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Andy Clark · Robbie MacNiven · Gav Thorpe · L J Goulding
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CRUSADE

ANDY CLARK

CHAPTER ONE

The augur probe Kalides-Gamma-19-8_6 floated in the void. It was an Imperial monitor satellite, a bulky mass of machinery and bio-reliquaric components slaved to a deep-space Mandeville point. Kalides-Gamma-19-8_6 had a single purpose: to monitor activity around the Kalides System's last stable warp translation point.

From here interstellar warships could break through from the strange dimension of the warp and begin their journey in-system. It fell to the augur probe, and several dozen more like it, to monitor all new arrivals and send word of their coming to the inhabited worlds deeper in-system.

Kalides-Gamma-19-8_6 had hung in place for decades. In that time, precisely twenty-seven starships had translated into real space beneath its watchful ocular receptors.

Now, came the twenty-eighth.

Auto-scriptoral data feeds scrolled through the probe's artificial cortex. Auto-inquisitions answered auspicatory sweep readings, but as its machine-spirit prepared to catalogue another uneventful sweep, the probe's cogitations were broken as a priority signum-interdiction signal flared within its empyric augurs.

The augur probe's void-hardened lenses refocused. Its empyric signums whirled to life, drinking in data on every spectrum as reality buckled. The starfield warped and rippled in a patch a hundred miles across. Light bent in the probe's staring fisheye-lens as though contorting in the grip of a black hole. Witchfires sparked and died in the darkness, each flare scorching the skin of reality.

Rents appeared, matter peeling away in strips like flesh from a leper's face,

and ectoplasm spilled through, billowing in geysers and glowing with an eerie light.

Real space convulsed, crumpling and stretching all at once before ripping open like a fractal wound.

From within burst a starship.

It tumbled, engines firing as it fought to right itself. The ship's Geller field tattered amidst dancing corposants, revealing a craft almost a mile long, a buttressed Imperial warship whose battered hull plates were scorched and dented. Behind it, the tear in reality writhed madly, tendrils of dirty light groping blindly as if seeking to snatch back their prize before it could escape.

As the warp anomaly collapsed in upon itself and the starship sailed free, Kalides-Gamma-19-8_6 worked furiously to codify and categorise, to scan and transmit. Info-spools whirled within its armoured carapace, preparing a package of intelligence ready to be beamed through its aquila-carved macro-array. Machine-spirit interrogations determined the ship's designation as a strike cruiser – a Space Marine vessel. Further rapid auto-scans detected and classified the heraldry of the Ultramarines Chapter, from the noble world of Macragge.

The probe worked diligently, still attempting choristry with the on-board machine-spirits of the Ultramarines strike cruiser even as the warship bore down upon it. Retro-thrusters fired in the probe's flanks, trying to shunt it out of the starship's path, and Kalides-Gamma-19-8_6 was still busily compiling its vox-package when it was annihilated by the impact of the onrushing craft. The probe exploded, a brief starburst of fire against the armoured flank of the vessel.

It left a slight scorch mark upon the strike cruiser's starboard prow plating, directly below the ship's name: *Primarch's Sword*.

Within the armoured hull of the strike cruiser, a robed helot hastened along a corridor lit by strobing emergency lumens. He gripped the guide rails with one hand, ignoring the canted angle of the corridor and the shuddering gravity fluctuations. In his other hand, he clutched a freshly scribed dataparchment, intended for the eyes of the most important warriors on the ship.

He passed beneath the watchful eye-lenses of gothic gargoyles. He hurried across a gantry above a gun deck where servitors fought to extinguish fires and medicae teams saw to the wounded. He brushed past other helots, each

hurrying along on their own missions; many of his fellow servants were wounded, or hollow-eyed from lack of sleep.

The helot halted for a moment as the *Primarch's Sword* gave an especially violent jolt, and a groan of stressed metal rolled through the air. His eyes darted to the dark corners, whites shrinking around his pupils. He recalled the unnatural entities that had attempted to manifest during the strike cruiser's violent trip through warp space. The ship's Geller field had kept the warp-things at bay, but all the same the helot's thoughts turned to the reassuring weight of the bolt pistol holstered at his hip. No servant of the Ultramarines was defenceless...

'Emperor give your servant strength,' he muttered, 'and protect this unworthy soul from the terrors of the outer dark.'

Slowly the shuddering beneath his feet subsided, and the corridor righted itself as the *Primarch's Sword* restabilised its internal gravity. The helot made the sign of the aquila over the stylised white U emblazoned on his chest, then hurried on.

The helot arrived at the gold-embossed doors to the ship's strategium. Two Primaris Space Marines stood guard outside, bolt rifles held across their armoured chests. The warriors were demi-gods in the helot's eyes. Their fully enclosing suits of blue power armour, their proud helms with the faintly glowing eye-lenses, their thrumming back-mounted power packs – all of this filled him with a near-religious awe.

He approached with his eyes cast respectfully downwards, and one of the Ultramarines nodded in acknowledgement.

'Proceed,' said the warrior, his vox-amplified voice a deep rumble.

The doors slid aside, and the helot passed into the strategium. The chamber was high-ceilinged and decorated with marble statuary. A huge hololithic table squatted at its centre, and banks of cogitators and strategic auspex shrines lined its walls. The strategium was large enough to hold twenty armoured Adeptus Astartes, but for now it contained just three Primaris Space Marines, the noble lords who led this strike force.

They were stood around the holotable, and their eyes turned to the helot as he entered. The gravity of their combined gaze almost pinned him in place.

He approached Lieutenant Cassian, holding out the data-parchment to the strike force's commanding officer.

'Missive from Shipmaster Aethor, my lord,' said the helot. 'He deemed it

too urgent to await restoration of ship-wide vox.'

The Primaris lieutenant took the illuminated plastek printout, his noble features set in a stern frown.

'My thanks...'

'Kallem, my lord,' said the helot.

'My thanks, Kallem,' said Cassian. He unfurled the parchment, his eyes scanning its contents with inhuman speed.

'What is the word?' asked Librarian Keritraeus. The helot's eyes flicked involuntarily towards the psyker, drawn to the nest of cabling that punctured his scalp, and his dark eyes like wells of secrets.

'The shipmaster is pleased to inform us that, with the aid of Navigator X'gol, we have escaped the empyric storm that has gripped the ship these past days,' said Cassian.

'That much was obvious,' grunted Chaplain Dematris. The Chaplain's black armour and skull helm stood out in dark contrast to his comrades' blue armour. Dematris' mace-like crozius was laid on the holotable before him, a symbol of both his spiritual authority and his martial might.

'He goes on,' said Cassian dryly. 'The initial damage report from the techmagi estimates the *Primarch's Sword* to be operating at fifty-two per cent combat effectiveness. We've lost several gun decks to fires and munitions detonations, and the aft void shield generators are inactive. Ship-wide vox is down, and we've lost more than half of the hull auspex.'

'And our warp drive?' asked Keritraeus.

'Magos Lamdaxh has been forced to render it quiescent for fear of empyric feedback or malefic overspill.'

'Then we are crippled,' said Dematris angrily. 'Without the power of our warp drive to pierce the veil, we are reduced to conventional drives. A journey that would take us days in warp space would require years under such conventional power. We have no way of rejoining the Indomitus Crusade, or even of letting our comrades know that we still live.'

'Does the honoured magos suggest how long it will take him to effect repairs?' asked Librarian Keritraeus.

'He does not,' replied Cassian. 'But let us assume for now that the gates of the warp are closed to us.'

'Then what is our course of action?' asked Dematris. 'We surely haven't succeeded in the pacification of Knossa only to be cast adrift in the

interstellar darkness – that would not serve the Emperor’s will.’

Lieutenant Cassian punched a runic sequence into the holotable, muttering the rites of awakening as he did so. The device flickered to life, crafting a three-dimensional map of local space in the air from light and shadow. The *Primarch’s Sword* sat at its centre, a blue-and-gold rune, and around it the map slowly expanded as the ship’s remaining auspicators wove a data-fresco of its surroundings.

‘There are machine-spirit acknowledgements from deep-void satellites,’ said Cassian. ‘That would put us on the fringes of a star system, at least.’

‘There,’ said Keritraeus, pointing as further runes flickered into life. ‘An asteroid belt. A gas giant. A death world.’

‘More planets,’ said Cassian, ‘and with Imperial designators. By the Emperor’s grace, we have come to a settled system, my brothers.’

Astrogation data scrolled down one side of the map. Names began to appear in flickering, High Gothic script as the bridge crew worked to triangulate their position.

‘The Kalides System,’ Cassian read aloud. ‘And there, the capital world – Kalides Prime. Tithe-grade secundus, which would suggest sufficient orbital docks to hasten our repairs.’

‘Even better...’ said Keritraeus, tapping commands into the holotable’s runic keys. The display focused on Kalides Prime, expanding the world into a slowly spinning orb and projecting additional information in a halo around it.

‘An astropathic relay,’ said Cassian, allowing himself a tight smile. ‘This is good news. Not only can we repair the *Primarch’s Sword*, but with the mind-choir of that planet’s astropaths we can pierce the veil and send word to the Indomitus Crusade. We will let them know of our success on Knossa, and coordinate our rendezvous with the crusade fleet. We will return to the primarch’s side.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Dematris. ‘But let us take Knossa as a warning. According to this feed, the last confirmed contact with any world of the Kalides System was almost two years ago.’

‘Not so unusual,’ observed Keritraeus. ‘The Imperium is a vast realm, and since the opening of the Great Rift it has been harder than ever to travel safely between the stars. This would hardly be the first isolated-yet-loyal system the Indomitus Crusade has brought back into the fold.’

‘True,’ said Dematris. ‘But the corrupting influence of Chaos pervades the

galaxy. Before the flesh-cults rose from the shadows to seize power, I don't doubt that Knossa was loyal also. Following the teachings of the primarch, I suggest the theoretical that we find ourselves in a hostile system until it is proven otherwise.'

'Wise counsel, Brother-Chaplain,' said Cassian. 'I will order Shipmaster Aethor to proceed under combat conditions, and have all battle-brothers stand ready for an engagement. Should the people of this system prove to be traitors, we will wrest control of Kalides Prime by force. We must be bellicose in this. Until we can achieve a true sidereal fix, it is impossible to know how much time we lost within the jaws of the warp. And we have our orders.'

Cassian keyed a sequence of runes, and the image of Kalides Prime was replaced by a towering warrior clad in magnificently ornamented armour. All but forgotten by the three Space Marines, Kallem gasped at the imposing sight of the Ultramarines' primarch, Roboute Guilliman. Even rendered in a grainy hololith recording, the Lord of Ultramar exuded such a god-like presence that the helot was driven to his knees in awe.

'My sons,' said Guilliman, his voice rich, deep and utterly commanding. 'As the Indomitus Crusade gathers pace, we drive like a spear into the heartlands of my father's Imperium. So the dangers to our flanks grow manifold, and must be addressed. Captain Adrastean has already given you your orders, but allow me to say this to you. You are all newforged, all Primaris battle-brothers. You are the product of my will and Archmagos Cawl's labours. You are the ultimate warriors of the Imperium of Mankind, the torchbearers who will drive back the shadows in this darkest of hours. Know that you have my absolute faith. Let that knowledge strengthen your arms and gird your souls. Prevail, gloriously, swiftly, then return to my side. There are always more foes to be fought. The crusade must continue.'

The holorecording came to an end, and was replaced again by the image of Kalides Prime. Cassian, Keritraeus and Dematris looked at one another.

'We have a duty to perform, and no time to waste,' said Cassian. 'We will not shame Captain Adrastean, and we will not fail our gene-sire.'

The lieutenant turned to face Kallem, who tried to control his shaking body and rose unsteadily to his feet.

'Kallem,' said Cassian. 'You will bear these orders to the shipmaster. He is to make all speed for Kalides Prime, and to stop for nothing. The magi and

Techmarines are to make what repairs they can while en route. It will take us sixteen hours to reach the planet from this position, and I expect the *Primarch Sword*'s combat effectiveness to be increased at least twenty per cent by the time we do. External vox is to remain shrouded unless we receive Imperial hails first – the shipmaster should assume that we are in hostile space until it is proven otherwise.'

Kallem nodded, saluting the lieutenant with the sign of the aquila.

'At once, my lord.'

He turned and marched away, the image of the primarch's features still burned into his mind.

'Wise,' said Dematris as the doors slid shut behind the helot. 'Replaying that holorecording. It stoked the fires of that man's faith, and those flames will spread.'

Cassian smiled. 'It was for our benefit as much as his, Dematris.'

'Sixteen hours, then,' said Keritraeus. 'Ample time to prepare ourselves for whatever lies ahead. I will meditate, and focus my powers. Passage through the warp storm was... unpleasant. I need to refortify my mind.'

'I will look to matters spiritual,' said Dematris, hefting his crozius. 'There will be those who wish to make their devotions in the Reclusiam. Besides which, duty requires reconsecration.'

'It will be good to wield that blade again,' said Cassian. 'Almost enough to make me hope that Kalides *does* play host to heretics.'

'Always hope for enemies to slay,' quoted Dematris. 'For in their spilled blood will the Imperium be washed clean.'

Keritraeus raised one eyebrow, but made no comment.

'Very good, brothers,' said Cassian. 'Muster will commence when we are six hours out.'

'Until then,' said Keritraeus.

The Librarian and the Chaplain departed, leaving Lieutenant Cassian standing alone before the slowly revolving image of Kalides Prime. He stared hard at the hololith, as though he could force it to give up its secrets. There was much to be done, he thought. Strategic inloads of the planet's topography, settlement maps, last-known military strengths and the like. Then construction of likely battlefield theoreticals and the practical solutions to them, as the primarch taught. A tour of the ship for the sake of morale, and

then his own personal preparations: the rites of arming over his wargear, and meditations to centre himself.

‘But first,’ he murmured, ‘to stoke those fires of faith.’

The ship-wide vox might still be crippled, but Space Marine armour was a marvel of arcane technology. Alongside the suites of auto-senses that sharpened their battlefield perceptions, and the servo-bundles that augmented their already prodigious strength, every Primaris battle-brother’s Mark X armour incorporated a hardened vox-emitter keyed to a set of coded command channels. This vox-net was impervious to all but the most devastating forms of disruption, and so as Cassian keyed his vox-bead to channel ultima, he knew that his address would reach every one of the seventy-two other Ultramarines aboard the *Primarch’s Sword*.

‘My brothers,’ began Cassian. Throughout the vessel, Primaris Space Marines ceased what they were doing and attended to their lieutenant’s words.

‘My brothers, on Knossa we crushed the heretic foe,’ he said. ‘We threw down the twisted idols of Chaos and we purged the degenerates that had fallen to their worship. We brought the light of the Indomitus Crusade to those benighted by heresy. We won victory in the primarch’s name.’

Upon the ship’s firing ranges, Intercessor battle-brothers held up their bolt rifles in salute, while heavily armoured Aggressors clenched their power fists and raised them triumphantly.

‘Upon our departure from that system, the foul powers of the empyrean attempted to punish us for our victory,’ continued Cassian. ‘Yet even the fury of a warp storm could not hold us back from our duty. We escaped. We endured.’

Knelt in meditation in the ship’s Reclusiam, the brothers of Sergeant Marcus’ Reiver squad let the lieutenant’s words echo through their minds, even as they prepared to don their sinister wargear and the terrifying personas that went with it.

‘Now, the Emperor has provided us with the means to contact the crusade forces again, and to repair our craft that we might rejoin our battle-brothers all the sooner. But the greatest gifts are not given freely. The Emperor’s beneficence must be earned, and there is every chance that we will find a world turned to madness and heresy by the malign influence of the Great

Rift.'

Upon the arming deck, the brothers of Sergeant Gallen's Hellblaster squad looked up from their prayers over the bellicose machine-spirits of their plasma incinerators. They shared stern, stoic glances, the looks of warriors committed to giving everything – even their lives – if victory demanded it.

'Perhaps we will find a world of faithful Imperial servants, ready to aid our cause,' said Cassian. 'But if not, then know this – we will crush anyone foolish enough to oppose us. We will lay low any heretic who dares stand between us and our return to the primarch's side. We are the gene-sons of Roboute Guilliman, and we will prevail. For the Emperor!'

'For the Emperor!' cried Cassian's warriors, their booming voices carrying along the ship's corridors and through its cavernous chambers, filling their helot servants with pride and courage.

'Muster begins at seventeen hundred hours shiptime,' said Cassian. 'Look to your wargear and ready yourselves for battle. If enemies await us, we shall make them rue their folly...'

CHAPTER TWO

‘Generosity,’ said Lord Gurloch. The Lord of Contagion’s voice was deep and wet, bubbling with the rancid sweat that seeped through his body both inside and out. ‘Generosity is the watchword of Grandfather Nurgle. It is the first rule of our god, and we who worship him must follow his divine example. It is how we show our faith.’

Gurloch stood amidst the mould-furred rubble of the Mons Aquilas counting house, addressing his followers. He wore fluid-streaked Terminator plate, his bloated flesh spilling through corroded rents, and though the warriors he addressed were hulking Plague Marines, he loomed over them all.

‘Take our enemies,’ Gurloch said, stomping forwards. His brothers parted to let him through, their armour joints seeping and respirators gurgling. ‘They show no generosity of spirit. No magnanimity, and though we bring them plentiful gifts, they offer nothing in return. And thus, they suffer.’

Gurloch halted at the edge of the ruins and stared up the processional roadway, to where the astropathic fortress stood beneath skies clotted with sluggish clouds. The structure was vast and imposing, yet it cowered behind its flickering banks of void shields. It stood silent and alone amidst the war-torn remains of Kalides Prime’s capital city, a vast and now ruined sprawl named Dustrious.

‘I hate them, of course,’ said Gurloch. ‘For their ignorance, their worship of the Corpse-Emperor. For their blinkered refusal to accept the true might of the Dark Gods, and the glory of Nurgle above all. But I pity them, also.’

‘What is there... to pity... my lord?’ asked Thrax, Gurloch’s favoured lieutenant. Thrax was a Biologis Putrifier, a plague alchemist whose armour was festooned with clinking alembics and experimental blight grenades. His

voice escaped his helm's respirator like that of a drowning man, snatches of words gasped through the fluids that bubbled in his lungs.

'Thrax, these wretches have been deprived,' said Gurloch with an expansive gesture. 'They refuse to share the psychic bounty of their astropaths only because their God-Emperor has taught them to be grasping, cruel and selfish. He has taught them that only through suffering can their lives have meaning, that freedom and empowerment are just clever names for damnation. I pity them that their faith is built upon weakness, upon clinging to what little they have and refusing to give or receive the gifts that could be theirs. We must set an example, and show them a better way.'

As he spoke, the boom of artillery fire rolled through the air. Gurloch raised his horned helm and watched as shells sailed up from behind the counting house and arced down to burst against the fortress' shields. Dirty flame blossomed and the void shields flickered, their efforts becoming more frenetic as thick clouds of black spores spilled from the blasts and whirled across their glowing surface.

'We still cannot... breach their shields... at range... my lord,' said Thrax. 'And... Imperial forces survive... in the Temple District. They continue to... harass our flanks. If Plaguelord Morbidius... returns before we secure this... sanctum... then he will... punish us for our failure.'

'Patience, Thrax,' replied Gurloch in a tone of genuine good cheer. 'Battle should be steady, drawn out, savoured to the last dribbles of blood and pus. Entropy is our ally. Suffering is our gift. Starvation, despair, the inevitability of disease – these are the vectors by which our god's power spreads. So Mortarion teaches us.'

'Dark praises upon... the primarch,' gurgled Thrax.

'Dark praises upon the primarch,' echoed Gurloch before continuing. 'Eventually, our enemies will concede defeat, Thrax. And as for the Imperial Guardsmen lurking in the Temple District, let them try to fight us! Let them pit their paltry strength against the indomitable might of the Death Guard! I applaud their tenacity, and relish the utter hopelessness of their cause. Let us give them suffering and sickness that they might, in their turn, aid our true purpose here. Let us be... *generous*.'

Gurloch turned to the assembled Plague Marines, hefting his massive plaguereaper axe high.

'We are the sons of Mortarion!' he roared, clotted matter spraying from his

vox-grille. ‘We are the warriors of the Third Plague Company of Mortarion’s Anvil, blessed with the Everseep, the Endless Suppuration, the Weeping Gift of Nurgle himself!’

His brothers waved bolters, blades, heavy maces and rot-nozzled plague spewers. Their cheer was ghastly, a gurgling drone that sounded like a herd of grox drowning in swamp water.

