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PROLOGUE

A scream.

It had no sound, no breath and no voice. And yet it fell upon him with claws of grief. The scream grew until its non-sound tore his soul apart.

Elisath woke to agony. He had done so for days, weeks; long enough for time to blur, for the past and the future to be lost in an undifferentiated present of drudgery and beatings. His material reality was so present in its pain that it had overwhelmed his senses, shattered his concentration and cut him off from anything other than the torture of his body. The orks had worked him until he had given out. His body was old, weaker than those of the other eldar slaves. His eyes fell on his hands, on the long fingers so translucent, already so far gone towards crystallisation. He was a long way down the Path of the Seer. He had travelled so far that the end of his bodily existence was the shaping fact of his reality. Every perception was filtered through the imminence of his fusion with the infinity circuit. Or so it had been before his capture. The orks had turned him from a being of spirit to a being of nerve endings. But when he could work no longer, they hadn't killed him. They had taken everything from him. They had even stolen his waystone, either through greed or instinctive cruelty. But they kept him alive. Perhaps they had other uses in mind for an eldar farseer. As brutish as the orks were, they had a cunning that was dangerous to dismiss. Especially their leader.

So Elisath woke to agony, but that was nothing new. The new thing, the terrible novelty, was that he hadn't been jolted to consciousness by a kick in the ribs or a whip across the back. He had been woken by an even greater agony: he

had heard his brother's psychic death cry. It had resonated in his mind and soul as if it were his own scream, but because it was not, it carried the extra charge of consuming grief. And there was still worse. Beyond the pain, beyond the grief, there was the knowledge of what his brother's end meant. He had a responsibility now, one he couldn't fulfil.

The consequences were the raw stuff of despair. They did not take a farseer to predict. The shard of Kaela Mensha Khaine was his to guard and protect. He could not do so, not when he couldn't even help himself. Broken and in fetters, he had no recourse other than to pray to murdered gods and a splintered one that the shard remain hidden. He tried to divine if it would, but when he sent his consciousness out onto the skein, he ran into the disordered, psychic fury and energy of the orks. The threads of possibility were altered and torn so quickly, and so chaotically, that he could follow no coherent pattern, and the orks' psychic presence, an incandescence of exuberant anger, threatened to drown him. And he couldn't venture any further than the immediate disorder. He had no runes. They, too, had been taken from him. He had nothing to guide him out and back along the temporal weave.

Something was coming. Elisath heard the boisterous cacophony of the guards change in tone. Brawls and barbaric laughter ceased. In their place came awe, excitement and fear.

Elisath looked up. His cell was little more than a closet, a place to store a possession rather than a living thing. It was barely high enough to sit up in, and he could not lie down without curling foetal-tight. The floor was deep in filth, an archaeology of misery. The door to the cell was, like so much of this ship, crude, clumsy but effective. It was a patchwork of scrap metal, welded together into an object as strong as its edges were ragged. Instead of bars, Elisath looked through gaps and rips in the metal. They were wide enough for him to see the ship's corridor. They were so narrow, he couldn't pass his arm through without slicing open his wrists. He watched, waiting, as the creature approached. The ripples of its presence spread before it. Orks howled in ecstatic worship. Prisoners whimpered, hoping for a quick death. Crouching, Elisath kept his gaze steady. He feared ends far worse than his own demise.

He could hear the beast coming now, its footsteps a pounding drum of war on the metal decking. The booming resonated down Elisath's spine. It grew louder, shaking dust and powdered rust from the door. Just outside his cell, the monster stopped. The only sound now was the ork's breathing. It was a deep, growling rattle, the sound of giant strength and hair-trigger rage reverberating in a vast,

echo-chamber of a chest.

The ork blotted out the dim lights of the corridor. Elisath saw nothing but an immense silhouette. It was broader than he was tall. It was violence made flesh. And it was the ruler of an empire.

Elisath couldn't see the ork's eyes, but he could tell from the tilt of its head that it was looking at him. It was pausing, thinking. A meditating ork, in Elisath's experience, was one of two things. It was either comically idiotic, or fantastically dangerous. There was nothing humorous in the shape before him. There was only doom.

The ork whirled and bellowed an order. Its voice was a rasping thunder. It strode off. As it did so, Elisath collapsed against the rear wall of his cell. He gasped. The tangle of possible futures had suddenly cleared. Elisath could still see no further forwards than he could before, but now there was no need to know more. The ship had changed course. He knew where it was heading.

No, he thought. *Not there. Not this ork.* And still, his knowledge was useless. Still, all he could do was pray.



CHAPTER ONE

What are you? The question lingered. He could not exorcise it.

The predator lurked at the outer edges of the Lepidus System. It moved slowly through the void, waiting for its prey. It was not a sleek hunter, but it was immense. Over four thousand metres long, its hull was thick-bodied, with a massively armed prow that projected forwards like a clenched fist. There was nothing subtle about its design. It was a monster whose every rivet and plate were slaved to a single purpose: the brutal annihilation of its enemies. Now it stalked one particular target, one that had to be lured into the killing ground.

The predator was the *Verdict of the Anvil*, strike cruiser of the Salamanders reserve Fifth Company. On the elevated strategium of the cathedral-like bridge, Captain Mulcebar briefed his officers. His broad, heavy-browed countenance was not one that smiled easily. He had the visage of a stern, impassive god of war, carved out of onyx, his red eyes the glow of the furnace deep within. But as the captain spoke, Sergeant Ba'birin thought he could detect a hard satisfaction in Mulcebar's tone. 'The missions undertaken by our brothers in the Raven Guard and the White Scars have been successful. The orks have been dealt severe blows on the planet and its moon. Of more immediate concern to our mission, these two strikes appear to have had the desired effect. Our sensorium has detected the warp displacement of a large body, accompanied by numerous smaller ones, on approach.'

'He is coming,' Sergeant Neleus said.

Mulcebar nodded. 'So it would seem.'

There was a stirring among the officers, an anticipation of battle that bordered

on eagerness. For some, and Ba'birin was one of those, the wait had been galling. First, the Salamanders had been diverted from their original course. They had been bound for Antagonis, there to assist the Black Dragons combat a plague of undeath. But a more immediate threat to the wider Imperium had declared itself in this system, and so they had responded, only to wait. While the Raven Guard and the White Scars fought with honour, the Salamanders had been stuck out here, hundreds of millions of kilometres from the fields of battle, preparing for an opportunity that might never materialise. Their target was the ork leader himself. The Overfiend. The invasion of the system was his doing, but there had been no possibility of retaliation until now. As far as Imperial intelligence could tell, the Overfiend remained within an enormous fleet, one far beyond the ability of the currently assembled human forces to tackle. But while they could not go to him, they could make him come to them. The broader strategic goal of killing the Overfiend's lieutenants had been to lure the monster out. And here he came.

The wait was over. The forge of war called.

What are you?

The words looped, a pulsing beat through Ha'garen's head, as he headed for the enginarium. He had not thought the question needed asking. He had not thought about such a question at all. He was himself, as he had always been. There had been changes, these last years. He was aware of them, even if there was no emotional weight that accompanied that awareness. But the essential truth remained. He was Ha'garen, Techmarine of the Salamanders Fifth Company. How could there be any questions to ask?

But one had been asked, and not *who are you?*, as damning and doubting as that would have been. *What are you?* The doubts were far more fundamental, his identity questioned down to its absolute core. And the question had been asked by not just any brother, but by Ba'birin.

Ha'garen's mind, seeking the roots of its unease, flew back to Heliosa, the Beacon City of the Salamanders' home planet of Nocturne, more than a century ago. Two aspirants survived the trials to become Scouts. That they had known each other before their first true testing on the anvil was unusual. What was unheard of was that they came, essentially, from the same house. Ba'birin was the son of a dealer in sa'hrk hides. His family had taken in the orphaned Ha'garen when his parents had died in the Time of Trials. The two boys had bonded. They were both apprentices to Ba'birin's father, though Ha'garen had

shown none of his foster brother's promise as a tanner. Then they were recruited. They triumphed together. They became Scouts together.

They became Salamanders together. Fireborn.

For seventy years, they fought side by side, bringing the wrath of Vulkan down on the Emperor's enemies. Each knew the other's combat craft as intimately as his own. Their war was a synchronous meshing of lethal gears, never retreating, always implacably advancing on the foe. Their styles were different but complementary. Ba'birin was as mercurial as a Salamander ever became, and had a gift for improvisation. His feints and counter-attacks surprised the enemy, but not his battle-brother, who provided the anchor for their joint assaults. Ha'garen was the constant, unwavering, metronomic beat of relentless war upon which Ba'birin built his flourishes and variations. Ha'garen was the anvil against which Ba'birin's spirited hammer smashed xenos, heretic and traitor.

For seventy years, they forged a chain of comradeship. But Ha'garen had a gift with machines. The boy had been hopeless with the organic messiness of hides, but the Space Marine understood the mechanical, and when he spoke to that world, it responded. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that just over thirty years ago, Captain Mulcebar had sent him to Mars.

He returned a Techmarine. And then, before he could regain his bearings after his absence, Nocturne was invaded. Mulcebar and the Fifth were tasked with the defence of Heliosa. Ba'birin and Ha'garen were on the front lines, fighting for the life of the Sanctuary City of their births.

It was not a happy reunion. Ha'garen could recognise strain on Ba'birin's face, though he did not feel it himself. In fact, he felt very little at all. His induction into the cult of the Omnissiah had tempered his emotions. His passions had flattened out to a steady, tempered mixture of logic and worship. His mind and soul were filled with the mysteries of machines and the litanies of the inorganic. When he had become a Space Marine, he had become something his former, mortal, human self would barely recognise, let alone understand. And he had felt the inevitable distance from mortals that a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes experienced. It was a distance that the Salamanders worked to counteract by remaining a part of the society of Nocturne. It was a distance that had become a yawning abyss when Ha'garen returned from Mars. He did not care to bridge it. The flesh was imperfect, a distraction, an obstacle to be overcome. Ha'garen was aware, he thought, of the degree to which he had changed. He knew that his alterations went far beyond the physical. But he did not consider them so radical

as to have destroyed the self he had always possessed. It had survived the ascension to Space Marine. It lived on in the Techmarine.

So he believed.

What are you?

The question had come during the battle of Heliosa. The heaviest fighting on Nocturne had been at the gates of Hesiod. The contingent of the traitor Nihilan's forces that had besieged Heliosa was little more than a diversion from a diversion, but the kroot and other mercenaries fought there as savagely as anywhere else on the planet. Mulcebar had his squads fight as if to lose Heliosa would be to lose Nocturne. Honour, loyalty and love of the home world demanded nothing less. And so, for the first time in three decades, Ha'garen and Ba'birin were in combat at each other's side.

Their synchrony had once been such that they had fought like a single machine. Now that a large part of Ha'garen *was* machine, the unity was lost. Ha'garen could no longer see Ba'birin's flourishes as anything other than excessive. They were a pointless waste of energy, a deployment of technique for technique's sake. He saw no need to cater to them, and could not fathom why he once had. They brought terrible wrath down on the enemy, and butchered the foe in numbers that made hills of corpses, but the music of their joint actions was discordant. They fought well because they were Salamanders. They no longer fought well together.

When Nihilan's terrible weapon blasted Nocturne to the core, the earth heaved and danced, and walls hurled themselves to the ground. The enemy streamed through overwhelmed void shields and into the city. The savages and xenos filth wasted no time in descending upon the civilian population. It was as if they knew they were bound to be defeated, and had decided to enjoy a premature sack of Heliosa rather than face a futile struggle against the unwavering strength of the Salamanders. There was no strategy. There was only the barbaric impulse to cause as much harm as possible before being stopped.

A ten-metre breach in the wall opened at the position held by Ha'garen and Ba'birin's squad. Ba'birin and three other battle-brothers fell with the stone and rockrete. Rubble pounded the Salamanders. Beneath Ha'garen's feet, the wall still stood. He looked down and saw his brothers shrugging off the wreckage. They were monuments, animated statues rising from ruins to defy a hostile fate. They were not to be stopped.

Nor were their enemies, who traded indomitable strength for the power of the swarm. Kroot and human stormed into a civilian compound fifty metres back

from the wall. The people of Heliosa had the innate strength and resilience of all Nocturneans, and they were armed, but they were no match for the military savagery that came at them. Ha'garen saw Ba'birin lead his group of Salamanders to the defence of the populace. He took in the relative distances between the civilians, invaders and Space Marines. The outcome was obvious. The Salamanders would annihilate the foe, but be too late to prevent the slaughter of the civilians. A few paces to his right there was a heavy bolter turret. Its gunner was dead, but the weapon was still functional. Ha'garen manned it, even as Ba'birin's voice came in over his comm-bead.

'Brother,' Ba'birin said, 'we could use your assistance.'

Two choices now. The first was whether to join the ground-level combat or hold his position, and it was really no choice at all. To give up any tactical advantage was irrational in the extreme. The second choice was where to aim the turret: turn it to face the interior of the redoubt and provide assisting fire, or train it on the larger body of the enemy still surging towards the breach.

Again, there was really no choice.

Ha'garen opened fire. The turret's *chug-chug-chug* was the pounding rhythm of Vulkan's hammer, the perfect regularity of machined death blasting xenos and heretic mercenaries to bloody pulp.

'Ha'garen?' Ba'birin voxed.

'I am doing what I must, brother,' Ha'garen responded. And that was not concentrating on a specific skirmish whose outcome would not be affected by any action on his part. He was laying waste to the foe, damaging his war-making capacity by culling his numbers and slowing his advance. The invaders charged forwards in their hundreds. There were far more than Ha'garen could hope to kill, but they were not infinite. As the turret's mass-reactive shells exploded flesh and bone, punching bursts of dirt and blood skywards, the assault lost strength and momentum. Ha'garen made a difference.

But not the right one, as far as Ba'birin was concerned. It was the first time Ha'garen had knowingly acted against the wishes of his brother. They had not been in concert; they had been at cross purposes. Ha'garen's worst sin, it appeared, was a distorted sense of priorities. He learned this after the battle, after the war. Heliosa was secure, and the slow staunching of Nocturne's wounds had begun. It was then, while Ha'garen was salvaging usable weaponry from the field, that Ba'birin confronted him.

'You abandoned us,' Ba'birin said without preamble.

'I made a decision based on tactical necessities.'

‘The people of Nocturne are our charges.’

It seemed to Ha’garen that his battle-brother was speaking from an impulse of sentiment, not reason. ‘Our duty was the successful prosecution of the war. I followed my duty.’

And then the question came. Ba’birin shook his head. ‘What are you?’ he said, and walked away.

Puzzled, Ha’garen had watched the other Salamander as he receded through smoking metal and charred rubble, then turned back to his work. The question was an odd one, but he did not feel its full weight just then. What he felt was the rift with Ba’birin. To the extent that he still experienced emotions at all, the loss of that comradeship gnawed at him, and would continue to do so in the days and months that followed. It was the news about Argos that turned the question into a refrain that no force of reason or passage of time could exorcise. Argos’s mind had been infected by an enemy attack, turning him from his true course, making him act against his brothers. The Forge Master had realised what was happening and managed to excise the infection, but not before causing considerable damage. The event disturbed Ha’garen. That Argos, one of the mightiest of the Chapter’s Techmarines, could be attacked at such a fundamental level was more than a warning against complacency. Ha’garen was engaged on a path that meant a metamorphosis of body and of self. If the greatest of his kind was vulnerable, then so was he, and how was he to monitor his journey? How was he to know if his transformation took him down deviant paths?

What are you? The question did not have the easy answer it should.

He reached the enginarium. This would be his field in the battle ahead. He would be guardian of the *Verdict of the Anvil*, preserving its spirit and maintaining its body as the ship brought the fury of Vulkan down on the long-awaited foe. Surrounded by machines, immense beasts of metal flesh and plasma heart, he was among kin. Litanies of battle, sanctity and calm sprang to his lips. He began his communion with his gargantuan charge, preparing the ship for the fight. Tech crew and servitors flew to the tasks he assigned them, and the cavernous space echoed with the thrum and clatter of a collective action as perfectly timed and choreographed as it was precise. The question’s refrain faded into the background of Ha’garen’s consciousness as he became one with the *Verdict*.

The mechanistic dance of war began.

On the main tactarium screen, Mulcebar watched the enemy transition into the

materium. The ork warlord was coming in strong. The massive kill kroozer was escorted by a cluster of attack and ram ships. Mulcebar was looking at a storm system of brute aggression. The squadron was an expression of greenskin nature. The ships were ramshackle, blunt in form and function, and dangerous in the extreme. The very fact that, against all logic, they did not spontaneously explode was itself a sign that to underestimate the orks would be suicidal.

The *Verdict of the Anvil* was massively outnumbered. It was alone.

It was more than strong enough. The predator waited, silent, running dark, for the orks to come within range.

‘Nova cannon powering up,’ Phanes reported.

‘Thank you, helmsmaster,’ Mulcebar answered. He would strike the ork kroozer a death blow, then close in to exterminate surviving ships. He planned to avoid close-quarters fighting. The decision was a pragmatic one. A commander who rushed in to grapple with the orks was playing the greenskins’ game, and was a fool. There was nothing heroic in throwing away the lives of warriors and crew. This ork, through the schemes of his underlings, had already proven himself the most dangerous of his kind Mulcebar had ever heard of, barring the beast of Armageddon. But he would shortly be ash. Mulcebar eyed the screens, waiting for the nova cannon to be fully charged, and for the target to be acquired. As yet, the ork squadron showed no sign of being aware of the *Verdict of the Anvil*’s presence.

‘Target within range,’ the gunnery officer called out.

And the cannon was ready. Mulcebar opened his mouth to give the order.

Then the astropathic choir sang, and changed everything.

The music of the gears had been disrupted. The hymns of the engines were unsung. The captain had summoned him to the bridge. When he arrived, Ha’garen saw that Ba’birin and all the other squad leaders had been assembled too. A second full briefing, so soon after the last, and a critical action aborted. The Techmarine did not like the portents.

Mulcebar’s expression also boded ill. It was thunderous with frustration and distaste. ‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘I have received a communication whose urgency is matched only by its *timeliness*.’ He spat the last word. Ha’garen had never seen his captain in a rage. This came close.

Mulcebar paused for a moment before continuing. When he spoke again, his tone was a bit more phlegmatic, as if he recognised the need for what he was going to say, bitterly though he might resent it. ‘The message is from the

Stormseer of the White Scars. We cannot destroy our foe's ship. We must board it.' He grimaced, as if his next words left a sour taste in his mouth even before being spoken. 'We must board it and extract an eldar prisoner.'

There was a moment of silence. Ha'garen had seen a familiar light blaze up in Ba'birin's eyes at the mention of a boarding action, and his battle-brother would not be alone, he knew, in relishing the idea of taking the battle to the orks on a more personal level. But the mission the captain had just described was obscene.

'Extract...?' Neleus began.

'Alive,' Mulcebar clarified.

'In Vulkan's name,' Ba'birin said softly. 'Captain, why?'

'Our brothers in the Raven Guard have been encountering orks that are very large and aggressive. Unnaturally so, as if anything about the greenskins can be said to be natural. The strength they are demonstrating is of great concern, however.'

'What does this have to do with our rescuing an eldar?' Neleus asked.

'He is a seer and he knows why this is happening,' Mulcebar answered. 'Our duty, as distasteful as it might be, is clear. We must board the ork ship, find the eldar, and extract him.' His voice turned grim with menace. 'We will then take what we need to know from him.'

It had been a long time since Ha'garen had experienced anything that he would have described as visceral. He did so now. The racial memory of millennia of slaver raids on the people of Nocturne rose in his blood. It demanded satisfaction. That Nocturne was a stalking ground for the dark eldar and not their less hedonistic kin was, for every Salamander, a distinction without a difference. The mission was perverse. Its irony had a tactile cruelty.

'The boarding party will consist of two tactical squads,' Mulcebar said, 'led by Sergeants Ba'birin and Neleus.' He turned to Ha'garen. 'Brother,' he said, 'your skills will be especially needed. We do not know anything about the layout of the ship, much less where the prisoners might be held. Learn everything you can. Guide your brothers.'

Ha'garen lowered his head. 'In Vulkan's name,' he said, 'and with his aid, I will complete this task.' When he looked up, he noticed the look on Ba'birin's face. The other Salamander's lack of expression was eloquent.

The predator had been preparing itself for war. It still was, but for a very different sort. The engines powered up, and the walls of stone and steel vibrated with their gathering strength. The *Verdict of the Anvil* was going to plunge into

the ork maelstrom. It would be hunting hard prey.

In the solitorium, Ba'birin also prepared for war. He was engaged in a private communion with his primarch before joining his brothers for the communal prayer. His weapons had been cleaned, loaded and anointed. They and his armour, and the priest who would dress him in his raiment of war, awaited him in the next chamber. Here, only Akakios, his brander-priest, waited on him. Clad in a loin-cloth, Ba'birin knelt over a fire pit. The heat from the incandescent coals washed over him. He opened his flesh and soul to the purifying sear of the forge, the strengthening pain of the anvil. He thought about the mission, and made himself confront all the elements of it that rankled. He focused most of all on the rescue of the eldar prisoner. He brought all of his revulsion and hatred for that race to the surface, and gave himself over to a spasm of absolute fury. He gave his anger to the fire, so that the forge burned the extraneous emotions away, leaving only duty. When he felt his rage retreat before a calm that was no less implacable, no less determined, he rose and turned to face Akakios.

'I am ready,' he told the priest.

