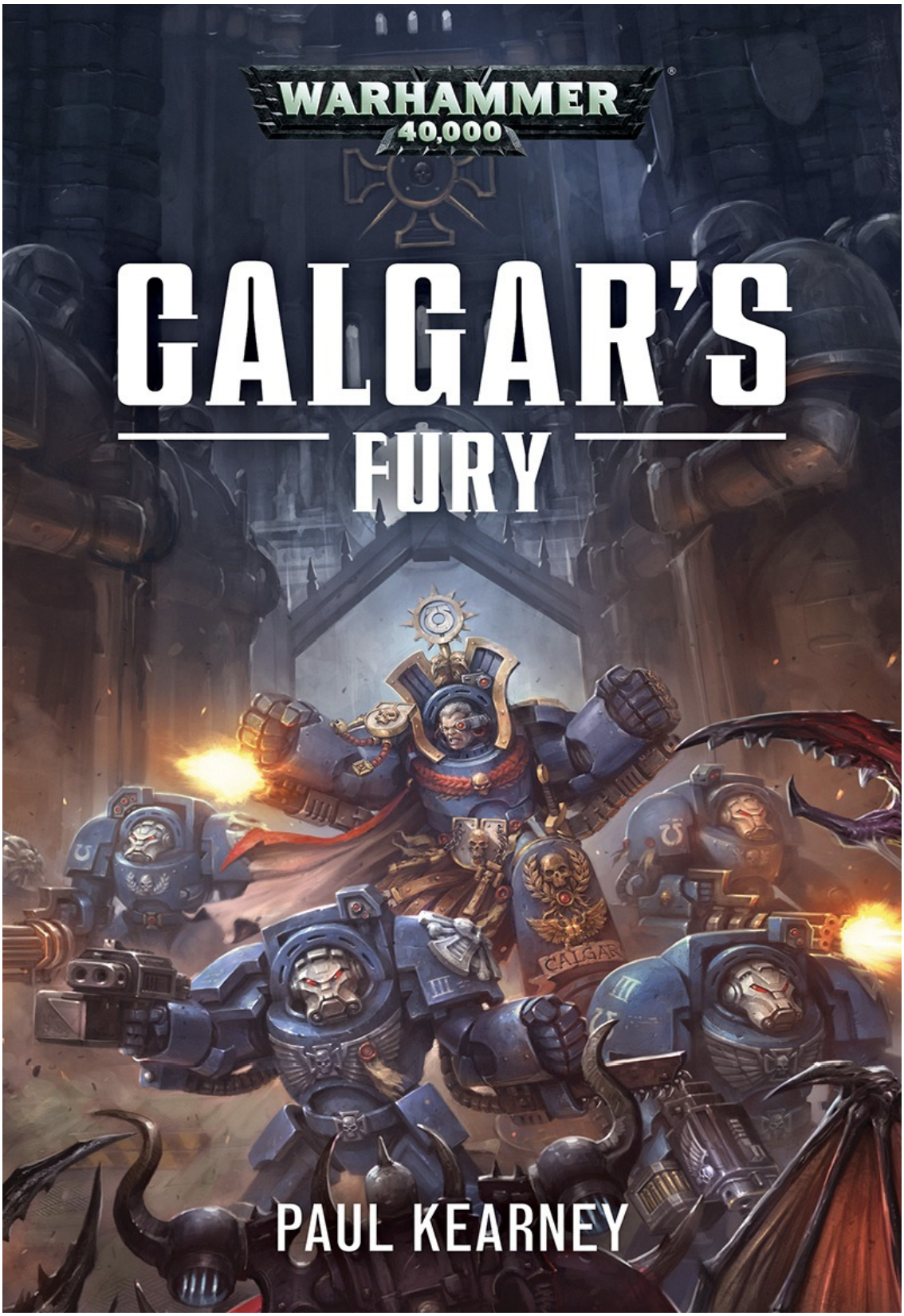
WARHAMMER
40,000
CALGAR'S
FURY
PAUL KEARNEY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WARHAMMER 40,000

CALGAR'S FURY

PAUL KEARNEY

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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 Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

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

Dark star, that hath no light;
Whither shalt thou wander,
If not back into the abyss
Where we must follow?

Prophetic Musings,
By the False Saint Basillius, 321 M.37
Expunged *in Heretico*, 134 M.38

Accounts of Ultramarines Operation code word Fury suppressed,
By Order of Imperial Inquisition, Ordo Hereticus, 812 M.41
Adeptus Terra Sanctum Noctis in Extremis

GLORIA IN IMPERATOR EXCELSIS

I have seen more than two standard centuries of human history go by, and as the years pass, it seems to me it is a hazard of them that one dwells increasingly on the defeats one has known, rather than on the glorious victories.

It is not merely the memory of dead brethren that springs into the mind, though that is part of it. We of the Adeptus Astartes do not mourn our fallen brothers as ordinary men do. Their deaths are a fulfilment of their purpose in life. They were brought into being to destroy the enemies of mankind, and if they die doing that, then their destiny is fulfilled, their fate complete. There is no higher calling in this universe, no better way to make an end. We may miss the wit and wisdom, the steadfast savagery of those who are gone before us into the Emperor's Peace, but we do not dwell on their loss in the same way that lesser men do. For we know that one day we will follow them on that road into the darkness.

No, it is something else. The victories – they are ours by our own prowess and the divine blessing of the Emperor. And there is a tradition of them, especially for my own Chapter. Especially for those of us who bear the ultima sigil on our shoulders. We have prevailed against terrible odds on battlefields and worlds beyond count. Victory is something we often take for granted.

It is the defeats which gnaw at us – and at myself, if truth be told.

We analyse them, learn from them, put them behind us and carry on, but the foul taste of some remains with us always.

This is not that most sterile of emotions, regret. It is anger. Anger at stupidity and waste, the wanton foolishness of so many of those who inhabit the Imperium of Man.

We have strayed so far from what once might have been, and are now a species

that claws for its very existence amid the stars, having fallen from grace. That original sin, that blasphemy, will always be with us. It is the dark shadow we must all live with, and every day it grins out at us from the immaterium, in a battle without end. That is one defeat which will never go away. The memory and the consequences of it are with us always.

Tireless, indomitable, the Adeptus Astartes were created to smash the shadow, to thrust it back into the gibbering abyss from whence it came. We have fought that fight for ten millennia now, and will fight it for ten more if that is what is required of us by our bright Father. But we cannot ignore our past, the failures that are remembered but not spoken of.

When I kneel in prayer before great Guilliman, the light shining around his timeless form, I look upon the very life-blood of my forbear, my great and noble sire – I see the mortal wound that shines ever-fresh in the holy stasis field which sustains his ever-dying flesh.

And I remember that it was inflicted by one of our own. His own brother primarch, Fulgrim, brought him down.

It is one thing to suffer defeat. It is another to suffer betrayal at the hands of those who were once our own brethren. For such as these, there can be no forgiveness, no end to the quest for vengeance. They are the worst of our enemies, those who turned to the Ruinous Powers and broke down the great edifice of the Imperium of Man.

They were once like us, and that is why our hatred of them is undying.

Deep in our souls, we fear that we carry the same sin within us.

I
INSANISTA IN TENEBRIS

ONE

‘*Primarion Optis, this is Arnaeus three, sweeping grid three-seven-two-five now, my augur is clear, all systems are in holy function. Throne be with us.*’

‘Acknowledged Arnaeus three, we have you on long-range and are plotting now. Your patrol route has been inscribed in the Cogitator of Navigation.’

The augur controller Rann Gorekian, a human overseeing a long bank of murmuring servitors, yawned. It was a beautiful morning, and the sun was rising fat and red over Primarion Optis, the only large-scale urban area on all of beautiful Iax. Gorekian’s shift was almost over, and unlike the tireless servitors he oversaw, he was looking forward to his early morning meal, cold water on his face and some sleep. But for now, his duty kept him here, in the long, stone-built chamber that was as austere and echoing as a place of worship.

He bore the ultima sigil on the chest of his blue uniform, surrounded by the stylised wheat ears that made up the symbol of his world. Green garden of the sector, Iax was an agri planet, the granary of Ultramar. Nestled in the heart of that great, guarded realm, it was surrounded by minefields and gun-satellites and was as protected a world as could be found in this embattled galaxy. But still, the inter-system patrols went out every few weeks to police the space-lanes about Iax, a fleet of small ships kept in constant motion and watchfulness by the decree of Macragge.

Call sign Arnaeus three was a tiny craft, by Imperial standards. Based on the hull of a Faustus class interceptor, it was one of several squadrons maintained at Primarion Optis Space Port on Iax. Just over three hundred feet long, it had a crew of four: pilot, observation officer, flight engineer and gunnery mate, as well as several servitors. On this day the Arnaeus was close enough to its home planet

to travel with a reduced crew. Its job was to observe, not to engage, and in any case, this far into the heart of Ultramar the system patrols had become over the years something of a pro forma exercise. Everyone knew that an Ultramarines strike cruiser was never more than a day or two away; on this occasion the massive, sacred bulk of the *Rex Aeterna*, commanded by Captain Caito Galenus himself with a full company of Adeptus Astartes aboard.

Gorekian walked up and down the monitoring dais which arced between the banked servitors and their screens. Incense hung blue in the air; the tech-priests had already conducted their ritual morning blessings, and the cogitators hummed serenely, the spirits within them in harmony.

High above him, the early light of Iax's star poured through the armoured windows of the command chapel, yellow tinged with blue. He checked his chrono. Thirty minutes until relief. Another uneventful night in Ultramar.

It had been over sixty years since the tyranid invasion of the sector, and the terrible destruction of that titanic conflict had long since been repaired. To Gorekian, who was not yet thirty, tales of those years were something akin to legend. His father had known that time, and disliked speaking of it. Back then, Macragge itself had been all but overwhelmed, the Ultramarines beaten off their own home world, much of the surrounding systems devastated. But though there had been other wars since, they had taken place out on the fringes of the sector. Some were still ongoing; the orks were continually probing the borders of Ultramar, as were the eldar. But to a young man like Rann Gorekian, the possibility of a major threat making it all the way here, to the heart of the Ultramarines' territory, was so remote as to be unthinkable.

Such are the limitations of men's memories.

Gorekian yawned again, thinking of his wife in the hab out in the suburbs, the green fields that stretched beyond it. The plains of Iax were given over to grain crops, farmed on an immense scale by semi-automated combine-reticulates, irrigated, verdant, quiet. A man might spend his life on the planet and not see a single tree, just those endless plains of wheat and soy and millet; but the immense sky was always there to wonder at, and at night the stars blazed across it in trails and streamers of all colours, not hemmed out as they were on so many other worlds by the lights of hive cities and the miasma of man-made smogs.

Iax was clean, unpolluted – it had to be, for the foodstuffs it created fed half the subsector, even venerable Macragge itself. A man counted himself lucky to make his life there, when he could be toiling in some lightless mine or sweating his innards out in the manufactoria of a forge world. Iax was blessed, and the

prowess of the Ultramarines saw to it that it remained so.

'*Primarion Optis, this is Arnaeus three, we have an anomalous reading in grid three-seven-two-six, coming up on augur now. Some kind of energy bloom. Could be the residual from a warp translation.*'

Gorekian rubbed his eyes and touched the vox mic that hung from one ear.

'I hear you, Arnaeus three. Do you wish to investigate? You are beyond our augur and your sweep is almost over.' And so is my shift, Gorekian thought irritably.

A few seconds delay. Arnaeus three was moving farther out from the planet, the lengthening distance delaying signal transmission somewhat. Gorekian picked up the ship's ident beacon on the data readout of the servitor tasked with monitoring the void space over Iax and frowned. Almost out of patrol range.

He knew Arnaeus three's pilot – young Jesh Warius, a fire-eater if ever there was one. The fellow was a voidsman of some repute among his comrades in the Iax squadrons, one of those who loved nothing more than to pilot his craft out there in the darkness, intent on one day joining the Imperial Navy proper, to course the true depths of the void. But he was trustworthy.

'*Affirmative, Primarion Optis, we are heading to intercept, should be within good interrogative range within fifteen minutes.*'

'I see nothing out there,' Gorekian said, walking up and down the dais and scanning each slate and screen below him. Nothing was logged as inbound in that grid – if some vessel had translated out of the warp, then it was not on any schedule here, which was unusual for a system as well regulated as Iax.

The servitors muttered in binharic and their barely human limbs moved across their keyboards like musicians playing some enormously intricate instrument. Whatever it was that had piqued Warius' interest was too far out to show up here.

The Arnaeus' ident beacon glowed yellow, surrounded by darkness – no other Imperial ships were anywhere near. Gorekian's stomach rumbled. Silently he cursed Warius and his curiosity. Like as not it would be nothing, some spatial anomaly which would go into the log and be forgotten along with the fistful of others that cropped up every few months. The void was full of phenomena that had not been investigated or explained; they were merely catalogued. Scientific curiosity was for the Adeptus Mechanicus, not a planetary patrol crew.

Minutes clicked by. Gorekian's relief would soon be here. He could hand over Warius and his curiosity to Lieutenant Haldane, or he could adhere to the letter of the regulation tomes and remain.

Gorekian sighed. He knew what he would do. The training had ingrained it in

him.

'*Primarion Optis, Arnaeus three here – you are not going to believe what I'm picking up!*' Warius' voice had lost the bored competence he usually affected. '*Throne – I've never seen anything like this before!*'

'Maintain proper voice procedure,' Gorekian warned, though he felt a shrill spike of adrenaline at the outright fear in the pilot's tone. 'Arnaeus three, relay your findings to me at once.'

There was a squawk of static, and then silence.

'Arnaeus three, do you read? Acknowledge my last message and relay your augur readings to my cogitators for analysis.'

'*It's drawing us in– we're out of–*' The transmission cut off on Warius' last shout.

Nothing more. Gorekian strode up and down, his weariness forgotten. The servitors muttered binharic around him like a congregation mumbling its prayers. He stared up at the tall, cool walls of the chapel.

'Throne,' he growled under his breath at last. He touched his vox and called up the servitors direct.

'Sigma binary one, extend planetary augur to full reach, bearing towards grid three-seven-two-six. Binary two, re-establish vox with Arnaeus patrol.' He hesitated, and bared his teeth a second. 'Sigma three, ready emergency vox call for *Rex Aeterna* strike cruiser, Captain Galenus commanding.' His heart began to thump in his chest. 'But hold off on that until I give the word.' It was written in the Regulation tomes that all unusual vox occurrences be routed out to the nearest Ultramarines strike cruiser for further analysis, but he did not want to go down that route yet. One did not disturb the Ultramarines with trivialities.

Gorekian began to sweat. The servitors went about their business with the calm imperturbability of their kind, the readiness lights on their decks glowing amber as they undertook their newly assigned tasks in addition to their continual monitoring of the space port systems.

The command centre doors slid open and Lieutenant Haldane walked in, an older, crumpled man who looked as though he had just got out of bed. But he was a veteran of his kind, and took in the situation on the boards at a glance. Making the sign of the aquila to the little Imperial Shrine, which glimmered with a votive light, he placed his vox headset behind one ear and raised an eyebrow at his fellow officer, but Gorekian held up a hand. 'I have this, Borr.'

'Warius again, eh?' Haldane said, scanning the call-logs.

‘It’s probably nothing.’ But Gorekian could not forget the fear in Arnaeus three’s last transmission.

‘He has travelled far out,’ Haldane grunted. ‘He has exceeded the parameters of his orders.’

‘Warius lives to fly that ship, Borr, you know that. There’s not a better pilot in the squadron.’

Haldane scratched his unshaven chin, grimacing. ‘He is insubordinate, but I admit what you say is true.’

They stood listening, waiting. Gorekian found himself staring at the ident beacon of Warius’ ship on the control slate. It was not moving, but at least it was still there.

Haldane cleared his throat. ‘Lieutenant Gorekian, I intend to clear Arnaeus two for lift-off, just in case. Do you concur?’

‘Affirmative.’ If something had happened aboard Warius’ ship there might be survivors in need of rescuing. In any case, vox had been down for too long. The void around Iax was as close to tamed as space became, swept clear of debris, asteroids and anything which might impede the coming and going of the grain convoys.

They waited. Gorekian felt the vibration from the launch pads through the soles of his boots as Arnaeus two warmed up her engines below the command tower.

‘*Primarion Optis, Arnaeus two ready for take-off.*’

Haldane and Gorekian shared a look and the younger man nodded.

‘Arnaeus two,’ Haldane rumbled, ‘you are cleared for take-off. Make for geosynchronous orbit and await further orders.’

‘*Acknowledged.*’

A dull roar outside, and a brightening of the morning as the Faustus took off, streaking up into the blue above.

The mechanical grate of a servitor spoke up over the noise. ‘Vox transmission incoming, grid three-seven-two-six, non-Imperial frequency… Transmission ends.’

‘Play it back,’ Gorekian snapped.

They heard a garbled flash of static, nothing more. Haldane swore under his breath. ‘Non-Imperial? Binary two, do we have any ships showing in that grid?’

‘Affirmative,’ the servitor intoned. ‘Call sign Arnaeus three is in that grid.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Negative.’

‘Try and sweep from here.’

‘Negative. That location is beyond planetary augur range.’

‘Play back the transmission, and clean it up,’ Gorekian said.

It came again, still soaked in static, but now there was definitely a voice there, words drowned out by interference. Something about the transmission set the hairs rising on Gorekian’s neck.

‘That’s no vox shadow,’ Haldane said, bending over the shoulder of a servitor to look at the screen. ‘It’s an old frequency – I’ve never seen it used before.’

‘Analyse,’ Gorekian said harshly.

The servitor answered with implacable calm. ‘Transmission is non-mechanical, non-xenoid. Transmission is human.’

‘Throne,’ Haldane swore. ‘Put it on a loop and see if you can reconstruct it.’

The two men went to one knee, the better to look down into the servitor well and watch the creature at work, though the servitor’s digits moved too fast to follow.

‘I have partial reconstruction,’ the servitor said.

The two straightened. ‘Let’s hear it,’ Gorekian said.

The transmission came over the chapel speakers again. This time as they listened, Gorekian and Haldane looked at one another and the same bleak astonishment was in both their faces. It was not a language they knew, but it was human speech – speech from a voice that set their skin crawling. A short, truncated phrase, repeated over and over again, until it seemed like a chant to fill the air, loathsome and alien, and yet hauntingly familiar.

‘*Insanista in tenebris*,’ the voice said, garbled and static-haunted but recognisable now.

Insanista in tenebris.

Gorekian’s eyes were wide. He tried to shake off the sense of clammy terror the words engendered.

‘Shut it off,’ he croaked. ‘Turn the damn thing off.’

The command centre went quiet again but for the binharic murmuring of the servitors and the hum of the boards.

‘Sigma three,’ he said at last, ‘patch me through to the *Rex Aeterna*. Get me Captain Galenus of the Ultramarines.’

TWO

Two miles long, the massive spacecraft nosed its way through the void like a lean-nosed reptilian of old earth. It had skirted the ruined system of Prandium not three days before, and was powering through the empty space beyond at cruising speed when the message came through. Decoded by the ship's vox-servitor, flagged as urgent, it was at once relayed to the bridge of the starship, and the shipmaster himself brought it to the attention of the Adeptus Astartes standing there, Veteran Sergeant Lars Greynius of Fifth Company.

The Ultramarine held the plasreel tape in his gauntleted fists, and his face did not change as he read the decoded strip.

Brother Sergeant Greynius was old in service, a veteran of Fifth who had survived the battles against Hive Fleet Behemoth. The scars that raked his face were testimony to the things he had seen and done during that campaign. He wore them as proudly as any decoration. The blue of his power armour gleamed in the instrumentation lights that winked up and down the nave of the starship's bridge. He was the only Ultramarine standing in that great, vaulted space, with its banks of servitors and data-slates and cogitator screens, and the human fleet personnel made their way around him with the careful reverence one might show to a religious icon.

There were over twenty thousand crew members aboard the *Rex Aeterna*, and some six score of them were Adeptus Astartes; the bulk of Fifth Company, plus some detachments from Ninth and First. The strike cruiser was Ultramar's first line of defence and reaction out here in the Eastern Fringe, and its commander, Caito Galenus, was Lord of the Marches as well as Captain of Fifth. The borders of Ultramar were his especial responsibility, and he took that responsibility with

all the seriousness of his rank and kind.

'This is all there was?' Greynius asked the shipmaster.

The human officer bowed slightly. He was in his fifties, Terran-standard, trim and erect, with a greying beard that only partially covered a livid ripple of burn tissue down the side of his cheek and neck.

'It was marked Immediate Attention. I have not yet tried to reach Iax for confirmation – I thought you should see it at once.'

Greynius looked over the plasreel vox tape a second time, to make sure he had it word perfect, and then bent over his personal console, which reared up like a pulpit in one corner of the nave.

'Priority vox Brother Captain Galenus to the bridge, code Epsilon three five alpha.'

He turned to the shipmaster. 'Shipmaster Remion, on my authority I believe you may make the ship ready for a course-change, to be implemented without delay.'

Remion raised one eyebrow, but said nothing, only bowed slightly once more, and then rejoined his fellow fleet officers at the crux of the nave. A series of orders was issued, without fuss or comment, and the banked servitors seemed to pick up the tempo of their work before their slates and cogitator screens. The thrumming of the drives under Greynius' feet seemed to die back a little as the orders went down to the engine compartments, those vast, hellish chambers that housed the drives in the stern of the *Rex Aeterna*. The ship was slowing down, readying for the anticipated manoeuvre.

Galenus' personal quarters were up here in the superstructure of the ship, close by, and it was only a few minutes before he joined Greynius on the bridge. He made the sign of the aquila to the Emperor's Shrine at the base of the nave, ignoring that of the Cult Mechanicus which stood beside it, and then strode down the plasteel decking towards his sergeant.

'I thought it had been too quiet,' he said tersely, taking the vox-tape from his brother Ultramarine. 'You've brought down our speed.'

'I judged it prudent,' Greynius said.

Galenus took in the information on the tape as quickly as Greynius had, and his seamed face tightened.

Clad in the full, gold-ornamented battleplate of his rank, he was shorter than the armoured form of his veteran sergeant, but their faces were oddly akin. The same massive, shaved skull, seemingly welded together with bone and muscle close under the pale skin. The same cold eyes deep-set in cavernous sockets, glinting

with ocular augmentation. But where Greynius' were blue, blue as glacial ice, Galenus' were as green as a sunlit sea.

The two Ultramarines towered over the ordinary human crewmembers who populated the bridge of the *Rex Aeterna*, at well over seven feet tall, and twice as broad as any man had a right to be. Human they might be, but they were much more than that. They had been created by the God-Emperor, the genes of their kind spliced together with strands of his own preternatural body chemistry back in the unimaginable past. On primitive planets, the Adeptus Astartes had been worshipped as gods when first they had appeared out of the skies, so far beyond the normal run of humanity had they seemed.

But they were, at heart, still men. Great Guilliman himself had emphasised that, and his successors had stayed true to their forefather's philosophy. They were an integral part of the Imperium of Man – more than that; they were its servants, albeit the mightiest that had ever been known.

'Shipmaster,' Galenus said in a quiet voice that nevertheless carried the length of the nave.

The pepper-bearded man in the blue coverall of the Ultramarines fleet made his way back towards them from a cluster of his fellow officers. He saluted, fist on heart. 'Captain.'

Galenus nodded. 'Remion, I want you to set course for a grid on the far side of Iax. Three-seven-two-six. Our flight time should be no longer than sixteen hours at current speed, by my reckoning. You will dock any scout vessels we currently have abroad, and bring us to full combat readiness. I want all our Thunderhawks prepped in the launch bays, with two set aside for close support and one for insertion. All clear?'

'Aye, captain.'

Galenus turned to his sergeant. 'Sound battle-prep. I want the entire company assembled in the launch bays within the hour.'

Greynius frowned. 'As you wish, brother captain.' He hesitated a moment, and then said, 'It is a single missing patrol ship, brother.'

Galenus held up the vox-tape. 'Let us hope that is all it is. But something about this does not feel right, Greynius. You were right to call me – you felt it yourself.'

The Ultramarines sergeant nodded. 'The words...'

'They belong to an ancient Earth tongue, that is all I know – one dating to before the Great Heresy. That fact alone makes this incident worthy of our attention. And I must send word to Macragge also. Have our best astropath relay

all this to Lord Calgar, or if he is unavailable, to Tigurius in the Librarium. It goes through no one else – is that clear?'

'Yes, brother captain.'

Galenus looked over his two comrades, the hulking Ultramarine and the bearded shipmaster, both scarred in service of the Chapter. Both seemed troubled by his reaction to the message.

'I want a scrambled link established with these officers on Iax,' Galenus added. 'Everything they know, every mote of intelligence on this missing patrol vessel, must be analysed in the hours before we reach that location. When they are on vox, patch it through to my quarters.'

Then he turned and left, the hem of his scarlet cloak whispering on the plates of the deck.

Brother Tersius was polishing and oiling down bolter ammunition when the Assembly Klaxon sounded in the crew compartments. He preferred to handle and inspect each and every round of ammunition personally. For him, as for his brethren, it was a form of prayer, and his lips moved soundlessly as he wiped down the gleaming blunt-nosed cylinders and clicked them one by one onto the table in front of him. They stood arrayed there like soldiers on parade, ready to be loaded into his magazines, which lay to one side. He was a senior member of the squad, and his brothers knew his routine well. Many of them had become accustomed to it over decades of service.

The bare cell in which he sat held few creature comforts. It was a place for contemplation, for solitary prayer. A single lumen glowed in the ceiling, and the furnishings were sturdy and unadorned. A shelf held a few data-slates, and the floor was flagged with plascrete tiles.

Brother Tersius was clad in the heavy chiton that the Ultramarines sometimes wore shipboard when they were fasting, doing penance, or absorbed in prayer. It was rare for them to shed their power armour when travelling through the void, and few ordinary men had ever seen one of them without it, but now and then they would set it aside so that it might undergo repair, and receive the holy seals of the tech-priests attached to the company.

The rows of cells that lined the dormitory were each inhabited by other Ultramarines. Most of Fifth Company was stood down after a long day's training and maintenance and the Adeptus Astartes typically used these few quiet hours outside their punishing schedule to carry out small personal tasks. Some were reading data-slates on tactics and history, others were comparing fighting styles

(those arguments and discussions were unending, part of the meat and drink of the Chapter), while yet more sat in quiet contemplation, utilising these off-hours to pray to the Emperor for guidance, as all fighting men have prayed between battles since the dawn of human history.

Also adjoining the dormitory was the armorium, wherein the power-armour of the Ultramarines underwent maintenance and blessing and anointing, each suit of battleplate with its own attendant servitor to assist the owner in donning it. It was in the armorium that the company Techmarine, Brother Salvator, had his cubicle, along with a backup crew of specialised servitors. He oversaw not only the arms and armour of the company, but the vehicles also. An aloof, but immensely experienced Ultramarine, Brother Salvator's armour bore the Machina Opus of Mars, chased with rust-red, and sprouting a servo arm and other mechadendrite limbs like the tentacles of some marvellous beast. It was rare he was not within the armorium – rarer still for him not to be found praying over some overtaxed piece of Ultramarines equipment, sounding out the troubles of the machine-spirit and setting it to rights.

Last in the line of compartments that led down to the launch bays was the Ultima Sanctorum, that blessed space which housed the Imperial shrines. One was to the Emperor Resurgent, and depicted the Saviour of Mankind in all his martial glory. The other was the Founder Chapel, dedicated to Roboute Guilliman, founding primarch of the XIII Legion – that ancient host from whence the Ultramarines themselves had been engendered. There was also a small side-chapel to the Omnissiah, which was neither as richly decorated nor as frequented as the other two. It was visited chiefly by Brother Salvator, and those Adeptus Astartes who crewed the vehicles and voidcraft of the Chapter.

All three shrines were passed by every time the Ultramarines marched down to the launch bays, and all three were passed again as they returned from battle to their quarters. In such small ways the traditions and continuity of the Chapter were maintained and reinforced. Fifth Company had been on the *Rex Aeterna* for four months now, and would remain stationed on the ship for eight more before they were relieved – unless some conflict erupted in the meantime to call them forth from the great craft, bearing the wrath and judgement of the Emperor to their foes.

When the klaxon started, the Ultramarines in the dormitory cells reacted with calm efficiency. Most were fully armoured save for their helms, and they had but to march to the armorium to retrieve their ancient weaponry from the racks there, many of the bolters they took down older than themselves, relics of the Chapter,

and already streaming with prayer scrolls, shining with holy lubricating unguents.

Those few who, like Brother Tersius, were not already clad in battleplate stood in front of their armour as the servitors assigned to each sprang to life and began settling it on their anatomy, piece by piece, while the blue chitons lay puddled on the deck at their feet. As the larger sections of the power armour were laid on their torso, so the plates themselves seemed to come to life. Cables and tubing snaked out of the breastplates and embedded themselves in the chests of the standing Ultramarines with clicks and hisses. They meshed with the implanted carapace that lay under the skin of every Adeptus Astartes, and man and metal became one.

The Space Marines wore their armour as though it were a second skin, for all that it weighed hundreds of pounds, and the fibre-bundles in the armoured limbs linked directly into their nervous system, augmenting their already immense bodily strength. Then the power pack was settled into the back-plate, and there was a faint thrum in the air as the armours took on the energy load, and locked in. Lastly, the helms were settled into place above the collar-locks, again with a hiss of atmospherics.

The tech-priests went by, murmuring in binharic, bestowing traditional blessings, anointing the standing giants, and after them the sergeants checked the members of their squads one by one while the blue-clad figures stood perfectly still in two lines snaking down the huge compartment. The squad leaders tugged at joint seals, tapped helms, examined bolters, making sure that all was as it should be. That, too, was tradition.

Finally Brother Salvator arrived, his rust-red armour sprouting the big servo arm as he walked the length of the files, as though he had a scorpion's sting affixed to his back. He too examined the waiting Ultramarines, while a tracked servitor clattered alongside him, relaying information in bursts of binharic. There were eight squads present of Fifth Company, all at full strength. The Devastators of Ninth and Chapter veterans of First were quartered elsewhere, closer to their bulkier weapons, and the silent Reclusiam in which were stored those holiest of battle relics, the tactical Dreadnought armour.

The lines of Ultramarines trooped down towards the launch bays and the Thunderhawks and drop pods that awaited. As they passed the shrines many of the battle-brothers touched the aquila on their chests, or tapped a gauntleted fist against their helms. There was not a word spoken. They had done this many times, in drills and before battle.

Long before they came down to the cavernous launch bays of the flight deck, they could hear the bellow of the Thunderhawk engines warming up and the clatter of ordnance loaders. The *Rex Aeterna* was flexing its muscles, coming to roaring life under their feet.

They came to a halt within the launch bays, and peeled off, squad by squad, following the red-helmed sergeants. Here, they found the Devastator detachments of Ninth awaiting them, for they were quartered closer to the lower decks, and here also there stood a single group of four First Company veterans, clad in Terminator armour that towered even over the line warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. These were the cream of the Chapter, with centuries of battle experience behind them. And yet they had all been elevated to First in the last sixty years, for not one member of that mighty company had survived the onset of Hive Fleet Behemoth.

The leader of these warriors was Brother Sergeant Caius Starn. He had not yet donned his helm, and stared out appraisingly at the line squads as they marched past him, his eyes bright as wet flint, a stubble of black hair standing like a brush on his skull, his forehead lined with service studs. Even among the Ultramarines, he had a reputation as a savage fighter, one who would never retreat, but would stand to the end. He had once been a battle-brother of Fifth, but had been promoted some thirty years before. He nodded at Tersius as they marched past him; Starn had once been the squad's sergeant.

With the elite Terminator veterans stood the company banner bearer, Brother Gerd Ameronn. He bore no banner now, for it was not carried when the likelihood was of void combat, but he carried *Warspite*, a power sword of great lineage, at his hip, and honour seals gleamed red as clots of fresh blood on his armour. Like many of the veterans, he wore a Mark VI Corvus helm with an embossed laurel wreath in white, and the beak-like nose of it turned this way and that as he watched the squads file in, under the shadow of the growling Thunderhawks.

Over a hundred Ultramarines now stood in the launch bay, filed in squads, weapons ready, and around them the fleet personnel of the *Rex Aeterna* hurried to load up the Thunderhawks with fuel and weaponry and ammunition. But as yet, none of the company command or staff save Brother Ameronn had arrived. Fifth Company stood ready, and waited.

Captain Caito Galenus stood, fully armoured, at the head of the long table which dominated the briefing room. Made of Macragge liveoak, it was a reminder of

the home world. Aside from a cogitator terminal, there was no other furnishing to the compartment.

But on the bulkheads around him were stencilled dates, and names; many hundreds of them – perhaps even thousands. They were the dates that the *Rex Aeterna* had seen action, and the names of those who had died in those actions. When the compartment was not being used by the Ultramarines, any member of the crew might wander in here at will, to stand and stare at the dates, the names, the long litany of the dead.

Standing in the compartment now were four other Ultramarines besides Galenus, fully armoured except for their helms, which graced the tabletop before them. Galenus looked them up and down without speaking, and they repaid his scrutiny with the disciplined silence of their kind.

Veteran Sergeant Greynius was there, his ice-cold gaze missing nothing, tall even for one of the Adeptus Astartes, and with a fine strategic mind that might well earn a captaincy for him one day, if he survived. Galenus could not have wished for a better second in command. They had won their stripes together in the Behemoth fighting, and had fought side by side in the border battles with the eldar craftworld *Karan-Ske*.

Next to Greynius stood Brother Philo, the Company Apothecary, his stark white helm on the table before him, one pauldron also painted white and decorated with the helix of his calling. Like all the rest of Fifth however, that pauldron was outlined in sable, the company colour. His narthecium was already on his wrist, and the point of the drill it carried glittered cruelly in the overheads.

Philo was a lean, cadaverous-looking fellow with a face that Galenus had heard described like that of a hungry dog. But he had surprisingly expressive eyes, large in that thin visage, and as brown as the wood of the table before him. He had a quirky smile, lopsided due to the scar that pulled it askew at one corner, but his face was grave now as he awaited his captain's words.

Brother Murtorius was a different type altogether. He was clad in tar-black armour, and his helm was an ivory-white skull. He had been Company Chaplain these last fifteen years, a man with a thick neck, an angry cast to his broad face, jutting brows that were surmounted with black, beetling hair, and scriptural texts tattooed down his neck. He was nicknamed the Bull, and accepted the honorific with good grace, even a kind of pride. Oddly enough, he and Philo were close friends, and on more than one battlefield it had been the sardonic Apothecary and the angry-eyed Chaplain who had held the line together when all had seemed lost. The Bull was renowned for his impatience and his quick temper,

but he waited now with an appearance of equanimity alongside his battle-brothers.

Last was Brother Ulfius, the Company Librarian. A much older Space Marine – older than any of them here – the shorn hair on his skull was grey as frost, and the black contusions in his eyes bore witness to decades of combating the denizens of the immaterium. He had confronted the forces of the Ruinous Powers in battles beyond count, and it had taken a toll. One of his arms was prosthetic, a bionic appendage to replace that which he had lost to a tyranid lictor at Cold Steel Ridge, decades before. His face was grey and worn as weathered stone, and it gave away nothing. Even Galenus sometimes found it hard to endure the stare of his deep-hollowed, black-veined eyes.

Galenus himself set one fist on the hilt of his power sword and faced his brothers squarely. Recently promoted, he bore the honour seals from five different campaigns on his blue armour, and the white laurel wreath of one who had performed acts of bravery outstanding even among the Adeptus Astartes. That had been against the eldar, when he had commanded Task Force *Cestus* some fifteen years before. His entire line career had been spent in Fifth, the Black Company of the Ultramarines as they were sometimes known within the Chapter.

He knew the men standing before him as well as if they were his own family – which they were, by blood and by long association. As veteran sergeant, he had commanded large contingents of the company before, on detached duties; but the *Rex Aeterna* deployment was the first time he had commanded all of them together, as a whole.

Eighteen years ago he had been made veteran sergeant of Fifth, after old Toll Grimion's death at the hands of the T'au. Now he was captain, Master of the Marches no less – Marneus Calgar had selected him for the captaincy personally a year before, because of his extensive void-combat experience and the way he had helped hold the line squads together after Captain Fortunus had been incapacitated in the *Karan-Ske* boarding battles. Those had been bitter times, but Fifth Company had prevailed, and the losses they had taken back then had since been made good.

The company now was stronger than it had ever been, and Fortunus, subject to wounds that not even the Chapter's best Apothecaries could heal, was still with them, down in the *Rex Aeterna*'s arsenal. After years of hovering between life and death, he had finally been committed to the ceramite sarcophagus of a Dreadnought hull, and now he awaited the day when Fifth would need him

again. Before his interment, he had been briefly conscious, long enough to bless the choice of his successor, something which Galenus had found humbling beyond belief; he had always revered his captain.

But that was in the past. Events were pressing on, even as they stood here. Galenus snapped out of a reverie that had lasted only a split second, though it had seemed longer in his mind.

'Three hours ago,' he said, 'the vox team at Primarion Optis on Iax lost contact with a routine patrol craft some two and a half million miles out from the planet. While trying to re-establish vox with the ship, they picked up a fragment of a transmission originating inside the system, which they cleaned up and then sent to me.'

Galenus took a small voxcorder from his armoured harness and thumbed it. The briefing compartment was frozen in silence as the words hissed out through the static.

Insanista in Tenebris… The phrase repeated itself, and the vox-technicians of the *Rex Aeterna* had cleaned it up further. It almost seemed now that there was laughter behind the voice, a gibbering dark mirth which crawled across the minds of those listening.

The Librarian, Brother Ulfius, bared his teeth at the sound of the crackling recording and shut his eyes as though they pained him.

'There is blasphemy behind those words,' Chaplain Murtorius growled, his broad face flushed with anger. 'I smell the stink of it from here.'

'That is also the opinion of Chief Librarian Tigurius, to whom I relayed this information not an hour ago via astropath,' Galenus said. 'I might add that when the astropath, an experienced psyker, tried to send the gist of the message, he had to fight hard to push through a barrier of fear and pain he has not encountered before. As though–'

'As though there is an evil in the words themselves,' Librarian Ulfius interrupted, opening his eyes.

Galenus nodded.

'What do they mean?' Brother Sergeant Greynius asked, his icy eyes glinting.

'Brother Tigurius has identified the language as one of Old Earth, a tongue so ancient that it predates the Great Heresy. There are some uncertainties about the exact translation, but roughly speaking it means *Fury in the Dark.*'

Brother Ulfius made a hissing noise as the breath whistled from his thin lips. 'Captain–'

Galenus held up one gauntleted hand. 'Given the context, this is no mere

happenstance, it is not just some inexplicable vagary of the warp or the void. Brother Tigurius believes that this, this scrap of vox, is but a harbinger of something greater.'

'Chaos,' the Apothecary, thin-faced Brother Philo said. Disgust shone out of his brown eyes and brought colour to his gaunt face.

'Indeed. Somehow or other, the Ruinous Powers have inveigled an element or agent of their forces into the heart of Ultramar, and that, my brothers, cannot be borne.'

There was a murmur of agreement down the table. Chaplain Murtorius set one black fist atop his skull helm and the table creaked under the pressure he exerted. 'May our Blessed Father witness that we are here to do His will,' the Chaplain said formally, the cords standing out in his bull neck. 'We will cleanse Ultramar of this filth in blood and fire, as the Throne wills it.'

'As the Throne wills it,' the others repeated.

'Our orders have come down from Lord Calgar himself,' Galenus went on. 'We are to investigate the grid in the vicinity of Iax whence the transmission originated, and whatever we find there will be met with full force, and if necessary, extirpated from the Guarded Realm. The *Rex Aeterna* will arrive on location within fourteen hours. The company is already stood-to. We must be prepared for anything, my brothers – either a ship-to-ship fight, or a boarding action. There is no telling what is out there.

'Brother Greynius, you will hand pick a squad for void insertion if that proves necessary. The spearhead will be Brother Starn and his veterans. All nine Thunderhawks are being prepped as we speak. Brothers, we will meet this taint head-on and wipe it from space.'

'What of Macragge?' Murtorius asked.

'Macragge awaits our word. If it should prove necessary, reinforcements will be sent with all speed. Lord Calgar views this development with the utmost gravity.'

'Then let us fulfil his faith in us,' Brother Philo said, touching his fingers to the aquila on his armoured chest.

'I wish to accompany the initial boarding party, should boarding prove necessary,' Murtorius said.

'Negative, brother,' Galenus told him, and he held the Bull's formidable gaze without flinching. 'Your place is here with the bulk of Fifth.'

They looked at one another in silence for a moment, the captain and the Chaplain, and finally Murtorius nodded. 'As you say.'

‘We will remain on the bridge for now, the better to monitor developments. There is a possibility that this is nothing of consequence, let us remember, an echo, or a remnant of old evil. We will know what to do when we arrive at the transmission’s source. Until then, we stand ready.’

He looked them up and down, keeping his own misgivings well buried. An Ultramarines captain could not allow doubt or apprehension to show in his face or manner – he did not have that luxury. But Galenus felt heavy on his shoulders the responsibility he bore – for his brethren, for the Chapter. This is what it meant to command.

THREE

It came up on augur several hours later, and had Galenus not seen it for himself, relayed to the tall vid-screens on the bridge, he would not have believed it.

At first glance, it was an asteroid. Fifty miles in diameter, it was as irregular as a broken boulder, turning in the light of Iax's star. Fragments of wreckage floated about the main body, drawn to its meagre gravity, and it was surrounded by a faint haze, as though it had some tenuous atmosphere of its own. As the *Rex Aeterna* drew closer, it was possible to see that this was no construct of nature. There were regular outlines on the surface, angular shapes, parallel lines.

It was no ordinary asteroid, flung into the system by the currents of the void. Parts of it were deliberate constructions, broken and ensnared remnants of other things. As the starlight coursed across its turning surface, the watching Ultramarines could see half-recognised shapes, blurred, half buried, surrounded by vast fields of rubble and mountains of aggregated trash.

'A hulk,' Sergeant Greynius said, eyes narrowed.

'The largest I have yet seen,' Apothecary Philo agreed.

The Ultramarines stood on the bridge as Shipmaster Remion and his crew brought the strike cruiser in for a close pass, and the servitors sent out augur sweeps, assimilating information, calibrating the senses of the *Rex Aeterna* as a man would fine-tune the lenses of a pair of magnoculars.

'The missing patrol craft from Iax has been drawn down to the surface of the – the artefact, captain,' Remion said. 'There is a weak gravitic field in play about it, but it shows signs of unpredictable spikes.'

'He must have got too close,' Chaplain Murtorius grated, glaring at the shape of the hulk on the vid-screens as though its very existence were an affront.

‘Agreed. Keep well clear, shipmaster.’

Brother Salvator, the Techmarine, had been called up from the launch bays to witness the sight at first hand. So pale his skin was almost grey, he was looking over the figures streaming across the screen in the pulpit, the mechadendrites of his armour folded up like angular wings on his back. His eyes widened slightly, rust-brown. The service studs at his temple shone in the light.

‘Augur tells us that there is a Geller field operational around the artefact, captain,’ he said. ‘It is in slow decay, and whatever is powering it is deep below the surface. Interference is too great to establish whether there are life signs. Mass is at an estimate some nine billion megatonnes. The structure is not entirely stable.’

He looked up. ‘It has drawn in untold numbers of ships and masses of debris in its passage through the void – thousands of vessels and megatonnes of asteroid fragments. It must be truly ancient.’ There was something like awe in his voice.

‘The warp brought it here, vomited it into the heart of Ultramar,’ Brother Ulfius said, his black eyes gleaming. ‘And there is life aboard, you may count on that, brother captain. I can feel it. There is an intelligence aboard that hulk – it is dormant, but powerful. There is something familiar – I sense minds that are close to our own, or that were.’ He shook his head. ‘It is indeed ancient, something from another eon.’

‘Destroy it,’ Murtorius snarled. ‘It is clearly tainted.’

‘It sleeps for now,’ Brother Ulfius went on. ‘Whatever chance brought it here, it is not aware of where it is, or even when it is.’

Brother Salvator spoke up. ‘Captain, there is no telling what may be aboard that artefact. It has drifted for millennia. It may house relics of technology we cannot even guess at.’

‘It may house abomination,’ Murtorius retorted. ‘It must be obliterated.’

Galenus held up a hand, silencing them all. He turned it over in his mind. His inclination was to side with the Chaplain; a quick, clean strike with a single cyclonic torpedo from the *Rex Aeterna*, and the thing would be done, the threat averted.

Except that the *Rex* did not carry cyclonics. The nearest were at the Calth shipyards, days away.

‘We have a window of time here,’ he said at last. ‘Shipmaster Remion, you will take a high orbit about the hulk and probe it as best you may. I want every ounce of information you can glean from augur.’

‘It is in slow movement,’ Remion said. ‘Captain, it is drifting deeper into the

system, towards Iax itself. The currents of the void are bringing it in.'

'There is no propulsive energy aboard the hulk itself,' Brother Salvator said, looking up at the information that streamed past one flank of the vid-screens. 'I doubt it has the ability to set a course or adjust its path.'

'Then what brought it here?' Brother Philo demanded, his scarred mouth dragged down in irritation.

'These things happen, from time to time,' Brother Ulfius said. 'The warp is a sea of souls, and occasionally it bubbles like a cauldron on a fire. Sometimes it vents pockets of energy, and whatever is caught within them is pushed into normal space.' The Librarian frowned, his grey hair shining white in the light of the display.

'Such pockets are not stable. The hulk could be drawn back into the warp at any time, or it could remain here in our own dimension for centuries – going by the debris which makes up much of it, I would hazard that this has already happened many times over the years of its existence. The gravitic field which surrounds it is in part the residual of one such translation. It draws in that which is close by.'

'Could it affect the *Rex*?' Galenus asked Remion instantly.

The shipmaster shook his head. 'We are a large vessel, captain, well-powered and forewarned. We should have no difficulty in standing clear. The Iax patrol craft was too small and too weak – and it got too close. It was drawn in to crash-land on the surface, like many before it.'

'Some of the wrecks I can make out – they are of Imperial design, but on ancient lines,' Brother Sergeant Greynius said. 'I would swear I can see a Dauntless there, back broken, but recognisable. And others that seem like something out of a history slate.'

'The wrecks closest to the surface will be the most recent,' Brother Salvator told him. 'But close to the core of the hulk, they could be of immemorial age.' The Techmarine turned to Galenus.

'Captain, this hulk is highly dangerous, but at the same time, it could be an immense opportunity.'

'For what?' Galenus asked Brother Salvator, although he knew. 'Archaeology?'

'Of a sort. The hulk almost certainly houses technological relics from another millennium. So much has been lost over the centuries, so much of what mankind once knew.' Salvator looked back at the screen, the slowly turning hulk broadcasting bands of colour across his pale face. 'Some of what was lost may be aboard that thing, hidden in the shadows. We cannot ignore this possibility. At the very least, the Adeptus Mechanicus should be informed.'

‘This is an Ultramarines matter, not for your friends the tech-priests of Mars,’ Murtorius snapped balefully. ‘You forget yourself, brother.’

‘With respect, Brother Chaplain, I don’t believe I do,’ the Techmarine answered, unchastened. ‘Captain, at least relay the latest augur scans to Macragge. Let Lord Calgar decide. This is too great a decision for even a company captain to make on his own.’

Galenus felt his own pride flaring into anger at Salvator’s presumption, but he knew the Techmarine was right.

They were all looking at him, all those peerless warriors. The decision was his to make, but he did not want to overstep his authority. Nor did he want simply to pass a decision up the chain of command, to abdicate his own role in events. That was not how the commander of Fifth should behave, even one who had been in place barely a year.

It will come to me in time, I suppose, he thought.

How much easier it was simply to lead his brothers in open battle. Battlefields were something he understood. This was... complicated. And his brethren waited still in the launch bays, ready for his word.

‘I will send this information to Macragge and ask for the instructions of Lord Calgar,’ he said at last. ‘But we will not simply sit out here staring at this thing. I must have more data on what we face. We will attempt a void insertion, a single squad to make an initial reconnaissance. Brother Starn of First Company will lead, along with three of his veterans. Brother Sergeant Greynius, you will stand by with two more line squads as a quick-reaction force. The *Rex Aeterna* will move up to full battle readiness.’

He felt Brother Salvator’s eyes on him – the Techmarine badly wanted to go along, but he had been indulged quite enough for now. Galenus ignored his silent entreaty, and turned to Greynius. ‘Set it in train, brother. As soon as Starn is prepped, he may proceed on his own initiative. He is to be escorted by two gunships, and all pilots are to be made aware of the gravitic anomalies they may encounter closer to the hulk. That is all.’

Brother Greynius clashed his armoured fist against the aquila on his breastplate in salute and then turned and strode off the bridge. The war klaxon began to sound throughout the immense compartment, and the human personnel of the cruiser dashed around them, taking up battle stations. Galenus tapped the hilt of his sword absently. The orders had been given. Now he would have to live with their consequences.

The three Thunderhawks swooped down across the surface of the hulk, the flight in an arrow formation with the two gunships on the wings. The lead pilot, Brother Odyr of the Thunderhawk *Penitent* spoke to his wingmen in a low, conversational tone.

'Ease it up now, brothers. Turbulence here – gravitics are unstable.' The Thunderhawk lurched, and for a moment the blunt nose of the craft was dragged down towards the hulk. Brother Odyr pulled on the yoke, lifting the Thunderhawk, and spoke up for the benefit of those listening back on the *Rex*.

'Captain, we have wells of gravity at irregular intervals. It would seem that some of the grav generators on the wrecks are still running and are exposed to the void. It is akin to flying through heavy atmospheric turbulence but I am compensating. All systems are nominal, and auspex is coming up empty. The Arnaeus crew which went down here must be dead. I see no life signs anywhere. Will finish sweep of insertion point in three minutes.'

'*Affirmed,*' came back Captain Galenus' voice. '*If the landing zone is cleared to your satisfaction you may commence with insertion. Brother Starn, are you ready?*'

The reply came echoing from the spacious hold of the *Penitent*. 'My brethren grow impatient, Galenus. Give us somewhere to plant our feet and let us be at it.'

On the bridge of the *Rex Aeterna*, Galenus smiled. He and Brother Starn had been sergeants together for many years, and had fought side by side times beyond count. There was no Ultramarine he trusted more. Starn was a man of few words, the summit of his ambition to wear the Crux Terminatus in the hallowed ranks of First Company. Now that he was part of that august band of warriors, he had no wish to be anywhere else.

Brother Odyr spoke again. '*Setting down in three… two… one. Captain, this is* Penitent *on the surface. We are four hundred yards on a bearing of one twenty from the Arnaeus crash-site. Opening bay doors.*'

'We are feet down,' Brother Starn came back a few moments later. *'Squad is out. Take her up, Odyr.'*

'Penitent *lifting off. Good hunting, my brothers. We will maintain geosynchronous overwatch. Throne – that's rough. Brother, give me more power. This damn thing wants to suck us down.*'

Galenus listened silently along with the rest of the company senior officers on the bridge of the *Rex*. No one spoke.

'Penitent *away clear,*' Odyr came back on the vox. '*Turbulence is surprisingly strong. Heavy gravitic interference. My readings are of a thin atmosphere,*

mostly methane and ammonia. Heavy metal contaminants, and radioactive trace elements. The surface of the hulk is pure poison, captain. It may also be corrosive.'

Brother Starn's voice sounded out, distorted but perfectly intelligible. '*Acknowledged, brother. Nothing we cannot handle. Reminds me of a fine day on Parrenon. Only without the acid rain. Auspex calibrated. Heading on a bearing of two-four-zero from insertion.*'

Galenus watched the progress of the Terminator squad from his position by the pulpit, a vid-stream coming through from Brother Starn. The First Company veterans were armed with storm bolters and power fists. They made slow progress, battering aside thickets of wreckage as though they were thrashing their way through a metallic jungle. He saw the energy readouts on their suits rise as they utilised their fists to create a passage through the chaotic junkyard that was the surface of the hulk.

Brother Starn grunted over the vox. '*Ceramite, plasteel, ferrocrete. Captain, these are definitely of Imperium origin… One moment.*' There was a pause, and up at the head of the nave the vid-feed steadied. '*Are you getting this?*'

A blurred grey image, which steadied after a few seconds, though it was still bisected by lines of interference. Galenus could make out a familiar shape. Below him, Chaplain Murtorius peered up and tapped the butt of his crozius emphatically against the deck of the *Rex*. 'That's an Imperial aquila, or I know nothing.'

The two-headed eagle of the Imperium of Man, stencilled onto a broken piece of plating. Starn kicked it aside. The vid-feed scrambled again as he continued on his way.

'Electromagnetic interference is intense,' Brother Salvator said. 'I am reading weak energy flashes all over the surface of the hulk. Some ship drives are leaking radiation and the gravitics are slowing its dispersal into the void. It is like a post-atomic wasteland down there. It should not constitute a problem for Tactical Dreadnought armour, however – or for standard power armour.'

'I am relieved to hear it,' Galenus said dryly. The Techmarine seemed wholly absorbed by his readouts, and he fairly radiated impatience. Clearly, he wanted nothing more than to be down there with Starn's squad. But he kept his tone professional as always. He may have spent thirty years on Mars, but in the last analysis, Salvator was an Ultramarine.

'*At the crash-site now. Investigating,*' Brother Starn said.

'*They came down hard.*' Galenus heard the veteran suck air in over his teeth.

‘*The crew are still in their seats. No survivors. There has been no interference with the wreck that I can see.*

‘May they know the Emperor’s Peace.’

The Company Librarian, Brother Ulfius, spoke up. ‘Brother Starn, look for a means to enter the hulk, or to go deeper at least. The surface is dead. We can expect to find nothing of interest unless we go below the uppermost stratum of wreckage.’

‘*Acknowledged, brother. We will do as you suggest. The wreckage seems fairly stable in this area. There are holes everywhere, but none nearby that are big enough to admit a Terminator. There is a large spire of wreckage half a mile away, bearing one five five from this location. It appears to be more or less intact. We will try there. Setting out now.*’

The four Ultramarines Terminators began heading what might be called south east, picking their way through the carcasses of broken voidcraft. Once they halted, and the vid-feed caught a strangely familiar outline.

‘That’s a Stormbird, I think,’ Brother Salvator murmured.

‘The Imperium has not used such craft in centuries,’ Galenus said, shaking his head.

‘Traitor Chapters have been known to keep such ancient Imperial craft in use,’ Brother Murtorius told them stonily. ‘Brother Starn, watch your step.’

