

WARHAMMER

40,000

A SPACE MARINE BATTLES NOVELLA

FLESH OF CRETACIA

ANDY SMILLIE



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ANDY SMILLIE



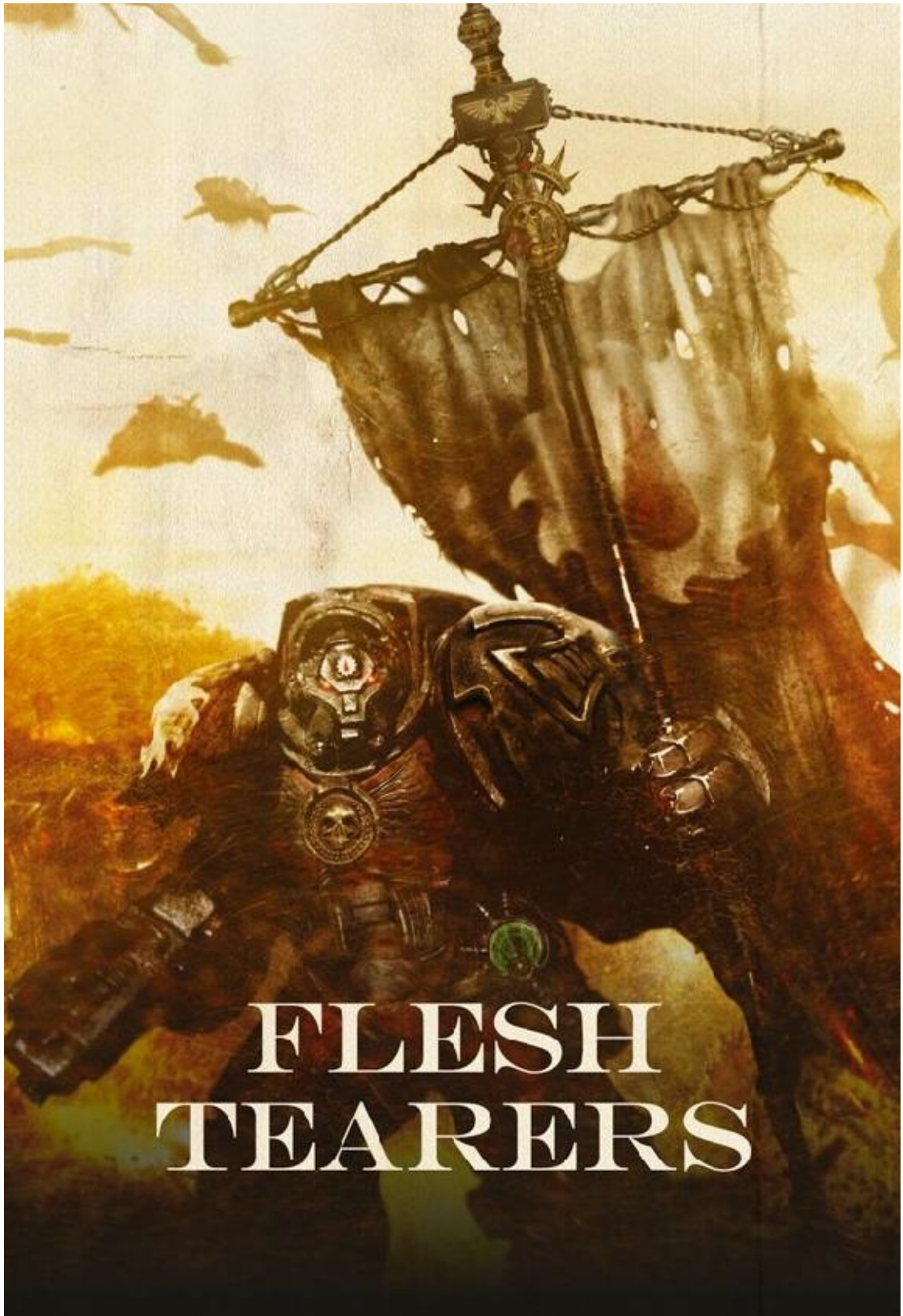
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WARHAMMER 40,000

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 IMPERIAL GUARD AND COUNTLESS PLANETARY DEFENCE FORCES, THE EVER-VIGILANT INQUISITION AND THE TECH-PRIESTS OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS TO NAME ONLY A FEW. BUT FOR ALL THEIR MULTITUDES, THEY ARE BARELY ENOUGH TO HOLD OFF THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT FROM ALIENS, HERETICS, MUTANTS - AND WORSE.

TO BE A MAN IN SUCH TIMES IS TO BE ONE AMONGST UNTOLD BILLIONS. IT IS TO LIVE IN THE CRUELLEST AND MOST BLOODY REGIME IMAGINABLE. THESE ARE THE TALES OF THOSE TIMES. FORGET THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE, FOR SO MUCH HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN, NEVER TO BE RE-LEARNED. FORGET THE PROMISE OF PROGRESS AND UNDERSTANDING, FOR IN THE GRIM DARK FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR. THERE IS NO PEACE AMONGST THE STARS, ONLY AN ETERNITY OF CARNAGE AND SLAUGHTER, AND THE LAUGHTER OF THIRSTING GODS.



FLESH TEARERS



FLESH TEARERS SPACE MARINE

I am sorry.

'We have failed you, brother.

'It should not have come to this. You have stood against the darkness, a shield against the horrors that call it home. You have killed and you have bled. You have endured where your brothers could not. You have given all that you have, sacrificed all that you are, and now nothing remains to defend against the violence raging inside.

'Yet you are still my brother, and you do not deserve this. This is not your failure to carry.

'We are children of war; baptised in the ashes of victory. We are our father's second sons, and we are all the fiercer for it. His pain burns sun-hot in our veins, undiluted by old honour or tithes. We are him at his purest, his most wrathful. We took our rage and tried to blunt it on the stars themselves, waging a crusade as bloody and vicious as any that had gone before. We bled the galaxy without mercy. We bled ourselves without respite, battling almost unto extinction. But still we were not cleansed, our actions not our own. Still, the Thirst endured.

'Cretacia was to be our salvation.'



ONE

PLANETFALL

Tamir let Kesef fall. Pressing himself into the rockface as the youth tumbled past, he didn't spare the other warrior another glance. The weak had no place on Cretacia. It was better for Kesef to die than live to infect the tribe with his wretched blood. Tamir reached for the next handhold and paused. Kesef wasn't screaming. The warrior had not allowed his death to expose Tamir and the rest of the war party. There was honour in that, at least. When the hunt was over, Tamir would have Harut find Kesef's body and burn it. He would not leave the youth's spirit to be consumed by the earth.

Ignoring the blood seeping from his palms and feet, Tamir swung his hand up and climbed. Around him, the rest of his warriors continued the ascent, scaling the mountain with renewed care. Tamir knew many more would fall before they reached the summit. The ranodon had chosen its lair well. The four-winged beasts nested atop the mountain's peak, laying their nutrient-rich eggs away from the hungry claws of predators. The rock of the mountain was ragged, spiked like the hide of a snarling barasaur. It tore at his flesh and bled his strength. Yet he knew the climb was only the beginning; worse was to come. The steppes ahead were searing hot, boiled from within by the mountain's fire. They would have to move fast or be cooked to the bone. Tamir dug his fingers into a fresh handhold and pressed on, protected by the vines of knotted scar tissue covering his body. The suns had died and been reborn many times since his first hunt, and he longed for the stabbing pain of his youth, the agony that lent haste to his limbs. Now he felt little but the beat of his own heart.

Movement to the left caught Tamir's eye. Harut had stopped climbing and was motioning to the sky behind them. Tamir followed the tracker's gaze as a hail of flaming debris peppered his skin. He clung tight to the mountainside, turning

away from the sky as the fiery hail raked his back. The stench of burnt flesh attacked his nostrils, making him scowl. Three more of his war party dropped from the peak, their screams drowned out by the growl of the fire-rock as it struck the ridge around him. Panic sent a shiver through Tamir's body. If they had angered the mountain it would spew forth its rage and wash them from its flanks in a tide of flame. He looked to the summit, but the mountain was still, unmoved by their presence. Tamir cursed himself for being so foolish. They had performed the necessary rites, smearing themselves in the terracotta mud bordering the foothills. There was no way the mountain's spirit could have sensed them. The sky-fire was something else.

Tamir turned towards the sky as a cluster of larger rocks burned downwards, crashing into the forest beyond the next ridge in a halo of fire and dust. Dread knotted Tamir's stomach and sent a burst of adrenaline through his veins. His village lay beyond the ridge.

'Baktu! Baktu!' Tamir shouted, ordering the war party down, descending as fast as he dared.

The village was gone. The falling rocks had burned great troughs in the ground, scouring the wooden huts from the earth. Malyai trees lay flattened under one another, knocked over as if by a mighty wind. Flames shivered on the edges of their weeping leaves, burning away what remained. The bodies of Tamir's tribe were gone, lost in the smoke that drifted from the dark ash carpeting the ground and hiding all traces of life. Tamir's angular jaw remained unflinching, his heart as hard as the muscles that crowded his chest like boulders.

He felt no sorrow for any individual. The fates were not always kind, and such was the way of things. But with the women and children dead, it would be many passings of the sun before the tribe was able to replenish those killed in battle – to survive, he would have to claim warriors from the neighbouring tribes. This was to be only the start of the bloodletting that must surely follow.

Buried in a mound of churned earth, a single, huge rock shone as the sun's light touched it. Tamir ran at it, intent on revenge. He would break it asunder and fashion a club from its remains. He froze, muscles bunching in anticipation as the rock hissed and spat geysers of steam. A moment later a section of the outer layer slid away, disappearing into an unseen recess. Several of Tamir's warriors recoiled but the warchief held his ground, snarling as a green-skinned beast stumbled from the opening.

The creature emitted a low growl as it collapsed to its haunches. Thick blood

ran from a wound in its side. Bunches of taut muscle strained beneath its flesh, and alluded to the violence the beast was capable of. Knifed teeth sat below devil-red eyes.

Tamir circled the beast. It stank worse than the sump bogs. Had it been upright he had no doubt it would have been twice his size, though small in comparison to the great beasts who had tasted his spear. Harut and Koi stepped towards it. Tamir read the desire to kill in their movements, and spread his arms to stop them. It had been his village to protect; the right to kill was his and his alone. Grunting their assent, the two warriors fell back among the others.

The green beast's breath came in laboured gasps as it tried to drag itself up. Snarling, Tamir threw his spear through the beast's forearm, pinning it to the ground. The greenskin roared in pain, saliva dripping from its maw. Tamir skipped forward, slicing off its hand with his blade, the sharpened stone cutting easily through the bone. The beast's roar died in its throat, its voice robbed by pain as it fell onto its back. Blood enough to bleach a man death-white ran from the stump of its wrist, congealing the ash around it into a thick sludge.

On a hunt, such a sight would have driven Tamir's war party into a frenzy, eliciting a chorus of triumphant calls and whistles, but now they remained silent. A vengeance kill brought with it no prize, no spoils worthy of the cost.

Studying every tortured spasm of the beast's face, Tamir unhooked his club from his waist. He wanted to remember the kill.

Spitting its hatred, the greenskin tore its arm through the spear, leaving behind a chunk of flesh, and threw itself at Tamir.

The warchief anticipated the move, but the beast's size belied its speed. Springing back, Tamir avoided its snapping jaw, but was caught by a swinging right hook. The greenskin's fist thundered into his face. Tamir heard his cheekbone crack, wincing at the sound, though he had yet to register the pain. The greenskin pressed its attack, punching its stump into his nose. He gagged as blood and the stench of alien flesh filled his mouth.

The beast's resurgence was shortlived. Even its seemingly indomitable constitution couldn't contend with the blood leaking from its wounds. Tamir weaved under another strike, rising to smash his club into the beast's head. The blow shattered the greenskin's cheek. It toppled to the ground mewling, its yellowed teeth scattered beside it. Tamir straddled the beast's chest and hit its skull again and again, spurred on by the gore that spattered against his body. He continued to smash the beast's skull into the earth until its body ceased twitching.

Tamir's breath came in frantic bursts as he staggered to his feet. His limbs were soaked in the creature's life fluid, dyeing the mud caking his skin a dark, visceral red. Tamir straightened, armoured in crimson, and raised his weapon to the sky.

'Ruta, ruta namuna, ar-a!' Tamir shouted.

Tamir's kinsmen echoed his cry. They were the tearers of skin, the eaters of flesh.

Death in the void left Amit cold.

The Chapter Master of the Flesh Tearers stared through his flagship's oculus at the spread of plasma torpedoes flickering in the darkness, streaking towards the last ork hulk. The vessel was crippled, ruined by bombardment cannons and broadside salvos. Though he couldn't see them, he knew a squadron of Thunderhawks burned ahead of the torpedoes, clearing a path for the deadly payload of ordnance, thinning out the debris fields that had hours ago been the ork fleet. The harsh flash of turbo-lasers and the pulsating flicker of lascannon fire were the only visible markers of their position.

This was not battle as he knew it. His pulse was at rest, his blood cool in his veins, his heart inaudible over the idle purr of his powered warplate. He felt misplaced on the bridge of a starship. Naval engagements were detached... *things*, tightly regimented, logistical processes carried out by innumerable souls at the behest of unseen masters. Most who died in space did so out of consequence: incinerated by plasma fires, drowned in coolant, sucked into the freezing embrace of the void; they died almost by accident. Amit saw little difference between that and how men met their end in times of peace. Burned as their dwellings caught fire around them, drowned by untamed rivers, taken by the night's chill; men had died in such ways long before they had joined their gods in the stars.

Amit turned from the oculus and let his gaze drift around the vaulted bridge. Banks of lumens hung from the distant ceiling like giant teardrops, their crimson light bleeding down to slick the floor. Dozens of serfs in grey tunics attended to the clacking consoles that controlled the *Victus's* systems, their sun-starved skin cast into eerie blue relief by the myriad auspex and data-viewers. It had been weeks since any of them had left their stations. Snaking tubes of bio-fluid and stimulants nourished the serfs' gaunt bodies and kept their minds alert, while others carried away their excrement. Amit doubted any would survive past the next few hours. Mechanical servitors shuffled across the iron of the deck,

incense wafting from their altered skin as they mumbled blessings in strangled snatches of machine code. Stuttering hololithic arrays in arched vestibules displayed representations of the eight strike cruisers that made up the rest of the fleet. Yet the bridge felt almost silent, the noise of the unceasing activity drowned under the background thrum of the flagship's growling engines.

'Impact imminent, liege.' A tactical serf rasped an update as the torpedoes slammed into the ork ship, his voice hoarse from over ninety hours of continuous combat.

Amit watched his quarry through the oculus, taking a final look before it was delivered to oblivion. Even by ork standards the ship was almost unrecognisable as something befitting that description. It was larger than any other he had ever encountered, a lumbering mass of rock and twisted metal, whose haphazard construction gave it no right to exist. Rocket boosters, exhaust vents, sensor spines and weapon mouths jutted from every angle imaginable. Its hull was formed from the ruins of thousands of vessels. Some Amit recognised as having once belonged to the Imperium, others were xenos in origin, all were mashed together with the same direct brutality with which the orks waged war.

Amit stared at its undulating flanks as the torpedoes struck, wondering at the history sealed within the drifting mausoleum, at what pieces of the past they were about to destroy forever.

'All enemy contacts vanquished, liege.'

Shipmaster Neta Pia stood up from her command throne and grasped the support rail. It had been a long pursuit through the Corythos system and she had not left the chair for fourteen cycles. She stood out of triumph, out of respect for the Chapter Master, and for a chance to let the blood back into her legs. Neta looked to Amit and felt a shiver run through her spine. She would never grow accustomed to his presence. More god than man, he was as broad as any bulkhead and stood almost twice her height in his Terminator armour, a full head taller than Brother-Captains Barakiel and Ismeriel, who remained immobile on either side of him. Amit's ancient warplate was as pitted and scarred as the flanks of the *Victus*, his eyes as ancient as the stars she sailed among.

'Survivors?' Even without his helm and the metallic hiss of his vox grille, Amit's voice was like the idle growl of a chainsword.

'Surveyors, wide spectrum scan,' said Neta. 'If even one of those green-skinned brutes survives, I will know about it.' She snapped the order to the chorus of surveyor serfs and their attendant servitors.

The lobotomised slaves trembled as data coursed through their binary veins. ‘Processing,’ they uttered as one.

Neta listened to the stilted machine idiom as the surveyors gathered data. She had heard that on planets less feral than her own, servitor babble was considered beautiful – movements of techno-composers and machine adepts grouped servitors of differing functions and logic cores together, orchestrating their garbled speech into something akin to art. Neta ground her teeth. The stuttered consonants of the servitors did little more than tear at her nerves.

A blinking rune on her console demanded attention. ‘Plasma trails and heat flaring suggest several craft made landfall, liege,’ the fleet captain said.

‘Show me.’ Amit faced the tactical hololith that hung in the air above the command dais.

System of seven worlds. Uncharted. The words scrolled across the hololith as the planets came into focus. A moment later, clusters of pulsating orbs lit up across three of the planets, indicating where the ork engine signatures had been lost.

‘Here, liege.’ Neta brought the fourth planet into sharp focus with a subvocal command, letting the others dissolve into the background. ‘The majority of the orks fled to this world.’

The hololith shuddered a moment as the ship’s cogitators generated an analysis of the planet. Neta clicked her tongue in annoyance as a slew of negative returns came back concerning land mass, population, atmospheric conditions, climate and mineral density. ‘Surveyors, I need more information.’

‘With regrets, captain, the world is blanketed in electrical storms and thick cloud. Our auspex is unable to penetrate further.’

‘Cunning.’ Neta gave a wolfish smile. She had long suspected the orks were more than barbarous raiders. The survivors sought to hide within the shroud of the mysterious fourth planet.

‘Recall the Thunderhawks.’ Amit’s voice ground out from behind her. ‘Have the company assemble in the hangar.’ He was leaving.

‘Liege?’ Neta asked as the three armoured giants strode towards the chamber’s exit.

‘Assist Brother-Captain Azazel in hunting the other orks, shipmaster,’ Amit told her without stopping.

‘Yes, liege.’ Neta stiffened with purpose and went to her duty, rallying the helm and comms to contact Azazel’s strike cruiser in the Flesh Tearers flotilla.

‘Shipmaster Neta...’ Amit stopped in the doorway, turning to look at her. ‘You

fought well. Even after this long century of war, the fire still burns in your blood. Secure the system and I'll make sure the cartographers hear of your name.'

'Liege.' Neta bowed. When the Traitor Legions had reduced her world to a scorched husk, loyalty to the Imperium had been welded to her soul. When the Blood Angels had liberated the planet, she had sworn an oath of enduring servitude. Until that moment she had wanted nothing more from her life than the chance to kill the enemies of man. But to be immortalised on a star chart, to be remembered until the suns burned cold... 'By His blood, it shall be done.'

Ismeriel waited until the door had closed, its barrel locks hissing into place, and he stood alone in the corridor with Barakiel and Amit before speaking. 'My lord.'

Amit faced him, finding the red orbs of Ismeriel's bionic eyes as unreadable as ever. The optics glowered in the low light of the corridor, casting a ruddy sheen over the metal plating covering the left side of his face. 'Speak your piece, Ismeriel.'

'Is this plan wise, lord? The orks may not have chosen the fourth planet through desperation alone. It could be lair to any number of the wretched things,' Ismeriel continued, unaware of Amit's rising impatience. 'We don't know what else awaits us down there. Let me take the Scouts, properly reconnoitre the—'

Amit took a step so his face was a handspan from Ismeriel's. 'Do you think me a coward, brother-captain?' The other Flesh Tearer opened his mouth to speak but Amit continued, pressing his forehead into Ismeriel's. 'I am not one of Guilliman's pedantic tacticians.' Amit raised one of his crimson gauntlets. The servos in its adamantium joints growled as he bunched his fingers into a fist. 'I am armoured in blood, not the dark cowl of Corax's saboteurs.'

'Lord.' Ismeriel held Amit's gaze.

Amit grinned, pleased by Ismeriel's resolve. If the Chapter were to survive then it would take leaders like Ismeriel to see it through this bloody era. But Amit was too soaked in violence to change now. He could not deny the Blood; its call grew ever louder in his mind.

'And you, Barakiel, what say you?' Amit turned to the other captain.

'I care not whether there are a hundred orks or a thousand on that world. We will slay them. But we would be better served resuming our crusade into the Sakkara sector. The Star Phantoms have already sent a request for aid.' Barakiel spoke evenly, his face free of emotion. 'Leave the auxiliaries to clean up here. There is blood enough to be shed elsewhere.'

‘No,’ said Amit, his jaw clenched tight, a cage against his mounting anger.
‘You are wrong.’

‘There is never enough. The Thirst endures.’