Akakios stepped forwards. The serf's narrow, ascetic face was a lined map of age and piety. He placed the end of his branding rod in the fire pit, heating it to a red glow. Then he brought it up to Ba'birin's chest. To a topography of victories and pledges, he added the brand of another holy promise. Ba'birin stood motionless as he accepted the pain. It was the symbol of duty and its reminder. It was the mark of this mission, binding his life to its completion. The calm he had achieved absorbed the pain and honoured it. Cleansed, steeled, determined, he strode out of the chamber to don his armour.

When he emerged from the solitorium, he found Neleus waiting for him, helm under his arm. 'Brother-sergeant,' he said, nodding in greeting.

'Brother-sergeant,' Ba'birin returned. 'Shall we?' He began to walk down the hallway, heading for the ramps that would take them down to the torpedo deck.

'Would you indulge my curiosity for a moment?' Neleus asked.

Ba'birin paused, his precious calm fraying ever so slightly. 'Of course,' he answered, though an intuition told him that he should not be eager to hear Neleus's question.

'You have your doubts about Techmarine Ha'garen's role in this mission, don't you?'

Ba'birin gave a soft, rueful laugh at his own expense. In his meditation of purging, he had concentrated so completely on the eldar that he had avoided confronting his other source of disquiet. And now here was Neleus, the

unknowing tool of fate, to punish him for his dishonesty. Ba'birin accepted his chastisement as his due. 'Was I that obvious?' he asked.

'Hardly,' Neleus said, sounding amused as well as concerned. 'You didn't react at all.'

'And that was, in itself, a reaction.'

'Given the former cohesion of your fighting unit, yes.'

'You think I don't trust Brother Ha'garen.'

'So it would appear.'

'And so it is,' Ba'birin admitted. 'I do not.'

'You blame his conversion to Techmarine?'

'I do.' Ba'birin began walking again, slowly. 'I believe that he has divided loyalties. I believe that he is finding it difficult to reconcile the Cult Mechanicus and the Promethean Creed. And so I believe that his judgement is suspect.'

Neleus frowned. 'Forgive me, brother, but you speak as if Techmarines were unknown in our Chapter.'

'I am not speaking in general. I have the most profound...'

'... trust?' Neleus put in.

'Respect,' Ba'birin finished, 'for our three Masters of the Forge. But I can see the difference between Ha'garen as he was and as he now is, and some of his decisions are unsound.'

'If you are referring to what happened at Heliosa, his actions were entirely justifiable from a tactical perspective.'

'That they were justifiable doesn't make them right.'

Neleus shrugged but said nothing, and they walked on in silence for a minute. Ba'birin wasn't sure whether to read agreement or dissent on Neleus's part. The other sergeant was one of the most even-tempered souls Ba'birin had ever encountered. Though his ferocity in battle was a sight to behold, and he did not admit even to the mere existence of the word 'retreat,' his attitude towards war was very different from Ba'birin's. The distinction lay, Ba'birin thought, in the fact that where he saw war as the destruction of enemies, Neleus saw instead the defence of the Imperium, of their home world, and of the innocent. Ba'birin exulted in the furnace of conflict, and for this he made no apologies, but he respected Neleus's more measured philosophy. It was often a valuable corrective when his own enthusiasms threatened to get the better of him. And he had no quarrel with Neleus's sense of priority. In the end, Ba'birin too fought to preserve, no matter how enthusiastically he sought the fight. So he was surprised that Neleus showed any sympathy at all for Ha'garen's choice at Heliosa.

Neleus did not speak again until they had almost reached the torpedo deck. ‘Are you really doubting his loyalty? Because if you are, then you must, in good conscience, warn the captain and the Chaplain.’

Ba’birin sighed. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m sure he is loyal, or at least that he believes himself to be.’

‘Meaning?’

‘In leaving the flesh behind, he is forgetting that he is not a machine, and that he should not be thinking like one. If he loses all connection with the fact that we are, all of us, however much we have been transformed, *human*, then he will make decisions that will take nothing human into account. In the field, those decisions could have terrible consequences.’

‘I see.’ Neleus’s tone was neutral, non-committal, and Ba’birin couldn’t tell if he agreed or not. But at least Neleus was following the thread of his logic. ‘And we are about to embark on a mission that will require Ha’garen to immerse himself in machinery of xenos design,’ Neleus said. ‘If he should lose himself in the inorganic, he might act only in its interests.’

‘And we will be in his hands,’ Ba’birin finished.

The torpedo deck opened up before them. Nestled low in the hull, it was an immense temple consecrated to the destruction of enemies. Row upon row of tubes lined walls that rose dozens of metres. Gantry cranes and gangways fed servitors and ordnance to their positions. At the forward end, a colossal bas-relief sculpture of Vulkan dominated the space. The primarch’s hammer was smashing an anvil, and flashing outwards from the blow were the streaks of torpedoes, bound on their missions of righteous punishment.

The squads were assembled. The parchments of new oaths of moment hung from the armour of the Space Marines, fluttering slightly in the light breeze of the ventilation system. The Salamanders were gathered to pledge unity and duty. In their reptile-green armour emblazoned by the snarling profile of their namesake, they were the most honourable of paradoxes. They were both drake and knight. They were self-reliance and devotion to brotherhood. And at their gathering, Ba’birin’s chest never failed to swell with pride and humility.

Ha’garen was standing in the shadows cast by a lume-strip shining through a walkway. He was motionless, his servo-arms folded behind his back. He might have been an empty suit of armour but for the intensity of the red glow behind his eye lenses. He was standing beside the access hatch to a boarding torpedo. Ba’birin felt another wave of unease as he regarded his old friend. Then he felt shame. Not because of his suspicions, but because they made him a hypocrite as

he entered into the rituals that bound the Salamanders to each other and to their cause.

It was almost a relief when, with the blaring of klaxons, war came early.



CHAPTER TWO

There were glories to war, and there were curses. The greatest curse, as far as Mulcebar was concerned, was the madness that attended it. It was not battle itself that was madness. What was mad was the contingencies of action and perversities of fate that forced a commander to issue orders that he knew to be foolish. So it was now. He was going to close with the orks. He was committing himself to an action he would decry as the height of stupidity in any other circumstance. And he was hurling his company into a suicidal confrontation in order to rescue a single eldar. Some of his more mystically inclined fellow officers might see the compounding ironies as a sign of fate. Perhaps they were right. He had no interest in working out the philosophical niceties of his war. But as he launched an assault that had nothing to do with pragmatism and everything to do with an idealistic, death-or-glory charge, he took solace in the fact that it was not naiveté but duty that forced his hand. He would not mourn any warriors who fell in the performance of duty. He would honour their deaths, and accept his own, but regret and sorrow were the province of the weak and the faithless. This battle, here, now, in all of its madness, was the new anvil upon which Fifth Company would be tested, and if this were the path drawn by Vulkan that would lead the company to its destiny, then Mulcebar welcomed it. He also blessed the efforts of the White Scars and the Raven Guard that had lured the Overfiend into the open, and so made this test a reality. The task that loomed was formidable; without the blows struck by the other Chapters, it would have been impossible.

But though the Salamanders would be shaped against the anvil, they would also be a hammer themselves.

‘Full ahead,’ Mulcebar ordered. ‘Prioritise fire on the escorts.’

The *Verdict of the Anvil* lunged forwards from the darkness of the void, plasma engines flaring, their nova brilliance a roar of challenge to the ork ships. The greenskins responded in kind, and war rushed to meet the strike cruiser. The *Verdict* closed at a right angle to the course of the squadron. On the tacterium screens, Mulcebar had a last look at the flank of the kroozer, a massive target begging for the judgement of the nova cannon, and then shifted his focus to the escorts. The smaller ships were peeling away from their charge. There were six of them, their guns already flashing though they were not yet within range.

‘Approaching ork escort ships,’ a servitor intoned. It was slaved to the long-range augurs. ‘Three pairings. Designations: Onslaught, Ravager, Brute.’

Technical data appeared on Mulcebar’s screens. It was unnecessary. The names had told him what he needed to know, and the comparisons between the ork forces and the *Verdict*’s strength were clear in his mind. The *Verdict* was faster than all the enemy ships except the Brutes. It had better shields. It was so much more manoeuvrable than the kroozer that it could dance circles around its foe. But it could not do the same to the escorts. The Onslaughts and the Ravagers were clumsy ships, but they could still turn faster than the *Verdict*. Then there were the Brutes. They were fast, agile, and they rammed.

Still, it was the kroozer that represented the orks’ biggest advantage. Not because it was solid as a greenskin’s skull and could absorb horrific damage, but because Mulcebar could not attack and destroy it.

‘Ten seconds to range,’ the gunnery officer reported.

The seconds Mulcebar ten seconds had left to decide his opening strategy. He didn’t need them. There was only one path to follow. The Salamanders had to board the ship. Now. So the attack would be as risky as it would be savage: blast through the escorts, launch the boarding torpedoes on a near approach to the kroozer, then withdraw and shadow.

Simple.

He doubted the orks would cooperate.

‘Maintain full ahead,’ Mulcebar ordered. ‘Prow cannons, fire on Ravagers. Port and starboard batteries, prepare for flanking attacks.’

The ships reached firing range. The flashes from the enemy were now true threats, and the *Verdict of the Anvil* answered the orks with its own fury. The forward bombardment cannons opened up. The ram ships were already swinging wide for their attack runs, but the other ork ships flew into the teeth of the Salamanders’ monstrous ordnance, either trusting in the strength of their shields,

or too single-minded to think of evading. The leading Ravager was the first sacrifice on the altar of war. It was in the process of launching a massive torpedo salvo when the *Verdict*'s fire hit. The chain of explosions was immense. For a few moments, the ship became a comet, its momentum granting the flaming mass a strange coherence. Then even larger blasts from what had been ammunition bays spread the wreckage wide, forcing its companion ships off their direct course.

One of the Onslaughts had been coming on too hard on the Ravager's heels. The attack ship was an awkward beast: merciless in a direct assault, with formidable forward shields and batteries, but with the manoeuvrability of a sauroch in mud. It rose up, flying above the worst of the boiling gases, exposing its vulnerable belly to the *Verdict*'s guns. The strike cruiser's bombardment raked the Onslaught, tearing through useless shields and cracking the ork ship open like an egg. The Onslaught disintegrated, littering the void with metal fragments and tumbling, flash-frozen corpses.

The second Ravager swerved to port, then returned to its course. Its racks of torpedoes fired. They came at the *Verdict of the Anvil* in an undisciplined swarm. Mulcebar saw premature detonations, erratic flight paths, even outright collisions. But there were so many, too many. The orks were geniuses of quantity. It didn't matter how imprecise their technology was. If they hurled enough spears at their target, some were bound to hit.

The *Verdict*'s side batteries lit the void with a hellish shield of explosions. They created a net of plasma and las, missiles and beams, a net of destruction to catch and exterminate any ship or projectile that dared approach. But there were too many.

'Port, thirty degrees,' Mulcebar called, and the *Verdict* began its turn into the torpedo salvo, reducing its profile. The impact warning sounded, whooping through the four-kilometre length of the ship. Three torpedoes slammed into the prow. The first was a dud, flattening itself against the shields. The other two exploded within less than a second of each other, embracing the bow of the ship in a blossom of flame. The void shields crackled, flaring bright with the overload, and flickered. The weakness was brief, but it was just long enough. Another torpedo struck the port side. The hull shook. Crimson runes cascaded across the tacterium screens. Mulcebar took them in, seeing cause for both relief and concern. There were no breaches. But an entire rack of port batteries had taken a direct hit and been destroyed. There was a gap in the ship's defences now.

The remaining turrets blazed hell at the Ravager, while the prow cannons sought out the remaining Onslaught. Mulcebar looked for the Brutes, and saw the two ramming ships beginning their attack, one on each flank. He couldn't evade or outrun them. There might have been a slim chance of foiling the charge of one, but now an inescapable pincer was closing around the *Verdict*. The hope was to shatter the claws before they could meet with the flesh of the ship.

'Side batteries, target ram ships,' Mulcebar said. 'Helmsmaster, take us down.' The strike cruiser began as sharp a plunge as a beast its size could manage. The prow dropped below the plane of the engagement. The Brutes adjusted and continued to close. The Onslaught was slower. It had been weathering the storm of the *Verdict*'s barrage through a combination of speed, counter-measures and sheer, brutal resilience. Its own firepower was pressing the *Verdict*'s void shields hard. Now its las and missiles passed over the *Verdict*'s prow. The hits were more glancing, over a wider area of shield, and for a precious second, Mulcebar's gunners again had direct shot on an ork ship's weaker armour. They took it. The cannon gutted the Onslaught. The colossal ordnance slammed deep into the belly of the ship and exploded, tearing the vessel in half. Its pieces tumbled end over end through the void, trailing gas and wreckage.

The Ravager was passing port and aft. In the last second before it moved beyond the arc of the remaining batteries, a lance struck its engines. The port side of the torpedo boat flashed like the death of a sun, then gouted red flame and ugly smoke. The ship spun into a drunken spiral, and a few seconds later the glare of its starboard engines went dark. Intact but drifting, the Ravager fell into the dark of the void. The oily flames of its wound were the receding marker of its existence.

Four ships down, and the length of the war could still be counted in seconds. Four kills, but Mulcebar didn't allow himself to feel any satisfaction. It was the nature of all war, and especially void war, for crushing victory to become final defeat on a second's whim of fate. The ramming ships were still coming for the *Verdict*. The strike cruiser was injured, and it hadn't even begun its run at the kill kroozer. 'Kill those Brutes!' he shouted. He could feel the fate of the mission, and then of millions of souls, balancing on the cusp of the next few moments.

The starboard batteries set the heavens ablaze with turret- and missile-fire. Lances seared the dark, reaching for their agile, speeding target. Brutes were vessels designed for but a single function, but it was an act so completely at one with the ork character that there was a raw, ugly brilliance to their design. The prow accounted for over a third of a Brute's length. It was an enormous, serrated

knife blade, and every bolt, every rivet, every scrap of metal of the ship was in the service of that blade. The vessels were armoured not to withstand enemy fire but so they could hit harder. Their engines were better than those of other escort ships. They were faster and more manoeuvrable. And all of these strengths were conceived so that the Brute could fulfil its simple, crude destiny: to smash into another ship at high speed and rend it asunder. It was a crewed torpedo a thousand metres long.

Its size, however, meant that it could not evade fire forever, no matter how swift and agile it was. The pincer closed, the ram ships barrelled in, and on the starboard flank, the lances reached out, grasped and burned. Their target had been acquired. Energy concentrated into beams of destruction incarnate sliced deep into its core. Its engines blew, and though it was as if a dwarf star had gone nova in close proximity to the *Verdict of the Anvil*, the wash of superheated gases over the struggling void shields was a soft caress compared to the blow the Brute had so eagerly promised. The shock wave slammed into the strike cruiser. The *Verdict* yawed like a log in an angry river. The hull groaned.

That was to starboard. But to port...

Even as the lances were striking their quarry, Mulcebar was calling for a hard turn to port. The portside Brute had found the gap in the strike cruiser's fire arc and was storming forwards. The turn was a desperate gambit to change the *Verdict's* orientation and bring weaponry to bear on the ork ship-killer. Mulcebar had seen grand cruisers have their backs broken by the blow of a Brute. Now the *Verdict's* hull did not just groan, it shrieked the agony of torque as the roll, the turn and the drive forwards unleashed warring physical forces. The movement was fast for a cruiser, and it was tortuously slow.

'Brace for impact,' Mulcebar ordered. The shriek of the klaxons climbed in pitch and rhythm.

And there, with the seconds draining away, the Brute appeared in the sights of one of the port batteries. Missiles streaked to intercept the ram ship. It was so close, and so big, that its speed was no longer a factor. The rockets couldn't miss.

They didn't. Projectiles a hundred metres long struck the Brute head-on. The punch of their mass was fused with the fury of their explosives. On the bridge, the portside occuliport flashed crimson from the detonation.

The tactarium screen to Mulcebar's right displayed the pageantry of destruction. The Brute emerged from the heart of the explosion. It was battered and rocked by secondary blasts. It had been knocked off course, and was

skewing towards the *Verdict* at an oblique angle. It had been slowed. As flames plumed from all parts of the ork ship, it was hard to tell if its engines were still working, or even if it were still being piloted.

In the end, Mulcebar was looking at minor blessings. The vicious prow, though damaged, was not gone. The ship had not been destroyed. Collision was inevitable.

The Brute hit. It dragged itself along the midship flank, gouging the *Verdict* open. The impact shook the entire length of the ship with the force of an earthquake. Mulcebar kept his feet, but servitors and human crew were thrown down. He felt the wound reach into the heart of his ship. Then the Brute revealed itself to be a dying beast and it was burst apart by an internal blast. Its end was its final curse on the *Verdict* as it fed its flames into the gaping breach, infecting the cruiser with an immolating disease. The fever raced through corridors, leaping past shredded bulkheads. Power flickered and wavered. The overloaded void shields collapsed.

The runes on the tacterium screens tumbled over each other in a litany of disaster. Each was a different message of woe, but together they spoke a single word: doom.

Mulcebar cursed as the containment mechanisms failed and the fire spread its wings.

In the torpedo room, the battle was experienced as sound and movement, punctuated by fragmentary glimpses through oculiports. The sounds were an oratorio of machine rage. An immense choir of booms was punctuated by the strobing of energy weapons and the shrieks of metal. When the Brute struck, it was as if Mount Deathfire had erupted in the heart of the ship. Seismic pain shook the walls and floor, and the sound was so gigantic that it blotted out thought.

The initial impact passed, but the hull continued to tremble with smaller explosions. A constant vibration hummed through the walls, and something distant but terrible murmured through the ventilation system. Ha'garen recognised the voice of fire. Beneath his feet, the injured ship quivered.

At the far end of the torpedo room was a maintenance console. Ha'garen ran to it. Mechadendrites extended from his neck and plugged themselves in beneath the screen. The console was designed to monitor and service the atmospheric conditions local to the room itself, and nothing more, but it was still a conduit to the entire nervous system of the ship. Ha'garen's consciousness became one with

the *Verdict of the Anvil*. He had been aware of the anguish of the vessel's machine-spirit before, but now its wailing of anger and pain was overwhelming, and for a moment it filled his entire existence. A tiny portion of his mind noted that his body was uttering a litany of calming, and he channelled the power of the ritual directly into the ship's soul. Though the machine-spirit's agony did not diminish, its frenzy abated just enough for Ha'garen to see and think clearly.

He took in the damage and the growth of the fire, traced the path it would follow, and evaluated the options in the same fractions of a second that he had trained to read a battlefield. The wound along the port flank was long and deep, and its effects spread far beyond the actual gap in the hull. The integrity of electrical and life-sustaining systems was badly compromised. The ship could be saved. Power could be stabilised and routed to engines, shields and weapons. Most of the *Verdict of the Anvil* would still be able to support life. It could still be the Emperor's might and Vulkan's wrath, and it could still complete its mission. *Could*. But all these things would become possible only through immediate, drastic action. If the *Verdict* were not saved in the next few seconds, it would not be saved at all.

There was precisely one option: amputation.

The fire roared through the passageways of the ship, gorging on combustibles. Servitors were incinerated at their posts and as they plodded along their dutiful paths. Some writhed, their nerve endings reacting to the burn even while their brains remained as oblivious to their deaths as to their lives. The sentient crew – serfs, grunts, officers, technicians, priests – fled before the flames, but the fire outpaced them and ran them down, devouring the oxygen they needed to scream as their flesh blackened to crisp ash. Salamanders caught by the inferno survived inside their armour, but there was nothing they could do for the humans, some of whom turned, in their final moments, with pleading arms outstretched to the gods who had suddenly been found wanting. Bulkhead doors dropped, automatically triggered to seal off the damaged area. The attempt was failing. Too many frames had been twisted out of true. There were too many alternate paths for the fire to take. It found them all. It was a lightning cancer flashing through the arteries and organs of the ship.

Fore and aft of the fire, well beyond the damage wrought by the Brute, in zones structurally sound, regions that were still refuges, massive doors closed, locked, sealed. Here, the frames were perfect. The barriers were absolute. Many crew members saw the doors shut. More than a few guessed what was about to

happen.

An exterior voice intruded on Ha'garen's focus. It was Ba'birin's. 'Brother, what are you doing?' His hand was on Ha'garen's shoulder. Information about the grip and its pressure reached Ha'garen's mind as pure data. He did not feel the tug. His awareness of his physical self had been reduced to information, and was no more visceral than the electrical impulses down which his identity travelled and through which he acted. He redirected enough of his self to answer Ba'birin.

'I am acting to save the ship,' he said.

'There are large numbers of active personnel signals in those sealed areas.'

The monitor, Ha'garen realised, must be displaying what he was calling up. 'Yes,' he said.

'We must extract them,' Ba'birin insisted.

'We cannot,' Ha'garen said. He completed the procedure.

Explosive bolts fired, blowing wide hatches and doors. Valves burst open. Across a third of the length of the *Verdict of the Anvil*, the ship opened itself to the void. Its atmosphere was stripped away, sucked out with a burst of smoke, oil and flame, and puffs of water crystal. The fire was robbed of its breath in an instant. So were the trapped humans. Their deaths were quick but agonised. Their jaws widened, desperately grasping for the absent air. Some held their breath, and their lungs exploded. They were, perhaps, the fortunate ones. The others remained conscious longer. They had time, so much time, ten eternal chrono-ticks to know what was happening to them, to suffer the foretaste of hell and understand that there would be no rescue. They had not been abandoned. They had been sacrificed. Tick, and tick, and tick, and their chests heaved with the effort to fill empty lungs. Their muscles locked, and then began to convulse. Water vapour expanded and their bodies swelled, and still the unlucky ones did not pass out. When they did, their bodies lived on for more than a minute.

