



WARHAMMER
40,000

A RAVEN GUARD AUDIO DRAMA

LABYRINTH OF SORROWS

GEORGE MANN

Labyrinth of Sorrows

DAED

The planet was dead.

A rotten husk, suffocated beneath a blanket of thick, pestilent fog, Kasharat had always been a place of death – a mortuary world, bristling with the stele of glorious tombs, overgrown with forests of monumental spires and statuary. Here there was nothing but tributes to the long-dead heroes of old, the forgotten soldiers of millennia past. Yet now, even the curators of this hallowed place were dead or diseased, overcome and conquered.

If there was any indigenous life left upon this blighted world, it was now only carrion, picking over the remains of what had gone before, revelling in the reek of death and despair. Kasharat had been lost, just as its sister planets in the Sargassian Reach had been lost, swept away in a tide of blood, plague and suffering. Here on Kasharat the Imperium had buckled. Here there was only death.

Yet amongst the marble tombs of this vast necropolis, things were stirring – things that had once resembled human beings, but were now barely recognisable as such. Things so depraved, deformed and pox-ridden that they were reduced to scuttling through the shattered ruins like animals, running errands for their foul masters. These were the pitiful wretches who had given over their lives to the Sickening. These were the disciples of Nurgle.

Amongst these former men walked the grotesque giants of the warband Empyrion's Blight, Space Marines of the heretical Death Guard Legion, traitors to the Emperor's cause; monsters – Captain Daed considered – who deserved nothing as forgiving as simple death.

These foul warriors of Chaos – polluted not only by the stink of treachery but also by the stench of unnatural sickness – had prosecuted a brief and terrible campaign throughout the Sargassian Reach. Seven Imperial worlds had been obliterated, the populations poisoned and the very soil blighted

beneath the boots of their oppressors. Even now, war still raged across the surface of three of these planets, although Daed knew that without reinforcements, without some way to alter the course of the war, the Imperial cause was all but lost. The Plague Marines were legion, and they, in contrast, were few.

Nevertheless, Daed would fight on until the bitter end, clinging to those benighted worlds until the very last of them had fallen. Such was the duty of a Space Marine. Such was the honour of a Brazen Minotaur.

For now though, Daed had other priorities to attend to; the means, perhaps, by which to turn the tide of the war. At the very least, the means by which he could offer his brothers a fighting chance, a reason to hope. Somewhere on Kasharath was the key to their salvation.

If only he could find it.

Daed sat rigid in his webbing as the Thunderhawk banked, its engines howling as it dipped beneath the cover of the dark, viscous clouds. The planet's atmosphere was thick with the aura of death, a haze of green mist that cloaked the mortuary world to form a near-impenetrable shroud. The Thunderhawk sighed as its airbrakes dragged at the putrid fog, churning great funnels in its wake. It slewed around, searching for a place to set down, its search lamps penetrating the eerie gloom. It drifted along a corridor of marble spires, dipping and banking to avoid the structures that loomed out of the foetid haze, and then moments later the pilot was easing it down between two massive obelisks, its landing gear sinking into the soft loam. The engines wheezed for a moment longer, and then were still.

If the arrival of the Thunderhawk had been noticed by anyone on the planet's surface, it went unremarked. There was no chatter of autocannons, no bark of plasma guns. Either the traitors were unaware of Daed's arrival, or they were unconcerned. The latter thought didn't offer Daed much comfort as he pulled himself free of the webbing, glancing from side to side to see his battle-brothers doing the same.

A few seconds later the vessel's hatch slid open and Captain Daed of the Brazen Minotaurs Third Company stood framed in the doorway, a

gleaming silhouette against the stark light spilling out from within. He was tall, even for a Space Marine, encased in shimmering golden power armour. His shoulders were draped with the pelt of one of the hulking black lions that roamed the forests of Tauron, his home world, and his left pauldron bore the blue-on-white bull's-head insignia of his chapter. In his fist he carried a slender power axe, its head finely etched with Tauronic trceries and runes.

Daed's neck was thick with ropey muscles and his face was craggy and tanned, pitted with innumerable scars, as if he wore his centuries of service to the Emperor like tally marks on his flesh.

He stood for a moment, sucking at the foul air, his nose wrinkling in distaste. His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the eerie landscape around them. 'There's nothing but death here, Bardus,' he said, his voice a low growl.

In response, another figure appeared in the hatchway behind him. He wore the same shining golden armour as his captain, but his lower face was swathed in a long plaited beard and he carried a bolter in his right hand.

'The stench of the traitor,' Bardus replied, and Daed could hear the disgust in his tone. 'Their very presence is enough to choke the life out of a world.'

'True enough, brother,' said Daed, hefting his axe. 'But remember – we are not here to reclaim Kasharat from the traitors, much as the notion galls me. We are here to retrieve what they have taken from us, so that we may use it against them. We must look to the war and not to the battle. This mortuary world will be of little use to either side in the conflict ahead.'

'Aye, but it makes for a damn good hiding place,' muttered Bardus, peering out through the open hatch. He raised his bolter as he spoke, as if he expected something diabolical to come lurching out of the fog at any moment. Daed could hardly blame him for that – it wasn't as if it hadn't happened before. They had been caught unawares any number of times in the last few months during their extended campaign against the Death Guard. There were things in the fog, half-dead creatures that didn't even

register life signs on their auspexes, cursed monsters that had once been men but were now nothing but shambling, diseased carcasses, unholy plague spawn created only to spread the festering curse of Chaos ever further, or to soak up fire on the field of battle. Even these had proved difficult to despatch in such incessant numbers. The Death Guard had infected the populations of entire worlds as they had cut a swath through the Sargassian Reach; now they were goading the fallen into battle in their multitudes.

The damned smog gave the enemy a great advantage – that and the fact they seemed able to survive wounds that would have felled a normal Space Marine, shrugging off bolter fire and blows from Daed's power axe as if they had barely been scratched.

'You stand there talking like tacticians!' bellowed Brother Targus from behind them, laughing as he hefted his heavy bolter onto his shoulder. 'I hunger for the opportunity to put some more of those plague-ridden traitors out of their misery.'

Daed grinned. He could understand that impulse, the desire to smite the wretches where they stood. He relished the idea as much as Targus himself – burned, in fact, with the need to bring the Emperor's justice to bear on their corrupt souls.

'I assure you, Targus, there will be time enough for us all to blunt our axes in the stinking corpses of our enemies. I wish for nothing more myself. But first, we have a job to do.'

Daed turned and strode down the disembarkation ramp, his footsteps strangely muffled by the thick, diseased air. Glancing up, he could make out only the spear-like tips of mortuary structures silhouetted against the sky, and the dull orbs of the twin moons that circled Kasharat in their stately, perpetual dance. Around him, there was nothing but an impenetrable bank of putrid fog. Yet even before it was infested with the plague, Daed mused, there would have been a grim, funereal air about the place.

He stood for a moment as the others clambered out of the hatch, coming to join him, their boots sinking in the sticky loam.

