

WARHAMMER
40,000



A CARCHARODONS SHORT STORY

DEATH WARRANT

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

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Death Warrant – Robbie MacNiven

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DEATH WARRANT

Robbie MacNiven

Vox transcript of interrogation 26-75, 2769879.M41.

INTERROGATOR AUGIM NZOGWU: Enough. We won't ask you again.

PRISONER 988 [IDENTIFIED AS EMIL VASILY CONTIN]: Why are you doing this? I'm loyal to the Throne, damn it. I—

[RECORDING INTERRUPTED BY SCREAMS AND THE SOUND OF ELECTRO-FLAILS]

NZOGWU: Loyalty is made manifest in actions, not words. Your actions may condemn you, but your words can still save you. You were a helmsman in the employ of the Trayn family. Four Terran months ago, Anjelika Trayn inherited her father's Warrant of Trade along with your ship. You made a warp jump from the Bor'el System, charting a course for the under-reach sectors. Trayn and her retinue haven't been heard from since. Tell me, what occurred when you reached your destination?

CONTIN: Y-you'll kill me if I tell you.

NZOGWU: And I'll kill you slowly if you do not. You are not beyond the God-Emperor's light, Emil. Tell my master what happened and you will yet gaze upon His holy splendour.

CONTIN: You're hunting the grey monsters, aren't you? Nobody believed me when I spoke about them.

NZOGWU: I will believe you, Emil. That much I can promise.

Two Months Earlier

Anjelika Trayn – antiquarian, astro-cartographer and rogue trader – ran for her life. Behind her, the black jungle resounded with the sounds of pursuit. Branches split and ivy snapped as over seven hundred pounds of reptilian hunger pursued her. She ducked beneath low hanging boughs and weaved around trailing creepers. Twigs and rotting leaf-mulch whipped her as she passed. *Throne*, she thought. Throne, Throne, *Throne*. Every muscled burned. Her body was slick with a cold sweat and swamp water dripped from her black hair, stinging her eyes. The plasma pistol strapped to her thigh pinged, its core fully recharged, but there was no time to draw it, let alone turn and aim.

‘Moren,’ she panted into her micro-bead, too breathless to utter anything but his name.

There was light ahead. She threw herself at it and burst into the clearing, her eyes scanning the open ground. Six enviro-domes sat before her, their pristine white shells a stark contrast to the darkness of the jungle surrounding them. She kept running, straight into the cleared space at the heart of the camp.

‘Moren!’ Trayn knew she should never have trusted him. What better way to seize her Warrant of Trade than leave her to be devoured by a karnid? She spun around, hair trailing, her plasma pistol up and aimed.

The great lizard slewed to a halt, barely three bounding leaps from her. It was a long, sinuous thing – its grey scales rippled with honed musculature, and its broad, flat head cocked to one side as it regarded its prey. A forked tongue darted from its mouth to taste the humid jungle air. Trayn locked on to its small, black eyes, not looking at the size of the beast’s fangs.

She struggled to slow her breathing and heart rate in an attempt to keep her aim steady. The plasma pistol was an ancient one. She had once immolated a Tarsian battle-drone with it from over two dozen yards away, but such power came at a price. It took a full second of pressure on the trigger to generate a shot, and she knew full well that in that time the karnid would close the distance and disembowel her.

The deadly impasse was broken by a roaring sound, rising steadily over the noises of the surrounding jungle. The karnid cocked its head to the other side and lifted it slightly, though its hungry eyes didn’t leave Trayn. She grinned at the reptilian, relief flooding her.

‘Looks like I’m eating lizard tonight,’ she said. The words were stolen away, lost in the shriek of vectored turbofans. A gale engulfed her as *Berkut*, her family’s heavy gun-cutter, swept over the jungle canopy and turned in a tight circle over the clearing. The karnid let out an ululating shriek and rose onto its

hind limbs, scales bristling at the new threat. For a moment Trayn thought it was going to leap at the flier.

The thudding of Dorkin's autocannon dispelled that possibility. Trayn flung herself backwards as the ogryn opened fire from the gun-cutter's side hatch. Great clods of damp earth were churned up by the abhuman's inaccurate fusillade, but some shots couldn't fail to hit. The karnid twisted as the hard rounds punched through its torso and cracked off its plated skull.

'Not the head!' Trayn shouted into her comm-bead. 'I want that for the trophy cabinet!' She knew her words were in vain – even if the ogryn could have heard her, he didn't possess the necessary accuracy to avoid shredding the lizard.

The creature writhed and shuddered as its body was ripped apart. Finally, it slumped, the earth beneath it drenched with purple blood. Dorkin continued to fire until his auto-feeder jammed.

Berkut came in to land, the pitch of the flier's engines dropping as the heavy gun-cutter settled on its landing prongs. Trayn deactivated her pistol and holstered it as Moren, her stocky, flint-eyed first lieutenant, dropped down from the flier's hatch. He grinned at Trayn, an expression she didn't return.

'You're shaking,' he said.

'I'm fine,' she lied.

'You thought I wasn't going to strike in time? That I'd let that beast devour you instead?'

'You could've been quicker,' Trayn said. Forcing herself to ignore Moren's baiting, she turned towards her enviro-dome. 'I'm going to get changed. Have Karney prepare that thing's carcass, then begin preparations. I want to be at the temple before the first night cycle.'

If the etchings on the mould-blotched walls were anything to go by, humans had built the crumbling structure that Trayn and her retinue had come to investigate many hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of years earlier. It was one of nine such sites dotting the jungle moon of Terix IX.

Karney, Moren's silver-haired Catachan, was the first to re-enter the temple with his lascarbine charged. The ex-Guardsman was followed by Rubio, the expedition's dead-eyed combat servitor. Trayn remained outside with Elgar Ghould, the rogue tech-adept, and the rest of the company.

It was the third time the expedition had visited the site. On this occasion, they had decided to erect their camp a thirty-minute trek away from the temple. As with the other structures they were investigating on Terix IX, there was some

sort of machine-distortion emanating from the ancient ruins, and it grew worse the nearer anyone got. It had caused the auspex to scramble and distorted the vox-units. It had forced them to construct relays to maintain contact with the *Saint Justinian*, which was being kept by its helmsman, Contin, in high orbit. In the two Terran months they had been on the jungle moon, none of them, not even Ghould, had identified the source of the disturbances. Like the absence of whoever had first built the temples, it was an enigma that had overshadowed everything since their arrival.

‘Clear,’ Karney called, his voice accompanied by an automated blip from the transmission unit sutured into Rubio’s pale throat. Trayn brushed aside the jungle creepers that half obscured the temple’s opening and entered, followed by the rest of the expedition. Dorkin, Moren’s pet ogryn, hesitated, gazing fearfully at the confined space.

‘Stand guard,’ Trayn ordered him from inside, pointing at the temple’s entrance. ‘You’ll wait for us here. Yes?’