‘We are entropy personified!’ cried Gurloch. ‘We are the death inevitable, the inexorable wasting, and we will grind these heathens down until they give us what we want.’

His warriors gave another mighty cry, almost drowning out the roar of their Plagueburst Crawlers lobbing another volley of shells towards the fortress.

‘Ready your weapons, and bring up another batch of cages,’ ordered Gurloch. ‘Let us offer them our gifts again.’

Throughout the ruins, the warriors of Gurloch’s vectorium trudged into position with their bolters ready. They would advance into range of the fortress’ shields and then lay down harassing fire, continuing to probe the enemy defences. They likely had the numbers and the fortitude to carry the day if they wished, but by Gurloch’s order, they would not push up the slopes to the fortress walls themselves.

Not yet.

That duty would fall instead to other, lesser beings. He saw them now, packed tightly into huge, rusting cages that ground through the ruins on industrial tracks. The creatures’ eyes stared mindlessly into the middle distance. Their rictus grins dripped with slime. Their rotting flesh and squirming tentacles stank of putrefaction, and their moans filled the air.

‘My poxwalkers,’ said Gurloch, his tone that of a proud parent.

The tracked cages lurched to a halt, well out of range of the fortress’ guns. Locking bolts blew and the cage doors swung open with shuddering clangs. Groaning sorrowfully through their rotten smiles, the diseased former populace of Dustrious stumbled from their cages and shambled towards the fortress. Some clutched crude clubs and rusting tools. Others brandished firearms, though Gurloch knew that none of them had the wit to use them.

They were not the first such attack wave unleashed upon the astropathic fortress. Many thousands of their fellows already formed gory mounds around its walls. The combined stench of their gas-bloated corpses was ghastly, and Gurloch breathed a deep draught as he watched his latest attack

wave advance.

Thousands of the mindless never-dead swarmed through the ruins and began the stumbling ascent towards the Imperial fortress. Gurloch's brothers strode behind them like shepherds, while from the rear lines the Plagueburst Crawlers maintained their steady bombardment.

The guns of the astropathic fortress came to life. Heavy bolters and autocannons roared, mowing down rank upon rank of plague-ridden mutants. Battle cannons hammered shells into their midst, raising geysers of foul fluids and spinning limbs, but the poxwalkers advanced undaunted, as incapable of fear as they were of escaping their own dreadful fate.

'Shall we... join the attack... my lord?' asked Thrax, caressing the brittle glass alembics that hung from his armour. 'I have concoctions... I wish to perfect.'

'Small chance at such a range,' said Gurloch. 'No, let the poxwalkers soak up our enemy's fire and gnaw away at their munitions. Let them groan their fulsome dirge, that it might seep into the minds of unwary defenders and sow the seeds of sickness in their dreams. I have need of your concoctions elsewhere, Thrax.'

'The... Imperial Guard?' asked Thrax.

'Perhaps,' said Gurloch, 'but perhaps not. Blorthos has had a vision – something he believes worthy of my attention. Let us take his Witherlings and see for ourselves.'

Gurloch turned away from the ongoing slaughter and stomped through the ruins, Thrax lumbering at his side.

A half hour later, Gurloch led Thrax and the Witherlings down a deep drainage trench between rows of gargoyles-encrusted hab-blocks. He waded hip-deep through rancid sewage, clouds of fat flies droning around him.

The Witherlings were almost as massive as their master, a band of five Blightlord Terminators whose hulking armour drizzled unclean fluids and crawled with corrosion. They were led by their grotesque champion, Blorthos, whose helm was little more than a rusted frame for a bulbous eye the size of a man's head. The dripping orb was milky with cataracts and threaded through with burrowing worms, yet still it rolled back and forth in its setting, following movements only he could see.

'Up ahead, my lord,' rumbled the Terminator. 'There is a tunnel, and

beyond it—’

‘The munitions manufactorum,’ said Gurloch. ‘Yes, this is its primary run-off channel, is it not? Then your vision concerned Slaugh and his squad?’

‘The Grandfather gifts me fever dreams, my lord,’ replied Blorthos. ‘They are vivid, but rarely lucid. I saw this place, and a threat to our brothers – sharp needles digging through rotten flesh, but little more.’

‘Of course, of course,’ said Gurloch. ‘It is not for such as us to question the glorious gifts of the Grandfather.’

‘What was... Slaugh... doing in this region?’ asked Thrax. ‘There have... been no reports of... Imperial activity here for... several weeks now. Not since... our initial... drop.’

‘No indeed,’ replied Gurloch. ‘A hearty bombardment of slitherpox and churning lung put paid to any who took refuge, and the Imperials have not dared to set foot here since, lest they feel the touch of Nurgle upon their flesh. No, Thrax, this was not intended to be a combat mission. I merely sent Slaugh to hunt out any munitions stockpiles that we could turn to our use should our constant generosity lead our own guns to feel the pinch of famine.’

‘Seems Slaugh may have felt the pinch of something else,’ chuckled Blorthos. There was no love lost between Gurloch’s champions, who were forever locked in competition.

‘We shall see soon enough,’ said Gurloch, as he waded on into the shadow of the cavernous inflow pipe. The flanks of the manufactorum reared overhead, and for a moment it felt to Gurloch as though he were advancing into the maw of some immense beast. He grinned at the thought – anything foolish enough to devour him would soon find itself poisoned beyond words – and led the way into the darkness.

‘Here is... another one,’ called Thrax. Gurloch looked up from the sprawled body of Slaugh and grunted in irritation.

‘All of them, then,’ he said.

He and his followers stood amidst the massive labour-belts and rusting machinery of the manufactorum. The work-floor was carpeted with the contorted remains of the hundreds of labour serfs who had died here weeks earlier. Amongst them, Gurloch had found the corpses of Slaugh’s squad. Their armoured forms had not been difficult to locate.

‘They died without firing a shot,’ said Blorthos contemptuously. ‘They sent no message.’ His Terminators stood in a rough ring around their leaders, facing outwards with their guns raised.

‘It must... have been swift,’ said Thrax, glancing at the deep shadows wreathing the manufactorum. ‘An ambush...’

Gurloch switched through his helm’s visual filters, each one a noxious shade of rust, rot or poison, and began cogitating ballistic trajectories and assessing impact points.

‘Accurate,’ he mused. ‘And deadly. These shots hit eyes, armour joints, corroded plates. They punched right through the blessed flesh of our brothers and killed them as though they were flimsy loyalists.’

‘The Astra Militarum must have sent snipers,’ said Blorthos, but he sounded doubtful.

‘Our enemies have neither the marksmanship nor the weapons to achieve this,’ replied Gurloch. ‘No, brothers, Grandfather Nurgle has blessed us with a warning. Some other power is at work here, and we must be wary. Thrax – vox Phlegorius, if you would. Let us have our plague surgeon cut these corpses up and inspect the rounds that killed them. Besides, he will need to reclaim their gene-seed for the Legion before it becomes too flyblown to be of use. I–’

Gurloch was interrupted by the dull tolling of his helm vox. He activated it, and heard the voice of Ruptus, one of his Plague Marine champions.

‘My lords, the assault upon the astropathic sanctum has reached the third firing line,’ gargled Ruptus, *‘but the Astra Militarum have launched another attack. They are pushing tanks and infantry out of the Temple District into sectors six and seven.’*

‘They timed their strike well,’ said Gurloch. ‘We are extended on the attack, and I am at a remove from the battle.’

‘Perhaps... this was their... work... after all?’ asked Thrax. ‘A... ruse to... pull you away?’

‘The Imperials could not have sent me my vision,’ snorted Blorthos.

‘No,’ said Gurloch. ‘Yet still the timing is fortuitous, is it not? Ah well, the heavier the rain, the swifter the crops rot, and we cannot win Nurgle’s blessings without opportunities to excel. Ruptus, spread the word – all vectorium forces are to pull back and reinforce against the Imperial Guard. Leave the poxwalkers to press their attack. They will not last much longer

anyway.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Ruptus over the vox.

'You shall oversee the defence until I return, Ruptus,' continued Gurloch. 'Give ground slowly – concentrate on exhausting their forces and eliminating their armour wherever possible. And send Pustulus' and Thrombox's squads to sector nine. Have them bring a couple of bloat-drones, hmm? We will congeal with his forces on our way back and hit the Imperial flank, severing the spear tip of their advance.'

'In Mortarion's name, my lord,' said Ruptus, cutting the vox-link.

'It seems Phlegorius has been saved a walk,' said Gurloch.

'Lord?' asked Thrax.

'Whether or not our enemies staged this diversion, they have made best use of it,' said Gurloch, staring out into the gloom. 'And we must assume that the assassins that killed Slaugh and his brothers are still at large. No, I will not risk our best plague surgeon at this juncture. Blorthos, you and your brothers heft a corpse each. We will bring them with us, that Phlegorius may examine them at his leisure.'

Gurloch saw Blorthos stiffen; he knew that the Terminator would resent this demeaning duty. He also knew that no warrior of the Death Guard would complain at such a hardship, lest their fortitude be questioned.

'Yes, lord,' said Blorthos, motioning to his brothers to choose and heft a corpse each. Blorthos himself threw Slaugh's body over one shoulder as though his armoured remains weighed nothing at all.

'Good,' said Gurloch. 'Let us away. Battle calls.'

Captain Dzansk, commander of the Cadian 44th Heavy Infantry, cursed as something struck the flank of his Chimera. The armoured personnel carrier rocked on its suspension, throwing Dzansk and his command squad around in their restraints.

'What in Throne's name was that?' barked Colour Sergeant Weims as the vehicle skidded to a halt.

'No clue,' said Dzansk. 'Nothing good.'

He banged a fist on the hatch to the drivers' compartment, ignoring the ache in his bones from whatever heretical ague he had contracted.

'Hey, Stranson, what—'

Dzansk was cut off as their transport bucked again, lurching backwards with

a shriek of tortured metal. Dzansk heard muffled screams from the drivers' compartment, followed by a loud bang. Smoke began to leak through the ventilation ports.

'Damnit,' said Dzansk. 'Chonsky, get the hatch. Weapons ready – we're disembarking.'

Gunner Chonsky hefted his meltagun with one hand and hit the hatch-release rune with the other. The Chimera's rear ramp opened with a hydraulic whine, allowing thick smoke and buzzing flies to spill inside.

Chonsky was first down the ramp, coughing on the foul air that had already poisoned their lungs thrice over. Dzansk followed, but pulled up with a yell of alarm as huge metal tentacles whipped out of the fug and punched through Chonsky's chest. The gunner screamed as he was hefted off the ground, his wild eyes locking with Dzansk's in the split second before the rusted tendrils ripped him bloodily in two.

Looming through miasmal smoke and spores came a Helbrute Dreadnought, a hulking giant of rusted metal and rotten flesh taller than Dzansk's burning Chimera. One arm comprised the waving tentacles that had ripped Chonsky apart, while the other mounted a massive cannon. A cluster of eyes rolled above a fleshy maw in the thing's chest, which was itself an armoured sarcophagus housing the tortured flesh remnant of the machine's pilot, a once-great Death Guard champion.

'Down!' shouted Dzansk, diving aside as the ironclad monster opened fire. Shells whipped over him in a storm, reducing Medicae Danvers and Colour Sergeant Weims to bloody gobbets.

Voxman Xavier hit the ground next to Dzansk, swearing inaudibly over the din of the fusillade. The Helbrute's fire tore through the open hatch of the Chimera and detonated its engines. The explosion was shockingly enormous. It picked up Dzansk and hurled him past the Helbrute, leaving his ears ringing and his body bruised as he rolled to a stop.

Dzansk looked up groggily through the swirling smoke and saw the Dreadnought turning towards him. Its fanged maw yawned and its eyes rolled madly. There were more shapes in the murk: Cadian Guardsmen and tanks firing as they advanced, but none were close enough to come to his aid.

Dzansk rolled sideways, frantically avoiding the lash of the Helbrute's tentacles. He ripped his laspistol from its holster and fired, bursting one of the creature's eyes with a lucky shot. It roared, though the sound was still

muffled to Dzansk, and stomped towards him.

He saw Xavier, lying on his side, unmoving – no help there. He prayed to the Emperor for aid, scrambling to his feet and swatting away droning flies. His eyes alighted on Chonsky's meltagun, lying discarded near the bloodied remains of its former owner. He dived for the gun, feeling everything inside him constrict in terror as the Helbrute's tentacles whipped past mere inches from his flesh.

Captain Dzansk hit the ground in a roll and came up with Chonsky's meltagun levelled.

'Oh spirit of the weapon, forgive my crude ministrations and vent thine wrath upon this unclean thing,' he prayed, then squeezed the trigger.

The meltagun's energy blast built from a hiss to a roar in a split second. The Helbrute reeled as a column of super-agitated microwave energy bored through its sarcophagus and struck the clotted remnants of the Death Guard warrior interred within. Boiling flesh and warp flame jetted from the glowing hole, and the machine gave a ululating howl as it staggered backwards. Something exploded within its armoured frame, smoke belched and the war engine toppled, crashing down mere feet from Dzansk.

'Emperor be praised,' whispered the Cadian captain. He shook himself out of his daze and rushed over to Voxman Xavier. To his relief, his comrade was stirring and groaning – wounded, ill, but very much alive.

Dzansk grabbed the headset attached to his voxman's backpack and dialled into the Cadian command channel, listening as he scrolled hastily through strategic data on his auspex.

'-eventh Platoon retreating, repeat, Seventh Platoon retreating, overwhelming enemy fire at-'

'-what in Throne's name is that thing? Watch out, don't-'

'-questing immediate fire on these coordinates, one-four-one-two, repea-'

'-coming from the flank. Holy Cadia, are those Terminators? We have to-'

'Men and women of Cadia!' barked Dzansk, overriding their vox-channels so all would hear. 'I am sounding the retreat. Enemy flanking forces are attempting to bifurcate our advance and trap our forward elements between their guns. Fourth, Eighth and Twelfth Platoons – fall back immediately to position Shades and filter out through the ruins. Lieutenant Bronski, get your squadron out of there and punch out to the right flank, *Vengeance* to the fore. We need your battle tanks intact. Everyone else, fall back by squads, cover

pattern Alphaus, and rendezvous at the Shrine of the Emperor's Beatific Countenance. Cadia stands!'

Confirmations flooded back through the vox, and Dzansk felt a moment of pride at how efficiently his warriors fought, even in conditions as terrible as these. The thunder of Death Guard bolters echoed through the murk, spurring the captain to action. He hoisted Kavier onto his feet, ignoring the voxman's pained groans and the blood that caked his scalp. Throwing one of Kavier's arms over his shoulder and clutching Chonsky's meltagun tight, Dzansk began a hurried limp back towards the Imperial lines. He heard the ragged wheeze in his breathing, and ignored it.

'Emperor,' he prayed as he hobbled through the murk. 'If you're listening, I know we're no more deserving than anyone else, and I'm sure you've got better things to do than listen to my pathetic bloody prayers, but if you can hear me, please, send us your aid. I don't think we're going to last much longer without it.'

CHAPTER THREE

The embarkation deck of the *Primarch's Sword* resounded with activity. Squads of Primaris Space Marines jogged into position in preparation to board heavily armoured gunships. Munitions servitors lumbered between the strike force's vehicles, hefting shells and power packs into place with their servo-arms, or hauling sloshing fuel bowsers.

Helots hurried back and forth, bearing equipment, orders and artefacts for their masters. Chaplain Dematris marched along the lines of warriors, leading them in chanting the Chapter's rites of battle, while cyber-cherubim fluttered through the strobing light, carrying censers which trailed thick incense smoke. All the bustle and activity was framed against the star-speckled darkness of space, visible through the deck's open blast doors but held at bay by a shimmering force field.

Lieutenant Cassian and Librarian Keritraeus stood on an observation gantry, watching the final preparations.

'It appears you will get your war, lieutenant,' said the Librarian.

'You make me sound like some bellicose Space Wolf or Black Templar,' said Cassian. 'I am not champing at the bit for bloodshed, Keritraeus. But I won't shy from doing the Emperor's work, or from admitting it brings me satisfaction.'

'Nor should you, Cassian,' said the Librarian with a faint smile. 'But have a caution. I know that Captain Adrastean placed a substantial burden of responsibility upon your shoulders. Be sure you don't allow it to force your hand.'

'I don't deny I have much to prove,' said Cassian. 'To Adrastean. To the primarch.'

‘To yourself?’ asked Keritraeus.

Cassian nodded. ‘That too. This war has raged for ten thousand years, my friend, and we are latecomers. We have not shared the burdens, nor endured the hardships, that others have. There are those, even amongst the armies of the Indomitus Crusade, who still doubt us for what we are.’

Keritraeus chuckled softly.

‘My brother, look at whom you are speaking to,’ he said. ‘Since the earliest days of the Imperium, there have been voices raised against my kind. Witches, they call us, unnatural and dangerous. That has never stopped the Librarians of the Space Marine Chapters from using our powers to aid our battle-brothers, shield the Emperor’s servants and slaughter His enemies.’

‘A wise comparison, brother,’ replied Cassian. ‘One I hope we can live up to.’

‘We shall soon see. It appears that Dematris has concluded his prayers.’

‘Good. Then in Guilliman’s name, let us be about it.’

Cassian stepped up to the railing and keyed his vox-grille to amplify his voice.

‘Brothers,’ he said, voice booming through the embarkation deck. ‘Once again, we prepare to do battle with the dark forces of Chaos.’

His warriors cheered.

‘Within minutes, the *Primarch’s Sword* will enter high orbit above Kalides Primes. Though atmospheric conditions are poor, from long-range auspex and oracular interrogation we can surmise that the planet has been invaded by the Heretic Astartes. Brothers, we face the Death Guard.’

A murmur ran through the ranks at this. The Death Guard were one of the original Traitor Legions – ancient warriors, steeped in corruption and seething with the power of Chaos.

This would be a hard fight.

‘We have detected the wreckage of several Imperial Navy warships scattered through the planet’s upper atmosphere,’ continued Cassian. ‘We have also marked warp translation signatures that suggest where our enemy’s craft came and went, leaving us with orbital supremacy. Moreover, the capital city’s astropathic fortress remains intact, and there are at least some Imperial ground forces still engaging the invaders. Do not make the mistake of believing that any of this will make our mission easier. The Death Guard seem to be warding themselves from our auguries in some fashion. Strategic

intelligence is thus fragmentary, but hints at enemy numbers substantially greater than our own. Also, the foe has control of the capital city's orbital defence batteries.

'You have all been briefed upon the plan. We will execute a combat drop to capture the orbital batteries while Shipmaster Aethor uses starship wreckage to shield the *Primarch's Sword* from any return fire. Once the batteries are ours, we will bring the strike cruiser lower to provide supporting bombardments, link up with any localised Imperial forces and drive for the astropathic fortress. We will do this swiftly, before the enemy can marshal their strength, and we will do it in the name of the Emperor and the primarch!'

'For the Emperor!' roared his warriors. 'For Guilliman!'

Inceptor Sergeant Polandrus depressed a runic stud in his gauntlet, causing a ceramite heat shield to slide down over his helm. He flexed his limbs, feeling the motor-bundles of his Mark X Gravis power armour respond smoothly, before depressing his heels and causing his servo-stirrups to give, then resist. He interrogated his weapon-feeds, ensuring they were clear of obstruction and their ammunition counts were at maximum.

'Final checks, brothers,' he voxed, casting an eye over his two comrades as they underwent their own pre-drop rituals. The Inceptors looked unwieldy in their heat-shielded armour, with their heavy jump packs and their guns underslung on their forearms. Polandrus knew better.

His battle-brothers confirmed their readiness, and Polandrus nodded in satisfaction, activating his helm's drop protocols and watching as wireframe flight vectors overlaid themselves on his vision. He glanced across at Inceptor Squad Thaddean, their comrades in arms for over a decade now, readying themselves nearby.

'Ready, brother?' asked Polandrus over the vox.

'To slaughter heretics?' asked Sergeant Thaddean. 'Always.'

'For the glory of Ultramar, then,' said Polandrus. 'Inceptor Squads Polandrus and Thaddean commencing atmospheric insertion drop in three, two, one...'

Feeding power through his armour's systems, Polandrus began a pounding run across the embarkation deck. His brothers followed, their steps becoming bounding springs as servo-stirrups took their weight and propelled them

forwards. The Inceptors engaged their jump packs, blue firelight flaring within their jet nozzles, and led by Polandrus they accelerated towards the lip of the embarkation deck, the void of space and the immensity of Kalides Prime yawning dizzyingly below.

The brink came up to meet Polandrus and he leapt, propelling himself through the deck's force field and into the cold emptiness of space.

