

A detailed illustration of a Space Marine in full combat armor, holding a chainsword. The armor is silver with gold and red accents, including a skull emblem on the chest. The background is a dark, industrial setting with large, curved structures.

WARHAMMER
40,000

CARCHARODONS OUTER DARK

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a Space Marine in full combat armor. The armor is primarily silver with gold and red accents. A prominent red skull emblem is visible on the chest. The Marine is holding a large, dark chainsword with a serrated blade. The setting appears to be a dark, industrial interior with large, curved structures.

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An Extract from ‘Watchers of the Throne: The Emperor’s Legion’

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CARCHARODONS OUTER DARK

ROBBIE MACNIVEN



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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.

And lo, the grey-clad came from the outer night, and their jagged maw did swallow the stars, and their black gaze did mirror the void of oblivion. Their pale shadows fell upon the servants of the skulled-one with great fury from the darkness, unseen as the beast that lurks beneath the black waters, death for death, blood for blood... Thus were the sons of Sanguinius bought respite, and did turn back upon their pursuers, and so were the damned traitors of the false gods driven unto their ruin.

– Cantic of Cassandra Lev, Vol. CVI, Chapter One, Paragraph
28.

**+++ Adeptus Mechanicus Cargo Barge *Arc Lux*, holding station,
Lysia System, Under-Sector 236-3 +++**

+++ Sensorium array entering monitoring cycle 6B +++

+++ Empyrean variance detected, sector 9-2 theta +++

+++ Scanning... +++

+++ Results triangulating, standby... +++

+++ In-system warp jump confirmed, sector 9-2 theta +++

**+++ Reading 13 [thirteen] returns. Running keel tag
identification +++**

+++ Standby... +++

**+++ Results confirmed. 12 [twelve] escort-designate Imperial
warships [highlight to review names and classes], 1 [one] capital
ship +++**

**+++ Capital ship identification confirmed. Adeptus Astartes
battle-barge class, designate *Nicor*. Carcharodon Astra primary
fleet asset +++**

+++ Threat level: extreme +++

+++ Orders? +++

CHAPTER I

The depths of the Lost World were silent. Every step Khauri took felt as though he were summoning a thunderclap, his footfalls echoing on through the lightless depths long after he had come to a halt. He stood at the heart of a chamber of natural rock, its jagged floor uneven, the roof high above bristling with stalactites. The tunnel at his back was not the only entrance to the space of shattered rock – seven more branched off to his left and right, a web of passageways through the underworld. Each one represented a wrong choice. Every one held a phantom, a psychic spectre attuned specifically to Khauri's memories. To engage one would be to risk losing oneself forever. Beneath the surface, the Lost World was a warren of caverns, caves and shafts, the planet's integrity long ago splintered by forces far beyond mankind's reckoning. To have come so far and delved so deep was rare, even for one of Khauri's kind. Reaching this point had strained the focus and psychic warding of the young Lexicanium to breaking point.

At least his journey had not been in vain. He felt a surge of satisfaction as his optics picked out the markings on the wall opposite. He quickly suppressed the feeling. Emotions were dangerous to one such as he. That was the first thing he had learned. Left unchecked, they made him a liability or, worse, turned him into prey for things that hunted in places far deeper and darker than the one in which he presently stood.

He refocused, letting his helmet's auto-senses piece together the image before him. It was a carving, roughly hewn into the very heart of the Lost World, a bestial likeness that took long seconds for his mind to properly comprehend. When he did, his breath caught and his grip on his adamantium stave tightened.

'Now you truly understand,' whispered a voice.

Khauri spun, the grating of his armoured boots against the stone underfoot loud in the dark space.

‘Master,’ he breathed, bowing his head hastily.

Te Kahurangi, Chief Librarian of the Carcharodon Astra, mirrored the motion. Unlike Khauri, his helmet was mag-locked to his belt. A dry smile played over his gaunt, pale features, exposing rows of sharpened teeth.

‘You have done well to come this far, brother,’ the Chief Librarian said, stepping past him. Like Khauri, he was clad in ancient power armour that hummed and whirred as he moved. The traditional colours of the Chapter – greys and blacks – had given way to deep blue, though the battleplate was heavily inscribed with swirling white exile markings, honours that Khauri’s equipment did not yet bear. Te Kahurangi also carried a staff, though his was considerably heavier, clad in carved bone and tipped by a shard of green stone that began to glow as he raised it.

How the Chief Librarian had succeeded in following him so closely without his knowledge – let alone entering the chamber unannounced – was something Khauri had learned not to ponder on too closely.

‘Do you know what it is?’ Te Kahurangi asked, his voice a deathly whisper. The green glow from his staff picked out the bestial features Khauri had been straining to identify, and the Lexicanium found himself forced to suppress a shudder.

‘A monster,’ he said after a moment.

Te Kahurangi’s smile widened slightly, the light gleaming from his wicked teeth.

‘It is us,’ he said, lifting his other hand as though to caress the carving. His gauntlet stopped an inch from its surface, hesitated, then withdrew. ‘It is the truth about who we are, Khauri. You understand the crest we bear on our pauldrons?’

‘The great carcharodon,’ Khauri said, glancing at the white, finned predator coiled on the right shoulder of the Chief Librarian.

‘You have seen them during your induction, have you not? Swum with them, meditated upon their nature. They are mighty predators indeed, and our Chapter’s doctrines and philosophies do well to reflect them. And yet, it could be said that the great carcharodon is but a mask we all wear.’

‘This is known to all void brothers?’ Khauri asked slowly, his eyes dragged back to the nightmarish creature that had been hacked into the Lost World’s bedrock millennia before.

‘It is,’ Te Kahurangi confirmed. ‘We do not hide our origins, Khauri, not from

our own. We do not hide who we are. We do not hide this.'

Khauri pondered the beast a moment longer before speaking again.

'It is a creature from ancient Terran myth, is it not?'

Te Kahurangi turned abruptly, the light of his staff falling away from the carving and leaving it in darkness. His features, made even more ghoulish by the contrasting illumination, were suddenly grave.

'No more words, my apprentice. Your trial is complete. We must make haste, back to the surface. The machine-men have made planetfall, and the Grey Tithe is about to begin.'

It was growing dark on the surface, the weak sunlight hidden by a rising dust cloud that threatened to shroud the length of the Tithe Valley. The bleak, desolate rift in the dead planet's crust echoed with the ticking of radium carbines, the whirl of cybernetics and the metallic thump of thirty sets of bionic limbs as Magos Primary Otte Benedikt's skitarii vanguard came to attention.

Not *his* skitarii, Otte corrected himself as he passed between their twin ranks, red robes flapping in the bitter wind that knifed down the valley. They were Magos Domina Kraph's. The combat-augmented tech-priestess had made it abundantly clear to the primary that, just as she would leave the discourse to him, so he must leave security to her and her rad-troopers. A younger, more flesh-prone member of the Adeptus Mechanicus might have probed her reputation for weakness, thinking her own calculations unstable or her functions not fully settled, but Otte knew better than to waste processing time on such pettiness. He had served alongside Kraph enough to be certain that her security precautions would be faultless to within point one of a per cent.

The truth was, if the beings Otte was about to meet decided to engage in hostilities, the skitarii present would not be enough to significantly increase the likelihood of his survival. Without doubt the combat assets escorting the Adeptus Mechanicus exploration vessels in stasis anchorage above would be enough to cripple the warships with which they shared orbit, perhaps even destroy them. Otte, however, knew that the likelihood of him still being even partly functional by that point was statistically negligible. Those they were about to meet rarely took survivors.

He could see them now, their bulky outlines a few hundred yards ahead, his green optic clusters stripping away the grey, wind-whipped dust that shrouded them. It bit and chafed at the few remaining organic scraps of his body, and befouled the mechanical purity of his metallic form with a million insidious

grains. It would take weeks of lubricant salves and auto-benedictions to purge himself of this filthy backwater world.

He deleted such secondary concerns from his consciousness, the brief spike of anger that accompanied them vanishing as he ran an override on all background considerations. *Focus*. He could not afford a miscalculation, not now. Behind him Explorator Deitrich and his bibliovore logis, Severus, were barely resisting the urge to overtake the magos primary. Deitrich had worked hard to mask his excitement during their long warp transit, but the explorer's reserve was coming undone now that he was drawing close to so much prized archeotech. It was easier for Otte to suppress his own desires to claim the blessed relics for Mars. Deitrich, after all, wasn't the one who had to negotiate with their current owners.

Those owners were only twelve in number, and they waited impassively as Otte and his skitarii approached. The magos primary completed his scans as he closed the last few dozen yards, logging every detail as a matter of potential importance. Six of the figures, the ones on the flanks, were clad in Tactical Dreadnought armour, their off-white slabs of plasteel, ceramite and adamantium caked with the valley's pervasive dust. Otte's internal processor registered a degree of awe at the presence of such blessed battle suits, even as his analysis moved on to the other six.

They made for a less uniform gathering. All were Space Marines, two in the grey power armour that predominated in this particular Chapter, two in the blue battleplate that Otte's data files informed him belonged to sanctioned Adeptus Astartes psykers. The fifth wore red ceramite, and bore upon his breastplate the wondrous Machina Opus of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Approval at the presence of the Techmarine barely registered before Otte took in the final figure.

He stood apart from his brethren, alone, a dozen paces behind them. Even by the standards of the Adeptus Astartes the figure was a giant, standing a head above the rest. He too was clad in Tactical Dreadnought armour, and for a moment Otte's analytics glitched, informing him he was looking at a graven statue. A slight shift in the giant's stance removed that possibility – dust cascaded from the cliff-like plates of his immense suit and his huge, wickedly barbed gauntlets. Every inch of the warrior was clad and armed with the most hallowed and rare pieces of wargear Otte had ever set his optics upon. It made the Space Marines standing in the giant's shadow seem like children.

He was not supposed to be here. In three centuries overseeing exchanges such as these, Otte had never once encountered him. Binaric discord filled his

thought-algorithms for almost two whole seconds before he regained cognitive control. He misstepped, the slight change in motion enough for Kraph to thought-cant him.

<Is there a problem, primary?>

<Negative. Proceed,> he replied, filing away the shame he felt at his moment of weakness for later analysis.

Otte halted half a dozen paces from the nearest Space Marine. The rest of the Adeptus Mechanicus expedition came to a perfectly synchronised stop behind him. For a moment, there was nothing, nothing but the hissing of the wind in the sand and the flapping of crimson robes.

The wind died. The dust settled with it, and suddenly what lay beyond the Space Marines became visible. A great shard of black rock jutted from the head of the valley, framing the Adeptus Astartes. A crevasse was open in its flank, a jagged, lightning-bolt split in the stone that led to a darkness so complete Otte's bionics could not penetrate it.

'H-hail and well met, children of the void,' the magos said, his external vox-units stuttering slightly as they came online and issued the pre-recorded greeting. 'I am Magos Primary Otte Benedikt, of Exploration Fleet 2-8-17 *Arc Lux*. I thank you on behalf of the Omnissiah for this audience. May it serve us both.'

He made the sign of the cog over his breast, silver digits clicking as they interlocked. For a moment, none of the Space Marines spoke. Then one of the grey-armoured warriors took a pace forwards, towering over Otte's bent frame.

'Hail and well met, servant of the Machine-God. I am Akamu, Harvester Prime and captain. I bid you welcome to the Lost World on behalf of my void brethren. We are here seeking the beneficence of the Grey Tithe.'

'All will be as the Omnissiah wills,' Otte said, giving the ritual response. Both spoke in High Gothic. 'I call upon you, Harvester Prime Akamu, to deliver a hallowed oath that you will protect me and my binaric congregation for as long as we remain upon this world, and that no harm will befall us while under your stewardship.'

'I make this oath gladly and freely,' Akamu responded, the words scraping through his helmet's vox-grille like a blade over a whetstone. 'With my void brethren and great *Rangu* as my witness.'

Otte bowed his cowled head, the motion mirrored by the Space Marine. The magos deactivated his vox recording, ritual observed, and switched to mem-generated audio-cant.

'Brother Hitaki, it does my processes good to witness you once again.' The red-

armoured Techmarine Otte had addressed nodded his head, but said nothing. Otte spoke to Captain Akamu again.

‘You have a crop for us, Harvester Prime?’

‘We do, magos. The Outer Dark has rendered up a great deal in the past decade. We believe it will more than match your needs.’

‘We can only hope, captain,’ Otte canted, irritably deleting a snap-response to the excited blurt of lingua-technis that Deitrich emitted. The mention of potential archeotech had excited the explorer even further.

Akamu stepped to his left, his brethren parting either side of him. Only the giant in Terminator armour remained between the Adeptus Mechanicus adepts and the black crevasse that led into the heart of the valley beyond. Otte had avoided addressing the hulking warrior, his algorithms calculating that there was insufficient precedent to risk disrupting the Grey Tithe’s ceremonial opening. For a second, as the giant seemed to bar their way, Otte was forced to suppress a series of alarm responses, wondering whether his decision not to honour the figure had been correct. Then, with a deceptively soft whir of servos, the great Carcharodon moved aside. Otte could not delete a relieved scatter of binary before it reached the rest of the expedition’s receptors.

The magos passed between the Space Marines, and in the moment before Akamu fell into step alongside him Otte experienced the full weight of their predatory attention. Though they had hardly moved since his optics first registered them, there seemed to be a constant threat of sudden motion hanging over them, as though the black lenses of their helmets were an oily film covering waters churning with razor-toothed savagery. Bar those consigned to servo-skull plates and cogitator mem-banks, Otte knew that no functioning members of the Priesthood of Mars had encountered this particular Chapter as frequently as he had. He was one of the few who had witnessed just what these silent, grey giants were capable of.

Akamu led him to the jagged crack in the valley’s flank, its darkness drawing them on. Only Deitrich, Severus and the Techmarine, Hitaki, followed. The rest of the magos’ expedition remained facing the Space Marines in silence, the wind the only low, moaning conversation that passed between them.

‘Do you desire a techna-arcanum exchange, Magos Benedikt?’ Hitaki asked as they passed into the rock’s shadow. Otte responded with a blurt of binaric affirmation, offering a similar service in return. As the Harvester Prime led them through the passage out of the valley, the Techmarine and the magos exchanged remote data feeds containing preparatory information on the resources both sides

had brought. Otte routed the information on to Deitrich and his bibliovore. Even the magos primary felt a flare of eagerness as he ran through the lists provided by the Space Marine – the harvest this time was bountiful indeed.

A number of questions were flagged up on his response units, but he queued them for the moment, unwilling to disturb the dark, dusty quiet of the rock they were passing through. There would be time enough later. Tact and a respect for protocol, he calculated, accounted for over thirty per cent of the reason he was entrusted with these sorts of negotiations. To call them vital was an understatement.

His optics, which had automatically switched to minimal light filters upon entering the crevasse, clicked as they recalibrated for a change in illumination detected around a bend in the tunnel. The dusty, echoing passageway opened before him into a sprawling chamber, its ceiling dominated by a jagged split that admitted the light of the planet's dying star. Though Otte had entered the chamber on two occasions previously, he still ran a diagnostic of the echoing space, as intrigued as ever by its dimensions. Its rough walls were uneven, the one to Otte's left sitting lower, creating a slope in the stalactite-studded ceiling. The floor underfoot was similarly rough, the magos' lobe stabilisers triggering as he compensated for the rocky surface. To a mind not blessed with machine-derived analytics, the cavern would appear natural, and even a newly inducted tech-adept, unused to applying the cold algorithms of the Cult of Mars to everything he came across, would likely not have thought twice about its origins, believing it formed by geological processes and the passage of millennia.

But not Otte. There was something more to it, he was certain, the work of some strange and powerful consciousness. His schematic analysis of the angles around him pinged back with too many coincidences of geometry and too many precise measurements for him to believe that the rock had split apart and reformed of its own accord. Something had fashioned this place, and it had done so with a degree of care and detail that his precise mind found both appealing and alarming. Just who, or what, the architect was, though, he had yet to discover. Some of his brethren, when presented with his findings, had hypothesised that it was the work of ancient, all-powerful xenos. Otte gave silent praise-digit cant to the Machine-God that he was not so superstitious. Still, the mystery remained.

Besides the deeper, more easily overlooked precision of the chamber's structure there were two more blatant signs of intelligent design, ones that Otte was sure had been added later by a hand less subtle than the original architect. At the cavern's far end what could only be described as a great throne, unadorned by

any sort of pattern, had been carved into the rock face, while at its centre, bathed in the jagged scar of light that lanced through the split ceiling, a long dais had been hacked from the planet's bedrock. On that dais lay their objective, a dozen opened cargo crates, while around them, standing just within the darkness beyond the light, stood another squad of Adeptus Astartes. Otte and his entourage halted before the dais.

'We may approach, Harvester Prime?' he asked, his vox-voice echoing weirdly from the strange chamber's walls.

'You may,' Akamu responded, taking post alongside his silent brethren. Otte stepped up onto the dais, accompanied by Deitrich, Severus and Hitaki.

They moved from left to right, inspecting the inside of each crate in turn. Some were locked in stasis fields, a film of blue energy playing over their contents. Deitrich emitted another burst of excited binaric as he bent over the first container. Otte locked into the cant passing between the explorer and his bibliovore, listening in as they assessed the objects delivered to them by the Adeptus Astartes.

<A computational void cable,> Deitrich said, peering down at a coil of thick, plastek-clad wiring. <Well preserved, Stygies markings.>

<Eighty-nine per cent functional, I estimate,> Severus added, cranial bionics whirring as they magnified sections of the cable. <Application of the blessed lubricants is long overdue, however.>

<We will apply them as soon as we reach orbit, Omnissiah willing,> Deitrich said, seeking to reassure his shorter, more stooped companion. They moved on to the next crate.

<A fragment of keel tag,> Deitrich said, logging each item in the expedition's shared inventory. He turned to Hitaki. 'What is its providence?'

'It was salvaged off the Hirath Nebula seven standard years ago,' the Techmarine replied, his vox-voice deeper and more grating than those of the tech-priests. 'I believe it to be part of the Third Dawn expedition. I would have investigated further, but had neither the time nor the resources.'

<He is correct,> Severus canted, drawing an acutor-wand over the blackened shard of adamantium. <I am getting point seven... No, point eight returns. How magnificent.>

<This will give us an indication of the Third Dawn's location or fate?> Otte asked.

Deitrich gave an affirmative screed of lingua-technis, shot through with unhappy discord at the magos primary's interruption of his analysis. After a

moment more he dragged himself away from the previous shard of void-scarred metal and on to the next crate.

So they continued, the explorer and his bibliovore logging and scanning each new piece of salvage, occasionally addressing a question to Hitaki, all the while watched by both Otte and the squad of Adeptus Astartes guarding the cavern. Eventually they reached the final crate. Deitrich's excitement, already palpable across Otte's readouts, spiked.

<Can it be?> Severus said.

'Where was this retrieved?' Deitrich asked Hitaki.

'The moon of Terax Nine,' the Techmarine said. 'Six Terran years ago.'

'You have possessed it ever since?'

'We have, locked in stasis,' Hitaki confirmed.

Otte leaned forwards on his adamantium cane, peering into the crate's bottom. There, nestled in the cables and fixing prongs of the stasis field's heart, was a red stone. It was smaller than Otte's palm, similar to a ruby, the light coming through the shaft in the cavern's ceiling glittering from its rough edges.

Otte didn't need Deitrich or Severus to tell him the identity of this particular piece of archeotech. The explorer magi of half a dozen forge worlds had spent millennia searching for it. It was the Red Periapt, and it had been thought long lost by the adepts of Mars.

'We will have to conduct additional scans,' Deitrich said, struggling to delete the scattering of extra binary that laced his vox-speech. 'And we will need a full transcript of exactly where and how it was reclaimed.'

'I have one ready to upload to your noosphere the moment you provide me with the activation hymnal,' Hitaki responded. 'I trust you are pleased with the harvest, Magos Benedikt?'

It took a second for Otte's analysis to register the half-joke. The periapt alone was worth all the materiel the explorer fleet had brought to the Lysia System.

'I am pleased,' Otte agreed, his secondary systems failing to find a more organic response to the Space Marine's dry humour. 'My masters will likewise rejoice at these reclamations.'

'I am sure they will, Magos Benedikt,' Akamu said from the shadows beyond the light-bathed dais. 'I hope this ensures the continuation of our ancient pact. There is much in the Outer Dark that can benefit the Adeptus Mechanicus. Much that only the Carcharodon Astra can reach, let alone recover.'

'This is true,' Otte allowed. 'I have no doubt that those who approve these transactions between us will permit them to continue. For the glory of the

Omnissiah, of course.'

'And the Imperium, magos primary.'

<My servitor haulers will move in immediately,> Deitrich canted, crooning over the crate containing the periapt. <And a detail of your skitarii vanguard to help protect it, magos primary?>

Otte transmitted a binaric affirmative. He was already sending a signal to the *Arc Lux*, anchored in low orbit above. The communications marker on his optics display flashed green, the preset message acknowledged.

'I have authorised the landing of our cargo shuttles,' he told Akamu. 'Will you allow me the honour of showing you just what the Omnissiah has provided to further your war efforts?'

'I am not the one who will be inspecting the iron harvest this time, Magos Benedikt,' Akamu said, the black lenses of his helm glittering in the darkness beyond the light. 'The Red Wake will review this Grey Tithe personally.'

It took almost half of the Lost World's rotational cycle to complete the transaction. Fat-bellied lighters the colour of rust descended ponderously from orbit, their thrusters kicking up wild eddies of dust from the valley floor. Their contents, laid out on unfolding auto-racks before their open cargo bays, gleamed in the weak light – bolters, power armour, munitions, even two Land Raiders and a trio of Rhinos, their hulls gleaming silver.

Akamu moved from one suit of power armour to the next, inspecting each greave and joint socket, rivet and ceramite plate. Hitaki was present to ask additional questions of Otte as he followed them from one rack to another, probing the magos on servo running times and auto-sense responsiveness. Particular attention was paid to the ten sets of Tactical Dreadnought armour, sheathed in plastek wrap to shield their unpainted surfaces from the wind and dust.

The Red Wake oversaw it all. The giant remained silent, following Akamu and Hitaki. Occasionally he would pause of his own accord, assessing a particular suit of battleplate or a weapon. Then, wordlessly, he would move on. Otte, unable to compute whether or not he was permitted to address the figure, kept his focus on Akamu and Hitaki.

While the inspection continued Akamu permitted the magos' entourage to pore over the archeotech they had brought out into the valley, rigging scanning units and analysis drones around the crates and their precious contents. Much like the other Space Marines present, their skitarii guards watched on impassively, metal-

clad frames unmoving as the wind snatched at their red robes and piled dust around their feet.

As darkness fell the machine-men departed, their shuttles stabbing the darkening sky with points of light. Bail Sharr, Reaper Prime and commander of the Carcharodon Astra's Third Company, stood on the valley's edge and watched the winking of pilot lumens and plasma thrusters high above, until his vox-unit clicked with the message he had been waiting for.

He had been ordered to attend Akamu and the Second Company in their voyage to the Lost World, but he had not been told why. It was a break from the rigours of preparing his own brethren for their campaign on Kolch Secundus, and not a welcome one at that. With the rising of the Great Devourer from the galaxy's depths, time had become a precious commodity for every company in the Chapter, and Sharr had little desire to spend his overseeing another Prime's tithing.

Then he had received word that the Red Wake would be with the expedition. That had changed everything.

Sharr passed into the jagged, black tunnel that wound its way through the valley's bedrock, emerging into the cavern where the Adeptus Mechanicus had first inspected their half of the tithe. The chamber, which had held only one of Akamu's tactical squads along with the cargo crates, was now full. Much of the equipment provided by the Adeptus Mechanicus – bar the heavy armour – had been transferred into the subterranean space, where it was being subjected to the checks and rituals of the Chapter, ensuring nothing dangerous or unworthy was brought to the Nomad Predation Fleet. Hundreds of serfs, from overseers to magnicled slave-hands, were undertaking the packing and preparation of the dozens of suits of armour and weapons, observed by fussing artisans and machine-savants, as well as Techmarine Hitaki's unblinking bionic optics. A dozen Red Brethren – veterans of the Carcharodons First Company – observed the bustle from the chamber's edges, as silent and unmoving as the rough-clad rock surrounding them.

Sharr passed between serfs struggling to auto-clamp plastrons and armoury-devotants counting out bolt-rounds. He was alone – his command squad had remained aboard his strike cruiser, the *White Maw*, in high anchorage above Kolch Secundus, as had the rest of his company. Being separated from them for the first time in many decades had created a curiously hollow, dislocated feeling. Those around Sharr were not of his shiver, not part of his void brotherhood. He had spoken only briefly with Akamu during their journey to the Lost World.

Intruding on another Prime's tithing felt unnatural, perverse even. He would have complained were it not for the commands of the great warrior who occupied the stone-cut throne he now approached.

Tyberos, the Red Wake, Reaper Lord of the Void, Master of the Carcharodon Astra. Even seated, he seemed to dwarf those around him, utterly immovable, a vast, silent judge whose pronouncements were always final. The armour he wore was a Tactical Dreadnought pattern, but heavily modified to suit his stature. Dozens of brass bonding studs gleamed atop slab-plates of grey ceramite, layered over blocks of plasteel reinforced with rods of adamantium. A skull, the bone yellowing and ancient, dangled from a chain at the giant's waist, its eye sockets as dead and soulless as the black lenses of the Red Wake's boar-snouted helm. More terrible yet were the two great gauntlets he wore. Named Hunger and Slake, the ancient fists combined wicked power talons with twin-linked underbite chainblades. The carnage they could unleash had to be seen to be believed. The entire suit of ancient battleplate throbbed with the vast power necessary to keep its thick servo bundles active, and the very air around Sharr felt alive with the potency of the supreme predator seated before him.

The Red Wake was not alone. Two Red Brethren flanked his throne, their armour heavily inscribed with exile markings. Another two Carcharodons stood slightly to one side, observing Sharr's approach. One the Reaper Prime knew well – the Chapter's Chief Librarian, the Pale Nomad, Te Kahurangi. The other was Khauri, Te Kahurangi's Lexicanium apprentice.

Sharr halted before the Red Wake's throne and went down on one knee, ceramite scraping bedrock. He stayed there, head down, until Tyberos spoke.

'Rise.'

The voice that issued from the helm's vox-unit was at odds with the figure it belonged to – dry, rasping, dead. It was a voice that sounded as though it issued from an ancient Administratum savant or data-scribe, bent double and weary with a lifetime's toil. There was a coldness there though, a chill in the irregular vox-crackle that accompanied it, a hardness like ice. Sharr obeyed it and stood, though he did not raise his own helm to directly face his master.

'You are suffering, Bail Sharr,' Tyberos said. It was not a question.

'I do your bidding, lord,' Sharr replied.

'It is not easy to be drawn from your brotherhood while they are on a war footing,' the Red Wake continued. 'You are eager to spill xenos blood, rather than parley with machine-men.'

'This is not my place,' Sharr admitted. 'I am unsure as to why my presence is

required.'

'This Grey Tithe has been a bountiful one for the Chapter,' Tyberos said. 'It was necessary. The War in the Deeps has cost the Chapter dearly in terms of materiel. In terms of flesh also.'

'It has,' Sharr agreed, sensing the giant's helm shift slightly as Tyberos surveyed the activity filling the chamber behind him.

'It was necessary that I oversee this particular tithing in person,' the Red Wake went on. 'It has fallen at a crucial juncture. It is necessary too that I impart your new orders to you in person. The future of the Chapter will rest upon your abilities, Reaper Prime.'

'What is it that my lord wills?'

Tyberos was silent. Sharr risked a glance at Te Kahurangi. Unlike most void brethren, the Chief Librarian had a habit of only rarely donning his helmet. His features were pale and drawn in the cavern's shadows, the patches of flesh around his eyes, jaw and neck blotched with the dark denticle scabbing that afflicted the oldest members of the Chapter. He sensed Sharr's attention, and a ghost of a smile parted his thin lips, revealing teeth sharpened to wicked points. His Lexicanium, Khauri, remained inscrutable behind his own blue helm.

'Our numbers are grown thin,' Tyberos' voice rasped, and there was a whir of servos and a scrape of metal against stone as he shifted slightly. 'Too thin, now, to be replenished by the Red Tithes. Our casualties from the War in the Deeps mount at a rate that cannot be replaced, not without compromising the induction processes or dedicating extra companies to the tithes. Those are companies that we cannot afford to redeploy. Without intervention, we face extinction.'

'I have failed the Chapter—' Sharr began.

'You have not, Reaper Prime,' Tyberos said before he could continue. 'The void brotherhood has entered a period of conflict more intense than any in the past five centuries. Our genetic difficulties have ensured that our combat operations have become unsustainable. That, rather than your abilities as master of the Red Tithe, is the primary cause of the danger we now face.'

There was no comfort in the cold words, no condemnation either. Such things did not concern the Red Wake. Sharr remained silent. He had held the role of Third Company captain for a decade – not long in the context of most Primes' service – and had overseen two Red Tithes, the expeditions mounted by the nomadic Chapter to replenish their stock of both void brethren recruits and serf-slaves. While not outright failures, neither had matched Akamu's Grey Tithes – conducted to replenish the Chapter's stocks of materiel – and nor were they

enough to replenish ranks flayed by incessant deep-void actions against the hive fleets.

‘You will conduct a new reaping, Bail Sharr,’ Tyberos said. ‘But this one will be unlike the last two you have embarked upon. Korro and a squad from the First Company will accompany you, as will Te Kahurangi and his novice.’

‘As you wish, lord,’ Sharr said, casting a glance at one of the two Red Brethren Terminators – Korro – who flanked the throne. ‘Where would you have the Third Company go?’

‘These times require measures we would not normally countenance,’ Tyberos said. ‘The Chapter’s need for fresh, worthy recruits demands we exploit every resource. You will take your fleet and your company, Reaper Prime, and chart a course for the Ghoul Stars. You will return to the world of Atargatis Prime, and once there you will renew the Carcharodon Astra’s pact with the Ashen Claws.’

+++ Astropathic decryption analysis complete +++

+++ Date stamp, 2008885.M41 +++

+++ Opening transcript +++

Salutations, Brother Nzogwu,

It has been too long since I last sent word of our joint undertaking, and for that I can only apologise. Work in the Kelebari subsector continues apace – the secessionist ‘government’ has still not yielded to Grand Marshal Vokk’s battlegroup, despite his scouring of Clandor.

Even with my resources stretched here I have not forgotten the work we have both dedicated ourselves to, and parts of my retinue continue the search. It gives me great gratification to report that one of my operatives embedded with the Administratum cohort on Damara has come across archival reports detailing what I believe to be evidence of the possible renegades we have been tracking [activate to view sub-file A].

As you will see, the evidence relates to frescos and bas-relief panelling on the cemetery world of Hypasitis [activate to view sector code and astro-cartographae coordinates]. Actual picts of the work are sparse and incomplete, but cross referencing with Hypasitis’ history [activate to view sub-file B] strongly implies the involvement of unidentified Adeptus Astartes during the so-called Ghost War of late M37.

Members of my retinue are in contact with a mortuary-archivist on Hypasitis by the name of Dolorous Sozel. He appears to be the current living expert on the frescos I have enclosed. I have already despatched a liaison operative to make contact with him. If you were to do the same, the pooling of our resources would offer the best chance of picking up the trail once more.

I have attached a data burst containing information on Hypasitis and the histories of the Ghost War [activate to view sub-file C]. I look forward to your response.

May the light of the immortal God-Emperor illuminate the Outer Dark that hides our foes, and bring them to the swift and righteous judgement of the Holy Inquisition.

Yours faithfully,

Legate Inquisitor Augustus Frain + + +

+ + + Transcript ends + + +

CHAPTER II

The nightmare saved her life. Without it she would have been asleep when the killers came for her in the bed granted by the High Karnid's son. As it was she had already risen, donned a shirt and running shorts, and was dousing her face in the bathroom sink when the window smashed inwards.

She went for her shotgun. The weapon's blast sent Damar starting from the sheets and flung the first would-be assassin back out of the window he had been clambering through. She wracked the heavy Vox Legi's slide and turned it on the second masked man as he burst in through the auto-door. A spray of hard rounds from the attacker's autorifle blew chunks of plaster from the ornate ceiling as he was punched back, blood splattering the plush white vectornid rug underfoot.

'Up!' she snapped at Damar, not looking around as she chambered another cartridge. Something moved in the doorway, so she shot it again. Damar had finally located his laspistol and was tugging on his combat fatigues at the same time as he tried to get his vox-earpiece in.

'Seriously?' she demanded, before another burst of fire lacerated the window and sent them both ducking beneath the frame. This shooter was packing bulk – the heavy-calibre rounds punched through the external wall facing the street, spraying them both with debris and blasting feather stuffing from the bed in sudden, soft white clouds.

'Avatar, this is Imperious,' Damar was shouting into his vox-mic as another salvo shattered the lumen orb on the far wall and riddled an expensive landscape print of the Atavian foothills. 'We're under attack, for Throne's sake. Multiple shooters. Where the hell is Tibalt?'

Whatever the response was, Damar's partner didn't hear it. She was moving, taking advantage of the brief seconds between bursts as the shooter reoriented

himself. She scrambled through the apartment door, clad in her running gear, shotgun in hand, vaulting the black-masked corpses of the two attackers who had attempted forced entry. Before her was a long, elegant corridor lined with guest apartments. Doors banged and locks clicked as she sprinted past, the accommodation complex's other residents clearly deciding it was far too early to get caught up in a dawn shootout.

The fire exit at the end of the corridor was open – doubtless it had been the entry point for their attackers. She raced through it and down the narrow stair frame beyond, feet cold on the bare metal. Outside the night was balmy, dawn's first hints hidden by the buzzing of street lights and neon advertisement boards. She ran through the alleyway below the emergency exit, dodging around spilled rubbish bags, head down, heart racing, skin slicked with cold night sweat. The thudding report of an autocannon echoed along the otherwise silent street, the flash of the weapon's discharge reflecting back from the silver surfaces of idle tram haulers and storefront windows. The cannon was set up beside a second storey window directly across from the guest complex. It would be a Throne-blessed miracle if Damar wasn't already riddled with holes.

The ground floor of the shooter's nest was a patisserie. Its front door was locked. She waited until the next burst of shots, then blew the entrance in with a point-blank shotgun blast. Light from the street illuminated a polished, rustwood counter and shelves of glass containing delicate swirls of confectionery. A door at the back led to a dingy internal stairwell, its wall paint flaking and its sickly yellow lumen flickering. She took the stairs three at a time, panting, the now-muffled sound of the autocannon echoing down to her.

'Stop!' The voice brought her up short just before the second landing. A man in brown combat fatigues and the same style of woollen mask worn by the other attackers was staring down at her, autogun in one hand. She didn't give him a chance to recover from his shock. She jammed the muzzle of her shotgun into the man's stomach, doubling him up before he could bring his rifle to bear. He grunted, a gloved hand going out to snatch her, but it slipped on her slack shirt. She grabbed hold of his collar before he could right himself and, with a yell, flung him down the stairwell. The autogun flew from the man's grip as he went down with a series of violent thumps. She didn't pause to see if he was still conscious when he hit the bottom. The second floor exit above was open. It only took a moment for her to locate the room being used by the shooter in the corridor beyond. She caved the door in with the heavy butt of the Vox Legi.

There were two men in the apartment, masked like their brethren, one feeding a

belt into the autocannon being fired by the second from its window tripod. The room's bed had been hoisted against the wall and the floor was littered with ammunition crates, while a mound of spent shell casings had built up around the shooter's boots. He had been realigning his sights when she burst in. Both men turned. Neither were fast enough.

'Surprise,' Jade Rannik said, and fired.

Inquisitor Nzogwu's retinue rendezvoused at one of the safehouses established when they had first arrived on Kora. It was a derelict printing warehouse that one of Nzogwu's bartering associates had bought up when the ordo agent had shifted operations to the agri world, seven months earlier. The state of its main floor, littered with the remains of stripped-down press automatons and less-identifiable litter, as well as its location in the downtown of Kora's agri-collective capital, had made it an attractive purchase. It had already been used by the team twice.

Damar was sitting on an old printing workbench, still alive. A grazing shot had taken a slice of meat out of the ex-Guardsman's upper right arm, and his body was lacerated with splinter wounds, but all things considered he had been lucky. The guest apartment had been left in a far worse state.

'Hold still,' snapped Janus. Once tipped for the role of high surgeon in the upper-spires of Exaltis Prime, now the gaunt, silver-haired surgeon filled the role of retinue medicae. His words had been directed not at Damar, who was docile and bleary-eyed from the suppressant stimms, but at the servo-skull hovering over his shoulder. The light from the stab-lumen built in to its right eye socket kept wavering, the antigravitic impeller implanted into its occipital bone in need of Tech-Adept Ro's maintenance liturgies. Janus cursed the disembodied cranium as he applied another layer of counterseptic-laced synthskin wrap to Damar's upper arm.

'He'll be out of action at least a week, assuming the synth takes,' Nzogwu said as he watched Damar's treatment from across the warehouse's open floor. The big inquisitor was clad in his well-worn black trench coat and the Imperial Navy trousers he affected, golden Inquisitorial rosette gleaming on his chest. Rannik was with him, dressed in combat fatigues and a white tank top, dragging on a lho-stick. She shrugged.

'He's lucky there weren't a few bigger pieces blown out of him. Tibalt was slow.'

There was a scream, coming from the cellar below, muffled and cut brutally

short. Nobody in the derelict warehouse reacted to it. Nzogwu grunted at Rannik's comment. She had expressed her belief that the retinue's crusader guardian was past his prime on several occasions.

'We're in no position to shuffle the pack just now,' the inquisitor said after Rannik said nothing more. 'Especially not when it looks like a shooting war is going to break out any minute. You know as well as I that we'll need every Throne agent in this collective soon enough.'

'It's the others I'm worried about,' Rannik said, flicking the butt of her lho onto the refuse-littered floor and grinding it out with a boot. 'What would happen if you lost both me and Damar? That's the combat half of your retinue gone.'

'The chances of losing you both would be decreased if you didn't share the same bed,' Nzogwu responded.

Rannik looked away, silently cursing the redness she felt stinging her expression. Nzogwu said nothing. He had the power to order the former Arbites and the ex-Guardsmen to end their dalliance whenever it pleased him. Rannik knew the fact that he hadn't yet was down to the regard he held her in – since joining his retinue a decade earlier she had proven her usefulness on many occasions. Damar played his own part too, the two of them helping ensure the inquisitor's team maintained good security levels and an effective state of combat readiness. Their contribution had almost ended last night.

'Tell me more about the attackers,' Nzogwu said.

'They were amateur,' Rannik said, trying to mask how glad she was to change the subject. 'Very amateur. Poorly equipped as well. No las. One grenade at the start would have finished us.'

There was another scream from below, this one more drawn-out. Damar twitched and Janus swore at the servo-skull again.

'I don't think they were meant to kill us,' Rannik said. 'At least, I don't think they were expected to by whoever hired them.'

'DeVree,' Nzogwu said. 'I would wager every Throne gelt in this operation's reserve fund that it was DeVree.'

'How do you figure that?'

'You said it yourself, last night wasn't a genuine attempt to kill our mission here. If it had been they'd at least have struck at me simultaneously. My lodgings in the High Karnid's hall are practically public knowledge. No, the attack reads more like a statement. DeVree has been trying to implicate the Ux Cartel since the moment we made planetfall. At the very least he's attempting to subvert the work of a member of His Holy Ordos by embroiling him in local politics.'

‘And blowing chunks out of his retinue,’ Rannik added, leaning back against a rusting print lathe and glancing at Damar as Janus finished applying the final bandages to his arm. ‘So what are we going to do about it?’

‘We’ll see what Rawlin brings us,’ Nzogwu said as another scream rang out from the cellar, where the inquisitor’s acolyte was applying his developing interrogation skills to the formerly unconscious attacker retrieved from the bottom of the patisserie’s stairwell. Welt, the team’s astropathic chorister, was down there as well, probing the man’s mind as surely as Rawlin was probing his flesh. For an incompetent gun-for-sale it was a grim fate, but such was the price that came with attacking agents of the Throne.

‘He’s just a hired goon,’ Rannik said. ‘I doubt he’ll know anything useful.’

‘You’re right,’ Nzogwu replied. ‘But there are other indicators we can watch for. If DeVree really is behind this then he’ll already know the attack has failed. He’ll be waiting for us to report it, then he’ll immediately blame the Cartel.’

‘That’s true. But stop avoiding my question. What are we going to do about it?’

Nzogwu smiled and shook his head. ‘You really were an arbitrator before I picked you up, weren’t you?’

‘You’re going to authorise a smash raid,’ Rannik said, smiling back. ‘You hate smash raids.’

‘So direct, so visible, so... potentially bloody.’

‘And no faster way to cut to the core of our problems.’

‘For once,’ Nzogwu admitted. ‘We’re going to hit DeVree, pay him back for this. Within the next two cycles, local time. It’ll probably have to be without Damar though. Do you think you’re up to it?’

‘Always,’ Rannik responded. ‘Is it just a strike team, or will everyone be getting in on the fun?’

‘Everyone,’ Nzogwu said. ‘I want to knock DeVree out of the game. He was a distraction, now he’s a liability. At the very worst, he’s a pawn of the darker forces at work across this collective. That can’t be allowed to continue.’

‘I’ll break out the flak plate,’ Rannik said, grinning. ‘Finally.’

Khauri’s body was numb. The water around him was ice-cold, and he had been kneeling in it since the start of the *White Maw*’s night cycle, feeling the slow pulse of the ship’s warp drive throbbing up through the submerged deck plates beneath.

The chamber around him, the Bay of Silence, was part metal, part jagged, imported basalt, and all of it was currently sheathed in ice. The temperature

varied depending on the level of power being routed to the ship's plasma drives or the state of the energy usage on the bridge and enginarium decks. That led to cycles of meltwater which collected at the chamber's lowest point, the drainage vents around the stone pedestal that rose at its centre. During the darkest hours, the ice gathered.

The pedestal had been the focus of Khauri's attention since he had entered the chamber. More accurately, the beings occupying it had been the locus for his meditations. There were three of them, three giants of plasteel and ceramite, towering twelve feet above the basalt they were chained to. Their armoured shells were grey and black, mirrors of the power armour worn by their fellow void brethren. Their helms, sunk low in their thick-set shoulders, stared blankly out above the water lapping at their base. Hoarfrost glittered across great ice-clenched power fists and uncoupled weapons systems. They were the Greats, the Wandering Ancestors, the Third Company's trio of Contemptor Dreadnoughts, and here they had stood, frozen in their deep slumber in the *White Maw's* depths, idle for more years than Khauri had known as a member of the Chapter.

Their chamber was a focus point for members of the company seeking an internal silence worthy of the void they venerated. It was a place second in sanctity only to the *White Maw's* devotarium, administered by Chaplain Nikora. Khauri preferred it to Nikora's domain, though – his status as a Lexicanium, a junior member of the Chapter's Librarius, rendered him separate from the normal hierarchies of the battle companies. He would not be turned away from his brethren's regular places of worship, but nor would he be welcomed, at least not until he had earned his place as a stable combat psyker, and a member of the shiver.

So Khauri spent his time in the silent, frigid company of the ancients. A number of other Carcharodons had come and gone since he had entered the chamber, doubtless making their own private observances, but he had barely noticed them. His mind swam in deep, dark places, seeking the silence, seeking the purpose that came with it.

It felt strange to be disconnected from Te Kahurangi. The Chief Librarian was on board the strike cruiser, but Khauri had sought this communion alone. It was necessary sometimes to remove himself from his master's presence. In the decade since he had first awoken on the bloody medicae slab, since he had taken his new name-designate and seen his body begin to morph and change under the influence of the strange organs grafted into it, he had only known Te Kahurangi as his mentor. The master of the Chapter's Librarius was truly ancient – just how

old none seemed to know – and he wielded powers that the Lexicanium could scarcely fathom, despite having spent long months studying the scrolls and data-crystals housed within the Librarius’ disparate gen-bay subsections. Khauri understood well enough that his path had only just begun, and the mysteries of the warp were still unfathomable to him, but when he observed the power Te Kahurangi wielded, he despaired of ever attaining even a degree of his mastery.

‘You will never truly understand the warp,’ the Chief Librarian had cautioned him on several occasions. ‘If you did you would lose your sanity, and your soul soon after. It is the dark mirror of the ocean we swim in, and its unknowable depths are the home of a billion billion hungry terrors. We are their prey, Khauri, and the moment you forget that is the moment they will consume you.’

Mika.

He shifted, clenching and unclenching his hands and toes, trying to work the feeling back into them. The ache reminded him of the pains that had wracked his body for so long during the implantation process. He had been an aspirant and then an initiate for seven years, his body subjected to the scalpels and auto-cauterisers of Apothecary Tama along with the three dozen others taken by the Chapter. From the beginning, though, he had been different. Te Kahurangi had been his constant guardian. He had been kept separate from the other initiates who had survived the gene-seed implantation, not permitted to join their squads in the Tenth Company. He had been drilled more rigorously, his mind and body punished incessantly. Hypno-canting, ice submersion, indoctrination therapy – all this on top of the constant combat drilling and exercises, and the countless hours spent locked in the gen-bays, with only the servo-skull that monitored him for company. The drone had only ceased to record his every movement when he had finally gained his black carapace and joined the ranks of the fully inducted void brethren. Since his first day – and he remembered little from before the first scalpel had cut his flesh – he had felt as much like a prisoner as he had a brother of the Chapter, not far removed from the emaciated slave-hands who served the Nomad Predation Fleet.

Doren.

He could not hear the voice. Not here, not so close to the Wandering Ancestors. He sought the darkness, the silence. Emotions were dangerous. He was a lit flame for the creatures in the warp’s depths, and emotions made that flame burn brighter. The danger multiplied further during times such as these, when the *White Maw* traversed the empyrean’s depths, protected from the ravages of daemons and other warp-spawned horrors only by the throbbing cocoon of its

Geller field. All aboard suffered from the writhing, sickening influence of the immaterium that engulfed them; from migraines, nosebleeds, waking nightmares. Khauri had scarcely known sleep since the voyage had begun two weeks earlier. He had relied on Te Kahurangi's methods of meditation and seclusion to find a degree of peace.

As he knelt, he focused his mind on the fifty-second Silent Litany, one of the hundreds of Chapter canticles, exile mottos and void vows taught during indoctrination. It stressed the virtue of isolation, of the transience of individual existence and the vital nature of the self-sacrifice that defined the Chapter. Yet as he ran through the words, Khauri felt his thoughts slipping, like pale, aquatic flesh sliding deeper into murky depths. He remembered the shadows beneath the Lost World, lit by Te Kahurangi's staff. He remembered the beast of carved stone. The monster, with its ravenous maw and hungry eyes. Te Kahurangi's words came back to him, a rasping whisper in the dark. *They were all monsters.*

Skell!

He surged to his feet, his secondary heart kicking in. The black visors of the great Contemptors seemed to glare down at him accusingly, though they remained frozen. What had he brought down here, to their hallowed resting place? What did he bear inside him? He turned in the water and made for the exit, cracking freshly formed ice, forcing his stiff, numb body to obey him.

He would find answers, he swore it.

The sub-reclusiam was dark, lit only by a dozen electro-candles. Here the silence was more complete than anywhere else on the *White Maw*. The chamber of rough, glittering coral was sited just back from the ship's prow boarding plates, far from the throbbing vitality of the plasma drives and warp engines.

The silence was coveted by the Carcharodon Astra, a sacred thing that spoke of the Chapter's long exile. It emphasised the oblivion of the void, a nothingness that every member of the Chapter sought to apply to their individual self. From the first moments of induction, individuality and ego were stripped away, like faulty parts that no longer served the functionality of the whole. Names were forgotten, replaced with coded number-designates until a void brother proved his worth to the Chapter, to Rangu and to the Forgotten One. Self-sacrifice and dedication came before all else. Such denial of individual importance staved off a multitude of heresies – pride, greed, envy. Such things were without meaning in the Outer Dark. They led only to death.

The sub-reclusiam of the Third Company reflected such doctrines. It was a

spartan place, adorned with only a few relics that had been set into niches in the rock-lined walls. More ostentatious Chapters maintained their holy objects in cases of gold-edged crystalline, with gilt Imperial aquilas gleaming amidst incense smoke swung from the censers of flitting cherubim. Here, however, there was nothing but the rough-hewn stone, and a handful of ancient blades and suits of power plate, hard edges and harder shadows in the flickering half-light.

One of the relics was out of place, removed from its alcove and brought to the centre of the chamber's stone-flagged floor. It was a suit of power armour, grey and white, studded with monomolecular brass bonding pins. The helm bore a wicked ceramite crest that ran along its vox-uplink strip, while the visor was inscribed with a white, razor-toothed maw and, over its left temple, the intertwined shark-and-scythe symbol of the Third Company. The breastplate was embossed with the skull and lightning bolts of the Terran Pacification War, the same ancient battle honour worn on the armour of every company captain, and even the Red Wake's mighty Terminator armour. The suit's right pauldron likewise bore the sigil of the Chapter, the predatory white crescent of the great carcharodon, master of the void, spiller of blood and bringer of swift, merciless slaughter.

Once, the battleplate had resided in the ship's primary armoury, along with the rest of the company's equipment. Chaplain Nikora, however, had recently deemed that the exploits of its many wearers had earned it a place alongside the battle-scarred items already occupying his chapel. Its current owner, Bail Sharr, had gladly acknowledged the honour.

The captain sat cross-legged before the venerable armour, his pale, tattooed body clad in the grey robes worn by the void brethren when not geared for battle. In his hand was a cauterising stylo, its white-hot nub smoking gently as he applied it inch by inch to the gleaming surface of the suit's right greave. The tool left behind white scarring, a pattern that the Reaper Prime was slowly weaving into the flowing design of a fresh exile mark. Such intricate embellishments already flowed over the armour's vambraces, gauntlets and other sections of the greaves. Sharr was adding one for the first time in almost five years, half a dozen inches of whorling tide-lines that fed into the oceanic pattern already adorning the grey plate.

He leaned back from his work, letting the heat-etched ceramite cool. He had earned the marking – a brotherhood etching – nine Terran months earlier when the *White Maw* had abandoned its own objectives to come to the aid of the Fourth Company, embroiled in void combat with a tyranid splinter fleet above

the dead world of Anarkis. The Fourth had been saved from annihilation, and its captain, Nakara, had personally recommended Sharr for the honour marking.

The Reaper Prime had added more designs to the battle-scarred armour over the past decade than its previous owner, Captain Akia, had achieved in nearly a century. The Chapter had been embroiled in warfare the likes of which it had not known for many hundreds of years. A tyrannid hive fleet, vast and insatiable, was rising up from below the galactic plane, towards sectors considered well removed from the front of mankind's incessant wars. The Carcharodon Astra, their Nomad Predation Fleet exiled far beyond the Imperium's borders, had detected the threat before the rest of humanity. They had been deployed against the xenos ever since, engaging numerous splinter fleets around lonely asteroids and abandoned systems deep below the Imperium's edge. Thus far the line had held, but at a terrible cost. The Chapter, always struggling to maintain its numbers and equipment in the Outer Dark, was facing extinction.

The responsibility for halting its decline lay with Bail Sharr. As Reaper Prime his duty, beyond the captaincy of the Third Battle Company, was to ensure the Chapter was constantly supplied with fresh aspirants. That was normally achieved during the Red Tithes, when the Chapter's Edicts of Exile permitted it to descend on a world and harvest the population. The vast majority of those taken would go on to become slaves and serf labourers in the Chapter's great fleet, providing the means by which the Carcharodon Astra could continue to function in exile. Those of the right age and temperament, however, would undertake the trials. Few would survive to become Tenth Company initiates. The degree of attrition during the induction process was higher even than most Space Marine Chapters, but it was the unavoidable legacy of the Carcharodons' unique nature.

Sharr had conducted two Red Tithes since inheriting his role from Akia, the first in particularly desperate circumstances, when the chosen harvest world had been attacked by Chaos Space Marines of the Night Lords. The Tithes, however, were not the only means of recruitment. During times of desperation they had recourse to another brotherhood, one that, like the Carcharodons, had chosen the path of exile. The Ashen Claws.

During the darkness of the Heresy not all of the Legiones Astartes had cast in their lot with either the Emperor or the traitor Horus. The Ashen Claws, former members of the Raven Guard Legion's 18th Chapter, had despaired at the chaos engulfing the galaxy, and their own primarch's disgust at their slaver practices. They had turned against both the Imperium and the forces of Chaos, unleashing

devastation on the Night Lords and their home sector of Nostramo. Afterwards they had slipped away, disappearing from both Imperial space and those records that survived the Heresy's carnage. Few now living knew they still existed, let alone where they made their home. The Carcharodon Astra were among those few.

A noise disturbed the perfect stillness – the unmistakable tread of heavy ceramite on cold stone. A shape loomed in the open darkness of the chapel's entrance arch, a vast shadow of unyielding metal. It stood for a moment beyond the edge of the candlelight, the air vibrating with the hum of charged power armour. Sharr deactivated the stylo, replaced it in its holder, and stood.

'Brother Korro,' he said. 'My thanks for coming. You are welcome.'

The giant stepped into the light. Like all Red Brethren, Strike Veteran Korro remained armed and armoured at all times. The Terminator plate he wore was heavily inscribed with red exile markings and hung with the yellowing predator incisors collected by some Carcharodons. His helmet's black visor lenses gleamed lifelessly in the chapel's flickering illumination.

'*Kia orrae*,' Korro responded, uttering the Chapter's ritual greeting.

'*Kia orrae*, brother,' Sharr replied. 'Remove your helmet.'

Korro did nothing.

In most Chapters, members of the veteran First Company were often seconded to battle companies to supplement their fighting power. In the Carcharodon Astra they served an additional purpose. Utterly loyal to the incumbent Chapter Master, they were deployed on the most vital missions – usually tithings – to ensure that the overriding objectives were met and the Chapter's needs satisfied. The Carcharodons' mode of warfare meant that individual companies could spend years separated from the Nomad Predation Fleet. In such circumstances the Red Brethren were responsible for seeing the orders of the Red Wake carried out.

The Red Brethren also, however, fell under the command of the captain they were assigned to, and were bound to follow his orders, provided they did not directly contradict the mission assigned by the Chapter.

Sharr waited. Eventually, Korro reached up and disengaged the clamps from his helmet's gorget seal. The features revealed were not far removed from Sharr's – death-pale, black-eyed, angular, almost gaunt. Unlike Sharr, however, Korro had chosen to replace his teeth with metal incisors, each filed to a saw-edge. They gleamed as the Terminator spoke.

'As you wish, Reaper Prime.'

Sharr inclined his head slightly. The first test had been passed.

‘We have never served the Chapter side by side, have we, brother?’ the Reaper Prime asked.

‘I fought under Strike Leader Torr when Akia was still captain of the Third. On Ulixis.’

‘A worthy campaign,’ Sharr acknowledged. ‘I had just entered Akia’s command squad.’

‘We made the traitors suffer on that world,’ Korro said, the barest hint of relish colouring his voice. ‘There were no survivors.’

‘You are the third strike leader from the First Company to be assigned to me in three priority operations,’ Sharr said. ‘In your own opinion, why do you suppose that is?’

‘Because Strike Leader Kahu is dead,’ Korro replied, his metal teeth clicking every time he spoke. ‘And Strike Leader Zatari has been assigned to the Fourth Company for their strike against the xenos moving on Praxor.’

‘Zatari was reassigned from this company before we left the Lost World,’ Sharr said. ‘He could easily have remained with us. Instead I have you.’

‘This mission is of primary importance, and I have served as a strike leader for longer than Zatari,’ Korro said, clearly opting for the direct approach. ‘Your disagreements with Zatari during the last Red Tithe are well known, as were your difficulties with Kahu on Zartak.’

‘Both tried to subvert my authority in favour of more aggressive measures,’ Sharr said. ‘It cost Kahu his life, and Zatari made matters more difficult than they needed to be.’

Korro said nothing, his black gaze not leaving Sharr’s.

The captain continued.

‘The squad under your command is double the usual complement assigned to company-level operations.’

‘We are here to help ensure your protection, Reaper Prime.’

‘I already have over seventy void brothers to do that, Korro. This is not a combat assignment, and the Chapter surely cannot afford to remove a tenth of its First Company for a diplomatic foray.’

‘Is there a purpose to this meeting, Reaper Prime?’

Sharr smiled. For all his stoicism, the expression clearly caught Korro by surprise.

‘I am testing you, strike leader,’ Sharr said. ‘You have not been to Atargatis before, have you?’

‘No.’