The thought pushed unbidden into his mind. It was a sentiment he would not – could not – voice. If he, the strongest among them, lost hope then... Amit growled. ‘Look around you, brothers. Our warriors grow restless. Their frustration is as tangible as the deck we stand on. It has been too long since our blades tasted flesh. We attack.’

‘The Star–’ Barakiel began.

‘We do not answer to the Star Phantoms, and there will be time enough to cleanse Sakkara. We finish what we start.’

Barakiel dipped his head in abeyance, his voice a whispered growl. ‘As the Blood wills it.’

One hundred of the Emperor’s finest. One hundred warriors in crimson and ash. One hundred angels of death.

Amit stood at their head on the muster deck, a giant among giants. He let his gaze drift over them, committing to memory each of the warriors he was about to lead to war.

Serfs in coal-dark robes drifted between the serried ranks of Flesh Tearers, anointing their armour with lubricating oils and unguents of warding.

To Amit’s left, Barakiel held aloft the company standard, a six-metre banner that bunched where it touched the floor. The thick fabric was torn and frayed. Amit knew there were those among his cousins who would lament the raggedness of the banner. Even the Blood Angels, their primogenitors, venerated their standards as holy relics, imbued with power and the weight of history. But Amit was content to let his colours bear the mud and blood earned on the field of battle. Each ruddy stain acted as a badge of honour in a way the intricate script worked into the fabric never could.

A chalice, an angel in an executioner’s guise, a saw-toothed blood drop... Amit turned his eyes to the incongruous images adorning the fabric, joined by a ragged seamline. The banner had once been three. Each had been woven on Baal when the Flesh Tearers were first forged. Three banners, one for each company that had operated under his direct command, First to Third. But war and the Thirst had savaged the companies until only a scant few warriors remained in each. Amit had ordered the remnants banded together to form this, his company. It bore no name and no number. Its lineage was the Chapter’s, its banner an

amalgamation of the three that had been.

Undoubtedly, this disregard for the structures laid down by Guilliman's Codex would not have sat well with the primarch himself. Amit smiled. He hoped not. That the master of Macragge saw fit to shackle the Legions was poor irony – he had been absent from the only fight that mattered, and Amit would not see his warriors suffer for the Ultramarines' failure.

'By His blood are we made.' Amit smashed his gauntlet into his breastplate.

The assembled Flesh Tearers echoed the verse, the sound of a hundred armoured salutes like a thunderclap hammering throughout the muster deck.

'By His blood are we armoured.' Amit knelt and the company knelt with him, the servos in their knees firing like pistons.

'By His blood shall we triumph.' Amit removed a gauntlet and drew his knife through the flesh of his palm, squeezing a measure of the hot fluid into a thin channel worked into the metal of the deck. The other Flesh Tearers bled with him, spilling their blood too.

The dark liquid trickled down through a drainage membrane, dripping into the Ortus Grail, the chalice of rebirth. The grail was suspended in a consecrated antechamber below them. At battle's end, Amit's company would sip from its gilded edges, so that the fallen might live on in their veins.

Chaplain Zophal stepped from the ranks, uncoiling his rosarius as he made his way to Amit's side.

'We are vengeance made flesh.' The Chaplain began the Moripatris, the mass of doom. His devotions would draw out those among the Flesh Tearers whose rage could no longer be contained. He would welcome them into the ranks of the Death Company and there they would at last find peace.

Amit kept his eyes low as Zophal recited the mass, silently wondering how many warriors he would lose to the Thirst's call. He felt his pulse quicken as the Chaplain's catechism stirred his killer's heart, and wondered if perhaps this time, it would be he who donned the black armour of death.

Scarred blast shields and toothed hatches opened as the *Victus* prepared to send Amit and his warriors into the void. The massive launch tunnels were little more than dark pinpricks against the crimson backdrop of the battle-barge's immense hull.

Seven gunships boosted from the *Victus's* flanks, the flash of their thrusters lost amongst the thousands of emitters and blinking sensors studding their parent vessel's armour plating: three Thunderhawks – squat, airborne battle tanks that

flew seemingly in defiance of their design – and four smaller, nimbler Storm Eagles. All were painted in crimson and ash, save one. A single Storm Eagle, its hull as dark as the void surrounding it, carried the Thirst's chosen to war.

The wing of gunships burned at full thrust towards the fourth planet. Stacked in tight formation, the Storm Eagles covering the unarmed bellies of the larger Thunderhawks, they drove straight through the last remnants of the ork fleet. The flicker of lascannon fire joined the harsh flash of turbo lasers as the gunships blasted a path through the debris field. Pilots bent on the quickest path to combat crashed stub-nosed prows through lesser obstacles, weathering the deluge of shrapnel and calcified space dust that showered their hulls and added fresh lesions to their glaxis plates.

Scout Cassiel grimaced and reached for a mag-harness, tensing as *Baal's Fury* reverberated around him.

'You won't find a harness here, boy,' Brother-Sergeant Asmodel said to the neophyte. 'Training's over. Time to stand on your own two feet.'

The reprimand drew a grunt of amusement from Hamied. He sat opposite Cassiel in the Thunderhawk, hunched over as he ran a serrated blade across a silver-flecked whetstone. This was to be Hamied's last mission before elevation to full battle-brother. The veteran Scout already bore many of the marks of his progenitor. His once dark skin had paled, his eyes had the piercing blueness common within the Chapter and his close-cropped hair was streaked with blond. Hamied regarded Cassiel coldly, his eyes far more vicious than the blade in his hand.

Cassiel bit back a growl, but looked down. Of all his new-found gifts, the Rage was the one he found hardest to adjust to. His pulse was never quiet, and the hearts of the others drummed like thunder in his ears. He pictured Asmodel's face smashed against the bulkhead, and imagined the sound of crunching bone as he drove his elbow into the sergeant's skull, pulping it.

'Let peace beat in your breast and save your wrath for your bolter.'

Captain Akrasiel's words surfaced in Cassiel's mind like a calming breeze. The Master of Recruits had spoken them after dragging him from the throat of another Blood Angels neophyte. Those three minutes in the duelling cages had cost him many hours of penance.

'I don't know,' said Melech, gesturing to the heavy bolter he held. 'Some equipment is more useful than others.'

Cassiel grinned, glad of the distraction.

Melech took better care of his weapon than he did his own flesh. In the aftermath of a battle he would see to its maintenance and rearming before allowing an Apothecary to administer to his wounds, a habit that had left him with a patchwork of re-grafted skin covering his face and the faint light of a bionic in place of his left eye. Many of Melech's brother Scouts favoured the silent precision of a sniper rifle, but there was little he couldn't sneak up on and throttle, or gut with his blade. When the time came to use a firearm, he would welcome the angry roar of the heavy bolter. 'What say you, Izail?' the hulking Scout asked the fifth and final member of the squad.

Izail said nothing, lost in one of his brooding silences.

Cassiel saw Melech's eyes narrow. He hated Izail with a purity only a brother could muster. The two Scouts vied for Hamied's position as Asmodel's second, and with his departure imminent the animosity between them had increased. Cassiel regarded them both. They were as different as fire and ice. Where Melech was broad and prone to impetuosity, Izail was wiry and calculating. On their last deployment, Melech had rallied a group of Karythian Irregulars and bolstered the line. Izail had done likewise further along the trench-line, but where Melech had spoken of duty and honour, rousing the Irregulars into a fervent fury, Izail had executed them until the others got the point and stopped running.

The Thunderhawk's sixth and final occupant stood stock still in front of the exit ramp. Grigori had been the last passenger to board the gunship, but he would be the first to leave. His immense shoulders spanned the breadth of the transport hold. Each tooth of the metres-long eviscerators clamped in his fists were twice the size of a man's head, yet his arms seemed untroubled by their weight. Scrolls of parchment and lines of golden scripture covered Grigori's adamantium shell. He was a crimson monument to the glory of Baal. Cassiel looked away in deference. It was hard not to feel small and insignificant in the Dreadnought's presence. A venerated hero of the Chapter, Grigori had walked with Amit on Terra itself and killed scores of the Archenemy in the final days of the Great War.

'Keep your mind on the present, neophyte,' said Asmodel.

Despite the sergeant's words, Cassiel found his thoughts turning to the fallen Space Marine whose gene-seed now resided within his own body. What great wars had he fought in? How many lives had he claimed? What fate had befallen him? Did he, Cassiel, deserve to carry such a legacy?

Five minutes to entry

The status update flashed amber on Manakel's retinal display as he sat within the *Spear of Sanguinius*. He shifted position to accommodate the slight changes in pitch as the craft readied for atmospheric entry. For almost a decade, the Storm Eagle had carried him and his assault brethren into battle. The subtleties of the gunship were as familiar to him as the idle purring of his power armour.

'Make ready.' Manakel's vocal cords had been severed by an ork cleaver, and he rasped the order through a mechanical vocaliser. He tugged at the scar tissue coiling around his throat, angered at the tortured parody of his voice, and mag-locked his helmet into place.

'I am His vengeance as He is my shield.' Manakel upturned Brother-Sergeant Seraph's chainsword and pressed the tip of the blade into the deck, as was his ritual. The same ork who had robbed Manakel of his voice had also killed Seraph, ripping out his primary heart and leaving Seventh Squad under new stewardship. 'We will deliver death to His enemies as He brings deliverance to our souls.'

As his brothers followed him in the litany of battle, Manakel felt the weight of command rest like a Titan's foot upon his chest. Until today, those words had always been Seraph's to utter, and his own gnarled voice was but a crude echo of the revered brother-sergeant.

Manakel was a warrior to the marrow of his bones but he knew Lahhel or Nanael would have made better leaders. He felt the two Space Marines watching him, and was certain they knew it too. 'As the Blood wills it.' Manakel tightened his grip on Seraph's chainsword, finishing the rite and crushing his doubts between gauntlet and pommel. He would lead as he had been led, resolving to honour his mentor's spirit or die trying. Seraph's blade would taste blood again.

Two minutes

Amit flexed his fingers, sending a shiver of power arcing along the edge of his chainfists. Every minute inside the Thunderhawk felt like a helpless eternity as he stood impotent with his honour guard – nine of the greatest warriors the Flesh Tearers could muster, trapped inside the ceramite hull of the *Vengeance*, awaiting a malfunction or pre-emptive attack to send them plummeting to an ignominious death.

'I see you have yet to visit the artificers, lord,' Barakiel said to Amit over a closed channel, indicating the shell impacts and lacerations marking the Chapter Master's armour.

‘My armour still functions,’ said Amit levelly. ‘It has no need of repair.’

Barakiel bit back his response. Tactical dreadnought armour was more than a suit of warplate. It was a relic of the Chapter, an artefact from a time when mankind had the ability to create technological marvels. Its like would never be seen again. It angered him that Amit had forgone the proper ministrations. ‘As you say.’

Amit felt a surge of anger at Barakiel’s tone, though in truth, he was grateful for the distraction; the exchange had brought them a moment closer to planetfall. His twin hearts grew restless in his chest, like beasts snapping as they strained at the end of their tether. He was desperate to unleash them, to have them beat at the resounding rate only combat required. Amit ground his teeth at their rising rhythm and watched the mission counter on his helmet display blink to zero.

Entry achieved

‘Traitor’s blood.’ Brother-Pilot Raziel fought to hold his Storm Eagle steady as it speared into the fourth planet’s atmosphere. The muscles in his arms begged for respite as strong winds vied with him for control of the craft. They battered against the *Spear’s* hull and clawed over its wings, threatening to tear him off course. The Storm Eagle shuddered, rattling as though under fire. A blanket of jet-black cloud rushed up to meet the armourglass of the cockpit, drawing a further curse from Raziel. Even with the Storm Eagle’s bank of sensors, his armour’s autosenses and his own enhanced vision, he couldn’t see the nose of his craft. The diodes and instrumentation sharing the cockpit blinked in a quickening irregular rhythm as the gunship’s machine-spirit vented its own frustration. Struggling to maintain speed and trajectory, Raziel opened a vox channel to the nearest Thunderhawk in formation. ‘*Spear of Sanguinius* to *Baal’s Fury*, situation critical. Report.’ A raft of static screamed back in his ear. He tried again, snarling under another barrage of white noise.

‘Raziel, what in the Emperor’s name is going on? I’ve had smoother emergency drops,’ Manakel said over the internal comm.

‘Be thankful we’re still in the air, brother-sergeant,’ Raziel replied. ‘Atmospheric conditions are worsening by the second and the auguries are returning gibberish. We’re flying blind.’

Asmodel growled as a bank of klaxons shrilled overhead, reverberating around the enclosed hold of the Thunderhawk. ‘Cassiel, find out what is going on. Izail, silence that alarm.’

Izail pulled a handful of cables from the ceiling and severed them with his knife. The rumble of the Thunderhawk's engines returned, audible again as the klaxons fell silent.

Cassiel scaled the ladder two rungs at a time and climbed into the upper hold. Pressing his palm to a waiting bio-reader, he bypassed the circular hatch barring access to the flight deck. 'Brothers, why haven't you answered Sergeant Asmodel's status requests?'

'A little preoccupied here, neophyte,' said Orifiel. The co-pilot's usual even tone was a clipped growl as he hunched over an augur array.

'Tell Sergeant Asmodel to brace for engagement.' Mikhaiel, the Thunderhawk's gunner, was peering out through one of the armourglass windows. 'There's something out there. I can feel it in my blood.'

Static growled from every vox channel, drawing a curse from Amit. He was unable to contact any of the other craft in the attack wing. The Thunderhawk's external pict-recorders fed nothing but blackness to his helmet display. They were adrift, blind and alone, enveloped in a dark cloud.

Amit rocked in place, the mag-clamps on the soles of his boots locking him to the deck as the Thunderhawk shuddered around him.

'That was not wind,' said Barakiel.

'Agreed.' Amit opened a comm channel to the Thunderhawk's pilot as a resounding thud reverberated across the hull. 'Zadkiel, report.'

'The tail fin's damaged and we're showing stress fractures across the port-side armour plating.'

'Source?'

'Unknown contact, lord.' Zadkiel sounded distracted. 'Anjelo saw something, but we lost it again in this wretched cloud. Our auguries are blind.'

Amit snarled as the Thunderhawk convulsed again, sending a shower of sparks cascading from the ceiling. 'Whatever it is, kill it before it tears us apart.'

'Forgive me, Chapter Master, but how can we fight what we cannot see?'

'When in doubt, brother, kill everything.'

'Master?'

Amit was about to clarify when Barakiel grabbed his pauldron. 'If we open fire, we risk hitting our own ships. Unless they've changed course, the *Spear of Sanguinius*, *Baal's Fury* and the *Mortis Wrath* are all within our killzone.'

'I am aware of that, but we are under attack. We cannot assume the others haven't been destroyed or driven off course.' Amit shrugged off Barakiel's hand.

‘Zadkiel, increase speed and angle of descent—’

‘Lord, if we hit a mountain—’

‘We land now or we die!’ Amit declared as the Thunderhawk bucked around them.

Barakiel swallowed back his reply. He would trust in the will of the Blood. ‘Anjelo,’ he voxed the gunner. ‘After the next impact, open fire. Heavy bolters only.’ If the rest of the gunships were within lethal range then, Emperor willing, the explosive rounds wouldn’t cause too much damage. ‘Keep shooting until we’re on the ground.’

A pair of acknowledgment icons flashed on Barakiel’s helmet display. ‘The Blood protects.’

Target

Target lost

Target

Target lo—

Manakel cut the vox feed, silencing the gun servitor’s erratic updates. ‘Raziel, break formation. Descend, full burn.’

Lahhel spoke up. ‘*Baal’s Fury* will be exposed if we break formation. We should maintain standard descent speed and heading.’

Manakel gritted his teeth as another jarring impact forced him into his harness. ‘We cannot protect ourselves, let alone the *Mortis*. Raziel, get us on the ground.’ The mechanical raspings of Manakel’s voice sounded even more tortured as he growled out the syllables between the gunship’s convulsions. ‘*Now*.’

‘Acknowledged, burning—’

Raziel’s reply was drowned out by a hail of sharp explosions striking the *Spear’s* hull.

‘Raziel!’

‘We’re under fire!’

The Storm Eagle shuddered violently as another fusillade slammed into its flank. This time the rounds perforated the hull, stitching a line of fist-sized holes in the wall. Manakel did his best to protect his head as a slew of shrapnel ricocheted around inside the transport hold. ‘Evasive action, sharp descent.’

‘We’re dead if we collide with another gunship,’ said Lahhel. His objection came a moment before another torrent of rounds struck the hull.

‘We’re dead if we carry on like this,’ Manakel snarled, his gaze finding the shredded corpses of Nanael and Barchiel. The two Flesh Tearers slumped in their

harnesses, gaping shrapnel wounds in their chests.

The Storm Eagle's hull squealed as the gunship lurched and pitched. 'Raziel?' Manakel tried in vain to summon the pilot on the vox. Cursing, he called up the squad ident icons to his helmet display. Nanael and Barchiel's were faded out, Raziel's too – the pilot was dead. 'Rest well, brother.' Manakel mouthed a short prayer then opened the squad-wide comm channel. 'On your feet. Lucifus, open the ramp.' The Flesh Tearer nearest the exit hatch disengaged his harness.

'That last burst must have damaged the servos.' Lucifus's voice was strained and it was only then that Manakel noticed the ceramite around his ribs was slick with blood. 'It's jammed.'

'Stand aside,' Manakel growled, flicking the activation stud on Seraph's chainsword. A hail of amber sparks showered his armour as he punched it into the door seal and dragged its adamantium teeth through the locking clamps. With a grunt of effort he brought his knee up to his chest and kicked out, snapping the door from its mounting, allowing it to be sucked away by the gale outside.

'We cannot jump into that.' Lahhel was standing by Manakel's shoulder, but had to shout to be heard over the tumultuous winds and the screech of the Storm Eagle's engines.

Manakel turned to face his squad, the Chapter symbols emblazoned on their shoulder guards strengthened his will. 'Where a man may find himself frozen, gripped by hopelessness, a Space Marine shall act. We are the sons of Sanguinius and we fight for every breath!'

'Until death!' Seventh Squad said as one, the sound of their gauntleted salutes a harsh rebuttal to the chaos enveloping their Storm Eagle.

One by one, they leapt from the tumbling ship, vanishing into a sea of cloud.

'The Blood protects.' Manakel rapped his fist against his helmet and followed them into hell.

The winds caught Manakel as soon as he'd cleared the craft, whipping him down and across the belly of the Storm Eagle. Warning sigils flared on his retinal display as he slammed into the hull and drifted through the gunship's engine backwash. Errant flame licked at his armour, burning away the parchments of litany and scorching the crimson plating black. He tumbled, blind, grimacing as he collided with the wing. The jolt threw him clear. He activated his jump pack. Nothing.

'Mars be damned,' Manakel cursed as the altimeter on his helmet display raced towards zero.

He boosted the jump pack again. The twin thrusters coughed, flaring once in defiance of the winds before stuttering and dying. Manakel continued to fall. A terminus rune filled his display as his armour's cogitators predicted his death. Even encased in ceramite and the shock-absorbing membrane of his power armour, he was unlikely to survive the fall. Anger surged through Manakel, dragging a bestial roar from his lips. This was no way for a warrior to die. 'Blood, grant me my vengeance.' Manakel closed his eyes.

The clouds vanished, dissipating without warning. Stabbing beams of light from the wings of the Flesh Tearers gunships split apart the night sky to reveal an undulating landscape of soaring trees and black-tipped mountains.

'Target. Emperor's glory. Target acquired,' Anjelo bellowed over the vox as he sighted the enemy.

Weapons fire rang out like thunder as the *Vengeance's* guns opened up with renewed vigour, the chatter of heavy bolters joined by the snap of lascannons as the Thunderhawk's weapons locked on.

The vox channels, which had hummed with stale static, came alive as the gunship pilots co-ordinated their attack. Reports of multiple air targets flooded over Amit's helmet display. He pushed them aside, calling up the view from the *Vengeance's* external pict-viewers. His display flickered for a moment before a tactical inset resolved over his right eye, giving him his first glimpse of their attackers.

Four-winged beasts, almost as large as Storm Eagles, circled the Flesh Tearers gunships. Scaled skin covered their bodies and necks like a suit of segmented armour. The broad brow of their avian faces narrowed to hooked beaks and they had long, whip-like tails that ended in orbs of gnarled bone. The nearest of the beasts was using such an organic mace to bludgeon the armourglass of the *Vengeance's* flight deck. A bead of white-hot energy spat out from *Baal's Fury*, scoring a wide gash across the creature's chest. It fumbled in the air before being shredded by a salvo from the *Mortis Wrath's* heavy bolters.

