

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

TRAITOR'S GORGE

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELLA

TRAITOR'S GORGE

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TACTICAL MAP RYNN'S WORLD

MAGALAN CONTINENT
JADEN MOUNTAINS REGION



TRAITOR'S GORGE

To PORT CALINA
(REF: RM-CF-30212)

Asm. Columns
(REF: RM-MD-41197)

- Reported Ore sightings
(REF: RM-CF-27125A77)
- ROUTE OF CRIMSON FISTS ADVANCE
(REF: RM-CF-91-41-04C1)
- Sites of Encounters with Enemy Forces
(REF: RM-CF-97X112-9C27)

- Facility: Gurnas 3403
(REF: RM-CF-92403)





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.



THE FARSEER RAISED the delicate wraithbone cup to her lips and sipped lightly of the quicksilver wine. Her two guests leaned forward slightly, robes rustling as they chose their own cups from the black lacquered table. Their movements were fractionally swifter and more direct than proper etiquette allowed, but they were wanderers, and had been a long time away from the craftworld, so a certain lack of decorum was to be expected. Hours of polite conversation and contemplative silences had worn their patience thin. They were ready to hear the reason for their summons.

Sethyr Tuannan breathed deeply, her senses sharpening as the effects of the wine spread swiftly through her system. The three eldar sat in a secluded corner of a meditative garden within the outer precincts of the Dome of Crystal Seers, a refuge that encouraged both contemplation and discretion. The farseer shifted her body ever so slightly away from the low table, towards the rushing waterfall that roiled the waters of the wide pool just a few metres to their left. Sethyr closed her eyes. The breath of the falls stirred the lush grass that bordered the pool, and plucked at the braids of her long, dark hair. Intricate, shifting patterns of mist pressed like spider webs against her pale cheeks.

'I have seen the doom of Alaitoc,' she said, her voice heavy with portent.

The two rangers sipped their wine and made no reply. Doom stalked the eldar at every turn. Those that travelled the Path of the Outcast, as they did, knew this more than most.

'Of late, your ranging has taken you through the *Abraig an'athas*,' the farseer said. 'What did you find there?'

The more senior of the two rangers, a pathfinder named Shaniel, curled her lips in distaste. She wore her hair very short, and feathered in shades of sea green and sapphire. The tattooed rune of the Outcast stood out sharply beneath the corner of her right eye. 'War and desolation,' she answered softly. The humans know the region as the Loki Sector, and believe it to be theirs - but of late the orks of Charadon have put lie to their claim.'

Shaniel's companion nodded in agreement. He was much younger, slender as a

monowhip, with large agate-coloured eyes.

'The greenskins have invaded in great numbers,' Teuthas added. 'Many systems were overwhelmed. Even Rynn's World, home to an order of human Aspect Warriors—'

'*Space Marines*,' Shaniel corrected. '*Adeptus Astartes* .' Her delicate features contorted as she struggled with the guttural, human words. 'They call themselves *Crimson Fists*.'

Teuthas nodded respectfully. Yes. Just so. The orks destroyed their..' He looked to the pathfinder. 'Shrine?'

'*Fortress-monastery*,' Shaniel said. 'Alike in function, if not in form.'

'Ah,' Teuthas said. The ranger took a nervous sip of his wine. 'Well. At any rate, these... *Crimson Fists*... suffered grievously. Many hundreds were slain.'

'The ork warlord had apparently singled them out for destruction,' Shaniel explained. 'Barely a handful survived, but by all accounts they fought well, holding out against the onslaught long enough for Imperial reinforcements to arrive. Now the orks have been driven off-world and are retreating back towards Charadon.'

'No,' the farseer said. 'Not all. And therein lies our peril.'

Shaniel's smooth brow furrowed ever so slightly in consternation. Sethyr Tuannan was the youngest and least experienced of Alaitoc's farseers, but like most who walked the Path of the Seer, she had already grown fond of speaking in riddles. The seers hold her in great esteem, the pathfinder reminded herself. And before she chose the Path of the Seer, she walked the path of the Dire Avenger, so she is well versed in war. Listen closely, and think on what she says.

Young Teuthas, however, was less inclined towards contemplation. 'I don't understand.' The directness of the statement skirted the very edges of propriety. 'What does the aftermath of an ork invasion - on a *human* world, no less - have to do with us?'

Shaniel replaced her cup on the table with a graceful sweep of her arm and sighed faintly, indicating deep disapproval of her companion's boorish behaviour. But the farseer smoothed the awkward moment away with a languid wave of her hand.

'The skein of fate is comprised of a great many threads,' she said to Teuthas. 'Indeed, the threads of the galaxy's other races are far more numerous than our own. It is only natural that they would be caught up in the weaving of our fate, whether we desire it or not.'

Teuthas leaned forward, thin lips compressing in a thoughtful frown. 'Well, all right,' he allowed. 'But I still don't see how—'

Sethyr silenced the ranger with a single arched eyebrow. Chastened, Teuthas

sat back and contemplated his wine.

The farseer let go of her cup. It hung in the air next to her, spinning slowly, its delicate surface glowing from within. Sethyr opened her other hand, revealing a trio of gleaming rune stones. They were the foundation of the seer's art, acting as a kind of lens through which they could focus their awareness and unravel the complexities of the skein. As she concentrated on the stones, they stirred to life, rising into the air like leaves whirling in a gust of wind. 'Twenty-five passes hence, a great shadow will fall upon the Abraig an'athas,' the farseer intoned. 'The orks will come howling out of Charadon in numbers unheard of, led by a warlord greater and more terrible than any we have known before. They will lay waste to the worlds of humankind, and then fall upon the maiden worlds, further to the galactic south, which the Biel-tan call the *Tuagh an Gwyl*.'

Shaniel nodded to herself. 'The Jewels of the Night,' she said. 'I know them well. Of all the maiden worlds, the Biel-tan love them most. They would fight to the last breath to protect them.'

'And so they will. But even the valour of the Biel-tan will not be enough,' Sethyr replied. 'In their darkest hour, they will invoke the ancient ties of honour between Alaitoc and Biel-tan, and call to us for aid. And we will go to them. We will gird ourselves in our war-masks, and our battle-harnesses, and hasten to our doom.' Shaniel's hand strayed to the spirit stone that hung on a chain around her neck. A chill had crept into her heart. Even Teuthas had grown sombre, his wine cup cradled in his hands.

'The war will be long and terrible. Our blood will flow across the maiden worlds, and the greater our loss, the more stubborn our leaders will become. And once our strength is spent, the orks will unleash their fury upon our craftworld. Alaitoc will burn.'

Teuthas gasped in shock. He had forgotten himself entirely, but for once, Shaniel could not fault him. 'Impossible!' he said.

Sethyr glanced at the young ranger. Her expression was bleak. 'I have seen it, Teuthas. Broken domes and lifeless bodies, tumbling into the darkness. Fire and blood. The infinity circuit will resonate with the screams of the tortured and the dying, until finally it will shatter from the strain.' Tears glimmered in the farseer's eyes. The orks will make a lair out of our beautiful home for nearly a hundred passes, until finally it is destroyed. Only then will the war end, and our people pass into memory.'

For a moment, neither of the rangers could speak. Shaniel fought against a rising tide of despair. With an effort, she pushed the dark thoughts aside and composed herself.

'What can we do?' she asked calmly.

The farseer considered her reply carefully. 'Perhaps nothing,' she said. 'Orks are such impulsive creatures that their fates are almost too chaotic to follow. I have sifted through countless different threads, searching for a better outcome, but to no avail. Once the war begins, all paths eventually lead to our defeat.'

'And before then?' Teuthas asked. 'Can we stop the ork rampage before it starts?'

Sethyr shook her head. 'I have contemplated every possibility, from assassinating the ork warlord to launching a pre-emptive invasion of Charadon,' she said. 'The attempts fail. Worse, they accelerate the ork invasion of the Abraig an'athas.'

She sighed. 'We cannot prevent this. But perhaps, with your help, someone else might.'

Teuthas straightened, shaking off his own dark musings. 'Tell us,' he asked, his expression intent

The farseer studied the whirling rune stones. 'A great many catastrophes begin with a single, seemingly unrelated event,' she said. 'The fall of Alaitoc begins on Rynn's World, just a few dozen cycles from now. The ork who will, in passes to come, supplant Snagrod as the Arch-Arsonist of Charadon, will begin his rise to power with the death of the human warrior called *Pedro Kantor*.'



THE GREENSKIN WAS a towering brute, two-and-a-half metres tall and broad as a bull grox. Clad in patchwork armour made from scavenged steel plates, and brandishing a massive cleaver and a huge, belt-fed gun in its knobby fists, it lurched from the darkness of a decrepit shack into a storm of smoke and full-auto fire. Mass-reactive shells were ripping through the squalid, ork camp, clawing apart their sheet metal huts and scattering piles of refuse, or kicking up geysers of mud and fluid from steaming cesspools. Greenskins charged about in confusion, roused from their night-time stupor by the sudden onslaught and blazing away with their own weapons at anything that moved. Streams of green and red tracers sprayed in every direction, buzzing and snapping down the narrow lanes or ricocheting wildly from the armoured flanks of ork bikes and war buggies. Coals scattered from the greenskins' many bonfires had set a number of trash piles alight, deepening the murk and adding to the chaos.

The ork brute breathed in the reek of burning trash and the stink of spent propellant. Its beady eyes narrowed, and a toothy grin spread across its scarred face. A stray round *spanged off* its left shoulder plate and went howling off into the darkness. Filling its lungs with smoky air, the greenskin raised its weapons, threw back its horned head, and roared.

'Waaaaaaa—'

A figure reared up out of the smoke. A giant of a man, clad in battered armour of midnight blue and hammered gold. A winged skull in silver, covered in bright scars from the bite of bullet and blade, was emblazoned across his breastplate, and golden laurels of valour were fixed to the warrior's pauldrons and greaves. A fifth laurel wrought in dark grey metal and humming with untapped power, rested upon the brow of the giant's scratched and pitted helm. Ragged stubs of parchment, fixed to the warrior's armour by huge wax seals, fluttered at shoulder and knee, and a tattered crimson tabard hung from his armoured waist. The giant's fists were painted the colour of blood, and the right one, outsized and crackling with fearsome energies, was raised to strike.

Pedro Kantor, Chapter Master of the Crimson Fists, reached the ork in a single stride and slapped the brute across the face with his power fist. The fist's power

field met flesh and bone with a sizzling *crack*, bursting the greenskin's head apart.

'For Dorn and the Emperor!' Kantor roared, his war cry ringing from his helmet's speaker grille and across the combat patrol's vox-net. 'Death to the xenos!'

Guttural roars and furious, bloodthirsty shouts echoed from the darkness in answer to Kantor's challenge. Hobnailed boots pounded over the barren ground as the greenskins came charging down the camp's filth-strewn lanes towards the sound of the Chapter Master's voice. Within moments, they were upon him, charging out of the murk from ahead and to either side; a dozen, perhaps more, brandishing a wicked array of cleavers, axes, prybars and oversized spanners. They fired on Kantor as they charged, filling the air with burning streams of lead. Their battle-cries shook the air, reverberating against the thick ceramite plates of his armour.

It was a vision of hell that would have tested the courage of any mortal, but Kantor was a Crimson Fist, first among the shield-hands of Dorn, and he knew no fear. The Chapter Master answered the orks' war cries with a furious shout of his own and waded into the storm. Heavy shells buzzed past his helmet, or caromed off the curved surfaces of his ancient battle armour. One round flattened against his chest with a dull *clang*, leaving a shallow, circular dent just over his primary heart. Kantor shrugged off the impacts as though they were little more than raindrops. His left gauntlet came up in a sweeping arc, trailing linked ammunition feeds that fed the relic weapon mounted on his forearm. Dorn's Arrow thundered, the twin barrels of the venerated storm bolter glowing red as it unleashed a withering burst of mass-reactive shells into the ranks of the charging orks. The burst scythed into the oncoming greenskins, the explosive rounds burying themselves deep in the xenos's dense flesh before blowing apart. Four of the onrushing orks toppled to the ground, their smoking corpses trampled in an instant by the onrushing mob.

A warning icon flashed in Kantor's helmet display. Dorn's Arrow consumed ammunition at a prodigious rate, and it had been eighty-seven days since the patrol's last resupply. The Chapter Master reckoned that he had one or two bursts left before the weapon ran dry.

The greenskin mob was growing by the moment, as more and more of the xenos were drawn to the sound of battle. They came at Kantor in a howling tide of muscle and iron, their beady eyes glinting with bloodlust. The Chapter Master raised his crackling power fist in reply - and orange tongues of flame stabbed from the darkness at his back.

Sergeant Edrys Phrenotas and his Sternguard veterans fired as they advanced,

ripping into the ork mob with precise bursts from their drum-fed Phobos-pattern boltguns. In better times, each of the Sternguard would have been armed with an array of special ammunition, from searing Hellfire rounds to armour-piercing Vengeance bolts, but the stores of those rare and prized shells had long since been used up. The veterans were reduced to using common bolt-gun rounds; nonetheless, every shot found its mark in the head or chest of a charging ork, hurling the corpses of the front rank back upon the mob and causing them to falter. Phrenotas took position at Kantor's right, firing his combi-bolter one-handed at the xenos. Blood and bits of green flesh sizzled from the knuckles of the sergeant's power fist.

'Now, Artos!' the veteran sergeant commanded.

To Kantor's left, one of the Sternguard took a step forwards and levelled the hissing projectors of a heavy flamer at the mob. There was a draconic roar of superheated air as twin streams of searing promethium engulfed the tangled mob. Bellows of rage turned to shrieks of agony as the liquid fire ate through flesh and bone. Ammunition in the orks' guns cooked off in the intense heat, filling the air with shrapnel and adding to the carnage. The momentary pyre lit the night like a flare, casting ghoulish shadows against the sides of the orks' ramshackle huts and painting the canted belly of the crashed transport ship that loomed above the south end of the camp.

Kantor tasted the acrid, earthy stink of burning ork through his helmet's olfactory receptors. The few greenskins that had escaped the flames had been driven back the way they had come. One of the Sternguard to the Chapter Master's right sighted down the scope mounted on his boltgun and snapped off a single shot at a retreating ork. A moment later the *crump* of the exploding round and a harsh, gurgling scream told that the veteran's bolt had found its mark.

More sounds of boltgun fire thundered off in the darkness to the Chapter Master's right, forming a wide arc to the east and south-east. The far end of the arc was anchored by Sergeant Victurix and his Terminators, with the ten Space Marines of Sergeant Daecor's. Tactical squad in the centre. Kantor had decided to strike the ork camp from three sides, to sow confusion and force the greenskins to fight on a broad front. Now it was time to drive the xenos into the trap.

The Chapter Master keyed his vox-link. 'Squads Daecor and Victurix, begin your advance,' he ordered. 'Keep moving. Don't give the beasts time to react.' He glanced to his right. 'Phrenotas?'

'Right flank is clear, my lord,' the veteran sergeant answered sharply. The Sternguards' armour, like their Chapter Master's, was battered and scarred from nearly two years of relentless combat against the ork invaders of Rynn's World,

but their hearts were hard as iron. They were among the finest of the Chapter's elite Crusade Company, and they lived and died at their Chapter Master's command. 'Awaiting your order.'

Kantor took a bearing on their objective, just a few hundred metres north-west, and nodded. 'Fire pattern epsilon! Follow me!'

The Chapter Master pressed onwards, his armoured boots scattering red-hot fragments of metal and bits of blackened bone as he tramped through the remnants of the pyre. Beyond, the narrow lane wound past another cluster of rusting, sheet metal huts before curving sharply to the south. Kantor followed the path only as far as it led towards his goal, then raised his power fist and ploughed on ahead, smashing through a reeking hut made from scavenged deck plate and bits of refuse. The Crimson Fists burst through the far side into a small cleared area that was crowded with the skeletons of derelict ork bikes. A pack of vicious, diminutive greenskins scattered like rats at the Space Marines' sudden appearance, brandishing oversized pistols and knives as they took cover behind and beneath the bikes. Kantor and the Sternguard scarcely broke stride, kicking over the derelict vehicles and crushing the screeching xenos beneath their boots. A handful of the creatures escaped, firing wildly over their knobby shoulders as they fled along another crooked lane to the south-west, towards the crashed transport.

The camp was the largest that the patrol had encountered yet, high up in the Jaden Mountains and more than four hundred kilometres from the smouldering ruins of Port Calina. When Snagrod had invaded Rynn's World, the orks had descended upon the planet in their tens of millions, and for eighteen brutal months they had raged across the beleaguered planet. By the time an Imperial relief force arrived, only the capital, New Rynn City, remained in human hands. Everything else - every city, every settlement, every agri-combine and grox-ranch - had fallen to the xenos horde. What the orks could not kill, they looted, and what they could not loot, they burned. Only a tiny fraction of the planet's two hundred million, citizens had survived.

Retribution had been swift and merciless. Companies from no less than six Space Marine Chapters, including large detachment from the Imperial Fists and the Black Templars, plus Titan war engines and dozens of regiments of the Imperial Guard, broke the siege of New Rynn City and crushed Snagrod's horde over the course of a savage two-week campaign. Finally, the ork warlord had had enough, and ordered what was left of his invasion force back to their transports. Many escaped, fleeing back to Charadon, but hundreds - perhaps thousands - of greenskins had been left behind, cut off from their ships by the presence of Imperial troops. Those remnant bands had gone into hiding, scattering to the

farthest and darkest corners of the planet to lick their wounds and wait until they were strong enough to plague Rynn's World once again.

Rynn's World had been the home of the Crimson Fists for thousands of years, and the Chapter took in aspirants from neighbouring feral worlds across the subsector. Snagrod had invaded the planet with the express purpose of destroying the Chapter, and, by the cruellest twist of fate, had nearly succeeded. During the early stages of the ork invasion, a missile launched from one of the Crimson Fists own defensive batteries had malfunctioned, falling back upon the Chapter's fortress-monastery and penetrating deep into its vitals. The explosion detonated the monastery's vast magazines blasting the fortress apart and killing six hundred Space Marines – more than half of the Chapter - in one fell stroke. Only Kantor and a bare handful of his battle-brothers survived the blast.

The Chapter Master led the survivors from the ruin and across ork-held territory to rally what was left of the Chapter in the defence of New Rynn City. Standing upon the brink of annihilation, they had remained true to their oaths and fought the xenos in the Emperor's name, and when the hour of their deliverance was finally at hand, it had been Kantor and the Crimson Fists who had retaken the city's star port and opened the way for Imperial forces to reach the surface. The Chapter's honour remained intact, but the price it had paid was almost too terrible to contemplate. By the time the siege of New Rynn City was broken, less than a hundred of the Chapter's battle-brothers remained. Their losses had been so great that Kantor and the Crimson Fists had been unable to take part in the campaign to liberate their own home world. Force Commander Geryon, leader of the Imperial Fists and overall commander of the relief force, had respectfully delegated the survivors to the reserves, and given them a place of honour defending what was left of the capital. It had been the correct decision, Kantor knew, with the future of the Chapter hanging by the slimmest of threads but a galling one nonetheless.