Some of the dead were sucked from the ship by the decompression. Most remained where they fell. Ha'garen had killed the atmosphere but not the gravity. The bodies in their thousands would wait for disposal. They were a carpet of dead matter.

But the fire was out, killed as quickly as the humans. The *Verdict's* machine-spirit calmed.

Ha'garen withdrew from the ship's being. He retracted his mechadendrites. Ba'birin was staring at him, horror etched deeply into his obsidian features.

‘In Vulkan’s name, what have you done?’ the sergeant whispered.

‘I preserved the ship.’ Ha’garen was not boasting. He was speaking a simple truth.

‘You have killed thousands of fellow Nocturneans.’

‘I saved many thousand more.’ He wasn’t trying to defend himself. He was simply giving Ba’birin all the information.

‘And there was no other alternative? You acted without thinking.’

‘That is not true.’ Ha’garen had examined every possible course of action, and had chosen the best alternative. When he was part of the machine circuit, his thoughts were quicksilver lightning. He had weighed the costs of his action carefully. He knew exactly what he had done, down to the last tortured serf. He also knew precisely what the cost would have been if he had done nothing, or even waited a few more seconds.

Ba’birin shrugged, not convinced. ‘Remember the human, brother,’ he said as he turned away. ‘If you forget, you will kill us all.’

Mulcebar read the tally of casualties and damage. The numbers were grim, but could so easily have been worse. A large area of the ship was sealed off and would remain so until the *Verdict* could return to Prometheus and dry-dock for repairs. But the ship could pursue. It could fight. It was responding to commands from the bridge once more. Its machine-spirit was snarling softly, eager for retaliation.

There was a mission to complete.

‘Bring us back to our pursuit heading,’ Mulcebar said. When the helmsmaster nodded, the captain added, ‘Get me that ork.’

The *Verdict of the Anvil* was wounded, but not hobbled, not crippled. The predator could still hunt, and the duty of the Salamanders was now twinned with the ship’s thirst for vengeance. A rage for the wounds and for the dead permeated the walls of the vessel, and Mulcebar wasn’t sure if he was feeling his own anger and that of his men, or picking up the *Verdict*’s own fury. Perhaps there was no distinction to be made. The engines flared the searing white of that fury, and the *Verdict* powered forwards, building momentum as it closed on its prey.

The prey that it must not kill. The prey against which it could use little more than speed and void shields. And a lethal injection of warriors.

The kill kroozer had put some distance between itself and the *Verdict*. Though the battle with the escort had been brief, there would have been time for the

flagship to reverse course and engage with its wounded enemy. Mulcebar was surprised that it had not. He was also concerned. For orks to avoid, or at the very least ignore, an obvious scrap, they had to be focused on something else that was extraordinarily compelling. Some lure, whether instinct, intuition or perverse chance, was calling that ship onwards. He wondered again about the secret the Salamanders were chasing. Did the orks know what was enhancing their planetside forces? He thought not. But it didn't matter, if the mere existence of this power was enough to draw them on.

The *Verdict* gained, but slowly. The speeds of the two ships were almost identical. Urgency and rage granted the strike cruiser just enough of an edge to close with its prey. Every moment saw the ork monster drive deeper into the system, and the window for the mission close a little bit more.

Then Mulcebar saw an adjustment in the kroozer's course. It was beginning a starboard turn. 'Got your attention at last,' he muttered. The enemy ship was coming around to meet them with its heaviest guns and strongest shields. 'Helmsmaster,' he said aloud, 'let us give the greenskins what they are clearly wanting. Set course to meet their turn.' He opened a channel to the torpedo deck. 'Boarding party, prepare for launch.'

The *Verdict* began a starboard correction as well, moving on a diagonal to its original heading. The lumbering kroozer finished its turn. A hook-jawed leviathan, it surged forwards to meet its rival. The two predators closed with each other, one eager to devour, the other intent on purging its opponent from within. When the kroozer's guns began their bombardment, Mulcebar stifled the impulse to respond in kind. 'Evasive manoeuvres,' he ordered. 'Get us within range, helmsmaster. Batteries open fire. Target only the enemy's turrets.'

Phanes took the *Verdict* to port and down. Against an attack ship, the move would have been pointless. Against the beast that was the kroozer, the *Verdict*'s agility was blinding. Some of the ork shots hit, but most went wild. The void shields held. The kroozer's turrets spun, fighting to reacquire their target. The *Verdict*'s batteries blazed at the kroozer. The show of firepower was spectacular, but barely more dangerous than a fireworks display as the *Verdict*'s targeting concentrated on turrets and the thickest shielding. A few of the ork guns were silenced. There were plenty more, and as the vessels drew nearer to one another, it became impossible for the orks to miss. The barrage pressed the *Verdict*'s shields hard. 'Torpedo decks,' Mulcebar voxed. 'Status.'

'Ready for launch,' Ba'birin's voice came back.

The ships were upon each other. 'Do it now,' Mulcebar told Phanes.

The helmsmaster straightened the *Verdict*'s course. The two behemoths slid by each other, unleashing hellish broadsides. The *Verdict* took strong hits on the port side. Most of the ork shells struck the damaged area, but Ha'garen had quarantined it so completely from the rest of the ship that a few more gaping rents in the hull were beneath notice. The *Verdict*'s own guns still fired to spectacular effect, causing only minor damage but blinding the enemy's eyes with constant las and plasma flashes. The blaze of ordnance was cover. In the midst of the exchange of fire, while the ships passed the length of each other like ancient, three-masted privateers, the boarding torpedoes launched.

Mulcebar watched them go as Phanes shot the *Verdict of the Anvil* out of the kroozer's range. The kroozer tried to turn around, but by the time it did, the Salamanders would be well under way. There was no catching up possible.

The torpedoes had almost reached their target when a servitor announced, 'Contact.'

Mulcebar looked at his own screens. He saw no other ships in the vicinity. 'Is there any confirmation?' he called out.

An officer had run to the servitor's augury station. She looked at the screen, then back up at Mulcebar. 'Nothing,' she said. 'Perhaps an anomaly caused by the damage.'

Mulcebar frowned, dissatisfied. 'Keep watch,' he ordered. 'Inform the boarding party.'

Minor explosions erupted in the kroozer's flank. They were close together, a concentrated burst of two pinpricks. They were the sparks of Vulkan's hammer striking the anvil, bringing the war to the orks.



CHAPTER THREE

The boarding torpedo was a blunt instrument whose uses were as varied as they were sophisticated. Though it was crewed and had enough fuel and engine power for limited manoeuvres over short distances, its action was still one of the most basic of warfare. It was a projectile. It was an object launched to hit other objects as hard as possible. Its uniqueness among other projectiles, its sophistication, came in the fact that it caused most damage after its initial impact as the living weapons it carried stormed the passageways of its target. From that uniqueness sprang its versatility. Should the strikes concentrate on a single entry point or be spread out, engaging the enemy on multiple fronts? Hit from one side for a spear-point thrust, or from both flanks, trapping the foe in a ceramite fist? The answer depended on the ship and the objective. Was the vessel a known quantity whose layout could be factored into planning? Was the objective one of total annihilation or more surgical?

This ship was unknown. It was the creation of a species whose approaches to technology were in equal measures crude and enthusiastic.

And the mission was grotesque.

But there *was* a mission, and so there was a strategy. The mission was search and rescue through hostile, alien territory. The strategy was the use of a concentrated, mobile force. And so the boarding torpedoes drove into the centre of the kroozer's port flank.

For Ha'garen, the line between machine and flesh was blurry at best. There were times when he saw no distinction at all. Was there an essential difference between his mechanistic implants and prostheses, and the organs that had

transformed him into a Space Marine? He didn't think so. The hands of the Mechanicus hovered over both. Neither was natural. What, beyond the medium of construction, distinguished his eyes that saw radiation above and below the wavelengths of visible light from the neuroglottis that broke taste and smell down into component, identifiable parts? Nothing. Flesh and metal, bone and ceramite, the physical was the physical. The body was the body.

So when the vulcan-drills of the boarding torpedoes parted metal, they were parting flesh. The torpedoes were blades sinking into the body of a living enemy, and then sealing the entry wound. There was nothing of mercy in the healing; it merely permitted the deeper, more lethal wounds that would be inflicted subsequently by the transported Salamanders. There was an aesthetic to this form of attack, a perfect fusion of the organic and inorganic in form and function that he found pleasing. The very act of waging war in this fashion was a tribute to the Ommissiah. The focus of the hammer blow was an obeisance to Vulkan. And the war itself was a sacrament to the Emperor. There was a trinity of worship simply in the manner in which the squads had arrived on the ork ship. This simple truth was so clear, it was a wonder it was not visible to all. But he did not need to see Ba'birin's face beneath his helmet to know that the lesson was lost on him. Ha'garen could read distrust in the microscopic changes in the other Space Marine's posture whenever Ha'garen was in his field of view.

There was more than distrust. There was anger, running deep. Ba'birin still did not see the necessity of what Ha'garen had done on the *Verdict of the Anvil*. He saw Ha'garen disregarding any consideration of the flesh in his effort to save the machine. He was wrong. Ha'garen's judgement was sound.

Are you sure? What are you?

The Salamanders disembarked in a large cargo bay. The ceiling was high, like those of the *Verdict*, but there was none of the Imperial ship's majesty here. The walls did not rise to ribbed vaults that lifted the eyes in awe. Instead, there was an irregularity to the space that offended the Techmarine. There was a morality for the constructed, and there was none in evidence here. The walls were of different heights, varying by as much as a metre even on a single side of the room. The ceiling dipped and sagged overhead like an iron tarpaulin. Worst of all, Ha'garen couldn't shake the sense of grotesque improvisation. The space's function was the result of chance and opportunism. It was not big because it was a cargo bay. It happened to be big, and so it was a cargo bay.

He was disgusted, in the sense that every bit of technical data streaming to his consciousness revealed their surroundings as corrupted. Not by Chaos, but by

incompetence. He was not surprised. This first glimpse of the interior of the ship matched what he had seen of the exterior during the torpedo's approach. Though the kroozer had an impressive, bestial solidity to it, there was little overall planning to its design. Its shape, not unlike an elongated ork's skull, was not produced by careful design. It was the inevitably ramshackle work of many hands guided by single-minded aggression. The greenskins could not help but produce a machinic embodiment of themselves: brutish, stupid, ferociously dangerous and hard to kill. There was no system, no logic to the construction. There was only instinct.

The Salamanders were surrounded by vehicles in various states of construction, disassembly and experimentation. Some looked intact, awaiting the signal to deploy. Others had been dissected, seemingly by a drunk and blind butcher. Engines had been removed and scavenged with no thought as to how they might be replaced. Wheels, tracks, chassis, weapon mounts and unidentifiable scrap littered the floor, some in mounds that rose higher than the intact vehicles. The scene was an engineering disgrace. But for all the heaped junk and parts, for all the haphazard placement of the transports, bikes and tanks, there was also menacing force. The ork way of war was sloppy, and at first glance seemed alien to any recognisable concept of strategy. But it was devastatingly effective. For every vehicle in pieces, there was one ready for battle, and another being rebuilt into something even more deadly. And there were numbers. In this single cargo bay, stacked and parked any which way, there was enough transport and heavy support to annihilate an entire company of Imperial Guard.

The space was lit by guttering glow-globes. Light a shade of filth and rust slicked the room, glinting dully off metal. The vehicles and scrap piles cast jagged shadows. Some of the shadows moved.

Orks had been at work when the torpedoes burst through the hull. Several had been pulverised by the vulcan-drills. The others had regrouped at the far end of the bay and were charging forwards, roaring with anger that intruders had invaded their territory, and with delight that an unexpected scrap was at hand. They came in a straight line, a wave of snarling barbarism, leaping over obstacles that might have served as cover in their eagerness to reach the Space Marines and start the killing.

The Salamanders obliged. They didn't seek cover any more than did the orks. 'Brothers!' Ba'birin called out. 'Purge the savage greenskins from the sight of the Emperor! Let them feel the fire of Vulkan's judgement!'

‘Into the fires of battle!’ Neleus cried.

‘Unto the Anvil of War!’ the squads chorused. Ha’garen unleashed the battle cry with as much force as any, his vocal cords grating from the unusual strain. He rarely raised his voice above a monotone now, relying almost exclusively on his helm vox-caster to deliver the volume he needed, whether in discussion with his battle-brothers or reciting liturgical verse over a damaged machine. But in this moment, in this surging birth of battle, he was a Space Marine above all else, and the passion he felt for war surprised him in its fire.

The fight had been too long in coming. Anticipated while the other Chapters carried out their missions, held off again while the void-ships engaged in their lethal dance, its glory tainted by the nature of the mission, the struggle was nothing as simple as a military tactic. It was a need, a reaffirmation of nobility and purpose.

And a battering ram of vengeance.

The Salamanders marched into battle. They were a steady, measured, implacable advance. They were a fist of ceramite, flame and bolter-fire. Neleus and Ba’birin led the two squads as a single whole, twenty Salamanders moving forwards like an adamantine piston. Both sergeants carried combi-flamers. They formed the blunt end of a terrible spear, and fanned a spread of burning promethium before them. Fuel drums and pools of spilled chemicals ignited with the ferocious *whoosh* of a sudden gale. The orks poured into the fire. The front ranks were consumed. The mob coming up from behind pushed over the bodies and broke over the rock of the Fifth Company. The Salamanders continued their advance, hammering the orks. They husbanded their ammunition. They knew they would be needing it the further into the ship they drove, wading into a sea of orks. They used the initial blast of bolter-fire to complement the wash of flame. A horizontal, explosive hail turned the greenskin charge into a storm of rancid meat. Through the storm came still more orks, laughing at the spectacle of their fellows’ deaths even as they hurled guttural curses at the Space Marines. The momentum of their rush, though, was lost. They couldn’t simply bound over vehicles. They had to avoid flaming slicks and red-burning wrecks. They had to fight past their twitching, near-dead comrades and tangling stumbles of the barely-more alive. The single-minded tenacity of the orks kept them coming when a lesser foe would have been exterminated, but even a slight bleed-off of speed and energy was enough for the Salamanders to exploit.

Mag-locking projectile weapons to their thighs, they moved into close combat with chainsword, gladius and fist. Ha’garen brought up the rear. His servo-arms

smashed flanking greenskins to the ground with metronomic rhythm while he gutted enemies to the front. His burst of excitement had faded, giving way once again to an intense, cold-blooded focus. At the speed of instinct, but with the precision of meticulous calculation, he evaluated each second for maximum damage to the enemy. He slew the orks with a methodical brutality that would have made even his cautious, pre-Mars self chafe with boredom. His new incarnation was not bored. He experienced no tedium. Instead, he was engaged in the deliberate crafting of the perfect ork kill. It was, in its way, a form of art, the only kind that he could still recognise.

The Salamanders battered their way to the entrance of the cargo bay. They reached the raised gate and began to run out of orks. They turned around and mopped up. The remaining monsters did not give up. They fought as hard, and with as little fear, as they had at the beginning of the struggle. But then they were dead, and for a few moments there was silence. Or as close to it as could be experienced on an ork ship. There was no true silence in such a place. The throb of the engines made the filth-encrusted iron walls vibrate as if from the grunts of a giant beast. Snaking, creaking pipes and conduits carried the echoes of snarls, blows and screams. Some of the screams could have been the squeals of poorly slaughtered animals. Others surely were the agonised howls of breaking slaves. Still more might have been either.

The squads moved into the wide corridor outside the cargo bay. It stretched a good distance fore and aft before dropping into gloom. It was wide enough for four Space Marines to march abreast, and Ha'garen pictured it feeding vast numbers of orks to the various flank bays, whose openings were so many gaping maws along the passageway's length. Narrower corridors, tributaries to a major river, ran off the main hallway. From what little Ha'garen could see, they twisted, angled and crossed each other in a hopelessly tangled metal labyrinth. They made a mockery of the logical, strategic function of the principle artery.

The Salamanders formed a defensive semi-circle, covering all approaches. Ba'birin and Neleus turned to Ha'garen. 'Any ideas?' Neleus asked.

'We can hardly go exploring,' Ba'birin said. His tone was cold, accusatory, as if Ha'garen had suggested just such a lunatic plan of action. Ba'birin was right, though. Slightly longer and broader than the *Verdict of the Anvil*, the kroozer was the size of a small city, one whose entire population of tens of thousands would have no other thought than to wipe out the Salamanders once their presence became widely known. It was no heresy or failure of will to acknowledge that they could not take on the entire ork crew. It was madness to believe otherwise.

Past Imperial encounters with ork ships was of little help. Greenskin vessels of a given class resembled each other sufficiently in their broad lines to be recognisable as being part of that class, but in the specifics, each was its own unique monster, shaped by the whim of its commander and the demented experimentation of his mekboyz. Relying on previously experienced layouts was just as likely to lead to dead ends and disaster as one's objective. Ha'garen might have been willing to make some educated guesses based on existing data if the Salamanders' target had been the bridge or the engine room. But they were here to find a single prisoner.

Ha'garen stepped back into the cargo bay. In the wall to the left of the gate was a large metal box. Its location was promising. So was the sound of sparks and angry hornets coming from inside. Ha'garen opened the panel. If an Imperial engineer had produced such a collection of wires, circuits and outlets, he would have been shot, had he avoided electrocution long enough to reach the firing squad. It looked like a death trap, and not a power source for the orks working on the vehicles in the bay. Sparks jumped from wires that had little or no insulation. Through his helmet's rebreather, Ha'garen picked up a powerful smell of ozone. He accepted all of this as normal. He had long ago learned to accept that ork technology worked in defiance of common sense. His mechadendrites moved towards the electrical snake pit but he hesitated before making contact, forging a mental shield from his prayers to the Omnissiah. Though he spoke the words aloud, the principle force of the ritual was internal, a ceremony between his flesh and machine, mind and spirit, a communion in that sacred place where the self was still evolving out of the fusion between Salamander and machine.

The link he was about to attempt was dangerous. He was aware of no precedent for it, nor did he even know if it was religiously sound. He had been thinking about the act and its possible consequences since Mulcebar had first assigned him to this boarding mission, and had tried to think of an alternative means of acquiring the necessary information. There was none. He thought back to the briefing, to the look Mulcebar had given him as he had saluted, arms crossed to slap chestplate, before leaving the strategium. The captain did not have an expressive face, and his look of stoic pragmatism did not change then. But Ha'garen had thought at the time, and was convinced now, that there had been a glimmer in his eye, a hint of repressed regret. He had known. He had known the step Ha'garen would have to take, but he could not let an impulse of sympathy compromise the mission, just as he had to swallow the revulsion that

came with ordering the rescue of an eldar.

Duty came before self. And the self must be used in the furtherance of duty. The principles were that simple.

Simple, too was the equation that now confronted Ha'garen. Personal risk was irrelevant. The mission was crucial to the survival of far more than a local system. The eldar witch must be found. There was only one Salamander who could find him, and there was only one way to do so. With the equation solved, the reasons to hesitate evaporated like the mirages they were. Strengthened by resolve and communion with the technical purity of the Machine-God, Ha'garen linked himself to the kroozer's electrical system.

It was like stepping into a surging river of raw effluent. Ha'garen could imagine no machine realm more disgusting, unless it were one corrupted by Chaos itself, and into those waters he would not have waded, for the risk of contamination was so high. He would have doomed himself, his mission, and everyone and everything he had been trying to save. As it was, he strengthened his mental barriers of purity before he opened himself up to the full picture of debased circuitry that coursed through the ship.

The kroozer appeared to him as a pulsating line schematic. It was drawn by the currents flowing down cables and through circuits across the ship. Zones of heavy electrical use shone brightly, the lines thick with energy. Bridge, engine room and weapon systems shone like suns. Ha'garen was contemplating a three-dimensional grid in the shape of an ork kroozer. There was no matter to the vision, nothing but void between the lines, but the ship did not appear insubstantial. It was just as vicious in this incarnation as in its physical one. The flickering light-beast was a carnivore on a perpetual hunt, lashing out at the entire universe. It was energy sculpted into rage, and it was inarticulate. But though it would not speak, perhaps it could be read.

The eldar the Salamanders sought could be in three possible states. He could be dead, though they had the assurance of the Stormseer that he was not. Therefore, he was either engaged in the labour of a slave, in which case he could be almost anywhere on the ship, or he was in a cell. And if he was suffering under the greenskin lash, he would, sooner or later, be returned to his cell. That was the target Ha'garen had to identify. Slave pens would be allocated the bare minimum of energy resources. Orks being what they were, the simplest means of containing their captives would be used, likely little more than a large space in which they could toss the prisoners. Probably in the lower decks.

There. Minimal circuitry surrounding a void towards the bottom centre of the

hull. Only the most sporadic tracery of electrical activity running in those bleak walls. No quick access to cargo hatches or weapon systems there. Anything kept in that space would count for very little. The area was very large, too. It could hold thousands. He had narrowed the search, but not enough.

Ha'garen opened himself up a bit more to the ship. His awareness closed in on that large emptiness in the grid. The faint energy demands, invisible when blotted by the incandescence of the full ship, became clearer when he looked at the low-use zone in isolation. *Find one prisoner*, he told himself. *Read the electronic entrails and find one prisoner*. He scanned the entire zone multiple times before the odd detail popped out. Towards the bottom, near the prow end of the space, there was a small but constant pulse. Someone was drawing on the grid. Not a slave, but in the slave quarters. Guards, Ha'garen surmised. A small number, and in an odd spot. The location was not quite on the perimeter, where even orks would find it logical to place security for the prison as a whole. And indeed, when he pulled back for a moment, Ha'garen saw a glow that likely was the principle guard post. The other, weaker, smaller shine was inside the pen. Extra guards. For select prisoners.

