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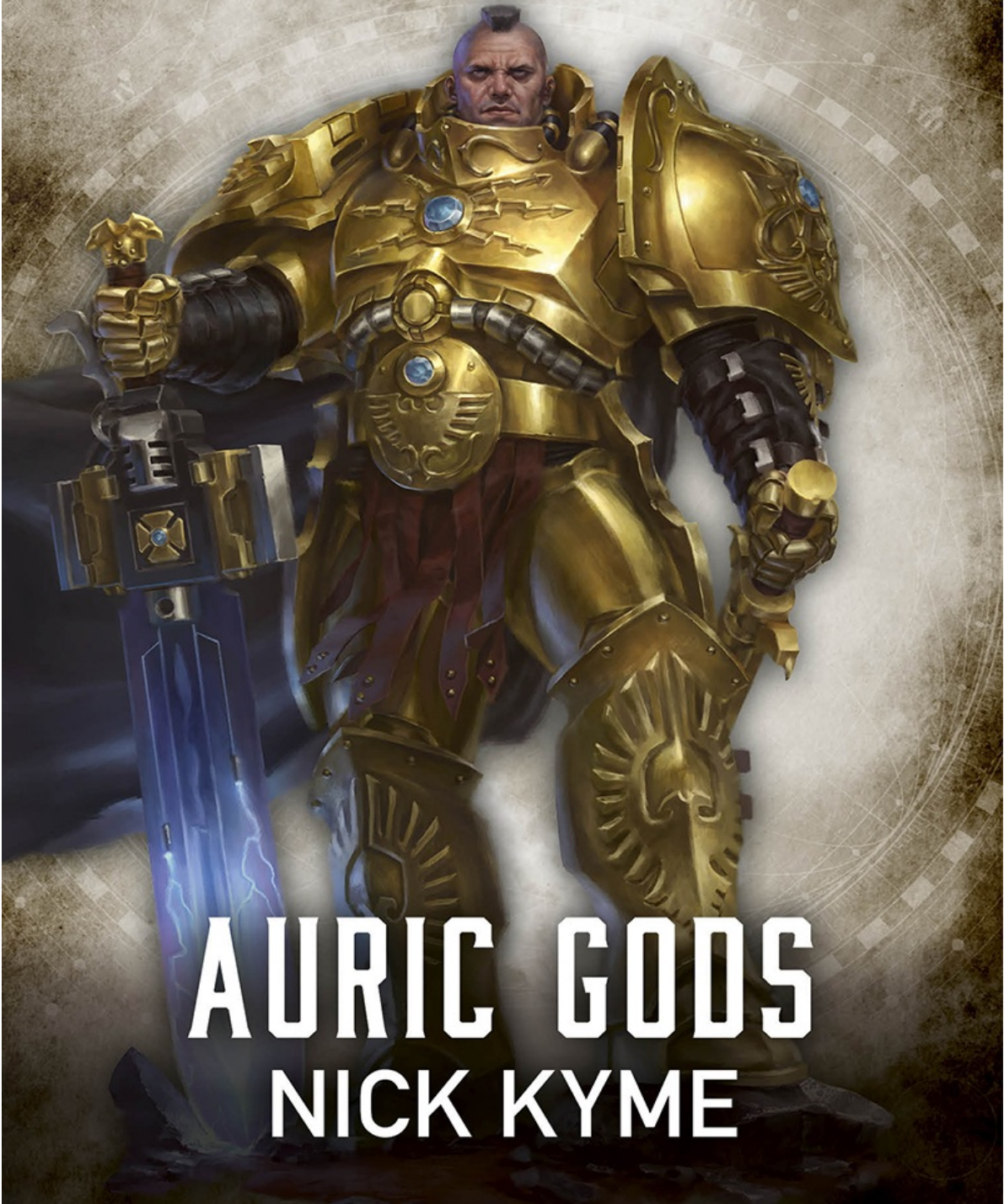
WARHAMMER
40,000



AURIC GODS
NICK KYME

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About the Author

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AURIC GODS

NICK KYME



BLACK LIBRARY



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

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

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

‘Gilded tombs do worms enfold.’

– *The dramaturge Shakespeare*

PROLOGUE

The city glowered. Gaudy lights leered from its ugly silhouette. It seethed. He could feel its jagged countenance boring into his back.

Ezrik was going to die. He had known it ever since he and his sister had boarded the skimmer-craft bound for the ocean rigs.

He and Mythla were twins. Though not identical they did share certain traits, both in kin and kind. Their bond went beyond mere patrimony. So when Ezrik shivered, his thin, pale fingers clutching at his heavy robe, Mythla trembled too. Dark hair rippled beneath her hood. Her grip was firm. She had always been the stronger of the two, her gifts more profound.

‘Hold on, brother,’ she whispered, her words carried away by the wind.

Mythla tugged up the collar of her cloak, trying to ward off the scything cold. Gusts cut across the disused rigging platform like knives of ice, deep enough to find bone. Frost sheathed the mainland, and the banks of looming cloud overhead presaged a heavy snow. Ezrik loved the snow. It had a slow sort of melancholy that appealed to him. But it wasn’t the cold that chilled his sister, or set his teeth to chattering. Ezrik knew their fear came from another place.

From the deep.

Black and fathomless, made darker by the lack of a moon, the sea churned that night. Grey light shone onto the water from humming lumen arrays set around the edge of the rigging platform. It was shaped like a letter ‘C’ with the lamps aimed into the space, which was partially delineated by the sturdy metal decking. Each lamp was directed downwards, their grainy beams converging to a point where four lengths of chain hauled on something concealed beneath the ocean. It was rising steadily.

Four cranes, industrial-grade, heaved at their drowned burden. Ezrik winced as

each ugly link of iron fed through the crane pulleys. Hot pins pierced his brain meat, sending small convulsions through his thin frame. Mythla tensed, her skeleton suddenly taut and rigid. A tiny yelp of pain escaped her lips.

Ezrik had never known Mythla to betray weakness before.

‘Sister...’ he tried to say, but she wasn’t listening. She couldn’t.

Fire raced through Ezrik’s marrow. He no longer felt the cold. He could barely hear the sea. A darkening intruded at the edge of his vision that put him in mind of the black water, as if it had somehow spilled onto his eyes and was slowly swallowing his sight.

It took considerable effort but he glanced at their minders, standing either side of them. He wanted to see if they felt it too. Ever since he was a boy, Ezrik had been good with details. Enhanced perception was a part of his gift. He turned that gift on the man and the woman standing close enough for him to touch. Tough, athletic, they had long storm coats that failed to hide the bonded carapace they wore beneath. Nor did their attire smother the side holsters belted at their hips and the heavy-gauge pistols sat snugly within. Both had Militarum haircuts, close-shaved, and a faded Guard tattoo on the left temple. A much newer mark was etched below the right eye – a solitary candle with a lit flame.

Most interesting of all were their collars. Though ostensibly of dull, grey plasteel, a closer examination revealed circuitry and a tiny diode, almost invisible in the foul conditions, winking... Green-green-green.

An activation rune, Ezrik realised.

He considered trying to reach into the machine, extinguish the rune and see what happened next. He wondered about escape. But then his attention went back to his sister and he knew it was impossible.

Mythla stood less than a foot away. She might as well have been on another continent. Her eyes had turned completely white. Her splayed fingers quivered, as if touched by an electrical current. She shook, slightly at first but with increasing violence.

Mythla took the strain for him. His older sister was trying to bear the pain alone.

They had been careful. They had hidden for years, successfully, swallowed amongst the masses. Hidden from the witch-takers and the Black Ships. But *he* had found them. The wanderer. He said it was providence. He said it was His will. Ezrik believed that ‘His will’ had nothing to do with it, that instead the slumlord to whom they owed their rent and for whom he and his sister had performed certain ‘favours’ over the years had betrayed them.

Ezrik reflected on this poor turn of circumstances as Mythla's skin shrivelled and started to flake, the very essence of her degrading before his eyes. A sudden desire overcame him to tell her what she meant to him, that he loved her, although they had never been close by any conventional assessment. They had bickered, the presence of one an irritant to the other. A side effect of the gift. But they had stayed together, driven by the fear that gripped all outcasts, of being alone with no one to externalise their inner misery upon.

Such was their antipathy that it had been several years since Ezrik and Mythla had touched. To touch meant to share thoughts, to share pain, but as the chain links clacked upwards Ezrik reached out and held Mythla's hand.

White heat flowed, her thoughts subsumed by it. Nothing else remained but the fire. Mythla had been cored out so that the only thing left in her skull was a piece of slowly burning meat. Ezrik smelled it. His sister. Burning.

The chain clacked again, thunderous inside the tortured confines of Ezrik's head.

He looked down, drawn by the sound, a presaging death knell. Fear rushed up in an icy flood as the edge of a dark metal casket breached the surface of the waves. Old, old laughter echoed in his mind. Inhuman, bestial. Ezrik cried out at a sudden hammer blow, though no one had touched him. One of his ribs broke. Then another. Spikes of agony pierced his hand, the one clinging to Mythla's. An immolating statue stood in her place, a ferocious human candle with flesh for wax. Ezrik held on as her fingers broke apart in the heat until, at last, unsupported by his sister, his knees buckled and he fell. Mythla fell too, what was left of her, collapsing into a pillar of ash.

The chains clacked on, the metal casket dangling heavily in mid-air, turning slightly in the wind.

Ezrik lay on his side, the taste of his own blood heady on his tongue, in his nose. His inner ear felt wet and he knew he bled from there too.

Now he was *really* shaking, and though terror resonated through his body like a shock wave, he couldn't tear his sight away from that casket. Every detail spoke to him. The heavily aged metal, the warding sigils carved into its sides worn almost to nothing, the faint Inquisitorial seal...

Through his final agonies, Ezrik became aware of a figure that had crouched down next to him.

'Well done... well done,' said a voice.

Calm, cultured, foreign.

Ezrik hadn't realised he was here. The wanderer.

The chain clacked.

Smooth, faintly perfumed fingers cradled Ezrik's chin. His eyes bulged. His teeth clenched. The carotid artery in his neck stuck out, as taut and thick as a hawser. Ezrik trembled, rage boiling inside as he breathed in his sister's ash.

A tanned face looked down at him.

Every detail rushed by in a blur of fading cognition.

Strong cheekbones; straight, unblemished teeth; skin tightened by repeated rejuvenat treatments.

Fair hair, cut short.

A muscled neck met broad shoulders under robes, under flak armour.

Rings on every finger, shaped like little golden candles with frozen flames.

A tattoo inscribed above the bridge of the nose, the letter 'I' within an eye.

Such belief Ezrik saw in those silver-grey eyes. Such conviction!

The collar around the wanderer's neck winked... Green-green-green.

Ezrik wanted to touch it, to snuff out that light and let whatever lurked in the metal casket have its way. But all he could do was die and he quailed in that moment of revelation, realising why they had been brought here.

His captors needed *proof*.

'Do not yield to despair,' said the wanderer as Ezrik's mind slowly boiled away to smoke. The burning he smelled was his own, but the wanderer smiled in spite of the horror of human immolation. 'Your suffering serves a great purpose.' He wiped away a trickle of blood from his nose as the snow began to fall.

CHAPTER ONE

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Pain was an old friend. Meroved kept this in mind as he worked through the last of the sword and spear disciplines. Thrust, turn, parry, thrust, turn, parry. The regimen was necessarily rigorous, the pace increasing with each rotation, and it showed in the finest sheen of sweat across his body. His muscles burned as he completed the final kata, his spear-tip blurring with sheer ferocity.

Meroved held his stance for several minutes at the end, his skin trembling with the effort, his breath even and controlled to siphon the pain.

He looked into the eyes of the man in the mirror before him. They were weary and the colour of creamy jade. It was not for vanity that the entire north wall of the training arena had been replaced with this silver reflective pane. He studied with it. Form mattered, so did speed and precision.

An old man, at least to Meroved's eyes, looked back. Barefoot, naked but for the short-legged training fatigues he wore. Sweating and weary from exertion. More grey than black in his beard. The skin looser than it had been before, the ink proclaiming his many deeds and many names faded, scars that had soured with age. Even the bionics, the metal that had replaced shattered bone and destroyed tissue, appeared to have lost some of their Martian solidity. Centuries take a toll. He had *lessened*. To mortal eyes he would appear quite different. But their senses were not so attuned, and more awestruck.

'End session,' he said with barely a discernible hint of fatigue, but Meroved heard it. He knew.

The chrono confirmed it. Three-tenths of a second slower.

'I am dying...' he said to himself, and set down the spear. It touched the ground with heavy metallic resonance. 'As all things must. As all things should.'

He turned from his reflection, tired of seeing it and being reminded of

everything he was not, and everything he used to be in his mind's eye, and padded out of the room.

'Zatu...' he said, pulling a black robe from the rack in the arming chamber.

'*My lord.*' Relayed through a vox-speaker built into the wall, the voice of his major-domo sounded cold and metallic.

Meroved cast his eye across the many weapons shackled behind stasis fields.

'I am resuming vigil,' he said.

'*As you wish, my lord.*'

The various armaments took up most of the south wall in a vaulted room that stretched fifty feet above where he was standing. It had taken several centuries to curate those weapons and the other pieces of armour and battle ephemera that he stored alongside them. Many remained unused, for he had his favourites, though they all paled in comparison to the trappings of his former calling.

Except for one. The misericordia was a knife of rare provenance and still rarer craftsmanship. Its beauty and significance eclipsed everything else in Meroved's vast arsenal and yet he had not drawn it from its scabbard in many centuries. Before he had exiled himself.

In any case, in this place he was no longer a spear-bearer. He had left behind the life of auric gods. He had embraced shadows and alchemy.

'I am His eyes,' he reminded himself, and tried very hard to believe that was still enough.

He walked out onto a metal promontory that resembled a gangplank. Below his feet, the chamber plummeted into a deep shaft not unlike a large well. At the end of the gangplank an iron cage hung from a cable bolted to the ceiling, turning slightly with the movement of the air.

Meroved crossed the rest of the promontory and entered the cage.

'Ascend,' he uttered, and the cage began to rise. 'Any items of import, Zatu?' he asked during the ascent.

'*The Vexen Cage has been found, my lord. Awaiting confirmation.*'

A tremor of unease and excitement warred ambivalently within Meroved at this news. His tone betrayed none of this inner conflict, however.

'Where?'

'*Within the city districts.*'

'Active?'

'*Unknown.*'

'Exact location?'

'*Unknown.*'

The cage finished its ascent and came to a halt. The soft glow of another room beckoned through an archway. Meroved heard the low susurrus of the machine within. Its activity hum had become like music.

‘Then let’s rectify that, Zatu.’

‘As you wish, my lord,’ the major-domo replied, welcoming Meroved to the nexus chamber, the dwelling place of the machine.

Zatu bowed as Meroved entered beneath the archway, retreating on the wheeled trackbed he possessed in place of legs. His arm ports were currently vacant, having been slaved to the machine. The light in the vision slit of his helm turned from red to green as he surrendered operation to Meroved.

‘And the other matter, my lord?’

‘Make contact,’ Meroved answered, taking up position in the command throne of the machine and allowing the mechadendrite frame to attach to his back. A twitch of pain recognition registered in his cheek as synaptic pins entered his flesh. ‘Bring her here to me. Events are transpiring more quickly than I anticipated, Zatu. We must be swift to ascertain the nature of the threat.’

‘I can reach the Unsighted for you, my lord, and petition the Aegis.’

Meroved considered it. Much was still unknown.

‘That won’t be necessary. Not yet.’

CHAPTER TWO

The Imperial Palace, Tower of Hegemon, Terra

Few ever ventured this deep. Even amongst the Ten Thousand, those who had done what Syr Cartovandis was about to do could be counted on the fingers of two hands. That would change, of course. Ever since the Rift, everything had changed. The Neverborn had come to Terra. In over ten millennia that had only happened twice. *Twice.*

It was a staggering statistic. And it had meant those who felt it necessary to do so were taking certain measures in the Tower of Hegemon.

Cartovandis counted himself amongst this number.

Of all the enemies that mankind faced, the daemonic, the Neverborn children of the warp itself, were the vilest. In them mankind saw reflected his own selfish desires, his lusts and mortal weakness. He could no more banish them than excise his own moral turpitude. The battle, then, was an endless one, and Cartovandis had made his peace with that long ago.

So as he stood, head bowed, sentinel blade held in an easy grip, and faced what had been brought to join him in the Oblivion Vault, he felt neither fear nor trepidation, nor even anger. He merely desired to improve.

‘Nullify defences,’ he muttered, and heard the numerous cannons with their thrice-blessed ammunition whirr and power down.

A chuckle echoed from across the darkness.

‘Are we to play now?’ it said, two voices laid one upon the other.

Cartovandis did not acknowledge the figure, though he heard the scrape of its binding chains as it fidgeted in a manner not uncommon for its kind. Much like the cannons, these chains were a precaution. To fight and train against the Neverborn was no small matter. The fact that such creatures were kept on Terra at all spoke to the severity of the Oblivion Vault’s purpose.

We must never be found wanting again.

These had been Cartovandis' thoughts as he had entered the chamber.

'Hexagrammic warding... twenty feet,' he said, and heard the entity in the chamber with him hiss in pain as the sigil rings etched into the floor became active and forced it inwards.

A solitary lumen burned overhead and cast the entity in a pale yellow light.

It had a human form, male, wiry and emaciated. Sores and black lesions marked its greying skin, which was waxy and translucent. A few hairs still clutched at a bony scalp. The eyes had become little more than bloody sockets, the mouth reduced to a few rotten stumps of teeth.

Flesh had such impermanence when invested with the daemonic.

Even twenty feet away, Cartovandis could feel its hunger like a pricking at his bare skin. He wore training armour, a light flak chest-piece with metal greaves on his shins and forearms. No auramite, not here. Not for this.

'You're a bold one,' it said. *'Have you come to cut me... Thronesworn?'* It spat a rangy gobbet of phlegm as it uttered the final word. *'Does it thrill you to do it, neutered as I am? Do you like it? Feeling my pain? Does it make you feel strong?'*

Cartovandis moved forwards, so fast he appeared at first to be in one place and then another a second later, almost twenty feet away. The sentinel blade lashed out like a tongue of darting silver, flaring bright azure as it struck its target.

The binding chains sloughed loose, clinking loudly as they hit the ground.

Cartovandis slowly backed away, his eyes never leaving the entity, which smiled at him sickle-wide.

'Oh... Sweet thing... You have unfettered me. I should very much like to taste you now.'

Cartovandis held his sword in front of him at the height of his eyes. The grip, the weight, the thickness of the blade – he knew it as well as he knew his own name. It was a good weapon, a worthy weapon. He wondered if he was still fit to bear it.

'Let us see,' he said.

The daemon came for him fast. A second mouth disgorged from the gaping cavity of the first, drooling saliva and ringed with remora teeth. Cartovandis turned on his heel, and the ugly mouth clapped down on air instead of flesh. He swung wide with the turn, the daemon now behind him, and felt the sentinel blade bite. Hot ichor hissed as it splashed the floor of the Oblivion Vault.

Emperor... I am Your blade.

These words were his mantra.

Cartovandis turned to attack but leapt back before a snapping claw could rip off his face.

Without its chains, the daemon could reshape its form at will. It was not supposed to be free of them.

It made a bone spear out of its hand and thrust for Cartovandis' chest, but the Custodian was faster. He weaved aside, lashing out. The sentinel blade hummed as it cut the air. The arm with the bone spear separated from the daemon's body, dissolving into foul-smelling smoke as it hit the ground.

Guide my hand, oh Master of Mankind...

A thrust brought Cartovandis in close, rancid innards spilling from the daemon's sliced torso. It laughed as the sinewy ropes of its intestines coiled around Cartovandis' sword arm and held it fast.

Bestow unto me Your will and see it enacted...

Undaunted, Cartovandis threw the sentinel blade and caught it in his other hand, hacking down and parting rubbery organs. He sprang aside as flagstones cracked underfoot, the flesh mace the daemon had made of its other hand - shattering them as it struck.

Forsake me not, oh Emperor...

Turning, Cartovandis had been about to change to his favoured hand when a lashing tentacle took him off his feet. The sentinel blade spun from his grasp and skittered across the floor out of reach.

'Delicious...'

Remora teeth bared in anticipation, the daemon lunged for Cartovandis.

For I am Your willing servant...

He closed his eyes, his hand finding the long knife secreted behind his back, before the daemon came apart in a flurry of percussive explosions.

As the sentry guns cycled back down, Cartovandis got to his feet and saw Adio waiting for him at the threshold of the chamber. He was in shadow, but visible enough. His green eyes stood out like emeralds. The dark pallor of his skin took on the reflected glow of the lumen, his bald scalp shining like a halo, his features edged in pale light. It only served to enhance his noble visage. A crusader was Adio, like a knight of Terran myth. He had rejoiced when the captain-general had exercised the right of magisterium and sent the Ten Thousand out amongst the stars.

Unlike Cartovandis, Adio was clad in gold auramite battleplate. His fluted helm was tucked under one arm, the red horsehair plume draped over it. His castellan

axe, Puritus, and storm shield, Bulwark, were strapped to his back.

‘You look as if you’ve been on campaign, brother,’ said Cartovandis by way of greeting, and walked right past him through a hexagonal doorway and out of the chamber.

Banks of lumens flared brightly inside the Oblivion Vault, revealing a hexagrammic dome made up of six-sided armourglass facets, like a diamond spanning six hundred and sixty-six feet. In essence, the vault was a glass cage, a warded and psychically impenetrable one. The door shut behind Cartovandis and an alarum sounded, prompting the sentry guns to fold up into niches set into the ceiling. In their place came an array of incinerators, which slowly panned across the entire chamber, cleansing it with blessed promethium.

Ichor burned, all remaining trace of the unclean with it.

‘I have not long returned to the Throneworld,’ Adio replied, turning his back on the firestorm to follow Cartovandis with his eyes. ‘It’s good to see you too, Syr.’

‘Out protecting priests and politicians, eh?’

‘The Aquilan Shield goes where it is directed,’ Adio replied with good humour. ‘But you already knew that.’

Cartovandis grunted in response. He stopped when he reached one of the ablutionals in a separate antechamber appended to the vault but separate from it.

‘Those chains and sentry guns are active for a reason,’ said Adio, a hint of mild accusation in his voice.

‘And they neuter the foe.’

‘You feel the need to test yourself.’

Cartovandis paused.

‘Don’t you?’ he asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. ‘I did not require or ask for your intervention, Adio,’ he continued, reverently laying down his weapons on the rack provided. He quickly stripped off his armour and other trappings, leaving them for the serf who scurried to attend him, and stepped naked into a metal cubicle. ‘I had the better of it.’

‘Feigning weakness so it lowered its guard. Dangerous.’

‘It’s a dangerous galaxy. Much more so of late.’

A scalding blast of water from a spout above struck Cartovandis across the back of the neck and shoulders, so violent and raucous that he bowed his head.

‘You don’t need to prove anything to me,’ said Adio, once the purification ritual had ended. ‘I apologise if I acted pre-emptively, old friend.’

Cartovandis took a deep breath, inhaling the steam billowing off his body. His skin had reddened. The horrific scar that ran from his left shoulder almost to his

groin looked more pronounced.

‘Meroved saved your life that day at the Gate,’ Adio uttered softly. He, like the rest of the Ten Thousand who fought in that battle, still held the horror of it in his eyes.

‘He did,’ Cartovandis replied, turning to the serf and taking a proffered robe, which he pulled over his body. ‘Hykanatoi, Kataphraktoi and Tharanatoi all fighting together. Quite the sight, with Valoris at our head. Do you remember it?’

Adio’s face darkened.

‘Do not ask me that.’

‘How many perished?’

‘Too many.’

‘*Half*. Almost two thousand of us.’

‘Then it is by the Emperor’s will that you and I lived, and serve still.’

‘Meroved should have let me die.’

‘Perhaps.’

Cartovandis turned to the serf once more. Her head had been shaved, an aquila fashioned into the left temple. She bowed before the Custodian, out of respect and awe.

‘Siris, you need not attend me further today,’ said Cartovandis, not unkindly. ‘You may leave.’

Siris bowed again and scurried quietly away. Cartovandis waited until she was gone.

‘I have not heard His voice since my wounding, Adio.’

‘I know, brother.’

‘It leads me to questions that I am loathe to learn the answers to.’

‘You assume there are answers. If it is His will, you shall hear Him again – but let us speak of this away from this wretched place. I would hear of events in the Palace since I left. In the cerebratory?’

‘I’ll meet you there.’

Cartovandis called out as Adio was leaving.

‘Old friend,’ he said. ‘It is good to see you too.’