‘Engage your respirators,’ he said, fixing his own mouthpiece into place and activating his vox link. ‘Keep this foul air from settling in your lungs.’ He glanced around at his assembled squad as they followed his lead, each of them fixing their helms to their gorgets with a series of hissing, pneumatic sighs, then gestured to one of them. ‘Bast, check your auspex for signs of life.’

Bast unclipped the scanning device from his belt and studied the readout. ‘Nothing, Captain.’ He turned it so that Daed could see the display. ‘It’s this fog – it smothers everything. I can’t get a reading. It’s as if the mist itself were alive.’

‘Widen the spectrum. Look for anything at all.’

‘Captain...’ started another of the squad, Brother Throle, but Daed silenced his objections with a wave of his hand.

The auspex chirped momentarily before going silent again. ‘Bast?’

‘It’s intermittent, captain, but there’s something there. A beacon...’ Bast turned and the auspex emitted another dull electronic bleep. ‘That way.’ He pointed to indicate the direction from which he had registered the distress signal.

‘It’s most likely a trap,’ muttered Targus, moving around to stand before Daed. ‘They may be traitors but they’re not fools. They know we’re here.’

Daed set his jaw. He fixed Targus with a resolute stare. ‘Throle?’ he called over his shoulder.

‘Aye, captain?’

‘Move out.’

Daed watched Targus as he fell into formation behind the others, the enormous bulk of the heavy bolter balanced on his right pauldron. He

understood his brother's reluctance. They probably were walking into a trap, but there were no other options. They had a mission to complete, and they were Brazen Minotaurs. They would face whatever the enemy put before them with unflinching determination, and they would do it in the name of the Emperor. That, or they would die trying.

Daed hefted his power axe and unholstered his bolt pistol, falling into line behind the others.

KORYN

They moved silently, as if they had surrendered their corporeal forms to become spirits or wraiths, as if the very shadows themselves were living things that shifted and breathed – shadows that wore black ceramite armour and harboured vicious adamantium claws. Shadows that were trained to kill.

Ravens.

Shadow Captain Koryn of the Raven Guard flexed his neck and shoulders to dispel the tension. He sensed more than saw his brothers – Argis, Grayvus, Syrus and Coraan – as the five of them crept through the narrow tunnels of the maze-like mortuary complex, surrounded by the remnants of the dead. Dour faces hewn from soapstone and marble loomed out at him from all sides in the gloaming, their blank eyes watching impassively from across the centuries. Ornate tombs, stone coffins and the skeletal remains of old politicians and administrators – some of them still wearing their now-faded finery – lined the walls, embedded in roughly chiselled niches like insects in a hive.

It had once been a sacred place, a place to honour the dead in the name of the Emperor. Now, though, the blight of Chaos had infected the planet, and even here, in the bowels of this ancient mortuary complex, the evidence of corruption was all around them.

Foul mist clung to the air, turning everything a pale, putrid green. The walls were slick with ochre slime that seemed to quiver and move with the perturbations caused by their passing. Worse of all was the stench, the rotten reek of death and decay that pervaded everything, threatening to overwhelm even Koryn's hardened senses.

He didn't know what had brought the Death Guard to Kasharat, a mortuary world on the outer rim of the Imperium. Their reasons were opaque. It may simply have been a symptom of their inexorable drive to spread their foul plague – that burning, zealous desire to infect world after world with

their sickening rot – but their actions hinted at some greater purpose. Koryn knew that his bull-headed brothers, the Brazen Minotaurs, would be concerned only with smiting the enemy and not with understanding their motives. To them, Koryn knew, the enemy were the enemy; faceless traitors who needed only to be vanquished. Their strategies were not subtle. They did not need to understand their enemy in order to strike them with a wall of sheer force, to overwhelm them with firepower. There was a certain honesty in that sort of combat, and Koryn respected the Brazen Minotaurs for their unwavering, unquestioning approach. He had seen them storm their way to victory on more than one occasion, a fist of iron driven into the very heart of the enemy.

The sons of Corax, however, excelled at a different kind of combat. Koryn knew how to hit an enemy where it hurt, to search out their weak points, to foil their plans. The Raven Guard struck from the shadows and were gone before their foe was even aware of what had happened. That, he knew, was what was needed here on Kasharat. That would ensure the success of their mission. The mortuary complex would be easily defended and a full assault would result only in a stand-off. That stand-off, in turn, would result in a siege that would take days, if not longer, to break. And days were a luxury the Brazen Minotaurs didn't have. Not if they wanted to retrieve their target in one piece.

Koryn hoped that their brothers might have had a chance by now to pick up the signal from the beacon he had planted earlier, amongst the corpses of the corrupted humans who had guarded the entrance to the mortuary complex.

He slowed as the passageway opened into a large, cavernous space. They were now far below ground, and looking up, Koryn could see that the space had originally been a natural formation, remodelled some time in the distant past for the mortuary builders' macabre purposes. Huge stalactites dripped from the roof like fangs encircling an enormous maw. Two colossal statues towered over the Space Marines, the figures' heads bowed in quiet repose. Each of them clutched a sword and shield and wore an unfamiliar pattern of armour. Effigies, Koryn assumed, of ancient heroes, long since forgotten.

At the feet of these towering figures stood a small group of grotesque creatures, formerly human, but now mutated and corrupted by the Sickening. One bore a writhing, wriggling proboscis where its arm had once been, erupting from just beneath the shoulder joint to curl, snake-like, in the air. The man's face was deformed with pustulent growths, and his belly was distended and marred with puckered sores. Beside him, another appeared to have lost his lower jaw, and his tongue, now oversized and sickly yellow, lolled across his naked chest, where his skin erupted in innumerable boils. He clutched a lasrifle in his disgusting, weeping fingers. There were five others, each of them bearing the diabolical mark of Nurgle.

Koryn glanced from side to side, noting how his brothers had fanned out in the shadows, drawing a wide semicircle around the group of cultists. This was how the Raven Guard worked. So attuned were they to each other, so practised were they in the art of subtle warfare that he need not even issue his command. Intuitively, his veterans knew what he expected, what was necessary.

Koryn readied himself. He would enjoy this, would enjoy despatching these foul bearers of the taint.

Silently he raised his twin lightning claws, the flashing blades glinting in the half-light. He drew his breath and then swooped forward, barely making a sound as he erupted from the shadows like a whirlwind of slashing blades, spinning about so that his talons traced wide circles through the miasmatic air. The lightning claws parted the flesh of the nearest cultist like warm butter, slicing him open from shoulder to belly so that his body collapsed silently in a bloody heap in the dirt.

Koryn's blood sang as he twisted, knocking aside the raised barrel of a lasrifle and skewering a second cultist through the belly. The man opened his mouth as if to howl in agony, but was silenced a second later as Koryn's other set of talons flashed, removing the cultist's head from his shoulders and spattering hot, festering blood over the Space Marine's ebony chest-plate.

Around him, Koryn's brothers moved silently in the dance of death, ducking and weaving and swiping as their blades and talons despatched the remaining five cultists in moments. The disciples of the Death Guard barely had time to register what was happening before it was all over. None of them had the opportunity to even squeeze off a shot or so much as raise an arm in defence. Within seconds the Raven Guard had melted away into the shadows, their work done, the only trace of their passing the quivering heap of corpulent flesh and severed limbs on the ground, writhing with the swarms of maggots that the cultists had harboured within their obscene bodies.

