

WARHAMMER
40,000



CRIMSON DAWN

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELLA

C Z Dunn

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ONE

The Beast of Blades

The klaive crackled as it sliced through the artificially generated air, the power field that engulfed the blade burning off the gaseous construct and leaving both an acrid tang and searing afterimage in its wake. Scout Sergeant Anzo Riegler took a half step backwards and brought his own powered weapon upwards, the two blades meeting in a crescendo of bright, noisome energy.

For a moment the two combatants remained locked together, each channelling their considerable strength through their weapon in an attempt to drive their foe backwards. Energy flared, bathing the Space Marine's armour in a strange, suffuse glow, turning his pauldrons from their usual white to an unnatural mauve. Riegler's oculobe kicked in as the actinic blaze grew brighter, sparing his vision from permanent damage while allowing him to keep his eyes open.

Too evenly matched in brawn, the stalemate could have gone on forever with neither warrior relenting. Coming to this realisation fractionally sooner than his inhuman enemy, Riegler withdrew his blade and spun around his opponent, briefly exposing his back but secure in the knowledge that his speed was superior. In a single fluid movement, the Scout sergeant positioned himself at his enemy's rear and thrust with his power sword.

Only to have it parried by the scything talon of a tyranid bio-construct.

Another of the thing's multiple arms swung around, this one tipped with a cluster of kroot hunting knives, and slashed at Riegler's head. The Crimson Sabres Scout ducked the blow and, pushing the chitinous limb away with his blade, raised the sword to a defensive position in

anticipation of the next attack. Another swipe from the talon met only Riegler's powered blade, while a simultaneous thrust from the klaive was dodged as defence turned into attack.

Dipping under the dark eldar weapon, Riegler allowed it to crackle harmlessly over his head before pushing the tyrannid limb away with his own sword. With half of the construct's limbs briefly posing no threat, Riegler slashed powerfully in the direction of the thing's chest.

This time his assault was met by a blade that was a dark mirror of his own.

Forged during the days when the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes were still assembled into Legions, the once bright metal of the blade and clean lines of the hilt had become blackened and corrupted through millennia of malign change. Where once its wielder had raised his sword in defence of humanity, and in the name of the Emperor, seditious voices had spoken to him, leading him away from the path of righteousness and into the arms of foul deities. Worlds that he had formerly raised his sword arm to defend were in time crushed beneath his heel. Allies became enemies; brothers became hated foes. Bestowed with strength and martial prowess beyond even his primarch-granted gifts, the boons from his new master and the changes wrought upon his body and wargear saw him rise to become a leader of his new ilk. Like-minded warriors flocked to his banner and for thousands of years he brought glory to his patron's name, each new kill or atrocity bringing with it unbounded pleasure.

Until, on a nameless battlefield mere decades ago, Anzo Riegler had killed him in single combat and taken the ancient power sword from his ruined corpse as the spoils of war.

The Scout sergeant's weapon clashed with the Chaos blade; the four-armed weapon-servitor was knocked back slightly under the ferocity of the riposte. Riegler took a step backwards himself to assess the situation. All of the trophy weapons were raised in a ready position, the automaton awaiting the next attack. As Riegler swung his own blade and adopted an offensive stance, he became aware of another presence in the duelling chamber – a figure in blue power armour that had not been there at the start of his training session. Ignoring the uninvited spectator, Riegler unleashed a flurry of swipes.

The servitor raised one arm after another, countering each of the slashes and driving aside the Space Marine's blade. Sensing an opening, the thing swung both of its left arms, attempting to impale Riegler upon the Chaos sword and the tyranid talon. By rote, his post-human reflexes took over and he countered the attack, his lone power sword locking with the twin blades. With a similar degree of speed the servitor lashed out with both the klaive and the kroot knives, killing blows aimed at the Scout's now exposed flank.

This time Riegler drew upon decades of combat experience in addition to his enhanced physiology – real-world battlefield skills that had earned him the trophies now arrayed against him. Maintaining his lock with his power sword, he raised his arm to meet the blur of alien steel aimed at his vulnerable head and chest. His gauntlet connected with the pommel of the klaive lashed to the servitor's handless arm and reversed the direction of the swipe away from his head. Shifting his position slightly, he brought his left pauldron up to meet the knives. The crimson iconography of the crossed swords beneath a skull was scraped away, but the ceramite plate remained intact.

With a roar Riegler raised a booted foot and pushed the servitor back, the remnant of his Chapter symbol obliterated entirely as the blades passed over his shoulder pad for a second time. The weapon-servitor halted its retreat after only a couple of steps and prepared to counter attack.

Before it had a chance to react, Riegler lunged forwards and drove his sword through the servitor's sternum in a coup de main, thick, black, oily blood burning off as it came into contact with the power field. He withdrew the weapon, forcefully causing the void in the man-machine's chest to issue forth a wet *pop* before it crashed forwards onto the metal floor of one of the *Red Honour's* many training chambers.

'Forge Master Gorthus will be most dismayed,' said the blue-armoured figure, stepping over the shallow indentation that denoted the perimeter of the duelling ring. 'That's the third weapons-servitor you've ruined since we set out from Drogsh. Wouldn't disarming it have sufficed, or was killing it the point?'

Riegler deactivated his power sword, the blue glow dissipating accompanied by a fizzing whine. He placed it in the scabbard at his waist.

‘If you’re here to assess my state of mind then you’re wasting your time, Brother Mannon.’ The Scout sergeant didn’t look at the Chief Librarian as he spoke, instead inspecting the damage to his pauldron. ‘Besides, isn’t Okrark or one of the other Chaplains better suited to the task than a washed up old witch-mind?’

Riegler looked up now and stared the more senior member of the Chapter square in the eyes. After a moment Mannon snorted and shook his head, eliciting a smirk from the Scout sergeant who put out his hand and gripped the Librarian’s proffered arm in a warrior’s embrace.

‘I had come here to speak to you about the matter of who will take temporary charge of the Tenth,’ Mannon said, relinquishing his grip. ‘But if that’s how you speak to senior members of the Chapter then I’m not sure you’re fit for the role,’ he added with a grin.

‘The Sword Council has made its decision then?’ Riegler asked. He knelt down beside the ruined servitor and began to unleash the myriad weapons from its arms. Mannon had been right: Gorthus would not take kindly to the destruction of yet another training servitor, but that would not stop Riegler from visiting the Forge Master in his workshop on board the Crimson Sabres flagship to petition him to construct another. Perhaps this time, at the risk of causing offence, he might ask the Techmarine to build one that was more durable.

‘The council is still in session,’ Mannon replied, kneeling to assist the sergeant in his task. ‘Though you are the longest serving and most senior of the sergeants in Tenth, there are other equally worthy candidates from other companies. Both Chyre and Fuslev of the First have distinguished themselves in recent campaigns and Jurzek of the Second is said to be amongst Chapter Master Kranon’s favourites.’

‘All good men and fine warriors,’ Riegler said, carefully placing the tyranid talon to one side. ‘As in all matters, I will trust and respect the judgement of Master Kranon and the Sword Council. The Scout Company has been without Master Murdok’s guidance for almost a year now and no matter who takes our wounded brother’s mantle for the next campaign, the Tenth will be led by one of our Chapter’s very best.’

‘But you hope that it will be you?’

Riegler said nothing, but the sides of his lips pursed into an embryonic grin.

Mannon had fought alongside Murdok, Riegler and the elements of the Tenth and Fourth Companies who had struck in the galactic south to counter the tyranid threat on a chain of agri worlds vital to the continued existence of three entire sub-sectors and the lives of over a hundred billion souls. Mannon was there when the Master of Tenth was torn open by one of the alien fiends, the entire right side of his body shorn away, resulting in a year of recuperation and reconstruction. He was also there when Riegler and his squad took down the beast that had so nearly claimed Murdok and the sergeant had cut off one of the massive talons from the still twitching tyranid, claiming it as a war trophy.

The Chief Librarian unwound the metal twine that held the Chaos blade in place and carefully pulled the sword away. Among many Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, possession of such a weapon would lead to accusations of heresy followed by certain excommunication or even execution. Among the brethren of the Crimson Sabres, however, though the practice was not encouraged it was certainly tolerated and the blades of fallen traitors were claimed as readily as those of slain xenos for inclusion on a battle-brother's personal training-servitor.

‘Isn’t four a little excessive, sergeant?’ Mannon said, rising to his feet and handing the black sword to Riegler pommel first. ‘The brothers of First Company still only train against dual-wielding servitors and I can count on one hand those among our number who practise against even three blades.’

Riegler placed the dark blade on top of the others. ‘I would try to explain it to you, Master Librarian, but I fear that it would be lost on a brother who, among a cadre of swordsmen, eschews the blade.’ The Scout sergeant motioned to the mace hanging at the Librarian’s thigh.

The origins of the Crimson Sabres lay only a few millennia in the past, but all records of their history had been lost when they were forced to abandon their home world, Rhoghon, and blight it with radiation unleashed by forbidden technologies. Even prior to that their history had been sketchy at best and the identity of their Primogenitor Chapter had remained an enigma. Each brother among the Chapter held their own theory, often claiming they were descended from such noble and proud Chapters as the Ultramarines, Blood Angels or Imperial Fists. There had been a few members of the Chapter down the centuries – usually brothers

of the Librarius or Reclusiam – who held a different belief regarding their origins, that the Crimson Sabres were founded from a Chapter whose own roots lay on a feudal world. This, they argued, was the source of the Crimson Sabres prowess and fascination with the blade, but at the cost of mastery of other close combat weapons. Those who held to this particular school of thought bore maces, halberds and sometimes even axes into battle to honour this supposed tradition.

‘I may not be able to match your mastery of the sword, brother-sergeant, but I assure you that my skill with the mace is unparalleled within the Chapter.’ He grinned. ‘As you have found to your detriment on numerous occasions in this very chamber.’

Riegler visibly bristled. ‘How long has it been since we last duelled? Five years? Ten?’ His hand reached down to the handle of his power sword. ‘I think we are long overdue a rematch, don’t you? You’ll find I’m a more formidable prospect these days.’

Mannon’s grin grew wider as his hand too strayed to his waist. He was just about to speak when a crimson-armoured figure appeared at the threshold to the chamber. Both the Scout sergeant and the Librarian turned to face the newcomer.

‘Pardon the interruption, brothers,’ said Sergeant Kohl of First Company. While the Sword Council was in session it was the sworn duty of the first sergeant of First Company to remain in the Sword Hall and to carry out any task that the Masters of the Crimson Sabres required of him. If he was here now then it could only mean one thing.

‘The council is over,’ he continued. ‘The decision is made.’

TWO

Called

The eyes of the assembled captains were fixed on Anzo Riegler as he stepped into the vast Sword Hall aboard the *Red Honour*. The nine of them stood in full armour around the vast granite table recessed into the deck, where for centuries the important business of the Chapter had been debated and determined. In front of each of them was a helmet, the coloured flash over the ceramite ridge denoting their company command. Beside each helm lay an unsheathed sword, some ornate power blades with intricate, baroque hilts, others brutal chainswords with runes of protection and kill tallies carved into the casing.

There were empty spaces at the end of the table, reserved for brothers of the Reclusiam and Librarius for those occasions when the nature of the Sword Council's business demanded the presence of the Chapter's spiritual and psychic leaders. When it came to matters of Chapter organisation, deployment and promotion, only the company captains and Chapter Master were permitted to be present around the table, though other brothers of the Crimson Sabres were welcome to observe from the rail running around the edge of the recess. In a break from Chapter protocol, the *Red Honour's* Signal Master lingered close to the threshold of the Sword Hall, a portable hololith unit clutched under her arms. The tenth figure, Chapter Master Kranon, gestured for Riegler to come before the Sword Council, and as he descended the steps Mannon and Kohl took up positions along the rail.

As Riegler approached the Chapter Master, Kranon gestured again towards the far end of the table. Though he went unhelmeted, a sword still hung at Kranon's waist, long-standing Chapter tradition dictating that the

Crimson Sabres Chapter Master should never go unarmed lest disaster befall them. As he took up his position, none of the captains averted their gaze from him. One of them, Sevarion Kranon, captain of Second Company and true brother of the Chapter Master, seemed to be staring at him harder than the others. The ghost of a smile at Captain Kranon's lip, a smile Riegler had witnessed countless times when the two Crimson Sabres had been squad mates, told him all he needed to know.

'Sergeant Riegler, do you know why you have been summoned here?' Kranon's voice echoed around the high, vaulted ceiling of the massive chamber. The Chapter Master's weathered face betrayed no emotion, his dark hair and bright blue eyes the mirror of his younger brother's.

For a brief moment, Riegler wondered whether he was in fact present to hear the council's decision about who was to assume temporary command of the Scout Company, or whether he was about to face censure. The trophies he had claimed down the years were not dissimilar to those taken by others of the Crimson Sabres – he knew for a fact that every man staring at him around the council table kept chests and lockers in their own quarters containing blades and guns that once belonged to vanquished foes – but he knew of no other among his brothers who had taken a sword from a fallen traitor. That very fact alone may have been enough to condemn him, but to actually use the weapon in training?

'The Sword Council has been determining who is to take command... excuse me, *temporary* command of Tenth Company,' Riegler said, dismissing all thoughts of his eccentric ways. 'The Chapter once again goes to war and the Scouts are without leadership. One of the more experienced companies might well be able to cope with a significant period of time without a captain at their head, but the men of Tenth are still in the process of being moulded into Space Marines. Without Captain Murdok to lead them, their efficacy as a fighting force is severely compromised and their use to the Chapter is therefore negligible.'

Chapter Master Kranon smiled and nodded. 'Your bluntness and ability to cut through to the heart of matters is commendable, sergeant. It is that, along with your undeniable skill in combat, that has made the council's decision an easy one this day.' He held his palm open and motioned to the empty space beside Captain Urzoz of Ninth Company. 'Please, take your place at the Sword Council, *Captain* Riegler.'

Spontaneous applause broke out around the table, a harsh metallic sound generated by ten pairs of armoured hands. As the newly appointed captain took up his position, several of his peers patted him on the shoulder and offered their congratulations. As he slid his power sword free from its scabbard, he looked up at the rail where Mannon and Kohl both nodded in approval.

‘My thanks to you all, brothers,’ Riegler said, placing his blade carefully on the granite surface. ‘To command my company is an honour I do not take lightly and, as I have ever done, I will serve the Chapter with all of my skill and courage.’

Chapter Master Kranon raised his hand and the applause instantly abated. ‘That skill and courage may be needed sooner than you think. Now that the Sword Council has a quorum once again there are urgent matters to discuss. Signal master, play the message.’

Doing as she had been ordered, a slender woman in the deep red robes worn by all Crimson Sabres Chapter serfs and fleet crew manipulated the controls of the unit before her. Above the council table beams of ethereal blue light flickered into being and projected a holographic image onto the surface below. The image wavered and distorted as if it were being viewed underwater but the figure that resolved was clearly identifiable from the symbol of office inset into the chestplate of the ancient suit of power armour he wore. The inquisitor appeared to be middle-aged but, with the rejuvenat treatments available to the ordos, he could have been hundreds of years old for all any of the Sword Council knew.

‘This is Lord Inquisitor Federic Koshyn of the Ordo Hereticus hailing all Imperial forces. This is a vermillion-level message.’ Though the image was strong, the audio accompanying it was choppy and distorted, at times sounding like there were multiple speakers. ‘The world of Umidia has succumbed to the malign influence of the Archenemy. Cult activity is rife and the entire world is in the thrall of malevolent entities. Any Imperial forces receiving this message make all haste to Umidia. This sedition and heresy cannot stand and must not go unpunished. Let us bring the flame of the Emperor to bear and raze this world as an—’ The message cut out just as the inquisitor’s zeal was beginning to reach fever pitch.

‘That is all we received?’ asked Ragnald, captain of Third Company. He was the eldest of the Crimson Sabres captains, his dark hair flecked with

silver above the ears.

‘There were coded coordinates for the planet in question along with a response frequency embedded in the message but that was all we picked up,’ said Chapter Master Kranon. ‘Now that the matter has been brought to our attention, what are we to do about it?’

‘The Inquisition is no ally of the Crimson Sabres,’ said Barkman of Sixth Company. ‘Let it deal with this itself.’ Murmurs of approval followed from the captains to either side of him, Shergon of Fifth and Kiestor of Seventh.

‘Inquisition or not, a world has fallen to the Dark Powers. The corruption must be dealt with before it spreads,’ said Dzarton of the Fourth.

Eli Dzarton was a powerfully set man, even by Space Marine standards, popular not only among his fellow captains but also the lower-ranked brothers of the Chapter. Though he did not covet Sevastus Kranon’s position, it was no secret that Dzarton would likely lead the Crimson Sabres in the future.

‘Agreed,’ said Captain Kranon. ‘Though we have long since severed our ties with the bureaucracy and other militant forces of the Imperium, we are still its servants and loyal to the Golden Throne. If this planet has become a haven for the Ruinous Powers then it is our sworn duty to cleanse it.’

Draznicht, captain of First Company and usually the most taciturn and reserved of the Sword Council, spoke next, his more customary Terminator armour eschewed for a suit of Mark VII power armour for council matters. ‘If old grudges and animosity guide our hand in all matters then the Crimson Sabres would never go to war. Let us strike for Umidia and fulfil our oaths to the Emperor.’

‘The message was broadcast on a general channel,’ said Nthicrar of Eighth. ‘Even now, other forces will be preparing to come to the Lord Inquisitor’s aid. Let them, I say. The Crimson Sabres should have no part in this.’

‘Signal master. Open the frequency that came threaded with the hololithic message and put it over the ’casters,’ the Chapter Master ordered. Flicking switches and spinning dials, the robed woman found the channel and the hall’s vox-casters crackled into operation.

‘...of the Hawk Lords pledges his aid and that of the three companies he leads to your effort, Lord Inquisitor.’

‘Castellan Zargo answers your call, as do five hundred brothers of the Angels Encarmine.’

‘Master Gabriel of the Dark Angels lends his blade and those of two hundred battle-brothers to your cause.’

‘It would seem that we must make our decision soon, lest the point become moot,’ said Chapter Master Kranon. Even as he spoke, more promises of aid filtered through the vox-casters. ‘We must vote now. How say you all?’

As was Chapter tradition, each captain voted in company order.

‘Aye,’ said Draznicht.

‘Aye,’ said Captain Kranon.

‘Aye,’ said Ragnald.

‘Aye,’ said Dzarton.

‘Nay,’ said Shergon.

‘Nay,’ said Barkman.

‘Nay,’ said Kiestor.

‘Nay,’ said Nthicar.

‘Aye,’ said Urzoz.

All eyes once again fell on Riegler. If he voted in the affirmative then the motion would be carried and the Chapter would be committed to war. If he voted against action then the matter would pass to the Chapter Master to cast the deciding vote. Riegler may have only been part of the Sword Council for a matter of minutes, but it was common knowledge that Sevastus Kranon preferred to let his captains determine their own collective mind in matters of war.

‘Aye,’ said Riegler after a brief pause.

There was no admonishment from those who had voted not to answer the Lord Inquisitor’s call, but Barkman snorted and shook his head. Chapter Master Kranon smiled warmly at Riegler and nodded.

‘So be it,’ said the Chapter Master. ‘The matter is decided and the Crimson Sabres will rally to this Lord Inquisitor. Signal master, open the channel.’

After more dial spinning and button flicking, static washed over the vox-casters before ebbing away.

‘This is Chapter Master Sevastus Kranon of the Crimson Sabres. We heed your call and make all haste for Umidia at Chapter strength.’

After he spoke, there was a long, uncomfortable silence over the vox. Just as the Chapter Master was about to repeat his pledge, a scratchy, whispery voice spoke. ‘The Hawk Lords withdraw their offer of aid.’