The abhuman batted at the fat-bellied rotflies swarming around his sweaty scalp, and glanced uncertainly at Moren. Trayn’s second hesitated for a moment before nodding.

The temple was as they had left it the day before. The lumen strips rigged in the lower side chambers were still active, filling the rock-rooms with an electric buzz. Blue plastek tarps set up to shield sections of the walls from the moisture dripping through the cracked ceiling were also undisturbed. Trayn felt foolish sending Karney and Rubio in first. Such caution would have seemed excessive were it not for the occurrences. In addition to the strange effect Terix IX’s ruins had on sensorium and communications equipment, there had been other events that had left them all unsettled. Rubio frequently picked up phantom returns, swivelling and engaging the auto-loader of his heavy bolter despite the fact there were no targets in sight. The vox-master, Pedra, likewise heard strange sounds over the communications systems – when pressed, he’d admitted they had seemed like voices, though he couldn’t decipher what they were saying.

‘Get back to it,’ Trayn said, nodding at Dros. The aged lexographer grumbled and hitched his robes, limping over to a section of wall lit by the lumens before pulling out a magni-scope and ux hair dust brush. Dros had spent every day since their arrival inspecting the inscriptions and carvings on the temple walls. Thus far, he had learned precious little other than the fact the moon’s absent natives had fought one another incessantly before uniting to construct the ancient buildings. The information was of little use to them. Trayn had long suspected

her late father had only kept Dros on the bounty roll out of charity.

‘They’re still active,’ Moren said, his voice bouncing weirdly around the temple’s cracked chambers. Trayn turned to see that he had a hand on one of the upright stone caskets that lined several of the walls. They might have been for human remains, but stood a little too tall and narrow. Stranger still was the stone they were made of – it vibrated to the touch. They had found similar sarcophagi in every one of the temples they had investigated so far. On several occasions, they had tried prising them open or even blasting them with charges, but to no avail. Beneath the worn, human-crafted stone was a different material, black and unyielding. Neither Dorkin’s strength nor Karney’s lascutters could prise them open. They continued to throb with a strange, dormant power.

‘Leave them,’ Trayn ordered. ‘The tunnel is more important. I want to be down and back up again before we hit the deep night cycle.’

Moren hesitated for a moment, but eventually stepped away. The rest of the expedition, Dros excluded, had already gathered around the entrance Rubin had uncovered four days before. Something had tripped the servitor’s targeting matrices – while they had been investigating the temple’s side-chambers, it had opened fire seemingly at random, caving in a wall with a hail of heavy bolts. Beyond, they had discovered the tunnel. They had been down three times, discovering strange, smooth passages constructed from a metal-like substance, black as jet. None of the expedition had travelled far – the tunnels quickly became confusing, and even Karney had complained of the unsettling nature of the place. Today, however, would be different. During the last night cycle, Ghould had completed the subsurface scan he’d been conducting since they’d unearthed the entrance. Four servo-probes had mapped out the tunnels and chambers beneath. The complex was vast, and thanks to the tech-adept, Trayn now had a good section of it transcribed onto a data-map.

‘We’re going down again,’ she said, the slate containing the map in one hand, a stab-lumen in the other.

‘You think the periapt is down there?’ Karney asked, lighting a cigar. The question had been directed at Moren, but Trayn answered it.

‘There’s only one way to find out.’

‘We’re receiving a transmission from the *Saint Justinian*,’ Pedra interrupted, a hand on his bulky vox headset. ‘It’s being routed through the camp’s relay. The message is heavily distorted.’

‘Then get outside and steady the signal,’ Trayn ordered, eyes not leaving the tunnel and its all-consuming darkness.

The two long months had taken their toll and supplies were now so low they were hunting the native wildlife. There was still no sign of the red periapt – the fabled Dark Age amulet that was supposedly buried beneath Terix IX’s rotting canopy. Trayn’s father had often spoken of the amulet, recounting a tale born from the legends of the Drakar flesh-miners, handed down to him from his own grandfather. The recent death of Trayn’s father and her inheritance of his Warrant of Trade had come with numerous issues – old debts, an ailing capital ship in need of expensive refits, and unrest among the old rogue trader’s crew. Moren seemed aggrieved at Trayn’s inheritance, as though he had deserved recognition in her father’s will. He wasn’t the only one. But Trayn was her father’s daughter – she knew that a quick profit would assuage their disappointment. Rumours of the periapt, an item said to be able to bend any machine-spirit to its will, had seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Now the grievances were resurfacing, exacerbated by the unsettling occurrences that had beset the expedition. It hadn’t just been scrambled voxes or faulty auspex readouts. Dros claimed to have awoken one night to see the silhouette of a tall, gaunt figure outlined against the outside of his enviro-dome, backlit by the camp’s floodlights. Last week, a distant boom had caused them all to leave their habitations. High above the jungle branches, they had witnessed a trio of eerie lights illuminating the night sky. Helmsman Contin, aboard Trayn’s ship, the *Saint Justinian*, had failed to pick up any hard returns from augur scans from orbit, but he had triangulated the lights to one of the temples they had investigated a month earlier. A visit aboard the gun-cutter yielded nothing new and by dawn the lights had vanished.

‘I’m going in first,’ Trayn said, standing before the tunnel entrance. Karney took a slow drag of his cigar, but said nothing. He’d spent the better part of two decades in the Astra Militarum, and had exuded arrogance since the day Moren had hired him.

‘No complaints from me,’ Moren said to Trayn, his smile as forced as ever. There was a scrabbling sound from the temple’s entrance that interrupted Trayn before she could respond. Pedra burst back in through the creepers obscuring the doorway, red-faced with exertion.

‘It’s Contin,’ the vox-operator panted. ‘The *Saint Justinian*’s augur systems... He’s reporting a ship entering high orbit, using the planet’s gravity well to descend immediately above us.’

‘Imperial?’ Trayn demanded.

‘Worse. Contin says it’s an Adeptus Astartes warship.’

Trayn exchanged a look with Moren. What in the name of Terra's Golden Throne had brought the Imperium's finest warriors to a far-flung moon like Terix IX?

'Everyone back to the camp,' she said after a moment's hesitation. 'Pedra, send word to Contin to keep his distance and leave the vox-channels locked until we know more.'

They arrived back in the camp to find the sensorium cherubim that had been left behind to monitor the enviro-domes darting around in circles above the clearing, its transmission implant flashing. It fluttered down onto its charging pedestal as Trayn strode back into the camp and waved its deactivation wand. There had been no word from Contin. She headed straight for the enviro-dome housing Pedra's long-wave vox-transmitter.

That was when she noticed the shadows.

They were stationary, watching the base in silence. They seemed to sense Trayn's attention though, and began to move out from under the boughs.

'Emperor, preserve us,' Moren muttered as the expedition caught sight of the new arrivals.

