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SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

SHADOW CAPTAIN

DAVID ANNANDALE



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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELLA

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PROLOGUE

The orks raced over their dead. They trampled the fallen, crushed bodies to pulp beneath treads and wheels, and left a wake of their own blood with every metre of their advance. Their battle joy raged. It shook the air itself.

The aggression wave travelled ahead of the horde. It was a continuous battering. There was no adapting to it. The furious revel kept growing. The wave built on itself, a monstrous, mountainous psychic shock that never crested and never troughed, yet crashed and crashed and crashed against the eldar. The orks rode the crest of the wave, howling with the glee of absolute destruction. They came to smash and sever, shoot and burn. They came for a violence so pure, victory was incidental.

That would not make it any less real. Or catastrophic.

Though they died by the hundreds, the orks didn't care. They were ecstatic. The deaths didn't matter. And they were closing in on the city. Though they could not know what its capture truly meant, that didn't matter either.

The orks raced over their dead, and they raced towards victory.

Perched in the high branches of a conifer at the edge of a narrow forest, Alathannas pulled the trigger of his long rifle with a steady rhythm. Every second, he dropped another ork, taking his prey out with a concentrated energy bolt between the eyes. He chose the big targets. The larger the ork, the more authority it wielded. His hope: kill enough leaders to create confusion in the ranks and slow down the advance.

The reality: there were so many big orks. Too many.

On the plain before him, the warriors of Saim-Hann fought to stem the green

tide. Jetbikes streaked the length of the front lines, their shuriken catapults shredding the orks into strips. They were supported by a squadron of Vypers, whose rear-mounted bright lances struck at the ork battlewagons. The harvest of death was immense. The eldar irrigated the plain with ork blood. And the brutes came on. The war-fire in their veins burned ever higher. Nothing would turn them back. Only total annihilation would stop them.

It would also be the one thing that would end the Saim-Hann struggle. Alathannas would snipe his prey until he was ground beneath the wheels of the ork tanks. And that, he knew, was his likely end. The orks had the numbers for a war of extermination. The eldar did not.

Alathannas fought the temptation to look behind. He knew what there was to see. Nothing would have changed. If it had, if the thing he both hoped and feared was transpiring, he would hear the change. If he turned his head, he would miss an opportunity for at least one more precious kill. In exchange, all he would see would be the reminder of how little space and how little time the Saim-Hann had left.

The forest was barely a hundred metres wide. It ran north and south a few thousand metres in either direction from the ranger's position, marking the end of the plain. The land sloped downwards through the trees. Beyond the forest was an even narrower strip of barren, rocky ground, ending at a deep gorge. The river at the bottom was a thin ribbon. The bridge that spanned the gorge was the only access to the western side of the city.

The city whose beauty had died millennia before. The city that was now a brutal cluster of human spires. The city that had become an aesthetic scab on the surface of the planet.

The city that the orks must not take.

Alathannas aimed and fired, aimed and fired. Every kill was a handful of water taken from the ocean. Every shot was a denial of the futility of what he was doing. Every pull of the trigger was an act of defiance. He was fighting as hard against his own despair as he was against the orks.

Despair. The state had the toxic allure of simple logic. In the adjacent system, the orks and tyranids clashed, destroying each other by the millions, and thus strengthening each other. The orks were spilling out of their empire, and now they had come to this system. Perhaps their initial incursion had been the result of luck. The improbable played a dismayingly crucial role in the successes of the orks.

The first orks into the system were a terrible sign. The first on the planet were

catastrophic. Alathannas was sure that the orks did not understand how important the world was to them. Their understanding, though, was irrelevant. They wanted the world, and so they would take it, and given enough time, in the end, they would find the secret.

In the end. Yes, that would be the end. For uncountable systems. Alathannas could bring himself to face the material destruction that would follow. He refused to imagine the spiritual damage that would strike the eldar.

The one comfort that might come from failure on this day would be not living to see its consequences. But such comfort was cowardice. It was not on the path down which Alathannas was travelling.

‘I am here,’ he whispered. He was here for his kin. He had voyaged far from the craftworld. It had been so long since he had seen it that his memories of home were growing distant to him, curiosities without pain, and he knew that his emotional distance did not inspire trust. He could wish that his actions would prove his loyalty, though he had his doubts. He knew how important this mission was, and what its failure would mean. He felt the dread of those consequences so acutely that he nurtured a forbidden hope. Though he risked treason even to think of this event, he would welcome it.

He could see how the battle was going. The orks were pushing the eldar back. In another few minutes, the Saim-Hann would be forced to fight in the woods. The wave of orks might break into foam in the trees, but the skimmers would be hampered, too. The horde’s advance would continue. The orks would push the eldar to the bridge. This was inevitable. It was as true as if it had already happened.

Now he felt a greater fatalism with each pull of the trigger. It might even be the despair after all. A battlewagon took out a Vyper with its big gun, brutish excess of explosive triumphing over the perfected art of war. The skimmer’s elegant flight turned into a rolling fireball, its pilot and gunner vanishing into the wraithbone pyre. The other Vypers slashed through the troops and concentrated their lances at the tank, bringing the energy to bear on a single point of the lower rear armour. They ruptured the fuel tank, ignited it, and rewarded fire with fire.

But the green tide was endless. The front lines of the orks were ragged, but they were also amorphous, spreading like liquid across the plain, defying the eldar attempts to hold them back. The skimmers were no longer in front of the ork army. They were in its midst. There were more tanks coming, and ahead of them were the raving mechanical monsters that the orks created by wiring their kin into armoured cylinders. Piston legs smashed into the ground with all the

pained rage of the pilots. Articulated metal arms with pincers or snarling blades for hands waved with hunger. The guns on either side of the cylinders unleashed a perpetual stream of projectiles whose size and velocity rendered their primitive nature irrelevant.

The walkers were mad. And they were lethal. Even as the Vypers killed the battlewagon, three of the walkers lurched forwards with a sudden unity and surrounded a jetbike. The density of the orks was slowing the skimmers down, hampering their movement. The jetbike pilot, cut off from his squadron, tried to evade the orks. He couldn't. Three pairs of arms fell on his ride. He was already dead before three of his comrades managed a return pass to come to his aid. They shot the arms off one of the walkers, but the central mass of the beast survived their attack. The cluster of cylinders turned as one. They met the jetbikes head-on. Their fire was unavoidable, devastating. Two of the skimmers, their pilots dead, slammed into the walkers. The conflagration spread wide, taking out the third jetbike and every ork within a dozen metres.

Six eldar had died in the last few seconds compared to scores of orks.

The advantage was to the orks.

From a great distance, Alathannas realised he was whispering curses. He mouthed the oaths without emotion. He killed the orks without hope. Another few seconds, and he would have to retreat. The tide was lapping at the edge of the forest.

Then, over the primal howl of the orks and the sear of energy bolts, he heard it. The event was beginning. His forbidden wish was coming to pass. Still he exercised discipline, and did not look towards the city until the orks were only moments away. He dropped down from his tree and ran deeper into the woods. Beneath his cameleoline cloak, he was almost invisible. Once their numbers were great enough, though, the orks wouldn't have to see him to crush him beneath their onslaught.

Alathannas reached the edge of the woods. He had a clear view across the gorge to the city, and of the territory to the south and west, on the other side of the river, where the elevation dropped and the river once more meandered through a plain. He saw the streaks in the sky. He gave himself a few seconds to observe the descent of tears of metal. The humans were coming. They were the one hope left against the orks.

The ranger's despair retreated. His dread, however, did not.

It grew worse.



CHAPTER ONE

The command tent stood in the centre of the Raven Guard base. Its walls flapped sluggishly in the wind that blew over the wide plain. Inside, surrounded by his sergeants, Reszasz Krevaan leaned over the taticarium table, eyeing the hololithic map of the region.

‘They’re flanking, Shadow Captain,’ Sergeant Behrasi said.

Krevaan traced a route on the map leading down from the flash point at the bridge. ‘Sweeping around to the south?’ he asked.

‘Yes, as expected.’

‘Any signs that they care about our presence?’ It was most likely that the orks had seen the drop pods come down, though he knew, given their single-minded focus on the eldar, that it was possible they were unaware of the Raven Guard’s presence. But he could not risk such an assumption. Krevaan did not believe in the ignorant act. Information was the most potent weapon he knew. The warrior in the dark required a battle-barge. The one with full knowledge of the enemy needed only a blade.

‘The greenskins appear to be focused on the eldar,’ Behrasi told him. ‘Not one of them has shown any interest in this location.’

‘Good. Thank you, brother-sergeant.’ He thought for a moment while the rest of his sergeants waited. If the orks wanted a fight, they would find the Raven Guard Eighth Company ready. The drop pods had landed about a kilometre south of the city of Reclamation, and Krevaan had ordered the base established here. The location was nondescript. It was not a defensible position, a fact that held exactly no importance for Krevaan. The Raven Guard were on the attack on

Lepidus Prime. If they wound up on the defence, then they had already failed their mission. The location was a useful one for its openness. Enemies would be visible from a great distance.

‘Have you reached my fellow captains?’ Krevaan asked Akrallas, who was operating the vox.

‘I have Captain Mulcebar. No luck with Temur Khan.’

‘Anything at all from the moon?’

‘Fragmentary. Some brief moments from the Mordian Iron Guard.’

‘Which leads me to guess you are hearing nothing good.’

‘It seems the orks have a great deal of heavy armour on the moon as well.’

‘The White Scars must be delighted,’ Krevaan muttered. He indulged in a moment of irony at the expense of the sons of Chogoris, but only a moment. Though the Raven Guard had no love for the White Scars, the difficulties that Temur was facing had implications for them all. The Imperial forces had expected the orks to be formidable, but based on how long they were known to have been in the Lepidus system, it didn’t seem possible for them to have ramped up tank production to such a degree. Yet they had. That was the reality of the situation. Krevaan accepted that. There was information that was missing. That bothered him more.

He took the handset from Akrallas. He was connected to Mulcebar, captain of the Salamanders Fifth Company, on the strike cruiser *Verdict of the Anvil*. ‘Has there been any change?’ he asked Mulcebar.

‘None. All quiet.’

‘That won’t last. We are just getting started.’ He was aware that his optimism sounded forced. The plan was ambitious. The Overfiend ork had defiled an Imperial system. The White Scars, the Raven Guard and the Salamanders would do more than crush the invading force: they would use the Overfiend’s own temerity against the warlord. For whatever reason, the Overfiend had committed massive resources to conquering Lepidus. If the beast wanted the system badly enough, the thinking went, important losses might draw it out of Octavius to take personal charge of the invasion. Greenskin psychology was not sophisticated. A good fight, frustrated desire and a point of pride would be enough to call the monster forth from the safety of its stronghold.

So the White Scars would destroy the heavy armour manufactorum on the moon of Lepidus Prime. The Raven Guard would put an end to the threat on the planet, and so preserve the Imperial colony. At the edge of the system, the Salamanders would wait in the *Verdict of the Anvil* for the Overfiend to show

itself.

Yes, an ambitious plan. Sound as far as it went. Krevaan accepted the merits of its conception. He was troubled by its lacunae. *For whatever reason*. Orks were creatures of aggression and impulse. Krevaan had rarely known them to do anything for a reason. But 'rarely' wasn't 'never'. When there was discernible reason behind ork actions, that was when they were at their most profoundly dangerous, as Armageddon had learned to its cost. The orks had not hit Lepidus as a raiding force. This was a campaign. The manufactorum was proof of that. And now silence from Temur and the White Scars. Signs that something was calling very forcefully to the orks.

'If we're just getting started,' Mulcebar said, 'I wish our start were more assured. We cannot raise Temur on the vox.'

'Nor can we.'

'And your situation?'

'Interesting.'

'When a Raven Guard tells me something is interesting,' said Mulcebar, 'I brace myself for the worst.'

'There is an eldar force combating the orks.'

'Oh. That *is* interesting.'

'Puzzling, too.' Unknowns on the moon. Unknowns on Lepidus Prime. Too many. Mulcebar was right to be wary. 'To all appearances, their primary objective is to prevent the orks from taking Reclamation.'

'Why would the eldar concern themselves with the fate of one of our cities?'

'Exactly.'

The Salamander was silent for a moment, taking in the full contours of the mystery. Then he said, 'What are your plans?'

'The orks are more numerous and better equipped than the Navy's reports to us had suggested. The eldar might be useful. The orks won't see us coming.'

Mulcebar chuckled. 'Does any foe see the Raven Guard coming?'

'Not if I can help it,' Krevaan admitted. 'Good hunting, brother.'

'And to you.'

Krevaan turned back to his officers. 'Brother-Sergeant Caeligus, take your squad to the bridge.' The span over the gorge was the clear focus of the struggle between the two xenos races. He would show eldar and greenskins alike that control of the gateway to Reclamation belonged to neither. 'Prepare it for demolition. Do not destroy it until you receive my command. Sergeant Behrasi, how large is the ork flanking movement?'

‘It is a considerable one. No heavy vehicles, but a number of smaller ones. They’re putting a premium on speed.’

‘Your estimation?’

‘If they manage to come up behind the eldar, that war is finished.’

‘Then we shall prolong it.’

Caeligus and his men approached the bridge through the city. They had the streets to themselves. The orks were still a few kilometres distant, but the roar of their invasion had already arrived. An endless howl filled the air and bounced off the façades. The echoes of gunfire and cannon shells were a constant thunder. The sound was a terrible promise of destruction to come.

The citizens of Reclamation were off the streets. They hid behind their walls. Caeligus understood the mortals’ impulse to seek refuge. He wondered, though, whether *they* understood how pointless the attempt was. If the orks entered the city, there would be no defence, no shelter. No mercy.

The human occupation of Lepidus Prime was a relatively recent one. Reclamation had been established only in the last century. The planet was verdant, fertile, temperate, and free of xenos taint, but the system’s proximity to Octavius had made it an uncertain proposition. When it had appeared, to the more optimistic members of the Adeptus Administratum, that the Overfiend’s war with the tyranids would keep both xenos horrors occupied with each other indefinitely, permission had been granted for colonisation. The founders of Reclamation were the descendants of the noble families of Orrok, the survivors who had fled the ork takeover of Octavius hundreds of years before.

The spread of the colony had been slow. Reclamation remained the only major population centre. There were a few small clusters of homes on farmland some distance to the east, but most of those had been abandoned as the ork invasion had dawned. The humans had withdrawn into their city. Caeligus had heard a few of the exchanges that his captain had had with the planetary governor, Aloysius Kesmir. The man’s hololith revealed him as a thin creature, whose bones seemed slightly too long for his skin. He spoke with a mixture of fear and stubbornness. He was terrified of the orks, but determined to stand his ground.

Or at least remain on it, while someone else actually fought the war. Caeligus had the impression that the governor was a good exemplar of the populace. He was unimpressed, but the possible unworthiness of the people of Lepidus was of no concern to the Raven Guard. They had not come to defend a colony. They had come to exterminate an enemy.

As he passed through the city, though, he looked at it with interest. Its architecture was not what he had expected in something so new. He saw plenty of prefab rockcrete, but the city was just old enough that the colony's initial homogeneity had eroded. Modifications and additions were breaking down the uniformity, differentiating one hab zone from another, creating a sense of local character.

None of this was surprising. What did surprise Caeligus was that there were frequent signs of much greater age. Some of the variations in construction appeared original. There were foundations, just visible above ground, that were not rockcrete. They were something else, a material that appeared to be almost organic. Caeligus had the impression of something that had been grown. He saw one building after another that had clearly been built atop a pre-existing structure. Yet he knew that, prior to the colonisation, Lepidus Prime had been uninhabited for as long as it had appeared in Imperial records.

When the squad reached the bridge, he saw that it, too, was an anomaly. The surface of its span was not of Imperial construction. There were three arches across its width: one at each end, and one in the middle. The iconography chiselled into their surface was Imperial in subject, but the images looked like emendations. Caeligus suspected they had been added to wipe the memory of something blasphemous from the face of the marble.

He walked to the foot of the bridge. On the other side of the gorge, the eldar were fighting hard. Most of them were mounted on skimmers the same deep crimson as their armour. Their movements through the trees were as sinuous as their strikes were rapid. They waged war with a quicksilver, alien elegance. They would be, Caeligus could tell, dangerous opponents.

But what Krevaan had heard was true. Their position was untenable. They should retreat much further. Given the size of their force compared to the overwhelming numbers of orks, the eldar were using the wrong tactics. The orks were primarily infantry, and Caeligus could hear tanks and blasphemous Dreadnought imitations crashing their way through the forest. The eldar should be using their greater mobility and speed to full advantage. They should already have crossed the bridge, pulling back to return in harrying attacks against the ork flanks. Instead, they were holding their ground. They weren't just risking their own annihilation; they were ensuring it.

The only possible reason for not retreating was an attempt to defend the city. The eldar were mysterious, unknowable, and untrustworthy. But they were not fools. Yet a suicidal defence of a human city was an action so beyond fathoming

that Caeligus wondered if the entire race was mad.

‘What do they think they’re doing?’ Havran asked.

Caeligus shook his head. ‘If they think they’re doing anything other than offering themselves up to a slow slaughter, they’re mistaken. But their insanity is not our concern. Let’s get that bridge ready to fall.’

Setting the melta bombs took a matter of minutes. The eldar were dying, but managing to hold the orks at bay. Caeligus knew them to be skilled warriors. He was still impressed. And more and more puzzled. They were fighting with last-stand desperation. Caeligus could think of few human forces that would give up so much for a city whose strategic value, in the final analysis, was nil. He believed in the defence of Reclamation, certainly. But the primary mission was the extermination of the orks. Perhaps the Salamanders would feel differently.

He spoke into his vox-bead. ‘The bridge is ready, Shadow Captain.’

‘The orks are still on the other side?’

‘Both races are. We can cut off access to the west side of Reclamation at a moment’s notice.’

‘Good. Stand ready, but do nothing.’

Vaanis was holding a detonator. He was watching Caeligus for the signal. The sergeant shook his head. ‘Shadow Captain,’ he said, ‘at this moment, neither the orks nor the eldar are approaching the city. We can finish our job here and join your assault.’

‘Remain at your current position,’ Krevaan said. ‘Do *not* destroy the bridge without my express order. Keep me informed of any changes in the situation. Am I clear?’

‘You are, Shadow Captain.’

Krevaan signed off. Caeligus said to the squad, ‘We wait.’

‘For what?’ Havran asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Caeligus admitted. He was frustrated by Krevaan’s decision. He was not, however, embarrassed to reveal that he did not understand the reasons behind it. The captain treated information with the care due any great weapon. He was not deceptive with his battle-brothers. Caeligus did not think Krevaan had ever kept secrets that the company should have known about. But he guarded his thoughts jealously. Caeligus had never been able to read his face.

He tried. He had tried earlier, during the briefing. Krevaan’s expressions were as opaque as if he were wearing his helmet. Caeligus knew the captain would not delay the demolition of the bridge without good motivation. He also knew that he would not be privy to those motives until Krevaan chose to reveal them. If

ever.

Caeligus accepted all of this, but it still frustrated him.

He walked to the edge of the bridge. He watched the war on the other side. He watched skill struggle with ferocity. He saw the inevitable draw closer. He saw extraordinary ability ground down a bit at a time, pushed closer and closer to oblivion. *Behrasi should be here*, he thought.

The other sergeant had a better appreciation for the finer aspects of tragedy.

A few thousand metres to the south of the bridge, Behrasi was a shadow among shadows. He was positioned at the edge of the tree line, before the narrow strip of land that ran between the forest and the gorge. The orks' flanking advance had one quality that Behrasi appreciated: it was direct. They were taking the most obvious route to trap the eldar in a vice: loop around the edge of the forest and back up again. They were charging at full speed, a mass of fury operating more on instinct than strategy. That made them easy to anticipate. Their route forward was obvious.

'There is a certain luxury in a foe who obediently enters the ambush,' Krevaan said.

Behrasi would have sworn the Shadow Captain hadn't been at his side a moment before. His years of service in Eighth Company had taught him to expect Krevaan's sudden appearances, even if he was never able to see his commander approach. Krevaan inhabited the shadows like no other warrior in Behrasi's experience. He carried the night within him. It was present, a cloak waiting to cover him, even in broad daylight. The shadows began in Krevaan's eyes. They lived there and emerged from there, as if the captain could blind whatever met his gaze.

Sometimes, when they felt particularly in the dark about the reasons behind Krevaan's decisions, and they attempted a futile parsing, Behrasi and Caeligus would wind up at the point of their captain's physical obscurity. Caeligus maintained that Krevaan was hard to read. Behrasi disagreed. He thought Krevaan was hard to *see*.

At a superficial level, Krevaan's features were not invisible. He had the same bleached pigmentation of all the Raven Guard. His features were sharp, the hollows of his cheeks and eye sockets so deep that his flesh seemed to be being absorbed by his skull. The effect was enhanced by his pronounced brow and cheekbones. His eyes were almost hidden. They were narrow, dark, glittering judgement. They saw everything, and revealed nothing.