Several of the captains began to vocalise their anger but Chapter Master Kranon gestured for silence.

‘The Angels Encarmine likewise withdraw their offer.’

This was followed by more voxed declinations, each one terse but not impolite, save for the final one.

‘Master Gabriel of the Dark Angels also refuses to come to your aid, Lord Inquisitor. I will not fight alongside base curs such as the Crimson Sabres and you should think twice before throwing your lot in with such renegades.’

The Chapter Master could no longer contain the captains’ rage and it looked to Riegler as if he had no intention of doing so. Insults were hurled and challenges issued, but the Dark Angels had already cut the vox-link and so remained blissfully unaware of where Barkman, Draznicht and Kohl, among others, would like to have inserted their blades about the Deathwing Grand Master’s person.

Another voice cut across the channel, the same one that had forced the vote among the council. The captains stopped raging, though each wore a look that could kill from a hundred metres. ‘My gratitude, Chapter Master Kranon. The Ordo Hereticus gladly accepts your aid and awaits your arrival upon Umidia.’ More static as the link went dead.

His visage as grim and determined as those of his slighted captains, Sevastus Kranon looked each of the Sword Council dead in the eye. ‘Go now, brothers, and prepare your companies for battle. The Crimson Sabres go once again to war.’

THREE

Lessons

Within an hour of the Crimson Sabres fleet exiting the warp, Tenth Company was ready to insert on Umidia, the dark green orb now ringed by a flotilla of red-hulled vessels.

On the main hangar deck of the *Red Honour* battle-brothers, serfs and servitors readied their gear and war machines while Techmarines paced, offering up the prayers and litanies that would ensure the reliability of the equipment on the forthcoming mission. Bikes and Rhino troop carriers rolled along ramps into the waiting bellies of Thunderhawks while beside them Stormravens idled, awaiting their cargo of Scouts to be delivered planetside.

Anzo Riegler moved among his men, checking their preparations and offering words of advice and encouragement. Though he had served his entire career as a brother of Tenth Company many of his charges had spent only a few years among the ranks of the Scouts, perfecting their warcraft until they were ready to ascend to one of the battle or reserve companies. It was always a sombre occasion when a brother of Tenth moved on, not because they were losing one of their own to the ranks of fully fledged Space Marines, but because of the more permanent loss endured by the Chapter that had necessitated the Scout's advancement.

Not that Tenth was immune to those kinds of losses. Captain Murdok and a dozen Scouts languished on Drogsh as a result of wounds incurred at the claws and talons of the tyrannids, while of the eighty-seven men left under Riegler's command almost a score were freshly raised to the company to take the place of those slain by the xenos horde. Even before his ascension to the rank of captain, Riegler had taken the time to learn

every one of their names and speak to the Chaplains who had recruited them, pumping them for information about any potential weaknesses and specific areas of training to concentrate on.

‘Brother Sylas,’ Riegler said, halting next to a Scout intently cleaning the barrels of a shotgun. ‘You may well have inherited your armour from a fallen brother but keeping it in the condition it was bequeathed to you in is no way to honour his sacrifice.’

The fresh-faced Space Marine looked up at his superior, his bright green eyes still invested with a youthful innocence. Okrark himself had been the one to recruit Sylas from one of the eastern tribes of Drogsh – the boy’s fair hair evidence of his genetic heritage – and though Riegler believed him too young to take his place in Tenth the senior Chaplain had vouched for the recruit. Sylas put aside the cloth he was using to wipe down his weapon and placed his hand on the pauldron of his carapace armour. The crimson plate was mottled and pitted from where the acid blood of a lictor had engulfed its previous owner, Brother Kruzon. Riegler had been fighting alongside him when his end came and had been the one to retrieve his battlegear once the xenos threat had been beaten back.

Sylas looked to Riegler, then back at his own shoulder pad before making eye contact with his captain. He looked to be considering his words. ‘My apologies, Captain Riegler. I will be certain to pay Master Gorthus a visit once the mission is over.’

He nodded to the boy, who retrieved his cloth and set to work once more on his gun. Riegler was just about to find a Techmarine to bless his power sword on the likelihood that the scouting mission would turn to one of combat when a voice from behind him caught his attention.

‘Captain Riegler. I would like to speak with you,’ said Sevastus Kranon.

Riegler turned to find the Chapter Master flanked by Draznicht of First and Ragnald of Third, two of his fellow captains who had voted to answer the Lord Inquisitor’s call. They halted on the threshold of the hangar deck, awaiting the Scout captain.

‘Anzo,’ Kranon said as Riegler drew closer. Kranon’s voice was so low that it could not be heard by any of the Scouts, but was perfectly audible to Draznicht and Ragnald. ‘In this Chapter we lead by example. In future, if you’re going to admonish your men for ill-repaired armour it is perhaps best if you make sure yours is pristine first, no?’ The Chapter Master

tapped Riegler's scarred shoulder pad for emphasis. In his desire to prepare thoroughly for his first mission as commander of the Scouts, Riegler had neglected to repaint the Chapter icon onto his pauldron.

'My apologies, Lord Kranon. I was too conc—'

Kranon held up a hand to silence the Scout captain. 'You are responsible for shaping the next generation of our Chapter, captain. The men under your command will look to you for guidance and leadership in all matters. You cannot be found wanting in any regard. We've all seen the way you strive for perfection in the art of bladecraft, your desire to be peerless in matters of combat, but now is the time to apply that to all aspects of your life within this Chapter. Your apologies are meaningless, captain. It is only your desire to change and be better in the future that matters.'

The words were not harshly spoken but, by uttering them away from the Scouts and in front of two company captains, Chapter Master Kranon was delivering a very clear message to Riegler: the eyes of the Sword Council were upon him.

'Now then,' Kranon said, abruptly changing the subject. 'How go your preparations?'

'All vehicles are loaded and ready for embarkation. My Scouts are making their final checks and preparations and will be aboard the Stormravens in minutes,' Riegler said. Behind him, the first few squads were already boarding their transports.

'And you are deploying at company level?' Draznicht asked.

'Yes, Brother Draznicht,' Riegler replied. 'Umidia is a vast and heavily jungled world with many population centres spread over great distances. Most of them are in areas with dense tree coverage, making reconnaissance from the air almost impossible. To complete the mission in the allotted time I will need every man at my command on the ground, rooting out the heretics and searching for the Lord Inquisitor.'

Draznicht nodded, impressed that the new captain had passed his little test.

'Has there been any further communication from the surface, Chapter Master?' Riegler asked.

'No,' Kranon sighed, the lines of his face creasing with concern.

'Locating the inquisitor is only your secondary objective, though. If this

world is damned then it will feel the wrath of the Crimson Sabres. You have thirty-six hours, Terran standard, to decide this planet's fate, captain.'

'Third Company stands ready should you require our support,' Captain Ragnald said. Braglan Ragnald had only fought in the latter stages of the Crimson Sabres campaign against the tyrannids – *Red Horizon*, the strike cruiser transporting him and his battle-brothers to the galactic south, having been waylaid in the warp. Although the foe that potentially awaited them below was unlikely to be as deadly or insidious as the xenos Hive Mind, the veteran captain had already staked his claim that Third Company be in the vanguard should the Scouts require reinforcements.

'If the Lord Inquisitor's reports are accurate then you and Brother Ragnald will be fighting alongside each other again soon enough,' said Kranon. 'Go now, Captain Riegler, your men await their new commander. For the memory of Rhoghon and the glory of Terra!'

'For the memory of Rhoghon and the glory of Terra!' the three captains said, echoing their Chapter Master's battle cry. Riegler made the sign of the aquila, returned by the three elder Space Marines, before heading towards a waiting Stormraven.

As he boarded the troop transport, the noise of its engine increasing as it prepared to take off, he turned to face the three crimson power-armoured figures observing him from the edge of the hangar deck, each of them with both hands still splayed out and crossed over their chest.

It was only then Riegler noticed that Chapter Master Kranon had neither his sword nor bolter sheathed at his waist.

FOUR

Planetfall

‘Over here, captain,’ said Brother Sylas from where he crouched with his fingers brushing the baked earth of the jungle floor. ‘More tracks.’

Riegler broke off his own search of the nearby undergrowth to join the neophyte. He too took to one knee and caressed the bumps and grooves that Sylas had uncovered. ‘Wedsoe. Inhoke. Come over here. I want to know what you make of this.’

Two of Riegler’s squad of novice Space Marines abandoned their own detailed search and followed their captain’s order. Under the ashen light of dawn, the remaining three scanned the ground meticulously for further evidence of passage.

Tenth Company had made planetfall almost twenty-four hours earlier and had split down to squad level to head towards population centres. Most of the neophytes had been placed in squads under the command of veteran sergeants to progress their training, but Riegler had detailed six of them – those he was most uncertain about – to form his own squad. While the rest of the Scout Company struck out for the teeming cities that sheltered under the high jungle canopies, these seven were pursuing the mission’s secondary objective.

‘Some kind of tracked vehicle judging by the print pattern. It’s only partial but the ground is recessed ever so slightly here, indicating that it would have retained a pool of rainwater during the planet’s rainy season. Hence why the track is so strong here but completely obliterated elsewhere.’ Inhoke hailed from the same region of Drogsh as Sylas, their close-cropped blond hair an almost identical length and shade. Though the eastern peoples of the Crimson Sabres adopted home world were not

renowned for their tracking ability, Inhoke had taken to it like he had spent his entire life pursuing quarry through deep forest.

‘These tracks are months old. See, even the plant life has had time to grow over it.’ Wedsoe pointed to where Syllas had cut back the thick foliage with his combat knife to reveal the imprint beneath. ‘If the inquisitor’s vehicle passed this way then it wasn’t recently,’ he concluded. Wedsoe’s deep set eyes and jet black hair lent him the aspect of a younger version of Captain Ragnald.

From the corner of his vision, Riegler noticed one of the other Scouts divert his attention from the search for further tracks and glance at the quartet huddled over the faint imprint.

‘Brother Petronaias, would you like to offer an opinion?’ Riegler asked.

The youth strode over to his superior, what could be taken for enthusiasm evident in his gait. He too crouched down.

‘Chimera,’ Petronaias said after a few seconds. ‘Even though the mark is almost completely worn away you can tell by the width and pattern of the track. See those two raised areas there? That’s where the wet mud passed through the gaps in the tracks where they link together. There’s another.’

He pointed to a barely perceptible section of the imprint, and then moved his hand across it, wagging his finger at regular intervals.

‘And another. And another...’ Petronaias continued.

Riegler had already come to this conclusion before Petronaias had even become involved in the discussion, but he was still impressed by the neophyte’s speed and accuracy in assessing what to the untrained, and unenhanced, eye would be considered no more than the natural lie of the land. Riegler had been equally impressed when Petronaias had spotted the initial scuff marks against the bark of a tree, which had set them on their course, only fractions of a second after he had.

‘And another.’ Petronaias stood up abruptly, his large brown eyes staring intently into the middle distance. ‘The Chimera was heading this way,’ he added, raising an arm in the direction of dense green foliage to the south, pre-empting the answer to his captain’s next question.

‘Alpha Squad. Form up behind me, single file,’ Riegler ordered. In a combat situation he would have issued the command by way of a hand signal. On what up until now had amounted to no more than a training

exercise, he was content to use verbal commands while his charges' eidetic memories were still in the process of being conditioned.

Petronaias tried to move past Riegler to take up his place in the formation. The Scout captain held out a muscular arm to block the neophyte's passage.

'Where do you think you are going, Brother Petronaias?' Riegler smiled, lowering his obstruction and taking up a position behind the bemused Scout. 'Lead on.'

By the time the sun had broken fully over the horizon, Alpha Squad was almost five kilometres deeper into the jade gloom that lay beneath the high tree cover. Native fauna cried and called, scurrying about in the bush as their day cycle, and with it the relentless hunt for food, began.

Tenth Company's hunt was drawing to a close. The vox-bead in Riegler's ear was alive with the chatter from squads drawing in on their objectives all over the planet and the Stormravens patrolling high above the cloud cover to avoid detection by Umidia's potentially hostile inhabitants. The Chimera tracks had become clearer as the jungle had grown thicker, so much so that Riegler and his unblooded charges had been able to follow a pair of unbroken tread marks for the past few kilometres.

Petronaias maintained his focus well at the head of the squad. Though yet to receive his oculobe implant, the Scout's vision was keen and he would occasionally slacken his pace to pay closer attention to some mark or deviation in the trail without the need to come to a full halt. Behind him his battle-brothers kept their guns trained on the dense foliage to either side of the ad hoc path forged by the personnel carrier, alert as much for local wildlife as any potential ambush.

Riegler too had his weapon drawn, though it was his deactivated power sword he gripped in his fist rather than his bolt pistol. Something gnawed away at his thoughts as he sliced his way through the brush, a feeling that he was missing something obvious, something right in front of him that wasn't quite right. Petronaias stopping abruptly right in front of him snapped him out of his reverie.

'They've gone,' Petronaias said, turning to his captain. 'The tracks. They've just... disappeared,' he added, bemusement writ large across his

face.

Riegler crouched down to see for himself. Sure enough, both track lines terminated alongside each other, though the path inexplicably continued on through the jungle. He retraced his steps, moving past the five other Scouts whose weapons were now pointed a little more intently into the green half-light. Still stooping, Riegler ran his hand over the depression in the earth as he moved.

‘The tracks don’t get any deeper,’ he said, looking up at his squad.

‘It didn’t slow down then,’ said Aronsh, the eldest of the newly elevated neophytes. His natural bulk had been enhanced significantly by his Space Marine implants and conditioning, but the heavy bolter he carried looked enormous even in his corded arms.

‘Zero evidence of weapons discharge,’ said Trebereck, the final member of the newly re-formed Alpha Squad. Like Syllas, he favoured the shotgun, but in place of a combat knife he carried a Drogshian tribal hunting *kukri*, elongated to the degree where it could almost be considered a sword. This, and the fact that the Chaplains had noted the boy’s short temper, had made him Riegler’s first choice.

‘No sign of explosives either,’ added Wedsoe. Each of them knew why they had been singled out by the captain and all were eager to impress him. Though they had overcome the trials that had proven them worthy of admission into the ranks of the Crimson Sabres, they still had to pass muster as Scouts. Those who did not meet the Chapter’s high standards would likely end up dead or, worse, relegated to the position of Chapter serf, loyally serving those who had attained the rank of full battle-brother.

‘It’s like it just... disappeared,’ said Syllas.

‘Thirty-eight tonnes of armoured personnel carrier doesn’t just disappear without a trace,’ said Petronias. ‘Does it, captain?’ he added, suddenly less certain.

Riegler turned his attention back to the tracks before staring out into the thick jungle. ‘I’ve seen things that stretch comprehension to breaking point, fought beings and entities that are humanity’s greatest fears made manifest. I’ve witnessed great starfaring craft, powered by the very stuff of the warp, ablaze in the airless void. I’ve seen men turn into deranged beasts before my eyes, contagions that have killed entire populations in less time than it’s taken me to tell you about it, and alien technologies that

make the greatest achievements of the Adeptus Mechanicus look on a par with the invention of the wheel.'

Riegler stood up and moved off towards the thick-trunked trees. 'Can a Chimera just vanish into thin air? Of course it can, but until we've exhausted all other alternatives then it's out there in the jungle somewhere. Now fan out and search in a two hundred metre radius.'

Hours later, just as Umidia's sun was reaching its zenith, Alpha Squad located the missing Chimera. It had not vanished, nor was it in Riegler's initial search area, but what they found posed more questions than it answered.

'It must have been here for decades, centuries even,' said Inhoke, running a hand along the thick jacket of corrosion enveloping the hull of the vehicle. 'Parts of the hull are almost rotted through with rust.'

'It could be the chemical composition of the rain on this world that caused it to rust so quickly,' said Trebereck. 'But how did it end up so far from the trail and what flipped it over onto its roof?'

The seven Crimson Sabres encircled the stricken personnel carrier, the stylised 'I' of the Inquisition barely visible beneath the dense layer of oxidised metal. There were no signs as to how it had ended up over half a kilometre from where its tracks had disappeared: no damage to trees to indicate it had been tossed through the air and no gouged earth to denote where it had rolled. It was as if the Chimera had been plucked from one location and then set down, upside down, in another.

Riegler knelt and dug his fingers into the jungle floor. His arm sank down through the baked earth until it almost reached his elbow and he tore away dried mud until he found what he sought. He pulled out his hand, cupped to hold the dark, filthy water he had uncovered, and placed it to his mouth, allowing the contents to spill over his tongue.

'Hydrogen and oxygen mainly,' he said, swallowing the rainwater. 'Traces of other elements but nothing that should accelerate the oxidisation process to this degree.' Like all fully-fledged battle-brothers, Riegler had undergone the implantation processes and conditioning that allowed him to analyse chemical properties merely by smell or taste. In time, the nascent Space Marines under his command would experience the

same transformation, but for now they would have to rely upon their captain's heightened senses and abilities while learning from him the skills and techniques that would help them make the most of their transhumanisation.

Riegler paced around the upended troop carrier, his uneasiness in no way diminished by its discovery. They had received the Lord Inquisitor's message little more than three Terran standard weeks ago yet his transport appeared to have been lying abandoned in the jungle for years, with no evidence of how it had ended up in that state. If it even was Koshyn's vehicle. The Inquisition could have had a presence on Umidia for decades if it was investigating cult activity.

'Treberock. Sylas. Help me get this hatch open,' he said, tearing away a bundle of creeper vines that had engulfed the rear of the Chimera. Even with the combined might of a Space Marine and two Scouts the rust-weakened door was reluctant to budge, but eventually the hinges holding it in place gave out and the slab of corroded metal was tossed aside. Treberock and Sylas gagged as the moist, foetid air from within assailed their nostrils. Riegler didn't even flinch. The Chimera had come to rest on its turret, forcing the Scout captain to climb up to access the open hatch. The rest of Alpha Squad aimed their weapons at the aperture, ready for anything that might await their commander in those dank confines.

Green jungle light bled into the troop compartment, casting an ethereal glow on the remains within. Hellguns and ammunition littered the roof-cum-floor, clogging the channels between the carapace-armoured corpses sprawled haphazardly where they had perished. His vision operating as effectively as in full daylight, Riegler counted eight bodies, all identically attired in dark bodysuits liveried with Inquisition icons. Whereas the armour had maintained its integrity, what it was designed to protect had not. Skulls stared blankly from inside visorless helmets, all vestiges of flesh long since rotted away. With the storm troopers' tomb newly opened to the jungle outside, flies and other insects buzzed into the Chimera, drawn there by the smell and the promise of new breeding grounds.

Lifting the nearest corpse from where it had come to rest atop one of its comrades, Riegler hauled it towards himself. The internal organs, protected by the suit of carapace, had liquefied but not yet fully decomposed. He pulled away the collar piece of the armour to expose the

skeletal neck, revealing precisely what he was expecting. Two of the vertebrae were severed completely, almost certainly during the Chimera's inexplicable flight and violent landing.

It was an undeniable fact of life in the 41st millennium that service to the God-Emperor of Mankind almost certainly ended in death. For Space Marines, that end was often glorious, a heroic sacrifice in the face of insurmountable odds that allowed his battle-brothers, and those they were sworn to protect, to survive and avenge his killing. For those devotees of the Golden Throne not blessed by the genetic legacy of the primarchs, that demise could still come on the field of battle, weapon gripped tightly, defending a world that was not their own against the seemingly endless hordes of the xenos or Archenemy. But, even more likely, that death would be futile, a waste of a human life whose potential was never going to be realised. Obliterated along with the rest of their regiment and troop transport as collateral damage in a void battle. Bombed into nothing by an orbital strike or artillery barrage they never even saw coming. Succumbing to poison or disease by an unseen enemy that uses subterfuge and sabotage as its modus operandi. Or killed inside their vehicle as they rode into battle or ran a supply or reconnaissance mission, their weapon never even fired in retaliation.

