chokda and the rest of the mounted strike force. The swarm had responded sluggishly to the sudden, sharp change in direction, no longer pressing the White Scars now that they weren't offering a direct threat to the maleceptor. The momentary decrease in the ferocious coordination of the swarm had allowed the bikes to pull away, though hormagaunts in particular were still throwing themselves at the White Scars with the great, bounding leaps that made them so dangerous.

'They're moving in behind,' Hagai said to Chokda over the vox. 'Cutting you off.'

He was right. While the swarm was no longer flinging itself at the bikes, they had moved around and beneath their current route, fully separating them from the Devastators and Tactical Marines holding the rise overlooking the combat. The only way to escape now was to continue straight onwards – towards a canyon concealed by the dry earth of the steppe grasslands. After Jaga's death, the entire brotherhood had been warned about the dangers of hidden sinkholes out on the plains.

'Use your firepower to keep herding them after us,' Chokda instructed tersely over the vox, addressing both *Wind Tamer* and the Devastators. 'We'll only get one chance at this.'

Timchet did as directed, picking off the stragglers below and leaving the gaunts pressing close on the strike force's tyres. The entire swarm was being drawn after the assault bikes, its centre dragged south-west by the new angle adopted by Chokda. The maleceptor was no longer at its heart, but was close to being left

in its outer orbit, lumbering to keep pace with its underlings even as it drove them relentlessly after Chokda's harried bikers. Another White Scar had fallen, his bike riddled with borer beetles and his body run through multiple times with long chitin blades. Unless the swarm could be driven off or dispersed, none of the fallen brothers' gene-seed would be recovered.

'I'm coming in low,' Hagai warned as he brought *Wind Tamer* round on the tail of the swarm. Ahead Timchet could see the bikes nearing the hidden canyon's edge. Behind, frag rockets, brilliant bolts of plasma and lascannon beams from Subodak's Devastators were tearing at the edge of the alien horde, the crump of detonations and the crack of high-energy shots overlying the constant thunder of thousands of xenos hooves.

'Five seconds to the canyon's edge,' Hagai voxed, guiding the bikes from above. 'Accelerate!'

'*May the Khagan and the Emperor watch over us!*' Chokda's voice shouted over the link. Moments later Timchet heard the roar of bike engines rising above the battlefield din, and saw the surviving bikers, still led by Chokda and Changadai, ride straight at the length of dead earth. They cleared its edge, wheels spinning, dust and xenos gore streaking out behind them. Almost immediately the ground began to give way in their wake, a cascade of earth that threw up a great pall of choking, yellow dust. For a glorious moment Timchet saw the bikes suspended in mid-air, like the vengeful spirits of the eternal hunt, defying the laws of the galaxy on their long and magnificent ride. Timchet watched them clear the canyon's edge, and he gloried in the name of his Chapter and his primarch.

Chokda struck the other side of the ravine first. The impact would have likely smashed a lesser-made bike and broken bones in a mortal rider, but the White Scar's locked power plate and his mount's grav suspension and auto-stabilisers absorbed the worst of the landing. The great treads bit dirt, and the türüch roared away, his exhilarated laughter audible over the vox. Chaplain Changadai and his hunt-brothers followed, each in turn slamming down on the far side of the dividing canyon and racing for the grassy plains beyond. Behind them the full expanse of the canyon became apparent as the soil gave way to a black void, the earth shuddering at the exposure of the long fissure.

The tyrannids realised what had happened far too late. They were driven wholly by the imperatives being channelled through the maleceptor, and the lumbering beast was not wholly aware of the presence of the canyon that now carved through one flank of the battlefield. It understood thanks to the great dust cloud

and the vision of the leading edge of the swarm, but by the time its imperatives to stop had registered with its underlings the forward momentum was too great. The thick press of stampeding gaunts pitched the foremost over the canyon's newly crumbling edge, shrieking and twisting as they fell to their deaths on the jagged rocks below. Timchet watched in awe as a glittering wave of black carapace cascaded over the side of the cliff, driven to destruction by the remorseless imperatives of the hive mind.

'Told you they'd make it,' Hagai said as they tore through the dust cloud, while Chokda and his hunt-brothers brought their bikes around. For once, Timchet didn't respond. He was grinning like a freshly scarred steppe youth.

Not all of the swarm pitched itself over the edge. The rearmost, alerted by the deaths of those in front, were able to pull away in time, splitting left and right along the canyon's edge in scurried masses. Others made the jump. Dozens of those hormagaunts not forced over, but given the split second needed to bunch their thick leg muscles, leapt the divide. They cleared the far edge of the gorge and immediately continued on after the bikes, quickly becoming strung out across the grasslands.

'Let's clean them up,' Hagai said, and *Wind Tamer* dropped down to support Chokda's riders. The biker squad had completely come about and were now roaring forward to meet the hormagaunts. The Land Speeder joined them, keeping pace, barely fifty feet above the flattened grass. Timchet locked his auto-senses onto the leading xenos and opened fire.

Across the canyon the Devastators and Tactical Marines were clearing up the remains of the swarm. It had swung about in confusion, the central controlling consciousness now uncertain whether to turn its attack towards the ridge line, or cluster defensively around the maleceptor. Controlled bursts of long-range bolter fire supported by the heavy weapons specialists of Subodak's squad whittled down their remaining numbers remorselessly, leaving twitching, blown-apart xenos corpses scattered around the thicker clusters from Chokda's first charge.

The hormagaunts left stranded on the far side of the canyon met the same fate. Scattered and no longer a coordinated mass, the firepower from the bikes and Timchet's heavy bolters wiped them out. Hagai climbed away up and over the gorge, leaving Chokda and his brothers to pick off the last of the xenos. The White Scars whooped and laughed as they caught the surviving disorientated beasts, putting them down with crunching impacts from their bikes or vicious slashes of daos and chainswords.

'*Targeting the leader-beast,*' said Subodak over the vox. The commander of the

Devastators had turned his firepower against the maleceptor on his own initiative, no longer viewing the remains of the swarm as a threat. The gigantic tyrannid lowed and shuddered under the successive strikes of krak missiles, plasma bolts and lascannon beams, the psychic shield that protected it quickly overloading. A las-bolt seared into one of its throbbing brain lobes, bursting the grey matter in a hideous shower and slicing straight out the other side. A krak missile buried itself between the creature's thick rib plates, blasting a chunk with the mass of a grown human away in a spray of ichor and torn organs. The thing went down on its knees, phantom tendrils whipping the air in pain and distress, the gaunts around it shrieking in panicked impotence.

The killing blow was a las-bolt to the head. It struck the dying monster in its right eye, blasting its thick skull out of the back of its head. The beast finally collapsed with earth-shuddering force, the last of its minions crunched beneath its weight. A congratulatory cheer went up over the vox at the las-shot's precision.

'Lucky,' Timchet grunted. Hagai laughed.

'Jealously does not become you, brother.'

'I will keep my heavy bolter, thank you. Suhtar's lascannon takes too long to recharge.'

*'Move down onto the plain,'* crackled Chokda's voice. *'Slaughter the wounded and start burning pods that have yet to burst. Yes, even you, Suhtar. You can boast to the khan-commander all you want when we rejoin the rest of the brotherhood.'*

Chokda and his bikes had ridden around the freshly opened gorge and were now rejoining the battlefield. The infantry had begun to move down amidst the bodies, crushing the skulls of twitching aliens beneath their boots. A combat squad moved immediately to retrieve the bodies of Karro'sai and his pilot from the remains of *Spear of the Khagan*, along with those bikers who had fallen in the initial charge. Emperor willing, their gene-seed was unharmed. Hagai pulled *Wind Tamer* up, circling the battlefield and providing overwatch.

'Word from the khan-commander,' the pilot said to Timchet, listening in over the open command frequency. 'He too has triumphed.'

'When does he not?' Timchet replied, but Hagai wasn't listening. The gunner twisted in his harness to regard his co-pilot.

'A distress sigil,' Hagai said, indicating a rune that had lit up on the dashboard's long-range auspex viewscreen.

'To the north-west?' Timchet said, frowning. 'There are no squads out in that

direction, certainly not that far from the Founding Wall.’

Hagai didn’t respond immediately, checking the location beacons of the rest of the brotherhood in-between visual scans of the surrounding airspace.

‘*Red Berkut* is with the khan-commander, and *Fury, Lord of the Sky* and *Lightning Death* are both clearing up a stray flock of flying beasts to the south-east,’ the pilot said, identifying the location of the brotherhood’s Stormhawks and Stormtalon.

‘What about Emtich and Rondai?’ Timchet asked, referring to the pilots of the brotherhood’s third Land Speeder, *Tulwar of the Wind*.

‘Protecting the main migration route to the Founding Wall from xenos stragglers,’ Hagai said, consulting the auspex again. ‘Wait, I think I have it.’

The pilot was silent for a moment before cursing.

‘What is it?’

‘That haunted fool Feng. He’s still with one of the nomad tribes trying to reach the wall. They’ve been spotted by a secondary swarm. Some place listed as Juben’s Gorge.’

‘He’s alone?’

‘His squadron are here riding with Chokda. He was supposed to report back over an hour ago.’

‘Wind Tamer, *come in,*’ clicked a voice over the vox. It was the khan-commander’s. Hagai and Timchet exchanged a glance.

‘Here, khan-commander,’ Hagai responded.

‘*I am reading a distress sigil north-west of your position. You are the closest unengaged flyer.*’

‘Yes, khan-commander,’ Hagai said, bringing *Wind Tamer* around. ‘We’re already on our way.’

### **Juben’s Gorge, Darkand**

For a few minutes, the bolters kept them at bay. Feng kept both firing studs depressed, the bike linked to his auto-senses. The twin bolters mounted on the shield screen could only be moved left or right with a turn of the front wheel, but in the narrowness of the canyon it didn’t matter. The gaunts coming at Feng had no room to manoeuvre, channelled by the rough yellow Darkand stone either side of them. The steady stream of bolts punched through black exoskeletons and skulls, blasting great chunks of flesh and chitin from the onrushing swarm.

The thunder of the two weapons echoed back relentlessly from the sides of the gorge, drowning the hissing and scrabbling of the swarm and making the dirt and

stones underfoot leap with every double discharge. At Feng's advice the tribesmen beside and behind him had torn strips from their undershirts and stuffed them in their ears, but still their faces were creased with discomfort. Feng had simply removed the sound from his Lyman's ear.

The bolters had reaped a high tally, but they would not be enough to stop the swarm. Feng had deliberately left the lictor's head lashed to the front of his bike, hoping its pheromones would channel the xenos down the gorge rather than allow them to go around and cut them off at the other end of the pass. It seemed the ploy had worked a little too well – the swarm was numerous. Every xenos that went down, cut open by bolter shells, was a step closer, the sheer mass meaning that the corpses of those gunned down absorbed more bolts before they were finally dragged under and trampled by those behind. The gaunts rose like an onrushing flood, skittering and scrambling over one another and scraping along the sides of the gorge, their only thoughts to rend and tear the flesh of the prey trapped ahead.

Eventually, the swarm only a few more lunges away, Feng dismounted and triggered his guan dao.

'With me,' he shouted over the thunder of the coming xenos, and gestured at the two tribesmen either side of him, Gochet and Torman. Together, the three warriors stepped past Feng's bike and met the rolling tide.

When he had first seen the Sky Warrior kill, Gochet had imagined he would never live to see something more terrifying, or more majestic. He knew now that he had been wrong. He and Torman hung two paces back from the giant in white, as he had instructed them. Gochet saw why – with a single, vast blow of his magic-wreathed glaive, the giant cut the space before him from one cliff face to the other, slicing half a dozen leaping fanged void-yaksha in half. Stinking, steaming purple blood immediately painted the giant and the dust under his huge boots.

The things behind the first row of bisected void-yaksha came on regardless. They seemed to possess no fear for the god that had just cut down a whole clutch of their brood kin. Cholek, the Beged's wizened shaman, had described them as relatives to the reptors that had once dragged away Gochet's grandmother. Certainly the single-mindedness and eerie coordination of these monsters were not unlike the discipline displayed by the terrible steppe lizards.

Such thoughts had occupied the tribesman's mind since he had first seen the half-invisible monster by the light of the campfires the night before. The eternal

battle in the heavens, where the Sky Warriors fought the void-daemons and stopped them from devouring the world, had finally come down to the steppes. Now all reasoning fled as the first monster lunged at him.

It was wounded. It had been clipped by a stroke of the Sky Warrior's huge, crackling weapon, and half its head was a mangled, oozing mess. That it was still moving was a testament to the power of whatever hungry god was driving these things. It used its vast talons to haul itself forward, passing unnoticed beneath the white giant's guard as he slashed and stabbed the things in front of him. Then, with a burst of frenzied speed that belied its wounded state, it leapt up at Gochet.

Suddenly, the horror of what he was fighting faded. There was no more time for fear or confusion. His instincts – the natural reflexes of a warrior who had been fighting for his tribe on horse and on foot for nearly three decades – took over completely. His spear came up in time to meet the lunging beast, catching it in the gullet just below its distended maw. The thing's own momentum drove it onto the weapon's honed tip, and Gochet braced his feet, side on to it, absorbing the force of the leap and holding his weapon firm as it twitched and scrabbled. Its great, hideous talons sliced the air impotently until finally its soulless black eyes glazed over. It slumped, slipping back off the spear.

He had no time for elation, or even relief. Beside him Torman was fighting for his life. Another of the void-yaksha had managed to slide past the Sky Warrior's glaive and almost had Torman down on his knees. The Beged tribesman had dropped his spear and now held both the beast's forearms by the flesh just below its talons, the wicked lengths of hardened bone gleaming inches from Torman's throat. It was snapping at his straining face with its fangs as well, driven wild by the desire to rip apart the tribesman's flesh.

With a bellow of effort, Gochet ploughed his spear into the void-yaksha's flank. The blade jarred off a rib before finding leathery, purple flesh. Gochet snarled and forced the weapon deeper, puncturing unnatural organs and causing the thing to drag away from Torman. The sudden motion pulled Gochet off balance, and he had to yank hard at his weapon to free it.

A blow to the torso would have left most creatures weak and dying, yet the void-yaksha seemed almost unharmed. It went for Torman again as Gochet tried desperately to retrieve his spear. This time, it caught him. One of its long talons sliced through the tribesman's abdomen as Gochet's spear tip clattered off the monster's hardened shell. Torman went down, impaled, blood flowing from his mouth and matting in his beard. Bellowing with fury and denial, Gochet thrust

his spear again. This time he went for its throat, the way the Sky Warrior had told them to, angling the thrust down between the black plates protecting the thing's back.

The strike was a good one. Gochet felt a solid crunch as his weapon pierced bone, severing the point where the creature's skull met its spine. The thing went immediately limp, slumping in the dirt. Torman slid free of its talon.

'Gochet!'

The shout came from Damur, old Kal-chi's son. They had battled side by side for as long as Gochet could remember. Now his hunt-brother came to his rescue once more, leaping from the reserve to drive his spear through the eye of another void-yaksha. The thing had fought past the white giant while Gochet had been avenging Torman. Now it shuddered, impaled, its talons mere inches from Gochet's leather hauberk. He dragged his spear from the dead void-yaksha at his feet and plunged it into the throat of the one caught by Damur.

There was no time for thanks. One of the things battling the Sky Warrior had raised its forearms, fused together into a hideous, pulsing cone of flesh. As Gochet and Damur twisted their spears free from its brood kin's corpse, the thing clenched and spat. A dozen black shapes were launched from the sucking orifices dotting the obscene growth. They hit Damur squarely, the impact sending him staggering.

'Brother,' Gochet said, snatching Damur's shoulder to steady him. There was no visible sign of what the black pellets had done to him, at least for the first few seconds. Then the tribesman started to scream, and Gochet realised they weren't pellets at all.

They were insects. Black and glittering, not unlike one of the large, hooked steppe beetles the Yarri tribeswomen sold, cooked on sharpened sticks. These creatures, however, were altogether more vicious. As Gochet watched he saw one dig itself into the exposed flesh of Damur's throat, driving its scuttling body directly into the tribesman and disappearing from sight. Others had bored through the leather of his hauberk and into his chest.

'Get them off me!' Damur was screaming, dropping his spear and clutching at his armour. For the first time in his life, Gochet found himself frozen with horror, unable to do anything but stare at the parts of Damur's flesh that distended and writhed with the creatures' subdermal burrowing. The Begeg warrior collapsed to his knees, his screams choking out as blood burst from his mouth and nose. They were eating him alive, from the inside out.

Too late, Gochet heard the thud of hooves. His instincts kicked in with enough

time for him to turn, but not enough time to deflect the scything talon. It ploughed into his stomach, jarring off his spine and stabbing out from his back. At first, the impact drove him back a pace and forced the wind from his lungs. Then the pain hit.

The snarling void-yaksha dragged its bone-blade free. Another Beged warrior, Hular, was rushing towards it, bellowing, spear levelled. For some reason, Gochet couldn't hear the shout. The chaotic noise, confined by the rock walls either side, seemed to have faded. He didn't even know if he was screaming.

He realised he was on his knees. Both hands were clenched around the wound in his stomach, slippery and red, pressing hard as though by doing so they would squeeze out the agony. He'd been hurt before, a distant thought reminded him. Hurt before, but never like this.

His strength had vanished. He hit the dirt, gasping for breath. Blood, coppery and thick, choked him. The detached part of his failing mind wondered whether Damur was dead yet. He hoped so. He hoped he would see him again soon, along with Torman.

As he lay, bleeding to death, his last sight was of the Sky Warrior. Even as the Beged had struggled and died against the horrors from beyond the stars their champion had fought on, not giving an inch of ground, planted as surely as the Founding Wall that circled the slope-city. The great glaive was still in his hands, wreathed in the energies of the gods, every stroke cutting down two of three of the terrors Gochet and his brothers had fallen to. His white armour was befouled from helm to boot in the stinking, steaming viscera of the beasts, and talons and claws had scarred it in innumerable places, yet if he was hurt the giant showed no sign of it. He fought and killed, fought and killed, while those he had come down to protect died. Gochet knew he would not stop until every monster lay carved apart at his feet.

After a lifetime of war and conflict, Gochet spent his final few moments at peace, knowing that the gods themselves now fought on the side of the Beged.

The tribesmen fought on against the monsters flooding the gorge. They did so with the fury and bravery of warriors protecting their mothers, wives and daughters, each one stepping forward through the narrow canyon to take the place of a fallen brother. Ultimately, though, they were just men, and poorly armed and armoured ones at that. They managed to kill perhaps a little over a dozen hormagaunts and termagants before the last tribesman finally died, run through and then stabbed violently to death by a pack of half a dozen frenzied

swarm creatures.

After that, Feng was alone. Still he fought. He'd stopped looking at the kill tally in his visor's top left display. His muscles burned with exertion and his servos were whirring and clicking, the friction of his constant movement heating the under layers of his power armour despite its coolant systems. Despite the reactive grip and automatic clamping of his gauntlet, it was becoming difficult to keep a firm grasp of his guan dao. The whole weapon, from haft tassel to the disruptor field node just below the crossguard, was slick with alien ichor.

They'd caught him in three places – right hip joint, right elbow, and a talon that had struck with such force it had managed to penetrate his breastplate. None of the wounds were serious and all had clotted already, his Larraman cells more than a match for the injuries. Nonetheless, he didn't need the vital signs blinking on the edges of his display to tell him he was starting to falter. It had been half an hour since the first creature had fallen beneath his lance. He could not resist the tide for much longer – the wall of xenos dead he'd heaped up was now almost as tall as him, even while it was being continuously crushed and broken by the wild motions of those pushing in from behind. The physical weight of the swarm pressing in against him was pushing both his body and his armour to their limits. Even the gulley seemed to be suffering – the fury of the combat was shaking loose stones from its flanks, bouncing and clattering from gnarled xenos carapace.

Help was still at least fifteen minutes away. An automated scrawl had told him that *Wind Tamer* had been dispatched from an engagement to the south-east, and was on its way. If those ever-quarrelling fools Hagai and Timchet managed to put aside their discourse long enough to reach him in the next quarter of an hour, all estimates said he'd be dead by then anyway.

And in a way, that realisation did not distress Feng. Even now he was not alone, not truly. In the snatches between each kill he caught glimpses of his squad – his old squad, his brothers. They stood together, all four of them, watching him fight in silence from the top of the cliff to his right. Where normally their presence brought him a chilling dislocation, now, for the first time, knowing they were near gave him a deep sensation of harmony. Soon he would join them, and they would hunt together once more, as they had done on the endless Plain Zhou so many years before.

Feng snatched a lunging hormagaunt by the throat, his reflexes a match for the alien's lightning-swift strike. He snapped its neck with a twist of his wrist and flung it back into its brood kin. He had hoped the second's respite earned by the

thrashing xenos would give him long enough to adjust his stance before they came at him again. As it was, he needn't have worried.

The swarm had stopped. Those gaunts nearest to him stood perfectly still, sinuous tongues lolling from between wicked fangs, their black eyes glazed. There was suddenly no sound other than the rasping of alien breaths and the occasional clatter of dislodged stone. The silence and the stillness was unnerving.

After a moment, the reason for the unnatural pause became apparent. The leader of the swarm was approaching. Not leader, Feng realised. Leaders.

It was not some monstrosity, but a trio of tyranid warriors. They were the least powerful of the synapse creatures that coordinated any tyranid attack, but they were still deadly beasts, standing head and shoulders above a Space Marine. Their shrieks, deeper than the gaunts surrounding them, had quelled the swarm. Now they pushed their way past their minion-beasts, glittering black eyes locked on the lone warrior that dared bar their passage to the prey.

Feng smiled as they approached, not the mirthful look of a White Scar standing triumphant over his foes, but a cold, tight-lipped expression of hatred. He had resisted the swarm for so long, and killed so much of it, that its leaders were now prepared to face him personally. That the brotherhood would never know of the honour his defiance had won was not important – his brothers, Ajai, Tenjin, Oyuun and long-lost Tayang, would see him. They would know. They would welcome him, now that his time had finally come.

The tyranid warriors were too broad for any more than one at a time to pass down the gorge towards Feng. The first came forward with a step that was altogether more deliberate and measured than the stampeding of its underlings, a forked tongue flicking out to taste the dry air, like a *gaja* lizard on distant Chogoris. The hormagaunts and termagants scraped their chitin against the canyon's flanks in their efforts to make way, nodding their crested heads at the warrior's passing like beasts acknowledging the presence of a pack alpha. Feng spread his arms, still smiling, alien viscera dripping slowly from his body.

There was a clatter off to his right. More stones falling from the cliff face. Feng looked up. His smile faded. His hunt-brothers had gone from the top of the canyon's right-hand side. It could not be. They had come here for him. He was ready. His time had come. At least, he was going to rejoin them and their unity would again be complete. They could not leave him, not again, not now.

The stones falling from the gorge's flanks became rocks, harder and heavier. A gaunt shrieked as it was crushed, its back snapped by the boulder dislodged from

the canyon's side. It was joined by another, and then another. The clatter rose to a din, and the truth became undeniable – the cliff face in front and to Feng's right was collapsing.

The tyranids realised the danger they were in too late. The swarm's unified consciousness was focused entirely on Feng. He had made everything difficult, but they were being drawn on, drawn to the prey like bloodtails to fresh meat. Overcoming this one last obstacle meant everything. And because of that the swarm found itself trapped.

After the initial dislocation, the collapse occurred with terrifying rapidity. A great chunk of stone near the top of the cliff, close to where Feng's brothers had been, crumbled and came away, ricocheting down the rock face with earth-shattering force. It slammed into a clutch of gaunts close to Feng, flattening them without ceremony and sending a hail of rock fragments, grit and dust slamming along the canyon's bottom. Even with his armour locked and auto-stabilisers activated, Feng was knocked back momentarily onto one knee.

Now an unsupported overhang, the top section of the canyon, swiftly followed. It dragged the whole cliff down with it, a thunderous cascade that tumbled down upon the shrieking tyranids. The warriors went with the rest, lost entirely to the freak avalanche. Feng took a pace back as rocks the size of his clenched fist battered and scored his armour. Alarm systems pinged as his auto-senses registered multiple impacts and damage points – barely an inch of the front of his white battleplate wasn't scarred or dented.

Finally, the collapsed stone settled. The last long echoes of the rockslide clapped away up the gorge, leaving behind only the occasional rattle of loose fragments. The dust began to clear. Feng's optics pierced the worst of it, revealing the carnage wreaked by the collapse. The swarm was gone, crushed and buried, no trace of it remaining amidst the jagged mound of yellow stone the northern half of the canyon had become. The sudden lack of motion, of movement, of life where once there had been so much of it was unnerving.

He looked up at what had been the right-hand side of the canyon, now reduced to a sagging ramp of rubble. Its top was bare, the spore-choked skies visible beyond. There was no sign of his dead brothers.

He stood for long minutes, feeling his secondary heart slow and settle, sensing the combat stimms and adrenaline easing from his battle-fired veins and muscles. It was the vox that brought him back. It clicked in his ear, demanding his attention. The icon on his visor told him it was *Wind Tamer*.

'Feng,' he said, opening the link.

*‘Honoured türüch, we are inbound. What is your status?’*

‘Secure,’ Feng said, looking once more at the carpet of shattered stone that had once been the canyon floor. ‘By the Khagan’s will, the xenos are no more.’

*‘We are passing a column of Darkand tribespeople. It appears they are under attack. Will your status allow us to divert?’*

‘The column is under attack?’ Feng demanded. ‘From what?’

*‘A single xenofom. The scans are reading it as a lictor. If we don’t intercede immediately it will slaughter the entire tribe.’*

‘Do it,’ Feng said. He had already slung his guan dao and was running, back towards where his bike waited, the dead bodies of the Begeg warriors and the tyrannids they’d taken with them heaped around it.

It wasn’t the lictor’s severed head mounted on his bike that had first drawn the swarm. There had been a second lictor, a second murderous xenos chameleon in the mycetic spore he had first seen in the Begeg encampment. He had believed the threat ended. He’d been wrong.

The roar of his bike filled the broken canyon as Lau Feng raced east.

Yenneth watched the battered and bloodied mon-keigh warrior depart. She stood near the edge of the canyon’s southern cliff face, the steppe wind twitching at her blue-and-yellow robes and soul charms, shielded from the senses by an invisible sphere of deflective psychic energy. Beneath her, scattered among the rocks trailing along the cliff’s edge, were Pathfinder Roneth’s outcasts. The rangers preferred their chameleon cloaks to Yenneth’s seer spells, their shrouded forms blending seamlessly into the dusty yellow stone around them.

*‘Was that necessary, honoured farseer?’* Roneth asked over the link. Few aeldari would have addressed a member of Iyanden’s seer council so brusquely, but the rangers answered to no one, least of all Roneth. He had been walking the path of the outcast for at least as long as Yenneth had trod that of the seer.

‘It was,’ she answered. ‘The thread of that mon-keigh was fixed in place. If it were snapped, our task here would become almost impossible.’

*‘Perhaps that would be better, for us all.’*

‘Perhaps, pathfinder, but perhaps not. There are few absolutes in the universe. I deal only with varying degrees of likelihood. And upon those degrees, the mon-keigh must live at least a while longer.’

Roneth did not reply. Yenneth surveyed her handiwork – the shattered gorge beneath. She had observed the mon-keigh warriors from the moment they had passed into the canyon. Their stand had been undertaken with their usual

attributes, a savagery that was disgusting yet effective. Not effective enough, however, to see the group's leader survive until help arrived. The eldar farseer had been forced to intervene, summoning her eldritch strength and using it to prise a great boulder away from the canyon's flank. The ensuing rockslide had pounded the tyranid swarm into oblivion. It had taken a great deal of focus and control to ensure the collapse did not spread, or catch the lone mon-keigh up in its crushing embrace.

Now he was safe, returning to the ones he had been trying to protect, not realising they were already dead. Yenneth's intervention would be enough, for now. She still had to weave together the threads representing her actions with those of the mon-keigh. Time, such as it was, had almost run out. A different, more direct approach was necessary.

'Back to the portal,' the farseer ordered. The rangers responded without question, five jagged boulders suddenly transforming into lean, patchwork-clad figures as they threw back their capes and rose. Roneth and his outcasts closed around Yenneth as she retreated towards the shimmering patch of light, barely discernible amidst an outcrop of boulders a hundred yards back from the canyon's edge.

If the mon-keigh seer would not countenance an alliance, perhaps their blade-master would.

The aeldari stepped through the patch of haze and, like a mirage losing its grip on consciousness, they flickered from existence. The shimmer was gone, leaving behind only the steppe wind sighing in the long grass.

*Trying to fight them is like counting the grains of sand on the shore. Better you burn your own homestead, your own city, your own world and everyone you know, than allow yourselves to be consumed.*

– Inquisitor Syllas Vult,  
Ordo Xenos, just prior to the  
Entharian Exterminatus



## CHAPTER NINE

### THE GREAT DEVOURER

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 29 HOURS.  
TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **East of Juben's Gorge, Darkand**

He was too late to save the Beged.

Lau Feng knelt beside the lictor's corpse. There wasn't a great deal of it remaining. *Wind Tamer* had riddled it with heavy bolter rounds, blasting away limbs and gristly pieces of torso. The split-open carcass was still smoking. Feng looked into its eyes. They were black, glassy, unreal-looking. Even in life, they had no soul. Without the hive mind, they were nothing.

The White Scar stood slowly, servos in his armour clicking. The creature lay at the heart of a jagged pattern of death it had woven about itself. The remains of the Beged tribe stretched out around him, massacred. With their most experienced warriors fighting and dying alongside Feng in the canyon, there had been none capable of stopping the xenos assassin when it had struck.

There were bloodflies buzzing around the slaughtered tribesfolk lying nearby, but no insect or vermin would touch the tyrannid's corpse. It lay undefiled, alien in every sense of the word. It had killed about half of the tribe before *Wind Tamer* had ended its rampage; not all the Beged had been slaughtered – many

had scattered, terrified of the creature that suddenly appeared in their midst. They were as good as dead though, spread out and lost across the grasslands. The xenos would find and tear them apart one by one.

‘Brother türüch,’ said a voice, starting Feng from his dark thoughts. *Wind Tamer*’s gunner, Timchet, had approached him without his knowledge. The Land Speeder was idle a few dozen paces from the body-littered track, awaiting fresh orders.

‘You are unharmed, brother?’ Timchet went on. The gunner would know from his own auto-sense scans that very little of the blood on Feng’s armour was his own, but he clearly wished for a reason to address the squad leader.

‘I am,’ Feng said, looking back at the lictor’s remains.

‘The entire brotherhood is assembling before the Founding Wall,’ Timchet went on. ‘*Wind Tamer* could escort you, if you wish.’

‘No,’ Feng said. ‘I will make my own way.’

Timchet lingered for a moment longer before turning and walking back to his Land Speeder. The skimmer departed with a screech of turbofans, the steppe grass rippling in its wake. Silence descended after it had gone, Feng’s only companion the whisper of the wind. And the four corpses looking at him.

He glanced up to the sky. It was not long after noon, and yet the sun’s light was weak, diluted by the alien filth choking Darkand’s atmosphere. The hive fleet’s grip on the stricken world was tightening. Eventually, the White Scar turned and mounted his bike.

There was another wave coming.

### **The Mountain Gate, Heavenfall**

The Great Devourer had arrived in full. The khan of the Fourth Brotherhood watched as Darkand’s skies convulsed. They were clear and open no more – the heavens had been infested, a thousand alien bio-ships occupying upper orbit like fleshy growths. The flanks of the hideous xenos organisms rippled and pulsed with peristaltic motion as they spat wave after wave of mycetic spores down through the upper atmosphere. Cicatrix was seeding Darkand, ripening it for annihilation.

Joghaten saw the second wave filling the skies from the primary gatehouse of the Founding Wall. Below him stretched a river of human misery and fear – the tribes of Darkand, returning to Heavenfall. Over a dozen had arrived in the last hour alone, choking the routes into the slope-city and flooding its gateways. The Pinnacle Guard had been deployed in strength both inside and just beyond the

wall, their orders to keep the columns moving and stop them turning against one another in fear and anger. Behind, up the tower slope, the lower streets of the city were filling with a swelling tide of men, women and children, along with their herds. Few of the beasts brought by the tribes could be accommodated within the wall – under the eyes of Pinnacle Guard squads, herds of yats and ux were released. There wasn't even time to cull them, they were simply set loose on the steppe. Even the tribe's precious horses weren't all spared. There had been arguments and threats of violence from the tribes, but the presence of the White Scars, scattered among the slowly converging columns, ensured that eventually the tribespeople complied. Joghaten knew that the nomadic peoples of Darkand would suffer many years of famine and poverty because of what was happening today.

Assuming any of them survived.

'*Khan-commander, we are in position,*' voxed Subodak, commander of one of the brotherhood's two Devastator squads. Joghaten acknowledged with a blink-click of his visor display. A few hundred yards from the base of the wall's outer las bastions, the Fourth Brotherhood was assembling. The two Devastator squads had established a firebase on a low rise overlooking the main route to the gatehouse, white-plated Rhinos idling in the shadow of the hill's reverse slope. The tactical squads not seconded to Qui'sin's protection in the city had set up in support, guarding the base of the rise. To their right flank, close to the road and the column of tribespeople flooding it, the brotherhood's bike squadrons were still drawing up. Lau Feng had only just rejoined his hunt-brothers. The pilots of the Land Speeder *Wind Tamer* had reported that the haunted türüch had been trying to protect one of the farther-out tribal convoys. He had been unsuccessful, it seemed, and his delay had left his squadron relying on Chokda's leadership during the opening skirmishes. Joghaten would need to speak with him personally again, when time allowed.

The shriek of engines momentarily engulfed the khan as *Lord of the Sky* roared overhead, kicking a swirl of dust from the parapets of the Mountain Gate and tugging at his lar'ix furs. The Stormhawk banked north beyond the wall, running parallel to it, its snub-nosed shadow darting along the plain beneath. Bar the Thunderhawks that had remained with the fleet, most of the brotherhood's air power was aloft, watching over the last of the tribal columns straggling in from the steppes. Not all the nomads would make it – out beyond the horizon a storm was building.

From his vantage point atop the gate Joghaten could see black clouds

coalescing, shot through with occasional bolts of purple lightning. The air was heavier than ever with xenos spores – the Pinnacle Guard had donned their respirators, and the tribespeople were already suffering from raw eyes, red skin and breathing difficulties. The tyranids were polluting Darkand, but it was as nothing to the swarm seedings currently happening across the farthest reaches of the plains.