And always, the shadows. Was it possible that his features themselves cast them? Was his face his own mask? The idea had occurred to Behrasi more than once. At other times, he assumed that he was seeing Krevaan's supreme skill at work. He had mastered wraith-slipping to the point that it was his natural state of being. To pass unseen and unheard until the enemy's final moment had gone beyond instinct with Krevaan. It was no different from breathing, or from the beat of his hearts. Every action, at every moment, evaded the gaze of the observer. Behrasi took some pride in his own wraith-slipping, but even when Krevaan was standing directly before him, his impression of the captain was uncertain. Krevaan existed in the gaps between perception. It seemed to Behrasi that it was an act of conscious choice for Krevaan to step out of the shadows – a choice he rarely made. But this was not sorcery. It was a skill as material as the wielding of lightning claws.

Now Krevaan stood beside him, surveying the ambush preparations. They could hear the orks coming closer; perhaps still as much as a thousand metres away. The trap was set about a quarter of the way up the east side of the forest. The land was still high here, the gorge still deep. To the north, the eldar and the rest of the ork army were setting the woods on fire with their struggle.

'The greenskins do not have too many routes open to them,' Behrasi said.

'Oh?' Krevaan gestured to the trees behind them. 'Are those trees an impenetrable barrier?'

'For this style of attack...'

'Precisely. These orks are wed to speed. Yet our arrival was clear. They have chosen to ignore us because we complicate the narrative of their battle.'

Behrasi smiled. 'I don't often think of the orks as complicated.'

'Few do. Which is why the struggle for Armageddon was so desperate. The orks are fully capable of shadow raids. There are many dead warriors who have learned that lesson too late. Our good fortune is that these orks have not thought of that.'

'They're running with their first impulse.'

'Yes.'

The answer was so noncommittal that Behrasi asked, 'You think they aren't, Shadow Captain?'

'No, I think they are. But there are elements here that we do not understand.'

That was true. Behrasi gestured towards the battle in the north. 'I don't understand *that*.'

'We are missing information,' Krevaan said. 'Our knowledge is incomplete,

and that leads to mistakes.’ After a moment’s pause, he added, ‘As the orks are about to learn.’

If Behrasi had spoken those words, he would have smiled. He imagined that Krevaan did, though he could not tell. It was night, they were in the shadows of the trees, and the captain was the ghost of a shape. Then, even as Behrasi looked, Krevaan was gone.

Behrasi turned his attention to other shadows around him. They were the members of his squad. Each Raven Guard was in position, a motionless absence ready to uncoil and become a streak of lethal dark. Two of the absences were huge: the Dreadnoughts Karom and Raust. Four squads of Eighth Company were waiting at the edge of a long strip of land. They were only on one side, under cover of the woods. Krevaan had ordered this distribution of the forces. It doubled the extent of the kill zone. There would be no enfilading fire.

‘We won’t need it,’ Krevaan had said. He had picked a particularly narrow strip of land. There were only about ten metres between the forest’s edge and the drop into the gorge.

The orks were close now. A huge snarl fell on the land. It came from engines, and it came from throats, and it was the sound of rampage. To the south, where the land dipped towards the plain, the orks appeared. At the head of the charge were warbikes. They fouled the air with exhaust, the noxious clouds darkening the night still further. They were followed by four-wheeled vehicles, each with a gunner on the rear turret. Behind them, after a gap, came the infantry.

Behrasi was startled by how small the gap was between the vehicles and the foot soldiers. The terrain was rougher here, and the route narrow, forcing even the most reckless ork riders to slow down. Even so, the other orks were *fast*. They were keeping pace with their mounted kin. They had travelled many kilometres since splitting off from the main force, and been moving at a full run the entire way. As the horde stormed past him, Behrasi watched the greenskins closely. There was no sign of exhaustion. They ran as if they were fresh. They were sprinting, and they were speeding up.

Krevaan had said it: *Our knowledge is incomplete*. The unanswered questions were about more than the eldar presence and their ferocious defence of Reclamation. There was something unusual about the orks. They were faster and more exultant than Behrasi was used to seeing, even in a race defined by its gigantic appetite for war. They were also bigger. The entire mob, even its most mundane members, was larger than the norm.

Don’t underestimate them, Behrasi thought.

His next thought was, *Kill them.*

The lead bikes ran over pressure sensors, triggering cluster mines. Swarms of bomblets flew upwards and exploded. The first bikes caught the brunt of the blasts. They disintegrated in the fireballs of their fuel tanks.

The orks coming behind overcorrected. One of them turned a hard right, and sailed into the air over the gorge. The ork screamed for the entire length of the plunge. Two more bikes went down, sliding and tumbling into the destruction of the others. Their explosions washed over the next. The orks' momentum drove them into a growing wreck. Now the sounds of metal and flesh were shrieks instead of roars. More mines ripped out the bottom of one of the buggies. It veered sideways and flipped over, crushing driver and gunner.

The way forward was blocked by a tangle of twisted vehicles and burning flesh. The orks at the front tried to stop, but the others, further back, could not see what was happening. They heard the sounds of war, saw flames and smoke, and pushed forward even harder. The carnage escalated. And when at last the horde began to react, to pull back from throwing itself on its own pyre, Krevaan's whisper came over the vox: 'Now.'

Along almost the entire length of the ork advance, the Raven Guard struck. They began with frag grenades. The blasts rippled over hundreds of metres. The jostling orks were so crowded together that their bodies muffled the explosions. Limbs and organs rose into the air, bubbles in a tar pit. The horde reacted with rage and confusion. The orks were being hit everywhere, and they could not see their enemy. Some of the greenskins blamed each other. They caused eddies of riot as they fought and died.

'Fire,' said Krevaan.

The night ripped the orks to pieces. Concentrated bolter fire smashed into them. The mass-reactive shells did more than slaughter. Their impact was such that the ork line was pushed back, closer to the drop. The more heedless ran, so intent on finding their enemies that they did not look at the ground beneath their feet. They pitched themselves into the void.

The casualties were great. The surprise was total. It was also brief. The orks recovered quickly. They were not concerned with the deaths of their brothers, as long as they were still in the fight. They began to return fire. Their weapons were crude. The guns were ridiculous in comparison to the bolters. But the orks still held the numerical advantage, and the barrage of bullets and flame took a toll. Behrasi heard the vox-chatter of damage reports begin. There was a sharp cry as one of his battle-brothers in another squad was brought down.

‘Take them,’ Krevaan said.

After one more burst of fire, the Raven Guard charged. Darkness snapped out from the trees at the orks. The Space Marines moved as one, maglocking their bolter rifles to their thighs and striking with lightning claws. A wall of ceramite bladed with adamantium turned the ork lines into meat. The Dreadnoughts closed too, unstoppable as glaciers. The horde staggered again.

‘Space,’ Krevaan had said, ‘will be the other side of our attack.’

It was. There was nowhere for the orks to take another step back, but they did, and they fell by the scores. The war music changed again. The yells of rage were interrupted by the wet, staccato thuds of bodies hitting the rocks far below.

‘Forward!’ Behrasi called. ‘Push them forward!’ He slashed and stabbed with short, quick gestures. He opened throats and punctured eyes. He used the full weight of his power armour, taking no step without being grounded. He was a mass that would not retreat. Eighth Company advanced into the orks at a slow, measured pace while their claws struck with eyeblink speed.

The orks fell beneath Behrasi’s tread. And they fell from the cliff. Krevaan’s trap was wiping them from the face of Lepidus. Still, they fought. They fought well. The more heavily armoured orks were with the main force, destroying the eldar. These were the lighter infantry. They were here because they could move faster. They were no match for Adeptus Astartes. But Behrasi’s initial impression was correct. They were bigger, more ferocious. They struggled against him with an incandescent energy. Each greenskin was war given muscle, flesh and bone. They chopped at him with cleavers and clubs, shot him point-blank with shotguns that more than once blew up in the wielder’s hands. His armour turned away the blades and projectiles. The xenos filth could do little against him. Their battle was futile, their end preordained. Yet they attacked as if the Raven Guard were the ones on the defensive. They roared with a savage joy. They fought as if their victory was at hand until the actual second of their demise.

The Raven Guard finished their advance. Behrasi stopped one stride away from the drop. The mop-up was brief. He and his battle-brothers gutted the last few orks and tossed them over the edge. It was in the final minutes of the operation, when the mass of orks was reduced to individuals, that he found himself most troubled.

The orks were laughing at him.

Their numbers were down to a tiny handful, the massacre clear, and the orks showed no frustration or any other sign of acknowledging their defeat. But they

laughed.

Behrasi silenced one more greenskin, and there were none left to fight. He looked up and down the line. The battle was over. The flanking force was gone. Apothecary Madaar was dealing with the wounded. There were only two battle-brothers who had fallen, and whose progenoid glands he had to recover. The ambush had been a near-perfect success.

The laughter of the orks rang in Behrasi's ears. He tasted something bitter. Its flavour was uncannily like that of defeat.

Krevaan emerged from the smoke that surrounded the burning vehicles. 'Your evaluation, brother-sergeant?' he asked.

'Their confidence in the face of their extermination...'

'The laughter was troubling, wasn't it?'

'What is it that they know?'

Krevaan shook his head. 'There was nothing sly or cunning in that laughter. I believe it emerged from a fact of their being.' He looked back towards the struggle near the bridge. 'The question is not about what they know, but what we don't. We are too much in the dark.'

On the vox's company channel, Caeligus spoke. 'The eldar are moving towards the bridge.'

Krevaan thought for a moment before answering. The flames cast deeper shadows over his face. 'Let them cross,' he said. 'Help them cross. Then blow the bridge.'

Behrasi blinked in surprise. Caeligus said, 'Shadow Captain?'

'We will be with you before long.'

After Caeligus signed off, Behrasi said nothing. Krevaan heard him all the same. 'You have a question for me, brother-sergeant?'

'Why are we helping the eldar? Why not force the two races to finish their war? The orks would be weakened, and that is useful.'

'Because of what we were saying a moment ago. I wish to know what is happening on this planet.' Then he smiled. That was never a simple expression of pleasure with Krevaan. It was more like the arming of a weapon. 'Besides,' he said, 'I believe the eldar can be more usefully deployed.'



CHAPTER TWO

Looking across the bridge, Havran said, ‘They won’t make it.’

Caeligus thought he might be right. The fight in the woods, followed by a huge surge from the orks, had broken the coherence of the eldar lines. The vehicles had little room to manoeuvre. The orks were immobilising them and bringing them down with the force of a mob as much as they were with the fire from their tanks and their walking cans. A number of the eldar were on foot now, and even more vulnerable. Almost all of them were engaged in individual battles. They were trying to support one another, but the disorder brought by the orks was only growing worse. The eldar were drowning in the green tide. They had waited too long to retreat.

Help them cross. Krevaan’s order. It would take more than covering fire to do that now. Caeligus would have to engage the orks with his squad directly. To take the field in direct support of a xenos race revolted him. The Shadow Captain had his reasons. He always did. But not knowing what they were grated. Caeligus believed in the power of information too. He believed in being able to judge the value of decisions. And of orders.

He did not, however, believe in disobeying orders. ‘The eldar seem bent on losing,’ he said to Havran. ‘That would not be to our advantage.’ *Or so I gather,* he thought. ‘Brothers,’ he called to the squad, ‘the orks have been ignoring us. That is an insult. I will not tolerate it. Will you?’

They answered by joining him in formation at the bridge. ‘They do not look to the skies,’ Vaanis said.

‘They should,’ Caeligus snarled.

The jump packs of the assault squad flared. The ten Space Marines rose over the gorge. At the apex of their arc, Caeligus's discontent evaporated. The reasons for the action became insignificant. He was airborne. His talons were extended. He was a raptor streaking down on prey.

'Victorus aut mortis!' he yelled in the same moment as the rest of the squad. The war cry froze the orks with surprise. They looked up, confused. Caeligus relished the stupid look on the greenskin's face below him in the second before he hit the ground, driving his lightning talons all the way through the ork's skull.

Squad Caeligus struck in a wedge formation. Vaanis and Harvan anchored the two ends, on either side of the bridge access. The sergeant was at the head. They cut into the ork horde. The greenskins within the angle suddenly found themselves isolated from their brothers. Their confusion and rage did not last long. The Raven Guard killed them within seconds. Even as the rest of the mob began to react, the squad took to the skies again.

The orks started firing upwards. They were disorganised. Their attention was torn between the eldar on the ground and the airborne Space Marines. The eldar seized the opportunity. A brace of the larger skimmers broke through the tide and took up position in the space the Raven Guard had cleared at the bridge. Their turrets fired in a rotating, interlocking pattern, holding the ground, expanding the territory.

'The tank,' Caeligus ordered.

A battlewagon had emerged from the forest. Its side guns were tracking one of the smaller skimmers. Its cannon was turning towards the bridge. The squad came down on all sides of it. Caeligus and Kyremun took the roof. Kyremun butchered the greenskins riding on top of the tank, while Caeligus balanced on top of the main gun. He walked its length as it swung to the left, acquiring its firing targets. At the end, he dropped to all fours and threw a Krak grenade into its mouth. On the flanks, the other gunners were silenced by bolter shots directly into the firing windows.

'Up!' Caeligus warned.

The squad lifted off. The gun fired at the same moment as the shaped charge of the grenade blasted inward. The top half of the tank exploded. The twisted gun flipped forward to crush the orks who had been rushing in to repel the attackers.

Many of the orks were losing interest in the eldar. They collided with each other as they tried to follow the flights of the Raven Guard. The disorder in their ranks grew with the rising casualties. Granted breathing space, the eldar gathered

their force together. Their grip on the land before the bridge became more assured. Vehicles and foot soldiers converged on that point.

The orks raged. Their attacks became more frenzied. They did not become more accurate. They killed each other in their efforts to take down Caeligus and his brothers. And so they added to their own confusion.

The Raven Guard angled down to a point where the orks were spilling out of the forest, in a direct line with the bridge. As they came in, a huge shape emerged from the woods. The ork wore armour plating thick enough for a tank. It raised a huge, twin-linked gun. It moved with greater speed and precision than anything should beneath that much metal. It fired. The rounds weren't simple bullets. They were a meteor storm. Kyremun took the full impact of the volley. It smashed into him with such force it seemed that it might arrest his plunge. Instead, his descent became a tumble, shedding chunks of armour. Caeligus took several rounds to the shoulder. The brute mass of the projectiles sent him into a rapid spin. He was still spinning when he hit the ground on his back.

He was on his feet in an instant. Kyremun had landed in front of the giant ork. His helmet had been shot away, so had one of his legs, but he had his bolter out and was firing at the monster. His shells penetrated the armour, but did not slow the ork. Its left hand was a giant power claw. It clamped its grip around Kyremun's head and squeezed.

The wet snaps and cracks cut through the rumble of the war.

Kyremun's corpse fell backwards, blood flooding from the headless neck. Around the giant, a group of orks in welding masks trained flamers on the rest of Caeligus's squad. He hissed a curse for his own ears. He would not give the giant ork the satisfaction of seeing anything from him other than cold rage, and the arrival of merciless death.

He leaned forward and used a short burst from the jump pack. The angle was perfect. His flight took him straight at the ork's head. He shot over the huge plate beneath the ork's lower jaw. He stabbed down with his talons as he flew by. Adamantium punched through the top of the ork's skull and severed its brain in two.

His descent pulverised one of the flamer orks. The greenskin's reservoir burst, splashing burning promethium over its kin further back. Caeligus turned from the screams to face the armoured giant. It was still upright, still moving, still dangerous, but its actions were agonised and mindless. It stumbled in random directions. It flailed with its power claw. Convulsions pulled the trigger on its weapon. Bullets thudded into anything before it. Orks scrambled out of the way

of its footsteps. Those not fast enough were trampled to death. Those in the way of its lunatic fire exploded when the bullets hit. The rounds were large enough to shatter ceramite. They turned flesh into mist.

The bulk of eldar survivors had reached the bridge. They were crossing now, those on foot first.

‘We are done here,’ Caeligus voxed.

The Space Marines took off once more, dropping frag grenades behind them, giving the orks still more reason to fear the sky. Riding flame, they flew back across the gorge. The first of the eldar had reached the other side of the bridge. Squad Caeligus provided further covering fire, sending bolter shells into the orks that tried to follow. The lance turrets of the skimmers sterilised the approach to the bridge of greenskins. The horde bayed in frustration, but didn’t stop running forwards, firing all the while. They died. More came. More died. But the advance was relentless, the embodied violence always reaching forward, their bullets finding targets, and then another tank was smashing its way out of the trees.

The last of the jetbikes crossed the bridge. The first of the larger skimmers backed onto the span, still firing. As the second moved into position, it was struck by the tank’s cannon shell. The eldar vehicle exploded. The ruptured lance released a burst of energy that brought day to the battlefield and wiped out the leading cluster of orks. Its death bought the other skimmer the time it needed. It picked up speed, gaining distance from the orks.

The horde pursued. The greenskins ran through the burning wreckage. Some fell, covered in flames. The rest came on. The orks in the lead were a third of the way across when the skimmer reached the other side.

‘Now,’ Caeligus told Vaanis.

The Raven Guard detonated the melta bombs. They ate through the span. It took a few seconds longer than Caeligus had anticipated; the material of the bridge was stronger than it should have been. But then it surrendered, and the middle half fell into the gorge.

The orks had too much momentum to stop. They ran off the edge. More than a hundred orks plummeted before the rest managed to restrain their energy enough to slow down. Stymied, they roared their curses at the eldar and Raven Guard. Infantry and tanks kept firing. The shouts of the orks grew ever louder, as if their anger itself would close the distance between themselves and their prey.

Caeligus would not have been surprised if it had.

Krevaan stood at the melted edge of the bridge and looked into the depths of the gorge. Caeligus and Behrasi were beside him. The other sergeants were keeping the eldar under close watch. Battered as they had been, the eldar still boasted a small but extremely mobile force of two dozen jetbikes in addition to the large skimmer.

The orks had abandoned the far side of the gorge. Krevaan knew they had not given up on Reclamation. They were seeking another road into the city. They would find it. They would have to travel many kilometres, but the land to the east was a gentle rise. The orks would have to be stopped before they entered the city, or Reclamation would die.

Krevaan watched the scene in the gorge carefully. ‘There *are* a resilient race,’ he said.

‘But this is ridiculous,’ Caeligus protested.

Improbable, certainly. Grotesque, very likely. Ridiculous, no. Krevaan held the orks in contempt, but they were not creatures of ridicule. To consider them as such was to underestimate them. Krevaan knew better than that. And the orks below were proof that they should be regarded as a very great threat. Many of them had survived the fall. Krevaan counted fifteen climbing back up the wall of the gorge.

‘That will have to be dealt with,’ he said.

‘Flamers?’ Behrasi suggested.

Krevaan nodded. ‘Yes. Burn them as they near the top. All of them.’

‘How are any of them still alive after that fall?’ Caeligus was outraged.

‘Chance?’ said Behrasi.

‘No. Look at them.’ Krevaan pointed. ‘The survivors are all large specimens. The strongest of these orks are unusually strong. And the pattern is consistent. We are not dealing with random mutations or lucky accident. There is an increase in power and aggression across the entire greenskin force on Lepidus. Given what we have seen, the surprise would have been if the strongest of the brutes had not survived this fall. It was only gravity, brothers. Did you expect to crush this foe with so simple a weapon?’

‘But what is making them so formidable?’ Behrasi asked.

‘*That* is the question.’ Krevaan started back towards the gathered forces. ‘Abnormal orks. Eldar fighting to the death to save a human city. Two phenomena with no clear explanation. Is it possible that that these two mysteries are not linked? Frankly, no.’

‘But why keep one of those mysteries alive?’ Caeligus asked.

Krevaan looked at both Caeligus and Behrasi before answering. He was sure that Caeligus knew better than his question suggested. The sergeant had a hunger for information that was laudable, but he was impatient, too. Krevaan wasn't sure that, in his desire to know more, Caeligus had the wisdom to make proper use of the knowledge he had. Behrasi was no less curious, but more patient. He was willing to suspend judgement. Caeligus wanted an immediate verdict.

And what of us? Krevaan wondered. *How do we gauge the worth of our own judgement?*

By asking the question, he thought. By being aware of the gaps in information. By watching for his blind spots.

The eldar force had suffered badly at the hands of the orks. Even so, it remained a power to be taken seriously. It was based on mobility and speed. Krevaan surmised that the few warriors on foot were ones whose vehicles had been destroyed. All the others were mounted on jetbikes, or the last turreted skimmer.

Vyper, he thought, reviewing his store of knowledge about the eldar. *They call it a Vyper. And these are the Saim-Hann.* Xenos soldiers obsessed with speed. It occurred to Krevaan that the presence of one of the White Scars might have been useful for the conversation he was about to have. He gave a mental shrug and tossed the idea away. It did him no good, and so was not worth his time.

He knew what he had to accomplish. The task was distasteful. It would involve a measure of trust. It would be provisional, minimal, and fragile. It would also be necessary.

