

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

STORMSEER

DAVID ANNANDALE



WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

STORMSEER

DAVID ANNANDALE



A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELLA

STORMSEER

DAVID ANNANDALE



BLACK LIBRARY



PROLOGUE

And so they had his brother too.

Merentallas strained against his shackles. There was no point to his struggle. The ork bindings were as solid as they were crude. All he did was sink the metal into his flesh and come close to dislocating his shoulders, but the psychic agony of knowing that, in another system, Elisath had been taken by the ork warlord's flagship demanded expression. He could howl his desperation, or he could pull against his bonds. So he struggled. He struggled, in the painful twisting of his body, to push away the despair that closed around his mind.

He failed. The despair was as strong as the ork metal, as oppressive as the walls of the underground cave. With Elisath prisoner, the orks, whether they knew it or not, had taken a great step towards a terrible victory. The eldar's great fear was coming to pass. The humans had withdrawn from what they called the Octavius system, deciding to do nothing more than observe the conflict between the orks and the tyranids from a distance, hoping for mutual annihilation. They didn't understand. They didn't realise that the only possible outcome of that war was a strengthening of both species as they honed their rage and adaptability on each other.

For the moment, the tide of the war was with the tyranids. The orks were spilling out of Octavius, set upon conquering new systems. And so they had come to this one. There were strategic rationales for them to do so, but there was another reason too. He prayed that the orks were unaware of it. Only he and Elisath knew the full secret of what gift the orks could find here. It was the secret he had come to remove. He had seen the danger. The Saim-Hann had

acted.

The cruiser Serpent's Strike was faster and more manoeuvrable than anything the orks possessed. It came to the Lepidus system to scour it of the beasts. Instead, it fell to their numbers. The Overfiend's ships came at it relentlessly. Many died, but there were always more, and more, and more. The orks boarded at multiple points. They came straight for him. He and his kin fought hard. In the image of their ship, they killed many of the invaders. Like the cruiser, they could not kill enough. Merentallas could foresee the attacks, but there were too many, and they were too concerted, for advance knowledge to do any good. Barricaded on the bridge, cornered, deprived of the space to deploy with speed, the Saim-Hann of the Serpent's Strike made their last stand.

The orks took the doors down with high explosives. Massive brutes in thick armour barrelled through the burning entrance. The eldar cut the first two down, but again there were more. And behind them, something worse. It registered upon the skein of time as a dark, nomadic tangle. Merentallas couldn't get a proper reading on it. He couldn't formulate a counter. Then the bridge filled with fire and shock, and it was all too late.

The orks had taken him. And now they had Elisath too.

The orks didn't fully understand the prizes they held. That was the only consolation. It was too small a glimmer to count as hope. It was only a matter of time before the orks discovered what they held. They had taken the moon. They were taking the planet. They would find the secret. It would already be affecting them.

And then these orks would shatter the galaxy.

The lighting in the chamber flashed brighter. The shadowed figure that had doomed him on the *Serpent's Strike* snarled something. The ork working the devices cackled with brutish delight. Merentallas caught a glimpse of energy arcing on the back of a hulking shape, and then felt the electric surge as a violent prickling of his flesh. The electrodes in the band around his skull came to life, stabbing their energy into his brain. He writhed again, involuntarily this time. The pain was a spike driven from the back of his skull to his forehead as power was forced to flow *out*. It was the power that defined him. His very identity was being torn from him by savage technology, reducing him to an energy source.

Blinded by the pain, shocked into near unconsciousness, his awareness floated out onto the skein. He tried to think. He brushed along the tangled weave of moments to come. For all their interconnections and contingency, there was also a dreadful unity here, all those moments moving together to a single end, a

cataract plunging to doom. And he could do nothing.

Except. He could see a possibility. It was a thin thread, easily broken by the vicissitudes of war and the ignorance of those upon whom it depended. But it was there, a potential course of events that might deny the orks the victory that they themselves could not consciously anticipate. Merentallas could not influence events. He could not change this potential into the actual. But if the players upon whom it depended played their parts as they should, then a moment would come when he would have a choice. It would be a poor choice, one evil or another. But it would be his to make. It would be an action, and one of the evils was lesser. The thought of bringing it about would have made him weep, if the machine that grasped him had allowed him that luxury.

The greater evils approached him. The mirage of hope faded. The two orks loomed over him, each the bringer of a different sort of pain. They grinned at him, and got to work.

The White Scars strike cruiser *Legnica* was in sight when the visions came for Ghazan again.

The figure of darkness and lightning, a brute mass of savagery and lethal cunning. The swirl of power, of reality bending, twisting, collapsing into a fury of energy. The figure hurling the nova rage through shattering worlds. Ghazan standing against the foe. The battlefield a confusion of up and down, a vortex of metal, of gears and pistons, of destruction given mechanical form and fate become a grinding clockwork. Ghazan launching his own attack. A war of storm against storm. Thunder speaking with the voice of destiny. Battles and worlds teetering in the balance.

The figure of darkness and lightning must be stopped.

The Stormseer blinked. The visions receded for the moment, waves pulling back before another crash. His surroundings clicked back into place. He was once again in the troop compartment of the Thunderhawk, looking out the viewing block as the *Legnica* drew nearer. He was the lone passenger.

The visions had left Ghazan alone during the bulk of the voyage, though it was their power that had impelled his journey in the first place. He had been headed to join the defence of the next system when the revelation had burst upon him. The White Scar had a destiny here, instead, on the moon of Lepidus Prime. The Sixth Brotherhood's frigate *Talskar Pride* had dropped out of the warp at the Lepidus Mandeville point, sending him by gunship to the Fifth Brotherhood's strike cruiser now closing in on the moon.

The Lepidus system was a small target for the greenskins. The uninformed might have thought it unworthy of the confrontation that was building within sight of its sun. Only Lepidus Prime and its moon were habitable. The rest of the planets were either gas giants or cold rocks shrouded by toxic gases. Human colonisation was so recent that the only permanent establishment was a large city on Lepidus Prime.

A small enough prize. Yet the orks had committed major resources to taking it. And the Imperium had responded with forces from three Chapters of Space Marines: the White Scars, the Raven Guard, and the Salamanders. The orks were spilling out of Octavius in numerous directions, but Lepidus was a near neighbour to Octavius, and in turn was the gateway to a series of densely populated Imperial systems. If it fell, the orks would have an easy resupply point, free of the tyranids, from which to mount further invasions. Lepidus was key to the spread of the ork empire, and key to ending that spread.

Ghazan knew that the hope, hatched in the grand war rooms where the Imperial Navy and the captains of the Adeptus Astartes plotted strategy, was that if the orks wanted Lepidus badly enough, and if they were hurt badly enough, then the Overfiend itself would attack the Imperial forces. This would give the Imperium the chance to end the greenskin menace in the subsector once and for all.

Ghazan held definite views about this hope. Though he had not spoken to him yet, he suspected that so did Temur, the khan of the Fifth Brotherhood, tasked with taking back the moon alongside the 64th Regiment of the Mordian Iron Guard. Ghazan could believe in a strong blow being dealt against the Overfiend. He *did* believe in the necessity of preserving Lepidus. But the talk of ending the threat came from the mouths of admirals who had been removed so long from the front lines that they had become more politician than warrior. Did they imagine the orks and the tyranids would remain contained within the Octavius system indefinitely? Very likely they did. It was an illusion that allowed them to sleep at night, and so they chose to act as if it were a reality.

To be a Stormseer, a *zadyin arga*, meant having a much more firm hold on the hard edges of reality. That was true, he knew, for all Space Marine Librarians. He and the other brothers of his calling had an added responsibility, though. The *zadyin arga* were the guardians of the spirituality of the White Scars. Grasping the soul of the Chapter brought visions, and to parse those visions, to understand the path along which they dictated he must ride, it was necessary to view the undreamed world all the more clearly. It meant piercing the false visions that

tried to disguise that world. Hopes and wishes and lies were the raw material of those illusions. So were names.

Octavius. The name was a lie, a veneer of Imperial nomenclature that had come into use at the very time that the Imperium had had to abandon the system entirely to its warring monsters. To call it *Octavius* was to attempt, by naming alone, to lay a claim where none was possible. But Ghazan remembered. The system had once been called *Octarius*, and the subjects of the Imperium had declared the planet Orrok home. Perhaps the names had come to echo their doom too closely, a reminder of the conquest by the orks. So now the system was *Octavius*, and there was rarely a mention of the colony that had been lost centuries before.

Such pretence was not helpful to Ghazan. It clouded the context in which his visions appeared. So he did his best to identify the bad faith that surrounded this mission. He focused on what he and his brothers were here to do, and interpreted the visions in terms of the bearing they might have on the mission, and not the web of hopes and political expediency in which the mission existed.

Such rigour also demanded he be honest with himself. He had to guard against his own desire for a universe that was better than it was. Applying that honesty meant admitting that he had come to Lepidus for reasons that extended beyond the success of the mission. There were personal ones. His own destiny awaited him somewhere on the surface of that moon.

Unbidden, the question came: *Are you being honest?*

Yes. Yes, I am.

Your coming here is destined. There is no free will. You have no choice.

Choice. The word was a thorn, stabbing at his certainty. Duty was not a choice, and that was no cause for discomfort. But the means by which duty was performed, there was choice there. Strategy was all about choice, and the khan was facing difficult ones. Did Ghazan see himself as freed or bereft of the need to decide? Were his visions so definite in their meaning that his every important action, up to the moment of his death, was preordained?

He set the questions aside. They remained in the back of his mind, gnawing.

Through the viewing block, Ghazan could see the ship and the moon. The sense of imminence rose up, more powerful than ever. The beat of his hearts sped up even as his breathing slowed to a trance-induced somnolence. His mind's eye filled with the rage of the battlefield. He was swept up in a torrent of images. They were momentary fragments. Some were concrete: a ceramite gauntlet crushing a snarling green face to pulp, screaming humans squashed

beneath monstrous treads. Others were abstract: the shape and sound of combat and loss, a synaesthesia of colour, angle and noise.

From the centre of the images came the prophecy. A figure appeared. Its shape was ill-defined, but bestial. It reached out for him, and in its hands were the naked energies of creation and destruction. His soul rushed to meet the enemy. They clashed in an exultation of war.

The visions ended. Ghazan blinked, steadying himself in the here-and-now once more. He was right to have come. Something was waiting for him on the moon. It was eager for his arrival.

He would make it regret that wish.



CHAPTER ONE

And then there were more ork tanks.

They hadn't been there a minute before. Temur Khan had expected their arrival, but he wasn't pleased to be correct. There had been two Battlewagons: one that the Iron Guard had managed to destroy as it closed in on the walls of the bastion, the other, further to the rear of the ork force, taken out by a well-placed melta bomb slapped onto its side by Temur himself as he and his command squad stormed past it on their bikes. For several minutes, the riders of the Fifth Brotherhood had torn across the ork ranks, taking the greenskins apart with bolter and power lance, grinding them to muck beneath the wheels of the bikes. They blunted the ork advance. Forward of the White Scars incursions, many of the brutes turned back, enraged, to try to close with the Space Marines. Those who continued to rush forwards to scramble up the slope towards the bastion were cut down by the disciplined, unceasing fire of the Iron Guard.

The White Scars' tactic was perfectly calculated to disrupt the orks: a harrying attack that killed momentum by sowing confusion and forcing the enemy to expend energy in conflicting directions. It succeeded. The orks' vast numbers began to work against them. They became a mob afflicted by colliding currents. Temur wanted their advance transformed into a whirlpool, a confusion of rapids breaking into foam against the rocks of the Fifth Brotherhood. For those several minutes, he saw that configuration form. He saw the greenskins' excuse for order break down.

Several minutes of apparent progress. Several minutes during which Temur *knew* all that progress would be reversed, while he hoped to be completely

wrong. But then the tanks were there, appearing just over the rise to the north, only a few hundred metres away. Even over the baying of the greenskins, he should have been able to hear the approaching clamour of the Battlewagon engines. But he hadn't. The vehicles were just suddenly *there*.

This was not speed or stealth. This was something else.

He had been proven right, but everything else was wrong. The entire tenor of the battle was wrong. The White Scars and the Iron Guard had come to purge the orks from the moon. But now the Imperial forces were the ones besieged.

The reversal was not due to tactical error. Temur had a powerful rapid strike force to command: six combat bike squads, three of them supported by multi-melta-equipped attack bikes, five Land Speeders, one assault squad, and a five-man Scout squad. And they had chosen their staging area well. The STC bastion elements had been dropped to a plateau that had a commanding position, its peak higher than anything else for a dozen kilometres in every direction. The bastion's core was a squat, crenellated tower, crowned by a lascannon turret. The tower and the sectioned walls were constructed of prefab iron components and reinforced plasteel.

Within the perimeter were the landing pads for the two Thunderhawks, the *Furious Lightning* and the *Khajog's Stand*. The bastion was a dark grey judgement upon the landscape, its outer barrier a hundred metres long on each side. Where, an hour before, there had been nothing, now there was the stamp of Imperial strength. But the bastion was designed as a beachhead, a powerful mustering point out of which would radiate the assault. It was, in its intent, a weapon, not a defence. If a siege was to take place, it was to be undertaken by the forces that were sent out from the fortress.

But the greenskins had no interest in Imperial war doctrine. The ground rose in a series of swells to the north, and it was from that direction that the orks had come. They had arrived just as the bastion had been completed, but before the White Scars had been able to scout out the ork positions. The watch in the bastion was able to see the dust kicked up by the greenskin infantry from a fair distance, but not the tanks. The heavy support kept arriving on the field as if from nowhere.

The implications were dark. And Temur resented fighting a defensive battle. That was a game for the Imperial Fists. But unless they could ease the orks' pressure on the bastion, the White Scars would be stymied, their mission stalled. He had expected to encounter the greenskin tanks. That was why he was here: the orks were producing heavy vehicles on the moon, and sending them down to

the surface of Lepidus Prime.

What was unexpected was the suddenness of their arrival. Temur's philosophy of war was offended by tanks, especially the lumbering, ungainly behemoths slapped together by the orks, hitting a conflict with the impact and suddenness of drop pods. Lookouts and augurs were useless. The ork machines arrived as if they had been spat out by the warp.

Four Battlewagons. Unbelievable. Huge, clanking, roaring monstrosities. Spewing black exhaust, they chewed the ground beneath them as they descended the slope, rumbling their way towards the plateau and the bastion. They didn't look built so much as *assembled*. They were patchwork metal horrors. There was no consistency between the machines, and barely any evidence of rational thought. They were fantasies of violence. Their hulking chassis bristled with spikes and guns and secondary cannons. Their fronts had been fashioned into faces that were blades and battering rams.

Two of the tanks moved faster. They appeared to be armoured transports, overflowing with hooting orks. The other two had massive cannons. They started firing the moment they appeared, even though the bastion was still out of range. The shells fell short, blowing up the orks' own front ranks. The surviving orks responded with delighted laughter. Instead of creating more disorder, the friendly fire seemed to invigorate the forward elements, and the orks charged once more.

Temur emerged from the greenskin mass, his armour and bike drenched with xenos blood and pulped flesh. Stray bullets flew past him and careened off his ceramite. But the masses that had been raging for his blood had lost interest. They wanted the bastion. The Battlewagons were giving them focus. Temur cursed, then spoke into his vox-bead. 'Brother Tokhta,' he said. 'A lesson needs to be taught.'

'Understood.'

Moments later, Temur saw the Thunderhawk *Furious Lightning* take off from the bastion.

He switched to a company-wide channel. 'Brothers,' he said, 'we need to strike the enemy armour with a mighty fist. I want the greenskins demoralised and broken. Land Speeders, take the forward tanks. Bikes, the ones to the rear. Assault squad, the central mass. Use the *Furious Lightning* as our cue. Let's show them the truth of a sudden arrival.'

Temur likened the deployment to the snap of a steel-jawed trap. The bikes that had been scything through the ork mass pulled away and rode towards the back of the ork horde. Temur watched the sky, tracking the flight of the gunship. It

came in low, screaming the rage of a storm, and unleashed punishment on the orks. The other White Scars attacked at the same moment. Blows from the front, the sides, the rear, and from above. Steel jaws. *Snap*.

The Thunderhawk began with its twin lascannons, scorching a furrow through the orks, leading up to the first Battlewagon. Then it switched to its battle cannon. The shell struck the ork machine head-on. The brutes who had been hanging on to the tank's profusion of metal projections, riding it like ticks, flew away in chunks. Flames erupted from inside, yet the tank kept going, gears screaming against each other. Smoke poured from the front as if the beast were a wounded dragon.

The orks did not abandon their ride. If it had not exploded, then there was nothing wrong with it. Gunfire stabbed upwards at the *Furious Lightning* as it passed overhead. Rooftop turrets tracked its flight, but it was already streaking on to its next prey. Its lascannons never stopped firing. Tokhta was going to cut the ork army in half with a line of flame. He loosed Hellstrike missiles at the second Battlewagon, and was on to the next before the rockets struck.

The hit was perfect. The explosion was massive, engulfing the tank, and then redoubling in force as the vehicle erupted. Fireballs grew out of each other. The orks in the vicinity scattered, burning and howling. Flaming wreckage rained down in a wide area. With it, as if born from the same fire, came the jump-packed assault squad, deploying from the Thunderhawk.

The White Scars landed in the middle of the orks, justice lashing out from the dark of the night sky. Each warrior killed dozens of greenskins in a wide swath around his landing area, then rose up to come down again, repeated hammerblows striking the orks. Eddies of confusion rippled out from each strike point. The advance was slowing again.

In the growing disorder, five Land Speeders hit the orks head on. They skimmed barely two metres above the ground, so fast it was as if they were trying to outrace the shells from their heavy bolters. They ploughed more furrows into the ork lines. They decapitated the greenskins who were foolish enough to stand tall and roar a challenge. They closed with the wounded tank with krak missiles from their Typhoon launchers.

Temur observed the first blows of the steel jaws as he and his bike squads approached the rear elements and the two remaining tanks. He saw the flashes and explosions, and he heard the reports over the vox. He thought, *Good, good, good*. The orks could throw their heavy armour at them, but the White Scars were still going to smash this assault.

The bike squads came in from two sides. The ones on the east side were targeting the same tank as the *Furious Lightning*. Temur led the assault from the west. The twin bolters of the bikes cut a path through the savage masses, heading straight for the tank. The orks responded more quickly, firing back with inaccuracy but wild abandon. Temur jinked the bike left and right. At this speed, riding over bodies, colliding with orks in primitive armour, he risked overturning. He only went faster. With his helmet on, he could not feel the rush of wind against his face, but he saw the smear of enemies falling in his wake, and he felt every jolt and bump of his hurricane ride.

The Battlewagon was just ahead now. And the Thunderhawk launched more Hellstrikes at the other tank. Another snap of the jaws—
No.

At the moment the *Furious Lightning* fired, the ork machine put on a burst of speed. It surged forwards. The rockets flashed past it, blowing up scores of foot-soldiers behind. For a second, the Battlewagon claimed the initiative.

A fatal second. The tank's cannon fired. The exuberant, excessive, overpowered shell struck the gunship's starboard wing.

The explosion lit the night, an evil sun. The ablative ceramite armour should have been proof against a single shell. The titanium rolled plates should have held. But it was as if this shell had been blessed by a ravaging spirit of war. The wing sheared off. It tumbled end over end to the ground, killing more orks with flames and crushing steel. The *Lightning* went into a spiral. Its remaining engine roared as Tokhta fought to stabilise the flight.

There was nothing he could do. The gunship's death was inevitable. Still, it fought hard against the end. The engine's howl became a cry for vengeance. Wounded, burning, the Thunderhawk spun around its own axis and slammed to earth in a steep diagonal. The impact was storm and earthquake. The battlefield shook. Flames washed over the orks. As it died, the ship took a phalanx of greenskins with it.

The final retaliation meant nothing. The orks' collective shout of celebration was deafening.

The stern of the *Furious Lightning* was on fire, but the fuselage was still intact. The Battlewagon closed in.

No, Temur thought. *No, by the winds and by the earth, no!* The tide would not turn like this. But there was nothing he could do. He saw only enough of the disaster to know what had happened. He was committed to his own attack, now seconds away.

‘Thunderhawk down, providing assistance,’ said a voice over the combat channel. It was Ghazan, leading the western charge.

‘Punish the greenskins’ temerity, Stormseer,’ Temur told him.

‘I will, khan, and more.’

Ghazan split up the squad. He and Brother Kaidu veered off towards the fallen gunship while Sergeant Qaraqan led Ulagan and Boralun against the tank. He urged even more speed from his bike. The Thunderhawk was a prone target for the Battlewagon’s giant gun.

The cannon fired again just before Ghazan reached the *Lightning*. The shell fell short, but not by much. The blast threw up a cloud of earth that half covered the wreck. Then Ghazan and Kaidu were at the front of the ship, on the port side, opposite the tank’s approach. The nose had dug itself into the ground. The primary access ramp was crumpled and half-buried. There would be no extraction that way.

‘Brother Tokhta,’ Ghazan voxed. ‘Are you still with us?’

Static at first, but then a volley of pained curses.

‘Sounds like he is,’ said Kaidu. They dismounted, leaving their bikes close to the fuselage.

The cannon thundered again, but at a different target. Ghazan heard the stutter of a bike’s bolters. Qaraqan’s attack was under way. The bike weaponry wouldn’t be enough to pierce the tank’s armour, but it was drawing the attention of the ork gunners, buying some time. Only a matter of seconds, though. The crash had killed scores of orks, but their comrades were rushing forwards to swarm over the prize, heedless of the possibility of being blown up by their own armament.

