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THE ETERNAL CRUSADER

GUY HALEY



A THIRD WAR FOR ARMAGEDDON NOVELLA

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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.



CHAPTER ONE

CRUSADE'S END

At the edge of the galaxy floated an iron cathedral, an edifice of great beauty raised not to peaceful gods but to war.

For ten thousand years it had plied the stars, bringing destruction and salvation in equal measure. The enemies of mankind had long learnt to fear it, as had those it protected. War followed the ship as surely as night follows day.

It was called the *Eternal Crusader*: a vast battle-barge, the mightiest of its type ever built, ten kilometres long, whose keel was laid in the inconceivable past. The sides and forward-thrusting spine of the *Eternal Crusader* were festooned with the tools of death; its hangars were the eyries of war-angels, ever poised to open and rain the champions of mankind upon benighted worlds. So long after others of its kind had ceased to be, or had turned away from the crusade of the Emperor to stage a faltering defence against the all-consuming dark, the *Eternal Crusader* fought on for a broken dream.

Ancient, weakened by age, its corridors and chambers were empty compared to the days of its might, but its heart remained strong, its reactor pulsed hot. Still it sailed, bloody and furious, into reaches of space abandoned or forgotten, there to do battle with the alien, the heretic and the creatures of the warp, and to claim their domains as the Emperor's own.

The Black Templars, the Knights of Dorn, were the grim wardens of its precincts. Of all the sons of the primarchs, they reckoned themselves the true chosen of the Emperor. They and they alone saw through the myths and tales of their fellow Space Marines to recognise the divinity behind the man who made

them.

They held it an irony that the other Adeptus Astartes did not embrace the truth so easily seen by the inferior humans they were made to protect.

The Black Templars had never abandoned their crusade, nor ever would, not until every last alien warlord and divergent human culture was cast down, or they died in the attempt.

Steeped in blood, hardened by the failure of ancient dreams, the spirit of the *Eternal Crusader* was old and wicked in its bellicosity. Had it thoughts to form, it would not have cared for ideals of honour or of worship, only that there was a war to fight, and that it would be at the forefront of that war. How its masters would feel at this ambivalence, none would ever know. Ships have no voices, and if the Black Templars had an inkling of the nature of the ship's spirit, they would not have told. The Adeptus Astartes are jealous of their secrets.

Let it be known then that the aims and choleric nature of the Black Templars accorded well with the tempers of the *Eternal Crusader's* angry soul. They were the same after all: weapons forged for a war that had been lost one hundred centuries ago, both cankered by time, both nevertheless dogged. That is enough.

In orbit about a poisonous world bathed in the light of sinister stars at the edge of the reach of the Astronomican, the *Eternal Crusader* bridled. Every part of its immense superstructure creaked with suppressed tension. In its primal, inchoate way it yearned to break free of the shackles of gravity and strike out onwards, ever onwards, on, on, on!

It could not. Its spirit was mighty in its way, but it had no will, no agency of action.

Within his chilly bower, the lord of the ship's masters brooded on a war he could not claim to have won, and so the *Eternal Crusader* was forced to wait.

Restlessly, it bided its time.

The Ghoul Stars Crusade was over.

From his personal sanctum aboard the *Eternal Crusader*, Helbrecht, High Marshal of the Black Templars, watched the bombing of the last world of the cythor fiends.

He stood in an armourglass cupola extending from traceried galleries. Glass glinted to his left and right in precise geometric procession. By cunning artifice, the heroes of his Chapter had been captured in the windows, forever to raise siliceous weapons against the eternal night. The effect within was gloomy, as starlight was dimmed from the glass – the shadows of the Galleria Astra behind

were deep.

The cupola, though, was clear, intended for unobstructed viewing. The ribbed shutters that protected it in battle were withdrawn into the metal supports like the lids of some monstrous compound eye.

An arming servitor and three honoured neophytes removed the Chapter Master's armour. The cupola was silent but for Helbrecht's breathing and the whir of power tools, swift, soft footsteps behind him, the muted click of his brazen war-plate being replaced in its recess on the far side of the gallery, and the distant, constant rumbling of the vessel's ordnance ravaging the unkillable planet.

The world had no name the Imperium knew of, but for Helbrecht it was 9836-18, the eighteenth planet subjugated in the 9836th Black Templar Crusade. They had dubbed it with the code-signum 'Grave Core'. Neither name would outlast its attempted destruction.

A strange, blue world of gelid and toxic atmospheres – a mid-range gas giant as sour as Sol's Neptune. No use to humanity at all, unfit for habitation. Too far from any human world to justify harvesting the useful elements of its dense air; too far, even, from any other of the galaxy's vile races for them to make use of it. Helbrecht would have been justified in leaving it.

He refused to do this.

Helbrecht hated Grave Core with the fury of the zealot. He hated it because it was a world of the bizarre cythor. But mostly he hated it because it had been empty, a tomb abandoned before the Black Templars had come to pass the Emperor's judgement upon its abhorrent inhabitants, seemingly desolate for thousands of years when that could not possibly be the case. This was where the cythor had fled – the Black Templars augurs had been clear. This was to have been the xenos' last stand. Instead of glorious victory, the Black Templars had descended to the platforms anchored in the clouds to find... nothing.

Helbrecht's slablike muscles tensed. One of his attendants flinched, interrupting the smoothness of his ministrations.

Cheated of his prey, Helbrecht had ordered Grave Core destroyed. The world was as unnatural as the fiends, and deserved to burn. But it would not die. By rights, the atmosphere should have ignited under the punishment of the orbital bombardment. Modified fusion bombs slammed down in regular patterns, silently exploding at predetermined depths in the world's thick sheath of gas. Their orange effulgence was muted; the world-fire did not take. Rather, the clouds burned reluctantly, and weirdly. Looping curls of blue skittered across the

stratosphere. No more devastating than high-altitude lightning effects, these phenomena sparked strange auroras in the planet's radioactive corona. They danced, mocking Helbrecht with their vitality.

Why would it not *burn*?

No glorianas accompanied the crusade's conclusion. Melancholy ruled Helbrecht's flagship. His servants worked quietly, tugging at him as gently as they could to take away his plate. None dared address him. His cloak went, his pauldrons and heavy powerplant were borne away by the uncomplaining servitor, and his greaves and vambraces were unclasped, each carefully unscrewed from one another and unplugged from his body. With efficiency they rendered him naked. He did not want to be disrobed; he was vulnerable to his shame without his armour.

Forgive me, Emperor, for I have failed you, he thought. Strike me down now for my inadequacy.

No strike came. Helbrecht yearned to find another battle. He would have done so immediately had ritual not demanded his disarming, his prayer and his repentance.

Helbrecht moved his body with the ease of one long practised, lifting his arms or shifting his weight to aid his attendants. Otherwise he ignored them; he ignored too the sharp pains as interface spikes were withdrawn. He ignored everything but his anger and his shame. He could not hide from them.

In the windows of the cupola, reflections of his face were superimposed over the planet. A noble visage, but harsh, an unreadable stone crag weathered by the unkindnesses of the Adeptus Astartes transformation and unrelenting war. Few could gauge his thoughts from his features. Helbrecht was a guarded man.

For once, his anger was plain. It could not be seen, but it could be felt.

The last piece of his armour came away from his black carapace. The arming servitor trudged back to its station beside the armour's recess, slotted itself into its coffin in the wall and deactivated. The neophytes bowed and departed for a while, returning minutes later with hot water and warmed oils. They whispered the benedictions of cleansing as they wiped his body with damp cloths. With this done, two of the three worked warmed, scented oils into his scarred skin, massaging carefully at knotted post-human muscle. Then they scraped away the ingrained filth and war-sweat with bronze strigils. The third knelt and attended to Helbrecht's artificial right arm, a gleaming brass construct that erupted from the scarred stump of his elbow. The novitiate oiled and polished it, murmuring simple maintenance cantrips. Helbrecht ignored them and glared at the planet.

His doors chimed. The limbless servitor torso built into an alcove beside them announced his visitor, its beautiful voice at odds with the fleshless hideousness of its altered skull.

‘Master of Sanctity Theoderic requests ingress. Allowed, denied?’

Helbrecht stirred, turning from the planet for the first time. His attendants skilfully accommodated themselves to his movements.

‘Is he alone?’ he asked.

‘Negative. Master of Sanctity Theoderic is accompanied by Captain Naroosh of the Death Spectres Adeptus Astartes Chapter.’

‘Leave me and return to your knights.’ He dismissed his attendants.

Helbrecht’s voice was deep, made gruff and resonant by centuries of yelled orders and screamed prayer. As his face was emotionless, so too was his voice: bland almost beneath its roughness.

The neophytes bowed. ‘As you wish, High Marshal,’ they said, and departed through a lesser entrance. Four Chapter-serfs, robes embroidered with the Templars cross and armed with pistol and sword, filed in as the young Space Marines filed out. They took their stations, ready to serve this most exalted son of Rogal Dorn.

‘Permit their entry,’ said Helbrecht. ‘Bid them welcome.’ He strode with sudden purpose from the cupola. His quarters were large, encompassing the Galleria Astra in which he currently stood, a private audience chamber, the Strategium Occultis, the High Marshal’s Librarius, his sleeping cell, armorium, armoury and other, more esoteric rooms. Situated at the peak of the *Eternal Crusader*’s central tower, many of the High Marshal’s chambers were capped by vaulted, armourglass ceilings that revealed the terrifying majesty of space.

These rooms had once belonged to Sigismund, founder of their order, and had almost certainly played host to Rogal Dorn himself. Such storied history, such *honour*, meant little to Helbrecht at that moment. He shrank from it, feeling unworthy.

The doors clanked back on giant cogs into the *Eternal Crusader*’s internal bulkheads. Master of Sanctity Theoderic walked into Helbrecht’s rooms. As tradition demanded, the Chaplain wore his battleplate and helmet. Captain Naroosh of the Death Spectres followed. He too wore his full armour.

‘My lord,’ said Theoderic. He waited until the doors were shut and removed his skull helm, exposing a face that was timeless in the Adeptus Astartes way, free of the signs of genes unwinding with age, but unmistakably ancient. Leathery and hard, it was a face that was inexpressive because it had had time to

try every permutation of expression and found them all inadequate. The single stripe of hair running down his skull was brilliant white. Five service studs were screwed into his forehead in the shape of a cross – two hundred and fifty years of service.

The serfs averted their eyes. Only the marshals, the Inner Circle knights and the others of the Chaplain brotherhood were permitted to look upon the unshielded face of a Black Templar warrior-priest.

Helbrecht's face became stonier still that Theoderic should unmask before an outsider, but he did not voice his disapproval. Naroosh was a captain of a Chapter after all, albeit a foreign one, and worthy of the honour. The truth was that Helbrecht's reaction was a personal one, and to comment on what he regarded as Theoderic's lapse would be discourteous to his guest, unwelcome as he was.

Helbrecht picked up a towel offered by one of his body-serfs and wiped his face and chest with it. Another brought him his robes – many-layered priestly garb in bone-white. Over that went a thick, black woollen habit, embroidered with the fluted cross of their order. So dressed, he had the look of a great man grown weary and gone into a monastery. If, that is, one did not look into his eyes. These were dark, and burned with a warrior's zeal, flashing with the light of gunfire remembered and anticipated. He exulted in battle and sang his praises to the Emperor hardest over the ringing of blades. There was a hunger for war around him that could be tasted on the air. Righteousness, certainty and, in his few unguarded moments, impatience for bloodshed could be glimpsed in his eyes, if one had the will to hold that gaze long enough.

His defeat had not dimmed the light in them at all. Far from it.

'Brothers, what may I do for you?' Helbrecht reached for a carafe, waving away the thrall that moved to pour it for him. He filled three fine pewter and glass goblets, their panelled sides as intricate as the windows, with thick blue Holschtian life-water and held one out to Theoderic. The older man placed his helmet on a table and walked forwards to accept it. Captain Naroosh stood aside. He did not remove his helmet. Not one of the Death Spectres had ever done so in any Black Templar's presence. Helbrecht held out a second goblet to him for a moment, and replaced it upon the table without a word when the captain did not move to take it.

Theoderic perceived Helbrecht's dourness and made his point quickly. 'My liege, we should discuss plans for the victory ceremony,' he said.

Helbrecht sipped lightly, a delicate gesture for so solid a man. 'What

ceremony? What victory? We do not celebrate.'

'My liege...'

'*We do not celebrate,*' he said harshly. 'My inaugural crusade as High Marshal has proved an abject failure. There is nothing to celebrate.'

'Is that so, brother?' said Theoderic. He used the mild tone the Chaplains employed when confronting a brother with doubts – kindly yet firm, it begged confession.

'The world was empty. The fiends remain undefeated,' explained Helbrecht, irritated he had to explain at all.

The Death Spectre spoke.

'All has played out as we said it would, High Marshal.' Naroosh's voice was leaden, rasping through his vox-grille. Sorrow and regret could be the only emotions conveyed by such a voice. 'There is no victory to be had over the cythor fiends. We can only watch and contain them, as has been my Chapter's burden for millennia. You have committed your bold warriors to a fool's errand.'

Helbrecht's eyes flashed dangerously.

Theoderic spoke before Helbrecht could respond, holding up a hand in a silent plea for reason. 'Perhaps you are both correct. Perhaps this empty world is a failure of sorts. Looked at another way, the High Marshal has won a great victory. Seventeen worlds scoured. No evidence of the ghouls remains anywhere in this segmentum. They will trouble no one again. Brother, they will have to rename the Ghoul Stars, thanks to you.'

'I do not think so,' said Helbrecht. 'Captain Naroosh does not think so either. Do you, captain?'

'We warned you,' said Naroosh dolorously. 'You were vainglorious to attempt the impossible. Your efforts have come to nought. All is as we warned.'

Helbrecht turned away from the captain. The Death Spectres were the guardians of this benighted stretch of space, posted beyond the bounds of the Imperium to ensure the inhabitants of the Ghoul Stars could never escape to threaten the wider galaxy. Helbrecht had thought them indolent, cowardly even, in that they obeyed their orders of containment and did not attempt to purge the aliens. He acquiesced to their demand that he take one of their ships along with him under great sufferance, and only after the production of Inquisitorial fiat.

'Maybe, captain, if you had fought alongside us, the result would have been different.'

'It would not,' said the captain firmly. 'We did not fight, because it was pointless to fight. This we said, and this you have discovered for yourselves. Our

task is to watch. We are gaolers, not conquerors. Leave these worlds. They tolerate no masters but the fiends.'

Helbrecht's eyes narrowed. 'The crusade never ends. It should never end until every star in this galaxy shines under the benevolent rule of our lord Emperor. You betray our lord's most cherished aims.'

Naroosh, who had not moved at all during their exchange, nor exhibited any sign of life beyond his speech and the tinny, near-silent thrum of his armour, pointed out of the windows. 'This place is not for us. This place is not for any creature. We know, because we once tried what you have tried. We failed – we heard their taunts, as no doubt you have also. We lament our failure to this day.' His black lenses looked deep into Helbrecht's smouldering eyes. 'You will leave this place, they will come crawling back through the gaps in the night, and nothing will have changed. You cannot sterilise their world. You cannot kill that which has never lived. They are beyond our arts of war. They can only be hindered, never subdued. Our shame you have willingly chosen to share. We are sorry that you decided to accept this burden. We are sorry that you did not listen.'

Theoderic and Helbrecht followed the Death Spectre's pointing finger. The cythor home world had finally caught fire, burning a sickly green. The bombardment continued.

'You cannot be sure of that, captain. Their dead burn in pyres the breadth of this sector, their world is finally ablaze,' said Theoderic. 'They have gone.'

'Gone is not a synonym for destroyed, Chaplain,' said Naroosh. 'They will return, as they always have.'

'He is right, Master of Sanctity.' Helbrecht impulsively drained his cup, but one of his serfs refilled it instantly. A sudden thirst had gripped him.

Theoderic chose his next words carefully. 'If your mood has been blackened by what you witnessed on the platforms, the sons of Terra can put no store in the words of...'

'I do not wish to talk of it,' said Helbrecht, and his tone brooked no disagreement. His fury became momentarily obvious on his face, his teeth clenched. 'No, Chaplain, this crusade is a failure. We have not won. I will not celebrate.'

Theoderic dipped his head, letting the matter rest.

'We will depart now,' said Naroosh. 'We return to our brothers and the Citadel of the Unsleeping Watch. We thank you that our task will be easier for a while, my lord.' His thanks might have been sincere or they might have been outright

derision, but Naroosh's tone did not vary. There was no clue as to his intention. 'We wish you all fortune in your next venture. May it bring you more honour.'

Naroosh made the aquila over his chest and bowed his head in salute.

Helbrecht placed his wine aside and made the Templars cross with his forearms. Theoderic did the same.

'Then you have my permission to leave,' said Helbrecht, with as much civility as he could manage.

'The Emperor guide and protect you, captain,' said Theoderic.

'We are a long way from the Emperor's light here, Chaplain,' said Naroosh. 'A very long way.'

Naroosh walked from the room, showing a heraldry as sombre as his voice upon his left pauldron as he turned away – a grim skull with crossed scythes.

Helbrecht stared at the closed door for a full half minute after Naroosh had gone, rolling his goblet back and forth in his hand.

Theoderic cleared his throat.

'Other matters await you, High Marshal. Have you given any thought to the matter of Mordred the Avenger's replacement? We wish to inter his remains within the Sepulcrum Ultimus. His soul deserves rest – he was a good man, and a bold warrior.'

'No doubt you have ideas of your own as to who should be the next Reclusiarch,' said Helbrecht.

'Not at all, brother,' said Theoderic, careful not to rise to Helbrecht's insinuation. 'The choice is yours and yours alone. You are the High Marshal of the Black Templars – the divine will of the Emperor works through you, not I. I will not make any suggestion as to who you should elevate. You will have my opinion in the Inner Circle as ritual demands, not before.'

'Should it be you, perhaps, Theoderic?'

'If that is the Emperor's will, so be it. If not, then that is also the Emperor's will.' He paused. 'You are in poor humour today, my liege. I will leave you, and prepare the Ceremony of Crusade's End. A shriving is also called for. Victory or defeat, after facing such an unclean foe, every brother's soul requires cleansing. A shining blade is of no use if the spirit wielding it is corrupted. May our next war be more to your liking. Praise be.'

'Praise be,' said Helbrecht under his breath.

Theoderic reached for his helmet. It had sat there on the table, a great death's head grinning at Helbrecht. For an insane moment, he felt it was the Emperor's own corpselike visage, staring in disapproval.

Helbrecht sighed, some of the tension passing out of him with the breath. His voice came close to betraying his anguish, but he was his heart's master, and would not allow his emotions to be known. 'Brother!' he called. 'I am sorry. You are correct. I allow my disappointment to rule my head. This is my first crusade as High Marshal, and I cannot in all good conscience enter it as completed into the record.'

'I understand, my brother.'

'And I have considered the matter of Mordred's successor,' Helbrecht went on. 'I am not yet decided, but I am minded to honour Mordred's wishes.'

'Grimaldus,' said Theoderic. 'Mordred knew his vocation. It is a worthy nomination. The Avenger has been preparing him for the best part of two centuries.'

'There are those who do not believe Grimaldus to be ready to take on the mantle of Reclusiarch,' said Helbrecht.

'I know, brother.'

'Nevertheless,' went on the High Marshal, 'it is towards Grimaldus that I lean. I will reveal my decision to the Inner Circle once I am certain. First we must do penance for our failure, and cast off our shame. Say nothing to the others.'

Theoderic favoured his lord with an understanding look, and dipped his head. 'As you command, my liege.' He replaced his helm, and left Helbrecht alone with his servants.

Helbrecht turned to watch the world roasting in the breath of its own winds. The issue of Grimaldus slipped easily from his mind, and his thoughts returned to what the Death Spectres grim Chapter Master had warned him of several months before, and what he had witnessed there below in the ghouls' nests of spun glass and acid-etched palladium. A million ossified corpses, calmly staring. And that voice...

His impassive face twitched, his hand tightening on the goblet. With a sudden, explosive cry of rage, he hurled it at the wall. His serfs rushed to clear the mess as he stalked from the room.

He went deep into his sanctuary, coming quickly to the Strategium Occultis, where only he might go, a huge, spherical space at the centre of the spire. He walked up steps cantilevered out over the room's depths to a lectern. He activated it, sending it whirring on tracks around the room. At the base of the pit, a vast holo projector sprang into life, painting a galaxy on the air big enough to lose oneself in. Upon it were described billions of stars: a million human systems and countless others unknown, unvisited, lost or infested by xenos breeds. A

hundred thousand wars were picked out in bloody red. Gothic crosses denoted the positions of the other Black Templars crusades. Taking in the endless assaults upon his beloved lord's domains, his resolve steadied. His gaze travelled to where his knights sought to expand the rule of man. Only he was privy to that information, no one else. Only he had been chosen by the Emperor. If he must know defeat, so be it. A test, nothing more. Let him go on to the next test and pass that.

He stood there a long while, staring into the false galaxy of light, seeking a worthy victory to wash away the sickly taste of failure.



CHAPTER TWO

PENITENCE

The adamantium doors of the Temple of Dorn creaked open, and Helbrecht entered. From the vast crossing of the third transept, three hundred and seventy-six ash-smeared faces watched his approach, their eyes catching the light of the wide iron fire bowl at their centre. The warriors of the Ghoul Stars Crusade were broken into three roughly equal fighting companies, their officers at the front, watched over by several war-priests in full armour. Aside from the Chaplains, the brethren wore the rough robes of penitents. Helbrecht had donned his brazen battleplate again. Newly polished, it reflected a shattered galaxy of candlelight, although his face too was stained with the ash of shame. Behind him came the Inner Circle of the Ghoul Stars Crusade – Champion Bayard, Master of Sanctity Theoderic, Master of the Forge Jurisian, Castellan Ceonulf, and Praeses-Sword Brother Gulvein – the warrior selected by that august brotherhood to be their senior.