Adio nodded, and continued on his way.

CHAPTER THREE

The Imperial Palace, Tower of Hegemon, Terra

The dominion of the Adeptus Custodes on Terra was absolute, yet if there was one place in the populous districts of the Imperial Palace that could be considered the beating heart of their order, then that place was the Tower of Hegemon.

The Throneworld faced many threats, both within and without, and so vast was the urban sprawl that it rivalled many continents in terms of its sheer size and scale. This, together with its pre-eminent status as the founding seat of all mankind, necessitated unique measures of protection. The tower saw all. It knew all. Through a complex array of data-engines and monitoring systems, the Custodians maintained supreme vigilance over the Palace and its confines. All of its security augurs and scrying devices fed into this one nexus, and from here potential threats were analysed and, if necessary, acted against. Defences were tested and retested. Crisis scenarios were devised and implemented. Blood Games were fought.

Pilgrims flocked to Terra in their billions, every man, woman and child desperate for a glimpse – just a *glimpse* – of the Immortal Emperor, or at least the fabled Eternity Gate behind which He resided. Few accomplished this holy quest: most perished before they even set foot on Terra's sacred soil; others died when they encountered the cruel realities of the gangs, the hidden cults and the massive overcrowding. But every day more ships arrived, and every day the population edged closer to a critical mass. Any one of those vessels might harbour a danger to the Golden Throne and so the tower and its incumbents maintained their vigilance.

Yet, although the main function of the tower was to act as the watch station of the Emperor's Custodians, it had other purposes.

Cartovandis had donned his armour to meet Adio in the cerebratory. Though its halls were not given over to violence and battle training, there was a certain ceremony that required observation in the quietude of this place. It had a peaceful air about it. Relics of Terra's lost culture could be found in the art and architecture on display. A forum in many respects, its walls and chambers were adorned with tapestries and portraiture; sculpture and the fossilised remains of ancient beasts inhabited its alcoves. Here a Custodian could seek counsel with his fellows, or debate, if he so chose. Others came for solitude or reflection, for war had never been the principal role of the Ten Thousand.

Of his brotherhood, Cartovandis found few. A warrior of the Solar Watch conversed in hushed tones as the grim spectre of a Custodian of the Dread Host listened intently. The Solar Watch were one of the Hykanatoi's shield hosts, the warrior bands that defined the Adeptus Custodes. They garrisoned the fastness of Sol's borders at Luna, Jupiter and beyond. They had much in kind with the old VII Legion, praetorians and wall watchers in the mould of Dorn's own. To have come from the outer strongholds meant tidings of import. Cartovandis assumed those tidings pertained to a matter necessitating the attention of a ready sword, if the presence of the Dread Host was any barometer. The helmed warrior looked up as Cartovandis passed, his regard forbidding. Judgement burned in the eyes behind those retinal lenses.

Cartovandis had no desire to know their business, but knew it must be serious to provoke such a meeting. He pressed on, and overheard the muttered conversation of a cohort of Emissaries Imperatus debating insights derived through mediation, both pertaining to what was known as the *speculum certus* and the *speculum obscurus*: the first concerning the Emperor's words and His meaning, the second concerning His will.

These too Cartovandis avoided, for they reminded him of the silence he now endured. He had almost died at the Lion's Gate. It was the second time such a desperate battle had been fought in its shadow. The first was over ten thousand years ago; the second, the one at which Cartovandis had stared death in the face, had taken place scarcely more than a century past. Daemons had come to Terra and he, like so many of the Ten Thousand, had taken up arms against them. A Legion still in mourning had mustered for the first time in millennia and cast back the hellspawn of Old Night. It had left Cartovandis with grievous hurts, and so close to death that he felt it still, some one hundred years or so later. Meroved had intervened and turned the hand of fate aside, sparing Cartovandis from his doom but condemning him to this misery instead. The silence had followed not

long after. He had feared it meant the Emperor's death but the Sanctum Imperialis had not been breached. The Master of Mankind endured, enthroned everlasting, His voice denied to Cartovandis.

Despite the pain of his exile, he knew he owed Meroved a debt. Though as the venerable shield-captain had left the Throneworld soon after, together with his rank, his armour and all the trappings that made him a Custodian, Cartovandis doubted it would ever be repaid. Meroved had slipped into obscurity, his watch ended as his body surrendered to the rigours of duty at last.

‘Syr...’

A voice that was not the Emperor's drew Cartovandis from the bleak reverie. Adio smiled warmly across the softly lit expanse of a statue-lined gallery rendered in umber stone.

‘I had thought you might not come,’ Adio said as he approached, and gestured to a semicircle of stone benches.

‘I almost didn't,’ said Cartovandis, following Adio to where they both sat down.

‘You prefer the violent solitude of the lower depths then?’

‘There is no shame in preparation.’

‘True, and yet you refuse to leave Terra and join your brothers out amongst the stars. What is it, I wonder, that you are preparing for then, Syr?’

It was asked honestly, without agenda, though Cartovandis felt the bite of the question like it was an accusation.

‘Our place is here, Adio, by the Throne, by His side.’

‘And can we not serve Him still by venturing beyond our own borders?’ Adio countered. ‘Should we let His enemies come here, to our sovereign earth, or would you seek them out and kill them before they have even glimpsed at Terra's light? The galaxy has changed, Syr. Nothing is as it once was.’

‘We remain as we were, as we are. Our role unchanged.’

Adio gave a short, sad laugh. ‘Would that it were true. We can no longer linger here in His gilded tomb, no more than worms creeping through darkened hollows.’

‘It is no tomb!’

‘It is decay and it is decrepitude. I know your belief, Syr Cartovandis. It is not as unpopular amongst our order as you might think.’

‘Are the tongues of the Ten Thousand made bolder the farther they venture from the Throneworld?’

‘Listen, Syr. You can hear it in these very halls. If Lord Guilliman can return

from the brink of dissolution... then why not Him? I know you think it.

‘You say nothing has changed. *All* of it has changed. Long past are the days when we were His confidants, His counsellors, when we shared His wisdom and offered our own meagre insights in return. We were an ideal before He made His lesser creations. Instead we are forced to derive scraps of meaning from the Emissaries Imperatus. I say we are deaf, Syr. I would not also be blind. Unlike you, however, I believe this is the state of things and this will not change. So, we must.’

Cartovandis shook his head, unconvinced.

‘Soldiers over companions, over protectors, is that it? We renege on one oath to embrace another? His blood is our blood. You forget, Adio, I served at His side, amongst the Companions. I felt it, His will, His desire to rise up from the Throne and command the stars anew.

‘The son is reborn, why not the father? Blood will out, blood will bring Him back to us and lift Him from out of this torpor.’

‘You speak of resurrection, of a second coming, Syr.’

‘I speak of revival, of waking from a deathly slumber. The Emperor is Terra, and Terra is the Emperor. The blood-red tear that glows above our heads, Adio, it represents a wound. The Neverborn trod here... *here*, brother, on this very soil. Their taint extends beyond the physical. It is a malaise of the spirit. Ever since the Lion’s Gate I have not heard His voice. Only silence remains.’

Adio’s expression darkened. ‘I cannot subscribe to this, Syr. The Emperor is absolute. He is all. He is eternal. He is wounded, yes, but it is from a blow struck ten thousand years ago. Few remember it as we do, but it is still the truth. No divine vessel will see this undone. No blood of His can heal it.’ He frowned, suddenly pained. ‘The silence is torturing you, Syr. It is merely His will, and you must accept it.’

‘I cannot,’ said Cartovandis.

Adio sighed, and put a hand on Cartovandis’ shoulder.

‘Then I am sorry, old friend. It is a heavy burden. But do not seek His voice in that place, in the Oblivion Vault. You will not find it in shadow or the gibbering of daemons.’

‘I will not find it beyond the Throneworld either.’

‘Do not be so sure.’

Cartovandis smiled, shrugging off his melancholy like an ill-fitting cloak. ‘Have no concern for me, Adio. I do not seek destructive ends. I am merely a sword unsheathed that wishes to remain sharp.’

‘Those depths have a way of holding on to a man, and dragging upon him. Do not leave a piece of yourself in that cage, Syr, that’s all I’m asking. By severing their chains you unknowingly forge your own. Do not underestimate the Neverborn.’

Cartovandis raised a placatory hand. ‘I heed you, Adio. I acknowledge I was reckless, and vow to be more mindful. There. Does that set your mind at ease?’

Adio raised an eyebrow, suggesting it did not.

Cartovandis gave a dark laugh, full of grim humour. ‘It could be worse. There are direr hollows beneath the Palace than the Oblivion Vault. And terrors more fell than daemons. You know of what I speak, and the one who keeps them. How long has it been, Adio?’

Adio fell silent, his expression one of inner turmoil.

‘How long since you last spoke to your brother?’

CHAPTER FOUR

The Imperial Palace, The Dark Cells, Terra

Even the echo of his steps felt wrong. At first they would reverberate in a seemingly endless refrain, only to cease abruptly and fall still and heavy like footfalls in a sound-deadened room.

Varogalant ignored it. Claspig Vigilance to his chest, like a standard-bearer drawing strength from the colours of his regiment, he maintained his watch. He passed another of his order, the warrior lost momentarily to the creeping shadows, his sable-black armour blending with the dark.

Varogalant nodded once, solemn, and saw the gesture returned. No words were exchanged. Few words were ever spoken in this place. But *listen*. Oh, yes, they would all listen. Silence prevailed at first, but only at first. Then the half-heard voices would drift through the iron-grey corridors in languages older than mankind itself. Try to attend, to fathom the nature of the imparted message, and the silence would fall again like a dolorous veil. Deafening, absolute... until the voices returned, at the barest edge of hearing. Lesser men would have been driven to madness.

The voices belonged to the eldritch creatures, to the horrors and grotesques, to the macabre and the profane. Not all had flesh, not all were truly alive, but every wretched thing incarcerated behind the wards and santic circles, the rune-locked gates, the binding chains, the null cages and obviation charms possessed *anima*.

Varogalant could feel it trying to worm in, to unpick the mental fastness he had raised around his mind. Every cell and oubliette held an abomination, a thing so terrible that it could not be killed or destroyed – either because no known method of annihilation had been found or because it was unknown if the very act of dissolution would unleash a greater calamity.

Remnants of Old Night, when the galaxy was swallowed by darkness and

humanity stood alone, ignorant and afraid, these things went beyond evil and only the Dark Cells could keep them. Here, where menace as thick as blood lay on the air, even the warders, the grim-faced Shadowkeepers, felt unease.

Varogalant strode on, ignoring the wailing, the whispered promises and sanity-eroding imprecations. The light maintained a constant struggle against the dark down here, the sodium braziers flickering weakly and barely holding back the encroaching shadow. Mechanicus adepts, the greatest Martian minds, had tried to engineer lumens capable of cutting through the darkness but no power augment or fuel source could touch it. Even arcane methods of illumination had been found wanting, though they fared better than any technological solution. The darkness reigned, its dominion almost absolute.

Varogalant kept his eyes open, disavowing the half-glimpsed phantasms at the edge of sight. His nerves felt exposed, raw, as if the slightest touch would send them into spasm. Here, even the Custodians gave pause.

Marshalling his resolve, Varogalant came upon the chamber he sought. Much like the others, the chamber had a marking on the wall next to it, a simple numeric code that belied the nature of what it harboured. Its door stood open, a reminder of his failure. The gloom inside beckoned but he refused it. Even in absence, the thing that had once been held here had a presence. Like an unquiet spirit, it seemed to haunt the room, which was scarcely ten feet across and the same deep. The ceiling was high enough to admit the Custodian should he choose to enter. He did not. A void held him back, a space both unoccupied and occupied at the same time.

Poised at the threshold, Varogalant lowered Vigilance and pointed the guardian spear's scythe-like blade towards the dingy cell, as if he could impale the memory of what it had contained. He closed his eyes... and was assailed by visions.

A great leviathan, slowly uncoiling from a heady brume, its malice suffocating...

A skeletal effigy, its horns reaching into the night and the screams of sacrifices heavy on blood-misted air...

A cage of lightning, a cruciform figure silhouetted within, the forks tearing slits in reality...

When he opened his eyes again, he had fallen to one knee. His heart pounded, breath sawed through his mouth. Varogalant gripped the haft of Vigilance and used it to push himself back up. It anchored him for long enough that he threw off the insidious darkness.

Then he turned, his back to the opening, and slammed the spear's ferule against the floor. It made no sound beyond a deadened thud.

The shame weighed heavy, but he bore the burden, as they all did.

The open door behind him served as a reminder of their collective failing. It was not the only one.

Other Shadowkeepers stood before similar doorways.

For thousands of years, the Dark Cells had remained inviolate until the Maledictum, the Rift.

The black iron halls ran deep, bored into Terra's bedrock, and sealed during the time of Unity. There they remained, the vigil of the Shadowkeepers undisturbed until the day the Neverborn returned to the Throneworld. Such was the unfolding crisis that every shield host was mustered and the black-armoured sentinels were sent above ground with only the barest handful of warriors left behind.

It was desperate, a panic not seen since the Siege.

By the time they realised what had happened it was far too late.

Borsa Thursk gave the order to retreat, leaving the survival of other shield hosts in serious doubt as they faced the daemonic hordes alone. He had erred, in the order to fall back and the one that preceded it, which had seen the Shadowkeepers take to the field. Upon their return, they found two things: those they had left behind dead, slain in ways too horrible to utter, and several of the cells empty, the method of their contents' escape or theft impossible to fathom.

In seeking to avert one calamity, the Shadowkeepers believed they had turned a blind eye to another that had then come to pass.

A great and exhaustive search followed as the Shadowkeepers hurled themselves into the void, chasing every scrap of rumour and evidence that would see these terrors placed back under lock and key.

Some had been recovered, but not all. The diaspora went far, had no discernible pattern and presented a nigh-on impossible task.

It was the single bleakest moment in all of Varogalant's long memory.

But he did remember.

He remembered the Lion's Gate. He remembered Borsa Thursk bellowing for the shield host to return and the harrowing that followed when the Shadowkeepers realised they had been undone.

And he remembered Adio, and how he had left his brother to die. In the end, it had been for nothing. The old relics, the creatures that once haunted Old Night, they were loose and they could be anywhere.

CHAPTER FIVE

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Though the shadows hid the blood, they could not disguise the smell. It lay thick and metallic on heavily recycled air. Above, the lazy sweeps of a ceiling fan pushed the stench around the room, making sure it got into every crevice and cranny.

Ursula Gedd felt it adhering to her skin. She'd need a full hour's steam-scour in the precinct ablutional just to get the stink out. The scene laid out in front of her in the shabby tenement room would linger on well after that.

She frowned, and looked over to her fellow peacekeeper.

'Can we get any more light? Saint's piss, but it's dark in here. How do you even see in this shit, Klein?'

Arpa Klein looked up from a crouched position. He had standard-issue, dark green peacekeeper flak armour. Yellow chevrons marked the chest-plate and shoulder guards. Just like Gedd, except she wore a long dark green slicker over hers. Klein also wore gloves and a helm-lumen. A piece of pinkish bone chip shone in the dim light of his portable array.

'Skull's utterly fragged.'

'Your detective skills continue to amaze, Klein. Now, what about that light?'

Klein tapped the helm-lumen, causing it to flicker. He tapped it again, harder, and the beam stabilised.

'Best we've got,' he said, reaching for another bone chip. 'The blood makes the room darker,' he explained. 'This back wall used to be grey. All the habs are grey in this district. No one bothers to paint them.'

'Until now,' Gedd remarked drily.

Klein pointed upwards with a metal stylus, and the hovering servo-skull slaved to his neuro-quill followed suit.

‘Ceiling used to be grey too.’

Gedd didn’t look up. Something dripped down onto her shoulder, though.

‘Saint’s piss...’ she muttered, and cast about for clues.

She found a weapon, lying side down on a table. Blood spatter flecked the barrel and stock. A pump-gun. Low-grade, but then the human skull wasn’t particularly resilient when it came to firearms. Using her boot knife, she hooked the gun by the trigger guard and brought it in for a closer look. She sniffed the muzzle, though it was tough to discern anything other than blood on account of the victim’s being... well, everywhere.

‘Male?’ she guessed, turning her attention to the body.

Klein nodded, the light beam bobbing up and down and throwing frantic flashes against a dark red wall.

He was seated, whoever he was. His ankles had been shackled to the chair legs, the shackles then bolted. One wrist was free, the hand nearest the table and the gun; the other was bound, same as the legs.

He looked ordinary enough, possibly a hive worker, one of billions inside Vorganthian. The fact his neck ended in a ragged stump stood out though.

‘You ever see a pump-gun do something like this?’

Klein looked up at Gedd holding the weapon to his meagre light.

‘Jam it in deep enough, then angle it just right... How should I know? Maybe.’

‘Blast out the back of the skull, perhaps... Deconstruct and violently explode the entire head?’ Gedd frowned again. ‘And *this* much blood?’

She swore under her breath, setting the weapon back down. It had a full load, even the breech. And where was the shell casing? No reek of cordite either. Retrograde weapons like the pump-gun had a smell after discharge.

‘How many is this?’ she asked, surveying the small room.

Klein paused, thinking. ‘Twelve suicides.’

‘Is that what your report will say?’

Klein deactivated his stylus and the servo-skull went into dormant mode.

‘Same as all the rest,’ he said, grunting, his legs stiff as he got to his feet. ‘You think it’s something else?’

Gedd tugged a data-slate from out of one of the slicker’s pockets and brought up a map. She’d flagged all the recent ‘violent cranial explosion deaths’ and added the one from the tenement they were standing in. She mentally drew a line connecting the site of each death until it formed an arc in her mind’s eye.

‘You seeing something I’m not, Gedd?’ asked Klein, securing the bone chip evidence in a small plastek sheath.

Gedd turned and headed for the door.

‘Let me know when you’re done.’

‘Where are you going?’ he called after her.

‘Out of this shithole.’

CHAPTER SIX

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Gedd exchanged the heady aroma of human vitae for the sweaty bustle of the Vorganth down-trans, the main thoroughfare through the city that led to low-hive.

The moment she left the hab, a swarm of slow but determined bodies swallowed her up as she joined the mass of Imperial citizens going about their dreary business.

Gedd slipped on a rebreather, grateful for the advanced filtration unit built into the cup. Petro-chem and other pollutants gave the air of low-hive an ugly jaundiced tinge. Gedd heard coughing in the morass, the telltale sign of lung-rot. Most in low-hive, the ones who had no creds for a decent filter, died of lung-rot. Gedd had no time to pity them. In the Imperium, life was cheap if you were a bullet farmer or a wrench-hand... or a peacekeeper. She knew her place.

With a judicious amount of elbow jabbing, scowling and the occasional flash of her precinct-ident sigil, Gedd steadily fought through the crowds.

Above, the towering hive spires loomed like bulky minarets. The spires were well armoured with slabs of ferromite and gunned up to their crenellated teeth. She sometimes wondered if the auto-slaved cannons were for foreign invaders or to keep the burgeoning populace quiescent. Upper transit-ways threaded a false sky overhead, connecting the many districts. Mag-lifts rose and fell with agonising slowness, thronged with hundreds of bodies. The harsh sodium flares of solar traders competed with the furnace fires of the manufactora. A background hum, the heavy, brain-aching heartbeat of industry worried at the raw edges of Gedd's nerves. For a moment the accreted misery of Vorganthian's citizens threatened to crush her. This city hated humanity. Its contempt was palpable.

She took a breath, a heavily filtered and twice-cleansed breath, and carried on.

Taking a side street, one of several lesser arteries bleeding off the down-trans, Gedd found some relative peace. She activated the hidden vox-bead in her ear. She listened to three seconds of static, keeping watch on the alley mouth through which she had left the down-trans, and was rewarded for her patience by a man's voice on the other end of the feed.

'Utterance,' he said plainly.

'Throne ascendant,' Gedd replied.

There was another short pause as her code was verified.

'He wants to see you.'

'Good,' Gedd answered, though she stifled a tremor of unease. *'Wait... what did you just say?'* He had never requested her presence before. *'I have information.'*

A further pause as this was relayed.

'The lamplighter on Elserow.'

'I know it.'

'You have nine minutes.'

'What? Damn it!'

The feed went dead, and Gedd killed the static as she broke into a run.

Elserow lay at the other end of the down-trans. On foot, even at a decent pace, it was probably a twelve-minute journey. Through the worker crowds... Add at least another fifteen.

As Gedd raced out of the alley, she drew her sidearm. A Verifier VII 'auto-load', it shone like a matt-black finger of judgement in her fist. Verifiers were known for accuracy. They also had a wide chamber for heavy ammunition. The trade-off was a low-load in the mag, hence the auto function. Upside, it made a hell of a mess and a damn fine noise.

Gedd fired two rounds into the rockcrete, bellowing.

'Move! Peacekeeper!'

Her rebreather had a vox-amp function and she engaged it to boost her voice.

The crowd fled, dozens barrelling into the sprawl. There would be injuries.

Gedd had no time for guilt or regret. She'd deal with that later. So she ran.

'Make way! Peacekeeper! Make way!'

A thin-faced man, tall with a studious expression, wandered into her path. Gedd knocked him aside, making the best use of her bulky armour and forward momentum. The man, who wore the long tan robes and carried the lectorum-bible of an uphive census-taker, was about to hurl some abuse Gedd's way when

he saw the gun and decided to keep his mouth shut.

Gedd barely spared him a glance.

A chrono-chime in her ear signalled a minute had lapsed. Panting hard, she accelerated, cursing the weight of her armour and the hefty Verifier, which pulled at her left arm like an anchor.

After another five minutes she left the down-trans and hit Elserow. A narrow concourse stretched before her, less densely populated than the down-trans but harder to navigate.

Elserow was a labyrinth. A part of down-hive, its streets overlapped and intersected, as if caught in the fever dream of some deranged hive-planner. There were switchbacks, bottlenecks, doglegs and dead ends aplenty. It had no scheme, no reason, having developed organically over many centuries. It was also extremely old. Here, ferrocrete gave way to actual stone mined from the planet's core when there were still quarries. Buildings of brick and even wood lurched out of smoke-choked alleyways. They ran on for storey after storey, stacked one atop the other until the sheer mass of the buildings above began to displace and flatten the ones below. They leaned, lecherous and ugly, and the district reeked of dank and mildew.

But Gedd knew this place. She had mapped its bewildering expanse before, and so reached the Avenue of Lights where the lamplighters roamed with a few seconds to spare.

+Cutting it a little close, peacekeeper,+ said a voice in Gedd's head. +I was about to take my leave.+

CHAPTER SEVEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Gedd started at the sudden voice in her head, turning around, half-blinded by the oil lamps hovering in their stations. She had her gun out again, the instinct to draw it natural and defensive.

+No need for that.+

Gedd lowered then holstered her weapon. She raised a hand to ward her eyes. Breathing hard, she felt like puking but kept it down.

'It's rather bloody bright,' she complained at length.

The Avenue of Light was just that, a part of Elserow that consisted of a long paved street illuminated by a hundred oil-fuelled globes, each one held aloft by an anti-gravitic plate. It was a metaphor for the Imperium's adherence to archaism and the stagnation of technological endeavour, though few appreciated the contradiction.

Few ever ventured here too. No one in Vorganthian really wanted to see themselves in the light. The blood, the grime, the misery, it all seemed starker in the pitiless luminescence of those globes.

Gedd saw the lamplighter. A short, unassuming man in a brown leather storm coat and a wide-brimmed fedora, he stood at the end of the Avenue of Light. He had a walking stick in his right hand, the tech in the haft visible even from distance. Armour beneath the coat bulked him out a little. Gedd reckoned he was at least a hundred feet away, which either meant he had abilities or she did.

The lamps in Gedd's sector dimmed as the man approached.

+Is that better?+

She lowered her hand. 'Better, but if you try to speak into my mind again I am going to have to shoot you. I haven't decided where yet either.'

The lamplighter held up his hand by way of apology.

‘Old habits,’ he said, when Gedd was close enough to hear him normally. ‘I don’t see many of his agents around these parts. Haven’t seen a peacekeeper in some time.’ He nodded. ‘My name is Xeus, but I am generally known as the Lamplighter.’

Gedd frowned. ‘By whom? I thought you said you hardly saw anyone down here.’

‘By those to whom I am known,’ answered Xeus with no suggestion of offering any further explanation.

‘You’re a wyrd, aren’t you?’

‘A psyker, yes. I am a theta-level telepath, though I also possess some minor kinetic abilities.’ He gestured to one of the globes, which intensified and dimmed again to illustrate the point.

Gedd sniffed her amusement. ‘Clever trick. Didn’t know he was using wylds.’