The secondary access hatch was also inoperable. Ghazan looked at the slope of the ruined bow. ‘Let’s climb,’ he said. He and Kaidu scrambled up. To the north, they were exposed to the Battlewagon’s cannon, but it was still trying to hit closer targets. From the east, west and south, the orks rushed towards the *Furious Lightning*. A sea of green savagery was coming to drown them. The orks fired as they ran, filling the air with bullets. In less than a minute, the wave would crash against the gunship.

The Thunderhawk’s forward armourglass windshield had been blown out by the impact. Tokhta was visible inside, pinned by crushed metal.

‘How are you faring, brother?’ Ghazan asked over the vox.

‘Left arm, leg, and ribs broken,’ the pilot answered. ‘No leverage.’

Kaidu dropped inside and began hauling the wreckage away. Ghazan turned to hold back the orks. As he did, he thought through another problem. They could not leave the *Furious Lightning* to be desecrated by the xenos. He thought of a possible solution. It was lunatic.

My destiny lies elsewhere, he thought. *So this will certainly work*. He didn't think anyone else would appreciate the humour. He barely did himself.

'Can you ride, brother?' he asked Tokhta. His staff in one hand, he opened fire with his bolt pistol with the other, blasting at the orks that came near his and Kaidu's bikes. He ignored the ones on the other side of the gunship for now.

'If I can breathe, I can ride.'

Good. 'Are there any jump packs aboard?'

'In the troop compartment, yes.'

'Brother Kaidu, I'll need one.' He maglocked the pistol, pulled a frag grenade from his belt and tossed it into the horde. The explosion hurled broken orks into the air. He had the pistol back in hand and was firing again before the bodies landed. Corpses accumulated in a semi-circle around the bikes. The greenskins on his side of the Thunderhawk slowed down and started shooting at him. Their bullets were no match for his armour. But behind these orks came their slower, larger, more heavily-armoured brothers.

'Is that wise, Stormseer?' Kaidu asked.

'No, but it is necessary. Do hurry.'

A massive ork in clanking armour leapt up onto the *Lightning's* nose. It took a bolter shell in the chest. The hit damaged the armour, but the ork kept coming, its forward momentum unaffected. Ghazan blinked at the greenskin's strength. He had never seen an ork able to shrug off a bolter's impact quite so easily.

It swung a huge chainaxe at him. He took a step back, and the axe went wide. Its head was so heavy that the ork's swing threw it off balance for a moment. Ghazan raised his staff high. The eye sockets of the horse skull on its end glowed with the fury of Chogoris, and the winds of the White Scars home world rushed out from his being. They knocked the ork off the gunship, then raged to the ground below, hurling the attackers back.

Ghazan reached into the spirit of the moon itself. He touched its elemental strength. He spoke to it with the voice of Chogoris entwined with his own. *Cast these vermin away*, he said. *Scour them from your surface*.

The winds shrieked with anger. They flattened the orks and bowled them over, clearing the area around the two bikes by a dozen metres on all sides. Ghazan held the orks at bay. He pinned them to the ground with the moon's howl.

Frothing with rage, the biggest of the orks were already pushing themselves up. Then the Battlewagon's cannon thundered again, and this time it hit very close to the flank of the *Furious Lightning*. The gunship shook hard. It broke Ghazan's concentration, and he lost his link to the moon and his home world.

Behind him, Ghazan heard Kaidu climb out of the cockpit, then pull Tokhta up. Ghazan turned. 'You have seconds to get clear,' he said. He took the jump pack Kaidu handed him.

Kaidu nodded. Tokhta said, 'My thanks, Stormseer.'

Supported by Kaidu, the pilot slid to the ground. He slumped over Ghazan's bike, but managed to start it unaided. Tokhta opened up with his bike's twin bolters, pushing the orks back again, giving Kaidu the seconds and space he needed to start the run. Then they rode off, smashing through the greenskins, crushing them beneath their wheels.

On the starboard side of the Thunderhawk, the tank was closing in. It had been slowed by the other White Scars, but they hadn't been able to cripple it. The ship was surrounded by orks racing with each other to claim the prize.

Ghazan had the jump pack on now. 'Pull back,' he voxed to the squad. 'I have this.'

He dropped into the cockpit. Despite the damage, the control surfaces were still more or less intact. He drove his fist into the panelling until he had punched a hole through, then peeled the metal back, exposing the wiring. He was no Techmarine, but he murmured a prayer of apology to the ship's mortally wounded machine-spirit. He asked it to accept what he was about to do, and act as he hoped it would.

The orks were on top of the nose now. Two were fighting with each other over which would have the privilege of entering the cockpit first. Ghazan shot them both. He grabbed the shattered windshield frame and hauled himself out. He looked down at the wiring, fixed its position in his mind, and triggered the jump pack. He shot into the air as the tank drew up beside the *Furious Lightning*. He kept looking downwards, visualising the cockpit, as he reached out once more to the elements.

He was a seer of storms. He would share his vision with the orks below.

The moon responded to him. The land was outraged by the presence of the greenskins. It was eager for retribution. It gave Ghazan its lightning. His staff crackled electrical silver along its entire length, and then the blast, a sear in the night, struck the cockpit of the Thunderhawk.

With a roar of final rage and triumph, the *Furious Lightning* embraced its

namesake and found its vengeance. All its weapons systems fired at once. Its remaining Hellstrike missiles launched straight into the ground. Explosions grew from explosions as the fuel and ammunition ignited. The gunship disappeared in an earth-shaking blast. The fire swallowed the tank, and then it too added to the holocaust. The fireball rose to meet Ghazan, and the jump pack barely kept him from the hunger of the spreading destruction. Successive booms built on each other. They were a symphony of ending. They were the sound of the entire centre of the ork army gone in a second, incinerated at the moment of their celebration.

On the descending arc of his jump, Ghazan saw the lights of the two bikes streaking away from the fire, still cutting their way through the greenskins. As he landed just beyond the periphery of the blasts, he saw the last tank come apart in flames too, brought down by Temur's bike squad.

Ghazan hit the ground with his bolt pistol drawn. He marched forwards, staff high, putting shells in the skulls of the nearest orks. A few fired back at him, but they were not attacking. The remaining force was in disarray, panicked by the massive, sudden losses of infantry and all their heavy support.

No other tanks appeared. The orks were retreating.

'We have a respite,' Temur said. 'I don't expect it to be long, and it was dearly bought. I have no intention of sacrificing our remaining Thunderhawk to gain us another breathing spell, and I dislike sieges. I dislike them intensely.'

The Fifth Brotherhood had regrouped in the bastion. The khan was speaking to his sergeants in the command block. Colonel Gregor Meixner of the Mordian Iron Guard was present, but standing to one side, remaining silent with good grace while Temur paced. Meixner struck Ghazan as an officer with a finely developed sense of the possible and the political. The 64th was a justifiably proud regiment, but Meixner knew that he and his men were present in this engagement in a supporting role. They would assist the White Scars as they could, but it was the Fifth Brotherhood that would stab the ork operations on this moon through the heart.

Ghazan was impressed by Meixner's good-natured calm as he listened to Temur. The Iron Guard on this day had wound up being little more than bait. As Ghazan turned over in his mind what must happen next, he realised that the men would continue in this role. They were the inviting target that would keep the main body of the ork army focused on this spot, distracted from protecting its own base.

He doubted that Temur would be as sanguine when the same happened to him. But that was what the scenario he was outlining would be.

‘Our choices are limited,’ Temur said. ‘We will not give up our foothold on this moon, and we cannot attack a target whose location is unknown to us.’ He grunted, as if the reality of his situation just now fully registered. His scars, in the pattern of the claw marks of a *berkul*, darkened as his frustration shaded towards anger. ‘We will have to hold this position until we know where to strike.’ He turned to Sergeant Kusala, who led the Scout squad. ‘Brother-sergeant,’ said the khan, ‘I believe it is clear what we need you and your men to do.’

Kusala nodded. ‘It is, my khan,’ he said. He had lived long enough that his hair, tied back following tradition in a horse’s tail, was grey. Though Ghazan was younger, his hair was white. It had been since the night of his first vision, when his fated role as *zadyin arga* had been made manifest. ‘We will find the greenskins’ manufactorum for you,’ Kusala went on.

‘Good. And when you do, we shall fall on it like the worst of gales.’ To Meixner, Temur said, ‘When that moment comes, we will move to destroy the manufactorum, regardless of the situation on the ground here. That may well mean abandoning you to face another siege like we saw today. Quite possibly a worse one.’

‘We will do our duty,’ Meixner said. ‘We will hold.’

Temur grunted again, this time more satisfied. ‘I look forward to your being put to the test, colonel. We cannot afford to let this mission drag on too long. Neither can the Raven Guard on Lepidus Prime.’ Temur stopped pacing. He had barely glanced at the tactorium table behind him. Not that it was proving useful. They all knew the lie of the land around the bastion. Northwards, where the target lay, was mostly conjecture. The difficulty was not in knowing the terrain of the moon. The problem lay in how the orks had transformed the surface since their arrival. None of the lithographs produced by orbiting augur arrays were helpful. The only way to find the site of the orks’ heavy armour production would be to find it on the ground.

All the same, Ghazan found himself looking past Temur at the table. The lithograph of the regions north of the bastion seemed to look back at him. The longer he stared at the image of the terrain, the more he felt the fraying vibration around the contours of reality that preceded his visions. Destiny tugged at him. The being he would fight awaited him there.

‘I will accompany the Scouts,’ he said.

Temur's pacing stopped dead. He gave Ghazan a sharp look, but didn't respond to him. He spoke instead to Kusala again. 'When will you be ready to leave?'

'Within the hour, khan.'

'Good. Make ready, then.'

Kusala saluted and left. To the rest of the sergeants, Temur said, 'We will make what repairs we can to the bikes and Land Speeders. We will have constant, rotating patrols out there. We know the orks are coming back. I would have us hit them before they get so close again.' He glanced at Meixner and visibly stopped short of issuing commands to the colonel.

If Meixner noticed the near slight, he didn't show it. 'We will be ready as well,' he said.

'Thank you, colonel.' To the White Scars he said, 'To war, then. For the Khan and the Emperor!'

The war cry was echoed, and the sergeants left the command room, as did Meixner. Temur made no move to go. He stood beside the tacterium table, as still as he had been restless a few minutes before. Ghazan remained where he was. The two of them waited until they were alone.

'You are needed here, zadyin arga,' Temur said. 'On the front lines.'

'Perhaps. But this is where I cannot be. I am fated to be elsewhere.'

Temur's scars darkened again. 'You saw what we were up against. Your presence tonight was the difference between our provisional triumph and disaster.'

'That is not a certainty.'

'The certainty is that our losses would have been much greater.'

Ghazan inclined his head once, conceding the point. He said nothing.

Temur began to pace again. As he did, he tapped a finger against the surface of the table. He struck it with the rigid *tak, tak, tak* of a march. 'You arrived on my ship without any notice, at the last moment before the commencement of the mission,' he said.

Again, Ghazan bowed his head. What the khan said was true. Ghazan saw no need to expand on that truth.

Temur moved to the far side of the table. The tapping continued. He seemed to be expecting more of an answer. When he received none, he said, 'I received you with, I believe, the respect due to your office.'

'That is so.'

'Yet you will not do me the courtesy of telling me *why* you are here.'

‘I do not intend to be cryptic, khan. The full contours of my fate here are hidden to me. I have come to do battle with a powerful enemy. That is the full truth.’

‘And you don’t know who or what or where this enemy is?’

‘No.’ Ghazan gestured at the taccarium table. ‘But my sense is that it waits for me in the north.’

‘Has it not occurred to you that this enemy might be drawn to the battlefield here? I have a great respect for the visions of Stormseers, Ghazan, but are they not open to different interpretations? You just admitted that the details are hidden from you.’

Though his soul already knew the answer to the khan’s question, Ghazan did not dismiss it. He considered it long enough to confirm his certainty that he was choosing the right path. ‘No,’ he said. ‘This foe will not come to me.’

‘Then let the Scouts do their work, and in the meantime, fight where you are needed.’

‘I am needed in the north. With the Scouts.’

‘You are wrong. Your destiny may be pulling you there, but that is not where you should be at this time.’

Ghazan was silent for a moment. ‘I am sorry to disappoint you, Temur Khan. But fate is not subject to pragmatism. I have no choice.’ He said the last sentence as if to speak it were to cast aside all doubt. He brought his arms to his chest in the sign of the aquila and left before Temur could answer.

He did pause in the corridor outside the command centre. He understood Temur’s growing anger. His actions would appear, from the outside, to be selfish and quite possibly foolish. He removed his left gauntlet and held his staff with his bare hand. He felt the ridges of the protective sigils. He closed his eyes and opened himself up to the warp.

The tug was there immediately. The chains of destiny were pulling at him with even more insistence. At their end, the figure of the foe awaited. The shape was no clearer than it had been before. But what it radiated had come into focus: triumph, bestial delight, destructive hunger. And power. Power that somehow was not entirely inherent to the foe itself. Power that was being fed, and was growing. Power that Ghazan must extinguish or die trying.

The Stormseer opened his eyes. Temur was right to think that the White Scars had little time before the war became entirely a defensive one and was lost. But the key was in the north. That was where time was slipping away. Time for the White Scars, time for Lepidus. Time for many systems beyond.



CHAPTER TWO

They left at dawn, heading north from the bastion, travelling at close to top speed for several hours. Ghazan was on his bike. In the Land Speeder Storm were Kusala and the four Scouts: Tegusal, Ariq, Bokegan and Yekejin. Day on the moon was a smear. Visibility was poor, thanks to a perpetual ground fog that was knee-height over much of the land, but rose as high as three metres in patches.

The ork army, though, was easy to spot. Ghazan and Kusala slowed their vehicles when they saw the greenskin horde appear over the horizon. They veered east, giving the orks a wide berth. The land had more pronounced rolls in that direction, and they were able, as they drove over the hilltops, to observe the size of the greenskin force and vox a report back to Temur. The numbers were greater yet, but there were no tanks. There were no vehicles of any kind.

‘I wish those were glad tidings,’ the khan told them.

Ghazan agreed. In the initial stages of the first assault, there had been no sign of tanks. And then suddenly they had been there.

‘Well, they’re not hauling them down the road with them,’ Kusala observed. ‘That much we know now.’

The greenskin army stretched for kilometres. Its clamour reached further yet. The moon’s day was filled with the yells and laughter and crude songs of the beasts. The cacophony of the voices was backed by the beat of thousands of trudging feet and the clanking of weapons and armour. It sickened Ghazan to think that he was looking at another nomadic army. That there should be any parallel between the orks and the culture of Chogoris was obscene. But the

distorted, monstrous suggestion of the familiar was before him. It underscored the need to exterminate these xenos.

But his fight was not with that army. Not with those orks. Not now.

Half an hour after they left the marching horde behind, bike and speeder climbed a ridge, then stopped. Before them was a wide plain that had been transformed by the orks' presence.

'I do not like to credit the greenskins with genius,' Sergeant Kusala muttered over the vox. 'But the bastards can make our life hell without even trying.'

The plain had been turned into a refuse dump covering hundreds of hectares. Broken and half-finished vehicles and tonnes of scrap metal covered the area. The fog eddied over and between the detritus, concealing and revealing jagged edges, senseless assemblages, and endless, endless waste. Scattered irregularly were much larger piles of cast-offs, some of them the size of low hills. Smoke rose from fissures between the debris, and from exhaust pipes poking out like toxic weeds. There was a deep, arrhythmic beat that Ghazan could feel coming up from the ground. It was strong enough that he could see the contours of his bike vibrate slightly in time. Now and then, flame would belch up from the plain. There was no consistency, though. Ghazan didn't see the burn-off emerge from the same spot twice.

'How did they do this so quickly?' Tegusal wondered. 'Or have they been here longer than we thought? Is this deliberate?'

'Does it matter?' Bokegan asked. 'It exists. Now we have to deal with it.'

'Brother Tegusal's questions are relevant,' Ghazan said. 'If the orks have been here longer than we thought, that means they hid. Successfully. That means they planned. There is already considerable evidence for this. They established their heavy armour facility on an uninhabited moon, giving them plenty of opportunity to build up their arsenal unmolested before they attacked Lepidus Prime. Do those actions sound like the familiar tactics of orks?'

Tegusal began, 'On Armageddon—'

Kusala cut him off. 'We are not fighting that enemy. There cannot be two orks in the galaxy like that.'

'Still,' Ghazan said. 'This is unusual. And in close combat, these orks seem... more resilient.'

'Stormseer,' Kusala said, 'do you have any good news to bring to the table? Or is the galaxy already doomed?'

Ghazan smiled. He gestured at the view before them. 'Well, brother-sergeant, there can be little doubt that the greenskins are producing their vehicles

somewhere here.’

‘Mm,’ said Kusala. The grunted syllable might have been amusement, or it might have been displeasure. With the sergeant, it was often both.

‘They’re building the tanks underground,’ Ariq said.

‘Yes,’ said Kusala, ‘but where? Everywhere?’ A gout of flame appeared at the base of the descent to the plain. It vanished. A moment later, another appeared a hundred metres further in. ‘No industry should work like this.’

‘Nothing about the greenskins should work the way it does,’ Ghazan said. ‘It is pointless, perhaps even dangerous, to try to reason it out. We must accept that it is so, and deal with its reality.’

‘All very true, Stormseer,’ Kusala answered, ‘and all very well. That doesn’t help us, though. We cannot be sure of destroying everything beneath the surface without deploying cyclonic torpedoes.’

‘We are here to reclaim the system, not destroy it,’ Ghazan said.

‘Exactly.’

‘Where do we begin to look?’ Ariq asked.

‘Near the bigger piles?’ Tegusal suggested.

Kusala thought for a moment, then nodded. ‘There has to be some way in. Those are as likely spots as any.’

Ghazan agreed. The tug of fate was stronger yet. The battle was waiting for him underground. He was not close enough yet, in time or in space, to know more precisely where to find the enemy.

There were no orks visible on the surface. Kusala decided to favour mobility over stealth, so they kept to the vehicles and rode down onto the plain. They started with the nearest hill of debris, about two hundred metres to the north-east of their position. They circled it twice. There was no entrance. Nor did they see any means by which the discarded metal had arrived here in the first place. They moved on to the next hill, with no better luck.

As they reached the third, not far from the centre of the plain, there was a shrieking grind of gears. It came from beneath the surface, a few metres away from the north face of the heap. The hill began to shake. Slag tumbled down the slope. The lower portion of the mound heaved, and a trap door rose on hydraulic lifts. A maw the size of a Thunderhawk troop compartment gaped. The interior was a throat descending beneath the surface of the plain. From within came the screech of metal against metal.

Ghazan and Kusala steered bike and Storm around the curve of the hill and killed the engines. They kept the weapons pointed towards the entrance.

‘Did they spot us?’ Yekejin asked.

‘We’ll know in a moment,’ Kusala answered. ‘Do not fire without my order.’

They watched a treaded vehicle crawl out from the interior. It was loaded down with scrap. It was followed by another, then a third.

They were driven by grots. The diminutive greenskins had become permanent parts of the machines: the creatures’ legs had been amputated, and their torsos emerged from the centre of the guidance mechanisms. The ends of their arms had been fused with the gears and steering wheels. They were almost servitors, except servitors did not howl and complain about their fate.

The grots did. Their litany of injustice continued without pause as they drove up the hill. The box of each truck tipped to the side. The dumped loads ran down the hill, creating a small avalanche of metal. The vehicles then backed up. They disappeared once more into the maw. Filthy smoke billowed out as the door lowered itself shut again. Debris continued to tumble down the side of the heap, covering the door once more with accidental camouflage.

‘Well,’ said Tegusal. ‘I suppose that’s one way in.’

‘It might be a way directly into one of their infernal machines,’ Kusala said. ‘It is clearly not used by the warrior greenskins. Better to find how they get in and out.’ He pointed to the door. ‘Note this location, though. We may yet have to use it.’

‘The other debris hills are likely more of the same,’ said Ghazan.

The sergeant nodded. ‘Then we proceed on foot.’ He looked around. ‘This is close enough to pass for the centre. We’ll start here.’

Twenty metres away, there was a pile of discarded vehicle parts. With the addition of a camo-net, the bike and the Storm blended in with that confusion of metal. The Space Marines began a search that moved out in a spiral from the hill.

The hunt felt like drudge work. The orks had forced them into a humiliating slog through industrial offal. There were no options. The entrances to the complex, if that was what it was beneath their feet, could be doors or something as simple and lazy as holes in the ground. They would be hard to spot. Maybe the orks were hiding them, but it could also be that the greenskins simply weren’t bothering to mark them.

‘Here,’ Ariq called. He had found a chute. There was a rough ladder leading down into the depths.

‘Right,’ said Kusala. ‘Let’s see what sort of damage we can do.’ He started down the rungs.

Ghazan waited as the other Scouts followed the sergeant. He frowned at the opening. He would have expected to feel something if he was moving closer to his fated appointment. Something as simple as rising heartbeats, or an intensified anticipation. He did not. Somehow, this route was not getting him closer to where he needed to be. He saw no better possibility for the moment, though, so he descended after the Scouts.

The chute ended in a passage that appeared to have been blasted out as quickly as possible. Its width varied every ten metres or so, making it more like a series of linked caves than a tunnel. The floor was littered with bits of assembly.

The Scouts used beam-lamps to illuminate the passage, though empty fixtures on the walls suggested there had once been lighting here. The tunnel led to a larger cavern where there were even more bits of incomplete war machines. They looked like they had been on their way to being eccentric variations of tanks, and had been abandoned because they did not work, or their creators grew bored. On the far side of the derelict workshop was another tunnel, from which came the noise of machinery. Ghazan looked down the short passage. The clanking grew louder. After a few minutes, he saw a grot-driven trash hauler arrive. It paused a moment, as if waiting to receive an addition to its load, then moved on.