Joghaten had a direct link to the Darkand augur arrays, sited high up on the slope-city's flanks. They were detecting tens of thousands of large orbital entries to the west, north and south, bombarding the open steppe just beyond the horizon. The khan already knew what such readings meant – the primary invasion was underway. The two swarms already picked off by the Fourth Brotherhood had been small-scale scouting operations, designed to ascertain the level of resistance and confirm the findings of the vanguard organisms. The true swarms, many thousands of times larger, were now landing, a deluge of mycetic spores disgorging wave after wave of chittering weapon-organisms and their larger leader-beasts. They would be moving on the Founding Wall in a matter of hours.

Joghaten's visor pinged. After over twenty minutes, his uplink had finally established a connection with the *Pride of Chogoris*. He opened the channel and was greeted by Tzu Shen.

'It does me well to hear you again, voyagemaster,' the khan said, eyes still on the distant thunderhead that stained the horizon from end to end.

'*And I you, earth-brother,*' Shen responded, voice chopped and distorted. '*We are holding position along the system's coreward edge. The xenos have committed wholly to the planetary invasion, they haven't troubled us yet. How do things fair dirtside?*'

'As well as can be expected. We are still relocating the tribesfolk. Those that haven't joined us by now are lost. The Devourer has begun its primary planetfall.'

'*Then it is time for the next phase?*'

'Yes, voyagemaster. Let us begin.'

*I don't know how they carried on. Ten thousand to one, it must have been. I'm not ashamed to tell you the truth, any of us would have just laid down our lasrifles and let them tear us apart. But they're not like us. They're nothing like us.*

– Corporal Torchim Drang,  
401st Battalion, Darkand  
Planetary Defence Force



## CHAPTER TEN

### THE BATTLE OF THE FOUNDING WALL

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 15 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **Outside the Founding Wall, Heavenfall**

The tyrannids came with the dawn. The night had been a dark one, Darkand's three moons obscured by the hive fleet's presence. The last of the surviving tribes had straggled in, terrified and exhausted. The Pinnacle Guard had finished its deployments along the wall. There had been no word from Commander Harren. The entire city was tense, poised on the edge of anarchy.

Joghaten had put it all to the back of his mind and focused on the specifics of the coming battle. The plan he had discussed with his squad leaders was an old Chogorian steppe ploy, as simple as it was effective. It was the *khan alakh*, the king killer, and Joghaten knew that it was their only chance of survival, let alone victory.

The brotherhood's defence was based around the dismounted Devastator and tactical squads, deployed on their shallow rise just outside the Founding Wall's Mountain Gate. They were supported by the brotherhood's armour – three Predators, a Vindicator, two Land Raiders and a Whirlwind – and by the two jump pack-equipped assault squads stationed on the wall's forward bastions. The

bikes and Land Speeders had been grouped on the right flank, along with Joghaten's own bondsmen. It was not a conventional defensive formation, but the White Scars were rarely known for either convention or defence, especially when it came to the Master of Blades.

Joghaten spent the night passing through the battle lines, speaking to each hunt-brother in turn. In the distance thunder continued to rumble, the ominous crashes lit with distant flares of hideous pink lightning. There were other noises too, carried on the humid, spore-choked wind – shrieks and ululating cries, and occasionally a deep, resonating bellow. The sounds were bestial, alien, and caused even the Space Marines to adopt a sombre mood. The hunting kindred spoke quietly among themselves as the hours wore on until someone, probably Jamek or Surbach, started the *khoomei*.

The primal sound rose quickly, passing like a lit flame in dry steppe grass from one squad to the next. It was a throat-chant, the form of song practised by the tribes of the Plain Zhou. It was the sound of distant Chogoris, brought here to its honour world. The throbbing baseline pitched and rolled across the grasslands and out into the night, steadily lowering, rising and lowering again, accompanied by the rhythmic slapping of gauntlets into breastplates and pauldrons. Despite himself, Joghaten found himself smiling by the time he had rejoined his honour guard, on the far right of the battle line.

Whatever happened, it was good to hunt with brothers such as these. He was guilty of forgetting that sometimes, when the weight of command dragged his spirit down. Now there was nothing between him and the hunt, nothing to cloud the reason for his existence.

A sickly, yellow dawn light revealed the things they had come here to kill. They seemed to stretch from one end of the horizon to the other, at first a black line beneath the edge of the storm that swiftly coalesced into a swirling mass. The sky was full, a great flock not just of gargoyles but also bigger, more terrible beasts, half shrouded by the leathery swarms around them. Those beneath were just as terrible – Joghaten's optics picked out a chittering carpet of gaunts tens of thousands strong, a bristling sea of black chitin, fangs and gleaming eyes. Their leader-beasts drove them on, phalanxes of warriors, brain-bloated zoanthropes and worse. And there, at the heart of it all, the orchestrator of the invasion force: a king tyrant, master of the devouring horde, dragging its supreme bulk across Darkand's trampled plains.

The thunderhead had come with the swarm, a broiling black morass through which the airborne flocks circled. The darkness, poised on the edge of the dawn

light that still dashed across the steppe where the White Scars stood, rent into roiling pillars by the darting cloud cover. The brotherhood's auspex displays were unable to compute the number of individual organisms converging on their positions, the screens reduced to a single mass of enemy contacts. The khoomei had ended – only the thunder of a hundred thousand hooves, and a rising swell of alien shrieks and roars, remained.

'*Khan-commander, we are in the air,*' clicked a voice in Joghaten's ear as the Master of Blades took post on the right flank of his line. He surveyed the swarm for a moment more. He had almost forgotten how utterly sick their presence made him feel. Almost. He clicked the response rune.

*Strike.*

A new roar filled the air – engines. Sticks open and turbofans screaming, the Fourth Brotherhood's strike wing tore over the Founding Wall and the White Scars' positions, angled like a speeding arrow towards the heart of the approaching wall of alien ferocity. Someone let up a cheer, and the rest of the hunt-brothers joined in, hailing their airborne brethren and the first blood they were about to spill. Joghaten didn't join in, but the sight of the five white-plated berkut sent a fresh surge of adrenaline through his veins, and he felt his secondary heart kick in, his systems flooding with battle stimulants.

'It matters not if the foe faces us on the ground or strikes from the skies,' he said to his bondsmen. 'With such craft as these, none shall escape our wrath.'

The swarm reacted to the incoming attack, its pace increasing once more. A great, rolling shriek rose, shuddering the air with its potency, peeling out across the steppe and up the slopes and cobbled streets of Heavenfall. The Devourer had come, and it would not be denied. The strike wing opened fire.

Joghaten's uplink with the *Pride of Chogoris* was still transmitting. He opened the channel, watching as the first distant specks tumbled from the sky amidst a hail of fire and metal.

'Voyagemaster, we have engaged the primary swarm.'

### **Approaching high orbit, Darkand**

The warfleet of the Fourth Brotherhood returned to Darkand on a battle heading. The *Pride* led them, swept and cleared for action, macrocannon batteries run out and lances primed. A smile was playing across Tzu Shen's scarred lips as he sat in his throne mount in the primary bridge dome.

'The xenos are still clustered north of the equatorial segment, quadrant eleven-fifteen, voyagemaster,' an augur zart reported.

Shen accepted the information with a nod, despite the fact that he was already aware of it. His body was riven with the electrical charge of his ship, his hands clenched into fists, potent with the power of a whole strike cruiser's weapons systems. He could see the hive fleet in his mind's eye, polluting the upper atmosphere of Darkand, clustering like parasites suckling off a host creature. He would wipe them away.

'Let them know we are here,' he ordered, routing the command to lance battery control. His words received an almost immediate response – a spear of energy lashed the nearest edge of the void swarm, missing the nearest bio-ship and dissipating in the upper atmosphere. The shot was a long one, but it had the desired effect – across the oculus stands, viewscreens and augur arrays, a large section began to break away from the tyranid fleet, rising like oceanic beasts from the depths to meet the oncoming White Scars fleet. Shen let them come, before issuing a fresh burst of reading coordinates.

'Hard to port,' he ordered. 'Mark three. Make sure they follow.'

The fleet turned, offering their starboard flanks to the approaching flock of xenos bio-ships. Shen scanned the approaching creatures, sending a vox update planetside as he did so.

'Next phase initiated.'

### **Outside the Founding Wall, Heavenfall**

Joghaten and the bikers of the Fourth Brotherhood turned north with the lodge pole at their head. They were riding parallel with the swarm and away from the hill that was acting as the firebase for the brotherhood's tactical and devastator squads. Jubai, the horsehair plumes streaming above him, rode alongside Joghaten and *Whitemane* as they led the squadrons on, between the bastions and parapets of the Founding Wall and the left flank of the xenos swarm. Behind them the battle had been joined. The strike wing had claimed the first kills, as they so often did, scything in amongst the enemy from above. The tight phalanx of Stormtalon and Stormhawks had attacked the flocks of gargoyles above the main swarm head-on, a hail of high-energy las, heavy bolter rounds and twin assault cannon streams clearing a path before them. They turned back on themselves, cutting the other way, white-and-red armour plates already slick with steaming acid, bio-plasma, and the remains of gargoyles torn apart by their ferocious lightning passage.

Their third run cut low, in beneath the bloodied flocks to target the lumbering leader-beast at the heart of the swarm. They were forced to pull up almost

immediately – a bolt of energy burst from the swollen brain-stem of a zoanthrope drifting close to the leader-beast, clipping *Red Berkut's* wing and causing it to drop out of formation. The rest of the strike wing fell in around it, protecting it from the shrieking gargoyles while its pilot regained control.

'*The leader-beast is protected,*' the wing's leader, Agaar, reported over the vox. '*As we expected.*'

'Just keep the flocks off the firebase on the hill,' Joghaten ordered. 'Is the swarm dividing yet?' There was a moment's silence before Agaar replied.

'*Yes, khan-commander.*'

A moment later *Whitemane's* auspex confirmed the report – a glance at the reading told Joghaten a large section of the swarm was peeling away from the main body and pursuing his bikes north, away from the hill where the brotherhood's Devastators, heavy armour and tactical squads were deployed.

'Press on,' Joghaten urged over the vox. Behind him the main swarm was starting to come under fire from the hill. The White Scars there followed their targeting directives and focused their heavy weapon fire on the leader-beasts. The brood's fury rose audibly as krak missiles, plasma and lascannon bolts slammed into clusters of warriors and leader-beasts, splitting chitin and bone. The infantry support weapons were bolstered by the brotherhood's battle tanks, Vindicator battle cannons, Predator las turrets and Land Raider heavy bolters ripping gouges amidst the smaller creatures attempting to protect their masters.

The first wave of the main swarm charged, a mass of gaunts that was met by a wall of bolter fire from the tactical squads. The thunder of a full, pitched battle dragged at Joghaten, calling him back to the hill. It was all he could do to focus and continue to ride north, using the Founding Wall as a guide.

The section of the swarm that had broken off to shadow the bikers continued to follow them northwards.

### **High orbit, Darkand**

The hive fleet splinter in orbit was still following the *Pride* and her escorts. Shen focused on the brood of bio-ships intently, body rigid and quaking with the strain of the ship's systems. His vital signs were beginning to spike, pushed to the edge by the ship's systems being routed through his own nervous centre, but he brushed off the mental alarms. Now, more than ever, he needed to be at one with his ship.

The *Pride of Chogoris* was leading the fleet along the rear of the swarm, drawing the greater part of it up out of Darkand's increasingly choked

exosphere. The hive ships themselves remained in a lower anchorage, their presence overseeing the planetside swarms and providing the option of further reinforcement seedings, but most of the bio-ships that protected the ruling triumvirate were now pulling themselves after Shen's vessels. The fleet had turned in-system towards Darkand's star, adopting a speed that was both brisk and unhurried.

'Hold course and maintain formation,' Shen instructed for the umpteenth time, not truly aware of the orders leaving his lips. He was too engrossed in the *Pride's* own progress, his sense of the bridge yurut now distant and blurred.

Still the xenos followed. A few launched acid spores and trailing gnaw-pods, but the organic projectiles trailed off before making contact and drifted away, the range too long. The White Scars carried on, keeping just out of the edge of the engagement zone. Shen's concentration remained fixed, his breathing rapid and shallow, his whole body rigid. The crucial moment was fast approaching.

### **Near the Mountain Gate, Heavenfall**

*Wind Tamer* was caught up in the aerial battle spreading through the air outside the Mountain Gate. Timchet gritted his teeth and dragged his heavy bolter back along its rail mount; his armour was locked, struggling to keep the viciously kicking weapon on target as he pumped hard rounds into a flock of gargoyles shrieking towards them. Winged aliens tumbled or burst apart in showers of stinking purple gristle, but most came, careering past *Wind Tamer*, over, under and around it, splatters of bio-acid and clawing black insects making the scarred Land Speeder shudder.

For once, Hagai didn't criticise his gunner's accuracy. The pilot was too engrossed in his own battle, struggling to keep pace with Joghaten's bikes and steal between the thickest clusters of airborne alien flocks. The entirety of the brotherhood's skimmer complement was providing air support for the bike wing while the Stormtalons and Stormhawks protected the infantry firebase on the hill. What had started out as boastful competition among the three sets of Land Speeder crew had quickly grown serious – they were beset. While most of the swarm was still attacking the hill, a huge flock had detached and was now focusing on the right flank of the White Scars formation. The Land Speeders' orders were straightforward – keep the flying xenos away from the bikers – but it was quickly proving easier said than done.

'*Harpy*,' crackled the voice of Sai'li over the vox. '*Your nine o'clock*, Wind Tamer. *Don't let it through.*'

Hagai confirmed with a blink-click, grunting a warning to Timchet as he wrenched the Land Speeder to the left. The movement hardly made any difference to Timchet's aim – there were xenos all around them, it didn't matter which way he fired. They were at the heart of a swirling, shrieking storm of leathery wings, snapping maws and drooling orifice weapons. Everywhere his heavy bolter turned it was blasting apart flesh and chitin, and everywhere the gaps torn by his shots were swiftly filled.

'Visuals,' Hagai said over the vox. Timchet dragged the heavy bolter back round so it was facing directly ahead, just in time to vaporise a clutch of gargoyles coming at them head-on, their hideous, unearthly shrieks stripped out by his Lyman's ear.

Behind them was the harpy. It was a larger sister to the flocks of gargoyles under its command, a great, sinuous thing with a wingspan wider than a Stormtalon. Its forelimbs were fused ranged bio-weapons, but worst of all were the spore cysts clustered beneath its wings. The tactical briefings had been clear about the damage it could do if it was allowed to rain explosive organics down onto those below.

Timchet opened fire without hesitation. The oncoming harpy took a string of explosive blasts to its tough exoskeleton before it pulled up, its deeper roar making the whole Land Speeder rattle.

'Follow it up,' Timchet barked as he tried to track the lithe airborne alien, his stream of bolts eviscerating a clutch of its underlings but failing to catch it.

'Trying,' Hagai growled, wrestling with the stick. *Wind Tamer* started to climb, turbofans protesting at an agonising pitch. For all its speed and agility, the Land Speeder was not an air superiority fighter. Against something like the harpy it was outmatched, and both pilot and gunner knew it.

'It's coming overhead,' Timchet warned, still unable to get a lock on the thing's serpent-like body. 'Break left! Break!'

Too late they realised what the harpy was doing. Its climb hadn't been simply to avoid them, it had been to bring them into range of its cysts. With the Land Speeder momentarily directly below it, the creature loosed another bellow and spat the spores clustered beneath its wings. Thanks to Timchet's warning, Hagai's reflexes and *Wind Tamer's* response, the Land Speeder was veering out of the cone of destruction dropped from the winged xenos, but it could not escape entirely. One spore clipped the right tail fin, a gout of steaming bio-acid melting away the plasteel in a heartbeat and damaging the workings of the right turbofan within, after a few seconds of hissing, metal-gnawing insistence.

Another spore clipped *Wind Tamer's* nose and burst with a wet pop, showering both pilots with a hail of chitin shrapnel. Timchet's auto-senses pinged with impact warnings, his armour riddled with spines, but none had penetrated.

Hagai was not so lucky. The burst found weak points in his right elbow's electro-seal and punctured his helmet above his left visor lens, scraping his temple. He grunted, *Wind Tamer* twitching off course for a moment before his enhanced body overcame the pain.

'I'm fine,' he managed.

'I wasn't asking,' Timchet responded, already firing again. The evasive manoeuvre had carried them right into the heart of another flock. The xenos were all over them.

'It broke through,' Hagai said into the vox, twisting *Wind Tamer* hard to the right.

'*I've got it in my sights,*' Sai'li responded. Even over the labouring scream of their engines, the hammer of Timchet's heavy weapon and the screeches of the xenos all around them, the two pilots heard the familiar rattle of an assault cannon, followed by a monstrous bellow.

'Always taking our kills,' Hagai said, slewing *Wind Tamer* into another violent turn.

Supporting fire from the Pinnacle Guard manning the Founding Wall bought the White Scars on the hilltop precious time. In truth, Subodak and his Devastators had expected the human defenders of Heavenfall holding the bastions behind the White Scars to abandon their positions at the first sight of the oncoming swarm. Instead, as the lead elements of the tyranid invasion closed with the Space Marine tactical and devastator squads out on the hilltop, a barrage of las-fire and parapet-mounted heavy weaponry brought them to a halt.

The intervention was a welcome one. The Devastators under Subodak, holding the very crest of the hilltop, had followed their directives and focused fire on the large leader-beasts interspersed among the carpet of gaunts and rippers, but that meant the smaller, fleeter beasts had been able to close the range more effectively. The relentless bolter fire of the supporting tactical squads had checked them for a while, but even the most disciplined fire protocols and engagement arcs could not help but be overwhelmed by the sheer size and speed on the onrushing swarm. The brilliant barrage of las-bolts checked the dark tide of claws and fangs just a few dozen yards from the Tactical Marines.

Subodak knew they had two minutes at most before the tyranids rallied once

more and closed the final distance. He told Joghaten as much on the vox. Several miles north, the khan-commander acknowledged and checked his scope. He was out of time. The moment had come. He held up one hand, fist clenched but for a single finger pointing skywards.

‘Hunt-brothers,’ he said over the vox. ‘Break.’

### **High orbit, Darkand**

Onboard the *Pride of Chogoris* a bell clanged, its sonorous tone rolling out across the bridge dome. The motions of the zarts came to a standstill, and all eyes turned towards Tzu Shen. The voyagemaster held a single finger up towards the yurut’s dome, and smiled.

They had dragged the hive fleet’s drones away from orbit. The largest xenos ships were still above Darkand, but the screen protecting their immediate vicinity was much lighter. The time had come.

‘Helmsman, priority order, effective immediate. Break.’

### **Near the Founding Wall, Heavenfall**

The Fourth Brotherhood’s biker squadrons had been travelling north at a steady pace, still outside the Founding Wall. The hive mind was aware of them, and aware of the threat they posed. The destruction of the initial swarms and many of the vanguard organisms had not been in vain – the tyranids knew the bikes were fast, deadly, and created a very different problem to the common difficulties of an entrenched opposition. A large section of the swarm had detached to shadow the column of bikers, following them north without engaging. As long as they were kept isolated, the prey upon the hill would soon be swallowed whole, and the city would follow soon after.

Joghaten had been judging speed and distance with a hunter’s eye ever since the column had set out. The *khan alakh* was not an easy tactic to master. On Chogoris it had become well known and, consequently, all the more difficult to use effectively. Joghaten, however, had enjoyed the better part of two centuries to perfect it, on a thousand battlefields across a hundred systems.

He knew just when to begin.

At his curt order, the whole column suddenly changed direction. The bikes slewed south-west, turning immediately and in perfect unison across the crushed grass of the plain. The stalks were brittle in the heat approaching the Furnace Season’s peak, and filled the air with dust and chaff as the bikes rode over them. Now, suddenly, the White Scars were no longer a column but a line, moving in

echelon almost back the way they had come. And moving fast.

Without needing to be told, the White Scars turned throttles and gunned engines, releasing their steeds to their full potential. The bikes shot forward, each a bolt of white lightning, darting and leaping across the grassland. The riders, silent until now, loosed battle cries, oaths and yells of exhilaration that carried over the vox to their brothers on the besieged hilltop. The hunt had begun in earnest. Joghaten held his arm up, palm outstretched and fingers splayed.

*Ride.*

The Master of Blades rode at the fore, leaning low in the saddle, leading now through skill rather than by dint of rank. The wind whipped at his helm's topknot and at his furs, and he loosed a shout of his own as he slid one tulwar from its sheath. His blood sang with the glory of the hunt, screaming like the wind slashing by. In that moment nothing, not the burden of command, nor the sting of loss, nor the fear of a faceless future, mattered. His existence was reduced to perfection, to the flat, hot, open expanse beneath and to the foe before him. The prey. The main swarm and the king tyrant, left exposed now that the White Scars bikers had doubled back on themselves and left the broods detached to shadow them stranded and impotent, far from the fight.

The swarm had committed an error, and now the speed of the White Scars was about to make that error fatal.

*To some, the khan alakh is a final resort, an act of desperation that seeks to turn the tide. To the boldest, however, it is always the preferred choice. To personally seek out the master of your enemies, to humble him in combat before his best warriors and take his head for the White Road – what strategy could better represent the spirit of great Chogoris?*

– Jurga, Master of the War Council,  
Khan of the Spearpoint Brotherhood



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### KING KILLER

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 14 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

As the brotherhood's fleet yielded Darkand's orbit to the tyranids, Shen was careful to withdraw with as unhurried a pace as possible, cutting back on the *Pride's* enginarium and clustering the five escorts close to her flanks. The tyranids learned. More so than any other race in the galaxy, they changed and adapted to overcome every threat and setback. The genetic material digested by the hive fleets resulted in hyper-evolution, the continual development of the ultimate predatory organism. The voyagemaster understood that adaptability was easily their greatest strength.

Nothing, however, could adapt as fast as the White Scars could ride, be it on the steppes or in the void. Every vehicle and engine possessed by the White Scars was built to maximise speed, from the extended plasma drives and warp couplings of the *Pride* to the quad MKII adaptable thermic combustor reactors that powered the Fourth Brotherhood's Rhinos. Armour was often compromised – almost every vehicle and ship possessed by the Chapter was less well protected than the equivalents used by more standard Chapters – but the exchange was more than worth it. No other fighting force in the entirety of the Imperium of Man venerated speed more highly than the White Scars, nor put it

to deadlier effect.

Cicatrix discovered that in the void above Darkand just as it did on the surface below. At Shen's simple command the fleet broke, turning with a pace and precision that would have left the captains of the most tightly drilled Imperial Navy interceptor squadron shamefaced. In only a handful of minutes the *Pride of Chogoris* was leading the fleet back to Darkand, engines blazing with the white-blue heat of plasma drives being pushed to their extreme limit. The six vessels swung out and around the great section of the hive fleet that had broken from orbit to catch them, sliding past the lumpen, floundering bio-ships with mocking ease and grace.

Too late, Cicatrix understood that it had been tricked. Too late, the hive ships began to drag themselves up towards high orbit, their great bodies shuddering and rippling with peristaltic motion as they prepared spore mines and boarding seeds. It would do them no good. Shen's blind smile had become a broad grin, for he knew he had made the hunter into the hunted.

While below, the tide turned against the White Scars.

### **Outside the Mountain Gate, Heavenfall**

Subodak watched as *Red Berkut* fell. The strike wing attacking the tyranids driving towards the White Scars' hilltop defences had already split apart, spreading out as the individual aircraft sought to keep the airspace above the hill clear. *Red Berkut* was clipped by the psychic discharge of a bloated zoanthrope, lashed by the bolt of lightning that burst from the floating alien's distended brain sac. Flames burst from an engine, and the Stormtalon rocked dangerously. As Dren-cho fought to regain control the shrikes seized their chance. The winged tyranid warriors had been using their gargoyle flocks as cover, and now they fell upon the stricken Stormtalon as it veered back towards the Founding Wall. Great talons raked and sawed through ceramite and plasteel as the beasts sought purchase on the flyer's hull, beating their leathery wings and shrieking triumphantly as they dragged the Stormtalon down. One creature attached itself to Dren-cho's cockpit and attempted to hack its way through. After a series of blows failed to do more than crack the protective armourglass, the screeching alien fired its limb-fused bio-weapon point-blank. A wad of steaming purple acid smacked into the screen, obscuring Dren-cho's vision as he wrenched at the controls. After a few moments the shrike broke through the weakened armourglass, ripping into Dren-cho's harness.

Then *Lightning Death* struck. The Stormhawk came in low and hard from the

south, both assault cannons spinning. Two shrikes simply came apart, pulverised against *Red Berkut's* hull before being scraped away by the wind. The third tyrannid, however, would not be dislodged. As *Lightning Death* ripped past with engines screaming, it finally dragged a struggling Dren-cho from his flyer and hauled him aloft, screeching triumphantly.

*Red Berkut* hit the ground, ploughing into the swarm a hundred yards south of the White Scars positions, and was lost in a roiling ball of flame.

The situation on the hill was not much removed from *Red Berkut's* fate. On the edge of the slope, Subodak cursed as he reloaded. The king tyrant had gone to ground in a small, shallow ravine three hundred yards out from the lead tactical squads, and short of going on the offensive there was no way for his Devastator squad to hurt it now. Not all the fire was outgoing either – the xenos had brought up biological artillery, biovores and bigger exocrines that were launching spore pods and bio-plasma from their suppurating orifice-cannons. Brothers Kell and Tuchog had been reduced to organic slurry by a direct bio-plasma strike, and Brother Xanti had been riddled with the poisonous spines of a slowly drifting spore mine. The hilltop was being lacerated with biological alien weaponry, and even with the supporting fire coming from the wall behind them Subodak had been forced to redesignate fire protocols – the xenos were about to break through.

The tactical squads holding the base of the hill had engaged in hand-to-hand combat, bolters discarded in favour of kindjals and curved chainswords. Thus far the fire from the squads on the crest of the slope was keeping the larger beasts at bay, but even as Subodak chambered a new round he saw a carnifex slam through Fifth Squad's cordon, crushing Brother Ong-li as it went. The hulking ram-beast was aflame from head to hoof, lit by the blazing promethium of Brother Yori's flamer, but still it came, bellowing even as its chitin blackened and split, and its flesh melted from its bones. It hit the Predator *Horselord* head-down as the main battle tank attempted to reverse higher up the slope. The hideous crunch of the monster's plated skull against the tank's plasteel glacis shuddered out across the hill, followed by a teeth-jarring clang as the forty-tonne vehicle was flipped right over. The carnifex carried on, gorging and grinding the tank's underbelly with crab-like claws as it tried to get at the crew within.

'Suhtar, bring it down!' Subodak bellowed at the White Scar twenty paces to his right, painting the roaring carnifex as an immediate priority target on his Devastator squad's auto-sense targeters. Suhtar didn't even acknowledge. He just fired.

The lascannon beam lanced lengthways across the hill to strike the carnifex where its right shoulder plates met its neck. The brilliant beam of red energy punched deep into its torso, liquefying thundering alien organs and splattering *Horselord's* twisted wreck with a fountain of ichor.

The tyrannid shook and, for a moment, it looked as though it would collapse. Instead, it planted one hoof directly on top of *Horselord* and raised its chitin-plated head defiantly.

'Hit it again,' Subodak snapped as the whine of Suhtar's recharging lascore filled the air. The carnifex, still on fire, was just about to slam both upper claws into *Horselord's* twisted chassis when a streaking krak rocket struck it squarely in the centre of its skull. Its head atomised, sending thick shards of bone scything across the hilltop. Incredibly, the beast managed to stay upright for a few moments more before toppling ponderously back, its impact shaking the earth underfoot.

*'That's one each, Suhtar,'* Bechin's voice crackled over the vox.

There was no time to reply. A brood of termagants were seething up through the hole battered by the carnifex, snapping and yowling, wickedly sharp spines from their biomorph weapons spraying ahead of them. The poisoned barbs whickered past Subodak and clattered from his white battleplate as he brought his bolter to bear, roaring his primarch's name. Those among his squad not bearing heavy weapons and still able to fight added their firepower to that of their türüch, cutting down the lead termagants and giving the bloodied remains of Fifth Squad enough time to seal the breach with a flurry of frag grenades.

The crumping detonations were lost amidst the crash of shifting earth as the very hill beneath Subodak's feet moved. His auto-stabilisers triggered as he half turned, the earth around him erupting. A terrible, keening wail filled the air, and the türüch knew that their resistance was at an end.

For Hagai, Timchet and their Land Speeder, the end came moments after Joghaten's riders turned back on themselves towards the main swarm. *Wind Tamer* turned with them, even as Timchet's warning rang out over the vox. The auto-loader, after so much loyal service, had jammed.

It took Timchet perhaps ten seconds to free the belt and chamber fresh rounds, but on the eleventh a huge barbed shadow, borne on leathery wings dozens of feet across, materialised ahead. As big as the harpy that had almost caught them earlier, it burst from the flock of gargoyles swirling nearby, clouds of tainted spore gas wreathing it, its winged shadow falling across *Wind Tamer* as it

effortlessly rose above the jinking Land Speeder.

This time Timchet's warning really was too late. Trailing writhing tendrils, the tentacled parasites nestled beneath the crone's wings fell and burst around them. *Wind Tamer's* dashboard and viewscreens went blank, shorted by the bio-electrical pulse blasts of the living alien weapons. Hagai's curse was lost amidst the shriek of the engines as the skimmer went down.

The impact jarred Timchet against the restraint harness and showered him with a wall of dirt. He shook his head, even his enhanced body taking a second to recover from the crash landing. *Wind Tamer* had ploughed into the grassland, its nose crumpled and half-buried, its already-damaged right turbofan blown out and smouldering.

Before either pilot could speak the crone's shadow fell upon them once again. Timchet tried to reach for his heavy bolter's grip. The alien's shriek filled the air around them. It came in low and wickedly fast, the trio of chitin blade-spurs extending from its underbelly carving the air towards the downed skimmer. The broken vehicle rocked with its passage, slamming Timchet forward once more, the sound of shearing metal assaulting his auto-senses. Then it was gone, back up into the heavens, the spore cloud it churned from its dorsal chimneys wreathing *Wind Tamer's* remains.

'Brother,' Timchet grunted as he released his restraint harness, finally snatching hold of the heavy bolter. 'Brother, we...' He trailed off and looked around.

Hagai was dead. The crone's low passage had scythed him open, splitting both the pilot and the Land Speeder almost in half. His blood had painted the white cockpit a slowly dripping red. Timchet stared for what felt like a long time.

It was the shaking of the earth, rattling up into the broken plasteel frame around him, that finally snapped him back. The spore smog from the crone was clearing, revealing Joghaten's bikers racing towards the main swarm. The Land Speeders had succeeded in protecting them from the air long enough for the khan to strike. But now the secondary swarm that had been left stranded while trying to shadow them was racing back to catch the bikes.

And *Wind Tamer* had come down directly in the path of their stampede.

'Stay, brother,' Timchet said softly, rising in the cockpit and bringing the heavy bolter around. 'I shall be with you again soon.'

They struck as hard and true as an arrow shot from the Khagan's bow, right into the heart of the beast.

Joghaten roared with fury as *Whitemane* crashed into the first termagants, the

strains of the previous month evaporating in a welter of broken alien bodies. The broods surrounding the king tyrant were thinner now, drained by the swarm sent to shadow them and the assault on the hilltop. Joghaten's ploy had opened the enemy's guard, and now the dao would slide home.

The king tyrant had gone to ground, sheltering from the heavy weapons on the hilltop in a shallow crevasse. Many of its synapse beasts were already dead, picked off from the hilltop by the firepower of the White Scars Devastators and armour. Its ability to control its swarm had become tenuous, and its defences had been thinned. Its end was at hand.

Joghaten's tulwar blazed, an arc of lightning that left bisected, steaming alien bodies in its wake. The khan's focus was wholly on his prey now, his every transhuman sense bent towards the kill. He would not be denied.

Because of that, by the time he noticed the heavy-set tyrant guard as it lunged out of the swarm, it was too late.

Eji, Feng's hunt-brother, had fallen as the squad charged the swarm alongside Joghaten and his bondsmen. Feng hadn't seen it, though the blinking red rune in his visor display made him aware of the fact. At some point moments after the bikes of the Fourth Brotherhood had impacted with the swarm, Eji had been hit. Feng suspected it was during the hail of organic firepower that had struck them over the last dozen yards, spat from the weapon-orifices of the termagants they now slaughtered. Bio-plasma, venom spines and borer beetles had battered at the charging White Scars like a hideous, destructive rain. Feng's own armour was reading structural damage from a thick wad of burning venom that had splattered his bike shield and left pauldron.

But there was no time to turn back, no time to mourn. In truth, Feng barely even felt his brother's death. He would see him again, he knew. Death was all around them now, and a part of the steedmaster revelled in it. He bellowed an incoherent oath and he speared a leaping hormagaunt on his guan dao, swinging the scrabbling, shrieking alien down into the next one coming at him. Backjointed limbs snapped and crunched beneath his spinning front tyre tread, the auto-stabilisers struggling as the bike jarred over a carpet of bodies. It was carnage, the air alive with the howling of thousands of alien throats, Feng's dao lancing through one body after another, scything talons and bio-plasma raining down on him from all sides.

He would see his brothers again soon, he was sure of it.

Joghaten had punched through ahead of all of them, leaving even his honour

guard behind. He was hacking a path towards the master of the swarm, the great beast sheltering from the fury of the Khagan's sons in a shallow gully ahead. Only Feng had made it as far as the Master of Blades, carried by the sudden, urgent fury that fired his blood. He saw the tyrant guard before Joghaten did.

He accelerated, the swarm around him a blur, punctuated by thudding impacts. The tyrant guard was a big, heavy-set beast, lumbering forward on its trunk-like forearms like some sort of simian. In the heartbeat before he struck, Feng swore vengeance for every battle-brother that had died fighting a monstrosity such as this.

The beast lunged for Joghaten as his bike reached the edge of the gully, one of its great fists sweeping down to pulverise the khan's skull. Feng struck first.

The steedmaster's dao caught the beast by the throat, mid-swing. The wicked lance's disruptor field cut flesh and bone, the full weight of Feng's careering charge behind it. The tyrant guard's shriek was cut brutally short as its head was cleaved from its torso, its lunge faltering.

A second later and Feng's bike slammed into the bulk of the creature's heavily armoured body. The White Scar left the saddle with the bone-crunching impact of plasteel and reinforced rubber meeting thick chitin. The three went down together – Feng, his bike and the beast, broken as one. Darkness took the steedmaster.