‘Our employer uses every tool at his disposal, though I would ask you to refrain from using that term.’

‘Wyrd?’

‘If you wouldn’t mind.’

‘Sorry, I meant no offence.’

‘None taken,’ Xeus said. ‘You wish to see him.’ It wasn’t phrased as a question.

‘I was told he wished to see me,’ Gedd replied, stupidly feeling she needed to justify her presence.

‘He does,’ said Xeus, and Gedd thought perhaps he had taken offence after all. ‘Stand under the eighth globe along on the left if you wouldn’t mind.’

‘What?’ asked Gedd, but Xeus merely stepped out of her path and indicated the appropriate globe.

Gedd did as asked, standing under the eighth globe on the left side of the street. She frowned, the hint of irritation in her voice. ‘I’m here. What now?’

‘Well...’ said Xeus, turning away as one by one the globes were extinguished, leaving only the eighth still lit, +I would shut your eyes.+

The eighth globe burned into brilliance, as bright as magnesium, and Gedd clamped her eyes shut before it blinded her.

‘Son of a bi—’

Darkness fell a moment later, the background roar of the overtaxed light globe fading as she tried to open her eyes again. A harsh after-flare muddied her vision but when she was at last able to see, Gedd was standing at the bottom of a narrow stone stairway with a barred iron gate in front of her. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the stairway went up into darkness. Then a vision slit in the

gate quickly slid aside, revealing a pair of augmetic eyes, flashing red in the shadows.

‘Ursula Gedd?’ an automated voice asked.

‘Who else would it be?’

‘Utterance,’ the voice replied. The augmetics blinked once, calibrating targeting arrays. Only then did Gedd notice the weapon slits in the walls. She heard the *chug-clank* of heavy cannons cycling to readiness.

‘Throne ascendant,’ she said quickly, taking care to keep her hands well away from her sidearm.

After a few seconds the augmetics blinked again and the vision slit slid shut. A heavy boom sounded from the other side of the door, then came the metallic scrape of several bolts disengaging automatically. At last the gate ground open on automated hinges.

Gedd didn’t linger. She had only just got inside when the gate slammed shut behind her. There was no sign of the servitor on the other side of the door. A thin metal track ran underfoot. She felt it against her boot. It still retained a faint charge and led into the wall.

Fifty feet ahead, a vague glow beckoned.

Despite her earlier desire to appear unthreatening, Gedd kept her hand on the grip of the Verifier as she made for the opening.

As she reached the glow, the corridor opened out into a much larger chamber, though it was hard to tell exactly how large on account of the sheer amount of surveillance engines in situ.

Banks of cogitators spewing reams of hard data-screed stood alongside innumerable pict-feeds, each displaying a subtly different view of the city. It was like staring into the many-faceted compound eyes of a fly. Vox- and data-gathering engines kept up a steady hubbub that instantly irritated with their half-heard susurrations. Physical maps, architectural sketches, schematics and diagrammatic calculations papered every available surface. Some appeared to be highly technical, others arcane. Gedd found them all unfathomable.

And at the heart of this machine, this web of information hoarding, sat its spider. Huge and many-limbed, its form swathed in darkness, it looked up as Gedd entered.

‘You’re late,’ growled Meroved.

CHAPTER EIGHT

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

He could sense her fear of him, though she hid it well. Micro-tremors in her cheek, neck and fingers, the slight dilation of the pupils, a scarcely detectable rise in heart rate and perspiration told Meroved all he needed to know.

'I said, you're late,' he rumbled, still engaging with the data-feed as he addressed her. Six servo-arms, attached to a frame on his back and partially concealed by black robes, interfaced with the network of machinery delivering every scrap of information to Meroved for his analysis.

'By whose definition?' asked Gedd.

Meroved's smile stayed hidden behind his vox-mask and the shadows of his hood.

'I do believe you may have offended Xeus,' he said.

'That imp? The lamplighter? I can't say I have a fond opinion of him, either.' Gedd looked around, her keen grey eyes analysing everything. 'What is this place? We've never met here before.'

'Very old and well hidden,' answered Meroved. 'And we've never met *anywhere* before, Gedd.'

'And yet I feel I know you.'

Meroved laughed, thunderous and resounding.

'I'm glad you still find me amusing, but I have to know,' said Gedd, 'why did you bring me here? Two years, Meroved. Two *years*. And in all that time, never a face-to-face and never in your...' She looked around, trying to find the word. '*Lair*. Either you've suddenly developed an inexplicable desire to trust or something is happening. It's the suicides, isn't it?' She smiled ruefully. 'I knew there was more to it.'

Meroved nodded.

‘Yes. You have found something, Gedd, and it relates to the deaths you describe.’

He took in the peacekeeper, her officer’s garb, her slightly drawn but not unattractive face, the black hair that had been cut short to be less of a hindrance in the field. She had a heavy build, broad-shouldered, muscular yet still athletic. Strong fingers, calloused from regularly loading and stripping her sidearm, betrayed her nervousness. Her work had aged her prematurely but only slightly, a litany of long, demanding shifts and a less than ideal diet. No evidence of rejuve, either. She favoured a heavy-gauge pistol, hip holstered; the blade strapped to her boot looked clean and sharp. All of this Meroved processed in less than a millisecond.

‘Though your colleague Arpa Klein is wrong about the cause.’

‘You’ve been watching me.’

‘Of course I have. That is my purpose. To watch,’ said Meroved. ‘What did you see?’

‘Ask your lamplighter. He was rudely poking around in my head.’

‘Xeus is a gatekeeper – he doesn’t gather information. We all have our roles, Gedd. We must merely play them the best way we can.’

Gedd did not appear mollified, but described what she and Klein had found in the tenement – the man shackled to the chair, his skull conspicuously distributed around the room; the volume of blood; the unspent pump-gun on the table; the fact there had been at least eleven other similar incidents in the last few weeks alone.

Meroved listened intently, absorbing every detail and filing it away alongside the constant data-stream spewing from his array of surveillance engines.

‘What else?’

‘Isn’t that enough?’

‘I want to know what you *think*. You have a theory.’

‘There are trends,’ Gedd went on. She made a face, attempting to summarise, and gesturing with her hands as if weighing the information and its value. ‘Disappearances, mysterious deaths, spontaneous combustion.’ She sniffed, trying to feign her insouciance, but Meroved could detect her unease. ‘Now we can add violent inter-cranial detonations to the list. I have a ream of reports and unsolved cases. Mostly low-hive. I think there’s one underlying cause and I think whoever is behind it is trying to stay out of sight by operating in places that will draw the least attention. And I think whatever they’re doing is increasing. Frequency, intensity, it’s going somewhere.’

Meroved listened intently, and when Gedd had finished he allowed the churn of the machines to fill the silence for a moment before deciding to speak.

‘Every city, every world has a pattern. Did you know that, Gedd?’

‘I’ve seen a pattern, and I’m fairly sure I know the origin point for this madness, but I don’t think you’re talking about just that, are you?’

‘We are not so far from Terra,’ said Meroved. ‘On this world, we live within His light, albeit at the very edge. But darkness encroaches, even here. Even now. Ever since the Rift... everything has changed.’

‘Including the pattern of this city.’

‘I am talking about the rhythms that define life in its usual state, its mundane comings and goings,’ said Meroved. ‘Anything is possible. The galaxy is vast, the Imperium’s worlds many, and there are old, old secrets that would threaten your grip on sanity were I to divulge them to you. Much therefore can be explained. Much therefore can be tolerated if a part of a small enough ratio. These quirks are simply that, inconsequential and innocuous. But, yes, in Vorganthian the pattern has changed. Even now, as you and I speak, it is moving.’ Meroved turned his hand for emphasis, his fingers half-clenched as if gripping an invisible object. ‘It is being reshaped.’ He nodded to Gedd. ‘I think you know this already, albeit on a crude, instinctive level.’

‘I’ll try not to take offence at that.’

‘Escalation, Gedd...’ Meroved narrowed his eyes, ‘and the slightest fraying of the edges.’ He illustrated the point by holding his thumb and forefinger a hair’s breadth apart. ‘Infinitesimal and almost unnoticed.’

‘Fraying?’ asked Gedd, her unease suddenly more apparent.

Meroved’s mouth curled into a humourless smile.

‘Reality, Gedd.’

Gedd paled but maintained her composure. ‘If I pretend to understand what you’re talking about, will you kill me? Is that why I’m here, because I know too much?’

Meroved gave a cold laugh. ‘That is precisely why you are here, Gedd. But I won’t kill you. I need your help.’

‘Why does this *not* feel like a promotion?’

Meroved engaged a hololithic projector built into his machine. It displayed a grainy image of a part of the city, rendered in three-dimensional green light. A red rune flickered over a small section of it. A warehouse.

‘Is this the same origin point you mentioned?’

Gedd took a closer look. ‘More precise than I had it, but...’ She nodded. She

had brought up a similar schematic on her data-slate back in the bloody tenement room.

‘That’s the Hoard. It’s an abandoned commercia district in low-hive. Some habs, mainly warehouses. I need you to find out what’s there and report back. Observation only. You must go alone. The circle stays small. No one else must know, not until I am certain what it is we are dealing with.’

‘While you watch?’

Meroved suddenly rose from amongst the machines, the servo-frame detaching with a hiss of pneumatic pressure release. He had seen something on his myriad of screens and vox-feeds. He shrugged off his robes and padded over in bare feet and loose-fitting breeches towards an archway leading off from the chamber.

‘I have another matter to attend to.’

Ever since she had come into his service, Gedd had maintained theories about Meroved’s origins. At first she considered the Adeptus Arbites. His voice, his obvious authority, what he knew, his words and how he said them all pointed towards the *Lex Imperialis*. She had also considered the Inquisition, a theory that had fallen apart as soon as he had risen from the machine.

Meroved’s immensely muscled body shimmered in the light. His sheer size suggested transhuman, and his mental acuity went beyond exceptional into another spectrum entirely.

Gedd had thought some of his size could have been armour, but the sheer bulk and brawn hinted at beneath the now shed robes was all flesh and blood. He appeared almost sculpted, more a work of art than a man, though she also saw scars and the surgical evidence of augmentation. Part of the right leg, a section of shoulder, the right wrist – all shone metallically in the light.

Letters had been etched into his flesh using dark ink, long snaking syllables that coiled around his arms, his neck, across his back, his sides. Names, she realised, or parts of names. She noticed ‘Mero’ and ‘Ved’ amongst them.

Gedd could not help but stare.

‘The ink,’ she ventured. ‘It is military?’

‘Of a kind.’ He paused, seemingly unprepared for the question. ‘Though we were never supposed to be soldiers. That happened later.’

‘“We”?’

Meroved stopped to regard her, and Gedd saw his face properly.

‘A brotherhood of sorts.’

Without the vox-mask and hood, he had a noble face – old but with wisdom

rather than age, though she saw signs of that too. A dark-haired beard, flecked with iron-grey, framed a sturdy chin. The head was closely shorn, barring a shaven strip of hair with blunt, brush-like ends that streaked back from just above the forehead and neatly divided the scalp into two equal hemispheres. A scar below the right eye suggested a serious wound, sustained a long time ago.

‘You are quite the sight,’ uttered Gedd. ‘I’m still staring, aren’t I?’

Meroved turned away again, indicating an end to the conversation. ‘Xeus will be waiting for you outside the gate. He will escort you back to Elserow.’

‘I think I can find my own way.’

‘No, you won’t,’ said Meroved, stepping through the archway and becoming lost to the shadows beyond.

CHAPTER NINE

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Hezme had led what she regarded as an ordinary life. She had worked hard, toiling in the data-stacks of the western district's scriptorium primus, compiling census records, mercantile quotas and military tithing rates. It was dusty work and although she had never done a shift bending metal fuselage plates in a factorum or counting furnace-hot casings in a bullet farm, she did still bear some scars. Her fingers were regularly shredded by the ancient leaves of vellum spewed from the mouths of calculation-servitors. It had got so bad, in fact, that she had resorted to bandaging her hands in the manner of a leper. And her bones ached so regularly from hauling massive quantities of hard-data records around the stacks that she sometimes felt true manual labour might be easier on her body.

She had never married, nor did she have children. She lived alone and had a modest income that came with modest expectations. Hezme had believed she would die in the stacks or the clean but tired confines of her tenement hab. She was pious. Her fear of all things aberrant, the alien, the witch and the heretic, had her cleave to the Imperial Creed as an infant would its mother's teat. An aquila shrine to the Emperor Ascendant was one of the few adornments she allowed herself to possess, and she knelt before its glory at the start and end of every day.

But deep down, she wanted more. Piety should be rewarded. Xenophobia and intolerance required recognition. It took effort to hate, to fear what was *other*. Wasn't Hezme deserving of something for her efforts?

She had heard about the preacher through clandestine channels, through whispers and rumours. A missionary some said, he who had come to speak of the Emperor's will and usher the faithless back to His light. He had been hard to

find. In the end, he had found her. Trudging through the Vorganth down-trans heading for the western maglev transit station, she had been confronted by a figure in dark red robes with a learned disposition.

His charisma, his absolute faith and belief in the Emperor of Mankind beguiled her. After that first meeting she had not returned to the scriptorium primus. The wanderer, as he was known, had changed all that. She felt warmer in his presence, and a sense of fulfilment she had not realised she was lacking until the moment she met him.

He had other followers, of course, and it was impressed upon her the need for complete and utter secrecy. At first, she had questioned why such steps needed to be taken. After all, worship of the Emperor was no crime and in the dark times that had fallen upon the city, an outpouring of faith could shore up the ailing populace.

It was only when Hezme became privy to the purpose – to the Awakening as the preacher had described it – that she understood. It thrilled her to think of it, to know that she would be a part of this great undertaking. So devout was Hezme, so utterly committed to the cause, that after many weeks there came the day she had long been waiting for.

‘You are to be illuminated, Hezme,’ the preacher had told her.

And in that moment, she realised all her piety and faith *had* been rewarded.

Illumination.

So she did not question when they took her to a forgotten place at the edge of the western district, to a derelict factorum whose machines had long since turned cold, where the silky webs of orb-spiders hung in gossamer strands between the bullet-cutters and metal-shapers.

She felt the accumulated dirt and grime between the toes of bare feet and the warm air catch around her thin shift as she was led into a large ablutions chamber.

The old, grimy tiles chilled her skin as she followed the steps into a deep basin rimmed with scum around its edges. The lights were no longer working, so oil drums had been stacked with combustibles and set aflame. The flickering light cast across a circle drawn inside the basin. In the dingy confines of the room, it looked dark red.

She entered the circle along with seven others, each ushered to their place where a rune had been marked in the floor. These runes were strange to Hezme and it hurt her eyes to look upon them. She shivered, not out of fear but anticipation.

Only when they clamped the heavy chains around her wrists, neck and ankles did she begin to quail. The chains were marked too, just like the circle. There were stains on the metal and a smell like warm copper.

Then he entered the room and Hezme's concerns lessened. She tried to catch his gaze but he seemed to look through her, focused on his purpose.

'Through His will are we judged,' he said, 'and through suffering will He judge you worthy of salvation. Gaze upon the abyss. See into the mind of that which lurks beyond the veil for only then shall you be illuminated, only then shall you be inured to the terror and take your place in the Awakening.'

A sudden chanting began from figures hidden in the darkness at the edges, and a strange sensation overcame Hezme. The chains began to burn her skin. She wanted to scream but an invisible force held her tongue and so she writhed instead as a foreign and intrusive presence wormed its way inside her body. Like a dirty splinter, it festered, growing more virulent with every passing second. She heard voices, but they spoke in a language Hezme did not understand and in a way that turned her blood to ice.

She wanted to escape. This was wrong. She had changed her mind, but she knew with gut-churning clarity that it was too late to back out.

Her sense of time fell away, and the tatters of herself fell with it, carried off on a foul-smelling breeze.

It could have been days she spent in this place, the voices growing ever louder in her head, her will dissolving like ice before a cruel sun. Distantly, she felt changes to her body, to her bones, even her mind. There were strange growths that hadn't been there before, and unclean marks had spread across her skin like mould over a canvas.

And for the briefest moment before her will surrendered to the thing that had taken root within her and made of her flesh its host, Hezme saw the other supplicants and the cult spreading across the city, as rampant as a holy wildfire.

The wanderer was with her at the end, but his words provided no comfort.

'Do not despair,' he said. 'Your suffering serves a great purpose.'

Hezme laughed, though the voice was not her own, and as she threw back her head, laughing, crying and shouting, she let the darkness swallow her.

CHAPTER TEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

The mag-trans was poorly lit and smelled of dank. The shadows served Meroved, who went swiftly through the transit tunnels beneath Vorganthian's eastern district. No one bothered him. Few of the ragged-looking patrons even glanced in his direction. This part of the automated transit hub did not attract crowds. It was the oldest section of the network, in one of the oldest city districts and close to disuse.

Parts of the roof had begun to sag in places, the sheer weight of the agglomerated levels above taking a toll on the aging granite brick and iron rebar. Streams of effluence trailed through gaps in the rockcrete, dark and dirty little stains that put Meroved in mind of blood.

He had left the observatory with all haste, dressing quickly in a lightweight but durable flak-weave bodysuit with a plasteel-plate layer over the torso. He had selected a broad-bladed vibro-sword, which now sat in a scabbard slung across his back, and a heavy-gauge bolt rifle called a Shieldbreaker, which hung on a strap next to it. A hip holster contained an archeotech fusion pistol, Firebrand. From an old wooden casket, he had taken several pieces of arcana.

A black storm cloak finished off the ensemble, both large and thick enough to hide the munitions belt he wore around his waist and the fact he was well armed. A deep hood concealed a vox-bead.

It had not taken long to reach the mag-trans tunnels via grav-speeder and follow them on foot to the main transit hub. His observatory lay at a nexus point underneath the city and all roads fed to it, which made reaching the edges of the city easier. Meroved had left the transport behind in a disused service dock, where it would remain hidden and undisturbed until he returned for it.

The tunnel he had entered the transit hub by eventually opened out into a large

and dilapidated atrium. It ran upwards for several floors, terminating in a vaulted ceiling where cracks in the decaying plaster had spread like veins. A single mag-carriage hovered at the edge of the tiled space in a poorly maintained grav-harness, its repulsor plates sparking. It carried a handful of passengers: a few lowly scribes and some Munitorum labourers who huddled close together and exchanged words in a stooped, conspiratorial fashion. One of the labourers, a woman with grimy hair and soot stains on her face, looked up at Meroved as he passed. Upon seeing him she quickly looked down again.

The atrium itself had a few loiterers. Dirty bullet-farmers and plate-cutters gathered in begrimed and beaten-down groups. A dishevelled old man in dirty rags played a tuneless ditty on a pump-organ but had failed to attract a crowd. A Ministorum priest in long puce robes read aloud from a battered copy of the *Sermons of Sebastian Thor* and was similarly ignored.

A trader in a dishevelled brocade jacket with a discoloured neck ruff had more admirers. He cleaved to his servitor bodyguard, clutching a lockbox close to his chest as he gave a look of undisguised contempt to a pair of shaven-headed juves with ganger tattoos. And then there were the hooded and the cloaked figures, the ones who kept to the shadows and the edges, the mutants and low-level wyrds. These poor wretches posed no threat to Meroved or the Throne. They hid down here away from the witchfinders and bounty hunters who plied their trade in the scalps of the undesirable and the shunned. Fear and suspicion were valuable commodities in the Imperium and the hunters traded on them.

Meroved scowled beneath his hood.

Lassitude and despair clung to this place like an invisible fog. This part of the transit hub should have been torn down years ago, though perhaps the labour-barons who ran it were simply waiting for it to be crushed by the layers pressing down from above.

Off-world smugglers tended to use the rundown parts of the city to conduct their illegal activities. Much like the dregs trying to hide away behind rags and anonymity, such activities seldom piqued Meroved's interest. He wasn't on Vorganthian to enforce law and order; his remit was much larger and more far-reaching. The cargo rumoured to be in the smugglers' possession had changed the normal run of things. The pattern had shifted, just as he had told Gedd.

The Vexen Cage. A relic, a *very* old and dangerous relic that had no place being at large in the galaxy. The description he had received matched what he knew of it, but until he was certain he would not act beyond observing. What he did, what he was oath-sworn to do, only worked because no one knew he was doing it. His

decision to leave the observatory had not been taken lightly.

Meroved needed proof, one way or the other.

He surreptitiously opened the vox-bead.

‘Zatu,’ he whispered, crossing the atrium floor.

A click in his ear indicated Zatu was receiving.

‘I have reached the atrium.’

‘*East tunnel, my lord,*’ Zatu replied.

Meroved found it immediately. It was approximately seventy feet ahead of him, a wide arch of grey stone that led into further shadows. A chain hung across the opening with a metal sign that read CONDEMNED in stencilled letters. He saw something else too, a small mark on one of the bricks that made up the arch. It was too deliberate to have been created by accident, so Meroved had to assume the graffiti was meant as a message or marker. However, it looked incomplete, like an arrowhead without a shaft with a thin vertical line drawn at the broad end.

A man standing near the tunnel, leaning against a decrepit column, looked up. He wore a long grey storm coat and had the look of the Astra Militarium about him with a close-shaved head and a regimental tattoo. A second mark under his right eye was definitely not military. It was of a lit candle depicted in dark red ink. Unlike the other civilians, the man did not look away when Meroved met his gaze.

‘Something here, Zatu,’

‘*Do you have the relic in sight, my lord?*’

‘Not yet. It may be close. Stand by.’

Slipping the catch from his hip holster, Meroved made for the ex-Guardsman. He had gone less than a few feet when the glow-globes that were affixed to posts around the atrium floor flickered and went out. A heavy darkness fell, like a blindfold drawn across the eyes. The last carriage noisily slipped its harness, drawing Meroved’s eye for a second. The resulting charge had overloaded the lights. It sped off, trailing a chain of angry sparks. After a few seconds the momentary blackout lifted.

The ex-Guardsman had gone, but the chain roping off the east tunnel still swung slightly in his wake.

Meroved accelerated into a run, his cloak parting to reveal Firebrand. He shot through the chain, the two severed ends sweeping apart like a drawn curtain. Panicked shouts came from some quarters.

He reached the tunnel entrance in seconds, the meagre crowds parting

instinctively, and rushed inside.

Only then did Meroved slow to a walk. More darkness pervaded here, and even greater disrepair. The sign had been accurate, but someone was using this part of the transit hub. He discerned footprints and the signs of occupation, a few lho-stick stubs and a doused sodium lamp. The tunnel went on for at least a hundred feet before it turned a corner. Meroved followed it.

He had only gone a few paces when the low *hum-buzz* of an anti-gravitic engine made Meroved turn to his left. Alcoves punctuated the tunnel walls at evenly spaced intervals on both sides and from one burst the man he had seen outside the entrance, riding a Harrower jetbike. It was vintage and large, a low-rider with the driver leaning back as he pushed out the throttle and dug in his heels. A long grey-and-black chassis cut through the air like a prow, its front-mounted heavy stubber no use against a pursuing target.

A lookout, Meroved realised. He had to stop him.

He triggered Firebrand and the muzzle flared, emitting a low activation whine. The fusion beam glanced the front deflector of the jetbike's chassis, kicking up a riot of hot and angry sparks that sent the driver off course and his ride digging into the ground like a ploughshare. It cut a furrow about twelve feet long before it went too deep and stuck hard, flinging the driver over the chassis and another twelve feet farther up the tunnel. He came to rest in a heap, his limbs bent awkwardly around his body.

Meroved quickly covered the distance to the crash site in long, powerful strides. Crouching down, he hauled the driver up onto his backside, eliciting howls of pain, and propped him against the wall.

'Talk,' he demanded. 'Now.'

The ex-Guardsman grimaced, his teeth pink with blood. A surge of it came up out of his throat and he choked for a few seconds before managing to spit it out over his chin.

'You're dying,' Meroved told him. 'Your ribs are shattered, and at least one of them has pierced a lung. Your left arm is broken and both legs. Death will be very painful. I can make it less so and end it quickly.'

'Holy... Terra... you're...' the ex-Guardsman began, wheezing and gurgling between words, 'one of them...'

Something like awe or fear flashed in his eyes. Even so close to death, a mortal could not deny the existential dread of being faced with one of the Emperor's chosen.

Meroved scowled. He needed him to talk.

‘And you knew that before you ran. How? Who are your allies? Are they down here too?’

The man laughed, though it looked painful for him and sounded more like choking.

‘It will be like drowning,’ said Meroved, losing patience, ‘except you’ll be on land and it will be in your own blood. What is your name? What does that mark underneath your eye mean?’