In a moment, the din of gunship engines and autoloaders was gone, replaced by the sound of his steady breathing, the dull thump of his twin hearts and the clipped vocalisations of the squad vox. He fed power to his thrusters and tucked his limbs in at his sides as he angled himself towards Kalides Prime and began his descent.

'Squad, report,' he said. His battle-brothers voxed in, confirming that they had successfully exited the *Primarch's Sword* and were following him in towards the thermosphere.

'Sergeant Thaddean?' asked Polandrus.

'*We're away,*' came Thaddean's voice. '*Smooth deployment. Coordinates locked in. We will follow you down.*'

'On wings of fire, brother,' said Polandrus. With a few quick bursts of thrust, he turned his arcing flight into a level descent, watching the runes designating his squadmates as they all settled into their drop vectors. Beneath him, Kalides grew larger by the second while the starfield slowly dimmed. At his back, the *Primarch's Sword* descended more slowly, gunships beginning to boost out of its launch bays as it came.

The gunships would be the second wave; the Inceptors had the honour of being the first.

'*Entering upper atmosphere in five,*' voxed Thaddean. '*Brace.*'

Polandrus felt his armour's servos stiffen and his posture lock as its machine-spirit baffled him against the impending gravitic forces. He muttered a prayer for the Emperor to watch over him, then flames were licking across his armour's plates as he began re-entry. Thermosensors registered steep spikes, and a bone-deep shuddering ran through his body, fierce enough that a lesser being would quickly have been rendered unconscious.

'Watch your angles,' he voxed. 'Brother Ulandro, adjust point two – you're a little steep.'

Flames were blazing around him now as he punched down through Kalides' atmospheric envelope. Thermic warnings continued to ping. He felt his

momentum and weight increase as the planet's gravity reached up to take him in its embrace, and a constant roar filled his senses.

Polandrus felt no fear. This was what he was made for.

The fires died in an instant, replaced by the vertiginous sensation of full gravity and the churning mass of the planet's polluted storm clouds rushing up to meet him.

'Reading high winds within the storm system,' he voxed.

'Acknowledged,' replied Thaddean. *'Detecting trace malefic energies within the clouds.'*

'Confirmed,' said Polandrus. 'Intone the litany of denial, brothers. Gird your souls.'

The Inceptors streaked down like missiles, maintaining a grim chant as they punched into the cloud layer. Polandrus gritted his teeth as visibility dropped to virtually nil and furious cross-winds pummelled him. Greasy rain streaked the lenses of his helm, and as green-tinged lightning flashed around him, he thought he saw the suggestion of leering visages swirling hugely amidst the thunderheads.

'Keep your coordinates locked, brothers,' he ordered. 'Trust in the machine-spirits of your armour. Follow drop vectors and be ready for combat landing in one hundred and eighty seconds.'

Lightning flared in strobing blasts. The clouds formed fanged maws the size of hab-blocks that yawned wide and closed over them. Thunder crashed and the winds howled, while storm rain hammered the Inceptors' armour with the force of shotgun pellets.

Through it all they held their course, and as his helm altimeter spiralled downwards, Polandrus unlocked his drop posture and roused the wrathful machine-spirits of his assault bolters.

'Breaking cloud cover in three, two...' Polandrus shot through the last wisps of cloud, and the ruined cityscape of Dustrious was revealed below him.

'The city is in an advanced state of deterioration,' he voxed, opening his channel to the entire strike force. 'Visual confirmation – large portions of Dustrious have been bombarded from orbit. Damage and auspex readings suggest a mixture of conventional munitions and malefic contaminants. Malefic contagion levels high throughout the city. Confirming status of astropathic fortress... It appears intact and shielded at this time.'

'Orbital batteries sighted on southern edge of the city, coordinates one-one-

seven-three-one,’ added Thaddean. *‘Auspex reads enemy presence confirmed on site.’*

‘Commencing final approach,’ said Polandrus. ‘Emperor guide our aim.’

With a thought, Polandrus increased the thrust from his jump pack, accelerating into an almost suicidal dive. As he did so, lights flashed amongst the batteries below, muzzle flare sparking amongst metal gantries and illuminating the flanks of huge las silos.

‘They’ve spotted us,’ said Thaddean.

‘It won’t save them,’ said Polandrus.

Shots whipped around him. Flak shells burst in clouds of dirty smoke, shrapnel sparking off his armour plates. Warning chimes sounded as threat recognition runes blossomed across his field of vision.

‘Landing zone confirmed,’ he said, jinking to evade a sawing line of flak fire. ‘Roof of generatorum seven-alpha. Light enemy presence. Deploy on my mark.’

Polandrus and his warriors streaked downwards at punishing speed, using their sheer momentum to confound their enemy’s aim. The generatorum swelled before them, a blocky building nestled amidst the looming barrels of the las silos, its flanks thick with industrial piping and its roof a flat expanse dotted with huge cooling vents.

Enemy warriors were visible between them, ragged human cultists who pointed and screamed as they sprayed autogun fire skywards.

Polandrus waited until collision alarms were shrilling in his helm, then triggered his landing thrusters. Retrorockets fired with body-blow force, spinning him in the air so that his feet were pointed groundwards. His heavy jump pack howled as it arrested his descent, and he hit the generatorum roof with enough force to crack the ferrocrete, his servo-stirrups absorbing the shock that would otherwise have broken every bone in his legs.

Polandrus swung his assault bolters up, ballistic cogitations and targeter runes dropping into place over his vision. He depressed his firing runes and sent a hail of mass-reactive bolts thumping into the cultists on the rooftop. The bolt shells leapt away on blazing propellant trails, and as each one punched through flak armour and flesh, the micro-cogitators built into their warheads detected sufficient surrounding mass to trigger detonation. Four luckless worshippers of Nurgle exploded in as many seconds, the diseased blessings of their god powerless to save them.

‘For the Emperor!’ roared Polandrus.

His brothers slammed down beside him, their fire joining his own. A hurricane of bolt shells whipped outwards, the Inceptors’ firing solutions perfectly cogitated to prevent them from catching each other in their overlapping fields of fire.

Cultists burst one after another, blood spraying across the rooftop, severed limbs spinning away. Skulls detonated. Bone shrapnel flew. In under twenty seconds, Polandrus and his two battle-brothers killed all thirty of the Chaos cultists occupying the rooftop. Their enemy’s ragged fire barely scratched their armour.

‘Squad Polandrus, drop insertion successful,’ voxed the sergeant.

‘Squad Thaddean, drop insertion successful,’ echoed his comrade. Polandrus glanced over at a shuttle pad some hundred yards to the east. Thaddean’s squad had landed there, and had slaughtered their enemies with little resistance.

‘Well done, brothers,’ voxed Lieutenant Cassian. *‘Drop craft on approach. Commence stage two.’*

‘Confirmed,’ replied Polandrus.

A spread of runic designators lit up on his auspex, each one indicating a flak battery that could pose a risk to the Ultramarines gunships even now streaking down through the cloud cover overhead.

‘Good hunting,’ voxed Thaddean, before he and his squad lit their jump packs and boosted away from the landing pad. Their guns roared as they sighted more enemies to slaughter.

‘And to you, brother,’ said Polandrus, igniting his own rockets. He leapt skywards, his brothers close behind, soaring clear of the generatorum and arcing down towards a nearby blockhouse. Polandrus had a fleeting glimpse of the ferrocrete roadway between the two buildings as he passed over it. He spotted more cultists dashing along it, yelling and pointing upwards.

He slammed down on the blockhouse roof. Ahead of him, he saw a bulky flak-cannon emplacement, its barrels aimed at the heavens and a grey-fleshed servitor wired into its flank. With a press of his firing runes, Polandrus annihilated the servitor in a spray of bolts. His brothers added their shots to the fusillade, reducing the anti-aircraft cannon to sparking wreckage.

‘Life signs approaching,’ said Brother Donadus. ‘One floor down.’

‘Dispersal pattern,’ ordered Polandrus. His battle-brothers redeployed in jet-

assisted leaps, forming a semicircle around the exit hatch atop the roof.

The hatch swung open with a clang, and the first cultists spilled upwards. Polandrus had a fleeting impression of rag-wrapped features, yellowed eyes and disease-bloated flesh before the Inceptors blew them apart.

More of the enemy spilled onto the rooftop, only to be blinded by the spraying viscera of their comrades. Bolt shells drilled into their bodies and exploded, slaughtering them wholesale.

‘Press the attack,’ ordered Polandrus, and he and his warriors closed up, hosing fire down the stairway below the hatch. Cultists screamed in terror. Most of them died in droves, packed in and unable to escape, before the last of them turned and fled, chased by roaring bolt shells.

‘Enough,’ said Polandrus. ‘Relocate.’

His squad leapt again, dropping from the rooftop of the blockhouse into the square below. Another flak emplacement stood here, surrounded by buildings and flanked by statues of Imperial saints now furred with mould. Polandrus’ warriors blitzed the cannon with fire.

‘*Gunships inbound,*’ voxed Thaddean. Polandrus looked skywards and saw Ultramarines craft sweeping down through the clouds like vengeful angels.

‘Three more emplacements to eliminate,’ he said. ‘Resistance negligible.’

‘*Moving on,*’ said Thaddean.

At that moment, the distinctive roar of bolters echoed across the square. The shells struck Brother Ulandro, tearing open his chest-plate in a gory spray.

‘Death Guard!’ roared Brother Donadus, raising his assault bolters and letting fly even as Ulandro’s body crashed to the ground.

The Plague Marines strode into the square, bolters up and firing. They were abhorrent, their dirty-green power armour thick with rust and seeping sweat. Gurgling tubes punctured their forms, and plague flies swirled around them.

‘Unclean filth!’ shouted Sergeant Polandrus, leaping aside on a jet of flame as he opened fire. His shots hammered the nearest Plague Marine, staggering the monstrous warrior and cratering his power armour. Yet the heretic didn’t fall, instead giving a gurgling laugh and returning fire.

Bolt shells chased Polandrus through the air, several rounds ricocheting from his armour with punishing force. He landed and leapt again, still firing. More shots struck the trudging Plague Marine, punching through his cracked armour plates and detonating within him. Filthy gore splattered the square as the Death Guard warrior’s torso was blown apart.

Still he kept firing.

‘Guilliman’s oath!’ cursed Polandrus. ‘These heretics are nigh invulnerable.’

‘Enough bolt shells will kill anything, sergeant,’ said Donadus fiercely as his stream of shots took off one of the Plague Marines’ heads. The heretic’s body staggered several more paces, bolter still firing wildly, before toppling onto its side.

‘True words, brother,’ said Polandrus, unleashing another salvo and snarling in satisfaction as his target finally collapsed, dead.

The last two Plague Marines kept advancing and firing, but they were outmatched. Weathering their fire, the two surviving Inceptors poured shots into the traitors until they were nothing but twitching corpses.

‘Heretic filth,’ spat Brother Donadus, voice thick with disgust. ‘Ulandro was thrice the warrior any of these unworthy things were.’

‘Focus, brother,’ said Polandrus. ‘We will mourn Ulandro later. For now, we have a beachhead to secure.’

Rune-marking the position of Ulandro’s fallen body for the Chapter’s Apothecaries, Polandrus selected his next target and engaged his jump pack. Meanwhile, the Ultramarines drop-ships swept in to land, shrugging off the last desultory streams of flak fire as they delivered infantry, battle tanks and Dreadnoughts into the fight. The beachhead was as good as secured, and soon the Ultramarines would take the fight to the Death Guard.

In the meantime, Polandrus would avenge his fallen brother in heretic blood.

Far across the city, strange figures stirred within the banquet chamber of a ruined manse. Lithe forms moved through beams of weak daylight, treading with a fluid grace that was entirely alien. The thick dust barely stirred at their passing.

Sat in their midst, their leader raised her head and closed her eyes, reaching out with senses beyond those of the mortal flesh. She breathed deeply, and nodded to herself.

‘They have come,’ she said, her voice musical and lilting.

She rose from her cross-legged pose, the runes on her armour glowing softly and her long cloak flowing around her like water.

‘It is time.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Lieutenant Cassian moved along a roadway between crumbling ruins, bolt rifle sweeping for targets. His strike force was spread through the streets to either side.

Intercessors and Hellblasters jogged from one firing position to the next, stopping to cover their battle-brothers. Aggressors stomped through rubble and ruin, ready to bring point-blank annihilation to anyone that stood in their way. Polandrus' and Thaddean's Inceptors had the flanks, while on high the Reivers of Squad Marcus could be glimpsed as they used grapnel guns to swing from one vantage point to the next, keeping watch for threats.

The strike force's infantry was supported by a pair of Redeptor Dreadnoughts, Brother Indomator and Brother Marius, who strode along in their midst. Fifteen-feet-tall bipedal war engines, each Dreadnought was built around an armoured sarcophagus containing the still-living remains of a mortally wounded battle-brother who piloted his walking tomb as though it were his own body.

Cassian's force was completed by a trio of Repulsor battle tanks, which he had placed at the forefront, an armoured spearhead to drive their attack home. The Repulsors were slab-sided war machines bristling with heavy firepower, hovering several feet off the ground on thrumming grav-fields that would crush and pummel anything they passed over, be it rubble, wreckage or enemies.

'Chaplain Dematris?' voxed Cassian.

'No resistance yet,' replied Dematris from his position one street over. *'The enemy clearly lack fortitude, or else they would come and oppose us.'*

'If there is one thing the Death Guard do not lack, it is fortitude,' said

Keritraeus from his position elsewhere on the line. *'We are making good progress, but we should remain cautious.'*

'The foe should not be underestimated,' agreed Cassian. *'But we captured our beachhead with virtually no casualties, and we still have the element of surprise. With luck, we will reach our objective before they can rally more than token forces against us.'*

'We also have the Primarch's Sword,' added Dematris. *'Shipmaster Aethor has enough weapons systems working to provide a substantial planetary bombardment should it be required.'*

'The tainted atmospherics render auspex scans unreliable,' said Keritraeus. *'We do not know for sure where our enemies are. We have only ghost returns.'*

'What do you counsel?' asked Cassian.

'We slow our advance. We use the Reivers to scout the path ahead. If we cannot rely on the senses of our machine-spirits, then we must instead rely upon our own.'

'An excess of caution,' said Dematris. *'Surprise is an advantage that lasts only so long. Everything we know of the Death Guard suggests that they are predominately an infantry force, exceptionally resilient and deadly in close-range firefights, but ponderous. If we give them time to respond, the situation will deteriorate rapidly.'*

'Lieutenant, I cannot agree,' said Keritraeus. *'The enemy has been here for weeks. With the auspex so unreliable, we have no way of knowing where their forces might be massed. And they are still Space Marines, let us not forget. I believe it would be a grave error to rush blindly in on the assumption that they did not have contingencies in place for just such an attack.'*

'Brothers, I hear you both,' said Cassian, *'but I must err on the side of decisive action, for every moment spent away from the primarch's side is a moment we are failing in our duty. However, I agree that we must determine our foe's true location and strength. That is why we require more eyes on the ground. Eyes that I intend to secure now.'*

So saying, he cut the link to his brothers and began to cycle methodically through Imperial command channels, sending out a rune-coded interrogation to each one.

Cassian led his Intercessors across a rubble-strewn intersection, stepping around collected pools of oily filth. It had begun to rain, a light, greasy

drizzle whose touch Cassian did not trust – wary of heretical contaminants, he had ordered his brothers to keep their helms on. He ducked through a blackened archway and picked his way through the bombed-out ruin of a hab-block. Heaps of remains lay rotting here, the sad remnants of Dustrious' inhabitants now little more than fly-picked bones.

As Cassian emerged into daylight again, he saw the astropathic fortress standing proud on a hilltop in the middle distance. According to his helm's auto-senses, the structure now lay just a few miles ahead. At the Space Marines' swift pace, they would reach it in less than twenty minutes. If the enemy had not made themselves known by then, he would use the fortress as his base of operations and begin hunting the heretics while he waited for the Indomitus Crusade fleet's response to his astropathic message.

Cassian's vox crackled. A coded response came back to him, indicating a secure channel.

'This is Lieutenant Cassian Talasadian of the Ultramarines Fourth Company,' said Cassian. 'Identify yourself in the Emperor's name.'

'My lord, it is good to hear your voice,' came the reply. *'This is Captain Dzansk, Cadian Forty-Fourth Heavy Infantry.'*

Cassian heard exhaustion in the man's voice, along with an unhealthy hoarseness, but also steel.

Cadian, he thought. They were the most renowned of all the Astra Militarum's countless regiments, and arguably the finest.

'Captain Dzansk, well met,' said Cassian. 'Appraise me of your disposition.'

'I am the surviving ranking officer in the Dustrious warzone,' said Dzansk. *'From an initial regimental strength of five thousand men and two hundred armoured vehicles, I currently command eight hundred and twenty-two able-bodied men and women of Cadia, along with seventeen Leman Russ battle tanks and twenty-one Chimeras. We are operating out of the Temple District, where we have fortified several structures. Ammunition is low, and rations and medicae supplies virtually nil. Sickness is rife and morale has been steadily deteriorating. Though if I may say so, my lord, your arrival will do much to bring heart to my soldiers.'*

'How long have you been in the field?' asked Cassian. 'And what can you tell me about the enemy here? Strengths, dispositions, capabilities?'

'They attacked twenty-one days ago,' said Dzansk. *'Bombarded the city*

from orbit with viral contaminants and conventional ordnance. We lost over half the regiment during that first attack. I and a few other officers managed to get our troops to the shelters, but the rest... After that, the Death Guard landed a force of – I would estimate – two to three hundred Heretic Astartes supported by war machines and heavy mobile artillery. General Yorin attempted a counter-attack in force, but the contagions the enemy had dropped made the battlefield hazardous. Worse, many citizens and soldiers who fell to their plagues rose up again as revenants and overran our lines.'

Cassian frowned, disturbed by the estimated enemy numbers. There were more heretics here than orbital scans suggested.

'The counter-offensive failed utterly, my lord,' continued Dzansk. 'It cost us at least another thousand able bodies, along with Yorin and his entire upper command staff. My men and I have been holding out ever since, attempting to harass the enemy wherever possible, and launching measured attacks to break their besiegement of the astropathic fortress. Thus far we have met with only defeat. I believe we have endured this long only because the enemy do not fight as a sane man would, instead seeking to draw out our misery for as long as they can.'

'You have done what you could, and the Emperor will look kindly upon you for it,' said Cassian. 'Now, however, He has a different duty for you, captain.'

'Of course, my lord. What are your orders?'

'My brothers and I are pushing towards the astropathic fortress. We must secure it in order to despatch a message to the Indomitus Crusade. We must rejoin our comrades and free the stars from the rule of Chaos.'

'A crusade?' asked Dzansk, excitement in his voice. *'My lord, we had no idea. We thought, perhaps...'*

'That it was the end?' said Cassian. 'No, captain, this is just the beginning of the heretics' final defeat. But in order to play our part in that battle, we must return to our comrades. Aid us in that fight, and the Emperor will smile upon you. Guilliman needs all the warriors he can get.'

'Guilliman?' asked Dzansk, his Cadian discipline slipping for a moment. *'My lord?'*

'Our father has returned to us,' said Cassian. 'There is much to tell, captain, but it can wait. For now, I need you to mobilise your forces and support our advance.'

‘At once, my lord. Send me your coordinates, and I will mobilise the regiment.’

Cassian tapped the runes on his vambrace, each one flashing briefly and fading again as he despatched the data to the auspex-inload channel Dzansk provided. There was a pause, then Dzansk spoke again, his voice urgent.

‘My lord, you are well within Death Guard territory. They have maintained their perimeter around the fortress at a remove of between three and five miles since their siege began. They have some sorcery that shields them from our auspex. You should have had some engagement by now. If you haven’t seen them yet, it’s because—’

‘They know we’re coming,’ said Cassian.

Lord Gurloch stood still as a statue on the ground floor of a skeletal ruin. Every inch of his armour was covered with fat-bodied plague flies whose only movement was a slight riffling of their wings. Blorthos’ Blightlord Terminators stood around him, each with their own coating of bloated insects. Beyond the ruin, Gurloch’s forces spread away to either flank, forming a long, deep battle-line utterly carpeted in plague flies.

No one moved.

The vox was silent.

The ambush was ready.

Gurloch saw the first flash of blue armour through the greasy drizzle. A tall, clean-limbed loyalist, different to any he had seen before, picked his way through the ruins as he swept left and right with a long-barrelled bolt weapon.

Then came another one, and another. The Murmuring Swarm had concealed Gurloch and his warriors from the enemy’s auspex, but any second now they would make visual contact. It was time.