Now, six months later, the relief force was gone, its forces summoned to new wars and new undertakings across the subsector and beyond. Kantor and the Crimson Fists had been forced to stand aside while others liberated Rynn's World, but as far as the Chapter Master was concerned, the war was far from over. Neither he nor his brothers would rest until every last trace of the greenskin taint had been scoured from the surface of the planet.

The sound of boltgun fire swelled to the east and south-east, punctuated by the ripping snarl of an assault cannon. Off in the distance, something - possibly an ork bike or war buggy - exploded with a dull *thud* and sent a rolling cloud of smoke and flame rising into the overcast sky. The firefight was moving rapidly westwards now, as the greenskins withdrew in the face of the Space Marines'

advance. Gauging the relative positions of his three squads, Kantor redoubled his pace, leading the Sternguard onwards through the thickening gloom.

The lane wound south and west for more than a hundred metres. Their enhanced senses unhindered by the smoke and the darkness, the Crimson Fists raced along the track at a dead run, overtaking the squalling gretchin and crushing them into the mud. Kantor never slowed his pace focusing solely on the objective up ahead. He took each corner at a pounding run sweeping the path ahead for targets. After a few minutes, the trail veered sharply to the east then, just as abruptly cut back to the south. The Chapter Master and the veteran squad swung around the final turn - and found themselves in the midst of a greenskin mob retreating along another, wider path running due west.

There was no time for oaths or shouted commands, the Adeptus Astartes reacted without hesitation, their superhuman reflexes honed by decades of unrelenting war. Boltguns barked out single shots as the Sternguard fired point-blank into the mob; the range was so close that the rocket-propelled rounds tore clean through their targets before they could arm themselves. Crimson power fists flashed and thundered, hurling the smashed bodies of greenskins into the air. In the space of a dozen heartbeats, the Crimson Fists carved a path of carnage through the mob.

Then the greenskins were all around them, howling their battle-cries and chopping at the Space Marines with cleavers and saw-toothed axes. A trio of orks leapt at Kantor, their beady eyes burning with bloodlust. The Chapter Master was a blur of motion, catching the blow of one cleaver on the thick plate of his left gauntlet, just to the side of Dorn's Arrow. An axe plunged downwards, aiming to split Kantor's helmet, but he slipped fractionally to one side and let the blow fall harmlessly onto his thickly armoured pauldron.

The third ork was slightly cleverer. The beast lunged forwards, wrapping an arm around Kantor's waist and digging a shoulder into the Chapter Master's chest, even as it jabbed a chisel-pointed blade under the Space Marine's chin. The impact staggered Kantor, but he did not fall. Without conscious thought, he lifted his right arm high and brought his elbow down onto the third ork's skull. Bone crunched, and the greenskin collapsed in a spray of gore. Twisting at the waist, the Chapter Master punched at the axe-wielding ork with his power fist and connected with the creature's midsection, ripping the xenos in half. The ork with the cleaver chopped at Kantor again, this time adding another deep scar to the Chapter Master's breastplate. Snarling, the Crimson Fist jammed the barrels of Dorn's Arrow beneath the beast's chin and sent a precise neuromuscular signal that fired a pair of single shots into the greenskin's misshapen skull.

A shrieking hiss and a flash of orange light beat back the darkness at Kantor's

side, and the screams of burning orks rent the air. Kantor glanced quickly about. The Sternguard surrounded him in a rough circle, their armour spattered with xenos blood and bits of flesh. Greenskin bodies were heaped about them. A pool of fire and a heap of burning corpses blocked the path to the east.

The Chapter Master checked his bearings once more. They were very close now. 'Keep moving!' he ordered, pointing up the path to the west. The veterans fell in behind Kantor once more, boltguns sweeping their flanks and Artos's heavy flamer covering the rear.

Less than a minute later, the path emptied onto a track of churned, blackened earth some forty metres across and a hundred metres long, stretching up the slope to the canted hull of the crashed transport. The craft's bulbous engines and scarred belly were pocked with scores of ragged holes, many streaked with bright patterns of rust from leaking fuel and other corrosives. The Chapter Master reckoned it had come down in the early hours of the invasion of Rynn's World, riddled by anti-aircraft fire as it thundered in low over Port Calina, far to the east. Any crew on board that had survived the murderous anti-aircraft fire had probably been turned to pulp by the force of the crash.

How the orks had found the crash site, so far up in the mountains, was a mystery. From Kantor's experience, some greenskin mobs devoted themselves so completely to a certain kind of mayhem that it literally changed them, inside and out. Perhaps they had been drawn by the scent of leaking propellant from kilometres away.

They had driven their fuel-starved vehicles up the mountain as far as they could go, and then set about scavenging the crashed ship for every bit of salvage they could find. Ork mechanics had dragged huge, rusting tanks out of the wreck and created a makeshift refinery in the shadow of the transport's hull. Segmented power cables and taut hoses as thick as a man's leg snaked through jagged rents in the ship's belly and connected to ponderous, clanking pumps. At the centre of the refinery rose a five-metre fuel processing tower, its stained surface lit by harsh flood lamps and wreathed in tendrils of toxic mist as it worked to convert the ship's propellant into something that the greenskins' vehicles could use.

The slope to the east of the refinery was crowded with huge, hulking ork vehicles. The biggest and meanest of the greenskin bosses had forced the mob to drag their vehicles up the valley to the processing tower for refuelling. Now those vehicles were swarming with activity as dozens of orks piled aboard and fought to complete the refuelling process. Still more greenskins were racing up the slope towards the big war trucks and squat, heavily-armed buggies, eager to find a working vehicle to ride.

Boltgun fire still thundered behind Kantor and his veterans. Daecor's tactical

squad and Victurix's Terminators were still a couple of hundred metres to the east, driving the remainder of the orks in the direction of the refinery. The battle plan was not unfolding perfectly, but none ever truly did, Kantor knew. He was confident that the vast majority of the greenskins were upslope, between him and the processing tower. The battle was nearly won.

Hoarse shouts rang out from a number of the ork trucks. Thick fingers pointed downslope at the Crimson Fists. Gunners bared their crooked fangs and slewed heavy, belt-fed guns around to aim at the oncoming Space Marines. A squat red-painted rocket launched from one of the trucks with a roar and went corkscrewing through the air over the Sternguard's heads before plunging into a duster of shacks further downslope.

Thirty metres up the slope, a huge ork boss clad in massive armour-plates shambled to a halt and watched as the rocket howled overhead. He followed its course eastwards, until his one, good eye fixed on Kantor and his warriors.

The boss's power claw twitched at the sight of the Crimson Fists. Kantor watched the beast glance back up at the rapidly filling war machines, then return to the oncoming Space Marines. A hungry grin spread across the boss's face.

Kantor's eyes flicked to the fuel tower. It was still a dozen or so metres out of range.

'Waaaaaaaaaaaaggghhhhhh!' the ork boss roared, and charged the Crimson Fists. A score of the greenskins surrounding the massive xenos followed suit, galvanised by their boss's war cry.

Answering cries rose from the east. 'More greenskins behind us,' Artos called out. 'They're coming up fast!'

They would be surrounded in moments. Kantor knew there was only one course of action left. 'At them, brothers!' he ordered, and the Sternguard answered with a roar of their own, charging up the slope at the oncoming mob.

Ork guns hammered at the oncoming Space Marines, filling the air with streams of buzzing green tracer shells. Kantor aimed Dorn's Arrow at the ork boss and let fly. The ancient storm bolter unleashed the last of its rounds in a quarter-second burst. The orks to either side of the boss were flung backwards, their torsos transformed into smoking craters by mass-reactive shells. More shells detonated in white bursts of flame across the boss's armoured form, but the heavy rounds failed to penetrate the thick metal plates. The Sternguard opened fire as well, pouring out precise, deadly bursts from their boltguns. More greenskins fell, dead or crippled by the barrage of fire, but the rest came on, spurred by their fearsome leader. The Crimson Fists managed only a few, quick volleys before the xenos were upon them.

An ork charged in from Kantor's left side, swinging an axe. The blade clanged

off the Chapter Master's hip. He ignored the blow, focusing his attention solely on the looming figure of the ork boss.

The xenos was as large as Kantor himself, encased in crude power armour that was a mockery of the Crimson Fists' own. The ork's three-bladed power claw opened and shut with a sinister hiss of hydraulics. Dozens of yellowed human skulls swung from iron chains around the beast's shoulders.

As the boss closed to fighting distance, the huge power claw reared back to strike - then, without warning, the ork brought up a huge double-barrelled gun and aimed at Kantor's face. Kantor dodged to the left, into the path of the axe-wielding ork. His left hand darted out, grabbing the xenos by the throat and pulling him into the boss's line of fire. The big gun thundered, stitching a burst of shells across the hapless ork's back.

Kantor shouldered his way past the ork's falling corpse and leapt at the boss, just as the greenskin lunged at him with the power claw. The Chapter Master ducked beneath the blow at the last second and crashed against the massive greenskin. His power fist jabbed at the ork's armoured head, but the boss seized his arm just below the elbow and stopped him in his tracks. The power claw reached for Kantor again, but he gripped the ork's arm as well, holding the fearsome weapon at bay.

The two warriors grappled for a long moment while the battle raged around them. Sergeant Phrenotas and the Sternguard were being pressed from every side, fighting with bolter and knife against the greenskin mob. Phrenotas crushed one ork after another with his power fist, but for every xenos that fell, another leapt to take its place. Further up the slope, ork gunners blazed away with their heavy guns, firing without hesitation into the melee. The big shells ripped through the tightly packed orks and hammered at the sacred armour of the Crimson Fists. One Space Marine was struck in the thigh and knocked to one knee by the impact, but the Sternguard fought on, ignoring the gaping wound.

Five metres, Kantor reckoned amid the chaos of battle. Just five more metres.

Neither Kantor nor the ork boss gave an inch. Servos whined and pressure valves hissed as the strain between them built. Warning icons flashed urgently in Kantor's helmet display. The ork's snarling face was close enough to leave flecks of spittle on his lenses.

The Chapter Master recoiled slightly from his foe - and then lunged forwards, slamming his helm into the boss's face. Bone crunched and blood splattered across Kantor's vision. The ork roared in pain, and for just a second the grip on Kantor's power fist slackened. With a shout, the Chapter Master tore his arm free and drove the power fist into the side of the boss's head. The detonation of the power field was so close that for an instant Kantor's helmet display dissolved

into a burst of static.

The Chapter Master hit the blackened ground on his back. When his vision cleared, he saw the smoking, headless corpse of the ork boss toppling onto its side. Frenzied greenskins shoved the heavy body aside and leapt at Kantor, hacking at him with cleavers and crude chainswords.

Kantor rolled onto his feet, meeting the attackers head on. A sweep of his power fist hurled the broken bodies of two orks back up the slope. A chainsword's jagged teeth screeched against his right pauldron, sending up a shower of sparks. Another ork lunged forwards and drove a cleaver into his midsection, searching for a weak spot in the Space Marine's armour. The Chapter Master swept the ork aside with his power fist, leaving the broken stump of the crude blade lodged just above his waist.

Another of the Sternguard fell, still fighting, dragged to the ground by three screaming orks. More of the xenos were arriving every moment. If they did not act swiftly, they would be overwhelmed. Five more metres. 'Phrenotas!' Kantor cried. 'With me!'

The Chapter Master pressed on, batting another ork's chainsword aside. Another greenskin darted in from the right, axe raised - and was hurled backwards as a boltgun shell punched through its chest. Sergeant Phrenotas forced his way through the press, drugging aside blows from axe and cleaver and crushing every ork who tried to block his path. Kantor caught another ork by the throat and tore its head from its shoulders. He charged forwards opening his arms wide. 'Vermin!' he cried. 'Greenskin filth! Here I am! Strike me if you dare!'

The orks closed in again, shouting wildly. Kantor let the blows rain down, trusting in his blessed armour to protect him while he opened a path for Phrenotas. His legs drove him further up the slope.

Two metres.

One.

Kantor swung his power fist in a vicious arc, hurling the smashed corpses of three greenskins to the ground. A torrent of tracer fire sawed through the air around the Chapter Master. Several of the ork trucks started their engines with a chorus of deep, guttural roars.

Kantor dropped to one knee and keyed his vox-link. 'There is only the Emperor!'

Sergeant Phrenotas heard the signal. The blow of a greenskin's axe had bitten into the side of the veteran warrior's helm, leaving the right eye socket jagged and dark. Forcing his way between a pair of orks, he raised his combi-weapon and sighted on the distant processing tower. 'He is our shield and protector!' the

Crimson Fist answered, triggering the combi-bolter's plasma gun attachment.

A single bolt of incandescent plasma howled up the slope. It passed high over the trucks and their scores of ork passengers and struck the tower just below its primary condenser. Superheated metal blew apart in a brilliant flash of white, detonating the huge amount of unrefined fuel stored in the tower and the fuel tanks at its base.

Phrenotas fell to his knees, tucking in his arms and bending his head in preparation for the shockwave. The Sternguard had followed suit as well. The Chapter Master watched the ork war machines and their crews vanish in an expanding wall of fire and then bent his head as well, bracing himself for the storm.

As the roaring flames washed over him, incinerating the rest of the ork camp, Pedro Kantor knew a fleeting moment of peace.

THE JAGGED, BLACKENED remnant of the processing tower was still wreathed in boiling green and orange flames hours later, sending up a column of greasy black smoke into a morning sky already thick with the ash of ruined cities and scorched fields. The hull plates of the crashed transport had buckled under the relentless heat, allowing the licking flames to penetrate the belly of the ship. Its guts had been rumbling with random explosions since shortly after dawn.

The crashed ship's hull had also reflected much of the heat and shock of the initial blast down the valley, as Kantor had intended. The huge ork trucks had been flung through the air like toys, careening end-for-end through the camp and crushing everything in their path. The smaller buggies and attack bikes had simply disintegrated in the blast, scattering molten debris for hundreds of metres downslope. Most of the orks' sheet metal huts - made from deck plate scavenged from the transport - had been flattened by the shock-wave. Small fires still burned amongst the trash piles and cesspools partially buried by the debris.

Every living thing not sealed into Imperial power armour perished in the firestorm following the initial blast, either burned to ash or suffocated as the storm sucked the oxygen from their lungs. Like any warrior of the Adeptus Astartes, Kantor knew the tolerances of his blessed armour to a tenth of a degree. He and the Crimson Fists trusted the spirits of their venerable wargear to shield them from the wrath of the storm, and their faith had been rewarded.

Since dawn the combat patrol had been combing the ruins of the camp, counting greenskin bodies and dragging them up the slope to the fire. Kantor stood on the blackened ground below the processor tower, not far from where he had grappled with the ork boss. The Chapter Master listened to the tolling of his armour's locator beacon as he studied the ashen sky.

Sergeant Phrenotas made his way downslope towards Kantor. His deep blue armour was mottled with patches of bright silver where the searing heat had eaten away the decorative enamel. The rest of the Sternguard were still clustered about the roaring fire, finishing the night's work.

'That's the last of them, my lord,' Phrenotas said. Damage to his helmet's vox-unit lent his voice a sharp, static rasp. Victurix and his squad just finished their search of the transport. No signs of xenos on the upper decks.'

Kantor nodded. 'What was the final count?'

'Two hundred and seven,' the sergeant replied. 'Plus fifty or sixty runts.' Phrenotas hefted his combi-bolter and surveyed the smouldering ruins of the camp. 'A fair night's work.'

'That's the largest number of stragglers yet, by a wide margin,' the Chapter Master said. 'Would that account for the number of abandoned camps we've found over the last few weeks?'

The Crimson Fists had begun their hunt almost as soon as the last ork ship had left orbit. Kantor had led his patrol up into the Anshar Mountains north of New Rynn City for the first two months, then shifted his attention to the distant continent of Magalan after receiving reports of ork scavengers outside the ruins of Port Calina. The hunt had led west, up into the Jaden Mountains, where the patrol had spent the last four months working their way south from peak to peak and valley to valley, eliminating every ork camp they found. The campaign had been a difficult one, until only just recently. After weeks of hard fighting, the patrol had come upon one abandoned camp after another - some deserted only days before the Space Marines' arrival.

Phrenotas considered the question for a long moment. The veteran sergeant had forged an illustrious career during his three hundred and twenty years as a Crimson Fist, and in his time had distinguished himself as a Scout, a line battle-brother and a long-serving member of the Deathwatch, the chamber militant of the Ordo Xenos.

'I do not think so,' the sergeant said at length. 'All these ork vehicles have been here for months. It's clear that the camp grew up around them. Lack of fuel is probably the main reason they haven't left like all the rest.'

'But left to where?' Kantor prodded. 'And for what reason?'

The sergeant shrugged his armoured shoulders. 'We knew that sooner or later the xenos would realise we were hunting them. I suspect the mobs are fleeing through the mountains further to the south-east, trying to stay a step or two ahead of us. Once we've had time for re-arming and repair, it should be easy enough to pick up their trail.'

A low rumble echoed through the hazy sky off to the west. The sound grew

louder and nearer with each passing moment, until the ground trembled beneath the Space Marines' feet. An icon in Kantor's helmet turned from amber to bright green.

'They can run until the mountains meet the sea,' the Chapter Master said grimly. 'It will make no difference in the end. Their days on this world are numbered.'

The source of the earth-shaking noise passed directly over the Crimson Fists, before slowing to a stop. The ashen sky began to roil as the deep-throated rumble rose in pitch to a harsh, metallic shriek. Moments later, the huge, boxy shape of a Thunderhawk gunship took shape through the haze, descending on vortices of ash churned by the force of its thrusters.

The gunship was one of the few that had survived the destruction of the Arx Tyrannus, and the desperate fighting that followed. Its armoured flanks were as battered and scarred as that of the Space Marines themselves. Patches on the wings and thruster cowlings spoke of hasty repairs to try and keep the massive craft flying. The Thunderhawks had been kept in nearly constant service during the invasion, and were continuing to fly almost around the clock on crucial tasks for the Chapter. Kantor watched as the Thunderhawk's pilot rotated the craft so that its blunt nose faced upslope, and then lowered the craft carefully onto its squat landing gear.

Kantor switched off his locator beacon. There was an explosive hiss of pressurised air and a groan of hydraulics as the forward assault ramp opened. 'All squads, form on me,' the Chapter Master called over the vox, and went to meet the transport.