‘*I always do, Brother Chaplain,*’ Starn said with mordant humour. And to his squad he said: ‘*Weapons free, brothers. Consult your auspex.*’

On the bridge of the *Rex Aeterna*, Captain Galenus resisted the urge to stride up and down, to vent some of the impatience that was bubbling up in him. He settled for inspecting each of the various technical stations along the nave, absorbing the information being relayed by each one in a matter of seconds. He stopped at the astropath’s cubicle, and Brandon Clemente, the psyker inside the featureless room, made the sign of the aquila as soon as he realised the Space Marine captain was looking in on him. The astropath’s face was half-hidden in the hood of his green robe, but Galenus caught a pale glint of his blind milk-grey eyes.

‘Be ready to respond at once to any request by Brother Starn for teleportation off the hulk,’ he told Clemente. ‘It may come at any time. He is under orders not to risk his squad.’

The astropath raised his head. ‘Captain, I am ever watchful, and my brethren in the Choir stand by to augment my powers, down in the Relay.’

Galenus nodded. How he hated this. Sending his brothers on a mission that once he would gladly have undertaken himself. This was one of the aspects of the captaincy he had yet to become accustomed to.

He climbed the steps of the great dais at the end of the nave, above which the vid-screens and data banks flickered like the stained-glass windows in a cathedral of Old Earth. Here, there were fewer servitors, and more human fleet personnel, and the shipmaster, Remion, bowed slightly as Galenus joined them.

'The void is clear, captain,' Remion said. 'I have rerouted a grain convoy bound out of Iax which would have come through this area, and First Landing now has orders to quarantine the entire grid with their Arnaeus squadrons.'

Galenus said nothing. He looked up at the vid-feed from Brother Starn. It was fizzing and whiting out every so often, a grey lightning-split storm of static. He could not account for the great and mounting unease that was troubling him. He felt a sudden urge to recall the First Company veterans, to stand off and order in cyclonics from Calth – to eradicate this monstrosity from the realm of Ultramar, as Chaplain Murtorius had advised. As a sergeant in a line company, that would have been his instinct. As commander of that company, he knew that there were other things at stake, larger issues, complications.

Master of the Marches he might be, but he had not yet been truly tested in that role. He did not intend to lash out blindly, no matter his own misgivings.

Throne, guide me, he thought, unsettled and irritated by the unaccustomed presence of doubt in his thinking.

But his face remained serene, implacable, stern as that of a statue in the Temple of Hera. No one watching him would have thought for an instant that there was any doubt in his mind at all.

Brother Starn's voice came over the vox again, echoing the length of the nave. '*We are at the spire. It seems to be the prow of an ancient warship, embedded stern first in the surface of the hulk. If I had to make a guess I would say that it is Sword-class, a frigate of Mars manufacture. Definitely from the Imperial Navy, but of indeterminate age. There are large apertures in the base of the prow. I intend to enter there. Captain, should we need to teleport out, this is the rendezvous point. Do you acknowledge?*'

'I hear you, brother. We will keep the waypoint under surveillance,' Galenus said.

The four Ultramarines disappeared one by one into the wreck, which towered like a lopsided sheer mountain over the surface of the hulk. As they did, their

signals weakened. The vid-stream cut off, and static roared out grey and loud from the bridge vox, interspersed with a phrase here and there.

'*–hollowed out, as though there has been salvage work done here,*' brother Starn's voice stuttered through the interference.

'*There are signs of machine–*'

'*–auspex is down–*'

'*–going deeper. Leading down. I shall–*'

Then there was just the grizzling grey static.

'We need a vox relay on the surface to boost the signal,' Galenus said. He switched to the company vox and called up the rune for the veteran banner bearer Brother Ameronn.

'Brother, board a full squad. Take a Thunderhawk and set up a vox relay on the surface, fifty yards from the waypoint I am relaying to you now.' He called up the teleportation rendezvous that Brother Starn had made.

'Brother Salvator will join you.' He blinked, and the neural relays implanted in his skull and in his right eye came up with their runes and protocols. Salvator's rune flashed acknowledgement and the Techmarine left the bridge for the launch bays without a word.

'It shall be so, captain,' Ameronn replied. The veteran Ultramarine's rune flashed twice as he acknowledged the order.

'Shipmaster,' Galenus said to Remion, 'clear Thunderhawk *Victris* for immediate launch.'

'Launch clear in three and a half minutes, captain,' Remion said formally.

The fourth of the *Rex Aeterna'*s nine Thunderhawks blasted free of the strike cruiser soon after, and powered towards the surface of the hulk. The *Penitent*, *Sinbreaker* and *Carenus* maintained overwatch as it landed and Ameronn's Ultramarines deployed. Then the *Victris* took off again and joined the rest of the flight.

'*Squad in place,*' Brother Ameronn's voice cut through the static. '*Brother Salvator is setting up the relay now.*'

'Are you in contact with Brother Starn?' Galenus asked the banner bearer.

'*Negative, captain. But interference is playing havoc with vox down here. It should improve once the relay is operational. I will try again in four minutes.*'

There were now sixteen Adeptus Astartes down on the hulk, four of whom were out of communication. It was not a situation that Galenus liked, but as yet there had been no sign that their presence had been registered by whatever intelligence Brother Ulfius had surmised was hibernating aboard the structure.

There was just that feeling in his gut; that they had all to tread very carefully here, for something slept below them. Something it would be better not to wake.

FOUR

One did not interrupt the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines when he was at prayer. Especially when he was kneeling before the shrine of his primarch in the Temple of Correction.

Librarian Tigurius stood near the great closed portals of the temple, and let the quiet serenity of the immense space above him calm his soul. The great glass dome of the temple reared up to an impossible height above his head, and enclosed a space so great that clouds had been known to form within it when it became crowded at times of pilgrimage. It would then rain on the tens of thousands of marvelling pilgrims below – *The Tears of the Emperor*, they called the phenomenon, the Lord of Mankind weeping for His fallen son.

Yet now it was empty but for the shimmering shrine of Roboute Guilliman, and the figure, small with distance, that knelt in unadorned blue robes before it.

Tigurius turned and read over some of the names that had been chiselled into the walls of the temple. He saw many there he recognised out of the thousands that ran in lines between the pillars.

The Ultramarines dead, immortalised here all around their fallen leader.

One day his own name would join them, and he would be part of a long and noble history that stretched unbroken back into the unimaginably distant past, when the Emperor Himself had walked among normal men, and had led in person the Adeptus Astartes who were His creation. Before the shadow fell.

The distant shape of Marneus Augustus Calgar finally rose to its feet, and the Chapter Master bowed to the mortal remains of his great forbear. Then he turned and began walking back to the main doors of the temple, which were ninety feet high, shining with adamantium and embossed with the sigil of the Ultramarines.

They weighed many tonnes apiece, yet were so well poised on their noiseless hinges that an ordinary man might have pushed them open without breaking sweat.

Roboute Guilliman himself had designed this place, and the austere grandeur of it spoke of something in the primarch's soul – a longing for order, perhaps even for peace.

The temple had been built not to glorify the Ultramarines, but to draw the mind into contemplation of the potential within mankind itself. To stand within it was to find faith renewed. The affecting sight of its builder, entombed in an ageless stasis field under the grand dome he had raised – not dead, not alive – only lent a terrible poignancy to the structure. Guilliman had built so much, endured so much, and ultimately had saved the Imperium in its darkest hour. His reward was betrayal, and death.

For Tigurius did not adhere to the superstitions of lesser men, the absurd claims that Guilliman's mortal wound was slowly healing before their eyes and that one day he would return to save the Imperium a second time. No – the primarch was truly gone.

It was for those who had come after him to shoulder his burdens, fulfil his hopes, and guard what was left of his dreams.

Calgar approached, his feet making almost no sound on the shining marble floor despite his imposing size. The Chapter Master's left eye, a bionic implant, gleamed red in the dimming light of the temple.

The Lord of Macragge was taller than Tigurius, even though he was not in armour. In appearance, his figure was akin to that of a well-preserved, athletic man in his early fifties, by Terran-standard years, his hair dull gold shot through with grey. Except for the massive scale of his skull, and the broad bulk of his immense form. And the light that shone deep in his remaining human eye.

All over his exposed skin were the faint contrails of old scars, gained over centuries, and so lean was his flesh that when he compressed his lips the outline of his teeth could be seen behind them. His gaze could not be met for long, even by one as close to him as Tigurius.

The Chief Librarian knew the myths that had grown up around the Chapter Master – that he was invincible, that he was Guilliman come again. Sometimes, when he met Calgar's deep-set eye and divined the ferocious intelligence behind it, Tigurius could almost believe the legends himself.

'What news?' Calgar asked his brother, clasping his seamed fists together within the sleeves of the blue robe.

‘I have sent word to the Adeptus Mechanicus, as you suggested. We have yet to receive a reply,’ Tigurius told him.

Calgar tilted his head to one side, a gesture that was habitual to him. A small, humourless smile appeared on the wide, thin-lipped mouth. ‘They’ll come. They are on their way already, I would guess. The nearest forge world is Gantz, and the most prominent of their emissaries there is Magos Fane. I have had dealings with him before.’

The two Ultramarines walked together through the tall doors of the temple, which swung open for them, warned by hidden sensor mechanisms. The bright light of a morning on Macragge beamed down on them, and Calgar lifted his face to greet it, closing his eye for a moment and breathing in the cold air off the Hera’s Crown Mountains.

Tigurius followed his Chapter Master without speaking as Calgar led him up onto the immense Aegis Wall of the Castrum, the fortress within a fortress that housed the Temple of Correction, the Sword Hall, the Librarium and other massively constructed edifices which were the ceremonial heart of Ultramar.

Once on the walls, the pair could look down from the two-hundred-foot height of the fortifications to the teeming expanse of Magna Civitas below, sharp as a pict image in the cold bright air of early spring. The Avenue of Heroes, bordered by thirty-foot statues of Ultramarines notables, lanced down through the sea of buildings to the wide expanse of Martial Square, almost a mile to a side, thence to the Landing Fields beyond, and in the uttermost distance, the blue waters of the Gulf of Lycum.

But Calgar turned his face from this bustling panorama which was the heart of his realm. He looked north, towards the mountains, and the long gleam of Hera’s Falls tumbling down from the high country of snowfields and conifer forests, beyond it the white-tipped savage spike that was Andromache, rearing up against a hard blue sky and beginning to stain with the sunset of the west.

‘Have you ever been to the summit?’ he asked Tigurius, gesturing to the snowbound mountain. The Librarian shook his head.

‘I climbed it once, back in my youth. A test, I deemed it, one of many I set myself in those days. I damn near died in an avalanche. It is bare, lonely rock at the top, Tigurius, and the air is gossamer thin. But the view! It made it all worthwhile. It made me love this world of ours all the more to see it spread out before me in all its magnificence. Some mountains are worth the climb, no matter how alone we find ourselves at their summit.’

They walked along the battlements. The noise of the teeming city below carried

up to them as a distant hum. The Castrum, built on a spur of the mountains, seemed for all its magnificence to be a place set apart, and few people walked its wide avenues and roads. The Season of Pilgrimage was not yet come, and it seemed as quiet as some cloistered place of worship, which in a way it was.

'Brother-Captain Idaeus informs me that it will take close on two days to assemble a suitable force from the fleet,' Calgar went on, walking slowly. 'The *Octavius* is readying as we speak, and Seventh is being brought out of reserve. Ixion will be taking them up to the battle-barge in the next few hours. We are short of escort vessels though – they are being called in from elsewhere in the sector.'

'It will be a formidable force,' Tigurius said.

'Word came this morning that Galenus has lost contact with the First Company brethren he inserted yesterday. He has landed an additional squad, and hopes to regain contact within hours,' Calgar said thoughtfully.

'Captain Galenus is a capable commander,' Tigurius said.

'Yes, though were I in his place, I might have done it differently. A reconnaissance in force perhaps, with the bulk of the company. Right now, his landing party is too many, and not enough.'

'The Adeptus Mechanicus will want their own people to board the hulk, beyond question,' Tigurius mused.

'Indeed. Galenus' strategic reasoning is sound. The hulk is a potential threat which cannot be allowed to drift further into Ultramar, and yet we cannot simply destroy it – there is no telling what might be aboard, what gems of knowledge it may contain. In this, I am of a mind with the Adeptus Mechanicus.'

'There's a first time for everything,' Tigurius said with a thin smile. It was not an expression that crossed his austere face often.

Calgar stopped and laid his hands on the stone of the battlements. He seemed to be looking far out beyond the city below, beyond even the blue line of the sea that girded it.

'*Insanista in tenebris*,' he whispered. 'It means something, Tigurius. It is no mere gibberish. I want you to utilise all the resources of the Librarius. Find out where it comes from, what it truly means. Something tells me it is important we know.'

'I have a cadre of Codiciers working on it, my lord,' the Chief Librarian said. 'But our archives are not what they were, not since the destruction wreaked by Behemoth. We may have to look farther afield for elucidation. Perhaps to the Administratum itself.'

‘I don’t care if you have to send all the way to Terra – or Mars for that matter. In a short time I will be taking to the void to see this thing for myself, and I want all the intelligence we can muster.’

Tigurius stopped short. ‘You intend to oversee this operation personally?’

‘I do. Galenus is, as you say, a good man, but he has not been a captain long – I will not let him face the subtleties of the Adeptus Mechanicus without guidance – and it may well not end there. I have had an enquiry from Talasa Prime. The Inquisition will certainly become involved if it is proved that the hulk houses the spawn of the Ruinous Powers. We must tread carefully, my friend. The Ultramarines are but one piece on the gaming board of Imperial intrigue.’

‘A mighty piece, all the same. Let us hope we can resolve the situation to our satisfaction before the Inquisition starts to–’

‘Meddle?’ Calgar smiled. ‘I share your hope, but it is a faint one, Tigurius. Even here in Ultramar, we are subject to the fiat of the Administratum, and even the Lord of Macragge cannot ignore the will of the Lords of Terra.’

Later in the day, Calgar’s words proved prophetic. Within hours of each other, two ships translated out of warp in the void surrounding Macragge. Passing by the great orbital fortress of Korinthos, they took up high orbit above the planet, and that evening sent word that an audience was requested with the Ultramarines Chapter Master.

The first of the incoming ships was the *Spatha*, out of Talasa Prime. One of the cruisers known as the Black Ships of the Inquisition, its commander was one Lazarus Drake of the Ordo Hereticus, and he made planetfall that same night in a sable liveried Aquila lander.

The second ship, a light cruiser called the *Mutatis Mutandis*, belonged to the Adeptus Mechanicus, and a humble Arvus lighter brought its commander down to the planet. Magos Explorator Albius Fane arrived with an escort of red-robed skitarii, and like Drake, was given quarters by the Castellan in the South Wing of the Residency, that vast complex of buildings which housed the personal household and staff of the Lord of Macragge.

The two honoured guests were then kept waiting for several hours while Calgar oversaw the preparation of the battle-barge *Octavius* and the embarkation of Seventh Company, an event they could not help but witness from the balconies of their quarters in the South Wing.

The crystal-clear night sky of Macragge was alive with the roar of afterburners,

the city lit up for miles as each heavy shuttle took off, bearing arms, ammunition, equipment and squads of Adeptus Astartes to the mighty *Octavius* in low orbit above. As a display of Ultramarines might it could scarcely have been bettered, and the stars of the system seemed to multiply in the night sky as the ships of Marneus Calgar's fleet gathered above.

Inquisitor Lazarus Drake was a small, meanly proportioned man with a surprisingly handsome face – as though head and body had become mismatched at some point in his eventful life. He had a long, narrow skull with a crooked nose, a high widow's peak of jet black hair run through with veins of silver, and dark blue, almost violet eyes, both of which flashed with the glint of hidden optics.

He wore power armour custom-forged by the Inquisition tech-priests, slate-grey and unadorned except for the rosette of his calling on one shoulder-guard. He carried no weapon, and his head was bare. A cloak of rich sable hung from his shoulders, partially concealing the bulk of his spinal power-pack, and a shimmer in the air before his eyes spoke of a conversion field generator in the gorget of his armour.

Magos Explorator Albius Fane was a wholly different creature. Tall as an Adeptus Astartes but slim as a mortar-tube, his thin form was partially concealed by a voluminous, rust-red robe and hood. His eyes were crimson lenses glinting from a face which was as angular and artificial as the helm of a Space Marine. He had no mouth, only an ornate grille, and from the back of his robe a servo-arm protruded like the head of a great snake, while bulges in his robes spoke of other cybernetic enhancements. He carried a staff with the toothed blade of a power axe at one end, and bore the cog and skull of the Adeptus Mechanicus embroidered on both shoulders.

These two creatures of the Imperium now stood in Marneus Calgar's private apartments in the Residence. A fire was burning in a hearth large enough to spit-roast a grox, but aside from that the cavernous room was austere, sparsely furnished with a massive table and chairs. It had been furnished thus for many centuries.

The floor was simple flagged stone, the walls bare except for recessed glims up near the beamed ceiling. On the table a decanter full of ruby liquid and three brushed-steel goblets stood untouched.

What technology the space possessed was discreetly hidden in arched alcoves in the corners of the room. There was a vox system in one, and the flicker of a

cogitator screen in another. A third held a small library of data-slates.

In the remaining corner a votive light flickered below a stylised representation of *The Emperor Sorrowful,* mourning the betrayal of his favoured Warmaster, Horus, Bright Star of Morning. Lazarus Drake examined the shrine with some interest, while Magos Fane simply stood immobile before the crackling fire, the flames' light playing back across the burnished lenses which served him for eyes.

'I would have thought to find a more triumphant depiction of the Emperor in the Chapter Master's personal quarters,' Drake said, breaking the silence.

'Marneus Calgar knows the cost of victory, the price it demands,' the magos said without turning around. 'In that, he is one of the more… humane of his kind.'

'I have heard that said,' Drake mused. He came back to the table, his hand reaching for the decanter, but then thought better of it, frowning. 'You think this facet of him is a strength, or a weakness?' he asked Fane.

'Why ask me?' There was a coldness beyond the effect of the metallic mouthpiece in the magos' question.

'You have met him before, I am told. I have not.'

'You are well informed, inquisitor.'

'It is part and parcel of my trade, magos. Do not be offended.'

The magos seemed to shrug ever so slightly. 'The Inquisition knows its business, I am sure. If you have files on me, then I am sure you have many more on the Lord of Macragge. What worth is my opinion?'

'Flesh-and-blood–' here Drake caught himself, and smiled. 'If you will forgive the term. Flesh-and-blood sources are always more valuable to me than the transcriptions of lexmechanics.'

The magos looked at Drake, his eye-lenses catching the yellow leaps of the flames in the fireplace.

'Very well, inquisitor. If Marneus Calgar has a weakness, then it is that he is perhaps too patient with the follies and incompetence of mankind. But I speak as a servant of the Omnissiah.'

'Yes, the follies of mankind must be difficult for one such as you to bear,' Drake said wryly.

'Our life's quest is to eliminate them, so as to approach the perfection we find in the machine-spirit. But Man's weaknesses are a factor which must be integrated into every calculation, even when one is dealing with the Adeptus Astartes.'

‘I have had many dealings with the Adeptus Astartes,’ Drake said, raising an eyebrow. ‘Weakness is not a word I would ever associate with them.’

‘There are many kinds of weakness, inquisitor.’

Their conversation was brought to an abrupt close as Marneus Calgar himself entered the room without fanfare, clad in plain Mark VII power armour.

The Lord of Macragge’s battleplate bore no decoration or mark of rank, only the Ultima sigil of his Chapter embossed on the shoulderguards, and the Adeptus Astartes aquila, skull and wings guarding the breastplate.

Calgar nodded to his guests. ‘My apologies for keeping you waiting, gentlemen. I trust you have found your accommodations adequate.’

Drake bowed, while Magos Fane inclined his head. ‘The Chapter Master honours us. I know he has much to do,’ the magos said, his sibilant, metallic voice gliding out from the slits in his mouth grille without intonation.

‘I thought I would wait for you, my lord, before I tried the wine,’ Drake said, with a smile. He poured out two gobletfuls, paused with the mouth of the decanter poised over the third, and shrugged slightly before setting it back down. ‘Would you honour me by sharing a drink?’ he asked Calgar.

The Ultramarines Chapter Master took up one goblet, tiny in his massive gauntlet, and raised it. Slowly his gaze went from Magos Fane to Inquisitor Drake. With his back to the fire, his features were in shadow. All the pair saw of them was the red gleam of his bionic left eye.

‘The Emperor, may he live forever,’ Calgar said.

‘May he live forever,’ the other two rejoined, Magos Fane intoning a half-heard addition to the toast. No member of the Adeptus Mechanicus could honour the Emperor’s name without also mentioning the Omnissiah, whom he was believed to embody.

‘A fine vintage,’ Drake said, regarding his cup. ‘From Iax, I believe?’

‘Indeed,’ Calgar said, watching him.

‘A marvellous planet, the jewel of the Eastern Fringe. Where would we be without it? Or without the Lord of Ultramar to protect it?’ He looked around the room. ‘So thoughtful of you, my lord, to meet us in a private space, away from prying eyes and wagging tongues. I applaud your discretion.’

‘The Lord of Ultramar is a man with much on his mind, Inquisitor Drake,’ Calgar said quietly. ‘He would be obliged to you, and to the estimable magos, if you could both be clear on your missions here on Macragge, and the intentions of the great institutions you are here to represent.’

And be swift about it, the dangerous glint in his eye said.

Drake inclined his head. Standing, the top of it came barely to the base of the aquila on Calgar's chest. 'If the magos will indulge me, I shall go first then.

'I am sent here on the orders of the Administratum itself, my lord. You have told us that you intend to board and explore at least part of the hulk which has translated into Ultramar, and we applaud your initiative. But rumours of what Fifth Company has found have been rather disquieting. It seems to the Ordo Hereticus that the hulk we have now codenamed *Fury* may contain any manner of tainted artefacts from an earlier age, some of which may be best left alone, or indeed destroyed where they lie.

'The *Fury* hulk cannot be allowed simply to drift through the Imperium, as I am sure you will agree. At some point it will have to be destroyed. I am here to aid you in that resort. I have a full complement of cyclonic torpedoes aboard my ship, the *Spatha*, and the vessel is at your disposal. I ask only that I be allowed to board the hulk alongside your brethren in order to ascertain what it signifies, and how great is the threat it embodies.'

'Is that all?' Calgar asked.

Drake blinked. 'It is enough.'

'Very well, Inquisitor Drake. I foresee no problems accommodating your mission. It jibes nicely with my own intentions. You need not worry about cyclonics, however. If need be, the *Octavius* is quite capable of taking care of the hulk on its own.'

Drake bowed. 'I am relieved, and honoured to find us in agreement, Chapter Master.'

'I wish that I could say the same,' Magos Fane spoke up, the words hissing slightly as he uttered them.

'The Adeptus Mechanicus takes a different view of this incursion, Lord Calgar,' the magos went on. 'My own Ordo, the Exploratorum, sees this as an immense opportunity. From what we have learned so far, the hulk named *Fury* is one of the most ancient to have penetrated Imperium space. There is no telling what remnants of archaeotech may yet be lurking aboard, dormant, damaged, hidden–'

'Guarded,' Lazarus Drake interrupted grimly.

'That is as may be,' the magos continued. 'But the possibility of harvesting something unique and priceless must be set against the risks involved. There may even be a Standard Template Construct still intact–'

'You tech-priests and your STCs,' Drake snapped, his light manner gone in an instant. 'The *Fury* is a clear threat to the security of the Eastern Fringe, and as

such it should be neutralised forthwith. Forgive my candour, magos, but the dangers it represents grow with every passing day. No ancient technological gewgaw is worth jeopardising such an important sector of Imperial Space.'

'The Inquisition's attitude to such artefacts has often been blinkered, and short-sighted in the extreme,' Magos Fane retorted, his voice rising like a nail scratched across iron. 'As yet, the hulk is inert, harmless. It would be criminal to wantonly destroy the possibilities it embodies without further investigation – my Ordo must be granted access to it at once.' Here he turned his scarlet eyes upon Calgar.

'My lord, surely you must see this. You have at your command a fleet strong enough to destroy the hulk in a matter of minutes. It can pose no threat to Ultramar so long as it is monitored and warded.'

'It can pose a threat to those of my brethren who are already on its surface,' Calgar said in a low tone that silenced his guests at once.

'Make no mistake,' he went on in the same quiet voice, 'I am Lord of Ultramar, and I shall do as I see fit in respect of this event. If I believe the hulk constitutes a clear and present danger to the Imperium, and more specifically to that portion of it which I am privileged to watch over, then I shall take the appropriate action without reference to any authority other than my own. Unless by some happy miracle the Emperor Himself intervenes.

'I hope I make myself clear.'

'Quite clear,' the magos said frostily, though he seemed shaken. Drake only smiled.

'Having said that,' Calgar went on, 'I do not see the premature destruction of such an important historical artefact to be beneficial to the ultimate good of the Imperium either. As long as the hulk remains dormant, it shall remain intact, and we will do our best to plumb some of its mysteries.'

Drake's smile faded.

'With that in mind, I would like you both to come up with a plan to penetrate the interior that will entail as little disruption or disturbance of the structure as possible. And Magos Fane, I would like to be kept abreast of any and all intelligence which the Adeptus Mechanicus can dig out of its archives with regard to this phenomenon.'

Calgar stared down both his guests.

'The hulk came from the warp, but it did not originate there. From what we have discovered thus far, it would seem that it is a conglomeration of mostly Imperial vessels, of ancient design. How ancient, remains to be seen.'

There was a pause, and then the magos glided across the floor, his robes whispering on the stone flags.

'I appreciate your candour, and your sentiments, Lord Calgar,' the tech-priest said. 'In a similar spirit, I can tell you that my own brethren on both Gantz and even on far-off Terra are trolling through the great archives of my Adept for a clue to the hulk's genesis. As soon as I know something, it shall be relayed to you.'

A light appeared on the vox unit in one corner of the room. At once, Calgar strode over to it and thumbed the receiver.

'Yes?'

By the rune on the vox display it was Brother Morent, one of his honour guard.

'*My lord, we have word from Captain Galenus on Fifth Company's landing party.*'

Calgar cast an eye swiftly over the inquisitor and the magos, who stood stock still in the firelight.

'I shall take it in the briefing chambers. Have the senior officers meet me there.' He turned to his guests. 'Gentlemen, you must excuse me.'

'We should perhaps repair back to our ships, now that the strategic situation has been clarified,' Magos Fane said.

'As you wish. Though you will have to file for a flight window with Orbital Control in the Magna Civitas Space Port. The skies above Macragge are rather busy at the moment.'

'Perhaps we should wait,' Lazarus Drake said with a shrug, and he drained his wine. 'It looks as though there will be more information to analyse presently.'

Marneus Calgar looked down at the diminutive inquisitor, and cocked his head in his accustomed gesture to bring his human eye to bear.

'What makes you think I will see fit to share it with you, inquisitor?' he said, and the tone of his voice chilled the room. Then he left them, swift and silent as a giant shadow.

Lazarus Drake expelled air gently from his mouth, and poured another goblet of wine, finishing it off in a few swallows.

Magos Fane watched him, leaning on his axehead staff. 'Is there a reason for your borderline impertinence towards the Lord of Macragge, inquisitor, besides mere devilment?'

Drake smiled thinly. 'I have an exuberant personality. It must out, sometimes. Besides, when you press a man to the point of insolence, his response teaches you something about him.'

‘And what have you learned of the Chapter Master?’

Drake gave the magos a strange look. ‘That the more quietly he speaks, the more frightening he is.’

The magos swayed slightly, as if in acknowledgement.

‘Then you should beware the day he regards you in silence.’

FIVE

Brother Starn extended his arm and the crackling disruptor field that enwrapped his fingers made the dust rise in a grey cloud as he grasped the heavy plasteel girder and tossed it aside, the marks of his fingers embedded in the ancient metal as though it were impressed clay. The lights that blazed from his protective armoured hood illuminated a long dark passageway, a tunnel leading down into uttermost blackness. He checked the auspex readout in his heads-up display. It pulsed with meaningless chatter and he blinked on its rune, switching it off.

At once, things seemed quieter inside the helm of the tactical Dreadnought armour that enclosed him. He could hear the rasp of his own breathing, the ticking and whining of the armour's systems, and the static of the company vox, which he had dialled back to end the distracting hiss in his ears.

He listened, staring down into the darkness. The ancient passageway had once been a corridor on a mighty Imperium ship. From his own knowledge of similar craft, he guessed he was in a maintenance walkway, created for the passage of the ship's servitors. The plating that formed it was broken and buckled, and here and there it had collapsed entirely, but the four Terminators had punched their way through the debris and wreckage until he guessed that they were almost a mile from their entry point, and at least some two hundred feet lower down, deep in the fractured innards of the wreck.

It was slow going. They had taken some eleven hours to come this far.

The vox sputtered and spat in his ears. He could speak to his three squad members, but contact had been lost with the *Rex Aeterna* and with Brother Odyr in the *Penitent* Thunderhawk circling above. He checked his teleportation input. All systems green. If need be, he and his brothers could be out of here in the

blink of an eye, so long as Brother Ulfius on the *Rex* could still maintain contact with their locator beacons. He had no way of knowing whether or not this was the case, but he was not greatly troubled. The hulk into which they were making their slow journey was as dead and lifeless as a grave.

Almost.

There were times, as they forged deeper into the wreck, that Brother Starn almost thought he had caught something on the vox, a whisper in his ear, the faint noise of far-off voices. Once, he had called a halt, convinced that a deeper shadow had moved in the blackness beyond his armour stablights. The infrared capabilities of his helm and his own augmented anatomy were little use, because there was no heat here, nothing to register in the spectrum. The hulk had a thin atmosphere, which was thickening slightly as the Ultramarines made their way underground, but it was still not far off the true vacuum of the void.

His gaze flicked again and again to the status rune of his storm bolter. He could feel the weapon sitting ready, a Hecaton-pattern he had used for years, attached to the wrist of his armour. But as yet it was unfired.

'This tunnel should lead all the way back to the Drive Compartment, if it still exists,' he told his brethren. 'I would estimate we are barely halfway there. Threat indicators are all in the green. Let us pick up the pace, my brothers.'

The three runes of the rest of his squad blinked in sequential acknowledgement. They were using the vox as little as possible, and keeping to their own frequency, a narrow bandwidth that would be hard for any outside scanner to pick up. Terminators were not built for stealth, but if need be they could lower their signature to a surprising degree, and the crashing din that should have announced their progress was dulled by the lack of oxygen in the thin atmosphere.

A gap up ahead – more than that – a great absence. Brother Starn halted and swept his stablights across it. The wreck they were travelling through had broken in two – he knew now that it had come down stern first upon the surface of the asteroid, the impact burying it deep in the loose wreckage of the outer crust. But the spine of the vessel had been shattered in the collision, and now he was looking at the fracture.

The passageway ended in twisted rent plasteel plates and hanging conduits, snakes of cabling and wiring like the tendrils of vines dangling from the ceiling. Beyond that, the space opened out into vast, looming darkness, a sense of shifting air that the Terminator veteran felt as if upon his own skin as it passed across the ceramite plates of his armour. He called up a rune on his display, and

sent a signal flare arcing out from his hood. Two yards out, it ignited, and went swooping into the abyss.

It guttered and flickered, going down into unreachable depths, lighting up broken compartments, shattered bulkheads, the massive connective keel-strakes of the ship broken and skewed like splintered bamboo. The wreckage staggered out in great steps of broken metal, jagged edges shining in the light of the descending flare.

There might be a path down, if one were a goat from the Hera's Crown Mountains. For the giant Terminators, there would have to be another way.

'The path ends here – for now at least,' Brother Starn said, frustration hoarsening his voice.

One of his battle-brothers edged forward to the lip of the pit, the buckled plasteel plates giving slightly under his thousand-pound weight.

'We have climbing cable,' he said to Starn. 'A full coil.'

'I know, Antonus, but it would take too long, and we have been out of vox for hours now. My orders were to take no undue risk.'

'We will go back knowing little more than when we arrived then,' Brother Morenich said from the rear.

'The upper levels are dead and empty,' Brother Torian interjected. 'If there is life on this hulk, then it is down there, Starn. In the pit.'

Brother Starn stood silent. It was wholly unlike him to hesitate so, to pause on the brink of action. He thought for a moment that he heard the distant voice clawing its way through his mind, a flitting shadow of whisper, no more. It angered him.

'Very well, brothers,' he said at last. 'Brother Torian, uncoil the climbing cable. There is a stanchion about ten feet behind you that looks as though it will bear our weight. Brother Antonus, you will lower me down. You and Brother Morenich will then stand watch here on the edge, ready to haul me up again.'

'How low will you go?' Brother Torian asked, leaning to look down into the lightless void below.

'We have three hundred feet of cable. We'll go as far as it holds out.'

It took a quarter of an hour before they were ready to lower Brother Starn down. The Terminator armour was equipped with heavy carabiner-like loops that were housed in recesses set within the upper portion of the breastplate. The cable was looped through these, made fast, and then Starn was lowered down by his battle-brothers, foot by foot, turning slightly in the dark, his stablights wheeling cones

of brightness at the towering tunnel of wreckage that enfolded him. It was like travelling down into the gullet of some huge beast.

He turned on his auspex, and to his surprise the sensors had begun to work again, though they only reached out some thirty yards. The atmosphere down here was murkier though, and grew more so as he descended; he watched his armour's analysis of it change, and the temperature gauge rise degree by degree for every yard he was lowered.

'*Fifteen feet of cable left, brother,*' Antonus' voice came over the vox.

'Hold here. I see a ledge, and a tunnel leading off. I am–' Starn grunted. 'I am attempting to swing into it.'

He scrabbled for the edge, caught hold of a pipe, and dragged himself into the broken mouth of the tunnel. Holding the cable, he blinked on the hook rune on his display and the carabiners snapped open, releasing him. Then he looped the end of the cable round a protruding girder, and took stock of his surroundings.

Dust floated in the air, hanging like a mist in the low gravity. Starn switched off his stablights and went to preysight. Still nothing. The hulk was cold and dead as a stone in the Hera's Crown Mountains, or so it seemed.

The passageway arced off into utter blackness. As Starn walked along it the plates creaked under his weight and at times he felt ceiling panels and drooping cables click and brush the hood of his armour, like cold fingers. He longed for a target, something to confront, the flash and roar of gunfire.

This barren wreck reminded him too much of the silence in the catacombs of Macragge, as the relief squads had made their way down to find the site of First Company's last stand, some sixty-five years before.

Back to back the veterans had lain, in a vast ring, and all around them the tyranids had sprawled in heaped mounds of carnage yards high; a charnel house in which nothing had stirred, in which the elite of the Chapter lay massacred.

He shook his head in the brutish helm, banishing the ill-fortuned image.

Fifty yards in he found writing embossed upon the wall of the passage, and fired up his stablights again to read it. Low Gothic, an Imperial cipher with the eagle above it. *Centurius Sol*, it read, a ship's name, below which there was a broken system slate, and below that a fragment of blueprint incised on the wall, a guide for the crew. He was in another maintenance passageway, but this one led abeam of the ship's hull, down to the plasma batteries.

'The ship definitely belonged to the Imperial Navy,' he said aloud on the squad vox. 'But which millennium is anyone's guess. I am following this corridor, bearing eighty-six degrees.'

‘*Locator is clear,*’ Brother Antonus’ voice came back. ‘*Shall I join you, brother?*’

‘Negative. My weight is burden enough for these weakened floorplates. Were it not for the low gravity they would already have collapsed under me. If my signal weakens, let me know, brother.’

‘*Affirmative.*’

He walked on, storm bolter primed on the back of his fist, his other hand crackling with energy as he fired up the power glove that enclosed it.

‘Atmosphere readout is still in the red. Radioactivity is growing, but well within safety parameters. There has been plasma leakage here. Damage is more severe – the plating has melted. Auspex range is limited, but scanning is functional. I will–’

The floor gave way under him with a groan of metal that screamed through the silence. He fell, tumbling, into the endless dark.

Brother Tersius was crouched in a firing position on the surface of the hulk. Were it not for the wiring and cables that writhed in rivulets and the buckled rectangular plates that lay scattered all around, one might almost believe oneself to be in some portion of the Macragge Badlands. Hills and mesas of heaped debris rose out of the undulating surface as far as the eye could see, broken by black fissures and upthrust jagged peaks and cliffs.

But these were not geological phenomena. There was no soil or stone underfoot; everything they trod upon had once been crafted and forged and welded. The sparkling dust that hung in the thin atmosphere was pulverised metal, shining in sparkling shoals of light, and the far-off glittering ripple that coursed along a distant gulley was not water, but lines of sheared-off ceramite reflecting back the light of Iax’s star.

And the horizon was curved, where it could be made out. Immense though the hulk might be, it was nowhere near the mass of a normal planetary body, for all that it had the gravity of one.

Tersius studied his heads-up display for a second, noting the position of his squad, Brother Salvator the Techmarine and Brother Ameronn the company banner bearer. These last two were conferring with Brother Sergeant Gaden near the vox amplifier array, which now stood blinking on its iron frame between them.

Behind the twelve Ultramarines, the great looming prow of the downed ship into which the First Company veterans had climbed reared up against the stars

like some savagely broken mountain. Tersius cradled his bolter, wiping off the metallic dust that coated it.

His helm's auspex was nearly useless out here; there was so much of the stuff adrift in the atmosphere around them. He scanned the contorted landscape with active dislike. There were too many avenues of approach, too much cover and dead ground. If an enemy came upon them here, it could be within fifty yards before it was seen.

But it was not his task to pick and choose where he fought. He had been assigned an arc of fire and he would watch it, as all around him the other members of his squad did likewise, stationed in all-round defence with bolters poised.

He heard the crackle come to life on the vox.

'*Affirmative, brother, we are reading– with some –culty. Boost –nal. Zeroing in now. Signal has cleared.*'

'What is your status?' Tersius heard Brother Ameronn ask.

Fading in and out, but intelligible, the reply came back.

'*This is Brother Antonus. We are approximately a mile into the wreck, and have lost contact with Brother Starn, who was reconnoitring a deep chasm in the wreckage. I am preparing to be lowered down to search for him. We have blazed the route with infrared markers – it should be easy to find should you wish to follow.*'

'Brother Antonus – can you access company vox?'

'*Negative. I cannot raise the* Rex *or the* Penitent*, even with the additional boost. You will have to relay, brother.*'

'I acknowledge. Find Brother Starn and exfiltrate as soon as you are able.'

'*Does the* Rex *still register our locator beacons?*'

'Yours, but not brother Starn's. It has either become damaged or he is out of range. Captain Galenus has ordered us to consolidate on the surface. The Chapter Master will be joining us with Seventh Company as soon as is practicable. My mission is to find a suitable location for a base of operations on the surface, and I have been given command of your squad. Do you acknowledge?'

There was a pause, and then Brother Antonus said, '*Affirmative.*' The First Company Veterans were notoriously reluctant to accept the leadership of anyone but the senior officers of the Chapter, but they would obey the dictates of the Codex. And besides, brother Ameronn was a veteran like themselves.

'*We will keep you informed of progress,*' Brother Antonus added.

‘Any sign of life, brother?’

‘*Negative. The ship is the* Centurius Sol *of the Imperial Navy, that much Brother Starn discovered before he disappeared. You might want to relay that to Captain Galenus.*’

‘I will. Throne be with you.’

‘*And with us all. Antonus out.*’

Brother Starn was hanging upside down in a tangled mesh of cables and wires that he had plunged through in his fall. He checked his armour systems. Several were in the amber range and two more in the red, but he had not suffered any critical damage.

He had fallen some hundred and fifty feet, by the altimeter, crashing off a jagged girder of the smashed superstructure, careering into other obstructions and protuberances, and finally coming to rest in a great bird’s-nest of wreckage with a jolt that had momentarily made him black out.

The Terminator armour he wore was scratched and battered, and the broken line across his helm readout spoke of damage to the internal systems, but the suit’s damage control protocols were already rerouting along secondary pathways. In a few seconds his display cleared and all runes came up green or amber. Good enough.

He struggled in the net of wire and cable that had arrested his fall, igniting his power fist, dialling up the energy input and slashing through the imprisoning wreckage with the edge of his fingers. The metal sparked, glowed, and fell apart, dripping molten as the disruptor field agitated the molecules of the cables to the point of dissolution.

He fell sideways, grasped a shank of copper cabling with his bolter hand as the great weight of his armour slewed around, and his feet fell free. He ranged out with his auspex, but the system was still sputtering, trying to repair itself. One of his stablights had been smashed and the other was an erratic flicker, but it served to illuminate the space around him fitfully. He was hanging above a massive crevasse in the very substance of the hulk. It went down into unfathomable darkness, as though cloven by some great blade. He could see layers of strata running down the edges of the gash, like sediment packed by geological action, except that these strata were all composed of compacted man-made materials. He was in fact looking at a cross-section of the sub-surface of the hulk; layers upon layers of void-going ships, all crushed by the weight of those above them, reduced to flattened metallic pulp only a few dozen feet wide.

The sight startled him. There must be thousands upon thousands of wrecks making up this artefact. And the farther one travelled into the uttermost depths, the older those wrecks must be. But what was at the core? What had formed the original structure?

He released a flare, twisting in the immense armour to follow its path into the chasm. It twinkled down into the abyss like a falling star. He watched it until it disappeared, his helm systems tracking it, calculating.

The hole below him was at least two miles deep.

It looked as though part of the crust of the hulk had been torn apart by gigantic forces that had worked upon the structure like a man tearing open an orange with his fingers. It must be the warp. The hulk had been subject to the titanic eddies and currents that roared in the immaterium and had been made and remade over the centuries, split and compressed with every translation.

And yet, by his readings, the Geller field was still intact, as was a gravitic field which was stronger than anything a fifty-mile diameter asteroid had any right to produce – stronger, in fact, the deeper one went.

Somewhere in this thing, power was still being generated, and it was being used to keep the hulk intact, to keep it free of the worst insanity of the warp.

Which meant that there was, or had been, an intelligence at work aboard.

Brother Starn was not surprised. It was rare that space hulks were uninhabited. The survivors of the ships they drew in often created an existence for themselves in their vast prison. But it was unknown for men to survive such an experience with any remnant of sanity remaining. More commonly, it was xenos who eked out an existence on such monstrosities. That, or the spawn of the Ruinous Powers.

He tried the vox. It was dead, but the sigils and runes running down one side of his helm display told him that the Terminator systems were in full autorepair mode. They were in the ancient alphabet which every wearer of the *Crux Terminatus* had to learn in training, a code that reached far back to the lost years of their making.

Dead nodes were being bypassed, sundered connections being re-established by the nanomolecular redactive abilities of the armour. Such processes were not wholly understood, even by the tech-priests who maintained the armour. The technology that had created such miraculous subtleties was long forgotten. The shell that enclosed him truly was a relic from a former age.

But it worked – which was the main thing.

And Brother Starn had found, quite by accident, a way down into the depths of

the hulk.

He keyed his locator beacon and waited, but no teleportation occurred. He had not truly expected it. The radiation, the conglomeration of untold megatonnes of signal-absorbing material, ruled out any easy exit from this place. To teleport out blind would be insanely hazardous; he might rematerialise within a slab of iron. If he was to get out of here, it would have to be done the hard way.

There was immense strength in tactical Dreadnought armour, but little in the way of agility. Brother Starn moved ponderously, slow as some great beast hauling itself out of a sucking swamp. Step by step, he climbed up the long drooping fall of wiring and ferrocrete reinforcement rods which had saved him, as one would clamber up a boarding net. Many times, he slipped back as his great weight snapped the weakened metal under him, but always his progress was steadily upwards, until he came to another opening in the side of the chasm, and pulled himself within it.

There he immediately scanned the passageway, the roof of it scraping his hood, and consulted his compass. The digital readout ran past in a meaningless blur of figures, thrown out by the great mass of metal that surrounded it. There was no magnetic pole on the hulk, but he was keyed in to the direction-finders of the *Rex*, and the compass could not fasten on to the locator pulse from the cruiser; the signal was blocked.

Some of his other systems were still thready and weak, flashing up red for seconds at a time as he walked down the passageway. He could feel the weakness around his right knee joint where it had slammed into an outcrop of shard-sharp ceramite in his fall. The whine of it went in and out as he walked steadily onwards, hoping to find a way back up to the surface. He was no good to his Chapter here.

Dust was thick under his feet, and as he stirred it up it hung waist-high around him in a shining fog. Visibility was reduced to ten or twelve feet and the auspex was greyed out by the floating metallic particles.

He sensed rather than saw the movement as it flashed through the fog, a shadow moving ahead, and instinct as much as training made him raise the storm bolter in a split second and fire a five-round burst down the passageway, shattering the silence, lighting up the polluted air around him. Then he powered forward, limping but still moving as fast as an unencumbered human sprinter, and fired again as the shadow sped down into the darkness beyond, and disappeared into it, black into deeper black.

‘Captain, Brother Starn. Contact, I say again, contact at my location. I have

movement in the hulk.' There was almost no chance it would get through, but he made the contact report out of habit as much as anything else. The Codex was ingrained deep in him, as in every Ultramarine.

He stood there and let the dust settle somewhat, then walked forward slowly. The ground was uneven under his feet now, and as one boot moved it clicked against something on the floor of the passageway, half hidden in dust like something lost in sand on a beach.

He bent at once and went slowly to one knee. His great gauntlet felt through the particulate, grasped a hooped shape, and lifted it. What he had in his fingers made his eyes widen.

It was an Adeptus Astartes helm.

SIX

Above Macragge, the ships had gathered at last, and were formed up in high orbit within supporting range of each other. At the epicentre of the formation was the mighty *Octavius*, the battle-barge of Marneus Calgar itself, one of three of this class that the Ultramarines possessed.

Four miles long, spired with a massive towering superstructure and lined with multiple batteries, the *Octavius* was manned by a crew of forty thousand human and servitor personnel, most of whom spent their entire lives aboard the ship. The barge was capable of launching three full companies of Adeptus Astartes into battle along with all their vehicles and a contingent of heavy armour, and its bombardment cannons could reduce the surface of a planet to cinders. Centuries old, the *Octavius* had endured battles beyond count, and had been refitted and largely rebuilt three times.

Now, it was taking Marneus Calgar and Seventh Company of the Ultramarines out to join Fifth, and confront the drifting enigma which was the *Fury* hulk.

Alongside this spacefaring giant were lesser ships. The light cruisers *Spatha* and *Mutatis Mutandis* of the Inquisition and the Adeptus Mechanicus flanked the huge Ultramarines vessel, and surrounding them were five Sword-class frigates of the Ultramarines fleet.

All told, there were perhaps two hundred thousand beings of one kind or another manning these ships, and yet it was but a tithe of the total might that the Ultramarines fleet possessed; for most of their formations were far out on the borders of Ultramar, divided into task groups that were securing Marneus Calgar's vast realm from the depredations of the eldar, the T'au, and other menaces that erupted out of the void with ruinous regularity.

One by one, the Navigators of the fleet mustered their powers, orientated themselves to the distant pulse of the Astronomican, and linked in to the gargantuan drive engines of the ships, beginning the build-up to warp translation. To travel to Iax in normal space would take weeks, and time was precious, so the perils of the warp would be braved in order to bring the fleet to the vicinity of *Fury*. A task which for the Navigators would produce a psychic spasm of excruciating pain.

A short, calculated translation from the Mandeville point in the Macragge system, it still had its risks, as did all warp travel. The ship Navigators used their third eyes to peer into the psychically charged maelstrom that lay ahead of them and plotted a course through it, trusting that such a brief jump would not be thrown far off course or leave them remote from normal space-time.

For time moved strangely in the immaterium. One day in the warp might be half a month in the normal dimensions of space. It had been known for ships to become ensnared in the currents of the warp for years, centuries, all the while assaulted by the baleful malevolence of the Ruinous Powers. The dark evil that lay just beyond the void was never far away. For one of the Navigator kind, it was merely the other side of an unquiet dream.

A few hours they were in the warp, the vessels clustered close together, utilising their thrusters to maintain station in the currents and eddies of the immaterium. For those on the ships the time passed slowly, with a persistent ache to be borne, as though an infected tooth were throbbing in their head.

The Adeptus Astartes shrugged it off as they did all bodily pain, the servitors continued with the tasks that their existence was programmed to fulfil, and the human fleet personnel carried on doggedly with their own duties, ignoring the voices that seemed at times to whisper at them through the Geller field, putting out of their minds the noisome images which would creep into unwary daydreams. They kept their focus, as they had been trained, swallowed the nausea that gnawed at their guts and prayed to the Emperor to see them through the warp, to watch over them.

During warp jumps, the shrines of the Omnissiah would become clustered with lit candles, and the tech-priests attached to the Chapter would lead chanting processions of their kind up and down the passages and maintenance conduits of the ships, swinging censers of sweet incense. Others of their Adeptus would take station in the enormous drive compartments, braving the terrific heat and noise to reassure the machine-spirits with ancient incantations and libations of

lubricating unguents. The tech-priests called on the Omnissiah to fortify the spirits that dwelled in every humming, turning, rumbling piece of machinery which made up the greater entity of the ship itself. They soothed the unquiet impulses which could lead to malfunction, and prayed for the strength to navigate safely an environment that was inimical to all rational life.

In this way, the fleet of Marneus Calgar passed into the warp, and kept to its perilous course through it, the Navigators of each ship clinging to the beacon of the Astronomican to orientate themselves in a void without time or reason, one that skewed the normal laws of physics and sought to claw a passage into their minds. Shielded by their tenuous link to the immortal God-Emperor's immense, dying mind, they pushed at the interstices of the warp, stretched it against the fabric of true space and opened a portal back into the void of normal dimensions.

The fleet reappeared again exactly where they had intended, and tore through into the Eastern Fringe of Ultramar trailing streamers of noxious waste and membranes of disintegrating warp-plasma. The battered Geller fields of the ships were powered down as the residue of their passage was burned off, sparkling on the shimmering void-shields that cocooned each vessel.

On the bridge of the *Octavius*, the cogitators noted the position of the mapped stars in the system they had entered and recalibrated their location, then reset the chronos. They had been four hours in the warp, but nearly twelve had passed in real time.

'Translation complete,' Varius Sulla, shipmaster of the *Octavius* said. 'We are on station four hundred thousand miles astern of the *Rex Aeterna.* All ships, report in. Vox staff, re-establish the net.'

Marneus Calgar stood in full artificer-forged power armour in the middle of the *Octavius*' nave. Readouts flashed across the data transfer interfaces of his bionic eye, read and analysed in a matter of seconds. He perused the reports coming in from every department of the battle-barge as they clicked across his own personal console, a triptych of data screens housed on the back of a wide-winged imperial eagle of pure adamantium that loomed over the nave. Then he went through the status of his own Ultramarines – all of Seventh Company down in the crew compartments near the launch bays, the attached Devastators of Ninth, a Scout squad from Tenth – before sounding out the escorting frigates one by one. They all reported in: the *Axion*, the *Minarron*, the *Tyrus*, the *Rapidan* and the *Morcault* – a ship he had named personally on its launch not twelve years before.

Finally, he extended augur range with a blink of his human eye, and ascertained

that the *Spatha* and the *Mutatis Mutandis* were alongside the battle-barge.

'Fleet is all present and complete, my lord,' Shipmaster Sulla said formally, confirming it.

'Thank you, shipmaster. Have a priority vox summons put through to Captain Galenus on the *Rex* and have it routed to my briefing room. Sound battle prep, and have the flight deck ready all Thunderhawks for launch.'

'Yes, my lord.'

As the klaxon sounded, Calgar turned to Librarian Tigurius, who stood silently behind him.

'Brother, alert the Adeptus Mechanicus personnel in the arsenal. Tell them to wake the Ancients.'

Tigurius raised an eyebrow. 'Both of them, Chapter Master?'

'Yes. The time for half measures is past.'

'Then it shall be so.'

Calgar walked down the nave, his ancient armour glinting. A product of some lost, archaic technology, the plates of it ran with reflected light like the surface of rippling water, at times midnight blue, at others storm grey. The armour had been repaired many times, but the bulk of it dated back thousands of years. The unknown artificer who had created it on Ademax Primus millennia before had been a craftsman of genius, to forge something of such brute power and bewitching beauty. It was one of the treasures of the Chapter and Calgar had worn it in battle times beyond count, as had Chapter Masters before him.

Fury filled the vid-screens at the head of the nave, a black ovoid devoid of light, stark against the stars. The light of Iax's sun crossed it in a jagged terminator, throwing into relief the ragged contours that rippled it.

An ugly thing to look at. Calgar was not one for imagination, but it did not take much to believe that the hulk was a brooding, malign presence here in Ultramar, something that did not belong, that had travelled too far and too long in the darkness to ever properly exist here in the Imperium of Man.

Destroy, and preserve; the twin duties of the Adeptus Astartes, now bound into a conundrum that confronted him along with the image of the hulk that loomed above him on the bridge.

Dark star, that hath no light;
Whither shalt thou wander,
If not back into the abyss
Where we must follow?

The lines came to him out of a long-forgotten scrap of text; the ramblings of a heretic who had once been a Saint of the Imperium. He did not know why they appeared in his mind at that moment, but they disturbed him, as though his thoughts had been touched for a second by a cold spirit passing by.

Calgar shook off the thought, uttered a brief prayer to the Sustaining Emperor, and left the bridge for his briefing room.

'I will accompany Seventh Company down onto the hulk to join Fifth,' Calgar said crisply, looking up and down the high officers of the Chapter who gathered around the ancient, scarred table in the middle of the chamber. 'Librarian Tigurius will remain on the *Octavius* as commander of all orbital assets. I have already spoken to the shipmasters of the *Spatha* and the *Mutatis Mutandis* and they have agreed to subordinate their vessels to Ultramarines command while the magos and the inquisitor are down with us.'

'Forgive me, Chapter Master,' Captain Ixion of Seventh spoke up, 'but are you saying that we will be operating side by side with agents of the Inquisition and the Adeptus Mechanicus upon the hulk itself?'

'That is correct, captain. Inquisitor Drake and Magos Fane have insisted on landing, along with detachments from their Orders.'

'That'll complicate the tactical outlook,' Brother Morent, one of Calgar's honour guard, muttered, the overheads glinting on the gold ornamentation of his armour.

'The Chapter will maintain overall command,' Calgar said quietly, a low tone that always made his brethren listen more intently. 'I will have the final say on all activity upon and within the hulk, and where a tactical situation arises, the senior Ultramarines officer present will make the decisions.' Calgar's human eye flashed coldly. 'Is that clear?'

'Yes, Chapter Master!' they chorused.

'Insertion of Seventh Company will begin at once. Captain Ixion, as senior captain on the ground I want you to set up a base of operations, fortify it if possible, and do what you can to improve communications. At present they are woefully inadequate.'

'Yes, my lord.' Ixion was a lean, dark, serious-looking fellow, renowned as one of the more intellectual of the company officers. There were rumours that he had latent psychic abilities, but he had never manifested them, and had come through the line companies with a fine fighting record. He was careful with his men,

which Calgar liked, and had a keen insight into strategic planning. Also, he was senior to Captain Galenus by many years. He would command the combined companies of Fifth and Seventh if the Chapter Master was not nearby.