Amit blink-clicked to the next pict-viewer and the next, cycling through the multitude of feeds to establish a broader picture of the combat. A dozen beasts remained. Though many were wounded, their carapaces cracked by heavy bolter rounds, they continued to throw themselves against the Flesh Tearers craft, snapping their beaks against stabiliser fins and wings. Amit admired their tenacity, but their resistance was in vain. With their targeting auguries functioning, it took the Flesh Tearers fewer than two minutes to cut the beasts

down. Ochre carcasses toppled from the sky like wilting leaves or exploded in hails of gore as the Flesh Tearers gunners found their mark. Dogged by missiles launched from *Baal's Fury*, the remaining pair of beasts gained altitude, retreating up into the clouds.

'Get us on the ground,' Amit snarled as the last of the threat icons disappeared from his display. His blood was up, pulse hammering. To have been so close to the enemy but unable to kill them with his own hands was a cruel torment. 'Now!'

'There's nowhere to land, master.' Zadkiel regretted his reply even as the words left his mouth.

'Then have Anjelo make somewhere.' Amit's voice was a threatening growl, the rumble of distant thunder before the storm.

'Yes, Chapter Master.' Zadkiel was loath to waste the ammunition but better that than challenging Amit, given his lord's current mood.

The *Vengeance* turned her weapons on the ground below, joined an instant later by the *Serrated Angel* and *Baal's Fury*. The three Thunderhawks cut out a clearing, their battle cannons blasting apart protruding rocks, while sustained salvos from their heavy bolters churned trees into a fine mist of splintered wood and pulped foliage. The gunships' thrusters finished the job, burning away what little remained as the craft descended.

The *Vengeance's* assault ramp was halfway down as its landing struts met the ground. Amit was out of the gunship a few seconds later, dropping from the lip of the ramp into the wet mulch of the earth. His honour guard followed him, their storm bolters panning for targets. The whirring clack of Drual and Tilonas's assault cannons competed with the landing jets of the *Mortis Wrath* and *Blood Drinker* as the six barrels of their weapons cycled to firing speed. Rainwater fell from the sky in unending sheets.

Barakiel took point, his feet pressed ankle-deep into the mud by the immense weight of his armour as he strode towards the treeline. Tactical data cascaded over his helmet display as his armour's autosenses analysed everything he looked at. 'Threats negative. Area secure.'

'What of the others?' asked Amit.

'All craft are on the ground and accounted for, save the *Spear of Sanguinius*.' Barakiel kept his gaze on the forest as he spoke, performing a final scan before rejoining the honour guard in the lee of the Thunderhawk.

'Destroyed?'

'The *Mortis Wrath* caught a glimpse of her tumbling.'

‘Survivors?’

‘Unknown, lord.’

Amit snarled, and gestured towards the encircling forest, wondering what dangers awaited them there. ‘Have Bieil move his squad up and burn back those trees ten metres.’

While a Flesh Tearer was easily a match for a single ork, he had no idea of the size or position of the enemy force. If the greenskins attacked in enough numbers, the Flesh Tearers risked being overrun. It was imperative they establish some clear ground, a killing field that would allow them to thin out the ork numbers before meeting them with fist and blade. ‘I want a defensive perimeter in ten minutes.’

A rune of affirmation blinked on Amit’s helmet display as Barakiel went to carry out his orders.

‘Asmodel.’

‘Yes, lord.’ the Scout sergeant’s voice came in distorted snatches over the vox.

Amit paused as he stared through the pitch black of the night into the forest. A labyrinth of trees and long grass glared back, their imposing silhouettes lit up by sporadic flashes of lightning that cut the sky in angry swathes. ‘Find me some orks.’

'Many died on that first day. But far fewer than would fall later, and fewer still than those who have died since.

'We descended from the heavens, angels of fire and death, bent on vengeance. But the fourth planet was a death world, a wildwood of wrathful fauna and barbed flora, an unforgiving landscape that sought to punish those who trespassed against it. We named it Cretacia, from the ancient Baal sandscript, meaning Birth of Wrath.

'Like us, Cretacia was a consummate killer. Violence lived in its very air. Its winds were the lash of a terrible beast, striking out to flay us from the skies; its clouds, void-dark phantoms whose acid tears stripped the crimson from our warplate. Death met us at every turn, tested our resolve and measured our strength. We were as the angels from old Terran legend, trapped in hell itself.

'Yet for all our trials, Cretacia's wrath was far from spent.'



TWO

SURVIVAL

Asmodel held up a fist, slowing the march.

Sweat rolled from Cassiel's brow and dripped from his chin in a continuous patter; the pace had been punishing. He crouched low and sucked in a breath. The forest air was moist, thick with unfamiliar scents.

'What's wrong, brother? Mission pace too much for you?' Melechk's voice crackled low in Cassiel's vox-bead.

'Whelp should have stayed in the training cages.' Izail's tone had none of Melechk's warmth.

Cassiel bit down a reply. His blood was already up, and he had no desire to lose his composure under the lash of Izail's tongue. He would wait until the mission's end before answering the wretch's challenge. He turned his head to his left and ground his teeth. Though they were barely ten paces from him, Cassiel could not see his brothers. Formed up in standard tactical dispersal, following the strictures of the new Codex Astartes, they were separated from each other by rows of thin-trunked trees and a swathe of creeper vines and shrubs. Though it isolated them, the formation made it hard for an enemy to stumble across the entire squad and allowed the others to perform a swift counter-attack. Each of the Scouts was essentially the bait and the relief. Not that it mattered, Cassiel didn't need his eyes to know where the others were. Training and instinct were far harder to confound than sight. Melechk was to his immediate left, Izail out past him on the far-left flank, while Hamied was to his right and Asmodel just ahead of him.

'Enough chatter,' Asmodel said over the comm. 'All of you, bury your scent.'

Cassiel dropped to one knee and dug his fingers into the ground. Scooping up a handful of earth and loose foliage, he rubbed it into his face and hair.

Snatching up another handful, he smeared it over his armour and weapons. Though no Scout would openly admit to performing such sacrilege on their trappings or defiling their Blood-blessed skin with the soil of a heathen world, none would contest its necessity. The consecration balms and purifying oils administered by the Chapter serfs were needed to keep their equipment in working order, but it marked them out from the environment. A Scout had to smell like his surroundings. Cassiel had to become as innocuous as the crawlers that scuttled over the forest floor and scurried up into the trees. To be otherwise was to invite death.

‘Blood of the—’ Izail’s curse drifted over the vox a second before his bolt pistol sounded in anger.

Cassiel was on his feet and moving before the second shot rang out, snaking towards the other Scout’s position. Hearing Izail scream he picked up his pace, ignoring the long branches that whipped against his face as he tore through the forest. He reached the Scout a heartbeat after Asmodel.

A giant, three-headed plant towered over the sergeant, standing more than twice his height. Its rust-brown maws, the same colour as the wilted bark that covered the ground beneath their feet, were clamped around Izail’s torso. Serrated rows of dagger-teeth speared his flesh and punctured his organs, letting the plant drink deep of the Scout’s blood.

‘Emperor’s mercy, be silent,’ Asmodel snarled and ended Izail’s anguish with a single round from his bolt pistol. The explosive shell blew apart the Scout’s skull.

Slow, painful exsanguination had been the only alternative to Asmodel’s quick mercy. Shouting, Cassiel opened fire, blasting apart the plant’s stem and sending its heads tumbling to the ground.

‘Get back!’ warned Melechk.

Cassiel leapt away.

An instant later, Melechk’s heavy bolter thundered to life, drowning out the background noise of the forest as a dozen more plants sprung up around the first. Knotted sinew rippled along the Scout’s arms as his muscled frame absorbed the gun’s recoil. Melechk concentrated on the nearest of the plants, bursting its heads in a flash of well-placed rounds.

‘Cut them back to ten paces.’ Asmodel’s order was barely audible over the rhythmic clatter of Melechk’s weapon.

Cassiel growled an acknowledgment, bringing his knife up to slash through a barbed vine that whipped towards his throat. He advanced beside Hamied,

grinning as his bolt pistol bucked in his hand, its mass-reactive payload pulping the stem of the offending plant. Switching to full-auto, he panned his weapon in a tight arc, covering Hamied as the veteran Scout primed a frag grenade.

‘Down!’ Hamied roared, tossing the grenade among the cluster of plants.

Still firing, Cassiel dropped to one knee. The explosive detonated, incinerating a pair of plants in a cloud of flame and sending a hail of serrated metal and wire fragments tearing through the others. Cassiel grimaced as a mist of spores washed over him, stinging the exposed skin of his face. Tears rolled down his cheeks where they burned his eyes. Even in death the cursed plants were trying to kill him.

Asmodel held up a clenched fist. ‘Cease fire! Conserve your ammunition.’

Cassiel barely registered the sergeant’s voice over the drumming of his heart. The rest of the plants were too far back to pose further threat, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t care. He would show them no mercy, no respite. Sheathing his knife, Cassiel scooped up Izail’s bolt pistol and rose to his feet, firing on full-auto as he pressed into the morass of hostile vegetation.

‘Enough!’ Asmodel snarled, grabbing Cassiel’s forearm and guiding the nose of his weapon towards the ground. ‘You cannot take vengeance on an entire world with a pair of bolt pistols.’

Cassiel grunted in frustration, his free arm still levelled at the forest. ‘But Izail, our brother... We must—’

‘We must do nothing!’ Asmodel spat, spraying Cassiel’s face with saliva. ‘You call Izail brother because you share the Blood. But you know nothing of the bonds of brotherhood, nothing of the pain that bind us in a shell harder than ceramite.’ Asmodel banged his fist against his breastplate and pushed Cassiel backwards with a sharp palm strike to his chest. ‘When you have bled for the Chapter only to watch those you have suffered for devolve into madness, then you may talk to me about vengeance.’

Cassiel lowered his weapon, his body trembling with anger. ‘I—’

‘Say nothing,’ Asmodel ordered, his eyes fixed on Cassiel. ‘I want neither your apology nor your excuse. Melech, retrieve Izail’s body. Hamied, secure our rear. Make sure that we haven’t attracted further attention.’ Asmodel turned away from Cassiel to address the squad. ‘Move.’

Pain dragged Manakel back to consciousness. It was an agony unlike any he had experienced before, as though his body had saved up every wound, every injury he’d ever sustained and revisited them upon him in that exact moment. Each

breath brought with it more torment. He blinked hard, clearing his vision in an attempt to focus on the garble of tactical data and biometric readouts that shuddered across his retinal display. Frustrated, he tried to blink-click it away, but the nonsensical sigils remained. His helm's cogitators were damaged. He activated his vox, wincing as wheezing static spat in his ear.

'Useless machine junk,' Manakel roared, spitting a raft of incoherent curses as he tore his helmet from its locking clasps and threw it away.

Growling, he pushed himself to his knees. Only then did he notice that Seraph's chainsword was still clasped firmly in his right fist. He redoubled his grip on the weapon in an effort to crush the pain wracking his body. 'It seems I'll get to keep my oath, brother-sergeant.' Manakel forced the words through a mouthful of saliva, a by-product of the pain suppressors, bio-nutrients and adrenaline his armour was pumping into his system. He spat bile-coloured phlegm from his mouth and loosened his grip on the sword as the cocktail of drugs began to ease his pain.

His other hand remained slack, his forearm broken at a sickening angle. Planting Seraph's sword in the ground, he unfastened his vambrace and gauntlet, and took hold of his damaged arm. 'The Blood grant me strength.' Manakel's face contorted in pain as he snapped the bones of his forearm back into alignment. The sudden sharpness of pain brought him a moment of relief from the rest of his injuries, which paled in comparison. Grimacing, he flexed his fingers. By the grace of Sanguinius the arm would heal before too long.

Grunting with effort, Manakel got to his feet. The servos in his armour echoed his struggle, whining as he rose. Without his helmet display he had no way of knowing how badly damaged his armour was. Not that it mattered, he would make do. Pressing the release catch, he let what was left of his jump pack drop to the ground. Its twin cylindrical boosters had been shattered by his fall, and he doubted even the Chapter's master artificers could repair it now. Removing a pack of ceramite paste from a compartment in his thigh, Manakel squeezed the viscous liquid over a crack in the side of his abdominal plating. The air-drying compound would maintain his armour's integrity until a more permanent repair could be made.

Satisfied that his armour was as secure as he could make it, Manakel turned his thoughts inwards, focusing on the multitude of sensations vying for attention within his body. He sifted through them, tensing muscles, lingering where something felt off kilter, and assessing it against the combat casualty training stored in his memory. Level three polytrauma, several sources of distress and

multiple injuries... But his limbs were intact and functioning within combat efficiency; he had no need of an Apothecary.

Manakel let out a long sigh of relief, and gazed up at the strand of light stabbing down through the gaps in the canopy of branches that had broken his fall. If he had survived, then perhaps his squad had as well.

Pulling Seraph's chainsword from the ground, Manakel clasped it in a two-handed grip and held the weapon out in front of his chest. He had been raised on Arakell, a world of warrior tribes. His people had a saying: '*As man finds his way to woman, a weapon finds its way to war*'. It was an archaic sentiment. Using a blade like a divining rod was tantamount to madness, but he had nothing else to go on.

'Direct my wrath...' Manakel stared at the weapon, panning it across the treeline. He bit down on his lip, and spat a measure of his blood onto the blade. 'Guide me to my vengeance.'

Tamir watched the crimson giant from the lee of an ytamop tree, letting its thick skin of dagger-like leaves conceal him. It was the seventh such beast he'd come across in as many hours. Unlike the others, this one was still alive.

He had watched them plummet from the sky, a shoal of blood drops that spat fire in defiance of the winds. But the beasts had quickly been taught the error of their ways. Angered, the winds had tossed them to the earth, discarding them like the degenerate children of his tribe whom the elders threw from the cliffs of Ilse. Though it had not been the wind that had killed the others, at least not all of them. Tamir had found several of them torn apart, their entrails smeared across the earth and their limbs reduced to fleshy stumps. A kaxarous had set upon them. Fragments of their crimson hides still bore its mark. The predator's incisors were unmistakable.

The crimson giants were different, though no less imposing, than the green-skinned beast he had killed at his village. Tamir watched, awestruck, as the one in front of him tugged at its red hide, pulling off its face and tossing it away. He inched closer, flinching as the giant sat up. Annoyed at his own lack of understanding, Tamir stifled a grunt and touched the geryoch skull covering his head. The giant had been wearing a war-helm. He made to take a step forwards, but shock fixed him in place. Though the giant's forehead was broader and its skin paler, underneath its helm it was a man, like him.

Tamir felt, more than heard, the anxious murmur that rippled through the hundred warriors arrayed beside him in the brush as his kin struggled to

comprehend what their eyes were telling them. Tamir patted his hand to the ground, ordering his warriors to be silent, to be still. He had gathered many tribes to his banner after the destruction of his village and many more since the crimson giants had fallen from the sky. Rumours about the origins of the giants ran like rainwater from the mouths of all who could speak, threatening to drown the tribes in fear. Chief Sabir told of air spirits formed from the blood of the dead who had returned to claim the living. Chief Ra'd believed the giants to have been birthed by the mountains. He had said that they were beings of fire and ash, sent to test their bravery. Both he and Sabir stood on the opposite side of the thicket from Tamir, watching the giant with their own war parties. Venerable Chief Abbas claimed that his grandfather had seen the giants before, that they were a tribe of great monsters who lived high above the clouds beyond even the reach of the ranodon. Abbas and his hundred warriors were encamped only a few moments' sprint away, ready to lend their spears should they be needed.

Tamir clicked his tongue in frustration. He had no idea who or what these giants were, but he was certain that both Sabir and Ra'd were mistaken. Air spirits did not bleed, and any child of the mountains would have had no quarrel with the mighty kaxarous who slumbered within their slopes. Perhaps Abbas was right, perhaps the giants were simply monsters he had yet to slay. Tamir edged forward, keen to see what the giant did next.

He stopped, reaching for his blade as the giant let out a roar. Catching a glimpse of its broken arm, Tamir settled himself. It was in pain. He crept closer, watching intently as it grabbed hold of its wounded limb and snapped it into place. The giant was still for a moment as though lost in a trance. Tamir turned his attention to the massive blade embedded in the ground. The long, vicious weapon was both broader and taller than he. It reminded him of the God Blade that hung in the cave of ancestry. Hewn from a single kergasaur tooth, it was said to have been forged by the creators themselves. No warrior had ever been able to wield it.

Tamir's eyes widened as he watched the giant pluck the blade from the earth without effort. He grinned. Unlike the greenskin, this beast would be a worthy foe.

Amit stood on the roof of the *Vengeance* and surveyed the darkness. Inside the gunship's hull, the rest of his command squad was huddled around a data console, examining a tactical hololith. But he wanted to check on the company's progress first hand. Carefully arranged blades of light and spacial

approximations would never give a true picture of a world. No amount of cogitators could be used to discern the measure of a place. Amit reached up and removed his helm. His own eyes were the only filter he truly trusted.

It was still death-dark, the nights on the planet seemingly unending, and it took a moment for him to adjust to the gloom. The earlier downpour had subsided to a wet mist that fogged the air. He could feel moisture settle on the lids of his eyes and gather along the age lines that scored his brow. The air was thick with the acrid tang of promethium and recently detonated melta-charges.

He surveyed the makeshift camp. The company had worked ceaselessly to secure the landing zone. The Thunderhawks and Storm Eagles had been arranged like the spokes of a giant wheel, their prows aimed out towards the forests, enabling them to lend their weapons to the defence. The gunships were framed by a trench line that extended fifty paces in front of them. At the corners of the trench, heavy bolters stripped from the Storm Eagles were being modified for use as weapon turrets. Further out, harsh flashes told of the firing pits being blasted out of the earth with shaped melta-charges. Beyond them, a pall of smoke drifted from the ground where Sergeant Agadon and his men had burned back the trees to create a wide kill-zone.

Deep pits, lined with warriors supported by heavier weaponry, formed the backbone of the encampment. By the standards of many, the defences would have seemed crude and overly simplistic. Amit knew it to be true, that his warriors were not siege masters like the sons of Dorn, and their hurried fortifications were a far cry from the intricate earthworks that the Imperial Fists used to confuse attackers and funnel them into lethal choke points. Amit grinned as he thought of the Fists hidden behind their barriers. It was no coincidence that they wore the colour of cowardice, while his Flesh Tearers clad themselves in the colour of spilt blood.

Amit watched his warriors work with pride. The sons of Sanguinius were killers, not wardens. They would meet force with greater force, and the enemy's ire with fury. The defensive line was little more than a place to start the attack from.

'Lord,' Grigori's metallic voice rasped through the vox-bead in Amit's ear. 'May we speak?'

Grigori had battled beside Amit for decades, since the days of the old Legion; they were friends. The formal nature of his request spoke volumes. Amit sighed, steeling himself for what was to come. He turned around, seeing the Dreadnought lifting a generator into place at the south-west emplacement.

‘Speak your mind.’

‘Why are we building defences?’ In his first life, Grigori’s voice had been almost melodic. Litanies of battle had rolled from his tongue like the ballads of ancient Terra. Now, it was more akin to the grinding of rusted cogs, a dull machine noise filtered through a harsh amplifier to create a synthetic approximation of speech. ‘The orks are defeated. They are not looking for us. We must hunt them and kill them.’

‘What would you have us do? March into the forest until we happen across the greenskins?’

‘We waste time here.’

‘Perhaps. Perhaps not. But we do not know what else this world holds, and I will not be taken by surprise again.’ Amit was silent a moment. ‘There is something about this place, Grigori. It is the same as a hundred worlds whose earth we have trodden. Yet it is not. It is as different from them as we are from those winged beasts that attacked us. I would stay until I know why.’

‘As you say. Has there been any word from the Scouts?’

‘Sergeants Angelo and Raphael report negative contacts.’

‘What of Asmodel?’

‘His squad pushed beyond vox range a little over two hours ago.’

‘Age, it seems, catches up with even the fastest among us. He’s getting slow.’

Amit grinned, though the meaning behind his friend’s joke was not lost to him. ‘Asmodel’s rotation is due to bring him back within comms range in eight hours. Concentrate on finishing the defences before then.’

‘As the Blood wills it.’

Amit echoed Grigori’s words and turned his attention out towards the forest. Row upon row of towering trees stared back at him in challenge. Their silhouettes were like toothed blades cut from the night and planted in the earth as a warning. He felt his pulse quicken, his heart sending a tremor through his muscles, and just for a moment Amit thought he heard something growl.

Cassiel followed in Asmodel’s wake as they marched on, sweeping through the forest as fast as reasonable caution would allow. The steppe had given way to an undulating series of gorges and ravines. From what little chatter passed between the squad, Cassiel gathered that the world was as unforgiving as any of hundreds Asmodel had set foot upon. The rain continued to fall in relentless sheets, turning the ground into a soup of mud and flattened grass. Yet the burning ache in his thighs and leg muscles was easier to ignore than the growing sense of

frustration rising in his gut. He was tired of the hunt. He wanted to fight, to kill. He could feel his blood rumbling in his veins, growling like the thunder that kept them company from overhead.

