

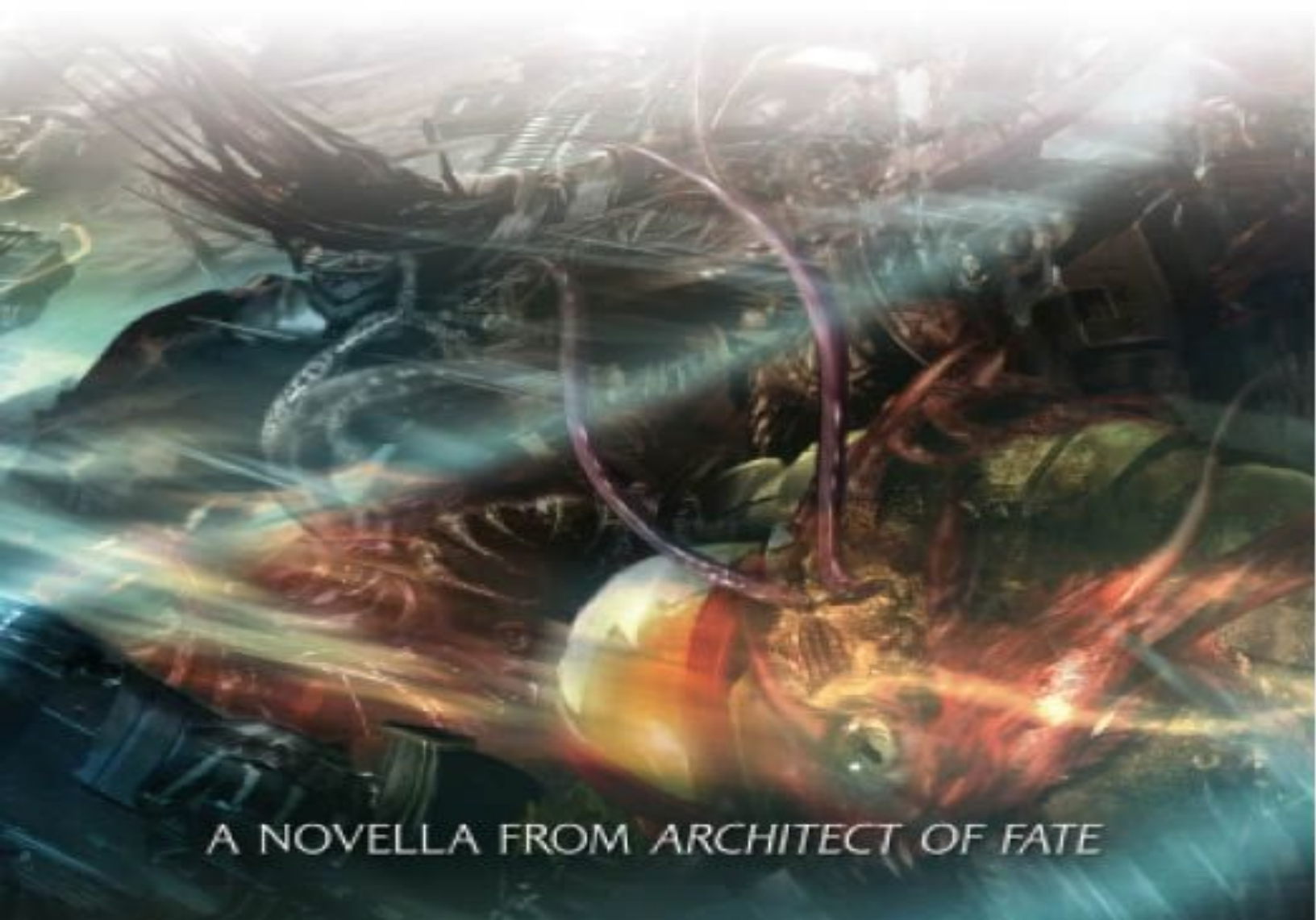
WARHAMMER

40,000

A SPACE MARINE BATTLES NOVELLA

ENDEAVOUR OF WILL

BEN COUNTER



A NOVELLA FROM ARCHITECT OF FATE

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A NOVELLA FROM *ARCHITECT OF FATE*

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

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WARHAMMER 40,000

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

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

multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

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

PART ONE

Lochos was a beautiful city.

Steel spires burned silver in the sun of Olympia. Rivers of mercury ran through the streets, winding between the forges and the temples of that warrior-world's oldest ancestors. Minarets and steeples competed to reach the sky. Mosaiced streets glittered and hearth-fires glowed deep red in the shadows between the foundries. From mountainside to seashore the city stretched, encompassing a thousand generations of Olympia's past, and a million dreams of her future.

Statues of mighty armoured men of war stood atop every important building. The new gods of Lochos, the icons of a pious world, they were the emblematic of the new galaxy and the Great Crusade that was to unite it. They were exemplars of what humanity could one day become. They were the Iron Warriors.

This was the sight that beamed down on Shon'tu as he knelt upon the sacrificial stone. The warsmith had never knelt to any man, but he knelt now, because it was in deference to something more than a man. The vision of Lochos, the lost capital of Olympia, filled him with something that might have been emotion. He could not properly remember it, because it had been ten thousand years since he had last felt joy, or sadness, or anything so petty as that. Iron within, he had told himself then. Iron Without. Never again will there be anything in this soul but the iron of purpose and the steel of fury.

Perhaps it was regret he felt. It might have been longing that flickered across Shon'tu's barely-human features, the few fleshy parts of his face almost crowded out by the steel jaw and the studded metal cranium. The man that later became Shon'tu had been born in Lochos. That man's memory remained in Shon'tu. He remembered when he left it to join the Great Crusade of the wretch he would later know as the False Emperor, the Corpse-God. He remembered when he

returned. He remembered when it fell.

Lochos was dead. Olympia was dead. But its spirit still lived.

‘I kneel,’ said Shon’tu.

‘Stand,’ replied the Spirit of Lochos.

Shon’tu stood up, armour clanking and whining, letting off jets of steam from its archaic motors. The Spirit of Lochos filled the whole ritual chamber, giving the impression that the chamber carried on for dozens of miles in every direction. In truth it was a small patch of holy ground set aside within the confines of the *Ferrous Malice*, consecrated with battlefield trophies offered up by the Iron Warriors. The ship was a relic of a previous age, pitted and scarred by the millennia, as gnarled and vicious as the Iron Warriors who rode in it. It was more than a machine or a weapon – it was cruel and self-aware like an animal trained to attack. Every piece of it was consecrated in battle, but the ritual chamber had been set aside solely for Shon’tu. The sacrificial stone was one pried from the streets of Lochos and bathed in the blood of its people long ago. Shon’tu had poured his own blood – though little enough remained in his body – onto it.

‘I was born in the streets of your city,’ continued the Spirit. ‘My birth pangs were the screams of its people. In the deeds of the Iron Warriors alone I live on. To you alone I grant my presence.’

‘The dying words of a hundred oracles brought us here,’ said Shon’tu, ‘to this place beside the Eye of Terror. They spoke of havoc and bloodshed to be wrought.’

‘They did not lie, warsmith.’

‘Then how shall we find it?’

Battles were raging in the streets of Lochos now. Citizens and soldiers facing the Space Marines of the Iron Warriors. Each Warrior was like a walking bastion, invulnerable to the fire and blades of his enemies, blazing death from his guns. The Purging of Lochos was a time of horror and betrayal, but it was also the time when the Iron Warriors had realised the weakness of the Emperor and his new order. It was the birth of Shon’tu’s Legion, a sacred time, a forging in fire. The vision of the city reddened as the streets ran with blood.

‘The Eye has opened,’ said the Spirit, ‘and Chaos pours forth. Many of the Corpse-God’s lackeys are isolated and alone, though they do not yet know it. Two star forts guard a gateway into the Eye. The *Bastion Inviolate* and the *Endeavour of Will*. If they are attacked, there are none to help them save a few. Their loss will strike a grievous blow, for deprived of them the Imperium will

not recapture the region without a crusade of a magnitude beyond its capacity to mount. But this concerns you less than those who hold them now.'

'Who?' said Shon'tu.

The bodies were being heaped up now in the squares and crossroads of Lochos. Good men and women, portrayed as rebels and traitors by the Emperor, whose deaths were demanded to prove the loyalty of the Iron Warriors. Instead, the betrayal compelled loyalty only to the powers of the warp, the Gods of Chaos, of whom the Spirit of Lochos was a messenger.

'The Sons of Dorn,' replied the Spirit of Lochos. 'The Imperial Fists.'

Warsmith Shon'tu was silent for a moment, watching the carnage in the city. He remembered being there. He remembered taking part in it. Somewhere he was there in the vision, striding from house to house, killing everything that dared move. The same bolter that hung at his waist had shed blood that day. The same combat knife sheathed on his chest. The same hands.

Then, Warsmith Shon'tu began to laugh.

'It's the *Ferrous Malice*.'

The man who had spoken, Cartographer Skune, was dwarfed by the Space Marines who stood beside him. In the gloom of the *Bastion Inviolate*'s command deck, wearing the golden armour of his Chapter, Castellan Lepidus looked more like a statue carved from amber than anything that had once been a man.

'You are certain?' said Lepidus.

'As certain as can be,' replied the Cartographer. His rank was high among the unaugmented humans who crewed the star fort, but his deference to the Space Marine was clear. He could not look Lepidus in the eye, as if Lepidus were some holy relic and Skune's eyes were unworthy to look upon him. 'The ship profile is very old and somewhat corrupt, but the correlation is clear.'

Lepidus stood at the head of the command table, which took up the centre of the deck. The deck resembled the interior of a castle on some feudal-level world, with shields and swords hung on the stone-clad walls beside tapestries of the star fort's battles, the holo-projectors and station controls hidden within the huge hardwood table. Around the edge of the chamber sat the crew, their dark blue uniforms and golden fist emblems marking them out as unaugmented men and women who served the Imperial Fists Chapter.

'Prepare the machine-spirit for war and bring all weapons on-line,' said Lepidus. A smile crept onto his face. 'And alert the astropath. Send a communication to Strike Fleet Helios informing them of our position. Include a

note for Captain Lysander. Let him know that if he is quick, he might have the chance to pick over the corpses we shall leave in our wake.'

Castellan Lepidus had earned his role in command of the *Bastion Inviolata* with several episodes of intense violence levelled against the Chapter's foes. His armour was in the form of a fortress, the ceramite collar worked into ornate battlements and his greaves buttressed like foundations. It was hung with trophies of the enemies whose lives he had taken – ears from a greenskin warlord, delicate wraithbone trinkets from a farseer of the eldar, teeth and vertebrae from a host of malformed aliens. He clapped a fist to his chestplate.

'I have a space kept here,' he said, 'for a part of the heretic who helms the *Ferrous Malice*. Many of us have sworn to take him down, and I shall be the one to keep that oath. Some finger or jawbone, a rib or a hand, it does not matter! Some piece of Warsmith Shon'tu shall hang here.' He turned to the crew already working at the various command helms, bringing up the many weapons systems of the star fort. 'Rejoice, you sons and daughters of mankind! This day you shall serve your Emperor by giving him the head of an Iron Warrior! The head of Shon'tu!'

Deep in the heart of the star fort, infernally hot and lit by the winking green lights that studded the menhirs of black datamedium, Techmarine Korgon waited for the machine-spirit of the *Bastion Inviolata* to unfurl. The intelligence was encoded in the millions of sheets of datamedium, untold trillions of calculations in every fraction of a second weaving together to create a sentience as old as the Imperium. Forged in the age before the Emperor had united humanity, the *Bastion Inviolata* had accumulated more battle-wisdom than a whole Chapter of Space Marines could boast.

From a well lined with black crystal a swarm of flickering motes rose, glowing blue and green. They coalesced into a shape that could have represented something alive, perhaps a serpent squirming in knots or a colony of polyps. Or it could have been an expression of something mathematical, a fractal constantly splitting and turning in on itself.

'*Bastion!*' called out Techmarine Korgon. 'We are at war!'

'Who,' demanded the machine-spirit, 'is the enemy?' Its synthesised voice filled the datacore of the *Bastion Inviolata*. The spirit was known to be curt and crude, constantly angry about something.

'The Iron Warriors,' replied the Techmarine. The servo-arm on his armour's backpack inserted a dataprobe into a socket on the crystal wall behind Korgon,

inputting the data the star fort's sensorium had collected on the enemy ship. 'The *Ferrous Malice*, known to be the flagship of Warsmith Shon'tu. Less than half an hour ago it emerged into real space within striking distance of us.'

'Filth-licking dogs!' spat the machine-spirit. 'Would that I had hands to wring their necks! Would that I had bowels that I might void them on their corpses!'

There was a reason Techmarine Korgon tended to converse with the machine-spirit alone. He was used to its temperament, but the same could not be said of the other Imperial Fists and Chapter crew who staffed the *Bastion Inviolate*. 'You echo our own sentiments,' he said. 'The *Ferrous Malice* is a Castigation-class grand cruiser and is a formidable foe. We ask that you lend your wisdom to the battle sure to come.'

'My wisdom?' snapped the machine-spirit. 'Wisdom counts for nothing against such a foe! No, it is hatred that will count! Rage! They stew in their filth and imagine our heads on spikes. But I'll split their hull open with my lance fire and turn them into frozen mist! My servitors will string their entrails on my battlements! Whatever foetid data festers in their systems, I'll delete it zero by one and scrape that ship bare! Long ago the *Ferrous Malice* opened its machine-spirit up to traitors and daemons! Whatever's left, I'll kill. You'll be lucky if there are any Iron Warriors left on whom to practise your aim.'

'Then I shall cede the primary weapons to you, machine-spirit,' continued Korgon. 'And retain the defensive systems under the command of my crew that you might focus on the enemy. I have ordered them to make ranging shots at—'

'Quiet!' bellowed the machine-spirit. The fractal of light flattened and spread out, the holo-image rippling over the Techmarine's armoured form and up the crystalline walls. 'I can hear them.'

'Hear them?' said Korgon. 'They are still beyond medium sensorium range. We can barely pick up any comms at all.'

'They are here,' said the spirit. 'I can taste them. I can smell their filth! Filling the radio spectrum with their ordure! Flooding the data network with seething rot! Techmarine, this is no physical assault! I am... I am besieged!'

The fractal darkened. Flecks of yellowish light flickered like fireworks in the datacore. A tendril of fractal spilled against the edge of the well, like a weary hand steadying a battered fighter.

'*Bastion!*' said Korgon in alarm. 'Speak! What ails you?'

'Witchcraft!' spat the machine-spirit. 'Daemon-magic! Flee this place, Techmarine! Flee! These rancid frag-holes, these rot-belching vermin, they have

undone me! Ten thousand years, an entire age of Imperium, and now by these cowards I am undone!’

The whole datacore shook. Shards of black crystal fell as the stacks of datamedium fractured. The floor tilted and split, crevasses opening around Korgon’s feet.

‘What must I do?’ shouted Korgon over the din of tearing metal.

‘Go! Now! Run! Take my guns and blast them from the void!’

‘I cannot leave you! I have my duty!’

‘Your duty is the destruction of our foes!’

Tendrils of yellow-green light were writhing through the steel of the deck and the crystal of the datamedium now, like snakes squirming beneath the surface of black ice. Korgon fell, the deck breaking under him, and he grabbed at the shards of metal to keep himself from sliding into the well.

The fractal was shimmering between black and sickly yellow-green, a semblance of tormented features shuddering across it. There was something else in in there with it, too, something dark and sinuous, smoky coils wrapping around the machine-spirit to strangle and constrain it.

Korgon scabbled to his feet and backed away from the struggle. The daemon-coils snagged around his feet and arms but he broke them, breaking into a run as he headed for the exit that would take him into the maintenance sections of the *Bastion Inviolate*. A hand half composed of greenish light and half seething darkness grabbed the dataprobe on the end of the Techmarine’s servo-arm and wrenched it towards one of the datamedium stacks. The probe stabbed into the black crystal and the servo-arm glowed bright as a torrent of data stormed through it.

Korgon’s back arched as his muscles convulsed. Bones cracked. His lips peeled back from his teeth and his eyes rolled back, his body shuddering. Foam flecked around his mouth.

‘Techmarine!’ yelled the machine-spirit. ‘My brother!’

Korgon’s body deformed under the convulsions of his own muscles. The ceramite of his armour buckled. Where it split, blood flowed.

Where the armour was torn, eyes bulged, veined and filmy, staring madly. Korgon the man disintegrated, replaced with something awful and inhuman.

The machine-spirit of the *Bastion Inviolate* bellowed in anguish and pain. As one the stacks of datamedium shattered, shards of crystal howling on a gale of shredded information. The daemon-shadow slithered over everything and a well of darkness erupted in the heart of the star fort.

Death came to the *Bastion Inviolata* beneath a veil of shadow and flesh.

Castellan Lepidus outlived the command deck crew by a handful of seconds. They were asphyxiated as the machine-spirit lost control to the data-daemon and the airlocks and bulkhead doors were slammed open. The air shrieked out of the star fort, dragging many crew with it, kicking out blindly as they were thrown out into the void. Those who held on died in the next moment, blood vessels rupturing, lungs bursting, their blood coughed out into a frozen mist in the sudden cold.

A Space Marine could survive the void for a while. It was not the void that killed Lepidus. It was the face that bulged up from the deck under his feet, its lines carved hard from the steel, huge glassy black eyes unblinking as Lepidus was dragged down into its yawning mouth by hands of data-shadow. The Castellan was drawn into a pit of gnashing blades, the throat of a steel serpent lined with jagged teeth, and swallowed whole by the abomination conjured from the substance of the *Bastion Inviolata*. His shouts of defiance were swallowed by the vacuum and his life winked out as his body was shredded and crushed down there beneath the deck.

The scene was repeated all across the star fort. The fort's small detail of Imperial Fists were ground to paste or impaled on fingernails of steel from hands that unfolded from the machinery around them. Others followed the crew out of the airlocks, tumbling through space, alive for the moment but certain to die as their armour's air supplies ran out. They had the last sight of the *Bastion Inviolata*, of the way its ornate arches and buttresses folded in on themselves to form huge faces, of the enormous filmy eyes that stared from the wounds opening up in the star fort's hull.

As they died, they saw the *Bastion Inviolata* die too. In its place was created something much, much worse.

Sometimes, Captain Lysander's thoughts turned to sacrifice.

The first lesson he had learned as a Space Marine was sacrifice. The man who had begun his training under the Chaplains of the Imperial Fists was long gone now, replaced by someone who was more a legacy, an embodiment of his Chapter, than a human being; but Lysander still remembered what he had learned. In battle, nothing can be won without sacrifice. Be it the expenditure of a single bullet or the death of a whole world, victory had to be paid for somehow.

Sacrifice was foremost in his mind now as he regarded the tactical map of the

region surrounding the Eye of Terror. In the immediate vicinity of the Eye, grey icons marked worlds which had been sacrificed to the tide of Chaos that had flooded from the Eye. There were the graveyards of vast armies and planetary populations, billions fallen to the Chaos-worshipping heretics who called themselves the soldiers of the Black Crusade. Prominent battles and naval actions shone bright in the holo-display, all of them marking mass sacrifices to the possibility of victory by Imperial commanders. Some had been successful. Most had not, and the campaign around the Eye was one of containment. The Chaos spearhead had to be blunted. If it burst through in force from the Eye and crashed through the cordons the Imperial Navy had thrown around it, the Black Crusade would make for Terra herself.