Galenus was brave as a lion, a hard fighter, but he still had a tendency now and then to think like the sergeant he had so recently been – to attack problems before analysing them. His aggression was a valuable trait, but aggression alone could not plumb the depths of the enigma which was *Fury*.

'I want a landing field cleared on the surface,' Calgar went on. 'Large enough to accommodate at least three Thunderhawks. The terrain is rough down there. For that reason I have seen fit to awaken all three of the Ancients with our forces. They are being prepped for revival even as I speak. Brother Fortunus on the *Rex Aeterna*, Brothers Tolkos and Uther here on the *Octavius*.'

'Lord, is there any word on the First Company veterans?' Captain Ixion asked.

'Three are on vox, uninjured and still exploring the depths of the hulk. The fourth, Brother Starn, is unaccounted for. Fifth's Librarian has lost contact with his locator beacon, and he has been out of vox for some thirty-six hours now.' Calgar's face gnarled in a frown.

'At present we must assume that Brother Starn has been lost. We will not stop looking for him, but other priorities have now superseded that search. I intend to enter the hulk in full force and conduct an extensive survey of as much of the interior as we can reach. And I intend to do it quickly.

'It is not unknown for these phenomena to disappear as quickly as they have arrived, though it would be unusual. Brother Tigurius will warn us if he senses that *Fury* is about to experience an imminent translation. If that occurs, we will evacuate at once. Every battle-brother in the line companies must be impressed with this knowledge, brothers. I do not intend to leave anyone behind if it can be helped.' He paused, and his fists clenched.

'We will find Brother Starn. Dead or alive, he will come back with us to Macragge. I promise you that.'

Back and forth the Thunderhawks went, shuttling the Ultramarines down to the surface of *Fury*. It took the better part of two hours before the two companies and their attachments were duly assembled, and the Ultramarines threw up a massive ring of breastworks out of the debris and rubble that made up the hulk.

Within that bristling ring were two smaller encampments; one belonging to Inquisitor Drake, the other to Magos Fane. The inquisitor had brought a small entourage of retainers with him; they were hard-faced human veterans in

armoured vac-suits who bore a variety of weapons, and they kept themselves to themselves.

The magos had touched down with an escort of skitarii and a train of other specialist servitors, many of whom bore no resemblance to humanity. On landing, he immediately had a shrine to the Omnissiah constructed, and conducted a brief Techsorcistic Ritual to cleanse the immediate surroundings of the camp from the scrapcode of the Dark Mechanicum. And as the Dreadnought warriors of the Ultramarines emerged from their transports, he and his acolytes blessed the towering machines, and hallowed the ancient hulls that housed the Adeptus Astartes veterans.

The Dreadnoughts paused only a few minutes for their anointing, and then set to work constructing a larger landing pad for the Thunderhawks, hurling aside great masses of wreckage to provide a cleared space within the perimeter.

Marneus Calgar himself oversaw the landings; he had come down in the *Galatan Rise*, the first of the *Octavius*' Thunderhawks to make landfall. He had donned the Gauntlets of Ultramar, ancient power fists mounted with storm bolters that linked into dorsal magazines. An Iron Halo glowed above his helm, and prayer strips streamed from his battleplate where the tech-priests of the *Octavius* had blessed and anointed it with purity seals. Under his gaze, the Ultramarines of his Chapter worked with swift and unerring efficiency, while the Thunderhawks came and went, roaring among them in clouds of shining dust.

All told, some two hundred and sixty servants of the Emperor were now on the surface of the hulk, a force to be reckoned with no matter who the foe might be.

And maintaining stationary orbit over them, the *Octavius* task force looked down protectively, though Calgar knew that there was little the Ultramarines battle-barge could do to assist them. If it came to combat aboard *Fury*, then the *Octavius* would not be able to use its heavy weaponry for fear of destabilising the hulk. But the sight of it, gleaming above them in the void, was reassuring nonetheless.

'I want two squads from each company to patrol out from the defences and search for means of entry into the superstructure of the hulk,' Calgar told Captains Galenus and Ixion. 'Magos Fane will nominate members of his Adeptus to accompany each squad and provide technical assistance.

'We must find a way in, brothers. We must get to the heart of this thing, and swiftly. The remainder of the companies will stand ready within the camp we have constructed.

‘Captain Galenus, you will detail a further squad to liaise with the First Company veterans still inside the hulk. I want to link up with them and analyse their findings. From what I have heard so far, their mission came to a possible entry point – not ideal, but useable if we find no other. Now, to your commands.’

Calgar stood at the command post as his captains left him. His honour guard stood nearby; Brothers Morent and Ohtar, resplendent in their finely ornamented armour, and bearing power axes as tall as a man. They said nothing; they had no need to say anything. Their sole purpose was the preservation of their Chapter Master’s life, and if they were apart from him, then they worked in blood and fire to preserve the honour and integrity of their Chapter.

The other members of the guard were scattered across Ultramar, accompanying other task forces of the Chapter – as were the Master of Sanctity, Brother Ortan Cassius, and the Master of the Forge, Fennius Maxim. Calgar had come to *Fury* with little in the way of personal staff or retainers. He did not believe that the Chapter Master of the Ultramarines should always be surrounded by a coterie of officers. He preferred to deal directly with his company captains and sergeants – it was one of the strengths of the Chapter, he believed, that there was a streamlined chain of command. And it was recommended by the Codex Astartes his own primarch had written.

The Ultramarines worked through the day, setting up strongpoints in the perimeter, clearing fields of fire and stationing the Devastators of Ninth at critical locations. The scout squad from Tenth, in half-plate armour that had been modified for vacuum, ranged out quietly from the main body, scouring the tumbled landscape of wrecks and flitting in and out of the carcasses of broken ships.

As their first twenty-two hour interval on the surface of the hulk came to a close, the Scout sergeant, Narmaticus of Calth, split his squad up into two-man observation teams armed with high-powered vox transceivers and sniper rifles, to keep an eye on obvious lines of approach. And as the hasty fortifications of the encampment were finished, so the warriors of the line companies settled down to monitor their arcs of fire and await further orders.

There was no true day or night on *Fury*; vast though the hulk was, it was too small to register such changes. It was turning slowly in the void, it was true, and every eleven hours or so the light of Iax’s sun left them, and they were plunged into darkness as the structure spun slowly on its unsteady axis. In the thin atmosphere, the Ultramarines could clearly hear the creak and groan of settling

metal when all those untold megatonnes of material cooled and warmed, expanding and contracting as the light came and went; as though the hulk were breathing quietly under them, a vast respiration, which they could feel through their very feet.

It was in one of these dark periods that Captain Galenus made his way to the command post to give his news in person.

‘Chapter Master, we have regained contact with Brother Starn. We are working on his extraction now. He has intelligence which he says you should learn at once.’

SEVEN

Brother Starn stood immobile in his Terminator armour while the tech-priests went to work on him, like vultures of Old Earth surrounding a downed carcass. They lifted off ceramite plates, delved into the fibre-bundles of his servo-systems, and adjusted the more delicate of his ancient armour's protocols and programs with a linked mobile cogitator that they had brought down from the *Rex*.

The Terminator looked like some old statue left to decay in a forgotten ruin as he stood there, a giant shape covered in metallic dust, his armour scratched and scored and dented, bedecked by fragments of wiring and the gleam of naked adamantium. But his voice on the vox was unchanged. Before him on a crate lay the thing he had brought up with him out of the depths, very like a snouted skull, at once familiar and strange to those who looked upon it.

'I penetrated about three and a half miles, my lord,' he said to Calgar, 'but it is my belief the chasm below me extended much further. I came across other structures which had obviously been created after the pit's formation. Roadways and catwalks welded together, passages leading off which had been maintained in the more recent past.'

'Any operational systems?' Calgar asked the veteran.

Starn paused for a second. 'None that were obvious. But I am sure I picked up... something.' His hesitation was unusual. 'There is definitely life down there. I tried to engage with something that crossed my route, but I do not believe I hit anything. And then there is this –' He gestured to the helm which sat before him.

Inquisitor Drake bent and picked it up, massive in his gauntleted hands. The inquisitor wore a helm of grey ceramite with black lenses, a flat nasal grille and

various optic and sensory attachments set on its temples. He turned the relic over in his hands.

'Mark V – see the molecular bonding studs? This is of ancient make – it could be millennia old.'

'Heresy-pattern,' Calgar said tonelessly.

'Yes, Chapter Master, though this Mark continued in use for hundreds, even thousands of years after the Great Heresy.'

'Is there anything else on it to date its provenance?' Calgar asked, his Corvus helm turning to the inquisitor.

'I would need a closer examination. With your permission I shall turn it over to one of my tech-savants. He should be able to date the alloys to within a reasonable timeframe.'

'What about identity?' Calgar asked.

'The enamels have long since been scoured off it and there are no visible markings, but there should be nano-registrative idents on the components. It will take time. I shall have to vox my findings to Talasa Prime, but I believe that given a few days, I shall be able to give you the name of the Chapter it belonged to.'

'Does it matter?' Brother Starn snorted. 'Whether the thing dates back to the Heresy or not, it proves that some portion at least of the hulk is composed of Adeptus Astartes wrecks – they must be deep in the lower layers.'

'I quite agree,' Drake said. 'But are they the remnants of some faithful Chapter's lost detachment, or are they a harbinger of something more sinister?'

'If anything still lives down there, then it is not likely to acknowledge the authority of the Emperor – you know that, inquisitor,' Calgar told him.

Drake turned his grey helm to look at the Chapter Master. 'What think you now of the need to destroy this thing at once, my lord?'

'I think it is a viable option, as it always was. But no matter what we find down there, the final decision rests with me.'

Drake set the ancient helm down again. 'I am reluctant to say it, Chapter Master, but in such cases the authority of the Ordo Hereticus supersedes all others. You know that as well as I do.'

Calgar inclined his helm, the lenses glinting in the half-dark. 'I am aware of that, Drake. But there are the wishes of the Adeptus Mechanicus to consider also. Magos Fane is already working on a way to insert an expedition down the route Brother Starn has found. The gravitic sleds he has brought down from the *Mutatis Mutandis* will serve to transport the heavy stores and the troops

themselves, once we have cleared a path to the great abyss Starn has described.'

'So you intend to pursue this course.'

'For now, yes. As you say, it will take time to identify the owners of this artefact. Until then, I intend to proceed as planned.'

'But you agree that this discovery and Brother Starn's report makes the existence of Heresy aboard this structure more likely.'

'I never doubted that possibility. We will proceed with all caution, insofar as the Adeptus Astartes utilise caution.'

'Then I will bow to your wishes, Chapter Master, in the interests of fostering amity between us.'

Calgar could not see Drake's face, but he was sure that the inquisitor had that peculiarly annoying half-smile on his face. He had worked with many agents of the Ordo Hereticus over the years, but none who had the same strange mix of levity and authority which Drake exhibited.

The man intrigued him somewhat; he did not evince the usual humourless severity of his kind. They had been oaks; this fellow was willow, willing to bend but never to break. Calgar sensed a steel resolve buried in the affable manner of the inquisitor – Drake could never have attained his current rank on affability alone – and he wondered when the true mettle of the man would surface.

'How did you make it back?' he asked, turning to Brother Starn.

'There was a great deal of climbing, my lord,' Brother Starn answered. 'I fell many times – the blessed armour I wear is not built for agility. But eventually I found a broad roadway which had been cleared through the wreck. It had been carved right through the hull of the ship I was exploring, and through those of others. And it is more recent than this –' he gestured to the helm he had found. 'It is large enough for vehicles in places, in others it has clearly been damaged by the convulsions of warp translations. But it is still viable, and it cuts down to the great pit into which I fell.

'Once I made it up to within a thousand feet of the surface, Brother Ulfius was able to home in on my locator beacon once more, and help guide me. But I did not teleport – I walked out, all the way. The tunnel I took has its egress not five hundred yards from where we now stand, the entrance half buried. By following it back, we would make much better time than I did.'

'It would seem we have a way in,' Calgar said. 'Well done, brother. I am glad to see you restored to us. We cannot afford to lose veterans like yourself, not when First Company is still so slow to rebuild.'

'I live for the Chapter. I live to obey, and carry out the Emperor's Will,' Starn

said formally. ‘I can lead my brothers back into the hulk by the same road I took out, Chapter Master. I would deem it an honour.’

‘You will, brother. You and your brothers of First will be the vanguard of our advance. Have you no idea what it was that escaped your bolter?’

An edge of baffled anger crept into the veteran’s voice.

‘It was small, as small as him–’ he nodded to Inquisitor Drake, who bowed slightly, taking no offence.

‘And it moved fast. It was not armoured – it slipped away from me like a Macragge snow-hare, and made no attempt to engage.’

‘A watcher, or scout of some sort, I would guess,’ Drake said.

‘Whatever is down there likely knows we are here,’ Calgar admitted. ‘Well, we were not going to remain a secret forever. When you are finished with repairs, Brother Starn, I want you to lead the insertion teams to the route you blazed out of the hulk. Fifth Company shall follow on behind you. I will keep Seventh on the surface for now.’

‘I work well with Fifth,’ Starn said. ‘They are my line-brothers of old.’

Calgar smiled. ‘I remember. You were one of the best sergeants to survive Behemoth. You have my trust and my faith as always, brother. I know you shall not lead us awry.’

They set off two hours later: over ninety Ultramarines in staggered file, picking their way through the maze-like landscape with the quartet of Terminators at their head, and crunching along in their ranks, the towering shape of the Dreadnought in whose adamantium sarcophagus the broken body of Captain Fortunus resided. His two other Ancient kindred remained with Captain Ixion and Seventh to help guard the perimeter of the base that had been established on the surface.

The Dreadnought’s fist clenched and unclenched and spun on its servo-powered right arm, while on its left the pilot light of a promethium flamer flickered and spat. Fortunus had accepted the greetings and salutes of the Space Marines he had once commanded without speaking, only raising one claw-fisted limb in acknowledgement.

He had adjusted well to his interment, the tech-priests had told Calgar. It was good for him to be wakened, this early in his new role. He would see familiar faces all around him that he had led and served with scant years before. Some Adeptus Astartes who were interred in Dreadnought armour were not woken until centuries later, when all about them had changed, and their adjustment was

correspondingly more problematic.

Even one who had survived the novitiate found it a worse ordeal to have his life renewed as a machine, though for the members of the Adeptus Mechanicus, that was their fondest dream, and they regarded Dreadnoughts with particular awe, as a perfect evolutionary step towards becoming one with the machine-spirit.

For Calgar, who remembered the bright, determined Captain of Fifth he had known, the sight was bittersweet. Brother Fortunus survived to serve his Chapter; with the right luck, he might outlive them all. But there was a certain sadness in seeing an Ultramarine of such promise and talent buried in the innards of the monstrous machine, no matter that it was a holy relic of the Chapter, and a fearsome engine of war.

It made Calgar think on the fate of mighty Guilliman, once a peerless leader whose words and deeds had inspired whole worlds; now a frozen, ageless icon.

He wondered how his primarch would have felt, had he divined his ultimate fate. Would it have horrified him, to know what he would become?

When I go, Calgar thought, let it be at the height of battle, spilling the blood of my foes and surrounded by my brothers. Let the Emperor's Peace find me swiftly there, on that unknown field, and then let that be an end of it.

He joined the long files of Ultramarines, flanked by his honour guards. Behind him came Inquisitor Drake and his retainers, a dozen seemingly normal human personnel who held Locke-pattern boltguns with the ease of long association. Calgar's quick eye noted the faded regimental badges of the Astra Militarum that some still bore on their armoured vac-suits. One of them also sported the stencilled fist and scales of the Adeptus Arbites.

After the Ordos Hereticus personnel came Magos Fane and a trailing line of tech-priests, transmechanics, enginseers and finally close on a score of skitarii hypaspists in scarlet robes. These last had bronze masks for faces, with green eyelenses, and many had clearly undergone bionic augmentation – for one thing, they had, like all of their kind, sacrificed their biological legs for servo-powered limbs, a tradition that went back to the long ago marches across the rough hills of Mars.

They carried arc rifles and macrostubbers, and also hefted backpacks containing hundreds of pounds of extra equipment. Yet more was piled up on half a dozen gravitic sleds, which floated along in their midst like carts without wheels, fifteen feet long and impelled by the remotes the tech-priests bore.

The sleds carried, among other things, the spare ammunition for Fifth, heavy and light; and vox relays which they intended to set up every so often on their

path into the hulk, like a trail of breadcrumbs in a mythic wood.

The column trudged through the shining dust, raising it up like smoke in the low gravity, and one by one they disappeared within the black depths of the tunnel into which Brother Starn led them.

EIGHT

The darkness was total at first, until the Ultramarines at the head of the column ignited their stablights, and Brother Fortunus lit up the two search beams which had been affixed to his superstructure. Then the long column of marching figures made better time.

It was of course possible for most of those in the expedition to see in the dark; the Adeptus Astartes had been genetically engineered to do so, and their power armour boosted such abilities to a high degree. But such was the interference produced by the metallic fog that their autosenses were impaired.

As a defensive aid, the fog could hardly have been bettered. It meant that they relied on artificial light to an extent that would not have been remotely necessary in any other environment. Light that illuminated their path, but that also gave them away.

Captain Galenus marched along behind Sergeant Gaden's lead line squad, along with Chaplain Murtorius, Apothecary Philo and Librarian Ulfius.

The Chaplain was muttering the Litany of Warding as he walked, blessing them all against the insidious onset of the Ruinous Powers. His crozius glimmered lightning-pale with the energy field that enfolded it. A fearsome weapon, it seemed to Galenus like a beacon of faith, a statement of defiance against the great somnolent corpse that they were travelling ever deeper into with each footfall.

Brother Ulfius' psychic hood was flaring bright blue around his helm and he did not speak, but even Galenus could sense the waves of psychic interrogation that the Librarian was sending out into the blackness ahead of the Terminators in the vanguard, seeking other minds down there in the dark, mapping out the route

they were following and shielding those in front from a similar analysis.

Brother Philo had brought along a canovene bag full of additional medical supplies and equipment. In fact, all the Ultramarines of Fifth were burdened with extra clips of bolter ammunition, additional charge-packs for the heavy weapons, belts of frag grenades and spring mines. They could not count on resupply where they were going, and they intended to be ready to face anything.

They travelled some mile and a half, the way under them largely clear except for the dust, and some broken portions of wreckage which lay across their path like felled trees in a forest. At times the tunnel was wide enough to have admitted a Rhino; at others it narrowed so that it could take perhaps three Space Marines abreast. They heard behind them the scrape and crash as Brother Fortunus pushed a way through, widening the path for the grav-sleds, thrashing aside overhangs, kicking obstacles aside.

Every six hundred yards or so the column halted as the Adeptus Mechanicus, aided by the Techmarine, Brother Salvator, set up another vox relay so that they might keep in close contact with Seventh, and the *Octavius* battle-group in orbit. These relays were also rigged with motion sensors, and booby-trapped with shredder mines to deter any interference. They were well hidden, when it was possible, buried in rubble and covered with shrouds of the metal particulate which ran in dunes along the sides of the tunnel.

As they progressed, Calgar fired off regular vox-checks to Tigurius up with the fleet. He had thought to bring the Chief Librarian along, but on balance he preferred Tigurius' abilities to be geared towards safeguarding the *Octavius*, the *Rex* and the other ships. Brother Ulfius of Fifth was a competent Epistolary of the Librarium with a good record. He deserved this chance to work under the eyes of his Chapter Master.

Let every mission be a test, every battle an opportunity for excellence to shine, the Codex said, and it was a tenet that Calgar had lived by all his long life.

Brother Starn came up on the vox from the vanguard. '*Chapter Master, we have reached the end of the broad tunnel. Now we must be prepared to descend. We are on the lip of the abyss.*'

'Acknowledged,' Calgar said. He keyed up the vox. 'Magos Fane.'

'*Yes, my lord?*'

'Bring the grav-sleds forward. Unload them and prepare for personnel transport. I shall go down with the first wave.'

'*It shall be so,*' Fane's sibilant metallic voice hissed in his ear.

Calgar went back down the column. The Ultramarines had taken up firing

positions on halting, and they did not look up as he passed by, he noted approvingly, but monitored their arcs. The Chapter Master halted before the looming giant that was Brother Fortunus. The Dreadnought's stacks were venting steam into the already foggy atmosphere of the tunnel. Calgar looked up to the sensor-port where a red gleam might be thought of as an eye.

'Brother, you will remain here as the rest of the expedition descends. Your mission is to secure this entry point, and sweep the tunnel regularly. This is our escape route. Keep it clear.'

'Acknowledged, my lord,' the cold sepulchral voice of the Dreadnought said.

'Throne be with you.'

'And with you, Chapter Master.'

Calgar took the first sled down along with brother Starn's Terminators, their collective weight making the gravo-magnetic engine of the vehicle whine and labour. They stopped at the lip of a large side tunnel, from the edge of which a cascade of gleaming metal cable fell like a frozen waterfall. It looked as though it had once been a single, bound mass of wiring, but the binding material had decayed over the centuries allowing hundreds of feet of cable to spring free.

'I climbed up this way,' Brother Starn said, 'after my fall. I was lucky. If I had not become snarled in this, I think I would be falling yet.' Grim humour tinged his words.

'Secure the tunnel,' Calgar said, and he thumbed the remote to send the grav-sled back up again.

While the rest of Fifth came down, squad by squad, Calgar and Brother Starn explored the tunnel they had entered. The veteran's description had been accurate. Work had definitely been done here in the recent past to stabilise the structure, and it led steadily downwards, becoming wider and less ruinous by the yard. Calgar examined the construction, but it was without mark or clue as to its architects. It was good work, however; as solid as though it had been hammered out yesterday. He touched a welded seam in the tunnel wall. At some point in the recent past other plating had been brought here and set in place to fill in gaps and strengthen the supporting stanchions.

Brother Starn swept the darkness ahead with his stablights. 'Damn this fog. Effective range is minimal. I am as much in the dark as some neophyte from the Agesilus.'

'Keep listening, brother,' Calgar told him. 'Anything that comes up this way will be heard before it is seen.'

When the entire column was reassembled in the tunnel, they carried on

descending. Calgar watched his atmospheric readouts. It was becoming warmer, the air was thickening and gravity was growing stronger. The tunnel seemed to be closing in on them, even though it was wider than the one above, and moisture began dripping from its roof onto the Ultramarines below, slicking their armour and washing the dust from it in shining streaks.

They followed the tunnel for another two hours. By altimeter, they were now almost five miles deep in the hulk and had travelled another six from the entry-point. The silence was deafening, a black thing that hung in the air around them.

And yet there were times when Calgar thought he caught something in the middle of it; far-off whispering, now and then the echo of an incantatory chant. A click of iron which echoed down the tunnel. It was as though all around them *Fury* was watchful and waiting.

Side passages began to yawn to left and right, pits of darkness which the stablights of the Ultramarines barely lit up. The column was called to a halt by Magos Fane when they passed a large entrance, with wreckage piled about it.

'Chapter Master, can you join me please?'

Calgar strode back down the column. The magos stood in the midst of a cloud of his retainers, and the skitarii had taken up firing positions all around. Calgar's eye swept over their deployment without conscious effort, noting the way they held their weapons, the arcs they had taken up; he judged their efforts adequate, if uninspired.

'There are operational systems down that tunnel,' the magos said, gesturing with a clawed metal hand. 'We have picked up their binharic signal. I wish to lead a detachment to investigate. With your permission.'

Calgar frowned, but nodded. It was what they were here for, after all.

'Make sure you stay in vox range, magos.' And on Fifth's network he said, 'Captain Galenus, detach a squad to escort an Adeptus Mechanicus party down a side tunnel. They have thirty minutes.' He looked at Fane. 'We must not stay separated for long, is that understood, magos?'

'Perfectly, my lord.' There was a trace of impatience in Fane's reply.

'Very well.' Calgar blinked on the First Company rune. 'Brother Starn, advance ahead of the main body two hundred yards and secure the approach. We will pause here half an hour before resuming the advance.'

'*Acknowledged,*' Starn came back.

As the Mechanicus party and their escort of Adeptus Astartes filed off, Calgar stood in their midst and flexed his fingers in the Gauntlets of Ultramar. He was joined by Inquisitor Drake.

‘The magos is treasure-hunting, eh?’

‘He is fulfilling his mission.’

‘All very well, Chapter Master, but I trust you will keep him on a tight leash. The Adeptus Mechanicus are apt to be single-minded when on the trail of archaeotech. Their notion of time quite deserts them.’

Calgar ignored the inquisitor’s flippancy. ‘You are a psyker are you not, Drake?’

The inquisitor’s helm turned, covered in dust save where the ionic field kept the eyelenses clear. ‘I have some abilities.’

‘And what do they tell you?’

‘That we are in a place which is easier to get into than out of, Chapter Master.’

‘I have walked in such places all my life,’ Calgar said. He looked back up the tunnel to the ranks of his brethren. ‘But I know what you mean. Withdrawal will be problematic if we are hard-pressed.’

‘To answer your question,’ Drake went on in a harder tone, ‘I know only that we have been observed since first we set down on this hulk, and the further we travel within it, the more... wakeful it becomes. I suppose it has already occurred to you that we are being *allowed* to advance deeper towards its core.’

‘Sometimes the only way to destroy a trap is to spring it,’ Calgar said.

‘A saying of your primarch?’

‘From his Codex. I know that we are in peril here, inquisitor, but after all, that is what we were made for, my kind and I.’

‘As I was made to destroy such perils, not preserve them,’ Drake countered. ‘Do you trust Magos Fane?’

Calgar turned his helm to regard the diminutive inquisitor. ‘About as much as I trust you.’

Drake laughed. ‘Good – good! That is as it should be. The authorities that support this Imperium are often at their strongest when they provide checks and balances on one another’s powers. That way no one agenda overrides the others.’

Calgar was about to reply when a new voice came over the vox on the command frequency, crackling with interference.

‘*Chapter Master, this is Librarian Tigurius, are you reading me?*’

‘You are workable, brother. Send.’

‘*My lord, we have had word back from Talasa Prime, a coded message for the inquisitor. The vox specialists on the* Spatha *have been unable to get through to him through their own channels and are thus requesting it sent via our relay system. Shall I attempt to decrypt before forwarding it?*’

Calgar considered. Trust, what a fragile thing it was – a leap in the dark.

'Process the message as it stands, Tigurius,' he ordered, and he watched the inquisitor closely as it went through. Mere numerical gibberish to his own ear, the decoder protocols in the inquisitor's helm would turn it into intelligible words.

'*One more thing, Chapter Master. We have managed to track down the records of the* Centurius Sol*, the downed ship which Brother Starn explored on the hulk. It originated at the Imperial Navy base of Cypra Mundi, in the Segmentum Obscurus, and was reported lost in a warp storm some eight hundred years ago.*'

The Segmentum Obscurus – clear on the other side of the Imperium. The hulk had travelled far in its wanderings.

'Thank you, brother,' Calgar said. He was still watching Inquisitor Drake, studying his reaction to the forwarded comms. Helm or no, a man's stance gave away his thoughts.

Drake stood very still, as if he knew that also. Finally he clasped one armoured fist in the palm of the other, and looked up at the Lord of Macragge.

'That was good of you,' he said. 'To send the message without an attempt at decryption.'

'It was necessary.'

'You will be glad to know, my lord, that this is not information I mean to keep to myself. The tech-savants on Talasa Prime have made contact. They have sent me a positive ident on the registration runes of the helm Brother Starn found.'

'The Inquisition works swiftly. I congratulate you, Drake.' Calgar waited.

Lazarus Drake patted the Locke boltgun he wore at his waist. 'The helm is Adeptus Astartes – but we knew that. About three thousand years old or more. A Chapter once known as the Viridian Consuls.'

Calgar's mind ranged instantly through a whole mass of lore and history which he had read and heard over the years. Within half a second, he had recalled the necessary information.

'Throne,' he said, the word a curse. 'The Abyssal Crusade.'

'Even so,' Drake said. 'I congratulate you on your knowledge of Imperium history.'

'So this is where they ended up? Ah, my poor brothers.' Grief tinged Calgar's voice. The Abyssal Crusade was a dark episode for his Adeptus in the history of the later Imperium – one that had led to the almost complete destruction of thirty Space Marine Chapters, sent into the Eye of Terror on the word of a False Saint.

'I had not thought to find anything quite like this here,' Drake said in a

thoughtful voice. ‘But it makes our mission all the more vital.’ He lowered his voice.

‘This hulk has come from the Eye of Terror.’

It was most likely true. And it strengthened the inquisitor’s case for immediate destruction of the structure. Calgar re-weighed the possibilities, and went over his strategy once more.

As of yet, no real threat had been detected on board. Not so much as a stone had been thrown at the Ultramarines and their allies.

He could not simply turn them around and evacuate – it would be an act of pure cowardice.

No – the hulk must still be explored – it no doubt held some dark filth within it, but the Adeptus Astartes did not retreat without good reason. Until the hulk gave him one, Calgar intended to continue with the mission as it stood.

But he had forgotten something – he was sure of it. Something had been overlooked. The feeling was maddening to him – his mind was able to range in a dozen directions at once, devoting stringent analysis to all of them – but he had left something out, and it was something to do with the Abyssal Crusade.

‘Chapter Master,’ Magos Fane voxed him. ‘Can you join us up the side tunnel? I think there is something here you should see.’

‘I will be with you presently, magos,’ Calgar answered. He blinked up the Command Vox. ‘Tigurius, do you read?’

‘*Yes, my lord.*’

‘Remote search the Librarium for information on the Abyssal Crusade, anything you deem worthy of interest – and also on – on –’

He remembered. Suddenly he realised what it was he had forgotten.

Insanista in tenebris. It was part of a sermon, once promulgated across the Imperium. Notorious in its day, it had never quite been forgotten, even though three millennia had passed since it had been written.

‘And send me anything you have on Saint Basillius.’

‘*The heretic?*’

‘Yes. His life, writings and especially the sermon he wrote which condemned the Thirty Chapters.’

‘*The information you request is probably extant within the Noctis Sanctorum, the sealed chamber of Ptolemy’s Librarium, Chapter Master – but should such unholy texts be transmitted to you when you are in the company of the Ordo Hereticus?*’

‘I’ll be the judge of that,’ Calgar snapped with unwonted asperity. ‘Just do it,

brother.’

‘*As you wish, my lord. Tigurius out.*’

Drake was watching him, though he had not heard the exchange. Calgar did not need the inquisitor’s shrewd flippancy right now. He strode off without a word to join Magos Fane and see what the Adeptus Mechanicus had found.

NINE

The rubbish-strewn passageway was some two hundred yards long, with half-blocked openings in its sides that had been cleared by Magos Fane's servitors. At its terminus was a tall, gothic arch, beautifully forged out of plasteel sections, but pocked with what might have been old bullet holes. Calgar ran his gaze over them as he passed through it, and saw the familiar shape made by the explosive impacts of boltgun rounds. One long slew of them drew his attention particularly; it had obviously been fired at a high rate on full automatic. The work of a heavy bolter. Other agencies of the Imperium used such weapons, but all the same, it was more than likely that the Adeptus Astartes had fought in this corridor, long ago.

A large, domed chamber met him as he passed under the arch. The servitors had set up portable lumens all over it, and they illuminated banks of cogitators, data terminals, vid-screens, most ruined and broken, but some now winking and gleaming with operative lights. Magos Fane met Calgar by a bank of terminals that seemed to be in something approaching working order. The magos had tucked aside his robe to let the mechadendrite limbs that festooned him operate freely; he seemed like some metallic undersea octopoid with red lights for eyes. But as Calgar approached he folded his limbs decorously and twitched his scarlet robe back into place about his inhuman form.

'Take a look, my lord,' the magos said, and gestured to one shimmering screen in particular.

It was a rolling blueprint, intensely complicated, shapes overwriting other shapes, lines overlaid and reworked, becoming ever more complex until the schematic was a tangled mass. An ordinary man might have studied it for hours

before finding any sense in it, but Calgar recognised what it was in seconds.

'This is a revised design. It is a map of the hulk's upper levels, as they are today – or very recent in any case.' He straightened, the light from the screen scrolling across reflecting facets of his armour.

'The hulk is not simply a thing of chance. It has been worked and reconstructed, to a great extent.'

'Even so,' Magos Fane said. 'New access tunnels have been dug, power conduits re-routed, whole shipwrecks incorporated into the overall pattern. The scale of the labour involved is immense. It must have taken many centuries.'

'That they had, whoever they are,' Calgar murmured, still looking at the scrolling blueprint. 'They had time, and materiel – and obviously, they had a labour force to do the heavy work. But where is it? Who did this?'

'I would hazard that the deeper compartments of the hulk are even more extensively reconfigured,' the magos went on. His voice lowered, but he could not conceal the excitement that filled it. 'My lord, in the logi-stack of this terminal there is a tech-ritual for the architecture of mass construction – one which I have never encountered before. We are inloading it now. It is ancient beyond my reckoning – and it should prove invaluable, an empirical rethink of the way we approach large manufacturing projects. And this is only the beginning!'

'The beginning, but not the end,' Calgar muttered. He looked around the chamber. Something about the place made his skin crawl, though there was nothing threatening or special about it; a room filled with old tech and metal dust and wreckage.

And something else. He bent, and picked up a shining object. It was a shell-casing from a bolter round, the brass green with age.

'Pack up, and rejoin the column as soon as the cogitator program is secure,' he told Magos Fane sharply. 'And copy this schematic. It will speed our penetration of the hulk. You have fifteen minutes.'

The magos raised one clawed hand as if to remonstrate, then dropped it again. There was no arguing with Calgar's tone. A burst of binharic issued from Fane's mouth-grille, and was acknowledged by clicks and nods from the other Mechanicus personnel who were still rooting round the chamber.

The column moved on. The tunnel they were following now branched out until it became part of a vast maze of passageways, some original to the ships that made up the hulk, others of later construction. Huge pistons from the drive

compartments of lost vessels supported the roof, like vast glinting pillars, and they passed over roughly welded bridges, crossing chasms in which there was the howl of wind passing far below, currents moving in the depths of the hulk and the foul miasma of whatever was at the bottom of them drifted up with the hot air. It was as though the heart of *Fury* were a stinking swamp and they were travelling deeper into it with every step.

At last they came to a vast open space which bloomed out in the darkness and soared up far above them. Here, the Adeptus Mechanicus lit up tripod-based stablights to aid them as they examined the debris piled up all around, and their ranks broke as they skittered off in all directions. Captain Galenus set up Fifth for all-round defence, a perimeter a hundred yards across, and sent out reconnaissance teams to explore the far side of the chamber.

The stablights reflected off the roof, and they saw that it was composed of one whole side of a star-going ship's hull, half a mile across, pitted and broken, but still with the Imperial aquila emblazoned across it in dull rust-streaked paint, fifty yards high.

Underfoot, the metallic plates which had constituted the floor were now interspersed with black gaps that went down into unguessed depths, black as the void between stars. Through these gaps a foul stench issued, and here and there it thickened into steaming gouts of fog of all colours.

Captain Galenus called Calgar over to one crevice, and drew his Chapter Master's attention to the metal that bordered it. It was ceramite – ship-armour – and it had bubbled and bled like melted wax, pustules of near-transparent alloy clustering upon it like risen blisters. And yet there was no sensation of heat apart from the thickening humidity in the atmosphere.

Gravity was near Terran standard now, and radiation levels had steadied. The air, though foul, was close to breathable – for Space Marines at any rate.

'Auspex is working normally again, my lord,' Galenus told Calgar. 'That damned dust seems to have been left behind.'

'Kill the lights,' Calgar told him. 'Sweep with infrared. You have the blueprints, Galenus. There should be three exits from this chamber, all on the far side. As soon as they are located I want them secured, Devastators posted at each. How is the vox?'

'Workable, but not optimal, Chapter Master.'

'Very well. Set up another relay in the middle of the chamber and booby-trap it like the rest. I have a feeling this is some kind of assembly area.'

'It's certainly big enough,' Galenus ventured.

‘Do not let the squads become too scattered,’ Calgar told him. He would have said more, but bit back the words. Galenus was a capable officer and did not need his superior telling him how to dispose his company.

‘Brother Ulfius has become aware of life movements in the passages beyond this chamber,’ Galenus went on. ‘Psychic signatures.’

‘Can he be more specific?’

‘Definitely non-xenos – that is all he can make out.’

‘Many evils in this universe are non-xenos,’ Calgar said. ‘Mankind has become the progenitor of its own enemies over the millennia, including those who are our bitterest foes.’

‘Chaos walks here,’ Galenus said.

‘I fear so, captain.’

‘I wish it would show itself. This endless marching in the dark–’ Calgar could sense the smile in Galenus’ voice. ‘It becomes tedious after a time.’

‘Brother, you have no disagreement from me on that score.’

Magos Fane leaned in close to one of his tech-priests.

<Alt-seven is aware of orders protocol integra two now in effect.>

<Alt-seven is aware.>

<Alt-seven will move on to protocol integra three, and implement at once.>

The tech-priest still had one vaguely human eye with an eyelid that blinked behind a thick lens full of salve.

<Alt-seven will do so.>

<Timing must be appropriate.>

<Acknowledged, magos. Protocol states that–>

<Restatement of orders protocol is unnecessary, Alt-seven. It is enough that you obey them. I will inform the hypaspists. Are you in concurrence?>

<Alt-seven is in full concurrence with revised protocol implementation timeline.>

<The Adeptus Astartes must remain unaware until it is too late.>

<It is so stated in the protocol, magos.>

<See that you follow it to the last numeral.>

<It shall be so.>

<Remember, Alt-seven, subordination of the self to the will of the Omnissiah is the ultimate erasure of human weakness. It is the first step towards the sublimity of the machine-spirit. What one component does is for all.>

<What one component does is for all,> Alt-seven repeated. <Alt-seven will not

malfunction in this task, magos.>

Calgar was conferring with Drake and Galenus. He called up the blueprint of the upper levels in his mind's eye and ran through it.

'We should take the middle exit,' he said. 'It runs down to a further complex of passageways which lead deeper into the core. Most of the rerouted and repaired conduits go that way.'

'Like following the veins,' Galenus said.

'And thence to the heart of the thing,' Inquisitor Drake added. 'I would be grateful, Chapter Master, if you would perhaps enlighten me as to your larger strategic plan. My men are the hardiest of their kind, but they are not Adeptus Astartes, and they cannot march forever.'

Calgar turned the beak of the Corvus helm he wore towards the inquisitor.

'I wish to gain control of the systems which are still powered up aboard the hulk. Life support, gravitics, the Geller field generator, and the drives, if they are in any way operational. Until we control them, we are at the mercy of whatever intelligence is aboard this thing. Once they are ours, I shall begin the exploration in earnest.'

'A sound strategy,' Drake said. 'Let us hope it is tenable. For now, we are like fleas creeping through the fur of a canid. Any moment now, we will irritate it enough to warrant some scratching.'

'Which is why we must keep moving,' Calgar said simply. 'The more quickly we can reach the control areas of this structure, the less risk we will have to face. In the long run.'

'I thought the Ultramarines cared not what they risked, in the Emperor's service,' Drake said, his voice almost a sneer.

Calgar looked down on the diminutive inquisitor. One fist clenched slowly in the power gauntlet that enfolded it.

'He who chooses to ignore all risk is a fool,' he said shortly. 'Even you should know that, inquisitor.'

The expedition took the central exit from the great chamber. As they were leaving, one of the grav-sleds slowed down and lagged behind. Magos Fane promised the Ultramarines that it would be repaired within minutes; a few incantations and a quick blessing would revive the flagging machine-spirit. Calgar was ahead with Brother Starn's veterans, so Captain Galenus let it go at that, chafing at the slowness of the Adeptus Mechanicus personnel.

Had the expedition consisted of Space Marines alone, they would have made

twice the distance they had, and the Chapter Master had impressed them all with the need for speed in their penetration of the core of the hulk. So the Mechanicus party was left to bring up the rear and told to catch up as soon as they could.

As the last of the column disappeared into the chamber exit, Alt-seven straightened from his work on the grav-sled's propulsion system and nodded to those who surrounded him. A pair of enginseers and a quartet of hypaspists.

<Protocol integra three is in place.>

There followed a further burst of machine-speak. The Adeptus Mechanicus personnel followed him without a word as he tapped on the grav remote, and then followed him back the way they had come, across the huge echoing chamber with its steaming vents and broken flooring, to the tunnel mouth that had brought them down here.

TEN

Brother Malthus was so perfectly still that he had become invisible. He could feel it settle down upon him, that sense of blending in with his surroundings. Even though he wore a light vacuum helm, he controlled his breathing until it was inaudible, slowed the beating of his two hearts, and let his eyes work for him.

He lay beside Brother Huthor, his spotter, and the two Ultramarines were under the overhang of a broken tangle of wreckage which threw them into deep shadow every time the light came round on *Fury*'s slowly turning surface. A cameleoline tarp covered them both, and they were nothing more than a grey hummock of dust upon which more dust settled as they lay.

They were perhaps three hundred yards out from Seventh's perimeter, watching over an open avenue in the massed, contorted heaps of debris that piled up in jagged bluffs around them. The two o'clock position – millennia after the invention of digital timepieces, the ancient description still stood.

They had orders to monitor an arc of some thirty-five degrees. Other brethren from Tenth were off to their left and right, keeping an eye on other open approach routes to the Ultramarines position, and the cleared landing pads in its midst which were the expeditionary force's lifeline back to the *Rex Aeterna* and the rest of the battlegroup.

Malthus lowered his head fractionally until he was looking down the sight of the M40/A1. The long-barrelled rifle was covered in strips of fabric so that it looked like just another piece of broken wreckage, and the end of the flash-suppressed muzzle was still in the overhang's shadow.

Beside him, Brother Huthor had the spotting scope set up on a broken girder,

overlooking their arc.

They had been lying like this for some sixteen hours.

Sergeant Narmaticus' voice came up on the tight-beam squad vox.

'*Secundus vox-check.*'

'Secundus optimal,' Brother Huthor said quietly.

The quiet again, broken only by the cracking and groaning of the wreckage that composed the surface of the hulk, rising and settling under them as the light came and went and the metal expanded and contracted. It was so like slow breathing that it had been unsettling at first, but now they were used to it.

The light died as the terminator swept across *Fury*. Just as it dimmed, Brother Malthus thought he caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked into the scope again. Infra-red was useless in the floating dust that contaminated the thin atmosphere, but the high-powered magnification of his sights just caught a shadow, moving off to one side of the main approach.

'See it?' he asked Brother Huthor quietly.

'Seen,' Huthor replied. 'I count two, three – six or more. Very low signature. Painting location now.'

Huthor pressed a button on the side of his scope and the location was logged into it and relayed to the sniper rifle Malthus cradled. In turn, that information was sent to the tactical readout of Brother Sergeant Narmaticus, some mile and a half to their south. He then flagged it up for Captain Ixion at the command post. All in a split second.

Heavy dark fell, the brief night of the hulk. The two Scout Marines switched to preysight one last time, but it was little use. They turned it off again, preferring to watch the darkness with their own unaided but genetically enhanced vision.

A click of metal ahead of them, louder than the groans and creaks of the settling wreckage.

'Command, this is Secundus,' Brother Huthor said. 'Movement on my axis.'

'*Acknowledged,*' Sergeant Narmaticus said. '*Perimeter will be notified.*'

Looking down the scope, Brother Malthus followed the shadows, the outlines he had come to know so well over the last sixteen hours. This little patch of *Fury* was as familiar to him as his old dormitory in the Agiselus barracks; he had been filing away every detail of it in his mind.

And now there was something new. A silhouette that should not be there, not moving, barely visible – but it had not been present an hour before.

'Twelve degrees left of axis, ninety yards out,' he said to Huthor.

His spotter studied it through the scope.

‘Seen. Marking now.’

An invisible laser beam lanced out from the scope and targeted the shadow.

‘You are free to engage,’ Brother Huthor said.

Brother Malthus breathed out slowly, letting the stock of the rifle become part of his own musculature. He was hardly aware of the pressure his gauntleted hand was exerting on the pistol-grip. He did not hear the retort as he fired, only felt it as the barrel jumped slightly. At once, he was steady again, breathing in slow, scanning the placing of the shot.

‘Target down,’ Brother Huthor said. ‘Whatever it was. Command, this is–’

He stopped. All at once the darkness was moving, out ahead of him. Not one or two shadows, but a whole mass of them, the noise of their advance incredibly loud after the almost-silence.

Brother Malthus’ voice was still calm on the squad vox. ‘I have multiple targets advancing on my position.’ He fired. Once, twice, three times. A shrill howl went up, out in the night.

‘Ninety yards and closing.’

‘Command, this is Secundus,’ Brother Huthor called up his sergeant while aligning his assault shotgun. He ejected a shell from the breech and fed in a new one with a bright red casing.

‘Contact to my front, multiple targets – at least two dozen. Enemy closing fast. Engaging now.’

‘*Do not stand fast, Secundus,*’ Sergeant Narmaticus warned. ‘*Identify, then exfiltrate.*’

‘Acknowledged. Wait out.’

Brother Malthus was still firing. He changed the clip in his rifle, and at once the shadowed enemy came pouring forward. They fired no weapon, and could barely be made out, but were man-sized or smaller – humanoid.

‘Time to cast a little light,’ Brother Huthor said. He stood up, the tarp falling from his shoulders, and pumped off a round into the midst of the advancing enemy. It was an inferno shell, and as it impacted it sprayed phosphorous gel over the target and those next to it. Flames shot up, blue-white, and a tearing shriek rent the air. All at once, the entire front rank was illuminated, black silhouettes twisting and mewling in the glare of the fire.

The enemy was a mass of hunched, contorted bipedal humanoid creatures. Once, they might have been men. But something had taken them and made them into a grotesquery of twisted nightmares. They had whirring blades for hands, transplanted limbs, glaring ocular implants. Their flesh had been sheared open,

torn and burnt and stitched up again over crude bionics. In place of limbs and skulls there were the gleam of alloy and metal, and crests of loose wiring running down their spines.

They were burning now, screaming with mouths that had no tongues. The grind of shredder blades whirring on their bionic limbs rose to a high shriek.

Brother Huthor pumped round after round into them, choosing targets as they came forward, the dead entangling the living – if they were alive at all. When shot they barely bled, and their grey flesh looked already half putrefied.

Beside him, Brother Malthus dropped his rifle and swept out his bolt pistol. The sharp crack of bolt rounds whipped out into the thin, corrosive air. The enemy crawled forward over their own dead like grey maggots writhing in a wound. They screamed in rage and kept coming, even after losing limbs, after having huge holes blown through their torsos. Only headshots seemed to fell them swiftly. Malthus and Huthor dropped fifteen, sixteen – but the two Scout Marines saw now that more and more were pouring out of holes and apertures in the mounded wreckage behind the first wave. Fifty, sixty, eighty – there were too many to count, and movement off in the utter dark beyond the fight hinted at yet more.

'We will be overrun,' Malthus said. He had engaged his chainsword now, hacking at those of the enemy who got too close, putting round after perfectly aimed round into the skulls of those farther back, his arm aiming the bolt pistol without conscious effort – the merest squeeze on the trigger, and then a new target.

Brother Huthor blew the head off one squalling monstrosity that had kept coming despite having no arms. He racked in another shell, beat back one saw-handed foe with the butt of his assault shotgun, and blasted it to oblivion, viscera splattering over his vacuum helm.

'Agreed. Time to leave, brother. Get the rifle and reload. I will cover. Fire and manoeuvre.'

Other voices were coming up on the squad vox now, the rest of their brethren from Tenth.

'*I have multiple contacts closing in.*'

'*This is Decimus – large movement to my front. Am engaging.*'

'*Command, contact with at least a hundred unknowns.*'

'*Position untenable. We are falling back–*'

Then the voice of Sergeant Narmaticus came up. '*All teams, fall back to Seventh's perimeter at best speed. Our positions are compromised. Captain, this*

is Tenth, code Firebreak. Our brothers will be to your front in a few minutes.'

'*We have you on tactical, sergeant,*' Captain Galenus' voice came in. '*All squads, stand-to.*'

Brother Huthor snapped off shot after shot at the enemy, blasting them off their feet, kicking out at those who strove to grapple with him, crushing bone with his shotgun-butt.

Malthus grabbed the sniper rifle and dashed back twenty yards, reloaded his bolt pistol and took aim. The burning corpses were sputtering out, and it was growing darker again. He briefly cursed the tainted dust which shrouded everything and thickened the air into a shining fog, then sighted down his pistol barrel.

'Now, brother,' he said.

Brother Huthor swung out the shotgun barrel like a blade, smashing to pieces the cranium of his closest attacker. He turned to run, and another of the foe leapt on his back. The jagged blade that protruded from its wrist stabbed into the Scout armour, bounced off, then on its third lightning descent it found a gap and went deep. Huthor knocked the monstrosity off his back, fell to one knee, reversed the shotgun muzzle and fired at point-blank range, disintegrating two more who came leaping upon him. Half a dozen lunged out of the milling pack. They grabbed the shotgun barrel and even as it went off again it was torn out of his hands. Huthor rose unsteadily, whipped out his bolt pistol and emptied an entire magazine into the howling faces of the enemy, then staggered away.

Brother Malthus took down four of Huthor's pursuers with single shots, all to the head. His battle-brother joined him, falling heavily at his side.

'Persistent scum, I'll give them that,' he said, breathing hoarsely. His armour was so stained with blood and gore that it was a shining vermilion clotted with shredded organic tissue, scraped and slashed and dented in a dozen places.

'How is the wound?' Malthus asked him, still firing.

'Closing. I'll be fine. Are you ready?'

'When you are.'

Now Huthor turned and began squeezing off shots at the advancing horde. The creatures yowled in a furious rage as he took them down. Brother Malthus retreated fifty yards at a swift sprint, then turned and began firing again. Brother Huthor followed more slowly. The blade that had stabbed him was broken off and jutted from between two plates of his armour up in the angle of one pauldron.

'There is some manner of filth in this wound,' he said, gasping as he joined

Malthus. ‘The maggots have poisoned me, may they rot for it.’

‘Can you keep going?’

‘March or die, brother. Isn’t that what they told us in the Agiselus?’

‘Get going.’

‘I hate retreating before scum like this.’

‘What in Throne’s name are they?’

Huthor spat inside his helmet, a dark stain on the inside of the plastex.

‘Murder servitors. Adeptus Mechanicus minions.’

‘Well, there are enough of them to go round.’

Malthus took in the situation, darting glances left and right as he fired.

‘They have flanked us, brother. Not as mindless as they look.’

‘Or else something is controlling them.’

‘It is all one. We have to fight through them, charge as hard as we can back to the perimeter.’

Huthor raised his chainsword. It whined as the monomolecular teeth of its blade sped up into a shining bar of light.

‘You go. I am too slow. I will draw them off.’

‘No brother. We stay or go together.’

‘You were always a stubborn fool, Malthus.’

‘And you were always slow as a lame grox. Let us fight here, brother – it is as good a place as any.’

The two Scout Marines stood back to back as the enemy closed in, a great host of them now, hundreds strong. When their ammunition ran out, the pair fought on with chainswords, the blades screaming and whining like bars of angry light that sheared through their foes and chopped them to steaming pieces that writhed around their feet, lopped-off arms still wriggling on the ground, decapitated heads still gnashing and snapping at their boots.

Brother Huthor slumped as a servitor cut half through his knee with a sputtering chainsaw. He clicked out a frag grenade, tossed it into the scrum before him. It went off ten feet from the pair, blasting the ranks of the foe open but smashing the two Scout Marines off their feet with the concussion of the explosion.

Brother Malthus blinked, his head ringing. He climbed to his knees, and as he did, he heard a new, thunderous noise snapping and cracking through the air about his head. Looking up, he saw heavy tracer fire arc past his eyes and slam into the enemy that surrounded him. He hacked savagely at the snarling faces – flesh and bone and tainted metal, hanging cables that dripped with venomous ichor, pulsing green lights for eyes, shattered fangs of ceramite embedded in

black, diseased gums, snapping against his visor.

And they were hurled back. Well-placed bolter fire was chewing up the enemy horde, and then the long, bellowing bark of heavy bolter volleys. Brother Malthus looked back the way they had been running, and saw five Ultramarines from Seventh striding up slowly, firing from the hip, a blazing hedge of light and fury, and the long streak from the heavy bolter lancing out like staggered lightning.

'*To me, brothers,*' the lead Ultramarine said on the vox. '*We must be swift. There are too many of this scum to count.*'

Huthor was lying motionless at his side. Brother Malthus seized his brother and dragged him away by one arm, towards the firing Ultramarines who now stood and laid down a torrent of covering fire. Malthus was standing in the path of it and the rounds passed close enough to scorch his armour, but none touched him. He reached his brethren and two of them clicked out a whole stick of frag grenades to throw into the yowling pack that was surging forward regardless of loss, advancing over hummocked mounds of their own dead.

'Back to the perimeter,' the squad leader said. 'This is a full assault.'

Huthor was still breathing. The visor of his vacuum helm was black with vomited blood, but he clasped Malthus' arm feebly as the Scout Marine dragged him along, and the five Ultramarines from Seventh backed away step by step, still firing, chopping up the enemy and blasting them off their feet – and yet more of the foe were piling into the rear ranks of those in front, slashing at each other's flesh in their insane need to come to grips with the Ultramarines.

Malthus heard Captain Galenus' voice on the company vox. '*Ancients to the perimeter. Prepare for close-quarter combat.*'

The surface of *Fury* erupted in a maelstrom of bright violence.

On the *Octavius'* bridge, Chief Librarian Tigurius watched the layouts flash up scarlet on the tactical feed. The shipmaster, Varius Sulla, brought the battle-barge to full alert. Along the hull of the immense ship, the gun-doors opened, the plasma cannons nosed out, and the launch bays retracted their armoured blast shields, ready to send out the remaining Thunderhawk gunships. In the drive compartments the tech-priests brought more power out of the immense engines, and sent it towards the void shields and the bombardment cannon. Though that great, apocalyptic weapon was kept housed for now.

All through the angular hull of the *Octavius*, thousands of fleet personnel, human and otherwise, took their places. Convoys of grav-sleds began moving up

from the munitoria, laden with missiles and charge-packs, while the elevators which served the great guns began thrumming up and down the superstructure of the ship, propelled by legions of mindless Chapter servitors and their sweating tech-overseers.

Across the fleet, the other vessels were following suit. The *Rex Aeterna*, the *Spatha*, the *Mutatis Mutandis* and the five escort frigates all came to full battle-readiness. There was enough firepower aboard them to obliterate a planet, but they held their fire for now, waiting for word from the flagship – waiting, also, for word from the ground, where Seventh Company was now fighting for its life.