Space Marines. There were eight of them, converging from all sides. Each was a giant in grey-and-black power armour. Their heavy boots thumped through the clearing's undergrowth, and the servos in their colossal suits of battleplate hummed. Each carried a weapon that Dorkin might have struggled to lift. Worst of all were their helms – the visors were black, glassy, and as cold and unfeeling as Rubio's dead eyes. Trayn felt her heartbeat rising as they approached.

There was a click as Rubio's heavy bolter tracked round and locked on to the nearest giant. The Space Marines' response was as immediate as it was terrifying – all eight halted, their massive bolters coming up together.

'For the Emperor's sake, deactivate him!' Trayn snapped at Ghould. The tech-adept scrambled to comply, canting a series of binaric commands. Rubio's organics went limp and the heavy bolter returned to its resting stance. After a second, the Space Marines lowered their bolters and resumed their approach.

'Remember you are a rogue trader,' Moren hissed in Trayn's ear as the Adeptus Astartes surrounded them. 'They have no right to make demands of us.'

Trayn didn't respond. The Space Marines halted, again as one. The jungle echoed with the crash of ceramite. Trayn heard one take another step forwards behind her. She turned to face him.

The giant stood towering over her, unmoving and silent. Up close, she could

clearly see the details on his slate-grey armour – swirling white lines, like oceanic currents, decorated his greaves and pauldrons. A leather band around his left vambrace was hung with clusters of predatory fangs, talons and teeth, their yellowing edges still wicked. His silent presence exuded implacable, deadly force. Trayn tried her best to stop her legs from shaking. Her heart was slamming in her breast and her stomach felt like it had been twisted into knots. She held her hands slightly out from her sides, conspicuously avoiding the plasma pistol holstered to her thigh. The rest of the expedition watched on, none daring to so much as breathe.

The Space Marine moved. There was a thud as he mag-locked his bolter to his hip, then reached up to his gorget. The sealant clamps disengaged with a hiss. He slowly removed his helmet.

Trayn fought the impulse to take a step back. Whatever she had expected beneath the helm – probably a horribly scarred, square-jawed killer – wasn't this. The being's features were broad and blunt, and the flesh was a deathly cast of white. Worse were the eyes. They were a nightmarish mirror of the helmet lenses, almost wholly black. Unlike the visor, they possessed a predatory, intelligent gleam. There was a merciless hunger to them that rooted Trayn to the spot and made even Dorkin whimper.

'*Ave Imperator,*' the giant intoned, his voice raspy and deep. His teeth had been sharpened to wicked points. '*Ego percutiens princeps Kordi Carcharodon Astra.*'

There was silence before Trayn spoke.

'Dros?'

'H-he said greetings,' the lexographer managed. 'And introduced himself as Kordi. He is their leader... A Carcharodon Astra.'

'You would be better served by Low Gothic?' Kordi asked.

Trayn swallowed hard and nodded. 'I am Anjelika Trayn, rogue trader and servant of the Throne,' she said, feeling as though she were addressing a mythical monster. 'I bear a Warrant of Trade, signed by the High Lords of Terra and inherited from my late father.'

'That is well,' Kordi said, his black eyes never once leaving her. 'What brings you to this moon, Anjelika Trayn?'

'Salvage,' she said, mind racing as she tried to decide on how much to admit. 'There are ancient human ruins here that may contain materials useful to the Imperium.'

'You should not be here,' Kordi said. 'If you stay much longer, you will die.'

‘I am a rogue trader,’ Trayn reiterated with more confidence than she felt. ‘I bear a Warrant of Trade. I am not required to follow any of your directives.’

‘It will be your death warrant if you adhere to it,’ Kordi said. ‘I will not warn you again. If you stay, your demise is certain. Contact your cruiser and depart immediately.’

‘Would you still be advising us to do that if you knew what I possess?’ Trayn said, holding up the data-slate containing Ghould’s map. ‘You are here for the Red Periapt, aren’t you? I have here the only map of the temple’s underground layout.’

It was a desperate move. Trayn knew that the Space Marines could slaughter them all and seize the slate. But she was a rogue trader and if they were loyal to the Throne, they couldn’t harm her. If they weren’t, Trayn and her retinue were dead anyway.

The Space Marine spent long moments looking at her. She stood her ground, fighting to suppress a shiver. She would not be cowed, not even by these monsters. Eventually, the Carcharodon spoke.

‘You are correct. If you insist upon accompanying us, we do not possess the power to stop you. Your warrant ensures that.’

‘I wouldn’t be worthy of it if I did not take that chance,’ Trayn said.

‘Very well, then.’

‘I must confer with my expedition,’ Trayn said, glancing back at her retinue.

‘As you wish, but my void brothers and I shall be departing presently, regardless of your decision.’

The warriors in grey broke their encirclement and moved away towards the edge of the camp. Trayn’s entourage clustered around her.

‘You told them about the periapt?’ Moren hissed, glaring at the Space Marines.

‘What else would have brought the Adeptus Astartes to this sump hole?’

‘We weren’t sure that they knew. You have virtually handed them the very thing we’ve spent months looking for.’

‘It doesn’t matter now,’ Trayn snapped. ‘They were surely going to enter the temple anyway – why else would they be here?’

‘But they could have gone to the temple directly,’ Ghould said, adjusting his vox-unit to a whisper. ‘Why warn us first?’

‘Because they need our help,’ Trayn said. ‘Thanks to your scans of the underground.’

‘Or they simply wish to save us,’ Pedra said. ‘They said we were all in danger...’

‘They’re trying to intimidate us,’ Moren said. ‘We can’t abandon the search now, not after grubbing among these foul glades for so long. The periapt has to be down there.’

‘Moren is right,’ Trayn admitted. ‘They’ll take it whether we accompany them or not. It’s better to keep them close.’

‘You’ll really contest it if they find it?’ Ghound asked, his monotone vox-voice failing to give the question its proper incredulous inflection.

‘We’re not giving up now, are we?’ Moren said, slapping the tech-adept on the shoulder. ‘Come on, they’re leaving.’

Trayn realised he was right – as quickly as they had appeared, the grey-clad Adeptus Astartes were vanishing back into the black jungles, headed in the direction of the temple.

The expedition caught up with the Carcharodons just inside the ancient ruins. Most of the Space Marines, including the one named Kordi, were assembled before the opening created by Rubio, but one was passing between the stone sarcophagi, rigging them with some form of explosive charge.

‘We’ve already tried detonations,’ Trayn said as they entered the temple. ‘There’s some other material beneath the stone that’s impervious to explosives.’

The Space Marine didn’t look up from his work.

‘We are not trying to open them,’ Kordi said. He’d put his helmet back on, his voice a cold, hard scrape issuing from its arched vox-grille.

‘What’s inside them?’ Moren asked. Kordi did not answer, instead gesturing down into the opening they had uncovered.

‘If you intend to join us, you must do exactly as we say. You will remain in the centre of our formation. Do not open fire unless we positively identify a threat.’