‘I have, thirty years ago, under Akia. It is a dangerous place. The Ashen Claws will not treat us with the respect we deserve. Their master, Nehat Nev, will try to provoke not only me, but you as well. He will try to taunt us, divide us, cause us to act rashly, so that our hand in the negotiations is weakened.’

Korro inclined his head slightly.

‘They are renegades, Reaper. Without honour.’

‘Honour is a dead thing,’ Sharr said, quoting Carcharodons doctrine. ‘But they should not be trusted. Nor should they succeed in drawing out our aggression. The Red Brethren have come close to compromising my missions in the past. I will not permit that to happen again, Korro.’

‘We are both here for the good of the Chapter,’ Korro said. ‘Do your duty, Reaper Prime, so I won’t have to. That way there can be no danger of any undue interference.’

‘Indeed. I believe we have an understanding.’

The Terminator departed. Sharr activated his stylo and applied it again to his armour, letting the slow emergence of the fresh, white lines ease his thoughts. A decade ago, when he had first taken command of the company, confronting a strike leader of the First in such a manner would have been an action of last resort. They were the Red Wake’s enforcers, and their attitude was more often than not blunt and uncompromising. Sharr, however, had learned much from the past ten years. Third Company was his, and its successes and failures rested on his shoulders alone. The Red Brethren would not dictate his strategy.

He finished the armour scarification and paused for a while, black eyes surveying his handiwork. There was peace there, in the flowing patterns, an ebb to the sharpness that surrounded the Reaper Prime. He acknowledged it only for a second before rising and summoning the artisan-serfs who would return the armour to its place of honour. The ship was about to enter the deepest point of its plunge through the warp, and much of the company had already retreated to their numbing void slumber. Cryo-sleep called to Sharr. A last taste of peace, before the waves crashed home with thunder and fury.

There was no point in denying the approach of that savage tide. It was what Sharr had been bred for.

Nzogwu’s team gathered in the warehouse’s stock-filing annex. Darkness was beginning to fall outside, the room’s shattered skylight admitting the sound of commuter trams and haulage units making their final journeys of the day. Even

indoors the air was heavy with the musk of weave-grain pollen and freshly tanned ux horn leather, the scents of an Imperial agri world approaching the height of its harvest season, ripe on the evening breeze.

Nzogwu was late, as was Welt. The rest of the retinue were seated on benches and desks facing a projection beamed by the inquisitor's servo-skull, all except Tibalt, who was watching the warehouse's front door.

'How is it?' Rannik asked Damar, taking a seat next to him. The former Guardsman glanced morosely at his bandaged arm.

'I've had worse.'

'Makes a change from sifting through silos of grain chaff at least,' Rannik said. 'I was starting to think I'd never get to rack that shotgun slide ever again.'

Damar said nothing. He had been surly ever since the shootout. It was his usual response to having his life saved by Rannik. He claimed it was an Arbites-Militarum rivalry issue, but Rannik suspected he just still hadn't got used to other people saving his life, especially a thirty-year-old woman. She left him brooding and went to talk to Ro. The tech-adept was running a maintenance scan over the servo-skull, murmuring to it in lingua-technis. He nodded to Rannik as she leaned against the bench next to him.

'Good evening, Miss Rannik.'

'Hello, Cogs.' She gestured at the skull as its projection beam flickered. 'How freckled is it?'

'I'm still scanning,' Ro said quietly. He was the youngest member of the retinue, still a long way from the machine-dominance the members of the Adeptus Mechanicus aspired to. He would have been handsome too, his angular features and brown, almond-shaped eyes distorted only by the cortical implants grafted into the side of his skull. He seemed to have an issue with Rannik, though – whenever she approached him directly he would grow quiet and furtive. She put it down to general tech-priest social difficulties, but Damar joked that it was something more.

'Joining us for the retaliation strike, then?' she asked him, half teasing.

Ro shrugged. It was amusing seeing an adept of Mars still able to affect such human responses.

'I will perform whatever task the inquisitor deems suitable.'

'Ever shot someone before, Cogs?'

'You are aware I have now, Miss Rannik. You have asked me that on six different occasions previously.'

'Just looking forward to your first time, Ro. I bet you've got one of those rad

carbines stashed somewhere. They can do some damage.'

'I do not, Miss Rannik. Just my Stygies Mark Three laspistol.'

'Leave the machine kid alone, woman,' Janus snapped. 'I want that damn skull of his fixed.'

'Eyes not what they once were, old man? You'll be a servo-skull yourself soon enough.'

Janus' retort was cut off by the sound of the annex door opening. It was Nzogwu. His expression was grim.

'Ten minutes more,' he said, before addressing Rannik individually.

'Outside.'

The arbitrator joined Nzogwu back out on the main warehouse floor. Her spirits had plummeted the moment she had seen his expression.

'News?' she asked.

'From Legate Frain,' Nzogwu confirmed. 'He's picked up the trail again.'

'Where?'

'Hypasitis. A crypt-world near the Ocularis Terribus.'

'What sort of trail?'

'For now, it looks like an etching record. Part of the funerary monuments dedicated to those who resisted one of the Throne-damned Black Crusades. The information comes from one of his own agents operating out of Damara. Seems like it was a chance discovery while purging secessionists in the Kelebari subsector.'

'It's cold then,' Rannik said. 'No direct leads. Just old fragments.'

'No, but the description is good enough to warrant immediate attention. It's part of the puzzle, and until all the pieces are in place we won't be able to truly see them for what they are. When we do, the resources we will be able to bring to bear will make all this worth it.'

'You're reassigning me, aren't you?'

'Yes. Does that disappoint you?'

Rannik paused to consider her answer. Seven months they had spent on Kora, tracking the subtle scents of heresy through weave-grain silos and ux horn pens, tracing back-room deals and corrupt Administratum tithings. Now the shooting was finally getting started and she was being sent away, literally on the eve of the first combat raid since the start of the investigation. After seven months of stifling agri-collective life, it stung to get pulled at the pivotal moment.

And yet...

'You're still having the nightmares,' Nzogwu murmured.

Rannik nodded, saying nothing. They had been her constant companion for the past decade, drenching her dreams in blood, stalking her with darkness and razor grins and black, pitiless eyes. She would wake up screaming, shaking, sweating, reaching for the weapon she kept by her side at all times. Sometimes the horrors persisted after they had any right to, intruding into wakefulness, and she would imagine a pale spectre looming in the corner of her sleep cell, silent, unmoving, watching her, ready at any moment to explode into a savage, slaughterous frenzy.

‘I’ll go,’ she said.

‘Operation basics,’ Nzogwu said, handing her a data-slate. ‘I’ll have more for you after the briefing. There’s a grain hauler leaving from Saint Dorfin’s tonight. Welt is getting you a transport. Take my seal.’

‘Who’s the pickup?’ Rannik asked, slipping the slate into the rear pocket of her fatigues.

‘An archivist named Sozel. I’m sending word ahead to Frain to make sure he knows where to find you. I suspect he’ll send Vex as the intermediary.’

‘I understand. What should I expect when I get there?’

‘If memory serves, a miserable, grey, wind-blasted tomb world. Beyond that I don’t know. Sozel or Vex should be able to set you up with local resources.’

‘I’ll send word as soon as I’m able,’ Rannik said.

Nzogwu placed a hand on her shoulder, dark eyes holding her gaze.

‘I wish I was going as well.’

‘I’ll make sure you don’t have to. Hopefully you’re right. Hopefully this is the piece of the puzzle we’ve been waiting for.’

+++ Final vox-log of Imperial tithe freighter *Solar Wind* +++

+++ Transmitting from the Inax System +++

+++ Date stamp, 6093755.M41 +++

+++ Traitor? No, captain, you are mistaken. We are not traitors. I have only ever had one loyalty, to the brothers you see before you, the ones who stormed your bridge and will momentarily relieve you of the supplies you carry.

Maybe it does look like treachery to you. Maybe you actually believe warriors like me – the pinnacle of gene-bred evolution in the galaxy – truly exist only to protect your pitiful life. Maybe you do not know of the others. There are far darker beings out there than those you see before you, captain. Ones as ancient as us, but enslaved to powers beyond your reckoning. We are not them. We will not tear out your soul and feed it to daemons, or bind you to nightmares made flesh. We'll just kill you.

Maybe we are renegades then, yes. But traitors? Never. Our loyalty has always been to ourselves. I am an Ashen Claw, and I belong to the Ashen Claws, as does your ship, your cargo and your entire crew.

Transmission ends +++

+++ Logged by Deep Void Listening Post Gamma-16-8, 5939795.M41 +++

+++ Status of tithe disappearance investigation: still pending... ++

CHAPTER III

The ships of the Carcharodon Astra's Third Company fleet rose from the depths of the warp like leviathans surging into the shallows, grey vessels trailing streams of etheric ectoplasm and shafts of purple lightning in their wake. On board the *White Maw* the silence that usually reigned over the coral-clad bridge was lost amidst the High Gothic chanting of the transitional choir, their ranks swathed in the sickly sweet miasma of incense being swung from cherubim auto-censers. Real space re-entry was always one of the most dangerous times for any ship, the point when the denizens of the warp tried more desperately than ever to pierce its Geller field and snatch away the souls on board before they escaped the empyrean's grasp. The Chapter's immortal enemies were clawing and shrieking in the minds of every member of the fleet as they broke free.

Nor were the daemons of the immaterium the only threat. A ship was most vulnerable to corporeal foes in the precious minutes it took to readjust to reality. Every vessel of the fleet was cleared for action as they ripped their way into the Atargatis System, while the Third Company had woken from their cryo-slumber and stood armed and armoured for battle. Sharr, clad in his relic battleplate and with his great chainaxe, Reaper, in one fist, stood beside the coral command throne of the *White Maw*'s shipmaster, Teko. On the other side of the throne were Te Kahurangi and Khauri, while next to them loomed Korro's dire bulk, his helmet once more locked in place. The rest of the Third Company's strike leaders were gathered around the bridge's holochart below the throne's dais, eyes on the flickering green display as it came online with updates from the augur array's returns.

Those returns painted a bleak picture. Aeons before, two of Atargatis' worlds had collided, shattering into countless fragments and leaving the system a

broken, desolate place, choked with shards of dead rock and blasted by cruel, radioactive solar winds. The ruination panned across the fuzzy, sea-green display of the holochart, devoid of life signals or artificial energy returns. It was a miserable realm, ruled by a decrepit red star, without natural resources and far from habitable space. A perfect haunt for pirates, renegades and worse.

‘Warp time variance update,’ Teko reported as more of his ship’s real space systems came online, lighting up the displays on the panels surrounding his throne. ‘The date is 6993885.M41. We are on schedule and are within a five per cent range of our predicted ingress coordinates.’

‘Testimony to your skills and those of Navigator Korwin,’ Sharr said. ‘There are no contacts registering with the sensorium display?’

‘No, captain. We’re still updating, but there are no immediate threats in range. No contacts at all, for that matter.’

‘Set a course for Atargatis Prime,’ Sharr told the shipmaster. ‘Mark three on the engines, keep it slow and steady. And route all power from the weapons batteries to the shields, fore and aft. Transmit the same orders to the rest of the fleet. Maintain our defensive formation.’

‘Understood, captain,’ Teko said, not questioning his commander’s orders. It was an unusual way to approach the heart of any system – while routing energies from the *White Maw*’s weapons to reinforce the shields would leave the ship well protected, it would also mean they were unable to strike back against any potential ambusher. The unhurried pace of their new course would also negate the speed advantage enjoyed by Adeptus Astartes fleets – it would take time to bring the plasma drives up to full capacity if they were suddenly required.

These were calculated risks. From now on every action would meet with a reaction.

‘We are being watched,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘I can feel it.’

‘Maintain heading,’ Sharr said firmly. ‘And keep scanning.’

The first contact came four hours after their arrival in-system. There were three in quick succession, hard returns that materialised from behind the bulk of the system’s barren fourth planet. They lit up the holochart and Teko’s displays, and caused an alarm bell to start chiming somewhere.

‘Escort ships,’ Teko said, eyes scanning his throne’s projection readouts. ‘Imperial design, Sword-class. Refitted for speed. Their current course will bring them in across our T-section in under half an hour.’

‘Identity?’ Sharr demanded.

‘No returns. Their keel tags have been wiped.’

‘Vox contact?’

‘Communications channels are all closed.’

‘Maintain current speed and heading.’

‘Understood, captain.’

Ten minutes later a second trio of unmarked escorts – Cobra-class this time – emerged from system debris close to the wreckage that had once been Atargatis’ third planet.

‘Coming up on the starboard side of the *Void Revenant*,’ Teko reported. ‘They’ll be in range at the same time as the Swords.’

‘Acknowledged. Maintain course.’

Most other fleet commanders would have hesitated at such an order. It was quite clear that the Third Company’s warships were advancing into an ambush. The system’s sprawling debris and jagged radiation flares made concealing hard returns a simple matter, and the deeper the fleet progressed into the system’s ruined core, the more it exposed itself to being outflanked and surrounded.

Still the Carcharodons held steady. Sharr had already briefed the fleet commanders and his strike leaders thoroughly, and most had experienced an Atargatis welcome before, almost three decades earlier. The masters of this broken system would have been aware of their arrival the moment they broke from the warp. In a sense, negotiations had already begun.

‘Third contact set,’ Teko reported. ‘This one has a return.’

Sharr’s eyes were on the readouts. Another vessel was emerging onto the display viewscreens, this time from behind the bulk of Atargatis Prime itself. Unlike the previous contacts though, this one was a capital ship. And going by the readouts, it was vast.

‘Infernus-class battleship,’ Teko said. ‘Logged from the Great Crusade era as the *Wicked Claw*. Primary command vessel of the Raven Guard’s Eighteenth Chapter.’

‘Flagship of the Ashen Claws,’ Te Kahurangi added.

‘Put it on the pict screens,’ Sharr ordered.

The bank of display panels rigged above the bridge’s viewing port blinked online, fuzzed with static that eventually resolved into the magnified view being picked up from the *White Maw*’s prow. Teko focused in on the ship moving ponderously towards them from Atargatis Prime, framed by the planet’s barren, grey sphere.

It was a monster. The Infernus class of battleship had been out of commission

since the days of the Heresy, one of a number of vessels considered too powerful to be left in the hands of any single commander. The Ashen Claws had clearly preserved theirs, and now it rose towards the Carcharodons fleet. The red light of Atargatis' grim star picked out its weapons towers, crenellations and macrocannon-studded flanks, the arching crest of its bridge block and, most fearsome of all, the vast, spinal-mounted exo-laser battery that ran down its length. The *Wicked Claw* was larger even than the *Nicor*, itself a holdover from the days of the Heresy, and it dwarfed the *White Maw*. It was a weapon of terrible destructive presence, and it was advancing on a collision course.

Sharr had witnessed it before. The Third Company's previous expedition to Atargatis, three decades earlier, had been similarly greeted. It was a power play, pure and simple. Even without the escorts hemming in the fleet's flanks, or the additional craft following in the *Wicked Claw*'s wake, the great Infernus could have destroyed every one of the ships intruding into its desolate realm.

'Orders, captain?' Teko asked, eyes fixed on the approaching monster.

'Unchanged,' Sharr said. 'Maintain heading and current speed.'

The silence that followed his words did not last long. Teko's hand went up to his earpiece, and several of his displays lit up.

'Word from the communication pits,' he told Sharr. 'We are receiving a vox transmission from the *Wicked Claw*.'

'Link to my personal vox and put it on the main speakers,' Sharr ordered. A moment later the vox-horns slung from the communications gantry overhead came online. There was a moment of static, before a voice, broad and bass, came through.

'Are you lost, little predators?'

Sharr exchanged a glance with Te Kahurangi before speaking.

'I am Bail Sharr, Reaper Prime and captain of the Third Company of the Carcharodon Astra,' he replied.

'I asked you a question, mongrel.'

'No. We are not lost.'

'Then why have you returned? You know there must be death because of it.'

'We always return for the same reason,' Sharr said. 'This time is no different.'

'You are a fool to come back after the last time,' the voice replied. *'I could annihilate you with a word.'*

'You could,' Sharr allowed. 'But in doing so you would also destroy the cargo we carry, cargo that is of great value to the Ashen Claws.'

There was a moment's silence. When the voice spoke again it was brusque.

‘Your escorts will change course immediately and withdraw to an anchorage above Atargatis Four, where they will remain. Your strike cruiser will proceed under our own escort to a fixed location in Atargatis Prime’s high orbit. We are transmitting the coordinates to you now. You will keep your gun ports closed and your weapons systems deactivated at all times. Is this understood?’

‘It is,’ Sharr agreed.

‘Landing protocols will be made available when you arrive in orbit, and the rest of your fleet has departed. If you were wise, you would turn back now.’

‘If I turned back now, I would not be a son of the Forgotten One.’

‘You dishonour his name. We have not forgotten him.’

‘And yet you no longer serve him. We do.’

‘Perhaps. We will find that out soon enough, Carcharodon.’

‘He’s broken the link,’ Teko said, as the vox-horns degenerated back into static.

‘Issue the following orders to all escorts,’ Sharr said. ‘New course to be set for Atargatis Four’s high orbit. Hold defensive formation but ensure that weapons systems remain offline at all times. Once they have acknowledged, lock in a new heading for the *White Maw* using whatever coordinates they provide.’

‘There’s a data burst coming through right now, captain,’ Teko said.

‘Good. Maintain a steady speed and allow them to form up around us. Do nothing to provoke them.’

As Teko began issuing orders to the communication pits, Sharr addressed the strike leaders around the holochart, beneath the shipmaster’s dais.

‘As we planned, brethren. Nuritona, you have command in my absence. If I or any member of the planetside expedition is attacked, or contact is lost and not regained for one Terran hour, you are to withdraw to the nearest jump point and exit the system with all possible speed. We are surrounded here, and the Chapter cannot afford the loss of an entire battle company. Especially not during times such as these. Is that clear?’

‘Affirmative, Reaper Prime,’ Nuritona said.

‘Korro, you and Strike Leader Kordi’s Fourth Tactical Squad will act as my honour guard. You are to say nothing and act only on my express orders.’

‘Understood,’ Korro’s voice rasped from his helm’s vox.

‘Pale Nomad, will you do me the honour of accompanying us?’ Sharr asked Te Kahurangi.

‘It is why I am here,’ the Chief Librarian said, inclining his head. ‘Khauri will accompany me as well.’

‘You think him ready?’ Sharr asked. He sensed the Lexicanium bristle at the

blunt question.

‘He has much to learn,’ Te Kahurangi said, placing a gauntlet on Khauri’s pauldron. ‘And an expedition like this has much to teach.’

‘Very well,’ Sharr said. ‘Korro, Kordi, prepare your squads for atmospheric entry. We expect to drop stasis anchor in Atargatis Prime’s high orbit within the hour.’

The Thunderhawk gunship *Void Spear* shuddered with turbulence as it descended towards Atargatis Prime’s surface. Strike Leader Kordi gazed through the nearest vision port from where he was seated, held in place by a restraint harness. The armourglass port had been wreathed in the fires of atmospheric entry, then obscured by scudding cloud cover. Now, as the heavy flier banked around, the strike leader could see Atargatis Prime stretching out beneath him.

It was as bleak and barren a place as the rest of the system. Craggy grey tundra stretched away as far as the eye could see, the weak sunlight doing little to penetrate the grey clouds. If anyone lived among the black rocks or upon the infertile soil, Kordi could see no sign of them.

The Thunderhawk levelled out as it began its final descent, and Kordi found himself gazing at one of the aircraft accompanying the gunship. The sleek cruciforms of a trio of Primaris Lightning Strike interceptors had fallen into formation around *Void Spear* as it broke from low orbit, the lithe air superiority fighters escorting the larger flier towards landing coordinates transmitted from a shielded location on the planet’s surface.

That location was visible now. *Void Spear*, like most Thunderhawks, possessed a prow pict-feed linked to a viewscreen at the top of the troop bay. Its purpose was to enable those about to charge from the prow hatch to know exactly what was waiting for them. In this instance it provided a view of the landing party’s destination. The briefing docket claimed that the Ashen Claws called it the Lost Eyrie, and it seemed to be the closest thing the renegade Chapter possessed to a fixed base of operations. It was a twisted spire of black rock that rose from the surrounding wasteland, tapering to a spike of stone that nearly pierced the low, bleak clouds above. There were no visible structures and no evidence of human artifice, but Kordi had no doubt the uneven rock faces, crags and crevasses hid all manner of defensive batteries and sally ports. The Lost Eyrie looked like a lonely outcrop on a lonely world beyond the Imperium’s borders. In truth, it was a haven of piracy and recidivism.

‘ETA five minutes,’ clicked the monotone voice of *Void Spear*’s servitor co-pilot

over the intercom. Kordi glanced at those seated around him. He had commanded the Third Company's Fourth Tactical Squad for a decade, since its previous strike leader, Ekara, had died during the Red Tithe on Zartak. Besides Kordi there were five other void brothers – Aleph-eleven-ten Tulu, Aleph-five-one Takari, Aleph-fifteen-five Warak, Beta-twelve-nine Ranga and Theta-six-two Motako. When Carcharodons first joined the Chapter they were stripped of their former name and given only a coded number-designate. Ascension from the ranks of the Tenth Company's Scouts to those of the void brotherhood came with a new name based on the Chapter's past, but only by attaining the rank of strike veteran could a member of the Carcharodon Astra begin to leave his blank code signature behind. It was just another reminder of the Chapter's rejection of the individual, and its focus on the whole.

Fourth Squad shared the troop bay's harness benches with the two psykers – the Pale Nomad and his apprentice – and the Reaper Prime, as well as his command squad. At Bail Sharr's orders the entire landing party, bar the Red Brethren, had left their helmets mag-locked to their belts. The faces around Kordi mirrored his own – pallid grey or deathly white, with inky black eyes and wicked teeth. The ghoulis visages were broken up by the black, red or white swirls of exile tattoos, the commemoration of completed void vows and honour kills with the tribal patterns that occupied the Chapter's ancient, collective memory. The eyes of most of Kordi's brethren were unfocused, each individual lost in the silent contemplation that featured in so many of the Chapter's indoctrination rituals. Lyman's ears cancelling out the roar and rattle of *Void Spear's* engines, the warriors were checking their mental wargear, just as they had checked their grey battleplate, bolters and chainaxes before leaving the *White Maw*.

Whether or not the Red Brethren were deep in similar preparations was impossible to say. The seven Terminators stood in the lower hold of the troop bay, boots mag-locked to the floor, their great power fists inactive. They had not interacted with any members of the Third Company during their transit. They were the Red Wake's silent watchers, and they would be the first to set foot on Atargatis.

'*Sixty seconds,*' clicked the co-pilot's voice. Kordi glanced down, checking his Phobos-pattern bolter and its chainblade combat attachment. The co-pilot's words seemed to rouse the other Carcharodons from their fugue state – they too began performing final equipment checks. It felt strange to be entering what seemed like a combat situation with his helmet still locked to his side. Kordi supposed that was the reason for the order. After all, this wasn't a combat

assignment. Despite every indicator, he had been told by Sharr to inform his squad that no blood was going to be shed on Atargatis.

It hadn't worked out that way the last time they had visited this Rangu-forsaken system, and Kordi suspected it wouldn't be bloodless this time either.

'Thirty seconds.'

The rocky spire now filled the troop bay viewscreen, a black spear set against the dark red of the Atargatian sunset. The trio of Primaris Lightning fighters had peeled away, leaving *Void Spear* to begin a vectored descent into a jagged canyon near the spire's base. Ancient tectonic activity seemed to have left Atargatis' crust shattered and broken into a million fragments, and for a moment Kordi was reminded of the Lost World, that wind-whipped, barren and lonely place used by the Carcharodon Astra as both an equipment depot and a spiritual haven. It came as no surprise that the Ashen Claws had chosen a similar world as their new home. In a way, the world had chosen them.

Void Spear passed below the edge of the canyon and into the darkness. The restraint harness disengaged with a thud. Kordi swung it up as the troop bay's seated contingent rose. Another commander might have uttered final orders or words of encouragement in the last few seconds, as the Thunderhawk's landing prongs dug in and its engines cycled down. Sharr, however, remained silent. His orders and objectives had been clear. The Carcharodon Astra required neither repetition nor motivation in order to function effectively.

Void Spear's engines cut out completely. The sudden silence was a surprising comfort. It didn't last long. There was a thump of disengaging locks and a hiss of compressed air, followed by the whine of hydraulics as the Thunderhawk's prow ramp was remotely lowered from the cockpit above. Artificial light streamed in from outside. There was a series of thuds as the Red Brethren disengaged their mag-locks and advanced out into the canyon, followed by Sharr and his command squad. Kordi, Tulu, Takari, Warak, Ranga and Motako brought up the rear. As Kordi stepped out onto the ramp he caught sight of what awaited them.

There was a greeting party assembled in the canyon's bottom, backlit by the glow coming from an open pair of heavy blast doors set into the canyon's rock face. Kordi counted thirty human males, all of combat age, gathered before the channel formed either side of Korro's Terminators. They were clearly toned and fit, and though clad only in the leather-and-fur garb commonly seen on Imperial feudal or savage worlds, they were all armed with well-oiled Locke-pattern boltguns. They displayed no sign of the shock, fear or awe that was common among humans when they first encountered Adeptus Astartes. These men were

accustomed to seeing Space Marines.

There was also an Adeptus Astartes legionary leading them. He wore Mark V Heresy-pattern power armour not dissimilar to that borne by many of the Carcharodons. It was a dark grey, almost black, but the pauldrons were the colour of butchered meat, a red, deep and dark as the encroaching Atargatis dusk. Unlike the Carcharodons he wore a helmet, a beaked Corvus-pattern variant that gave him a raptor-like silhouette against the light behind him.

‘Captain Bail Sharr,’ the Space Marine said as Kordi and his squad came to attention behind the rest of the landing party. ‘I am Rama Sixx, of the Ashen Claws First Company. Welcome to Atargatis Prime.’

‘Hail and well met, Rama Sixx,’ Sharr responded.

‘You and your retinue will accompany me,’ Sixx said. ‘Do not stray. The Chapter Master is waiting.’

Sixx turned and made his way through the canyon’s blast doors. His human followers parted to either side, allowing the Carcharodons to troop after him before falling in behind. Kordi found himself in an artificially cut rock passage, the light emanating from rigged lumen strips running via cable clusters overhead. The gravel underfoot was crossed by two rusting metal rail lines that had started at the tunnel’s entrance. No one spoke. There was only the thump of armoured footfalls and the hum of charged battleplate, competing with the buzz of the lumens.

A large grav-lift lay at the end of the rock passage. Judging by the worn rail system and the heavy locking bars set into the lift’s baseplate, Kordi suspected the canyon had once been a secondary landing facility for shuttles bringing raw materials into the Eyrie. Unloaded from cargo holds, the goods could be ferried up the track and onto the lift. Now, the same lift carried them into the darkness of the Ashen Claws’ nest.

Kordi saw six levels pass by beyond the lift’s mesh door before the mechanism creaked to a halt. The doors clattered open and Sixx led them out into another wide, low, rock-cut tunnel. Its right side was interspersed with defensive weapons slits, the last of the day’s red light filtering in through the narrow gaps. Beyond them Kordi caught glimpses of Atargatis’ barren expanse, stretching out below. They were inside the Eyrie, and climbing.

Sixx led them higher via another heavy grav-lift, then a winding stair casement barely wide enough for the Terminators to climb, step by step. On their way they saw no one else, but in the corridor beyond, sealed metal doors concealed evidence of the spire’s inhabitants: a bout of raucous laughter, the hum of what

sounded like meat storage units, the familiar sound of metal striking ceramite – whether sparring blades or repair hammers, it was impossible to tell.

Another lift, another set of corridors, and Kordi began to suspect their guide was leading them on a deliberately circuitous route. Sixx had said nothing since greeting them, and his human guard continued to follow behind Fourth Squad. It was obviously an opening power play on the part of the Ashen Claws – the Carcharodons did not merit a guard of fellow Space Marines.

Finally, a corridor lined with ancient suits of power armour, dark grey and darker red, led to a great set of adamantium blast doors emblazoned with the Ashen Claws crest – a circle and four talons. Beyond them came the sounds of feasting – the clatter of plates, the babble of conversation. Sixx turned at the doors, his humans passing around the Carcharodons to flank them.

‘My lord Nehat Nev awaits your presence,’ the Ashen Claw said. ‘You and your personal retinue may enter, Captain Sharr, and you may bear your weapons with you, but the rest of your party must wait here.’

‘Very well,’ Sharr said. ‘Korro, Kordi, hold position. Do not interact with anyone until my return.’

‘I will take my own leave,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘There are... other matters that must be addressed.’

He looked at Sixx. For a moment the Ashen Claw was silent. Then he nodded.

‘As you wish. Come, Captain Sharr.’

The Ashen Claw rapped three times on the adamantium doors, and they swung back with a clicking of auto-rollers. As Sharr and his command squad entered, Kordi caught a glimpse of what lay beyond – a great hall carved from the tip of the Lost Eyrie’s black stone, its upper vaults open to Atargatis’ encroaching night. Torches and braziers lit long tables and benches lined with revellers. Kordi saw humans and Space Marines feasting side by side, before the great doors rolled shut again with a crash.

‘Overwatch,’ he ordered the rest of his squad. ‘And put your helmets back on.’

Te Kahurangi led Khauri back down, along narrow side corridors and winding stairways set along the rocky spire’s flanks. They passed others on their way – humans and Space Marines both, but none stopped or questioned them. It was as though Te Kahurangi were one of them. Khauri knew better than to question him about it, or about where they were going – it would likely only be met with an obscure deflection.

‘I do not understand what the Reaper Prime hopes to achieve here,’ he said

instead, switching to his helm's internal vox so that his words remained private.

'Why do you say that?' Te Kahurangi asked, not turning to look at the Lexicanium as they progressed down a stone corridor lined with more weapon slits. The Eyrie was honeycombed with openings, seemingly as much to allow access to the native corvids as it was a defensive measure. The birds were big, black-feathered creatures with bald heads and ugly, hook-nosed visages. Their cawing filled the bleak passages and tunnels, underlying the moaning of the wind as it knifed through the openings riddling the structure. The floor underfoot was carpeted with avian refuse – broken egg shells and delicate bones and skulls. Twice men in dark red robes and cowls hurried past the two Space Marines, carrying sacks filled with the birds' remains. Whether they were simply cleaning the corridors, or taking the bones for a more esoteric purpose, Khauri could not tell.

'The Reaper Prime has not opened negotiations with a strong hand,' he said as they entered another spiral stairway, his voice echoing weirdly from the claustrophobic stonework. 'Not from what I can see, anyway.'

'Where is his mistake then, if you think he has already made one?' Te Kahurangi asked. As ever, Khauri got the impression the Chief Librarian knew the answer to his own question, and was merely encouraging him to enunciate his thoughts.

'When we first made contact with their fleet he agreed to withdraw our escort ships,' Khauri said. 'And then again when he arrived here. We make planetfall with a strong personal guard, but they have almost all been left outside without complaint. Surely that shows a degree of weakness?'

'I doubt any think us weak, especially not the Ashen Claws,' Te Kahurangi said. 'Yet even if they did, would you not consider the possibility that the Reaper Prime is playing a more complex game? What if his decisions so far have been a deliberately feeble show, set out to disguise his hidden strengths?'

'You believe he seeks to lull the renegades into a false sense of security?'

'This is their home, Khauri. We are all aware they could annihilate us, should they so choose. That will make them confident, possibly arrogant. Furthermore, Sharr remembers Nehat Nev from our previous voyage to this place, but it is doubtful Nev recalls Sharr. He was a faceless member of Captain Akia's honour guard when last we visited. Sharr knows his enemy, Nev does not. That sort of advantage is of huge worth to any commander.'

'I see. It sounds as though you have complete confidence in the Reaper Prime, master.'

‘Sharr has grown into his role these past ten years,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘When he first became captain of the Third he struggled with the burden of authority, as must we all. He overthought and second-guessed too often. Now his every decision stands or falls clearly on its own merit, as it should. We are the judges and we should hear no appeals, not even from our own conscience.’

‘Is our purpose here not to assist him with his negotiations?’

‘You are working towards asking me why we have abandoned the landing party, and where we are going,’ Te Kahurangi said, and though Khauri couldn’t see his face, he could sense his thin-lipped, razor-toothed smile.

‘It seems strange, master,’ he admitted. ‘I presumed Captain Sharr would lean on your wisdom and power to assist his discussions with the renegade.’

‘Sharr doesn’t need my help, not any more. Our purpose coming here was twofold – to teach you, and to visit an old friend.’

‘To teach me?’

‘Yes. For example, it would be extremely unwise to continue calling the Ashen Claws renegades. That may be what they are, but it is not what they consider themselves. When entering the fastness of another Chapter, it is always best to view them as they see themselves – things can become needlessly complicated otherwise.’

They had reached a level without the openings that perforated the rest of the Eyrie. Khauri suspected that they had passed underground. The tunnels started to feel more subterranean, rough-cut and narrow, illuminated only by braziers positioned at occasional intervals, throwing monstrous shadows against the uneven walls as the Space Marines passed. The number of dead corvids increased as well, their bones crunching underfoot. There were no longer any signs of human activity, and nobody passed them by.

They arrived at a spherical chamber, lit by a smouldering firepit set in its centre. Open tunnels and closed metal doorways led off in half a dozen directions around them. The junction was almost completely silent, only the low crackle of the flames and the steady drip of some underground leak reaching the Space Marines’ senses. A feeling of unease began to creep over Khauri, causing him to grip his stave tighter. Why had they abandoned the others and come all the way down here, to this dead, deserted place?

‘Ease your mind, my young brother,’ Te Kahurangi said, and stepped towards one of the barred doors. Its surface was emblazoned with an eye symbol, almost lost amidst the streaks of rust and fungal growths that blotched the metal. The Pale Nomad rapped his force staff against it three times, the clacking noise

echoing away up the adjoining tunnels.

There was a thud, and the slow, torturous scrape of ancient bolts. The door groaned as it swung inwards, revealing a stooped figure backlit by the crimson light of red electro-candles. It was a Space Marine, but he wore a dark grey robe rather than power armour, and leaned on a bone staff not dissimilar to Te Kahurangi's. Like the Pale Nomad, he seemed ancient – his hair was white, lying lankly about his shoulders, and his flesh was a knotted patchwork of old scars. One eye was milky and white, while the other stared at the two Carcharodons with feverish intensity. After a moment realisation seemed to dawn, and a smile split the old warrior's ravaged features.

'Tis not a dream,' the figure said in High Gothic, taking a step out of his chamber. 'Nor some damned waking vision. Pale Nomad, you have come back to me.'

Te Kahurangi grasped the figure's forearm and drew him in close.

'Arathar,' the Carcharodon said. 'It does me well to see you again, after all these years.'

'And I you,' Arathar said, pressing his brow against Te Kahurangi's. 'Welcome home, brother.'

There are few places in the blessed and holy Imperium more sacred to the memory of our warrior-martyrs than Hypasitis. It stands alongside Tanikle and Last Rest as among the largest cemetery worlds in the Segmentum Obscura. Home to – at last count – the Throne-blessed remains of eighty billion loyal servants of the God-Emperor, it is a place of homage for hundreds of millions of mourners each Terran year, and forms a keystone in the long pilgrimage routes trodden by the faithful. Ministered to eternally by the Necropolis Guilds and mortuary-archivists, it has provided a fitting place of rest for those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in the defence of our glorious inheritance since the 37th millennium. From the Crypt of the First Heroes, where the remains of the first to fall against the Archenemy's invasion lie, to the Frescos of the Obsidians, those mysterious grey-clad champions who came in the hour of our need, a mourn-visitor will find plenty of sites worthy of their time, prayers and remembrance tokens. Whether the bones of your forefathers lie in its sacred soil, or whether you simply wish to pay back a fraction of the infinite respect all loyal Imperial citizens owe to our saviours, Hypasitis should be your first and final stop.

– Extract from the *Jorus Introductory Brochure and Guide to Hypasitis, World of Martyrs* (Ninety-third edition, reprinted 755.M41, publication paid for by the Hill of Silence Necropolis Guild), page xii.

CHAPTER IV

The primary skyrail line could carry over a thousand wealthy mourners and martyrologists from the disembarkation zone at the Thalastian Jorus star port to the Imperial Cenotaph on the Hill of Silence in under an hour. Today, however, its black-draped, skull-embossed carriages seemed greatly underused – besides Rannik and her companion there was only one other occupant in their section of the transport. She sat in the far corner, alone, features hidden behind a mourning veil, shrouded in the silken folds of her black Shontii-style dress. All of the other seats were unoccupied. Rannik wondered whether the carriage's near-abandonment was the work of the man sitting opposite her, staring out of the skyrail's window.

Cyril Sebastian Vex. She had met him once before, during joint ordo operations unearthing the Skyla Heresy on Donaris, five years previously. He was Legate Inquisitor Frain's chief of staff, one of Lord Inquisitor Rozenkranz's close allies and, by extension, an ally of his successor, Inquisitor Nzogwu. He had an experienced, rigid air to him, from his close-fitting black combat jacket, upright posture and clipped mode of speech to the flamer scars that had left one half of his face a mess of twisted, puckered white flesh. Definitely ex-Militarum or Arbites, though Rannik had never asked which. He knew she still bore her own Adeptus Arbites badge and tag, but he had never offered any opinion on her life before joining Nzogwu's retinue.

'Impressive, isn't it,' he said now, clearly sensing her attention. She followed his gaze out of the skyrail's window, the black drapes that covered the carriage's flanks tied back to reveal the passing scenery of the cemetery world of Hypasitis.

A sad, slate-grey sky matched an equally grim landscape of memorials and headstones. The skyrail was mounted upon a great, winding viaduct that carried

the black-painted locomotive over and around the millions of sprawling mausoleums, reliquary shrines and obelisks that covered so much of Hypasitis' surface. The viaduct itself was a miles-long tomb, its stout stone arches inset with a million coffin slats and its cement mixed with the bone-dust of the faithful.

'Approximately eighty billion martyred souls reside within the hallowed ground of this cemetery world,' Vex said, quoting from the black-bound brochure lying on the table between them. 'A testimony to the fact that the God-Emperor does not forget those who give their all in the eternal struggle against heresy and corruption.'

'The seventh Black Crusade,' Rannik replied, watching the twin gothic spires of a crypt-cathedral as they passed it and its adjoining grave basilicas. 'Launched by the forces of the Dark Gods from the Ocularis Terribus in 811.M37. Halted on the world of Mackan and then finally turned back over the course of the Ghost War.'

'You are a student of history then, Miss Rannik?' Vex asked.

'Top of my class in the progenium, Mister Vex,' she replied, turning her gaze from the morbid scenery back to Frain's operative. His eyes were pale, almost sad, the left one half lost amidst the knots of old scar tissue. 'Though I admit most of the voyage here was spent conducting additional research.'

'I'd expect nothing less from an arbitrator.'

Rannik sensed the dangling hook of a question, but ignored it, returning her gaze to the passing tombs. If Frain's man wanted to learn more about Nzogwu's retinue, he would have to try harder.

Vex had met her at the Thalastian Jorus star port, when she had made planetfall that morning. As well as conducting her to the skyrail he had delivered an encrypted data-slate bearing an astropathic translation from Nzogwu, transmitted before Vex had made the short warp jump from Amistel to Hypasitis. Rannik had read its contents with trepidation, but the news had been good. The raid on DeVree's estates had gone well. The ex-governor had been knocked out of the game at the expense of a flesh wound on Tibalt and the loss of one of Ro's combat servitors. Nzogwu was sure he was closing in on the conspiracy's ringleader. He estimated another week at most, followed by another five or six spent conducting trials and building pyres – the public face of the inquisition, made manifest after so much time spent conducting covert operations.

The slate had been date-tagged over a month ago. Rannik wondered how things had progressed since then. Had her own suspicions about the Ux Cartel been

correct? Were their corpses smouldering in the market squares of each of Kora's agri-collectives, the stench of burned flesh mixing with the summer scents of pollen and freshly harvested weave-grain? A part of her was still unhappy with her reassignment, and struggled to accept being taken off the case after so many months of slow, tedious investigation.

The nightmares reminded her that what she was doing now was important. They had redoubled since Nzogwu had dispatched her to Hypasitis, exacerbated by the weeks spent locked in the immaterium. The precise details changed, but the motifs that haunted her remained consistent – she would wake up in her cabin berth slicked with sweat, heart pounding, her thoughts full of grey phantoms, claustrophobic rock tunnels and wicked, blood-slick claws. It had been the same ever since she had joined Nzogwu's retinue a decade earlier.

Ever since Zartak, and the coming of the black-eyed monsters that called themselves the Carcharodon Astra.

A bell, linked from carriage to carriage by a cord that ran the length of the locomotive, gave out a single sonorous chime. Rannik started.

'Five minutes,' Vex said, pocketing the brochure that had been on the table and tugging his fatigue jacket straight. Outside the funerary landscape had become even more crowded as the skyrail passed beneath the graven mortuary arches and entered the Palace of Martyrs, Hypasitis' largest necropolis city. Rannik stood and dragged her kitbag down from the overhead rack, refusing the assistance of one of the blackened, chrome-plated luggage servitors.

'Sozel will meet us beneath the Pillar of the Broken Angel,' Vex said as the skyrail's clattering began to die away and the carriage slowed. Rannik nodded, glancing up and down the aisle while she shouldered her bag.

Though she hadn't noticed it, at some point during their journey the carriage's only other occupant, the woman in black, had gone.

The mourning wind was gusting hard as they disembarked into the morgue streets that wound about the foot of the Hill of Silence. Unlike the skyrail, the lanes running between the reliquary stalls and trinket-sellers were packed, full of the bustle brought by – according to the brochure – the six hundred million mourners, pilgrims and supplicants who visited Hypasitis' grave-surface every Terran year. Those pressing around Rannik and Vex presented a black-clad sea, dressed as they were in the funerary garb purchased by visitors on arrival. The men wore wide-brimmed black hats and capes over their attire, while women were swathed in mourning veils and shawls. The poorest – the barefooted

pilgrims who came to Hypasitis as part of the great decades-long trail to Holy Terra – tied black scraps of cloth about their tonsured heads and around the tips of their walking staffs, or draped them over the shoulders of their threadbare habits.

Neither Rannik nor Vex were similarly attired, and their more practical clothing drew glances. Vex seemed not to mind, forging them a path up the lower slopes where the shacks of those peddling near-illegible rolls of honour and chips of martyr bone leaned against the crumbling tombs of the Lesser Dead. Everywhere the symbols of mortality – skulls, bones, withered roses, the God-Emperor's reaping angel, skeletal aquilas – dominated the architecture of stalls and mausoleums alike. Rannik had travelled to many places with Nzogwu since joining his retinue, certainly further than she had ever believed she would venture when she had been assigned to her first sub-precinct on the prison colony of Zartak. In all that time though she had never experienced the grim, sprawling mass of architecture that constituted a cemetery world. For all her preparations it was impossible to avoid the crushing chill of finality that pervaded everything around her. How anyone could live their entire lives amidst Hypasitis' grey, wind-whipped tomb cities was beyond her.

Vex paused to buy stale gritbread and protein jelly from one of the vendors, a stall set against an obelisk whose inscriptions had long ago been eroded away to nothing. Rannik hadn't eaten since making planetfall – despite the vile taste, she devoured the food as they climbed higher.

'How much does it usually cost to perform an act of remembrance at the Imperial Cenotaph?' she asked Vex as they went. The crowds had started to thin as the lanes grew ever steeper. Occasionally they were forced to one side by a growling hauler transport, its black hull and tinted windows reflecting the stares of those it passed by. Only the wealthiest of Hypasitis' visitors could afford to hire out such luxury.

'It depends,' Vex answered. 'There's a minimum threshold, but payment can be made in different ways. The Office of Tribute assesses the proposal of each supplicant when they arrive. The queues can stretch all the way to the Militarum Barrows five miles south of here. It takes days to clear them.'

Not for the first time, Rannik gave silent thanks that the authority of the ordos allowed them to bypass the Imperium's sprawling bureaucracy. The sloping pathways around her were now almost deserted, occasional patrols of frateris militia with black-wrapped autoguns checking the passes of those headed towards the hill's summit. Vex had clearly made his preparations well in

advance – nobody impeded them, despite the unbecoming nature of their appearance.

‘That’s the place,’ Vex said, a little short of breath. Rannik looked up. On the horizon, looming amidst the bristling stone forest of obelisks, statues and spires that crowned the Hill of Silence, was the imposing bulk of the Imperial Cenotaph. Countless war banners and standards, pale and ragged with age, flapped from its stone flanks, while the eyes of ten thousand Imperial martyrs glared down with graven finality upon the necropolis sprawling beneath them. Rannik assumed the Cenotaph and the great mass of the grave-city’s most prominent architecture was their final destination, but Vex’s gesture drew her attention to the right of the tomb-lane they were currently climbing.

A black iron fence and ivy-encrusted lich gate separated a memorial carving from the crumbling mausoleums around it. The monument, while still vast, was only a minor one in comparison with those clustering towards the hill’s crest. It was a pillar surmounted by the kneeling form of a Space Marine, his armour cracked and broken, helmet raised towards the grey heavens. Two angelic wings rose from his back, though – whether by artifice or because of time’s erosion – one was broken. On the dying Space Marine’s pauldron, only just legible through the lichens that clung to much of the statue, was a teardrop sigil, flanked by two bat-like pinyons.

The small open space around the statue was overgrown with long grasses and weeds, but a figure was visible kneeling before the pillar’s base, seemingly in prayer. He didn’t react to the shriek of ancient hinges as Vex opened the iron gateway and passed beneath the lich arch. Vex flicked a hand signal to Rannik, a perfect display of Arbites riot-cant.

Follow my lead.

The two of them approached the figure. He was wearing a mortuary-archivist’s black robes, with the cowl drawn up. As Rannik drew closer, feet swishing through the long grass, she caught the sound of unhealthy, irregular breathing.

Vex knelt to the figure’s left, mirroring his posture. Rannik did the same to the right, the pillar and its broken champion towering above her.

‘There are black shadows over Goransburg,’ Vex said, eyes fixed on the pillar’s base.

‘How many?’ wheezed the kneeling figure.

‘Five-score and one,’ Vex replied.

The figure made a grunting noise and retrieved a black walking cane lying in the grass beside him. Vex reached out a hand as he struggled to rise, but the old

man snatched his sleeve away. Rannik caught sight of him properly for the first time – if Vex had told her he had been resurrected from Hypasitis' graves she wouldn't have been surprised. His flesh was sagging and discoloured, spotted with age marks, and his eyes were milky and pale, one befouled by cataracts. A respirator-unit, sutured into his throat, was the source of the unhealthy wheezing that accompanied his every breath.

'It's been some time, Vex,' the aged man said after he had regained his feet and brushed the grass off the hem of his robe. 'Frain still not managed to get you killed yet?'

'As the God-Emperor wills,' Vex said, gesturing towards Rannik. 'Arbitrator Rannik, this is Mortuary-Archivist Dolorous Sozel.'

'You're Nzogwu's girl?' Sozel asked, turning his rheumy eyes on her. She nodded.

'I am Warden Jade Rannik of the Adeptus Arbites, currently seconded as an ordo operative to the retinue of Inquisitor Augim Nzogwu. I carry his full authority, and his seal.'

Sozel grimaced, but nodded.

'Nzogwu, that young pup. All of his mentor's fiery ambition, none of his wisdom or learning. Old Rozenkranz would be twisting in his shroud.' The archivist struggled to make the sign of the aquila while still resting on his cane, a fit of coughs wracking his decrepit body. Rannik managed to stifle a retort.

'Well come on then,' he snapped after a wheezing recovery, pausing to spit a wad of phlegm into the long grass about the statue's base. 'I've taken time out of the data inscription crypt to be here, and we'll get nothing done when darkness falls.'

'Lead on, Sozel,' Vex said.

Rannik threw him a pointed glance, but he merely shrugged.

'I'm glad you've made such an effort to stand out,' Sozel grumbled as they passed out beneath the lich arch and began to climb higher, towards the Cenotaph. 'Your clothing doesn't befit someone visiting the Blessed Graves of Hypasitis. It makes your silly little code phrases and cyphers seem even more ridiculous.'

'I didn't bring a mourning dress,' Rannik responded. 'Partly because I don't own one, and partly because I'm an ordo operative on a priority mission. Now, tell me where we are going.'

'To visit the Obsidians,' Sozel said, gesturing towards the Cenotaph that now towered over them, the chill of its looming shadow sending a shiver up Rannik's

spine. 'They're most clearly visible on the frescos around the Imperial Cenotaph's base walls. I will show you the most detailed in person, but there are many more.'

'I have a week before I depart,' Rannik said.

Sozel came up short, glaring at Vex.

'A week? You really expect me to abandon my own cataloguing for a whole week to lead this girl around the shrines and memorials searching for the answer to some long-forgotten myth? My mortuary-brethren would eject me from the order! I would be left grubbing for alms by the gravesides!'

'I assume you have a list of the pertinent sites,' Vex said, appearing considerably more immune to the archivist's bitter attitude than Rannik. 'I will accompany her myself if need be, and you can return to your work after today.'

Sozel coughed again, spat, then began to carry on up the slope, wheezing and muttering darkly to himself.

The mourning wind was strongest at the hill's crest. Its groaning roamed around the great spires and statues that clustered about the Cenotaph, biting deep wherever it found exposed flesh. Beyond its miserable lamentations the Hill of Silence lived up to its name. The crowds that choked the tomb streets and memorial walkways winding about its base were reduced to individuals or small groups, hurrying with heads bowed as they clutched on to their black garments. Strips of remembrance cloth, tied about the wrists of martyr statues and on the lich posts that bordered the plots of the Greater Graves, flapped in the knifing wind. The place was as desolate and grim as Rannik had imagined.

'You know the Cenotaph's name is a misnomer?' Sozel asked as they approached the great fresco walls that surrounded the hill's crest. 'A cenotaph is an empty tomb erected to honour those whose remains are elsewhere. It is true that the monument you see before you is dedicated to all the honoured dead of the Ghost War, and that the vast majority do not reside here, let alone in the hallowed turf of Hypasitis. However, the very hill we are climbing is in fact a vast mortuary mound. Its foundations are the steam-scalded bones of the billion-and-one martyrs of the Harnas Collective. So while the Cenotaph itself contains no remains, its very base rests upon those cruelly culled by the traitor and the heretic.'

'How long have you sought out and recorded the identities of this world's fallen?' Rannik asked, speaking over the wind's eternal misery.

'Eighty-nine years Terran standard,' Sozel replied, seemingly pleased that

someone was asking about his life's work. 'Those who earn a living catering for the incoming mourners must pay their tithes to the Necropolis Guilds that rule this world. I was part of one such tithe – my father's firstborn son, given over to the mortuary-archivists as soon as I was old enough to hold a stylo and learn my letters.'

'And you have catalogued this world's graves ever since?'

'I have, and I would do so all over again if I could. To be chosen for the archivists is one of the highest honours any on Hypasitis can aspire to.'

They had reached the base of the first of the Cenotaph's encircling walls. Sozel turned right, leading them along its southern length for almost a mile before stopping and gesturing up at the carvings with his cane. Rannik followed the movement, looking up at the great bas-relief effigies that adorned every inch of the stonework. Each carving was huge, almost life-sized, filling the face of what she estimated to be over fifty feet of wall. She picked out a scene of battle – Imperial Guardsmen, a solid, side-on mass of grim, uniform faces, advancing through a maelstrom of fire unleashed by heretics in chipped rags, their mutated visages hideously rendered.

'How much do you know of the seventh Black Crusade?' Sozel asked, making the sign of the aquila as he uttered the name of the conflict that had first filled Hypasitis' graves.

'I spent what time I could studying it,' Rannik said. 'But it is not a topic easily accessed, even for one with lower clearance from the ordos.'

'Have you heard of the Canticle of Cassandra Lev?' the mortuary-archivist asked, peering at her with his cloudy eyes.

'A work produced by Saint Lev over a century after the final engagements of the Ghost War,' Rannik said. 'It's voluminous to say the least, and the oldest comprehensive account of the conflict as a whole. I've only had a chance to read its preface data.'

Sozel grunted, the rare happiness he clearly derived from describing his life's work evaporating.

'Come,' he said, leading them further along the fresco.

'If the information forwarded to me by Legate Frain is correct, I suspect the first chapter of the one hundred and sixth volume will be of greatest interest to you,' he said, clearing his throat as he came to a halt again beneath another section of the wall.

'And lo, the grey-clad came from the outer night, and their jagged maw did swallow the stars, and their black gaze did mirror the void of oblivion. Their pale

shadows fell upon the servants of the skulled-one with great fury from the darkness, unseen as the beast that lurks beneath the black waters, death for death, blood for blood. Thus were the Sons of Sanguinius bought respite, and did turn back upon their pursuers, and so were the damned traitors of the false gods driven unto their ruin.'

Rannik said nothing. Vex and Sozel watched her in silence, the wind moaning between them. The archivist's quote had caused memories of her nightmares to resurface, like a sudden, suffocating tide. She pushed them back, focusing on the quote and how it linked to the figures portrayed above her.

'Are you all right?' Vex asked. She waved him away.

'I'm fine. Go on.'

'Saint Lev's record, supported by the other ancient accounts, tells us that at the moment of their triumph the heretics were turned back by the intervention of those we now know as the Obsidians,' Sozel said, watching Rannik closely. 'They came from the void beyond Imperial space, the Outer Dark where no true servant of the God-Emperor steps without great trepidation. At the hour of greatest need they interceded on behalf of their fellow Adeptus Astartes, the Blood Angels, and with fearsome savagery struck down the legions of darkness.'

'And thus earned themselves a place on this planet's endless memoriams,' Vex said, gazing up at the great figures carved above them.

'Yes,' Sozel said. 'Observe, the Obsidians.'

Rannik had already identified the beings Sozel was referring to. There were Space Marines on this section of the fresco, towering head and shoulders above the mortal warriors and nameless Chaotic horrors that surrounded them. Many bore the teardrop-and-wing sigil Rannik had seen on the pauldron of the warrior atop the Pillar of the Broken Angel. The accounts she had read claimed the crest belonged to the Blood Angels, one of the oldest and most honoured of all Space Marine brotherhoods. Not every one of the Adeptus Astartes above her, however, bore their crest. There were others, some poised in a moment of vicious close combat aboard what looked like the corridors of a heretic warship, others striking against the warp-spawned beasts that sought to overwhelm the Blood Angels as they withdrew from the battle of Midian. The heraldry was different – a curling oceanic predator, one of the finned, saw-toothed sharks that had once swum the seas of ancient Terra. Rannik recognised it immediately. She had seen it before, a decade earlier, during the events that still stalked her sleep. Her shiver has nothing to do with the mourning wind and its low groaning.

'Carcharodon Astra,' she murmured. If Vex or Sozel heard her, they said

nothing. Both were gazing at the representations of the Obsidians. The reason the archivists of Hypasitis had given them the name was obvious. Unlike the Blood Angels, or even the traitor forces they fought, every single one of the Space Marines bearing the shark motif had a disc of black obsidian inserted where his helm's visor or face should have been. They were featureless, black as the void, little spheres of nothingness amidst the rough, time-worn stonework. They rendered each warrior quite literally faceless and unidentifiable.

'Here we can see the intervention of the Obsidians as the Blood Angels make their withdrawal,' Sozel said, pointing to various sections of the bas-relief. 'They counter-attacked a force of berserk enemy warriors led by some great champion of darkness, and turned them back with a fury to match. Not even the Sons of Sanguinius had witnessed such bloodshed before, or so the ancient accounts tell us.'

'There are none without the discs?' Rannik asked. 'None that haven't been rendered faceless?'

'No,' Sozel said. 'After a decade's supplication to our mortuary-librarium and a month's fasting, one of my brother archivists was granted permission to remove one of the discs to inspect what lay beneath. He found nothing, only a smooth insert. The obsidian does not cover their features. It represents them. There is nothing beneath.'

'I had heard tell that the discs were a later addition,' Vex said, gazing at the faceless warriors. 'There is a story told by some stall-sellers that they appeared overnight, centuries after the wall's completion.'

'Disingenuous gutter gossip at best,' Sozel snapped, glaring at Vex. 'And heresy at worst. Such an idea is ridiculous.'

Rannik said nothing. She had stepped up to the wall and was reaching out, up towards the disc covering the helm of one of the mysterious warriors locked in battle with a many-limbed warp-spawn. The obsidian was chill to the touch. She shivered again, and drew her hand back. As she did so, she noticed something further up the fresco. On the hull of a rolling battle tank, carved into the stonework, were a series of markings. They were illegible, a nonsensical scraping of circles and dashes, but for some reason Rannik was certain they hadn't been there for long. She was about to point out the scratchings to Sozel, but he spoke before she could, turning away from the frescos.