Special prisoners.

An eldar seer would be very special. Orks were extremely superstitious, and an enemy who knew what they were going to do before they did would be a prize catch. They would be nervous about what he might be capable of, but also proud to have caught him. He would be an anxiety-inducing trophy. The commander who caught him would expend greater effort in keeping him alive, confined, and helpless.

Ha'garen pulled out from the ork grid. As he left the cargo bay, he felt a fading aftertaste of his link with the kroozer. It was a stuttering, background vibration in his mind and soul, and a shedding of tainted ash. The purity of his link to the Ommissiah had been compromised, and he didn't know if it could be cleansed.

He rejoined his squad. His consciousness had been away from the physical world for less than ten seconds, but even in that lapse of time, events had moved forwards. The noise of the kroozer was ramping up. Retaliation was on its way and closing in.

'Well?' Ba'birin asked.

'I have a location for the prisoner.' He filled them in.

'Well done, brother,' Neleus said.

Ba'birin was less enthusiastic. 'Is this a certainty or a surmise?'

'A surmise.' Ha'garen felt no shame in stating the obvious.

Ba'birin nodded towards the iron depths of the branching corridors. 'You will have Brother-Sergeant Neleus and myself rest the fate of our squads on a surmise that gives us little more to go on than "down," "centre" and "fore." Forgive me if I wish for something a little more concrete.'

'Don't be so churlish, brother,' Neleus put in. 'Techmarine Ha'garen has done well. He hasn't just narrowed the field of our search. He has provided us with an actual destination.'

'What of the path to it?'

'Through the bodies of orks,' Ha'garen said.

Neleus laughed. He clapped Ba'birin on the pauldron. 'Spoken like a true brother, no? And so to war!'

'And so to war,' Ba'birin repeated. There was none of Neleus's humour in his tone, but there was pure determination. Whatever distrust Ba'birin felt for Ha'garen, he was going to use the information he'd been given, and he would complete the mission.

Ha'garen asked for nothing more. Faintly, barely detectable at the back of his mind, like a half-heard voice that disappears in a crowd, came a tiny echo of regret. It served no purpose, so he ignored it.

Cacophony was heading for the Salamanders. It boomed around corners like an avalanche of boulders and swine. It was coming from all sides.

'They come to repel us, brothers!' Ba'birin thundered. 'They believe we are a threat! Let us show the greenskins how right they are, and bring war on our terms down on their skulls! Form up!' He led the way down the nearest side corridor. 'At my side, Ha'garen,' he said. 'Point us the way, if you can.'

Ha'garen could. He had paid for this ability by acquiring a taint on his soul, but yes, he could point the way.

The Salamanders moved deeper into the ship. They were a solid mass of force incarnate travelling down the corridor, one whose advance would not be stopped by so weak an obstacle as flesh and bone. The orks threw the obstacle at them anyway. The squads hit the first wave of defenders around the third bend of the passage, just as it reached an intersection with another, larger corridor. The Salamanders did not stop. Two trains collided in cramped quarters. One was ceramite and faith, the other muscle and rage. The crunch of bodies was almost loud enough to drown the howling of the orks. The Salamanders tore into their foes with chainsword and gladius. Blades dug into meat, severing arms and heads. Motors whined with hate and organs spilled onto the floor. The passageway turned into a Stygian abattoir, mired in pulp and blood. The front

line of the Space Marines took the initial impact of the forces, but as the Salamanders advanced, the sheer pressure and numbers of the orks squeezed xenos warriors past the sergeants. Nocturne's sons closed ranks more tightly. Their formation became a clenched fist. There was barely room to swing a blade, but there was plenty of killing for all, and not a bolter round needed. The combat was close, personal, tactile.

Ha'garen's servo-arms reached over his head, striking down to crush skulls with their vice grips. He stabbed forwards with his combat blade through armour, deep into an ork's gut. Then he cut upwards, slitting the beast open. As it fell, he snapped his fist out, driving the next greenskin's nose into its brain. The head was dead, but the ork swung at him one more time before it fell, bouncing its axe against his shoulder. Then it was down, and Ha'garen could take another step forwards. They were wading through a green quagmire, and their progress was agonising.

The Salamanders reached the intersection. The space opened up, and there was room to swing. The bulk of the orks were storming in from the left. The path to the right was almost clear. The squads took it, mowing down the few orks in the way, grinding them to paste. 'Move,' Ba'birin exhorted, and the Salamanders did. They took the corridor at forced-march speed. Brother Ko'bin and Apothecary N'krumor, forming the rear guard, unleashed a punishing wave with their flamers, creating a temporary barricade with the ork dead. Smoke choked the passageway, filtered out by rebreathers but blinding and smothering the orks. The greenskin attack slowed, and the Salamanders gained ground.

Old instincts died hard. Ha'garen found that he had to remind himself that they were not retreating. They were not fleeing the orks. They were stabbing their blades deeper into the ship.

'We have to do better,' Ba'birin said.

He was right, Ha'garen knew. They had picked up speed, and they were moving in the right general direction, but taking corridors at random in the hope that they would lead down into the hull was not a strategy, and time was not an ally. He looked up. The ceiling was idiocy: pipes leaking steam, pipes leaking smoke, pipes dripping filth, exposed conduits, tangled cables. He accessed the memory block that held the image of the kroozer's power grid. He traced the lines leading from the Salamanders' current location to the target. He pointed to one of the cables. 'We follow that one for now,' he said. 'Three turns, down one deck. Then there will be another.'

'Another surmise?' Ba'birin asked.

‘A map,’ Ha’garen answered, keeping the grid visible to his mind’s eye.

Ba’birin nodded once. Whatever he thought of Ha’garen’s loyalty or judgement, he had stopped questioning his expertise. ‘Lead us,’ he said.

Ha’garen did. The Salamanders’ drive gathered momentum. The Techmarine took the force from cable to cable. There was no hesitation. He had committed himself to a route, and it was beacon-clear to him. He did not know if the end of the path held what they sought – he thought it might – but he *knew* he could guide the way. He and his brothers would know the truth of his surmise, and know it soon.

Faster. The drive became a charge. The Space Marines encountered parties of orks and smashed through them with the punch of a maglev train. They left nothing recognisable in their wake. Behind them, the pursuit howled and grew, and grew. But it was not about to catch them. As he followed the grid, reading the language of energy, Ha’garen knew his way around the ship better than the orks did themselves. The Salamanders squads changed direction constantly. They plunged down one corridor, then another. They zig-zagged in three dimensions, taking left and right without pattern or rhythm, rising up a deck in order to drop more quickly down three more. They could not be anticipated. Ha’garen knew why the sounds of the pursuit were only becoming bigger, not closer: the orks kept losing track of their movements.

The Salamanders plunged deeper and deeper into the maze of the ship, deeper and deeper into its xenos obscenity. The walls and floor were caked with grime both industrial and organic. The lighting was erratic, flickering and browning out much of the time, then suddenly glaring bright. The ship’s architecture remained a savage patchwork, metal welded to metal in slapdash fashion, as impossibly dense and solid as its creators. Some sections seemed unfinished, others damaged, while still others were simply littered with piles of scrap iron. Metal, whether waste, wreckage or caprice, reached from the walls or decks with jagged fangs. And everywhere, ork graffiti covered the walls and ceilings. Crude, snarling faces, clenched fists and bloody axe blades were the favourite images. Surrounding the art were scrawled slogans, many of them painted in blood. The orkish glyphs were unintelligible to Ha’garen. They did not torture eye, mind and soul in the manner of Chaos lithography. These were simply brute aggression transmuted into text.

Down. Deeper.

‘Brother Ha’garen,’ Neleus said, ‘you must be very careful not to die, or the rest of us will never find our way out of this ship.’

‘In which case we’ll just have to kill it,’ Ba’birin grunted.

They were, by Ha’garen’s estimate, three decks up and a few hundred metres aft of the target. The path ahead would take them along a catwalk, from which they would drop down a level and take another corridor that passed through a large open area. It frustrated Ha’garen that he could not anticipate more of the nature of the spaces before the Salamanders reached them. To know where he was going, but not what he was passing through, seemed a reckless approach. His guesses were no more than that. And he guessed that what lay ahead might be an assembly hall of some kind.

It was loud enough to be one. Even from this distance, and with the echoing hunt shaking the walls to the rear, the cacophony up ahead was deafening. The Salamanders paused. The noise before them was as rage-filled as what was behind. They might be rushing to throw themselves into the jaws of a pincer movement. After a moment, as his Lyman’s ear resolved the noise into more discrete parts, Ha’garen realised that the uproar was not another ork contingent heading their way. He heard chaos, roars, weapons-fire: the sounds of battle.

‘Well?’ Ba’birin asked.

‘That is our route,’ Ha’garen pointed out.

‘I feel left out,’ Neleus said.

Ba’birin laughed for the first time since Mulcebar’s briefing. Ha’garen felt his own lips twitch, out of practice though they now were with expressing emotion.

‘The anvil calls, brothers,’ Ba’birin said, and took the catwalk.

It did call, Ha’garen thought as he followed. War was what they, and all other Space Marines, had been bred to wage. Some of his brothers embraced it more fanatically than others, and some saw it as a regrettable necessity. But it defined them. They *were* war, and now battle called with its siren song, and the prosecution of their mission demanded that they answer the summons.

Down the catwalk. Over its rail. Along the corridor. Armoured boot steps bringing the beat of Vulkan’s hammer to the struggle ahead. The passageway was a wide one, ending at a large double door. Ba’birin and Neleus barrelled into it and knocked it flying from its hinges. The Salamanders burst into the vast chamber. Before them was war.

Between ork and eldar.



CHAPTER FOUR

The eldar were clad in crimson armour, its hue offset by a sinuous white rune. Ha'garen pulled a designation from his memory: Saim-Hann, the same force that the White Scars and Raven Guard had encountered. He took in their weaponry. Like the Salamanders, they were conserving ammunition, primarily using their guns to crush ork skulls. But when they fired, the orks before them vaporised. Melta weapons, Ha'garen realised. He was looking at a squad of Fire Dragons. Two had fallen. There were eight remaining. One, in more ornate armour, was wielding a heavy flamer of some sort, and was a bit more free with the trigger. A ninth member of the squad wore robes over his armour and fought with a blade whose elegance and lethality shrieked its sorcerous nature.

The eldar were fighting hundreds of orks. They moved with a fluidity that should have been foreign to armour, as if they were wearing blood-red light, and were made of nothing more than thought themselves. There was a choreography to their combat, as there was to the Salamanders', but it was very different in its nature. The Salamanders worked together with the precision of a finely tuned engine of destruction. There was something of the machine in their synchrony, for which Ha'garen gave thanks. The Techmarine knew very little of the arts outside of warfare and its monumental representations, but he knew that they existed – perhaps more in Ultramar, where life wasn't perpetually on the knife edge of extinction. The movement of the eldar was, he felt instinctively, of a kind with those other arts. The rhythms weren't the unvarying pulse of machinery. They were syncopated, complex, unpredictable. As unknowable as the race itself. Alien. Ha'garen knew that he was seeing a method of warcraft

that was beautiful in and of itself. He did not like it.

Still, it was remarkable. But though the eldar were dropping orks by the dozens, it was insufficient. The Fire Dragons were doomed.

The space was an arena. Concentric circles of seating descended steeply to a pit not much more than ten metres in diameter. The Salamanders had entered behind the top row of benches. Their goal was a gated tunnel at one end of the pit. The logic of the path Ha'garen had chosen now became clear to him. The arena was used for gladiatorial combat between slaves. The surface of the pit was deep in the stew of corpses, human and otherwise, in every stage of dismemberment and decomposition. The slaves would be herded in from the tunnel to fight to the death. Ha'garen did not know if they were given weapons. He suspected they were not.

The barbarism was irrelevant. He filed it away. What mattered now was that the tunnel would lead to the slave pens, and to their target.

There was almost a full second during which a decision hovered. The Salamanders saw a clash of enemies. One was a plague upon the galaxy. The other was a particular curse upon Nocturne. The decision was not whether to interfere in the conflict, and it was not whether to attack one side or the other. There question was whether to kill both as they fought their way to the tunnel.

The eldar were clustered about three-quarters of the way down the slope. They appeared to be trying to reach the pit too. They were bogged down. They were a force that would be fearsome in confined quarters, but in the open, they were vulnerable. The orks were upon them in a flood. From the top of the arena, Ha'garen could even see currents and eddies in the rampage of the greenskins.

The second, and truly it was a *full* second, passed. The orks on the upper levels turned to welcome the Salamanders with open arms and hacking blades. Ba'birin said, 'Slay the greenskins. Do not fire on the eldar.'

The decision was a sound one, in keeping with the objectives of the mission. And like the mission itself, it rankled. There was too much history, and it was too dark, for things to be otherwise. But the Salamanders accepted the test, and vented their wrath on the orks.

Numerous as the brutes were, there was room to fight in the arena. Room to shoot, and room to swing a weapon properly. Ba'birin and Neleus struck first, once more leading by burning the plan of attack into the flesh of the enemy. They opened with a flamer blast, their promethium jets bathing the closest ranks of orks. The brutes turned into wailing, stumbling torches. They fell back against their kin, spreading the pain like a burning ripple over a pond of green scum.

Straight ahead, a path through scorched bodies opened up. The Salamanders stormed into the breach. Ha'garen built on the opening move. He advanced, between the two sergeants. His servo-arms swung forwards, then out, crushing ribcages and smashing spines. His shoulder-mounted flamer fired, incinerating the orks that were trying to charge up the gap. More bodies, more collateral burns. But still more greenskins were rushing forwards over their flaming dead. Ha'garen didn't think there was any other race, barring the tyranids, who were so completely unafraid of death. The orks' fears were far more irrational, and would take much more than the wholesale slaughter of their own to invoke.

He would show them how wrong they were not to fear the Salamanders.

He took another two steps forwards, brandishing his chainaxe. He had the high ground. He dropped down the next tier of benches and swung his weapon in a wide, horizontal stroke. It roared as if hungry. Its teeth fed on flesh, muscle and bone. It sliced deep into the chest of the leading ork as it tried to climb the riser. The top half of the beast toppled backwards while the bottom stood upright for a second after death. Ha'garen's swing side-swiped two other orks on either side of the leader, the impact sending them stumbling back. Then Ba'birin and Neleus were at Ha'garen's flanks, striking with their own chainswords. Behind them came supporting fire, bolter shells blasting greenskins to pulp.

The Salamanders descended the tiers of the arena like a lava flow from Mount Deathfire. They were flame and rock, scorching the enemy and grinding him into the filth of his own decking. They conserved ammunition by limiting themselves to sharp bursts of flamer and bolter that were just enough to make the orks reel, and then followed up with close-quarters hacking. There was no pause in their killing march, no stopping their momentum.

The orks weren't limiting themselves to blades now, but their gunfire was a weak threat. It was wild and undisciplined, and much of it wound up cutting down their own troops as they tried to close with the Space Marines. Stray rounds struck Ha'garen's armour. He ignored them.

The Salamanders advanced. They punched through the orks, and the eldar responded to the shift in the battlefield. The Fire Dragons changed their focus. No longer struggling to reach the pit, they began to make their way back up the slope of the arena. They were going to link up with the Salamanders, trapping a riot of orks between the two disciplined forces. And with that, the Salamanders were working in concert with the eldar.

Ha'garen glanced at Ba'birin. The gesture was unthought, automatic, the product of decades of habit suddenly resurfacing, a vestigial reflex that no longer

meant shared battlefield cynicism. And yet... The portion of his consciousness that, since Mars, had become a process of perpetual analysis noted the reaction and tagged it for later examination. It noted, too, that Ba'birin had made the same gesture. *Preliminary analysis: old alliances strengthened/restored in face of extraordinary new circumstances.*

Interesting, but hardly relevant. Very relevant was the most effective way of disposing of the orks before him. His flamer blast joined that of the two sergeants. Orks fell. The Salamanders were over halfway to the pit. They were closing on the eldar position.

The rockets hit the riser between the Space Marines and the eldar. The orks took the direct hit. Benches and decking blew into shrapnel. Metal torn into jagged blades whipped into the squads, along with chunks and limbs of orks. Four explosions, disorienting with skull-ringing surprise. The force of the blast staggered Ha'garen.

Momentum faltered.

Through the smoke, Ha'garen saw the eldar reeling too. He looked up. Massive, armoured orks stood at the top of the arena, spread out along its periphery. They were discarding what looked like large sticks that were smoking at one end. They were very basic, single-use rocket launchers. *So simple*, Ha'garen thought. Their effectiveness was insulting. He didn't know if the bombardment had missed its intended targets or not, but its impact shifted the strategic balance. Both parties of invaders were stunned. The orks outside the radius of the explosions were unfazed and charging.

Small, snivelling greenskins were handing new rocket sticks to their masters.

A plasma cutter was mounted on the left shoulder of Ha'garen's servo-harness. He fired it now, shearing off the arm of one of the giants. It howled in annoyance, then stared down at the ground with an expression of stupid surprise before its weapon exploded, smearing the ork and its retinue across the scorched walls. The Fire Dragons recovered at the same time and drew their fusion guns. Melta beams of an intensity that Ha'garen envied struck the other rocket-wielding orks. They vanished in a flash of heat that seemed frozen in its purity. Flamer and bolter-fire from the Salamanders drove the orks back again, but only just. Another rocket assault would have been lethal. The Space Marines and eldar were in the open. Their armour did not make them invincible.

The attack had been good tactics. The ork resistance was becoming organised. Orders were being given, orders with some thought to strategy, however crude.

Through the arena entrances came more orks, all of them brandishing heavy

weapons. Too many to take down at this distance. Ha'garen saw annihilation loom ahead. Annihilation even had a shape. A gigantic silhouette appeared behind the troops, towering over all the other orks. It seemed too huge to pass through the doorway, but on it came, a striding mountain of darkness and brawn. The allotted span for all life in the arena was measured in seconds.

The Salamanders used those seconds. So did the eldar. Flamers and fusion guns on full, ammo conservation be damned. The two forces turned as one and blasted exterminating fire down the bowl of the arena. They ran into the wake of their blasts, scorching armour. There was no pause in the wave of flame. Fuel canisters depleted as a swath of orks five metres wide vanished, replaced by charcoal and burning logs of bone. Eldar and Space Marines punched through the last of the orks like a spear-tipped battering ram. A fusion beam melted the gate. The eldar, furthest down the rise, were first into the mouth of the tunnel. The Salamanders were at their heels. Ha'garen splashed through the pit, the traces of a thousand miserable deaths crunching and splitting beneath his boots. He sensed the space above him hold its breath as something monstrous roared a command.

He plunged into the dubious shelter of the tunnel.

The very air of the arena exploded.

The rocket bombardment was an embodiment of will and totality. It was madness to use ordnance of such size, and in such quantity, inside a ship. For a moment, the sun rose behind Ba'birin. The blast wave slammed air into the tunnel like a giant fist, flattening every soul to the ground. As he fell, Ba'birin saw a Fire Dragon hurled against the wall where the tunnel bent. The eldar crumpled to the ground, a shattered doll with too many joints. Flame followed with a hollow, booming roar. Even through the protection of his helmet's rebreather, Ba'birin felt the air inside his lungs turn scorching dry. He held his breath, waiting for the worst of the fire to pass. As the oxygen in the tunnel was consumed, the fire abated. In its place came choking smoke, roiling with toxic particulates and organic ash. The world's-end thunder of the explosions faded. The aftermath was a chorus of crackling flame and groaning metal.

'Give me the count!' Neleus shouted. The Salamanders called out their names. Brother Ko'bin did not.

Ba'birin followed Neleus back to the mouth of the tunnel. Ko'bin had been caught by the blast. He was tangled in the rubble at the entrance. His armour had been reduced to slag, less by the heat than by the direct force of the explosions

themselves. His body had been pierced by an assemblage of metal. Perhaps it had once been decking. Perhaps part of a wall, or some seating. Perhaps all three. It had become a missile. Now it was a sculpture, a writhing, tortured abstraction of agony.

Neleus spoke softly. 'Look,' he said. 'Look at what he did.'

Ba'birin was confused at first. Then the meaning of Ko'bin's crucified corpse became clear. His outstretched arms and legs were not an accident of death. Ko'bin had done what he could to block the tunnel mouth with his body, absorbing fire and forming a new barrier by becoming one with debris. He had sacrificed himself to save his brothers from the worst of the explosions.

'Thank you, brother,' Ba'birin murmured. The loss was even greater than that of a single warrior. Ko'bin's progenoid glands were beyond salvaging. His genetic code was lost to the Salamanders forever. The Circle of Fire, the process of rebirth as asserted by the Promethean Creed, was broken.

They rejoined Ha'garen at the head of the formation. The Techmarine stood motionless except for the plasma cutter on his servo-harness. It traced a gentle arc back and forth as if scanning the xenos before it. The eldar had recovered. Salamanders and Fire Dragons eyed each other warily. Weapons were at ready, but not trained on targets. There was enough consciousness of shared circumstances to hold off conflict for the moment.

'Now what?' Neleus asked.

'Insight would be welcome,' Ba'birin answered.