He eyed the eldar as he approached. They were a race that embodied mystery, but not, he thought, because of their mastery of the shadows. He did not believe that their motivations were shrouded. They were, as far as he was able to tell, perverse. That fact did not warrant his respect. It did demand his caution.

On the other side of the gorge, there was no road to the bridge. There were barely any paths through the forest. On this side, though, paving travelled east from the bridge, becoming a wide square after the first cluster of buildings. It was more than enough space for both the eldar and Eighth Company. They faced each other across the square, eldar to the north, Raven Guard to the south. The weapons of both forces were at the ready, though not quite pointing at each other. The fiction was that it would take either group as much as a second to rain death on the other.

Krevaan walked to the middle of the square, then stopped. He folded his arms and waited. An eldar carrying what appeared to be a sniper rifle over his

shoulder walked forward to meet him. The xenos wore a cloak that had some sort of active camouflage, and Krevaan found it difficult to track his movements. On instinct, he reached for the shadows around him. He noted their location, their density, how they linked to each other. The lumen globes of Reclamation's streets were harsh, and the shadows they cast were edged like blades. He decided how best he would kill the eldar walking towards him. He felt the impulse to clench his fist and slash with his talons.

He held himself back.

The eldar stopped a few paces from him, and made a respectful nod. 'I am Alathannas,' he said.

'Do you lead?' Krevaan asked.

'No. I speak your language. Will you talk with me?' His accent in Gothic was odd. It seemed to slip from system to system, sector to sector. It was made of layers, and beneath them was a core that belonged to no human planet at all.

'I will listen to what you have to say.'

'That is well. We can work together. We must. I am glad you are here, human. I hoped for your arrival.'

Krevaan gave Alathannas a hard look. The eldar's face was unshadowed. It had the length and elegance typical of his race, and an openness that appeared to Krevaan to be unfeigned. It was a form of curiosity, an energetic inquisitiveness that was present even in the midst of war. Krevaan recognised and understood the hunger for knowledge that he saw in the eldar's eyes. But he also saw before him a being who was eager to experience the new. That was an impulse he distrusted.

Alathannas had stopped with a lumen globe shining directly onto him. He had thrown back the hood of his cloak. He was inviting Krevaan's scrutiny. He wanted the Shadow Captain's trust. That made Krevaan even more suspicious. 'Why would you hope that we would come?' he asked.

'We cannot stop the orks on our own. And they must be stopped. We must protect the city.'

Krevaan kept his surprise at the vehemence to himself. 'The city,' he said, 'is already well defended.' He lied to see how the eldar would respond.

'Not well enough,' Alathannas said. 'I believe we both know what route the orks are taking at this moment.'

Krevaan could see strain on his face. That was unusual. When he had served in the Deathwatch, Krevaan had had dealings with the eldar. Violent ones. He had needed to acquire a certain familiarity with the enemy, insofar as it was possible

for any human to fathom their alien minds. Alathannas was on the verge of pleading.

We must protect the city. What did he mean by that? Was that the eldar mission on Lepidus? Why? It defied all logic. He did not ask why Reclamation was so important to the Saim-Hann. He would have no faith in the veracity of the answer. He would have to find it himself. He would have to observe the eldar, and see how best to strike. In order to observe them, he would have to offer the simulacrum of trust.

‘The orks must be destroyed,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Alathannas said. ‘Above all things, yes.’

More strain. Desperation perhaps.

Krevaan nodded. ‘Then cooperation between our forces would be to our mutual advantage.’

Alathannas’s relief was as evident as his tension had been. Krevaan began to feel contempt for this warrior, along with suspicion. He was giving too much away. He should not be so easily read by an opponent. ‘You will liaise?’ Krevaan asked. He looked beyond Alathannas to the eldar host. One figure stood apart, its armour more ornate. *You, Krevaan thought. You are the commander.*

The warrior said something to Alathannas, and though Krevaan could not understand the words, he sensed that they were spoken for his benefit. The voice was female, and rich in authority.

Alathannas acknowledged the commander with a solemn nod. To Krevaan, he said, ‘I will be the bridge between our people.’

‘You understand that you are standing on Imperial soil?’

‘I do. We all do.’

The agreement was too quick in coming. *I see, Krevaan thought. You were passing by, noticed the orks invading an Imperial world, and decided to give your lives in an act of transcendent selflessness.* Alathannas was lying.

Krevaan added that fragment of information to his store. Then he said, ‘Then I believe cooperation is possible. Speak to your commander. We should discuss our next move.’

‘Did he believe you?’ Eleira asked when Alathannas returned. She removed her helmet.

‘He will work with us, autarch.’

‘That is an equivocation.’

‘I apologise. I don’t know whether he believed me or not. He has

extraordinary self-discipline.’

‘For a mon-keigh.’

Alathannas bowed his head. ‘I used body language that should have been interpreted as great eagerness and a certain naiveté. If he thinks his judgement superior to mine, I think he will trust me more. Or at least distrust me less. But I could not tell what he was thinking. I have failed in that regard.’

Eleira drummed her gauntleted fingers once against her armoured thigh. ‘You have had much experience with the mon-keigh on your travels, ranger. I would have thought it useful at a time such as this.’

‘I have never encountered a human like this one.’

‘Then we are hardly better off.’

‘With respect, autarch, we are still alive, capable of fighting, and the orks have not taken the city.’

‘But now the forces of the mon-keigh are involved.’

‘The city was always in their hands. What is different? With their help, we might be able to stop the orks.’

‘That is not our only goal,’ the autarch reminded him. ‘You are far too sanguine about the human occupation. I wonder if you have been too long within their influence.’

It was difficult to remain upright beneath her gaze. Defiance was out of the question. Eleira’s centuries were visible in the scars she had acquired in countless battles. Their lines, most faint, some fresh, made her face a tapestry of war, and accentuated the sharpness of her skull. Her age was most apparent, though, in her eyes. They had accumulated so much experience, so much pain, and so much anger, that they were the colour of cold metal. They had had all hope scoured from them.

Alathannas chose to think that this absence was an error. He had no illusions about humans. They were a race of violence and waste, one that could be trusted to act, with demoralising consistency, against its own interests. That self-destructive instinct would make them merely pathetic if it did not also have catastrophic results for the rest of the galaxy. Alathannas knew all this, but he had also encountered individual humans who shared his desire to hope. Small as those slivers of optimism were, they were no less real. The alliance he had just forged was of the moment, yes. It was driven by necessity, riven by mistrust. But it had already produced a tangible result. That was worth something.

He wished he could be certain what it was worth.

‘If you think my judgement is flawed,’ he said to the autarch, ‘then disregard

it. But please consider the fact that we are having this conversation. If these humans had not arrived, we would have failed in every aspect of our mission. We would be dead, and the orks would be in the city. How long would it be before what we fear came to pass? The effect on the orks is already great. It is calling them. They—’

Eleira held up a hand, silencing him. ‘What do you take me for?’

‘I—’

‘Do you think I am unaware of our situation?’

‘No, autarch. I know that you are.’

‘Then spare me your lectures.’ She gestured to Passavan, who stood a few metres behind. The farseer left the side of his jetbike to join them. As far down the path of the seer as he had travelled, he was still young. There was still a healthy materiality to his frame and his flesh. ‘Your evaluation of our current path,’ Eleira said.

‘The skein is tangled with disaster.’

When Eleira turned to look at the farseer, her lips thin with displeasure, Alathannas saw how exhausted she was. ‘I could have told you that myself,’ she said to Passavan.

Passavan bowed his head. ‘I understand. I wish I could be more precise. But the path we are walking is so frayed, so crossed with conditions and divergence, that any outcome beyond the most immediate is impossible to divine.’

Eleira snorted. ‘I can divine that if we open fire on the force before us, we will be annihilated. You will have to do better. I need to know if this path has a chance of succeeding where it matters most.’

Passavan said, ‘There is a chance.’ He did not sound happy.

‘But?’

‘The route there is so reliant on elements beyond our control. There is very little we can do at this stage to be assured of its outcome. The alliance that lies before us is, however, the only path that has even a remote possibility of success.’

‘We will have to walk carefully, then.’

‘Yes. I will guide us as much as I can. But no matter how cautiously we tread...’

‘Yes,’ said Eleira. ‘That might not make any difference.’ She looked at the humans on the other side of the square. ‘Well. So much for choice, then.’ To Alathannas she said, ‘Do what you can to earn their trust. Without it, much more than our lives is forfeit.’



CHAPTER THREE

The task he had set himself was futile. Behrasi knew this. Even so, he tried to divine the reasons behind Krevaan's move.

Eighth Company was back at its original base in the land to the south of Reclamation. Behrasi stood outside the command tent, waiting for the Shadow Captain to finish speaking with the commanders of the other missions. Contact had been re-established with Temur Khan and the White Scars. This was a good sign.

Being outside the city, with the eldar inside, on the other hand, was less reassuring. The situation was also too bizarre for Behrasi to dismiss it as a disaster. They had not been forced out, after all. The departure had been Krevaan's decision. It was the most baffling one that Behrasi had ever known him to make. 'The orks have a long road to travel,' Krevaan had said, as the Raven Guard and the eldar discussed strategy. 'But they will come. We need a more detailed sense of the environs.'

The leader of the eldar had said something to Alathannas. 'The city must be protected,' he had translated.

And then Krevaan had said, 'We will leave it in your care.' The reaction among the other Raven Guard was one of acute discomfort. The move went against every instinct. It had also not gone over well with the authorities in Reclamation. Governor Kesmir had come to meet Eighth Company as it marched towards the southern exit from the city. He had been accompanied by Cardinal Reithner. The ecclesiarch had been apoplectic.

Krevaan had stood and listened to the duo's remonstrations for precisely one

minute. At the sixty-first second, he had said, 'My decision is final.' Then he had resumed walking, and ignored the indignant squawks of the two mortals. They had howled, and the selfishness of their fears had been so clear that Behrasi had, for a moment, rejoiced in the fact that he and his brothers were leaving these two bellowing non-combatants to what they believed to be their fates.

Now, though, his concern had returned with a vengeance. Around him, most of the other sergeants were pacing. Some spoke in groups of two or three. Others kept their thoughts to themselves. Caeligus moved between all of them, demanding answers that none could give. At last, he reached Behrasi's position.

'What is he thinking?' Caeligus said.

'You don't really expect me to know that.'

'Do you realise what we're risking?' Caeligus wasn't listening. 'How can we walk away from—'

'Brother,' Behrasi interrupted. He clamped a hand on Caeligus's shoulder, hard enough to jolt the other out of his rant. 'Yes. I am aware of the risk.'

'We have to do something.'

Behrasi hissed, 'What are you saying?' Now he was furious. Caeligus was one very small step away from outright mutiny.

The other sergeant seemed to realise this. He looked at Behrasi as if he hadn't been seeing him properly until this moment. 'Your pardon, brother,' he said. 'I don't know what I was saying.'

'Clearly not.'

Caeligus sighed. 'That was frustration and ignorance talking. Not me.'

'It was your voice.'

'Yes.' He paused, looking towards the lights of Reclamation. 'But why, in the name of the Emperor, would he have us leave the city?'

'The city is not the mission,' Behrasi said. He felt that he was on the edge of revelation.

'What?'

'The city is not our mission. It never was. Remember the larger goal, brother. The orks are our target, and even then in the service of luring the Overfiend. In that context, the city is unimportant. We could achieve our strategic ends even if the city were destroyed.'

'Maybe,' Caeligus admitted. 'But how is our greater purpose served by leaving the eldar in control?'

Behrasi had no answer. He knew he was right, though. He struggled to grasp the truth that hovered just at the limit of his reach.

Krevaan stepped out of the command tent. ‘Please join me, brother-sergeants,’ he said.

Inside, the tactarium table’s hololith was showing the landscape to the east and north of Reclamation. ‘The greenskins have been busy,’ Krevaan said. ‘So have our allies. Vox contact has been restored. The White Scars have destroyed their manufactorum on the moon. They have also managed to kill a powerful ork psyker.’

‘That is welcome news,’ Sergeant Klijuun said.

‘Not all of it is. The ork engineer escaped. Temur Khan believes that it has teleported to a planetside location.’

Caeligus said, ‘I don’t see how a single ork tech is of much concern.’

‘This one is. You have paid attention to the tanks we have seen here?’

‘They do seem bigger and more resilient,’ Caeligus admitted. ‘But they are not indestructible.’

‘But do you know how the ork heavy armour has been arriving on Lepidus?’ Krevaan asked. ‘It was being teleported. Do you know what powered the teleporter? A device that turned dozens of captured eldar psykers into a massive battery.’

‘An ork did that?’ Behrasi was stunned.

‘In cooperation with the witch, yes.’

‘If the manufactorum is destroyed,’ Caeligus said, ‘surely the principal means by which this ork could trouble us are gone too.’

Krevaan gave him a sharp look. ‘Do you speak from a position of knowledge, brother-sergeant?’

‘No.’ Caeligus looked defiant. ‘I am basing my conclusion on what we do know.’

‘What we know is that these orks are far more unpredictable, powerful and resourceful than we could have imagined. They had a Stompa on the moon. I, for one, would have been surprised by the sudden arrival of that war machine. Surprise is what we inflict on our enemies. I do not accept being subject to it.’ He turned from Caeligus and addressed the sergeants as a group. ‘We will assume that the greenskin engineer is here, and active in the ork campaign. Expect an increase in heavy armour.’

Caeligus looked like he was on the verge of saying something more. Behrasi willed him to silence. Caeligus seemed to read his mind. He closed his mouth.

Krevaan returned to the table. The hololith had a line running, tracing the circular route the ork army would have to take to get around the gorge. The

greenskins had gone north from the fallen bridge. That meant dozens of kilometres before the land dropped enough for it to be possible to ford the river. After that, the orks would still have to travel far to the east as the north boundary of the city was a sharp escarpment. Even allowing for the faster speed of these orks, it was unlikely that the shortest route would bring them close to besieging Reclamation before daylight.

‘This,’ Krevaan said, ‘is what the *expected* route of the greenskins would look like. It is not good enough. We cannot *expect* anything of these orks. If our intelligence is not first-hand, and based on direct observation, it is useless. So we will observe. Brother-sergeants, your squads will fan out from the eastern gate of Reclamation. Sergeant Behrasi, your squad will attempt to intercept on the likely route. The rest of you will spread out further to the north-east. When one squad makes contact, the rest will close in.’ He held his hand out, palm up, fingers splayed. He slowly made a fist. ‘In this way, we will crush the greenskins,’ he said.

‘What will the eldar be doing?’ Zobak asked.

‘Sending out scouting units as well, according to our agreement.’

‘Units,’ Behrasi repeated. ‘What about their main force?’

‘Remaining in the city. Protecting it.’

‘And what else will they be doing there?’ Caeligus demanded. His tone was accusatory.

You really can't help yourself, can you? Behrasi thought. Caeligus sometimes accused him of excessive caution. In moments like this, though, it was Caeligus who demonstrated excess. Behrasi took the example of the captain to heart. Action was based on information: the better the intelligence, the more devastating the attack. Behrasi sometimes wondered, as he did now, whether Caeligus's desire for information only extended to the point of confirming what he had already decided.

‘Your question is an excellent one, brother-sergeant,’ Krevaan said to Caeligus. His patience was more withering than his earlier sharp tone. ‘Which is why I will be observing them.’

Alathannas and Passavan walked a step behind Eleira. They were nearing the centre of the city. The human construction was becoming denser and more elaborate. The scale of the task ahead was increasing. So were its complexities. So were its risks.

‘They've changed so much,’ Eleira said. ‘I can see traces of what was once

here, but our records will be useless.’

‘They were never going to be sufficient,’ Passavan pointed out. ‘This was a maiden world. The city was constructed, but never settled. As for what we seek...’

‘It wouldn’t be on the surface,’ Alathannas said.

‘Precisely. And all we know is what the surface once was.’

Eleira stopped in an intersection. She turned around slowly. ‘How do they live like this?’ she said. ‘What have they done?’

On three of the corners rose more of the human habitations. They were dark monuments of rockcrete. Their windows were like the firing apertures of fortifications. Faces appeared in some of them. They were suspicious, frightened, and furtive as rats. The people of Reclamation, believing themselves abandoned and invaded, sought strength in their prison-like homes. Relief sculptures of the double-headed eagle of the human Emperor dominated the façades. There were other figures, too, that Alathannas surmised also had some kind of religious significance. The overwhelming impression was of a race whose spirit was imprisoned by its manifestations of material power.

On the fourth corner was a place of worship. In its massive, glowering oppression, it was not different in kind from the habitation complexes, but merely in degree. It was worse. It was their inspiration. It was the enforcer. The eagle detached itself from the wall, became iron, and spread its wings over the portico. Humans, the ranger thought, spared no effort in celebrating what crushed them.

And yet there were individuals who encouraged him to hope. Over the decades of his travels, there were humans whom he felt he could call friends. Those connections, impossible in principle, were the shining fragments that shielded him from despair. He did not expect friendship from the Raven Guard. But he had to believe in the chance of honest cooperation. If that existed, these orks might be defeated. The alternative was so dreadful, it had to be denied.

Neither he, nor anyone else on this planet, could afford to believe in the most likely outcome of the war.

‘The changes are too great,’ Passavan said. ‘I cannot tell if the entrance we seek still exists. Perhaps it never did. We don’t know what happened to the Exodites who began the settlement. Their work was surely incomplete. If there were an entrance, the mon-keigh would have found it.’

Eleira started walking again, moving up the street past the church. She was looking closely at the foundations of the buildings, at the vanishing traces of the

eldar city that had stood here, and been erased by the millennia without ever truly living. ‘The question of the entrance is irrelevant,’ she said. ‘That is not what we are seeking. We need a location, first. Farseer, you carry our hopes.’

‘I wish I could fulfil them.’ Passavan’s grief was profound.

‘You must.’

Passavan glanced at Alathannas as if looking for his support. ‘What you ask is beyond my reach.’

‘Merentallas and Elisath both know.’

‘And *only* they know. They have travelled the path of the seer much longer than I have. Their sight extends far beyond mine.’

‘If they are still alive,’ Alathannas said.

Eleira ignored him. ‘We are all being tasked with the impossible,’ she told the farseer.

Passavan looked back at the church. He frowned and stopped walking.

‘You think it might be under that?’ Alathannas asked. The irony would be disturbing.

‘No. I thought I saw...’ His eyes moved over the wings of the eagle. That seemed to satisfy him. ‘I’m wrong,’ he said and moved on.

Alathannas scrutinised the face of the church. He trusted Passavan’s skills. He also valued his own. He looked for movement, or an anomalous shadow. But no, the farseer was right. There was nothing there. He scanned for another minute before he was certain, then walked after the others. He stopped just as he caught up and looked again.

There was only the night, pooling around the doorways.

The night watched the eldar continue north away from the cathedral. Krevaan remained as motionless as the stones around him until the trio were almost out of sight. Then he spoke softly into his vox-bead. ‘What do you see?’

‘Several other small groups are roaming the streets.’ Techmarine Thaene had taken up a position on the roof of one of the tallest habs in the south-central zone of Reclamation. He and Krevaan had approached directly from Eighth Company’s encampment. There was a delicious edge to the challenge of going so deeply into the shadows that even the eldar could not see them. Thaene did not venture far into Reclamation, as Krevaan needed his eyes from the commanding heights of the tower. From there, the Techmarine had a view of the square where the eldar had established their base, and a good perspective on the central avenues.

Krevaan wanted to be closer. He had spotted Alathannas and his companions heading towards the cathedral. He had chosen his post in the recesses of the portico and waited. His Deathwatch years had left him with some knowledge of the eldar tongue. It was not enough for him to follow the conversation as the trio paused in the intersection. He was able to pick up some fragments, though. They were searching for something. That much he gathered. He noticed the way the leader was examining the buildings as they left.

He asked Thaene, 'Are the groups on patrol?'

'No, Shadow Captain. I have used high magnification to look at the ones that passed the closest to my position. They appear to be very interested in the foundations of the buildings.'

'Thank you,' Krevaan said. He was grateful. Thaene's observations dovetailed with his own. There was a pattern now to the eldar behaviour. Why the foundations?

We must protect the city.

The foundations of Reclamation were older than what was built upon them.

Which city are you protecting? Krevaan wondered. Answers blossomed before him. They were dark ones, but they explained much. If an eldar city had once stood here, it made more sense that the Saim-Hann had been so desperate to preserve it.

More sense? No, that wasn't quite true. Less irrational? Yes, that was closer to the mark. He could understand the location having an importance to the xenos. But their willingness to lay down their lives for something that had long since been erased almost completely from the face of Lepidus was still not explained. Their search was not for traces of the city itself. They were looking for something contained within the city. Whatever this prize was, it was worth any sacrifice. And if eldar lives were less important than this goal, what of the humans who now lived here?

That answer was easy. They were less than nothing.