As he walked, Kantor reached up and unlocked his helmet. As ever, for a fleeting instant his perceptions felt slightly dulled after disconnecting from his armour's complex sensory gear. A hot breeze blew against the back of his neck and through his close-cropped black hair. The sensation felt strange after so many months sealed inside his armour.

Motion inside the transport's forward bay drew Kantor's eye. He glanced up as Brother Olivos, the gunship's co-pilot, descended the port-side ladder from the cockpit and limped to the top of the ramp. Like the Chapter Master, Olivos had dispensed with his helmet. He had a long, chisel-shaped face and deep-set eyes that lent him a permanently mournful expression. A stack of grey data-slates was clutched in his left hand. At the sight of Kantor, the Space Marine bowed respectfully. 'My lord,' he said in greeting.

'Well met, brother,' Kantor said, climbing the ramp. 'My apologies for not making the rendezvous point as planned.' He gestured with his helmet at the destruction outside. 'We were otherwise engaged. Did you have any trouble

picking up the beacon?'

A ghost of a smile crossed the co-pilot's sombre face. 'Hardly necessary, my lord,' Olivos replied. 'That fire can be seen for a hundred kilometres on thermal.'

Kantor grunted an acknowledgement. 'How is the leg?'

Olivos glanced down at his right thigh. An ork chain-axe had nearly severed the leg during the bloody assault on New Rynn space port, six months ago. 'That? Scarcely a scratch now, my lord. Apothecary Salis had time to look at it a few days ago. The bone's knit, and the muscles are growing back as they should. I should be fit to join the others at the site in no time.'

The Chapter Master smiled gravely and laid a hand on Olivos's shoulder. The vast crater where the Chapter fortress-monastery once stood was no longer called the Arx Tyrannus; the great fortress was gone forever, and speaking of it only reminded the survivors of the magnitude of their loss. It was now just "the site", the scene of a massive excavation effort led by the Chapter's remaining Techmarines, and supplemented by several thousand labourers from New Rynn City. They worked day and night recovering bodies and equipment, salvaging everything they could. As far as Kantor was concerned, the work would continue until every square centimetre of rubble had been searched and carted away. They owed it to their brethren who had died there, and to the memories of all those who had preceded them, down through the millennia.

'I'm glad to hear it,' Kantor said. 'And I'm certain they will be glad to have you, though you are doing your brothers a great service already by flying with the transport crews.'

Olivos frowned. 'At the rate things are going we'll soon have more crews than ships,' the Space Marine replied. 'Another two Thunderhawks had to be grounded yesterday for repairs, and there are no spare parts to be had.'

'How many does that leave us?'

'Four, counting this one,' the co-pilot replied. Olivos offered the stack of data-slates to Kantor. 'It's all here in the reports.'

Kantor took the slates. They seemed heavier in his hand than he knew they truly were. The weight of command, he thought. 'Thank you, brother.'

Olivos bowed his head again and backed away. 'We're ready to return to New Rynn space port on your order, my lord,' he said, and returned to the ladder. Despite his injury, the co-pilot disappeared quickly into the upper decks.

Kantor stood to one side of the ramp as Phrenotas and the first members of his squad came aboard. The veteran sergeant had removed his damaged helmet as well, revealing the alabaster skin, white-blond hair and pale blue eyes of a man born on the barbarian world of Jotun. A long, thin red line running from the corner of his right eye back to his ear showed how deep the ork cleaver had bit

into his helm before the armour stopped the blow. Kantor met the warrior's gaze for a moment, and the Chapter Master saw the strain etched there. The invasion had left its mark on all of them. Kantor knew. In better times, he could have rotated the Sternguard squad back to the *Arx Tyrannus*, and given the Space Marines the opportunity to cleanse their spirits in the Reclusiam, or purge the ill humours with hours of vigorous training. Now, the closest Phrenotas and his squad would get to actual rest was a few days of hurried repair and re-arming back at the Cassar in New Rynn City before returning to the Jaden Mountains and embarking on another three-month patrol.

The Chapter Master turned his attention to the data-slates in his hand, thumbing the first one to life and rapidly scanning the reams of information contained within. Since the invasion, the loss of the planet's communication satellite network, coupled with the tons of ash in the upper atmosphere and the ionisation caused by orbital strikes, meant that long-range vox communication would be impossible for months, or even years to come. While in the field; Kantor kept abreast of his Chapter's operations and the planet's reconstruction efforts by data-slate, delivered during each scheduled supply drop or redeployment. He began with the roll of brethren still serving the Chapter, committing to memory their current status, location and readiness. One of the first things that the Imperial relief force had accomplished after defeating the ork invasion was to re-establish the astropathic relay in the system, and reports were coming in from the Crimson Fists who were on undertakings across the Imperium. First among the reports was news that Delevan Deguerro, now the Chapter's Chief Librarian, and Captain Alessio Cortez had safely reached Terra aboard the strike cruiser *Crusader*. Kantor had despatched them with all haste to convince the High Lords of Terra that the Chapter remained viable, despite the losses it had suffered. A Chapter reduced to less than a hundred battle brothers was typically disbanded, as the pool of viable gene-seed was considered too limited to survive. Force Commander Geryon had even suggested as such, telling Kantor that he and his brethren would be welcome amongst the ranks of the Imperial Fists. But Kantor would have none of it. He trusted that Deguerro's persuasiveness and Cortez's fiery charisma would sway the High Lords to give the Chapter another chance at survival.

There was also news that the *Bellator* and her escorts had arrived in-system, and would reach orbit within the week. She was one of the handful of strike cruisers left to the Chapter; the rest, along with the battle-barges *Tigurius* and the *Sabre of Scarus*, had been lost during the titanic space battle against Snagrod's massive invasion force. When the recall order had gone out in the weeks before the attack, *Bellator* and her strike group had been far to the galactic east on an

undertaking against the Corsair Worlds. Her return brought vital supplies, medicae facilities, and, most important of all, twenty-five battle-brothers to aid in the recovery effort. Another dozen or so smaller ships were still en route back to the home world, to add their strength to the Chapter's severely depleted fleet. The Crimson Fists would need every ship they had left; with the Arx Tyrannus gone, they had little choice but to become a fleet-based Chapter once more.

The rest of the reports dealt with the minutiae of an Adeptus Astartes Chapter: weapons and armour inventories, ammunition stocks, supply lists, logistical tables - on and on it went. He checked the entries against those committed to memory, analysing patterns and gauging the effectiveness of the Chapter's operations. In truth, the analyses were not very complex. There simply was not that much left to work with.

The thought made Kantor grimace. All at once, the magnitude of his Chapter's loss struck home again. Shame tore at his heart, as it had done so many times before. It is my burden to bear, he thought to himself, the words like a mantra to master his despair. I am the Chapter Master. The responsibility is mine. I will not break. I will not bend. I will rebuild. And, in time, I will make the xenos pay.

He finished the reports from the Cassar as Sergeant Victurix and his Terminators came aboard. The heavy ramp and the deck of the Thunderhawk shook beneath the tread of the five warriors, clad in fearsome suits of Tactical Dreadnought armour. Phrenotas and the Sternguard had already relocated to the transport's upper hold to make room for the hulking Terminators. Sergeant Daecor and his tactical squad were already forming up at the foot of the ramp, waiting for their turn to embark. As the loading continued, Kantor turned to the next set of reports, summarising the state of the planetary government and the civilian population.

The situation of Rynn's World's Imperial citizens was dire indeed. Though a census of survivors was still under way, it was believed that less than five million of the planet's original population of two hundred million people had survived. Much of New Rynn City was a charnel house, and disease was a constant threat to the population. Until the planet's agri-combines could be restored - a process that itself could take many years - Rynn's World would be forced to import its food from other worlds across the subsector. It was a bitter pill indeed for the planet's aristocracy to swallow, but better by far than the alternative. Even so, the prospect of starvation over the coming months was very real. Food stores were very low in the wake of the invasion, and food shipments were not keeping up with demand.

Kantor paused. He went back and re-read the addendum he had just scanned, making certain that he had absorbed it correctly. A frown darkened his square-

jawed features.

'Is there a problem, my lord?' Sergeant Daecor asked. He had removed his helmet upon boarding the transport, and the artificial light of the forward hold gleamed on his shaven skull and the complex pattern of tribal scars etched across his forehead and around his eyes. Daecor had been born on the feral world of Blackwater, and even before Snagrod's invasion he was considered a fearsome ork fighter, like Phrenotas, the left pauldron of his armour bore the insignia of the Ordo Xenos's elite Deathwatch.

The Chapter Master fought to control his anger. He understood at once what had happened, and why. It was even possible that the decision had been made for purely altruistic reasons, though he could not help but notice that the locations mentioned in the file belonged to the most important aristocratic houses left on Rynn's World, and represented a significant portion of their wealth.

'Two weeks ago, the Upper Rynnhouse ordered the despatch of a dozen expeditions to inspect agri-combines across the planet,' Kantor told the sergeant. 'The objective was to identify one or two combines that could be quickly brought back into operation, likely by scavenging equipment and raw materials from heavily damaged sites.'

Daecor's expression darkened. 'They are defying the edict?'

'Clearly.' Kantor scowled at the data-slate. He had told the aristocrats - *ordered* them, in fact - not to undertake any operations outside New Rynn City. 'Eleven of the teams have returned safely.'

'And the twelfth?'

'Seventy-two hours overdue,' Kantor replied. 'They were sent to inspect the facilities at Gueras-403.'

A dozen skilled engineers, twenty militia troops, and four flight crew, he thought darkly. A trivial number compared to all the millions that have been lost. But we are responsible for them nonetheless.

Daecor understood at once. 'Gueras-403 is in the Altera Basin.'

The Chapter Master nodded. 'Eighty-five kilometres south-east of here, near Traitor's Gorge,' he said. 'Right in the path of the orks we've been hunting.'

The last warrior in Daecor's squad triggered the ramp controls as he came aboard. Lift motors whined, and at once, the Thunderhawk's thrusters began to spool up for take-off.

Kantor blanked the data-slate. Seventy-two hours. The expedition's odds of survival were slim.

The gunship's thrusters rose to a furious shriek. As the deck plates trembled beneath his feet, Kantor tapped his vox-bead. 'Brother Olivos,' he called.

'My lord?' the co-pilot replied.

'Do we have reserve ammunition aboard?'

'Yes, my lord. A full load. Has there been a change of plans?'

Kantor glanced back at the members of his patrol. 'The Cassar have to wait,' he said to Olivos. 'Take us to Gueras-403.'



THE GORGE WAS small by Shaniel's standards, but its walls were high and steep, and it wound like a snake's trail among the tall crags of a forbidding mountain range. The watercourse that had carved it over tens of millions of years had long ago run dry, leaving a rocky, sloping floor that began amid broken hills to the north and descended into a lush, green basin to the south.

It was excellent defensive ground, the pathfinder saw at once. By luck or by design, the greenskins had chosen well.

The war band stood on a granite ledge of a massive peak whose sheer flanks formed the western boundary along more than half of the gorge's length. From there, the eldar had a commanding view of the hills at the northern end of the gorge, and of its approaches. The greenskin camp was hidden from view around a broad curve to the south. Every now and then, when the mountain wind would shift, she could faintly hear their bestial shouts.

Nine rangers from Shaniel's company - her very best, as Sethyr had directed - crouched like raptors along the length of the ledge, their cameleoline cloaks taking on the grey and black patina of the rock. Many wore their helmets and their hunting masks, but Shaniel's head and face were bare. She preferred to feel the touch of the air on her face, to breathe in the spirit of a world on the eve before battle. The pathfinder cradled her long rifle in her slender arms and squinted up at the hazy morning sky. The planet's two suns were blurry lamps behind the veil of atmospheric ash.

Sethyr stood just to Shaniel's left, resplendent in matt black runic armour and a heavy cloak of crimson and cobalt scales. Her face was hidden behind an alabaster war-mask, its smooth surface inscribed with complex trceries of psychic sigils inlaid with crushed ruby. Her witchblade, a long, double-edged spear made from a solid piece of blackened wraithbone, was clenched in her left hand. Three long ribbons of white samite were tied to the spear haft, just beneath the long, leaf-shaped blade, their long tails rippling sinuously in the wind. A quartet of gleaming rune stones spun in the air above the farseer's upturned right palm.

Behind them, in the deep shadow where the ledge met the arching wall of the mountain, stood five funereal shapes clad in suits of black armour. Each curved plate was inscribed with wards against the terrors of the warp, as well as on the red war-masks that each of the Warp Spiders wore. The Aspect Warriors were silent and still, their fearsome deathspinnars held at the ready. The jump generators affixed to their backs chimed softly, rising and falling in a kind of eerie threnody.

Fifteen warriors and a farseer, Shaniel thought, feeling the wind pluck at her long braids. Too few. Too few by far. But Sethyr had been adamant. The task would require timing and finesse, she insisted, not the brute energies of a warhost.

One by one, the rune stones dropped into the farseer's palm. Her helmeted head turned fractionally, and she pointed with her spear towards another, narrower peak on the eastern side of the gorge.

'You will be there, Shaniel, along with a squad of your rangers,' Sethyr said softly. The armour she wore was many millennia old. When she spoke, her voice was overlaid with the psychic echo of countless other farseers who had worn it before her. It was like listening to a chorus of ghosts. *'I will remain here, with the second squad, and direct their fire.'*

'And our targets?' the pathfinder asked.

'Fault lines. Fracture points,' the farseer said, her voice distant. *'You will know them, when the time comes.'*

Shaniel accepted the enigmatic answer with a nod. Such was the way of farseers. She glanced back at the silent forms of the Warp Spiders. 'What of them?'

'The spider's virtue lies in its web,' Sethyr replied. *'They will begin their weaving after the battle is joined.'*

'When?' Shaniel asked.

The farseer's head turned. For a moment, Shaniel thought Sethyr was looking at her, but realised after a moment that the psyker was looking *through* her, at something far off to the south.

'Tonight,' the ghostly voice answered. *'Even now, Pedro Kantor hastens to his doom.'*



KAKTOR KNEW A final stand when he saw one.

Hundreds of fresh bullet impacts pocked the ferrocrete steps and facade of the agri-combine's squat, two-storey operations centre, overlaying the faded scars and scorch marks inflicted during the invasion of the previous year. The building's heavy, reinforced doors had been blown open at some point during those hellish, early months, so the expedition's militia escorts had made a hasty barricade of burned-out logic engines, overturned tables - even the metal husks of long-dead servitors. The steps and the paving stones of the vestibule surrounding the barricade were heaped with the squat, brass shell casings of ork guns and covered with dried pools of thick, greenskin blood.

The centre of the barricade was split asunder. Eventually, the frenzied ork attackers had simply hacked their way inside. By then, the surviving militia troops had likely been down to their last few power cells. The high-ceilinged antechamber beyond was littered with spent cells, and the floors and walls bore their own tales of blood, pain and death. The Chapter Master stood in the entryway and counted the telltale scorch marks of no less than a dozen grenade blasts. Three of the marks were especially dark and small in size. Men had thrown themselves on those bombs in the heat of the fight, smothering the blasts with their own bodies so their squad mates would live and fight on.

Once the barricade had been broken, it had been down to bayonet work and point-blank fire, against creatures that could shrug aside boltgun shells when their blood was up. All told, the militia had held out for hours, maybe even as long as a day, but once the greenskins had made their way inside, things had come to a swift and brutal end.

Sergeant Daecor entered the antechamber from the doorway opposite the entrance, his bolter held across his chest. Glass and grit crunched beneath his boots. 'Search complete, my lord,' he said. 'No signs of survivors.'

Kantor accepted the report with a curt nod and went back outside. A rising wind left thin streaks of moisture across the lenses of his helmet and stirred up clouds of dust and ash amid the burned-out vehicles crowding the square outside the operations centre. The Chapter Master looked south and east, past the rows

of gutted warehouses and the vast fields of the agri-combine, and studied the dark line of the horizon. He did not need the atmospheric readings on his helmet display to know that a storm was blowing in from the Medean.

Sergeant Victurix and his Terminators were arrayed in a loose, defensive formation at the base of the centre's wide steps, alert in case there were still greenskins lurking about the site. Phrenotas and his veterans were making their way across the square from the west. Behind them rose the huge, hangar-like maintenance sheds where the combine's planter-harvester machines were kept. Beyond the sheds rose a trio of elevated landing platforms, where bulk lifters could land and take on cargoes of produce for orbiting cargo ships. The Chapter's Thunderhawk sat on one of the pads, its thrusters humming at a low idle. The next pad over bore the blackened, skeletal wreckage of the expedition's flyer.

The veteran sergeant's voice crackled over Kantor's vox-bead. 'The orks struck during the day, while the expedition members were at work,' he said. A bright line of bare metal across the side of Phrenotas's helmet glinted in the late afternoon sun, evidence of the hasty repair work the Techmarines had performed on the flight to the agri-combine. 'Maybe they were drawn by the sound of the flyer landing or maybe it was a chance encounter with a hunting party. There is no way to know for certain.'

Phrenotas gestured with his combi-bolter towards the two-lane access road at the northern edge of the square, which led off through the ruins of the combine's dormitories. 'They came through the north perimeter fence, and then down the access road, cutting off the inspection teams working in the maintenance sheds and the power plant to the south-west. The rest barricaded themselves inside the operations centre.'

Kantor indicated the landing pads with a nod of his head. 'What about the flyer?'

'Judging by the tracks, it appears that the team inside the power plant ran for the flyer while the orks were overrunning the maintenance sheds,' Phrenotas replied. 'They were boarding the craft when the greenskins caught up with them. A bullet might have found the fuel tank, or the pilot might have been killed as they were taking off. The end result is the same.'

'And afterwards?'

'Once the fighting was over, the surviving orks gathered up their spoils and headed north, towards Traitor's Gorge,' Phrenotas replied.

'Spoils.' Kantor's lip curled in distaste. 'You mean the corpses.'

The veteran sergeant nodded. 'And not just the humans, but their own dead as well,' he pointed out. 'Which orks never do, unless—'

'Unless there's not much else left to eat,' Kantor mused. 'How large was this hunting party?'

Phrenotas shrugged. 'Eighty to a hundred, I suspect. Much less after the battle was done. And also—'

'Yes?'

'There were human prints in the ash heading north with the orks,' Phrenotas said gravely. 'The beasts took at least five or six prisoners.'

The Chapter Master bit back a curse. 'How long ago?'

'Two days,' the sergeant answered. 'Perhaps less.'

Kantor glanced westwards at the line of sharply etched mountain along the horizon. Traitor's Gorge was only sixty kilometres away. If that was where the orks were camped, then their prisoners were likely already dead and roasting over a fire. Unless the beasts were interested in a little sport, in which case the people they had caught would take a very long time to die.