Cassiel opened a secure comms channel to Melech. 'We could wander this Emperor-forsaken earth forever and never find the slightest trace of an ork.'

'Don't worry. If that's the case, Asmodel will find us something else to kill. He usually does.'

Cassiel caught a glimpse of the other Scout's crag-like shoulders as he moved past him on the left. Even carrying his heavy weapon and with Izail's corpse slumped over his shoulder, Melech had kept pace with the rest of the squad. If the additional burden caused him any discomfort, it didn't show. Cassiel grinned, remembering the many beatings Melech had given him in the training cages, and was glad it was only orks he faced.

'I think—'

'Clearing ahead. Seven metres,' Hamied whispered over the comm, interrupting Cassiel's reply.

'Cassiel.' Asmodel ordered the Scout to take point.

Subvocalising an acknowledgment, Cassiel edged forward. He hunched low, snaking across the last metre of ground on his belly. Working his way up a rocky incline, Cassiel teased aside a clump of ferns and peered into a clearing.

Dead orks lay everywhere. Piles of them, gutted like herd cattle, their entrails dragged from their chests, were strewn across snapped tree trunks and loose mounds of churned earth. Blood spatter and ropes of viscera hung on long weeds and the lower portions of the surrounding trees like morbid dew.

'Report.' Asmodel's voice crackled over the vox-bead in Cassiel's ear.

'Orks, brother-sergeant. Dozens of them,' Cassiel whispered, trusting his throat mic pick up the subtle vibrations in his vocal cords. 'They've had their innards ripped out. No sign of survivors.'

'A trap?' The coldness in Hamied's voice sounded even more dispassionate over the comm feed.

'Perhaps. It's not unheard of for isolated ork units to devolve into infighting. They could be waiting for us to investigate the bodies,' suggested Melech.

'I hadn't thought orks subtle enough for subterfuge.'

Hamied snarled in amusement at Cassiel's remark. 'Assume your prey to be smarter than you. You'll live longer.'

'Enough.' The irritation in Asmodel's voice was plain. 'Cassiel, take a closer look.'

Cassiel moved forward a few metres, sifting through the barbed bush of the undergrowth and looking from tree to tree. Fist-sized lizards scuttled over the ork corpses, pulling off morsels of meat with tearing bites. Shimmering birds sat perched just above head-height, secure in the relative anonymity afforded them by their natural camouflage. If the orks were waiting for them, they were showing uncharacteristic patience. ‘No visible threats.’

‘Melech, keep us covered from the treeline. Hamied, circle around from the north-east. Cassiel, with me.’

A series of affirmations chirped over the comms in response to Asmodel’s orders.

Cassiel slithered down the incline into the clearing and came up into a crouch, letting his bolt pistol lead his eyes around the devastation.

To his right, Asmodel paced into the open, his own weapon still holstered. ‘It’s clear. Fall in.’

At Asmodel’s order Hamied and Melech appeared in the clearing, the latter still carrying Izail’s body.

‘No sign of plasma burns or fragmentation damage.’ Hamied prodded an ork corpse with his boot, disturbing a swarm of flies.

Cassiel stooped to pick up a handful of crude shell casings. ‘Trace heat. These were fired within the last hour.’

‘Defensive fire. Whatever killed these orks wasn’t using a gun,’ Melech said grimly.

‘Melech, I want a body count,’ Asmodel snapped, and stooped to examine a set of deep tracks. ‘Hamied, what do you make of these?’

‘Looks like some sort of beast. But not an ork, they’re too deep.’ Hamied pressed his hand into the impression. ‘And they’re too small to have been made by one of their war-beasts.’

‘Here.’ Cassiel knelt at the opposite side of the clearing.

‘What is it?’ asked Asmodel.

‘Ork spoor.’

‘Are you sure?’ Asmodel sprang to his feet, his voice eager.

‘Yes, but not many. Half a dozen at most.’

‘Tracks go this way.’ Hamied pushed past Cassiel to take a closer look. ‘Looks like they broke off from whatever was attacking them.’

‘Tag this location, we’ll pick up the trail of whatever else was here later.’ Asmodel’s lips twisted into a feral smile. ‘It’s past time our blades tasted ork.’

Manakel turned the pauldron over in his hands. Deep scars ran the length of the ceramite plating and a ragged puncture wound shone raw where something had pierced the armour all the way through. Whatever had killed Lahhel had been formidable.

‘Rest by His side, brother.’ Manakel knelt, placing the pauldron next to the rest of Lahhel’s remains. A severed head and a hand still clutching a bolt pistol were all that was left of the Assault Marine. ‘By the Blood, I will avenge you.’ Even as the words left Manakel’s lips he doubted them. He had uttered the same sentiment twice before in the last handful of hours. Once to honour Lucifus, whose headless corpse he’d found slumped over a fallen branch, his breastplate peeled open and his innards eaten away. The second time had been after he’d found scattered armour fragments and gobbets of flesh. Only by ingesting small samples of tissue and allowing his preomnor gland to analyse their biochemical structure had he identified the body as that of Oradiel.

Manakel growled as he dwelt on his brothers’ deaths. He could not allow his promises to be empty. Rising to his feet, he looked around the forest in search of something to rend. An army of sentinel-like trees sat still in the wind. They were the same as the hundreds of others he’d marched between in his journey through the forest, towering spears of nature whose needled branches obscured the sky. They stood at peace while the world raged around them. Manakel fixed the nearest of them with a murderous stare. ‘I will burn you to ash.’ The tree did not move, it did not quiver. Its smooth bark remained a passive canvas, mocking the Flesh Tearer.

Manakel roared, flicking the activation stud on his chainsword and charging the tree. He swung out with a double-handed grip, burying the blade in the trunk. The weapon’s adamantium teeth snarled as they chewed through the wood, spitting splinters of bark over Manakel’s armour. Screaming in hate, he tore the blade free, chopping downwards with the reverse stroke. Again and again he repeated the action, carving deep scars into the tree. ‘Fall!’ Manakel growled through gritted teeth. Discarding his sword, he threw a barrage of punches, hammering his fists into the trunk. Each crashing blow left behind deep craters in the bark but brought the tree no closer to toppling. Still he kept punching, oblivious to the sound of his knuckles cracking. He hit the tree again, this time following up with a thunderous head-butt. The blow sent a crack arcing up the length of the trunk, and staggered Manakel, dropping him to his knees and bringing him to his senses. ‘Emperor grant me peace.’ Manakel mouthed the

words between laboured breaths.

But the Emperor was not listening.

A wooden spear whistled past Manakel's face, breaking his reverie and planting itself in the ground just beyond Lahhel's remains.

He growled, standing as he turned to face his aggressor. A single human stood twenty paces from him. Confusion strangled the worst of Manakel's rage as he studied the man. He couldn't have been more than thirty Terran years old, and was clothed in a green-brown tabard made from the rugous skin of some beast. Bird skulls and an assortment of small bones hung from the man's neck on a band of woven vine. Slabs of dense muscle covered his frame, coloured by crude tattoos and markings. Though impressive, the warrior's stature was not beyond the limits of a human's normal physical tolerance; there was no evidence of gene-bulking or other enhancement. He would not have had the strength to tear apart Lahhel or the others.

'Leave me, and you may live,' Manakel barked, uninterested in wasting time.

The warrior responded with anger, bellowing a challenge in a tongue Manakel had never heard before, and jutting his jaw forward like a primate, spitting on the ground to emphasise his point.

'Do not pick a fight you cannot win, barbarian.' Manakel felt his muscles bunch in anticipation.

The warrior shouted again, and threw another spear.

Manakel snarled as his eyes followed the weapon. The warrior did not mean to miss this time. Manakel let the weapon strike his vambrace. The spear clattered to the ground, its flint tip shattering against his armour. Manakel could feel his blood simmering beneath his skin like the magma of a volcano. He would rip the contemptible human limb from limb. He took a step forward and stopped, calming himself. The man was irrelevant. He needed to find the rest of the squad, to avenge his brothers. 'Show me. Show me who is responsible for this and you may yet live.' Manakel's voice was like the crack of a furnace as he indicated Lahhel's corpse.

The warrior began to bray and howl, drawing a set of blades and charging.

'Death, then.' Manakel held his ground, unmoving for the three breaths it took the human to close within ten paces. Then in one fluid motion he drew his combat knife and threw it. The blade struck the man square in the chest, flipping him head over heels and tearing through his back. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Freshly spilled blood scented the air, greeting Manakel like the familiar smell

of an old friend. He snorted and took a calming breath. He would not allow the man's weakling cruor to stir his pulse. Manakel was about to turn back to Lahhel when a deafening cacophony of war cries resounded from all around him.

A horde of barbarians, dressed in the same garb as the one he'd just slain, rushed Manakel from all sides. He counted almost a hundred as he brought up both arms to protect his face from the hail of spears flung towards him.

Lahhel. They were after Lahhel. The idea sprang unbidden into Manakel's mind, bypassing all conscious thought and strangling any semblance of restraint he had left. 'You will not take him!' Manakel snarled, advancing. He would have his vengeance. 'I will kill you all. I will hunt down your mothers and slay your sons. I will end your heathen bloodline and drown your miserable world in blood.'

Spitting litanies of hate, the Flesh Tearer broke into a sprint, charging towards the largest group of attackers. He barrelled into them, smashing apart their formation in a violent instant. He shouldered men aside, smashed others from their feet with powerful backhands and crushed the fallen beneath his boots. Each punishing blow cracked bone and ended a life. Manakel was oblivious to their screams, unable to hear anything but the roar of his heart. He snarled, relishing the taste of the barbarians' blood as it splashed across his face and washed into his mouth.

'To live is to kill. To live for the kill is to be of the Blood.'

Until that moment Chaplain Zophal's sermon had been lost on Manakel. He grinned in mad ecstasy, oblivious to the crude clubs that battered his warplate like hail and the slashing cuts that opened his cheeks and forehead. Manakel continued to kill. Splaying his fingers, he tore them through the barbarians' bodies with the same savagery that a chainblade cut into flesh. With unrelenting vigour he eviscerated and smashed, killing and killing again. The dead piled up around him until he stood knee-deep in a mire of blood and dismemberment. Still he didn't stop, didn't slow. Picking up the bodies of the dead, he hurled them at those who tried to run. None escaped his wrath.

Tamir watched in disbelief as the giant butchered its way through the war party. Never had he seen something so large move so swiftly. It was fluid, like running water, striking with enough force to shatter rock. Yet its hide was harder than any stone he had ever encountered. How could he kill something that no spear could pierce and no blade could cut?

Tamir growled, angered by the weakness stirring in his gut. He had found the

other crimson giants dead where they lay, mauled and shredded by the beasts he'd hunted since childhood. This giant would die too, even if he had to throttle it with his bare hands.

Ra'd had been a fool to challenge the giant to single combat. The upstart warchief had wanted the glory of the kill for himself. His impetuous pride and infantile beliefs had cost the lives of every warrior under his totem. Tamir looked down at the blood-soaked grass, feeling it turn wet under his feet. Such things could not go unavenged.

Drawing his blade across the muscle of his chest, Tamir prayed to the mountain for strength, and prepared to lead his own war party against the giant. He stepped forward, but felt a hand around his arm. He snarled, angered by the disrespect, and turned to find Abbas staring up at him. The elder's eyes were moon-wide in a mixture of fear and admiration. Tamir pulled his arm free and glared at the old man, his ire fading as quickly as it had come. Had it been anyone else, he would have thought age had robbed them of courage, and struck them down as a coward. But Abbas had proved the strength of his heart on more occasions than any Tamir had fought beside. The elder's courage was beyond question.

The venerable war chief clasped the god-talisman around his neck and bid Tamir stay his wrath. 'When the past takes leave of our memory and returns to greet us, we must still the present. We must allow the past to speak with our dreams, so that together they may form our future.'

Tamir was only half listening, his attention fixed on the elder's talisman. He turned his gaze to the giant, finding the same two-headed bird staring back at him from its chest.

The orks outnumbered them four to one. But they were injured, disorganised. Cassiel could smell their foul blood as it seeped from fresh wounds. He listened as they argued in guttural bursts that sounded more like weapons fire than any language. Cassiel grinned darkly. He and his brothers would kill half of the orks before the greenskins even realised the battle had begun. The thought brought with it a warming rush of adrenaline. Cassiel relished the sensation, feeling his muscles twitch in anticipation, his mouth salivating at the thought of impending slaughter. He rolled his shoulders loose and redoubled his grip on his blade, savouring the metallic feel of the haft as he squeezed his fingers together, tightening each in turn. His heartbeat quickened as he shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, his body urging him to go forward, to attack. His mouth twisted

into a snarl of pleasure. This was what it was to be a child of the Blood. To feel truly alive only as you prepared to take the lives of others.

‘Stand ready.’

Cassiel subvocalised an affirmative to Asmodel. He was unable to speak, his teeth locked tight against one another, his mouth awash with saliva. The moment of bloodshed was so close he could almost taste the orks’ vitae.

‘Kill them.’

Snarling like a beast, Cassiel was moving before Asmodel finished the sentence. He lunged from behind a tree to drive his knife through the neck of the nearest greenskin. The ork spasmed through its death throes. Blood gushed from the wound, soaking Cassiel’s arm in warm, arterial fluid. ‘Filth,’ he cursed. The other orks reacted quicker than he expected, opening fire, spitting shells from their crude cannons in a wild hail. Cassiel pulled the dying ork to him, using it as a meat shield. The ork’s body shuddered under numerous impacts as the ork weapons carved away chunks of muscle and bone. Cassiel pressed his bolt pistol to the ork’s spine and blasted a hole in its torso. Forcing the nose of his pistol through the exposed innards, he returned fire. His first shot clipped the closest of the orks in the midriff, cleaving a chunk of meat from its side. Grunting in frustration, Cassiel adjusted his aim, shooting the ork in the head and blowing its brains over the face of the one beside it. Distracted, the other greenskins’ shots flew wide, churning up the undergrowth to Cassiel’s left. The Scout didn’t waste the opportunity, using the brief respite to release the ork’s corpse and throw himself behind a fallen tree trunk.

‘Melech!’ Cassiel had to shout to be heard over the bark of weapons fire. Wood splinters and shell fragments showered him as the orks resumed firing, blazing away at his cover with reckless eagerness. ‘I’m pinned.’

‘Keep your head down.’ Melech dropped his weight through his knees, bracing himself as his heavy bolter roared into life.

Cassiel felt his pulse quicken as the weapon belched rounds, each thundering shot as silence compared to the beating of his heart.

‘Move, now!’

On Melech’s word, Cassiel sprang up and over the tree trunk. The orks who’d fired on him were gone, reduced to a pinkish mist by the heavy bolter. To his right, Asmodel finished dispatching two more of the greenskins. The sergeant snarled and stamped his boot down onto a wounded ork’s head as it tried to rise, crushing its skull into the ground. The other died to a burst from his bolt pistol, its torso coming apart even as it swung a rusted cleaver towards Asmodel’s neck.

Nearby, Hamied was straddling the chest of the largest ork. The hulking greenskin's right arm was pinned, the Scout's blade buried up to the hilt. Its left arm finished above the elbow, the bicep reduced to a ragged mess of fused flesh by a point-blank bolt round. Hamied bellowed an incoherent stream of curses as he hammered his fists into the ork's skull. Blood and clumps of brain matter spattered Hamied's face and chestplate as he beat the greenskin to death.

'Hamied!'

Hamied ignored Cassiel. His blood was up, making him oblivious to the pair of armoured orks closing in on him, and to the energy round that tore through his shoulder and burned away the flesh of his cheek.

'Hamied! Cassiel opened up on full auto, emptying an entire clip at the orks. The explosive rounds sparked as they collided with the plates of metal the greenskins had hammered into their flesh. 'Emperor damn you, Hamied. Move!' Cassiel tried a final time to reach the other Scout, and threw a grenade at the approaching orks.

Hamied turned his head, foam riming his mouth. He growled, enraged to be denied his slaughter. His pupils were nuggets of coal, lost in a crimson furnace as they tracked the grenade. He moved at the last moment, rolling off the ork and dragging its bulk over him as the explosive detonated. Flame washed over him, the stench of cooked flesh choking the air as the ork's skin bubbled away.

The armoured orks were blasted from their feet, landing in bloodied heaps of flesh and gristle. Lethal clusters of steel pellets and shrapnel ripped through their armour and bodies, shredding their internal organs. One of the orks refused to die. It grunted with pained effort as it tried to rise.

Cassiel stared coldly at the greenskin. Blood seeped from innumerable wounds and its left leg had been reduced to a stump.

'Xenos filth doesn't know when to die.' Cassiel pressed his boot on the ork's back, pushing it into the dirt. 'Sanguinius savage your wretched soul,' he spat, firing a single round through the ork's skull. Warm blood splashed over him as the greenskin's head exploded. He looked for a fresh target but his attention became fixed on the thick blood as it dripped from his boot to mix with the wet earth underfoot. His eyes followed a narrowing line of the ork's arterial fluid, until it vanished, no longer distinguishable from the mud. Cassiel crouched down, his fingers straying to where the blood had been. He opened a comm-channel to Hamied. 'Do you ever wonder, brother, how much blood a world can drink before its seas run red and its continents become little more than scabs baked beneath the sun?'

A raucous squawk drowned out Hamied's reply. Cassiel rose, weapon raised, searching for the source of the noise. It came again, a shrill call that sent the birds flitting from the trees and the remaining three orks bolting from cover.

'An angel's wrath cannot be outrun.' Hamied was moving, pacing after the greenskins and pumping a stream of rounds into their backs as they fled. The Scout appeared to have regained his composure, but a thin line of saliva still trickled from his mouth.

The bark of Hamied's bolt pistol gave way to a thunderous pounding, the quickening step of something far larger than the Scouts. Cassiel kept panning, shifting his gaze from tree to brush, east to west as he sought a target.

'Perhaps the greenskins had the right idea,' Melechk joked, clearing a measure of phlegm from his mouth as the ground began to tremble.

The rhythmic pounding grew louder as the unseen threat grew nearer. Whatever was coming for them, it was crashing through the forest with enough force to tear the towering trees from their roots, snapping their trunks like kindling.

'East! It comes from the east,' cried Hamied.

'Form up, assault line.' Asmodel had to shout to be heard.

The four Scouts deployed in a staggered line with just enough space between them to prevent a well-placed grenade from killing them all at once. Cassiel ejected the clip from his bolt pistol and slammed in a fresh one. Hamied fixed his knife to his gun and drew another blade from a scabbard on his back. Melechk tightened his grip on his heavy bolter and braced himself as best he could in the slick earth. Asmodel tested the weight of a cleaver he had liberated from an ork corpse.

'Hold!' The sergeant bellowed the order as the forest was rent apart in a hail of splinters and displaced earth.

Cassiel shielded his eyes as fragments of tree split his skin and ruined his carapace. When the timber-fog cleared, he found himself staring at the brown hide of a gargantuan beast. It was impossibly large, bigger even than the Thunderhawk that had delivered them from orbit. Its chest and underbelly were armoured with slabs of bone. It had no forelimbs, but its feet ended in barbed talons and a muscled tail extended out of sight behind it.

The beast paused, huffing breaths through the lines of conical nostrils studding its long, reptilian snout. It snorted, opening its mouth to display a row of barbed incisors.

'What in the name of Baal is that?' Cassiel asked.

The beast snarled, emitting another torturous roar before loping towards the Scouts.

‘Worry about that later. Just kill it!’ Asmodel growled, unleashing a hail of rounds.

Cassiel squeezed his bolt pistol’s trigger with enough force to crack a man’s neck, as though the pressure applied determined the weapon’s potency. To his right, Melechk and Hamied opened fire, the bark of the former’s heavy bolter competing with the pounding footsteps of the beast as it bore down on them. The mass-reactive shells did little more than mottle the beast’s hide, impotent against the dense layer of natural armour.

‘Its hide’s too tough.’

‘Aim for its eyes.’

Melechk adjusted his aim, sending a burst of rounds into the beast’s face.

This second burst met with more success, stitching across the beast’s snout to tear through its left eye. The beast reeled, crying out.

‘My fury shall be unceasing!’ Melechk growled, advancing on the beast as it tried to shield its face.

‘Melechk! Hold the line,’ Asmodel shouted over the din of the heavy bolter, but the other Scout wasn’t listening. Melechk’s blood was up, his mouth twisted into a sneer.

Melechk kept firing, advancing, driving the beast back. Then, with a resounding *clack*, his weapon racked empty.

The beast let out a rumbling breath, turning its head back towards the Scouts, its single remaining eye fixed on Melechk.