A few moments remained. Meroved could hear it in the man’s breathing.

‘Speak to me. You have nothing to gain now by obfuscation. Serve the Throne and in that find some redemption.’

The ex-Guardsman smiled, and looked strangely beatific before spitting up another dark goblet of blood.

‘I am already a servant... but shall not yield...’ he rasped, every breath a supreme effort, ‘to despair... My suffering... serves... a great purp—’

He slumped back, chalk-pale, eyes sunken into hollows.

Meroved stood and cursed beneath his breath. He had found nothing, and was about to raise Zatu on the vox when he saw the parchment edge that had slipped out of one of the dead man’s pockets. Crouching back down, Meroved pulled out a map. It depicted the disused tunnels, describing a route from the eastern entrance to some kind of rendezvous point or hideout. Further inspection of the body revealed a null-collar around the man’s neck. It had been deactivated but appeared functional. Meroved unclasped it, folded it along the three hinges set around its circumference and tucked the collar into one of the large pouches on his munitions belt.

Then he looked back the way he had come to the jetbike, its anti-gravitic engines gently pushing it against the dirt, like an arrow slowly quivering in a target ring. Both the stirrups and the seat could be heavily adjusted. He reckoned it was approximately the same size as a Dawneagle, though bulkier and less refined than the jetbikes ridden by his old comrades in the Kataphraktoi.

Meroved raised an eyebrow.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

The air scythed past, tugging against his hood and pulling it away from his face. Meroved could not suppress a grin as he revelled in the sheer speed of the Harrower.

The tunnel sped by in a blur, lit by sweeping shafts of light from the Harrower's forward-mounted lamps. Meroved's mnemonic abilities kept him on the route described on the map, though the deep and disused conduits through Vorganthian's forgotten underbelly were labyrinthine. After a few miles, the turns came quickly and sharply. He could appreciate why the dead ex-Guardsman he had left back in the tunnel had needed a map, though Meroved needed only to glance at it once. What he could not fathom was why the dead man had been wearing a null-collar. As he piled on more speed, he considered the collar might relate to the supposed suicides Gedd had stumbled upon and wondered where all this might lead.

Eventually, Meroved came almost to the terminus of his journey as the tunnel network ended in a large subterranean excavation. Ditching the jetbike at the edge of a massive pit and killing its noisy engine, Meroved began to climb down a shallow slope that led into further darkness.

After about sixty feet, the slope started to level out and Meroved saw the watery light of sodium lamps strung up via cabling bolted to a low, natural ceiling. He found several large packing crates and empty promethium drums. Whoever had been down here had been in the process of moving location. Excavation tools lay abandoned, propped up against stacks of pallets. The place looked deserted. Even if the ex-Guardsman had not intended to return, he had probably been here at some point.

'Why did you need to keep a watch?' Meroved murmured. 'What are your

cohorts so wary of?’

The answers were not forthcoming.

Delving further Meroved found solid-slug casings, and the air still carried the faintest smell of cordite. A Custodian’s senses were greatly attuned, even more so than the Adeptus Astartes’.

His eyes narrowed. ‘You were interrupted.’

A fight had taken place here, a fierce one judging by the damage to the walls. Some of the crates had been used as cover. A few had been split in half. Others were shattered into pieces. It would take immense strength to strike such a blow. Drag marks and old bloodstains suggested that the casualties had been removed, and that the fight had taken place some time ago, possibly as long as several days.

As he went deeper the tunnels grew older, much older than the disused transit hub. Natural caverns replaced the man-made chambers, jutting with stalactites and strange bioluminescent fungus. Meroved doubted this place existed on any map. It was ancient. The sodium lamps had long since gone and Meroved pressed on into half-darkness until he caught the faintest glow of grey light. He followed it, moving slowly and cautiously, unsheathing the vibro-sword with Firebrand in his other hand, until the ceiling gave way to a grey gloaming sky.

Snow swept in from above through a natural cleft in the rock that led back to the outside world. It occurred to Meroved he must be nearing the northern district of the city, only a few miles from where he had sent Gedd.

The light was weak but limned a large cavern in an eerie pearlescent glow, sparkling where it touched cataracts trickling through fissures in the rock. The light also marked a body lying on its back in the middle of the cavern, its armour edged in silver. Spilled blood shimmered, glittering with frost. The sight of it caused Meroved’s breath to catch in his throat.

He rushed to the body and upon reaching it sank to his knees, his head heavy with grief. A light dusting of snow had fallen like a funeral veil. The thin white patina could not obscure the lustre of the armour. It shone gold. The specific manner of death was unclear, but the armour had been rent in several places. A slash carved open one side of the helm, revealing part of the face.

‘Kzamende...’ The name came out in a ghostly pall of expelled breath.

A guardian spear had fallen from the dead warrior’s grasp, and as Meroved reached for it he paused, remembering his oath. His outstretched fingers coiled into a fist.

‘How did I not see this?’

Kazamende had died here, presumably from his wounds. He may have died days ago. He wore the royal purple panoply of the Aquilan Shields.

‘What were you doing here, Kazamende?’ Meroved’s voice came out in a breath-starved rasp. ‘Who were you sent to protect?’

Deciding he could learn nothing more from the body, Meroved got to his feet. Taking off his cloak, he gently laid it across Kazamende.

‘Blood of the Throne...’ he whispered, unwilling to accept the truth of his eyes.

One of the Ten Thousand had been killed. No easy feat, and the Aquilan Shields were known for their skill in combat. They were also sworn to lay down their lives to protect an individual identified by the Emperor’s will. Meroved saw no other bodies. Either the man or woman Kazamende had been sent to protect had escaped or they had been taken. Alive or dead, it was impossible to determine.

A flicker of light caught Meroved’s attention and he looked up to see a hololithic figure resolve into being. It was a man, old but with the false appearance of youth. He looked strong and there was a slight militaristic air about his appearance, though the fatigues he wore were beneath the dark red robes of a missionary preacher. Flak armour bulked out his body. As he drew back his hood, he revealed rings on every finger, each shaped like the mark under the eye of the ex-Guardsman Meroved had left back in the tunnels – a candle with a solitary flame.

His hair was cut in the style of the Astra Militarum, shorn close though without a regimental insignia. He did have a tattoo just above the bridge of his nose, of a letter ‘I’ within an eye.

‘Who are you?’ demanded Meroved. He gestured to Kazamende’s body. ‘Did you have a part in this?’

‘I’ll presume you are pointing to your dead comrade,’ said the man. *‘Through the hololith I can only see you. The narrow beam focus, you understand.’* His voice was cultured, urbane and bereft of the usual condescension typical of his calling. *‘He is your comrade, yes?’*

‘Answer me now,’ said Meroved, in no mood for games. ‘There is no place you can hide from me. Nowhere that will be safe for you or those responsible.’

The man nodded. *‘I thought so,’* he said, as if he hadn’t heard Meroved’s threat. *‘I am Ylax Orn, not that my name will mean anything to you. I regret what happened to your comrade. I am the Emperor’s servant in this but he was unwilling to let me conduct my work.’*

Meroved scowled in disbelief. ‘You slay one of the Ten Thousand and claim

you serve the Throne?’

‘I did and I do. You do not understand yet. You will. But I wanted to be sure, to see you with my own eyes...’ He shrugged, and his casual manner turned Meroved’s hands to fists, though he knew his rage was impotent against a hololithic projection. *‘Well... You can appreciate what I mean.’*

‘You will die by my hand, heretic,’ Meroved promised.

‘Not until my work is done, and then I would gladly surrender my neck to your sword.’

‘What work? Does it involve the Vexen Cage? Do not use it. I warn you now.’

‘I fear if I told you, you would try to find a way to stop me and I cannot have that. I have the relic, that much at least I am willing to divulge. I am its guardian. It is His will that I have it. I will be completely honest – I hope that by telling you this you will let me continue without unnecessary impediment. It is essential to the Awakening, but you will see.’ He frowned then, seeing the look on Meroved’s face. *‘Although... perhaps you won’t.’*

Meroved tensed, his eyes narrowing as he searched the cavern for any threat, but he could find no sign.

‘I needed to know if there were more of you,’ said Orn. *‘So I left Reinhar as bait. I assume he is dead.’*

‘What are you talking about?’ demanded Meroved.

‘Do not despair,’ said Orn as the very air seemed to thicken and sound became muted. *‘Your suffering serves a great purpose.’*

It was as if Meroved had crossed an invisible boundary line into a different realm of existence. He knew this feeling. It had happened to him before, during the battle at the Lion’s Gate. He could detect the pulling of the veil, like overstretched rubber brought to breaking point before slowly returning to its resting elasticity. Something had crossed over.

The hololith faded. Behind it stood another figure, and this one was very real.

CHAPTER TWELVE

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Gedd had returned to the precinct as soon as she was back on Elserow. Xeus had met her outside the observatory, just as Meroved had said. He had been right about her not being able to find her way to the street too. Unlike when she had been here before, there was no stairway that led out of the alley. There was just a lamp, like that on the Avenue of Light. It had flared brightly, as before, and Gedd had shut her eyes to avoid being blinded. When she opened them again she was back on Elserow. Xeus had gone.

She met Klein on her way out of the precinct, shouldering his way through the burly peacekeepers, who were strapping on armour and preparing for an underhive sortie.

‘Low-hive cleansing?’ she asked, sparing Klein a glance as she headed to the precinct’s landing strip.

‘What? Oh yes, whatever, Gedd,’ he said, doing his best to follow. He had shed most of his kit and was wearing simple grey fatigues. ‘Our twelfth suicide...’ he ventured.

Gedd stopped and turned, swearing colourfully at the other peacekeepers trying to bustle past her. They all saw sense and took a wider berth.

‘Not a hive-worker,’ said Klein.

Gedd scowled. She didn’t have time for this.

‘And?’

‘Salvage yard dredged up a ship from over by the northern rigs.’

Gedd’s jaw tightened at the mention of the rigs.

‘I’m still not hearing the punchline, Klein.’

‘The pump-gun suicide, he was crew on that ship.’ He checked a data-slate that Gedd had once surmised was surgically attached to his hand. ‘The *Voidstrafer*.’

‘Ridiculous name for a ship.’

‘It’s a rogue trader,’ said Klein.

Gedd shrugged. ‘That explains it. Was it carrying anything?’

‘No cargo. Salvager said it was empty—’

Gedd snorted. ‘Of course he did.’

Klein went on, ‘—but that the hold had been blown open with charges.’

‘Interesting,’ said Gedd, and it was, but she didn’t know what to do with the information at that point. ‘I’m heading north anyway. I’ll take the cutter for a flyover. See what I can see.’

‘You need company?’ Klein asked.

Gedd had already turned on her heel and was walking away. ‘I do not. Just need transit. I’ll let you know if anything comes up.’

Gedd left Klein and the bustle of the precinct house behind.

Now, she was in a gun-cutter heading for the Hoard, her pilot having been given strict instructions to depart as soon as she was on the ground and be ready for her signal for pickup.

A strange day all round, really.

The Hoard lay at the northern edge of the city, deep into low-hive. It was a collection of vast warehouses and silos, bordered by hab-blocks. Trade had come this way once via the mag-shuttles and the arc-trans, but a catastrophic generator failure had turned the district’s fortunes. Without the Vorganthian main-grid, power became limited. The mag-shuttles no longer ran and the arc-trans froze as the northern winds began to bite. Half of the district lay clad in ice, the other half populated by the desperate dregs too weak or too stubborn to move on.

A heavy snowdrift, grey with ash from the uphive factorums, blighted the commercia-scape as the boxy gun-cutter touched down. Down-thrust from its turbines warmed the ice, and Gedd splashed onto greasy black melt-water as she leapt the short distance from the ship’s exit ramp to the ground.

She held her slicker tight around her body as she moved across a square of piston-hammered asphalt. Behind her, the cutter went airborne again, the din of its engines lessening as it pulled away into the storm.

The place looked deserted, though she thought she saw a few hooded figures huddled in doorways.

‘Bloody twists and wyrds...’ she muttered under her breath. ‘What’s here, Meroved? Other than imminent death due to hypothermia.’

Gedd looked out to the ocean and the distant rigging platforms. Her eyes narrowed and she paused for a moment before moving on. Her father had been a

rigger and had found some strange things in the deep ocean trenches. He never brought them back with him, he never mentioned them in detail at all, but she had heard him murmur in his sleep about the deeps and their secrets.

She turned away, the momentary nostalgia freezing on the wind.

Ahead of her was an old and disused warehouse, its battered plasteel door bent and gaping. ‘There. That’s it,’ she hissed, her breath coming out in spectral plumes. ‘Saint’s piss, I hope it’s warmer on the inside.’

As Gedd reached the warehouse, the wind rattled hard against the windows, and a metal sign outside hinged on a bracket swung dementedly. A thick patina of rust obscured the name on it. A ramp of snow had accumulated out front. Driven by the wind, the door pushed hard against it but could not dislodge the snow. It did yawn wide enough for Gedd to enter without needing to move it.

She was about to go in when she paused at the threshold.

A marking, something recent, had been etched into the frame. She turned and looked over her shoulder but all she saw was snow. Even the wretches in the doorway had gone. A child could have made the mark, an idle act of petty vandalism. She filed the thought away for later use.

The storm lessened the moment Gedd went inside, reducing to a howl that shook roof tiles and plate sidings. Metal pillars supporting the warehouse’s frame creaked ominously but held.

‘Better...’ said Gedd, blowing onto gloved hands.

It was dark within. Shafts of light from outside peeked through cracks in the roof but did little to lift the dinginess of the interior. No power meant no illumination.

She called out. ‘Hello... Peacekeepers. If someone is in here, make yourself known.’

No answer came, but for a slight echo.

‘Because I’ll bloody well shoot you,’ she said in a quieter voice. ‘Creepy as...’

Gedd threw two flares out into the shadowy expanse of the warehouse like a fisherman would cast a hook into the sea. The stench of sulphur and polymeric resin touched the still air.

Crates and other containers, and the strangely anthropomorphic shapes of long-dead machines caught the edge of the light.

She snapped the head off a third flare, using it as a torch, and delved into the darkness.

It wasn’t long before she found the first bodies.

A maintenance pit had been put to use as something arcane and ritualistic.

Standing at the edge, Gedd crouched down and touched her fingers to a smear of solid candle wax. She counted seven other such sites, all arranged around the circular pit. It was large, at least thirty feet across, and accessed via a wide slope that led from the upper part of the warehouse floor.

‘What in the name of the saints...’

The machinery, the tools and other trappings one might expect to find had been pushed aside. In their place she saw heavy-looking chains, half buried in snow, and six partially frozen corpses attached to them. Two sets of chains were empty, either unused or their captives had escaped. Or been set free.

‘Oh, now I am actively disliking this place.’

She thought about contacting Klein and getting him to bring the troops, but remembered what Meroved had said. She would not disobey him.

Instead, she listened, trying to discern if she was truly alone. Gedd only heard the wind, wailing a lament and pulling at the roof tiles as it tried to get in.

An ill feeling wormed into her gut, a sense of unease she found hard to dislodge. Meroved had told her to observe and investigate. She had to press on. The Verifier felt heavy and reassuring, holstered to her hip. She had come this far.

‘Saint’s piss...’

Exhaling a held breath, Gedd took the slope.

Once inside the pit, Gedd approached one of the bodies, a woman. She had suffered some physical deterioration from the adverse conditions, but the wounds to her face, arms and chest looked like they were made prior to death. Sigils Gedd didn’t recognise had been cut into the flesh and showed some evidence of healing. Clothes, little more than ragged, gossamer robes, had darkened with the blood. The chains had similar configurations carved into each link. Some of the links had been broken.

‘What is this all about?’

Closer examination of the bodies revealed something that Gedd did not expect. Her skin crawled at the sight of it and she wondered if this was what Meroved had meant when he referred to an encroaching darkness.

Each of the corpses had some minor transfiguration. Tiny bone nubs protruding from the forehead; black lesions across the back, face and neck; a tongue split into a ragged fork; needle-like teeth; a partly distended jaw, now broken; lengthening of the limbs, toes and fingers; loss of hair and the extension of the spinal column. She catalogued all of it, writing down her findings on a data-slate that she tucked back into her slicker when she was finished.

The changes could be birth defects – Gedd had seen wyrds with similar afflictions – but she suspected and feared they were not.

She was sweating in her gear, despite the fact it was colder than a Valhallan winter. Gedd wanted to turn around and get the hell out, but something kept her rooted. She hoped it was a sense of duty. There was something else in here, beyond the pit. Gedd kept moving.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

There was something wrong about the figure standing twenty feet in front of Meroved. It was a man, that much he had managed to interpret from its shape and build, but his head was bowed and he wore the anonymous overalls of a hive labourer. He had yet to step into the light after the hololith of Ylax Orn had faded, and stood remarkably still. It was almost as if he wasn't breathing.

'I am Meroved, once of the Ten Thousand, servant of the Emperor's Light. Come forward and make yourself known.'

'I know who you are.'

The voice definitely belonged to the man, but it was inhuman and entirely too deep and too resonant, as if more than one person were speaking at once.

'Do you know who I am?'

'No...' said Meroved, stepping back as he moved into a fighting stance, 'but I know *what* you are.'

'So confident, so sure of yourself... Do you think he was the same? Would you like me to tell you how he died?'

'Why don't you shut your mouth and try to kill me instead?' Meroved holstered the pistol. He wanted to do this hand-to-hand.

'Oh,' said the daemonhost, lifting its night-black gaze from the floor and revealing all the horror of its unholy countenance. ***'I would be delighted to.'***

Two shiny horns protruded from its forehead, framing a face elongated by the rigours of the warp. Its mouth was a pallid scythe-slit, filled with needle-sharp teeth. Its nose was long and edged like a dagger. Patches of dark discolouration covered its skin like a colonisation of plague.

As it advanced on Meroved, it seemed to stretch. The skin tautened, then ripped, revealing gleaming bone beneath. It teetered on spindly legs. Its overlong

arms swept down from its body like an ape's. The ribcage bulged then broke apart, the jagged edges of bone becoming gnashing teeth and the red place within, a maw. Its neck distended, uncoiling in peristaltic fashion until the now diminutive head wobbled on a grotesque tentacle of flesh.

The clothes it had once worn sloughed away, caught by some unseen fire and turned into burning scraps that fled on a stinking breeze, until it stood naked and foul as the night it was spawned. Spoiled meat and rancid milk tainted the air.

Meroved roared, never taking his eyes off the stalk-like daemon as it bore down on him with unnatural vigour.

He missed the first blow struck at him, his own cut with the vibro-sword glancing off rubberised flesh. Meroved lost his feet, a whipping arm taking his legs and dumping him hard on the ground.

Tasting blood, he realised he had bitten his tongue.

Shoving his body up with a grunt of effort, Meroved hacked at the daemon's ankle and was rewarded with a discordant shriek of pain.

He smiled grimly. 'Old weapons... They leave a mark.'

He jerked, a bone spar suddenly jutting from his chest where the daemon had impaled him.

Slow, Meroved. Too slow.

Cutting down with the vibro-blade, he severed the wretched limb and left the end of it sticking in his body like a piece of shrapnel.

Rusty too...

A savage kick sent Meroved sprawling, pain lancing up his back as he struck the wall.

'I remember this being easier with the gilded arsenal,' he said through gritted teeth, hauling himself to his feet as the daemon paraded in front of him.

'We have fought before, you and I,' it said, and Meroved was all too willing to let it talk. Daemons liked to talk. It was one of the attributes of mankind that they adopted with some relish. To taunt, to beguile, to mock and to promise... These were the daemon's tools as much as any bony blade or sharpened tooth.

Grimacing, Meroved wrenched out the bone spur sticking in his chest. The end of it was thick with dark blood and he realised it had gone in deep.

'Possibly... I don't remember.' He took a shuddering breath. Any one of the blows he had sustained would have killed a lesser being. 'My mind isn't what it used to be. Either that or you're just not very memorable.'

It smiled, revealing crocodilian teeth.

'Trying to wound me with words. There's only one word that can hurt me,

and you don't know what it is.'

Meroved sneered. 'I don't need your true name to kill you.'

The daemon struck with viperous quickness, and Meroved cried out as it lacerated his chest and left a ragged gouge in his flesh. He only just clung on to the vial of silver liquid he had taken from a pouch on his belt.

'As I was saying...' he rasped, shaking the vial hard before tossing it at the daemon. It hissed as the vial shattered, bathing it in some kind of holy acid that burned at its emaciated flesh and sent it reeling.

'*Sanctus lamenta,*' snarled Meroved, feeling the pain of his injuries. 'It means "saint's tears", you ignorant piece of filth.'

Foul-smelling smoke coiled off the daemon's body and left it raw and bleeding.

Meroved charged, swinging his sword two-handed. He closed fast before the daemon could recover, stepping between its gangling limbs and hacking up into its groin.

It writhed and staggered with every blow, emitting a porcine squeal from its overlarge mouth. Stabbing down with its arms, it tried to pierce Meroved's shoulders and back, but he weaved and turned and stayed out of harm's way. As long as he stayed beneath it, it could not bring its superior reach to bear.

But Meroved was tiring. The wound to his chest had taken more out of him than he had at first realised. Blood flowed freely over his armour, pooling at his feet. He almost slipped in it, and as he hastily regained his footing the daemon arced its neck and spat a fusillade of sharpened teeth, as though it were blowing Meroved a kiss.

He recoiled, but dared not release his hand from his weapon to clutch at the wound to his face. If he dropped his sword, it was over. Blood now streaming down his face as well, Meroved swept out the vibro-blade in a wide arc. He cut through the daemon's legs at the knee and it collapsed, a spider flailing without its limbs.

Meroved cut a second fusillade of teeth out of the air with the flat of his blade and advanced. With the daemon screaming curses, he severed one arm then the other, and then began hacking at its neck. It took several blows, each one releasing a welter of stinking ichor that gummed up his armour and burned his scalp and exposed skin. Meroved did not relent. The only way to vanquish a daemon was to disassemble it. The screams of its death throes reverberated around the cavern, but Meroved was resolute. Limbs burning, dizzy from the blood loss, his attack became urgent and frenzied. His grief found expression in a final roar of triumph and retribution. When he was done, he sagged and almost

fell. He dug the sword into the ground, using it as a crutch.

Nothing remained of the daemonhost but a rancid puddle of bubbling ichor that was evaporating into even fouler smoke. Meroved took care not to breathe it in. He blacked out for a few seconds, dark flashes invading his vision, and realised he was blind in one eye. He reached up with trembling fingers to find the wound and felt a ragged eye socket instead. Spitting a gobbet of blood he found the stimm-injector amongst his trappings and did not stint on the dosage. Bright fire lit up his nerve endings. He knew the effects would be short-lived and that medical attention would be needed, so he used the time he had to raise Zatu on the vox.

The servitor's response was swift.

'Have you found the relic, my lord?'

'No, but I am convinced it's here, Zatu. I have found something much, much worse.'

'You sound injured. Should I—'

'I am and yes, despatch the gun-cutter. Make sure there's a full medical array. I am sending you my location. The Throne must be made aware, Zatu. A threat is here in Vorganthian. It is real and it is dire beyond imagining. The cult of the Illuminated lives. I must contact the captain-general immediately.'

He gasped for breath, clutching the wound at his side. Then he glanced at the foetid remains of the daemon, almost incorporeal to the point of absolute dissolution.

'And try to reach Gedd. She has no idea what she's walking into.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

The warehouse was large and as black as an ocean without moonlight. Gedd's last flare had faded, fizzling to smoke, but the roof was more dilapidated here and enough ambient light came in from above that she could see fairly well without it.

She had yet to draw her sidearm, but felt the urge to now.

It was ahead. Something framed by the light. It reminded Gedd of a roadside shrine, an effigy mounted on a crude frame.

As she drew closer, she felt an instinctive urge to turn around. To not look at the shrine. Nothing good could come of knowing what the shapes were, silhouetted in the light, or why it smelled like it did. She brandished the smoking flare like a warding charm, despite how ridiculous she knew that was.

She was only a few feet away when the wind ripped loose a roof tile and the grey light fell upon the thing in front of her.

Gedd's knees buckled and she fell hard. She was vomiting violently, the urge to do so almost subconscious. She stayed like that, on all fours, head down with one hand still on the flare and wanting the other to draw her gun but unable to.

'Holy Throne,' she murmured, surprised at her sudden piety. 'Emperor... gird my soul against all evil.'

She tried to rise but couldn't. It was as if a heavy weight had been looped around her neck. It pressed against her and made it hard to breathe. Gedd's heart was pounding much too fast. A cardiac arrest felt imminent.