Sergeant Daecor worked his way through the gap in the barricade and stood at Kantor's side. As if sensing the Chapter Master's thoughts, he said, 'They had no business being here. Your edict was perfectly clear, my lord.'

'The fault was not theirs, brother,' Kantor said. 'They were here at the behest of the noble houses, who have a great many people to feed and winter only a few months away.' Kantor shook his head. 'And they did not bring the orks here. We did.'

'Nonetheless,' Daecor said. 'This is not our responsibility. Not now, after all that's happened.'

'Rynn's World is still ours, brother,' Kantor chided. 'Whatever left of it and its people. And we are still Crimson Fists. We are still the sons of the Emperor, and the shield-hands of Dorn. If we turn our backs on our sacred duty, then what right does our Chapter have to survive?' The Chapter Master pointed at the distant mountains. 'Right now there are Imperial citizens in the hands of our enemies. You know as well as I what kind of fate awaits them. Do you have any doubt that they are praying to the Emperor for salvation?'

Daecor was silent for a moment. 'No, my lord,' he said. 'I do not doubt it.'

'Then you understand that we must answer their call if we can,' the Chapter Master replied. 'And if we cannot save them, then at least they can go to their deaths with the sure and certain knowledge that we will avenge them.'

Chastened, Daecor bowed his head and rejoined his squad. Kantor keyed his vox-bead. 'Brother Olivos, we're heading to Traitor's Gorge,' he said.

The Thunderhawk's co-pilot responded at once. 'We will need to get you aboard at once,' he said. 'There's a major storm on the way, so our transit window is limited.'

'We won't be using the Thunderhawk,' Kantor replied. 'Its thrusters can be heard for kilometres. We don't want the orks to know we're coming.'

'Understood,' Olivos replied, though it was clear that he was uncomfortable with the idea. 'Then we will power down and wait here for your return.'

'No,' the Chapter Master said. 'You are needed at the Cassar. We will meet here again in a week's time for pick up. If we don't make the rendezvous, run a search pattern and listen for my beacon.'

'And if we can't detect the beacon?'

'Then return in a week's time and try again,' Kantor said sternly. 'Is that clear?'

'Clear,' Olivos replied. 'Dorn go with you, my lord. Good hunting.'

'Thank you, brother,' the Chapter Master said. He glanced back to the south-east, and saw the steadily thickening band of clouds in the distance. The storm was moving quickly. If they could reach Traitor's Gorge in time, perhaps it could be turned to their advantage. 'Sergeant Phrenotas, you and your squad take point. Sergeant Daecor, split your squad to cover the flanks.' Kantor descended the stone steps and made for the northern access road. Squad Victurix fell in around him, while Phrenotas and his warriors jogged ahead to pick up the orks' trail.

By the time the Thunderhawk spooled up its thrusters and lifted from the pad, the hunting party was already kilometres away.



THE ORKS MADE no effort to conceal their trail. Had they done so, Kantor and his hunters might have caught up with them before they reached the gorge. But the greenskins were more interested in speed than stealth, and the spoor they left behind ran as straight as a bullet in flight up and out of the Altera Basin, towards the brooding mountains. Such a trail said much to a keen tracker like Sergeant Phrenotas. He could tell that there were six prisoners by the depth of the tracks left by the orks that were carrying them, and he was certain that they had been taken alive from Gueras-403. From spots of blood and spent shells along the course of the march, he was also certain that the filthy xenos had already begun to fight over their human prizes. By the time that the Space Marines crested the rim of the great basin, Phrenotas reckoned that they were only twelve hours behind the greenskin raiders.

The Crimson Fists reached Traitor's Gorge just after midnight, with the fury of the storm howling at their heels.

The walls of the gorge were sheer and steep, rising hundreds of metres into the air on either side, plunging the uneven, rocky floor into deep shadow. With a simple, mnemonic command Kantor recalled the most recent geological survey of the region, made some four hundred and fifty years before. Aerial survey maps appeared in his mind's eye, as sharp as the day he had first set eyes on them. The gorge ran north to south for just over forty kilometres, sloping gently downwards the entire way before emptying into the Altera Basin. Along the way, the gorge carved a serpentine path, where rushing water had found a path through softer rock amid the mountain granite. There was one spot along the course, near the midpoint of the gorge, where it widened to almost a half-kilometre across. That was where he expected to find the greenskin camp.

Kantor kept his warriors on the move, keeping the Sternguard on point and letting them move further ahead to deal with any orks in their way. Then he called Daecor's squad forwards and let Victurix's slower Terminators bring up the rear. The Space Marines kept to the centre of the gorge, where the ground was flatter and allowed them to move quickly and quietly. Distant lightning flickered at their backs, painting streaks of blue across the rock walls and

providing momentary glimpses of the barren, rocky terrain.

The Space Marines' pace slowed and grew more cautious as they drew closer to their objective. Over the past hour, the wind at their backs had been rising steadily, and the constant flicker of lightning left streaks of static across their helmet displays. The farther they went, the more evidence they found of the greenskins' presence. Every scrap of dried wood, every shred of vegetation, had been stripped from the walls and floor of the gorge. The ground had been churned by the passage of hundreds of heavy, hobnailed boots, and every corner and crevice near the gorge's high walls had collected drifts of rubbish dropped by ork scavenging parties.

Two hours after they had entered the gorge, Phrenotas's voice spoke in Kantor's ear. 'We've found them,' the veteran sergeant said, his words hashed with bursts of interference from the storm. 'Some isolated orks moving about the outskirts of the camp just north of us. The rest are concentrated in the centre, around a series of fire pits.'

The cooking pits, Kantor thought, feeling a rising tide of anger. 'How many?'

'More than expected,' Phrenotas answered. 'Judging by the noise, perhaps a hundred. Perhaps more.'

Kantor's eyes narrowed. He studied the status icons along the margins of his helmet display. The patrol had been able to replenish its ammunition, but the rest of its wargear was in sore need of repair. A protracted battle would be risky, when even one casualty constituted a serious blow to the Chapter.

Surprise is on our side, the Chapter Master reminded himself. We are the sons of Dorn, and these vermin have defiled our world. Our duty is clear.

'Make a path,' Kantor told Phrenotas, and then ordered the rest of the patrol to advance.

With Daecor's squad and Victurix's Terminators close behind him, Kantor headed up the gorge. The rocky floor turned sharply to the west, and then ran for a few hundred metres before curving roughly northwards again. Up ahead, the rock walls narrowed to a natural choke point, some fifteen metres across. Beyond, Kantor knew, the gorge widened out dramatically. That was where the ork camp lay.

'Weapons check,' Kantor told his warriors. With a neuromuscular command, he ignited his power fist's deadly energy field. Another command released the safeties on Dorn's Arrow. Auto-loaders clattered faintly in the darkness as shells fed into firing chambers. Lightning flashed directly overhead, followed immediately by a punishing blow of thunder.

Kantor passed through the choke point, his armour's autosenses searching the darkness for threats. Past the narrow gap, the slope of the gorge increased

slightly. Perhaps another hundred metres further on, Kantor could see the eastern edge of the greenskin camp. The uneven shapes of crude shelters and filthy, trash-strewn nests were silhouetted by the flickering, orange glow of the greenskins' fire pits. The camp stretched nearly the entire width of the gorge, almost to the rocky overhang of Widow's Spire on the left, and the steep flank of Darkridge to the right. A tangle of narrow, debris-strewn paths wound amongst the squalor, all of them leading more or less towards the distant flames.

One of Phrenotas's veterans crouched at the entrance of one such path, his helmet lenses glowing balefully in the darkness. He rose silently as Kantor approached and led the rest of the patrol forwards. The wind was gusting at their backs, buffeting the greenskins' crude shelters and sending drifts of rubbish down the path ahead of the Space Marines.

Twenty metres later, Kantor encountered another of the Sternguard, standing watch at a point where three paths intersected. A spray of thick, drying blood gleamed like dark jewels across the veteran's breastplate and helmet. Next to him, in a hut made of grox hides, lay a trio of dead orks. The Space Marine gestured for Kantor to follow the left-most path, and fell in beside the others.

A few minutes later, they caught up with Phrenotas. The veteran sergeant and two of his warriors were busy dragging another pair of dead orks into a nearby cesspool as Kantor approached. They were very close to the centre of the camp now. They could hear the sullen roar of the flames and the guttural voices of the xenos as they crowded around the cooking pits. One of the beasts started loudly declaiming something to the assembled crowd, his words rising over the mounting wind and the angry rumble of thunder. Kantor tensed, thinking that they had been discovered, but then he heard the blustering tone of the greenskin's voice and realised that the beast was bragging to its fellows. No doubt it was gloating over the fresh meat that roasted over the fires, the Chapter Master thought. He concentrated on fixing the location of the voice in his mind.

'The cook fires are fifteen metres further ahead,' Phrenotas said, as the ork bodies sank beneath the muck. 'Most of the high-ranking orks are on the far side, judging by the noise.'

Kantor breathed deeply, centring himself. Heavy drops of rain pattered against his shoulders and the back of his helmet. Thunder growled, and the smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils.

'Are any prisoners left?' he asked.

The veteran sergeant glanced towards the flames, and then shook his head. 'No, my lord.'

Kantor nodded grimly. 'Vengeance, then,' he said. 'I will lead the assault with Squad Victurix. Squad Daecor has the left flank. Phrenotas, you will take the

right. We form a wedge and strike for the ork boss and his retinue on the far side.'

The Crimson Fists moved without hesitation, taking up formation as Kantor ordered. Within seconds, they were ready. As they moved into position, a lusty cheer went up from the greenskins as the ork boss finished his speech. The xenos celebrated, while death arrayed itself in the darkness.

'Grenades first,' Kantor said. 'Then we charge.'

As one, the Space Marines crept forwards. Squads Daecor and Phrenotas drew fragmentation grenades and primed them. Squad Victurix's assault cannon spun up with a hungry whine.

A few metres up the path, the huts gave way to a wide, cleared space given over to a quartet of roaring bonfires. Capering gretchin turned iron spits over the flames, roasting blackened torsos that had once been men. Greenskins surrounded the leaping flames in ranks three and four deep, bickering and snarling at one another over charred bones and dripping marrow. On the far side of the flames, the biggest orks formed a rough arc according to size and power, flanking a towering greenskin boss with a jagged, iron jaw and a ponderous suit of heavy armour-plates. As Kantor watched, a smaller ork with a gleaming metal skull-plate and an augmetic eye handed the boss a freshly stripped human skull. The huge greenskin accepted the morsel with a grunt, its iron jaws cracking it open like a piece of candy to get at the sweet brains steaming within.

A tremendous fork of lightning split the sky overhead, bathing the entire camp in white-hot light. The ork boss straightened, the skull filing from his hand as he saw Kantor and his Space Marines.

Pedro Kantor raised his power fist to the sky. 'For Dorn and Rynn's World!' he roared. 'Death to the xenos!'

As one, the warriors of Squad Daecor and Squad Phrenotas let hurling their grenades into the midst of the orks and then bringing up their bolters. Kantor and Squad Victurix were already on the move, the earth trembling beneath their tread as they charged towards the orks. Hoarse shouts of alarm turned to screams of pain as the grenades exploded, sending buzzing clouds of red-hot shrapnel slicing through the packed greenskin ranks. At the same moment the Crimson Fists opened fire, and a bloody reckoning was at hand.

The Terminators fired on the move, ripping through the packed greenskin ranks with deadly bursts from their twin-barrelled storm bolters. Kantor levelled Dorn's Arrow and tore three orks into ragged pieces with a stream of mass-reactive shells. Then, above the hammering of the guns, came the vicious snarl of the squad's assault cannon. The range was so close, and the enemy so crammed together that every round found its mark, ripping through flesh and

bone and toppling the xenos in a spray of flesh and blood.

But the surprise was short-lived, and the carnage did not dismay the orks in the least; indeed, they revelled in it. Return fire erupted around the Space Marines, though most of it was wild and undisciplined. Shells tore through the air around Kantor, or clanged from the heavy armour of the Terminators. A hissing ork bomb bounced across the ground at Kantor's feet; with a yell, the Chapter Master hooked it with the toe of his boot and kicked it back into the crowd.

The Crimson Fists plunged deep into the greenskin ranks. Orks hurled themselves at Kantor and the Terminators, bellowing war cries and hacking at the armoured warriors with cleavers and chain-axes. The Terminators let the blows fall upon the heavy plates of their Tactical Dreadnought armour, and responded with fearsome strikes from their power fists. The detonations when their energy fields connected with flesh were louder and sharper than the constant thunder of gunfire.

Kantor met an ork's charge with a swift punch from his own power fist, crushing the greenskin's chest and hurling its body backwards into the press. Another jab caught a screaming ork against the side of the head, vaporising its skull in a blue-white flash. He swept Dorn's arrow in a short arc, carving his way still deeper into the xenos ranks. Off to his right Brother Artos's heavy flamer gave a breathy roar, sowing death and terror through the greenskin ranks. On the left, Sergeant Daecor's men were raking the orks with a relentless barrage of fire.

They were less than five metres from the fire pits. The greenskins surrounding the Space Marines began to falter under the storm of flame and steel. Kantor could see the ork boss beyond the flames, bellowing exhortations at his warriors. His mob was already surging forwards, brandishing huge cleavers and rusty mechanical claws. All except the ork with the augmetic eye. The greenskin took one look at the onrushing Crimson Fists and ran off into the darkness, disappearing behind a line of squalid huts to the west.

The blow of an ork cleaver crashed against the side of Kantor's helmet, sending waves of distortion through his visual displays. Without looking, the Chapter Master felled the greenskin with a backhanded blow from his power fist, then cut down two more with a ripping burst from Dorn's Arrow. A trio of ork shells stitched their way across his left pauldron and the front of his breastplate, leaving bright, grey smears on the ceramite. A howling greenskin leapt at Kantor, swinging a chain-axe in a vicious, overhand arc; the Chapter Master caught the beast's arm with his power fist, then bowled the xenos over with a shoulder to its chest. The ork hit the ground, gripping the smoking stump of its right arm and bellowing in fury, until Kantor's boot came down on its throat.

Only a handful of greenskins were left between him and the fire pits. Dorn's Arrow snarled, blasting apart two of the orks, and the rest fell back under a hail of automatic fire. Kantor paid no attention to the fleeing greenskins. Instead, he charged straight for the warboss bodyguards, leaving Victurix and his Terminators behind.

'Death to the xenos!' Kantor shouted again, his power fist rised in challenge. He leapt straight through the roaring flames, propelled by a wave of righteous fury. 'Vengeance for the fallen!'

The warboss's mob answered with bestial shouts of their own and ran to meet the Chapter Master with guns blazing. Streams of heavy ork shells ripped through the air, striking sparks or bursting into red-hot fragments against Kantor's sacred battle armour. Dorn's Arrow responded in kind, its twin barrels shimmering with heat as it raked the greenskins with high-velocity rounds. The mass-reactive slugs punched through the orks' crude armour as though it were paper, their explosive tips blasting two of the xenos into bloody bits.

A heartbeat later the two sides crashed together in a hail of deadly blows. Kantor felt a cleaver smash into his thigh and rebound from the ceramite plate. The point of another blade dug into his breastplate, lodging between two silver pinions and cracking the laminate beneath. A chain-axe screamed, glancing from his right pauldron in a shower of sparks. The Chapter Master twisted away from the blow, his left hand darting out to seize the throat of the ork that had tried to stab him. He pulled the greenskin into a vicious punch from his power fist, then flung the headless corpse to the ground. The ork with the chain-axe rushed in again, this time swinging at Kantor's neck. The Chapter Master ducked the blow at precisely the right moment, and the axe's ravening teeth sank into the throat of a charging greenskin instead. Kantor pressed his advantage, raising Dorn's Arrow and ripping the axe-wielder apart with a burst of point-blank fire.

Kantor had sowed bloody carnage through the ranks of the mob, but the surviving xenos were quickly surrounding him. A power claw landed a heavy blow on his left shoulder, its hooked blades biting into his armour. The Chapter Master fought to keep his feet as the greenskin hauled backwards with all his might, trying to pull him off-balance. Hydraulics hissed as the three blades of the power claw bit down, scoring deep grooves in the thick, ceramite pauldron. Warning icons began to flash at the margins of Kantor's helmet display, and the pseudo-musculature beneath the armour-plates spasmed, causing the arm to lock in place. The claw had struck a neural feedback node, locking the muscles like a nerve strike, but the Chapter Master saw that the link to Dorn's Arrow still worked perfectly. Kantor fired off a short burst, blowing the ork's legs off at the knee, then drove his power fist into the screaming greenskin's chest. Another

blow, and with a sharp thunderclap the ork's power claw was torn free at the elbow.

Kantor shook his shoulder violently, trying to free himself, but the claw had locked down in a death grip and would not come free. The Chapter Master grabbed at a claw blade with his power fist; there was an angry sputter of released energy as the power field interacted with the rough steel of the claw. Temperature icons flashed insistently on Kantor's helmet display as the blade began to glow red-hot. Another second, two at most, and the metal would be soft enough to tear free.

Seeing that Kantor was half-paralysed, the survivors of the warboss's mob let out a bloodthirsty shout and closed in once more. Behind him, Kantor could hear answering shouts from Victurix's Terminators as they tried to fight their way to his side. Expertly placed shots from their storm bolters snapped past Kantor's struggling frame and struck down several of the greenskins, but the rest closed about the Chapter Master like a clawed fist.

Kantor roared an oath to Dorn and pulled with all his might at the claw embedded in his shoulder. The incandescent metal bent, joints screeching in protest. The war cries of the greenskins resounded in Kantor's ears. Blades and axes pounded against the Chapter Master's armour; chain-axes screeched and slid, seeking purchase on the curved plates of his shoulders and arms. Kantor was driven back a step by the frenzied onslaught, but he forced himself to ignore the blows and focus on the power claw instead. Just a few moments more, he told himself.

And then came a roar like a maddened bull grox, as a massive figure ploughed through the frenzied mob. The ork warboss drove through the press like a living battering ram, smashing orks trampling them underfoot in a berserk charge at Kantor.

The ork boss was armed with a huge drum-fed gun and a broad bladed axe that was larger and somewhat better made than most greenskin weapons. The giant brute was fast for its bulk, and clever while it was still a few metres away the xenos raised its gun and fired off a long, chattering burst at Kantor's chest. A hail of heavy rounds hammered at the Chapter Master's breastplate, ricocheting off its curved surface or flattening into dull, leaden discs against the ceramite plate. Already on the back foot from the frenzied attacks by the boss's mob, the onslaught of shells nearly knocked Kantor off his feet. He caught himself at the last moment, arms thrown wide for balance, when the warboss stepped in close and swung at him with its axe.