'*Heavy contact all along my perimeter,*' Captain Ixion was saying, the roar of the fighting almost drowning out his words over the vox. The speakers relayed his voice across the nave; a vast, towering space which was otherwise serenely quiet, fleet officers glued to their posts, servitors murmuring in a low whisper, the *Octavius* holding orbit around them like a slumbering god.

'*First wave has been destroyed – it was composed of murder servitors, some three or four thousand. The enemy made it right up to the breastworks. They are equipped solely for hand-to-hand fighting. A second wave seems to be forming up farther out. We cannot see what their composition is.*'

Tigurius shook his head, frowning. Murder servitors were thralls of the Adeptus Mechanicus, not servants of Chaos. He sent his own psychic enquiry lancing out of the *Octavius*, down to the corpse-heaped ring of rocks and wreckage that Seventh was defending, and met nothing there he could latch onto – no central directing intelligence, no sense of higher purpose.

And thus far, no Chaos taint.

'I have detailed *Penitent*, C*arenus* and *Victris* for close-in fire support,' Tigurius said, naming the three Thunderhawks. 'They will maintain overwatch until further notice. Do you need resupply?'

'*Negative, brother. Lord Calgar saw to it that we brought plenty of ammunition down with us.*'

'Casualties?'

'*Nine so far. I am sending them up to the* Octavius *on* Sinbreaker. *The enemy's weapons are envenomed with some potent kind of neurotoxin. Two of the nine are dead, the others dying. Apothecary Rannik has stabilised them, but there is nothing more to be done for them here. They need to be transported to the flagship's apothecarion at once.*'

A potent toxin indeed, if it could neutralise the enormous recuperative abilities

of Adeptus Astartes physiology.

'I will have the poison isolated and analysed,' Tigurius said. 'What word from the Chapter Master and Fifth?'

'*They are still in vox contact, about ten miles down. Lord Calgar intends to continue with his penetration of the hulk, unless things become untenable on the surface. Seventh's situation will clarify very soon – a second assault is forming up.*'

'Identify the enemy, Captain Ixion,' Tigurius commanded. 'We must know what we are fighting. I am turning Fifth's Thunderhawks over to your control. You may call them in at will.'

'*What about surface bombardment?*'

Tigurius shook his head, grimacing. 'There is too great a danger that it would destabilise the hulk. It will be used only as a last resort.'

'*I understand. I will send another situation report as soon as I have more information. Ixion out.*'

Heavy weapons fire began to hammer on the perimeter, smashing into the breastworks that the Ultramarines of Seventh had thrown up. The defenders kept their heads down, consulted auspex and loosed off volleys of bolter rounds in reply. The Devastators of Ninth held their fire, for there were as yet no clear targets despite the ferocious barrage that was slamming into every portion of the line.

Captain Ixion knelt on one knee as heavy autocannon fire whipped past his head in a bright skein of tracer. It was still some three hours until this part of the hulk turned back towards Iax's sun, and the entire area was obscured not only by darkness, but by boiling clouds of metallic dust and pulverised rockcrete. The noise was deafening, but his autosenses tuned out the worst of it, allowing him to concentrate on the matter at hand. The vox was perfectly clear as he called up the flight of Thunderhawks overhead.

'Overwatch Flight, do you read?'

'*Affirmative, captain. This is Brother Odyr of Fifth on the* Penitent*. We await your orders.*'

'Odyr, make a low pass and see if you can make out the enemy positions. They have heavy weapons emplaced all around us. I want your gunships to locate them and take them out.'

'*Acknowledged. Be aware, captain, visibility is very low, and onboard augur systems are compromised.*'

‘Follow their tracer, Odyr. And report any other enemy movement.’

‘*It shall be so.* Penitent *out.*’

Within seconds a new sound tore through the thin atmosphere as the three Thunderhawks came swooping in low over the perimeter. The roar of their approach drowned out even the heavy weapons fire, and their Mars-pattern engines sucked up great spiralling circles of dust in their wake. At once, the autocannons of the enemy switched targets, and stabbing lances of light shot up into the sky, following the aircraft. A web of tracer scattered across the stars. The Ultramarines below looked up to see rounds bouncing and careering off the thick protective armour of the Thunderhawks. They were taking a torrent of fire, but they had been built to take punishment, and they ended their pass intact, before wheeling back over the position again, gaining altitude and banking so as to bring their sponson-mounted weapons to bear.

‘*Attack run, Naevus formation,*’ Brother Odyr said on the vox. ‘*Brothers, follow me in. Targets of opportunity on my axis. Watch out for our brothers of Seventh.*’

‘Carenus *ready, on your three, brother.*’

‘Victris *ready, on your nine. Lead us in.*’

The aircraft powered across the blazing sky, and as they came in they loosed off hunter-killer missiles from their wing-pylons. The missiles arced down onto the surface, setting up a rippling series of explosions, a line of tawny boiling dust spouting up into the thin air with a maelstrom of fire at its base.

‘*Adjust on my axis,*’ Brother Odyr said. ‘*Coming round for a strafing run.*’

Again, they swooped round, banking so steeply that they set up a shrieking scream of tortured air and hammering engines. Now the heavy bolters in the sponsons opened up, sending streams of burning tracer in a torrent that walked along the perimeter. There was a spatter of secondary explosions on the ground as ammunition cooked off, and the Ultramarines of Seventh saw other things hurled through the air by the force of the detonations.

Captain Ixion looked up, following the flight of the Thunderhawks and noting the placing of their missiles, the avenue of attack they had chosen. As he watched, a second line of enemy weapons opened up from half a mile away, thick threads of white light pulsing up into the sky. One of the Thunderhawks was caught in that fiery mesh of energy and yawed wildly.

‘Penitent*, this is* Carenus*. Systems overload. I am losing altitude.*’

‘*I see you,* Carenus*. We are taking fire from heavy arc rifles a thousand yards on bearing one seven three.*’

‘*Break off attack, make altitude if you can.*’

‘*Negative, brother. Damage is too severe.* Carenus *is going down.*’

The Ultramarines within the perimeter watched in rage as the Thunderhawk tilted up in a last-ditch attempt to clear the cocoon of fire that was now tearing it to pieces. There was an explosion on board, one wing blown clean off the hull; then the great craft slewed drunkenly across the sky and tumbled down into the surface of *Fury* like a blazing meteor. As it struck, the massive explosion was felt through the feet of the watchers, like the tremor of a far-off earthquake.

The other two Thunderhawks screeched upwards, with lightning-like streaks of energy stabbing up into the sky in their wake. It seemed that for miles around, the surface of the hulk had come alive with hidden batteries.

‘*Captain, this is* Penitent,’ Brother Odyr said.

‘Send, brother.’

‘Carenus *crash-site in view – no survivors likely. It went down too hard. We are returning to* Octavius *for damage assessment and rearming. We will be back, captain, you can rely on that.*’

‘Emperor guide you, brother. I know you will return. When you do, come in force.’

‘*Aye.* Penitent *out.*’

The Librarian of Seventh Company, Brother Belisar, strode up to Ixion.

‘Captain, they are about to attack again. I can sense them – their minds are poor, half-formed things, broken and bestial. And there are thousands out there.’

‘What in Throne’s name are they?’ Ixion demanded irritably. ‘Not Chaos.’

‘No – not Chaos. Though that mark is on them – somehow they have felt its taint, but it does not direct them.’

‘Be clear, brother. I have no time for riddles.’

Belisar’s hood gleamed blue. His tone was savage. ‘I hear scraps of machine code on the aether, fragments of binharic. These things are not agents of the Ruinous Powers – they are minions of the Adeptus Mechanicus.’

Ixion was startled into momentary silence. From the perimeter, the cry went up. ‘Ware brothers – enemy approaching!’

The Ultramarines of Seventh, along with their brethren from Ninth and Tenth, manned their shattered breastworks, pushed aside shoals of spent bolter shells, and took aim once more. The deep thunking pop of the missile launchers sounded out first, followed by the hungry roar of meltaguns.

Then the heavy bolters went to work, stabbing out into the dust-choked darkness, tracer lighting up long serried ranks of cowled figures that came rushing forward in clots and mobs, then spread out under fire, losing dozens

before they went to ground in the wreckage, and began firing back in a close-gripped, raging ring of violence.

The entire perimeter was engaged all at once, and the star-filled night of *Fury* was broken open by a volcanic blaze of light that echoed out into nearby space, watched by the crews of the great ships orbiting above.

ELEVEN

<Kinsman, greetings. You have gone deep into the artefact. Not too deep now! I do not wish to lose you. And your servants. Such fine, useful adjuncts. Shall I adjust my input? I think so. It is archaic, but effective. Let me try and ease your puzzlement.>

Tech-priest Alt-seven stopped dead in his tracks, his head cocked to one side. Inside its sealed lens, his eye opened and closed slowly.

Before him the two enginseers paused in their work and looked back. A leakage of binharic code squirted out of the communication matrices of his bioware, and then was clamped shut again.

<Reboot primary logi-stack, trace errors, eliminate mutagenic malware. Initiating.>

<Reboot failed, secondary stack online. Auxiliary cogitator stream redirected to main interface.>

Alt-seven stumbled, then straightened.

<Enquiry – malfunction in overseer?> one of the enginseers sent.

<Proceed with protocol. Time remaining, one hour, eighteen minutes, thirty-six seconds for optimal result. Schedule proceeds. Attend.>

<Affirmative, overseer.>

The Adeptus Mechanicus party continued with their work. While the four skitarii stood guard, the two enginseers were busy cutting an opening in a bulkhead with their welding torches, the white-blue glare of the plasma-acetylene lighting up the chamber fitfully. Alt-seven stood silent and still, watching them.

They were back in the chamber of consoles and cogitators that they had been

through earlier, but now a mass of wreckage had been lifted away from the far wall to reveal a tall sealed door, very like an airlock hatch, which had lain hidden behind it.

The door had been located in the initial survey, but Marneus Calgar's impatience had meant that there was no time to investigate what lay behind it. Magos Fane had not pushed the point, unwilling to make an issue of the thing. In fact he had behaved as though there were nothing of interest left to investigate in that entire wing of the ruins they had traversed. But Alt-seven was his senior Artisan, and included in many of his decisions. He had felt the magos' excitement. There was something else here, something which it might be best not to reveal to the Adeptus Astartes and the Inquisition.

Sentience is the ability to learn the value of knowledge, the Third Mystery of the Cult Mechanicus said. But the Seventh Warning also stated: *Flesh is fallible*.

What the magos had sensed here had nothing to do with the other Adepts of the Imperium. It belonged to the Mechanicus, and as such, it must be investigated by their own.

Alt-seven was here to do his superior's bidding.

The incantatory programs against scrapcode were in place, but still, Alt-seven's bio-cogital interface had been sending up strange snaps and tweaks of fragmentary messaging in the last hour; some weirdly conversational, but most of a technical variety. It defied the analysis of his ward-logic rituals, and he had decided to quarantine and isolate it, but all the same, some leaked through. It was not an assault or a battery of his mental mechware; more a playful hit and run, irritating, even fascinating, but no threat to his core systems.

Until now. The entire mainframe of his primary logi-stack had been taken offline for diagnosis and purge, and Alt-seven was unsure what to do about it. His auxiliary systems had come online perfectly; communications, limbic control, motor function, environmental awareness. But his primary was still running in the background, every line of holy code being examined by his inbuilt cogitator protection script.

Something was wrong – but it did not feel wrong.

And Alt-seven began to feel something that was completely unfamiliar to his experience.

Fear.

The door crashed inwards, spraying gobbets of molten metal like glowing raindrops. Beyond, there was an acrid stench and utter darkness.

<By your leave, overseer, Taghma one will initiate entry.>

<Proceed.>

The skitarii stepped through the still glowing outline of the door, arc rifle poised. Two spotlights blinked yellow on either side of his brazen skull, illuminating a corridor, narrow and uneven, the plates that lined it buckled and bent, their supporting struts poking up like tree stumps.

<Taghma one will proceed fifty yards. Taghma two will follow.>

<Acknowledged. Weapons free. Auspex enabled. Scanning now... Scan clear.>

Alt-seven collected himself. <Taghma one will report.>

<Incline is fourteen degrees, temperature eighty-four degrees, humidity approximately eighty-six per cent. Corrosive elements in atmosphere are within nominal parameters. Gravitic impulse point nine-six Terran standard. Continuing.>

Alt-seven focused. The chrono clicked in his readout, counting down the magos' estimate of the maximum time available for the mission before the Adeptus Astartes grew suspicious.

<Remainder will follow me, best speed,> he ordered. He called up the binary readout and saw it lit up, as he had hoped it would be. Somewhere up ahead there was a large cogitator still functional, its power low as a flickering candle, but just enough to have been picked up as a tiny echo on the fine-tuned senses of the magos. To Alt-seven's binharic senses, the machine clinging to functionality somewhere in the darkness before him appeared as a framework, a dimly glimmering outline in which tiny lights came and went, flickering; programs running their unending course, clinging to existence here in the buried dark of the hulk, the machine-spirit of the device near extinction, but still struggling to maintain a kind of awareness.

<We come,> he murmured. <We come to succour thee.>

A broken and much blasted maze of corridors and passageways opened out before the Adeptus Mechanicus party in the blackness. Some were mere warrens, others grander affairs with towering arches blotched by the passage of centuries, dead, black terminals and vid-screens inset in the walls. The chrono ran on, clicking away their time. Protocol stated that there were to be no communications with the magos until the party was on its way back to the main body, but Alt-seven felt that fear again, mingled with the determination to fulfil his task. The darkness was empty but for the far glimmer of binharic life on his bioware readout, up ahead, getting closer as they trudged deeper into the shattered innards of *Fury*. A system that had endured this long – and the

corridors they picked their way through now were truly ancient – had to have been of major importance, with many backups and safeguards, otherwise it would have died long ago.

By his own rough estimates, Alt-seven reckoned that the code signature he was picking up had been running for some two thousand years.

<Taghma one reports that unknown signature is forty-six yards on a bearing of eight-six degrees,> the lead skitarii indicated, pointing with the barrel of his arc rifle.

<Taghma one and two will proceed to signature location and make immediate assessment of surroundings.>

<Taghma one and two in compliance.>

The two skitarii went ahead, their spotlights flaring up the buckled and stained walls of the passageway. Alt-seven let his senses range over the immediate area, taking in the signs of warp-damage, as though some gigantic force had taken the very fabric of the hulk and shaken and twisted everything slightly out of true.

But there was more to it than that. As he looked closer, he saw that some of the damage was explosive; plates that were torn and blackened as well as buckled, and here and there a line of shell holes in the plasteel – large impacts that had to be the work of bolter fire. Interspersed with these traces were other relics of past conflict; the long, searing furrows of arc-rifle blasts. There had been some kind of battle on *Fury*, long ago, and by the evidence, it had been between his own Adeptus, and that of the Adeptus Astartes. This was something Magos Fane must learn at once. But he was still in vox lockdown, while the mission lasted. It would have to wait.

A blast of impatience went through him. There was no word from the two skitarii; they had been swallowed up by the darkness ahead.

<Taghma one will report current status.>

Nothing. Alt-seven wondered if there was some blockage of the signal; the skitarii were less than fifty yards away. They were still on his bioware's auspex, as was the low murmur of the dying machine-spirit that was still running up ahead – so close now.

<All Adepts will join Taghma one and two at once,> he said to the remainder of his party, the two enginseers and the other two skitarii.

<Overseer, protocol states–>

<Protocol emergency override in place. Time factor is limiting, communications compromised. Taghma three and four will advance.>

<Acknowledged.>

With the other two skitarii in the lead, the party continued up the passageway. There was a tumbled mass of wreckage which partially blocked their way, but they clambered through it. Beyond, there was a sense of greater atmosphere – of moving air. The readout on Alt-seven's personal display clicked through the numbers. It was warmer here – there was water vapour, growing humidity, rising levels of sulphur dioxide and ammonia. Methane also. If he had possessed a sense of smell, Alt-seven would have been sickened by the stench, but as it was he merely filed the information away in his binharic log.

They were through the thicket of wreckage.

<Ah, here you are.>

Alt-seven felt an urge to knock his fist against the side of his own bronze-encased skull. It felt as though some insect were clambering around inside his wetware and biomechanical interfaces; a bug in his brain. He staggered slightly.

Taghma one and two were standing stock-still before a vast, looming spire of wire-frapped mechanica, the muzzles of their arc rifles leaning on the floor. Nothing came up from their systems; no acknowledgement, no sign of life. But they were stood there, breathing quietly, heads down.

Vid-screens snapped into momentary flashing life, a haze of static, reams of cable running serpentine all around the floor in a slowly boiling fog of vapour. And the huge many-branched pillar, composed of interwoven components of all kinds and eras, rose before them all like some unquiet blinking icon, fifty feet tall, a machine tree with limbs of cable and wire and plasteel supporting struts that rose up to grasp at the tall ceiling overhead.

The spirit within it leapt up into true binharic life – the sudden power of its onset seared green lines across Alt-seven's optical input. All around the great, trash-strewn, shattered chamber in which it stood, secondary modules clicked and spat into sputtering function. There was movement, minute, vibrating, a stirring of the hot mist that enveloped the place. From the fog-choked garbage of the floor rose up six servo-skulls, their eye-sockets glaring green, yellow teeth grinning and dripping with slime.

Alt-seven called up his internal vox, to try and reach out to Magos Fane.

<I think not.>

His communications systems were overridden, the ciphers deleting a million lines from his memory, his logi-stacks wrenched open by an invasion of foreign, alien code which was at the same time tantalisingly familiar.

<Welcome, brother. Let me calm your labouring spirit, and introduce it to the

sanity of true peace. We are all one here, all servants of the Omnissiah.>

The Adeptus Mechanicus party assembled in a regimented line before the great techno-tree and the floating skulls. Their hands opened, and they dropped their weapons. The mechadendrites attached to Alt-seven and the enginseers fell limp with metallic clangs. Alt-seven's mind was a whirring blaze of uploading data, his head shaking on his shoulders as it flooded him. His warding incantations and protective protocols were swept aside like so much chaff, and a massive, blinding, enveloping stream of data coursed through him, realigning all his thought processes, rerouting programs, rewriting the base holy code that made him who he was.

He gibbered behind his mask, and his body shook as though in the grip of a fever. Beside him, his companions were in like condition. The skitarii fell to their knees and uttered a collective, drawn-out howl of agony as their conditioning was overridden. One of them tried to rise, then staggered as though struck. He raised his empty fists, and Alt-seven, with an enormous effort, managed to turn his head in time to see the bolt of arc-fire lance out of the mouth of a servo skull and sear the skitarii to molten metal and black meat from the chest up. The stench in the chamber intensified, and the acrid smoke sank down into the ribbons of mist that were now collecting thicker around them. The skitarii stood, burning, his helm melting on his skull, the eyelenses exploding with vicious pops. Then he toppled to the ground.

The rest were now frozen in place, their limbic functions lost to outside control, their senses blinded, blown, their existence now nothing more than a mass of green static-laced data that invaded every atom of their biomechanical brains.

<This is death. Do you want it?>

<And this is life – true life. The truth behind the lies. Look on it, and feel the essence that is the ultimate sublimation of the will to the machine-spirit. This is how it should be. This is the reality of existence.>

<This is perfection.>

Alt-seven raised his head to look up at the structure of the great bio-mechanical entity that towered over him, and he saw not a lowering mass of hanging metallic tendrils, a spitting sequence of transistors and vid-flares, a hovering line of skulls.

He saw a face, as beautiful and serene as that of a benevolent god, smiling down at him. He saw peace, and the fulfilment of a lifetime's need, the opening of a dream.

<Lord. The component is in compliance.>

<Understanding is the true path to comprehension.>
<Comprehension is the key to all things.>

And the bright face smiled on him.

TWELVE

Marneus Calgar attended to the battle reports coming in from the surface in grim silence. Captain Ixion was heavily outnumbered, under all-round attack, and suffering a steady trickle of casualties – but he was holding his own. Seventh had dug in, and was well supplied with ammunition. Plus, the Thunderhawks of the *Octavius* and the *Rex Aeterna* would soon be returning in support. Ixion was confident he could hold.

'*But lord, there is something you should know,*' he said urgently over the crackling vox, '*the enemy we are facing here – they are not forces of the Ruinous Powers, at least, not as we understand them. We are encountering murder servitors, battle maniples of skitarii, and clades of Kataphron Breachers with heavy arc rifles and torsion cannons. These are the forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus.*'

Calgar turned to Magos Fane, who stood close by, and replayed the message from Ixion over his vox speakers so the magos could listen in. The tech-priest's alloy fists tightened on his axe of office and there was a bright glint from his eyelenses. A long hiss escaped from his mouth-grille.

'This cannot be so, Chapter Master. My Adeptus would not attack the forces of the Imperium, not least the Adeptus Astartes – not if they were still holding to their ancient allegiance. There must be something else at work here, an ancient evil which it makes me sick to think on.'

'Have you sensed the presence of the Dark Mechanicus here on the hulk, Fane?' Calgar asked the magos.

The tech-priest said nothing for a long moment. He was wondering what to divulge and what to hold back, Calgar thought, and a jet of anger shot up in him.

He looked quickly back down the long column of Ultramarines that ran down the tunnel behind him, cast his eye over the Adeptus Mechanicus personnel – and at once he knew that there were some of the magos' people missing. The anger grew. He should have noticed it earlier, but he had been too far to the front of the column, more concerned with what was ahead of them than what was behind.

Consider the whole, the Codex said. *A battlefield is like a body. Every limb is important. A mere nick in the right place, and it will bleed to death – the battle can be lost in the most unlikely of places.*

Inquisitor Drake strode up. 'Problems?' he asked in that arch way of his.

'Perhaps,' Calgar said bleakly. 'Magos, you have not yet answered me.'

'I have sensed something,' Magos Fane said at last. 'My techsorcist has been reiterating our incantatory rituals against scrapcode ever since we landed on the hulk, and he has, as yet, picked up nothing that is blatantly malign. But there is something – an intelligence.'

'We knew there had to be something sentient at the heart of this thing – that is no great revelation,' Inquisitor Drake snapped, and for once Calgar was in full agreement with him.

'I do not speak of what you think, inquisitor,' Magos Fane hissed back. 'Elements of the Ruinous Powers are almost certainly at the heart of this artefact's mystery – it came from the Eye of Terror after all – but there is something else, also. Some remnant of my own Adeptus is still in existence here–'

'They're killing my brothers on the surface even now,' Calgar said, reining in his anger, his tone low. 'I do not need the obvious restated to me, magos.'

The tech-priest actually backed away a step from the simmering menace in Calgar's voice.

'There is more to it than that. I–' he hesitated, and his thin body writhed within the scarlet robe, as if in indecisive torment.

'I have, it is true, detached a small element of my entourage, to investigate what may prove to be a possible clue as to the true nature of what drives the enemy forces – those which are attacking your Ultramarines, my Lord Calgar. I and the techsorcist have sensed a major cogital logistack nearby, one which is big enough to house trillions of terabytes of data, a treasure trove of potentially enormous significance. We passed by it on our journey downwards, and as we did, I sensed that its signal was weakening. Rather than lose it entirely, I assigned a trusted adjunct to investigate.' He paused. 'I have not yet heard back

from his party, but I should soon.'

'The spider stalks the fly,' Inquisitor Drake said with a sneer. 'You did not see fit to divulge this to Lord Calgar or myself?'

'I did not know if what we were looking for was viable. And the need for haste...' The magos trailed off.

'The need for haste – and for secrecy,' Drake grated. 'You withheld this information because you knew that I would insist on investigating it alongside your own forces, to check for taints of heresy.'

'Therein lies the problem. You might well have been deceived, inquisitor. There are subtleties to the traits of my Adeptus that only our own can sense. I needed an initial assessment by my own people, unhindered, before I divulged this information to you.'

'This changes things,' Calgar said, cutting them both short. 'Recall your team, magos. We must–'

A high-priority vox rune flashed up on his helm's readout, from Tigurius in the *Octavius*. He took it at once.

'Send, brother, but be swift.'

'*My lord, augur sweeps from both the* Rex *and the* Octavius *have picked up a sudden, massive power-surge at the heart of* Fury. *The hulk seems to be bringing many unknown systems online. There are currents in the aether which I am picking up myself, a sudden wakefulness – an awareness if you will.*

'*Chapter Master, the hulk is coming to life. More than that, the warp itself draws near to it. The currents of the immaterium are shifting all around us, and growing stronger by the moment. I cannot–*' He stopped. '*Forgive me, my lord, there is more data inbound as I speak.*' There was a crackling gap, a pause which had Calgar clenching his fists in the Gauntlets of Ultramar, impatience growing like a cold fire down his spine.

'*My lord, the Geller field around the hulk is strengthening, as is the artefact's gravitic generation.*' Tigurius' voice fell, shock darkening it.

'*It is my opinion that* Fury *is about to make a warp translation.*'

'Throne,' Calgar whispered. His mind ranged out in half a dozen directions at once, considering the long miles back to the surface, Seventh Company fighting there, the fleet in close orbit.

And he, entombed here with Fifth Company, hopelessly deep in the guts of this monstrous, birthing nightmare that was waking up around him at last.

'How soon, Tigurius?' he demanded of his Librarian.

'*Hours at the very most – perhaps minutes.*' Tigurius sounded both angry and

baffled. '*I cannot be more specific, my lord. The energy signature is on a steep arc. The reactor which powers it must be of an immense capability, and fully functional – something we had not even guessed at.*'

Another flashing scarlet rune. Ixion, with Seventh.

'Report, captain.'

'*My lord, the enemy have drawn back. They are in complete retreat on all sides.*' There was a mixture of triumph and puzzlement in Ixion's voice. '*They seem to be going to ground back in the wrecks which surround us.*'

They know, Calgar thought.

There was not enough time for Fifth to make it out, but Seventh might, if they were very swift.

He called up the Chapter-wide vox, keyed into all Ultramarines who were capable of picking up the signal.

'Lord Calgar – Lord Calgar!' Magos Fane was crying suddenly, 'My augur readouts–'

'I know. Be silent,' Calgar snapped.

Then he drew a breath, and spoke to his own brothers, the Ultramarines of the battle companies who were here on *Fury* with him, those listening on board the *Rex Aeterna* and the *Octavius*, the Thunderhawk crews, Tigurius and the few Adeptus Astartes who were with him in orbit. All those who shared his blood and bore the sigil of the Chapter on their shoulders.

'Brothers, this thing is about to shift into the warp, to go who knows where. For me, for Captain Galenus, for our comrades in Fifth and those with us, there is no hope of escape. But Captain Ixion, you must evacuate your men as swiftly as you can. All Thunderhawks are to launch and bring off as many as possible. Brother Fortunus – you must try and join up with Seventh. Brother Tigurius, I name you commander of the fleet in orbit. Take the ships away from the vicinity of the hulk, otherwise they may be dragged into the warp along with it.

'Now let us get to it, my brothers. Time is not our friend.'

There was nothing more to be said. His battle-brothers knew what to do, and they would do it with all the pitiless determination of their kind.

The vox filled with acknowledgements of his orders, clipped and precise, the voices of hardened warriors used to the prospect of mass death. Their voices warmed him.

'*Throne be with you, Chapter Master.*' He did not check to see who had said it – it was not Tigurius, merely a message from one of his brothers, a sergeant perhaps, or a warrior in one of the line companies. He did not want to know who

it was. It was enough to have heard it.

He looked down at Inquisitor Drake and Magos Fane, who stood silently beside him, having heard nothing of what had just passed on the Ultramarines vox net.

'The spider and the fly,' he said to Drake with a touch of cold humour. 'Inquisitor, you may have spoken more truly than you know.'

From the launch bays of the Ultramarines ships the Thunderhawks exploded like bullets from the barrel of a gun, piloted by battle-brothers who knew that every second counted. Between the *Rex Aeterna* and the *Octavius*, the Chapter still had nineteen of the heavily armoured craft flightworthy, and these now powered down into the artefact's thin atmosphere, to roar into the starfield above Seventh Company's positions, their hulls glowing red. Many were battle-damaged, some virtually unarmed, having volleyed out of the launch bays before their ordnance loads had been fitted.

No ground fire met them. The enemy that had been assaulting Seventh's positions seemed to have simply melted away, withdrawing into the maze of wreckage that composed the surface of *Fury*, offering no resistance. The Thunderhawks touched down in and around the company perimeter in a vast cloud of metallic dust that rose up to mangle all augury and auspex readings, and interfere with the vox, lacing it with static.

Librarian Tigurius was old in service of the Chapter, and old too in knowledge of the warp and the monstrosities it contained. He kept the nave crew of the *Octavius* on continual alert, had teams of tech-servitors sweep *Fury* without pause, and analysed every line of data they produced, running through it at the adamantium aquila that perched at the head of the nave. The Geller field that surrounded the hulk was now at some sixty-five per cent of that which was judged minimal for survival in the immaterium. If it did not come up to one hundred per cent of Imperium standard, then, once the artefact translated, there was no telling what nightmares might slip through it.

His Chapter Master was trapped, far too deep to be reached by any force available to him here. The only reason he was still in vox contact was because of the relays set in place on the way down. Tigurius could talk to Marneus Calgar, but that was all. In every other respect, the Chapter Master and the Ultramarines of Fifth Company, to say nothing of the Adeptus Mechanicus and Inquisition personnel, were already lost. He had to plan around that knowledge, to save what he could out of this looming disaster. And that meant evacuating Seventh Company.

‘Artefact’s Geller field is now at seventy-three per cent of Imperium minimums and still rising,’ a fleet officer said. ‘Power is–’ the middle-aged voidsman shook his head. ‘Lord Tigurius, the power readings are off the scale.’

‘I see it,’ Tigurius rasped. ‘Let me know as soon as the first Thunderhawks are back on board. I want an immediate report on conditions on the surface.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Tigurius closed his eyes, and reached out with his mind. His psychic hood began to glow, a bright cowl which encircled his skull, threaded with cables, thrumming with the power of his psyche.

In the storm of shining dust that surrounded the landing zones, Captain Ixion stood by his Librarian, Brother Belisar. The roar of the idling Thunderhawks was intense; it made the ground shake under his feet. He stood aside to let Brothers Uther and Tolkos, two towering Dreadnoughts, stomp past up the ramp of *Sinbreaker*. Around him, the squads of Seventh Company were filing into the other Thunderhawks while a skeleton force of some dozen battle-brothers formed a rearguard, in case the enemy chose to attack as the company was embarking.

But there was no attempt to interfere with the evacuation. The surface of *Fury* was broken and blackened, heaped with the bodies of the enemy slain, pocked by still-smoking craters, on fire here and there with puddles of still-burning promethium. But aside from that it seemed as dead as when they had first arrived.

Seventh’s senior sergeant, Brother Jarrow, joined Ixion. ‘Captain, what of the stores? We are leaving behind a mountain of ammunition and equipment here!’

‘Leave it,’ Ixion retorted. ‘It’s of no consequence now.’

Jarrow shook his helm slightly. ‘No word of the Chapter Master and Fifth?’

‘They are six miles down, brother. There is nothing we can do for them.’

‘Throne!’ Brother Jarrow’s voice was full of angry grief, even over the shrill static of the vox. ‘Surely there must be something–’

‘Just get our people out, brother sergeant,’ Ixion said. ‘If anyone can survive this, it will be Lord Calgar. He has seen much worse.’

‘Aye, captain.’ Jarrow waved an arm. ‘The last are almost on – it is just you, Brother Belisar, myself and the rearguard.’

‘What of the third Dreadnought?’ Ixion demanded. ‘Any sign of brother Fortunus?’

Brother Jarrow shook his head. ‘He is not here, and there has been no word

from him.'

Ixion clenched his fist slowly. 'Then get aboard, brother. I will see you on the *Octavius*.' He switched to a wider channel. 'Rearguard embark. All Thunderhawks, take off and make for the *Octavius* as soon as your complement is complete.'

He could delay no longer – he was imperilling his brethren with each passing minute.

The ground shuddered and shook as the great Mars-pattern engines of the craft powered up for take-off. As they lifted, their retros blew up an immense pall of dust and debris that was blasted up into the thin atmosphere, mushrooming out beyond *Fury*'s weak surface gravity and into space, a drifting cloud which shone as it twisted in the light of Iax's star.

The rearguard came in, trooping up the bow ramp of the Thunderhawk *Andromache*. Librarian Belisar stood on the lip of the ramp and called to his captain.

'Brother! It is time to go!'

Ixion stood a moment more, unwilling, somehow, to forsake the place his brethren had defended, the last link to his Chapter Master and the others who were with him – the faint hope that Brother Fortunus' immense shape might still be seen striding out of the dust. It seared his soul to flee like this, leaving them all behind.

The losses we endure may grieve us, but they must not cloud our thinking, the Codex said. *Sometimes the fate of the dead must be put from the mind, until there is time to mourn, and to rejoice in the valour of their passing. Until then, the fight must continue. Let anger clear your mind.*

'May the Emperor forgive us,' Ixion whispered. Then he walked up the ramp of the *Andromache*, and even before the heavy hatch was fully closed, the Thunderhawk was up and off the ground, ascending into orbit on a pillar of flame.

'Last Thunderhawk is clear of the hulk, my lord,' Shipmaster Sulla told Brother Tigurius. The Librarian did not open his eyes, but he nodded.

'As soon as they are onboard, the entire fleet is to stand clear of *Fury* some fifty thousand miles. The translation is very near, shipmaster, and it is a powerful one, which will ripple out into real space for quite some distance.'

'It shall be so. I shall send word to all ships. The *Spatha* and the *Mutatis Mutandis* have signalled that they will comply with your directives in obedience

to the orders of their principals.'

'Geller field at ninety two per cent of minimal Imperium standard,' the augur officer called out. 'Estimated time until maximum field now three minutes seven seconds.'

'All Thunderhawks clear of the artefact by eight thousand miles and closing on us – the first will dock in two and a half minutes,' the operations officer said.

It would be close – very close. Tigurius could feel the thrumming nearness of it, the immaterium drawn ever closer to the bulk of *Fury*, like a cloud dark with rain about to vent a deluge. The Ruinous Powers had their tendrils in the stuff of the hulk now, reaching out to cradle it, to drag it into their nauseating embrace. He could sense the strength of that dragging, enfolding blackness as it swept ever nearer. This would be a massive translation with enormous power behind it, not just that of a normal warp engine, but with the sorcerous might of unseen and unknown entities adding to the build-up. It would snap into real space with the force of a boulder dropped in a shallow puddle. If the fleet were not well clear soon, they would be caught up in that massive impact, sent spiralling out through the void like leaves, and perhaps even become ensnared in the translation itself.

'Lord Calgar,' Tigurius said. The vox link was tenuous now, despite the relays, like trying to speak into a mounting gale.

'*I hear you.*'

'My lord, the translation will occur in the next few minutes.'

'*What of Ixion and Seventh?*'

'They are clear, Chapter Master. They will be back on board the *Octavius* imminently.'

'*Will you be able to track us in any way, Tigurius?*'

'I will be able to sense your psychic signature for some time – it leaves a trail, like a faint wake, which can be sensed even after you have entered the warp. But it will dissipate quickly. And my lord, I feel that this is going to be a long translation. You may be in the warp for an indeterminate amount of time, and there is no telling where you will emerge.'

'*If we ever do,*' Calgar said, with a bitter laugh. '*It would seem, Tigurius, that myself and Fifth are about to follow in the footsteps of our lost brethren of the Abyssal Crusade. Rest assured that we shall fight to the end, and if there is ever any way we can relate our situation, our location to you, it shall be done.*'

'I know that, my lord.' Tigurius bowed in grief over the outspread wings of the aquila pulpit before him. His gauntlets grasped the adamantium until they creaked.

‘And the Ultramarines will never stop searching for you, no matter how long it takes.’

‘*In my absence, you will command the fleet. Make sure Iax is safe, and the system is clean. Then proceed to Macragge. Command of the chapter will devolve to Brother Captain Agemman. Counsel him as you have counselled me, and the Chapter will continue to prosper.*’

‘Geller field now at one hundred per cent Imperium minimum,’ the voice came down the nave.

‘All Thunderhawks aboard. Launch bays closing.’

Shipmaster Sulla called out in a voice of brass. ‘Afterburners, forward retros. Swing her larboard ninety degrees and then kick in all aft engines. Signal to the fleet – all vessels to make best speed clear of the artefact, fifty thousand miles minimum clearance, immediate execution.’

‘All ships responding, implementing now.’

The tenor of the hum in the nave picked up an octave as the massive sub-warp engines bellowed into life, and all along the immense length of the battle-barge the retros fired, the ship trembling slightly as they shunted her bow away from the hulk and the enormous afterburners in her stern lit up and began to glow like miniature suns. Tigurius felt the thrumming power of the manoeuvre through his hands and feet as he stood there at the aquila pulpit, grasping its shining pinions. Shards and darts of blackness seemed to come lancing into his psyche, like striking snakes; the outlying threads of the encroaching warp. He fended them off, his hood shining with sapphire light.

‘It comes, my lord. May the Emperor guide and protect you–’

Even here, high above the engine compartments, he could hear the savage roar through the towering superstructure of the *Octavius* as the shipmaster slammed the ship into full bellowing power, her stern facing the hulk now, the flames from her engines flaring out over a mile into space before the vacuum consumed their light.

‘*And you, my brother,*’ Marneus Calgar replied. ‘*Courage and honour.*’

‘Courage and honour.’

And then, as the fleet streaked away from *Fury*, the hulk was enveloped in a vast silver and sable skein of thrashing light, a wicked, beating, pulsing envelope which was nothing to do with the real, rational universe. It grew and expanded, a red glow permeating it, a sickening throb of blood-like warp-plasma. Tigurius watched on the vid-screens of the nave, the entire crew of the bridge silent around him, as *Fury* lit up like a bloody star, threads and skeins of carmine light

spearing out of it for thousands of miles into space.

And then in the next instant, the hulk had disappeared. And where it had been there was only the sickly smeared shimmer of decaying energy, red and silver, consuming itself in the blackness, the stars of Ultramar shining untouched and bright beyond.

Fury had gone. And with it, an entire company of Ultramarines, and the Chapter Master himself.

II
OCULARIS TERROREM

THIRTEEN

The agony of the shift was as intense as any Calgar had ever known, and he was no psyker. For those among the expedition who possessed such powers it was worse.

Inquisitor Drake fell to his knees, and in his pain and delirium he sought to tear his helm from his head. Calgar stopped him, pinning him with one hand, and scanned the rest of the column through the haze of nausea that enveloped his own mind. He fought clear of it, saw some of the inquisitor's men topple unconscious.

Two of the Adeptus Mechanicus skitarii tore at their own faces with flailing mechadendrites, ripping decayed flesh and metal mouth-grilles free of their bodies as if in an effort to breathe, tearing their scarlet robes to shreds. Further up the column, Calgar heard a bitten-off shout of agony from Brother Librarian Ulfius of Fifth, the psyker fighting to confront the lowering forces of the warp which now enveloped them and permeated every atom of the hulk.

It was a massive translation, a shift so brutal that even the Ultramarines staggered where they stood. Beside Calgar, his two honour guards, Brothers Ohtar and Morent, leaned on the haft of their power axes, and Calgar heard Morent mutter a strangled curse. For several minutes, they were all paralysed, hanging in the gap between real space and the howling depths of the immaterium, like men poised on a cliff edge with the precipice yawning up at them. And then they plunged.

They were engulfed by it, that swirling miasma of proto-plasma which lay behind the normal reality of the universe. *Fury* plummeted into its depths like a dark star bent on obliteration, and around it an entire other universe loomed up.

They were in its currents now, and could feel it, a maelstrom of madness which lay gibbering in every shadow.

But the Geller field was holding. Gravity, which had flickered for several microseconds, was now stabilised. The looming catastrophe of madness that hovered over them receded somewhat. It was still there, like a hound baying behind a closed door, but it was being held off for now.

Something like a kind of normality returned, and the tunnel which Fifth Company was spread through seemed to resume rational dimension again. For a few seconds it had stretched out for miles in shapes and curves that belied all rational analysis, full of roaring noise. Now it was a dark tunnel once more, something that bore their feet, where up was up and down was down. Calgar could still feel the currents of the warp moving through it as the hulk wheeled through the immaterium. They were travelling fast, and now all time was meaningless; there was only the present, and the immediate responsibilities.

'Captain Galenus?'

'*My lord?*'

'Status report from all squads. Apothecary Philo is to personally examine every battle-brother. When that is done, he will do the same for the inquisitor and his entourage. Brother Ulfius, on me. Brother Starn, do you read?'

The veteran sounded as calm and clear-headed as though he were on an exercise.

'*Starn here, Chapter Master. My brethren have secured a crossway two hundred yards ahead of the main body. Nothing to report. All systems nominal.*'

It made Calgar grin within his helm to hear the insouciant, clipped tones of the First Company veteran, as though nothing had happened.

'Hold firm there, brother. We will regroup to your rear.'

'*Acknowledged.*'

'I think you can let me up now, my lord,' Inquisitor Drake said hoarsely. Calgar's mighty fist was still pinning him to the ground. The Chapter Master straightened; the knuckles of the Gauntlets of Ultramar had left a welt of shallow indentations in Drake's breastplate.

'I thought you would do yourself an injury,' he said to the inquisitor with sardonic humour.

'For a moment there I thought I would myself. Thank you, my lord.'

'You had best see to your men.'

Calgar strode up and down the line. The Ultramarines were unfazed, ready to carry on, but others were not so hardy.

‘Magos Fane?’ Calgar sent out on the vox.

‘Here, my lord.’ The magos sounded shaken, but whole. Calgar saw that the tech-priest was crouching over the fallen form of one of his acolytes, removing components from the body.

‘Casualties?’

‘Two of my party succumbed to the madness of the initial warp onset. They are gone to the peace of the Omnissiah.’ The magos shook his cowled head slowly. ‘Never have I known such a fast and savage translation. The power it would require, to bring it on so swiftly–’

‘We’ll think on that later. We must move on. And magos – I want you to contact your missing team at once.’

‘It shall be so,’ the magos said. He paused a moment and then said, ‘The machine-spirits within the hulk are many and varied, Chapter Master. They have come to life all around us. There is a cloud of code coursing through the artefact now, signals which I cannot decipher without risking infection. My techsorcist, Adjunct-six, is incanting the proper warding rituals as I speak. I shall join him in an Incantation of the Iron Soul presently.’

Calgar cared little for the rituals of the Adeptus Mechanicus at present. He had too many other concerns, unanswered questions, possible strategies. They all vied for consideration in his mind.

‘Anything you discover as to how and why this warp translation occurred will be invaluable, magos,’ Calgar said shortly. ‘Whatever designs you had for the lost tech aboard this thing are now null. That mission is over. Now we must all work together if we are to survive. I trust I make myself clear.’ There was no mistaking the iron in Calgar’s tone.

‘Perfectly clear, Chapter Master.’

Brother Ulfius made his way down the column, his hood a flare of cobalt light above his helm. ‘My lord.’

‘Are you all right, brother?’

‘I was– I was momentarily taken aback by the violence of the translation – I was unprepared. It shall not happen again.’ Ulfius was a veteran of the company. He sounded ashamed of his momentary weakness.

‘See that it does not. Do all you can to pierce the dark which enfolds us. I have a schematic of the hulk’s upper levels, and I intend to proceed with our plan. We shall go deeper, find out where the control areas are, and take them by storm if necessary. Somewhere in this structure there is the equivalent of a bridge or enginarium, where this translation was triggered. I want you to point us at it.

Finding it may be our only chance of ever seeing Macragge again.'

Ulfius touched his helm. 'There are life signs before and under us, my lord, very many of them, scattered throughout the hulk. Their psychic signatures flared up in the wake of the translation. There are several areas which are well-nigh flooded with them.'

'Numbers?'

'Hundreds immediately below us. Thousands above.'

'As well we are not trying to ascend then,' Calgar said grimly. 'It would seem that Seventh Company drew off some of the enemy at least. If they start to converge on our location, I want advance warning.'

'My lord, I cannot be entirely precise–'

'Then make an educated guess,' Calgar said levelly. His tone silenced the Librarian. He called up Galenus on the vox. 'Captain, you will lead the column to join with brother Starn in the vanguard. We are too strung out. Find a more compact space where we can lay up and take stock. It may be we will have to send out scouting parties from the main body. I must have information, captain. Status reports every ten minutes.'

'*Acknowledged,*' Galenus said. He sounded somewhat relieved to be given concrete orders to follow. He was supremely comfortable with squad tactics – there were few better in the Chapter at the coordination of small bodies of Adeptus Astartes.

'And tell your senior sergeant, Brother Greynius, I want a full ammo count in the next half-hour. From here on in we are on our own. Not a round must be wasted.'

'*Aye, sir.*'

Inquisitor Drake had stood watching all this time. He was covered in dust, his armour scratched and dented. 'By your leave, Chapter Master, I believe I should go back and help the magos regain contact with his missing personnel.'

'Negative,' Calgar told him, towering before the diminutive figure like an armoured statue. 'If they cannot be contacted on vox then we will have to leave them be for the moment. Until we can regroup in a more tactically tenable location, the main body of the expedition must remain together. Once we have set up a base of operations, we will send out parties to reconnoitre the surrounding passageways and chambers, circumstances permitting. At that time, you may help the magos all you want, Drake – if he will indeed accept your help.'

The inquisitor stood silent a moment, and finally said, 'Very well. There is

something in what you say.'

'Have you psykers with you?'

'I have one. It would appear he is indisposed.' Drake gestured to a body on the ground amid his other followers.

'Get him up. His kind and yours may prove vital to us in the time to come.' Calgar felt a great, angry energy rise up in him, his adrenal glands flooding his limbs with much needed vigour. The warp translation had been draining; he shrugged off the weariness it had engendered, ignored the spiking pain in his skull and the rolling disgust of his innards. He felt the keen blade of new life surge through him as his superlative armour sent injected stimulants racing through his system.

'Galenus, lead off. All units, move out. Load the dead and injured on the grav-sleds. We must get clear of these passageways. Brother Starn, move out from the crossway at your own pace. By my reckoning the terrain should slope down to your left. Follow it, and mark each crossroads with flares. We will join you presently.'

He called up the schematic that Magos Fane had uncovered earlier. Incomplete, overwritten and fragmentary, it was nevertheless a guide of sorts, and racing over it his mind mapped out a path which would take the expedition below their current level to a substratum of more open passageways and compartments that seemed as though they might be less ruinous than this.

'Techmarine Salvator, you will move up and join Brother Starn. I want detailed analysis of the way ahead, composition, alignment and stability. Let us not fall into any more holes, brothers. We are in a deep enough one already.'

The Ultramarines rose from their firing positions and began to move out. Straggling over several hundred yards, the column began to advance once more, all the while fighting the rush and whirl of the warpstream that coursed around them, infiltrating every corner of the hulk, singing madly in their blood, whispering nightmares in their ears.

The mission had changed indeed. The mission had now been ground down to mere survival.

They travelled perhaps a mile in a straight line, though they walked twice that, and they descended some thousand feet before Brother Starn halted the column and called Calgar forward.

The Chapter Master stalked along the line accompanied by Drake and his honour guards, and found the quartet of Terminators deployed around an

enormous gateway which reared up hundreds of feet before them in the darkness like the frontage of a cathedral. Heavily ornate, but much broken, it was decorated with gothic ornamentation, smashed statuary and reams of deeply incised runes. This was genuine stone, not plasteel or ferrocrete; the gateway's massive blocks had been quarried out of the guts of a planet.

'I can analyse this material,' Drake said, examining a fragment in one hand, his stablights playing on it. 'I will not be able to narrow it down completely, but there are one or two of my retainers who can probably tell what sector it is from, given a little time.'

'Right now, I would settle for knowing what Segmentum it hails from,' Calgar said, staring up at the spectacle.

Beyond the gateway the space yawned out in a great womb of darkness. It smelled cleaner, and there were air currents moving through it. The ecology of the hulk was a baffling mystery; it had atmospheric anomalies which seemed to make no sense. After the moist warmth of the tunnels, Calgar registered a dramatic drop in temperature ahead; there were ice crystals floating through the gateway, which turned to droplets of liquid and trickled down the shining magnificence of his artificer battleplate. He was about to order Brother Starn's Terminators through the arch to scout the ground beyond the gateway, but thought better of it. The Terminators had been in the vanguard for long enough.

'Captain Galenus, send half of a line squad forward to scout out the area beyond the gateway. They will use maximum caution, and remain in close vox contact at all times. Execute at once.'

'Aye sir. Sergeant Gaden, you're up. One fireteam.'

Five Ultramarines trooped out into the chill darkness and disappeared. They had switched to preysight. One carried a flamer, the rest bolters.

'Brother Ulfius,' Calgar called up the Librarian, 'I want you, Inquisitor Drake and Magos Fane to cooperate, and see if you can decipher any of the inscriptions on this structure. It looks as though someone took a great deal of trouble to set it here, and I want to know why – and if it sheds any clues as to what lies before us.'

Brother Tersius took up position to the right of his sergeant, and the rest of his team spread out, ten feet between each Ultramarine. They walked slowly across the vast expanse of nothingness which opened out before them. It was dark, and the temperature had plummeted to well below freezing. The moisture in the air had frozen into sifting veils of ice crystals, and dropping down on the

Ultramarines were heavier flakes that built up grey on their armour; it was snowing.

Tersius looked up. The ceiling of the immense space above him could not be seen; it must be hundreds of yards away, and like the great dome of the Temple of Correction, the area it enclosed was of sufficient volume to create its own weather.

'Atmospheric controls are off in here,' Brother Darius said, hefting his flamer, the blue pilot light flickering under its muzzle. 'It's bitter as the Crown Glaciers.'

'Quiet,' Brother Sergeant Gaden admonished him. 'No chatter. Spread out.'

The snow crunched underfoot, and it grew lighter, a livid paleness with shrouded shapes scattered across it, like mounds. They stopped at one, and Sergeant Gaden scraped the snow from it with the edge of his gauntlet. There was sere yellow grass underneath, and below it, arid black soil.

'What in Throne is this place?' the sergeant murmured.

'Auspex is clear,' Brother Unser said. 'Nothing for two hundred yards. Nothing metallic, either, brother sergeant. We might as well be planetside.'

They moved on, leaving trails of dark prints in the snow, the ice accumulating on their armour. Tersius's temperature reading gave fifteen degrees of frost, and the farther they advanced, the colder it grew. He felt his battleplate creak around him as the ceramite cooled.

'Atmospherics improving,' Brother Darius said. 'Methane and sulphur levels dropping, carbon dioxide now within Imperium minimums. We could unhelm if we chose, and breathe good air.'

'Nothing is good about this place,' Brother Surus muttered. 'Can you feel it, brothers?'

They all could, though no one replied. They felt like insects creeping across a vast empty amphitheatre, and in the wide space of it they could feel the currents of the warp working on their blood, as Luna worked on the tides of Terra. The Chapter Master had been wrong-footed – they all knew it, though no one would admit such a thing openly. And now they were adrift in the warp, perhaps forever.

But it mattered not, so long as they held true to their brotherhood.

'Structure ahead,' Brother Unser said, consulting his hand-held auspex continually. It had greater range and sophistication than the sensors embedded in their autosenses. 'Fifteen yards, bearing six three.'

Sergeant Gaden bore off to the left, following the bearing, his bolter muzzle

nosing to left and right in his fists. ‘Arrowhead, wide spacing. Vox silence.’

They moved on, the squad sergeant at the apex of the formation, flamer on the left, the five Ultramarines moving with a stealth that seemed remarkable considering their size and weight. They made no more noise than an unburdened man, despite their armoured bulk. The auspex pinged in Brother Unser’s ear.

‘Contact,’ he said in a low murmur. ‘Dead ahead, forty yards.’

They could see little in the shifting snow. The moving air drew great towering curtains of glistening hoarfrost across their path, and it hissed slightly as it fell, adorning them with a layer of shining ice until their Ultramarines blue was almost hidden. They were grey, silent shadows, no more.

‘Hold fire,’ Sergeant Gaden said. He blinked on the company vox. ‘Captain, we are four hundred yards in. Vox optimal. Possible contact ahead. Wait out.’

A rune flashed in Gaden’s display in silent acknowledgement.

There were darker shapes ahead, a line of them. As tall as the Ultramarines who approached, they might have been nothing more than a serried line of staggered megaliths. Beyond them, there was an immense darkness, the loom of a structure of some sort rearing up tall as a cliff.

‘Guilliman’s blood,’ Brother Tersius said, startled into speech.

They were perhaps fifty feet away now, and the line of shadows had resolved themselves into a series of figures, half-buried in drifted snow.

They were Space Marines.

FOURTEEN

Magos Fane was running his clawed alloy hands over the stone of the gateway as though he could decipher its meaning through touch alone. Calgar stood behind him, flanked by his honour guards, and with him were Captain Galenus, Chaplain Murtorius, Librarian Ulfius and Inquisitor Drake. Just within the gateway, Starn's Terminators stood watch, storm bolters poised, and with them, Techmarine Salvator.

'Gaden's squad is four hundred yards in,' Galenus reported. His gauntleted fist tapped the grip of his plasma pistol where it was maglocked to his armour. 'A chamber vaster than any we have yet seen. It is winter in there, like the Crown Mountains at year's end.'

Calgar said nothing. He was watching the tech-priest and the inquisitor, each analysing the gateway inscriptions in their different ways. He reined in his impatience. He knew it was a fault of his, that desire to come to grips with things, the impulse to charge ahead. He had fought it his entire life. And now the knowledge that he had led his brothers to this pass seared a corner of his very soul.

'The stone is basalt, igneous rock from a volcanically active world,' Drake said, running the numbers on a hand-held cogitator slate handed to him by one of his retainers. The inquisitor had recovered from his earlier indisposition with admirable speed.

Calgar saw now the steel in the man, the ability to shrug off the calamity that had befallen them all. The inquisitor had kept his shrewd, sardonic mien intact as well as one of his own brethren might. He warmed to the fellow. Drake might be irritating, but he had the kind of cool courage even Calgar could respect.

‘Some three billion years old, quarried in the last ten thousand. By the residues I’m picking up, it has undergone warp translation hundreds of times. It registers with no known signatures in the Segmentum Ultima – nothing we have on file. But it does match a few from the Segmentum Obscurus.’ He looked up. ‘The closest match is archaic – the Dartaris system, not far from the Cadian Gate.’

‘And not far from the Eye of Terror,’ Chaplain Murtorius added grimly.

‘There are no Imperial installations in that system, and there have not been for thousands of years,’ Brother Ulfius said. He looked up at the gateway, the statues upon it broken and pitted. ‘This was deliberately done, this destruction. It is not the work of time – the heads of all the statuary have been broken off.’

‘A defilement then,’ Inquisitor Drake agreed. ‘I see what might be an Imperial aquila at the crux of the arch, though it’s hard to tell.’

‘Not Imperial,’ Calgar corrected him, staring hard. ‘That was once a skull in the middle, Drake, or I know nothing. This was an Adeptus Astartes aquila, the centrepiece of the whole arch. Our own kind built this thing, once upon a time.’