Talons dripping with gore, Koryn moved silently to join his brothers.

'Captain?' The voice that came over the vox was barely a whisper.

'Yes, Argis?'

'I understand, captain, that we owe the Brazen Minotaurs a grave debt, but should we not honour them on the field of battle as they honoured us, and not silently, from the shadows?'

'Argis, the Brazen Minotaurs honoured us in the only way they know how, in open combat, using their brute strength to aid us in our hour of need. Their sacrifice was great. But honour is not simply a matter of trading one life for another, of standing side by side on the field of battle. We honour our brothers the way we know how. The situation on Kasharat demands more subtlety than our bull-headed brothers could muster. We repay our debt the Raven's way.'

'Yes, captain,' said Argis, his tone circumspect. One of the shadows up ahead inclined its head, and Koryn smiled. Yes. The Raven's way.

Koryn watched as Argis slipped away into the darkness, and then followed silently behind.

DAED

The corpses were hideous to look upon, and if he hadn't seen their like a thousand times before, it might have been enough to turn even Daed's iron stomach. There were at least ten of them, perhaps more, heaped one upon another like some grisly diorama, an assemblage of severed limbs, decapitated heads and spilled organs. Some of the body parts still writhed, as if by their own volition, as if the diabolical pestilence that had infected them was unwilling to release its foul grip, even now, after death. They twitched and spasmed as if trying to pull themselves back together, trying to reassemble themselves into new, blasphemous forms.

Bast was standing over this strange monument to the dead, his jaw set firm in obvious disgust. 'This appears to be the origin of the signal, Captain.'

Daed sensed movement and glanced down to see a twitching arm scrabbling in the dirt near his boots, its fingernails raking pathetically at his leg brace. He sent it spinning away into the murky fog with a sharp kick.

'Explain,' he said, sharply.

'The beacon, captain. It must be buried somewhere in there amongst the corpses, transmitting its distress signal.' Bast was still studying the readout on his auspex, and he dropped to his haunches, running the device over the slurry of bodies. One of the torsos twitched suddenly, and Throle stilled it again with a short burst from his bolter, sending a fountain of blood and gore into the air. It splattered Bast where he stood, but he continued to study the readout without comment.

'Like I said, a trap,' growled Targus. 'They're trying to lure us in.'

The five Brazen Minotaurs were standing by the pillared entrance to a vast mausoleum complex, much of which, Daed had gathered, was buried far beneath their feet. The readings he had seen suggested there was a warren of tunnels and chambers stretching for miles below ground, although given

the interference caused by the green mist, he knew the veracity of any such readouts was in doubt. If they entered the labyrinthine structure, they would be going in blind.

The entrance yawned open before him, a marble staircase descending into the gloom. The traitor's icons and wards were splashed in sickly green across the pillars like a warning. Or, Daed considered, like a challenge.

'A trap?' said Throle in gruff rebuttal. 'Why would the enemy leave a distress beacon buried in a heap of their own dead?'

'The enemy are not easily fathomed,' said Bardus, his back to them as he kept watch, surveying their surroundings for anything that might come swooping out of the fog. 'There is no understanding the depths of their perversity.'

'Nor should we wish to understand it, Bardus,' replied Daed. 'For to understand it is to give yourself over to its foul corruption.' He glanced from side to side, hefting his axe as if anxious to bury it in something. 'But Targus is right. It may yet prove to be a trap.'

'Or worse,' replied Bast, his voice low and steady. 'There may be others who wish to claim our targets as their own.'

Daed nodded as he mulled this over. Were there other hostile forces here on Kasharat? Their surveillance had suggested only the presence of the Death Guard traitors and their cretinous followers. But perhaps Bast was right? Perhaps another faction had seen the opportunity to alter the course of the conflict in their favour. Perhaps even now they were winding their way through the tunnels below in search of Daed's quarry.

Targus was shaking his head impatiently, and Daed prickled with annoyance. 'Captain, we should leave this place. No good will come of it. The enemy waits for us inside. I am convinced these stinking corpses are nothing but a tribute to their vile god, intended only to lure us into their trap. We should return to where the real battle is, where we can honour the Emperor with blood on our axes, instead of skulking around here amongst the filth and the dead!'

Daed shook his head. ‘No, Targus. I, too, long for the opportunity to cleave their traitorous heads from their shoulders, to spill their foul blood upon my boots. But our mission here is critical. The fate of worlds rests on what we might find inside that foul warren. If Bast is right... if it were to fall into the hands of others... We cannot risk it. So we will go on, in the name of the Emperor, and we will do what is needed of us. We are Brazen Minotaurs!’

Daed turned at the sound of a boot scraping on stone, expecting to find another of the serpentine body parts stealing away from its kin. Instead, he caught sight of a human being, squatting on a nearby rock, cocking its head as it listened in to their conversation. One of its eyes had swollen to unnatural proportions and its forearms and fingers had become bloated and fat, oozing pus and ichor. When it saw him looking it made to scramble away behind the rock, dragging its enormous, distended belly behind it.

Daed leapt forward, moving faster than his immense size belied. He shot out his gauntleted fist and grabbed the pitiful thing’s head between his fingers. The creature whimpered and stared up at him, its scabrous lips parting as if about to beg for its life, but Daed did not award it the opportunity to speak. He closed his fist, bursting its fragile skull between his fingers. Its twitching corpse dropped to the ground, stinking pus and blood spurting from the stump of its neck.

Daed glanced around at his brothers.

‘We press on,’ he said, decidedly. ‘We find what we came here for, trap or otherwise.’ He didn’t wait for their agreement before stalking forward and disappearing into the enveloping darkness of the mausoleum complex.

KORYN

The incessant buzzing was growing louder.

Koryn pressed himself into an alcove, and waited. The five Raven Guard had wound their way deeper into the mortuary complex, drawing closer to what their auspexes and their intuition told them was the nexus of the labyrinth, the heart of the structure, where they reasoned the target would be found. And, Koryn considered, most likely a concentration of Traitor Marines and their pox-ridden kin, too.

They had despatched another seven cultists as they had passed through the warren of tunnels and deeper into the bowels of the structure. Here, the ornamentation of the tombs was less ostentatious, more functional, older even than those above.

In sharp contrast, evidence of inhabitation by the traitors grew all the more explicit. Rotting, fleshy membranes covered much of the walls, dripping with toxic slime, and the ground was thick with an oozing, corrosive sludge that lapped around their boots and made it harder for them to pass in silence. Bright runes flickered inside Koryn's helm, warning of airborne poisons and miasmatic spores that, once lodged in the lungs, would multiply at an alarming rate, overloading even the resilient metabolism of a Space Marine. Toxic shock would follow, or worse, infection by the vile pestilence that had claimed the traitors. Koryn knew what he would do before he ever succumbed to that. He thanked the Emperor for the resilience of his respirator.