The blow was a flickering blur in the darkness, reaching for his throat. Kantor's razor-keen senses saw the glint of the axe's curved edge and twisted his

body at the last moment, letting the strike slide harmlessly by. He followed up with a devastating blow with his power fist but the warboss tucked its shoulder and continued its charge, slamming into Kantor's chest and hurling him backwards. The Chapter Master landed heavily on his shoulders and neck, the impact digging a furrow along the churned ground. Laughing madly, the warboss pressed its advantage, unleashing another stream of shells at the fallen Space Marine. Rounds kicked up plumes of dirt around Kantor, or rang against his legs and shoulders. He responded in kind with a burst from Dorn's Arrow, but with his arm still locked it was impossible to aim, and the burst missed the warboss by scant millimetres.

Roaring in triumph, the ork reared above Kantor. Lightning flashed, glinting cruelly along the edge of the greenskin's axe. The Chapter Master rolled away from the blow, kicking out with his leg at the same time and hooking the ork's knee. The warboss toppled sideways, crashing to the ground with a stream of angry curses.

Kantor was on the brute in an instant, rolling back towards the xenos and bringing down his power fist, but the warboss dodged aside at the last moment, and instead of smashing the greenskin's skull, fist gouged a blackened crater from the ground.

The warboss recovered in an instant, aiming a backhand axe blow at Kantor's face. There was no way to dodge out of its reach, so the Chapter Master rolled into the blow instead, bringing his left around into the path of the axe. With a brittle clang the weapon smashed into the power claw pinning Kantor's left arm and shattered it into a dozen pieces.

Warning icons vanished at once from Kantor's display. Dorn's Arrow came up and fired in a single motion, stitching a line of shells from the ork's waist to its right shoulder. The mass-reactive rounds turned the greenskin's side into shredded meat and knocked it onto its back.

But still the brute was not finished. Roaring in anger and pain, the warboss ground its fist into the dirt and pushed itself upright. When it did, Kantor was ready. His power fist lashed out in a devastating punch, catching the ork's iron jaw and driving molten fragments of its teeth into the warboss's brain.

The ork fell backwards in a smoking heap. Kantor rose to his feet fist shrouded in boiling blood. The last of the warboss's mob backed away from the Chapter Master, bellowing in shock and dismay. Kantor advanced on them. 'Face me!' he shouted. 'Come and meet your death, vermin!' He reached for them with his power fist, its fingertips shedding drops of molten iron. 'Look upon the Emperor's wrath and despair!'

Greenskins raced past Kantor, firing wildly back the way they had come.

Storm bolters thundered close behind the Chapter Master, cutting down several of the fleeing orks. The rest ran past the warboss's remaining warriors, and within moments they, too, were in full retreat, disappearing amid the huts to the west.

Victurix's Terminators took up positions beside Kantor, their guns hammering away at the fleeing greenskins. The Chapter Master turned about, taking in the battlefield. Dozens of orks lay in bloody heaps around the fire pits, cut down by the ruthless fire of the Space Marines. Sergeant Daecor and his squad formed an arc to the south-west, advancing slowly through the tangle of bodies and killing any wounded xenos they found. Sergeant Phrenotas and his veteran had finished their sweep and joined up with the Terminators on the opposite flank, their bolters covering the approaches to the north and east.

It was over, Kantor thought with grim satisfaction. The attack, all told, had lasted less than eight minutes. With the greenskin warboss dead, the orks were broken. All that remained now was to hunt down the survivors. He and his brothers would be back at Gueras-403 by dawn.

Kantor turned to Victurix. 'Perhaps I should have told Brother Olivos to wait after all—'

Just then, an angry shout rent the night. It came from the west, out of the shadow of Widow's Spire. It was not the shout of a fearsome warboss, but it was the voice of a greenskin all the same.

'Waaaaaaaaagghhhhhhh!' came the cry, echoing off the walls of the gorge.

The voice faded. For half a second, there was silence. And then Kantor felt the ground start to tremble beneath his feet. It came from the west, swelling in power and intensity with every passing moment. A low rumble, like thunder, echoed across the gorge. Kantor knew the sound at once. It was the pounding feet of multitudes, racing across the rocky ground towards them.

It was the vast, hungry sound of a massed charge.

'WAAAAAAAAAGHHHHHHH!!!' roared the answer to the lone ork's call, and the storm broke over Traitor's Gorge at last.



THE RAIN CAME suddenly, bursting from the clouds in a torrential downpour that lashed angrily at the sides of the gorge. Thunder boomed, rolling along the tops of the mountains and reverberating along Shaniel's bones.

But it was not the sudden onslaught of the storm that roused the pathfinder from her meditations. A deeper, more distant sound was buried within the hissing of rain on stone and the knife-sharp whistling of the wind. Her other rangers heard it, too, many of them rising from their meditative positions and moving close to the mouth of the cave to listen.

Shaniel was already sitting close to the cave entrance, positioned so her slender back was to the rock wall and turned so that she could observe both the entrance and the interior of the cave itself. She cocked her head slightly to the side, concentrating on the sounds rising from the gorge. Her eyes narrowed in recognition.

The pathfinder rose smoothly to her feet. With a few softly spoken commands, her companions began checking their weapons and adjusting the settings on their cameleoline cloaks. Shaniel checked each squad in turn as she worked her way to the rear of the cave. Cold, blue light shone around a sharp turn in the rock, creating an alcove of sorts where the farseer and the squad of Warp Spiders waited.

Sethyr Tuannan knelt upon a small carpet woven of rich silks and inlaid with patterns of fine, glassy threads extruded from warp-reactive crystal. A small lamp rested on a delicate metal tripod nearby, bathing the alcove in its soft glow. At the very back of the alcove, half hidden in shadow, the five Warp Spiders sat facing one another in a meditative circle. The eerie song of their jump generators echoed faintly off the rough stone walls.

Shaniel knelt beside the farseer, her long rifle resting across her bent knee. 'The battle has begun,' she said quietly.

Sethyr nodded, her expression hidden beneath her war-mask. *'For some minutes now, yes,'* she agreed.

The pathfinder frowned. 'And nothing has changed? We must still take no

part?'

'Not yet.' The pale mask turned to regard her. 'Do you doubt me, Shaniel?'

'I do not.' The pathfinder paused, considering her words carefully. 'But I can hear the war cries of the greenskins. The gorge carries their bestial shouts for kilometres, even through the clamour of thunder and the hissing sheets of rain.'

'You have a flair for the poetic,' Sethyr observed. 'But I fail to see how this is relevant—'

Shaniel interrupted the farseer with a brusque wave of her hand. Nuance and circumspection were well and good in the tearoom or the garden, but not upon the eve of battle. 'Just how large is the greenskin force arrayed against us?'

Sethyr straightened slightly, but conceded the pathfinder's point with a curt nod. 'Pedro Kantor has been fighting the orks here for many cycles,' she explained. 'He hunts them relentlessly, driven by guilt and the demands of honour, and he is rightly feared by his foes. Those he has not killed have fled before him, retreating through the mountains in hopes of escaping his reach.'

'Here they have found good terrain to fight in, and a leader who has united them against Kantor and his warriors,' the farseer said. 'There are tunnels and deep caverns within the depths of this mountain, large enough to hide an army, and the orks have made good use of them.'

Shaniel let out a slow breath. 'And Kantor does not suspect?'

Sethyr shook her head. 'His hunger for revenge made him incautious. He hastened into the gorge, believing he faced no more than a hundred greenskins. The true number is closer to a thousand.'

The pathfinder felt a chill race along her spine. She leaned in close to Sethyr. 'Kantor does not stand a chance,' she hissed. 'The fate of Alaitoc rests in his hands. Surely we must aid him!'

The farseer's gaze fell to the meditation carpet. She laid a palm atop its surface, causing the crystal threads to glimmer beneath her touch. *'He is not ready for our help just yet,' she said softly. 'Not until he stands upon the edge of the abyss. Only then will he listen. Only then will he believe.'*



LIGHTNING, STARK AND white, knifed across the underbelly of the clouds and unleashed a torrent of pounding rain. The hiss of falling water, and the crash of thunder that followed, were swallowed up in the pulsing wall of bloodthirsty noise bearing down on the Crimson Fists from the west.

'WAAAAAAGGGGHHHHHHH!!!!'

'Brother Victurix!' the Chapter Master called, but the Terminators needed no prompting. They were already on the move, forming a firing line to receive the greenskin charge. Daecor's warriors were following suit, taking up position beside Squad Victurix and extending the line in a slight curve to the south. Phrenotas and his Sternguard ran up and took position behind the Terminators, ready to fire through the gaps between the Tactical Dreadnought suits and counter-charge the enemy if needed.

Kantor placed himself at the juncture where Squad Victurix and Squad Daecor met. From there he could gauge the strength of the ork counter-attack and be in a position to support any of the three squads if necessary. His mind raced as the greenskins bore down on them, considering his force's options in the face of the new threat. He wasted no time wondering where this new horde of orks had come from; all that mattered was how many there were, and whether his Space Marines could kill them before they were overwhelmed.

The Chapter Master checked the ammo load for Dorn's Arrow. The rumble of pounding feet was louder than the rain, more constant than the thunder. Another flash of lightning raked the sky overhead, and in that cold flash of light Kantor saw the leading edge of the charge.

There were hundreds of them. Beady eyes glinted in the blue glare. Tusks gleamed, and jagged blades flickered like serpents' tongues. They were pouring down the narrow lanes and crashing headlong through the camp's flimsy huts, goaded on by their bosses and bellowing at the tops of their lungs.

The orks were just over fifty metres away. Less than a minute, Kantor thought. If the Crimson Fists could not break the greenskins' charge within that time, their chances of survival were slim.

'Victory or death!' Kantor cried, raising his fist to the churning sky. 'Squad

leaders, mark your targets and fire at will!

A half-second later the thin blue line roared its defiance at the oncoming horde. Muzzle blasts strobed yellow and orange in the darkness, pouring streams of mass-reactive shells into the oncoming orks. Against such a large force, it was nearly impossible to miss. Orks toppled by the score, cut down by the merciless storm of fire. Rank after rank fell, their bodies trampled beneath the feet of those behind them. Within seconds the xenos were charging over a carpet of their own dead to get at the Space Marines.

The raging of the heavens was nothing to the man-made thunder of the battlefield. The air shook with the thunder of the guns and the screams of the dying. Kantor added to the storm, seeking out the largest and fiercest of the oncoming greenskins and cutting them down with devastating bursts of fire. Yet the tide of death crept closer. The mire of blood and tom flesh beneath the greenskins' feet only seemed to inflame them further.

The Crimson Fists kept up their fire, working with the cool efficiency of butchers at the slaughter. Spent shell casings flashed and tumbled across the muddy ground. When a weapon ran dry, the spent clip was ejected and another rammed home in less than a second. Raindrops hissed against the barrels of boltguns and storm bolters alike, wreathing the Crimson Fists in angry plumes of steam.

Thirty metres. Twenty. The orks were returning fire now, blazing away with their crude guns in the general direction of the Space Marines. Loose streams of tracer shells buzzed through the Imperial firing lines. Most of the greenskins managed only a single burst before they were cut down. Kantor could not say how many of the xenos had fallen. A hundred? A hundred and fifty? He fired another burst, catching an oncoming boss in the throat. The brute toppled, but the rest of its mob scarcely noticed. They ran on, eyes fixed on the Space Marines that were now almost within reach.

Ten metres. Both sides traded shots at point-blank range. Several of the Crimson Fists staggered as shells ricocheted off their thick armour. The orks were so close that their screaming faces were lit by the flickering orange glow of the muzzle flashes. Their eyes were wild and their teeth bared in a berserk rictus of fury.

There was no stopping them. The horde was too big, too frenzied to break. In those last moments, as the tide of flesh and steel rushed in, Kantor came to a cold realisation. If we die here, the Chapter dies with us.

The Crimson Fists met the ork charge with shouted oaths and the resounding clash of metal on metal. Cleavers and axes rang against the Space Marines' scarred plate. Chainblades screeched and spat hissing streams of orange sparks.

Combat knives jabbed and sliced, and power fists crackled. Blood, thick and hot, sprayed across battle-brother and greenskin alike.

Kantor felled a charging ork with a backhand blow to its skull, and cut down another with a quick burst from Dorn's Arrow. The Crimson Fists fought back against the xenos onslaught with discipline and teamwork, creating a wall of fists and blades that the orks could not break through. But the sheer number of attackers would soon tell against them, Kantor knew. Even now the ork horde was sweeping north and south, threatening to engulf the beleaguered Space Marines.

'Defensive formation omega!' Kantor ordered. An ork blade struck his upper chest. Another stabbed at his eye, missing by scant millimetres. He let the thrust slide past and took the greenskins head from its shoulders. 'Brother Artos, cover the gaps!'

The Space Marines reacted instantly, executing the formation drill without conscious thought. Squad Phrenotas swung north and east, anchoring their line on Squad Victurix to their left. At the same time, Squad Daecor drew back, connecting the far end of their line with Squad Phrenotas, creating a hollow triangle with Kantor in the centre. Brother Artos stepped out of the line and took position next to the Chapter Master, ready to cover any gaps with bursts from his heavy flamer.

Moments later, the Crimson Fists were surrounded. The Space Marines took a heavy toll on the greenskins, but in close combat the odds began to swing in the enemy's favour. Though they could not withstand a hit from a Terminator's power fist, the greenskins scarcely felt the bite of a combat knife, or the butt end of a swung bolter. And the damage to the Crimson Fists' armour was mounting steadily. Within minutes, nearly half of Kantor's warriors were sporting minor wounds as they struggled with the orks.

The Chapter Master stayed on the move, darting from one side of the formation to the next and lending support where it was needed most. He slew orks with swift jabs from his power fist, or blew them apart with point-blank bursts of fire. But for every greenskin he slew, three more appeared to take its place, and the Crimson Fists formation was squeezed tighter and tighter by the mounting press of bodies. Kantor knew from experience that the sheer weight of attackers would continue to drive the Space Marines back upon one another until they scarcely had room to swing their weapons. When that happened, they would start to fall, one by one, until finally the last few survivors were overwhelmed.

A furious bellow shook the air behind Kantor. He whirled to see a huge ork boss shoulder his way through the mob towards Squad Daecor. Brother Santoval, a Space Marine of only fifty years' service, stood squarely in the

brute's path. The warrior held his ground,

shouting an oath to Dorn as he fired point-blank into the ork boss's chest, but the range was so close that the rounds tore through the xenos's body before they had time to detonate. Blood poured from the wounds, but the boss scarcely seemed to feel them. Roaring with rage, the brute swung a massive, two-handed axe and split Santoval's helmet from crown to chin. Moments later the ork boss was engulfed in a burst of searing promethium as Brother Artos moved to seal the gap.

Kantor swallowed his anguish as Artos dragged Santoval's body into the centre of the formation. He would be damned before he stood here and watched his Chapter die before his eyes. They had to break out of the encirclement, and quickly, before the numbers surrounding them grew too great to overcome.

There were only two options. Kantor considered them and reached a swift decision.

'Brothers, stand ready!' Kantor called over the vox-net. 'We're fighting our way out of here! Brother Artos, rejoin your squad. On my command, we will form a wedge with Squad Phrenotas on point, facing north. Squad Daecor will form the flanks. Squad Victurix will form the rear and cover our withdrawal.'

'North, my lord?' Phrenotas said. 'That leads us deeper into the gorge.'

'We have no choice,' Kantor replied. 'The walls of the gorge narrow to the south. If we push that way, we'll just drive the orks ahead of us into the gap, and then we'll be trapped. There's high ground to the north. We can stage a fighting withdrawal and bleed the green-skins for kilometres. Swing the odds in our favour.'

'Understood,' the veteran sergeant said, though it was clear from the tone of his voice that Phrenotas had misgivings about the plan.

'Squad Phrenotas stands ready.'

'Daecor?' the Chapter Master called.

'Ready.'

'Victurix?'

'Ready.'

'Execute!'

At the command, Brother Artos laid down a broad arc of burning promethium in front of the Sternguard squad. Nearly a dozen orks were caught in the blast; they recoiled, screaming from the flames, and Squad Phrenotas drove forwards into the gap. Kantor followed close behind, covering the flanks of the squad with bursts from Dorn's Arrow. Squad Victurix moved next, falling back a step and turning their guns to the south. That was the cue for Squad Daecor. They fell back, passing between the Terminators and fanning out to left and right to form

the sides of the wedge. The Imperials completed the evolution in less than five seconds, firing all the while to keep the xenos at bay.

'Go!' Kantor ordered, moving up to join Phrenotas's veterans. He fired a long burst at a knot of orks lingering just beyond the flames, killing two and driving the rest back. 'Don't let up!'

The Crimson Fists drove like a spear tip into the mass of orks, burning those directly in front and shoving the rest to either side. The Sternguard and the warriors of Squad Daecor fired on the move, keeping the greenskins from pressing the formation too closely. At the base of the wedge, Squad Victurix had the hardest task, keeping the growing mass of orks behind them at bay with a steady hail of fire from their storm bolters and assault cannon. Every few minutes a large band of frenzied greenskins would brave the hail of shells and charge the Terminators, only to be crushed beneath the blows of their crackling power fists.

Streams of ork shells raked the wedge from all sides, but in the darkness and the rain most of the shots went wild. More than one ork fell in the crossfire, and soon there were mobs blazing away at one another from opposite sides of the gorge.

At the tip of the wedge, Kantor and Sergeant Phrenotas flanked Brother Artos, cutting down any orks bold enough to risk the flames.

The greenskins were hungry for battle, but found themselves inexorably pushed to the sides of the wedge by the Space Marines' relentless advance. Despite their overwhelming numbers, the xenos lacked coordination and leadership, and could not mass their strength in such a way as to halt the Crimson Fists. While the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were masters in every aspect of battlefield tactics, it was mobile warfare at which they excelled above all others. They could move faster, hit harder and more accurately, and coordinate their manoeuvres more effectively than their enemies. The orks had tried to deprive them of those advantages, and had Kantor hesitated even a few minutes, they might well have succeeded.

More shells tore through the Space Marine formation. Rounds glanced off Kantor's right pauldron and sped on, ricocheting wildly amongst the armoured warriors. A sputtering ork grenade flew out of the darkness and got tangled up between his feet before exploding. Shrapnel scored bright scratches across his leg armour, and a sharp flare of pain behind his right knee nearly caused him to stumble. Kantor took a step, found that the splinter did not greatly impede his range of motion, and put it out of his mind.