‘In the name of Mortarion and the Grandfather,’ said Gurloch over the vox, ‘begin the attack.’

As one, a billion flies lifted off from the Death Guard warriors and swarmed into the air with a thunderous droning. In the same instant, Gurloch’s warriors raised their guns, bellowed gargling war cries and attacked.

Gurloch himself stomped through the crumbled ruins of a low wall, crushing the rubble to dust. Around him, the Blightlord Terminators opened fire. Their shots blitzed the Ultramarines’ front line, bolts sparking from blue power armour and gouts of plague-ridden filth sizzling as they ate through

adamantium and ceramite.

The Ultramarines responded with commendable speed, and Gurloch was surprised to see just how resilient they were. The warriors took shots to their torsos, helms and limbs, some of which even punched through their armour and blasted bloody craters in their flesh, but they still returned fire, hammering volleys of bolts into their ambushers. Gurloch heard one of the Witherlings grunt in pain as a shot found a weak spot in his armour, blowing a bucketful of greasy pus across the walls.

Shots spanged off Gurloch's breastplate, and he gave a wet laugh.

'You will have to do better than that, little brothers!' he roared. 'Your Corpse-Emperor is nothing compared to the might of Nurgle. Come, let me bathe you in the generosity of my god!'

Crashing through another wall, Gurloch shrugged off the hammering fire of the nearest Ultramarine and swung his plaguereaper in a mighty arc. The axe was as tall as a grown man, and had three buzz-saw blades mounted within its cutting edge, forming the tri-lobed sigil of Nurgle. Those blades howled as they cut through the Ultramarine's chest-plate, scything in under his left arm and tearing out under his right.

The Ultramarine staggered, blood jetting from the catastrophic wound in his torso. Chuckling, Gurloch levelled his axe and smashed its head like a spear into his enemy's faceplate. Ceramite crumpled, eye-lenses shattered, and the butchered Space Marine crashed onto his back.

Another Ultramarines warrior came at Gurloch, hurling a primed krak grenade at him. The implosive charge struck his shoulder and detonated, crumpling rusted armour and tearing through rotten flesh. Gurloch growled in pain as foul fluids and gobbets of fat drizzled from the wound. The Ultramarine pressed forwards, drawing a bolt pistol and firing it point-blank into Gurloch's face.

The shot rebounded from his helm, rocking his head back, but the Lord of Contagion rallied with a roar of anger.

'You slopsome little slug!' he bellowed. 'You think that the sons of Mortarion fall so easily, do you?'

Swatting the Ultramarine's pistol aside, Gurloch grabbed his assailant around the throat and hefted him high. He brought the revving blades of his plaguereaper up and rammed them into the Ultramarine's midriff, ripping through power armour and churning into the flesh beneath. His victim roared

in agony as he was disembowelled, limbs spasming and dancing. The Space Marine managed to ball a fist and drive it into Gurloch's faceplate once, then twice. The third swing had no strength behind it, and then he was nothing but dead meat.

Gurloch tossed his enemy aside, glancing at the wound already sucking closed in his shoulder. Thick tentacles squirmed from his skin and wove together, secreting a slimy gruel that rapidly hardened into chitinous plates. Small yellow eyes rose like blisters upon the unnatural skin, bursting open with little fluid pops.

Gurloch laughed and raised his head to the sky as, all around him, his warriors pressed home their ambush against the Imperial lapdogs.

'Thank you, great Nurgle!' cried Gurloch. 'Thank you for your blessings! We offer you tribute in return!'

Cassian ducked behind a wall, feeling it shudder as bolt shells slammed into it. Stone shrapnel flew, and flies boiled around him in a blinding cloud.

He ducked out from cover, firing his bolt rifle on full-auto. His shots slammed into the nearest Plague Marine, blasting a rent in the traitor's chestplate and another in his helm. The Plague Marine staggered, but stayed on his feet and kept firing.

'Emperor curse their unholy resilience,' said Cassian. 'Sergeant Gallen, illuminate them please.'

'At once, brother-lieutenant,' replied Gallen. From across the courtyard, a salvo of sun-bright plasma slammed into the Plague Marines as Gallen's Hellblasters let fly. Volley after searing volley struck home, melting power armour, vaporising fluids and blasting diseased flesh to ashes. The Plague Marines died to a man, their fused remains tangled together in a heap.

'Magnificent, brother,' said Cassian. 'Thank you.'

'We do the primarch's work,' said Gallen. 'But we will need a moment – our guns' machine-spirits become enraged to excess. They must cool.'

'Understood. Fall back and have Sergeant Emastus' Hellblasters take your place. Circle around to Librarian Keritraeus' position and reinforce against the push in that sector.'

'At once, brother-lieutenant,' said Gallen, and his men bore their glowing weapons away towards the rear lines.

'Dematris,' voxed Cassian, 'how do you fare?'

'They press hard,' came the reply. Cassian heard the crackle of the Chaplain's crozius arcanum in the background, and the sounds of rattling bolt fire. *'But we shall not yield! Dreadnought-Brother Indomator is holding them back, and I have despatched squads Telor and Adamastes to work around the flank and provide enfilading fire.'*

'We will enfold the edge of their ambushing force and turn their flank,' said Cassian, *'then break through with the Aggressors. That will allow us to stall their momentum and regain our own.'*

'Lieutenant,' voxed Keritraeus. *'We've lost one of our Repulsors. Onslaught Intractable was struck from both flanks by armour-piercing projectiles. It's a wreck.'*

'Damn,' said Cassian under his breath. *'What of Maximus' Revenge and Pride of Talassar?'*

'Both still fighting, brother,' said Keritraeus. *'I've ordered them to pull back and stabilise our line. The enemy advance in dominant numbers, and they simply refuse to die.'*

'Here too,' said Cassian. *'I've sent you a squad of Hellblasters to help with that. Dematris is preparing a counter-attack on his flank. We need to hold our ground long enough for him to drive it home.'*

'Respectfully, I'm not sure that's wise, brother-lieutenant,' replied Keritraeus. *'The enemy surprised us. They outnumber and outgun us. Retreat would be the wiser option.'*

'If Dematris' attack fails, then I will give the order. But we must try. Duty compels us.'

'Wisdom is not cowardice, brother, but I bow to your authority.'

Cassian leaned out from cover and fired again, severing a Plague Marine's leg at the knee. He ducked back as ferocious return fire hammered his position.

'Captain Dzansk,' he said, switching channels. *'Are you in position to reinforce?'*

'Negative, my lord,' replied Dzansk. *'Our enemy planned his ambush well – we're dealing with an attack of our own here. If I send forces to your position, I will irreparably weaken my own.'*

'Understood. Hold out. Survive. When we break these heretic curs, we will require your forces for the counterpunch.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Dzansk, and cut the link.

Cassian checked his auspex and scowled. Death Guard runes swarmed his forward positions, outnumbering his forces by a substantial margin. However, he had his duty, and the blood of Guilliman running through his veins. He was determined that no heretic would defeat him.

With a quick flurry of runic commands, Cassian ordered Aggressor squads Temeter and Doras forward on the left, and called Intercessor squad Latreaus up to his position. His brothers raised their bolt rifles as he led them out across the courtyard, pouring fire into the Plague Marines in the ruins on the other side.

A sudden scream filled the air, swelling to deafening proportions. Cassian saw shells dropping through the fly-thick air.

‘Incoming!’ he yelled. ‘Disperse!’

His men leapt to obey, flinging themselves aside as the huge shells crashed down upon the courtyard. They detonated, hurling warriors through the air and throwing Cassian backwards through a stained-glass window.

He staggered to his feet, ears ringing, and stared through the shattered remains of the window at the slaughter before him. The shells had disgorged swirling clouds of black spores that were dissolving everything they touched. Intercessors writhed and choked as their armour, flesh and bone were eaten away. The ruins themselves began to crumble and dissolve, and the ground tipped as the spores chewed a deep crater in the earth.

Cassian scrambled back, diving through an arched doorway as the courtyard and the ruins around it fell away into the pit. He cursed the reckless insanity of his foes, to hurl such inimical munitions into the midst of a point-blank firefight. His fury became horror as he heard the rolling boom of another barrage being fired from behind the Death Guard lines, then another.

Huge shells rained down along the Ultramarines line, vomiting fire and spore clouds.

‘Lieutenant Cassian,’ voxed Dematris. ‘Squad Telor is all but annihilated, and Sergeant Adamastes is pulling his surviving battle-brothers back. We cannot endure in the face of such firepower.’

‘Lieutenant,’ said Keritraeus a moment later, ‘I am doing what I can to shield our brothers with the force of my mind, but those shells are death incarnate. If we don’t do something quickly, we’re going to be shelled into oblivion!’

‘Brother-lieutenant,’ voxed Reiver Sergeant Marcus, ‘the enemy are moving

industrial track units around the flanks. They're carrying iron cages the size of Thunderhawk gunships. Throne, they're full of... They're hard to identify – humanoid, mutant-like characteristics, packed in like livestock and groaning like the damned.'

‘Our enemy mean to pen us in with these creatures and then finish us off with shelling and gunfire,’ Cassian said as the artillery boomed again. ‘Primarch, forgive me. This isn't a battle. I've led us into a massacre...’

CHAPTER FIVE

The rain fell harder. It hissed against ferrocrete and drew oily streaks down the Ultramarines' power armour. A chorus of groans echoed through the ruins as hundreds of plague mutants spilled from their cages and shambled towards Guilliman's sons. Shells screamed like daemons as they plunged down into the battle, and the Death Guard pressed their attack.

Cassian slid Duty from its sheath. He pressed his thumb against the sword's activation rune, and a field of crackling power leapt up its blade.

'Emperor and primarch hear my oath,' he said as the Plague Marines lumbered closer through the rain. 'I will not let my brothers die here. I will not sacrifice them upon the altar of my ambition. Lend me strength – I shall pay whatever price I must.'

Lunging from cover, Cassian drove his blade through the gut of the closest heretic. He ripped the weapon free in a shower of foul viscera, and his victim crashed to his knees.

Cassian staggered as a second Plague Marine shot him point-blank, cratering his chest-plate and cracking the black carapace that fused his power armour to his body.

Rallying, the lieutenant placed a bolt through his attacker's right eye-lens, blowing out the back of the Plague Marine's head. He then spun around and under an axe swing that would have cut him in half, before lopping the third Plague Marine's arm from his shoulder.

Cassian's enemy gave a gurgle of anger, seeming not to feel the wound. The Plague Marine swung again, one-handed, but Cassian parried before ramming Duty point first through the traitor's throat.

The Plague Marine sagged as fluids pumped from his ruined neck, but still

he took another swing that almost connected with Cassian's chest. Angrily, the lieutenant ripped his blade free and swept it in a killing arc to remove the Plague Marine's helm from his shoulders.

'Stay dead, filth,' spat Cassian as his enemy crumpled.

'Brother-lieutenant,' came Dematris' voice over the vox, 'they're outflanking us, but with zeal we can still prevail! I shall rally my forces and lead them in a counter-attack.'

'No,' said Cassian firmly. 'We serve no one by dying here for nothing.'

'Not for nothing,' said Dematris angrily. 'For vengeance! For ten thousand years of wrongdoing! What is the crusade, if not a war of revenge? We don't need to rejoin the primarch to claim that – there are plenty of foes before us.'

'The crusade is a war of unity,' said Cassian. 'It is the primarch's quest to drive back the shadow of Chaos from the Emperor's realm. We are part of that quest. We are his weapons, and I guarantee you that Lord Guilliman has a better use for us than to see us blunted and ruined on this backwater.'

Dematris gave a grunt of acknowledgement. It was enough.

'Lieutenant,' voxed Keritraeus, 'what is our plan? We are mired in the living dead here, and we will soon be overrun.'

Cassian thought furiously, knowing he had moments to act. He heard the scream of incoming ordnance, and saw the heavy shells slam down in the ruins to his right. Spores billowed.

'Dematris, Keritraeus,' he voxed. 'Pull your battle-brothers back and find what cover you can. Regroup and be ready to fall back.'

'Lieutenant,' said Keritraeus urgently, 'if we close ranks they'll kill us all the quicker.'

'They're not the only ones with ordnance to deploy,' said Cassian, before switching vox-channels. 'Shipmaster Aethor, this is Lieutenant Cassian.'

'I hear you, my lord,' came Aethor's clipped tones.

'Aethor, can you pinpoint the position of the enemy batteries?'

'Within a quarter mile. No closer. The storm, my lord.'

'It will do,' said Cassian. 'On my order, fire a spread of orbital torpedoes at the enemy artillery's position, then commence a creeping barrage of lance fire towards our own. Stop only when you reach us.'

'Our efforts will be inaccurate, lord,' said Aethor.

'Do what you can. The Emperor expects.'

'Understood, my lord.'

‘Be ready, brothers,’ said Cassian, addressing the strike force. ‘Sergeant Marcus, get your Reivers clear. Everyone else, brace for barrage shock.’

Vox-pips and confirmation runes flashed back to him as his warriors continued to lay down fire into their attackers. Cassian saw corpse-like figures stumbling through the rain towards him. Dozens of them. Hundreds. A shambling wall of diseased flesh and mutant appendages, their rictus grins and staring eyes burning themselves into his memory.

High above, he could see black specks plunge through the clouds, driven groundwards on trails of flame. This was going to be close.

‘Emperor, shield your servants from harm,’ he said, firing his bolt rifle into the horde before ducking behind the rusting wreck of a cargo transport.

The orbital torpedoes struck. The first sign was a searing brightness, a false dawn that threw hard-edged shadows across the ruins. Then came the sound, a mounting roar accompanied by a hammer blow of hyperbaric shock. If Cassian’s power armour hadn’t protected him, his lungs would have been torn out through his throat by the sudden pressure wave and his flesh seared from his bones by the roiling firestorm.

The wreck was plucked up and hurled through the air, taking Cassian with it. He had a fleeting impression of towering blast clouds rising above the cityscape, perhaps a mile to the north, and of the mangled remains of diseased corpses scattering like fleshy rain.

Then Cassian hit the ground, and the cargo transport slammed down on top of him.

Dim light.

The flickering of electrical input and runic signals.

Dull chatter, resolving itself slowly into distinct voices. His brothers’ voices.

Cassian opened his eyes and assessed the damage. His auto-senses were flashing with amber and red hazard runes. He couldn’t move.

It took Cassian a moment to realise that he was pinned firmly under the wreck of the cargo hauler, with only his head and one arm protruding. He gasped a breath and flexed his fingers, straining to reach Duty, but the power sword’s hilt was just out of reach.

He pushed, trying to lift the wreck off himself. Fibre-bundles in his armour flexed, lending their strength to his own. He snarled with effort as the wreck shifted and slowly rose – one inch, two, *three*. Yet the weight was just too

much, even for one of the Emperor's finest, and the wreck thumped back down. Cassian hissed with pain.

Macabre remains lay in piles of corpse-meat around him, much of it still twitching. He grunted as he saw a half-figure tumble from the nearest pile and start dragging itself towards him using the hilt of a shattered sword. Perhaps the thing had once been a manufactorum worker, or maybe a militiaman; now it was nothing but rotting flesh, blackened overalls and grinning, pointed teeth growing closer by the moment. More came behind it, tumbling from the heaps like maggots and dragging themselves in his direction, groaning.

Cassian snarled, preparing to fight off these carrion things. In honest combat, the creatures would barely have given him pause, but with his body trapped and many of the undead mutants armed? Those blades would punch through an eye-lens or saw through the neck seal of his helm eventually.

He opened a vox-channel to call for help, but before he could speak a huge ceramite foot slammed down on the leading mutant and crushed it.

'Up you come, brother-lieutenant,' boomed a vox-amplified voice. 'You'll be no use commanding from under that wreck.'

Cassian looked up at Brother Marius. The Redeptor Dreadnought's blue armour had been scorched black by the blasts and dented by numerous impacts, yet Marius seemed none the worse for wear. With a whine of servos, he reached down and gripped the wreck with his articulated power fist. Metal crumpled in the Dreadnought's grasp, and he hefted the remains of the cargo transport off Cassian as easily as though it were made of parchment.

As the wreck crashed onto its side, Cassian got to his feet. His Mark X Tacticus power armour was battered and rent in several places, and he could barely move his left arm, but he was alive.

'Brother, my thanks,' he said.

'Lead us on to victory, and we will call it even,' boomed the Dreadnought. He pivoted on his waist gimbal, and Cassian's audio-dampers cut in as Marius' heavy onslaught Gatling cannon screamed into life. Rounds blitzed the ruins to their right, and Plague Marines died in eruptions of gore.

'Cassian?' came Keritraeus' voice over the vox. '*Brother-lieutenant, respond.*'

'Here, Keritraeus,' said Cassian. High above, the clouds were lit crimson as a lance of laser energy stabbed down. A ruin a hundred yards north

shuddered then collapsed as the blast ripped through it.

'Lieutenant, the enemy is scattered, shell-shocked, but so are we. That was reckless.'

'It was necessary,' said Cassian, before switching channels to address his entire force. 'Brothers,' he said, 'pull back now. Fighting retreat to these coordinates.'

Runes flashed back. Several sergeants warned that their battle-brothers were scattered, still recovering from the first barrage.

Some didn't reply at all.

Crimson light pierced the clouds again as the *Primarch's Sword* dropped another lance blast into the combat zone. The explosion shook the ground beneath Cassian's feet. Yet he knew the risk was worth it, for his enemy possessed greater numbers and would be suffering far worse against such a bombardment.

'Dematris, Keritraeus,' he voxed, 'lead the retreat. I will rally those squads still pinned. Captain Dzansk, my men are going to fall back towards your stronghold. Be ready to receive us.'

A Plague Marine appeared through the swirling smoke and dust and rain. Marius' cannon cut him to gory chunks.

'That will not be necessary, lieutenant,' came a lilting voice over the vox. Cassian frowned as he saw a channel he didn't recognise flash up on his auto-senses.

'Identify,' he barked. 'Are you with Dzansk?'

'Prepare to extract your remaining warriors,' said the unknown speaker. *'Fall back to these coordinates. Make haste.'*

'Identify,' repeated Cassian as a runic waypoint flashed up on his helm auspex. 'Or is this just another machination of the foe?'

'Our enemies are the same, Lieutenant Cassian, even if our species differ.'

'Lieutenant,' said Keritraeus. *'I'm sensing a prodigious psychic build-up. Something is coming.'*

Before Cassian's eyes, the rain slowed and hung in place, forming a glittering veil of impossible droplets. The air stilled. The drone of flies and the roar of gunfire became muted.

A sudden hurricane of psychic energy tore through the air. The halted downpour whipped outwards, caught in the ferocity of a storm that swept up debris, corpses and wreckage and hurled them towards the Death Guard lines.

Cassian's eyes widened as he realised the storm had left him and Marius untouched.

'Lieutenant, this isn't my doing,' voxed Keritraeus. 'It has the feel of xenos rune-craft. But if ever we needed something to cover our retreat...'

'Agreed,' said Cassian, making a snap decision. 'All battle-brothers, fall back on these coordinates. Be swift, but be wary.'

Cassian sheathed his blade and jogged back through the ruins, reloading his bolt rifle despite his wounded arm. Marius thumped along beside him as the psychic tempest continued to hurl corpses and rubble through the air, driving the Death Guard back with its battering onslaught.

Sorcery heaped on sorcery. A swift and simple offensive had become a convoluted and costly battle.

Cassian would have answers.

The rendezvous point was a bombed-out cathedrum, located two miles east of Captain Dzansk's position. The blasted structure was still magnificent for all its battle damage. Saints stared down from stained-glass windows, while gothic spires stabbed up into the clouds like rain-slick daggers.

As Cassian and Marius approached through rubble and wreckage, more Ultramarines appeared through the rain to join them. The lieutenant saw others waiting outside the cathedrum, and noted that they had their weapons levelled at the structure.

Keritraeus and Dematris came to Cassian's side as he neared the building. Both were battered and scorched, but appeared uninjured.

'Cassian, auspex shows multiple life signs within the cathedrum. Approximately twenty – xenos,' said Dematris. 'We felt it best to wait for your arrival before deciding how to proceed.'

'That psychic event struck the entire battle front,' said Keritraeus. 'It persisted for almost ten minutes after the last battle-brothers disengaged. Cassian, the psychic fortitude it would take to manifest such a phenomenon is staggering. We may be dealing with an entire conclave of witches. These mysterious allies could be every bit as dangerous as the enemies we have just escaped.'

'I don't believe they are a danger,' said Cassian. 'Not to us, at least.'