The buzzing was closer now, the screaming whine of engines churning the foetid air. Koryn watched the mouth of the tunnel, readying himself for battle, waiting to see what would round the bend.

Moments later he got his answer. Two man-sized machines came buzzing along the passageway, twin rotary engines burring. They hovered three of four feet above the ground, red lights winking in the darkness like murderous eyes. They were composed of nothing but huge sacks of

decaying, quivering flesh, melded with corroded machine parts and weapons in what Koryn took to be a sick parody of life. He had seen their like before on the field of battle. Blight drones.

The drones buzzed down the tunnel towards the Raven Guard, trailing stringy mucus behind them where they brushed against the dripping walls. Koryn gave a minute shake of his head, and he hoped his brothers had seen him in the gloom. They would let the foul things pass, engaging them only if they, themselves, were engaged. The drones were guards, nothing more, and destroying them would not only be a waste of ammunition, it would also risk bringing about unnecessary attention.

The mission was everything. The instruments of the enemy could wait. Koryn watched with gritted teeth as they brushed past, filling the passageway with their disgusting bulk, their putrid flanks only inches from his helm.

Moments later, the buzz of their rotary engines had receded into the distance. Koryn eased himself out of the alcove where he'd been concealing himself. He watched as his four brothers did the same, seemingly solidifying from the shadows, their ebon armour coalescing out of the darkness. Silently, they moved on.

The tunnels continued to descend into the earth, winding and doubling back on themselves, sometimes opening into wider, uninhabited caverns, other times drawing in until they were so narrow that Koryn had to walk sideways to squeeze his bulk through them. Brother Grayvus took the lead at the head of the small squad, and it was soon after they had put an end to another clutch of cultists that Koryn saw him stop suddenly at the mouth of a T-junction and hold up his hand in warning.

‘What is it, Grayvus?’ breathed Koryn over the vox.

‘Death Guard, Captain. Three of them, up ahead.’

Stealthily, Koryn slipped past Syrus and the others, coming to stand beside Grayvus. He peered around the corner. There, in the sickly glow of a candle sconce, stood three of the Traitor Marines. Their now deformed

armour was ancient - more ancient, even, than Koryn's own venerable suit of Corvus pattern armour. Unlike Koryn's, however, that of the traitors was now so degraded and corroded that it barely appeared to offer them any protection at all. It had clearly been altered to accommodate the mutated bulk of its inhabitants, and Koryn guessed they must have worn it for aeons, ever since the warp had first swallowed them and spat them out again in new twisted, decrepit forms.

Their flesh had grown through the cracks in the ceramite plating, enveloping it, causing the suits to become intrinsically part of them, inseparable from what remained of their once-glorious bodies. Their heads bulged beneath their broken helms and Koryn could see the face of one of them through the broken visor, his eyes shrivelled and weeping toxic ichor. Poison gases spewed from vents between their armour plates. They carried bolt pistols and power swords, the blades stained rusty brown with spilled blood.

To Koryn, the sight of the Plague Marines was disgusting beyond comprehension. Their vileness extended beyond the physical, of course, but it was as if their traitorous nature had manifested in their flesh, had been made physical and real as a result of their unholy pacts. He despised everything they stood for.

One of them stood fingering his own entrails, which spilled out from a jagged crack in his power armour to hang loose around his knees. Insects and other, more unnatural, creatures picked around in the ruins of his belly. Flies circled the heads of each of the traitors, and the reek of decay was all-permeating, even through the relative protection of Koryn's respirator.

'For Corax, brothers,' said Koryn, his voice hard as iron.

'For Corax,' his squad echoed in unison.

Without even the slightest sound, Koryn slipped around the corner, keeping his back to the wall as he began to manoeuvre himself into position for the ambush. The flickering candle in the wall sconce cast the Plague Marines in a warm, yellow orb of light, and Koryn knew that to get

close to them, he would have to betray his position. No matter – he and his brothers would silence the traitors before they had the opportunity to raise the alarm.

He glanced back to see the others following behind, Syrus, Grayvus and Argis across the tunnel from him, keeping to the shadows as they crept steadily towards their prey. The traitors seemed content with their own concerns, evidently still unaware of the Raven Guards' proximity.

Koryn paused, now just a few feet behind the nearest Death Guard. He could see the ancient iconography on the pauldron, the old symbol of the legion now barely visible beneath layers of grime and necrotic, rippling flesh.

He glanced at Argis, issued a hand gesture to indicate that the others should follow his lead, and then, in one swift motion, launched himself from the wall, unsheathed his combat blade from his belt, and slit the throat of the closest Plague Marine from behind.

The traitor choked and stumbled backwards, causing Koryn to do the same. Thick, yellow pus oozed from the open wound in the Death Guard's throat, seeping out from the rotten tissue between its helm and the remnants of its gorget.

Growling in anger, the Plague Marine turned, swinging its fist up and round, catching Koryn hard in the chest and sending him spinning to the ground. He could barely believe the traitor was still standing. The wound in his throat yawned open like a wet, smiling mouth, but the Plague Marine seemed utterly unperturbed by this wound.

Koryn's brothers had engaged the other two traitors and were now locked in vicious hand to hand combat, ducking and weaving to avoid the poisoned blades that threatened to open up their armour and allow the pestilence inside.

Koryn rolled, springing to his feet, his lightning claws sparking as he thrashed out, tangling them in the traitor's intestines and wrenching them free. The Plague Marine's guts spattered in a heap by Koryn's boots, but

still the enemy came on wordlessly, swinging its power sword in a wide arc so that Koryn had to raise his other talons quickly to defend himself, batting aside the deadly weapon. The Death Guard staggered with the momentum, and, seeing his chance, Koryn kicked out, trying to keep the foul thing at bay. It laughed, a deep, wet splutter from somewhere within its chest, and then charged forward, ignoring a swipe from Koryn's claw that drew four long gashes across its partially exposed chest. It struck him hard on his right shoulder and he shuddered under the force of the blow, feeling his pauldron crack with the impact. Warning sigils flared up inside his helm.

Once again Koryn lashed out, his talons raking open great furrows in the Plague Marine's belly, tearing away ceramite and stringy flesh. Still it came on. The thing was near impossible to kill, so close to death was it already.

Koryn twisted at the sound of Syrus crying out beside him, and saw with horror that one of the other traitors now held his brother's beaked helm between its fists. He was appalled to see that a broken fragment of spine trailed from the base of the helm, where the Plague Marine had physically ripped Syrus's head from his shoulders. Crimson blood spurted from the stump of Syrus's neck, and as Koryn watched, his corpse toppled backwards against the passage wall, sliding to the ground in a black heap.

Koryn embraced the rage that he felt welling up inside of him, but did not allow it to overwhelm him. He ducked to avoid another swipe from the Plague Marine's fist and struck low with his lightning claw, burying his talons in the traitor's right knee and shearing away its lower leg in a flurry of sparks. The traitor twisted and buckled, dropping heavily to the floor, its power sword skittering away across the ground. Wasting no time, Koryn leapt forward, pinning one of the traitor's arms beneath his boot and forcing his talons into the throat wound he had opened earlier. He finished the job with a grunt of satisfaction, wrenching the Plague Marine's head from its body. It rolled away down the passageway amidst a shower of dark blood.