'These are not the only inscriptions featuring the Obsidians,' he said, motioning back down the hill at the forest of graveyards and tombs stretching out beneath them in every direction. 'But this is the largest and most detailed display. Over

the past decade I have documented almost three hundred incidents of these Space Marines in frescos, murals and bas-relief images, from the walls of the Lower Graves to the Devotarium of the Fifty-five Saviours.'

'You can furnish us with details of where we can find the rest?' Vex asked.

'I believe the majority are logged, yes. I will provide you with a data-slate once we depart.'

'The masons and architects who carved this,' Rannik said, gazing up at the faceless Adeptus Astartes. 'Do we know where they drew their inspiration from? How accurate is their work?'

'Both the Imperial Cenotaph and these walls were designed by the great Markano Ditchari, when Hypasitis was first redesignated as a cemetery world for the war's martyrs,' Sozel said. 'Construction was begun within a decade of the Archenemy's final defeat, but it took over a century to complete. Ditchari is believed to have worked with a number of eyewitnesses in order to ensure faithful renditions of his subjects, but just who they were was never recorded. Their descendants may yet live on Hypasitis. It is believed all other portrayals are copies of these original frescos, and none match them for either accuracy or artistry.'

'You recognise them, don't you?' Vex asked, looking directly at Rannik. 'The Obsidians. They're what we're here for.'

'Perhaps,' she said, hoping the distress she had felt when she had first laid eyes on the obsidian discs hadn't been noted by Legate Frain's operative. 'I will have to conduct further studies before I can compile a report.'

'Darkness is falling,' Sozel said, gesturing to the lengthening shadows of the tombs all around them. 'It is not permissible to stay here after the beginning of the night cycle. Not even with your clearance. Nor should you wish to still be here. This is a place for the hallowed dead. The living do not belong.'

They took a land carrier from the City of Martyrs to the seaside residential town of Morrsburg. Night had fallen and the carrier's transport cabin was packed with mourners on their way to their rented accommodation and undertaker-serfs returning to their hab blocks. Those clad in the stifling funerary garb were in various states of undress, hats, shawls and veils pulled off to reveal tired, drawn faces. Vex and Rannik no longer drew disapproving glances.

Sozel had left them, returning to his scriptorium undercroft. He had grudgingly agreed to take Rannik to another of the prominent Obsidian frescos the next day, but beyond that had sworn he had done all he could to assist them. He had

provided Vex with a data-slate containing scans of all the known examples of architecture featuring the Obsidians on Hypasitis.

‘You think it’s them?’ he asked her as he passed her the slate. They had been unable to procure one of the carrier’s wooden benches, so instead stood in the aisle, gripping the overhead supports as the transport rocked along the winding roads out of the grave sites and into what passed for Hypasitis’ countryside. She shrugged, not wanting to be drawn. She had no doubt the carvings on the cemetery walls represented the Carcharodon Astra. Vex knew as much, she was certain. He would carry news to his own master, and if Frain and Nzogwu wished to continue their joint investigation that was up to them, but Rannik had long ago learned the value of not giving away anything freely, least of all information.

‘Something intervened during the Ghost War,’ Vex carried on, watching her carefully. ‘If not them, then who? How many loyal Chapters are there in the galaxy that are all but undocumented in Imperial archives?’

‘Perhaps you should ask the Blood Angels,’ Rannik said.

Vex laughed dryly.

‘My master has many contacts, but I rather suspect they are not among them. Still, I will suggest as much to him.’

The land carrier rolled to a stop three times before reaching Morrsburg, disgorging passengers along the way. After the second Vex and Rannik were able to sit. The black drapes either side of the window slats had been let down and fastened in place, so the carrier’s occupants could not look out into the depths of the night. Rannik was sure it was just some foolish local superstition, but she could understand why Sozel had been so eager to return to his undercroft before night fell. Even the most rational servant of the God-Emperor would surely have struggled to countenance staying out amidst the bleak headstones and funerary statues, with only the groaning wind for company. Rannik considered herself more level-headed than many, but there was no possibility she was going to pursue the investigation on into Hypasitis’ hours of darkness.

The transport’s cabin was almost empty by the time they approached the final stop, the hooded lamps dimmed, the deck underfoot swaying slightly with the carrier’s rugged motion. Morrsburg was one of the smallest of the seaside towns inhabited by Hypasitis’ living population. Vex had already organised their accommodation with a minor mourning guild, under the guise of an uncle and his niece come to pay their respects to a long-dead ancestor in the Astra Militarum. The thought of returning to the necropolis city and Sozel’s bitter

company the next day filled Rannik with misery. The sooner she scanned the remaining frescos and compiled them for Nzogwu's analysis, the sooner she could be away from this bleak corpse-world.

She felt her eyelids growing heavy. Vex had returned his attention to the brochure he had taken from the skyrail, penning notes in the page corners with a stylo.

She was about to rest her head on her arms when a sound disturbed the swaying rhythm of the cabin – fabric, swishing across the bare floor of the aisle. She half turned, looking back at the far end of the cabin. There, standing before the door leading to the drive compartment, was the same black-clad woman she had seen on the skyrail. Her face was still hidden behind the delicate embroidery of her mourning veil, but the thick, silken black folds of her expensive Shontii-style dress were unmistakably the same. The hems were now crusted with grave dirt, as though she had spent all day down among the final resting places of the dead.

She was looking at Rannik, the arbitrator was certain of it. Dread settled over her like a pall, clenching in her stomach and sending ice down her spine. Her hand went instinctively to the snub-nosed autopistol concealed in the pocket of her fatigues as the dim lanterns throughout the carriage dipped for a second. The woman remained where she was, silent, ominous, as much a spectre of death as the thousands of grim carvings Rannik had seen that day.

She stood and approached the figure, hand gripping the pistol in her pocket, her body tense with an unreasoning, surreal sense of fear. The lamps flickered again, and the carrier's tracks gave off an eerie shriek. Still the figure didn't move, even when Rannik stopped right in front of her. She reached up, towards the veil, remembering the black, faceless discs of obsidian that marked the fresco carvings. Remembering the bloody horrors that haunted her every night, the rippled faces and screaming mouths of those butchered by the monsters on Zartak.

She tore the veil away.

And woke with a start. Vex was staring at her over the top of the brochure. She looked about, blinking. She was still on the bench next to the window slat. Apart from the two of them, the carriage was empty. Of the woman in black, there was no sign.

'We're five minutes out from Morrsburg,' Vex said, snapping the brochure shut and pocketing it.

'I-I fell asleep?' Rannik asked, trying to process what had happened. She stood up, scanning the swaying carriage in the low light, unable to shake the sense of

dread the shrouded figure had brought on.

‘You’ve had a long day,’ Vex said, his voice more stoic than comforting. ‘Surrounded by death’s legacy. I think it’s time both of us got some rest.’

‘You didn’t see the woman?’ Rannik demanded, pointing at the drive compartment hatch. ‘The woman in the mourning dress and veil? She was standing right there!’

Vex stood, and for a moment, as the cabin swayed to a halt, his face was thrown into shadow. Rannik hadn’t realised just quite how savage his burn scars could make him look.

‘This is the final stop,’ he said, pulling her kitbag down from the overhead holder and tossing it to her. She caught it, but instead of following him to the exit she turned back to the drive hatch. There was something on it, carved into the metal. Markings, scrapes she had only noticed when she had pointed out the woman’s absence to Vex. They were a collection of circles and dashes, ones that she had seen before. They were identical to the inscription carved into the fresco. She could have sworn they hadn’t been there when they had boarded the carrier.

‘There was no woman standing there, arbitrator,’ Vex said right behind her, making her jump. ‘Hypasitis is a place that weighs heavily on frayed minds. I suggest we find our guild before it gets any later. Tomorrow will likely be just as taxing as today.’

Rannik said nothing, but slung her bag over her shoulder and followed Frain’s operative towards the disembarkation ladder. As she went her back prickled and her fists clenched. She could have sworn she felt eyes from the drive cabin doorway on her, every step of the way.

Our sanctuary is violated, my children. He is coming, and he is carrying the darkness with him. I have seen his approach. I have seen the thing that latches its claws on to him, into him, into the flesh of his back. Years ago it ripped his flesh, and it rips his soul still. The canker is throbbing within him, choking his throat, writhing in his breast. Old Arathar will not listen to us, so we must act alone. We must cut it out. I have prepared the necessary tools. We must free him of his taint, carve it from his body before it is too late. Before he brings damnation and destruction down upon us all.

Bring him to me.

– Astropathic dream-cant echo, detected by the choristorum on
Bella Natrix and deciphered by Astro-scrivener Hudlo,
4583891.M41.

--- **CHAPTER V**

The high hall of the Lost Eyrie was a place of barbaric splendour. The black stone walls of the spire's pinnacle were interspersed with burning braziers and battle trophies – ragged banners bearing the Ashen Claws' sigils and the bald-headed corvids hung alongside ancient suits of tarnished, dark power armour and archaic weaponry of all shapes and sizes. The floor was spread with rough mats of woven tundra grass and littered with the bones and spilt drink of a prolonged feast. A dozen heavy tables were ranged around a central pit which crackled with the embers of a dying fire, the benches that flanked them packed with revellers. They were a mixture of Space Marines and humans, male and female, mostly unarmoured, pale-skinned, dark-haired and clad in furs and homespun. They had been in uproarious conversation, the tables scattered with platters of half-eaten vat-meat, gritbread and fungal dressings. As Bail Sharr entered, however, silence fell. All eyes turned towards the interlopers.

The Reaper Prime and his command squad ignored the stares and muttering as the heavy adamantium doors clanged shut behind them, sending shudders through the floor. Sharr began to advance to the far end of the hall, where a raised dais was occupied by the top table. Its occupants were as eclectic a mix as anywhere else in the chamber – several Space Marines, some armoured in the dark grey and butcher's red of the renegade Chapter, some humans of varying ages. Between them all was a particularly broad Space Marine, sat on a high-backed throne and clad only in rough-patched trousers and a loincloth of black feathers. His skin, puckered with scars and the dermal ports of the black carapace, was pale as alabaster, even whiter than that of the Carcharodons. His eyes were similarly black, while his long, jet hair hung down about his broad shoulders. His face had a leanness to it, haughty and cruel. At his right hand sat a

woman, slender where the Space Marine was broad, though her skin was almost as fair and her hair, bound up about her crown, was almost as black. She wore a shamanic dress of thick corvid feathers, and her right hand rested on a large, yellowing bird skull set on the table before her.

Not a word was spoken as the Carcharodons delegation passed around the fire smouldering in the pit at the hall's centre and came to a halt before the dais. The silence was broken by the cawing of one of the ugly, bald-headed birds that seemed to infest the Eyrie, perched up on the flying buttresses of black stone that broke up the hall's open ceiling.

'Carcharodon Astra,' the bare-chested Space Marine said slowly, a cold smile splitting his white features. 'I see my First Company captain has guided you straight and true. You are as bold and as foolish as ever, coming here after what transpired between us last time.'

'Chapter Master Nehat Nev,' Sharr said, inclining his head. 'Kia orrae. It has been some time since I saw you last.'

Nev's smile disappeared. He did not mirror the Carcharodon's respectful gesture.

'Then you have me at a disadvantage already, little predator. You are not Akia, yet you wear his battleplate. And, going by the killer's lust in your eyes, I more than suspect you are descended from his lineage.'

'I am Reaper Prime Bail Sharr, of the Third Company,' Sharr responded. 'I was a member of Captain Akia's delegation when last we visited your domain.'

'What has become of Akia?'

'Dead these past ten years. Killed battling xenos in the depths of the Outer Dark.'

Nev grunted. His expression didn't show whether he welcomed the news or considered it sorrowful.

'So Akia is gone,' he said. 'And the rest of your Chapter must be dying. You would not be here otherwise. It is always the same.'

'The reasons for our return are the same,' Sharr allowed. 'But what we find here is also the same. The Ashen Claws, champions of the Great Crusade, reduced to feasting and drinking away whatever remains of their legacy in a forgotten system abandoned by everyone – your allies, your enemies, the gods themselves.'

Nev's expression darkened, and the Space Marines either side of him visibly stiffened.

'Akia's progeny indeed,' the Ashen Claw said. 'Arrogant. Bold. Hungry for

blood. If you were with us when last we parleyed, you will remember well enough that his foolishness nearly got him killed. You would do well to not repeat his mistakes so soon.'

'I have not come here for blood,' Sharr said. 'My ships stand off at your command, and my company remains in orbit. My own honour guard are outside, beyond the sealed doors of this hall. My life is at your mercy, raven's son, but my death would benefit only those who would destroy us both.'

'Then speak,' Nev snapped, slamming a fist down suddenly on the table, sending platters and utensils clattering. 'Why are you here, mongrel?'

'We require a tithe,' Sharr said.

'Of course. Of flesh?'

'Yes.'

'Why? Have your own Red Tithings failed you, Reaper Prime?'

'The Chapter is at war. There is a vast xenos threat, the scale of which is not yet known to the Imperium, approaching from the Outer Dark. It must be contained.'

'And what do you bring in return?'

'Arms and armour, enough to replenish your supplies and restore some of your faded glory.'

'Do the machine-men know you are siphoning off their gifts to traitors and renegades?' Nev asked mockingly. 'You understand that the Imperium you claim to serve would have you all declared *excommunicate traitoris* if they discovered your dealings with us?'

'The Grey Tithes are ours, to do with as we please,' Sharr said. 'And you do not know the contents of our Edicts of Exile. The pact between us is one of convenience. Through it, countless sectors of Imperial space have been preserved, without their commanders even realising the danger their worlds were in.'

'You still serve an Imperium that is barely even aware of your existence,' Nev said. 'Ten thousand years and you have not changed. Your doctrines are ones of miserable self-isolation and denial. You have surrendered any scraps of human nature you once had. Those you save view you as monsters, and rightly so. At least here we have not forgotten or abandoned what you still fight to save – our humanity.'

'That is as the Void Father wishes,' Sharr said, forcing his voice to remain level. 'I have not come here to debate the doctrines of my Chapter, Nehat Nev. I came with a simple offer. A flesh tithe and fleet support in exchange for materiel.'

'Now we come to the truth of it,' Nev said, smiling coldly. 'Not only will you

take our sons, but you wish to draw us into your wars. Fleet support? We have come a long way to avoid serving your rotting Imperium, shark. Why would we change that now?’

‘The threat we are facing is not one you have encountered before,’ Sharr said. ‘The tyrannids are insatiable hive-creatures that cannot be bribed or bargained with. Their tendrils have already ravaged the Eastern Fringe once, and they will bite deeper soon if we do not stop them. If they ever reach the Atargatis System you will not be able to resist them. You will be wiped from existence, and none will ever know of your passing.’

‘And these words are supposed to encourage me to assist you?’ Nev demanded. ‘If this foe really is as dire as you say then why should I risk my own Chapter’s ships and warriors? Let your Imperium face this threat. I will not sacrifice my people for your corrupt masters.’

‘I am calling upon you to remember your purpose, Ashen Claw,’ Sharr responded. ‘You and your brothers are warriors first and last. Here you slide into the arms of indolence and debauchery. When was the last time you crossed blades with an enemy beyond your sparring pits? And do not claim you seek to preserve your own people. You are headed towards extinction as assuredly as we are. Without the proper facilities and the right knowledge your gene-seed is degrading and your numbers are shrinking. How many of you will be left in a few hundred years? A thousand? We can change that. We can preserve your legacy if you show us that it is something worth saving.’

‘Enough of this,’ barked one of the other Space Marines at the high table, rising so fast that his chair clattered back. ‘This traitor-born scum has gone too far!’

‘Sit down, Brother Tanthius,’ snapped a voice. The command did not come from Nev, but from the human woman sitting beside him. She glared at the Space Marine who had risen. The Ashen Claw glanced at his Chapter Master, but Nev’s black eyes hadn’t left Sharr’s. After a moment, Tanthius retrieved his seat.

‘Reaper Prime,’ the woman said, looking back at Sharr. ‘Continue.’

Sharr glanced at her for a moment, then nodded his head in thanks.

‘We bring more than just bolters and power armour,’ he said. ‘We bring the genetic legacy of your ancestors. Not much, for we have little enough to spare as it is. But it is pure.’

‘You have not contaminated it with your disgusting breed?’ Nev demanded.

‘No. I have full details, as well as readouts covering the rest of our offerings, available as part of a data burst package. You may also inspect it in person, of

course.'

'And how many of my sons will you take in exchange for it?'

'That can be debated. The assistance of part of your fleet is just as important. We will almost certainly be overrun without it.'

'You want the *Wicked Claw*,' Nev said. 'And you think the offer of a gene-seed tribute alongside arms and armour will be enough. But it will not be. If you were with Akia when last your Chapter entered this place you would know why negotiations came so close to breaking down. You have something that belongs to the Ashen Claws, shark. Something that belonged to my forbears. Two items that your master stole from us.'

'This has been discussed before,' Sharr said.

'And remains unresolved,' Nev said before Sharr could go on. 'You want a deal, Reaper Prime. You want our flesh and our warships. You have made that much clear. Let me tell you what I want in return. I want the return of the Red Wake's gauntlets. I want Hunger, and I want Slake.'

The Space Marine named Arathar was a psyker. It was obvious enough from his attire, but was further confirmed by the aura of power bleeding from him. Khauri's witch-sight could see it coiling and twisting like a golden nebula, waiting to be harnessed with a single word or gesture. It was a power not far removed from Te Kahurangi's, just as potent and seemingly intuitive.

After greeting one another, Arathar had taken the Carcharodons Chief Librarian into the room he had emerged from – Khauri caught an impression of spartan rock-cut walls and banks of data crystals and scrolls, wrapped in plastek sheaths to preserve them from the subterranean damp. Te Kahurangi had ordered him to remain in the tunnel confluence outside. He would not be long.

Khauri had bowed his head respectfully, but inside he struggled to suppress the anger that grew more potent with every passing minute. He did not understand what was happening, and that feeling of helplessness had always been anathema to him. How did Te Kahurangi know these renegades? Worse, why did they welcome him with open arms? Did Sharr or the others know how they greeted him? If he was so close to them, why was the Chief Librarian not heading negotiations himself?

He sought to ease his concerned state, certain that Te Kahurangi or, worse, the ancient Ashen Claw would sense his distress. His mind harked back to his training, to the dangers posed by unchecked emotion. More so even than other Carcharodons, he had to find the strength to abandon undue thoughts, abandon

his very self, find the cold, hard core that encapsulated the mindset of his Chapter. Te Kahurangi had assured him that the slow work of his gene-seed would combine with the Chapter doctrines and his own experiences to mould a warrior worthy of the Outer Dark. On the best of days, Khauri had his doubts. On the worst, he heard the voice.

The Lexicanium turned slightly, his thoughts interrupted by a sound. It resolved itself into the slow shuffle of feet. He stepped away from Arathar's door, into the centre of the confluence of tunnels. The noise had grown louder, but the sound was bouncing, impossible to pin down to a single direction. He turned on the spot, silently cursing the seemingly impenetrable nature of the darkness pressing in against the flickering firelight of the braziers.

Focus. He could almost hear Te Kahurangi's soft, rasping voice, speaking words of advice in the total darkness of the psy-monitor chamber on board the *Nicor*. He ceased his turning, closed his eyes and gripped his adamantium stave with both hands. A moment to slow his breathing, to steady his pulse, before his secondary heart could kick in. He reached out with his thoughts, the way Te Kahurangi had taught him to, coalescing them into a conscious creation – the snaking, dead-eyed creatures he had seen in the aquatic chambers aboard the Carcharodons flagship. He sent them shooting down each hall in turn, pale, pelagic shapes slipping through the darkness, visible only to those with the witch-sight.

Down the tunnel to Khauri's left, they found something. He spun, just in time to see a trio of figures coalesce in the light cast by the braziers. They stood barely higher than his knee plates – children, he assumed, though the dark green robes and cowls they wore made it impossible to be certain. They paused on the edge of the flickering firelight, observing Khauri. They possessed an aura less pronounced but not dissimilar to Arathar's – whatever they were, they were psykers, and potent ones at that.

'Who are you?' Khauri demanded.

They did not answer, though one stepped towards him. He stood his ground, stave still grasped in both hands. He felt his secondary heart kick in as his body flooded with adrenal and combat stimms. He fought to suppress the battle-urge and maintain his focus, marshalling his psychic abilities with the use of the earthing stave.

The child stopped before him and looked up. The light picked out the grime-encrusted features of a young girl with blind, milky eyes. Despite her disability, Khauri could sense the child looking at him, her psychic potency giving her a far

more probing means of discernment.

‘You are one of them,’ the girl said. The other two children had followed her, and now stood before the towering Space Marine.

‘I am a void brother of the Carcharodon Astra,’ Khauri said, trying to master the sense of unease that had crept over him. They were just children. Yet how could their young minds apparently harness such psychic strength?

‘Yes,’ the girl said, frowning slightly. ‘But you are also *one of them*.’

‘I do not understand,’ Khauri began, but he got no further. The girl reached out and touched his stave. He felt a shockingly cold, icy sensation rush over him, like a sudden winter flood. He tried to utter the words of warding Te Kahurangi had taught him, tried to marshal his psychic barriers against the sudden assault, but he was too slow and the attack was too overwhelming. His vision dimmed, and the last sensation he felt was a plummeting dislocation as he fell, his stave tumbling from his grasp.

Then, nothing.

The Ashen Claws’ librarium was buried deep beneath the Eyrie, shielded by adamantium-laced rock and wards of triple-locked power. Te Kahurangi joined Arathar at the centre of it, the two Space Marines pacing together between the red-lit data racks and stone-cut alcoves filled with tomes and interspersed with the bones of the Chapter’s corvids. So far below ground, the only noise was the crackle of the electro-candles, the slow drip of moisture and the tapping of the Librarians’ force staffs.

‘Our difficulties continue,’ Arathar said, breaking the quiet.

‘I sensed as much,’ Te Kahurangi admitted. ‘Nehat Nev is becoming ever more desperate.’

‘Resources have grown thin,’ Arathar said. ‘And the tribes are ever more restless. Some speak of rebellion. He has sought to channel their urges into raids on nearby settlements, but he is too afraid of discovery. The Imperium is not as indolent as we like to believe. It is always watching.’

‘It is,’ Te Kahurangi said. The two lapsed into silence once more as they walked. After a while Te Kahurangi motioned towards the chamber around them.

‘Your librarium is quiet, Arathar. I assume your quest to secure a fresh apprentice remains unfulfilled.’

‘You are correct,’ Arathar said, unable to mask the bitterness in his voice. ‘I do not have the resources to find a suitable inductee, and Nev will not permit me to travel far in search of one.’

‘We have struggled recently as well,’ Te Kahurangi admitted. ‘Cut off from the full channels of recruitment, consigned to exile... We both know the difficulties of finding pure, worthy candidates.’

‘Yet you have one,’ Arathar said. ‘I can sense his potential.’

‘He was procured at great cost,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘But I have spared nothing in his tutelage. My own visions tell me he will play a vital part in the future of the Chapter.’

‘And what of your new Reaper Prime?’ Arathar asked. ‘I witnessed old Akia’s passing in a warp dream one night. It was a hard death.’

‘Akia’s mastery of the company had begun to slip towards the end,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘I had many doubts about Bail Sharr when first he took up Reaper, but he has proven me wrong more often than not.’

‘He is of Akia’s own legacy is he not?’

‘He is. He is younger though, more controlled. He will clash with authority, as Akia did, but he is wise enough to not lose sight of the larger picture. Akia had started to do that too often towards the end.’

‘You must be careful, brother. Nev will seek to use his own heritage against him.’

‘I trust him. Perhaps I should not, but we will soon know whether my judgement is misplaced.’

‘I fear he will struggle to win any form of agreement. Nev was left in a vengeful mood after the last visit. He wants blood.’

Any reply from Te Kahurangi was interrupted when Arathar came to an abrupt halt, his grip tightening on his staff. He turned back towards the librarium’s entrance. After a moment the Pale Nomad sensed what Arathar had already felt.

‘Khauri,’ he muttered. Arathar was moving towards the door.

‘They have him,’ he said.

Nehat Nev had risen and paced round from behind the hall’s high table, coming to stand before Sharr. A number of his Ashen Claws made moves to follow him, but the pale warrior stilled them with a gesture. He was taller than Sharr, and almost as broad even without power armour. He looked down at the Carcharodon, head cocked slightly to one side, disdain warring with interest in his haughty gaze. For a brief moment, Sharr thought he knew what it felt like to be hunted by one of the Chapter’s hook-beaked raptors.

‘Do we have an agreement then, Reaper Prime?’ the Ashen Claw asked.

‘The Red Wake will not surrender his weapons,’ Sharr said. ‘I can make an

agreement, but I can give no guarantees.'

Nev turned away and, with a speed that was almost blinding, snatched the large corvid skull from the feast table and smashed it into the floor at his feet, shattering it into a hundred fragments. He looked once more at Sharr, and his black eyes blazed with an abiding, arrogant fury.

'I welcome you here and still you insult me, Carcharodon?'

'The gauntlets are not mine to give.'

'Then what is? You came here to negotiate, so where is your leverage?'

Sharr glanced around. Since they had first stopped before the high table the occupants of the rest of the hall had risen and approached. Sharr's command squad were surrounded by well over a hundred humans and Space Marines, all stoked by their master's fury. Their feast had been interrupted, and the cold indifference of the intruders had set them on edge. They wanted blood, Sharr could smell it.

'I have offered you all I have brought,' he said to Nev. 'Arms, ammunition, the gene-seed that will slow the degeneration of your brotherhood. What more can I give?'

Nev stared at Sharr for a long time. The chamber was hushed. Eventually, the harsh cawing of one of the avians perched high broke the silence.

'You can give me your life, Carcharodon,' Nev said. The comm-bead in Sharr's ear ticked.

'*Contact outside the main doors,*' Kordi's voice crackled, accompanied by the sounds of bolters being racked. '*A dozen Claws in Terminator armour, and more approaching.*'

The first thing that Khauri realised when he woke was that he was surrounded by beings of immense psychic power. Not as strong as the dormant energies he occasionally sensed surrounding Te Kahurangi, but potent nonetheless.

The second thing was that he couldn't move. He was clamped onto what appeared to be a rusting surgical rack, powerful spot-lumens glaring in his eyes. Even worse, his breastplate and backpack had been removed, right down to the servos, leaving his pallid torso and the puckered skin around his neural ports exposed. The armour itself, along with his stave, lay propped against the only door leading into the rock-cut room.

He tensed, trying to break his bonds, but they held firm.

'Steady now, child of the shadows,' said a sibilant voice. 'This will not take long.'

Khauri blinked, his genhanced eyesight reducing the burning light of the lumens shining in his face. There were four figures gathered around the rack he was bound to. Three were the children, their faces lost in the deep shadows of their cowls. The fourth, while likewise clad in a frayed, filth-encrusted green robe and hood, was older – from a glance Khauri guessed he was middle-aged, though the struggles of a hard life had left his features pallid and deeply worn. Like the children, his eyes were also milky and blind. Only with that realisation did Khauri recognise the psychic powers his witch-sight could sense coiling around his captors. They were astropaths, or at the very least the eldest had undergone the Soul-Binding.

‘We need to get rid of the taint inside you,’ the elder one said, smiling and exposing the nubs of his rotting teeth. Khauri realised the blind figure was wearing stained surgical gloves, and held a scalpel in one hand. There was a rusting rack behind him, littered with more medicae tools. Worse, he had inscribed markings onto Khauri’s bare chest with a black stylo – a circle over his abdomen, another just below his throat. He had marked out the location of the Librarian’s progenoid glands, the most vital part of his gene-seed.

‘I will cut the taint out,’ the astropath hissed. ‘I can feel it, squirming and writhing inside you. Breeding. Our hated enemies. The Great Crow will reward me for this.’

‘Get away from me,’ Khauri snarled, trying to marshal his thoughts, trying to bind together the energies that would spring open his locks and fling his captors back against the roughly hewn stone of the small medicae chamber. His stave lay where it had been discarded, beside the door. He felt lost without it, addled and unfocused.

‘The taint must be torn free,’ the children chorused as the older psyker leaned over Khauri, his vile breath in the Carcharodon’s face, the gleaming edge of his scalpel pressing down against the white skin of his chest.

Then, with an ear-splitting crash, the door to the chamber blew inwards. A gale seized the room, sending trays of rusting tools clattering and whipping at the robes of Khauri’s captors, making them stagger. Brilliant light blazed through the doorway, resolving itself around the stooped figure of Arathar. The ancient Librarian’s eyes were ablaze with lambent power, and warpfire flared around the tip of his staff. His dark grey robes snapped and fluttered, as though caught at the centre of a storm.

‘Enough!’ he bellowed, his voice riven with the power of the immaterium, words over-layered as though he spoke from three throats at once. ‘This one isn’t

for you, Damarius!’

The three children fled, wailing, to the embrace of the one Arathar had called Damarius. The astropath spat, clutching the younger psykers protectively as they buried their faces in the folds of his robes.

‘He is one of them,’ he hissed, gesturing at Khauri with his scalpel. ‘His presence here violates the Eyrie! I can sense the taint inside him, and across his back! I have seen the scars!’

Arathar made the slightest of gestures, and the clamps holding Khauri in place sprang open with a thud. The Carcharodon leapt to the floor and snatched his stave, a canticle of binding on his lips. Rather than the vengeful surge of power he was seeking, however, he felt his strength desert him, as though drained by some external source. He put a hand against the cool, rough stone of the wall, steadying himself.

‘Easy now, brother,’ said a new voice. It was Te Kahurangi. He had stepped in after Arathar, the jade stone that tipped his own force staff pulsing with power. ‘There is no need for violence here.’

Arathar had also lowered his staff, though witch-light still lingered in his one good eye as he glared at Damarius. The air of the room was vibrating, affected by the presence of so many psykers. Khauri could sense the tension continuing to rise – he could feel the very stone beneath his fingers pulsing with raw energy.

‘You’ve scared them!’ Damarius snapped as he cradled the weeping children. ‘You should know not to do that by now!’

‘Then calm them,’ Arathar responded coldly. ‘This is no way to treat our guests. You could have broken our entire pact single-handedly.’

Damarius hushed the psy-sensitive youths, and slowly Khauri felt the pressure in the room starting to subside. He eased his grip on his stave and bent to retrieve his breastplate. As he did so he felt Arathar’s eyes on him, running the length of his scarred back, taking in the wounds dealt to him a decade earlier. Though he had suffered them before his transcendence to the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes, they had never healed. Te Kahurangi had dismissed their significance, though he knew their origin better than most.

‘They are hungry,’ Damarius said, gesturing down at his now-quiet charges.

‘I will have leftovers brought down from the feast hall,’ Arathar said. He sounded weary, distracted, the fearsome psychic warrior that had first burst into the chamber now gone.

‘We should return to the hall,’ Te Kahurangi said as Khauri clamped on his upper armour, moving to help him connect the backpack’s exposed Mark V

power cables. 'I fear the Reaper Prime has arrived at the decisive point in the negotiations.'

'One last word before you go, brother,' Arathar said. He nodded at Khauri and Te Kahurangi motioned him outside with his staff.

'Follow the corridor beyond this door up two flights,' he said. 'It will take you back onto the path to the hall. When you find it, wait, and I will catch up with you.'

Khauri didn't move. For a few long seconds the Chief Librarian and his apprentice locked eyes, saying nothing. One of the children began to cry again.

Eventually the Lexicanium nodded and left, saying nothing.

'What is he?'

Te Kahurangi didn't reply. Arathar shook his head.

'You are bold, bringing him to this place. I know now why you have sought me out, rather than joining your captain in the high hall.'

'He is vital to the Chapter's future,' Te Kahurangi said. 'I have seen it.'

'What else have you seen?' Arathar demanded. 'Do not tell me that this... creature, brings only hope.'

'You know as well as I that the future is a narrow path for ones such as us,' Te Kahurangi replied. 'On the one side, the salvation of the Chapter. On the other, annihilation, damnation. Khauri walks it, just like the rest of us.'

'And if he should fall?' Arathar asked. 'Or, worse, if he should realise what the scarring on his back portends?'

'Then I will catch him,' Te Kahurangi said, turning and leaving the medicae room.

The Ashen Claws' gladiatorial pit lay in the open air, out amidst the jagged black rocks that marked the boundary between the Lost Eyrie's spire and the rugged, bleak tundra of the Atargatis plains. Night had fallen, swathing the land in darkness, but the great braziers and burning pits that surrounded the arena had been lit, rendering the display in a fiery hue. The arena itself was a natural depression that had been augmented by its renegade masters. The bottom, a bare place of gravel and gnawed bones, had been accentuated so that the immediate sides were sheer, trapping anyone caught in it. The rugged sides above the edge had been planed down to rough tiers, stepped seating that was now teeming with hundreds of onlookers, human and transhuman alike. They had come to the arena not over the rocky slopes that descended from the Eyrie's plunging flanks, but through the underground passageways and tunnels that honeycombed its

surface.

It was in one such tunnel that Sharr made ready for combat. As the cheering of the crowd drifted down to them, Strike Veteran Dorthor checked his battleplate, the few scarred parts of his face not replaced by bionic augmentation unreadable in the torchlight. He tugged at a vambrace, rang his fist against a pauldron, checked the sealant clamps around Sharr's gorget. The rest of the command squad, accompanied by Te Kahurangi and Khauri, stood around them in the flickering firelight. The two psykers had joined them as they descended from the high hall to the pit. Sharr had explained the situation on the way.

'Let me go,' Red Tane said for the eleventh time. The Third Company's champion was practically shuddering in his own armour, desperate to defend the honour of his void brethren and the Reaper Prime. Sharr said nothing, turning to allow Dorthor to check his backpack's vent tabs, power cables and mag-clamps.

'It is my purpose in life,' Tane went on, hand clenching and unclenching with subconscious fervour around the pommel of the void sword. 'You chose me to be the company champion. That means you chose me to represent you in trials like these. I will slaughter whatever these renegades unleash.'

'Enough, brother,' Sharr said quietly as Dorthor stepped away, his work done. 'Nehat Nev was clear enough. For the agreement to be binding, it must be me.'

'He dishonours me,' Tane said, grip on his sword tightening. 'He dishonours us all!'

'How often must I tell you that honour is a dead thing,' Sharr replied, unclamping Reaper from his backpack and testing the great chainaxe's weight. 'Will you never learn the tenets of the Chapter, young champion?'

'Be silent,' Dorthor said, the strike veteran's rasping tone cutting off Tane as he began to speak again. The champion bristled, but said nothing more.

'Swear me an oath that you will not draw the void sword this day, regardless of what happens to me,' Sharr said to Tane.

'This is wrong,' the champion said through gritted teeth.

'It is unavoidable,' Te Kahurangi said, laying a hand on Tane's pauldron. 'Nehat Nev has to make an example of us. He has failed to secure a guarantee over Hunger and Slake, just as he failed when last we came here. He has failed to take the upper hand because we hold nothing more than we originally intended to offer. He can either accept what we are giving him and save his Chapter, or spite us with a refusal.'

'So why must the Reaper Prime fight?' Tane demanded.

'It is a show of strength. Nev has taken our bargain, but he has to be seen to be

in control. He also knows we are not likely to turn down a trial by arms. Officially, it is only a formality, a means of sealing negotiations.'

'That is madness. We don't even know what is waiting in that pit. The Reaper Prime could be killed!'

'If that is the Void Father's wish, it will be so,' Sharr said. 'At this point my fate is no longer relevant. Korro and Kordi's squads are overseeing the delivery of our cargo and the arrival of the shuttles that will take the Ashen Claw's tribute. If I die here, I will have done my duty to the Chapter. Nuritona will return to the Nomad Predation Fleet with our tithe, and you will be with him.'

The cheering of the crowd outside rose.

'It is time,' Te Kahurangi said. 'Go with Rangu's blessings, Reaper Prime.'

Sharr stepped away from his command squad, towards the end of the tunnel. The roaring of the crowd reached a crescendo as he passed out into the firelight bathing the bottom of the pit. Thousands lined the tiers above him, jeering, yelling and gesticulating, the arena resounding with their thunderous expectations. Nehat Nev sat enthroned on a rocky spur, flanked by blazing braziers, his court and a bodyguard of Terminators, fully armed and armoured. He had donned his own wargear, baroque plates of dark grey and red.

'Welcome, shark,' the master of the Ashen Claws called down to Sharr as the Reaper Prime paced towards the centre of the pit, gravel crunching beneath his boots. 'I am glad to see your commitment to our new pact runs deep enough for you to risk your own life. We shall have a little sport, you and I, before we part ways.'

'Unleash whatever pet you keep locked down here, Nev,' Sharr said, eyes on the tunnel opposite the one he had emerged from, its entrance barred by a rusting portcullis. 'The sooner I put it down, the sooner I can return to my shoal.'

'You shouldn't call him a pet, Sharr,' Nev said, his voice slick with cruel humour. 'He could well be a brother to you. We picked him up during a supply raid into the Mordant Nebula six years ago. We found his vile breed attacking an agri-cluster off Hyrax. He was unfortunate enough to survive.'

The cheering of the crowd redoubled as the portcullis opposite Sharr clattered slowly upwards, the stone tunnel beyond yawning. Sharr hefted Reaper and planted his feet, boots grinding in the grit. For a moment there was nothing as the portcullis grated up into its slats, nothing but the howling and jeering of the spectators and the quiet in Sharr's mind as his Lyman's ear silenced them.

Then came a roar, one that was immediately familiar to the Reaper Prime – the sound of a chainaxe activating. It was followed by a second similar roar, and the

crowd reached new heights of fervour as, with a bellow of rawest hatred, a Space Marine came storming from the shadows of the tunnel.

Sharr's genhanced mind took two seconds to assess the oncoming figure before his reflexes kicked in, causing him to trigger Reaper and bring the weapon up in a defensive stance. The warrior was *excommunicate traitoris*, a heretic. His armour was ancient and badly worn, chipped and crusted with old blood, but the symbols of one particularly hateful Legion were still visible alongside the blasphemous runes of his savage allegiances – the XII, the World Eaters. He wielded a chainaxe in each fist, both shorter and more nimble than Reaper's two-handed length. Judging by the speed and ferocity of the warrior's charge he was more than likely addled by excessive combat stimms and the nightmarish cranial surgery that drove all World Eaters into their berserk state.

Sharr had just enough time to appreciate the irony before the Chaos Space Marine hit him. It was like being struck full on by a charging rhinox. The moment of collision saw one of the berserker's chainaxes slam Reaper's haft, driving the weapon down and exposing Sharr's breastplate in time for the traitor's shoulder-barge to connect. There was an ear-splitting crack of ceramite meeting ceramite. A normal human's chest cavity would have been pulverised, his spine shattered. Sharr was slammed back two paces, but took the hit, the skull-and-lightning crest on his breastplate cracked down the middle.

There was no time for recovery – the berserker's second chainaxe passed inches from Sharr's helmet, narrowly clipping the side of his backpack. The Reaper Prime was inside the traitor's guard, but too close to wield his own weapon effectively. He slammed the haft back against the World Eater's breastplate, and for a moment their helmets were forced together. Sharr realised that one lens in the berserker's battered visor was shattered. A yellow eye glared at him from behind it, bloodshot, dilated and riven with a butcher's madness.

The connection lasted less than a second. The berserker headbutted him. Sharr went back again as another crack rang around the pit, only his genetic enhancements saving him from long moments of stunned concussion. He turned the backwards step into a short retreat, giving himself enough room to swing properly for the first time. Reaper went low and hard from left to right, its motor revving, but the adamantium-tipped teeth bit only Atargatis' flame-torn night air. The berserker, showing reflexes every bit as sharp as Sharr's, threw himself back to avoid the disembowelling strike. For all his drug-fuelled fury, the traitor's movements were well-considered and honed. For a moment, Sharr was reminded of the sparring matches he and the rest of the command squad had once

conducted with Akia.

Reaper passed the berserker by and he came back in, both axes a blur. Sharr managed to flick the butt of Reaper's haft up in time to knock one of the strikes to one side, but the other connected, screaming as it hit his left pauldron and juddering over the bonding studs in a hail of sparks. Warning runes lit up on his visor as he threw his left side back, dragging the traitor after his weapon as it found purchase and bit into ceramite and plasteel. Sharr met the warrior once more with his haft, cracking the space between his two grips against the heretic's visor. The berserker reeled away, and Sharr was forced to clench his sharpened teeth so as not to release a roar of effort as he swung Reaper back round with all his strength. Now it was the turn of the Carcharodon's weapon to shriek as it connected, chewing off the upper curve of the traitor's baroque pauldron and slicing off a piece of the *caedere remissum* mantle that adorned his battered helmet.

No pause, no hesitation. As Sharr's attack swung wide the traitor was coming forwards again, raining down blows with both axes. Sharr just managed to bring Reaper back in time to parry one, two, three strikes, more fat sparks raining across the arena, the trio of weapons roaring and snarling at each other like primeval beasts. Sharr gave more ground, muscles burning with the strain of matching each madness-fuelled blow. The connection with his left pauldron had drawn blood – he could feel the wound clotting, the sting drowned out by anti-pain stimms and counterseptic. He had almost been forced back up against the pit's sheer side. The World Eater was unrelenting, striking from every guard – overhead, underarm, scything cross-cuts, short-distance jabs designed to lock the axe's snarling teeth onto Sharr's gorget, breastplate, elbow joints. Always he was too close to bring Reaper's full weight to bear, too fast for the bigger weapon to land the decapitating, limb-shearing hit that would have finished the duel in an instant.

Sharr could feel his own anger rising. It was something he was aware of, but it wasn't something he could stop. It had been dragged up from dark, cold depths by the heat and speed of the combat, forced upon him by the savagery of the madman striking at him over and over. His throat caught with every breath, and his visor's vitae monitor started to chime, tracking rises beyond the accepted norms of combat.

He was the only one to have beaten Akia, the only one to have bested him on the sparring mats. The traitor would fall the same way the last Reaper Prime had. Sharr jabbed his right foot forwards, going on the offensive. He opened his guard

with a huge overhand blow. For all his own ferocity, the traitor's parry wasn't enough – Reaper sent one of the two chainaxes skidding from the heretic's numbed fingers, the rotor shattered, dozens of wicked chain teeth scattering across the pit. The World Eater barely hesitated, bringing his second axe round in a wicked arc. If Sharr had attempted to recover from his blow with a parry using Reaper, he would have been too slow.

But he didn't use Reaper. Leaving the two-handed chainaxe embedded in the gravel, he spun into the World Eater's guard, taking the hit on his shoulder, forcing himself in close. He slammed his helmet into the traitor's at the same time as he snatched the wrist of the arm still bearing a weapon, the crowd gasping with excitement at the cracking sound of ceramite on ceramite as it clapped out across the arena.

For a moment the two warriors struggled, pressed against one another, muscles bulging and servos grating. Sharr's breathing rasped in his helmet's filters as he grappled with the berserker, one hand keeping the remaining chainaxe to the side while the other punched over and over into the warrior's plastron, the grey gauntlet ringing from the battered, blood-red armour. The heretic's free arm had locked around Sharr's back, snatching at his backpack. With bestial strength, he ripped away one of the armour's exposed power cables. Red warning icons flared across Sharr's visor, indicating energy shortages to his left side and rising servo temperature levels.

Another cable popped from its socket with a crack of released charge. The left side of Sharr's armour locked entirely, servos jamming, leaving him unable to bend his arm. With a howl of fury the World Eater ripped his chainaxe from the Carcharodon's grasp and raised the weapon to strike.

Sharr lowered his head and rammed it straight forwards. He did so with a roar of his own, driving every last ounce of his strength into the movement, shattering the silence he had maintained since the start of the combat. The jagged ceramite crest running along the top of his helmet ploughed into the shattered eye-lens of the traitor's helm, crumpling as it carried on through flesh and bone, and pierced the World Eater's brain. The warrior immediately began to spasm violently, the chainaxe tumbling from his grip to judder and twitch, like its master, in the gravel. The World Eater slumped back off the crest and fell to his knees, then onto his back, feet drumming the ground, fists clenching and unclenching.

Sharr raised his head, slowly, panting. Blood and torn cranial matter ran in thick rivulets down his helmet, its crest turned red. The crowd had gone silent.

For a moment, the only movements were the death-throes of the Chaos Space Marine, the only sounds his ceramite scraping in the dirt. Sharr's fists were clenched, his whole body rigid and shaking. It took what felt like an eternity to bring his breathing down to an even level, to ease his twin heartbeats, pounding their furious tattoo in his breast.

He sought the silence, a canticle of oblivion running through his mind, but it would not do. The rage would not leave. He turned to Nev's rocky throne and gestured towards him.

'You wanted this?' he barked. The Ashen Claw's expression had turned dark. Sharr walked to where Reaper still lay planted in the gravel, dragged it free and lifted it high before activating it. The familiar, vicious roar once again filled the arena. He paced over to the fallen traitor, whose body still twitched with his ruined brain's endless kill-imperatives.

'You wanted this?' Sharr repeated, and swung Reaper. The chainaxe's roar rose to a howl as it bit ceramite, then flesh, then bone, blood spraying. The traitor's head came away, separating from its shattered helm as it rolled in the gore-drenched grit. Sharr let Reaper's roar drop to a throaty growl as he bent and retrieved the pallid, bloody trophy.

'Then you can have it!' he roared, and flung it at Nev. There was an audible gasp from the crowd, followed immediately by the thump of flesh striking flesh. With reflexes that even most Space Marines would struggle to follow, Nev's hand had shot out and caught the grisly trophy. An aftershock of blood whipped the master of the Ashen Claws, leaving a red spray across his dark power armour. His eyes hadn't left Sharr, and remained fixed on him as he let the head tumble, bouncing across the black Atargatis stone.

Sharr said nothing more. He turned away from the arena and paced back down the tunnel he had entered through, mag-locking Reaper as he went.

Neither Te Kahurangi, Khauri or Sharr's command squad said anything as they rejoined the Reaper Prime in the rock passage leading to the gladiatorial pit. Blood streaked the Carcharodon's helmet, and had turned his gauntlets red. Eventually Dorthor spoke.

'Strike Leader Nuritona reports that the *White Maw* has taken its first shipment of the tithe, Reaper Prime. The youths are currently being secured in the main hold.'

Sharr knew what those words meant – screaming, wailing, tears, eyes wide with terror. He had seen it enough times already, both before and after his ascension

to command of the Third Company. While he had fought in front of Nehat Nev, the Ashen Claw's enforcers had been prising children from their mother's arms and dragging them to the black bellies of the cargo shuttles.

'How long until the holds are full?' he asked.

'Two more hours, approximately.'

Sharr unclamped his helm, shook the blood from it and mag-locked it to his side. As he did so the scent of the heretic's blood caught in the back of his nostrils – coppery, bitter, fresh with newly spilled vitality. It sent a surge of adrenaline through the Space Marine's body. He suppressed the resurgent need to kill. He had failed in the pit, he would not do so again – not surrounded by his brothers.

'Your work here is done, Reaper Prime,' Te Kahurangi said softly, no doubt sensing the Reaper Prime's internal struggle. It took a supreme effort to not snap at the Chief Librarian, to avoid cursing the Ashen Claws and their petty needs. Sealing a pact with an honour duel was one thing. Nev had taken it a step too far.

'We return to *Void Spear*,' Sharr said. 'The sooner we leave this accursed place the better.'

'Captain,' Dorthor said, his tone shot through with warning. A moment later the reason became apparent. Someone was approaching down the tunnel. It was Nev. For the first time since Sharr had met him, he was alone.

Tane's hand dropped to the void sword's hilt, but froze when Sharr cast him an icy glance. Nev came to a halt amidst the Carcharodons. He was still armoured, but wore no helmet and was armed with nothing but a wicked dagger, sheathed at his hip. His expression was impassive in the shadows of the tunnel.

'A moment more of your time, Carcharodon, before you depart,' he said. Sharr remained silent, his command squad motionless around him.

'Alone,' Nev added, voice cold and echoing in the rocky passage. Eventually Sharr nodded.

'Proceed to the gunship, brethren,' he said, eyes not leaving Nev. The command squad departed reluctantly, casting lingering glances at the master of the Ashen Claws as they passed. Te Kahurangi was the last to leave, his eyes not on Nev but on Sharr. The Reaper Prime nodded to him, but said nothing.

For a moment, after the sound of footsteps and the hum of powered battleplate had receded up the tunnel, there was silence. Both Space Marines stood facing one another. It was Nev who spoke first.

'My every instinct screams at me to kill you, monster,' the Ashen Claw said.

'The feeling is mutual,' Sharr replied, the black eyes of both warriors locked.

‘How things change when the pretences and falsehoods of negotiation are stripped away.’

‘What did you expect to happen? I have provided my end of our deal. You will provide your end now, and in the coming weeks.’

‘The aspirants you can have,’ Nev said. ‘As for the rest, we shall see.’

‘You have forgotten yourself, brother. You have forgotten the purpose for which you were forged. You are lost out here.’

Sharr expected Nev to strike him. He didn’t. When the Ashen Claw spoke again, his voice was tight with emotion.

‘I am not naive. The Imperium does not show mercy. You are the living embodiment of that, Carcharodon. We will never be accepted back, and if we are discovered we will be annihilated. This is what we have been reduced to – exiles cowering on the edge of existence, afraid to ever step back into the light, afraid to take up arms and perform the deeds we were gene-bred for.’

‘The Imperium does not need to know of your deeds. Glory and honour breed weakness and arrogance. We have eschewed both. Our exile has made us stronger. It can do the same for you.’

‘Perhaps,’ Nev said, the cold arrogance of his expression replaced for once by a look of uncertainty. ‘But perhaps not. The ideals we each fight for are a far cry from their reality.’

‘And that is why you fell, Ashen Claw,’ Sharr said, turning to leave. ‘You allow yourself the luxury of ideals. We do not. A true predator has none.’

‘More than three thousand youths will be torn from their families for the sake of our old accord,’ Nev said as the Carcharodon walked away. ‘To reinforce a Chapter that will likely one day be used to destroy us.’

‘It is not our place to judge you,’ Sharr called back. ‘The Edicts will not permit it. The honour of deciding your fate belongs to the Forgotten One. And if it is his will, then we will wield the axe of execution.’

‘I suspect we shall meet again, Reaper Prime, if you survive the rising tide.’

‘We swim with it,’ Sharr replied. ‘Farewell, Ashen Claw.’

Salutations, fellow servant of the Golden Throne!

This communication is to notify you that on 3035885.M41 Lord Inquisitor Augustus Hagen called for a gathering of the Tri-Sector ordo conclave at the Black Court on Imperius. This request was approved by the Joint Ordo Situational Council on Telemon three weeks later, Terran standard. Because of this, all inquisitors of the Tri-Sector conclave are hereby notified that a general assembly will sit between 3650885.M41 and 3685885.M41. You, along with all Throne-ratified Inquisitorial operatives not currently conducting aleph-level investigations, are required to attend the assembly in person. More details will be forthcoming via encrypted astro-communique.

Signed,

Jozia Sol,

Conclave Equerry Praetor

+++ Thought for the Day: We are the fire that burns away all impurities. +++

CHAPTER VI

Imperius, Planet of Ten Thousand Pyres. Imperius, the Judgement Seat. Imperius, ordo headquarters for the Tri-Sector, the third largest and second most visible Inquisitorial base in the Segmentum Obscura. That was where Rannik found Nzogwu, four weeks after a mourn-carrier gave her transit off Hypasitis and its necropolis cities.

Imperius' sprawling sky-hives were technically governed and administered by the local Imperial Commander, Hylecon Zain, and his elected cabinet. There were few places in the Imperium however, let alone the segmentum, where the Inquisition exerted more authority. From the gothic spires of the Black Court, representatives of the ordos conducted affairs that spanned all three neighbouring sectors. It was to Imperius that the most dangerous and notorious heretics were transported, and it was in the domed squares of their sky-cities that they met with the hungry fires of purification.

Rannik found Nzogwu at one such public display of Imperial retribution. The Arch Recidivist of Tyrain, a heretical cleric wanted in at least eighteen systems, was screaming out his final breaths at the centre of Saint Avrail's Square, atop a twenty-foot pyre of blessed rustwood specifically shipped to Imperius for the purposes of immolation. A humming air purification filter set beside the pyre was dragging in the worst of the thick swirls of black smoke, stopping the clouds of the Arch Recidivist's conflagration from darkening the city's sky dome or choking its atmospheric ports. Crowds of thousands looked on, held back by black-and-red clad Inquisitorial guards, who surrounded the stack with readied lasrifles and lowered blast visors. Thousands more Imperial citizens packed the surrounding streets, watching the burning via giant viewscreens erected on gantries specifically raised for the purpose. The air vibrated with the heretic's

howls of agony, amplified and broadcast from gilt-edged vox-horns set up around the square. The sounds of agony were competing with the sonorous chanting of the Ecclesiarchy choir arrayed before the pyre, sweating in their white robes.

Rannik understood their discomfort. She was fully armed and armoured in her dark blue-and-black arbitrator riot-plate, complete with half-helm and the pin signifying that she was an operative seconded to the Inquisition. Appearances on Imperius meant everything, especially in the galleries of the pyre-deck. The floating platform played host to the dozens of Inquisitorial dignitaries come to view the execution, carrying them slowly around the square's edges on its purring skimmer engines. Many of the thousands of spectators below were as interested in the platform as they were the pyre – its baroque, gold-ribbed flanks and fluttering prayer streamers made it look like a miniature Ministorum basilica or cathedral that had taken flight, shrouded in plumes of censer smoke from the flocks of cherubim that flitted over and around its engraved hull. Rannik had boarded it moments before it had taken off from the Black Court – it had required more than a little persuasion to convince the Tempestus Scion captain in charge of the security detail that she was indeed part of Inquisitor Nzogwu's retinue. She doubted she'd have got on board at all without her full Adeptus Arbites equipment, rosette or not.

Most of the pyre-deck's occupants were on its top platform, standing before the brass railings marking the construct's edge. They were as eclectic a mix as any gathering of Inquisitorial representatives – hunched lexmechanics with auto-quill grafts and calculus logi with bug-eyed magnification lenses stood alongside tonsured, white-robed Ecclesiarchy castigators and pallid, blind astropaths clad in the green robes of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. More martial figures prowled the deck plates as well – half a dozen enforcers and former Guardsmen in flak plate and fatigues, a lithe death cult assassin in a form-fitting black bodyglove, two power-armoured Battle Sisters of the Adepta Sororitas, watching the conflagration below intently. Most shocking of all was the silver-armoured giant who stood near the pyre-deck's arching prow – a lone Grey Knight Space Marine, his gaze inscrutable behind his gleaming helm.

Then there were the inquisitors themselves. Some Rannik recognised as she passed – the corpulent Devrain Marcanis, consigned to his mechanical, spider-limbed support-throne and attended by his smock-clad personal surgeon, who intermittently administered salves and booster shots to his wheezing master. Further along was Sebastian Grym, towering and unapproachable in his crimson

Ignatus-pattern power armour, his bionic eyes clicking audibly as they recalibrated to filter out the smoke and heat haze from the pyre below. Beside Grym, apparently unintimidated by the big, heavily armoured Ordo Xenos operative, was Inquisitor Gwendolyn Aberfairn. She wore a coat of ragged scale mail, her fair, braided hair cascading down her back. Rannik noticed her exposed forearms were tattooed with hexagrammic wards. She gave the arbitrator a cool smile as she passed.

There were more still who Rannik didn't recognise, over a dozen in total, some observing the fiery retribution below, others in low conversation with one another. Around them clustered their interrogators, explicators and notaries, wearing the formal robes of their masters, emblazoned with their heraldry and seals.

Among them she found Nzogwu. He had brought Rawlin and Welt, the former standing alongside the pyre-deck's railing, staring at the fire below with undisguised glee, the latter leaning heavily on his staff as he spoke with his master. When Rannik approached, he stopped and turned to her, the dark holes of his empty eye sockets seeming to look her up and down.

'Welcome back, Arbitrator Rannik,' he said. She didn't pause to consider how the blind psyker had known it was her – the witch-sight was something that was best left unexplained. Nzogwu smiled as he caught sight of her, but it was a harried, distracted expression.

'Welcome back, arbitrator,' he said. He had abandoned his usual overcoat for the formal black-and-tan robes and carapace armour of the Tri-Sector ordos, and he was sweat-streaked and visibly uncomfortable.

'It's good to be back,' Rannik said. 'The rest of our current company excluded. I bring news from Hypasitis.'

Nzogwu cast a glance at the figures around him and stepped in closer. 'Not here.' He took her by the arm and led her away to the opposite railing, the other side of the pyre-deck from where the gathering watched the Arch Recidivist's demise. Welt remained behind, engaging the auto-cognitist next to him in conversation.