Three banner bearers brought up the rear. The signifer primus bore Helbrecht's personal standard, a knight in red holding up the lantern broadcasting the Emperor's light. The signifer secundus carried the icon-heavy pole the crusade took into battle. The signifer tertio had the banner of the Ghoul Stars Crusade. This depicted a whirling vortex in the sky, a bold knight, sword raised, facing the half-glimpsed horrors within.

The delegation walked down the silent ranks of their brothers. Priceless artefacts of aeons past were rough shapes in the shadowed arcades along the aisle. Between these treasures, the solemn stone faces of heroes of their order

looked on with unseeing eyes of statues'. Huge though the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes were, and mighty by any reckoning was their gathering, such grandeur was in the temple that their numbers seemed insignificant. It was a space made for ten times three hundred. The empty floor stretched into blackness around the group, a reminder of greater days.

The crossing of the third transept with the nave was the very centre of the temple. Four herms depicting the Primarch Rogal Dorn at different times in his life held up the central dome. Half-glimpsed war-saints battled there, their gold and lapis lazuli stained by one hundred centuries of candle soot. At the dome's apex was a glass lantern, through whose windows cold stars shone steadily in unblinking judgement.

The procession halted before the fire bowl. Helbrecht took the banner of the Ghoul Stars Crusade from his signifer tertio. Crusade banners were not taken into battle, but created to be hung at the campaign's successful conclusion. This one would never join its fellows. Helbrecht said nothing as he gazed upon the image. There was silence, underpinned by the ever-present drone of the ship's mechanical life and the crackle of scented logs.

'I bring you here today, brothers,' said Helbrecht eventually, 'not to celebrate victory, but failure. We have scoured the stars of the cythor.'

'Praise be,' intoned the Chaplains.

'Praise be,' replied the throng.

'But we have not destroyed them. Your efforts will be well remembered, your individual deeds marked in the hall of records, your honours respected. You, Brother Cadillus, and you, Brother Fethral, and many more of you are worthy of celebration. I am not. I have failed you, my bold warriors.'

He held the standard up and ripped it free of its mountings. Brass rings pinged upon the floor. 'This banner will not hang in this temple with the others. The name of the Ghoul Stars Crusade shall be carved upon the Wall of Shame so that all will know of my error, so long as our Chapter persists.'

He balled the standard up in the fist of his artificial arm, and cast it into fire. The blaze dimmed as it was covered, then leapt up as the cloth caught fire. Helbrecht grasped the haft of the standard in both hands, bringing it down with such force over his knee that the metal was broken asunder. He cast the pieces upon the floor with a clatter. With a rasp, he drew his blade – one of the holiest blades in the Imperium, the Sword of the High Marshals, and the Sword of Sigismund, first Champion of the Emperor – forged from the broken shards of Rogal Dorn's own weapon.

‘But know this, oh Knights of Dorn!’ he shouted. ‘I will seek you out a new war, so that your arms will always be weary from blade work, and my dishonour shall be washed away with the blood of the xenos, the traitor and the heretic! This I swear!’

‘Praise be! Praise be! Praise be!’ shouted the throng, and the temple shook. The dusty banners depending from the roof stirred in the drafts of their exultation.

The Chaplains went among the brothers then. The Black Templars knelt before their priests and were granted benediction. Skull helms leaned in close to hear of sins and failings, to forgive or to admonish, before wiping the stain of ashes away. ‘You are blessed!’ the Chaplains said to each. ‘You are the beloved of the Emperor! Away with shame, and to a new war!’

Theoderic stepped forwards as they went about their holy business, his voice ringing out from his death’s head in prayer.

‘Oh Emperor! We pray for your forgiveness! Bring us a new task, so that we might expunge the sin of failure! Keep us pure in our purpose! Keep us noble in our aim!’ Servitors appeared from the gloom, swinging censer arms. Cybercherubim swooped low, brushing the heads of the adepts with the holy scrolls they bore. Their confessional accomplished, the Black Templars broke into song.

So loud was the hymn of the Templars as they purged themselves of their shame that at first none heard the second opening of the great doors, nor the intrusion of a different tune. Pure and high, it infiltrated and complemented the harsh, basso-profundo hymn of the transhuman warriors. Beginning softly, so softly that even enhanced Adeptus Astartes senses could not hear it, it rose until it was unmissable. Helbrecht sought its source. Finding it, he fell to his knees.

Making her way down the long aisle from the great portal of Dorn came Mistress Anyanka Dei Osper, Astropath Prime of the Ghoul Stars Crusade. A hundred thralls attended her: a dozen at the fore of her procession sweeping the spotless floor with sanctified brooms, lest her purity be compromised. Five rows of cybernetic castrati followed them, singing the song of annunciation. Beyond these came books containing the names of every member of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica ever assigned to the Black Templars and the collected interpretations of their messages. The books were chained to rings sunk into the flesh of bearers whose mouths were sealed by staples of gold. More came – men clutching heavy brass poles topped with candles the thickness of a thigh, censer-bearers, water-bearers, factotums and body servants. Then came Dei Osper’s bodyguard: twenty heavily armed Adeptus Astra Telepathica bonded warriors, each carrying

double-handed swords and shields whose heraldry was divided between that of the Black Templars and their mistress's adepta.

Finally, the long train of her robes borne by fluttering vat-constructs, came the Most Holy Mistress Osper.

The Black Templars changed their song to one of lesser volume, forming a counterpoint to the choir of cyber-thralls and relinquishing dominance to the voices of the astropath's servants. As one, they turned to face her and touched their heads to the floor.

The Chaplains knelt and bowed their heads except Theoderic, who raised his crozius and shouted, 'Welcome, welcome, bid welcome to Blessed Mistress Anyanka Dei Osper, touched by the Emperor! Pay obeisance, give your awe! Here is one who has seen the light of the Lord of Man!'

He too knelt then. So the Black Templars remained, softly chanting, until Osper had traversed the two hundred metres to their place of gathering. Her procession parted and halted. The songs diminished to a murmur. Her bodyguards pivoted to line the aisle, clashing their blades upon their shields, and knelt, allowing Osper to come forward to greet the High Marshal.

The hymns quietened to a drone.

'Blessed Lady, to what do we owe this honour?' asked Helbrecht. 'Too infrequently do you bring the light of the Emperor to us. We thank you for the blessing of your presence.'

Osper's staff clicked on the stone floor. The buzz and murmuring of her attendants was pervasive to Helbrecht's enhanced ears – encouragements and blandishments in the main. Waves of annoyance emanated from the powerful psyker at their fussing.

'Greetings, High Marshal. I am sorry to intrude here, in your order's most holiest place. I beg your apology.'

Helbrecht looked up into the blind face of the astropath. She was a handsome woman of middling years, arresting in the strength of her features. When she had her hood down, one could see that her wavy brown hair was streaked with iron grey. Tonight she came on business of the greatest solemnity, and wore the full robes of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. Her eye sockets were covered by taut and seamless skin. When she turned her head just so, they became shallow pits of shadow.

'I have a message, one of some import. It has been shouted across the heavens at great volume, repeatedly, and with urgency from many quarters. This is why I come to disturb your prayers. Forgive me,' she asked again.

She paused, her sightless face scanning back and forth over the assembled brethren, her cheeks whispering against her green adept's hood.

'The orks have returned to Armageddon. A plea for aid has been sent across the Imperium, so far and so loud that I received it even here.'

Helbrecht looked upwards. His expressionless face could not display the ecstasy he felt. 'Emperor! Oh, Emperor! I thank you for this most welcome sign! A chance, a chance to wash away failure in the blood of our enemies!'

He stood, and held Sigismund's sacred sword high. 'I take a solemn oath before all my brothers here present, and the most holy Mistress Anyanka Dei Osper!' He turned around to face his men. A wall of prayer emanated from their modified throats, so low it made Osper's teeth vibrate. 'Oh Emperor! I swear in the fullness of your sight that I will not rest until Ghazghkill, the Great Beast of Armageddon, lies dead at my feet. I, Helbrecht of the Black Templars, the most faithful of all the sons of your sons, will slay him.' He knelt suddenly, reversing his blade and planting its point on the deck. Under the barest pressure, it slid into the stone. 'This oath I take before your vessel, Mistress Anyanka Dei Osper. Hear it, oh Lord, and be certain of its sincerity. Praise be!'

'Praise be!' shouted the brothers.

Serfs rushed forwards, a servitor-scribe between them. The machine-slave's chest-mounted mechanism chuntered while it walked, spilling an oath paper from its cybernetic innards. One of the serfs tore the warm parchment free, and held it to Helbrecht's lips to kiss as the other prepared the seal. With the hiss of hot metal on wax, the menials affixed the paper to Helbrecht's chestplate.

'It is sworn. It is done.' He stood. Anyanka could not see the tears drying upon his cheeks. His religious fervour retreated back within him, leaving him a man of stone again.

'The Ghouls Crusade is done. By the power given me, I formally incept this Armageddon Crusade. Let our victory stand as testament to the supremacy of man. Mistress Osper, if I might request that you and your adepts send immediate word to Marshal Amalrich and Marshal Ricard. Inform them that I declare their crusades to be over, and that they must make all haste to the Chapter keep at Fergax in the Ultima Segmentum. Inform them to hold there and await further orders.'

'It is my duty and my honour, my lord,' said the astropath.

Helbrecht's earlier dismay was forgotten. His blood was hot with zeal. 'To your stations, brothers. We make all haste to the Armageddon System!'

Something akin to pleasure coursed through the *Eternal Crusader* as its warp engines were engaged to rip aside the curtains of reality and show the horrors behind.

Flanked by its seven escorts in arrowhead formation, the *Eternal Crusader* leapt into the jagged tear in the walls of space-time. Their inferior engines struggling to keep pace, the heavy cruiser *Majesty* and lesser battle-barge *Night's Vigil* straggled after. For the briefest instant, the rip in the cosmos afforded a view into a realm of insanity where the engine stacks of the crusade fleet burned, candles in a hurricane.

A boom rumbled across the void, sound where no sound should be, as it collapsed. The Black Templars were gone, their ships carrying them forwards on their endless crusade.

Some hours after the fleet's departure, the guttering embers of Grave Core went out. With remarkable swiftness, the frigid blue of the planet's original colour began to return.



CHAPTER THREE

GRIMALDUS

The ship juddered, bouncing over a wave in the deep warp.

The seven knights of the Inner Circle ignored the *Eternal Crusader's* creaking and rolling. Gathered in the Chamber of Sigismund were Champion Bayard, Master of Sanctity Theoderic, Master of the Forge Jurisian, Castellan Ceonulf, Praeses-Sword Brother Gulvein and Brother-Dreadnought *Cantus Maxim Gloria*. Also present were Abbott Giscard, leader of the thrall-monks of the Monasterium Certituda deep in the bowels of the ship, Sergeant Majoris Valdric, chief officer of the Chapter's warrior-serfs, and Confessor Cornelius Halquon, lately arrived from the convent world of Rith. These last three had no vote in the doings of the council, but their voices were heeded by Helbrecht, the confessor's especially.

Helbrecht occupied his throne. In front of it was a pool of dazzling light.

Sword Brethren in robes lined the walls in the shadows, allowed to witness but not permitted to add their own arguments. The air was thick and hot, heavy with the scent of incense and the Dreadnought's exhaust stacks. The rumble of *Cantus's* powerplant turning over brought an industrial quality to the proceedings. The confessor, new to the ways of the Adeptus Astartes, was taken aback when *Cantus* clanged into the room to take up his place at the edge of the Inner Circle. It was explained that *Cantus* was an Ancient, and senior Dreadnought of the Black Templars. His wisdom was invaluable in such debates as these.

Currently, Valdric occupied the speaking place in the circle of light.

‘Lord Grimaldus is a good choice, my liege,’ said Valdric. He was a stern, grim man, who had aged quickly in the manner of unaltered humans, bald, gruff and close-mouthed. In his gleaming armour and with sword by his side, some saw in him a Helbrecht in miniature.

‘He has little time for the menials, lord,’ said the abbott.

‘And rightwise too!’ barked Valdric. Spittle was apt to fly from his mouth when he shouted. His grey moustache quivered. The two men had little time for each other, despite their equal love for their masters. ‘The spiritual welfare of the Chapter’s servants is your concern, not the Lord Reclusiarch’s. A warrior-priest should be grim, unapproachable. He frightens the sergeants, and that is as it should be.’

‘Have you finished?’ growled Bayard.

Helbrecht sat forwards on the great throne of Sigismund, his face emerging from the shadows cast by its ornate gothic canopy of carved black wood. Above him, tiny, stylised figures of Black Templars waged endless, frozen wars against grotesque foes.

‘Valdric has the right to speak, Bayard,’ said Helbrecht.

‘My liege—’

‘Now is not your turn to speak, Champion. We know of your objections. Confessor, holy father, give me your opinion.’

Halquon, a shrewd man with a sharp face, came forwards. He was young, but a twisted spine caused him to go about perpetually hunched and clutching at his staff, as if he were burdened with the weight of his office.

‘The Ecclesiarchy recognises Chaplain Mordred’s wishes. You will find no objection from our diocese. I cannot speak for all, but the episcopal rede of Ultima Segmentum has voted in Grimaldus’s favour.’

‘What has the rede to do with our affairs?’ asked Bayard. He was particularly short-tempered, and his lack of respect offended some of the others.

‘Among the Adeptus Astartes, you are the sole followers of the great truth of the Imperium, my lord,’ said Halquon to Bayard. ‘That the Emperor is a god. Your spiritual decisions are of great interest to us.’

Helbrecht’s robes rustled as he raised his hand.

‘Brothers, what say the rest of you? Most venerable *Cantus*?’

‘Grim-ald-us,’ rumbled the Dreadnought, and fell silent.

‘Castellan?’

‘Grimaldus.’

‘Praeses-Sword Brother?’

Gulvein stepped down into the light, his face thoughtful. ‘I do not agree, my liege,’ said Gulvein. ‘Grimaldus has all the makings of a great and noble warrior – he has since the day he was elevated to our Chapter from the gross condition of humanity. But he is not ready yet.’

‘Your objection is noted, Praeses. You, forgemaster, what is your opinion?’

Jurisian stepped forwards into the light; his red robes, embroidered with the Machina Opus and the Templars cross, stirred up a storm of glinting dust motes.

‘He is not ready,’ Jurisian said regretfully. ‘He is a master of small engagements, and a warrior without peer. But he is not a leader of the Chapter.’

‘The forgemaster speaks the truth, High Marshal,’ said Bayard. He too stepped down from Helbrecht’s side and joined Gulvein and Jurisian. ‘Grimaldus is flawed by hesitation, a second’s delay in all he does, and it is no secret why. He holds himself to his master’s standards. Doubt clings to him, darkening his place in the Chapter.’

‘He is shaken by Mordred’s death. He seeks his place in the Eternal Crusade,’ continued Jurisian.

Helbrecht put his flesh hand to his mouth in thought. He rubbed his lips and he shook his head. ‘In the coming war, I will give him the chance to find that place.’

Jurisian and Gulvein bowed, and retreated to their places. Bayard did not relent.

‘My liege! I must protest – Grimaldus is not the right choice! What of Theoderic? He is older and wiser by far. Or Cethervold of Ricard’s crusade?’

The Sword Brethren jeered, and clashed their hands on their ritual shields.

‘Hold your peace, brothers!’ said Helbrecht. ‘The Inner Circle have cast their votes – I have heard the words of our most trusted servants, and that of the Ecclesiarchy’s emissary. All have spoken, and I have heard. My judgement in this matter that I believe Mordred’s wishes are paramount. Who can dispute that he was not as fine a judge of men as he was a warrior?’

The High Marshal looked from face to face. None disagreed.

‘Then it is done. Grimaldus will be the next Reclusiarch of the Black Templars.’

‘Now,’ said Theoderic. A group of serfs came forwards carrying large bronze bowls. ‘We will undergo physical and spiritual purging, and then we shall feast.’

The following day, Bayard travelled to the Temple of Dorn. Silent monks, their faces hidden, whispered away from him as he walked through its empty

immensity.

A knot of shame clogged his throat. He went to the chapels at the first transept's end side, those set aside for private prayer and confession. As he approached a shriving chamber, he startled a vat creature out of its roost. His hand went automatically for his bolt pistol, and he cursed himself for his nerves. The thing flapped away, moronically croaking praises to the Emperor.

A servitor-warden asked his business. Bayard spoke it freely; there was no shame in seeking guidance. He was shown into a bare cell. He waited but a short while in silent contemplation before he heard the steady whir of active power armour and heavy boots on the mosaic floor.

Bayard looked up to see the Master of Sanctity. Theoderic's voice growled through the vox-grille of his skull helm. In the half light, he appeared as a revenant come to test the damned. 'You wish to confess, my brother. Speak your sins and I will soothe your suffering.'

Bayard returned his gaze to the floor. 'Intercede for me, most holy brother, with the Emperor. I have committed the sin of speaking out against my liege.'

'It is no sin to voice your objections in council, my brother. While you carry the black sword, you are a member of the Inner Circle. It is your right to speak, and to be heard.'

'It is a sin to continue one's objection when your voice has already been heard.'

'It is,' agreed Theoderic. 'Best that you admit so, and move on. A day's prayer will banish your troubles.'

'That is not the worst of it, Brother-Chaplain. I have not set aside my doubts. They writhe within me still like serpents. They sink their fangs into my soul.' He looked up hesitantly. 'It should have been you.'

Theoderic sighed, and walked round to Bayard's front. His tone became gentler, but clad in his armour he presented a fearsome sight. 'No, it should not, my brother. The Emperor's will is the Emperor's will. The High Marshal has the Emperor's blessing, he was chosen by the Emperor, and so the High Marshal's word is the Emperor's word. Divinity works through Helbrecht and him alone. Would you take it upon yourself to make the Emperor's choices for him?'

'No, of course not.'

'And it is not for I or for you to make the High Marshal's decisions for him either, Bayard.'

Bayard shifted, adjusting the great blade girt to his waist. In his armour or out of it, the black sword was never far from his side. 'I was chosen by the Emperor

too. I have seen him, Brother-Chaplain. I have seen him in my dreams! Can Helbrecht say the same? I say Grimaldus is weak, too unsure of himself. He is no Mordred.'

Theoderic rounded on him, his voice rumbling sternly from his mask. 'The Emperor chose you for a different task, Champion. Do not mistake one role for another. Mordred has been preparing Grimaldus as his successor for nearly two hundred years.'

'Then Mordred was wrong.'

Theoderic raised his hand, fingers spread, as if to lay his gauntlet upon the top of Bayard's head. He hesitated, and pointed accusingly instead. 'You are too proud.'

The ghost of a sneer poisoned Bayard's hawkish features. 'You admonish me for pride? I have heard from your own lips that we should be proud, for we are the sole bearers of the light. What of Helbrecht, is he not proud?'

'We should be proud. Helbrecht is right to be proud. He fulfils his role. The artificer in the forge who maintains your armour, the basest menial who washes your clothes – they too are right to be proud as they also fulfil their roles. Your pride is misplaced because you have yet to do the same. When your corpse lies in the Sepulcrum Ultimus, covered in glory, you may partake of as much pride as you wish. We each have our own roles to perform, Bayard. We do not question what the Emperor has chosen for us. Arrogance is not pride. Do you understand?'

Bayard stared back.

'Do you understand?' said Theoderic, this time at a greater volume.

Bayard's face contorted. His natural pride and deep misgivings warred with his desire to comply with Helbrecht's ruling. 'Yes... Yes, Chaplain. I do.'

'You do not think Grimaldus is worthy still?'

Bayard cleared his throat. 'No,' he said quietly. 'No, I don't.'

Then Theoderic did put his hand upon Bayard's head. 'To doubt is not to err, Champion Bayard. Without doubt, there can be no certainty, and with no certainty there is no truth. But when our doubts cannot be overcome or reconciled with the wishes of others, you must learn to discard them.'

He pressed down hard on the Champion's head. 'In the name of the Emperor, lord of all mankind and giver of the light, I absolve you of your sins, Champion Bayard. Go now in peace.'

This has to be right. This is right, thought Helbrecht. It is right because I cannot

be wrong. Why then, oh Emperor, do I still feel irresolute?

Helbrecht wore his bone-coloured robes, and waited before the Tomb of Sigismund. The founder of their Chapter was entombed in a sarcophagus of glistening white marble, his prone, heroic form rendered three times life size. Sigismund's monument dwarfed Helbrecht, as much as his legacy dwarfed every High Marshal who came after him.

Is this right? He asked himself. Yes. Yes.

For the first time since his defeat by the blasphemous xenos construct Trazyn, Helbrecht was uncertain. The failure of the crusade upset him. Others still spoke of it as a victory, but he could not, would not see it as such. His shoulders stung from the ritual scourgings he had undertaken nightly since they entered the warp. Not so much from the physical pain, this was frustratingly fleeting, but from the acid shame of his oath unfulfilled.

He put his anger from his mind. There was this matter to resolve, the elevation of Grimaldus – he must focus on that alone.

This is right, he insisted to himself. It cannot be any other way.

He went over the objections of the others, his own thoughts. He weighed everything meticulously in making his judgements. In this equation, it was the lack of total certitude that he found vexing.

Grimaldus and he were kindred spirits. But Bayard was correct that Grimaldus pondered too long before acting. This elevation would be difficult on Grimaldus, for all Mordred's long preparation.

He will emerge from it tempered, his edge honed, thought Helbrecht. Difficulty forges better weapons for the Emperor than ease.

Grimaldus approached, wearing his Chaplain's armour and battle-robes. He bore no crozius, and wore no helm. In Helbrecht's hands was Mordred's helmet. Once bestowed upon Grimaldus, it would become his new face. To the brothers of the Chapter, it would be as if Mordred had never died.

Grimaldus approached and knelt at Helbrecht's feet in the centre of the knights of the Inner Circle.

'Grimaldus,' said Helbrecht. His voice rang from the temple's vaulting.

'Yes, my liege.'