Something had exploded from the hill's heart in a hail of rock and dirt. The White Scars closest to the upheaval had fallen, flung across the flattened grass by the sudden upsurge of muck. Subodak turned in time to see a monster breaking forth amidst the deluge of dirt, dragging itself up out of the tunnel it had burrowed beneath the Space Marines' defences. It was vast, bigger than any of the xenofoms yet engaged on Darkand, a nightmare of coiling armour plates and scythe-arms. Its body was long and sinuous, like a serpent's, its segmented plates of chitinous exoskeleton caked with the thick grime it had wormed its way through to reach the hilltop. Its upper limbs, each ending with a blade-talon longer than Subodak was tall, clacked as they freed themselves from the thing's serpentine flanks. Its skull was broad and flat-plated, built for burrowing through sightless subterranean depths. Its maw unhooked like a steppe adder's, distending to a hideous length as it announced its arrival with a screech.

It was a mawloc, a vast, serpentine xenos, and it was about to tear the heart from the White Scars' defences.

'Up,' Subodak barked over the vox. Every squad leader on the hilltop had

already painted the lithe monster as a priority target, but the White Scars heavy weapons specialists were scattered and disorientated by the sudden fury of the subterranean upheaval.

And it was fast, by the Khagan it was fast. It was already killing before Subodak could bring up his bolter. The brotherhood's Whirlwind, *Skyfire*, was the closest vehicle to the epicentre of the mawloc's arrival. The monstrous tyrannid brought down one set of scything talons as the missile support vehicle attempted to simultaneously reverse and bring its rocket systems down to lock with the looming beast. The creature's blades punctured the Whirlwind's armour, lodging in its main drive compartment. Then, with sickening ease, the beast heaved the entire vehicle into the air, whirring treads leaving the ground in a cascade of dirt. The mawloc brought it up to the height of its head before slamming its four other talons into the chassis, from all angles, impaling it like a child stabbing pins into a steppe-grass doll. Then, shrieking as though in petulant frustration, the monster flung the entire vehicle straight at Subodak.

The White Scar ducked. He felt the passage of *Skyfire* as it arced with agonising slowness a dozen paces overhead, the air shuddering with its passing. It cleared the edge of the hill before slamming into the cordon beneath, where it detonated. Subodak's auto-senses registered the heat blast as it rolled back over him like a thunderclap, flattening the few stalks of grass still standing on the hilltop.

He found his feet and brought his bolter up, his expression grim. There were times when a leader could do no more. His squad knew the target. If there were none able to take the shot, he would.

His bolts burst harmlessly against the mawloc's grime-caked exoskeleton as it twisted, seeking to drag its long, barbed tail free from the tunnel it had burst from. It slashed its lower talons as it did so, slicing apart Imchi and Songatten as they too fired up into it. It was toying with them.

It would not toy with *Khum Karta* though. The mighty Land Raider, named after the great mountain range of Chogoris, came thundering over the brow of the slope all guns ablaze, Darkand dirt spinning from its aquila-stamped treads. Modified engine roaring, the heavy battle transport slammed into the mawloc's segmented body prow-first, before the tyrannid could properly free itself from its burrow. The crunch of impact was followed up by the snap-crack of lascannon sponsons and the thudding of heavy bolters as the great tank unloaded its weaponry point-blank into the monstrosity.

The beast was tough. Even the searing power of *Khum Karta*'s lascannons barely drew ichor from its grubby hide. In response to the ramming attack, the

thing brought down four talons in a vicious series of stabs, the clang of diamond-hard chitin rebounding from white adamantium ringing out across the hilltop. *Khum Karta*'s armour, however, held.

Engine gunning, the Land Raider reversed, dirty smoke churning from its exhaust stacks. The mawloc shrieked at it as it went, thick acidic spittle splattering the hull. The tank had been engaged on the White Scars' extreme left, almost single-handedly holding back the swarm there. Its white-and-red armour plates and heavy treads were smeared with alien remains and pitted by countless claws and acid sprays.

For a moment, Subodak thought the tank was attempting to disengage from the monster it had so rashly charged. He should have known its commander, Xiamet, better. Engines once more roaring into life, the tank ploughed forward again. This time it hit the xenos so hard it bent the creature back almost double, the tank nearly rolling over the monster's burrow hole. Its talons, driven by frenzied desperation, gouged great rents in *Khum Karta*'s hull, but failed to stop it or reach its crew. The great tank rolled back once more, treads biting dirt and alien flesh alike, engines growling as it readied for one more charge.

The mawloc, it seemed, was willing to face such a wild foe no longer. Screeching woefully, it dragged its broken body back down into its hole, fresh earth cascading down with it into the darkness. *Khum Karta* remained where it was, like a snarling attack dog watching over a snake's pit.

'Melta bombs and krak grenades into that hole, now,' Subodak snapped. His order went unheeded. The earth beneath was shifting again, right across the hilltop. Drawn by the tremors of their sire, a dozen sinuous raveners surged from Darkand's depths, dirt-encrusted shovel-talons reaching for the White Scars.

### **Low orbit, Darkand**

The White Scars fleet had swept back into orbit, leaving the drones that had been shadowing them trailing in their wake. Now they were tearing the sluggish xenos hive ships apart.

'Again,' Voyagemaster Shen commanded. Gunnery complied without query, and through the augur links and oculum feedback the commander of the *Pride of Chogoris* saw another brilliant beam of red light sear through Darkand's upper atmosphere. It punctured the side of the hive ship like a surgical tool lancing a blood-swollen tick, tearing its bloated flank. A second beam of energy followed the first as the next lance strike slashed home, causing bulbous birthing sacs lining the monstrosity's back to explode.

All data agreed, the xenos was dying. Its void-scarred carapace had been split and shattered by a flurry of broadsides from the *Pride*, its bio-defences no match for a close-range engagement with an Adeptus Astartes strike cruiser. The *Pride*'s lance batteries, assisted by torpedoes from the fleet's twin Cobra escorts, had finished the job. Now one of the alien fleet's three hive ships was wallowing like a beached leviathan, its vast body wracked by internal organ failure and death-spasms, haemorrhaging vile life fluids out into the void where they froze in great trailing, glittering sheets. A second hive ship was already dead, gutted by the *Pride*'s ministrations and the continual, terrier-like snapping of the three Sword-class escorts that swooped in from the strike cruiser's starboard flank.

Only one xenos capital ship remained. It was rising out of orbit now, ponderous, trying to drag itself away from the White Scars. A thick screen of crustacean-like drone ships protected it, clogging the *Pride*'s targeting matrices and lines of fire in a suicidal effort to protect their brood-master.

Shen mentally scanned trajectories, new headings, and the speed of the vast section of the tyranid fleet they had sidestepped in the sudden race back to Darkand's orbit. The xenos were returning, desperate to preserve their last hive ship. Even crippled, the combined alien fleet was more than sufficient to swallow up the small White Scars expedition. Shen keyed the bridge-wide vox.

'Break.'

Such a simple order would have meant nothing to the officers of the Imperial Navy, but for the void assets of the White Scars it triggered a spree of well-honed reflexes. Whereas most fleets would have required a long string of orders and directive-bursts, the White Scars turned on a single command. The sons of Chogoris had always valued simplicity, Shen reflected. It left more room for skill.

On his one word the fleet turned, disengaging from the final remaining hive ship. Supercharged plasma drives engaged as the six ships, unharmed bar some damaged shields and hull scarring, pulled back out of Darkand's exosphere. Shen had already input a new heading before beginning the engagement, now being auto-locked by the main helm. The fleet made in-system, for Darkand's star and the Pillar of Fury, the great solar flare stretching away from its broiling heart.

Shen's careful concealing of the upper limit speed capacity of his ships had paid off – he had executed a near-perfect *khan alakh*, luring slower elements of the more powerful enemy fleet away from their leaders before swinging back and delivering two fatal blows. The xenos had been caught by the terrific speed

and deft handling of things they had thought of only as prey. Shen wondered whether the hive mind was capable of regret.

‘All xenos contacts moving in full pursuit, voyagemaster,’ an augur zart reported. Shen saw that the serf crewwoman was correct – reunited with the main part of its fleet, the remaining hive ship was still rising from orbit, lunging after the small band of vessels that had dared slay its sisters. Shen knew he had left it with little choice. If it remained above Darkand, supporting the swarms it had already seeded across the planet’s surface, his fleet would continue to harry its drone ships and pick its defenders apart. Another day perhaps, and with careful handling, the entire hive fleet would have been destroyed. The xenos needed to snap up the threat posed by Shen’s strikes while it still had the chance – while the White Scars were withdrawing.

‘Maintain current speed and heading,’ Shen ordered, satisfied with the escort dispositions and noting with approval the disciplined order that emanated from the bridge dome. Most ships, in a knife-edge engagement like the one they had just left, would have been filled with report chatter, vox blurts and the chemical stink of defence shields and macrocannon venting. The command hub of the *Pride of Chogoris*, however, remained a quiet, tranquil place, as was befitting a capital ship of the White Scars. Such harmony belied the skill behind the battle just fought – a daring raid on the enemy’s heart, followed by a disengaging manoeuvre that would have been beyond many senior Navy captains. For the first time since contacting the bio-fleet, Shen relaxed in his throne mount.

All that remained for the moment was pray to the Khagan that the Master of Blades fared as well as his fleet.

### **Near the Mountain Gate, Heavenfall**

Joghaten was barely aware of Steedmaster Feng and his slamming collision with the tyrant guard to his right. The khan’s attention was fixed on the king tyrant as *Whitemane* crested the gully’s edge. The beast was different from the one he had cut apart out on the plain earlier – larger, more heavily armoured, more ponderous. It turned its chitin-crested head towards Joghaten as *Whitemane* leapt. To a superhuman such as the khan, the two-and-a-half seconds he spent in the air seemed to last long minutes. He saw the tyrant’s eyes, black, doll-like, even as it beheld its death coming from the Darkand skies.

Time reasserted itself with a crunch, and *Whitemane*’s front wheel impacted into the beast’s upturned skull. Spinning rubber flensed flesh from bone in an instant, followed by the crack of fracturing bone and shattering fangs being

slammed back into the tyrant's brain. One side of its head caved in beneath *Whitemane's* impact.

Joghaten was already leaving the saddle as his assault bike tumbled, anticipating the collision and kicking his feet from the mag-locking boards. He hit the stony earth of the gully floor, armour absorbing the worst of the impact, rolling with it. He was springing up, tulwar ignited in each fist before *Whitemane* had even crashed to the ground.

Of course, the xenos monster was not dead. The bike's impact had crushed part of its skull, but not killed it. It turned on Joghaten, an ugly noise rattling from its ribbed throat, huge talon blades coming at the White Scar. He kept on his toes, ducking the first, deflecting the second with both tulwars raised. A front-foot lunge took him inside the monster's guard. It was sluggish, its brain damaged, ichor weeping from the fractured mess that had once been the right half of its skull. Any other creature would have already been dead, but the raw imperatives of the hive mind kept it functioning well after much of its cranial matter had been pulverised.

Joghaten would make sure the wound was fatal. He delivered two violent slashes to the beast's upper torso, just below the rim of chitin that protected its throat, dodging away from the acidic ichor that splattered out onto the scarred earth. A third blow cut to the bone of one of its scythe-limbs as it swung clumsily at him once more.

The creatures around the king tyrant were reacting to their leader's distress, a wall of termagants rushing towards Joghaten with fangs snapping. They could not get close enough to him, however, pressed right up as he was against the tyrant's haemorrhaging bulk. He stayed there, using his abilities to keep close to the monster while at the same time avoiding its struggling efforts. His tulwars were a blur of lightning, slicing through chitin and meat, a dozen deep wounds in two dozen seconds.

It was not long before the wounded tyrant's strength gave out. It gave an angry bellow as it collapsed onto its front, crushing a brace of gaunts scrabbling desperately at Joghaten. The White Scar spun and slew two of the lesser xenos before turning back to the fallen tyrant.

'I am Joghaten Khan,' he snarled into the creature's face, addressing whatever nightmare consciousness the remains of its primitive mind was linked to. 'Master of Blades, Steppe Lord and Hetman of Chogoris. Your rampage ends here. This is our galaxy.'

The thing took one last rattling breath, ready to roar its defiance back. The khan

didn't give it a chance. With a deft flick, his tulwars opened its throat, cutting back to its thick spinal column. The swarm shrieked with one voice, minds scarred by their sudden loss of contact to the hive. Joghaten kept his blades lodged in the beast's torn throat, until it finally slumped into Darkand's ichor-drenched soil.

It was over.

*Not only does the astrological phenomenon of Darkand's star exert huge cultural and societal significance on the day-to-day lives of the system's only inhabited planet, but it also represents a very clear danger to any vessel passing through the system core. Only military-grade shielding offers any hope of protection against the twin threats of the awesome heat and intense radiation represented by the Pillar.*

– Elim Weiss, Adeptus Astro-cartograpae,  
from the Index of Stellar Curiosities, Chapter CXX



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### FURY'S PILLAR

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 13 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **Near the Mountain Gate, Heavenfall**

There was a common misconception among Imperial strategos that killing a tyranid swarm's leader-beast led to the immediate disintegration of the swarm itself. Such a belief, however, only held true with the smallest of broods. The one besieging Heavenfall was too large to turn on the synapses of a single organism, no matter how powerful. Secondary leader-beasts littered the swarm – clutches of tyrant primes, warriors and zoanthropes, all capable of transmitting the will of the hive mind to the lesser creatures clustered around them.

Joghaten's final blow to the king tyrant, however, was still decisive. The heart of the swarm, formerly under the umbrella of the tyrant's leadership, fell into anarchy even as the Master of Blades freed his tulwars from the beast's flesh. The firepower of the Devastators on the hilltop now proved its worth – targeting the larger xenos beasts earlier on had broken the swarm's chain of command. Great sections were now without leadership, their synapse handlers already put down by krak missiles, lascannon bolts and plasma. Those gaunts no longer directed by the hive mind started to scatter, obstructing the remains of the swarm

still acting coherently and, in some cases, even attacking them.

Such disruption saved both Joghaten and Lau Feng. The steedmaster, thrown by his impact with the decapitated tyrant guard, found his feet and his bearings in time to see the Master of Blades clambering up from the nearby gully, slick with xenos ichor. He signalled for Feng to attend him. The steedmaster's guan dao was planted in the earth two dozen paces away, deactivated, so Feng drew his bolt pistol and curving kindjal as the surrounding aliens came for them.

For long, bloody minutes the two White Scars fought back to back, weapons in each fist, killing in a manner that would be recounted around the camp-fires and in smoky yuruts for many years to come. In truth, it was not the deadliest struggle either warrior had fought in. The lesser tyranids were confused and uncoordinated, left dazed by the sudden absence of overriding control. Most were seeking to escape rather than kill, their now-feral minds causing them to scatter out onto the plains. Joghaten's bondsmen finally hacked their way to the Master of Blades, and together they made a mound of slaughtered xenos beneath the fluttering horsehair plumes of the Fourth Brotherhood.

Timchet had stopped killing long before many of his brothers. He stood perfectly still in the trampled remnants of *Wind Tamer*, clutching his now-empty heavy bolter, purple alien viscera dripping in slow, thick strings from his armour. Hagai lay beside him, untouched. When the swarm racing back to catch Joghaten had struck, the gunner had been sure his end was at hand. The aliens, however, had simply ignored him. Realising the danger posed by the bikes to their leader, the swarm had parted around the downed Land Speeder, not a single gaunt spared from the stampede to strike at the lone prey-warrior. Timchet had emptied his heavy bolter into the passing swarm, creating a carpet of twitching, blown-apart alien dead around *Wind Tamer*, as chilled by their mindless precision as he was filled with hatred and rage. He remained where he was long after the swarm had dispersed, surrounded by the slain and the low moaning of the steppe wind.

By midday the battle of the Founding Wall was over. The tyranids had scattered, those that fought on isolated and destroyed. Detachments of wide-eyed Pinnacle Guard troopers moved out onto the plain, moving cautiously among the carpets of xenos dead to administer las-bolts to anything still twitching. The White Scars gathered on the low hilltop where they had anchored their stand, carrying their dead with them. Feng brought Eji, while Timchet carried Hagai in both arms, his heavy bolter salvaged from *Wind Tamer's* wreck and slung over his back. Servitors and salvation teams would recover what they could from the machinery that lay broken among the mounds of alien dead. Timchet knew,

however, that *Wind Tamer* would never touch the sky again.

As the White Scars gathered around the hill, Subodak was still working on its crest. The türüch had been lowered into the pit burrowed by the mawloc, its sheer flanks levelled at one end into a dirt slope thanks to the careful placement of a clutch of grenades. The smaller ravener tunnels had been sealed up after the beasts had been killed, bereft of the hive mind and beset by a counter-attack led by Qui'sin and the assault squads. Something about the mawloc's pit, however, had drawn Subodak down into the dirt and darkness.

'What do you see?' Joghaten called after him. He'd descended as far as he could unaided, close to where the pit seemed to reach its deepest extent before levelling out. He could make out Subodak on the edge of the burrow-dark ahead, shining a stab lumen inbuilt into his right pauldron into the shadows beyond.

*'The tunnel passage,'* the türüch replied over the vox.

'So?' Joghaten demanded. 'The beast is fled – we would feel its tremors if it were still nearby.'

*'We would, khan-commander,'* Subodak acknowledged. *'But that is not what concerns me. What concerns me is the direction the tunnel goes in. It leads straight back towards the city, and it's the only passage I can see.'*

Joghaten murmured a Chogorian curse as he realised the import of what the türüch was saying. It wasn't even just the fact that the giant tyranid serpent was now beneath Heavenfall's streets.

It was the fact that, to reach the hilltop beyond the Founding Wall, it had come from there in the first place, and not from out on the steppes.

### **The Void, Darkand System**

During the voyage to the system's heart Shen turned and savaged his pursuers twice. On the second time, they lost the *Steppe Lord*. The hive fleet showed that the White Scars were not the only ones capable of sudden speed. A brood of the kraken drone vessels swept out of the protective formation they'd adopted around the sole remaining hive ship, catching Shen's twin Cobra escorts in their rearguard position. The *Falcon* managed to get clear, but the *Steppe Lord* was caught by one of the kraken. The long, hook-like alien craft latched on to the white Cobra like a greedy parasite, its snout tearing through the escort's flank before unlatching its jaw. The nightmarish creature then began to suckle, dragging whole decks and their crews into its acidic gullet, draining the *Steppe Lord* and leaving it like a withered husk.

Shen managed to suppress the anger he felt at the *Steppe Lord's* hideous fate.

Victory necessitated control; no matter the passions of battle, to turn away from a wise strategy would only bring more pain. A good hetman, luring the enemy away, did not turn back to the fight because his brother had fallen. The fleet swung back towards the system's star, the *Falcon* now alone.

Despite their minor victory, the hive fleet was suffering. Shen could sense it across all the data being fed to him by the *Pride*. The White Scars were still outnumbered thousands to one, but Cicatrix had been bloodied above Baal, and now it was being bloodied once more. It had lost vast amounts of organic - material and, so far, had gained almost nothing back.

'Voyagemaster, we are approaching Fury's Pillar,' reported one of the bridge zarts. Shen drew himself from his running analysis and cast his consciousness wider, addressing their latest heading. They were coming up on Darkand's star, and with it the fixed stellar flare that brought on the planet's Furnace Season. The augurs were reading dramatic spikes in radiation and heat.

'Cut speed by a third and hold course,' Shen ordered, the command transmitted across the fleet. The reduction in speed meant the tyrannids, already dangerously close, would be in the long-range engagement sphere in a matter of minutes. Such a risk was necessary.

'Keep monitoring shield integrity,' Shen added. The carbon heat shields, ceramite-layered equaliser plates and active magnetic shielding would preserve the White Scars fleet from the concentrated heat and cosmic radiation as they passed through the Pillar. At least, that was what Shen hoped. Anything less than a military-grade vessel would already be suffering. Few ships other than those of the Adeptus Astartes could hope to reach the other side largely unscathed.

The hive fleet was not so fortunate. Sensorium data ramped up to maximum amplification, Shen watched as the hive fleet's near-perfect coordination gave way to apparent confusion. The greater part, caught in the Pillar's extreme heat, sought to turn back on those behind. Astral tendrils snagged and became locked, and gnarled hides cracked up against one another. The smaller drones began to combust and liquefy, flames flickering brief and blue in the void, blackening shells cracking and bursting apart to emit streams of half-cooked innards that froze in gory tendrils. Shen was reminded briefly of a plains beast coming across fire for the first time, and not understanding the source of its pain.

The voyagemaster smiled, blind eyes unseeing but the senses of his ship knowing more than enough. The hive fleet was in turmoil, the screens of drones protecting the bigger ships stripped away by the unrelenting heat and radiation of Fury's Pillar. For the moment, the eerie coordination that typified the xenos was

gone, the remaining major bio-ships exposed. Now was the time to turn and strike. Shen knew this would be the last time he would need to give the order against this foe. He held up one hand, index finger raised.

‘Helmsman, priority order, effective immediate. Break.’

### **The Mountain Gate, Heavenfall**

Joghaten stood in the shadow of the Mountain Gate, alone. The great adamantium doors had been swung open, allowing purge units with flamers and promethium doublers to move out beyond the Founding Wall and start torching the mounds of xenos dead. In the rising heat of the Furnace Season it was a hellish job, but to their credit none of the Pinnacle Guard commanders had complained to Joghaten. It seemed they were mostly just relieved to be alive.

The khan watched a Hellhound flamer tank rolled past, dust kicking up off its tracks, the promethium gel in its flamer canister sloshing audibly over the growl of engines and the clatter of treads. He had left his bondsmen on the gatehouse above while the rest of the brotherhood had pulled back within the wall. He had needed a moment of separation to clear his mind.

It wasn't over, he was sure of it.

A blip in his ear heralded an incoming vox transmission. It was Qui'sin. The Stormseer had been sent further up the slope-city's steep streets, to see with his own eyes the situation being faced by the tribes brought within the Founding Wall.

‘Speak,’ the khan commanded, accepting the transmission.

*‘The area around the Old Town is overcrowded, my khan,’* Qui'sin's voice replied, the words spoken against a backdrop of raised, chattering voices and lowing beasts. *‘Pinnacle Guard reserve units are corralling most of the steppe folks along the lower slope-streets. They claim to be doing so on orders from the Pinnacle, but I have been unable to contact anyone in the government claiming responsibility for their actions. Commander Harren seems to have disappeared.’*

‘What of the catacombs?’ Joghaten asked, turning away to better shield his hearing as another Pinnacle Guard armoured fighting vehicle trundled past in a haze of dust.

*‘Full, or so the government ministers I spoke with are claiming. The citizenry of Heavenfall have been moved below ground, but supposedly there is no room for the tribesfolk. The Pinnacle Guard will not allow them to pass. The heat is continuing to rise and there have been outbreaks of fighting between the Pinnacle troops and the tribes, as well as within the tribes themselves. I fear*

*some are using the confusion to settle old scores.'*

'If the tribespeople are left to burn out in the heat the sacrifices made to save them will have been for nothing,' Joghaten said angrily. 'Show yourself to the Pinnacle Guard in person and make that clear. And what of the... other matters we spoke of?'

*'I have deployed four squads in combat teams to the temple district,'* the Stormseer replied. *'There has been no sign of the High Enunciator or his priesthood since the swarm was broken outside the gates. The first hunt-brothers are moving into the crypts below as we speak, but they are reporting tunnel collapses and sections of the catacombs that have been sealed from within. I fear something lurks down there, Master of Blades. We must find it.'*

'Have there been any anomalies above the surface, besides the priesthood's disappearance?'

*'It is difficult to say. The tribespeople here are on the brink of panic. I cannot tell whether the unrest I have witnessed is human emotion, or something darker.'*

'Harren's disappearance speaks volumes. Go to the Pinnacle as soon as you can, weathemaker, and seek to bring the situation there under control. We need to find shelter for the tribespeople before the temperatures rise any further.'

*'Understood, my khan,'* Qui'sin replied. There was a moment's pause before he spoke again.

*'Remain on your guard. I do not need to have trod the Path of Heaven to know that there is something wrong here.'*

### **The Temple District, Heavenfall**

The White Scars cleared the temple district. It was on Qui'sin's advice – more so than any other part of Heavenfall, the site of the city's Ministorum cult was the most riddled with catacombs and underground passages. If there was a xenos threat still lurking beneath the slope-city's streets, it was likely to be there. The priesthood's recent disappearance only heightened the White Scars' suspicion.

Four squads performed the clearances, broken down into combat teams. Feng's was one of them. They had dismounted in the street outside their first objective, a yellow stone devotarium, slowly baking in the heat. Jakar, Oda and Sauri moved with their steedmaster in a loose spread between the colonnades, the spore-shrouded sunlight burning the hot sandstone underfoot and casting long shadows between the pillars.

Feng paused them on the edge of the open-aired building's central square. Shadows glared back at him from beneath the opposite cloisters, hard and

menacing. The square's central fountain, built around a graven effigy of Saint Paulus, was dead, its waterworks inactive, the pools of water drained by the Furnace Season's heat and scummed with xenos spores. The readings on Feng's power armour showed ever-rising levels of atmospheric toxicity, and the filtration units were starting to struggle with the sheer amount of alien microbes clogging the air. Their armour could resist both the heat and the xenos spores for some time to come, but it could not do so indefinitely. There were also rising reports of Pinnacle Guard troopers succumbing to both respiratory difficulties and the blistering heat of near-peak Furnace Season. Emergency response units from the slope-city's medicae ward were setting up makeshift treatment clinics on the lower slopes of Heavenfall to cope with the thousands of tribespeople similarly affected – all were overwhelmed with patients. Even with the main swarm scattered, it felt as though Darkand was dying. Such grim revelations had not served to lift Feng's mood in the wake of the victory before the Founding Wall.

'Jakar, Sauri, cover. Oda, on me.'

The steedmaster stepped out into the open square and advanced, big Oda at his side, their bolt pistols raised and auto-senses probing the surrounding pillars for sudden movements. Jakar and Sauri adopted braced shooting positions, scanning the entire space. Still, there was no sign of any contact. The two White Scars made it to the opposite cloisters without incident, boots thumping on the hot stone underfoot. Sauri and Jakar joined them moments later.

'Auspex says they're clear,' Feng said, glancing at the vambrace-mounted augur he'd taken from his bike. The device was speeding up their clearances considerably, but there were still several blocks to go before they could descend into the temple district's underbelly.

'Scan them,' the steedmaster said, indicating the archways leading off from the cloister's flanks. 'Let's pick up the pace, brothers.'

The squad went door to door, sweeping into one chamber after the next, weapons ready, senses on edge. Still, however, they found nothing. There weren't even signs of struggle or hasty evacuation. Sub-scriptoriums lay deserted, data-slates stacked neatly and stylus pots capped. A refectorium had its plastek trays laid out and the heating stoves scrubbed and gleaming. The psalters in the primary devotion annex all lay open at the last reading. Even the light that filtered in through the bare window arches in each stone-flagged room seemed undisturbed, xenos spore clouds hanging heavy and lazy in the shafts of illumination.

The reports coming in over the vox told the same story. Despite High Enunciator Traik's pledge that his priests would not abandon the surface for their catacombs, the White Scars could find no hint of a single monk, devotionary or deacon anywhere throughout the temple district. Worship halls, vigil closets, auto-flagellation racks and confessional stands that should have all been busy with the unending benedictions and scourging of the God-Emperor's worship were silent and empty, bar the low purr of the Space Marines' power armour and the tread of their heavy boots. It was as though some curse had rendered the faithful entirely invisible, while all their works and daily preparations remained.

The eerie absence was frustrating Feng. Creeping through buildings and alleyways in some deserted part of the city: this was not how the White Scars made war. It was bad enough that they'd been separated from their bikes, let alone that they were now chasing noon shadows. He wanted this done with, as quickly as possible.

'Last section,' he voxed, indicating the final unexplored side of the square to the rest of the squad via the visor display. Five doorway arches, one of them an open metal grate leading down into the undercroft. Shontai's assault brothers had already been through that section of the catacombs and reported it clear.

'Split this time,' Feng ordered. 'One to a door. Let's get this over with and report back to the wall.'

Oda, Sauri and Jakar's icons blinked affirmatives across Feng's display. He squared up to one of the arches, the entrance to the refectorium pantry from what he could see beyond, and checked his bolt pistol.

Movement to his right caught his eye before he could enter. He spun, bolt pistol going up automatically. The other three had already breached their assigned rooms, leaving Feng alone. But there was a fourth figure among the cloisters, about to pass into the darkness of the undercroft entrance. Feng's finger eased off the trigger as he recognised the white markings of a brother White Scar, a half-second before his blood turned to ice.

It was not just a fellow battle-brother, appearing out of nowhere. It was him.

### **Saint Attia's Ward, Heavenfall**

Heavenfall's primary medicae ward was full to capacity. Sited midway up the mountain slope, on the corner of the temple district, it had become a locus for the tribes brought within the Founding Wall – hundreds had been admitted with symptoms indicative of the peaking Furnace Season. Firethroat and steppe-skin, along with the more common complaints of heat exhaustion and dehydration

were all taking their toll. There were already dozens dead, and it would only worsen over the coming days. The medicae facility, a sprawling complex of white-painted rockcrete, was running on a volunteer staff with key surgeons gone to the shelter of the catacombs. Pinnacle Guard details stood throughout the buildings, sweat-slick and red-faced in their ochre combat kit, watchful lest the panic brewing beneath the surface should spill over into outright disorder.

Joghaten passed through the crowded wards like an angel of death – the incessant chattering, arguments and grieved wailing that filled the rest of the facility grew still and silent at the presence of the giant in battle-scarred white armour. He ignored the stares and the muttered prayers, his mind elsewhere as he made his way to the fifth surgeon bay.

The brotherhood had triumphed once again. Despite the odds, the White Scars' gamble – simultaneously striking down the primary leader-beasts both in orbit and on the surface, decapitating the swarm – had succeeded. Furthermore, word had come through from Tzu Shen: the hive fleet's threat was ended, the vast majority of the xenos bio-ships incinerated in Fury's Pillar or blown apart by the guns of Shen's counter-attacking fleet. Relative to what he had expected, the brotherhood's losses had been light. And yet, instead of the victory-joy he should have felt at another notch in the lodge pole, his thoughts were weighed down by a sense of foreboding. The xenos taint was not yet fully purged. None of the squads yet deployed to the catacombs had reported any contacts. They were down there though, the khan was sure of it.

He drew back the plastek drapes leading into the surgeon bay, his keen senses struck by the familiar scents of blood and counterseptics. The White Scars had requisitioned the small side ward for their own uses. There were six Space Marines present – four wounded hunt-brothers being administered to by the emchi Dorich, and a guard on the door, Assault-Brother Hechin. He bowed in salute and made way for the khan.

Dorich did not look up from his work. He was administering adrenal balances via his narthecium to a comatose brother Ulya, from the Second Tactical Squad. All four wounded Space Marines had entered a restive state thanks to their sus-an membrane, and were laid out on straining surgical gurneys, stripped of most of their armour. Their wounds were uniformly grievous – much of Ulya's left side, including his face, had been scarred and melted by a gout of bio-plasma. Dorich had been stripping away the fused, dead flesh and applying synth-skin wraps, while at the same time trying to stabilise the Space Marine's vitae signs before shock overcame him. The other three were all suffering from the vicious

stab and slash wounds administered by tyranid talons. Two zart assistants, the sleeves of their white kaftans stained red, were overseeing the other three while Dorich sought to save Ulya.

Joghaten said nothing as he watched the emchi work. It was Dorich who spoke first, eyes still on the synth-skin he was applying with short, expert strokes to Ulya's flank.

'The other three will live.'

'Thanks to you, honoured emchi,' Joghaten said, casting his eye over the bloody flesh of his brothers. Space Marines rarely reached the medicae table. Their transhuman physiology and mental strength ensured that any wound that was less than fatal could be shrugged off or treated without the need to leave the front line. Victory or death, there was rarely a line between the two.

'Would that I could save them all, my khan,' Dorich said quietly as he applied the last of the synth and injected a final shot into Ulya's arm.

'They fell in glory,' Joghaten assured him. 'This world has been saved because of them.'

'You sound unsure. Rarely have I seen the Master of Blades heavy with mourning guilt following a great victory.'

To many other members of the Tulwar Brotherhood Joghaten would have brushed aside such an accusation. Dorich, however, was far too venerable to be fooled by his khan. The Master of Blades nodded slowly.

'I cannot truly explain it, emchi,' he said. 'Little since we made planetfall has been as I expected. I had... such dark premonitions. This world is not finished with us yet.'

'Perhaps the Khagan has interceded for us,' Dorich said, gaze lingering on Ulya's terrible scars.

'Perhaps,' Joghaten said, accepting an incoming transmission feed in his earpiece. It was Qui'sin.

'*You must come to the centrum dominus, my khan,*' the Stormseer said. '*There is something happening out on the plains. The augurs have detected it.*'

'Detected what?' Joghaten said, bowing briefly to Dorich as he exited the ward.

'*The swarm has ceased to scatter. They... appear to be coordinating once more.*'

### **The Temple District, Heavenfall**

Lau Feng, steedmaster of the Fourth Brotherhood. It was unmistakable, an almost exact likeness. The only difference was what looked like three las-burns

in his breastplate, and the fact that he wasn't wearing his helmet. A dark gash was clotting over his left brow, where none yet marked him. Feng only saw the vision for a split second, but he knew his memory did not lie. Like all Space Marines, he could replay visual snapshots with perfect clarity. It was absolutely the steedmaster of the Third Assault Bike Squadron that he had just seen. It was Lau Feng.

But the figure had already gone. Feng's double had passed into the darkness of the undercroft stairway without even looking at him. It was as though he hadn't even existed, as though he was present and intruding on his own waking dream. His pistol, still raised and now aiming at thin air, started to shake. He lowered it slowly.

'Steedmaster?' Oda was standing before him, face unreadable behind his helmet's visor. Feng blinked, unsure when his three brothers had returned from the cleared rooms.

'Is something there?' Jakar asked, following Feng's gaze as it lingered on the undercroft grate. 'Contacts?'

Feng didn't respond. He pushed past Oda and approached the entrance to the catacombs. The darkness beneath was even more absolute than the spore-choked shade that gathered under the cloisters. He activated his pauldron's inbuilt stab lumen. The sharp beam of light struck an unyielding surface about a dozen paces down the crumbling undercroft staircase. It took him a second to realise the surface was a breastplate of white ceramite, embossed with a red-winged lightning bolt. Slowly, Feng drew the light upwards, up past a gorget, up towards the face of the figure blocking the passageway. Up to the ruined, acid-burned features of Eji.