‘Unlikely,’ Karney grunted around the stub of his cigar.

Kordi turned towards the Catachan, the light from the rigged lumens glinting from his soulless visor.

‘Then you will be the first to die.’

The descent began.

Kordi took point, the other Carcharodons positioning themselves behind Trayn and her followers. Only Dorkin stayed behind – even if he had been able to fit into the tunnels below without panicking, the big abhuman appeared terrified by the Space Marines. He shied away from them and fingered the stock of his autocannon nervously when they were nearby.

Pedra carried a set of vox-relays with him. The rest, bar Dros, were all armed.

Ghould had recalibrated Rubio to stop identifying the Space Marines as hostile contacts.

‘I’ve never seen subterranean spaces like these before,’ Trayn said to no one in particular as they moved down the long, sloping tunnel. The humans activated their flashlights – the harsh points of illumination picked out the smooth black surfaces and the writing that covered every inch of the wall, floor and ceiling. Trayn reached out one hand as they went, fingers brushing the wall. It was cold, seemingly far removed from the humidity of the jungle. A vibration still ran through it. Something below was generating power.

They went deeper. The tunnel levelled out, then branched into two. The Space Marines halted, and seemed to do nothing. Trayn heard a series of clicks and realised they were communicating via their helmet’s internal vox-links. She glanced at the faint glow of her data-slate, trying to chart the course they were taking through the labyrinth of tunnels.

‘I should establish another relay here,’ Pedra said, voice unnaturally loud in the cold depths. ‘Contact with the surface is patchy. If Contin wants to reach us again, he’ll struggle.’

‘Hurry,’ Trayn ordered. The communications specialist drew one of the two relays from his bulky pack, extending its mounting prongs and antenna and settling it between the two corridors. As he busied himself with calibrating its frequency and connecting it with the rest of the expedition’s comm-units, Kordi spoke.

‘We continue.’

They took the left-hand tunnel. This one was smaller, and once again sloped downwards. While the surfaces around them remained black, the strange writing was now picked out in silver and gleamed in the passing lumen light. Trayn realised her breath had begun to frost before her face. Every few dozen paces, her hand would stray down to the engraved butt of her holstered pistol.

The Space Marine in front of her halted abruptly, her view reduced to his bulky backpack. Behind her, Moren cursed.

‘Contact.’ A sound accompanied Kordi’s voice – a rustling susurration that rose from the edge of her hearing. The whine of Karney’s charged lascarbine reverberated up the tunnel.

‘Hold your fire,’ Kordi ordered. ‘Do not move if you wish to live.’

‘What’s happening?’ Trayn demanded, pushing her way past the rest of her retinue despite the Space Marine’s order. Then she saw what was causing the noise, and froze.

There was a swarm passing around them. It moved like liquid quicksilver, the stab-lumens gleaming from the shining exoskeletons of what appeared to be tens of thousands of beetle-like creatures. They flooded down the tunnel all around, covering the walls, ceiling and floor in a moving tide. When they reached first the Space Marines and then the humans behind, they parted, leaving little spheres of space around each foot. Trayn stared at them as they flowed around her, the whispering of their passing ringing in her ears.

Whatever they were, they weren't organic. Though each was smaller than her thumb, they appeared to be formed from a metallic substance. The perfection of each carapace mirrored the precision of their coordination as they swept along the tunnel. In just a few minutes, the tide had become a trickle, the weight of the strange insectoid swarm gone past.

The insects receded into the darkness behind them, going the way the expedition had come. Trayn let out the breath she had been holding as the clatter of millions of tiny mechanical limbs faded into the chill silence

'What were they?' she demanded. When the Space Marines remained silent, she turned to Gshould, who shook his cowed head.

'An abominable intelligence. Not something the adepts of Mars would ever countenance. I have never seen its likeness before.'

'We continue,' Kordi said.

They went lower. The tunnels they followed were no longer as uniform – now the walls were interspersed with more sarcophagi, albeit without the man-made stone cladding.

About twenty minutes after beginning their descent, Pedra tugged on Trayn's sleeve.

'Contin,' he said, offering her his headset. She pulled it on as they went, and winced at the static backlash that filled her ears.

'I can't hear him,' she said, pulling one side of the headset off.

'Exactly,' Pedra said. 'That's our primary link with the *Saint Justinian*. We've lost contact with orbit, and probably the surface as well.'

'Emperor's wounds,' Trayn hissed. 'We need to stop.'

'Time is lacking,' Kordi said from ahead. 'You cannot expect to maintain contact with the surface for long in a place like this.'

'Relays allow for underground communication,' Moren responded, his voice strained. 'Pedra, why has it stopped transmitting?'

'I don't know,' the vox-operator admitted after a moment, frowning down at his

handheld comm-display. 'It's reading as offline and the locator beacon isn't registering it. It's not just on a blip, it's been completely deactivated. Like it's been dismantled. Perhaps part of the tunnel has collapsed. Or... it could be the work of the swarm?'

'Regardless, we can't go any further without a connection to the outside,' Moren said. 'It would be far too easy to become lost down here. Pedra should double back and check the relay.'

'If you go alone, you will die,' Kordi said.

'Nonsense,' Moren replied.

'I'm not going without Karney,' Pedra said, looking at Trayn.

She nodded. 'Go, both of you. Get back in touch with Contin and update him on our location. We may require rapid extraction.'

Karney and Pedra retreated, pressing past the unmoving Space Marines.

The journey resumed. Trayn realised that the digits of her wrist-chron had failed – they appeared to be stuck at the time the vox-relay had gone offline. The rest of the expedition reported the same thing. Trayn didn't press Ghould for an answer as to why. She knew he wouldn't have one.

The tunnel reached its end. Before them was a chamber and two more passageways leading away from its far side. The sigils on the walls were larger and embossed in silver, while the ceiling was ribbed like a black spinal column.

'You have this area marked out on your map?' Kordi asked.

'Yes,' Trayn said, glancing down at the scan map. 'It seems there's a larger chamber beyond the left-hand tunnel leading on from here.'

'Very well. Remain close.'

Trayn realised, as she entered, that there was a large plinth at the chamber's centre. Thick clusters of cabling snaked from its flanks, linking it to some sort of silver-skinned statue set on top of it. At first glance, it looked like a huge, metallic spider, or perhaps a giant version of the strange micro-constructs that had passed them by earlier. Artificial optic clusters were set into its shoulders. They shimmered in the beam of the passing stab-lights. Trayn found herself staring into them. She shuddered.

'Do not approach it,' Kordi ordered. The Space Marines took up positions around the chamber, weapons ready. Some were covering the plinth and its statue.

'It is dormant,' Kordi added, as though that explained everything. 'We must carry on.'

'Has anyone made vox contact?' Trayn asked Moren, Ghould and Dros. 'Any

signal from Pedra or the *Saint Justinian*?' They all shook their heads, expressions pale in the lumen light.