‘This doesn’t connect to anything except their disposal system,’ he said.

Kusala joined him at the passageway. ‘Then it seems we are fated to take that route.’

Ghazan winced at the sergeant’s use of *fated*. It was wrong. *No*, he thought, *not this way*. ‘That will not serve,’ he said.

Kusala turned to face him. ‘Why not? Clearly, construction is going on at the other end of that line.’

Ghazan shook his head. The tug of destiny was suddenly strong, and it was pulling him away from this path. ‘That may be so, but it is not what we seek.’

Kusala answered slowly, choosing his words with care. ‘The khan gave us,’ he gestured to his Scouts, ‘the mission of pinpointing, and if possible sabotaging, the greenskin manufactorum. Do you know something, Stormseer, to suggest this route will not take us to our target?’

Now Ghazan was cautious as he answered. Though he outranked Kusala, he did not want to put him in the position of having to choose between two contradictory sets of orders. But there was no question of taking this path. In this, he did not believe he was being selfish. If the struggle he faced was so formidable that it sent ripples from the future to the present, then it would have

an importance that went beyond the personal. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘If we go this way, we will not reach our goal.’

Kusala paused a long while. His face was concealed behind his helmet, but Ghazan could guess the doubts written on it. He could see them in the expressions of the Scouts as they waited for a decision. Finally, Kusala said, ‘Are you aware of an alternative?’

‘I am not.’

‘Then—’

‘Not yet. Give me a few minutes, brother-sergeant. Will you do that?’

‘Of course, zadyin arga.’ The respect due to Ghazan’s position permitted no other response.

‘Thank you.’ Ghazan wasn’t sure if Kusala was aware of the friction between himself and the khan. But he wanted the sergeant to know that he did not take his cooperation for granted. ‘This is necessary,’ he added.

Kusala nodded, non-committal. He stayed where he was.

Ghazan left the others and retraced their steps to the chute, and climbed back to the surface. He stood in the centre of the orks’ landscape of waste and turned around slowly. He stopped looking for a logical point of entry. There would be none, not in the normal sense of *logical*, not with the greenskins. The chambers below were proof of that. How many other semi-discrete workshops would they find if they kept looking? Some might be occupied, some not. Kusala was right that following the disposal line would bring them to an active facility. But if the manufactorum was spread out in bits and pieces, in haphazard fashion, underneath the full expanse of this plain, the White Scars could be searching for days and find nothing of any strategic value. There were great questions here. Not just where the tank-construction facilities were, but how the tanks were arriving at the battlefield. If the vehicles were being built here, how were they leaving? Shouldn’t there be a steady stream of them emerging from the ground at some point?

No, the answers were stranger, and deeper. They had to be. Surely that was why he had been called here. The being he must fight was tied to those answers.

He kept turning, letting the details of the plain blur into an impressionist continuum of debris. He opened himself to the warp, feeling the currents of the possible and the inevitable. He could not read the future, but he could feel its undertow, and he could sense the gathering density of the potential seeking to become the enacted. He reached out to the land. He spoke to its spirit. Its suffering must be great, wounded and abused as it was by the orks. *We have*

come to free you of them, he told it. He sought the worst injury, the nexus of greatest harm.

The answer came in the form of an instinct. He stopped turning. He found that he was staring at a spot about a hundred metres away, further to the north-west. There was no landmark that he could see. He kept his eyes fixed on the location as he began to walk towards it. ‘Sergeant Kusala,’ he voxed. ‘I think I may have found something.’

He became more certain as he drew closer. There was nothing to confirm his instinct. There was only that growing certitude. It was enough. It fed on itself. He realised his lips had pulled back into a grim smile.

He stopped. There was still nothing to see, but this was the spot. He began tossing scrap metal aside as the Scouts joined him. He looked up at Kusala. ‘Right here,’ he said. ‘Our path begins here.’

Kusala was motionless for a moment. ‘Stormseer,’ he said, ‘there is nothing but more waste here.’

‘No. There is something. We have to dig a bit further. That is all.’ The sergeant’s tone had been flat, respectful, but his doubts were growing stronger. Ghazan was sorry for it, but not insulted.

Kusala and his squad helped with the dig. The scrap was deeper here. They kept going down, and had not reached the ground yet. Ghazan realised this was a declivity in the plain, smoothed out by the volume of rubbish. This, he thought, was camouflage. This entrance was too perfectly hidden. Here was more worrying evidence of something greater than cunning on the part of these orks.

The earth shook. There was a single, hard jerk. It almost knocked the White Scars off their feet. More debris slid down the heaps. The air was filled by the sound of thousands of torn sheets of metal scraping against each other. The shockwave was visible, the shadow of a ripple, as it travelled beneath the plain. Then the earth stilled. Metal settled with a rusty chorus.

‘What was that?’ said Tegusal.

‘The reason we are here,’ Ghazan answered. He reached down, grabbed a sheet of metal that looked as if it had been intended as a door, and hurled it away. Beneath it, a hatch, three metres across, was set into the rock of the plain. There was no visible way to open it. But there it was: the true door concealed by a false, discarded one.

Kusala examined the hatch. ‘Only to be used from the inside,’ he said.

Then the vox sprang to life. Their khan was calling. The reprieve was over.

No, Ghazan thought. Even before he heard Temur’s demand, he knew that he

would refuse it.

At the head of the Fifth Brotherhood, the engine of his bike snarling its hunger for xenos blood, Temur Khan rode out from the bastion to meet the orks. The White Scars had had ample warning this time. The greenskin foot-soldiers were hours away when the report had come in from Kusala. Temur had the position of the orks, and the time and the distance to savage them utterly.

The entire mounted Brotherhood was part of the attack: the six bike squads and the five Land Speeders. The assault squad was carried by the surviving Thunderhawk, the *Khajog's Stand*. What raced towards the orks was nothing as mundane as a mere opposing force. It was war and wind combined. The sudden change on the battlefield, the flash of fortune's reversal, the decapitating blow of surprise: all of these things were embodied in the charge of the White Scars. The tribes of Chogoris had followed a tradition of combat for millennia. The technology had changed. The philosophy had not. The enemy was shattered not by overwhelming numbers or impregnable armour. It was speed, and the terrifying momentum that came with it, that routed the foe. It was lightning, not thunder, that was lethal.

Even so, the Fifth Brotherhood came with thunder. They eschewed the Land Raiders and Rhinos that were the mainstay of other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, so the deep growls of the heavy vehicles were absent. But the snarl of Land Speeders and bikes in such numbers was monstrous. The air itself turned feral. The White Scars were a storm flying over the land, and it would flatten everything in its path.

The wind rushed at the green tide. It came to break the waves, to turn them back. It would blow so hard that it would show that a tide could be stopped after all.

Temur Khan did not believe in comforting illusions. He knew, when he saw the ork mob stretching out for kilometres, that he was here to perform a miracle. So be it. He knew what he and his battle-brothers could do. He closed the distance with the orks, the landscape a streak in his peripheral vision, and he laughed.

'Behold the greenskin numbers!' he called out over the vox's company channel. 'Do they imagine that will make any difference to us? All they have done, brothers, is ensure that each of us may quench his thirst for xenos blood this day. Destroy them! For the Khan and the Emperor!'

The orks started shooting as soon as they saw the Space Marines. For the first

few seconds, the range was too great. Then the gunfire became something to take seriously. The orks were not marksmen, but they didn't need accuracy when they had volume. The calibre of most of the bullets could do little against power armour, but the vehicles were vulnerable.

Speed was the answer here, too. The orks couldn't get a fix on targets moving that fast.

Temur kept the Thunderhawk's heavy arsenal in reserve for now. The White Scars struck as a series of spearheads. Temur's bike squad hit first, killing the orks at a distance with bolter fire, and then driving hard into the centre of the lines and moving forward to cut the march in half. As the orks' resistance stiffened, the squad broke to the left and right, slicing through the greenskin flanks and out. Next came the Land Speeders, plunging the knife deeper into the enemy's heart. And when they veered off, the next wave of bikes followed on. By then, Temur and his squad were harassing the periphery of the horde as they looped back for another run.

The White Scars attack was a perpetual shock. The orks reeled. They were hit in the centre and on the sides simultaneously, and they were unable to get a fix on one group of Space Marines before it had moved on and another was renewing the charge. The bastion's plateau was barely visible over the horizon. The orks' advance ground to a halt, and bit by bit the White Scars crushed them to pulp.

When it came, Temur didn't see or hear the disaster. It happened on ground hidden by the gentle swell of the landscape. From the perspective of the battlefield, nothing had changed for the bastion. Temur wasn't even looking in that direction. He was focused on the next group of greenskins about to go down under his wheels and be shredded by his guns. The White Scars were tearing the enemy apart, moving so fast that the orks had yet to claim a single kill, unless it was their own kin as they fired indiscriminately in all directions.

The Fifth Brotherhood had absolute control over the battlefield, and yet Temur knew that it had all gone wrong. Something had changed. Perhaps the corner of his eye caught the flash of energy discharge in the distance, back towards the base, as he began his turn once again to drive through the orks' disintegrating front lines. Perhaps it was something as simple as premonition. But his heart was already sinking when Colonel Meixner was suddenly on the vox.

'Multiple heavy armour units inbound from the north,' he said. 'Six of them. They'll be at the foot of the plateau in minutes.'

From the north? Temur wanted to roar at the impossibility. How could the

tanks have bypassed them? Yet they had, and now his entire force was hours away from the bastion that was in immediate danger. The army of thousands of orks, the army that he was shattering, now looked like a decoy.

The idea that he might have been outmanoeuvred by orks was an obscenity that robbed Temur of words. It took him several more moments of outraged killing before he was able to answer Meixner. 'Hold fast, colonel,' he said.

'We plan to,' Meixner answered, clipped and assured, and fooling neither of them about the odds against six of the orks' war machines.

Temur turned sharply, cutting his advance short. The rest of the squad followed behind as he cut his way back out of the howling mob of xenos beasts. 'Brothers,' he voxed, 'we have been deceived. The bastion is in need of our aid. We must fly to the true battle.'

The orks were deciding where and how he fought. For that outrage, he vowed to coat the surface of the moon with their blood.

Then he opened a channel to the Scout squad.

Ariq was rigging a demolition charge on the hatch when Temur's voice came through on the company vox-channel. 'Have you found the manufactorum?' the khan asked.

'We have found another potential entrance to it,' Kusala answered.

'Six tanks are closing with the bastion. The greenskins' ability to field heavy armour must be neutralised.'

'Agreed,' Ghazan put in.

'Brother-sergeant,' Temur said, and the slight aimed at Ghazan was clear, 'how close are you to accomplishing the mission?'

'I don't know, my khan,' Kusala said. 'The lead is promising, but not definitive.'

'Very well. Carry on. You are more useful to us there. Understand that it may fall to you and your Scouts alone to destroy the facility.'

'Then that is what we shall do.'

'Good.' Still on the company channel, Temur said, 'Stormseer Ghazan, you must return to base. I hope your aid will not be too late in coming.'

Ghazan switched to a private frequency. 'I can best help the struggle here, Temur Khan.'

'If the entrance has been found, the Scouts can do their work. Your work belongs here.'

'I have no choice in this matter,' Ghazan said. 'And neither do you.' He

terminated the link. He looked back at Kusala. The sergeant had removed his helmet after leaving the abandoned ork workshop. He wasn't even trying to hide his doubts now.

'None of us has a choice now,' Ghazan said, as much to convince himself as Kusala. 'What is coming is destined. Now open this hatch.'



CHAPTER THREE

Speeding south, away from the orks, Temur bit his tongue hard, preferring to draw his own blood than vent his rage pointlessly at the static that had replaced Ghazan's voice. He focused the energy of anger into greater velocity for his bike. He willed the terrain to flow faster. He opened a channel to Meixner. He got through, and he heard what he thought was the colonel's voice, but the man was drowned out by the sound of explosions.

The White Scars raced for the bastion. They flew over the land. They were a blinding streak of war. The ork force had vanished in the distance behind them. It seemed to Temur, though, that the greenskins' laughter followed them across the terrain. His ritual scars burned. His blood was up with fury, and with humiliation. He would tear the sky in half before he saw his company defeated by ork strategy. He still had difficulty in believing that there even was such a thing.

Geography was his enemy now, too. He needed to be at the siege of the bastion *now*. But no matter how hard he pushed his bike, he could not compress the distance to nothing. The Thunderhawk was faster than the Land Speeders and bikes, and he ordered pilot Naku to take the *Khajog's Stand* and its assault squad on ahead.

The gunship couldn't cross that distance instantly, either. By the time it reached the battlefield, and Naku began appraising Temur of the situation, the orks had had far too much time to wreak their havoc.

'Is the bastion still standing?' Temur asked.

'It is.'

‘The walls are holding against the bombardment?’

‘Not exactly,’ Naku said. ‘The Iron Guard has managed to draw the greenskins away from the walls for the moment.’

‘How?’

‘By mounting a charge.’

The implications of that tactic sank in. Infantry charging heavy armour. Temur could imagine nothing other than a massacre. ‘What is the status of the colonel’s men?’

‘They are still fighting.’

No elaboration was needed. Temur gave the Mordians a mental salute. He understood what they were doing. Their assault would distract the orks, who would seek to destroy the humans before them and save the bastion for later. He also understood the irony that loomed: the bastion might be standing after all the forces it was meant to shelter were dead.

Faster.

The terrain a vibrating blur beneath his wheels.

Faster.

The wind against his armour going from whistle to howl to shriek, its transfiguration of fury taking it from the voice of the moon to the voice of Chogoris.

Faster. And there, there, the bastion in sight, veiled by black smoke. On the plain before it, heroic but outmatched men fighting visions of giant, mechanised violence.

The voice of Chogoris calling him to battle, calling him to be wind himself, to be the gale, to be the violence of speed.

He rode with a thousand generations of tribesmen at his back. The wind was their voice, too. In his mind’s eye, the spirits raised the curved blades of their tulwars high. As he topped the final rise before the plain of battle, the ancient cavalry flowed with him.

Temur Khan took to the field with a momentum to shatter worlds. At his sides, and following, was the scythe of the Fifth Brotherhood. And if an infantry force had been before him, the battle would have been over. Human or xenos, a hundred or ten thousand, no such enemy could withstand the shock of that charge. But no such enemy was here. This enemy had taken the form of metal monsters. And they were laying waste to a different infantry.

What the Mordian Iron Guard had achieved was worthy of monuments. The mortals had three Chimeras at their disposal, and had hurled them against the ork

armour, as they had their own fragile bodies. The Chimeras were outnumbered and outgunned. Their armour was not in the same league as that of the ork machines. One of them was already a smoking wreck, identifiable only by the sheer amount of blackened, twisted metal. The other two were damaged but still fighting. They had destroyed one of the ork tanks. And the foot-soldiers of the Iron Guard were still charging, again and again. The sun shone, resplendent, on their uniforms of blue and red and gold. They were pride and they were discipline. More than that: they were heroism, rushing to fight what could not be fought.

Worthy of monuments. Rewarded with a mass grave. Two of the Battlewagons moved around the field on random trajectories, pouncing on whatever large clusters of Mordians were closest at any moment. Gigantic, articulated claws were mounted on their hulls. They reached down into the mass of soldiers and pulled them up by the score, crushing them, spraying the ground with blood. The attacks were savage. With the claws, the orks had found a way to exaggerate even the violence of war. The machines appeared to revel in the sadism, to drink in the vitae that they squeezed from their prey as if downing casks of *chinyua*. At the same time, the main guns fired into the more distant formations, shattering charges, hurling body parts high into the air. The Iron Guard had diverted the orks from the goal of the bastion, and had given them the gift of enormous slaughter. The orks had accepted the gift with glee.

As he descended the slope, Temur saw a Battlewagon ram the side of one of the Chimeras. The front of the ork machine looked like a fist with teeth. The Chimera's gun fired one last time. The shell might as well have been wet sand. The Battlewagon was untouched. It collapsed the flank of the APC as if it were vellum. Flame and smoke poured out of the wound. The tank rode up over the Chimera, crushing it down.

The Mordian vehicle exploded. The blast was muffled beneath the weight of the Battlewagon. Fire enveloped the tank, an embrace and surrender. The Battlewagon drove out of the flames. The huge, jagged metal cluster at its front looked like a snarl of triumph.

The remaining Chimera was limping, slowed by its injury. Its moments were numbered. Its crew pushed it towards another of the Battlewagons. The main gun fired, and fired again. Its heavy stubbers sent an unending stream of bullets at the target. Its opponent had two cannons on staggered levels above the hull. They were short, primitive, and with a bore twice that of the Chimera's weapon. Their fire was a syncopated double-beat, the sound of a monstrous heart.

The accuracy of the Iron Guard was impeccable. Every shot hit. The orks missed, and missed again. Yet the outcome of the duel was preordained. The men were doomed. Their ordnance did little more than render the forward armour of the Battlewagon even more grotesque. The ork shells kicked up huge fountains of earth where they hit. Only one strike would be needed to kill the Chimera.

The *Khajog's Stand* criss-crossed the field, striking at the tanks. Naku was being more conservative than Tokhta had been. The White Scars could not afford to lose both Thunderhawks. Nor could Naku fire with as much freedom. He did not have a plain filled with greenskins below him. His targets were larger and fewer. The gunship's heavy bolters and lascannons harried the Battlewagons, scoring telling hits against the weaker top and side armour. The Thunderhawk cannon had killed one of the other tanks. Its corpse was a gutted shell on the eastern edge of the battle. The assault squad had deployed, and was vectoring in on the tank closing with the Chimera.

'For the Khan!' Temur voxed to the company.

'For the Emperor!' his warriors answered.

And though he felt the truth of the battle cry to the depths of his soul, he also thought, *For me*. He owed the orks a debt of humiliation.

He led the charge towards the nearest Battlewagon. The tank turned to meet the bikes. Its claw reached out with delighted hunger.

In the great plain of debris, Ghazan watched Ariq detonate the charge on the hatch. The blast was muffled by the earth. The hatch blew in, its broken halves tumbling into the shaft it had concealed. It was wider than the one near the scrap heap, and had three sets of rungs. Ghazan and the squad descended quickly. Kusala waited to go down in parallel with Ghazan.

'Zadyin arga,' he whispered, 'are you sure that this is—'

Ghazan cut him off. 'My level of certainty is irrelevant. I am not deciding on the best tactic, brother-sergeant. I would not think of contradicting the khan in such matters. I am accepting what is destined. And neither he, nor you, nor I have the right to question fate.'

'As you say.' Kusala still sounded uneasy.

At the bottom of the shaft was a wide passageway, much larger than at the first location. The insulting ork versions of lumen globes illuminated its length. It stretched a long way to the left and right before it curved, and there were many branching corridors. There were signs here, too, of quick, crude blasting, but part

of the tunnel was a natural formation. The orks were making use of a pre-existing cave system.

The walls vibrated with the beat of endless industry. The heart of the manufactorum was not far.

Tegusal was looking to the left, his head cocked, listening. 'This way,' he said. 'The heaviest sound is coming from this direction.'

Kusala concurred. 'Forward, then. That will guide us to what we must destroy.'

Ghazan took a step to follow. He stopped, rooted to the spot. He tried to walk. His legs refused to move. Tegusal and Kusala were right. Logic dictated they take this route.

Fate, inexorable and mysterious, called him the other way.

'No,' he said.

Kusala turned, eyebrows raised. He said, 'How can there be any question about our path?'

'There isn't.' He turned and started walking to the right. His body unlocked. His legs wanted to rush him to the appointed encounter. Since setting foot in the tunnel, he had felt the tug grow stronger yet. Time was a torrent, a cataract, and all the seconds were falling to the great clash at the bottom.

No choice, he thought. None at all. There is no such thing.

Kusala did not follow yet. 'What will we find that way?' he called.

'What we must fight if we want to win,' Ghazan said. He understood Kusala's reluctance. Without the impulse of his vision, he would see his own actions as those of a madman, or possibly something far more dishonourable. If they followed the other path, it was true that they must find the heart of the orks' tank production. But that wasn't enough. Ghazan knew, as surely as if the land had cried out its secrets to him as he had dropped below the surface of the moon, that he was following the only road that could lead to victory. The true threat lay elsewhere.

He paused and looked back at the Scouts. He was pushing them to go against all common sense, and possibly against the orders of their khan. He said, 'Brother-sergeant, the struggle that lies before me is destined, but it may not be for you as well. I will go on alone if necessary, and there will be no dishonour if you choose to part company with me here. But if you choose to walk this path with me, you will strike a greater blow against the enemy. I am certain of that.'

'The situation at the bastion is desperate,' Kusala said. 'We have to stop the tanks. Our failure would be catastrophic.'

‘Then all the more reason why you should come with me.’

The Scouts looked back and forth between them. Ghazan regretted putting them in a position where their loyalty to their sergeant was forced to contend with their spiritual awe of a zadyin arga. They were, to a man, keeping their faces neutral.

Kusala shook his head and walked forwards to join Ghazan. ‘I do wish you could share your visions with me,’ he said.

Ghazan smiled. ‘You must rely on faith, brother-sergeant.’

‘I am. Believe me, I am. And it is being tested.’

‘It shall be rewarded.’

Kusala said nothing to that, but he gestured to the Scouts. They moved on, following Ghazan.

For the first few minutes, they seemed to be heading into another abandoned sector of the complex. The sounds of construction grew more distant, and they did not encounter any ork traffic. There were so many branches, though, that it would have been easy for considerable numbers of greenskins to be moving in parallel with them, with neither group being aware of the other’s presence. After about fifty metres, the tunnel forked into three. Ghazan stopped in the centre of the intersection, listening for the pain of the moon and the imperative of fate. He chose the left-hand fork. A minute later, that tunnel split into four.