Riegler checked the remaining seven bodies for a cause of death and on each occasion he found the same thing, sometimes with the addition of trauma that had caused the skull to fracture. Of the Lord Inquisitor, there was no sign.

It was yet another mystery for Riegler to ponder, but one that would have to wait. His vox-bead fizzed to life.

'Captain Riegler. Sergeant Vonderell reporting in,' said a gruff, static-heavy voice. Vonderell was one of Riegler's veterans and led a squad comprised entirely of seasoned Scouts all ready for a position to open in one of the other nine companies. The sergeant and Beta Squad had been given the task of scouting the planetary capital, deep within the lush jungle that covered the majority of Umidia's western hemisphere.

'Riegler receiving. Go ahead, sergeant.'

'You'd better get over here, captain. It's worse than we thought,' he said. Riegler was already exiting the Chimera and signalling for Alpha to be ready to move out.

‘Much, much worse.’

FIVE

Ritual

‘How long have they been doing this?’ Riegler asked, one thick arm wrapped around the trunk of an ancient, massive tree.

‘They’ve been congregating since first light but the ritual has only been going on for a couple of hours, since just before I voxed you,’ Vonderell said, his wizened features drawn up into a scowl. ‘It would seem the Lord Inquisitor was correct. This world has fallen under the sway of the Archenemy, its inhabitants in the thrall of a Dark God.’

Far below their vantage point in the jungle canopy, the Umidian capital teemed with activity. Built almost a kilometre off the jungle floor, Krevsh, as the natives called it, was a vast wooden metropolis of timber platforms, log huts and shelters carved into still-living, monolithic trees. An intricate lattice of bridges connected everything together, converging on a huge octagonal central plaza lashed together from thousands of the felled giants.

Prior to the Tenth’s deployment, Riegler had studied the scant information the Chapter held regarding the planet: a mention in an old logbook from when a Crimson Sabres fleet had passed nearby almost three millennia ago; its location on an outdated parchment starchart; the results of an Imperial census carried out more than a century ago, the last time any branch of the Imperium had any official contact with Umidia. The Administratum clerks had counted two hundred thousand souls residing in the tree city on that occasion; easily twice that number filled the town square now and Riegler did not like what he saw or heard there.

The beating of drums constructed from the hides of jungle beasts pulled taut over wooden frames rose up from Krevsh, accompanied by the half-

chant, half-singing of its people. Some wore barely anything at all while others went fully robed, but all of them danced or swayed in time with the beat, their bodies as well as their voices given over in devotion. Man and woman, young and old, all revelled with equal fervour.

‘This might not be what it looks like,’ Riegler said, turning his attention back to Vonderell. ‘For thousands of years the Ecclesiarchy has tried to incorporate the native beliefs and rituals of any new world or culture it comes across into worship of the Emperor. The sky god who they pray to for rain to water their crops? A manifestation of the God-Emperor. The fires that sweep across the plains every summer, razing settlements and killing livestock? The Emperor’s wrath, His displeasure that the planet does not swear fealty to Terra. The sun that rises every morning? The light of the Emperor bathing the faithful with its rays. Any narrative can be manipulated to make the Emperor its architect, any history moulded to make Him its shaper. Perhaps that’s all this is. Some vestige of their old ways repurposed as worship of the Golden Throne.’

Vonderell’s scowl deepened. He had served the Tenth for almost as long as Riegler and though there was no animosity between them over the younger sergeant’s temporary promotion, Vonderell had little patience for some of Riegler’s more outré personality traits. He made no secret of his distaste for the captain’s trophy taking or his unnatural desire to fight every battle up close and personal with his blade rather than from a distance. He also didn’t appreciate Riegler’s tendency to look at all aspects of a situation before committing to a course of action, preferring instead to assault first and deal with the consequences later. Ironically, it was this very bull-headedness that had kept Vonderell in the Scout Company for so long, whereas he believed it to be the very thing that should have secured his advancement long ago.

‘Then how do you explain that?’ Vonderell said, jabbing a finger in the direction of a masked figure on a raised platform at the centre of the plaza.

Riegler was momentarily confused. He had seen the figure the first time he had looked but its odd demeanour and attire had not registered. Even now, staring directly at it with his Adeptus Astartes enhanced eyes, Riegler found it hard to make out what it was wearing or doing.

‘Wedsoe, pass me your magnoculars,’ Riegler said, reaching his hand out to the Scout who was perched lower down on the trunk.

Wedsoe, like all of Alpha Squad, did not have the same level of optical enhancement as his captain or counterparts in Beta Squad and carried a set of magnoculars in addition to his standard mission kit. Clinging tightly to the tree with one hand, he passed the eyeglasses up to Riegler.

Riegler adjusted the focus and zoomed in on the mysterious figure but the precision-crafted lenses and augmetic circuitry could not resolve the image, instead grinding and whirring futilely as it returned blurred image after blurred image.

‘Shall I call the Stormravens back, captain?’ said Vonderell with a little too much relish. ‘We can wipe out this nest of heretics and be back with the fleet before the mission timer reaches zero.’

Whereas Beta Squad had inserted at ground level and spent many hours climbing to this vantage point, Riegler and his Scouts had been airlifted in above the canopy and had clambered downwards to join their battle-brothers. At the very limits of his augmented hearing, Riegler could make out the engines of multiple Stormravens, staying high to avoid detection but low enough to swoop into action should the order come.

Riegler checked the chron display embedded in his gauntlet. The timer rolled over to one hundred and nineteen.

‘Negative, sergeant. We still have almost two hours left before we’re due to report in. Squads Alpha and Beta, maintain your positions.’

Riegler began to climb downwards, his crimson Scout armour several shades lighter than the red-brown of the tree bark. ‘I’m going down to take a closer look.’

Riegler had to pause three times during his descent, almost certain his senses were deceiving him.

Wooden torches and braziers burned away, illuminating the strange rituals taking place beneath the shadow of the jungle canopy, but instead of the expected stench of burning oil Riegler could smell only roasting meat. On each occasion he halted his climb he found no visual sign of any cooking fires either in the plaza or coming from the chimneys and smokeholes of the crude huts and habitats. Stranger yet, he could hear the shouts and laughter of children playing intermingled with the chanting and

singing, but those participating in the twisted revelry were all of majority, not an infant in sight.

When he was almost in line with the thatched roofs of the timber structures that ringed the wooden octagon, Riegler retreated back further into the shadows, lest a keen-eyed celebrant spot him, and observed the rituals being enacted before him.

In one group, bare-chested men and women danced and spun, neither in time with each other or the beating of the drums. Some wore deep hoods that shrouded their features in shadow, while others wore full head masks, simplistic caricatures of horned beasts likely native to Umidia. Next to them robed figures locked arms in a circle, each in turn taking to the centre and performing a crazed, convulsive half-dance, half-fit.

Dotted around the plaza other rings had formed, inside which paired combatants fought bare-fisted until either one or both were rendered unconscious, the frenzy of the onlookers intensifying with every body that crashed to the hard timber underfoot. Other gatherings seemed to eschew any kind of structure or form entirely and were one single mass, their sweat-slick bodies writhing over each other in a fashion that suggested passion and violence in equal measure.

And over it all, perched atop a raised dais in the centre of the plaza, stood the strange figure, its face entirely obscured by an ornate mask resembling the head of a bird. Its lifelike rendition, even down to the hooked beak that appeared to be made from bone, stood in stark contrast to those worn by the residents of Krevsh, as did the fine, feathered robe that shimmered and changed colour in the torchlight.

Though much closer than he had been up in the jungle canopy, Riegler was still several kilometres away from the platform and again had to use Wedsoe's magnoculars to get a clearer look. As before, the eyeglasses struggled to focus, the automatic rangefinders seemingly confused by what they were aimed at. Just as Riegler was about to lower them they suddenly found sharp focus, the speed with which it happened and the clarity of the image they returned momentarily startling the Scout captain.

The figure in the bird mask was staring directly at him.

Riegler instinctively pulled the magnoculars away from his face and buried them in his chest. At this distance only somebody or something with enhanced vision should be able to see him but, ensconced as deeply

into the shadows as he was, even that was improbable. He glanced down at the lenses of the magnoculars to check that the antiglare shield was not defective but found that neither the light from the torches or braziers nor the diffuse light filtering through the greenery high above was bouncing off the dark glass. Cautiously, he raised them to his eyes again.

For the briefest instant the beak of the mask appeared to split into a sly grin, its eyes flashing bright. The magnoculars blurred again, servos and motors silently grinding as they struggled to lock on to their target. When they did, the focus had shifted, the viewing screen showing a wide vista of the plaza. Whereas previously the disparate crowds had been performing their own peculiar rituals, now they came together as one vast crowd, attention rapt on the figure at their core. A single chant rose up, bizarrely musical and alluring, and the dance began anew, rhythmically and with fervour hitherto unseen. The drums beat louder, the very trees that held the massive wooden platform in place shaking every time they were struck. But still, on the very edges of his perception, Riegler could smell the cooking of meat and hear the playful noise of children.

The bird-headed figure raised its arms, its feathered robe splayed out behind it like a set of wings, and the singing and drumming grew in volume, the pace of the dancing becoming frenetic. Like a conductor leading an immense orchestra, the shape on the dais waved its arms, encouraging its devotees to higher levels of adoration and adulation. Any lingering doubts that this was misguided Emperor worship had long since left Riegler's mind, yet still he remained in place, some strange compulsion forcing him to witness the remainder of the ritual.

On the dais, the cult leader threw off his robes altogether and, unbidden, the magnoculars refocused yet again. When they resolved, the image was tight on the bird-headed figure again, giving Riegler a clear view of what he was wearing.

A suit of slate-grey power armour inlaid with a stylised golden Inquisition symbol from chest to sternum.

Seemingly unencumbered by the ancient suit of plate, the figure launched into a crazed mummers' dance, arms flailing and legs kicking in perfect unison with the chanting and drumming but at the same time discordant and uncomfortable to watch. The noise of the cult amplified, rising to a crescendo that made the giant redwoods surrounding the plaza

sway like saplings. The cultists' fervour spurred their leader on, their arms and legs becoming blurs.

Just when it seemed that the bird-masked figure could go no faster, the revellers no louder, the ritual ceased. Riegler's magnoculars went dark.

When they flickered back into life, the cult leader's face filled the viewscreen. It smiled again, eyes flashing, and placed one gauntleted hand on either side of its head. Slowly, it removed its mask.

To reveal an identical head beneath it.

SIX

Crossroads

‘And you are absolutely certain of what you saw, Captain Riegler?’ Chapter Master Kranon asked, his hololithic form cut through with distortion lines.

‘Positive, Chapter Master. Though the thing wore Lord Inquisitor Koshyn’s armour, when it removed its headgear its face was that of a daemon,’ Riegler answered.

A ripple of chatter passed between the other eight hololithic figures projected onto the dusty jungle floor, slowly drifting dust motes captured in the beam of the portable unit. Behind Riegler Alpha and Beta squads secured the perimeter of the clearing they had found – actually the confluence of several jungle paths – where they could safely report back to the Crimson Sabres fleet.

‘Yet only you witnessed it?’ said Shergon, raising his voice to be heard over his fellow captains’ discussion.

‘Aye. Our vantage point was suboptimal so I went in closer. Sergeant Vonderell and his squad remained with mine in the canopy cover.’

‘And none of the other squads have reported daemonic activity anywhere else on the planet?’ asked Nthicrar, another of the Sword Council who had been opposed to the mission to Umidia.

‘Affirmative. All of them have reported similar cult activity in every major population centre, though.’ Riegler had already mentioned this in his initial report to his peers but thought it prudent to remind them in the face of not entirely unexpected scepticism.

‘Why are we even having this discussion?’ said Ragnald. ‘Third Company can be planetside in under an hour. This cult will be wiped out

and the daemon banished by the end of the day.'

'Why even waste our efforts putting brothers on the ground? Destroy the settlements from orbit and be done with it,' said Draznicht.

'If what Captain Riegler says is true then a ground assault is the only way to be certain of vanquishing the daemon,' Barkman pointed out.

Of all the captains who had been initially opposed to answering the Lord Inquisitor's call for aid, Barkman was the only one whose position had shifted, but Riegler still smarted at the bullish captain calling his integrity into question.

'I know what I saw,' Riegler said, the slightest hint of aggression seeping into his tone.

Chapter Master Kranon raised a hand to silence the captains who had begun discussing the matter between themselves again. 'Captain Riegler. Could you call Sergeant Vonderell before the Sword Council? I wish to hear his opinion on the matter.'

Riegler motioned for the sergeant to come and join him but Vonderell had already started to make his way over to the portable hololith unit, having heard every word of the impromptu council meeting. Though it was not the norm for brothers below the rank of captain or attached to the Librarius or Reclusiam to speak on such matters, it was not entirely without precedent.

'Sergeant Vonderell. You did not witness the daemon unmasking itself?' asked Chapter Master Kranon.

'I did not, Chapter Master,' said Vonderell. He turned to look at Riegler before returning his attention to the flickering image. 'But I did see the thing from afar and it was my doubts about its nature that led Captain Riegler to investigate it further. We may not see eye to eye on all matters but I do not doubt his word. If he says that he saw a daemon leading the ritual then he saw a daemon leading the ritual.'

'My thanks, brother-sergeant,' Kranon said. Vonderell nodded respectfully at Riegler as he made his way back to his position along the perimeter. All discussion among the captains back on board the *Red Honour* had ceased. 'Captain Riegler. I am about to put the motion for war before the Sword Council. Is there anything else you would like to add before it goes to the vote?'

Riegler hesitated for a moment, the recollection of the out-of-place sounds and smells playing on his mind. The intangible facsimile of Sevarion Kranon arched an eyebrow. 'No, Chapter Master. I have delivered my report to the council and I stand by it.'

Chapter Master Kranon nodded. 'Captain Barkman is of the right opinion. If we act upon this matter then it means committing brothers to the fight, not sitting in orbit and wiping out pockets of cultists from afar. The ballot is a simple one. Aye, and Third Company will assist Tenth in cleansing this nest of filth and eliminating the daemon. Nay, and we leave this world to its fate. How do you vote, brothers?'

In quick succession, nine 'ayes' were returned.

SEVEN

Crimson Slaughter

Arterial blood gushed from the cultist's torn throat, turning Riegler's defaced shoulder pad the same colour as the rest of his Scout armour. The near-decapitated man staggered on a few steps before crashing forwards to the floor of the plaza and staining the timber crimson. Without even pausing for breath, the Scout captain slashed out with his power sword, bifurcating two more cultists attempting to avenge their comrade's slaughter.

Alongside him, Ragnald of Third Company matched Riegler for brutality and body count, though the elder captain fought with the curved blade of his home world rather than a powered weapon. It was no less effective, however, and the trail of corpses in his wake stretched as far back as the deployment zone at the edge of the plaza where the entirety of Third and Tenth companies had inserted by Thunderhawk only minutes earlier.

'This isn't war,' Ragnald said grimly, running through a trio of robed assailants. 'This is wholesale slaughter. These cultists come at us with sticks and clubs and we reply with cold steel and bolter shells. Where is the glory in this?'

'You were the one so eager to commit your company to the fray,' Riegler replied, swinging his blade by rote. Limbs and ruined bodies rained down around him. 'Perhaps you should have left this one to Captain Draznicht? He cares not who or what he slays as long as First Company is in the vanguard.'

Ragnald snarled, taking Riegler's bait. 'There's not a man under my command who isn't the match of any in First.' In his anger, he lashed out

at the nearest cultist with a gauntleted fist, caving in the features to such a degree that Riegler could not identify its gender. 'Besides, that is where the glory is to be found.' Ragnald thrust out his sword, pointing with its tip.

In the centre of the plaza, still perched atop the dais, the daemon-inquisitor surveyed the massacre of its followers. In its hand it now held a staff, coruscating blue energy crackling along its length, an unblinking eye at its apex darting about unnaturally, trying to secure the position of the Space Marines. Decades of training subconsciously rose to the fore and as Riegler concentrated on the ghastly yellow orb, his sword arm moved only out of muscle memory. A cry from alongside him snapped Riegler out of his trance-like fixation.

'Captain! To your left,' Inhoke yelled. The young Scout's armour was drenched with blood, the metal of his blade awash with gore.

Riegler turned his head, fighting the compulsion to lock his gaze with the eye of the staff. No more than a hundred metres away a cultist had a lasrifle raised, the Scout captain trapped in its sights.

Still swinging his power sword in his right hand, Riegler reached down with his left, drawing and firing his bolt pistol in a single, fluid movement. At the same moment, the muscles in the cultist's hand twitched, squeezing the firing stud of the lasrifle and unleashing a searing bolt of energy.

Las-bolt and bolt round struck simultaneously, the cultist's head exploding in a shower of bone and brain, the beam of supercharged energy slamming into Riegler's blood-slicked carapace pauldron. He girded himself in anticipation of pain biting through his shoulder but it did not register. Not wishing to draw attention away from the melee around him again, he glanced briefly at his shoulder pad. It was undamaged, save for the scoring and defacement caused by the training servitor. Even the coating of blood was still wet, not scorched or dried as he would have expected it to be as a result of a direct hit from a lasweapon.

'Did you see that?' Riegler said, turning to Ragnald, but the captain of Third Company was no longer beside him. Bodies tumbling broken before him, Ragnald was clearing a path to the dais, those not succumbing to fire from his bolter going down with swift jabs from his fist and forearm. All across the plaza, Crimson Sabres executed the Umidian cultists with

ruthless efficiency, seemingly oblivious to the daemon in their midst. Riegler opened his vox-link.

‘Alpha Squad, with me.’ Withdrawing his blade from the torso of a slain cultist, Riegler set off after Ragnald. Finishing off the cultists in their immediate vicinity, the Scout captain’s six charges followed.

Sensing that their master was under threat, enthralled Umidians moved to block Alpha Squad’s progress, trampling over the corpses left there as Ragnald carved his bloody path. Aronsh opened up with his heavy bolter, putting them down as quickly as they appeared, Sylas and Trebereck mopping up any not caught in his corridor of fire with unerring blasts from their shotguns.

In such close proximity to the weapons’ discharge, Riegler’s auditory enhancements kicked in, muffling the noise to prevent combat deafness. When his hearing normalised, the sounds of the dying had been replaced by something else.

Why are you doing this?

Riegler signalled Alpha Squad to halt. ‘Can you hear that?’ he asked, looking around to find the source of the voice.

‘Hear what?’ replied Petronaias.

What did we do to justify this slaughter?

‘That voice. A woman’s voice,’ said Riegler.

‘All I can hear is the screaming of heretics,’ said Trebereck, taking the impromptu break as an opportunity to reload his weapon.

We did nothing to you. Nothing.

‘There. You must have heard it that time.’

‘Our hearing is not yet as developed as yours, captain,’ Sylas offered.

‘Or it could be a daemon trick,’ Wedsoe spat. The entire squad turned to look at the power armoured figure on the dais. Ragnald had almost reached the daemon, maglocking his bolter to his thigh, choosing to face it with his Drogshian blade instead.

Riegler stood there a moment longer, hoping to hear the voice again.

‘Captain?’ Inhoke asked impatiently.

‘Move out,’ Riegler said eventually, blade flashing as he tore apart a trio of cultists foolish enough to get within sword range. ‘Support Captain Ragnald.’

The captain of Third had leapt up onto the dais and was already engaging the daemon-inquisitor, its staff morphing into a massive two-handed sword as it swung to meet Ragnald's opening stroke. The weapons clashed in a blinding shower of unnatural sparks, blessed and warded steel meeting the raw stuff of the warp.