Krevaan felt no outrage. If Reclamation had to burn in order to defeat the orks, then it would burn. He would take no pleasure in such an event, though, and he would seek to avoid it. What was impermissible was that the eldar harm the subjects of the Emperor in the pursuit of their own ends. The treachery of their race was rising to the surface, as he had known it would.

Thaene must have reached some of the same conclusions. He voxed, 'Will we be attacking them?'

'Not until we have dealt with the orks. The eldar will still be useful in that

endeavour. But we should make some preparations for afterwards. How populated is the camp?’

He waited while Thaene carried out more observations.

‘Very few of the eldar remain. A skeleton guard.’

Either they were not expecting an attack, or they were arrogant in their estimation of their capacity to spot an enemy’s approach. Krevaan was not surprised. The eldar seemed unable to grasp the ability of the Raven Guard to wraith-slip. They looked at the power armour, and saw only juggernauts. Good.

‘Any likely targets?’ he asked Thaene.

‘Many. The vehicles are on the outer perimeter of the camp.’

Of course. For rapid deployment. That would make his task easier.

Krevaan debated following Alathannas. He decided against it. As shadow-cloaked as he had been, both the ranger and the psyker had become aware of something. He would not tempt fate. The longer the eldar did not think that he was actively moving against them, the better. Their cooperation was still useful, and their actions would be more revealing if they believed themselves unobserved by any eyes that mattered. Better not to give them the chance of suspicion. Whatever they were seeking, they did not know where to find it.

‘Meet me at the tower base,’ he told Thaene. ‘Have the equipment ready.’

Krevaan made his way back to the Techmarine’s position with the same care that he had used in reaching the cathedral. The eldar search parties were not in this sector, as far as he and Thaene knew. Krevaan assumed that they didn’t know enough. He anticipated the enemy’s gaze at every step. He factored in the chance looks of mortals at their windows. He was hidden, a massive shadow among shadows, a heavily armoured silence moving in on prey. No matter how circuitous his route, he would complete his hunt.

Dawn was still an hour away when he reached the hab-tower. The night pressed down on Reclamation with the full weight of the siege to come. Thaene stood against the façade, in the dark between two of the street’s lumen globes. He was holding the melta bombs. Krevaan examined them. ‘Near the engines of the skimmers,’ he said.

‘That is correct, Shadow Captain. Inside would be best.’

‘But any location where they are unlikely to be discovered, at any rate. There is no chance of their being triggered accidentally?’

Thaene shook his head. ‘The detonators will not function unless they receive the signal that I send them.’

‘Good.’

He did ask himself, as the flow of shadows took him towards the eldar encampment, if there was any situation that would not result in his ordering Thaene to set off the bombs. He didn't think there was. If the eldar betrayed the Raven Guard during battle with the orks, he would kill them and their vehicles. If they remained trustworthy to the end of the war, there was still the question of Reclamation. The eldar wanted something here. Victory against the orks would change nothing. The Saim-Hann would have to be expelled by force. This was the simple truth of the matter.

Krevaan found it interesting, all the same, that he even considered the question. The extermination of the xenos had been a given in the Deathwatch. He wondered why he engaged in this speculation at all.

Because you can, he thought. Because the orders come from you, not the Inquisition. He had the luxury of acting with the full knowledge of why the actions were called for, and what purpose they served. He was proud of his achievements, now over two centuries in the past, in the Deathwatch. He had been less enamoured of how the true purpose of the missions had often been shrouded from his vision. He understood the motivation behind the secrecy. He understood its utility. He had chafed at being subject to it. Now he made use of it. He wielded it as he would any other weapon.

He reached the square. Crouching in the darkness cast by the squat hab-block, he was only a few metres from the perimeter of eldar vehicles. He slowed his breathing and heartbeats. He became the thing that the eye passed over as it moved between points of interest. He watched the movements of the eldar.

They had patrols along the edge of the camp. There were few guards, but the timing of their circuits was complex. They didn't appear to move at a constant speed. It was difficult to predict when he would fall in a blind spot. The minutes to dawn fell away. He was patient, unhurried. There was time. He would not need long.

When the moment came, he was moving even before his conscious mind noted the opportunity. He crossed the open space, slipping between the overlapping gazes of the guards. He reached the vehicles, staying low and motionless before the Vyper. He waited for the next opportunity, then moved along the skimmer's nose and fixed a melta bomb to the underside of the fuselage, where it joined the short, angular wings.

Stillness again. Then a shift among shadows. A bomb attached beneath the engine of a jetbike. He repeated the pattern. He was never where the eldar looked. He was engaged in a duel that he would lose if his opponent ever

realised that battle was engaged. He respected the eldar's perception.

And he thwarted it.

The operation took an hour. The sky was lightening as he headed back to meet Thaene. The tide of darkness was receding. It was still more than deep enough. He did more than evade the eldar's sight. He smashed its power. When he rejoined the Techmarine, he completed an act of war that would not be known until he chose. The shadows had planted a gladius in the heart of the eldar. He had killed them. He would let them sustain their illusion of life only for as long as it suited him to do so.

As they headed back to Eighth Company's base, Thaene asked, 'Is there any chance we will not use what you have prepared?'

That question again. *No*, Krevaan started to say. He changed his mind. 'If the eldar prove trustworthy, you will not have to send that signal.'

'No chance, then,' Thaene said.

A thought crossed Krevaan's mind. It was close to being a doubt. Was he setting impossible conditions? Was it possible that he was acting dishonourably?

Before he could answer himself or the Techmarine, Caeligus's voice came over the vox. His tone was urgent. The background noise was chaotic.

Then it resolved into the roar of a gigantic engine. And that was much worse.



CHAPTER FOUR

Travelling in sustained bursts from the jump packs, Caeligus had led his battle-brothers on a wide sweep. They were the squad furthest out from the base, sent dozens of kilometres to the east of Reclamation. Reaching the reconnaissance point assigned, learning the details of the landscape but finding no enemy, Caeligus pushed north as hard as he could. He didn't expect to intercept the orks. He assumed that they would turn in towards Reclamation at the first opportunity.

He was frustrated by the position Krevaan had designated for his squad. His hope was to catch sight of the orks during one of the jumps. He accepted that he would not be among the first to engage, but he wanted his knowledge of the greenskins' position to be first-hand. It was a point of pride, not of necessity. He admitted this to himself. Though he said nothing to the others, their grim drive told him they felt the same. The engagement against the orks at the Reclamation bridge had been unsatisfying. It had felt too much like what it was: fighting in defence of the eldar. Now, though, the true war of extermination could begin.

He saw a light to the north. It was an intermittent glow.

'That can't be them,' Vaanis said. 'Why would the greenskins travel that far out of their road?'

'That isn't sunrise,' Caeligus said. 'And it isn't natural. So it's either the orks or the eldar.'

The squad had already travelled much further than Caeligus had anticipated. The glow was more distant yet. It made no sense that the orks had headed in that direction. *It therefore makes perfect sense, given these orks,* he thought. Even if he was wrong, ignoring this event would be a mistake. *Orks or eldar, I see*

enemy activity. ‘That is our destination,’ he said.

‘Should we report in?’ Havren asked.

‘When we have something definite to report,’ Caeligus told him. Unlikely as it seemed, if the lights were the result of a freak planetary feature, he would risk deviating the war effort from its proper course.

He would also risk humiliation.

They arced towards the light. With each flight, the glow sharpened. Caeligus began to distinguish individual beams. He could hear the sound of engines. Then they picked up the tracks of the ork passage. The terrain was chewed up in a swath. But not a wide one. The main body of the ork army had not come this way.

Caeligus swallowed his rage. A portion of the enemy was ahead. The activity had to be investigated.

The squad was still several minutes away from the ork position when a formation of eldar jetbikes flew towards the lights. Caeligus cursed.

A few leaps away, the scene ahead began to take form. It was no less confusing. There was a building that looked like a crude hangar. It was huge. It had been covered with earth, camouflaging it from any distant onlookers. A large party of orks surrounded it, their guns facing out.

The eldar were conducting hit-and-run attacks. The greenskins were laying down forbidding barrages of shells and bullets, but they had no tanks. One jetbike burned. The ork casualties were mounting quickly, though they had the resources to hold out for some time yet.

The squad came within range. Caeligus called a halt on a small hill just beyond the range of the orks’ rifles. The brutes hadn’t noticed them yet. They were focused on the eldar. The sounds of industry came from inside the hangar. There was also a heavy, continuous, beating roar. *An engine?* Caeligus wondered. If so, it was colossal.

The sky was shifting from black to grey. In the growing light, Caeligus realised just how blasted the land here was. The orks had been on Lepidus longer than anyone had thought. Long enough to have built this hangar. Caeligus thought, at first, that this was the point to which the greenskins had been teleporting their battlewagons from the moon. Then he realised that in that case, there would have been no reason for them to attack Reclamation from the west. This was something else, perhaps originally intended to provide reinforcements, thereby trapping the city in a pincer assault.

‘The orks are looking outward,’ he said. ‘We will use that distraction.’ He

pointed. 'We land before the doors. We will destroy what the greenskins wish to protect.'

They made the jump. They came down hard, bolters already firing. The orks nearest the hangar doors died without knowing what was striking them. The next ones spun in confusion. Half of Squad Caeligus tore into them, spreading an arc of death outward from the building. The orks' fire lost all coherence as they tried to respond to eldar and Space Marines at the same time. While Havren and his brothers waded into the enemy, Caeligus and the others provided cover for Vaanis as he set demolition charges on the doors. On the other side of the iron wall, the rumble and whine of the enormous engine intensified. The sound felt loud enough to shatter bone.

The details of the cacophony were hard to sort. Even so, Caeligus realised something had changed. The sounds of construction had ceased. They were replaced by a rhythm. It was slow at first, the heartbeat of a huge machine. Within seconds, it accelerated.

It was easily recognisable. It was also impossible. It was too big.

Vaanis turned his head to look back at Caeligus. 'Brother-sergeant...' he began. He knew. They all did.

'Move!' Caeligus roared.

The locomotive smashed through the hangar doors. The iron barrier disintegrated. Metal shards flew like sleet. Vaanis was smashed against the front. It bore the shape of immense clamped jaws, and the machine leapt forward with such speed that the impact held the Raven Guard's body against the lower fangs for a few seconds before he fell. Treads ten metres long crushed him, hundreds of tonnes of mass smashing ceramite like an eggshell, smearing his genhanced flesh across the ground.

Caeligus used an emergency burst from his jump pack to hurl himself up, back, and to the side. So did the rest of the squad. Reflexes and speed were not enough. Three others were knocked down by the juggernaut's charge. Brother Cyok rose above the height of the cab, only to come into the line of fire of the enormous gun mounted on the rear car. It fired. Cyok vanished. The shell lit up the dawn with a streak of flame. When it reached the ground, kilometres ahead, it struck with the force of a meteor.

The side of the engine clipped Caeligus. It knocked his flight out of true, and he slammed into the ground at a steep angle. He launched himself back into the air immediately, shaking off the stun in mid-flight. He landed fifty metres away, then turned to fight the new enemy.

The land train was a colossus. The locomotive alone was several times larger than the battlewagons. It pulled four cars that were almost as huge. The lower half of each appeared to be troop compartments. The top half held turrets and rocket pods. Engine and cars bristled with so many guns, they looked like clusters of spines on a living animal. Running on treads constructed of metal so thick that it seemed the cars were solid all the way through, the train should have advanced at a tectonic crawl. But its engine was so overpowered that the monster tore up the earth with the eagerness of a hunting saurian. The orks on the ground shouted their joy as their great machine was unleashed. Many of them did not move from its path in time. They were pulped in their turn. The celebration only grew more frenzied.

The train's sudden emergence placed it in the path of two of the eldar jetbikes. Their drivers tried to evade. They veered hard to the left and the right. They might as well have tried to avoid a moving mountain chain. The Saim-Hann worship of speed turned them into burnt offerings. The skimmers became fireballs as they collided with the monster.

On top of the locomotive, towards the front, was the clear blister of a canopy. In it, a single ork surveyed its works, and exulted.

'Raven Guard!' Caeligus called over the vox. 'Strike the engineer!' As he began his descent, he opened the company channel. 'The orks have a land train,' he warned. 'North-north-east of Reclamation.' He fired a long burst of shells at the canopy. 'The eldar...' he began, but trailed off when he saw the look on the ork's face. The brute was a big specimen, bent over by a giant, flashing collection of coils on its back. It looked up at the Raven Guard assault squad coming at it from all angles. Still twenty metres out, Caeligus could see the monster grinning.

Laughing.

The bolter shells left the canopy untouched. One second too late, Caeligus realised that they weren't even hitting it. There was a strange shimmer about the train. The shells were striking a force field. Then every gun on the train fired simultaneously. A curtain of projectiles cut through the squad. The bullet streams were unending. They defeated ceramite, battered and bled the Space Marines into bloody meat. The cannon fired again. All the cannons did. The train was surrounded by a storm of blasts.

The fire faded. So did Caeligus's retinal display. Havren was the last of his brothers to die. Caeligus saw him topple from the roof of the locomotive, both arms and his left leg shot away. Caeligus clung to the lower fangs of the engine's

battering ram. There were large holes in his power armour. His jump pack was leaking promethium. If he tried to use it, he would immolate himself. Though he had lost his display, he knew he was suffering from massive internal bleeding.

He would rip the laughter from that ork's throat.

Strength fading, he tightened his grip on the iron fang and hauled himself upwards. He grabbed the upper teeth, found a foothold on the lower ones. Above that, there was a smooth expanse of metal. He paused, looking for any means to climb higher.

The jaws parted.

He lost his grip and fell forward. His chest hit the mouth of a stubby cannon almost as wide as the one on the rear car. He threw himself backwards as the gun roared.

The shell did not hit him directly. So he lived long enough to know what was happening to him. The damage was so great that it was beyond pain. His body was enveloped by a cold nothing. He flew in a broken cartwheel and landed a short distance ahead of the locomotive. He tried to rise. His body did not respond. He couldn't even blink. He lay on his back, his head twisted to the side. In the burning dawn, he watched the train rush towards him. Its shadow passed over him, returning him to night. Then came the treads.

And then, at the very end, there was room for more pain.

Behrasi heard Caeligus's final vox transmission. Then, as if summoned by the dawn, the rest of the ork army appeared over the north horizon. A few moments before, there had been silence. The cacophony of engines and war cries did not approach: it erupted.

'How did we not hear them before?' Brother Rhamm asked.

Squad Behrasi was on one of the few roads of Lepidus. It circled the hill of Reclamation in a wide ellipse, about five kilometres from its base to the north and south, twice that east and west. On the east side, it embraced most of the colony's cultivated land. The Raven Guard were midway between the point where the road turned south, and the branch that led to the city's east side. The terrain consisted of gentle hills. Further to the east was a web of deep gullies. The road was the easiest, most likely route for the orks to take. The surprise had been in the enemy's absence until now.

'They were waiting for the signal,' Behrasi said. The strategy was simple, it was effective, and it was another lesson in the danger of underestimating the orks. 'The army and the land train will reach Reclamation at the same time.'

Krevaan's voice came over the vox. He was speaking to the entire company, demanding news of Caeligus. Behrasi said, 'We've lost all contact. I have eyes on the ork army.'

'All forces converge on Squad Behrasi's location,' Krevaan ordered. After a moment, he added, 'I will send you word about the eldar disposition shortly.'

'Will they be joining us?'

'It would be in their best interests to do so.' The comment could be taken a number of ways. Behrasi assumed that Krevaan meant them all.

He watched the rising clouds of dust and smoke that marked the ork approach. 'The greenskins will be here before reinforcements arrive,' he said.

'Slow them down,' Krevaan said. 'We must keep the two forces apart. Together, they will raze everything. We have a chance of defeating the separated foes.'

'Well,' Behrasi said to his battle-brothers when the Shadow Captain had signed off, 'shall we demonstrate how a single squad can stop an army in its tracks?'

A few hundred metres further on, the road passed between two rises. It was as close to a choke point as they would find.

'This is where we stop them,' Behrasi said.

'Will we?' Rhamm asked.

'I didn't say permanently. But long enough.'

Half the squad began laying mines. Behrasi took the other half forward. The single ambush would not be enough. Every impediment they could throw in the orks' way would make a difference. Each moment that the orks had to struggle to advance was a moment that brought the rest of Eighth Company closer to the engagement and interfered with the timing of the orks' assault.

The Raven Guard advanced on foot, at a run. They eschewed the use of the jump packs. They needed invisibility more than speed. Behrasi and Rhamm pounded along the west side of the road while the other three took the east. They would have time, Behrasi estimated, to cover perhaps a kilometre before they met the leading elements of the orks. That would be enough.

Going north, the hills became even lower. They were gradual swells giving way to prairie. There were no trees. The grass was less than calf-height. Day had come, and the sky was overcast. If Behrasi looked away from the approaching horde, if he blocked out the sound of savagery and war, he saw a mirage of peace. Other than Reclamation and its immediate surroundings, Lepidus was untouched. The roads, like the bridge, pre-existed human colonisation. They

were almost completely unused by the colonists. The millennia had eroded them, just as they had toppled the city that had once stood in Reclamation's place. Though the edges were ragged with creeping growth, and there were cleavages where the ground had shifted in important ways, for the most part the pavement ran straight and smooth. Behrasi did not recognise the materials of the road's construction, though he now had a very good guess as to their origin. Other than the roads and the city, the planet was a blank slate, a garden that tended to itself, waiting to be of use.

Lepidus was, he knew, beautiful. He did not feel it to be beautiful. He experienced it as an arena of war. The peace of the landscape would vanish, ground to muck by the machines of slaughter. And this bucolic gentleness was an irritant in its lack of cover.

An irritant, not an enemy. The land was open, and the light was bright. There were still shadows. Wherever the foe was not omniscient, the wraith-slip was possible. And the orks were far from omniscient.

Now the enemy was less than a kilometre away. The Raven Guard kept moving forward, but at a diagonal away from the road. The orks were in full flight. They were charging straight ahead, hungry for their appointment with battle. They were not interested in what was happening on the sides, in movements that were visible only in the corners of their eyes.

One by one, the warriors of Squad Behrasi went to ground. At staggered intervals, the Space Marines lay prone, shadows in the grass, bolter sights set on the road. Behrasi was the closest to the enemy. He took up his position with barely a hundred metres to go before the greenskins arrived.

The warbikes came first. Their drivers leaned forward in their seats, jaws wide as they drank in the exhilaration of speed. They snarled at each other as they raced to be the first to arrive at the celebration of violence. They were within arm's reach of each other. Behrasi opened fire.

He blew the head off the leading ork. Its bike turned into the path of others as it tumbled down the road, spreading metal and flame. The next ork in line turned too hard and lost control. The bike flipped, catapulting the driver with such force that the brute left a metres-long spread of skin and blood when it hit the pavement. As at the gorge, a chain reaction built up. Laughter at the misfortune of rivals turned into screams as the bikes piled into each other. A burning mass of jagged metal screeched along the pavement and stopped.

Behind it, drivers of other warbikes managed to slow down enough to veer off the road. There was no cliff to finish them off here. Some rode past the flames

and then were back on the road, roaring back to full speed. But others hit the wrong bit of unevenness of terrain. At those speeds, that was enough to send more bikes to the ground, their drivers catapulted into the air. Some of the orks survived their falls.

The army's advance began to stumble.

No orks had survived the massacre at the gorge. The rest of the army had not known there was a lesson to learn. With grim amusement, Behrasi watched history repeat itself for the first minute of the ambush. But the terrain was wider here, the orks had room to manoeuvre, and the force was so much larger. It was too big to be stopped.

The rest of the bikes found their way around the obstacle. So did the buggies. The battleguns came up the middle and drove straight through the wreckage, scattering it to either side. The infantry followed.

To the south, more bikes went down. And then Rhamm took out the driver of one of the buggies. It slewed violently. Instead of trying to regain control, its gunner opened fire. Bullets raked across more of its kin than the landscape. A tank disciplined the gunner by putting a shell into the buggy before the vehicle could crash. More drivers died, more vehicles collided with each other, and the tangle grew worse.

Less than a minute had elapsed.

Behrasi rose from his position and headed south. He ran parallel with the orks. They paid even less attention to the sides. All eyes were on the fire and riot ahead. The horde slowed again, bunched up, and spread out. The orks were close to overrunning the Raven Guard positions without even knowing it. Behrasi pulled further back. He wanted a few more strategic kills before he was dragged into the mire of the fight for survival.

He was level with one of the tanks. It had a double turret, a smaller cannon placed above a larger one, each rotating independently. Its gunners were riding in the open. The hatches were open. The target was ideal. The opportunity was there.

He looked ahead. The wreckage was being cleared again. There was only a few hundred metres before the orks reached the choke point.

'Brother Gheara, wait for the first tank. The rest of you, join the attack when it begins. Use of jump packs authorised.' He looked back at his battlegun. *Now*, he thought, *you have my full attention*.