'Has something happened?' Rannik asked.

'Yes,' Nzogwu said, glancing back at the assembled retinues and their masters. 'Lord Inquisitor Hagen called a full conclave assembly almost eight weeks ago. There have been thirteen incidents of heretical disturbances and cult activity across the Tri-Sectors, beta level and upwards. Hagen is calling a purification initiative.'

‘That’ll put all inquisitors in the Tri-Sector conclave on high alert,’ Rannik said. ‘Maximum priority assignments for everyone.’

‘We’ve already been given our new task,’ Nzogwu said. ‘There have been reports from local Adeptus Arbites forces of cult activity on Piety Five.’

‘The shrine world?’ Rannik asked.

‘The most prestigious Ecclesiarchy fiefdom in the Tri-Sectors,’ Nzogwu elaborated. ‘Any ordo operations there, even covert ones, risk huge ramifications. I wasn’t the only one given the task of conducting the investigation there, initially. Marquan wanted it too, but Hagen overruled her. She’s being sent to investigate tech-heresy on Cython instead.’

Rannik glanced at where Marquan was conversing with one of her black-armoured crusader guards. The short, shaven-headed inquisitor caught Rannik’s eye and turned her back, her displeasure at Nzogwu obvious.

‘But that’s not what’s got to you,’ Rannik said.

Nzogwu grimaced, his dark eyes returning once more to his peers.

‘I didn’t realise I was being that obvious.’

‘A little, sir. You’ve never balked at a high-priority investigation before, not in the ten years I’ve served you. And pyre-maniacs like Marquan are nothing to be afraid of.’

Nzogwu was silent before speaking again.

‘Tell me about Hypasitis. I received your transmission after we broke from the warp in-system here, but the data burst is still decrypting.’

‘Your suspicions were correct,’ Rannik said. ‘The Adeptus Astartes strike force that intervened during the Ghost War were the Carcharodon Astra. I’ve obtained pict scans of over a hundred murals featuring them. Locally they’re known as the Obsidians. My contact planetside seemed to think there could be descendants of those who encountered them in person still on Hypasitis, but he was less than helpful.’

‘Was there anything aside from the frescos? Did Frain’s operative offer up anything from his own investigations?’

For a moment, Rannik recalled the woman in the black dress and the strange scratchings on both the Cenotaph wall and the carrier door. She thrust the memories aside and shook her head.

‘No. But I do think it would be worth sending someone back. If what they say is true, it may be one of the few places the Carcharodons have visited and left survivors to tell the tale.’

The screaming of the burning Arch Recidivist below rose. A crack reverberated

across the square as part of the pyre gave way, gouting sparks and smoke whipped away by the air purifier.

‘Send *someone* back,’ Nzogwu said, echoing Rannik. ‘But not you?’

‘It’s... a grim place, sir.’

‘I know. It’s a lead I’ll follow up in the future. Perhaps Fustis will know more. Or Solomon, with his antique guilders friends. For now though we must begin preparations for Piety Five. I’ve been awaiting your return. I’ll need the best for this.’

‘Are we deploying the entire retinue?’

‘A good part of it.’

‘But not everyone? Why aren’t we able to send someone to Hypasitis...’ She trailed off as realisation broke through her confusion.

‘The Carcharodons are connected to the events on Piety,’ she said quietly. ‘Somehow. You’d send operatives to Hypasitis if it were the only lead you currently had on them.’

‘Keep your voice down,’ Nzogwu urged, glancing at one of the censer cherubim as it wheeled overhead, leaving a trail of sickly sweet smoke in its wake.

‘What do you know?’ Rannik demanded.

‘Nothing... certain. It’s Welt. He’s been experiencing aleph-level psy-visions for almost a month now. I thought at one point we were going to have to put him in containment, just before we left Kora. He predicted our assignment to Piety. And he predicted they’d be there.’

‘What did he see?’ Rannik asked. ‘What exactly?’

‘The descriptions match the nightmares you still have about Zartak. Grey-armoured Adeptus Astartes, pale flesh, black eyes. He’s seen them among buildings I’ve pict-logged to Piety Five, specifically the capital, Pontifrax. He’s never been there before. And there were other signs as well.’

‘What signs?’

‘He saw the world flooded with black, churning waters. Pallid creatures, like giant, furless rats, that stalked the sewers. A woman, dressed all in black, with a mourning veil covering her face.’

Rannik said nothing, but had to put a hand on the deck’s ornate railing to steady herself. The final description had turned her blood to ice. For a moment she could see her in her mind’s eye, looming once more on the carrier on Hypasitis. The ongoing screaming of the burning Arch Recidivist dragged her back to the present.

‘What’s the matter?’ Nzogwu asked.

‘I’ve seen her,’ Rannik whispered. ‘The... woman.’

‘You’ve dreamt about her as well?’

‘No. I mean, perhaps. I’ve seen her twice, on Hypasitis. I may have been sleeping once but... It felt real. It felt like I could...’

‘Reach out and touch her,’ Welt said. Rannik and Nzogwu both started. Neither had noticed the astropath’s silent approach.

‘What is she?’ Rannik asked the blind psyker.

‘I do not know,’ Welt admitted. Beneath the green folds of his cowl, his gaunt face looked even more pale and haggard than ever. The dark pits where his eyes had once been made Rannik shiver – they reminded her of the Obsidians.

‘I hope I will have a more comforting answer before we reach Piety Five,’ Welt went on.

‘I want to submit to psychic screening,’ Rannik told Nzogwu.

‘That is unnecessary,’ Welt said before the inquisitor could answer. ‘It is unlikely that you bear any particular psychic taint. You probably picked up an echo of what I felt. You are the only member of the retinue to have encountered the Carcharodon Astra before. That made your subconscious more likely to mirror my experiences. It is probable we saw her at the exact same time, despite being separated by half a segmentum.’

‘I don’t understand,’ she said.

‘Think of it like a clap and its echo in a high chamber. I provide the clap and you are its reverberation. There is no danger of you coming to any harm. In fact, spectres such as these are common side-effects for more powerful vision-dreams. And they have been powerful, I assure you of that. I have had little rest this past month.’

‘Tell us if you see her again,’ Nzogwu said. ‘I will inform the rest of the retinue to do likewise. If what you say is true, then they may also begin to experience your subconscious psychic backlash.’

‘I will do all I can to contain it,’ the astropath said, bowing his head. ‘But there are momentous events on the horizon. Your quest is about to enter a new phase, Inquisitor Nzogwu. Of that I am certain.’

The Arch Recidivist’s horrid screaming finally trailed off, and the Ecclesiarchy choir reached the crescendo of its repentance dirge. Images of the massed pyre would be disseminated throughout the Tri-Sectors along with small portions of the heretic’s ash, to be scattered in public spaces, a testament to the weight of the Imperium’s authority and the forgiving grace of its God-Emperor. It seemed as

though, at the last, the heretic had repented.

The pyre had been an act of mercy.

The predators met in the darkest depths, where no light had ever reached.

It was a gathering the likes of which Sharr had only seen twice before in his many decades as a void brother. They had come from every part of the Outer Dark, to this point of lifeless, featureless space far below the galactic plane. This was not somewhere like Atargatis or the Lost World, somewhere remote that had been forgotten. This was a realm that had never been found, waters with unmeasured depths, seas that existed on no known chart.

Into it the predators swam. The *White Maw* and her escorts joined another fleet as it broke from its warp jump point, led by the strike cruiser *Silent Judge*, flagship of the Fifth Battle Company. Together they approached the grand gathering of warships and supply carriers that was slowly assembling, like some vast shoal backlit against the sea of stars. Strike cruisers similar to the *White Maw*, lithe and deadly, passed alongside the grey flanks of their larger cousins, the battle-barges of the First and Second Companies. There were other capital ships as well, so ancient and so heavily modified that they defied easy classification, the starlight outlining brazen gun batteries and the sloping grey-and-black surfaces of adamantium glaxis-plates and wicked prows. Protected by such warships and their shoals of escort vessels were the non-combat ships of the fleet – lumbering cargo haulers of numerous ages and designs, slaver ships, the great forge vessel *Adamantius*, smaller agri-trawlers and scout drones. The Nomad Predation Fleet of the Carcharodon Astra was assembling in all its predatory strength, drawn by the call that had gone out through the depths.

At the heart of it all was the *Nicor*. She was not the largest vessel in the fleet, but she was by far the deadliest. Nothing could match the speed of her plasma drives, the strength of her guns and the stopping power of her shields and bulkheads. She was an apex killer, a hunter refined by ten thousand years of success. She was the queen in the Outer Dark, and none approached her without permission.

The *White Maw* had received that permission. Shipmaster Teko brought the Third Company's capital ship up alongside the brutal might of the Red Wake's flagship, and launched a transport shuttle, like a minnow passing between leviathans. It docked in the *Nicor*'s flank, the void port venting steam that froze in great, glittering clouds around the hull.

Sharr was aboard the shuttle. Accompanied by Te Kahurangi, Khauri and

Korro, he boarded the *Nicor* and made his way to the bridge.

The *White Maw*'s interior was a far cry from the ancient flagship the Reaper Prime now found himself on. Like many Carcharodons, he eschewed the weight of relics and trophies so beloved of other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes. Most void brothers bore no bone reliquaries, purity seals, devotional scrolls or sanctification etchings on their simple, grey armour – their exile markings and the occasional predatory tooth or talon were sufficient. Likewise the *White Maw* was a spartan place. Its corridors and blast doors were bare, gleaming metal, only the sections of basalt and coral stonework giving an indication that the warship was a unique Chapter vessel.

On board the *Nicor*, however, the true age of the Carcharodon Astra became apparent. The service tunnels, gangways and corridors Sharr and his companions traversed were filled with ten thousand years of trophies. The desiccated bones of countless predators from across the galaxy decorated almost every inch of the ship, littering the walls with fanged skulls and ribbing the ceilings with ancient remains. Niches in the adamantium walls either side of the party were interspersed with battered, dusty suits of power armour, all sporting grievous damage – the plate of heroes gone by, broken beyond the ability of even the Chapter's most skilled artisan-serfs to repair. There were other trophies as well, ancient, age-faded banners, broken pieces of war machinery and weapons of all shapes and sizes. Everything here was testimony to the age of the Carcharodon Astra, and the Chapter's long vigil in the dark. In a way, it almost reminded Sharr of the Lost Eyrie.

They made their way to the *Nicor*'s bridge in silence, the same silence that seemed to shroud the great ship. Their route took them along the gantries of the secondary enginarium, the great plasma coils below them sparking and cracking with blue lightning, and past the immersion tanks, whatever aquatic creatures there were residing within them invisible in the dark waters. Occasionally they passed serfs in the Chapter's pale robes, shaven heads bowed. They never looked up or made eye contact with the Carcharodons, and the Space Marines barely even registered their passing. Sharr knew that mere feet away, in the sweat-decks below, thousands of slaves toiled just to keep the ancient warship functioning, let alone provide fodder for the rest of the Chapter. It was something he never paused to consider. Without such labour the Chapter would surely have ceased to function during its long exile. And besides, it was tradition, a tradition they had long ago paid the price to defend.

They arrived at the blast doors that led to the primary bridge, the metal plates

inscribed with the great shark crest of the Chapter and hung with the huge incisors of vast, long-dead predators. Two Terminators flanked the entrance, but neither moved to stop Sharr as he activated the unlocking rune, setting the great doors pulling apart with a grinding of old servos. Even a captain like Sharr would have required maximum clearance to enter the *Nicor*'s bridge, but the presence of both Te Kahurangi and Korro ensured none stopped him. His void brothers following close behind, the Reaper Prime entered the Carcharodon Astra's inner sanctum.

The bridge of the *Nicor* was akin to the rest of the ship – shrouded in murky darkness and locked in a bubble of silence, its viewing ports sealed and its vox-banks and rune-keys reduced to low clicks. The only light emanated from the hololithic displays, oculus stands and cogitator viewscreens, which cast a dancing, aquatic-like luminescence across the rugged coral that clad the ceiling and much of the walls. The space was structured in tiers, comprising lower communications pits, a main deck featuring the gunnery, enginarium and augur work-blocks, and a raised command dais where the primary cogitators were sited, worked by the chief crew serfs and patrolled by the ominous, shadowed forms of more hulking Red Brethren Terminators. It was to this higher tier that Sharr went, passing between the control stations and the emaciated operators chained to them, none of them daring to raise their gaze from the viewscreens and rune pads they worked at. The entire space resembled some ancient, submerged palace, held entirely in the thrall of one figure.

That figure stood at the back of the command deck, facing away from the rest of the bridge. If the Red Wake was aware of Sharr's entry he made no sign of it. The great Carcharodon stood before a sheet of armourglass, clad in his Terminator armour, Hunger and Slake clothing each gauntlet with a dozen wicked edges. His focus was seemingly lost amidst the inky blackness of the waters held back by the vast tank that constituted the bridge's rear section.

There was another Carcharodon beside him, and this one stirred as Sharr, Korro, Te Kahurangi and Khauri climbed to the Red Wake's command platform. His power armour was a dark shade of blue rather than the usual grey, and he bore a bone staff not dissimilar to Te Kahurangi's, tipped with a shard of black stone. His name was Atea, and he was second only to Te Kahurangi in the Chapter's Librarius.

'Kia orrae, void brethren,' he said, inclining his head to the new arrivals. His features were far removed from Te Kahurangi's – where the Chief Librarian was gaunt and scabbed with the Chapter's genetic affliction, Atea was broad and

blunt, looking more like a veteran of the First Company than one of the Chapter's cadre of pallid psykers.

'My thanks, brother,' Sharr said, acknowledging Atea with a reverential nod before going down on one knee, a dozen paces from where the Red Wake still stood.

Only then did Lord Tyberos shift. He turned slowly, his armour purring – soft and smooth, for a suit so large and old. The black lenses of his helm – not removed even on the bridge of his own flagship – fell upon Sharr. The other Carcharodons behind him fell to their knees, the sound of ceramite meeting plasteel loud in the deep silence.

'Rise,' Tyberos said, his voice a dry, dead whisper. 'What have you brought the shoal, Reaper Prime?'

'Flesh,' Sharr said. 'The transport berths are full. Aspirants for every battle company. I have the full data available whenever you desire it.'

'Te Kahurangi?' Tyberos rasped.

'The Ashen Claws remain as they have always been,' the Chief Librarian said. 'Indolent and fearful. They occupy Atargatis and dominate its tribes, but rarely foray beyond its borders. Their prey are reduced to outlying void clusters and lost colonies. They have not struck an active, tithe-paying Imperial holding for many years.'

'They have agreed to supplement our fleet when the time comes,' Sharr added.

'You are sure?'

'Nehat Nev still rails against us,' Te Kahurangi admitted after Sharr said nothing. 'Whether he will come in person or not I cannot see. Some among his Chapter and the tribes he claims mastery of support our ongoing pact, but many more do not.'

'If he wishes to continue his slow slide into damnation, that is of no concern to us,' Tyberos said. 'Whether he assists us against this threat or not, he will still be judged one day.'

Sharr had nothing to add, so remained silent. Atea was the next to speak.

'As you are no doubt aware, the Reaper Lord of the Void has sent a call through the deeps, summoning the shoals to return here. The Chapter is assembling in its entirety to face our new threat.'

'New threat?' Sharr asked.

'The Great Devourer approaches. Deep-space probes have confirmed what we feared. The recent xenos withdrawals from the Under-Sectors have resulted in them coalescing into a single tendril. It is vast. Our current estimates point to

over five hundred million individual void-faring organisms. They are approaching.'

'So the Chapter has come together to deny them in a single engagement?'

'They are changing tactics,' Atea said. 'Instead of attempting to penetrate up through multiple points in the galactic core, they will seek to breach the Imperium on one front. They are going to try to overwhelm us.'

'They are being drawn,' Tyberos added. 'Like carrion to a carcass.'

'Drawn by what?' Sharr asked, looking from the Red Wake to the Librarian beside him.

'There have been visions in your absence, Chief Librarian,' Atea said, addressing Te Kahurangi. 'All evidence points towards an attack on the system of Piety, on the fringes of the Segmentum Solar. That is the first inhabited sector of space in the hive fleet's path, and its large population means it is rich in the bio-fuel that the tyranids feed on.'

'They have been made aware of Piety's ripeness by traitors and alien consorters,' Tyberos said. 'The visions of the Librarian point towards a xenos cult buried in the heart of that world's Imperial clergy. It has inveigled itself into the shrine world, though how we do not know. We suspect also that they are aware of our observations. They are the ones calling up the kraken from the depths. They are the light drawing it out of the dark. They must be extinguished.'

'The entire Nomad Predation Fleet has been assembled,' Sharr said, repeating his earlier statement. 'Are we to make a stand against the xenos in our entirety?'

'No,' Tyberos said. 'We will mount one last effort to stop this horror before it breaches the Imperium's walls, but you and your company will not be part of it. You will go to Piety instead, and you will unearth the xenos cult there. You will exterminate it. Rangu willing, that will extinguish the beacon drawing the hive fleet and cause it to turn away before it reaches us here.'

Silence followed the Red Wake's words, interspersed only with the low tapping of the hundreds of menials working at their stations below. Sharr managed to hold his tongue, just. Tyberos went on.

'If you fail to exterminate the cult, or it does not turn back after you do so, it is probable that every ship and void brother in this fleet will perish. If that occurs, then the Third Company will become the sole survivors of the Carcharodon Astra and the only inheritors of the Edicts of Exile.'

'My lord, how can that be so?' Sharr said, struggling to control the surging tide of thoughts. The other Carcharodons remained deadly silent as he continued.

‘Have I failed you again, that I am denied the chance to fight alongside the rest of the Chapter?’

He trailed off. No one spoke. In the silence Sharr realised once again that he was shaming himself. Just as in Nev’s gladiatorial pit, when the frenzy had overwhelmed him and he had screamed his hate, so once more was he putting himself above the needs of his Chapter and the orders of his lord. Head bowed, he went down on one knee again.

‘As you wish, my master.’

Tyberos nodded once and turned his back, returning his attention to the waters before him.

‘Speed is now of the essence,’ Atea said. ‘You must depart as soon as you have taken on fresh supplies and we have transferred your cargo to the rest of the fleet. A data burst containing more precise orders and coordinates will be available shortly.’

‘I have a single request, master,’ Sharr said, still kneeling, addressing Tyberos instead of Atea. ‘I assume I am to be supported in my expedition by a detachment from the First. If that is the case, I ask that Strike Leader Korro and his brethren remain attached to my company.’

For a moment Tyberos didn’t reply, his back still turned to Sharr. When he spoke, the words were directed at Korro.

‘Did the Reaper Prime conduct his late operation satisfactorily?’

Sharr could feel Korro’s gaze burning into him. He kept his head bowed. Eventually the Terminator spoke.

‘He did, my lord. There were a number of... irregularities, but he has fulfilled all of the operation’s requisites, despite the difficulties placed in his path by the renegades. I second his request that I remain assigned to his battle company.’

‘Very well,’ Tyberos said. ‘It shall be so. Now go, all of you.’

Sharr stood and the delegation began to leave, Atea with them. As he turned away from the Red Wake, movement caught his eye – something beyond the armourglass had stirred. For a moment, he thought he saw a shape in the dark waters, something almost unfathomably vast passing by the edge of the tank. An instant of pallid flesh and a soundless, dreadful ripple and it was gone again, receding into the gloom of its aquatic world.

Tyberos remained facing the darkness, unmoving, silent. Sharr turned away from him and made for the bridge’s blast doors.

Khauri withdrew to the gen-banks of the *Nicor*. The ancient warship had entered

its night cycle, plunging the Chapter's librarium into near-darkness. Khauri navigated the data-stacks and scroll ports by way of the blue lights winking from psy-crystals ranked around the chamber's sides, each one containing a fragment of the Chapter's long history stored in ununlockable mem-traces. Unlike other brotherhoods among the Adeptus Astartes, the Carcharodon Astra didn't hide their past from their own. Khauri, as with all initiates, knew their origins, had been told them from the start. What he had glimpsed in the depths of the Lost World had simply confirmed the lessons he had been taught by Te Kahurangi in the librarium's depths.

The Lexicanium paused, allowing for the limping passage of one of the maintenance servitors that eternally checked the slates, scrolls and books for the purposes of cataloguing and preservation. The servitors were the only other beings present in the librarium at such a late hour, the shaven-headed lexicographers and biblio-savants retired to their sleep cells. Khauri entered one of the alcoves reserved for data monitoring and inserted the activation stick he had brought into its cogitator casket. There was a soft hum as the engine's viewscreen came online. He took a seat on the bench before the display. Ostensibly he had come to the gen-banks to research Piety V before the *White Maw* departed for the shrine world. In truth, he needed the distance and the solitude. It was among the darkened stacks and high shelves that he had learned the ways of both the Chapter and the Librarian over the past decade. Returning to them felt like coming home. Or at least what he imagined coming home felt like.

The events on Atargatis still played on his mind. The astropath and his blinded spawn, the fervour with which they had sought to cut him apart, the zealous mania of their belief that he was tainted. He understood why. Te Kahurangi believed it was related to his gene-seed. But he had doubts. There was more to it than that, he was certain. If he was right, a swift death would be a blessing.

He was sure, too, that he was not alone in his fears. What had Arathar said to Te Kahurangi on Atargatis? And Atea had spoken with him in private as well, after the Red Wake's dismissal. It felt as though the Chief Librarian was still shielding him, though from what exactly he wasn't sure. Was he truly unaware of the possibility of taint, even while all those around him cast suspicions on his apprentice? Did he really not know about the voice that so often whispered to Khauri in the dark, when he was alone and filled with doubts?

The sound of bone clicking against plasteel disturbed his thoughts. It was a noise he knew well – the sound of a staff tapping the deck plates. He rose

moments before Te Kahurangi rounded the stacks beside the alcove's entrance. His black eyes passed from the viewscreen to Khauri.

'I thought I would find you here,' he said, his rasping voice barely disturbing the librarium's quiet.

'Preparing for our next operation, master,' Khauri said, indicating the data files relating to the Piety System that had started to screech across the viewscreen.

'Not our operation,' Te Kahurangi corrected. 'Yours alone, my apprentice. I have spoken with Atea and the other members of the Librarius. They are in agreement with my suggestion that the voyage to Piety Five with the Third Company should be your first undertaking without me. Your training is complete.'

'I am to accompany the Reaper Prime alone, master?' Khauri asked, his thoughts racing.

'You do not think you are ready,' Te Kahurangi said, pre-empting Khauri's doubts. 'I assure you, none are. When we first step out into the darkness, the most detailed scrying cannot accurately tell us whether we will stand or fall. It is the loneliest thing, to have the abilities we possess and be the only one of our kind, surrounded by those who can feel like brothers in name only. To be a Librarian attached to a battle company is to realise the full extent of the curse of psychic potency. Those around you will always be wary of you, yet at the same time will expect the contribution of your counsel and wisdom. If you fail, the censure will be the harshest imaginable.'

The Chief Librarian trailed off and smiled, the expression given a wicked edge by his sharpened teeth.

'But all this you know, Khauri. You have been an attentive pupil. All that remains is for you to put what you have learned into practice.'

'Master...' Khauri paused to take a breath, marshalling his thoughts. 'May I ask you something?'

'Of course.'

'On Atargatis, the astropath... He thought I was tainted.'

'He was delirious,' Te Kahurangi said. 'The Ashen Claws are cruel masters, and they have few enough psykers as it is. The remainder do not function as they should.'

'But what was it that their Librarian, Arathar, said to you afterwards?'

'That is a matter for me alone to know.'

'And what of Master Atea, on the bridge?' Khauri pressed. 'You have always taught that I must be independently minded, master. I must be able to see things

differently if I am to offer the counsel befitting of a Librarian. I cannot help but wonder about...'

'I know your fears,' Te Kahurangi said quietly.

Khauri sensed an emotion stirring in the Chief Librarian, deep below the surface, rarely seen, but present none the less – anger.

'If I thought you would fail, I would not send you,' Te Kahurangi went on. 'I must remain with Lord Tyberos. If Captain Sharr fails to uproot the xenos taint in time then I will be needed here, for the final stand. You passed your trials on the Lost World.'

'And what if I fail?' Khauri said, forcing himself to hold the ancient predator's black gaze. 'If the Nomad Predation Fleet is destroyed before we can wipe out the cult, then I will be the last living Librarian of the Carcharodon Astra. The sole guardian of our Chapter's knowledge.'

'You will be,' Te Kahurangi agreed. 'Ultimately, that is what it means to be ready.'

The Chief Librarian departed. Khauri turned back to the cogitator's viewscreen. It had gone into standby, the monitor blank. On its surface the Lexicanium noticed something he hadn't spotted when he had first entered the alcove. There were markings on the screen, scratches, as though someone had scraped them into the surface while Khauri and Te Kahurangi had conversed. It took him only a second to recognise the strange formation of circles and dashes. He had seen them before. He recoiled, blood running cold, his hands grasped around his stave. They shouldn't be here. They couldn't be.

His motion disturbed the viewscreen and it blinked back online. The markings vanished. He reached down and snatched the activation stick from the cogitator's port, automatically deactivating the machine. The screen returned to blank, but there was still no sign of the markings.

Khauri turned and left, the grip on his stave tight. Every step of the way he tried to ignore the laughter, ringing inside his own head.

+++ Gene scan complete +++

+++ Access granted +++

+++ Beginning mem-bank entry log +++

+++ Date check, 3680885.M41 +++

The gathering of the ordo conclave on Imperius was as taxing as I had feared, but it has yielded the hoped-for result. I have secured an assignment to Piety V. Given Welt's visions, I feel the hand of none other than the God-Emperor Himself assisting our undertaking.

We have just this last hour broken in-system. The voyage was fitful – Welt is still wracked with prophecy, and his psychic emanations are draining the rest of the retinue. Rannik in particular seems affected. I will have to keep her close when we make planetfall, otherwise she may become a liability.

Word was sent ahead of us, and the Supreme Pontiff has requested our presence at a ball celebrating the Final Feast of Saint Etrikus. Given we are operating here under the guise of a simple supplication visit it seems politic to accept. At the very least it should provide us with an introduction to the other dignitaries currently visiting the shrines. The local arbitrator commander, Fulchard, was the one who first raised concerns about cult activity here. The sooner we can begin investigating the root of his fears, the sooner we can determine if they are properly founded.

I only hope we have dealt with them before the Carcharodon Astra arrive.

Signed,

Inquisitor Augim Nzogwu

+++ Mem-bank entry log ends +++

**+++ Thought for the Day: By their works will thee know the
righteous +++**

CHAPTER VII

The interior cabin of the *Falcon* vibrated softly as the cutter's wing-mounted stabilisation gyros accounted for the tremors of atmospheric entry. The sound was setting Rannik on edge. The whole interior of the luxury flier felt anathema – the plush burgundy carpet, the chrome upholstery gleaming in the unfiltered light of high altitude, the filigreed amasec glasses tinkling softly in their seat holders. She was more used to the gut-wrenching judder of a combat lighter or the stinking, cattle-like pens of a mass conveyance shuttle. Even Nzogwu's regular mode of transport, the gunship *Antheon*, was a far cry from the *Falcon*, its rugged hull and bare metal benches well removed from the world of polished metal and soft leather Rannik now found herself in.

'Relax,' said Nzogwu as he passed her seat and noticed her white knuckles.

'You know I hate this thing,' Rannik said. 'It feels like we're not even in the air.'

'First impressions are vital, you know that,' Nzogwu said, amused at her discomfort. 'Just enjoy the view.'

He carried on towards the pilot's cabin, passing the rest of the retinue chosen to meet the dignitaries of Piety V – Welt, Tibalt and Rawlin. Rannik returned her gaze to the viewing port beside her seat, just as the scudding white cloud cover beyond gave way to her first view of mighty Pontifrax.

The shrine-capital of Piety V was in itself not an extensive place. It sat in the bend of the River Amarikus, and as the *Falcon* dipped towards it, the sunlight caught its golden-capped domes and spires, the gleam of a priceless jewel nestled amidst the silver glitter of the great, arching river.

The jewel, however, was surrounded by filth. Beyond the edges of the outlying places of worship, the rude encampments of the faithful sprawled. Nearer the

capital's edge the shacks were multi-layered and expansive, lived in and added to by generations of pilgrims to create a slum warren that spread out beyond the shrines and past the river in all directions. The structures became ever-less permanent the further they strayed from the capital, with tens of thousands of ragged tents and enviro-domes marking the outer boundaries of the settlement, before they gave way to the arable land tended to by Piety's indentured agri-monasteries.

Rannik had witnessed the dualism of the Imperium of Man many times before. Most often it was to be found in the hive spires, where families of unimaginable wealth lived almost within touching distance of leagues of poverty-ridden, obscura-haunted slums. Never before, however, had she witnessed so great a contrast on so large a scale. As the *Falcon* banked lower she could make out the multi-hued glassaic window arches, a hundred feet high, in the flanks of the towering Ecclesiarchy buildings, the gold finish on the thousands of gargoyles and the gleaming marble of hundreds of statues representing the saints and martyrs of the Imperial Creed. She could also see the squalor of the encampments that surrounded the shrine-capital – the rickety shacks made from rotting layers of multiwood and rusting corrugated sheets, the plastek tarpaulin shelters and lean-tos, the fyceline-drum fires and refuse heaps, all populated by a million tiny figures that whipped past the viewing port as the *Falcon* swung overhead.

Rannik wondered whether those who lived, prayed and administered to the wealthy faithful in the glittering marble-and-gold domes had ever set foot amidst the filth and squalor that surrounded them, had even looked down from their balconies and spires to see the sprawl of destitution that lapped like scummy waters against the foundations of their churches. It seemed unlikely.

She glanced away from the port. Nzogwu had passed by again on the way to the *Falcon*'s kit hold, and now stopped beside Rannik's seat holding up a long, heavy-looking, black plastek wrap.

'For you,' he said.

'What is it?'

He unzipped the wrap's top, revealing sapphire silk folds and golden lace.

'No chance,' Rannik said immediately.

'Yes chance,' Nzogwu replied. 'The pontiff has invited us to the ball celebrating the Final Feast of Saint Etrikus tonight, and we all need to look the part. Stow this in your personal locker, and make sure Rawlin takes it with him when we disembark.'

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘We’re not supposed to be here on business, arbitrator. No riot-plate this time, at least not until things go live.’

‘Why can’t I just wear this?’ she said, gesturing at the semi-formal black-and-tan Inquisitorial robes she had donned. Welt and Rawlin were similarly attired, in preparation for the introductory meeting with the reigning supreme pontiff, Guillermo de Grattio. If it had been up to her, Rannik would have gone before the ruler of Piety V wearing her usual black fatigues, but Nzogwu had insisted. Only Tibalt was armed and armoured, and that was only because of the close association his crusader rank held with the Ecclesiarchy.

‘You’re supposed to be here seeking supplication and the God-Emperor’s blessings, like the rest of us,’ Nzogwu said. ‘As far as de Grattio is concerned, we’re not conducting any sort of investigation within his diocese. The less Inquisitorial gear, the better.’

‘Did Damar put you up to this?’

‘Take the dress, Rannik.’

Eventually she hefted her kit back off the seat beside her, making room for Nzogwu to lay the plastek-wrapped finery down.

‘You should’ve let me go with Damar and the others,’ Rannik muttered as the intercom pinged with a final approach warning. While Nzogwu went before the supreme pontiff amidst pomp and ceremony, Damar was leading the rest of the retinue in a covert insertion among the pilgrim slums. Arriving visibly on Piety with a full retinue would have raised suspicions.

‘Beyond the preliminary report from Judge Fulchard, we have no idea as to the extent of possible heretic activity waiting for us,’ Nzogwu said. ‘I don’t want to make planetfall without a measure of personal security.’

‘You think dressing me up is going to help me keep you safe?’ Rannik asked.

‘First impressions,’ Nzogwu said again.

The landing sign overhead blinked on, and the inquisitor headed for his seat before Rannik could respond. She fastened her restraint harness, scowling. There was something off about Nzogwu’s actions, something that didn’t sit right. He had been the same since she had linked back up with him on Imperius. There was something she wasn’t being told, and she didn’t like it one bit.

The Celebration of the Feast of Saint Etrikus was to be held in the Theocratica, the high palace of the supreme pontiff of Piety V. It sat at the heart of the shrine-capital, its great golden domes vying with the seven spires of the grand Cathedra

of Saint Solomon. Rannik was afforded a view of it on the approach via the Boulevard of the Blessed to Absolution Square, the grand, statue-lined thoroughfare that ran through the heart of Pontifrax. The evening sun was catching the palace's whitewashed colonnades and gleaming domes, a vision of wealth and splendour to greet those who could afford to venerate the God-Emperor of Man at the heart of Piety's capital.

Rannik knew better than to mention how sickly she found the sight of such opulence, even more so when it was surrounded by the sprawling destitution of the pilgrim slums. Nzogwu himself had grown up on a shrine world, amidst the wealth of cardinals and the poverty of paupers. A place such as this seemed natural to him, and Rannik had been an arbitrator long enough to know that one of the few certainties in the galaxy was injustice. It would do her no good to complain about it.

The *Falcon* had landed on a docking plate of the Observance, one of the gothic high-rise blocks that provided accommodation for the wealthiest of the supplicants visiting Piety V. The planet's days were long, almost double Terran standard, and the retinue had taken one of the four-hour rest cycles customary in the shrine-city. As the extended night approached they had risen and readied themselves for the feast being held in honour of Saint Etrikus and his ascension during the war on Tretchark.

It had taken almost an hour for Nzogwu to convince Rannik to don the dress he had brought for her. He had eventually done so under direct orders, Inquisitorial rosette and all. She was now clad in thick silk folds, a blue corset and high-heeled shoes, her severe ponytail swapped for ringlets that hid the comms piece in her ear. She had insisted on strapping an autopistol to her thigh, concealed by the heavy skirt. The entire garb was nightmarishly uncomfortable, and she had needed Nzogwu's hand to help her from the sleek landcar that had taken them from the Observance to the Theocratica's gold-plated doors. There they had joined the queue of hundreds of other supplicants winding down the palace's marble steps into Absolution Square, hoping for an introductory audience with the pontiff prior to the start of the Feast.

'At least we look equally ridiculous,' Rannik said as they waited. Nzogwu smiled but said nothing. While Welt and Rawlin still wore their black-and-tan Inquisitorial robes, Nzogwu had opted for the black habit of the devotati, the Ministorum cult-faction currently ruling over Piety. It was traditional, though not required, that the leader of each group of supplicants wear the garb as a mark of respect to the supreme pontiff, who himself had risen through the ranks of the

devotati's seculum before the collegiate bishops of Piety had elected him to his august post.

'First impressions,' the inquisitor murmured.

The line progressed slowly. The dying sun winked and glittered from the domes and statues all around, darkness creeping from the streets and alleyways leading off from the square. The sound of plainsong drifted on the heavy, warm air from the cathedra of Saint Solomon, adjoining the palace. The suppliant group directly in front, a family led by a Navy officer in the finery of a Segementum Pacificus admiral's full dress uniform, were discussing which other dignitaries they expected at the Feast. Further up the line a child had started to cry. Movement was incremental, a few steps every five minutes. Rannik kept changing her stance in a vain effort to ease the tightness of her corset and the ache in her feet.

Occasionally armed guards would clatter past. They were frateris militia in red-and-black robe-fatigues, their autoguns wrapped in the ceremonial gold cloth that shrouded weapons in Pontifrax. There were more of them ranked around the Theocratica's open doors, and around the statuary that lined the streets leading from the square.

'It's unusual to have a standing force of frateris, is it not?' Rannik asked as another squad passed the queue on their way inside the Theocratica.

'A borderline heretical breach of the Decree Passive,' Nzogwu said, watching the frateris as they went by. 'But given the need to keep the pilgrim slums from encroaching within the shrine-city's boundaries, I'm not surprised.'

Rannik said nothing more. One of the frateris had paused on the steps next to them, his eyes travelling from Nzogwu's black habit to the robes worn by Welt and Rawlin. He was a big, shaven-headed man, with the black sash of the devotati over one shoulder and a heavy-looking cudgel strapped around his waist. A scar twisted the left corner of his mouth, giving him a sneering, sardonic expression.

'I thought I recognised the garb of the ordos,' he said to Nzogwu, offering a smile that never quite reached his dark eyes. 'I am Cleric Marshal Amil Brant, commander of the frateris militia of Piety Five. You must be Inquisitor Nzogwu.'

'I am,' Nzogwu said, making the sign of the aquila in greeting to the frateris. 'These are members of my retinue and fellow supplicants, Isiah Welt, Delt Rawlin and Jade Rannik. We were just commenting on the presence of your men, cleric marshal.'

'They aren't detracting from your worshipful experience I hope, inquisitor,'

Brant said. 'They are merely here for the safety of the supplicants.'

'Our safety seems to be assured, given the extent of your security preparations,' Nzogwu replied.

'The supplicants who come to venerate this city's shrines include some of the most eminent figures in the segmentum,' Brant went on, his smile not wavering. 'Anything less than the maximum protection would be a dangerous dereliction, wouldn't you say?'

'I would say you must be aware of some sort of threat to warrant such a presence.'

'Perhaps it is the same threat that has brought you here, inquisitor?'

'I come as a supplicant, like everyone else.'

'I'm sure the supreme pontiff will be glad that a member of the ordos has found the time to offer veneration on our humble shrine world. He would surely be displeased if he knew you were required to wait like this.'

'As I said, I am a mere supplicant,' Nzogwu reiterated.

'Regardless, I am sure His Holiness would like to meet you as swiftly as possible. Please, follow me.'

Rannik looked at Nzogwu. Almost imperceptibly, she noticed Welt nod. After a moment the inquisitor gestured up the steps.

'I am in your debt, cleric marshal. Lead on.'

Brant took them from the queue and led them up the marble stairs past the rest of the supplicants. The frateris at the palace doors parted for Brant, snapping to attention. Beyond the gold-clad entrance Rannik found herself in a mosaic-flagged hallway, ranked with statues and paintings of Imperial splendour. On her right Saint Soriel vanquished the daemon prince of Narcissus with her fiery axe, while to her left a likeness of the atmos-spires of the Seventeen Shrines of Imtep sprawled across the wall space in a blaze of golds, silvers and pastel blues. The urge to pause and stare at such artistry tugged at her, but she forced herself to focus, looking down the hallway to the doors parting at the end.

The group entered the room beyond, a state chamber that left those visiting in no doubt as to the wealth and power of the Ecclesiarchy on Piety V. The roof was an arching vault, the stonework plastered with gilded leaf forming the patterns of a golden canopy overhead. The floor underfoot was polished marble over which a sumptuous purple carpet had been laid, providing a direct route to the golden throne sited at the far end of the chamber. The statues of past supreme pontiffs, with their aquila staffs and mitres, ranked the carpet on either side, their graven eyes glaring down as though upon a parade of unrepentant sinners.

Around the walls were gathered dozens of clergymen and those supplicants who had already processed through the chamber, their murmured conversations melding into an underlying drone. The entire space was lit by great candles in brass holders clustered around the bases of the statues, while a trio of priests in trailing black robes seemed to be circling the chamber continuously, swinging golden censers that gouted purple smoke.

Brant led them onto the carpet. At its far end Supreme Pontiff Guilermo de Grattio waited. He appeared to be truly ancient. His sallow skin was crumpled, like thin parchment that had been crushed and then flattened out again too many times. His sumptuous white-and-gold robes hung from his wasted frame, while skeletal hands gripped the armrests of his throne. A skull cap sat upon a head that bore only a few slender white hairs. Rannik didn't want to imagine how many decades – centuries – rejuvenat drugs had given him, while countless members of his clergy, and those miserable pilgrims who crowded the borders of his city, were born, lived and died.

The route to the throne was guarded by a pair of Ecclesiarchy crusaders, their burnished battleplate and heavy two-handed power swords gleaming in the light of the candles. They parted before Brant, admitting them with a scrape of armour. The incense smoke was making Rannik feel ill, and she could hardly breathe in her Throne-damned dress. The pontiff was smiling down at them as they approached, his gaunt features giving the expression of the leering visage of a skull. A cyber-cherubim was perched on the back of his throne, its mechanical wings furled, bionic optics clicking as it assessed the approaching group with bird-like twitches.

For the briefest moment, Rannik wondered if she now understood a fraction of how it felt to step into the time-worn splendour of Holy Terra itself.

More clergymen were clustered around the throne's base, most of them in the black habits of the devotati. One came forward as the group approached, a vox-amplifier obscuring the lower half of his face. There was a click as he hefted a heavy-looking data-slate and consulted it before speaking.

'Inquisitor Augim Nzogwu of the Ordo Hereticus, presents himself and his fellow supplicants before your Holiness. Ave Imperius.'

Brant halted a dozen paces from the throne and they all did likewise, mirroring his bowed head and the sign of the aquila he made across his breast. De Grattio raised one liver-spotted hand and sketched the sign of the Emperor's grace.

'Your Holiness, it gives me great pleasure to introduce Inquisitor Nzogwu of the Tri-Sector conclave,' Brant said. Nzogwu took a step forwards and bowed

again.

‘Honoured inquisitor,’ de Grattio rasped, his voice the death-rattle of a corpse. ‘You and your retainers are most welcome to the Holy See of Piety. Had I known of your arrival I would have had you admitted immediately.’

‘You honour both me and the ordos, your Holiness,’ Nzogwu said. ‘As I have already explained to the cleric marshal, I am here only to make my veneration to the Cult Imperialis... and my donations, of course.’

‘Of course,’ de Grattio echoed. ‘But regardless, it is always a comfort to the faithful to know that an agent of the Throne is among them. But tell me, who are your fellow devotees?’

‘Loyal servants of the God-Emperor and the ordos, and supplicants like me,’ Nzogwu said, not looking back at Rannik, Rawlin or Welt.

De Grattio regarded them for a moment, and Rannik found herself looking at the base of his throne rather than meet his eyes. She felt horribly out of place in her dress. The only comfort was the solid weight of the nine-millimetre autopistol, cold against her thigh.

‘You have brought an astropath?’ de Grattio said, his attention focusing on Welt. There was a hint of displeasure in his cracked, ancient voice.

‘He has served me loyally for many years, and my master before me,’ Nzogwu said. Welt remained silent, gripping his staff. De Grattio grunted.

‘It is... unusual for a psyker to partake in the Feast of Saint Etrikus. It was witchcraft that martyred the great woman, after all.’

A chilly silence followed the pontiff’s words, before he spoke again.

‘Regardless, any servant of the Throne is more than welcome to take our communion. If there is anything you require during your stay, inquisitor, do not hesitate to let me know.’

‘You honour me, supreme pontiff,’ Nzogwu said, bowing again. Rannik and the others mirrored the motion once more, and stepped back from the throne.

‘The Feast’s opening service will begin in a little over an hour,’ Brant said as he led them off the carpet towards the edges of the chamber. The other supplicants who had already been introduced to the pontiff were gathered there, waiting to begin the procession to the cathedra.

‘His Holiness seemed... surprised at my presence,’ Welt said as they went.

‘His Holiness has a certain puritanical bent,’ Brant admitted. ‘He is from an older time, after all.’

The cleric marshal introduced each of them to the partner who would accompany them to the service. Nzogwu was paired with a wealthy-looking

rogue trader by the name of Sorin, dressed in mottled white lyrix fur and expensive knee-high Sar'tel boots. Welt took the arm of a female Navigator of House Jorow, and Rawlin accompanied a scarred Astra Militarum brigadier.

Rannik found herself being introduced by a clerical attendant to a leering, corpulent man in the charcoal-grey robes of an Administratum optio. His name was Hamich, and he took Rannik's arm in an uncomfortably firm grip as they left the Theocratica and began the walk towards the cathedra along the side of Absolution Square. He stank of sweat and vellum paste.

'You are an arbitrator then, my dear,' he wheezed as they went. 'I did not know any among the ranks of our rugged protectors possessed such dazzling beauty.'

'I could break your arm and put you in magnicles in under ten seconds, if that's what you're asking,' Rannik said, keeping her eyes on the cathedra's six dizzying gothic spires as they entered its shadow.

Hamich chuckled.

'I would expect nothing less from an operative of the ordos. Travelling the galaxy, chasing down villains and vagabonds. It must all be terribly exciting.'

'Have you ever watched a man being burned alive, optio?'

'Have you ever seen a man with so many reports to log that he forgot to eat or sleep, and wasted away over a matter of months?'

'I suppose both of our branches of the Adeptus Terra have their own horrors.'

They passed up the cathedra's steps and through the great aquila doors, an attendant deacon blessing them as they went. The interior of the Theocratica's place of worship was every bit as opulent as the palace. Gilded doors led to an expansive nave and aisles ranked with row upon row of rustwood pews, carved with elaborate scenes of saints and sinners locked in eternal struggle. Six great pillars, each fashioned in the likeness of the Imperial oak, supported a ceiling that rose to a spectacular dome overhead, its plaster awash with images of the God-Emperor's triumphs. The air was heavy with incense from the censer cherubim that flittered around the soaring buttresses, and flickered with the light of the thousands of candles adorning the idol-alcoves and niches set into the walls and pillars. At the distant end of the chamber, a raised pew platform sat alongside an apse, the curving space dominated by great glassaic windows and a heavy-looking altar that had been draped with the white cloth and golden objects of the Imperial Creed. It was surrounded by more candles, and black-robed devotati clergymen, their cowls raised. The vast, echoing space between them and the doors was being slowly occupied by the supplicants, their chatter backed by the low notes of organ pipes coming from the east transept.

‘Glorious, is it not?’ Hamich said, his grip on Rannik’s arm still tight as he led her down the nave towards the pews close to the chancel at the front. Nzogwu and the others had already peeled off to the left and right.

‘Excessive, more like,’ Rannik said, unable to resist spiting the optio. ‘Especially given the squalor that surrounds this city.’

‘Careful now, I’m not sure your master would appreciate such a dispassionate view of the Imperial Truth,’ Hamich said with a loathsome grin. Rannik’s expression remained frosty.

‘He isn’t my master. I am no slave.’

‘In the same way that my tens of thousands of Administratum clerks, liturgists and archival drones aren’t technically slaves, and yet...’ He trailed off. Rannik forced herself to say nothing, instead focusing on her surroundings. While the hundreds of dignitaries filling the cathedra stared in awe at the marble and gold, the lacquered wood and burnished gilt, she sought out choke points, overwatch positions and fall-back routes. It was habit, but at times habit saved lives.

The balconies beneath the buttresses on either side were the most immediate concern. They were accessed via external staircases in the atriums branching off the main chamber. An Ecclesiarchy choir was slowly filling them, preparing for the ceremony’s opening, but there was no sign of any guards on the open platforms. In fact, the only obvious protective measures were the dozen frateris militiamen visible on either side of the far pulpit, their robe-fatigues bulked out by the armour they wore underneath, their autoguns shrouded with ceremonial gold cloth. The lack of obvious security was disconcerting, especially given how much tighter it had been outside. What was she missing?

Hamich had found their pew aisle, just four rows back from the open chancel floor that lay before the altar and the pulpit platform. They slid in and seated themselves. A supplicant in the high-collared finery of an Imperial Knight household greeted Hamich, causing him to turn away from Rannik. She took her chance, surreptitiously leaning away from him and keying her earpiece.

‘Avatar, this is Crosshatch. I’m not liking the look of this. Where’s Brant’s security gone?’

‘Affirmative, Crosshatch. Hold position. I’m at your six, nine rows back.’

‘Anyone on those balconies will have the whole space at their mercy.’

‘I know. Salvo is on his way to secure your right side. Stay alert. And remember to play nice.’

‘Did you say something, my dear?’ Hamich asked, turning in his pew, his bulk pressing up against her.

‘Merely a prayer, optio,’ she said, giving him a cold smile. ‘For your health and longevity.’

‘Such a sweet girl,’ Hamich said. ‘I can see why you transferred away from those ghastly Arbites. Inquisitor Nzogwu clearly has excellent taste.’

One of the choir members on the balconies above struck up a bass note. The rest joined in, and the supplicants fell into silence as the cathedra resounded with High Gothic plainsong. Rannik rested her hand on her autopistol, concealed beneath the voluminous folds of her dress.

The choir’s canting turned to the *Te Imperius Deum Laudamus*, the words of praise seeming to fill up the vast, arching spaces around them. The supreme pontiff entered the apse from the ambulatory space behind it, preceded by his armoured crusaders and followed by a trail of clergymen, some weighed down with the gold-and-white finery, chains and mitres of their offices, others in the simpler black cassocks of the devotati. De Grattio himself was even more ornately garbed than he had been during the reception – the man’s decrepit body was swathed in thick folds of embroidered cloth, and an ermine-trimmed train a dozen paces long trailed out behind him, hauled along by a dozen pageboys in tights and powdered wigs. In one hand the aged Ecclesiarchy master clutched a golden aquila staff, while the other held the black orb of the devotati. On his head was a towering skull-faced mitre, while his feet, paradoxically, were bare – a weak homage to the pilgrims that had first brought wealth and power to the monastic houses of Piety V.

The pontiff and his cavalcade of clergymen filed into the apse, where they made their genuflections towards the high altar. De Grattio then carried on up the stairs to the wooden pulpit platform, helped by one of the pages. He took position behind a lectern fashioned in the likeness of the Imperial aquila, head bowed as his assistant hefted open the great tome set before him.

For a moment there was nothing but silence – clergy and congregation alike waited in the flickering candlelight. Even the cherubim had taken up a perch on one of the buttresses overhead, watching the pontiff with childish intensity.

De Grattio spoke. The words boomed out over a vox-amplifier concealed within the lectern, eclipsing even the earlier chants of the choir. The words were delivered in High Gothic, and it took Rannik a moment to understand what the high pontiff was saying. She had always scored miserably low in her classes growing up in the schola progenium but over the past decade she had worked hard to learn the formal tongue of the Imperium. It was, after all, the language most favoured by the Carcharodon Astra.

‘Salutations, fellow-servants of the God-Emperor, as we gather here this evening to celebrate the final Feast of Saint Etrikus, her martyrdom at the hands of the heretic and the recidivist, and her unrepentant faith in the saving glory and majesty of Him on Earth.’

De Grattio went on, his voice a crackling drone. His head remained bowed over the lectern, and he seemed hardly capable of staying on his feet, so frail and weighed down by his finery was he. Rannik wondered whether the opening blessing was prerecorded – she had certainly heard of unscrupulous Ecclesiarchy preachers doing such things before.

‘Hallowed is the God-Emperor, hallowed is the salvation He has promised us. Join with me now, brothers and sisters of His blessed grace, in the first prayer of supplication.’

There was a moment of silence as the pontiff’s attendant turned the page for him. Before he spoke again, words rang out abruptly from somewhere in the congregation directly in front of Rannik, also spoken in High Gothic.

‘Mendax! Aditus salutis nostrae!’

Liar, she translated. *Our salvation approaches!*

The supplicants gasped at the sudden, blasphemous interruption, and the two crusaders guarding the altar hefted their great power swords. In the split second of stunned quiet that followed, the voice cried out again.

‘Glory to the star saints!’

The cathedra resounded with the percussive bangs of a flurry of gunshots. The grand pontiff collapsed, his staff and mitre tumbling across the pulpit platform.

The *Nicor*’s choristorum was a place even most Carcharodons were forbidden from entering. It was lodged in an astral blister near the battle-barge’s primary bridge, far from the slave decks or even the cryo-chambers and armouries. Te Kahurangi was one of the few able to access it without prior agreement from the astropathic chamber’s scry-master, his psychic presence unlocking the triplicate sealant runes guarding the entrance doors, and his staff initiating the grav-lift that took him up into the heart of the Nomad Predation Fleet’s main astropathic choir.

The chamber itself was shrouded in darkness, but illuminated with a silvery glow thanks to the stars above. The reinforced armourglass dome gave those beneath a full spread of the firmament, countless glittering lights and multihued swirls of gas set against the utter darkness of the void. The rest of the choristorum, however, was far from picturesque. The smooth, black plating of

the psy-reactive flooring led to half a dozen telepathica cradles, caskets of metal streaked with old grease and dermal lubricant salves. Clusters of hundreds of wires snaked out from the throbbing earthing node sunk into the chamber's centre, burrowing into the caskets and linking their occupants. They were wretched creatures, pale and wasted, their shaven scalps studded with links and masked with respirator-hoods and nutrient feeds. Their bodies were submerged in amniotic-like fluids, not dissimilar to the gel-like substance that preserved the Carcharodons during their long cryo-sleeps. As Te Kahurangi entered all six of the astropaths wired into their cradles appeared to be asleep, but the Chief Librarian knew it was an illusion, the work of the suppressants constantly pumped into their bodies when they were inactive. They were currently more than aware of his presence.

'This is an unexpected honour, Chief Librarian,' said a voice from the deeper shadows clustered around the edges of the chamber. Attendant Master Yenaro stepped from the darkness into the soft starlight, his heavy grey robes and raised cowl giving him a spectral air.

'There was no time for prior warning I'm afraid, attendant master,' Te Kahurangi said. He towered over the human, but Yenaro was unintimidated – he was one of a select few of the human serfs raised out of bondage, a figure so vital to the Chapter's continuation that he was afforded rights and privileges unavailable to even most void brothers. Yenaro oversaw the Chapter flagship's astropathic complement as well as the transmission and receipt of vision-messages. His father had done so his entire life, and his offspring would do likewise. None outside the Chapter's Librarius, bar the Reaper Lord of the Void, could command him.

'You wish to initiate an astral communique,' Yenaro surmised.

'And I wish it to remain unrecorded,' Te Kahurangi said.

Yenaro said nothing, but nor did he move to his control lectern. All communications both to and from the choristorum had to be psy-logged and replicated. The sending or receiving of astropathic messages without the Librarius' knowledge and review was forbidden. Unless the sender was the Chief Librarian. Eventually Yenaro nodded.

'As you wish, my lord.'

The scry-master retreated to his lectern and began the dream-cycles. The suppressants keeping the astropaths docile were gradually reduced until one of the psykers began to show flickering signs of consciousness on the vitae monitors built into the lectern's top.

‘If you wish to avoid the automatic log...’ Yenaro trailed off, looking at Te Kahurangi.

‘I understand,’ the Chief Librarian said. Instead of taking up a position beside the attendant master and his scry-lectern, he approached the casket containing the waking astropath. Contact would have to be made directly. He unclamped one gauntlet and reached out, pausing inches from the psyker’s submerged scalp.

There would be repercussions for what he was about to do.

But he was a Carcharodon Astra. He was already sure about the course of action he had to take. For the good of the Chapter, he would be unwavering.

He plunged his hand into the amniotic fluids and grasped the astropath’s pale skull. The man’s eyes snapped open and he surged upwards. His screams resounded from the armourglass, as the stars above watched on in silence.

As the gunshots rang out, the Cathedra of Saint Solomon descended into chaos. The frateris guarding the chancel rushed the pulpit while the congregation tried to flee in every direction at once, the sudden uproar of screams and shouts feeding the panic. Rannik was moving in an instant, shoving a stammering Hamich down behind the partial safety of the pews before shouldering her way out into the aisle. She hitched up the skirts of her gown and kicked off her heeled shoes as she went, snatching her autopistol from the holster strapped round her thigh.

‘Move!’ she bellowed at the people crowding around her. More shots rang out. One of the frateris in the pulpit went down, blood blossoming across the dark woodwork and white flagstones. Rannik flung herself past an overweight deacon and shoved a powdered woman out of her way, the chancel before the pulpit’s stairway finally opening up before her. Rawlin’s voice clicked in her earpiece.

‘Multiple shooters, left-side balcony and the front of the nave. They’re dressed in Ministorum robes. I can’t get an angle.’

‘I’m securing the pontiff,’ Rannik snapped, pushing through the last of the congregation fleeing towards the back of the chamber.

‘Negative, hold back,’ Nzogwu’s voice said over the vox. *‘We can’t reveal our presence yet.’*

‘Too late,’ Rannik snapped. She mounted the pulpit’s stairs, straining to breathe in the hellish constraints of her corset. As she neared the top a shadow loomed over her, obstructing the last few steps. She found herself staring up into a mourning veil. The woman in the black dress stood at the top of the pulpit, filling the narrow space with her sudden, malevolent presence.

Rannik yelled and tried to bring her autopistol to bear, but she slipped on the stairway. She had to throw out a hand to stop herself tumbling back the way she had come, snatching the head of one of the carved wooden effigies lining the route to the pulpit. It took her a second to steady herself and bring her sidearm back up.