Koryn turned to see Argis had finally felled another of the Death Guard, carving out its twin hearts with his talons and his combat blade. Grayvus

had the third pinned against the wall, writhing and belching foul gases as it fought to get free. It was a matter of a moment's work for Koryn to loose that one's head from its shoulders too, and Grayvus allowed the corpse to drop to the ground, still twitching.

Argis dropped to his knees before the remains of his fallen brother. He looked up at Koryn, still panting for breath. 'I will honour him, Captain, by returning his corvia to the soil of distant Kiavahr.'

'Quickly then, Argis. Do what is necessary to honour our fallen kin,' replied Koryn gravely.

Argis cupped the bundle of fragile bird skulls suspended from fine chains on Syrus's belt and gave them a sharp tug, pulling them free. He stood, hastily tying the talismans to the small cluster that hung from his own belt.

'Another brother lost in battle. He will not be forgotten.'

Koryn stepped forward, putting a hand on Argis's shoulder. 'Yes, brother. He will not be forgotten. But remember why we are here. The Brazen Minotaurs sacrificed an entire company on Empalion II in order to enable the successful completion of our mission. We owe them a debt of honour, and we owe them our lives. Syrus understood that.'

They were silent for a moment.

'Retrieve his progenoid glands, Argis,' said Koryn. 'And hurry. We don't have much time.'

'Yes, captain,' replied Argis, drawing a scalpel from his belt and setting to work. Koryn watched the mouth of tunnel while Argis carried out the necessary procedure, the means by which their chapter's future would be secured.

'Now help me to move his body out of sight,' said Koryn a moment later, when Argis had hidden Syrus's geneseed carefully in a pouch at his belt. He stooped and took up Syrus's legs while Argis hefted the corpse beneath

the arms, and silently they deposited it into one of the nearby alcoves in the wall, hidden from view.

‘A dusty tomb for a hero,’ said Coraan.

Koryn surveyed the carnage around them, feeling his shoulder twinge with pain. The traitor had obviously done more damage than Koryn had initially realised. Not enough, however, to render the limb useless.

He turned to face the remaining three members of his squad.

‘We draw closer,’ he said, his voice low. ‘Closer to our goal, and closer to the heart of the enemy.’ He only hoped that somewhere behind them, Captain Daed of the Brazen Minotaurs could say the same.

‘Move out.’

DAED

‘It’s as if someone is leaving us a trail,’ said Daed, staring down at the ruins of a former Traitor Marine. ‘A trail marked in blood.’

The traitor’s wounds were still weeping dark, corrosive fluid that scarred the stone floor where it pooled, forming hissing spirals of vapour. This was the fourth scene of its like that they had encountered as they had passed through the winding tunnels, each of them alike, all lined with tributes to the long-forgotten dead.

‘Either that,’ said Bast, ‘or it is evidence that another faction are indeed here on Kasharat, searching for our prize.’

Daed nodded. He had yet to decide which he thought it might be. Either way, neither option offered him much comfort. Worse still, he could sense the warp-infested traitors all around him, elsewhere in the tunnels, seething like the poisonous vapour itself, like rodents scuttling about in the darkness. The notion filled him with a sharp sense of disquiet.

Something, or someone, had passed this way, tearing through the defences of the Death Guard to leave a path through the mausoleum complex. Whoever or whatever it was, they had enabled the Brazen Minotaurs to pass unmolested into the lair of the enemy. The only question that still concerned Daed was why. It felt somehow wrong that he hadn’t yet had cause to bloody his axe.

‘Captain?’

Daed turned to see Bardus watching the passageway behind them, eager for his attention. ‘What is it, Bardus?’

‘Listen.’

Daed concentrated, straining to hear anything in the echoing depths of the mortuary. There it was – a droning, buzzing sound, like that of a hovering

insect.

‘I hear it,’ he replied.

‘Whatever it is, captain, it’s coming this way,’ said Bardus, hefting his bolter.

Daed smiled. Perhaps, finally, they had stirred the enemy in their nest. ‘Brace yourselves. Ready your weapons, I want to be prepared for them when they arrive.’

‘Aye, Captain,’ said Bardus, dropping to one knee and bracing himself against the tunnel wall.

The air here was thick and syrupy, denser than it had been even on the surface, and it obscured Daed’s vision, making it difficult to see what was coming, what diabolical thing was responsible for the noise. He longed for the clean air of Tauron, for the lush green forests, filled with prides of the black lions that prowled through the wilds in their thousands. He longed for the hunt, for the feel of one of the great beasts struggling in his arms as he wrestled it to the ground, burying his hunting knife in its heart. He thought then of what the Sickening would do to Tauron, and he raised his bolt pistol and power axe in defiance. That was what he fought for – to hold the forces of Chaos at bay, to protect the Imperium from its terrible taint. Kasharat was already lost, but the weapon he hoped to recover here might prevent other worlds from falling. Whatever it was that had lured them there, down into that vast mortuary complex, Daed knew then that he would defeat it.

Something stirred in the swirling mist, but Daed was unable to get any real sense of bearing, of how far away the thing might be. He trained his bolt pistol on what he took to be the epicentre of the disturbance, but refrained from opening fire without knowing exactly what it was he would be shooting at. He felt the fine hairs on the back of his neck prickle in anticipation. The mist began to churn.

Daed waved his hand to signal the others to remain silent. He could hear the buzz of rotary engines now, drawing closer by the second. Bast had

heard them too, and he raised his bolter in readiness. ‘Incoming!’ he called.

Targus strafed left and dropped to one knee, swinging the heavy bolter up onto his shoulder.

Seconds later, Daed saw the hellish machines that were responsible for the sound. They burst out of the bank of green vapour – strange, hovering contraptions about the size of a man, with twin rotary engines and bulbous fleshy torsos that hung from the metal casings like the bodies of fat maggots. The drones were half machine, half rancid flesh, and they bristled with winking lights and strange mechanical weapons.

There were two of them, and they shot down the passageway, propelled at speed by their whirring engines. Daed hefted his axe, preparing to make a swing for one if it came close enough.

Beside him, Targus squeezed the trigger on his heavy bolter and it boomed with explosive force in the confined space, belching an explosive shell at the lead drone. Targus’s aim was true, and the bolter shell pierced the soft, fleshy tissue of the machine’s torso. It exploded in a shower of glistening pus and mechanical components, its rotors clattering to the floor.

The reverberating sound of the explosion was enough to stir the other Brazen Minotaurs into action. Bast sent a spray of bolter fire arcing into the air, clattering off the walls as the other drone slid noisily out of the way, churning the green miasma as it shot forward and into their midst.

‘Keep away from its poisoned blades,’ Daed barked. He raised his bolt pistol and fired a number of shots into the flank of the bizarre thing, opening puckered wounds that wept like silent, screaming mouths.

Targus was furiously loading another round into his heavy bolter, while the others continued to pepper the drone with shot after shot, holding the thing at bay.