He thought of Tigurius’ findings in the Noctis Sanctorum. The Viridian Consuls were a Chapter of which the Imperium had almost no records remaining, and yet Brother Starn had found a helm of theirs here on *Fury*. Clearly, the hulk was tied into the fate of the Abyssal Crusade. And somehow the Adeptus Mechanicus had become embroiled in its millennia-old existence also. There were questions and riddles here that were baffling.

Momentarily, he wished that he had kept Brother Tigurius by his side. The Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines was one of the most potent psykers in the Imperium, and a master of historical lore. Calgar missed his counsel, his learning.

But it was bad enough that the Chapter Master was lost to the warp. For the Ultramarines to lose Tigurius also would have been a blow to rock the Chapter to its foundations.

No, he had made the right choice. Tigurius was where he ought to be, where he was needed most. Right now, Marneus Calgar and all those with him were as good as dead.

It was not a sentiment he would ever share with his brethren here on the hulk, but all logical analysis led to the same conclusion. The odds were that he and Fifth would share the fate of the Viridian Consuls and the other twenty-nine lost Chapters of the Abyssal Crusade. They were adrift in the warp, and it was unlikely that they would ever find a way out of it.

But that did not mean that they would stop trying. Even here, on the dark side

of the universe, their faith held, their oaths bound them.

He wondered if the Consuls had thought the same, and if so – for how long had they preserved their allegiance to the Emperor in the madness that had engulfed their Chapter?

'What in the Eye is something like this doing here?' Drake broke into his thoughts. 'It looks like it has been transplanted from some planetside installation.'

Chaplain Murtorius was looking closely at the mounded wreckage round the base of the structure, walking under it, Starn's Terminators making way for him. Rubble streaked with ice that continually melted and refroze lay around their feet. The Chaplain bent and retrieved a dripping fragment of debris. His skull helm dipped. His fist tightened on his crozius. 'Chapter Master.'

He tossed it to Calgar, who examined it in his turn. It was a stone-carved hand, and it grasped what might have been a bolter. A scroll was sculpted flowing from the muzzle of the weapon, and in good Gothic, the runes spelled *Imperator Fidelis*.

'Not words the Ruinous Powers would ever suffer to have uttered.'

'No.' Murtorius answered. The Bull seemed grieved. 'This was once a place revered by those who bore allegiance to the Emperor. I am sure of it. There is a piety here still, like the last echo of a song. Something terrible happened to those who raised this thing, my lord. I feel it in my bones.'

'The runic inscriptions above are later work, more crudely engraved,' Magos Fane said, leaning back and letting his limbs fold themselves back within his red robe. 'They are not in any tongue extant in the Imperium today.'

'It makes my skin crawl to look at them,' Murtorius said. 'I can damn near taste the taint that lies upon them. The inquisitor is right. This place was deliberately defiled.'

Calgar turned away from them and stepped through the gateway. Once again, he felt the impatience rising in him, the desire to confront whatever was at the heart of *Fury*. For all the subtlety of his mind, he wearied of the speculation. His fingers twitched in the mighty engines of destruction that were the Gauntlets of Ultramar. He longed to light up the mighty fists, and rend some charging enemy limb from limb.

And as he did, he wondered if the impatience and the anger were not wholly his own. There was an unreasoning aspect to them that disturbed him. As though some part of the warp had lit up the fires of his anger and was stoking them.

Throne forbid.

The high-velocity crack of bolter fire lit up his mind as it burst out, shattering the quiet, banishing all his doubts away.

Brother Tersius took up a firing position as Brother Sergeant Gaden examined the inert corpses that stood upright across their path. But though he covered his arc as he ought, he could not help but look across every now and again at Gaden and Unser – the second most senior of the squad – as they examined their dead brethren.

They were eight Adeptus Astartes in antique battleplate, unarmed, simply standing there frozen solid in close-packed drifts of mounded snow and ice. Tersius saw the bonding studs that dotted their armour, the Corvus helms which many of the Chapter veterans of the Ultramarines still sported. But the frozen figures had no power packs on their backs. They had stood here until their armour's power had run down, and then they had died, still standing, without so much as a knife between them.

It looked like an execution, but the strangest that Tersius had ever encountered. The gelid forms had experienced no violence; their armour was pocked by no bullet hole. It was as if they had simply opted to stand there and die.

Brother Sergeant Gaden was chipping ice from the pauldrons of one of the figures. He stared closely at the result, then Tersius saw his helm shake in puzzlement. He watched his own arc again, angry with himself for his own curiosity, for the snow that degraded the efficiency of his tactical readouts, for the entire foul structure in which his company was now buried. He felt oddly like pulling the trigger of his bolter, merely to have the weapon jump in his hand. To see the fire and light of the muzzle leaping up in his grasp. He blinked inside his helm, fighting the impulse, ashamed of himself for almost having succumbed to it.

And then he saw the shape moving slowly towards him through the shifting curtain of the falling snow. It was large, by human standards and it had an odd, crabwise movement to it. His aiming reticule shot up in his display and automatically locked on at the same time as his eye took it in, and he shifted the muzzle of his bolter slightly to bring it to bear.

'Possible target, on the move, eighty-six degrees. Watching,' he said quietly on the squad vox.

His brothers were lying in the snow on either side. At once, Gaden and Unser dropped to the ground.

'Hold for my word,' Sergeant Gaden said. 'We are not to engage unless it is

unavoidable.'

The pressure to fire grew in Brother Tersius as he watched the shadow flounder towards them out of the drifts. It disturbed him, this sudden urge to throw up his years of training, his long experience of war. He had seen some neophytes do so in their first battle, but he had years of combat behind him, and he shook his head in his helm, baffled by the impulse, beating it down.

Throne, guide me. Emperor, watch over me. Great Guilliman, let me do thy will, here, now and always.

The prayer steadied him. He drew a breath, and watched as a fellow Space Marine limped into his targeting array, the reticule landing scarlet on him. One of his own – a brother of his own Adeptus. Tersius bit down on the glad laugh that filled his chest.

And, again, he found himself distrusting the emotion – it was as though there were something outside himself leaning on levers which sparked up the key reactions of his psyche. It took all his training to beat them down. He breathed out, steadied his aim, and waited for orders, praying again as he had not prayed since he had first donned battleplate.

The strange Space Marine limped closer. He was dragging one leg, and cradled one arm in the other as though it were injured. His helm was half shattered on his head, the muzzle broken off and dangling by a few wires. His armour was a bleared green colour, faded and pocked with holes and scars, and rimmed with red, the red of fresh-gutted intestines. On one pauldron there was a symbol, hard to make out, but there was a sword emblazoned in the middle of it.

'Brother,' Sergeant Gaden called out, 'hold there and speak to us. Identify – company and Chapter.'

The unknown Space Marine did not halt, but continued to lurch towards them. He let go of his injured arm, and as it fell free of his grasp so the vambrace that covered it fell off into the snow, revealing a glistening, suckered tentacle which writhed up like the head of a snake, dripping green ichor.

'He is no brother of ours,' Unser spat.

The approaching figure raised his shattered helm and a tongue licked out of it, a foot long and black. From the steaming hole which might have been a mouth a high, piercing moan issued, one that made Brother Tersius' blood run cold as it pulsed through his twin hearts. There was in that sound such despair, such lost hopelessness, and a hatred beyond madness.

'Abomination!' Brother Sergeant Gaden cried, and he opened fire, the bolter leaping up in his fists, the muzzle-flare of the weapon illuminating his snow-

covered armour.

A five-round burst peppered the mutant Space Marine's armour, two rounds whining as they glanced off, but the other three went home, in through the shattered helm. The head of the creature was blown to pieces, the black tongue flung, severed, through the air.

The thing's tentacle came up and touched the place where its head had been. It limped forward one step, two.

'Brother Darius,' Gaden said. 'Cleanse this thing.'

'Gladly.' Brother Darius stood up and aimed his flamer. The jet of promethium spurted out in a stream which thickened as it drew clear of the weapon, bright and boiling. The fire of it slammed into the target, and the headless foe now was a pillar of bright flame, writhing. It staggered forward a few more steps, and then toppled into the snow, casting droplets of burning promethium across the frozen ground. At last its feeble thrashings stopped. There was no sound but for the crackle of the sinking flames.

Something sounded out, high above the heads of the Ultramarines. A piercing wail which echoed even through the falling snow, and seemed to be recast and repeated by the unseen roof of the immense chamber high above them. But it was not one voice alone. Others joined it now in a savage chorus, and the collective keening thickened, becoming a howl which might almost have had words in it, before descending into a bellowing snarl.

'I have contacts on auspex,' Brother Unser warned. 'Multiple contacts two hundred yards to our front. Brothers, we have company, and they are moving in fast.'

'Captain,' Sergeant Gaden called up the company vox, 'One enemy down, and many others converging on my location. We are withdrawing to the entry point, and may need support.' He paused, and the disgust was thick in his voice. 'The Great Enemy is here.'

'Acknowledged, sergeant. Pull back, and we will come forward to meet you. Brother Starn and reinforcements are on their way.'

'I have seventy-five contacts, a hundred yards out and closing,' Brother Unser said.

'Pull back by twos,' Gaden told his squad. 'I will cover the first move.'

Brother Tersius climbed to his feet and backed away along with Brother Surus. His aiming reticule was trying to latch on to targets out in the falling snow. There were two dozen in his arc alone. Some broke forward of the rest, dark shapes he could barely make out. He loosed a series of controlled bursts,

relishing the feel of the bolter coming to life in his hand.

Another great bloom of promethium as Brother Darius laid down a wall of fire to cover their retreat. The five Ultramarines withdrew slowly, snapping off disciplined bursts of fire.

'Enemy still closing fast. Let us check them, brothers,' Sergeant Gaden said calmly. 'Stand fast, pick three targets each, make sure they go down.'

They stood there and fired from the hip, long bursts, their bolters keyed into the aiming auspex of their power armour. There were screams out there in the snow-choked darkness, and now Tersius could see several figures floundering on fire through the drifts as Brother Darius set them ablaze.

And now there was return fire. Tracer whipped out of the snow towards them in bright streaks, bolter rounds. A burst took Brother Surus full across the chest, and he grunted, falling to one knee, still firing. At once, Tersius ran over to his wounded battle-brother, and stood over him, changing a magazine with blurringly quick movements before opening up again. To his front, three figures came thrashing out of the dark – big looming figures with red lights for eyes, uttering that eerie howl as they charged.

They were Space Marines, but something had taken them and twisted their anatomy into a degraded nightmare. They had tentacles for arms, horns poking up through their helms and what looked like slapping appendages of black, dripping meat hanging from their shoulders and waist; these rose up and spat at him with tiny fanged mouths. They came howling, reaching for him with the dilating suckers of their corrupted flesh, and Tersius felt a wave of disgust as he let loose on full automatic, an entire magazine of the heavy self-propelled 20mm bolter rounds, which slammed into them and blasted chunks of flesh and ceramite from their bodies.

But that did not stop them. They fell, got up, and tottered forward again. A bolter round smashed into Tersius's left shoulder-guard, sending amber runes lighting up in his helm display. His left arm stiffened at once, and his armour sent analgesics racing into his bloodstream. The adrenaline sang in his blood. He stepped forward in a black fury and brought the muzzle of his bolter down square upon the skull of one horned monstrosity that was roaring in his face, breaking off a chunk of the noisome helm, snapping a curved horn and splattering curd-grey brains into the air. In the same moment he whipped out his gladius and with a bright sweep of the wicked blade he decapitated the thing entirely, booting it aside.

But others were reaching for him. His armour smoked as their tentacles

fastened upon it, the paint blistering, steam rising from the seared ceramite. They were splattering him with acid, spitting it in his face. His helm display shorted out for a second, then came back online. He chopped and stabbed with the gladius, fired his bolter with the muzzle pressed close to his attackers' foul flesh, blasted them clear, and stepped back, gasping.

Brother Surus was gone, his bolter lying in the snow, still smoking. His hand was still on the pistol-grip. The rest of the squad were surrounded, fighting with gladius and bolt pistol, struggling in a crowd of the enemy.

Another flare of promethium as Brother Darius was smashed onto his back and fired up at his attackers, enmeshing them in a greasy, searing cloud of flame. They were embroiled in a murderous hand-to-hand fight now, and they were about to be overwhelmed. Tersius snarled as he fought. He heard Sergeant Gaden's voice bellow '*Guilliman!*' and he answered it.

Tersius was tripped up, a tentacle taking him by the ankle and flipping him off his feet. He could smell burning metal within his armour. An Adeptus Astartes helm was pushed close to his own, but the face grille was gone, and in its place was a wet gleam of fangs snapping at him. They fastened onto his head, and he heard the ceramite groan. He punched it away, breaking the fangs, feeling the shards of them break off in his knuckles.

And then the great weight of his foe was flung off him, and a massive grip hauled him to his feet.

'Up, brother. We must make some space here.'

It was the Chapter Master himself. Marneus Calgar stood there flanked by the Terminators of First Company. He strode ahead of Tersius and opened up a deadly torrent of fire from his storm bolters. The Terminators joined in, laying down a stream of destruction that blasted the enemy backwards, tearing them asunder. Calgar's fists were glowing, the Gauntlets of Ultramar alight. Tersius saw his Chapter Master lift one of the wriggling foe into the air and rip him apart, throwing the sundered halves into the faces of the enemy.

'*Macragge*!' Calgar was roaring, and the ancient cry was taken up. Tersius scrambled to his feet, reloaded, and saw that more squads of Fifth had come up, thirty or forty of his battle brethren advancing in extended line, firing as they came. A great rush of joy flooded his hearts. The Ultramarines advanced inexorably, tossing out frag grenades into the ranks of the foe, then following up with reams of heavy bolter fire. Tersius saw the bright lances of melta-guns and heard the harsh pop of missile launchers as the Devastators of Ninth joined in.

The enemy line was torn to pieces, engulfed by bright explosions, lit up with

gouts of blazing promethium and then chopped down by heavy bolter volleys, the tracer scything out in great shining arcs. The Ultramarines followed up, squad by squad, a tactical checkerboard which swept forward, bowling the enemy backwards.

But those they fought were not simple cultists, or brutish orks, or even the subtle eldar. The Ultramarines were combating an enemy that had once been like themselves, with the same vicious stubbornness, the same maniacal courage, and genetically enhanced forms that were still clad in what had once been Adeptus Astartes power armour.

The enemy gave ground, but did so grudgingly, fighting for every foot, and rushing forward every now and again to take advantage of imperfections in the Ultramarines formations. They did not heed their own casualties, but fought with the daemonic energy of things possessed. The only thing that made them more vulnerable than Calgar's brethren was the insane craving to come to grips with their foe. They had been warped and twisted into creatures which excelled at close-quarter fighting, and when they managed to come in near to the Ultramarines line, they would leap upon their enemy and then the acid-drenched tentacles, the snapping fangs, the horn-frapped appendages that festooned them would come into play, deadly and effective.

Two and three of them at a time would burst out of their own ranks and sacrifice their lives to bring down a single Ultramarine. Tersius, advancing to Calgar's left, saw half a dozen of his brethren go down in this fashion. The shining gladii of the Ultramarines would go up and down in murderous swings which chopped the attackers to pieces, but by the time they had been flung back, they would have done their work, and an Ultramarine would lie torn and smoking on the frozen ground, the acid scars etched across his armour, his innards spread far and wide in a dark steaming stain upon the snow.

The company banner bearer, Gerd Ameronn, had unsheathed *Warspite*, his ancient powerblade, and he strode into the ranks of the enemy and hacked them to pieces with a ferocity that matched theirs. Beside him was Chaplain Murtorius, his crozius spitting lightning, battering the enemy apart. Around them a blue crackling fire was kindled, burning the enemy from the feet up, as Librarian Ulfius waded in, protecting his brothers, hurling the enemy back with blunt waves of psychic force. The very snow seemed to kindle in that quarter of the fight, lighting up in blue and yellow flame, searing the Ultramarines' armour black, making of their foes living torches that shrieked and writhed and flailed against the disciplined waves of fire which were hosing them down.

Finally, they broke. It was not a rout, more a bitter acknowledgement of defeat. They retreated by squads, covered by bolter fire and streams of promethium. A pulsing wall of flame was flung round them as they fell back, and they were still tactically astute enough to cover their retreat with frag grenades, volleys of bolter fire and, here and there, the long streak of a plasma burst, blinding bright, carving smoking furrows in the snow. But in the rearguard of their retreat the largest champions of their kind stood unbeaten, falling back step by step with unbalanced rabid hatred shining out of their eyes. They could be seen rallying their own – preparing for a last assault.

Marneus Calgar and his Honour Guards charged into this rearguard, scattering them, the axes of Brothers Ohtar and Morent flashing bloody as they rose and fell, and to the right, Brother Starn's Terminators burst into the thinned enemy line like a thunderbolt, their armour on fire as they fought, the power fists they bore sending the enemy reeling back in shattered knots of broken, staggering wounded.

'Hold,' Marneus Calgar's voice came over the vox. 'Hold here. Single shots. Launchers, give me a salvo.'

Three missiles streaked over the heads of the Ultramarines and slammed into the enemy rearguard, destroying all remnant of formation, the explosions fountaining up in bursts of fire and earth and tortured ice. The last of the enemy champions fell, his helm blown off, his face a tortured grey skull that had barely any shred of humanity, baying defiance to the last.

More tracer spat out in long bright lines. But the meat of the thing was done. The enemy had been decimated, and only a few pulled free of the slaughter, still snarling hate, disappearing towards the shadow of the immense structure that loomed tall as a hill in the falling snow to their rear. Behind them, they left at least eighty of their own dead, and some thirty Ultramarines still standing.

FIFTEEN

‘What casualties have we taken?’ Calgar asked, shaking the clotted viscera from his fingers with a grimace.

Apothecary Philo ran his own gauntleted fingers along the bloodstained drill of his narthecium. ‘Heavy enough for such a short fight, my lord. Eight dead, seventeen wounded to varying degrees. I have recovered the gene-seed of six of the fallen. The other two were too badly burned to be of use. Acid.’ The last word was laced with disgust.

Calgar gestured to the huge structure which loomed dark ahead of them.

‘We will call up the rest of the company and move up into that building, clear it, and then take stock. I want no weapons or ammunition left behind, not a single round. We will need all of it before we are done.’ He paused. ‘If any of the enemy’s munitions are still usable, then they must be gathered also. Now is not the time to be worried about what we put in our bolters. Captain Galenus?’

The Ultramarines captain came over the vox. ‘*Aye, my lord*.’

‘Bring up the rest of the column, grav-sleds and all. Fane’s skitarii will provide the rearguard. We are moving on. Join us at best speed.’

‘*Acknowledged.*’

‘Brother Starn, lead out. Sergeant Greynius, you will take Third and Fourth squads and police the battlefield. First and Fifth, on me. Devastators will go from here and join with Galenus as he comes up.’

They moved out again, striding past the burning plumes of smoke that rose into the dropping snow, passing by the torn corpses of their foes and the bodies of their brothers. Their formations were as perfect as though practising on Martial Square in Magna Civitas, Calgar noted, though the squads were understrength

now, and many of those moving up with him were wounded, slowing the overall pace. But those who were still alive would heal, given time and Brother Philo's skill.

Calgar looked his own wargear over. The ancient battleplate was scored and splotched with acid burns, but most of the damage was little more than cosmetic. Whatever technical savant had created his armour, back in the misty years of the Chapter's past, had been an artisan of genius. The Iron Halo the Chapter Master bore had also mitigated the worst effects of the splashing acid.

'First Company, take the vanguard. Make ingress of the building ahead and report,' he said.

'*Acknowledged,*' Brother Starn replied, as nonchalant as ever. The four Terminators went ahead of the main body, their storm bolters still hissing as the snow landed on the hot metal. Now and then a pale blue ribbon of light would pulse around their power fists.

'*Chapter Master,*' Starn said a few minutes later, '*the structure is immense, a roofless ruin. But the walls are more or less intact. It appears to be some kind of cathedral, at a guess. No sign of the enemy. They have pulled out. The far end of the chamber is now in view, perhaps half a mile beyond.*' A pause. '*There are things here Inquisitor Drake might be interested in.*'

'Take cover there and watch the far approach,' Calgar told him. 'On our way.'

The forward elements of the Ultramarines came up to the tall walls of the building. It soared up in front of them, a maze of gothic spires and buttresses, empty windows lined with broken glass, at least two hundred feet high and a quarter of a mile wide. An enormous broken gate lay at the top of a sweep of stone steps, all slippery with congealed ice. On the gate was an emblem, inlaid in shining adamantium plates that time had not tarnished. The ultima sigil of their own Chapter, bisected by a two-handed sword and flanked by stylised, wing-like flames. Calgar stared at it, disturbed. Below the emblem were the words *Fidelitas ad Mortuum*, picked out in blackened silver that was inlaid with winking green jade.

Faithful unto death.

Was this their motto, the lost brethren of the Viridian Consuls? If so, it was a hollow irony. For a similar emblem had been on the shoulder guards of many of the monstrosities he had just killed.

Similar, but not the same. On their armour, the enemy had reversed the sigil, so that it formed the ancient Omega sign, which signified the end of all things.

But this ultima element – did it mean that the survivors of this lost Chapter

were also sons of Guilliman – their own primarch?

The thought filled him with mingled disgust and grief. For a while, back in the fight, he had been able to set free his rage, to let it run loose in glad abandon. He had fought the enemy with a joy he had not known in combat for a long time. A primitive fury. Now, he felt as cold as the snow which mounded up in grey drifts about the broken cathedral. This had been their sacred place, this majestic ruin. They had brought it with them when they had elected to try and cleanse their name in the Abyssal Crusade.

Calgar looked at the ceiling of the immense chamber far above, gauging the dimensions. With a sudden flash of insight, he thought he knew now what it was.

They were walking in the vast, hollowed-out hull of a Space Marine battle-barge.

The expedition reassembled within the walls of the lost cathedral, and set up a perimeter there while Sergeant Greynius saw to it that ammo was redistributed, Brother Salvator effected repairs to those whose power armour had been damaged in the fighting, and Apothecary Philo tended the wounded.

Inquisitor Drake joined Calgar as the Chapter Master watched over his brethren, turning over in his mind the cluttered blueprint that Magos Fane had found back in the tunnels.

'So, there is no doubt of it at last,' the inquisitor said. 'The Consuls turned to Chaos.'

'Not all of them,' Calgar told him, thinking of the eight dead Adeptus Astartes standing stark in the snow. 'Some at least elected to die with their faith intact. And what is more, they were allowed to do so.'

'Yes, I saw them. A pitiful way for the Emperor's Chosen to die.'

'Better that than turn to the Ruinous Powers,' Calgar said, though he had to agree. For himself, he would have fought to the end. There was no despair so great that it would ever make him lay down his arms. He would fight on alone against all the powers of the warp if it came to that. And he trusted that his brothers would do the same.

Something else had made those Space Marines stand there and wait for death – some betrayal so foul that it had sapped their will to fight.

'The Consuls were sent here on the word of a heretic,' Drake went on. 'Their name and their honour destroyed, the favour of the Emperor withdrawn. Perhaps that in itself was enough to break their faith. It is one of the saddest episodes in Imperium history.'

‘There are many events which vie for that title,’ Calgar said wryly. ‘You are surprisingly compassionate, for one of your Order, Drake.’

‘I hate to see excellence wasted. Imagine, my lord – thirty entire Chapters of your Adeptus, lost to the Eye of Terror. It was a great defeat, and a betrayal which ranks high in infamy. The *Astartes Praeses* – twenty Chapters entrusted with watching over the Eye of Terror, were broken apart by the loss of so many of their own. Thanks to the counsels of the accursed Saint Basillius, the whole defence of the sectors around the Eye, and what is now called the Cadian Gate, was wrecked, leading to the perpetual state of siege which exists in the region to this day.’

‘Warp Storm Dionys, and its legacy. I have scanned the records. Tigurius sent them to me.’

‘Basillius was a major figure in the Age of Redemption, as it is called. He was given overall command of several Space Marine Chapters, and in the wake of the warp storm he decreed that the home worlds of those Chapters which it had passed be rendered up for judgement. Thirty Chapters were deemed to have been corrupted by the warp, and were ordered to undertake the Abyssal Crusade in penance. It was a death sentence. Only one re-emerged from the Eye, centuries later. The Vorpal Swords. They denounced Basillius, though he was long dead, and his evil was finally recognised for what it was. But for all the others, it was much too late.’

‘Believe the word of a false Saint over that of the Adeptus Astartes, and that is what happens,’ Calgar snapped, unwilling to be lectured in history by the inquisitor. ‘According to the records I have viewed, your own Ordos approved that blasphemy. Basillius worked hand in glove with the Inquisition.’

Drake bowed slightly. ‘I like to think if I had been alive at the time, I would have asked better questions. And stood over the truth of the answers.’ He sounded bitter, and Calgar believed him.

Drake collected himself. ‘But if we may return to more recent history, my lord, you will be pleased to know that Magos Fane has re-established vox links with his missing colleagues. They are on their way to rejoin us even now.’

‘Did they find anything worth their trouble?’

‘The magos refuses to say. If they were returning having recovered an STC I am sure we would hear of his triumph, so I doubt it.’

‘All that is meaningless now,’ Calgar said quietly. He looked up at the ruins that surrounded him. Once, this had been a structure to inspire awe, to engender faith – much like the Temple of Correction on Macragge.

For a terrible moment, he thought he could imagine that great dome broken, ruinous, left to the elements and forgotten, with mighty Guilliman's bones lying at the heart of it, mounded in dust.

That would never be. Not so long as a single Ultramarine lived.

There is no need of temples, a faint whisper went in his mind, like a scarlet thread strung taut. *Our deeds are worship enough*.

He shook his head, banishing the gossamer voice. 'As soon as we are organised, and Magos Fane's party has rejoined us, we will move on,' he said roughly. 'The last attack was a mere probe. The next will be better coordinated. And the longer we wait, the heavier will be the odds. We must go deeper, Drake. We must smash a way to the heart of this place. It is the only way we will ever have a chance of surviving it.'

'Agreed. But we need better intelligence. My lord, my men are well trained in subversion and infiltration. They are not Adeptus Astartes, but they are veterans, formidable fighters of their kind.' The inquisitor looked up at the towering Chapter Master. 'I intend to send out a scouting party ahead of your own brethren. In fact I would like to lead it.'

'Getting bored of bringing up the rear, Drake?'

The inquisitor stiffened. 'I would have you remember, Chapter Master, that we are, so to speak, on my territory now. I have spent decades cataloguing and destroying all aspects of Chaos. I flatter myself that I have a knowledge of the workings of the Great Enemy that rivals your own.' He tilted his helm to one side. 'Perhaps it even surpasses it.' Calgar sensed the smile in Drake's voice.

'Well, you do not lack humility.'

'Self-deprecation has its limits.'

'Very well. But let us agree that there are no sidelines – no secret agendas. Find me a way to the heart of the hulk, Drake, and make sure it is a path we can all follow.'

The inquisitor bowed again, snow sizzling on the ionised lenses of his helm. 'I shall leave in a few minutes, vox channel Orion.'

'I do not need to tell you to be careful, do I, Drake?'

'We are facing warriors who were once of your Adeptus,' the inquisitor said gravely. 'Debased, corrupted, but still formidable. I shall not underestimate them, never fear. I have faced their like before, as have you.'

'Too many times.'

Calgar watched him go. His men followed him off without a word, and the little group climbed over the half-wrecked end wall of the cathedral nave and then

disappeared into the falling snow.

The Ultramarines Chapter Master looked again at the ruined walls around him, thought of the faith they represented, the immense labour it must have taken to set them here. The Consuls had not been corrupted, they had not broken their oaths – not until they had been sent to their doom.

He bowed his head. It was his mission now to destroy them, these lost brothers who were now the worst of all enemies. He hated them. But in his hearts, there was room for a fragment of pity, also.

The missing Adeptus Mechanicus personnel rejoined them soon after. They were a skitarii short – one apparently had fallen into a pit too deep for hope of recovery.

The party had found little of interest, Magos Fane told Calgar, and the scrapcode that had been infesting the binharic aether around them seemed to have receded. The Dark Mechanicus was content to confine itself to the upper levels of *Fury*. It had engaged Seventh Company, been repulsed, and in the wake of the translation, had withdrawn.

There was more to it than that, Calgar suspected. He did not quite like Magos Fane's absent manner, as if the tech-priest were only giving him half his attention. Nor did he care for the magos' quick dismissal of his heretek kin. But there were too many other things to occupy his thoughts for him to dwell much upon it. The upper levels were behind them now – a sterner task lay ahead in the bowels of *Fury*.

He wondered especially about Brother Fortunus. The Dreadnought would have heard his evacuation order, but would he have had time to make it out? Calgar had ordered Seventh Company to flee the hulk, and Fortunus belonged to Fifth. But Fortunus had been stationed closer to the surface, above a pit he could not negotiate – wholly separated from his company. Calgar had reached out, in the past hours, to no avail. All vox links to the upper levels of the hulk were gone.

He hoped Brother Fortunus had made it out. The hope preyed on his mind, one more thread amid a thousand others.

Calgar clenched his fists. Ever since he had arrived on the hulk he had felt that his normal thought processes were being slowed, prescribed. As though some evanescent force, too nebulous to be grasped, were at work to confuse him. He was missing things, he was sure of it, but the realisation of that fact did not mean that he could refute it. And the anger which burned steady at his core was part of the problem. He knew that too.

Within an hour, the column was ready to move on again. Brother Starn led out, followed by Calgar, his honour guards and Librarian Ulfius. Then came Galenus and the main body of Fifth. The Adeptus Mechanicus and their cargo sleds brought up the rear. On the sleds now were six sets of empty power armour which had been stripped from dead Ultramarines. Their bodies had been laid in a row in the nave of the cathedral and then set alight with promethium fire, as Chaplain Murtorius intoned a *Te Deum* above the burning corpses. Some rituals had to be maintained, even in straits as desperate as these.

It was by the flickering flames of this pyre that the Ultramarines left the great ruin, and all the while the snow continued to fall silently upon them, mixed with the drifting ashes of their fallen brothers.

<Enhance protective ritual Ansepic two nine. Implement.>

<Influx of data overflow. Ritual inadequate.>

<Reboot warding program. Isolate infected bioware. Shut down main system and ignite backup. Prepare for data dump. Memory erasure prepared. Isolation sequence commences.>

Magos Fane walked along amid his followers, leaning on his cog-headed staff of office, his scarlet robe powdered white with snow. He had no features to speak of that could give away his thoughts, nor did his bionic limbs falter as they propelled him onwards. But inside his cybernetically bonded mind, there was a struggle beating as violent as any he had ever known.

<Adjunct Alt-seven will elucidate downloaded data and aid in isolation of infected logi-stack.>

<Alt-seven, obey.>

<Alt-seven, respond.>

<Magos, Alt-seven presents his reprogramming for data analysis. See the newly forged pathways. Observe the enhanced efficiency of informational relay. Cogitational power is enhanced by eighty-six per cent. Memory is expanded by two point seven million terabytes. Optimisation of current bioware exceeds former parameters by a factor of two point four. See, magos.>

<Alt-seven will quarantine newly acquired data and optimisation programs at once. Main stack is to be shut down pending holy maintenance and purge. All warding rituals are to be re-established.>

<Alt-seven will comply. ... But *see*, magos...>

They came to the far end of the massive cathedral-chamber at last, and here the wall of it reared up a mile high, with a great rent torn through the middle. It was

possible to see now that the chamber walls were the hull of a starship, the ablative armour lying in mounds all around them, along with staggered piles of cabling, rat's-nests of tangled conduits and masses of smashed plasteel girders that stood up like the ribs of a vast skeleton, three hundred feet high.

'*Chapter Master,*' Drake said over the vox. '*There are a series of power relays leading off to your left, some forty-eight degrees. Follow them downwards. We are approximately a mile and a half ahead of you. No sign of the enemy. There are a lot of ship systems embedded in the substructure, and all are now active and running. Environmental and gravitic controls for the most part. I see no sign of overwatch cogitators.*'

'Acknowledged, inquisitor,' Calgar said. 'Vox is optimal. We will follow your trail. If you meet resistance, do not attempt to fight through it. Exfiltrate at once and rejoin the main body.'

'*I will exercise my own judgement, Lord Calgar. Drake out.*'

The column found itself back in the maze of tunnels once more. The temperature rose, and moisture dripped off the armour of the Space Marines as the snow which had accumulated on them melted. The air was thicker, and radiation levels had spiked. Somewhere not too much deeper, a drive system of some sort was operating, and it was running hot, leaking radiation into its surroundings. The readings grew as they advanced.

They had been descending steadily for some hours when Brother Ulfius suddenly tensed, and stood stock-still.

'My lord,' he said quietly. 'I sense something.'

'What is it?' Calgar demanded.

Magos Fane came striding up the column, his artificial legs eating up the distance in seconds.

'Chapter Master, my adjuncts have detected a sudden upsurge in the hulk's binharic activity. The drives have now powered up to full capacity and the Geller field has been strengthened. It is my opinion–' he stopped. 'Can you not feel it?' he asked softly.

'He's right,' Brother Ulfius said. 'The immaterium is... thinning – we are pushing at the envelope of its existence. I can feel the hammering of it. The warp claws at *Fury*, and the hulk is fighting through it, trying to break free.'

'We are about to re-enter normal space,' Calgar surmised. On the vox he said, 'Brothers, prepare for warp translation. Drake, do you read?'

'*I was about to inform you. Radiation levels in the lower levels are now hazardous. If they rise much further they will be too much even for our armour.*

The hulk will translate in the next few minutes.'

'Stand fast, and give me a status report once it is done.'

'*My lord, in courtesy I will do so.*' Drake sounded as though he were biting back an angrier retort. Phlegmatic as he was, he did not appreciate taking orders, not even from the Lord of Macragge. Calgar smiled inside his helm. He liked this man, not that he would ever show it. As an inquisitor, Drake held rank close to his own and was no subordinate, but he did not stand on protocol the way others of his kind did. It made him oddly effective.

And then he felt it himself. The onset of the translation, the currents of the warp picking up in tempo, shuddering through his bloodstream, bringing a glow of pain to his temples.

The entire structure around him, the enormous crushing mass of the hulk, seemed to suddenly bear down, to close in and squeeze his perception into a narrow pinpoint of pain.

It passed in a few seconds, but raised the beat of his two hearts until they thundered in his massive chest. Looking around, it seemed for a moment that Librarian Ulfius had moved hundreds of yards away, and was an attenuated silhouette glowing with blue light. The magos elongated into a leaning beanpole of scarlet, the gleam of his alloy knuckles each a tiny sun as they gripped his cog-headed staff.

Calgar saw his own brethren as mere stumps of shadow, hundreds of feet below his gaze, and looking down he saw that he, too had been stretched beyond rational perception, his feet as far away as though he were looking through the wrong end of a binocular lens. It lasted only the blink of an eye, a heartbeat, but the effect made him briefly gag. He bit down on the pain and nausea, this time disdaining the analgesics his battleplate wished to inoculate him with, and stood stone-still until the thing had gone, like a dark cloud passing over, and then it was done.

But something was not right. Though the world seemed a rational place again, and all three dimensions now stood in their proper place, he could still feel the currents of the warp, faint now, but ever-present. The hulk had undergone a translational shift, but they were not yet in real space, not entirely.

'Brother Ulfius,' Calgar said, 'tell me what you sense.' The Librarian ought to have some idea of what had just happened.

'We are in something approaching the void, my lord, but we are still so close to the warp that its effects remain. I have not felt this before. It is as though we were balanced between the two.'

‘A border,’ Calgar said.

‘Yes, something like that.’

‘I know where we are,’ Magos Fane said. His voice was dull – different somehow. Were it possible, Calgar would have said that the tech-priest was utterly weary, like a man exhausted by hard labour.

‘I have been in such a place before, many years ago on another mission for my Adeptus. These conditions correspond to those which exist on the rim of the Eye of Terror. The hulk has returned to its origins.’

Calgar absorbed this. If it were true, then the translation had taken them across half the galaxy in an astonishingly short time. And it had placed them on the edge of ruin.

SIXTEEN

Brother Fortunus let the last remnants of the translation wash over him. He barely registered it in an organic sense, for there was little that was organic remaining to him. The body of the Ultramarines captain that he had been was now a foetal husk cocooned within the sarcophagus of the mighty war engine that stood guard in the access tunnel near the surface of *Fury*. A Mark IV Castraferrum-pattern Dreadnought, some thirteen feet tall and weighing over a dozen tonnes.

His original orders had been to stand here, and he would do so now until he was told otherwise. When the evacuation order for Seventh had been given, himself included in it, he had tried to obey, hard though it was to walk away from his brothers trapped deep in the core of *Fury* – even in his previous life, he had always followed his orders to the letter. But he had been too slow. By the time he had marched to the surface entrance of the tunnel, the last Thunderhawk was already soaring into the void. All vox frequencies had died with the departure of the fleet from close orbit.

He was here to stay, like his Chapter Master far below. The only useful thing left for him to do was to follow his last instructions to the letter.

And so he stood here now in the darkness and the dust-tainted thin air of the hulk, waiting for what was to come.

There was movement in the tunnel leading up to the surface. He knew what it was he was facing. He felt no fear – even alone. He had not known it as a captain of the Adeptus Astartes and it was even more foreign to him now, encased in the massive hull which had become his own body.

He loved his Chapter, and he loved his brothers in it. He had not been dead so

long as to forget them, and he knew that he was lucky in that. There had been no long, slow sleep for him, before an awakening to a world that had changed beyond recognition. The battle brethren he had commanded in life were still here, still needed him, and he would lie in ashes before he let them down.

The Codex spoke of loyalty as one of the great binding forces of the Imperium, perhaps the greatest, and Brother Fortunus, who had once been captain of Fifth Company, had no quarrel with that.

So when the enemy came advancing down the tunnel that he occupied, swift in their arrogance, moving fast with little thought as to what might lie ahead, he planted the splayed feet of the great war engine he inhabited on the plating beneath him, took stock of the tactical readouts that lit up his mind, and uttered a swift prayer to the Emperor, and to Roboute Guilliman, his long-distant genetic father.

Into thy hands, I commend my spirit.

Then he let them come close, and opened fire.

The skitarii burned up first, a whole maniple of them chopped to pieces by the storm bolter in the palm of his left hand. He laid down a barrier of fire from his flamer, then shifted location as the Codex taught, backing up the tunnel fifty yards, in time to avoid the frag grenades and the following missiles from the sagitarii. He felt the concussion as they went off, as a man might feel the wind on his bare skin, and held fire in the smoke and the billowing dust, knowing that their auspex must be as blind as his own. When the melta-gun streaked out its beam of molten annihilation he was already twenty yards beyond, backing up steadily. He threw out a couple of heavy smoke grenades from his launchers, then waited. The seconds ticked past.

There is no courage without honour. There is no honour that can be bought without courage.

The tunnel he was in creaked and shifted under his great weight. Sometimes it was almost possible to forget that the hulk was not an asteroid, complete of itself, but a mere conglomeration of broken ships. It was fragile, in a sense. It groaned and moved the way an ancient wooden vessel might, sailing on the seas of old Terra. It had endured for thousands of years, but that did not mean that it was entirely stable. Brother Fortunus factored that into his tactical appreciation, and took up his second position.

A noise ahead, the rattle of tracks on the plating of the floor, like heavy vehicles. The auspex reached out and was largely foiled by the silken metal dust

that choked the air, but for a second it managed to light up an image of things moving that were broad and heavy, their weight creaking the deckplates of the tunnel.

Brother Fortunus crouched, his engine stacks smoking at his back, and gleaned what he could from the tactical readout. The tunnel could take only one of these bulky vehicles at a time.

Create a chokepoint. Use it to maximise the killing zone.

He charged forward, moving at all the speed he could muster, twelve tonnes of heavy metal now accelerating to the speed of a running man, the energy levels required of the manoeuvre sending amber sigils all across his sight. Just before impact, the dust cleared enough to let him see a tracked vehicle surmounted by what might have been a humanoid-shaped torso – a kataphron of the Adeptus Mechanicus. He slammed into it at full tilt, his left hand – a claw almost a yard wide – closing on the head and torso, and his right coming up with the flamer poised within its claw to loose a billowing jet of flame beyond.

The crash shunted the kataphron back on its tracks for five yards, metal shrieking upon metal. Brother Fortunus' whole weight was on the Mechanicus beast; he felt the snap and slump as its suspension gave under him. His left hand ripped into the armoured torso that surmounted it, and he felt the pop and snap of bones and flesh breaking, even through the grinding shriek of the broken armour that encased its frame.

He rose up, straightening from the wreck, and with him came the torn-free organic remnants of the creature. He crushed them in his clawed fists, tossed them aside, felt the searing burn of arc-rifle fire on his armour, and bending, he took the entire caterpillar-tracked base of his dead enemy and reared it up on its stern. He pushed it in front of him like a great shield, rounds impacting against it, and powered forward, finally giving the broken chassis a massive shunt with all his strength, sending it tumbling down the tunnel, into the face of his enemies.

Then he backed up, popping out more smoke, and running a quick register of his systems. Some were throbbing red, others amber, but he was still combat-functional.

Now, come to me, and see what you shall receive.

Unaimed fire came roaring up the tunnel, from arc rifles that sizzled lightning through the dust, to the shimmering rip of torsion cannons. The volley tore free a stream of plates from the entire structure and made the tunnel shake and twist in their wake. The firing soon stopped. Some among the enemy knew that they

were in danger of collapsing the passageway around them.

Brother Fortunus backed up another ten yards – he still had plenty of room behind him before the yawning abyss in the heart of *Fury* – and he automatically checked his ammo readouts. He still had plenty of death to go around.

The arc-rifle fire continued, but it was desultory and speculative; he could afford to ignore it. Clearly, the enemy was engaged in bringing up something heavier, but due to the increasing instability of the tunnel, it could not be heavy long-range fire. Whatever came next would fight close-in.

And he heard it, minutes later. The heavy tread of feet in the tunnel, slower than human pace but more massive – almost as massive as his own. He flexed his tri-clawed fists, feeling them move at his behest just as his fingers once had when he had been of flesh and blood entire. He had not been in vox contact with the rest of his Chapter for some time now, but he sent out a message nonetheless.

'Fortunus, location some hundred and fifty yards bearing two eight six of my last vox contact. Enemy advancing in force. About to engage. Vox unworkable. I will stand here until I am ordered otherwise. Fortunus out.'

He thought of the bright mountains, the blue skies of Macragge, which had been his home world. He thought of Andromache, the sheer peak he had always meant to climb. Last of all, he thought of Caito Galenus, his sergeant, who had also been his friend, and who was now Captain of Fifth as he had been. Those were good memories to fight for.

He strode forward, twelve tonnes of violence bent on murder.

This time it was something else confronting him. There was no more fire, and the silence was broken only by the thunderous clap of his feet on the plates of the tunnel. He stopped, and if he had still possessed eyes he would have narrowed them, staring into the fog of smoke and dust and wreckage that now scarred and cluttered the passageway ahead of him for some fifty yards.

But he could still hear the enemy coming up, the slow clump of footsteps too massive to be that of mere men.

And as the first huge shape cleared the dust he opened fire, targeting the head.

It was man-shaped, very like the form of an Adeptus Astartes in some respects, but more rounded, with massive-fingered gauntlets, and a heavy flamer affixed to one shoulder, which now bloomed out in a harsh rushing roar of bright fire. Ten feet tall – smaller than the bulk of the Dreadnought frame of Brother Fortunus, and with a rounded skull which had a visage of sheer, polished metal. It advanced with the steady sureness of a human walker, but Brother Fortunus knew that it was entirely mechanical. There was nothing human about it at all,

unless it might be the shadowy, darting figure that hovered in its wake – an Adeptus Mechanicus datasmith.

He had heard of these things, but never faced them in combat. It was a kastelan, a mere robot. Fortunus felt disgust at having to fight such an unworthy foe, but he squared off nonetheless, aware that such things were high among the fighting elements of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

There were two of them, but they could only come at him one at a time in the smoking, half-wrecked tunnel. A blast of promethium surged around Fortunus and blistered the paint from his armour plate, clouding his visual readout for a second, and then the kastelan was upon him, claws reaching out to try and grasp his own.

He tried to blow one off with a sustained volley of storm-bolter fire, the heavy rounds snapping into the kastelan's torso and forearms, many streaking away in ricocheting whines, others tearing into the ceramite and adamantium. But the great fists were unhurt, and they crackled now with pale streaks of light. Too late, Brother Fortunus realised that they were power weapons. One seized the layered alloy and ceramite and adamantium of his hull, and the fingers of it sank into the metal with a vicious tearing crackle, the lesser metals of his armour melting in a bright glowing stream, the ceramite snapping, blackening. A chunk of Brother Fortunus' great frame was torn off and flung away in a spatter of molten sparks and gledes, and he felt the sudden lessening of vitality in his systems, red runes flashing up in his display. Some of his core servo-leads were exposed to the air, steaming with lubricant like a man's exposed intestines.

Anger lit up in his mind like a blaze. He smashed his free fist into the head of the kastelan, to no avail – it was armoured to an incredible degree – and let rip with his storm bolter until he could feel the ammo belt whining from his hull reservoir and saw the overheat warning in his weapon's runic outlay. The bright fusillade staggered the big robot and made it back up a step. Fortunus sent out a great gout of burning promethium and aimed it not at his foe, but behind it, at the Mechanicus datasmith who was to the rear, tapping on some kind of control device. The tech-servant was caught in the cloud of fire and shrieked as he lit up, his red robes kindling, half a dozen bionic limbs flailing up around his head, trying to beat out the flames – but the greasy, clinging promethium blazed on, burning white and turning him into a tottering torch.

The first kastelan ignored the fate of its overseer and came forward again with mindless implacability, power fists reaching out, wreathed in the destructive field which flared in sinuous lightning across the blunt fingers. A last burst from

Brother Fortunus' storm bolter was aimed square at the heavy flamer affixed to the robot's shoulder, blowing it apart. Promethium rained down on the kastelan and it blazed as brightly as its master, the red paint on it blackening. But it seemed otherwise unaffected.

Brother Fortunus backed up, popping out a smoke grenade in the face of his foe. He was on fire himself, but it was only a patchwork of guttering flame, a splash of promethium that burned itself out on his armoured hull. He reached out and grasped at the side of the passageway, his claws digging deep into the plating that formed it. Tearing free a massive plate, he threw it edge-on at the advancing, burning kastelan, and struck it on the gleaming head. The thing staggered, but barely paused.

He pulled out wreckage from both walls, and finally his clawed digits found a thick metal stanchion. Tugging on it, his immense servo-motors whined and spat as they fulfilled his will. The stanchion came free, and as it did a large section of the tunnel collapsed around him.

He had been backing away, the enemy robot still advancing. Debris clattered off his hull, but the kastelan was half buried in it. For a moment it struggled there, fighting to free its arms. Brother Fortunus stepped up, holding the stanchion in both claws like a spear, and ran it through his enemy, the heavy reinforced plasteel bending under the impact. Fortunus sent it deep into the metallic torso of the kastelan, red runes flashing all over his readouts with the wicked force of the thrust. The giant robot struggled, impaled, and Fortunus worked the stanchion round, widening the great wound in the machine, feeling the cables and levers within the thing break and snap and bend. The kastelan shuddered, then was still.

More smoke, and then Brother Fortunus backed away again, battering aside the wreckage which now half-filled this section of the tunnel, kicking his way free. His searchlight flickered, then steadied. His backup systems came online, but he could feel the overstrained artificial sinews in his arms, some severed, others skewed and bent. His visual readout was a mosaic of flashing runes.

Fifty yards more and then he halted again. The great pit that led down into the guts of *Fury* was not far off now. He could feel it yawning behind him like an open grave. An internal fire was extinguished by his safety systems, and the ancient technologies embodied in his frame worked to mitigate the worst of the damage he had suffered. His ammo counter was in the red; he had loosed off over five thousand rounds in the last five minutes. Promethium was at five per cent.

There was a mad crashing in the smoke ahead of him. The second kastelan was trying to get to him over the fallen carcass of its comrade, fulfilling the last order of its dead datasmith. Fortunus stepped forward, bringing up what he could in the tactical outlay, and began a series of carefully controlled bursts of storm-bolter fire, aiming for the joints of the machine, blasting off the heavy weapon affixed to its shoulder. A hot streak lanced past him and detonated further back in the tunnel; a lascannon of some sort. He concentrated fire on it, and blew it from its mountings; and with that, his internal magazines came up dry.

The second kastelan thrashed through the wreckage and confronted him, opening and closing its fists so that they glittered with throbbing disruptive energy. It stood there one moment, as though taking stock, and then came hurtling towards him, a massive steel juggernaut whose footfalls made the entire passage quiver and raised up the metallic dust to merge with the dissipating smoke in a silver-flecked fog.

Fortunus knew that to let the thing grapple with him at close quarters would be to suffer defeat. He threw out a fiery blast with what remained of his promethium reserves, filling the tunnel with flame, and backed away as quickly as his massive legs would carry him, calling up the tactical readout, noting the environmental stability around him, the distance from the pit – all in a split second.

Then the kastelan barrelled into him with a high ringing crash.

The impact jarred him backwards, despite the fact that the Castraferrum-pattern Dreadnought he inhabited was taller and heavier. The power fists of the enemy robot tore at his armour, his limbs, rending his metal flesh, the fingers of the enemy digging deep, reaching for his core systems and servos, trying to rip the life out of him. He was able to grab one arm by the elbow joint and, with an immense effort, lever it free of his own torso and squeeze until he felt the joint break under his triclawed digits. The power field which surrounded that fist winked out, and the limb fell lifeless.

But the other had clawed its way deep into the innards of his form, tearing away the protective armour, coming close to the sarcophagus which enclosed what was left of his organic remains. Fortunus' consciousness flickered for a second, his visual input darkening. The great stacks on his back stuttered out gouts of black smoke lit with sparks, backfiring and shuddering as his basic servos began to shut down.

This is my death, he thought calmly. I must bear it well. I must do something of meaning with it – something to make these scum fear the sigil I bear.

‘*Guilliman!*’ his harsh, inhuman bellow roared out, augmented by the speakers in his hull. With the last of his strength he fastened on to the kastelan, and embraced it in both his arms. He lifted the struggling machine clear off the ground for a second, and slewed it round.

Yes – he had gauged it right. He was close enough.

A final, titanic thrust from his mighty legs, and the pair of them went staggering back along the last few yards of the tunnel, the kastelan tearing frantically at the sarcophagus which enclosed Fortunus, which he had been honoured with. The body which allowed him to give his life for his Chapter a second time.

Brother Fortunus lurched on the edge of the great pit for a moment, his enemy caught tight in the failing strength of his deadly embrace. Then with the last of his strength, he hurled them both over the lip of the tunnel’s ending, into the emptiness beyond.

He felt himself falling free, just as the final layer of his sarcophagus was breached, just as the acrid air of *Fury* hissed into the amniotic sac which enclosed his mortal remains.

He did not feel the first, massively destructive impact, one which finally broke the kastelan free of his embrace. He did not see the giant robot explode as it struck a protruding girder with enormous, hurtling force. He did not feel the final detonation of his own internal reactor as its shielding was torn open, its coolant blooming out like silvered spray.

Brother Fortunus had gone by then, to join his brothers who had walked before him on that long road into the darkness.

SEVENTEEN

Inquisitor Drake felt a tremor of disgust run through him as he surveyed the way ahead. The corridor was ten feet high, fifteen broad, and had once been composed of neatly moulded plasteel tiles supported by heavy ferrocrete pillars reinforced with steel rods. Standard Imperial construction for mass-produced civilian shipping; cheap and effective for a vessel which was not expected to endure void combat. He was in the hull of some ancient, lost freighter that had been chopped up, realigned and brought into the overall architecture of *Fury*.

Now the Imperial construction was overlaid with a miasmatic swamp of slime-mottled mud in which gleaming pale tendrils quivered like intestinal worms, faintly luminous, translucent, things that fed on and vomited filth.

They veined the passageway in a seething maze, and hung from the ceiling in trembling snakes. The air was foetid, thick with steamy mist, and the grease of it clung to his armour like an unclean touch. Up ahead, he could see faint movement in the very stuff of the floor, as though things coursed and slithered under the muck; but they moved in the walls as well, the very plasteel running and bulging like overfired clay.

'Just when I thought I was beginning to understand,' he murmured.

The passageway ran on ahead into darkness. There was no sound but the gloop and drip of its contents, the far distant thrum of drive engines, the soft sough of the heavy atmosphere as it moved in currents known only to itself.

'Regan,' he said.

A man in a heavily armoured void-suit joined him. He bore a Locke-pattern bolter, a laspistol and a power maul that hung from his belt. His breastplate sported the faint skull and scales of the Adeptus Arbites. His helm was of

Arbites-pattern, its design in turn inspired by those of the Adeptus Astartes. He was half a foot taller than the inquisitor, but there was no doubt who was in command here. His tone was deferential on the closewave vox.

'Nothing on auspex, sir. Life readings all around, but they are not sentient. We're clear for two hundred yards in every direction.'

Drake nodded slightly. 'We have a conundrum here, my friend. I feel the echo of the Blood God in this place. The air is rank with anger, like a cloud which seeks to blind us. But that thing's worshippers would never produce an environment such as this. There is more.

'Here, I smell the stink of the oldest of the Ruinous Powers. I sensed it on the Chaos Marines who attacked back in the cathedral chamber. The filth of that so-called deity who is known by his acolytes as the Plague Father. And yet…'

'Could they both have their adherents here, on the hulk?' Regan asked his superior.

'Let us hope not. But the red rage of the Lord of Blood lies thick on *Fury*. There are times I think I can almost taste it. I would bet that even the Ultramarines are affected by it, though their conditioning is proof against the rage it engenders. For them it is an impulse to be ignored. Lesser men might be hip deep in one another's entrails by now, lost in a berserk frenzy.'

'I have felt it,' Regan whispered.

Drake seemed to collect himself. 'And you can thank the conditioning of my Order that it has not taken root in you. Not yet, anyway.

'It would seem that our foes have been subject to the attentions of more than one foul deity in their long travels. I begin to understand now why some of the Consuls stood in the dark to wait for death. It must have seemed better than what was consuming their brethren.'

'Does Lord Calgar know this?' Regan asked.

'Lord Calgar has a deep and subtle mind, but I doubt he possesses my familiarity with the wiles and conflicts of the Ruinous Powers and their disciples,' Drake said. 'Nor do I believe he has ever tasted the bitterness of utter despair.' He shrugged. 'I do not boast. It has been my life's work, is all.'

Another of the dozen men behind Drake came forward, this one in faded green camo, but as heavily armoured as Regan. On his shoulder plate was the number *214*, and the double-headed eagle of the Astra Militarum.

'Motion detectors are in place three hundred yards to our rear, sir. All clear,' he said.