The apparition was gone. In its place a frateris militiaman was raising his autorifle, gold shroud snatched back, a challenge on his lips. Before Rannik could respond more shots rang out. The frateris was thrown back, his throat and shoulder torn. Rannik ducked as hard rounds tore into the carved rustwood around her, blasting away splinters and clipping one of the golden wings of the aquila lectern above. She turned as best she could in the stairway's narrow space, covering the nave with her pistol, all the while damning the gown's silken folds as they bunched up around her.

The congregation had withdrawn like a tide towards the gilded doors at the back of the cathedra, exposing a figure in the black robes of a devotati. His cowl was up, and he was crouched over an autorifle, clipping home a fresh magazine.

Rannik fired, her first two shots snapping wide and cracking off the flagstones beside the shooter. He chose to run rather than return fire, sprinting for the ornate pillars to his right. He didn't get far before the guns of the frateris who had flooded the pulpit area caught him. He stumbled and went down, twitching as he was hit multiple times, the cathedra ringing with repeated discharges.

'Cease fire!' bellowed Nzogwu, striding from the mass of people still trying to force their way from the chamber. He was holding his Inquisitorial rosette high in one hand, his charged plasma pistol in the other, its ribbed coils glowing with power. Welt was beside him, the golden eye of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica that tipped his staff wreathed in blue witchfire. Rannik felt the backwash of the psychic imperative the astropath added to Nzogwu's order, forcing her to ease her finger off the trigger.

The sudden silence that flooded the cathedra after the gunfire was followed by the thumping of combat boots and bellowed orders as more frateris burst in through the atrium side doors, spreading out along the pew rows and the nave.

Rannik stood, pulling her gown's hem out from under her and shaking out the silken folds. She realised her whole body was trembling, the sudden adrenaline rush refusing to dissipate. She glanced back up at the top of the pulpit stairway. Two frateris were crouched, trying to stabilise their comrade who had been hit blocking Rannik's route. Of the mourning woman in the veil, there was no sign. Rannik hitched her skirts and descended to where Nzogwu was crouched over

the body of the attacker. The inquisitor had drawn the man's cowl back, revealing tonsured hair and a lean, pallid face. Even in death his expression seemed twisted with hatred, black eyes glaring up at the frescos decorating the dome above. Nzogwu tugged the robes away from his throat, exposing the black mortification stamp of the devotati.

'This isn't a disguise,' the inquisitor said. 'He's a member of the clergy.'

'Or he was, before he embraced heresy and betrayal,' Welt said, standing over the corpse. Rawlin's voice clicked across the retinue-wide comms channel.

'I've secured the balconies. There's another gunman up here, looks like a priest. Took his own life.'

'Affirmative,' Nzogwu replied. 'Maintain overwatch.' He stood and turned to Rannik.

'I told you not to engage.'

'I was the closest to the pontiff,' she said. 'You wanted me to just stay down among the pews?'

'We're not supposed to be on an operational footing. If we reveal our purpose at the first sign of trouble it will only make my investigation more difficult.'

'Did you see the woman?' Rannik asked, looking at Welt. The astropath's blind eye sockets turned towards her, as though watching for her reaction.

'Yes,' he said.

'You still think she's just a psychic echo?'

Welt was silent. Nzogwu began to speak again, but stopped as one of the frateris approached. It was Cleric Marshal Brant. The big militia officer was still in his ceremonial robes, but now carried a lasrifle and had a cudgel strapped about his waist.

'Inquisitor,' he said, nodding to Nzogwu. 'My thanks for your timely response to these unfortunate events.'

'What of the supreme pontiff?' Nzogwu asked. 'He was hit?'

'My men have removed him to a safe location,' Brant answered. 'He is injured and in shock, but stable. Thanks be to the God-Emperor that he donned a flak vest beneath his robes today. His Holiness usually puts his faith in divine providence.'

'He is blessed indeed,' Nzogwu replied. 'If only the same could be said for some of his clergy.' A flicker of consternation seemed to cross Brant's face as he looked down at the corpse of the gunman. Blood had pooled across the flagstones beneath the body, forcing Rannik to hitch her skirts higher.

'I will have the body removed immediately,' the frateris said. 'That is, unless

you wish to perform an analysis of your own?’

‘I trust in your ability to identify him,’ Nzogwu said.

‘The God-Emperor shows His benevolence by sending a member of the ordos to us in our time of need. I pray these events will not disrupt the purpose of your visit to Piety, inquisitor. That is, assuming you are indeed here seeking a supplication.’

‘I go where the Emperor wills,’ Nzogwu said. ‘I will provide whatever assistance I can, should you require it.’

‘We shall see, my lord inquisitor. We shall see.’

The frateris moved away, barking new orders to the militiamen now filling the cathedra. Rannik looked at Nzogwu.

‘What now?’

‘The cult has forced our hand,’ Welt said. ‘We cannot refuse to act after such a public attack against Imperial authority.’

‘They’re trying to make us play to their game,’ Nzogwu said. ‘So we’ll just have to play it better than them.’

‘The devotati have been compromised by whoever is behind this cult,’ Welt carried on. ‘My scrying shows a great darkness on this world, blacker than the robes that mark out these monks.’ His staff tapped the flagstones near the corpse.

‘But if the devotati are involved then why would they strike de Grattio?’ Rannik wondered. ‘He’s the source of their power on Piety Five. If he dies a new supreme pontiff will be elected, and the chances are he won’t be drawn from the devotati’s seculum. They’ll lose their influence over the other factions of the clergy in Pontifrax.’

‘Perhaps,’ Nzogwu said. ‘Or perhaps de Grattio wants to appear a victim. Remember the strike against us on Kora, how DeVree orchestrated it so he could appear innocent? And you heard what the cleric marshal said. Of all days, today he chose to preach wearing a flak vest.’

‘Perhaps it was because he knew the Feast of Saint Etrikus would be well attended,’ Rannik said. ‘Or perhaps Brant is just lying about the vest. What became of his security? All that show of strength outside, and when it comes down to it the frateris are found totally wanting.’

‘I know,’ Nzogwu admitted. ‘But regardless, Welt is right. We have to act now. I will demand access to the devotati’s records and cross reference the identities of these attackers with whatever Brant finds. In the meantime, the retinue is to adopt a maximum alert posture.’

‘What about Damar and the others?’ Rannik asked.

‘We’ve no reason to assume they’ve been compromised yet, and if the link to the devotati proves correct we’ll need them out among the pilgrim slums. We have to assume we’ll be added to their list of targets after your heroics.’

‘And what about the woman?’ Rannik asked.

‘The woman?’

Rannik turned to Welt. The astropath shook his head.

‘I will not lie to either of you. I am no longer certain what she represents. What she is, even. As I said, there are dark powers at work here. It will take time to illuminate them.’

‘Time we may not have, if your visions concerning the Adeptus Astartes are also true,’ Nzogwu said. ‘That is why we requested this assignment from the conclave, after all.’

‘Oh, my visions are true,’ Welt said, turning away from the gunman’s corpse. ‘Have no doubt, inquisitor, the predators of the void are already circling us.’

[Intercepted high-anchorage vox traffic, bandwidth 88-91, between Imperial Navy defence monitors *Overwatch* and *Eagle*, Piety System]

*[Identified as Captain Maska, officer commanding the **Overwatch**] + + + All the system piquets are reporting it now. Six ships making an unsanctioned warp jump in-system, rimward quadrant 11-15. + + +*

*[Identified as Captain Shelim, officer commanding the **Eagle**] + + + I'm still not getting readouts from any of the piquet drones. The last update was still scanning. + + +*

[Maska] + + + I'm telling you, we have a fleet-level incursion going on here. + + +

[Shelim] + + + Then do you want to be the one to report it planetside, during the start of the Feast? + + +

[Maska] + + + If I have to be. We can't let something like this go. + + +

[Shelim] + + + I'm telling you, it's a drone malfunction— Wait... + + +

[Maska] + + + Your systems are reading them now too, aren't they? + + +

[Shelim] + + + Throne preserve us. + + +

[Maska] + + + What? Captain Shelim, come in. + + +

[Shelim] + + + Your scans haven't finished identifying them yet, have they? + + +

[Maska] + + + Beyond the fact that they're Imperial, no? + + +

[Shelim] + + + Maska they're... they're Adeptus Astartes warships. + + +

[Maska] + + + By the God-Emperor. + + +

[Shelim] + + + I'll patch through to Pontifrax immediately. + + +

+

[Maska] + + + I'll send a verification burst with what data we have. Close the vox-channels too, immediately. + + +

[Shelim] + + + Too late. They're hailing us. + + +

[End of transmission intercept]

--- CHAPTER VIII

Khauri was with Sharr and the rest of the Third Company's command squad as the Carcharodons fleet completed its warp jump into the Piety System. The void brethren of the Third had barely spoken to their new Librarian since they had departed from the rest of the Nomad Predation Fleet, and in truth he was thankful. He had spent most of the voyage in cryo-sleep, unwilling to impose himself on his new brethren.

'We have been cleared to approach in-system,' Shipmaster Teko told Sharr, glancing up from the bridge's oculus stands. 'The local Imperial Navy monitors are standing off and we are being supplied with anchorage coordinates for Piety Five. We're approximately nine hours out.'

'Any word from the Ecclesiarchy?' Sharr asked.

'We received a request for vox contact from the Theocratica complex on Piety Five, but I haven't responded to it yet.'

'Good. Maintain our silence. The less we become embroiled in local protocol, the faster we will be able to uproot the xenos menace. Time is of the essence.'

The fleet progressed deeper into the Piety System, defence monitors and passing cargo haulers shying out of their prowling, silent path. Khauri kept his eyes on the hololithic chart below the bridge's command dais, watching the phantom green orb representing their destination growing steadily closer. Below decks he knew the rest of the company were making ready, arming and armouring themselves with their ancient, composite battle gear. The Third was going to war, though just how hard the fight would be remained to be seen. If the xenos had not yet penetrated Piety V's upper echelons – and if the Ecclesiarchy could be convinced to aid the Adeptus Astartes in the purge – Khauri doubted even the most vicious cult would be able to resist for long.

If the Ministorum denied them assistance or, worse, had been tainted, the Carcharodon Astra would find themselves tested.

‘Brother Khauri,’ Sharr said, drawing his gaze away from the chart. ‘A moment.’

He followed the Reaper Prime to the rear of the command platform, where the murky lighting of the bridge’s displays barely reached.

‘You have been silent for much of this voyage, Brother Librarian,’ Sharr said. He had not yet donned his helmet, and the shadows at the edge of the bridge hung heavy about his pallid features. Only his sharpened teeth caught the glint of the cogitator screens and oculus stands.

‘You have not been visited by any portents regarding this expedition?’ he went on. ‘No visions?’

‘My cryo-slumber was long and deep,’ Khauri said. ‘I did not see anything that speaks of our fate upon this world, or the wider destiny of the Chapter.’

Sharr said nothing for a while. When he next spoke, his tone was a little less brusque.

‘Perhaps I have just grown too accustomed to the guidance of the Pale Nomad. I suspect you feel the same way. We should consider it a blessing that our actions are not weighed down with prophecy and myth.’

‘Perhaps,’ Khauri allowed, not wishing to be drawn with opinions on his mentor. ‘I am here to assist you in any way I can, Reaper Prime. If I have news, I will share it with you.’

‘Good,’ Sharr said. ‘You know as well as I how vital this mission is. The very existence of the Chapter rests on our ability to unearth and uproot the xenos as swiftly as possible. In doing that we will have to confront the cult’s patriarch and the leader-hybrids it surrounds itself with. They will likely be potent psykers. We will need you, Brother Khauri, and all of your abilities if we are to vanquish the Great Devourer.’

‘I understand,’ Khauri said. ‘I am with you and your company to the end, Reaper Prime. We will not fail the Red Wake or the Pale Nomad.’

They returned to the centre of the bridge together. Korro and the entirety of his squad had joined the company’s command elements, the looming bulk of the Red Brethren making even their fellow Space Marines seem small.

‘You sent for us, Reaper Prime?’ Korro asked, his voice emanating from his helmet’s external vox.

‘I did,’ Sharr said, as Khauri took post beside him. ‘We will be making planetfall on Piety Five within the next four hours. I would like the Red Brethren

to be part of our initial contact with the Ecclesiarchy.'

'You wish to leave them in no doubt as to our intentions,' Korro surmised.

'Precisely,' Sharr said. 'They will aid us, or they will be slaughtered along with the xenos they are harbouring. There is no time for anything less.'

'Very well, Reaper Prime,' Korro said. 'I will prepare my squad for Thunderhawk insertion.'

'Let us hope the clergy submits,' Sharr said, his gaze lingering on Piety V's holo-representation. 'Otherwise their shrine-cities will burn.'

Strike Leader Kordi finished his combat preparations. He had donned his Mark V armour and mag-locked his chainsword and Phobos-pattern bolter to his hip. Around him the rest of his void brothers were likewise clamping on the final pieces of their battleplate, the armoury resounding with scrapes, clacks and the low murmurs of the rites of war.

'Bands,' Kordi ordered. His primary serf, Trayn, stepped forwards and held out the leather cords hung with the talons and fangs Kordi had collected over the past century. He fastened one around his left vambrace and the other around the hilt of his chainsword. They were the only affectations he bore on his armour, besides the exile markings that ran like oceanic swell along its greaves and pauldrons.

'Helm,' he said. Trayn hefted the heavy Mark V helmet, complete with its veteran's red jag, and passed it to him. She had been his foremost serf for the past four years, ever since the former rogue trader had become entangled with his squad during the purging of a remote jungle moon, deep within the Under-Sectors. She had been left with a choice – remain on the moon as the rot-canopies were consumed by the fires of annihilation, or renounce her Warrant of Trade and accompany the Carcharodons into the Outer Dark. She had chosen the latter, though it had been many long months before she had finally surrendered her hopes of escape. Now she was Kordi's most diligent serf, responsible for overseeing the integrity and sanctity of his power armour. She offered him his helm with her shaven head bowed, but he caught the slight smile that flickered across her starved face. There was no greater satisfaction for the Carcharodon's slave than to help prepare her master on the eve of a combat insertion.

Kordi resisted the urge to address her, and instead turned towards the service corridor that had been opened in the armoury's side. It led directly from the equipment plinths to the shuttle bays and drop pod terminals that studded the *White Maw's* underbelly. The Reaper Prime's orders had been clear – Fourth

Squad, along with First, Eighth and Ninth, would constitute the first wave to make planetfall, as soon as the captain had made contact with Piety V's rulers. They were not expecting immediate hostile contact, but they were prepared for it nonetheless. Kordi found himself hoping the xenos showed themselves immediately – the mood among his squad and, he suspected, among the company as a whole was a bloody one. The Ashen Claws had dishonoured them on Atargatis, and their departure from the rest of the Nomad Predation Fleet had been another slight. For all of their doctrines of restraint, the Carcharodon Astra wanted blood.

The Reaper Prime had assured them all they would have it.

Rannik and Nzogwu set out for the Cloisterum Devotati towards the end of Piety's long night cycle. They had slept for a while in their supplicants' accommodation in the Observance building, where Welt and Rawlin had remained. The astropath was troubled, plagued by waking nightmares, and Nzogwu didn't want to vex him further with what could prove to be a combat operation. Both Rannik and the inquisitor had swapped their formal garb for loose fatigues and under-shirt flak vests. While they weren't obviously bound for trouble, neither were they adopting the appearance of the other supplicants any more. Rannik was just glad to have dumped her dress on her bedroom floor.

'The devotati aren't expecting us,' Nzogwu said. The two ordo operatives were seated side by side in the air-conditioned back of a servitor-manned landcar, laid on by the Observance. They were approaching the limits of the shrine-city, where the smaller, more dilapidated churches and devotariums gave way to the slums of the pilgrim camps. The Cloisterum Devotati was situated on the boundaries, where the Ministorum-sanctioned majesty of Pontifrax met the fervent poverty of those who came to worship it.

'We're not operating off anything other than the fact the attackers last night were from the Cloisterum?' Rannik asked. 'We've not even had their identities confirmed yet. Don't the devotati operate out of numerous smaller chapter houses beyond their headquarters?'

'This is an opportunity to see how high the corruption goes,' Nzogwu said. 'We're not going to be subtle about this. They've pressured us into acting. Now it's our turn.'

'No holds barred then,' Rannik said with a smile. 'Just the way I like it.'

'That's why you're here and Rawlin is watching over Welt,' Nzogwu said, looking out of the landcar's tinted window. Outside the shrine-city was still

slumbering, dawn about an hour away. The great doors of the shrines and temples had been barred and locked, and even the alms queues and the devotional lines of the poorer supplicants had dispersed for the night. The streets were a blur of shadow-wreathed statues and gothic archways, devoid of life.

‘No word from Damar?’ Rannik asked.

‘Not yet. He and Tibalt are moving in on one of the smaller chapter houses near to where they’ve established themselves in the slums. Whether the corruption is emanating from the upper echelons of the devotati or the lower, we’ll unearth it tonight.’

‘*Ten minutes to destination,*’ clicked the servitor driver’s monotone voice over the landcar’s intercom.

The vehicle began to climb Justicia Hill towards the Cloisterum Devotati, its tyres rumbling on the cobbles. Originally the headquarters of Piety’s ruling sect had been a humble monastery, housing a few dozen cloistered brothers. Now it was a sprawling complex of dark stone and iron-barred windows that dominated the top of the Justicia, rising like a black fortress above the sea of shacks and hovels that stretched out from the edge of Pontifrax. The entrance was protected by a checkpoint barrier gate, manned by a squad of frateris. The landcar slowed and stopped automatically, and Nzogwu lowered the window as two of the militiamen approached.

‘I am Inquisitor Augim Nzogwu, of the Ordo Hereticus,’ he said, holding up his rosette. ‘I am here to visit the halls of the Devotati.’

The first militiaman glanced at his comrade, clearly unsettled.

‘The monks know of your visit, my lord?’

‘They do not. Nor am I required to announce myself beforehand.’

‘I will... have to vox ahead, lord.’

‘Very well, but in the meantime remove this barrier and give me open passage.’

The frateris glanced from the landcar up the cobbled slope to the grim entrance arch of the Cloisterum, before nodding.

‘Of course, my lord.’

Nzogwu lowered the window as the frateris raised the barrier gate and the transport set off once more.

‘How far is that rosette going to get us?’ Rannik wondered out loud.

‘Far enough,’ Nzogwu said, his voice stiffened with determination.

The landcar passed in through the archway and slowed to a stop once more in the courtyard beyond. It was a wide space, cobbled like the approach route, the buildings surrounding it gothic structures of dark arched windows and leering

stone gargoyles that loomed out of the shadows.

‘Remain on station,’ Nzogwu ordered the servitor as they exited the transport. A cool night breeze struck Rannik as she stepped out onto the cobbles. Before her were two heavy-looking doors, studded with black iron. The only light in the courtyard emanated from a lantern above them, casting a flickering glow across the steps leading to the foreboding entrance.

The servitor driver cut the landcar’s engine. The sudden silence was unnerving.

‘It seems the worthy brothers are all abed,’ Nzogwu said softly.

The words had barely left his lips before there was a scrape of heavy bolts and the groan of aged timber. The doors swung open, and from the darkness within seven figures emerged. All were robed in the devotati’s black habits, cowls raised, and in the lamp-lit shadows they were a sinister group. They paused at the foot of the entrance steps, and the foremost – stooped beneath a hunched back – threw back his hood to reveal a pale, ageing face and tonsured skull. He looked less than happy.

‘Inquisitor Nzogwu?’ he demanded.

‘Yes,’ Nzogwu said, approaching the man and making the sign of the aquila. Rannik mirrored the salutation. The devotati looked unimpressed.

‘I am Praeses Majoris Baldichi,’ the hunchbacked man said. ‘I assume you are here regarding the attack earlier today.’

‘I am,’ Nzogwu said, his tone measured but firm. ‘This is an investigative matter. May we enter?’

Baldichi looked from Nzogwu, to Rannik, to the pistols at their hips and the rosette in Nzogwu’s hand. He nodded.

‘Follow me, inquisitor.’

The Carcharodon Astra came to Piety V as dawn touched golden light to the tops of Pontifrax’s great domes and spires. *Void Spear* touched down amidst the shriek of turbofans, the landing pad it alighted on streaked with early morning light and the last deep shadows of night. Clergymen and frateris militiamen snatched at their cassocks and robes in the lashing backdraught of the engines and sought to maintain their ranks either side of the hulking gunship’s prow ramp.

Sharr was the first to set foot on Piety V, his boots ringing from the rockcrete of the Theocratica’s landing plate. With Khauri at his shoulder, he stopped before the gaggle of churchmen who intercepted them before they reached the landing plate’s entrance arch, his armoured form towering over them.

‘You are welcome to the Holy See of Piety, great lord,’ one of the clergymen said, cringing in his gold-and-white vestments. ‘Please, allow us to—’

‘Who rules this world in the Void Father’s name?’ Sharr demanded. The words were delivered in High Gothic, and after a moment another of the churchmen answered.

‘The diocese currently falls under the stewardship of Supreme Pontiff Guilermo de Grattio, my lord.’

‘And where is he?’

‘He is... indisposed, lord,’ another churchman, his robes struggling to contain his rotund bulk, added hastily. ‘There was... an attack...’

The fat man trailed off miserably, glancing at his brethren. Another spoke, pushing his way to the front of the assembly.

‘His Holiness was the target of a traitorous assault during the opening service of the Feast of Saint Etrikus,’ the man said. He was bigger than the others, scarred and shaven-headed. He wore the robe-fatigues of the Ecclesiarchy’s militia, and didn’t flinch in Sharr’s shadow.

‘And you are?’ the Carcharodon demanded.

‘Cleric Marshal Brant. I am blessed with the command of Piety Five’s frateris divisions.’

Sharr looked the man up and down, before nodding.

‘I am Bail Sharr, Reaper Prime of the Carcharodon Astra. There is a xenos taint festering on your world, and I am here to uproot it. I will expect to meet with you and your subordinates immediately, Cleric Marshal Brant. In the meantime, my battle company will begin deploying to this city. We will be barracking in your main square. Do not approach or interfere with them. Now, I require one of you to take me to de Grattio.’

Only Brant didn’t respond with dismay. The cleric marshal bowed his head and stepped aside for the Carcharodon as the priesthood around him threw up their arms and shouted protestations at the giant in their midst. Sharr didn’t even register them. He gestured for Khauri to accompany him, and the two Space Marines followed Brant into the Theocratica, while the command squad and the Red Brethren secured the landing plate.

Overhead, the dawn sky was streaked with the contrails of incoming gunships.

De Grattio was housed in the medicae block of his own living suite, near the heart of the Theocratica. Brant took Sharr past the heavy frateris and crusader security presence. The Carcharodon was unimpressed by the lavish opulence of

the passages and hallways he was led through. Excess, arrogance, imperiousness – the architecture seemed to bring out everything that caused the Chapter to distance itself from the modern Imperial Creed.

The supreme pontiff himself remained unaware of the Angels of Death watching over him in his ward. While the shots of the gunmen in the cathedra hadn't penetrated his body armour, the fall had cracked his skull and left him in a coma. Brant informed Sharr that the College of Cardinals was still deliberating over whether to elect an interim leader, or whether to give de Grattio more time. It seemed as though the idea of electing another supreme pontiff only for de Grattio to return to consciousness was more vexing for the cardinals than having him quietly pass away.

'You are telling me Piety Five is currently without a ruler?' Sharr asked in the corridor outside the pontiff's sumptuous medicae block.

'The bishops can meet and discuss lay matters in the Forum Theocratica,' Brant said. 'But yes, to all intents and purposes we are in a phase of transitional government until the College has reached a decision.'

'You know the identities of the pontiff's attackers?'

'They were both members of Piety's current dominant cult, the devotati. Cloistered monks, with few personal contacts and no previous history to suggest a mindset prone to heresy.'

'The devotati, they have a headquarters?' Sharr asked.

'The Cloisterum, on Justicia Hill. It is on the outskirts of the city, close to pilgrim slums.'

'I am taking a strike force there. You will put your militia on high alert and lock down all public and government buildings in the city. You will also inform the clergy that they are not to practise or preach over the next forty-eight Terran hours. I am closing down the shrines.'

'That is not possible,' Brant said as Sharr began to turn away. 'There will be protests from the clergy and riots among the pilgrims! The supplicants will agitate as well. Besides, my frateris have no power to close the shrines. It is their sworn duty to keep them open.'

'You will close the shrines,' Sharr reiterated. 'Or I will consider the frateris fully complicit in cult activity.'

Sharr summoned his command squad, and spent the next half hour touring the remainder of the Theocratica, ostensibly using the time to test its defensive potential. He spent a particularly long period with Brant on the main address

balcony overlooking Absolution Square. Inside, the Theocratica's primary gathering chamber was dominated by a living arboreal display of well-tended bushes and small trees clustered around a great Imperial oak. The symbology of the tree, its boughs and leaves, was repeated frequently throughout the palace, and upon the seal and signet of the Piety diocese. Sharr's command squad spent a long time observing the display while their commander was in discussion with Brant and his frateris subordinates.

Eventually the Carcharodons returned to the Theocratica's primary landing plate. The Reaper Prime had sent word to the first elements of the company making planetfall in Absolution Square – they would take a strike force to the headquarters of the devotati, and render judgement against them immediately. As Khauri mounted *Void Spear*'s ramp alongside the Reaper Prime, he spoke for the first time since they had made planetfall.

‘Is it wise to close the shrines?’

Sharr paused before replying, whether because he was considering his answer, or didn't think the question deserved one, Khauri wasn't sure.

‘Our objective here is to expose the cult as quickly as possible, so that we can attack and destroy it decisively. The easiest way to do that is to encourage the cult to be bolder. If it chose to, the xenos patriarch could remain hidden and simply await the hive fleet's arrival. We must lure it out by presenting it with the possibility of total victory before its masters can reach the system. Disorder will encourage it.’

‘We are deliberately destabilising Imperial rule,’ Khauri surmised. ‘What if the Ecclesiarchy turns on us as well as the cult?’

‘If they are mad enough to do that we will slaughter them too. I doubt many of the faithful will dare stand against the Emperor's Angels of Death.’

‘Perhaps not,’ Khauri said slowly. ‘But we should not underestimate them. For all their wealth and indolence, there are many here driven by a zeal that could be unthinking and destructive if unleashed. I have felt the heat of their thoughts, Reaper Prime. There is a fire smouldering in many, not least the cleric marshal.’

‘Fire, but no taint?’ Sharr asked. ‘And what of the pontiff?’

‘It is difficult to say while he remains unconscious,’ Khauri said. ‘But... given what I have sensed from the cleric marshal, I suspect it is as we discussed while still in orbit. I believe your plan to be a sound one, Reaper Prime.’

Sharr did not respond as they seated themselves in *Void Spear*, the command squad and the Terminators following them in. The Reaper Prime's expression was inscrutable behind his helm, and Khauri did not intend to reach out and

touch upon his thoughts. Eventually Sharr spoke again, and his words surprised the Librarian.

‘Your counsel is appreciated. I said it on the *White Maw*, and I shall say it again here – do not hesitate to speak your mind. Your abilities provide you with a prescience not afforded to the rest of us. You should not take that for granted.’

‘I understand, Reaper Prime,’ Khauri answered, feeling a strange sense of relief. ‘I shall offer my advice freely.’

‘Very well,’ Sharr said, as the hold filled with the vibrations of the Thunderhawk gunship’s engines. ‘Stay on your guard as well. When we uncover the source of the xenos filth, our minds will likely be attacked as viciously as our bodies.’

Praeses Majoris Baldichi led Rannik and Nzogwu through the Cloisterum Devotati. Nzogwu had requested access to the primary chapel. The chiming of lauds-hour prayer bells rang through the bare stone corridors and hallways, waking the brethren to their dawn prayers, but as of yet Rannik had seen none besides the praeses and those six who had first accompanied them. She had also begun to wonder why they couldn’t hear the ringing of bells calling the faithful to the shrines and churches in the city below. When they had arrived the night before, it had felt as though every minute of darkness were punctuated by the tolling of the canonical hours, yet now the steeples and spires seemed to have fallen silent.

‘Is the Cloisterum always afforded a frateris guard?’ Nzogwu asked as Baldichi led them through a dark, shadow-haunted undercroft and up once more into an auxiliary corridor. Since the checkpoint outside, Rannik had seen three more teams of frateris, armed and armoured, mounting patrols around the monastery.

‘No,’ Baldichi said brusquely. ‘They are here at the request of the cleric marshal due to the... incident yesterday. As are you, I assume.’

‘My investigations are independent of the frateris,’ Nzogwu said.

Baldichi didn’t respond. Rannik wondered how hard Nzogwu had pressed him in private.

There was another courtyard deeper within the devotati headquarters, a cloistered space dominated in its centre by a fountain sculpture that took the shape of three Guardsmen of Navalorn, kneeling in the waters and looking skywards with stoic expressions. Rannik recalled the briefing slate she had skimmed on the journey to the Cloisterum. The devotati owed their founding to military personnel mustered out of the Makarus Crusade, conducted on the

Eastern Fringe three millennia earlier. The black habits had originally been a memorialisation of the Astra Militarum's many casualties during the crusade, and the only time the monks ever permitted anyone to leave their ranks was if they were joining the Imperial Guard. Rannik wondered whether there was a link with the order's martial roots and the fact that two unassuming members could suddenly transform into armed gunmen.

The cloisters were quiet and dark, the shadows seeming to twitch and shift at the interlopers' passing. The only others present were two *frateris militiamen* patrolling the far side. There was a strange air to the place, from the mournful expressions of the statuary to the stillness that seemed to muffle even footsteps and the swish of clothing. It made Rannik's skin crawl.

'The inner chapel is this way,' Baldichi said, ushering them to one of the many doors leading from the courtyard into the heart of the monastic complex. As the stooped *praeses majoris* reached for the door latch, Rannik caught sudden movement out of the corner of her eye. In the same moment there was the bang of a gunshot, and a grunt from Nzogwu as he was hit.

The screams had kept Rawlin up for much of the night. Welt occupied his own sleeping chamber adjacent to the one used by the interrogator in the Observance. The astropath's nightmares had been multiplying ever since they had begun their journey to Piety V. They appeared to have reached fever pitch now – Rawlin had barely slept. He cursed Nzogwu's instructions to stay behind and watch the deranged psyker, and cursed Rannik for always wanting to be at the inquisitor's side. At times it felt as though she were Nzogwu's apprentice, not him.

He dragged himself from his bed as Welt's screams redoubled, and strapped his autopistol to his side. Welt had been a member of the *retinue* for decades, but Rawlin would be damned if he went into a room with a screaming psyker without some sort of protection.

He opened the door between their rooms and peered inside. Both the lumen strips overhead and the one beside Welt's bed were flickering, throwing the room into oscillating bursts of light and dark. The astropath was at the far side of the chamber, crouched before the tenth storey window, facing away from Rawlin. His screams had dropped to a low murmur, and he was rocking backwards and forwards, still dressed in his green robes.

'Throne, no,' Rawlin murmured, battling the urge to simply back out of the room. He stepped towards Welt, hand on the grip of his pistol. The psyker seemed to sense his entrance, going silent and still. Rawlin had almost reached

him when he suddenly stood and turned, causing the interrogator to yell and snatch his pistol. The astropath's bony hand gripped his wrist before he could bring it to bear, while the other snatched his night shift, dragging him in close.

'They're here,' he snarled, his voice unnaturally deep. His empty eye sockets were bleeding, two streaks of glistening red that ran down a gaunt face, white as death. The blinking of the lumens only made the visage more nightmarish.

'They're here,' Welt repeated, releasing the interrogator's wrist and gripping his chest with both hands. *'She's not what we thought she was.'*

'Who?' Rawlin managed. The room had gone cold, his breath visibly frosting in the air.

'Tell Rannik,' Welt hissed, spittle flecking his lips. *'Tell her she was right. Tell her she's not just a shadow.'*

'What shadow?' Rawlin asked, trying to prise himself free from Welt's shuddering grip.

'The door,' the astropath said. Before Rawlin could respond again he heard a knocking sound. Someone was outside Welt's room.

'Don't answer it,' Welt said, his voice suddenly firm and clear. *'I have delivered a message to Frain, the last message I will ever send. You must leave. Leave now.'*

Rawlin dragged himself away from the psyker, snatching his autopistol from its holster, eyes on the door.

'Who's there?' he demanded.

'Go,' Welt urged, trying to push Rawlin back towards his own room. The interrogator grappled for a moment with the astropath, before a thud from the window made them both freeze.

'What was that?' Rawlin breathed. Welt's grasp became an embrace as he drew close to hiss in his fellow operative's ear.

'She's here.'

The apartment window blew in, a blizzard of glass followed by a wall of fire and twisted metal. Rawlin sensed Welt, caught between him and the window, shudder as he was hit, then experienced a gut-wrenching sense of dislocation as he was lifted into the air. He felt his ears burst, the blunt-force impact of debris and shrapnel all over his body, the agony as his clothes ignited, and the slamming impact as he was carried through to his own room, all as though in nightmarish slow motion. Then, finally, his head connected with something unyielding, and the darkness took him.

The shot had come the moment Baldichi laid his hand on the devotati cloister door. Rannik threw herself against Nzogwu, pitching them both behind one of the cloister's pillars as more gunshots rang out. The frateris across the courtyard had opened fire on them.

Rannik snatched her autopistol from its holster. It was immediately apparent that the pillar wasn't big enough for both her and Nzogwu. Move or die. She flung herself through the open space to the next pillar, not giving herself time to think, hearing the echoing reports of the gunshots in the tight space and the clack of hard rounds striking stonework around her.

She hit the next pillar's cold surface with a grunt and pressed herself against it, chipped stone dust blossoming around her.

Are you hit, she signed back to Nzogwu. The inquisitor removed his hand from the outside of his right thigh, revealing a red patch spreading from the torn fatigues.

Fine, he signed back. He'd had worse.

The frateris paused, and Rannik heard the clack of fresh magazines. A beginner's mistake. She rounded the pillar, pistol up, and eased off a trio of rounds. One of the frateris had been standing exposed between two of the pillars as he reloaded, and he scrambled back as Rannik fired, dropping his magazine as he went. She thought she had clipped him, but couldn't be sure. Of the devotati there was no sign – Baldichi had vanished at the first sound of gunfire.

She sent three more shots slashing across the courtyard, keeping their heads down, before ducking back and reloading. Nzogwu had his plasma pistol out, rosette in his other hand.

'I am an inquisitor of the God-Emperor's Holy Ordos!' he bellowed. 'Cease fire!'

The answer came in the form of another spray of rounds that battered at Rannik's pillar, chewing chunks out of it. Nzogwu stepped round on his uninjured leg and fired. Rannik looked away in time to avoid the sunburst brilliance of the discharge. There was a violent whip-crack, and the sound of the better part of one of the opposing pillars being blown away in a blaze of plasma. Rannik swung round to fire again just as one of the frateris stumbled into view, shrieking. The pillar he had been behind was a mess of broken stonework, glassy from the fury of the plasma burst. The gunman himself was wreathed in blue fire, howling with agony. Rannik put him down with two shots, her pistol braced in both hands.

'Surrender!' Nzogwu shouted again. This time the remaining gunman stayed

behind cover. There was a ping as the inquisitor's plasma pistol completed its recharging cycle.

'May the Emperor have mercy on your traitorous soul,' the inquisitor said. But before he could fire there was the bang of a door opening further along the courtyard's south side. It was followed by the scuffle of combat boots as more frateris burst into the cloisters, a kill-team of four.

Rannik and Nzogwu opened fire in unison, the furious blast of the inquisitor's pistol turning one of the militiamen to ash in a blaze of light. The rest managed to hit pillars and start returning fire, cutting in at their position from the right. The surviving gunman to their front also added his fire, forcing them both to press back behind their cover.

'This is a tight one,' Nzogwu snarled, pistol pinging again.

'We've had worse,' Rannik said, as a hard round hit the flagstones inches from her left boot and ricocheted up to crack off the wall in front of her. 'Maybe.'

'I've sent an emergency burst over the vox, Damar is nowhere near, though,' Nzogwu answered.

'Another sixty seconds would be too long anyway if they open up another angle on us.'

'Where in the Emperor's name are the devotati?' Nzogwu wondered aloud. Rannik began to answer, but a near miss made her flinch away. Chips from the disintegrating pillar behind her had already drawn blood from her arm and grazed her cheek. They had a matter of seconds before they started to take critical hits.

The door they had been about to pass through when the ambush had been sprung burst open. A frateris militiaman came through, cowl drawn up, autogun raised, less than a dozen paces from Rannik and on her side of the pillar. She managed to get a shot off, the stopping power of the heavy Stygies X autopistol saving her life as it punched a round into the man's gut and doubled him over. She put him down with another shot then sent the remainder of the clip into the doorway, keeping the other gunmen behind the first pinned back.

'We've got to break for the main doors,' Nzogwu said, gesturing back through the archway they had entered by. Rannik knew running from cover now would be all but suicidal. They were completely surrounded.

Apparently sensing the hopelessness of their targets' situation, or perhaps hoping to lure them out, the frateris ceased fire. In the brief pause, as she reached for a fresh magazine, Rannik heard a rumbling sound followed by a clatter that seemed to come from beyond the Cloisterum's walls. The noise grew louder,

filling the courtyard, vibrating up through the pillar against Rannik's back and causing the broken masonry underfoot to judder.

'What—' she began to say. She got no further. There was a crash as the archway collapsed, caved in by the impact of something truly monstrous. Stone and splintered timber slammed inwards in a great cloud of dust, a wall of debris flooding the middle of the courtyard. A hail of shattered masonry pounded past Rannik and Nzogwu. Three of the frateris were caught in the collapse and simply vanished, crushed and broken by the Cloisterum's remains.

The beast responsible for the destruction came with the debris, shaking shattered stone from its treads and frontal glacis. It was a battle tank, one of the largest Rannik had ever seen. A solid box of grey plasteel and adamantium, it had simply driven through the devotati headquarters checkpoint, the initial archway and now the cloister block, its sloping armour plates scarred silver by the grinding impact of tonnes of stone.

It growled to a stop just inside the courtyard, the wreckage of its passage settling behind it. Even idling the potency of its engines made the stonework around Rannik shudder and caused her teeth to vibrate. The great guns that studded the war machine's prow and flanks remained inert, but the disembarkation ramp in its front disengaged with a thud, and clanged down into the rubble spread before it like a tidemark.

Rannik stared as figures began to emerge from the belly of the beast, giants in grey-and-black power armour, grasping huge bolt weapons that swung back and forth as they fanned out from their transport. Rannik recognised them, recognised the colour of their battleplate, the white crests on their pauldrons and the sides of the tank, even the individual designs of the swirling markings covering parts of their power armour. She had seen them all before, a long time ago, and saw them again every time the nightmares came for her, tearing her sleep to shreds and snatching her to sweat-streaked, panting wakefulness.

They had come back. They had come for her.

The surviving frateris militiaman recovered before either Nzogwu or Rannik. Howling, he opened fire from behind his pillar, sending wild shots at the squad of Space Marines deploying into the Cloisterum. The hard rounds cracked impotently from their armour and the battered hull of their transport.

The response was immediate. One of the grey-clad warriors returned fire, the booming report of his bolter eclipsing the autogun and making Rannik flinch back halfway behind her pillar. She saw the traitor militiaman's own cover simply disintegrate, the bursts of shattered stone and grey dust turning red as the

gunman was blasted open by mass-reactive bolts.

The other Space Marines had noticed Rannik and Nzogwu. They approached, weapons raised, their heavy footfalls grinding rubble against the cracked flagstones beneath. Rannik found herself standing out between the cloisters, as though in a daze. This was a dream, another terrible nightmare, and any second she would awake to a cramped transit ship bunk or a safehouse bed with a scream on her lips.

As the grey giants loomed, their predatory shadows falling across her, she realised that in truth she had known this day would come. She had been praying for it for a long time. Fury gripped her.

Screaming with rage and hatred, she raised her autopistol, and fired.

The woman's pistol clicked empty. Dorthor, towering over her, raised his bolter, a heartbeat away from annihilating his would-be killer.

'Hold your fire,' Sharr ordered, striding to his strike veteran's side. At the same moment the man who had been behind the pillar next to the woman tackled her to one side, wrestling with her pistol as she furiously attempted to reload.

'Wait!' the man shouted, raising his left hand as he pushed his companion back from the Carcharodons. He was holding an Inquisitorial token.

'Contact in the doorway,' Dorthor said over the command squad's internal vox, bringing his bolter back up. There was a flicker in the archway beyond the two humans, the flash of a raised autorifle. Dorthor put the gunman down with two shots, blood splattering up the heavy wood panelling of the courtyard door. The reports caused the inquisitor and the woman to stumble back, hands clapped against their ears.

'Sweep the complex,' Sharr ordered, unclamping Reaper. 'By twos.'

Behind the command squad Khauri, Korro and his Red Brethren had disembarked from the Land Raider, their mighty Terminator armour whirring and grinding as they crunched across the courtyard's remains. Each of the First Company veterans paired with a member of the command squad as they headed for separate doorways in the cloistered walls.

'What about these two?' Dorthor asked, nodding towards the inquisitor. The man had managed to calm his companion somewhat, wrestling the pistol from her grip, but she was still glaring with a furious hatred up at the Carcharodons, apparently devoid of fear. Something about her made Sharr's memories stir, but he pushed the recognition aside – now was no time for retrospection.

'Carcharodon Astra.' It was the inquisitor who spoke. Both Space Marines

turned to him. He smiled, and there was triumph in his expression, not wholly eclipsed by the fear.

‘You are surprised that I know of you,’ he said, interposing himself between the Space Marines and the woman. ‘We both do. We have been waiting for this day for a very long time.’

‘This complex is infested with xenos taint,’ Sharr said. ‘We have no time for niceties. If you are a servant of the Imperium you will leave immediately.’

‘I am Augim Nzogwu, inquisitor of the Ordo Hereticus,’ the man said firmly. ‘And if you serve the Emperor as I do then we will purge this taint together.’

‘Do as you please,’ Sharr said dismissively, signalling Dorthor to cover him through the doorway in front of them. ‘But do not hinder us. If you know who we are, you know the fate of those who obstruct us.’

The Carcharodons spread through the Cloisterum Devotati. They found it deserted. Side chapels, scriptorums and a librarium block were all unoccupied, and the sleeping halls the Space Marines moved through showed signs of recent abandonment. Frateris and devotati, all seemed to have vanished.

‘The auspex is picking up lifeforms in a large chamber beyond this corridor,’ Dorthor said as they left another hastily deserted dorm. ‘Over four hundred. It could be the primary chapel or refectory.’

‘Squads, converge,’ Sharr said, marking the area on the heads-up map of the complex that their linked auto-senses had pieced together during the sweep of the buildings. He approached the double doors leading to the chamber beyond, Reaper in both hands, the great chainaxe inactive but hungry.

‘I am breaching,’ he said coldly and, without waiting for Dorthor, kicked in the doors.

They came apart with a crash of bending metal and splintered wood. Hundreds of pale faces turned. Sharr found himself entering what had to be the main chapel. It was a stone-flagged space with high wooden beams and a raised altar platform at the far end. At one point carved wooden gargoyles had occupied the rafters, but they had been replaced with works that, judging by the fresh cut of the wood, were recent additions. At first glance they looked like any other imperchanted upon the walls of Imperial places of worship, but there was something unnatural in their elongated skulls, and in the long, multiple sets of limbs they bore, outstretched over the congregation below. The pews beneath them were packed with black-robed monks – apparently the entirety of the Cloisterum’s brotherhood – while frateris lined the walls. Their autorifles had been trained on

the devotati, but as Sharr stormed the main doors they turned them on the Space Marines.

The chapel resounded with gunfire. Sharr's armour registered hits, but nothing penetrated. He triggered Reaper, its frenzied howl easily overwhelming the sounds of autogun fire.

Sharr charged at the frateris along the left-hand wall. He was vaguely aware of Dorthor going right, the thunder of his bolter joining Reaper's righteous exclamation. The monks were wailing and either throwing themselves to the ground or trying to scramble towards the far end of the hall, over the pews and one another. The frateris were also going back, but too slowly. Reaper hit the first one as he brought his autorifle up over his head, trying to block the two-handed downward swing. The chainaxe barely paused. It sheared the plasteel and plastek of the weapon, spitting sparks, and then the man's skull and torso, all the way down to his groin. Blood, gore and shards of bone splattered Sharr's armour and everything around him as the halves of the hapless militiaman came apart, flopping like so much butchered meat to the floor.

The Reaper Prime went over them, a sideways swipe cleaving another frateris to his spine. One of the militiamen's wild shots found its mark, penetrating the joint between his thigh plate and his hip but barely drawing blood. Another ricocheted off Reaper's adamantium haft to strike him squarely in the visor, but failed to do more than scratch the grey plate.

The eight frateris on the left side of the chapel were all dead in under a minute, gutted and eviscerated by Reaper or broken by Sharr's gauntlets. A hard round to the right cheek of his helmet twitched his head to one side, and alerted him to the fact his auto-senses were also registering shots from across the hall. He turned, expecting to find some of the gunmen across the nave not yet cut down by Dorthor firing on him over the cowering devotati.

Instead he realised the devotati themselves were shooting at him. Two had plucked pistols from beneath their black habits and were firing on the Carcharodon, faces twisted with rictus expressions of hatred. Sharr didn't hesitate, advancing on them amidst their scattering brethren. His fist broke the skull of the first, while Reaper took the second, drenching the screaming monks around him in blood and reducing a pew to a hail of splinters.

More shots, again from among the devotati. Sharr turned. A side door on the chapel's right-hand side had crashed inwards, emitting Khauri and one of the Red Brethren into the hall. Korro and Red Tane had entered through the main doors and were wading into the carnage, the Terminator's power fist ignited.

Sharr fought down a snarl of frustration mixed with fury as more pathetic gunfire jarred off his left pauldron and right tasset.

‘Kill them all,’ he snapped into the vox.

The massacre lasted only a few minutes. The Carcharodons opened fire into the black-clad mass, or waded in with chainblades and power fists, slaughtering the brotherhood like penned cattle. Sharr felt the rage rising as he killed, the dark ennui that haunted every member of the void brotherhood gripping him. Keep killing. Spill their blood. Leave no survivors. It was like an itch in the tips of his fingers, phlegm at the back of his throat, choking him. He swallowed it, focused through it, his mind silent even as the chapel resounded with screams and butchers’ chops.

Baldichi was the last. The praeses majoris had backed off all the way to the high altar, cringing away from the red-drenched killer who stalked towards him. The Carcharodons had deactivated their chain weapons, and a cold, dripping silence had fallen across the carnage of the hall. Sharr reached out and grasped the misshapen man’s habit before giving it a brutal tug. It tore and the creature masquerading as the master of the devotati’s headquarters wailed as his corrupt form was revealed – a third atrophied limb, ending in a crab-like purple claw, had been strapped up across the thing’s back.

‘I find you guilty of consorting with xenofoms,’ Sharr said, his icy words filling the hall. ‘The sentence is death.’

Before Baldichi could respond, Sharr reached up and crushed his windpipe, dropping the tainted monk instantly.

Sharr turned. Khauri, Korro and the rest of the Carcharodons strike force had all assembled among the bloody remains. The two humans, the inquisitor and his henchman, had witnessed the entire event, standing at the entrance Sharr had burst through. Khauri’s voice clicked over the vox.

‘The city authorities are approaching. I can sense them.’

‘Prepare to move out,’ Sharr replied, then addressed Nzogwu from across the hall.

‘Inspect them all if you wish. You will find the taint has run rampant. If this place is anything to go by, I would not be surprised to discover that this world is infested with xenos filth.’

‘And you are to be the judge of it?’ Nzogwu asked.

‘If you will not act, inquisitor, you may rest assured the Carcharodon Astra will.’

Nzogwu stayed close to Rannik as they stepped out into the rubble that had once been the Cloisterum's entrance arch. The arbitrator was shaking, the empty pistol still in her grip. Nzogwu understood a good deal of what she was suffering through. When he had arrived on Zartak a decade earlier to investigate the prison colony's mysterious silence, he had found nightmarish scenes – thousands dead, massacred in the mining plate's underworld. He had also found Rannik. She had been the only survivor, the only one not killed or abducted. Her stories, backed by the evidence of pict footage captured from the arbitrator base, had first introduced Nzogwu to the existence of the Carcharodon Astra. They had haunted him ever since, a background presence that informed far too many of his undertakings across the Imperium. To be face to face with them now was to experience terror edged with fascination, excitement coloured by angry disbelief. For Rannik the feelings had to be even more extreme.

The great tank that had brought the Space Marines to the Cloisterum had turned in the courtyard and was now grinding back down Justicia Hill. The Carcharodons hadn't embarked but were advancing alongside it, spread out. Nzogwu and Rannik followed in their wake, the inquisitor moving so he was between the arbitrator and the Adeptus Astartes. If her weapon had been loaded when she'd tried to fire on the grey killers, he had no doubt they would both already be dead.

Their reprieve might be short-lived, he realised. As they stepped out through the broken rubble of the Cloisterum's breach, they were afforded a view of the shrine-city and the slums that surrounded it like cancerous growths. The vista of cliff-like gothic spires and arches giving way to endless shacks and prefabbed hab blocks would have been impressive, had there not been more immediate concerns. Half a dozen Chimera transports had drawn up just beyond the remains of the Cloisterum's checkpoint, their engines turning over, multi-lasers and heavy bolters trained on the Carcharodons. Spread before the armoured transports were several platoons of frateris, autorifles unmasked. Brant was at their forefront, his expression darkening visibly as the Space Marine tank ground into view over the powdered rubble of Piety V's wealthiest monastery. In an instant of foresight, Nzogwu saw the sickening violence he had witnessed in the Cloisterum's chapel play out again in the open air of the hillside.

'Wait!' he shouted, running to interpose himself between the frateris and the implacably advancing Carcharodons. He holstered his plasma pistol and held up both hands as he went, praying silently that what he was doing wasn't as mad as it felt. The frateris had fired on them, and at the very least a large part of the

devotati had been uncovered as xenos-worshippers. There was no reason to think that Brant and his men weren't cultists intent on gunning him down. Nor did the Carcharodons seem like anything other than renegades happy to butcher Imperial servants if they so desired.

But Nzogwu knew he had to gamble. He gambled on Brant's loyalty and the Carcharodons' restraint, even on Rannik not turning her pistol on the Space Marines again. And in the few seconds it took him to cast the dice, he found himself standing on the wreckage-littered road between both sides. They had each come to a halt and, though their weapons were raised, nobody fired.

'What is the meaning of this, inquisitor?' Brant demanded. 'Why have you attacked the holy brethren of the devotati? Where is Praeses Majoris Baldichi?'

'There was corruption here, cleric marshal,' Nzogwu called out. 'It has been purged. I recommend your men lay down their arms and submit themselves to my investigations fully, before this situation devolves any further.'

'There are processes...' Brant said, but trailed off. Nzogwu heard the whir of servos and the grinding of boots on stone, and turned to find the Carcharodons leader looming over him. Blood and thick strings of gore were still drying on the warrior's armour, and he was carrying a chainaxe as long as Nzogwu was tall in a single great fist.

'Your fellow-worshippers harbour egregious xenos taint, cleric marshal,' the Space Marine said coldly. 'You will do as the inquisitor says.'

Nzogwu looked back at Brant, struggling to stop his own surprise at the Carcharodon's words from showing. The cleric marshal's expression grew darker still.

'I have not come here to be the defendant in some snap trial,' he said. 'I came because there has been another attack. Multiple ones, in fact, across the shrine-city.'

'Against whom?' Nzogwu demanded.

'The Adeptus Astra Telepathica,' Brant continued. 'As far as we are aware, every single astropath on Piety Five has been killed. Including your own star-whisperer.'

+++ Gene scan complete +++

+++ Access granted +++

+++ Beginning mem-bank entry log +++

+++ Date check, 2715885.M41 +++

Welt is dead. I should have seen it. I should never have left him exposed. The strike against the astropaths has left us completely cut off, and I have little time. For such a strike to have succeeded, the corruption in Pontifrax must be endemic.

The Carcharodon Astra are here too, as I hoped and feared. They were even more terrible than I had dared imagine. I am powerless to hold them to account, for now. If I turn the Ministorum and the frateris against them, or attempt to use them to purge the frateris, I will only weaken us against the xenos cult that has taken root in this place. I am damned either way. Regardless, I must act, and swiftly. Damar believes he has found something in the slum shrines. Our best hope is to uncover the cult's head and strike it off as swiftly as possible.

Rannik has become a liability. She is too emotionally invested. I have asked Damar to keep her close.

Rawlin claimed Welt had contacted Inquisitor Legate Frain before he was murdered. I cannot tell if it was insane ramblings, and even if it wasn't, I do not know the nature of the message. Regardless, I find myself praying he will hasten to this world. That is not something I ever expected to put on record, but in times such as these any ally is better than none.

May the God-Emperor be with me.

Signed,

Inquisitor Augim Nzogwu

+++ Mem-bank entry log ends +++

**+++ Thought for the Day: Though we may wander in darkness,
the sword of the Emperor shall guide us still +++**

CHAPTER IX

Rawlin had survived. The attack on the Observance had left him confined to a medicae bay at the city's foremost emergency treatment ward, his flesh burned and gouged, but he would live.

The same could not be said of Welt. In shielding Rawlin from the blast he had been killed instantly. The attackers had scaled the outside of the Observance and fixed an explosive charge to the window during the night. When they had failed to open the door to the first group of assassins, the second had blown the charge. There was pict footage of their preparations in nearby alleys and their efforts scaling the Observance's sheer side, but identification would be all but impossible – they were shrouded in the black habits of the devotati.

'We're completely isolated,' Rannik said. The retinue had assembled in full in the remains of the Observance suite. The whole tower block had been evacuated and an Arbites team had cordoned the building off, but Rannik had managed to talk them through before Nzogwu had been forced to call upon his authority. The floor that had once housed the retinue's apartments was still stable enough to enter, and the ordo operatives now stood before the ruins of Rawlin and Welt's rooms. The intervening wall had been mostly demolished, and the floor was a mess of rubble and burned or broken furnishings. The space that had once been Welt's window was now a gaping hole through which the city's jagged forest of spires and domes was visible, a straight drop through which a cold wind cut. Damar was there, as were Ro, Tibalt, Janus, the lexo-archivist Llorens and Maurus, the Ministorum lay preacher brought to help ease the tensions between the operatives and the pilgrim masses.

'Every single astropath eliminated,' Janus said. 'How is that possible?'

'It could only be achieved by the most complete infiltration of this world's top

tier command and control structures,' Ro replied.

'You've seen the choristorum?' Rannik asked Nzogwu. He had gone with Brant directly to the Theocratica's astropathic hub, where all messages into and out of the system were sent and received.

'I have,' he said slowly, as though still processing what he had seen. 'It's the work of xenos, undoubtedly. Purestrain xenos, not the hybrid things concealed in the Cloisterum. The astropaths had been torn to pieces, as had the frateris guarding them.'

'The frateris weren't responsible then?' Rannik pressed.

'If they were they allowed themselves to be butchered by their masters. Someone with high-level access was involved – the pict footage has been wiped and doors that should have been easily secured were auto-unlocked.'

'And now it's impossible for us to get word off world,' Damar said. 'We should have anticipated this.'

'We weren't ready,' Nzogwu admitted, his words coming faster now as his thoughts seemed to settle on a course of action. 'This is an infestation reaching the end of its cycle. We could be talking about tens or even hundreds of thousands of infected personnel across this city, maybe planet-wide. We need to find the head of this taint and cut it off before it flourishes into a full-scale insurrection.'

'Is that why the Carcharodons are here?' Rannik asked.

'Perhaps,' he said. 'But at the moment we are in no position to open proceedings against them. We could all be fighting for our lives in a matter of hours.'

'You saw them,' Rannik said, speaking slowly so that her voice didn't crack. 'You saw what they are capable of. We have to confront them now, before they slip away again. We'll never have another opportunity like this.'

'No,' Nzogwu said firmly. 'I cannot simply declare them *excommunicate traitoris* and demand they submit themselves. Besides, they also saved both our lives. They show every intention of rooting out the cult.'

'So they can abduct the population free of taint,' Rannik said. 'They will do the same to us, or simply kill us.'

'We cannot pursue both the cult and these Adeptus Astartes simultaneously,' Damar said. 'You have to let this one go, Jade, for now. We will call them to account one day.'

Rannik opened her mouth to snap a retort, but managed to hold the words back. The rest of the retinue were looking at her, their expressions grim. None of them

were going to back down, and Rannik had to concede that they were right. As much as it hurt to admit it, there was nothing they could do right now to harm or hinder the things that she had first seen on Zartak.

‘I understand your thoughts,’ Nzogwu said, looking at her. ‘After Zartak I swore I’d track down those responsible and hold them to account. We’re closer than ever to doing that. But first we must secure this world from the corruption that permeates it.’