The ghost's scream melded with Feng's own.

'Steedmaster!'

It was Oda again. The White Scar was pinning Feng's right vambrace in an iron grip, holding it away towards the fountain of Saint Paulus. Feng realised after a moment that it was because he'd been pointing his bolt pistol at Oda's face. He was standing back before the doorway arch he had yet to enter, the undercroft stairway still a dozen paces away.

'He is touched with the sight,' Jakar said quietly. 'I have seen it before. My father's father was a weathermaker.'

'So you often tell us, brother,' Sauri said with false levity. Oda was still gripping Feng's arm.

'Release me,' the steedmaster ordered. The larger Space Marine did so only

after a second's hesitation. Feng mag-locked his pistol.

'We are reporting back to the khan,' he said with a certainty he did not feel. 'This sector is clear.'

'The catacombs,' Jakar began, then trailed off.

'The sector is clear,' Feng repeated. The other three White Scars exchanged looks, still unreadable behind their helms.

'This place is cursed,' Feng said, moving past them towards the devotarium's exit.

'Everywhere you go is cursed,' Oda muttered.

Feng didn't respond.

### **The centrum dominus, Heavenfall**

Fifteen minutes after first receiving his Stormseer's message, Joghaten was standing beside Qui'sin at the edge of the centrum dominus' primary holochart. Pinnacle Guard officers clustered across from them, the green light of the projections throwing their tired, worried features into ghoulish contrast. The khan ignored their low muttering. His eyes were on the projections being beamed from the chart, fed by the Pinnacle's powerful augur arrays nestling on the mountain peak above.

The swarms were gathering again. There was no other way to describe it. Red icons representing tyranid broods had scattered like a constellation across Darkand's plain after the battle outside the Mountain Gate, their coordination gone with the loss of the hive mind. Now, however, it seemed something was once more orchestrating them. A vast alien mass was forming out on the plains with terrible rapidity, swelling even as the two Space Marines watched. The flocks of gargoyles that wheeled above the swarms were already turning towards the wall, darkening the holo-representation's skies.

'How is this possible?' Joghaten asked eventually. 'The hive fleet has been all but destroyed and their primary leader-beast is slain. None of the remaining synapse creatures should be strong enough to coordinate a swarm of such size, let alone over so wide an area.'

'I do not understand it,' Qui'sin admitted. 'Nothing in the records speaks of an event such as this. Unless Hive Fleet Cicatrix has developed some horrific new evolutionary trait, our remaining operations here should have been simply cleaning up.'

'They will be moving against us again in a matter of hours,' Joghaten said grimly. 'Whatever power now controls them, it will not cease until it has

breached the city and consumed those within. Pinnacle Guard, stand your men to and prepare the wall once more.'

'But the Furnace Season,' one young officer complained, not daring to meet the Space Marine's eyes. 'It is already taking a toll. We cannot survive above the surface for more than another day in this heat. It is about to hit peak temperatures.'

'We will hold your Wall together,' Joghaten said firmly. 'Or the xenos will slaughter you and all your family once they breach your catacombs. You must choose where and how you meet your fate – cowering in the dark or defending your bastions like men. Is that clear?'

There was a flurry of affirmatives, all edged with fear. The assembly broke up as the two Space Marines stepped away from the hololith.

'They are even more afraid than they were before,' Qui'sin said quietly, watching as officers barked deployment orders to the centrum's vox operators. 'They thought themselves reprieved. Now they know what is coming.'

'But just what is coming?' Joghaten asked, eyes on the holo display as it flickered and dissolved. 'This is... unprecedented.'

'I feared it would happen,' Qui'sin admitted, hand resting on the ulzi fate-pattern marking his staff's haft. 'The portents have been ill ever since we made our jump to the warp. Darkand is not finished with us.'

'You have been reticent since we first engaged the xenos on the plains,' Joghaten said. 'What have you seen, weathermaker?'

Qui'sin hesitated before answering.

'There is a presence in the city. It seeks to mask its psychic potency, but I can feel it all the same. I fear it is... beneath us. In the catacombs.'

Joghaten remembered the mawloc's tunnel, and how it had led not to the plains, but to the city.

'The squads deployed below ground have yet to find anything. If the xenos strike from beneath us as well as above, can we hold them?'

'I cannot see,' Qui'sin said. 'But I fear we cannot weather this storm alone.'

Joghaten marshalled his bondsmen and rode for the scriptorium. The roar of engines parted the wide-eyed nomads clogging the lower slopes, the sound echoing back from the crowded hab blocks. As they climbed higher the streets became deserted, bar the occasional stray pony or ux horn that had escaped the tribes below and now wandered the abandoned upper slopes. The citizens of Heavenfall were in their catacombs, while the steppe peoples were still packed

into the lower slopes, either occupying the destitute hab blocks near the Founding Wall or filling the streets and flattened square blocks. Patrols of Pinnacle Guard, however, had stopped any moving higher than the Old Town, and the steepness of the streets themselves had been a sufficient deterrent to the heavily laden tribal masses.

Joghaten led from the fore as they climbed higher, his hunt-brothers close behind. Those members of the brotherhood not investigating the temple district had been redeployed back to the wall, while their air elements were refuelling higher up the slope. Joghaten made it halfway towards the scriptorium headquarters, passing up the eerily deserted colonnades of the temple district, when the vox messages started coming through.

They were picked up from the Pinnacle Guard's comm-nets first, reports of gunfire in the lower districts, down among the nomad tribes. Then the messages started coming from the White Scars squads still stationed on the Founding Wall. Elements of Shontai's assault squad started taking sniper fire from the nearby hab tops. A combat team drawn from the Third Tactical Squad and assisting the Pinnacle Guard with keeping the nomad tribes corralled came under fire from an unseen source. Further confirmation of what Qui'sin had warned them of. Joghaten routed a message to the entire brotherhood.

'Be aware, hunt-brothers. Pinnacle Guard units could potentially bear xenos taint. There are snakes in the grass. Secure your objectives with all possible speed.'

*By the time the cult reveals its full military capabilities and begins to openly attack centres of Imperial authority, it is almost always far too late.*

– Inquisitor Tormund Kalo, Ordo Xenos,  
from his Selected Memoires, sixth edition



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE SECOND SWARM

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 5 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The Founding Wall, Heavenfall**

Qui'sin joined the First Battalion of the Pinnacle Guard on the Founding Wall, two sections north of the Mountain Gate. Colonel Uygur was there, struggling in the furnace heat, still sporting the scars of his first encounter with a tyranid – red-stained bandages over his scalp that hid a vicious slashing wound. His expression was grim as he stood in the White Scar's shadow, following his gaze out onto the plain.

The swarm had returned. It stretched from horizon to horizon, a glittering, barbed black sea covered by a thunderhead of flying xenofoms, rolling like a rising tide over the patchwork yellows and browns of the steppe. The air between the xenos and the wall shimmered, distorted by the Furnace Season's heat and the sheer amount of alien spores clogging Darkand's atmosphere. Behind the swarm, on the plains where they had first made planetfall, dark clouds had gathered. The planet's skies were being changed and deformed by the hyper-evolution of the hive mind. Even without its mother ships in orbit, the Great Devourer was still doing its work. Qui'sin still did not understand how

such a thing was possible.

‘They are numerous,’ Uygur croaked, his throat parched and raw from xenos spores. It was a commendable understatement. The susurrations of the approaching swarm carried through the heavy air to the wall. Qui’sin could feel the rockcrete vibrating underneath his boots.

Against the great mass, what did they still have? The brotherhood was still combat effective, with just over seventy hunt-brothers able to wield a bolter, but their strength was split between the wall and those still combing through the catacombs. There was no possibility of them meeting the swarm on the plain again, and no clear leader-beast for them to strike at anyway. The Pinnacle Guard had supplied thousands to the wall’s parapets, but from what vox traffic Qui’sin intercepted it seemed they were suffering command and control issues. Units had gone dark on the comm-net or were not reporting to their designated positions, and munitions were still being transported down the slope-streets to the wall’s rear armouries. No one had foreseen the tyranids’ return.

‘Your men are fully equipped?’ Qui’sin asked Uygur, forcing himself to turn his gaze away from the dark majesty of the incoming swarm and meet the terrified eyes of Darkand’s defenders, the thousands of Pinnacle Guardsmen atop the wall.

‘We have brought forward all our reserve stockpiles,’ Uygur said. ‘Brigade command expects it to last until tomorrow.’

‘And then what?’

‘And then we will use our bayonets, great hetman.’

Qui’sin looked back at the swarm, his heart heavy. Too often the duties of the Adeptus Astartes called upon them to witness good men die badly. For a warrior genetically formed to defend mankind’s empire across the stars, it was a cruel irony that he so often had to witness the best of humanity perishing.

‘Tell your men to conserve ammunition as best they can,’ he instructed. The colonel’s affirmative seemed distant as the Stormseer began to focus his mind. He was tired, mentally fatigued not only by the previous fighting but by the ever-present scratching of the hive mind, and the strain of not fully understanding what was coming for them. They had won. They had killed the leader-beasts. So how could the swarm be so coordinated?

For a moment, he recalled the aeldari witch and her warnings. He had almost told Joghaten about her visit in the centrum dominus. Now that hope had begun to gutter out, the temptation of seeking the aliens’ help was growing stronger. But what had such creatures ever offered mankind besides lies and deceit? The

eldar were more likely to worsen their situation than save them.

The Stormseer forced such troubles from his mind, seeking his centre. More so than ever before, his abilities were needed, not just by the brotherhood now taking up positions along the wall, but by the human soldiers who stood by them. Repel the swarm one more time and it may disintegrate, or they might be able to find the root of its strength. It was their only hope.

Qui'sin raised his hand and unhooded Kemich, the psyber-hawk taking flight with a cry. Either side of him the Pinnacle Guardsmen began clicking home power packs, while the auto-loaders and mount rotations of the heavy weapons batteries built into the bastions clattered. The swarm was about to enter maximum range.

*'All Wall sections,'* crackled Joghaten's voice over the vox. *'Fire at will.'*

### **The catacombs, Heavenfall**

Underground, vox distortion was chopping the net. Feng and his three brothers had moved down into the catacombs east of the devotarium, seeking traces they had picked up on the auspex. Feng led them in silence. He had barely spoken a word since leaving the devotarium's quadrangle. The quiet was at odds with his thoughts. He had seen himself, of that he had no doubt. Not a revenant, but real, tangible, present. How could it be possible?

He forced himself to focus. From what little they could pick up, it sounded as though the swarm had re-engaged the defences of the Founding Wall. Feng yearned to be on the front line, but Joghaten's orders had been clear – they couldn't afford to let up on the hunt for whatever was festering beneath Heavenfall. Defeating the swarm attacking from the plains would count for nothing if the city was breached from below.

He concentrated on the winding rock tunnel ahead. Heavenfall was riddled with catacombs. Most were used for storage or to shelter the slope-city's citizens during the Furnace Season, though beneath temple district there was also numerous crypts, undercrofts and ossuary vaults. It was one such catacomb that the squad was moving through now, its walls lined with heavy, upright stone caskets containing the remains of long-dead dignitaries from the government district. The cobwebbed lumen orbs in this section of tunnel had failed, and the White Scars had fallen back on their auto-senses to pierce the dusty darkness.

*'Lower slope contacts–'* a panicked voice on one of the Pinnacle Guard frequencies clicked, before the signal was lost again; *'–everywhere, we need–'*

Feng cursed, wishing he could pick up a link to the rest of the brotherhood. It

appeared fighting was breaking out in the streets and squares near the Founding Wall. He pushed back his desire to know more about what was happening on the surface. His thoughts were still haunted, memory fixed on the image of his own revenant.

Darkand was cursed, and a part of him knew he would never leave it.

Oda was on point, but at an intersection Feng took over the lead. His brothers were no longer willing to follow him, he was sure. They knew how much the loss of his old squad still plagued him. They knew he was only a remnant of his former self, shattered pieces placed back together but never fixed. They knew he saw things that were not really there.

The thought had barely entered his mind when he became aware of a presence to his left, looming between two of the upright stone sarcophaguses. It showed up on his visor's infrared display as a patch of distortion, rather than a direct contact. He turned sharply, cancelling the visor reading with a blink and activating his pauldron's stab lumen.

The beam of light picked out broken white ceramite. This time, Feng did not hesitate. With a roar he swung his fist at Eji's horrific, acid-burned face, transhuman strength driven on by the need to end the nightmare he had slipped into. But there was nothing there. Feng's gauntlet met the stone of the wall, and carried on. There was a shuddering crunch as the steedmaster punched through the tunnel side, the stone façade giving way before him.

The lumen picked out what lay beyond – a secondary tunnel, this one lower and more natural, its rocky sides craggy and scummed a rust-red with lichens and fronds. Feng stared for a moment, recalling the auspex mapping of the lower levels. This tunnel was undocumented, and it ran parallel with the one they were currently following.

'Markings on the walls,' Oda said from over Feng's shoulder, painting them up on the squad's connected visor display. Feng saw that he was right – there were scrapes around the shoulder height of a man all along the tunnel, where the lichen had been dragged free and the rock itself scarred. Whatever had caused the markings had left behind no other trace.

Feng tried the vox, but the connection was gone. Someone more prudent would likely have withdrawn to the surface and reported what they had found. But Feng, like all White Scars, was a hunter first and last.

'Jakar, cover the rear,' he ordered, moving into the secondary tunnel with his bolt pistol raised.

After a moment's hesitation, his hunt-brothers followed.

## **The Chamber of Seers, Iyanden Craftworld**

With a harsh clatter, the seeing stones fell to the floor of the arching wraithbone chamber, scattering across its gleaming expanse.

Yenneth did not remember crying out, but she must have done – Arianna had entered at the sound. The first she knew of the warlock's presence was her hand, helping her back into a sitting position. The farseer blinked, struggling to process past and present realities as they were unmade around her, unravelling like a thread being dragged by a spindle. A shudder ran through her body, and she realised she was clutching her spirit stone so hard the edges of the wraithbone filigree that decorated it were cutting into her slender fingers.

Arianna said nothing, but Yenneth could sense her questions. She shook her head, taking a breath and letting the present settle into being.

'I was too late,' she said. 'I have done everything within my power to avoid this moment, but it is upon us regardless. I must go back to the mon-keigh city and set in train the final events. You must awake your cohorts, dear Arianna, and return to the City of Pillars.'

'The dead do not return to us lightly,' Arianna said. 'Not so soon after being put to rest once more.' Yenneth did not look at the warlock, but gestured instead at the stones scattered across the floor.

'Tell me what you see, sister.'

Arianna took in the supposedly random fall of the stones, and realised in a heartbeat what they showed.

'The runes of past and future, looping to form the whole.'

'Past and future, yes,' Yenneth agreed. 'But where is the present? Nothing lies between the two. They lead back and consume one another.'

'Then it is true,' Arianna said, bowing her head. 'I will ready our fallen brothers and sisters. The wraith hosts of Iyanden will march once more.'

## **The upper catacombs, Heavenfall**

Fourth Tactical Squad took the upper slope catacombs. Timchet was with them. They'd lost their heavy weapons specialist, Hunt-Brother Oyunchimeg, in the first clash with the tyranids in the Hills of the Broken Bones. Timchet and his heavy bolter, salvaged from *Wind Tamer*, was Fourth Squad's replacement.

Timchet had not interacted with the Tactical Marines since joining them in the troop compartment of their Rhino, responding to squad leader commands only.

In truth, none of the White Scars were in the mood for exuberant back and forth – they had all lost good hunt-brothers, and the joy of a battle well fought had evaporated when it became apparent that there was another xenos attack being mounted against the wall, and possibly more already below them. The squad had been deployed high up the slope and split into two four-man combat teams, to better explore the catacombs there. These were expected to be occupied by civilians, but a sweep was necessary – contact had been lost with the evacuees within, and it was impossible to be sure that was simply the effect of Darkand’s yellow rock and soil.

Timchet was with the second combat team as it secured a registration hall and took a grav-lift down to the entrance of the nearest catacomb section. These ones, higher up on the mountainside, were the preserve of Heavenfall’s wealthier citizens. While not quite the private compartments enjoyed by those employed in the government district, the briefing docket Timchet had memorised during the ride up the mountainside had described them as more spacious and better ventilated.

The entranceway to this particular section had been sealed off, but the leader of the combat team, a silver-haired hunt-brother named Uygai, possessed the access code.

‘Still no contact from within,’ he warned as the hatch’s locking bars disengaged automatically. ‘Be wary, brothers.’

The hatch rolled open and revealed what lay beyond – a cavernous space lit by wired lumen strips, the light illuminating ranked bunks and storage lockers.

‘Janggi, on point,’ Uygai voxed. The White Scars breached in silence, Timchet taking up the rear. Janggi’s curse told him something was wrong even before his auto-senses registered the stench of opened bodies.

Most of the people sheltered in this section of the catacombs had been wealthier than most Darkanders – artisans, educators, government district administrative staff and the families of off-worlder Imperial dignitaries or merchant and freighter captains. They had all died together though, massacred like a trapped herd of yats towards the far end of the chamber. The bunk beds and storage cabinets ranking the subterranean space were soaked with blood.

‘The entrance was sealed,’ Janggi confirmed. ‘And the grav-lift had not logged any usage since it brought the last relocation group down.’

‘Something was already down here with them,’ Timchet said quietly. ‘Perhaps it was even already among them.’ He’d barely spoken before movement at the far end of the cavern flickered across the squad’s linked auto-senses. The lumens

towards the rear of the bloody chamber had failed, but the darkness could not fully hide what was lurking there.

‘Contact,’ Janggi managed to vox, before an alien shriek rent the air.

### **The Mountain Gate, Heavenfall**

The Master of Blades had taken up a position on the Mountain Gate. Behind him Heavenfall and the Slope Road stretched, a mountain-city under siege. Ahead, the swarm engulfed all.

The Founding Wall’s defences had opened fire. Bastion-mounted artillery lobbed high explosives into the oncoming masses, churning up clouds blossoming with burning and torn xenos meat. Heavy bolters, autocannons and missile launchers were deployed, first tearing into the gargoyles sweeping down from above, then blasting gaps in the broods beneath, holes that were instantly filled. The thudding of flak turrets added to the barrage as the wall’s inbuilt, servitor-manned air defences kept the flying swarms at bay. All the while the khan was scanning the broods beneath for whatever leader-beast was controlling it. There were still synapse creatures – warriors, zoanthropes, even lesser tyrants – but nothing that seemed to be coordinating so vast a brood. The absence of a leader made striking a swift, decisive blow impossible. Such troubles enraged Joghaten’s Chogorian sensibilities.

The snap-crack of thousands of lasguns opening fire simultaneously was filtered out by the khan’s Lyman’s ear. The rapidly narrowing space between the swarm’s leading edge and the foot of the Founding Wall became brilliantly lacerated by thousands of points of light as the Pinnacle Guard poured small-arms fire into the swarm. For a moment the swiftest creatures in the alien horde, the hormagaunts and sinuous raveners, faltered.

‘Maintain fire on the leading edge,’ Joghaten instructed, his orders routed through the Pinnacle Guard’s comms systems.

There was a whirr beside him as the fixed-defence Hydra AA gun sited on top of the Mountain Gate traversed, its quad cannons opening up with air-shuddering thuds. Seconds later bisected alien remains were tumbling down around the khan. He looked up as sizzling xenos ichor splattered his armour. The brotherhood’s air support had engaged with the flocks of gargoyles that had broken through the initial salvos of fire from the wall, combining with Heavenfall’s flak defences to paint the sky with metal and death. Those Pinnacle Guardsmen stationed to the rear of the wall’s parapets were shooting up into the sections of flock that managed to wheel below the flak barrage, searing the sky

with bolts of red las.

It was carnage but, for a moment, it looked as though the swarm was stalling.

Then the tyranids unleashed firepower of their own. Bio-plasma and goutts of acid struck the wall's parapets, sending groups of Pinnacle Guardsmen reeling back screaming as they clutched burning or dissolving flesh. Borer beetles, launched by the gargoyles swooping above, chewed through flak and flesh in an indiscriminate feeding frenzy, while venom-coated spines riddled rockcrete and dropped men who clawed at pierced faces, shoulders and backs.

The White Scars steadied the line. These were not the open plains, and their steeds were not beneath them, but they were Space Marines, the Emperor's chosen, as immovable in defence as they were implacable in attack. Spread thin along the Founding Wall, they stood tall amidst the nightmarish alien barrage, cutting down the oncoming tide with disciplined bursts of bolter fire and directing the shots of those nearest to them.

The swarm shuddered forward then stalled once more, barely a hundred yards from the wall. Joghaten, still standing unmoving atop the Mountain Gate, looked from left to right and knew hope. If anything could stop this tide of ravenous alien filth, it was the Tulwar Brotherhood.

Then the xenos struck back once more. Too late, Joghaten realised the tide truly had turned.

### **The catacombs, Heavenfall**

Movement through the secondary tunnel was difficult. Feng was forced to advance almost side on, power armour grinding against the ragged edges of the stone passage. The scrape markings were higher up than the old ones that seemed to mark the tunnel for its entire length. What had made them remained a mystery, as did their location or where they were headed. The auspex display was offline, blank and useless, and all communications systems were being blocked by the weight of stone and earth above. All Feng was certain of was that the passage was sloping gradually downwards. They were descending into Darkand's depths.

After about fifteen minutes the tunnel started to widen once more. Feng's auto-senses detected a scent on the humid subterranean air – sickly, alien. He didn't need to open his visor to know that the tunnel was thick with the stench of xenos.

'Light ahead,' he voxed. 'Possible contacts.'

They had reached the end of the tunnel. Feng found himself emerging into an

uneven cavern, its ceiling a thicket of jagged stalactites. Other tunnels, similar to the one he had entered through, pierced the cavern's walls. The light was dim, cast by a few lumen lanterns scattered across the more even parts of the floor. Feng took in the surroundings in a second – the rough stone, a littering of human remains – before focusing on those still living, occupying the centre of the room.

There were half a dozen of them. One, a prisoner, had been bound to one of the stalagmites studding the cavern's floor. The other five, clearly alerted that something was approaching thanks to the scraping sound of the White Scars' armour, had gathered close to the passageway's entrance. They were not human, or at least not fully so, though clad in the ornate yat gowns and beading of the local Imperial cult; the exposed flesh of their heads and hands was pale and purple-veined, and their craniums were obscenely swollen. The five figures were staring up at Feng as he emerged, black eyes registering something akin to shock. Whatever they had expected to emerge from the tunnel, it was not a fully armed and armoured son of Jaghatai.

Feng suffered from no such hesitation – a glance was enough to know the five men were xenos-tainted. The first died from a snapshot at point-blank range, a bolt pistol round blowing away much of its torso. A second followed the first before they were able to react, Feng's gauntlet pulverising its swollen skull as the White Scar launched himself into the cavern with a roar.

The three surviving hybrids snatched at lasrifles bearing the markings of the Pinnacle Guard. The nearest fired just as Feng, striking with all his servo-enhanced strength and speed, knocked the weapon's muzzle aside. The las-bolt struck one of its kin, searing through its throat and dropping it immediately. A heartbeat later Feng's bolt pistol detonated the first hybrid's skull in an explosion of bone fragments and grey matter.

The final half-xenos' salvo cracked squarely into Feng's breastplate, the shots burning into ceramite and plasteel at point-blank range. Warning icons blinked on the White Scar's visor display as his armour registered penetration and pain flared across his chest, but before he could respond the cavern resounded to another thunderous detonation – Oda, the second White Scar out of the tunnel behind Feng, had blown apart the last hybrid.

Feng dismissed the warning displays, feeling his body flood with stimms and counterseptics. A glance at the vitae readout told him the wounds were flesh only, and his enhanced physiology had already suppressed their pain.

'Area secure,' Oda voxed as the rest of the squad spread out through the cavern. Only one other figure now lived in the echoing subterranean space, the ageing

man bound to one of the stalagmites. Though he was alone, there had clearly once been more prisoners – the cavern floor underfoot was carpeted with human remains, a few scraps of rotten meat and tendon, but mostly polished bone. The prisoner himself wore a slashed scriptorium gown, and had what appeared to be bite marks on his arms and legs. He was shaking and dull-eyed, seemingly unaware of what was happening around him.

‘No threat,’ Sauri confirmed as he scanned the man. ‘His vitae signs are low.’

‘Let him down,’ Feng ordered, boots crunching through bone as he approached. The man collapsed into Sauri’s arms as he snapped his bonds.

‘Who are you?’ Feng asked, going down on one knee so he was level with the man.

‘They turned the young ones,’ the man mumbled, not making eye contact with Feng. ‘They... they didn’t need us.’

‘It seems as though the xenos have been feeding on prisoners held here,’ Jakar said. ‘Almost all the bones have been gnawed.’

‘Where did they take you from?’ Feng asked the prisoner. He didn’t respond. He’d gone limp in Sauri’s grip. Feng’s auto-senses confirmed that he was dead.

‘Back to the surface,’ he said to the rest of the squad. ‘If this is just one of their nests the size of the taint here is greater than we thought.’

The others didn’t reply. Feng didn’t need to ask why – he’d just realised there was a noise echoing down the tunnel and into the cavern. And it wasn’t just coming from the one they’d entered through, but from all the entrances around them. It took him only a second to recognise the long, multi-limbed shadows thrown ahead of the hundreds of creatures approaching the cavern, their carapaces scraping the tunnel sides.

Genestealers.

*Many of our cousins refuse to retreat. They see it as dishonourable. They are fools. Ten thousand victories have started with a retreat. The only dishonour is in not coming back.*

– Vorgha, Master of Steeds,  
Khan of the Bloodrider Brotherhood



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### HEAVEN'S FALL

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 2 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The Founding Wall, Heavenfall**

At the rear bastions the men of Fifth Squad, Company C, First Regiment of the Pinnacle Guard watched the skies with terror. In the supply zone, at ground level immediately behind the Founding Wall, they were unable to see the nightmarish might of the tyranid swarm throwing itself at the parapets held by their comrades, but the flocks of gargoyles battling the Space Marine gunships overhead were all too visible. The thunder of the battle only added to the fear, each hammering discharge of the Earthshaker artillery pieces, set up on the bastions mere feet away, making the pale-faced soldiers flinch.

Sergeant Toren had given up trying to find the words to embolden his charges. The Fifth Squad was one of the youngest in the entire regiment, and for that reason they had been posted to the rear echelons during both the first assault on the Mountain Gate, and now during this second, unexpected attack. Besides the batwinged aliens wheeling in their shrieking flocks overhead, none of them had yet seen a tyranid.

Toren was standing in the doorway to one of the wall's rear bastion armouries,

in section two. In the half-darkness behind her the great auto-loaders rattled, the mechanised system carrying Earthshaker shells up through a hatch and onto the loading deck for the heavy artillery pieces. Half of her squad were inside the dimly lit armoury, watching over the loader and the dead-eyed servitors that hefted shells from their cradles to the clattering belt feeds. The other half were posted outside, trying to keep their eyes on the open space of the loading bay before them rather than stare up at the horrors battling overhead. Silver slope haulers would roll on their electrified wires into the bay every fifteen minutes, their carriages packed with fresh munitions brought up from the reserve catacombs. A quartermaster and his team of lifter-servitors ferried the shells into the bastion, but for the past half hour Toren had been using her squad to assist them, hoping to keep their minds off what was coming for them from the other side of the wall.

The next hauler was still a few minutes away when a squeal of tyres announced the arrival of an ochre Pinnacle Guard flatbed in the loading area. The transport had barely come to a stop before a dozen figures leapt from it – a fully armed security detail, their snarling steppe canid visors lowered.

‘Who is in command here?’ one of them demanded as he strode towards the armoury’s open blast door. Toren snapped a hurried salute.

‘First Sergeant Toren reporting, sir.’

‘I am Guardmaster Nergüi, Seventh Pinnacle Security Troop,’ said the figure, features inscrutable behind his visor. ‘This armoury is secure and functioning at maximum capacity?’

‘It is, sir,’ Toren responded.

Nergüi didn’t say anything back. He simply raised his laspistol and shot Toren through the head.

It only took a few seconds. As their sergeant crumpled back through the armoury’s doorway the half of the squad in the bay outside were cut down in a spray of fully automatic las-fire. On the inside one Guardsman reacted fast enough to scramble for the blast door’s locking wheel, but a stun grenade tossed by Nergüi left him stumbling and dazed. The security detail swept into the armoury with kindjals drawn, butchering their screaming comrades while the loading servitors continued dragging shells to the mechanised hoists, oblivious to the cold-blooded killing going on around them.

‘Glory to the Great Devourer,’ Nergüi hissed as the last Pinnacle Guardsman was silenced. ‘The demo charges, my brethren. Quickly.’

Nergüi’s kindred began taping explosive blocks to the sides of the armoury’s

shell cradles, while the guardmaster closed and locked the blast door, sealing them all inside. He grinned as he did so.

All throughout the city, their brethren were striking. At long last, the day of ascension was upon them.

On the parapets of the Founding Wall, Qui'sin stumbled. The Stormseer had bent the full weight of his psychic abilities into an earth tremor that had widened a gully rift a few hundred yards out from the wall, pitching dozens of shrieking tyranids to their deaths. As the aftershocks shuddered up through the rockcrete beneath him the White Scar slumped against the parapet, panting, his grip on his force staff shaking.

That was when the vision came for him. For a split second he found himself frozen in mid-air, suspended amidst a sea of shattered stone and torn bodies. He snapped back to the present with a gasp, lurching back from the parapet.

'Great hetman?' Colonel Uygur enquired, shouting over the furious snap-cracking of his men's ongoing las fusillade. Qui'sin stared about with wide eyes, even his well-trained mind struggling to accommodate the lurch from future back to present.

'The Wall,' he managed to say, sending a mind-imperative to Kemich that drove the airborne raptor higher. 'Get your men off the wall, colonel.'

'Great hetman-' Uygur began, but it was too late. Qui'sin realised, in that double heartbeat, that they were going to die.

The Founding Wall beneath burst upwards, and for a second all was curiously slow and silent. Qui'sin felt himself lifted into the air, his transhuman senses rendering everything in painful clarity. He saw rockcrete shattering into a hundred crumbling shards, plasteel shredded into a thousand scraps of twisted metal. He saw the autocannon emplacement directly to his right break into pieces, the heavy weapon buckling, its crew flung up amidst the debris. He saw Uygur's head struck by a spinning piece of broken parapet, the colonel's flesh splitting and deforming around the impact before his skull cracked, brain matter splattering slowly across Qui'sin's white battleplate. He felt his own armour taking impacts, warning sigils igniting one by one across his visor as rubble battered and pounded him.

Then the explosion blossomed, fierce and untameable, searing away flesh and bone, rockcrete and plasteel. Qui'sin was shielded from its fury, his auto-senses killing the visor glare and dampening the eardrum-bursting roar of the great detonation. Regardless, as it engulfed the Stormseer a part of his mind fled. He

found himself amidst the clouds, weightless and free, drifting on air currents rent by aerial combat. He watched the explosion far below him, splitting open the Founding Wall, demolishing an entire section just north of the Mountain Gate in a great cloud of fire, smoke and rubble. He realised he was seeing it all through Kemich's eyes and was content, just for a second, to imagine that in death he had become truly as one with the noble berkut.

It was the screaming of his armour that brought him back to his own body. His auto-senses were warning him of multiple servo impairments. He deleted the reports and was on his feet before he was even truly aware of where he was or what was happening. A Space Marine could not be stopped or stunned the way a normal human could, but the dislocation was still jarring.

His staff was still in his grasp, lashed by its cord to his wrist. The left side of his visor was unresponsive, fuzzed with static backwash. He was surrounded by a wall of dust that resisted his helmet's wounded optics for a second. He was standing amidst furrowed, smoking dirt that had once been section two's rear echelon bastions, while ahead of him a part of the Founding Wall almost a hundred paces across had simply disappeared, replaced by a jagged mound of scorched, broken rubble. Debris was still falling from above, dirt pattering down on the Stormseer's befouled armour, mixed in with liquefied or burning organics. There was no one living in the space revealed by his auto-senses, only a broken wasteland, rendered in shades of gloomy ochre by the death-shroud of smoke that choked the air.

For a second, apart from his connection to Kemich, Qui'sin felt as though he was the only one still alive in the entire city.

Then the first hormagaunt came bounding over the rubble. It was followed immediately by another, and then another. The scrape and clatter of hundreds of hooves on broken rockcrete reached Qui'sin over the patter of falling remains.

Bellowing an oath to the Khagan, the Stormseer hefted his force staff, and met them head-on.

The Pinnacle Guardsmen around Joghaten fell when the explosion hit. The khan's auto-stabilisers triggered as the shock wave struck the Mountain Gate, yet even so he was forced to steady himself. A moment later and the dust and debris hit.

A normal human would have spent long, precious seconds recovering from the detonation that shook Heavenfall to its core. Joghaten, however, took only a moment to reassess the situation as rubble clattered from his scarred armour. A

long section of the Founding Wall just to the north of the gatehouse had been breached by a terrific internal explosion. It could only be a detonation in one of the reserve armouries. Whether it had been caused by an accident or treachery was impossible to say. Either way, the result was a fatal gap in the wall's defences.

Through the smoke, Joghaten could already see the swarm shifting.

'Reserve units to the breach, sector two,' he voxed over the joint command frequency as the Pinnacle Guardsmen around him picked themselves up. He was met with discord over the net. A dozen panicked voices shouted over one another, demanding clarification or issuing contradictory orders. Joghaten snarled a curse and switched to a direct link to the reserve commander, Brigadier Yegem.

'Wall sector two,' he instructed. 'Move everything within one mile to the breach and lay down suppressing fire. I am bringing as many of my brethren as I can muster to you.'

'*Great hetman, the governor has ordered us to withdraw,*' Yegem replied, voice shrill with distress. '*I-I cannot countermand a direct order from the Pinnacle.*'

It was treachery then. In the back of his mind the khan had feared as much. The upper echelons of Heavenfall's command structure were causing Pinnacle Guard units to abandon their positions at the crucial moment.

'If you are a servant of your treacherous governor, withdraw your forces,' Joghaten told Yegem. 'If you are a servant of mankind and the God-Emperor, follow my instructions and seal the breach. The choice is yours.'