'It was a storm of their raising that covered our retreat,' admitted Dematris, 'but the works of aliens are unclean. They cannot be trusted, nor treated with

lightly.'

'In this I must agree with Dematris,' said Keritraeus. 'Clearly these xenos mean us no immediate harm, otherwise they simply would have allowed the Death Guard to overwhelm us. But neither would they aid us out of simple charity. Their very being here seems too convenient for mere chance.'

'They knew me,' said Cassian. 'The one that addressed me did so by name and rank. Maintain a cordon and have Apothecary Lamdas see to the wounded. Keritraeus, contact Captain Dzansk and establish the status of his forces. I am going to speak to our mysterious allies.'

'You are wounded yourself, brother-lieutenant,' said Keritraeus. 'Lamdas should inspect that arm, if nothing else.'

'After,' said Cassian, then turned away and strode up the cathedrum steps.

The interior of the building was thick with shadows and whirling dust, yet he could feel the aliens' piercing gaze. Cassian kept his hands well away from his weapons, walking forwards slowly and deliberately as he swept the cavernous structure with his auto-senses.

'Make yourselves known,' he called, his voice echoing into the gloom. 'You told me to come here. I have come. Now reveal yourselves in the Emperor's name, and state your purpose.'

'Our purpose?' The reply drifted from the shadows, whispering around him like a wind. The voice was musical, lilting. Female, he thought. 'Lieutenant Cassian, the true answer to that question would be more than even your transhuman mind could comprehend. But put simply? Our purpose is survival.'

Cassian was deep within the cathedrum now, surrounded by shadows, rubble and the looming silhouettes of old altars and statuary. Amidst the darkness, he caught movement in his peripheral vision: lithe figures in slender, sculpted armour and elongated helms were moving to surround him, chainsword-analogues and alien pistols poised.

'You are aeldari,' said Cassian, halting his advance. 'Craftworlders? How does preventing our defeat aid your survival? How do you know me?'

'Your kind are normally so closed-minded,' said the voice, a slight edge of mockery in its tone. 'Yet *you* have so many questions.'

'This is not a game,' said Cassian angrily. 'Good battle-brothers fell today, and their deaths are upon my conscience. My enemies seem insurmountable, yet my duty is inescapable. And now you appear with aid unsought, calling

me by name and unleashing powers that my Librarian assures me are monumental in scope. Yes, I have questions, and I would have you provide answers, or by Macragge and Ultramar I will order my men to bring this roof down with all of us inside.'

'That would be... unwise, lieutenant,' said the voice. Something flew out of the darkness and clattered at Cassian's feet. He recoiled, drawing Duty in an instant and scanning for threats.

The xenos warriors remained unmoving. Cassian realised that the object now lying at his feet was a tall staff, graven from a bone-like substance and decorated with xenoform runes. It was lined with gems, all blackened and cracked, and silvery smoke drifted from a much larger gem held in a setting at its end.

'The Dreamer's Stave,' said the voice. 'An ancient relic of my people that had endured since before your kind lost its first empire amongst the stars. I destroyed it unleashing the conjuration that saved you and your warriors from death. I trust that the seriousness of this sacrifice indicates my own.'

'I have only your word for this,' said Cassian, 'but let us suppose for now that I am convinced.'

He stayed still, aware of the xenos warriors' eyes upon him as the speaker emerged from the shadows. She was tall and willow-thin, her armour and robes flowing around her like silk in a breeze. An ornate blade was fastened at her hip, and she went unhelmed, her features angular, sculpted and - inescapably alien. She stopped before Cassian, the ruined stave lying between them, and fixed him with her amber eyes.

'I am Farseer Ithlae, of Craftworld Yme'Loc,' she said. 'I know you, Lieutenant Cassian, because I have foreseen all of this in the runes.'

Cassian framed his next question carefully.

'If you were able to predict all of this,' he began, 'then why not simply intercede before the battle began? If you wished to aid us, why not forewarn us of the ambush? Lives could have been saved.'

'Lieutenant, your lives mean less than nothing to me. Furthermore, fate is... You might envision it as a river. It can be dammed, its course altered, but one must be careful when doing so, lest the river burst its banks or take a path other than the one you sought. The dam must be placed at precisely the correct intersection to change the flow as desired, or all is for naught. The moment that your defeat drew nigh – *that* was the perfect intersection.'

Cassian restrained his building anger, but his hands tightened into fists.

‘You will next ask me why I did not bring a greater force,’ continued the farseer, ‘or perhaps why I chose a path that necessitated the ruin of such a precious and ancient artefact. I will endeavour to explain the price that must be paid to alter fate, at which point you will have still more questions for which I cannot provide you with explanations that your crude psyche can comprehend. And all the while, our mutual enemy rallies his strength.’

‘Speak your piece, then,’ said Cassian. ‘You save us, and say you did so to aid your own survival. Why? What do you expect in return? What threat are the Death Guard to you?’

The farseer gave a lilting laugh both musical and deeply unsettling.

‘These plague-ridden vermin? No, lieutenant, the Death Guard pose no threat to Yme’Loc. At least not here. Not now.’

‘Then what—’

‘*You*, lieutenant,’ said Ithlae, cutting off his next question. ‘It is my duty to save you. Specifically. In days not yet dawned, your deeds will save us in kind. You will fight for Craftworld Yme’Loc, and thus you yourself must survive to fulfil your destiny.’

‘Foolishness,’ said Cassian, incredulous. ‘I know our species have found tenuous ground for alliance when we must, but I am no xenophile. I would no more fight for a craftworld than I would to protect an ork warlord or defend a necron tomb! You have wasted your time, farseer, if you think that I will barter my loyalty for my continued survival.’

‘I did not say that you would *intentionally* fight for us, lieutenant,’ replied Ithlae. ‘It is already done. Your feet are on the path. By living to fight another day, you have defied the end that fate laid out for you. You walk in our webs now.’

Cassian felt horrified anger rise within him. His hand gripped Duty’s hilt.

‘Lies! My life is not lived in thrall to some xenos witch!’

‘Believe what you will,’ said the farseer dismissively. ‘You asked, and I answered. It is nothing to me if you accept the truth. Whatever the case, we must take our leave, for you still have a battle to fight, and we wish no further part in it.’

‘Cowards,’ spat Cassian.

‘A last word of advice, lieutenant. Remember that your enemies here do not think as you do. To one who has sold their soul to Chaos, madness seems like

logic. Consider that your enemy's strength may also be his weakness, his faith also his curse.'

'I have warriors all around this structure. Do not think you can simply dismiss us so easily, xenos. You will remain and answer to me.'

'No, lieutenant,' said the farseer with a faint smile, 'I will not.'

The aeldari faded back into the shadows. Cassian followed, casting caution aside as he sought to keep the xenos in his sights. He barked orders through the vox, commanding his battle-brothers to stand ready and apprehend all aeldari forces emerging from the cathedrum, and for several squads to converge on his position and help him sweep the ruined building.

It was only minutes later, with the xenos vanished and no sign of them reported either within the cathedrum or without, that Cassian was forced to admit the truth: the aeldari had disappeared as mysteriously as they appeared.

They were gone, leaving only questions in their wake.

CHAPTER SIX

‘Squad Polandrus reports no signs of pursuit by the Death Guard,’ said Dematris.

He and Keritraeus stood on the steps of the ruined cathedrum, staring out into the rain-slick ruins. Their brothers maintained a perimeter, Intercessors and Hellblasters standing guard while the wounded were seen to and Techmarine Tyvos repaired the strike force’s remaining Repulsor battle tanks.

‘That’s the last squad to report in,’ replied the Librarian. ‘The heretics chose not to drive home their attack.’

‘Perhaps they lack the proper zeal,’ said Dematris. ‘Between Shipmaster Aethor’s bombardment and the storm raised by that xenos witch, the traitors may have been put to flight.’

‘Perhaps, but the Death Guard pride themselves on their capacity to endure. I doubt we broke their nerve, brother.’

‘Whatever the case, the respite is welcome. Time for us to regroup and rearm, to focus ourselves and prepare for the next attack.’

‘Time enough, also, to scout the lie of the land, and attempt to coordinate more closely with our allies,’ said Keritraeus. ‘Squads Marcus, Polandrus and Thaddean make good progress.’

‘Have you had any success reaching the astropathic conclave inside the fortress?’ asked Dematris, methodically checking over his plasma pistol’s workings.

Keritraeus shook his head in frustration.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘The warp is agitated, and the presence of the Death Guard worsens things. But I ought to be able to sense something there. I have

tried repeatedly to project my thoughts into their own, but it is as though they simply are not there.'

'I know little of witchery. Does that mean they're dead? Do we fight for naught?'

'I don't know, brother. Perhaps. Or maybe they have hidden their minds somehow, the better to survive the heretical forces beyond their walls. Until we gain entry to the astropathic fortress, I fear it will remain a mystery.'

'Then let's hope the lieutenant emerges from his meditations soon,' said Dematris. 'I am keen to extract vengeance for those we lost today.'

'As are we all, brother,' agreed Keritraeus. 'But have a little patience. Cassian has much to think on, and he cannot risk another defeat.'

'Every minute the foe remains unprosecuted risks defeat. If he does not emerge soon, I will rouse him myself. There's a war to be won.'

Cassian was deep within the ruins of the cathedrum. He had found a small annex that remained untouched by the destruction. Its stained-glass triptychs were intact, and its devotional candles stood in their mounts as though waiting for a priest to come and light them. Cassian had taken this as a sign, and chosen to make his devotions here.

The lieutenant's injured arm had been temporarily freed from its sheath of power armour. It was encased instead in a gelid medi-compress that flooded the limb with hypernutrients and muscle stimms to aid recovery. Ignoring the stinging discomfort, Cassian knelt unhelmed before the spread wings of a golden aquila. Duty's point was driven into the tile floor, and his forehead rested against its pommel.

He had knelt like this now for over an hour, attempting to still his thoughts and meditate upon all that had occurred. At first his mind had whirled with frustration and anger, his hatred for the traitors only marginally less than his disgust at himself.

Then there was the deep sense of disquiet that the farseer's words had brought him. Cassian was a Primaris Space Marine, one of Archmagos Cawl's original warriors who had stepped directly from stasis and taken up arms during the Ultima Founding. Ingrained into every fibre of his being was a sense of purpose and duty, a certainty that his every thought and deed served the Imperium of Mankind. It was, in a very literal sense, what he had been created for.

That certainty had been shaken, first by his defeat at the hands of the Death Guard, then by the aeldari's intimation that he now walked their path. Cassian was unused to the idea that his fate lay in anyone's hands but the Emperor's.

He found himself scrutinising his every thought, deed and utterance.

Space Marines were not religious in the way that most Imperial servants were; they did not, as a rule, deify the Emperor, nor pray to Him for direct intercession. Yet they were still deeply spiritual beings in their own way, venerating their primarchs and their Emperor, and deriving strength from their examples.

It was this that had allowed Cassian to finally calm his mind, to centre his thoughts and slip into a meditative state during which he had dissected every fragment of information he had gathered, analysing it from every angle.

Now Cassian's eyes opened and he raised his head, an expression of fierce determination on his noble features.

'Thank you, Emperor, for your guidance,' he intoned. 'Thank you, primarch, for your clarity. I will not fail you again.'

Cassian rose and sheathed his blade. He flexed his wounded arm experimentally, nodding to himself as he felt reknitted muscle tense and reset bone hold strong.

'Sufficient,' he said. 'There is much to be done.'

An hour later, Cassian held his council of war within the lower narthex of the cathedrum. Rainwater dripped through shattered windows and fell from ragged holes in the ceiling high above. A foul mist drifted at ankle height, while plump flies meandered through the still air. Stained glass crunched underfoot as Cassian, Keritraeus, Dematris and their senior sergeants gathered. The two Dreadnought battle-brothers were also present, for they had fought since the earliest days of the Indomitus Crusade and had gained much strategic insight. The Cadian captain Dzansk completed the gathering, albeit as a grainy green ghost beamed from a holoprojector.

'Honoured warriors of the Imperium,' began Cassian, 'we have suffered at the hands of the heretic invaders, but that ends now. We are going to defeat them in the Emperor's name, and see to it that every trace of their filth is cleansed from this world.'

Several of his sergeants slammed their fists against their chest-plates in

salute, and Brother Marius rumbled a near-subsonic ‘Hear, hear.’

‘We are with you, lieutenant,’ said Keritraeus. ‘But how?’

‘The Emperor has gifted me with insight into the minds of our foes,’ said Cassian. ‘They worship a god of plagues, and are empowered by his unclean gifts. I believe that their god, and by extension the Death Guard themselves, derive much of their power from sickness and misery – from entropy.’

‘Based on what, brother?’ asked Dematris.

‘Consider,’ said Cassian. ‘They bombarded the city before their initial landing. Why use a mixture of targeted ordnance and bio-phages? Why not just hammer Dustrious into ruin and move on? With so superior a force, it was strategically inefficient at best.’

‘The astropathic fortress, brother-lieutenant,’ said Sergeant Gallen. ‘I would suggest that they want to capture the astropaths and use them for their own purposes.’

‘Likely, but then, they have overwhelming numbers – if they had wished to crush Imperial resistance here and claim their prize, they could have done so in a matter of hours, not weeks. I mean no disrespect to your brave fighting men and women, Captain Dzansk.’

‘No offence taken, my lord,’ said Dzansk in a static-furred voice. ‘We have been wondering the same thing since day one. It seems unlikely that the enemy commander is so incompetent as to have misjudged the comparative disposition of our forces. Our best guess was that he was waiting for something, perhaps for sickness to decimate our ranks.’

‘In a way, I believe that he was,’ said Cassian. ‘I believe our enemy is deliberately drawing this battle out. The Death Guard are causing as much misery and suffering as they possibly can, for by doing so they best honour their god.’

‘A devotional offering,’ said Dematris in disgust. ‘They torment this planet and its populace as one might light candles in an Imperial shrine.’

‘I fear that, if you are correct, it may be worse still,’ said Keritraeus. ‘I told you that the empyrean feels agitated here.’

‘You did,’ said Cassian, ‘but is that not simply the aftermath of the warp storm that marooned us?’

‘I thought so at first,’ said Keritraeus, ‘but if you are right about this, then the storm on high, the agitation in the warp, the silence of the astropaths... It could be the effects of a wider, ongoing ritual – signs that the Death Guard

are making an offering to their god, and that it is being accepted.'

'You're talking about the summoning of daemons,' said Dematris.

'Perhaps,' said Keritraeus, 'or some other foulness that sane minds cannot even guess at. Whatever the case, it seems logical that the astropaths would be the final offering, the heart's blood that seals the compact.'

'By the Throne!' said Aggressor Sergeant Temeter. 'If this is true then the heretics are using this entire world as their sacrificial altar. The consequences of such a vast ritual would surely be disastrous.'

'Just so,' said Cassian. 'You see now why we cannot continue to offer this enemy a battle of attrition. That is precisely the war they want. We must resolve this swiftly and decisively, and capture the astropathic fortress before they are able to make use of it.'

'I ask again,' said Keritraeus. 'How? Impetuosity has already failed us once. They outnumber us, even with the Cadians added to our own forces. Our losses during the ambush were considerable, and even with the *Primarch's Sword* to support us, I believe we will be hard-pressed to defeat this foe.'

'In a straight fight, that is true,' agreed Cassian, 'but just as they are the twisted progeny of their primarch, so we are the true sons of ours. We will outmanoeuvre them, find their weaknesses and exploit them. Their heretical faith compels them to behave in ways that seem like madness. They may be working to a plan that we cannot fully fathom, but they have also ignored strategic practicals that we will not.'

Cassian felt a frisson of disquiet at how closely his own words echoed those of the farseer, but he pressed on regardless.

'Sergeant Marcus has identified one such strategic option,' he said, turning to the Reiver sergeant.

Marcus nodded. 'During our scouting sweep, we located a partial tunnel entrance at this location,' he said, exloading coordinates to his comrades' auspex-maps. 'It lies amidst the ruins of a generatorum block, and presumably was opened by the enemy's initial bombardment. Binaric interrogation of functioning cogitators within the generatorum complex revealed this as an entrance to Dustrious' municipalis support grid. It's a backup power supply, whose conduits run beneath the astropathic fortress.'

'Is it a route in, then?' asked Keritraeus. 'If so, are we to assume that the enemy have simply overlooked it by chance?'

'To the first question, yes, we believe so,' replied Marcus. 'Data-schematics

suggest that an exit hatch could be used to emerge within the outer cloisters of the fortress. But to the second, no, the enemy have not overlooked it.'

'How can you be sure?'

'We eliminated a small herd of the plague mutants penned in a cordon around the entrance. We further disarmed a substantial quantity of tripwires linked to viral grenades, and heard the groans of more of the creatures from the tunnel's mouth. They were not there by chance.'

'Then we are to believe they have simply ignored this route into the heart of the fortress?' asked Dematris doubtfully.

'The tunnel confines would be tight,' said Marcus. 'An unaugmented human could progress down them, or Primaris Marines in light combat armour such as my Reiver squad. Anyone larger would struggle. The exit point would also be overlooked by servitor-guns on both the outer and inner fortifications. Attrition amongst the initial attackers would be high.'

'All of which, the Death Guard could have overcome with sufficient ingenuity and belligerence,' said Cassian. 'But I believe that doing so would have ended their war too soon. A virus that kills its host is inefficient, and ultimately self-destructive. To thrive, it must allow its victim to live.'

'At least for as long as serves its needs,' added Keritraeus, nodding. 'So how do we exploit this omission by our foes? We can hardly move the bulk of our forces through such a narrow conduit.'

'True,' said Cassian, 'but we can send Squad Marcus through it, and thus gain access to the fortress. The Reivers will link up with whatever garrison remains within. They will manually direct its guns, and stand ready to support our strike for the gates.'

'It's to be another direct assault, then?' asked Dematris.

'A coordinated strike,' replied Cassian, 'with the intent of denying the enemy their prize and contacting the crusade's forces. We cannot overcome this foe with our current strength, but nor can we leave them to complete whatever foul ritual they are attempting. Thus, if we cannot rejoin the crusade as duty compels, we will bring the crusade to us.'

His comrades nodded. He saw hope in their eyes.

'Captain Dzansk,' said Cassian. 'Are you ready to serve your Emperor?'

'Always, my lord. Cadia stands.'

'Very well. What I ask of you is no easy thing, captain, but it must be thus. You will mobilise all your remaining forces and engage the Death Guard in a

diversionary attack shortly before we launch our own assault. Draw them in, and tie up as much of their strength as you can.'

'That will cost us dear, my lord,' said Dzansk. 'Many of my soldiers are sick, or wounded. Our ammunition stocks are low. If the Death Guard respond in force, we will not endure their wrath for long.'

'I understand,' said Cassian. 'While your forces engage the enemy, ours will move swiftly into position and secure the main fortress gate. Sergeant Marcus will already be inside, and he will open it to allow us access. We will then hold the gate for you for as long as we can before falling back within.'

'Yes, my lord.'

Cassian heard something in the captain's voice – doubt, perhaps – but victory here was too important. So long as the Cadians did their part in the Emperor's name, that was what truly mattered.

'Keritraeus,' he said, 'what of the enemy's apparent invisibility to our auspex?'

'The storm continues to interfere,' replied the Librarian. 'And in theory, they may be able to conceal themselves as they did before their ambush. But we have visual confirmation from our Inceptor squads as to enemy movements. After the ambush, the Death Guard appear to have tightened their cordon around the astropathic fortress.'

Cassian nodded, then addressed Dzansk's hologram again.

'Captain Dzansk, ready your forces to launch their attack at seventeen hundred hours sidereal. Sergeant Marcus, you know your duty?'

'I do, brother-lieutenant,' said Marcus with a salute.

'Then ready yourselves, brothers. We go into battle again, and this time to victory or death.'

Lord Gurloch stood amidst the ruins of the Mons Aquilas counting house and stared up the hill at the astropathic fortress. Another wave of groaning poxwalkers was stumbling towards it, falling rank by rank to the fortress' guns.

'How soon... until the loyalists attack... again?' asked Thrax.

Gurloch responded with a heavy shrug that sent foul fluids trickling down his armour.

'We gave them a sound beating, for all that they wounded us also, but the Emperor's lapdogs have never known when to admit defeat. I doubt they'll

be dissuaded for long.'

'Should we... accelerate... the attack?'

'And spoil so fine a broth?' asked Gurloch in a tone of genuine surprise. 'No, Thrax. Allowing these new arrivals to force our hand would waste all our hard work. The sorcerers assure me the empyrean churns like a cauldron of poxes. Beyond the veil, our plague of misery is brewing nicely. Let the loyalists come at us again, and again. We have the numbers, the commanding ground, and the gifts of Nurgle and Mortarion both. We are Death Guard, Thrax – we will endure while they suffer and die.'