‘How? The Cloisterum is a charnel house and the frateris have already locked down the smaller devotati holdings scattered across the city. How do we even begin to screen an organisation like either the frateris or the devotati? It’s obvious they aren’t wholly tainted, or we’d already be dead. How do we then divide the corrupt from the pure without the time or resources to do so?’

‘We aren’t going to pursue the frateris or the surviving devotati,’ Nzogwu said. ‘We’re going straight to the source. This is a genestealer infestation, and we’re going to hunt down and kill the patriarch. Doing so will reveal all the remaining corruption.’

‘And how do we find something that infiltrated this world decades, maybe even centuries, ago?’

‘We’ve already made a start,’ Damar said. He drew something from a pocket in his fatigues and held it up. It was a metal token, shaped like a crescent, fashioned into a snapping maw and a ridged spine that tapered off to a wicked tail. For a horrible moment Rannik thought she was looking at the predatory crest of the Carcharodons, but she quickly realised it was different – more alien, more ravenous. The little token made her grimace.

‘I retrieved this from the pilgrim offerings in a shrine outside the city,’ Damar said. ‘There are more of its kind there.’

‘It’s a typical genestealer cult symbol,’ Nzogwu added. ‘It seems their influence extends out into the slums.’

‘We’ve seen numerous examples of cult activity since our arrival,’ Damar said, referencing the half of the retinue that had made planetfall amidst the pilgrim hovels rather than in the shrine-city proper. ‘Ro and I managed to infiltrate one of the shack shrines. We found tunnels. They look like they were once part of a rudimentary burial system that was modified into sewers and has since been changed to... something else. There was more evidence of the cult there. We got into a little bit of a firefight, hence the delay in reaching you at the Cloisterum.’

‘This is worth following up,’ Nzogwu said. ‘We have to move fast.’

‘We’re going down into the tunnels?’ Rannik asked. ‘If the cult is in the slums

too, will we be numerous enough? If we're cut off down there—'

'We're not going alone,' Nzogwu said.

'Local Arbites forces?' Rannik said. 'I've not had a chance to meet with Judge Fulchard, he couldn't be...' She trailed off as he shook his head, and her expression hardened.

'The Carcharodons,' she said slowly.

'Their commander also has his suspicions. He is sending a task force into the slums. I have... requested that we accompany it. Their abilities will allow us to cut right to the heart of the xenos, and perhaps we can help restrain some of their more violent activities as far as the slum's populace are concerned.'

'Violent, as in massacring anything in their way?'

Nzogwu nodded, but said nothing.

'I would like to volunteer to go,' Rannik said.

'I thought you would. Damar will accompany you. I will link your comms systems to my own rosette tracker so even if we're cut off, hopefully we can maintain our location with one another.'

'What time are we moving out?' Damar asked.

'In an hour's time, from Absolution Square. The cardinals have agreed to allow me to establish a temporary base of operations in the Theocratica, so that's where the rest of us will be located. Brant has teams on standby too if a rapid response is required.'

Nzogwu dismissed the retinue, but asked Rannik to stay behind. She wouldn't meet the inquisitor's eye, but instead gazed out through the blast hole at Pontifrax's gothic glory.

'Rawlin has news for you,' Nzogwu said quietly to her after the last of the retinue had departed. 'Or more accurately, Welt did, right before he died.'

Rannik felt a chill creep over her. Somehow, she knew what was coming next.

'He wanted to warn you about a woman. He said that... she wasn't what he had thought she was.'

'He didn't say anything more?' Rannik asked, looking at him. 'He didn't... identify her?'

'No. The blast happened immediately afterwards, or at least that's the last thing Rawlin remembers clearly. He's on a lot of counterseptics and pain stimms, but he was insistent.'

Rannik looked away once more, out of the hole torn in the Observance, at the distant spires of the shrine-city's ecclesiastical sprawl. Welt hadn't needed to say. They had both known. They'd both known the woman in the black veil was out

there still, somewhere. She had taken Welt. Next, she would take Rannik.

‘We just have to carry on,’ she heard herself saying, though she wasn’t sure why. ‘We need to hit back, before we suffer any more losses.’

‘And the woman?’ Nzogwu asked.

‘If she comes back, I’ll kill her,’ Rannik said, speaking with greater strength and conviction than she felt.

‘We don’t know what she is. Some sort of psychic apparition. A spectre. Maybe worse.’

‘She could have come from the depths of the warp itself,’ Rannik said. ‘I told you. I’ll kill her.’

Nzogwu was silent for a while before nodding. ‘Very well. Get yourself ready. Absolution Square, one hour.’

A Carcharodon known as Strike Leader Nuritona took three squads into the slums. The column was accompanied by the company’s Predator Destructor, *Black Scythe*, as well as Rannik and Damar. The ordo operatives rode with Nuritona and his tactical squad in the lead Rhino.

Being locked in a plasteel hold with seven of the grey monsters made Rannik’s flesh crawl. Damar looked no better – he was clamped into the restraint harness across from Rannik, the red lighting of the Rhino’s interior giving him a ghoulish, wide-eyed appearance. He was kitted out in his ex-Guard flak plate, lascarbine across his lap. Rannik was clad in her own full riot-plate, the Vox Legi locked at her side. Its bulky presence was her only comfort.

The Carcharodons were silent and unmoving as the transport rocked back and forth, the growl of its engines vibrating the metal around them. Their nightmare features were hidden behind their helmets, and their huge, vicious weapons – bolters, chainaxes and chainswords – were mag-locked to their hips or across their chest-plates. They were like automata, deactivated and left inert until the right binaric code sprung them into sudden, frenzied action. Just being near them made Rannik’s guts churn. It felt like one of her dreams made manifest.

‘*Time to arrival, sixty seconds,*’ clicked the driver’s voice over the hold’s intercom. The words seemed to trigger the Space Marines. They disengaged their harnesses and rose as one, unclamping their weapons as they did so. Rannik and Damar hurried to do the same, flanked on either side by the huge warriors.

‘*Thirty seconds,*’ clicked the voice. The column had departed Absolution Square forty-five minutes earlier, *Black Scythe* leading the three Rhinos out along the Pilgrim Way, through the devotarium district and out into the clogged

streets and paths that wove through the slum city. They were almost on top of the shrine unearthed by Damar.

‘There is a crowd gathering outside,’ the Space Marine called Nuritona said to Rannik. ‘Prepare yourself.’

She said nothing, unclamping her Vox Legi and racking the slide.

The Rhino lurched to a halt. The red interior lighting blinked to green and there was a buzzing noise. The rear access ramp dropped.

Rannik was the second out, after Nuritona. The light of a Piety summer evening hit her a second before the stench and the noise.

Nuritona’s statement about a crowd had been conservative. There were hundreds of people pressing around the Space Marines’ vehicles, clad in raggedy pilgrimage robes and brown or black devotional garb. There were gasps and screams of terror as the Carcharodons started to disembark, towering over those around them.

‘Defensive cordon,’ Nuritona ordered. The crowd’s distress magnified as the Space Marines spread out from the Rhinos, people pushing and falling as they scrambled back from the grey giants. Rannik was joined by Damar in the shadow of their vehicle. She was scanning the ramshackle buildings hemming them in, the conglomerate constructions of corrugated iron and layers of rotting multiwood rising three or four storeys either side. Close in to the edge of the shrines the pilgrim shacks were like a city in their own right, albeit one stinking of refuse and bearing no obvious layout or plan. It was an excellent place for an ambush, and the Carcharodons were clearly aware of it.

‘I don’t like this,’ Damar murmured, lascarbine up, eyes darting from one shack to the next. ‘We’re hemmed in.’

‘We are about to move in on the target building,’ Nuritona said. ‘It is a hundred yards to our south-east. Fourth Squad will take point. I recommend you remain by my side at all times and follow my instructions.’

‘We will accompany the vanguard,’ Rannik said before Damar could speak. He shot her a withering look, but nodded.

‘My master wishes us to be among the first to reach the target building,’ he admitted.

Nuritona reached up to his helmet, likely communicating with the rest of his strike team, before speaking.

‘Very well. Stay close to Strike Leader Kordi or Librarian Khauri. We are moving now. This place is too exposed to remain stationary.’

Rannik hefted her shotgun and sprinted to the most advanced Rhino, Damar

behind her. It was getting infernally hot, her black bodyglove slicked with sweat, and her flak plate grating and uncomfortable. Ahead of her was another Carcharodons squad, including one warrior in blue battleplate carrying a bone staff.

‘You are Damar and Rannik?’ he asked as they approached.

‘We are,’ Damar replied.

‘This is Strike Leader Kordi,’ the Librarian, presumably Khauri, responded, indicating one of his grey-clad brethren. Before either Rannik or Damar could respond, the Librarian made a sudden motion, twisting away from the humans to scan the buildings to their left. He spoke.

‘We are about to come under attack.’

There was a crack. In the same moment the head of the Space Marine named Kordi snapped to one side, his helmet split. More gunshots rang out, and the crowd’s wails of fear turned to screams of terror.

Rannik and Damar both hit the sides of the Rhino at the same time, using its brutal outline to minimise the angles around them. The Space Marines exhibited no similar concerns regarding cover or self-defence – they had already opened fire on half a dozen of the shack windows and entrances to the column’s left, apparently guided by their psyker’s prescience. Plasterboard and rotting timber burst and splintered while beneath, the crowd recoiled, surrounding the Carcharodons with a maelstrom of churning, filthy, panicked bodies.

‘I’ve got nothing!’ Damar shouted over the thunder of the bolter fire, lasgun shouldered and twitching from one fire-lacerated opening to the next.

Rannik didn’t respond. The Carcharodons sergeant, Kordi, had disengaged his broken helmet, revealing the face of her nightmares – deathly pale, black-eyed, with wickedly sharp teeth. For a moment, the thunderstorm barrage surrounding her seemed to fade, and she was back in among the cold darkness of Zartak’s depths, alone, afraid, hunted by death-faced killers in dark battleplate.

The sergeant’s words, addressed to her directly, cut brutally through the waking memories.

‘We are moving up to the shrine. First Squad will secure it while we push underground!’

She managed to nod and tap Damar’s shoulder. They moved away from the Rhino just as the transport gunned its engines, jetting black smoke from its exhausts. The tracks started to roll, the Space Marines and the two humans moving forwards either side of it. Rannik realised they were still under fire – though she couldn’t hear the discharges, she saw a round crack off the flank of

the Rhino beside her, and another score the pauldron of one of the Space Marines ahead. She kept her Vox Legi up, but there were no easy targets. She caught snatches of movement in windows, alleys and lean-tos all around, as well as more deliberate, aggressive movements in the crowd still scattering around them, but the gunmen were too fast and the Carcharodons' fire suppression too intense to get a good fix. They were surrounded.

There was a building directly blocking the route of their advance, a ramshackle construction of old freight containers and mismatched multiweave boards. The Predator tank had slewed to the side, demolishing a section of ramshackle lean-tos and opening the route for the transports behind. The first Rhino didn't slow. It hit the base of the shack and ground on through it, rusting metal crumpling and wood splitting. The building came crashing apart, the Carcharodons continuing through its remains as the treads of their transport kicked out dust and debris.

'Objective ahead,' Rannik heard Khauri call out as she and Damar clambered through the wreckage. The Librarian hadn't drawn his bolt pistol, but held his staff aloft as the column pressed on. In the pall kicked up by the building's demolition, she realised it was glowing with a faint blue luminescence.

The shrine lay before them. There was little to distinguish it from the surrounding shacks – a rusting Imperial eagle, scavenged from an altar or ceremonial panel, hung over the door to a hovel dwelling constructed from broken plasteel shipping plates, scabbed with mould blotches.

The Carcharodons didn't bother stacking and breaching. Kordi simply kicked the door down – making the whole structure shudder – and swung inside. Damar and Rannik entered after half the squad, the rest remaining outside covering the approach.

The space within was low and cramped, and littered with refuse in various stages of decay. It was also deserted. Rannik would have assumed it was a hovel like any other were it not for the tokens that had been hammered into the far wall, above a low table littered with offerings of grubby cloth and scrap metal. The tokens themselves were mostly crude crescent shapes like the one Damar had first recovered, rendered in the likeness of snarling worm-like alien creatures. There was a larger and more sinister object at the centre of the display, though. A harvest doll had been woven from straw, presumably from the agri-collectives that supplied Pontifrax with bread for the monastic orders and alms houses. It might have been mistaken for human, had it not possessed six twig-limbs instead of just four.

'It was like this when we first found it,' Damar said, carbine slung by its strap

as he knelt and brushed decaying litter away from a patch on the floor. ‘Ro’s scans found this.’

He prised his fingers under one of the stained flaxen mats carpeting the floor and lifted it up. The swirl of dust and debris revealed a hole in the floor, a narrow earthen staircase picked out by the luminator in Damar’s other hand.

‘We went down, but not far,’ he said, looking up at Rannik and the Space Marines. ‘It connects to the sewer tunnels and burial caverns running beneath the rest of the slum. It probably goes all the way to Pontifrax.’

‘There is a presence down there,’ Khauri said, gesturing at the stairs. ‘I will take point.’

‘As you wish, Librarian,’ Kordi said, slamming home a fresh magazine.

‘We’re with you,’ Rannik said, Damar rising to stand beside her.

‘It is not advised,’ Khauri began, then seemed to think better of it. He nodded.

Khauri and the two humans were the first down, the Space Marine barely fitting through the narrow opening in the shrine’s floor. The Librarian began to descend into the darkness, Rannik and Damar close behind. The tactical squad followed, Kordi taking up the rear. As they descended, the stink of the slums was replaced by an even worse stench, that of overflowing waste mixed with decaying remains. Rannik gagged but carried on, knowing the reflexive revulsion would pass. Damar had locked his luminator to his carbine’s lug, and the light danced around the tunnel they found themselves in.

It was quickly apparent that there was little rhyme or reason to the subterranean construction. A few dozen paces on and they found themselves standing before four different possible routes – one led a short way to a gushing waste chute, its sides scummed with brown froth. Another looked as though it had recently been walled in at its far end, while the third, unlike the first two, was burrow-like and completely earthen, with only a few timber supports seemingly keeping it from collapsing. The final one looked to lead through an old crypt that had been broken open, its tombs long ago shattered and ransacked.

‘We could divide,’ Kordi said, moving up from the rear. ‘The auspex appears to show that the crypt tunnel directly ahead goes the furthest.’

‘No,’ said Khauri abruptly. He had been looking down the crypt tunnel, but turned sharply back. ‘It is a trap. This whole place is. We have to get back to the surface immediately.’

Rannik saw the one called Kordi hesitate for a moment, his pallid features lost in the tunnel’s shadows. The Librarian seemed on the brink of speaking again when he began snapping orders back to his squad.

‘Withdraw back up the tunnel, Receding Tide formation. Rangaru, take point.’

The Carcharodons made for the stairs. Khauri, Rannik and Damar brought up the rear.

‘What is it?’ Rannik asked, twisting to look back at the Librarian. He didn’t reply.

They reached the foot of the stairs. Kordi was already up, back in the shrine above. Khauri motioned to the last member of the squad, who had been covering the withdrawal. He turned and began to climb ahead of the two humans and the Librarian.

Rannik tried not to think about the fact that she was trapped between her night terrors on a narrow dirt staircase. She only managed a few steps before a heavy grip took hold of her shoulder, dragging her back and knocking her into Damar. She yelled in protest as she found herself falling back down into the tunnels, hauled by the Librarian’s unyielding grip.

‘Too late,’ the Space Marine said, depositing Rannik and Damar into the dirt at the foot of the stairs and moving to get between them and the entrance.

The charges buried in the bare earth of the stairway walls detonated. Rannik caught a snapshot of the Space Marine who had been climbing above her, hit from both sides by the full force of the twin blasts halfway up the stairs. He was torn apart in a welter of shorn plasteel and blood, before the storm of dirt buried him. The blast roaring down the stairway was blocked by Khauri, who interposed himself between the explosion and the two humans he had thrown to the tunnel floor. The Librarian took a single step forwards as he hunched against the hail of debris, and Rannik was forced to bow her head as the detonation rolled over them. Her ears burst, and her mind struggled to react as she tried to cuff grit from her eyes, coughing and choking. The stairway was gone, reduced to a wall of shifting earth, and the tunnel was fogged with smoke and dust.

She scrambled to her feet and spat a wad of dirt, her vision swimming. The ringing in her ears was driven out by the boom of another discharge, and another. Flashes lit the subterranean gloom, competing with the smoky glare of Damar’s luminator. She dimly realised that someone was firing a sidearm.

It was the Carcharodon. He had moved from the caved-in stair entrance to the other side of Damar and Rannik, his back to them now as he fired a bolt pistol down the tunnel at some unseen target. Shielding the two humans from the blast had left his backpack badly dented and pitted, and his blue armour scarred silver. Rannik stared at his towering form for what felt like an age, each booming report of his pistol making her ears ache.

Damar brought her back to the present. He dragged her back onto her feet and pressed her shotgun into her hands. The light of his luminator made his face a jagged contrast of light and dark as he pressed it close to hers.

‘The cultists are here! Come on!’

Then he was gone, forward to crouch at the Carcharodon’s side, the bolts of his lasgun sending streaks of red light into the dark. There, a sea of snarling, white faces and snapping fangs rose towards the two warriors.

Teeth gritted and grip tight on her Vox Legi, Rannik joined them.

In the depths of the Outer Dark, the hive fleet approached.

The number of returns on the *Nicor*’s powerful augur arrays were beyond computation. The flagship of the Carcharodon Astra had taken the van of the assembled fleet, its decks cleared for action and its guns run out. It was flanked by the *Annihilation* and *Scyla*, the battle-barges of the Red Brethren and the Second Company. The trio of warships would have been enough to break the back of a sector fleet. Early analysis from the cogitator banks estimated they would last between three and five hours against what was approaching.

The leading edge of the hive fleet – two dozen crustacean-like organisms about the size of Imperial escort ships – were slowly approaching the Nomad Predation Fleet’s engagement zone. Te Kahurangi watched them on the oculus screens of the *Nicor*’s bridge, the great flagship’s primary viewing port closed and sealed for the coming engagement. The things marking the extreme edge of the tyranid swarm were just minnows compared to the leviathan-like bulk of the hive ships following them. As they drew closer, those command and control vessels blotted out the stars with the hideous bulk of their void-scarred chitin and orifice-studded underbellies.

‘The rest of the Nomad Predation Fleet is in position,’ the Chief Librarian said to the Red Wake. Tyberos was standing on the edge of the *Nicor*’s command platform, watching over the silent activity of the bridge below. Te Kahurangi and Atea flanked him, their eyes on the secondary displays below. Both Librarians could feel the skin-crawling, thought-numbing psychic horror of the approaching swarm. The size of it was utterly overwhelming, like a tidal wave that threatened to snatch up individual minds and drag them out to be swallowed whole. Te Kahurangi had never encountered such an alien power before, had never felt the way it scratched and scraped inside his skull or slithered along his flesh. His - psychic hood throbbed, and his grip was tight on his force staff. Going by Atea’s drawn features, he was similarly strained by the strength of the hive mind. It

only reinforced the necessity of stopping it here, before it could dig its claws into the soft underbelly of the Imperium.

‘They are breaking to attack us,’ Tyberos said, his helmeted head swinging back and forth as he surveyed the data charts mapping out as close an approximation of the swarm’s formation as possible. Te Kahurangi realised he was right – a solid wedge of red, representing perhaps as many as a hundred major void-born organisms, was driving ahead of the ponderous mass that constituted the main part of the fleet. Even now yet more bio-ships were entering the sensorium range of the Carcharodons vessels, a seemingly endless procession of larger alien creatures. Te Kahurangi feared that even given the size of the swarm that had arrived so far – over a million organisms – they were viewing but a fraction of the primary fleet, the vanguard of a force that, when massed together, would be large enough to swallow up the greater part of the Segmentum Solar. The sheer scale was almost incomprehensible.

‘Message to all ships,’ Tyberos said, routing his words across the bridge’s individual vox-units. ‘Hold position.’

He did not need to explain the reasoning behind the unusually static defence. The longer it took the tyranids to engage them, the more time they bought for Third Company to complete their mission. Te Kahurangi had heard nothing since the last astropathic transmission, and this close to the hive mind he was unable to find the silence needed to scry Khauri’s whereabouts. All they had now was hope, hope that the Reaper Prime was close enough to cornering the patriarch, and hope that the warships of the Nomad Predation Fleet were strong enough to resist until he did.

It had been a trap. Damar admitted he realised that now. Initially tailing groups to the slum shrine, groups that were aware of his presence all along, had resulted in the strike force assault that had now left the ex-Guardsman, Rannik and Khauri trapped below ground. The cultists probably hadn’t expected half as much success luring investigators out into their subterranean realm.

‘I should have seen it,’ Damar said. Neither Rannik nor Khauri replied. The three were picking their way down the crypt tunnel by the light of Damar’s luminator, over the corpses of those xenos-worshippers who had charged them after the detonation of the stairwell explosives. They had lost vox contact with the surface, though the trackers Nzogwu had given Damar and Rannik were both still working, giving them an idea of their location in concert with the pocket chart Rannik had unfolded from her fatigues.

‘We need to find an exfil point,’ she said, slipping into Arbites combat-cant without realising as she held the chart out to catch the light from Damar’s luminator. ‘That probably means keeping to the sewer tunnels until we reach a manhole. Throne knows where those other burrows lead to.’

The walls around them shuddered with some sort of distant impact, sending a stream of dirt cascading from the ceiling. Rannik looked at Damar, and they both looked at Khauri, but the Space Marine remained inscrutable, the hard plates of his scarred power armour gleaming in the artificial light.

‘Along this tunnel again, then right,’ Rannik said, glancing at the chart again. ‘We should be able to pick up one of the larger waste chutes.’

‘Don’t you have any advice?’ Damar asked Khauri directly, his voice strained. ‘You... you can see things. How do we get out of here?’

‘The arbitrator’s plan is a good one,’ Khauri said. ‘Down here it is difficult for me to walk my visions. We are close to an extremely powerful psychic presence. It scratches along inside my skull. Its ache drives out all other thoughts.’

Rannik and Damar exchanged glances again. There was another mysterious, distant impact, shuddering through the tunnels.

‘Let’s move,’ Rannik said.

They picked up the waste tunnel, travelling north-west. At some point Pontifrax’s authorities had given up trying to provide amenities to the slums that crowded their city, and the sewer systems had consequently broken down. Some tunnels were overflowing with pouring filth, while others had been cut off and dried up. The tunnel they had found was among the latter, its floor now a stagnant quagmire, shin-deep and black. The stench was almost overpowering.

‘There are no vermin down here,’ Damar said as they went. ‘How can that be, in a place like this?’

‘They won’t go near it,’ Khauri said. ‘Its presence drives out everything not under its sway.’

‘What’s “it”?’

‘The patriarch.’

Rannik halted them both before Damar could reply. The sewage tunnel had come to an abrupt end. Before her was a wall of dirt, seemingly freshly disturbed, blocking off the passage.

‘This is a recent collapse,’ she said.

‘That explains the tremors we felt,’ Damar said. ‘They must be caving tunnels around us still.’

‘We go back,’ Rannik said. ‘There’s no way they can seal off every route in the

slum. We just have to hurry.'

They made their way out of the sewer system and north, into another crypt that had been broken into in order to expand the subterranean network. This was a high, desolate place, its arching vaults thickly cobwebbed. The tombs themselves appeared undisturbed, graven effigies that cast long shadows in Damar's luminator beam.

They got halfway towards the other side before the ex-Guardsman stopped abruptly.

'Movement left,' he said, swinging his lasgun to cover a side tunnel branching off from between two grave slabs. In the same instant Rannik caught a shadow flitting along the wall to the right, its form distorted to an unnatural shape and size by the darting laminator beam. She turned her Vox Legi on it, but there was nothing there.

'We are surrounded,' Khauri said. 'Above us.'

Rannik realised what had happened a second too late. A shriek – unnatural and ululating – rang through the tunnels, and as she tried to bring her shotgun up something struck her from above.

It was lightning fast. She stumbled, and managed to right herself just in time to catch a flash of claws and blood. Damar went down as he tried to turn his carbine on the thing that had dropped from the ceiling.

'No!' Rannik screamed, and fired. The crypt resounded with the shotgun blast, followed immediately by the hammer of Khauri's bolt pistol. The bolts missed, but the spread of Rannik's shot clipped its flank, causing it to stumble as it darted away from Damar. In the light of his fallen luminator, she saw it properly for the first time.

Genestealer.

+++ Vox transmission 88-3, bandwidth 19-10 +++

Reaper, this is Grey One. It is an ambush. The objective was mined and we are coming under heavy fire from all directions. Grey Four has lost contact with Pale One and the two humans – he believes they were caught underground when the charges blew. We have lost their vox-signal and there is no way to shift the debris. My auspex reads thousands of contacts closing on our position. Requesting permission to withdraw. Grey One out.

+++ Vox transmission 88-4, bandwidth 19-10 +++

Grey One, this is Reaper. Permission granted. Withdraw on fall-back position aleph-one and rendezvous with Grey Six. Permission to use all force necessary. Reaper out.

+++ Vox transmission 88-5, bandwidth 19-10 +++

Reaper, Grey One. Acknowledged, all weapons active. Black Scythe is leading off. Grey One, over and out.

+++ Vox transmissions end +++

--- CHAPTER X

Sharr broke the vox-link with Nuritona and mounted the steps of the Cathedra of Saint Solomon. Before him Absolution Square was being cleared. The Third Company had cordoned off the space and were now setting up defensive positions around the towering cathedra's base.

The strike force sent into the slums was on its way back, minus Khauri and those among the inquisitor's retinue who had accompanied him. Sharr had already had Nzogwu on the vox, demanding to know what had happened after he'd lost contact with his operatives. Sharr had more pressing concerns than their wellbeing, or even the immediate recovery of his Librarian. The rising had begun.

From the reports he had tracked over the frateris communications channels, it had started as several separate incidents. A mob had gathered in the Saint Claudian district outside the Church of the Seculum, protesting over the closing and barring of the shrines. Not long after another group had tried to force entry to the residences of Cardinal Delcharo. There had been spontaneous acts of small-scale vandalism, and at least two bands of pilgrims from the slums had forced entry to the suppliant quarter and were holding public prayer meetings that the frateris were struggling to disperse.

And now Nuritona's strike on the slum shrine was withdrawing under the assault of thousands of pilgrims, some of them armed, flocking from all corners of the sprawl that surrounded Pontifrax. Sharr doubted all those involved were cult members, but there was no doubt that the xenos were making their move. He had ordered his armour to block the side streets flanking the cathedra while the majority of the company prepared to receive an attack across its open ground. The cathedra and the Theocratica were both the spiritual and administrative heart

of Piety V. If the xenos wished to crush Imperial rule before the arrival of their masters, they would have to storm Absolution Square. The Carcharodon Astra would be ready for them.

The vox-uplink icon on Sharr's visor pinged with a transmission from orbit. It was Uthulu.

'The teleportarium is primed, Reaper,' the Techmarine said, his voice chopped and distorted by atmospherics. *'Strike Leader Korro and the Red Brethren stand ready for your deployment orders.'*

'Acknowledged,' Sharr said. *'Contact Chaplain Nikora and proceed to the Bay of Silence.'*

There was a slight pause before Uthulu responded.

'You wish me to begin awakening rites?'

'No, but stand by to. We do not yet know the enemy's true strength, but from what I have seen thus far I fear it is vast. We are about to enter a battle for our Chapter's survival. We shall need all void brothers, past and present, before the end.'

There were three of them. Three purestrain genestealers, hunched, purple-fleshed creatures with bulbous heads and spiny, mottled chitin carapaces. They attacked in the dark, little more than blurs of bared fangs and raking claws.

Damar was screaming. The alien that had slashed him had been hit in its side by Rannik's scattershot, and it twisted towards her with talons outstretched. She hit it again, this time face-on. Its swollen cranium exploded in a shower of grey matter, and its corpse barrelled into her, cracking against her flak plate and pitching her to the crypt floor.

Stinking xenos fluids splattered her, making her retch. Its claws scraped her armour, still scrabbling as she tried to grip its chitin and haul it off. Beside her Damar was writhing in pain, hands clutched to the small of his back. His flesh had been torn by the first genestealer's claws, and the second was standing over him, its jaws distended.

The thunder of Khauri's bolt pistol filled the vaulted space. Rannik saw the xenos hit as the third darted from the side-tunnel behind, just a six-limbed blur in the alternating light and dark of the weapon's muzzle flash. Alien flesh burst apart and chitin cracked, but it was not enough.

There were more, more bursting from the tunnels all around and through a fissure in the ceiling, shrieking and hissing as they scrambled down to surround their prey.

Rannik tried to stand, but Khauri flashed a glance at her.

‘Stay,’ he said, the command running deeper than mere words. Rannik felt a sudden pressure against her chest, keeping her down.

Blue flame burst into life around the Librarian’s stave, and he spun, a blow crashing into the first alien to lunge at him. It was smashed from its feet, but one of its brood-kin was already in past the Carcharodon’s guard, claws digging and scraping along his backpack. He turned, cutting it down with a trio of point-blank bolts, and spun the stave back just in time to deflect another low, raking blow to the back of his legs.

The things were everywhere, and Khauri was a blur of blue-wreathed motion in their midst. The pressure on Rannik subsided enough for her to raise her shotgun from the floor, and she let out a shout of adrenaline-fuelled fury as she fired into more of the genestealers emerging from the tunnel to her left. The fight became a haze of screams and shrieks, of fanged maws and glassy black eyes lit by the fury of muzzle flashes.

Rannik’s Vox Legi clicked empty. She realised there were no more targets. As quickly as they had appeared, the genestealers had vanished. She dropped the shotgun and slumped back, panting.

Khauri was standing in the centre of the crypt, surrounded by smoking, broken bodies and splattered in alien viscera. His fire had reduced to a burning glow that suffused his stave. His armour was shattered – a talon had split his helmet, one pauldron was a mangled mess and his backpack, already damaged by the blast on the shrine stairs, had been split open and was smoking and sparking.

A groan dragged Rannik’s attention away from the Librarian. Damar was still alive, but losing both blood and consciousness fast. She scrambled onto her knees and knelt beside him. He snatched the edge of her flak plate, hissing between gritted teeth.

‘I-it’s bad.’

‘You’re going to be fine,’ Rannik said, gripping him by the shoulder. ‘We’re going to get you out of here.’

‘His spine has been injured,’ Khauri said. There was a whirl of servos as the Space Marine knelt alongside Rannik, knee plate grating against the stone of the crypt’s floor. ‘He will have to be transported with care.’

‘Get out,’ Damar said. ‘I’ll slow you down. You need to get to a surface point before they block them all.’

Khauri had slipped a small syringe from a port in his thigh plate and now ripped a section of Damar’s fatigues open to drive it home.

‘What are you doing?’ Rannik demanded.

‘Blood coagulants and painkillers,’ he replied. ‘Normally reserved for my kind, but a half dose should be the right amount. That should keep him quiet.’

‘We’re not leaving you,’ Rannik told Damar, taking his head in her hands and focusing his eyes on her. ‘I’ll still be here when you wake up, right next to you. We’re going to get you to Janus and he’s going to patch you right up. Again.’

Damar tried to reply, but his words were already slurring as the injection took hold. His eyes rolled and he went limp in Rannik’s arms.

‘It would be wise to leave him,’ Khauri said. ‘The injection will stop him alerting any more threats to our location.’

‘No. I’m not going without him.’

‘There is little chance of reaching a medicae soon. He is also likely crippled beyond repair. He will only serve to lessen the chances of our own survival. His blood loss has already been considerable.’

‘Then help me stem it!’ Rannik snapped, struggling to ease Damar onto his side and expose the ruin of his back.

Khauri said nothing, but removed a canister from his belt’s mag-strips. As Rannik applied pressure to the wound he sprayed on a dose of synth-skin, its artificial smell and the stink of counterseptic battling with the alien reek of the genestealer corpses.

Rannik slid an arm around Damar’s shoulders, her hands red with his blood, but Khauri stopped her.

‘It will be better if I carry him.’

The Space Marine stood and began to disengage latches on his power armour’s backpack.

‘It is too damaged,’ he said when he noticed Rannik’s confused expression. ‘It will only be a hindrance to me.’

He uncoupled the power unit along with the rear plate it was linked to, sealing off the power nodes. The two heavy pauldrons followed. The white flesh of his back was left exposed.

He laid his stave carefully against the broken backpack before bending and picking up Damar’s limp body. Pale and blood-streaked as he was, it looked as though he were already dead. Khauri cradled him in one arm and retrieved his stave with the other. He turned away from Rannik, towards the tunnel the genestealer brood had burst from.

‘We must keep going,’ he said.

The crypt resounded with the cold, clear double-clack of a shotgun’s slide being

racked.

Khauri turned back. Rannik was pointing her Vox Legi squarely at his chest. She was shaking.

‘Turn around,’ she ordered. ‘Now.’

Khauri held her gaze for a moment, his black eyes betraying neither fear nor surprise. Slowly, he obeyed, displaying his pallid back. Displaying the old scars that marked it, circles and dashes.

They formed a pattern that Rannik recognised, a pattern that had haunted her since Hypasitis.

‘What are they?’ she demanded. ‘What do they mean?’

‘They are marks I received before my ascension,’ Khauri said. ‘The work of the Archenemy, rendered impotent.’

‘I’ve seen them before,’ Rannik replied, trying to keep her voice level and still the quiver in her hands. ‘I’ve seen them everywhere.’

‘They do not concern you.’

‘You said it yourself, they’re the marks of the Archenemy! You’re a traitor! Your entire Chapter are traitors!’

Khauri turned back to face Rannik, his expression still unreadable.

‘You do not know what we are, human. What we have become. You would be dead without us.’

‘Maybe I should be,’ Rannik snarled. ‘Maybe it’s time I was, and you along with me.’

‘If that is the case your companion will die also.’

Rannik’s eyes darted to Damar, cradled and helpless in the giant warrior’s grip.

‘He’s your hostage. That’s the only reason you’re not abandoning him.’

‘I swear to you, neither I nor my brothers are agents of the Dark Gods. If my words do not convince you, let our actions show our loyalty.’

‘You massacre and enslave. If you aren’t servants of the Archenemy, you’re little better than them.’

‘We serve the Imperium. How many of those like us whom you would call saviour perform the same deeds we do? The Void Father’s works could not continue were it not for such actions.’

‘That is a lie. You are supposed to protect and uphold, just like the Adeptus Arbites. We are mankind’s protectors.’

‘We are mankind’s judges,’ Khauri said, and now his voice was tinged with anger. ‘When they stray, they are punished. We serve the Imperium, not man.’

‘You serve yourselves.’

‘Enough,’ the Carcharodon snapped. He cracked his stave into the crypt’s floor, and Rannik felt a force snatch the Vox Legi from her grip, sending it tumbling to the ground. At the same time something cold and insubstantial seemed to flood her lungs. She choked and gagged, hands going to her throat, eyes wide as she struggled for breath. It felt as though she were drowning, though no water had entered her mouth.

‘I could annihilate you in the time it takes for you to blink,’ Khauri said, his eyes now burning with the blue light that had surrounded his stave. *‘You are a fool if you attempt to resist me, and an even greater one if you think I mean to betray you. I am going now. If you wish, you may follow. If not, stay here and die.’*

The pressure disappeared, and suddenly Rannik found she could breathe again. She collapsed to the floor, gasping, a hand clutching her aching chest.

Khauri was leaving, still carrying Damar. Rannik snatched her shotgun and found her feet. For a moment, the urge to level the Vox Legi at the Carcharodon once more was almost overwhelming. But she knew to do so would mean death, at best for her, at worst for Damar. She kept the weapon lowered, and hurried to catch up.

Khauri said nothing as she rejoined him. They were passing through a burrow-tunnel that seemed to connect to another section of dilapidated sewage chutes. The dark, claustrophobic environment and the towering presence of the pale-skinned warrior was dredging memories Rannik had long suppressed, memories of Zartak – suffocating heat, bare rock walls, red blood on white skin. She felt sick, but she forced herself to keep going. She had to get back to the surface, not just for Damar’s sake. She had to link back up with Nzogwu.

The sound of more detonations crumped through the maze-like underworld, shuddering through the walls around them. Khauri paused, looking back at her.

‘They are still collapsing exit routes,’ he said. *‘Keeping us trapped. They must control the entirety of the slum district.’*

‘There’s one way out they can’t reach then,’ Rannik said, slowing down as she flashed the stab lumen on the tunnel pocket chart. *‘Less than a mile ahead, though the path isn’t direct. There’s an Adeptus Arbites sub-precinct with a sewer patrol grate. If we reach that I can get us back up to the surface.’*

‘Very well,’ Khauri said.

They set off with renewed purpose, Rannik taking point while Khauri carried Damar. The passageways led them through slime-encrusted culverts and broken-through crypt tunnels. Twice they passed secondary tunnels that had been

collapsed, munitions planted above shattering the structure of the underground network.

‘They’ve been planning this for months,’ Rannik said as they passed into another sewer section, up past their ankles in dark, stinking slurry. ‘It’s as though they knew we were coming to this world. But how could they?’

‘The woman in the veil told them.’

Rannik stopped.

‘What did you say?’

‘You have seen her, I sense it. She will come for us both before the end.’

Nzogwu had lost contact with Damar and Rannik. The inquisitor paced the interior of the state room of the Theocratica, given over to him for use as an operations centre. Lexo-archivist Llorens and Preacher Maurus were absent, watching over Rawlin at the medicae suite, but Janus, Ro and Tibalt were sitting watching the viewscreens rigged up to the room’s far wall. Nzogwu had used his authority to route pict-casts from across the shrine-city to the monitors. They currently displayed the mounting tensions gripping Pontifrax. Groups of supplicants and worshippers were gathering outside locked churches and shrines all over the city. In some places they had started to try to break in. Mobs of pilgrims were also moving in from the slums in ever-increasing numbers. The frateris command and control appeared to be deteriorating. Some units had abandoned their posts and joined the ragged bands starting to fill the city’s streets.

The vox-caster set up in the corner told a similar story. There were reports coming in from the frateris command channels of out-and-out rioting in the slums. Beyond the state room’s arched windows, Nzogwu could see columns of black smoke climbing up beyond the spires.

And still nothing from Damar or Rannik. The last word he’d received had been from Damar, reporting that the column had come under attack and they were making a move on the objective. Nzogwu hadn’t been able to break into the Space Marines’ own communications, despite Ro’s best efforts, and while the Carcharodons in Absolution Square appeared to be setting up defensive positions outside the cathedra, none would speak with him or tell him where their commander was. They had barred all entry to the cathedra itself.

It felt as though every being in the city was moving with a purpose, except him. The isolation and the sense of helplessness was not something Nzogwu was accustomed to.

The vox made a ticking sound, cutting through a static-garbled transmission from a frateris officer who had decided to let the mob of pilgrims at his checkpoint pass rather than open fire on them. Ro stood and bent over the caster, muttering to himself in lingua-technis. He turned to Nzogwu.

‘We’re receiving a transmission on a bandwidth used by the frateris high command on Piety,’ he said. ‘I don’t know their call signs, but it could be Brant.’

‘Put it through,’ Nzogwu ordered, striding over to the caster and unhooking the horn and aural clamps. Ro worked the transmission dials, and after a moment a voice came through. It was Brant.

‘We have a situation, inquisitor.’

‘That’s an understatement, cleric marshal,’ Nzogwu said, trying not to snap. ‘I have two operatives missing and the city is degenerating into chaos before my eyes. You need to isolate these crowds, re-establish your cordon and, for Throne’s sake, reopen the shrines.’

‘The shrines have been closed on the orders of the Adeptus Astartes,’ Brant said. ‘And I fear it may already be too late anyway. I have received reports of an attack on the primary Adeptus Arbites precinct, east of the Shrine of Garro the Stoic. Judge Fulchard has requested I reinforce him. I am going there immediately. Hopefully an... example can be made of the rioters.’

‘And you want my help in doing so?’ Nzogwu surmised. ‘You think the authority of an inquisitor will be enough to stop what is happening out there?’

‘Together I believe there is a chance,’ Brant said. ‘If the people see our three great arms of the Adeptus Terra – the Arbites, the Ministorum and the Inquisition – united, then their fervour will surely be quenched, at least until I can convince the Adeptus Astartes that closing the shrines was a mistake. Once we have dispersed the rioters outside the precinct I am happy to broadcast a message from you across all channels and frequencies within the city.’

‘You really think what we are seeing is the work of those loyal to the Imperial Cult?’ Nzogwu asked. ‘Not the activities of the xenos worshippers?’

‘I believe the xenos will attempt to use the existing unrest to further their own ends. If we don’t act now it will be too late to curtail the spreading violence. It may already be impossible to stop, but this is our best hope. My reaction force is departing from outside the Theocratica’s north gate in fifteen minutes.’

‘So be it,’ Nzogwu said. ‘I’ll join you, Brant. Let us hope you are right, and we can contain this madness before it spreads any further.’

The transmission ended and Ro broke the link.

‘I am going to the Arbites precinct,’ Nzogwu said to the rest of the retinue.

‘There may still be a chance to stop all this, or at the very least force the cultists to break from the rioters and reveal their true hand.’

‘What about us?’ Janus asked, arms folded over his chest.

‘You will remain here until my return. Tibalt, none are to enter this room, understood?’

The ageing crusader nodded, hefting his broadsword.

‘I’d feel no less safe out there than in here,’ Janus went on, glancing at Tibalt. ‘And what about the Space Marines? If it weren’t for their damned orders I doubt half of these people would be on the streets. It’s as though they’re deliberately attempting to undermine Imperial authority here.’

‘The Carcharodon Astra will be held to account,’ Nzogwu said. ‘But now is not the time.’

‘If not now, then when? We need to reopen the shrines. They’re the ones stopping us.’

Nzogwu was already heading to the door, dragging his overcoat on over his flak vest. He called back as he left.

‘Right now it doesn’t matter any more. If they are renegades, we’re as good as dead anyway.’

Khauri knew of the woman in the veil. He refused to say more, beyond the fact that she was a malignant entity. Rannik didn’t know why she had been appearing to her, but a review of the possibilities revealed none that offered her any comfort. Again she found herself trapped and bound to the Carcharodon Astra.

Panic was only one focused thought away – she knew from experience that if she paused to consider her situation she wouldn’t be able to go on. She was trapped down among the filth and the dead along with one of her nightmares made manifest – a renegade, a monster, a creature utterly removed from humanity. Worse, that creature was somehow connected to her, linked by a phantom that refused to give her peace. How she could banish it, let alone escape this mouldering, dark, echoing place and her grim companion, was something she didn’t have an answer to. All she could do was carry on.

The sub-precinct was listed as Bastion 17-Z. It was one of a dozen small Arbites stations planted out in the pilgrim slums, responsible for providing an Imperial presence and at least the threat of retaliation in what would otherwise be a lawless zone. Bastion 17-Z had an entrance to the slum’s decaying underground networks, a mould-blotched armoured door set at the end of a sagging tertiary tunnel. Rannik approached and hammered on it with the butt of

her shotgun, looking up at the pict-caster overlooking the entrance.

Nothing happened. She tried again. After a moment more she felt a heavy weight on her shoulder, and realised Khauri had put his hand on her. She stepped aside hastily, the thought of making contact with the Carcharodon making her skin crawl.

For a moment she thought the psyker was going to tap into the terrible abilities he had displayed earlier against the genestealers. Instead, with Damar cradled in one arm he simply raised his other hand and knocked. The force of the strikes reverberated through the tunnel around them, and left a slight dent in the door's rusting surface.

This time there was a response. A click sounded, and a voice crackled from the grime-gummed grilles of the vox-unit set into the door's upper half.

'Identify yourselves.'

Rannik stepped forwards again and held her Arbites badge up to the pict-caster.

'I am Sub-Warden Jade Rannik, Adeptus Arbites. I have with me a brother of the Adeptus Astartes and a critically injured member of the Inquisitorial ordos. We require access to the surface via your installation, in the name of the Emperor and His Holy Inquisition.'

Silence followed her words. Eventually there was a thud of disengaging locks. She stood back as the door ground open on rusting hinges. Beyond two figures waited for them, a man and a woman, both in full dark blue arbitrator riot gear. The man's face, bar the downturned line of his mouth, was shielded by his helmet, but the woman still had hers mag-locked to her hip. She was young, her blonde hair cropped short, dark eyes darting from the Space Marine to the man he was carrying, then to Rannik. Her face was pale, and the hard edges of her armour didn't detract from the prettiness of her features.

'Sub-Warden Rannik,' she said, ushering them over the threshold. 'I am Sub-Warden Tanner, Bastion 17-Z. We heard there was a fellow officer of the *Lex* with the Inquisitorial delegate that arrived on-world.'

'News travels fast,' Rannik said, entering the sub-precinct and giving Tanner the closed-fist arbitrator salute. They were inside a small guard post, reinforced metal walls containing a viewscreen and vox section for monitoring the tunnel outside. A grav-lift at the far end presumably led up to the precinct proper.

'This is Brother Khauri and my fellow operative, Damar,' Rannik said, making space as the Carcharodon ducked into the small room with the ex-Guardsman still cradled in one arm. Tanner's eyes widened visibly as the Space Marine loomed over her.

‘Greetings, sub-warden,’ Khauri said. ‘We require access to the surface immediately. The slums beyond your gates are riven with xenos taint, and on the brink of rebellion.’

‘We know,’ Tanner said, activating the grav-lift. ‘The attacks started about an hour ago. Not just here either, every sub-precinct beyond the shrine-edge is surrounded. We expect a breach within half an hour if support doesn’t arrive.’

‘We’ll do what we can,’ Rannik said as the three arbitrators stepped onto the lift, moving to make room for the Space Marine in their midst. Tanner closed the lift’s mesh door-cage. There was a lurch and a whir as the machine activated, carrying them up to a small control room.

‘My detail is only eleven strong,’ Tanner said as she dragged back the mesh cage and stepped out into the cramped space. A dozen cogitators and a viewscreen bank took up the centre of the chamber, manned by several arbitrators in black fatigues. More stood around the edges, fully armed and armoured, apparently waiting on Tanner’s orders.

‘Drok, Koster, take him to the medicae,’ Tanner told two of them, gesturing to Damar. The men approached Khauri hesitantly, and the Space Marine handed Damar’s pallid body over to them with a care that belied his size.

‘What happened to him?’ Tanner asked, seeing the grievous slash wounds as he was carried through a door into the white-scrubbed interior of the station’s medicae bay.

‘A xenos,’ Rannik said. ‘A tyranid bioform known as a genestealer. They’re highly dangerous, and they’re in the tunnels below. They’re behind the attacks.’

‘The slums have been quiet for weeks,’ Tanner said, her tone disbelieving.

‘That should’ve been a warning in itself,’ Rannik replied. She was watching the viewscreens. The pict-feeds monitoring Bastion 17-Z’s exterior were picking up half a dozen scenes of chaos. Mobs had surrounded the small outpost’s walls and its two gates. They had yet to coordinate any action beyond baying and smashing at the defences with slum debris, but given how well armed and coordinated the earlier attack on the Carcharodons column had been, Rannik knew it wouldn’t be long before Bastion 17-Z was breached. When it was, everyone inside would be dead in minutes. Even the pict-caster’s grainy returns couldn’t hide the alien deformities that marred much of the crowd, their hybrid mutations now revealed for all to see.

‘If you want to get out, you’re going to have to fight,’ Tanner said.

‘Extraction is inbound,’ Khauri said. Rannik hadn’t heard him speak, but guessed he still possessed some sort of active locator somewhere on the remains

of his armour. 'It will take at least fifteen minutes to arrive. Does this facility have a defensible rooftop?'

'That way,' Tanner said, pointing up a ladder bolted to one of the walls, leading to a closed blast hatch. 'We had the section's sniper performing spotting on the rooftop, but they have gunmen out there and the weight of fire became too heavy. If it's aerial extraction, it'll have to be fast.'

'It will be,' Khauri replied.

Rannik had spotted something on one of the viewscreens. The crowds around the sub-precinct were a churning mass of motion, yet in the midst of it all a patch of stillness had drawn her attention. She leaned forwards, over the shoulder of the arbitrator manning the station, peering at the grainy images produced on the screen. As they resolved, her blood ran cold.

The woman in the mourning veil was out there, motionless, standing amidst the corrupt horde, untouched and seemingly unnoticed. And as Rannik looked, she swore the apparition's head twitched to fix the pict-caster in its sights. She stumbled back from the viewscreen, pointing at the figure.

'Do you see her?'

'Who?' Tanner asked, walking over. Rannik dropped her arm. The churning of the crowd had passed over the apparition and it had gone, as though never there. She glanced back at Khauri, but the Space Marine merely shook his head. As she was trying to find a coherent answer to Tanner, she noticed the gatehouse control panel, across from the viewscreens. The locking rune for the sub-precinct's main doors had been deactivated. An arbitrator was sat by the controls and as his eyes met Rannik's, she realised they were black – as black and glassy as the eyes of the genestealers that had come for them out of the dark.

The bang of a shotgun blast filled the small room. Rannik was dimly aware of Tanner shouting a warning, and one of the arbitrators beside her going down in a spray of blood as she brought her Vox Legi to bear on the hybrid at the gate controls. He reached for his autopistol, but Rannik was quicker – the point-blank shot blew his remains across his console and rune pads.

The cramped command centre had descended into chaos. There was more gunfire, deafeningly loud. Rannik crouched as the viewscreens beside her were hit, sparks and shattered plastek exploding across the space in front of her. Another of the arbitrators went down, hit by his own comrades. Two of the armed and armoured lawmen on the edge of the room had turned their weapons on their own, gunning them down before the arbitrators had realised the enemy was already among them.

Khauri had taken a scattershot to his left side, and his armour had been penetrated at several points. He betrayed neither pain nor rage at the sudden betrayal, however – Rannik saw him turn and discharge two bolt pistol shots at the attackers. There was a grisly double-crack as their heads were burst apart with pinpoint accuracy, blood and brains painting the wall behind them.

The sudden silence that followed was almost as shocking as the violent betrayal itself. It looked as though there was only one of the arbitrators left – Tanner. She began to rise from where she had been crouching behind the room's vox-bank.

'Stay down,' Rannik snarled at her. She froze.

'Clear,' Khauri said.

'Damar,' Rannik said, turning towards the medicae bay. She kicked in the door, shotgun primed. One of the two arbitrators, presumably uninfected, was already dead. So was Damar. The hybrid masquerading as a lawman was gnawing on his blood-drenched throat as Rannik crashed inside.

She screamed with rage and denial, and put the thing down with a shotgun blast. It was still twitching, its flak plate taking the worst of the hit, so she stood over it and applied another to its skull.

'The main gate is breached,' Khauri said from the control room. As though to underline his words there came the sound of hammering from the chamber's entrance. Tanner had managed to get the secondary door locked in time, but the rest of the small facility was already flooding with cultists.

'Onto the roof,' Khauri ordered, snatching both Tanner and Rannik and dragging them away from the medicae door. The control room's entrance had started to buckle beneath the external pounding. Rannik felt an overwhelming urge to disobey the Carcharodon and stay. Illogical as it was, she didn't want to leave Damar, much less to follow a creature like Khauri.

Then the control room door burst open. Something had hit it hard enough from the other side to crumple the upper half. While the frame held, the breach revealed snapping claws and hands that reached in and scraped at the obstruction. There was a groan of metal as the rest of the doorway began to give.

'Come on!' Tanner urged. Khauri was already climbing the ladder, the rungs visibly straining. Teeth gritted, Rannik tore herself away from the medicae bay and sprinted across the control room to the ladder's foot. Tanner was already there, shotgun in hand. She was opening her mouth to say something, but the crash of the door as it finally burst open stopped her.

The hybrids stormed the control room. Rannik and Tanner opened fire with their shotguns simultaneously as the first creatures burst in through the broken

door. They were thrown immediately back, great wounds blown in their deformed bodies by the close-range blasts. More came through, splattered with the discoloured blood of their kindred, snarling and screeching for the arbitrators' deaths. Their faces were nightmarish, at once recognisably human yet utterly alien. Their skulls were elongated and hairless, their teeth sharp, their skin white as a corpse's and shot through with ugly purple veins. Their eyes were pitch-black. For a second Rannik found herself thinking of the Carcharodons.

'Go!' Tanner shouted as she racked her shotgun and fired again. Light fell on them both as Khauri hauled open the hatch in the control room's roof. Rannik fired again and placed one boot on the ladder's bottom rung. The situation was hopeless – the hybrids were numberless, and if she and Tanner turned and began to climb they would flood the room and tear them both back down or shoot them off. One of the arbitrators had to keep the cultists at bay for the seconds it took the other to reach the roof.

Rannik locked the Vox Legi to her back and began to climb. Tanner fired again, and again, the howls of the xenos worshippers filling Rannik's ears. They had forced their way over their own dead and were closing on the ladder from either side of the cogitators and viewscreens, their broken machinery sparking as more shots impacted into them. Autogun fire rang out, and Rannik was vaguely aware of shots striking the wall around her. Then she was up at the hatchway, and a grey gauntlet was hauling her through by her flak plate. Khauri dropped her on the rockcrete roof, then slammed the hatch door shut. She had a last brief glimpse of Tanner below, surrounded by hybrids, her shotgun clicking empty.

'You could have held them off,' Rannik snarled, regaining her feet and stepping up close to the Space Marine, ignoring how he towered over her.

'I would not have survived. One of us had to give them pause. She chose to be the one.'

'You're Adeptus Astartes. You were created to protect mankind. To protect us. You're no better than a renegade or a traitor.'

If her words affected the Space Marine, he didn't show it.

'Neither of you would be extracted from here without me,' he said. 'If I was killed the flight mission would be aborted immediately. You are mistaken if you believe any individual matters. Neither you, I nor Tanner deserve special treatment. The best we can hope for is to serve Rangu in whatever capacity we are able. Tanner has served Him well this day. I pray I am able to do likewise.'

There was a hammering on the hatch beneath them. The sound was followed by

the crack of gunfire. Rannik realised the hybrids still clogging the surrounding alleys had spotted them. She crouched beneath the roof's parapet. The Carcharodon remained standing. Even unarmoured and bleeding from the earlier shotgun hits, he appeared set on disdaining the incoming fire.

A sound rose above the tumult of the horde below, a distant, teeth-jarring whine. Rannik looked skywards in time to see a cruciform shape arc around the towering spires of Pontifrax, nose-down, darting across the slum rooftops low and fast. It was a Carcharodon's flier, not one of the hulking gunships that had ferried them down from orbit, but something smaller and lithier. As she watched it jinked left, spitting flares in time to avoid a twisting rocket-propelled grenade that streaked up on a crooked contrail from the slums beneath. It swooped in over Bastion 17-Z, the scream of its engines engulfing Rannik and Khauri, engaging its thrusters as the twin assault cannons studding its prow opened up into the mob below with a whining buzz.

'On board,' Khauri shouted, lifting Rannik like a child. Her protestations turned into a yell of fear as he physically tossed her two-handed towards the hatch of the flier, the entranceway dropping open a dozen paces above the edge of the sub-precinct's roof. She experienced a gut-lurching moment of dislocation, and saw rounds fired from below spanking and sparking from the grey metal ahead of her, the noise of their impacts lost in the cacophony of the engines.

Then she hit the cold deck plate of the flier's empty hold, the impact driving the wind from her lungs. She had time to scrabble to one side, gasping, before Khauri impacted beside her with shuddering force.

'*Throne*,' was all she could pant as the hatch levered shut, sealing them within the juddering metal container of the troop section.

'Lock yourself into the restraints,' Khauri said, picking himself up along with his stave. 'We will be taking more fire once we re-enter the city.'

The battle of Absolution Square began, as such things so often did, with a degree of incongruity. A landcar, apparently commandeered, raced up the Boulevard of the Blessed and into the square, tyres squealing. Its occupants apparently only then noticed the Carcharodons battleline arrayed at the far side, turned the vehicle so hard it almost flipped, and raced away, north along Saint Kleitus Way.

'Scouts?' Dorthor muttered.

'Or just some fool trying to escape what is coming,' Sharr said coldly.

The Reaper Prime and his command squad occupied the steps before the aquila doors of the Cathedra of Saint Solomon, the company's Devastators arrayed

either side of them. Beneath were three tactical squads, Third, Fourth and Fifth, anchored around the company's Land Raider, *Maxima Alba*. The other two tactical squads, the twin Predators *Black Scythe* and *Grey Reaper* and the Rhinos had been deployed covering the streets and wynds leading off from the cathedra's flanks and rear.