'Breathe...' she told herself, and in her head her voice sounded small and insignificant, like it had been when she was a child and her father had gone off to ply the deeps. A memory imposed itself in her mind, of a cold hab, of a weeping mother, of a drowned father...

‘Breathe...’ she snarled, and her voice sounded older, and the memory faded, consigned to the mental compartment where Gedd locked away all of her fears and doubts.

‘Now, get the hell up,’ she said through gritted teeth, anger lending her much-needed strength. ‘Get up!’

She lifted her head, still trembling, and then managed to get to her knees. She wiped the sick from her mouth, the flare wafting madly in her shaking grip. She held it as steady as she could, pointing it at the abomination and looking at it even though she knew the nightmare would forever haunt her afterwards.

The man hung upside down, attached to a thick iron ‘X’ like a tank trap that kept him in a cruciform position. Wire bound his ankles, wrists and neck. Someone had taken a blade to his eyelids, and his dead gaze bored into her. The flesh around his chest and abdomen had been neatly cut, and the skin flayed and pulled away from his body. He glistened, the frost upon his exposed bones turned red and shiny. The ragged flesh had been stitched to his hands and the two translucent flaps reminded Gedd of wings.

A sacrifice. An offering.

It resembled a perverse homage to the aquila, only in reverse. Purity seals nailed to his ribcage gently fluttered in the air like rotting feathers. The man had been a priest, one of the Ecclesiarchy.

Out of the corner of her eye, Gedd saw the silhouette of a second figure. It turned slowly on a length of chain, its limbs wrapped in razor wire. Beaten, battered, adorned with savage cuts, the eyes had been—

‘Holy Emperor...’ Gedd sobbed.

Then a third figure, vast and distended, writhing with parasites and a fourth bound with studded leather, its skin peeled away to reveal—

Tears blurring her vision, she looked away.

Gedd cast aside the dead flare as she began to weaken, the terror pushing her down. Bile rose up in her throat, hot and acerbic. She vomited again and saw something black and vaguely resembling a feather amongst her leavings. She had to get away, to get out. She would die if she stayed. Gedd crawled. Indistinct chattering worried at the edge of her hearing like the rapid snapping of many beaks or the clack-clack of bird talons.

She found the strength to rise, pushing up onto her heels and staggering at first before she ran, teeth gritted, into the snow and the night.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

He turned off the hololith, plunging the room into a penumbral twilight. Shrouded by shadows, he shut his eyes and asked for the strength to continue.

Ylax Orn sighed, weary. His bones ached, his skin felt as thin as parchment.

‘Have you ever served a cause?’ he asked. ‘I have. I still do. It was not always so. I used to be envious of the other priests of my order, the ones who had found purpose. For the longest time I looked for my own. I gave up my vestments and became a missionary, hoping I would find my path that way. Spread the creed, I thought – bring the faithless back to His light. I thought this was my purpose, my cause.’

Orn gave a sad shake of the head.

‘I searched, across worlds, across the void. I travelled on freighters and with rogue traders. I even fought at the side of the Astra Militarum. But I remained unfulfilled. I cannot describe to you how utterly demoralising that is, to seek and seek, and to not know *why*.

‘I actually don't know how old I am. After the first century I stopped counting. It didn't seem meaningful to weigh the significance of my life in years. Then I found illumination and everything I knew and understood, everything I believed was possible... It all changed.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ rasped a frightened voice from behind him.

‘Because I want you to understand why this matters.’

Orn leaned forwards and there was a sharp but diminutive flare of light. A candle flame flickered into life, easing back the darkness. Its light fell across the spines of books, and scrolls bound with leather twine.

‘History, ancestry, origins,’ he said. ‘These volumes, every scrap of parchment in this library was compiled over many years. Some are extremely old.’ Orn

stepped around the pedestal where he had lit the candle and gently traced his fingers down the spine of one of the books.

‘What does any of this have to do with me?’

‘It’s blood,’ answered Orn. ‘*His* blood. I needed a means of reaching Him. *That* is my cause, my purpose. It has been difficult, I won’t lie.’ He looked up as if an answer would present itself in the grimy vaults above, but all he saw was dirty glass and shadows. ‘I have done regrettable things. I had begun to doubt.’

‘Please... let me go,’ rasped the voice.

‘I wandered, alone and in search of death,’ said Orn, as if he hadn’t heard. ‘I left behind a battlefield of the dead as the very night seemed to split open and a ragged wound tore across the black. As the burning rain began, I sought refuge in an old, abandoned chapel. I intended to die there but His will demanded a different fate for me. I found the Cage. It was just lying there, as if waiting to be discovered. And though back then I had no idea of what it actually was, I knew it was significant. And so it proved. It became my salvation.’

‘I don’t understand any of this.’

‘You will.’

‘What you do want of me? I have archival duties that must be attended to. I have scrolls that—’

Orn turned to regard a man stooped behind him. He was thin-faced and pale, studious-looking, and wore long tan robes. The two guards from the rigging platform stood in the shadows close by.

‘I need your blood, or specifically, your *bloodline*. You have been exceptionally difficult to find. So many records, so many falsehoods and dead ends.’ Orn smiled. ‘Psychic resonance,’ he said.

‘W-what?’

‘It leaves a mark in the ether, the little candle flames of our souls, the anima that the ravenous beyond do so hunger for. It’s unique, like a fingerprint. Yours is particularly old and rarefied.’

The man protested. ‘I am not a wyrd.’

‘Would you even know if you were? Your ancestry is deeply buried. I needed a...’ He paused, seeking the word. ‘A *trigger*, a way to tease it out. I narrowed it down to this city, but finding one amongst billions? I discovered a better way than dusty ancient records and enlisted a dubious ally to obtain what I needed. The trigger.’

‘Please...’ said the man, wincing. ‘Something is wrong. My heads hurts.’

‘Pain is necessary, I’m afraid.’

The man's eyes widened, his pupils dilating. 'I can feel it... in my mind.'

'Yes, it's brutish.'

'What is it? Am I insane? Is all of this—'

'You are awake, you are sane and the voice you can hear, that bestial voice, it is very, very old and it is stirring your psychic resonance.'

If the man thought anything about that he kept it hidden behind a mask of abject terror.

Orn seemed not to notice. He gestured to the man's belongings sitting on a table beside him, a lectorum-bible and the tools of a scribe.

'A census-taker,' he murmured, turning a few of the pages and glancing absently over the names carefully inscribed within. 'How the ordinary and the mundane can give root to the exceptional and the unique.'

'Please...' said the man, his voice a reedy croak, 'let me go. I have broken no laws, I am a loyal servant of Terra.'

'Yes,' said Orn, his attention back on the man, 'yes, you are. And you will serve. Rejoice, I have given you purpose. Fitting that you will give your life for Him as He once did for you. Tell me,' Orn continued as the man was led out of the library by his minders, 'have you ever heard of the Sigillites?'

Only when the man turned and saw the cage of black iron beyond, did he begin to scream.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Gedd bent double, her hands on her knees as she tried to breathe. She barely felt the cold. The image of the butchered priest returned when she closed her eyes, so she stared into the distance and tried not to let the darkness in. She had felt something inside the warehouse, a presence both simultaneously there and not there. It lingered, like smoke on cloth after a fire or the taste of spoiled meat. It had *seen* her.

Gedd wanted to scream, to tear at her eyes as if it might rid her of the memory. She half imagined that terrible effigy lurching into motion, tearing free of its crucifixion and taking flight on its tattered, flesh wings, a hellish shriek resounding as she—

Gedd bit her lip and the pain brought her back.

She saw a figure moving unsteadily through the snow, which seemed only to have worsened since she had been inside the warehouse. Gedd drew the Verifier. Her aim wobbled but she managed to hold it firmly enough to draw a bead on the figure's chest.

'Halt,' she said, trying to put some confidence back into her voice. 'Peacekeeper. I am armed. Come no closer.'

The figure kept coming, swaying drunkenly and mumbling. Something wasn't right about its uneven gait, and a long uninterrupted strand of drool hung from the figure's mouth.

'I am warning you.'

It looked like one of the dregs she had seen skulking in a doorway earlier.

It kept coming as if it hadn't heard her. She fired once into the ground, hoping the shot would snap the figure out of its strange torpor but it didn't even react. Gedd reckoned it was about twenty feet away, the snow plastered to its face and

clothes. An odd ache began to build at the back of Gedd's teeth. She winced. Then it got worse. It seemed to coincide with the proximity of the figure. Her vision began to blur. The figure started to moan and then scream, throwing its head back to clutch at its skull, tiny lightning arcs cascading from its mouth and eyes. Gedd fired, and grimaced as her head felt like it was cracking apart. The bullet tore open the figure's shoulder, releasing a puff of blood and a ragged bloom of cloth. It staggered but didn't stop. The lightning arcs grew worse. She felt their heat. Her own pain intensified. Is this what happened to the poor bastard her and Klein had found just off the down-trans?

'I said... stop!' she yelled, and fired three times.

Gedd could scarcely see, but she knew at least one of her bullets had found its mark when the figure slumped and fell. Dark red spilled across the snow.

'I'm sorry...' she whispered, breathless and afraid, driven to her knees. The pounding in her head became a roar of nerve-shredding tinnitus, failing to abate even though the figure she had thought was causing it was dead. She dropped the gun to press at her ears, her mouth wide in a wordless scream for help. Her entire world was pulsing, and it hurt just to open her eyes. From her knees she slumped onto her back, willing the throbbing agony to stop but knowing she was powerless against it. She curled into a foetal ball. Her teeth clenched and her fists tightened as she was wracked by spasms.

I'm going to die here, she thought, alone, in the snow, next to some bloody cultist's den.

Something warm touched her neck. She heard a faint click and then the whirr of mechanical activation. The pain lessened almost instantly. It diminished so much that Gedd could open her eyes. She could function. She saw Meroved crouching beside her, a gun-cutter in the distance, sat up on its landing stanchions at the edge of the asphalt with engines humming.

'Gedd...' he was saying. His voice sounded muffled at first, as though they were conversing under water.

She nodded to show that she was rational.

'What happened? Everything sounds muted.'

'It's the dampener,' he told her, and she felt the collar he had placed around her neck. 'You'll adjust.'

Her eyes widened when she at last managed to focus.

'Saint's piss, what happened to you?' She reached up to touch his ragged eye socket, but Meroved leaned back and Gedd withdrew her hand.

'The fraying at the edges... It has begun.'

‘What the hell does that mean, Meroved?’ She winced as a fresh spike of pain hit her. ‘What’s happening?’

‘The veil is thinning. We have to leave here now.’

‘Not until I get answers. I felt something in the warehouse... A presence. Is this the thinning veil? Is that what we’re fighting?’ She took a deep breath. ‘I saw something too...’

‘Four crosses.’

‘You knew?’

‘I guessed. You’re not the only one who had an encounter. Each sacrifice is devoted to one of the cardinal aspects of Ruin. The effigies represent the four temptations, the four great sins. There is the *changed* and the *agonised*, and the *bloated* and the *flayed*,’ said Meroved. ‘These are old names, but there are many others. Each is a benediction to a presence beyond the veil.’

‘Again with the veil. Throne... What I felt, what did it—’

Meroved took a small, stoppered bottle from a wooden casket hooked to his belt.

‘Drink this,’ he said. ‘You will feel better.’

Gedd took the bottle and pulled out its stopper. She sniffed at the contents.

‘It stinks... What is this?’

‘Potent. It will help. You’re not the first in my employ to have had this reaction.’

‘How am I faring?’

‘Better than most.’

Gedd swigged it in one. It went down hard and lit up her nerve endings like wildfire. Her senses heightened briefly, painfully, but it was warming, like the sudden relief of a balm applied to an enflamed tooth. ‘Saint’s piss! It burns! Do you drink this?’

‘My constitution has a greater tolerance for alcohol.’

‘Are you sure it’s not fuel for that gun-cutter?’

Meroved did not answer. He merely watched.

Gedd nodded. ‘That does help. Thank you.’ She glanced at the warehouse. It loomed with an animus she hadn’t felt before, but her terror of it had lessened since taking Meroved’s draught.

‘What’s happening, Meroved? Why are you unaffected by whatever this is?’

‘I am not like you.’

‘That is something of an understatement.’

‘We have to leave.’

He got to his feet and made for the idling gun-cutter. Through the drifts, Gedd saw a servitor at the pilot's controls.

Meroved kept walking. Gedd noticed a limp.

'You're really hurt.'

'Yes.'

'Saint's piss... You can *be* hurt.'

'Yes.'

Gedd saw more figures emerging, staggering into the storm. She gestured.

'Ignore them,' said Meroved. 'They won't reach us.'

Meroved had made it to the ramp and waited there for Gedd to catch up.

'Shouldn't we try to help them?' she asked, calling after him.

He stared back at her, impassive.

'They are beyond that now. Get aboard. This is just the beginning.'

Gedd took the ramp, which slowly closed behind her. The gun-cutter rose on its wing turbines, its thrusters building to a scream before levelling off again as it soared away, leaving the Hoard behind.

Gedd sat down, strapped in and hung her head by her knees.

'What was that out there? It felt like my skull was about to split open.'

'That would be accurate,' Meroved replied. He had also taken a seat and was starting to shed his cloak and armour.

Gedd gave him a scathing look to suggest she did not appreciate his candour.

'What causes it? Is it a weapon of some kind? How does it work?'

'Those you know as wyrd are more severely affected. Their connection to the warp and their powers are greatly amplified. Too much and—'

'Violent cranial explosion death, like my fake suicide on the down-trans.'

'Precisely.'

'But I'm not a wyrd... Am I?'

'No, you'd be dead if you were.'

'I'd be dead if I were still out there too.'

'Possibly.'

Gedd tapped the null-collar. 'So I assume I shouldn't take this off any time soon.'

'That would be a very bad idea.'

'You still haven't told me what it is. I assume this is the other business you referred to earlier?'

'You are very astute.'

‘I agree, but that’s not an answer.’

‘A relic, something very old, something mankind should not meddle with, was stolen. It has since reappeared here in Vorganthian. It’s an amplifier of sorts, a piece of arcana from a dark time in mankind’s past. Whatever is fuelling it must be potent.’

‘I don’t feel any better or wiser for knowing any of that.’

Meroved shrugged. He had stripped off his torso layer to reveal an ugly gash across his chest and even uglier goring in his flesh.

Gedd swore under her breath.

‘That wound... You should be dead. What happened to you?’

‘One of my brothers was murdered. The same thing that killed him tried to kill me. I survived.’

Gedd’s eyes narrowed. ‘When you say “brother” you mean brotherhood, don’t you, as in a fellow warrior?’

‘His name was Kazamende. He was regarded as a protector amongst my former order, one sent to watch over someone of importance.’

‘A duty he failed if he’s dead?’

Meroved nodded. ‘Yes, one he failed.’

‘And this person of importance... Where are they right now?’

‘I do not know.’

‘Could they still be alive?’

‘It’s possible.’

A brief silence fell as the events of the last few hours began to sink in. Gedd found the engine noise soothing and realised how close to exhaustion she was. If not for Meroved’s fortifying tonic, she would probably have collapsed by now. Instead, she watched in silence as he first washed then dressed his wound. It looked savage, like the kind of damage that never really heals.

After fifteen minutes of silence, Gedd decided she had to know.

‘Who are you, Meroved, or should I ask, who *were* you?’

‘I am my Emperor’s loyal servant, even in exile,’ he replied.

‘A Space Marine?’

‘No...’ said Meroved at length, looping the bindings tightly and methodically around his chest. ‘I am no wolf. I was a lion once.’

‘I don’t know what any of that means.’

‘It doesn’t matter, Gedd.’

‘Call me Sula.’

Meroved smiled, despite the obvious pain he was in.

‘Sula,’ he repeated.

‘It’s short for Ursula.’

He laughed. ‘I know.’

‘So, what do we do now?’

‘We wait. Word has been sent. Terra has heeded us. They are coming.’

Gedd frowned. ‘Who is coming?’

‘My former brothers in arms, the Adeptus Custodes.’

‘Former? But that would mean...’

Meroved nodded. ‘Now you have your answer.’

Gedd leaned back in her seat.

‘Saint’s piss...’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Imperial Palace, Tower of Hegemon, Terra

Trajann Valoris was already waiting for them as Adio and Cartovandis entered the triumph hall. He sat at the end of a long wooden table, remarkable for the fact that it was hewn from actual oak and preserved by the arcane science of Adeptus Mechanicus magi. A host of rigid banners flanked the captain-general on either side. Mosaics caught the lambent light of lume-sconces. Both described past victories, and hung heavy with dust or were faded with age.

He reclined in the easy manner of a king comfortable before his court, his left leg outstretched and the other tucked in, a gold-armoured knee protruding. A red cloak lay across one shoulder, partially hooding the sculpted eagle of his guard. His lion mantle sat at his feet, a predator at rest. His helm, a fearsome mask of auramite crested with a blood-red plume, sat on one arm of his throne; the other supported Valoris' elbow, and his hardy chin was leant upon a clenched and gauntleted fist. He had the manner of a philosopher, an appearance which held some truth, though his musings tended inevitably to the bellicose, to war.

He appeared not to have seen the two Custodians as they passed through the soaring arch, also decorated with the now lustreless glory of old crusades, the dusty bricks of a fallen empire. And then he spoke.

'Take a seat,' he said without turning, his voice low and deep, his attention on the darkness that only partly occluded craggy features riddled with the fissures of scars. Even in this rare, pensive state he radiated aggression. Not towards his comrades – his ire did not extend to the Ten Thousand but rather was a form of restiveness, a palpable energy too volatile to shackle. Sinews in his neck stood out, thick as rope, his jaw tensed, a possible prelude to wrath.

Cartovandis glanced at Adio; they had just been about to leave the celebratory when they had received the summons. Adio gave the slightest inclination of his

head. Like Valoris they went unhelmed out of respect for their kind, and they sat at opposite sides of the table.

It was only at this point that Cartovandis realised Valoris had not been not alone before they had entered. His companion stood cloaked by shadows, his hands clasped in front of him as if resting them on the pommel of an unseen weapon, though he was not ostensibly armed. Unlike the other Custodians in the room, he wore his helm, his shield host easy enough to determine even in the gloom: red shoulder guard and grey-white robes, one of the Emissaries Imperatus. Cartovandis stifled a momentary pang of envy, deeming his thoughts unworthy. At least he knew why they had been summoned here – the Emperor had willed it through His gilded proxy.

Neither Cartovandis nor Adio spoke. They settled into their seats and did not stir. They trusted they waited for good reason and saw no need to breach the silence with idle and pointless words. Both had set their helms down upon the table, and done so reverently, the mask of each as impassive as the face of its owner.

Valoris would address them when he was ready. Cartovandis realised the captain-general was still waiting for someone.

Before long, footsteps echoed down the gallery that led to the triumph hall. A single set, clipped, precise and metronomic.

Adio turned, and his posture stiffened as he recognised the newcomer.

So did Cartovandis.

‘Syr...’ the newcomer said.

‘Varo.’

Then he turned his head to address Adio. ‘Brother.’

Adio did not move, not even to acknowledge Varogalant at first. At last, he gave a curt nod.

Varogalant bowed. ‘Captain-general.’

Valoris gestured for him to sit, which Varogalant did, removing his helm as the others had and revealing the same swarthy complexion as his brother, only the Shadowkeeper looked gaunter around the eyes, which were brown like his skin. He had close-shaven white hair and a seemingly perpetual frown furrowed his brow. The burdens of his calling were obvious to all.

‘Tell them why they are here, Zayadian,’ said Valoris to the emissary, his mind seemingly still on the dark and the enemies he imagined there.

The Emissary Imperatus stepped forwards into the light.

‘I have heard the voice of the Emperor. He speaks each of your names,’ uttered

Zayadian with heavy solemnity, ‘and bids you away from Terra.’

Cartovandis shifted in his seat, his reaction visceral and subconscious. The noisy scrape of chair legs drew all eyes to him.

‘This cannot be...’ he whispered, fighting down a growl of disbelief.

‘It is,’ Zayadian replied. ‘It is the *speculum obscurus*. Our conclave has determined it.’

Cartovandis was about to object more strenuously and even Varogalant had a query forming in his expression, before Valoris finally turned to regard them.

His bloodshot eyes spoke of anger, but his voice was calm, his tone measured.

‘Word has reached me from an old ally, one of the Eyes,’ he explained. ‘A threat to the Throneworld,’ he looked pointedly at Varogalant, ‘and the discovery of a relic of Old Night, stolen from the Dark Cells.’

Cartovandis noticed the slightest clenching of Varogalant’s fists and knew that the Shadowkeeper would voice no concern at leaving Terra now. In his mind, he was already on the hunt.

‘It is the Emperor’s will that you three meet this threat,’ said Zayadian.

Valoris turned his gaze on Cartovandis and Adio. If possible, he looked sterner than before.

‘Kazamende is dead.’

‘Mercy of the Throne,’ Adio hissed, leaning forwards in his seat. ‘How?’

‘It doesn’t matter how,’ snarled Valoris. ‘All that matters is what happens now. He was of your host, Adio. He must be avenged. The protection of the Aquilan Shields must be absolute.’

‘And what of me, captain-general?’ asked Cartovandis.

Valoris raised an eyebrow and it pulled at his scar tissue, rendering it even uglier and more savage. ‘I assume you do not question the Emperor’s will.’

‘I only wish to know. I have never ventured beyond the Throneworld. My place is by His side. What has changed?’

‘A great deal, I think you know.’

A great deal, echoed Cartovandis in his mind, choking back the grief of his isolation from the Emperor’s voice. A single word tore him from reverie. A name.

‘Meroved,’ said Valoris.

Cartovandis’ eyes widened a fraction. His jaw stiffened.

‘Yes...’ added Valoris. ‘I thought that might get your attention.’

Cartovandis’ gaze hardened. Even if he could, he would not refuse to come to the aid of his old comrade. He owed Meroved his life, but also his pain.

‘When do we leave?’

‘Immediately. A ship is being prepared for departure as we speak,’ said Valoris.

‘Then we should make ready,’ Adio cut in, eager to be under way. He spared a glance for his brother but then looked away.

‘And where are we bound, captain-general?’ asked Varogalant, showing none of his brother’s unease.

‘Kobor, at the edge of the Sol System. Meroved’s report will be made known to you on the way.’

Cartovandis was the first to rise.

‘If there’s nothing further...’

Valoris nodded, bidding them on their way.

Adio and Varogalant followed, the latter waiting for the former and last to leave as they exited the triumph hall headed for the transport bay and the Coronus grav-carrier that would ferry them to their voidship.

Trajann Valoris watched them go.

‘A long time since they fought together, captain-general,’ remarked Zayadian.

‘The Emperor’s will is not without its quirks.’

Zayadian gave a mirthless laugh.

‘It was at the Lion’s Gate,’ said Valoris.

‘I remember it.’

‘As do I, Zayadian,’ Valoris replied, his words thickening with anger and grief.
‘As do I.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Lion's Gate, Terra

Evil had taken on corporeality in the army of screaming Neverborn awaiting the Custodians.

Meroved could hear them, despite the thickness of the gate in front of him.

Every one of the Ten Thousand waiting in the grand entrance hall could hear them. Whispers of damnation, curses and promises – all fell on deaf ears.

Four shield hosts stood together, a mustering not seen since the War of Shame, almost four thousand Custodians in full battle panoply. A gilded sea of Hykanatoi with spears, blades and shields looked to their general.

Blood-red light coursed through openings in the wall where gun emplacements had begun to engage, and it bathed Trajann Valoris in a murderous aura, as if he could appear any more belligerent.

He uttered no war cry, standing atop an ornate dais for all his warriors to see. Instead, he cast his gimlet gaze across the pristine banners, the war engines and the Revered Fallen, and as if satisfied with what he saw, he raised his guardian spear aloft. At his signal, the Lion's Gate began to open. Mechanisms unused for millennia churned with metallic agony, shrieking loud enough to eclipse the hellspawn beyond for a short while.

As the shield host began a slow march, Meroved felt a hand upon his right shoulder. He turned to Syr Cartovandis.

‘We must annihilate them, shield-captain.’

Meroved nodded. ‘Aye, and we will.’

‘Terra must be rid of this filth.’

The gate's aperture widened; more light and air fed in, thick with blood and brimstone. The wailing of the lost and damned became so loud it was difficult to hear.

In the end Meroved did not answer with words, but slammed his spear haft against his shield and saw it echoed amongst his gilded brothers as hundreds of struck shields stirred up a strident chorus. The daemons began to wail.

Let them suffer.

Favouring a glance to his left, Meroved saw Adio at his other shoulder, the banner clenched tightly in the Vexilus Praetor's fist. The effigy of the Eagle Resplendent shone golden despite the bloody light.