'And when... the plague is... ready?' asked the Biologis Putrifier.

Gurloch heard the relish in his gargling voice, and knew that Thrax already knew the answer to his question; he just liked to hear it spoken aloud.

'Why then, old friend, we will demonstrate the true generosity of Nurgle,' he said. 'We will swat aside the paltry forces arrayed against us, claim the astropathic fortress for our own and use its psycho-amplific machineries as the vector for our wondrous new disease. We will disperse it through the ether like flies from a bursting corpse, like spores from fungus, like Nurgle's Rot through a healthy body. We will beam our psychic contagion across the stars to every Imperial world in this sector. We will raise an epidemic the like of which has not been seen in millennia.'

'And with it... we will praise... Nurgle.'

'And with it,' said Gurloch cheerily, 'we will earn Nurgle's praise!'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dropping down into the ferrocrete confines of the tunnel, Reiver Sergeant Marcus held his bolt carbine in one hand and his long blade in the other. His auto-senses overlaid his sight with multiple spectra, driving back the darkness and revealing shambling half-shapes amidst the deeper shadows.

As expected, bulky power conduits took up most of the tunnel space, while the ceiling was low enough that Marcus was forced to stoop to avoid catching his skull-faced helm on low pipes and jutting gauge assemblies.

‘Targets ahead,’ he voxed to his squad. ‘We’re going to have to advance single file and engage as best we can. Brother Ignatio, you have rearguard. Brother Tanus, mapping. Keep us on the right path if we’re busy with battle. Blades only unless in extremis.’

Vox clicks came back to him, signals that his squad had received and understood their orders. There were eight of them in all, down from ten after the hard-fought battle earlier that day – more than enough, however, to complete their mission.

Sergeant Marcus led off along the tunnel, setting a swift pace. The first plague mutant died before it even knew he was there, his blade punching through the back of its neck and all but sawing its head off. The second fell as it turned towards him, a foot-and-a-half of combat knife sliding through its eye socket into its rotted brain.

More of the creatures staggered towards him, their moans filling the enclosed space. The sounds made him feel nauseous, as though some sort of poison were seeping into his mind.

‘Mute your audio-intakes,’ he ordered as he hacked and tore his way through the creatures. ‘Vox communication only.’

‘You feel that too, sergeant?’ asked Tanus.

‘There is some heretical taint to their voices. I will not risk its corruption.’ Marcus punched his gun butt into another rotting face, shattering the thing’s blast goggles and snapping its head back in a spray of fluids. The corpse-mutant crumpled, still grinning. ‘That’s the last of them for now.’

‘Movement at our rear, sergeant,’ said Brother Ignatio.

‘Keep moving,’ he replied. ‘We can’t let these abominations slow us down, or the whole attack fails.’

He set off along the tunnel, scanning the darkness for threats and watching the chronometer on his helm display as it ticked slowly downwards.

Captain Dzansk stood atop a Chimera, ignoring the oily rain that poured down upon him. He surveyed the last of his forces, a few hundred fighting men and women clad in the battered and stained uniforms of the Cadian Imperial Guard. The last few regimental preachers and commissars moved through the ranks, offering a muttered benediction here, a stern gaze there. A half-company of Leman Russ tanks idled off to one side, engines rumbling while their commanders sat high in their cupolas to listen to his address.

‘Soldiers of Cadia!’ began Dzansk, his voice amplified through the speaker on Voxman Kavier’s pack. ‘You have fought long and hard for this world, and I salute your tenacity! Your bravery! Your faith!’

Many of his warriors made the sign of the aquila, but their faces remained grim. They knew what was coming.

‘Yet our work is not done,’ said Dzansk. ‘The enemy remains. Our Emperor asks more of us, and we shall answer, “Yes!”’

He saw the determination in their faces. They were strong, Cadian steel still in their spines despite the weeks of hardship they had endured and the threat of almost-certain death.

‘The heretic foe have poured their filth down upon us. They have inflicted every hardship and horror that they could. Lesser soldiers would have faltered long ago, but still we stand strong! I look upon you and see not broken souls, but brave soldiers of the Imperium, and it swells my heart with pride!’

He saw a few heads rise a little at that, a few shoulders straighten.

‘Perhaps our enemy thought us defeated, just as the Despoiler thought us defeated when he shattered our world beneath our feet! But we were not

defeated then, and we are not defeated now! I keep Kasr Partox in my heart, and I know you all do too! Today we go into battle alongside the glorious Adeptus Astartes of the Ultramarines Chapter, in the service of no less than Primarch Roboute Guilliman himself, and we will prevail!’

This raised a cheer at last, albeit a hollow one. He saw the waxy pallor of his soldiers’ skin, the lesions and marks of sickness that clung to so many, just as they marred his own flesh beneath his sodden uniform. Dzansk and his regiment had been immersed for too long amidst the contagions of the enemy – and put down too many of their own sick – to believe that they were making it off Kalides alive. He had agreed when Lieutenant Cassian had outlined his plan to retreat through the gates of the astropathic fortress, but he had done so knowing that he could not risk bringing disease inside those walls.

‘Be strong, brothers and sisters of Cadia!’ he cried. ‘Gird your hearts with faith. Armour your souls with contempt. And remember that to die in the Emperor’s name is an honour without compare!’

He clambered down from his perch and boarded his transport, Kavier and the drafted replacements for his command squad following him in.

‘Soldiers of Cadia,’ voxed Dzansk as he strapped himself into his restraints. ‘In the Emperor’s name – advance.’

‘It is all of them, lord,’ said Blorthos. ‘I can see them moving like maggots through the corpse of this city.’

Gurloch led the Witherlings down a half-flooded processional, Plague Marines and thrumming bloat-drones following in his wake. He shook his head in disgust at Blorthos’ words.

‘Such a waste,’ he said. ‘These fools had days and days of sickness and sorrow yet to offer up. Now the Ultramarines throw their allies’ lives away, and for what? A distraction.’

‘They are... ignorant creatures... lord,’ came Thrax’s voice over the vox.

‘So be it,’ sighed Gurloch heavily. ‘These Imperials have no idea how to savour their own suffering. Once again, they prove themselves ungrateful. My patience with them has run out.’

‘The... Space Marines...’ Thrax began, but Gurloch cut him off, suddenly irked by his subordinate’s gasping voice.

‘The Space Marines will undoubtedly strike when they believe us

sufficiently engaged. Perhaps they will even bombard us from orbit again. None of that matters. They clearly want the astropathic fortress as much as we do, so let's give them a little false hope.'

'Lord?'

'Send in another wave of poxwalkers,' said Gurloch. 'A big one. Enough to keep the guns busy for a spell. Use them as cover and pull back to within the shadow of the fortress walls, then dig in. The Ultramarines won't risk dropping barrage bombs and lance strikes so close to their objective, so they'll have to dislodge you the old-fashioned way.'

'They can... try,' said Thrax scornfully.

'Exactly. Hold them there for me, Thrax. I will finish the Astra Militarum and then return, and between us we will hurl back the surviving Ultramarines a second time. Such a bitter mix of disappointment and suffering will surely be enough to perfect our plague.'

'In Mortarion's name... it will... be done.'

'Eighth Platoon,' voxed Dzansk. 'Move up through those ruins and secure firing positions. Signal when you're in place, then cover Fifth as they attack.'

Voices came back to him over the rattle and thump of gunfire, tight acknowledgements of orders received. The Cadians had advanced to within two miles of the fortress before meeting resistance amidst a district of old, rusting chem factories. Now they were fighting to gain ground, Dzansk still pushing his soldiers forward as aggressively as he dared.

'Captain, Third Platoon reports more Death Guard moving north of their position,' said Xavier. 'Heavy infantry and several tanks, Predator-class.'

'They'll be outflanked,' said Gunner Astin, tightening her grip on Chonsky's old meltagun.

'Gatekeeper, do you read?' voxed Dzansk. 'Sergeant Yuri?'

'Affirmative, captain,' came Yuri's voice, lousy with static. *'Awaiting orders.'*

'Third are about to be outflanked to the north,' said Dzansk. 'Intercede. Take *Kasr's Fury* with you.'

'Understood,' said Yuri. *'We'll hammer those heretics all the way back to the warp.'*

'Good man,' said Dzansk. He knew that two Leman Russ tanks wouldn't be enough to overcome the enemy force that Third Platoon had reported.

Sergeant Yuri probably knew it too.

At this stage, it was something of a moot point.

'This is Sergeant Chenska, Second Platoon,' came a desperate voice over the vox. *'We're overrun. They're pushing up through—'* The voice cut out, replaced by the scream of lasgun fire. Something exploded with a dull thump, before the voice returned. *'Repeat, Second Platoon is overrun. Enemy infantry and Dreadnought-class walkers are pushing up through refinery one-nine.'*

'Understood, Chenska,' said Dzansk. *'Can you extract?'*

'Negative, command, negative,' said Chenska as gunfire blared again. *'They've pushed past us. We're holed up in the administratum wing but we don't have long. I'm ordering all grenades primed. We'll bring the roof down on these heretic bastards.'*

'Go with the Emperor's grace, sergeant,' said Dzansk.

'Cadia stands! Cadia st—'

Static swallowed her voice.

Dzansk balled one fist and thumped it against the Chimera's bulkhead, hard enough to hurt.

'Captain,' said Kavier, *'Eighth report heavy drone presence on the ridge. They've been driven back. Martyr's Fist and Imperius have moved to support. Sir, Commissar Durent has taken command of Fifth Platoon — they're attacking despite the lack of covering fire. Taking massive casualties.'*

'Of course they are,' said Dzansk. For a moment, he felt nothing but an incredible weight of exhaustion. Yet anger at his own weakness eclipsed it, and faith burned hot in its wake. *'Lieutenant Cassian,'* he voxed, switching channels.

'Captain,' came the Ultramarine's voice.

'I estimate that we have minutes at best, my lord,' said Dzansk. *'I can't listen to my soldiers die without me any longer. I'm joining the fight.'*

'No word yet from Squad Marcus,' replied Cassian. *'We are moving up on the hab-district south of the fortress now. Encountering increasing Death Guard resistance. I need you to give us as long as you possibly can, captain.'*

'With respect, my lord, I've been fifteen years in the Guard. I fought at Kasr Sonnen. I fought on Thracian Primaris. I fought on the Partox Fields when the Despoiler came for my world. I've fought on half a dozen planets since, and I have never, ever given less than my all for the Emperor. The same is

true of every single soldier I lead into battle, so you can be damn well assured that we don't need your urging to fight this fight to our last breath.'

'Very good, captain,' said Cassian. 'We are fighting too close to the fortress walls to risk deployment of orbital ordnance. Shall I re-task Shipmaster Aethor to support your efforts?'

'Yes, my lord,' said Dzansk. 'Let cleansing fire rain down upon them.'

'Go with the Emperor's blessings, Captain Dzansk. It has been an honour.'

'And you, Lieutenant Cassian. Make this count.'

Dzansk cut the feed, checked that his laspistol was charged and his grenade belt clipped in place, and then thumbed the tank's internal intercom. 'Driver, take us in. Let's give these faithless traitors a taste of Cadian steel.'

'Absolutely, sir,' came the reply, and with a roar the Chimera surged forwards.

'Get that top hatch open,' said Dzansk. 'Gunners, grant the Emperor's mercy to anything that moves.'

'Yes, sir!' chorused Astin and Nils, releasing the locking bolts on the Chimera's roof hatch. They heaved the doors open with a clang and hauled themselves up into firing positions. Dzansk joined them, laspistol in hand, while Kavier added his own lasgun to the arsenal. Behind them, Colour Sergeant Bastel unfurled the banner and raised it high, allowing it to stream out behind the Chimera as it sped between the crumbling ruins.

Lasfire flashed in the chem factory to Dzansk's right, and the clouds glowed as the first orbital lance beams stabbed down into the battle. Through the driving rain, Dzansk saw bulky shapes loom at the intersection ahead. Bolt shells started to clang from the Chimera's hull and whip past his head.

The Chimera's turret tracked and fired, its multi-laser spitting shots into the enemy. The heavy bolter in the hull joined in, thumping shells back at the traitors.

'Pick your targets,' ordered Dzansk. 'Fire at will!'

As the Chimera ploughed through the intersection, Plague Marines scattered before it. Dzansk fired his laspistol, shots scorching the heretics' armour. Gunner Astin's meltagun gave its breathy roar, and Nils' plasma gun joined in with a deafening scream. Their fire turned one heretic to glowing ash and took the legs off another. Lasfire from Dzansk, Kavier and Bastel blew a third Plague Marine from his feet, then their tank was across the intersection and racing away down the street.

‘Excellent marksmanship,’ said Dzansk, grinning fiercely despite himself. ‘Driver, circle through those ruins towards the Eighth. We’ll lend them our support.’

Overhead the sky caught fire again as a lance strike speared downwards and detonated a chem factory. The entire structure collapsed, no doubt burying Cadians and heretics alike. The Chimera slewed around a rain-slick corner, then Dzansk had to cling on tightly as the armoured transport swerved sharply, narrowly missing the burning wreck of a Leman Russ sat in the middle of the street.

Dzansk saw the words *Martyr’s Fist* still legible on the wreck’s bubbling paintwork.

‘Enemies ahead,’ voxed the driver. ‘Captain, get back inside! Now!’

Dzansk glimpsed a nightmarish mechanical contraption squatting amidst the ruins in front of them, Cadian corpses heaped around it. He had an impression of an armoured mass covered in spikes and guns, with armoured arachnoid limbs and a ghoulish death mask. The cannon that jutted from the monstrosity’s chest fired, and a sudden hammer blow knocked the breath from Dzansk’s lungs.

Suddenly he was tumbling through the air, rain and fire and hurtling ferrocrete all around him. Something hit his cheek, and pain exploded through his jaw. Something else detonated in a cloud of flames and whizzing metal.

Then Dzansk hit the roadway with tremendous force and blacked out.

...Gunner Astin, blood running down her cheek, a chunk of metal piercing her torso, still bracing and firing her meltagun with a scream of defiance. Blood bursting from her as her body jerks and dances...

...boots thumping near his head, jolting him from darkness, running past him. Screams. Gunfire...

...a familiar figure crawling towards him. Something bulky on its back. Fire. Fire dancing down its limbs, in its hair. Kavier, reaching out towards him, then slumping face first in the rain...

...darkness and grey...

...water and flame...

Dzansk groaned and rolled onto his back, then gasped in pain as the motion

caused his broken bones to grind together. He opened his eyes, vision swimming, and felt agony radiating from every part of him.

Kavier!

He looked, and saw Xavier's burned corpse sprawled in the roadway, a dozen yards from a crater full of mangled metal that used to be a Chimera.

Dzansk groaned again, reaching a tentative hand up then snatching it away as he felt how horribly mangled his jaw was; his hand came away soaked in blood.

Running on nothing but defiance, Dzansk forced himself to his feet. His right arm hung uselessly by his side, white bone showing through a rip in the blood-drenched cloth of his sleeve. More blood ran freely from cuts and contusions all over his body, and Dzansk was glad that he couldn't see what he looked like at that moment.

A corpse too stubborn to die, he thought, then recoiled at the mental image of the enemy's plague mutants.

Through a haze of pain, he grasped that he was alone. Xavier, Astin and Bastel lay dead in the street. Nils was nowhere to be seen. The monstrous spider-engine was gone too, no doubt stalking away to slaughter the last of his regiment.

Captain Dzansk stood alone, mortally wounded, drenched with rain and full of sorrow and hate. He limped down the street and bent over Bastel's mangled body. With his one good arm, he fumbled at the pole of the regimental standard. It took him three attempts, but he managed to hoist the rain-slick pole aloft. The banner still hung from it, singed and stained but in one piece.

Dzansk turned from the wreck and began to limp, one step at a time, towards the distant sound of gunfire. While there was breath in his body, he thought, he would continue to do what he could.

Heavy footsteps behind Dzansk made him turn, and he leaned on the banner pole for support. His eyes widened as he saw hulking Terminators lumbering towards him. At their head strode a horn-helmed monster with a tri-bladed axe.

The enemy's leader, he thought feverishly. It had to be.

He cast about himself for a weapon, or for a vox headset to call down fire on his own position. *Anything.*

The huge Chaos lord lumbered closer, engulfing Dzansk in a sweat-thick

reek of putrefaction that made him gag, then groan at the agony that that motion caused him. Hate flared in his chest as he realised the figure was laughing.

‘By Grandfather’s cauldron!’ exclaimed the Terminator. His voice was a deep, bubbling horror, like the last death rattle of a dozen drowning men. ‘This must be the leader of this merry band of fools.’

Dzansk tried to limp backwards, still casting desperately around for a gun. If he could reach Astin’s body, then perhaps Chonsky’s meltagun could strike one more blow before the end. That spark of hope fizzled out as the hulking Terminators surrounded him, hemming him inside a ring of rusted, seeping metal and flyblown flesh. The stench was almost more than he could bear.

Dzansk leaned on the banner pole and hauled himself upright, staring defiantly as the horn-helmed lord loomed over him.

‘You stand in the presence of Lord Gurloch,’ snarled one of the Terminators, a disgusting vision with a single bulbous eye where his head should be. ‘You should be on your knees, worm.’

‘No, Blorthos,’ said Gurloch. ‘No, this one has earned the right to stand.’ He looked down upon Dzansk, whose hate-filled stare didn’t waver. ‘Look at you. Jaw hanging by sinews. Arm broken. Organs ruptured, bones cracked, flesh veritably seething with disease. And still you refuse to fall. In another life, my father might have welcomed you with open arms.’

Dzansk tried to speak, but managed nothing more than a slurry of bloodied grunts. Lord Gurloch laughed again, his mirth as genuine as it was horrifying.

‘I shall assume that whatever you were attempting to say, it was somewhat less complimentary,’ he said, eliciting cruel chuckles from his warriors. Off in the distance, something exploded as lance fire stabbed down from the sky.

‘You have proven yourself a stubborn and tenacious foe,’ said Gurloch, his tone growing serious, ‘and for that I salute you. But your mind is closed, your eyes shut to the glory of Chaos, and you have cost me time and warriors.’

He reached out and grasped the banner pole, plucking it from Dzansk’s hands as easily as taking a toy from a child. Gurloch cast the banner into the mud, then wrapped his fingers around Dzansk’s neck and hoisted him easily off the ground.

The captain gurgled in agony as broken bones crunched together in his jaw, Gurloch’s rust-metal fingers tightening on his windpipe and vertebrae. His good arm twitched and spasmed as he felt rot spreading through his flesh

from the heretic's touch.

'I am done with your little soldiers,' said Gurloch. 'I have wrung the last droplets of misery and pain from your husks. Now you will die, then the Ultramarines will die, and then – at *last* – I will be free to spread the blessings of Nurgle across the stars.'

Dzansk was dying, his tormentor's words echoing to him down a long, dark tunnel. His fingers twitched with the last flickers of his life. He felt them touch something.

Cold metal.

Pin.

In his pain and bewilderment, he had forgotten. But now he remembered, and he wordlessly thanked the Emperor for this final gift.

With his last breath, Captain Dzansk summoned the strength to pluck out the pin and let it tumble slowly away. He went with it, drifting into darkness like an autumn leaf on the Partox fields of home.

He was already dead when the krak grenades on his belt exploded.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cassian charged up a heap of rain-slick rubble, shrugging bolt-rounds from his shoulder guard. He swept Duty in a killing arc, lopping off the end of the Plague Marine's gun along with the fleshy tentacle that held it.

His enemy bellowed in anger and tried to smash his mailed fist into Cassian's faceplate. The lieutenant wove aside and slashed his sword through his enemy's legs, causing the heretic to fall to his knees. Cassian pressed his bolt rifle one-handed against his enemy's helm and blew off his head.

'They're retreating to the next line,' voxed Dematris. 'Heavy covering fire coming down from the right. Brother-lieutenant, they're digging in again.'

A spray of diseased filth rained down from above, and Cassian threw himself out of its path. He cursed as droplets splattered his armour, causing ceramite to hiss and bubble. The remaining two battle-brothers of Intercessor squad Telor were less fortunate: they staggered in pain as their armoured forms were eaten away by virulent bacteria.

'Brothers, find cover and suppress the enemy,' ordered Cassian. 'Inceptors, encircle their position to the right and open the way for Aggressor squad Doras to turn their flank.'