There was no sign of any frateris troops, either holding the adjacent Theocratica or in the other administrative buildings overlooking the square. Reports were coming in over the vox from the company's air support that a huge mob of pilgrims was flooding in from the north-east, picking up smaller bands of rioters across Pontifrax as they went. Sharr had already permitted strafing runs, but the topography of the city's jagged skyline and the sheer weight of firepower the mob could bring to bear was forcing even the trio of Thunderhawks to stand off. He accepted an incoming vox transmission as *Maxima Alba* gunned its idling engines.

'*Reaper, this is Void Four,*' crackled the voice of one of the company's pilots, Tokaru. '*I have extracted Pale One. We are inbound on your position.*'

Sharr acknowledged with a blink-click. Dorthor's auspex had just pinged.

'Contacts closing,' the strike veteran said. 'From the east and north-east. Thousands. Estimated time to contact, less than five minutes.'

Sharr could hear them now, the rising swell of thousands of voices and hammering feet, pounding down the streets and the boulevard towards Pontifrax's lavish heart. He turned to Niko.

'Remove the company standard into the cathedra,' he said. 'That is our one and only fall back point.' He switched his vox to address the company in its entirety.

'The time has come, void brothers. The Chapter's future will be decided by our actions here today. Make ready.'

That was it. The Carcharodon Astra needed no great orations or litanies. Their duty was as clear as ever. Silent as the void, they waited.

And with a howl, the xenos horde burst into the square before them.

+++ Gene scan complete +++

+++ Access granted +++

+++ Beginning mem-bank entry log +++

+++ Date check, 2801885.M41 +++

The situation has degenerated completely. There's rioting throughout the city, and the frateris seem powerless to stop it. I am going with the cleric marshal to relieve the primary Adeptus Arbites precinct. This will likely be my last entry for some time.

Signed,

Inquisitor Augim Nzogwu

+++ Mem-bank entry log ends +++

CHAPTER XI

A knock rang out through the Theocratica's state room. Janus, Ro and Tibalt looked at one another. After a moment's silence the crusader moved from where he had been standing beside one of the windows, and headed for the door.

'Don't open it,' Janus said. The knock sounded again. Both Janus and Ro reached for their sidearms as the crusader turned the handle.

On the other side they found the supreme pontiff himself, waiting. De Grattio was conscious once more, though his wizened expression gave nothing away. He was still clad in his loose, plain blue medicae shift, as though he had only just left his ward.

'Supreme Pontiff?' Janus asked when Tibalt said nothing. The crusader seemed rooted to the spot, unable to speak. Janus assumed he was conflicted over his duties – while his oaths were to the Ministorum, he had also sworn fealty to the ordos and Nzogwu. If the master of Piety V demanded entry in his own palace, there was little Tibalt could do.

De Grattio, however, seemed content to stand on the threshold, staring into Tibalt's eyes. Janus had forgotten just how black the pontiff's own gaze was, void-like, almost dead, like a doll's. It was only when Tibalt's broadsword clattered to the floor that he realised there was more than mere awe behind the frozen silence between the two men.

'Ro, get back,' Janus snapped, raising his autopistol. He knew both the words and the action were useless. He tried anyway. Tibalt stepped aside, his features slack, his eyes staring, sword abandoned as his mind tried and failed to overcome the numbing hypnotism of a genestealer hybrid. Even as he did so, there was movement in the doorway. There were creatures behind de Grattio, stooped and hissing, and as the crusader left the door they pushed past the

pontiff, a sudden blur of wicked claws and black, glittering eyes.

Janus managed to get off just one shot before the purestrain genestealers darted into the room, and their talons ripped the life from Augim Nzogwu's Inquisitorial retinue.

By the time the frateris relief column reached Pontifrax's primary Arbites precinct headquarters, Bastion Alpha, the mob outside its razorwire-studded walls had devolved into a full-scale riot. Most of the crowd seemed to be raggedly clad pilgrims from the slums, but there were also black devotati among them, and many of them seemed to be armed. Gunshots rang out from the streets and alms buildings near the precinct, and the Arbites garrisoning the walls were returning fire.

Nzogwu was at Brant's side as he brought his men up to the gates. They had arrived on foot – the frateris' limited motor pool seemed to have been deployed to stiffen what remained of the cordon stopping the rest of the slum's inhabitants from flooding the city. Brant ordered his vanguard to fire on the rioters without hesitation – the fusillade of autogun fire quickly cleared the street leading to the precinct's front gate.

'It looks like we're already too late,' Nzogwu said to Brant as they approached, squads of frateris fanning out on either side to secure the wide, open street set before Bastion Alpha's walls. 'The situation is out of control.'

'With respect, inquisitor, I would hear Judge Fulchard's opinion before saying that,' Brant said, stepping over one of the dead rioters, an aged pilgrim. Nzogwu noticed the token clutched in the old man's death-grip – the same crescent-shaped xenos predator found by Damar in the shrine. Whether the cult had fully turned the mob or not, it was present in one form or another. He picked up his pace as the precinct's doors swung open to admit them.

The precinct's commander was waiting. The short, stocky arbitrator was fully clad in riot gear, face obscured by his helmet, shotgun in hand and an autopistol at his hip. Behind him stood the precinct's parade ground and execution blocks, and beyond it the black rockcrete bulk of the main keep.

'Well met, Judge Fulchard,' Nzogwu said. 'I am Inquisitor—'

'Augim Nzogwu,' the arbitrator said, his tone brusque. 'Welcome. As you can see, things here have escalated to an extreme degree.'

The clicking of his vox interrupted Nzogwu before he could respond. He half turned away from Brant and the arbitrator, hand going up to his ear. There was a voice battling through the blurts of static. It sounded like Rannik.

‘Crosshatch, this is Avatar, come in,’ he said into his bead, trying to move away from the frateris and arbitrators who had clustered around him. ‘Crosshatch, is that you?’

The static degenerated further. Nzogwu cursed and switched to the channel established with Janus, Ro and Tibalt. ‘Bastion, this is Avatar, come in.’

Nothing. This time there wasn’t even static, just silence.

‘Bastion, this is Avatar, do you copy?’

Movement at the precinct’s gatehouse caught his eye, causing him to turn back towards the entrance to the street. The abitrators hadn’t closed the gate after Nzogwu and Brant had entered. The mob was back, and its riotous fury was gone – hundreds of the ragged pilgrims were approaching the opening, now in total eerie silence. The frateris and the abitrators did nothing. They weren’t even looking at them. Every eye was on Nzogwu.

‘The gate–’ he began, but stopped. They had the same eyes. Everyone around him, from Fulchard to Brant. The same glassy, black eyes.

Nzogwu reached for his plasma pistol, but the cleric marshal already had his sidearm out, pressed to his head.

‘You have failed, inquisitor,’ the hybrid magus said. ‘Glory to the star saints.’

He fired.

Rannik cursed and slumped back in her restraint harness, abandoning the vox-link. She couldn’t reach Nzogwu. His locator was showing him present in the city’s primary Arbites headquarters, but Khauri had already refused to turn the flier towards it. They were returning to Absolution Square.

Khauri had said nothing since the flier had picked them up. He was strapped in opposite Rannik, his black eyes staring into space, seemingly lost in the trance Carcharodons appeared to enter when there was nothing to fight or kill.

Rannik realised she was staring, and looked away. The sooner they got back to Absolution Square, the sooner she could return to the Theocratica – even if Nzogwu was in the Arbites precinct, surely he had left some of the retinue back at the commandeered headquarters? She thought about Damar, and bit back a fresh flush of anger mixed with regret. She should never have let him out of her sight. He wouldn’t have been stupid enough to abandon her in a place like that.

A sudden, violent lurch interrupted her thoughts. She gripped her restraints tighter as the flier pitched, its engines rising to a painful shriek.

‘*We’re taking fire,*’ clicked the voice of the pilot over the intercom. ‘*Activating flares and taking evasive action.*’

The words, rather than the violent rattling of the hold, seemed to snatch Khauri from his trance. The intercom had barely clicked off again before the whole aircraft shuddered like a wounded beast. An alarm began to clatter, and the lighting abruptly turned red.

‘We have been hit,’ Khauri shouted over the cacophony. ‘Brace yourself.’

Rannik mouthed a prayer to the God-Emperor, the words lost in the cacophony of the plunging flier. Her knuckles were white around her harness. She screwed her eyes shut, gritted her teeth and leaned forwards into the brace position, hands over her head, trying not to panic, trying to block out the ear-aching howl of the engines and the uncontrollable turbulence. The plummeting descent lasted perhaps twenty seconds, but it felt like an age, an age where every breath made her want to throw up and start screaming.

Then they hit the ground. She blacked out, perhaps for a second. When she came to, the alarm had died, but they were somehow still falling, crashing through multiple layers of stonework. The world turned upside down. Forces pulled and crushed her, shaking her like a rag doll against the harness. The hull around her crumpled. Metal screamed, tore. The lights went out.

And abruptly it was over. She was in darkness, but her shaking fingers found the stock of her Vox Legi, still clamped beside her. She triggered the lumen she had strapped to it. A figure was standing over her, deathly white. She screamed.

‘Be calm,’ said a voice she recognised. She realised it was Khauri. The stress seemed to drain from her, and a detached part of her mind, curiously untroubled by the terror she had just experienced, recognised the same gentle psychic influence Welt had used on occasion to counter traumatic experiences. She swallowed and took a long, shuddering breath, willing the sickness in her stomach and the shaking in her limbs to ease.

‘You are a difficult woman to kill, arbitrator.’

‘I’ve got a job to do,’ she growled, managing to finally grip the release clamp on her harness. The restraints snapped back and she stumbled forwards, Khauri’s hand arresting her fall. The deck was pitched at an awkward angle, but at least it had settled the right way up.

Khauri hit the hold’s rear disembarkation ramp. It lowered just a few inches before grating up against something unyielding. He blew the side hatches, and the left-hand one clattered out, emitting a stream of sunlight. The Carcharodon dropped through, stave in hand. After a moment to find her balance, Rannik followed. Her skull was throbbing – despite the restraint harness, she had hit it during the crash landing, and blood was seeping from her scalp. She wiped it

away and gripped her shotgun, dropping down through the tilted hatch.

The flier had come down in a church wynd, carrying a good deal of the place of worship down with it. It had clipped the spire and then demolished part of the roof and one wall, leaving behind a wake of rubble in which it had settled, propped against the neighbouring devotarium. A pall of dust and powdered white stone was still settling as Rannik got her bearings.

‘The pilot is dead,’ Khauri said. He had been checking the flier’s cockpit, but now returned, boots crunching against the rubble underfoot.

‘Where are we?’ Rannik asked. A street was visible at the end of the wynd, but it appeared deserted. Sustained gunfire and the tumult of a crowd was rising audibly above the buildings around them, seemingly no more than a mile or so distant.

‘We are south-east of Absolution Square,’ Khauri said. By now, Rannik had learned not to ask how he knew.

‘We cannot reach it above ground without passing through the xenos horde assailing my void brothers,’ he went on. ‘We will take to the underground once more.’

‘Go back down?’ Rannik asked incredulously.

‘The xenos are mounting a full-scale assault. There is zero chance we can approach the cathedra from any side undetected. In the crypts below the city we will be able to channel any threat we face. You, of course, are free to depart.’

She paused to check her vox again, but there were still no returns on any of the frequencies used by Nzogwu or the rest of the retinue. His marker was still static on the Arbites precinct – from the sounds of the engagement nearby, she wouldn’t be surprised if he was under siege there.

‘I need to find my fellow operatives,’ she told Khauri. ‘And as far as I’m aware, they’re still based at the Theocratica. So...’ She took a breath, and looked the Carcharodon in his soulless, black eyes.

‘If you think you’re getting rid of me that easily, you’re wrong.’

‘All strike leaders, fire at will.’

The Reaper Prime issued the order over the company-wide vox-net to the Carcharodons facing down the cultists rushing Absolution Square. The open space resounded with the thunderclap reports of bolter fire, the whoosh of rockets and the roar of searing plasma as his warriors opened fire. The leading edge of the swarm, flooding the square ahead, shuddered like a single, sentient entity. Cultists and hybrids were cut down, their pallid flesh blasted apart, blood

and black ichor slashing the flagstones underfoot. The Devastators set up on the steps either side of Sharr added to the slaughter, frag missiles reducing clutches of xenos worshippers to bloody shreds, plasma igniting ragged robes and turning hybrids to ash in sunflash bursts of brilliance.

Sharr scanned the initial salvo, auto-senses logging estimated damage and casualty ratios. The horde had been checked, but the pause would not last. Numbers were still pouring in from the surrounding streets and the Boulevard of the Blessed was choked with writhing swarms of alien flesh, their rags thrown off and their hideous deformities revealed. *Void Spear* had already shrieked down to strafe the long, wide road, but its bolters and battle cannon had barely made an impression. It seemed as though Pontifrax's slums had emptied, the population filling the streets and scrambling over their own dead towards the Space Marines. Sharr supposed, in a way, that they were simply completing their pilgrimage.

If the Carcharodon Astra had anything to do with it, then it would end only in blood, that much the Reaper Prime swore.

The *Nicor* shook as another wave of bio-plasma evaporated against its bulkheads. Its last remaining shields had dropped ten minutes earlier, overwhelmed by the organic weaponry of the hive ship spearheading the tyranid fleet's assault. It was three or four times the size of the *Nicor*, a great, bloated expanse of chitin, craggy flesh and solar tendrils that flailed ponderously as they sought to ensnare the Carcharodons flagship.

'We have a breach on fore-deck sigma-five,' Te Kahurangi said, his eyes scanning the bridge's cogitator viewscreens. 'Plasma erosion has breached the hull. The damaged section is being void-sealed. There are no survivors.'

Tyberos said nothing. He hadn't moved since the forward edge of the tyranid fleet had entered the *Nicor*'s engagement zone. Te Kahurangi could sense the Chapter Master's anger building despite his cold exterior. A more prudent commander would have given ground before an opponent as vast as the hive ship, or at the very least called upon the forward capital ships and escorts to come and assist. Instead, the *Annihilation* and *Scyla* had turned their guns against the drone-minnows that formed a screen around the hive vessel, following the Red Wake's orders and not targeting the mothership directly.

It was dragging itself ponderously towards the *Nicor*, blindly feeling it out with its tendrils while apparently impervious to the firepower blasting great gouts of flesh and ichor from its hull-hide at point-blank range.

‘The xenos are going to attempt to board us,’ Tyberos said. They were the first words he had spoken since the order had been given to open fire.

‘Increase prow augur magnification,’ he added. ‘Focus on its maw.’

The sensorium serfs did as ordered, directing the ship’s remaining bow pict-casters towards the hideous, fleshy mouth-like orifice that constituted the hive ship’s prow. It swam into view across the displays, row upon row of incisors the size of escort ships backed by billions of waving latch-fronds, all coated in icy streamers of digestive juices and ectoplasm. Around the gaping hole other, smaller orifices were puckering, the softer flesh surrounding them writhing with vile, subdermal motion. As Te Kahurangi watched the openings contracted and belched forth a stream of hideous fluid, followed by what looked like hook-nosed flesh darts. There were dozens of them, and they left their rapidly freezing afterbirth behind as they shot towards the *Nicor*.

‘Focus close-range defence systems,’ Tyberos ordered. Gunnery relayed the command over the vox, and within a minute the *Nicor*’s close protection batteries were firing, lighting up the void around it with laddering spears of munitions and energy bursts. Te Kahurangi saw one boarding pod after another hit and burst apart, spilling effluvium into the vacuum, shuddering and writhing in their death-throes. The flesh of the hive ship beyond rippled as it birthed another wave of the organic attack craft, all the while bearing down on the Carcharodons flagship.

‘Pale Nomad, with me,’ Tyberos said. ‘Atea, you have the bridge.’

‘Where to, my lord?’ Te Kahurangi asked as he joined the Red Wake in descending from the command platform.

‘The defence batteries won’t be able to stop them all,’ Tyberos said.

Rannik and Khauri almost made it to the cathedra before they met opposition. The route chosen by the Carcharodon had taken them into the church building the downed flier had half demolished and into its undercroft, where the Librarian had broken into the tomb network that honeycombed Pontifrax’s underworld. It was far removed from the disused, tangled mess that had been burrowed into by the slum-dwellers – here most of the crypts were fully intact, and didn’t spill over into the sewer networks or maintenance tunnels.

Nor did they come across any evidence of cult activity. It seemed that, while happy to infect the city’s outskirts, the patriarch and his children hadn’t wished to risk extending their fiefdom below the very feet of the Ecclesiarchy on Piety V, not with the constant arrival of off-world supplicants who at times wished to

view the grim grandeur of the shrine-city's bone-stacked catacombs.

It was only when they entered the cathedra's outlying tombs that Rannik felt a change. It was intangible at first, but it grew with every step she took into the cold darkness. She paused between two ancient grave markers, Khauri at her side. The undercroft was silent. Even the thunder of the battle happening above couldn't penetrate so deep underground.

Rannik turned, shotgun raised, but nothing stirred ahead or behind. The ice running down her spine didn't go away, though.

'She's here,' she murmured.

'I know,' Khauri said. He advanced deeper into the crypt, his stave aloft. Blue witchfire ignited around its tip, illuminating the leering stone effigies and mouldering tombs beneath the ancient cathedra. The shadows around them seemed to cringe and scuttle, fleeing from Khauri's light as they slithered back into their alcoves and cracks with its passing. As her gaze twitched about the chamber it felt as though the graven images in the corner of her vision would lean in or twitch, only to freeze once again when she refocused. A fresh shiver ran up her spine.

'The cathedra's main space is directly above us,' the Librarian said before pausing abruptly. Rannik did likewise, straining to catch what the genhanced warrior had already detected. Finally, she heard it – the distant tattoo of weapons fire, drumming through the crumbling stonework around them. They had gone a long way down.

'We're not too late,' she said, trying her vox-bead. Static burst in her ear, making her flinch.

'We are too deep,' Khauri said. 'We must find a way into a more current undercroft, not these deeper, older burial sites. Something that will give us access to the cathedra.'

'If this crypt is disused it was probably bricked up a long time ago,' Rannik pointed out.

'If there is not a path I will make one,' the Carcharodon said stoically.

Rannik didn't reply. A sudden scraping sound made her turn, shotgun raised and probing the darkness. The sharp light of her stab lumen picked out a faceless mortuary statue, its features long obscured by rot-lichens. After a moment's breathless tension, she eased her finger off the trigger.

'Probably just vermin,' she said, her breath frosting in front of her.

'No,' Khauri said. She turned to ask what he meant, then froze.

There was a figure in one of the alcoves. Rannik didn't know if she had initially

dismissed it as another statue, or whether there hadn't been anything there before she looked. There was something now, though, a tall, slender shape draped in the shadows that haunted the abandoned space. Rannik didn't aim her stab lumen at it. She didn't need to.

'What are you?' she snapped. 'What do you want with us?'

'Do not speak to it,' Khauri said. 'It is a creature of the warp. A daemon.'

'How can that be?' Rannik asked. 'How has it been able to follow me? How has it manifested here?'

'It is bound to me,' Khauri said softly, his eyes on the shadowed apparition. 'And to those linked to me.'

More than you could know, snarled a voice. Rannik let out a gasp, one hand going up to her head. The voice hadn't come from the shadowed woman, or even from anywhere else in the crypt. It had issued directly inside her skull, a deep voice, edged with cruelty, cold as the crypt's chill air.

'Pay no heed to its words,' Khauri ordered, striding towards the alcove where the apparition waited. 'Its banishment is at hand.'

No, Mika Doren Skell, exclaimed the unnatural voice. ***Our partnership is only just beginning. I still have so much to teach you, young shark.***

'You have no place with me, warp spawn,' Khauri snapped. The flames around his stave flared, illuminating the creature in the alcove – the black mourning dress, the grave dirt. This time, however, there was no veil. This time, the thing's face was laid bare.

Section T-16 had been breached. One of the tyranid boarding pods had made it through the *Nicor*'s protective barrage, wounded and trailing ichor, but with its internal gestation sacks intact. The *Nicor*'s external pict-casters had caught it as it latched its lamprey-like maw on to a section of hull and began to gnaw, the grinding motion of its rows of serrated teeth aided by the toxic bile continuously spewed by its acidic gut.

Section T-16 was the first part of the ship beyond the armour plating the creature had attached itself to. It was an external service corridor, largely disused, lying frigid and dark, its bare metal walls and pipes scummed with void mould. Tyberos and Te Kahurangi entered it just as the boarding creature's bile burned its way through the last of the plasteel and adamantium, spilling out into the corridor in a stinking yellow tide writhing with alien insects.

The two Carcharodons had descended into the service corridor alone. Te Kahurangi knew better than to question the Red Wake's decision not to bring any

of the Red Brethren to the breach. There were times when the Reaper Lord of the Void brooked no competition for the kill.

‘Close the void lock,’ Tyberos ordered over the ship-wide vox-channel. The heavy doors leading to the service tunnel could be closed in the event of a hull breach, sealing the resultant vacuum off from the rest of the ship. Doing so meant the Red Wake and the Pale Nomad would be trapped until the disengagement protocols allowed the lock to be opened once more. It also meant the xenos would take longer to access the rest of the ship.

A buzzer sounded, and the corridor shuddered as the doors behind Tyberos and Te Kahurangi ground shut. The lighting began to flicker as this section of the ship switched to reserve power. The bile spurting from the breach had reduced to a trickle, leaking through the molten hole burrowed in the *Nicor*’s hull. For a moment there was nothing but the patter of the alien fluids and the distant, vibrating heartbeats of the battle-barge’s engines and weapons systems.

Then the first xenos emerged. It dragged itself from the fleshy depths of the boarding creature and out through the breach, splashing down amidst the spreading bile on four of its six limbs. It was large, a tyranid warrior genus, modified for boarding operations. The digits of its upper limbs ended in diamond-hard claws useful for rending open bulkheads, while those lower down were a ranged bio-weapon mesh that drooled more acidic bile. Its front was more heavily armoured than usual, chitin plates protecting its torso and elongated skull in the confines of the narrow tunnels and corridors it had been bred to kill in. Its entire body was slick and dripping with embryonic fluids. Still on four limbs, it turned its head slowly towards the two Carcharodons at the end of the corridor, and emitted a low, warning hiss.

‘Remain behind me, Pale Nomad,’ Tyberos said, beginning to advance towards the xenos. The creature stood and began to move towards the Red Wake, picking up speed. Behind it another was dragging itself through the breach, claws scraping fused adamantium. Te Kahurangi gripped his force staff tighter, the green stone at its tip glowing with psychic power.

The first warrior shrieked and broke into a charge, its hooves drumming on the deck plates. Tyberos answered it with a great, electrified crack as his talons sprang forwards from their gauntlets, bathed in blue energy. Hunger and Slake had awoken.

*She's not what she seems! She's here, down among the tombs and
the crypts and the dead! She has come back for you! She thirsts!
She thirsts!*

– Vox recording of the final words,
screamed in unison, of Piety V's
astropathic choristorum.

--- CHAPTER XII

The firing in Absolution Square was no longer one way. Hybrids had occupied the rooftops of the chancellery and the Ecclesiarchy court on the far side of the square. Small-arms fire gave way to the rattle of a heavy stubber, followed by the throatier beats of an autocannon. The fire was inaccurate, chewing up the flagstones around the Carcharodons, but within a minute of their unmasking two void brothers had been hit, one fatally. The cathedra's steps were devoid of cover, and Sharr knew that they couldn't divert sufficient firepower from the swarm's attacking edge to pin down or eliminate the rooftop gunmen from range.

More traditional methods would need to be utilised.

'Seventh Squad, advance and assault the heavy weapons on the rooftop emplacements. Fourth Squad will push the perimeter fifty yards forward and provide a base of fire. Tenth Squad will provide cover. Acknowledge.'

Confirmation snapped back over the vox from the strike leaders.

'Advance,' Sharr said.

Kordi reloaded and signalled to the rest of Fourth Squad.

'Dawn Tide pattern, maintain formation. I will lead off.'

There was a series of clacks as the rest of the tactical squad finished reloading. Kordi began to advance towards the mass of purple-veined flesh and rags bearing down on them, Fourth Squad forming up around him. The attack was measured, a wedge that extended and then detached itself from the Carcharodons gunline. They fired as they went, Kordi letting his auto-senses ping him targets – a three-armed hybrid swinging an improvised club, a swollen-headed creature in soiled Devotati robes, a Ministorum shrine-attendant with a mouth full of fangs. They all went down, their insides shredded by mass-reactive rounds, Kordi's

auto-stabilisers, recoil lock and targeting matrices meaning he could fire on the move with almost no loss of accuracy.

The Carcharodons advance was cold, clinical and unyielding. The fire of Kordi's brothers alone, however, would not have been sufficient to drive the assault immediately ahead of them back without the focused support of Tenth Squad. Lakari's Devastators lacerated the morass of xenos with frag rockets and searing bursts of plasma, scything apart and immolating the densest parts of their formation. Together the two squads were able to project a cone of firepower that drove a semicircle of clear ground into the heart of the swarm.

'Fifty yards, halt and stabilise,' Kordi said, then blink-clicked the vox to the company-wide channel. 'Fourth Squad is in position.'

The Tactical Marines halted amidst the broken bodies and blood-splashed flagstones that marked the extent of the xenos advance. Kordi glanced back as he ejected his spent magazine and unclamped a fresh one, the rest of Fourth Squad holding the now-static wedge around him. Behind, Seventh Squad had moved up from their reserve position just within the cathedra's open doors, and were now moving down the steps and across the square at a run.

Kordi's attention snapped back to his front as his armour auto-senses warned him of incoming fire. The hybrids on the far rooftops were focusing on them. Heavy calibre autocannon rounds chewed splinters from the stone around Kordi. Brother Ranga took a hard glancing hit on his left pauldron, and Brother Motako had a part of his right bicep torn away, blood turning the grey armour of his right arm red. There was a pause as the heavy weapon operators reloaded. Another minute and Kordi and his squad would be decimated.

But the xenos didn't have a minute. Seventh Squad had arrived, occupying the cleared space just behind Fourth. The Assault Marines were in position, Kordi's advance and the covering fire from the Devastators allowing them to get within striking distance of the far rooftops without having to hack their way into the endless tide of xenos swarming the square. The fifty-yard advance had brought the heavy weapons within range of their jump packs, and there was a whoosh-crump of thrust as the Assault Marines soared over Kordi's head, their chainswords and axes roaring to life in mid-air.

'Keep your fire focused,' Kordi warned the rest of his squad. Takari had opened up with his heavy bolter, its explosive rounds tearing away rank after rank of onrushing creatures, its roar clapping back from the buildings surrounding them. Despite its destructive power, and even with the support of the Devastators, the cultists were gaining ground. Kordi was firing into them from barely a dozen

yards, almost close enough to be hit by the viscera of the hybrids his bolt-rounds were tearing apart.

His boltgun clacked empty again. Too close to reload. He mag-locked the weapon and unclamped his bolt pistol and chainsword. He didn't have time to activate the latter before the first hybrid was on him, gibbering manically. The weight of his swing was enough to split its skull, and as the creature went down, the weapon's motor roared to life, tearing the warped, snarling face from the next thing scrabbling at Kordi over its kindred's corpses.

'Warak,' he grunted over the vox. 'Now.'

The tactical squad's weapons specialist didn't respond, but his flames did. There was a whoosh as a great gout of burning promethium speared out over the mass trying to swarm Fourth Squad and envelop its flanks. The hateful screaming of the hybrids rose to a cacophony of agonised, alien shrieks as they were engulfed, rags igniting and skin blackening and searing away in the liquid inferno. Warak guided the spear of immolation left and then right of Kordi, the fires spreading as the burning cultists staggered blindly into one another. Black flames blew back over the Tactical Marines and the stink of roasting flesh and cooking organs even penetrated the filters of Kordi's armour.

The flamer's wrath was answered by the smouldering power of Seventh Squad's roaring Mark II jump packs. Their swords, axes and armour plates were slick with the blood of the heavy weapons teams, who now lay slaughtered across the chancellery and court house rooftops, their weapons broken. The Assault Marines dropped back down behind Kordi, the stone underfoot shuddering with the successive impacts. A glance at his display showed them taking up position among his tactical brethren, adding their bolt pistol fire to the curtain of shots narrowly keeping the horde at bay.

'Withdraw, Harvester pattern,' Kordi ordered, patching Strike Leader Garanga and the rest of Seventh in. The combined squad disengaged amidst a flurry of fragmentation grenades, Kordi locking his chainsword and sending one of his own into the savaged, burning mass in front of him. The bloody detonations cleared a swathe of space and allowed the Carcharodons to pull back, holding formation and firing as they went. Kordi yanked the pin on another grenade and sent it underarm, snapping off well-placed shots with his bolt pistol as he backed up. The pressure of the rising tide of xenos decreased as the Space Marines successfully broke contact, and it wasn't long before Kordi realised they had rejoined the main firing line, Seventh Squad continuing on up the cathedra steps and back into reserve.

The entire strike, from start to finish, had taken just over four minutes.

As he switched back to his Phobos bolter, Kordi wondered at the fury of the assault. There were few enemies in the galaxy, from brute greenskins to chittering Q'Orl, that would have held against such focused brutality, let alone continued to attack in the face of it. The cultists, however, seemed utterly without fear or sense of self-preservation, driven on by a fanatical zealotry not even the Ministorum's most bombastic battle preachers could have hoped to inspire. It spoke volumes of the threat such cults posed, and the hypnotic, corrupting power of the genestealers themselves. The hundreds of lives already expended by the cult in Absolution Square meant absolutely nothing to the patriarch and its magus.

Kordi offered a terse prayer to Rangu as he opened fire once more, asking that the cult's masters reveal themselves before they ran out of ammunition.

The face of the daemon in the undercroft was the stuff of nightmares. The flesh was white but bore a hideous latticework of black veins. Its eyes smouldered like coals, burning from within deep, haunted sockets, and a distended jaw gave way to a maw filled with hundreds of slender, needle-like fangs. As its features were revealed it let out a terrible shriek and launched itself at Khauri, dragging the incorporeal shadows after it.

Rannik fell to her knees, Vox Legi clattering onto the bare stone floor. Her hands gripped her skull and a scream was torn from her lips as the daemon's screech flooded her mind with memories she had thought long suppressed, adding to the nightmare realisation that she was in the presence of a predator from the warp. Suddenly she was back on Zartak, in among the darkness and the dead, a single pistol shot ringing out from a high domed ceiling. She could smell the rot and see the pale, dead faces with their staring eyes and clutching, frozen fingers. She could hear the horrid crunch of heavy boots stepping uncaringly across a carpet of bodies. The low whine and whir of servos, the scrape of their battleplate. Worse, the snap and crack of the lightning that shrouded their armour, like the bleakest, blackest midnight made manifest.

If the daemon's assault struck into Khauri's memories as well, he did not show it. As she hit the ground, Rannik was vaguely aware of the Space Marine throwing himself forwards to meet the creature's attack, his staff describing an arc of fiery blue illumination. Rannik saw nothing more, her eyes screwed tight shut as she sought to fight back against the tide of nightmares made real around her, but she heard the shuddering crack of an impact, and the explosive force of a

psychic discharge.

‘Libera nos, salva nos...’ she began through gritted teeth, speaking the prayer Welt had taught her in an effort to control her nightmares. The words wouldn’t come, though. There was only the memory of Zartak, and the black, aching presence of the daemon that dominated everything with its warp-cast shadow.

She forced herself to open her eyes and raise her head, slowly. Khauri and the daemon fought at the centre of the crypt, their power crumbling old stone statues and splitting open ancient tombs. The Carcharodon was wreathed wholly in the blue fire, his pale skin like a conductor for the energies that snapped furiously from his fingertips and around his stave. The creature that flitted about him was darkness personified, somehow immune to the light, its shrieks accompanied by the raking of claws that tore at and doused the Librarian’s flames.

Slowly, Rannik reached out, her teeth gritted, her hands trembling. Slowly, her fingers found the stock of her Vox Legi. She gripped it, raised it. She was making a keening noise, low down in her throat, a primal expression of terror coupled with the mindless determination of a being pushed beyond breaking point. Knuckles white, she racked the shotgun’s slide. Amidst the crackling of arcane energies and the wailing of the damned, the cold, precise noise was a strange comfort. It gave her focus.

The daemon had shrunk back from Khauri. Neither warp creature nor Carcharodon seemed able to fully land a blow, their psychic wills nullifying one another. As Rannik sought to master her thoughts, shotgun still in hand, the daemon drew more shadows into its incorporeal form. Before the eyes of the human and the Space Marine it began to harden and grow in stature, the darkness forming wicked spines and the memory of hanging, torn flesh. An unearthly groan suffused the crypt. Khauri seemed rooted to the spot, as the shape of another Adeptus Astartes formed before him. This one, however, was midnight-clad, a dark parody, a servant of the Ruinous Powers. Rannik remembered his likeness from Zartak. Words pounded inside her skull as the creature faced Khauri.

You remember me now, don’t you, boy? You remember your Flayed Father? He who first marked you with the favour you now bear?

‘I remember you,’ Rannik shouted. Shotgun lowered, she fired.

Third Company was being outflanked. Sharr had been expecting it since the beginning of the assault. The cult had more than enough fodder to demand the weight of the Carcharodons’ firepower in Absolution Square while at the same

time turning their sides. First and Second Squads, led by Strike Leader Nuritona, had been deployed to delay such an eventuality, dividing into combat squads that covered the alleyways and narrow cathedra wynds that led off from the towering gothic structure.

At first, contact had been minimal, the only hybrids they encountered overspill from the Absolution Square assault and smaller cultist bands that seemed to have become lost. As Seventh Squad slaughtered the heavy weapons teams on the roofs surrounding the square, however, the nature of the opposition attacking the Carcharodons' flanks changed. The hybrid groups moved with purpose, and were better armed with autoguns and stubbers. Nuritona noticed that they were all former *frateris* or *devotati* in their black habits – the root of the infection on Piety V, and what passed for the elite of the xenos brood.

They brought armour as well. Stolen landcars and Chimera transports raced down the narrow streets towards the seven spires marking the cathedra, and were met with a hail of firepower and the cracking autocannons and lascannons of the Carcharodons' twin Predators. No vehicles made it within two dozen yards of the Space Marine positions, but the burning wrecks provided cover for the hybrids moving up behind. In less than half an hour, fire was being poured into Nuritona's squads from close range, and they were sustaining casualties. Sharr ordered a general withdrawal.

The crews of the company's armour exited their vehicles and sealed them, trusting to the frenzy of the hybrids' assault and their lack of sufficient armour-piercing equipment to see the vehicles unharmed when they returned. Only the occupants of *Maxima Alba* remained, continuing to unleash all of the Land Raider's weapons systems into the impotent horde surrounding them. As the Carcharodons fell back inside the cathedra, the Reaper Prime cast one last glance at the mighty tank and then across Absolution Square, at the buildings overlooking it. During the Assault Marines' attack on the opposing rooftops, Strike Leader Iko had confirmed a spotting initially relayed by the company's twin Stormtalon fighters, *Judge* and *Executioner*. The Carcharodons' primary objective had been half-achieved – part of the cult's leadership had been exposed. The magus, so-called Cleric Marshal Brant, was with a gaggle of hybrid leaders – bedecked like some mockery of the Imperial Creed in Ministorum finery, watching the assault on the cathedra from the Theocratica's address balcony. With the Devastators withdrawing inside the cathedra to set up, and the tactical squads fully engaged, they appeared beyond harm's reach.

They were wrong.

Sharr had suspected taint had found its way into the heart of Piety V's government from the start. Killing Brant immediately, however, would have only served to drive the patriarch away. Now that battle was fully joined, it was time to act. He keyed an uplink to the *White Maw*. After a moment, the vox established a chopped connection with the strike cruiser's teleportarium, high above. He uttered two words.

'Korro. Strike.'

The Red Brethren materialised in a blaze of lightning around the teleport homer Apothecary Tama had concealed in the palace's arboreal feature. It had been there since the command squad passed through the Theocratica after their initial planetfall, ostensibly to assess it for defensive purposes. The hybrids observing the assault had nowhere to go.

Korro killed Brant as the magus sought to marshal the psychic potency the hive mind had granted him, unnatural powers that had allowed him to conceal his corruption for so long. The strike leader smashed him with his thunder hammer, sending his pulverised remains hurtling over the balcony's edge. The rest of the Carcharodons Terminators slaughtered his brood-kin without pause, lightning claws slicing alien-tainted flesh to gory ribbons.

Below them, the horde had failed to notice the butchering of their leader. They surged on, towards the cathedra's doors, where now only Sharr and his command squad remained.

Te Kahurangi had seen the Red Wake fight and kill many times before. Regardless, it was always a special privilege to witness the elemental destruction unleashed when the Master of the Carcharodon Astra was called upon to render judgement.

Tyberos met the first of the boarding tyrannid warriors head on, his own charge making the entire service tunnel quake. The force of his impact carried the xenos off its hooves, slamming it through the air and then back down into the deck plates with an ear-splitting crack. Tyberos planted one great boot on its chitin-plated breast and, fast as lightning, slashed down from left to right with Hunger. The great swing of the gauntlet's charged lightning claws sheared through the wall to the Carcharodon's left, severed the warrior's head, and carried on to slice into the wall on the right, leaving a trio of glowing gouges to either side that were immediately splattered with purple ichor.

The Red Wake moved on immediately, his weight cracking open the twitching warrior's carapace as he lunged towards the next of its brood-kindred. Slake took

this one, its wicked, hooked tips scything down from the warrior's skull to its groin, releasing a burst of viscous gore and writhing bio-things. A follow-up thrust from Hunger cracked the tyranid's skull apart in a welter of grey cranial matter.

The combined force and speed of the Red Wake's attacks was without equal. It was to be expected that the hulking Chapter Master, clad in Tactical Dreadnought armour, would smash and break his way through almost any and all opposition. What opponents did not anticipate was how quickly Tyberos moved when roused to battle, how his gauntlets became a blur in the ichor-slashed air. While his centre of mass remained largely static, his thick plasteel and adamantium plates absorbing attacks with ease, the extra servo bundles in the armour's shoulders and arms allowed him to strike faster than even an unencumbered member of the Adeptus Astartes. It was this advantage that meant the first three tyranid warriors to board the *Nicor* hardly managed to land a single blow. Te Kahurangi, a dozen paces behind the Red Wake, hadn't even raised his staff.

Tyberos had advanced as far as the breach. He eviscerated another warrior as it dragged itself through the hull, its reinforced chitin no match for his ancient lightning claws' disruptor fields. The lumen strips in the service corridor continued to dip on and off, occasionally throwing its length into darkness, the towering form of the Red Wake left silhouetted by the actinic crackling of his two fists.

'The pod will continue producing and birthing bioforms,' Tyberos said, as though he wasn't single-handedly stymying a tyranid infestation of the *Nicor*'s lower decks. 'I am going to purge it from within. Remain here and kill anything else that emerges.'

Again, if any other besides the Red Wake had uttered such orders, Te Kahurangi would have questioned them. Instead he simply confirmed over the vox and took up position beside the breach. Tyberos took one leaden step up into the orifice that had clamped and sealed around the acid-chewed hole. Servos groaning, he hauled his bulk into the opening. Beyond were the thousands of snaggle-teeth that had gnawed through the hull, each longer than Tyberos was tall. Past them was darkness, emitting a gut-churning alien reek.

'Rangu and the Wandering Ancestors be with you, Red Wake,' Te Kahurangi said as Tyberos began to advance down the alien's gullet, squelching and crunching through membranous tissue and cartilage. If he heard the Chief Librarian, Tyberos didn't answer. Instead there was a roar, as Hunger and Slake's

chainblade underbites activated.

They needed more time. The hybrids had flooded the steps before the Cathedra of Saint Solomon, rushing its doors while they still stood open. Sharr barred the way with his brothers – Dorthor, Niko, Tama, Red Tane, Sengaru. The hybrids came on, talons and daggers out, screaming for the loyalists' deaths. The Carcharodons met them with chainaxes and Niko's adamantium koa spear. Blood painted the cathedra steps, shorn and mangled bodies flung back down it in welters of ripped flesh. Sharr stood a few paces ahead of the rest of the command squad, giving himself the room to swing Reaper. Blades and hard rounds rebounded from his armour as he swung left and right, the great chainaxe eviscerating everything it touched. His muscles burned with adrenal and combat stimms and his soul soared with the brute, simplistic violence, his every thought bent to breaking the weak, pathetic creatures scrabbling around his boots. He remained silent, however, balanced on the jagged edge of self-control as Reaper's whirring teeth cleaved flesh and bone with every juddering stroke.

Nuritona's voice brought him back, clicking in his ear. *'All squads are in position.'* The rest of the company, including Nuritona's flank guards, were inside.

'Back,' Sharr voxed to the rest of the command squad. He stepped towards the doors, still facing the square. The foremost hybrids were still being forced against the Carcharodons by the pressure of the swarm at their backs, and it only built as first Sengaru, then Niko and Tama moved inside the great doors, locking their close combat weapons and turning to their bolt pistols. Dorthor was with Sharr as they backed away, the strike veteran opening fire at point-blank range to clear enough space to allow them both to disengage.

Amidst the hail of detonating shells, Red Tane stood his ground. The company champion was a blur of savage motion, the void sword running with ichor as it cut heads and limbs off with every stroke. The coral shield's jagged surface was also slick with the gory remains of those it had been used to bludgeon back down the stairs.

'Tane, withdraw,' Sharr snapped tersely. The champion showed no sign of having heard him. Taking Reaper in one hand, Sharr clapped his other on the Carcharodon's pauldron and hauled him back. Dorthor switched to his bolt pistol and gripped the other, firing past him into the howling, snapping horrors rushing them.

Third Squad's commander, Strike Leader Waratak, was a giant of a

Carcharodon, as tall and broad even as the Red Brethren in his Mark V power plate. The forearms of his armour, like the flesh beneath, were covered in swirling exile markings boasting of his strength. As Sharr and Dorthor dragged Red Tane out of the doorway and the Tactical Marines forced the great doors shut, it was Waratak who single-handedly heaved the great metal locking beam – normally the work of a dozen Ministorum attendants – into place, barring the frame. The sound of the beam's impact into its slats echoed from the vaults above, followed immediately by the pounding of fists on the other side.

Sharr released Tane's pauldron and strode down the cathedra's nave, towards the pulpit, apse and altar at the far end. He issued orders as he went.

'Second and Ninth Squads, divide into combat teams and secure the balconies and side entrances. Third and Tenth, set up fire arcs around the main doors. Nuritona, on me.'

The pews had been moved to the side of the main approach to the altar to deny any attackers the cover they provided, though there were too many to fully clear the space. The Devastators of Ninth Squad were already setting up around the altar and on the pulpit's raised wooden platform. They were joined by Nuritona's First Squad and Sharr's command squad. Niko had already planted the adamantium haft of the company's battle standard into the flagstones behind the altar, its dark, ragged cloth a counterpoint to the pristine white of the embroidered slab covering.

'We do not leave this place,' Sharr said to the void brethren gathering in the apse. There were nods and simple affirmations. The Reaper Prime sent a prearranged vox-tap to the *White Maw*. The final pieces of the Carcharodons' last stand were in place.

The great doors came crashing open, and a tide of howling, shrieking xenos filth burst in. As one, every Carcharodon in the cathedra opened fire.

They are not our brothers any longer, not truly. They are something both more and less. What they have suffered is nothing but the agonies we would all bear out, were the long millennium allowed to take its toll on us without the reprieve of death. Fear them, yes. Mourn for them, certainly. But above all, respect and honour them. They have met the eye of the Outer Dark, and they have held its gaze. Would that we were all strong enough to do the same.

– Chaplain KioTama, Carcharodon Astra,
On the Ancients, verse 19.

CHAPTER XIII

Techmarine Uthulu entered the Bay of Silence as the freeze protocols reached the end of their cycle. Chaplain Nikora was already there, stripped and submerged to his chest in icy meltwater. Uthulu joined him at the base of the Ancients' plinth, the vast forms of the trio of Contemtor Dreadnoughts towering over them.

'Word from the Reaper Prime,' Uthulu said, having to shout to be heard over the sound of the steadily flooding chamber. 'Are they prepared, Brother-Chaplain?'

'Void Father willing,' Nikora said. 'Perform your duty, Techmarine.'

Uthulu hefted the cog-edged hammer he carried and began breaking the chains binding one of the Dreadnoughts to the plinth. Each blow rang through the cavern and shuddered through the rock, a herald for the start of a ritual rarely attempted. When the final heavy link splashed into the rising swell, the Techmarine locked the teeth of the heavy tool into the panel at the base of the basalt stone. A clicking sound echoed around the high chamber as he turned it like a great wrench, setting ancient gears in motion. After a moment's muscle-straining effort he removed it and swung, smashing the shark-stamped activation rune at the base of the plinth with a shuddering clang.

A hum of charged power shuddered through the nodes that ran deep into the rock, accompanying the slow grinding of the newly activated gears. Uthulu and Nikora stepped back towards the shallows, the Chaplain's devotional cant melting with his brother's mechanically delivered lingua-technis.

The humming rose in pitch, and there was a crack of discharged energy that sent ripples out through the meltwater, followed by the familiar whirl of armour servos. For a moment all was still. For a moment, both Uthulu and Nikora

wondered whether their supplications had been insufficient.

Then the unchained Dreadnought moved. Its helm shifted slowly, and there was a ponderous thud as it took a step towards the edge of its dais. Uthulu and Nikora both went down on their knees in the ice-skimmed shallows, heads bowed.

‘Hail to you, Wandering Ancestor Itako,’ Nikora said, following the ritual response to the awakening ceremony. ‘Arise, for there is blood in the water. Your judgement awaits.’

For a moment the Dreadnought didn’t respond. For a moment, the Chaplain feared he had failed – Ancient Itako had once more slipped back into slumber, his mind lost in the void of dream-memories he had spent so long swimming through.

Then there was a click, and a harsh blurt of static as the great Contemptor’s external vox-units came online. The sound was followed by another, altogether greater and more terrible.

With a howl of purest, frenzied rage, Ancient Itako heralded his own awakening.

Rannik’s shotgun blast passed through the daemoniac apparition in the undercroft without meeting resistance. It twisted on her, the form of the Space Marine it had adopted flickering and unravelling as it shrieked. Rannik screamed and clutched her skull, the Vox Legi clattering to the floor once more as her mind was flooded with the searing chill of the void.

A few seconds of exposure to the daemon’s wrath would likely have killed her. Khauri took his opportunity. He lunged, stave outstretched, and plunged the psy-conduit into the centre of the morass of shadows. His roar of pain and exertion joined the daemon’s own shrieks and Rannik’s agony as she collapsed onto her knees, her mind riven with the horror of what she was witnessing. The blue flames flickering around the Librarian flared, his roar growing deeper and more furious as he channelled every ounce of power he possessed into the stave. It throbbed and vibrated, as though it were about to shatter, the daemoniac essence it had plunged into writhing and twisting around it like a nest of grasping tentacles.

Then, abruptly, it was over. There was a crack, and a shock wave of energy blasted from the struggling combatants out through the crypt, shattering every tomb and splintering a hundred bones and skulls into shards. The shadow daemon gave way, expelled in a corona of white light that seared its incorporeal being to nothingness. A shriek lingered in the energy-suffused space for a

moment, an aftershock of pain and anger, the false memory of a thousand future atrocities denied.

And then, silence.

Rannik blinked and groaned. The creature's banishment had instantly alleviated the skull-splitting pain in her head, but in its place it had left an ache that infused her whole body. The memories that it had forced back into her mind made her want to retch, but she took a slow breath and controlled them, binding them away in the manner she had been taught. She was not a young arbitrator cowering in the dark any more, and she never would be again.

'I am going above,' said a voice. Khauri stood over her. He looked wholly unlike the Space Marine Rannik had first seen when she joined the strike column. His bare flesh was raked and bloodied, and still glowed with a suffusion of unearthly power. His eyes were lit by witchfire, and his voice rebounded with an unnatural tremor.

'I... have to find my master,' Rannik said, rising to her feet.

'You will not,' Khauri said. 'Not living. You are too late.'

'You can't know that,' Rannik said, knowing he was right.

'Do as you will. Regardless, we shall meet again.'

Rannik looked at the Space Marine psyker, at his black eyes riven now with lightning. Her own expression darkened, and she nodded.

'Yes, Carcharodon. We shall.'

Where once the Cathedra of Saint Solomon had resounded with praise, now it echoed with the sounds of slaughter. The xenos had risen like a tide, and like grey rock the Carcharodons resisted.

Kordi was reloading when the thing came at him from out of the bloody press. It was a hybrid, but a warped one at that, its human features barely recognisable any more, given way to purple claws and hardened chitin. It barrelled into him full on as his magazine clicked home, its talons punching deep into both sides of his breastplate. He grunted as they drew blood, scraping his fused ribs. The thing hissed in his face, fangs snapping, its dead black eyes wide.

He headbutted it. There was a crunch. One of its claws was still locked in his side. Dropping his bolter, he reached up and broke its neck with a violent twist.

The pain pushed him to the edge. He was already near it, already dangerously close to dropping off into the Blindness, becoming consumed by the violence that haunted his Chapter. Visions of a sun-streaked beach and crashing blue waves flashed before his eyes, pre-induction memories that hadn't stirred for

years.

Those were behind him now. He was Carcharodon Astra. He was in control.

He unclamped his chainsword and set about the hybrid's shrieking kindred. Around him the remains of his tactical squad were doing likewise. They had been driven back to one of the cathedra's great stone pillars, carved in the style of Piety V's tree sigil. One, Void Brother Takari, had fallen, his body lost in the press as the seemingly endless tide of cultists continued to scramble over their own dead and dying and deeper into the cathedra. The Carcharodons had been pinned back to the sides and towards the apse and its altar, above which the company banner still hung. Sharr was there with most of the Devastators and Assault Marines, a semicircle of hammering bolters and roaring chain weapons that shrank little by little. The thunder of the battle, rebounding from the great vaults above, was deafening even for Adeptus Astartes, and Kordi had been forced to use his Lyman's ear to filter much of it out.

When the end began, it did so abruptly. Kordi realised that the attack had paused. Everywhere the hybrids' forward momentum disappeared as they ceased throwing themselves against the increasingly separated hard points of the Carcharodons' defence. Though the Space Marines continued to cut down those nearest, an unnatural, disconnected hush had fallen over the cathedra.

Kordi realised why as the front ranks of the xenos parted. The patriarch had arrived.

Sharr watched as the master of Piety V's genestealer cult made its entrance. The creature was twice the size of its lesser brood-kin, its muscular purple limbs enclosed in thick plates of black chitin, its foot-long talons scraping the flagstones as it prowled into the cathedra on all fours. Its skull, bulbous and swollen, swung from side to side as it took in the carnage around it, its sinuous tongue tasting the air. Its kindred flanked it like the honour guard of some ancient monarch, providing the deferential space given to an alpha predator.

A hush had fallen across the cultists as the creatures entered their presence, and some dropped their weapons and fell to their knees in mind-numbed rapture as the monster's psychic aura washed over them. The pall of the hive mind had fallen across the entire cathedra – Sharr could feel its maddening buzz in the back of his every thought, the hideous scraping of its claws on the inside of his skull. The king of the swarm had arrived.

It seemed to sense his attention. Its small, glittering black eyes fell on him. It stopped and stood up on its rear limbs. The motion was hideous – in an instant it

turned from being an utterly alien, animalistic predator to being something almost human. Sharr realised more clearly than ever before how pervasive the threat of the cult could be. This was not an invasive species, easily uprooted from where it did not belong. It was a mimic, an infiltrator, a supremely intelligent being capable of secreting itself among its prey, and then twisting those around it to more closely resemble its own damned visage.

And its eyes were utterly enthralling.

+*Not now, Reaper Prime*,+ snapped a voice. Sharr realised it was Khauri, and the words had come from inside his head. They broke the spell of the patriarch's powerful hypnosis, the same alien gaze that had come so close to enslaving an entire planet.

Realising its trickery had failed, the creature shrieked and attacked. Even by the standards of its alien breed, it was impossibly fast. Two of Lakari's Devastators were on their knees almost before Sharr had raised Reaper, disembowelled, and Lakari himself followed a heartbeat later, his severed head, still in its helmet, bouncing out into the chancel. Sharr knew, in that moment, that the thing would slaughter them all without pause.

He had failed.

That was when the soaring domed roof of the Cathedra of Saint Solomon – the life's work of the great Ecclesiarchy architect-deacon Rozarius, pride of Piety and one of the Seven Wonders of the Under-Sectors – came crashing in.

The Wandering Ancient had arrived.

The Red Wake had gutted the interior of the tyrannid boarding pod. He returned to Te Kahurangi drenched in viscera, every inch of his Terminator armour slick, Hunger and Slake drooling thick strings of gore and shredded flesh. He had carved his way through the birthing sacks and the limpet-like creature's great organs, ripping its vile heart to pieces with the clawed tips of his gauntlets. It was now nothing more than a dead husk, still latched by its barbed teeth to the exterior of the *Nicor*'s hull.

The service corridor was unsealed, and the two Carcharodons returned to the flagship's bridge. In the time it had taken Tyberos to slaughter the alien boarders, the hive ship assailing the Space Marine battle-barge had drawn the warship within reach of its slowly rippling fronds and tendrils. The vast xenos was slowly enveloping the *Nicor* in its flesh, even as the Carcharodons vessel pounded it with every gun and battery, blasting great globules of alien meat and milky, pus-like fluids into the freezing void.

‘The rest of the fleet has engaged, my lord,’ Atea said as Tyberos and Te Kahurangi returned to their positions on the command platform. The Red Wake remained silent, the lights of the viewscreens and oculus stands winking across the fathomless black of his helmet’s eye-lenses. Te Kahurangi surveyed the readouts from the augur charts, his genhanced mind mapping out the location and status of the Nomad Predation Fleet in seconds.

The *Annihilation* and *Scyla* had advanced upon the flanks of the hive ship, and had been hammering it from either side until more drones had swooped in and forced both vessels to divert fire to their own defence. More elements of the Carcharodons fleet had come up and engaged the increasingly numerous bio-ships, until a full, sprawling general engagement had developed over the space of a little more than an hour.

Beyond the void battle, the bulk of the hive fleet continued to bear down on Piety. The long-range augurs were simply unable to compute the numbers still approaching from the Outer Dark, continuously feeding into the battle with the Carcharodons fleet. Even the great hive ship attempting to drag in the *Nicor*, acting as the lynchpin of the swarm’s vanguard, was a minnow compared to some of the beasts ponderously approaching from beyond the reach of the Carcharodons’ scopes. In all of his long service, Te Kahurangi had never witnessed a threat so vast, or so unrelenting. The Nomad Predation Fleet would not be able to stop it. They would not even be able to slow it. It would consume them all and strike the Imperium deep within its borders, tearing the heart from mankind’s empire among the stars. In a moment of the coldest clarity the ancient Librarian saw a galaxy stripped bare, a constellation of dead rocks and barren worlds devoured by a hunger that was as old as it was insatiable.

He saw the death of the entire galaxy. And he saw the only one who could save it. In the great cathedra of Piety V, Bail Sharr fought on.

[Intercepted high-anchorage vox traffic, bandwidth 88-91, between Imperial Navy defence monitors *Overwatch* and *Eagle*, Piety System]

[Identified as Captain Maska, officer commanding the Overwatch] + + + ***What in the name of Terra's Golden Throne is happening down there?*** + + +

[Identified as Captain Shelim, officer commanding the Eagle] + + + ***I told you, I don't know. We're getting no returns from the Theocratica, or anyone else for that matter. The vox traffic is freckled.*** + + +

[Maska] + + + ***There's reports of riots, fighting. My augurs are picking up fires breaking out all over Pontifrax.*** + + +

[Shelim] + + + ***Perhaps the agri-collectives or the shrine-towns know more?*** + + +

[Maska] + + + ***Unresponsive too.*** + + +

[Shelim] + + + ***Throne damn it. I'm telling you, it's an uprising...*** + + +

[Maska] + + + ***How can it be this abrupt? There's been no intelligence, no rumours?*** + + +

[Shelim] + + + ***You think the arrival of an Adeptus Astartes warfleet is a coincidence?*** + + +

[Maska] + + + ***Wait, augurs are spiking.*** + + +

[Shelim] + + + ***What? What is it?*** + + +

[Maska] + + + ***The strike cruiser... It just launched something straight at Pontifrax.*** + + +

[Shelim] + + + ***Munitions? Has it just opened fire?*** + + +

[Maska] + + + ***No... I think it might be worse.*** + + +

[End of transmission intercept]

CHAPTER XIV

Ancient Itako's arrival on Piety V shattered the grand dome of the Theocratica's cathedra. Almost half of it caved in when it was hit by the huge Dreadnought drop pod, descending in a cascade of shattered rubble. The drop pod itself hammered into the centre of the nave, reducing over a dozen xenos to gory smears and flinging countless more through the air along with a storm of broken flagstones and splintered pews. Yet more were crushed by the collapsing masonry, the thunder of falling debris competing with the howls and shrieks of the hybrids and their masters.