‘Hurry, Targus!’ Daed bellowed, glancing over his shoulder to see Targus raising the weapon onto his shoulder once again.

A spray of the machine's pustulant innards spattered over Daed's arm brace then, and too late he realised their error. The gloopy stuff began to corrode his power armour almost as soon as it came into contact with the ceramite, chewing a series of deep pockmarks where it had landed.

'Hold your fire!' he screamed, but it was too late. Targus had already pulled the trigger of the heavy bolter.

The blight drone exploded in a fountain of acidic pus, showering Bardus in a concentrated burst, covering his golden armour in a spray of the nauseating yellow fluid. He staggered back a few steps as he tried to clear the stuff from his helm, and then realised what was happening as it began to chew its way into the crevices between the armour plating. He held his hand up and cried out in pain as his flesh began to disintegrate inside his armour.

The drone itself was a trap, Daed realised, like a deadly, hovering land mine. The corrosive filth inside it was a weapon, and it was eating away at the joints in Bardus's armour, seeping beneath the ceramite to burn his flesh. There was nothing they could do, no way for them to save him without succumbing to the poison themselves. All they could do was watch as Bardus was slowly, inexorably overcome, until the poison had consumed his body. He staggered back against the wall, issued a long, pained exhalation and collapsed into a crumpled heap upon the ground.

What was more, the noise of the heavy bolter fire meant they had given themselves away. Now the traitors would know they were there, and so would whoever was responsible for the trail of corpses that had led them this far into the complex.

Targus lowered his weapon and pushed past the others to stand over the corpse of his fallen brother. He turned, wordlessly, to look at Daed.

'Bardus is lost, brothers,' said Daed, 'But we will honour him.' He reached up and unclasped the black lion's pelt that hung around his own shoulders.

Foul vapour was now issuing from inside Bardus's armour as the poison burned through his corpse. A section of his helm had been eaten away, and

beneath it Daed could see the damaged, half-disintegrated remains of his brother's face.

Daed stepped forward, dropped to his haunches and draped the lion's pelt almost reverently over the corpse, as if it were a death shroud.

'He was Lionguard,' said Daed. 'His name will be recorded in the annals of Tauron.' He stood, resting his hand upon Targus's pauldron. 'There is nothing you could have done. You were not to know.'

Targus nodded, but Daed could see he was grieving for the loss of his brother. 'I will avenge him, captain.'

'On the field of battle, yes,' said Daed, his voice low and commanding. 'But here, now, we must focus only on the mission. Put all other thoughts from your mind.'

'Captain?' The voice that interrupted them was insistent over the vox. Daed turned to see Bast approaching. 'We must move swiftly, captain, before the enemy mobilises. The noise of the battle will draw them to us. This foul air gives them the advantage. They know the tunnels.'

Daed nodded. 'Lead on, Bast. Follow the trail of the dead. One way or another, we will reach our goal.'

He started forward, but stopped short when his boot encountered something hard on the ground, which skittered away across the stone floor, clanging off the tunnel wall. Crossing to where it came to rest, Daed was surprised to see the beaked, ebony helm of a Space Marine. He frowned when he noticed the sheared fragment of spinal column still jutting rudely from the base of the helm, and realised with surprise that the decapitated head of its former owner was still contained within. The wound looked recent. The stump of the neck was bloody and wet.

'What is it, captain?' said Throle, coming to stand beside him.

'I'm not sure,' replied Daed, turning to glance after Bast, who was already barely visible in the soupy miasma. 'But I believe this confirms we have

company on Kasharat.'

KORYN

The echo of heavy weapons fire reverberated through the tunnels like the crack of thunder. Koryn and his Raven Guard froze in response, each of them attempting to ascertain from which direction the sound had come. It was somewhere up above, a few tunnels away, back towards the surface.

After a moment, Grayvus spoke. ‘What are they doing? They’ll have the whole place down upon us!’

‘The blight drones,’ said Argis, and the dismay was evident in his voice.

‘That is their way,’ said Koryn. ‘They meet their enemies head on. They look them in the eye before they take their lives. There is honour in that.’

‘They’ll be meeting even more of them now,’ said Grayvus, wryly. ‘The pox-ridden scum will be swarming through these tunnels in a moment.’

Koryn nodded. ‘Yes, we must press on. We must keep the way clear. We’re near to the heart of the complex now. There our brothers will find what they are looking for.’

‘I hope it shall prove worth it,’ muttered Coraan. Koryn let the comment pass. He knew his brothers were still smarting from the loss of Syrus. To the Raven Guard, who were so few, every fallen brother was painfully mourned, every loss keenly felt by all. But on Empalion II, the Brazen Minotaurs had helped the Raven Guard to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. They had laid siege to a city under the sway of the Iron Warriors, sacrificing an entire company as a decoy in order to allow the Raven Guard to slip over the walls of the city and destroy the enemy from within. It was that which had brought Koryn to Kasharat, that debt of honour. The Brazen Minotaurs, bull-headed and brutal, could never have reached their target alone, and without it they risked losing the entire conflict to the enemy warband. Seven Imperial worlds had already fallen, and it was Koryn’s duty to come to their aid. He would not allow another world to succumb to the Sickening.

Footsteps pounded in an adjacent passageway. Koryn felt his pulse quicken. They would have to fight their way through from here on in, carving a bloody path through the corpses of the corrupted. It was not, perhaps, how he might have chosen to proceed with their mission, but Koryn's had to admit – the notion of spilling more traitorous blood had a certain appeal.

Koryn raised his lightning claws, which crackled and sparked in readiness.

‘Now, brothers!’ he called over the vox. ‘Let us see how many of these vile traitors we can destroy!’

Forgoing all sense of subtlety, Koryn took the lead, charging out of the mouth of the tunnel and directly into the path of a band of seven cultists coming in the other direction. His talons flashed and three of them fell before they had even realised what was happening, torn asunder so violently that they showered Koryn's armour in a dark, fleshy rain. He heard the chatter of bolter fire from behind him and knew that his brothers were there too, as he cut a swathe along the passageway.

‘Victorus aut Mortis!’ he bellowed over the vox as he opened up the belly of another cultist, before severing a fifth entirely in half at the midriff.

‘In the name of the Emperor!’ called Argis, whipping his combat blade around so that it opened a broad gash across the face of cultist, slicing through flesh and bone alike and felling the foul man where he stood.

‘For Corax!’ echoed Grayvus, loosing off a chatter of bolter shells.

As more and more of the cultists spilled forth from the other end of the tunnel, Koryn smiled. He allowed the lust of battle to consume him, to fill his thoughts until he was barely conscious of his own actions, carried along by the ferocious rise and fall of combat, the dance of the raven. Within minutes the corridor was filled with a tide of corpses, as if they had somehow washed up here, deposited and abandoned like unwanted flotsam – a torrent of death left in the wake of the living shadows.

Koryn, dripping blood from his talons, charged on, allowing his intuition to guide him, crushing the enemy as he led his Raven Guard deeper below ground, down towards the heart of the mortuary complex.