Helbrecht looked down at the Chaplain. His obeisance was perfect in humility. It was impossible to judge how Grimaldus felt about this appointment from his comportment.

'We have brought you here to honour you, just as you have honoured us for so many years,' said Helbrecht. 'We have summoned you to be judged.'

Grimaldus gave the ritual response. ‘I have answered the summons. I submit myself before your judgement.’

‘Mordred is dead, slain by the Archenemy. You, Grimaldus, have lost a master. We have all of us lost a brother.’

The knights intoned their liege’s words, the repetition chasing echoes of Helbrecht’s utterance into the shadows.

Silence.

‘We mourn his loss, but honour his wisdom in this, his final order. Grimaldus, warrior-priest of the Eternal Crusade, it was the belief of the Reclusiarch Mordred that upon his death, you would be the worthiest of our brother Chaplains to stand in his stead. His final decree before the returning of his gene-seed to the Chapter was that you, of all of your brethren, would be the one to rise to the rank of Reclusiarch.’

Grimaldus raised his head, staring into the dead, glaring eyes of Mordred’s war mask. There was nothing but determination on Grimaldus’s face.

‘Grimaldus, you are a veteran in your own right, and once stood as the youngest Sword Brother in the history of the Black Templars. As a Chaplain, your life has been without cowardice or shame, your ferocity and faith without equal. It is my belief, not merely the wish of your fallen master, that you should take the honour we offer you now.’

Grimaldus nodded, a barely perceptible movement.

‘Rise, if you would refuse this honour. Rise and walk from this sacred chamber, if you wish no part in the hierarchy of our most noble Chapter.’

Helbrecht’s hearts caught as he imagined Grimaldus standing, stumbling back, repulsed by the honour. He half saw it.

Nonsense, thought Helbrecht. Mordred believed him worthy. He is worthy, I am sure of it. I do not make mistakes. I cannot make mistakes. I am the chosen of the Emperor.

Grimaldus did not move.

Satisfied, Helbrecht drew the blade of Sigismund. ‘You will have your own rituals within the Chaplain brotherhood. For now, I recognise you as the inheritor to your master’s mantle,’ he said, and held the blade at Grimaldus’s throat. The Sword was ten millennia old, and as sharp as the day it was made, the balance of it was such that Helbrecht barely felt it in his hand, despite its huge size. His hearts never failed to quicken upon its drawing. ‘You have waged war at my side for two hundred years, Grimaldus. Will you stand at my side as Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade?’

Grimaldus spoke without hesitation. 'Yes, my liege.'

Helbrecht drew back his bionic hand and punched his new Reclusiarch in the face.

'I dub thee Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade. You are now a leader of our blessed Chapter. As a knight of the Inner Circle, let that be the last blow you receive unanswered.'

Helbrecht watched Grimaldus's face carefully. He yearns to strike me back, he thought. This is fitting, this is right. Mordred was wise in his selection. I am not wrong to honour his wish.

'It... will be so my lord.'

'As it should be. Rise, Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Eternal Crusade.'



CHAPTER FOUR

ARMAGEDDON

The *Eternal Crusader* speared back into the mortal realm to find a system readying itself for war. Vox-traffic, squealing with star-born interference, echoed over the comms channels, bringing the rumour of battles done days past at the edge of the system, orders long since fulfilled and the screams of dying men whose corpses were hours cold. Interspersed with Imperial signals were the invaders' broadcasts, carrying the deep, inhumanly guttural utterances of orks.

There were two weeks, maybe less, until the orks made their way to Armageddon. The Black Templars fleet was swifter, cutting in from the Mandeville point to the heart of the system in a matter of days. Helbrecht remained on the command deck of the *Eternal Crusader* for most of that time, retreating only for prayer, and rarely resting. He consulted often with his shipmaster, Baloster, but allowed his serfs to attend to their duties without comment. His eyes were forever on the oculus. When not staring into the sparse voidscape of interplanetary space, he could be found at the holo tables, running the system's planetary orbits months ahead, plotting all manner of strategic situations again and again. Scribes from the Hall of Records came to him in a constant stream, bringing every scrap of information they could find on the Second War and the ork warlord who had brought Armageddon to its knees once before.

They coasted round the gravity well of Pelucidar. As they used the planet's gravitative attraction to slingshot themselves to greater speed, scattered wreckage annihilated itself on the void shields of the *Eternal Crusader* and her

sisters. Fresh isotopes tickled the *Crusader*'s auspexes from recently destroyed vessels and spent munitions. A battle had been fought there recently. They saw no other sign of the orks. For all the crowded nature of the Armageddon System, the cosmos remained big enough to swallow them all.

Finally, Armageddon itself: it grew from a glint of sickly yellow to a grey ball of poisoned skies and poisoned seas, its diseased surface scabbed by the metallic growths of human hives. Whether man could be entirely to blame for Armageddon's deadly nature was moot; its own volcanic systems blasted out a thousand years' worth of industrial pollution every year, but the actions of mankind lay heavily on the world.

And this, thought Helbrecht, surveying the grubby planet, is what we must fight for. Such is the will of the Emperor.

The activity around Armageddon was frantic, thousands of ships dropping from orbit to surface, giving no time for their ticking hulls to cool before soaring skywards again. When night's Terminator crept around the globe, the light trails of spacecraft coming to and from orbit in queues thousands of kilometres long lit up the dark. Millions of men and billions of tonnes of war materiel came down endlessly from the sky. Adeptus Mechanicus coffin ships, Astra Militarum landers, tank transports, freighters, Naval lighters, dual void/atmospheric fighter squadrons, barques, heavy lifters, resupply galleasses, tugs – every kind of vessel imaginable, stirring the skies of Armageddon into unseasonal storm through their constant activity.

All orbits were crammed with ships of war, the void between them dense with craft ferrying messengers and personnel to and fro. Traffic control worked overtime, the orbital stations of the hive world staffed by gritty-eyed adepts directing ships away from each other. Sleep became a commodity rarer and more valuable than adamantium.

The Black Templars Crusade was only one fleet among dozens. Each passing day more vessels arrived, called from every corner of the galaxy to this vital part of the Segmentum Solar. Aboard vessels, monitoring stations, ground control bunkers and command ships, scribes laboured ceaselessly over their cogitators and auto-scriveners, logic banks running hot calculating the names, numbers and disposition of the growing Imperial forces. Servitors collapsed, their brains cooked by data overload. The planetary noosphere was as clogged as the skies, and information was slow in getting to its destination. Those wisest among the members of the various adepta responsible for all this looked to their augur screens, deep-space pict captures and far-seeing oculi and knew it would not be

enough. All too soon the lumbering hulks bearing the orks would be upon them. There were three of these waste-ships, then nine, then fifteen, escorted by somewhere in the region of two thousand ork cruisers, a host many times greater than the combined Battlefleet Armageddon and Space Marine fleets.

The *Eternal Crusader* was allocated a slot in a crowded orbit. A summons came soon after. Helbrecht called his new Reclusiarch and his Champion to his side, and together they went down to the surface where, at Hades Hive, a council gathered.

A theatre auditorium in the drab city played host to the first act of war. Over one hundred commanders of the Imperium – human, post-human and cybernetically altered – stood shoulder to shoulder in a riot of differing heraldries and uniforms. In the bunchings of the group one could see cliques developing, results of shared outlook or centuries-old debts of honour.

Between some factions there was outright antagonism. Hard looks and harsh words were exchanged many times. But every man and woman there, be it on shoulder, sash or armour plate, bore the freshly minted badge of the Armageddon campaign. Unity was the guiding principle at work, unity in the face of disaster.

Helbrecht approved. Too infrequently did the subjects of the Emperor act in harmony.

To Helbrecht's front and right was Grimaldus, behind him Bayard. The two of them had exchanged no more than a handful of words since the Reclusiarch's investiture. It would be interesting to see what both of them made of this meeting. Grimaldus's first test, that is how Bayard will see it, but it shall also be a test for him, thought Helbrecht.

There was one within to whom all paid heed, a man of such years that he was truly ancient by non-Space Marine standards. Papery flesh, thin bones and a body ravaged by war. His one eye had been replaced by an unwieldy augmetic and his right arm was a stump with his commissar's uniform sleeve pinned neatly over it. He should have been at rest, this loyal servant of the Emperor; he should not have been at war. Rejuvenats and surgery only went so far in holding the corporeal shell of a man together, yet within him burned a devotion to the Emperor that Helbrecht had rarely witnessed. To see such faith in so fragile a man humbled Helbrecht, and he could not take his eyes from him.

He was Commissar Sebastian Yarrick, the hero of the Second War for Armageddon. He looked around the room, his remaining flesh eye undimmed by age.

‘Hades Hive will not survive the first week,’ he said. His voice was dry but powerful. Servo-skulls broadcast his words to all corners of the crowd.

A murmur went around the room.

Yarrick leaned on the edge of the chart desk at the centre of the chamber and keyed coordinates into a numeric keypad. The current display of Hades Hive shifted focus, drawing out to show both inhabited subcontinents. Hades became a blinking signifier. The pinprick of red denoting it covered an insignificant portion of the hive on the pict-map. A metal disease with a suppurating sore at its heart, thought Helbrecht. A sure sign of humanity’s dominance, that we remake worlds so readily.

‘Six decades ago, the Great Beast met his defeat at Hades. Our defence here was what won us that war,’ Yarrick said.

Helbrecht had read this. His opinion differed. Yarrick had won that war, and the defence of Hades Hive could not have occurred without him.

‘Why?’ a transhuman voice interrupted.

There were many Space Marines present. Over two dozen captains, and a handful of Chapter Masters. Such a gathering belonged to legend, to the times of the Great Crusade. Helbrecht recognised the speaker as belonging to the Angels of Fire, an insignificant Chapter. They had a reputation for brashness and arrogance, to make up, he suspected, for their patchwork heritage. They were a mere thirty centuries old, and could claim no primarch. Founded by decree with gene-seed tithed to Terra, they were a mongrel breed. You could not create nobility from nothing.

‘We recognise Brother-Captain Amaras.’ A herald banged the butt of his staff on the floor three times, and the skull-drones repeated his announcement.

‘Commander of the Angels of Fire.’

‘Why would the greenskin warlord simply annihilate the greatest battlefield of the last war?’ Amaras said. ‘Surely our forces should muster at Hades and stand ready to defend against the largest assault?’

Helbrecht watched this young upstart. Their armour was as offensive as his attitude, bright scarlet chased with orange flames. Amaras did not notice Helbrecht’s stare, but emboldened by words from other commanders, spoke to Yarrick through a condescending smile. ‘We are the Emperor’s chosen, mortal. We are His Angels of Death. We have centuries of battle experience compared to these human commanders at your side.’

A new voice barked out harshly, moderated by a vox-grille. ‘No.’

The voice was Grimaldus’s.

Good, thought Helbrecht. Now we shall hear your wisdom. He left his stare boring into the side of Amaras's head, but listened carefully to his Reclusiarch.

'We recognise Brother-Chaplain Grimaldus, Reclusiarch of the Black Templars,' shouted the herald.

From his posture, Helbrecht guessed Grimaldus was surprised he had spoken, but realised he could not take back his objection. He shifted in his armour. Go on, brother, thought Helbrecht, put this insolent unbeliever in his place.

'The xenos do not think as we do,' the Reclusiarch said. 'The greenskins do not come to Armageddon for vengeance, or to seek to bleed us for the defeats they have suffered at Imperial hands in the past. They come for the pleasure of violence.'

Yarrick watched Grimaldus keenly, his own face in the dim light as skeletal as the Chaplain's death mask.

Amaras pounded his fist on the table, and pointed at the Templar. Grimaldus tensed. Helbrecht noted a flicker of movement in his pistol hand, but he restrained himself.

'That lends credence to my belief,' said Amaras.

You fool, thought Helbrecht, he is not agreeing with you.

'Not at all,' said Grimaldus. 'Have you inspected what remains of Hades Hive? It is a ruin. There is nothing to fight over, nothing to defend. The Great Beast knows this. He will be aware that Imperial forces will put up no more than a token resistance here, and fall back to defend hives that are still worth defending. It is likely that the warlord will obliterate Hades Hive from orbit, rather than seek to take it.'

'We cannot let this hive fall! It is a symbol of mankind's defiance!' protested Amaras. 'With respect, Chaplain—'

'Enough,' Yarrick said. 'Peace, Brother-Captain Amaras. Grimaldus speaks with wisdom.'

Grimaldus inclined his head towards the ancient hero in thanks.

'I will not be silenced by a mortal,' Amaras growled.

Like all puppies, thought Helbrecht, there is no real fight in him.

Yarrick stared the captain down, letting his patient glare linger on him before turning to the rest of the room. His augmetic eye whirred as it focused.

'Hades will not survive the first week.' He shook his head. The motion made his statement final, irrefutable. 'We must abandon the hive and spread the forces here to other bastions of strength. This is not the Second War. What is coming in-system now far exceeds what has laid waste to the planet before. The other

hives must be reinforced a thousand times over.’ He cleared his throat, a hoarse sound devoid of moisture, a cough rooted in the dry wastelands of life’s final years. ‘Hades Hive will burn. We must make our stand elsewhere.’

General Kurov, ostensibly in command of all Imperial forces on Armageddon, stepped forwards with a data-slate in hand. ‘We come to the division of command.’ He took a breath. ‘The fleet that will besiege Armageddon is too vast to repel.’

There were jeers. Helbrecht and his brothers remained silent.

‘Hear me, friends and brothers.’ Kurov sighed. ‘And hear me well. Those of you who insist that this war is anything more than a conflict of bitter attrition are deceiving yourselves. At current estimates, we have over fifty thousand Adeptus Astartes in the Armageddon subsector, and thirty times the number of Imperial Guardsmen. And it will still not be enough to secure a clean victory. At our best estimates, Battlefleet Armageddon, the orbital defences and the Adeptus Astartes fleets remaining in the void will be able to deny the enemy landing for nine days. These are our best estimates.’

‘And the worst?’ A Space Wolf asked. Helbrecht took in his furs, his totem-decked battleplate, and thought him a heathen.

‘Four days,’ the old man said through his grim smile.

Silence came that no one broke. Kurov seized the opportunity to continue without interruption. Helbrecht decided that he had more respect for Kurov and Yarrick than for many of his supposed brother Space Marines.

‘Admiral Parol of Battlefleet Armageddon has outlined his plan and uploaded it to the tactical network for all commanders to review. Once the orbital war is lost, be it four days or nine, our fleets will break from the planet in a fighting withdrawal. From then on, Armageddon will be defenceless beyond what is already entrenched upon the surface. The orks will be free to land whatever and wherever they wish. Admiral Parol will lead the remaining Naval ships of the fleet in repeated guerrilla strikes against the invaders’ vessels still in orbit.’

‘Who will lead the Adeptus Astartes vessels?’ Captain Amaras spoke up again.

Yarrick paused, and nodded at the Black Templars.

‘Given his seniority and the expertise of his Chapter, High Marshal Helbrecht of the Black Templars will take overall command of the Adeptus Astartes fleets,’ said Yarrick. The look of understanding that passed between himself and Helbrecht was not lost on some of the room’s other ambitious commanders.

Uproar ensued – some Space Marine leaders demanded that the honour be theirs. The others looked on with a mixture of disbelief and distaste to see

humanity's champions bickering.

'We are to remain in orbit?' Grimaldus asked.

Helbrecht ignored him. He kept his focus on Yarrick, his face as stony as always. Let no man accuse him of triumphalism in being awarded the singular honour of overall command. 'We are the obvious choice to command the Adeptus Astartes elements in the orbital battles.'

'The *Crusader* will plunge like a lance into the core of their fleet. High Marshal, we can slaughter the greenskin tyrant before he even sets foot on the world below us,' said Grimaldus, his voice fervent.

Now Helbrecht turned to Grimaldus.

'I have already spoken with the other marshals, my brother,' he said, pitching his voice low so that it was lost in the ongoing furore rippling around the room. 'We must leave a contingent on the surface. I will lead the orbital crusade. Amalrich and Ricard will lead the forces in the ash wastes. All that remains in a single crusade is to defend one of the hive cities that yet remains ungarrisoned by Adeptus Astartes.'

Grimaldus shook his head. Helbrecht wondered if he guessed what was coming. This would be hard for the Reclusiarch to bear. That is why it had to be done. 'That is not our duty, my liege. Both Amalrich and Ricard have a host of honours inscribed on their armour. Each has led greater crusades alone. Neither will relish an exile to a filthy manufactorum hive while a thousand of their brothers wage a glorious war in the heavens. You would shame them.'

'And yet,' said Helbrecht implacably, 'a commander must remain.'

Grimaldus's reaction did not surprise Helbrecht; nevertheless, it did disappoint him.

'Don't,' said the Reclusiarch. There was a plea in the voice of the Chaplain. Disappointing. 'Don't do this.'

'It is already done.'

'No, no!'

'This is not the time.' Helbrecht made especial effort to keep his voice level. His own fury responded to Grimaldus's. The Reclusiarch's reaction was unseemly, and demanded rebuke. 'The decision is made, Grimaldus. I know you, as I knew Mordred. You will not refuse.'

'No!'

The animated debate of nearby groups faltered. Helbrecht was acutely aware of commanders staring. To see differing Chapters argue was bad enough; dissension between two officers in the same brotherhood put them on edge.

Helbrecht said nothing. He needed to end this, and had no desire to provoke Grimaldus further.

‘I would burst the Great Beast’s black heart in my hand, and cast his blasphemous flagship to the surface of Armageddon wreathed in holy fire. Do not leave me here, Helbrecht. Do not deny me this glory!’

‘You will not refuse this honour,’ repeated Helbrecht. Grimaldus relented, and took a step back. The confrontation melted away as greater concerns took hold in the crowd, but Helbrecht was still aware of his Reclusiarch’s dissatisfaction.

Order was restored. Conversation turned to tactics. Grimaldus waited the barest amount of time that decorum demanded before walking away.

‘Wait, brother,’ said Helbrecht. He did not order, allowing Grimaldus to make his own choice. He willed the Reclusiarch to see sense, to not demean himself further.

Grimaldus left without another word.

Helbrecht watched him go, face fixed. Disappointing.

‘My liege—’ said Bayard.

Helbrecht cut off whatever the Champion was about to say. ‘Say nothing. Grimaldus will stay, Bayard. He will not dishonour us. He will emerge from this trial newly forged, or he will die gloriously. Either way, his actions will make this small tantrum of his appear as nothing. Now, attend to the discussion. We will speak no more of this today.’

The briefing lasted throughout the night, the final groups of generals only dispersing when Armageddon’s pallid sun pushed its rays through the choking air outside. Helbrecht and Bayard were among the last to leave, exiting the amphitheatre to an external walkway curling around a war-scarred starscraper. Already it was uncomfortably hot. Bayard and Helbrecht walked together towards the landing fields and Helbrecht’s Thunderhawk.

‘Such a man as Yarrick is a lesson to us all,’ said Helbrecht.

‘There is a light about him, brother.’

‘You can see it?’

‘Yes,’ said Bayard simply. Helbrecht did not press him on it. What the Emperor chose to reveal to his Champion was only for them to know.

They proceeded on several hundred more paces, their ceramite boots grinding the windblown ash dirtying the walkway into fine dust, both deep in solitary thought. A hundred kilometres of urban sprawl stretched away beneath them, the unrepaired damage of fifty years ago hazed by smog.

Bayard broke the silence. ‘When we landed, and we offered our services to General Kurov on the landing field, you spoke of nine hundred battle-brothers, and Amalrich and Ricard in orbit when they are not. Why?’

‘A necessary deception, brother.’

Bayard looked at the ground as they walked, idly flicking his targeting reticule from one skittering piece of grit to the next. ‘They hear the number, and it gives them hope?’ he ventured.

‘It does. But there is a more practical consideration than morale,’ said Helbrecht. ‘With nine hundred battle-brothers, we possess one of the largest Space Marine contingents in the system. With four hundred, we do not.’

‘And so another commander might think he has more legitimate claim to the admiralship of the combined Adeptus Astartes fleets.’

‘Just so,’ said Helbrecht. ‘Never forget, we are the chosen sons of the Emperor, Bayard. Of all the Adeptus Astartes, only we have ever seen fit to acknowledge the truth of the Emperor’s divinity – no Chapter but we of the Adeptus Astartes has ever done this. The others are fools to deny our lord as a god. They take no notice that our faith is rewarded, and that we are the Emperor’s right hand. It is fitting and just that I take command of the assembled fleets. Let the unbelievers wail and complain. They will follow me still, because they know in their hearts that I am the best choice for overall void commander, divinely appointed or not. And I am the Emperor’s elect, even if they do not care to admit it. What I told the commanders is not a falsehood. Amalrich and Ricard will be in orbit soon enough, and they shall rain down upon the orks as avenging angels. I have pledged nine hundred of our brothers to this war. Nine hundred Black Templars are what the defenders of Armageddon will receive. I keep my oaths.’

‘Meanwhile, Grimaldus goes to Helsreach as our emissary.’

‘Yes. And as our promise. Let none say the Black Templars stint in blood. Parol has a viable plan. We will stay to aid him in delaying the ork invasion. When the fleet enacts its fighting withdrawal, we shall examine the situation, and depart for Fergax to fetch our brothers from there when occasion allows.’

‘I do not understand why you are telling me this, my liege.’

‘As the Emperor’s Champion, Bayard, you are a knight of the Inner Circle. You are entitled to know.’

‘What does it matter if I know or not? My visions grow stronger – they have outgrown my dreams to plague my waking moments. I am to die soon. This sharing of knowledge does neither of us any good.’

Helbrecht halted and placed his artificial hand upon Bayard's pauldron. 'Until you relinquish the black sword in death, brother, you are a lord of this Chapter. Do not abandon yourself to your fate so readily. You have much to give, and your death might lie years away. We all die, Bayard. Give what you can while you can. The Emperor chose you – that is why you stand in council with us. Bury your misgivings. Not only your hand but your words are guided by the greatest of powers, and they are heeded.'

'Yes, my lord.' Bayard fell silent.