That would not happen. The Imperium would sacrifice everything it had to keep it from happening. The Imperial Guardsman or Naval crewman might not understand that. He might equate victory with survival, in the way that the small-minded Imperial citizen had to just to stay sane. But Lysander understood.

Lysander contemplated this in the tactical orrery of the strike cruiser *Siege of Malebruk*. The ship had been sent from Fleet Helios, the Imperial Fists fleet guarding one of the approaches from the Eye. It was all the fleet could spare. Any moment now the fleets of Chaos could approach and force the Imperial Fists to a naval battle. Lysander himself was an asset that the Imperial Fists could ill afford to have anywhere but in the heart of battle – but his task was more important even than to lead his brother Space Marines of Fleet Helios.

His task was to confirm that Warsmith Shon'tu really was dead.

Lysander's vox-link chirped behind his ear.

'Speak,' he said.

'Captain,' came the voice of the ship's commander, Chrystis. 'We are exiting the warp. All indicators green.'

'Contact the *Bastion Inviolata* and the *Endeavour of Will* as soon as we are in real space,' said Lysander. 'Have us battle-ready. The fight will have been joined and may still be going on. We must be ready to lend our guns.'

'Yes, captain,' replied Chrystis. 'Breaching real space now. The Emperor protects.'

The tactical orrery, clad in brass and inscribed with the cogs and stylised enginework of the Adeptus Mechanicus, shuddered as the *Siege* tore through the veil between the warp and reality. For a split-second the architecture of the orrery shifted; impossible angles ghosted across its architecture as reality protested at the intrusion. Then the moment was over and the *Siege* was back in

reality.

The holo-display winked out and was replaced, the ship's immediate vicinity being picked out in light. The *Endeavour of Will* was surrounded by flickering icons representing its small garrison of Imperial Fists. A star a handful of light hours away, with dead moonlets and a band of asteroids. Long-defunct explorer platforms.

There was no *Bastion Inviolate*.

'Comms coming in,' came Chrystis's voice over the vox. 'It's garbled. Distress beacons everywhere from the Endeavour.'

'What of the Bastion?' demanded Lysander.

'Nothing,' said Chrystis. 'We're searching for it. It's not putting out anything, not even static beacons.'

'Find it,' said Lysander.

'Yes, captain. Should we hold position?'

'No,' said Lysander. 'Bring us in to the *Endeavour of Will*.'

Daemon virus, the last message had said. In the arcane code of the astropath, it had flickered across from one star fort to the other at the speed of thought.

Witchcraft. Moral threat. We are undone.

The words ran through Techmarine Hestion's mind as he shouldered his way through the bulkhead door, forging a path through a maintenance passage not built for a Space Marine in armour. From somewhere deep in the engine and power sections of the *Endeavour of Will*, warning klaxons were blaring and synthesised voices were issuing dire warnings in a confused babble of sound.

Hestion pulled himself through a hatch into a vast, cold vault. The arched ceiling high above was obscured with freezing mist, and the polished metal of the walls was caked in ice. The vault housed a roughly spherical mass of archeotech, a biomechanical mass woven together from dozens of human forms, swathed in cabling and steel casings. The machine-spirit of the *Endeavour of Will* was housed here, the rhythms of a hundred human bodies regulating its functions and a hundred human brains containing the architecture of its mind. Just as the servitors that maintained the star fort's systems were built around the bodies of deceased crew, so this machine was composed of the bodies of the various tech-adepts and magi who had maintained it over the millennia. Their final honour had been to join the machine-spirit, their own minds mingled with it, their own wisdom added to the vast knowledge fillings its memory banks.

'I can see them,' said the *Endeavour of Will*, its voice issuing from its

hundred mouths. ‘They are between the seventh and eighth moons. They watch us.’

‘The enemy ship is not the biggest threat,’ said Hestion. ‘The last communication from the *Bastion Inviolata* spoke of witchcraft. Of a tech-virus, born of daemon magic.’

‘Then the *Bastion* is lost,’ said the *Endeavour of Will*. ‘I felt an emptiness in the realm of information, and I feared my friend was gone. For ten thousand years we have been brothers, forged in the same age, fighting alongside one another in the age that followed. So does time rob us even of that which cannot die.’

‘They will assault us next,’ said Hestion. ‘Shon’tu and his Iron Warriors will not be satisfied with one prize. He will want to take us too.’

‘He cannot have us,’ said the *Endeavour of Will*. ‘You and I, we are forewarned. We will fend off this daemon-scourge. Shon’tu will have to pursue his victory with gun and blade, not witchcraft.’

‘This I swear too,’ said Hestion.

A Space Marine’s lifespan far eclipsed that of an unaugmented human, but even by a Space Marine’s standards Hestion was old. His long, mournful face seemed out of place in the red and gold armour of an Imperial Fists Techmarine. He lacked none of the size and presence of a Space Marine, but somehow still looked more like he should be bent over a scholar’s desk instead of bringing fire and bloodshed to the Emperor’s enemies. Sure enough, bundles of scrolls and books hung from his armour, containing the various tech-rites with which he honoured the spirits of the machines and wargear he maintained for the Chapter.

Hestion took one of the thickest books and his servo-arm unfolded down over his shoulder, the manipulator at its tip unlocking the clasp holding the book’s cover closed. Hestion flipped rapidly through the pages and found the ritual he was looking for.

The pages were covered in blocks of zeroes and ones, separated by complicated algebra. Hestion ran his finger down the page, the bionics behind his eyes whirring as they parsed the phrases of machine-code and sent them to the logic circuits in the back of his skull.

‘Ommissiah,’ read Hestion. ‘You whose knowledge builds a fortress of understanding in the realm of information. You whose domain is everything forged and wrought. The dark powers look upon your servant with jealousy. Protect him and snatch his sacred knowledge back from the jaws of sin.’

The mouths of the many bodies opened. The machine-spirit inside

coordinated their vocal cords to create a harmony of machine-code, a white noise of clicking and buzzing that echoed Hestion's words in a language that an unaltered human mind could not comprehend. Fingers twitched as their nervous systems, long unused to movement, stuttered into life.

'Ah, they are here,' growled the *Endeavour of Will*. Warning lights flickered across the casing, sending red-edged shadows flitting across the columns and arches of the vault. 'An edifice of such profane knowledge, crashing through the sea of understanding like a ship crewed by the dead and hung with the trophies of violation. Would that you could see them, Imperial Fist! Even your vaunted hate would be inflamed to a new height!'

Warning icons ghosted over Hestion's vision, projected onto his retina. They told him that an unknown vessel had breached the sensorium range of the *Endeavour of Will* and was approaching fast, cloaked in all manner of sensor-f fooling effects that rendered it a shadow on the void. The Imperial Fists garrison and the human crew, already on the highest of alerts after the death rattle of the *Bastion Inviolate*, were powering up the star fort's weapons.

'But it was not guns or torpedoes that took down my brother star fort,' continued the machine-spirit. 'That is something he could have fought on his own terms! Fire with fire! No, it was the very soul of deceit that brought him low. But I will not follow him into the depths of ignorance! I will not be lied to! By the holy truth shall I be shielded!'

Hestion's servo-arm reconfigured and seared a complicated pentagrammic symbol on the floor of the vault with a cutting laser. The steel of the floor seethed and bubbled around it, and not just with heat.

The shadows were darkening. The bodies of the machine-spirit's casing were ageing rapidly, skin turning grey and flaking away, muscle and organ sinking into skeletal hollows. Faces decayed into bare teeth and black eye sockets.

'Omnissiah, grant us your aid!' shouted Hestion. 'Delete not this ancient soul! Permit not this corruption!'

Crackles of red lightning played across the high ceiling forming blood-coloured fingers along the columns and walls. Distant voices chanted and gabbled, competing with Hestion's lone voice. One section of the wall bowed in and split, becoming the lids of a huge bloodshot eye that rolled madly. Hestion yelled and threw a handful of pure carbon into the circle, and the eye withdrew.

The vault was shuddering. Voices were flitting across the star fort's vox-net, carrying information about the enemy drawing closer. It was a grand cruiser, its shape well-known by the tactical histories accessed from the valley of

datamedium in which the machine-spirit kept its immense reserves of knowledge. It was a flagship of the Iron Warriors, servants of Chaos. If Hestion did not fend off their daemonic attack, the Imperial Fists would never have the chance to look this enemy in the face.

Thick reddish veins blistered up from the floor and up the side of the machine-spirit's casing. Withered bodies broke and flopped aside, revealing the tangle of circuitry and cabling inside.

'Back! Back to the warp with you!' came the machine-spirit's voice, distorted to an atonal bray. 'You will not have this soul! For ten thousand years I have wrought a grim end for your kind! I will not die now! Not now!'

Hestion looked around him. Corruption was flooding through the vault. Eyes were opening above him. The circle, the focus for his ritual, was distorting, new symbols appearing among the sigils of protection and warding.

'Flee!' said Hestion. 'Move your spirit to your datamedium vault! Abandon this place!'

'I cannot,' replied the *Endeavour of Will*, synthesised voice distorted. 'It will follow me. There all my knowledge is vulnerable.'

'They will not follow you,' said Hestion. 'I swear. I cannot hold it back here. I will not lose you. Flee, *Endeavour of Will*! Let this fight be mine!'

'Then Emperor's speed upon you, Techmarine,' said the *Endeavour of Will*. 'What you have done for me will never be deleted.'

The lights on the casing turned dark. The bodies remaining fell limp, the cacophony of their machine-code silent and replaced by the wrenching of metal as the vault was warped and distorted by the daemonic virus seeking out a way to the machine-spirit.

Hestion extended his servo-arm and plunged it into the machine-spirit's casing. 'In a few seconds you will reach this machine,' he said aloud, knowing that whatever was attacking the star fort could hear him. 'And nothing I can do will stop that. But you will find no way to the machine-spirit. Your virus will follow the only path it can, the only one open to it, and that is me! My body! You will never reach it, because you have to go through me first!'

All the mass of profane knowledge that made up the daemon-virus, all the vastness of its hate and the torrent of its blasphemy, poured through Techmarine Hestion's body. Hestion jerked and spasmed as if in the throes of electric shock, fire spitting from the extremities of his armour. The edges of his battle-plate glowed red and the skin around his collar scorched as he cooked in the heat. Blood ran from his eyes and ears. He slumped to his knees but did not fall,

muscles held rigid by the force of the current.

The daemon virus coalesced into a pair of triangular red eyes, blistering down from the ceiling of the machine-spirit vault. Monstrous features pushed against the steel of the vault from the other side of reality, gnashing mandibles twisted with anger, pseudopods bowing up the floor and pushing in the walls. The daemon's roar echoed through the chamber, competing with the howl of twisting metal and the crackle of the power coursing through Hestion.

Hestion ripped the dataprobe from the machine-spirit casing. The link was snapped. Its information spine broken, the daemon screamed, an impossible sound that was both loud and distant, a thunder from another dimension booming through the star fort. The whole vault was suddenly twisted as if wrenched in two opposite directions by a pair of gigantic hands, and shards of torn metal fell from the broken columns.

Hestion fell to the floor, smoke rising from him, blood dribbling from his face. He dragged himself half a pace and slumped again, all his energy drained away by the task of standing against the virus. He doubled up in pain as the vault collapsed around him. The whole ceiling loomed down as the fabric of the vault failed.

Hestion waited to die. He would be crushed as the machine-spirit vault collapsed on top of him. He had saved the *Endeavour of Will*. To die fulfilling such a duty was no bad death.

He was moving now. He thought the floor had partly collapsed into the maintenance deck below and was tilting, and that he was sliding towards a crevasse opening up. But what little of his sight remained caught a glimpse of a gold-armoured hand grabbing one wrist and dragging him away from the collapse, towards the vault entrance. Behind him the machine-spirit casing disappeared in a torrent of torn metal where he had been lying a moment before.

Hestion forced his head to turn. Skin tore away where it had been welded to his collar armour. But what he saw took enough of the pain away.

He was looking up at Captain Lysander.

Velthinar Silverspine recoiled in anger, shuddering the jewel-encrusted pillars of its temple. Slabs of silver fell from the wall, and the lesser abominations that attended on it, misshapen things like mosquitoes crossed with many-armed humans, squealed and flitted around in fear. One of Velthinar's many limbs swatted a couple from the air, slamming them against the temple walls.

Around the temple, which took up a good portion of the midsection of the

Ferrous Malice, ran a gallery where supplicants and sacrifices could walk around the temple at Velthinar's eye level. At intervals along this gallery were statues looted from benighted, primitive worlds where the gods of the warp were worshipped, and their sacred power helped keep Velthinar manifest while the *Ferrous Malice* was in real space. Onto this gallery emerged Warsmith Shon'tu, the only man on the ship who could walk into the presence of Velthinar when it was angry and not rile it up further.

Velthinar, if anything, sank down a little at the sight of the warsmith. It was here on the sufferance of the Iron Warriors leader, whether it liked it or not.

'You failed,' said Shon'tu.

It was not an accusation. It was just a statement of fact.

'I was betrayed!' replied the daemon. 'Betrayed by ignorance! One of them was armed with the knowledge of their false machine-idol. That pitiful god of stupidity and rust! That its teachings should befuddle me so! Had I known I would have stripped that information from their minds and left them grass-eating imbeciles.'

'But you did not,' said Shon'tu. 'Your virus form could not break the *Endeavour of Will*.'

'It will,' said Velthinar. 'It will! The next time I will decorate the walls with the liquid mush I leave of their brains! I will—'

'There will not be a next time.'

The daemon Velthinar Silverspine resembled an enormous bloated insect, something that might be found clinging to a leaf on a poisonous jungle world but expanded to a titanic size. Its fleshy bulk could not be contained within its exoskeleton and bulged between the carapace plates in pallid hanging folds. It had legs, many of them, but its size was such that it could not hope to move normally, and it lay on its back with its head curled up over its thorax. Its carapace was iridescent and jewelled, like a suit of alien armour created by the finest craftsmen, with fine silver filigree over plates of deep blue that shimmered to purple. Its head was a mass of eyes and mouthparts, its mandibles sheathed in silver and decorative rings and jewels hanging from every piece of exposed flesh. Its eyes were orbs of red and blue, misty and swirling inside like a soothsayer's crystal ball. Its lack of apparent mobility was irrelevant given its role – its shadow form, the shape it took when shifted into the realm of information, was the form it used to do all its damage. It was the techno-virus that had destroyed the *Bastion Inviolate*, just as it was the insectoid horror that lurked inside the *Ferrous Malice* like a parasite in a hollowed-out organ.

‘But... to me was promised the spirit of the star forts!’ Velthinar’s voice, issued from several sets of mouthparts, sounded like several chittering, sibilant voices clamouring at once.

‘And you promised that you would cripple their machine-spirits and deliver them to us!’ snapped Shon’tu. Velthinar’s flesh rippled as it recoiled a little. ‘You will devour the *Bastion Inviolate*. That you have earned. But you did not deliver on your side of the bargain where the *Endeavour of Will* is concerned. The Iron Warriors will do with that star fort as we wish.’

Velthinar’s many eyes narrowed. ‘If you think, warsmith, that a lord of the Silver Towers will be cowed by your anger...’

‘Anger?’ replied Shon’tu. ‘Why do you think I am angry?’

It was normally impossible to read expressions from the daemon’s alien face, but the wagging of its mandibles and flexing of its forelimbs might well have indicated confusion.

‘The lords of my Legion care only that a blow is struck against the sons of Dorn,’ continued Shon’tu. ‘But what glory is there in watching their corpses tumble through the void? What pleasure can be gained from giving the kill to a creature such as you? Now, the Iron Warriors can face the Imperial Fists as it should be, face to face! The iron within us, and the iron without, will crush their entreaties to their Corpse-Emperor, and prove with whom the strength of the warp lies! Perhaps we need some humanity in us, daemon, to understand. Whatever I now am, I was once a human being, a man, and still I possess the jealousy and rage of a man faced with an enemy whose inferiority he cannot demonstrate. Now I can sate that anger with the blood of Imperial Fists! I give thanks to all the gods that you have failed, Velthinar. It is a gift from the warp! I am not here to remonstrate with you. I am here to tell you to stay out of our way until the killing is done.’

Velthinar was silent for a moment, limbs folding and unfolding as its various eyes came to focus on the Iron Warrior. ‘I begin to understand,’ said the daemon, ‘why this task was given to you.’

The apothecarion of the *Endeavour of Will* was kept dark, the patients illuminated by the spotglobes that trained their lights on the prayer book over each bed. Automated manipulators turned each page at regular intervals, to make sure that if no one else was reading a prayer over the wounded, the eyes of the Emperor at least were looking on their words of devotion.

The *Endeavour of Will* had an apothecarion large enough for the wounded of

an army. Now, however, it only had one patient – Techmarine Hestion, stripped of his armour and surrounded by medical servitors patiently weaving artificial skin over the wet red expanses of his burnt body.

Lysander watched the servitors work. Hestion was unconscious, kept in an induced coma by the autosurgeon pumping chemicals into his system. He could die then and there, or he could hold on for a long time. But Hestion was most certainly dying.

‘His sacrifice will be remembered,’ came a voice behind Lysander. Lysander turned to see another Imperial Fist in the doorway of the apothecarion. He walked into the ward, the dim light revealing him to be a lot younger than either Lysander or Hestion, a sergeant by his markings of rank, fresh-faced and relatively unscarred by the years of battle a Space Marine veteran endured. Young, thought Lysander, to have his own squad. Five Imperial Fists, wearing the same squad markings, followed him in.

‘It is our duty,’ replied Lysander, ‘to see that someone lives to remember.’

The sergeant held out a gauntlet. ‘Sergeant Rigalto,’ he said. ‘It is an honour, First Captain.’

Lysander remembered the name. Every Space Marine in a Chapter at least knew of every other. Lysander remembered Rigalto as a line trooper, bright and respected, but not an officer.

‘Those campaign badges,’ said Lysander. ‘Agripinaa subsector.’

‘You are correct, captain. Storming of the Basilica Pestilax.’

‘Then that explains it,’ said Lysander.

‘Explains it?’

‘Heavy losses at the Basilica. Your sergeant died and you took his place. Am I correct?’

‘You are,’ said Rigalto. ‘My honour and my despair. I saw him die, and could not stop it. One day he will be avenged.’

‘Such things must be known by a captain of the Chapter without asking,’ said Lysander. ‘We are spread so thin, we can die without our brothers knowing of it.’

‘They will all be remembered, just like Techmarine Hestion,’ said Rigalto.

‘In time, their names will be written down, when the enemy is driven back into the Eye.’

Lysander nodded. ‘That at least I can promise. Well, we have you and your squad, and myself. Who else holds the *Endeavour of Will*?’

‘Scout squad Menander,’ replied Rigalto. ‘They are on their tour of service, in preparation for elevation to full brotherhood. The station crew under

Engineer Selicron, and Astropath Vaynce.’

‘And my command squad,’ said Lysander. ‘Seventeen Imperial Fists, including myself. Quite the army, is it not?’

‘And the *Siege of Malebruk*,’ said Rigalto. ‘And the weapons of the star fort. Thanks to Hestion, the machine-spirit still has some of the weapons on-line.’