Still over a hundred metres away, Riegler raised his bolt pistol and fired at the bird-headed monster, dragging his blade through onrushing attackers as he did so. Without even looking to see where the shots had come from, the daemon raised one of its clawed hands, melting the mass-reactive shells in midair. Enraged, it lunged forwards with the double-handed blade, wielding it one-handed with the ease that a Space Marine would with a combat knife. Ragnald almost sidestepped the blow completely, the tip of the daemon's sword scraping across the thigh of his power armour and splitting the ceramite. Spotting the weakness, the daemon spun the blade over and stabbed at the broken section but Ragnald brought his blade down to counter at the last possible moment, sparks cascading to the plaza floor, small fires breaking out where they landed.

Like all captains of the Crimson Sabres, Ragnald was a consummate swordsman more than able to hold his own against most foes. Unfortunately for the captain of Third Company, his opponent was no ordinary foe.

Despite being burdened by Inquisitorial power armour, the daemon Ragnald duelled with moved as if unencumbered, its every stroke and parry fluid and graceful. The huge blade in its clawed hands would take both hands of even the largest Space Marine to wield but the daemon-inquisitor carried it in one, switching sword arm at will to create optimum angles of attack and defence. Had Riegler himself been up there facing the daemon in combat, or even Chapter Master Kranon or Captain Draznicht, then he would have been confident of the outcome. As it stood, Ragnald would be lucky to last another minute against such a skilled opponent.

'Cover me,' Riegler voxed on the squad channel. Wedsoe, Inhoke and Petronaias sheathed their blades and drew their bolters, shooting open a path to the dais for their captain to follow. Aronsh lent his firepower too, while Syllas and Trebereck thinned the mob encroaching on Alpha Squad's position.

Bolt pistol chattering in one hand, his sword in the other, Riegler ploughed through cultists, the metres between him and the dais being eaten up by the second. With fifty metres to go he saw the daemon-inquisitor go onto its front foot, knocking Ragnald back with a flurry of swift strikes. The Crimson Sabre parried the first four but a fifth broke through his guard and caught him across the breastplate, the force of the impact splitting it open and knocking Ragnald back.

With twenty metres left for Riegler to cover, the daemon thrust the blade towards Ragnald's exposed chest, running him through at the shoulder. It withdrew the sword, blood spilling through the rent it had created. Ragnald slumped to his knees with a grunt, pain suppressants already coursing through his system. The daemon took a step back, its blade twisting form once again to become an enormous executioner's axe.

Riegler was still ten metres away from the dais. Ragnald would be dead by the time he reached him and all the Scout captain would be able to do was avenge his battle-brother's death. Unless...

The daemon-inquisitor brought the axe back across its head and shoulder, primed for the killing blow. Freeing his power blade from among the human detritus cascading to the plaza floor, Riegler gripped the hilt in both hands and brought it forwards with all the might he could muster. Letting go at the last moment he flung the crackling blade towards the dais.

The axe had already been swung towards Ragnald's head by the time Riegler's sword struck the first of the support beams holding the dais in place. The field of blue energy carved through the thick wooden strut as if it wasn't there and continued on to the next, then the next. By the time it struck the fourth strut, a mere eye blink since it had left Riegler's hands, the dais had begun to give way. Once it had sliced through the sixth, the dais's total collapse was assured.

Ragnald felt the effect first, the timber beneath his kneeling form giving way just as the executioner's blade was about to find its mark, but instead flashing safely over his head. Already overbalanced the bird-headed daemon toppled forwards, coming to rest facedown on a pile of collapsed timber.

Seeing Ragnald's weapon on the plaza floor reflecting the light from the still-burning torches, Riegler plucked it from the ground, raising it to

waist height before striking down at the prone form of the daemon.

When the sword came to rest, its curved blade was embedded in the remains of the dais, the daemon having disappeared in the time it had taken Riegler to swing it.

‘That wound is deep, brother, and inflicted by a daemon weapon. You should return to the fleet and have it checked out by an Apothecary,’ Riegler said, crouching beside the sitting form of the Third Company captain. He had to raise his voice slightly to be heard above the sound of sporadic gunfire as the combined forces of Third and Tenth swept away the last few surviving cultists who had failed to flee into the jungle.

‘I’ve suffered worse. Besides, my armour is in a sorrier state than I.’ Ragnald gestured to the damaged power armour alongside him. Lasakar, one of the more seasoned Scouts, had helped the captain remove it to get a closer look at his wound and was administering treatment to the already clotting gash. Though ready for advancement to a full battle company, Lasakar had been held back in the Scouts to await a vacancy in the apothecarion where his natural talents for healing could be put to best use.

‘Why were you so keen to take it on alone? Has the great Braglan Ragnald become so bored of serving the Crimson Sabres that he now seeks a heroic death?’ Riegler picked up the breastplate of Ragnald’s armour and examined the crack, a perfect horizontal gash right through the golden aquila.

‘You know exactly why, Captain Riegler,’ Ragnald snarled. ‘It was my tardiness that caused the death of over half of Tenth Company and meant that Murdok was invalided back to Drogsh while he heals and the Apothecaries and Techmarines rebuild him.’

‘That wasn’t your fault,’ Riegler replied, putting the armour back on the ground and giving Ragnald his full attention. ‘You were delayed in the warp. There was nothing you could have done about it.’

Ragnald rose to his feet, wincing as the effort strained the clotting tear in his shoulder. ‘Do you think the Chapter Master sees it that way? Or Captain Draznicht? The honour of Third has been drawn into question and it is my sworn duty as its captain to restore it. You may have only just risen to command, Riegler, but I know you are not that naïve. The Crimson

Sabres demand perfection in every aspect of Chapter life, and above all in combat. Be seen to fail and others will be only too quick to capitalise on your weakness.'

As if to punctuate Ragnald's point, the vox in Riegler's ear sparked to life on the command channel.

'Captain Ragnald, Captain Riegler,' said Chapter Master Kranon, his voice adrift in a sea of static. 'The auspexes are reporting mass migration from the population centres. The Umidian cults are fleeing into the jungle. Third and Tenth Companies are to pursue and execute all cultists. First and Second Companies are deploying to the surface to hunt for the daemon.'

Riegler didn't have to repeat the message, Ragnald's transhuman hearing having already picked it up. Shaking his head, the captain of Third went to tell his men that they had failed the Chapter again.

EIGHT

New Day Rising

Within a week of the slaughter at Krevsh, the entirety of the Crimson Sabres Chapter was engaged on the surface of Umidia.

The two companies sent down to bolster Third and Tenth soon became bogged down in jungle combat against small squads of cultists, forcing Chapter Master Kranon to send down the remaining two battle companies. When they too got caught up in the guerrilla campaign, the reserve companies were inserted one by one until only a handful of Chaplains and Librarians remained in orbit to guide fleet operations.

Despite almost a thousand Space Marines scouring the planet for the daemon, it had so far eluded discovery and execution. Unlike the population of Umidia.

They had died in the hundreds of thousands, each pocket of resistance hunted down and slaughtered without mercy, but for each cell put down several more would spring up in its place. The pace of the operation was frenetic; as soon as one nest of cultists had been eliminated new orders would come down from the fleet, their auspexes having located new targets. Chapter Master Kranon – fighting alongside Ragnald at the head of Third – had already ordered a brief cessation of operations shortly after first light so that several companies could be extracted and returned to their vessels for recuperation and resupply. In every other prolonged campaign that Riegler had fought, this rotation would have been an opportunity for the wounded to receive treatment. With the exception of Ragnald, who had sustained injuries while duelling the daemon, not a single Crimson Sabre had suffered even the mildest of flesh wounds, a fact the Scout captain saw fit to remark upon as he stalked through the

benighted jungle alongside Captain Kranon as they approached their next target.

‘The enemy is hardly a match for us, brother,’ Sevarion Kranon replied. ‘Had any Imperial Guard forces responded to the Lord Inquisitor’s request then the Sword Council would have voted unanimously to leave the cleansing of this world to them. As it stands, this is our operation to prosecute against an enemy that finds itself woefully outgunned and outclassed. I would be more shocked if we *had* sustained any casualties.’

‘But that is odd in itself, is it not, brother?’ Riegler said.

For the past two days Riegler and his six novice squad members had been operating in advance of Captain Kranon and Alpha, Beta and Kappa Squads of Second Company, following up on enemy movement reports before leading the might of thirty full battle-brothers to their next target. ‘For every Space Marine Chapter there are a thousand Imperial Guard regiments yet not a single one offered the Lord Inquisitor its aid, if it even was the Lord Inquisitor who broadcast that message in the first place.’

‘Does that matter, Anzo?’ Kranon said.

Through the undergrowth tiny orange pinpricks of distant fires became apparent. Both captains signalled to the Space Marines under their command and in an instant all four squads had disappeared into the pre-dawn darkness of the jungle, spreading out to encircle their unaware enemy.

‘I don’t understand,’ Riegler said, crouching down so that he was completely immersed in the dense foliage that carpeted the jungle floor.

‘The population of Umidia has given itself over to the veneration of the Dark Gods, of that there is little doubt. By virtue of that alone, their destruction is warranted. If, as you claim – and I have no reason to doubt you, brother – the inquisitor has been possessed by some form of daemon and it was that which summoned us here, then what does it matter? The cults will be eradicated and their master will perish alongside them.’

‘But why? Why summon a Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes to Umidia knowing that it would place itself in danger?’ Riegler still had many questions and doubts about the mission and how they came to be the sole Imperial force operating on the planet, but that was the one that troubled him the most.

Kranon looked ready to answer his old friend when a series of clicks sounded over the vox telling both captains that their squads were in position. Raising his bolter to his shoulder, Kranon yelled ‘Now!’ before emerging from the dense undergrowth, a stream of bolt shells blowing apart surprised cultists. All around the clearing in which the near five hundred Umidians had chosen to make their camp, crimson-armoured figures stepped out of the darkness, bloody murder presaged by the harsh blooming of muzzle flare.

Riegler took aim with his bolt pistol, taking single, placed headshots at those cultists not caught up in the cauldron of fire at the heart of the jungle glade. Half a dozen went down in quick succession, their screams joining the cacophony of gunfire and death cries.

Their screams.

Riegler ceased firing, tuning out the noise of bolters to concentrate on the sounds of the dying. They were not the defiant cries of the fervent or the debased; they were the panicked shouts of the scared and the innocent. Riegler closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to clear the fug he had suddenly become acutely aware of.

Bursts of intense light from weapons discharge lit the agonised faces. Sylas and Trebereck blasted away with their shotguns at what until only moments ago had been raging madmen, knives raised in defiance of their killers, now revealed as simple peasants and townsfolk. Aronsh blazed away with his heavy bolter, making ruin of what he believed to be the followers of the bird-headed daemon but that were in reality no more than labourers and timbermen. Wedsoe, Inhoke, Petronaias, likewise veiled, butchered the corralled Umidians like livestock. Thirty brothers of Second Company, veterans of wars against Traitor Space Marines, the greenskin, the tyranid and countless other horrors from the stars, slit the throats of women and children as if they were the greatest threat the Imperium had ever faced.

Why?

The voice, the same voice he had heard at Krevsh, roused Riegler from his near-trance at the unjust horror he was witnessing. He turned to Kranon to find that the captain of Second Company had also stopped firing, his weapon hanging limply at his side, shock and revulsion carved into his stern, ashen features.

Why?

Kranon looked to Riegler, then back to the carnage being performed before him. 'Cease fire,' he said weakly.

Save for Riegler, not a single battle-brother had heard his command.

The vox-link crashed open abruptly, crazed interference jarringly giving way to Kranon's booming voice. 'I said cease fire!'

In concert, the Crimson Sabres weapons fell silent, blades allowed to fall idle at their wielders' sides. The brothers of Second and Tenth looked to each other uneasily, confused by Captain Kranon's order.

Why?

The Scouts, hearing the voice too, looked up into the darkness attempting to discern the speaker. Some of the brothers of Second removed their helmets, also raising their heads to the sky in search of the source of the voice.

Why?

The woman's voice was reedy, like wind blowing through trees. Riegler wasn't sure whether it was just the noise of the breeze or an act of mimicry on the part of some jungle bird. Willing his aural senses to shut down, Riegler temporarily deafened himself in an attempt to disprove one of his other theories.

Why?

The voice was louder now, reverberating around his head, pushing aside all other thought. He closed his eyes but instead of the total darkness he had expected, visions of the recent slaughter played out with clarity so sharp it was as if he was reliving the horror once more. He opened his eyes with a start to find that whatever bar had prevented his Scouts and Kranon's men from seeing the truth of their actions had been lifted.

Why?

The few brothers whose helms remained in place removed them, their faces the mirror of their captain's. Some dropped to their haunches, vainly searching for signs of life among the corpses strewn across the clearing. The sergeant of Beta Squad, Yegzenik, looked at Kranon, his eyes wide with shock. 'What have we done?' he asked, his loosely held bolter dropping to the ground.

The loss of innocent life was a regrettable, though often unavoidable, part of any operation involving the forces of the Imperium, most notably

the Adeptus Astartes. The prosecution of war threw up many uncomfortable decisions regarding who should live and who should die, and there were often times when Space Marine forces would willingly sacrifice civilians and less able Imperial personnel if it enabled them to achieve a tactical objective or gain some advantage over their foes.

This slaughter served no purpose, at least none that the Crimson Sabres could see.

‘I...’ Kranon could not find the words. ‘Riegler?’ he said, not taking his eyes from the panorama of violence he had unwillingly helped wreak.

The Scout captain closed his eyes again but blinked them open abruptly as he was once again confronted by visions of the massacre. Thankfully, the disembodied voice had stopped pleading for an answer.

‘Sevarion, with me. The rest of you, secure this area,’ he said, grabbing the Second Company captain by the shoulder and guiding him towards the dense brush at the edge of the clearing, which quickly loomed up to engulf him. ‘Do not leave or make contact with anybody until you hear from either of us or we return. Is that understood?’

Nobody replied.

‘Is. That. Understood?’ he repeated with a malice to back up his words.

This time each of the Crimson Sabres acknowledged him, though few of them had the faculty to vocalise it.

Content, Riegler allowed the darkness to swallow him.

Neither captain spoke to the other, their climb down the vast trees towards Krevsh as silent as their dawn flight there on board the Stormraven had been. In contrast to the last time Riegler had made this journey the descent was rapid, the knowledge that there was nobody left alive in the Umidian capital lending him speed.

The roofs of the wooden buildings below came up fast until, twenty metres from the plaza, Riegler leapt downwards, the force of his impact splintering the timbers. Kranon did likewise, coming to rest alongside the Scout captain.

‘What are we doing here?’ Kranon asked, rising to his feet. His voice was flecked with revulsion and something else, something Riegler was unfamiliar with and unable to specify.

‘This was where we first encountered the cult and broke up their ritual. Where Ragnald fought the daemon. I have to be sure. I have to...’ Riegler trailed off, his first sight of the already decomposing corpses confirming his worst fears. The battle he had fought, thought he had fought here, was against armed, frenzied cultists bent on their foul worship and the extermination of the Space Marines.

There was not the single corpse of a cultist anywhere to be seen.

Men, women, children, entire families had been massacred here, their bodies in violent repose alongside cooking fires and spits, half-roasted carcasses of animals left as feasts for insects and local carnivores. Bunting and streamers ran from rooftop to rooftop, tree to tree, and wooden carvings, some Riegler recognised as replicas of Imperial saints, lined the bridges and promenades leading to the central square.

Both Crimson Sabres picked their way through the human detritus, each cadaver facedown, many piled atop those who had died before them.

‘These people weren’t attacking you,’ Kranon said, examining the deep gashes in a dead man’s back. ‘They were running away from you. They were running away from you and you murdered them!’

Oblivious to Kranon’s words, Riegler’s attention was attracted by a female corpse that had come to rest at an awkward angle, as if she had fallen upon something as she died. He slowly knelt down and rolled the woman over. When he saw what she was cradling in her arms, he quickly pulled his hand away in disgust and closed his eyes tightly, the truth of the events that had occurred here revealed to him.

The citizens of Umidia, loyal Imperial citizens celebrating their all saints’ day, set upon by Angels of Death, cold-blooded killers blinded by foul magicks. He saw the looks upon their faces as Space Marine blades rose and fell, as their loved ones fell under an assault they could not even begin to comprehend, let alone contend with. He heard their cries for clemency, tasted their tears, saw their blood on his gauntlets like an indelible stain upon his honour.

He opened his eyes. Kranon was standing right before him.

‘Why?’ said Sevarion Kranon.

‘We didn’t know,’ Riegler said quietly.

‘You slaughtered an entire city and you “didn’t know”? Has the strain of command caused you to lose your grip on reality?’ Kranon’s face was

mere centimetres from Riegler's.

'And what about you back there in the jungle clearing? How many did you kill before you realised what was really happening?' Riegler fixed his gaze on Kranon's ocean-blue eyes.

The Second Company captain looked away in shame.

'What do we do, Anzo? No matter what my brother and the Sword Council believe, the Crimson Sabres are already treated with disdain. You know the contempt in which other Chapters hold us, the strained relationships we have with the Inquisition, the Administratum and the Mechanicus. Something like this will push us over the precipice, lead us to excommunication and extermination.'

Riegler was just about to tell his fellow captain that he was bereft of ideas when one presented itself to him. The northern side of the plaza was blackened and scorched, the result of an overturned brazier or out-of-control cooking fire.

'We burn it,' Riegler said, coldly.

'Tell me you aren't serious, Anzo,' Kranon scoffed. 'You would cover this... this *atroc*ity up?'

'And what is the alternative, brother? That we reveal the truth of the matter to the Chapter Master and force the Sword Council to vote in favour of the conscious slaughter of millions of innocents, or have it call a halt to operations and condemn the Chapter to censure and extinction?'

'But what you're suggesting—'

'What I'm suggesting is that we do what is best for the continued existence of the Crimson Sabres while still rooting out the malign power behind this. Or have you not yet realised that a daemon's trick led us to do this, brother?'

The command channel opened over the vox and Chapter Master Kranon spoke before his brother could give his reply. For a single hearts-stopping moment, Riegler thought the Commander of the Crimson Sabres had become aware of what was really happening on Umidia.

'Captain Riegler, finish your current operation and prepare your company for extraction. Tenth and First will rotate back to the fleet for twenty-four hours Terran standard.' Sending the Scout Company back into orbit made sense because of the physical limitations of the younger battle-

brothers, but recalling First instead of Third, who had engaged on Umidia, was designed to send a message: Ragnald's failure was yet to be rectified.

'Acknowledged. We'll be airborne within the hour, Chapter Master.' The link went dead.

'What's it going to be, Sevarion?' Riegler asked. 'Do you order your men to burn the corpses and keep their mouths shut while we take care of things here, or do we force the Sword Council into an impossible decision?'

Captain Kranon closed his eyes but soon opened them again with a start. From his expression, Riegler could tell Kranon had seen exactly what he had the last time he had shut his eyelids.

'We do it,' he said eventually, barging past Riegler to commence building a pyre. 'But may the God-Emperor have mercy on us all.'

NINE

Confrontations

The mood on the hangar deck was sombre as Alpha Squad disembarked from the Stormraven. In the next berth a Thunderhawk disgorged more brothers of the Tenth, Vonderell at their head. Riegler nodded to the veteran sergeant but he seemed not to notice his captain, his gaze locked on some unspecified point in the distance. Ignorant of all else around him, Vonderell headed for the hangar exit, his squad in tow. Riegler was about to follow him when three more Thunderhawks loomed up in the vast hangar opening and began their landing procedures.

In perfect formation, the trio touched down on the deck, rear hatches opening in unison with pneumatic hisses barely audible over the sound of engines spooling down. Alpha Squad looked on, impressed as from the belly of each Thunderhawk marched the brothers of First Company, resplendent in their Terminator plate. As they reached the bottom of the boarding ramp they removed their helms to reveal faces bearing the same expression as Captain Kranon's when he realised the truth of the situation on Umidia. Unusually, Draznicht was the last to exit the troop transport, his helmet already gripped in his gauntlet, his visage that of a haunted man.