Hold it high, brother, Meroved willed, the furore beyond the slowly opening gate almost overwhelming now.

Adio spared a glance to the only patch of darkness amongst the gold, the grim ranks of the Shadowkeepers, clad in black and summoned from the Dark Cells to stand and fight on Terra's soil for the first time in millennia. The distraction was fleeting; Adio turned away as if he'd found what he sought and returned his attention to what lay ahead.

The slow march became a steady run, the tracked Land Raiders and hovering Vertus Praetors astride Dawneagles keeping pace. Contemptors amongst the throng, side by side with warriors in Allarus Terminator plate, sped up into a lumbering gait.

With every step, the light grew brighter and more visceral. A sense of moment fell upon Meroved, his storm shield thrust to the fore and his spear at shoulder height, poised to strike. The steady run became a sprint, the gate yawned wide unleashing the Emperor's Legion in full fury. Hundreds of guardian spears drew level, ready for the initial thrust.

The Ten Thousand passed through the towering arch above the Lion's Gate and into a cacophony.

Hellspawn in their multitudes surged against them like an unclean sea. The entire processional that led to the Lion's Gate was choked with red-skinned daemons capering on reverse-jointed legs, with brutish flesh hounds swathed in brimstone scales and hulking mechanical beasts that bellowed metallically, spewing smoke and ash.

For Meroved, the conflict came in violent flashes, his vision shrinking to myopic focus but his awareness of the greater battle acute on account of his Emperor-given gifts.

Above, a flock of winged creatures duelled with golden gunships. Leathery bodies fell like burning rain. One of the craft exploded, violent and terrible, as it was overwhelmed. It took the harpies with it, and crashed beyond sight of the walls.

On one flank, Venerable Uriaxes wrestled a beast to the ground, hurling it onto its side before he tore open its chest and ripped out the foul organs within.

A sweeping run by a squadron of Kataphraktoi saw a pack of flesh hounds skewered on crackling lances, a salvo of flakburst missiles launched from jetbikes finishing the task.

These were but skirmishes, preludes to the greater struggle.

A massive host of red-skinned foot-soldiers dominated the processional and threw their bodies onto the spears of the Hykanatoi with reckless abandon.

Meroved saw dozens raised up, impaled and then decapitated by a sentinel blade a moment later. Hundreds leapt at the Custodians, cackling, only to land again in severed pieces. A shield wall formed, bearing the brunt of the daemons' fearless charge. Limbs shattered. Skulls cracked. The Custodians pressed forwards into the mass, grinding bodies underfoot into slowly disintegrating ichor. A spear-tip of gold and black drove into the sea of red, parting it like the prow of an inexorable ship.

Having weathered the onslaught, Valoris led the counter-attack.

Meroved saw only glimpses, but he felt the shape and rhythm of the battle changing as the Custodians battled their way free of the gate and began to fight as they were always meant to, as individuals but acutely in synch.

The attack was devastating, a thresher of golden blades hacking apart the daemon-kin with deadly precision.

This was their war, *the* war against the one true enemy. It lent the Custodians fury, not the unshackled wrath of their crimson-fleshed counterparts but the pure, focused anger of a surgical laser cutting out the foe's heart.

As the battle wore on, it expanded. Meroved found himself fighting alongside Cartovandis and Adio, each warrior complementing the other though acting entirely alone. It was a curiosity of the Custodians to fight in such a way; it had been thus since they were a Legio, before the adepts they had become. No other warrior of the Imperium could do the same – even the much vaunted and tragically flawed Adeptus Astartes needed the strength of the pack. The Ten Thousand felt no such dependency and yet they were in tune.

In a rare moment of respite, Meroved took stock.

Fires burned in the Terran night, reaching up in swirling conflagrations to touch the sky and set it aflame. Ash choked the air, thick with blood and black dust. Everything burned. A diabolic lens had imposed itself over the Throneworld and here at the Lion's Gate that reality would fade or be made permanent.

Meroved would die before letting that come to pass, and his brotherhood was

not alone in that conviction. Silver-armoured Grey Knights fought beside the Ten Thousand, daemon-killers by trade if not by right, and the Neverborn army faltered. The defenders of Terra pressed their advantage, slaughtering without restraint, constantly moving to the next battle, to the next enemy.

Terra must be rid of this filth.

Meroved intended to see that come to pass.

A hefty gouge had been carved in the ranks of the bloodletters, which bayed and fought and snarled at their gradual but certain dissolution.

Meroved had barely been struck, and his armour had weathered with ease what few blows had breached his defence. Cartovandis and Adio were similarly unscathed, advancing alongside him out of instinct. As they were pressing forwards, a horn sounded, a deep discordant note that echoed across the entire processional.

Adio paused, looking to his shield-captain. The din that had initially assailed them had lessened since the battle had worn on and it was possible to speak and be heard again as the horn's reverberations faded.

'Hold here...' Meroved warned. The air changed, thickening with humidity. His voice and all ambient noise became muted.

Cartovandis hacked apart the last of the bloodletters they had been fighting and looked up, his blade and the mask of his armour flecked with sizzling ichor.

'I feel the approach of something, brothers,' he said, his gaze drawn skywards to the boiling red and black.

Nearby Grey Knights struck up a chant, joining in a psychic mantra as they took on a pearlescent aura. The Paladin who led them unclasped a book from his vestments and began to read in an ancient tongue, his words sharp and acerbic.

A warrior clad in the armature of a Nemesis Dreadknight stepped over the steaming corpse of a hell beast, his eyes on the churning sky. Locked in the arcane exo-frame, the pilot towered above both the other Grey Knights and the Custodians. Pistons growled in the Dreadknight's legs and the rotator cannon on its left arm cycled in fresh daemon-killing rounds. The pilot raised the sword in the Dreadknight's right arm to the dark heavens and spat out a curse. '*Kharneth exilium!*'

And the dark heavens answered.

On black and smoking wings, a beast plunged out of darkness and fire.

The flagstones of the processional shattered beneath its hooved tread as it sat hunched, exuding palpable menace, its wings furled around it like some leathery cocoon. As it rose from a crouching stance, a brutish head crowned by two horns

and sat upon a brawny neck slowly acknowledged those who challenged it.

A bellow ripped from its canine snout, wings thrust to the extent of their massive span and a whip uncoiled from around its wrist, as thick as the haft of a guardian spear blade. A breastplate of blackened iron wrapped its torso, still steaming as if fresh forged on some black anvil. Tufts of stiff crimson fur jutted from beneath the metal.

It had many names – Eater of Gore and Flesh, Lord of Skulls, High-handed Slayer; each honorific was as gruesome and forbidding as the last.

But the Ten Thousand knew it by a different appellation.

Cartovandis' lip curled. 'Bloodthirster.'

The Dreadknight rushed to meet it, but with a savage beat of its wings the Bloodthirster smashed into the war engine and bore it down. Hunching over its stricken form, the daemon tore the pilot from his exo-frame. With the sound of hard rain splashing against metal, silver turned to red as the Bloodthirster bit deep, hurling the sparking exo-frame into the other Grey Knights, scattering them as it gorged on their dead comrade's corpse.

Snorting, a half-chewed, silver arm still hanging from its mouth, the Bloodthirster unhitched a black-bladed axe from its back and turned towards the Custodians.

Meroved felt the weight of its hatred and raised his spear.

He charged, Cartovandis and Adio on his heels.

It was like running headlong into a furnace, the air choked with ash and shimmering with heat.

The whip snapped at him, almost sentient, but Meroved eluded it and found a gap in the Bloodthirster's breastplate. It roared, half in pain, half in fury, spitting up partially dissolved bones and pieces of armour. Spattered in acid-eaten gore, Meroved thrust his spear deeper in the hope of reaching something vital.

A desultory swipe of the Bloodthirster's wing sent him sprawling, his guardian spear still embedded in its form. His shield clanged loudly, lost somewhere beyond his sight. Caroming over the broken processional like a stone skipping over water, Meroved reached out and grabbed a jutting rock to arrest his violent tumble.

Adio had closed on the daemon, castellan axe swinging for its arm. He jerked, suddenly pulled to the side as the whip snared him, and he came up short. Dark leather tightened around his waist as Adio was wrenched off his feet and hurled into the air. He flailed into the distance, crashing down as he was lost to the sprawl of the battle.

Meroved was back on his feet. He stooped, retrieving his shield at a run, as Cartovandis turned an axe blow on his shield and stabbed hard into the Bloodthirster's hide before falling back. Meroved made the most of the distraction to get close enough to yank out his spear.

The whip arced around, the barbs along its length cutting air but forcing both Custodians back.

A rope of thick, phlegmy blood jetted from the Bloodthirster's flared nostrils as it snorted its contempt. It bled from dozens of minor wounds, leaking sizzling ichor like oil. Its massive shoulders heaved with its heavy exhalations. It even breathed angrily.

Meroved heard Cartovandis murmuring.

'Emperor... I am Your blade. Guide my hand, oh Master of Mankind...'

Out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the Grey Knights stirring...

'Bestow unto me Your will and see it enacted.'

Bloodied, crawling on his hands and knees, the Paladin reached for the book that had spilled from his grasp. His fingers trembled...

'Forsake me not, oh Emperor... For I am Your willing servant...'

The Bloodthirster roared, a prelude to violence. It hacked at Cartovandis, a flurry of life-ending blows, but exposed its flank as the Custodian withdrew. Meroved lunged, but the Bloodthirster turned and his guardian spear only raked the black iron breastplate, spitting sparks as it skidded off hell-forged metal. The axe's backswing took him by surprise, a glancing hit that sheared Meroved's hastily proffered shield in half and punched him off his feet. He spun, pain coursing through his chest and arm. Bones broke, auramite cracked and he blacked out before he hit the ground.

He came around a few seconds later, groaning in pain as he heaved himself onto his hands and knees. Seizing the haft of his spear, he eviscerated a bloodletter seeking to take advantage, before lurching to one knee and beheading two more as he swept his weapon in a wide arc. The daemons' headless bodies had yet to fall as Meroved's eyes alighted on his brothers.

Cartovandis fought alone. He had lost his shield and wielded a sentinel blade two-handed, turning and cutting and stabbing. Adio was some distance away. He had lost his weapon and wrestled a massive flesh hound with his gauntleted hands. A clutch of Shadowkeepers had seen his plight but had been waylaid by bloodletters and fought to make a path.

Meroved could only reach one and he chose Cartovandis. His fellow Custodian was a consummate swordsman, but a Bloodthirster was a lord of battle incarnate.

Alone, he would not survive.

Spitting out a goblet of blood, Meroved staggered uncertainly to his feet.

Wounds gaped in the Bloodthirster's flesh and its breastplate had a ragged crack across it, but the daemon had lost none of its fury. After each thrust or cut, Cartovandis faced a frenzied counter-attack. Every blow he parried raked a cascade of black sparks from the edge of his sword, his body trembling with the impacts, and he moved with desperate haste.

Seeing an opening, Cartovandis hacked down onto the Bloodthirster's wrist. The hand clutching the whip separated from the arm, but the spurting wound splattered Cartovandis in boiling, viscous ichor. He gagged as his armour was bathed in the filth then staggered, barely turning the next blow. A second attack opened up his defence, putting him on the back foot as his sword spun wide, and he only just held on to it with one hand. The axe swept down, blistering the air... A spear embedded in the Bloodthirster's hand pushed the blow wide. The axe sheared into the ground instead, missing Cartovandis by a hair's breadth. He had yet to fully recover when the Bloodthirster thrust with its snout and gored Cartovandis on its horns, razor-sharp bone tearing through auramite and splitting it apart. He cried out, the agony catching in his throat as he hacked off the horn. The daemon roared and smashed Cartovandis aside, having raked his body from shoulder to groin.

He fell, his sword slipping from loose fingers, and did not rise again.

Meroved only had his knife but drew it anyway as the daemon bore down on Cartovandis' prone form. A rare battle cry escaped his lips, intended to draw the daemon to him and purchase a few vital seconds. He was only moments away from death when he heard chanting.

'Khak'akaoz'...'

The Bloodthirster faltered as if struck. It visibly shrank, the skin flaking off its body like ash.

The chanting came from the Paladin. He leaned against the bodies of his fellow Grey Knights, the book of true names he was reading from aglow with psychic potency.

'...khyshk,akami...'

Every syllable brought the daemon fresh pain. It sank to one knee as its indomitable will began to fail. A guardian spear pierced its side. It howled, flailing ineffectually as another blade found its mark. And then another. A host of Custodians jabbed at the Bloodthirster from every quarter, thrusting and stabbing with spear and sword as the Paladin's chanting grew fiercer and more

determined.

'Khak'akaoz'...

The daemon fought on but diminished with the Paladin's every utterance.

'...khyshk,akami...'

Its limbs already withering, the daemon's stiff fur grew grey and piebald. Its wings sagged, torn ragged and moth-eaten.

Satisfied, Meroved left the daemon to its fate and made for Cartovandis.

He was dying, ripped open with his entrails spewed like so much offal.

A horn sounded, this time a clarion he knew. The Shadowkeepers had signalled a retreat in the face of the daemon's onslaught, their dark-hulled gunships strafing the enemy but descending to extract them from the field.

Meroved spared a glance for Adio, the flesh hound's jaws clamped around his wrist and more of the Neverborn bearing down on him.

'Hold on, brother...' he murmured, but knew he had to deal with Cartovandis first. Meroved pushed his guts back into his body and told him to hold them there as he grabbed hold of the stricken Custodian's gorget and began to drag him towards Adio. Pain burned white-hot as his own wounds tore open and widened, but Meroved kept going.

Adio had snapped the flesh hound's neck. He had also drawn his misericordia and used it to cut apart the bloodletters that had flocked like carrion birds eager for his skin. The banner lay broken at his feet but he was unbowed as he regarded the departing gunships. He found his castellan axe and cut down another swathe of daemons before the three Custodians were reunited.

Meroved limped with every step, and Adio quickly took the burden he carried in his stead.

'It's a miracle he's alive.'

'How much longer he stays that way depends on whether we can get him to a surgeon,' Meroved replied.

In the distance, the Grey Knights and Custodians were finishing off the Bloodthirster. Almost nothing remained, just a shrunken and flaking husk until even that was gone, broken apart and turned into smoke on the wind.

'I thought you were dead...' admitted Meroved, wincing as he clutched his side.

Adio looked skywards. His fist clenched.

'And yet still you came.'

'They must have had good reason...'

Adio lingered on the gunships until they had turned into little more than specks

on the blood-red horizon, but said nothing.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

A teardrop of light fell through the darkness, trailing fire. At first it looked like a candle flame flickering against a night without stars, but as the drop-ship drew closer to the tower it was clear a figure writhed in those flames. Flailing limbs became visible until the drop-ship swept by so close that those aboard could see burning hair and a mouth stretched in the agony of a soundless scream.

An astropath plummeted from the Tower of Sight, but he was not alone. A second light followed the first – another astropath, awash with shattered glass from the window she had just broken through. A third followed the second and then a fourth, dying fireflies spiralling to their doom. After almost half a minute, the first astropath reached the smog layer and his light dimmed, glowing for a few more seconds until it was gone. Until they were all gone, lost to the dark.

The entirety of the city had darkened with their passing, the only illumination now coming from the guttering fires of crashed ships that lay broken apart in the middle of transit-ways or smashed against the sides of buildings. Destruction ran rampant but Vorganthian was still, like a wounded prey animal waiting to die.

‘There...’ Standing on the ramp of the open rear hatch, Cartovandis gestured to a landing apron spared the worst of the carnage.

Adio looked up from the grav-bench, a small flashing device shaped like a bullet casing in his hand. ‘He’s close to this location.’

Cartovandis nodded and opened the vox to the cockpit.

‘Set us down. South-east, six hundred and fifty feet.’

The drop-ship began to bank and turn. Spires and watchtowers loomed across the viewports, as black and devoid of life as the rest of the city. Communication across the sector appeared to be dead too.

Cartovandis closed the vox. ‘We go the rest of the way on foot.’

‘Can we assume he’s even alive?’ asked Adio.

‘We must,’ Cartovandis replied, walking back into the troop hold.

It had taken several weeks to reach Kobor. It was a minor world, all but forgotten by most galactic cartographers and sitting at the very edge of the Sol System, but it had taken on significance beyond its meagre station and drawn the eye of the Aegis. Whatever was happening here, it had neutralised an entire hive city and apparently threatened the Throneworld.

‘Even if Meroved has perished, the Vexen Cage remains,’ said Varogalant, his tone as grim as his armour. ‘We have a duty to reclaim it.’ He lurked in the shadows, facing the rear ramp but at the back of the hold, slightly apart from the others.

‘And I owe a debt,’ Cartovandis replied, ‘and would see it repaid.’

Adio looked down, as if to his own thoughts. ‘And there is the matter of Kazamende.’

Cartovandis sat down heavily, facing Adio, who wore a stern expression, one that did not suit his countenance but that had not leavened since they had left the Throneworld. He appeared ill at ease. It was not difficult to understand why.

‘You both speak of ends that serve your own desires,’ said Varogalant.

Adio turned. ‘Whereas yours are selfless, brother.’

‘Honour and brotherhood are far from selfish,’ Cartovandis reminded them both.

‘I know what is at stake if we fail here,’ said Varogalant.

Adio looked about to say something. Instead, he took his helmet, which had been clamped to the grav-bench where he was sitting, and walked from the troop hold into the cockpit.

As the door slid shut behind him there were a brief few moments of silence.

Varogalant scowled. ‘I know you would prefer it otherwise,’ he said.

‘Speak plainly, Varo.’

The engines throbbed noisily with descent thrust, the inner hull reverberating with the stress.

‘You and my brother...’ said Varogalant. ‘You would rather I were not here.’

‘I will take every ready sword of the Ten Thousand into a fight in which I do not know the odds.’

Varogalant chuckled. It was humourless and did not suit him. ‘I always thought of Adio as the diplomat.’

Cartovandis smiled, his eyes cold. ‘I do believe you bled that out of him.’

Varogalant’s expression darkened.

‘Is that regret I see?’ asked Cartovandis.

A whisper answered. ‘Yes...’

‘I will say this, Varo – you *are* here. All of us are. It is the Emperor’s will, such as we can know it. Trust in that. Perhaps there is meaning to this beyond what we can perceive.’

‘Is that why you left the Throneworld?’

‘I left because I was ordered to.’

‘You could have refused. No, I think you left because you are hoping there *is* meaning. Tell me, how long has it been since you heard the Emperor’s voice?’

Cartovandis jerked as if stung. He opened his mouth, but could not find an answer.

‘To have felt His grace only for it to be taken,’ said Varogalant. ‘It is a heavy burden, I imagine. Did you think He was dead?’

Cartovandis’ gaze hardened.

‘Did you think your brother was dead?’

Varogalant smiled grimly. ‘Don’t try to deflect. You’re better than that, Syr.’

‘I thought He was dead,’ Cartovandis admitted.

‘If it is any salve at all, I do not think you were alone in that assumption.’

‘And then I saw one of His reckless sons brought back to life. A miracle.’

‘And you hoped.’

‘I hoped.’

‘Be mindful of what you seek here, Syr... Lest you become lost to it.’

‘Your brother once said something similar to me.’

‘Then perhaps you would be wise to listen. The Vexen Cage is all that matters. That and nothing more.’

‘Varo, old friend,’ Cartovandis replied, smiling sadly, ‘there is much more at stake than that.’

Varogalant leaned back in his seat, letting the shadows claim him, and said nothing further. Cartovandis turned his attention to the device that Adio had left behind on the grav-bench. It winked intermittently, a tracking beacon leading them to Meroved. What would happen after they reached him, he could not say.

CHAPTER TWENTY

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

The drop-ship touched down amidst the roar of turbines and a whirlwind of displaced dust and other detritus. No landing markers met its descent, so the Orion strafed the ground with flaring lumens, and no crews came to meet it. The city, by all available evidence, was deserted.

The ramp eased open as the ship's extended landing stanchions touched the ferrocrete apron and it at last came to rest.

Adio had joined the others in the troop hold and the three Adeptus Custodes disembarked together. They each went unhelmed and wore black cloaks over their armour. The area of the hive city in which they had landed was apparently abandoned or had simply fallen into disuse, an industrial zone, mainly automated machines and cargo. It was quiet; the machines had ceased operation and cargo lay untouched.

Adio winced. 'Do you feel that?' he asked as the drop-ship took to the sky, its passengers now clear of the landing apron.

Cartovandis watched the vessel depart, communicating instructions to the pilot to return at his request.

'Yes,' answered Varogalant. 'I feel it, brother. A throbbing pain against the skull.'

'It is a psychic emanation,' uttered a voice.

Cartovandis turned and saw a lone figure standing where there had not been one before. He too wore a black cloak, the hood drawn up to hide his features, though there could be no mistaking who it was.

'Meroved,' he said, lowering his sentinel blade.

Meroved pulled back the hood and smiled bitterly. 'Welcome to Vorganthian.'

'A psychic attack?' asked Varogalant. 'Then the Vexen Cage *is* here.'

‘It is,’ Meroved replied. ‘Be grateful for your gene-wrought psychology. A terrible malaise has stricken the city, and threatens to spread. Your appearance is timely.’

Adio was the first to come forward. He clasped Meroved’s arm. ‘Well met, Meroved,’ he said warmly. ‘It has been a long time. More than a century.’

Meroved clapped him on the shoulder.

‘Another life, it feels like,’ he said, releasing his grip from Adio’s arm. He cast a glance in Cartovandis’ direction. ‘You look better than when we last met, Syr.’

‘And you look old, Mero.’

Meroved laughed, and the mood lightened. ‘I am.’ His gaze lingered on Cartovandis a little longer, as if seeing something not readily apparent to the others, before he gestured to the city behind him. ‘I have a gun-cutter waiting. It’s smaller than that Orion you came in – better for getting around the city.’ As he turned, indicating for them to follow, he said, ‘I have found the threat to the Throne. We need only deal with it.’

‘You make it sound simple,’ said Cartovandis.

‘It is far from it. Come.’

They followed. Cartovandis took up the rear, eyeing the shadows as they passed through the industrial district. He remembered Meroved as a fine warrior and an excellent tactician, and yet by his own admission he had uncovered the threat but failed to act. He had slowed with age, that much was obvious, but this sort of caution was unlike him. Cartovandis wondered what that meant.

‘What happened here, Meroved?’ he asked. ‘Where are the populace?’

‘They are here, though most fled the outskirts of the city to seek safety within.’

‘Safety from what?’ asked Adio.

‘It will be easier to show you.’

Around the next bend, Meroved’s gun-cutter was waiting, a boxy craft in gunmetal grey, its wings angled up like a predator-bird diving for prey. The turbines in its wings were already cycling, throwing intermittent slashes of light over a pair of stub-barrelled lascannons attached to the fuselage. A side hatch slid open. In the cockpit, Cartovandis saw a servitor making pre-flight checks.

He shared a look with Varogalant, who had dropped back, presumably so that he did not have to talk to either Meroved or his brother. Neither spoke, but the meaning in that look telegraphed itself. The old shield-captain was hiding something.

The gun-cutter swept in low over the Vorganth down-trans, kicking up grit and

squalls of litter.

‘The worst of it happened a few days ago,’ said Meroved, and shuffled over to wrench open the gun-cutter’s side hatch.

He noticed Adio peering through the viewslits on the opposite side of the hull.

‘Are those... *people*?’

Even in the darkness, the Custodian could see as well as if it were day and with a sniper-sight’s focus.

‘Take a closer look...’ invited Meroved, clinging one-handed to the guiderail as the passage of air buffeted his cloak and revealed the flak-weave body armour underneath.

Cartovandis was closest and leaned over to look outside. His eyes widened.

‘How many?’ he asked as he met Meroved’s gaze.

‘Hundreds of thousands.’

Adio had joined them by the hatch, crouched down to get a better view.

The gun-cutter flew over a vast sea of humanity, seemingly frozen still, their clothes and hair stirred by the backwash coming off the engines. In the streets, hanging out of grav-cars, huddled in the lee of buildings. Everywhere.

‘What is wrong with them?’

Meroved opened the vox to the pilot.

‘Zatu. Reduce to three-quarters velocity.’

The gun-cutter slowed, the engine noise diminishing to a low burr.

‘Throne of Terra...’ Adio murmured.