‘Enough to kill Shon’tu,’ said Lysander. ‘He banked on us being slain by his virus attack without his traitors having to raise their guns. Now he must give us a fight that we can win.’

‘I have heard tell,’ said Rigalto, ‘of the *Shield of Valour*. Of Malodrax. To us, those who were recruited after the event, it is told like a parable. But to you, it was real. It is memory. To fight alongside one who—’

‘Malodrax is in the past,’ said Lysander, holding up a hand to silence Rigalto. ‘A battle is to be fought now, and it is to the present that I would have us turn our thoughts.’

‘Then it is enough to say that we shall help you make the Iron Warriors pay for the *Shield of Valour*, and all that followed.’

Lysander’s vox-link chirped. ‘Chrystis here,’ came the transmission from the *Siege of Malebruk*.

‘Speak,’ said Lysander.

‘Captain, we are under attack.’

From the glare of the system’s sun, the waning red star Kholestus, the *Ferrous Malice* dived through sensor-baffling bands of solar radiation.

The *Siege of Malebruk* turned to face it, presenting a broadside which brought as many of its guns to bear as possible. In its tactical orrery, Chrystis and the ship’s battle-cartographers used holographic void-maps and rulers and compasses alike to build up an arsenal of manoeuvres the *Siege* could execute depending on the actions of their enemy. On the *Ferrous Malice* far less natural things, crewmen possessed with daemons of cunning and corrupted machine-spirits, were doing the same.

Naval battle proceeded at its own pace, as if time meant something different when it came to ship-to-ship murder in the void. Torpedoes and broadside shells proceeded not at the speed of gunfire, but lazily, spiralling through space to intersect with the likely locations of the enemy. It was war in which geometry and helmsmanship counted for more than aggression and fearlessness, cold-blooded and removed compared to the thunder of face-to-face battle.

That cool detachment broke as the first shells hit home. The barrage from the

Ferrous Malice's nose cannons speckled the hull of the *Siege* with silvery explosions, and inside, crewmen were shredded as metal deformed into bursts of jagged blades. Air shrieked out of hull breaches and damage control teams stationed beyond the inner hull died as the void boomed in to strangle and freeze them. Fires broke out, cutting off teams of crewmen with walls of flame.

The return fire from the *Siege* took its toll, hammering into the armoured prow of the enemy ship. Hull plates were torn free, and ribbons of frozen blood billowed out as the strange, half-living physiology of the ship was breached. The *Ferrous Malice* passed under the *Siege*, both ships battered by the first exchange of fire.

The *Ferrous Malice* was the larger ship, a grand cruiser of a design long forgotten by the shipyards of the Imperial Navy, and it sported more firepower covering every angle of attack. But the *Siege of Malebruk* was a Space Marine strike cruiser, with far greater agility and a quick-witted machine-spirit that calculated thousands of attack solutions every moment at the same time as fending off the virus attacks from the mind of Velthinar Silverspine. The two spiralled around one another, the Chaos vessel in one moment seeming lumbering and slow, and in the next making the strike cruiser seem massively outgunned and outclassed.

But this was just the overture. In a plume of purple black flame, alchemical rockets flared along the spine of the *Ferrous Malice* and slowed it down suddenly, twisting it into a reverse manoeuvre far beyond any Imperial-built ships of its size. At the same time its prow split open, revealing folds and tendons of vulnerable muscle, already torn and bleeding from the opening fire. From this biomechanical mass emerged the snout of a nova cannon. Few Imperial shipyards could forge such a weapon now, and none knew the secrets of creating the nuclear flame that now flared around the barrel as the weapon charged.

The crew of the *Siege of Malebruk* responded to this unexpected change in the battlefield by turning every effort towards evasion. The machine-spirit charted a crazed, jinking path that wrapped itself around the *Ferrous Malice*, too far for defensive turrets to open up against the strike cruiser but too close for the nova cannon to be brought to bear.

The nova cannon stayed silent. The *Siege of Malebruk* moved out of its arc of fire, even as the Chaos ship's alchemical rockets fired again to turn it back on itself again.

The *Ferrous Malice* had no machine-spirit. In place of an artificial

intelligence roosted a host of data-daemons, insubstantial warp creatures that flocked to serve their master, Velthinar. They squabbled and fought faster than the speed of thought and, through the sheer bedlam that went through their inhuman minds, wove battle plans that no enemy could predict. Their pronouncements were passed on to the crew and the strange unwholesome creatures that writhed through the oil sumps of the engine decks. The insane command structure of the ship, with the Iron Warriors overseeing multiple castes of mind-slaves, possessors, daemons and mutants, should never have permitted anything so complicated as a warship to function – but the *Ferrous Malice* was a construct of Chaos, transformed into a voidbound asylum by millennia in the warp, and by some incomprehensible process all the madness produced a ship that could think and act faster than should have been possible for its size.

And so the *Ferrous Malice* rolled on its side, presenting a scarred expanse of hull to the enemy. The broadside guns mounted there did not fire, and the crew of the *Siege of Malebruk* took advantage of this unusual good luck to hammer out a broadside of their own, stripping away hull plating and ripping charred craters along the length of the enemy. Fires billowed out into the void as ammunition and fuel stores cooked off. The wounding was terrible, with laser turrets boring holes decks deep and vast areas of the *Ferrous Malice* depressurising and throwing struggling handfuls of crew into space.

Then the hull peeled away of its own accord. Coils of muscle unravelled, whipping across the closing gap between the two ships and wrapping around the extremities of the *Siege of Malebruk*. The tentacles reeled in the strike cruiser, even as armoured beaks, like the mouthparts of some sea-dwelling kraken, emerged from the ruination of torn flesh and metal inside the *Ferrous Malice*.

The machine-spirit of the *Siege of Malebruk* had not factored in this turn of events. The ship had nothing to fight off the grand cruiser's predations. Up close it had its defensive turret fire, which was designed to shoot down approaching torpedoes and bombers, and would have scarcely any impact on the mass of the *Ferrous Malice*. It had the option to board, but aside from the few spare crewmen it could arm it had only the single command squad who had accompanied Captain Lysander to the star fort. The *Ferrous Malice*, meanwhile, was guaranteed to be brimming with mutants, psychopaths and worse.

The Imperial Fists on board, offensive as the presence of the *Ferrous Malice* was, would not throw their lives away boarding it and accepting certain death. They would do more good opposing the ship's undoubted intention to take on the *Endeavour of Will*. The order was given for the *Siege of Malebruk*'s crew to

abandon ship.

The *Ferrous Malice* had no intention of letting all those fleshy morsels go. Tendrils snapped out from its ruptured hull, snaring saviour pods and shuttle craft as they fled the *Siege*. Dozens of men and women died as their escape craft were smashed open, or were forced alive down one of the gullets that opened up within the biological mass beneath the hull of the *Ferrous Malice*. The armoured shuttle carrying the Imperial Fists weaved between spinning wrecks and the biological growths trying to ensnare it, the survival of five of the Imperium's finest warriors now down to nothing more than the encoded skills of a servitor-pilot and a hefty dose of fate.

The *Ferrous Malice* reeled the *Siege of Malebruk* into a close embrace. Beaks armoured with bone crunched into the strike cruiser's hull, ripping through decks and shearing off one of the ship's engine sections. Plasma coolant billowed silver-black into the vacuum, and the reactors discharged their power load in a storm of blue lightning. The shockwaves tore apart more escape craft, or shredded their guidance systems to send them tumbling without power in all directions.

The Chaos ship dismembered the strike cruiser, forcing massive chunks of spaceship into its many jaws. The machine-spirit of the *Siege of Malebruk* survived until the last, moving from one stack of datamedium to the next as parts of the ship were crushed or torn away. The strike cruiser was a gutted shell by the time it ran out of places to hide, and its existence winked out in the closing maw of the Chaos ship.

The *Ferrous Malice* let the remains of the *Siege of Malebruk* drift away. One side of the strike cruiser was gone completely, the rest hollowed out like a carcass abandoned by scavengers. The Chaos ship had a bloated appearance, an insect gorged on blood, squatting in a haze of debris. Only a few silvery specks remained of the *Siege's* crew. The *Ferrous Malice*, sated for now, ignored the fleeing escape craft, and the escapees clung to life for a few hours more as their craft headed for the relative safety of the *Endeavour of Will*. Among them were the five members of the Imperial Fists First Company, seething with eagerness to get to grips with the enemy who had just handed them such a total defeat.

PART TWO

Shon'tu stepped through the door of the Dreadclaw, and breathed in the ancient, stale air of a dying empire.

Behind him, a squad of Iron Warriors followed him out of the Dreadclaw's jaws and into the interior of the *Endeavour of Will*. The Dreadclaw was a make of hull-boring assault capsule that the Imperium had long since forgotten how to make, but which still hung in their dozens over the assault decks of the *Ferrous Malice*. Its bronze-cased beak had torn through the star fort's outer layers and come to rest in a maze of maintenance passages and superstructure supports, into which the Iron Warriors emerged already prepared for a fight.

Shon'tu went helmetless, for even a sudden vacuum could do little harm to his artificial skin and bionic lungs. 'Dust and desolation,' he said. 'Like the inside of a tomb. Such a lifeless place.'

'And we shall make it literally so,' said Brother Ku'Van, one of the veterans accompanying Shon'tu.

'As we have done so many times before, my brethren,' replied the warsmith. 'We shall leave this voidbound coffin as empty as the souls of those we kill. For they have no iron within!'

'Iron within!' shouted the squad in response. 'Iron without!'

'Warsmith!' came a vox from somewhere nearby, among the webs of dark iron and cramped maintenance spaces that soared in every direction. The rune on Shon'tu's retina told him it was Steelwatcher Mhul speaking. 'My coven has made safe breach.'

'As has the Choir,' came another vox from Forge-Chaplain Koultus. Koultus's voice was unmistakable, a brash growl of amplified bass and churning sub-tones. It had to be, or the Choir couldn't have heard the prayers with which he drove them forwards.

'Then converge on me, brothers,' replied Shon'tu. 'To you has been given the honour of accompanying me in this boarding action. Prove to me that you

deserve my favour. Drive on, strike hard and without pause, and we will drive a spear of iron into the heart of this place!’

‘Well met, captain,’ said Brother-Sergeant Laocos, clapping a hand to the enormous ceramite barrel of his chest.

‘Well met, my brother,’ replied Lysander.

The star fort’s archive, a high-ceilinged room lined with cases of books and scroll tubes, was one of the few places Lysander and the Imperial Fists of his command squad could gather without being cramped. Like Lysander, the five-strong squad wore Terminator armour, a mark of the esteem in which the Chapter held the First Company, and the rarest and most advanced piece of wargear in the Chapter’s armouries. Each man was closer to a walking tank than a single soldier, close to three metres tall and not much less across. Most other suitable places on the *Endeavour of Will* were too small to accommodate them all comfortably. It was the first time Lysander had seen the men of his command squad since he had left the *Siege of Malebruk* to see to the star fort’s situation in person.

‘I so nearly lost you’ continued Lysander. ‘The Emperor’s shield was on you.’

‘Perhaps’ said Laocos. ‘But the *Siege* did not have such good fortune.’

‘I saw only via the tactical sensors here,’ said Lysander. ‘It looked bad enough from there.’

‘It was a horror such as I have rarely witnessed,’ replied Laocos. ‘All we knew of Shon’tu and the *Ferrous Malice* is but a fragment of the truth. We were—’

‘We were caught out,’ said Lysander grimly. ‘This is not an act of opportunism by the Iron Warriors. Scavengers they may be at heart, but Shon’tu knew the disposition of the star forts and the fact we could spare but few to defend them if their own weaponry failed. He had exactly the tools he needed to destroy them, and but for the valour of Techmarine Hestion he would have done just that. He made sure to bring a ship the equal of the best we could afford to spare from the front line. What we know – what I know – of Shon’tu is enough to tell me that he will have brought the means to destroy the *Endeavour of Will* now, even when his assault on the machine-spirit failed.’

‘Then what will he do next?’ said Brother-Scholar Demosthor. Demosthor, in training to attend the Reclusiam of the Chapter’s Chaplains, had passages of Dorn’s philosophy pinned to his armour, and to the casing of the squad’s assault

cannon, which he carried.

‘The Iron Warriors are creatures of directness,’ said Lysander. ‘Not for Shon’tu another round of deceit and trickery. He will take the path that leads most clearly to victory, though it may be the hardest.’ He looked from face to face, noting the features of men who had served their Chapter for the better part of centuries even before they had been assigned to Lysander’s own squad. ‘Shon’tu is going to board us. Against any other enemy, any other Chapter, he might pause. But not against us. He wants to fight us. He wants our blood on him, he wants to see us die.’

‘If he wants battle,’ said Laocos, ‘should we give it to him?’

His words were answered with an explosion from somewhere far off in the body of the star fort, and the equally distant blaring of alarms and klaxons. A cogitator console near the door of the archive lit up with warning icons.

‘We will,’ said Lysander. ‘To arms, Fists of Dorn.’

The star fort’s six segments radiated around its core. The core, heavily armoured and covered by the defensive weapons the machine-spirit still controlled, housed the datamedia vault and other essential command systems, along with the power plant. The six segments housed all the other structures needed for a battle station – barracks, now almost completely empty, supplies and ammunition stores, fighter decks silent without crew to fly the fighters and bombers stored there, fuel tanks, sensorium stations and mountings for weapons now lost to the machine-spirit. Here could also be found the places of worship used by the station’s crew, chapels to many faces of the Emperor and shrines to Rogal Dorn for the use of the Imperial Fists.

One of these sacred places was consecrated to the hero of the Chapter who was entombed there. In death, he still watched out on the void for the enemies of mankind, for his sarcophagus had been installed on the *Endeavour of Will* some two and a half thousand years before.

It was at the Tomb of Ionis that the Imperial Fists drew the battle lines.

Scout Sergeant Menander peered across the expanse of the Tomb of Ionis, his magnoculars sweeping past the fluted columns and scrollwork. It was a forest of stonework, as dense as a death world jungle. With little need to conserve space on the huge star fort, the tomb had grown with successive generations of masons and artisans, so the sarcophagus sat at the centre of a labyrinth of statuary and decoration. The sarcophagus itself rose like a granite mesa in the centre of the

tomb, crowned with an outsized carving of Ionis himself lying in state.

Menander's squad crouched around him among the coils of stone. Their cameleoline cloaks had turned speckled grey to match their surroundings, and they were adept at clinging to the shadows and breaking up lines of sight. Menander's four Imperial Fists Scouts carried sniper rifles, draped in cameleoline strips to diffuse the outlines of the weapons.

'Brother Moltos,' said Menander softly. 'Bless us.'

Brother Moltos made the sign of the aquila, and clapped a hand silently to his chest in the salute of Dorn. 'Emperor most high, and Omnissiah who knows all, bless this battle-gear that will so sorely be tested. Keep our lenses bright and focused, and fill them with the sight of the enemy. Let our bullets fly true. Let the armour of the enemy crumble before them. Let them find nothing but the hearts of traitors.'

'Amen,' said Menander, echoed by the other three Scouts. 'Spread out. Intel pattern. Do not engage.'

The Scouts split up and moved quietly through the tomb, heading on different winding paths towards the sarcophagus. Menander glanced behind him and could see the glint of golden ceramite between the columns lining the near edge of the tomb. Captain Lysander and Sergeant Rigalto's squads were mustering there, ready to act.

And somewhere up ahead were the enemy.

'I have movement,' came a subvocalised vox message from Menander's right. Scout-Brother Tisiphon's rune winked. 'Three hundred metres, approaching. Two of the clock.'

Menander looked in the direction Tisiphon had indicated. He thought he could see movement, black against black. He held up his magnoculars and could make out, clearly now, the dark shape advancing towards the Imperial Fists.

It moved without concern to stealth. Menander could even hear it now, crunching through granite carvings. It was taller than a Space Marine and far more broad, and the oily gunmetal of the Iron Warriors' armour was deformed by red, weeping bands of corded muscle.

'Captain,' voxed Menander. 'I have sighted the enemy.'

'Is Shon'tu among them?' came Captain Lysander's reply.

'I cannot tell,' said Menander. 'They have sent in the Obliterators.'

Shon'tu watched as the Obliterators forged ahead. The five sons of the Coven, marshalled by the relatively normal Steelwatcher Mhul. Each Obliterator had

once been an Iron Warrior, just like Shon'tu or Mhul himself. But the fates had seen fit to infect them with a warp-born tech-virus that had melded their flesh and armour into one, and turned them into machines of Chaos.

The Obliterators were twice the size of a Space Marine, and crashed through the statuary towards the high ground of the sarcophagus. Their limbs, wrapped in clubbing masses of muscle, opened up into dozens of orifices from which emerged gun barrels and chainblades. Each one was a walking arsenal, containing within him the firepower of a whole squad of Space Marines.

The rest of the strikeforce advanced in their wake. Shon'tu's own squad, alongside the Choir, swept the avenues of fire with bolter barrels, watching for the glint of Imperial Fists armour. Lysander's men had chosen to face them here, perhaps to force a decisive battle, perhaps because this was sacred ground.

'Brethren!' bellowed the amplified voice of Forge-Chaplain Koultus. Koultus's skull-shaped faceplate had a yawning mouth framing a speaker which boomed his voice in all directions. 'Behold you all the enemy! They cower from us! They that pray death might come before their weak hearts compel them to flee! Grant their wishes, and by iron seal their fates!'

The Choir rushed forwards around him, leaping through the wreckage left by the Obliterators. Their gunmetal armour burned from the inside, blue and red flames flickering where the plasteel plates met. The fires were barely contained, for they formed the haloes of daemons caged within them, desperate to break free through the sacrament of combat.

The first of the Obliterators clambered into the lip of the sarcophagus. Its limbs reformed into twin assault cannons, bundles of revolving barrels which span as they hammered out a rain of fire towards the Imperial Fists at the other end of the tomb. A few return shots snapped up at it, but the Obliterator stood proud as its brothers of the Coven took up position beside it. Steelwatcher Mhul was directing their fire, crouched beside the huge sarcophagus, the enlarged lens of his bionic eye sending greenish light beams playing across the statuary ahead.

Shon'tu's own veteran squad were the backbone of this force, advancing patiently with bolters levelled. Soon their fire would chew through the few Imperial Fists that weathered the storm of the Obliterators. Shon'tu was a patient creature, but even his soul seemed to drag him forwards a pace, eager to kill.

Shon'tu backed against a half-collapsed statue that had once depicted one of the honour guard of the hero buried here. He peered through the dust kicked up by the gunfire and saw the shape of an Imperial Fist in Terminator armour, sheltering behind a pile of fallen rubble as he gave orders to the Space Marines

around him. He was huge, shaven-headed, with a massive storm shield in one hand. In the other was a weapon that Shon'tu recognised – a thunder hammer with its end forged into the shape of a fist. The Fist of Dorn.

Captain Lysander.

Shon'tu's spirit won the battle, and Shon'tu rushed forwards for the kill.

'Hold them at the sarcophagus!' yelled Lysander over the gunfire. 'Advance! Imperial Fists, advance!'

Lysander could see one Scout fallen, a leg blown off by the storm of fire that had come from the Obliterators. Lysander knew of the Obliterators – he had fought them – and he knew well how deadly they could be. There was nothing in the Imperial Fists' armoury that could kill as swiftly, man for man, as those infected by the tech-virus.