Still running, he shot the gunners. As the orks behind the tank turned in his direction, he used his jump pack to propel himself at the vehicle. He landed on

the top turret. An ork popped out of its hatch. He impaled its throat with his lightning claws, and hauled the gurgling greenskin out with one arm. He tossed the ork over the side. It was trampled by its fellows. Behrasi dropped frag and krak grenades down the hatch. Then he shot away from the battlewagon on full burst from the pack.

Below, the tank halted after the first muffled explosion. Both cannons aimed his way. Smoke was billowing from the hatches, but the greenskins were still determined to fire. The guns boomed. The shells shrieked past Behrasi at the same moment as the battlewagon blew up.

He came down at the choke point. The mines had torn the treads out from the leading tank. The orks were still trying to drive it. It lurched forward in jerks, spraying sparks as its metal wheels dug at the pavement. Two other buggies were upended and burning. Infantry was pouring into the space between the hills. Gheara and Paazur were on the battlewagon, fighting a dozen orks on the roof. Behrasi fired at the orks climbing up the sides of the tank. So did the other four members of the squad as they arrived. They bought Paazur enough time to haul open the hatch. He turned, aimed his flamer down and incinerated the interior.

The battlewagon stopped moving, a hulk of dead iron in the middle of the road.

Squad Behrasi kept shooting, piling up the bodies. The orks kept coming, faster and stronger. Gheara was in the clear, but before Paazur could leap from the tank, two massive orks surged from the crowd, faster and with more agility than should have been possible with their armour. They attacked Paazur from both sides, one with a chainaxe, the other with a power claw. The blows were the crack of thunder.

Paazur fell to his knees. One ork jammed the chainaxe into his gorget, grinding through until Paazur's head hung down his left shoulder. The other greenskin, unwilling to be left out of the kill, slammed its claw against his back. Its aim was off and it burst the flamer tanks. Howling, coated in liquid fire, the orks jumped from the battlewagon, spreading flame in the horde below.

The tide rose up both sides of the choke point. Two more tanks were coming up behind. The Raven Guard had created a dam, but Behrasi knew it was about to burst. How long had they held the orks back?

The battle had lasted a few minutes. It was almost over.

The squad regrouped. The Space Marines formed a line across the road. They walked backwards, away from the wreck of the battlewagon, and poured bolter shells into the horde. They killed orks by the score. Orks by the hundreds

replaced them. The retaliatory fire became more organised, more concentrated, more lethal.

‘Brothers,’ Behrasi voxed to the company, ‘I hope you are close. We have held the enemy back for as long as we can.’

‘We are almost with you,’ Sergeant Klijuun responded.

‘I see them,’ Gheara said.

Behrasi risked a glance backwards. He saw the streaks of seven more assault squads closing in.

In the same moment that he saw the hope of reinforcements, he heard the train. Heavy, thudding, sending the vibrations of its might spreading through the ground for thousands of metres in all directions, the orkish madness for speed and strength given material form appeared in the east.

Too soon, Behrasi thought. *Too fast.*

The train’s horn blasted across the land. Violence itself had a voice, and it rejoiced.



CHAPTER FIVE

The autarch and Alathannas arrived in the field just outside the Raven Guard encampment within minutes of Krevaan's return. The two eldar rode their jetbikes to within a few metres of where the Thunderhawk *Claw of Deliverance* was preparing for lift-off. Krevaan was aboard with his squad. He ordered the pilot, Radost, to wait. He pulled open the side door, jumped to the ground, and strode over to the two xenos.

'You know of the land train,' Alathannas said.

'It destroyed ten of my warriors.'

'And many of ours. Autarch Eleira believes our strategies should be closely coordinated. We cannot confront the orks in a direct contest.'

Admitting the orks' numerical and armour superiority to anyone other than his battle-brothers went against Krevaan's every instinct of honour and pride. Denying the truth of the assessment, however, would be madness. There was no time for grandstanding. And he had never had patience for commanders unwilling to face reality. 'I agree,' he said, looking directly at Eleira.

She acknowledged him with a formal nod.

Alathannas began, 'If the land train joins the main army...'

'We are aware of the danger,' Krevaan interrupted. 'We are fighting to keep them apart.'

Eleira said something to the ranger. Alathannas translated, 'With respect, force may not be sufficient.'

That, too, was true. 'What alternative do you propose?'

'We must make the orks choose to take separate paths.'

‘I approve of the goal. You would need to offer them something very tempting for that to work.’

‘The autarch proposes that we offer ourselves. All the eldar on this planet will ride before the army, drawing it off before the land train arrives.’

Krevaan was impressed by the daring and the selflessness of the move. The sacrifice the eldar were willing to offer was great.

It was one that would make no sense if there wasn’t something more important to the eldar than any of their lives on this planet. In the city.

For Krevaan, the conversation took on the aspect of a duel. He and the eldar were using verbal camouflage as they sought to outflank each other. Every word spoken was true, and every word spoken was beside the point. The eldar needed the orks destroyed so they could find their true target. Krevaan had come to rid the planet of the orks, but to the larger game of luring the Overfiend to the system was added the necessity of uncovering the eldar game.

‘Your plan does you great honour,’ Krevaan said. And he too, was speaking the truth, even while he thought how profoundly he distrusted the eldar motives for undertaking this action. ‘Should you succeed, have you considered how to survive that pursuit?’

‘Speed has always been our weapon. If the orks look to our annihilation, rather than to besiege the city, we will have greater scope for action,’ Alathannas said.

Krevaan visualised the territory. ‘There are gullies to the east,’ he said. ‘If they follow you there, their mobility will be compromised.’

Alathannas translated for the autarch. She inclined her head again. The ranger said, ‘We thank you for the information. You will mount an assault on the train?’

‘Yes. It will not reach the city.’

‘Then we wish you victory.’

The sentiment sounded heartfelt. It was difficult to read what move in the duel it concealed. Krevaan wondered if the ranger had his leader’s full confidence. Having him speak made Eleira’s strategy even harder to divine, especially if Alathannas believed what he was saying. Yet the autarch was not wearing her helmet. She was looking at Krevaan with a clear gaze, and an expression that spoke of the respect of one veteran warrior for another. She spoke now, her Gothic laboured but correct. ‘Your alliance is an honour,’ she said.

‘As is yours,’ Krevaan said. He had expected to grind his teeth. Instead, the words came easily. They were true without qualification, without subterfuge. The skill of the Saim-Hann was ferocious. Krevaan knew this from having fought them in the past. As formidable as these xenos warriors were, they were

as badly overmatched as they had been the night before. The orks were stronger, more numerous and better equipped than either eldar or Space Marines had expected. What Eleira planned verged on martyrdom.

The eldar departed, bikes streaking over the morning field of a paradise tipped into war. Krevaan returned to the *Claw of Deliverance*. As the gunship took off, he looked out of a viewing block. He followed the track of the two warriors as they joined the larger stream of skimmers. They flowed out of Reclamation to hook up with the patrols that would now be converging on the orks. Krevaan appreciated the art that he saw. He understood the elegance of the perfectly executed attack. Whether it came from the shadows or the wind, the enemy did not see the blow coming until it was too late.

Just as the eldar would not see his blade until it was deep in their flesh.

He thought about the melta bombs planted on the skimmers, awaiting his will. He looked across the troop compartment at Thaene. The Techmarine's face was expressionless. Much of his flesh had given way to machinic replacement. His eyes were black crystal lenses. His lips were a grille that was a mirror of his helmet's. The larynx through which he spoke delivered his words in a flat monotone. The cock of his head was expressive, though. *He can see my doubts*, Krevaan thought.

'What do the eldar intend?' Thaene asked.

'To fight a heroic, and perhaps doomed, battle.'

'Their plan is much like ours, then.'

Was Thaene capable of humour? That was a mystery Krevaan had tried and failed to pierce several times in the past. He decided to take the words at face value. 'Quite,' he said. They had no real intelligence on the land train beyond Caeligus's aborted vox transmission. But the obliteration of the squad told an important story. All ten of the Raven Guard gone in seconds. The rest of Eighth Company would be up against a weapon that was the equal, at least, of the entire greenskin army.

Thaene was still watching him. 'A question, Shadow Captain?'

'Go ahead, brother.'

'Do you believe we were in error in our judgement of the eldar?'

Having his doubts spoken aloud gave them added force. 'We were wise to prepare for the worst eventuality,' he said, knowing that that was not what Thaene had asked. The Techmarine said nothing in response. He remained motionless, impassive, while Krevaan examined his own reasoning.

He did not trust the eldar. No human should. And after the orks were crushed,

the eldar would have to leave Lepidus, or be exterminated in turn. These facts were givens. There could be no tolerance of xenos presence on an Imperial world. Krevaan, though, had acted on a presumption of hostilities

Why did you plant the bombs?

Because eldar have a deeper agenda.

One that you know to be inimical to Imperium?

If it is for xenos ends, it is inimical.

That truth wasn't enough. It was a principle so universal, it might as well have been background radiation. It did not speak to his personal decision.

Krevaan looked deeper. It was his responsibility as captain to know the source of his commands. That was intelligence at least as vital as understanding the enemy. He found himself turning to his experiences in the Deathwatch. Mission after mission, decade after decade of xenos extermination. The reflex to plan the violent end of the eldar on Lepidus was as natural as breathing.

And what of honour?

That mattered too.

What if the eldar are truly acting in good faith?

Doubts on that side too. But the possibility was there. He could not deny the reality of what they were attempting in the battlefield.

He looked up at Thaene. 'Brother Techmarine,' he said, 'you asked, earlier, if there was any chance we would not use the bombs.'

'You have decided that there is, Shadow Captain?'

Krevaan nodded. 'We will give the eldar the opportunity to prove themselves. If they act honourably, they will be allowed to depart the planet without harm.'

Thaene looked out through the viewing block on his side of the compartment. 'I can see the greenskins,' he said. 'Their force is colossal. They may not grant the eldar the chance that you offer.'

'It would,' Krevaan said, 'be in our best interests that they do.'

Radost's voice sounded from the vox-speakers. 'Land train in sight.'

Krevaan rose, opened the forward door, and climbed the ladder into the cockpit. He looked ahead. He saw the train. It was the antithesis of the Raven Guard way of war. It was monstrous. It was snake and mountain chain. It was machinery that had become the brutality of strength itself.

The train rumbled across the plain, gouging a long wound over the landscape. Its current position was just to the south of the higher, rockier, gully-riven terrain. A few kilometres to the north-west, the ork army fought the squads of Eighth Company. The formation of eldar skimmers was moments away from

joining the fight.

‘All squads,’ Krevaan voxed, ‘leave the orks to the eldar. Converge on the train.’

‘What do you suppose will kill that thing?’ Radost asked.

‘The same things that will kill anything else,’ Krevaan said. ‘Shadows and knowledge, brother. Shadows and knowledge.’

The Space Marines left the field as the Saim-Hann closed in. Their jump packs took them away in steep climbs. Alathannas saw what looked like a flight of black, iron birds shooting upwards. They were harsh silhouettes, fire and darkness cutting wounds against the sky. The humans lacked grace in their methods of combat, he thought. But there was a cold, merciless precision at work. To be dismissive of it would be to fall to it.

The orks were convinced of the Raven Guard threat. The army was having to advance through hundreds of its dead. Two- and four-wheeled vehicles smouldered, almost all of them killed in the middle of the road, where they would most hamper the orks’ forward march. The horde had spilled up the slopes on either side of the road, and more of them had died there. The Raven Guard’s kills had eaten into the coherence of the ork army. It still advanced, but more slowly. Eddies of confusion slowed it down. The orks were striking out in all directions, and were unable to find a concentrated foe. Instead, they had been struck again and again by single warriors and small hit teams.

The orks had drawn their own blood. Alathannas saw, scattered over the hills and on the road, the giant bodies of the Space Marines. Their armour had been shattered by massive projectiles and repeated explosive attacks. Orks were still raining blows on the corpses. The green tide bellowed in triumph as its foe departed, and raged in frustration that its prey was slipping from its grasp. The orks sent a storm of ordnance into the skies. As if governed by a single thought, they all turned their eyes upward. They were so intent on bringing down the giant humans that they paid no attention to the ground.

They don’t see us, Alathannas thought. He rode just behind the autarch. Behind his helmet, he grinned for the first time in days.

The Saim-Hann slashed into the orks’ front lines. Eleira led them in a narrow wedge. The jetbikes’ catapults launched their monomolecular discs into the horde. The shuriken sliced through muscle and bone, dismembered and disembowelled. They blinded, and they opened throats, and they even cut through weapons. Some orks found their prize possessions coming apart in their

hands. Others tried to fire the damaged gear, and lost hands or lives as the guns blew up. The jetbikes carved their way through the orks until Eleira signalled a turn and led the squadron out of their midst towards the south. She hesitated briefly at the first gully.

Alathannas looked back. The orks had given up on the Raven Guard. They were now sending all their wrath towards the eldar. Their fire was indiscriminate, inaccurate and plentiful. Rounds chewed up the nearby ground. One hit the cowling of his jetbike. The orks did not pursue. Though distracted, they were still moving down the road, towards the junction that would take them to the city.

And the boon that would make them unstoppable.

Eleira turned to Passavan. 'The strategy will work,' the farseer said. 'For good or ill.'

'For both,' Eleira shot back. Then she was riding again, leading them all again, a crimson spear aimed at the orkish heart.

They could not pierce that heart. Alathannas knew that. The body of the horde was too strong, too resilient in numbers. Even so, the satisfaction of retaliation was visceral. The retreat at the bridge had been a profound humiliation. Now the orks were learning the cost of that affront.

He was grinning again as the bikes hit the orks for a second time. The rush of speed was even greater inside the green tide. He was surrounded by fragmentary images of ork faces. They raged, they screamed, and they bled and died. He saw a blur of green, of clawed fists turning blades and guns his way. They were so slow, they appeared frozen.

The orks' sluggishness was an illusion. A dangerous one. It encouraged recklessness. It bred disaster. Eleira knew this. She guided her warriors back out once more, before the orks could arrest their flight. But Alathannas still heard the crunch of a high-velocity impact, the singing wrench of disintegrating wraithbone. The cry of a rider who was not killed on the instant, and instead fell to the butchery of the orks.

A battlewagon pushed past the wreckage of one of its kin. It surged forwards, cannon and side guns blazing. A shell burned through the air over Alathannas's head. It struck a jetbike three back from him. The explosion took out the skimmer, its rider, and the orks in immediate proximity. Earth, flesh and wreckage rained back down.

Bringing up the rear of the eldar formation was the sole remaining Vyper. Its gunner, Selandria, turned the bright lance against the tank. Its beam scorched the

armour, shearing right through the thinner plating of the shutters. It cut the side gunners in half.

The cannon swung at the Vyper. Selandria trained the beam on the barrel of the gun. The battlewagon fired as the skimmer passed close. Warped by the lance, the cannon burst apart. Selandria staggered as shrapnel bit into her armour.

The battlewagon was bereft of weapons except its very mass. The maniacal frustration of its driver was audible well beyond the tank itself. As the Vyper veered away from the tank, following the jetbikes, the battlewagon gave chase. It broke out of the greater mass of the army, and headed out across the plain after the eldar.

The other orks on vehicles did the same. Most of the bikes and buggies in the front half of the ork advance had been destroyed by the Raven Guard. But another wave had been riding escort to the rearward tanks, and its vehicles now roared free of the choke point. Blue and black smoke choked the air. The drivers pursued the Saim-Hann with total disregard of common sense. Rough terrain or smooth made little difference to the skimmers. The jetbikes flew above the uneven ground. The orks came at such speed that they caught up to the eldar. For a few orks, that was all that they did. Their bikes hit rock outcroppings. The drivers lost control. The vehicles went into violent rolls.

Still the bikes kept coming. The more stable buggies weren't far behind. Sprays of bullets covered the eldar formation. They began to take their toll. Two more riders were killed. The last of the enemy force passed through the choke point, unleashing still more vehicles. The final two battlewagons joined in the hunt. So did the infantry.

The orks had taken the bait.

The Saim-Hann raced to the gullies. The formation broke up. A handful of bikes dropped down each slope. They spread out over the terrain. They were no longer a coherent force. Having enticed the orks, the eldar denied them a concentrated group of targets. The green tide had numbers enough to cover the entire area. The orks poured into the maze of narrow streams and high cliffs.

The duel began.



CHAPTER SIX

The *Claw of Deliverance* went in for a strafing run along the length of the land train. The armoured beast grew before Krevaan's gaze. The locomotive and four cars resembled a mechanical being with its own volition. It was gargoyle, snake and battering ram. The crude, leering face at the front was, he suspected, a product of whatever passed for worship for the greenskins. The behemoth was constructed in tribute to their false god, and it was so powerful that it approached the monstrous divine.

The Thunderhawk launched a full barrage at the locomotive. Primary cannon, twin-linked heavy bolters, lascannons and Hellstrike missiles: an inferno enveloped the engine. The train didn't even slow. It drove through the explosions, and Krevaan thought its face bore a mocking snarl. He could see some minor scarring on the roof plating of the cars, but the locomotive showed no damage at all. At the very least, the clear blister beneath the great turret should have been shattered, its occupant reduced to ash. Instead the engineer appeared to wave, as if amused by the Raven Guard's attempts to do it harm. Then it retaliated.

The big gun rose and swung towards the gunship. The movement was slow. Radost evaded it easily. The other, smaller guns were a different story. The entire length of the train erupted in projectile fire. The armament was beyond excessive. It was as if the engineer had been possessed by an inspiration that had turned into madness. Guns that blurred the line between stubber and cannon were present every few metres along both sides of the roofs of the engine and the cars. The simultaneity of the fire meant that the engineer was controlling all of

them. Shutters opened up in the flanks, and the ork troops aboard started shooting too.

Radost took the Thunderhawk into a steep climb. The wall of ordnance slammed against its armour. A few of the rounds penetrated, though the damage was minimal. The main cannon fired. The shot went wide, but the size of the shell hit home for Krevaan. That was an artillery piece. The shell arced into the sky. Its descent was hidden. The orks, he realised, could start bombarding Reclamation whenever the spirit moved them.

The orks wanted the city as badly as the eldar did. They both had to be denied.

‘Shadow Captain,’ Zobak voxed, ‘we are in position to attempt to board.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Approaching the rear car.’

Radost brought the gunship around. He began dropping towards the train once more. The squads had all been kept at bay by the massive firepower, but Krevaan saw Zobak’s squad arrowing down towards their target. ‘We’ll draw the fire,’ Krevaan said.

Radost nodded that he’d understood. He raced the assault squad. The Thunderhawk screamed across the locomotive’s front at maximum velocity. The ork guns sought it out again. The range of the train’s field of fire was impressive. The engineer could shoot at whatever it saw. The *Claw of Deliverance* passed close enough for Krevaan to see the massive grin on the ork’s face.

The guns tracked, the beat of their fire a *chud-chud-chud-chud-chud* that shook the land. More rounds struck the gunship. He heard the crash and shatter of damage. He saw Radost struggle with controls becoming sluggish. The gunship’s weapons struck at the train again, and again the ork machine shrugged them off.

The *Claw* shot up and away from the train. Krevaan looked down to see if they had held the ork’s attention long enough to give Zobak the chance he needed.

They had not.

He saw the final moments of another slaughter. The train’s guns were not slaved to each other. They were capable of firing at independent targets. While the locomotive’s armaments had hit the Thunderhawk, the ones on the cars had responded to Zobak’s attempted incursion. The blizzard of fire killed his squad. Of the ten warriors, only one managed to land on the roof.

‘Take us to the rear,’ Krevaan told Radost.

The pilot kept the gunship high until he was level with the last car and began the descent. Krevaan called the sergeant’s name over the vox. Zobak answered

with a croak. It was he who stood on the roof. As the gunship drew nearer, Krevaan increased the magnification of his helmet lenses. He looked at his sergeant. Zobak was stooped, his armour ruined in a dozen places. He took one heavy step.

A hatch opened in the centre of the roof and an ork climbed out. It rushed at the Space Marine, brandishing a cleaver the size of its arm. Zobak did not move. The ork stepped up to him and swung the cleaver back with both hands. Zobak shot out his arm, ramming his lightning claws into the ork's brain. The ork sagged on the spikes. Its weight dragged Zobak's arm down. He almost dropped to his knees. He pulled his arm away, freeing it of the ork. He stumbled back, but remained upright.

He walked forward another step.

Two more orks had emerged from the hatch. They carried huge shotguns. They shot him as they walked towards him. The rounds must have been solid slugs. The impacts were massive. Zobak jerked with each hit. The orks fired, reloaded, fired again.

Krevaan watched the blows batter the sergeant to death. The vision through his lenses grew in detail and pain as the Thunderhawk plunged towards the roof of the train in a desperate dive.

A useless dive, Krevaan thought. Did he imagine there was any aid they could bring to Zobak? What did he think would happen when the *Claw of Deliverance* came close to the land train once more? He killed the magnification. 'Pull up,' he told Radost.

The pilot must have been expecting the order. He responded as if he had been about to make the course correction himself at that moment. Below, the diminished figure of Zobak fell from the train. He was crushed beneath the treads of the cars.