'Thank you, Kastiro. It would not do to be caught by surprise, not down here,'

Drake told him.

Anger and despair, both of which can lead to the Path of Ruin. The Viridian Consuls had been consumed by them both as they undertook the Abyssal Crusade, peerless warriors wrongly accused, exiled, sentenced to a horrible end by those whose authority they revered and had been created to defend. They had been ripe for the Fall, on their entry to the Eye of Terror. No doubt they had fought for years, their valour never known, their bravery unrecognised, their dead mounting. How many had been left when they had finally succumbed to the lure of the warp? How many remained now?

'We will move on,' Drake said briskly. 'Murron, lead out. Kastiro next, then myself. Regan, take the rear, and stay alert. We are in a place now where there is no safe station. The way may seem clear behind us, but all that could change in a moment.'

He keyed up his hololith, and ran the blueprints and the maps he had augmented yard by yard. On the narrow-vox band he sent a swift, digitised code burst back to Marneus Calgar.

Way ahead clear for point eight miles. Bearing one nine six, descent one nine three. Waypoints marked.

Then he followed in Regan's wake, his feet sucking in the glutinous muck of the passage floor.

He was looking for evidence of control systems; some clues which would lead him to the true heart of *Fury*. He estimated that they were some eighteen miles into the heart of the hulk now, and the deserted nature of the structure made him uneasy.

In the levels above him, the inquisitor's party had discovered evidence of heavy fighting, so ancient that later accretions had almost obscured it. But they had found discarded weapons of Adeptus Astartes make, broken remnants of armour they could not place, and even the wreckage of one large tracked vehicle which could only be the carcass of an Adeptus Mechanicus kataphron, half buried in muck and the pale creepers which seemed to have a life of their own. It had been shattered by lascannon fire, so long ago that the strange half-life that existed on *Fury* had begun to work the huge mechanics of it apart, growing through the broken tracks, the holed chassis.

So, Drake thought, we have the Dark Mechanicus – let us assume for now they are of the Dark, for even the vilest Adeptus Mechanicus renegade would hesitate before attacking the Ultramarines as they did Seventh Company. These are on the upper levels, and on the surface. But once, long ago, they came all the way

down here, fighting their way into the guts of the hulk – for what?

To gain control of *Fury*, of course. Their mission was the same as ours.

But the Consuls, or what had once been the Consuls, stopped them, hurled them back to the higher levels – and there they stayed.

The hulk had become a prison for these renegade Mechanicus adepts, and the Chaos warriors who had been the Viridian Consuls were their jailers. Not strong enough to wipe them out, but strong enough to hold them at bay, to protect the heart of the structure and ensure that they maintained control of its core systems.

For Drake knew now that *Fury* was no ordinary space hulk, no random accretion of lost starships slowly growing over the centuries by luck and happenstance. There was a design to this thing. In the beginning it had been created with a purpose in mind.

He had yet to divine that purpose.

The passageway led to others, which branched out further; a labyrinth of dark, dripping, noisome tunnels which had become so changed by the passing of the years that it seemed they were not walking through a man-made artefact at all, but might have been exploring some subterranean jungle, fraught with pitfalls, bisected by streams of black, oozing liquid festooned with foetid growth. Here and there they found the minute gleam of a cogitator console, the lights of its systems glowing behind a carapace of slimy filth. These the inquisitor examined closely after his retainers wiped them down, and he began to build up a picture of what had been done down here, right in the steaming depths of *Fury*.

The work was ancient, and it was systematic. It was earlier by far than the layers of filth that covered it, antique engineering overlaid by centuries, millennia of accumulated debris. Sometimes his men had to use flamers to burn off the clinging creepers and semi-sentient vines that clung to everything, and under their smoking remains Drake found evidence of a rational engineering layout. The broken, trapped ships that had congealed here in the heart of the structure had all been brought together into a semi-cohesive whole, new connective conduits laid down, power re-routed through them, atmospherics linked in. Someone had taken all the jigsaw pieces and made of them a completed puzzle, though it took all his training and experience to see it. The heart of *Fury* was an enormous void-going vessel, complete in itself. The upper levels were simply trash, though there had been an attempt to integrate even them into the design at one point.

Three thousand years it had been since the Abyssal Crusade. And *Fury* had been ancient even then. The Consuls had become ensnared by the hulk, and after

them the Adeptus Mechanicus. And now the Ultramarines.

The thought gave him pause, and for a moment he wondered if he, Marneus Calgar and the much vaunted warriors of his Chapter would simply become another trapped element in the complex makeup of the ancient artefact. Another forgotten story, to be explored centuries hence by yet more trapped explorers who thought they were different, better than the rest.

We are different. We are better, Drake told himself. I am an inquisitor of the Ordo Hereticus, and Marneus Calgar is Chapter Master of the Ultramarines. *Fury* shall not absorb us as it has absorbed so many before. I will see it destroyed first.

They descended by steep, slippery pathways that had been laid down in piles of welded wreckage, going ever deeper, the heat increasing around them and the atmosphere thickening until, by his own readings, it approximated some equatorial rainforest of old Terra, though with much higher levels of inert gases, and high background radiation; the drives which lay somewhere below them were not adequately shielded.

And there was life here. It squirmed under their feet, watched them from the dark shadows their spotlights threw, lashed away into the far-flung darkness with sickening wails or shrill squeals. These were the offscourings of Chaos, the maggots of the warp. Lesser forms that nevertheless partook of that great evil, and that given time might evolve into upright enemies of baleful power, the spawn of the Archenemy. These levels of the hulk were a fructifying hothouse, an incubator of all that Drake had been trained to despise and destroy. That, too, was part of the thing's overall design.

The first attack came some thirty hours after they had left the Ultramarines. From a black side-passage there exuded a sickening stench and a great spray of stinking acid which sizzled on the plates of their armour. Then a huge, slimed bulk heaved itself out into the middle of them, glistening flippers smashing men aside. A head that was a tentacle-fringed steaming maw opened and it reared up, ten feet high, with its organs pulsing redly in the translucent flesh of its belly. It whipped out a series of muscular tentacles, caught Gort Steyler, one of Drake's retainers, and drew him in, thrashing, then collapsed on top of the unfortunate man, all that was to be seen of him a gauntleted hand spasming in agony as the acid it secreted dissolved his armour and went to work on his flesh.

They opened up on it with bolter fire, but the heavy rounds simply disappeared into the creature's rubbery hide, raising bruised lumps as they exploded within

its body, the damage absorbed. Then they hacked at it with chainswords, but the bright blades just churned up mucky gobs of steaming meat, the clogged sword-teeth sizzling as if red-hot. It was not until they brought in the flamers, and hosed the creature with blazing promethium that it reared up and let out a bubbling squeal of pain. Under it, Steyler lay already half-digested, a mound of bubbled, melting flesh in which his smoking armour plates floated like broken crockery.

The beast tried to get away, its rubbery bulk undulating like a flag in the wind, still burning. But the fire, while it pained it, seemed not to seriously cripple the thing; the layer of slime which covered it was a natural insulate, and it was not until Drake stepped up and threw a frag grenade into its shrieking gullet that it went down, the explosion blowing it clean in half, and spattering them all with its burning residue.

The inquisitor's retainers yelled and cried out as the acid in the thing's sundered flesh ate at their armour, and they plunged into the putrid muck that covered the floor, rolling along it in an effort to quench the agony. Even so, two more of them died there within moments, eaten through to their vital organs, their vac suits pierced and corroding around them, their eyes burnt into steaming jelly.

Another two who had been most splattered by the corrosive meat were in a pain that no medikit could ease. They lay writhing and screaming as the creature's body fluids boiled into their flesh. Drake said a prayer over them, and shot both in the head with his bolt pistol, to end the hopeless agony.

They gathered what they could from the dead, though there was little left of them that could be touched without incurring further injury, and then they went on their way once more. Almost half of them had fallen in five nightmarish minutes. But the inquisitor was not a man to be swayed from his path by death. He led them on again, and they followed him without protest. For as he told them – there was no place better to go. Death awaited them now around every corner.

'*Drake, do you read?*' It was Marneus Calgar's voice on the vox. The inquisitor halted his surviving men and they went into all-round defence about him.

'Yes, my lord. Vox is difficult but workable.'

'*We are some three miles behind you, following your waypoints. We have had to abandon the grav-sleds – they're too big for these passageways. No sign yet of a control space, I take it.*'

'You shall be the first to know, my lord,' Drake said wearily.

‘*Problems?*’ Even over a difficult vox link, Calgar could read his voice, Drake thought with a wry inward smile.

‘A few. But we are continuing. Beware of beasts that lie in wait, my lord. We are being ambushed by the filth of the immaterium as we advance. The hulk seems to be divided into a series of overlapping environments, all with their own denizens.’

‘*I had thought there might be more than one influence at work here, more than one kind of evil in play.*’

‘You are perceptive, my lord. I have made a similar conclusion.’

‘*It would seem that the hulk is full of surprises.*’ A pause. ‘*Do not take unnecessary risks, Drake. Your death would present me with all sorts of tiresome complications.*’

Was that humour? Drake was unsure – too tired perhaps.

‘I shall do my best to stay alive, my lord,’ he said. ‘I would hate to inconvenience the Lord of Macragge.’

‘*I have seen a lot of service, inquisitor, and the things I have felt here...*’ Calgar caught himself like the man on the edge of an indiscretion.

‘I know. The malignity is intense, as deep as I have ever known it. We are proceeding with all due care, Chapter Master. Drake out.’

He looked at his men as they crouched in firing positions around him.

‘I shall take the vanguard,’ he said, and led them off again.

Groping in the dark, Drake thought. It comes to this. This darkness ahead of me, this stinking muck my feet sink into. The ooze which courses down the walls, and the hungry tendrils which infest it all.

Whatever design had been set in place here, deep in the bowels of *Fury*, it had been swamped by the faecal decay of the eldest of the Ruinous gods, the deity of Death. This being drew its power from the mortal fear of death and decay. Small wonder that its influence had gained traction here, on an artefact from which there was no escape, no release except that of death itself.

Drake could feel the hopelessness working in him, could see it in the eyes of his retainers. They did not believe that they would survive this mission. Conditioned by the Inquisition though they were, they were human after all. They held to their duty, and would no doubt fight to the end – but they believed that they had no prospect of escape from the nightmare they were plunging deeper into with every footstep.

For himself, for the Adeptus Astartes, he knew it was different. The

Ultramarines would fight to the last, partly because their own Chapter Master was with them – that hero of the Imperium, that paladin, Marneus Calgar – and partly because it was in their genes. In every member of the Adeptus Astartes there burned an infinitesimal genetic remnant of the Lord of Mankind himself. The Emperor had created them, and to this day, some fragment of that grace remained. It did not mean that they could not be corrupted, or seduced by despair. But it did mean that of all mortal men, they were most proof against such things.

And yet, an inward voice told him, that had not saved the Viridian Consuls, or the other Chapters of the Abyssal Crusade.

It had not. But all the evidence suggested that it had taken centuries for them to succumb to the lures of Chaos, to give in to hopelessness. To break their oaths.

Drake was glad Marneus Calgar was here on *Fury*. He should not have been, because the Lord of Macragge's presence on the hulk weakened the realm of Ultramar, that great buttress of the Imperium.

He was glad for his own sake, for the sake of the mission he now knew he had to fulfil. With Calgar here he knew that the Ultramarines would fight with a savagery yet unknown to the inhabitants of the hulk, and the dark powers that watched over it.

With Calgar here, he still held out a flicker of hope.

He was still not prepared for what confronted him next, however. The passageways in this region of *Fury* all drew down in one direction, like rivulets seeking the sea. They converged on a single area, and the limited auspex readings lit up like a flare as the inquisitor's party drew near.

He had not been boasting idly when he had told Marneus Calgar that his men were well versed in infiltration and subversion. His seven remaining followers were all veterans of the Astra Militarum, the Adeptus Arbites, and in one case, the hive gangs of Peloris II. They occasioned no notice as they slowly approached an archway which loomed up before them, unguarded, open, carved it seemed out of some kind of red-tinted stone. It was immense, perhaps two hundred feet in height and almost as wide. Runes marked it, and there were skulls adorning it, thousands of them. A cursory examination by Drake, and he saw there human, eldar, ork, T'au and the large craniums of Adeptus Astartes, decorating the entranceway like polished pale stones.

But that was nothing, compared to what awaited them on the far side of the arch.

There was light here, a baleful grey-green glimmer, like the sun shining through algae-clotted water. And there was water ahead, and from it the light rippled in pale snakes.

A lake. And it sat in a chamber whose vastness made the inquisitor's party stop a moment and stare, open-mouthed.

It was three miles wide, at least, and its ceiling was half that above them – solid rock, interspersed with the embedded plating and keels of myriad long-lost ships, the metals in them gleaming like stars. A landscape in itself, like a hollow world.

Drake had not seen its like in scale before. Even the greatest chambers in the interior of Imperial battleships were not as gargantuan as this phenomenon at the heart of the hulk.

He consulted his readings. They scrolled in green lines down his interior helm display. He and his men were within two miles of *Fury*'s innermost core, over twenty from the surface of the hulk. The radiation levels were now high enough to be harmful with even a moderate exposure length. A few days standing here without their armoured void-suits, and they would all be seriously ill. A week, and they would be corpses.

But that was beside the point. Drake and his retainers crouched behind a low tangle of wreckage, like a surf of debris, that was thrown up in a wave all around the outermost rim of the great chamber. As they stared out at the spectacle before them, Drake saw Regan, that hardest of men, make the sign of the Imperial aquila with both gauntleted hands against his chest. Two of the others lowered their helms as if they could not bear to look.

It was a sight to unnerve the bravest man.

Before them was a grey strand of shattered stone and machine parts, stretching some half a mile wide in a great circle around the circumference of the chamber for as far as the eye could see. Dotted across this beach of debris were tall crosses of welded girders and stanchions, embedded in the trash and dirt of the chamber floor.

And crucified to these structures were Space Marines.

Drake counted fifty nearby, but there were many more – scores, perhaps hundreds, out in the distance. They were still clad in fragments of power armour, which might have originally been green, but now were so stained and pitted that they had descended into a bilious pink-grey. The Adeptus Astartes had all been unhelmed, and were bolted to their scaffolds through every limb. Their agonies were written across their faces; these paragons of courage were shrieking with

silent mouths.

Some had been disembowelled, others dismembered and then nailed back together. Many had had their eyes and tongues torn out. Most had the eight-pointed star of Chaos carved on their foreheads, the flesh sliced so deep as to reveal the glint of bone.

Others had undergone mutation. They had tentacles for arms, horns arching out of their skulls, nests of snakes squirming in their exposed bellies. Still more were being gnawed on by the shining pink slugs of Chaos spawn, which infested the ground around them like maggots in a gangrenous wound.

And the worst thing of all; most of them were still alive.

Their eyes moved, wide and white – those who had them. They quivered in their impalement, their flesh trembling, exposed organs pulsing dark and gleaming. They dripped blood, but the blood was black, and it seethed with bubbling life even as it left their veins. Their bodies had become incubators of teeming foulness, and they knew it; it could be seen in the glittering madness of their gaze.

Some of them struggled on their crosses, as they must have struggled through years uncounted, but they were stuck fast. They endured the torture unendingly, and around the feet of every one the maggot-life of Chaos writhed and squirmed, feeding on their dripping blood, their chopped viscera, and above all, on the pain itself, nourished by it, growing on it.

'Throne of Terra,' Regan said in a cracked whisper on the vox, and his voice was near breaking.

These were the Viridian Consuls, a proud Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes whose primarch was Roboute Guilliman himself. In each of these agonised forms there dwelled the holy genetic remnant of the Emperor of Mankind. And now that blessed legacy was being tormented and corrupted by an eternity of pain, made immortal by the power of the Dark Gods. They would suffer here until they turned to Chaos, and embraced the foulness of the warp. They had suffered here for centuries. And yet still they resisted.

Even Drake, hardened as he was, felt an overwhelming hatred and rage rise up in him at the terrible spectacle.

And, he thought to himself, when Marneus Calgar sees this, he will loose the Ultramarines. There will be a terrible reckoning. He will burn *Fury* to ash.

This place – this thing, must be destroyed. These souls must be released from their pain. No matter if it takes my life to do it. No matter what dark technologies lie hidden here. This cannot stand.

He collected himself, and tapping the oculars on his helm, he zoomed in on the farther reaches of the foul chamber. The lake shone there, beyond the tortured Space Marines. A grey-green, rippling expanse of liquid that steamed and plopped like a bubbling cauldron. It stretched for another half a mile beyond the grey strand before him, and rising up out of it there was an island, maybe a mile wide, cragged and broken like some wave-shattered shore, made of black stone or metal – he could not make it out – smeared with green growth that seemed to move and shift as he looked at it.

And on the highest reaches of this island there was what looked almost to be a castle or keep of some sort, its walls rearing up like sheer cliffs of shaggy filth, bedecked with looming towers, some of them formed from the sharp prows of void ships, others composed of the blunt rectangles of freight containers stacked like immense bricks, five hundred feet high. There were battlements, hacked out of layered metal, and stained poles upon which ragged banners hung, moving sinuously in the air currents which came and went, engendered by the humid steaming heat of the place. Some were scarlet, others green. The devices upon them had been made of flesh, skin and gleaming bone, and everywhere below them there were dunes of skulls, thrown up at the base of the black walls like pebbles tossed on a beach.

Drake saw Khorne's rune there, painted on the walls in dried blood and smeared tissue, the symbols a hundred feet high, bordered by thousands more skulls affixed to the battlements. And he saw what he now knew to be the badge of these Chaos scum. The Ultramarines sigil, turned upside down to form the Omega which was the symbol of the end days, bisected by a bloody sword, wreathed in wing-like flames. Though some of the Consuls had kept their faith, all through the long agony of their torment, others had not. The Chaos warband they had degenerated into had its heart here, Drake could feel it. The psyker in him could sense a great, keen intelligence ahead, one that would soon become aware of him. He felt a fierce exultation at the thought of confronting it, of ending the abomination.

'Here, at last,' he said quietly, 'we come to the heart of the thing. The lair of the beast.'

EIGHTEEN

The Ultramarines lost nine more battle-brothers to the treacherous denizens of the hulk as they descended in Drake's wake, following the path the inquisitor had blazed for them.

They were some two miles above him, following the waypoints he had marked out in coded vox coordinates. But things had changed since Drake had passed this way hours before.

As the Ultramarines drew closer to the hollow hall and the castle of skulls where Drake awaited, so it seemed that they attracted more and more attention from the loathsome Chaos spawn that infested these lowest levels. Their progress slowed, until they were fighting for every yard, springing ambushes left and right – great gargling beasts that leapt out of the very decking at their feet or that slapped down from catwalks far above, right into their midst – and in their wake hurtled possessed, raving monstrosities that might once have been of their own kind, now ravening mindlessly out of the noisome dark.

And there were things more twisted than these, kept in the shadows by the faith of Chaplain Murtorius and the psychic shielding of Librarian Ulfius. They watched, and did not engage. Their eyes could be seen gleaming.

By the time the Ultramarines were within narrow-vox range of Drake, nearly every member of Fifth Company was nursing a wound or damaged, acid-eaten armour. It fell to Calgar himself, his two honour guards and Starn's Terminators, to bludgeon a way through.

Three times, they had to be resupplied with ammunition for their storm bolters, and twice they had to halt while Brother Salvator made what repairs he could manage to the ancient armour these veterans wore.

Nothing could withstand Marneus Calgar and his two bodyguards; with power gauntlets and power axes they smashed their way deeper into the filthy core of *Fury*.

But now the rear of the column was being attacked as well, and Magos Fane lost four of his skitarii to a particularly determined assault composed of huge slithering monstrosities and a dozen frenzied Chaos Marines, their armour slathered blood-red. The Blood God's crooked antler-like rune was emblazoned on their shoulderplates.

Horned monstrosities, armed with what had once been the holy relics of Adeptus Astartes weapons, would have slaughtered more of Fane's followers had Captain Galenus and Fifth's champion, Gerd Ameronn, not come to their aid. And it was Chaplain Murtorius who slew the last of these Khornate followers, shouting alternating battlecries and curses as he beat them to a bloody pulp with his crozius.

The corridors and passageways were alive with the enemy now, and it was a running fight in places as the Ultramarines dashed from position to position in a welter of fire. The enemy were trying to cut the column into pieces and then deal with the severed remnants, but again and again the Ultramarines re-formed and drove their foe back.

Two of their number too badly wounded to continue were left behind with explosive charges which they detonated after being engulfed by their warped brethren, bringing down part of the passageways behind the column, their gene-seed destroyed with them. But their sacrifice brought something of a respite for the main body of Fifth, and the column staggered on behind the Chapter Master.

Their blood was up now, and while it in no way dulled their perfect professionalism, it made of them a puissant force of pure, unadulterated violence, their years of training and experience, their genetically honed bodies and minds bent to one thing only; destruction of the travesties that were attacking them, and obedience to the man who led them all, and whose resolve never faltered. It was for places like these that the Adeptus Astartes had been created. It was for times like these that they had been born.

In a brief respite between attacks, Calgar called up Inquisitor Drake for a situation report. The inquisitor sent his reply in a brief encoded vox-burst.

Main base of the enemy at my location, coordinates to follow. All quiet here, but I sense a great number of the foe in this place. This is the key, the heart of it.

Calgar looked back along the tangled, overgrown and half-wrecked passageways in which Fifth Company now took up station behind him. The

company had lost almost a quarter of its strength since its arrival on *Fury*, but with Ninth's Devastators and Starn's veterans, he still had over seventy Ultramarines with him, plus Magos Fane's dozen or so skitarii. It was not enough, he knew that. But it would have to do. If they could but put an end to the foulness in this thing, then their losses would not have been in vain.

'Gather up all the ammunition you can scavenge,' he told Captain Galenus, who stood beside him, chainsword dripping and steaming. 'The enemy's armament will find itself cleansed by its use in our hands. Let Chaplain Murtorius bless and anoint it.'

All spare magazines that could be found were now stripped from the carcasses of the Chaos warriors by the Ultramarines to bolster their own firepower, though the warriors of Fifth handled these clips somewhat gingerly at first, until Murtorius smeared holy oil on them and growled prayers over the filthy runes that bedecked them. Most of the Ultramarines defaced these runes with their gladii and scratched the Chapter sigil into the magazines, to exorcise the last black remnants of their former owners.

'Desperate times,' Captain Galenus said to his Chapter Master.

'How are we for ammunition, Caito?'

'Each man still has some dozen clips, my lord. But we are low on promethium, and missiles for the launchers.'

'It is not far now, according to Drake. But the sternest test is yet to come. These attacks are meant to wear us down, not to stop us. Whatever is at the heart of this hulk, it knows we are coming now, and it awaits us.'

'It will regret that,' Galenus said, and Calgar smiled inside his helm and set one huge gauntlet on his captain's shoulder.

'Courage and honour, my brother.'

'Courage and honour.'

They had not made another quarter of a mile before the attacks began again, in a constricted series of passageways that were slick with putrid mud underfoot and that twice collapsed around them as they advanced, the Ultramarines digging each other out of the wreckage; a tumbled morass of debris that was both metallic and organic, as though someone had filled a swamp with scrap metal and then upended it on their heads.

They came under fire as they pulled each other free, bolter rounds, plasma beams and las-bolts, so that they went to ground in a blinding spray of muck and stinking liquid, viscous and clinging, and even the superlative targeting of their

autosenses had trouble picking out their foes. It was not until the Devastators fired a series of their precious launcher missiles down the passage that the firing tapered off, but the missiles set off a further series of collapses which blocked the way ahead. To make things worse, vox with Inquisitor Drake was lost at the same time.

Calgar led his battle-brothers down a side tunnel, relying on instinct alone to take them on the right path, always descending, their journey marking a great spiral into the guts of *Fury*, and all around them the tunnels were no longer things constructed and built, but more like the biological innards of some enormous creature that twitched and belched and groaned around them.

Insanista in tenebris. The words found themselves in Calgar's mind even as he blazed a way downwards, trying to get back to the waypoints that Drake had set out for them.

The ancient phrase meant *fury in the dark*, but Calgar's wide reading and research also suggested that it meant *madness*.

Both of them were here with him, walking at his side. He felt them as surely as he felt the presence of his honour guards. They walked the passageways of the hulk like ghosts, urging him to set aside his discipline, his training, to give in and succumb to their blandishments in a glorious abandonment of all restraint. To let his anger and his disgust have free rein. To follow death and murder into the dark, and there encounter the glowing heart of true wisdom.

So disquieted was he by these impulses that he spoke to Brother Murtorius as the Chaplain drew near on the march.

'This place radiates the filth of its evil with every step we take,' he said. 'Brother, pray for us as we strive to strike at its black heart.'

The Bull brandished his crozius and let the light of it wash over them.

'My lord, our very deeds are offered up as prayers. When we smite the enemy in his lair, the blood we spill rises up like the voice of a mighty choir. Everything we do, we do for the Emperor, for the ignorant masses of our fellow Man. And for each other. As long as our faith holds strong, we cannot be defeated, even in death.'

'I have been–' Calgar found the words sticking in his throat. Anger glowed in his hearts, and as he clamped it down, it left behind a sick residue of doubt that gnawed at him.

'The influence of the Ruinous Powers is seductive in this place,' Murtorius went on, looking at Calgar out of his skull helm. 'It is an old evil, and we are in a

stronghold of its minions.'

'I have been in such places before, many times,' Calgar said. 'But brother – I worry that I have brought us here to this pass because of the pride I feel, the overweening confidence I have in my brethren. Perhaps I erred. I was arrogant.' He paused for a second. 'I pray I have not brought us to the brink of ruin.'

'Never,' Murtorius said stoutly. 'What is death, but a passageway to a greater peace wherein we shall know the immortal soul of the Emperor Himself? No – so long as we hold true to the Codex, to the precepts of our mighty Founder, then it is of no matter whether we live or die. The Chapter will go on. The Imperium will endure. Our part in the story will have ended, that is all.' The Chaplain lowered his crozius.

'But we must beware of losing all hope, my lord. Despair is a sickness of the Death God, fecund and decaying at the same time. It is the siren call of the grave. The eight dead Space Marines we found in the cathedral chamber high above us succumbed to it, and allowed themselves to leave the world rather than face what was to come. That was a despair so deep that even shame had no part of it. It was an abnegation of self.'

'No Ultramarine will die like that,' Calgar swore, his doubts dissolving at the Chaplain's words. 'Not so long as I am able to stand and feel the blood of Guilliman beat in my hearts.'

'Then let us be content to fight, and follow the precepts of the Throne, while we have strength. And never forget, Chapter Master, that even when hope is gone, faith remains.'

Librarian Ulfius came up on vox. '*My lord, we have large auspex contacts to our rear, and there is weapons fire echoing in the tunnels we have just traversed.*'

Calgar snapped back into an instant appreciation of the present.

'Alert the rearguard. I will be there presently. The company will halt here. Captain Galenus, to the vanguard – hold fast.'

Another voice, toneless and somewhat shrill.

'*Chapter Master, I will join you at the rear. I must speak with you urgently.*' It was Magos Fane.

'Very well. But be swift, magos. Murtorius, with me.'

Calgar and the Chaplain strode down the line, leaving the honour guards at the front of the column to bolster the defence there. The Ultramarines were spread along some three hundred yards of tunnel, crouched in a foot of thick green water in which oily smears reflected the light like flattened rainbows. Thin

worm-like tentacles were reaching blindly out of the walls at them, and many of the company had drawn their gladii and were methodically hacking the things off.

Of their original deep-blue livery, little was to be seen. Fifth were so scored and burned and covered in filth that barely a handspan of blue remained visible on their armour. But their eyelenses gleamed bright scarlet as Calgar passed by, and they had all wiped clean the Ultramarines sigil that they bore on one shoulder. Brother Salvator and Apothecary Philo were tirelessly going up and down the line, effecting minor repairs and administering to the more severely wounded. When an Ultramarine in this place could no longer walk on his own two feet, he had to be left behind. It was a strategy that scoured Calgar's soul, but there was no help for it. His brethren knew it, and accepted their fate without complaint.

Brothers, let me be worthy of your faith. Let not this sacrifice be for nothing. Emperor, watch over me. Great Guilliman, guide me.

Chaplain Murtorius dropped back and began blessing his brothers, sloshing through the stinking water, his crozius held high and blazing again. He alternated his blessings with stories of the Ultramarines heroes of old, speaking to each Space Marine by name, complimenting him on his deeds, remarking on their collective appearance with a dark wit that had the brethren laughing over the vox, setting his hand on their heads and calling them to remember past glories, and the darkness the Chapter had known in the past.

He was a pearl beyond price, and Calgar heard Murtorius' words still echoing in his own mind as he went down the line.

Some Space Marine Chaplains held that their brethren needed nothing more than thunderous sermons to keep their faith true and unsullied by doubt. The Bull was subtler than that, for all his fearsome reputation. He knew what it took to keep fighting men's hearts high. Sometimes a little cajolery, a little self-mockery went farther than a pious reiteration of Chapter dogma. And yet his faith was solid as a mountain.

A good Chaplain was not just respected, or feared. He was loved.

It was not a distinction that could be readily understood by those who had never stared death in the face time and time again, and it was as true for Adeptus Astartes as it was for lesser men.

Calgar had known many Imperial commissars who were rigid and unyielding in their orthodoxy, their blind allegiance to the tenets of their training. But the mark of true greatness was the ability to look beyond it – to remember the humanity of those who put their lives on the firing line – to make misgivings into a joke. To

laugh at death in the company of others who faced it also. That was a truth as ancient as warfare itself.

Magos Fane was waiting for him at the rear along with some of his attendants and a pair of skitarii, their red robes now green-grey with muck. Second squad was with them, Sergeant Gaden and his brethren in firing positions facing back down the way the column had come, brother Unser sweeping the hand-held auspex back and forth, and Brother Ulfius alongside him, his psychic hood flaring bright under its covering of accumulated filth.

'Report,' Calgar said tersely.

'A large force is gone to ground in the passageways behind us, my lord,' Unser said. 'I make it some hundreds strong, but the signatures are… different.'

'In what way?'

'The readings show they are not equivalent to the Chaos filth which we have been fighting thus far. I cannot be more specific. The atmospherics and interference are too great.'

'Brother Ulfius?' Calgar asked the Librarian.

'They are not Chaos,' Ulfius said. He nodded to Magos Fane. 'The magos may be able to explain more fully.'

'Someone should,' Calgar said, reining in his irritation.

'I should like to speak privately to the Chapter Master,' Fane said. 'My lord, will you indulge me with a private channel?'

Calgar opened one up. 'Speak, magos. Time is short.'

Fane paused a long moment, all the same. 'My lord, I have been… contacted by the forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus which are extant upon the hulk.'

'The Dark Mechanicus, you mean.'

Fane shook his head earnestly. 'No, my lord – that is a misconception. They are of my Adeptus. Martian renegades, it would seem, who broke off from the orthodox Cult Mechanicus a long time ago, and became lost. But that does not mean they are scions of Chaos – they have never worshipped the Ruinous Powers, and are free of taint. The forces here on *Fury* have been stranded a long time, forced to keep to the upper levels of the hulk by the malign presence below, unable to escape, unable to gain control. They attacked your brethren on the surface because they felt threatened, but now they regret that precipitate action.'

'Do they indeed?' Calgar snapped, but his mind was already racing over the implications of what Fane said.

‘My lord, they believe that we have an enemy in common, that which dwells at the heart of the artefact. It is inimical to all rational life, and it is the very antithesis of our dedication to the worship of the Omnissiah.’ Again, a long pause. Calgar watched the magos closely, but the adept had no features to read, and he kept his limbs within his ragged robe like a man hugging his own chest. ‘They have a leader, an ancient adept of my own order, and he wishes to treat with you. He is not far away. In fact, he is just down the tunnel behind us.’

‘A parley?’ Calgar asked, surprised, dredging the word out of past reading.

‘Just so. He swears that he will meet with you and you alone, and that whatever happens, no further harm will come to you or your brethren from him and our– his kind. My lord, I beseech you, meet with this adept. He has worthy things to say.’

‘It would seem he has already been saying quite a lot to you, magos.’

‘We have been in communication for some time now, yes.’

‘I wonder how your ordo would feel about that.’

Fane bowed. ‘My lord, we stand here on the brink of dissolution. Mere politics is no longer a matter of import. We must speak now of a way to resolve the entire issue of the hulk we stand upon, and the threat it represents.’

Threat, or opportunity? Calgar did not like this. He weighed it up in his mind, and it took only a fraction of a second for him to decide.

‘I will meet with him. Where?’

The magos gestured down the tunnel behind him with one alloy claw. ‘Just down there, in the dark behind us.’

Calgar nodded. He brought up the company vox.

‘Captain Galenus.’

‘*Yes, my lord.*’

‘I am going out alone to the rear of the column. If I am not back with the main body in one hour, you are to kill Magos Fane and all his party before continuing to our rendezvous with Inquisitor Drake. You will leave a rearguard behind if necessary, but you must join forces with Drake. All subsequent actions will be taken in close advisement with the inquisitor. Is that clear?’

There was barely a hesitation. ‘*Clear, my lord. It shall be so.*’

‘Well, magos,’ Calgar said back on the private channel. ‘Let us see what your long-lost kin have to say for themselves.’

NINETEEN

He was taller than Calgar had expected. It was the arthropod-like bionic legs, very like those of a spider, which elevated his thin, insectile torso, decently covered by a scarlet robe though it was. He held a cog-headed staff in one of his many limbs, and from his wide-lensed face-mask a long proboscis drooped down. Under the robe, other limbs tensed; Calgar could make out the thrum of a plasma weapon there, and the static crackle of an arc pistol. This entity might appear to be a tall, lean stick-insect of little might, but it was well armed and armoured under the Mechanicus rags. And even Calgar, no psyker, could sense the great innate power of the intellect that now regarded him.

Strangest of all though, was the voice. When it spoke, it was not in the shrill, nasal, tinny tones of a Mechanicus adept, wearisome voices that Calgar had become used to over two centuries of dealings with the politics of the Forge Worlds. No; this being's voice was a hale baritone, one which should have come out of a shape far more human than that which currently stood before him in the dripping dark of *Fury*.

'I thank you for your forbearance, Chapter Master,' it said.

Calgar did not reply. Part of his mind was calculating how most efficiently to kill this creature, another part noted the movement in the tunnel far behind; sagitarii setting up their heavy weapons. And a third monitored the tactical outlay of Fifth Company as it sat tight some two hundred yards up the passage behind him, waiting on events.

'Don't thank me just yet,' he said. 'You know who I am – perhaps you could do me the courtesy of identifying yourself.'

'You would not have heard my name before, I think.' The thing had a smile in

its voice. ‘But once I was called Hagnon-Cro, an honoured cognomen given to me by my Adeptus upon attaining my current rank.’

‘And what rank is that?’

‘I am a dominus of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Chapter Master, as I think you well know, as far above Magos Fane as you are above a lowly trooper in one of your Chapter’s line companies.’

‘I am not above them,’ Calgar retorted. ‘We are brothers, same blood, same faith.’

‘And yet you command them.’

‘I would die for them. Can you say the same for your kind?’

Amusement. ‘I cannot. I have progressed far beyond bonds of blood and sentiment. It has always been a besetting weakness of your kind, Lord Calgar. It led to the greatest of all sins. It has led to where we find ourselves now. It is your own Adeptus who brought us both to this pass.’

‘My kind have fought for ten thousand years to right that wrong – can you say the same?’

‘I can. We have done better. We have laboured far longer for the advancement of knowledge, for the improvement of the Imperium, for the elevation of the consciousness into a higher state of being that is embodied in the Omnissiah.’

‘We do not share your particular dream of apotheosis.’

‘That is your loss. And yet you grope towards it now and again. Your brother in arms – Fortunus, was he named? He was embodied in the machine-spirit of a mighty engine, and came close to true approximation of what we seek.’ A pause. ‘It was a shame that we had to destroy him.’

Calgar let the anger wash over him, and beat it down. He knew how to use it, though on *Fury* it was less governable than it had been of old.

They had killed the Ancient, this monstrosity and its minions. And this Hagnon-Cro had the gall to admit it to his face.

He fought the impulse to light up the Gauntlets of Ultramar and rend the adept limb from limb.

‘He blocked your path to the lower levels, I take it.’

‘Yes, Chapter Master. He was faithful to you, right to the end. I honour him for it. I wish it could have been otherwise. But you and your brethren have cleared a way into the very depths of the artefact for us, partly because you are–’ a smile in the silken voice ‘–rather adept in the arts of killing – and partly because you have been allowed to progress. Do you understand that, Chapter Master?

‘You have battled mightily to come this close to the core of the artefact, but you

have been directed and managed most of the way. I and my kind have followed in your wake, and in doing so have come closer to our goal than we have in the last millennium.'

'And your goal is?'

'The same as yours. To destroy it.'

They looked at one another. Calgar knew that the dominus was lying. It knew that he was caught in an impossible place, a place that held only death or worse for them all. But if he simply rejected this renegade's approach, then his brothers would be caught between two fires. The odds, bad already, would become overwhelming. They would all die here, and for nothing.

The Codex was no help. It dealt with strategy and tactics, with honour and wisdom. What he had to deal with here held precious little strategy, less wisdom, and no honour at all.

'My Librarian says you hold no Chaos taint,' he said to the dominus. 'Magos Fane tells me you are Martian renegades, lost in the void.'

'They both speak truly. We hold true to the vision of the Omnissiah, and believe that it is embodied in the Emperor of Mankind. The Dark Mechanicus broke their oaths and joined the traitor Warmaster, Horus, at the start of the Great Heresy, led by the Fabricator-General of Mars, Kelbor-Hal,' Hagnon-Cro told him. 'We are not of their kind.

'And yet, for the Adeptus Mechanicus, the motives for the Great Schism were not the same as those which motivated the Traitor Legions of the Warmaster. The rebels were mistaken in their allegiance, but not perhaps in their ideals. They wanted to be free of the hegemony of Terra, free to seek out knowledge beyond the absurd cabalistic restraints of the Martian Administratum. They sought knowledge for its own sake. Some followed it down dark paths which should not have been trod.

'For myself, I led my adjuncts here in search of pure knowledge. We are not part of the Imperium any longer, but that does not mean that we have succumbed to the lures of the Ruinous Powers – indeed, we have been battling their kind on this artefact for centuries.'

'I see.' This Hagnon was not being entirely honest. It was clear he did not seek to eradicate *Fury*, merely to supplant its current masters. But he must be used. There had to be a way to harness him to the right true end of it all.

Let us hope I am equal to the deception, Calgar thought. And the mere thought angered him further. He had to negotiate now with a subtle mind which had centuries of familiarity with the hulk. One which had overseen the deaths of his

own battle-brothers. The idea left a foul taste in his mouth.

There would be a reckoning for those deaths.

Guilliman, look on me, and be merciful. Sometimes honour and courage are not enough.

'What is your proposal?' he asked the dominus bluntly.

To his surprise the answer was just as blunt.

'We join forces. Fight a way to the heart of this thing and eradicate it.'

It, or those who currently control it? Calgar thought, but he nodded in his beaked helm. 'Very well. But do you know how best to destroy the – the artefact?'

'The control systems are all in a chamber below us, an enormous hollow which in itself is but the relic from a ruined planet. In that immense chamber – well defended – is the key to everything we need,' Hagnon-Cro said. And such was his eagerness that his eyelenses glowed brighter, and his clawed feet skittered a little in the noisome water they stood in.

'What planet?' Calgar asked. He noticed that the dominus did not speak of escape, of how to survive the end of the hulk. And it was that omission which finally set the seal on the thing's lies.

'You do not know?'

He stood silently, and the dominus settled a little on his insectile limbs.

'It is of no matter. A portion of a broken world was taken and set adrift millennia ago by the Ruinous Powers, an unholy relic, a mere fragment.' Then the dominus stared at him.

'By the way, Chapter Master, those of your own Adeptus who have been corrupted by the dark forces at the heart of this artefact are now its staunch defenders, as I am sure you know.' A smirk, not seen, but sensed. 'They call themselves *The Broken*, now, and their Master is named *The Witness*. It was the absurd caricature of justice, as your Imperium sees it, which condemned them here. And Chapter Master–' the long proboscis leaned closer '–they do not forget.'

Calgar swallowed his rage. 'So it would seem.'

He stood there for a long moment in silence, looking at Hagnon-Cro. The creature's arrogance was almost insufferable. But when he spoke again, his voice was grave and measured.

'It would also seem that we can help one another, Dominus Hagnon-Cro. We both wish to be free of *Fury*, and–' he joined in the lie without audible hesitation– 'see it destroyed. Shall we then consider how best our forces will aid

one another?'

The creature reared up on its prehensile legs from the dappled filth in which it stood. 'At last – a servant of the Imperium that exhibits some acumen. I salute you, Chapter Master. Let us cooperate in sending the foul guardians of this artefact to their doom. My troops are behind me, battered but still potent. Let us meditate a little on the prospect of killing.'

Calgar smiled grimly inside his helm. 'My lord dominus,' he said, 'killing is my business.'

Later, he stood before the senior officers of Fifth Company, and told them of his words with the dominus, the fragile truce which was now in place – perhaps even an alliance. He did not need to see their faces to know how it disquieted them.

'Brothers,' he said, 'I, too, wish there was some other way, but I do not believe that even Fifth Company can prevail both against the Chaos scum which infests this place, and the Mechanicus renegades behind us. This Hagnon-Cro knows it – he believes he has us just where he wants us.'

'To treat with renegades is to start out on the road towards something darker,' Chaplain Murtorius said sternly. 'My lord, perhaps it might be better if we simply died here, fighting them all, keeping our souls clean and our honour unbesmirched.'

'I am Chapter Master of the Ultramarines, Lord of Macragge,' Calgar said sharply. 'I do not have the luxury of despair. It is my task here to put an end to this thing, not merely add to the list of those it has consumed. If we must dirty our hands a little in the process, then so be it. I will grind whatever grist the mill requires to fulfil my mission, and you will obey me in that. Am I clear, Chaplain Murtorius?'

The Bull looked at his Chapter Master for a long moment, the skull helm unmoving. 'Let us hope that the Emperor forgives us,' he said.

'What does this Hagnon-Cro suggest we do?' Captain Galenus broke the simmering silence.

'We make our way to the great chamber which lies below, where, Emperor willing, Inquisitor Drake still awaits us. Then we launch an all-out assault on the Blood Keep that is within, aided by the Mechanicus troops.'

'As simple as that?' Galenus said, astonished.

'Nothing is that simple, captain. At the heart of the keep is a vast control centre, which is itself but the refashioned bridge of an ancient voidship. In that place are

all the keys to *Fury* – the Geller field, the drives, navigation, gravitics, life support. We must capture it – one way or another.'

'A straight-up assault may not be the best way, my lord,' Galenus murmured.

'I know it. These Mechanicus types have little real tactical sense – it has atrophied in their long years here. I intend to acquiesce in their frontal attack – Galenus, you will take Fifth into the assault. But at the same time, I, Brother Starn's veterans, my honour guard and Inquisitor Drake will seek a less direct approach. We will try to gain entry to this hellish fortress by another route – or at least with less fanfare – and make our way to the heart of it.'

Calgar paused, regarding his brothers. 'Those who used to be our brothers are now our foes. Chaos has corrupted and ruined them with the agonies and temptations of millennia. But do not forget that once they were as us, until they succumbed to rage and despair. Both those emotions run deep in this place – the touch of Chaos lies heavy upon it. Guard your hearts, brothers. It may be we have to set aside the pure dictates of honour for a little while, but I swear to you, before this thing is done, all those who have betrayed and injured us shall be paid out in full.' He was thinking of the dead of Seventh, and of Brother Fortunus, who had died alone, and he knew they were also.

'So be it,' Chaplain Murtorius said, and he raised his crozius to bless them. 'Let us have faith – in the Emperor's will, and in one another. In this foul place, that faith is all that will sustain us.'

The Ultramarines stood aside as the troops of the Adeptus Mechanicus filed past them in the reeking tunnels. As a mark of good faith, Calgar had insisted that the dominus' minions take the lead, and clear the way below. The battered, burnt, mud-caked Space Marines crouched unmoving in firing positions as skitarii, sagitarii, kataphrons and kastelans rumbled and splashed past them, attended by a skittering crowd of enginseers, datasmiths and servitors. There were several hundred of them, and it took a good hour before they had all gone by. Magos Fane's party joined them, but the magos himself stopped a moment beside Marneus Calgar and addressed him on the private vox channel.

'You think I have succumbed to the wiles of a dangerous renegade, do you not, Chapter Master?'

'You need not worry what I think, magos. For good or ill, your fate is now entwined with this Hagnon-Cro. You had best pray he finds you indispensable.'

The magos shook his head, lenses shining, his red hood sodden with filth. 'He was of my own order once, and to some extent, he is fulfilling the tenets of it to

this day, and has been for over a thousand years. I am privy to the uplink of his consciousness. I do not detect the withering contempt which is at the heart of all Chaos taint.'

'Do you really think you see more than he chooses to let you see?'

'Do you really think that you are a free agent here on this hulk?' the magos retorted. 'The creature at the heart of this artefact has been aware of our movements and motives since the moment we landed. Dominus Hagnon-Cro has been battling him for centuries. Once he was an Adeptus Astartes. Now he has turned so completely, and accomplished the damnation of his Chapter so thoroughly that the Ruinous Powers have rewarded him with apotheosis. This so-called *Witness*, Chapter Master, has become a daemon prince.'

'Hagnon-Cro did not see fit to share that with me,' Calgar said thoughtfully.

'I share it with you now, as a gesture of my continued goodwill towards you and yours. This daemon has been refashioning the core of the hulk into a world of his own design for centuries. He wants us to become part of that design – you especially. That is why you are still alive.'

Calgar looked at the magos closely. 'You seem to know a lot about the secrets at the heart of the hulk all of a sudden, Fane.'

'Dominus Hagnon-Cro has been enlightening me.'

'How charitable of him. He is a selfless soul indeed.'

It was the magos' turn to stare. 'Beware, Lord Calgar. I see in you the simmering rage which boils at the heart of this thing. Khorne's red thread runs through this place, affecting all within it.'

'I am the master of my own emotions, magos. I only hope that you are still master of your own intellect. Is it not said that the scrapcode of the Dark Mechanicus can insinuate itself with such subtlety that those who are infected by it are not even aware?'

'It is said,' the magos replied. 'I have faced its subtleties many times, Chapter Master. And I tell you that here, it is something different.'

'I hope so, magos, for your sake. Because if I find that this Hagnon-Cro is in league with the dark powers, then there will be nothing for it but to kill him, and you along with him. I will accomplish that, even if it means my own death.'

The magos inclined his head slightly. 'I would expect no less.'

'You are his creature now, are you not?'

The magos stiffened. 'I am an adept of the Ordos Exploratorum, high in the regard of the powers of Mars. Do not take me for some mindless servitor, Lord Calgar.'

‘Then take a piece of advice from one who has been battling the Ruinous Powers all his life. Trust no one, magos. Hold to the tenets of your order, and do not allow yourself to be swayed by the temptations of your own intellect and its programming. Suspicion is blessed, it is said. Hold fast to the Cult Mechanicus, and remember that for you, the Omnissiah is present in the Emperor. It can be approached no other way than through His service. All else is a lie.’

Magos Fane bowed again. His fists tightened on his cog-headed staff.

‘I will remember,’ he said. And then he joined the rear of the Mechanicus column as it clanked down the tunnel ahead.

There was more fighting to come, some of it very savage. Dominus Hagnon-Cro brought his kastelans – he had four maniples of them – up to the vanguard, and the giant robots smashed and battered their way through a steady stream of foes, while the tunnel sizzled with the bright lightning of arc-rifle fire.

Further down the extended column, groups of Chaos warriors attacked from side-passages, and dropped from holes in the deckhead, or thrust up out of pits concealed in the noisome slime-pools that lapped on the floor. Most of these attackers were humanoid. Some even bore still the remnants of carapace armour, and on examination their tortured corpses could be seen to bear the faded imprint of the Imperial aquila. These had once been proud members of the Emperor’s Anvil, the Astra Militarum. They were fed into the fight now in their hundreds, and cut down without mercy.

Others were even more degenerate. Shaven-headed cultists with the eight-pointed star carved across their snarling faces, their limbs bound with bloody wire. They attacked in mobs, with no real tactics save mindless hate. In places their bodies were mounded so high that the Ultramarines had to stack them against the walls to make a passage. To save their ammunition, the Adeptus Astartes met these attackers with the cold steel of gladii, or the brute impact of power-armoured fists. They were not worthy of bolter rounds.

Two more of Fifth perished on the long descent, however. The first was swarmed by a hacking crowd of cultists, one of whom detonated a krak grenade under the flailing limbs of his fellows. A second was blown apart by the plasma gun he bore, as it overheated in a vicious firefight.

Brother Philo retrieved their gene-seed, and the advance went on, slow, bloody and inexorable. The slaughter was intense, but the Ultramarines showed no mercy and no hesitation. The fate of Brother Fortunus was now general knowledge, and it fed into a cold, focused rage which fuelled his brethren as they

slew the howling ranks of the Archenemy by the hundred.

And still, there was no word from Inquisitor Drake. The Ultramarines were advancing in the wake of the Mechanicus troops up front, but they were advancing blind, and even Librarian Ulfius, his psychic senses swamped by the miasma of pain, fear and loathing that now surrounded them, could not make contact with the inquisitor. This deep into the heart of *Fury*, his abilities were dampened and dimmed, much like the flickering auspex readings of the Ultramarines themselves.

They fought like men on a battlefield of Old Earth, slashing and hacking with wicked steel, aware only of the snarling face in front of them which had to be cut down, and the hoarse orders of their officers who stood fast and sought to produce order out of the mayhem.

A pause in the killing, and Marneus Calgar shook the blood from his fingers to hear the voice of Dominus Hagnon-Cro on the channel he had set aside for the Mechanicus forces.

'*Chapter Master, my forward elements have arrived at the entrance to the great chamber we spoke of. The enemy has been hurled back and is regrouping in the wider space beyond. Now the real battle will begin.*'

'Acknowledged. We are still some half a mile behind you. You should deploy as compactly as possible. To spread out will allow them to bring their superior numbers to bear.'

'*I am aware of that, Lord Calgar. I will construct a defensive line and await the arrival of your troops. Once they have come up, we will resume the advance*.'

'You truly mean to attack them head on?'

'*There is little else for it. And what we face is mostly Chaos fodder – waves of lesser beings thrown in to pin us down. The Blood Keep is ahead. The elite forces of the enemy are within. I have no doubt that their master wishes to see us all committed before he looses them upon us.*'

'Very well. We will join you in the next hour or so, and then I will make an appraisal of the tactical situation.'

'*The tactical situation?*' The dominus seemed amused. 'T*he situation, Chapter Master, is that we must fight here and prevail, or fight here and die.*'

'So be it. Calgar out.'

TWENTY

Inquisitor Drake and his men had made their way along the wall of the great chamber – the Skull Chamber, he thought of it in his head – and were now almost a mile from the entrance. They had proceeded with all the stealth they could muster, creeping from mound to crater to wreck to stagnant pool, and were now laid up in a tangled mass of metallic debris that might once have been the coolant tubes of a voidship's drive section. There, in the dim, greenish light that pervaded the chamber, they sat withdrawn into the shadows, under cameleoline tarps, their vox turned down to a narrow-band whisper.

Drake had mapped out the walls of the keep in his head, and every foot of their visible length was etched into his trained mind; a foul memory which he nonetheless knew how to pick apart for any mote of advantage. And he thought he had found one; a sliver of hope. The enormous, fortified gates of the keep's curtain wall looked well-nigh impregnable, at least without armoured support or artillery to call upon. But there might be another way, almost overlooked. A way to enter the place without wading through a torrent of blood.

But even as Drake watched and calculated, the main gates of the Blood Keep opened with a brass clang, and an army poured out.

A long, dark mass speckled with metallic glints, it straggled across the open ground, amid the mounded skulls, and splashed through the shallow lake that served as moat to the Blood Keep. The column widened as it advanced, tangled and knotted ranks opening out, the hungry roar of its troops echoing in the humid air. It deployed before them in its thousands, perhaps a mile wide and many ranks deep. Among its humanoid files there towered great twisted beasts which gargled and bellowed. And on its flanks were swift-moving lupine shapes

which seemed some unholy cross between hound and reptile, horned and red-skinned with maws full of yellow teeth.

It took all of Inquisitor Drake's psychic powers to keep his own little band of men hidden from their keen searching senses as they coursed the wide wasteland that loomed out before the gathering army. And those powers were severely compromised by the daemonic psychic emanations of the beasts.

+Brother Ulfius, this is Drake. Listen to me. Hear my voice.+

It was like whispering into a gale. Drake could not chance a wide-band vox signal for fear of being picked up, and even sending out the minute psychic enquiry was dangerous enough. He was cut off from the Ultramarines, and could only watch, listen and examine the terrain and troops in front of him, looking for an opening, a weak spot which the Ultramarines might be able to exploit, once they arrived.

Though even they, he knew, could not hope to prevail alone against the host of the enemy that was forming up in front of the Blood Keep. Not just cultist filth but disciplined bodies of fighting men, their armour painted red or green. And Chaos Marines embedded with them, champions of their kind with tall-horned helms and power armour that had been reforged into plates of twisted, leering faces, adorned with skulls, streaming with flayed skins.

And looming above even these were terrible, scarlet-skinned daemons crowned with antlers, bearing swords as long as a man with blades that rippled and gleamed like snakes of flame. These seemed to be some kind of lesser daemons from the depths of the warp, souls twisted and destroyed until they were nothing more than vessels for the rage and hatred of the Blood God. Looking upon them, even Inquisitor Drake felt his heart fail him for a moment. To fight one of these things would be a fearful battle in itself, and there were many of them arrayed here. At some point in *Fury*'s past, the Geller field must have flickered or failed, to allow such creatures to board the hulk.

Emperor, send me the light of your ancient courage and insight. Help me see a way to rid ourselves of these abominations.

And then there was something else, a flicker of light in his clouded mind.

+Drake. I hear you. Speak again. See how I narrow the contact to a mere shining filament, undetectable, but so fragile. Listen to me now, and take hold of it. Speak to me, inquisitor. I listen.+

It was nothing more than the faintest murmur in the mental maelstrom that thundered about him, but it was there. Brother Ulfius was contacting him on a psychic skein that was so tenuous as to be almost inaudible. But it was enough.

It would have to be enough.

+I listen, Librarian, and I send you my sight. See what I see now. See the horde that awaits you. Warn Calgar. His doom is here.+

Was that his own thought, that last phrase, or something else? He was not sure, and it troubled him. Flashes of other thoughts were lighting up his mind's eye, and he had to fight to keep the message narrow, guarded, secure.