'Return to quarters,' Riegler said to Alpha Squad, 'but be in the training chamber in one hour. You all did well down there but there are areas that need working on before we redeploy.'

He received a chorus of 'Aye, captain,' before the six Scouts filed past him, mingling with the Chapter's elite as they headed for the doors. Riegler moved against the tide of Space Marines, weaving his way through them in the direction of the Thunderhawks.

‘Captain Draznicht?’ Riegler called as he got closer. Like Vonderell, Draznicht appeared not to notice the Scout captain. ‘Captain Draznicht?’ he said again. The First Company captain looked up and was just about to say something when a commotion from the hangar exit drew his and Riegler’s attention. Barging through the mass of Terminator armour, both captains forced their way to the front of the bellowing crowd that had formed, rapt on a scuffle taking place in its midst.

Chyre, one of the First Company sergeants, had Aronsh gripped by the throat, the big Scout’s feet almost a metre from the ground. His squad mates were yelling and trying to reach their stricken comrade but a dozen Terminators barred their path.

‘What in Terra’s name do you think you are doing, Chyre?’ Riegler snapped incredulously. ‘Put him down this instant.’

Aronsh beat at the massive hand around his throat with his meaty fists but only succeeded in drawing blood from his own knuckles.

‘Your whelp had the temerity to try and leave the hangar deck before his betters. I’m just teaching him the error of his ways,’ Chyre said. Aronsh’s face was taking on an unhealthy blue pallor.

‘Have you taken leave of your senses?’ Riegler said. Chyre was a ferocious combatant with a fractious nature but this was out of character. He was a noble warrior of the Crimson Sabres, not some common bully. ‘Do something, Draznicht. Your sergeant is acting no better than an animal.’

The First Captain still wore a disturbed, vacant look. He looked to Riegler, then at the Scout dangling from Chyre’s grasp. Something that could only be described as amusement took hold of his features.

‘Apologise,’ Draznicht said.

‘What?’ replied Riegler.

‘The boy. He needs to apologise.’

‘This is outrageous. He has done noth—’

‘Make him apologise.’ There was a darkness to Draznicht’s tone that Riegler had never heard before. Aronsh’s eyes began to roll back in their sockets, his hold on consciousness slipping away.

‘Aronsh. Apologise to Sergeant Chyre,’ Riegler said reluctantly.

‘I... I’m suh... suh... sorry,’ Aronsh gurgled.

Nothing happened.

‘He’s apologised, Draznicht. Order Chyre to release him,’ Riegler pleaded.

Moments passed.

‘Let him go, sergeant,’ Draznicht said.

Chyre squeezed a little harder, causing Aronsh to pass out. He tossed the unconscious Scout to the deck, his arm snapping with a sickening crack as he landed on the hard metal. The brothers of the First who had been holding Alpha Squad back turned to leave, allowing the Scouts to check on their fallen squad mate’s condition.

Riegler placed himself between the prone form of Aronsh and the Terminators striding from the hangar until the last of them had filed past. Not a single one of them gave Riegler, Aronsh or the other Scouts a second glance.

‘Get him to the apothecarion and make sure you stay with him. Do not let him out of your sight.’ Riegler made to follow First Company.

‘Where are you going, captain?’ Wedsoe asked, helping Sylas and Petronaias haul Aronsh from the cold metal floor.

‘To try and get some answers.’

As he made his way from the hangar, Riegler swore he could hear the sound of a woman laughing.

Chief Librarian Mannon was deep in the study of an ancient, fragile tome by the time Riegler found him. As the psyker was wont to do when not engaged in combat, he had ensconced himself in the extensive library on board the *Red Honour* in an attempt to expand his already vast reservoir of knowledge. Without looking up from the book, Mannon acknowledged the Scout captain’s presence as he was still wending his way through the cyclopean bookshelves crammed with the Crimson Sabres accumulated intellectual wealth.

‘Captain Riegler. I sense your soul is in turmoil.’ The Librarian marked the page he was reading and turned from the lectern.

Riegler tried to force a smile to acknowledge his old friend. Somehow it came out as a grimace.

The Librarian stiffened, like a canid catching scent of prey on the wind. ‘No. I sense many souls in turmoil. A canker at the heart of the Chapter.

What has happened, Anzo?’ Mannon asked gravely.

‘I did not know whether to seek out one of the Brother-Chaplains, but under the circumstances I thought it better to unburden myself upon one with a knowledge of warcraft,’ Riegler said.

‘Under what “circumstances”? What happened on Umidia?’ Mannon gripped Riegler by both shoulders, forcing the Scout captain to look him dead in the eye.

‘I don’t know where to begin. I don’t know how much you know about the operation on the surface.’

‘Assume I know nothing and start from the beginning.’

And so Riegler did. He left out no detail from the instant he had set foot on Umidia right up to the recent fracas on the hangar deck that had put one of his young charges in the apothecarion. When he had finished his account, Mannon was contemplative for several minutes.

‘And only you and Captain Kranon are aware of the truth of the situation on Umidia?’ the Chief Librarian said eventually.

‘Three of his squads along with one of mine know that they slaughtered innocent civilians in the jungle clearing, but the massacre at Krevsh is known only to Sevarion and myself,’ Riegler replied. The dim candlelight of the ship’s library shimmered from the beads of sweat dotted across his forehead. He had not paid it any heed before now but both his hearts were pumping furiously: unbidden, his body had put itself into a combat-ready state.

‘But you destroyed all evidence of that. Set fire to the bodies and to the capital itself?’

‘Yes,’ Riegler cast his eyes to the floor. ‘We thought we were doing the right thing.’

‘Perhaps you were,’ Mannon said with a smile that conveyed no happiness. ‘By keeping the matter hidden you prevented the Chapter Master and the Sword Council from making an impossible decision. By leaving no trace of the atrocity behind you ensure that no subsequent investigation will implicate the Chapter. Provided these are isolated incidents, of course.’

‘You do not think they are?’

‘Neither do you, Anzo. You practically told me that yourself.’

‘I did?’ Riegler said, confused.

‘The lack of response from Vonderell when you came aboard. The reaction of Draznicht and his men to the perceived slight from Aronsh.’

‘The stress of combat. They have been fighting relentlessly for more than a week.’

‘Has the ensorcelment that blinded you to your true actions on Umidia also robbed you of your common sense?’ Mannon snapped. ‘We are talking about Space Marines here. The phrase “combat stress” has no meaning among our brethren. To your novice Scouts, perhaps, but even then it would only manifest itself when facing deadlier foes in a more protracted campaign.’

Riegler didn’t hear the last part of what the Chief Librarian told him, fixating instead on a single word. ‘Ensorcelment. Is that what you think has happened here?’

Mannon turned back to his book. ‘I have been delving into the history of this world, at least the little of it I can ascertain.’

‘And?’

‘The message we received from the Lord Inquisitor – or the daemon posing as the Lord Inquisitor as you believe – had a germ of accuracy to it. There are records of a cult called the Balethu operating on Umidia many centuries ago. It was wiped out by the Ecclesiarchy when the planet was brought back into the Imperial fold but it is possible that elements of it escaped destruction, its cultists biding their time until they could rise again.’

‘Which of the Dark Gods do they swear fealty to, these Balethu?’

‘That’s the strange part. Different factions within the cult dedicate themselves to the worship of different aspects of the Four. Each adopts the methodology of their patron, but as part of an alliance. Even the followers of those powers who operate in opposition to each other – the God of Blood and the God of Pleasure, for example – will work together for the greater good of the cult.’

Riegler looked perplexed. ‘But how did they grow so powerful? The Crimson Sabres have put down cults countless times before, but never any with the means to hoodwink the entire Chapter.’

‘How many of those cults had a daemon at their head? Especially one that is an aspect of the Trickster God, if your description is accurate.’

It was Riegler's turn to be contemplative. 'What do we do?' he said, after some thought.

'You could go to the Chapter Master and tell him what you know, but I doubt he will be sympathetic. You left no traces of the massacres you participated in, no matter how unwittingly, so the only evidence you would be able to present him with are those mass murders other companies were complicit in. Provided you could find proof, of course. If you covered up your butchery then it's likely Draznicht and any other company captains did likewise.' Mannon paused, a new thought coming to him. 'Maybe the Chapter Master himself has been duped by this daemon's trickery – have you stopped to consider that?'

Riegler sighed. 'Then what is the alternative?'

'We see the mission through to the end.'

'But that could mean the needless slaughter of millions,' Riegler said, incredulous.

'That is unavoidable, Anzo. If Draznicht and the other captains know the reality of their actions but are unable to confront them or even admit them, then you will find yourself in a minority of one, two if Sevarion has the conviction to stand up to his brother. You've witnessed first-hand the effect this has had on Draznicht and it's likely to be worse among some of the others. Can you imagine what state Barkman is in right now if he is having the visions and hearing the voices?'

Riegler nodded.

'No more blood need stain your hands, Anzo. You are the captain of the Scouts. If you fail to uncover any more "cultists" hiding out in the jungles of Umidia, you can pursue the daemon at the heart of this while others take care of the Balethu hiding among the population. Once the architects of this deception are dead there is every chance that the curse will be lifted and the Chapter can make reparations.'

'And if the curse isn't lifted?'

Mannon didn't answer.

'And there are really no alternatives?' Riegler asked.

'I can think of none, can you?'

Riegler shrugged.

'You will not be alone in this, Anzo. Captain Kranon is a noble man and has already proved his worth and integrity as well as his desire to protect

the good name of the Crimson Sabres, such as it is worth. I will attach myself to Tenth Company when you are rotated back into combat and together we will hunt down and kill the abomination that threatens to tear our Chapter asunder.'

Riegler forced a smile onto his face. 'Thank you, old friend. I knew I could count on you.'

'And I, you,' Mannon said warmly. 'Now get some rest. The past few days weigh heavy upon you and I'll need you at your best if we're to hunt a daemon.'

'Not just yet,' said Riegler, turning to leave. 'There's one more matter I must attend to.'

When Riegler reached Draznicht's quarters it was apparent the First Captain was not alone.

'...kill just to be rid of you?' Draznicht's harsh, clipped tones echoed along the wide, high corridors of the *Red Honour's* accommodation deck. Riegler retreated back into an alcove and listened from the shadows. Riegler heard no reply, though Draznicht's words suggested that he had.

'Impossible! We'll root you out, every last one of you, and hang your corpses from the trees. You may hide like cowards but there is no sanctuary beyond the reach of my brothers and I.' There was a frantic edge to Draznicht's voice, an agitation that bordered on fear. Again, the Scout captain heard no reply.

'You dare to mock me?' Draznicht said, suddenly lucid. 'I am Dzargon Draznicht, First Captain of the Crimson Sabres. Remember it well for it is the name of your executioner!'

A crash sounded out, followed by the unmistakable thud of armour impacting against metal. Riegler rushed into Draznicht's chamber to come to his aid against this foe that had somehow made it aboard the Crimson Sabres flagship. Slamming open the heavy door, Riegler found that his First Company counterpart was entirely alone.

'You dare enter uninvited?' Draznicht railed, fixing Riegler with a bloodshot stare. He still wore his suit of Terminator armour, the right gauntlet of which was scratched from where it had struck the bulkhead, leaving an indelible dent in the wall of his quarters. The floor was littered

with the contents of Draznicht's trophy chest, xenos bones and blades scattered haphazardly in his rage.

'I heard voices,' Riegler said, remaining on the threshold, uncertain of the First Captain's frame of mind. The two captains had never been the closest of battle-brothers but Draznicht was the most stable and level-headed Space Marine Riegler had ever served with. The recent actions of Draznicht and the company he led were entirely out of character. 'Raised voices.'

Draznicht's façade softened. 'You heard...' Then, as suddenly as it had relaxed, his aspect darkened again. 'Get out. Your company and your counsel are unwelcome here.'

'I wished to speak to you about what happened on the hangar deck.' Though he kept his distance, Riegler's words were forceful.

'Your boy apologised to Sergeant Chyre. As far as I am concerned the matter is closed.'

'Sergeant Chyre put one of my Scouts in the apothecarion. In my book that makes the matter far from closed.' Riegler took a step forwards. 'I thought that the matter could be resolved between us, brother to brother, rather than involving the Sword Council.'

Draznicht's nostrils flared, Riegler's conciliatory words and manner having the opposite effect to what he had intended. 'Unless you would like to join your whelp in the care of the apothecarion then I would strongly suggest that you let this matter drop.' Draznicht took two great strides towards Riegler, putting him within striking distance. 'I have already asked you to leave once. I shall not ask you again.'

The atmosphere in the chamber was so charged that Riegler felt it could combust at any moment. The two transhuman giants held each other's gaze for several uncomfortable seconds. It was Riegler who relented first.

'This is not over,' the Scout captain said, backing out of the room.

'I know, Anzo,' Draznicht said. The aggression had drained from him, his voice taking on a fatalistic quality. 'This is only just the beginning.'

The door slammed shut scant millimetres from Riegler's face. As the echo of its closing subsided, the laughter in his head rose up to fill the void. Fighting in vain to suppress the woman's cackle, Riegler made his way to his own quarters, uncertain whether what had gone unsaid between

he and Draznicht was of more consequence than the threats they had exchanged.

TEN

Resistance

The burning of the massacre sites by Riegler and Captain Kranon had another unintended and unforeseen consequence.

Fanned by the winds blowing through the dense, dry jungle the blazes soon spread to engulf not only trees and undergrowth but also the settlements nestled within. Panicked Umidians caught in the path of the inferno hurriedly abandoned their aerial towns and villages, sacrificing their homes and possessions in a bid to save their lives.

Instead of salvation they found only the waiting bolters of the Crimson Sabres.

Either still befuddled by the glamour placed upon them or disregarding the spilling of innocent blood, Draznicht, Barkman and several other of the more belligerent captains of the Chapter requisitioned the Crimson Sabres entire complement of flamer weapons. Commending the younger Kranon and the Scout captain for their ingenuity, their peers soon had entire island chains and landmasses ablaze, butchering the burned and choking populace the instant they staggered out of the jungle. Thousands died in the flames. Thousands more died at the blades and bolters of the Space Marines.

Tenth Company had rotated back into the action within a single day cycle of returning to the fleet, though Riegler had exercised prudence by staying out of First Company's way while they redeployed, only ordering his Scouts to muster on the hangar deck once all of Draznicht's Terminators were planetside. Aronsh had regained consciousness a few hours after Chyre's assault and though Riegler would have preferred to leave the boy aboard the *Red Honour* to recuperate, the psychosis

overcoming First Company and the rest of the Chapter meant it was safer to patch up the young Scout and keep him alongside his battle-brothers.

‘How’s the arm, Aronsh?’ asked Mannon quietly as Alpha Squad stalked through the thick brush. The Chief Librarian had been true to his word and attached himself to Riegler’s squad for its return to Umidia. His presence had already proved invaluable as his psyker talents had warned them more than once of nearby Umidians and allowed them to change course to prevent the unnecessary spilling of blood. The slaughter of innocent civilians was not their concern; the banishment of the daemon behind the trickery was their only goal.

‘The pain has subsided but I still can’t move it freely. Looks like Wedsoe gets to hang onto the heavy bolter for a while longer, Master Librarian.’ The novice Scout, like the others in Alpha Squad, wore a rebreather that muffled his words. Though the main fires raged on the other side of the planet, the air was thick with the stench of burning vegetation intermingled with hints of charred flesh and the chemical tang of promethium. Riegler and Mannon’s transhuman physiology allowed them to filter out the acrid scent unaided, but the fledgling Space Marines transformations were not yet that advanced.

‘And when the time comes, I’m certain Scout-Brother Wedsoe will make good use of it,’ said Riegler, moving up from his position at the tail of the small group marching single-file through the brush. ‘Take the rear, Aronsh. I would like to speak with the Chief Librarian.’

Aronsh nodded his affirmation and held his position until the rest of Alpha Squad had filed past him, bolt pistol primed and ready in his good hand, his splinted and bound arm hanging limply at his side.

‘Sevarion?’ asked Mannon sympathetically. The captain of Second Company had not been heard from since he and Riegler had covered up their atrocities, and had failed to return to the fleet when ordered to rotate out by the Chapter Master. The initial admiration from the other captains at Kranon’s use of fire to literally smoke out the cultists was beginning to sour and the word ‘cowardice’ had been used more than once on the broad-range vox-channel in relation to his going dark. Riegler nodded grimly.

Closing his eyes, Mannon drew upon his psychic boons to reach out through the warp, seeking out Sevarion Kranon’s light among the firmament. The temperature around the Librarian dropped significantly,

causing Riegler's flesh to prickle in response. After a few seconds the Librarian opened his eyes again, the cold abating as his mindmagic faded. 'Captain Kranon has reached the planet's pole. No other companies are operating within a three hundred kilometre radius and the only other presences I can detect are animal, not human. Would you like me to contact him?'

Riegler considered this for a moment. 'No. If Sevarion does not wish to communicate with anyone then I respect that. He, like I, knows the true shame of the Chapter and he is free to deal with it in any way he sees fit.' Riegler paused, his face contorting into a half-smile, half-grimace. 'Though I cannot help but feel his obvious inaction will have repercussions down the line.'

They continued their march in silence, the only noise other than the sound of insects and distant wildlife being the occasional report over the company vox-channel. Mannon had reached out through the aether prior to Tenth Company's return to Umidia and had found a blind spot near to the equator on the planet's western hemisphere. No matter how hard the Chief Librarian tried to penetrate the region, all that the warp returned was darkness and quietude. It could have been a naturally occurring phenomenon, some quirk of geography or the world's position within its sub-sector, but both Riegler and Mannon were experienced enough to know that with a daemon present on Umidia, coincidence was the least likely explanation. Riegler was also seasoned enough to know that anything powerful enough to cast such a vast veil over the warp would be a formidable foe, possibly even more than a match for Mannon, but the Scout captain did not share his observation with the venerable psyker.

The entirety of Tenth Company had deployed on the edges of the dead zone, each squad taking its own path through the veins of the jungle to reach Umidia's dark heart. Some had progressed more quickly than others, well-beaten tracks and sparse tree coverage aiding their advance, but the chatter on the vox was yet to relay any sign of the daemon inquisitor or the true cultists no doubt in his service. Sergeant Vaskane had just finished reporting in when Mannon stopped dead in his tracks, head snapping around as if in response to some unheard sound.

+Into the undergrowth. Now,+ Mannon sent, his booming voice invading the head of each member of Alpha Squad.

As quiet as the grave, the eight Crimson Sabres bled into the jungle like spectres. Without Mannon's warp powers Alpha Squad would still have heard any 'enemies' approaching, but the Chief Librarian's foresight gave them vital extra seconds to avoid unnecessary confrontation. Though on one level Riegler, Mannon and the Scouts were fully aware of their situation and the geas placed on them by the daemon, if attacked then their battle conditioning would take over, compelling them to retaliate with deadly force.

Unmoving, captain, Librarian and Scout alike clung to the shadows as the Umidians hove into view. To Riegler's eyes they appeared to be masked and robed, grotesque visages atop rune-daubed gowns the colour of blood. In their hands they carried knives and axes, ornate to the point of vanity but no less deadly for it. At the rear of their column a lone figure carried a crude effigy in her hands, eyes darting this way and that as she held the vile facsimile to her breast like a lover.

Riegler screwed his eyes shut. He knew that his eyes told him only lies so why could he not lift the veil of untruth? He shook his head in an attempt to clear the fog that had occluded his mind. When he opened his eyes again he saw a very different scene.