Before the brigadier could reply Joghaten's attention was dragged back to the gate below by a furious, ululating bellow. A shape burst through the swirling smoke blanketing the combat zone, big as a Land Raider and gaining speed. Joghaten recognised the brute form of a carnifex, and it was headed straight for the Mountain Gate, its head lowered.

'Decrease elevation!' Joghaten roared at the gunners manning the Hydra flak cannon. 'Bring it down!'

The Hydra's quad cannons lowered with painful slowness. The swarm was rushing headlong now, dragged as though by a vacuum into the breach in the wall to the right of the gate. The curtain of firepower that had been keeping them at bay was now reduced to a few stuttering las-bolts and the work of a single battery of Colossus siege mortars, sited north of the blast radius. The detonation had not only destroyed the wall, it had also broken the interlocking fire discipline that had given Joghaten cause for hope.

The Hydra finally locked into its new firing depression. The air shook as its quad cannon opened up, pumping a withering stream of heavy calibre rounds into the oncoming tyranid monstrosity. Any other creature would have been torn to pieces, yet the carnifex absorbed the worst of the damage, its thick plates of chitin riddled and cracked but its forward momentum unchecked. Worse, the Hydra's elevation meant that it managed to lock on to the beast for only a few seconds before the xenos was beneath its arc of fire.

'Brace!' Joghaten bellowed to the gateway's defenders. A second later and the carnifex impacted into the adamantium gates beneath. There was a shriek of buckling metal and the rockcrete around Joghaten shuddered. The khan did not have time to issue fresh orders, however – the carnifex was not the only tyranid to have reached the Founding Wall. The first hormagaunt leapt for the parapet, powered into an almighty leap by the thickly bunched muscles of its hind limbs. It fell short, scything talons scraping sparks from the bulwark. The second, however, cleared the edge. Its hooves clipped the rockcrete and it tumbled directly onto one of Joghaten's drawn tulwars.

'Bondsmen, on me,' the khan grunted over the vox, igniting his blades as the alien tide crashed against the Mountain Gate. Beneath, the carnifex beat what remained of its armoured skull against the broken adamantium, driving the entrance to the city open even as its mangled body finally succumbed to its wounds.

The Founding Wall had fallen.

It only took a moment's assessment for Qui'sin to realise that they couldn't hold the breach. Already the rubble left by the detonation was swarming with gaunts, spreading like water from a burst dam into the space behind the wall and the streets beyond.

For a moment, the Stormseer was alone. For a moment every ounce of his physical and mental strength was bent towards stemming the tide. He met the gaunts skittering down the reverse side of the wall's remains wreathed in a tornado of summoned power, the whipping elements shot through with bolts of lightning that earthed and cracked into anything that came close, flinging shrieking xenos from his path. The Stormseer's eyes blazed with the golden light of Chogoris as he mounted the rubble, every footstep a thunderclap, his hair erect with the static charge that played and sparked across his blue-and-white battleplate.

For a moment, the weathermaker held the breach, at the eye of the tempest the

power of another dimension channelled through his body and mind. That moment was enough. Like moonfins darting through cloudy water, red las-blasts started to punch through the dust kicked up by the wall's destruction and the White Scar's psychic potency, first a few, then dozens. Figures came charging through the gloom, bayonets fixed, shouting in fear and terror. The tyranids, unable to lay a single talon on the warrior bestriding the breach, turned aside as one, driven back by the fury of Qui'sin's localised storm and the sudden counter-attack mounted by the prey.

The Pinnacle Guard's First Battalion had been savaged by the blast that had broken the Founding Wall, but it had not been destroyed. Those soldiers who had survived in reserve in nearby streets, or the extreme left and right flank companies on the parapets, had initially been left stunned by the scale of the disaster and the death of Colonel Uygur.

It was Lieutenant Senga who took control as the aftershock of the mountain-shaking explosion finally faded away. Senga's platoon had been stationed north of the armoury, and were sheltered from the worst of the blast by one of the poor hab blocks clustering the base of the slope-city, nearest the wall. While others stared in horror at the cloud of dust and smoke rising from the epicentre of the blast, Senga followed his training; he got his men on their feet and, ears still ringing, led them in a boots-pounding rush directly into the carnage, all the while barking orders to the nearest surviving units over the regiment's short-range comms frequency.

Qui'sin only became aware of the Pinnacle Guard's arrival when the number of gaunts flinging themselves into the psychic maelstrom he had created lessened. He was deep in a warp trance, fist clenched around his force staff like a drowning man grasping gnarled old driftwood as his mind plunged through the wild, swirling eddies of the empyrean. It was Kemich who dragged him back with her startling cry, the psy-linked familiar acting like a beacon in the storm. The winds about him died abruptly as he gasped back into full consciousness, the after-effects of the actinic lightning still darting across his energy-wreathed form.

'We can hold them, Sky Warrior!' shouted Senga from across the rubble to his right. Qui'sin became properly aware of the Pinnacle Guardsmen pushing up alongside him for the first time. He flinched as the aftershock of the immense powers he had just wielded washed back over him – his skull was throbbing in time with his psychic hood, its wires and dermal nodes pricking his scalp, while the staff in his fist was still vibrating as it earthed the warp-spawned potency he

had called upon. He could taste blood.

‘Hold your advance,’ he told Senga, struggling to regain control of the moment before the young officer’s exuberance carried him too far. ‘My powers are spent, for the moment, and we will need more support.’

‘Governor Harren has ordered all Pinnacle Guard units to withdraw,’ Senga said. ‘I fear there will be no support, Sky Warrior.’

‘What?’ Qui’sin demanded. ‘This is the only chance we’ll have to shore this breach up. If you withdraw now the city will fall.’

‘It’s all confusion,’ Senga admitted. ‘There are reports of fighting breaking out further up the slope. Some say the tribes are rioting, others that Pinnacle Guard units have turned traitor.’

Qui’sin paused as a blinking transmission sigil on his visor display demanded his attention. It was Joghaten.

*‘The Mountain Gate is breached,’* the khan said. It was obvious from his laboured breathing and the clash of blades in the background that he was as embroiled in the battle for the wall as Qui’sin.

‘The breach has not yet fallen, but it will soon without reinforcements,’ the Stormseer replied. Ahead of him the sounds of las-fire intensified. Already the edge of a fresh wave of gaunts was scrabbling through the rubble towards the makeshift defence, as numerous and implacable as ever.

*‘Disengage and withdraw to secondary positions in the Old Town,’* Joghaten ordered. There was a pause, punctuated by an alien shriek, before the vox transmission continued. *‘We must tighten our defensive lines if we are to halt them.’*

‘I’ve heard reports of fighting further up the slope,’ Qui’sin said. ‘We are being attacked from within as well as without.’

*‘It is as we feared. I am withdrawing squads from the catacombs to reinforce our rally points in the Old Town.’*

‘I must meet with you, khan,’ Qui’sin said. ‘There are words I must impart.’

*‘In Old Town,’* Joghaten said, the net chopped now with interference. *‘I will meet you soon, brother.’*

‘Begin a staggered withdrawal,’ Qui’sin said immediately to Senga, eyes on the gaunts now swarming over the rubble towards them.

‘But, great Sky Warrior—’ the young lieutenant started.

Qui’sin turned on him.

‘Now,’ he snapped, thrusting psychic imperative into the officer’s mind. He stumbled back, eyes wide in his red, sweat-slick face, then began issuing orders

into his micro-bead as Qui'sin turned his attention back towards the oncoming tyranids.

The swarm would overwhelm the remnants of the First Regiment long before they could withdraw. They needed his power, every last ounce of it. The Stormseer pushed the fatigue brought on by his last psychic assault to the back of his mind, and clutched his force staff firmly in both gauntlets. Kemich swooped down to alight on his backpack as Pinnacle Guardsmen dropped back past him in staggered squads, firing as they went. They were brave men, good men. As the swarm poured down the reverse slope of rubble in a glittering black tide, the White Scar slammed his staff into the cracked rockcrete underfoot, and roared a word of pure power. The baking hot Darkand air, shimmering around him in the heat of the Furnace Season's peak, ignited once more into a howling, lightning-lashed gale that slammed into the oncoming alien mass.

In the Khagan's name, the breach would not fall. Not yet.

### **The Temple District, Darkand**

Feng felt the alien's claws bite deep.

There was no pain. Though the diamond-hard edges clamped around his arm and carved into the meat of his left bicep, adrenaline and battle-fury drowned the wound's bite. Even as the genestealer dug its claws in, hissing in his face, Feng's guan dao was driving into its midriff, disruptor field effortlessly slicing through spine and exoskeleton. The xenos monster shrieked as it fell, ichor splattering Feng's already-scarred plate. Even as it died it clung on, until a backslash of the dao severed its arm.

They'd made it to the surface. So had the xenos. When Feng and his hunt-brothers had finally emerged onto Heavenfall's streets, all of them wounded and ichor-plastered, they'd found the whole city locked in desperate slaughter. Feng had barely had time to transmit a warning to the rest of the brotherhood before the waves of genestealers that had nearly cornered them in the feeding chamber burst out after them. Had it not been for the narrowness of the rock tunnels, forcing the aliens to come at them one at a time, Feng knew they would all be long dead. They had battled back the way they had come for what felt like an age, back up through the catacombs, until they'd finally reached the streets above. There a Pinnacle Guard Leman Russ tank had put a series of battlecannon rounds into the building near the devotarium, demolishing it and burying their pursuers.

Or so they'd thought. Feng and his brothers hadn't even had time to mount their

bikes before the first genestealer had burst up out of the rubble. They'd started taking fire from across the street as well – well-armed hybrids in the armour of the Pinnacle Guard had left the Leman Russ a blazing wreck with a well-placed melta shot, before Jakar and Oda had flushed them out and slaughtered them in a desperate melee assault.

'On me,' Feng ordered over the vox. They'd turned their bike's bolters onto the ruins of the nearest building, chewing apart each new xenos as it dragged its battered form up from the rubble. Even then, some were still getting through, a few reaching the White Scars despite the barrage of firepower.

'A message from the Master of Blades,' Sauri said as the squad closed in around Feng. The steedmaster had been so focused he'd missed the transmission sigil on his visor. He blink-clicked it open as Sauri once again opened fire beside him, putting down another genestealer leaping up from a rupture in the jagged rubble before them.

'We're to consolidate our positions,' Feng said after a split second spent assessing the new orders. 'Old Town and the upper slopes are the two primary rally points.'

The squad remained silent. Ever since finding the feeding chamber, they'd known they would either die within the city, or abandon it to its fate. Either way, the Fourth Brotherhood had failed. The knowledge had turned every blow to bitterness and given every wound a crueller sting.

'Mount up,' Feng ordered. 'Before they breach the cordon. Coordinates are downloading.'

'Can't we just die here?' Jakar grunted as he slammed a fresh magazine into his bolt pistol. Feng didn't reprimand him. He knew he was only half joking.

### **The upper catacombs, Heavenfall**

The catacomb shelter was littered with a fresh carpet of dead – genestealers and their hybrid offspring, piled on top of the citizens they had massacred before the White Scars had arrived. Timchet didn't realise the xenos attack had ceased until Janggi snatched him by his pauldron and dragged him back. He stopped firing, the heavy bolter clattering to silence as he fought off Janggi's grip.

'We're going,' the Tactical Marine said, letting go and backing away. 'You can come with us, wind rider, or you can stay here and die.'

Timchet shook his head, trying to focus. He'd lost himself completely when the genestealers had first exploded from the darkness at the far side of the catacomb shelter. The thunder of his heavy bolter had filled the cavern, drowning the

firepower of the rest of the combat team as the great weapon had burst apart skulls, limbs and torsos. For a moment he'd been back on *Wind Tamer*, Hagai at his side once again, free to hunt, free to kill. For a moment he'd lost himself utterly as he took revenge on the hideous monsters that had killed his brother.

Reality reasserted itself. The genestealers were dead, their remains joining the rippled corpses of the Darkanders they'd butchered mere moments before the White Scars arrival. The rest of the combat squad were leaving.

'Orders from the khan,' Janggi said. 'We're redeploying to the Pinnacle.'

'We can't retreat,' Timchet said, sudden anger colouring his voice. 'We can't let our brothers' deaths have been in vain.'

'We're not retreating,' Uygai said tersely. 'Consolidating. A last hunt, before our end catches up with us.'

*We do not truly understand Time, young one. And if we – immortal, all-seeing practitioners of arts far beyond your comprehension – cannot grasp it, what hope have you?*

– Farseer Nara, Lugganath Craftworld,  
at the Treaty of Dorisel



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### THE WEAVE OF FATE

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK

[TERRAN STANDARD]: 1 HOUR.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The Exchange House, Heavenfall**

Joghaten and his bondsmen had dismounted. The tyranids were flooding the Mountain Gateway and the breach, the broken rockcrete and plasteel covered by a dark tide of rising chitin. Three squads – the khan’s honour guard, Subodak’s Devastators and Torchin’s Assault Marines – had rallied and held the courtyard beyond the gateway for over fifteen minutes following the initial breach. Torchin himself had fallen, the türüch run through by the bio-blades of a trio of hormagaunts. Two of his assault brothers – Sokhor and Khadan – had flung themselves into the press and managed to drag his body back, his gene-seed still intact. Sokhor had fallen seconds later, head half dissolved by a gout of bio-plasma.

In an effort to check the tyranid flood long enough to allow the wall’s defenders to withdraw further up the slope-streets, Joghaten had ordered the squads under his immediate command to rally at the Exchange House. It was the first building beyond the Mountain Gateway, a grand six-storey structure in the Imperial gothic style set on the corner of the Slope Road, that great, steep thoroughfare

running from the Mountain Gate up towards the Pinnacle. The remains of Subodak's heavy weapons specialists set themselves up on the Exchange's roof while the bondsmen and the survivors of Torchin's assault team garrisoned the lower floors.

'Hold the door,' the khan snarled as he lashed out with one boot, snapping a termagant's spine and cracking its chitin shell. The Exchange's main entrance was a grand affair, a short flight of stairs carved from yellow Darkand stone leading up to the double doors. The wood had already splintered and caved, but the space was narrow enough to allow the White Scars defending it to meet their attackers no more than three at a time. Joghaten stood at the centre, flanked by his bondsmen, their powerblades ignited as they sliced apart each and every xenos that set foot inside the Exchange House, slashing the marble floor with sizzling purple ichor. The rest of the honour guard and the Assault Marines were committed to the arching windows down the hallway that ran the length of the building, shattered glassaic and alien corpses crunching underfoot as they heaved back against the ravenous tide threatening to spill in and flood the lower levels of the building.

'*Leader-beast in the gateway,*' Subodak's voice crackled in Joghaten's ear as he physically shouldered another termagant out of the doorway, smashing its elongated skull off his battered pauldron.

'*Hive tyrant,*' the Devastator türüch elaborated.

'So bring it down,' Joghaten growled, parrying the scything talon of a hormagaunt as it cleared the steps to the doorway.

'*Ammunition is approaching critical levels,*' Subodak said, his voice backlit by the roars and thuds of the heavy weapons on the rooftop. 'We need to resupply or we'll have to start prioritising between the swarm and the leader-beasts.'

'*Hit the tyrant,*' Joghaten ordered. '*Let me worry about the swarm.*'

'*Khan-commander, xenos coming through the second floor windows,*' said the voice of Assault-Brother Waylan, cutting through Subodak's transmission. '*Hormagaunts. They're leaping from below.*'

'Khuchar, take the door,' Joghaten barked, taking a pace back from the Exchange's entrance. Khuchar went past him, the brotherhood's champion grinning with battle-joy as his blade replaced his khan's in the breach.

'Bleda, Jubai, with me,' Joghaten said as he sprinted for the stairwell, his tulwars still crackling. The two members of his honour guard followed. Joghaten could already detect the revving of chainswords from above. He took the stairs in a few strides, nearly barrelling into a hissing gaunt as he burst into the

Exchange's upper corridor.

The thing died in an instant, its chitin and leathery flesh no match for the khan's power swords. It had flung itself in through one of the upper windows, its powerful leap easily clearing the building's height. More were doing so along the length of the corridor as the rest of Joghaten's bondsmen and those Assault Marines on the upper level counter-attacked. Joghaten snatched one hormagaunt by its ribbed throat as its talons jarred off his armour, hoisting the writhing creature into the air before flinging it bodily back out of the window it had come through. It struck another bounding xenos on the way down, the two aliens disappearing with a crunch into the brood swarming at the foot of the building.

From the upper window the khan was afforded a better view of what was happening. He realised immediately that delaying their holding action any longer risked annihilation. The entire space between the Exchange House's street and the broken remains of the Mountain Gate was an undulating carpet of tyranids. The gateway itself had been demolished, allowing easy access to the bigger leader-beasts. The firepower being laid down from the Exchange's roof by Subodak and his brethren was hardly making any impression at all on the rising tide.

The rear of the Exchange, an open slope courtyard, could only be reached from the front by going through the building, or around the end of the street. Thus far the desperate, fighting withdrawal of Pinnacle Guard companies had stopped their position from being completely outflanked, but that situation had to change soon. If they were going to make it to a stand higher up the slope they needed to reach their bikes and the Rhino stationed in the rear courtyard.

'Brethren, switch out,' Joghaten voxed to all White Scars in the Exchange House. 'Fall back on the next rally point.'

The Space Marines yielded the front rooms of the Exchange amidst a blizzard of short-range bolter fire, supporting blasts from a flurry of grenades giving them the space necessary to disengage from the voracious xenos crowding the doors and windows. The Devastators and Assault Marines switched positions, the former boarding the Rhino waiting with its engine gunning at the rear of the building while the latter took to the heat-hazed sky from the rooftop, using their jump packs to power to the adjacent block.

Joghaten's honour guard closed around him as he reached the rear doors of the Exchange, his auto-senses reading a notable spike in external heat as he stepped out into the blistering Darkand sun.

'Is that everyone?' he demanded over the vox. There was a flurry of

affirmations as his bondsmen fired back into the Exchange House – it was already overrun, xenos hooves skittering and clacking on polished floors as they pursued the prey.

Pursued too eagerly. Joghaten hit the detonation stud wired to his vambrace, before throwing one leg over *Whitemane's* saddle.

There was a crump, followed by a concussive blast as the demo charges left taped to the front doors went off.

### **Old Town, Heavenfall**

Qui'sin slammed his force staff into the cobbled street and roared a Chogorian phrase long outlawed among the superstitious tribes of the steppe. A bolt of lightning split the spore-befouled Darkand sky, earthing itself into the zoanthrope drifting up the narrow street. Its distended brain sac burst with a spectacular detonation, splattering the cracked, yellow stone façades of the Old Town buildings around it with a thick layer of dripping grey matter.

The Stormseer staggered slightly, and was caught by Jeddah's steadying hand. The annihilation of the zoanthrope had left a psychic aftershock behind it, a splitting headache that was only worsened by the strain already being put on Qui'sin's mind. Channelling Darkand's natural wrath was becoming progressively more taxing as the world slipped further and further into the clutches of the tyranids. The Stormseer steadied himself with his staff as Jeddah barked orders to his combat squad. Qui'sin had linked with them and Zabeg's reserve Tactical Marines during the retreat up the slope from the Founding Wall. Few of the Pinnacle Guard who had stood with the Stormseer at the breach had survived the relentless waves of xenos that had poured into the city after them. The last he had seen of Lieutenant Senga, the young officer had been leading the ragged remnants of his platoon in a fighting retreat north-east. Qui'sin had become lost in the powers of the warp, and when he had re-emerged the Guardsmen were gone. Worse, the White Scars had been completely blocked out from the Pinnacle Guard's comm-nets – presumably it was another deliberate act of sabotage.

'Fire shift, target the gaunts,' Jeddah snapped at his Tactical Marines. The zoanthrope had been acting as the cornerstone of the tyranid swarm flooding up through the heart of Old Town. With its destruction the lesser xenos had been thrown into momentary confusion. Jeddah and his Tactical Marines took advantage of it as best they could, closing into rapid fire range and slaughtering the leading termagants with a hail of bolts. There was a familiar whoosh-crump

as Brother Taigar ignited his flamer, coating a swathe of howling, squealing xenos in a gout of blazing promethium. The stink of burning alien flesh caught in Qui'sin's throat, penetrating even his helm's filters.

The Stormseer used the brief lull brought about by Jeddah's counter-attack to collect himself, steadying his breathing and seeking balance. The amount of concentration required of him and the sheer power he had been channelling for the past hour had left him shaking and weak. His psychic hood was throbbing, struggling with the mind-crushing strength of the Great Devourer and the shadow it had cast over the slope-city. It felt like claws scratching on the inside of his skull, scraping away incessantly. He turned his mind to the situation reports blinking across his visor, using them to centre himself.

They did not make for encouraging reading. The Founding Wall had now been breached at four different points besides the Mountain Gate and the initial blast site. Imperial forces had been completely driven back from over a third of the outer defences, and two major prongs of xenos ingress were driving up the slope-streets on either side of Old Town's steep, tiled houses. The brotherhood were battling for every inch of Heavenfall's mountainside, but a glance told the Stormseer that those squads holding Old Town were minutes away from being cut off. Bar a few Pinnacle Guard units still operating alongside other White Scars squads, they didn't even have the support of Heavenfall's human defenders anymore.

The khan had clearly come to the same realisation. Fresh orders overlaid the tactical updates, routed through to Jeddah and Zabeg's squads.

*Withdraw. New rally coordinates uploaded.*

They were to abandon Old Town, before the swarms that had broken the last vestiges of the Pinnacle Guard units holding the tannery complex to their south and the tramline haulage depot to their north cut across the slope and collapsed their flanks. The rally point was close to where Joghaten had placed himself after pulling back from the Exchange building, right on the edge of the government district, in a legislative review office-turned-strongpoint.

'Zabeg to cover the withdrawal,' Qui'sin voxed to the two combat squads as he blink-acknowledged the khan's orders. 'Watch the alleys either side, brothers. We are about to be enveloped.'

Jeddah's Tactical Marines backed up the street as the swarm they had been savaging collected itself, hissing and snapping while the hive mind once more assumed control. Despite the death of the zoanthrope, they hadn't immediately scattered. Black smoke from the burning remains of those gaunts doused in

flame by Taigar shrouded the street, twisting and broiling in the spore-choked air. The old stone buildings echoed with the thunderclap reports of the White Scars' bolters as they pushed further up the slope.

The other half of Jeddah's squad joined the combat team at the far end of the street, where the Old Town's warren of winding stairways and precarious red-tiled buildings gave way to the pale colonnades and arching windows of the government district.

The xenos had already passed through. A group of tribespeople, clearly fleeing from further down the slope, had been caught by a brood of hormagaunts halfway across a slope haulage junction. The dozen or so unfortunates had been sliced to strips of bloody yat wool and torn meat by the wicked talons of the lithe aliens. The gaunts themselves came at the White Scars from across the haulage wires, the air filled with their hissing and the clatter of hooves on cobbles as they leapt for their prey.

'For Chogoris!' Qui'sin bellowed as he swept his force staff in a vicious arc, pulverising the skull of the first xenos to leap at him. Jeddah and his squad managed to cut down the lead attackers with bolter fire before those behind reached them, talons cracking viciously off scarred white ceramite.

The melee did not last long – the brood was not a numerous one, and the White Scars were lent fresh vigour by the bodies of the slain tribespeople they fought over. They had come to Darkand to uphold their honour and protect these people, and they were failing. Their shame bred a ferocity above and beyond even the warlike traditions of the steppes.

For the moment, however, the dead tribesfolk were not Qui'sin's concern. There was something far more troubling at hand, something that only became truly apparent as he put a bolt pistol round through the skull of the last hormagaunt, while its talons scraped and scarred his battleplate. The brood they had just slaughtered had attacked with single-minded determination and relentlessness. Likewise, the termagants further back down the slope in Old Town had rallied almost as soon as Qui'sin had destroyed the zoanthrope that had been coordinating them. Yet there didn't appear to be a leader-beast anywhere nearby. Neither the auspex nor the Stormseer's psychic intuition – what remained beyond the incessant scraping of the Shadow in the Warp – had detected anything. And yet the aliens' drive and coordination had remained total.

Qui'sin kicked the remains of the twitching hormagaunt away and signalled to Jeddah.

'Press on to the rally point. I am going to join the khan. I must speak with him

in person.’

### **The Government District, Heavenfall**

Genestealers. They’d known they were here, but now that confirmation was finally coming in over the vox the reality of the situation hit home. The Fourth Brotherhood were pinned between defending the wall and clearing the catacombs. Worse, they weren’t numerous enough to provide protection to either the nomad tribes or Heavenfall’s citizens. The first report, from a combat team led by Uygai, had spoken of a massacre in one of the subterranean Furnace Season shelters. Others were confirming similar events – the xenos had already slaughtered hundreds, probably thousands beneath Heavenfall’s streets, and the White Scars hadn’t even been aware of it.

‘We need to create a cordon,’ Joghaten said. Qui’sin stood before him. The khan had set up his new makeshift command centre in the Canton Five Legislative office, a functional Administratum building close to the Pinnacle. The building, far up the slope, had not yet come under attack, but the auspex had picked up hostile contacts moving in the surrounding streets. Joghaten and Qui’sin stood in the remains of a scriptorium office, its lecterns overturned and papers and data-slates scattered across the floor, while the khan’s bondsmen guarded the doors.

‘Safe zones are impossible while the xenos retain control of the sewers and subterranean passages,’ Qui’sin said. ‘And, given the extent of the infestation, by the time we establish any, ninety per cent of Heavenfall’s population will be dead anyway. After that it’s merely a question of how long until we’re overrun.’

Qui’sin knew that Joghaten already understood the situation. It did not take over a century of combat experience to know that the defence of Heavenfall had failed, even if the khan-commander’s pride stopped him from admitting it. There were only two choices remaining – annihilation or retreat. Word from Tzu Shen put him an hour out from high orbit, returning to the planet with all haste. He had believed he was coming back to a triumphant brotherhood, only to discover that, somehow, the xenos had outwitted them. Even with the dire nature of his visions and the eerie psychic presence he had sensed in the city, Qui’sin had not predicted the scale of the alien infiltration. They would be lucky to hold on until Shen even reached orbit.

‘The Furnace Season will weaken them,’ Joghaten said. ‘Temperatures out there are almost beyond human ability to withstand. It must have some effect on the xenos.’

‘Their kind have seeded more hostile worlds than this,’ Qui’sin pointed out. ‘Ice

wastes to desert tundra, they transform it all. The spores choking the atmosphere have stopped the Furnace Season from reaching peak temperatures, and the climate will only deteriorate further unless they are exterminated from the planet's surface.'

A sigil lit up Joghaten's visor. He accepted the transmission in time to catch a jarring blast of static, followed by the familiar thunder of bolters.

*'The xenos have broken through along the upper slope, sector three,'* crackled the voice of Delbeg, commander of the brotherhood's First Tactical Squad. *'It looks as though they're trying to pincer the government district.'*

'Standby,' Joghaten instructed, turning back to Qui'sin as the Stormseer spoke again.

'We're still unable to make any contact with Pinnacle Guard units or the centrum dominus. Harren has either been compromised, or is already dead. Many of the tribes have been cut off along the lower slopes as well. We do not have the time or sufficient numbers to counter-attack.'

Joghaten knew the Stormseer was right, but the truth made him snarl with frustration. They were failing. Death, dishonour, total annihilation at the hands of these vile creatures – it was a fate the Master of Blades railed against.

Before the khan could speak a terrific blast tore through the scriptorium, a stand of data files near to Joghaten disintegrating in a wall of white light. His arms went up and his armour locked, but there was no blast wave or wall of debris. Only a rush of wind-flung files and slates from the shelves and whipped-up scrolls and loose pages around them.

The light remained, a corona of white brilliance that even the Space Marine's auto-senses could not dull. Joghaten's hands closed on the hilts of his tulwars as a shape materialised from the blazing halo.

+Those will not serve you this time, mon-keigh.+

The words leapt into the khan's mind, sharp and cold. He felt his hands freeze.

'Witch,' he spat, turning to Qui'sin. The Stormseer had gone rigid, both hands clutching his force staff, its skull top wreathed with warpfire. Kemich had taken off and was circling the scriptorium's wind-whipped vault, shrieking.

'I cannot resist her,' the Stormseer managed through clenched teeth.

+Nor do you have reason to,+ the figure added. It was clad in a tall helm and robes, but remained a black shade silhouetted by the light at its back. Regardless, Joghaten recognised the creature's unnaturally tall, slender form. It filled him with skin-crawling, gut-twisting revulsion.

'Out of my head, eldar,' the khan snarled, taking a pace forward.

The silhouette stood its ground, robes whipping in the wind that scythed through from the ether behind it.

‘I have come to treat with you, Joghaten Khan of the White Scars,’ the figure said, this time speaking openly. ‘You face annihilation, you and all your brothers. Only I can turn the tide of these events.’

‘You have picked an ill time to show yourself, skulking witch,’ Joghaten said. ‘My heart cries out for your head.’

‘Then try listening to your own head for once,’ the figure said. ‘I am Yenneth, farseer of the craftworld of Iyanden, and the offer I make you now is one I have already brought before your seer.’

Joghaten turned to look at Qui’sin. The Stormseer was obviously suffering more than the khan, his more highly attuned psychic senses unable to bear the presence of the powerful xenos witch.

‘Ever sowing discord,’ the Stormseer grunted, finding the strength to shake his head.

‘Yet never without purpose,’ the figure that had called itself Yenneth said. ‘Your seer will not tell you, Joghaten Khan, so I must. The vanquisher of your old master is near at hand.’

‘Your kind have plagued this world for millennia,’ Joghaten said. ‘Why should I believe anything you say?’

‘Because I have the power to turn your fates on their heads. The choice between annihilation and flight is a false one. Strike a blow against the ones who slew your brothers, and I can save both you and this world.’

‘How is that possible?’ Joghaten demanded. ‘How can you unmake what has already taken place?’

‘Your seer knows such things are not beyond the realm of possibility.’

‘Is what she says true?’ Joghaten said, rounding on Qui’sin.

The Stormseer nodded.

‘Or it could be a trap.’

‘Trap or not, it is your last hope for saving this city and the people you have led to it,’ the eldar said. ‘Our dark kin prevent me from coming to your aid, but if you join us against them they can be overcome. The blood of your former lord is still wet on their blades.’

The silhouetted figure raised one hand, and the portal behind her flickered. Images pierced the brilliance, shapes that resolved into wicked, barbed forms. Joghaten recognised the porcelain-white flesh and bladed spine-plates of the eldar’s dark slaver cousins. Worse, he knew one in particular. Memories of the

brotherhood's last hunt on Darkand flashed back. The rush of the wind, the whickering of splinter barbs, the ululating shriek of xenos skimmers, the roar of bike engines and the bark of bolters. He remembered too the face he now saw in the farseer's portal. It was female, sharp and vicious, with a sickeningly cruel grin.

'You know her,' the farseer said. 'She slew the master of your brotherhood, the one you called Arro'shan.'

The vision swam and refocused. Joghaten saw a White Scars helmet fixed to the xenos creature's belt. Though cracked and defiled by wicked eldar runes, it was one he would have recognised anywhere – its twin, marked with a red lightning bolt, was mag-locked to his own belt. It had belonged to Arro'shan before he had fallen, fighting the xenos scourge. Joghaten felt his secondary heart kick in with a thud of adrenaline. He snarled.

'She is near,' the farseer said, reading the Space Marine's raw aggression. 'On the other side of the webway, blocking my access through it. I will guide you there and in exchange I will give you the power to end the threat of the Devourer here.'

'False promises,' Joghaten snapped. 'Stop speaking in riddles and explain, or I will cut you down where you stand and take your skull for the White Road.'

'You could not, even if you tried,' the farseer responded. 'The paths I will tread for you are beyond your comprehension, but this much is not – we have nothing to gain by betraying you today, and everything to lose. Our enemies are mutual, and your destruction is guaranteed without my intervention. Whether or not you deny such truths to me right now, I can see that in your heart you understand them.'

'We are not some xenos' puppets.'

'Nor am I asking for you to be. Take vengeance for your slain brother, Joghaten Khan, and save those who look to you for leadership. If you travel west, onto the plains, and reach the rocks you call the Gates of Eternity, I will guide you from there. You must go now, though. We are already out of time.'

Joghaten started to respond, but the vision was already beginning to fade. The silhouette was swallowed up by the portal's brilliance, becoming rapidly more slender, until it was lost completely in the light. The ethereal wind that had been whipping around the room was suddenly gone. There was a crack of displaced air, and then the portal itself disappeared. Sudden silence gripped the scriptorium, broken only by the rustle of loose papers drifting to the floor.

Joghaten spoke first.

‘This witch has already visited you?’ he asked Qui’sin, turning towards the Stormseer. The weathermaker stood before Joghaten, unflinching, and there was a scrape as Kemich alighted on his pauldron, feathers ruffled.

‘She has, brother. She came to me speaking the same lies she told you. I am only sorry I could not keep her presence at bay.’

‘Perhaps it is well you did not,’ Joghaten said tersely. ‘Her intervention changes things.’

‘For the worse,’ Qui’sin went on. ‘When have the eldar ever offered honest aid? She is seeking to manipulate us for some dark purpose.’

‘Darker than the one that has already befallen us?’ Joghaten exclaimed. ‘The last of the people we came here to protect are being slaughtered even as we waste time with words, and we are not numerous enough to save even a fraction of them!’

‘I rail against what is happening as much as you, Master of Blades, but the witchcraft the xenos proposes is beyond dangerous. She will seek to manipulate reality itself to suit her own agenda.’

‘You know all this?’ Joghaten snapped. ‘What other counsel have you withheld from me, weathermaker? What have your true masters in the Ayanga told you?’

‘Nothing, but there is a presence newly arrived in this city, khan-commander, a psychic one. It is familiar, and yet I do not know it.’

‘The witch?’

‘No, it is not alien. I do not know how it has come to be here, or why.’

‘Your riddles are worse than the xenos,’ Joghaten said. ‘And I have had enough of both. A decision must be reached.’

‘My visions have failed the brotherhood thus far,’ Qui’sin said eventually. ‘You yourself see the options before us, my khan. I will not presume to offer counsel any longer.’

‘You are wise for your years, Qui’sin,’ Joghaten responded. ‘But those years are still few. There are no easy answers to the troubles of command.’ There was silence before Joghaten spoke again.

‘My heart yearns to die here, brother,’ he said eventually, his hawkish, warlike expression grown dull and distant. ‘To flee now, to abandon the honour world... it is unthinkable.’