From the destroyed arena came the first sounds of orks clambering down to investigate the results of their handiwork. The huge voice was bellowing orders again. The greenskins would be here before long.

The robed eldar stepped forwards. He glanced first at the flamer-wielding commander, and received a nod. His blade was unsheathed, but he was not brandishing it. It seemed, rather, as if the sword were as much a limb as his arms, and moved as part of the eldar's expression of self. He reeked of witch. When he spoke, his Gothic was accented but arrogantly precise, as if he were instructing the Salamanders in the use of their own language. 'Warriors of the human Emperor, greetings. I am, by name, Kaderial, and by deduction certain that we are on this ship with the same purpose.'

'And your conclusion?' Ba'birin asked.

'The urgent need for an alliance, and the need, as urgent again, to avoid conflict.' He sheathed his sword. The sudden economy of the gesture made it seem as if even keeping things simple were a luxury and an art.

The noises of the ork approach were drawing closer.

‘Agreed,’ Ba’birin said.

Kaderial nodded. ‘I am, by joy, surprised.’

The hyperbole grated, but Ba’birin let it pass. ‘We should go,’ he said.

‘Agreed, in turn. Shall we lead?’ Without waiting for an answer, the eldar moved off with his troops.

Ba’birin gestured for the Salamanders to follow, and he marched after the eldar.

‘Brother-sergeant,’ N’krumor voxed over the company channel. ‘Are we really?’

‘We are,’ Ba’birin told the Apothecary. ‘Or would you rather not keep a close eye on an enemy force whose target is the same as yours?’

‘A sound strategy,’ Ha’garen offered.

‘Thank you,’ Ba’birin said, and realised that his distrust of Ha’garen had tempered. He did not understand his brother’s altered way of thinking, and worried that his judgement was suspect at best. But Ha’garen was, at least, starting from a human standpoint, however far he had travelled from it. The conversation with the eldar warlock had been disconcerting. One did not talk with orks. They barely seemed to talk with each other. The only possible interaction with that race was a clash of arms. There was a comfortable simplicity, then, to their alien qualities. Orks also had but one mode of existence: attack. They were predictable. But the eldar were a hated mystery. The fact that one could communicate with some of them only compounded their disgusting otherness. This contingent was particularly off-putting. Their predilection for flame and their drake-like iconography gave them a touch of the familiar that only made them even more alien. Ha’garen strode forwards, his servo-harness turning him into a multi-limbed creature of metal. The eldar moved with grace, and their armour had a flexibility that made it seem mere raiment than protection. They were entirely of the organic realm. Ha’garen was far down the path to the inorganic. He was disappearing, it seemed to Ba’birin, into the realm of the machine. He marched with clockwork precision, servo-arms flexing and grasping, shoulder mounts swivelling from target to target even as his chainaxe was angled diplomatically down. There was no trace of the flesh in his heavy, perfectly measured tread. Yet in this moment, in the presence of true xenos, he was completely human.

Eldar and Salamanders moved down the tunnel. It ran straight for a few hundred metres. There were no branches. The metalwork was so rough, it was as

if the passage were a cave mined out of a mountain of iron. It was wide enough for the Space Marines to walk two abreast. Ba'birin suspected beasts sometimes chased the slaves out into the pit. There were plenty of rotting bits of bodies. People had lost limbs in this tunnel. There were claw gouges here and there in the walls.

Neleus voxed for his ears only. 'They have their backs to us. How are they watching us?'

'You assume that they are.'

'They have to be.'

Ba'birin nodded. 'The one who spoke to us is a witch of some sort.'

'Sending one to find one. Sensible.'

'Any suggestions for what we do once we reach the prisoner?'

'Other than kill them before they kill us?' Neleus's grin was almost visible through his helmet.

'Then we agree that that should be our plan.'

'There can be no other.' Neleus sounded much less jocular.

'Brother-sergeants,' a voice interrupted. It was Berengus. He had the long-range vox equipment. 'I have received an urgent message from Captain Mulcebar.'

'I'm sure it's good news,' Neleus said.

'The Raven Guard's mission planetside has been successful,' Berengus began.

'I congratulate my brothers,' Ba'birin interrupted, 'but we already knew that, and the tactical relevance of this information—'

'Culminating in the annihilation of eldar ground forces,' Berengus finished.

'Thank you, brother,' Ba'birin said. 'Please alert the others.' He tightened his grip on his flamer, lifting the muzzle just a little bit higher, ready to stream death at a moment's notice.

'Do you think they know?' Neleus wondered.

'They must.'

'There has been no detectable broadcast since the beginning of this encounter,' Ha'garen put in as the information reached him.

'That means nothing,' Ba'birin said. 'The eldar are masters of sorcerous communication.'

'Then why aren't they attacking?' Neleus demanded.

'For the same reason we aren't.'

'The mission is paramount,' Ha'garen said, completing the thought.

The tunnel ended in a long chamber filled floor to ceiling with cages. They

were rough cubes, about a metre and a half on each side. There were no platforms or walkways reaching to the upper prisons, just a tangle of rope ladders. Some of the cages were empty. Most were not. Inside the tiny boxes were the arena participants. Ba'birin saw humans, eldar, kroot and more. There were even a few orks. This was a menagerie in which the differences between species had been all but erased. The prisoners were all feral, ravening rage and gibbering fear. He didn't hear a single intelligible word, only the whining pleas and growling threats of beasts. There was nothing to salvage here. A conflagration would be nothing less than euthanasia.

'Is our target here?' he asked Ha'garen, eyeing the advance of the eldar carefully.

The Techmarine shook his head. 'Nearby, but not part of this collection. These are not slaves. Not any longer.'

'Where, then?'

A moment passed, a tick during which Ba'birin sensed Ha'garen's consciousness vanishing into mechanistic meditation, as if he were a walking cogitator. Then he was back. 'Down another level,' he said. 'Then we look.'

Ahead, the eldar had stopped. They had spread out in a rough circle, and appeared to be focused on a section of decking. Kaderial gestured Ba'birin forwards. 'I am, by circumstance, delighted,' he said. 'Farseer Elisath, reaching the end of his misfortune, lies almost directly below.'

Ba'birin glanced back and forth between the deck and the eldar. 'You are suggesting cutting through.'

'Motivated by strategy, I am.'

Neleus said, 'You don't appear to be equipped for this sort of work.'

The same thought had occurred to Ba'birin as he ran his eyes over the eldar arsenal. He didn't know what they had concealed on their persons, but they weren't holding anything other than their primary weapons. The fusion guns would punch through the deck easily enough, but they would also vaporise anything beneath. The prisoner would not survive such a rescue.

Kaderial spread his hands. 'We are, by the fates, embarrassed.' His ornate, conical helmet turned Ha'garen's way. 'While you, by the same, are prepared.'

Ba'birin glanced at Ha'garen's plasma cutter. 'You are inviting us to gain initial entry to the target's prison?'

Kaderial stepped to one side. He made a sweeping, expansive gesture that took in both deck and Salamanders. 'By our wishes,' he said.

'Brother-sergeant?' Ha'garen voxed.

‘I’ve never seen such a shameless trap,’ Neleus observed, still on the company channel.

‘It can afford to be,’ Ba’birin said. ‘We can’t refuse it.’

‘We don’t know what Ha’garen will be cutting into.’

‘It is not likely to be explosive,’ Ha’garen put in, ‘or the eldar would be destroyed also. They are too close.’

Neleus wasn’t placated. ‘It isn’t likely to be the location of our target, either.’

When Ha’garen spoke again, it was with resignation. ‘There is little choice. Furthermore, I estimate that the likelihood of our being in the immediate vicinity of the target is high. So...’

He moved forwards.

‘With our thanks, Forge Master,’ Kaderial said.

Ha’garen froze. He could still take offence, Ba’birin noted. ‘I am no such thing,’ the Techmarine snapped at the eldar. ‘There is but one Master of the Forge, and that is Master Argos. You taint his honour and mine with your tongue.’

Kaderial cocked his head. ‘Perhaps. My apologies, by your leave.’ He seemed amused. ‘Still, by your path, you are exceptionally at one with the machine.’

Ha’garen ignored the comment. He lowered his cutter-wielding servo-arm until it was close to floor level. The plasma beam sliced metal, scalpel in flesh. Ha’garen traced a large rectangle, far larger than would be needed for simple access down below. He was thinking, Ba’birin realised, of squad movements, planning for speed and force. The eldar stepped back out of the way of the widening perimeter. They made no objection.

Ba’birin’s suspicions grew.

‘They are being much too accommodating,’ Neleus said, echoing his thoughts.

Ba’birin said nothing. But as Ha’garen completed the cut, he raised his flamer. He angled it towards the floor, ready to incinerate whatever might lunge from below, but it would take nothing to jerk the muzzle higher and train it on the Fire Dragons.

Ha’garen’s two manipulator servo-arms reached down and fastened their vice grips to the decking. He finished. The outline of the cut was incandescent. He gave the decking a yank. It lifted as a single piece three metres long by two wide. The eldar did not rush in. Ba’birin took a cautious step forwards to see what was below.

More of the ork ship’s sickly penumbral light. He was looking at another corridor, with more cells on either side of it. The drop was a short one. The space

was not cavernous like the one where they stood. The cries of prisoners moaned up through the gap. The babble of pleas drowned out individual voices, but Ba'birin could still make out the articulations of words and phrases. The souls down there were still sentient. Theirs, he thought, was the more cruel fate. They could hope for rescue, and despair when it did not come.

'Where is he?' Ba'birin asked.

'Aft and port, by my numbers,' said Kaderial. 'A few lengths more.' He made an elaborately casual hand gesture that suggested both an apology and shrug.

'Cutting directly above, by my thinking, would have been lethal to our lost one.'

'Quite,' Ba'birin said. He and Neleus faced each other, sharing a silent debate. Split the squads or descend together? Attack the eldar now, forestalling the trap?

He recoiled at the idea of the pre-emptive strike. There was no honour in the act, and though he knew the warlock was setting him up, he lacked the formal proof that would satisfy his own conscience. The Salamanders had experienced treachery in the most foul form imaginable at the dawn of the Heresy, and it was repugnant to consider an action that even approached that particular sin. The eldar were a race that Ba'birin despised with every fibre of his being, but the behaviour of these warriors had all the trappings of honour, even if that couldn't possibly be the truth of their actions.

'Together,' Neleus said.

'Yes,' Ba'birin agreed. They would not be divided. 'Brothers,' he called to the squads, and then dropped down to the deck below.

'The orks, by their noise, are not long in coming,' Kaderial said. 'Do not tarry.'

Ba'birin bit back a retort. He could hear the growing savage rumble. The greenskins must have discovered that their bombardment had not produced the expected number of bodies.

Aft and port, Kaderial had said. Ten metres on, the Salamanders found the cell. The eldar seer was crouched inside the claustrophobic box, weak and covered in filth, but his gaze steady. He looked more than a little confused as Ha'garen ripped the door off its hinges.

'Can you understand me?' Ba'birin asked. When the eldar said nothing, the Space Marine jerked a thumb, and the prisoner staggered out of his cell. The Salamanders moved to surround him. Down the corridor, a group of ork guards were yelling at each other and the intruders. Two of them ran deeper into the ship. The others attacked. Berengus's bolter cut them down. 'Which way?' Ba'birin asked Ha'garen.

The Techmarine looked at the cabling. 'Back,' he said. 'The routes from that

deck to our entry point are more direct.'

Ba'birin accepted this, along with the imminence of the struggle for custody of the seer. He still couldn't see what strategic benefit the eldar were imagining would be theirs by letting the Salamanders take first possession of the prisoner.

They headed back. Halfway there, Kaderial called to them. 'It is done?'

'It is,' Ba'birin answered. He braced himself. The opening was just ahead. He could see the Fire Dragons outlined in the noxious glow of the larger chamber.

'He did not suffer long, by your hands?'

Ba'birin froze. Calculations and assumptions crumbled. *What?* he thought. The eldar had been pretending concern for the prisoner's safety? They had been assuming the Salamanders were pretending too? *What, what, what?*

'Ah,' Kaderial said. 'This is, by its perversity, a realm most inimical to sight. But now I see.'

The silhouettes moved. Fusion guns and dragon's breath fired.

Everything became flame.

Madness.

Obliteration.



CHAPTER FIVE

Amidst the flash, amidst the hurtling through disintegrating space, amidst the battering thunder-burn of being caught in a fusion gun fusillade, Elisath slipped onto the skein. Time expanded as he dropped into the impossibly dense knot of his own tangled fates. The grains tumbling down the abyssal hourglass paused. When the next grain fell, his body would collide with something unyielding, unforgiving. If the impact were hard enough, the knot would be sliced as his fates came to an end. But if the blow was not fatal, the knot would grow more tangled yet. He still couldn't see far. To the disorienting energy and randomness of the orks had been added the gigantic improbability that was now unfolding. An improbability he had helped bring about.

The next grain wanted to fall. His body would soon hit. He raced up and down the paths that were visible to him, stealing a bit more time. The loss of his waystone was a cancer of fear on his soul. If death waited with the plummet of that grain, he was engaged in his final acts of awareness before he fell prey to She Who Thirsts. So he took what he could.

He meditated on irony.

(His body spinning. The moment coming. Time slowed, but unforgiving, and coming for him.)

He was being hunted by his kin. So he had taken the only path open to him. He had placed himself at the mercy of the Salamanders. His vision of the future was crippled, but the thread drawn by the Fire Dragons had been clear enough. They thought that killing him would preserve the secret of the shard. Stupid. Didn't they know whose ship they were on? Didn't they see where it was headed?

Didn't they know what ork it was who ruled here?

Blocking Kaderial's vision had been a simple matter. Weak as he was, Elisath was more than a match for the warlock. All he had had to do was direct Kaderial's attention to the thread that saw the Salamanders coming to kill him. This was the particular irony that Elisath savoured now: the most improbable thread had been the one that common sense would have declared inevitable.

The grain dropped. Time and frailty hurled him from the skein, back to his body and the annihilating pain of his salvation.

A sun was born inside the kroozer. It was the offspring of simultaneous fusion and flamer barrage. It was a tiny, wailing infant of a star, an insignificant mote. Except that it did not seem like a mote in a ship's corridor. It did not seem insignificant from the inside.

Ha'garen understood the principles of the fusion gun. He knew it was similar to the Imperium's melta weapons. He knew what such a weapon did to defensive positions. To armour. To living flesh. But he did not have the luxury of reflecting on his theoretical knowledge of the fusion gun. He was too busy surviving his practical experience of its blast in the midst of a flamer attack. His world became a sear of absolute light in the microsecond before his helmet lenses shuttered, sealing his eyes in sight-preserving darkness. The heat, no less absolute, was the teeth of the light. It devoured all. It snapped its jaws around Ha'garen, and there was a moment of pain such as he had never imagined. It was a wave and a spike, an invasion from without and an attack from within. It swallowed every thought, sensation and instinct. It was his all.

And yet no, it was not. As absolute as the light, as absolute as the fire, was the core of his being, defined and shaped by the Promethean Cult. It shouted with exultation, taking the exterminating blow, accepting yet another strike on the shaping anvil, rising to the test that Vulkan sent his sons. To be of Nocturne, to be a Salamander, was to confront the ordeal. It was to endure.

And thus grow stronger.

(And from the Ommissiah, the gift of the mortification of the flesh. What is weak shall be replaced. What is strong shall be transformed.)

In his faiths, Ha'garen found the strength to survive a first moment in the jaws of the fire. A second moment would have killed him, but the decking melted faster. The shape of the corridor evaporated. The Salamanders dropped. The deck below disintegrated just as they hit it, and the lower abyss of the kroozer opened its jaws wide.

His lens shutters opened. Ha'garen fell into darkness. He hit something, bounced off, slammed into more metal. He bounced between ill-defined objects, his fall slowing. His eyes had adjusted before he hit the bottom. He processed his surroundings and his injuries simultaneously.

His armour was badly scorched, his body burned not by flame but by sheer heat. The damage to the flesh was extensive but shallow. Regeneration was already under way. His armour was still viable, though one of his manipulator arms had melted to slag. Joints and seams were distorted, making movement more awkward. He took a step, learning the new character of the armour, learning what compensatory effort would be necessary to keep up his reaction speed.

Neleus, his voice strained, was calling for the count. Ha'garen answered, all the while processing the new circumstances, analysing, evaluating, extrapolating options.

The space they found themselves in was enormous. It was the largest they had yet seen on this ship. As far as Ha'garen could tell, it ran the entire length of the hull, and its ceiling was a good thirty metres high. The Salamanders' plunge had been broken by what appeared, at first glance, to be two towering heaps of scrap metal. The Space Marines had been deposited in a valley between these twisted mountains. Flames licked at the hole through which the squads had fallen. The glow was fading, the infant star dying.

The count was complete. There were losses. Five battle-brothers had died in the fusillade. The corpses of three of them had come down, their armour melted into amorphous coffins. The other two, Brothers Jer'wan and Ka'gis, had taken a direct hit and been reduced to floating molecules. There were injuries, some debilitating. Neleus had lost his left arm. The stump, extending a hand's length below his shoulder, ended in a cauterisation that was ugly, black and weeping. N'krumor was applying sterile clay from his narthecium to the wound.

Ba'birin was standing over the eldar. Elisath was on his feet, battered, bloody, but intact. Ha'garen caught himself trying to calculate the odds against the prisoner having survived the blast and the fall, unarmoured and in poor condition. Somehow, he had been surrounded by enough Salamanders, who had taken the worst of the damage, and nothing he had hit in the fall had been jagged enough to slice him open. It was impossible not to see the actions of fate in his survival.

Ba'birin turned to Ha'garen. 'Where are we?' he asked. He used the vox. The chamber was filled with a tremendous mechanical din that drowned out every

other sound.

In hell, was what Ha'garen almost answered, and seen by the lights of the Cult Mechanicus, that was exactly where they were. The hold was illuminated by haphazardly placed glow-globes, torches mounted on poles, bursts of ignited gas, and the flaming of filthy engines. What the Techmarine saw, stretching for thousands of metres in every direction, was machinic obscenity. The plasteel hill that had broken the Salamanders' fall was not simply a pile of refuse. It was a collection of parts, all of them engineered, however crudely, however partially. The entire space was a collection. It was an endless, labyrinthine conglomeration of the unfinished, the discarded and the experimental. Gigantic metal frames were heaped up against each other. Servo-arms sprouted like weeds. Some were motionless, frozen in entreaty. Many were active, and they were worse, locked in endless loops of meaningless activity. One piled objects together while another took the heap apart. Multiple arms, linked into idiotic arachnid configurations, scrabbled in competing directions. Other devices were beyond identification. They were whirling, stomping flights of fantasy, assembled for no possible reason other than that they were conceivable. Some should not have been possible, but they moved and rattled and roared, climbing up and falling over hills of less animate creations.

The scale was as varied as the objects. Something no larger than Ha'garen's fist flopped past his feet. It looked like a grenade on tracks, as if it were an abandoned prototype for a self-propelled explosive. Other creations were gigantic. One, several hundred metres towards the bow of the ship, was almost as high as the hold, and Ha'garen had initially mistaken it for another heap. It was roughly conical in shape, a stack of massive rings of decreasing diameter, all spinning in random directions. It also appeared to be jointed, and it nodded and bobbed and weaved, grotesque dancer, drunken mountain.

And everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, engines keeping the madness going. Engines that were whining irritations. Engines that were monumental maws. Engines being fed fuel by an army of gretchin and chained slaves. They swarmed over the metal nightmarescape, maggots and rats, so consumed by the endlessness of their task that the nearby gretchin were only now starting to notice the Space Marines.

Wherever Ha'garen looked, he saw the precision and purpose of technology debased. It was not the work of Chaos. It was the work of orks. It was ork logic made concrete. It was the playground of ork science, but it was also something else. A terrible epiphany dawned on Ha'garen, and he knew what he was seeing.

Along with experiments, junked and ongoing, there were bits. Parts. Spares.

He finally answered Ba'birin. 'The orks store the leftovers here,' he said.

'Leftovers?'

'The leftovers from the construction of the ship. The pieces that didn't fit. The ones they weren't sure what to do with, but thought might be useful some day.'

'I'm sorry, brother,' Ba'birin said, and there was genuine sympathy in his words.

Startled by the discovery that he could still experience revulsion, Ha'garen almost missed Ba'birin's first real expression of friendship since the walls of Heliosa. 'Thank you,' he said. It was the correct response, he knew. He wondered if he should be concerned over the fact that his reaction to Ba'birin's gesture was not gratitude, relief, or even satisfaction, but simply interest.

What are you?

Neleus asked, 'Can we reach our boarding point from here?'

The gretchin were scurrying to safety and shrieking warnings.

Ha'garen called up his memory map of the power grid. The readings for this region were erratic, difficult to interpret. But there were some stable junctions. They might well be near entry points to the hold. 'Perhaps,' he said. He identified the power flare that was linked to the most promising route out of the hold. Probability, or perhaps just hope, suggested heading sternwards and portside.

Ba'birin nodded. The Salamanders formed up, with Elisath in the centre of the armoured tortoise configuration, and began to march. The elapsed time since the eldar had opened fire was less than a minute. The squads had regrouped after the fall at speed. The Salamanders did not fetishize speed on the battlefield in the manner of the White Scars. They preferred the steady, unstoppable advance. That did not mean their reaction time was any less rapid.

But there was a reason for their emphasis on battlefield strength. The foe could easily be faster. The key to victory was not to strike first, necessarily. It was to withstand all that the foe could muster, and then give the decisive blow of the conflict.

Movement above. Movement on the periphery.