Meroved followed his eye to the stricken masses hunched and prostrate on the ground. Labourers, scribes, functionaries, overseers, law-keepers or merchants – it did not matter who they were or what they did. A great leveller had made a mockery of station and influence. They each suffered the same and as one, everything that had preceded this moment was superficial and ultimately insignificant. Paralysed, emaciated, choking on their own drool, both living and dead had fallen where they had stood, some atop one another, others seized by palsy with fingers half clenched into claws and limbs trembling. Teeth chattered in some, the sound so loud it could actually be heard over the gun-cutter’s engines. Others had bitten out their tongues. Fire-blackened patches seared voids in the otherwise densely packed morass, the silhouette of a human form just visible at the heart of each.

A low hum emanated from the mass and as Adio’s eyes narrowed, Meroved knew the Custodian had realised why.

‘They are aware, and in agony.’

‘Pain beyond reason, all motor function interrupted, nerve endings stripped raw and exposed, synapses in spasm,’ said Meroved.

‘Has anyone been spared these effects?’

‘I have a few operatives still at large in the city, well hidden and protected by null-collars. For now.’ He pointed to a large scorched area of the down-trans. Several bodies, torn apart and festering, lay around it. ‘Psykers had it worst and were the first to feel its effects.’

‘We saw the Tower of Sight upon our arrival,’ said Cartovandis. ‘Astropaths on fire, leaping to their deaths.’

‘Preferable to being burned alive by warp flame,’ said Meroved. ‘The entire world has gone dark, not just this city. In the first few days, people tried to flee, those with means and those without, but the fear of contagion galvanised the other cities to defend their borders with tanks and troops. That smoke and fire on the horizon... They burned the bodies. They are *still* burning the bodies.’

‘It is the Cage.’

They were Varogalant’s first words since he had boarded the gun-cutter. He remained sat in his seat, uninterested in the crisis below.

‘It is a psychic amplifier, a relic of Old Night. Despots and tyrants used it to subdue populations and bend them to their will, to keep the people quiescent to work until death, to fight their wars without question – but in their hundreds, possibly even thousands and certainly not an entire world. This is beyond that, beyond what I know of the Cage, and I know everything that has been uncovered.’

‘There is something else,’ said Meroved as he shut the side hatch again and took his seat. ‘It is enhancing the strength of the Vexen Cage, making its effects much more wide-ranging and potent.’

‘In order to subdue a world?’ asked Cartovandis. ‘What use is a population unable to function?’

‘None, but I do not believe that is his goal.’

Adio raised an eyebrow. ‘*His* goal?’

Meroved then told them of everything he knew, of the man called Ylax Orn and the Cult of the Illuminated.

‘Heretics?’ said Cartovandis.

‘He claimed he was a servant of the Emperor and spoke of “the Awakening”.’

‘Well, that’s a little ominous,’ Adio cut in.

Cartovandis frowned. ‘And could mean anything. How many men who believed they were devout committed atrocity in the name of worship? The

archives of ten thousand years of history are littered with them.’

‘He wants to give praise, a demonstration of his faith,’ said Adio, ‘here, on Kobor. How does any of this fit with what we know of the Vexen Cage and what it’s doing to the people?’

‘It doesn’t,’ said Meroved, ‘so it must be something else. The effect on the population is incidental, as appalling as I know that must sound.’

‘None of this matters if we do not find and secure the Cage,’ said Varogalant. ‘Tell us that you have at least found it.’

Meroved nodded.

‘An old library. It once held the city’s archives but has been condemned for decades. We are closing on its location as we speak.’ He got up and opened the gun-cutter’s weapons locker. The vibro-sword, bolt rifle and fusion pistol were within. He took all three, arming up as he spoke.

‘The Illuminated are more widespread than I first realised. Several of their nests had been put to the torch, but a few yet remain.’ He sighed, betraying a little of his weariness. ‘I have been blind...’ he said, and saw Cartovandis watching him intently.

You know, don’t you? You can see it.

Meroved recovered quickly, strapping Firebrand into its holster with a decisive snap.

‘They have boltholes throughout the city, and their influence runs deep, even though I believe they only have a few members.’

The engine noise changed, indicating that they were coming in to land.

‘What of Kazamende?’ Adio asked quietly. ‘Did he die fighting this cult?’

Meroved nodded, his expression sober. ‘They are radicals, and use the diabolic as weapons to further their cause,’ he said. ‘Kazamende died at the hands of a daemonhost, the same one that tried to kill me. It did not succeed.’

‘At least he is avenged,’ said Cartovandis.

‘Not until this cult is cleansed utterly will I consider it vengeance,’ Adio replied, his darker mien refusing to lift. ‘He was sent here for a reason, to protect someone.’

‘I have yet to find them,’ said Meroved.

‘It cannot be coincidence. Kazamende’s mission, the rise of this cult and the appearance of the relic Varo is hunting,’ said Cartovandis. ‘Find one and we find them all.’

‘Agreed,’ said Adio.

The gun-cutter touched down, preventing further discussion.

Varogalant clasped the haft of Vigilance and slammed the ferrule against the deck, raising a loud clang.

‘Enough talk. We end this.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

A cracked, mosaic concourse led to the entrance of the library. Tufts of wiry, grey vegetation clung to its fissures, steadily prising them apart. Statues of politicians, warriors and priests stood in dilapidated ranks, worn by age or vandalism and served to emphasise the faded grandeur of the place.

The door to the library was tall, almost twice the height of the Custodians, and lay partly open, letting in the dirt and the vermin and anything else that chose to make this ruin its lair. A stone portico, its columns rendered into the likeness of saints and theologians, framed a grand entrance but had also succumbed to disrepair.

Cartovandis paused at the threshold as the three Custodians took in the monolithic structure.

Standing behind the others, Meroved regarded it too. 'Magnificent, or at least it was once. A forgotten world...' he murmured.

'Then let us bring it back into the Throne's light,' said Cartovandis, and gestured to Adio. The two of them then heaved against the door, pushing it open. A chasm of darkness yawned beyond and there was the suggestion of a wide and sweeping stairway that led below.

Without further hesitation, Cartovandis led them inside.

Even with only ambient light coming through the dirt encrusting its glass ceiling, the devastation was obvious. A fire had ravaged the library, turning its tomes and scrolls to ash, blackening its halls and stacks. Part of the stairway had given way to the blaze, a ragged edge leading to further darkness and the collapsed remains of the steps below. Rot and disuse had sundered the rest, the air thick with spores and coiling with dust motes disturbed by the Custodians. As deserted as it first appeared, a light flickered below, distant but apparent.

Once again, Cartovandis asked himself why Meroved had waited for their arrival to act.

Upon reaching the base of the stairs they passed through the broken and sorry stacks to the edge of a large lectorium pit.

A dais sat in the middle of the pit, sparking with obscure technologies. Hoar frost crept over it. Wires and cables fed to it and the device that lay atop. It was a spherical cage, forged of black metal. Inside it sat two further spherical cages, one slightly smaller than the other. Each of these inner compartments turned slowly, in opposing directions, on the axis of the largest sphere. Thick spikes jutted both outwards and inwards. Carved sigils adorned the metal, deep enough that the half-light caught in their recesses. And within this tri-part prison, a man was turning along with the spheres, chained so that his arms and legs were splayed in a cross. Lightning arcs obscured further details, crackling across the surface of the metal.

As the Custodians reached the edge of the lectorium pit, a different man, in dark red robes and flak armour reminiscent of that worn by the Astra Militarum, turned to greet them.

‘I thought you might have survived,’ he said to Meroved, his voice urbane and with wisdom that belied his apparent youth. ‘I hoped you had survived to live to see the purpose of what I am trying to achieve.’

He cast his eye across the Custodians.

‘Behold...’ he uttered with almost breathless awe. ‘Auric gods.’ Orn shook his head. ‘You would not seek to stop me if you knew what I intended.’

‘Enslavement and death,’ Cartovandis replied. ‘We have witnessed your intent and are here to end it. Though I would know your plan before we kill you.’

‘Awakening,’ said Ylax Orn, and his next words made Cartovandis pause. ‘*His* awakening. Resurrection.’

The shadows moved at the edge of the light.

‘Blasphemy! You’ll die by my hand!’ Varogalant leapt into the pit and made for the Vexen Cage just as Orn’s minions surged out of the darkness. The crack of lascarbines heralded their arrival, men and women in heavy grey carapace armour. Dozens and dozens of them. They advanced along the balcony that delineated the edge of the pit, sharp red flashes denoting their positions. In a few seconds, the air was filled with heat and las.

Adio took the brunt of the blasts against Bulwark, sweeping his cloak aside to reveal gilded auramite to the cultists, inspiring awe in some before he advanced down the left side.

‘To the other side!’ snapped Meroved, gesturing to Cartovandis as he went after Varogalant.

Mirroring Adio, Cartovandis went right. His sentinel blade, Arcana, roared in his grasp, its attached bolt casters breaking apart the frail mortal bodies sent against him. They held their ground despite the onslaught, finding cover behind upheaved benches and debris. As soon he got close enough to wield Arcana as a broadsword it would be over.

Adio barrelled a cultist over the edge of the balcony with his shield as the mortal’s ill-considered charge went awry. Then he let loose with Puritas and the fight was all but done.

Down in the pit, Orn had retreated onto the dais as more of his cohorts rushed to defend him from inside.

Varogalant cut them apart, barely slowing down.

A few with breacher shields and power mauls braved hand-to-hand, but lasted only a few seconds longer. At last, they brought up a heavier gun and from his vantage above the pit, Cartovandis saw the first ranks for what they really were – a distraction.

It came out on tracks, a Rapier mount designed to take on armour. A flare-nosed graviton cannon rumbled as it emitted a heavy particle burst that struck Varogalant in the chest and crushed him into the ground. Stone slabs split and the floor cracked beneath him. He did not rise.

Then the track-mount turned, angling its cannon and aiming for Meroved as it started to power back up. A low energy hum rippled the air, the invisible presaging of a second grav-burst. The sound built, rising to a fever pitch whine, nanoseconds from activation.

Cartovandis redirected his fire against the Rapier and destroyed it, releasing a dense grav-implosion that gave off a migraine-inducing bass note and pulped its crew to shattered bone and jelly.

Adio hurled his shield to kill the last of the cultists, bulwark embedding in the far wall and quivering like an arrow as he leapt the balcony.

As the grav-cannon exploded, Meroved saw a way through to Orn. He touched a hand to his chest and it came back bloody. No matter. He had to end this. Gritting his teeth against the pain, knowing he should probably be dead already, he ran.

He got off a few shots with Firebrand before he realised Orn was protected by a refractor field, the beams hitting an invisible wall and dissipating in a flash of

light. He discarded the archeotech pistol and focused on his blade. The vibro-sword hummed in his grasp. It would cut through almost any defence with ease.

Orn was close. He backed up a few more steps, the Vexen Cage circling faster and faster.

You're mine now...

Corposant crackled over the dais, drawing Meroved's eye. Too late, he realised what was happening and urged his wounded body to move faster.

'Not this time!' he roared, just as Adio came into his peripheral vision.

'Do not despair...' Orn began.

Meroved threw the vibro-sword. It disappeared in a flash of blinding light and spatial displacement. Meroved felt a surge of pressure hammer into him.

The dais and everything on it disappeared. A storm blew about the pit, throwing around scraps of old parchment and other refuse. Lightning crawled across the ground, across the stacks, ephemeral and beautiful.

Meroved's blade clattered down in two neatly shorn pieces.

The dais was a teleportation plate. Orn had prepared well.

He had also sent something the other way – not just matter translation but also a concomitant matter transfer.

The incendiary device blinked once then went off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

The explosion tore through the library, billowing up out of the pit and swallowing the ringed balcony in fire and clouds of shrapnel. The bodies of the cultists were blown back, paper marionettes tossed about by a hurricane.

Cartovandis stood firm and weathered the blast, letting the fire and the sheer force of it wash over him. He lost sight of the others down in the pit and had to wait for the chaos to clear.

Smoke and heat bled off Adio's armour but he was moving, clambering to his knees and closest to the blast. He must have thrown Meroved clear when the bomb went off, an Aquilan Shield to the last, his instinct to protect his old mentor as ingrained as the names etched on the inside of his armour.

Varogalant staggered over to him, his own armour cracked in places from the effects of the grav-cannon but otherwise unharmed. Both had lost their helms or removed them and as Varogalant clasped the back of his brother's neck, Adio did the same, their heads touching briefly in celebration of their survival.

Both had cuts to their faces, no more than flesh wounds.

No words passed between them, their bond of fraternity obvious. More than a century of long-held enmity dissipated in that moment, and Cartovandis found himself suddenly envious.

They broke apart, exchanging curt nods.

Though it had momentarily lifted, Varogalant's expression darkened again when he saw the empty teleportation dais. Much of it had been destroyed in the blast and it was a mess of sparking wires and bent conductor plates.

Scraps of books, their torn and half-singed pages scattered about, gently floated to earth. The rest of the library had been utterly denuded by the fire or possibly some prior calamity; these were the only tomes left. But Varogalant's attention

was elsewhere. He had noticed one of the cultists had survived. The man's uniform was torn up, the bones in his legs shattered, and as he crawled on his belly he left a dark blood trail like a slug. Varogalant seized upon him.

'Unburden your soul and tell us where he took it,' he said, his voice low and sinister. Unsheathing his misericordia, he pressed it to the man's throat.

'I fear... no... p-pain...' said the man, choking out the words just before he went limp. 'The... Emperor... protect—'

Snarling, Varogalant released the dead cultist.

'They fight us and yet invoke His name,' he muttered, arcing back his neck as he briefly closed his eyes.

'We will find it, brother,' Adio said, the burden on Varogalant never more apparent than in that moment.

His answer was simple. 'We must.'

It was then that Meroved lurched to his feet and promptly collapsed.

Cartovandis saw him first and leapt into the pit, coming to the side of his stricken mentor, who lay prone and barely breathing.

'A blast like that should not have injured him this grievously,' said Adio.

'Without the auramite—' Varogalant began.

Adio cut in. 'He is still Adeptus Custodes.'

Cartovandis pulled open Meroved's ravaged armour to reveal a black wound that had festered around his heart. 'He was dying before he even entered the library.'

'It looks like a piece of bone,' said Varogalant, standing over the other two as they crouched next to Meroved.

Adio inspected the bloody wrappings around the wound, which had rotted through. 'An attempt has been made to clean and bind it...'

They had all seen wounds like that before, over a century ago at the Lion's Gate.

Meroved coughed hard as Adio examined him, and Cartovandis held his head to prevent further injury.

'You are dying, old friend,' he uttered.

Meroved looked at him from the side of his eye and gave a blood-toothed grin.

'I am sorry, Syr...' His voice was weak, a scratch of a quill against parchment.

'For what, shield-captain?'

Meroved's grin turned into a rueful smile.

'I have not been that for some time.'

'You have ever been my shield-captain.'

Meroved reached up, hand trembling, to clasp Cartovandis' shoulder.

'I know you wanted to repay me. To balance the debt.'

Cartovandis said nothing. No one spoke. Adio held his head low in reverence, muttering an oath. Varogalant detached himself, uncomfortable with the intimacy.

'You coming here...?' Meroved continued. 'It is already repaid. Know that I never regretted my decision to leave. I have found purpose here at the end of my duty...'

He held out a device, showing it to Cartovandis, a small black box forged from metal in the likeness of an eagle's head. It was the motif of their order.

'Her name is Gedd,' Meroved told him. 'She is watching. She will know.' He gave a wry smile. 'She will know.'

Cartovandis frowned, exchanging a confused glance with Adio.

Meroved's clenched teeth were pink with blood and tight with pain. He rasped, 'No more. I have served. Let that be enough.'

His breathing grew sporadic, coming in sharp, punctuated bursts. His eyes widened.

'Let it be en—'

He stopped and fell still.

'And so tolls the Bell of Lost Souls...' said Adio.

They each bowed their heads, observing a moment of quiet contemplation.

Cartovandis looked on grimly. 'Our task remains unfinished.' He glanced at the vox-device Meroved had given him and was about to activate it when Varogalant spoke up.

'There is something here, Syr. Something you need to see.'

He was standing amidst the fallen scraps of books and scrolls, a clutch of burnt paper in his hand.

'Here,' he said, handing Cartovandis a few pieces as he joined him.

They were torn-up fragments of various genealogy charts, ancient judging by the brittle nature of the vellum, and some scraps of Terran censuses dating back millennia.

As a member of the Ecclesiarchy, Orn would have been privy to records that ordinary citizens of the Imperium would not, but these were colonial records cataloguing the diaspora of mankind following the War of Shame. They had been unearthed, removed from shrines and archives. The names of families and clans had been compiled in exacting, if incomplete, detail. Each account shed more light on the one that preceded it. Bloodlines that stretched back to Terran

prehistory, to the violent days of Old Earth and pre-Unification. To collate it was the labour of several lifetimes.

Cartovandis cogitated all of this in a few seconds, one name resounding in his consciousness above all others, the end of the string that Ylax Orn had pulled.

‘The Sigillites.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

They were close. Orn knew this as he shrugged off the vague feeling of nausea and the lingering existential dread of matter translocation. Strands of warp residue clung to the edge of his robes, dissipating rapidly with the reassertion of the real over the incorporeal realm of dreams.

He had nowhere else to fall back, no more boltholes. This was the last one, a place in the depths of Vorganthian that would be hard to find. Orn was forced to admit he had reached the point of desperation. Meroved had seen to that, and they would be coming. His kind. Very soon. It saddened Orn to think of how blind they were. Revelation would come. Illumination would come. Then it would not matter. He would have fulfilled his purpose.

'Make ready,' he said to one of his men, a believer. The light of illumination burned in the soldier's eyes. He nodded at his master's commandment, and issued gruff orders to a handful of others.

They would perish. No mortal army could withstand the Ten Thousand. He doubted few foes that lived in the galaxy could. So he had been forced to look beyond the veil of the void.

'It won't be long now...' Orn said to himself, only now aware of the Vexen Cage and its infernal revolutions. 'Turn, turn, turn...' he said as the hosts grew restless in their chains below.

And the Cage did turn, and the heir of the Sigillite screamed with it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Zatu was waiting for them in the gun-cutter when they emerged from the library with Meroved's body. Cartovandis carried him and he almost appeared smaller in the Custodian's arms, as if the piece of his soul that had sustained him and fortified him had fled with his passing. Adio and Varogalant formed an honour guard, and they walked up the hold's ramp in solemn silence. From there, they flew to the observatory, where a woman called Ursula Gedd waited for them.

'So he's dead then,' she said, regarding Meroved's inert form. 'I actually didn't think your kind *could* die.'

Gedd had met them in the observatory's arming chamber. She had resisted the urge to kneel, though she had felt a profound desire to do so. Her heart hammered to be so close to such beings, but her sadness at Meroved's death had tempered that too. Grieving, even for so short an alliance, would have to wait. The Aegis had been summoned and Vorganthian might yet be saved.

It struck her that an onlooker might find the scene in the arming chamber mildly preposterous. A woman in the battered uniform and armour of a peacekeeper, standing before the body of a dead giant with his three solemn companions who looked like statues wrenched from some mythic age, hanging on her words.

'Saint's piss...' she muttered, and instantly regretted the choice.

The leader, or at least she assumed he was in charge, frowned.

'My apologies...'

'Syr Cartovandis,' he supplied. 'We can die, Ursula Gedd. We are flesh and blood just the same as you.'

Gedd took them in with a glance, frowning. 'I can hardly tell the difference.'

Gedd knew she should have more respect, but she had spent the last few weeks

trying to survive with a sanity-eroding throbbing forever at the edge of her conscious mind. Dark grey rings had formed around her eyes, which had sunken a little in her skull on account of lack of rest and ready nourishment. She scratched at the rash on her neck, her nails digging under the metal clasp that encircled it. Her teeth itched. Her bones ached, but she was alive and that counted for something. She had also been given a purpose, and this is what her newfound allies waited on.

Another of the three, one with dark skin and an almost youthful appearance, if such beings could ever be considered as that, turned to Cartovandis.

‘This is Meroved’s companion?’

‘I am standing just here,’ she said.

The last of the three, and the only one in black armour but dark-skinned like the second, glared. She half imagined him taking up his massive spear and ending her for her impudence. She told herself it was fatigue, but it was more than that.

‘I only meant,’ said Gedd, heart thumping again as she fought down her rising dread, ‘that he put me here knowing you would come. He had hoped to be here himself, but I saw his wound. If anything could kill one of you, it would be a wound like that, I suppose.’

‘And what do you know of it?’ asked the one in black armour, his voice fierce.

Gedd gestured to Meroved’s body. ‘Only what he taught me.’

Cartovandis regarded her. ‘You are a curious mortal, Gedd.’

She laughed, despite herself. ‘It’s almost like he’s still here. I am barely holding myself together,’ she admitted.

Cartovandis continued as if Gedd had not spoken. That too felt familiar. ‘Meroved said you were watching, that you would know.’

She nodded. ‘Follow me...’

The one in black armour muttered something to the youthful one and they remained in the arming chamber.

‘There are tools here?’ the youthful one asked. ‘For us to prepare our weapons.’

From what she saw of them, Gedd thought their weapons looked pristine and indomitable but she replied that there were such tools and indicated where Meroved kept them.

‘Very well.’ The youthful one exchanged a furtive glance with Cartovandis and gave an almost imperceptible nod before he signalled for Gedd to carry on.

‘Is it possible?’ asked Varogalant once he was certain the female could no longer hear them. ‘The bloodline of the Sigillite... Is it possible?’

Adio considered it. He considered what it meant alongside everything else that Ylax Orn had spoken of.

‘He is a zealot.’

‘A devout adherent of the Emperor.’

‘One who has succumbed to madness,’ said Adio. ‘No psychic cry can reach Terra through blood and the warp. And yet?’

Varogalant understood at once. ‘There is little enough known about the Vexen Cage.’

Adio nodded. ‘He said “resurrection”.’

‘And how many cults who bear that name have been put to sword and flame, some of them by our order?’ Varogalant countered.

Adio considered that too.

‘Whatever is the truth,’ Varogalant continued, ‘it must not be allowed to come to pass. He must be stopped along with his depraved experiment. It’s madness. All of it.’

His expression darkened, as it often did when he thought of his duty.

Adio drew closer. ‘Do not bear the burden alone.’

‘To be a Shadowkeeper is to be alone,’ Varogalant replied. He met his brother’s gaze. ‘It was not my will to leave you on the field. It tortured me not knowing. And after what happened in the Dark Cells... I could not leave. I can never leave. It haunts me even here in this moment.’

‘It was a day of hard lessons,’ Adio replied, ‘but we are far from that day now.’

Varogalant nodded, and they clasped arms in the way of warriors and of brothers.

In the heart of the observatory, in Meroved’s lair as Gedd had often thought of it, the many pict screens and data-feeds still chattered even without a master to engage with them.

‘I do not think your comrades trust me,’ she said.

‘Some knowledge is best left unknown, especially for mortals.’ As Cartovandis settled in to the seat at the core of the machine, he gave Gedd a glance. ‘What did Meroved tell you of our enemy?’

‘Not much,’ Gedd admitted. ‘He said they called themselves the Cult of the Illuminated and that their beliefs are aberrant to the Imperial Creed.’

Cartovandis nodded, as if deciding that was an acceptable amount of knowledge for Gedd to possess. Gedd wondered what would have happened if he had made a different determination.

‘We thought them wiped out. Many, many years ago, but here they are again. Resurgent.’ His jaw clenched, Gedd saw it in the sharp line of his cheekbone.

‘You’re angry,’ she ventured, inwardly cursing herself for her boldness; it would likely get her killed. ‘That he’s dead. That it’s unfinished.’

To Gedd’s surprise, Cartovandis’ stern countenance turned thoughtful.

‘Unfinished?’

‘Whatever was between you,’ she said, and pointed to the screens and vox-casters, the last of which were silent now with no one left alive or physically or psychologically able to operate them. A strange *un-noise* emanated instead, the tendrils of some half-heard dream, scarcely remembered but which weighed upon the listener well into the hours of first light. ‘He spent most of his time where you are sitting now. He treated it as his calling.’

Cartovandis regarded the screens as if seeing them for the first time. He felt the ache in his own wounds and experienced a profound sense of empathy for his departed mentor. His frustration faded. He began to absorb. Everything.

‘I am the watchman in his stead,’ he uttered. ‘Show me what he meant for us to see, Gedd.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

A flare of light, the dull register of energy in a city cast into permanent night, that's how they found it. Meroved had forced Orn's hand. In an ocean of darkness, something like the power required by a teleportation event tended to stand out. It only identified a region, but Gedd knew how to pinpoint a location.

'They use a mark,' she had explained to Cartovandis as he analysed myriad data-streams. 'It identifies the boltholes and safe houses the cult have established around the city. That's how Meroved found them.'

'Describe it to me...' said Cartovandis, assimilating all live and archived visual information with a series of ultra-rapid saccades.