The White Scars moved deeper and deeper into the labyrinth. After the first branches, Ghazan let the Scouts take the lead. There were sounds ahead once more, and it was impossible to tell, in the web of caverns, how far ahead, and down which passageway, they were. The guttural ork voices bounced from wall to wall, mixed with the clang of hammers, the whine of tools, and the crackle of dispersing energy. Other noises too, less easily defined, but all suggestive of a great deal of activity.

‘Why the different construction sites?’ Kusala wondered. ‘Not very practical. More planning and effort than I would expect from greenskins.’

‘These orks are full of surprises,’ said Ghazan. ‘I think we will find that there is a reason.’

Step by step, branch by branch. One of the Scouts would take point, moving in silence and within the shadows. The next brother would follow half the length of the corridor behind, providing overwatch. The first would observe the intersection, and when he was sure it was clear, signal for the rest of the squad. Ghazan would point to the next branch to take, and the cycle repeated. The further into the maze they went, the more signs of occupation they encountered.

Cables running along the floor, greater illumination, ruined bits of machine, and more and more of what passed for ork art: crude illustrations of their monster gods, scrawls that were meant to be pictures of orks in battle, and the angular, jagged runes that were the greenskins' barbaric excuse for a language.

They reached another fork. Far more noise to the left. Ghazan felt the pull to the right. Kusala looked like he was about to say something, but held his peace.

Tegusal had point. Ariq was guarding the rear. The squad was halfway down the current section of tunnel when Ariq hissed a warning. They froze, waiting, weapons at the ready. A minute passed. No enemy appeared.

'What was it?' Kusala asked Ariq.

'A shadow moved,' said the Scout. 'I think we might be being followed.'

'Too stealthy for an ork.'

'My thought too, brother-sergeant. I did see something, though.'

Kusala doubled up the rear guard. They advanced even more cautiously. But at the next intersection, Bokegan also reported movement. Tegusal watched the auspex. Its screen showed a single blip, then nothing. 'Hard to tell if that was a legitimate contact,' he said.

'We will treat it as one,' Kusala told him. 'The day you ignore a possible threat is your last.' He turned to Ghazan. 'We are being shadowed.'

'Yes.' They needed to neutralise this enemy, force whoever was following them out into the open.

No opportunity arose at the next two junctions, but at the third, the route took the squad into a large cavern. It had been a big natural formation to start with, and the orks had expanded it further. The tunnel opened into it about two-thirds of the way towards its roof. A catwalk crossed the space to the other side. The cavern was filled with cables thick as tree trunks, pipes wide enough to ride a bike through. Steam and narrow jets of flame burst from cracks in roughly patched seams and joints. Arcs of blue lightning crackled along the lengths of the cables.

The conduits of energy and fuel arrived from dozens of different openings in the walls. The tangle achieved something resembling order towards the far end of the cavern, about five metres above the floor. There, the cables and pipes joined into two enormous, braided hybrids. One carried on straight out of the chamber. The other branched diagonally to the right.

Some thirty metres below, on the floor of the cavern, the orks laboured over roaring, sparking, grinding mechanisms. Ghazan guessed these machines had something to do with regulating the flow of energy and fuel. The cavern was

some form of power plant.

The White Scars were going to have to cross in the open. The noise made by the orks below would give them cover. The uproar of snarls and machinery was almost physical. A small war could be waged on the catwalk without drawing attention.

‘Auspex?’ Kusala asked Tegusal.

‘More readings, brother-sergeant. Brief, but definite.’

‘And the position of our trackers?’

‘To the rear.’

Ghazan and Kusala exchanged looks. The cavern was a few hundred metres wide. Kusala said, ‘If they don’t attack before we reach the other side, we’ll gain a significant lead. They might lose us.’

‘If they’re orks, they can just move faster,’ said Tegusal.

‘No,’ Kusala said. ‘If they were orks, they would already have attacked. This is something else.’

Ghazan looked at the other end of the catwalk. ‘This is the only path forward,’ he said.

Kusala grinned. ‘You’re proposing we blow up the bridge in our wake.’

‘Your mission involves sabotage, does it not?’

Kusala gestured at the cables. ‘We could do a lot of damage here. Perhaps cripple the manufactorum.’

‘No. That would draw too much attention. We still don’t know how the enemy is outmanoeuvring our forces on the battlefield. And the true threat is not mechanical.’

‘Knowing what the orks are attempting will serve little good if they have already done it.’

‘They haven’t. Not yet.’ Destiny would not allow it. For what purpose was he here, if his actions were meaningless? He did not believe such a perversity was possible. The war on the moon would hinge on the battle he must wage. ‘We are close to our goal,’ he said to Kusala.

‘Though we don’t know what it is.’

‘Have faith, brother-sergeant,’ he said again.

Kusala looked serious. ‘I do.’ There was a pointed ambiguity to the way he insisted on those two syllables. This time, he articulated his doubts. ‘But forgive me, zadyin arga, if I ask whether you place too much faith in your particular interpretation of your visions.’

‘I do not.’ Ghazan spoke with cold anger. ‘We’re wasting time. I suggest we

destroy the catwalk behind us.'

Kusala nodded, and gave instructions to Ariq.

The White Scars moved out into the cavern. They kept strict watch on three directions at once: their destination, the cave floor, and their rear. Covered by Bokegan, Ariq set demolition charges at the entrance and midway point of the catwalk. The orks below didn't notice. Tegusal kept his eye on the auspex. Two-thirds of the way across, the Scout voxed, 'Multiple contacts! Closing fast.'

'Ready to detonate,' Kusala ordered.

The Space Marines raised their bolters.

Shadows made of speed and blood shot out of the gloom of the tunnel. Eldar. Ghazan recognised their red armour and white, serpentine runes. They were of that xenos sect that, like the White Scars, valued velocity on the battlefield. Clearly anticipating the destruction of the catwalk, a handful of the eldar warriors leapt off it and onto a pipe that ran parallel for most of its length.

Xenos and Space Marine weapons zeroed in on each other.

Ghazan saw his struggle teeter on the edge of ruin.



CHAPTER FOUR

The eldar did not fire. Only a few seconds had passed since their arrival. Those seconds were tantamount to the pause of an age. These xenos did not hesitate in battle. And now the seconds were passing, passing, passing.

The miracle, it occurred to Ghazan, was that his own brothers had not started shooting either. He grasped that miracle before it slipped away. ‘Hold fire,’ he hissed over the vox.

‘*What?*’ Kusala was outraged.

‘They haven’t attacked.’

‘What difference does—’

‘*Why* haven’t they?’

Kusala’s breathing over the vox was furious, but he repeated, ‘Hold fire.’

At the other end of the catwalk, another eldar emerged. This one carried a staff and wore robes. A halo of warp energy pulsed once around the figure. It was not an attack; just enough of a sign for Ghazan to recognise another psyker.

The eldar advanced slowly to the middle of the catwalk, then stopped. The other xenos warriors kept their weapons ready, but remained just as motionless. Four of them, male and female, carried rifles and swords. Three other female warriors had what looked like amplifiers built into the sides of their helmets.

The seconds passed. The din of ork industry continued, oblivious to the confrontation.

‘Cover me,’ Ghazan said, and he walked to meet the eldar witch. If Kusala had doubts about his judgement before, they would be even greater now. The eldar were a duplicitous, untrustworthy race. The wise course would, on most days,

have been to ignore their stratagem and blow the catwalk. But on this day, Ghazan could not afford to regard the unfolding event as trivial. He could feel the incidents of these hours being woven together. The anomalous and the serendipitous were aligning, forming a pattern that would be the revelation of his own war.

Still the eldar did not move. Ghazan stopped a few paces from the witch. He was close enough to strike a blow with his staff. Over the vox, Kusala said, 'Ariq stands ready with the detonator.'

'I would expect no less. Use it if you must. I trust your judgement, brother-sergeant.' Ghazan faced the eldar, waiting. He gazed at the elongated helmet and its black eye slits. He could not see the features beneath. The helmet was its own face. Elegant, yet somehow insectoid. Hard. Alien.

The witch gave a shallow bow. 'My name is Tellathia.' The voice was female. 'I would trace the skein where our forces parlay. Will you?' Her Gothic was fluent, but its perfection was odd. There was no trace of accent. It was an incarnation of human language untouched by any human culture. It was a mimicry, a performance, flawless in technique, hollow at its core. There was no feeling for the words, as if the speaker floated far above them, gazing down with utter dispassion on something that was a tool and nothing more.

Ghazan's mistrust flared so powerfully that he almost lashed out. His grip tightened on his staff. He leaned on it, pressing it down onto the catwalk as if grounding his hostility, dispersing it into the metal around them. 'Will you give me reasons to negotiate?' he said.

'Our mutual destruction would serve the orks well. We have not come here to aid them.'

'Why have you come here?'

Tellathia cocked her head to the left. 'If I said that we are here to harm the orks, that would not satisfy you, would it?'

'No.'

'But would you tell me more of your goals?'

'No,' he admitted.

Now her head leaned to the right. 'Then we understand each other that much. I believe that you and I, among our brethren, know each other somewhat better. You are called by something stronger than mere orders.'

Ghazan said nothing, but he did not contradict her.

'This encounter is not a surprise to me,' Tellathia went on. 'Is it to you?'

'It is of little importance to me,' he said.

If the eldar was insulted, her body language gave no sign. There was only that gentle movement of the head back and forth, a graceful pendulum, between each exchange. It seemed to Ghazan that she was looking at their dialogue as if it were a physical thing, a jewel she was examining for its facets and its flaws. Her sorcery was at work. He sealed himself away, using the shield of his psychic hood to counter any probes.

Wherever she looked, whatever she saw, it seemed to satisfy her. 'True enough,' she said. 'There is a larger shadow ahead, isn't there?' She didn't wait for a response. 'We should not pretend that our real goals are the same. We might agree that they are not incompatible.'

'How can we, when neither of us knows the other's goals?'

'Through reason.' She gestured towards the floor of the cave. 'Can you imagine us in league with the orks?'

'With difficulty.'

'Perhaps trust might be an element, too.'

'No.'

A wave of the hand, unconcerned. 'No? A sense of the breath of fate, then?'

Once again, he said nothing. He was sure he sensed a smile behind the helmet.

'An alliance of the moment, then?' she asked. 'We are agreed?'

He glanced at the warriors crouched on the catwalk and on the pipes. Tellathia's words were pleasant, almost playful. The stance of the other eldar remained frozen at the last moment before an explosion of violence. 'Do you speak for your kin?'

'I will speak *to* them. Will you do the same?'

He thought for a moment before answering. He made himself review the situation once more. There was much to be uneasy about. There was also little choice. 'Yes,' he said.

She bowed, more deeply this time. She held her staff at an angle, pointing away from her body, aiming it at the cavern ceiling.

Ghazan nodded. He walked towards the Scouts, turning his back to the eldar, showing that much trust. He spoke into his vox-bead. 'Stand down, brother-sergeant.'

'Why?'

'We have found common cause.'

'And you trust these xenos?'

'We should stand down. We should not be at ease.'

Kusala was reluctant. So, it seemed, were the eldar warriors. They did not

lower their weapons at first. When Ghazan drew level with Kusala, he looked back. The eldar were carrying on their conversation by means as private as that of the Space Marines. Tellathia's gestures were expressive, though. She seemed to be working as hard to convince her comrades of the wisdom of this course as she had with Ghazan.

She prevailed. The eldar lowered their weapons. So did the White Scars.

'Put the detonator away,' Kusala told Ariq as the crimson warriors descended to the catwalk. They came forwards, stopping a few paces away. Tellathia stood at the forefront of the squad.

'I will choose the path,' Ghazan said.

Tellathia nodded once. 'That is as it should be for you. When our routes diverge, then so be it.'

As Ghazan turned to go, he saw Tegusal gazing over the edge of the catwalk.

'What is it?' Kusala asked the Scout.

'There is a lot of space down there.'

Ghazan looked. Tegusal was right. The tangle of cables and pipes in the upper portion of the cavern had prevented him from noticing the fact earlier. All of the ork machines were concentrated in the centre of the chamber. Their periphery was very wide, clear, and level. 'Room for large vehicles,' he said.

'The entrances too.' Kusala pointed. Ghazan could just make out metal doors suitable for hangars at either end.

'Their heavy armour must pass through here,' Tegusal said.

'A road,' Kusala mused. 'Perhaps there are other, larger points of access to the surface than we've found so far.' He looked at Ghazan. He spoke quietly, though Ghazan was sure the eldar would hear what they wanted to hear. 'We must explore that possibility. Something wide enough to let vehicles out...'

'Would also let them in,' Ghazan finished. 'We will do as you suggest, brother-sergeant. In due course.' Kusala looked like he was about to protest. Before he could speak, Ghazan said, 'What we see here is important, but is not the whole truth of this facility. Isn't that more important still?' He was trying to meet Kusala on his own territory. The sergeant didn't know what to make of Ghazan's visions, so Ghazan spoke to him in terms of reconnaissance and intelligence. He didn't know if he had convinced the sergeant, but Kusala nodded, ready to move on.

The White Scars and the eldar crossed the rest of the catwalk. On the other side, the tunnels branched again. The widest passage sloped downwards, continuing forward. Ghazan chose it without hesitation. As soon as he saw the

route it took, the sense of imminence became overwhelming. He was not far now. His opponent would soon emerge from the shadows of his visions and take on flesh.

Even without the tug of fate, he would have known this was the right path. As it dropped and angled to the right before straightening out again, it was clearly moving into parallel with the great braid of cable and pipe that had headed out of the cavern in this direction.

The descent was a long one. Once the tunnel levelled off, Ghazan became aware of a faint vibration in the walls. He tasted the air. It was dry, ozone-filled, sparking with latent energy. He was walking through the incubation of an electrical storm.

‘Do you feel it?’ he asked Kusala.

‘Yes.’

‘You will be satisfied for having trusted me, brother-sergeant.’

Kusala grunted. ‘Perhaps so.’

The first of the intersections approached. Both Scouts and eldar went forwards, neither trusting the other to do the job properly. Bokegan and one of the crimson warriors advanced to the junction. When they looked right, they stopped for a moment, then ushered the others forwards. ‘I think this is our goal,’ said Bokegan.

Ghazan looked down the length of the short passage. It opened into another big space, this time at the level of the floor. His blood stirred. It burned. It was a form of exhilaration. He knew that he was looking at a *destination*, in the full meaning of the word. Revelation loomed. It took an effort of will not to charge into the cavern, roaring for his enemy. He held his war-thirst in check as both squads advanced.

What he saw beyond the opening made him pause. Shock hammered Space Marine and eldar alike. In the corner of his eye, Ghazan saw Tellathia stagger. The spectacle before them was a great fusion of horrors. Manifest atrocity and monstrous implication vied with mystery.

This was another space of complex machinery. Shouting orks rushed from one device to another. Energy crackled between gigantic electrodes. The jagged arcs were every colour of the spectrum, and some were no colour at all, wayward flashes drawn from the heart of the greenskins’ grotesque edifice.

Its living heart.

Beginning four metres off the ground, and rising to the ceiling, were rows of cylindrical cages. Like everything else, their construction was rough, a hurried

welding together of sheet metal and bars, but they did their job well enough. Each was about a metre and a half in height, and a metre in diameter. Inside each cramped space crouched an eldar.

The prisoners were emaciated and bruised. On the ones close enough for the details to be visible, Ghazan saw festering sores. Every one of the wretches wore a high metal collar embedded with crystals. The devices made Ghazan think of grotesque distortions of his psychic hood. Cables ran from the collars, connecting each to the next. More arcane energy flashed and sparked along their lengths.

Beneath his armour, Ghazan's flesh crawled, reacting to the dramatic rise in ambient psychic activity. The eldar prisoners were witches, every one of them. He was looking at an immense network of linked psykers. The fused pipes and cables from the previous cave arrived here, the cables plugging into the metal grid of the cages while the pipes split off to bring fuel to the machines at the base. On the far left, more cables twined away from the grid, passing through the cavern wall. The orks were using the eldar to power their project, though to what end, he could not guess. It made no sense that this was for any kind of manufacturing process. There was another purpose here, something that went beyond the construction of heavy armour.

'What is this?' Kusala whispered.

'This is a generator,' Ghazan said.

'It is an atrocity.' There was still no emotion in Tellathia's surface perfection of Gothic, but there was anger in the words, and horror in her stance. The same was true of all the eldar. They were so taut, the air around them seemed to thrum.

Ghazan's gaze dropped down from the ranks of tortured prisoners, back to the orks at work. Two of the greenskins stood out. One had so little flesh visible that it would have been easy to mistake the creature for part of the machinery. It was a large beast. Its arms were thick, its back broad. It was as tall as a man, but would have been taller yet if it hadn't been doubled over by the weight of the equipment it wore. A metal-and-leather harness held a power generator, half the size of the ork, on its back. Its forest of conical coils glowed violet. Light refracted oddly around the ork, as if the brute moved within a not-quite-invisible sphere. It wore complex headgear and what looked like mismatched goggles, the scope over one eye narrowing, the other widening. One of its arms was bionic. The prosthetic was misshapen, oversized. Its hand was a power claw, and instead of fingers, a cluster of tools, burners and shears extended from the end of the claw.

The ork walked back and forth before the entire length of the psyker network, supervising its operation. It beat underlings who weren't working the machinery properly. It was constantly making adjustments, shoving its way forwards with a snarl to adjust dials and power levels. Its gestures were wide, sweeping, brusque. Ghazan saw none of the precision that was the hallmark of a Techmarine. Even so, the ork demonstrated great focus as it fine-tuned its creation – and the creation functioned. Greenskin technology was disturbing in its ability to perform brutal wonders when it looked as if it should simply explode at the throwing of the first switch.

This machine worked. The orks had harnessed the power of dozens of eldar witches. Ghazan looked again at the rows of prisoners, a multitude forced to sacrifice itself for another's will. The thought came that this was a monstrous parody of the Golden Throne. He hurled the idea away before it took root.

The overseer of the machines was accompanied on its rounds by another ork. When he saw this being, Ghazan thought, *At last*. Here was his enemy. Here was the threat he had come to this system to fight. And it was another parody, this time of his own station. The ork carried a staff. Its copper shaft was festooned with iron bells, and topped by a configuration of bones and a skull. The ork had adorned itself with totemic symbols. Ghazan was disgusted that he could recognise anything at all in its iconography. To think that there was any impulse in common between these creatures and the proud heritage of the White Scars was obscene. The destruction of the greenskins was all the more imperative. Their existence was a mockery, an offence to the eye of the Emperor. And this ork was a special insult.

It was also a special danger. Ghazan could see that at a glance. He had fought ork witches many times. They were explosive powers on the battlefield, dangerous, but closer to walking bombs than sentient foes. Their control over their abilities was limited. They were creatures of frenzy and storm. This one, though... Green energy spiralled in wisps from its fingers up and down the length of the staff. It glowed from the monster's eyes, and leaked from its ears and jaws. A brace of small greenskins dogged its footsteps. They danced, gibbered praise and pawed at their master's legs. The dispersing energy delighted them, but the witch ignored it and them. It walked with the tech and conversed with what passed for orkish calm. Their dialogue was barbaric, guttural snarls that sounded like fighting canines, yet their body language suggested a common cause rare in orks.

'This is their collaboration,' Ghazan whispered, the realisation startling the

words from him. And still he could not imagine the purpose of the machine.

‘It is what we have come for,’ said Tellathia. ‘To liberate our kin.’

‘In one way or another?’ Ghazan asked. He felt no trust for the eldar. He did feel some sympathy.

‘Yes.’

‘That witch...’ Kusala said.

‘It is the figure in my visions,’ Ghazan told him.

‘It displays unusual self-control.’

‘Agreed.’

‘How?’

Ghazan shook his head. ‘I don’t know how. These orks are different somehow. Harder to kill. They seem more... energised?’

‘Exactly.’

Ghazan turned Tellathia. ‘Can you explain this?’

‘I cannot.’ She hesitated before answering.

Ghazan watched the ork witch again. In the way it strode, in the grate of its laughter, it was a personification of the supercharged nature of the orks on this moon. Its tusked face and small, feral eyes gave it a look of animal stupidity. Yet it and its kind were waging a winning campaign against the forces of the Imperium, and somehow doing so thanks to having captured and enslaved dozens of eldar witches, each one of whom would have been mighty on the battlefield.

Do not underestimate this ork, he told himself. For the xenos to have shaped his visions so powerfully, it had to be a danger of the highest order.

‘A lot of space here, too,’ Tegusal whispered. Running to the right and left of the opening was another wide strip of level, empty ground, with the same vast hangar doors at either end.

‘I count a hundred orks,’ Ariq put in. ‘We can kill them in moments.’

‘Not those two,’ said Ghazan, pointing at the architects of the savage machine.

‘We’ll need to seal the entrances,’ Kusala began.

He was drowned out by the approach of a great roaring and clanking. The door to the left rose with the screech of uncoiled metal. The roar became deafening, the sound too huge for even as large a chamber as this cavern. The White Scars and eldar withdrew deeper into the shadow of the tunnel. A Battlewagon passed before them. A score of orks rode it, cheering in anticipation of bloodshed. It rumbled across the cave.

A hum built into a painful pressure around Ghazan’s skull. Beside him,

Tellathia sank to her knees, clutching the sides of her helmet. In the cave, the ork activity around the controls of the psychic machine grew frenzied. The discharge of energies became a lightning storm. The eldar prisoners contorted in their prisons, their mouths stretched wide in screams too painful to be voiced.