'Be strengthened by the anvil, brothers,' Ba'birin called, 'then shatter our enemies against it.'

Eldar and orks rushed to be shattered.

The Fire Dragons had come through the gap and were descending the slope of the metal heap. They were moving fast, but they didn't have a clear shot. The

topography of the hold kept changing as the piles shifted, whirled, collapsed over each other and rose again. The Salamanders stayed low, sticking to paths of bare decking, and the movement was as unpredictable and changeable as the environment.

‘How much fuel do those melta weapons have?’ Ba’birin wondered.

‘Something less than infinite,’ Neleus quipped. The strain had vanished from his voice. He was at war, and he had banished distracting pain.

‘They are short-range weapons,’ Ha’garen said. ‘They will need opportunity. There is also the risk. We are very close to the outer hull. Another attack like earlier and everything in this chamber will be cast to the void.’

Neleus said, ‘I don’t think they’re suicidal.’

‘That depends on how desperate they are to complete the mission,’ Ba’birin pointed out. He turned his head to look back at Elisath. ‘Why do they want you dead?’ he asked.

The eldar didn’t answer. His face was closed, unreadable. He looked desperately fragile to Ha’garen, a bundle of crystal sticks. But he was keeping up with the pace of the much larger Space Marines, and his footsteps were sure.

Ha’garen checked over his shoulder. The Fire Dragons were still coming on, but now they had to pay attention to their own survival. A hideous tide of orks was spilling through the gap. The greenskins were pouring in through every access hatch and gate. Numbers growing exponentially, they formed a cordon around the edges of the hold and closed in. During the time it took the Salamanders to move a hundred metres towards their goal, so many orks had arrived that their chants and roars were audible above the unceasing clamour of the engines.

This was no longer a force sent to repel invaders. This was an army. And it had come to fight in an open space. No more bottlenecking in constricted passageways. The Salamanders might as well have been on a planetside battlefield. Ha’garen did not calculate the odds of fewer than twenty Adeptus Astartes against thousands of orks. He knew what they were. The enemy’s reinforcements were, in practical terms, unlimited.

None of this mattered. The mission mattered. Duty mattered. The Salamanders would smash their way through ork lines through force of will.

The tide came on. It arrived as a storm surge of gretchin. Ha’garen looked at the squalling, scrabbling, creatures and saw hook-nosed vermin. They came bounding over the metal waves, wielding makeshift blades and axes, and firing guns that looked even more primitive than the gretchin themselves. Ha’garen

saw more than a few pistols explode, killing their owners. The nearby creatures howled with delighted laughter. Larger orks came on immediately behind the gretchin, shouting curses and jabbing at the reluctant with electric prods.

The diminutive xenos weren't threats, but they were an obstacle. They swarmed around the Salamanders' feet, many of them as anxious to flee as they had been to arrive, but just as great a nuisance. They were a morass. Ha'garen swept them away with his servo-arms. His blows pulped. He moved ahead of Neleus and Ba'birin and cleared the way. The crack of bones and squish of internal organs reverberated down the length of the arms. It was like threshing green wheat.

The Salamanders formation opened fire, bolter rounds streaking not through uncountable gretchin, but straight to the brain pans of their minders. Heads burst like exploded fruit. Bodies toppled. The gretchin panicked. They scabbled like cornered rats. There was nowhere for them to run as the principle thrust of orks charged. The greenskins laid down a horizontal curtain of heavy-calibre slugs before them. Gretchin exploded into mist. The Salamanders tightened their formation, absorbing the bullets, taking the hits and moving forwards, holding fire and above all protecting the eldar in their midst.

'I am half-sick of irony,' Neleus muttered.

The straightest line to the target exit took the Salamanders straight into the thick of the ork host. Towering shapes waved in the corner of Ha'garen's eye. Inspiration beckoned. He tapped Ba'birin's shoulder and pointed. The sergeant changed direction without question. The Salamanders pounded over low-lying heaps of scrap towards a cluster of towering axles and pistons. The plasteel trunks vibrated and shook as they rotated. Their foliage was gears and blades several metres in diameter. They spun high above, turning nothing but air.

Only seconds now to the full impact. Ha'garen felt adrenaline levels surge to levels of ecstatic rage. The other clashes had been mere prologue, and when Neleus shouted '*Into the fires of battle!*' the cry was more than words. It was the spirit of the Chapter forged in sound.

The answer came: '*Unto the Anvil of War!*' And this, this was the will of the warriors. It was the alchemical fusion of fury and righteousness and juggernaut determination. The thunder of the roar was a physical force, the blow of Vulkan's hammer made manifest. It struck the enemy hard, and the front lines of greenskins actually stumbled a moment before the oncoming wrath.

Salamanders and orks crashed together in the shadow of the demented forest. It was the collision of solid, burning fist and rampaging mob. The Salamanders

unleashed a stream of flamer and bolter-fire. Orks blew apart and burned. The smell of cooking meat mixed with the hard tang of spraying blood and the miasma of ork stench. The rush of orks was slowed less by intimidation than by the need to clamber over and through the dead. Ha'garen saw more than a few greenskins trip and be trampled by their charging kin. The Salamanders descended upon the next lines with the snarl of chainblades. Ha'garen swung his chainaxe and took an ork's head off above the nose. He rammed forwards, a machine beast with five arms, all of them pounding his enemies to broken sacks of bone and leaking blood. He battered away blows aimed at his head, shrugged off the strikes that hit home. Momentum and fury pushed him ten metres into the lines of the orks.

It was enough. He was in the midst of the rotating cylinders, just forward of the rest of his battle-brothers. He turned his plasma cutter on an axle. It was thirty metres tall and festooned with cog wheels starting halfway up its length. The wheels varied in diameter from two to four metres, and brushed very close to the shafts on either side. They were so ragged, they could never have been intended to mesh with other gears. They looked predatory. They were metal whose one function was to tear and rip. Ha'garen would see them fed. He cut away a chunk of the shaft, and peered inside the hole as it rotated past. There was no power cable. The axle seemed to have its own power source built in. It was as if its engineer had been seen the device as an end in itself, not part of a functioning whole, and, knowing that the object was supposed to rotate, had ensured that it would, no matter what.

Ha'garen shrugged off the ork logic and sliced through the shaft at an angle, controlling where the towering axle would fall. The rest of the Salamanders reformed around him, dropping the orks that entered the whirling, grinding, humming forest. They created a perimeter ten metres wide, containing the Techmarine and his sabotaged poles. Elisath crouched in the centre. The line was thin, and pressed hard. The Space Marines were barely more than a dozen strong. They held. Green rage crashed against them, hacking with the strength that came of an existence devoted to nothing else except conflict. The Salamanders held. They held because they had to. Ha'garen moved from iron trunk to iron trunk, cutting until each pole was on the razor's edge of falling, but holding back until he had a dozen ready for the touch of his will. They formed a rough circle.

As he finished the last one, his brothers pulled in, concentrating their force, constricting the circle within Ha'garen's trap. Every move the Salamanders had

made, from the moment Ha'garen had pointed at this spot, had been accomplished without a word being uttered. Every warrior had seen the location's potential and had known what to do. The silent efficiency was a hymn to the Ommissiah, Ha'garen thought. Organics functioning together with machinic rigour had an aesthetic and moral strength. It was, he realised, art of a kind, a kind to which he could still respond. Mechanics, war and art were fused together into a manifestation of the divine.

He felt something in his chest. For a moment, he did not know what it was. Then he recognised it: it was elation.

He finished his preparatory cuts, then moved to the centre of the Salamanders formation. He raised his cutter arm high above his head. He angled the muzzle down. The squads ceased fire. They let the orks approach. The green horde rushed in, sensing only opportunity. The guttural shouts of the aliens crested against the clanking, grinding clash of the nonsense engines.

At the back of his mind, Ha'garen noted that the orks were using very few projectile weapons of any sort, and were deploying none of their heavy guns. More data to be analysed later. Now, in this moment, he was experiencing the very flesh-based sensation of contempt. He looked at the orks in their overwhelming numbers as they surged through their macabre, mechanical playground, and saw a slovenly, unforgivable disregard for order and the truth of the machine.

He fired up the plasma cutter. He spun it in a circle. He finished the cuts. Time for a hard lesson.



CHAPTER SIX

The shafts split a metre up from where they plunged into the scrap-metal loam that covered the deck. They fell, still spinning. Cog wheels and blades flailed. In their deaths, the shafts were no longer metal trees. They were grotesque, monopod giants panicking in their moments of doom. Vibrating, spasming with centripetal seizures, they crashed down around the Salamanders. They became the spread and grasping fingers of Ha'garen. He had forged a power with a reach of dozens of metres. The shafts crushed the orks beneath them. The jagged wheels dug deep into the flesh of the howling army. The spinning did not stop. The wheels found traction. They chewed the orks into mulch, hurling bloody chunks and splintered bone high and far. They bounced and drove over and through greenskin bodies. The violent rotation carried the shafts away, pulping and shredding. They left a swath of smeared green punctuated by bits of torn armour and splintered, jagged bone. The orks fled from the jouncing meat-shredders. The roars were just as loud as before, only now they were hitting the higher registers of surprised fear. The army before the Salamanders thinned, culled and frightened. The rear lines pushed forwards, urged on by something more formidable than the insane axles, but they ran into their fleeing comrades. Confusion reigned.

The way forwards was close to clear. Only a few hundred metres to the cargo bay exit. The Salamanders stormed into the disorder, slashing and crushing. The same tight defensive formation as before, striking like a spiked, mailed fist. Power and chainblades scythed greenskins as they tried to recover their momentum.

Ha'garen estimated he had gained the squads fifteen or twenty seconds before the orks shrugged off the blow. Perhaps a bit longer, because several shafts were still careening about on unpredictable trajectories.

Ba'birin gave him an approving nod as they fought their way forwards. 'Well played, brother,' he said.

'Thank you,' Ha'garen answered, noncommittal. What war had riven, it had now reknit. He noted this with mild interest, and he noted his mild interest with alarm. Was there no possibility for brotherhood left in his evolving configuration?

What are you?

A question for later, because now something arced through the air at them. It was small and metallic. It gleamed in the fitful light of the cargo hold.

'Grenade!' Neleus yelled. It came down in the centre of the squads, expertly thrown. Ba'birin grabbed Elisath and threw himself to one side. Ha'garen leaped with them. The melta bomb went off, vaporising a pile of stacked parts, a whining engine and the lower half of Brother Battarus's body. Battarus crashed down, a felled monument. The damage was catastrophic. His system could not hope to repair itself. He was still conscious, still clutching his heavy bolter. A sound emerged from his helmet grille. It was agony transmuted into terminal rage.

The hull did not burst open. The atmosphere did not rush into the void. Tiny mercies.

The Fire Dragons leaped from cover to cover, covering ground with the grace and speed of las-fire. Ha'garen's rolling destruction had given the eldar the chance to break from the ork forces that had been pinning them down. The Salamanders returned fire with bolters, using the weapons' greater range to break the eldar rhythm and block another grenade toss.

Battarus's rasping roar turned into a word. '*Go!*'

N'krumor had been leaning over him, carnifex aimed at Battarus's temple to grant him the Emperor's Peace. 'Brother,' he began, 'you will be sacrificing—'

'*Go!*' There was nothing human in the cry, barely anything alive. It was the sound of pure, furious will animating a body just a bit longer, reaching out to punish the enemy one last time. Battarus raised the heavy bolter with arms that shouldn't have been able to move at all.

'Vulkan guide you, brother,' Ba'birin said. The Salamanders left him, the mission overriding mercy and the need to recover progenoid glands. As they moved off, Ha'garen heard the heavy bolter open up, its murderous *chug-chug-*

chug denying the Fire Dragons' advance. Shells blasted through a weak cover point. The eldar warrior behind them exploded into pink mist.

The Salamanders pushed forwards another dozen metres. The pathway dropped and twisted, turning into a trench through higher stacks of metal. More of these moved, crawling on their clumsy tracks as they carried out non-existent duties. They changed the route of the trench every few seconds. The orks had recovered and were hungry for retaliation. Only the narrow confines of the path now prevented them from crushing the Space Marines with the sheer mass of their numbers.

The heavy bolter fell silent. Another melta bomb landed close, heat from the heart of a sun banishing a cluster of orks and scrap from sight and memory.

Ha'garen faced the direction the grenade had come from. He couldn't see the eldar. There were too many orks pouring over the lip of the trench. His chainaxe chopped down through the skull of the beast in front of him, splitting the greenskin in two. He raised his cutter arm high and fired the plasma beam. It was a blind shot, a raking sweep. He knew he was killing orks. There was no room to miss. As for the eldar, the best he could hope was that he was making them keep their heads down.

Shrieking whistles. And then an eruption. Fireballs and smoke, an upheaval of metal and a rain of bodies and shrapnel. Enthusiastic carnage concentrated in the region where Ha'garen had last seen the eldar. It was a volley of rockets and grenades, blanketing the area, completely indiscriminate. There was no thought to ork casualties as long as the eldar got a taste.

None of the ordnance came anywhere close to the Salamanders' position.

'What just happened?' Neleus demanded. He plunged his chainsword point-first into an ork's forehead. The greenskin's jaw went slack in death and surprise. 'And I do not want to hear that we just received covering fire from orks.'

'Evidence suggests precisely that,' Ha'garen answered. And still the orks pressed in. There was no quarter in their attacks, no lack of the furious desire to butcher the Space Marines.

Neleus grunted. 'I was wrong earlier,' he said. 'I am *utterly* sick of irony.'

'Why aren't they shooting?' N'krumor wondered.

The detail returned to the front of Ha'garen's mind. It was insistent this time, demanding to be explained. The answer came a few moments later. A massive ork, bristling in spiked armour, chainaxe in one hand, power claw in the other, rounded the next corner of the path and slammed into Ba'birin. The greenskin was fully as tall as the Salamander, and the force of the blow knocked Ba'birin

back a step. The ork raised both claw and axe to pound the Space Marine into the metal litter of the decking. Ba'birin raised his flamer. Ignited promethium engulfed the ork's head and took out three others coming over the top of the trench. But right behind the big ork came a much smaller one. It didn't even try to hit Ba'birin. Instead, it ducked around the Salamander's legs and reached for Elisath. Ha'garen struck it down with his remaining grip arm. The ork collapsed, spine cracked. Ha'garen closed the vice over the greenskin's head and squeezed it to jelly. He took in that the ork had nothing in its hands. It had a blade at its waist. *Sheathed*. Ha'garen had never seen a sheathed ork weapon.

Realisation dawned. 'They want the prisoner back,' Ha'garen said. 'They want him alive.'

Silence on the vox. For a few seconds, the only focus was on killing as implications sank in. Fact: the orks wanted Elisath badly enough that they refrained from using maximum deadly force. Inference: they were being led by a commander canny enough to think beyond bloody-minded violence. Inference: a commander *powerful* enough to impose *restraint* on orks. The schemes uncovered by the White Scars and the Raven Guard were proof enough of tactical ability and influence. But the degree of tactical attention on the current battlefield spoke of a moment-to-moment awareness of the conflict's currents.

That enormous shadow in the arena.

The Overfiend was close.

'If he wants his prize badly enough,' Ba'birin said, 'he had better show himself.' He gutted two more orks, and walked over their twitching bodies.

'Eager?' Neleus asked, sounding like he was.

'The final contours of this mission would be highly satisfactory,' Ha'garen said.

An amused snort from Ba'birin. 'Contain your passion, brother,' he said.

'I will try,' Ha'garen answered, making Neleus laugh. (Laugh and snarl, beating and burning orks.)

They moved closer to the exit, but slowly, too slowly. The orks came on, and on and on. There was no end to them. If the Salamanders could reach the narrower space of the corridors, they stood a chance of fighting through to the boarding torpedoes. But as they rounded another bend in the junkyard madness of the hold, the path rose, and the final stretch was in the open.

The cry of the orks took on a new note of triumph as they thundered in for the finish.

In their midst was something huge and clanking.

The kroozer was closing in on the decision point. Once it reached orbit, Mulcebar would have his hand forced. He could not permit the ork force on the ship to land. Not while there was something on that planet that would power them up. He would not betray the efforts of the Raven Guard, and he would not doom the people. The moment loomed when he would have to deem the mission a failure, and open fire on the kroozer. His grim prayer was that, if the moment came, it would be because his men were already dead. He understood the higher imperative. He knew what had to be done. That did not mean he relished having his warriors' blood on his hands.

The *Verdict of the Anvil* had shadowed the kroozer since the launch of the boarding party. Mulcebar had held the strike cruiser at a distance, presenting a less inviting target, and giving the repair crews a chance to heal what they could of the *Verdict's* injuries. The kroozer's fire had diminished since the boarding torpedoes had hit, as if the tactical intelligence aboard the ship were being distracted by other, more pressing problems. Now Mulcebar ordered the distance closed. Vox contact with the boarding party was becoming more and more sporadic. He knew the prisoner had been found, and he knew that the fighting was so fierce there was the very real chance that the boarding torpedoes were impossibly distant.

'I want firing resolutions for the forward batteries,' he announced. 'And for the nova cannon.'

There was no true pause before his orders were carried out, but there was a beat of silence as the *Verdict of the Anvil* prepared to annihilate some of its own.

'Contacts,' the augury servitor intoned. 'Ork ships.' It began a list of designations, and the list just kept going. Mulcebar called the readings up on a taticarium screen. Ships were translating into the system. They were coming in force. This was not a squadron. It was a fleet.

Mulcebar saw his options become very few and very bad.

He also saw his choice become very easy, if he could receive the answer he needed to a simple question. He opened the vox-channel to the boarding party. 'Brother Berengus,' he said, 'link me to your sergeants.'

Static. Explosions of white noise mixed with clanging and grunts. Then a clipped, 'Brother-captain,' as if squeezed in between death blows. Ba'birin's voice.

'Can you yet prevail?' It was an honest question. Mulcebar required an honest answer.

Ba'birin's response was almost completely lost in the welter of growls and

clashes of metal that erupted from the speaker. Only one word came through: ‘Anvil.’ Its two syllables were spoken with faith and determination.

So it wasn’t just an easy choice. It was really no choice at all.

‘Helmsmaster,’ Mulcebar told Phanes, ‘we need a new bearing. We will face the greenskin fleet.’

Again that beat of silence, only this time because of eagerness.

The *Verdict* turned. The wounded predator raced to throw itself into the teeth of the swarm. Mulcebar watched the screens as the catalogue of attackers grew.

++*Designation: Onslaught.*++

++*Designation: Ravager.*++

++*Designation: Savage.*++

++*Designation: Brute.*++

Over and over and over, a multiplying taxonomy of threats. And something else, multiplying and repeating like the beat of a savage drum:

++*Designation: Unknown.*++

++*Designation: Unknown.*++

++*Designation: Unknown.*++

To the massive punch of the attack ships was added a host of the eccentric and the grotesque. Many ships appeared to be formerly Imperial, killed, salvaged and reconfigured into xenos obscenity. Others, whatever they had once been, were now hulks, garbage given propulsion and made stupidly dangerous. There were transports, out of which came insect clouds of fighters and bombers. There were ships that should never have made it through the warp, but had reached the field of battle on the strength, it seemed to Mulcebar, of sheer ignorance. Some had not arrived intact, and were already burning, breaking up into high-velocity debris that crippled and killed nearby craft.

But enough had come through. Too many. Mulcebar was looking at the green horde embodied in void-ships.

There was really only one sensible response to the horde: burning it.

‘Nova cannon ready,’ Phanes said.

The *Verdict of the Anvil* was still a fair distance from the ork fleet. Too far for either side to deploy guns and torpedoes to any effect. The nova cannon had plenty of range. It was the drake’s breath of the Salamanders, and it had been held back for too long. ‘Give me a target,’ said Mulcebar. ‘Anything of attack-ship size or greater. In the centre of their formation.’ The cannon wasn’t an accurate weapon. It didn’t need to be. It was a gun that embodied the idea that ‘close’ was good enough. Mulcebar simply wanted a point chosen for the

moment of shell implosion.

‘There’s a very large mass,’ the gunnery officer said. ‘Bigger than a grand cruiser.’

‘Shoot that,’ Mulcebar said. ‘Fire.’

The nova cannon was a marvel of war. It was a technological miracle worthy of the most hushed Mechanicus prayers. But in its fundamental conception, at the core of its being, it was simplicity itself. It was just a gun. A gun of godlike proportions, but a gun. Its barrel ran much of the length of the strike cruiser. Its projectile was fifty metres in diameter, and was fired at speeds commensurate with the weapon’s scale. When Mulcebar gave the order, enough stored energy to power the entire ship was unleashed. The weapon’s trigger automatically kicked the *Verdict of the Anvil*’s engines into a massive thrust forwards against the cannon’s recoil. Magnetic fields that bordered on the sorcerous impelled the projectile to near light-speed. Space bent as the shell blasted from the prow of the *Verdict*. It slashed across the Lepidus Capital to the storm of ork ships on the wings of wrath.

Before it reached the implosion point, the shell passed through two ork craft. The encounters had almost no effect on the projectile. Massive as it was, its size was negligible by comparison to the hulk and the Ravager that crossed its path. But its kinetic energy was near infinite. The ships slowed the shell by a microscopic degree, to their doom. The energy transferred to their hulls blew them apart, every rivet and beam flying off as if in terror from the point of impact. For a fraction of a second, the ships retained their shapes, swelling, still moving forwards. Then they disintegrated, the blasts of their stricken fusion engines racing to swallow the metal debris.

Then the light of their spreading destruction was eclipsed by the bright dawn of the shell’s death.