Radost asked, 'We do have to board it, don't we?'

Krevaan nodded. 'Our weapons aren't enough to get through that force field.' 'How can it be so powerful?'

'For the same reason that all these greenskins are exaggerated exemplars of their kind. There is something on this planet, brother, that is driving them to obscene accomplishments.' *The eldar know what it is*, he thought. There would be no use in asking Alathannas the nature of the secret. It was something important to the eldar. It would have to be discovered by other means.

The Thunderhawk was moving west, tracking the train's progress. Krevaan looked to the north. From this height, it seemed that the eldar had lured the orks

into cracks in the land. Both armies had vanished. It occurred to Krevaan that this invisibility might give the Saim-Hann dangerous opportunities.

He contacted Behrasi. 'Brother-sergeant,' he said, 'I have a task for you that I don't think you will welcome.'

'I welcome my duty in whatever form it takes, Shadow Captain,' Behrasi answered.

'You have fought well from the shadows, and justified my faith in you. I need you to act as observer for the moment.'

'Meaning?'

'Track the progress of the eldar campaign.'

'Are we providing assistance?'

'No. Surveillance only. Keep me informed of its success or failure. More particularly, watch for any behaviour that is not about killing greenskins.'

'We are tasked with watching our eldar allies,' Behrasi said to Rhamm.

'That's all?'

'For now.' He looked towards the lowlands of the gullies. The ground to the west levelled off, becoming dryer and cracked by jagged cleavages. There must once have been aggressive streams carving out such deep beds. They were long gone, leaving behind a maze of rock. There was no way of monitoring the entire network of crevasses, though that wouldn't be necessary. The struggle itself would be a guide.

He addressed the full squad. 'We'll have to spread out,' he said. 'Cover as much ground as you can. If the eldar are any sort of tacticians, they'll be leading the greenskins into multiple gullies. Stay with the larger struggles. Relay what you see.'

They moved out onto the broken terrain. The gullies were a sudden drop in the dry plain extending east and north. They were narrow and very deep, easily twenty or thirty metres and more. Behrasi thought their depth and the complexity of the network was a bit too remarkable to be entirely natural. From the position of the squad as it moved from the south-west corner of the system, the interconnections resembled the radiating pattern of a spider's web. It was too artistic. In this, it was in keeping with what he had seen of the planet's geology. It was too precise, too pleasing to the eye. The quick shifts from one region to another felt like an arrangement rather than the lucky chance of natural processes. He wondered again about the eldar interest in the world.

Perhaps Krevaan's suspicions were justified. And yet he felt uneasy in his task

as he took up a position at the edge of a gully that pointed straight as a clawed finger. Partway down, he saw a large skirmish. The eldar were fighting hard. They had fought honourably, and their actions, as far as he had seen, had been the same. They were keeping faith with the agreement.

We are the ones who are not, he thought.

He lowered himself amid the rocks at the top of the cleft. He found shadow, and made himself part of it. He stood with perfect stillness. He waited, and watched, and wished he was boarding the train. He would have preferred the honest directness of that action. What bothered him was not quite that the Raven Guard might be betraying a xenos race. This was not about being more accepting of species whose existence was an affront to the sight of the Emperor. It was about being true to what the Raven Guard should be. They fought from the shadows. They became shadows. That did not mean becoming infected by shadow.

We are not the Night Lords.

He hoped that when he was next called upon to act, he would be confident that he did so with honour.

Alathannas was alone again. He had been in a squadron of four other jetbikes, but had split off from them at a Y-junction of gullies. He had sensed opportunity down the left-hand one. It was extremely narrow. It looked like a cleft made in the bedrock by a giant axe blade. Its course was a series of switchbacks. He was mad to take it at this speed. He hoped the orks were proud enough and foolish enough to follow him.

They were.

Four bikes followed him. The excited hoots of their riders echoed up the rock walls.

So, Alathannas thought, *we find common ground in madness*.

He flew even faster. He skimmed over the broken bottom of the gully. He was surprised the orks were able to maintain control of their vehicles over such a surface. The air rushed hard against his skin. A cliff face loomed ahead of him. He waited until the last second to throw his jetbike into a hard left turn. The wall came at him so quickly, and was so close, the wind itself seemed to turn into stone. The jetbike screamed. Momentum wanted him to wreck himself against the stone. Instead, he shot away and rounded the next corner.

He looked back as he took the turn. The leader ork drove straight into the cliff without even trying to turn. The bike exploded. Flames washed back over the

other two. They managed to stay upright even as they had to make a ninety-degree course correction. Alathannas left them behind for the few moments it took them to reach the turn. They came around it firing. The bullets shrieked past him. He pulled ahead, the jetbike flying over the land with grace while the ork vehicles gouged the earth. They pursued him with power and brute aggression. That would be enough to keep them in the race, but no more. If he wanted, he could lose the ork bikes.

He wanted them to follow. He wanted the orks certain that his fall was imminent.

There was still a hundred metres before the next sharp turn. He risked a glance back. The orks were falling too far behind. He slowed down a fraction. Just enough to give them the illusion of closing. Then he was at the turn.

The orks wouldn't fall for the same gambit again. Even they would slow down enough to negotiate the turn. That gained him another couple of seconds. He looked ahead, saw that the next switchback was barely thirty metres distant. He accelerated, flew hard right at full speed. Now there was another long, narrow stretch before the cleft in the rock closed entirely fifty metres on. He was in a dead end.

He saw all this, and the moves open to him, in a fraction of a second. For all his time as a ranger, for all the distance that existed between him and the greater community of his fellows, at this moment, he was one with them. He was living at the speed of the Saim-Hann. The world was a blur, the past non-existent, the future compressed into a present of lightning decisions and consequences. Battle was the wind against him, the wind created by his own velocity. The experience was more profound than exhilaration. It was the expression of the deep truth of his being. It was a summation.

The orks thought they could use speed against the Saim-Hann. He would prove them wrong.

He turned the jetbike around and rose a few metres higher above the ground. He flew back the way he had come. He lowered the aim of his shuriken catapults. The orks came around the corner at the same time that he did. He fired down, strafing the riders as they passed beneath him. The shuriken severed the right arm of the lead pilot. His bike jerked left and started flipping. The others couldn't avoid it. They drove into a collision.

Alathannas's lip curled. The orks were becoming very good at killing each other through their own love of speed.

Alathannas left the orks behind. He returned to the junction and made his way

through the maze of connections towards the sounds of war. He shot through a passage so narrow that the walls brushed the wings of the jetbike. He came out in one of the larger gullies. It was wide and long. The orks used the greater room to their advantage. They filled the space with their strength. Infantry and bikes were here in numbers. There was also a battlewagon. It struggled to find traction in the soft earth of the former riverbed. It advanced in irregular lurches. That was dangerous enough. The combined ork forces filled the gully with a torrent of fire.

It worked. No amount of speed or manoeuvrability could escape that storm. As he entered the gully behind the orks, Alathannas saw an entire squadron of jetbikes smashed and blown apart by bullet and shell.

Three jetbikes still flew, jinking hard, flying straight at the orks in a desperate attempt to punch a hole in their fire. The excited laughter of the orks rose over the hammering roar of their attack.

Alathannas flew down the centre of the gully. He passed over the orks' heads, once more firing down on them, drawing part of their attention away from the other attackers. Some of the orks assumed he was not alone, and retaliated against phantom enemies to the rear. The confusion was the edge the attacking eldar needed. They lost another jetbike, but they also cut a swath deep into the ork infantry and took out two riders. The tank advanced unharmed.

Alathannas joined the other two. One was a Fire Dragon named Kuthalen. The other was the autarch. Eleira reversed direction and led them away from the enemy. The remaining bikes ran over their own foot soldiers in their eagerness to give chase. One collided with a walker, destroying both. The rest of the orks advanced at the pace of their tank.

The gully had a gradual curve to the right. The jetbikes moved beyond the line of sight of all but the bikes. Eleira turned around again. 'Stay a few lengths behind me,' she ordered. As Alathannas had done earlier, she sped back to meet the bikes.

Instead of flying above the orks' heads, she stayed at ground level. The bikers, four of them, found themselves on a collision course with her, shuriken volleys cutting into their vehicles and their flesh at eye level. The bikes veered off to either side. While the orks fought to regain control, they were easy prey for Alathannas and Kuthalen.

They had gained a breathing space for the few minutes it would take the other orks to arrive. Ahead, another channel joined from the right. The sound of more combat came from the far side of the rock face. Alathannas heard what he was

sure was the growl of another large engine. He pointed to the junction and said, 'We could well have tanks on either side of us very soon.'

'If we can foresee that result,' said Eleira, 'be assured that Passavan does, and is doing what he must. The timing will need to be precise.' She took them towards the junction.

'For what, autarch?'

'Bringing the tanks together.'

Alathannas pictured two battlewagons following them into the channel before them. It was still wide enough for the heavy vehicles to enter, but their movements would be even more restricted. Despite the increase in firepower, two tanks would be a liability, one that, with the right lure, the orks would be unable to resist.

'We want the tanks following us here,' Eleira said. 'The farseer has determined that this path will give us what we need to destroy them.'

She did not add, *Before they destroy us*. Alathannas understood the implication all the same. 'How many of us have fallen?'

'Too many.'

Deep rumbling from behind, approaching from two angles. Alathannas looked back. He saw Passavan's bike and the Vyper racing their way, firing shuriken and exterminating energy into the pursuing army. The timing would be as Eleira had ordered.

As the other two eldar skimmers arrived, and all five headed down the channel, there was a moment when the combined fire of the two ork forces reached for them. The sinuous turns of the gully gave the eldar cover after the first few seconds, but by then, the damage had already been done to Kuthalen. Her jetbike's starboard wing was reduced to a ragged stub. Its flight was uneven. She leaned forward, her back arched with pain.

Alathannas flew beside her. Her helmet turned to face him. She nodded, then dropped back. She was giving the uninjured a clear path. And preparing to give the orks a bitter triumph when she could no longer fight.

The gully's curves came quickly. Around each, Alathannas hoped to see the salvation that Eleira and Passavan expected to find. It remained invisible. To the rear, the ork bikes kept pace, racing ahead of the battlewagons. Their fire was continuous. They appeared to have unlimited supplies of ammunition.

'Now,' Passavan said as the Saim-Hann hit the next corner. The channel kept curving, turning north and east. Part way in, Alathannas saw the trap they needed. Ahead, a rocky arch spanned the gully. The Vyper passed under it. Its

gunner turned the lance's beam on the ends of the arch, alternating shots, working symmetrical weakness into the stone.

'Slow them down,' Eleira ordered, heading back towards the orks. 'Bunch them up.'

Kuthalen shot ahead of her. 'Let the first blow be mine, autarch,' she said. Her jetbike's flight was even more erratic. The strain in her voice was mortal. Will alone was keeping her alive and aloft.

'Granted,' said Eleira. 'With our thanks. Safe journey, Fire Dragon.'

Kuthalen dropped low, her hull almost kissing the river bed. She held her fire. Over the din of their own engines and guns, the orks had no warning of her coming. They met in the curve, less than a dozen metres separating them. Their relative velocity was blinding. The orks appeared, and Kuthalen ploughed into them. She fired at the last second, and decapitated the leading ork. Kuthalen turned her skimmer as she hit. She crashed into two of the enemy at once even as her shuriken sliced through engines and fuel lines. Tangling metal and wraithbone erupted in flame.

Alathannas was startled by the size of the explosion. Kuthalen's vehicle appeared to be the source of the blast, and it blew up too easily, with too much force. At least its death hurt the orks. The remaining eldar skimmers steered around the burning crash, Eleira and Passavan on the left, Alathannas on the right. They strafed the flanks of the orks. The enemy's charge stumbled. The orks turned their bikes towards the attackers, and now they were colliding with each other, driving at cross purposes, firing across the gully. Within seconds, six bikes were caught in the confusion.

The hammering roar of the battlewagons drew closer. The delaying tactic had served its purpose. Alathannas raised his bike over the heads of the ork riders and followed the other two eldar back around the curve. A cannon shell hit the cliff wall on his left. He was buffeted by the blast. A wind of stone shards hit him and his jetbike, shredding his cloak as he drove on.

Behind him came the sound of crumpling metal as the tanks drove over the wreckage. Bullets and shells shrieked past him as the orks moved forward again.

The arch was just metres ahead. Eleira and Passavan went underneath. They kept on going, drawing the orks' attention beyond the natural bridge. Alathannas reached it. Just as he did, another shot from one of the big guns hit the stone. He winced, expecting the rock to fall on his head and disarm the trap, but the arch held.

He was past it now. He kept moving forward, maintaining the lure, but slowed

down just enough to look back.

The two battlewagons arrived. The bright lance struck the arch one more time.

From a distance, there was something almost gentle about the touch of light against stone. The effect was massive. The bridge collapsed. Thousands of tonnes of rock fell on the ork tanks. The thunder of avalanche mixed with the grind of crushed metal. The ground shook with the compressed blast of ordnance exploding. Dust rolled in both directions down the gully. Alathannas turned around again and headed into the cloud. As the echoes of the rock fall faded, he saw the stony heap that marked the grave of the tanks. From the other side came the frustrated howls of orks. Their heavy armour was destroyed, and their way forward was blocked.

Alathannas prepared to take his jetbike over the rubble and into the ork mass. The dust was an opportunity. It was perfectly suited to the path that had long been his. He would strike the orks as a phantom from the white limbo. But before he could descend, Eleira and Passavan had joined him.

‘No, ranger,’ Eleira said. ‘Your battle here is finished.’

‘Autarch?’ He could not keep the disbelief from his voice. His battle here was just beginning, he thought. The field of struggle had transformed. It had become his domain.

‘We have hurt the orks,’ Eleira told him, ‘but we are a long way from defeating them.’

‘Our losses elsewhere in this network are severe,’ Passavan added.

‘Our victory is uncertain.’ Eleira paused, letting her words sink in. ‘A loss against the orks here is far more serious than our deaths.’

‘The mission,’ Alathannas said.

‘We might fail here. There is the possibility that the humans will fail against the land train.’

Alathannas looked at Passavan. The farseer was difficult to make out in the billowing dust. His silhouette nodded. ‘The skein is tangled,’ he said. ‘I can discern the paths we must follow, but the outcome of any of them is very uncertain. Our best course is not much better than a hope.’

‘What would you have me do?’ Alathannas asked Eleira.

‘Return to the city. Your skills are suited to more than combat. Find what we seek. If we fall here, you might yet have a chance of preventing the greater evil.’

‘Even if I find it, what can I do alone?’

‘You won’t be alone. We will spare who we can to join you. If you succeed that far, then nothing else matters. We will abandon the struggle here, and do

what must be done.'

'I see.' He did. He didn't have to walk the path of the seer to know what the consequences would be. No matter what happened, none of the Saim-Hann on this planet would live to the next dawn. Their doom was a certainty. His heart felt heavy with the weight of his race's tragedy. The Fall continued to echo in every death, in every lost cause.

Perhaps this cause was not yet lost. The success of the mission would be worth his own death.

He used the cover of the dust to rise out of the gully.

Behrasi heard the huge rumble to the north-east of his position. A few moments later, the dust cloud billowed into the air above the gullies.

'That could have been the work of either side,' Rhamm said.

'True.' He watched the cloud. After a minute, an eldar bike emerged from the dust. It headed west. Back to Reclamation.

'They can't have won already,' Gheara said.

Behrasi tracked the flight of the lone warrior. Just as the xenos was disappearing into the distance, three more jetbikes appeared and flew off in the same direction. 'They haven't won,' he said. 'That's why we're seeing this. Only a few warriors being sent? This is an act of desperation. They think they might lose.'

'What do they hope to accomplish?' Gheara wondered.

'That is our mission to discover.' He waited until the eldar were out of sight and he was certain no others would be leaving the fight with the orks. He contacted Krevaan over the vox. 'Some of the eldar are heading for Reclamation,' he reported.

The Shadow Captain grunted. 'Follow them,' he ordered.

'We are on the point of doing so.'

'Good. See what they do. Keep me informed as best you can,' Krevaan said and broke the connection.

The captain, Behrasi thought, had not sounded surprised at the news. If anything, there had been the satisfaction of having been proven correct in his tone. Behrasi, for his part, felt something closer to disappointment. Perhaps even sadness. He would not go as far as to say that he had trusted the eldar. But he *had* wanted to believe in their honour. He had thought he had seen something of that order in Alathannas when the two forces had parleyed in the city.

As his jump pack took him on the first leap towards Reclamation, the

disappointment turned into resentment. He did not like being fooled. By the time he and his squad were halfway to the city, he was furious. He was ready to exact lethal punishment for the xenos' treachery.



CHAPTER SEVEN

There would only be one chance to board the land train. It would come as the ork juggernaut started up the slope towards Reclamation. The road that the train followed passed through a cut in a low hill at the foot of the main slope. The cliff walls on either side of the road were sheer, and about ten metres high. They were close together, too. There would barely be space for the train to pass between them. When it did, that would be Eighth Company's best chance to board. Staying just beneath the brow of the hill, the Raven Guard would be invisible to the orks until the last moment.

Even so, a distraction was needed. If the greenskin engineer had the time to trigger the defences, they might still be enough to sweep Krevaan and his men from the roof. And then the savage machine would not stop until Reclamation was a ruin. Krevaan needed all of the engineer's attention focused elsewhere. His strategy called for a secondary attack, one ferocious enough to resemble the main event.

He would take the strength of one combat squad onto the train. As he disembarked from the *Claw of Deliverance* on the other side of the hill from the train's approach, he addressed the company over the vox. 'Brothers,' he said, 'I want a direct, frontal assault on the enemy. Step out of the shadows, and you will create the ones from which our death blow will come.'

A chorus of acknowledgements followed as he took his squad to the ambush point.

'We will attempt to gain access through a roof hatch?' Thaene asked.

'No,' Krevaan told the Techmarine. 'We should keep our exposure in that

position to the bare minimum. As soon as that greenskin tech has any idea of what we are doing, it will hit us with that armament. We'll go down in between the cars.'

In position, the five Space Marines listened to the land train close in. They could not see it, but the reports of their brothers painted the picture of the battle. The *Claw of Deliverance* launched the assault, raining missiles at the locomotive. The engine drove through the flames. One of the rockets gouged a crater in the road before it. This was no obstacle. The treaded beast dealt with it as it would a simple unevenness in the road. There was no pause in the train's relentless drive forward.

As the engine passed through the fire of the Thunderhawk's assault, the second phase of the attack began. Just beyond the cut, waiting on either side of the hill, were the Venerable Brothers Karom and Raust. The Dreadnoughts of Eighth Company, dropped off by the gunship, now had their moment in a war that had, since the first ambush, been a series of rapid deployments. They were not fast, but they too were creatures of the shadows. They were the hammerblow of night, their attacks as devastating as they were unexpected. They lit up the ork tech's blister with fire that could level a fortress. Karom struck with lascannon, Raust with multi-melta.

Any other vehicle would have died in that moment, its armour pierced and melted to slag. The ork engineer's mad genius of excess stymied the Dreadnoughts. The force field, powerful beyond any rational conception, absorbed the hits and dissipated their energy along the entire length of the train. For a second after each blast from the Dreadnoughts' weapons, the line of cars flashed a sun-bright green and crackled with violet lightning. The locomotive was undamaged. The engineer exulted inside its blister. Karom and Raust continued firing. They could not overload the force field, but the blinding discharge of energy dazzled the ork.

The rest of the company joined the attack. Seven assault squads poured fire at the greenskin. Their shells came at it from all angles. Seventy Space Marines, manoeuvring by jump pack, rose and fell before the land train. Their movements were constant, rapid, erratic. They gave the ork engineer no concentration of targets upon which to retaliate. They were a jagged constellation of war, stretching across the arc of the horizon. The assault squads, Dreadnoughts and Thunderhawk hit the train with a force to level cities. The craters multiplied, turning the land into a moonscape. The ork machine roared on, as if it were the brutal war lust of the greenskins given metal form.

Perhaps it was, Krevaan thought as the disbelieving reports flooded the vox. He had seen enough earlier to know that they would not stop the train through direct means. All of his brothers had, too. But the force field's strength defied reason. There was something malign at work on Lepidus Prime. It manifested itself in everything from the unusual size and strength of the ork foot soldiers to the mad invincibility of the land train. This was different from what the Imperium had fought on Armageddon. There, the greenskins had been directed by a leader of unholy skill, one whose threat, Krevaan was certain, was still not fully appreciated. The orks on Lepidus Prime seemed... transformed. It wasn't leadership that was animating them. It was something else, something that touched their very being, and all the works that flowed from it.

Unharméd though the train was, the ork tech retaliated as though threatened with imminent destruction. It unleashed the armament in full. Turret cannons opened up. Rockets flew in swarms. The accuracy of the bombardment was nonexistent, but it blanketed everything ahead of the train. The engineer didn't have to aim. If it made the world explode, its enemies would die in that fireball. Krevaan blinked through the readouts of his helmet lenses. He saw one rune after another turn red, then dark, his brothers giving their lives in an attack that was only a diversion, an attack that was, by its nature, doomed to failure.