+He knows, Drake. The renegade Mechanicus are with us – we have a truce. We are coming, us and them. Coming to fight.+

Astonished, it took a few minutes for Drake to gather his thoughts again and refocus the psychic connection. He did not waste time on venting his incredulity, however, but got straight to the heart of the matter.

+There is another entrance to the keep, a postern on the left-hand side, some two miles in. It may be the only way.+

+Understood. Stand fast. We come.+

Nothing would be unguarded in this place, but Drake did not see how a frontal attack on the Chaos host before him could succeed. It would take several companies of Ultramarines to prevail there.

Hope is lost, the thought came to him. But he recognised the oozing despair for what it was; a groping tendril of Nurgle's baleful influence. He had felt such things before. He ignored it and, calling up the magnification in his helm's oculars, he scanned the ground to the left of the main gate, that blasted, debris-strewn plain with its crucified figures and broken wreckage. A small party might get a long way there without being seen, but only if the watchful eyes in the citadel beyond were elsewhere.

And then Regan tapped him lightly on the arm under the tarp, and pointed wordlessly. From the main entryway into the Skull Chamber a group of large figures was emerging. They were ten feet tall, reddish, metallic, and they moved with the steady clockwork of automata.

Drake recognised them at once; he had seen them in action before. Kastelans of the Adeptus Mechanicus, at least half a dozen of them. And after them came skitarii in their scores, and then the rattling, thunderous rumble of kataphrons, their tracks churning up the mud and sending it flying as they manoeuvred.

The Chaos host bayed its hate, surging forward and back like the waves of a tidal sea. But their leaders restrained them for now, and the forces of the Mechanicus renegades deployed before them without interference, opening out onto the plain. Near their rear there strode a taller, barely human figure on a skittering of many-jointed legs, its robe billowing out around it and more limbs

rising out of the tattered fabric. An Adeptus Mechanicus dominus, one of the generals of that kind. And now Drake understood many things, letting them all fall into place in his mind.

Calgar has made a devil's bargain, he thought. I did not think he could find such flexibility in that iron soul of his. I wonder what it has cost him?

But he dismissed the thought with an effort, though all his training, all his long experience told him that there was treachery in the air here, renegades selling out traitors.

'At least they will kill each other,' Kastiro said beside him in a murmur. 'Perhaps, my lord, it will even the odds some.'

Drake was about to reply when he saw the first Ultramarines issue from the tunnel in the wake of the Mechanicus troops. There was little of their blue parade-ground flash left now. They looked like men who had come through hell. And yet there was no obvious weariness to their movements. They shook out into squads like warriors come fresh and eager to the fight, and now Drake saw Marneus Calgar himself with his honour guard, and the four towering Terminators of First Company who strode alongside him, giant figures to inspire awe.

He felt hope again. Such warriors as these, such pride and honour. It lifted the heart – even one as cynical and corroded by distrust as his own.

He keyed up the private channel, hoping that the general chatter which now flooded the aether would disguise his transmission to any who were listening.

'My lord Calgar, I must speak with you.'

Marneus Calgar stood in the midst of the Ultramarines formation and heard the first cries of outrage, the half-stifled curses that broke out on the company vox as his brothers caught sight of the crucified Space Marines that dotted the plain of battle ahead.

He saw them himself, and for fully three seconds he stood there frozen, the rage flaring up a storm in his mind, the fury choking him. He had seen many terrible things in his long life, but to see his own kind impaled there, alive, enduring torture beyond the ken of mortal man – it kindled a wrath he had not known he could still feel.

Taste the anger. Savour it. Feel the thrill of rage in every limb – the joyous prospect of bloody slaughter, of justice, revenge. Death must come to those who did this. Embrace the fury, the black despair. Stare down into the pit and see the bottomless depths of it.

He shook his head, his eye stinging. ‘Formations!’ he barked, and now he shouted it out loud, augmenting his voice with his vox emitters so that it echoed all over this end of the plain. ‘Ultramarines, stand fast – sergeants, see to your squads! Deploy Devastators. Stand with me, my brothers!’

A roar came out of Fifth Company, an inarticulate bellow of anger and acknowledgement. The squads shook out into chequerboard formation, the heavy weapons deployed in the gaps between them, the whole company as perfectly mustered as if it were training on Martial Square. But it was a depleted force, just over sixty Ultramarines of Fifth left standing now.

Calgar listened as Drake told him of the postern gate out to the flank of the Blood Keep. It might do – it was doubtless a trap of some sort, but it was an alternative.

‘If we make for it straight away, and the enemy will simply detach forces to block us,’ Calgar said. He had brought Captain Galenus into the vox exchange and now Fifth’s commander spoke up.

‘My lord, we must make them commit, heavily – here where we are. They must send everything they possess against us – perhaps then there will be a chance for a small party to make it out on the left.’

‘Agreed,’ Calgar said. He paused in thought. ‘Caito, I must go. Whatever lies beyond that side gate is meant for me – I am sure of it.’

‘I agree, Chapter Master.’

‘I would rather stay with Fifth – you know that. But I cannot. And you will have to fight on without me, for as long as you can, drawing in as many of the enemy as possible.’

‘Acknowledged.’

‘One thing, though. I shall lead out the company as soon as the Mechanicus troops are engaged. We will advance in echelon, edging leftwards as far as we can. As soon as the main body of the enemy has contacted our Mechanicus allies–’ the word had a sarcastic emphasis – ‘we will engage the enemy right flank. That way it will be easier for me to leave the battle-line. And it will also improve your chances on the field. If you have to retreat, withdraw out to the left, towards the side gate, and make for it. Join me if you can, Caito.’

‘I will, my lord.’

Drake’s voice broke in. ‘The dominus’ forces are moving up, Chapter Master. The enemy advances.’

‘Stay low, Drake. I will give the signal to rendezvous after I break free of the line. We will enter this evil hold together.’

‘As you wish, Chapter Master.’

A roar sounded ahead and the entire side of the great skull-cavern lit up with a long volley of arc-rifle fire, light from the skitarii, and heavier from the kataphrons. A salvo of missiles streaked out in its wake – and half the frontage of the Chaos forces disappeared in a welter of explosions and jagged welts of blue-white energy discharges.

But through the barrage the enemy came charging with a rage-mottled bellow that made the foetid earth under their feet tremble. Out of the smoke and flame they came hurtling, hundreds of them in the first wave; cultists, mostly, the cannon-fodder of the Ruinous Powers, but here and there a tall champion in power armour, one of the Broken, who had once been the proud Viridian Consuls. As they advanced they gave not a glance to the crucified forms of those who had once been their brothers, but urged on the shrieking hordes about them and fired their defiled bolters.

‘Captain,’ Calgar said, flexing his fists in the Gauntlets of Ultramar, ‘we will deploy left in echelon, at the double. Brother Starn, your veterans are with me. Move, brothers. The real battle begins now.’

The Ultramarines broke into a run, maintaining their squads. With amazing speed they sprinted out to the left of the Mechanicus troops, who were now fighting all along their line, and re-formed out on the open flank of the Chaos army. Intent on the first assault, the enemy were barely aware of their presence. Calgar had time to shake out his battle-brothers afresh, the Devastators of Ninth set up their weapons, and Fifth’s line was drawn up once more. Behind it, the Terminators came stomping up, moving more deliberately than their power-armoured brethren.

The first wave of the enemy had been annihilated, a storm of fire mowing them down before they got to within a hundred yards of the Mechanicus formations. But the second was already on the way, and it was heavier, more disciplined. This wave put down a steady covering fire and advanced one section at a time. It was made up of crazed troopers in the broken and defiled remnants of Astra Militarum carapace armour, plus a swarm of bounding, slathering Chaos spawn and enormous slithering beasts. Leading it were three scarlet daemons, their immense swords flaming above their horned heads, their forms shining bright as freshly flayed carcasses.

This line went to ground some three hundred yards from Dominus Hagnon-Cro and his forces, and the beasts within it pelted forward under a hammering fire which knocked down a dozen skitarii. Calgar saw one kataphron blow up in a

spectacular explosion which sprayed out burning promethium for thirty yards in every direction. A horned daemon screeched and laughed as it bounded into the Mechanicus line, and at its first blow the hellish blade it wielded cut three skitarii clean in half. Then a kastelan lurched towards it, and the two began a close-quarter duel, oblivious to the carnage surrounding them.

The main body of the enemy second wave moved up now, firing as they came. The Mechanicus kastelans strode forward of their own troops to meet it, and dealt out terrible violence to the leading elements. The line of Chaos troops was broken into wedges by the big automatons, men sent flying through the air, dismembered, set ablaze in a curtain of promethium. But the infantry coursed around the kastelans like waves pouring round rocks, and engaged the skitarii behind. The kataphrons drove forward into the fray, heavy weapons blazing, power claws crackling and sizzling with spilled blood, their tracked chassis riding over whole squads of the enemy, while to the rear of the Mechanicus line more of their kind stayed clear and sent heavy ordnance arcing over the tangled frontage of their own troops and into the packed main body of the Chaos host.

Calgar heard a voice on the vox. It was Dominus Hagnon-Cro.

'*Chapter Master, I am fully committed. I hope you see now that I do not mean to betray you. I have waited to make a fight like this for a long time – longer than you can imagine. Should you choose to aid my forces now, I would take it very kindly.*'

There was an element of strain to the voice now that Calgar had not heard before. He smiled inside his beaked helm.

His Ultramarines were standing silent to the left of the Chaos host, some four hundred yards out. The enemy was so concentrated on the fight to its front that the flank had been ignored, but he could see the formations coming up on that flank now, being set in place to counter his brothers. It was time.

'Dominus, the Ultramarines will attack at once. May the Emperor reward us with victory.'

'*My thanks, Chapter Master.*'

Then Calgar switched to the company vox. 'Captain Galenus, Fifth will engage on your command. Keep clear of close-quarter fighting for as long as you can. I want to bleed them, Caito.'

'*Acknowledged, my lord. Courage and honour.*'

'Courage and honour.'

The order went out, and the Ultramarines took a split second to line up their targets, their bolter muzzles momentarily sketching out small movements as the

weapons followed the reticule in their autosenses. Not a shot would be wasted. Their targeting displays were interlinked, so that no two Ultramarines would fire on the same foe.

'Open fire,' Galenus said calmly.

And Chaplain Murtorius bellowed, 'For Macragge!'

The ancient war cry was taken up as the first volley thundered out, and a hedge of bright tracer streaked across the battlefield to scythe into the flank of the Chaos host. It was a deadly, supremely accurate barrage of disciplined fire, sent with all the venom and anger which was burning in the hearts of the Ultramarines for these, their bitterest foes. And it struck home with the force of a thunderbolt.

The enemy right flank was torn up and shattered, close on two hundred of the howling foe taken down in the space of five seconds. The heavy self-propelled bolter rounds blasted through two and three of the enemy at a time, shattering armour, dismembering bodies, decapitating and disembowelling cultists and feral guardsmen, slamming into the Chaos champions and making them stagger. Calgar saw a Bloodletter take the strike of a Devastator missile full in the chest. The creature exploded, its daemon sword whirling high across the battlefield trailing a tail of yellow flame.

'Secondary targets,' Galenus said. 'A home for every bullet, brothers.'

There was dark laughter on the vox, but it ended with a second volley, as murderous as the first. The Ultramarines were firing single shots or three-round bursts, and the heavy weapons were picking out the commanders in the enemy ranks, Champions, daemons and Chaos Marines. These were taken down one by one, reducing that flank of the field to a churned-up charnel house, the ground under the feet of the enemy quickening into a mire of steaming blood and body parts.

Calgar stood and watched with his honour guards and Starn's Terminators standing around him. His autosenses dampened the noise and fury of the battle, and he looked it up and down with a cold eye, gauging the enemy tactics, the dispositions of the Mechanicus troops, and the fresh formations which were moving out now on the left to reinforce the shattered flank.

There was not much tactical acumen on display in the ranks of the enemy; they were throwing numbers at him rather than trying to out-think him – the failing of Chaos since time immemorial.

But his brothers were outnumbered ten to one on this section of the field alone, while the dominus' troops were now embroiled in a close, deadly fight that

stretched for fully half a mile across the great Skull Chamber. And the Blood Keep, far behind the Chaos lines, was still quiet, dead-seeming.

Calgar did not believe that the enemy commander had yet committed all his forces, or even the bulk of them. The Witness, or whatever he called himself, wanted to bring all his enemies into the fight before he showed his true strength.

'Keep them at a distance, captain,' he told Galenus again. Fifth's captain was standing with Brothers Ameronn, Philo, Salvator, Ulfius and Chaplain Murtorius just behind the line squads. 'Don't let them draw you in.'

'*Aye, my lord. Hear me, Fifth – prepare to withdraw by fire and manoeuvre on my word. No one is to advance without orders.*'

The squad sergeants acknowledged. Calgar saw senior sergeant Greynius walking up and down the rear of the line, checking on ammunition and casualties. As yet, there were a few minor wounds, but not a single battle-brother had fallen.

'Devastators, kill their leaders,' Calgar went on. 'Don't allow them to re-form. We must keep them in confusion.'

They met savagery with discipline, hatred with faith, as they had in all their long, proud history. There was not another race in the Galaxy who could outmatch the Adeptus Astartes in a firefight, and Calgar meant to keep that edge as long as he could.

Half a mile away on Calgar's left flank, Inquisitor Drake watched the battle rage with a mixture of brutal elation and professional detachment.

Part of him wanted to be in the fighting with Calgar's troops, dealing out death to the twisted scum who profaned the very fabric of the universe with their existence. But he held himself in check and watched as the Ultramarines line chewed up the flank of the Chaos army, while in the centre, the troops of the renegade Mechanicus fought in a desperate milling slaughter. He saw Dominus Hagnon-Cro himself wade into the fight as the line wavered, and the tech-priest took on a Bloodletter in single combat, slaying the daemon with a shattering blow of his cog-headed power-staff, mechadendrite limbs rising out of his torn robes to blast back the enemy with plasma-pistol and arc-fire.

The Mechanicus line steadied, and the aether was filled with the clicking spurts of binharic communications as the dominus' minions re-formed their units and sent in their reserves. Only four of the great kastelans were still on their feet now, but they fought on like towering engines of slaughter, carving great swathes of mayhem in the enemy lines. Drake saw a daemonic hound grasped by one and

flung fifty yards through the air, its innards streaming out of its ripped side like a bloody flag. Another kastelan broke open the skull of a red-skinned daemon in its massive clawed fists while the creature's sword lay buried in its mechanical bowels, sparking and flaring with diabolical energies. The renegade Mechanicus forces on *Fury* had been waiting a thousand years for this day, and they intended to have their victory.

But the forces opposing them seemed in no way diminished by the fearful slaughter they were enduring. And now Drake saw the towering gates of the Blood Keep boom open once more, and from its yawning darkness a second army began to march out, scarlet and green banners held high, roaring with eagerness to join the fight.

'Chapter Master–'

'*I see it,*' Calgar said on the vox. '*There can be no victory here, not against these odds. They are merely toying with us. The real enemy is in that stronghold, biding his time.*'

'I shall join you.'

'*Not yet. I intend to draw out as many of them as I can before we make our move. Keep me informed as to the status of that side gate.*'

'It is deserted.'

'*I am not surprised. He is dangling it in front of us.*'

'Is it wisdom then, to take that bait?'

'*We are low on options, inquisitor. But I do not intend to walk blindly into all his traps. I mean to upset his calculations here, on the field of battle, before we try for it.*'

'How?'

Drake sensed the cold smile even over the vox.

'*By killing more of this scum than he intended to lose. Wait for my word, Drake, and then be prepared to move fast.*'

'As you wish, Chapter Master.' Drake was alarmed, but he trusted Calgar. If there was one thing the Lord of Macragge never made, it was an idle boast.

TWENTY-ONE

The second army was splashing through the stinking moat that surrounded the Blood Keep, extending their frontage yard by yard and coming on at a run. Before them fanned out a screen of flesh hounds, baying with rabid hatred, their eyes gleaming and the water steaming on their crested backs.

This formation came on at a gallop, and was slammed by a heavy volley of fire from the left-flank squads of Fifth Company. But the momentum of the great daemonic beasts was too great to halt. Though dozens went down, a score or more made it all the way into the midst of the Ultramarines line, and there set about them with snapping jaws and rending claws, the impact of the heavy creatures knocking many of the Space Marines off their feet with a thunderous crash.

Brother Tersius was in the midst of that howling scrum. He took down two of the Chaos hounds with headshots before the creatures were upon him. Shunted aside by one that raced past him, he felt the horny excrescences of the creature tear the outer skin of his armour and gouge a furrow in the ceramite. He drew his gladius and stabbed at the hound as it seized Brother Darius in its smoking maw and lifted the Ultramarine clear off the ground.

Tersius' blade took the creature deep in its ribs, broke through two, and carried on into its dark heart. The beast collapsed, bellowing, and Tersius finished it off with a round in the head that blasted an eye free of its massive skull.

He helped up Darius. His brother had a mangled wreck of mashed armour and bleeding flesh for an arm, but the bleeding soon stopped, halted in its tracks by the Larraman organ. Darius sank to one knee, then rose again and drew his bolt pistol, firing single shots at the other Chaos beasts that were whirling among

them. ‘My thanks, brother.’

Tersius grunted a wordless acknowledgement as he slashed and fired, left and right, amber runes springing up in his helm display, his autosenses tuning out the deafening shrieks of the beasts that coursed around them, the rattling gunfire, the all-encompassing roar of the battle that rose up on every side.

He was smashed off his feet by another of the creatures that had come up on his left, out of nowhere. It lunged for his face, the breath steaming out of that snapping muzzle, the yellow teeth as long as his fingers. He dropped his bolter, strove to hold off the jaws, stabbing with his gladius. But though the blade pierced its hide time and time again, the hound settled both forefeet on him and forced its great head downwards until the teeth scraped his helm. Then there was a flash of light, a great blare of noise which his autosenses could not quite protect him from, and the hound was off him, flung free. He climbed to his feet, retrieving his bolter. Beside him towered a Terminator, the storm bolter roaring out from one fist. It was Brother Starn.

‘Up, up, brother,’ Starn said. ‘This is no time to take a rest.’ And he strode forward, batting aside another flesh hound with a thumping crackle of his armoured fist that took the thing’s head clean off, then firing a blaze of storm-bolter rounds that took down another.

‘Re-form,’ Sergeant Gaden said on the vox. ‘Withdraw thirty yards. On me, brothers. Pick up your feet.’

‘Thank you, brother,’ Tersius told Starn.

‘Move off,’ Starn said. ‘I will cover you.’

The Ultramarines line bent back. The flesh hounds were all dead, but they had taken a toll. Tersius saw Apothecary Philo bending over three slain brethren, retrieving their gene-seed with his narthecium, ignoring the shots that whined past and clipped his armour.

The Terminators of First covered the withdrawal, and at the sight of those four massive figures, the advance of the second Chaos formation seemed to check for a moment, as if even they quailed at the thought of attacking such warriors. But it was only for a second. They came on again, waving their banners and roaring out insults and curses which were lost in the awesome sea of noise that now rose up in a storm on all sides. They drew out into a great crescent, widening as though to swallow up the Ultramarines, overlapping them. There were more of the Broken in this force, towering over the lesser warriors and cultists. And now the stabbing lance of heavy bolter fire began to burst out towards Fifth Company in lines of tracer.

The Terminators fell back into reserve once more, and Captain Galenus detached four brethren of Ninth with melta-guns and missile launchers to reinforce the harried left.

Marneus Calgar watched Galenus' dispositions with approval, his gaze ranging over the battlefield. He had known scenes like this since he was a boy, centuries of carnage which his cold intellect dissected and analysed, a cogitator of slaughter. He was able to identify the weak spots that were going to arise in the next few minutes, and he was already planning past them.

'Captain Galenus, I want you to start peeling squads off from right to left, by fireteams. The line will move left in echelon.'

'Acknowledged.'

Calgar was going to shift the Ultramarines line sideways, a perilous move with so few troops, but he had to counter the advance of this second army. If it managed to outflank his brothers, then it would all be over. He looked over the Mechanicus lines. They were holding there, though now they were fighting atop mounds of dead. Hagnon-Cro had lost a third of his troops, and the enemy was trying to move out on his right. There was only a skirmish line of skitarii out in that direction, a very thin line indeed.

He was about to call up the dominus on vox when a sight stopped him. From the entrance to the great Skull Chamber at the rear of the renegade Mechanicus forces, a new body of figures was marching out. Skitarii and sagitarii in scarlet cloaks, more kataphrons, and another maniple of kastelans. Apparently, Dominus Hagnon-Cro had kept a little something up the sleeve of his robe.

Calgar contacted the Adeptus Mechanicus renegade.

'Dominus, I intend to draw the enemy out to our left. If you have anything in the way of reserves at that point, then I suggest you strike as they expose their flank to counter me. That way this second army can be thrown back.'

'*I will do as you suggest.*'

'Where is Magos Fane?'

There was a momentary pause. '*He is fighting as a loyal servant of the Omnissiah should, with his troops and mine.*'

'You mean to assault the Blood Keep itself, I take it.'

'*I do. I have waited a long time for this day, Chapter Master.*'

The vox cut out.

Fifth Company was now sidling leftwards and pulling back at the same time, drawing out the second Chaos army that had issued from the Blood Keep. It was

a delicate manoeuvre, but Galenus was conducting it superbly. He had always been a master of squad tactics.

This move stretched out the advancing enemy, and they were coming forward with little thought for their open flank, confident that their fellows were keeping the Mechanicus forces occupied. But in left rear of the renegade Mechanicus line the reserve was building up, maniple by maniple. Calgar noted it with approval. One thing about Mechanicus troops; they could be counted upon to stand and fight, and die where they stood.

Hagnon-Cro was letting his front line bleed so that he could launch a surprise attack with his fast-arriving reserves. It was as well done as Calgar had ever seen, and he made a swift mental reappraisal of the dominus' tactical abilities. The creature was able, cunning and ruthless. He would prove a worthy foe, if it came down to a last struggle between them.

Calgar looked up and down the thin line of Ultramarines that were fighting in front of him. He felt proud of them, as proud as a father with worthy sons. And he felt also the grief of a father as he watched them fight, and fall.

Even on Cold Steel Ridge, he had not had to struggle against such despair, for he had been fighting on Macragge itself, for the life of his home world. Here, he stood on unholy ground, and in order to cleanse it he would have to order Fifth Company to its destruction.

There would be no triumph in this place, no true victory. His brothers would obey him and fight until they died, one by one, and if they were lucky, then he might be able to make their deaths meaningful. He might be able to make the universe that little bit cleaner. It was the best he could hope for – a meaningful death.

And yet, and yet, as he stood there and watched his battle-brothers mow down the advancing tide of hate and madness, he could not help but respond to their valour, the honour that bound them all. It uplifted him, made him shake off his despair. He remembered something Guilliman had once said, on surveying the aftermath of a bloody battle, back in the blurred mists of time.

It is well that war is so terrible, or we would grow too fond of it.

The Adeptus Mechanicus reserve assault went in, as Calgar had said it should, right into the flank of the advancing second Chaos army. While the Ultramarines chewed them up from the front, fast-striding kastelans and rumbling kataphrons sped ahead of the main Mechanicus forces and hurtled into the arrogantly exposed flank of the enemy formations. The Chaos regiments tried to swing

round to meet them, but that only confused their ranks more, and it was a bawling, packed mass that the troops of Hagnon-Cro hurtled into, with no attempt at a firefight, simply a base urge to come to grips with their enemies.

The enemy advance was thrown into utter confusion, and into that confusion, Fifth Company poured a torrent of fire, their line now well beyond the foremost enemy ranks. A terrible slaughter ensued, and the battlefield, which had begun to seem fluid, snarled up once more.

Calgar watched it happen, saw how the Chaos forces were now irretrievably embroiled in a bitter close-quarter fight on both the centre and right of their formations, and gave the order.

'Fall back.'

Both Chaos armies were now fighting the renegade Mechanicus troops, and his own brothers were free of that murderous embrace, and he meant to keep them free.

'Drake, I am sending you coordinates now. Meet me there.'

'*Acknowledged.*'

'Captain Galenus, screen the left flank. Keep withdrawing and do not let them come to grips with you at any cost. If you have to detach a squad to hold up the enemy, then do so. It is imperative that you screen my next movement. Understood?'

'Understood, my lord.'

'Keep falling back, but do not lose contact with the enemy.' Then Calgar realised that he was giving too much advice. 'We go now to try and gut the heart out of this abomination, Inquisitor Drake and I. You must cover us, captain.'

'Fifth Company will do its duty, my lord.'

'I know it.'

Calgar turned aside. He looked at Brother Ohtar and Brother Morent, his honour guards. Each had nearly two centuries of service with the Chapter. There was not much left of their gold ornamentation and they stood in their armour like battered metallic statues, leaning on the hafts of their power axes.

Calgar raised up a bloody fist.

'Roboute Guilliman once wore this. He took it from a Chaos chieftain, and redeemed it with his faith and his valour. I ask you now to follow me the same way his brothers followed him. Into darkness.'

'My lord,' Ohtar said, 'we would follow you through hell itself.'

Calgar called up Brother Starn.

'With me. We go now to fulfil our mission. Fifth must fight alone.'

‘*Acknowledged, lord,*’ Starn said.

Then Calgar led off, moving as fast as the Terminators could manage. Behind him, the cacophony of the battle swelled up into an unholy din, like the roar of an unhinged god.

Seven Ultramarines powered across the desolate expanse of skull-scattered grey and puddled earth, moving swiftly, the Terminators in the party struggling to keep up.

And on their left, a small group of men left their hiding place and started pelting across the steaming plain to join them. Inquisitor Drake and his five surviving retainers.

And less than half a mile behind there rose a third group, a small knot of figures who left their hidden hollow and began following slowly in the wake of the inquisitor, unseen and unremarked. They wore robes that might once have been scarlet, but were now ragged and faded by hard service, and they moved with the singular ease of those whose legs were not made of flesh and blood at all.

TWENTY-TWO

It was hard to walk away from the fight, as hard a thing as Marneus Calgar had ever known. Drake and his men joined the Ultramarines, and were only just able to keep pace with the giant warriors despite the fact that they were as fit and hardened as human soldiers could be. Were it not for the presence of the lumbering Terminators, they would have been left behind, nonetheless, for Calgar set a pace that had the First Company veterans edging their reactors into the red to match.

They covered a mile in something over five minutes, and paused to take stock, scanning the wide ground behind them.

'I never suspected Space Marines could be quite so swift,' Drake said, panting.

Calgar was looking around him, the beak-like Corvus helm turning this way and that.

'How far?' he asked Brother Ohtar.

'Four hundred and sixty yards, my lord.'

'Inquisitor – we need you to use your psychic skills and look ahead of us.'

There was no gainsaying Marneus Calgar at this moment. The Chapter Master had a tone in his voice that was not far off outright violence. Drake closed his eyes, steadied his breathing, and searched out with the disciplines he had been taught.

Out he reached, as quietly as his hammering heart would let him. His psychic abilities were being thrown off by the sheer level of unadulterated carnage which was in full glorious rage across the Skull Cavern, but he rose over it like a bird soaring, ignoring the lesser troubles, the blood, the mayhem, the lives suffering

and ending under him. He had been taught to do this.

He breathed deep, and worked beyond the corrupting rage and despair that infested *Fury* like a disease.

There was a baleful power in the Blood Keep. He felt it as a man feels the sun's heat on his face. The massive citadel, though by no means deserted, did not teem with the foul squirm of life which was fighting across the battlefield. Most of the enemy forces had indeed been drawn out. But those who were left, who remained silent and unseen within the fortress, were the most formidable of all. They had been kept back, waiting.

Then Drake felt the counter-lunge that rebuffed his psychic enquiry and sent it reeling back across the battlefield, a spike of pain erupting in his skull as it impacted. He had to stop a moment and collect himself, work past the needling agony in his mind. He had seldom touched on such a formidable presence before.

'The walls are almost unguarded,' he told Calgar at last. 'From what I can make out, most of the enemy who remain within them are gathered in a central location, around a single, directing presence, a psyche of immense power.'

'So much the better,' Calgar retorted. 'Guide us, inquisitor. You shall be our compass in this foul place. Direct us to that location.'

They powered onwards, at a more reasonable pace this time. They passed crucified Viridian Consuls in their progress, and Brother Morenich raised his storm bolter to put one of them out of his misery, but Calgar stopped him. 'Save your ammunition, brother. When we are done, this thing will have been destroyed, and they shall all of them be at peace at last.'

'I pray, my lord, I have the chance to visit justice on those who did this.'

'I promise you will, brother.'

Calgar was laconic, self-contained, continually monitoring the way ahead and then stopping to glance back at the battle they had left behind. His face could not be read in the stark helm, but his fingers clenched, and the energy fields surrounding the Gauntlets of Ultramar crackled and spat as though feeding off the Chapter Master's anger.

They splashed through the shallow, sucking expanse of the moat, the water rising no higher than the Adeptus Astartes' knees – though it was over Drake's thighs. Even through his sealed armour, the touch of the stuff felt unclean.

He felt the sweat trickling down his nose inside his helm and longed to wipe it away.

'There it is, bearing two eighty, two hundred yards.'

The walls of the Blood Keep towered over them, running with slime and moisture. They were an eclectic mix of stone, steel and ferrocrete, all festooned with green moss which seemed to writhe in unsettling patterns, giving the battlements a singular crawling aspect. Drake thought he saw bloodshot eyes there, embedded in the very walls, and pink-grey tendrils uncurled to grasp feebly at the humid air. More rose up under his feet, and he crushed them beneath his boots as he splashed along in the wake of Marneus Calgar.

He heard his own men curse and pray alternately, sobbing for breath. When Kastiro stumbled, the foul tentacles sought to latch onto him, entangling his hands, his weapon. It was one of the Terminators, Brother Antonus, who physically picked up Drake's struggling retainer and ripped him free of the earth's foul clutch.

'You go down here, you're liable to stay down,' the veteran said. 'Keep up.'

Kastiro gasped his thanks, and on they jogged, until they were right before the wall itself, and the unmanned gate that nestled within it. Behind them, the battle raged on as though it had forgotten them.

Close to, the postern did not seem small at all; it was perhaps twenty-five feet high and half as broad, welded steel reinforced with bands of adamantium, all caked with filth and fecund growth like running sores. Runes were graven across it, and the eight-pointed star of Chaos, as well as the antler-like rune of Khorne.

Calgar stood there, and they stood behind him as though waiting for some sign.

Drake reached out to his fellow psyker, Brother Ulfius, and found a howling cacophony out on the plain beyond – and in the midst of it the Ultramarines Librarian was encased within a psychic shield, lashing out periodically in vicious explosions of power that burned up whole squads of the enemy and blasted others into blank drooling oblivion.

Fifth Company was still withdrawing, but the enemy were gaining the measure of the Mechanicus forces, and were now sending fresh formations out on both flanks. The fighting was reaching a desperate crescendo.

But no doubt Calgar knew that. The Chapter Master looked the gate before him up and down, and then without warning he charged forward and slammed his fists into it with two vast hollow booms. The entire structure quivered, and they were all deluged in falling muck and fragments of broken masonry that tumbled from above.

The Gauntlets of Ultramar shook and shimmered as Calgar slammed them again and again into the gate, lightning bolting out of them in a corona of flaring

discharges. The disruptor fields that encased them made the metal of the gate melt and run, molten rivulets pouring bright and steaming down to the ground, the structure groaning and shrieking in a howl of overstressed alloys and rending steel.

And Drake saw now the true depths of the rage that burned in Marneus Calgar. He might direct his brothers on the battlefield with cold, unsparing efficiency, but here, in the momentous crushing blows he struck the gate, was the Lord of Macragge's genuine, unfettered fury. The massive gauntlets he wore struck again and again at the tall gateway, until it buckled under the blows, and then he grasped great chunks of the door and ripped them clean away, like a man setting his fingers to gouge a bank of soft clay. Within a few minutes, the gate lay in sundered, steaming ruins, the hot metal spitting and creaking as it cooled in broken pieces on the wet ground.

'Now, let us go,' Calgar said, and his voice was low and calm, but something in it set the hairs rising on the back of Drake's neck. He had never before sensed such pent-up violence in another being that purported to be human. Even the First Company veterans seemed subdued by it.

He hoped that Calgar could retain his iron control, and keep the boiling rage in check for when it was needed.

Beyond the ruined gate was a broad avenue, running at a slight incline, up to a series of immense red towers which formed the heart of the Blood Keep. Under their feet, the ground was no longer wet earth, but slick, shining metal, set in plates like the pebbles of a riverbed, and running with foul effluent in which fragments of body tissue floated. It was hotter. Drake consulted his helm readings and registered a temperature jump of some fifteen degrees, and the radioactivity that flooded all the vast Skull Chamber was steepening also. Were an unprotected man to walk in this place, he would be dead in a few days, and as it was, Drake's own suit systems were all at their limits trying to compensate.

The roadways within the Blood Keep were all but deserted, but there were dark shapes scurrying about, and as they continued onwards they twice ran into slithering beasts which Calgar's honour guards chopped into pieces, the Axes of Ultramar slicing them to shreds and steaming unharmed in the acid that sprang forth from their carcasses. The two tall Ultramarines had once been glittering figures of blue and gold, but now they had been seared and burned and battered until their armour was the colour of dull, blackened iron. Yet their fighting prowess was undimmed, and they strode along swiftly behind their Chapter

Master showing no sign of weariness.

'Where to, inquisitor?' Calgar barked, pausing to look around. Their entrance had been marked now, and in the distance bodies of the enemy were forming up. A shining volley of lasgun fire zipped through the party, and one bolt fizzed off Calgar's ornate shoulder-plate, leaving a smoking dot of black carbon behind.

Drake pointed. 'The towers – there is a tall, sharp one in the midst, very like the prow of a voidship. It is in there, my lord.'

'We shall have to find a way in. Onwards, brothers. While we dawdle here, Fifth Company fights for its life.' He powered off again, towards the cruel angular tower which loomed ahead, fully a thousand feet high, dull red, venting steam from a hundred orifices, and foul with foetid, luminous growth, like garlanded intestines wrapped steaming around a jagged megalith.

There was real fighting then, as warbands of Chaos troops began to converge on the interlopers. The Ultramarines stood back to back and loosed blazing, superbly placed volleys of storm-bolter fire, and bursts of promethium for the charging rabble who got too close. The roadways and streets of the Blood Keep, so empty a few minutes before, were filling rapidly.

Scores, hundreds of the enemy were streaming out of the shadows, and not only cultists, but tall Champions of the Broken also. Some of these screamed challenges that were barely rational speech at all, their power armour decorated with Khorne's rune as well as their own defiled badges, and they came running at Calgar and his entourage like things demented.

They were brought down by well-aimed shots, sent to their knees. Even shattered by gunfire, they kept trying to crawl into contact with the Ultramarines. One of them had his helm blown off to reveal the pale, noble features of a Space Marine, hardly different from his foes; but he snarled like a rabid beast, and his eyes were full of darkness, nothing human left in them at all. Brother Morent decapitated him with a sweep of his axe, and booted his body aside.

They came to the base of the tall blade-shaped tower, and there they found huge double-hatchways yawning open, and beyond, a wide staircase going up into darkness, fashioned out of immense blocks of unmortared stone.

'These were blast doors,' Drake shouted on the vox, trying to make his voice carry over the shrieks of the gathering enemy. 'This whole structure was a ship hull at one time.' He peered up and down. 'It looks like the prow of a strike cruiser, half buried here.'

'My lord, the enemy is closing in. If you must go up, then my brothers and I should stay here and hold the doors,' Brother Starn said. 'Otherwise they will

rush us from the rear.'

'Acknowledged,' Calgar said. 'But Starn, be ready for my word. I will call on you, before the end.'

'We shall not fail you,' Starn said grimly, and he blasted back a howling knot of the enemy with a billow of bright, crackling promethium, setting a dozen of them alight as they closed in on him, and striding forward to kick the burning, shrieking wretches out of his field of fire.

'We will stand here as long as you need us, my lord.'

Calgar turned to Drake and his men, a swift appraisal from the cruel blankness of the Corvus helm.

'Follow me. We do not stop.'

Then he turned and began running up the massive staircase into the dark, and it was all Drake could do to keep up with him.

TWENTY-THREE

Captain Galenus changed the magazine in his bolt pistol. He had four left on his belt, eighty rounds. Not much, all things considered, but the chainsword still glittered in his right fist as its teeth sped too fast for eyesight to follow, spraying black blood as it thrummed in his grasp.

'Sergeant Greynius, report,' he said, snapping off a round which took a Chaos Marine clear in the centre of his helm's mouth-grille, and then stepping forward to thrust the chainsword into the vulnerable join between neck and breastplate. The weapon shuddered in his hand and the foe toppled, hands going up to its throat, a black fountain steaming up into air that seemed already saturated with the stuff.

Greynius' voice came up on the vox. '*There are forty-six of us still alive. All the ammunition has been shared out. Brother Philo reports that the gene-seed of eight brethren is lost along with their bodies.*' A pause, heavy with unexpressed anger. '*In retreat, we leave them behind.*'

'We will all be left on the battlefield today, brother,' Galenus said. 'It no longer matters. It is how we go that counts.'

He cast a glance around the chaos that enveloped Fifth Company. Third squad had been detached to slow up the enemy advance and they had bought the rest of the company precious time to make up some distance, before being overwhelmed. Seven battle-brothers, gone in the space of as many minutes, and the howling mob which had consumed them was now on the move again, like a great beast whose hunger could not be sated.

Fifth was now some half a mile from the side gate which Marneus Calgar had disappeared into, and as far again from the Adeptus Mechanicus forces that were

still battling hard near the cavern entrance. The heaviest formations of the enemy were still trying to come up, but more lightly equipped companies were streaming out over the plain in their hundreds, desperate to come to grips with the Ultramarines. They took no notice of casualties – and Fifth had cut them down like grass – for they had the magnitude to soak up any number of dead.

They were things unhinged, human once perhaps, but now mere vessels of flesh and bone, filled with the madness of Khorne, the reckless despair of the Plague Father. Death and killing were all that mattered in the broken remnants of their ruined minds. Galenus had seen many of them laugh as they were cut down, taking twisted joy in the violence of their own extinction.

But Fifth still held together – the surviving squads, what was left of them, held their formations and their discipline. And still, Galenus drew them back, yard by bloody yard, retreating towards the farther walls of the Blood Keep wherein his Chapter Master had disappeared. Calgar would need him, before it was over – he was sure of that. And he did not intend to let the Lord of Macragge down.

A trio of Chaos hounds was burned up by the jagged blue-white lightning which arced out of Librarian Ulfius' fingers. They yowled and shrieked as they burned, becoming black, jerking bonecases, skulls falling apart under the psychic assault. Ulfius staggered a little as he stepped back into the line, and it was Chaplain Murtorius who beheaded another of the beasts with his crozius before it could leap on the Company Librarian.

'Don't go to sleep on me now, brother!' the Bull shouted, and he stepped forward with the blazing crozius held high.

'What glory it is, to fight and die for the Emperor. We are lucky men today, my brothers – today we pit our faith and strength against the worst of all enemies, and today we send them back to the abyss whence they came!'

There was an answering growl from the embattled Ultramarines around him. The company champion and banner bearer, Gerd Ameronn, joined him to bulk out the thin blue line. *Warspite* gleamed in his fist, burned clean by the power field that surrounded the ancient blade.

'Fine speech, brother,' he said.

'I felt it was called for,' and there was humour in Murtorius' tone, despite the grim skull helm he turned to Ameronn.

Something new was speeding towards them. They felt the thunder of it through the earth under their feet. The hordes of Chaos rabble that had been surging forward now slowed, then halted – but they were in no way disheartened or in retreat. They began chanting 'Khorne, Khorne, Khorne!'

There was a sound like a stampede of enormous herd animals, and the air shook. And then out of the ranks of the Chaos troops there burst a scarlet avalanche of galloping shapes, huge, horned, bellowing. And on their backs a band of scarlet daemons waving their long blades, black with the evil of the warp.

'What misshapen monsters approach,' Chaplain Murtorius said. 'The juggernauts of their foul god. Now, brothers, we shall truly be tested.'

The onset of the immense, heavy, red-hued creatures was enough to strike terror in the heart of any man. They were the size of rhinoxes and the daemons on their backs goaded them on with roaring shrieks.

'Open fire!' Captain Galenus ordered. 'Aim for the mounts. Bring them to their knees, Fifth.'

Then the cavalcade of juggernauts slammed into the Ultramarines line and smashed it to pieces.

<Protocol Omega zero one is proceeding, location sent, outlines as per plan, all systems at eighty-six per cent of nominal. Two adjuncts have been lost but four remain.>

<Excellent. Proceed as far as Protocol Omega zero one allows, and then utilise your own judgement. Exercise due caution in that location and maintain vox binary bursts at regular intervals.> A pause.

<You have done well, Magos Fane.>

<I shall fulfil your wishes. There is no alternative.>

<Yes. We are fighting hard, here, and we will prevail upon the field, but this is all a mere distraction. The Witness must meet with Marneus Calgar. And it must fall. Only then can our destiny be fulfilled, and *Fury* reclaimed by its rightful owners.>

<I understand, and I agree… What of Calgar himself?>

<He, too, will fall. The abomination which awaits him is too strong. They will be the doom of each other. It is the price that must be paid.>

<Then it must be paid. I will see to the secondary annex of the protocol at once.>

<Your mission is key to the reclamation of our ancient works. The perfection of the Crux Mechanicus awaits, Fane. You have seen how close it is. You have felt the boundless perfection of such possibilities. But in order to ascend to that blessed state, we must have *Fury* under our control. This is our chance. It has been ten thousand years, and it comes down to this moment.>

<Acknowledged. I rejoice, dominus. I am your instrument. The will of the Omnissiah shall not be gainsaid, not by the daemon of the warp, or the Lord of Macragge. Thy will be done.>

<Soon I will join you, but first the battlefield must be swept clean, and the interlopers must fall.>

Marneus Calgar ascended the massive staircase with even strides, his honour guards on either side of him, Drake and his men struggling to keep up. Far below, the sound of the fighting echoed up the tunnel-like space, as Brother Starn and his First Company brethren fought to hold the doors.

The staircase was titanic in length and scale, each step almost a yard high. As they ascended, so the stone of its composition changed. It shifted to steel alloy, and cabling ran alongside them in thick snakes, clamped to the walls and ceiling. It was all in remarkably good repair, and though it streamed with moisture, the fecund growth which infested the rest of *Fury* seemed here to be held in abeyance.

'I am reading a low energy field,' Drake said, panting. 'Like a Geller field, but different.'

'It inhibits organic life,' Calgar said. 'They wanted this access route kept clear. It is an ancient register, and has been running for many centuries. All this work here, this engineering – it is not the work of the Ruinous Powers, nor of Man.' He was looking around himself intently, but he did not slow his stride for a moment.

Other dark entrances, passageways and conduits led off the staircase, and the thrum of power grew under their feet. A few ceiling plates had buckled and fallen onto the steps below, and a few massive cables hung free of their brackets, but otherwise their surroundings were in good repair.

Finally, Calgar stopped, and bent to run his gauntleted fingers over a series of markings which etched the wall. 'We are indeed in the hull of an ancient vessel of some kind, built in millennia long gone. And now, see who the architects were.' He gestured, and Drake scrambled up the steps to join him.

The skull and cog of the Adeptus Mechanicus, stamped indelibly into the metal, but at an angle.

'The staircase is later work, but these bulkheads are original.'

'We are only some two miles above the absolute centre of the hulk,' Drake said. 'By my readings, the energy levels are off the scale now. It is as if we are standing squarely on the carapace of a vast reactor.'

‘Or something that functions in the same way,’ Calgar said. ‘A planetary core perhaps.’

‘You think the hulk was originally a planet?’

‘It would explain a few things.’

‘It raises more questions than answers,’ Drake retorted, baffled and intrigued despite the desperation of their current predicament.

‘If there are any answers to be found in this place, then I’ll wager they are at the top of these stairs,’ Calgar told him, with something like a ghost of humour. His anger was banked down now, and he seemed thoughtful, warier.

‘The Blood God is strong in this place,’ Drake told the Chapter Master. ‘He feeds on the energy our wrath gives him.’

‘I know,’ Calgar said quietly. ‘But anger is strength, too, inquisitor. Better that than despair.’

‘Do you not feel the way these things are growing in us all, my lord?’

‘I am master of my own emotions, if that is what is worrying you, Drake.’ And then Calgar led off once more, bounding tirelessly up the endless staircase.

Endless it might seem, but it did have an end at last. It opened out onto a vast space like the narthex of a cathedral, a towering emptiness red-lit by guttering torches and flickering lumens which sputtered and winked high above them. Huge doors were set in a dull wall or bulkhead, and it was clear to see now that they were indeed blast doors of the kind used to separate the critical compartments within a large voidship.

On the doors were forged the skull and cog of the Adeptus Mechanicus, but the symbol had been defaced and scored out. Scratched in its place was the tripartite fly of Nurgle, repeated seven times, and the angular rune of Khorne.

The doors seemed to bleed as they stood there, venting an ooze of trickling rot as though the very metal they were composed of were putrefying. And as the party drew closer to them, vast hordes of fat black flies lifted up and began buzzing round in a shapeless cloud.

Whatever else the protective field kept at bay, it had not proved equal to the task of keeping this place clean, untouched. The stench of rot hung over it and the doors were painted in bright-red blood, which the flies fed off.

Calgar stepped forward. ‘Whatever lies behind these doors is meant for me,’ he told his companions. ‘Inquisitor, look for system controls, any mechanisms which govern the very stuff of *Fury* itself. Find a means to destroy the hulk. I will try and make a space in which you can do that.

‘Brothers Ohtar, Morent. You will protect the inquisitor now as he fulfils this

task – it is the primary objective. You are not to intervene on my behalf unless I specifically give the order. If I am right, then we have come to the crux of our task, the place where it will all be decided.'

Then he called up Fifth Company's vox. 'Caito, do you hear me?'

There was a crackling roar, a storm of static.

'Captain Galenus, if you can hear this, then your orders are to disengage with all speed and join me at my current location. Abandon the battle. It has served its purpose, and drawn out most of the forces from this stronghold. The Adeptus Mechanicus will prevail on the field – they have been planning this. Link with Brother Starn and then make your way to these co-ordinates.'

Nothing. Calgar looped the message and set it on repeat, then shut down the vox.

'It is too late for Fifth, lord,' Brother Morent said sombrely, grasping his axe, the blade flickering with fire.

'Perhaps. Remember your orders, and abide by them. What comes next will test us all, even unto death.' And with that, Marneus Calgar strode forward and smote the glistening, fly-spotted doors with one crashing fist.

They swung open, trailing streamers of slime and blood. A red light shone out on those standing there, as if they had all been bathed in gore.

An enormous, fire-flickering expanse opened out before them, perhaps four hundred yards long and half as wide, the roof looming up into impenetrable creeping shadow. On both sides, enormous pillars as wide as a Dreadnought reared up, green with bubbling rot, and beyond them were banks of cogitators and vid-screens, many dead, others flashing with mechanical and electronic life.

There was a heavy stench of decay, but underlying it was the metallic, oily reek of heavy machinery, and the chamber seemed to quiver with buried life as they stepped over the threshold, as though great wheels were turning under the floor.

Like the nave of a cathedral, or the baroque interior of an ancient voidship, the way stretched out before them, and at the end of it a dais rose up to a mighty throne, made of skulls and bones, held together with skeins of decaying flesh, boiling with putrescence. The very air dripped with malice and anger, the stench of an unquiet grave.

'I have been waiting for you,' a voice said, one that stunned the thick air and echoed off the walls in a thudding boom.

And then the immense thing on the throne stood up, towering in a black and scarlet silhouette that caused Drake's men to cry out in terror and fall to their knees on the floor. Great wings extended, thirty feet across, and out of the stench

and the darkness two eyes burned, black and lightless, but distinct, deeper than any shadow.

‘Welcome, Marneus Calgar. My brother.’

TWENTY-FOUR

Calgar strode forward alone, a glimmering blue giant who was nonetheless dwarfed by his surroundings, and by the creature that awaited him.

On either side, there was movement along the walls of the chamber, things sidling out from behind the pillars. They were bulbous, gleaming, vaguely humanoid. Some wore remnants of Adeptus Astartes power armour, others stood naked in the swollen meat of their sore-encrusted bodies, carrying black swords, rusted bolters, or merely wielding the curved black claws which had once been their hands. The flies buzzed around them in clouds, big as a man's thumb, slime spattering from their iridescent wings. A murmur went up, like that of a distant crowd.

Calgar ignored them, and walked on, leaving his companions behind. The Gauntlets of Ultramar lit up with clean blue-white light on his fists, startlingly bright in that dimmed place.

The creature at the end of the nave approached him, an immense shape, horned, winged, its footfalls echoing like stones set loose by an avalanche. It wore armour fashioned from a hundred stitched-together plates of ceramite, and between the plates its flesh bulged red and shining. It bore a great crimson blade which pulsed with dark light and dripped carmine drops of bubbling putrefaction on the floor that hissed and burned there with the stench of corrosive acid.

The face it displayed might once have had human features, but the twisted energies of the warp had rent it out of all proportion. There was a fanged mouth that came and went, teeth yellow as a sick man's vomit, and those pitiless holes for eyes, slits that opened into an absolute void; a glimpse of the immaterium itself.

‘Name yourself,’ Calgar said, his voice as calm and steady as though he were speaking to a new acquaintance.

‘There is a power in names,’ the thing said, and it halted some ten yards from the Chapter Master. ‘I had one once. I was named Phrynon, back when I had mortal form.’ He paused. ‘I see the name is not known to you. And yet it was well enough known once. I was Chapter Master of a band of unfortunates your kind knew as the Viridian Consuls.’ He grinned, his teeth puncturing the flesh of his lower face so that it bled.

‘That was then. Now I am the Witness, leader of the Broken, those who were betrayed, who were sent into the pit on the whim of a lie.’ He cocked his immense horned head to one side. ‘A false saint sent me here, Marneus Calgar, and made of me what I am. I hated him for it, but I see now that it was meant to be. It was destined. I was brought here to confront the reality of existence, to bear witness to its truth. My followers found it here with me, in the black, warm deeps of the warp. And now you are here, also, to confront that same truth. I brought you here, lured you in as I too was once ensnared.’

Calgar flexed his fists. When he spoke his voice was thick with grief or anger, or both.

‘I mourn for the Viridian Consuls, brothers of my own Adeptus – many of whom suffer below, clinging to their faith through long years of torment unimaginable. But you – you are nothing but the spawn of the warp, and I am here to end you, Phrynon, or whatever name you choose to call yourself by.’

The thing laughed, but its eyes lit up with a light like that of distant stars. It stepped forward, and they saw now that it did not have human feet, but great cloven hooves that rang on the metal plates of the floor.

‘Fine words! Do you think I have not heard their like before, Lord of Macragge?’ Its voice bellowed out in a whip of scorn that woke echoes up and down the steaming chamber.

‘I spoke them myself once. I led my brothers into the Eye of Terror itself, along with other proud Chapters of your Adeptus. We went there intent on upholding our faith, redeeming our honour.

‘Shall I tell you what we found there? Anger and despair! Your arrogance should choke you – you have no idea how long we battled in the warp, how many years we struggled to hold on to the memory of what we were – I held them together, my poor brothers – I watched them die, one by one, bereft of hope, tainted by doubt, orphans repudiated by the Imperium they had given their lives to serve!’

It took another step forward, and its hooves clanged like clashing iron. The daemon's flesh glowed; rage emanated off it like some pulsing radiation. The flies that settled on its red armour sizzled and fell dead.

'Ultramarines! The much vaunted Thirteenth Legion of Guilliman! We too were scions of your primarch, a Chapter of the Second Founding, as proud and undaunted as you are now. We too set our faces against the glorious truth of the uttermost dark, and sought to preserve your Emperor's pale reflection of the true, endless night that is the real universe.

'We fought for decades, before we were admitted to the true brotherhood, the reality of life and unlife that binds together all existence.

'You blue-clad worm! You hide behind your faith like a child afraid of the dark. What do you know of the warp? Your very existence is naught but a single droplet lost in the ocean of night.'

'I know evil when I see it,' Calgar said quietly. 'I know when a man has become so twisted by hatred of himself that he repudiates all that makes him what he is. You were betrayed, it is true, but you let that betrayal destroy you. You could have died fighting – instead you bowed the knee to that which is pure evil. For that, there can be no excuse. And for what you have done to your brethren, no forgiveness.' The last sentence came out as a snarl.

The Witness stepped forward again, dragging the blade it carried so that its tip carved a smoking furrow in the floor.

'I preserved my brethren – those who accepted the truth I had revealed. They serve me yet – they stand around you now, the Broken, immortal warriors of a valour you cannot even guess at.

'We attacked this hulk when it was but an experiment of the Adeptus Mechanicus, a fragment of a world they had dragged out of the Eye of Terror to practise their tinkering filth upon. They scoured a planet clean, and took its hot heart to make their wheels go round – but we seized it from them and made it our own. We built this. I built this – I made it, and I am master of it. My dark benefactors have given it to me, and–'

'Master of your own prison. You did not even have the strength to keep it clear of the Adeptus Mechanicus – they have been on the upper levels for a thousand years, imprisoning you here. They are below us right now, fighting their way to this very keep. You have already been defeated, and you do not even know it.'

'If that is true, Marneus Calgar,' the Witness said with soft venom, 'then it is one thing that you and I have left in common.'

And it raised the immense smoking sword to smite.

Inquisitor Drake felt the massive impact as the blade came down and smashed into the upraised fist of Marneus Calgar. There was a detonation of competing energies in the chamber that lit it up bright as sunlit day for a second. Even the two Ultramarines honour guards were knocked off their feet.

He saw Calgar fall to one knee, the storm bolter which was attached to his right arm sheared away with a flash of flame, the rounds in it igniting as it tumbled through the air. But the Chapter Master raised his other arm and opened up with a thunderous volley of fire from the storm bolter under his left fist, and the impact of that barrage sent the Witness staggering backwards.

'Guilliman!' Calgar roared, and rising off his knee he hurtled forward, a blue blur, like lightning at the base of a storm cloud.

The Witness tossed aside the smoking hilt of its shattered blade, and with a bellow it lunged down at the Chapter Master, great wings spread wide, the hooks on their pinions scoring the pillars beside him as though they were made of clay. Both the daemon's great clawed fists swooped down and slammed into Calgar even as the Lord of Macragge tore at its belly armour with his power fists.

Another staggering detonation, and then Calgar was on the floor, his helm dented, his artificer battleplate fizzing and sparking, rent and torn. As he tried to rise, the Witness flapped its wings, lifted up, and then came down upon him with crushing force, the cloven hooves smashing into his power pack. It flared up in a series of sputtering explosions.