'There is something else that troubles you, Champion?'

'You know your warriors well, my liege. I cannot hide my innermost thoughts from you.'

'Speak.'

'It is this. I know my fate, and although I do not wish to throw my life away, the wait for my life's...' He searched for the correct word. '...resolution is hard on me. I have this great honour at my side.' He gripped the hilt of the black sword swinging from its hanger on his belt. 'I would dearly love to use it. Grimaldus was right in that. Why must we wait? Defence, waiting... Neither have ever been our Chapter's way.'

'Champion Bayard, you will have your chance soon enough,' Helbrecht answered assuredly. Such confidence, such surety of purpose. Bayard admired him greatly, which is why he took what Helbrecht had to say next remarkably well. 'You are to remain behind with Reclusiarch Grimaldus and Forgemaster Jurisian.'

'My liege, I... I do not know what to say.'

'You do not know what I *expect* you to say,' corrected Helbrecht. 'Do you accept the honour without argument as you should, or protest your wish to remain at my side as Grimaldus did? I know which path you would find shameful. I know you of old, Bayard. The Chapter is everything to you. This is why the Emperor has blessed you. You will not disobey me. It is unthinkable to you even. But you do not like my decision.'

Bayard made no attempt to hide it. 'No, my liege. I do not.'

'You do not like it because you too do not wish to die in defence, when every fibre of our being rages for advance. And you do not like it because you dislike Grimaldus. You opposed his appointment. I care not for these petty feelings. He wrestles with the acceptance of a great legacy, and you see fault in him. He tests himself, Bayard – he is a cautious man as you rightly said and will not rashly hold himself to the measure of his antecedent, no matter that he is obviously

worthy. I tell you this – as surely as the Emperor commanded that I be High Marshal, Grimaldus is worthy of the burden placed upon his shoulders. His only flaw is that he is as yet unaware of his suitability. And yet you needle, you complain, you see his reticence as weakness. How does this befit the Champion of the Emperor, to doubt his greatest warrior-priest?’

Beneath his helm, Bayard’s face went pale. ‘I... I... My liege!’ he protested. ‘I had not the thought to disobey my lord,’ Bayard fell to his knees with a crash, his armour joints growling as it compensated for the unexpected movement. Bayard bowed his head.

‘Yes, you did. Grimaldus is conflicted, but his actions in there reflected poorly on us. You would not bring the same minor dishonour upon me.’ Helbrecht grasped Bayard’s arm and pulled him upright. ‘On your feet, Champion. You bear a black sword, second only in sacredness to the blade I wear. You are a chosen of the Emperor, a champion of the elect. Humility is not for the likes of us.’

Bayard stood.

‘I command you to go with Grimaldus, so go with him, my brother, with no ill will and with iron righteousness in your soul. Do so with no doubt in your heart, and with honour foremost in your mind. You carry the legacy of Sigismund himself in your right hand. Do not dishonour it. Do not dishonour *me*.’

‘Yes, my liege.’

Helbrecht held out his hand. Bayard bowed from the waist, took it in both his own and kissed the armoured fingers.

‘I return to the *Eternal Crusader*. May the Emperor bring you a worthy death, Champion Bayard. Do not sell yourself cheaply.’

They walked the remaining distance to the landing fields in quiet discussion of tactics and shared glories of the past, periods of silence more common than those of words.

When they reached the field, Helbrecht’s transport was preparing for the journey to low orbit, the building whine of its engines loud in the dawn. There Helbrecht left Bayard with a stern blessing.

‘Die well, Champion.’

Bayard let out a shaky breath. His destiny was set. As much as his impatience nipped at his heels, demanding he run fast towards his glorious end, now it was in motion he felt the electric touch of apprehension.

He watched Helbrecht depart, knowing that he would never see his lord again.



CHAPTER FIVE

FIRST ACTIONS

A day before the long-range battle with the orks was joined, Admiral Parol's battlegroup came in from the outer reaches of the system. His ship, the Apocalypse-class *His Will*, bore damage all over its hull. Others limped, trailing clouds of discharge from wounded engines. These were the halest, the more badly damaged having retreated to the Naval base at St Jowen's Dock which, other than a limited assault, the orks had thankfully bypassed in their rush to the system capital.

When the damage to *His Will* became apparent and news of the loss of its sister *Triumph* spread to the waiting fleet, the mood on the ships became sombre.

The orks came closer. When the largest of their craft resolved into diamond chips of light, the gathered Imperial fleet opened fire. Every vessel turned, bringing their powerful broadsides to bear. There were four great Imperial Navy battleships alone, all capable of reducing a continent to rubble. Their decks shook for hour after hour as they cast their shells at the approaching ork horde. Still they came on. For a day and a night the void twinkled with the light of a million false stars and miniature novae as the ork fleet flew into the opening Imperial bombardment.

And then, with disorienting suddenness, the ork ships were upon the fleet. For days they had been an imminent threat, and yet distant. Then an endless armada of scrap-cruisers and modified space hulks filled the void as far as the human eye could see. The actuality of their arrival hardened hearts and resolved wavering souls. There could be no retreat from this. Cowardice would avail a

man of nothing.

Hurling crude missiles before them, the ork fleet moved in to attack with all the subtlety of a landslide.

The Third War for Armageddon began in earnest.

‘Correct bombardment drift!’ bellowed Helbrecht. ‘Omega Marines vessel *Notoriety*, pull back. You are being pushed off course by discharge reaction and drifting forwards of your attack group. I repeat, pull back! Raptors attack wing gamma, hold steady!’ Helbrecht gave orders to the assembled might of a score of Chapters, their strike cruisers and battle-barges deferring to his judgement. The Imperial fleet was a wall, the orks a besieging horde of savages.

There were no tactics here, no manoeuvres. The Space Marine fleet far outnumbered Battlefleet Armageddon’s capital ships, but their craft were made for planetary assault and not best suited to ship warfare. Wave after wave of badly wrought ork cruisers came at them, casting a hail of missiles in front. Beyond, seven space hulks waited. The Space Marines were capable of laying down punishing salvos of fire, but their bombardment cannons lacked the precision of Navy guns.

Each hulk was followed by a trail of heavily armed asteroid fortresses, dragged on in the hulks’ gravitic wake, preventing attack to their rear. Parol’s early attempts to exploit this weakness had been comprehensively beaten back. Should the hulks have closed, they ran the risk of being annihilated by the battle-barges’ bombardment cannons; instead, their cruisers bore the brunt of the shelling, catching the rounds on their shields as they incessantly probed for weakness.

Strike cruisers cut back and forth as fast as they could in interdiction, intercepting breakaway squadrons of orkish craft getting too close to the world. All the while, the battle-barges’ guns spat fury at the invaders. Arranged in a giant box thousands of kilometres across, they made a fortress into which no ork vessel might come without being targeted by multiple Imperial ships. Initially, this proved successful, but Armageddon’s orbital defence network fared badly. Spread across the planet’s low orbits, it was being isolated and destroyed. One of the major forts was burning already. Another had ceased firing after three ork cruisers crash-landed into it, disgorging a horde of howling monsters. As they fell silent, the intensity of the Imperial bombardment slackened, and the orks drew closer to Armageddon.

‘We’ve another message from Armageddon High Anchor Station, my liege,’

reported a vox-officer. There were dozens like him, human servants of the Chapter arrayed in stepped banks at their consoles, outnumbered by servitors in the same ratio that they outnumbered the Adeptus Astartes. Their voices were a racket, a hundred competing, each one the carrier of urgent news.

‘Acknowledge request for aid, Armageddon High Anchor. Iron Champions Third Company inbound.’ Helbrecht looked to the line of hulks waiting in the distance. The *Eternal Crusader* shook as another Space Marine escort craft exploded into an expanding cloud of vaporised metal. ‘They wait. Why? What is the status of the ork hulks?’

‘No firing solutions on the hulks, my lord. They remain out of effective range of our lance batteries,’ said Shipmaster Baloster.

‘They are sacrificing their ships,’ said Helbrecht. ‘This mess they’re creating is a far more effective shield than any energy field. Inform me when debris saturation exceeds fifteen hundred tonnes per cubic kilometre.’

‘Yes, my liege,’ said Baloster.

‘My liege!’ A frantic shout from one of the operations desks was heard. Helbrecht leaned on the railing of his command dais to look at the serf who had spoken.

‘Battle-barge *Victus* is taking heavy damage, my liege,’ said a vox-serf.

Helbrecht took a data-slate from an attendant. The image of the Flesh Tearers flagship displayed upon it was so covered in damage indicator runes that the hull was obscured. ‘Tell them to fall back. Strike group Calisthenis, move around to escort them away.’

The *Eternal Crusader* shuddered as a barrage of orkish cannon rounds pounded against its side. A ship caught Helbrecht’s eye.

‘Which ship is that? There’s a vessel crossing their departure vector. Get me a clearer image! This damned display’s too crowded.’

His servants dutifully focused the main holograph on the ship he indicated. A wireframe ghost sailed through the air, blinking red. In the oculus display, a real-time true-pict showed the craft wallowing hopelessly out of formation. Trails of multicoloured plasmas leaked from its venting ports in a desperate attempt to forestall reactor death. A soapy flash marked the collapse of its last void shield, and fire bloomed all along its length as scrap missiles and gravity-weapon-hurled rocks battered at it hard.

‘Celestial Lions cruiser *Lavi*, my liege. It is about to be overwhelmed.’

‘Emperor, it’s going to fly right into the *Victus*!’ said Baloster.

‘Pull up! Pull up! *Lavi*, pull up!’ shouted Helbrecht. His orders were repeated a

dozen times by human and cyborg throats. A garbled message burred through in response, but no words could be teased from it.

They heard though, at least they heard. The Celestial Lions vessel fired all its manoeuvring jets; it turned painfully slowly, inching away from the *Victus*'s flight vector. Helbrecht clenched his bionic fist, praying they would make it, but their helmsman lost control. The engines pivoted up and over as the *Lavi* went into a slow tumble. *Victus* attempted evasive manoeuvres, itself still taking plenty of fire from ork cruisers sensing a kill. The *Victus* rolled ponderously to the side, but the *Lavi* was by now little better than a runaway and was on a direct collision course. The Celestial Lions ship slammed into the Flesh Tearers *Victus*, dragging its hull diagonally up across the battle-barge's long, battle-scarred neck.

The oculus display flash-burned images of destruction into their retinas as the bottom was torn out of the *Lavi*.

'Blood of the Saints! *Victus, Victus!* Chapter Master Seth, do you hear me? Do you hear me? Hail him!'

The two ships sailed past one another, trailing clouds of debris. The keel line of the *Lavi* was gone, its lower decks a tangled web of bent spars and curled plating.

An image of Gabriel Seth fizzed into existence at the corner of a holo display. 'I hear you, High Marshal. We still have power and engines, but *Victus* has been badly damaged. I am almost entirely without weapons.'

'Stand ready for escort, Chapter Master. Help is inbound. Get out of here.'

'Get aid to the *Lavi!* Now!' shouted a voice. Helbrecht turned his attention to see the ship fall into the gravitic trap of the world below, fire boiling out of its underside.

'Four hours to impact. They have an orbit, but it decays, my liege.'

'Augur team, see if anyone is alive. Calculate a rescue plan if possible. Every dead Space Marine is a small victory for the orks.'

His deck officers saluted. Nobody said anything about the three thousand mortal lives aboard the ship.

'Maintain bombardment,' Helbrecht ordered. 'They will run out of ships eventually. I want—'

A titanic detonation bloomed across the lower portion of the oculus, racing up the display until it consumed the room. The Chapter-serfs flinched; so bright was the representation, it seemed for a moment that the *Eternal Crusader* had taken a critical hit itself. Atomised metal and lives turned into a physical blow blasting

outwards into the fleet. The *Eternal Crusader* rolled with the shockwave of the explosion, thrusters jetting as it fought to maintain position.

The babble of orders and reports across the command deck reached a frantic level.

‘The *Laudator*, my liege. The *Laudator* has been destroyed.’

A battle-barge of the Celebrants. An incalculable loss to the Imperium at large, and a disaster for Armageddon’s defence.

The *Laudator* had been with the *Victus*. Helbrecht ran searching eyes all over the displays. A ragged hole had opened up in the kill box. Immediately, several large, ugly ork ships started a run for the breach.

‘My lord! Long range augur sensors show multiple power signatures on the hulks,’ reported Baloster.

‘They play their hand. They are coming. We shall make them pay in blood for every ork whose feet dirty Armageddon! Praise be!’ he roared.

‘Praise be!’ shouted his men.

All the while the space hulks drew closer.

The next six hours were a frantic blur of split-second decisions. Helbrecht kept up a steady stream of orders as the orks burst through the line. As much as they tried to maintain the wall of fire, with ork ships swarming all around them, the vessels of the Adeptus Astartes were soon fully occupied trying to keep themselves from being destroyed. At the end of those hours, the hulks of Warlord Ghazghkull’s invasion forced their way into Helbrecht’s formation.

With the cordon around the world broken in half a dozen places by the space hulks, small, swift landing ships hurried through while the hulks began a bombardment. Fusion bombs rained down from the battle-barges in return, slamming into the hulks. Where they scored hits, the rock and steel of the ork vessels became pockmarked by glowing craters. But the hulks were so vast, so heavily armoured and protected by energy fields and anti-ordnance fire that it did little good.

Under the hulks’ protection, the orks’ rustships pierced the diffuse layers of the outer atmosphere, hulls glowing as they descended. Imperial ships pirouetted, delicately avoiding each other, trying to keep their guns trained on the landing craft, but there were too many to destroy. The High Marshal roared out his anger at them.

‘All Adeptus Astartes vessels! Concentrate all fire on the hulk designate *Woeful Desolation*. Naval strike wings, keep the battle-barges free of ork attack. We’ll take one of these abominations down before we retreat.’ A chorus of thirty

different Imperial dialects acknowledged him.

Servitors gabbled their sluggish alarms.

‘We’ve energy spikes from all over the hulks, my liege, unknown source or purpose,’ said an augur officer.

‘My liege, we have reports of orks landing all over the surface,’ said another.

‘How is that possible? None of their ships have made landfall. Teleportation? It is said they used such technology during the invasion of Piscina Four,’ said Helbrecht.

‘Aye, my lord. No ships, orks appearing out of nowhere,’ confirmed Baloster.

‘Concentrate fire! Destroy the *Woeful Desolation*!’

Helbrecht had chosen the hulk on a whim. All were bespoke creations, no recognisable class. Their capabilities and intended purpose were unknown. Some were bewildering mishmashes of rock and derelicts – true, warp-forged space hulks adapted by the orks. Others appeared to have been constructed, while two were giant asteroids festooned with ramshackle towers and thrusters. *Woeful Desolation* paid richly for the actions of its fellows. The rain of fusion bombs slamming into it overwhelmed the hulk’s crackling green energy fields. As they impacted on its void-worn surface, the outer layers were turned to ruddy slag. Still it persisted, until one of the lava bombs broke through into some vital internal space. With a tremendous heave, its back broke, scattering rubble and metal all across Armageddon’s upper orbits, troubling already damaged ships and knocking void shields down across a swathe of Helbrecht’s fleet.

A cheer went up on the command deck. ‘Praise be!’ the serfs and brothers of the Black Templars shouted. ‘Praise be!’

Helbrecht did not join their cheers; his attention remained on the bewildering dance of hundreds of ships across the command deck displays.

The Imperial fleet was in a poor position. The orks had effectively dismantled its formation. Many of the attackers died, but so close to the planet, that the ships the massed Space Marines fleet shot down were as much a hazard as those they didn’t. The downed craft became missiles, spearing towards the planet bearing the promise of destruction as surely as if they had still been packed with living orks.

‘My liege, you should take a look at this,’ Baloster called, drawing Helbrecht’s attention to a section of the screen, which he duly magnified.

Helbrecht watched on the oculus as an asteroid was catapulted from an aperture at the front of a hulk they had dubbed the *Malevolent Dread*. The asteroid, vaster than an island, tumbled with deceptive slowness towards the

world below. It skipped across the surface of the world's blanket of air, glowing hotter as friction did its work. On its second orbit, it was dragged down into the haze beneath. The impact came twelve minutes later. The plume of superheated vapour it threw out reached all the way into the upper atmosphere, the blast front racing out across the wastelands of Armageddon at supersonic speed, destroying everything in its way.

'Hades Hive has been destroyed, my liege,' said Baloster.

'As Yarrick predicted,' said Helbrecht dispassionately.

And then the *Malevolent Dread* turned its guns upon the *Eternal Crusader*. Crude cannons wheeled out of irregular apertures all along the thing's ugly spine. Welded artlessly together from two massive ships, one alien of unknown origin, the other ancient Imperial, the *Malevolent Dread* was a graceless chimera of a ship, but deadly.

Blasts of green lightning hurled themselves across space, writhing all over the *Eternal Crusader's* shields. They flared brighter and brighter, struggling to shrug off the actinic energy wracking them.

With a tortured groan, the shields collapsed. The *Eternal Crusader* was wide open to attacks from all quarters, and they came. As if the Black Templars flagship had been identified as key to the Imperial defence, a hundred ork attack craft assailed it simultaneously.

The ship rumbled under the assault.

'Get the shields up!' ordered Helbrecht. He came to a decision. 'Hail Admiral Parol. Prepare for retreat.'

Parol's voice sounded out over the command deck, vying with the noise of the *Eternal Crusader* at war.

'High Marshal,' said Parol. He was harassed, but the steel in him shone through. His manner suggested that Helbrecht make this quick.

'They are too many – we are too many, admiral. We're getting in each other's way. Your ships are too few for this fight, and our ships are certainly not intended for this kind of warfare. We must pull back, and engage them from a distance – let us see if we can convince a few of the orks to follow us and break up their attack.'

'Agreed,' said Parol. 'We have had some success harrying the advance, but we cannot sustain this level of attrition. The war must be fought on the surface, for now.'

Parol signed off.

'Signal Grimaldus,' said Helbrecht. Down there, it was the calm before the

storm. In minutes, that calm would be swept away.

‘I can’t raise him, my liege.’

‘Then take this message, and send it into the vox-network.’ Helbrecht began, pitching his voice so that it cut through the racket of bombardment. ‘Helsreach, this is *Crusader*. We are breaking from the planet. The orbital war is lost.’ A weapons platform burst apart in a briefly lived orange fireball, the shockwave causing the ship to rumble and punctuating Helbrecht’s speech with its destruction. ‘Repeat, the orbital war is lost. Grimaldus... Once you hear these words, stand ready. You are Mordred’s heir, and my trust rides with you. Hell is coming, brother. The Great Beast’s fleet is without number, but faith and fury will see your duty done.’

‘Grimaldus, die well.’

Helbrecht took a deep breath. ‘Message ends. All ships retreat, all ships retreat! Break from orbit. We will return when the odds favour us better.’

The *Eternal Crusader*’s engines howled in protest as the ship’s pilots brought it about and pointed its ornate prow away from Armageddon. Firing all the way, the warship departed, the battered fleets of a dozen Space Marine Chapters flying after.

Three days later, the fleets of the Imperium gathered in orbit of Armageddon’s primary gas giant to regroup. Fleet tenders from St Jowen’s Dock dodged ork blockades to bring ammunition, supplies and crew. All over the fleet, repair tugs and service vehicles flew to and fro, the brittle electric sparks of Adeptus Mechanicus and Imperial Navy repair crews twinkling upon damaged hulls.

His Will was moored alongside the *Eternal Crusader*. Within the High Marshal’s quarters, Admiral Parol took counsel with Helbrecht.

Parol was a slender man, thin-faced with an aquiline nose underlined by a pencil moustache. He had a cynical kind of expression, not helped by his features being twisted out of shape by his shipmaster’s ocular augmetics and interface. He was shrewish on occasion, but shrewd, and respected because of that.

He disliked dealing with the Adeptus Astartes on their own ground; everything was too damned big. Trying and failing to get comfortable in their ludicrous furniture while they towered over him made him feel like a child, dragged before the Magna Domina for some schoolboy transgression at the schola navitas.

There was something nightmarish about it all. Aboard his ship, surrounded by his officers and with a spread of the Navy’s greatest vessels at his beck and call,

Parol felt not invincible, because that kind of thinking got a voidsman dead very quickly, but *potent*. In the chambers of this giant, he felt robbed of all his power. That the High Marshal was completely devoid of expression did not help. Space Marines could be difficult to read at the best of times; beyond fervour and aggression, their emotional range was so limited. Helbrecht was worse than most. His face showed nothing of his feelings. Even though his gruff voice rumbled words heavy with respect for Parol, it somehow made no difference. The admiral couldn't help the feeling that he was being reprimanded.

I'm the second son of an Imperial commander, he reminded himself. My father ran a Blessed-Throne *planet*. I've a million men under my command.

He still couldn't shake the feeling.

'You're a fine admiral, Parol,' Helbrecht was saying. 'I know what you achieved at Pelucidar. This isolation and destruction of the first ork hulks is very fine voidsmanship. And approaching assault group Gamma 14 with your engines cut to avoid detection was an admirably intelligent move.'

'My thanks to you, Lord High Marshal,' said Parol, shifting uncomfortably in his oversized chair. The goblet was a bucket in his hand, enough wine sloshing in its bowl to render every one of his command deck crew insensible, he reckoned. 'The orks have their beachheads on Armageddon Prime. They are gathered about Armageddon in too great a force. There is nothing we can do about that, but we can disrupt their supply and reinforcement, and destroy the unwary. Once the Season of Fire begins, they will be unable to land at all. It is my contention that they will become bored and a portion of the fleet will move away from Armageddon towards other targets. Once the fleet breaks up, they will be vulnerable.'

'Are you certain of this?' asked Helbrecht. Not so much a question as a test of Parol's knowledge, the admiral felt.

'Of course. Not even the Great Beast can constrain the greenskins' lust for violence. We can use this to our advantage.'

'Agreed,' said Helbrecht. 'Your battlefleet should continue with its current strategy of seek and destroy. We Adeptus Astartes will switch tactics as of now, however.'