When he finally came to rest a short while later, it was beside the entrance to a large subterranean cavern. Here, an ornate doorway had been erected, a vast, steeped arch, towering above even the Space Marines' heads. It seemed incongruous to Koryn to find such a place at the heart of such a dark, oppressive structure.

Immense statues stood proud and silent on either side of the yawning archway, their heads, hands and feet now vandalised, leaving them deformed and unrecognisable. Their blank faces stared unseeing into eternity.

Koryn stepped to one side, pressing himself up against the wall in order to remain out of sight. He glanced round to see Argis's helm looming out of the gloom beside him.

'I sense movement inside,' said Argis quietly.

Koryn could tell that Argis was spoiling for another fight – he'd had a taste of battle and was now filled with the rush of it, with the desire to smite the enemy. Koryn knew, however, that it would be wrong for them to go any further. This was no longer their fight.

'No,' he replied, shaking his head. 'This is a battle our brothers should face alone. We should allow them that, at least – the opportunity to defeat the beast in its own lair. We have done what we came here to do, to lead them to their goal, to ease their path to victory as they once did ours. Now we must leave them to finish it, to taste the blood of their enemies for themselves.'

'Yes, Captain,' said Argis, and if he was disappointed, he did not allow it to show in his voice. 'The Raven's way.'

'And besides,' said Koryn, grinning. 'We need to clear them a path out of here, yet. There are plenty more of those traitorous wretches waiting for us

in the tunnels above.'

Argis raised his bolt pistol. 'I am ready, captain,' he said, and Koryn could tell that he was smiling with anticipation behind his respirator.

Koryn turned and made a hand gesture for the others to follow, and then silently the Raven Guard melted once more into the shadows.

DAED

It had been a bloodbath.

Whatever had happened here in this confined tunnel, it had been carnage. Someone – and having found the beaked helm in the passageway above, Daed was beginning to form an idea of who might have been responsible – had ripped through a swarm of enemy cultists, shredding them limb from limb and leaving behind a slick mess of body parts and eviscerated corpses. It wasn't so much a bloody trail as evidence of a massacre. There must have been thirty or more of the corrupted humans, their wretched, mutated cadavers already rotting where they had fallen. It was difficult to make out their true number – their remains were no longer whole enough to be able to judge.

‘What happened here?’ growled Throle, and Daed knew it was a rhetorical question, echoing all of their thoughts.

‘Help,’ he replied, his voice quiet and low. ‘We were wrong to assume we were being led into a trap, or that another foe was engaged in attempting to beat us to our target. Whoever did this... they are allies. Someone is clearing us a path.’

‘Clearing us a path...?’ said Targus, his voice incredulous. ‘But who?’

‘There'll be time for that later,’ replied Daed, brandishing his axe before him to underline his point. ‘We are close to our goal. I can sense it. We must press on. We must make good on the fortune we have been granted.’ He turned and charged off along the passageway, his boots sloshing in the spilled blood of the enemy. The others fell in behind him, and together the four Brazen Minotaurs began their final descent into the heart of the enemy labyrinth.

It was not long before Daed, following in the wake of his benefactors, located the entrance to the central cavern at the nexus of the mortuary complex. The path had been made clear to him by the grisly trail of fallen

cultists. They were heaped against the tunnel walls or spread out upon the ground, in some instances two or three deep at a time.

Some of them, he'd realised as he'd thundered down the tunnels, were still alive, scrabbling at his legs as they bled out from terrible wounds or tried to push their spilled organs back into their rent-open cavities. He finished many of them as he ran, crushing their skulls with his boots or spreading their infected brains across the walls with a swift shot from his bolt pistol.

Now, in the shadow of the enormous archway, surrounded by wispy green mist, Daed stood shoulder to shoulder with his brothers, ready to face whatever – or whoever – was waiting for them in the dank cavern beyond.

Without a word he stalked forward into the gloom, his bolt pistol tracking back and forth, his footsteps ringing out in the cavernous space. Inside, the cave had been dressed to resemble an elaborate temple, with a corridor of ornate marble columns leading to a raised dais upon which, Daed saw with a quickening of his hearts, their target rested: the supine form of Theseon, the Chief Librarian of the Brazen Minotaurs.

Theseon, apparently unconscious, was lashed to a marble slab, and as Daed watched a number of human cultists worked strange ministrations over his power armour, splashing unguents across his chest-plate and painting runes upon his pauldrons in livid green paint. They were trying, Daed knew, to weaken Theseon so that their psykers could extract the secrets from his mind. He only hoped that Theseon had been able to remain pure during these assaults. It had been days since he'd been taken, captured alive on the field of battle, and Daed knew that he had only two options: to kill the Librarian before Theseon gave himself up to the creatures of the warp, or to save him and return him to his brothers. He hoped for the latter, but as he entered the grotesque temple he began to prepare himself for the former.

Around them, candles flickered in sconces upon the walls, casting everything in a dull, flickering glow. Between the pillars, the remnants of ancient statues watched forlornly as Daed and Targus strode forward, preparing to slaughter the infidels who held their brother captive.

But Daed knew immediately that something was wrong. The cultists hadn't so much as stirred as the Brazen Minotaurs had entered the chamber, hadn't even looked up from their diabolical work at the sound of the Space Marine's thundering footsteps. Where were the guards? Where were the former Death Guard, the traitorous Space Marines of Empyrion's Blight? Surely they would not leave such a precious weapon as Theseon unguarded by anything but mere humans?

Daed's questions were answered a moment later as he neared the flight of stone steps that lead up to the dais. From the darkness off to his left, he became aware of a wet, rasping laugh and the sound of footsteps splashing heavily in the poisonous slurry that pooled on the floor.

Raising his axe, Daed turned to see one of the most horrific creatures he had ever encountered emerging from between two of the pillars. It had once been a Space Marine, but now it was a disgusting, lumbering, monster. The remnants of its terminator armour hung off its twisted, gangrenous flesh, and half of its ribcage was exposed to the elements, allowing Daed to see through to one of its black, beating hearts. It had swollen to almost twice its original size, and a large, bony horn protruded from the centre of its forehead, erupting through the remains of its helm. Acid dribbled freely from the orifice that had once been its mouth, and its respirator had been almost entirely eaten away by corrosion. Necrotic flesh hung in loose strips from between the plates of its ruined armour.

In its left fist it clutched a storm bolter, but its right arm was now a wriggling mass of tentacles – at least six of them – each of them dripping with glistening venom. Strange, repulsive creatures, about the size of rats, scuttled over its body, burrowing in and out of its flesh.

The monster was flanked on either side by two Plague Marines, each of them clutching bolters trained on Daed and his brothers.

Daed wasted no time. With a bellowing roar he lowered his head and shoulders, raised his power axe and charged.

The creature's storm bolter barked, spewing shells, but Daed charged on, strafing left and right and swinging his axe in a wide arc over his head. It

connected with the monster's chest, shattering ancient ceramite and ribs indiscriminately, burying itself deep inside the rotten husk of the former Space Marine. The creature staggered back under the force of the blow, wrenching the shaft of the axe out of Daed's gauntlets in the process, so that half of the weapon's double-bladed head still protruded from its chest.