'Contact approaching from the rear.' It was one of the Space Marines who had spoken. The Carcharodons swung their bolters around to cover the archway the group had entered through. Trayn drew her plasma pistol, its charged hum a sudden reassurance. She couldn't see what had triggered the Space Marines' alertness. Then she heard a noise: the tread of feet. It sounded much like the passing of one of the Space Marines, the heavy clang of metal on metal, only these steps were limping and disjointed.

The light picked up a flicker of movement in the all-engulfing darkness of the tunnel. A scrap of pallid skin.

'It's the figure I saw outside my tent,' Dros stammered, peering over the pauldron of one of the kneeling Space Marines.

'No, it's Pedra,' Moren said. 'Pedra?'

'It is not,' Kordi snapped. 'Stay back.'

Dros opened his mouth to speak, but the words choked in his throat. The figure limping towards the chamber resolved at the edge of the archway

It was a tall, humanoid creature, but badly hunched. It appeared not to be a thing of skin and bone, but of silver metal. It was difficult to tell, however, because it was wearing Pedra's skin like a cape. Long strips of flesh were draped across its shoulders and down its back. Blood had drenched much of its silver exoskeleton and still pattered from its gory trophy, as well as from the wicked set of foot-long talons that constituted its hands. The remains of Pedra's skinned face, left torn and wailing, hung about its skull like a nightmarish mask. Two green eyes burned from within the former vox-operator's empty sockets.

The expedition's horrified screams were drowned by the thunder of the Space Marines' bolters. The creature was struck as it shuffled into the chamber, its red-slick talons clacking as it flexed. The bolts impacted into its metallic torso with a sound like hammers striking anvils, and despite the imperative to shoot the oncoming horror Trayn found herself covering her ears instead, the weapon reports in the chamber threatening to burst her eardrums.

The skeletal horror came apart under the barrage. Metal spun away while circuits sparked and smoked. Its advance stuttered to a halt and it went down on one knee, going into spasms as its systems were wracked by failures. A round struck the side of its skull and detonated, exposing a knot of broken wiring amidst the remains of Pedra's torn, stolen flesh. Finally, it collapsed and was still, the blood from its victim's flayed hide pooling around it. Kordi approached

and put a final round into its head, blasting it apart in a hail of sparks. There was nothing but the ringing in Trayn's ears and discharge smoke, coiling lazily through the frigid, lumen-stabbed darkness.

'What in the God-Emperor's name was that?' Moren eventually managed to say.

'A xenofom known as a necron,' Kordi answered, his tone blunt. 'I warned you this place was dangerous.'

'Dangerous?' Moren exclaimed. 'Have you seen what that thing did to Pedra? Emperor only knows what's become of Karney!'

The rest of the retinue remained silent, their eyes on Trayn. She turned to Kordi.

'These creatures, the necrons,' Trayn said. 'How have they come to be here?'

'They were likely present many millennia before mankind's arrival,' Kordi said. 'We suspect the primitive humans who made a home in this jungle built constructs venerating their slumbering forms. Eventually they awoke them, and were wiped out before the xenos returned to their slumber. Your delving has been bringing them closer to full consciousness ever since you arrived.'

'What about the periapt?' Moren demanded. 'Did you know about it before you arrived here?'

'Yes. It is a piece of Dark Age technology stolen by the master of this tomb, one of many such items. There are those among the Adeptus Mechanicus who covet it, those we assist as part of our ancient pact. We did not come here specifically to retrieve it, but as it is now within our grasp, it is logical to do so.'

'Two months,' Moren said, turning on Trayn. 'We risk our lives in this place, and now these monsters walk in and lay claim to it?'

'We are out of our depth,' Trayn said. 'This place is crawling with xenos, Moren, for Throne's sake.'

'All the more reason to not leave empty-handed.'

'You will be fortunate to leave with your life,' Kordi said. 'My brethren and I must press on. We do not have long before the systems around us start returning to life.'

'We didn't come all this way just to give up the periapt,' Moren said. 'We can go on alone, Anjelika.'

'We're following the Space Marines,' Trayn snapped. 'You're not in command of this expedition, Moren, no matter how much you wish you were. I am my father's daughter. The *Saint Justinian* is my ship and this is my retinue.'

'Not after what you've led us through,' Moren snarled. 'Even your own father

doubted you. He told me he wished I could inherit the warrant, instead of you.'

'That's a lie,' Trayn said, trying and failing to control the anger in her voice.

'I have the vox recording, Anjelika. The crew all agree. I should be the master of this expedition.'

'He was delirious by the end,' Trayn snapped, taking a step towards Moren.

'He knew you would squander everything he had spent his life building up.'

The Space Marines didn't seem to be listening to the exchange. They'd begun to move off through the left-hand tunnel branching away from the chamber.

'I'm going with the Carcharodons,' Trayn said, doing her best not to lose control in the face of Moren's insults. 'And if any of you are fool enough to think you can get out of here alive without them, feel free to take one of the other tunnels.'

'I will retrieve the periapt first,' Moren said, turning towards the remaining tunnel entrance. 'And when I do, I'm not handing it over to anyone, Anjelika. Who else is with me?'

'Statistically, he is correct,' Ghound said after a moment, his vox-voice as monotone as ever. 'We have no hope of attaining the periapt for ourselves alongside the Adeptus Astartes, and I suspect the chances of becoming involved in a combat engagement are severely increased by remaining in their presence. It is highly unlikely that they have divulged the entirety of their mission to us yet either. Those are not variables I will place any faith in.'

'Go, then,' Trayn spat. 'Take Rubio with you. Dros?'

The lexographer began stuttering, his eyes darting from Trayn to Moren. After a moment, Trayn made a disgusted noise and turned away from the group, moving after the Space Marines. A second later, Dros followed her.

'I didn't want it to be this way, Anjelika,' Moren called after them. 'Throne willing, I'll see you again on the surface, far away from this forsaken temple.'

'This isn't a temple,' Trayn said. 'It's your tomb, Moren.'

The scan-map led them through an empty sub-vault and down into a series of winding tunnels. Every so often, Trayn caught a glimpse of Kordi checking his auspex, clearly doubting her suggested route. Trayn ignored him and pushed on. Eventually, the tunnels led them to the edge of a wide, low chamber. They halted. It was far larger than the last one they had passed through. Columns of black metal arched up to form a ribbed dome overhead. There were dozens of sarcophagi lining the walls, all still sealed, their shells bearing the xenos letters of warding and vengeance. Hundreds of slender channels had been cut into the walls and floor between the alien script, each strip emitting a baleful green light

that seemed to pulse slowly with some distant, slumbering heartbeat. The channels all ran together in the chamber's centre, where an obsidian pedestal bore their objective, bathed in eye-aching jade luminance.

The periapt was on top of the pedestal. It looked small – a shard of red stone that would've fitted comfortably in Trayn's palm. It floated in a stasis just above the black stone, and green light glittered from its ruby surface.