‘Sanguinius feast on your heart!’ Melechk had just enough time to spit a curse before the beast’s tail whipped round and slammed into him. The blow shattered the heavy bolter, smashed Melechk’s breastplate and hurled him thirty metres backwards through a tree.

‘Fall back!’ Asmodel unhooked a clutch of grenades and tossed them at the beast. The explosives detonated in front of its face, drawing a roar as its skin blistered. ‘Go, now!’

The blast had disorientated the beast but Cassiel knew the flesh wounds would do little to slow it. Breaking into a run, he tried to raise the wounded Scout on the vox.

‘Melechk?’

‘There’s blood in me yet, neophyte,’ Melechk rasped, clearly injured. ‘But I might need some help getting out of here.’

‘I have you,’ Hamied’s voice cut in over the vox.

‘The gorge to the south-east... The beast won’t find footing,’ said Melechk as Hamied hauled him up.

‘Agreed. We must draw it out.’ Asmodel’s voice was like steel. Even a tactical retreat did not sit well with the sergeant.

Cassiel kept running. He had not trained for this. Absent were the staggered fields of covering fire, the ordered displacement and the possibility of counter-attack. This was a flat-out sprint, driven by instinct and a primal need to survive. Wide leaves and whip-like branches slapped against his face as he drove through the forest. He could hear Melechk to his left. The other Scout’s breath was coming in rasping, irregular bursts. The beast’s tail must have smashed his ribs, collapsing a lung. He had lost sight of Asmodel, the sergeant’s greater experience allowing him to maintain an enviable pace, even over such uneven ground. Hamied was just behind him, though he suspected the other Scout’s progress was slowed by his desire to stay and fight rather than fatigue.

Cassiel picked up his pace, pushing his muscles beyond the searing acid that made them beg for rest as the beast drew closer. It felt as if it was almost on top of them. He could smell its pungent breath, hear the dull boom of its monstrous heart. He stumbled a moment, breaking stride as he realised it was his own heart he was hearing, beating in his chest with all the power Sanguinius had gifted him. Like the beast, Cassiel hungered for the kill. He shared with it a thirst that could only be sated with the blood of others.

Cassiel risked a glance over his shoulder.

‘Damn it,’ he swore, slipping on a patch of wet leaves and falling off an embankment. The steep gradient stole his footing. He slid down through wet mud that pooled through his fingers and defied his attempts to find purchase. Striking out with his knife, Cassiel tried to arrest his fall but the ground came away and he continued to tumble. Head over heels he fell, spinning down through scree and loose foliage. Pain lanced into his ribs as he collided with a protruding rock. He felt his leg go numb as a thick branch broke against it. Something hit his head. He snarled, registering a flash of movement before darkness took him.

Banks of luminators sunk into the earthworks and the lamps studding the wings of the corralled gunships burned on full beam, piercing the darkness with harsh blades of light. Zophal stood in the shadows of the *Mortis Wrath*’s doorway and stared into the dawn-bright night. Like all members of the Adeptus Astartes, he

had no need of artificial light. Even if his augmented eyes had not enabled him to see in complete darkness, the auto-senses built into his helm would have been more than sufficient. The illumination of the camp was not about seeing, it was about being seen. Amit wanted the orks, and whatever else lurked in the forest, to know where they were.

Depressing the locking stud, the Chaplain stepped down the assault ramp. The jet-black door hissed closed behind him, sealing the eleven members of his Death Company inside the Storm Eagle's hull. The eleven were further secured by heavy mag-harnesses, the type normally used to shackle Dreadnoughts during transit. Stimm injectors fed their veins an elaborate mix of specially engineered muscle relaxants that would help keep them sedated until they were needed. The Death Company were a blade without a sheath. They were of no use in defence. It was a concept as alien to them as the world whose sodden earth Zophal stood on. The frenzied cadre of black-armoured warriors would sooner kill their brethren than occupy a trench line.

Zophal removed his skull helm, turning it over to regard its ebon features. Two blood drops had been worked into it below the left eye, one for each of its previous wearers. The moist night air was refreshing on his skin after the recycled atmosphere of his armour. He stood for a moment, watching as stray raindrops filled the recesses of his helm.

‘Something troubling you, Chaplain?’

Zophal raised his head. ‘Trouble is the curse of my order, captain. And you? What dark thoughts bid you seek me out?’

Barakiel grinned. ‘I see the air has done nothing for your humour, Zophal.’

‘Without my mask,’ the Chaplain began, ‘you look upon the face of a brother and so you take me to be one. But I have walked in madness's shadow for too long, captain. So this too is just another mask.’

Barakiel stared into the coals of Zophal's eyes and bit back a reply. He was in no mood for the Chaplain's obtuse sermons. ‘We should not be here, Zophal.’

‘That is for Amit to decide.’

Barakiel sighed. ‘I have spoken with him. But he will not listen. He is hellbent on driving the orks from this world.’

‘You would allow them to gain a foothold here?’

‘Of course not,’ Barakiel growled, and took a breath, letting the ire drain from his face before continuing. ‘But this planet is a death world.’ He motioned with upturned palms. ‘Even the air is toxic. There are countless thousands of worlds of more use to the Imperium. Better we blast this accursed place from orbit and

be done with it than bleed the company further.’

‘Perhaps. But perhaps we, of all the Emperor’s servants, should be less willing to cast judgement based on savage appearances.’

Barakiel ignored the remark. ‘Even Grigori has counselled Amit against this stubbornness. Will you not speak with him?’

‘If the Blood wills it. Otherwise...’ Zophal turned from Barakiel, locking his helm back over his head. ‘I shall not.’

The Chaplain left Barakiel by the side of the Storm Eagle and walked to the forward firing pits. Flesh Tearers were warriors, butchers all. Even under normal circumstances, they made poor custodians and watch was not an easy discipline for them to maintain. But having lost so many of their brothers during planetfall, and without a target, something to kill in return, the company was struggling to stay focused. Clipped readiness reports and snarled vox exchanges hinted at the tension that assailed the camp like an invisible foe. The sooner battle was joined, the sooner such anxiety could be washed away, cleansed by the purity of combat. Zophal coiled his rosarius beads around his fist. Until then, it fell to him to ensure the disquiet in their minds did not grow, that the Rage was not allowed room to breathe in their thoughts.

He walked the defensive line in measured strides, neither quick enough to draw attention nor slow enough to seem without purpose. In battle, he would have focused his ministrations on captains and first sergeants, giving them the fortitude of faith needed to lead. But under the cruel lash of peace, all the Flesh Tearers were in need of his guidance. Zophal stopped by every dugout and barricade, checking the battle readiness of every warrior. He led each of them in turn through the catechism of observance and the rite of temperance, ensuring their strength of mind and purity of spirit.

Zophal finished his rounds in the shadow of the *Serrated Angel*. Underneath its port-side wing sat a fire-blackened patch of earth, a dozen upended chainswords marking the perimeter of a crude duelling arena. ‘*Words are but chaff, blown away in the whirlwind of fury, forgotten in anger’s thrall.*’ The Chaplain tightened his grip on his rosarius as he approached the arena. There would always be Flesh Tearers who needed more than prayer to temper their bloodlust.

Gabriel from Third Tactical and Anael from Seventh Assault stood in the centre of the circle. Their chainswords sparked in the gloom as they crashed against one another, the roar of the weapons’ adamantium teeth barely audible over the guttural snarls coming from the two combatants. Gabriel loomed over

Anael, using his size and weight advantage to deliver a series of hammering strikes. But what the Assault Marine lacked in stature, he made up for with experience. He parried each of Gabriel's blows in quick order, turning aside the larger warrior's blade with ease, before thrusting through with a sharp counter-attack.

Zophal smiled darkly as Anael's blade scored across Gabriel's pauldron. The Assault Marine's technique was near perfect. Yet he would still lose. The arena was no place for finesse. Enraged, Gabriel was tireless. His thunderous attacks would eventually find a way through Anael's defence, and a glancing blow would be all it would take to shatter Anael's calm. Driven into a fury, the Assault Marine's poise would fall away. He would meet Gabriel head-on and the larger warrior would bludgeon him into submission.

'Our wrath shall know no end, our swords no peace.' Zophal mouthed the axiom as Gabriel knocked Anael to the ground. The Rage would win out, it always did.

'Brother-sergeant.' Zophal turned to Menadel. The sergeant stood to the side of the arena, a storm shield locked to one gauntlet, a power sword grasped in the other. A thin line of fulgurant energy pulsed along the blade's length. Like its wielder, the weapon was ever ready. Menadel was an excellent swordsman, a master of personal combat. If any warrior lost control or succumbed to the Rage, then he would intervene. Only one Flesh Tearer had ever died in the arena under Menadel's stewardship.

'Chaplain.' Menadel dipped his head in acknowledgment, his eyes never leaving Anael and Gabriel.

'Apothecary Iezalel has been required to administer treatment to five of our brothers in the last two hours,' said Zophal.

'They remain combat ready.' Menadel's voice was even but the tension in his jaw told of the emotion suppressed beneath the sergeant's measured exterior. *'You doubt my diligence?'*

'If I did, brother-sergeant, you would know.'

Menadel smiled and rubbed his jaw, remembering the last time he and Zophal had come to blows. *'Many died in the descent, Chaplain. Our brothers are angry.'*

'Yet that is what it means to be a Space Marine. To fall from the heavens as fire and wrath. To bring death or to greet it.'

'But we are without a foe. There is no enemy to take our vengeance upon, nothing upon which to bloody our blades.'

‘Take solace in the fact you yet live, Menadel. For you, vengeance is only a matter of when. The fallen were not so fortunate.’

‘Sanguinius honour them.’ Menadel pressed his fist against his breastplate in salute.

Zophal glanced at the ragged scars covering Menadel’s armour. There were few within the Chapter who could have inflicted such a battering on the sergeant. ‘How long since Master Amit left?’ he asked.

The deep furrows and ragged crevices covering Amit’s armour appeared like the fanged maws of beasts in the flickering light of the trench’s luminator. A skilled remembrancer could have retold Amit’s entire history from the battle scars adorning his warplate. Zophal slowed his pace as he approached from behind the Chapter Master.

‘I am still here, Chaplain, and my anger remains in check.’ Amit spoke without turning around, his gaze fixed forward on the forest’s edge.

‘Yes. It seems we have Menadel to thank for that.’ Zophal crested a mound of compacted earth to step level with the Chapter Master.

‘He’ll make Captain of the Blade one day.’

‘If you don’t kill him first.’

Amit grinned.

The pair stood a moment in silence.

‘You have spoken to Barakiel?’ Amit asked.

‘I have.’

Amit grunted, well aware of Barakiel’s position. ‘The war in the Sakkara sector will still be there when we are finished here.’

‘There will always be war, brother. It falls to you to ensure that we will always be able to fight.’

Amit fixed his gaze on the middle-distance. ‘There is violence in this world, Chaplain.’

‘Those of the Blood flow to violence...’

‘As rain runs to a stream,’ Amit concluded.

Manakel knelt by Lahhel’s remains and sank his teeth into another barbarian corpse. Blood flooded his mouth and cooled the itching at the back of his throat. The battle had brought him release. The slaughter had been a glorious expression of the anger burning in his veins. But he had come close to the darkness, too close, almost losing himself to the Rage. Manakel shivered as a line of blood

spilled over his lips. It was all he could do to keep its shadow from his mind. It hovered at the edge of his consciousness, whispering promises of absolution. It would steal away his pain, his doubt. It would armour him in wrath and lend him the strength to kill any who stood in his way. Manakel felt his pulse slow and the blood-lust inch away as he took another mouthful from the dead barbarian's veins. He would resist the urge to embrace the Rage, but there was no denying the Thirst everything it wanted.

Tamir grimaced as the scent of filth and rotten flesh assailed his nostrils. Even the great wind that passed through the valleys and stirred the lakes from their beds could not have lifted the stench of death from the air. He watched the crimson giant as it feasted on Ra'd's war party. The grim spectacle reminded him of the Hunt's End ceremony, a rite he had undertaken more than a dozen times. When a great beast was slain, his tribe would gather to feast on its flesh and drink of its blood. In doing so, they honoured its spirit and added its strength to their own. Tamir grunted in approval, satisfied that Ra'd's warriors were being shown such respect.

Manakel growled. Another of the Emperor-damned barbarians. This one was more muscled than the last, though he carried no weapon. A fresh scar shone pink across his breast. Too neat to be battle-won, the wound seemed ritualistic, a display of intent or badge of oath. He snorted in derision: scars should be earned, not gifted like decorative trinkets. Tearing the head from the corpse he was drinking, he hurled it at the barbarian. The man offered no defence, letting it strike him.

Tamir felt his shoulder crack as the head struck him. The blow smashed him down. He groaned, spitting curses as he pushed himself up. Abbas had told him to remain still, to show courage and be unflinching. He glared at the giant, struck by its resemblance to a hunting dog, its lips and lower face stained pink by gore. If Abbas was wrong and this giant was nothing more than a savage, a beast, then he would haunt the elder's dreams from the afterlife.

Manakel bunched his fists, annoyed by the barbarian's continued presence. 'Emperor damn you. Leave me be.' He advanced on the warrior, a contemptuous scowl etched on his face. A dark bruise had spread over the man's shoulder and

chest, and his left eye was swollen shut. Killing him was barely worth the effort. Yet there was something else, something that gnawed at Manakel. Something that was trying to make itself known through the fog clouding his mind.

Tamir knew no fear. He had stared down a herd of ranalocx, and survived an encounter with the monstrous karnrous. Yet in the shadow of the crimson giant, it took all of his courage to remain calm. Every beat of his heart came as a welcome surprise as he listened to its laboured breathing. Keeping his head low, Tamir risked a glance up. A battered eagle stared down at him from the giant's chest. Dried blood drifted like snowflakes from between its metallic feathers. The giant's hide was not the smooth cowl he had expected. Deep grooves broke the surface into distinct parts, some ridged while others were studded with angular fastenings. Beneath the crimson of the giant's hide, patches of grey and silver shone like fresh scars.

Manakel stopped within striking distance of the barbarian. The man's pulse was steady, his brow free from sweat. Manakel growled. He was a child of Sanguinius, death incarnate, and this man was arrogant enough to be unafraid. Manakel snarled, the urge to snap the man's neck, to pull his head from his shoulders and bathe in warm arterial fluid rising in his gut like hot magma. The Flesh Tearer reached out to crush him...

...then paused, for the first time noticing the metal talisman dangling from the man's outstretched hand.

Tamir let the giant take the talisman from him, and touched his head to the earth in respect.

Manakel turned the piece of metal over in his hand. Its finish had been distorted by age and wear, but there was no mistaking the Imperial eagle, the sigil of the Emperor of Mankind. 'Where did you find this?' Manakel's tone was even but demanded answer.

The man looked up but said nothing.

'Where did you find...?' Manakel trailed off as hundreds of barbarians emerged from the forest around him, their hands crossed over their chests in a crude approximation of the aquila. 'What in the Emperor's name?'

Manakel's mouth hung open as yet more barbarians came into view. This

second wave marched in tight lines, four stretchers supported across their shoulders. Each stretcher was over four metres long, the struts made from a single waist-thick branch. Animal skins and wide leaves formed the beds of the stretchers, bound between the struts by knotted vines and bundles of rope-like plants.

Manakel's eye's followed the procession. 'Emperor...' He stared in disbelief at what the stretcher bearers were carrying. Pauldrons, vambraces, breastplates, chainswords, bolt pistols: the remains, weapons and armour of his squad. Manakel continued to watch as the barbarians set the stretchers down next to him. Grief turned to rage as he cast his eyes over what was left of the Flesh Tearers. Like Lahhel, they had been partially devoured, feasted upon by beasts.

At the beat of some unseen drum, the sea of barbarians parted, allowing a third group to move into the clearing. They brought with them bundles of wood and dried leaves, and began chanting in a soft murmur that grew to a crescendo, timed to peak as the drum was struck for a second time. Taking great care not to disturb the Flesh Tearers remains, they made a fire around the stretchers.

An aged barbarian, the oldest Manakel had seen so far, stepped towards him. The elder knelt and made the sign of the aquila, before turning away and shouting in a guttural tongue. 'Muk-da. Muk-da heti.' The cry was echoed by a thousand barbarians who knelt in unison, raising up their arms and bowing their heads to the earth.

For the first time since planetfall, Manakel was without anger. '*Where one remains, wrath endures.*' He let the words strangle his grief; there would be time to reconcile the death of his squad later.

Manakel cast a cold gaze over the thousand supplicant warriors. It was not unusual for less evolved civilisations to worship Space Marines as gods, yet the sentiment made him uneasy. Such admiration had given rise to a pride that birthed a civil war more terrible than any had dared contemplate. Even now, the full cost of Horus's treachery was still being counted. The Emperor's armies had won, but Manakel knew that for every world saved, a lifeless husk spun in shadow, entire generations consigned to spend their lives digging graves for the dead. Manakel hammered his fist against his chestplate, and folded his arms into the sign of the aquila.

The barbarians let out a cheer.

Manakel smiled. He was no more a god than any other Space Marine, but he would use the barbarians' beliefs to his advantage. He looked again at the rows of bowed heads and wondered how long their faith would last when they realised

he did not bring salvation, only death.

‘Uta.’ The elder turned to Manakel, interlocking his fingers and wriggling them as he cast his gaze to the stretchers.

Fire.

Destroyed by the ravages of battle or consumed by searing hate, all Flesh Tearers would burn. Manakel glanced at the funeral pyre and nodded.

The elder mumbled what sounded like a prayer, striking a set of stones together to light a tight bunch of grass reeds. He rose, proffering the torch to Manakel.

‘Wait.’ Manakel held up a hand. Stepping into the middle of the pyre, he allowed his gaze to settle on each set of remains in turn. Seraph would have had him strip the dead Flesh Tearers of their weapons and ammunition but Manakel had never shared his mentor’s tactical coldness. He could not bring himself to dishonour his brothers in such a fashion. The weapons would survive what flesh did not, he could return for them later. He took the ammunition, though, saving it from the fire and the tribesmen from their own ignorance.

‘Your duty is at an end, brothers.’ Manakel drew his knife across his palm and flicked a measure of blood over each of his fallen charges. ‘Death sealed by the Blood shall be the final death, a lasting rest.’ It would have been more fitting for Zophal or one of the other Chaplains to perform the rite, their skill as orators far greater than his. Manakel touched his fist to his pauldron in salute and stepped from the pyre. He hoped his words would be enough.

Taking the torch from the elder, Manakel set the bodies ablaze.

The barbarians remained on their knees as the pyre burned, breathing in the smoke as it wafted over them. Manakel knew that in some primitive cultures, fire was said to free a warrior’s spirit, that those who inhaled the smoke welcomed the spirit inside themselves, allowing it to live on through them. In return, they would be granted a portion of the deceased’s strength.

In spite of himself, Manakel drew in a long breath. ‘As the Blood is my shield, let my brothers be my sword.’

Water lapped at the edge of Cassiel’s hearing, stirring him. He opened his eyes, squinting through pain and in reaction to the bright light that stabbed down at him. Clear of the forest canopy, his aching bones were glad of the sun’s warmth. He sat up, shielding his eyes as he tried to blink the stupor from them. He stopped as a shadow fell over him, a bulky outline that resolved in a flash of crimson. Cassiel was driven onto his back, powerful hands locked around his

throat.

Training took over where instinct would have failed him.

Resisting the urge to pull away, Cassiel turned his head to the side, loosening the pressure on his carotid artery. The adjustment stopped him blacking out, buying him an extra few seconds to shirk his attacker. He reached up, grabbed hold of the attacker's hands and tried to prise them from his neck. But the attacker was too strong and their entire weight was bearing down on him. Cassiel arched his back, driving his head into the ground and away from the attacker. Still, the hands remained fixed around his throat. He kicked out in desperation, splashing up water as his legs sought something to strike. He felt a sharp pain and smelled the copper tang of his own blood as his attacker's fingers pierced the skin of his neck. A burning surge of adrenaline kept Cassiel focused as he realised his assailant didn't mean to choke him to death. They were trying to rip his head off. He reached up, finding his attacker's head. If he could just get enough leverage...

Something barrelled into his attacker, tearing them away.

Cassiel gasped, clutching his neck and rolling into a protective position, arms covering his head. He waited for a heartbeat, tensing, expecting a strike from above, before rolling away and springing to his feet.

Asmodel was wrestling with Melechk. The sergeant was snarling, saliva dripping from his mouth. His fingers were hooked like claws, his nails caked in blood. Cassiel touched a hand to his neck. 'Brother-sergeant...?' he said in disbelief.

'Stop... staring... and help me.' Melechk grimaced as he tried to subdue Asmodel, one muscled arm wrapped around the sergeant's throat.