Then, almost as if the weapon had barely caused a scratch, it came on again, lashing out with its multiple tentacles, whipping Daed's legs from underneath him so that he fell, hard, to the floor.

Daed scrambled for purchase, attempting to lever himself up before the massive bulk of the thing fell upon him. He could hear the chatter of bolter fire from behind him, and realised that his brothers had engaged the two Plague Marines, keeping them busy while he tackled the beast.

The creature raised its left leg as if to crush him beneath it, but Daed rolled, springing up onto his feet just as the thing was struck by a blast from Targus's heavy bolter, punching a massive hole in its left side and spilling its rotten innards across the floor. Daed raised his bolt pistol and pressed forward, shooting openly into the creature's face so that it howled in pain and stumbled back against one of the pillars.

Hands shot out from the strange, fleshy membrane that covered the pillar, and Daed realised with disgust that there were humans in it, half-subsumed by the gelatinous goo so that they had become one with the walls, their bodies melding into the organic morass. They clutched the former Space Marine to them in their fleshy embrace, and it battered them off, lumbering forward, its storm bolter raised.

It snapped out a reply to Targus's heavy bolter and Daed saw his brother reel, shredded by the explosive rounds as they chewed pockmarks in his chest and face. He fell without issuing a sound, his weapon clattering noisily to the ground.

'Targus!' Roaring in rage and defiance, Daed rushed forward, his bolt pistol flaring. The creature swung around, its trigger still depressed, and Daed felt a sharp pain in his left shoulder as a stray shot burst through his armour, blowing out the top of his arm and rendering the limb useless.

Warning sigils flared in his helm display but he charged on regardless, crying out for vengeance, ignoring the pain.

Daed slammed against the rotten bulk of the creature, striking it hard in the face with his good fist. He felt its tentacles lash out in response, curling around his waist and squeezing him with crushing force. He could smell the thing now, even through his respirator, and its stench was repugnant: the very scent of death itself.

Choking as the creature tried to squeeze the life out of him, Daed grabbed for the shaft of his axe, hauling on it with all of his might in an effort to wrench it free. He felt it give as the creature shifted, and he pressed on with renewed vigour, working the blade back and forth until it finally slid free in a spray of sickly ichor.

Daed was feeling dizzy now from the sheer force being exerted upon his body. His armour was beginning to crack under the pressure and he could feel where the creature's acidic spittle was searing his flesh, burning through the ceramite on his chest-plate. He had only moments to act.

With a huge effort, Daed raised the axe as high above his head as his good arm would allow him, and then brought it down in a sharp chopping motion, throwing all of his strength behind it. His aim was true, and the blade struck the creature hard in the side of the throat where acidic discharge had rotted away its armour.

The creature lurched backwards, loosening its grip and allowing Daed to drop to the floor. It staggered back, its storm bolter swinging aimlessly, and then, to Daed's relief, its head slid from its shoulders, the last vestiges of its decaying flesh failing to hold it in place any longer. The head struck the stone floor only seconds before the lurching, spasming body.

Daed clambered up onto his feet, twisting around to see how his brothers were fairing. Throle was on the ground, his leg shattered at the knee, but with the corpse of a fallen Plague Marine beyond him. Bast was standing over the toppled remains of the other, still spraying its now obliterated face with bolter fire.

Daed staggered over to them.

‘Targus is lost,’ said Throle, matter-of-factly.

‘We shall mourn him later,’ replied Daed, putting a hand on Bast’s pauldron to stay his brother’s hand. Bast released the trigger of his bolter, and the last echoes of the battle died a few moments later.

On the dais, the cultists were working furiously to release the chains that bound Theseon to the marble slab, evidently planning to flee.

‘Hand me your bolter, brother,’ said Daed, passing his axe to Bast and taking his brother’s weapon in return. He raised it, took aim, and felled the screaming cultists one by one as they finally acknowledged his presence and bolted for cover, abandoning the Librarian where he lay. None of them made it as far as the door.

‘Bast – see to Throle. I’ll see to Theseon.’ Daed crossed the cavern, taking the steps two at a time as he leapt up onto the dais. There, on the marble slab, Theseon lay unmoving, still wearing his bright blue power armour, covered now in blasphemous scrawl. He was still alive – that much was clear to Daed almost immediately – but he had retreated into a sus-anic coma, disappearing into his own mind in an effort to protect himself and the secrets of his chapter from the foul ministrations of the Death Guard’s psykers. Whether he might ever be roused from it, Daed did not know. He hoped it would be so – Theseon’s mind was a powerful weapon, and he was needed if the war against the Chaos forces was to be won.

But now was not the time for such thoughts. Daed would have to carry the Librarian to the surface. He only hoped their mysterious benefactors had thought to consider their escape, too.

It was the work of only moments to wrench Theseon free of the chains that bound him. Daed turned to see Throle, upright, resting on Bast, his shattered leg hanging useless and limp. With a groan of agony at the sharp pain in his left shoulder, Daed hefted the bulk of the supine Librarian over his shoulder, and staggered towards the door.

Their passage to the surface proved relatively uneventful, if painfully slow. There was evidence everywhere of the passing of another party; corpses strewn at every junction, tunnels spattered with the blood of both human cultists and traitorous Death Guard. Once again, it was clear to Daed that someone had seen fit to carve them a path to the surface. With the burden of the injured Throle and the unconscious Theseon, it was a much-needed reprieve.

Above, on the planet's surface, the green mist now swirled thicker than ever, cloying and sickly even through Daed's helm. Trusting his instincts, he staggered into the haze towards the Thunderhawk resting amongst the broken spires of the vast temple complex.

Soon enough, the shadow of the vessel hulked out of the fog to greet them. Daed staggered over to the ship, reaching for the control panel that would release the boarding hatch. But his fingers encountered something unexpected there. He glanced down to see something dangling on the end of a chain that had been draped over the release mechanism. It was a tiny, fragile bird's skull, bleached white and stained with splatters of dark blood.

The skull of a raven. He had seen their like before, hanging from the belts of fellow Space Marines, ebon-armoured warriors of the Raven Guard, whom he had fought beside on Empalion II. He cupped the totem in his fist and then thumbed the release control, causing the hatchway to hiss open like a gull's wing.

'What is it, Captain?' asked Bast, standing behind him as he held the raven's skull up to the light. It twisted as it dangled on the fine chain.

'Hope,' said Daed, cryptically. 'Hope that we may yet win this war, and a debt repaid.'

Daed slipped the totem into a pouch at his belt, and then strode purposefully up the ramp towards the waiting vessel. The Brazen Minotaurs would triumph yet in this conflict. They had Brother Theseon, and they had help from the most unexpected of quarters.

Daed grinned as he dropped Theseon onto a bench and secured him into place with the webbing. He wondered if, even now, the sons of Corax were watching from the shadows. The thought filled him with an unexpected mix of confidence and dread.

Seconds later the hatchway hissed shut once again, and Bast gunned the Thunderhawk's engines.

Now, Daed knew, the real battle would begin.