‘To a hunt-brother rising through the ordu, perhaps,’ Qui’sin said. ‘But it should not be unthinkable to one of your rank, khan-commander. With all respect, you can no longer act like one of Arro’shan’s bondsmen, bound to honour and personal glory. The lives of the entire brotherhood are in your hands, not just

your own. If we stay and die here, needlessly, the Chapter will suffer. Even in the best of times, Chogoris can ill afford the loss of an entire ordu. And these are very far from the best of times. All of us yearn to meet an honoured death, rather than abandon whatever remains of these peoples. But honour and duty are not one and the same, and we have a duty beyond Darkand. A duty to the Khagan.'

'The Khagan,' Joghaten echoed. 'What would he think of us now, weathemaker? The Imperium stood upon a precipice, yet he carried the Great Hunt on into the unknown of the webway, seeking glory and vengeance. If such an act befitted our primarch, would it not also befit us?'

'Vengeance,' Qui'sin said, slowly and firmly. 'Arro'shan's spirit still wanders, lost while his killers remain unrepentant. To abandon this place to its fate risks dishonour, yes, but there is no dishonour in skinning the xenos scum who took him. If we are doomed regardless, I can think of no better end for the Brotherhood of Blades. I am sure my hunt-brothers would concur.'

'I will hesitate no more,' Joghaten said, one fist clenched to a tulwar's hilt while he activated the brotherhood-wide vox frequency. 'All hunt-brothers, standby for priority transmission.'

*Remember young ones, your truest and most constant companion is your own shadow.*

– Jodagha, Master of Braves,  
Khan of the Windspeaker Brotherhood



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### ETERNITY'S THRESHOLD

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The Slope Road, Heavenfall**

The brotherhood rode. Joghaten rallied the hunt on the Slope Road running between the temple and the government districts. The brotherhood's air cover closed in above, lacerating the surrounding streets with heavy bolter rounds, assault cannon bursts and frag rockets. Aerial spotting and auspex readouts showed a swelling mass of hostile contacts – a vile morass of hybrids and their genestealer masters – flooding Heavenfall's slopes. They burst from hab basements and sewer chutes, warehouse blocks and storage depots. The nearest were flocking towards the assembling brotherhood from all sides, driven on by whatever alien will directed them from Heavenfall's depths.

'*Lance*, take us forward,' Joghaten commanded over the vox. The booming discharge of a battle cannon, echoing like a thunderclap up the long, steep road, came back as an answer.

The brotherhood's armour was to spearhead the breakout. The *Vindicator*, *Khan's Lance*, took the lead, its heavy dozer shield starting to grind xenofoms

mercilessly as it lurched forward. Its battle cannon hammered out another shell, obliterating a clutch of onrushing gaunts in a hail of fire and shattered masonry. The air filled with dust and exhaust smoke as the Rhinos followed, flanked along the wide thoroughfare by the remnants of the bike squadrons. Joghaten kicked *Whitemane* forward down the column's right side, horsehair plumes snapping overhead.

Around them there was nothing but xenos infestation. Aliens and deformed hybrid monstrosities swarmed from alleys and side streets towards the Slope Road, the unbearably hot air thick and heavy with the scraping of their claws and carapaces, and the hissing of their reptile-like communications. Joghaten and his bondsmen helped keep the flank of the column clear, the khan slamming *Whitemane* into one alien swarm-beast after another, the tyres running with ichor, one tulwar snapping out at anything that came too close. Qui'sin led the other flank, force staff crackling with the energies of the storm. Organic bio-weaponry rained down on the White Scars, their proud armour long reduced to scarred silver or splattered viscera. The column's firepower, however, stopped the xenos from massing an effective amount of force at any single point along the route of their advance. Joghaten and the other bikers would snap a warning when a particularly dense knot of aliens burst from the adjoining streets, and bolters and heavy weapons from the squads firing from the Rhino's opened tops would disperse the swarm.

The brotherhood's Predators brought up the rear, turrets rotated back, savaging any pursuing broods that drew too close. From the rooftops either side Joghaten tracked the twin assault squads keeping pace. On three occasions they caught packs of hybrids armed with grenade launchers and tube charges preparing ambushes from the roofs of hab blocks, ripping them apart with chainswords and bolt pistols before they could decimate the armour below.

They failed to catch the fourth attempted ambush. Two xenos-twisted humans had secreted themselves in the upper storey of a yat wool loom mill. They waited until most of the column had passed before revealing themselves. A krak rocket corkscrewed from their vantage point, twisting wildly off course before darting back down onto its intended target – the rearmost Predator, *Hetman's Pride*. It struck the weaker top armour just behind the turret, penetrating before detonating. The tank's thermic combustor reactor ignited, a mushrooming fireball killing the crew instantly and shrouding the end of the street in flames and smoke. The Predator's killers didn't have time to reload before a vengeful salvo from *White Road's* autocannon riddled the upper floor of the mill and

shredded them both.

Another ambush caught Shontai's assault brothers three blocks short of the remains of the Mountain Gate. The hybrids attempting to set up a heavy autocannon on the top of a fast food outlet were simply bait. As the Assault Marines dropped down to slaughter the pathetic creatures, their masters – a brood of genestealers – burst from the access stairwell and flooded the rooftop. Two hunt-brothers, Chimbai and Dargan, were torn apart by the lightning-fast attackers before the rest of the squad could pull away, dropping a clutch of frag grenades in their wake.

By the time the brotherhood had broken out to the gateway the city was completely overrun. They had seen no tribesmen during their withdrawal, only a sea of xenos. The communications channels now returned nothing at all but static. Heavenfall was a slaughterhouse. Joghaten knew he had failed, and the realisation made his stomach clench and every muscle burn with a violent, passionate shame.

The Mountain Gate was no more, reduced to a breach of crushed rubble by the pounding entrance of hulking xenos monsters. *Khan's Lance* rumbled through the remains, its great cannon primed, but there was no resistance. Beyond, the plains of Darkand stretched, bare but for the dark piles of xenos dead. Jaw set, Joghaten looked back over his shoulder. Behind, up the long Slope Road towards Heavenfall's Pinnacle, there was nothing but a dark morass of alien xenofoms, all pouring after them. It was already far, far too late to turn back. After one more moment of hesitation he opened the link to the rest of the surviving White Scars and raised his right hand, fingers splayed.

'Brothers, ride.'

### **The Chamber of Seers, Iyanden Craftworld**

'They are coming.'

Yenneth stood before the council of Iyanden, robes drawn tight around her, runelights playing over the wraithbone arches of the seeing chamber. Her kindred remained silent, critical, she was sure, of her every breath. Regardless of what the fates willed, what she was about to do risked the fabric of reality itself.

'I have dispatched Arianna and her phalanx to the City of Pillars,' she continued, her voice echoing around the dark chamber.

'We know,' Hildar replied. 'We shall soon discover whether your trust in the mon-keigh is misplaced or not.'

‘I do not trust them,’ Yenneth said. ‘I trust the path I have set them upon. I have reactivated the gateway, to the best of my abilities. I will join Arianna while my spirit walks on Darkand.’

‘We shall see soon enough whether the path you have chosen does indeed run straight and true,’ Hildar said. ‘Go now, sister, and complete the act you have begun, for better or for worse. We shall be waiting.’

### **The Gates of Eternity, Darkand**

The remains of the Fourth Brotherhood reached the stone pillars of the Gates of Eternity as dawn was turning the steppes blood-red. The pollution in the atmosphere had grown worse, the rising sun given the appearance of an angry, infected wound-scab as it climbed wearily into Darkand’s discoloured sky. The Furnace Season had lost its edge due to the infestation, the heat burning away countless billions of alien microbes in the atmosphere but barely reaching the plains beneath.

The White Scars had ridden through the night. Three times they had engaged – purging xenos spore stacks, digestion pits and birthing pools, taking root like foul plants out around what had been the largest tyrannid seeding areas. The Rhino transports remained at the heart of the column. Half of them were now like tribal mortuary carts, filled with the brotherhood’s precious bodies and what equipment they had salvaged from Heavenfall. Dorich’s narthecium was bloody and full.

As the brotherhood arrived power was arcing between two of the pillars of stone that constituted the Gates of Eternity, bolts of energy leaping from one to the other with reports that boomed out over the plain. The eldar witch, Yenneth, was waiting for them, standing on one of the great, jagged yellow rocks at the edge of the erratic formation. There was a strange wind whipping around the stones, snatching at the eldar’s robes and making her charms and stones rattle eerily. Her form seemed to flicker when Joghaten focused on it, like a faulty pict-feed. Another illusion.

‘This is the heart of your portal on Darkand?’ Joghaten called up to the xenos as he brought *Whitemane* to a halt at the base of the rock. Behind him the battered column waited, engines growling, weapons primed. ‘This is where you have plagued our systems from all these millennia?’

‘It is one gateway, yes,’ the farseer allowed, her voice sounding strange and distant on the scything wind. ‘The largest, but there are others, as I’m sure you now know. Even in your fallen city.’

‘What lies beyond?’ Joghaten demanded. He’d already drawn a tulwar, and now gestured with the wicked weapon at the crackling nimbus of energy wreathing the stone pillars.

‘The webway,’ the farseer responded. ‘And your nemesis. She and her kindred occupy an abandoned, dead place we call the City of Pillars. Slay her there and scatter her band, and I will lead you back here. All will be remade.’

Joghaten turned to Qui’sin, who now rode beside him at the head of his bondsmen. The Stormseer’s helmet was mag-locked to his belt, his features tight and grim. He merely shook his head.

‘All is as the Khagan wills it,’ Joghaten said, as much to himself as to his brothers. ‘Did he not face this very same choice, almost ten thousand years ago?’

Behind them the remains of the brotherhood watched on, tense with expectation. They had been quiet since leaving Heavenfall, their oaths and boasts turned to ash by the defeat they had suffered. Joghaten knew their souls were torn, pride sundered by their failure to protect the hundreds of thousands who had looked to them as champions and saviours.

‘Make your decision,’ the farseer called.

Joghaten twisted in the saddle and raised his blade. The dawn light caught it, running with the actinic blue of the portal to create a kaleidoscopic brilliance that glimmered before the eyes of the brotherhood.

‘We have reached the end, brethren,’ the khan called out, routing his words through every vox band and frequency. ‘Our end. Let there be no doubts. We have failed. Our charges lie dead, and many of our own brothers have been sacrificed for nothing.’

None replied. Joghaten went on, words punctuated by the booming discharges of the webway portal.

‘You all know me. You know how I cleave to the memory of our great Khagan, how I have sought to emulate him and honour his memory since the first day I was taken from the steppes to the mighty Quan Zhou. We all know his story, and we know where he rides still, beyond the ken of man.’

He lowered his tulwar, so that it pointed at the alien gateway.

‘There, beyond the veil of reality, our primarch hunts. There we will find vengeance for our brothers fallen on this same plain, all those years ago. I will personally take the head of the xenos filth who slew the great Arro’shan Khan. And, if we are found worthy, I will lay it at the feet of the Khagan. We shall find him, and in doing so we will atone for what has happened here.’

This time there was a response, a low growl undercut by mutterings of

affirmation and vengeance. Joghaten ignited his tulwar, energy streaking across the weapon's razor edge.

'We ride from reality into the unknowable beyond. We shall not return, not in this life. Our fleet will carry word of what happens here today back to Chogoris. All will know of the Tulwar Brotherhood. All will know of our last hunt.'

*It is never about trying to convince the mon-keigh to trust us, for they never will. It is about showing them that they have no choice in the matter.*

– Attributed to Farseer Eldarian, Yme-loc craftworld.



## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

### **CITY OF PILLARS, CITY OF BLOOD**

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.  
TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The City of Pillars, the Webway**

The City of Pillars had become a place of death, a slaughter-yard for a cousin's feud. Skalorix, archon of the Kabal of the Pierced Eye, let out a shriek as her raider dipped into a stomach-turning dive, giggling like a young drukhari at her first slave-whipping. She clutched the edge of the barbed skimmer's cupola with just one hand, revelling in the rush, in the knife-edge danger of the transport's twists and turns. Its pilot, Vornex, was her favourite. More so than any in the Kabal of the Pierced Eye, he knew how to fly the drukhari way – unnecessarily risky, unbeatably exhilarating. Skalorix's incubi, impassive behind their daemonic white masks, remained locked to the deck around her, like guardians watching over a child while its parents were absent.

'Hit them again,' the archon hissed into the communicator. The splinter cannons spat once more, and her sharp features twisted with delight as her raider made a low pass over another spirit-phalanx, riddling the wraithbone automatons with razor barbs. Though none fell, they shuddered and buckled beneath the barrage. Reality screamed and shuddered around the speeding raider as it took return fire,

wraithcannons tearing hairline cracks in space and time. None could hit the skimmer, however, as it darted up over the edge of the broken amphitheatre the aeldari were making their stand in.

The attacks had started mere minutes earlier, and in truth Skalorix was more than happy to see her cousins converging on her kabal's positions once more. Holding the City of Pillars had never truly been about defending the webway gate. She needed slaves and, even more importantly, spirit stones if the fortunes of the Pierced Eye were to be truly revived.

She'd known Yenneth and her ghost-constructs would return, seeking to dislodge her either by force or misplaced lies about the Devourer. This time, however, Skalorix would make sure she did not let any of her foolish cousins leave the City of Pillars.

It was like waking from a dream. For the briefest moment, Joghaten didn't know where he was. He found himself and his bondsmen racing through a wide, deserted street, flanked by the husks of tall, pale stone buildings. The eyes of alien gods looked down upon him from either side, the graven images scarred by time and neglect. Overhead impossible constellations swirled through a deep blue sky, ethereal brilliance shining down on a forgotten city locked in a bubble of unreality. *Whitemane's* roar was his only comfort, rebounding from the walls around him.

Then figures flitted across his vision, barbed shadows at the far end of the street. He remembered.

He'd been the first through, the first to pass beyond the crackling gateway and into the unknowable realm of the aeldari. The strange city he found himself in now had been built by the eldar, that much was clear, for in the tall, slender buildings, crystalline trees, broad boulevards and statues carved from strange, bone-like substances, their handiwork was certain.

The vox was down and *Whitemane's* auspex display was a scrambled mess, but Joghaten needed neither to tell him that he wasn't alone after all. Behind him he heard the roar of assault bikes, and the keening battle-yell of the steppes. Grinning wildly, the Master of Blades depressed his firing studs.

Two figures ahead convulsed and fell, spindly forms eviscerated by the hail of bolts. Joghaten recognised the wicked, sickeningly slender forms of dark eldar raiders, scurrying to respond to the sudden attack from the reactivated webway portal.

If there was any force in the galaxy – or beyond it – that was not going to give

them time to recover, it was the White Scars.

The remains of the Fourth Brotherhood speared from the active webway gate, actinic energies trailing after them. The forgotten streets and alleys of the City of Pillars were suddenly alive and throbbing with the fury of dozens of overcharged engines as the Space Marines ploughed straight into the first contacts that registered on their auto-senses.

It was the brotherhood's pilots who reaped the swiftest tally. The Stormhawks and Stormtalons came through the eldar gateway with unerring speed and accuracy, climbing immediately into attack runs on the first airborne xenos craft they spotted.

There were plenty, but none had expected to find their rear echelons under attack. Heavy bolter and assault cannon rounds punched through the light xenos, sending two raiders slamming with fatal speed into roofs and walls.

Drayang caught another flyer as it rose from what looked like some sort of ancient amphitheatre. The area around the tiered stone seats bore the heaviest enemy presence, and Drayang's Stormhawk took fire from a darting xenos fighter that almost took out his left afterburner. It was while twisting away that the Stormhawk found the raider rising directly up into its sights.

The alien skimmer jinked and turned away with more speed and skill than any airborne object had any right to, but it was too late. A spray of assault cannon rounds hammered its fuselage, causing it to tip suddenly and violently. It clipped the amphitheatre's flank and dropped back into it, vanishing from Drayang's target lock. The whole exchange lasted perhaps three seconds before the Stormhawk had passed overhead and then dropped down to street level to shake its new pursuer. The dark eldar fighter followed with a skill not even the Adeptus Astartes could match. Two streets beyond the amphitheatre, its dark lance speared straight through the Stormhawk, blasting it apart in mid-air.

Drayang died without knowing he had brought down the drukhari archon's raider.

In the shadows of the City of Pillar's ruinous temple of Khaine, Iyanden's assembled warrior council waited on their farseer's command. Yenneth stood with her head bowed and both hands grasping her staff, feeling Arianna's mind caress her own. The mon-keigh had arrived, she realised. Even better, their sudden assault from the webway portal had left Skalorix and her personal retinue stranded.

'We must strike,' she said to the council, who were standing, robed and

armoured, in the jagged shade of the temple's broken columns. The sound of splinter rifle fire and the rip-scream of wraithcannons echoed around the neighbouring streets.

'It will take them only minutes to recover the initiative. Skalorix must die.'

'What of the mon-keigh?' one of the warlocks, Yetoc, asked. 'What if they attack us as well?'

'Focus on the drukhari,' Yenneth urged. 'But, if need be, slay the mon-keigh too. There is no time now for hesitation.'

As the council set off Yenneth reached out with her mind, seeking the mon-keigh's leader one last time. This was what she had brought them here for. For better or for worse, the path she had chosen for them all was nearly at an end.

The witch was in his mind again. Joghaten had come to a halt on the corner of some sort of shattered temple, eldar blood dripping from his blades and bike. His White Scars had rallied to him, those who had managed to stay at his side thus far – his bondsmen, Qui'sin, Feng's riders and the Fourth Tactical Squad. Vox communication was seemingly impossible. At this stage there was nothing to do but kill. Until the farseer spoke to him again.

+She is close, huntsman,+ said the voice. +Travel east. Your vengeance is at hand.+

Joghaten turned to Qui'sin, whose bike was idling next to *Whitemane*. The Stormseer merely nodded. Joghaten raised his right hand, palm open, fingers splayed.

'Ride.'

Skalorix and her retinue were stranded at the bottom of the City of Pillar's crumbling amphitheatre, their raider brought down by a crude mon-keigh flyer. Aeons before, the open-air space had played host to the troupes of the Harlequinade and their breathtaking recreations of the heights and depths of the aeldari's existence. Now it was a scene of slaughter, brutal and uncomplicated.

Skalorix's mirth had turned to rage. She should have known. Of course a craftworld like Iyanden, which tortured its own dead and forced them to serve its whims, would trick the brute mon-keigh into aiding them. That Yenneth would actively bring them into the webway showed how desperate she was.

'Kill them!' Skalorix shrieked. 'Kill their weak shells again!'

Her incubi were cutting into the wraithguard lining the amphitheatre's tiers, glaives cleaving through wraithbone with bursts of cutting energy. The burning wreck of her raider lay at the centre of the open space, its beautiful, hook-like

form twisted and broken. Her pilot, Vornex, lay among the remains, impaled on his own barbed control panel, and a lone piece of shrapnel from the battered fuselage had sliced over Skalorix's right cheek, leaving a single ruby line defiling her porcelain whiteness. For that alone she would hire the Altered Coven's most talented haemonculi to recraft Yenneth's flesh.

A fresh hail of splinters began to rain down from the amphitheatre's sides. Wayne's kabalite warriors had managed to scale its sides and were now catching the battered wraithguard in a vicious crossfire. The whole kabal was converging on the clash, drawn by their archon's demands for support. In a few more moments the aeldari would once more be overwhelmed, and she would turn her vicious passions on the idiot mon-keigh who dared defile this place with their presence. Battling with the constructs across the gladiatorial space, it felt for the world as if she was back in the pits of Commorragh. The thought made her pulse race.

One of her incubi fell mere feet away, neck snapping in the relentless grip of one of the wraithguards. Even with a warlock guiding them the constructs were sluggish and ill-suited to melee, especially against warriors such as Skalorix's bodyguards, but they were still far from harmless. The incubi's killer turned its wraithcannon on the archon.

She was moving long before it fired, rolling beneath the tear the construct's strange weapon ripped in reality. Her twin splinter pistols were in both hands in the same instant as she came up, lithe as an angry felid. The pistols spat, and there was a shuddering clatter as a thousand tiny, wicked barbs perforated the construct's wraithbone shell. It stumbled backwards, half of its long, smooth helm riddled with shards. A second salvo at point-blank range caused it to slump, the spirit stone inset into its breastplate growing dim.

They were no fun, these ghosts. They didn't scream. The thought had barely entered Skalorix's mind before she heard the revving of engines, reverberating around the amphitheatre's sides. She whipped around, both pistols raised and primed, in time to see new arrivals tearing into the blood-slashed arena from beneath the vault of the primary gateway. Mon-keigh warrior-breed, plated in white, splattered in the blood of her warriors.

Skalorix couldn't resist a shriek of bitter laughter. Things just kept getting better.

Joghaten saw her the moment *Whitemane* roared beneath the amphitheatre's gate and into the main arena. It was impossible to miss the archon – while surrounded

by heavily armoured drukhari bodyguards, she cut a lithe, simple figure. That, and she bore the cracked helm of Arro'shan hanging from her belt. The sickening laughter that she greeted the Space Marines with only sharpened the khan's hate.

Joghaten charged her where she stood, near the burning remains of her raider at the amphitheatre's centre. *Whitemane* roared across the arena, kicking up grit, while his bondsmen and Qui'sin followed. The tactical squad's Rhino had slewed to a halt beside the gateway, the squad within dispersing and opening fire on the dark eldar shooting down from the amphitheatre's sides. It was chaos, and the Master of Blades was at the heart of it.

His assault bike slammed into one of the archon's bodyguards. The eldar crumpled with a wet crunch, but its death was enough to arrest *Whitemane's* motion. Joghaten was already out of the saddle before his mount hit the bloodied dirt, a blade in each hand. The archon met him with a burst of splinter pistol fire, still laughing viciously as she skipped back from him. Joghaten grunted as he felt multiple impacts, and his armour told him what his flesh already knew – the barbs had cut deep in half a dozen places, drawing blood that couldn't clot while the razored metal remained lodged.

He lunged at the archon, a snarl of pure hatred twisting his face. She was nowhere near where his blow fell, however, her speed outstanding even for the natural abilities of her race. Joghaten's tulwars cut only air, and another spray of barbs hammered him from his left, the damnable creature's laughter ringing in his ears.

Then Qui'sin was at his side. The Stormseer had dismounted, his force staff raised to the maddening heavens. A blast of psychic energy slammed past Joghaten like a slipstream, catching the lithe drukhari. The archon's laughter turned to a shriek of panic as she was snatched up and flung a dozen paces, bouncing in the dirt of the arena.

Joghaten was on her in an instant, tulwars scissoring towards the pale flesh of her throat. There was a flare of energy, and the khan's oath turned to a grunt of effort and then a bellow of frustration as the tulwars rebounded off an invisible field. Power flared for the briefest moment as the strike was deflected, and the one unbroken eye-lens in Arro'shan's helmet glowed red before fading again.

The helmet contained some sort of protective energy sphere installed by the drukhari. The agony of the dozen barbs studding Joghaten's flesh faded into nothing, drowned in the sea of his fury. He flung himself at the eldar with a vox-roar that shuddered the air around him, tulwars a blur of cutting power. But the

archon was up and moving again, dancing away around the arena, cackling once more as she taunted her multiple adversaries. As another maddening burst of splinters battered his armour, a distant, disconnected part of Joghaten's mind realised that this was where his hunt ended.

Timchet and his new brothers were pouring fire up into the amphitheatre's flanks, trying to suppress the dark eldar before the xenos' superior positions began to tell on the exposed White Scars. The Space Marine braced his feet and spread his arc of fire wide, armour locked as he hammered heavy bolter rounds into the upper tiers of the amphitheatre. Old stone burst and exploded as the xenos scattered, reduced to dark, dripping smears wherever the stream of firepower caught up with them.

The rest of his adopted tactical squad were laying down similar fire support from the shadow of the Rhino, parked just inside the arena's entrance. The high arch of the gateway offered the squad some protection from the return fire, but it was coming in from all angles. The dark eldar had turned the arena into a kill zone, and they were filling it with splinter death. One of the Tactical Marines, Ughan, had already fallen with a shard through his visor, while Timchet had taken three penetrating strikes to his left pauldron. The barbs were agonising, overcoming even his enhanced ability to subdue pain, but he forced himself to focus. He tracked left and right with his heavy weapon, dispersing or cutting down the largest concentrations of darting xenos warriors, even as the air around him hummed and whizzed like a living beast, given voice by the passage of a thousand deadly shards.

'Supporting fire, right side,' Uygai voxed. A moment later Timchet saw the dark eldar firing down from the amphitheatre's crest start to convulse and fall, their spiked armour riddled with shuriken. They were replaced immediately by more eldar figures, but these wore bold blue-and-yellow heraldry, like the larger constructs battling at the centre of the arena. They opened fire on their dark cousins on either side as more reinforcements joined them, scaling the amphitheatre's outer flanks.

'Only target them if fired upon,' Uygai said, indicating the new arrivals on the visor display. 'We must support the khan.'

'Enemy reinforcements to the centre,' Janggi observed. A fresh rush of drukhari warriors had abandoned their shooting positions on the tiers and rushed towards the melee swirling across the arena, locked around the crashed remains of the dark eldar raider. Joghaten, his bondsmen and Feng's bikers had been swallowed

up by the vicious three-way combat and there was no way of offering them fire support without risking hitting them.

‘Blades,’ Uygai said. ‘For the Khagan and the Emperor.’

Timchet uncoupled his heavy bolter and set it down in the dirt before drawing his kindjal.

‘Guide me, brother,’ he murmured, his mind on *Wind Tamer* and Hagai, on better times in a now-distant place.

Fourth Squad advanced.

Lau Feng had lost himself to the fury. He was no longer aware of where he was or what was happening around him. All he knew was that his brothers – his slain brothers – were screaming for vengeance, and their killers were before him.

He’d dismounted, when or how he couldn’t recall. How many had he killed? Not enough. He slammed his dao down, the charged blade slicing through a raised alien rifle, then its crested helm, then its skull, parting it from head to groin. He was shouldering through the bloody remains before they’d even slumped, dao now cutting into another’s flank as it struggled with a blue-and-yellow automaton, gutting it with a furious twist. Feng then turned the dao on the construct, hacking into wraithbone, toppling it like a felled tree. He carved open its smooth, elongated helm and, finding nothing inside, turned his dripping blade on a glaive-wielding warrior with a horned white helm. The two energised weapons clashed, the discharge forcing them both back. They re-engaged, Feng keening a mindless, frenzied scream.

This one was faster. It parried Feng’s stroke deftly and turned his recovering jab with the flat of its long blade. In the same fluid movement it spun inside his guard and brought its long weapon down in a stroke that almost cut the White Scar from collarbone to abdomen. Feng twisted his own body, and the blade instead bit into his left pauldron, jarring off the bloody white ceramite.

What was meant to have been the alien’s killing stroke had brought it too close. Feng lashed out with the back of his gauntlet, smashing the creature’s twisted white mask and knocking it to one side. Before it could recover he slammed a boot into its shin. There was a gristly snapping sound and the xenos went down. It tried to roll in the dirt, lashing out with its blade as it did so, but there was no force behind the blow and it scarred harmlessly off Feng’s leg. The White Scar pinned the dark eldar with one foot, raised his dao, and brought it down like a lightning bolt. The drukhari’s horned head was severed, the dao impaled in the ground.

Feng bellowed his victory. Around him the revenants of Ajai, Tenjin, Oyuun and Tayang screamed with approval, the sound drawing further agony from Feng. He plucked up his weapon and flung himself forward once more.

Qui'sin spun his staff in a tight arc, deflecting the glaive that would have opened his stomach. With a word he channelled a wave of psychic energy into his counter-thrust, the skull tip of his staff slamming into the drukhari's breastplate with enough force to shatter its ribcage and fling it back into those behind. The Stormseer just had time to bring the staff back up again before another blade rang off its haft, the impact shuddering up Qui'sin's arms.

Around him the warriors of the brotherhood seemed to have lost themselves to madness. Even the tactical squad had flung themselves into the assault, blades drawn, bathing themselves in the mania that gripped the arena. To his right Joghaten was locked in a dance of death with the drukhari archon, both warriors clashing around the small space their vicious combat had created. The khan was bleeding from a dozen splinter wounds, and his armour was scarred silver in a thousand places, but still he could not land a telling blow through the archon's energy shield. Every time Qui'sin attempted to find his focus and lash out at the mocking alien, one of its minions would come at him in a blur of razored steel. Twice Kemich had bought him time, darting down from where she had been circling the arena to drive his attackers back in a flurry of feathers and talons. Joghaten was fading however, every fresh nick accompanied by a burst of agony that intruded into the Stormseer's mind. He had moments more before one of the drukhari's pistol shots proved fatal.

A presence intruded in Qui'sin's mind as he turned aside another attack. It was one he had felt before, though it still sickened him.

'The witch,' he voxed to Joghaten, though he doubted the khan was aware of his words. He'd barely spoken them before a shock wave blasted through the arena, kicking up a hail of dirt and staggering the combatants. The force of Farseer Yenneth's arrival made Qui'sin's hand go up to his cable-studded scalp, his psychic hood pulsing with painful energies. He stumbled and the next thing he knew a drukhari dagger was digging into the joint between his thigh and his groin. The agony of the monomolecular blade seared away the pain in his skull and made him lash out reflexively, crumpling his attacker's helm. The knife remained lodged in place though, the Stormseer's blood painting his white thick plates a bright red.

He parried two more strikes from two separate drukhari, each coming at him

from opposite sides. A third blow deflected off his breastplate, jarring away to the left. A fourth would have caught him above the gorget and cut his throat, were it not for the presence of the aeldari.

The tall, robed warrior was suddenly at his side, its witchblade turning away the dagger stroke before a riposte of flawless perfection cut off the drukhari's head.

Qui'sin used the moment's respite to drag the knife in his thigh free, grunting with pain. The wound was refusing to clot, kept open by some vile agent coating the alien blade. He tossed it angrily aside, as Kemish alighted on his backpack, her beak bloody. Around them, a sudden calm had settled, a psychic bubble only his attuned senses were aware of.

The seer council of Iyanden had entered the fray.

*Fate leads those who embrace it, but pushes those who do not. Eventually it masters them all, regardless of their own will.*

– Ancient Chogorian steppe proverb



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### PREDESTINATION

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The City of Pillars, the Webway**

The City of Pillars resounded with the sound of battle, and no more so than in its ancient amphitheatre, where the strands of fate came together to form a tangled, blood-soaked knot. Joghaten did not notice the aeldari witch's intervention until one of his blows broke through the archon's energy field. The tulwar's edge passed a few inches from the drukhari's face, where before it had rebounded. The realisation that the shield had been overloaded struck them at the same time. The archon, however, was faster. As one of her pistols came up towards Joghaten's helm there was a flash of light, and a thudding sound. The drukhari let out a shriek, no longer of delight but of raw frustration. Something, moving with a speed not even a regular aeldari could match, had impacted into her side and thrown her off balance. She was forced to turn her stumble into a dive as a witchblade shrieked from the figure who had collided with her, the wicked, psychically charged edge barely missing her pale throat. The desperate motion saved her from the robed aeldari's blade, but it had carried her, for the briefest moment, within reach of Joghaten's.

He did not hesitate. Roaring Arro'shan's name, he swept one tulwar from right to left with all his strength. The archon's head left her body with such force that it sailed across the surrounding combatants and was lost in the press. The body collapsed at the khan's feet, its twitching death-throes sending blood pattering across his boots and greaves.

The eldar witch who had struck the archon was beside Joghaten, her alien blade vibrating with potency. The khan rounded on her without a thought. Even the aeldari, it seemed, could be taken by surprise. The farseer found herself gripped by the throat and hauled into the air.

'She was mine to kill,' the khan bellowed furiously.

+You took her head,+ the farseer responded, forcing the words directly into Joghaten's mind as she choked in his tightening grasp.

'I did not need your aid, witch. You shame me with your presence.'

+If you kill me, you will never be able to return to reality. You can still save your city and your brothers.+

Joghaten's grip lessened slightly as he felt something scrape against his breastplate. One of the farseer's council had the tip of a black spear, shuddering with alien energies, planted against his side. The rest had surrounded him, and he could feel their psychic presence teetering on the edge of his consciousness, unwilling to intervene lest the slightest motion snap their leader's neck, but ready with the speed of thought to tear his mind apart. The realisation pierced the Chogorian battle lust that had consumed him. His every instinct demanded he break the lying xenos and turn his tulwars on the rest of her kindred. After a moment's resistance he overcame the killer urge, and released the farseer.

The alien leader landed on her feet, gasping but upright. The battle still raged around them, but within ten paces of Joghaten all seemed eerily calm. He was surrounded by aeldari seers, with only a few of his brethren caught in the sphere of their psychic trickery. Steedmaster Feng was on his knees, dripping with xenos blood, his eyes distant. A blow had shattered his helm and left a jagged slash down the side of his face. The wind-brother, Timchet, was there also, turning in a slow circle with his kindjal held point-down as he watched for any signs of attack from the aliens around him.

'So show me,' Joghaten snarled at Yenneth. 'Show me how I can save Darkand.'

'Only a few may come,' Yenneth said, straightening with the aid of her staff. 'What we do runs too much risk if more intervene.'

'Whatever you do witch, know that I shall hold you to account,' said Qui'sin as

he strode to Joghaten's side, his armour painted with dark eldar blood. The khan had never seen the Stormseer looking so wrathful and battle-ready.

'Your trickery has shrouded this world for long enough,' he went on. 'You will atone for it now and deliver your side of our agreement, or I will break you.'

'Stand close,' Yenneth said, slipping a hand into her robes. Joghaten gestured at his brothers, bringing Qui'sin and Timchet to his side. After a moment, Feng followed. The farseer had produced a shard of stone, black, its edges sharp.

'A waystone,' the aeldari said. 'One that I myself have imbued with guiding power. Clear your thoughts, mon-keigh. We must turn our actions in on themselves.'

Before Joghaten could respond, he realised that sudden silence had fallen over them. The sound of the vicious combat in the arena had not faded, it had simply vanished. Joghaten looked around, marvelling at the perfect quiet, even while robed and armoured xenos danced around one another, blades flashing, blood spraying the air. As he watched, the action itself began to dissolve, the light that radiated off gemstones and sword edges, helmets and barbed armour growing until it became a brilliance so intense even the Space Marine's helmet could not properly filter it.

Joghaten took a step, lips parted in a snarl, one arm up and shielding his face. His boot rang against stone. He knew instinctively that was wrong, not just because it broke the other-world silence that had engulfed them, but because the floor of the amphitheatre had been blood-slashed sand, not stone. He realised the light was gone. He lowered his arm.