Parol leaned forwards to put his giant drink on the table. He slipped on the edge of Helbrecht's chair, and was forced to brace himself clumsily with his foot. Not only was the chair too big for him, it was extremely hard. He gave up and stood. Even then, the sitting Helbrecht's eyeline fell only a short way below Parol's own. Parol drew himself up in an unconscious attempt to appear larger,

caught himself doing it, and felt ridiculous.

‘You are speaking of boarding actions, I presume. That is more to your liking. The Black Templars, the other Chapters... Direct assault.’

Helbrecht nodded. ‘More of our brother Chapters are inbound from the rest of the sector. Ork presence is lighter outside of the Armageddon System proper than feared. I have a number of astropathic messages promising aid. I will transmit them to the Adeptus Astartes fleet.’

‘These men would be better on the surface, surely...’ said Parol, waving his hand as a conclusion to his trailing sentence.

‘Exactly my thinking, admiral. The Adeptus Astartes will best serve the Emperor on the surface. I have spoken with many others of my brothers from other Chapters, including Chapter Master Tu’Shan of the Salamanders. Several of them wish to make orbital insertion to bolster the defences. We have more than enough warriors to defend our fleet and make sorties against the enemy hulks.’

‘I understand,’ said Parol. ‘How many ships will need to approach?’

‘In total, perhaps twenty. I estimate we will have gathered approximately thirteen companies of Adeptus Astartes, according to Guilliman’s codex.’ Helbrecht managed to make this sound like an insult; his kind had never had much time for the strictures of the Ultramarines primarch. ‘A deployment of fifty-eight Thunderhawks, eighty-nine drop pods – mass deployment is to be recommended.’

‘Naturally.’

‘The Salamanders have a large contingent currently aboard the *Serpentine*. There are many others. We should rely on speed. I have advised my brothers to remove their men to their strike cruisers and leave their barges behind. This will be a blockade run, nothing more. We cannot risk being mired in orbit again.’

Parol twisted his hands into one another behind his back and looked out to the assembled fleet. Not a single ship was free of damage. ‘Another approach to Armageddon itself. This is a somewhat inadvisable course of action.’

‘It cannot be done any other way, lord admiral.’

‘I am aware of that, Lord High Marshal,’ said Parol, struggling to keep the waspish tone from his voice. ‘But it is nevertheless a difficult proposition.’

‘But not impossible.’

‘Indeed, no.’ Parol looked around the room in curiosity, a moment of distraction. Not thinking about the war only for that instant, he felt how immensely tired he was. Exhaustion was like a heavy cape sodden with rain

dragging at his shoulders.

Helbrecht was not done. ‘There is more, admiral. Once the orbital insertion is complete, I will depart for a short time on business of my own.’

That got Parol’s attention. He turned quickly on his heels to look at Helbrecht. ‘What? What did you say?’

The High Marshal remained expressionless. ‘Marshals Amalrich and Ricard are travelling to our Chapter keep at Fergax. I am to go to them to form a grand congregation of my Chapter.’

‘And why can they not come here to you?’

‘Because I have an idea, admiral. One that will better serve our efforts than ordering them into the system piecemeal.’

‘The other Space Marines will not unify behind another commander.’

Helbrecht shook his head. ‘They will. You.’

‘If that were the case I would be delighted, High Marshal,’ said Parol. ‘But I doubt it. There is bound to be disunity. If I were a betting man, and I am from time to time, that’s a wager I would gladly take.’

‘Yes,’ conceded Helbrecht. ‘You are correct, but it will play a part in my plan. I have ordered the Adeptus Astartes fleet to disperse anyway, to undertake hit and run and boarding actions separate from the combined fleet. Let them fight as Chapter units for a while. This should encourage the orks to fragment, and draw a portion of them away before the Season of Fire begins. I will not be gone long. I aim to return before the commencement of the Season of Shadows.’

‘Very well,’ sighed Parol. ‘Emperor knows, High Marshal Helbrecht, you are a skilled fleetmaster and a renowned warrior. I am sure you have your reasons. You will share them, I hope?’

‘Yes,’ said Helbrecht, in a way that quite definitely did not mean ‘of course’.

‘Good. What should be our next move? These boarding actions you mention, Lord High Marshal. Let us coordinate the first of those.’

Helbrecht gave Parol an unreadable look. ‘One thing at a time, admiral.’



CHAPTER SIX

A GATHERING OF BROTHERS

Fergax turned peacefully beneath the ventral weapon mounts of the *Eternal Crusader*, green and ignorant of the endless wars wracking the heavens. A feral world, innocent in spirit, some might think. The people there lived hard but simple lives, their greatest contribution to the Imperium being a supply of recruits for the Black Templars crusades. The world hosted a Chapter keep; aside from that, the Emperor and all his doings were myths to its inhabitants.

The Chapter anchor at Fergax played host to more brothers of the order than had been gathered simultaneously for two thousand years. The aged castellan, a Space Marine too damaged to fight further, had been extremely relieved when Helbrecht informed him that the Black Templars would not be descending to the surface en masse, but would remain in orbit.

Above the backwater world, more ships had joined the Black Templars fleet: the cruiser *Virtue of Kings*, commanded by Marshal Amalrich of the Damaris Crusade, and the battle-barge *Light of Purity*, lead vessel of the Tiberor Crusade under Ricard. Five more escorts came with them to bolster Helbrecht's destroyer and light cruiser squadrons. Three combined crusades of the Black Templars were, by any measure, a powerful force.

Helbrecht greeted his marshals in person as they arrived on one of the *Eternal Crusader's* cavernous embarkation decks. Amalrich landed as Helbrecht, Theoderic and their entourage of honour guard, sergeant-serfs and mortal priests arrived at the deck. Amalrich's Thunderhawk was as black as interstellar space, its hard angles brightened by the marshal's personal heraldry.

Amalrich, the younger of the two, strode down the gangplank. Four Sword Brethren of humourless demeanour and a dozen shield-serfs came after him. All looked as if doomsday was upon them, except the marshal himself, who wore a broad smile. He took Helbrecht's armoured forearm in the warrior's grasp.

'Brother Helbrecht! Master of Sanctity Theoderic. How goes the war at Armageddon?'

'Badly,' said Helbrecht.

Amalrich pulled a concerned expression tinged with disbelief.

'I had heard you had destroyed three hulks through boarding actions alone, my liege.'

'I have,' said Helbrecht. 'It is not enough.'

Honking klaxons announced the arrival of Ricard. A serf officer's warnings echoed over the landed craft arrayed neatly down the length of the deck, the tail end of his orders lost to the scream of engines as Ricard's Thunderhawk blasted from the launch tubes. Armsmen, deck-serfs and forge thralls marched to their positions, ready to welcome the machine-spirit of the ship. With a wash of acrid exhaust, the ship came to a gentle hover and landed with the clanking of spreading landing claws.

'I have news, brother!' shouted Amalrich over the roar of Ricard's ship. 'A Champion has arisen.'

'Truly?' shouted Helbrecht, although he had no reason to doubt his commander. His reticence came from what the news betokened. His thoughts went to Grimaldus at Helsreach.

'Yes, my liege! Yes! We have removed our black sword from its stasis field, and begun the rituals of sanctity,' said Amalrich. Pride was on him like raiment; it was honour for a Champion to arise in his crusade.

'I left Brother-Champion Bayard upon Armageddon at Reclusiarch Grimaldus's side,' said Helbrecht.

The Thunderhawk's engines cycled down to tolerable levels. Amalrich's voice lost some of his pleasure along with its volume. 'You have not heard, then, that he has fallen?'

'We are fresh from the warp, and have received no message.'

'I am sorry, my liege. I had not realised that a Champion had arisen in your crusade. This is as bad news as it is good.'

Sorrow engulfed Helbrecht, but he allowed none to show. 'It is joyous. One falls, another arises to feel the divine grace of the Emperor. Praise be.'

'Praise be, brother.'

Announced by the clamour of docking rituals and hymns of welcome, the second Thunderhawk's assault ramp hissed open, disgorging Marshal Ricard and his Sword Brethren. All were shaven headed and sported moustaches. White cloaks lined with red swept around their feet.

'Ricard!' said Amalrich, with plain delight.

Ricard was between the ages of Helbrecht and Amalrich in years, and similarly disposed in humour: not as grim as his lord, and not as cheery as his peer.

'It is good to see you all. Brother Helbrecht.' Ricard bowed his head and took Helbrecht's hands in one of his own. 'I am pleased my choice was backed by the others. You will be a fine High Marshal.'

'We shall see,' said Helbrecht. He had no desire to go into the debacle of the Ghoul Stars Crusade.

'Master of Sanctity,' Ricard said to Theoderic. 'Might I beg the indulgence of your blessing before we depart?'

'You may, marshal. The Emperor will show you his favour.'

Ricard bowed.

'I was informing the High Marshal of the advent of our Champion,' said Amalrich.

'It is a boy who has heard the Emperor's call, I understand,' said Ricard.

'Vosper is his name, my liege,' explained Amalrich to Helbrecht. 'He is young, a neophyte, but close to finishing his training. The visions came upon him three nights ago, and grow in strength. He is a worthy Champion, my liege.'

'Then Bayard is dead,' said Ricard. 'I am sorry, my liege. We lose a fine brother.'

'He is certain to have died a hero's death. May the Emperor shield his soul,' said Theoderic.

'Praise be,' they all murmured, and shared a moment of silence.

Helbrecht rubbed at his chin, the brass of his bionic hand rasping against his stubble. 'Does the boy...'

'Vosper, my liege.'

'Does Brother Vosper know what this means?'

'Yes, my liege,' said the marshal. 'He has undergone initiation into the third mysteries.'

'And he knows no fear?'

'None, my lord. He is among our most promising neophytes. He shows only faith, and a desire to die for the Emperor.'

‘Chaplain Theoderic, this coming of a second Champion so soon after the demise of the first is unusual. And in one so young. What do you make of it?’

Theoderic made a fist, and contemplated the skull-adorned knuckles of his gauntlet a moment, as if the answers were hiding in their empty eye sockets.

‘It is highly unusual, my liege, but there is no reason why it should not be so. The Emperor works in mysterious ways. Now, at this dark hour, he comes to our aid directly. The youthfulness of this vessel, Vosper, is perhaps indicative of his purity. No matter his experience in war, the Emperor will fill him with his might. If Bayard is dead, it was meant to be. And we have a new Champion to return to Armageddon with. In my opinion, it is a sign that the Emperor is with us, my liege. Praise be.’

‘Praise be,’ the others responded. Automatically, without thought. The praising of the Lord of Mankind waited always on their tongues.

‘The visions have proven true, my liege,’ said Amalrich. ‘He has been tested by my crusade’s Chaplains. He has undergone all the trials.’

Helbrecht looked at Theoderic.

‘Dagal and Leofald, my liege. The Chaplains of Amalrich’s crusade.’

Helbrecht nodded in recognition. ‘Good priests. I am sure they have been thorough, but we must be certain. Amalrich, have the Master of Sanctity examine this Brother Vosper.’

‘At once, my liege,’ said Amalrich, beckoning for his shield-serfs, telling them to relay orders to the *Virtue of Kings* to make the neophyte ready.

‘What of our crusades, High Marshal?’ asked Ricard.

‘They are done. If circumstances permit, you will be despatched to bring them to successful conclusion once the war for Armageddon is at an end.’

‘The banners then?’

‘Keep them with all honour. Your crusades are suspended, not dissolved.’

Ricard and Amalrich bowed. ‘Thank you, my liege,’ said Ricard.

‘I am sure the vorteth will appreciate the rest,’ said Amalrich. ‘Let them feel safe in their burrows for a few years more – their extermination will be all the sweeter for their reprieve.’

‘Well said, Amalrich,’ said Ricard.

‘I will go at once, by your leave, my liege,’ said Theoderic.

Helbrecht gave his assent.

‘You may use my ship as your own, Chaplain,’ said Amalrich. ‘Our business will keep me here a while, I am guessing.’

‘Emperor bless and keep you, brother.’

Theoderic left, the Thunderhawk switching immediately to takeoff protocols.

‘So then,’ said Amalrich to Helbrecht, his friend and master, ‘tell us of this ork who would foolishly defy the God-Emperor of Mankind.’

‘He is no fool,’ said Helbrecht.

For three days the marshals conferred with one another while fresh neophytes were gathered from the Chapter keep’s training priories on Fergax. Eighty-four were judged ready for ascension. Meanwhile, in the holiest places of the *Virtue of Kings*, Theoderic questioned the young Space Marine Vosper. On the fourth day, he returned with joyous news.

Neophyte Vosper entered the Chamber of Sigismund with wonder and trepidation writ plainly on his face. He tried manfully to keep to the prescribed walk of entrance – small steps were required from one as junior as he. Head bowed, he made slow progress forwards, in time to the chanting of the Chapter’s thrall-monks, but he couldn’t help himself from glancing at the ostentation surrounding him, so different to the training decks. Three dozen Sword Brethren from three crusades lined the way to Helbrecht’s throne, their armour highly ornate, chased with gold and platinum, the darkness of the plate enlivened by the bright colour bursts of their own heraldry. A crowd of the Chapter’s best – Adeptus Astartes and unmodified human servants – waited for him. Representatives of every branch of their order, including one of the Chapter Ancients entombed in a hulking suit of Dreadnought armour. The Praeses-Sword Brother who stood next to his lord’s throne bore a massive sword in its scabbard, wrapped all about with ribbons and oath-papers.

Still young, Vosper was already fearless, but awe made itself known to him then.

Helbrecht stood up from his throne as Vosper reached the foot of his dais. All those present made the Templars sign, crossing their forearms in front of themselves. The sudden clash of metal on metal was startling. Vosper dropped to his knees, his supplicant’s robes pooling around him.

Helbrecht spoke, and his voice was by far the most overwhelming thing Vosper had ever heard, although the High Marshal wore no helmet to amplify his words and spoke no louder than a man in conversation. ‘We welcome you to the Inner Circle, brother of the Black Templars, son of Rogal Dorn, successor of Sigismund. What you see and hear within this chamber shall be repeated to none outside these walls. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, my liege.’

‘Then be at ease, Brother Vosper.’

Vosper remained kneeling.

‘You may stand, brother,’ said Theoderic gently. ‘You are a member of the Inner Circle now.’

Vosper did as he was told, his wondering gaze switching from one grim warrior to the next, each resplendent in their robes and heavily ornamented battleplate. ‘You call me brother, but I... I am a neophyte, my lord.’

‘Are you suggesting that the High Marshal is mistaken?’ said Ricard.

‘No, no! Forgive me, my lords.’

‘We are all equals within this precinct, Brother Vosper,’ said Helbrecht. ‘You may refer to all here simply as brother, except I. Have you completed your training?’

‘Nearly, my liege. I have undergone the final implantation. I await only my Knight’s Confirmation.’

‘Who is your master, squire?’

‘Brother Galbus, my liege.’

‘Tell him that you have your confirmation.’

‘From you, my liege?’ Vosper’s face lit up. He dropped to one knee. ‘Thank you, lord! Confirmation from you is a great honour.’

Helbrecht shook his head. ‘No.’ His face remained stern. The neophyte looked up, concerned. ‘Confirmation does not come from me.’

‘My liege? I do not understand.’

‘You have been chosen by a higher authority. You have received the Champion’s blessing. Your Knight’s Confirmation comes from the Emperor himself, brother, not from one so lowly as I.’

Helbrecht bade him rise.

‘We pay homage to you,’ Helbrecht said. He took the man-high sword from Gulvein. It made a whispered scrape as he pulled it free. The blade was black, so black it took no reflection, appearing to consume what light dared fall upon it.

‘This is one of the ten black swords of the Black Templars,’ said Helbrecht. He pointed the sword’s tip at Vosper’s face. ‘It was forged of black solarite in ages past. Few have the honour of bearing one, and none for long. It is now yours, if you will take it. Do you accept this role given to you by the Emperor of Mankind, Brother Vosper? Will you take up the black sword and this great boon, and wield it in the service of our lord, in the furtherance of His Great Crusade to purge the stars? Or do you refuse this honour, and will henceforth be stripped of all title, and driven forth, and hunted until slain? The choice is yours.’

‘I accept, my liege, although I am not worthy.’

‘You put aside the right to judge your own worth the moment you were chosen to join the Chapter,’ said Theoderic. ‘The Emperor has deemed you fit, and you have no authority to question Him.’

Helbrecht saluted Vosper with the sword, and then, taking the blade in his hand, reversed it and handed the hilt to Vosper, who took it in his hand, his face alight. Theoderic stepped forwards to clasp the lanyard bracelet about the neophyte’s wrist, and locked it in place.

‘Let this blade now never fall from your grasp,’ said the Chaplain. ‘I name you the Emperor’s Champion,’ he said.

‘Emperor’s Champion,’ the others echoed.

‘You are the chosen of the Emperor, and worthy of a good death,’ said Theoderic. ‘We envy and honour you. For our envy, we shall do penance. For the honour of fighting by your side, we will be proud. Praise be.’

‘Praise be!’ the others shouted.

‘You will be taken from this place to a place of arming,’ commanded Helbrecht. ‘You will be equipped in the Sanctis Sanctorum aboard the *Eternal Crusader*. Bring to him the armour of the Champion. Bless him well. When armed and blessed, you will await in prayer within the Temple of Dorn, sainted son of the Emperor. There you will remain until a sign is given unto thee. This you shall reveal only to Master of Sanctity Theoderic. The revelation shall be our signal to go to war.’

‘War! War! War!’ the Inner Circle shouted. ‘Praise be! Praise be! *Praise be!*’

The *Eternal Crusader* was vast. Far bigger than most battle-barges, it dated from a time when a force of Space Marines numbered in the tens of thousands, not mere hundreds. The Black Templars Chapter was slightly larger than most, but even they all gathered together would barely tax the capabilities of the vessel. With the mere two hundred brothers of Helbrecht’s Void Crusade aboard, just under a fifth of the Black Templars total strength, a large portion of Sigismund’s ship was empty. Two of the five embarkation decks were mothballed, their maintenance status one of barest renewal. Many hangars were seldom used. Practice halls, gymnasias, barracks and armouries were devoid of life. Several decks were rarely visited; one was sealed off and airless. Only servitor constructs roamed these sepulchral spaces, checking endlessly for decay and reporting malfunctions back to the forge.

To reach the Navigator’s palace, Helbrecht had to traverse the most eerie of all

the *Eternal Crusader's* quiet places. He must pass through the librarium.

There were no Librarians in the Black Templars Chapter. How long this had been so had been lost to the turning of millennia, for without the expertise of the librarium, the Chapter's records had inevitably fallen into decay.

Helbrecht and his honour guard went into a baroque tunnel that ran along the spine of the vessel, some decks above the main thoroughfare. The towers of the librarium opened up off either side. Up here the ship's breath was more apparent: the creaking moans and sudden, sharp shrieks of metal shifting under stress. Distant systems grumbled or whooped. Clatters sounded from unguessed places. Here, so close to the soundless void, the ship seemed noisier than elsewhere, as if its machine-spirit sought to drown out the silence with its own voice.

The librarium surrounded the access corridor and intensified this sensation. The blast doors into its towers and the deep-thrusting catacombs beneath were welded shut and covered over with hundreds of purity seals. They bore the mark of every Chaplain and High Marshal the Chapter had produced. Some were so old that the parchment had crumbled to dust, the wax cracked away. No cleaning drones came this way, and the trails of previous visitors to the Navigator's palace were faint marks in the dirt.

Helbrecht came here infrequently. Ordinarily, when a meeting was called for, Jushol went forth from his palace by ways known only to himself, but what Helbrecht would ask his Navigator demanded the proper protocols. He must be visited at home.

He recognised his own seal on a door, fresh looking and still bright red amid the crumbling remnants of his predecessors, a mere eight years old. What lay beyond the doors none now knew. The psychic traces of the Librarians clung to the place, evident in the corridor outside their haunted bastions as a faint sense of unease.

Helbrecht and his men picked up their pace. Soon they left the sealed doors of the librarium behind them as the access way went into less-haunted areas of the ship, and before long they were at the principal entrance to the Navigator's palace, a pair of grand golden gates barring the way. The spinal corridor terminated here, and few might go beyond.

Before Helbrecht could announce himself, the golden doors of the palace creaked inwards, pushed open by slack-mouthed servitors whose wheeled lower parts were set into tracks.

Inside was a world apart. By ancient treaty signed between the Black Templars and House Ju-Sha-Eng, the area beyond the portal was, technically, not part of

the *Eternal Crusader* at all, but sovereign house territory. Even Helbrecht could not enter without permission. A group of heavily altered combat thralls clumped forwards on hissing legs, their eyes far too alive for true servitors. They held weapons at the ready in metal hands. Shoulder-mounted meltaguns, bonded into their flesh, panned back and forth over the group of Space Marines. A phalanx of men wearing the exotic colours of House Ju-Sha-Eng formed up behind them, standing to attention, their laser carbines across their chests.

A female menial, her painted face scarified and neck extended upon a tower of brass rings, came forwards from the palace's atrium. She stopped at the threshold of the doors, the place where the domain of the Navigator ended and that of the Black Templars began. In her long service, she had never been beyond the boundary of the palace.

'Welcome to the domicile of Jushol Ju-Sha-Eng, Lord Helbrecht,' she said, revealing filed teeth inlaid with patterns of silver. 'I am House Mistress Talifera, pledge-bound to House Ju-Sha-Eng. I bid you welcome. The Lord Navigator is expecting you.'

Helbrecht had his honour guard wait outside, their inscrutable red helm lenses locking in uneasy stand-off with the visored eyes, augmetic and biologic, of the Navigator's household troops in.

The palace was a domain unto itself. The gravity here was lower, set to the preferences of Jushol's mutant physique. Although not one of the void-dwelling Navigator clans, he was nevertheless delicate, as many of his kind were.