Cassiel didn't react. Asmodel's treachery had done more damage than any blow ever could. Watching from the barbed towers above the aspirant fields, the sergeant had been a constant in Cassiel's life since he had been inducted into the Chapter. It was almost unthinkable that Asmodel could have tried to kill him. Cassiel was transfixed, lost in memory.

'In a universe of war, only the Chapter survives beyond the moment.' Chaplain Zophal began the baptismal with sombre resonance as one of the seminarians pulled the branding iron from the Reclusiam's brazier. *'Brotherhood and adamantium, both bonds that can be broken. Victory as fleeting as pain.'*

Cassiel winced as the seminarian pressed the glowing iron into the meat of his chest.

'But this...' Zophal paused, touching his hand to the serrated blade-shaped

scar on his breast. 'This you will carry with you until death. It will outlast you. It will burn in the annals of history long after your bones have become dust, and the battle cries of war have faded to whispered echoes.'

Asmodel growled and bit into Melechk's forearm. Melechk spat a pained curse, his grip loosening enough for Asmodel to drive his elbow up into his nose. He staggered backwards, blood spilling over his chest. Asmodel stepped after him, pulling a knife and ramming into the side of the Scout's throat. He tore it free, bellowing in triumph as blood fountained over his face.

Melechk's head flopped back on his neck like the cloth hood of a serf robe.

Cassiel stared into Melechk's eyes, his gaze drifting to the Chapter symbol on the dead Scout's breastplate as his body slumped down.

Cassiel's cry of anguish ground into a hateful snarl as he drew his blade and lunged at Asmodel.

The sergeant was too fast. Possessed of a frenzied speed, he caught Cassiel's attack, clamping his hand around his forearm with bone crunching force, and thundered his head into his face. Cassiel dropped his knife, barely recovering quickly enough to jam his forearm into Asmodel's, preventing the sergeant from stabbing him. He bent double as a knee drove into his chest, feeling his ribs break an instant before a hammer blow to his head sent him sprawling to the ground. Landing hard on the rocks of the riverbed, he folded his arms up over his head, defending against a stamping kick meant to kill him. Asmodel kicked again. And again. Each blow hammered into Cassiel's forearms and the meat of his shoulders. He roared in defiance; he would not die in the dirt. He willed the Rage to claim him, to give him the strength to rip Asmodel open and feast on his heart.

Hamied crept from the underbrush, clutching a thick branch. 'Enough!' Hamied swung the branch as Asmodel turned to face him. The waist-thick timber shattered as it connected with the sergeant's head.

The blow toppled Asmodel, breaking his cheekbone and eye socket. But the Rage would not let him yield to unconsciousness. Growling long and low, the sergeant pushed himself up onto all fours.

Hamied allowed no respite, kicking him as he tried to stand. The blow snapped Asmodel's head back, knocking him to the ground. His eyes remained wide, his body twitching as the bloodlust fuelling his veins willed him to rise. Hamied stamped on his knee, preventing it.

It took Cassiel three attempts to stumble to his feet. His arms were bruised black by the sergeant's assault. Hamied said something to him but he ignored it,

staggering through the stream to where a bolt pistol glinted in the sun.

‘Cassiel,’ Hamied moved towards him, ‘Stop.’

Cassiel spat a gobbet of blood from his mouth and checked the clip on the bolt pistol.

‘Brother, his life is not yours to take.’

Shaking with anger and exhaustion, Cassiel aimed the pistol at Asmodel’s head.

‘This is not his fault, brother.’ Hamied put himself between the gun and Asmodel, spreading his hands in a gesture of calm. ‘It is the Curse. We must honour the warrior Asmodel was. He will die, brother, but not by your hand. He deserves to die as he has lived, in service to the Chapter. You will not deny him that.’

‘And what of Melechk?’ Cassiel snarled. ‘What of *his* honour?’

‘He died performing his duty. He died to protect his brothers. To protect you.’ Hamied advanced on Cassiel, his temper on its last nerve. ‘Melechk’s honour is intact. We must take Asmodel to Chaplain Zophal.’ Hamied took a further half-step, careful not to make any sudden movements as he drew his knife. ‘Emperor willing, Zophal will clad Asmodel in the armour of death and allow him to shed the blood of our enemies one final time.’

Cassiel didn’t move, his finger poised on the trigger.

‘Brother...’ Hamied reversed the grip on his knife. ‘I will not let you take his life.’

‘Blood!’ Cassiel screamed in rage, and hurled the gun away. He fell to his knees, balling his fists and punching the earth until his knuckles flattened under the relentless impacts. He sought peace through pain, but his anger didn’t abate. He wanted to kill. He had to. He needed to. ‘*Sanguinius shape my being, redress my temperament, render me a reflection of your perfect form.*’ Cassiel muttered the prayer, his lips shivering. He repeated it again and again, letting the words slow his breathing and bring his trembling body to rest.

Hamied rested a hand on Cassiel’s shoulder. ‘Now, brother. Now you know what it is to seek vengeance.’

With thunderous staccato, the Flesh Tearers guns lit up the night.

The attack came from all sides. But instead of the green-skinned orks, the Flesh Tearers found themselves faced with a horde of savage creatures. Countless hundreds of beasts swept into the Flesh Tearers encampment as the planet sought to rid itself of the intruders. The Space Marines were like a thorn

in the flesh of the world that needed to be excised, ripped out. With snarling, snapping jaws and crushing limbs, it would expunge their taint.

A herd of bipedal beasts swarmed in from the north, their elongated heads snapping ferociously as they closed on the forward firing pits. The creatures died in droves, blown apart by disciplined bursts of bolter fire and vaporised by the shrill snap of lascannons. Still they poured towards the Flesh Tearers, loping over piles of their dead kin without pause, driven by instinct away from the lumbering beasts that followed at their backs. Each twice the height of a Space Marine, the larger beasts were all muscle and sinew. Agile, their hairless skin rippled as they pounced from the treeline to land among the firing pits, their faces fixed in a snarl as they killed with clubbing swipes of their clawed forelimbs.

‘Status?’ Amit barked into the comm as he eviscerated a heavy-set creature whose jaw ended in two oversized horns. The beasts’ leathered skin offered no protection from the Chapter Master’s chainfists, its weight and momentum driving it onto the churning blades, aiding its demise.

‘We’re surrounded,’ Mendel’s voice crackled back from inside the *Vengeance*. Amit had left the sergeant overseeing the defence. ‘All squads engaged and taking casualties but the line’s holding.’

Amit dropped to one knee as a warning sigil flashed on his display. Behind him, a repurposed heavy bolter stripped from one of the Storm Eagles opened fire, blasting apart a pair of the horned beasts. Amit felt his pulse quicken in time with the bark of the weapon. Pressing his fists into the earth, he fought the urge to rise up until the remote gun fell silent, its targeting laser returning negative contacts.

Flightless birds cloaked in mottled feathers assaulted the western defences. Sergeant Bieil and his assault squad met them with a wall of blazing promethium. Screeching, bald survivors ran on through the flames, their pinkish skin dripping from their bones. A second burst at close range incinerated them.

‘Back. Drive them back!’ Bieil bellowed over the roar of his flamer.

A dozen, two dozen, a hundred. Still the birds came, seemingly heedless of the death toll. The balance shifted as the flamers spat their last, their fuel tanks exhausted. With swift ferocity, the flock took its revenge. Long, dagger-beaks driven by piston-like necks shot forward to pierce the Flesh Tearers armour and pluck the blood-rich organs from their bodies.

To the south and east a stampede of squat creatures had barrelled their way past the outer perimeter, forcing Menadel to detonate the minefield. Those

directly above the frag mines exploded, their bulbous bodies coming apart in a shower of cooked meat. Others collapsed and died, their innards torn out by lethal payloads of shrapnel. The least fortunate of the creatures had been at the fringes of the minefield. Clipped by the hail of adamantium pellets released by the mines, their legs were ruined, leaving them to suffer and die on the ground.

‘Lord.’ Barakiel’s voice sounded strained over the vox.

Amit called up the feed from one of the pict-recorders studded around the encampment. A grainy image of the northern defences resolved and settled into the corner of his helmet display. Barakiel was attempting to hold the line. The remaining smaller beasts had sped past him, dropping into the trench line behind, leaving him embroiled in a bitter assault with several of the larger creatures.

‘Speak,’ Amit barked as he drove his chainfists into the abdomen of a snapping beast whose atrophied forelimbs pawed at his breastplate.

‘Asmodel’s squad have crossed into comms range.’

Amit relished the quickening sound of his pulse as his weapon churned through the beast’s innards, showering him in gore. Kicking its corpse from his blade, he sprinted towards another of the creatures and opened a channel to the Scouts. ‘Asmodel, report.’

‘Lord...’ Sustained las-fire had ionised the air, distorting the comms signal, leaving Cassiel’s voice to crackle over the vox in distorted snatches. ‘We located the orks... all dead... bring warning... beasts.’

Amit laughed, though his tone held no humour. ‘You have been blessed with understatement, Scout. How many are you?’

‘Brother Hamied and I are combat ready.’ The vox signal cleared up as Cassiel closed on Amit’s position. ‘Asmodel is in need of Zophal’s ministrations.’

Amit paused before replying, taking no notice of the dying creature at his feet. Asmodel had a will of iron. He was a bulwark of the Chapter, who had taught five decades of neophytes what it meant to control their bloodlust. Yet it seemed even he could not outlive the Curse. ‘The rite will have to wait,’ Amit’s voice was neutral. ‘Approach from our west. Assist Sergeant Bieil’s squad where you can.’

‘Understood. The Blood protects.’

Amit cut the vox feed and slammed his fist through the skull of another beast. He was in need of no protection. He was master of a thousand of the most savage warriors the universe had ever known. The fate of entire worlds rested in his hands. He would not surrender his Chapter to madness.

‘Blood begets blood,’ Amit roared as he ripped the jaw from a creature that had intended to devour him.

Anger burned through him, his limbs powered by a furnace of hatred, a dire self-loathing that could never be described with words. If death or madness were to be his only options he would make this world beg for his death. His wrath would know no master. He turned, presenting his front to a charging beast whose brow ended in a plate of reinforced bone. Slipping left an instant before the beast made impact, Amit grabbed its crenellated brow. The servos in his armour whined in protest as he tore the plate from the beast’s skull. The creature spasmed and died. Spitting a curse, Amit slammed his hands together, crushing it. He stared at his gauntlets, watching as the chunks of bone fell away. From beneath the crimson of his armour, the stain of history glared back at him, a wolf’s snarl ringing in his ears. Amit bunched his fists and roared again. He was vengeance and he was death, nothing more.

‘By Sanguinius’s might, you *will* hold!’ Zophal bellowed over the roar of bolter fire. He could feel the warriors around him straining against the Rage. Their desire to charge forward, to take the fight to the foe, was as tangible as the pistol barking in his hand. But they were all that stood between the herd of beasts and Barakiel’s squad. If forced to turn and deal with this new threat, the banner bearer would be overrun and the perimeter lost. ‘Hold!’ Zophal would not allow that to happen.

‘What about the damned?’ asked Tilonas. The Terminator’s power fist was thick with blood and viscera, a severed spine clasped between his fingers. ‘Why not release them?’

‘No. Their rage cannot be marshalled to defence,’ Zophal replied. ‘We must hold his line without them.’

‘Incoming!’ Drual motioned to the sky with his assault cannon, his other arm hanging limp at his side where a whipping blow from a beast’s tail had shattered armour and bone.

Zophal lifted his gaze. A pair of the four-winged beasts that had attacked them during their descent were swooping down from the clouds. ‘We are no easy meal,’ Zophal snarled. ‘Bring them death!’ The Chaplain’s crozius crackled as he activated its power cell and pointed to the avian beasts.

Drual’s assault cannon whined as it spun to firing speed, joined an instant later by Tilonas’s. The two Terminators opened fire, the barrels of their weapons burning hot as they spat an unceasing hail of shells towards the winged

creatures. The first of the avians came apart in a crimson mist, ripped asunder by the heavy rounds. The second slammed into the earth, its wings perforated by fist-sized holes.

Zophal was on it an instant later, smashing his crozius through its skull.

‘They’re peeling off.’ Tilonas gestured to the beasts as they turned from the line, angling off towards the flanks.

‘Keep firing, and do not break the line.’ Zophal had yet to observe the creatures employing anything approaching tactical cunning: their attack had seemed hurried, desperate. But he was not willing to take the chance.

‘There!’ Drual shouted over the shrieking creatures.

‘Emperor’s blood,’ Tilonas whispered over the vox.

Zophal followed their gaze as the treeline ahead of them disappeared, smashed under a giant pair of clawed feet. A lumbering beast stood in the clearing it had made for itself. Supported by two huge hind legs, its forelimbs hung from its shoulders like a Terran primate’s. Three more of the beasts stomped into view. They were four times larger than anything the Flesh Tearers had faced so far, their serpentine eyes full of violent intent, dwarfing even the Dreadnought, Grigori.

Drual and Tilonas fired, but Zophal didn’t waste his ammunition, instead opening a vox channel to the Storm Eagles’ gunners. ‘Targets to my north. Engage.’

On the Chaplain’s command a fusillade of missiles streaked from the gunships. An instant later the monsters disappeared behind a halo of explosions. When the fire cleared, two lay in dirt, their corpses crushing dozens of smaller beasts. A blast from the *Serrated Angel’s* turbo laser flickered out to incinerate the third.

Zophal cursed; the fourth was untouched. Displaying a level of low cunning, it had taken shelter behind its kin, avoiding the Flesh Tearers weapons. ‘Fire again.’

‘Negative, Chaplain. We’re awaiting charge.’

Zophal growled, glancing around for a way to kill the beast. ‘Drual, Tilonas...’ He trailed off, catching sight of a lone warrior in Terminator armour racing towards the beast. The Chaplain didn’t need to check the ident-tag to know it was Amit.

Grigori stood in a crater of his own making, the teeth of the massive eviscerators he held in each powered hand choked with flesh and viscera. Broken corpses were piled around him like grisly sandbags. He strode over them, feeling a rush

of cold satisfaction as he heard bone crack beneath his footfalls. For a son of Sanguinius, entombment in a Dreadnought was a great honour, and the cruellest of torments. He had been given the strength to serve long after his body had faded to atrophied mush. But to maim, to kill, while unable to feel the hot splatter of gore on his face made Grigori's mind itch. Many Flesh Tearers had gone mad, succumbing to the darkest of rages while locked inside a sterile sarcophagus.

Blood. He tasted the familiar tang as a measure of the dead creature's arterial fluid seeped through a channel in his armour to mix with the bio-fluids sustaining him. The pain in his mind eased, the Thirst sated for the moment. Had Grigori still been able to articulate his facial muscles, he would have smiled. *Emperor praise you, Cael.* He gave thanks to the Techmarine who had engineered the complex structure of veins that made such relief possible.

The sensorium wired into Grigori's sarcophagus threw up a slew of warning sigils as he crested the mound of bodies. An instant later, Amit flew past him, struck by the remaining beast. The Chapter Master's body gouged a deep furrow in the earth as he slammed into the ground.

Angry data lit up Amit's helmet display as he pushed himself to his feet. The blow had shorted out one of his chainfists and cracked his breastplate. Blood ran from his nose and his teeth felt loose in his mouth. He snarled, glaring up at the gargantuan beast as it crushed some of Sergeant Dael's squad under its feet. 'Grigori, let us kill that thing.'

The hydraulics and pistons in Grigori's legs resounded like heavy bolter fire as he cast aside a twitching creature and powered towards the giant beast. It turned to meet him, opening its mouth and lowering its head to devour him. Grigori didn't slow, firing a salvo from his frag launchers up into its face. The beast roared, closing its eyes and reeling away from the cloud of explosives. Grigori ploughed into it, thrusting his eviscerators into its abdomen. The beast bawled in pain, smashing its head down into Grigori. The Dreadnought stumbled backwards under the impact, unable to recover in time to avoid the beast's jaws as they snapped closed around him. Warning icons scrolled across Grigori's display as the beast's metres-long incisors punctured his adamantium shell and damaged his power plant. Without it, it would not be long before the final death claimed him.

'You die first!' Grigori roared. Amplified by his sarcophagus's audio casters, the sound was more terrible than the roar of any beast. Activating his flamers,

Grigori sent a gout of superheated promethium into the wounds he'd carved in the beast's abdomen, roasting its innards. The beast staggered backwards, smoke bleeding from its wounds as traces of its organs dribbled down its skin like milky bile. Grigori paced backwards, using what remained of his power to draw the beast after him and towards the *Vengeance*, and Amit.

Amit grunted with effort as he climbed up the *Vengeance*, driving his fist and boots into its armoured flanks for purchase. If it hadn't been for the protection offered by his bulky Terminator armour, he would not have survived the blow the creature had dealt him. But hanging from the *Vengeance*, his muscles burning with effort, he missed the relative flexibility of power armour.

With a final snarl of effort, Amit pulled himself up onto the wing as Grigori passed beneath it, the beast a pace behind him.

'Sanguinius feast on your soul!' Amit roared, leaping from the Thunderhawk, and punching out with his functioning chainfist to impale himself upon the beast's torso. He swung his other hand up, his power gauntlet crackling with energy as he dug his fingers into the beast and ripped open its flesh. Grunting with effort, he pushed a pair of melta-charges inside its body and activated his chainfist. Driven by Amit's weight, the weapon's teeth tore down through the beast's side, lowering the Chapter Master towards the earth. The beast thrashed wildly in a vain attempt to dislodge him as he maimed its flank. It staggered but did not fall, turning its eyes on the Chapter Master and issuing a final roar as the melta-charges detonated.

The blast threw Amit clear, hurling him into the side of the *Vengeance* with enough force to shatter the armoured glass of the cockpit. He thudded to the ground as the beast's body came apart, burying him in slabs of cooked meat and boiled blood.

'Even we have our limits, brother. Though as with all truths, there are those who would cry this false. The ignorant of humanity believe us to be gods, worshipping us as divine beings of impossible power, who bring hope and terror in equal measure. But there is no mercy in our hearts, brother. Salvation does not run in our veins.

'But the Rage, the Rage knows no limit. Some think we clad the damned in black to mourn their passing. But that is to misunderstand our purpose. We are angels of fury and violence. We are wrath and we are death, and nothing more. In the last moments of life we embrace the darkness, for there is no light after death, no forgiveness, only the blackness of rage and the absolution of death.

'For only in death does duty end.'



THREE

CONQUEST

‘Can you move?’ asked Cassiel, grimacing as he pulled a barbed tooth from his bicep.

Behind him, Hamied sat with his back to a wall of earth, his hands clasped against his abdomen, blood seeping between his fingers. ‘Well enough.’ Hamied paused. ‘But I cannot carry the sergeant.’

Cassiel snorted as he glanced down at Asmodel. The sergeant was still unconscious, dried saliva caking his mouth.

‘We have both bled to get him this far, brother. Do not make it for nothing,’ said Hamied.

‘Emperor damn you, Hamied,’ Cassiel growled, hoisting Asmodel over his shoulders. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

Hamied winced as he got to his feet, following Cassiel over the crest of the firing pit towards the trench line.

A thick cloud of dust hung in the air, thrown up by the mines when they’d detonated.

‘I can’t see a thing,’ Cassiel said, stumbling on the uneven ground as he negotiated a section of razorwire.

‘It’s this way,’ said Hamied, stepping ahead of him.

‘How can you be certain?’

‘There’s fuel leaking from one of the Thunderhawks. Can’t you smell it?’

Cassiel gestured to his broken nose. ‘No.’

The two Scouts pressed on, ignoring the occasional bark of a bolter that sounded from the middle distance. No Flesh Tearer would show such restraint in battle. A single round was the mark of an execution. Every gunshot was the end of a life, a wounded creature being put to death or, Cassiel felt his jaw tighten,

one of his brothers receiving the Emperor's mercy.

Cassiel stopped walking as they closed on the encampment proper.

It was in ruins.

The earthworks had been trampled by marauding beasts, the Flesh Tearers' measured defence lines churned apart by claw and hoof. The *Barbed Angel* and the *Blood Drinker* had been reduced to smouldering wrecks, leaving the *Mortis Wrath* the only intact Storm Eagle. The three Thunderhawks had fared little better. *Baal's Fury* was missing a wing, the *Serrated Angel's* hull was scored by hundreds of deep lacerations, its ceramite coating chewed away by monstrous teeth, and the *Vengeance's* engines had been beaten beyond recognition.

'How under the sun of Baal are we supposed to get out of here now?' Cassiel dropped to one knee, Asmodel's bulk proving a strain for his battered body.

'Leaving so soon, brother? You've only just arrived.'

Cassiel turned to find Bieil grinning at him.

The sergeant's left arm was missing from the elbow and his Devastator markings were lost under the thick layer of soot covering his scorched armour. Cassiel felt a pang of guilt in his gut. Locked in combat with a long-snouted creature, and then driven into cover by a mass of retreating beasts, he and Hamied had been unable to reinforce Bieil and his squad. 'It seems we weren't the only ones to run into the locals,' said Cassiel with a rueful smile.