The battle had been raging for less than a minute. The train was still pulling its length though the cut.

Thaene said, 'Our losses our growing.' He was hearing the same reports. He spoke without emotion, offering an observation, evaluating a situation on the point of deteriorating.

'Yes,' Krevaan said. *I will honour every death*, he thought. Every battle-brother who had fallen had purchased them the hope of victory. 'Now,' he snarled.

Shadows flowed over the hill. Giants in armour became wraiths. Though it was day, the lethal touch of the night reached for the train. Krevaan leapt. He landed on the roof of the second car. The rest of the squad followed. The sound of the impact of their boots vanished under the hill-shaking din of the guns and the engine. The Space Marines stayed low, beneath the fire of the turrets. Krevaan looked across the roof of the next car to the locomotive. The engineer was visible in its bubble. The hunched figure was facing forward, riveted by the unfolding inferno of war.

'Over the roofs?' Dvarax voxed. Natural speech was impossible, even if it wouldn't have given their position away.

‘No,’ Krevaan said. If the greenskin’s attention wavered from the front for an instant and it saw them, it would redirect the turrets their way. They had to use the time bought for them to get beyond the reach of the guns.

Crouching, Krevaan moved to the gap between the first and second cars. He looked down. There was no platform between them. The coupling was a grotesque conglomeration of pistons, chains and spikes. It made little mechanical sense. It was excessive, it was inefficient, and it was dangerous. Every element of the land train had been weaponised. Any being not heavily armoured that tried to stand on the coupling would be ground to blood and meat by the moving metal.

There were doors leading into each car. By contrast to the coupling, they were simple affairs, nothing more than hinged, uneven rectangles. It was as if the makers of the train had grown bored with any elements that could not be put to killing use.

Krevaan pointed to Dvarax, Revaal and Akrallas, then down at the car they were on. He indicated that he and Thaene would take the forward car. The squad understood his intent: kill the sentries, prevent any warning from reaching the engineer.

Krevaan and Thaene leapt over the gap between the cars. Krevaan waited for the other three to get into position. Akrallas took point. He nodded at the Shadow Captain.

Shadows moved again, shadows with mass and force. Krevaan and Akrallas dropped to the coupling. Krevaan felt motion beneath his boots like a sea with claws. Gaps opened and closed between the metal with every jolt of movement as the train rumbled over the craters. Krevaan grounded himself. His legs moved, adjusting for the motions of the grasping iron. His upper body was motionless. He reached out and grasped the door by a protrusion on its right edge. ‘Ready?’ he voxed Akrallas.

‘Ready.’

The doors opened out, so they struck in two beats. Krevaan yanked his door off its hinges. He lunged inside as Akrallas hauled the other open. The other members of the squad followed. Krevaan knew Thaene was at his back before he had taken two steps into the car. Before him was a cluster of surprised orks. There were four infantry, aiming their guns outside the metal-shuttered windows. They struggled to bring their weapons back in, getting the barrels stuck against the narrow frames. Krevaan dismissed them to the edge of his attention. They were already dead.

The fifth ork was a concern. It was another of the hulking, armoured brutes. This one wasn't quite as massively plated as the others Krevaan had encountered on Lepidus Prime. The armour bore enough spikes to turn its shoulder guards into weapons in their own right, but it wasn't powered. The ork, though, was huge. It didn't need an exoskeleton when its own frame was so gigantic. One hand wielded a clip-fed pistol the size of a bolter. The other carried a thick, short blade. The monster almost reached the ceiling in the car, but it was prepared for close-quarters fighting. It had decided to leave the ranged combat to its underlings and to the train's defences. It thought ahead. That made it dangerous.

Krevaan lunged at the warboss, slashing at its exposed face with his lightning claws. The ork took a step back, tucked its chin in, and raised its pistol. It fired a volley of bullets at Krevaan and Thaene. The rounds were huge. They punched into the interior walls of the car. Four of them slammed into Krevaan's chest. His armour held, but the inertia of the blows was enormous. They stopped his charge.

The other orks brought their weapons to bear as their leader emptied its clip. Krevaan ducked beneath the swing of the chieftain's blade. He struck out with his right arm and impaled the nearest greenskin through the chest. The ork howled and dropped its gun. Krevaan hauled the ork in and hurled it at the chieftain. The big ork's blade sliced into the minion's ribs and stuck.

Behind Krevaan, Thaene took down the other ork on the right with bolter fire. He trained his servo-arm's plasma cutter on the left-hand enemies. One died immediately, the upper half of its head sheared off. The other pulled the pin on a long-handled grenade.

Krevaan saw the gesture in the corner of his eye. He had fractions of a second to brace himself before the grenade blew up in the ork's hand, setting off all the other explosives the greenskin carried. Inside the confined space of the car, the blast was huge. These were no mere frag grenades. They were another product of the ork engineer's obscene inspiration. The devices were as much incendiary as fragmenting, and they filled the car with flame and shrapnel. The explosions scorched the surface of Krevaan's armour and knocked him sideways. Thaene, closer to the centre of the blast, was knocked to the ground.

The ork chieftain roared through the fire, flesh smouldering, and brought its blade down in a two-handed chop. Krevaan brought his left arm up to block. The ork hit him with strength to shatter steel. The blade cut through the ceramite and into his forearm. He yanked his arm down, dragging the weapon with it, and punched forwards with his right claws. The ork dropped the blade and reared

back, but not before Krevaan put out its left eye.

The injury drove the ork to a paroxysm of fury. It came back hard at Krevaan, proving just how dangerous it was by channelling the rage into savage but skilled combat. It rammed him with its shoulder. One of the spikes on the plate stabbed through Krevaan's gorget and into the side of his neck. The ork knocked him back against the wall, grabbed its blade and attacked again. It used the blade one-handed now, stabbing and slashing with its right hand while it hammered at Krevaan with the mailed left fist.

Krevaan parried and jabbed. He drew more blood, but the ork absorbed damage like a sponge. Somehow, its mass and its energy of rage took the place of stronger, more complete armour. It was fast, too, much faster than should have been possible for a being of its bulk. It was another dark wonder of the orks of Lepidus: a serious threat that had been transformed into a monster.

Behind it, Thaene had recovered. He aimed his plasma cutter at the combatants. The end of the servo-arm swivelled back and forth as Krevaan and the ork slashed, blocked, lunged and grappled. 'Shadow Captain?' the Techmarine asked.

'I have this.' Krevaan grunted as the ork landed a heavy blow against the side of his helmet. 'Do what we came for.' If the engineer had heard the explosion, it might be preparing a counter. The orks had little regard for each other's survival. He would not be surprised to learn that the locomotive had a cannon that could fire through the car interiors.

Thaene moved to the far end of the car. There was no door. The land train's maker did not trust its passengers to have easy access to the locomotive. Thaene turned the plasma cutter on the wall.

Krevaan forced the ork back with a flurry of slashes. The chieftain blocked his claws from tearing anything vital, but the brute was covered in its own blood. Krevaan swung up with his left hand and caught the underside of the ork's right arm. He dragged the blades along the arm, slicing off flesh, feeling them grind against bone. He gave his fist a harsh jerk, and severed the ork's right hand at the wrist. The chieftain howled its outrage and stumbled back to the other side of the car.

Krevaan used the second's pause to vox the other group. 'Brothers?' he asked.

'A large contingent, Shadow Captain,' Akrallas answered. 'There were too many sentries to kill at once. They raised the alarm. The whole force on this train is converging on our position.'

'Do what you must,' Krevaan answered, and then the ork was attacking him

again.

It lunged with its left arm outstretched. It did not try to strike him. Instead, it sprayed a vast quantity of blood at Krevaan, completely covering his helmet. Through its lenses, he saw nothing but blood. He wiped them clear, but for a vital moment, he could not see the ork. He swung with his right hand, trying to ward off an attack. The ork came in low. It rammed its blade up the inside of his left arm, piercing the armour's seam. Pain flashed down the length of his arm.

At the end of the car, Thaene finished cutting through the metre-thick metal. He kicked the wall down. The cut slab fell onto the coupling between the locomotive and the car, then to the ground.

Krevaan propelled himself forwards as if catapulted. He slammed into the brute. His momentum carried them both past Thaene and through the gap in the wall. They fell on the coupling. The grinding mechanism bit through the ork's armour and seized its flesh. It beat at Krevaan, its blows still heavy but panicked now, losing precision as it reacted to its danger.

Krevaan shoved himself away from the ork. He reached back and grabbed the ragged edge of the hole to pull himself back to his feet. The chieftain raged and struggled, but the mechanism held it fast and pulled it deeper into the gears. Krevaan now saw purpose in the excess of the construction. The cars were not linked by simple couplings. They were linked by traps. They were yet another of the train's defences. The ork was falling victim to the engineer's designs.

Steadying himself, he stomped on the ork's chest, driving it further into the hungry metal. The greenskin's howls of rage became screams. Bone snapped. Flesh tore. The monster's body was rendered bit by bit to pulp. For a surprisingly long time, it struggled to reach Krevaan and drag him down to the same fate. Then it was gone, the metal shards of its armour bouncing off the machinery to the ground.

Thaene joined Krevaan at the gap. Behind them, they could hear the battle against the other orks still raging. The snarls and sounds of gunfire blended with the raucous beat of the engine and the clanking of treads. There was still no sign that the ork engineer had realised anything was wrong. If there was any way that the troops in the cars could communicate with the locomotive, they weren't using it.

The engineer was still consumed with the challengers before it. Ahead, the sky was a lighting storm of war. Rockets and shells flew from the train in answer to those that surrounded it with a halo of fire. The machine was moving uphill now. As Krevaan stepped back into the car, he heard a massive detonation. The big

cannon on the rear car had fired. Krevaan saw the comet streak of its shell arc upwards. It had been fired at a target far beyond the attacking Raven Guard. It had, he realised, been fired at the city. A few moments later, there was a flash from beyond the horizon, reflecting against the low clouds. Reclamation had taken its first hit.

‘Do it quickly,’ Krevaan said to Thaene.

The Techmarine trained his plasma cutter on the coupling. As it came apart, the machinery flailed like the ork had, pistons and chains and gears flying apart with centripetal violence. ‘This obscenity is an insult to the Omnissiah,’ Thaene said. His tone was even, the venom present only in the words themselves. But to the degree that Krevaan had ever known Thaene to express satisfaction of any kind, he was doing so now as he set about cutting the land train’s throat.

The coupling gave a final, tearing death cry before the flare of the plasma cutter, and the link between the locomotive and the cars was severed. For a moment, the two sections of the train continued moving forwards. The cars lost speed quickly, their momentum drained away by mass and friction. The treads slowed to a halt. The locomotive pulled ahead, its own speed increasing. It advanced another fifty metres before it began to slow. After another ten, it stopped.

Thaene said, ‘The defences are still operational.’

Krevaan nodded. The turrets on the cars had not stopped firing. The big cannon boomed again. He jumped to the ground and looked up. He saw the flash and crackle of dissipating energy as Raven Guard attacks were neutralised along the entire length of the train. ‘The force field is still up too,’ he said. Whatever power system the ork engineer was using, it was not dependent on the physical connection of the land train to work. And the locomotive had not gone far enough to break the energy link.

No matter. It was the engine and the being inside that counted. Once they were dead, the rest of the train would follow. And the advance had been stopped. That much was important.

As if to contradict him, the big cannon fired once more. The flash of the detonation came a few seconds later. Reclamation was hurt, and it would bleed until the engineer was destroyed.

‘Brother Akrallas?’ he voxed. He ran towards the locomotive. Thaene followed.

‘Holding, Shadow Captain.’ His discipline hid his pain. Krevaan heard it anyway. ‘We have lost Brother Revaal.’

‘You are wounded.’

‘We both are.’

‘Your evaluation?’

‘The orks have the numbers.’ The statement was not a surrender. It was mere accuracy. Akrallas was letting him know what was inevitable unless the circumstances changed. It fell to him and Thaene to make that change.

‘How long?’ Krevaan asked.

‘As long as we can.’

‘Thank you, brother.’

The ork tech was still in its blister. It was looking back as Krevaan and Thaene raced towards the engine. It was very still, its revel arrested. Krevaan could feel the rage in its glare, and he rejoiced that the beast was at last experiencing the possibility of defeat. He and Thaene drew nearer. Thirty metres away, the massive hulk of the locomotive loomed before them, the blister no longer visible. The defences lashed at the Space Marines. Corner turrets turned away from the diversionary attack and pointed downwards. They rotated back and forth, blanketing the area with shells. They were not aiming, which told Krevaan that the ork couldn’t see them either. It was trying to take them out by destroying the entire region to the rear of the engine.

The turrets pumped out their high explosives with the speed of heavy stubbers. The direction of their fire crossed and re-crossed. Krevaan could see the movement of the guns, could tell where the shells would land. He and Thaene jerked left and right, their race now as much an evasion as it was an assault. They could not avoid the shells entirely. They were buffeted by the blasts. The engineer’s blows chipped away at their strength as they closed with the mobile fortress. They ran through an exploding landscape, fountains of earth and stone erupting on all sides.

The engineer’s guns did not stop them. They reached the locomotive. There was no door at the rear. They began moving clockwise around the engine, looking for the entrance. The cannon fire continued. The engineer must have had a sensor array of some kind, however crude, because the turrets followed their movement. The guns could not aim straight down. Krevaan and Thaene were safe as long as they stayed almost flush with the side of the locomotive.

The left-hand flank of the beast was far from featureless: it was covered in two-metre-long spikes pointing in every direction. The construction was monolithic, overlapping metal plates welded and riveted to excess. There was no entrance on this side. Nor was there on the front, though the jaws of the

locomotive looked as if they might well be functional.

‘It would be unfortunate if the only way in is a hatch on the roof,’ Krevaan said. The engineer would have a free hand with the turrets in that case. The Raven Guard wouldn’t last long enough to effect a breach.

‘The greenskin is primitive,’ Thaene said. ‘So are its works. But there is dangerous cunning here. I doubt the beast would give itself only one possible egress.’

The force field flashed and crackled. Krevaan was surrounded by wars that were simultaneously close and distant. His brothers’ assault was a great thunder, but it stopped just short of the land train, as if he were seeing the dissolve into static of a hololithic transmission. Several dozen metres away, the rest of his squad fought an army. He knew this, but his only evidence was vox communication. The sounds of that conflict were drowned out by the din of rockets and cannon. And somewhere further out, so distant at this moment that the struggle was almost mythical, the eldar fought another army. The final outcome of all those battles hinged on what he and Thaene did in the next few minutes.

On the right flank, Thaene pointed to a metal slab near the bottom of the locomotive’s skirt. It was smaller than all the other pieces, and was an almost even rectangle in shape. A single spike stuck out of the centre. ‘Here,’ Thaene said. He examined the welding. ‘None on the outside,’ he said. ‘From the inside only.’

‘No one in, but it can get out,’ Krevaan said. ‘No trust among the greenskins.’

‘None,’ Thaene agreed. He started cutting along the outline of the entrance frame. The plasma beam sliced through the seal in a few seconds. Thaene gripped both sides of the door. Krevaan readied his bolter. Thaene yanked the door free.

The entrance exploded. A huge blast of flame billowed out of the train’s interior. It smashed Thaene back, picking him up and hurling him across the blasted landscape. Krevaan had been standing a few metres to the side. He was brushed by the explosion, and that was still strong enough to knock him to the ground, armour smoking. The flames dissipated quickly. Krevaan risked looking in the entrance. He saw a narrow tunnel snaking its way deeper into the machine. On both sides of it were the immense gears, pistons and ill-defined mechanical follies that were the orks’ stock in trade. There did not appear to be any further traps.

Krevaan looked back at where Thaene had landed. The Techmarine had

ploughed a furrow into the ground when he had hit. He had been standing in the mouth of a giant cannon just as it had fired. ‘Thaene!’ Krevaan called over the vox. The Raven Guard’s rune was flickering red in Krevaan’s display.

Thaene’s voice was weak. It could have been mistaken for a burst of static. But the sounds of a broken machine became words. ‘*Victorus aut mortis,*’ the Techmarine said.

‘We will have victory,’ Krevaan promised.

He entered the locomotive. The passage took him through the interior of a monster’s heart. The air itself pulsed with the arrhythmic beat of huge mechanisms. There was barely enough room for him to walk without scraping against the tangle of heavy machinery on either side. The vehicle was not advancing, but it was very much alive, waiting only for the command of its master to rumble over any resistance. Vast breaths of steam gasped periodically from vents and nozzles placed at odd angles in haphazard locations.

Halfway across the width of the locomotive, the passage turned right. On both sides now, Krevaan saw pistons the size of a Predator tank’s cannon. There were multiple sets, driving gigantic gears. There was little in the iron phantasmagoria that made any kind of sense. Krevaan could not imagine how the grinding work around him made the engine function. Against all reason, it did.

The noise was enormous. Hissing and clanking and complaining metal filled the uneven pauses between the beats. Krevaan didn’t worry about stealth. He couldn’t hear his own footsteps, which meant he wouldn’t be able to hear the approach of the ork tech, either. He walked with bolter pointing forward, eager to send the greenskin aberration to oblivion. There was no sign of the engineer.

The passage ran forward most of the length of the locomotive. It ended at a ladder that went up three metres to a second level. Here, the way was even more cramped. The restless, groaning, shuddering web of machinery pressed in, surrounding him. He did not feel as if he were moving through the interior of an engine. He could see individual components whose function he could understand, ones that had a clear purpose of propulsion or the production of energy. But so much more of the engineering seemed to exist for its own sake.

Perhaps, Krevaan, thought, it was yet another symptom of the supercharged nature of these orks. Even the drive that led to the construction of monstrosities like the land train had been exaggerated. The ork tech had built and built and built, unable to stop, and the end result was a creation whose enormous excess meant that it was as indestructible as it was nonsensical.

Still no sign of the ork. Krevaan advanced halfway down the tunnel of gears

and steam, then stopped. He knew where his enemy was: the blister. The ork controlled all aspects of the train from there, including all the defences. There would be no reason for the greenskin to leave that redoubt. If it had guarded so elaborately against attack so far, there would be other death traps ahead. Krevaan wasn't interested in fighting this battle on the engineer's terms. He would make the field of engagement his own. He would show the ork that there were shadows even here, where it felt safest.

He examined the machinery more closely before deciding that there was no way of predicting the consequences of what he did next. The prospect pleased him. He would turn disorder and the storm of war back on the ork.

He took a frag grenade from his clip and threw it to his left, deep into the gears. It bounced back and forth off the metal organs of the locomotive, then dropped towards the first level. Krevaan lost sight of it. The detonation was muffled, barely audible over the clanks and growls and hisses. For a few seconds, there was no change to the din, as if the locomotive had swallowed the grenade without notice. Then a different sort of grinding began. Its pitch started high and went higher. It was joined by a rising chorus of metal complaints as components scraped against each other and the perverse workings of ork technology began to go awry.

Krevaan threw a Krak grenade to the right. When it went off, its light and heat were also smothered by the intricacies of the machines, but its damage was felt, and the metallic shrieks grew louder yet. Live steam filled the passageway. Krevaan heard the angry buzz of multiple electrical shorts nearby. He smelled smoke. He couldn't hear the crackle of flame, but his readouts indicated a rise in temperature.

Visibility across all the energy spectrums fell to zero. As the locomotive writhed in machinic pain, it was filled with shadow. If the ork remained in the blister, Krevaan would take the engine apart with his bare hands until the engineer had nothing but its hiding place left. Krevaan started moving forwards again, certain that he had forced his enemy to join him.

He was right. The ork dropped down in front of him from a tube in the ceiling. It was shorter than he was, but only because it was bent over from the weight of the giant harness on its back. Violet energy blazed from the towering coils of the harness, distorted light fighting the darkness that Krevaan had claimed for his own. Its left arm was a huge prosthetic. In its right, it held a gun that looked like a twisted, sawn-off lascannon.

The Shadow Captain fired, point-blank. The mass-reactive shells slammed into

the beast's force field. The violet flashed brighter, and the shells disintegrated. The ork didn't even blink. It grinned, and pulled the trigger of its own weapon. A beam of focused energy hit Krevaan in the chest. It threw him back down the passage, embedding him in machinery at the far end. Damage runes flared. His pauldron was cracked and smoking. His power pack struggled against the massive spike in temperature. Servo-motors stuttered, and for a moment his right arm shook back and forth. He steeled himself, fighting down the neurological chaos that raced up his spine and through his cortex. Will, strength and discipline worked in concert to return mobility to him.

The engineer was advancing towards him. Dark lighting arced about the muzzle of the gun as it recharged. Krevaan lurched forward, tearing himself free of the nest of wreckage and maglocking his bolter to his thigh. Pipes burst. Gas flooded the space.

Krevaan threw a krak grenade before the ork. It stepped back, perhaps on instinct, perhaps because it recognised the damage that was about to happen to the floor. The lightning around the gun became a sharp flash, then stopped. The engineer aimed it at Krevaan.