Lysander held his shield in front of him as he led the way forwards. Gunfire hammered against it, jarring his arm. His command squad advanced behind him, with Squad Rigalto to the right. Lysander could hear Rigalto yelling his own orders and bolter fire was streaking up towards the sarcophagus in return now. The sound was deafening – literally so, for anyone other than a Space Marine, with his enhanced and protected senses, would have been robbed of hearing by the din.

Something screeched among the bedlam. Some old soldier's instinct took over in Lysander and he brought his shield down just in time to take the charge of an Iron Warrior who crashed through the statue forest right into him. Lysander kept his footing and slammed the shield down, trapping the leg of the Iron Warrior and pinning it to the ground.

The Iron Warrior was the colours of his Legion, oily gunmetal with yellow and black warning strips. But he was not a Space Marine. He had given up that label when he had allowed himself to be possessed by the thing squirming out of the eyepieces of his faceplate. Its twin wriggling pseudopods lashed from holes in his face and one of its gauntlets burst apart, more fleshy tendrils snaking out to wrap around the edges of Lysander's shield.

Lysander's stomachs turned at the sight of the possessed Iron Warrior. He raised the Fist of Dorn over his head and slammed the butt end down, impaling the Iron Warrior through the chest. He ripped it free and lifted his shield, carrying the enemy up on it and slamming it into the pedestal of a statue. Lysander brought the Fist of Dorn down again, the head falling in an arc, crunching into the Iron Warrior's deformed face.

‘Possessed!’ yelled Sergeant Laocos. ‘Brothers, the enemy wears the face of his corruption!’

‘Not for long!’ came the voice of Brother-Scholar Demosthor. A volley of assault cannon fire blew one possessed’s head open, revealing a mass of squirming muscle like the bloom of a fleshy flower. The screeching thing kept attacking, but now blind and without coordination. Demosthor drew back his power fist and punched the Iron Warrior with such strength he was thrown clear out of sight by the impact.

Lysander pushed on, throwing another Iron Warrior aside with a swing of his shield. The sarcophagus rose right ahead of him, the shape of the nearest Obliterator illuminated by the blaze of fire roaring from the weapons unfolded from its arms. Lysander planted a foot on the lower edge of the sarcophagus and powered up onto the top.

The Obliterator turned to face him. Its face was a mass of muscle and machinery, gun barrels emerging from its eye-sockets and its mouth lolling open, glowing with the fire of its internal forges. Smoke and steam rose from it, spurting from between the armour plates fused with its flesh. The multi-barrelled cannon on one of its arms folded back into the mass of muscle and steel, and iron-sheathed claws emerged in its place, forming a bunched fist crackling under a power field.

Lysander braced himself into a stance his body knew from decades sparring in the duelling rings of the *Phalanx* and the battlefields of the Imperium. His shoulder dropped, shield held low and firm to take the charge. The floor under his feet was uneven, for he was standing on the carved face of Ionis, whose body lay in the sarcophagus below.

The Obliterator roared a wordless war-cry, loud and braying, the sound of an angry machine. Its bulk loped forwards, fist drawn back to club down and crush.

Lysander sidestepped with speed that should have been impossible for his Terminator-armoured form. He spun, cracking the front of his shield into the side of the Obliterator, using its own momentum to knock it forwards off-balance. He swung the Fist of Dorn around into the Obliterator’s back, smashing into its spine. Bone and iron cracked. The Obliterator slumped to one knee and Lysander slammed the lower edge of his shield down onto the back of its calf, splintering the stone beneath and trapping the Iron Warrior in place.

The second swipe of Lysander’s hammer crunched through the Obliterator’s upper back. The head of the hammer ripped right through the Iron Warrior’s bulk, tearing its upper chest and head off in a fountain of shredded meat and

gore. Sparks sprayed from its ruined body as it toppled over.

‘Menander!’ said Lysander into the vox-net as he turned to scan for more targets. ‘What is your situation?’

‘Almost in position,’ came the reply.

‘We hold the sarcophagus,’ said Lysander. ‘Act now!’

‘It will be done,’ said Menander.

Rigalto’s squad were embattled at the other end of the sarcophagus, pinned down by volleys of bolter fire from the advancing Iron Warriors. The Imperial Fists were outnumbered and outgunned. They could not hold. Not for more than a few moments.

Lysander’s thoughts were broken as he saw the black and yellow heraldry, like a warning sign. He saw the brass superstructure around the armour, the nightmare in clockwork striding through the wreckage.

This Iron Warrior’s armour was bulkier and more elaborate, the ornate plates supported by a framework of brass struts and powered by a shuddering back-mounted generator with spinning cogs and pumping pistons, wreathing the traitor’s form in greasy smoke. One hand was a monstrous claw, and the other was encased in a triple-barrelled bolt cannon from which hung chains of ammunition rattling as it blasted volleys of fire into Squad Rigalto.

The Iron Warrior’s face was bare, but it was a face as much of steel as of flesh. Twin rebreathers were implanted in his throat and his mouth was articulated like a hunter’s trap with teeth of iron. The eyes were human, and it seemed that into them was poured all the hatred and anger that had been replaced by steel throughout the rest of the traitor’s body.

‘Warsmith!’ bellowed Lysander. ‘Shon’tu! I see you! Before the Emperor’s sight shall you fall!’

Shon’tu looked up at Lysander and, somehow, that mechanical nightmare of a face smiled. ‘Commander Lysander!’ he replied. ‘Such kind fates the warp has woven, to give your death to me!’

Shon’tu laughed and kicked through a ruined statue, where an Imperial Fist of Squad Rigalto lay trying to get back to his feet with a bolter shell through his thigh. Shon’tu’s claw clamped around the Imperial Fists warrior’s torso and he held him up for Lysander to see. The talons of the claws sheared closed, pneumatic pistons slamming shut, and the Imperial Fist’s body was sliced into three. The parts flopped to the ground, blood already pumping from between the sheared ceramite. The blood splattered across Shon’tu and hissed as it touched the warsmith’s hot armour, turning to black smoke.

‘In position,’ came Menander’s vox.

‘Fall back!’ ordered Lysander, not taking his eyes from the sight of Shon’tu driving on through the gunfire. ‘Imperial Fists, stay tight and fall back!’

The sound that reached Lysander’s hearing through the gunfire was Shon’tu laughing, an awful mechanical noise like tearing metal. One of the surviving Obliterators turned its guns on Lysander and he ducked back behind the plasteel slab of his shield. The weight of fire hitting it was like an avalanche, almost throwing Lysander onto his back.

Lysander jumped down from the sarcophagus. His command squad were back to back, surrounded by shattered statuary and the bodies of the possessed Iron Warriors who had charged into the range of their guns and power fists. Down at the base of the sarcophagus Lysander could see one of Menander’s Scouts crouched down, attaching a large, thick metal disc to the stone. Lysander recognised it as a demolition charge

Bolter fire slammed into the Scout. The Imperial Fist slumped against the sarcophagus, mouth gaping dumbly, eyes glassy.

The charge was set. His duty was done.

Lysander led the way back towards the edge of the tomb. The Terminators’ storm bolters gave Rigalto’s squad enough covering fire to make it out from under the guns of the Iron Warriors. Sergeant Rigalto himself was firing his bolter one-handed, his other hand a mess of torn skin and gore.

The Imperial Fists passed through the corridors leading away from the tomb. Menander and the surviving three Scouts were last out, Menander slamming his hand against a control plate mounted on the wall. Pneumatic pistons hissed and warnings sounded, and reinforced twin blast doors slid down, closing off the tomb with a biological seal.

It wouldn’t stand up to a concerted blast of fire from the Iron Warriors’ Obliterators. It wouldn’t have to.

Lysander focused on the detonator rune on his retina.

‘The Imperial Fists do not retreat,’ said Shon’tu, more to himself than to anyone else. The dead Space Marine lay just behind him, oozing vermilion blood, and even as they witnessed their battle-brother dying Lysander and his force were falling back.

Shon’tu opened up a vox-link to the *Ferrous Malice*. ‘Velthinar!’ he demanded.

‘Could the warsmith deign to speak with us?’ came the reply from the

daemon that squatted in the bowels of the Iron Warriors ship. ‘We who have failed him so?’

‘I have not the time,’ said Shon’tu. ‘Scour the memories taken from the *Bastion Inviolate*. Seek out knowledge of Ionis, a hero of the Imperial Fists, entombed on the *Endeavour of Will*. Now!’

The Iron Warriors around Shon’tu were pursuing the Imperial Fists squad in front of them through the ruins that remained of the tomb’s decoration. Shon’tu could see Lysander and his Terminator-armoured cohorts also moving towards the exits.

They could be cut off and trapped like rats. The Choir, those Iron Warriors blessed enough to harbour daemons sent to possess them, could move rapidly, like hunting animals. The Obliterators could blast and melt through bulkhead walls. The Iron Warriors had superior numbers and firepower. Lysander would never commit his force to a retreat into the tangle of maintenance and crew decks, never. It was as wrong as could be.

‘Warsmith,’ came Velthinar’s chittering buzz of a voice. ‘Ionis was a Castellan of the Phalanx, millennia ago. For three hundred years he served, until caught in the virus-bombing of Golgothix Superior and slain.’

‘Virus-bombing,’ spat Shon’tu. ‘Lysander! I owe you a betrayal! I owe you a death by deceit! Iron Warriors, retreat! Back to the Dreadclaws!’

The order did not have time to register in the minds of the Iron Warriors before the detonation charge mounted on the sarcophagus exploded. The detonation threw members of the possessed Choir off their feet, throwing chunks of statue everywhere. Normal troops would have been killed and thrown into disarray, but not the Iron Warriors. That wasn’t the aim.

Shon’tu could see, through the billowing dust and smoke, the side of the sarcophagus blasted open. The grinning skull of Ionis, resting on a bed of golden silks now tattered and blackened, rolled onto its side as if fixing Shon’tu with its eye sockets. Super-cooled air misted and rolled from the ruptured sarcophagus.

One of the Choir was loping through the ruins, falling behind his fellow possessed. He slipped to one knee, faceplate breaking open into a tangle of gnarled mandibles like a fist opening and closing. The possessed’s body convulsed and a yawning mouth opened up in its chest, a fat purple tongue lolling out and coughing out stringy red gore.

The Iron Warrior’s joints were eroding, some corrosive substance finding purchase in the joints of the armour. One of his arms fell off, crumbling bone and flaking muscle pouring from the exposed socket. The ceramite was becoming

pitted and discoloured, the exposed flesh drying and flaking off as if ageing centuries in a few moments. The possessed toppled to the ground and came apart, armour cracking like dropped pottery.

‘Virus attack!’ yelled Shon’tu. ‘Mhul! Koultus! Get them back to the Dreadclaws in good order! Move!’

One of the Obliterators had been caught in the invisible tide. The virus leaking from the ruptured sarcophagus had infected the thick bands of muscle wrapping around its deformed armour. The muscles contracted, the armour plates warping and splitting under the pressure, spiny growths bursting from exposed flesh. Malformed gun barrels cycled, lumps of fused ammunition thunking to the floor. The Obliterator’s face burst into a clutch of eyeballs, each one swelling and bursting to dribble red-white gore down the torn armour. It took a long few moments to die, its body deforming until it was turned almost completely inside out, metallic organs split into fans of bloody steel and loops of articulated entrails clattering around its feet.

The warning systems built into Shon’tu’s cranial augmentations were sending pulses of alert hormones through him, and setting off microscopic klaxons and strobes in his ears and eyes. Every bio-alert was going off, his armour detecting the presence of pathogens, his augmetic organs fending off the voracious strains of virus which mutated into new forms with every moment.

Shon’tu made it to the rear of the tomb. Twin blast doors had descended, cutting off the Tomb of Ionis and turning it into a biological containment zone. Shon’tu ripped through the first door with his power claw, punching through the front and ripping the door off its mountings. The second lasted no longer, and he was through, the cavernous outer hull voids reaching ahead of him. Steelwatcher Mhul and the remaining possessed had made it through too, and Shon’tu could feel the impacts of the Obliterators stomping behind him.

The virus incubated in Ionis’s ancient corpse was voracious enough to kill a Space Marine, but not a warsmith of the Iron Warriors. Most of the Iron Warriors of Shon’tu’s own unit, veterans with multiple augmetics and enhanced physiologies, had also made it, their altered immune systems rapidly adapting to the virus’s assaults. Most of the possessed were gone, left behind among the ruined statuary to writhe and deform as they died.

Shon’tu cast a glance back towards the Tomb of Ionis, now a smoking ruin blanketed in an invisible layer of bio-predator. The emotions in him were not human, but might have most closely resembled a mix of anger, shame and hate.

‘A trick worthy of victory,’ said Shon’tu. ‘But it is no victory you have won

here. All my brothers wait for you. The *Ferrous Malice* waits for you. You have bought yourself a far worse death, Lysander, and I will still be the one to deliver it.'

The remains of the Iron Warriors strike force headed for the waiting Dreadclaws as maintenance servitors were already trundling to erect replacement bio-seals to cut off the Tomb of Ionis.

It did not matter, this defeat, any more than the failure of Velthinar to destroy the *Endeavour of Will's* machine-spirit truly mattered. Shon'tu had not reached the position of warsmith without thinking many steps ahead. The next stage of the star fort's death was already laid out, ready to be enacted with an order. The Imperial Fists had achieved nothing here but to listen to the ticking of the clock counting down their final moments.

Lysander knew there would be little time before he would have to act again in the star fort's defence. The Iron Warriors were the masters of the siege, just as the Imperial Fists were the masters of defence – Shon'tu would not have thrown his entire force against one weak spot. He would have more in reserve, ready to storm in when the first breaches were opened. They would attack soon enough. Shon'tu would not let the ignominy of defeat last for long.

Lysander was alone as he ascended the chill spiral staircase towards the belfry, a place lined in marble and silver plate, kept isolated from the rest of the star fort. Above him the lofty reaches of the belfry's rafters were hung with huge bronze bells. The belfry's single occupant knelt on the floor, a small desk in front of him with an array of inkwells, quill stands, pots of sealing wax and reams of parchment. His head was bent as if in prayer and he did not turn to look at Lysander – not because he did not care that the captain had approached, but because the eyes hidden under the heavy bottle-green hood could not see at all.

'News must be grave,' said Astropath Vaynce. 'It is rare anyone comes up here when there is not some crisis to be transmitted to the galaxy.'

'I am sorry to break your silence,' said Lysander.

'It is in silence that I take solace,' replied Vaynce. 'But I have my duty. What do you wish of me, Captain Lysander?'

'I have a message I need you to send,' said Lysander. He could see now that the shadowy walls of the belfry were lined with intricate cages, each with several tiny, silent birds, their bright plumage hidden in the gloom, hopping between their perches. Vaynce had the company of several hundred birds in total.

'I understand the Tomb of Ionis was violated,' said Vaynce.

Lysander was silent for a moment. 'It is no concern of yours, astropath. Damage was inflicted to the star fort, as would be the case in any battle.'

'Ionis had lain here for thousands of years,' said Vaynce. 'So few knew what his sarcophagus really contained. A stroke of cunning, do you not think? To contain a sample of such a dangerous bio-predator within the body of the last man it killed, and disguise it as his resting place? How many men and women who served here knew it was beneath their feet? I would imagine it was sealed there so it could be recovered and employed as a weapon by the Imperial Fists. Perhaps that purpose was forgotten. In any case, it will not be fulfilled now.'

'Ionis decreed with his last breaths that he be used as such a weapon,' replied Lysander.

'Some would call it a violation,' said Vaynce, 'of the venerated dead.'

'Then let them say it,' said Lysander. 'I have answers for them.'

Vaynce smiled and turned. His eyes were bound with a strip of embroidered cloth which could not quite hide the enlarged, scorched pits beneath. He smiled. His teeth were black, carved from ebony and inscribed with prayers of humility and perseverance. 'Mere words, captain,' he said. 'Forgive me. I spend much time alone. Proper etiquette has rather... passed me by.'

'Can you encode my message now?' said Lysander.

'Indeed,' replied Vaynce. He took a book from beneath the pile of parchment in front of him and opened it. Its pages were crammed with symbols, some pictures of animals or objects, others completely abstract. Each had a meaning that changed with its proximity to other symbols, forming an infinitely complicated language of symbols that those strange, blessed individuals known as astropaths had to master before they could serve the Imperium. Vaynce ran his fingers along the page, reading the symbols through the feel of the ink on the paper. 'Commence, if you will.'

Captain Lysander dictated his message to Astropath Vaynce. He kept it succinct, leaving out all but that which was necessary, knowing that an astropath's art became more difficult, the message more prone to mistranslation at the other end, the longer it was.

Vaynce did not flinch as he heard it. One hand flicked through the book with a speed born of decades of practice, the other scratching down symbols on a strip of parchment that unrolled from a tiny motorised reel. He used a quill and reddish ink.

When Lysander was done, Vaynce lit a stick of incense and took a fingertip of ash, smearing it in a circular symbol onto the floor in front of him. He spat

into the circle, mumbled a prayer, and wiped off the ash and spittle with his sleeve. The ritual done with, he rolled up the parchment into a tight tube and sealed it with a blob of wax and the ring that hung on a chain around his neck.

‘And the recipient?’ asked Vaynce, although it was obvious to whom the message was addressed.

Lysander told him the identity of the recipient. Vaynce scrawled a corresponding symbol on the outside of the rolled parchment, then climbed unsteadily to his feet. He tottered over to one of the bird cages, opened the door, and took out a bird with blue and red plumage that glittered under the light of the belfry’s glow-globes. The bird sat calmly on Vaynce’s finger, tiny black eyes flitting from Lysander to the astropath, making no effort to fly away.

‘We all have our ways,’ said Vaynce. ‘Every one of us is different. Some make sculptures, some paint pictures. Some even make music. But in the end we are the same. Whatever we create, we must destroy.’

The astropath tied the rolled-up message to the bird’s leg with a piece of scarlet ribbon. ‘Go, go,’ he whispered, and the bird flitted off his finger and skipped up towards the bells hanging from the rafters.

‘It is the trauma of destruction,’ said Vaynce, ‘that gives it form in the warp. To see our creations die gives us the focus to do what we must.’

A grid of needle-thin lasers glittered into existence, strung between the bells like a driftnet. The tiny bird flew through the grid and disappeared in a flash of flame.

Vaynce closed his eyes. The embroidery around his eyes glowed and the empty sockets smouldered beneath them. Flickers of blue-white power played around Vaynce’s skull, earthing through his fingers to the belfry floor.

Lysander, though he possessed no psychic ability, could feel the fabric of reality shifting, as if a wrinkle was being pulled out or the galaxy had moved along some infinitely distant fault line.

Vaynce coughed and his shoulders slumped. Smoke coiled off him.

‘It is done,’ he said.

‘Was it received?’

‘Impossible to tell,’ replied Vaynce. ‘It would be futile, I believe, to expect a confirmation, given the recipient.’

‘Then we are finished here,’ said Lysander.

‘I understand.’

‘No,’ said Lysander. ‘Perhaps you do not.’

Vaynce sighed and sat back down next to his writing desk. ‘What I have sent

for you is... toxic. The information contained therein is dangerous.'

'Not least,' said Lysander, 'to our enemies. And I have no doubt that Shon'tu has the means at his disposal to tear memories from even the mind of an astropath. Ours would not be the first Imperial force to be undone by just such a breach.'