Artos raised his heavy flamer and unleashed another, hissing blast. There were only a handful of screams this time. The press ahead was thinning out. 'We're

almost clear!' Kantor called out

The Crimson Fists plunged ahead, through the fire and the driving rain. The jellied promethium clinging to the ground splashed beneath their tread, kicking up sprays of ferocious yellow-orange light. Then they were through, and Kantor found himself looking out upon a rocky, desolate slope that ran for nearly a hundred metres before disappearing around a slight bend to the east. They had fought their way clear of the camp and the greenskin horde. Now came the difficult part.

'Squads Phrenotas and Daecor, flank left and right. Skirmish order. I want harassing fire to the south. Squad Victurix, head north at the double. Find us good, defensive ground and take up position there. Go!'

'Acknowledged,' Sergeant Victurix replied. The Terminators fired off another volley at the milling orks and headed north, into the darkness. The Space Marines, in their massive Tactical Dreadnought suits, could manage little more than a lumbering trot. Kantor and the other squads would have to buy them as much time as possible.

The Chapter Master watched the Terminators go, and then turned his full attention to the south. The scene inside the camp was one of total pandemonium. The greenskin horde had broken down into separate mobs, blundering into one another and trading blows in the darkness. Tracer fire zipped back and forth across the gorge, punching through grox-hide shelters and, occasionally, ork flesh. The hot tracers and Artos's promethium had started a number of fires amongst the rubbish, which burned stubbornly despite the pounding rain. Kantor looked upon his foes in disarray and cursed in frustration. With a single, well-equipped tactical company at his back, he could have destroyed the greenskins in the space of an hour. As it was, he knew that the orks would sort themselves out sooner rather than later, and then they would come swarming up the gorge. It would be all he and his hunting party could do just to survive. With a growl, Kantor banished such grim thoughts from his mind. The situation was what it was. He had to work with what was at hand. And his immediate problem was the hundred or so orks gathering less than a hundred metres south of him.

The one advantage to being surrounded by the greenskins was that the Space Marines only had to concern themselves with the xenos immediately in front of them. Now the orks had the entire width of the gorge to spread out and attack their enemy. Kantor knew that the orks did not see well in the darkness, and were easily distracted when their blood was up. For the moment, only those closest to the breakout had any real idea where the Crimson Fists were. That mob was pushing up the slope, roaring and shooting and trying to get the attention of the rest.

Kantor pointed at the oncoming orks. 'Those are the ones we have to deal with, and quickly, before the rest of the horde begins paying attention. We hit them hard, scatter them, and break contact. No shooting. I don't want to give away our location to the rest.'

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, the Chapter Master broke into a run. Squads Phrenotas and Daecor fell into step a moment later, readying their combat knives.

Kantor hoped to be upon the orks before they knew what was happening. Their dark armour rendered them almost invisible, and their heavy footfalls were masked by the constant hammering of gunfire and the greenskins' shouts. But a sudden flash of lightning directly overhead betrayed the Crimson Fists more than twenty metres from their goal. The orks caught sight of the armoured warriors bearing down on them and let out a wild roar, opening fire with every weapon they had as they charged to meet their foes.

Bursts of glowing tracers whipped through the narrowing gap between greenskins and Space Marines. Several of the Crimson Fists were hit. One, a warrior from Squad Daecor by the name of Velas, staggered in mid-stride and fell forward into the mud. By ill chance, an ork round had struck his occularium, passing through his right eye and into his brain.

Rage burned at the edges of Kantor's brain. He longed to bellow his fury at the orks, but iron self-discipline held his emotions in check, as it did for his remaining battle-brothers. They shouted no oaths or righteous imprecations, calling no attention to themselves from the larger horde in the last few seconds before they crashed into the greenskin mob.

Kantor swept his power fist in a wide arc as he ran past the first of the orks, catching one of the xenos under its chin and flipping the brute's body end-for-end before it hit the ground. An axe smashed heavily into his shoulder, but the Chapter Master ignored the blow, pushing deeper into the mob. He clipped another passing ork on the hip, shattering the joint in a spray of blood and dropping it as well.

Onwards he went, step by step, dealing death to any greenskin he passed. His Space Marines did the same, slitting throats, slashing bellies and ripping hamstrings with their saw-backed knives. Another ork leapt directly into Kantor's path, hacking at him with a cleaver. The Chapter Master took the blow against his breastplate, stiff-armed the ork in the throat, and stomped down with the full weight of his armoured body on the ork's chest as it fell back against the ground. Bones crunched, and the ork's angry roar turned into a blood-choked scream.

Kantor glanced left and right, searching for the leader of the mob, and caught

sight of Phrenotas squaring off with a massive greenskin wielding a chain-axe. The ork howled in fury, raining a flurry of blows down on the veteran Space Marine. One stroke raked across Phrenotas's breastplate, just millimetres below his throat; another caught him across the left forearm and left a jagged scar across his battered vambrace. The third stroke was a lightning reversal aimed for the damaged side of the sergeant's helm. Phrenotas ducked smoothly beneath the blow, his power fist pistoning downwards in the same motion to shatter the ork's right knee. Unbalanced, the ork boss spun about with a howl of pain - until the sergeant's backhand stroke blasted its skull to bloody flinders.

The orks' shouts turned from bellows of rage to cries of panic. More than a dozen of the greenskins had been killed, and the survivors scattered into the darkness. Kantor halted, his boots sliding a bit on the muddy ground. 'That's enough,' he said over the vox-net. 'Those stragglers will be looking for other mobs to join. I want to be a few kilometres away before they can point anyone in our direction.'

The Chapter Master surveyed his warriors as they turned silently and began jogging back up the slope. Their wargear was etched with new scars and wet with rain and fresh gore. They were battered but unbowed, beleaguered but still defiant. The sight of them filled Kantor with pride, and a bitter ache for all that had been lost.

The deaths of Santoval and Velas brought them two steps closer to annihilation. As he ran, Kantor wondered if his Chapter would survive to see the dawn.



THE FIGHTING WAS drawing nearer. Shaniel had been listening to the running battle for hours, crouched with her rifle at the mouth of the cave. The storm had moved off to the north-east, leaving behind the first clear sky she had seen since coming to the human world. Without the muffling effects of the rain and wind, the sounds of combat were sharply defined, echoing along the twisting course of the gorge, and to Shaniel's experienced ear they spoke volumes about the struggles taking place just a few kilometres to the south.

'Kantor has escaped the cauldron.'

The pathfinder stirred, glancing up at Sethyr. She had not heard the farseer approach.

'You sound as though you admire him,' Shaniel said coolly.

The farseer gazed out at the winding gorge. *'Kantor is fighting for the honour of his brethren, and the survival of his people. Is that not admirable, Shaniel?'* The farseer's voice was grave. *'I have seen the foes he must face, and understand the sacrifices he is willing to make.'*

The pathfinder shrugged. 'They are fighting well, I will grant you that. By the sound of things, they have been staging an expert fighting withdrawal. But their pursuers have grown in number with each passing hour, and the humans are running out of room to manoeuvre.'

Sethyr nodded. *'Even so.'* The ribbons tied to her spear haft fluttered in the breeze as she pointed off to the east. *'Dawn is fast approaching. It is time we took our places upon the stage.'*

Shaniel rose smoothly to her feet. Her face was composed, but inwardly she was eager at the prospect of action. Her rangers took notice and stirred from their meditations. Rifles were readied, and concealing cloaks were dropped into place.

The pathfinder gestured to the squad she had chosen to accompany her. The second squad, including Teuthas, would remain with the farseer.

As she made ready to lead her warriors from the cave, she realised that the Warp Spiders were nowhere to be seen. They had already activated their jump

generators and slipped away, on whatever mission Sethyr had assigned them.



HERE THEY COME, brothers!' Kantor called out. 'Stand ready!'

Dawn had given way to a grey-orange haze that hung close to the mountaintops and left the air humid and close. The last hill, at the farthest end of the gorge, was tall and possessed of a long, gradually steepening slope that had made difficult going for the ork horde. Eight times the greenskins had come howling up the slope, and eight times the Crimson Fists had hurled them back. They had left behind hundreds of corpses, heaped in bleeding mounds all down the length of the hill. There were so many that the Space Marines had made barricades from the dead, piling them up all along the summit to provide cover from ork bombs and rockets. It was a vista of carnage grim enough to give the fiercest warrior pause. But not the orks. The sight of the growing slaughter only seemed to excite them further.

It had been a long night of ambush and retreat, stretching for twenty kilometres up the course of Traitor's Gorge. The Crimson Fists found defensible terrain, let their pursuers charge into a punishing crossfire, and when the orks fell back in disarray they would withdraw in search of the next ambush point. They had killed scores of the enemy along the way, but the number of orks pursuing them had only seemed to grow larger and more determined with every passing hour.

Once dawn had broken, the greenskins' accuracy had improved as well. They lost Artos just after the last ambush. The veteran warrior had waited until the last moment to withdraw, covering the rest of his battle-brothers with the dregs of his weapon's promethium tank. Just as he had been about to break off, a sputtering ork rocket came corkscrewing through the air and struck him full in the chest. Every other Space Marine had been wounded along the way, some multiple times, by the bite of axe, cleaver and shell. The Crimson Fists fought on by virtue of their superhuman stamina and rapid healing abilities, but even they had been taxed to their limits.

And now the orks were getting ready to charge again.

Kantor had chosen their position carefully, positioning his warriors atop the hill so that the orks could not outflank them. Victurix's Terminators formed the

centre of the line, a fearsome bulwark that had broken the enemy's assault again and again. Phrenotas and the Sternguard covered the right flank, standing upon a rocky outcropping that allowed them to pour enfilading fire down on their attackers. Kantor stood with Daecor and his tactical squad on the left. The worst injured amongst the Crimson Fists sat some distance behind the battle line, employing rest and meditative techniques to boost their bodies' healing abilities. At Kantor's warning they stirred themselves and rose slowly to their feet, taking their places beside their brethren.

Kantor turned to the Terminator squad. 'Sergeant Victurix, what's the status of the assault cannon?' Limited maintenance and hours of sustained fire had caused the multi-barrelled weapon to jam with increasing frequency.

'Ready, my lord,' Victurix replied. 'But Brother Silva says ammunition is running very low.'

'The same can be said for all of us,' Kantor said grimly. Dorn's Arrow was down to its last few bursts. They had killed hundreds of the xenos over the course of the night, but still there seemed to be hundreds more. 'Make each shot count, brothers.'

At the base of the hill, the orks war cries grew louder and more intense. The leading edge of the horde began to shift, as one group of greenskins or another made to lunge up the hill towards the waiting Space Marines. Huge ork bosses waded through the frenzied mobs, goading their followers with snarls, punches and kicks. The brutes forced their way to the front of the horde. They looked up the corpse-strewn slope and smiled wicked, bloodthirsty smiles.

'WAAAAAAGGGHHHHHH!!!' they roared, and the horde surged forwards. Gunfire erupted from the greenskin line as the orks opened fire with every weapon they had.

The Crimson Fists crouched behind their makeshift barricades as the air filled with a hail of heavy-calibre shells. A trio of rockets came sputtering up the slope; two passed over Squad Victurix, missing the kneeling Terminators by scant metres. The third struck the barricade of flesh shielding Squad Daecor, hurling up a fountain of charred flesh and fragments of bone.

As ever, the gunfire from the orks was inaccurate, but the sheer volume kept Kantor and the Space Marines under cover as the horde clambered furiously up the slope. The air hummed with the constant passage of shells. Another pair of rockets streaked into the Space Marine positions, carving gory craters from the barricades. And all the while, the baying of the horde drew nearer.

The Chapter Master gritted his teeth. The orks were getting clever, employing basic tactics like suppressing fire to support their assault. After suffering punishing casualties the orks were starting to show signs of real leadership.

Kantor would have given much to know who this new leader was - and to have a clear shot at the greenskin's head.

The ork assault wave was close now. The air shook with their war cries. Consequently, the volume of suppressing fire began to diminish, as the greenskins risked hitting their own warriors as they approached the barricades.

'On my command,' Kantor said over the vox-net, 'we throw the last of the grenades and then open fire. Aim for the bosses. If we can kill them, we might be able to break the rest.'

Kantor listened. The pounding of feet rose to a crescendo. Twenty metres. Fifteen. Ten.

'Now!' the Chapter Master cried. 'For Dorn and the Emperor!' Kantor rose from behind the barricade, bringing up Dorn's Arrow.

'Wait!' Phrenotas shouted.

Kantor had no sooner heard the warning than his world dissolved in an orange blast of fire.

Seething flames and tongues of black smoke blotted out Kantor's helmet display. Temperature readings spiked; he could feel the intense heat seeping through layers of ceramite and adamantium plate. Instinct and training took over at once: the Chapter Master moved without conscious thought dropping down behind the barricade and pressing himself face-first into the ground in hopes of smothering the flames. The fluids leaking from the once-living barricades had turned the earth at their base into reeking mud, thick and dinging. After a few seconds, it put out the jellied vehicle fuel spat by the ork flamer.

When Kantor could see again, the entire length of the barricade was ablaze, throwing plumes of greasy smoke into the hazy sky. Two flamers continued to pour fire on the centre of the line, trying to get at Victurix's Terminators. A third stream of liquid fire was playing over Phrenotas's position, likewise forcing the Sternguard to keep under cover.

To Kantor's left, dozens of orks were overrunning the barricade, many leaping headlong through the flames to attack Daecor's Space Marines. The Chapter Master bit back a curse. The damned greenskins had planned well this time. He rose from his crouch, intending to aid Daecor's squad, and at the last second heard a thin, hungry hiss from the other side of the barricade. Instantly he dropped back behind cover, just in time to avoid another blast of fire.

The Chapter Master could see the orks' tactics at once, they were using their flamers to keep most of the Space Marines under cover, while throwing most of their weight at just one segment of the line. From there they could work further along the barricade, wiping out the Crimson Fists one squad at a time.

Kantor estimated that one of the ork flamers was just a few metres away, on

the other side of the barricade from him. He could not stick his head up without drawing the greenskin's attention. Slowly, he turned about and looked down the far end of the battle line, past Squad Victurix. Through the swirling smoke he caught a glimpse of a streak of flame dousing the Sternguard position. If he leaned away from the barricade, he could just catch sight of the ork wielding the flamer. Without hesitation, he raised Dorn's Arrow and fired a long stuttering burst. The greenskin jerked and twitched as a dozen rounds struck home. One hit the flamer itself and detonated, spraying burning fuel in every direction.

A roaring tongue of flame arced over the barricade opposite Kantor, forcing him to duck away from the blast. Moments later, bolter fire began to pound away from the outcropping where Phrenotas's veterans stood. Orks screamed in pain, and another flamer exploded with a hollow *whoomp*. The fiery barrage covering Squad Victurix suddenly ceased, and within moments the Terminators were back in action, blasting away with their storm bolters. Kantor could hear the shells bursting on the far side of the barrier opposite him.

Trusting in his battle-brothers, Kantor surged to his feet. All four of the flamers had been knocked out, and the ork assault was over-extended, funnelled in a long line towards the far end of Daecor's position. Fire from the Sternguard and Victurix's squad was raking the orks' vulnerable flank. As Kantor watched, the Terminator's assault cannon went into action, scything down ranks of greenskins in a hail of high-velocity shells. The Chapter Master added his own fire to onslaught, triggering a long burst at the head of the line.

Three orks were cut down before the twin bolts of the ancient storm bolter locked back on empty chambers. The weapon's capacious magazine had finally run dry.

Roaring a battle-oath, Kantor raced down the line to aid Daecor and his squad. The Space Marines were hard-pressed, but fighting furiously against the ork onslaught. Sergeant Daecor himself was being attacked from all sides by a group of five orks. The Chapter Master fell upon them and slew three of the xenos with sweeps of his power fist before the others realised their danger. Daecor despatched them both before they could recover their wits.

The Sternguard continued to rain down fire on the orks while Victurix's Terminators had left the burning barricade and were pushing towards the orks' extended flank. Daecor rallied his squad and with Kantor's aid the Space Marines began to push the greenskins back. For a moment, the horde wavered, and the battle hung in the balance. Then the Terminators crashed into the ork line, crushing nearly a dozen greenskins beneath their power fists, and the enemy assault collapsed. Within moments, the surviving xenos were pulling back firing wildly in their wake as they retreated back down the corpse strewn hill.

Victurix's Terminators withdrew to the centre of the battle line, though with the barricade still engulfed in flames there was little cover to make use of. Kantor surveyed the tactical squad.

'Casualties?'

'Nothing serious, my lord.' Daecor's left pauldron was askew. He reached under the curved plate and, with a grunt, pulled out the broken tip of an ork cleaver. The sergeant tossed the red-stained length of metal aside and picked his bolter up from the ground. His left arm hung limp at his side. The other members of his squad looked to be in little better shape.

The Chapter Master nodded gravely. 'What about ammunition?'

Daecor shook his head. 'We fired off our last ten rounds just before the assault hit. If they come again, we'll just have to kick the greenskins to death.'

Kantor could not help but smile at the defiance in Sergeant Daecor's voice. Every one of his Space Marines had fought like heroes, each one accounting for scores of the enemy since the battle of the gorge began. But knives and fists would not be enough. When the orks came again, Squad Daecor would be hard-pressed to survive.

'The Sternguard may have some spare ammunition left,' Kantor said, though he knew it unlikely. 'Get your squad to work building another barricade. We will need the cover when the orks—'

Kantor was interrupted by a furious roar from the bottom of the hill. The sound surprised him. How could the orks have possibly rallied so quickly? He turned and stared down the slope.

The lower third of the hillside was still crowded with orks retreating from the last assault. Beyond them, at the base of the hill, waited a force of some two hundred greenskins. They were by far the largest and best-armed warriors of the horde, led by a collection of huge, ferocious bosses. They were bellowing in rage, not at the Space Marines, but at the greenskins who blocked their path to the summit.

Kantor saw the orks' strategy at once. The whole point of the last assault had been to soak up the last of the Space Marines' ammunition and break up their barricades with the flamers. The weaker members of the horde had been sent up as boltgun fodder, while the real assault force waited to finish the job.

The realisation struck him like a dagger to the heart. This is the end of us, he thought, as the final assault began.



SETHYR STUDIED THE weavings of fate. In the space of a single moment, the continuum of potentialities resolved into the pattern she had so long sought. The future lay within her grasp. The moment was at hand.

One by one, the rune stones dropped into her palm. She murmured a command into her helmet, opening the comm-link.

'Take up your rifles, sons and daughters of Alaitoc,' she said. *'Strike, and be the salvation of your people.'*

The farseer raised her witchblade and etched a trio of burning runes in the hazy air.

SHANIEL LIFTED HER gaze from the sight of her long rifle and glanced across the gorge. She could just make out the slim figure of the farseer, black against the grey of the mountainside. Strike? Strike whom?