They were not in the arena anymore, nor even in the strange, alien city the farseer had led them to. Joghaten, Qui'sin, Timchet and Feng, flanking Yenneth, were standing back in Heavenfall. They were in a deserted street in what appeared to be the temple district, an arching devotarium building lying directly in front of them.

'Impossible,' Joghaten breathed. 'This is xenos trickery.'

+Trickery would serve no purpose at this stage,+ spoke Yenneth into his mind, though her thought-voice sounded strained. +I offer you this one chance to work together and help to turn fate back on itself. Save the world you have died on so many times before.+

Joghaten checked his armour's auto-senses, but the chrono display, locator beacons and time stamps were non-functioning, cycling constantly through their digits. He deleted them all, scanning the street as he did.

It was quiet. The upper slopes of the city, if indeed it truly was Heavenfall, had

not yet been consumed by battle.

+If we hurry we can cut out the cancer in this place,+ Yenneth willed. +And forewarn you and your brethren in time to resist them when they rise from below.+

‘Forewarn me?’ Joghaten snapped. ‘What madness is this?’

‘She is right, brother,’ said Qui’sin.

The Master of Blades turned to his Stormseer, and saw by his rigid posture and shaking grip on his force staff that he was under a tremendous amount of strain.

‘I do not know how but... I sense a presence here,’ he went on. ‘I sense myself, just as I now realise I did before. We... we are all here already, my khan.’

+You must not be seen,+ Yenneth urged. +I have laid a glamour about us, and I will seek to redirect any focus away, but if you directly interfere above the surface you risk more than your lives, or the fate of just this place. Stay at my side at all times.+

The farseer began to move towards the devotarium’s open gateway. Joghaten looked to Qui’sin. Eventually the Stormseer nodded. They followed.

The khan checked the vox-net as he passed into the shade of the devotarium’s courtyard. What he heard sent a chill running up his spine. The voices of his brotherhood, repeating words he’d heard before, mere hours earlier. Worse, his own voice, clear and distinct, snapping orders for clarification over the link as he realised that the swarms out on the plain began their fresh assault on the Founding Wall. He blink-clicked the vox transmission sigil on his visor display, but it was unresponsive.

+Do not attempt to communicate,+ Yenneth warned. +I have already sent a subtle imperative warning of the cult’s presence. You will act on it, Joghaten Khan, and save many lives, but we must also do our part without being discovered. The leader of the swarm lies below.+

Joghaten’s response was interrupted by Feng’s curse. The small band had entered the devotarium’s cloistered heart. There, between the shadows and the sunlight, just beyond a spore-clogged fountain, a squad of White Scars was passing by. It was a squad Joghaten recognised immediately. Lau Feng’s riders. The steedmaster himself was there, half turned away as he prepared to enter one of the devotarium’s side rooms. Joghaten looked from him to the Feng by his side, thoughts baulking. He felt a presence in his mind, encouraging but urgent. Yenneth, desperately trying to keep them moving.

+I am concealing our presence,+ she thought to them. +But I cannot maintain it for much longer. We must descend. Do not hesitate.+

As though in a dream, Joghaten and the others passed through the shadowed cloisters, barely a dozen paces from where the other Feng and his hunt-brothers were conducting their clearances, seemingly oblivious to them. As he went, the khan realised he and the others were making no noise at all – even their footsteps had become silent, masked by the incredible power of Yenneth’s witchcraft. She led them to an open grate, an entrance to the darkness of the devotarium’s undercroft.

Feng brought up the rear. He refused to look at his double, so oblivious to his presence. He knew what was about to happen. He remembered it exactly, from the other side. He was about to look up, and see himself – his helmet gone, scalp gashed, battleplate scarred. The impossibility of it all drove him on into the darkness, even as he felt his own disbelieving eyes fall on himself.

‘He will follow,’ he hissed to the rest of the group as they descended the narrow stone stairway into the undercroft.

+I will stop him,+ Yenneth responded. +I have conjured an illusion of his fallen brother to halt his pursuit.+

Feng recalled Eji’s screaming, acid-scarred face, blocking his path down into the undercroft. Despite his best efforts, he shuddered. Were they all tricks? Was his very existence a lie? How many times had he descended these stairs? How many times had he seen his own ghost, dragged from another reality? How many versions of this place, altered beyond recognition, existed?

Such thoughts would have broken the will of lesser warriors. The White Scars, however, could only respond to adversity with greater determination. It had always been the way of Chogoris, even before the coming of the Khagan. Tense and with weapons drawn, they made their way into the darkness of Darkand’s underworld, guided by a witch’s promise.

### **The Founding Wall, Heavenfall**

*Qui’sin turned sharply, his force staff raised. Below the xenos assault was still slamming against the unbroken rock of the Founding Wall. All about him the carnage of battle unfolded, Pinnacle Guardsmen loading and firing down into the rising tide, or shooting up at the gargoyles battling the Space Marines’ combat flyers overhead.*

*And yet, a part of the Stormseer remained detached from it all. There was a presence, if not here then somewhere in the city, somewhere nearby. A presence he knew he recognised, though its exact identity remained just beyond his grasp. A sense of foreboding prickled at the edge of his senses. He patched a link to*

*Joghaten.*

*'There is something in the city,' he told the khan. 'Something's coming.'*

*'Have you received word from the squads deployed to the catacombs?'*

*'No, but I fear the xenos presence is far greater than we anticipated. I would strongly advise reinforcing our rear lines, and those units sent underground, as well as moving into the evacuation catacombs. If the xenos are using the tunnels below the city, they could slaughter most of the population before we even became aware of them.'* After a moment's pause, *Joghaten responded.*

*'Very well, weathermaker. I shall come to you directly, and send combat squads up the slope to occupy the shelters and evacuation tunnels right now. If the xenos come, if they truly are as numerous as you believe, we shall be ready.'*

*Time is the devourer of all things.*

– Ovarid, Imperial scholar



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### ECHOES

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK  
[TERRAN STANDARD]: 10 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The catacombs, Heavenfall**

They encountered no more White Scars beneath Heavenfall, though it wasn't long before they engaged the first xenos. They were alone initially, in the crypt and mausoleum levels below the temple district, hybrids concealing their deformities beneath the heavy gowns and caps of the cult of the Voice of the Emperor. Yenneth and the Space Marines fought side by side, guided by a white light glowing from the intricately carved tip of the farseer's runestaff.

None of the White Scars spoke as they descended ever deeper into Heavenfall's depths. It felt as though to do so would be to shatter the dream they had become lost in. As they went further though, and the man-made tunnels gave way to narrow, natural fissures and passages scarred with vile xenos bio-infestation, a sense of revulsion began to intrude on their thoughts. It was accompanied by a scratching, like claws on the inside of the skull, grinding away. Even Qui'sin could not block it out – Kemich's distressed cries echoed through the winding tunnels as her master struggled on, bearing the full weight not only of the twist in reality they now occupied, but also the unshielded psychic horror of the

monster lurking below.

Eventually, just as Joghaten was becoming convinced they had been cursed to wander the underworld for eternity, Yenneth signalled back to them. They had reached their destination.

The cavern that opened out before them was vast, and irrevocably tainted. Lit up on the Space Marines' visor displays, its rugged floor and the thousands of great jagged stalactites that studded its ceiling would have been an awesome sight, were it not for the horror that now infested it. Great globules of alien flesh wormed and burrowed into the cracks and fissures that lined the uneven floor and walls, and coiled like monstrous parasites around stalagmites and stalactites. A web of xenos meat, throbbing and alive, had turned the entire chamber into a vast, living nest, a place of unnatural growths and chitin-plated tumours. The other-worldly, stomach-turning stench of the Great Devourer – spilled guts, digestion juices, waste and bile – permeated everything.

Even worse were the things nesting in the chamber. The walls were studded with thousands of pale amniotic sacs, row upon row nestled into the uneven Darkand rock. Multi-limbed alien forms were visible within the milky depths, writhing and churning with new life. Hundreds of the sacs had already split, their fluids oozing across the worm-infested floor. Their former occupants – slick genestealers with see-through flesh and carapaces that were still hardening, scuttled in an ever-rotating circle around the thing dominating the centre of the cavern, the sounds of thousands of claws scraping off rock creating a deep susurrantion that had risen through the tunnels and burrows and into the catacombs above.

The beast they surrounded was a monstrosity. Far larger than even the mawloc they had faced outside the city, it filled the centre of the mountain's heart with a wall of pulsing, leathery skin and chitin plates as thick and gnarled as the flanks of a fleet escort. The beast's primary maw was large enough to swallow a Land Raider, while scything talons and tendon whips the length of an Imperial Knight bristled from its multiple limbs. It was shrouded in a miasma of spores, churned out from its vapour chimneys and spine ducts. The mere sight of it painted across the auto-senses of the Space Marines caused a surge of sickening revulsion to wash over them.

And yet it was not the true master of the swarm. The source of the synapse link, identified now by Qui'sin as so powerful that it was able to reach the swarms still gathering out on the plains, was the patriarch latched parasitically to the larger monster's back. The dominatrix was a symbiotic creature, a carrier host

for a synapse leader of tremendous power, its reach extended by the as-yet unknown means by which its flesh meshed with that of its host. Magos biologists usually listed the synapse master as something akin to a withered hive tyrant, yet this one was different. The spade-like nature of the dominatrix's talons and the size of the tunnels that branched off from the cavern implied it had been deposited by the hive fleet somewhere out on the plains and had burrowed its way beneath Heavenfall, where it had linked with the genestealer cult's patriarch. From there it had controlled not just the swarm, but the cult secreted within the city as well.

+The symbiotic creature,+ Yenneth thought as the small band stood staring up at the beast dominating the cavern. +The mistress of the swarm. She has sensed us.+

The genestealers circling the dominatrix had changed direction. The nearest peeled off and were skittering along the cavern floor towards the intruders. Their shrieks filled the air, and were answered by a deep, earth-shuddering bellow from the dominatrix.

'Glory be!' called a human voice, cutting through the alien uproar. It was a voice Joghaten recognised. Septimus Traik. The High Enunciator of the Emperor's Voice was standing on a high rocky ledge to the right of the tunnel they had entered through, apart from the alien swarm that filled most of the chamber. He was clad in his heavy ceremonial gown, though the beads of his broad-brimmed hat had been drawn back to reveal a gaunt, wicked old face, as white as Joghaten's armour. He grinned down at them from his perch, revealing teeth sharpened to wicked fangs. The two dozen Pinnacle Guardsmen surrounding him mirrored the unsettling expression; their own helms were removed, revealing skulls left bloated and deformed by the hybrid effects of the xenos.

'I had not heard her great voice until this moment!' Traik called over the thunder of the oncoming swarm. 'A blessing upon you for bringing this about, on the eve of our ascension!'

'He is the cult magus,' Qui'sin said, realisation mixing with disgust in his voice.

'He must die,' the farseer said aloud. 'As must the symbiotic creature. Only then will the swarms on the surface scatter.'

'You dream, witch,' Joghaten said, staring up at the hulking alien leader-beast as it shifted its bulk around to face the tiny prey-things that dared disturb its nesting. 'It is too vast for us to harm.'

'Individually yes,' the aeldari agreed. 'But not if we combine our powers.'

Qui'sin, will you take the rock with me?' She raised her runestaff, pointing towards Traik's perch.

'If it means tearing that traitor apart,' the Stormseer replied darkly.

'The rest must keep the swarm at bay. We have to be fast.'

The small band set off, making for the rocky promontory occupied by Traik and his hybrids. The magus laughed openly as they approached, gesturing at his twisted guards.

'More flesh for our saviours, my children,' he shrieked. The Pinnacle Guard responded by meeting the charge of the White Scars with blades and claws. Joghaten parried a Darkand knife not unlike a Chogorian kindjal and used his momentum to carry his second tulwar through the snarling hybrid's guard, opening its throat in a jet of discoloured blood. Beside him Feng had struck with the force of a stampeding ox horn, roaring incoherently as he used his armoured bulk to shatter ribs and snap grasping claw-limbs. Even he, however, could not match the sheer destructive power of the aeldari farseer in those first few seconds of contact.

The witch was a blur, her already fearsome speed and agility given a further edge by a psychic quickening even the likes of Qui'sin could never have hoped to emulate. Three rapid heartbeats and a dozen razor-blows, and six deformed cult members lay clinically beheaded at the base of the outcrop. Qui'sin had barely struck down the first hybrid to come at him before the farseer had opened a path for him to the top of the rock. He hefted his force staff and scrambled after her, grasping on to hideous alien flesh-growths to help clamber up the uneven stone.

'You cannot stop what is coming!' Traik was screaming. 'You cannot stop the Great Devourer. We will consume the entire galaxy, and your flesh and blood and bone will fuel our next conquest!'

Traik was still screaming when the farseer reached him. She got there before Qui'sin, far faster than the heavily armoured Adeptus Astartes. The magus' ranting was cut short as the aeldari's blade flashed out, a tracer of white light in the foetid darkness. Qui'sin saw Traik's head tumble, the white beads of his ceremonial veil turned red as they broke and scattered into a thousand specks of brilliance. The body toppled backwards, gown flapping, and was lost in the mass pressing against the base of the rock.

A howl of dismay arose from the hybrids, and Joghaten, Feng and Timchet struck all the harder, chopping left and right with tulwar, dao and kindjal. The mass around them, however, did not lessen. It only increased, as the first wave of

purestrain genestealers struck.

‘The beast is the last unbroken link between the swarm and the hive mind,’ the farseer said to Qui’sin, gesturing up at the dominatrix. ‘We must sever it.’

‘How?’ the Stormseer demanded through clenched teeth. The presence of the symbiotic creature, the scratching in his skull, was almost unbearable. Only Kemich, perched loyally on one shoulder, gave him a degree of focus, a psychic anchor which he could tether his mind to.

‘Crush it,’ the farseer said, raising her runestaff and stretching out her free hand.

‘We cannot make contact with its mind,’ Qui’sin said. ‘We’ll both be consumed the moment we do.’

‘I did not refer to crushing it psychically.’

Qui’sin followed the seer’s staff, and realised where it was pointing. He understood. Widening his stance on the flesh-veined rock, he planted his force staff and began to chant in the ancient tongue of Chogoris.

While below him, his brothers died.

Timchet’s kindjal was stuck. It had lodged itself between a hybrid’s ribs, and now the deformed creature was scrabbling at his armour as the blade twisted and sliced its insides. He snatched it by the neck and physically dragged it away, separating the body from the blade through sheer strength.

But by then it was too late. He was already aware of the next hybrid behind him, already turning, but the thing’s lasrifle discharged at point-blank range, searing through the back of his left knee joint. He grunted as his leg gave out, alien flesh pulping beneath him as he went down on one knee.

He would have died there with a las-bolt to the back of his head had Feng’s energised dao not severed first the rifle’s barrel and then its wielder’s skull. The türüch was a perpetual web of keen-edged motion slashed with gouts of blood and ichor, his power lance inscribing bright, deadly arcs in the chamber’s darkness. The manic fury he had displayed during the fighting in the arena appeared to have gone, replaced by what native Chogorians called the sword song – the metamorphosis from killing to artistry.

Joghaten too danced to the song’s cutting tune. He did not know it, but he grinned. His body, battle weary and wounded in dozens of places, could only carry on for so much longer, yet the khan was no longer aware of the aching in his muscles or the pounding of his hearts or the blood trickling down inside his armour. He thought only of death and glory, and how his soul soared to the song

of his blades as they split skulls, severed limbs and opened alien bodies.

Timchet regained his feet as Feng and Joghaten killed, killed and killed again. He did not dance as they did. He was weary, so weary. He yearned for Hagai's presence. If the xenos witch could manipulate time surely that meant he was out there, somewhere, if not in this reality then in another?

Perhaps, in some strange and unthinkable parallel, he was still by his side.

Back against the rock, kindjal in his fist, Timchet fought on.

The witch was trying to bring down the stalactites. Her fist was clenched and her knuckles were white where she gripped her runestaff. Qui'sin could sense the pressure she was exerting over one of the jagged rock shards above the dominatrix. He felt the stone tremor and shift fractionally. She was not strong enough, however. Not alone.

So Qui'sin began to chant. He beat the base of his staff against the defiled Darkand rock, slowly and rhythmically, eyes rolling into the back of his head as he found his rhythm. Kemich had gone still, seemingly as lost to the trance as her master. Abruptly, the Stormseer's hand shot out and gripped the farseer's slender shoulder. For a second it seemed as though the Space Marine's strength would snap her bones, but she did not resist, and Qui'sin did not remove his hand. Instead, force staff raised in his other fist, he let out a bellow of exertion. Lightning sparked and coruscated around the horned skull topping the psy-reactive haft, before exploding with whiplash force across the cavern. It struck the base of the stalactite with a boom that made the entire cavern shudder, the actinic flare accentuated by a burst of sparks that scattered across the chamber. Before the echoes of the thunderclap had faded, the sound of collapsing rock heralded the stalactite's fall. It struck the dominatrix left of its spine ridges, crunching through the thick chitin and causing it to hunch its arched back and shudder.

'We have to hit it again,' the farseer panted, reaching out once more towards the cavern's roof. Qui'sin couldn't respond – he was lost, mind overcome by the ancient tribal energies surging through the rock beneath his feet. Lightning lashed out once again, this time leaping between three of the jagged rocks. The farseer's groan of exertion rose to a scream as she ripped another of the weakened shards away. It struck one of the tyranid's weapon limbs with a gristly crack, shearing it to the bone. Another stalactite followed, and then another, the great spears of Darkand bedrock lancing the huge creature's carapace in half a dozen places. It wailed, and was answered by a fresh uproar from its children.

They were scrambling up the sheer face of the outcrop Yenneth and Qui'sin occupied, a rising tide of berserk talons and fanged maws.

'One more,' the farseer panted, her whole body shaking. But Qui'sin no longer had the strength. Kemich rose from his shoulder with an agitated shriek as the Stormseer collapsed.

'No!' shouted Yenneth as she felt his grip on her shoulder disappear, their psychic link broken. The presence was replaced a second later, however, by the sensation of talons digging into her wraithbone armour. The Space Marine's familiar, the cybernetically altered raptor, had alighted on her shoulder. She felt the immaterial locus contained within its altered form, a bond with the warp that she could grasp on to, if only for a moment. In that fraction of calm, a time within time itself, she reached out once more and channelled her will into Darkand's bedrock.

There was a cracking noise, greater than all the ones that had come before. Qui'sin's lightning had weakened the structure of the cavern's roof. Now the largest of the remaining stalactites, like a great stone fang, was crumbling beneath the pressure of Yenneth's efforts.

With one last scream of exertion, the farseer tore the stone free.

*You are not lost. The tide of time has merely carried you away, but all tides must come back in. The next one will return us to ourselves, and right the wrongs heaped upon us by this cruel existence.*

– Jaem Pulvar-Jorrow, Scion of Navigator House Jorrow



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### THE BEGINNING ENDS

TIME TO FURNACE SEASON PEAK

[TERRAN STANDARD]: 9 HOURS.

TIME TO PREDICTED PRIMARY XENOS PLANETFALL [TERRAN  
STANDARD]: 0 HOURS.

#### **The catacombs, Heavenfall**

Fighting at the base of the rocky outcrop, the genestealer that finally caught Timchet came from above. It had dug its diamond-hard claws into the cliff face at his back, scaling halfway up and then crawling sideways, like some vicious insectoid. It dropped onto him with a hiss, its claws gouging great, bloody rents in his shoulders and scalp as it bore him to the ground.

He managed to roll, trapping two of its six limbs beneath his armoured bulk. That pinned it enough for a quick, clinical slash across its throat with his kindjal, but the damage was done – a cut above his right eye had not only shorted out his auto-senses, but had also left him half-blind with his own blood.

Somehow he managed to find his feet, dragging a hybrid down onto his blade as he did so. He left the Chogorian steel lodged in its windpipe and smashed his gauntlet into the snapping maw of the next genestealer to come at him, shattering fangs and pulverising translucent, newborn flesh. His fall, however, had carried him away from the rock at his back, and a hybrid managed to work his way in behind him with a lasrifle. It hit him on full auto from a range of three paces,

punching through his armour in half a dozen places and causing his backpack's generator to enter shutdown. He stumbled, even his enhanced physiology unable to stem the flow of blood from the wounds now covering him.

Hagai's name was on his lips as the final stalactite fell, the sound of crashing rock drawing his gaze even as a xenos blade punched up beneath his fused ribcage, and another broke the seal beneath his helm. Darkness took him.

Joghaten saw the final moments of the combat via his auto-senses, the scene picked out with flares of colour and heat recognition mapping. The stalactite struck the master of the tyranid cult, the patriarch meshed into the flesh of the dominatrix's upper back. It pulverised its bloated skull before splitting its body in half, a shard of rock twice the height of a man cutting deep into the symbiotic beast. Even unattuned as he was, Joghaten felt the psychic death knell wash over him, a sickening sense of dread and loss that was accompanied by a fresh wailing from every xenos in the cavern. The horrific clamour painted a broad grin across the khan's face. He struck out again, cutting the talon-limb from one purestrain at the same time as his second tulwar took the eyes of a hybrid attempting to bring its lasrifle to bear. Even with their master's death, the creatures around the khan fought with a bestial fury, their animalistic instincts bent towards slaughtering the intruder violating their nest. The khan fought on, still smiling.

He would be with the Khagan soon, he was sure of it.

Feng's dao had shorted out, its disruptor field overloaded. The steedmaster did not care. Its blade was wicked enough to pierce xenos carapace without the cutting technology, especially when wielded with the force he now exerted. Unlike Timchet he hadn't backed away to the rock where Qui'sin had fallen, but had planted both boots in the open space beside it, defying the creatures that came from every corner of the cavern. Great swings of his glaive were keeping the tyranids at bay, any that came within range of the constantly moving arc of death being cut down in an instant. A hybrid in the uniform of a Pinnacle Guard guardmaster had almost led a rush that would have seen him overwhelmed. Now the creature's twisted head lay at the White Scar's feet, and the blood of its brood kindred slashed in thick droplets from his dao with every swing.

Feng felt calm now, calmer than he had in a long time. He could no longer see his long-dead hunt-brothers, or feel their presence. They had finally gone. Or perhaps he had joined them. Perhaps he was already dead.

The thought seemed curiously irrelevant. He wondered how Jakar, Oda and

Sauri fared in the webway. Were they even there still, or here on Darkand, above where he now battled? Did they exist at all?

He had given up wrestling with such questions the moment he had glimpsed himself for the second time in the devotarium. He had always known that the secrets of the galaxy were beyond the wisest of the Zadyin Arga, let alone a hunt-brother such as himself. Let others strain their minds. His purpose was to honour his khan and his Emperor with the blood of their enemies. That was what he did, right up until the earth shifted beneath him and he found himself flying through the dark, dank air. Bones snapped wetly as his heavy body slammed into those seeking to kill him, followed by a wall of dirt. His hands went out, finding alien claws and carapace instead of purchase, and he realised his dao was no longer in his grasp. He didn't have time to unclamp his kindjal before a genestealer's claws punched through his breastplate, puncturing flesh and scraping off his ribs.

He snarled with frustration, blocking out the pain. It wasn't time, not yet. He hadn't killed enough.

His fist shot out, gripping the twisted, alien features of the genestealer. With a bellow he forced two fingers into its sockets, jellying its eyes before forcing its head back until it snapped. The thing collapsed on top of him, pinning him down, while its own kin savaged and tore at its remains in their frenzied desire to get at him.

Feng barely noticed their efforts. Head pressed forcefully to one side by the stinking alien corpse, he was aware of the earth-churning motion of a great, serpentine body, seconds before its shriek split the air.

The mawloc had returned.

The vast, burrowing tyranid caught Joghaten as it ploughed upwards from Darkand's ichor-slick soil. The khan felt the earth shifting and threw himself forward, but he was already being lifted up, his armour grating against the dirt-caked shell of the mawloc as it burst up in the swarm leader's defence. With a lurch, Joghaten realised he had been snagged by its maw.

He lashed out as he felt the membranous, distending flesh stretching over his legs. There was no purchase though – he was caught in freefall, half in, half out of the huge serpentine alien's dislocated jaw. One tulwar struck one of the monster's great fangs, and the khan grasped it desperately as he felt its snag-teeth and digestion tendrils latching on to his armour. They were physically

attempting to drag him down its open gullet.

He snatched on to another fang as his grip began to slip. His armour was reading the corrosive bite of acidic bile rising up the mawloc's throat. According to the battleplate's integrity sigil, the burning liquid would eat its way to his flesh within the next thirty seconds. He knew he wouldn't be able to hold on for that long anyway.

The last sight he saw, as the alien's fleshy maw closed over him, was the aeldari farseer. She was still atop the rock, the waystone in her hand and her runestaff raised, white light shining like a beacon from its tip. Qui'sin lay prone at her feet, while Kemich was on her shoulder, her great wings spread. Around them a sea of xenos had clambered up, the runestaff's light reflecting from their black eyes and bared fangs as they surrounded her.

Even in their frenzied rage, the cult would not get an opportunity to tear apart the two psykers. Fatally weakened by the blows of Yenneth and Qui'sin, the cavern roof had started to collapse. Joghaten saw it all for no more than a second, yet it seemed to hang in his mind for an eternity. It would be with him forever, he was sure. However long that was.

Then it was all gone, lost in the darkness, and the crashing, crushing finality of a planet's vengeance.

### **Archival tunnels, Heavenfall**

*They didn't need the auspex to detect the severe earth tremors that gripped the city fifteen minutes after Qui'sin had ordered reinforcements into the catacombs. Whole blocks in the Old Town had collapsed, while cobbled slope-streets had ruptured and tiles had cascaded like hail from the roofs. An entire section of the city slumped, as though the heart of the mountain itself had given out.*

*Qui'sin didn't have time to ponder the meaning of such seismic events. He was leading Jeddah's tactical squad through the archival tunnels below the government district's Administratum quadrangle. They'd been encountering xenos ever since using krak charges to break into a set of natural rock passages detected on the squad's auspex. Hybrids, many clad in Pinnacle Guard uniforms, had tried to halt them, to no avail. There had been purestrains too; their subterranean lairs now reeked of their charred meat, where the Stormseer's lightning had flensed them. Thus far none of the xenos had attacked with any degree of coordination, certainly not that which was usually experienced when engaging a genestealer cult on the cusp of revealing itself.*

*Reports coming in from elsewhere beneath the city carried similar messages.*

*One group of hybrids, masquerading as a Pinnacle Guard security detail, had even attempted to gain access to a heavily stocked reserve artillery armoury at the rear of the Founding Wall. A combat squad redeployed to patrol the wall's rear echelons had gunned them down as they tried to storm the bastion, demolition charges primed.*

*Everywhere the White Scars had caught their enemy off guard, and seemingly without a central intelligence or driving force. Qui'sin refused to dwell on just how he'd known to give the order to strike at certain parts of Heavenfall's convoluted underworld. That was a riddle for another day.*

*'They're withdrawing,' crackled Joghaten's voice over the vox. 'The swarm at the wall has been thrown into some sort of confusion. They're turning on one another again.'*

*'It is the Khagan's blessings,' Qui'sin responded, knowing in his heart that there was something far more to it than that. Something had intervened on their behalf, a power beyond his current understanding. He had felt it ever since the moment on the Founding Wall, and in truth he had seen it in the weave of fate since they had first set a course for Darkand. This world had taken more than any other from the Fourth Brotherhood, but it had also given. Given in impossible, unknowable ways.*

*'Shen is nearly in high orbit,' Joghaten went on. 'He reports the swarms out on the steppes have turned feral again. Whatever was driving them, it's gone now.'*

*'It is,' Qui'sin agreed slowly, as the sounds of bolter fire continued to echo through the subterranean tunnels around him. 'It is gone. And so are we.'*

### **The Gates of Eternity, Darkand**

The sun was setting. It was not a Chogorian sunset, of course, not the red and gold glory of the Plain Zhou. But it brought home to mind for the White Scars who watched it, and listened to the wind singing soft and low around the rocks of the Gates of Eternity.

The swarms were broken, scattered. Fighting still flared in Heavenfall, but the cult there was directionless and uncoordinated. Pinnacle Guard, assisted by Darkand's tribal warriors, had purged the temple district, while squads from the Fourth Brotherhood did sweeps of the levels below the government district. The vox-net spoke of further casualties – Shontai had fallen leading his assault brothers through the vaults of the scriptorium, while Chokda's bikers had suffered in an ambush sprung by what turned out to be the hybrid's last stand, near the centrum dominus. Governor Harren had fallen there amidst a hail of las

and bolter fire, the Imperial Commander almost unrecognisable, given over to alien infection. Despite the losses, the outcome was a far cry from what had come before.

The aeldari was still with them. Joghaten turned his back on the setting sun and faced her. She had removed her tall blue-and-yellow helm, so that the golden light fell on features that were at once disconcertingly recognisable, yet quite alien – too sharp, too slender. Try as he might, the Master of Blades could not meet her fathomless black gaze, for doing so only reinforced the impossibility of the events in which he had just participated.

‘I remember nothing between the darkness of the cavern and finding myself here,’ he said eventually.

‘Your mind rejects what it cannot comprehend,’ Yenneth replied, her voice seeming to merge with the murmuring of Darkand’s wind.

‘Are we dead?’ Joghaten demanded.

‘Perhaps, in some worlds and times, long since passed.’

‘We cannot stay here though,’ Joghaten went on, unwilling to slip any deeper into her race’s interminable riddles.

‘To do what I have already done stretches the bounds of reality to its very limit,’ Yenneth said, the barest hint of remorse colouring her words. ‘To bend it further would be to break it, at least in this sphere of existence. Besides, I see in your heart that you do not wish to remain anyway. Those in the city right now are not your own. Your brothers lie elsewhere.’

‘The webway,’ Qui’sin said before Joghaten could respond. ‘When we left it was in the heat of battle. What if they are already dead, in your lost city?’

‘Even I do not know their fate, yet,’ Yenneth admitted, turning towards the Stormseer. Kemich, perched on his shoulder, ruffled her golden feathers.

‘Then there is only one way to be sure,’ Timchet said eventually, pointing towards the arching rocks where the webway gate stood. The strange stones were not as active as they had been when the brotherhood had first ridden through, but the air between them now was rippling gently, as though caught in a heat haze.

‘I cannot force you to pass over,’ Yenneth admitted. ‘But I suspect you cannot stop yourselves. To remain here would be a lonely and meaningless existence.’

‘It would be an abandonment,’ Qui’sin admitted, then trailed off when he saw that Joghaten, his helm removed, was beginning to smile.

‘What is it?’

‘The Khagan calls,’ the Master of Blades said softly, with all the relish he might

have displayed when he was still Arro'shan's prized bondsman, thinking only of glory. 'Can you not hear his hunting cry, weathermaker? It echoes from the beyond.'

'The eternal hunt,' Feng said, joining the other three before the farseer. 'It is a worthy fate for any son of Chogoris. My brothers wait for me to join them in it. I can already see them there, on the other side.'

'I can accompany you some of the way,' Yenneth said. 'I will take you back to the City of Pillars. After that, whatever path you choose to wander will be your own.'

'We will see our brothers again,' Joghaten said, louder now, with vigour in his voice. 'All of them. And when we are reunited, the Tulwar Brotherhood will embark on the hunt that will end all others. We will seek neither rest nor sustenance, but only our Khagan, until we are with him once again. And when we are, we will ride at his side for eternity, as we have been fated to do since the dawn of time. What do you say, weathermaker?'

Qui'sin nodded, and when he spoke there was no more hesitation, no more uncertainty in his voice.

'Truly we are blessed, my khan. Our last hunt shall be eternal. The Ayanga will not know of our true fate, but we shall return to them in glory. Such has been our purpose all along. I am sure of it.'

'You shall see your brother Hagai too,' Feng added, a hand on Timchet's unblemished pauldron. 'Nothing can keep true kindred separated, not for eternity. Of that I am sure.'

Finally, Timchet nodded, and a sad smile touched his lips.

'I do not know if I can endure that fool for an eternity. Regardless, let us be on our way. It will be good to see him again.'

Yenneth led the White Scars to the edge of the shimmering portal. Joghaten went first, unhesitating, bold and sure as ever. Feng followed, after only a moment's pause, and then Timchet, now smiling broadly. Only Qui'sin remained behind.

'You still doubt, Stormseer,' Yenneth said softly.

'The Master of Blades is an incomplete soul,' Qui'sin said, still facing the portal. 'At times, he lacks a sense of reserve. I am that reserve.'

'It is not just your natural predilection that is making you hesitate. You wonder whether you will see your father again, the one you call the Khagan.'

'It is what we yearn for, more than anything, more so even than the other brotherhoods. We believe in being reunited with him. We believe the Khagan

still hunts.'

'Whether or not he does, I cannot say,' Yenneth admitted. 'But one thing I do know. To find out, you must pass through.'

'Yes,' Qui'sin said. 'And that is why I must stay at my khan's side, guiding him as best I can. That is my fate, just as it is his to seek out the Khagan.'

'Seek him you shall,' Yenneth said.

Qui'sin nodded, and stepped through the shimmering light. She followed, her form melting into the haze between the stones.

The portal blinked from existence, leaving only the ancient, weather-beaten stones, the wind sighing through the steppe grass, and the last of the day's light vanishing amidst the long shadows.