'Some astropaths possess compartmentalised minds,' said Vaynce.

'Dangerous knowledge can be isolated and burned away, and the memory wiped clean. But not I.'

'Then you know what must be done.'

'Of course.' Vaynce pulled down the hood of his robe, exposing a shaven skull criss-crossed with burn marks.

Lysander levelled his storm bolter at the back of Vaynce's head. The selector was set to single shot – even so, it would be massive overkill.

'If there was another way,' he said, 'I would take it.'

'I have always known that it would end this way,' replied Vaynce, his voice unwavering. 'Some of us can see... echoes, of what might be. I saw this place many times before I was assigned to this star fort. I knew that I would die here. Whatever form our duty takes, we must welcome it, must we not? We must give thanks that we know what must be done.'

Lysander did not answer. The report of the storm bolter shot echoed around the belfry, ringing off the bells overhead. Vaynce's headless body slumped onto its front, the astropath's skull vaporised by the bolter shell's detonation.

Lysander lowered the gun. He left the body where it was, and descended the stairs to join his fellow Imperial Fists.

PART THREE

The ritual chamber, when stripped of the battlefield trophies the Iron Warriors had set up there, served as a passable fighting pit. Two huge doorways were revealed when captured banners and tapestries were removed, and the sacrificial stone was strewn with a handful of shell casings and a sprinkling of blood to ready it for battle.

One door rumbled open. The holding pen beyond was full of the seething, coiled flesh of the first combatant, a serpentine monster composed of dozens of torsos fixed end to end. Its hundred limbs were fused from the claws and talons of executed xenos creatures, and they skittered along the floor drawing sparks as the serpent raised a head hung with grasping hands around a crocodilian maw. The serpent whipped around the chamber, every movement revealing another way in which human and xenos had been fused into a single horror. Here and there faces remained and they were alive, conscious and full of terror, features deformed in pain. A stinger on the serpent's tail was held in place by a fusion of human and alien heads, half-flensed skulls and drooling jaws screaming silently.

The second door opened. The creature revealed was enormous and apelike, its massive shoulders supporting club-like arms that dragged along the ground, leaving a trail of blood from its torn skin. Skinless muscle wrapped a framework of fused skeletons, the bones inscribed with runes that glowed with the creature's fury. Steam hissed between its vertebrae and from the vertical mouths of its two heads, wreathing around the tiny red eyes set deep into each deformed mass.

The serpent reeled around the wall opposite the newcomer, hissing and spitting as it reacted to its rival. The beast roared, its two voices combining to a storm of atonal noise, and slammed its fists into the floor. The serpent made to cower and the beast took a step forwards, before the serpent bunched its muscles and struck.

The beast was far too quick for anything of its size. One fist whipped up and

caught the serpent around the throat, holding it down pinned against the floor as the length of its body thrashed. The beast's other fist came up and hammered down onto the top of the serpent's head, again and again. Bone crunched and gore spattered across the chamber's walls.

But the beast had not paid attention to the serpent's stinger. The slender point of curved bone hissed with acidic venom as it arched over the beast's shoulder, the human and xenos heads embedded around it twisting as the muscle beneath tensed.

The beast slammed the serpent into the ground again. Its mouths split wide as it made to bite into the serpent's head, and bloody saliva ran between the rows of fangs lining its mouths and throats.

The stinger punched down through the flesh of the beast's shoulder. The beast let out a twin howl as the poison sacs along the serpent's underside emptied themselves into its torso. Flesh and skin blistered along the beast's back, and greenish boils welled up and burst. The beast clutched at its shoulder, and chunks of corrupted flesh came away by the handful, exposing bone and organ beneath. The serpent, wounded but alive, slithered away to the back of the room and watched the beast stumble blindly. The venom had reached its faces and they were withering away, fangs falling from its jaws and thudding to the floor amid the rain of blood and muscle.

The beast thudded into the wall and slid down it. Its voice was growing weak as its lungs were eaten away. Its upper body was now a semi-liquid mass, only the bones remaining intact as everything between them sluiced away. Finally it was silent, gory skulls lolling senselessly, blood emptying away into the drains in the chamber floor.

Doors opened and crewmen entered the room. Most of the *Ferrous Malice's* crew were mutants, whose deformities had made them reviled and oppressed by the rest of the Imperium, and who eagerly flocked for the chance to serve the Imperium's enemies. In their malformed limbs they carried goads and coils of rope, and they advanced on the wounded serpent coiled in the corner. They jabbed at it, driving it back towards the door it had emerged from as its half-crushed head wavered between them and its coils bunched up as it prepared to strike.

The mutants yelled to one another in the short, barking language of the ship's crew, herding the serpent back. The serpent snatched a goading pike off one of the mutants and splintered it between its jaws, and threw another off his feet with a lash of its tail. But metre by metre the crew forced it through the doorway, and

one of their number hauled on a lever that slammed the door shut behind it.

‘Leave us,’ came an order from vox-casters mounted in the chamber. The mutants cowered at the artificial voice and hurried out of the chamber, dragging their wounded crewmate along the floor.

In their place, Warsmith Shon’tu entered. When the last of the crewmen were gone and the door shut behind him, he walking over to the dead beast and examined its ruined corpse. He knelt down and magnification lenses unfolded over his eye, bringing out the detail of the beast’s strange physiology. With much of its flesh liquefied it was clear from the skeleton the number of creatures that had been fused together to make it.

‘You have your sacrifice,’ said Shon’tu, though the beast could surely not hear him. ‘A hundred victims made it, and a hundred more made its conqueror. Once they died by the knives of our priests, and again they died by violence. This is what was written. This was what you demanded.’

‘To show ourselves,’ came a reply, a high, grating hiss from somewhere near the chamber’s sacrificial stone. ‘Nothing more.’

‘Then show yourself, as you are bound,’ said Shon’tu.

The blood and shadows around the sacrificial stone flowed up into the air, as if filling an invisible vessel. They formed a spindly, roughly humanoid shape, with a head hung low between its shoulders and a long, equine face. It was somewhat taller than a man, and when half formed it drew the shadows around it like a cloak or furred wings, the spindly construct of blood obscured by the darkness that clung to it.

Behind it several more were forming in the same way, figures that seemed barely sketched on the surface of reality, stylised daemons scratched in blood onto the canvas of the air.

Shon’tu took a scroll case that hung on the waist of his armour. He opened it and unravelled the long sheet of lizard-like hide within. It was covered in cramped writing and symbols, and at the end was the seal, in black wax, of the steel helm emblem of the Iron Warriors Legion.

The leader of the daemons skittered forwards, its limbs seemingly jointed at random. Its head, which had now formed three eyes of bluish fire, was held low as it perused the writing on the hide.

‘The contract is as it was made,’ said the daemon. ‘All parties are thus bound.’

‘Then you must bargain,’ said Shon’tu. ‘The terms of our agreement state that you must enter into an agreement for services we demand of you.’

‘And you must give us what we want,’ said the daemon. ‘The Dancers on the Precipice do no man’s will for nothing.’

Shon’tu scowled. ‘It is always thus,’ he said. ‘Though our enemies are the same, though the warp’s glory relies on our labours, still the spawn of the warp must take their payment.’

‘It is written,’ said the Dancer. ‘So it shall be.’

Shon’tu opened a small compartment in the armour on his chest. Inside was a tiny glass vial of red liquid. ‘Shed by Perturabo,’ he said, ‘upon the fields of Isstvan. Collected even as the Corpse-God’s lackeys were butchered beneath our guns. Seasoned in the smoke from their pyres.’

‘The blood,’ said the Dancer, ‘of a primarch.’

Its fingers grew longer as it reached for the vial. Shon’tu snatched it back out of the daemon’s reach. ‘I have a very specific task,’ he said, ‘for which this is the payment.’

‘Give it unto us,’ replied the Dancer, ‘and it shall be done.’

‘Payment will be granted when the task is complete,’ retorted Shon’tu. ‘That is also written.’

The Dancer spat in frustration. ‘For the blood of Perturabo, for the life-stuff of the warp’s prophet, we will do as you wish. But break this covenant, delete what was written, and terrible shall be the warp’s vengeance! For ten thousand years you will find no ally in the empyrean, Warsmith Shon’tu. Only enemies shall swarm wherever your soul touches the warp, and the gods themselves will learn of it!’

‘There will be no reneging on this bargain,’ said Shon’tu. ‘That is not our way. This is a high price to pay, and it does us ill to part with it, but the victory it will buy us is worth the price and it will be paid.’

The Dancer turned to its fellows. Just beyond reality shimmered the forms of many more, a whole tribe of these warp-predators. Their silent conversation lasted a few moments and the Dancer turned back to Shon’tu.

‘What is it the Iron Warriors desire?’

Shon’tu locked the vial of primarch’s blood back into its compartment in his armour. ‘Kill Lysander,’ he replied.

The first sign that anything was wrong, as was so often the case, was when the bodies were found.

Three of them, all engineers, were found near one of the star fort’s primary thruster arrays. The array, which was used to keep the *Endeavour of Will* in a

steady orbit around its star, had been one of the many systems to be damaged during the attack on the machine-spirit, and the engineers were attempting to get it back to working order. They wore grey habits with half-cog symbol showing they were laymen trained by the magi of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the body of each had been hollowed out as if by hungry fingers cracking them open and tearing out the meat inside.

Lysander knelt in that moment beside the corpses lain out on the floor of the barracks, where they had been brought. They were a sorry sight, lopsided and sagging as if deflated. Rigalto stood behind him with a couple of the battle-brothers from his squad, along with a gaggle of crewmen who had found the bodies. Rigalto's wounded hand was bound and bloody.

'What other signs were there?' asked Lysander, not taking his eyes from the bodies.

'Prints,' said one of the crew, a woman, stocky and smeared with machine grease. 'On the floor and the ceiling. In blood.'

'Footprints?'

'I could not tell.'

Lysander stood up. 'They were in blood?'

'They were.'

He pointed at the corpses. 'Their blood?'

'I could not tell.'

'They were eaten,' said another member of the crew. This one was lanky with awful skin, and a deep rash around his mouth and nose where a rebreather mask normally sat. 'Duct spiders. We had an infestation of 'em on the Executioner's Moon. They get into the engines and breed, and they'll chew you up just like that.'

'This is daemon-work,' said Lysander.

'Are you certain?' said Rigalto.

'I have rarely been more certain of anything. These souls were their way in. With enough will, enough power, even the mind of a non-psyker can be a gateway for the daemon. We bloodied Shon'tu's nose at the Tomb, my brothers. It is not the way of the Iron Warriors to send warp-spawn to do what they could themselves do face to face. We are forcing their hand.'

'Then let us take what encouragement we can, captain,' said Rigalto. 'But that does not change the fact that these things are running around our star fort.'

'Leave us,' said Lysander. The crew, used to taking their orders from an Imperial Fist, bowed their heads and left the barracks room, leaving the Space

Marines with the bodies.

‘And you, Rigalto,’ added Lysander.

‘Captain? If we are to hunt them down we must stick together. We could sweep by sections, drive them towards—’

‘Leave,’ said Lysander. ‘This is not a battle to be fought, because the enemy is not a soldier. Not this daemon. It is an assassin. It will not make itself known until it can move on its target. We could wait forever for it to emerge from whatever shadow it hides in, only for it to strike when our guard eventually falls.’

‘Then it is here to kill you,’ said Rigalto. ‘And you will use yourself as bait?’

‘The bait has no say in the kill,’ replied Lysander. ‘I shall. My orders have kept us alive thus far. Follow them again, Rigalto. Make your brothers ready, for Shon’tu will strike as soon as his daemons have either succeeded or failed. Go.’

‘As you command, captain,’ said Rigalto with a bow of the head. ‘Good luck.’

‘Dorn wrote that there is no such thing as luck,’ replied Lysander. ‘Fate perhaps, but not luck. To your duties, sergeant.’

‘Yes, captain.’

Rigalto saluted and turned away, leading his squadmates out of the barracks. Lysander turned again to the sorry sight of the bodies on the floor.

‘If you hear all, as you claim,’ he said quietly, ‘then hear this. I am the victim you are commanded to kill, but you will find no victim on this star fort. If you can feel anything so human as regret, then you will regret the binding that compels you to seek me out. I am an Imperial Fist, a son of Rogal Dorn, and I do not feel fear. But I know what fear is, because it is my duty to inflict it on creatures such as you.’

Lysander could hear them, their limbs clicking on the walls and ceiling of the corridors around the barracks like so many spiders scuttling around their web. He did not look back as he left the barracks and the corpses, and headed towards the star fort’s apothecarion.

The Dancers at the Precipice did not perceive reality at all. Existing partially in the warp, their senses strained to reach across the veil to real space. It was the warp’s reflection they saw, the emotional echoes of structures in reality. The corridors and hangars of the *Endeavour of Will* were seen in the shades of old emotions left there. All areas of the star fort were veneered in a thin layer of fear, as suffered by the unaugmented crew in times of battle. Pain was scattered, like

blood spatter, around old battle damage scars, and it pooled in glowing stains around triage stations and the way leading to the apothecarion.

Arrogance and a sense of iron-bound duty glowed around the command areas where the Imperial Fists were most often found, details picked out in anger and flavoured with the lust for battle secretly held by so many Space Marines, and acknowledged by only a few. The airlocks, where the dead were traditionally sent on their final voyage, were steeped in sorrow and regret. Trace elements of happiness, even pinpoints of ecstasy in hidden secret places among the star fort's architecture, were swamped by the grim emotions of war, those stains that lasted the longest and brought out every passageway and compartment as the Dancers scampered through them.

They followed the pain. They had tasted Lysander and the train of relentless duty he left, a metallic thread winding through the star fort, and it coincided with the increasing density of pain and desperation encrusting the approaches to the apothecarion.

The Dancers had no leader. They were moved by the currents of the warp that flowed through them, and in that moment it demanded that they kill. Lysander's was a taste they knew well, and nothing would be as delicious as to temper it with pain and anger, and the awful certainty that came with the approach of death. They had already killed, but the deaths of those whose bodies they had usurped was weak and watery. Their deaths were tasteless compared to the banquet that would be Lysander's death. The warp gave them hunger, and they sprang on to sate it.

Techmarine Hestion was awake. His eyes opened as Lysander boomed hurriedly into the room. The autosurgeon knitting together the skin of his chest recoiled at the motion, spindly arms folding up and away from the exposed muscle. He still looked shockingly weak, his musculature scorched and wasted away, and it looked impossible for him to ever fill the armour stacked up at his bedside. He sat up as best he could at Lysander's approach.

'Captain!' he said, raw-throated. 'I have heard of battle. The orderlies know little, only that the enemy is upon us and that you have fought them off. Is it so?'

'Thus far,' said Lysander. 'The battle is not done. And forgive me, brother, for I have brought it with me.'

The apothecarion darkened. Spidery shadows flickered over the glow-globes in the ceiling. Half-glimpsed figures of gnarled, blood-red muscle, cloaked in darkness, scampered around the walls. Lysander backed up against Hestion's

bed, drawing the Fist of Dorn up into a guard and shouldering his shield so it protected Hestion from the gathering shadows.

Spectral fingers lashed out, congealing into reality as they raked across Lysander's shield. More reached out from the warp and snared Lysander's limbs, trying to haul him off his feet. He wrenched his shield arm around and batted one of the shadows against the far wall, its body like a bundle of spiders' legs bunching up as it slammed into the wall and thrashed to the ground. Lysander raised the hammer and punched its head into a second daemon as it coalesced in front of him – the daemon flitted back, vanishing through the wall as the hammer crunched home a hair's breadth too late.

'I may be laid low, but I am still Adeptus Astartes,' said Hestion, struggling to sit up. 'Hand me my gun, Lysander. My blade.'

'You will fight, my brother, fear not on that score,' said Lysander as he circled, starting at the daemons as they stalked through the half-light around him. 'I must ask more of you than I have ever asked of an Imperial Fist.'

'Then ask, captain. What little I have left to give, I would give in battle.'

'For once, Hestion, do not give so unthinkingly. For I ask of you your death.'

Hestion forced himself into a sitting position and swung his legs over the side of the bed, grimacing as his half-healed skin tore. He wrenched a surgical blade from the autosurgeon above him, wielding it like a dagger. 'I do not understand, captain,' he said, voice strained.

'Your death, Hestion. The one thing I can have no right to demand of you. I must ask for it, freely given.'

'I will die here anyway, captain. The apothecary cogitator has made its prognosis. My organs are too badly damaged. Soon I will be comatose, and death will then be swift.'

Another daemon slashed forwards, aiming for Hestion. Lysander stepped into its path and caught the charge on his shield. He was forced back a pace, before swinging the Fist of Dorn into the daemon and tearing it into a shower of shredded limbs and broken shadows.

'Back!' yelled Lysander. 'Just as Dorn cast the daemon from Terra, so I will cast you from this place! Back to the warp, to burn beneath the wrath of your gods! You will not take Lysander today!'

'I told myself that death is no shame, if it be a warrior's death,' said Hestion. His blade was held in front of him, but his hand wavered, for most of the muscles had been scorched away and his strength was gone.

'It will not be a warrior's death,' said Lysander. 'It will be a wretched one.'

Will you give this to me, my brother? I ask you as a friend, not a commander. Will you accept?’

Hestion’s eyes turned from Lysander to the daemons. They were gathering more thickly now, as if the apothecarion was disappearing to be replaced by a hellish place composed of daemon’s flesh.

‘When you returned from Malodrax,’ the Techmarine said, ‘some said that you should not rejoin us. The risk was too great that you had... brought something back with you. That you were corrupted, somewhere deep down.’

‘What are you saying, Hestion?’ demanded Lysander.

Hestion’s voice shook as he forced out the words. ‘You ask if I trust you with my death, brother. My reply is that I... I do not know.’

The walls bowed in and the daemons tore through, reality splitting like torn skin. The Dancers at the Precipice roared like a tornado of daemons’ flesh centred on Lysander and Hestion, limbs lashing out at the two Imperial Fists. Lysander caught blows on his shield and on the haft of the Fist of Dorn, protecting Hestion as best he could. Hestion fended off a claw that unfolded from a stalk of lashing, knotted flesh, cutting through the unreal muscle with his blade, but other talons caught him and opened up new wounds on his half-formed skin. Hestion slumped off the bed to one knee, a red slash along the side of his throat, exposing spine and sinew.

Hestion coughed out an angry growl. He grabbed one of the Dancers with his free hand, dragging it out of the swirling mass. He stabbed down at its shifting face, the features swimming around the blade as it punched into the place where its head should have been. Limbs split and reformed, squirming under Hestion and pincering around him to hold him fast. Lysander kicked out and shattered the daemon’s body with a massive armoured boot, smacking the remains off Hestion with a swing of his hammer.

The Dancers swarmed closer. Hestion was caught by a dozen limbs at once and hauled off his feet, pulled into the mass. Lysander yelled and tried to drag the Techmarine back, even as the Dancers ripped at him too, scoring deep gashes in the ceramite of his armour and shield, clawing at his face and eyes.

‘I was there when the black sun rose!’

Lysander’s voice cut through the hiss of the daemons’ talons.

‘Upon the blood-red sands, I laid him low!’ continued Lysander. ‘I cast his head into the ammonia sea! I stood against you and I defeated you! I am the Gilded Wrath of Malodrax!’