The second wave of greenskins were on the move, smashing aside the last few retreating orks and heading up the slope. Most of the Space Marines were in the open, their barricades reduced to charred flesh and piles of brittle bones. None of them were firing at the oncoming orks, which told her that the humans had used up the last of their ammunition. This time the fighting would be hand-to-hand, and it would not end until one side or the other was destroyed.

Did Sethyr mean for them to kill *all* of the orks? It was not possible. There was not enough time.

Her eyes narrowed. Was that a glimmer of light next to the farseer?

One of her rangers murmured in surprise. Scowling, the pathfinder peered through her scope. All she saw were orks—

A flicker of light caught her eye. She centred her scope over it. A wisp of blue-green flame danced a few centimetres above the head of one of the larger orks.

Fracture points, she recalled the farseer telling her. You will know them when the time comes.

A slow, predatory smile stole over Shaniel's face. She laid the aiming point of

her sight on the back of the ork's head and caressed the trigger.



THE ORKS HAD pushed the last of the stragglers aside and were picking up speed. 'Close in!' Kantor ordered his warriors. 'We anchor the line on the Sternguard! Squad Daecor will cover the left flank and keep the xenos from circling around to our rear!'

Squad Victurix shifted their formation further right, coming into contact with the Sternguard. Phrenotas and his Space Marines had set their prized boltguns aside and drawn their combat knives. Once again, Kantor took up position between Squads Daecor and Victurix. Sergeant Daecor himself was at the far end of the line - a refused flank that curved back towards the north.

The Chapter Master hoped to take the brunt of the charge upon himself and the Terminators. If the orks got past him and fell upon Squad Daecor, the Space Marines would not be able to hold out for very long. Once the greenskins got behind the Terminators, they would eventually fall as well, and then it would just be Phrenotas and the Sternguard against the horde.

The taste of defeat was bitter on Kantor's tongue. There was nothing left to do now but to die with as much honour as possible, so that the memory of the Chapter might live on in the annals of the Imperium.

Shame and anger swelled up inside him as he watched his doom approach. It was not the prospect of death that troubled him, nor was it even the extinction of his Chapter, for it was the purpose and the privilege of the Adeptus Astartes to fight and die in the Emperor's name. It was the senselessness of it all that galled him to the core. We survived Snagrod and his hordes, he thought, only to meet our end in this dusty gorge over a matter of personal pride.

Kantor raised his power fist in challenge to the orks, and the greenskins responded, brandishing their weapons and howling for blood - and then, as he watched, one of the larger orks stumbled, dropping its weapon and falling onto its face.

Another greenskin let out an agonised scream and lurched sideways, one hand clapping against the side of its neck as though stung. A second later, Kantor saw a flicker of intense, blue-green light blossom at the back of the greenskin's head, and the brute's face went slack. As the ork boss fell to the ground, the baying of

the horde gave way to shouts of confusion and dismay.

'Snipers!' Phrenotas called out. 'The orks' are taking fire from Widow's Spire and Darkridge!'

Kantor saw them at nearly the same moment: lithe figures, armed with long-barrelled rifles, dashing nimbly from cover to cover and targeting the largest warriors of the ork assault with precise bolts of las-fire. They were not Crimson Fists, the Chapter Master saw at once. Given their uncanny grace and speed, Kantor did not think they were even human.

Whoever the surprise attackers were, their effect on the orks was immediate and obvious. The assault had ground to a halt on the slopes of the hill, its members thrown into disarray by the deadly fire.

The enemy had, for the moment, lost their momentum. Kantor's battlefield instincts, honed by training and centuries of combat, told him that the outcome of the battle hung in the balance.

'Forwards, brothers,' he said. 'Forwards! If we charge now, we can put the greenskins to flight!'

Kantor broke into a run, heading straight for the centre of the milling orks. Fierce shouts filled the air behind him as the Crimson Fists joined their Chapter Master. In moments, the ground shook with the force of their charge.

With their bosses slain, and more orks falling with each passing moment the greenskins' attention was divided between the oncoming Space Marines and the death raining down on them from behind. Those xenos closest to the charging warriors tried to warn the rest, but Kantor and the Crimson Fists gave them little time to react. They struck the greenskin mobs like a hammer, crushing those in the front ranks and scattering those behind.

The unexpected onslaught was too much for the orks. They broke and fled down the slope, raked all along the way by bolts of brilliant light from the snipers overlooking the gorge. Their panic infected the rest of the horde, and within minutes, several hundred greenskins were in full flight, retreating back down the gorge in the direction of their camp. By the time the Crimson Fists reached the bottom of the hill, the last of the orks had disappeared behind the next set of low hills to the south.

The Space Marines stood amidst the slaughter, silent and somewhat stunned by the reversal of fortunes. Phrenotas and Daecor joined the Chapter Master, who was studying the figures on Widow's Spire.

'Thank the Emperor,' Daecor said solemnly, 'that we may live to fight another day.'

'You should be thanking them,' Phrenotas said, nodding towards the distant peaks. 'Though first I'd like to know what they're doing here, and why they chose

to aid us.'

Kantor watched one of their saviours, darker and taller than the rest, break off from its companions and descend the steep side of the mountain with unnerving grace and speed. He was torn between competing emotions of relief and apprehension.

The Crimson Fists had survived a second brush with annihilation, but at what price?



SETHYR DREW ANOTHER burning rune in the air and leapt from the ledge, dropping the last ten metres to the bottom of the gorge as lightly as a leaf on the breeze. The bodies of dead greenskins were not so thick here as upon the slope of the nearby hill; she picked her way between them easily as she approached Kantor.

The Chapter Master stood like a statue amongst the corpses of his foes, his expression hidden, like hers, by the helmet that he wore. Most of Kantor's warriors had fallen back, busying themselves with searching for wounded greenskins and slitting their throats. The largest of them, the ones called Terminators, formed a single rank just a few metres behind Kantor, their bestial helmets turned towards her in stony silence.

Each and every one of them, down to the lowest-ranking battle-brother, was a living testament to the wrack and ruin of combat. Their armour was battered and scarred, its enamel chipped and covered with splashes of dust, blood and viscera. Where fluttering ribbons had once been attached by thick coins of wax, there were only scorched fragments or fading red stains. Tabards had been shredded and stained, many reduced to little more than rags. When they moved, the farseer's keen hearing detected the faint whine of overtaxed power plants and the rope-like creak of damaged pseudo-musculature. And not all of the gore caking their wargear belong to their foes. Every one of the Space Marines bore wounds that individually would have been the death of a mere human. They endured by virtue of their physical and mental conditioning and an iron will that bordered on the supernatural.

The threads of fate lay heavily on these warriors - Sethyr could feel their vibrations like plucked cords - but none so much as Kantor himself. More and more wove about him with every passing moment, as the great skein adjusted to his continued existence. Now, instead of dying upon the summit of yonder hill, Pedro Kantor would rise from this world, and the cosmos would tremble beneath his feet. Not for the first time, Sethyr wondered if perhaps she had done the right thing by sparing him, even to save her beloved craftworld.

She approached him without preamble, her witchblade tucked beneath her arm

and pointed at the ground. Tell him no more than necessary, the farseer reminded herself. Humans were too volatile to take chances with.

Kantor nodded her way in wary greeting. 'On behalf of the Crimson Fists, you have my thanks,' he said. His voice was deep and resonant, gripping in its intensity. It surprised Sethyr, who had never seen one of the Imperium's elite warriors up close.

'The surviving beasts cower in the shadows below, ensnared in a web of our devising,' she declared. *'Pursue them into the darkness, and a great victory shall be yours.'*

Despite the layers of heavy armour, the farseer could see Kantor stiffen at her tone. Like most human leaders, he was not accustomed to being spoken to in such a fashion. A stir went through the Terminators as they watched the exchange. Sethyr gripped the haft of her spear lightly, feeling the threads of fate shifting around her.

The Chapter Master stared down at her in silence. She stared back unflinchingly.

'And should I choose not to do so?' the human said at last.

Had the farseer not been wearing her helmet, her jaw might have dropped in an unseemly display of shock. Such arrogance! She and her people had crossed the stars to save him.

'Then they will escape and grow ever stronger in the darkness,' she replied, speaking as though to an insolent child. *'In fifty of your years a shadow of their making will rise to envelop this area of space which, unopposed, shall be the doom of your people and mine. Catastrophe will reign, and you shall lament your inaction this day.'*

That seemed to get the Chapter Master's attention. Kantor turned and considered his warriors for a moment. 'Will you aid us in the gorge as you did here?'

'Be not so swift to embrace us as allies,' Sethyr snapped. She was saying too much. She knew that on one level, but she also knew Kantor's future - the future that she had just made possible - and how it would ultimately run its course. The words came pouring out of her in an angry flood. *'Auspicious fate dictated that we should fight side-by-side this day, but fate is a fickle creature. At our next encounter, it will be my fists that bear the stain of your blood.'*

She spun on her heel and stalked away before Kantor could reply, fearful that her outburst might have compromised everything she had worked so hard to arrange. Whatever she might feel, her duty to the craftworld came first.

Sethyr opened her comm-link. *'There is nothing more to be done,'* she told her companions. *'Withdraw from your positions and return to the cave.'*

Shaniel and her rangers complied at once, rising from cover and vanishing into the shadows. Sethyr raised her witchblade and inscribed a rune in the air, then danced lightly up the side of the gorge. In moments she had slipped into a narrow cleft in the flank of the mountain and was hidden from view.

Now it fell to the Warp Spiders to do their part.



KILOMETRES TO THE south, the ork horde was still on the run. The gutless humans had somehow done it again. Ever since the attack in camp the night before, the hard-shells had done nothing but pretend to put up a fight then flee further up the gorge. It had gone on for so long that by the time they had finally cornered the enemy in the foothills, the horde was almost berserk with thwarted bloodlust. And then, just when it seemed like they were about to give the hard-shells the kicking they deserved, death came raining down on the horde from above. The gorge, which had served them so well these past few months, had been turned against them. Now, instead of a refuge, it had become a trap.

Howling and cursing at the steep, uncaring slopes, the greenskins reached the smouldering remains of their camp and kept on going. Their only thought was to escape the trap, to scatter across the fertile lands to the south and survive until Snagrod sent a ship to retrieve them. That is what they had been told when the fleet had left for Charadon: lay low, pick a fight or two, and wait. Raiders would return soon to pick up whoever was left.

It was those thoughts of escape that drove the remnants of the horde into the eldar's next ambush.

South of the camp lay the narrow place, where the walls of the gorge came together so close that only three orks could walk it side-by-side. A handful of greenskins could hold that gap against an army, they had all thought. Now the choke point worked against them, bringing the panicking mobs to a grinding halt while they filtered through the narrow lane like sands through an hourglass.

Silent and patient as their namesakes, the Warp Spiders were waiting for them. The first dozen orks died without realising their peril, racing headlong into monofilament webs spat by the eldar deathspinners. Screams of pain and the reek of spilled blood filled the air, drowning out the thin, whistling sound of the spinners as they created a glittering, killing ground before the greenskins.

Another two dozen orks died, thrashing and struggling as the weight of the horde behind them drove them inexorably into the gleaming strands.

The slaughter went on for several minutes before the rest of the orks realised their peril. They were trapped! Other orks caught glimpses of dark figures along

the sides of the gorge as well: bulky, armoured silhouettes carrying huge weapons that appeared and disappeared along the high slopes. It was only a matter of time before those weapons - whatever they were - opened fire on the packed ranks of the horde.

Faced with threats from every direction, the orks cast about for some place - any place - where they could take refuge. Finally, one of them remembered the caves. The caves! The shooters on the slopes could not reach them there! The shouts went up from one end of the diminished horde to the other. Within moments, the greenskins were stampeding for five dark tunnel mouths, hidden beneath a wide, rocky ledge along the western side of the gorge.

The mountain swallowed them up as quickly as it had spat them out, almost twelve hours before. Not long after the last of greenskins disappeared inside, the five Warp Spiders blinked into existence along the top of the ledge and stood watch, ensuring that none of the orks tried to come out again.



NO BODIES ON the far side of the choke point,' Sergeant Phrenotas reported. The veteran paced across the churned ground, reading the marks left there by the greenskins' boots. 'Judging by the tracks, I'd say the rest of the orks panicked when they hit the ambush and headed into those caves to the west.'

The Crimson Fists stood at the southern edge of the orks' camp. They had made their way carefully down the gorge, collecting their dead along the way. Every piece of wargear - even the fragments of Brother Artos's breastplate - was recovered. They had so little now, Kantor mused, that they could afford to waste nothing.

He had had hours to think on what the eldar had told him as the hunting party worked its way down the gorge. The Chapter's brush with annihilation weighed heavily on him, but the alien's warning could not be ignored.

Kantor beckoned for Phrenotas to join him. Sergeants Victurix and Daecor waited close at hand. When they were all together, the Chapter Master turned to Daecor.

'Sergeant I want you to select the three most fit members of you, squad. The rest will escort our dead back to Gueras-403 with Squad Victurix.'

The squad leaders shared surprised looks. Rogo Victurix shook his head in bewilderment. 'I do not understand, my lord.'

Kantor pointed to the distant caves. 'I'm taking the Sternguard and Daecor's men in there to finish what we started.'

Victurix was taken aback. 'Then you'll need my squad more than ever—'

The Chapter Master silenced the Terminator sergeant with a raised hand. 'Not for the sort of battle I have in mind,' he explained. 'And I expect that the tunnels beyond are barely wide enough for orks, much less Tactical Dreadnought armour. No. You will serve me best by escorting the wounded and the dead to Gueras-403 and awaiting pick-up. Tell the Cassar where we've gone, and prepare a relief force.'

'That could take weeks,' Victurix protested.

Kantor nodded. 'For what I have planned, we'll be in there at least that long.'

Phrenotas folded his arms. 'What about ammunition? My squad is down to

just our combat knives.'

'Mine as well,' Daecor added. 'And our armour is in need of repair.'

The Chapter Master turned, taking in the deserted ork camp with a sweep of his arm. 'If there is one thing the orks never lack for, its weapons and ammunition. We'll make use of theirs.'

Now it was Phrenotas's turn to be shocked. 'The Codex specifically forbids it, my lord.'

'The Codex was written by Guilliman with full strength Chapters in mind, operating under ideal conditions,' Kantor replied. 'Not a handful of battle-brothers facing a dire threat with empty weapons and no support. That's one lesson this damnable gorge has taught me.'

Phrenotas shook his head. 'But—'

'Forget about the Codex, Phrenotas.' Kantor declared. 'We don't have a choice. If we are to continue to serve the Imperium, we will have to make up for our lost strength with whatever tools are at hand, and fight our enemies in ways they do not expect. And we *will* continue to serve, brothers. We will uphold the honour of our primarch, and prove beyond any doubt that our Chapter remains a force to be reckoned with. Do I make myself clear?'

Chastened, Phrenotas bowed his head. But Daecor was not mollified. 'You are trusting the word of a xenos,' he cautioned.

'Under the circumstances, I do not see as we have a choice. The warning was a dire one. We must take it seriously, regardless of the source.'

At our next encounter, it will be my fists that bear the stain of your blood. The last words the farseer had said to him still lingered in Kantor's mind.

Daecor bowed his head. Kantor had made his decision. 'I will gather my men,' he said.

'What would you have us do in the meantime?' Phrenotas asked.

'Scour the camp,' Kantor said. 'Gather all the weapons and explosives you can find. *Especially* the explosives.'



THE FOUR CHARGES detonated in a rolling blast that reverberated in a bass drumbeat against the far side of the gorge. Roiling plumes of dark earth and pulverised stone exploded from four of the tunnels as their entrances collapsed. The Crimson Fists waited until the dust had settled, confirming that the explosives had done their work, before shouldering their burdens and heading for the only entrance left.

Scouring the ork camp had turned up a vast assortment of ordnance, from primitive slug-throwers to stick bombs, rockets and strange, scratch-built energy weapons. Each Space Marine carried multiple looted guns, plus bandoliers of shells and scavenged haversacks filled with grenades. Kantor also insisted on bringing a wide array of ork cleavers, axes and clubs, despite their own perfectly functional knives. Daecor and his squad mates brought up the rear, each warrior lugging along a large metal fuel drum. There was no one there to see them depart. Sergeant Victurix and his charges had departed for Gueras-403 several hours before. The afternoon was giving way to evening, and the shadows were lengthening along the bottom of the gorge.

Phrenotas and the Sternguard entered the tunnel first, looted weapons at the ready. When they were certain the path was clear, they signalled for the others to join them.

The tunnel was long and mostly straight, carved from the rock with chainblades, hammers and chisels. As Kantor and the rest filed inside, they were careful not to disturb the improvised charges they had set into the walls along the first few metres from the tunnel entrance.

The Space Marines followed the tunnel for almost thirty metres before coming upon a small natural cave. Three other tunnels connected to the cave; from Phrenotas's preliminary reconnaissance, all of them ran deeper into the mountainside. The veteran sergeant suspected that the subterranean network was quite large. Daecor favoured sealing all the tunnels and letting nature run its course, but Phrenotas could not guarantee there was not another exit, perhaps on the far side of the mountain.

Kantor took the eldar's warning seriously. They would leave nothing to

chance.

The Space Marines spread out inside the cave. Daecor and his men set down the fuel drums and shielded them with their armoured bodies. When everyone was in position, Kantor nodded to Phrenotas. The veteran sergeant raised a modified auspex unit and thumbed a flashing, red button.

The charges at the mouth of the tunnel went off with a roar, sealing them inside the mountain.



I COUNT TWELVE Brother Diaz whispered over the vox.

Kantor lay on his back in deep shadow, his armoured form concealed behind a line of broken stalagmites. Slowly, a centimetre at a time, he sat upright and peered over the broken fingers of calcium carbonate.

Dark water rushed by not twenty paces away - a subterranean remnant of the mighty glacial melt that had first carved the gorge, untold millions of years in the past. It was swift and cold as ice, flowing through a long chain of caves and tunnels that ran roughly southwards for more than two hundred metres. Kantor suspected it continued on, deeper underground, into the Altera Basin, and helped account for the fertile lands there.

Twelve orks had crept into the tunnel from a side-passage off to Kantor's left. All of them were heavily armed, and all of them were wary. The river was a dangerous place to be, lately.

Seven of the orks carried crude baskets in addition to their guns. They continued to creep towards the rushing water, while the other five spread out and took up positions covering them. They all eyed the water with a combination of nervousness and need. The greenskins were very, very hungry.

'I confirm twelve,' Kantor replied. He glanced off to the right where Diaz was crouched behind another mound of rock. 'One grenade each. Wait for my signal.'

The dark silhouette that was Brother Diaz shifted slightly as he readied a looted ork grenade. 'Confirm.'