For a moment, it seemed as though the entire roof of the cathedra would collapse, forever burying both the Carcharodons and their attackers. The structure held, though, even as parts of it continued to crumble down onto those below. Stones were still pattering from the scarred hull of the great drop pod when its trio of hatches fell open with a resounding clang.

None knew for sure just how Wandering Ancestor Itako had first fallen. The Chaplains of the Carcharodon Astra, guardians of the Chapter's ancient, near-mythic past, told different stories depending on the occasion. Some said he had been a Reaper Prime who had held a fortress breach for two days and a night alone, against a horde of insectoid Krulid, filling the gap with their twitching carcasses before succumbing to their poisons. Others said he had been the champion of the Third Company who had fought a Chaos lord during one of the earliest Black Crusades. While the traitor had cut him down with his final mighty blow, Itako had struck the warrior's head from his shoulders, turning back his warband before the darkness took him.

The truth would likely never be known, but whatever combat had first seen him confined to his armoured sarcophagus, the towering Contemptor Dreadnought

had eclipsed it with a dozen mighty feats since. From the Outer Dark to the Under-Sectors, the grey-and-black-plated war machine had decimated armies and butchered warlords in a frenzy of bloodletting.

Sharr had seen him in action once, decades ago. It had been years since any of the Third Company's Ancients had been woken from their deep, cold slumber, years since they had faced a threat so dire that Nikora and Uthulu had dared to drag one of the resurrected heroes back to full consciousness.

Itako screamed. It was a horrible noise, part human, part machine, grating and grinding from the vox-grille set in the war machine's breastplate. It was something inimical to the void brethren in the cathedra, a shattering of traditions, a reminder that whatever was now nestled within the Contemptor's armoured shell, it was far removed from the warrior that had once been.

Such was the price of waking one of the Wandering Ancestors. Once unleashed, there was little that could be predicted, bar that they would wreak devastation.

Itako took two steps, out from the frame of his drop pod, great metal foot-plates ringing off plasteel. He swivelled his body slightly as he went, as though surveying the carnage wreaked by his impact into the cathedra. The xenos surge had stopped momentarily, the heart of the assault broken by the mere arrival of the Dreadnought. Even the patriarch and its purestrain had broken off, slinking about the chancel before the altar platform, heads darting between the Carcharodons and the clanking monstrosity suddenly in their midst.

Itako screamed again, part rage, part pain. This time the terrible noise was followed by a roaring whoosh of igniting air, as the twin heavy flamers built into the Dreadnought's torso loosed a sheet of burning promethium on the cultists picking themselves up around him. The cathedra descended once more into chaos as the Carcharodons opened fire and the cultists surged forwards, more frenzied than ever.

Itako met them. While the flamers guttered out, their blackened nozzles still spilling short gout, the Contemptor's two great fists swung into action. The right, a great siege claw, snapped shut over the first hybrid to fling itself at the Dreadnought, shearing the creature into four pieces with a single clench of the great blades. At the same time his left-side armament, a triple-headed siege drill, roared into action, the three rotating adamantium bits ploughing into another hybrid and reducing it to a red haze in a heartbeat. Arterial blood and ichor slashed the grey front of the great walker as he swung ponderously with both weapons, the force of each blow unstoppable, eviscerating, gouging and shredding two or three xenos at a time. For their own part, the Dreadnought's

attackers were unable to harm him, their talons and blades scraping his flanks and rear, autorifle shots and las-blasts scarring his breastplate and heavy-set shoulders. Seemingly bored with the slaughter he had unleashed, the towering Contemptor turned, crushing another clawed later-strain hybrid beneath his bulk as he shifted. He had sensed the patriarch and its bodyguard, who were in turn moving to face him, allowing the weaker strains of hybrids and their genestealer masters to block the firing lanes of the other Carcharodons and soak up the bolter rounds that otherwise might have decimated them.

‘Counter-attack,’ Sharr said over the vox, addressing all Carcharodons holding the apse and pulpit. It didn’t take the experience of over a century of combat combined with genhanced battle tactics to realise that if the swarm turned its strength against Itako, the Venerable Dreadnought would eventually be brought low. Between him and the rest of his void brethren, however, there may be a chance to snare and slaughter the patriarch.

‘First and Tenth, supporting fire,’ Sharr ordered. ‘Eighth and command, on me. Focus on the patriarch, no matter the cost.’

Sharr led the remains of his battle-brothers down from the altar and into the carnage spreading out to the chancel from the nave. The swarm met them. The Reaper Prime was only dimly aware of point-blank bolter fire ripping into the hybrids either side of him as he stormed their centre, Reaper’s roar his battle cry. The chainaxe tore xenos flesh, unstoppable as ever. Sharr could see the patriarch over the heads of its brood-kin, leaping for Itako. It mounted the Dreadnought’s torso with ease, its talons raking metal, but though the wicked claws gouged great slices of plasteel and ceramite away, they could not reach the thing housed within. Itako bellowed with rage, a twist and a swing of his great gauntlets causing the alien to dart off to one side, hissing. Had either of the Dreadnought’s two fists caught the genestealer they would have butchered it with ease, but the patriarch was far too intelligent and far too fast. It came in low, ducking beneath the flames that burst from the Dreadnought’s torso and then leaping up once more as they fluttered out, movements preternaturally swift and fluid.

It latched its talons around Itako’s great helm, set low in his armour-plated shoulders. Claws sparked as they sheared metal, and it was all Sharr could do not to let out a great roar of anger as he strove to hack his way to the Dreadnought and his attacker. If the Wandering Ancient fell, the last means of resisting the patriarch would be gone.

Itako attempted to strike the lithe xenos, but could not bring his weapon-arms to bear before the creature had moved again, scuttling up over his heavy shoulders

to scrape more long, jagged rents in his plate. The great genestealer moved yet again as Itako shifted his bulk to throw it off, released its death-grip on the towering war machine and darted in among its followers as the great drill bits and blades of the Dreadnought's arms scythed only air.

Yet as Itako struggled to turn once more to face the patriarch, the xenos did not move to attack again. It had sensed something, something approaching the cathedra's bloody space, something that even Sharr, unattuned though he was, picked up after a few moments.

A presence had entered in among the heaving, slashing, stabbing bodies, one that Sharr recognised, yet did not fully believe until he saw the Librarian striding through the melee around him.

Khauri had returned, and he brought with him the power of the void.

'Is this how it ends?' Atea asked, his stoic voice turned heavy. The prow pict-casters of the *Nicor*, those which had withstood the bombardment of bio-plasma, acidic ichor and spore mines, now showed nothing but a yawning, fanged maw, a mile wide. The hive ship leading the tyranid fleet's vanguard had finally snared the *Nicor*, and was now hauling its battered form towards the orifice in its chitinous prow that constituted something approaching a primary mouth.

The *Nicor*'s mighty plasma destructor had seared a dozen great holes in the monstrosity, but its vents were glowing white in the void vacuum and its weapons systems were on the brink of meltdown. Tyberos had ordered the gunnery terminal to cease fire, conserving the final plasma blast for when they were all but within the creature's gullet.

Te Kahurangi assessed the tactical readouts for what felt like the hundredth time, but they offered no more hope. The combat element of the Carcharodons fleet was fully engaged, each ship fighting for its life against a swarm of fleshy bio-vessels. In the ponderous logistics of void warfare, the *Nicor* was already gone, already consumed whole by the behemoth. It was a fate unbecoming for such a venerable warship, yet it was the only one the Chief Librarian could see among the future possibilities his mind sought out. Closing his eyes and seeking the silent inner core of concentration, all he saw was ruin.

And then, suddenly, discord. The possibilities revealed by his inner eye changed, switched, like a deck of Tarot cards newly shuffled. As Te Kahurangi tried to make sense of them, a message came to the command platform from the bridge's sensorium pit.

Something was about to break from the warp into the Outer Dark, and it was

going to do so right into the midst of the engagement.

‘Identification?’ Atea demanded. The serfs didn’t answer. The return to real space was being conducted so nearby, in such fraught conditions, that the *Nicor*’s embattled sensor arrays had only just picked up on it. But Te Kahurangi didn’t need the ship’s consciousness to realise who was about to plunge into the heart of the battle. He had seen them already, had felt the presence of his brother’s approach. The slenderest smile twitched at his thin lips.

‘The Ashen Claws have come,’ he rasped.

The *Wicked Claw* tore its way into reality just starboard of the hive ship. Te Kahurangi’s warp sight granted him a view of its arrival, reality buckling and tearing in a corona of purple lightning, a clutch of small bio-ships caught too close to the rift atomised by the disruption. Such a return to real space, made far from a warp jump point and into the midst of a heavily contested battle zone, spoke volumes of the abilities of the *Wicked Claw*’s Navigator, and the determination of its commander.

The Infernus-class heavy cruiser had materialised not side-on to the hive ship dragging in the *Nicor*, but with its own prow facing the beast’s flank. Te Kahurangi knew why before the energy spike across the *Nicor*’s augur arrays confirmed it – the ancient warship was about to unleash the fury of its exo-lance. The spine-mounted weapon began to charge the instant the *Wicked Claw* completed its warp jump, and Te Kahurangi realised that the heavy cruiser had neither raised its shields nor activated its plasma drives. It was routing all of its power to the exo-lance, activating it as rapidly as possible.

For once, the silence on the *Nicor*’s bridge was born out of expectation, rather than doctrine. The energy readouts of the sensorium spiked. The *Wicked Claw* had fired. Moments later, the *Nicor*’s augurs began to flood back with damage reports. The pict screens caught only partial images, even their flare-resistance overwhelmed by the fury of the lance strike.

The entire left side of the hive ship had been liquidated, annihilated in a blaze of crimson energy. Great entrails and an ocean’s worth of vital fluids burst into the void, where they crystallised and froze. The behemoth yawed to the side, its tendrils unlatching from the *Nicor* as the dozens of great hearts pumping vile life through the monstrosity struggled to carry on. It was a testament to the hive ship’s size and strength that it had taken a direct hit from a weapon that would have atomised most capital ships.

The *Wicked Claw* fired again. This time the result was certain. Te Kahurangi scanned the displays beneath him, already knowing what they would read – the

master of the swarm's vanguard had been reduced to continent-sized globules of flesh.

'The synapse link with the vanguard will be broken,' Atea said, indicating the holochart icons representing the drones that had formerly been clustered around their mothership. Already they were showing signs of disorganisation, their previously perfect formation disrupted. Even as the Nomad Predation Fleet bore down on them, the warp convulsed once more.

The rest of the Ashen Claws fleet had arrived.

Khauri strode from the east transept into the ruinous carnage of the nave. His power armour had almost been reduced to its under-layers and servos, slashed and crusted with his own blood and congealed xenos ichor. His eyes were glowing an electric blue, sparking with power, and his stave likewise crackled with charge, its basic psy-reactive material barely able to channel the energies generated by the young Carcharodon. None could approach him. Lightning lashed from his stave at the first few hybrids that tried, their twisted skeletons visible for brief glimpses within their pallid flesh as they were riven and burned by the strength of the discharge.

The patriarch sensed the potency of the new challenger. Its enemies lay around it at its mercy, defeated. The shrine-city was on the brink of belonging to its accursed brood. The whole of Piety V would surely follow, and when the full might of the hive fleets arrived, the worshippers of the great shrine world would look to the convulsing skies and, rather than cowering in fear, give praise and rejoice.

The patriarch hissed, and leapt for Khauri. It did so with such speed that Sharr could not follow it, until the psyker intervened. One moment the great genestealer was a blur of clawed, chitinous motion, the next it was perfectly still, suspended in mid-air, its talons less than a foot from Khauri's head. It remained frozen, as though time itself had ceased to function, though round about it the lightning of Khauri's stave still crackled and snapped.

The Carcharodon reached out with a single gauntlet, the motion unhurried. A collective shriek went up all through the cathedra as the xenos saw their father threatened, yet none could move to its defence. It was as though the entire space had been removed from the considerations of reality, reduced to a place where Khauri did as he pleased and all was bent to his will.

The Librarian touched the patriarch's distended brow. A single bare forefinger pressed against the veined, purple flesh. The reaction was immediate. The

patriarch's skull exploded, blasted to a pulp, a shower of grey matter splattering Khauri and everything within a dozen paces. It was as though a wave of immense, focused pressure had hit the trapped alien, pummelling its way through its body in a ripple, splitting its carapace, shattering its chitin, bursting its organs and ripping away its flesh all the way down to its thick, spiked tail. In barely a second, the founder and master of Piety V's genestealer cult was obliterated.

The impossible stillness that had gripped the cathedra disappeared the moment the last of the patriarch's remains showered down. The shrieks of genestealers and hybrids alike redoubled. Khauri, however, was not finished. Eyes still wreathed in balefire, he slammed his stave into the cathedra's bloody flagstones, cracking those beneath his feet. More power arced from the staff, striking the nearest hybrids and then darting between them, igniting their clothing and bursting their alien skulls apart in a drumbeat succession of detonations.

There was no let up in the slaughter. The idea that the patriarch's death precipitated the total collapse of the cult was at best an exaggeration – even as Khauri decimated the swarm filling the cathedra, more came at him and the Carcharodons. Sharr brought Reaper round just in time to tear its motorised teeth through the carapace of a purestrain as it leapt at him, its maw-tongue darting out to latch on to the Reaper Prime's gorget even as it was bisected. He reached up and tore the fleshy proboscis free, fighting back a snarl of frustration mixed with hate-fuelled anger. They were all going to die here, xenos and Adeptus Astartes alike, mutually butchered, slaughtered in an orgy of bloodletting. It didn't matter, he forced himself to recall. They had done it. They had killed the patriarch, and broken the psychic beacon it and its magus had been projecting into the Outer Dark. Regardless of what became of any of them, of Piety V itself, the Great Devourer had been turned away.

Now they fought for survival alone.

'The augurs...' The serf who had called up from the *Nicor*'s sensorium bay trailed off. The Carcharodons on the command platform waited in silence for him to collect himself.

'The augurs are reading a... withdrawal of the enemy fleet,' he eventually managed to say. Te Kahurangi stepped from the command platform down to the sensorium, where the augur arrays were presented on the viewscreens and cogitator printouts in detail. He looked from one to another, assessing the combined data output, probing for any mistake from the analysts or lie among

the patterns of the xenos swarm. The report was incontrovertible, though – from the vanguard to the great mass that lay beyond, the great hive ships were turning ponderously away, their drone swarms flowing around them as they receded once again into the Outer Dark. One by one, the constellation of contacts dropped off the sensorium arrays. One by one, the combined guns of the Carcharodons and Ashen Claws fleets fell silent as the remnants of the swarm drew out of range.

Te Kahurangi looked up at Tyberos, and nodded. The Red Wake uttered a single order, his deathly voice breathing out across the quiet bridge.

‘Hold.’

The plasma drives gradually slowed to idle, as shields knocked down by bio-plasma and borer pods flickered back to life. Macro cannon batteries were reloaded and lances recharged, but they remained silent. The hive fleet continued its slow progress away from the twin fleets, away from the Imperium’s undefended heart, back out into the darkness far below the galactic plane.

Sharr fell.

His armour was screaming at him. It was dying, penetrated in half a dozen places by talons and blades. One of the hybrids had latched itself around his left leg, stabbing into the sealant joint behind his knee plate while another dragged down his right arm. He had gone down, Reaper locked in the chest cavity of a corpse just out of reach, and now a purestrain was pinning him to the ground, two of its limbs on his other arm while its upper two dug at his gorget, seeking the bare flesh of his neck.

A force struck the xenos piling on top of him like a tidal wave, snatching the hybrids and snapping necks and limbs as it sent them flying into the air. Khauri stood over Sharr, wreathed in power, arcing energies pulverising anything that came at him. The Reaper Prime tried to rise, but his left leg wouldn’t respond. He managed to unlock his bolt pistol and open fire from the floor. Ahead Ancient Itako was still butchering an implacable path through the cathedra, a mountain of scarred, ichor-drenched metal, both fists heavy with the remains of the deformed things still throwing themselves at him.

Apothecary Tama knelt at Sharr’s side and helped him up, both warriors firing their bolt pistols into the press.

‘They have come,’ Khauri said, not looking at them, and when he spoke it was like a dozen voices uttering the words at once.

‘Who?’ Sharr asked tersely, reloading.

‘Our brothers.’

The Ashen Claws descended on Piety V, three companies’ worth of battle-brothers deploying via Dreadclaws and Stormbirds across the shrine-city. They cleared drop zones with murderous efficiency, point-blank bolter barrages and massed flamers slaughtering and immolating the disorganised, poorly equipped rioters. Xenos, hybrids and those simply swept up in the uprising, they were all purged as the renegade Space Marines moved into the surrounding streets and squares, clearing shrines broken into by the mobs as they went.

Two squads of Ashen Claws Terminators, clad in archaic Cataphractii armour, teleported directly onto the edge of Absolution Square and immediately set about carving a red path into the cathedra. They slaughtered the hybrids still attempting to break into *Maxima Alba* before one squad formed a cordon around the cathedra’s broken doors. The other carried on inside, combi-bolters drumming a savage tattoo from the bullet-riddled stone columns and the shattered dome ceiling. The Carcharodons and the Ashen Claws met amidst a storm of fire and slaughter.

The remnants of the cult collapsed. The battle of Absolution Square was over.

The *Wicked Claw* hadn’t powered down its weapon systems.

As the tyranid fleet receded back into the depths of the void, the Ashen Claws flagship and its escorts had come to new headings, headings that brought their guns to bear on the Carcharodon Astra. The *Wicked Claw* was still routing vast amounts of power to its exo-lance, and it was target-locked on the *Nicor*.

‘Incoming pict transmission from the *Wicked Claw*,’ one of the vox-serfs called up from the communications pits beneath the *Nicor*’s command deck.

‘On screen,’ Tyberos rasped.

The pict monitors above the platform flickered into life, resolving into an image of a throne of black stone. On it was Nehat Nev, clad in the dark power armour of the Ashen Claws, his pale features as firmly set as the stone he sat upon.

‘*The Reaper Lord of the Void*,’ said Nev, his voice crackling from the *Nicor*’s vox-speakers. ‘*Is it still the Red Wake who wears that battleplate, or has Tyberos changed once again?*’

‘You know me, Ashen Claw,’ Tyberos replied.

‘*I know what you carry as well, Carcharodon. Your fists are clad in the property of my Chapter.*’

‘I was going to offer thanks for your intervention,’ Tyberos said. ‘Perhaps I should save my breath?’

'You know why I am here, Red Wake.'

'You are mistaken, Ashen Claw. Is there more to your arrival than the honouring of ancient pledges?'

'You mock me,' Nev snarled. *'I was promised the return of what is mine by right. Hunger and Slake.'*

'No such promise was made,' Tyberos responded. 'Your arrival here was contingent on the tithe already made to you.'

'Tell that to your Chief Librarian,' Nev said.

Atea turned to Te Kahurangi, but the Pale Nomad said nothing. Tyberos remained facing the viewscreens, unmoved.

'He sent an astropathic communique renegotiating the terms of our agreement. For our guaranteed assistance he swore the gauntlets would be turned over to me.'

The silence on the *Nicor's* bridge was deeper than ever. Tyberos said nothing. Eventually Te Kahurangi spoke.

'It is true.'

'He admits it,' Nev snapped. *'Surrender them to me, Red Wake.'*

Tyberos remained silent for a moment more. His stance hadn't shifted, but slowly, the fingers of Hunger and Slake clenched, adamantium grating together with brutal promise.

'No,' he said.

'We will destroy you,' Nev shouted, smashing his fist against the side of his throne. *'I could annihilate you and your pathetic ship with a word!'*

'You could,' Tyberos allowed. 'But by the time you recharge your weapons, the *Scyla* and *Annihilation* will tear you apart. You are no match for the Nomad Predation Fleet.'

'You are breaking your vows,' Nev snarled. *'I was promised those gauntlets!'*

'They are not Te Kahurangi's to give,' Tyberos replied, the tone of his deathly voice never changing. 'If you wish to possess them, I will acquiesce to a duel. The two of us, and to the victor the prize.'

Nev went quiet, face contorted as he tried to summon a response.

'That is not how oaths work, Red Wake. I do not have to prove myself in combat to know they belong to me!'

'Face me in person,' Tyberos said. 'Or face my fleet. But I will not freely give you my Chapter's relics.'

Nev glared from the viewscreen for a moment more. Then, abruptly, the transmission ended.

‘Our shields are at maximum,’ Atea said quietly. Tyberos didn’t respond. The bridge waited, all eyes on the *Wicked Claw*’s energy outputs.

They flared. For a moment it looked as though the exo-lance was firing. It wasn’t. The power was coming from the *Wicked Claw*’s plasma drives. Slowly, reluctantly, the Ashen Claws flagship was turning away from the *Nicor*.

‘They’re powering up their warp drives,’ reported a sensorium serf. ‘They’re disengaging.’

‘Void Father preserve us,’ Atea said, turning to Te Kahurangi. ‘You nearly finished us all. What possessed you?’

It was almost unheard of for any to speak against the Pale Nomad, especially within the Chapter’s Librarius. Te Kahurangi, however, bowed his head.

‘It was a necessary deception. My visions have been clear. Without the certainty of their intervention much of the fleet would have been lost, as well as our entire Third Company. I had to promise what I knew we would not give.’

‘It was a betrayal,’ Atea said. ‘A betrayal of all of us.’

‘It was not,’ Tyberos said before Te Kahurangi could respond, causing both Librarians to go silent. ‘The Pale Nomad put the good of the Chapter first. That is the heart of our doctrines.’

The giant in ichor-stained Terminator armour turned slowly to face the Chief Librarian, his black gaze as soulless as ever. Hunger and Slake had unclenched.

‘Nonetheless, the events here will come at a price. We will all have to pay it, in one form or another, some day.’

The sun was setting across the shrine-city, its last rays breaking through the smoke that hung about the ruined, ransacked churches and basilicas. In the distance bolter fire still rang out as the Adeptus Astartes hunted and slaughtered the remnants of the cult. The purge would continue through the long night and likely on into the days to come, unrelenting and merciless. By the end neither hybrid nor purestrain xenos would be left on Piety V.

Bail Sharr stood on the broken steps of the Theocratica’s cathedra, looking out over Absolution Square as the sun went down. Before him stretched a sea of carnage, the flagstones covered with the corpses and detritus of the unrelenting cultist assaults. They lay like tidal wreckage, one disorganised row after another, heaped up thicker and thicker the nearer they got to the cathedra’s broken doors. The steps were hardly visible, carpeted with the ichor-splashed pale flesh and the torn robes of the hybrids. Among them were rare glimpses of battered grey power armour, those void brethren fallen amidst the onslaught, cut down by

overwhelming firepower or the talons and claws of dozens of assailants. Tama had already extracted their gene-seed, dragging each body out from under the mounds of those they had brought down in their final moments. The rest of their remains, including their precious battleplate, would be taken up by the shaven-headed serfs who now picked their way through the wreckage under the gaze of their overseers.

A figure passed among the emaciated humans, heavy boots grinding uncaringly over the remains of the xenos dead. The serfs cringed back from him as he mounted the steps and halted before Sharr. The Reaper Prime looked down on him and, after a moment, made the sign of the aquila. The figure did likewise, ichor still dripping slowly from his dark battleplate.

‘Hail and well met, Carcharodon,’ said Rama Sixx. It was he who had led three companies of the Ashen Claws to the Piety System, the same companies that had delivered the Third and now spearheaded the purge spreading from Absolution Square into every street, alley and undercroft.

‘Well met, Ashen Claw,’ Sharr said. ‘You have my thanks and that of my brethren. Were it not for your intervention, we would still be battling here. I doubt many of us would have seen the next dawn.’

‘It is good that we have come here,’ Sixx said. ‘For our own sake as well as yours. It has been too long since my brothers and I drew blade and bolter against a worthy foe. To be cleansing xenos filth once more... It is what many of us have yearned for.’

‘There will be no shortage of purging here,’ Sharr said, looking out over the square once more. ‘But tell me, how is it that you come to be here, at so fortunate a time and place? When I was on Atargatis last I did not know my orders would bring me here, and surely neither did you?’

‘We received word,’ Sixx said. ‘Or rather, Brother Arathar received word from your Chief Librarian. He told of your fleet’s stand and of your journey here.’

‘And what of that fleet?’ Sharr went on. A part of him was loathed to ask the fate of his brethren from a stranger, especially one such as Sixx, but he hadn’t found time to contact the *White Maw*’s choristorum or discover if any news had come through from the Nomad Predation Fleet. Even with victory on Piety, he didn’t know for certain whether the hive fleet had turned away. A part of him still feared that the Third were the sole remnants of the Carcharodon Astra.

‘I have not received word of any astropathic communication,’ Sixx said. ‘But my lord Nehat Nev took the greater bulk of the Chapter’s fleet to the aid of your brethren, including the *Wicked Claw*. If the xenos have not been turned back, it

will not matter – they will be upon us soon enough, and this world’s existence will be at an end.’

Sharr acknowledged Sixx’s words. They were true enough. Knowing that Nev had finally committed his Chapter to the defeat of the xenos was a comfort. In truth he now realised he hadn’t expected the Ashen Claws to honour their promise and come to their aid.

‘I will remember what you have done here this day, brother,’ he said to Sixx.

The Ashen Claw nodded, turning to leave.

‘I must oversee the ongoing purification of the city,’ he said. ‘The xenos survivors may seek to rally under cover of darkness.’

‘Agreed,’ Sharr said. ‘The majority of my company are still combat effective. We will join you within the hour, once we have gathered up our dead and resupplied.’

As Sixx departed, Sharr turned his back on Absolution Square’s destruction and paced into the cathedra. Here the ruination was even worse. The great, painted dome of the place of worship was now half-demolished, and the sun’s fading light was beaming in through the jagged gap, illuminating the rubble and Itako’s drop pod in the centre of the nave. The Dreadnought had returned to his slumbers, inert and silent amidst a small mountain of butchered corpses. Uthulu and his artisans reverently wiped the filth and ichor from the Contemptor, and conducted short-term repairs to his motor units and power plant. The rest of the cathedra’s architecture was no more intact than its ceiling – several pillars had collapsed completely, and the finely carved gothic architecture, from the vault’s buttresses to the statuary niches, was riddled with bullet holes, las-scars and flamer burns. Even worse was the state of the nave – besides the shattered flagstones around Itako, the hundreds of pews had been shot, beaten and broken to splinters. Bodies draped their remains, so many that the cathedra’s floor was hardly visible, and not a single block of the brutalised stonework wasn’t sticky and dark with xenos blood.

One of the grandest places of devotion to the Imperial Cult in the subsector had become a monument to wanton slaughter, a shrine of carnage and massacre that spoke volumes of the desperate position mankind held in an inimical and merciless galaxy.

And yet, despite the devastation, at the far end of the cathedra Sharr could see the Third Company’s ragged, dark standard, still hung over the cracked and bloodied remains of the altar. The apse was ruinous, every inch pockmarked by bullets and shrapnel. The Carcharodons fallen in the cathedra’s defence had been

hauled by the Chapter-serfs into the apse space, where they were being carefully relieved of their venerable battleplate. Tama was kneeling over the last, his narthecium full. Sharr had not yet heard a full casualty report for the company. He would put it off a little longer.

It was ironic, he thought as he looked up at the ceiling and all its shattered grandeur. Ironic that the Carcharodons disdained the modern Imperial Cult and all its lavishness. Yet here they stood, bloodied and wounded, having slaughtered thousands in its defence. Holding a place like this meant nothing to the Chapter. It meant everything to the wider Imperium, however. And when the scattered accounts were collated, and regiments of the Astra Militarum swarmed the shrines of Piety, they would find a stoic defence of all that the Imperium held dear. That narrative, rather than a simple massacre, could yet prove vital. Regardless, Sharr did not intend to be anywhere near the Piety System when relief arrived.

One of his brothers was crossing the chancel to join him, passing the inert form of Itako and the company's Techmarine. Sharr realised it was Khauri. The change in the Librarian was stark. Gone was the youthful void brother who had been assigned to them at the beginning of the operation. In his place was a warrior seer worthy of the likes of the Pale Nomad. It was not so much the shattered state of his battleplate or the fresh scars and grazes that criss-crossed his pale skin. It was the surety in his stride, the firmness in his black gaze, the stoicism of his set jaw. He looked like a void brother who had discovered the inner silence, who had been moulded into the selfless, cold warrior that the Chapter's doctrines demanded.

'The Nomad Predation Fleet yet lives,' the Librarian said as he reached Sharr's side. 'I have seen it.'

Perhaps the Reaper Prime would have doubted such an assertion before. He did not now. Instead, he nodded.

The Librarian carried on. 'We must depart soon. The Imperium will not be as slow to react here as we might expect. The woman will make sure of that.'

'We will be withdrawing to orbit within the next forty-eight Terran hours,' Sharr confirmed. 'Regardless of the status of the cult or the Ashen Claws' progress in purging them. The patriarch is slain and, if your visions are correct, the threat has receded, for now. I am eager to return to the main fleet.'

'You were there when I was taken, weren't you?'

The sudden question made Sharr turn to look at Khauri. He had removed his helmet and their black eyes met. Neither looked away.

‘On Zartak,’ Khauri went on. ‘You were there when the Pale Nomad took me.’

‘I was,’ Sharr said.

‘Tell me of it.’

‘It is not my place. Te Kahurangi is your master. If he judges the story relevant, I am sure he will tell it.’

‘I was dying when he found me, wasn’t I?’ Khauri went on, as though Sharr hadn’t spoken. ‘I have seen it all. The hypno-induction and the indoctrination therapies were meant to strip away all memories of a time before my ascension, but I remember it now. Those final moments on Zartak. The traitor, the one called the Flayed Father. The daemon he sought to harness to my flesh. Bar’ghul.’

Silence followed the blasphemous utterance, but Khauri seemed unperturbed.

‘I have his markings on me still,’ he said, half turning to show Sharr his back. Beneath the grime and filth of the more recent combat, the long, lazy stripes of the old wounds remained visible.

‘This is his rune,’ Khauri said, reaching back to trace one line-dashed circle, fingers following the curve from memory alone. ‘And this is the mark of summoning. And this, my life-knot, severed. If the Flayed Father had succeeded I would have become nothing more than a flesh-prison for the warp beast, my mind and soul eaten up piece by piece.’

‘Yet here you stand,’ Sharr said.

‘Here I stand,’ Khauri echoed. ‘Forever marked by the power of Chaos. Forever bonded with Bar’ghul, the shadow daemon.’

‘It was banished before it could ever latch its claws upon you. Te Kahurangi made sure of that.’

‘To an extent,’ Khauri allowed. ‘But he was not wholly successful in shielding me. You may not have yet realised it, Reaper Prime, but the Pale Nomad is not all-powerful. Zartak almost broke him. The Dead Skin almost defeated him. The scars I carry with me are a testimony to that.’

‘He has done more for our brotherhood than you yet know or understand, Khauri,’ Sharr said, his tone level. ‘It will be a long time indeed before any can claim to be his equal.’

‘That much is certain,’ Khauri replied. ‘I doubt I will ever have the strength or foresight he possesses. But that does not change what happened on Zartak. Bar’ghul is with me still. That is something I have now accepted. Rangu willing, I will one day find the power necessary to tear it from my soul permanently. But I will not learn that power from the Pale Nomad. If he knew, he would have

taught me already.'

'The knowledge your kind possess is beyond me,' Sharr said. 'If what you say is correct, you should bring it before Te Kahurangi. Even if you believe he cannot help you directly, his knowledge will point you down the right path. He has helped me many times before, and I am certain he can do so with you.'

'Perhaps,' Khauri said slowly, looking up as the last light blinked from existence on the edge of the broken dome, plunging the slaughter-filled cathedra into shadow. 'But one way or another, I will be free of this darkness.'

A lone figure stalked the streets as darkness fell. The staccato thudding of weapons fire continued to sound nearby, but the battle's fury had already moved on through the route the woman took. Its detritus had been left behind for her to pick through. Bodies, thousands of them, littering the rockcrete, scattered haphazardly along the roadways and intersections, heaped on street corners and outside the black iron railings barring the entrances to shrines and chapels. Almost all of them were human or xenos. From a glance it was often difficult to tell them apart. Some of the dead bore multiple limbs, distended skulls, fang-filled maws or had skin paler than bleached skulls, but just as many bore no immediate signs of corruption. Almost all were identically clad as well, in the devotional garb of Piety V, be it pilgrim shifts, supplicant habits, the white and gold of priestly vestments or the black of the devotati. It was no wonder that the cult had been able to hide away for so long, breeding and festering in the rustwood pulpits and the alms queues, the confessional booths and communion lines. How strong it had grown would now never be known. How many innocents had been purged along with the tainted was not a matter that concerned the Carcharodon Astra, or the other Angels of Death who had touched down in the shrine-city.

Occasionally, the woman saw their bodies as well. They were armoured like the Carcharodons, in ancient, mismatched battleplate, but its colours were different – darkest greys and deep reds. In the decade the woman had spent scouring archives and data-stacks for the many different brotherhoods of the Adeptus Astartes, she had never come across their colours and heraldry. Doubtless they were another band of renegades, just like the grey-clad killers they had come to rescue.

She passed by a burned-out landcar and picked her way over rubble spilled from the shattered wall of a devotarium. Bodies hung from the lamp posts at the far end of the street, dressed in priestly vestments, their gowns thrown up over

their heads before the nooses had been tightened. At the street's end a fountain, crafted into the likeness of a trio of soaring cherubim, had been shot to pieces, and the water had spilled out and flooded the small square it occupied. Bodies floated in the shallow water, the liquid discoloured by their blood.

She passed through the square and turned right. Ahead the Adeptus Arbites precinct loomed. The Space Marines had already swept through it – the gates lay broken open and the cleared space before it, with its razorwire coils and dragons' teeth, was thick with bodies blown apart by brutal bolt weapons. Smoke coiled from the central keep, the top of which had been shattered by a shell. She passed through the gateway, her footsteps loud in the deserted drill square beyond. Yet more bodies lay within the precinct, frateris and Arbites alike, a further testimony to the utter carnage that had enveloped the entire city. There were no survivors.

She stopped in the square, and cast about. There was a comms-bead in her hand, and she used the back-up locator to direct her movement, first over to the broken execution blocks occupying the east side of the Arbites courtyard, then back towards the entrance to the central keep, where a swathe of blackened, shrivelled corpses marked the work of a flamer. The air was still thick with the stench of burned flesh, and the woman put a hand up to her face as she passed, her eyes still scanning the ground.

Eventually she found what she sought. Amidst the blood-splashed dark blue of arbitrator riot-plate and the rustic browns and blacks of the cultists, she caught the flash of paler tan. She approached the body slowly and dragged the corpse of an arbitrator off the top, whose lower torso had been blown open by bolt fire.

Beneath, she found Nzogwu. The inquisitor had been shot through the back of the head, the upper part of his skull blown away. His eyes, curiously untouched by blood or brain matter, were open and staring. He hadn't even had time to draw his plasma pistol. It had been a betrayal and an execution, carried out as one. At least it appeared to have been quicker than the fate of the rest of the retinue. She had found Tibalt, Janus and Ro in the Theocratica's commandeered state room, all of them little more than shredded meat and spilled organs. Even the servo-skull had been shattered and broken.

Rannik looked at the body of her master for a long time. Then she reached down and closed his eyelids, before removing the front of his carapace armour and slipping a hand inside his fatigues. Her fingers brushed something cold and hard in his breast pocket, and she pulled it out. It was the inquisitor's rosette, the badge of his authority. She wrapped it by its strap around her left wrist, then

unbuckled the holster from around Nzogwu's waist and fastened it around her own, plasma pistol and all. Then she sat down, next to the body.

It would be a long time before anyone came. She would have to move eventually, find unspoiled food, drinkable water. For now, however, there was nothing to be done, nothing other than to sit and wait, down among the dead and the damned.

She was neither, and that knowledge made her smile. A higher power had chosen her.

There would be a reckoning.

EPILOGUE

The Tempestus Scions had beaten Rannik when they had first found her. She was transferred via shuttle to a holding cell and held through a day and a night cycle before Vex finally identified her. She had not been the only prisoner, he told her, but she was the only one still alive.

The Imperium had come to Piety V in force. Imperial Navy atmospheric air wings had filled the skies above Pontifrax, and Astra Militarum troop shuttles had followed soon after. They found death, and precious little else. The shrine-city was a smouldering ruin, black smoke still rising from the wreckage of its great basilicas and churches. The streets were choked with corpses and the refuse of battle.

The Guard spread their cordon, securing the planet's collectives and the smaller reliquary towns. Most of them were the subject of riots and looting. Purge teams moved in and began the slow, grim business of weeding out the surviving xenos taint.

Rannik saw none of it. She was moved from her cell to an interrogation chamber, a spartan place of cold, gleaming metal surfaces and harsh lumens. She was seated, hands magnicled behind her back. Before her was a table, her effects set upon it. There was the plasma pistol, its charge cells removed, and her scarred and battered flak plate. Her arbitrator badge sat alongside Nzogwu's rosette, gleaming in the buzzing light.

A klaxon sounded, and the door to the room scraped open. A tall man entered, clad in white robes. He was young, but the left side of his face was a mess of puckered, hideously burned flesh. He paused as the door banged shut behind him. His grey eyes looked Rannik up and down – grimy and blood-splattered, hair unkempt, her face bruised and swollen by the ministrations of her captors.

She returned his gaze, and smiled.

‘They’re calling it the Piety Five massacre,’ the man said slowly.

‘They’re right,’ Rannik replied. ‘It was a massacre. And worse.’

‘You witnessed it from the beginning?’

‘I did, Legate Inquisitor Frain,’ Rannik said, still smiling. ‘And I have so much to tell you.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robbie MacNiven is a Highlands-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. He has written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Carcharodons: Red Tithe*, *Carcharodons: Outer Dark*, *The Last Hunt* 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 *Watchers of the Throne: The Emperor's Legion*.



I have considered it. Making an end to it all. Of course I have. I looked to the skies. I saw good souls succumb to weakness, and foul souls seize their moment.

What of it?

We all doubt.

I have lived over two hundred standard years. Too long, I think now. I have buried two wives, and seen seven children enter service and leave me for the void, and still I remain here, old, stubborn, in irritatingly good health despite an atmosphere of toxins both natural and political.

I am alone again now. Strange to say that, surrounded as I am by the quadrillions of the Throneworld, and yet it is truer now than it has ever been. The faces pass me by. I know all of them. I know their histories and their allegiances. I see the plots they hatch and hear the whispers they make under gilded archways, and I grow numb to it all, for it matters so little. Even now, hard against the End of Time, when the death rattle of our species has become audible even to the thick-eared, they still grasp for a little more of the things we have always desired – coin, power, knowledge, gratification.

We are yet animals, at heart. Nothing has changed that. Not even He could change us really, though I think He wanted to once. I like to believe that we must be a disappointment to Him. If we are not, then His ambitions for us must have been so very poor, and that strikes at all I believe and hold dear.

I am Alexei Lev Tieron, and I was a supremely powerful man. I was not a warrior, nor was I a witch, nor was I a commander of great vessels. My power came only from the Lex Imperialis – a cold source, but an ancient one. Like so many within the bureaucracy that swathes us, I was protected by words written on parchment. It gave me my station and defined it. Without this piece of paper, the meanest hive-ganger could have ended me with impunity – she would have ripped the jewels from my fingers and tried to sell them for weapons, and none would have come to my aid, for this galaxy only recognises strength.

But there are many kinds of strength. I learned this during schola, when I was

as sickly as I am now hale, and the smooth-limbed scions of noble houses sought to crush my spirit with their brutishness. I might have died in that hateful place, had I not possessed the one talent that has preserved me ever since – the ability to deflect the ambition of others, to make it swerve, to direct hatred onto a target other than myself, to emerge from the lattice of competing egos intact and with no one aware of what veils have been cast over their stupid, powerful eyes.

No, I was not a witch. I just understood the pull of glory while having little attraction to it. I saw a man, or a woman, and I knew what they desired. I knew what to say to them, and I knew where to direct them. If they wished to do me harm, I found them prey more alluring. If they wished to help me, I extracted a suitable price. Thus I weaved my path between the paths of others, evading death while it devoured my rivals, until I reached the pinnacle, gazing back on a life of dissemblance and brokered deals. Compromise was my way, and for that I am despised, but that is as it should be. The Emperor has many servants, and we cannot all be power-armoured killers, can we?

I had many titles. This Imperium adores titles. The governor of the lowliest backwater rock will have a hundred names, each more ludicrous than the last. As for myself, only one really mattered: *Cancellarius Senatorum Imperialis*. Chancellor of the Imperial Council, in Low Gothic. Should you be inclined to trace that title back to its origins, you will find the true meaning of the words.

I was a doorkeeper. I watched people come and go. I made note of their intent, I had soft words with the ones who carried the weapons. I considered those who might be better suited to more exalted positions, and those who might be better extinguished. Over time, that capability generated a mix of terror and attraction. Many were afraid of what I could do to them; others speculated wildly on what I might desire, so that they might buy me and make me their creature. I was always amused by both reactions, for I did not act from malice and I cannot be bought. I was a cipher. Even now I wish for nothing other than that which I already possess, for I possess a very great deal.

I served in that station for nearly eighty years. I saw the composition of the High Twelve change over that span as death and rivalry took its toll. Some of those lords were vicious, many of them narcissists. Two were positively psychotic, and I remain convinced that a slim majority were always technically insane.

And yet – here's the thing – they were all quite superlative. You doubt this? You wish to believe that the masters of the Imperium are men and women of grasping inadequacy, forever squabbling over their own ambitions? Believe

away. You're a fool.

There are twelve of them. Twelve. Consider what that means. More human souls now live than have ever lived. In the absence of the active guidance of He who sits on the Throne – may His name be blessed – it is those twelve alone who have guided our ravenously fecund species through ten thousand years of survival, within a universe that most assuredly desires to chew on our collective souls and spit the gristle out.

Many lesser mortals might have wished, in their idle moments, that they too could have risen to the heights, and sat on a throne of gold and ordered the Imperium as it ought to have been ordered – but they did not do it, and these ones did. They faced down the demands of the Inquisition, the belligerence of Chapter Masters, the condescension of mutant Novators and the injunctions of semi-feral assassins, and held their power intact. They orchestrated every response to every xenos incursion and patiently calibrated the defences of the Endless War. They withstood insurrections and civil strife, zealotry and madness. Every one of them is a master or mistress of the most strenuous and the most acute capability, though they burn out quickly – I have seen it – for the cares of humanity are infinite and they themselves are most assuredly finite.

So mock them if you will, and tell yourself that they have fattened themselves on the labour of the masses and that they dwell in glorious ignorance while the galaxy smoulders to its inevitable ending. That is idiocy and it is indulgence. I served them for a good mortal span, judging them quietly even as they gave me their orders, and I tell you that though they had their many flaws, they were, and have always been, the greatest of us.

I never thought it would end. I never thought I would live to see the dawn of a day when the High Lords did not govern the Imperium as the highest arbiters of the Emperor's Will. In this, as in so much else, I have lived to see my error. Now, as I contemplate what must come next, I understand the true import of what I witnessed.

For the first time since He drew mortal breath, they no longer rule. For the first time since the Emperor was placed on the Holy Golden Throne, the High Lords no longer govern the Imperium that preserves His memory.

This is how it happened.

I remember the date. I remember the time, and remember the angle of the dying sun through my banqueting chamber's windows. You need not be detained with the figures, for all that has changed. In time, I suspect we will measure things

from a different fulcrum, for they cannot remain as they were.

What is important? I do not know any more. My belly was full, as it was so often then. I was dining well from a table set with silver platters. All of it was real – fruits conveyed from the farthest reaches of the Segmentum in cryo-tanks. I felt the tight berries burst in my mouth as I chewed. One of those alone would have bought a hive spire on a lesser world, but we were on Terra, at the top of the pyramid, and barely gave it a thought.

Perhaps that offends you. Perhaps you think that we were insensitive to indulge ourselves at a time when so many wanted for the basic necessities of life.

I care nothing for your judgement. I care not for piety of any kind, and I do not regret the way we were then. We were sophisticates swimming in an infinity of resources, and we laboured for our luxuries. Above all, do not mistake indulgence for corruption – their elision is frequent but not inevitable, whatever some inquisitors might think.

I looked down the table, and saw the balance of power arranged at every place setting. The mighty were decked in their heavy gowns of office, weighed down with medallions and caskets. Their flesh was bronzed or black or gold, painted with the filigree of fine Martian improvements. They murmured to one another, keeping heads bowed so the words did not travel beyond the hearing of their present counterpart. They were accompanied by pleasure-companions – catamites, courtesans and confidantes, who were arrayed even more spectacularly in jerkins and gowns of silk and ruffs of lace. All skin was flawless, all eyes were bright, all conversation was fluid.

I held court, and enjoyed doing so. I saw the Lord Constable of the Synopticon lean in close to the neck of the Mistress Plenary of Catacombs and breathe something intended to be scandalous. She absorbed the information without reaction, which was little surprise, as she knew he was destined for removal in a week's time. She knew that because I had told her. She was the sponsor of the one who would replace him, so I judged it prudent to keep her informed, only asking for the standard level of discretion in return.

They were all at the same game, my guests – angling, jostling, manoeuvring – and that gave me no little pleasure, as they were all stepping, to a greater or lesser extent, to the moves I had given them.

I took another bite, then reached for a golden goblet of opalwine. My hands were heavy with silver, my arms draped with a cloak of thick velvet. Only as I drew the rim to my lips did I notice the presence hovering at my arm.

I had no servitors in my employ. I detest them, and even now will not admit

them to my chambers. All my staff were human-normal, trained at the finest scholae and destined for positions of their own within the Adeptus Terra. This was one of those who had excelled – a student plucked from the Schola Havrath before he had turned fifteen standard, now my poison-catcher, his blood swimming with anti-toxins.

‘Lord,’ he whispered softly, lowering his head.

I turned to him. ‘What is it, Galeas?’

‘Forgive me. The Master awaits in your reception chamber.’

I did not need to ask which one. There were three Masters among the Twelve. The Master of the Astronomican, Leops Franck, would not have travelled here without warning, for he never went without an entourage of over a hundred attendants and that required planning; while the Master of the Administratum, Irthu Haemotalion, would not have deigned to visit me, but would have required me to visit him, such were the requirements of precedence that he set great store by. That left one: the Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, Zlatad Aph Kerapliades.

My heart sank. I was enjoying myself. Kerapliades was a bore, a man atrophied by his work and shrivelled into a drab kernel of pessimism. If he had come here, it would be due to some dire portent delivered by his ranks of dream-speakers. The portents scryed by Kerapliades were always dire, and had been since his first blinded interpreter had been bound to the God-Emperor’s holy will.

But he was a High Lord. If he was here, then I needed to be with him. I observed rank, for all my many sins – not even my many enemies ever accused me otherwise.

‘Thank you,’ I said to Galeas in the closed-speech of our household. ‘Ensure he’s comfortable – I will be there presently.’

I did not move immediately. Others would have observed Galeas leaving, and to follow him too swiftly would have invited speculation. I ate some more, I drank some more, I planted a seed of gossip in the mind of the Urbanus Cardinal of the Opheliate Tendency and exchanged pleasantries with a major general of the Astra Militarum segmentum command.

When the time was right, when the ebb and flow of the conversation had taken its own course, I rose from my seat and pulled my robes around me.

‘You’ll have to get along without me for a little while,’ I said. ‘Try not to eat everything, or each other, while I’m gone.’

Then I was out into the corridors, padding along the polished floors of my domain. I was dimly aware of movement in the shadows – my cadres of close

protection bodyguards, hanging within las-shot range, tracking my every move. After so many years I barely noticed them, and even had they not been clad in cameleo-plate I might have forgotten they were there altogether.

My aide-de-camp Anna-Murza Jek fell in alongside me, her long gown whispering over the black marble.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked, never breaking stride.

‘He’s flanked by his nulls,’ she said, speaking quickly as she always did. ‘That makes things difficult. This is a guess – he’s worried about Cadia.’

‘I’m worried about Cadia.’

‘I don’t have much else.’

‘Run a grid-search over his senior staff movements.’

‘Already under way.’

‘How many of our people do we have in the Scholastia?’

‘Thirty-seven.’

‘Make contact with them all, and have reports in my chamber before dawn.’

‘Already under way.’

I reached the doors to my reception chamber, turned to Jek and smiled. ‘When you’re done, have a drink.’

‘If there’s time, lord,’ she said, bowing and withdrawing.

The doors opened.

My reception chamber was a wonderful place. It ought to have been – I had eighty years to refine it. The objects within it were the most exquisite, the decoration a study in good taste. On occasion, despite all the changes, I still spend time there, enjoying it. The High Lords have their own palaces, and the spires of the Senatorum are the most magnificent in the entire galaxy, but I still prefer the oasis I made there. It acts as the exemplar of the message I wished to send at all times – that we are more than guns and fury. We are an ancient species with subtle tastes. We are intelligent. And we are still here.

‘My greetings, Master,’ I said, closing the doors behind me.

Kerapliades was standing before a sandstone fireplace. He gave no indication he had any comprehension of how valuable it was – over twelve thousand years old, fashioned in pre-Unity Francia, literally irreplaceable – but I could not blame him for that. He spent his days in iron-ribbed spires determining how many thousands of human souls would be fed into the mechanisms of the Throne and how many hundreds would be doled out to lives of unremitting duty as sanctioned Imperial psykers. I might have been less than equable, had I been in his place.

‘Is the chamber secure?’ Kerapliades asked.

His long face, a bony white-grey with sunken black eyes, regarded me mournfully. He was nearly two metres tall, with high-bunched shoulders and long slender arms. His robes of office were simple – black, heavy fabric hanging in long swathes. He was flanked, as Jek had warned me, by his two nulls, whose psychic dampening aura was palpable even to me.

‘All my chambers are secure, Master,’ I said. ‘You know this.’

‘I know nothing any more.’ Kerapliades leaned on a steel staff with an iron eye at its tip. ‘I took a risk, coming here.’

He looked at me with rheumy eyes. I had never managed to find out just how much he could see through them. Almost all astropaths are blinded by their creation ritual, and those who retain some visual function are damaged in other ways, so they say. I never liked to speculate too closely on what his eyes must have seen since his own soul-binding.

‘We speak in confidence,’ I told him, and that was true. Anything told to me by one of the Council would never be disclosed to another unless they wished it to be.

Kerapliades limped away from the mantelpiece. There were chairs everywhere, but I knew he wouldn’t sit.

‘It’s Cadia,’ he said, as if that conveyed everything that needed to be said.

Well done, Jek, I thought.

For as long as the Imperium had existed, Cadia was ever at the forefront of its deliberations. Over the last two hundred years – my lifetime – the High Lords had devoted an ever-increasing amount of time to that one world. Regiments had been thrown into the void to bolster it. Space Marine Chapters had been petitioned to reinforce its approaches. Armour-wrights and strategeos had been seconded to augment its walls and its fortresses. There were other battle zones of import – Armageddon, Badab – in which we were stretched, but in truth none of them mattered besides Cadia, for if that world fell then the balance of power we had cultivated for ten thousand years would be ended at a stroke.

‘You have tidings from the sector?’ I asked.

‘None.’

‘Well then,’ I said. ‘In the absence of that—’

‘You do not understand me.’

It was then that I first truly noticed the Master was not his moribund, desiccated self. I was used to seeing him gloomy. I was not used to seeing him scared. His long grey fingers clutched at his support, and even that did not quell the faint

trembling.

‘We can handle the visions,’ he said, and he no longer looked at me. I do not think he was looking at anything in the chamber just then. ‘I do not ask any of my alpha-level astropaths to undergo what I would not myself. I witness what they witness. I undergo the same trials.’

I let him speak. I will be truthful – his manner disturbed me. Kerapliades was not the confessional sort. I wondered if his mind had finally been cracked by the strain put on it, yet he did not show signs of mania, just a kind of dread.

‘Probing that close to the Eye has always been perilous,’ he went on. ‘But now – nothing. No terror. No screaming visions. A curtain has been drawn across it.’

I did not know what to say to that. We had been at full-scale war over the Cadian Gate for over five years, and during that time we had relied on the Adeptus Astra Telepathica for the vast bulk of our knowledge of how our forces were faring. There had always been interference, and ambiguity, and often contradiction, but never silence. In my naivety I even wondered whether it might be a good thing – that the nightmares unleashed by our enemies there might be finally abating.

Then I looked at the Master again, and saw immediately that it was not a good thing.

‘Tell me what you need,’ I said.

‘Need?’ Kerapliades barked a dry sort of laugh. ‘I need a thousand more psykers – stronger ones, not the dross I get from the Black Ships now.’ He blinked. His breathing was shallow. ‘This is different, chancellor. I can’t read it yet, but my blood tells me true enough. Don’t be misled by this calm – it comes before catastrophe.’

He had told me similar things before. I might have learned to ignore the warnings, if it were not for the horrendous expression on his mournful face.

‘The Twelve must meet,’ he said. ‘And Dissolution must be enacted.’

So that was it. Another throw of this old die. Despite myself, my heart sank. The arguments had been scoured over and over for more years than I had been alive, and there had never been a resolution.

‘I do not think that will be easy,’ I said, already determining how such a thing could be done. ‘*Camera inferior* is not scheduled for another three months.’

Kerapliades whirled around, fixing me with his strange, swimming eyes. I felt a brief tremor, just for a moment – a flash of insight into his colossal psychic power. It was not meant as a threat, I think, just a momentary lapse in control,

but the effect was still startling, like placing one's hand on static electricity.

'You can make it happen,' he said.

Possibly so. 'Have you spoken of this to any of the others?' I asked.

'None,' he said.

'Then I beg you – do not. Not yet. I will make my approaches – it would be best coming from me.'

'I know,' he said, and a grim smile cracked his features. 'You have wormed your way into the confidence of us all, doorkeeper. Sometimes I think you are the most dangerous man on Terra.'

Perhaps he meant that to be flattering.

'You give me too much credit,' I said. 'I merely accommodate.'

'So you say.' The hollow look in his eyes returned. 'Do it, though. Do what has to be done. If you need coin, if you need anything, let me know.'

That was an amusing thought. I had more coin than any of them knew. I could have bought half the Council with it already, were any of them remotely interested in such things, but, to their credit, none of them were. If they had vices then they were all connected to power, not avarice, and baubles held little sway over such souls.

'Of course, there is one difference, this time,' I ventured cautiously, knowing that I was telling Kerapliades something he already knew. 'The Lord Brach has not yet been replaced, and so one seat is empty.'

'Yes, and you know now what must be done, do you not?'

'I do not choose the High Lords,' I said.

'Go to see him,' he said.

'I do not think he will receive me,' I said.

'You will find a way,' he said.

And that was it. That was why he had come – to plant this idea in my head, to give it his blessing. I judged from this that he had support from others of the Twelve – he would not have advanced it if not. He was bound by the Lex Imperialis from making overt approaches himself, as were all his peers in the Council, but that would never stop them from making their views known.

It put me in a delicate position. Half the Council had always been against Dissolution, half for it. A reconfiguration might not change that, and by intervening now I risked aligning myself with a losing cause – a dangerous thing, even for a man like me.

I would need time to think. I would need time to confer with Jek and plot a route through this. The tides of intrigue in the Palace could rise fast and fall

fast – the trick was not to be carried by them.

I bowed. ‘I’m honoured that you came, Master,’ I said.

Kerapliades did not return the bow.

‘I’ll be waiting,’ he said, limping towards the chamber’s doors. His nulls went with him, making my flesh crawl as they passed me.

Once he was gone, I waited awhile, pondering what to make of the visit. His fear had not been feigned. I still found it unsettling to witness fear from a High Lord, and that alone weighed more heavily on me than anything he had said.

After a suitable interval, Jek reappeared, looking curious. ‘Anything of importance?’ she asked.

‘Not sure yet,’ I said.

I was aware I had guests waiting. I placed my hands on Jek’s to thank her for her concern, but could not linger to consult her then – that would have to wait for a few hours, by which point I might have settled the issues more clearly in my own mind.

I went back towards the dining chamber, gradually resuming my appearance of joviality as I walked. By the time I re-entered, my face was full of smiles again.

‘What kept you?’ asked the woman sitting on my left, just as the final courses were being delivered. ‘Great matters of state?’

‘A little indigestion,’ I said, reaching for the sorbet. ‘Not that there’s much difference.’

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