The rear of the palace extended deep into the ship's spires, sealed off from the rest of the *Eternal Crusader* by multiple blast doors and thick armoured bulkheads. In splendid isolation, the Navigator, far too valuable to risk in battle, could wait out any conflict. But the front part of his domain stood proud of the mass behind it, and this was a tower covered over with a dome. From there he gazed into the warp. It was to here, to the pilot's scrying chamber, that Helbrecht was led.

Jushol Ju-Sha-Eng stood at the console by his throne, consulting with a tech-adept. Maintenance of the chamber was the responsibility of the Navigator's House, not the forge. Like the thralls in Jushol's employ, the adept would be bound to him. The Navigator Houses completed their own treaties with the Adeptus Mechanicus for such work.

Thralls, menials, servitors and the tech-adept bowed and withdrew as Helbrecht entered the chamber.

'My Lord Helbrecht,' spoke the Navigator. 'A welcome interruption to my

daily chores.’

‘I will keep this short, Lord Navigator Jushol of House Ju-Sha-Eng.’ Helbrecht spoke humbly. He bowed his head and held out a scroll tied with a black ribbon. ‘I come with a petition.’

Jushol took the scroll in a spindly hand without looking at it. His human eyes did not leave Helbrecht’s face for ten long seconds. Under an embroidered scarf wrapped around his brow, his third eye twitched, as if searching for something beyond the blindfold. Then he unrolled and read the request.

Over the scrying chamber was the Acies Horrens, a dome of toughened armourglass reinforced with adamantium rods and threaded with veins of psy-active crystal. Thousands of charms, seals and other holy, esoteric wards were placed upon its muntins.

Nevertheless, although they were in real space, the great bipartite shutters were closed, only to be opened when necessity demanded and the Navigator must guide the ship through the warp. Helbrecht was an Adeptus Astartes, biogenetically crafted to feel no fear, and yet he was glad the Acies shutters were closed. What that window revealed was unholy, not for men to see, not even men like him.

Jushol rolled the parchment tight and clutched it. ‘Refreshments, High Marshal?’

Female menials came to them, bodies as cosmetically modified as the house mistress’s. Helbrecht supposed they represented some bizarre beauty aesthetic; Jushol certainly looked upon them favourably, his face lighting up with some emotion alien to the High Marshal. The women said nothing to him, other than to pay the proper respect. Their whispering robes were their only voices as they silently gave out sweetmeats and wine. Helbrecht sipped it; it was like no vintage he had ever tasted, born of unfamiliar fruit.

Jushol took his own goblet, his long fingers wrapping delicately around it, too long for a human hand.

‘Soon I must leave the *Eternal Crusader* and return to Terra. My time of bonding approaches. I have license from the Paternova, and the match chosen by my family is propitious. When this is done, I will fly no more. Other duties call.’ What *other duties* were he did not elaborate, and Helbrecht did not ask. The byzantine power struggles of the Navis Nobilite were not his concern.

‘We will miss you, Lord Navigator,’ said Helbrecht. ‘You have proven yourself invaluable to the *Eternal Crusader*.’

‘It is a venerable vessel. It has been my great honour to serve aboard it.’ He

looked around the ornamented dome, mixed feelings on his elongated face.

‘You see the light of the Emperor every day – you are truly blessed. Surely you will miss the light of the Astronomican?’

‘If you saw what I saw, my lord, you would not think me blessed at all. But yes, in answer to your question, I will miss it. I will never be blind to the light.’ He tapped the cloth band about his forehead over his third eye. ‘This is the eye that never sleeps. But to guide a starship such as this through the immaterium? I will miss that.’

‘Then this will be my last petition to you, Lord Navigator.’ Helbrecht gestured towards the scroll. ‘Can you do it?’

‘Jumping into a system within the safe zone of the Mandeville point is not to be advised. Jumping into the midst of a battle... Well, my lord, that is practically suicide, although our gravitic death-wave might well win you the battle. Posthumously, that is.’

Helbrecht glowered. ‘Suicide for some, perhaps, Lord Navigator, but our Chapter is guided by the hand of the Emperor himself. Did we not cross the stars to Armageddon with great speed? Was the journey to Fergax not shortened by His intervention? By the same means, we will emerge unscathed and bring his fury down upon our enemy.’

Jushol shrugged equivocally. ‘Perhaps.’

‘So, can you do it?’

Jushol’s eyes slid closed, the movements of his warp eye visible through its silk blindfold like the embryo of a shark twitching in its pouch. ‘Yes, yes, my lord, I can. What you suggest is a great risk.’ Jushol essayed a smile, tight on his parchment skin. ‘But I relish the chance at one last challenge. I will speak with the others of my House within your fleet, but they will not refuse. Where I go, they are pledged to follow. I will gladly do as you ask. When?’

‘When the Emperor commands it,’ said Helbrecht.

Admiral Parol paced the bridge of *His Will*. He was exhausted by months of warfare, but could not rest. And so, between the endless engagements with the ork fleets, the hit-and-run battles, the ambushes and kill-missions, he walked his command deck until he could walk no more.

‘Sir, I have an astropathic response from High Marshal Helbrecht. He has emerged from the warp at Fergax, and has been joined by an additional five hundred members of his Chapter.’

Parol walked around the rows of his bridge officers to the astropathic liaison’s

desk. He leaned in close to the cogitator screen where the astropath's report scrolled jerkily downwards in an eye-watering green.

'He's been gone a month. That is good news. Does he give notice of when he might return to Armageddon?'

'Yes, sir,' said the officer hesitantly.

'And? And? Go on.'

'It says they are waiting for a sign.'

'A sign?' said Parol.

'From the Emperor.'

'Obviously from the Emperor, lieutenant. Who else?' said Parol shortly. The news had agitated him. He wanted Helbrecht back, and soon. 'I doubt they are hanging on the word of your mother.'

'Sorry, sir.'

'Well then.' Parol stood straight again.

'Sir,' said the lieutenant. He was a career officer from a good family, but as one that couldn't stop his mouth opening half the time, he wasn't likely to rise far. If he lived.

'Yes, lieutenant?'

The officer winced, too late now. 'I always thought the Adeptus Astartes were a little less, well, devout than most of us. I heard that they do not worship the Emperor at all.'

Parol gave the officer a look that left the man wondering whether he'd still have his post come the morning. 'These ones, lieutenant,' he leaned in close, conspiratorially, and hissed, 'are a little bit different.'

The admiral continued his slow swaggering stride along the ranks of his officers' stations. 'Keep me apprised, lieutenant. I wish to know that they have set out the moment they send word.'

'Yes, sir.'

'In the meantime,' Parol continued, addressing the command deck at large, 'I am going to my quarters for four hours. I suggest you find a realistic target for *His Will* to destroy by the time I awake. This war will not win itself.'

'Yes, lord admiral,' they chorused.

'Very good,' he said. 'Carry on.'

Parol went to his quarters, wishing as he reached them that he could afford just a little more time to sleep. He lay in his bed for two hours, his head whirling with strategic possibilities, before his exhaustion took him.



CHAPTER SEVEN

RETURN TO ARMAGEDDON

‘Concentrate all fire on the *Harbinger of Disaster!*’ shouted Admiral Parol. ‘Do not let my kill slip away!’

‘We can’t get any closer. We’re taking too much—’ A scream blared out into the command deck as a ship took catastrophic damage, reduced in moments from a purposeful instrument of the Emperor’s will to a flaming cloud of scrap.

‘We’ve lost the *Storm of Ages*, admiral.’

The babble of voices on the command deck crowded Parol’s hearing. He shut it out. Before him, the oculus screen showed a dazzle of short-lived white-light explosions and engine burn. Clouds of debris drifted through the maelstrom, further adding to the confusion. Alarms blared as wreckage from the *Storm of Ages*’s demise pattered into the shields of *His Will*. Swarms of mass projectiles, simple but brutal, followed, collapsing more shields. A spread of them penetrated as far as the hull, hammering into the thick skin of the Apocalypse-class battleship.

Parol braced himself as the giant vessel shuddered. Sparks flew from ruptured conduits.

‘Get those damn shields back up now!’ Quarist, his chief flag officer, roared.

‘Damage report!’ said Parol.

‘Minor breaching on decks 100 and 302, admiral.’

‘Helm steady.’

The *Harbinger of Disaster* drifted under them, the haphazard arrangement of crude engines bolted all over its mangled shell making it surprising

manoeuvrable. Parol cursed as it passed under *His Will*'s keel. A trio of ork cruisers came in its gravity wake, all guns blazing.

‘Sir, shields are still below fifty per cent.’

As fast as the soap-bubble sheen of the void shields popped into life they were being knocked down by concentrated fire from the front.

‘Roll ninety degrees. Port battery, mass fire on the *Harbinger*. Lance batteries, open fire on those cruisers. Battlegroup Glorious Age come around to sector 495. Destroyer groups Augustus, Cleon's Brilliance and Woeful Heart come in closer to our stern. Draw fire from the ork asteroid fortresses. Keep my space free of those cruisers! Fire control, be sharper! How the hell am I supposed to conduct a battle when I'm micromanaging your bloody mistakes!’

‘Sir,’ came the response from below.

Parol rattled off a long procession of orders. Adjutants cast them onto chart-desk holos with their augments, while data savants ran battle outcomes through their lobotomised brains. Parol kept one eye on the predictions, the other on the battle as it was playing out and gave further orders relayed by data squirt and vox to the ships under his command. The fleet responded with somnolent movements, swinging like logs under water. Too slow, too slow. A lifetime of service in the Navy and still he thought the ships too slow! Sweat ran down Parol's face, soaking the brocade of his high collar, making the flesh around his augmetic eye itch maddeningly. He narrowed his flesh eye, but... but... but... For all that, his plan was working; they were boxing the hulk in, slowly but surely. Waves of bombers chipped away at its stone and metal, ineffectual ork flak guns blasting away at them. Thunderbolt wings scoured the void of ork fighters. The hulk was wide open.

‘Cruiser group Annihilus, steady as she goes. Give me four more volleys at this wreck and we'll have ourselves another trophy.’

‘Sir, we've another two hulks coming in, sector ninety-six!’ shouted an augur officer.

I spoke too soon, thought Parol. ‘Give me the designations!’ he said.

‘It's the *Paeon to Discontent*, and... and...’

‘Designation! Designation!’ shouted Parol.

‘The *Malevolent Dread*, sir.’

‘It's a trap!’ cried Quarist. He slammed his fist into the railing around the command platform.

‘Steady there, Quarist,’ said Parol from the corner of his mouth. ‘Bring me a view of the approaching flotilla, cast onto chart desk 4-a.’

‘Aye, sir!’ shouted his ratings.

‘Compliance,’ blurted half a dozen servitors.

The two hulks were a fair way off, but lumbering closer.

‘Designate inbound hostiles call-sign “Ork Flotilla Secundus”,’ Parol said – not very imaginative, he thought, but I am rather busy. ‘I want the *Harbinger of Disaster* in pieces before they are in range, is that clear?’

‘Sir, we do not have the time!’

Parol bit back a rebuke. The optimo of his fire control team was correct. A perfect chase, the careful ripping away of power fields, and now to be cheated of his prize as it ran helpless before his guns. Most annoying.

‘I never thought I’d say this sir, but they’re getting cleverer,’ said Quarist. ‘They are responding to our strategy.’

‘Damn it all, of course they are!’ said Parol emphatically. ‘Well, in the best of all possible worlds, the same strategy never works over and over again. Although,’ he added to himself, ‘I was rather hoping the orks might fall for it just one more time.’ He jabbed an impatient finger at his vox-officers. ‘Open broad channel, no encryption – if the orks think we’re running, they’ll make more mistakes.’

‘Aye, sir, all channels open.’

Parol smoothed the front of his uniform, and wiped the sweat from his face with his handkerchief. He would not have his command see him dishevelled, and he’d be damned if he would let the orks believe him scared.

‘Hailing all fleet, hailing all fleet! Belabour that hulk for all you are worth, do as much damage as is possible. Then...’ He paused. ‘Prepare to withdraw. Good order.’

He depressed a stud on a board mounted on the rail.

‘Return to encryption,’ he said. ‘Perhaps we might do a little more on the way out...’

Parol’s orders were complex, but efficiently delivered.

Jushol rode the waves of the empyrean, at one with the *Eternal Crusader*. More than at any other time in the warp, he felt the ship’s presence intimately – every thrum of its metal skin, every stretch and ache of its superstructure, every phantom urge of its vicious spirit. This was not the mind-bond a princeps might feel with his Titan, or an adept of Mars might feel with his machines. Jushol did not dominate; instead, he shared something of an empathy with the vessel: the way a good horseman has with his mount, it had been explained to him, although no horse had been seen in his clan house in aeons. Like a horseman, Jushol knew

his steed's every mood – if it were sick, if it were sorrowful, if it felt joy.

The *Eternal Crusader* was eager; it always had been enamoured of war.

The warp shone through the Acies Horrens, bathing his inhuman face with a light whose colour had no name. His primary eyes were closed, the ritual blindfold now bound tightly about them while he looked out instead through his warp eye, fixing it upon the blazing sun of the Astronomican. The Emperor's beacon cut through the riot of hellish colour, a lighthouse in nightmare fog.

Jushol judged them close to their destination and so he took his attention from the white light of Terra. He stared deep into the swirling patterns in front of the ship, although no such directional term could be held true in the warp. The ship shuddered as it breasted swells of emotion, the warp whipped up into a curdled mass of despair and rage by the war going on at Armageddon. Into these roils his jet-black third eye peered intently, seeking out smaller, subtler disturbances – places where gravity infinitesimally pulled on the no-place of the warp, distorting it. These tiny whorls of psychic foam marked out the skerries of reality. Combine this with the agitation of human beings packed close together under stress, and you had a ship; many such markers, many ships. He smiled. Few were as skilled as Jushol, and fewer still could fulfil the High Marshal's request. He was justly proud of his ability. The *Eternal Crusader* was no ordinary ship, and it demanded no ordinary Navigator.

Around the weak imprints of humanity's souls living out their short existences in real space, strong and brutish essences cut the stuff of the empyrean, single-minded as ocean predators, the collective manifestation of the orks' self-belief adding to the turbulence. In the shifting vistas cast up by the empyrean, Jushol caught glimpses of warrior giants clashing their fangs. A great battle was going on in the mortal realm, orks pitted against men, reflected by the phantoms in the warp.

'I have it, Lord High Marshal,' he said, his quiet words picked up by a servo-skull hovering close to his head. 'Prepare for immediate real space translation.'

He relished the power. While in the empyrean, the *Eternal Crusader* was at his mercy. One push of his mind, and he could destroy every soul aboard the vessel. He could *damn* them. Jushol Ju-Sha-Eng was senior enough in his House to know some of the truth of the warp. He was no naive shipsteer, who believed the faces howling at him were mere fancy. He knew them for what they were – souls, and the things that hunted them.

They called to him, gesticulating lewdly, their faces cycling from plea to threat to promise like patterns on molten metal. 'Release them to us, release them!'

they seemed to say. ‘Open up your box of morsels, and you shall be rewarded!’

Jushol Ju-Sha-Eng raised his aquila pendant to his lips, and kissed it.

‘The Emperor protects,’ he whispered.

The *Eternal Crusader* remained true upon its course, guided by the indomitability of his will. Beneath the faces were the eddies and currents of the raw warp stuff; it was there his attention needed to be. He shut the whispers out.

Focus, he thought. Focus. He willed himself to see through the nonsensical landscapes, evaluating the patterns of the corporeal universe that shared the same space, choosing the perfect spot. The High Marshal was a mighty warrior, but what was he without Jushol? Nothing. Nothing at all. Without Jushol, the plan would fail.

All the while, the Navigator held the ship in check. Its spirit was keen, desirous of throwing off its warp field and plunging into the cold night of true space where endless war awaited.

Focus, focus, he thought. Wait. Wait. There.

‘Now.’

By his thought alone, the warp engines howled. A rent opened to reveal mortal stars flickering behind hideous draperies of warp energy. The *Eternal Crusader* tore through the flimsy veil that divides reality from the truth, and plunged back into the void.

They went from one form of chaos to another. Battle raged in the heavens. The great bodies of ships, kilometres long, twinkled with weapons fire both received and released. This was not the stately dance of void war as it should be waged, fleets so far apart they could not see one another, payloads taking hours if not days to arrive, but battle as up close and dirty as a Naval engagement on a backwards world, where wooden vessels exchange close-ranged cannon shot. Mighty Imperial capital ships, great castles of the skies, traded blows with the unlovely creations of the orks at distances measured in the mere hundreds of kilometres. Jushol was no great strategist, but he could see the Imperial trap for the hulk at the centre of the ork fleet, and the approaching flotilla that threatened to undo it all.

Moments later, *Majesty*, *Night's Vigil*, the *Virtue of Kings* and the *Light of Purity* burst through polychromatic coronas into the night, the smaller ships that made up their escort powering ahead to protect the flagship. Warp fumes curled away from them as Geller fields flared and winked out. A millisecond later, banks of void shields flicked into life all around them, cutting off the barrage that had already begun to come their way. Psychic impulses, not quite telepathy

but not far removed from it, came from Jushol's cousins. Navigators of the other vessels, who informed him of their safe arrival in system.

From somewhere far away, Jushol heard an alarm ring. Not his concern. He sighed with satisfaction. All said, not a bad placement. He had put the Space Marine fleet directly between two ork battlegroups, much to the surprise of Navy and ork alike, he imagined gleefully.

His throne dais rotated smoothly, pistons hissing and bolts clunking as its transit carriage engaged. Before the Acies Horrens slid closed, his throne was already descending, multiple shields of metal and energy shutting over his head. He sat in his throne for the first time in days, closed his aching warp eye, undid his blindfold and retied it around his forehead. He opened his prosaic eyes. The quotidian colours of reality made him blink, and he shut his eyes again. He allowed the strain of staring into the warp to affect him. The pain of it was both physical and spiritual, not simply the tiredness of prolonged concentration. His muscles ached and his stomach was as nauseous as if he were suffering from rad-poisoning victim's. He closed his eyes and allowed the carriage to take him away, back to the armoured quarters of his palace, where he would recover, and wait out the engagement with his wines and his concubines.

Until the High Marshal called upon him again to part the veil of reality, his role was finished.

Upon the bridge of *His Will*, alarms rang. Augur servitors moaned with half-remembered panic.

'Admiral!' called *His Will*'s augur chief. 'Incoming warp signature, opening up between us and Ork Flotilla Secundus.'

A patch of space highlighted on the oculus became bruised by unnatural energies. Vortices of light appeared and a massive ship rushed through them.

'They're friendly, sir!' relayed the officer joyfully. 'All broadcasting Imperial recognition cyphers. It's the Black Templars!'

His Will grumbled under another series of punishing salvos. Parol grabbed at the rail around his command platform. 'Excellent!' he said excitedly.

'More ships coming in, sir.'

Parol counted the vessels. Helbrecht had returned with more ships than he had departed with; that was good.

'They're moving in to engage with Ork Flotilla Secundus, my lord,' said Quarist.

'On primary display!' demanded Parol.

‘Sir, the battle...’ said Quarist.

‘On primary display!’ he barked.

‘Primary display. Compliance,’ droned a bank of servitors.

The main oculus blinked out, replaced by a tactical placement map.

Parol squinted at the Black Templars fleet, his augmetic eye overlaying multiple informational light-screeds upon its position. He adjusted them.

‘Target, sir?’ asked Quarist.

‘Main oculus, return to battleview.’

‘Aye, sir!’ replied his augur officer. The true-pict view of the battle returned.

‘Ignore the *Malevolent Dread*. We shall leave that to our Adeptus Astartes friends. Maintain positions. All fleet, resume attack on the *Harbinger of Disaster*.’

‘Aye, sir!’

Orders were shouted into vox-tubes. Parol’s task force continued their bombardment of the *Harbinger*. It had limped away from them a little, but its engines had been shattered; it coasted on inertia alone. It could accelerate no more.

Helbrecht’s vessels crowded the other space hulks, cutting off their interception of Battlefleet Armageddon. Fresh into the fight, they punished the ork ships mercilessly. Parol watched for a few more moments on a secondary holo table, until the *Harbinger* brought his attentions back to his own battle.

Jushol lay on his couch, watching the gyrations of a score of dancing girls. A steady stream of rare dishes were brought to his side, and he ate from them mechanically and without tasting them. He was rake thin, but he consumed enough food for a man four times his weight; the energy demands of navigating the warp were onerous. He was untroubled by the rocking of the ship, the rumble of its cannon and the distant shudder of impacts on the surface. Battle was not his concern. His slaves’ dance was coming to a crescendo, their oiled, scantily clad bodies writhing against one another. Soon they would abandon their dance and entertain him in more direct ways.

I will regret losing this, he thought, when I become pair-bonded.

A buzz sounded from the corner, discordant with the music. Jushol raised himself to a sitting position and looked over. Nothing appeared amiss to his normal eyesight. His warp eye, sensitive to things beyond the mundane, saw just as well covered as it did uncovered, and through it he saw a glowing square, as light around an ill-fitting door.

Green lightning burst all over the room, earthing itself in flesh and liquid. His wine glass exploded, as did three of his dancing girls. The rest ran shrieking.

Jushol scrambled off his couch and was already heading for the door, his laspistol drawn in anger for the first time in his long career, when a crowd of orks teleported right into his sanctum.

The stink of them hit him first, a raw, animal reek that blasted out with the hot breeze of their arrival. They arrived firing and roaring, and did not stop.

‘This is Jushol! Navigator Jushol!’ he shouted at his servo-skull. ‘I have orks in my inner chambers! I require aid!’

Five doors slid up in the walls, revealing concealed cybernetic guards. His House Triarii jolted to life and thumped into position from their concealed alcoves, their weapons limbs tracking targets perfectly as they walked forwards to form a protective arc between their master and the invading creatures. Bonded armsmen hared into the room from the main entrance, responding to the alarms, rifles to their shoulders.

‘My lord, this way, this way!’ His master of arms pulled at Jushol’s sleeve. Jushol scrambled to his feet. Cerulean energy arced across the room from the arcane weapons of his Triarii, burning smoking holes in the chests of the orks.