The grenade went off. The heat ignited the gas. Everything became light and flame. The filters in Krevaan's lenses dimmed, protecting his sight with momentary darkness.

He didn't need to see. He had already chosen his target. He leapt to the right, into a gap between two large gear wheels. Behind him, he heard the blast of the ork's weapon, the shot going wild. There were more explosions. The rumble of the machinery was giving way to the roar of fire and the ever-rising screams of metal and energy and movement racing to destruction.

His lenses cleared, and Krevaan moved deeper into the machine. There was more light now, flashing and angry, creating shadows that raged like black flame. Krevaan joined them. He was the dark that moved through the ork's stronghold. He was the dark that even this greenskin would have to fear. He was the dark that vanquished.

Krevaan advanced more by feel than by sight. He grabbed a piston, let it carry him away from the wheels, released it to drop onto two more that moved in opposite directions. As great as the mass of his power armour was, the components of the machinery were more than strong enough to support him. The very strength of the locomotive's construction was making its gradual destruction all the more violent.

Spider in a moving, unravelling web, Krevaan made his way forward. He drew

level with the ork tech. He caught glimpses of the brute through the smoke and clashing gears. It was looking for him, moving back and forth on a small strip of floor between the ladder and the hole created by the grenade. It was snarling, and its attention seemed to be divided between its search and rage at the spreading damage. Krevaan kept watching, and kept moving. The engineer's movements became more frantic. It was growing anxious. As it should. It was surrounded by shadows, and one of them was coming to kill it.

For several metres, Krevaan's access to the ork was blocked. Then he reached a periodic gap. He stood on a crankshaft whose rotation was becoming more and more erratic. Ahead of him, a giant fan turned. Its blades were serrated for no reason beyond the orkish need for violence in all things. Its rotation was sluggish, and it had already lost one blade. Every couple of seconds, the broken section went by. If he moved quickly, he could get through. If his timing was off, he could be caught and dragged down into the growing mangle of iron and fire.

Krevaan waited through a few revolutions. There was little regularity to them. The fan's rhythm was broken. Nearby, Krevaan could hear more of the mechanism giving way. There was another gas leak, another explosion. The interior shook with the ecstasy of dissolution. Krevaan held himself steady, eyed the fan, and chose his moment. He threw himself forward while a blade was still blocking his view.

He hit the fan's position as the gap appeared. He shot into the passageway, shadow and hammer, and slammed into the engineer. Its force field repelled all forms of energy, including the kinetic. But Krevaan gambled that a certain velocity was needed for the effect to be triggered. If nothing passed though, the greenskin would long since have suffocated. As he and his squad had penetrated the train's shield, he now broke through the engineer's personal defence, smashing the ork against the machinery on the other side of the tunnel.

The engineer reacted with surprising speed, smashing its power claw against him. The fingers were tools. Cutters and drills burned into the side of his armour. He held fast against the assault for moment, then let himself be hurled to the left. The ork growled with satisfaction. It took a step forwards.

Krevaan kept going left, coming around the engineer's flank. He stabbed at the harness with his right hand. His lightning claws shattered one of the coils. Violet energy lashed out. It struck his arm and travelled up his spine. He took in the electric pain and swung his left fist in. He destroyed a second coil and plunged the claws deep into the harness, through the ork's back.

The ork howled. It tried to turn and shake him off. It couldn't reach him.

Keeping his right claws embedded in the greenskin's back, Krevaan brought the left ones down again, and then again. The coils exploded. Krevaan was bathed in an electrical storm. Pain raked his nerves. His body sought to betray him and flail in the grip of the chaotic discharge. He stabbed again. Bursts strong enough to incinerate a grox shook him. He grappled with a mass of desperate fury.

Another explosion shook the interior. He almost lost his grip on the ork, and his left fist hesitated before the descent. The engineer brought its right arm up and aimed the gun over its shoulder. Krevaan stared down the barrel. He changed the angle of his blow. He brought the claws into the side of the body of the gun. He breached the weapon just as the ork pulled the trigger.

A volcano erupted in the centre of the locomotive. The engineer was vaporised by its creation. Krevaan flew, a burning mass, into the machinery. Disintegration and avalanche and molten fury surrounded him. They tried to tear a hole in the world, to smash his sense of direction, his will, his consciousness. He refused them and dropped into the maw of the destruction, kicking and punching through hungry debris. He was no longer in the midst of a mechanism. He was in an iron gale. He was buffeted by shrapnel twice his size, seized by explosions and geysers of flame. He kept his sense of direction. He was knocked off his feet. He had to crawl beneath collapses. He fought his way through the vortex of an impossible creation finally succumbing to its own irrationality. He stayed true to his course.

Severed fibre bundles rendered his armour heavy. His movements grew sluggish, precision lost. The temperature regulator had shut down. He didn't know how much longer his power unit would function. If it died, so would he, his armour becoming a coffin inside the tomb of the locomotive.

And there, ahead, a glimpse of light that did not flicker: day shining through the egress. He pulled himself forward, managed to rise to his feet as the weight of the wreckage on his back lessened. He heard something very large crack overhead. He tried to run, but moved at a lethargic stumble instead. He reached for the sides of the doorway, grabbed them and propelled himself through as tonnes of metal crashed down behind him.

He fell to the ground. Victory when on his knees would be as unacceptable as defeat, and he forced himself to stand once more. Moving at a glacial pace, feet dragging, he walked away from the locomotive towards the spot where Thaene still lay. 'Brother Akrallas,' he voxed.

Silence.

'Dvarax?'

Nothing.

He looked to the right. Orks were emerging from the last of the cars. There were many, but many were injured, and they were moving with rare caution. They were gazing at the locomotive.

Krevaan turned to see its end. Its armour was cracking like an egg, an angry, molten red shining through the fissures. Incredibly, it still had power. The defence turrets and the cannon were firing, though without direction.

The moment of the great death came. The locomotive did not explode, but a sun blazed through its wounds. The machinic scream was almost sentient. Then the glow was that of ordinary fire. The engine seemed to slump on itself, transformed from monster to wreck.

And suddenly there was calm. Shooting and movement ceased. The sky over the train cleared, the shimmer of the force field gone.

‘Eighth Company,’ Krevaan said, ‘destroy this abomination and all its vermin.’

The orks fought back as the wrath of the Raven Guard descended upon them. They did not fight long.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Shadows followed wind. The eldar were fast. Behrasi didn't expect to catch up with them. It was enough to track them, and he knew where they were heading. The Saim-Hann riders slowed down once they reached Reclamation. They still moved quickly, but with frequent stops, and uncertain, changing direction. Picking up their trail was not difficult. Neither was following them undetected. The xenos warriors' attention was entirely on their search.

The ork shells started hitting shortly after the Raven Guard entered the city. The ordnance was colossal. Each blast was strong enough to level a building. The streets filled with rubble and dust, the bodies of the dead and the injured, and crowds of the mourning, the panicked, and the rescuers. Consumed by their immediate terror and grief, the civilians were unaware of the wind and its shadow that passed near them. Behrasi glanced at the mortals on a few occasions. Avoiding their sight was a simple matter, so automatic that it barely required thought. He wondered briefly what it must be like to be at the centre of a conflict, yet be irrelevant to its stakes and its result. Then he dismissed the thought as a distraction.

Irrelevant.

The bombardment was destructive, but brief. After a few minutes, the distant boom of the great gun ceased. The dust still rolled through the streets. The figures in crimson armour sped up. They appeared to have direction again.

'I think they've found what they're looking for,' Rhamm voxed.

'So it would seem,' Behrasi agreed. He didn't contact Krevaan. He would wait until he was sure. If the command was going to be sent, he wanted to be sure that

it would not be as a result of an error.

If it had not been for the destruction rained down on the humans by the orks, Alathannas thought that it might have been hours, perhaps longer, before the idea had come to him. But the dust was thick, darkening the day in the city. He had seen lights on behind the steel shutters over the hab windows. After one strike, the power had gone out for a moment. The flicker had made him think of the city's energy source, and that was when the realisation had hit.

He knew where he had to look.

He knew why the earlier attempts to locate the goal had been foiled.

The irony that the Saim-Hann encampment had been so close to that goal the whole time did not amuse him. It was too redolent of the perpetual tragedy that haunted his people.

The humans had built their power plant in the north-west of the city, a short ride from the square that the eldar had used as a base. Alathannas and his escort stopped outside it. A colossal aquila rose over the ornate mosaic of the containment dome, the tips of its wings touching the twin cooling towers.

Alathannas dismounted from his jetbike and contacted Eleira.

'Are you sure?' she asked when he had told her what he had deduced.

'It would explain our difficulty,' he said. 'The human technology is crude, but it is very powerful. The combination of the radiation and the shielding could have interfered with our attempts.'

'There is something fated about the humans building their power source there,' Eleira agreed. 'Search it quickly, ranger. Time is short.'

'The orks have the upper hand?'

'Worse. The humans have joined our fight. They have destroyed the rest of the foe. This battle is almost over. You have only a little longer to end the war.'

'I understand.'

The interior of the control block was deserted. The humans had fled their posts when the shelling had begun. The plant was automated, and though Alathannas saw warning lights flashing on some of the consoles he moved past, there were no klaxons sounding, and the power was still on.

Alathannas passed through a large, high-ceilinged hall. The architecture had the same prefabricated crudeness of the habitation complexes. The walls were grey, their bas-relief sculptures of the double-headed eagle looming on all sides in perpetual judgement. He found a staircase at the rear, and descended the levels of the complex. If he was correct in his surmise, the control centre would, like so

many buildings of the human city, have been constructed atop eldar foundations. He had to find his way into them. He was following hope and a guess. The success of the mission depended on luck.

At the lowest level, he found himself in a maze of service corridors. He paused, frustrated again by the irony that human interference meant that he could not hear the call that was turning the orks into monsters of war. He relied on his skills instead. He chose the corridors that moved away from the core of the plant. He headed into areas that had seen little use since the construction of the building. He followed dust and disuse. At last, he found himself in a chamber at the western edge of the building. Whatever function it might once have had, it had become a storage space of construction leavings, discarded tools, and failed equipment. The lower half of the outer wall was wraithbone.

Alathannas cleared away the detritus. The wraithbone ended a few arm's lengths from the north-west corner. The human portion of the wall was rougher than elsewhere in the room. It was not structurally integral. It was filling a gap. He placed a plasma grenade at its base and retreated to the hallway.

After the flash and the concussion, there was the sound of collapsing rubble. And then, something else. Before Alathannas could step forward, a wave of inchoate aggression slammed him to the ground. It was familiar, yet alien, and as he gasped for breath, struggling to remain conscious and to keep his thoughts coherent, he understood that he had released nothing. He had opened the way for a call to be answered. The actions needed to complete the mission created the possibility of catastrophic failure.

The exultation of war shook the foundations. The earth groaned. The hallways fell into darkness.

A hab in the block nearest the power plant had been felled by the bombardment. Squad Behrasi watched from the rubble as Alathannas entered the plant's control block. The other eldar turned their jetbikes to face away from the plant. They hovered in a semi-circle near the door, guarding all approaches.

'What do they think they're doing?' Rhamm growled.

'Don't try to tell me they're protecting the building,' Gheara said.

'The Shadow Captain says they've been searching,' said Behrasi. 'That might still be the case. Only one has gone in.' He only half-believed his own words. The conviction was growing that Krevaan and Caeligus had been correct about the eldar's perfidy. He waited, though. He would not act without true certainty.

The wait and the doubts ended with the violent rumble beneath his feet. The

entire square heaved. Cracks ran up the façade of the power plant. The eldar on watch reacted with startled gestures. One of them doubled over as if in pain.

‘Sabotage,’ said Rhamm.

Gheara readied his bolter. ‘I’ll give the xenos this,’ he said. ‘Their performance was convincing. I almost believed that they might be honourable.’

‘So did I, brother,’ Behrasi said. ‘So did I.’ Though he was puzzled by the reaction of the eldar to the upheaval, he could not let that distract him from the need to act. Another front had opened in the war. He raised Krevaan on the vox.

As Eighth Company regrouped near the corpse of the train, Krevaan knelt beside Thaene. The Techmarine was conscious. ‘You have earned your rest, brother,’ Krevaan said to him. ‘But you are needed.’

‘Good.’ The Techmarine tried to rise.

Krevaan put out a hand. ‘Stay as you are. Heal. The struggle is not here. I have heard from Brother Behrasi.’

‘I see. The eldar have betrayed us.’

‘Yes. Send the signal.’

Thaene made no movement. Yet Krevaan could sense the passing of a fatal instant.

‘It is done,’ Thaene said.

The Space Marine gunship roared over the gully network, its missiles raining down on the remaining ork vehicles. Caught between the cliffs, the orks had nowhere to run. Eleira and Passavan raced away from the marching detonations. They climbed up out of the network to join what was left of their forces. They had broken the back of the ork army, but the toll had been enormous. There were only four other skimmers left now. Too few.

‘Is Alathannas too late?’ Eleira asked the farseer.

‘We have to try,’ Passavan said.

‘That is not an answer.’

She received her answer a moment later. The jetbikes exploded. There was a flare of intense heat at the base of each one’s engine, followed by a larger blast as the anti-grav motors disintegrated, their energy uncontained and wild. Passavan and his mount vanished in a fireball. Eleira was thrown from her jetbike. She hit the ground so fast that there was no sensation of flight. She had been riding, and then she was lying on packed earth. She was broken. She couldn’t move, but she could feel the pain of her ending.

Her head rested against a slight rise, and she could see the squad of black shadows arriving on jump packs to the site of the wrecks. The humans, those creatures of darkness and war, had come to finish their work. Night seemed to be falling with their arrival, and she realised it was her vision that was failing. She hoped that her spirit passed into her waystone before the Raven Guard reached her.

She struggled against the agony and the fading light, finding the breath for one last task. She called across the distance to Alathannas. 'We are betrayed,' she said. 'Hurry. You are the mission's last hope.'

'Let it fail,' he cried. 'Let the humans face the consequences of their actions.'

'And if they are defeated here, too, what then? The consequences will pursue us all. You know your duty, Alathannas.'

'I do, autarch.'

The ranger's agreement was enough. She held on to the knowledge that she had done all she could, and took that with her into the night.

The melta bombs detonated, destroying the jetbikes. One of the eldar died instantly. The other two survived the explosions, one just barely. The other, limping, took cover inside the station. Behrasi moved forward, his squad following. 'Leave the one inside to me,' he said.

He approached the doorway. He was greeted by silence. The eldar might have retreated into the structure. Behrasi acted on the presumption of a dangerous foe. The lumen strips inside the plant were dark. A glance at the way the sunlight fell through the doorway told Behrasi where the shadows were at their most concentrated, where the best position for an ambush would be. He charged inside and swung to the left, firing.

A stream of monomolecular discs greeted his entrance. They sliced deeply into his armour. Blood coursed down from his right shoulder and the side of his throat.

The arc of Behrasi's attack found his target. His shells slammed the warrior back, shattering armour and bone. Behrasi advanced, unwavering death, ignoring the last of the eldar's fire. The xenos fell.

Rhamm entered the station. 'Is that all of them?' he asked.

'Yes,' Behrasi said. 'Now we find the ranger. Stop him before he destroys the plant.'

'I'm surprised he has the means to do so.'

'Perhaps he doesn't.' There had been no repetition of the initial quake. 'Either

way, he dies.’

Behrasi glanced at the bloodied eldar once more before beginning the search. The sight of the fallen enemy gave him no satisfaction. He was troubled by something more than a sense of waste. The thought that they had made a tragic mistake was half-formed.

But it was persistent.



EPILOGUE

The war paused on Lepidus Prime, but the shadows occupied Reclamation. The Raven Guard transferred their encampment to the square that had been the eldar base. Every paving stone of the city was once more under Imperial rule. The mortals gathered enough courage to venture out of their habs, though they avoided the square. They were frightened of the iron shadows.

Krevaan was alone in the command tent. Field repairs to his armour had given him back a fair bit of mobility. He stood, vox-unit in hand, and spoke to the captain of the *Verdict of the Anvil*. ‘Our mission is complete, Captain Mulcebar,’ he said. ‘The xenos taint has been purged from Lepidus Prime.’

‘I thought so,’ the Salamander said. ‘Our augurs have detected something massive heading for the system. It would seem that the Overfiend has taken the bait.’

‘Then the hour has come for your forces to bring this war to a close. Good hunting, brother.’

‘Thank you. I am still curious as to the orks’ obsession with this system.’

‘As am I. We have been unable to determine the cause of their strength.’

‘And what of the eldar? I understand the White Scars encountered them too.’

‘Another mystery. But we have defeated them as well.’ His answers were bitter on his tongue. The triumph of Eighth Company was ringing hollow. There was so much information that had been denied to him. He had acted as was necessary. If the eldar had managed to destroy the plant, they would have razed Reclamation to the ground. Perhaps they imagined that the Imperium would then have given up on this world, returning it to eldar control. But he had stopped

them. His decisions had led to the destruction of all the Emperor's foes on the planet.

But his information was incomplete, and he knew it. He had erred. He had been arrogant, too quick to act on his hatred. The unanswered questions made him doubt the truth of his victory. He could not shake the suspicion that somehow, he had won the wrong war.

And the last of the eldar, the ranger, still had not been found. Alathannas had disappeared into the ruins beneath the power plant. The xenos labyrinth had defeated the search. Eighth Company faced hundreds of kilometres of tangled corridors. The paths spiralled off in meaningless directions and disorienting intersections. Alathannas could evade the best part of an entire Chapter indefinitely in that maze. In the end, Krevaan could do little more than station sentinels at the entrance to the ruins. No further harm had come to the plant. As far as Krevaan could tell, Alathannas had been neutralised. But he had vanished.

Krevaan's doubts grew.

The psychic shriek of the slaughter had pursued Alathannas into the underground tunnels. The terrible silence that followed pushed him even further into the depths. He ran on instinct, not quite blind, but without conscious decision. His spirit writhed beneath the lash of rage and grief.

The object of the search, so long concealed, became unavoidable. Alathannas was caught in a whirlpool, racing down a wraithbone vortex. He knew where he was going. He knew what awaited him. Yet, after days of flight into the dark, when he saw the thing, dread drove him to his knees.

Alathannas trembled at the entrance to the chamber. In the centre of this room, at the centre of the serpentine coil of the tunnels, at the centre of the system-wide struggle, was what the Saim-Hann had come to find. He gazed upon the terrible object. He had fulfilled Eleira's final command. He had found it. But he was alone, and there was nothing he could do. He could not remove it from the planet.

Nor did he wish to any longer. His trembling was from anger as well as horror.

The humans had betrayed them. He had deluded himself with the belief that it was possible to forge real links with some individuals of that species. He had hoped, to his eternal shame, that the humans would come to the planet and defeat the orks. He had been wrong. Even if he had the power to take this thing from the planet, what would he do except complete the humans' victory?

If he waited, the orks would return. They had no choice. They could not resist

the siren call even if they were not conscious of it. And the humans had been weakened by this first conflict.

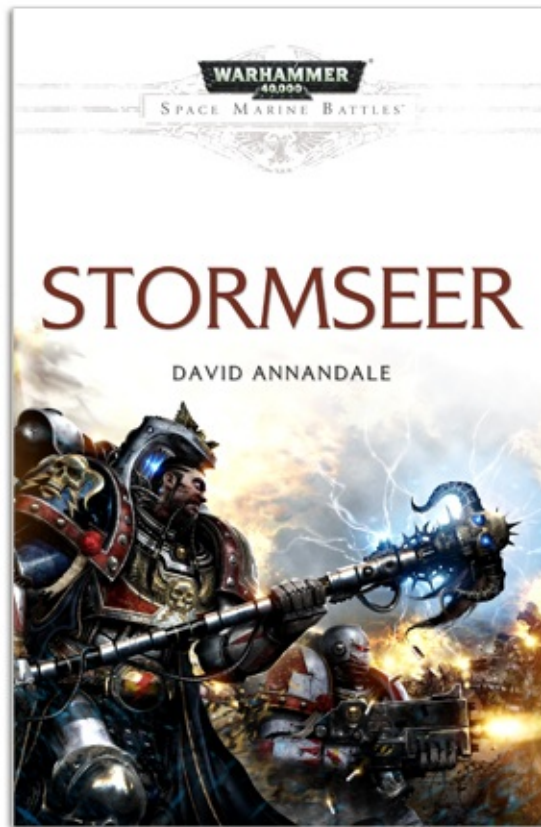
Before him, he saw the contours of vengeance given physical shape.

Rising from the chamber floor was a throne. Seated on it was an immense statue. Its form was distorted, vague, incomplete. It was a body without features. The Lileathan world had been abandoned too long, and what had been left behind had lost its essential connection to the eldar. Endlessly consumed by its fury, the shard of Kaela Mensha Khaine now poured energy into another race, one with an inexhaustible hunger for war.

From this single point, far beneath the surface of Lepidus Prime, wrath called to the orks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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