The implosion stopped the shell’s flight. Kinetic energy was released as light and heat. The light and heat of hell. For a few terrible seconds, the system had a second star. It howled its birth and death in the dense centre of the ork fleet. The nearest ship was a massive transport. It had once been the Universal-class mass conveyor *Benedictionis Aeternae*. Twelve kilometres long, it had, before its first doom, been host to a voidfaring community that had developed a thousand years of unique culture. Its people had created blown-glass icons that were never seen outside the ship’s hull, and that would have moved the most unforgiving Ministorum cleric to tears. Now it carried an invasion force of half a million orks. The nova cannon strike blew a hole a third of the ship’s size in its stern.

The demolished plasma engines added their screams to the new star's. The *Benedictionis* bucked, its prow dropping as if in penance for its betrayal before it boiled out of existence. It took the last of its glass icons with it. The five-hundred metre winged statue of Cardinal Marat survived long enough to fly straight into the loading bay of a bomber transport, venting the entire ship's oxygen supply.

The damage radiated out of the implosion zone in chained explosions. When night fell again, half a dozen ships had been crippled or destroyed. The *Verdict of the Anvil* had struck a legendary blow.

And an inadequate one. The orks broke formation, scattering from the devastation. The fleet lost cohesion. But still the horde was present. Still, it came on.

In their crude language, the orks called the thing a Deff Dread. It was an insult, by its very existence. Ha'garen felt his gorge rise in hatred. His modified cortex suppressed the emotion, perceiving it as a threat to rational action. It transmuted the energy into strength and speed of motion.

The ork creation was a blasphemous parody of a Dreadnought. Its body was huge metal box, somewhat taller than it was wide. Spikes jutted from its base like tusks from a jaw. Mounted on each side was a massive gun barrel. The thing rocked side to side as it advanced, with a speed that belied its apparent clumsiness, on pile-driver legs. Steam and oil shrieked from the joints. It waved massive pincers twice the size of Ha'garen's servo-arms. The right limb had the lower claw of its pincer replaced with a circular saw. The modification made little practical sense, but displayed a raw genius for violence. The pincer would automatically start shredding anything it grabbed.

The Deff Dread thundered into the Salamanders' flank. R'alum met it with bolter-fire. The rounds punched and dented the walker's armour, but the monster didn't notice. The painted, snarling face of the Dread appeared to laugh as its arms grabbed R'alum. The saw screeched as its teeth ground against ceramite. Splinters of metal and armour sprayed. The saw was digging into R'alum's shoulder, working to sever his arm, when the Dread threw him into the air. Speakers amplified and distorted monstrous laughter as the mechanised ork opened fire. It tracked the arc of R'alum's flight, slamming a rapid-fire stream of massive rounds into the Salamander's body. He was a mass of butchered meat when he hit the deck.

Ha'garen cut his way through the ork before him and closed with the Deff

Dread. It still had its back to him, but swivelled as he drew near. Its reach was much greater than his, but he dropped as the enormous arms swept in to grab him. He angled his flamer nozzle up and bathed the front of the Dread with fire. He didn't hurt the ork imprisoned in the war machine, but he did confuse the beast. It staggered blindly, flailing its arms, firing off random shots. Staying low, keeping the flames going, Ha'garen raised his cutter arm to a narrow horizontal slit, level with where he imagined the pilot's head would be. He fired the plasma beam through the slit. The scream was very short. The Deff Dread stumbled forwards on nervous system reflex, the momentum of its mechanism sending it on a pointless march, its arms swinging like syncopated pendulums. It waded into the crush of orks, leaving a wake of crushed bodies.

Orks wailed and fled the erratic path of the walking coffin. Then a moment came of precious hope and potential. Ha'garen saw the way forwards across the last few dozen metres of the hold's metal dementia to the exit and the corridors beyond. It was not clear, but the ork density had thinned. A short, concerted punch was all the Salamanders needed now. Not in a straight line, but lunging from enemy weakness to enemy weakness. Instinct, forged by decades, recalled by the molten light in the forge of war, had him call to Ba'birin.

'I see it,' Ba'birin answered before Ha'garen could speak. The same instinct there.

But no, Ha'garen realised as the second of possibility stretched long in his consciousness. The instincts weren't the same. Not his, at any rate. What had been unthought before was now the product of analysis. The battlefield resolved itself before his eyes as an exercise in the application of force. To act was not to follow gut impulse. The nature of the distance between himself and his battle-brothers achieved a still-greater clarity. Their actions would mesh, but emerge from different origins. He would forever be among brothers, but never again be part of them.

Ha'garen worked through the thought process and reached its conclusion in the time it took Ba'birin to speak his three syllables. That was also how long the moment lasted. It ended with a storm: a hail of melta bombs and a wind of fire.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The eldar strike force had been hammered badly. It was down to half its strength. Its extermination was inevitable. Its mission was the most important fact of its members' existence. So the Fire Dragons struck with the furious desperation of a terminally wounded animal. Weapons fuel was no longer a concern. There was only the imperative to stop the Salamanders here, in this nightmare space, before they disappeared into the warren of corridors. Beyond that, there was nothing for which to hope.

Later, Ha'garen would have the spare seconds needed to look back at this moment and understand the frantic need of eldar. But now, all he knew was heat and a terrible alchemy that turned metal to liquid and gas, and battle-brother to twisted hulk or nothing, nothing at all. The Fire Dragons kept up a constant stream of fire from their fusion guns as they advanced. A swath of orks vanished, and after them more Salamanders, reduced to vibrating molecules.

(Remember their names, add them to the roster of the lost and faithful: Verus and Hateris, Tychaeus, Sy'pax and Ob'iang. The cordon between the Fire Dragons and Elisath. The Space Marines who sacrificed themselves for an eldar. Warriors of purest faith and unshakeable duty.)

There was no formation defence against weapons designed to melt tanks and bunkers. For several seconds, the Salamanders were under simultaneous attack by enemies of such radically opposite methods of warmaking that to counter one was to be vulnerable to the other. Then the eldar strike culled the orks engaged with the Space Marines, and there were possible actions.

The Salamanders spread out, reducing the effectiveness of the fusion guns.

There were no more melta bombs coming. Ha'garen deduced that there would be no further such weapons on this field. If the eldar still had some, they would have used them and finished the squads completely. They had not. Instead, they closed rapidly, still firing, their leader scouring the terrain before him and all who stood on it with his powerful xenos flamer.

Ha'garen grabbed Elisath with two servo-arms and hurled him out of the range of the Aspect Warrior rushing to greet him. His flesh-arms swung the chainaxe. The eldar jerked left, trying to dance around him and reach the seer. Ha'garen's ruined servo-arm, now nothing but an articulated club, swept in, knocking the Fire Dragon off balance. Ha'garen brought the chainaxe back. His blow exploded the eldar's helmet and face.

As he finished the swing, a blur passed within his reach and lunged upwards at his neck with a sword. Ha'garen took a stumbled step back, and the Witchblade sliced within centimetres of the seam between his gorget and helmet. Ha'garen grounded himself on his heel and countered with his axe, reversing his swing and bringing the weapon up. Its teeth snarled, ripping the air as they sought to tear flesh.

Kaderial sidestepped. The eldar's timing was beyond exquisite: it was impossible. As Ha'garen's chainaxe went high, catching nothing, he realised that the warlock had dodged the instant *before* Ha'garen had begun his counter. And now the Witchblade plunged at his chest. He pivoted to deflect. He was as slow as Kaderial had been fast. He turned away the full force of the blow, but the blade sliced through his armour and he felt something cold and merciless, an omen of mortality, slide between his ribs. He brought his flamer to bear, and Kaderial was already behind him. He spun again, swinging the chainaxe before him, trying to use his greater reach to push the warlock back and regain the initiative.

Kaderial was ahead of him again. The eldar crouched low, beneath the arc of the axe blade. The sword rose in a gutting strike. Ha'garen's armour took the hit, but the sorcerous blade carved a deep gouge up his placket. He jumped back, using the damaged servo-arm to block a second strike. The sword sliced the arm off below the first joint, leaving Ha'garen a flapping stump on the servo-harness. The limb had already been ruined, and it was not part of his body, but his nervous system felt the loss as keenly as any flesh amputation.

Kaderial jumped forwards, pressing his advantage. Ha'garen changed tactics, defending with offence, trying to crowd the warlock, limit his movements. Their duel was a brutal dance of move and countermove, but one where Ha'garen was

perpetually out of step and off the beat. It was like a game of regicide where one player was obliged to reveal all his moves in advance to the other. Every one of Ha'garen's blocks simply exposed a different flank to Kaderial. Every counter was nothing but an invitation for a specific strike. Ha'garen landed no blows. Kaderial was insubstantial as a shadow, as fluid as quicksilver. He struck the Techmarine at his leisure. There was a condescending artistry to his movements, as if it were somehow beneath him to be saddled with so clumsy and brutish a foe. When he decapitated the orks who tried to rush in and capitalise on the distraction of the duellists, the kills were elegant grace notes in a composition of perfect balance and harmony. Ha'garen's only victory was in not dying. He suffered a thousand cuts, and he turned them into a bloody accumulation of minor wounds, just managing, with hit after hit, to deflect and absorb and redirect the blade. His transhuman nature kept him alive. His wounds clotted almost as quickly as they were inflicted.

Giving Kaderial a long fight was no victory. So as he fought and blocked and bled, Ha'garen analysed. The eldar was faster and more agile. His anticipation of Ha'garen's moves was far beyond skill and the ability to read an opponent. The warlock responded before Ha'garen even knew what he was going to do. Kaderial had some form of precognitive power.

Query: how do you vanquish a foe who can see the future?

Answer: put him in circumstances where that makes no difference.

Ha'garen saw what he had to do. So did Kaderial. The warlock stepped away from Ha'garen and thrust out his left hand, palm out. He hurled something at Ha'garen, something with no form but fierce substance. It hit Ha'garen, an invisible tidal wave. It was a blast of hatred and loathing. It pummelled Ha'garen. It crushed and drowned. It engulfed him with the knowledge that his species was the most obscene aberration the galaxy had ever produced. It implied by assault that extinction was too kind a fate for a species so perverse, so hideous, so vile. So beyond any hope for redemption.

The weight of the loathing was immense. The power of the attack came in the depersonalisation of the hatred. When it struck, it was no longer the expression of one being. It was the wrathful judgement of the cosmos itself. It sank through the interstices of his soul, a deluge onto sand, seeking the means to pry him apart. Ha'garen did not know fear. Since his induction into the cult of the Omnissiah, he knew very little emotion of any kind. But he still bore traces of the human in his being, and so he did know doubt. Not in the Emperor. Not in the Machine-God. Not in his Chapter.

What are you?

In himself.

The seeds of doubt responded to the scalding hate. They rose to meet it like poisonous desert blooms. Their tendrils tangled in his will, strangled his sense of self. They suffocated him, concealing everything, becoming everything. They had their own will, and that was to bring him to his knees in despair. Their blackness reached beyond the soul as his physiology reacted to the attack. His vision greyed. There was weakness in his limbs. The very air turned to grasping mud that would not let him move. Awareness of the orks charging at his back, of Kaderial raising his blade, of anything other than the dark flowering of doubt shrank to a distant point.

He fought back. He attacked the doubt with the weapons that remained to him: the certainties of Emperor, Omnissiah and Chapter. Those were the unshakeable bedrock of his being, the core without which he would not exist, and he *did* exist. And as long as he existed, there was duty. It too, was beyond doubt. Its demands did not care for doubt. Duty was action, and if he did not act, he would fail in his duty.

And betray Emperor, Omnissiah, Chapter.

Rage, pure and holy, at the mere concept of betrayal burned through the foliage of doubt. The poison still coursed through his system, but it had been there before Kaderial's attack. It would still be there after the eldar lay dead at his feet.

His vision cleared. The darkness evaporated. Kaderial was still raising his blade. He still had his palm out. Ha'garen's internal war had lasted less than the blink of an eye. Too long. In his anger, he surged forwards, chainaxe roaring for blood. His three remaining servo-arms lunged at Kaderial to grasp and cut and burn. Ha'garen struck to overwhelm. This was the attack the eldar had tried to prevent. This was the attack against which no degree of foreknowledge could help. This was *doom*.

Ha'garen stormed into Kaderial, bringing the eldar within the full, terrible storm of his grasp. He surrounded Kaderial with the war-form of his rage. Plasma beam, promethium and chainaxe descended on the eldar from all sides. There was no escape. Kaderial did not dodge. He did not attempt that futility. Instead, he attempted another: to kill a Space Marine in the full transport of righteous fury. With nowhere to retreat, he met Ha'garen's charge. The clash was unbalanced, a reed against a stampeding sauroch. But the weed had a thorn, and Kaderial plunged the Witchblade deep into Ha'garen's torso. The Techmarine

did not deflect the blow. The fury of his assault threw Kaderial's aim off, and the sword did not strike true. It stabbed Ha'garen in the side. The wound was deep, the blood flow copious. He would heal. The blood would clot in a few moments. But now the sword was his. He clamped an arm against his side and trapped the blade in his body. Kaderial tried to tug it out. He didn't have the strength. Ha'garen closed the burning, searing, crushing trap around the eldar.

'By your ignorance,' Kaderial began, 'you will destroy all...' The words failed him by the end, and Ha'garen barely caught them. Then there was crushing and paralysis, cutting and flame. He reduced the eldar to pulp and charcoal.

When there was nothing left of Kaderial, Ha'garen looked for Elisath. The seer wasn't far. He was still within the thinned ranks of the Salamanders. He was crouched behind a large metal box from which sprang a profusion of flexible stalks. Dangling from the stalks were chunks of iron cut into a senseless variety of shapes. Ha'garen had no idea what use the object could possibly have. Then again, he could say the same about Elisath.

But he knew his duty.

Ha'garen ran to the seer. Just behind the box, a melta bomb had gouged a crater in the scrap metal, almost down to the bare deck. Its walls were steep, and on the far side rose what looked like a dorsal fin five metres high. The location was almost defensible. Ha'garen tossed the seer into the makeshift trench.

As his battle-brothers took down the Fire Dragons and converged on his position, Ha'garen turned to face the next threat to the seer. It was the eldar commander. He was advancing behind the wall of flame that his weapon was projecting. His approach, stolid and relentless, was, Ha'garen thought, more Salamander than eldar in style. It was also, for this warrior, suicidal. Down to his last few troops, lightly armoured, outnumbered by a factor of many thousands, the eldar had little chance of surviving beyond the next few seconds. But he might well drive his flame through enough foes to reach and kill his target. There was a commitment there that Ha'garen understood, even as he prepared to thwart it.

Ha'garen heard thunder. He looked past the eldar leader. The oncoming orks were turned into silhouettes by the glare of the flames. They were big, much bigger than the ones the Salamanders had been fighting. Leading them was a monster. Ha'garen recognised the gigantic shape from the arena. It was larger than any ork he had ever seen. The entire hold seemed to shake with the doom-beat of its footfalls.

'Brothers,' Ha'garen said. 'He is here.'

The Overfiend loomed over the Fire Dragons commander. The eldar must have known what had come for him. The energy of the ork's presence alone was overwhelming. But the eldar did not look back, did not deviate, marched straight on towards Ha'garen's position and the seer.

Such was *his* duty. Such was his end.

The Overfiend fell upon the Fire Dragon. He reached a massive, mailed hand down.

Before the Overfiend could grasp the eldar, something happened. And the flames shone hellish light on a terrible miracle.

The kill kroozer entered low orbit of Lepidus Prime. Dropping through the ionosphere to a point less than a hundred kilometres in altitude, it skimmed the upper mesosphere like a bird of prey trolling for fish. It was visible from the surface, a bloated, grotesque shadow as it passed before the sun. A new moon had come to the planet, and its rising was a dark omen. It declared the futility of all resistance, and the pointlessness of dreams. It was the end of hope. It was the end.

The Overfiend had come, and with him the green horde in numbers to drown a world.

On the surface, the people of the city of Reclamation gazed at the new moon as it passed overhead, and knew a great despair. The Raven Guard looked up, and knew resolve, along with a grim realism.

A being of absolute aggression was on the planet's threshold. Beneath the surface of the planet, the fragment of a shattered god responded. There were none of the deity's worshippers at hand to propitiate and redirect the inchoate hunger for war that the shard embodied. But now, near at hand were more of the beings who not only did not resist the shard's desires, but were eager for its gifts, even if they did not yet know it. They were pure. They were aggression and war and nothing else. They fed the shard with violence, and it repaid them with the capacity for even greater feats of destruction.

The shard's essence reached out and caressed the kroozer. It was drawn inside, called by the enormous potential of the creature whose will the ship obeyed. The creature was found, and mindless energy underwent a kind of ecstasy. It poured itself into the orks and, most of all, into a monster whose capacity for violence was infinite.

In the darkness of its temple, the shard vibrated and glowed. It called to the monster. It fed him and promised more. It promised him power on the same scale

as his dreams of rage.

The moon of ill-omen had not just risen over the planet. It had risen over the galaxy.

Something entered the ship. Ha'garen felt it at an atavistic level. There was an apprehension of the alien and the divine, but no more. The orks had a much stronger reaction. All of them paused where they stood, and *roared*. The collective shout drowned out the machines. The roar was triumph, glee, ferocity, power. It was the sound of a species on the path to apotheosis. For a moment, the orks seemed to glow. No light shone from them, but they radiated energy in an almost palpable form. And they grew. That, Ha'garen could tell, was no illusion. Armour strained against expanding chests and swelling limbs. The footsoldiers, the greenskins that the Space Marines saw as little more than cannon fodder, suddenly had the mass and ferocity of elite units. The officers were turning into monsters of war. And the Overfiend...

Ha'garen was reluctant to apply a word to what the Overfiend was becoming. He did not want to use a word like 'god'.

The undertow was hard to resist.

The Overfiend raised his arms as if to smash the universe. His roar obliterated even that of his army. He was already twice the height of a man, and he grew larger yet. His armour sported a termagant skull on each shoulder, and looked like a disassembled Lemn Russ tank. Massive steel plates covered his torso and limbs, and his lower face was protected by a jutting metal jaw. Pistons linked the joints and provided powered assist. The resemblance to a tank went beyond appearance. It must have been, Ha'garen could tell, like *wearing* a tank. And now the Overfiend expanded. For a moment, Ha'garen thought the ork was going to be crushed by his own armour. Instead, the flesh and muscle won out. The pistons were yanked from their sockets. The fastenings of the individual plates were flexible enough to withstand the pressure of the greater beast. Without the support of the pistons, the monster should have collapsed under the weight of his protection. But he stood at ease, half again as tall and wide as he had been, his fanged jaw now the same size as the metal guard. The multi-barrelled gun in his right hand seemed no more than a pistol. His left hand was an organic version of the battle claws wielded by his lieutenants.

The eldar leader had sensed the hand reaching for him, and turned at the last second. What he saw changed his mission priority. He never let up on the flamer. Eldar fire and Salamanders bolter rounds anointed the Overfiend throughout his

transformation. The rounds exploded chunks of his armour, but no more. The flames were simply a baptism. Something had chosen the ork, and would not allow the moment to be tarnished.

The moment, a paltry second of chronological time, an age in the fortunes of war, passed. Their blessing received, the orks charged with unholy energy. The Overfiend moved with a speed that belied the weight of his armour. His hand snapped around the upper body of the Fire Dragon. He lifted the eldar warrior as if hoisting a doll. He squeezed. Runic armour collapsed. The eldar jerked. Bones shattered with audible cracks. The eldar's helmet shook back and forth as if plugged into an electrical circuit. Then blood cascaded over the pauldron from beneath the helmet. The Overfiend hurled the broken doll to the ground and marched on the Salamanders.

The Fire Dragons had been exterminated. The Salamanders closed their thinned ranks around the seer.

In perfectly accented Gothic, and with the voice of despair, Elisath spoke. 'You must tell your commander to destroy this ship.'



CHAPTER EIGHT

‘If you know what just happened, tell us,’ Ba’birin told Elisath. ‘Quickly.’

The Salamanders were only metres from the exit, but taking it was no longer a viable strategy. An unending river of orks flowed in though the gate. There was no way out.

‘There is a fragment of Kaela Mensha Khaine, our god of war, on the planet. The orks respond to it, and it to them. If a being as powerful as the ork warlord were to come into direct contact with the shard, he would be invincible.’

‘He is doing a passable imitation of that state now,’ Neleus said as the Overfiend continued to shrug off bolter rounds. He was seconds away.

‘The shard is still distant. That ork is but a shadow of what he will become.’

‘He lives, and that means he can die,’ said N’krumor. He revved his chainsword and plunged through the ork ranks to meet the Overfiend, G’ova and Eligius at his heels. The sudden burst took the orks by surprise. They stumbled back before the charge, but where the blow of a storming Salamander should have stunned senseless any ork caught in its path, these creatures, touched by the ravaging divine, shrugged off the hit.

As the trio closed with the Overfiend, he reached to his left and grabbed a thick exhaust pipe that stuck out of a nearby motor. He yanked the pipe free and swung it like a massive club. It smashed N’krumor off his feet. It didn’t kill him, and his greater mass bent the pipe in two, but he went down in the midst of the horde. They fell on him with axe and sword. Eligius aimed his chainsword at the exposed joint of the Overfiend’s upper leg. He never connected. Two barrels went off simultaneously. Slugs the size of cannon shells ripped the Space Marine

apart, exploding out the back of his armour and disintegrating his skull. G'ova scored a hit, slicing between armour plates and into the ork's upper arm. Snarling, the Overfiend lowered his head and rammed into the Salamander. It was like being hit by an iron-clad boulder with stone-column legs. The impact collapsed the right side of G'ova's armour, shattering his arm and the shell of his ribcage. His useless hand dropped his chainblade, but he stepped back, reached for his bolter and brought it up one-handed. The point-blank mass-reactive barrage made the Overfiend react, if only with yet greater rage. He smashed G'ova to the ground with the barrel of his shooter, then drove his foot onto the Space Marine's chest. A force equivalent to several tonnes punched through plate and bone, pulverising G'ova's hearts.