'So it would seem,' Bieil answered, indicating the wounds covering Cassiel and Hamied. His smile faded as he noticed Asmodel.

Cassiel's face hardened. 'The Rage.'

'Sanguinius keep him.' Bieil clasped his hand to his breastplate in salute. 'You'll find Zophal to the south, by the *Mortis Wrath*.'

'The Blood protects.' Cassiel nodded his thanks.

Bieil looked away, gazing over the dozens of dismembered Flesh Tearers whose corpses were strewn in every direction, the red of their armour punctuating the dark earth like blood spatter. 'Not today, brother.'

'Leave me,' Amit said to Iezalel, waving the approaching Apothecary away, and knelt down beside Grigori. Without power, the Dreadnought had collapsed onto his back. Lying motionless in the dirt, his armoured shell was now little more than a decorative tomb.

'It's been too long since we've had something worthy to kill,' Grigori rasped through his armour's damaged augmitters.

Amit said nothing.

‘Spare me your silence, brother. Your sorrow does neither of us any good. I have fought the Emperor’s wars for three lifetimes.’ Grigori’s voice softened as much as the antiquated casters allowed. ‘My death is long overdue.’

‘I could not have slain the beast without your help.’

‘Yes, you could.’

Amit smiled.

‘Take heart, brother. I die in crimson. Even after all these years, after all the blood I’ve spilled, the lives I’ve ended, the Rage has never been my master.’ Grigori’s voice began to distort, his vox-casters spitting static as his power became exhausted. With the last vestiges of his strength, he opened a secure vox channel to Amit. ‘There is hope for us yet, brother. There is hope for *you*.’

There were few who knew of Amit’s shame. Of the terrible Rage he had succumbed to and of those he had murdered. He had walked with the guilt since the days of the old Legion, since long before he had been reborn a tearer of flesh. The wolf blood still lingered on his tongue, his eidetic memory a cruel keeper of his hate. Yet, he had dared tell none of the truer shame, of the terror that haunted his dreams: that deep in his core, a darkness longed to sample its like again. ‘I hope, brother, that you are right.’

Grigori did not reply.

‘Chaplain.’ Cassiel eased Asmodel’s body onto the ground, and knelt before Zophal.

Zophal stood over a throng of dead Flesh Tearers, his black armour lost beneath a layer of gore. The corpses had been laid out in supplication to the heavens, arranged on their backs, arms spread wide by their sides, palms facing the sky. It was an old Baalite tradition, but one that, given the barbaric nature of the planet, seemed oddly appropriate.

‘Forgive me, Chaplain—’

Zophal paused in his ministrations, turning to regard Cassiel. ‘Forgiveness is for those who have failed. Have you failed, Scout?’

Cassiel felt his mouth run dry under Zophal’s gaze. ‘I...’ He struggled to speak, the suggestion of failure robbing the last of his strength. He looked up into the Chaplain’s unreadable eyes, finding neither solace nor damnation. ‘Brother-Sergeant Asmodel succumbed to the Rage,’ Cassiel continued, forcing his voice to rise above a whisper. ‘I would have killed him if not for Hamied.’ He motioned to the other Scout.

Zophal kept his eyes fixed on Cassiel. ‘But you did not.’

Cassiel didn't answer, his brow creasing as he replayed the events of the previous days in his mind.

'Even under threat of death, many do not find the strength to set aside their desires and do what they must. So I ask you again, neophyte. Have you failed in your duty to the Emperor and to the Chapter? Have you let weakness guide your actions?'

'No, Chaplain. He has not.' It was Hamied who spoke, his voice a crisp growl.

'Then you have no need of my forgiveness.' Zophal motioned for Cassiel to stand, and instructed two serfs to pick up Asmodel's body. 'You honour Asmodel by returning him to me.'

The two serfs shuffled Asmodel to a piece of wing fragment that stood in the ground, their augmented limbs whining under the sergeant's weight.

'You are a son of Sanguinius, a child birthed from wrath,' Zophal said as the serfs fastened Asmodel to the wing with a length of chain. He leant close to the sergeant, gripping his jaw in his hand, and growled.

Asmodel awoke screaming, a tortured wail that degenerated into a hoarse roar. The chains rattled as he strained against them, his body convulsing in fits.

Zophal stepped away, unwrapping a bundle of cloth to reveal an ornate hand flamer. It snarled as he activated the igniter. 'Daryn Asmodel, I armour you in darkness, for there is no light after death, only absolution.' Zophal depressed the trigger, sending a gout of fire across Asmodel's carapace.

Asmodel snarled, baying like a beast as the flames scorched his armour and blackened its surface.

'The dead have no blood, and so we grant you ours.' Zophal finished the rite of Iranatus. 'Repay us with the blood of the foe.' Removing his gauntlet, he drew a blade across his palm, using his blood to daub a saltire on Asmodel's shoulder guard.

'It is done.' Zophal turned to Cassiel. 'Go now. Mourn the loss of your sergeant.'

Cassiel went to speak but found himself without words. Instead, he took one final look at the warrior who had been Asmodel. He walked on, mouthing a silent prayer to the Emperor that when death came for him he would still be clad in the crimson armour of a Flesh Tearer.

'Contact, north,' Barakiel rasped in Amit's ear.

'What now?'

'Ident-tags... Brother-Sergeant Manakel, but...'

Amit growled as his damaged comm-feed hissed, burying Barakiel's voice in static. 'Druel, Tilonas, with me.'

Flanked by the two veterans, Amit crossed the northern defences and joined Barakiel. The captain said nothing as Amit approached, his gaze fixed on the kill-clearing Bieil and his warriors had reclaimed from the forest. Amit followed his gaze – the kilometre of land was no longer clear.

'By the Throne...' Tilonas slowed to a stop.

'I don't think we brought enough ammunition,' said Druel, reflexively bracing himself for firing.

Amit said nothing as he studied the thousands of barbarian humans, clothed in torn animal hides and dyed skins standing in serried ranks behind Sergeant Manakel. Most of the warriors carried a flint spear and a rough-hewn blade. They appeared to have given no thought to defence, only attack. The remainder held aloft crude standards: skin banners, stretched across frames of bone and wood, emblazoned with the Flesh Tearers Chapter symbol.

Druel growled low as he sniffed the air. 'That's not plant dye,' he said, indicating the saltires splashed across the warriors' chests.

Gesturing for the barbarians to remain where they were, Manakel approached his Chapter Master. 'I allowed no man to follow who would not bleed for the Chapter,' said Manakel as he knelt before Amit. Behind him, his army of barbarians did likewise. 'It is good to see you again, Chapter Master.'

Amit kept his gaze on the horde of humans. 'And you, brother.' He motioned for Manakel to stand. 'Now, explain this.'

Manakel handed Amit the aquila talisman the barbarian had given him. 'This planet was once under the Emperor's dominion.'

'You cannot assume the Emperor walked this earth simply because of this trinket,' Barakiel snapped.

'You are right, brother-captain.' Manakel spoke slowly, his anger at the slight against his judgment tempered by his respect for the captain. He turned to face the barbarians. 'Tamir, atta,' he shouted, raising his left fist to the sky.

'You speak their language?' asked Amit.

'A little. Its root is similar to a dialect of ancient Terra, though physical gestures seem to carry the bulk of the meaning.'

A single warrior rose from the kneeling horde and walked towards the Flesh Tearers. His left eye was swollen closed, and he moved like a man wading through quicksand. Dense bundles of muscle strained under the thick vines looped over his shoulders and wound round his torso, as he dragged an

enormous sword towards the Flesh Tearers.

‘His name is Tamir. He is their mightiest warrior.’ Manakel answered the question before it was asked.

‘He doesn’t look like much,’ Tilonas sneered, casting his eyes over Tamir’s battered body as the warrior knelt before them, his breath coming in ragged bursts.

Manakel growled. ‘He has borne the weight of that blade for a full day’s march, and he stood unflinching before my wrath. Could you say the same, brother?’

Tilonas laughed. ‘Your wrath? I would sooner fear a child.’

‘Enough,’ Amit said, and stooped to examine the weapon. His retinal display flickered into life, casting a web of data over his vision. *Enamel, dentin, cementum*. Sharpened to an impossible edge, the blade was formed from a single giant incisor. It was longer than he was tall, far larger than anything he’d ever wielded. He clasped its hilt, a single piece of bone bound with scaled animal hide, faded and cracked with age. Even in Terminator armour, his fingers only just met. His armour’s servos whined in protest as he picked up the weapon in a two-handed grip. Grunting with effort, Amit turned the blade through a practiced range of horizontal and diagonal cuts. For all its size and weight, the weapon was perfectly balanced. ‘Where did they find this?’

Manakel gestured to Tamir.

The warrior grunted and traced a twig through the dirt, marking a crude outline. ‘Raktor,’ he said, pointing to the carcass of one of the monsters that had attacked the encampment. ‘Raktor,’ he repeated.

Amit nodded for him to continue.

Tamir pulled a long dagger from a sheath on his back. It was smaller but almost identical to the blade in Amit’s hands – its bone hilt wrapped in animal hide, the blade formed from a single incisor. He thrust the blade towards the monster’s carcass and then pulled on one of his own teeth. Tamir’s meaning was clear – his blade was fashioned from a tooth taken from a monster such as the one Amit and Grigori had slain.

Amit’s face hardened as he sensed what was to come.

Tamir drew another shape in the earth, a second bestial outline that dwarfed the first. ‘Raktoryx.’ Tamir pointed at the giant blade in Amit’s hands. ‘Raktoryx,’ he said again.

Purpose charged Amit’s blood as he stood with his commanders. It was like a

drug, a burning euphoria he had not felt since the Chapter's founding, since before the Curse had ravaged its numbers and made oblivion seem inevitable.

'Brothers, there is a great beast that walks this earth. It is larger even than the god-machines of Mars.' Amit paused, turning his gaze on each of the Flesh Tearers in turn: Zophal, Barakiel, Menadel, Bieil and Manakel. 'We must kill it.'

'To what end?' asked Zophal.

'We are bloodied but we are not broken.' Amit gestured around him but he meant the Chapter, not the company. 'If we can tame this land, defeat this *beast*, then we can conquer anything.' Amit's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. 'Even the Thirst.'

'This is madness.' Barakiel stepped closer to Amit in challenge. 'This is not our mission.'

'That is for me to decide.'

Barakiel ignored him and turned to face the others. 'You have all heard Scout Cassiel's report – the orks are dead, devoured by the creatures that roam this place. There is nothing left for us here. We must signal Neta and return to the fleet.'

'And then what?' asked Amit.

'Then we rendezvous with the Star Phantoms and push into the Sakkara sector as planned.'

'What then?' Amit's voice was a clipped growl.

Barakiel made to answer, but Amit continued. 'What then, brother? What will we be when there is nothing left? When we have thrown ourselves into every battle, waged every war across this galaxy and the rest? Those that come after us will scour away our deeds and we will be remembered only for the Curse.' Amit gestured to the ashen hull of the *Mortis Wrath*.

'We are warriors, not scholars. Let others worry about what we have done and what we have not done,' Barakiel snarled. 'You serve your own bloodlust. I will not allow you to waste the lives of our brothers.'

'*You will not allow me?*' Saliva flecked from Amit's mouth as anger boiled through him. A dry itch grew in his throat. He craved blood: Barakiel's blood. It seemed so long since he had killed, since he had quenched his thirst. *Emperor bless me with your temperament. Fill me with a righteous inferno that I may burn away my bloodlust. Emperor keep me from the darkness of my soul.* He ran through the prayer in his mind, fighting to calm himself. He would not kill another of the Emperor's loyal sons. 'Barakiel, we cannot run from the Curse. If we are to survive, we must stay and face it.'

‘Run? I am no coward,’ Barakiel spat. ‘We do not all share your fea—’ the banner bearer staggered backwards, his nose ruined by Amit’s blow.

Barakiel wiped the blood from his mouth. ‘So be it,’ he said, and charged.

Amit shot forward, venting his pent-up rage in a guttural roar, and threw himself at Barakiel.

The two Flesh Tearers collided. Clad in their heavy warplate and fuelled by rage, they were each at once an unstoppable force and immovable object. Neither gave an inch as they grappled, forgoing any form of defence as they rained blow after blow into one another. Amit’s attacks were powerful enough to kill a man, but Barakiel was faster, landing three blows for every two of the Chapter Master’s. Their suits of Terminator armour whined and spat as they pushed them to the limits of their tolerance and design.

The servos in Amit’s damaged chainfist sparked as they shorted out, ruined by Barakiel’s repeated blows.

Amit growled in frustration. Even with his considerable strength, he was unable to articulate the limb without the powered assistance. With his left arm hanging useless by his side, the fight grew ever more one-sided. He grimaced, feeling his nose break under Barakiel’s head, before a kick to the chest knocked him to the ground. Barakiel followed Amit down, seeking to grind him into the dirt.

Manakel moved to intervene but found himself blocked by Zophal.

‘It will be as the Blood wills it.’ The Chaplain’s hushed voice did nothing to lessen the menace in his eyes.

Amit felt his cheek break as he pushed up into Barakiel’s descending fist. ‘You forget who trained you.’ He spat the words through a mouthful of blood, pausing for a moment before stamping his boot down on Barakiel’s knee. The harsh snap of the bone competed with Barakiel’s anguished cry. Amit grinned savagely, glad his enhanced hearing allowed him to savour both. ‘You were always too eager to land the killing blow.’ Amit yanked Barakiel up by his gorget, and punched him in the face before he could collapse again.

Barakiel slammed into the ground, struggling to push himself up.

Amit advanced on him, blood ringing in his ears like the toll of some great bell. It was time to kill.

‘Lord,’ Sergeant Menadel stammered. ‘The duel is over.’ He gestured to Barakiel but didn’t shift his gaze from the Chapter Master.

‘Not yet,’ Amit snarled.

‘It is done.’ Menadel met Amit’s gaze, his blade angled low, ready to bisect the

servos in the Chapter Master's legs.

'That will not stop me.'

'We will see.'

Amit smiled, impressed by Menadel's resolve. A terrifying, brutal warrior, Amit had seen him fight on dozens of occasions. The sergeant used every advantage the Blood's gifts lent him to butcher the enemies of mankind. Yet earlier, he had remained inside the *Vengeance*, orchestrating the defence, denying the call to battle and the urge to descend to the killing fields that burned in the blood of all Flesh Tearers. If they were ever to conquer the Curse, then they needed more warriors like Menadel.

'I'm going to have to kill you one of these days, *captain*,' said Amit.

'As the Blood wills it.' Menadel dipped his head, acknowledging the field promotion.

'I would have thought you more in need of an Apothecary than a Chaplain,' Zophal said without turning round, the broken murmur of Amit's ill-kept armour unmistakable.

'I would not give Barakiel the satisfaction.' Amit joined the Chaplain on what remained of the southern parapet. 'I need your counsel, Zophal.'

'You have already decided what must be done.'

Amit nodded. 'Yes, but what if I fail? What then for the Chapter?'

'You have chosen your captains well. You have tested their strength and their resolve, and never have you found them wanting.' Zophal paused to remove his helm. 'Should the day come when you fall in battle, then the Chapter will live on. But we stand on the brink of an abyss, a broken road between madness and salvation. Our brothers cannot shoulder the sacrifice of their Chapter Master.'

'Victory always requires sacrifice—'

'Yes, a sad truth. But this time, I must be the one to make it.'

'You?' Amit gasped, blindsided by the unexpected turn in the conversation.

'The Chapter's spirit is mine to safeguard. You must return to them, Amit.'

'I cannot ask you to sacrifice yourself in my stead. Only a coward would do so.'

'Sometimes, brother, it is the braver choice to go on living.'

'It—'

'It is as the Blood wills it.' Zophal cut Amit off, his patience worn, his tone brooking no further discussion.

Amit held the Chaplain's gaze. The age lines scoring Zophal's brow and

framing his eyes were deeper than he remembered. In that moment of silent commune, the iron visage of the indomitable Chaplain slipped, allowing Amit to see him truly for the first time. The Curse had taken its toll on Zophal, robbing him of his vitality, and though his ancient flesh was unmarked by blade or brand, the Chaplain's scars ran deep.

'As the Blood wills it,' said Amit, clasping Zophal's vambrace.

The Mortis Wrath's engines rumbled low as the gunship idled for takeoff.

Tilonas and Drual entered the transport. Its mag-harnesses were empty.

'I hope Zophal knows what he's doing. Even his lengthiest sermon won't keep the damned from blood for such a march,' Drual said as he secured himself.

'I wouldn't worry,' said Tilonas, darkly. 'He took enough of the tribesmen with him to keep their Thirst at bay.'

Amit placed a hand on Barakiel's pauldron, halting the captain's ascent up the access ramp. 'This mission is not yours to undertake.'

Barakiel turned to face him. 'Have I not honour enough left to accompany you?'

'You fought with conviction. There is no shame in that.' Amit looked into Barakiel's eyes. The beating he had inflicted on the captain's body had done nothing to break his spirit. 'But I need you to remain here.'

'As you wish.'

Amit stepped past him up the ramp, and stopped. 'Brother, if I do not come back...' Amit paused. 'Promise me you will return with the Chapter and conquer this place.'

Barakiel stayed silent.

'You will not defy me in this, Barakiel.'

'As you wish. But better that you return to do it yourself.'

Amit nodded and clasped his first captain's vambrace in a warrior's salute. 'Blood willing.'

'Sanguinius's might...'

Amit activated the pict-viewer as Zadkiel's voice stuttered over the comm. The screen flickered before revealing what had disturbed the pilot. Below them, the raktoryx loomed over the valley. It was as mighty a beast as Tamir had suggested, and far larger than Amit had imagined. Towering, irregular spines of bone jutted from its back, fused together by gnarled knots of muscle and sinew, giving it the appearance of a living mountain.

Determination set Amit's jaw. For the Chapter to survive it needed a home, something more than bloodshed to bind it together. But first, the raktoryx had to die. 'Take us in.'

Long-necked and with a winding tail that vanished into the forest behind it, the raktoryx was as broad as it was tall. Standing on its two hind legs, each a pillar of muscle and bone, it used its fore-claws to tear strips of meat from the carcasses strewn around it – the butchered remains of other, impossibly large creatures. Other than on its gut, which hung beneath it like a fleshy sack, the beast carried surprisingly little fat, its slabbed torso divided by thick trench lines of tendon that lent its smooth brown-green hide texture.

'Two minutes to optimum attack range,' said Zadkiel over the vox, his voice neutral.

Amit was not surprised by the pilot's lack of fervour. His own pulse was steady, his heart scarcely beating in his chest. Though he was not calm, for he was never without anger, the beast inside growled low, camped at the edge of his consciousness, rumbling like distant thunder rather than barking like a quickening hammer thrusting him into battle. This was not a righteous charge or enraged attack. This was something else.

'Open the hatch.' Amit moved down the ramp as it lowered, his boots reverberating as he mag-locked them to the deck, and looked down at the beast. He stared into one of its ink-black eyes, trying to gauge its strength.

Once, Amit had heard Sanguinius talk of his reunion with his father. Where many of his brother primarchs had attacked the Emperor or doubted his intent, Sanguinius had known him to be his father. *Some things*, the Angel had said to Amit, *a warrior knows as destiny manifest, his future made flesh*. Only now, staring down at the raktoryx, did Amit fully understand his primarch.

'One minute.'

Even over the roar of the *Mortis Wrath's* engines, the whip of the wind and the hum of his armour, Amit could hear the beast's heart. It throbbed slow and steady like the turning of the earth. The raktoryx had never known fear. Today, Amit promised himself, that would change.

'Targe–'

'Fire.' The Chapter Master snapped the order before Zadkiel could finish. An acknowledgement icon flashed back on Amit's helmet display in response, an instant before the *Mortis Wrath's* hull shook under the clamour of weapons discharge.

Beams of lascannon fire hammered the beast. Each blade of charged light was

powerful enough to cut through a tank's hull, yet the burst did little more than score the beast's skin. A spread of missiles impacted a moment later. Eight warheads exploded against the monster's hide in an ineffectual firestorm.

The attack brought a roar from the beast. It snaked its neck around, following the *Wrath* as the gunship banked around for another pass. It roared again, a rumbling precursor to a smouldering gout of flame that gushed from its mouth to break over the *Wrath's* cockpit and envelop the gunship. The white fire burned away the gunship's heat shielding and stripped it of paint, leaving behind only the natural grey of the ceramite, and pockets of rust-black scorch marks.

Amit took a step back as the flame flashed over the doorway. 'Zadkiel, status?'

'No lasting damage, Chapter Master. As long as we stay beyond its reach we should... Incoming! Port and starboard. Another flock of those Emperor-damned avians,' Zadkiel growled.