Ghazan heard the other door open. He risked edging forwards to see. He winced. The build-up of psychic energy was so great that it overwhelmed his hood's ability to cancel out the incoming force.

Beyond the door, in the next cavern, the floor was covered by a metal plate. It radiated energies in colours and pulses that mirrored those in the generator chamber, but with an even greater intensity. Towering coils surrounded its periphery. They were fed by the cables linked to the grid. The tank rumbled onto the centre of the plate and stopped. Its passenger orks hooted with delighted fury as the pulses became flashes, then a blinding sear. When Ghazan's vision cleared, he saw absence and revelation.

'Throne, no,' said Kusala.

The Battlewagon was gone.

'A teleporter,' Ghazan muttered.

The chamber rocked with the laughter of orks.

And another tank rolled by. Less than a minute later, it too had vanished.



CHAPTER FIVE

The first weapons of the White Scars' attack on the ork tanks were speed and presence. Those alone were enough to distract the crews from the less interesting targets of the Mordian Iron Guard. Their first pass, bolters blazing, did little damage. But it relieved the pressure on the mortal infantry. The Mordian units, shattered by the untrammelled slaughter, began to reform.

'You may pull back to the bastion,' Temur voxed Colonel Meixner after he had strafed one of the claw-bearing vehicles. He turned sharply and began another run at the Battlewagon.

'With respect, we will not,' Meixner replied. He sounded exhausted. 'We will fight at your side.'

'There is no need—'

'There is.'

Temur understood. Already, he saw order returning to the Mordians. Their anti-tank weaponry began to fire with greater focus. As he closed in for a second pass at his target, a rocket slammed into the Battlewagon's flank. The hit was a good one. The sides of ork tanks were never as heavily armoured as their fronts. The strike should have been enough to pierce the vehicle's hide and immolate its crew.

The tank kept coming. The construction of these Battlewagons was far more solid than Temur was used to seeing. It was as if the orks had been swept up in a ferocious enthusiasm for their creations, building armour upon armour, gun upon gun. The tanks reflected the bursting rage and strength of all the orks he had encountered on this moon. The greenskins in this system were overdeveloped.

They were explosive with the energy of war.

‘Draw their focus for me,’ he ordered his squad. He stopped firing and veered away from a direct approach, arcing around the tank while his brothers streaked towards it, drawing the ire of its crew. The bolters mounted on the bikes would be a distraction only. He would ensure that was enough.

Temur throttled up, speeding ahead of the rest of the squad members. As they hit the front of the tank with a storm of shells, he turned in to the rear, braked hard, leapt off the bike and climbed up the hull.

There were only a few orks riding on the outside of the Battlewagon. The rest had been stripped off by Imperial fire. The survivors ducked in and out from behind the fantastic, jagged protrusions that bedecked the hull. They raved and fired back at the White Scars, paying little attention to their own safety. Temur saw one take three bolter shells to the chest before he toppled to the ground. His corpse was crushed beneath the wheels of Standard-Bearer Kogegan.

‘I’m on,’ Temur voxed.

The squad stopped shooting at the hull. The bikes shot past, then came around again, close enough and aggressive enough to keep the orks’ attention without shooting Temur. He hauled himself up with his left hand. With his right, he pulled Windstrike from its scabbard. The power tulwar was a relic that dated to the Seventh Black Crusade. It had been in the possession of the khan of the Fifth Brotherhood for four thousand years.

Temur grabbed one more handhold and vaulted to the roof of the tank. There was an ork less than an arm’s reach away. It turned as he landed behind it. He thrust Windstrike forward. The balance of the tulwar was so perfect, its energy so attuned to its wielder, that it accelerated every movement. Temur’s blow punctured the greenskin’s metal collar and severed its spine. He whipped the blade free. There was no friction at all. It slid from the ork’s throat as if the brute were nothing but air.

The ork toppled to the ground, and Temur leaped to the next, who was riding just behind the hatch. It had seen him. It was a big specimen, massive even among these freakish greenskins. It swung its power claw at him, faster than he had been expecting. With no chance to evade, he grounded himself, sinking all the weight of his body and his armour through the tank, down to the moon’s core. Head down, he took the blow on his shoulders. Ceramite cracked. So did bones. The impact shook his frame.

He lunged down and forward, slashing up with Windstrike beneath the ork’s left arm, cutting through the tendons. The power claw became dead weight. The

greenskin howled and tried to spin its body, as if it could turn the claw into a flail. Temur stabbed it through the bridge of its nose. Bone and gristle parted before the powerblade. He hurled the corpse to the side.

Two other orks were scrambling to reach him from the front. The tank's hull had two levels, one with the gun, and the second, the upper one, with the claw and hatch. The greenskins had too much uneven ground on their own machine to cover. Temur pulled a krak grenade from his belt, triggered it, let it cook, then dropped it onto the hatch. He took one step back and shielded his eyes from the incandescent glare as the explosive melted through the tank's armour. The attacking orks staggered, blinded.

Temur leapt through the hatch while its sides still glowed with heat. He landed in a dark hell of grease, smoke, and roaring machinery. The cab was so cramped, he could barely turn around. The ork operating the claw had been killed by the krak. The gunner was climbing up from the lower level through another hatch. Temur sliced the top of its head off before the upper half of its body had emerged.

The driver came for him now. It fired a huge-bored pistol. The bullet ricocheted off the bulkhead to Temur's right and took off the ork's lower jaw. The monster shrieked its dismay and leapt at the khan. Temur stabbed Windstrike up through the driver's palate, skewering its brain.

He withdrew his blade from the slumping corpse. He was alone in the tank now, but it hadn't stopped. It hadn't even slowed. It rattled over the terrain at full speed, a mindless juggernaut. Temur took two more krak grenades and tossed them forward to the steering compartment. Then he climbed back out through the hatch.

He jumped off the Battlewagon just as the grenades went off. The tank's steering melted down. Its engine exploded. The front of the Battlewagon collapsed, ploughing itself into the ground with enough force to flip end over end.

It landed with a crash on its roof, and the impact touched off its ammunition. Then the fire reached its fuel tank and it blew itself apart. Temur saw the treads launched hundreds of metres across the battlefield.

Two down. Defence was turning to offence, with the Battlewagons under siege.

He ran back to his bike and mounted it. His squad reformed around him. He looked for their next target. Near the top of the rise, Sergeant Qaraqan's squad had driven another tank into retreat. Incredibly, it was still functional after being

hit by the multi-melta manned by Esen, riding in Boralun's sidecar. But its claw was disabled, and the side gunners were dead.

As the driver pulled away, the Battlewagon's turret swivelled left, then jerked right. The movement was so unpredictable, it could have been mechanical failure. It must have been chance. Temur did not want to credit the orks' brute, instinctive genius of war.

Not that it mattered. What mattered was that the cannon fired and the shot went true. The shell hit Qaraqan directly. He and his bike vanished in the explosion.

The blast took out Boralun's bike as well. The destruction of the multi-melta was a second explosion, smaller, but orders of magnitude more intense. Two more Space Marines were erased from existence. Worse, whether through luck or heightened cunning, the orks had managed to take out all of the attack bikes. Only the Thunderhawk still had effective anti-tank weaponry. And worse again: Ulagan and Batunai veered hard to avoid the carnage, and luck cursed the squad a second time. They were directly in the line of the gun when it fired again. An entire combat squad gone.

Raging, Temur charged the tank. The command squad came in at an angle, the bikes hitting the forward left flank. The turret swivelled away from the rest of Qaraqan's brothers. Temur led the run up, a hand's breadth away from the length of the vehicle. That took them to the top of the ridge. In the moment before he began his turn for another attack, Temur faced the land to the north, and he looked at just the right second. He saw the flash.

He saw the arrival of still another Battlewagon.

'The completion of our mission will also be yours,' Tellathia insisted. 'Once we free our seers, the teleporter will be disabled.'

The White Scars and the eldar had retreated a few metres back along the passageway, more securely out of sight of the orks, until they were ready to strike.

'That is insufficient,' Kusala said. 'That will not shut down this manufactory. It will not bring us appreciably closer to purging this moon of the greenskins. And there are vehicular routes in this warren. The teleporter is unlikely to be the only route to the surface for these tanks.'

Tellathia made a hand gesture that was eloquent in its disinterest. 'Our paths are not entwined beyond this chamber. And if you think our present numbers are adequate to take on the thousands of orks in this facility, then I fear you are

deluded.’

Kusala’s face darkened. Ghazan spoke before the sergeant responded with something more violent than words. ‘You are the ones deluded if you think the act of liberation will suffice.’

Tellathia’s head turned to him with a sharp jerk. She held it at an angle again, but instead of the hypnotic pendulum motion of earlier, there was an aggressive stillness. ‘Your meaning?’ Though the words were as empty of human intonation as ever, she spoke more slowly.

Anger, Ghazan realised. And quite quickly, too. Interesting. Perhaps important. The elegance and precision of these eldar did not make them immune to recognisable passions. But he was not looking for a weakness in combat in this moment. They all needed unity. ‘The larger shadow,’ he said. ‘It is here. You know this, I think.’

Silence from Tellathia. Her posture shifted slightly. She was more interested than hostile.

‘What would it take,’ he asked, ‘to capture so many of your kind? And to use them in this way?’

‘Much.’

‘The larger shadow can do this again, or worse, if it is not destroyed.’ He sensed her hesitation. ‘You saw that ork. You know there is something unusual at work here.’

‘More than unusual.’

Her phrasing struck him. He flashed back to what she had said before when he had asked if she could explain the anomalous nature of these orks: *I cannot*. He had the impression that she was genuinely unable to do so, and that the mere fact of her inability disturbed her.

‘That ork must be destroyed,’ he said.

‘Fighting it is your destiny.’

‘Not yours?’

For several seconds, she was motionless except for her fingers. They made slight movements in a complex pattern, as if she were playing some form of stringed instrument. Ghazan felt the deployment of psychic energies. There was a sharp spike, and Tellathia’s fingers stopped moving. Through the grille of her helmet came an intake of breath. Then she said, ‘No. The duel is yours alone. But it seems our necessary fate is to assist your journey to that point.’

One of the other eldar spoke quickly to Tellathia. She answered in a sharp tone. When she spoke her own tongue, Ghazan heard genuine emotion. Though

he could understand nothing, he could hear a musicality that was meaningful, shaded with poetry, sorrow and anger, and so different from the soulless precision of her Gothic. The exchange went back and forth a few times, and then the other eldar held up his hands in a gesture of acquiescence.

‘Your necessary fate,’ Ghazan repeated when Tellathia turned back to him.

‘I believe you understand me,’ she said. ‘There are choices where the correct decision is so imperative, there is no real choice at all.’

‘I do understand,’ he agreed.

She looked at Kusala. ‘You have carried the day,’ she told him. ‘You understand that our priority must be the rescue of the prisoners. We will provide what further assistance is within our power.’

Ghazan said, ‘The rescue can serve our purposes. What happens here will draw the greenskins’ attention.’ To Kusala he said, ‘You can follow the vehicular route away from the teleporter. That might lead to the manufactorum itself. Perhaps to the other exits.’

Kusala looked confused. ‘Don’t you mean *we*, Stormseer?’

‘My battle is here. But given what we now know, there is a clear, immediate need to shut down the rest of this facility.’

‘You are staying with—’

‘I am. It is true that there are choices that are not choices. I think your own path in this war has just become clear, brother-sergeant.’

‘Your decision is troubling,’ Kusala said. He eyed the eldar with clear suspicion.

‘It can barely be called a decision. It is what must happen.’ The struggle was rushing closer. Though he spoke calmly, he could almost feel his enemy’s blood splashing against his armour. The wind of the steppes was at his back. A culmination was near.

‘Very well,’ Kusala answered. ‘We will start in the previous large chamber. We will wait for you to engage the enemy.’

‘Thank you.’ He extended a hand. ‘For the Khan and the Emperor.’

They clasped forearms. ‘For the Khan and the Emperor,’ Kusala repeated. Then he headed off with the Scouts.

‘You fight alone with us,’ said Tellathia. ‘Your willingness to do so is unusual in your species.’

‘It is not a question of my willingness. It is the unfolding of what must be.’ Questions of possible betrayal and the unease inherent in any contact with the xenos had faded to background noise as the war of his visions came into being.

They moved forwards to face the consequences of forced choices.

No words passed between Ghazan and Tellathia as they launched the attack. There was no formal coordination of strategy. Neither would accept any interference from the other in war doctrine. But there was also a measure of respect. They both drew on the warp. They both lived its dangers.

Ghazan had his purpose. Tellathia had hers. He would use the possibilities opened up by her squad's attack to further his end. He knew she would do the same. The orks would be caught in the synergy of their separate but enfiling purposes.

The eldar struck first. While the ork tech and witch were moving towards the far end of the chamber, the three female warriors rushed forwards. They unleashed a scream that transcended mere sound. Even from his position behind the blast, and protected by his hood, Ghazan felt the brush of the lethal shriek. Its razors scraped against his nervous system. The orks operating the grid were far less fortunate. The nearest ones went into seizures. The eldar sliced them apart with power swords that sang with light.

The other four warriors in Tellathia's squad opened up with weapons that resembled rifles, but fired a stream of what seemed to be discs. The air hummed with the sound of steel insect wings, and the rest of the orks at the machines staggered back. Some of them fell, lacerated to shreds, and did not rise.

In less than ten seconds, every ork in contact with the machinery had been struck. The part of Ghazan's consciousness that saw the full picture of the battle registered that the eldar had taken care not to damage the mechanism itself. They were hoping, no doubt, for the luxury of removing the prisoners without inflicting further trauma.

There was no room in Ghazan's war for hope. There was the speed of the strike, the hurricane of strife, and the rush of fate. Striding forwards, his focus zeroed in on the ork psyker. The beast was just turning, as was the engineer, the two of them startled by the sudden deaths of their underlings. Ghazan pointed his staff at the witch. He seized the ferocious psychic energy in the cavern, and through it called once more on the storms of Chogoris. Lightning flashed across the chamber. The crack of thunder shook the walls.

The lightning struck the witch, hurling it against the rear door. The electrical discharge washed over the tech, sparking and dissipating around the contours of an invisible sphere. The conical power coils on its back glowed and spat their own lightning as they fed energy to the force field. The ork snarled at Ghazan. It loped away from him, reached the far door, and punched a control panel in the

wall to its side. The doors at either end of the cavern rose. Mobs of greenskins rushed in, raging at the intrusion, and celebrating the unexpected opportunity for war.

The web of pipes and cables were an easy climb, even in power armour. The Scouts, more agile in their lighter carapace, made their way down faster than Kusala. He caught up with them a few metres up from the floor. They waited in the shadows, surrounded by the hiss of leaking steam, the sparking of random discharges. The focus of the orks below was entirely on the machines and their snarling disagreements over how to make them work best.

The ambient noise was such that Kusala couldn't hear when the war began in the next great chamber. He knew it had started, though, when the orks were overcome with what appeared to be spontaneous rage. They were rushing to the left, brandishing weapons, even before the door rattled open.

As the last few greenskins passed through to the unfolding battle, Kusala dropped to the ground. To the right, the vehicle path led through another opening and into a wide, high tunnel. He pointed at the tangled knots of conduits, valves and levers. The Scouts nodded and began rigging demolition charges.

Kusala moved to the tunnel entrance. There were plenty of smaller passages and caves intersecting with it. He heard the echoes of running orks bouncing down the tunnel's length, coming from around the left turn a hundred metres from the entrance. A large force was approaching, too big to take on. 'Get it done,' he voxed.

They did. With seconds, the squad joined him. He pointed to the nearest cave. It was little more than a concavity on the right of the main tunnel, but it would do. There was no rear exit, so no further orks arriving from behind. If the squad was spotted, then it would be a fight, but Kusala didn't think they would be. The orks would be too set on having their share of the main battle, too focused on what lay in front of them, to notice what watched at the side.

They moved quickly along the tunnel and into the side cavern, going as far back into it as they could. They formed two lines, bolters out, with the front row crouching before the others. Ariq held the detonator. He looked up at Kusala with a grin. 'We aren't going to forge an alliance with this lot, are we, brother-sergeant?'

'No. Take them out at my command, brother.'

The horde arrived. The orks waved guns and blades. A few of them fired into the air. The ceiling was high enough for the vehicles to pass, but no more.

Bullets ricocheted. Some found marks on a return trajectory. Kusala saw an ork killed by his own ammunition. The greenskins around him burst into laughter as he blew his head off.

The stream of troops was a large one, but it ended. As the last ork entered the machine chamber, Kusala said, 'Now.'

Ariq pushed the button. Multiple blasts took out the controls, and brought tonnes of conduit crashing down on the orks' heads. Screams of outraged pain filled the air. The collapse continued for several seconds, and by the end of it, the entrance was blocked by metal wreckage.

'Both ends of the chamber?' Kusala asked Ariq.

'Yes, brother-sergeant.' Still that grin. Ariq was partial to explosive deaths for the Emperor's enemies. 'The survivors are going nowhere.'

'Good. Then let us make good use of the time we have purchased.'

Kusala sent Tegusal up as forward watch. They moved down the corridor at high speed, pausing at the corner just long enough to see that the way was clear. As they followed the vehicle route, they heard the alarm spreading through the facility. The side corridors fed more sounds of confusion and riot as the orks converged on the two caverns. More appeared in the main tunnel, but the White Scars always had sufficient warning to get under cover. As with the other large passages in the complex, the tunnel was actually a series of linked caves. The natural formation must have served the orks' purposes well, requiring very little in the way of further mining to create the underground highway. Kusala wondered how far it extended.

He had his answer before long, though he heard it before he saw it. The clamour of construction filled the tunnel. Even with a fight under way, and what must have been a serious loss of power, the manufacture of the tanks was continuing without pause. The squad went around one more turn, to the right this time, and before them appeared the heart of ork industry in the Lepidus system.

The cavern was the largest one yet. Its ceiling was no higher than the power plant, but this chamber was at least twice as long and wide. There were half a dozen Battlewagons close to completion, and what appeared to be the same number in earlier stages of assembly. More conduits from the power plant fed into the cave and into a collection of giant batteries spread at intervals around the floor. These fuelled the orks' tools. The greenskins swarmed over scaffolding, slapping metal and guns and engines together. The activity was furious.

The squad closed in on the entrance. The tunnel split there, with a branch heading off to the right on a pronounced uphill slope.

‘The road to the surface,’ Tegusal said.

‘Yes,’ Kusala agreed.

Ariq was eyeing the assembly bay. Kusala could see his eagerness. There was great scope for destruction in that space. Had Ariq not been a White Scar, Kusala thought, he would have thrived as a battle-brother in a Devastator squad. ‘We can finish the job right here,’ Ariq said.

Kusala shook his head. ‘Too many greenskins, too much materiel. We don’t have the explosives or the strength. We can inconvenience them, though.’ He turned to Tegusal. ‘Find the exit. The rest of us will give these greenskins some misery.’

He switched his vox to the company channel. Time to summon the rest of the brotherhood.



CHAPTER SIX

‘Are you sure?’ Temur asked Kusala over the vox.

‘I am. The zadyin arga will destroy the teleporter. We have the rest of the ork heavy armour before us. We don’t have long. Several vehicles look battle-ready. Even if the teleporter is destroyed...’

‘They can still travel here,’ Temur finished.

A cannon shell landed a few metres in front of him. He swerved around it, then turned for another run at the newest tank. The two recent arrivals were sticking close to each other, less for mutual protection, more to use each other as bait for the foe. The main cannons were blasting apart the Mordians from a distance. The side guns were punching into the White Scars as they tried to cripple the vehicles.

The White Scars and the Iron Guard were fighting five tanks again. The main body of the ork infantry would not be long in arriving. And now Kusala was telling him that the number of Battlewagons could easily double. Perhaps in a few minutes. At best in a few hours.

His bike raced towards the tank. His bolters fired at the side gunners. In the space between seconds, Temur weighed his decision.

If he took the brotherhood at desperate speed to the manufactorum, they would be leaving the Iron Guard to a fate that was anything but uncertain. The mortals had courage, tenacity and skill. None of that mattered in the long run against the ork machines. By the time the White Scars returned, the bastion could well be a smoking ruin.

And if he stayed? By Kusala’s own estimation, the Scouts were not strong

enough to cripple the ork facility. There would be delay, and there would be losses, but more ork tanks would arrive, and the end would be even more certain.

Closer to the tanks now. He made rapid corrections left and right. Ork bullets screamed overhead. A few struck the front armour of his bike. He kept to the course.

There was no real choice. To stay would result in the further consolidation of ork strength. The White Scars had come to find the manufactory, destroy it, and from that blow, destroy the orks on this moon. The bastion was here for that purpose too. So it would have to play its role.

He wondered what the difference was between his forced hand and Ghazan's sense of fate.

Temur and his brothers shot past the left flank of the Battlewagon, strafing it with shells. They killed the side gunners and a handful of orks clinging to the roof of the tank. But the vehicles had arrived with the greenskins covering them like ticks, and the gunners were replaced in an instant.

Temur contacted Meixner. 'Colonel,' he said, 'the successful prosecution of this war will require sacrifice.'

'Ours?'

'Yes. The heart of the greenskins' operation here is about to be exposed to us. The *Khajog's Stand* and the assault squad will remain to assist.'

'You did warn me of this eventuality.' There was no bitterness, no irony in Meixner's voice. He understood. 'We will hold the orks here,' he said. 'We will keep their forces divided for as long as we can.'

'That will be sufficient. You have my word.'

'Thank you.' Then the disciplined formality of Meixner's tone slipped for a moment. 'If I might request a favour?'

'Of course.'

'Hurry back.' The irony came through now. It was as clear as the exhaustion.