It was upon the blasted ground of Malodrax that the Dancers at the Precipice coalesced into real space for the first time, dragged out of formlessness and bedlam by a thousand voices raised in terror and pain. Malodrax was one of a million worlds found, conquered and subsequently forgotten by the Imperium, and seized by the powers of the warp who did not forget. From the flint-bladed mountains and ammonia oceans of Malodrax were forged death pits and warrens, carved by the hands of slaves and the sorcery of Chaos's champions. Each one was dedicated to a different form of torment or execution. Artists begged the God of Change to transport them to Malodrax so they might create wonders there that no sane world would permit. Daemons gambolled between the death pits, and among them were the Dancers at the Precipice, who congealed from the stuff of the warp to attend joyfully on a millions extinguished lives.

Cultists among the shipping lanes of the Imperium diverted passenger liners and pilgrim hulks into the dead, uninhabited space around Malodrax. Their living cargoes were poured into the death pits, and the Dancers at the Precipice took their place among the daemons and madmen welcoming them to their new and final home in the lava chambers or parasite nests, the endless steel-clad tunnels hung with flensed skin, the acid springs and the oubliettes full of razorblades.

The Iron Warriors saw a place of worship and pain, yes, but also one of inefficiency and waste. Space Marines of the Iron Warriors Legion landed there and turned the bands of daemons into armies, the death pits into factories. Daemon-scholars were summoned or created to keep a tally of every death offered up to the warp, and every form of torture discovered among the madness.

Then from the warp arrived a spacecraft accompanied by the heralds of Tzeentch singing in celebration. Every daemon, it is said, stopped their bloody work and watched as it descended from the torn skies of Malodrax. It had been lost in the warp for many years, as evidenced by the blistered hull and its state of disrepair, but there was no mistaking the heraldry of the Imperial Fists it bore. It was the *Shield of Valour*, thought destroyed in a warp collapse decades before, and it had been vomited up by the ether as a gift to the daemons of Malodrax. The Iron Warriors formed a guard to shepherd the passengers off the ship, and even now there was no doubting the pride and deadliness of those men – for they were Imperial Fists. First among them, like an animal kept caged in his armour of gold, was a Space Marine captain who with the merest glance told everyone who saw him what he would do to them when he got free.

All of the Imperial Fists were consigned to the pits. One by one, they died. They held on for a long time, and the unique opportunities offered by a Space Marine's physiology were not wasted by those daemons who fancied themselves surgeons. The Iron Warriors made a particular point of watching the captain, for they knew that he would last the longest. They were disappointed that he died so soon after his battle-brothers, and that the daemons, in their enthusiasm, had heaped upon him so many varying methods of death that it was impossible to tell what had killed him.

The Iron Warriors argued with the daemon torturers. The Dancers at the Precipice were among them, newly-born and already resenting the bonds that compelled them to obey the Iron Warriors or fade from real space. They denied that they had thrown away the Imperial Fist's life, for his soul was now being rent by their fellow daemons of the warp, and indeed the Iron Warriors were the wasteful ones for they denied the warp their kill for too long.

Guns were drawn. Daemons' teeth were bared. The Iron warriors and the daemons were ready to offer each other's deaths up to the warp; then one of them noticed the Imperial Fists captain's corpse was missing.

What followed was remembered only in scraps of memory. A few details were scraped onto the walls of a fortress in the warp, where details of a billion battles were kept inscribed on the massive lead blocks of its battlements. Others turned up in séances and daemon-haunted nightmares for years afterwards. The Imperial Fist became the Gilded Wrath of Malodrax, and daemons spoke of him as men spoke of daemons. He tore his way through the death pits, and by the time he reached the surface of Malodrax he was accompanied by everyone who could walk and fight that had broken from their chains as he slaughtered every daemon in his way.

Somehow, a message reached the Imperial Fists. A force sent to Malodrax found their battle-brother fending off a tide of horrors at the edge of a chemical ocean. The dancers at the Precipice fought him there, and from their number he tore the one who had been their primary personality, the thing closest to a leader.

The Imperial Fist tore the daemon's head off and threw it into the sea. Malodrax's sun turned black, the eclipse like an eye closing in response to the challenge. The Space marine cried out that he was Darnath Lysander, and that no daemon could kill him. And the Iron Warriors who had overseen his captivity, if they had a spine between them, would face him there and fight to the death, for no one locked up an Imperial Fist and lived.

The Imperial Fists landed and took their brother back to his Chapter before

daemon reinforcements could arrive. Lysander spat on the ground and cursed the Iron Warriors. A daemon was hatred and evil incarnate, but an Iron Warrior had once been a man who had chosen to become what he was. Lysander would never forgive them, not for what they had done to him, but for what they had done to themselves. And he would see them all dead in his lifetime, or he would have failed in his duty to mankind.

The Dancers hovered around Lysander. They crouched against the ceiling and on the floor, the knotted muscle of their bodies masked in shifting veils of shadow that fluttered like banners in the wind.

‘I took one of you,’ said Lysander. ‘I laid him low. The inquisitors of the Holy Ordos sought out the works of madmen and prophets, and found there the binding laws of the Dancers at the Precipice. I know that when I shed your blood, you are bound to me. You must obey, only once, but absolutely. Is this not so? Is this not written?’

‘It is so,’ came the hissing reply. ‘Upon the hides of the Gravendran Hydra, in the ink from the Tears of Morgedren, it was written. This was the contract that wove us into being from the raw stuff of the warp. This was the form taken by the will of Tzeentch.’

‘Then I may command you once.’

‘Not to destruction!’ came the reply. It seemed all the Dancers spoke at once, but as if through the same throat, so many voices tangled into one torrent of noise. ‘Not unto the end of existence! It is written!’

Lysander turned and looked down at Hestion. The Techmarine was breathing heavily, his fused ribs obvious as they moved beneath gelatinous, half-made muscle. He did not look back, his eyes instead fixed on the daemons that formed a wall before him. Lysander looked away from the Techmarine and spoke.

‘Take the body of Techmarine Hestion of the Imperial Fists,’ he said. ‘Into his body I bind you. Let his form be your prison. This is the will of the Gilded Wrath of Malodrax, and you are compelled to obey. So it is written.’

The daemons screamed. They fought. They howled and scratched at reality. But they were bound by fate, a force as certain and relentless in the warp as gravity was in real space. Their forms stretched and deformed as they were drawn by the grasp of fate towards Hestion.

It was impossible to tell if Hestion understood what was happening as he was caught in a cage of painful light, his form merging with that of the Dancers. Their tangled limbs rippled through his skin and muscle, their glowing eyes

bulged from his body and his features distorted with theirs.

Hestion's body contracted again, forcing the Dancers into his own form. He writhed on the apothecarion floor, and joints cracked and popped as his body was forced out of its proper shape. The faces of the Dancers, red eyes and indistinct folds of features, shifted under his skin. Hestion's face was as distorted as the rest of him, jaw locked open, eyes screwed shut, blood trickling from his nose and eyes.

'Now you have a body, an honest human body,' said Lysander, bringing the Fist of Dorn over his head. 'And now you can die.'

The Dancers screamed in denial, but as was written, the Gilded Wrath who had defeated them had bound them to his will and they could not escape the bonds of fate that held them in Hestion's body. Hestion was in there with them too, and perhaps some of the screams that issued from his raw throat were his. But they were lost among the inhuman sound that issued from Hestion, a howl like a gale roaring straight from the warp.

Lysander yelled and brought the Fist of Dorn down. Hestion, his body commanded by the Dancers at the Precipice, tried to rise to face him, but Hestion's body was broken and Lysander was too quick. The head of the hammer slammed into Hestion's chest and drove him against the wall of the apothecarion. Ribs crunched and splayed, painting the wall with the Techmarine's blood. From his ruptured body the broken limbs of the Dancers reached, waving feebly at Lysander as if trying to fend him off.

Lysander's second strike knocked Hestion's head from his shoulders. His body toppled to the side, and the cries of the daemons were replaced with the awful high-pitched squealing and gibbering that was their death rattle. As Hestion's blood pooled on the floor, the Dancers at the Precipice disincorporated and became once again the formless stuff of the warp.

The silence seemed to take a long time to return. The air rang with the din that had died down, as if the apothecarion was reluctant to let go of the battle it had seen. Moment by moment the echoes faded, until the only sound was the dripping of Hestion's blood from the ceiling and the autosurgeon bed.

Lysander knelt beside the body of the Techmarine. Hestion's body was a wreck, intact only below the waist, the torso broken open and the head gone.

'I am...' said Lysander. The rest of the sentence caught in his throat.

I am sorry, brother. There was no one to hear it.

He switched on his vox-link. 'Rigalto, Menander. Lysander here. The daemons have been cast out, but Techmarine Hestion is dead. Attend upon the

apothecarion for his honour guard. Though we are at war, we will give him the rites that are his due.'

Acknowledgement runes flickered. Lysander stood back up, and looked down at himself. Hestion's blood was spattered over him, already congealing into rust-red crystals, for a Space Marine's blood did so almost instantly to seal the wounds of battle.

Lysander leaned the Fist of Dorn against the wall and, pulling the sheets from a nearby bed, began to wipe Hestion's blood from his armour.

The muster deck of the *Ferrous Malice* was hung with captive banners, from the delicate silks of an eldar pirate lord to the bullet-shredded standards of Imperial Guard regiments. The siege masters of the Iron Warriors had taken them from the most secure fortresses in the galaxy, or from the corpses of the enemies who had dared to besiege their own strongholds.

Shon'tu looked up at them, and knew that added to them would be a standard torn from the hallways of the *Endeavour of Will*. It was not a vow, it was not an ambition. It was a simple fact. The gods of the warp had decided it would be so. Fate would take care of the rest. Fate, and the guns of the Iron Warriors.

Shon'tu turned to the Iron Warriors gathered on the muster deck. Beneath the blood-coloured light from above, the steel of their armour shone grimly, punctuated by the glow of the eye lenses beneath the visors of their helmets. Well over fifty Iron Warriors stood ranked up, the entire warband sworn to Warsmith Shon'tu. Four squads of Space Marines, along with the surviving Obliterators of the Coven and the possessed of the Choir. Forge-Chaplain Koultus, priest of the dark gods who brought the favour of the warp with him. Steelwatcher Mhul, Shon'tu's weaponsmith. Shon'tu's own veterans. Even with the losses at the Tomb of Ionis, the Iron Warriors outnumbered the Imperial Fists by three to one at least.

And every one of them wore iron within just as he wore the iron of his armour without. Every one had taken the steps on the path that Shon'tu himself had almost finished – the conversion from man into machine, from a weak thing of fallible flesh to a weapon in the image of the primarch Perturabo. The forges of the Iron Warriors created bionics with technology long forgotten by the Adeptus Mechanicus of the Imperium, and every one of Shon'tu's warband carried within him a relentless steel heart or a bionic limb, cranial implants loaded with battle-routines or inhuman artificial senses.

'Fate has seen fit,' said Shon'tu, 'to place before us a test. A puzzle box

hangs in the void before us to be unlocked. The prize inside is the head of Captain Lysander of the Imperial Fists. The daemon could not tear its machine-spirit from its shell. We have sought to pick its lock with a surgical assault. We have sought to bypass its defences and strike at the prize directly.’ Shon’tu drove a fist into the palm of his gauntlet. ‘The only tactic that remains is to smash it!’

The Iron Warriors raised their left fists. ‘Iron within!’ they yelled. ‘Iron without!’

‘Brother Malikos!’ ordered Shon’tu. ‘To your squad falls the task of securing the western lance battery. The assault on the machine-spirit left it dormant, and it has no defences against our Dreadclaws. Brother Veyrin, you will accompany Steelwatcher Mhul to the spur. Brother Tektos, Brother Skast, with me you will secure the rest of the western defence spur.’

The hullward edge of the muster deck was dominated by enormous cradles holding a dozen Dreadclaw assault-pods. Vapour hissed as pneumatic arms lowered the pods into boarding positions, warning lanterns flashing. Mutant crewmen scrambled across the machinery, tightening valves and operating controls, as the Iron Warriors lined up with parade ground efficiency to board.

Shon’tu’s mind had long been given over to the seething stuff of a devotee of Chaos, but fragments of human emotions could still surface, an echo of the man he had presumably been several lifetimes ago. He was angry. He was humiliated. The Imperial Fists had him – Lysander had bested him, with a cunning that should have been the province of an Iron Warrior. Lysander’s death would burn that away. The human side of Shon’tu would be forced down again, buried under the steel of an Iron Warrior, not to emerge again for another ten thousand years.

He would have to send his whole warband onto the *Endeavour of Will*. It was the only way he could be sure that no trickery of Lysander’s could withstand an attack. He had held back his force to test the Imperial Fists’ defences, and to claim the prize of the star fort and Lysander’s head without risking his entire strength. But risking it now was worth it. To silence that weak human, the final part of him not yet replaced with iron, it was worth it.

The Iron Warriors embarked into their assault-pods. The sergeants spoke words of prayer to the Iron Warriors they led. The crew hauled the Dreadclaws closed after them, sealing the embarkation doors with sigils of warding that called on the powers of the warp to deliver them to their enemies.

Shon’tu’s own veterans lined up with him at the final Dreadclaw. ‘I shall cast the head of Lysander into the warp,’ he told them. ‘It matters not who kills him. To us all the glory will belong. But I shall stand upon the threshold and give his

head to the gods. That is all that matters.'

'For such an offering,' said Brother Ku'Van, 'daemonhood will surely be granted.'

'Then if it is so,' said Shon'tu, 'I shall take the wings of the daemon and let their shadow fall across the Imperium. No Imperial Fist will be spared my wrath. And then, no Space Marine. And then, no man. It is here that it will begin; with the death of Lysander, and with the boon of daemonhood, it will never end.'

Shon'tu's squad climbed into the Dreadclaw. Grav-restraints locked around them as the door was hauled closed, and the only light was the winking of the status display that told Shon'tu the Dreadclaw was ready to launch.

'Iron within!' ordered Shon'tu. 'Iron without! To the fray, my brothers! Launch!'

'He was a Space Marine,' said Lysander, his head bowed. 'He was a son of Dorn. A defender of the Imperium. A golden light in the darkness. But above all things, he was a brother.'

Lined up in the airlock corridor stood the seven surviving members of Squad Rigalto, Scout-Sergeant Menander and his two remaining Scouts, and Lysander's First Company command squad. In front of them, held above the ground by a suspensor unit, was Techmarine Hestion's coffin. It was a functional box for transporting bodies from the apothecarion – a Space Marine required better, according to the law of the Chapter, but on a war footing there had not been the time to organise full funeral rites for Hestion. As commanding officer it was Lysander's duty to say the eulogy, a duty he had fulfilled many dozens of times. The circular airlock portal was ready to receive the coffin and send it on its way into the void, as was traditional for those who died on a spacecraft or space station. Hestion's gene-seed had been extracted by the star fort's apothecary staff as best it could from what remained of his head and neck, and all that remained for the Techmarine was this final journey.

'Victory,' said Lysander, 'is sacrifice. Rogal Dorn teaches us this. He learned it in turn from the Emperor Most High, who willingly sacrificed everything he was to defeat the arch-traitor, Horus. One day the sacrifice will be ours to make, just as it was our battle-brother Hestion's, and it is the greatest honour we can bestow upon him to make that sacrifice as he did before us. Go to Dorn, brother, stand beside the Emperor, and at His side may you fight on.'

'May you fight on,' echoed the assembled Imperial Fists. Their heads were bowed in prayer, too. They had performed this scene already for the Space

Marines lost at the Tomb of Ionis, and sent five such coffins into space with the same sentiments. It never became routine, this farewell to a brother, because every Imperial Fist knew that one day it would be him in the coffin, be it a wooden box cast from an airlock or a gilded sarcophagus interred in a memorial on the *Phalanx*.

But this time was different. Hestion had died from a head wound that every Imperial Fist who saw the corpse knew was from a thunder hammer strike. The only such weapon on the *Endeavour of Will* now hung across the back of Captain Lysander. Even if Hestion's body had been a host to daemons, Hestion himself dead, it had still been the hand of a fellow Imperial Fist that struck the final blow. It was not the first time a brother had killed a brother, nor would it be the last, but such an event was always toxic. It could only happen through treachery, as one brother turned on another, or the collapse of an Imperial Fist's vaunted mental defences, as when a mind was driven from its body and replaced with the daemon. For Lysander to have killed Hestion, no matter how justified in the moment, must have been the result of some appalling violation of everything a Space Marine should be.

Two of Squad Rigalto pushed the coffin towards the airlock. One of the star fort's crew operated the controls that slid open the portal, and the coffin passed through the first airlock door. The inner door closed again, the airlock depressurised, and the outer door opened.

The coffin slid out into the void, accompanied only by silence and a shoal of icy slivers that flaked off in the sudden cold of space. Hestion's coffin got smaller and smaller, lit into a hard-edged lozenge of red light from the star Kholestus, until it became impossible to distinguish from the scattering of stars and the billows of the nebulae marking the edge of the Eye of Terror.

Lysander's vox chirped. 'Sensorium helm here,' came the voice of one of the star fort's bridge crew. 'Multiple contacts coming in, looks like boarding craft. They're moving in on the western spur.'

'What defences are active there?' said Lysander.

'None,' came the reply. 'All were lost to the machine-spirit.'

Lysander looked up at the Imperial Fists who were now waiting for his orders. They knew from the tone of his voice that the time for reflection was gone, and that they were back at war.

'Shon'tu has launched his final attack,' said Lysander. 'We have humiliated him and he is sending everything he has to destroy us. But that also means he is risking everything he has. Take comfort from the examples of the brothers we

have lost. Through sacrifice, they have defied Shon'tu this far. Through sacrifice, if needs be, we shall defy him again. You have your orders. You know what is expected of you. To your stations, sons of Dorn.'

As the Imperial Fists split up to man the positions Lysander had dictated, Lysander took a final look through the airlock porthole. Hestion's coffin was invisible against the backdrop of stars. The Techmarine had gone to join Dorn and the Emperor at the end of time, to fight the final battle for mankind's soul. Lysander had at least one more battle to fight before he could take his place there too.

It was worth it. There was no doubt about that. Everything could be gambled and lost, if that was what it took to achieve victory.

Everything.

Though the Obliterators could no longer speak – their vocal cords having long ago been sacrificed for yet another gun barrel – there was never any doubt about their mood. They existed in a permanent state of anger, for the tech-virus that had altered their bodies also took a hold of their minds and filled them with the desire to destroy everything around them. Commanding such troops was as much a matter of reining them in as letting them loose.

Steelwatcher Mhul had the task of commanding the coven of Obliterators that belonged to Shon'tu's warband. Only two such creatures remained, the other having fallen to Lysander and the Fist of Dorn or to the virus in the Tomb of Ionis. Two was more than enough.

Mhul watched the Obliterators tear through the layers of steel and circuitry surrounding the massive cylindrical base of the defence laser. The laser was the largest weapon in the western spur of the star fort, a titanic weapon which focused enough power to punch a torrent of las-fire straight through the hull of a spaceship the size of the *Ferrous Malice*. The Obliterators could not fit through the narrow passages designed for the unaugmented crew of the *Endeavour of Will*, so they made their own path. Mhul followed, prodding the Obliterators in the right direction with bursts of pain from the mind impulse unit that surrounded his head like a steel halo.