'Deal with them.' Amit turned to Drual and Tilonas.

Drual's assault cannon was spinning to firing speed before he was even out of his harness. 'About time we had something to kill.' The Terminator pushed open the port hatch and opened fire. Spent shell casings clattered onto the deck in a brass rain as he tracked and killed a pair of the avian creatures. Behind him, Tilonas took up position covering the starboard side.

A stabbing beak forced Amit into a crouch as one of the creatures swooped onto the assault ramp. He growled, throwing an upper cut as he rose, driving his chainblade into the creature's skull. The avian juddered in his grasp. Amit stared into its slick, black eyes, smiling as he saw the familiar flicker of terror. 'Die.' His voice was barely a whisper as he activated the chainblade. The weapon burred into life, churning the avian's skull into fleshy paste and bathing him in gore.

'Jammed,' Tilonas snarled, striking his weapon in frustration. A piercing shriek filled the hold as one of the avians slammed into the starboard side, rocking the *Wrath* and knocking Tilonas off balance. The Terminator recovered too late, unable to defend himself as the creature reached in and plucked him from the hold.

'Tilonas!' Drual glanced over his shoulder but kept firing, unable to risk turning his back.

'Worry not, brothers. I am avenged,' Tilonas's voice sounded over the vox. An instant later, the Terminator dropped through Amit's field of vision, the avian's crumpled form tumbling after him.

'Sanguinius guide you, brother,' said Amit, his voice strained with emotion.

‘I think even without his help, I’ll manage to hit the ground,’ Tilonas laughed, a throaty sound that mixed with the growing static of the comm until the two became indistinguishable.

Amit kept the vox channel open, listening to the hiss of static until silence killed the feed.

‘What now?’ asked Druul.

‘Keep firing,’ Amit ordered, his eyes fixed on the raktoryx as the *Wrath’s* weapons marred its hide. Had he been gifted with psychic potential, like the Chapter’s Librarians, his anger would have been enough to boil the creature from existence. He would have succeeded where the gunship’s weapons could not, and he would have gladly given his soul to do so. Not that it mattered. All he had to do was keep the creature in the valley. The killing blow was not his to deliver.

Zophal swung his hand up and started to climb. Either side of him, the seven members of his Death Company did the same. Sixteen tribesmen were already metres above them, scaling the rockface with an ease born out of a lifetime of necessity. The Chaplain grunted in admiration. It was a testament to the humans’ spirit that they continued with such vigour even after what had happened in the forest.

The march from the Flesh Tearers encampment had been brutal and punishing. The tribesmen had helped them to avoid the worst of the planet’s killer-fauna and mask their scent from the beasts roaming the underbrush. Still, the journey had claimed the lives of two of the Death Company and almost forty of the humans. But the real bloodletting had only begun when the fighting had ended, when the last of the squat creatures that had attacked them had been put to the blade. The tribesmen had been helpless against the blood-hungry fury of the damned. Zophal cast his gaze over the dried blood that crusted the Death Company’s dark armour, and sighed. The Thirst could not be denied.

Pushing the massacre from his mind, he continued to climb. The tribesmen had extended their lead on the Space Marines, seeming almost ignorant of the scalding rock that blistered their skin and made him thankful for his power armour... though the warplate would offer him little protection from what was to come. Grimacing as a piece of rock crumbled away underfoot, leaving him hanging by his arms, Zophal wondered if the natives had any idea of what awaited them.

‘Incoming!’ Amit roared over the vox, breaking Zophal’s reverie.

He looked over his shoulder to see a cluster of four-winged avians diving towards them. A stream of rounds flashed from the *Mortis Wrath*, cutting down a pair of the creatures and shredding the wings of a third, leaving it to spiral to the ground. The remaining avians let out a shrill cry and dropped into a steep dive.

‘Bring them death!’ Zophal cried, and kept climbing. He was not there to fight.

The same could not be said of the Death Company. Their only purpose was to fight, to ensure the Chaplain survived to complete his mission. The frenzied Flesh Tearers opened up with their bolters, roaring in hate as the creatures began to bleed. The staccato bursts of their guns was like a rousing sermon, their guttural snarls a wordless litany of battle. Surrounded by the Curse’s chosen, Zophal felt renewed.

He climbed.

Spears whistled past him as the tribesman fought a desperate battle for their lives. Once again, the Chaplain found himself admiring the human warriors: they died with their honour intact. None screamed or cried out as they were torn apart by claws, plucked from the slopes and tossed to the crags below.

He moved past a Death Company Marine who was pitting his chainsword against an avian’s beak. The Space Marine snarled, and dived towards the creature. It screeched as his chainblade tore through its wing, and tumbled from view.

‘The Blood keep you, brother,’ said Zophal as the Death Company Marine fell with it.

‘Cha-pla-in!’ shouted Asmodel. Like all the Death Company, the warrior’s vocal cords were ruined by constant snarling, and murdered the syllables, making his warning sound more growl than speech.

Zophal heeded him none the less, rolling aside in time to avoid the bulbous tail that crashed into the mountain where his head had been a moment before. The quick evasion left Zophal hanging from one arm and without a foothold. He ground his teeth, searching for his next move as the beast prepared for another swipe.

Before the Chaplain could react, Asmodel dropped down on the avian’s back. Howling, he punched his knife into the creature’s neck, using the blade for purchase as it tried to buck him off. He roared, snarling and spitting curses as he fired his bolt pistol into the creature’s back. Asmodel leapt from the avian as it began to fall, hands outstretched towards the rockface.

Zophal found his footing and swung an arm out to grab Asmodel. He flexed his fingers, preparing to catch his battle-brother’s forearm.

‘Blood!’ Zophal roared as Asmodel’s vital fluid splashed across his armour.

Another of the avians had swooped past and had ripped right through Asmodel with its claws.

Zophal felt nothing but anger as another ident-tag blinked dark on his helmet display. He would kill every creature upon this world. He would spill their blood until the land was drowned in crimson.

Climb. Climb. Zophal had to force himself away from the violence, resist the urge to help his brothers. ‘Climb, damn you,’ he snarled. Forgoing existing handholds in favour of creating his own, he smashed his fists into the rock, venting his ire and climbing as though altitude itself were his enemy.

The summit of the volcano seemed to come from nowhere, jutting out from the cloud layer as unexpected as the glacial blue of the sky. Zophal crested the lip of the caldera and began his descent into its throat. He glanced back but could see no one following him. *The Blood bring you peace, my brothers.* Dropping onto a protruding slab of rock, Zophal scowled, blinking away the warning sigils that arced across his helmet display. The heat was so extreme that even the ceramite coating of his armour would not protect him for long. He grimaced as he felt his skin begin to blister under his armour.

‘Sergeant Manakel.’ Zophal opened a secure vox channel to the sergeant. There was still time for him to guide the fate of the Chapter one final time.

‘Chaplain?’ Manakel’s voice crackled over the comm, distorted by the thick walls of the volcano.

‘Seraph was a born leader. A gifted tactician. You are not him.’ Zophal paused a moment to let his words sink in. ‘He was a weapon, forged in the fire of battle. But weapons can never light the flame in the hearts of others. I have looked into your eyes, Manakel, and I saw braziers.’

‘I...’ Manakel stammered.

‘The tribesmen followed you because your fire ignited some primal belief within them. Channel your fury, Manakel, use it to lead the Chapter from the darkness, and to help those who cannot escape it to burn it away in the fire of battle. You must embody the Rage without ever succumbing to it. You must be a counterpoint, a deathly silence between each beat of the Chapter’s bloody heart. It is a task far less glorious than company command, and far harder. But there can be no victory without a tomorrow.’

‘I understand, Chaplain.’ Manakel’s voice was sombre, heavy with the weight placed upon him.

‘The Blood guide you, Chaplain Manakel.’ Zophal deactivated his comm and

removed the front plate of his helm. He would look upon the volcano with his own eyes. Hissing lava licked the sides of the basin and spat up to threaten him. 'You think yourself fierce, primal...' Zophal coiled his rosarius around his clenched fist. 'But you have no choice to be otherwise.' A red light blinked on the fusion charge as he twisted the activation stud. 'I choose to destroy, and in my destruction my brothers shall find salvation.'

Zophal closed his eyes. 'I am vengeance, I am wrath, I am death.'

Sparked by the fusion charge, the volcano erupted in awesome violence. Rocks ripped from the mountain's innards shot into the air on jets of superheated gas. Fire followed them, fountaining from the volcano's tip and splashing down its flanks, a harbinger to the outpouring of lava: a tide of viscous magma thrust from the volcano by the explosions wracking its bowels. The bubbling fire-river burned down towards the valley and the raktoryx.

'Rest well, brother. You have earned your peace,' Amit whispered, clasping his fist to his breastplate in a final salute to Zophal.

'Get us out of here,' Druval voxed Zadkiel as the *Mortis Wrath* shook under numerous impacts.

'No!' Amit snapped, his moment of observance shattered by the anger writhing inside him. 'Hold our position.'

'Chapter Master, we have to go.' Zadkiel failed to keep the tension from his voice.

The *Wrath* shook again, more violently this time. Thick ash and rock fragments choked the air, making it difficult for the pilot to keep the gunship aloft. The pyroclastic cloud was bleeding dust, cinders and pumice, blanketing the valley and staining the land ashen-grey.

'No. We have come this far. I will see this creature die.' Amit glared down at the raktoryx, ignoring the globs of lava that splashed over the *Wrath's* hull.

Below, the lumbering beast roared as tank-sized chunks of flaming rock punched into it. It turned to run from the encroaching lava, screeching as it lost its footing. The ground heaved upwards, displaced by the volcanic activity, trapping one of the raktoryx's rear legs. The beast toppled forward, unable to keep itself upright.

The burning river of molten rock wasted no time in claiming the stricken beast. The raktoryx bayed in pain and terror as the lava dissolved its legs from under it. Thrashing as if in the grip of a seizure, the beast fought in vain against the inevitable, tossing its neck from side to side as it sunk deeper into the flow.

‘Death is everything’s final limit,’ said Amit as the raktoryx vanished from view, swallowed by the volcano’s fury.

‘Let us not look too hard for our own limitations,’ Drual joked as he pulled Amit in from the ramp.

Back inside the hold, Amit became aware of the shrill klaxon and the slew of warning runes flashing on his retinal display.

‘The engines are failing, the ash cloud is too dense. We need to pull back now, Chapter Master...’ said Zadkiel.

‘Go,’ Amit said.

The volcano’s rage was brief but absolute. The lava soon cooled, leaving the landscape changed forever. The sea of fire had consumed the forest for kilometres in every direction, burning all organic matter. Only the highest peaks survived unscathed, protruding like miniature islands above the newly formed crust. Amit cast his gaze across the undulating vista of smooth rock. The valley looked as if it had been paved by an erratic madman.

‘At least now we have somewhere to land the gunships,’ Menadel spoke from behind Amit where he stood with Barakiel, Manakel and Drual.

Amit grunted in amusement. He had come to expect such ill-timed comments from Grigori, and was privately glad that Menadel was there to fill the void left by the Dreadnought. ‘I’m sure it will make Captain Neta’s job easier when she comes to extract us.’ Amit faced Menadel. The sergeant’s expression was as calm and hard as the ground under their feet, leaving him unsure whether he had been joking.

Amit looked to Manakel. There was a coldness to his eyes that Amit had seen in few outside the Chaplaincy. Not that it mattered... Amit paused, losing his train of thought as he glimpsed the ornate bolt pistol locked to the sergeant’s hip. *Zophal*. The Chaplain could read a warrior’s soul from behind a plate of ferrocrete.

‘Brother.’ Amit motioned to the standard clasped in Barakiel’s hand.

The captain nodded and passed the Chapter banner to Amit, the motion-dampeners worked into its lining ensuring that, despite the high winds, it hung straight and true.

Amit turned to face the rest of the Flesh Tearers. Thirty-eight warriors clamped their fists to their chests in salute. Victory had cost them over half of the company. The survivors stood shoulder-to-shoulder; their armour bore deep scars and had almost been scraped clean of rank and insignia. Behind the Flesh

Tearers, a thousand indigenous tribesmen kept a respectful distance. They were sprawled out in loose groups but stood with as much martial dignity as the Space Marines.

‘I have fought the Emperor’s wars since we were legion. I have killed his enemies since our father walked among us. I have maimed and butchered every creature and xenos filth that has dared to stand before my blade. But this world...’ Amit spread his arms wide to encompass their surroundings. ‘This world is more primal and more violent than the rage in my heart. Yet together, brothers, we have conquered it.

‘We are wrath! We are death!

‘Our brothers’ deaths were not in vain. We will ensure that this world, this single world, will forever be free from the taint of the mutant, the xenos and the heretic. This world will embody our cleansing rage and stand as an example to all who would set foot upon it.’ Amit thrust the banner into the air, deactivating the motion-dampeners and letting it fly free. ‘You stand on Cretacia, birthplace of wrath. Now the home of the Flesh Tearers!’

It took fewer than three days for the Flesh Tearers to bend the planet to their will. Orbital landers flocked to the surface carrying hundreds of Chapter serfs and auxiliaries. A small team of eight thousand Departamento Munitorum clerks began the task of cataloguing Cretacia’s assets and processing its populace. Over the coming months, thousands more would be ferried to the planet.

‘It is good to see you, master.’ Ismeriel clasped Amit’s vambrace, embracing him in a warrior’s greeting.

‘Captain. You have a huge task ahead of you. I will shortly return to the *Victus*, and carry on into the Sakkara sector for however long this damnable crusade may take. I am leaving you in charge of our future,’ said Amit.

‘Lord?’

‘We will no longer leave ourselves at the mercy of fate, plucking aspirants from the worlds we stumble upon out of war-born necessity. Any aspirant to wear our badge on his breast must have the same strength of character as these warriors displayed here under this sky.’ Amit indicated the tribesmen who had been organised into neat rows for processing. ‘I have declared the Right of Conquest. The future blood of the Chapter will be Cretacian.’

Ismeriel nodded.

‘And captain, when the Munitorum have ceased being useful, get them off this planet. Their weakling blood has no place here.’

Ismeriel smiled.

Amit left the captain and ascended the temporary dais that had been erected to overlook the processing camp. ‘Warriors of Cretacia.’ The din of activity fell away as Amit spoke, his voice a gruff growl, projected through the harsh filter of the audio-casters that hung from steel poles around the encampment. ‘Each of you will be tested. Those of you found worthy shall be made of the Blood. Those who fail the trials, but who show great courage, shall be allowed to serve.’ Amit motioned to the Chapter serf standing by his side. ‘The rest of you will not survive.’

Amit knew that the tribesmen could not understand him, much less the total change he was bringing to their world. It didn’t matter. His confessional was as much for his own soul as theirs.

At a command from Amit, Manakel stepped from among the tribesmen. He ushered their war chiefs and elders forward, all except Tamir, who he instructed to remain where he was.

Amit glared down at the group of barbarian leaders. ‘You fought bravely. The Emperor thanks you for your service.’ He paused, studying their faces for any sign of comprehension, and finding none. ‘You are too old to survive the trials, and there can be only one master of this world.’

Manakel placed a hand on each of the barbarian’s shoulders in turn, forcing them to their knees, and handed his chainsword to Amit.

Only then did the shaking chiefs grasp their fate. Amit saw the fear in their eyes. It filled him with peace. Weak men had no place in the Chapter; his judgment of them had been correct. Quicker than human eyes could follow, he beheaded them, tearing his blade through the sixth neck before the head of the first had toppled to the ground.

Flicking the blood from his blade, Amit beckoned to Tamir.

The war chief approached him without fear.

‘Sergeant Manakel has spoken highly of your courage and strength.’ Amit motioned to the Chapter serfs shuffling through their duties behind him. ‘You may yet serve.’

Tamir glanced at the wretches and shook his head. He clenched his fist and held it firm against his chest. He would die as he had lived, a warrior.

Amit smiled without humour. Killing the war chief would bring him no joy. ‘Very well.’ That future generations of Flesh Tearers would come from the same gene stock as men such as Tamir gave Amit hope for the future of the Chapter.

‘The Blood grant you a warrior’s peace.’

Tamir took a knee, feeling his heart quicken. He drew a breath, quieting it. He would not enter the afterlife a coward. Tamir whispered a prayer to his gods and looked up into the fathomless eyes of the crimson lord. They were the most terrible things he had ever seen.

'We thought Cretacia our salvation.

'We were wrong.

'Our efforts were in vain, our faith misplaced. We conquered that hell, that murderous planet we have come to call home. We slew its beasts and made trophies of their carcasses. We broke its people and made their strength our own. We built an empire from its rocks and renewed our conquest of the stars. But we did not sate the terror inside us.'

'We are our father's second sons, and we are all the fiercer for it. His pain burns sun-hot in our veins, undiluted by old honour or tithes. We are him at his purest, his most wrathful. No amount of bloodletting will siphon his Curse from our veins.

'I am sorry, brother.'

Gabriel Seth turned to look upon the Death Company Marine strapped to the relic table. His helm was misshapen, eroded by the acid saliva that dribbled in a constant flow from his frenzied mouth. His suit of dark warplate was stained by battle. Bullet holes, scorch marks and deep abrasions covered its surface, the gifts of three centuries in service to the Chapter. Most who succumbed to the Rage and donned the black armour of death survived to fight one more time, a glorious final charge in the name of the Emperor. Those unfortunates who lived longer degenerated into little more than beasts, primal creatures who could no longer distinguish between friend and foe. Blood was all that mattered, and they would feast upon their own, given no alternative.

'Release him, Gabriel. His duty is at an end.'

Gabriel lifted his head and looked up at Appollus. The Chaplain stood at the head of the table, his oil-black armour blending with the shadows of the candle-lit chamber inlaid with inscriptions and litanies of purity, it was a noble reflection of the warplate worn by the Death Company Marine. Yet for all the blackness of Appollus's armour, his eyes were darker still.

'This is a waste of time,' Appollus pressed the point. 'He does not understand, Chapter Master.'

'I am not a fool,' Gabriel snarled and got to his feet, his stature seeming to grow with his rising temper. 'It is enough that we understand, Chaplain.' Gabriel slammed his fist into his breastplate, the staccato clang resounding around the stone walls of the enclosed space. 'That we remember.'

'Lord.' Appollus nodded, bowing his head in deference.

Gabriel placed a hand on the Death Company Marine's pauldron. He could feel the tension in the other warrior's body as he struggled against his restraints. 'Be at peace, brother. You have earned this final death.' Withdrawing his hand, Gabriel nodded to Appollus.

The Chaplain turned to the reliquary inset into the chamber wall. The stasis field shivered as he pushed his hand through to retrieve the ornate bolt pistol from its centre. The weapon had once belonged to Chaplain Zophal, and had been used to end the suffering of the damned since Cretacia's founding. 'Requiescat.' Appollus pressed the pistol to the Death Company Marine's helm and fired.

Gabriel let his eyes linger on the dead warrior a moment.

'How many more, Appollus? How many more of our brothers must we lose to this madness?'

Appollus remained silent, knowing Gabriel did not really seek an answer. Few knew of the heavy burden placed upon the Chapter Master. What Amit had done was just the beginning; the salvation of the Flesh Tearers was far from certain.

Gabriel sighed, and turned to his left where another of the cursed lay awaiting the final administrations.

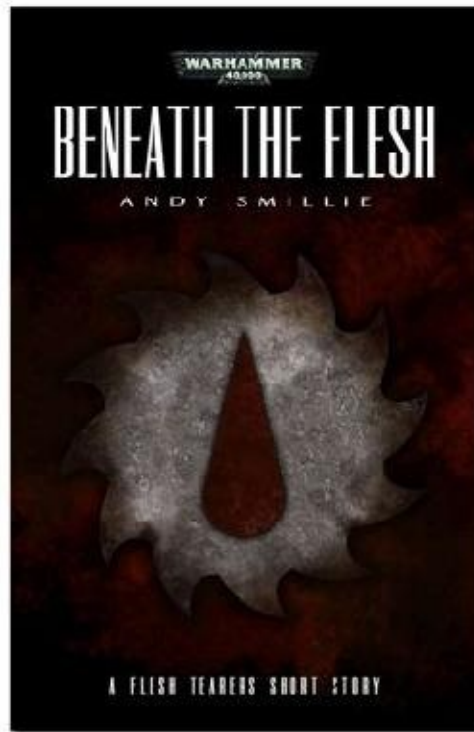
'I am sorry. We have failed you, brother.'

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Hailing from Glasgow, ANDY SMILLIE is best known for his visceral Flesh Tearers novella, *Beneath the Flesh*. He also has written a host of short stories starring this brutal Chapter of Space Marines and a number of audio dramas including *Deathwolf* and *From the Blood*. Andy lives in Nottingham, UK, drinks enough coffee to make his ears itch and cites napping as his favourite pastime.



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