There was a tremendous clatter of arms as the orks assailed the Triarii. Power fields crackled to life as Jushol’s cyborgs brought their close-combat weapons to bear. His armsmen took aim with their carbines, letting off a disciplined series of volleys.

Jushol knew that it would not be enough. He watched in horror as an ork wrenched out the weapons fittings of one of his augmetic warriors, dragging bloodied wires and metal-bound bones away. The construct gave a rattling metallic scream and fell dead, its operational lights going out. The ork stamped on the downed warrior, the grotesque rumbles coming from its mouth sounding uncomfortably like sadistic laughter.

Stumbling from the horrific scene, Jushol went after his House armsman, heading for the grav-drop escape chute hidden in his bedchamber next door.

They skidded on blood, Jushol going down. His man turned round to help him, his face a mask of controlled terror.

Jushol reached out for the armsman’s outstretched arms as they disappeared in a blast of fire, flesh gobbets and blood. An ork shouted out its delight, cast its pistol aside and came rushing towards Jushol, its axe over its head, mouth gaping obscenely wide to display a forest of yellow tusks and fangs.

Jushol raised his pistol and shot it three times rapidly in the head. He rolled out

of the way as it crashed to the floor, sliding to a halt where he had been but a moment before.

His Triarii were overwhelmed. His armsmen were locked in a bitter, uneven struggle with green monsters pouring in through the entrance to his dining chamber.

Obviously, thought Jushol, they've teleported into more than one place.

Their armour was primitive, but their warty hides seemed impervious to the blows of his protectors. He watched as his last Triarii was bludgeoned to the ground and hacked to pieces. His armsmen rallied around him, a dwindling number of brave men buying Jushol seconds with their lives. The orks shrugged off many of their las-shots, only direct hits to the eyes putting them down. They grabbed his men, hurling them out of the way as if they were woven of straw. One was shoved back into the Navigator, sending them both sprawling.

Jushol realised he was going to die. He had avoided thinking about death. Most of his kind did. Too many of them knew what awaited their souls on the other side of night.

Jushol scrambled to his feet. His way to the bedchamber and the escape chute was cut off. His men backed him into the corner. More Triarii came stamping into the room to fight the orks, but most of his armsmen were dead already. There were only six of them left when the welcome sound of bolter fire put thoughts of the afterlife from Jushol's mind.

Praeses-Sword Brother Gulvein ran into the dining chamber, his sword buzzing with leashed lightning and a battle hymn on his lips. Six of the Chapter's elite were behind him. To Jushol's psychic senses, their ornate armour seemed to blaze with light as they marched in step into the room, blasting orks off their feet with shots from their bolt pistols. Mass reactives thudded into ork flesh at hypersonic velocities, detonating deep inside to tear chunks from their bodies. Incredibly, the orks did not all fall. Their robust frames contained the explosions, and some fought on, sporting wounds from weapons that would have smeared a man across the walls. The Black Templars let out a great shout and ran forwards to engage the enemy hand-to-hand. The din of battle intensified tenfold with the buzzing crack of disrupter fields smashing matter apart.

Gulvein sang out a challenge cant. An ork moved to intercept him. Gulvein cut him in half without breaking his stride. More orks fell. Their enthusiasm to engage the Praeses-Sword Brother evaporated as it became deadly apparent that he was not a challenging foe, but death incarnate.

'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' he roared. A giant ork, half as tall as the

Space Marine again, rushed him. Gulvein deflected two of its blows with lightning parries, a third turning into a cutting riposte that sliced through the ork's armour and ribcage alike. The ork howled, stumbled backwards and collapsed to its knees. Gulvein struck off its head with his blade.

'So die all who would sully the halls of the *Eternal Crusader!*' He spat upon the dead xenos. 'No xenos has defiled Sigismund's shrine for centuries. None shall do so now!' He raised his sword and his men cheered.

A solitary bolt shot rang out. The quiet that followed was oddly disquieting after the fury of battle. Jushol's chambers reeked of ork blood and their piggish odour. Fycellum smoke drifted, curling into eddies near atmospheric rejuvenator vents.

'Navigator Jushol Ja-Sha-Eng,' said Gulvein. He saluted the Navigator with his great sword to his forehead, then slid its bloodied blade uncleaned into its scabbard.

'You got here quickly, Brother Gulvein.'

'We had warning from the astropaths. You are fortunate we were close by dealing with another incursion when you were attacked.'

With a wail close to the screech of vox feedback, House Mistress Talifera stormed into the room, a coterie of terrified concubines behind her. They rushed to Jushol's side, weeping to see him so cruelly treated.

'This is a gross abuse of the treaty between the Chapter Astartes Black Templars and House Ju-Sha-Eng!' shouted Talifera. 'Your actions will be reported to the—'

Jushol held up a shaking hand, silencing his house mistress. Dust caked itself into his sweat, making him appear even more ghoulish than usual. He coughed, his lungs burning with the smoke of burned ork flesh, weapons discharge and fire suppressants.

'Your insistence on protocol is entirely admirable, house mistress, but I think, Talifera, under the circumstances we can allow the Sword Brother this one lapse, don't you?'

'Navigator,' she said, and turned her anger on the servants. Those who weren't dead were roused out from their hiding places. They skirted the corpses of the giant aliens as if they would be tainted by contact then rushed, partly chased by the house mistress, back to their positions. Gingerly, his concubines helped Jushol to his feet.

Jushol holstered his laspistol and wiped away the blood trickling from his sodden blindfold. 'Make yourself useful and fetch me a fresh blindfold, Talifera.'

If it comes away, Gulvein, do not look into my eye.'

'Of course, holy Navigator,' said Gulvein, respectfully dropping his gaze.

The Black Templars' veneration of him always put Jushol on edge; he attempted to push it aside with levity. 'To be the focus of our enemy's direct attention was... invigorating,' he said.

'The orks know of your value,' said Gulvein.

'So it appears,' said Jushol in a breezy way entirely at odds with the hammering of his heart. He cleared his throat. 'Seeing as this is my final tour, Sword Brother, I see no reason to spend it languishing in luxury here. Perhaps I might join you on the command deck for a change?'

Gulvein laughed gruffly. 'Lord Navigator, I advise it.'

'High Marshal, we have orks aboard, repeat, we have orks aboard the *Eternal Crusader*.'

'Hold them! Destroy them, Ceonulf. By the Emperor, to battle!'

'It will be done, my liege.'

The vox clicked off.

Helbrecht ducked back into the chamber. Weapons fire strobed through the dark corridors of the *Malevolent Dread*. The cacophony of shrapnel and ricochets against bulkheads was like the foundry of a mad god. Initiates covering the doors of the generator room were engaged in a fierce firefight with orks crowding outside. Soon the aliens would amass enough strength to rush the handful of Black Templars. Helbrecht turned to the Techmarine kneeling beside the heavy thermic charge teleported in with the boarding party.

'How much longer, Brother Hexil?' he shouted over the roar of weapons.

Techmarine Hexil continued making fine adjustments, but interrupted his prayers to reply. 'The weapon's spirit was offended by the rough treatment it suffered on arrival, High Marshal. If its containment loop is not realigned by the proper supplication, it will fail to consume itself and the reaction will not grow to the correct size for full devastation.'

'Hurry, brother.'

Helbrecht was distracted by a sudden increase in the firing at one of the doors. Howls and yells announced an ork charge was imminent. He ran to meet the aliens' rush. A huge ork leader crashed through the doorway and eviscerated an Initiate with a powered claw. Helbrecht stepped in, parrying its next blow away from another of his men, and countered with a swing perfectly timed to catch his foe off balance. The glittering energy field of the Sword of the High Marshals

slashed through the ork's neck. Its great head tumbled to the floor with a thump, and the ork fell, its arms waving spasmodically.

Helbrecht leapt forwards into the lesser orks behind, hacking and slashing with little finesse but horrible effectiveness. Limbs and heads flew apart. In seconds the doorway was filled with twitching corpses. An Initiate came up with his flamer and the surviving orks were driven back down the corridor by a wall of flames.

'The charge is prepared!' called Brother Hexil.

Helbrecht switched vox-channels with a nerve impulse. 'High Marshal to the *Eternal Crusader*, immediate teleport recovery.'

The remaining Space Marines moved to the centre of the chamber and disappeared in a blinding flash of light and a clap of displaced air. Seconds later, the thermic charge blasted a new crater in the flank of the *Malevolent Dread*.

Helbrecht marched straight out of the teleportation chamber, barging aside serfs and artisans performing the rituals of sanctity. Still dirtied by battle, he strode onto the command deck in time to see the *Malevolent Dread* pulling away from the fight, its mismatched twin hulls pockmarked with fresh scars, a particularly large one still venting atmosphere from where the thermic charge had exploded.

'It flees before us, my liege,' said his shipmaster. 'Shall I order pursuit?'

'No. It is wounded, but we cannot destroy it and the *Paeon*. Chase the *Malevolent Dread*, and both will escape,' said Helbrecht. 'Join the others. Finish the *Paeon*.' He pointed to the oculus, where holograms showed a miniature light sculpture of the other hulk being pummelled by the remainder of the Black Templars fleet. 'As soon as it dies, engage main drive and make all haste directly to Armageddon. Do not hide our destination. I want the *Malevolent Dread* to thirst for vengeance. We have offended its pride, and it will come to us. Ricard, Amalrich, you are to prepare your men for immediate deployment upon Armageddon. The Season of Fire is over, the Season of Shadows is here and you may land in relative safety. Once we have dropped you onto the surface, we shall spring our final trap for the *Malevolent Dread*. We shall make it pay for the destruction of Hades Hive. We shall make it pay for its tainting of the *Eternal Crusader*.'

A febrile light was on him, and none would dare argue with him.

His Will's augurs registered the massive spikes of teleport energies gathering in the Black Templars fleet. An explosion sent a pillar of flame from the

Malevolent Dread. Like a wounded animal, it lumbered away from its persecutors. The *Eternal Crusader* turned its attentions to the *Paeon to Discontent*.

Time passed. All the while, the Black Templars kept up their bombardment of the *Paeon*. Finally, the *Eternal Crusader* finished its laborious repositioning and opened fire.

‘Steady, men!’ Parol shouted, anticipating with perfect accuracy what was about to occur.

Parol laughed in relief as the *Paeon to Discontent* burst apart. The cheers of his men were muted, occupied as they were with their own tasks.

‘Well done, High Marshal, well done. And now, my men, intensify fire!’ he barked. ‘Destroy! I will not have the Space Marines show me up, do you understand?’

‘Yes, sir!’

The shaking and rumbling of *His Will* increased as it hurled thousands of rounds of high-explosive shells and simple mass-blocks at the *Harbinger of Disaster* from its extensive gundecks. They had the *Harbinger of Disaster* trapped. The last of its cruiser escorts were attempting to flee. Bright flashes marked their deaths as swift destroyer groups chased them down and caught them in interlocking torpedo spreads.

Parol’s cruisers and battleships pounded relentlessly at the ork hulk, but it would not yield. The hulk was massive, three times bigger than *His Will*, though most of it was stone and ablative layers of dirty cosmic ice. Chunks of it came away in fiery blasts, knocked free with such force they had to be shot down by Imperial interceptors and flak cannons before they slammed into *His Will*.

Parol watched, and he waited, and then when he judged the moment right, he spoke. ‘All fleet,’ he ordered. ‘Withdraw to safe distance. Maintain fire!’

His Will rumbled loudly, the massive engines at the rear sending powerful tremors the length of the ship. It groaned as it nosed upwards away from the hulk. All around the ork ship, the rest of the fleet was doing the same.

‘Keep your shields up, captains. Any vessel with limited shield capacity fall back immediately. Anti-munitions cannons to full alert. Interceptors, prepare for debris. Escort squadrons, withdraw immediately. Stand by...’

‘I see no sign the hulk is ready to explode, admiral,’ said Quarist.

‘And that is why I keep you around, flag officer, so that I can constantly be proved correct. Observe.’ Parol gestured at the oculus

Without warning, the *Harbinger of Disaster* died. There was no great display

of fire and fury; it simply split down the middle like an opened seed pod, spilling a million grains of matter into space. Most of which, Parol thought with satisfaction, were orks. Flash-frozen gasses surrounded the wreck in a shimmering bloom of ice.

‘And there you have it, Quarist,’ said Parol.

‘Yes sir. All ships, break off! Break off! Victory is ours,’ said Quarist.

Polite clapping resounded around the command deck. Parol bowed graciously. ‘Thank you. Someone get me a drink. And hail High Marshal Helbrecht before he can go dashing off again. I wish to welcome him back,’ he said. ‘And by that, Quarist,’ he added as an aside to his aide, ‘I mean ask him where by the Emperor’s Throne he’s been these last months.’



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MALEVOLENT DREAD

From the underside of the *Eternal Crusader*, two dozen drop pods rushed towards Armageddon, Thunderhawks following. A cordon of destroyer squadrons and light cruisers kept the enemy at bay. Two minutes later, after the *Eternal Crusader* had progressed three hundred kilometres further around the world, and a similar number of craft burst out in a second drop. Glinting in the star's unfiltered light, they fell fast, accelerated by bursts of flame stabbing from their upper surfaces. They were unassuming teardrops of metal, each carrying a cargo of death – Marshal Ricard's men going down to war upon the surface.

'Ash Waste Crusade fighting companies one and two away, my liege. Ash Crusade away!' relayed the embarkation deck command liaison.

'All craft have attained atmospheric insertion, my lord. We may begin withdrawal,' spoke the Master of Landings, an Initiate this one.

'Praise be!' shouted the Master of Sanctity. A chorus of thrall-monks sang it back at him.

'May the Emperor bless them and guide them,' said Helbrecht. 'How is our other task?'

'Long-range augur has captured the energy signature of the *Malevolent Dread*, my liege,' said a senior auspex officer. 'It has taken the bait.'

'What other ships of the greenskins are in close range?'

'Three battlegroups, my liege. Adeptus Astartes strike force one is engaging with two of those, fifty thousand kilometres out. *Night's Vigil* reports successful rendezvous and is bolstering the Sons of Guilliman and Silver Skulls interdiction

groups. The third approaches from the night side. Admiral Parol's Battlegroup, *Gloriana*, is moving to intercept. Further ork forces are approaching, but are at best estimate seven hours away from our position. The *Virtue of Kings* has withdrawn and is responding to requests for assistance from the Celebrants and Mortifactors combined forces near Chosin.'

'And the *Malevolent Dread*?'

'Three hours, my liege. It will find us isolated and apparently vulnerable.'

'Send back our escort group to shadow the *Virtue of Kings*. Have the *Light of Purity* maintain position in the debris field. Whatever green tyrant rules aboard the *Malevolent Dread* has set his eyes on Sigismund's vessel, and I want this ship to remain too tempting a prize to ignore. I will depart for the *Light of Purity* in three minutes to prepare our boarding parties. Brothers, that I have asked the *Eternal Crusader* to run will have kindled the flames of anger in your hearts. Do not see our feint as shameful – it is the surest path to victory. Today, the *Malevolent Dread* will die. You know your orders. Now, to your stations.'

'It shall be done, my liege,' said Gulvein.

The group of Sword Brethren and Initiates bowed their heads and left the command dais.

'Now for ruin, and the pulling of this thorn from our side,' said Helbrecht to Theoderic. He took a final look around the command deck of his flagship. Well pleased by what he saw there, he departed, heading for the embarkation decks and his own transport.

Three hours passed.

Five thousand kilometres away, a subgroup of Battlefleet Armageddon were efficiently dismembering a shoal of ork cruisers.

Through the glare of Armageddon's atmospheric albedo, Parol watched the *Eternal Crusader* turning away from the approaching *Malevolent Dread*, giving all appearance of flight. Encouraged by this apparent display of cowardice, the ork craft's engines burned brighter, sending it quickly towards its prey.

Parol kept half an eye on this other engagement. The *Eternal Crusader* was nimble for its size, and was slipping away; engines pointing towards Armageddon, prow pointing up away from the planet's axis, it pushed out from the system's ecliptic plane. The *Malevolent Dread* was closing fast, coming at the battle-barge abeam as it travelled parallel to Armageddon's orbital track. Primitive engines bolted to the surface of the two ships that comprised the hulk burned with dirty yellow fire. The *Malevolent Dread*'s blunt-fronted prow lofted

‘upwards’ – Parol found it useful to think of any gravity well in his area of battle as ‘down’. In a slow parabola, the ship curved from its current heading, meaning to intercept the *Eternal Crusader* closely when they intersected, perhaps even ram her. An elegant move, he mused. Mathematics invested even the ships of orks with grace.

‘Forty-seven cruisers and another hulk are moving to attack the Black Templars fleet, my lord,’ reported an augur officer.

‘Shall we engage, sir?’ asked Quarist.

‘Sector?’ asked Parol.

‘Thirty, my lord. Coming in at twelve thousand kilometres per hour, thirty-seven degrees toward rotational plane, widespread. No formation, sir.

‘Hold steady. I’ll not commit until the orks have taken the bait,’ said Parol. ‘Finish this rabble.’

There was little need for Parol to direct his battlegroup in smashing the remaining ork cruisers, and so he watched the hulk until it passed over the debris field cluttering Armageddon’s orbit; the shattered hulls and fragments of the many vessels destroyed in months of fighting formed a shining, ragged halo about the world. Once this war was done, it would take months of expensive effort to render Armageddon’s near-space safe for shipping. For the moment, it provided the perfect cover for the *Light of Purity*. The battle-barge floated like any other giant piece of junk, engines dark. There was always a risk in this kind of venture; a clever ork might scan the vessel and note that its reactor was fully functional. Parol snorted at the thought. There were terrifyingly intelligent orks, of that there was no doubt; probably one of them was doing exactly that, right now. But what they lacked was organisation – if such an ork existed, he would not be heeded, and there was no overcoming that.

The *Malevolent Dread* passed over the *Light of Purity*. Focused on exchanging long-range fire with the retreating *Eternal Crusader* – all of which, being aimed directly at the battle-barge rather than where it would be, missed – it did not react when the other battle-barge’s engines flared, sending it quickly up to intercept the hulk.

With one devastating close-range salvo, the *Light of Purity* collapsed layers of power fields in strobes of sheet-lightning flashes. The hulk was wide open to assault.

Parol’s oculus and augur officers relayed teleport energy surges from the *Light of Purity*. Two minutes passed, then three. The hulk was firing at the *Light of Purity*, and this time it had a bead on its target, but the hulk, unprotected by

shields, was taking the worst of it. Meanwhile, the *Eternal Crusader* was altering its heading to come about in a long arc. Turning a ship of that mass was no trivial matter, but within a few hours it would be upon the *Malevolent Dread*, trapping it between itself and its sister.

When four minutes had passed, the silvery streaks of assault rams and boarding torpedoes crossed the space between the *Light of Purity* and the *Malevolent Dread*. Anti-attack-craft fire streamed towards them, but all but two of the assault craft made it through to converge on three distinct points.

‘Helbrecht has sprung his trap,’ said Parol. ‘Let us give him enough time to see it to success. Fleet, new heading. Prepare our second interception of the day.’ He began ordering the complex dance of spacecraft combat.

The assault ram banged as it penetrated the already weakened section of the hulk wall, vibrating fit to burst as its twin prows scraped against metal. The doors slammed down. Helbrecht was first out, his men following him into a large, open area about twenty metres across, the same in height and width. Three winding corridors led off opposite the ram’s breach point. Perhaps it had once been a cargo loading bay, but the ship that made up this half of the hulk was of unknown xenos make and therefore Helbrecht could only hazard a guess what the space had been intended for. The floor was tilted at an angle to the pull of artificial gravity. The walls bore the signs of the ship’s original impact with the second vessel comprising the agglomeration, being wrinkled with collision stress. The smooth, alien contours of the ship had been further defaced by the orks’ ‘improvements’. Huge, badly cut girders braced the ceiling randomly; pointless reinforcement had been riveted in ugly patchwork all over parts of it, leaving other stretches untouched. Ork filth coated the floors, and ork graffiti was daubed on the walls. Moisture dripped freely from the filthy roof. There was little illumination, and it stank.

Air howled through the breach around the ram’s front as the hulk depressurised, a distant moan through Helbrecht’s auto-senses. Dead orks were scattered everywhere. The snap of gunfire came from down all three corridors, its source masked by the decompression gale. Sword Brethren Terminators had teleported in and cleared the landing zone of orks, and now held the perimeter for the crusaders’ landing.

A second boom heralded the arrival of a boarding torpedo, followed by a second. The inner hull glowed as their melta-drills burned their way inside. Their grub-like noses of molten metal ran onto the floor and pushed their way into the

vessel. The metal hadn't cooled before the doors gaped wide and more Black Templars deployed.

'Castellan Ceonulf, report,' Helbrecht voxed.

'We have purged many xenos, my liege. More are inbound. We hold the perimeter, but tenuously,' Ceonulf replied.

'Squads five, nine and four, reinforce Terminator boarding parties. Squad six, with me,' ordered Helbrecht. His Initiates thundered out in good order, dispersing down the corridors to join the Sword Brethren teleport attack parties.

'Void Crusade group two reporting safe breaching,' said Praeses-Sword Brother Gulvein.

'Void Crusade group three aboard,' came Chaplain Theoderic's voice.

'Two ships lost, my liege. Three squads. Anyone else take a hit?' said Gulvein.

'No,' said Theoderic. 'We are all aboard. Praise be for our safe delivery.'

'Praise be,' they all said.

Gunfire rattled over Gulvein's vox-feed. 'Atmospheric pressure has stabilised here. I've multiple hostiles.'

'I too,' said Theoderic.

'To your targets, knights,' said Helbrecht. 'With the Emperor's blessing, I shall see you at the final objective. Praise be.'

'Praise be,' his subordinates replied.

In the meantime, Helbrecht's men had debarked and spread out. Last was Champion Vosper. He walked out of one of the boarding torpedoes and drew his sword. The hesitant neophyte of a few days before had gone, replaced by a graceful killer.