'Stop there,' Kordi ordered Trayn as they reached the edge of the tunnel.

'That's the periapt?' Trayn asked.

'It is,' Kordi agreed, and gestured towards the Carcharodon beside him. The Space Marine took a step out into the chamber. As soon as his heavy boot settled on the floor there was a thud. The sarcophagi surrounding the vault shuddered. Kordi placed a gauntlet on the Carcharodon's pauldron and pulled him back.

'As the auspex suggests,' he said. 'This place is heavily protected. If anything above a certain weight sets foot upon the floor of the chamber they will trigger its guardians.'

'Guardians?' Trayn echoed. Kordi nodded towards the sarcophagi but said nothing more.

'You're too heavy to enter?' Dros said to the Space Marine.

'We are. I suspect the master of this tomb built this to stop rivals of its own kind seizing its prize – few other than the necrons themselves know of this place's existence.'

'So we turn back?' the lexographer asked, clearly fighting not to sound overly eager.

'No. One of you must go.'

'What?' Trayn demanded.

'It is probable that you are light enough – you are neither armoured, nor composed of xenos metal.'

'It's exactly because I'm unarmoured that I don't want to go,' Trayn said.

'If any of us enter, we will wake them immediately, and none of us will leave here alive.'

'Or we could just go back now,' Dros said hopefully. 'While we still have the chance?'

Trayn looked from Dros to Kordi, and sighed.

'Oh, Throne,' Dros murmured, probably recognising the same look of determination Trayn's father had given him before so many foolish undertakings.

'Take this,' she told the lexographer, pulling off her coat and tossing it to him.

'Move slowly to start with,' Kordi advised. 'There are likely to be sensors that

will detect sudden motions as well.’

‘Is something going to happen when I grab the periapt?’

‘We aren’t reading any fatal snares around the item itself.’

‘Nothing fatal... Anything else?’

‘When you retrieve it, just run.’

Trayn shook her head and held her breath as she took her first step out into the chamber.

Nothing happened. She eased the breath out. Her heart was hammering, and the knowledge that she was stepping into an arcane xenos trap made her skin crawl. The green light emanating from the channels in the floors and walls was giving her a headache. It took every bit of self-restraint not to simply sprint for the pedestal.

She took another step. Again, nothing happened. She could feel the expectant gaze of the Space Marines burning into her back. She wondered if they would seize it off her once she’d retrieved it. Could she find her way out of here without them?

Step by step, she approached the periapt, her whole body shaking. A few paces away, her footfall triggered something. The perfect stillness of the chamber was disturbed by a tremor that ran through it, and the sickly green light dipped for a moment.

She froze. Behind she heard the faint scrape of ceramite as the Space Marines readied themselves. The sweat sliding down her spine made her shudder.

Still, nothing happened. The tremor passed without incident, the lights returning to their burning green glare. Trayn took another few steps until the pedestal was within touching distance. She reached out, hesitated, then snatched the stone.

Immediately, the chamber was plunged into darkness. For a second, there was nothing but the rasp of breather units in the icy air. Trayn heard Dros whimpering. Then, with a surge of eye-aching brilliance, the lighting returned. The whole chamber shuddered twice, as though a massive subterranean force was slamming into it. The throbbing in the metal around them rose to an audible pitch – a hum of freshly charged energy that vibrated in every surface. There was a thud and, in unison, the lids of the upright sarcophagi around them began to slide open.

‘Withdraw,’ Kordi ordered. Trayn didn’t need his instruction. She was already sprinting for the tunnel. She didn’t reach it. Kordi blocked her, a hand clamping over her shoulder.

‘The periapt,’ he demanded.

‘What?’

‘Now.’

The Space Marine didn’t shift. After a moment of angry denial, Trayn fumbled with the shard and shoved it into his gauntlet, glaring furiously up at him.

‘There. Now in the name of the God-Emperor, *get out of my way.*’

The Carcharodon slipped the periapt into a mag-pouch and moved aside. The rest of the squad were already pulling back, Dros stumbling with them. Behind them, she heard the first sonorous thumps of metal footsteps and the crackle of igniting energy weapons.

All around, the tomb was waking.

The tunnels they retreated through had changed. The millions of alien letters now glowed with the sickly green light that had suffused the periapt’s chamber. The vibrating in the black metal had also grown more intense, shuddering up through Trayn’s boots and throbbing through the whole underground complex. Worse, several of the caskets they had passed earlier had levered open. Necron warriors blocked their path, silver skeletal constructs with rifles that hissed and snapped with green energies as activated.

The Space Marines cleared the way. The tunnels thundered with the report of bolter fire, making Trayn’s ears ache. She drew her plasma pistol as she ran, but there were no targets – the necrons she passed had been cut apart by the Carcharodons, their silver remains twitching and sparking. Trayn shot those she past, reducing the broken pieces to molten slag.

Kordi took up the rear, pausing occasionally to send streams of bolts back the way they had come. Dros was struggling to stay ahead of him, panting with wide-eyed terror in the oscillating flashes of gunfire. Trayn snatched him by the collar of his robes and dragged him after her.

The tomb spider was waking as they passed back through its nest. The massive metallic construct twitched and shuddered on its black plinth, half of the green optic clusters that constituted its head blinking on and off. Power throbbed through the thick cabling linking it to its dais.

‘Krak charges, thirty-second fuses,’ Kordi ordered as the squad spread through the room, heading for the tunnel on the far side. As the Space Marines set grenades around the creature’s twitching form, one metal limb snapped free of its wiring, lashing one of the Carcharodons. The blow cut deep into his pauldron and sent him staggering back, but did not draw blood. Trayn raised her pistol and fired, averting her eyes from the brilliant flash of the point-blank plasma shot.

The bolt immolated one of the construct's limbs in a gout of searing blue flame. Kordi pushed her aside before she could shoot the shuddering thing again.

'Move,' he ordered. The Carcharodons abandoned the chamber, the two humans in tow, just as the spider began to raise itself from its nest. There was a flash and a thud of detonations. Trayn didn't look back. The voice of one of the Space Marines called down from ahead.

'The tunnel is closing!'

'Keep going,' Kordi ordered, his words interspersed by another thunderous bolter discharge. Trayn and Dros fled, trying desperately to keep pace with the Carcharodons ahead. They were right – the tunnel had started to artificially collapse, sections of the ceiling lowering down. Another minute and they would be crushed or, even worse, trapped.

Trayn could see daylight ahead, over the backpacks and helmets of the Space Marines. She dared to snatch a glance back down the tunnel, past Kordi. Behind them, the green lighting had failed, replaced instead with the crackle of flayer-weaponry and the hateful, burning, emerald glow of eyes in the dark.

The ceiling connected with Kordi's backpack, scraping sparks. At this stage, Trayn was practically carrying Dros, the aged lexicographer almost insensible with terror. The light ahead was growing stronger, but ever-narrower. The first members of the squad were already out into the temple beyond.