When the demolition charges went off and the power plant collapsed on itself, the energy levels fluctuated wildly around the cages on the grid. One of the machines burst into flame. But the grid did not shut down. A minute part of Ghazan's consciousness wondered about this. Perhaps the hellish construction stored reserve power in batteries. Perhaps it was the imprisoned eldar witches themselves who were the source of the power, and the cables were bringing their energies to the plant in the next cavern rather than the other way around.

It didn't matter. The only thing that did was to tackle his future head-on, and

the future was standing there, a thing of inhuman worship and feral magic.

Ghazan ran forwards. He sent another electrical blast ahead of him. It caught the oncoming orks and the flash turned three of them to ash. Two others were rooted to the floor as the lightning devastated their nervous systems. But one of them, with smoke rising from its eyes, managed to keep running towards Ghazan, taking half a dozen more steps before it died.

So strong, he thought. Why are they so strong?

The witch was back on its feet. It opened its maw so wide that its head rocked back. It roared with an ecstasy of rage. The other orks were frenzied by the shout, and fed their heightened fury back to the witch. The ork madness was an almost physical wave. It knocked Ghazan back a step.

He fired his bolt pistol as he steadied himself. The orks seemed stronger yet, but their skulls still flew apart when struck by mass-reactive shells. A howling monster hurtled into him. He blocked the swing of the ork's chainaxe with his staff and shot the greenskin through the throat.

His outrage had its own power, and he moved forwards again. Staff upheld, he roared back at the orks, hurling the shout of ancestral cavalry charges. The shout became wind, and it flattened the greenskins, clearing his path to the witch.

Four of the eldar were climbing the grid, firing down from the cages at the orks. The others were engaging in melee combat with the greenskins, slicing at them with twin blades, forcing them back from the machines. Tellathia moved through the battle with a mix of stillness and uncanny speed. She carried no weapon except her staff. Her right hand moved as if she were conjuring music only she could hear. Wherever she pointed, there went shuriken fire or sword blow. Orks tried to kill her, but the attacks of her squad always hit the greenskins just as they were getting her in their sights or closing within striking distance. She kept the eldar ahead of the orks. Whatever attack the greenskins tried, the eldar countered even as it began. She seemed to know what the orks were going to do before they did themselves.

A few times, when her brethren were pressed hard, an ork slipped through the cordon of pre-emptive kills that surrounded her. The opportunity did the beast no good. Tellathia snapped into motion, rounding on her foe with serpent speed. Energy coursing the length of her staff, she pointed. She didn't touch the ork, but it collapsed, screaming, clutching its head. It stayed down, gibbering, and was trampled to death by others of its kind as they tried to grapple with this being who seemed to exist a few seconds ahead of everything else in the cavern.

The ork engineer was in between Ghazan and the witch. It regarded him with

malevolent curiosity. Ghazan's bolter shells exploded against the force field. Ghazan refused to believe that the tech was intentionally providing cover for the witch; but it had done so, buying seconds during which the wind-stunned greenskins made it to their feet again. The ork witch spread its arms wide. Coruscating energy flowed from its claws. The streams split into dozens of arcs that landed on the greenskins on both sides of Ghazan.

The brutes seemed to grow before his eyes. He dismissed the sight as an illusion. But the orks were bursting with renewed power. They came at him as an explosion of violence. He saw residual energy crackle on the ends of their tusks. They were maddened with rage, ecstatic with it. He was surrounded by a wall of green muscle.

It closed in. A few orks, in the lunacy of their rage, fired their guns, shooting through their own ranks. Shotguns blew open chests and severed arms. The wounded kept fighting. A brute that should have been dead paid no attention to the hole in its torso, and swung a huge cleaver at Ghazan. The blow was strong enough to shatter the blade as it bit into the ceramite of his power armour.

There was a sound like stuttering thunder. It came from a portable stubber. Sparks and smoke billowed from the barrel as it spat a stream of bullets. The weapon was a monster of noise and recoil. It had no accuracy. It didn't need any. The volley cut through ork flesh and pounded Ghazan. His armour protected him, but he sensed damage occurring. His movements became heavier as servomotors lost power.

Something huge hit him from behind. He stumbled forwards a step, turned his momentum into a pivot and faced his attacker. The ork was a head taller than the others. It wielded a grotesque double-bladed chain-cleaver. The weapon was ridiculous in its overwrought expression of bloodthirst, but it was wielded by a being that was equal to its violence. More blows rained on Ghazan from all sides as the big ork swung the roaring blades at his face.

If the strike went true, it would cut his head in half.

He had all the time he needed to see the danger, to understand it, and to parse his reaction. As he had entered the pivot, he had reacted on instinct. He tapped into a power as elemental to the collective psyche of the White Scars as lightning and wind were to the identity of Chogoris.

He summoned speed. It had been the defining feature of the White Scars way of war for all the millennia of the Chapter's existence. It had been the way of the steppes long before the arrival of Jaghatai Khan. War was speed, and he became its incarnation.

The ork's swing appeared to slow, as if it were happening in deep water. The fists and blades around Ghazan became lethargic. He ducked beneath the chainblades and moved to the side of the ork. Beneath the greenskin's heavy brow, its stupid eyes began to widen in surprise. Ghazan brought his bolter up to the brute's temple. He pulled the trigger. The normal pace of time resumed as the ork's head exploded.

No more orks came from the entrance behind Ghazan. Ariq's sabotage had been effective. The great flood of the green horde had been slowed, but it had not been stopped. The enemy continued to arrive from smaller passages, mostly on the north side of the cave. More and more orks directed their fire at the eldar in the elevated positions, the greenskins showing no concern about preserving the lives of their prisoners.

The four warriors were forced to send their shuriken into the flesh of more and more targets. Even with Tellathia's direction, they could not hold them all at bay. The orks shut down the options of destiny through sheer numbers. There was no future where tragedy did not occur. First one, then a second of the warriors fell, sublime armour shattered by simple but overwhelming brutality.

There was art in war. To be Adeptus Astartes was to know this and to practise it. Ghazan recognised the alien brilliance in the eldar art. The orks had no art as he understood it. They were nothing but raw war. Their undisciplined, exuberant force smashed the art and trampled its remains.

The eldar on the ground tried to counter the new force. They unleashed their pulverising screams. The orks staggered, giving the last two eldar on the grid the chance to kill a few more. It wasn't enough. Tellathia's gestures grew more urgent. The eldar took down the orks faster, despite their own losses. But the tide was turning, and it was rising.

Wind, Ghazan thought. *Wind*, his spirit became. He reached deep into his soul, into the heart of Chogoris, and into the warp. He risked much, as the eternal claws of the immaterium reached into his self. He gained much, as the winds came, greater than before. They surrounded him, a cyclone spiralling out from this centre. The rage took the cavern. The orks lost their aim. The smaller ones fell. The eldar, warned by Tellathia of the coming of the gale, rode it out and slaughtered the enemy.

He'd won them all breathing space. Not much. A few seconds, perhaps.

Freed, for the moment, of the mob, Ghazan moved forwards again. Unmoved by the gale, as firmly grounded as a pillar, the ork tech hadn't moved. It was still blocking his path to the witch. It was still grinning. It was not attacking, but it

had the look of feral joy of a greenskin in full combat.

Behind it, the witch was bent over. It clutched its staff with both hands, trembling with the tension of effort. It was surrounded by a narrow, intense aurora. Power was barely contained by the ork's body, and was still building.

Ghazan realised that he'd been half right. The tech was not protecting the witch. But it was cooperating. The look on its face spoke the truth: it was attacking. The two were launching a coordinated strike, with the engineer giving the psyker the opportunity to prepare its great blow. Ghazan charged, still firing his bolter in the faint hope that he might overwhelm the tech's force field in time. He was drained from calling the great winds, but he began to open his mind to the warp yet again.

Stop, he thought. *Stop, stop, stop*. He'd been too slow. The orks had bought their own breathing space. They had delayed Ghazan just long enough.

Just a few metres away now. The tech's force field wouldn't matter. He wouldn't let it. He would smash the ork aside with his own momentum. Let him only have the time to take those last steps.

The tech jumped out of his way. It crouched low, racing to Ghazan's left for the nearest side exit.

The witch was standing straight.

The blow came.

There was no way into the cavern except through the main entrance. Yet there was still the chance to approach without being detected. The lumen orbs that the orks were using were harsh, bright, and threw stark shadows across the floor. The tanks were well-lit. Beyond them, the lower reaches of the cavern were a confusion of darkness and pulsing glare from giant welding torches. The noise of the construction was deafening. Kusala would have had to resort to hand signals just to make himself understood.

The Scouts moved in, flowing from shadow to shadow, wraiths in armour. The orks were consumed by the riot of industry. On all sides, Kusala saw the dark side of creation. The orks built with glee and wild passion. Everything they brought into being was grotesque. They gave form to excess, and the excess was brute violence. There was nothing sensible or practical about the designs of the Battlewagons. There was too much armament, too much shielding, too much metal piled on top of metal. And yet the vehicles were every bit as dangerous as the orks believed they were. Somehow, their form made them into the monsters they were meant to be.

Seeing them closer, outside the frenzy of vehicular combat, Kusala was struck by their size. They were larger than the typical ork Battlewagon. Everything about these orks was exaggerated, as if some malign spirit were inspiring them to greater heights of destruction, war, and riot.

Kusala scanned for opportunities as they headed deeper into the cavern. He would have to choose the target well. There would be a single opportunity. If the damage was severe, with accompanying chaos, the Scouts might live long enough to do more. If it were minor, they would be useless martyrs.

Ariq signalled for his attention. He pointed. Two vehicles over, partially obscured by the intervening scaffolding, a completed Battlewagon was being fuelled. It was close to the centre of the cavern. Beside it was a reservoir twice the size of the tanks. Kusala nodded. He followed a path that took them under the scaffolding, shifting back and forth between patches of darkness, approaching the clear space.

Closer up, Kusala could see the spills of the orks' promethium. There were pools of it over much of the cavern floor in this area. More was streaming down the side of the Battlewagon, leaking from the hose, and dripping from the bottom of the reservoir. Ariq's eagerness was bordering on delight. No wonder. The orks might as well have issued him a written invitation to do his worst.

Kusala looked back the way they had come. The quickest retreat would take the Scouts past two more Battlewagons. As single-minded as the orks were about their tasks, they weren't so blind that they wouldn't notice a human coming right up to the vehicles. But given a much greater distraction...

Kusala began to share Ariq's eagerness. It was time to unleash what he and his Scouts did best. In this cavern, they would complete the mission that Temur Khan had given them. He could not deny the importance of what following the zadyin arga had revealed. But he could not shake the idea that, if they had not encountered the eldar, Ghazan would have insisted they continue down the path of his visions. They would likely never have found this assembly bay.

Kusala had a full measure of respect for Ghazan's prowess. He did not doubt the importance of the Stormseer's visions. He did not doubt their reality. What he doubted was Ghazan's insistence that what he had seen superseded everything else about the mission. There would be a reckoning with the khan later. Kusala had no interest in being caught in the middle of that crossfire. He was a warrior of the White Scars, and he asked no more than to do his duty to the *minghan* and Chapter, primarch and Emperor.

Now, though, Ghazan had removed himself from Kusala's concern. Now, there

was only the purity of the mission. The purity of destroying the foe.

One of the lessons that Kusala taught the Scouts was the many shades of speed. On foot or on Land Speeder, the spirit of the White Scars way of war was the same. Stealth *was* speed. The attack came without warning. The enemy did not see the blow coming. The effect was the same: lightning from a clear sky.

Kusala sent Ariq to prepare the lightning over the reservoir. He led the others back so that they might turn the first thunderclap into a great storm. At the first Battlewagon, he stopped. Yekejin and Bokegan continued to the last vehicle before the entrance. They moved well. Within very few paces, Kusala could barely see them, even knowing where to look.

An act of great speed was closing in on the orks.

He maglocked his bolter. He took out a krak grenade for each hand. He eyed the tank's wheels and its roof, covered in labouring orks.

Two orks began shouting at each other. They stood on the top of the Battlewagon, behind one of the viciously angled crenellations. Each wanted the same tool. It looked like a combination wrench and welder, as long as Kusala's arm. After a brief tug of war, one ork snatched it from the other's grasp. The second greenskin grabbed its brother by the throat and smashed its head against the point of the crenellation.

The iron punched through the ork's skull and launched its left eye in an impressive arc. The rest of the orks hooted. The corpse's grip relaxed. The tool fell, clattering and bouncing through the scaffolding. It landed in front of Kusala. He was close enough to pick it up.

He mentally framed a string of curses. They were his most imaginative in at least twenty years.

He glanced left. Still no Ariq. Looked up. The ork was clambering down the scaffolding.

Left. Was that a shadow moving? It was.

The ork was on the ground. It reached for the tool.

Ariq was seconds away.

The ork grasped the tool. It saw Kusala. Its jaw hung open in stupid surprise.

Still holding the grenades, Kusala slammed his gauntleted fist against the bridge of the ork's nose. He caved in the greenskin's face. The brute still roared before it had the good grace to die.

'Now!' Kusala shouted. He threw his grenades, one at the roof, one at the wheels.

Ariq triggered the charge.

The speed of war struck the orks.

The first blast of Ariq's explosives was dwarfed by the conflagration of the promethium. The fireball filled the centre of the chamber. It swallowed the Battlewagon. It turned orks and scaffolding into flying, burning debris. Then the tank exploded. Its wreckage was of larger mass. It flew lower, hit the ground rolling, smashing down more construction works.

The flames were still spreading when first Kusala's grenades went off, then those hurled by Yekejin and Bokegan at the other Battlewagon. The kraks melted armour, wheels and axles. The vehicles slumped. They were far from killed, but their departure from the chamber was delayed.

The orks reacted with chaotic rage. There were explosions in three separate locations, flames and secondary blasts spreading through the cavern. The greenskins didn't know where to shoot, so they shot everywhere, at everything that moved. For those first crucial seconds, as the Scouts made their way back towards the cave entrance, the orks saw only each other. The instinct to retaliate was too strong. Ork fired on ork. Frenzy and ferocity spread ahead of the flames. What order there had been before the attack collapsed.

The squad was just reaching the entrance when there was a roar almost as loud as the explosions. Only it came from a living throat. Kusala turned. They had been spotted by the overseers of the construction zone. Two large orks in thick armour waded out of the fire. Between them, they carried what looked like a massive stubber. Kusala realised it was a gun intended to be used as a Battlewagon's side turret. One ork carried the barrel. The other held the stock and had its finger on the trigger.

'Move!' Kusala yelled. The Scouts already were.

The orks opened fire. The gun's recoil was great, and its barrel ran hot within seconds. Though the lead ork held on, the spray still went wild. Bullets the length of a mortal's hand ricocheted around the cavern.

The initial shots hit Bokegan full on. They stitched a trail of holes that ran the entire length of his torso and then his head. He jerked, immobilised by the severity of his wounds as the massive rounds took apart his carapace, blew out his throat, put out his eyes. The force of the blows propelled him forwards another step. Then he fell.

Ariq shot the lead ork in the head. It fell, dropping its end of the gun. The other ork howled as the gun kicked uncontrollably. It kept its finger on the trigger, spraying bullets across the entire breadth of the cavern until another round from Ariq dropped it too.

Now the other orks were breaking from their disorder. They realised that the true enemy had been found. More died as they were caught in the flames. The fireball was dissipating, but it was still touching off spills and minor reservoirs. The orks ignored their losses. Kusala doubted that they even understood the meaning of the word. They ran forwards, single-minded in aggression, heedless of anything beyond the need to kill the enemy.

There were hundreds of the orks. Not all of them joined in the rush. They climbed onto the completed Battlewagons. Kusala's heart sank as he heard engines rumble to life, spewing clouds of blue smoke.

As the Scouts reached the entrance, so did a large contingent of orks coming from the downward slope of the tunnel. *Trapped*, Kusala thought. 'For the Emperor!' he shouted.

'For the Khan!' the squad answered.

Blades drawn, they threw themselves at impossible odds.

Then the ground shook while, further back in the tunnel, the sun rose.

The race was even worse this time. During the run to the base, Temur had been fighting to avert disaster. Now victory was the prize, and that hope was so slender, so delicately balanced on the horns of time, that it could vanish if the brotherhood was as little as a few seconds late in arriving.

So far, he thought. *Too far*.

He didn't want to know how long it had been since he'd received Kusala's message. But he was aware of precisely how many seconds it had been, and how many minutes it would be before they reached the site of the manufactorum. *Too long*.

There had been no further messages. He had tried contacting Ghazan, but to no avail there, either. Once more, they had seen the ork infantry in the distance, closing in on the bastion. They would be in the fray long before the White Scars reached their target. Temur didn't doubt the Iron Guard's tenacity or sense of duty. He did wonder if they had the troops. The battle would soon have very little to do with skill. The orks would have the numbers and strength to win it, and the question was only how long it would take them to smash the human defenders.

Riding past the orks, ignoring the distant sounds of their raucous laughter and songs, knowing the devastation they were bringing, was one of the hardest things Temur had done. Earlier, he had had the reasonable expectation of returning to the bastion before the slow orks and their armour arrived. Now there was no

such hope. Now there was the need to strangle the ork operation at its source. Two bastions were being attacked. The first one to fall would lose the planet.

Temur's vox-bead crackled to life. It was Tegusal, one of Kusala's Scouts. 'We have secured an entrance, my khan,' Tegusal said.

'Good. Where is it?'

'Look right when you reach the manufactorum's vicinity. You'll know when you are there. It's unmistakable. We have the entrance open. We will send up a—'

Loud, continuous static on the vox. The thread of hope frayed. Temur responded with anger. He responded with speed. He vowed to tear every ork tank apart with his hands. And he called on Tegusal. He called on every White Scar in the ork manufactorum.

Nothing but white noise. Nothing but the idiot sound of disaster.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Ghazan had time to realise the ork witch was launching an attack. He had time to raise his own defences against it. There was even time for the eldar to redirect fire against the ork. Time to know that this greenskin must be prevented from striking this blow.

All that time. But no time to stop the attack.

Ghazan saw it all go wrong in precise, acid-etched detail. He saw the irony that Tellathia must have known what was coming, and though he heard her begin to cry ‘No!’ in Gothic, the crude medium of speech was too slow. He saw the ork aim its staff not at him, but at the grid of cages. He saw the muzzle of his bolt pistol come into line with the witch’s head. He felt his finger squeeze the trigger.

All too late. Far, far too late.

The energy discharge from the staff was enormous. The flash alone heated the air to the point that flesh on the nearest orks burned. What it caused when it hit the cages was of another order again.

The concentrated psychic strength of the eldar prisoners was released all at once. The power that had teleported tanks lost all coherence. The chamber vanished from Ghazan’s sight. The defence he had raised at the last second saved his identity from being ripped apart, its particulate echoes thrown to the warp. Even so, he was caught in an explosion that was the death scream of a hundred souls, and sheer, physical destruction. Blasts hit his mind and body at the same time. He held fast to his consciousness. His material self was hurled through the air. He couldn’t see where he flew. There was no up, no down, no direction.

Only the blind silver shriek.

The roar of flame.

The battering by stone and iron.

The blast that came through the tunnel was not a simple explosion. The light that engulfed Kusala's squad and the orks was not from the visible spectrum. It was not from the materium at all. Yet it blinded all the same. It struck like a spear to the brain. Kusala's very name started to slip from his grasp. He snatched at it, and at his oath of moment, and so it was as a sergeant of the White Scars that he shouted, 'Remember who you are! You are Adeptus Astartes. You are the sword of Chogoris! You are the sons of Jaghatai Khan!'

He didn't know if he was heard. The words were being spoken by someone a great distance away. Perhaps he spoke them only to himself. But they were the truth, and the truth was a potent weapon against the chaos that sought to devour them all. He could not see. He could not feel his limbs. But he knew they were there, and when he commanded his arm to swing, he was sure that it did. Even in the midst of a storm of disintegration, he attacked the enemy.

The wave receded, taking the pain with it. Kusala could see again. Another Scout, Yekejin, was down, perhaps felled by the psychic explosion, but now hacked apart by the orks' chainblades. Most of the greenskins who had been in the tunnel were also down. Some were dead. Others were writhing on the ground, clutching their heads. Their eyes had burst. Bloody foam was at their mouths. A few – the largest – still stood, and were fighting, but their movements were slow, their blows inaccurate. The orks in the cavern had been spared the worst of the blast, but they were stunned, sluggish.

With quick, vicious jabs of his tulwar, Kusala eviscerated the ork before him. He saw that Ariq was still dazed. He step-lunged forward, caught another ork in the chest. The brute rocked back but came at them again. Kusala shook Ariq's shoulder as he blocked another of the ork's blows. 'Scout!' he shouted. 'You are at war!' Ariq returned to the present moment and shot the ork. It took three shells to kill it.

Kusala and Ariq retreated up the slope. From inside the assembly bay came the sounds of pursuit as the orks recovered. The Battlewagons had stalled. Now they growled once more. The green horde and its machines of destruction were on the move.

'Do we stand and fight?' Ariq asked.

'Our duty is not martyrdom,' Kusala snapped. He led them upwards at a run. 'Our duty is to delay the orks long enough for the rest of the minghan to arrive.'

‘Two of us?’ Ariq sounded game, but sceptical.

‘Three,’ Kusala allowed himself a moment of grim humour. ‘We will rejoin Tegusal. We will not defeat the greenskins. But we can slow them down.’

The slope went on for at least another thousand metres. Some of the turns were sharp, though the width was always enough to allow the passage of the tanks. The sides of the walls were scraped where the orks had barrelled through with more speed than care. Kusala saw daylight after the third twist. One more turn, and there was Tegusal. A few dozen ork corpses were stacked on either side of the exit to the surface. The door was a single steel slab ten metres long, held open by hydraulic arms.