The Umidians were indeed masked, but with ragged scarves that covered their mouths and noses to block out the pervading stench of distant smoke. Their clothing was not covered in runes but rather tears and scorch marks; the scarlet of the material was not the result of dyes but of actual blood, the sheer quantity suggesting that not all of it was their own. Each face was carved from raw, primal fear but every pair of eyes revealed understanding and hopelessness; they knew that their would-be killers were the very beings charged with humanity's defence, the stalwart protectors of the Imperium and the chosen of the Emperor.

Every pair of eyes, save one.

The figure trailing behind the dishevelled refugees was no manic devotee of the Ruinous Powers, no student of forbidden lore or debauched malpractice and the idol in her hands was no rendition of a foul, unspeakable deity. Filthy from soot, a girl no older than five summers followed in the wake of the adults, gripping a doll with a disproportionately large head and eyes tightly to her chest. Channels had been carved in the blackness coating her face and the tracks of her tears

revealed pale flesh beneath. Piercing green eyes, robbed of the innocence of youth, looked from one side of the narrow jungle path to the other, overly alert for any danger lurking in the darkness.

In his peripheral vision Riegler saw the embryonic signs of movement from Syllas, his shotgun just beginning to rise from where it rested across his thigh to a position where it could be fired from the hip. Riegler reached out his arm and placed his open hand over both barrels of the Scout's weapon, gently and quietly returning it to its original place. Syllas looked to his captain, his face an uneasy mix of apology and incredulity.

Slowly the displaced Umidians moved past the hidden Space Marines, some of them limping or so unable to move freely that they had to be supported by others. For several uneasy minutes they remained within sight and Riegler was uncertain whether one of the other novices would succumb to their base instincts and reach for their weapon. Just as the last of their number was about to disappear from view, the girl, who had been looking from side to side, turned and looked back along the track. Though he knew it was impossible, Riegler thought she was looking directly at him, her wide, emerald eyes pleading, asking him a single question: *why?*

Then she was gone, engulfed by the darkness.

Riegler was just about to ask Mannon and Alpha Squad if anybody else had managed to shake the daemon's witchery and witness reality when the voice of Sergeant Vonderell registered on his vox-bead.

'Vonderell to all squads. We've found it.' The sergeant's normally grim tone was peppered with nervous excitement, his gravelly rasp like a shouted whisper. 'We've found the daemon.'

ELEVEN

Driven

Whether it was as a result of the Scout Company's assault or merely because it could no longer be bothered, the daemon abandoned all attempts at pretence.

The native flora was twisted here, the gnarled trunks in stark contrast to the trees that covered the rest of the planet, thrusting high and straight into the now smoke-darkened sky. The jungle floor was different too, patches of hard ground giving way to slabs of stone smoothed by centuries of rainfall, crude etchings and debased artwork still evident where time had not fully obliterated them. In places, larger stones jutted forth from the earth, ringing the immense clearing like teeth, a gigantic mouth ready to consume all who entered it. Riegler had seen ruins like this before on dozens of worlds, xenos and pre-Imperium structures devoted to the worship of blasphemous powers and the Dark Gods. He let slip a grin: the vile temple was already in ruins – it would save him the trouble of tearing it down brick by brick.

As the daemon's acolytes – its true acolytes rather than innocents disguised as cultists in the minds of the Space Marines – charged against the much smaller assaulting force, the warp-spawned horror shed the form of the inquisitor and assumed its true shape, towering over all before it. Fully six metres high, the bird-headed thing's coat of feathers shimmered under the wan, smoke-occluded light eking its way into the expansive clearing where it had chosen to make its last stand. Its beak mouth clacked and clicked, issuing orders to its foot soldiers in the blasphemous tongue of its vile patron. The younger Scouts winced visibly to hear it, their ears as yet unaccustomed to the psychological effects of Archenemy dialects.

Even Mannon appeared to be uncomfortable listening to it. Riegler decided to nullify it as a weapon.

‘Tenth Company, open fire!’ he bellowed, breaking from the treeline. Alongside him, Alpha Squad opened up with its weapons, the boom of shotguns and staccato thud of bolters joining the choir of weapons discharge. The first wave of cultists was utterly annihilated by the opening barrage, the second wave struck down to a man by the Scout squads emerging from the twisted trees on the far side of the ruins. Panicked, the surviving cultists, still numbering in the thousands, were routed, those with their faculties still about them at least attempting to fire their weapons to facilitate their escape.

Carefully placing his shots, Riegler emptied the entire clip of his bolt pistol, eight rounds, each one taking the head from the shoulders of a fleeing cultist. His weapon empty, Riegler replaced it in its holster and drew his sword with his other hand. Before the corpses of his initial eight victims had hit the clearing floor, his blade had separated the heads from three more of the daemon’s acolytes. Riegler felt a surge pass through him as he ended their lives, an unfamiliar feeling he wasn’t sure he was comfortable with. Even more unfamiliar was the weight of the sword in his hand. He looked down to find that rather than his usual blade, it was the sword he had looted many years before from the body of an Emperor’s Children champion that he now wielded.

How had it got there? He had checked his wargear meticulously during the downtime on board the *Red Honour* and was certain he had placed his regular sword at his hip before leaving his quarters. Could the pressure of recent events have caused him to forget or misremember? No. He was a full battle-brother of the Adeptus Astartes and possessed an eidetic memory like all of his ilk. What was happening to him?

Forcing the thoughts from his mind, Riegler returned his full attention to the battle. Those few cultists who had retained wits enough to fight back were proving no match for the Crimson Sabres Scouts and the only thing keeping them in the battle – if the bloodbath could truly be called a battle – was their sheer weight of numbers. Unconcerned by the insignificant enemy arrayed against him, he opened up the squad channel and voxed new orders.

‘Mannon. Alpha Squad. With me.’

Wielding the Chaos blade like an extension of his arm, Riegler ploughed through the throng of cultists, rending a bloody route through to their leader. In his wake, Mannon swung his mace with the same fury and zeal that the brothers of the Reclusiam displayed when fighting with their croziuses, while the Scouts covered them with withering fire.

Sensing danger, the daemon turned its head to appraise the threat, its glassy bird-like eyes scouring every inch of the Space Marines, sizing them up to find any weakness or chink in their armour. Its beak splitting into an unnatural grin, the thing seemed to grow even larger in stature before striding in the direction of the Crimson Sabres daring to oppose it. Crushing the bodies of dead and dying cultists underfoot, it raised its staff and unleashed a lance of warp energy at the Scouts and Librarian.

Raising his hand, Mannon swiftly erected a psi-shield around himself and Alpha Squad, the daemon's bolt crashing against it in a storm of crackling energy before dissipating. The daemon tried again but met with the same result, the Crimson Sabres advancing unhindered beneath the psychic dome. Riegler glanced over at the Chief Librarian and saw that blood was trickling from Mannon's nostrils, spilling onto teeth bared wide under the effort of maintaining the shield.

A third bolt struck the energy field, rocking Mannon backwards. The psyker gasped loudly, the air violently knocked from all three of his lungs. The shield held but Riegler knew that it would not stand another hit.

On my mark, drop the shield.

Riegler hesitated for a fraction of a second. He hadn't said the words out loud but Mannon nodded his acknowledgement despite giving the Scout captain a very peculiar look.

'Now!' Riegler yelled, regaining his composure. The shimmering wall of blue energy before Alpha Squad fell away, to be replaced instead by a wall of gunfire. Having taken the opportunity to reload his bolt pistol, Riegler's gun joined those of his squad, the unrelenting barrage blowing chunks from the near-unmissable form of the huge daemon. It howled in response, the canine sound emanating from its beak entirely at odds with its avian appearance. It too raised a psi-shield, quickly enough to prevent further shotgun and bolt shell wounds but not fast enough to prevent Mannon and Riegler getting in close.

The Scout captain swung his looted blade, the black blur met by the shaft of the daemon's staff, but Mannon used the distraction to strike with his mace. The head of the weapon struck true, impacting the daemon just below the knee and snapping bone – or whatever it was beneath daemon-flesh that held them together – with a satisfying crunch. The thing cried out again and dropped its psi-shield. Six Space Marine guns opened up once again, aiming high to avoid their captain and the Librarian and carving yet more warpstuff from its torso.

Suddenly, it disappeared.

'Wedsoe! To your left,' bellowed Inhoke.

Wedsoe, who had been operating the heavy bolter from the squad's flank, turned, weapon raised. The daemon, which had been in front of him only an eye blink earlier, was now only several metres to his left. He opened up with his weapon, certain he could not miss at such short range, but was surprised when none of the high calibre bolt shells found their intended target. Riegler realised what had happened immediately. Wedsoe was dead before he had a chance to come to the same conclusion.

Exercising its mastery over the laws of physics, the daemon had stopped the shells in mid-flight, suspending them before it, frozen in time and space. Its beak splitting once more with a grin, it reversed their direction, sending them back at the same speed they had been expelled, in Wedsoe's direction. The first shell killed him outright; the second made certain that his progenoids – had he been implanted with them – were unharvestable; the third ensured there was not enough of his body left to return to the burial fields back on Drogsh; the fourth was merely overkill; the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth impacted against trees several kilometres away, having passed through the void that Wedsoe's body had once occupied.

Alpha Squad froze. They had dealt with the deaths of their brothers in arms ever since they had joined the Chapter, before their age had reached double digits. Fellow aspirants who had perished during the trials that had led to a handful of Drogshian boys being taken into service in the Crimson Sabres fortress monastery. Scout hopefuls they had bunked alongside during their early years as Chapter serfs who had never returned from their testing in the Wildlands. Boys who lacked the necessary skills with a blade and did not make it through the Time of Duelling. Novitiates whose bodies rejected the Space Marine implants even after they had overcome all the

other hardships and barriers placed in their way on their path to become a Crimson Sabre.

Up until now they had not had to deal with the violent and bloody snuffing out of a battle-brother's life on the field of battle.

Riegler was the first to react. 'Grief comes later. Now is the time for revenge!' he bellowed. Snapped from the shock of seeing one of its own cut down so suddenly and violently, Alpha Squad recommenced its assault on the daemon. Other squads who had finished slaughtering cultists now turned their attention to the master rather than the minions, almost three dozen guns all trained upon the single, massive target that dominated the battlefield.

The daemon raised another psi-shield to counter the fusillade, solid shot dissipating the instant it made contact with the shimmering blue energy field. The Scouts continued to pour on the fire, with yet more weapons joining the effort as the cultists were reduced to the last handful and pursued into the jungle by two other squads. For the first time what could only be regarded as strain played on the daemon's hideous face. Its psi-shield began to falter, iridescent feathers torn from its wings where bolt shells had made it through the warp-constructed barrier. Riegler was about to order his company to increase the rate of fire when the daemon reacted to the onslaught.

Its staff seeming to grow larger in its clawed hand, the avatar of the Trickster God raised it high above the ground in preparation to strike the jungle floor.

'Brace! Brace!' yelled Mannon, both with his voice and his mind. Realising what was about to happen, Riegler and the Scout veterans thrust downwards with powerful thighs, cracking through the dried earth and sinking almost to the knee. An instant later, the base of the staff made heavy contact with the ground.

The wall of energy spread out like a three hundred and sixty degree wave with the daemon at its core. It battered against the brothers of Tenth Company like the shockwave of a powerful explosion, lifting them from their feet and throwing them many metres backwards into the treeline where they came to land forcefully amongst the thick vegetation. Several of the younger Scouts cried out in pain, bone and cartilage snapping under the impact, but seven crimson-clad figures still remained in the clearing.

Before the daemon could raise its defences again, Riegler and the veterans attacked, hauling themselves out of the dry mud and placing their shots. The warp fiend raised its staff again but Mannon, who had been standing closest to it before its counterattack, intervened at the last moment, striking the daemon's weapon with his own mace and preventing it from unleashing its dire magicks once more.

Almost too quickly for Riegler's enhanced vision to register it, the daemon reversed the impact, its staff transforming into an oversized dark mirror of Mannon's mace. The huge weapon caught the Librarian square in the midriff, lifting him from the ground and sending him sprawling through the claret puddle of all that remained of Wedsoe. When his blue-armoured form finally came to a halt it did not move again.

Returning its attention to the advancing Scouts, the daemon swung wide with its mace. Riegler, who had got within a few metres of the thing, ducked under the blow, continuing to fire with his bolt pistol while he redrew his sheathed blade with his other hand. Without even feeling the weight in his grip, nor being conscious of where he placed his strike, Riegler had parted the warp flesh just above the daemon's knee before he was even aware he had caused it injury.

The daemon's dark orbs dilated, a cruel smile forming on its beak.

'So the bargain is broken, is it? No matter. I had planned to do the same once this affair had drawn to its conclusion.'

The daemon's voice was the most beautiful thing Riegler had ever heard, yet at the same time the most horrific, as if a chorus of angels were revealing his deepest, darkest and innermost secrets. Riegler balked at the sound, not only the grating noise of it but at the words too. Was it speaking to him?

Adding that question to his rapidly lengthening list, Riegler lunged with his sword, aiming for the fresh wound in an effort to widen it and cripple the daemon's material form. The mace loomed up to meet his blade and the Scout captain instinctively altered the angle of his attack, glancing off the edge of the blunt weapon and coming to rest cutting edge-first in the daemon's ankle. It barked in pain as it collapsed to one knee, holes torn in its huge wings where the veteran Scouts were still laying down fire. Groggily, some of the younger Scouts emerged from the green-tinged gloom of the jungle, rejoining the battle as their faculties returned to them.

Riegler twisted the dark blade as he withdrew it from the meat of the daemon's lower leg, eliciting another howl from the stricken fiend. It listed to one side, shimmering blood leaking from its wounds as it rested uneasily on its haunches. Riegler was already moving in for the killing blow when he realised his mistake.

Riegler launched himself from the ground, his trophy sword raised high with both hands gripped on the pommel, ready to bring it down and decapitate the daemon. Still airborne, the blade failed to connect, passing through the space where the daemon had just been but no longer occupied. Riegler's feet had not even touched back down when he felt a clawed hand grasp him from behind, razor-sharp talons biting through his carapace armour and into the flesh of his waist and torso. Before he could react, he was thrown headfirst to the ground, almost blacking out as he made contact with the hard earth. Barely clinging to consciousness, he had wits enough to roll over onto his back and weakly raise his pistol in the direction of the dark shape looming over him. He expelled the last two rounds in the clip, both going wide of their mark as a result of his diminished state. The daemon raised its mace, ready to repay in kind the killing blow that mere seconds before Riegler had been poised to make.

Through blurred vision Riegler saw the daemon's arm disappear, shorn away at the shoulder. He felt gobbets of scalding warp flesh land on his face and exposed arms, heard the unmistakable staccato boom of a heavy bolter discharging.

The daemon turned its back on Riegler, screaming in rage and pain as it focused its attention on its new assailant. Consciously regulating the level of painkilling hormones washing through his system, the Scout captain hauled himself up to a sitting position, his eyesight rectifying itself as his Space Marine implants laboured to return him to battle readiness. The heavy bolter rang out again, removing a wing from the same side of the daemon's body as it had already lost an arm. Battered and bloody, his breastplate utterly destroyed by the daemon's staff-mace, Mannon chambered another round into the weapon previously carried by the unfortunate Wedsoe.

Using his sword as an aid, Riegler rose to a standing position. One of the younger Scouts who had charged back out of the jungle – Riegler could not tell which one in his current condition – halted his advance to check upon

his captain but Riegler waved him away. Staggering forwards, Riegler tightened his grip on the sword, determined to cover the metres between him and the daemon to join the Chief Librarian in the final duel. An inexplicable sense of dread suddenly came over him and the daemon's cries of pain turned to triumphant laughter. In the thing's remaining hand, its mace transformed back into a staff, raised once more to unleash dark magicks.

Riegler was just about to call out a warning to Mannon when everything turned white.

When he came to, Anzo Riegler had no idea how much time had passed.

Across the clearing, the rest of Tenth Company were lifting themselves from the ground, novices shaking their heads to remove the fog, their veteran counterparts checking over their charges for signs of serious injury. Already the sound of Thunderhawks and Stormravens could be heard in the distance, ready to swoop down and retrieve the Scouts. Of the daemon, there was not a trace. Mannon, his blue armour cracked and missing entire pieces, stood alone in the centre of the glade, motionless. Riegler moved to join his old friend, checking his wounds as he did so.

'Is that it?' he said as he drew alongside the psyker. 'Is the daemon vanquished?'

The old Librarian turned to look at Riegler, his face blank, devoid of any emotion or expression. Awkward moments passed, Mannon saying nothing.

'Are you all right, Xastus?' Riegler asked, breaking with Chapter protocol and using the Librarian's first name. Dabbling with the aether was fraught with peril and even a proponent as skilled as Mannon could suffer ill effects after channelling the warp. Though he bore wounds to his physical body, the injuries to his soul could be far more grave and lasting.

'The daemon is where it's supposed to be,' said Mannon, answering the Scout captain's first few questions but ignoring the third.

Still not visibly expressing any emotion, Mannon walked from the clearing in the direction of the approaching troop transports.

TWELVE

Reparations

It would be another day before the Crimson Sabres concluded their campaign and took their leave of the world. With the daemon banished the glamour had been lifted from the Space Marines, the truth of their actions laid bare.

As if some unspoken command had passed through the Chapter, the individual companies took to razing those towns and settlements that had thus far escaped the infernos raging across the planet's surface. Chaplain Okrark, attaching himself to the Scouts for the Crimson Sabres final hours on Umidia, told the novice Space Marines that they were honouring the dead who had been so brutally slain by the cultists languishing in their midst. When Vonderell and two of the other sergeants challenged the Master of the Reclusiam about this, pointing out that the Umidians' wounds were caused by bolters and other weapons too heavy to be operated by cultists, he brushed them aside, explaining that the dead civilians must have been executed for knowingly harbouring the daemon's servants.

'Are you buying that?' Vonderell asked Riegler after moving out of the Chaplain's considerable earshot. Though he had only recently ascended to the rank of captain, Riegler had served with the Chapter long enough to tell which direction the wind was blowing. He simply shook his head and went to take his place in one of the idling Rhinos that was waiting to take Tenth Company to the staging zone before it headed back to the fleet.

The journey back through the jungle took several hours, each one passing in abject silence. Both Vonderell and Okrark had chosen to travel with Alpha Squad and the veteran sergeant kept aiming disapproving

glances at both the Chaplain and the Scout captain. By the time the armoured convoy had finished its near hundred kilometre journey, Riegler had never been so relieved to get out of an armoured personnel carrier. That relief only intensified when he realised that Captain Kranon was already at the staging area, safe and well, though conspicuously placing his company some distance away from the remainder of the Chapter who awaited the Thunderhawks that would transport them back into orbit.

Riegler picked his way through the pyres that had been built to incinerate the last few Umidian corpses. The brothers of Second Company parted respectfully to allow Riegler free passage to his counterpart, who was engaged in heated debate with four of his sergeants. Before Riegler got close enough to hear the charged exchange, Kranon spotted him approaching and dismissed those arguing with him with a curt nod.

‘It is good to see you, brother-captain,’ Riegler said, a smile forming uneasily on his lips. ‘When nobody was able to raise you on the vox I feared the worst.’

‘Atmospherics,’ Kranon said, a little too hastily. ‘It played havoc with our equipment.’

‘We need to talk, Sevarion,’ said Riegler, lowering his voice to a terse whisper and ignoring his friend’s obvious lie. ‘As much as the rest of the Chapter wishes to ignore what has happened here, it cannot go unheeded.’

‘Not here,’ Kranon hissed. ‘The eyes of the Chapter are upon me.’ He surreptitiously motioned with his head to the far side of the staging area. Chapter Master Kranon stood staring in the direction of the Tenth and Second Company captains, Chief Librarian Mannon standing by his side looking for all the Imperium as if he was whispering in his commander’s ear. Draznicht and Barkman flanked them, both warriors looking on disapprovingly.