The Obliterators' hands reformed into steel claws that ripped away the metal of the weapon's housing, revealing stacks of datamedium amid the destruction.

'Stop,' said Mhul, his words accompanied by a burst of psychic code that seized the Obliterators' muscles. 'There. You. Infect it.'

One of the Obliterators took a step back and reeled as if struck. His face split

open and cycled through various calibres of gun barrels, melding from one to the other from the flesh and steel inside its skull. Finally something other than a weapon emerged – a nest of tendrils, fleshy and red, that probed in front of them accompanied by a wet hissing sound. The tendrils found the crystalline datamedium and wrapped around it, slithering across its surface to find a way in.

The Obliterators were created when an Iron Warrior, already as much machine as Space Marine, became host to a tech-virus. The virus itself had its origin in the warp. Perhaps it was a gift from one of the dark gods that reigned there, or was a curse on the Traitor Legions. Perhaps it was a natural predator (as natural as anything could be in the warp), or it was a daemon itself, one that existed entirely in information form. Whatever its reason for being, it took the substance of a Space Marine and turned it into a biomechanical weapon, every muscle and bone adapted to form part of the hundreds of weapon systems an Obliterator could form from his mutating body. And the tech-virus had another property even more dangerous than its capacity to turn flesh into a weapon. It was infectious, and could be transmitted.

The tendrils wormed their way under the surface of the datamedium. The crystal became blotchy and discoloured as the virus found a new place to live and thrive, forming mottled blooms like bacteria on a Petri dish.

The air was filled with the sound of grinding metal as the whole defence laser shuddered. It rotated in its mountings, the building-sized laser barrel turning towards the main structure of the *Endeavour of Will*. Flakes of rust fell like a dark rain around Steelwatcher Mhul, and loose components clattered to the deck around him. The Obliterators extracted themselves from the tangle of metal as it churned with the movement. The one who had infected the gun stumbled out of the wreckage as its face reformed into the scowl it always carried, one eye narrow and hateful, the other replaced with a gun barrel.

The Obliterators crouched down beside Steelwatcher Mhul like attack dogs deprived of prey, scanning for targets.

‘Good,’ said Mhul, sending a wave of pacifying code through the coven. He switched to the command vox-channel. ‘Warsmith,’ he said. ‘It is done.’

Shon’tu and the Iron Warriors under his command stood lined up ready to advance, in the primary arterial corridor that led to the main structure of the *Endeavour of Will*. The top half of the corridor was transparent and so Shon’tu could see the mass of the star fort looming over him, covered with soaring battlements and arched portholes, studded with weaponry. The banners of the

Imperial Fists, articulated sheets of steel half a kilometre long, hung to display the gold colours and red fist of the Chapter.

‘See?’ said Shon’tu, pointing up at the colours that hung from the star fort. ‘We shall tear them down. There shall hang the heraldry of Olympia.’

‘Warsmith,’ came Mhul’s voice over the vox. ‘It is done.’

‘Good,’ replied Shon’tu. ‘Ensure that the targeting is sound, and then open fire.’

The *Endeavour of Will* had one massive advantage over the Iron Warriors. Even with its weapons mostly dead and its garrison outnumbered, its sheer size made it a difficult fortress to break down. Between the Iron Warriors and the command centres at the heart of the star fort, the machine-spirit housing and datamedium vault, the bridge from which the whole star fort was controlled, were hundreds of kilometres of corridors, thousands of bulkheads and blast doors. Forcing a way through them would take time the Imperial Fists could use to set ambushes or outflank the Iron Warriors, cut them off from one another and channel them into battles they fought on their terms. The Iron Warriors would still be victorious, but only at the expense of many of Shon’tu’s warband, and that was not an acceptable way for an Iron Warrior to fight a battle.

There was no easy way into the heart of the *Endeavour of Will*. So Shon’tu would make one.

There need be no risk at all, said a familiar but unwelcome voice in Shon’tu’s head, buzzing around his cranial implants and hijacking the logic circuits wired into his brain. There is another way.

‘Silence,’ said Shon’tu, quietly enough for only him to hear.

Release me.

‘I said silence.’

The whole western spire shuddered and thrummed with power. Behind Shon’tu’s position the titanic defence laser was powering up, the energy coils along its length glowing at first a dull burnt orange, then blue, then white, as enormous amounts of power were pooled. The barrel completed its traverse to point straight at the centre of the star fort. Safety circuits that would normally prevent the laser from being aimed at the star fort itself had been burned out by the Obliterator virus, while the control circuits destroyed by the initial attack on the machine-spirit had been repaired. The defence laser was in Iron Warriors hands now, and there was nothing the star fort or anyone on board could do to stop it.

The laser fired, and it seemed that the void itself was torn open, a gash

through reality that opened up to an ocean of burning light. The augmented vision of the Iron Warriors kept them from being blinded. The heat and magnetic shielding of the star fort's structure kept them from being incinerated and irradiated. For that split second, a lance of energy hotter than a star transfixed the star fort like an arrow through the heart.

When the glare died, the star fort was laid open, a massive wound revealing the tangled steel entrails surrounding the machine-spirit core and the command decks. Torrents of wreckage spilled out, spinning off into the void in all directions. Severed power lines spat energy at random and explosions burst silently, instantly snuffed out by the vacuum.

'Onwards,' voxed Shon'tu. 'They are dead, they merely do not know it. Let us educate them. Onwards!'

The Iron Warriors followed Shon'tu as he led them down the arterial tunnel towards the ruptured heart of the *Endeavour of Will*, feet tramping in time, as the wreckage from the blast pattered against the transparent ceiling overhead.

Lysander forged through the dense smoke, the heavy chemical taste of it distinct even through his armour's filter, which had folded up over his mouth and nose.

He had been on his way to the command deck when the explosion had hit. He had known instantly that something huge had impacted upon the *Endeavour of Will* – the din echoed from every corner of the star fort, the floor shaking in a manner that told of the whole station shuddering, the sudden kaleidoscope of warning icons on his retina signifying a massive strike.

Around him, sections of ceiling had fallen in, and slabs of flooring had collapsed into the decks below. A fire had caught light somewhere very near and within seconds had filled the corridor with toxic smoke. Lysander found his footing, bracing himself against a buttress in the wall.

'Rigalto!' yelled Lysander into the vox. 'Where are you?'

'Command deck, captain,' came the reply.

'Casualties?'

'None of my squad or Menander's. I can't tell if any of the crew is hurt, but I can scarcely believe there are no casualties. One of the defence lasers hit us. Shon'tu must have taken control of it.'

'He has,' said Lysander. 'He had four choices for his final assault. That was one of them.'

'Commander?'

'Shon'tu's way of war is much like ours,' replied Lysander. His augmented

senses had adapted to the smoke and fire, and he could see several bodies in the corridor ahead of him, knocked unconscious or killed outright by the explosion and now aflame. The crew uniforms, with the heraldry of the Imperial Fists, were being consumed by the fire. ‘According to our ways, only a few possibilities for capturing the fort presented themselves. This was one of them. Shon’tu has gone through the same process of thought.’

‘Then what are your orders?’

‘Take your squad and Menander’s to the datamedium vault,’ replied Lysander.

‘The vault? There are more defensible areas of—’

‘Those are your orders,’ repeated Lysander. ‘Shon’tu relies on speed and shock. Do not give him those advantages. Go now, I will meet you there.’

Lysander ignored Rigalto’s acknowledgement, as through the smoke and flames charged the shape of a Space Marine.

Lysander knew it was an Iron Warrior by its unnatural silhouette, broken by ungainly bionics which looked more like industrial tools than replacement limbs. A steam hammer was attached by pistons and cables to the stump of one arm, and it crashed through a sheet of fallen ceiling as it swung at Lysander.

Lysander ducked the blow and brought the Fist of Dorn around for a reverse strike. But the floor shifted beneath him and he was falling head over toe, metal twisting around him.

Lysander hit the deck below at an awkward angle, almost head-first. Flames were everywhere around him, scorching his unprotected face, rippling up the walls and along what remained of the ceiling. He forced his way back to his feet but already the Iron Warrior was falling after him, hammer-first, steam spraying as the pistons drove the weapon forwards.

The hammer crunched into Lysander’s chest. Lysander sprawled onto his back under the weight, rolling onto his shield side to get out from under the enemy. The Iron Warrior stayed with him, his human hand holding on as the hammer was brought up to slam down again, this time into Lysander’s face.

Lysander smacked the edge of his shield into the Iron Warrior’s visor. The visor was sheared away and for a moment Lysander could see his assailant’s face. The skin was grey and withered, as if it had been drained of all vital fluids and filled up with colourless sludge. The eyes were silver orbs without pupils. The nose was gone completely, leaving two slits leading to implanted filters. The face ended just above where the mouth should be, everything from that point to the collarbone a tangle of cables, gauges and valves, spurting steam.

Lysander and the Iron Warrior were bathed in flames. Lysander wrestled with his attacker as the fire rippled over him, submerging him as if in water. He could feel the skin of his face blistering, the inside of his armour heating up, as he kicked and thrashed to throw the Iron Warrior off him.

Lysander caught the Iron Warrior's hammer with the haft of his own, forcing the traitor to one side. His shield arm was free again and he forced the shield under the Iron Warrior's body, levering the traitor off of him. With a yell of effort and anger he threw the Iron Warrior back into the flames.

Lysander lost sight of his attacker. The flames and the choking smoke masked everything. Even the ceramite of Lysander's armour was faltering in the fire, scorching him at the joints. He had to get out, but if he turned and ran the enemy would have a free shot at his back – and even Terminator armour could not be trusted to save him then.

The Iron Warrior leaped through the flames, the exposed skin of his face crackling and bubbling. Lysander stepped back, raising his shield to take the charge.

The side of the Iron Warrior's head burst in a spray of dark blood and torn wires. He skidded onto the ground, sliding through the flames and coming to a halt at Lysander's feet. He twitched a little and the flames rolled over him.

Sergeant Laocos strode out of the smoke. Lysander recognised the leader of his command squad, and the glowing of the barrels of his storm bolter, the gun which had just fired the fatal shot.

'Captain!' shouted Laocos over the din of the fire. 'The enemy seeks to surround and flank us! We must move!'

Brother-Scholar Demosthor was behind Laocos, tracking for targets with his assault cannon. The deck behind him was in a similar state of destruction, and while no unaugmented crew could have survived down here, the Iron Warriors could use it as a way through the star fort if they moved fast enough.

'To the datamedium vault!' shouted Lysander. 'That is where our stand will be!'

Laocos nodded. 'My brothers! Forge on!'

The five-strong squad gathered on Laocos and followed Lysander as he kicked his way through the burning wreckage and headed for the nearest stairwell leading upwards. The pain was great, with the burns on his face and joints just now flaring up, but a Space Marine could ignore pain for as long as he had to.

'I suspect I know what you are planning,' said Laocos. His voice came over

an individual vox-channel – the rest of the squad could not hear. ‘As your sergeant, it is my duty to speak.’

‘Then do so,’ replied Lysander. He shouldered open a buckled door and revealed a stairwell. The deck above was smothered in smoke but there were no flames, and the way towards the vault looked clear.

‘I am compelled to ask if you truly understand the consequences of this plan,’ said Laocos.

‘I am more aware of them than anyone,’ replied Lysander.

‘Shon’tu must fall, that is certain. And we have all heard of what his kind did to you on Malodrax. Any one of us would–’

‘I am not fighting for revenge,’ said Lysander sharply. ‘On Malodrax I saw what the Iron Warriors truly are, and that they cannot be permitted to live on. That is the sole relevance of the events on Malodrax to this battle. Shon’tu will not die to satisfy my bloodlust. He will die to ensure mankind never suffers from his depredations again. Does that answer your concerns, sergeant?’

‘My apologies, captain,’ said Laocos. ‘I felt I had to say something.’

‘And it is said,’ replied Lysander. He climbed the stairs and headed towards the central spire of the star fort, where the heavily armoured vault of datamedium lay, and where the machine-spirit of the *Endeavour of Will* now held court.

Rarely did anyone enter through the airlocked doors of the datamedium vault. The air was recycled from the same atmosphere that had been sealed inside the last time the datamedium stacks had been maintained, more than six hundred years ago. The stacks themselves formed rows of columns reaching up to the ceiling, like the pipes of an infernally complicated pipe organ taking up the entirety of the huge chamber. The stacks of black crystal were banded with gold and brass, and thick bundles of cables hung down between them like the viny foliage of a jungle. Freezing mist clung to the floor, generated by the coolant flowing through the pipes that criss-crossed the floor, and the air was as chill.

In those stacks of black crystal cylinders resided vast amounts of information, more than a planet’s worth of human minds could contain: all the memories, wisdom and personality that made up the machine-spirit of the *Endeavour of Will*. It was the most sacred place on the whole star fort, and a follower of the Adeptus Mechanicus would fall to his knees in the presence of such knowledge, such closeness to the infinite wisdom of the Omnissiah.

Freezing air hissed and vapour billowed as one of the doors slid open.

Rigalto and Menander's squads entered, spreading out rapidly as they scouted out the best firing zones and defensive positions.

'It is a fine place to fight,' said Menander. 'Cover from every direction. Limited entrances. Very fine.'

'But a bad place to be trapped,' replied Rigalto. 'And any damage here could lose a hundred years of knowledge. I would say it is an ill place for a battle. Better that we should sabotage the command circuits and hold one of the spurs, and attempt to get its weapons back on-line.'

'But then we would relinquish this vault,' said Menander, 'and the enemy would have the machine-spirit at their mercy. They would succeed where they failed before, to do to it what they did to the *Bastion Inviolate*.'

'Perhaps you are right, Brother Menander. And Lysander has chosen this place for the battle. He knows more of such things than I.'

'Than any of us,' agreed Menander.

Menander joined his Scouts near the only other way into the vault, among a bank of brass-cased cogitators around the door set into the far wall. The three Scouts and their sergeant were armed with sniper rifles from the star fort's armoury and they concealed themselves among the knurled valve wheels and steam pipes that connected the various cogitator sections, giving themselves lanes of fire right down the length of the vault.

Rigalto formed a firing line across the vault, his men's bolters levelled like an execution squad. The squad's tattered banner was planted in the middle of the line, the bullet-riddled fist symbol on a red field surrounded by silver lightning bolts. To the battle honours embroidered beneath the symbol would be added the *Endeavour of Will*, if anyone from the squad survived.

The sound of gunfire and thumping explosions reached the vault. Loose components fell as the vault shuddered and distant warnings blared. The damage control signals reaching the sergeants told them that the star fort's central spire was massively compromised, with many decks completely depressurised and the crew fighting countless fires. Crew were still dying out there, both to fire and vacuum, and to the guns of the invaders as they stormed through the ruined star fort.

The doors boomed open again and Lysander's squad stomped through, trailing smoke as they went. Lysander himself was the most badly scorched of them, his face red and raw, one side of his golden yellow armour black with soot.

'They are on our tail!' yelled Lysander. 'Stand fast, Imperial Fists! They have the numbers, but we have the will!'

A burst of fire ripped through the wall beside Lysander, throwing two of his command squad to the ground. Through the wreckage crunched the two Obliterators, the vanguard of Shon'tu's force, blazing fire in every direction. Their flesh was seething and sheened with blood, black tendrils of corruption writhing from their skin. The steel of the wall they burst through became blackened and veined, the tech-virus they carried bleeding out from them into everything around them.

Lysander grabbed one of the fallen command squad and dragged him into the cover of a datamedium column. The rest of the command squad followed, Brother-Scholar Demosthor carrying Brother Tingelis over one shoulder as he turned to bring the assault cannon in his other hand to bear. Shrapnel rained off Demosthor as he returned fire, and the Obliterators disappeared in a storm of flame and debris.

'Rigalto! Watch our flank! My brothers, bring them down!'

Demosthor shrugged Tingelis off his shoulder and braced beside one of the columns, keeping up the storm of fire as his assault cannon's barrels span. Lysander looked down to see that he had dragged Sergeant Laocos from the fray – Laocos's armour was smoking and battered but he did not look badly hurt. Laocos rolled to one knee and hammered out fire in the same direction as Demosthor with his storm bolter.

The attack was a diversion. The Obliterators' task was to draw the attention of the Imperial Fists' gun-line. The real attack ripped through the opposite wall, explosive charges blasting out a section of the wall and sending shards of datamedium crystal showering down. An Iron Warriors champion was first through the breach, surrounded by the baying remnants of the possessed who had been mauled so badly at the Tomb of Ionis. He wore a debased echo of a Chaplain's garb, his face an iron skull, a mace in his hand with a head in the shape of an eight-pointed star.

The possessed charged right into the teeth of Rigalto's guns. The bolter drill that Rigalto had taught them with such discipline sent chains of fire rattling through the bodies of the possessed. Eyes and mouths, clawed and taloned limbs, burst from the shredded flesh of the possessed. They fell and mutated where they lay, forms liquefying into piles of quivering, warp-tainted gore.

The Chaplain was struck in the chest and thrown against one of the columns. He rolled into the cover, the last of the possessed loping through the carnage towards the gun-line. One of them vaulted over a bundle of pipes behind which two of the Imperial Fists were sheltering – Rigalto stepped forwards and impaled

the possessed Iron Warrior with a thrust of his chainsword. The blade carved out through the Iron Warrior's lower back and Rigalto twisted it, pulling it out and bringing the contents of the Iron Warrior's abdomen with it. Rigalto plunged the blade over and over again into the possessed, each withdrawal bringing out a fouler knot of squirming flesh, until there was not enough structure left in the Iron Warrior's body to contain its corruption and its armour clattered to the deck, liquid gore spilling out.

But the Iron Warriors had their foothold. Shon'tu's hulking form was just visible through the mist of bolter smoke, surrounded by perhaps forty Iron Warriors taking advantage of the possessed's charge to sprint through the wreckage and into cover of their own. Lysander could see Shon'tu's battle plan unfolding even as Rigalto's squad returned fire and the first Iron Warriors fell among them. He had his beachhead, his breach had been secured. And he had more guns than the Imperial Fists.

He would win. There was no doubt about that. It was a fine piece of strike warfare, a besieger's gambit to force the besieged into fighting a final battle that he could not win.

'Shon'tu!' bellowed Lysander, knowing that the Iron Warrior could hear him. 'Here is the head of Lysander! Here is a trophy for the halls of your Legion! Take it and become a god!'

In spite of what he had become, of all the inhuman filth in which his soul was steeped, warsmith Shon'tu was still a Space Marine, and he still suffered from a weakness that was so definingly theirs. He still had the pride which had seen Chapters, and Legions before them, refuse to quit the field when all was lost; which had created animosity when there should have been brotherhood. It was the pride from which the Horus Heresy itself had taken root.

Shon'tu's augmetic eyes focused on Lysander. Bolter fire punched through the datamedium around him but Lysander stood proud of the cover, impossible to mistake even through the grime and chaos of the battle. Shon'tu shoved aside the Iron Warrior in front of him and broke into a run, gunfire sparking against his armour.

Lysander's command squad drew in around him, but they too recognised a warrior's pride when it was brought into play. Their efforts were focused on keeping their commander safe from the advancing Obliterators. Lysander alone would face Shon'tu.