'We're so close,' Trayn panted to Dros, desperately trying to close the last few paces.

Dros plunged through the opening, sprawling on the temple floor. Trayn flung herself at the light, bolts of energy snapping at the air behind her. She and Kordi slammed out of the tunnel together, hitting the roughly cut rock of the surface temple. The impact drove the air from her lungs and scraped the Space Marine's armour silver in several places as he hit his side. She'd barely found her knees before the entranceway slammed shut behind them both with an earth-shuddering boom.

Catching her breath, Trayn looked up at the destruction around her. The temple was even more ruinous than before. The melta charges rigged by the Carcharodons to the sarcophagi had detonated when their occupants had tried to leave them. Fused slag and bubbling, molten rock was all that remained of large sections of the ancient place of worship, along with the necrons entombed there. A tremor in the rock underfoot caused one of the damaged side chambers to collapse in on itself, forcing the Space Marines to trigger their stabilisers.

'The tomb is continuing to wake,' Kordi said as Trayn rose to her feet, pulling

up Dros alongside her. ‘The *Void Revenant* will be locked and primed above us. We must hurry. Extraction is inbound on the clearing.’

Trayn and Dros fled through a jungle alive with the rising dead.

‘Come on!’ she shouted at the lexographer, hauling him along by his robes. He was weeping and babbling, drenched in swamp scum. She’d have abandoned him if he hadn’t chosen to stay while all the others had deserted her.

Ahead, the Space Marines were almost out of sight. They ploughed through the mulchy undergrowth with terrifying speed, battering rotten bark and low-hanging boughs out of the way without breaking stride. Occasionally, the jungle would resound with the crash of a bolter and the harsh clang of metal-on-metal. Sometimes, too, there was a response – lightning would crack like a whip in the air, blasting apart timber and igniting undergrowth. Another of the Space Marines had been struck, his arm reduced to a bloody stump. Still he carried on, firing one-handed.

There were other figures moving in the gloom of the jungle all around them, and they were closing in. They were shuffling and sluggish, their exoskeletons dripping with the slime of the swamps. Their weapons crackled with terrible energies, green ghost lights that played through the turgid darkness all around the fleeing band.

Another bolt of alien fire struck a tree high up to Trayn’s right, causing her to stumble amidst the hail of burning splinters. Dros staggered after her. The swamp underfoot was alive, bubbling and rippling with subterranean disturbances.

There was a crash. Trayn saw the Space Marines ahead stumble, seconds before the shock wave hit her. This time it was Dros, hand clutching a bough, who reached out to catch her before she fell. The entire jungle was shuddering with some sort of vast release. Through the black canopy Trayn caught sight of a construct rising into the heavens, shaped like a vast, wicked sickle. After hanging in the air shortly, it darted away with a burst of incredible speed, followed by two smaller, similarly shaped craft. Where they had come from she had no idea. Presumably, they had been buried beneath the temples and had now risen at some terrible command, unseen and unheard by the mortals who had intruded on their master’s slumber.

They stumbled on. Dros yelled as he negotiated a patch of trailing vines and pitched forwards into the swamp, surfacing with a gasp. Trayn dragged him up by his drenched robes, cursing his clumsiness, before realising that there was

more to the lexicographer's fall.

'My leg!' the old scribe was screaming. 'My leg!'

A metallic hand, black with swamp water, had burst from the ground and gripped Dros' ankle like a vice. Even as Trayn watched, more of the assailant unearthed itself. A cranium rose from the bog, followed by hunched, armoured shoulders. A set of green eyes flickered to life amidst the ooze, unblinking and hateful.

'Shield your face!' Trayn screamed and levelled her plasma pistol. Dros, sobbing, was trying to drag himself away from the necron's unyielding grip. Its skull swivelled to face Trayn as she took aim from barely two feet away, finger pressed hard against the trigger.

'Die, xenos scum,' she spat.

The plasma pistol cracked and a bolt of brilliant blue energy struck the necron warrior, immolating its upper half in a blaze of light. The grip on Dros relaxed as the thing's remains slumped back in the ooze.

'Up,' Trayn said, blinking away the afterglow of her pistol's discharge as she hauled Dros to his feet once more. All around them more necrons were rising from the swamp, filth sliding from their immortal bodies as they moved to intercept the intruders. A minute more and the xenos would have fully freed themselves from their graves, and Trayn and Dros would be surrounded. The two stumbled to a halt, Trayn's pistol up, turning in a tight circle as the rogue trader searched for a way out. There was none.

Out of the corner of her eye, Trayn saw two of the Space Marines turn back. They had returned for the humans, and the sudden activation of their chainaxes made the fronds and boughs nearby shudder. Sparks and swamp slime flew as the weapons connected with alien metal, great strikes decapitating the nearest necron warriors before their long energy rifles could activate.

'Go.' The word snarled from the vox-grille of one of the Space Marines, breaking their murderous quiet. Neither Trayn nor Dros needed to be told again. They ran past, trying to catch the rest of the gigantic, silent grey killers. Behind them, the broken remains of the necron warriors started to drag themselves together once more, circuitry reknitting and limbs clacking back into place.

Trayn tried to reach the *Saint Justinian* again as she ran. The comm-bead came back with only static. The communications issues that had plagued the temples seemed to have been spread by the necron's wakefulness. What if Contin was under attack from the three sickle-like craft that had risen above the jungle earlier? What if he'd already fled?

There was light ahead now, not the ghastly death-glow of the alien's flayer weaponry, but actual daylight. The Space Marines were pausing at the edge of the treeline, waiting to be joined by the two who had rescued Trayn and Dros.

'Keep going,' Kordi told them as they hit the clearing. They pushed past, into the daylight, while behind the jungle echoed with the whirr and crash of more rising necrons.

Trayn only got a few paces into the open ground before she came up short. The camp was gone. The enviro-domes had simply disappeared. There was no sign of destruction – someone, presumably Moren, had dismantled them.

'Incoming,' one of the Space Marines voxed as they moved into the clearing. Trayn noticed a sound rising above the crash of the approaching necrons. She recognised it immediately. With a screech of turbofans, *Berkut* swung down over the clearing, sunlight gleaming from the gun-cutter's weapons and the autocannon carried by Dorkin in the side hatch.

'*I'm going to pry the periapt from your smouldering corpse, Anjelika,*' crackled Moren's voice over the vox as the flier swung side-on to them.

Dorkin opened fire. Trayn raised her plasma pistol, but something blocked her aim. There was a clang of metal and she realised she was looking up into Kordi's emotionless black lenses. He was facing her, blocking Dorkin's aim. He shuddered as he took the multiple impacts.

The gun-cutter's heavy bolters had opened fire too, filling the clearing with their thudding discharge. Dros was struck and stumbled away from Trayn's side, a mass-reactive round blowing his arm off in a spray of blood and flesh. He only had time to draw breath before a second shot shattered his skull.