‘Very well then,’ Riegler said, once the gravity of the situation had dawned upon him. ‘Swear to me that we shall speak once we have rejoined the fleet.’

The younger Kranon brother looked Riegler dead in the eye. ‘I swear it.’

Nodding his farewell, Riegler passed back through the ranks of Second Company to rejoin the waiting Scouts. The rumble of Thunderhawk engines that had been only background noise since he had exited the Rhino

gradually came to the fore, and three dark shapes were realised on the horizon of the darkening sky.

Spotting Vonderell in amongst the throng of crimson carapace armour, Riegler headed in his direction to say to the sergeant what he should have said hours ago before they had struck out for the staging zone. He was still over thirty metres away when the imposing figure of First Captain Draznicht stepped out to block his way. Riegler's hand strayed instinctively to the pommel of the dark blade scabbarded at his side.

'Please, Scout captain. I am not here for a repeat of the unfortunate incident on board the *Red Honour* – I am here to make amends,' Draznicht said. He was unhelmeted but his voice was as projected as if it were being amplified by a vox-grille. Whatever he had to say to Riegler he was making it a point to ensure that as many of the Chapter as possible heard it.

'It is not I you need to make amends to, First Captain,' Riegler said, his hand still positioned inches from his sword. 'Brother Aronsh still bears his injury.'

'Brother Chyre will set right the situation once we are back aboard the flagship, of that you have my word.'

'If that is the case then let us both consider this matter concluded,' Riegler said. He started walking again, eager to speak to Vonderell before any more time passed. Draznicht stepped to one side, barring the Scout captain's progress again.

'I said *I* would like to make amends, brother.'

'Unless you have been hiding your Apothecary skills from me, First Captain, and intend to speed up the healing of Aronsh's bones then I fail to see how you can do that,' Riegler said, more impatiently than he would have liked.

'The Chief Librarian tells me that Tenth Company was instrumental in the destruction of the daemon. That many of your Scouts were wounded in the final assault and a promising brother was stolen from the Chapter.'

'Brother Mannon inflates our role in the battle, First Captain. It was he who banished the fiend. Tenth Company simply led the Chief Librarian there and got him close enough to finish the mission.'

'Captain Riegler, please learn to take a commendation when it is proffered. It was Tenth Company's sacrifice that ensured the mission's

success and I wish to acknowledge your role by allowing you and your Scout brothers first passage back to the fleet.'

Riegler was taken aback, not only at the magnanimity of the gesture but also at its appropriateness. Aronsh's assault had been the result of First Company's perception that it had the right to be first in all aspects of Chapter business. That this honour was now being granted to the Tenth was an unprecedented and boasted privilege. It was also a political masterstroke on Draznicht's part; not only did he get to exercise humility in front of the entire Chapter but he also raised Riegler's standing among the Crimson Sabres, something far from insubstantial for a newly instated captain.

'An honour that Tenth Company would be only too honoured to accept, First Captain,' Riegler said. Spontaneous applause broke out around the staging area, more polite than enthusiastic. Draznicht offered his open hand to Riegler, raised to shoulder height ready to perform a warrior's salute. Riegler gripped the First Captain's gauntlet and both men leaned forwards, in Draznicht's case a little too far.

'As well as learning to take a compliment, you should also learn to pick sides better, Scout captain. Though newly elevated, you aren't stupid, Anzo. The Chapter is changing and you need to be ready to change with it. Your actions on Umidia – *all* of your actions on Umidia – have not gone unnoticed. Do not throw away all the goodwill you have earned here by clinging to old allegiances,' Draznicht whispered, using the sound of almost a thousand pairs of clapping hands to keep his words between himself and Riegler.

The two Crimson Sabres unlocked their hands and Draznicht nodded sagely at the younger captain. Riegler was pensive but returned the gesture before the First Captain stood aside and allowed the Scout to return to his men and board the waiting Thunderhawks. He tried once again to seek out Vonderell only to find him at the head of Beta Squad, leading it aboard the first of the transports. Riegler slackened his pace, showing some of Draznicht's political acumen and allowing the rest of his company onto the craft as his way of honouring them.

As he took his place behind Kappa Squad, preparing to ascend the ramp of the third Thunderhawk, a squad from Seventh Company was still throwing corpses onto the pyres. As Riegler got closer he saw one of them

throw something small and dark onto the fire, like the body of an animal. Breaking away from the back of Kappa Squad he approached the fire and retrieved the thing that had drawn his attention from amongst the flames. It had already started to ignite around the edges, forcing Riegler to pat it against his armour to extinguish it. Lit by the ruddy orange glow of the pyre he held it up to inspect it.

In his hand was the tattered form of a child's doll, its head and eyes disproportionately large.

Ignoring the bemused and disapproving looks from the brothers of Seventh Company who witnessed it, Riegler clasped the doll to his chest and made his way aboard the waiting transport.

THIRTEEN

Visitations

Sevarion Kranon was true to his word but it would be several days before he and Riegler had a chance to speak face-to-face.

Second Company was, unsurprisingly, the last to be extracted from Umidia and instead of being allowed to return to the flagship was instead assigned to the *Pride of Rhoghon*. Though the strike cruiser was a formidable vessel, it had been badly damaged during a void engagement several years previously and still bore ugly scars across its crimson hull. The Chapter had petitioned the Adeptus Mechanicus to repair and refit the once noble craft but, like so many of the Crimson Sabres requests to the various branches of the Imperium in recent times, it had fallen on deaf ears. By ordering Captain Kranon and his company to billet there, the Chapter Master was sending out a clear signal to the rest of the Crimson Sabres regarding his true brother's standing among their ranks.

The Stormraven carrying Sevarion Kranon hove into view through the opening of the hangar, the orange glow from its rear exhausts stark against the black backdrop of space. Servitors and serfs scurried away from the designated landing zone, avoiding the Scout captain as he headed in the opposite direction. The last figure to vacate the space the Stormraven would soon be occupying was Forge Master Gorthus, who scowled at Riegler as they passed each other, the gruff Techmarine still annoyed at having to repair an unreasonable amount of training-servitors since the Chapter had set out from Drogsh.

The roar of the flyer's engine subsided as it commenced its landing procedure and Riegler felt the temperature on deck rise as the craft drew closer. With pinpoint precision, the pilot glided into the allocated bay, the

Stormraven's landing gear touching down with a gentle thud. Over the rapidly dwindling sound of its engines, Riegler heard the hiss of hydraulics as the side hatch opened to reveal his friend and ally.

'I was beginning to think that the Chapter Master would have you shipped back to Drogsh before we had a chance to speak, brother,' Riegler said, clasping Captain Kranon's arm in the warrior's salute as he reached the foot of the disembarkation ramp.

'Sevastus has always been one for petty political gestures and empty grandstanding. I'm certain that once I've spoken to him and convinced him of the sense of my actions on Umidia he will see reason and we can begin to rebuild the Chapter's shattered reputation,' Kranon said, relinquishing his grip on Riegler's forearm and making the sign of the aquila, which the Scout captain mirrored.

'You plan on speaking with him?'

'It would seem he wishes to speak with me. Fleet Captain Praed received a communiqué from the flagship requesting I meet with the Chapter Master. I made sure I arrived early so that I could talk with you first, Anzo.'

'My gratitude, Sevarion. As if the events on Umidia weren't troubling enough, there have been... incidents on board the flagship ever since we left orbit and headed for the Mandeville point,' Riegler said, quieting his voice to almost a whisper.

'Incidents? What kind of incidents?' the Second Company captain said, as if he half-knew the answer to his own question.

'Not here. Not now,' Riegler said furtively, glancing over at Gorthus who was staring at the two captains. 'We need to find Mannon. I believe he has the answers to many of our questions.'

Riegler and Kranon turned to leave the hangar but had gone barely a dozen paces when Inhoke emerged through the bulky doors that led to the rest of the ship. The novice carried himself with the decorum befitting a Space Marine but Riegler could tell that he was walking faster than his normal pace, as if some urgency compelled him.

'Captain Kranon,' Inhoke said, nodding respectfully as he approached his two superiors. Kranon returned the nod. 'Captain Riegler, I must speak with you.'

'Then speak,' Riegler replied warmly.

Inhoke looked awkwardly at Captain Kranon then back at Riegler.

‘Captain Kranon is a friend. Whatever you need to say can be said in front of him,’ Riegler said. Inhoke’s natural affinity for the clandestine that had served him so well thus far among the ranks of the Scouts had a tendency to bleed over into other aspects of Chapter life. Riegler had already noted it as an asset.

‘It’s Aronsh, Captain Riegler,’ Inhoke said. ‘He hasn’t been seen for the past two days. He’s missed three training sessions and his bunk hasn’t been slept in.’

As a result of Chyre’s assault on Aronsh, Riegler had ordered the sergeants to train the Scouts intensively in unarmed combat. The relationships between the various companies stationed on the *Red Honour* had been tense and fractious since the Umidian campaign and Riegler wanted the Tenth to be able to handle itself should it spill over into violence again.

‘You’re certain of this?’ Riegler said. ‘His wounds have yet to fully heal. He may have been kept in the medicae by our brothers in the apothecarion.’

‘That was the first place we looked, captain.’

‘“We”?’

‘Alpha Squad. We’ve been trying to locate him in between training sessions.’

Riegler’s emotions were mixed. On the one hand it gladdened him that his squad was bonding like true brothers of the Adeptus Astartes, but on the other it dismayed him that it had taken such a potentially dark situation to bring out that camaraderie.

‘Good. Tell Sergeant Vonderell that Alpha Squad is excused training for the next three cycles on my orders. If he asks why, tell him I’m improving your bladework.’ Riegler was shocked at how easily the lie came to him, as if it was now becoming habit. ‘Scour the ship until you find Aronsh or, Emperor forbid, evidence of what has happened to him. Do not let anybody else know what you are doing and do not go about the ship alone – always travel in pairs or as a group. Understood?’

‘Understood,’ Inhoke said. He nodded once more to the captains and took his leave.

‘Do you think this is related to those “incidents” you seem so reluctant to tell me about?’ Kranon said.

‘I hope not,’ Riegler said, heading for the hangar exit. ‘For the Chapter’s sake, I sincerely hope not.’

‘And my brother has done nothing to intercede?’ Captain Kranon said, his breath misting slightly in the cold air of the *Red Honour*’s lower decks.

‘He has barely been seen since we returned to the fleet,’ Riegler replied. The low blue-tinged light from the lume-strips above them cast their armour in a strange aspect, granting it a purple hue. ‘Neither has Chief Librarian Mannon. Nor Captain Draznicht, for that matter.’

‘And this has happened on a dozen occasions?’

‘At least. Each time it has been claimed to be an accident and no further censure or investigation has been forthcoming.’

‘But we wouldn’t lose that many serfs to accidents in a year, let alone the time we have been gone from Umidia. Surely my brother can see that?’

‘Perhaps he doesn’t want to see it. Though it goes unspoken among the Chapter, it is plain to see that the horrors we were tricked into carrying out on Umidia rest heavily on the shoulders of each and every Crimson Sabre. Just as we have denied our diminished standing among the ranks of the Imperium these past few hundred years, now the Chapter Master seeks to deny what is right under his nose. For the good of the Chapter, of course.’

‘Is that what you truly believe?’ Captain Kranon said, halting and turning to look Riegler dead in the eyes. ‘That our brothers carried out those atrocities because they were tricked?’

‘You and I both know that to be the case!’ Riegler said defensively.

‘Just as you and I were able to see through the illusion and find the truth of the matter. Do you think that out of a thousand battle-brothers only a handful could summon the strength of will to cast off the shackles of the daemon’s magicks?’

Riegler said nothing, his cheeks taking on a shade close to that of his armour, though whether it was out of anger or embarrassment, he could not tell.

‘There has been a canker eating away at this Chapter for even longer than the pair of us have served it, Anzo. Those Chapters who refused to

come to Umidia's aid because of our presence did not do so because of our actions or those of any who currently wear the crimson and sport the crossed blades.' Kranon pointed to his pauldron, pristine in comparison to Riegler's tarnished insignia. 'They shunned us because of millennia of transgressions and deviation. We claim to serve the Emperor and the Golden Throne with our words but do our deeds match that oath?'

Riegler remained silent.

'How often have *we* refused to come to the aid of other Chapters because of some perceived historical slight? How many times have we abandoned entire worlds and systems to their fates because we chose to pursue our own agenda instead? How many times have we flirted with heresy and sedition?'

'You go too far, Sevarion,' Riegler said, his hand slowly reaching for the hilt of his sword.

'Do I? That blade I see you going to draw, where did you get it from, Anzo? Whose corpse did you steal it from?'

Riegler was aware that Kranon already knew the answer. He had been present when the Scout captain slew an Emperor's Children champion in single combat decades before and took the black blade as a trophy. Riegler was about to retort when Kranon spoke again.

'Is it just me or has the temperature dropped suddenly?' Kranon asked, his breath coming out in a plume of white. Fronds of frost dappled his armour, rapidly expanding across every inch of ceramite. Riegler drew the sword his hand had been lingering over. Kranon did likewise with his own blade.

Cautiously rounding the bend in the corridor, both Space Marines halted in disbelief. Where they had expected to find the entrance to the ship's library, and ultimately Chief Librarian Mannon, they instead found their way barred.

By books. Floor to ceiling books.

They had been stacked like bricks, each individual tome overlapping two others, and arranged spine out, in rows of equal thickness, to form a solid barrier between the library's sole entrance and the rest of the ship. Kranon approached the book wall with trepidation.

'Who could have done this?' he said, running a gauntleted hand along the sides of archaic leather-bound volumes. He withdrew one – *The Myth*

of Time by Inquisitor Vernais Auberon – and examined it. Just as he was about to open the book to check inside it, it was snatched away from him by some unseen hand, flying back towards the gap Kranon had created in the wall. Faster than the spectral force, Riegler swiped with his sword, slicing the book in half.

‘Perhaps *what* could have done this,’ Riegler said, bemused.

Both Space Marines looked on as the two halves of the ruined book were lifted from the floor and carefully slotted back into place. Further rumination was curtailed by a shift in the pitch of the ship’s engines and rumbling vibrations which shook the deck and bulkheads.

‘We’re translating into the warp,’ Kranon said. ‘But there was no announcement or warning klaxon.’

‘We were hours away from reaching the Mandeville point too,’ Riegler said. ‘Something’s happened.’

The two captains stood in the chilly corridor, torn between investigating the mysterious heap of books or returning above decks to find out what had caused the *Red Honour* to enter the warp in such a hurry. Once the wave of nausea that accompanied all shifts from real space into the immaterium had subsided, that decision was made for them.

‘Captain Kranon. The Chapter Master requests your presence in the Sword Hall,’ said Sergeant Kohl, rounding the corner. He looked first to the two captains, then at the unnatural stack of books behind them. He looked fit to burst with inquisitiveness but duty held his tongue.

‘Then he could have simply voxed me,’ Kranon said to Kohl over the vox, partly to prove a point, partly to test that it was still working in light of the recent bizarre turn of events.

‘His orders were that I was to find you personally and escort you to the Sword Hall. You too, Sergeant... I mean Captain Riegler.’

‘Why does he need to see us both?’ Riegler asked, ignoring the ambiguity in Kohl’s use of the word ‘escort’.

‘Because Chapter Master Kranon has called a Sword Meet.’

FOURTEEN

Judged

Whereas Riegler's first Sword Meet had been a relatively sombre affair, punctuated only by the outrage of being snubbed by fellow Space Marine Chapters, his second was an altogether different experience.

Even before Kohl had led the two captains into the Sword Hall, Riegler and Kranon could hear the hubbub and cries of consternation coming from within. Ragnald and Dzarton in particular were most vociferous about the impromptu warp translation, and when Riegler passed through the vast doors he found that the Third and Fourth Company captains were having to be separated from the Chapter Master by Draznicht and Barkman.

Though none were allowed a place around the council table, various brothers of the companies aboard the *Red Honour* stood at the rail overlooking it, adding their voices in support of their own captains.

Seeing that Kohl had carried out his order, Chapter Master Kranon raised his voice. 'I call this Sword Meet to order. All will have their chance to be heard at council and all will have their chance to vote on the matter before us.'

Reluctantly, and with more than a little coaxing from Draznicht and Barkman, Ragnald and Dzarton took their places at the table. Unusually, Mannon was down at the same level as the captains and as the Sword Council members took their places he drew alongside the Chapter Master and began whispering in his ear, just as he had done in the final moments on Umidia. Riegler and the younger Kranon brother descended the steps and as the Scout captain passed the Chief Librarian, Mannon broke away from speaking to the Chapter Master.

‘You will know the right thing to do when the time comes,’ he said cryptically to Riegler in a hushed tone. Riegler looked quizzical but showed his acknowledgement nonetheless. The Librarian took up a position at the rail above while Riegler found his way to the end of the table. The Scout captain removed the sword and scabbard from his waist, hesitantly placing the dark blade on the council table, Sevarion’s harsh words still fresh in his mind.

When all of the other captains had placed their blades upon the table an anticipative hush descended over the hall.

‘Recent events sit heavily on us all, brothers,’ Chapter Master Kranon began, his baritone lending the words added gravitas. ‘Though none of us dare openly admit it, the Crimson Sabres have fallen prey to an insidious trick of the Ruinous Powers, our once noble fraternity laid low by—’

‘Why in the Emperor’s name did you order the fleet into the warp?’ interrupted Dzarton, breaking with Chapter protocol. ‘We were not under attack and were making good progress to the Mandeville point.’

Draznicht snarled audibly at the Fourth Company captain’s temerity and looked ready to explode in rage, but the Chapter Master raised a hand to stay the First Captain’s tongue.

‘Please, Eli. Allow me to continue and all will become clear.’

Dzarton scoffed and turned to mutter to Ragnald and Shergon beside him.

‘...laid low by the scheming of a daemon,’ Kranon continued from where he been cut off. ‘Innocent lives have been snuffed out by our hands yet none of their blood is upon us. Those who died were cut down as surely as if the daemon itself had pulled the trigger or wielded the sword.’

Now it was Captain Kranon who scoffed, raising baleful stares from several of his peers.

‘But through the slaughter came redemption. The servants of the daemon were punished for their treachery, their lives forfeit to pay for those so callously slain as a result of their vile machinations, and their master banished thanks to the actions of Chief Librarian Mannon and Captain Riegler.’

Just as they had done on Umidia, cheers and applause rang out. Barkman and Draznicht were particularly enthusiastic in their endorsement.

‘Though the deaths of the Umidian population were unavoidable, that does not make them any less regrettable,’ Kranon said once the noise had given way. ‘Up until now we have chosen to suffer in silence as a Chapter, to internalise our shame and—’

‘Will you ever get to the bloody point?’ yelled Dzarton. ‘Why did you order us into the warp?’

Chapter Master Kranon didn’t miss a beat. ‘The voices,’ he said simply.

Abject silence followed for many seconds after. Riegler looked around at the faces of his fellow captains and the brothers crowded around the rail above. They all knew what the Chapter Master meant. Even Sevarion bore a look of pained acknowledgment.

‘You know exactly what I speak of, all of you,’ the Chapter Master said in a tone and level as if he was speaking to a small group of close friends. ‘They call us butchers and murderers, constantly questioning why we did what we did, never accepting our answers, never listening to reason. Whenever we close our eyes, they send us visions to remind us of the acts we unwillingly performed, of the misguided destruction of their towns, their villages. Their lives.’

The Crimson Sabres were rapt.

‘But they are no longer content just to haunt our sleep or confine their torment to our minds. Their rage and grief is now manifesting in physical form, taking the lives of our Chapter serfs in exchange for their own and plaguing our waking hours with their spectral activity. How many among you have thought you had taken leave of your senses at misplacing a weapon or seeing objects moving on their own?’