'That's the devious part,' said Gedd. 'The mark is broken up into pieces and inscribed in several places. It can only be discerned at a certain angle and distance, at a point where each of the pieces align and come into focus.'

'The shape of an eye with the letter "I" inside it,' said Cartovandis.

'Er... Yes, that's it.'

'I've found it.'

'You have?'

'Yes. Meroved has kept excellent records. The teleportation flare narrowed the search considerably. The rest was simply visual data analysis.'

'Saint's piss...' said Gedd, looking at the pict-feeds herself but seeing a visual blur without meaning. 'That was easier than I thought it was going to be.'

'It was incredibly difficult,' Cartovandis replied, taking up his sheathed sword, which he had removed so he could step into the machine.

'It took you less than a minute to find it.'

'I know.'

The old clock tower had collapsed during a hivequake many years ago and never

been rebuilt. Since that tragedy, the city had scabbed over it, layer by accreted layer until the clock tower became part of the lowest deeps.

Half of its face, a truly cyclopean structure that must have once inspired awe and reverence in all who saw it, jutted from a stagnant sump, the accumulated run-off from sanitation pipes and industrial chemical drains. Its gold detailing had succumbed to a grubby patina of verdigris, the effigy of the Emperor as a hooded chrono-lord dictating the passage of time similarly degraded. Some of the clock tower's inner workings lay exposed where the perma-glass or crystal-flex used in its construction had broken like wounds in a body. Great cogs and rusted springs, pulleys and cables extruded viscerally.

The entrance was an old maintenance access hatch, easily large enough to accommodate one of the Revered Fallen, let alone the three Custodians.

Once inside, the true expanse of the clock tower was revealed. Due to destruction, it leaned on a strange angle and this affected the dimensions and orientation within.

Efforts had been made to erect several staging areas, platforms and gantries fashioned from industrial pallets and bulkhead doors. This iron framework rose up into the high ceiling and above the encroaching fluids of the sump.

Cartovandis was first to mount the staging area and looked out across a large chamber lit with a daisy chain of sodium lamps.

At the far end, he saw a flash of light and discerned the metallic churning of the Vexen Cage. For now it was out of direct line of sight, secured in some lower vault or sub-chamber. The main room was dark enough that the armed cultists of the Illuminated hiding in the shadows thought they could not be seen.

'There are only a few dozen,' he said as Varogalant and Adio joined him. Ursula Gedd followed after them.

'Looks have been deceiving before,' said Cartovandis. 'Tread carefully.'

'Stay with me, peacekeeper,' uttered Adio, swinging up his axe into his grip as he slammed down his shield in a defensive posture.

'The Emperor protects...,' she murmured in response.

Adio nodded. 'He does, and through His Aquilan Shields.'

They were about to engage when a scratchy vox sounded over casters rigged up around the room.

'I knew you would come,' said Orn. He sounded calm, measured. *'Nothing could have stopped that. But you are misguided, blind. I would see Him reborn, through the blood of the Sigillite's heir. Illumination awaits if you would but allow it.'*

Cartovandis scowled. ‘Shut him up.’

For a few seconds a trio of bolt casters ripped back the shadows, destroying the vox-rig in a flare of sparks and squawking static.

The cultists came out of hiding, weapons free, and with the knowledge their deaths were inevitable.

They died swiftly in a blur of furious gold and black as Cartovandis and Varogalant cut through the mortals with ease.

‘Another delaying tactic,’ growled the Shadowkeeper, wrenching Vigilance from a dead cultist’s body.

‘It’s his last,’ asserted Cartovandis, the crackling light and the sanity-grinding hum of the Vexen Cage only a short distance away. He looked to Adio. ‘Varo and I can stop Orn.’

Gedd stepped up, realising what the Custodian meant.

‘I am seeing this through to the end,’ she said, though in truth she looked more haggard than ever. Prolonged use of the null-collar had taken a profound toll upon her, but she was determined.

Adio gave a noncommittal look to Cartovandis.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘But stay by Adio’s side. He will protect you. I couldn’t save Meroved, and you’re about all that’s left of his legacy, Ursula Gedd.’

She nodded, understanding.

‘Another pit,’ Varogalant remarked as they approached the edge of a deep recess. Sump fluids drooled down the edge, pooling in the corners. It was unlit, but the Cage shone over stark iron walls and a host of figures, men and women both, standing side by side and bound by rune-etched chains.

Orn, the Vexen Cage and the Sigillite’s heir were behind them.

‘Is it just me,’ said Gedd, ‘or is that shitting thing getting louder?’ A trickle of blood seeped from her nose and she wiped it away.

Cartovandis burned the cultist blood from Arcana and leapt into the pit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

Gedd had felt horror before, but this was different. Her fear had reached beyond the point of paralysis into a place of desperate survival. So she fought, her golden shadow by her side. The things in the pit came for her, perhaps sensing weakness, perhaps out of malice in that her death would mean another failure for the Custodians. She didn't care. She only wanted to end them, whatever they were. They wore the flesh of men and women but their forms swiftly changed, bloating and mutating into horrible parodies of humankind with limbs and bodies and mouths distending into savage versions of their former incarnations. They wore scales and hides and arachnid carapaces, or grew tusks and claws and barbs. Each was a weapon of altered flesh and bone, a monster from the deep places.

The Verifier bucked in her grasp, the auto-loader on a continuous cycle and burning ammunition as fast as Gedd was using air with every desperate gasp. It had little effect, except to stun or irritate.

Her protector was consummately more lethal. He weaved and cut with almost balletic grace, his shield miraculously deflecting every blow regardless of whether it was directed at Gedd or himself. She tried not to watch, for it was dizzying and she feared she might collapse from nausea. Effective as he was, the Custodian's combat prowess was not the greatest boon bestowed upon Gedd. His presence *galvanised* her. She believed that without it, her mortal mind would have already folded in on itself. Without him, she would have been a quivering and vomit-strewn mess of limbs, food for the unholy creatures trying to kill her.

'Stay with me!' she heard her protector say, the strength of his oration such that she had no choice but to obey.

Giddy, her quickening pulse feeling as if it were about to tear right out of her

arm, Gedd followed... And then abruptly stopped as she came face-to-face with Xeus.

The Lamplighter regarded her with curious eyes, pitying and condescending at the same time. Gedd staggered, her appreciation of time dwindling away like the sands in an hourglass.

‘Xeus...’ She felt strange, her voice sounding far away even as it resonated inside her skull.

+Shoot him, Gedd...+

‘W-what?’

+Shoot him.+

‘I can’t, I...’

+He can’t protect you.+

She looked to the blurring figure of her protector, so much slower than before. Everything was slower. His dance of blade and shield painted the air in gold. Dark, viscous blood fountained in miniature, slowly exploding blooms.

‘I... He...’

Xeus drew closer, a syncopated movement, jerky like a pict-cast skipping a few frames.

+Shoot him now, and I will do the rest.+

Gedd felt pressure inside her skull. The null-collar burned her neck, but she resisted the urge to take it off.

+You know me, Gedd...+

She saw her arm raising the Verifier, the experience of doing it removed from the actual action itself.

+You trust me, Gedd...+

‘I...’

+Do it...+

‘I...’

+DO IT!+

‘I never liked you, Xeus...’ She shot the thing wearing the body of the Lamplighter in the face. Time resumed its usual pace as the blade of a Custodian’s axe cut off Xeus’ head. ‘But I am sorry that you’re dead.’

Barely a few seconds had lapsed, and as they fought on Gedd thought she caught a fleeting glance from the Custodian. He had a look in his eye, there and gone in a moment. Gedd could have sworn it was approval.

Cartovandis cut one of the daemonspawn across the midriff, spilling its vile

innards. As he pressed on, Varogalant came up in his wake and finished it. They fought as two lions, alternating primacy at the vanguard of the fight, one the claws that maimed and disabled, the other teeth that applied the killing blow. One attacked then the other, their fighting styles utterly unlike, but their synchronicity of purpose undeniable.

This martial rhythm brought Cartovandis to the edge of the Vexen Cage, standing on its stepped dais. He felt its power wearing at his armour, scratching at the mental bulwarks that protected his mind. Through the rapidly turning spheres of the Cage, he saw the one referred to as the Sigillite's heir properly for the first time. He was withered, every tortured revolution of his body bringing him closer to dissolution. His eyes had long been burned from their sockets, blood and ocular fluid plastering his drawn cheeks like wax. Crackling, pearlescent light blazed there instead. It spewed from his mouth too, which was wrenched open, a chasm leading to the deepest pit of the man's agony.

It reminded Cartovandis of another's pain. The Lord Malcador's as he took up the Throne in His stead, a death sentence by any discernible measure. Cartovandis had not seen it, but every Custodian knew of this sacrifice and honoured the man who had given it so selflessly. This was not that. It was an abomination, but the symmetry of it left him disquieted.

And at the heir's feet sat a partly fleshed ork skull. It retained a leer within its porcine rictus, and its sheer size and apparent age suggested only one possible provenance. It had come from the War of the Beast, when orks had stridden the galaxy as conquerors. Their leaders had been beyond anything the Imperium had known before, literal titans with savage intellect to match their colossal stature. Here, then, was the thing that Meroved had believed was enhancing the Cage's reach, the tapped psychic power of a greenskin demigod, still potent after nine thousand years. Cartovandis felt the belligerence of its anima.

Orn stood nearby but did not impede him. The missionary was wise enough to know he posed no challenge to a Custodian. He talked instead.

'It can't be stopped, Cartovandis...'

Cartovandis' gaze snapped to Orn, who, though he wore a null-collar of his own, was evidently more gifted than he let on.

'You're wrong.' Cartovandis shot at the Vexen Cage but the rounds ricocheted away harmlessly. He hacked at it with Arcana, but his blow rebounded so ferociously it tore at his shoulder and he took a step back. Behind him, he was aware of Varogalant fending off the daemonhosts.

'I told you,' said Orn, his rising confidence seeing him come forwards.

Cartovandis struck again, but did not make a dent. The Cage turned, faster and faster, its victim almost lost in a blur of ancient metal.

Orn smiled, his face cast in the light of the rapidly moving shadows.

‘It is inevitable. It is *His* will. The Emperor shall rise from stupor and reclaim the galaxy anew. It cannot be undone.’

Cartovandis hefted Arcana again, but the weight of sorrow dragged upon his arm. It was a matter of seconds, a momentary doubt, the physical articulation of his desire to hear the Emperor’s voice again, to know that the Rift had not silenced Him.

Orn stabbed him in the chest, the vibro-knife slipping insidiously through auramite and the armour underneath, into skin and flesh and finally organs. Cartovandis gasped, his pain and disbelief all too apparent.

‘Do not yield to despair...’ whispered Orn, his wet lips pressed to Cartovandis’ ear as the Custodian sank to one knee and the vibro-knife began to move. ‘Your suffering serves—’

Orn stopped to look down at the misericordia protruding through his chest. He peered up, confusion radiating across his face, spitting blood, trying desperately to say something, anything, as Varogalant mounted the steps.

‘Told you...’ he said to Cartovandis, cutting off the priest’s choked words before Orn finally expired.

Wrenching out the vibro-knife with a grimace, Cartovandis staggered to his feet and turned to face the last of the daemonhosts. Adio held them all at bay, allowing his brother to have cast his knife. Gedd stood behind him, alive but almost spent.

‘It is impenetrable,’ Cartovandis said to Varogalant.

‘Nothing remains unbroken forever,’ he replied. He jammed his spear in the second sphere of the Cage, stopping it in a jerk of sparks and disgorged power. Then he seized it and the outermost frame of the Vexen Cage in both hands and started to pull.

Psychic energies rippled outwards like coronal mass ejections, striking Varogalant as he heaved at the relic. His armour and flesh burned, unmade by the arcane science of the Vexen Cage. Every strike lit his skin from the inside, turning it translucent and exposing the structure of his bones within.

He pulled, his face a rictus of agony, and slowly the complex frame of the Cage began to part. A fractious tendril of energy lashed out, impaling his body. Blood painted his armour. He kept pulling. The Cage began to slow.

Cartovandis roared as he leapt for the Cage, Arcana clasped in both hands. His

blade struck the metal hard, but the force of the blow returned tenfold and he was thrown, pinwheeling, off the dais.

Gedd saw Cartovandis flying through the air. She had slumped to one knee, struggling to stay upright with the hammering inside her skull. Darkness encroached at the edge of her vision, but she saw the turning Cage and the Custodian being slowly ravaged to death by its foul energies.

She saw the man inside it turning too, his yawning mouth locked in a silent howl of sheer agony. The Cage was hard to look at, but she managed to lift the Verifier and take aim. She felt her fingers tightening over the trigger. She heard the ravening of the monsters behind her and the ferocious defence of the one who had sworn to protect her.

Gedd was just another mortal. She was not fit to fight alongside these auric gods, but Meroved had chosen her for a reason. She had endured terror and seen a glimpse of the galaxy's true face. Unblinking, her outstretched arm steady, she faced the Cage, and fired.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

City of Vorganthian, Kobor, within Terra's light

The bullet seemed to twist in slow motion. It passed through the nexus of psychic energy that was killing Varogalant and scraped against the finest edge of the Cage in a brief cascade of sparks before it struck the man within in the heart and ended it.

There was no explosion, no flash of energy. It simply stopped, like a turbine starved of power, grinding meekly to a halt.

With a final swipe of Puritas, Adio beheaded the last of the daemonhosts. The wretched creature dwindled to slurry, devouring its stolen body until nothing remained but smoke and charred bone. Breathing hard, he turned. His castellan axe clanged loudly against the ground as he saw what had become of Varogalant.

A skeletal husk poking through broken auramite was all that was left.

The Vexen Cage endured but it no longer turned, its metal spheres dormant once more. The figure inside it held his form for a few seconds before collapsing into ash, only to be scattered away on the air.

Cartovandis stood with difficulty. Gedd looked back at him, exhausted. She unclasped the null-collar, clearly relieved to be free of it. She looked weak, her body and mind at the very limit, but determined not to falter in front of the Custodians.

'Is it over now?' she asked him.

He exhaled a long, drawn-out breath and felt the impermanence of his flesh as never before.

'By the Emperor's grace, it's over.'

But nothing would ever be the same again.

EPILOGUE

Several months later...

Vorganthian howled into the night, a wounded beast needing to lash out at its pain. Lawlessness plagued its streets and though the armies of neighbouring cities had begun to assert some form of order at the fringes, its heart remained in turmoil. Gangs roamed freely. Murder cults rose up from the ashes of unbelief. Its badly outnumbered peacekeepers found themselves beleaguered. It would yet be months before the greater Imperium came to reclaim the city.

The Eyes of the Emperor watched it all keenly, ever vigilant for a true threat to the Throne.

‘Order will return...’ a figure murmured, his face half lit by banks of pict screens, his attention split across manifold vox-channels and data-feeds. He saw all. He knew all.

‘And in the meantime?’ asked a second figure, much slighter and much shorter than the first.

‘We watch, Gedd,’ said Cartovandis, a shrewd smile turning the corners of his mouth, ‘and we listen.’

The Vexen Cage returned to Terra in a warded casket, thrice blessed by the most potent psykers of the Ordo Hereticus. Santic runes had been inscribed into the metal. Six belts of chain were wrapped tightly around the sides.

No triumphal fanfare greeted its successful recapture. It came back in secret, brought in via gunship with a guard of twelve Grey Knights swathed in black cloaks.

They met the Shadowkeepers at the subterranean gate to the Dark Cells, one group barely acknowledging the other during the silent transfer of responsibility. As the Grey Knights departed as clandestinely as they had arrived, the casket was placed upon a grav-sled and taken in solemn procession to its empty cell,

where a Custodian armoured in black awaited it.

As the other Shadowkeepers went to their duties, he was left alone. Grasping Vigilance in both hands he stood with his back to the cell, determined to honour his brother's sacrifice.

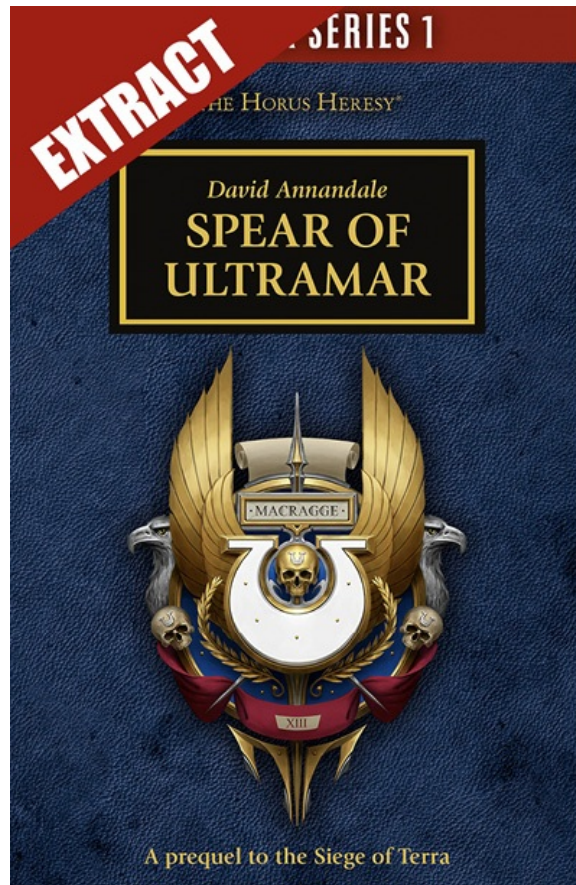
At the Tower of Heroes, the Bell of Lost Souls would be tolling.

'For you, Varo,' said Adio.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Old Earth*, *Deathfire*, *Vulkan Lives* and *Sons of the Forge*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio dramas *Red-marked* and *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnus*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Warhammer Chronicles novel *The Great Betrayal* and the Age of Sigmar story 'Borne by the Storm', included in the novel *War Storm*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

An extract from *Spear of Ultramar*.



In the depths of the valley the air is still, but above the mountains the winds blow with perpetual hurricane violence. Siderius has no space port. There is not enough level space to accommodate one, and the winds are a threat to any aircraft that might try to take off from the city.

The structures of the hive are cramped, built one on top of the other until the city resembles a frozen geyser of metal. The air in its valley is black and almost thick enough to drink. The smoke from thousands of chimneys wreathes Siderius in the ghosts of industry, the thick shroud streaked by the flames of burn-off and the glow of forges.

Khrossus recognised Siderius' potential value as a fortress the moment he laid eyes on it, when the Iron Warriors took the Carchera system. Using the hive as a central keep, it would be possible to hold Carchera against a superior force for some time. Only it isn't merely a superior force that is heading for the system. And holding the planet is not the primary mission.

You will block him, Perturabo told Khrossus. You will block Guilliman and you will bloody him, for as long as possible.

'If Horus wants the Ultramarines stopped,' says Darhug, 'it will take more than us to do it.'

'He doesn't need them stopped,' says Khrossus. 'He wants Terra, and to get Terra, he needs Guilliman slowed and damaged. So we make his fleet bleed and we kill his momentum.'

'For how long?' asks Vûrtaq.

'Until the last man standing.'

'How will we know that will be enough?' asks Darhug.

'We will make it be enough.'

Darhug snorts. 'I'm sure Horus will remember us in fine speeches once he is Emperor.'

'When have we ever been thanked?' says Khrossus.

‘I do wonder,’ Darhug says, ‘what we gained in trading one master for another.’
‘Meaning,’ says Khrossus. ‘We gained meaning.’ He thinks of the years of the Great Crusade, of the grinding marches and endless, debilitating sieges. The Iron Warriors did not ask for glory. They did not expect it, and they did not care for it. Khrossus mistrusts any legionary who celebrates battle. Any soldier who exults in war does not truly understand what it means. What Khrossus does ask for is purpose. He asks that his suffering and that of his brothers has a point. There was no purpose in serving the Emperor. Khrossus came to realise that. The Great Crusade had been constructed around a facade of purpose, when the reality was simply the destruction of one set of cultures in order to replace them with another. Khrossus has long since failed to see how one lie is better than another.

Iron within, iron without. That is the only truth he acknowledges, and it is the one constant that has never abandoned him. It sustained him during the darkest moments of the Meratara Cluster campaign.

Where is truth? Where is purpose? They lie in discipline, and in the full understanding of war. War is pain and death and destruction, and that is all that it is. There is no glorious dream at the end of it. War cannot bring about utopia. That is the great lie, and Perturabo has broken his Legion free of it.

War is not a means. It is an end. Khrossus will never again be fooled by the illusion that it can be anything else. And since it is for war that he has been fashioned, then war is his end. If that end is coming for him now, that is cause for regret only if he allows himself to believe the lies.

Perturabo has given him a battle that he cannot survive, but that he can win, and for this he is grateful.

‘Our lives for Horus’ glory, then,’ says Darhug.

‘No,’ Khrossus tells him. ‘We do not fight for Horus. We fight for Perturabo. We fight for the truth, and the truth is iron. That is what we will teach Guilliman.’

His officers nod, grimly eager to teach the lesson. Then Vûrtaq looks over Khrossus’ shoulder. ‘The sorcerers are coming,’ he says.

Khrossus looks back towards the gates of Siderius. Five Word Bearers have left the city and are walking up the pitted road towards the Iron Warriors. All five are apostles, and wear robes over their armour, embroidered in the crimson sigils of their faith.

‘I almost envy them their truth,’ says Darhug.

‘I don’t,’ Khrossus says.

‘We’ve seen evidence that they might be right,’ Vûrtaq points out.

‘And?’ says Khrossus. ‘What of it? If there are gods, does that mean I should worship them? I do not see that one means the other. Iron, brothers. There is no higher truth than iron.’

‘Iron within, iron without,’ Darhug mutters, and Vûrtaq echoes him.

‘Anything else is superfluous,’ says Khrossus. ‘For us,’ he adds. He watches the Word Bearers approach. ‘But their truth gives them their own strength, and it has its use.’ He is going to shape the battlefield of the Carchera system into a worthy slaughterhouse, and the Word Bearers will help him do so. Khrossus knows that hope is an illusion, and he is going to strip that illusion away from Guilliman.

‘What were they doing?’ Darhug asks about the Word Bearers.

‘Inspecting their sanctuary,’ says Vûrtaq. ‘Deep in the hive. Well out of the way of the front lines.’

‘The battlefield will reach them, too, in the end,’ Khrossus says. ‘They know that as well as we do. They know how this struggle will end for all of us. They have their contribution to make, and to do it they need the isolation. They need the sanctuary.’

The Word Bearers arrive. Their leader, High Chaplain Ker Vanthax, nods solemnly to Khrossus. His brow is so heavy, his eyes glitter within shadows even under full sunlight. His skin is taut, and marked by a complex series of runes. His cheekbones are high, aristocratic, but his nose is missing. He is commanding, and he is grotesque. ‘We have made our preparations, warsmith,’ he says.

‘Then it can be done?’

‘Yes. The Ruinstorm is still strong in the vicinity of Carchera, and with it the influence of the warp on the materium. This system is ideal. We can do what you ask of us.’

‘Good.’ Khrossus turns to his captains. ‘Are we ready?’

‘Yes,’ says Darhug. ‘The final platform was being moved into position at last update.’

‘The *Warforged* awaits its orders,’ Vûrtaq says. He will take a strike cruiser against a fleet.

An echoing series of booms comes from inside the pass, followed by the long, rumbling roar of falling rock. The sealing of the pass has begun.

‘Let him come, then,’ says Khrossus. ‘Let him come.’

‘It is a strange irony,’ Ker Vanthax says, ‘that a portion of the Fourth Legion must be on the defensive end of a siege in order for a larger siege to begin.’

‘There is no such irony,’ Khrossus replies. ‘You do not understand what our

strategies will mean for Guilliman. There is only the surface appearance of a siege here, and even that appearance is a trap. We are not fighting to hold Carchera. Siderius is not a citadel. It is an engine, and it is us who will be laying siege to Guilliman.'

'That will surprise him,' says Vûrtaq.

'No,' says Khrossus. 'We will not surprise him. He will see the trap coming. But we will hit him so hard, his foresight won't matter.'

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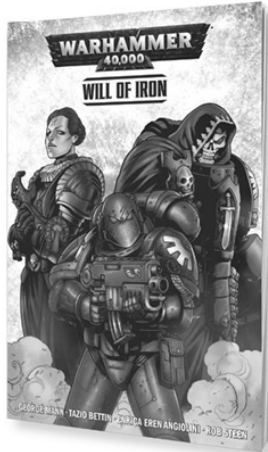
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I owe you a great debt for your mentoring, your guidance and compassion.
The Black Library will simply not be the same without you.*

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