## EPILOGUE

*Qui'sin tossed the scrap of flesh to Kemich, before lowering himself down onto the prayer mat. The scrying chamber was silent, once again lost in the flickering light of lumen sticks laid out around the Stormseer. Qui'sin closed his eyes, reached out and—*

*A chamber of shrieking xenos spawn. Stygian darkness. A piercing white light, emanating from a slender, robed figure. Impossibility, reined in only by death. One reality shrinking and merging with another—*

*He realised he was back on his feet, a protective ward on his lips. Kemich, still on her talon-marked perch in one corner, cocked her head to one side. The Stormseer rubbed his fingers over the worn bone of his force staff's skull, trying to shake off the vision's aftershock.*

*That was the third time since leaving Darkand's high orbit that he'd sought contact with his brethren in the Ayanga, and it was the third time his mind had instead been flooded with memories of events that had never happened. The first had been of an alien city, desolate but for screams, and the terrible whizzing sound of splinter weaponry. The second had been of Darkand's plains and a collection of strange, mighty standing stones. Now he was seeing caverns and xenos infestations. He had fought long and hard beneath Heavenfall in the week since the breaking of the main swarm outside the Founding Wall, but at no point had he or any of the Fourth Brotherhood come across a cavern that matched the one in his memory. Nevertheless, all three recollections had been clear, as though the places he was witnessing had been visited mere days earlier.*

*At the same time, somehow, he was certain he had never experienced any of them.*

*He settled himself once more and drew a calming breath, taking up a slow, low throat-cant that helped steady his mind in times of duress. Kemich alighted on his shoulder, her heavy burden a sudden relief.*

*One way or another, he would find the source of these vision-memories.*

*They were behind him, a deadly presence in the Pride's sparring ger. For a moment, Lau Feng didn't move. For a moment his world was reduced to the beating of his hearts, the tension in his limbs, the well-balanced weight of his guan dao grasped in both hands.*

*A noise ended the stillness, the merest brush of bare feet on the sparring mat. He turned, a whirl of keen-edged steel.*

*They were coming at him at the same time, Jakar with an overhead stroke of his tulwar, Oda cutting in from the right, angling up beneath his guard. Jakar, however, had struck a fraction too soon. That was all the advantage that Feng required.*

*He parried Jakar's stroke with the notched haft of his dao, then knocked aside Oda's strike by spinning the broad-bladed lance in his palms. The blade was slicing back towards Jakar before the hunt-brother had recovered from the shock of the parry, driving him back and keeping him off balance. Oda, understanding the danger of letting the steedmaster divide them, sprang back in with an overhasty lunge. The bold thrust was almost met with reward – it sliced open the right thigh of Feng's white silk leggings, but failed to touch his flesh.*

*Oda paid the price for his attempt at a swift victory. The haft of Feng's dao whipped around, cracking into his nose. A splatter of blood pattered onto the sparring mat, and the stocky hunt-brother had no choice other than to bow out.*

*All the while, Feng's eyes hadn't left Jakar's.*

*The türüch saw resolve there, but also acceptance – this bout was only going to end one way now.*

*Feng flicked aside another slash and turned defence into attack with a rapid three-step. The dao stabbed towards Jakar's abdomen as he was forced back once more. Though the riposte fell short, Feng used his momentum to carry him into a spin to Jakar's right. A heel in the back of his brother's knee, perfectly timed, was enough to drop him to the mat. Before he could rise, he felt the kiss of Feng's weapon on the exposed nape of his neck. After a moment's stubborn recalcitrance, he let his tulwar drop to the sparring mat.*

*Feng helped Jakar back onto his feet, and alongside Oda the three Space Marines bowed to one another. From Jakar's first blow the entire clash had*

*taken twenty-six seconds, according to the chrono ticking over on the wall of the deserted sparring ger.*

*It had been a long time since Feng had won so convincingly. In truth, his brothers had noted the difference the moment they had engaged the cult beneath Heavenfall. It was as though the steedmaster had remembered the warrior and the leader he had once been.*

*He helped Jakar and Oda roll away the mat, then stood alone as they left for their rest cycle. The lights in the echoing ger began to thud off, one by one. In the lengthening shadows, he waited. Even after the final lumen had clicked off, even after he had walked the corridors of the Pride of Chogoris and returned to his busad cell, he waited. But they did not come.*

*It had all been different since he had seen himself in the quadrangle of the devotarium. It had been a sign, he now realised. A moment of resolution – a part of him, no longer able to bear his sorrow, had departed and gone to join his lost brothers. And they had accepted him. From the nightmare moment when he had seen his double, everything had changed. They had fought well against the cult, into the depths of Heavenfall's subterranean heart. Himself, Jakar, Oda and Sauri, honouring Eji's death. The brotherhood had brought a slaughter-end to the alien and the hybrid with bolt and flame, kindjal and tulwar. And since the devotarium Feng had seen nothing of the revenants of Ajai, Tenjin, Oyuun or Tayang. Their baleful presence had lifted like the passing of night before a steppe dawn.*

*Feng stayed fully conscious through the night cycle, still watching, still waiting. In truth he knew he didn't have to. His brothers had passed on. He was sure a part of him had done likewise, leaving what remained to carry on. Freedom, and freedom's price.*

*Feng paid it gladly. He did not need to see their shades to honour their memories.*

*After taking a moment to ensure the wooden board beneath the vellum was angled correctly, Joghaten Khan leaned over and picked the aduu-hair brush from its pot. For a moment he stared at the white blankness of the page – furious white, old Arro'shan had once called it. Then, his spot picked, he raised his brush and administered the first long, steady stroke.*

*It had been a hard struggle, and desperate, but ultimately as successful as any in the proud history of the Tulwar Brotherhood. The xenos had been broken out on the plains, in the slope-city, and in the void of space. The people of Darkand*

*had suffered, but a great many had been saved, and the nomad tribes were now beginning to emerge once more from Heavenfall, parties of horsemen accompanying motorised Pinnacle Guard units in hunts across the plains for the xenos that yet survived, scattered and leaderless. It would be many months, perhaps years, before the planet had been truly purged, but the greatest danger had passed. The Devourer's hunger had been weathered and the White Scars hunted elsewhere.*

*And yet, and yet... victory had come at a price, and it had been paid in more than just the lives of many members of the Fourth. Sitting in his busad, sliding the ink across the vellum's crisp surface in long, steady strokes, Joghaten Khan sought to pin precisely what had happened in the final few hours before they had purged Heavenfall of the cult's taint. He knew he was not alone in believing some force, some strange, external knowledge, had guided them. Qui'sin was still struggling to identify and explain it, his wisdom taxed by their seemingly miraculous success. It was as though the Khagan himself had been with them towards the end, guiding their deployments and helping to scatter the alien filth.*

*As he pondered such a possibility, Joghaten found his thoughts overwhelmed by a surge of memories. He saw a Space Marine, tall and warlike, with twin tulwars at his hip and furs about his shoulders. With a start he recognised his own armour and weapons, and yet when he tried to focus upon his face, he found he could not. The warrior's features were an indistinct blur in his mind's eye, somehow insubstantial and ethereal. The khan shuddered away from the vision, realising that his grip had grown so tight on his brush that it was close to snapping.*

*He looked down at the vellum. A part of him expected to see his vision played out across it – the Master of Blades rendered faceless, a champion without either time or place, a ghost.*

*But the parchment was blemished with no violent vision-scrawl. Instead he saw a pattern, not the one he had set out to inscribe, but delivered as cleanly and precisely as any of his calligraphy pieces. It was a labyrinthine knotwork design, the ulzi, the ancient Chogorian symbol for the inescapability of fate.*

*For a moment, the khan considered taking such a portentous sign to Qui'sin. Then, instead, he sifted a portion of sand across its surface, blew, and slipped the dried parchment into the frame-drawer that held the rest of his work.*

*Whatever had become of them on Darkand, they had emerged victorious. There was no turning back, and no escaping. For better or for worse, they would hunt again.*

The time for words was over. Joghaten Khan sat astride *Whitemane*, blood still slowly dripping from his armour. He looked out over the smoking desolation of the City of Pillars, following the plumes of smoke upwards, until he beheld the strange constellations that ruled over this unknowable place. The webway, where the Khagan still hunted, outside the normal boundaries of time and space.

The Fourth Brotherhood was at his back, mounted and ready. His honour guard surrounded him, Dorich and Jubai, Khuchar, Tamachag and Bleda, fully armed. He looked right, to Qui'sin. The Stormseer held his force staff across his saddle, likewise staring up into the firmament. Kemich was at his shoulder. Neither reacted to Joghaten's gaze, but the khan sensed their readiness. He glanced to his left, checking that Jubai was holding the brotherhood's horsehair standard high. One last moment's contemplation and then, wordlessly, the Master of Blades smiled. He raised his right gauntlet, palm open, fingers splayed towards an alien sky.

*Ride.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Robbie MacNiven** is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. He has written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *The Last Hunt*, *Carcharodons: Red Tith*e and *Legacy of Russ* as well as the short stories 'Redblade', 'A Song for the Lost' and 'Blood and Iron' for Black Library. His hobbies include re-enacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000.



An extract from *Carcharodons: Red Tithe*.



The screaming marked an end to the day's toil. The aching noise came from the gargoyle-mawed klaxons that lined each of the narrow walls, tunnels, sub-surface lines and assembly points of Zartak's vast mine works. Mika Doren Skell dropped his half-pick into its tool crate, his scrawny limbs trembling with exhaustion. His fingers ached as he uncurled them. The blisters had burst again, and blood was welling up in little, oozing patches to discolour the thick layer of dust coating his hands.

'Move, inmate,' barked the arbitrator overseeing equipment reclamation. The armour-plated lawman gestured with the barrel of his heavy combat shotgun, motioning him back into line. Skell bowed his head and fell in behind Nedzy and the others, dropping his magnicled hands. The explosive-primed bonds chafed at his wrists, a constant, aching reminder of five months of captivity. Five months since the cowardly gang boss Roax had ratted him out. Five months since he had arrived in the subterranean hell of Zartak.

'Argrim's here,' muttered Dolar as he dropped into line behind Skell. The presence of his big cell-mate at his back was reassuring. Without him, Skell would have died at least twice already, either in the burrow pits and excavation lanes or trudging back to the prison cells of Sink Shaft One.

He had repaid his cell-mate many times over.

A sudden pain pressed against Skell's temples, as though the atmosphere in the low rock tunnel had suddenly changed. None of the other inmates showed any signs of discomfort. Skell's bloody hands clenched into fists.

'Argrim's going to try something,' he muttered to Dolar.

'You sure?'

'Yeah. I can feel it.'

Dolar said nothing, but Skell sensed him draw fractionally closer. The line ahead was beginning to divide as ragged prison groups were pulled from the column by shouting overseers and herded down the passages that would lead them back to their cell blocks and hanging cages. The pressure in Skell's head increased. Argrim and his cronies would strike soon, once the mass of dirt-

caked, dull-eyed labourers had been separated and divided. They'd tried it before, and Skell knew they'd try it again. They hated him. Not because he was from the sump-hive of Fallowrain, not because he was one of Roax's old gang. Not even because he refused to bend before Argrim's reputation and authority.

They hated Skell because he was a witch.

'That concludes the session review,' said Warden Primary Sholtz. 'Are there any questions? Sub-Warden Rannik?'

The words dragged Rannik from the fug of boredom that had gripped her thoughts for the past two hours. The situation room was silent, the pict screen behind the warden's lectern blinking, the lumen strips still dimmed. The transcription servitor in the corner clattered to a halt as its auto quill finished taking minutes. The other sub-wardens were all staring at her.

'No questions, sir,' Rannik said. 'A thoroughly comprehensive review, as ever.'

'Was it indeed?' asked Sholtz from his perch behind the aquila-stamped lectern. The man's stony glare was as hard as the blunt-force sarcasm he so loved to inflict on new officers. 'What a relief to have met with your approval. I shall be sure to tell Judge Symons of your weighty opinion next time we share a holo-briefing.'

The thirteen other Adeptus Arbites sub-wardens didn't respond, but Rannik could sense their amusement. It made her bristle. She fought down her anger, channelling it into a deferential nod.

'Perhaps,' the grizzled warden continued, 'you could elucidate further upon the last point I raised?'

'The last point, sir?' Rannik repeated.

'Yes, sub-warden. The one discussed barely a minute ago.'

Rannik said nothing. The silence in the situation room stretched to a painful, unnatural length. Finally, a bang at the hatch door broke it.

'Not now,' Sholtz snarled, his gaze not leaving Rannik. The banging sounded again. Scowling, the warden deactivated the lock with a flick of his sensor wand. The hatch slid open and a youth in the pale grey uniform of the Precinct Fortress' Augur Division ducked inside.

'What?' the warden primary snapped. The boy threw a hurried salute.

'Word from Augur Chief Tarl, sir. The sensor relays just chimed. The augur outposts on the system's trailward edge have detected a lone vessel breaking into real space.'

'Identity?'

‘We’re still running verification, sir, but initial scans of its keel tag and ident-codes show it’s probably our latest shipment.’

‘The *Imperial Truth*?’ Sholtz demanded. ‘That would make it over a week early.’

‘Yes, sir, that’s what Chief Tarl said. We have tried to hail it but we aren’t receiving any response. Communications may just be choppy due to interference from the asteroid belt, but they’re definitely registering our messages.’

‘How far out is she?’

‘Just entering the belt, sir. Once she navigates it she’ll be three hours from high anchor.’

‘Gentlemen, we have a situation,’ Sholtz said to the assembled sub-wardens. ‘This session is formally adjourned. Come with me.’

Sholtz left the situation room. The sub-wardens filed out from behind their benches and swept after him in a buzz of sudden, nervous excitement.

‘Bit of good fortune, this,’ Sub-Warden Klenn muttered as they entered the corridor, just loud enough for Rannik to hear. ‘The chief had her cold back there. She’s still making the same old mistakes.’

Rannik forced herself not to respond. She could feel the scorn of the older arbitrators as they clattered along the Precinct Fortress’ darkened rockcrete tunnels, following in the warden primary’s footsteps. None of them thought she was fit to oversee her own sub-precinct, regardless of her exceptional progenium training and indoctrination statistics, or the fact that she’d finished top of her class at the Schola Excubitos on Terrax. In their eyes, in the five Terran months since Rannik had arrived, she’d done nothing to prove she was worthy of holding the same rank as them.

She would prove them wrong.

The warden primary burst into the precinct’s Centrum Dominus, buried deep within the fortress’ armoured depths. There was a scrape of chairs and a thud of combat boots as the two-tiered room came to attention, cogitators and scanner systems still humming.

‘Report,’ Sholtz snapped. Chief Tarl strode across from his station at the augur arrays, a yellow message chit in hand.

‘It’s definitely the *Imperial Truth*, sir,’ he said, giving the ident readout to the warden. ‘Almost seven days ahead of schedule, and breaking from the warp in completely the wrong place.’

‘Comms?’ Sholtz asked, looking up at the vox-banks ringing the Centrum’s gantries.

‘We caught a burst of transmission code less than sixty seconds ago, sir,’ said a ruddy-faced vox-lieutenant, earphones in hand. ‘Unintelligible. There’s been nothing since. The contact is just clearing the asteroid belt now, so the signal should become stronger. We’re keeping all channels open.’

‘Sub-Warden Rannik,’ Sholtz said, turning to the officers who’d followed him into the cogitator-ringed pit at the heart of the Centrum. ‘Operations manual seventeen, chapter one, paragraph one. What is the foremost rule when faced with the unknown or the uncertain?’

‘Prepare for the worst,’ Rannik said. ‘And trust in the God-Emperor, sir.’

The warden nodded.

‘There, you see, even the bluntest blades have some cut if you sharpen them enough. We are arbitrators. We always assume the worst. Master-at-arms.’ He gestured at Macran, the head of Zartak’s Combat Division. The big woman, her shaved skull twisted with old flamer burns, came to attention with a clatter of flakplate.

‘Warden primary?’

‘Issue a priority broadcast throughout the fortress and to all sub-precincts across the planet. Code red, effective immediate. Stand to.’

Blood was dripping onto the floor, slowly. Dolar hadn’t noticed.

‘Dolar,’ Skell said. The older convict started, looking down at him with wide, worried eyes.

‘Your nose,’ Skell said, holding out a rag ripped from the hem of his grubby penal fatigues. Dolar stared at it, uncomprehending. Skell wondered if he was concussed.

‘Never mind,’ he said after a moment, stuffing the rag back into his pocket. Dolar’s eyes became vacant again, and he leaned forwards over the edge of his shackle bunk. Blood continued to fall, drip by drip.

Skell rolled back onto his own bunk and grimaced. Around them the sounds of the prison intruded, drifting up through the cell’s mesh flooring and around the bars of the hatch window – raised voices, the slamming of doors, the buzz of active alarm systems and pict monitors, thudding boots and the rattle of magnicles.

Skell had only been here five months, and he already wished he was dead. At least then he wouldn’t have to dig and grub with his numb, bleeding hands any more. The requirements of the hundreds of mine works branching out from Sink Shaft One were without end. When prospectors had discovered that Zartak

possessed a rich strata of raw adamantium-based minerals, the nearest consortium of hive worlds had acted quickly to forge a pact with the Adeptus Arbites, one that both relieved them of a good deal of their criminal underhive and enabled the tithing grade of the new mining colony to triple – much to the delight of the subsector’s Administratum officios. At some point the original miner colonists had vanished and been replaced by the lowest savlar – dregs, scum and the plain unlucky – of half a dozen miserable, industrialised Ethika subsector planets like Fallowrain or Nilrest. That was why Skell and tens of thousands of convicts like him were on Zartak. To drag raw material for the Imperium’s starships and armies from the hard, black earth.

Dolar had finally noticed his nosebleed, and was ineffectually trying to stymie it with his grime-caked fingers. He was two years older than Skell – sixteen, Terran standard, or so he claimed – yet most of the time he acted no more coherently than a ten-year-old. Only his solid build and his willingness to resort to his fists had kept him alive so far. That, and his partnership with Skell.

‘Something’s coming,’ Skell said, looking at the darkness beyond the hatch window.

‘Argrim again?’ Dolar asked vacantly. Skell shook his head.

‘Something worse. It wasn’t him I felt earlier.’ The pressure from the mine tunnel was still there, like a dull, ever-present headache, pulsing incessantly in his temples. He’d never felt it so strongly before.

‘Is it the things you see in the dark?’ Dolar asked. ‘The things that keep giving you nightmares?’

‘They aren’t nightmares,’ Skell said, scowling. ‘They’re just... I don’t know what they are.’

‘Nothing good,’ Dolar mumbled.

‘Well they can’t be worse than this place,’ Skell replied. He was speaking lightly, but in truth he was afraid. The things he had started seeing in his dreams recently – claws and talons spun from shadows, the crackle of lightning and bitter red eyes – had not brought him any comfort. Worst of all had been the face. It was a skull, a death mask, leering from a void of black. Whenever he saw it, it drew closer, grinning with savage, unblinking intensity.

‘They’re coming for me,’ Skell said, still gazing at the barred entrance to the cell.

‘Not me?’ Dolar asked. Skell shot him a look.

‘All of us.’

Dolar nodded. He always paid attention when Skell talked about the future.

Theirs was a mutually beneficial partnership – the larger, older inmate protected the smaller physically, while the smaller guided the larger. Even for someone as slow as he was, Dolar had realised within weeks of their incarceration on Zartak that Skell had a special talent. It was the same talent that had made him such a lucky charm with the older gangmates back in the sump-sink of Fallowrain’s planetary capital, Vorhive. At least before Roax had ratted him out. It was the same talent that always earned him such regular beatings from superstitious inmates like Argrim, whenever the arbitrators were looking the other way. Skell had the Sight. Nosebleeds, headaches, nightmares. Few appreciated it.

‘We need to be ready,’ Skell said. ‘It’ll start soon.’ His body still ached from Argrim’s last attempted murder. The ambush had been sprung just as he’d predicted, when the work gang had been returning from Lower 6-16 at the end of that day-cycle’s labour shift. Argrim, the big, brutal ex-smuggler from Shantry, would have staved his skull in with a concealed pick haft if Dolar hadn’t put him down before he could get swinging. When the arbitrators had arrived, shock mauls buzzing, Dolar and Skell were still on their feet while their three attackers most definitely weren’t. All thanks to Skell’s foresight.

The arbitrators had beaten them all the same.

‘When are they coming?’ Dolar asked, casting a lingering glance at the cell hatch.

Skell didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. An ear-splitting wail made Dolar start, the magnicles binding him to his upper bunk clattering against its metal sides. The red emergency lumen over the aquila-stamped hatch bathed the small, dank space in angry light. There was a jarring thud as secondary blast doors throughout the honeycomb structure of Sink Shaft One’s prison complex thumped shut on auto-hinges. Dolar stared down at Skell.

As the sound of heavy boots thumping past reached him over the screaming of the alarms, Skell swallowed and nodded. He shouted up to Dolar.

‘It’s started.’

The Centrum Dominus was buzzing with activity, operators clattering at their rune banks as they sought to update the data streaming in from the augurs. In the tunnels outside, containment squads could be heard running past from the armouries. Sholtz was reviewing squad dispositions throughout the sub-precincts via the Centrum Dominus holochart, Rannik and the other officers still clustered around him. A shout from Vox Chief Hestel, seated on the upper communications gantry, disturbed the warden’s assessments.

‘Sir, we’re receiving a transmission from the *Imperial Truth*.’

‘She’s just cleared the asteroid belt,’ Tarl added from his station at the augur array.

‘Put it on vox,’ Sholtz ordered, gripping the brass railing running around the holochart. The room went suddenly quiet.

There was a rush of static interference, rising and then dipping from an eerie squeal to a low grumble. Hestel bent over a frequency module, working a pair of sliders. A voice came and went, like a passing phantom. Eventually it snapped into focus.

*‘...repeat, this is Captain Van Hoyt of the Imperial Truth to anyone who can hear me. We are code black.’*

‘Captain,’ the warden primary called out. ‘We read you. This is Zartak Arbitrator Precinct Fortress Alpha, Warden Primary Sholtz speaking. What is your status, over?’

*‘Thank the God-Emperor,’* the voice of Van Hoyt crackled back. *‘We have a situation here, warden primary. Multiple prisoner exfiltration attempts, a heavy security breach. I’ve been forced to seal off vital decks and open the airlocks. I am currently barricading the bridge alongside the remains of my security detail.’*

‘Is First Arbitrator Nethim there?’ the warden prime demanded.

*‘Negative. He’s currently holding out in the enginarium. We have locked our course to Zartak’s high orbit. Emperor willing we can keep the scum at bay long enough to reach you.’*

‘Standby, captain,’ the warden primary said, signalling to Hestel to pause the connection. ‘Macran, are the sub-precincts mobilised?’

‘I estimate eighty-five per cent readiness, sir. But my shock troop squads can deploy immediately.’

‘Tarl, how long do we have?’

‘Going off the *Imperial Truth*’s current course,’ the augur chief said, bending over his screens, ‘and assuming Nethim manages to hold the enginarium, she’ll achieve high anchor in a little over two hours.’

‘Sir, should I forward a message to the choristorium?’ asked Hestel.

‘Negative, there’s no need to tax the astropaths just yet. The situation is still developing. Macran, take your teams into the void via the *Divine Retribution*. Intercept the *Imperial Truth* and contain the insurrection. I will continue to communicate with Van Hoyt while you are in transit and pass relevant intelligence on to you. After the suppression has been carried out and the situation is stable I will deploy detachments from the sub-precincts to support

the clean-up operation. Use extreme prejudice.'

'Of course, sir,' Macran replied.

'Warden primary, I have a request,' Rannik said from among the assembled sub-wardens. Sholtz scowled.

'What is it?'

'Let me go with the shock squads. I can provide liaison between you and Macran. Subordinate to her orders, of course.' Rannik inclined her head towards the master-at-arms. She crossed her arms over her breastplate and glared back.

'What makes you imagine she'd need you as an intermediary, Rannik?' the warden primary demanded. 'Macran is a veteran of twelve code black insurrections and a master suppressor. She is more than capable of heading up the operation and maintaining contact with the Centrum Dominus at the same time.'

'If I may speak plainly, sir,' Rannik said, taking a breath. 'I want to be with the shock squads because I want to prove I'm capable. I understand my status as the youngest sub-warden in this room. Progenium training modules can only account for so much. I wish to show my devotion to the God-Emperor and the *Lex Imperialis* in the fires of an active suppression.'

'You are impertinent, Rannik,' the sub-warden growled. 'The Adeptus Arbites does not operate on such vain whims. You will be assigned to tasks I deem you worthy of. Macran will have enough to think about on board that ship without your inexperience getting in her way.'

'With respect, warden primary,' Sub-Warden Klenn cut in. 'Maybe it would be good to bloody her. This incident aboard the *Imperial Truth* should not be difficult to contain, and if we were to experience a security breach down here on the surface I'd rather know all my fellow arbitrators have first-hand combat experience. One compromised sub-precinct can have dire consequences for the safety of all of our facilities on Zartak.'

'Let me prove myself,' Rannik added. 'The progenium thought I was ready, ready enough to assign me here.'

'The bowels of an Imperial prison hulk are nothing like the simulation exercises,' Macran snapped, the faint red glow of the holochart giving her grizzled features a bloody hue.

'Which is precisely why she needs to experience it,' Klenn said.

'Sir,' called Hestel from the vox-banks, transmission horn in hand. 'Captain Van Hoyt is still on vox. I believe the prisoners are attempting to storm the bridge.'

‘We don’t have time for this foolishness,’ growled Sholtz. ‘Macran, I leave Sub-Warden Rannik’s assignment up to you. Just intercept that ship before it reaches high anchor.’

Rannik looked at Macran. The flamer-scarred arbitrator glanced from the warden primary to Sub-Warden Klenn, then finally nodded at Rannik.

‘Draw shock kit from the armoury. Shuttle bay fourteen, ten minutes. If you’re not there we’re leaving without you.’

The fore armoury of the *White Maw*, like every level above the slave decks, was almost completely silent. The only noise was the throbbing heartbeat of the warp drives, which shuddered up through the decking plates. The air was alive with the static charge of the active Geller field, the chlorine tang of ozone warring with the familiar scents of bolter oils and preservation unguents.

Bail Sharr, Reaper Prime and Company Master, passed noiselessly down the length of the armoury hall, his bare feet making no sound on the cold metal deck. The few artisan serfs and repair savants still at work in the depths of the ship’s night cycle bowed as he passed, their gaze averted. Sharr ignored them, his void-black eyes focused instead on the objects the malnourished humans were attending. He passed row after row of empty battle suits, ranked either side down the armoury’s long walls, every one mounted on a steel pedestal-brace.

Each set of power armour was different, each an amalgamation of patterns and designs. Many of them were ancient. The most common parts were from Mark Vs, their surfaces studded with the gleaming brass orbs of the molecular bonding pins that held the worn plates of plasteel and ceramite together. Some bore the hook-nosed helmets of Mark VIs, others the ancient, circular ceramite banding of Mark IIs, or the vertical faceplate slits and horizontal mono-lens of the Mark III great helms. Only two features united the antique collection. All were painted with the same shade of deep grey, and all bore the same crest upon their right pauldrons – a white shark motif, jaw curling towards tail fin to form a razor-toothed crescent set upon a void of black.

Despite the efforts of the repair savants, the majority of the suits were still visibly scarred, not only with the ancient, swirling honour patterns of exile markings, but with the blows of desperate, bloody and all-too recent battle. The artisans that laboured in the ship’s fore and aft armouries had been working for almost a month, Terran standard, to repair the damage done by the Great Devourer. Still Sharr saw the gleam of bare metal as he passed, noting where armour had been raked and scored by chitin talons and blades or pitted by bio

acids and burrower beetles.

The toll the War in the Deeps had taken upon the Chapter's venerable equipment had been high. The toll on the flesh of its warriors had been even higher. Sharr himself walked with a slight limp, the pale grey skin of his right leg still not fully recovered from a genestealer's claws. He had refused the offer of an augmetic – the wound was bearable and, Void Father knew, high-functioning bionics were in scarce enough supply as it was. He'd ordered Apothecary Tama to save the replacement for a void brother who needed it.

The Reaper Prime reached the end of the hall. Before him, mounted upon the naked rivets and bare steel of the high wall, hung the faded remnants of the war banner of the Third Battle Company. His company now, Sharr reminded himself. Like the armour of the warriors that had fought to defend it, the heavy cloth bore fresh scars. Unlike the armour, the damage would remain unpatched, a ragged testimony to the fallen. Only the company's crest – the intertwining shark-and-scythe symbol mirroring the fresh tattoo on Sharr's left temple – would be woven anew in white. The new honour scroll pinned to the banner's ragged bottom looked fresh and out-of-place. The ink describing the battle company's actions during the War in the Deeps was barely dry.

Sharr's gaze lowered to the object that had drawn him to the armoury during the dead hours of fasting and cryo-meditation. It was another suit of power armour, its hard plates the opposite of the plain white robe clothing Sharr, standing rigid and inert on its pedestal like the other eighty-six suits lining the hall. This one, however, was different. Mostly Mark IV, its pauldron bandings were the colour of bronze, and the exile honour markings inscribed upon its dark grey surface were more intricate – they covered the suit's gauntlets, vambraces and greaves in whorling, interlocking designs, mirroring the tattoos on Sharr's own pale forearms and legs. The breastplate bore in its centre an embossed skull and twin lightning bolts, the crest of the ancient Terran Pacification War, the Chapter's first battle honour.

The helmet was also more elaborate. A heavy, modified Mark III great helm, the vox-uplink strip running along the top had been fashioned into a high, jagged ceramite crest, while the visor plate around the vox-grille was painted with the likeness of a yawning white maw. The Third Company's shark-and-scythe sigil was inscribed over the helm's left temple. Sharr felt his new tattoo, identical to the armour's marking, throb. The helm's inactive black lenses seemed to glare down at him in the armoury's quiet, murky half-light.

The looming suit had its gauntlets resting on the top of a great two-handed

chainaxe, the adamantium haft locked to the bottom of the plinth. The flared head of the weapon was uncased, the metal-tipped shark teeth that edged the bare rotor gleaming wickedly. Sharr reached out and touched one jagged incisor. He half expected such a brazen violation to cause the inert figure to leap into motion. The weapon, like the armour, was what the Chapter referred to as *tapu* – for someone of lower rank to lay even a finger upon it was anathema. But Sharr was no longer of lower rank.

The armour and the chainaxe – Reaper – had belonged to Company Master Akia for as long as Sharr could remember. He had been leading the Third Battle Company through the Outer Dark since Sharr's days as a voidborn initiate. Like many senior figures within the Chapter, Akia had rarely been seen unarmoured, even among his closest brethren. Sharr himself hadn't witnessed him fully without battleplate until the day Apothecary Tama had pulled his dead, white remains from its battered casing. Despite the ongoing repairs, the scars and rents of the genestealer broodlord's claws were still evident across the armour's grey surfaces.

For two and a half centuries the suit had *been* Akia. Now it belonged to Sharr. Even if *tapu* no longer applied to him, the thought of wearing it was an abomination. He withdrew his hand, gazing up into the eye-lenses. He felt the soul of the dead Company Master glaring back.

'He would not have approved.'

The voice startled Sharr. He turned to find Te Kahurangi approaching. Although the Chief Librarian was fully armoured, Sharr only now heard the thump of footfalls and the whir of sound-deadened servos. Had it been anyone else he would have worried at his own lack of vigilance. Te Kahurangi, however, had long ago established a habit of passing unnoticed.

'He would not have approved of what, venerable Chief Librarian?' Sharr asked as Te Kahurangi came to a halt beside him. The wizened psyker didn't look at him, but gazed up at Akia's old armour. Both Space Marines spoke in archaic High Gothic, the tongue used by their Chapter since its inception so many millennia before.

'The former Company Master would not have approved of you standing and staring at his battleplate during the dead hours like some unbloodied initiate. If meditation or cryo-sleep do not suit you then there is work to be done.' Sharr felt a stab of annoyance. He suppressed it.

'I came to pay my respects.'

'There has been time enough for that. As Akia would have said, what's passed

has passed. You are our Company Master now. You must assume your full responsibilities.'

Sharr looked at Te Kahurangi – the Pale Nomad, Chief Librarian of the Chapter. His power armour was even more impressive than that of the Company Master's. Its underlying surface was a deep blue, and every inch of it, from the boots to the cable-studded psychic hood, was inscribed with a dense knotwork of swirling exile marks. A heavy set of scrimshawed shark teeth hung about his gorget, and more old charms dangled from his vambraces. In his right gauntlet he grasped a force staff of carved bone, the head fashioned into a maw clamped around a sea-green shard of stone. The rock gleamed in the dim light.

'The Tithing draws near,' Te Kahurangi continued, turning to face Sharr. 'The Tithing of a planet you once knew all too well. Are you ready, Reaper Prime?'

'I am ready,' Sharr replied forcefully, meeting the black void of Te Kahurangi's gaze. The face that framed the unnatural eyes was a disturbing mismatch of colour. While much of it was as white as a corpse's flesh, patches of skin around his eyes, jaw and neck were scabbed a rough, dark grey by denticles, lending his skin a scaly texture. Sharr had recently started to note the first outbreaks of the genetic anomaly on his own flesh, scabbing his elbows and shoulder joints. It was just one of the many afflictions suffered by the older members of the Chapter, and the condition would only degenerate as time passed. With the exception of the slumbering Greats in their white suits of Dreadnought armour, Te Kahurangi was by far the oldest member of the Chapter. Sharr had heard it said that he was only three generations removed from the Wandering Ancestors, the first to have gone into the void, alone, at the behest of the Forgotten One.

'The company needs leadership now,' said Te Kahurangi. 'Your leadership, Sharr. This will be no ordinary Tithing.'

'So you have said.'

'The boy must be found,' Te Kahurangi continued, voice a dry, dead whisper in the armoury's echoing vaults. 'The Murderers in the Night have his scent. If the one called *Kiri Mate* sinks his claws into him the suffering for all will be great. It is not enough to complete the Tithe. We must reach the boy before the heretics.'

'We will find him,' Sharr said. 'And complete the Tithe, for the Chapter.'

'It will be your first true test as Company Master.'

'Then I welcome it, void brother.'

Te Kahurangi glanced back down the length of the armoury. 'Eighty-six functioning suits of battleplate recovered from the War in the Deeps. Seventy-nine void brothers to fill them. And you yourself plagued by doubt at this dark

homecoming. Are we enough for the Tithe, given what awaits us?’

‘On our shoulders rests the future of the Chapter,’ Bail Sharr said, looking once again at Akia’s power armour. *His* armour. He laid his hand once more upon the chainaxe’s head. ‘We are Carcharodon Astra, Chief Librarian. From the Outer Dark we come, and when the Red Tithe is over we will leave behind only darkness. Nothing more.’

**Click here to buy *Carcharodons: Red Tithe*.**

# THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER



Sign up today for updates on the  
latest Black Library news and releases

[SIGN UP NOW](#)

*To Mrs Merrell, the best English teacher a budding author  
could ever have.*

**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

Published in 2017 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.  
Cover illustration by David Alvarez.

The Last Hunt © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2017. The Last Hunt, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the ‘Aquila’ Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.

All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78572-751-1

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at  
[blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com)

Find out more about Games Workshop’s world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at  
[games-workshop.com](http://games-workshop.com)

## **eBook license**

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“Black Library”); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website (“You/you/Your/your”)

(jointly, “the parties”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book (“e-book”) from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

\* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

\* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

\* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in ‘seeding’ or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

\* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

\* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

\* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

\* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

\* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

\* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

\* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.