An embarrassed mumble rippled around the Sword Hall.

‘That is why we have entered the warp, Eli. Our shame occurred on Umidia. The lives we were forced to take were claimed on Umidia. Chief Librarian Mannon believes that if we put distance between ourselves and the planet then our torture will cease and the voices of the dead will be hushed. If I had had the time to tell you all then I would, but when Brother Mannon came to me with his theory I had to act. For the good of the Chapter.’

Despite his misgivings, Riegler could not help but be swayed by the Chapter Master’s words. He had experienced everything that Kranon had just detailed and, as soon as he had gleaned the truth about what was

transpiring on Umidia, had acted unilaterally without taking time to let the rest of the Chapter know. As for the Chapter serfs dying at the hands of the spectres that seemed to have attached themselves to the Crimson Sabres? Not an hour before, he had seen one snatch a book from the hands of a Space Marine like it was a plaything being snatched from the grip of a babe-in-arms. Then he remembered the little girl back on the planet and felt like he had been struck in the gut.

‘But you chose to call this Sword Meet,’ said Urzoz of Ninth Company. ‘Isn’t its purpose to explain your actions?’

The Chapter Master looked irked at Urzoz’s choice of words. His tone became darker. ‘You misunderstand me, captain. All that I have said thus far is merely context. The purpose of this Sword Meet is not to explain my actions. It is to take action.’

‘What further action is there to be taken?’ asked Ragnald. ‘If we are beyond the reach of the vengeance of the Umidians then all that is left is for us to return to Drogsh and begin rebuilding the reputation of the Chapter.’

‘Oh, I fully intend to rebuild the Chapter’s reputation, starting from within.’ Chapter Master Kranon looked down the council table. ‘Captain Kiestor, what is the greatest shame a Crimson Sabre can bring upon his brothers, even greater than the unwitting taking of an innocent life?’

The captain of Seventh didn’t even have to think about his answer. ‘Cowardice. To abandon your brothers in the theatre of war.’

‘Cowardice. Very good, Captain Kiestor.’ Kranon looked to the next captain. ‘Captain Barkman. Did you see any evidence of cowardice during the campaign on Umidia? Did any of your brothers abandon you in the theatre of war?’

Like Kiestor, Barkman did not need to think about his answer. ‘Yes, Chapter Master. Captain Kranon. For three whole days Sixth Company tried to raise him on the vox to assist us in our hunt for the daemon and for three whole days he ignored us.’

‘The daemon’s magicks interfered with the vox!’ Captain Kranon called out, unconvincingly. ‘The daemon’s magicks interfered with the vox,’ he repeated, quietly and less certain this time, fully undoing the lie.

‘You helped massacre innocent civilians, destroyed the evidence and then fled to the distant reaches of the planet and hid,’ the elder Kranon

said with an accusing glare. ‘You didn’t even try to make amends. You didn’t lift a single finger to make right the situation and atone for your misdeeds.’

‘How does the unnecessary slaughter of millions more atone for my misdeeds?’ Sevarion was angry and defensive now.

‘How does destroying the evidence of your crime and fleeing?’

‘It wasn’t like that!’

Every pair of eyes in the room turned to stare at Riegler, who hadn’t yet realised he had spoken out loud.

‘So how was it, Captain Riegler?’ the Chapter Master asked. ‘You also burned the corpses of the civilians you had slain, but did so to prevent further tarnish to the Crimson Sabres name, if Chief Librarian Mannon is to be believed.’

‘That’s right but—’

‘And after returning to action on the planet, did you not resolve to hunt down the architect of the treachery and restore honour to the Chapter?’

‘I did, Chapter Master, but—’

‘And did you also try to raise Captain Kranon over the vox to request his assistance in pursuing the daemon?’

The Chapter Master had questioned Riegler into a corner. His options were binary. Truth or lie. ‘Yes,’ he said, lowering his eyes to look at the surface of the council table.

‘Is this how it’s going to be?’ said the Second Company captain with a disbelieving smile. ‘A trial? My guilt or innocence to be determined by a jury of my peers?’

‘It seems it is your turn to misunderstand me, captain,’ said the elder Kranon brother. ‘Your trial was back on Umidia, your inaction on the field of battle the sole piece of evidence offered by the prosecution. Your defence has been found wanting so all that remains is for the verdict to be delivered. I put it to the council: is Captain Kranon of the Second Company guilty of cowardice and should he face censure for his transgression? An aye or nay from each of you. There are to be no abstentions.’

Disbelief erupted from several of the captains, support from others. Riegler simply stared at the smooth stone surface of the table, still coming to terms with having helped condemn his friend.

‘The matter is no longer open for debate,’ the Chapter Master said, slamming his fist on the table. ‘We make our decision now. Captain Draznicht, how do you vote?’

‘Aye,’ said the First Captain without hesitation, once the outcry had abated.

‘Captain Kranon?’

‘This is a farce! We spilled innocent blood and no matter what he tells you, it is on our hands,’ Sevarion said to the gallery.

‘You know the protocol as well as anybody, captain. Aye or nay?’

‘Nay, of course,’ spat the younger Kranon brother.

‘Ragnald?’

‘Nay.’

‘Dzarton?’

‘Nay,’ he said, before adding, ‘Do not take us down this path, Sevastus.’

‘Shergon?’ the Chapter Master asked, ignoring Dzarton.

‘Aye.’

‘Barkman?’

‘Aye.’

‘Kiestor?’

‘Aye.’

‘Nthicrar?’

‘Nay,’ said the Eighth Company captain, breaking the silence he had held since the commencement of the Sword Meet.

‘Urzoz?’

Urzoz hesitated for a moment before answering. ‘Nay.’

It was five ‘nays’ against four ‘ayes’. If Riegler voted against censure then the matter would be at an end but he would look weak and duplicitous in the eyes of the other captains after his statement against the Second Company captain. If he voted for censure then the ballot would be tied, forcing Sevarion’s brother to make the casting vote. At the very worst his punishment would be demotion, likely back down to the rank of sergeant or battle-brother should a subsequent vote go badly for him.

‘Riegler?’ asked the Chapter Master.

The Scout captain said nothing, still considering the permutations.

‘Your answer, captain,’ said Sevastus Kranon impatiently. Riegler looked up at where Mannon was standing at the rail. The Chief Librarian

smiled gently and nodded his head.

‘Aye,’ Riegler said eventually.

The next few moments were a blur. Without even pausing to remind the Sword Council and the assembled battle-brothers of the tally, or to announce that he would be making the casting vote, Chapter Master Kranon merely said, ‘Aye. Sergeant Kohl. Sergeant Chyre. Remove Captain Kranon to the cells where he will remain until we return to Drogsh.’

Riegler was vaguely aware of Urzoz moving to put his body in the way of Dzarton and Ragnald, who were trying to bar the two sergeants’ passage to their fellow captain. Nthicrar joined him and together they pushed back the Third and Fourth Company captains while Kohl and Chyre carried out their order. Sevarion, for his part, put up no resistance and with the two First Company sergeants flanking him he went along quietly. As he ascended the stairs, the former captain of Second turned to face Riegler, his face asking a single question.

Why?

Then he was gone, swallowed by the throng of crimson-armoured Space Marines still arguing over the verdict and punishment.

It was at that moment Anzo Riegler was granted clarity.

The Chapter Master knew before he even called the Sword Meet how the vote would go. Riegler would have naturally voted against censure and the motion would not have carried, so Kranon put the Scout captain in a position where he could have done nothing but condemn the Chapter Master’s younger brother, only to then look foolish if he voted nay. Second Company had not just been stationed on the *Pride of Rhoghon* for political reasons; it had been put there for practical ones too. With ship-to-ship vox communication impossible within the warp, it would be many months before Captain Kranon’s men found out that their captain had been replaced. If Sevastus Kranon had played the game right, they would be none the wiser regarding the reason for his removal. It was no coincidence that the companies of the other four captains who had voted against censure were also allocated to ships of the fleet other than the *Red Honour*.

Snapped out his daze, Riegler looked first to the Chapter Master and Draznicht, both of whom nodded and smiled approvingly at him, then to Mannon. Of the Chief Librarian and his distinctive blue armour, there was

no sign. In his place stood Petronaias, surreptitiously gesturing for Riegler to leave the hall.

Almost forgetting to retrieve his sword, the Scout captain barged his way past the thirty or more brothers who remained arguing in the Sword Hall and slipped out into the corridor beyond.

Petronaias had slunk back into an alcove several metres away from the entrance to the hall and had concealed himself so well that his captain did not see him at first. Amidst the tumult of emotions Riegler was feeling, pride was added to the mix.

‘What is it, Petronaias?’ Riegler said, after making certain nobody could see them.

‘It’s Aronsh, captain.’ The novice looked to the ground, then back at Riegler. ‘We’ve found him.’

FIFTEEN

Remember

‘No spirit did this.’

Riegler gripped the corpse of Aronsh under the chin and turned his head from side to side, numerous welts and bruises illuminated by the lumes high up in the ceiling of the training chamber.

‘It was Chyre,’ Sylas spat through gritted teeth. ‘For all of the First Captain’s talk of making amends, he still let his attack dog loose on Aronsh.’

Riegler examined the dead Scout’s wounds more intently. A dark purple mark here, roughly the same size as a power armoured fist; a slash, the flesh serrated where it had been parted, just like a cut from a Space Marine combat knife. Draznicht’s words echoed around the Scout captain’s mind: ‘Brother Chyre will set right the situation once we are back aboard the flagship, of that you have my word.’

‘Where did you find him?’ Riegler asked.

‘His body was stuffed behind a stack of ammunition crates on level B712/r. His bones were snapped postmortem and the corpse contorted to fit in a small space, but Brother Chyre did not do a very thorough job of concealing poor Aronsh’s body.’

Riegler and the four Scouts turned to face the newcomer, though the captain had already identified the speaker as Chief Librarian Mannon from his voice. The novices of Alpha Squad looked ill at ease. To be in the presence of one touched by the warp was never easy, doubly so when they had just used their gift to confirm your darkest suspicions.

‘You know for certain it was Chyre? Your warpsight has shown you as much?’ Riegler asked.

‘You already know that Chyre murdered your boy, captain,’ Mannon said, his usual warmth when speaking with Riegler not evident. ‘You knew the instant Petronaias told you up on the hangar deck that he was missing. All you needed was the proof, though sadly all this corpse proves is that Aronsh is dead, not who killed him.’

Riegler felt the same unease as his squad. There was something about Mannon’s manner that was different somehow, something that Riegler did not like.

‘I have been trying to speak with you ever since we returned from Umidia, Brother-Librarian. This is not an isolated incident. The Chapter is undergoing changes, grave changes. What we did on Umidia is not without consequence and I fear for the future.’ Riegler approached his old friend and looked him in the eyes. Mannon was impassive.

‘All in good time, captain,’ Mannon said, breaking eye contact. ‘We shall have plenty of time to discuss the future of the Chapter, you and I, for we are both key players, though you may not know it just yet. For now, I wish to take you up on your offer.’

‘My offer?’ Riegler said. ‘I do not recall making any offer.’

‘Come, captain. The trauma of murdering so many innocents can’t have addled your memory to that degree. Just before you were ascended to the captaincy, we discussed duelling like we used to in the old days. Well, here am I and this is a training chamber.’

Alpha Squad bristled. Mannon’s words, his tone, were cold and callous.

‘This may be the correct place but it is hardly the time for such matters.’ Riegler gestured at his charges. ‘We have lost a brother today, seemingly at the hands of one of our own. Our practice duel can wait. Right now my duty is to my Scouts, to keep them safe and to ensure that what happened to Aronsh is not repeated.’ He turned away from the Chief Librarian and back to the corpse lying in violent repose at the side of the chamber.

‘Your Scouts should watch us, captain. These are dangerous times to be a Crimson Sabre and they might learn from our example.’

Riegler turned his attention back to the blue-armoured figure.

‘Please, Anzo.’ The warmth and familiarity that had been absent from Mannon’s speech returned.

‘Very well,’ said Riegler reluctantly. ‘Though you will face me with a blade in your hand, not that thing.’ The Scout captain pointed to the mace

slung from the psyker's waist.

‘Of course,’ said Mannon, unslinging the blunt implement from his waist and tossing it aside. ‘Perhaps you might do me the honour of allowing me to use your blade for this duel?’

Riegler reached down and drew the black sword that had been sheathed at his hip since his rotation back down to Umidia. He considered it for a moment before presenting it to the Chief Librarian, pommel first. ‘Very well.’

Riegler looked around the chamber, deciding which of his Scouts’ weapons he would commandeer. ‘Trebereck,’ he said eventually. ‘Your blade, please. It has been too long since I wielded a traditional Drogshian blade and I feel it will be quite the test for the Chief Librarian here.’

Sombrely, the young Scout drew his weapon and presented it to his captain before retreating out of the designated duelling area and joining his squad mates on the sidelines.

‘First blood?’ Riegler asked, taking his mark.

On the opposite side of the circle, Mannon inspected the dark blade of his borrowed weapon, his visage half fascinated, half horrified. ‘If you insist,’ he said, not really paying attention. Without looking up at his opponent, he too took his mark.

‘Ready?’ Riegler asked.

‘Never more so,’ replied Mannon, finally deigning to look at the Scout captain.

‘Then let us duel.’

What happened next was brutal, bloody and over before Riegler realised what was happening.

A dark blur passed before him and Riegler felt warmth on his cheek from where the keen edge of the loaned weapon struck him. He brought up Trebereck’s sword to counter the next blow but Mannon altered his angle at the very last moment, the black metal gliding past the ineffective Drogshian steel and biting deep into the meat of Riegler’s calf. He dropped to one knee, futilely holding his weapon at an angle across him in an attempt to parry any blow aimed at his head. But, stunned and off balance, the next blow to hit him came not from a blade but from a power-armoured boot striking him squarely in the chest, shattering his ribcage and sending him sprawling breathlessly onto his back.

Mannon's final act of the duel was to raise Riegler's looted sword high above his head, gripped in both hands, before bringing it down forcefully into the Scout captain's shoulder. Riegler cried out in pain, pinned tightly to the deck. From the sides of the duelling circle he could make out the rest of Alpha Squad drawing weapons and preparing to engage what purported to be Chief Librarian Mannon.

'No. Stay back,' Riegler coughed weakly. 'He's too dangerous.'

The four Scouts stopped dead, weapons still gripped tightly.

'At least you can still exercise good judgement even in your diminished state, captain,' Mannon scoffed. He towered over the prone Scout captain. 'Just as you did at the Sword Meet by helping to condemn the unfortunate Captain Kranon. You should remember that in the months and years to come, Riegler. When everything begins to unravel and you and your brothers become the very things you despise.'

'I don't... I don't understand,' Riegler gasped through bloodied lips.

'Your kind very rarely does,' said Mannon. 'You were right about the Chapter undergoing change, captain, but the Crimson Sabres are already committed to that path. Nothing you or anybody else can do will alter that. What you need to ask yourself is: who set them on that path?'

Riegler went cold, not through loss of blood but in pure unadulterated dread. 'No...'

'Oh yes, captain. Who committed the Crimson Sabres to venturing to Umidia? Who ensured that the entire Chapter deployed planetside? Who chose to cover up the atrocities rather than confront them head on and prevent the rest of his brothers from spilling innocent blood?'

'No. It wasn't like that. We were tricked...'

'And who ensured that his only ally, his only true ally among the Crimson Sabres ranks, now rots in a cell?'

'You!' cried Riegler, some semblance of clarity returning to him. 'You did this. Not me!'

Mannon laughed a laugh that was not his own. 'I was merely the catalyst, "brother". You exercised free will in every poor decision you made, something else you should remember years from now when you look back and wonder where it all went wrong for you and the rest of your Chapter.'

‘You’re wrong.’ It was Riegler’s turn to laugh, a moist, blood-flecked noise that terminated in a cough. ‘We are not locked onto this path. We are still masters of our own fate. As soon as I share the truth about you with the rest of the Chapter, they will come to their senses and our honour will be restored.’

‘You wouldn’t live long enough to utter the words,’ said Mannon, his voice assuming a dark sincerity. ‘Your usefulness to the Crimson Sabres is at an end. Politically you have no currency left to spend and as a fighting force a lone captain and four unproven children are less than worthless under the new order. But you can still be of use to me, Riegler.’

Whatever was wearing the Chief Librarian’s form knelt down close to the wounded Scout captain.

‘You alone know that change is coming and that knowledge is your power. Embrace it, welcome it and master it. And when I call upon you for aid, as I no doubt will, remember who it was who opened your eyes. Remember who it was who spared you.’

The thing in blue armour rose from its haunches and without warning wrenched the black sword from where it was embedded in Riegler’s shoulder. The Scout captain cried out once more in pain, his Space Marine physiology clotting the wound before the echoes of his cry had died out in the training chamber.

‘As for you,’ Mannon said, inexplicably addressing the sword, ‘I’ll deal with you in my own time.’ He flung the weapon aside and strode towards the chamber exit, but lingered on the threshold.

‘My gratitude, Captain Riegler,’ he said, in a voice that didn’t belong to him, before disappearing into the corridor.

The four Scouts looked at each other in confusion. They did not recognise the voice Mannon had used but Riegler’s eidetic memory recalled it perfectly. It belonged to Lord Inquisitor Federic Koshyn.

Sylas and Inhoke started in the direction of the doorway to the training chamber. Trebereck and Petronaias went to aid their stricken captain.

‘No. Leave him,’ Riegler said, struggling to sound commanding.

‘Either the Chief Librarian has run mad or he has succumbed to some predator of the warp,’ Sylas said, cocking his shotgun. ‘Either way, his perfidy cannot be allowed to stand.’

‘And a pair of Scouts is a match for whatever Mannon has become?’ Riegler said, helped to his feet by Trebereck and Petronaias. The Scout captain knew exactly what his old friend had become but chose not to share the information with his young charges.

‘Then what do we do?’ asked Inhoke. ‘Nothing?’

‘Far from it,’ said Riegler, limping over to retrieve his sword from where Mannon had thrown it. He had also started to understand the true nature of the blade, something else he most definitely did not want to share with the four Scouts. ‘As much as it pains me to say it, that... thing was right. Change is coming to our Chapter and there is nothing we can do to prevent it.’

‘So we’re going to do exactly as he said and embrace it?’ asked Petronaias.

‘Precisely,’ said Riegler, sheathing the dark blade. ‘But we’ll be doing it on our terms. If we cannot fight it, if we cannot do anything to alter our destiny, then we might as well be the ones to shape it.’

The four Scouts looked to their captain, then to each other, the reality and gravity of their situation dawning on each of them.

‘Then what *do* we do?’ Inhoke repeated.

‘We prepare. The next time they come for us like they did Aronsh, we’ll be ready for them. The only corpses that will be found crammed behind ammo crates will be theirs. This is our home now.’ Riegler gestured around the training chamber. ‘You sleep here and when you are not asleep you train here. You train until you are the very best and then you train still more to improve on that. Do you understand me?’

Four heads nodded in affirmation.

‘Good. Then it starts now.’ Riegler tossed Trebereck’s kukri back to him. He could barely stand but took up his mark in the duelling circle nevertheless. ‘Each of you, come at me in turn. We continue until one of you draws blood, so prepare yourselves for a very long session.’

A determined grin forming on his lips, Riegler spat bloodied phlegm to the floor of the chamber and prepared to become the captain of his own fate.

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Domiciled in the East Midlands, C Z DUNN is the author of the Apocalypse novel *Pandorax*, the Dark Angels novella 'Dark Vengeance' and the audio dramas *Trials of Azrael*, *The Ascension of Balthasar* and *Malediction*, as well as several short stories. Having spent many years in the publishing industry, with a strong leaning towards genre fiction, he is an expert in e-publication, audio production and zombies.



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For Dodger, Bonzo and the Rest

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