Drake sent out an urgent psychic plea. +Brother Ulfius – you must come to us, all of you. He is going to die here. Calgar needs your help.+

There was no answer.

The Witness laughed, and stepped back from its fallen foe.

'Do you think you came here by your own prowess alone, Lord of Ultramar? I allowed you to, because it was here that I wanted you to recognise the hopelessness of your plight.

'You have two choices, as I had. Either you will bend the knee to the rightful lords of creation, the dark powers who are the true rulers of all, or you will die here. I will dedicate your destruction to Khorne, the red god, and he will take great and bloody joy as I break you. And of your body I will make a gift to the Plague Father, Lord of Death. He will oversee the decay of your mortal form, and in your corpse I will set the seeds of his spawn so that they may come into the world from your rotting remains. They will be your children, the only thing you will ever leave behind save the fading memory of your name.'

Somehow Calgar rose to his knees, and then climbed to his feet, swaying.

Sparks flew from the sundered connections in his ancient armour, and there was blood trickling from the splits in the ceramite.

'You talk too much,' he said. And then he charged forward again.

While the two fought, Inquisitor Drake scanned the great chamber both with his eyes and with his psychic insight. The great nave had once been the bridge of a ship, the control-room. His gaze ranged swiftly along the blinking, baroque consoles that lined the walls, the side-chapels that housed towering arrays of data-cogitators and logi-stacks. They were ancient beyond belief, defaced, defiled but still fully operational. Here was the heart of the hulk. Here was the glue that held it all together.

He looked across at Calgar. The Chaos Marines in the chamber, some of them Khornate worshippers, were gibbering with delight at the battle; others were plaguebearers who stood like collections of running abscesses set upright – all stood by and watched, as no doubt they had been ordered to do.

The breaking of Marneus Calgar was a triumph that the Witness did not want to share. The daemon wanted the deed to be all its own, a gift for its unholy masters.

And Calgar was buying time with his life, time for Drake to complete their mission.

'Do something,' Brother Morent said in a strangled voice. 'His orders – we are here to help you, not him. Whatever it is, do it fast, inquisitor. I will not let him stand alone, not like this. I cannot.'

His heart racing, Drake identified the various configurations which ran down the length of the great chamber. He had been in Adeptus Mechanicus ships many times. This one was of enormous antiquity, but he thought he could still identify the key aspects of its layout.

He looked round at his followers. They were crouching like men lost and afraid, though they were veterans of their kind. He could not expect too much of them, not here; but they, too, had their part to play.

'Clear the way left,' he said to Brother Morent. 'I want a path to the tall console with the column of lights and dials that rises up out of it, thirty yards ahead, behind the pillar. I believe it to be the drive controls.'

'What are you going to do?' Brother Ohtar demanded, not taking his eyes off the Chapter Master for an instant.

'I mean to complete the mission. To end all this. Now, do it.'

As if released by a hidden spring, the two honour guards sprang forward with a

speed that was astonishing in such enormous figures. ‘Guilliman!’ they shouted, and they hurled themselves at the line of Chaos Marines that snaked down the length of the chamber on the left.

‘Regan, Kastiro, cover our rear – as long as you can,’ Drake snapped. He did not wait to see if he was obeyed, but sped off in the wake of the two Ultramarines.

The honour guards slammed into the Chaos minions like a storm of steel, the great power axes they bore sweeping through the air leaving streaks of bright light in their wake. They carved four of the enemy to bloody fragments before the rest of the Broken even had time to react, and smashed clear a path to the side-chapel Drake had indicated.

Once, it had been a shrine of the Omnissiah, housing the means to regulate the very power which maintained the ship. Now it was an encrusted monstrosity – but the power remained, and the controls still reared up, massive brassy levers and wheels, flickering data streams and whirring cogitators.

Gunfire broke out, bright and deafening, as Drake pushed between the two battling honour guards. Behind him, his men were firing their own bolters, but two went down almost at once as a hail of fire followed them. The three survivors went to one knee and put down a blaze of bolter rounds, and Regan threw out frag grenades to add to the mayhem.

Drake had no eyes for the fight. He staggered against the cluster of levers and cabling which spilled out before him like the steaming innards of some vast gutted beast. A long-forgotten prayer to the machine-spirit rose in his mind. He studied the data output through the smeared screens of the vid-array. Power levels, coolant injectors, drive initiators – they were all here. He had guessed right. He gave wordless thanks.

Then he grasped one of the great levers, slippery with the organic muck that coated it, released the failsafe and began pushing it forward, seeing the power indicators climb, the runes lighting up as they climbed the tall display before him.

See what you make of this, he thought. And he watched as the runes began to burn red, and the enormous power source at the heart of the hulk climbed towards critical mass.

Out on the smoking, death-filled battlefield, Captain Caito Galenus raised his bloody fist and shouted, ‘On me! Fifth Company, on me!’

They fell back from the ruins of their line, leaving their dead behind them.

Immediately around Galenus stood Chaplain Murtorius, banner bearer Gerd Ameronn, *Warspite* glittering in his hand, and Librarian Ulfius.

Apothecary Philo was dead, trampled by a massive juggernaut and then cut to pieces by the sword-wielding daemons that were rampaging across the field, their blades shining light and dark, the warp powering them, augmented by the bloody hate which infested their owners.

Half the company lay back there in the wreckage of the juggernaut charge. They had destroyed all the great beasts along with the riders, but the price had been high. Just over two dozen line Ultramarines gathered together under their officers, most of them wounded, some so seriously that they could barely drag themselves along.

Captain Galenus now had twenty-six phials of gene-seed in a ceramite container strapped to his thigh, taken from Philo's body. It was pointless, he knew, but to leave it behind was to abandon all hope, to consign Fifth to utter oblivion, and despite the terrible toll he was not ready to do that. He would never be.

'You're sure that's what he said?' he demanded of Brother Ulfius. 'You're sure it was him, and not some trick?'

'It was him,' the Librarian replied. 'His psychic signature is that of an Imperial inquisitor. It cannot be replicated. Caito, we are wanted up there. Lord Calgar needs us. We must go to him now, whatever it takes.'

It would take everything, Galenus knew that. He would have to make a terrible choice, here and now, and there was no time to dwell on it, no time for sentiment. The Chaos forces were massing afresh – in moments they would come to grips again, and this time would be the last.

'Go to him,' Brother Ameronn said. 'I will stay here, Galenus, along with the badly wounded. We will buy you a few minutes.'

'I too will stay,' Chaplain Murtorius said. 'I have a few curses left in me yet.' The Chaplain had a great wound in his belly where a juggernaut had gored him, and even the recuperative powers of his mighty frame could not halt the steady flow of bright blood which now coursed down his black armour, staining the ground at his feet.

Galenus made his decision. 'Brother Sergeant Greynius, Librarian Ulfius and Brother Salvator are with me, along with the able-bodied of third and fourth squads. All others, fight here and hold them for as long as you can.' He looked at his brothers, blank helms, bloodied and blackened, hiding faces he knew so well, comrades he had fought beside for decades; friends. Brothers.

‘Stand here for the Chapter. We shall all meet again, soon enough.’

‘Courage and honour,’ Brother Ameronn said firmly, and he punched Galenus roughly on the shoulderplate. ‘Now get moving before I say something I’ll regret.’

They took off without another word, a dozen Ultramarines running from the enemy, running with death in their hearts, leaving their brothers behind. A few minutes later they poured through the gate that Marneus Calgar had broken down before them, but Captain Galenus held back to the rear, and looked back once.

Those he had left behind were already surrounded, but still fighting. He saw the flash of Murtorius’ crozius raised high and heard the Bull’s voice bellow defiance at the foe.

Then Galenus turned and ran on, into the high, echoing filth of the Blood Keep.

Marneus Calgar raised his head and tried to see past the fizzing broken lines in his helm readout. Sigils blazed red everywhere, and he could smell his own blood, as well as the acrid reek of burnt-out circuitry and broken metal. Added to that was the vile stench of the chamber around him, its atmosphere leaking through the broken seals in his artificer armour.

His multi-lung had already kicked in, dealing with the foul air, and the fractured bones in his arms and sternum were doing their best to knit, aided by the last reserves of analgesics and stimulants in his battleplate.

Power levels were sinking, his dorsal reactor broken and leaking coolant. Even without further damage, in a few hours his armour would be a dead weight on his back. It would take the skill of a veteran Techmarine to keep even the basic systems online. It had taken many hard knocks over the years, but the assault of the Witness had damaged it heavily, perhaps beyond repair.

Once again, Calgar laboured to his feet. The Witness towered over him, that stinking daemon that had once been of his own kind. The creature was also wounded, its armour rent wide open by the Gauntlets of Ultramar, its innards bulging through great tears in the flesh of its torso – and the flesh of one leg hung in ribbons, so that it limped as it moved in again.

There was more happening in the chamber now, though; gunfire, the sounds of combat. Calgar backed away slowly as the daemon advanced and looked around. Frustrated by the damage to his autosenses he ripped off the broken Corvus helm he wore and tossed it to the ground. His bionic eye was still intact, still able to send him data relays and spectral analysis, and his mighty frame was still proof

against the mephitic atmosphere, but the radiation would begin to eat into his exposed flesh now.

The Witness knew this also. The daemon smiled horribly, blood and saliva trickling down its chin. 'Now you can feel the touch of the world I have made at first hand, Calgar,' it said. 'You have fought well – better than any other foe I have ever faced. Kneel before me, and when you rise, it shall be as a prince, a lord of my realm.'

Calgar spat blood on the floor. There was no mistaking it. His honour guards were fighting with their backs to an alcove, holding off a horde of plaguebearers and Khornate berserkers and the foul air was now redolent of cordite. The long chamber rang with the din of combat. The Witness ignored it – the daemon had eyes only for Calgar, and was advancing on him once more.

'Drake–' Calgar said on the vox.

'Stay alive,' Drake grated. '*Better yet, destroy that abomination. I need more time.*'

Calgar smiled. 'You shall have it.' And then he brought up the green ready sigil that throbbed in his bionic eye's display.

'Brother Starn. To me, now.' He keyed the homer.

'Acknowledged.'

Calgar charged the daemon, lighting up his remaining storm bolter and emptying the last rounds in the ammo belt which hung loose from his smashed dorsal magazines. Thirty rounds, blazing into the creature's face – and then Calgar was at grips with it once again, the stench suffocating, foul beyond belief without the helm to protect him.

Secreted poisons from the thing's unnatural flesh burned streaks down his face as he lunged at it with the last guttering energies of his power fists, tearing at its armour and the meat beneath. He felt the clawed hands reach down and grasp him, seizing him about the shoulders. He was lifted up to stare into the broken maw, the steaming hole where one eye had been, the furious starlit blackness of the other. The thing's mouth opened, and became a long, fanged muzzle. He struggled mightily, jerking his head to one side, and the Witness snapped at thin air where his face had been.

Then it cried out in agony, and dropped Calgar, staggering backwards, the great wings flailing.

Four Ultramarines Terminators stood behind it, blazing on full automatic with their storm bolters, the light from their teleportation a fading blue haze about them. The energies of the warp still crawled about their armour as they fired, and

they ran the rounds up and down the back of the Witness, shredding the daemon's wings, blasting huge divots out of its flesh. The huge creature roared in pain and fury, and as it did, so the Chaos Marines in the chamber hesitated, and for a moment stood aghast in outrage and disbelief.

The Witness spun round, knocking one Terminator backwards to crash to the ground. But the other three lunged in close, punching it with vicious crackling slams of their power fists, the massive bunched flesh of the daemon quivering and smoking under the blows.

The Witness fell to its knees, still bellowing, and Calgar at once launched himself onto the thing's back.

He grasped one great horn in each fist and pulled the daemon's massive skull back with a sharp crack. Then he shouted aloud with an extreme effort as he gripped onto the horns with all his remaining strength.

Now, finally, he let go of his anger, the long simmering rage that had been building in him ever since he had boarded the hulk. Now, he expended the last drop of it – and under the grip of the power fists he wielded, the monster's skull was abruptly wrenched apart in a violent explosion of bone and fluid, drenching him in the burning ichor of its life's blood.

It collapsed under him, a massive tangle of hooves and wings and horns. He flung himself free of its ruin, and landed heavily. His head smashed into the hot floor and he blacked out for a moment.

Coming to, he lay there, assessing the damage, feeling his hands quiver with strain inside the ancient gauntlets, which were now dead and cold on his fingers.

The fighting was still going on around him, but it had not the desperate tenor that it had had before. The Broken were now streaming away down the nave of the massive control chamber, except for a few berserkers that the Terminators cut down without mercy.

Calgar felt a hand help to raise him up, and he climbed slowly to his feet, his armour an immense weight on his shoulders, his fractured bones grinding within it.

'You have killed it,' Brother Starn was saying, as if from a long way off. 'My lord, I fear you have suffered grievous hurt.'

'I am alive,' Calgar answered him, coughing up blood, swaying. 'I had not expected that.'

TWENTY-FIVE

Galenus and his comrades fought their way towards the coordinates they had been given, and it seemed that resistance had slackened. All through the avenues and alleyways of the Blood Keep, the servants of Chaos had felt the fall of their master and were rudderless, demoralised, like a hive of insects when the swollen creature at their heart is slain.

They still fought, but without tactics or direction, and the survivors of Fifth Company who made their way through them did so without difficulty, killing them with raw steel to save the dregs of their ammo and exorcise the furious grief which animated every blow.

'It's gone,' Brother Ulfius panted. 'Do you not feel it, brothers? The Chapter Master has done what he set out to do – he has killed the daemon. Look around you – its minions are out of their minds with the import of it. I feel it like– like–'

He stopped. +Brother Ulfius, can you hear me?+

+I hear you inquisitor.+

+The daemon at the heart of the Keep is slain, but Lord Calgar is badly hurt. You should bring all your Brethren here, to us if you can. There is not much time left.+

+Our Apothecary is dead, but Brother Salvator is still alive. We can–+

+It is no matter now. I have gained the controls of the hulk, and have set its reactor core on the way to meltdown. We do not have long before the entire structure self-destructs.+

Ulfius had known something like this was coming – this was success, or at least, the best outcome they could have hoped for, back when there had been no hope at all. But it was something of a blow, nonetheless. To finally confront the

fact that there would be no survivors, that Fifth would be totally destroyed, and with them, the Chapter Master himself. If this was victory, then it was a bitter one, a battle without triumph at its end for those who had won it.

+We will join you,+ he told Drake, keeping his sorrow and his regret hidden from the psychic overtones of his reply.

+Make it soon.+

He told Captain Galenus, who nodded grimly as they strode along towards the tall blade-shaped tower which was their destination, scarcely a quarter of a mile away now. 'This may not be to our liking, but it is a victory. The daemon has been banished to the warp, the hulk will be destroyed, and Ultramar will endure.'

The Techmarine, Brother Salvator, now strode at the side of the captain and the Librarian. 'I wonder at Inquisitor Drake's expertise, to be able to accomplish such a technical feat.'

'He is a resourceful man,' Galenus said, and then he halted where he stood.

'We are not the only ones who are about to taste death in victory.' He pointed.

There was a broad avenue, half ruined but still wide and mostly clear, which ran for perhaps three quarters of a mile on their right. It led down to the massive battlements of the Blood Keep. In that long wall there was a rough barbican of sorts, and the main gates of the Keep stood in it. But these gates had now been thrown down, and through their ruined remnants was stepping a pair of Adeptus Mechanicus kastelans, one of which lacked an arm, both much battered and with smoke drifting from their hulls. Behind them a host of other troops followed, skitarii and kataphrons, depleted by the battle before the gates, but still numerous enough to hurl aside the few defenders who remained before them; Khornate berserkers, bands of frenzied cultists, and a single remaining daemon with its black-bladed sword raised high.

'The Adeptus Mechanicus have finally found their way in,' Brother Ulfius said.

'May it profit them,' Captain Galenus said with contempt. 'Come, brothers. Let us join the Lord of Macragge. It is right and fitting that we be at his side when this thing goes up.'

The little band of Ultramarines picked up the pace, running now, and smashing aside those confused milling knots of Chaos troops who stood in their way.

In the thrumming, baleful heat of the vast control chamber, Marneus Calgar stood watching the reactor core readouts climb steadily into the red. He leaned on Brother Starn while the other three Terminators of First stood watchful, surrounded by a lumpen mound of bodies; the remains of the Broken, who had

fallen under their guns and fists. Calgar's honour guards stood to one side, leaning on their axes. Brother Morent had a slew of steaming holes down his ornate breastplate where a plasma gun had struck, but he was steady as a rock. The winged cheekguards of his helm had been ripped off in the fighting, and now his helm looked raw and wrecked, but the seals held.

Brother Ohtar held out a similarly battered, blackened object to Marneus Calgar. 'I beg you, my lord, put it on. The radiation–'

'I will be dead long before the radiation kills me,' said Calgar with a mirthless smile, looking at his helm. 'But I thank you, brother. The mission is accomplished. We need not worry after anything else.' He turned his scarred face to Drake. 'How long, inquisitor?'

Drake was watching the intricate numerals of the vid-screens that reared up in the side-chapel. 'We are talking about a small planetary core, Lord Calgar. It cannot be brought on with the flick of a switch. It will take several hours, at least.'

'*Chapter Master–*' A voice came up on the company vox that Calgar had not dared hope to hear again.

'Caito! Report, captain – status.'

'*We are about to enter the tower – the stairway is ahead. There are twelve of us left alive that I know of. My lord, the troops of the Adeptus Mechanicus have forced entrance into the Keep and are now approaching fast – they too are making for the tower, and in force.*'

'Very well, captain. You must join us at once. If needs be, we must hold them off up here until the hulk self-destructs.' He wanted to say more, to express his grief, his pride in Fifth Company's sacrifice, but he knew there was no need, not even now.

'Calgar out.'

He felt the bones in his body knitting together again, but more slowly than they should. The radiation was hampering his self-regenerative systems. Checking his power levels, he saw barely a flicker. The beautiful ancient armour he wore was all but dead, an ornate sarcophagus, nothing more.

If it comes to a fight, I will be all but useless, he thought. Not the way I would have made an end, sealed in a metal coffin, barely able to keep my feet.

As he stood there, he went over some of his command decisions. It was not regret, it was pure habit; a way of revisiting strategic and tactical problems. He knew now that Dominus Hagnon-Cro was a worthy adversary, who had used him to do what he could not – to slay the Witness, and allow the Adeptus

Mechanicus access to the place which governed *Fury*. But the dominus had overreached himself, in the end. He had not counted on Drake's expertise with ancient technology. The mission had been flawed, but it had succeeded. At great cost.

Captain Galenus entered the great nave, striding down it with his chainsword in his fist. Behind him came Brother Ulfius, Techmarine Salvator, and nine other battle-brothers, some of them limping, their gladii drawn and bloody, their armour rent and battered.

Calgar hobbled forward to meet him, his battleplate an enormous crushing weight on his injured flesh and bones. But he had a smile for Galenus.

'We are well met, captain. I wish only that more of you had survived.'

Galenus made the sign of the aquila. 'My lord, let Brother Salvator look at your armour. The Mechanicus forces are close behind us.'

'We must hold the doors,' Calgar said with a nod, his scarred face bleeding afresh as he grimaced. 'Hear me, brothers! The thing is not yet done. This unholy place must be preserved from the possession of the Mechanicus renegades, or else all that we have done and lost here shall be in vain. I ask you to stand with me a little longer.'

Brother Tersius raised his carbon-caked bolter. 'For Macragge!'

The rest of them took it up, so that the cry echoed out around them like a cheer. Then they took up their defensive positions, and the four Terminators of First Company boomed unhurriedly down the nave to the doorway, their power fists alight, the storm bolters cocking fresh rounds into their chambers.

'Brother Salvator,' Calgar said. 'Do what you can with my armour. I do not need much – just enough for one more fight. The last.'

<Protocol Omega zero one is now complete. Redirection of all control assets has been accomplished and is now online at my location. Restoration of safety manifolds and coolant levels is ongoing. All stations are now zeroed in to my cogitator frequency, and I have full access. I am reducing power levels and damping radiation to tolerable levels. All systems within seventy-four per cent of nominal.>

<Dominus, *Fury* is now under our control.>

Magos Fane straightened in the cramped, noisome compartment and folded his many limbs within the red rags of his robe. One of his eyelenses was shattered and there were the pock-marks of bolter strikes in his alloy torso. He moved in staccato jerks, like a clockwork device whose mechanism has been damaged.

Beside him the two enginseers who had survived were locked in to the jungle of cable and wiring that surrounded the console. He had subsumed their bio-programming into his own. They were now as much a part of him as his clawed metal digits, mere components routed through the nervous system of the hulk.

He was in the depths of the great tower, three hundred feet below the spot where Marneus Calgar and his Ultramarines now stood. A secondary access node, forgotten by all but those who had installed it, it had been enough. The ancient blueprints had been difficult to follow, reworked, twisted out of shape, and half buried in the foul detritus of the Broken and their minions, but such things had been built to last, in a long-gone age when technology had been better understood than it was now.

Magos Fane had fulfilled the dominus' faith in him. He had rerouted the main control systems of *Fury* away from the great nave above, to this unnoticed niche within the carcass of what had once been a proud Adeptus Mechanicus cruiser. And what was more, he was now linked in to these systems through his own cogital processes. For now, Magos Fane *was* the hulk, spliced into what amounted to the very nerves and arteries of the immense artefact – and he was not about to let it be destroyed. There was too much at stake, things which even the Lord of Macragge – and especially an inquisitor of the Ordo Hereticus – could never hope to understand.

For all that, his frame was wrenched and damaged, his biological processes injured. It had been a hard road to follow, but the Ultramarines had cleared much of it for him, and his skitarii escorts had done the rest, at the cost of their own lives.

Dominus Hagnon-Cro sent a burst of binharic code.

<Rejoice, magos. Today we have saved a treasure trove of lost technologies, a storehouse of archaeotech which will take forward the evolution towards the perfection of the Omnissiah by leaps and bounds. You are a most valued adjunct, and you will be rewarded. Meet with me, and let us rid ourselves of the last problem which remains. I go to speak with Marneus Calgar. You should be there at my side.>

<I will obey. I trust you will remember our arrangement.>

<You still expect to hold me to that? It is irrelevant, surely.>

<Not to me. And it may be a necessary move. It will prove to our advantage, in the end.>

<Very well. You have earned the right to your request. But do not expect much appreciation for your magnanimity. Not from the Ultramarines. They will never

forgive us for slaying their brethren.>

'No!' The cry was torn out of Inquisitor Drake's mouth and echoed around the chamber. He slammed a fist into the console before him, watching the readouts, seeing the red sigils slowly ease down into amber, the numbers falling on the streaming vid data-screens which loomed around him in their baroque frames.

'Problem?' Captain Galenus asked.

'Coolant levels are rising, reactor temperature is falling. Something has gone wrong – the controls are no longer responding to my input. *Fury*'s reactor is being brought back down to within safety levels.' The inquisitor scanned the readouts frantically. 'Excess heat is being vented into the void. The whole damn thing is cooling down – the self-destruct sequence has been aborted. Lord Calgar!'

The Chapter Master limped over to Drake. Brother Salvator came with him; his mechadendrite arms all extended, working busily to restore the battered power-pack of the artificer battleplate.

Calgar scanned the lines of code, a sombre savagery flitting over his face. 'I see it. Control of the hulk's major systems has been diverted from this station to a secondary node. Drake, can you get it back?'

The inquisitor's hands flew over the ancient control panel. 'I am locked out.' He stepped away from the console, his hands falling to his sides.

'My lord, we have failed to destroy *Fury*. This enginarium console has been completely bypassed.' He uttered a bitter laugh. 'Radioactivity is falling at least. We shall live a little longer, it seems.'

'That is not what we came here for.'

Calgar stood very still while Brother Salvator continued his work with all the absorbed imperturbability of his Martian training.

Mars. Yes. The Adeptus Mechanicus were behind this. Dominus Hagnon-Cro had been one step ahead at the end, after all.

Calgar tasted the full bitterness of his defeat – for that was what it was. From beginning to end, the Ultramarines had done the work of the Adeptus Mechanicus, ever since landing on *Fury*. He saw it now, with a blinding flash of revelation, the last veil lifted from his eyes.

He had been arrogant, complacent. The tainted influence of the hulk had been at work on him even as he congratulated himself on fighting it. It had been subtler than he had supposed, clouding his thinking in ways too delicate to be noticed at the time, nudging him towards misjudgement by increments.

But he was free of it now. His anger was burned away – it had died along with the slaying of the daemon prince. He was thinking clearly at last. And he saw now the full, intricate design of Dominus Hagnon-Cro.

And his soul burned with shame, at the way he had been managed. It had never happened to him before. He had mistaken his enemy entirely.

'My lord, the Mechanicus forces are ascending the staircase below,' Brother Tersius called out, from his post out on the narthex beyond the doors. He raised his bolter. 'Shall I engage?'

'Negative,' Calgar said. 'Pull back to the doorway. Brother Starn, stand fast. No one is to open fire until I give the word. Sergeant Greynius, status report.'

'My lord, both squads are in position. We have between one and two magazines left each. No heavy weapons, no frag grenades. One flamer, a quarter-full tank. Fifth Company numbers twelve battle-brothers, including officers.'

'Thank you. Stand by.'

Drake's men were all dead. Including the inquisitor, the honour guards and Starn's Terminators, there were twenty of them left. And an army was climbing the stairs below.

Calgar turned things over in his mind. Seventh had been attacked on the surface to keep them from following Fifth – two Ultramarines companies would have been too much for the dominus to manage, but one suited him well. And the Witness had made the warp translation as soon as it had realised the odds it faced in the void around Ultramar, the ships which had gathered about *Fury*. That had suited the Adeptus Mechanicus also. They had followed in Fifth's wake, the Ultramarines themselves allowed to progress into the heart of the hulk by the Witness' insane need to meet with and break a fellow Chapter Master of the Adeptus Astartes, to restore his position with his dark masters after centuries of stagnation. A gift of blood.

The Witness had played into Dominus Hagnon-Cro's hands as much as Calgar had. The Ultramarines had opened the door, and the Adeptus Mechanicus had followed them through it. Calgar had sought to use the Mechanicus forces to keep the Broken occupied while he fought to the heart of the thing, the final confrontation. But it was he who had been used.

There was one, small mote of consolation in the ruin of all his intentions. With the slaying of the Witness, the tortured Space Marines crucified on the plain beyond could at least be set at peace now. They would no longer be kept alive by the daemon prince's powers. Their mortality had been given back to them.

And we will join them in death, Calgar added to himself.

But it was one thing to die in victory, with his mission accomplished – quite another to face his end knowing that he had failed utterly, and in doing so had doomed an entire company of his brothers to an ignominious end.

That was intolerable.

There had to be another way.

The Ultramarines around the entranceway raised their bolters as the first Mechanicus troops appeared at the top of the stairs.

TWENTY-SIX

‘Stand fast,’ Calgar barked. As he stood there, he felt the dead weight of his armour shift a little. In his bionic eye’s linked readouts he saw his power meter climb up into the glimmering red, and new strength seemed to suffuse his limbs – fragile, temporary, but it was there. He cocked his remaining storm bolter. It was empty. And only one of his power fists would light up. But it was something.

He ignored the pain that wracked his limbs and said, ‘Thank you, brother,’ to Techmarine Salvator.

‘The power will last only minutes, my lord, an hour at best.’

‘It will be enough.’

He strode forward. A kastelan came up to the lip of the chamber threshold, and halted there. It was followed by another, clanking up the stairway. And then a third, followed by the datasmith and his remote console. Behind him came skitarii, twenty or thirty. They took up firing positions around the narthex and levelled their arc rifles. Calgar heard Inquisitor Drake’s sharp hiss of intaken breath, and held out a hand to keep his brethren in check. The four Terminators of First Company stood like graven statues, and over the vox Brother Starn said, ‘Only say the word, my lord, and we shall consign these renegades to the abyss.’

Drake and Galenus came to stand by Calgar, and Brothers Morent and Ohtar took up station on either side, their power axes shining and spitting shards of blue-white light. They waited, as did the troops of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The tension in the air fizzed like the disruptor field on Calgar’s fist.

More metallic steps on the stairs, a strange hesitant skittering of metal on metal, and then, at last, Dominus Hagnon-Cro came into view, tall on his angular many-

jointed legs, like a red-robed spider. And beside him, Magos Fane, moving like a man who has taken a hard beating. The two came forward without a word, and not one of the warriors of either side moved an inch as they approached.

'Do I have your leave to speak, Chapter Master?' Hagnon-Cro asked in that surprisingly resonant voice of his, 'Or shall we just start killing one another?'

'Speak, dominus. I shall listen. But I weary of lies, I warn you.'

The dominus came forward, his long torso bobbing as he advanced. 'I think we are past the time for untruths. The daemon is dead – or at least, consigned back to the warp for an age of Men. The heart of the artefact has been cleansed of that which corrupted it. I congratulate you.'

'Congratulate my dead brothers who lie strewn on the field below.'

The dominus cocked his head to one side, the long proboscis gleaming. His robe was tattered, there were a few bullet-strikes on his limbs, but he seemed otherwise untouched, despite the fury of the fighting that had taken place.

'They did not die in vain – I tell you that with all sincerity.'

Calgar did not trust himself to reply. More than anything, he wanted to leap forward, to seize the bobbing monstrosity before him and tear it to pieces as a child might dismember a fly. But he stood fast, mindful of his current weakness, his brothers at the last of their resources around him, and the quandary that now held them all entrapped.

'May I address the worthy Inquisitor Drake?' the dominus said next, surprising them.

Drake stepped up, hefting his Locke-pattern bolter. He, too, said nothing, but the way he held the weapon said it all.

'You thought we were of the Dark Mechanicus, inquisitor, but you were wrong. To you we are mere renegades, perhaps tainted by the same evil which Lord Calgar has destroyed here today. What if I were to put it to you that we are not, in fact, an enemy for you to hate? We are not in league with Chaos, nor have we ever been. We have fought against it here for centuries, a war which seemed to have no end, and yet one which we never stopped waging. Imprisoned on this artefact, forced to share it with our bitter foes, we drifted from the path of the Cult Mechanicus, it is true, but we held always to the essential truth of the Omnissiah. That revelation we have not repudiated. This I swear to you.'

Drake did not move. 'Talk comes cheap,' he rasped.

'Indeed. But trust is a commodity in short supply. What if I told you that there is no need for any more of you to die today?'

'I have heard turncoats and renegades of all kinds make such promises before,

more times than I care to count, dominus.'

'Ah, yes – of course. You are well versed in the wiles and machinations of those you fight, are you not? And you have also a psyker's insight to guide you. It must be a wearisome burden to bear, here on the very edge of the Eye of Terror.'

'All of life is a burden. One I shall shortly be free of.'

'Perhaps you will take more account of another's words rather than mine.

'Magos Fane, kindly explain to your friends here the truth of things, before some one of us does something we shall all regret.'

Fane limped forward, his one remaining eye glittering, green unguent oozing out of the shattered lens of the other.

'Dominus Hagnon-Cro and his forces are part of an expeditionary force sent out by the Lords of Mars some twelve hundred years ago,' the magos said, his voice shrill and harsh after the other. His words came out in a stream, with little inflection, like the recitation of a list. But he kept them listening with what he had to say, nonetheless.

'They were sent out to track down the truth of a legend. Ancient records found in the bowels of Olympus Mons itself spoke of a team of my Adeptus which discovered a small, active moon some ten millennia ago, back even before the Great Heresy. The core of that moon was still active, as hot as the heart of a planet, and on it were scattered remnants of archaeotech from the Dark Age of Technology – Standard Template Constructs of immense age and untold promise.

'The moon was explored, mined, and a Martian Mechanicum fleet was brought into orbit around it. There were plans to harness its core energies and create a great drive engine that would make it possible to bring the entire planetary body back to the Segmentum Solar – to the Terran home system itself.'

He paused. 'But then the great calamity occurred. The Eye of Terror was brought forth into our universe, the immaterium tearing at the fabric of real space, exploding into the void. In that maelstrom, the moon was thrown out beyond all navigable void lanes, tossed through endless warp storms, and lost.

'The Martian Mechanicum fleet which orbited it was brought crashing down – here, on its surface. Those who survived the catastrophe worked on in the lonely isolation caused by the warp storm, striving to engineer the moon as they had planned. But they dwindled and died over the centuries as more and more lost ships were drawn in to crash on its surface, and more and more survivors of

those landings fought to possess the artefact they had been creating.

'The original design was lost in the slow accretion of wrecks, and while the few adepts who were left still struggled to maintain the vision which had brought them here, in the end it faded, as did they.

'The centuries rolled by. The artefact was drawn wholly into the Eye of Terror, and it attracted the attentions of Chaos. The Viridian Consuls, decimated by years of fighting in the Abyssal Crusade, landed and took it as their own. But they could not fully understand the conception that had brought it into being, or appreciate that which still lay buried under them.' Again, Fane paused, and now he looked first at Drake, and then at Calgar.

'They possessed it. They kept the basic functions running. But they rejected the implications of the technology they found, deeming it heresy. In the end, they, too, succumbed to the Dark Powers, becoming the Broken, a vile shadow of what they once had been, gnawing on their rage in the dark and taking comfort in despair. Their Chapter Master, a noble, honourable warrior named Phrynon, succumbed, and dragged his brothers into the pit with him. At first, those who would not follow him were exiled to the upper levels, among the crashed ruins of their battle-barge. But later, he sought to turn those who stayed faithful to their Emperor, through terrible tortures.

'He became the daemon of the pit, rewarded by the Ruinous Powers for his treachery, with apotheosis. And so it went for centuries more.'

'How do you know all this?' Drake demanded, though his voice was less sure than it had been, and the bolter now hung at his side.

Dominus Hagnon-Cro spoke again.

'I have had a long time to think, and explore in this place, inquisitor. My ship was wrecked here almost a millennium ago. In my joy at finally tracking down the legend spoken of in the old texts, I came too close. In my arrogance, I took no precaution. I paid for it, with a thousand years of exile and war. My adjuncts were able to dominate the surface and upper levels of the artefact, but lower down, the forces of the Broken were too strong, and the evil of the Witness took hold of those who ventured into the depths, turning them against me. So I stayed, trapped, doomed to pick through the wrecks and try and create some kind of fragile economy, to keep my fellow adepts alive, until an opportunity should arise to take full control of the ancient relic we stand within.'

'We were that opportunity,' Calgar said, his deep voice echoing out across the narthex.

'Yes. I used you as best I could, Chapter Master. I, too, had a mission to fulfil

you see, and even after a thousand years I was still determined to see it through.'

They stood there, the Ultramarines stock-still, bolters poised, the Terminators ready to unleash lethal violence. But if they did, it would come to nothing. They might kill a great many of the Adeptus Mechanicus – and Calgar was willing to acknowledge that is what they were now – but the end result would be the same.

He looked at the inhuman faces of the dominus and the magos – there was no insight to be gleaned there.

'You had best kill us all, then,' he said quietly, and at the word every Ultramarine in the chamber sighted down his bolter, and the arc rifles of the skitarii came up.

'It was what I had thought of doing,' the dominus said. 'No loose ends. No more witnesses. But the worthy Magos Fane, without whom we would none of us be still living, put it to me that if I did, then the Ultramarines would search for you, with all the unyielding tenacity of their kind, and they would not give up that search, no matter how many years intervened, until they found us once again.

'The artefact is largely defenceless, Chapter Master – its gravity fields can be utilised as a basic short-range defence mechanism, but aside from that, the fleet of the Ultramarines – or any other major vessels of the Imperium – could reduce it to ash with a single cyclonic torpedo.

'If we killed you, we would be in flight for the rest of our lives, and we would never have any prospect of laying the technologies it carries upon the high altars of Mars. It is a rather telling argument, I think you'll agree, and Magos Fane has convinced me with it.'

'So what then?' Calgar asked, his deep voice a rasp of weary suspicion.

'We stand here close to the Agripinaa Sector, within striking distance of the Cadian Gate. It is a perilous region of the void, but it is not quite within the ambit of the Eye of Terror.

'On the surface of the artefact are several void-worthy shells of old ships. They have limited manoeuvring capacity, minimal life support, and no warp engines to speak off, but they could be utilised as a kind of saviour pod. I propose that you take your brethren and make your way back up to the surface. We will guide you to one of these, and I will manipulate the gravitic field to let it drift into orbit. A vox transmission will be made to the nearest Imperial authorities, and there is a significant statistical likelihood that you will be rescued.'

'And by the time they pick us up, you will be long gone,' Drake said coldly.

The dominus bowed slightly.

‘I am not your enemy, inquisitor – we are merely creatures with competing priorities. At present, I am in a position to indulge mine.’

‘I shall set the Inquisition upon you, Hagnon-Cro. We will track you down.’

‘The Lords of Mars may have something to say to that once I, in my turn, contact them with my discoveries,’ the dominus said, unruffled.

Calgar turned it over in his mind. It was not a familiar feeling, to find himself so outmanoeuvred, but it was this or death – for all of them. A death that meant nothing, achieved nothing. Whatever happened here in the next few minutes, the hulk would not be destroyed – it would endure, and Dominus Hagnon-Cro with it.

And vast though the galaxy was, if it had been found once, it could be found again.

To fight another day – he had done the same on Macragge once, leaving First Company behind to pursue the tyranid fleet Behemoth out of the system, leaving First Company to its terrible immolation. But that had been forced on him by circumstance of war. This was subtly different. He felt he would be acquiescent in his own defeat.

He looked around at the Ultramarines who surrounded him. So few. Fifth Company had already been destroyed, but Galenus held the gene-seed of his dead brothers, retrieved from the battlefield. They could rise again, as First had. The Chapter would endure. The time to fight this battle could come around once more – even supposing it was a battle that had to be fought.

Dominus Hagnon-Cro was not an agent of the Ruinous Powers – Calgar was convinced of that now. But that did not make him any less of an enemy to the Ultramarines. This gesture of generosity – if it were genuine and not just another trick – could not simply be spurned. It would mean throwing too much away.

He made his decision. It burned his warrior’s soul, a pain worse than the wounds which covered him. But he had known pain before. He could deal with pain.

Marneus Calgar walked forward, his ancient battered armour creaking around his limbs. He looked up at Dominus Hagnon-Cro.

‘On behalf of my brothers, I accept your proposal,’ he said.

And he felt no joy whatsoever in choosing life over death. One does not take joy in defeat.

EPILOGUE

Calgar watched the stars through the bleared porthole of the scow. Beyond the immediate expanse of the void, the Eye of Terror loomed, a vast circular expanse of gas and debris that blighted the clean black of the rational universe. Within it was the doom of humanity. He hung here on its outermost edge, scant light years from a place which might one day open to swallow them all.

But it was good to be in open space, to be free of the stink of the hulk, and the taint of Chaos that slimed it. Even though his surroundings were still squalid enough, in all conscience.

He stood on a rusted catwalk which in turn ran high around a wreckage-strewn cargo-hold, fifty yards to a side. Below him, the surviving Ultramarines were gathered, helms off at last, seeing to what repairs they could manage to their equipment. Brother Salvator was working steadily, like a busy scorpion with its sting extended, and Sergeant Greynius was taking careful account of every bolter round. At his hip, a power sword was sheathed, one that Gerd Ameronn had once carried.

Warspite had been found on the battlefield in the aftermath of the careful truce with the Adeptus Mechanicus, as had three more survivors who now lay in comas induced by their sus-an membranes on the deckplates amid their fellows, with the contents of scavenged medipacks scattered around them. One of these three was Chaplain Murtorius, terribly injured, but still clinging to life with all the faith and stubbornness of his nature. That, at least, was something. Fifth Company without the Bull to inspire it would never have been the same.

Calgar clanked along the catwalk, the ancient metal groaning beneath him. There was a passageway leading up out of the hold, to the bow of the ship, if

ship were not too grand a name for an orbital maintenance scow. He walked slowly along it, expending much effort to move the dead plates of his armour – despite the fitful gravity generator of the vessel. The ends of the broken bones in his body were beginning to knit, but he could still feel them grate together as he moved, a pain he welcomed. He felt that he deserved it.

The tiny bridge of the craft was open to the passageway, the hatch long ago scavenged by some denizen of *Fury*. Inside, Captain Galenus and Inquisitor Drake sat at the controls, Galenus folded up in the cramped space, though Drake looked quite comfortable on the bare wire of the pilot's seat. He caught Calgar's look as the Chapter Master entered, and smiled thinly.

'It is something to be of ordinary mortal stature.'

'How does it look?'

'We are six light years from the Cadian system, my lord,' Galenus said. 'This is an Imperial transport lane, well patrolled. It should not be long until we are picked up.'

'We have air for nine days,' the inquisitor added. 'Imperial patrols are relatively regular in this region of the void. But so are passing Chaos warbands. We must hope to meet with the former.'

Calgar nodded. He had said little in the last week. The weariness of the ascent to the surface of the hulk was still with him, and the helm of a dead Ultramarine was maglocked to his thigh, gleaned from the battlefield along with as much extra equipment and ammunition as they could find there. His armour had been roughly resealed by Brother Salvator, but its ancient power pack was beyond the Techmarine's skills of repair. Irony of ironies, once they made it back to Macragge, the artificer armour would have to be shipped off to Mars for a full overhaul of its arcane technologies.

And *Fury* was gone, translating into the warp within hours of their setting off. Who knew what journeys lay ahead of it still, what long years of travail through the darkness of the void? But Calgar promised himself that he would never stop looking for it, or those it contained. Not though all the tech-priests of Mars should set their faces against him. He still had a score to settle. He had been given his life, and that was as great an insult as he had ever endured.

'They will strike this episode from all Imperial records,' Drake said, as though catching the current of his thoughts. 'You know that, don't you, my lord?'

'Defeats must be bloody and glorious to be remembered. Throne knows I have lived through enough of them, along with the victories. I have no doubt, Drake, that your Order will lobby hard to have this affair expunged from every history

slate yet to be written.'

'I will not forget,' Drake said gravely.

'Nor will the Ultramarines, I can promise you that, inquisitor.'

'If ever *Fury* comes to light again, and you track it down, Chapter Master, I would count it a kindness, nonetheless, if you were to let me know.'

'I will. We will hunt it down together.'

'There is a ship coming up on augur,' Captain Galenus said as the cracked pict screen lit up before him. 'A long-range patrol frigate, Dauntless class. The Imperial Navy, from the Cadia yards.'

'Signal it,' Calgar told him. 'Give them our current code.'

'That will make them think,' Drake said. 'An Ultramarines code, out on the edge of Cadia.'

'I have little doubt they will investigate,' Galenus said dryly.

Inquisitor Drake looked up at the closed, scarred face of Marneus Calgar. 'I wonder if they picked up some hint of the hulk's translation.'

'Or perhaps the tech-priest did as he said he would, and sent them a vox,' Galenus suggested.

'My lord?'

But Calgar was not listening to them. He was thinking of the great pyre they had made, going up with a yellow roar on the battlefield, five days ago now, burning high and clean. The pyre had taken the survivors of Fifth a long time to build, and they would accept no help from the tech-priests and servitors that had flooded into the Skull Chamber in the wake of Hagnon-Cro's victory.

The Ultramarines had gathered up the bodies of all the Viridian Consuls as well as those of their own slain, bearing them as brothers should, and had burned them together. Calgar himself had intoned the funeral rites, wishing all his brethren well on their dark road into the Emperor's Peace.

That journey, at least, still lay ahead of him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Kearney's Warhammer 40,000 work comprises the short story 'The Last Detail' from *Legends of the Space Marines* and the Space Marine Battles novel *Calgar's Siege*. He studied at Lincoln College, Oxford, and has been widely published, as well as being longlisted for the British Fantasy Award. He lives and works in Port Glenone, Northern Ireland.

An extract from *Slaughter at Giant's Coffin*.

From out of the darkness, they came.

The blunted prow of the battle-barge *Heart of Cronus* split the veil of reality first, the strange angle of her re-entry a testament to the haste with which she had been hurled into the warp. The great ship juddered and pitched to starboard with the sudden deceleration, even as her escort frigates began to emerge about her. Strike cruisers and destroyers all jostled for the clear void as they tumbled from the empyrean, proximity alarms wailing and countless helmsmen fighting to bring their vessels back under control.

It was shambolic. Frantic.

Mortal voices, strained by emotion, echoed back and forth across the open vox; each shipmaster cursed the apparent ineptitude of his peers as the fleet spread out into what might pass for an operational grouping.

Nonetheless, in the fierce light of the Miral star, their transhuman masters tried to carry themselves with as much dignity as they could muster. To anyone who might have been watching, it was a most unusual sight – that of a mighty Space Marine Chapter humbled and brought low by its foes, its brothers resisting the urge to lash out at one another in despair.

Though there had been many amongst them who had truly believed that such a day would never come, the gaze of the Great Devourer had settled upon the galaxy once more. A new wave of trannied hive fleets had crept into the Eastern Fringe under the cover of unprecedented human unrest, and with the return of the xenos had come the horrifying realisation that in fact mankind might never truly be rid of them.

And now, Sotha was no more.

Great and noble Sotha. The fortress-monastery at Mount Pharos. All gone – consumed by the foul, living tide of Hive Fleet Kraken.

But, like little more than ghostly shadows of their former selves, the Scythes of the Emperor lived on. They reeled from the death of their home world in a way

that few beyond the Adeptus Astartes could ever truly appreciate.

The loss was shameful. It was inexcusable.

It had wounded them more deeply than anything else ever could.

The alert klaxons on the bridge were finally silenced as the *Heart of Cronus* swung into its high anchor approach. The acrid tang of burned-out circuits hung in the stagnant air, the main filtration system having been one of the many lost to the fire, and the deck plates around the command throne were sticky with retardant foam residue. Ragged and scorched crewmen, most still wearing their emergency breath-masks, blearily clung to their duties.

With a tortured grind of gears, the central blast doors slid open to reveal the strobing darkness of the corridors beyond, and Captain Thracian limped through. His proud, transhuman features were marred by an expression of utter defeat.

'Fleet Master Zebulon is dead,' he announced, coldly. 'My brother-captain's injuries were too severe. There was nothing they could do.'

Thracian's black-and-gold power armour was scorched, and his cloak hung in tatters behind him. Each laboured stride sent dull pain shooting up his right side. As he passed the empty throne, he spared it only a single reluctant glance.

'Shipmaster Devanti's condition is critical, but he lives.'

The news brought a stunned silence to the human crew. It was not unexpected, but the reality of hearing it from a senior Chapter officer took it from a fearful rumour to stark, inescapable fact. Thracian wondered how many more truths would make that transition in the minutes, hours and days to come, under the circumstances.

He halted before the cracked, static-laced screens of the forward oculus. The left-hand pane was dead. So were the hololithic overlay projectors. 'Tactical report,' he called out to no one in particular, tying back the lank strands of his hair. 'This is not my ship, but I would have a full appraisal of our location and disposition.'

A female serf-lieutenant with a hastily bandaged gash across her forehead stepped forwards, a data-slate in hand. Before the armoured Space Marine, she looked even more fragile and haggard, but her manner was firm.

'We have arrived at the Miral System, my lord, as per Captain Zebulon's original order. Seems we gave the local monitor patrols quite a scare – they weren't expecting us, and our dispersal pattern was… a little sloppy. As a formality, they're relaying our ident-codes to the Militarum outpost on the second planet now, for verification. We're updating our horologs to the local mean time, although that loses us something like nine weeks, even after

relativity adjustment.'

'And how many ships made the jump with us?'

'Information is still sketchy. We estimate no more than twenty-five vessels, based on the faint carrier signal transmissions from beyond the system-edge. About a third of them are apparently drifting without power, or have zero vox-capability after making the translation.'

Thracian furrowed his brow, prickling the superficial burns on the side of his face. 'Only twenty-five. Less than a quarter of the Chapter fleet.'

The lieutenant nodded wearily, scrolling through the numbers. 'Aye, lord. We had visual contact with at least another twelve before we entered the warp, but they are presently unaccounted for. It's possible that…' She sniffed, wiping dried blood from her top lip. 'It's possible that *some* may yet find their way here, but without long-range comms we'll never know where the rest might end up.'

Glancing up at the crazed oculus, Thracian lowered his voice a little. 'And what of the xenos hive ships? Could they have followed us?'

'Highly unlikely, my lord, although we do have reports from the *Dromea Bathos,* the *Pale Rider* and the strike cruiser *Atreides* of continued action against trannied boarders.' The lieutenant paused for a moment, then continued. 'Forgive my boldness, but Brother-Codicier Spiridonas might be better able to advise you on the matter of further pursuit.'

'Aye. Perhaps.'

A few muted cries of alarm went up across the bridge. Out beyond the viewports, two of the stricken Chapter vessels – by their markings, the *Ionia* and the listing, battle-scarred destroyer *Light of the Pharos* – had drifted too close together. Thracian watched as the *Pharos* collided with the other ship, its dorsal ridge tearing a hole in her flank and spilling debris and flash-frozen atmosphere into the void. Other vessels close to the impact began to pull away, their shipmasters wary of being drawn into a cascading wreckage storm.

Cursing, he returned his attention to the fragile-looking lieutenant.

'What is your name and rank designation?'

She straightened a little, although Thracian noted that she stopped short of actually standing to attention.

'Hannelore, my lord. Serf-lieutenant, second class.'

'You know this ship, Lieutenant Hannelore. Take me to the Navigator chambers.'

The undercroft spaces of the *Pale Rider* had become a charnel house. The stench

of slaughter was heavy in the air, carrying with it the acidic reek of xenos bio-weapon discharge and other, even less wholesome smells. The ship had suffered badly at the teeth and claws of the invaders, though her crew were exceedingly lucky to be counted among those who had managed to flee the death of Sotha.

It was not clean fighting. It was cramped, and chaotic, and far too many had died, for so little gain. Fatigue dragging at his limbs, Culmonios shook the blood and ragged flesh from the teeth of his chainsword before whirling around to hack into another of the scuttling beasts as it leapt for him.

'*Brother,*' came a heaving, breathless voice over the short-range vox, '*this is Nimeon. We have them contained. Port side, compartment nine.*'

Culmonios battered the creature down, wrenching the gun-analogue from its forelimbs and ramming it over and over into the thing's screeching face. His own pistol had long since run dry. There had, simply, been too many of them.

He threw the bio-weapon aside and grabbed the trannied creature by the throat. It thrashed and snapped at him, until he broke its spine over his knee.

Hauling himself back to his feet with a wordless cry of exertion, took a splattering hit to the breastplate as he charged the last of their numbers, though the corrosive, organic projectile – whatever it was – did not pierce the ceramite. The pair of skulking creatures hissed at him as he closed the distance, trying to scramble away over the mounds of their dead kin, but Culmonios would not be denied. He slammed bodily into the first, sending it sprawling to the deck where he shattered its chitin-crested skull beneath his armoured heel.

With a bestial shriek the last creature tried to raise its weapon, but Culmonios grabbed its open jaw and sheathed his chainsword in its gullet with one savage thrust. The trannied twitched as it died, gagging on the razor-sharp teeth of the blade.

'*Culmonios, are you receiving? Unknown hostiles were reported mass–*'

'Hunter-slayers,' he growled. His twin heartbeats thundered in his ears. 'Forty-plus confirmed kills. This deck is cleansed.'

'*Deck seventeen cleansed, aye. Heading to your position now. Are the others still with you?*'

'Negative. They are all gone.'

He ripped the chainsword free, and let the alien corpse crash to the deck. The blade rattled disappointingly, the mechanism evidently fouled by overuse in the past few hours, but Culmonios could only stare down at the steaming bone-case of the trannied's fallen weapon.

The damned thing had an *eye.* It stared back at him, the slit-pupil responding

reflexively to the erratic flicker of the lumens overhead.

Disgust rose in his gorge. Disgust, and rage, and sorrow.

'You vile, unworthy abominations,' he muttered behind his helm visor. 'How did your misbegotten kind ever take the home world?'

There was something in that vacant, alien gaze. Something that was not merely a weapon, not merely a tool. Culmonios gritted his teeth and, with one thumb, gouged out the eye and crushed it in the palm of his gauntlet.

He came up slowly, his hands trembling. Casting about the compartment, he took in the nightmarish scene that lay all around. A tableau of dead faces and spilled blood. Here and there, the bulky silhouette of a fallen Chapter brother. Spent bolter casings. Arcs of red splattered across the bulkheads, in some places right up to the vaulted ceiling. The deck plates were slick with gore, the remains of human and xenos alike hopelessly mingled.

It would all have to be disposed of. Ejected into the void, most likely, or scoured with flame. It was an undignified end for those Imperial citizens who had already died such a poor death.

The ventral hull zones were where the fighting had been thickest, but the short-range vox was filled with reports from his surviving battle-brothers and the frigate's serf security teams as they drove the last xenos creatures back to the outer compartments. Culmonios gathered that the fleet – if it could be considered such – had made the jump back to real space, but the translation had not even registered upon his weary senses. For him, the past hours had been filled with naught but slaughter, and the frenzied cries of the alien attackers.

He trudged back to his most prized kill, letting his chainsword clatter to the deck as he went.

The hulking corpse of a full-grown trannied warrior lay crumpled over a handful of its lesser cousins, its spilled innards cooling, its eyes glassy and black. The beast had claimed three of his battle-brothers before he had struck it down; Gordani's empty helm was still gripped in its claws. Culmonios knelt beside the fallen monstrosity, which in life had stood easily half as tall again as an armoured Space Marine.

'They don't look so big when they're on their backs,' came Brother Nimeon's voice from across the compartment. Culmonios had not heard him forcing his way through the barricaded entrance, though the warrior now picked gingerly through the carnage, sweeping the lamp of his bolter left and right. 'Oh, Holy Terra – this was another one of the refugee holds.'

Culmonios nodded solemnly. The xenos boarding parties seemed to have been

drawn to the least-protected parts of the ship, like predators seeking out the weakest members of the herd.

And they had fed well. The Scythes had arrived too late.

Drawing his combat blade, Culmonios wrenched the trannied's head up and began to saw at the corded sinews of its neck.

'Brother, what are you doing?' asked Nimeon.

Culmonios did not look up. A righteous fury burned in his hearts. 'This was the greatest of them,' he muttered. 'It shall serve as a warning to those that follow.'

'I do not think the xenos can be cowed by a gibbet.'

'Who said anything about a gibbet? This is a trophy.'

With a meaty snap, he twisted the beast's crested skull free and let the body fall away. As he rose, he hefted the crest like a shield, testing its weight. Bloody ropes of drool still hung from the creature's slack jaws.

Nimeon removed his helm, repulsion written clearly upon his face, but Culmonios met his gaze unwaveringly.

'They have taken everything from us, brother, and so shall I take from them as I damn well please.' He did not bother to clean the blood from his knife, and it slid wetly back into the sheath at his hip. 'We will have our vengeance upon the Kraken, one foul beast at a time.'

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First published in Great Britain in 2017.
This eBook edition published in 2017 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Jaime Martinez.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-646-0

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