The supporting fire from the other Salamanders counted for nothing. Tendons bursting as if he might explode with his own power, the Overfiend seemed bigger yet. His minions were vulnerable, though, and half of the squad's fire was directed at the spot where N'krumor had disappeared. However much they had partaken of a xenos deity's communion, the orks were still blasted into chunks of meat. N'krumor staggered up from beneath a heaving, flailing mound of green. His helmet had been torn away, he was bleeding through dozens of gouges in his armour, and his left leg dragged as he lurched over the uneven surface. The Overfiend could have been upon him in a single stride, or unloaded the shooter into his back. Instead, the monster ran past him, his eyes on Elisath. He shouldered N'krumor aside with the force of a sideswiping torpedo. The Salamander pitched into the mob of cheering orks.

Ba'birin ran to his aid, ploughing through greenskins with flamer on full, flanking the Overfiend. Neleus shouted for a vox-link to the *Verdict of the Anvil*. Berengus answered that the strike cruiser was locked in combat with an ork fleet. The last moment before the Overfiend's arrival was now. Time dilated as Ha'garen ran a cold appraisal of the battlefield. He was on the ramparts of Heliosa, in the breached *Verdict* again, seeing the inevitable, searching for the least bad option. Under current conditions, the Overfiend would slaughter the Salamanders and retrieve his prisoner.

So change the conditions.

Ha'garen saw what he needed, up a gradual slope, back deeper into the hold. A few hundred metres away. Impossible but necessary. The Ha'garen he had become approved the only strategy available. The echo of the Ha'garen he had once been revelled in the madness of the act.

He grabbed Elisath with his remaining grip arm. He leaped out of the trench

and onto the box, knocking the flexible pipes into idiot nods, the Overfiend one stride away. Another leap, across the trench, and he was scrabbling up the ridge of the dorsal fin. It was just thick enough for him to find his footing.

The Overfiend was upon them. He was a colossus of rage, a mountain of iron and claws, tusks and fists. He swatted Neleus aside and lunged for Ha'garen. His claws grasped at air as the Techmarine leaped again. There was no eldar grace in Ha'garen's movements. Instead, there was power and weight, and that was what he needed. From the peak of the metal fin, he passed over the heads of the nearest orks and landed midway up a teetering heap of discarded objects. Cylinders and polygons tumbled down the slope like old bones. Ha'garen scrambled up to the top of the heap and tore down the other side. He stamped hard as he ran, keeping his feet in the treacherous, sliding metal.

The orks came after him from all sides. Flamer arm raised above his head, he rotated the nozzle, surrounding himself with a continuous stream of fire, keeping the horde at bay. His chainaxe cut down any greenskin too slow or too foolish to get out of his way. Behind him, the Overfiend howled ever escalating rage. The juggernaut pounded in pursuit, the war-drum beat of his iron boots shaking the deck. 'Proximity to the shard is the source of the Overfiend's current strength,' he said to Elisath.

'It is.' The eldar clung to the servo-arm with fading strength.

'So this ship must leave Lepidus Prime's orbit.'

Elisath made a noise that was both agreement and disbelief.

'Ha'garen! In Vulkan's name, what are you doing?' Ba'birin was on the vox, his voice strained with the effort of combat.

'Acting on a surmise,' Ha'garen told him. 'But I need time.'

'And how...?'

'By fire and metal.' His target loomed ahead.

'As befits a Salamander,' Ba'birin said.

Ha'garen noted the praise, filed it, concentrated on the immediate task.

The opportunity was a gigantic blast furnace. Flames licked from the massive grill at its base. It nestled next to a mountain of scrap that rose to the roof of the hold. A conveyor belt tossed a steady stream of discards into the upper maw of the furnace. Molten metal ran in channels from the base, bathing the area in an orange-white glow. A dozen metres further on, moulds of every eccentricity received the metal and shaped it into the objects desired by the operators of the experimental station. Abandoned in the frenzy of the war, the station was a junk pile of workbenches and tables, half-completed devices and burned-out failures.

The lunatic flights of orkish science were powered by an electrical station ten metres high. It was a tight group of sparking, spitting pylons and arcing generators. The tops of immense dials on the generators were barely visible above the trash heaps, suggesting the devices were anchored to the deck itself.

Ha'garen's memory map of the power grid: there was a major node here.

He was moving fast, but the Overfiend, his momentum building, was faster. The vibrations of his footsteps were growing. He was closing.

Good.

Ha'garen used the plasma cutter on the blast furnace as he ran past, slicing it open about midway up its chimney. Gases vented, air rushed in, and reactions became uncontained. The furnace exploded. The shredded framework tore orks apart as it shrieked across the hold. A searing wave of metal fell on Ha'garen's pursuers. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the Overfiend stumble, raging at the burns that reached through his armour. He was a long way from dead, but he was brought to a stop, so he was where Ha'garen wanted him when the next thing happened.

Its base blown apart, the mountain of scrap trembled and collapsed. Metal shrieked on metal as thousands of tonnes of cataclysm swept to deck level. The Overfiend disappeared beneath the avalanche. As the creaks and roars of tumbling rubble faded, Ha'garen could hear the monster battling his way out from the metal tomb.

But Ha'garen had his lead time.

He reached the generators. He released Elisath, who collapsed against a workbench. The eldar was scorched and bleeding, but alive. Ha'garen approached the nearest generator. He pulled open a control panel and eyed the wiring inside. Monstrously crude, as ever, dangerously improvised, but somehow operational.

'Well done, brother,' Ba'birin voxed. 'We will be at your side momentarily.'

'I will be immobile and rather preoccupied,' Ha'garen told him. 'If you are able to keep me from being disturbed, I may be able to act on my surmise.'

A moment of silence, as Ba'birin wondered, perhaps, why Ha'garen did not say outright what he planned. Then he said, 'Understood.' Maybe Ba'birin had guessed, or maybe he simply realised a huge risk was involved. 'Vulkan guide you, brother.' A valediction. And an act of atonement.

'Thank you, brother.' The words were the expected ones. The correct ones to say. But even now, he still felt the disconnection from his earlier self and earlier friendships. The disconnection had not been Ba'birin's. It had been his.

What are you?

He could not pause for doubts. As at Heliosa, as on the *Verdict of the Anvil*, there was one path to follow, and he took it. This was his fire of battle, the anvil upon which he must not break. There was no time for a prayer, only an inarticulate reaching out to the Ommissiah as Ha'garen extended his mehadendrites and plugged himself into the generator.

Into the kroozer.

As before, the ship's power grid opened before him like a nervous system hololith. As before, the ship's lifeblood was a torrent of electronic filth. The difference was that now Ha'garen did not shield himself from the ship. He did not keep his distance from its xenos insanity. He plunged into it. His consciousness fell into the bloodstream. His awareness ran everywhere. Deeper and deeper he went. He was no longer contemplating a grid. He *was* the grid. He was every electrical function of the ship. He was thousands upon thousands of individual devices. He was the useful and the broken, the vital and the trivial, the barely logical and the utterly mad. He was the distortions of technology clumsily pilfered from other civilisations, and he was the perverse creations of the orks, inventions that had no right to work but somehow did.

He was the kroozer.

What are you?

Now the question was more pertinent than ever, and more vital. The otherness of the ship was a raging torrent, and it was a vast ocean. It tried to tear him apart, and it tried to drown him in its enormity. Since his first contact with the ship, it had been eating at his soul with the slow erosion of rust. Now it had swallowed him, and if he disappeared, his body would become just another elaborate object of forgotten use in the bottom hold of the ship. He fought for his self. He fought for his soul.

What are you?

I am Ha'garen. I am a Techmarine. I am a Salamander.

Three statements. Three identities. And then the revelation, bright enough to give sight to the blind: those were not three identities. They were one. The more completely he was one facet, the more completely he was all of them. The action he was engaged in was possible because of his transformation on Mars, and he was risking the greatest self-sacrifice possible for the good of his Chapter.

With realisation came unity of identity, and with unity came strength. He remained Ha'garen as he spread throughout the ship. He fought off the alien contamination. He became a virus himself. He claimed everything. Everything

became him.

He was not the kroozer. The kroozer was *him*.

He was everywhere. He knew what moved and died in his vast new body. He felt the Overfiend rise from his metal tomb and come to kill him.

Orks swarmed the Salamanders, fighting them to a standstill. N'krumor lived, but could barely move forwards. The choice came down to leaving either N'krumor or Ha'garen on his own. Ba'birin refused the choice. 'You know the way forwards, brothers,' he said. Then he followed Ha'garen's example, scrambling up the dorsal fin and hurling himself over the immediate ranks. A few metres on, and he was through any real resistance. Ha'garen had culled the enemy well.

Ba'birin came over the rise of the fallen mountain in time to see the Overfiend shrug his way free. The beast thundered towards Ha'garen, who stood motionless, tethered to a generator. Elisath tried to take the Space Marine's chainaxe from his hands, but the fists were those of a statue and not to be opened. Ba'birin charged down the slope, and while still several metres from the base, he leaped. He landed on the Overfiend's back. He hooked his knees around the Overfiend's neck, and raised his chainsword. Ork reinforcements were charging forwards, but they had some ground to cross. The avalanche had wiped out all the enemy in the immediate area. The Salamanders had time. Time enough, Ba'birin vowed, to rid the galaxy of this abomination.

He brought the chainsword down. It dug into the Overfiend's flesh, but it struggled to find a purchase.

The Overfiend swung a massive fist back. It hit Ba'birin with the force of a wrecking ball.

Ha'garen did not see well inside the ship. Random flurries of data from dozens of sensors gave him a shadowy picture of the war in the hold. He knew the Overfiend was near. He knew the ork was in combat, or else he would already be dead. He didn't know much more.

But outside the ship, his vision was crystalline. He saw the void war in all its balletic magnificence. Even the brute simplicity of the ork ship attacks took on a rough grace when seen from the multifaceted eyes of the ship. Information was an ever-shifting torrent. Updates every fraction of a second showed the changing nature of the battle. War was an accumulation of millions of variables and conflicting vectors. It was the embodiment of the contingent, and the small but

unforeseen event carried more weight than the great and predicted.

He saw the *Verdict of the Anvil* at bay. The Salamanders ship lashed at the swarm. Each strike of the lance, each torpedo launch, each gun volley was strategically placed and lethal. There were so many targets, the *Verdict* eviscerated one ork vessel after another. The void blistered with the roil of explosions, the death cries of warships. But even as the predator savaged its foe with its claws, so did it suffer its own wounds. The *Verdict of the Anvil* was bleeding. Its turns were sluggish. The flickering glow of uncontrolled fires licked at its hull. Ha'garen saw dark patches where he should have seen the flash of guns and the stab of lances. Mulcebar had bought the *Verdict* and the boarding party time, but the great, predictable event of this war was the annihilation of the Salamanders force.

Ha'garen became the unforeseen. He flexed the muscles of his new body.

The blow knocked Ba'birin down into the debris. He jumped back up, head ringing. The Overfiend had turned to face him. The ork brought his fist down hard enough to shatter marble. Iron fragments flew from the meteor impact. Ba'birin lunged, blade whirring at the Overfiend's face.

The other Salamanders had crossed the top of the hill of debris. They were almost here. They were too far. He had to give Ha'garen a few more seconds. This was the anvil on which his destiny was being shaped. He would make sure it was a worthy one. Worthy of the honour of being a Salamander.

The Overfiend's reflexes were daemonic. A massive hand snatched up Ba'birin. The grip was adamantine. Ba'birin slashed the blade across the xenos monstrosity's forehead. The Overfiend howled and crushed him into the scrap. It was like being hammered by a Dreadnought's power fist. His helmet cracked in two. The Overfiend raised his fist. Ba'birin jerked up, rolled down-slope. The fist came down on air and wreckage. Ba'birin stood and jabbed his chainsword between leg plates, sawing at the ork's tendons. The Overfiend stumbled forwards and dropped to a knee. And still he was fast. Faster than anything that huge had a right to be. He pivoted, shooter blasting out indiscriminate hell.

Fast. Too fast.

Ba'birin caught the rounds in the chest. Point blank. The first ones punched through his weakened armour. The others punched through him. Bone shattered. Hearts punctured. He felt a terrible loosening inside him as the damage overwhelmed his body's ability to repair itself. There was a strange impression of liquid, and a coldness that radiated from his core, freezing and numbing his

limbs. Darkness followed the cold. He was plunging backwards into an infinite well, and the world was receding from his view.

He clung to his sight as he collapsed into a seated position. He would know if he had succeeded.

The Overfiend loomed over him, eyes glinting triumph.

Then a terrible, echoing moan wracked the walls of the hold. There was a jerk like a mountain snapping out of sleep. The ship was moving.

Ba'birin grinned at the Overfiend. 'My brother has defeated you,' he said.

The world vanished. Ba'birin dropped into the dark and cold, and accepted their promise of rest.

Ha'garen's will seized the kroozer's engines. It seized the steering. It seized the weapon banks. He merged even more deeply with the ship. The engines fired at full, flaring second daylight over the surface of Lepidus Prime. The hull screamed from the strain. The kroozer pulled away from its prey and shot towards the fleet. Its cannons blazed at the ork ships. When it blasted the stern from a Brute, there was a moment of false calm in the war as confusion descended.

And then chaos.

Outraged crews fired at the kroozer. On other vessels, crews just as furious at the perceived mutiny unleashed savage counterattacks. Within seconds, the entire ork fleet was at war with itself. The void was filled with overlapping cannon fire and the tiny suns of disintegrating craft. From out of the disintegrating swarm came the *Verdict of the Anvil*. Bleeding oxygen and guttering fire, it ripped through the enemy ships, its lances and guns surrounding it with a halo of wrath.

Ha'garen had never had any use for chaos. It was anathema. Even its smallest, most subtle manifestation could be the sign of the Great Enemy at work. But this, this transformation of the void war, this was good. It was the routing of the Emperor's enemies. It was annihilation. It was glorious. He had done this. He, one soul, one mind, had created this vision of absolute destruction. As the first retaliatory strikes hit the kroozer, he felt a surge of incandescent aggression. The one directive of the universe was to smash and burn everything before him. Each hit on the hull was a gauntlet thrown. He would tear the enemy's heart out, he would sink his fangs into the throat of his prey, he would—

What are you?

The question was the faint but clear toll of iron on iron. The refrain had been

repeated so many times, metal folded over itself again and again, hammered and hammered until it had a new unity of strength, a new identity. The question resounded with Ba'birin's voice as though he were asking it for the first time, and it demanded an answer.

What are you?

I am Techmarine.

I am Salamander.

I am Ha'garen.

I am losing my soul.

He pulled out. The reality of the hold grasped him as he yanked his mechadendrites from the generator. He staggered, the ork taint leaving his self with reluctance. He felt shredded and hollowed out. He looked to his left and saw the Overfiend stride past Ba'birin's crumpled figure. The monster was coming to collect his prize.

The Overfiend paused. His expression changed from snarling omnipotence to enraged panic. As the ship powered away from the planet on the course Ha'garen had commanded, what had entered the orks now left, its reach overextended. Ha'garen saw the Overfiend wither before him, diminishing from god to mere monster. The hold echoed with the howl of despairing orks. The Overfiend's armour, lacking the power assist of its pistons, turned into a prison. The ork was wearing a tonne of inert iron. He toppled forwards with a booming crash.

They stared at each other for a moment, the fallen ork warlord and the Space Marine who stood only because he didn't attempt to walk. The Overfiend glared at Ha'garen with the fury of thwarted destiny. Ha'garen tried to raise a weapon, but his limbs and will were weak and drained. His servo-arms hung as motionless.

Bolter-fire hammered into the Overfiend's armour as the other Salamanders came down the hill. Their aim was thrown as a massive seizure shook the deck and the walls of the hold. The kroozer was rocked by the cannons of its own fleet. The Overfiend found the strength of desperation and struggled free of his armour. As he rose, a shell struck him in the shoulder. Instead of dropping him, it spurred him. The beast, still a gigantic monument of violence, but now raging impotence, tore past Ha'garen in a limping sprint and disappeared into the gloom of the hold.

The kroozer shook again, the battering even more insistent. The deck heaved. Towers of pointless mechanism collapsed. Even blessedly severed from his link

to the ship, Ha'garen could feel it begin to die. The orks that had been charging to the aid of their ruler had lost all discipline. They were disappearing from the field of battle as quickly as they had arrived. They were routed, panicked, fleeing the destruction of their vessel.

Ha'garen took his first step as his battle-brothers rejoined him. 'Ba'birin,' he began.

'He will live on,' N'krumor said.

Ha'garen nodded. So the harvest of Ba'birin's progenoid glands was complete.

More explosions. Somewhere in the distance, there was the ominous sound of wind. The hull had been breached. Berengus said, 'Contact from the *Verdict of the Anvil*. A Thunderhawk is on its way. It needs a location.'

The kroozer's every bolt was clear in Ha'garen's mind. He knew the ship as he knew the *Verdict*. He set aside thoughts of being tainted and said, 'There is a loading bay close at hand. One deck up.' He gave Berengus the coordinates to pass on to the Thunderhawk.

Prisoner in tow, the Salamanders plunged through the maelstrom of the agonised ship. It was as if the madness of the hold had spread throughout the hull. Corridors fell into pits of fire. Walls twisted under terminal strain and heat. Smoke choked the passageways. The light was the light of ending, flickering red and shrieking white. And filling the air was the song of a ship breaking up: a hellish choir of screaming metal punctuated by the deep, internal, fatal arrhythmia of explosions. Ha'garen led the way. There were no secrets in the iron warren any more, and he countered every blocked path with an alternative route. There was no hesitation, no delay. He had been shaped into the necessary weapon for this war, and he used the xenos knowledge to guide his brothers out of the kroozer as it succumbed to the purity of flame.

The docking bay was in the grip of a hurricane. The Thunderhawk *Mount Deathfire* had blasted its way into the bay, and the kroozer's atmosphere was pouring itself into the void. Elisath collapsed, gasping for air. Ha'garen carried him the rest of the way to the gunship.

As the *Mount Deathfire* pulled away from the kroozer, Ha'garen watched through a viewing block as the ork flagship underwent its death throes. By this point, it was no longer taking fire, and its own guns had fallen silent. Its engines were dark. It drifted now, its frame pulsing with the bursts of the fires that raced down its arteries. Those would fade, too, as the air finished venting from the dozens of breaches. It did not die with fury and glory. It burned to an ember, a broken shell. It would soon be a husk, a broken tombstone to its master's

ambition.

Neleus emerged from the cockpit. He had removed his helmet, and his face was lined with exhaustion, less from the loss of his arm than from the toll of the fallen. 'Word from our captain,' he announced. 'The ork fleet, what is left of it, is in full retreat.'

'Then the Overfiend is dead?' N'krumor asked.

'No,' Ha'garen put in. 'A retreat means they stopped fighting each other. Someone imposed order. They still have their leader.'

'Many small craft were seen escaping the kroozer,' Neleus said. 'But if he lives, his designs on this system have been crippled.' He turned his head to look at the prisoner. 'And we will destroy what was calling to the greenskins.'

Elisath said nothing. Ha'garen glanced at the eldar, and saw a being who had little to benefit from in his change of captors. He turned his attention back to the viewing block. The ork ship was going dark, disappearing into the night of the void. He was catching his last sight of Ba'birin's grave.

He asked the question on his brother's behalf. *What am I?* He knew the answer, for now, but he also knew that answer would continue to change. He had been able to kill the ship because of how much of the flesh and of the human he had surrendered. *Remember the human*, Ba'birin had said. So he would, but one could only remember what one no longer possessed. The path of this destiny was clear. He must transform. Contact with the kroozer had left him with a spiritual cancer. He felt it gnawing, and must burn it away. He must throw himself into the forge until he became the most perfect weapon in the service of his Chapter and his Emperor. Before the process was done, what had once been Ha'garen would be as dead as his brother.

But they would both be remembered.



EPILOGUE

Beneath the surface of Lepidus Prime, beneath the human city built on eldar ruins, Elisath stood before the entrance to the labyrinth. Above, in the city and in the land to the east, his kin lay in charred, blackened fragments. Their jetbikes, the emblem of the Saim-Hann way of war, were twisted, ruined mockeries of themselves. Behind him, the warriors of the human Emperor stood waiting, as monstrous and beyond entreaty as the orks.

No runes, but the future held no mystery. Now and forever, he was damned and lost.

‘Take us to it,’ the captain of the Salamanders ordered.

He could refuse, and rush to torture, or to the eternal embrace of She Who Thirsts. Or he could walk, and in the time he gained during the slow journey to the shard, he could pray. Pray to the splintered god. Pray that he was not the only eldar still living on this planet. Pray for a miracle. Pray for vengeance.

He began to walk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID ANNANDALE is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novels *The Death of Antagonis* and *Yarrick: Imperial Creed*, along with many short stories and novellas across the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 series. By day, he dons an academic guise and lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games. He lives with his wife and family and a daemon in the shape of a cat, and is currently working a host of exciting new projects set in the grim darkness of the far future.



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