It ended as abruptly as it had begun. Just a few seconds after *Berkut* opened fire, something tore from the sky, its shriek eclipsing the gun-cutter's engines even as its great shadow fell across it. There was a crash, and flames blossomed around the armed flier, one stubby wing torn away by a glancing impact. The shooting stopped as the cutter twisted violently, more flames bursting from its turbofans. *Berkut* impacted with the edge of the jungle treeline in a crash of splitting timber and a screech of twisting metal, black fronds lashing its fire-licked hull.

Trayn's eyes turned to the aircraft that had downed the gun-cutter. It was blocking out the sun as it came in overhead, a vast gunship that bristled with weapons systems and thick defensive plating the colour of the Space Marines' power armour. A ramp, embossed with the crest of a white oceanic predator, began to lower as landing prongs dug into the clearing's soil.

‘On board,’ Kordi ordered her. He was already turning away, moving towards Berkut’s downed remains and unclamping a huge chainsword as he went. She saw his back as he broke into a run – the armour was bent, twisted and bloody, riddled with the shots that would have torn her apart had he not blocked them with his own body.

Inside the gunship, one of the Space Marines pushed Trayn onto a troop bench and locked her into a restraint harness. The other Space Marines were doing likewise, lining the troop hold’s interior. The one with the wounded leg was being administered to by one of his brethren. His vambrace ports opened to allow a series of wicked-looking needles access to his flesh. The other, with the missing arm, appeared to have gone into some sort of self-induced coma, the blood from the ruined stump already clotted.

Trayn closed her eyes and tried to regulate her breathing, the way her father had taught her during times of stress. She couldn’t panic. Now, more than ever before, her decisions had to be rational. She needed to reach the *Saint Justinian* over the vox and convince the Adeptus Astartes to transfer her. She tried the comm-bead again, glancing at the unmoving warriors around her. There was nothing but static on the other end. Even if Contin hadn’t abandoned her, it was unlikely the short-range communications device would be able to reach him. After a moment she gave up, leaning back and closing her eyes.

There would be a way out of this. There had to be. Her father would have known.

The thump of heavy boots on the metal decking made her eyes open. The final Space Marine had clambered aboard – Kordi. Blood dripped from every inch of his once-grey armour and thick strings of gore hung from the deactivated chainsword he still gripped in one fist. Without saying anything, the Space Marine sat next to her, dragging a harness down over his slick battleplate. Trayn looked away, out of the armourglass vision port beside her, feeling her stomach churn.

The flier’s prow hatch rose, sealing them inside. With leaden grace, the aircraft began to rise; the pitch of its engines changed as its landing gear levered back inside. Below, the clearing fell away. Trayn caught sight of movement, and realised a figure had crawled from the smoking wreckage of *Berkut*, dragging itself to the centre of what had once been the encampment.

It was Moren. He’d survived the crash, though clearly not unharmed. Trayn couldn’t make out his expression, but he was clearly looking up at the departing

flier as it banked around.

There was more movement, this time from the treeline. The black undergrowth parted as skeletal figures began to emerge from all sides, their weapons flickering with green energies. They closed in on Moren with a slow, shuffling inevitability, the black filth from the swamps oozing from their silver bones. The filthy, deathless horde surrounded him. Finally the banking gunship obscured her view, hiding Moren's final seconds as the flier carried Trayn away.

'Our Edicts of Exile mean we cannot offer you passage from this place unless you renounce your current rank.' The words made her start. She realised Kordi was addressing her. He had removed his helmet, once again revealing his pale, razor-toothed countenance. The blood from his armour had formed a pool on the bench and on the deck underfoot.

'Why?' she asked, not looking at him.

'If you do not relinquish your status you will be killed. You cannot carry knowledge of us to those not permitted to know of our existence.'

'You can't leave me at the nearest Imperial augur station or outpost? I won't say a word about what has happened here, I swear.'

'Even if that were true, we are not going to Imperial space,' Kordi replied. 'You will need to surrender your Warrant of Trade if you wish to remain with us.'

Trayn's response was interrupted by a flash of white light. She looked out of the vision port once more.

Below, a great fireball was rising out of the black canopy. It flared and spread in all directions, a plume of smoke forming above it, climbing to the heavens. As Trayn stared, another detonation joined it – a flash of brilliance followed by a firestorm that rose up a kilometre further out from the first.

'Infurnace torpedoes,' Kordi rasped, following Trayn's gaze. 'Launched from our ship, the *Void Revenant*. They will scour the surface with fire and leave nothing but a husk.'

'Is that why you really came here?' Trayn asked, still gazing at the flames as they blossomed and spread through the black jungle, eating up the rotting surface with ravenous, white-hot fury.

'In part,' Kordi admitted. 'We were long ago alerted to the possibility of the periapt's presence through our links with the Adeptus Mechanicus. The fact that you were unintentionally disturbing the xenos meant we had to act. We came here primarily to return them to their tombs. If they continued to activate they would pose a threat to the wider Imperium. Now the ones we have drawn to the surface with the theft of the periapt will be destroyed, and the more powerful

ones still below will return to their slumber. We do not have the time or resources to conduct a more thorough purge.'

'You've done this before?' Trayn asked, not knowing if she wanted to hear the answer.

'The primitive humans of this moon started venerating the xenos while they slept, then sought to wake them. We destroyed them.'

Despite the heat of the troop bay, Trayn shivered.

'You're not going to release me, are you?' she asked.

'No. You will renounce your warrant, or you will die. You were warned.'

'And if I do join you, what then? Where are you taking me?'

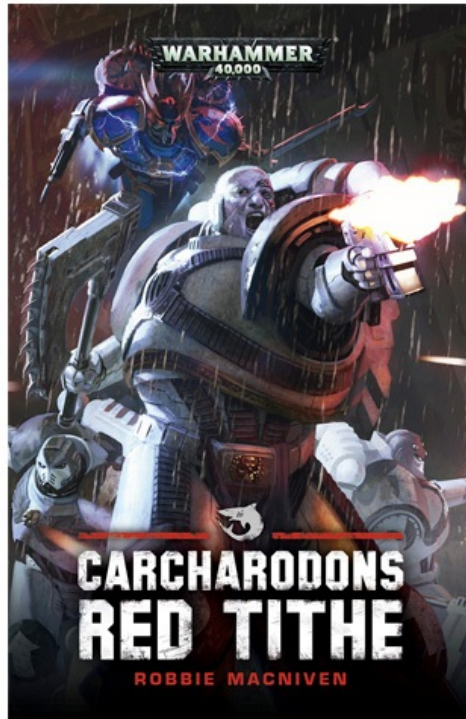
'To your new home,' Kordi said, as the cloud cover hid their view of Terix IX's fiery death, and the star-studded expanse of the heavens opened up above them.

'To the outer dark.'

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