'Where does the Emperor guide you, Champion?' asked Helbrecht.

'This way.' Vosper's voice had changed; it was quiet, imbued with divine power. Vosper pointed his sword down the middle of the three tunnels branching out from the breaching site.

Helbrecht unswathed the Sword of the High Marshals. 'I shall go with you. Where the Champion walks, there the fighting is thickest.'

'Praise be!' his men shouted.

Helbrecht and Vosper battled hard against an endless horde of howling xenos. They killed and killed, until the ground was slick with ork blood and the ship reeked like an abattoir. The fabled swords of the Black Templars rose and fell together, each swing slaying another of the creatures. Pace by pace, Helbrecht had his men push their way deeper into the hulk.

The orks were fierce. Black Templar zeal was matched by unthinking ork ferocity. By the time Helbrecht's group had reached its first objective – an erratic ork power source feeding the ship's grav generators – three of the nine Terminator-clad Sword Brethren had been killed or incapacitated, and seven of the fifty Initiates Helbrecht had brought aboard would fight no more. His group's Apothecary was all too busy harvesting gene-seed, his reductor bloody. Many others had sustained wounds; Helbrecht himself sported three, the rents in his armour closed up by interlayer sealant foam and his own fast-clotting blood.

More and more orks were swarming towards them. Gulvein and Theoderic reported mounting casualties as groups separated from the strike forces to pursue multiple objectives. The further they went in, the less sense the hulk's interior made. Hand-to-hand fighting became the norm as secure fire lanes were abandoned in the chaotic layout of the alien ship, and more deaths came as a result.

It took half an hour of hard fighting before Helbrecht's group were sufficiently clear of their first thermal charge to detonate it. Helbrecht interrupted his battle hymn to order his men to engage their boot maglocks. A thunderclap of overpressure blasted up the corridor, ripping at the robes and oath papers of the Space Marines, followed by the hollow, whistling howl of fire instantaneously consuming all the oxygen available to it.

'Gravity generatorium disabled,' reported Techmarine Hexil.

'Praise be!' roared Helbrecht.

The going became easier. The orks were severely disadvantaged by the lack of artificial gravity. After the first group were sent bouncing from the walls by their guns' recoil to be easily picked off by bolter fire, they ceased coming, resorting to a variety of equally unsuccessful tactics – strange creatures strapped up with explosives, or snivelling examples of their slave races walking hand over hand down the rough wall surfaces carrying bombs. Neither of these worked, and so the orks resorted to throwing grenades down the corridors, but the twisting nature of the xenos' ship made this difficult, and when the grenades did explode among the Space Marines, their explosives were insufficiently powerful to break through Adeptus Astartes battleplate.

These attacks, too, ceased, when Theoderic's group successfully blasted a series of holes in the hull, venting much of this section's atmosphere.

'Orks are tough, brother, but they need air to breathe,' said the Chaplain with grim delight. 'The Emperor guides us. Praise be.'

Each group battled onwards, detonating key parts of the ship's systems.

Occasionally, they were frustrated by multiple redundancies, but these had been randomly applied by the orks' mechanics. What would have been critical systems aboard an Imperial ship often proved to have no backup at all, whereas items of secondary interest to the Space Marines might have several. Other thermic charges were rigged for later remote detonation, part of the chain reaction that would tear the *Malevolent Dread* in two once the Space Marines had withdrawn to the *Light of Purity*.

Gulvein's group fared worse than the other two. Under strength, they struggled to beat back the assailing orks. One subgroup was cut off, finding itself fighting a desperate defence in a cavernous room full of junk. Their joyful death hymns provided inspiration for their brothers as they pushed on.

Three hours in, Helbrecht's group reached the end of the final corridor. Brother Hexil reached out his hand to lightly touch the wall.

'This is the skin of the ship, my liege,' said the Techmarine.

Helbrecht leaned on his sword a moment. His body buzzed with combat stimulants and counterfatigue drugs. His muscles were tired, but when his Apothecary attempted to examine his wounds, Helbrecht pushed him back and stood tall.

'Leave me!' he snapped. 'On the other side lies our final objective. Blow it wide, brothers, and let us bring the fury of the Emperor down on these alien savages!'

Helbrecht's command squad went through first, protecting the High Marshal as he emerged into the vast space between the two starships that made up the *Malevolent Dread*. It was a metal cave many hundreds of metres high, the walls a mess of crevices and room-caves where the hull fabric had given way. The ship opposite Helbrecht was noticeably of human make, an early Imperial ship approaching the *Eternal Crusader* in age. The cavern floor had been planed off into a number of levels by platforms and catwalks; similar structures had been bolted to the sides of each ship.

All were crawling with orks. Many hundreds more were flooding in from the ship opposite.

'There,' pointed Helbrecht to a part of the cave that appeared like any other, 'that is where the last charge must go.'

His men deployed in a line, Terminators and Helbrecht's command squad at the centre. Nearby, Theoderic's group emerged also, the edges of his line joining with Helbrecht's. The Black Templars silently waited until their lines were ready,

unconcerned by the sea of orks bounding up the cavern's floor towards them. They marched in perfect unison to the bomb site, and halted while Brother Hexil directed his slaves to position the bomb.

'Forward!' screamed Helbrecht. 'No remorse! No pity! No fear!'

Gunfire erupted all along the Black Templars battlefront, a withering hail of bolter fire that dropped hundreds of orks like rows of reaped corn. Still they came charging onwards. Behind Helbrecht, Hexil and his servitors prepared their last thermic charge. Helbrecht roared orders, directing the fire of his knights to weak spots on the ork line one moment, switching them to thin out stronger groups the next. The Black Templars marched forwards in time to their guns, singing their doom-laden songs of devotion to the Emperor. The orks came nearer and nearer, until they broke upon the Black Templars in a great green wave. A mob of huge orks in thick powered armour smashed into the centre of the conjoined fighting companies with an almighty crack, bowing it back. Against the odds, the line held, and the Black Templars sang louder as they unhitched their chainswords.

'Vosper! Vosper!' shouted Helbrecht, seeking out the Champion of the Emperor. The Champion was walking towards a part of the line that seemed no worse and no better than any other. Helbrecht cast a wary glance at the leader orks and saw one felled by a flaring burst of the Master of Sanctity's crozius. That part was holding, for now.

'This way,' replied Vosper's voice, a slow and somnolent as that of a dreamer. 'This way my doom lies.'

Helbrecht muttered a quick prayer. Putting his trust in the Emperor, he followed Vosper into the press of orks.

There was nothing dreamlike about Vosper in combat. He fought with unsurpassed skill, the mark of a warrior of many centuries, not a barely trained neophyte. Body parts flew high as he carved a bloody path forwards. Helbrecht followed, his command squad behind him, stopping the sea of orks closing around the Champion.

'High Marshal, we are ready to deploy the device,' Hexil informed him.

'How long?'

'Four minutes, no more.'

Helbrecht grunted as he forced his ancient weapon through an ork's chest-plate, the banging of the power field deafening as it shattered matter at the atomic level deafening. The sounds of battle retreated as his auto-senses dampened the din.

‘Gulvein, what is your status?’

‘Poor, my liege – we cannot break through the orks to join with you.’

‘We will soon be done here. Fall back, if you can. Make for the transports.’ He was panting now, fully occupied by the efforts of fighting and of directing his men. ‘*Light of Purity.*’

‘High Marshal?’

‘Inform the Master of Translocation to prepare the teleport bays. Multiple signal locks required.’

‘Yes, my liege. You are aware that we will struggle with so many. The plan was to return via the transports.’

‘Plans change. The *Eternal Crusader*?’

Silence as his operations commander conferred with someone Helbrecht could not hear.

‘The *Eternal Crusader* is out of teleport range, my liege, and will be for another quarter hour.’

‘Very well. Tell the transports to wait to the last moment, then cast off. See to it that as many of our brothers are saved as can be. But nothing, I repeat nothing, is too high a price to pay for this victory.’

‘As you will it, my liege.’

Helbrecht cut his vox-channel and screamed, a howl of fanatical hatred. If an ork stepped before him, it died. Invigorated by his dauntless ferocity, the Black Templars line pushed forwards, drawn on by their champions.

So it went – the orks were pushed back to the midway point between the two ships, the Black Templars so successful that their line bent like a drawn bow, so much they were in danger of exposing their flanks.

Then the orks parted, and a new threat emerged: the ork king of the hulk.

It was an enormous monster, the biggest ork Helbrecht had ever seen. In height, it was taller than two lesser orks, and massed as much as five. Its head was the size of Helbrecht’s torso and a tall iron totem depicting a leering ork rose from its back, decorated with human skulls and twists of hair.

Unlike so many orks Helbrecht had recently seen, the king had no clanking warsuit, only thick plates threaded onto leather straps to protect it. Consequently, it moved with terrifying speed. It came bursting through the press of its fellows, pushing them over and indiscriminately slaughtering them to get at the foe. Hurling two of its own warriors aside, the king reached the front of the line. It slammed into an Initiate, sending him down onto the heaped dead. A blow from its chainaxe, a huge, crudely made thing as big as Helbrecht, ended the Initiate

Black Templar's life. Roaring with laughter, the ork king laid about it, hewing apart the battle-brothers as easily as if they were made of glass. Another brother died, then a third, and a fourth. The ork's fist shattered helmets, and its chainaxe parted limbs from their bodies. It strode towards the Champion, seeing him as a worthy enemy.

The king's axe could not break the black sword. The ork's weapon stopped dead as Vosper intercepted its blow, the chainaxe held in place by the sacred blade, its teeth churning sparks from black solarite.

With an oath to the Emperor, Vosper twisted and disengaged, throwing the ork's axe wide and pressing home his attack with a deadly overhead strike.

The warboss caught the attack, and the next, but Vosper was unstoppable, driving the towering beast back, its minions spreading away from this embodiment of the Emperor's wrath until a circle had formed around the combatants. The Black Templars took advantage of the orks' cowardice to gun down many, but always there was a quiet prayer on their lips, willing the Champion to victory.

The ork king slipped on the guts of a fallen ork warrior, going down. Vosper delivered the final blow without hesitation, the black sword whistling down with unstoppable power.

The warboss caught the blow on the haft of its axe. The weapon was cloven in two, the heavy head spinning off into the press of orks. The black sword's tip continued downwards, scraping against the ork king's armour. Robbed of much of its power, it only wounded the creature. It did not kill.

Bellowing with primal rage at this humiliation, the ork launched itself from the floor at Vosper, knocking him off balance. It drew another axe from its belt to hammer over and over again at the Champion. Vosper stumbled backwards. The ork shoulder barged him, knocking the black sword back. With a triumphant roar, the greenskin swung his axe at Vosper's head, splitting helmet and skull.

The black sword dropped from his lifeless grip. Vosper fell. A moan of despair went up from the Space Marines to see the Champion fall. They faltered, if only for an instant, but it was enough.

The orks surged forwards. Helbrecht bellowed and waded into them, slashing and slaying. But the press of thick green arms was too much, and he was pulled down to the ground; only his oath-lanyard prevented the loss of Sigismund's sword.

Huge fists grabbed his wrists and ankles. He jerked his limbs, trying to wrench them free. Massively fanged jaws snapped at his helmet, coating his eye-lenses

in drool. Then the orks drew back, and he was pulled tight.

A big ork stepped forwards, hefting a massive axe. It raised the weapon over its head and swung hard, burying it in Helbrecht's chest-plate. Helbrecht roared as his reinforced ribcage cracked, the pain overwhelming him before his superhuman body adjusted. The ork snarled, tugging to free its axe so it might finish the High Marshal. The pain was unbearable.

The ork gripped the axe haft and leered at him, preparing to yank hard. Helbrecht gritted his teeth, but the pain never came. The ork disappeared in a blast of superheated steam.

Bolt-rounds felled a broad swathe of orks all around Helbrecht. Chainswords flashed. A meltagun vapourised another ork. The grips Helbrecht's limbs were released as his command squad drove the orks away from him. Hands grabbed him under his armpits. Apothecary Vargen looked down at him.

'Perhaps this time you will not push me away, my liege.'

Helbrecht grasped his Apothecary's forearm. His hand would not grip; he was weak. His limbs grew cold. 'Perhaps not.'

'My liege! We are falling! We cannot hold them!' shouted Theoderic.

'Hexil...' Helbrecht said groggily.

'One minute.' Hexil paused. 'Leave us here. I will see the job through to the end, as is my sacred duty.'

Helbrecht struggled up on shaking legs. The Black Templars line was in pieces. His men had been broken up into small knots, fighting back to back, small islands of black in a sea of green.

'Hexil!'

'It is not ready, my liege! Retreat, Brother Helbrecht. My brothers in arms protect me. They will see my task is completed. Pray for me, brother. Tell the Emperor of my loyalty.'

Helbrecht opened a vox-channel to the *Light of Purity* with a thought.

'Activate teleport. All units. Get us out of here.'

His final view of the hulk interior was bright light, oily wisps of smoke curling up from the centre as his brothers were spirited away and the crashing rage of the orks at the disappearance of their foes.

Bright light. The clap of displaced air. Helbrecht fell forwards into the dimness of the teleport chamber, colliding with hissing pipes. The axe buried in his chest jarred in his ribcage, bringing forth an unmoderated roar of pain. Frantic hands beat at the chamber door in response to his cries. Cleansing vapours gushed over

him and he reeled. The door seal whispered, and the door clanked aside. Strong hands dragged him from the teleport pod, supporting him as he rolled out.

‘Send word to the apothecarion!’ shouted Brother-Apothecary Vargen. ‘The High Marshal is injured! Thralls! Bring a bier!’

Cries went up. ‘The High Marshal! The High Marshal is wounded!’

Men and knights pulled at him, dragging him onto the bier. Helbrecht no longer had the strength to stand.

‘Destroy the hulk,’ said Helbrecht, rasping horribly through his grille, his throat congested with blood. The axe was buried deep in his sternum. The pain was overcoming the best efforts of his pharmacopeia and body.

‘My liege!’ protested the Master of Translocation, a high-ranking forge-thrall. ‘There are dozens of brothers unaccounted for and at this moment we cannot retrieve them because our systems have overloaded and we have multiple teleport failures! Give me minutes, my liege, and they will be saved. I beg you!’

Hexil’s voice came to him, blurred by static. ‘The orks are disabling the devices, my liege.’ Bolters cracked in the background. Battle hymns competed with the howl of orks. ‘We must do this now or our deaths will be in vain.’

How many were going to die? thought Helbrecht. How many?

Faith. The Emperor ordained this. It could not be any other way. It cannot be wrong. I cannot be wrong. I am the chosen of the God-Emperor of Man.

‘Destroy the hulk,’ he said through gritted teeth. Blood bubbled up from his broken innards, running down his chin and pooling in his helmet. ‘Fidelis, Brother Hexil. Your memory will be honoured.’

‘Order received,’ responded Brother Hexil dispassionately. ‘For the Emperor. For the Ommissiah. Praise be. No pity! No remorse! No fear!’ he shouted, and triggered the thermic charges.

The *Malevolent Dread* died spectacularly. A series of internal explosions blasted out from strategic junctures, wrenching apart the rough joining of the two ships. They split, finally free from one another after their millennia-long embrace, shedding fire and detritus that glittered outwards in an ever-expanding ball. The explosion pushed the alien half of the hulk straight into Armageddon’s grasp, where days later it would fall from the sky in fiery ruin. The Imperial half was jolted away from the planet, debris trails sparkling behind it.

Helbrecht saw none of this. The death of the hulk was coolly relayed to him against a background of lamentation.

The *Malevolent Dread* was destroyed, but at great cost. With it one hundred and seven Black Templars, living and dead, were annihilated.



CHAPTER NINE

AFTERMATH

Helbrecht watched the war-strewn void from his sanctum. A puckered scar ran at a slight diagonal up the centre of his chest, a reminder of the wound he had taken a year ago. Ten Terran months had passed since the *Malevolent Dread* had been destroyed; a blow against his Chapter, and one that effectively ended the Black Templars solo efforts against the ork fleet. Grievous to them, but to the orks also; in the months following, many more hulks had been destroyed by the combined actions of the Adeptus Astartes and Imperial Navy.

The war's second Season of Fire wracked Armageddon, bringing another cessation of hostilities. The volcanoes belching out their plumes of ash were hidden beneath palls of their own ejecta, the choking storms they engendered sweeping around the ravaged world like stirred-up silt muddies water.

The orb of detritus around the planet was thicker than it had been. Not one of Armageddon's orbital stations or satellites was intact. The shattered hulls of dozens of Imperial ships drifted there, along with hundreds of wrecked ork vessels too. Every night, the sky glowed with stars falling from this new constellation, streaking the darkness with smoke and fire. These war meteors were a blessing in their way, a reminder to those below that the war above was won, even though they brought more misery when they hit the ground.

The door spoke.

'The Most Honoured Commissar Sebastian Yarrick requests humbly to enter into my liege's chambers,' said the servitor. 'Accept, deny?'

'I am expecting him. Allow him entry.'

Helbrecht watched the door open. The cadaverous commissar came within. Gaunt before, he had aged more than a year since they had last met, his face pale and dry beneath his vast commissar's cap and high collars. He wore his armour, from which no amount of polish could remove the scratches, and his famous ork-claw prosthetic, cut from the monster that had taken his original arm during the first ork invasion.

'High Marshal,' said Yarrick. A strong, commanding voice still, issuing though from age-puckered lips blued with poor circulation. 'You are admiring Armageddon's new night sky? The people of the system thank you for its creation.'

Helbrecht made a little noise in his throat, part way between acknowledgement and dismissal.

'They should thank me, and every Black Templar. I have lost nearly five hundred Initiates fighting here,' said Helbrecht.

'And yet you have victory,' said Yarrick.

'I do,' said Helbrecht approvingly. 'A worthy one at that, bought though it was with half the number of my Chapter. Two most holy Champions of the Emperor died here, and still the price was not too high.'

'You are not alone,' said Yarrick. 'Several other Chapters report similar losses.'

'And worse besides, I am a warrior of faith, commissar. The Emperor ordained this, and so it must be.'

'You believe the Emperor to have a plan?'

'You do not?'

Yarrick smiled grimly.

'We do,' continued Helbrecht. 'The Emperor is all seeing, all knowing. This war here must form part of His intentions.'

'You think so? This carnage, so many dead, so many members of the Adeptus Astartes gone. It is unprecedented,' said Yarrick.

'We live in unprecedented times, commissar,' said Helbrecht. 'This war is cataclysmic, but there are worse being fought across the galaxy as we speak.'

'Yes, yes,' said Yarrick, turning to the High Marshal. 'You are a man after my own heart, High Marshal Helbrecht. Now more than ever, the Imperium demands sacrifice. And your order lives on to fight another day. Others will not. The Celestial Lions, I hear, have been almost destroyed.'

'Yes,' said Helbrecht. 'My Reclusiarch, Grimaldus, has requested leave to investigate this tragedy. The Celestial Lions are the sons of Dorn, as are we. It is

our duty to help them, as it was our duty to help you. But no price is too high to pay for victory.'

'You are leaving,' said Yarrick.

Helbrecht nodded. 'The Third War for Armageddon is done.'

Yarrick laughed, a rattling dry chuckle. 'The war here will never be done. It will be the work of generations to purge the system, and still the orks come.'

'True. But our part in it is over. I declare this crusade a success. The ork fleet is shattered. Their advances on the surface have been arrested. The Great Beast has fled the system. I swore an oath to kill him myself. The remnants of Amalrich's fighting company will stay, as will the *Virtue of Kings*, but I will not. Last night, I renewed my oath in the Temple of Dorn before the sarcophagus of our founder, my brothers as witnesses. In three days we will depart. I will hunt him down wherever he might be, and by Sigismund's sword he will die.' He growled this last. 'I said the war is done, but a new task beckons, a new chapter in the annals of the Endless Crusade.'

'You know what I have come to ask.'

The two warriors, an ageless giant and a broken old man living on borrowed time, looked through the windows of the *Eternal Crusader*, past the glint of the orbital debris field to the stars shining beyond.

'I do. You wish to do what any follower of the Emperor would wish. You wish what *I* wish. You would see Ghazghkull dead.'

'I am an old man, High Marshal – very old, by the standards of mere mortals. I am resigned to never retiring. I could, I am sure, go back to my garden and my writing with all honours, and not look back.' His mouth quirked wryly. 'But I tried that before, and it did not suit me. I am going to die. Not long now, I think. When I do, I want to know that at least one threat to our embattled Imperium has been removed, and if I cannot be there when it happens, I want to travel with the warrior who I know can see it through to the end.'

Helbrecht's stony face displayed some emotion for once: a hint of understanding. He looked down at the Old Man of Armageddon.

'It will be an honour to host you, commissar. You and your men will be welcome aboard the *Eternal Crusader* for as long as our mission takes. I ask of you only one thing.'

'And that would be?'

'When the moment comes to slay the Great Beast, stay out of my way.'

'As you wish, High Marshal,' said the old man.

They stayed unspeaking together for a while, lost in their singular thoughts yet

united by common purpose.

Under their feet the *Eternal Crusader* bustled with activity as the new crusade was prepared.

Lost amid all the preparations for departure, amid the clanking of foundries, the roar and buzz of the myriad machine processes required to keep the ship and its inhabitants alive, the chanting of monks, the rumble of the reactor and its subsidiaries, the comings and goings of lesser craft, the efforts of repair crews to heal the riven hull and a million more sources of noise, was a tremor of unalloyed, vicious pleasure.

The *Eternal Crusader* looked forward to a new war.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A prolific freelance author and journalist, **Guy Haley** is the author of *Space Marine Battles: Death of Integrity*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Valedor* and *Baneblade*, and the novellas *The Eternal Crusader*, *The Last Days of Ector* and *Broken Sword*, for *Damocles*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

[Sword Brother Brusca of the Black Templars clashes with his superiors and his warriors when he defies orders to abandon an Adepta Sororitas field hospital on Armageddon.](#)



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