From back in the tunnel came the clamour of the orks.

‘Any word from the khan?’ Kusala asked Tegusal.

‘He is coming, brother-sergeant. They all are.’

‘How long?’

‘I don’t know. The vox went out when we were hit by that...’ He hesitated, lacking an adequate word for the event.

‘A surge of some kind,’ Kusala said. ‘It doesn’t matter what it was. What is important is that the orks do not break out until our brothers reach us.’

‘We might be able to collapse the tunnel,’ Ariq offered. ‘We could seal them in.’

The sounds of riot were louder yet.

Kusala shook his head. ‘No time.’ He pointed at the arms. ‘Drop this door.’

Two Krak grenades were enough to melt the supports at their base. The White Scars moved outside as the door slammed down with a reverberating boom.

‘This won’t hold them long,’ Ariq said. ‘They’ll burn or blast their way through.’

‘And we will be here when they do,’ Kusala said.

‘Brother-sergeant, I know I could have rigged the ceiling in time.’

‘Perhaps. And are you sure this is their only exit?’

‘No,’ Ariq admitted.

‘We have their heavy armour held at this spot. They won’t retreat before a simple shut door. You’re right. They will break it down.’

He turned to scan the horizon. In the distance, he could see a cloud of dust. The full strength of the Fifth Brotherhood was coming to punish the temerity of the greenskins. ‘When the orks open that door,’ he said, ‘they’ll be letting us in.’

The heat faded before the psychic glare did. Ghazan knew this only because the

cavern was already cooling when he could think again. The ripples of the soul-death subsided. He was no longer being swamped by the doom of others.

The details of the material world returned in stages. First he realised that he was no longer in motion. He was lying on his back. Then the darkness registered as being the actual absence of light. Next came the awareness of great weight. Last was the warmth of his blood on his face. The wounds on his forehead had already sealed.

He was buried. He pushed against the wreckage. Metal, a great deal of it, but not stone. He pushed harder. The weight shifted. It gave him hope that there had not been a cave-in. He worked both his hands up to chest level, then shoved outwards. His arms were great pistons, and the remains of the ork machines fell away from him.

Ghazan stood up, testing bones and armour. Vital systems still intact. The heaviness was worse, but he could compensate for it. His body was as unbroken as his mind.

He was the only thing unbroken in the cave. The machine had spread its death across the entire width of the chamber. The explosion had reduced it to melted slag and blackened, twisted bars. The corpses of its prisoners were contorted husks enmeshed in the metal. The only light in the cavern came from the blue flame burning at the mouths of broken conduits.

The orks were all dead. Their bodies were incinerated. Many had died from forces other than fire. Ghazan saw skull after skull that had split open, the grey matter inside bursting out like a violent cancer. No eldar was still standing, either. The elegance of their armour was destroyed. It was fragments and angles, as ruined as the bodies inside.

The door to the teleporter cave had been peeled back by the force of the blast. The space beyond was just as wrecked. The platform appeared to have exploded. Large chunks of metal shrapnel were scattered about the cavern. Ghazan saw several corpses that had been cut in half by the flying debris.

There was no sign of the ork psyker in either cavern. The engineer, too, had made its escape.

Ghazan clenched his fists. His frustration was mixed with the intimation of destiny that still tormented him. He had thought the moment of the battle had come in this chamber. Its delay was maddening. The full reckoning still waited.

He heard movement behind him. He turned. Where the grid's control mechanisms had been, the rubble shifted. Ghazan approached, bolt pistol at the ready.

The movement stopped. Ghazan pulled the wreckage away. Tellathia lay beneath it, broken but still breathing. Ghazan didn't think she would be for much longer.

'The ork...' she said. Her helmet's amplifier still worked, giving her voice a volume at odds with the terminal pain.

'Escaped,' Ghazan said.

'Yes.' She spoke with resignation, not surprise. 'You will find it.'

'I know.'

'When you do, please, finish what we came to do.'

Ghazan looked at bodies in the wrecked cages. 'It is finished,' he said. 'Your kin are no longer enslaved.'

'No...' A long pause, and an even longer one between her breaths. Each exhalation seemed to expel a bit more of her being. 'Our great mission is as incomplete as yours.'

'There are more prisoners?'

'One more. The orks must not have him. Free Merentallas. Please.' When Ghazan hesitated, she said, 'It is what you are called to do. Just as we were called to die for your mission.'

He stared at her, wishing he could see behind the ornate but faceless helmet. 'Called?'

'By necessity.'

The implications of what she was saying sank in. 'You knew you were going to die?'

'It was...' Pause. Rattling breath. 'It was the only way to ensure your success. And through you, the ultimate fulfilment of our duty.'

'You assume much.'

'No. Nothing. You will see. Our fates this day are not our own. They are but steps in the culmination of another's. There was never any choice.' A very long breath, like a sigh down an endless tunnel.

'My fate is dictated by that of the White Scars,' Ghazan said.

There was no answer. He waited. She was still.

He knew the eldar had spoken the truth, at least as she understood it. He suspected that her perception of time's unravelling was more acute than his own. Though being indebted to anything xenos was distasteful to him, he had incurred a debt of honour here. He looked down at the psyker. 'I will free him,' he said. Their missions were still braided.

Never any choice. Wasn't that what he maintained? Then why did the words

haunt him?

Outside the vehicle entrance to the complex, the vox-network started functioning again. At the same time, the blows began on the other side of the door. Based on the sounds Kusala heard, the orks were beginning by hammering the metal with fists and weapons, as if sheer aggression would open the way for them.

‘We have a few minutes,’ Kusala told Temur. ‘No more.’

‘We are not far, brother-sergeant. Prime them for our greetings.’

The impacts on the other side became louder. Kusala guessed that grenades were being used. It wouldn’t be long before the orks thought to use the Battlewagons’ cannons. He stood to one side of the entrance, Ariq and Tegusal on the other, bolters ready. ‘The second a hole appears,’ he said, ‘open fire. Discourage their approach.’

He looked back at the dust cloud. It was growing larger. The khan was near.

The orks used their big guns sooner than he had thought. The first shot did not destroy the door, but shook it hard. Debris rolled down from the earthen rise in which the door was set. The next shell punched a hole the size of a man. Tegusal tossed a frag through it. The howls that greeted the explosion were gratifying. Then the cannon fired again. It kept firing, puncturing a new hole in the metres-thick metal each time. The door remained intact, and held down by its own weight, longer than Kusala could have hoped.

The shelling stopped. An engine revved. Something huge rumbled towards the door. The impact smashed the weakened metal apart, and the Battlewagon charged out into the daylight, the battering ram face wide with victory.

Kusala charged back inside the tunnel, Ariq and Tegusal at his heels. There was no fighting the Battlewagon on foot. If death was inevitable, it would come at a cost to the orks.

The greenskins were coming up the slope, a mob in fury. Behind them came another tank. It crushed the slower orks under its wheels. As yet it was not firing, though the passengers on its roof were. Bullets careened off the stone on all sides of Kusala. Rounds smacked into his armour. They didn’t slow him down. He roared back at the orks, and so did his Scouts. The three of them made their run at the orks as if there were hundreds of their battle-brothers at their sides.

Kusala threw his final two frag grenades ahead of him. They were joined a beat later by four more as Ariq and Tegusal followed suit. A minor artillery barrage hit the orks. The tunnel was almost wide enough for two Battlewagons to drive abreast, but it was still a confined space for such a concentrated burst of

explosives. A score of orks died immediately. Their bodies were reduced to jagged bone shrapnel, impaling still more. The horde's advance stumbled as the orks pushing from behind tripped over the bodies of the dead.

Barely a second behind the blasts, Kusala slammed into the orks. Tulwar in one hand, bolt pistol in the other, he slashed throats and burst skulls. The Scouts followed his model. They showed the orks that speed was not dependent on engines and wheels. Kusala's tulwar was more a blur than a blade. His prey did not see it until after he had severed their windpipes. When a brute tried to hit him with an axe or machete, the tulwar was already in defensive position, arresting the blow while the pistol came up and delivered a mass-reactive shell to the ork's snarling visage.

Kusala killed in spirals. He made it hard for the orks to anticipate his movements. He was never still. As one ork fell, he was already striking the next. The two Scouts showed they had absorbed every lesson of their training. They had nothing like the protection of his power armour. It was even more vital that they move quickly, and they did. Reduced to half strength, outnumbered by orders of magnitude, the squad cut the orks down. The Scouts were scythes from the steppes of Chogoris, reaping a harvest of death.

The orks were strong. They were not stunned long, and they were not passive before an enemy. If ever there was a species bred for the single purpose of war, Kusala knew, it was the orks. For each one he killed, three more were there, their hunger for battle undiminished. And they were strong. He was able to put them down quickly, but even these, the common infantry of the orks, were more resilient than they should be.

The Battlewagon continued to move forwards. It would have the Scouts under its wheels in the next few seconds. Behind it was yet another tank.

Tegusal went down. His legs were chopped from behind by a chainblade. He disappeared beneath the mob of stomping greenskins. The horde pressed tighter yet. Kusala's blade caught in the ribcage of an ork. He stopped moving for a moment, and he was almost borne to the ground. Whirring blades cut at the ceramite of his armour. He fired his pistol into the ork's body, knocking it back and freeing his blade. He swung wide, cutting throats and limbs. He was moving again, but he was more constricted.

The sound from the mouth of the tunnel changed. Kusala heard the first Battlewagon reversing back into the tunnel. There was another engine noise, too, higher-pitched and cleaner.

Bikes.

The minghan was here.

The manoeuvre was madness. The space was too restricted. His speed was too great.

It was perfect.

The Battlewagon was in the tunnel entrance. On either side of it, there was enough room for the White Scars bikes and Land Speeders, with no margin for error. Strafing the tank would be like shooting a bullet into the barrel of another gun. Temur didn't slow. Bolters blazing, shells stripping the surprised orks from the roof of the Battlewagon, he plunged past the vehicle and into the tunnel. The walls echoed and amplified the snarl of the bike's engine. He heard the rest of the brotherhood following his example, shrieking past the tank to become a wall of speeding death descending on the orks.

He heard the concussion of the Battlewagon's cannon. It had fired inside the tunnel. Temur could not look to see the result, but he knew that, in these initial moments of the incursion, there was no way for the orks to miss. He had lost at least one more brother, and perhaps more.

The destruction he would wreak on the orks became that much more savage.

From the moment he entered the tunnel, only a handful of seconds separated him from the horde below. He saw Kusala and Ariq struggling in their midst. He saw the other tank closing in. He heard, beyond the curve, the approach of yet another. He processed all of this, and he reacted. This was war in his element: the rush of events too quick for a mortal to process, the need for reaction at the same instant as perception, the exhilaration of murderous velocity.

A tiny correction to the right brought the bike close to the wall. He could have touched it with his hand. Kusala's squad was struggling near the centre of the tunnel. Temur aimed his strike along the sides. The twin-linked bolters tore into the orks. A score died without knowing what had happened. Still without slowing, Temur ploughed into the mass of greenskins. He smashed bodies to pulp, ground bones to powder. He rode through the horde, and behind him came his brothers, and now it was the orks who were trapped in the tunnel, because death, sudden and unstoppable, was upon them. There was no space for the orks, and there was no time.

But there were still tanks.

Temur flashed past the Battlewagon before its crew could react. He kept going down the tunnel, spotted the next tank, and then another. He kept firing at the vehicles, picking off passengers but doing little other damage. Shells ricocheted

off the monstrous forward shields. He had the crews' attention.

He whipped down the tunnel until he was sure there were no more tanks. Then he turned and raced back up the slope along the other wall. Now he could see the minghan, the long line of bikes and speeders following in his wake, just as fast, just as deadly. They formed a conveyor belt of death. The assault on the orks was unending.

But the Battlewagons rolled on. Though they had lost their passengers and some of their crew, their armour was holding up against the bolter fire. And they were firing their cannons. As he shot past the tanks once more, the shells smashed into the walls, missing him by little. The explosions in the tunnel were devastating. Speed was the White Scars one defence. It wasn't enough. When the shells hit, it was by luck, not by skill, but in this space, with these numbers, the orks in the Battlewagons had the luck they needed.

The infantry was in tatters now. Kusala and Ariq had jumped onto the nearest tank, and were fighting their way in. Good. The brotherhood was close to causing critical disorder in the ork force. The Battlewagons were moving closer together. Any discipline the greenskins had was tenuous. Temur would see it severed.

'Brother-sergeant,' he voxed, 'you know what has to happen.'

'Depend upon it, Temur Khan.'

Constant fire. He was draining his ammunition stores. He and his brothers were also hitting the orks with a perpetual, disorienting hammering. Even if the shells were still being stopped by the armour, the omnidirectional clamour would have the orks lashing out on instinct. Their accident would come.

At the upward end of the slope, almost at the exit again, Temur saw the accident happen. It was the Battlewagon under attack by Kusala that made the error; the sergeant had seen to it. It struck the first tank with its cannon fire. Knowing only that they were being hit by a barrage, and now by a vehicle boarded by their enemy, the orks in the uphill Battlewagon responded in kind, turning their full armament on their brothers. The two tanks went to war.

The Battlewagons rushed together, driven now by the crews' hunger to tear out each other's throats. The next tank arrived. Its crew joined the fray, shelling the nearest target. Kusala's Battlewagon was now in the middle of crossfire. It wouldn't last long. Its crew fought back, though, and were still fighting when the fourth Battlewagon arrived. It came around the last bend, and the orks aboard showed no hesitation before launching into an attack, training their gun on the third tank.

Temur saw the masterpiece of confusion take form. ‘Keep them surrounded,’ he ordered. ‘Concentrate fire on the rear armour.’ It was thinner. It would give out.

The White Scars circled the Battlewagons. They were a noose of speed. The larger predators were locked in combat with one another, and the White Scars would ensure that there were no victors. The bolter shells hit the rear armour. The cannon fire hit the front. First one, then two of the ork crews realised their mistake and tried to disengage, but it was too late.

The Battlewagons died close together. The explosive immolation of the first wreaked havoc with the others, and still the battles raged. The tunnel became a maelstrom of fire and sound. If not for the White Scars discipline, and their skill in adapting to the lightning changes in the currents of battle, they would have been sucked into the vortex. The explosions reached a climax. For a few moments, the Battlewagons merged into a single being of iron and flame. Then, after being dwarfed by the blasts of fuel tanks and ammunition caches, the guns fell silent. The fires dimmed. What remained in the centre of the tunnel was a twisted mass of blackened metal.

Temur brought his bike to a halt near the wreckage. The battle had been a costly one. The ruins of seven more bikes and Land Speeders were scattered through the tunnel. There was little left of the warriors who had ridden them.

He found Kusala and the surviving Scout standing before the iron pyre. He pointed to a deep wound that ran from Ariq’s right temple to the left side of his throat. ‘You have fought hard to earn that scar,’ he said.

Ariq bowed his head. ‘Only my duty, Temur Khan,’ he answered.

To Kusala, Temur said, ‘Where do we stand?’

‘We have accounted for all the completed heavy armour. There are still some partial ones in what appears to be the primary assembly bay.’ He pointed back down the tunnel.

‘Then the momentum is ours,’ said Temur. ‘We will erase what remains of the ork operations here and return to the bastion.’ He grunted. ‘If it is still standing. This war is far from over.’ He paused before asking his next question. He already knew the answer would not please him. ‘And Stormseer Ghazan?’

‘He remained with the eldar.’

‘The eldar?’ He listened with rising anger while Kusala filled him in. ‘What was the purpose of the imprisoning device?’

‘It appeared to power the teleporter. There was something like an explosion when we lost the use of the vox. The nature of the explosion...’ Kusala shook his

head, as if still trying to clear it. ‘The explosion was not entirely of the materium.’

‘You think the Stormseer destroyed the teleporter?’

‘I believe so.’

‘No word since?’

‘None.’

Temur cursed. Ghazan’s silence could be chosen, or it could mean he was dead. The implications of the first possibility were, after what Kusala had told him, worse than the second. He did not doubt Ghazan’s loyalty. He did not doubt the reality of the zadyin arga’s visions. What concerned him was Ghazan’s judgement and sanity. ‘This changes nothing. We proceed as I have said.’

As he marched back to his bike, he called Ghazan on the vox. He had the sensation of sending his demands into a darkness of ruin, a darkness that was not empty.

Ghazan stood in the centre of the cavern. He was surrounded by the death of machines, the death of bodies, and the death of psychic energy. The emptiness of the space was gigantic. It had been a realm of excess. The life of machines, bodies and warp sorcery in violent collision had created a psychic atmosphere as dense as the core of a gas giant. Its sudden end created a profound tomb.

The great death of the eldar psykers was the barrier to his pursuit. The loss reverberated, a powerful null with the lingering scars of agony. But destiny did not end in this place. It still waited beyond the tomb. The time of its unfolding was closer than ever. If only he could reach through the grave-void, penetrate this bubble of psychic annihilation.

He knew that at least part of the barrier was self-created, a wall that had protected him from the deathstorm that the ork witch had unleashed.

He thought of Chogoris. He grounded himself in the strength of the home world. It shaped its warriors. It moulded them with lightning and wind, with the plains of battle and survival, with the immensity of its sky. It was the scourge of the weak, and the inspiration of the strong. As he felt his ghost walk with the spirits of Chogoris, he opened himself up to the warp.

He found a thin wound of certainty, a hairline crack in the nothing. He concentrated on it. It changed from crack, to thread, to rope. It wrapped around his consciousness. It pulled. There was a direction out of the dark and into further destruction. He grasped it as it held him. The possible became the inevitable once more.

He returned to a consciousness of the materium. The pull made him look to his right. He saw the shadow of a cave entrance behind where the control mechanisms had been. That was where the ork witch had gone.

Ghazan made his way over and entered the tunnel. It was a small one, barely high enough for him to walk without lowering his head. It narrowed at the floor. It felt like a seam in the bedrock. As he followed it, some sections became so constricted he had to pass sideways, the front and back of his armour scraping against the walls. This was not a passageway that would be of any use for construction. It was, he thought, a private route. If the ork psyker had this route for its own use, then either end must be a destination of some importance.

His vox-bead came to life. The sound of another voice was startling after the silence of the tomb. It was Temur. ‘Stormseer, are you there?’

Ghazan did not respond at first. He knew how the exchange would unfold. He had nothing concrete to tell the khan about what he was doing. The full truth of his vision was still obscure to him. But he could not ignore Temur. ‘I am here,’ he said at last.

‘Where is “here”?’

‘Beyond the teleporter. I am in pursuit of the ork witch.’

‘You think it still lives?’

‘I am sure of it.’

There was a thoughtful pause. Temur was, at least, thinking about what that meant. Then he said, ‘That greenskin is no longer our concern. We are concluding operations here. The manufactorum is destroyed, but we still have several heavy vehicles and the bulk of the ork infantry attacking the bastion. Our attention must be there.’

‘So it would seem. May the winds propel you to the battlefield.’

‘We go with you.’

Ghazan sighed. He began to detach himself from conversation. It was pointless. ‘My purpose here has not yet been fulfilled.’

‘You have done extraordinary work. Without your intervention, we would still be searching for this plant, and the orks would still be sending a stream of tanks our way. You have done your duty here. Now it calls you elsewhere.’

‘Will you explain my visions to me?’

‘Only my orders.’

‘I regret, Temur Khan, that fate has decreed a different course for me.’

‘Be reasonable! What threat is a single ork?’

‘This ork? A considerable one. And we do not know that it is alone.’

‘Zadyin arga,’ Temur began again.

‘I *am* sorry,’ Ghazan interrupted. ‘But this struggle is preordained.’ He severed communications. *There is no choice.*

The tunnel’s route was jagged. It took Ghazan even further beneath the surface of the moon. Before long, the silence gave way to the sounds of activity. As he drew closer to the source, Ghazan distinguished one ork voice snarling above the others. Commands were being issued. The witch, he guessed. He could also hear the sounds of industry.

Closer yet, though still in darkness. He felt the level of psychic energy building once more. It had to be more than just the witch’s power. The strength was approaching what he had experienced in the presence of the cages.

Light appeared, the noise grew, and then the journey ended. Ghazan stopped in the shadows, a few paces back from a ledge a couple of metres above the ground. He looked into the cave before him, and saw just how wrong Temur was. The threat from the manufactorum had not ended.

Though they had lost the means to produce more tanks, the orks were on the cusp of victory.



CHAPTER EIGHT

The cavern was the largest yet, its ceiling cathedral-high. It was another teleporter room. It appeared to be powered by the same method as the first, and though the machinery was as large and complex as before, there was only one cage, one prisoner, the eldar that Tellathia had called Merentallas. The tunnels that arrived in the cavern at ground level were larger than the seam through which Ghazan had passed, but none of them could admit a vehicle. The thing that filled the space had been constructed here. It stood on the teleportation pad that took up most of the cavern floor.

Ghazan activated his vox-bead. ‘Temur Khan,’ he whispered, ‘the orks have a Stompa.’

He used the Gothic approximation of the greenskin name for the monstrosity. The syllables tasted unclean to Ghazan. No subject of the Emperor should ever have to speak a word that had no meaning outside of the human frame of reference. But the obscenity needed a designation, if only to rob it of at least some of its grotesque mystery. There was no proper word in the human tongue that could act as a name for the thing.

It stood well over twenty metres tall. It looked like all the detritus on the surface of the plateau had come together into a rusted mountain of an idol. Above a wide skirt of shielding rose a colossal approximation of a torso, arms and head. Smoke stacks emerged from what would have been a shoulder blade. There was a rumble, tectonic-deep, coming from its chest. Its engine was already active, its crew inside. Members of a diminutive ork subspecies scampered over the war machine, adjusting cables, tightening bolts, correcting the alignment of

guns.