The Ultramarines were less than half a mile from the front gate of the astropathic fortress, but Cassian felt his frustration growing with every second. The enemy had dug in with veteran skill. Every time the Ultramarines overran one Death Guard position, they found themselves enfiladed from two more. They were pressing forwards through the rubble heaps and ruins of the hab-district, but not quickly enough. Close by, Cassian could hear the endless groans of plague mutants and the chatter of the fortress' wall guns.

Again, he tried to raise anyone within the fortress by vox. Again, he met with silence. He switched channels, attempting to contact Captain Dzansk.

He heard nothing but static.

‘Keritraeus,’ he voxed. ‘Are you in position?’

‘Almost, lieutenant,’ came the Librarian’s reply. *‘They mined the transitway and packed the buildings with Plague Marines. Pride of Talassar took some damage pushing around their flank, but the combined fire of the Repulsors and the Dreadnoughts is too much for them. They are falling back, and we will be in position in less than a minute.’*

‘Make it sooner. If we haven’t heard from Sergeant Marcus by then, we—’

Cassian was interrupted by a flashing priority rune in his peripheral vision. He blink-clicked it, and felt relief as he heard Sergeant Marcus’ voice.

‘Lieutenant, this is Marcus, do you read?’

‘Go ahead, sergeant,’ said Cassian.

‘We were delayed, brother-lieutenant. We had to cut through a bulkhead that wasn’t on the maps. Then, upon emerging into the cloisters, we came under heavy fire.’

‘Fire?’ exclaimed Cassian. ‘Have the enemy gained the fortress already?’

‘Negative,’ said Marcus. *‘Lieutenant, everyone’s dead. The fortress... Some sort of plague has spread here. The garrison have been rotting for days.’*

‘Then the gunfire...?’

‘Automated servitor protocols. I lost Brother Archimaeus to them before we were able to reach the overseer shrine and repurpose the guns.’

‘Primarch’s blood,’ cursed Cassian. ‘If plague has spread within the walls, then the astropathic choir is no more. We can’t contact the crusade.’

‘No sign of any dead astropaths yet, my lord. And we’ve only seen part of the outer cloisters – it is possible that there are survivors deeper within, quarantined against the contagions.’

‘Do we proceed?’ asked Keritraeus. *‘I’m in position, but I can’t hold here long.’*

‘We proceed,’ said Cassian. ‘There is still hope. The Emperor would not abandon us so. Besides, if all else fails, we can use the fortress as a strongpoint while we plan our next move.’

And, whispered a traitorous thought in his mind, she said you would live to fight for Yme’Loc...

The voice of Chaplain Dematris came over the vox, addressing the entire

strike force. *'With zeal and determination, we shall overcome the works of these heretics,'* he bellowed. *'Believe in your primarch and the Emperor! Make their strength yours! Strike now for Macragge and the Golden Throne!'*

Keritraeus stormed out from cover with his force staff held high. His eyes flashed with power as he summoned the might of the empyrean, then unleashed it in a searing column of flame. The psychic blast leapt up the flank of the rubble mound and detonated at its peak. Blazing Plague Marines tumbled from behind improvised barricades; he snatched one up with the power of his mind, crushing the heretic's armour before hurling his mangled body at two of his blazing comrades.

To the Librarian's right, the two Repulsor tanks thundered forwards on pummelling cushions of grav-energy. They swept up the rubble, pounding it flat as they unleashed hails of bolts, shells and las-blasts. The Plague Marines guarding the enemy's left flank fired back, but several of their number burst messily under the Repulsors' combined fire, while others were left reeling as limbs were blown off and torsos torn open.

To Keritraeus' left, the strike force's two Redeptor Dreadnoughts advanced, servo-motors whining and generators roaring as they climbed the rubble slope. Brother Marius' onslaught cannon screamed as it spat streams of fire into the Death Guard, while Brother Indomator's macro plasma incinerator glowed and vented steam as it fired again and again.

'Forward!' ordered Keritraeus, gathering warp energies and using them to leap high into the air and sweep down atop the traitors' blazing position. *'Do not relent!'*

Death Guard lumbered along the top of the rubble ridge, bringing their guns to bear against the Ultramarines' flanking force. Blight-ridden projectiles rained down, chewing a blackened crater in Brother Marius' sarcophagus and stripping the las-talon from *Maximus' Revenge*.

A sudden storm of bolt rifle fire engulfed the traitors as, several hundred yards away, Cassian pushed his squads up in the centre. In their urgency to halt the flank attack, the Plague Marines had allowed themselves to be silhouetted atop the ridge. The Intercessors made them pay for their error, bolt shells and grenades blasting filthy chunks from the Death Guard. Some of the traitors fell dead. Others stubbornly fired back.

'Be advised,' came Sergeant Marcus' voice over the vox. *'The plague*

mutant numbers between you and the walls are thinning. We are repurposing half the wall guns to target the Death Guard.'

Keritraeus reached for the energies of the warp again, but snatched his mind back as he felt dark power surging beyond the veil. The warding circuits in his psychic hood glowed, and he let out a relieved breath as the danger passed. Conjuring psychic powers was dangerous at the best of times, risking the attention of hungry warp entities that sought to possess or consume mortal minds; now, with the empyrean churning with amassed ritual energies, it was hazardous in the extreme.

Still, he stopped for a moment, brow creased as he reached tentatively out with his mind.

'Something...' he muttered, questing with his senses.

There.

Keritraeus keyed his vox.

'Cassian,' he said. 'The warp grows wrathful.'

'More so?' asked Cassian.

'More so,' echoed Keritraeus. 'I sense malefic entities gathering to the slaughter. Whether this is what the heretics intended or no, it bodes ill for us if these warp predators pierce the veil.'

'Understood. Their line is about to break.'

Ahead, Keritraeus saw the Aggressors of Squad Doras crest the other flank of the rubble rise. Their boltstorm gauntlets roared, spitting out a hail of fire that drove the Death Guard back and sent several of their number crashing to the ground.

Figures moved amidst a ruin at the centre of the Death Guard line. Keritraeus saw the glint of light on tainted glass and drew breath to shout a warning.

Too late.

A hail of bulbous spheres sailed through the air, blight grenades plucked from the bone spines of a Death Guard alchemist and hurled by his comrades. The spheres smashed down upon Squad Doras, drenching the Aggressors in diseased slime. The Ultramarines roared in pain and shock as their flesh blistered and rotted, foul buboes rising and bursting across their bodies even as their armour rusted and corroded.

One by one, Squad Doras staggered and fell.

Aghast, Keritraeus summoned a surge of energy with which to exact

revenge, but the traitors were already gone, using the Ultramarines' moment of horrified distraction to fall back.

'The way is open,' voxed Lieutenant Cassian. *'But at a price. For our fallen battle-brothers, advance.'*

Lord Gurloch stomped through the rain, his grip flexing and tightening upon the haft of his plaguereaper. His good cheer had evaporated, leaving a scummy film of anger in its wake. The Cadians had delayed him far longer than he had expected, and injured him sorely. His chest was rent and mangled, and the faceplate of his helm had cracked to reveal part of his poxraddled face and one yellowed eye. The wounds done to his body by the Cadian captain's grenades were closing as his flesh gouted layers of pus and blubber, but he could feel the ache of shrapnel still buried deep within him.

Blorthos was dead, and two of his Witherlings wounded beyond the abilities of their god-given gifts to heal. The Terminator champion had foreseen the danger at the last second, wrenching the Cadian from Gurloch's grip just as the detonations triggered. Gurloch intended to ensure that the loyalists paid dearly for his death.

'Lord...' came Thrax's voice over the vox. *'Our position... is overrun. They have... retrained the fortress' guns.'*

Gurloch's foul mood darkened further.

'Rot them all,' he snarled. 'Have they contacted the garrison? Do people still live within the fortress?'

'Unclear...'

'Thrax, do not let them through the fortress gates. Wringing misery and suffering from a human garrison before striking the killing blow, that is one thing. But attempting to overthrow such a fastness when Space Marines hold the walls? No – they may be weak loyalists, but even so they could sterilise the entire ritual.'

'We may... not be able...to stop them... They have... numbers... momentum... Our casualties are heavy and our position... poor.'

Gurloch stared through the rain towards the fortress, still a mile ahead. He looked around at the trudging advance of his warriors, relentless but far from swift. A handful of daemonically powered bloat-drones thrummed along in their midst, their rusted turbines droning like giant flies' wings.

'The drones could reach you in time,' he said.

‘I doubt... they would be enough,’ replied Thrax, breaking off for a moment as gunfire roared and explosions thundered. *‘I am sorry... lord.’*

‘Save your apologies – they’ll sicken no one. Just make their advance as costly as you can, Thrax. I will do the rest.’

Gurloch cut the vox-link, switching channels to address the trio of Death Guard sorcerers that served his forces. He disliked the muttering plaguecasters intensely, a trait he had inherited from Primarch Mortarion himself. He dealt with the plague witches only when he had to.

Now was such a time.

‘Noxgol, Shunngh, Scroful,’ he said. ‘Heed the words of your lord.’

A chorus of replies came back to him: one voice droning, another wheezing, another sing-song and completely insane.

‘The suffering of this world has been magnificent,’ said Gurloch. ‘Much misery has gathered beyond the veil for our grand purpose. But if we wish to secure victory, then a little of Nurgle’s beneficence must be vomited forth.’

‘You wish us to open the Garden gates, my lord?’ asked Scroful.

‘A mere crack – sufficient just to bog the enemy down and stop them from gaining sanctuary within the fortress.’

‘You ask much, lord,’ said Shunngh breathlessly. *‘The daemons of great Nurgle are no mere foot soldiers, for you to command at will. Once the way is open, they may force it wider. It could mean our souls to deny them.’*

‘There are three of you,’ replied Gurloch scornfully. ‘A tri-lobe. Surely enough to do as I ask. Open the way, and retain control. I care not what it costs you, but understand this – if you throw the floodgates wide and waste the great bounty we have harvested here, then whatever torments you can imagine, I will show you far worse.’

His sorcerers chorused their assent, and Gurloch dismissed them with a thought. Ahead he could hear the clangour of battle, growing closer by the moment. Overhead the clouds roiled and churned like a dying man’s guts. Victory here had been assured until the arrival of the damned Ultramarines, and Gurloch saw only too clearly that his own complacency had played its part in allowing them to upset his plans. He saw, also, that what his sorcerers said was true: tapping the powers of the warp could result in a swift and overwhelming victory here, but at the cost of all that he sought to achieve.

Gurloch had fought the Long War for ten thousand years, and he had not risen to lordship in that time by avoiding risk. He had faith, deep and

festering. He knew that Nurgle would smile upon his endeavours. He had only to be courageous, and true to his purpose, and victory would be his.

Gurloch felt his skin crawl as though touched by a million twitching flies' wings. Thunder rumbled like the malevolent chuckle of a dark god, and emerald lightning danced through the clouds.

Cassian vaulted a toppled pillar and landed in the processional, barely a hundred yards from the fortress gates. He fired his bolt rifle from the hip, mowing down a gaggle of plague mutants, then drove his blade point first through the helm of a Plague Marine.

'With me!' he roared, his vox-amplified voice echoing over the battle. 'Ultramar! Ultramar!'

Cassian's battle-brothers surged around him, driving hard for the gates. The fortress loomed above them, a huge dark presence backlit by fierce green lightning. Its emplaced wall guns thundered, chewing lines of explosions through milling mutants and punching Plague Marines from their feet. Void shields thrummed, forming a protective dome that the loyalists now fought beneath.

The enemy still fought back, but it was a last gasp of defiance, nothing more. Plague Marines had dug themselves into the blasted ruins of hab-blocks lining the roadway, attempting to shoot at the Ultramarines while avoiding return fire from both in front and behind. It was not an enviable position, nor one that even the tenacious Death Guard could hold for long.

'Marcus,' voxed Cassian. 'It is time. Open the gates.'

'Understood, brother-lieutenant.'

A choral chime boomed out across the ruined city, and with a rumble of mighty engines the massive gates of the astropathic fortress began to swing open. As the gap between the slabs of adamantium widened, Cassian saw a sub-cloister beyond them, flanked by servitor guns and leading through to another set of gates beyond.

'Truly, the architects of this place meant for their charges to remain safe,' commented Dematris.

'Let us hope that – against all odds – they were successful,' said Cassian, gunning down another plague mutant.

The moment the gates were wide enough, Marcus' Reivers burst forth to join the fight. Now that stealth was no longer required, they entered battle as

Guilliman intended, their skull masks vox-amplifying their war cries into terrifying roars and their bolt carbines blazing. They pelted a band of Plague Marines with stun grenades, sending the traitors reeling as their auto-senses were overloaded by modulating blasts of light, sound and spiritual chaff.

Cassian charged up the roadway, leading his brothers to link up with Marcus' warriors. Ahead of him, a twisted Death Guard alchemist emerged from amongst the ruins. The figure hurled a bloated projectile at Cassian, some kind of severed and stitched-up head. The lieutenant threw himself aside, and the projectile burst against the roadway where he had been. Slime sprayed, chewing deep holes in the ferrocrete.

Cassian rose smoothly into a firing crouch and put three bolt-rounds into the alchemist's helm from twenty yards. The Plague Marine convulsed as his head deformed then detonated, much like the disgusting weapons he had flung at Cassian and his battle-brothers. His carcass slumped, shattering the last of the alembics on his back and engulfing the Plague Marines in a cloud of such virulent foulness that even they could not withstand it.

'Victory!' Cassian roared. 'We have victory! Brothers, smash the last of them aside. Make for the gates!'

'Lieutenant,' said Keritraeus, and Cassian was pulled up short by the pain and alarm he heard. He glanced left to see the Librarian staggering and clutching his temples. His psychic hood was glowing brightly, wisps of smoke rising from its circuits.

'Something is coming,' said Keritraeus. The next instant, green lightning stabbed down from the heavens, a searing volley that struck again and again. All through the ruins, foul green smoke began to billow up from wherever the lightning struck.

'Move,' ordered Cassian. 'Get to sanctuary, now!'

But even as he gave the order, he saw that it was too late. The lightning speared down amidst Marcus' Reivers, throwing them aside and raising billowing fumes that filled the gateway. Amidst the churning fog banks, Cassian saw cadaverous figures moving; he heard the clang of rusted bells, the drone of bloated flies and the miserable chant of endless counting. Cyclopic yellow eyes stared out at him as the things trudged forwards to attack.

'Daemons,' said Keritraeus in grim resignation.

CHAPTER NINE

Daemons.

Anathema things, warp spawn formed from the unnatural energies of the empyrean and given sentience by the Dark Gods. They were the hellish get of the Emperor's ultimate foes, and for that, Dematris hated them more than all the traitors in the galaxy.

He hefted his crozius arcanum, checked the load on his absolver bolt pistol and prepared to smite these unholy monsters in the Emperor's name.

'Dematris, Keritraeus,' shouted Cassian. 'We have to get inside the fortress. Shipmaster Aethor reports the main Death Guard force closing from the east. They'll be on us in moments. We can't let these abominations stop us when we're so close to victory.'

'Understood,' barked Dematris. 'I shall lead our brothers in a push on the gate.'

'We cannot risk committing our full force to this,' said Cassian. 'We would be exposed to attack from the rear. I will retain a force of our brothers and block the road.'

'I will join you, lieutenant,' said Keritraeus. 'The foe wields fell sorcery – you will need my protection.'

'In the name of the primarch then,' said Dematris.

'And of the Emperor,' replied Cassian.

Dematris advanced up the processional towards the fortress gates. Plague-mutant corpses formed smouldering hillocks all around him, and unclean things were squirming out of the charnel heaps like maggots.

He could see what remained of Squad Marcus fighting furiously against the foul daemons that now surrounded them. The things were bloated monsters,

their sloughing flesh pale and rotted, their faces ghastly masks of pus and buboes each boasting a single eye and a single horn. They clutched blades of rusted iron that they swung in ponderous arcs, while around them the air boiled with flies and plague spores.

‘Aggressors, Inceptors, Brother Indomator – with me!’ cried Dematris, his voice a vox-amplified roar. ‘The enemy reveal themselves in all their foulness, yet these heretical filth-creatures are no match for the true defenders of humanity. Gather your hate! Gather your faith! These worthless things can withstand neither!’

Dematris launched himself into the fight. He swung his crozius into the back of a daemon’s skull, and the thing’s head exploded in a shower of slime. Even as its bubbling body dissolved into smoke, he was already firing his heavy-gauge bolt pistol, every round finding its mark in another rotting body. Explosions sprayed filth across his armour. Hellspawn staggered and groaned.

They were tough. For every one of the creatures he sent howling back to the warp, another would withstand his attacks, stumbling then rallying back to stab at him with its blade. Flies whirled around Dematris in a storm, blinding him as they tried frantically to find any chink in his armour.

‘Foul spawn!’ he roared. ‘Filth incarnate! Unclean parodies! In the Emperor’s name, I hurl you back into the abyss!’

Dematris kept swinging and firing, ignoring the rotted claws and rusted blades that raked across his power armour. He hewed a path to Sergeant Marcus’ side.

‘Tough bastards,’ grunted Marcus, sawing his blade through a daemon’s throat and kicking its dissolving body away from him. ‘Fearless, too. Stun grenades do nothing.’

‘Faith will do everything you need,’ replied Dematris, and his tone brooked no argument. The mass of daemons pressed in from all sides, mumbling their endless, droning count as they fought. Thunder roared as the fortress’ wall guns poured shots into the melee, bursting the daemons of Nurgle like sacks of wet offal. Reiver blades and bolt carbines felled more of the creatures.

Still they pressed in, and Dematris began to think he would be overwhelmed before the very gates he had vowed to secure.

Then came the blaring machine-voice of Brother Indomator, bellowing his war cry as he led the charge into the daemons’ ranks. The Redeptor

Dreadnought fired his macro plasma incinerator point-blank, and rotted horrors vanished in a flare of light. His massive power fist swept through them like a wrecking ball, hurling melting corpses high into the air. At Indomator's side fought the Aggressors of Squad Temeter, along with the bounding Inceptors of squads Polandrus and Thaddean.

Dematris shouted in triumph as the daemons were torn apart. Groaning voices turned thin and echoing, before fading altogether as the pack of daemons disincorporated into sludge and smoke.

The Ultramarines were left panting with exertion, standing over the rusted and riven bodies of their dead. Yet the gate was theirs. Dematris opened a vox-channel to let the lieutenant know, but emerald lightning leapt again, and jaundiced smoke billowed up between Dematris' force and Cassian's. From within came the rumble and crackle of blazing furnaces, and the rusted creak of mechanical joints. Huge shapes moved amidst the murk.

'Back!' he cried. 'Secure the gates. Whatever comes, do not let it through, brothers. We cannot let the fortress fall.'

Gurgling roars shook the air, and from within the fume came tank-sized monsters, bloated things of leprous flesh and blazing eyes that trampled forwards on mechanical legs. The daemon engines flexed piston-driven claws and clutched foetid blades as tall as battle-brothers, and as they came they loosed a hail of shots from cannons sutured into their shoulder flesh.

'Hold!' roared Dematris as fire rained around him. 'Whatever the cost! Hold!'

Fifty yards down the processional, Cassian watched the Death Guard emerge from the ruins. The heretics' forces had been mauled, yet they still outnumbered his own warriors two to one at least. Foul champions led their advance: rot-cowled sorcerers and lumbering freaks that tolled monstrous bells or wielded filthy surgical instruments. Bloat-drones flew above them on smoke-belching turbines, their foul cannons pointed straight at the Ultramarines' lines.

Against this horde, he had his surviving Intercessors and Hellblasters dug in amongst the ruins, supported by the Dreadnought Brother Marius and the two battle-damaged Repulsors.

'There,' said Keritraeus. 'Their leader.'

Cassian followed the Librarian's gaze and saw a hulking warrior with a

cracked, horned helm. With him marched several twisted Terminators.

‘So much misery laid at that one’s feet,’ said Cassian. ‘Whatever else happens here today, he will not walk away alive.’

‘We need only hold them until Dematris secures the gate,’ said Keritraeus.

‘If Dematris secures the gate,’ said Cassian, glancing doubtfully at the yellowed fog banks that lay thick across the processional.

With a glottal roar, the Death Guard began their attack. Hails of bolt shells tore into the ruins, blasting away rubble and striking sparks from blue power armour. Sprays of filth jetted into the Ultramarines’ lines as the bloat-drones bombarded them.

‘Fire!’ roared Cassian.

Around him, his warriors let fly. The guns of the Repulsor tanks screamed as they hosed shots into the advancing traitors. Brother Marius joined his fire to theirs, while the plasma incinerators of the Hellblasters spat glowing blasts that reduced heretics to ash.