Shon'tu seemed to cover the breadth of the datamedium vault in a few huge strides. In a cloud of steam and smoke he fell upon Lysander like a comet from

the sky. His claw sliced forwards, talons snapping shut towards Lysander's face. Lysander ducked and took as much of the impact as he could on his shield. He was thrown back, bowling Sergeant Laocos aside, and rolled as he landed to bring him out of the way of the claw, which ripped into the deck beneath him.

Lysander and Shon'tu were face to face for half a second, more than long enough for Lysander to learn that there was nothing human in what remained of the warsmith's face.

Lysander batted aside Shon'tu's next attack with his shield, knowing it was a feint. The real attack was from Shon'tu's triple-barrelled boltgun, which he tried to ram up into Lysander's midriff so he could unload half its ammo chain into the Imperial Fist's body. Lysander span, knocked the gun aside with the haft of the Fist of Dorn, and kicked out hard enough to shatter the bronze struts lending strength to Shon'tu's right leg.

Shon'tu stumbled back and Lysander had a moment to seize the advantage. It had to be enough. He placed his hand against the nearest datamedium column and let his armour's interface connect with it, a probe in his gauntlet extending to dip into the ocean of knowledge inside.

'I am ready,' said the artificial voice that tapped into his vox-unit. It was the voice of the *Endeavour of Will* – the machine-spirit, the intelligence that had inhabited this place since its forging in the days when the Emperor still walked the galaxy.

'You have one more battle to fight,' said Lysander. He knew that his battle-brothers could only hear his side of the conversation. 'One blow to strike.'

'It must be done.'

'Forgive me, machine-spirit, that I command this of you.'

'Then redeem yourself, Imperial Fist, by avenging what I have lost.'

Lysander gave the order, a thought that triggered a sequence of commands in the machine-spirit. They in turn triggered more, the effect spreading out like ripples in a pond or the multiplication of an epidemic. Torrents of information were retrieved and released, centuries of battle-lore, millions of hours of battleground data, endless waterfalls of stellar cartography, earthquakes of raw mathematics coursing through every remaining stack of datamedium.

Some of the Iron Warriors might have understood what was happening. Shon'tu certainly did. As the green glow from the datamedium bathed the vault, he stepped back from the duel with Lysander. As power arced against the floor and ceiling, he ducked down, claw brought up to guard instead of attack.

'I want to look into your eyes,' said Lysander, 'and see the moment you

know defeat.'

'You dare?' yelled Shon'tu. 'You think this is a victory?'

'What else is it?' Around Lysander, green-white bolts of power, like lightning, were earthing against the floor. The columns were glowing so bright now that the whole vault shone with them, and they were bulging, cracking as the volume of information multiplied beyond their capacity to store it.

'You will learn,' retorted Shon'tu. 'When your soul goes dark! When this galaxy burns! You will learn!'

The columns shattered. Shards of crystal flew, spearing into the armour of Imperial Fist and Iron Warrior alike. They were not deadly enough to lay a Space Marine low, but they were not the true danger.

Every digit of information ever assembled or contemplated by the *Endeavour of Will* erupted into the vault, pure and raw.

Lysander's armour seized and shorted around him, suddenly heavy as the nerve-fibre bundles and servos were overloaded. Shots of pain punched through him as the many implants he possessed, interfaces drilled into his fused ribcage and cranial jacks that allowed input to his augmented eyes, sparked and died.

But the Iron Warriors suffered much worse. Shon'tu tried to continue with his retort, but his brass-cased form contorted and spurted jets of burning fuel. Components burst from the little flesh he had, panels of his armour falling open and bundles of bionics tumbling out. The other Iron Warriors were falling and spasming, losing control of their half-mechanical bodies.

The torrent of information released by the machine-spirit had flooded into them, and into the machinery with which they had replaced their weak, untrustworthy flesh. As one, every single bionic in the Iron Warriors of Shon'tu's warband overloaded and destroyed itself.

The retreat had been ragged. Almost half the warband were dead, shot down as they limped or crawled away from the datamedium vault. The Imperial Fists had been mauled, too, and some of the hated enemy had fallen. But it had been an appalling loss. Shon'tu felt what a human might call shame, if such a word could encompass the volcanic hate that it ignited; the emptiness within him, as vast and cold as the void, which could only be filled with thoughts of revenge.

Release me, came the voice again. It struck as Shon'tu was leading the retreat back towards the defence laser spur, dragging his heavy inert mechanical form along with the few motor systems that still functioned inside him. Around him the Iron Warriors were trying to maintain decent order, many unable to fight,

their arms useless and their weapons seized up; some barely able to move.

Release me. It must be done.

‘I cannot. You know that...’

In defeat all bonds break. In desperation, in the face of shame and catastrophe, the only rule is revenge. Release me. It is the only way. You know this to be true.

Shon’tu looked back along the route he had taken to the datamedium vault. It was burnt out and wrecked, scattered with the bodies of the star fort’s crew who had fallen to the laser strike or the Iron Warriors’ guns. Now he saw Forge-Chaplain Kourtos being carried by two of his Iron Warriors, his bullet-scarred body spasming as his spinal implants refused to obey the orders coming from his cortex.

Gunfire streaked from the Imperial Fists, who were pursuing in tight order, moving from cover to cover and taking only what shots could not be returned. One of the Iron Warriors fell and Kourtos clattered to the deck. Silhouetted against a bank of flames, one of the Imperial Fists Terminators stood out from cover and levelled his assault cannon. A volley of fire thudded into Kourtos’s body and the Forge-Chaplain, unable to move, was torn apart. Chunks of his flesh spattered across the ceiling and walls, and over the Iron Warriors trying to drag themselves into cover.

‘Then I release you!’ yelled Shon’tu. ‘In the name of vengeance! To see the corpse of this star fort tumbling through the void, as dead as the Imperial Fists for whom it has become a tomb! I release you from your bonds of servitude, from imprisonment in the *Ferrous Malice*! Lord Velthinar, I release you!’

Seen from space, the *Endeavour of Will* was clearly wounded, still bleeding wreckage from the crater left by the defence laser’s strike. A halo of debris surrounded it and flashes of explosions sparked as the fires in its central spire continued to burn, and fuel and ammunition stores cooked off. Much of it was completely dark, lights extinguished by the loss of power. It was a stricken animal, lame and vulnerable.

The *Ferrous Malice* was the predator. Far smaller, but unwounded and swift, it bore down upon the *Endeavour of Will*. Its hull split open and it seemed for a moment that it would try to grapple the star fort as it had the *Siege of Malebruk*. But forward thrusters fired and the grand cruiser slowed, pointing its slit belly towards the *Endeavour of Will*.

Light bled out. Multicoloured fire bathed the ship as the first limbs unfolded

from its interior, followed by the chitinous bulk of a creature that had spent an aeon confined.

The daemon Velthinar forced its way out of the ship. Its abdomen was a long, slithering white-fleshed mass that pulsed with veins, its thorax armoured in gilt and jewels. Hundreds of limbs opened up, tipped in golden claws. Finally its wings unfurled, a tremendous mass of iridescent sails uncoiling. With a single beat the dozen wings thrust Velthinar towards the *Endeavour of Will*.

Lightning crackled around it in every colour. The red giant star dulled as Velthinar drew off its light, surrounding itself in the star's fire so that every edge and tip of its armoured form glowed painfully bright. White-hot and trailing flame lightning like a comet, Velthinar accelerated, arrowing straight for the *Endeavour of Will*, shining with enough power to punch through the star fort and rip out its innards.

'Velthinar rises!' came the screaming voice of Shon'tu. 'You think you have defeated us, Imperial Fist? You do not even know what defeat means! But fear not! Velthinar will show you!'

Lysander and his squad heard Shon'tu's words as they pursued the Iron Warriors through the arterial corridor leading towards the defence spur. The corridor was dense with smoke but even so the aim of his command squad had despatched half a dozen Iron Warriors during their retreat, and they had almost reached the foothold the Iron Warriors had established with their Dreadclaw assault-pods. Lysander peered through the smoke, unable to make out any detail among the darkness. Gunfire could be heard from elsewhere in the spur as Rigalto's squad moved swiftly to recapture the defence laser itself.

'Warsmith!' yelled Lysander in reply. 'I hear only the words of one fleeing for his life! I hear the squeals of a coward! Stand forward and face me, as you were so eager to a few moments ago! Or do the Iron Warriors do all their fighting with words?'

The squad spread out around Lysander, covering every angle of fire. The shapes of giant capacitors loomed from the smoke, empty now of the energy they had stored for the defence laser. Lysander made out one of the Dreadclaw pods, its serrated jaws protruding through the hull into the space between two capacitors.

Above Lysander, the transparent roof of the corridor cleared for a moment as the smoke coiled out of the way. The light breaking through shone from a vast insectoid daemon streaking through space, aiming for the centre of the star fort.

It was an abomination, half titanic maggot and half bejewelled predatory insect, and the power streaming off it burned brighter than the nearest star.

Lysander took a few steps forwards and saw Shon'tu. The warsmith had made it to one of the Dreadclaws and was in the process of hauling its jaws shut.

'See, Lysander!' yelled Shon'tu. 'See the herald of your deaths! Every move you made, I had a counter! For every thrust, I had a feint! Our victory was decided before the first shot was fired, Imperial Fist!'

Lysander charged through the smoke. He slammed into the jaw of the Dreadclaw just as it was closing, reducing his view of Shon'tu to a sliver. The warsmith's face was lit red by the warning lights inside the assault-pod, just a few centimetres from Lysander's.

'My brothers on Malodrax were weak,' said Shon'tu. 'They were the dregs of our Legion. You think you have stared into the soul of the Iron Warriors. You have no idea.' Shon'tu smiled as he saw Lysander trying to force the Dreadclaw's jaws open, and failing.

'I know what you left behind on Malodrax,' said Shon'tu, with a smirk on the remains of his half-mechanical face. 'And I know what you took from there, too. What you still carry. It is what drives you to kill me, Lysander. It will be the death of every battle-brother who ever stands at your side And it will not let you go until you have killed everything you fight for!'

'I didn't fight you here to defeat you,' said Lysander as the jaw ground closed. 'I fought you here to bring out Velthinar.'

The faintest trace of confusion passed over Shon'tu's face. Then the Dreadclaw was closed and in a hiss of steam the clamps holding it in place disengaged.

'Breach!' yelled Lysander. 'Back! Fall back and seal us off!'

The Dreadclaw's thrusters roared and the assault-pod was ripped back out of the star fort's hull. Air whistled out behind it. Lysander pulled his helmet from the waist of his armour and jammed it over his head as warning runes flickered telling him the air pressure had suddenly dropped to little over nothing.

Smoke swirled out, the air suddenly clear. The area was strewn with the bodies of Iron Warriors, and Lysander's squad shot down a couple who were still moving even as the air dissipated and silence fell.

'Missed him,' voxed Brother-Scholar Demosthor. 'Damnation and filth.'

Lysander did not answer. He looked back up through the ceiling of the arterial corridor, the view no longer obscured. But he was not looking at the burning mass of Velthinar. He was looking at the storm of purplish lightning that

was swelling into real space just behind the daemon, the sign of a spacecraft ripping its way from the warp.

‘Throne of Gold,’ said Sergeant Laocos, standing just behind Lysander and following his gaze. ‘What is that?’

‘A friend,’ replied Lysander.

Velthinar knew that something was wrong. It paused in its path towards the *Endeavour of Will* and turned to see what was causing the disturbance in the warp behind it.

What it saw was reality splitting and the stuff of the warp pouring through. A billowing tide of sorcery crashed into the vacuum, carrying upon it a vast shape, like a ghost hulk carried on a stormy ocean. Its hull was pitted and scored with the punishment of the warp, and every surface was blistered with pustules and veins. Eyes opened everywhere there was space for them, clustering like buboes, rolling madly and bloodshot. The shape trailed ragged tentacles and arteries that spilled blackish blood into the void.

It was deformed and horrible, all symmetry destroyed, but it still carried enough of its original form to be identified as a star fort, much the same shape and size as the *Endeavour of Will*. A few tattered banners still hung from it, carrying the colours of the Imperial Fists.

‘I cannot be redeemed,’ bellowed an artificial voice, transmitted through the substance of reality. It was heard by everyone for light years around, but it was directed at the daemon Velthinar. ‘I cannot be saved. I cannot know peace.’

Tentacles burst from beneath the corrupted mass of the star fort, snaking around Velthinar’s primary limbs. Velthinar thrashed, but the star fort was bigger and stronger.

‘But I can have revenge,’ the voice continued.

Velthinar fought. The energy it had siphoned from the star Kholestus raked across the corrupted star fort, blasting off battlements and defence spurs, but it was no good. The grip was tight and not even Velthinar Silverspine could break free.

Velthinar was looking into the million eyes of the *Bastion Inviolable*.

‘My god will shred your soul!’ spat the daemon.

‘I have no soul,’ came the reply. ‘I was a machine. Now I am a disease. You did this to me.’

‘Serve Him!’ countered Velthinar. ‘Untold power will be yours!’

‘I do not want power,’ said the *Bastion Inviolable*, ‘save the power to break

you upon the anvil of my hate.'

A tentacle wrapped around the head and mouthparts of Velthinar, silencing the daemon for the moment. The eyes of the *Bastion Inviolata* turned towards the *Endeavour of Will*, the star fort which had until recently been its brother.

'Lysander,' it said.

On the *Endeavour of Will*, Lysander heard the voice, and he knew that it could hear him too. He had watched the corrupted star fort and the daemon struggling, and it had been clear from the outset that the *Bastion Inviolata* would win. Velthinar Silverspine had not destroyed it, for a being with the tenacity and willpower of the *Bastion Inviolata*'s machine-spirit would not simply be wiped out by corruption. It would become something else, something awful, and it would thrive.

'Your astropath called for me,' the machine-spirit said. 'He told I could have revenge on the being that did this to me.'

'And you have it,' said Lysander. 'Now depart. This reality has no place for you now.'

'I know what I am,' said the *Bastion Inviolata*. 'And I know the oaths that you swear. I am an abomination. Your kind must hunt me down.'

'And we shall,' said Lysander. 'When we meet again, it will be as enemies.'

'That will not be for a long time.' The *Bastion Inviolata* held up the squirming daemon like a hunter displaying the body of a kill. 'For many thousands of years I feel my enthusiasm shall remain. I am a newcomer to the warp. I have much to learn of what pain a daemon can feel. It will be a long time in the learning.'

'We will find you,' said Lysander.

'And when you do, the sundered corpse of this creature will be impaled upon my battlements, and its flayed skin shall be my standard. Farewell, Captain Lysander of the Imperial Fists. What remains of me with the capacity to honour you will soon be lost to the warp, but for now, it salutes you.'

Lysander could hear Velthinar screaming as the warp tore open again and the *Bastion Inviolata* sank out of real space. The daemon struggled and thrashed but the star fort held it fast in its hundreds of spiny tentacles. The vacuum boomed shut behind it, and when the afterglow died down, Velthinar Silverspine and the *Bastion Inviolata* were gone.

The Dancer was a messenger, neutered of its deadliness and malice, a barely

perceptible shadow within a shadow. The destruction of its kind had left only this shade, the ghost of a daemon. Only its eyes were obvious, flickering red-black orbs that darted in every direction as if watching for enemies.

Lysander knew it was there before he saw it. It had been nine days since the *Ferrous Malice*, shorn of the daemon that commanded it, had limped away from the *Endeavour of Will* with Shon'tu and the surviving Iron Warriors on board, and the star fort was still a wreck. More than half its crew were dead and large areas were ruined, amongst them the shattered expanse of map rooms and tactical libraries that Lysander was searching for dead crew or Iron Warriors.

Lysander froze, hand hovering over the shaft of the Fist of Dorn.

'I have not come to fight,' hissed the Dancer.

'The last time I met your kind, I tore you all to shreds. And the time before that. So for your sake, be speaking the truth.'

The Dancer slithered out of the darkness where it had been lurking, beneath the charred remains of a map table surrounded by scrolls and books. 'I come to give thanks.'

Lysander spat on the floor. 'Thanks from the warp are a curse. Begone or I will throw you back to your god in pieces.'

'But what else can the gods of the warp give to Captain Lysander of the Imperial Fists, when he has given to them a victory their servants could not win? The violation of Ionis's tomb. The death of Astropath Vaynce. The soul of Techmarine Hestion, upon which we still feast. The loss of a billion minds' worth of battle-lore. And the pact with the *Bastion Inviolate*, a pact to which no god could force a spirit such as yours and yet one of which you were the author! How could any servant of the warp win such victories from the Imperial Fists? Shon'tu sought only your deaths. He could never have won such triumph as we gained, but you have given it to us of your own will.'

Lysander hefted the Fist of Dorn and took a stride towards the Dancer. The daemon did not move, holding out its arms as if about to embrace the Imperial Fist.

'The warp thanks you, Lysander! The greatest champion of the gods could not have done more!'

Lysander swatted the daemon aside with the Fist of Dorn. The hammer's head tore right through the creature and its shadow dissipated into a thousand wisps that vanished like smoke into the air. There was no impact, no satisfying crunch of bone. The daemon was simply gone, for it had been sketched so lightly on reality its destruction had no meaning.

Lysander stood there for a long time. The words of a daemon would not sway him. They might worm into a lesser man's head, to discourage and corrupt, but not the mind of an Imperial Fist.

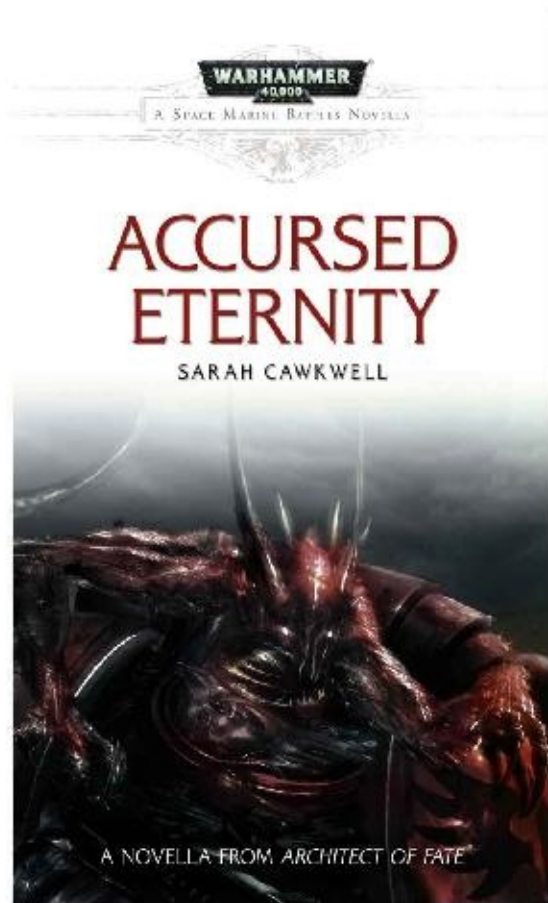
Nothing had changed. If anything, the events aboard the *Endeavour of Will* had proven to him what he already knew.

Everything could be sacrificed. It took a man of Lysander's will to know that. Everything was secondary to victory.

Everything.

About The Author

Author of the Souldrinkers and Grey Knights series, freelance writer Ben Counter is one of Black Library's most popular SF authors, and has written RPG supplements and comics books as well as novels. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England, where he can sometimes be seen indulging his enthusiasm for amateur dramatics on the local stage.



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