It looked like a mad construction that would fall apart the first time it tried to move. Ghazan knew, though, that it would work, that it would walk, and that it would be as indestructible as it would be devastating in its actions. Its torso was ringed with gun emplacements. Its right arm had twin-linked cannons, each with a barrel almost wide enough for a man to stand inside. Its left ended in a power claw the size of a Rhino.

The Stompa appeared to be imbued with the same excessive strength as everything else associated with the orks on this moon. If it arrived before the bastion, it would be unstoppable. The Iron Guard would be destroyed within minutes. There was precious little that the White Scars had in their arsenal that could do more than dent the monster. The Fifth Brotherhood would fight until the end, but if the other Battlewagons were still active, then with their strength added to the Stompa's, the end would not be long in coming.

'Is it completed?' Temur asked.

'Yes. And operational.'

Ghazan listened to Temur curse under his breath.

'It will be teleported,' the Stormseer added.

'Where are you?'

Ghazan described the cavern's location as best he could.

'We're on our way,' said Temur.

The ork psyker and the engineer were both here. The tech was overseeing the activation of the Stompa and preparing to climb aboard. The witch stood before Merentallas. It gave instructions to more underlings, who worked the controls of the psychic drain. The prisoner's back arched. The energy build-up spiked.

'There is no time,' Ghazan said. 'The teleporter is powering up.' No matter how quickly his brothers could travel through the complex, they would arrive too late.

'Do what you must,' Temur told him. 'For the Khan and the Emperor.'

'For the Khan and the Emperor.' Ghazan felt the fleeting touch of peace as he moved forwards. The constant, clawing sense of anticipation had vanished. Destiny was now. Fate was now. The fulfilment of his visions had arrived. He understood how mistaken he had been earlier to believe that the moment was upon him. He had not felt this calm. He had been responding to a prologue. Now the great act would begin.

He paused before entering the cave. If the orks in the Stompa decided to attack him, he would be dead in an instant. They would not dare attack, though, if doing so would put the teleporter at risk. He decided he could credit the psyker

and the engineer with instilling that much discipline in their subordinates.

His first move was clear. If he could cripple the teleporter, the Stompa would be stuck underground. He had told Tellathia that he would free the last prisoner. In this context, death was the best hope the eldar had of freedom. It was the one in Ghazan's power to grant.

He raised his bolter and fired.

As he did, he remembered that during the earlier battle, none of the eldar prisoners had been killed by ork fire, despite how copious it had been. Tellathia's warriors had been hit, but the bullets had left all within the cages untouched. Now Ghazan saw why. His shells exploded as they reached the cage, their energy dispersing with a ripple in the air.

There was a force field around the cage.

The orks on the ground sent a hail of bullets his way. The engineer ran for the Stompa. The psyker howled its rage and pointed its staff at him. Ghazan leapt from the opening. He landed in the middle of the rifle-wielding orks.

His mind reached into the ground itself. The bedrock answered his call. The stone rippled, heaving beneath the orks' feet, throwing them off balance. He turned, sweeping his staff in a wide circle. It was suffused with lightning, electrocuting the orks he struck.

Then lightning struck him in turn, rocking him back on his feet. Overloaded, his armour locked up for a moment. He dropped to one knee. The witch advanced on him, the electrical residue of the strike crackling around its eyes. The ork's snarl was also a smile, one of recognition. Ghazan realised that he had not been alone in the anticipation of this moment.

Already, the witch's energy was again approaching an explosive level. The greenskin was in a state of unceasing battle-wrath. Ghazan was still attuned to the voice of the moon's bones. He yanked at the earth. A slab of granite erupted from the floor. It knocked the witch over and Ghazan ran forwards, raising his staff to bring it down through the psyker's skull.

He almost didn't hear the whine. Almost didn't recognise what it meant. But as he raised the staff, he realised something was coming to life at his back. He threw himself to the left in a roll. Huge bullets shrieked through the air where his head had been the moment before. They blew rock chunks out of the cave wall. The whine of the gun revving up had become a huge, thudding drum roll.

The ork witch scrambled away in the other direction, back towards the prisoner. The battle had taken Ghazan too far from that position. The crew of the Stompa could not fire the main cannons without destroying everything in the

cavern, but the smaller guns could target Ghazan without fear of wrecking the teleporter or the machine of psychic torture that powered it. The witch was already standing once more. It was laughing, the sound a maniacal braying loud even over the battering of the gun. It brandished its staff. Green fire coruscated down its length.

The gun tracked Ghazan's roll into the other orks on the cavern floor. The ones it hit became explosions of blood and bone. The rest ran for cover, shooting at Ghazan all the while. He lunged to his feet, and was almost knocked off them again when another blast from the psyker's eyes struck the ground. He was under attack from too many directions. He couldn't focus on one enemy without being taken down by another.

He turned for aid from earth to air. Once again, he made himself wind. He shot towards the Stompa. The orks tried to correct their aim, but he was already at the base of the monster before they were able to take in which way he was moving. Shutters had opened in the lower section of the skirt: more guns being brought to bear on him. He leapt up. One-handed, he grabbed the lower edge of the nearest opening and hauled himself through into a cramped compartment of uneven metal walls, an iron blister pressing into the body of the Stompa. He hit the orks inside like a ceramite bullet. His speed was such that he didn't have to use a weapon. The impact shattered their bones and smashed the gun from its mount.

He stopped, feeling the moment of dizziness that came with the release of warp energy and the return to a normal pace. He rammed the weighted end of his staff through the skulls of the two orks in the compartment, silencing their snarls.

Outside, the witch and the rest of the orks were racing towards the shutter. The sight and their howls afforded him a rare form of grim pleasure. He had never before seen true outrage in an ork. It was there now. Even the greenskins had a conception of the holy, as debased and erroneous as it might be. They had their false gods, and the Stompa was in their form. He was trespassing on sacred ground.

He would do worse yet.

The psyker held back as the other orks ran pell-mell for his position. They were not firing yet at their own vehicle. Ghazan tossed a frag grenade out of the shutter. It bounced once, then exploded in mid-air into the faces of the charging orks. Two more died instantly, their torsos blown apart. The others started firing. Ghazan was under good cover. He used his bolt pistol to bring even more down with one skull shot after another.

The ork psyker retreated further, taking cover beyond the line of sight

provided by the shutter. It hid somewhere to the left. Ghazan did not oblige the witch by poking his head out to have it consumed by orkish lightning. He killed a few more of the underlings, then left the gunner's compartment.

He was in the workings surrounding the Stompa's right leg. The interior was a tangle of catwalks, ladders twisting around pistons the size of cathedral pillars, gears as big as Chimeras. The space was cramped, humid with steam, choking with smoke, dripping with grease, and the behemoth wasn't yet in motion. As immense as the leg was, it was short in proportion to the rest of the Stompa. The machine would not stride across the landscape with the majesty of a Titan. It would rock and stumble with the clumsy, unstoppable momentum of a walking rockslide.

The giant pistons rose at a diagonal. Midway up the skirt, they entered a great enclosure. Inside that, Ghazan thought, he would find the Stompa's motive power. It would be the heart of the beast. It would be where he must plant his tulwar.

Mixing with the clamour of grinding machinery was the howling of the orks. They were rushing out of artillery and control blisters, leaping down the ladders and stairs, coming to kill the invader. Ghazan welcomed their folly. He slammed his staff against the metal decking. 'Look upon me, xenos filth!' he shouted. 'I bring you the fury of Chogoris!'

He didn't expect them to understand his words. They would comprehend his actions well enough. He stood where he was, an unmoving, inviting target. In a few moments, he would be surrounded. His pursuers from the floor of the cavern were climbing in through the open shutter. The orks on all sides were frenzied, in a state beyond rage, and yet no shots were fired. Whether their hands were stayed by religious awe of the Stompa, or a base level of self-preservation, Ghazan neither knew nor cared.

He was barely aware of their threat. He was conscious of them only as vectors of approach, and as vermin about to be swept from the sight of the Emperor and the Khan. He was with the storm again. He was the storm. The unmaking of all order that was the immaterium flowed through his being, and he imposed a shape upon it. He took that which was nothing and turned it into the most primal form of existence: the purity of lightning. Electrical hell built up in his frame until it seemed his flesh and bones and blood had become nothing more than a negative phantom, the searing afterimage of a shape that would vanish as it released the thunder.

At the last moment before he would be consumed by the energy he had

summoned, he unleashed it. The lightning of the steppes struck the iron of the Stompa. The interior flashed with the catastrophic electrical discharge. The orks screamed. The bolt lifted them all, hurling them about the interior with enough force to smash their bones to dust against the metal of their creation. The superheated air turned all moisture into scalding steam. The stench of cooked flesh filled Ghazan's nostrils. The smoke of incineration roiled through the interior of the Stompa. The electrocuted were a great choir, their shriek a stuttering crescendo. And then the thunder came, a gigantic, terminal clap that snapped time in two. On one side of the cleavage: the screams of brutes, the gigantic white noise of energy's eruption. On the other: silence.

As he started moving again, Ghazan thought that it was a singular thing that there could be silence inside the Stompa. The din was, in truth, greater than ever. The engine's rumble was a tortured fibrillation. The gears ground against each other as if at war. But there was silence. The voices of the orks had been stilled. All of them. Ghazan had turned the greenskins into carbonised corpses. They lay in heaps and angles. Many had become part of the wounded machinery.

He strode through them, kicking them apart where they blocked his way. He attached his staff to a maglock on his backpack and climbed the ladders towards the engine compartment. He reached a catwalk that ran around the perimeter of the enclosure. He looked down. He saw flames from ruptured gas conduits. He saw sparks of ongoing secondary electrical damage. He saw no movement of anything living.

He walked around the metal shell. It was sealed. Pistons and cables ran in and out of it, but there was no entrance. Whatever the nature of the power source the orks had assembled, once it was in operation, they had no interest in gaining access to it. Perhaps it would be fatal to do so. Ghazan thought of the ruptured cores of plasma engines.

The stillness ended with the inarticulate shouts of the witch. Ghazan looked over the edge of the circular decking. The psyker had entered the Stompa through an opening on the other side of the skirt. It stood near the base of the left piston, gazing up at Ghazan. Its eyes glowed with energy. It seemed to be waiting.

'Well?' Ghazan called down. He trusted that the mockery in his tone crossed the barriers of language. 'How long do we intend to delay the moment? I know you want this fight. Show me how ridiculous your worst is.'

He would not go down. He would fight the witch here, where he might also kill the Stompa.

The witch responded in an unexpected fashion. It laughed. It was the sole ork alive in this space. The damage to the vehicle was already considerable. But it laughed as if Ghazan had fallen into a trap. It raced towards him, disdainful of ladders and even stairs, leaping from level to level as if being carried by its unholy energy.

Ghazan left his pistol maglocked to his thigh. Shells would not stop this creature. He pulled the staff off his back. He held it crosswise before him. As he braced himself, he wondered how the ork could be supercharged in this fashion. He had witnessed earlier how it drew energy from the collective war madness of its fellows. Here they were all dead. Yet the witch was stronger than ever.

The ork made one more jump, a huge one. It rose several metres straight up, higher than Ghazan. It had its staff raised above its head. As it landed, it brought the staff slashing down at the Stormseer. It shouted with such fury that it spat blood.

The two staffs clashed.

The ork's psychic assault was enormous. For the second time, lightning struck the interior of the Stompa. It was lightning in a form Ghazan had never encountered. It had none of the purity of the true storm. It was electricity born of aggression itself. It was the quintessence of ork being. If he had not been prepared, it would have incinerated him.

He tried to push back. But the energy he unleashed was barely enough to hold the ork at bay. The witch hit him harder, then harder yet. Its energy kept growing. The more it battered him, the stronger it became. The ork was untiring, while Ghazan felt the gradual unravelling that accompanied his own psychic exhaustion.

Where was the ork getting its strength?

With a still greater spike, the witch's attack blasted at his defences against the immaterium. Instead of shoring them up, he let them fall and his consciousness rode the explosion deep into the insanity of the warp.

If he lost his grip on his conception of self, his mind would be scattered on the waves of the immaterium, and his body turned to ash. The pull of disintegration grew stronger.

He held fast. He was Ghazan of the White Scars. He was a Stormseer.

Stormseer.

He saw the coherent powers that used the warp. He saw a line of force feeding the ork. He could not divine what it was, but its strength was gigantic. It was the source of the excess on this moon. The orks were too strong, too large, too

inventive, too powerful. Yet though the orks were fuelled by this current, it was not of them.

Perhaps, then, he could use it himself.

Temptation rushed him towards the current. He could plunge into it. He could turn it against the ork. He could make it his own. He could use its immensity and its anger to make a victory of every battle, to make battle itself a victory, to make war and more war, always and eternally war, and war, and war...

No.

Stormseer.

If he did this, he would betray the Emperor and the Khan. He would betray his own identity. With fading strength, he rejected an influx of unlimited power.

He made a choice.

He sought the pure storm, the full storm of Chogoris. He found it. *He saw it.* It was there in the warp, a potential needing a thought and a faith strong enough to shape it. And once he saw the storm, he wielded it.

He fought back. He countered the rage of a species with the storm of a world's soul. He struck with wind and lightning together. Into the cramped space of the Stompa's interior, he brought a hurricane. He stood firm as winds of hundreds of kilometres an hour slammed against the ork psyker. Cascades of lightning struck it. The witch stumbled. It absorbed the electrical energy into its own, but its attack began to lose coherence. Ghazan encompassed the hurricane with his will, honed it into concentrated form. He fused winds and lightning. His shout was the storm, and he sent all its kinetic and electrical rage coursing down the staff.

What hit the ork was annihilation. The beast's cry was cut short. It flew backwards into the metal shell. Its own attack lost all direction. The psychic energy was released. The explosion blinded Ghazan. A fragment of the time and space of the materium was destroyed.

Cataclysm. Creation and destruction were one. The possibility of the greatest storm, one that would sweep the cosmos before it, hovered at the edge of realisation. Then the world returned. Ghazan was lying at the base of a piston. He was wedged deeply into buckled metal. He had been hurled here like a cannon shell, though he had no memory of the violence. Above him, he saw the shell around the Stompa's engine fractured like an eggshell. Light from the heart of a violent green star shone through the cracks, outlining the corpse of the ork psyker.

The light pulsed harder. Something in the core of the Stompa was screaming to be born.

Ghazan pried himself free of the metal. His face was badly burned, and he could feel bones moving in his torso. There was a gun emplacement just above him. He climbed into it and out of the shutter.

The eldar prisoner was looking at him. Ghazan walked across the teleporter platform, past the strewn bodies of the orks. Behind him, the humming whine of the Stompa's approaching death continued to build.

Merentallas was a powerful psyker. That was clear, even with his strength shackled to the machine. He would have to be formidable, if he alone was enough to teleport something as big as the Stompa. His body had been greatly weakened by his imprisonment. It also seemed to be undergoing a transformation. The eldar had a quality of translucence, as if he were a liminal form between flesh and crystal. He spoke to Ghazan in Gothic, and his voice was crystalline too, a distant chime at the end of a long tunnel. 'Are they all dead?'

'They are.'

'Though the army is not defeated.'

'No. The main force is on the offensive.'

The eldar nodded, accepting a fact he had already known. 'Then do not free me. The orks must not triumph in this system.'

'They will not,' Ghazan assured him.

'You have no idea how vital their defeat is.' His smile was bitter. 'I envy you, human. I envy your wealth of choices.'

'I had none today.'

'You did. You found the path to your victory. I thought I had a choice. I do not. To stop the orks here, I must place my faith in the future choices of your species.'

'I don't understand.'

The psyker looked past Ghazan's shoulder at the Stompa. 'The end of that vehicle is almost upon us. If you want to save your fellows who are fighting the ork army, you should alert them.' He closed his eyes. His body contracted in on itself. Psychic energy crackled.

'What are you doing?' Ghazan demanded.

'What I must.'

The teleporter platform began to hum.

Ghazan opened the vox-channel to Temur.

The warning came to retreat behind the bastion walls. 'We are already there,' Meixner told Temur. There were still Battlewagons in the field, and the

thousands of orks that had arrived in a wave had swept the remains of the Iron Guard away. The Thunderhawk had succeeded in killing one more tank, but it was limping through the air, one engine smoking. The White Scars assault squad had delayed the orks long enough for what was left of the Iron Guard to retreat to the final defensive position. But that was all. The moves were finished.

The bastion was crumbling. Its walls had been hammered by cannon fire. They were plasteel and rockcrete rubble now. Cover behind which to shoot. Nothing more. Meixner had a panoramic view of the orks massing on the plain below the plateau, and the tanks moving towards its base. He imagined his command would exist for at most another hour.

There was a flash at the far end of the plain. Meixner's jaw dropped. The Stompa towered above the field. The orks cheered its arrival. A green wave prepared to rise up and swallow the bastion.

Meixner wondered why the Stompa wasn't moving.

Temur's warning kept coming over the vox: *Take cover. Take cover. Take cover.*

Meixner dropped behind his chunk of wall.

A green sun incinerated the plain with its birth cry.



EPILOGUE

Merentallas was dead. The energy that the teleporter had drained from him had reduced him to a husk. Ghazan stood for a moment before the body, honouring the sacrifice. Then he crossed the cavern. On the other side was a tunnel that had been concealed by the Stompa. Cables ran into it from the teleporter pad. After the Stompa had vanished, the machine had not shut down right away. It had dragged a few more seconds of use out of its captive. There had been a second energy burst in the tunnel.

The passage was a short one. At its end was a small cavern. In it was another platform, just large enough for an individual. There was also another set of controls. Ghazan stared at the device, a sick certainty in his gut. He was still there when the brotherhood arrived.

Temur joined him. ‘I have heard from the *Khajog’s Stand*. The orks have been exterminated.’

Ghazan nodded. ‘Good.’

‘You seem troubled.’

Ghazan gestured at the teleporter. ‘I believe the ork engineer has escaped. We have only half a victory.’

‘We will send a warning to the Raven Guard planetside,’ said Temur. He hesitated. ‘Or is your fate tied to that ork, too?’

‘It isn’t,’ Ghazan said. The tugging of destiny that had driven him to this system had ceased. He felt a sense of release, a pause between the commands of his visions.

‘You were right,’ Temur said. ‘I should not have doubted your judgement.’

Ghazan laughed softly. 'The line between judgement and compulsion is a thin one.'

But there is one, he thought. He remembered the moment when he had glimpsed the force that was feeding the ork witch. He had turned away from making that power his own.

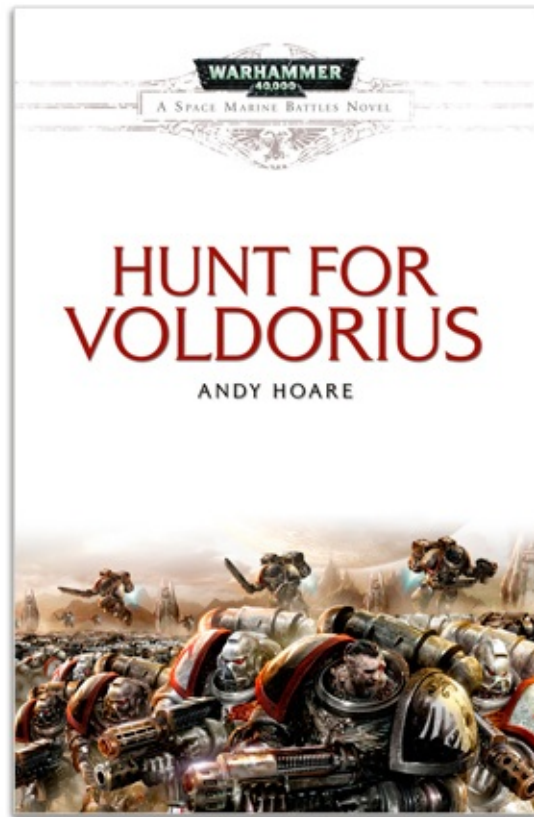
He saw his path ahead with a new clarity.

He had chosen his compulsion, and the choice had been real.

He had chosen the storm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID ANNANDALE is the author of the digital short story 'Eclipse of Hope' and the novellas *Yarrick: Chains of Golgotha* and *Mephiston: Lord of Death* for Black Library. By day, he dons an academic disguise and lectures at a Canadian university on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games. He lives with his wife and family and a daemon in the shape of a cat, and is working on several new projects set in the grim darkness of the far future.



Captain Kor'sarro Khan of the White Scars is petitioned by his Chapter Master to hunt down and destroy the daemon prince Voldorius of the Alpha Legion.

BUY NOW



READ IT FIRST

EXCLUSIVE PRODUCTS | EARLY RELEASES | FREE DELIVERY

blacklibrary.com

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

**Published in 2013 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

© Games Workshop Limited, 2013. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration by Clint Langley

Black Library, the Black Library logo, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy logo, The Horus Heresy eye device, Space Marine Battles, the Space Marine Battles logo, Warhammer 40,000, the Warhammer 40,000 logo, Games Workshop, the Games Workshop logo and all associated brands, names, characters, illustrations and images from the Warhammer 40,000 universe are either ®, ™ and/or © Games Workshop Ltd 2000-2013, variably registered in the UK and other countries around the world.

All rights reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-85787-501-3

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise except as expressly permitted under license from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at

blacklibrary.com

**Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer
and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at**

www.games-workshop.com

eBook license

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“Black Library”); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website (“You/you/Your/your”)

(jointly, “the parties”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book (“e-book”) from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal

person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in 'seeding' or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 You attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.