Out at the water's edge, the seven foragers set down their baskets, and, more reluctantly, their guns. With nervous glances back at their erstwhile protectors, they tugged grenades of their own from their belts. The xenos grunted to one another quietly, then jerked the pins on the stick bombs and tossed them into the water as far upstream as they could manage. Seconds later they went off in a string of dull blasts, each one sending up a small plume of white water.

The orks studied the surface of the water intently, rubbing their hands together in anticipation. Suddenly, one of the greenskins let out a shout and plunged into the water. The xenos waded out into water almost chest-deep, its hands reaching for the stunned cave fish floating along the surface. The rest of the foragers

joined in, leaping into the river. They began snatching up the fish with their wide hands and cramming them into their mouths, eliciting howls of protest from the guards.

Kantor smiled coldly. He rose silently to his feet. A belt-fed ork gun lay on the ground next to him, along with a sack full of grenades. 'Guards first,' he said, picking up one of the stick bombs.

'Ready.' Diaz replied.

The Chapter Master pulled the ring on the grenade and tossed it aside. 'Now!'

Both grenades flew end-for-end towards the guards. Kantor bent and retrieved his looted gun as they detonated, turning the orks' shouts into agonised screams. He brought the weapon up as he dashed around the line of stalagmites, prioritising targets. Three of the guards were down, their bodies shredded by flying shrapnel.

Kantor sighted on one of the remaining greenskins and squeezed the trigger. The big weapon bucked and chattered, spitting out a stream of shells at an impressive rate. The ork twitched and staggered under a hail of impacts, spinning halfway around before falling onto his back. The last guard turned and managed to spray a wild burst of his own before Diaz was able to cut him down.

The foragers bellowed in shock and began wading for shore, hands outstretched toward weapons that lay frustratingly out of reach. Kantor moved to the water's edge, raking them with the ork gun. Shells kicked up sprays of water around the greenskins, and two pitched over backwards, shot through the head. It never occurred to the xenos to dive underwater and escape the hail of fire. They hated and feared the water like nothing else, for they were poor swimmers, and their dense bodies sank like stones.

Brother Diaz moved to join Kantor, killing another ork with a torrent of shells. The four survivors had changed course and were wading downstream as fast as they could manage. Kantor shifted his aim to the ork furthest away and opened fire. The crude xenos gun spat two rounds and then jammed.

Kantor muttered a curse and started wrestling with the weapon. Diaz moved past him, keeping up fire on the fleeing orks. Another of the greenskins let out a howl and sank beneath the water. The remaining three were almost to a bend in the river course that would take them out of sight. That was when the other two members of Kantor's ambush team rose from cover at the bend and opened fire, gunning the foragers down at close range.

The echoes of the last shots faded quickly. Silence rushed in, borne along by the whisper of the ancient river. The Space Marines moved along the shore quickly and quietly, making certain the ork guards were dead.

'That was the largest foraging party yet,' Diaz observed. He studied one of the

fallen orks, then raised his boot and stamped down on the back of the greenskin's skull.

Kantor inspected the foragers' baskets. They held a pitiful amount of the purple moss that grew along the walls in the tunnels along the river. Barely enough to feed a single greenskin, much less an entire camp. The Crimson Fists had gone to great lengths to scrape up the moss wherever they found it. Some of it they ate themselves. The rest they let the river carry away.

For a full week after they sealed themselves inside the tunnels, Kantor and his hunters did nothing but conduct reconnaissance, mapping the tunnels and caverns as thoroughly as possible and gaining an understanding of their enemy. There were between four and five hundred greenskins trapped inside the mountain, but the subterranean network was large enough to hold three times that number. There were a dozen camps of varying size, situated in the largest caverns, though half were abandoned now. The network provided everything the xenos mobs needed - except for food.

The orks realised they had been trapped within hours after the tunnels had been collapsed. Kantor had been content to let the mobs try to claw their way through the rubble, certain that the enemy had neither the tools nor the expertise to deal with the tons of fallen rubble. Every day the greenskins dug, the hungrier they grew.

Once the Space Marines' reconnaissance was complete, the ambush campaign began. Kantor split his force into four teams, and began laying in wait for greenskin foragers along the river. Not every foraging party was ambushed. Some mobs came up empty-handed, while others managed to bring back a few baskets of fish and moss - just enough to stoke resentment and anger amongst the enemy, and little else.

Kantor kicked the baskets into the river, one by one. 'They're growing desperate,' he said. 'It will only be a matter of time now.'

'Until what, my lord?' Diaz asked.

The Chapter Master smiled grimly. 'Until the beasts decide to look elsewhere for their food.'

Their work done, the Crimson Fists spent several minutes carefully sweeping the area, ensuring that nothing had been dropped during the brief fight that might be found later and give them away. Satisfied, they departed in silence, following the underground river to a new ambush spot some distance away.

The bodies of the ork guards were left where they had fallen, chewed by ork grenades and riddled by ork bullets, for the xenos to find and draw their own conclusions.



FIGHTING BROKE OUT within the week. Though there was no proof who had been ambushing the ork foragers, in the end it came down to which mobs had food, and which did not. Starving ork raiding parties attacked the camps of other mobs, drawn by the smell of food. Reprisal raids followed. Soon, gunfire and explosions echoed from one end of the tunnel network to the other. The Crimson Fists withdrew to their operating base, a series of small, half-flooded caves in the lowest and least hospitable part of the tunnels, and listened to the storm rage overhead.

The orks tore at one another for days. Work on the collapsed tunnels ground to a halt as every greenskin eagerly joined in the battle. Only the largest and the most heavily-armed mobs continued to send out foraging parties, but their every movement was watched, and often they were forced to fight their way back to their camps with what little food they had been able to find. The rest made do by eating the bodies of the dead, as greenskins were wont to do then there was no other food to be had.

Entire mobs were wiped out. From time to time, Kantor would send out a pair of scouts to count the empty camps. Within the first five days, nearly two hundred orks were dead. Ten days after that, another hundred. The fighting began to dwindle at that point, as the survivors were the largest, best-armed and now the best-fed of the surviving xenos.

Kantor and his hunters had been sealed inside the mountain for six weeks when Sergeant Phrenotas and Brother Diaz returned from a scouting mission in the upper tunnels. 'It's over,' the veteran sergeant reported.

The Chapter Master leaned forwards, resting his elbows on his knees. The sunken caves were too low for a normal human to stand upright, much less a Space Marine. The warriors crouched on their heels or sat with their backs to the rough walls, keeping their minds occupied with meditative routines, or keeping their crude weapons maintained in the damp environment.

'What did you find?' Kantor inquired.

'There are perhaps a hundred of the xenos left,' Phrenotas reported. 'One large camp of about seventy, and a smaller, satellite camp made up of survivors from

the other mobs. The larger mob has moved to the big cavern closest to tunnel five, and is using the survivors at the satellite camp as labourers to move the rubble.'

Kantor nodded thoughtfully. This was what he had been waiting for. 'Do you know what this means, sergeant?'

'The orks have finally gotten themselves organized.'

'Which means they have a new leader,' the Chapter Master pointed out. 'An ork with intelligence, but one that wasn't powerful enough to assert itself until the fighting had created the opportunity it needed.'

Phrenotas cocked his head slightly. 'I fail to see how this is a good thing, my lord.'

Kantor waved the question away. 'How are they using these labourers?'

This time, it was Diaz who spoke. 'They work for twelve hours per day, under light guard, then they are escorted back to their camp and fed.'

The Chapter Master nodded. 'And the other camp?'

'Mostly they just sit around, sharpening their knives and waiting,' Phrenotas said.

Kantor turned to Diaz. 'And you said that the labourers were under light guard?'

The Sternguard nodded. 'Six to eight orks from the big camp. No more. And they're paying no attention to the tunnel approaches. We could sweep in and wipe out the lot of them in less than a minute.'

'A very inviting target,' the Chapter Master agreed.

Phrenotas caught the tone in Kantor's voice. 'You think it's an ambush,' he said.

'I think this ork leader is smart,' Kantor replied. 'I suspect it's been working in the background for some time now, gaining its strength and waiting for an opportunity to assert itself. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if this is the ork that is responsible for these tunnels, for surrounding us during the attack on the main camp, and for the change in tactics back on the hilltop, weeks ago. It's been advising the warbosses all along. Fortunately for us, the bosses only listened when things became desperate.'

Phrenotas considered this, and nodded slowly. 'I'm looking forward to meeting this ork,' he said grimly.

'What shall we do?'

'We wait until the end of the work shift,' Kantor said. 'Then we break out the barrels.'



FOUR HOURS LATER, the work on tunnel five came to a halt. Ork guards bellowed at their starving labourers, chivvying them along with curses and kicks as they were lined up and led back to camp for the day.

Mumbling and grunting, the labourers shuffled down the long tunnel, exhausted from hours of frustrating, impossible work. The guards were bored and none too hungry themselves, looking forward to returning to camp and filling their bellies with whatever was roasting on the spit that evening.

None of them saw the ambush coming.

The Crimson Fists knew the exact route the orks would take back to the labourers' camp, and chose their ambush point well. As the work party passed through the same large cave where the Space Marines had sealed off tunnel five weeks before, Sergeant Daecor and his reduced squad attacked the group from two sides. Bundles of stick bombs were tossed from the side tunnels, filling the cave with a storm of razor-edged shrapnel; then the Space Marines raked the stunned and wounded orks with savage bursts of automatic fire. The staccato roar of gunshots echoed down the connecting tunnels, punctuated by orkish screams of rage.

The sounds of battle travelled far, funnelled by the winding passageways to the primary ork camp. The mob was on its feet at once and racing towards the noise. Few had believed their new boss's suspicions of hard-shells hiding inside the tunnels, but now there was no doubt. It was time to spring the trap!

The camp emptied out in less than a minute. Kantor and the Sternguard waited another minute more, then crept into the cavern from a side tunnel and went to work.



THE ORK AMBUSHERS reached the site of Daecor's attack within minutes, coming upon a cavern choked with smoke from grenade blasts and gunfire. They waded into the murk, guns blazing, only to discover that their foes had long since broken off their attack and withdrawn into the maze of tunnels. They left behind fifteen dead orks and ten more injured, a number that increased to almost twenty when the would-be ambushers accidentally traded shots with the labour crew in the smoke and the confusion.

The new warboss restored order quickly, however, ordering the surviving labourers to take their dead and badly wounded back to their camp. Then small groups of orks were sent off into the tunnels in hopes of catching the attackers, but to no avail. After two hours of fruitless pursuit, the warboss ordered its warriors back to camp.



THE CAVERN HAD been in use by one ork mob or another for some time. High-ceilinged and roughly thirty metres across, its stone floor was covered in refuse and bits of discarded rubbish. A trio of smouldering cook fires in the centre of the cavern filled the space with a thin haze of greasy, bitter smoke. Patches of luminescent mould splashed across the walls and ceiling lent the cavern an eerie yellow-green glow.

There were a total of four passageways connecting the cavern with the rest of the tunnel network. Kantor and the Sternguard chose to make their stand in front of one that lay nearly opposite the entrance that led to tunnel number five.

The first orks that came stomping into the cavern were cut down in a storm of full-auto fire. Bellows of shock and rage erupted from the rest of the mob; they surged towards the sound of the guns, shouldering the bodies of the dead aside in their eagerness to get at the Space Marines.

Scores of greenskins poured into the cavern, filling the space and blazing away with their guns as they charged at the eight Crimson Fists. Kantor and the Sternguard held their ground, dropping one xenos after another with short, rattling bursts.

'Get ready!' Kantor called over the vox when the orks were halfway across the cavern. 'Phrenotas?'

The veteran sergeant stood to Kantor's left. Firing one-handed, he pulled out his auspex unit. 'Ready!'

Ork rounds buzzed and snapped through the air around the Space Marines. Several of the veterans staggered under multiple hits; other shots passed by and ricocheted from the cavern walls. Kantor let out a grunt as one shot struck him in the chest and punched through a weak point in his breastplate. He coughed, tasting blood.

When the orks were three-quarters of the way across the cavern, the Chapter Master called out, 'Back! Fall back!'

At once, the Space Marine line contracted upon itself. One at a time, the Crimson Fists would loose a burst at the orks, then duck into the passageway behind them. Kantor and Phrenotas were the last. The fire around them

intensified as the orks ran out of other targets to shoot at.

Kantor felt shots hit him twice more: once in the leg, and then in the side of his helmet. Then sparks flew around Phrenotas as a half-dozen rounds struck home. One shot punched cleanly through the sergeant's left knee. He let out a sharp cry and collapsed onto his side.

The Chapter Master emptied his gun and threw it at the greenskins for good measure. The orks were almost on top of them. He bent down and seized Phrenotas's backpack and dragged him backwards, into the tunnel. 'Now, sergeant!' he ordered.

Phrenotas obeyed without thinking. Still firing, his left thumb stabbed down on the unit's blinking, red button.

The five fuel drums that the Crimson Fists had carried with them into the tunnels had been laid on their sides and arrayed in a wide arc against the back wall of the cavern. The orks were so intent on catching their foes that they did not realise their danger until the packed explosives inside each drum detonated. In addition to the explosives, each container had been filled with pounds of jagged metal and stones, transforming them into massive grenades.

The blasts shook the cavern like hammer blows. Clouds of dust and grit poured into the tunnel, until Kantor feared that the ceiling might cave in. But the tremors passed within moments, leaving behind a smoke-wrought stillness that reminded Kantor of the seconds after a devastating artillery barrage.

Now was the time to strike, while the enemy was stunned and reeling. Kantor activated his power fist. 'Follow me, brothers!' he said to the Sternguard, and rushed back into the cavern.

Inside was a scene from some ancient, human hell. The floor of the cavern in a wide arc beyond the tunnel was carpeted in torn flesh and shattered bone. Blood splashed the rock walls as far as ten metres from the blast area, and streamers of gore hung from the arched ceiling. The first few ranks of greenskins had simply been obliterated by the blast, transformed instantly into shreds of scorched meat.

Further back, there were bodies heaped upon the stone floor, riddled by the hail of high-velocity shrapnel. The only survivors of the mob had been at the very rear of the crowd, shielded from most of the concussion and the fragments by the bodies of their mates. No more than a dozen of the seventy orks who had entered the cavern were still on their feet, clustered in a loose group just a few metres from the opposite passageway.

Deafened and concussed as they were, the orks still tried to put up a fight. The Space Marines crashed into them at a full run, slashing and stabbing with their combat knives. Kantor decapitated one greenskin with a sweep of his power fist,

then shattered the chest of another. One of the Sternguard let out a roar of pain and fell to his knees with an ork axe buried in his chest, even as the Space Marine spilled his enemy's guts with a sweep of his knife. The last two greenskins, overwhelmed by the Space Marines' furious assault, threw down their weapons and tried to run, but scarcely made it to the mouth of the tunnel before the Sternguard cut them down.

The fight had lasted scarcely a minute. Kantor turned about, surveying the devastation. Where in all this was the ork warboss?

He turned back to the orks he and the veterans had just killed. They had been surrounding a small pile of bodies. Frowning thoughtfully, he bent and began dragging the corpses apart.

Near the bottom of the pile was a greenskin of notable size. The brute lay spread-eagled on its back, eyes wide, with a neat, round hole in his forehead. Kantor grabbed the xenos by his armoured jacket and dragged him aside.

A smaller ork lay beneath the brute. Kantor caught a flash of curved, steel skull-plate and the red glint of an augmetic eye, then found himself staring into the cavernous bore of a xenos blaster.

The world disappeared in a flash of bright red and a brutal crack of thunder. Kantor felt a jolt run through his armour, and a bright blue icon flared in his helmet display. The iron halo, one of his Chapter's few remaining relics, had activated a split-second before he was struck. The momentary energy field deflected the blaster bolt, sparing him from certain death.

The hand of Dorn the primarch was upon him! Kantor felt a rush of righteous joy. He leapt forwards, smashing the blaster into pieces with a swipe of his power fist. His left hand closed about the ork's throat.

Kantor stared down at his foe. The greenskin was small for a typical ork - far smaller than a warboss had any right to be. The ork glared back at him, baring its teeth in a snarl, and Kantor saw the hateful intellect burning in the depths of its living eye.

Was this a future Snagrod, Kantor thought? Another Arch-Arsonist of Charadon, who would dream of putting Rynn's World to the torch in years to come?

In fifty of your years a shadow of their making will rise to envelop this area of space which, unopposed, shall be the doom of your people and mine.

Kantor drew back his power fist. He wondered what new future the eldar would see when he was done.



THERE WAS A muffled clap of thunder, and a shower of rock and dirt burst from the mouth of the tunnel. Moments later, Pedro Kantor emerged into the hazy sunlight, bits of molten stone dripping from his fingertips.

'It is done,' Sethyr said. She stood upon a shadowy ledge high upon Darkridge, surrounded by Shaniel and her rangers. *'Kantor has triumphed. Alaitoc has escaped its tragic fate.'*

Sighs of gladness rose from the assembled rangers. Shaniel knelt, smiling, and raised her long rifle to her shoulder. She laid the aiming point onto Kantor's forehead.

She was forestalled by a light touch upon her shoulder.

'Stay your hand, pathfinder.'

The ranger frowned. *'Why, farseer? A common foe does not make us friends. Kantor is a fearsome warrior. Better he die here than face us on a battlefield in years to come.'*

Sethyr leaned lightly upon her spear. She could feel the threads of fate shifting about her, the weft and weave altering to account for the severing of the ork leader's thread. A new web was woven in place of the old.

'Kantor's end lies elsewhere,' the farseer said. *Her fists tightened about the haft of her witchblade. 'He will die at the hands of another, and his foe will perish with him. I have foreseen it.'* She turned to the rangers, her expression hidden behind her inscrutable war-mask. *'Our task here is done. The craftworld beckons, o saviours. Let us depart.'*

Shaniel stared at Kantor down the scope of her long rifle for a moment longer, then acquiesced with a gentle sigh. Sure-footed and silent, the rangers withdrew. Sethyr Tuannan remained until the last, watching the Crimson Fists making their way slowly down the gorge. Kantor had removed his battered helm, his careworn face turned up to the sky. For the moment, the haggard warrior seemed to be at peace.

As the Space Marines passed below her, she raised her spear in a silent farewell.

'Until we meet again,' the farseer said.
And then she was gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Together with Dan Abnett, Mike Lee wrote the five-volume Malus Darkblade series. Mike has contributed to almost two dozen role-playing games and supplements over the years. His credits for Black Library include the Horus Heresy novel *Fallen Angels* and the Time of Legends trilogy *The Rise of Nagash*. An avid wargamer and devoted fan of pulp adventure, Mike lives in the United States.