The punishing firestorm intensified as the two battle-lines closed, and Cassian gripped the hilt of Duty tight. This was it – either the Death Guard would break them here, before the fortress walls, or they would hold out long enough to pull back through the gates and slam them in their enemies’ faces.

It was to be a battle of attrition.

Cassian’s eyes widened at the realisation. ‘Don’t give them the fight they desire. Keritraeus! Squad Gallen! On me! They are expecting us to dig in and try to outlast them, but you don’t survive a disease simply by enduring. You cut out the canker at its source!’

‘Their lord?’ asked Keritraeus.

‘Their lord,’ echoed Cassian. ‘Let us carve out the enemy’s cancerous heart and see if they can survive without it.’

He surged from cover, bolt rifle roaring.

Gurloch saw his enemy coming. It was enough to return the smile to his rotten features.

‘Ah! Some spirit after all!’ he growled. ‘Come to me, you hale lapdogs – let me dirty you with Nurgle’s munificence.’

He revved the cutting teeth of his plaguereaper, and planted his feet in a fighting stance. Around him, the surviving Witherlings opened fire. The roar of their combi-bolters was deafening, and Gurloch chortled as he felt it

shudder through his leprous bones.

One of the Ultramarines went down as a bolt-round punched through his faceplate. Another stumbled, then took a blight-shell straight to the chest. His body collapsed on itself in seconds, turning to blackened rot and rust.

The rest of the Space Marines dropped into firing crouches and let fly, their guns screaming with the distinctive fury of overcharge. Glowing bolts of energy slammed into the Witherlings: Gulgoth lost a leg at the knee and crashed over with a roar; Slurgh the Fatted took a shot to the gut, his armour dissolving and his straining belly bursting like an overripe blister; Nolghul Everlife was killed, his lifeless body toppling back like a felled statue.

One of the Ultramarines vanished in a plume of plasma and fire as his gun's machine-spirit rebelled, but it was small comfort to Gurloch.

At the same time, the two Space Marine leaders kept coming. A Librarian, and an officer or champion of a rank Gurloch didn't recognise.

'Come to me!' he bellowed. 'I am Gurloch of the Death Guard, and I will carve the names of my fallen into your rotting corpses!'

The loyalist champion came at him, firing his bolt rifle at Gurloch's face. The Lord of Contagion took the shots on his helm without flinching, then swung up his axe to block a swift blade stab. Power sword met plague-reaper in a shower of sparks, and the loyalist staggered back. Gurloch followed up, stomping forwards and swinging his weapon in a mighty arc that the Ultramarine only just dodged.

'Swarm him,' snarled Gurloch, and a droning mass of flies whirled down upon the Ultramarine like a storm.

Blue lightning leapt, and Gurloch's flies fell from the air in fistfuls, crisped and dead. The rest dispersed with a frantic buzzing, revealing the Librarian with his staff still crackling.

Molghus, the last of the Witherlings, rushed the Librarian, firing as he went. His shots rebounded from a shield of force. The psyker's eyes blazed, and Molghus bellowed as white fire burst from the joints in his armour, blazing like plasma. Still he lunged at the Librarian, managing to slam his power mace into the psyker's chest-plate. The Librarian was thrown from his feet, before Molghus collapsed in a blackened heap.

Gurloch roared his anger – a terrible, bubbling sound.

'Unworthy!' he bellowed. 'You are unworthy of those you slay!'

He stormed towards the psyker, but staggered as another volley of bolt shots

hit him in the side. The rounds blasted craters in his armour and sent splatters of flesh and slime across the ferrocrete. Gurloch turned angrily, just in time to catch the downswing of the Ultramarine officer's blade. It crackled blue as it struck his plaguereaper and mangled one of its buzz-saw blades.

In return, Gurloch stepped close, releasing his weapon's haft with one hand and grabbing the Space Marine's shoulder guard. His enemy tried to pull away as Gurloch's sweat-slick grasp rusted his armour, but he was nowhere near strong enough. With a deranged grin, Gurloch headbutted his enemy as hard as he could, crumpling the Ultramarine's faceplate and shattering the lenses of his helm.

Gurloch raised his axe to grind its whirring teeth into the loyalist's face, only for a blast of psychic energy to hit him from behind. Gurloch staggered, dropping the dazed Ultramarine, and turned with a furious growl to face the Librarian again.

'Enough!' he roared, and lumbered towards his tormentor. Plasma blasts screamed around him, one striking his armour with enough force to sear a blackened crater in his ribs. The Librarian hurled lightning at Gurloch, causing agony to race through the Chaos lord's body and his armour to smoulder, but still Gurloch forged on, Nurgle's gifts pouring fresh vitality through his flesh even as it blackened and died.

He raised his plaguereaper high, then swung it down with killing force.

Cassian's head cleared, and he hissed in pain as he tore his mangled helm free. His nose was shattered. One eye was blinded, and he winced as he pulled a shard of lens-glass from his bloody socket. The tainted rain dribbled into his wounds, making them burn and ache.

Yet his pain was forgotten in an instant as he saw Gurloch bearing down on Keritraeus.

'No!' he shouted, reaching for his blade, stumbling to his feet, knowing he was too late.

The axe fell.

Keritraeus' staff sheared in two as he tried to block the blow. Churning blades swept through the Librarian's gorget, then his neck, then out the back of his armour in a spray of blood and sparks. His head thumped to the ferrocrete, still attached to a mangled mass of flesh, bone and armour. His corpse fell next to it, bright Adeptus Astartes blood flooding into the oily

puddles.

Around Cassian, his battle-brothers were fighting as best they could, holding the enemy back despite the odds. One of their tanks was now a blazing wreck, and Brother Marius was limping on a ruined leg. The enemy pressed in from all sides.

He had led them to this.

He would not betray them by giving in now.

‘Dematris,’ he shouted over the vox. ‘Either the gate is secure or we are all dead men. One way or another, I’m ordering all battle-brothers to fall back on your position now!’

With his order given, Cassian shook the rain from his blade, spat a wad of blood and charged Lord Gurloch.

The hulking brute saw him coming and leered through a rent in his helm. He was bloated, enormous, reeking of power and filth. Yet he was wounded sorely; Cassian’s comrades had seen to that.

‘Emperor,’ bellowed Cassian, ‘lend strength to my arm!’

He came in hard, swinging his sword in a beheading arc. His enemy parried, far faster than his corpulent frame would suggest was possible, and their weapons clanged together again.

‘Your Emperor has no strength to give,’ laughed Gurloch. ‘He is weak. Impotent. Just like you.’

The two warriors swung and parried amidst the driving rain. Thunder boomed overhead, the Dark Gods themselves urging the Death Guard on to victory.

In his peripheral vision, Cassian saw his surviving men falling back in good order, blizzing fire into the Death Guard as they followed his orders and left him behind. That was good, he thought. Victory demanded sacrifice.

There was another clashing exchange of blades, and Cassian was driven back again, with a bloody rent in his chest and another in his thigh. He had wounded his enemy again and again, but the Chaos lord didn’t seem to feel it.

‘Give up, lapdog,’ said Gurloch, his tone almost kindly. ‘With every heartbeat, the gifts of Grandfather Nurgle crawl through your bloodstream and bring you closer to death, even as they fortify my magnificent form with fresh might. I have opened myself to his generosity, but for you, I fear, the burden of his boons may prove too much. This is a fight you cannot win.’

Cassian shook his head, feeling the truth of his enemy’s words. His body

burned with fever heat and shuddered with sudden chills. His vision swam. A momentary glance at his wounds confirmed that they were festering and blackening by the moment.

‘Strike swift,’ he gasped to himself. ‘Strike true. Cut out... the canker.’

Marshalling the last of his strength, Cassian hurled his bolt rifle at Gurloch’s head. Surprised, the Chaos lord swatted the weapon away with the blade of his axe. In that moment, Cassian hurled himself at his enemy, swinging his sword down in a thunderous overarm blow that left him wide open to attack.

Gurloch brought his plaguereaper back around. Its churning blades slammed into Cassian’s midriff and bit deep. Yet even the Chaos lord’s prodigious might was not enough to stop Duty slamming down onto the crest of his helm. Ceramite and diseased flesh split open like an infected wound as the power sword carved down through Gurloch’s skull and into the diseased meat of his brain.

Cassian stumbled back, rent armour sparking, blood pouring from the massive wound in his stomach. He felt his legs going cold. Dimly, he saw the hilt of his power sword jutting out from just above Gurloch’s jaw. It had split the Chaos lord’s head clean in two.

Gurloch’s mouth worked, a drizzle of rancid gore and wriggling maggots spilling from it. He pawed one-handedly at the hilt of the blade that had killed him. Then, at last, even the gifts of his foul god could no longer keep him on his feet.

Lord Gurloch fell, crashing to the wet stone, and Cassian followed him down. Over the vox, he half heard the bellows of Chaplain Dematris. He deciphered the words *gates secure* and something about *falling back within*.

It was enough. Knowing that he had done all that he could for his primarch, Lieutenant Cassian let the darkness take him.

EPILOGUE

Cassian lay beneath a pall of shadows. There was no sound, no sensation. No pain. His sense of self drifted, and for a time he felt nothing but a strange kind of peace.

Something moved. A figure, tall and powerful. Cassian saw for a moment the grotesque mass of the Death Guard lord, and he felt a shudder of panic grip him. Yet the hand that drew back his shroud was gentle, and the face that looked down upon him was regal and beatific. A halo of light shimmered around it, and in his mind Cassian heard the distant voices of angelic choirs swell.

‘Lieutenant Cassian,’ said the figure, and his voice was as firm and reassuring as bedrock.

‘Em... per... or?’ asked Cassian, his voice little more than a croak.

The figure smiled.

‘Once, almost, for my sins. Lieutenant, is your duty done?’

Part of Cassian wanted to nod, to say yes, that he had given everything: his men, his comrades. His life.

Instead, he shook his head in a single, jerky motion. ‘Only in... death... does duty... end...’

The figure’s smile vanished, replaced by something sterner, tinged with sorrow and pride. Cassian hoped never to forget the power of that gaze.

‘Very well, lieutenant,’ said the figure. Slowly, he replaced the shroud over Cassian’s face, and as he did so, darkness closed in once more.

Cassian woke, and for a moment believed that he was truly dead. He hung in darkness, and could feel nothing at all.

Then he heard a voice, filtering to him as though through a vox.

‘Vitals online. Synaptic choristry aligning. Bio-auguries look good, all runes in the green. Full sensorium coming online... now.’

Cassian tried to blink as light flooded his vision, yet even his eyelids seemed numbed. The pain swiftly subsided as he adjusted to the sudden restoration of his sight, and he realised that he was in a shipboard apothecarion. Three Apothecaries whom he didn’t recognise crowded around him. To his surprise, there was a Techmarine with them.

Suddenly, data-feeds began scrolling down his peripheral vision. He could see power levels, reactor-stability readings, vox and auspex data. Realisation began to dawn as he tried to look down at himself, only to feel a jarring sense of dislocation.

‘I... cannot feel my body,’ he said, and his voice was a vox-generated rumble.

‘It is alright, brother,’ said one of the Apothecaries. ‘Your body was ravaged beyond our abilities to restore. We saved only those parts you would need.’

‘I... would need...?’ Cassian knew what they were saying, but even as the conditioned part of his psyche processed the revelation, another part of his mind was screaming in panic and trying desperately to move limbs that weren’t there, flex muscles that didn’t exist and feel skin that he no longer possessed.

‘You made a great sacrifice, brother,’ said a familiar voice, and the others parted to reveal Fourth Company Captain Adrastean, clad in his shipboard robes and smiling a tight smile. ‘You gave up your body of flesh in the name of victory. These fine brothers have given you another, that you might continue to fight.’

‘I am... a Dreadnought,’ said Cassian, feeling a chill as the realisation sank in. He was organs, now. Biological component parts: a brain, hearts, lungs, veins, arteries and vulnerable innards – bound within an amniotic weave and entombed within the armoured sarcophagus of a Redeptor.

Part of him felt pride, and a thankfulness that he was not dead. The other part tried to vocalise its claustrophobic horror, but with an effort, he strangled that voice into silence. Some warriors went mad upon internment within a Dreadnought body. He would not shame himself by joining their number.

‘You are a Dreadnought,’ said Adrastean.

‘How? My men? Were we victorious?’

‘Thanks in no small part to the heroic sacrifices made by yourself and

Brother-Librarian Keritraeus, you were,’ replied Adrastean. ‘As I understand it, when you slew the enemy leader it caused no small degree of havoc amongst the Death Guard. Many of their high-ranking lieutenants must already have been dead. Their command structure was in tatters. In the confusion, Chaplain Dematris was able not only to pull the strike force back within the safety of the walls, but to lead a swift offensive that drove the foe from your vicinity and allowed for recovery of both your and Keritraeus’ bodies.’

Cassian took a moment to process this, feeling his senses gradually synching with those of his unfamiliar metal body. He realised that he could look through multiple optic actuators at once. As he did so, he noticed that his new body was, for the moment, limbless and suspended in an intricate web of wires and armatures.

‘How did we get here?’ he asked. ‘Where *is* here? Did we make it back to the Indomitus Crusade fleet?’

‘In fact,’ said Adrastean, ‘the crusade fleet made it to you. We received your astropathic message and sent a substantial force to effect your safe extraction.’

‘There was a plague. Within the walls. Everyone was dead.’

‘Not the astropathic choir. When the Death Guard first attacked, the choirmaster withdrew them within a psy-baffled refuge chamber. They and a few senior members of the fortress’ personnel quarantined themselves inside. Dematris found them, exhausted and close to starvation, within the fortress’ inner sanctum. He had them send a message, and keep sending it until half their number had died from warp trauma or physical exhaustion. But against the odds, they broke through the storms and made contact. Our ships arrived above Kalides five days later.’

‘Five days?’ asked Cassian. ‘The strike force held out that long?’

‘They did,’ said Adrastean proudly. ‘With Dematris’ leadership and the fortress walls to shield them, they dug in and resisted the Death Guard’s every effort to break through. Without their leader to drive them onwards, and with whatever ritual they intended in tatters, the enemy seemed to lose heart. Of course, the *Primarch’s Sword* punished them with heavy bombardments whenever its auspex were able to divine their locations. And once we had multiple ships in orbit, and fresh waves of Space Marines deploying to the surface...’

‘The Death Guard were defeated,’ finished Cassian with relish.

‘They were annihilated.’

‘What of Kalides Prime?’

‘Declared purgatus extremis. There was little enough to save. We bombed the astropathic fortress into rubble, destroyed any remaining viable military assets and laced the lower atmosphere with enough servitor-mines to ensure that, should the Death Guard return for their warriors, they will receive a deeply unpleasant welcome.’

Cassian was quiet for a moment, feeling the tick and whirr of systems within his strange new body.

‘Captain,’ he said eventually, ‘I wish to serve penance.’

‘Penance?’ asked Adrastean.

‘I lost over half of the warriors under my charge. I let Keritraeus die, and was very nearly slain myself. I cost the lives of every Cadian on Kalides, and barely succeeded in extracting any of my strike force at all. I failed in my duty, and deserve penance.’

Before Adrastean could reply, the doors to the apothecarion whispered open and a towering figure ducked through. Cassian’s hearts thumped faster as he recognised the magnificent figure of the primarch – Roboute Guilliman, here in person.

Around Cassian, the other Ultramarines dropped to one knee. He felt his shame and frustration grow as he instinctively tried – and failed – to do the same.

‘Brother Cassian,’ said Guilliman, fixing him with an unreadable expression.

‘My lord,’ said Cassian, ‘I am not worthy to be in your presence.’

‘You are not just worthy, my son – you are a hero. I will hear no more talk of failure.’

‘I...’ Cassian was lost for words.

‘You were thrown wildly off course by catastrophic warp storms,’ continued Guilliman. ‘Having already completed the mission that I sent you to accomplish, you not only held your force together through that dire experience, but you then successfully identified a means by which you could get word to us of your plight. You engaged a force of Heretic Astartes several times the size of your own, whose plan would, I suspect, have caused devastation and misery across multiple systems. I am reliably informed that

you showed nothing short of an absolute dedication to the completion of your mission, shrugged off a crushing defeat and alien interference, and even gave your own life to ensure the downfall of the foe. To me, Brother Cassian, those are the actions not of a failure, but of a hero.'

Cassian's mind reeled, and fierce pride burned within him as he felt the sincerity of his primarch's words.

'Thank you, my lord,' he managed, as around him the other Ultramarines officers stood and offered him a warrior's salute.

'You will be properly honoured for your valour,' said Guilliman. 'The commensurate accolades will be graven upon your sarcophagus by the artificers before we next go into battle.'

Cassian tried to nod, and realised he couldn't. 'Thank you, my lord.'

'Thank me by learning to wield that mighty new body of yours in battle, Cassian,' said the primarch with a smile. 'We are only three days out from the Tarchoria Front. Do you think you will be battle-ready in that time?'

'Give me my limbs, my weapons,' said Cassian fiercely, 'and I will train every moment until we make planetfall, my lord.'

'Good,' said Guilliman, smile broadening. 'Are you ready to keep fighting, Dreadnought-Brother Cassian?'

'I am, my lord,' said Cassian, feeling a surge of purpose like a flame within him. 'The crusade must continue!'

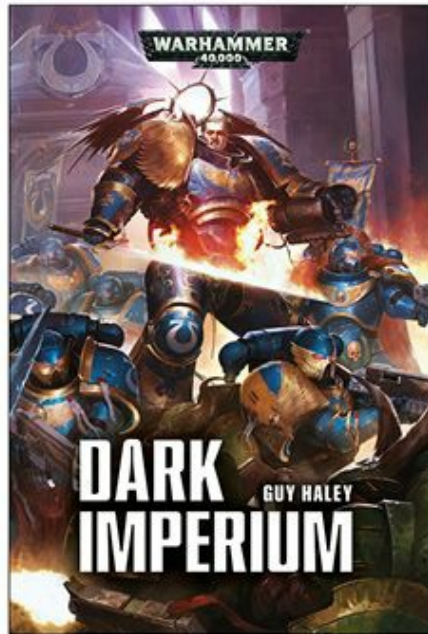
'And so it shall, until the last heretic lies dead and my father's realm is restored at last to glory.'

'For Ultramar!' cried the Space Marines, and Cassian shouted with them.

'For humanity,' said Guilliman. 'Before it is too late.'



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THE LOST KING

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

The World Wolf's Lair, Svellgard

Logan Grimnar – the Fangfather, the Old Wolf, the High King of Fenris – was dead.

So the daemons said. They howled and shrieked and gibbered the news from warp-spawned throats that shouldn't have been capable of intelligible words. But the servants of the Dark Gods had never concerned themselves with nature's constraints.

Logan Grimnar is dead!

'They lie,' Sven growled. The young Wolf Lord was clutching his doubled-headed battleaxe, Frostclaw, with such intensity that his whole armoured body was shaking. 'They *lie*.'

'They are warp-scum,' Olaf Blackstone said. 'Lying is the sole reason for their existence.' The white-pelted Bloodguard stood behind and slightly to the right of his lord, yellow eyes surveying the bleak hills that lay barely a mile across the icy sea. Those hills now undulated with a living carpet of daemons, like an infestation of lice swarming over a rotting skull. They had appeared not half an hour before, crawling like primordial nightmares from the depths of Svellgard's oceans. They were massing for an attack, cohorts of lesser daemons marshalling beneath the nightmarish banners of their gods, and as they did so their deranged shrieks carried across the cold waters to Sven and the rest of his Firehowler Space Wolves.

'They're trying to provoke us,' Olaf said. 'Hoping we divide our forces.'

Sven Bloodhowl opened his mouth to reply, then paused as the hammering of bolter fire broke out behind him. His Great Company were still purging the last of the defences at the heart of the World Wolf's Lair, burning the

shrieking daemons from their holes with goutts of blazing promethium before mowing them down with mass-reactive rounds.

Progress reports trickled back constantly over the vox as the noose tightened around the last wyrdspawn left in the depths of the fortified missile control nexus. Nine packs, the entirety of Sven's Great Company, were stalking the bunkers, redoubts and weapon emplacements arrayed in concentric circles around the rockcrete keep dominating the island's centre. They would not stop until they had hunted down every last creature from the first daemoniac wave to have overrun the island.

'I'm provoked,' Sven said as the bolter echoes were snatched away by Svellgard's cruel wind. 'What's the status of the Drakebanes?'

'Ten of the pups still able to wield a chainsword.'

'And the Firestones?'

'Only five. Wergid is among the dead. The survivors are still hungry though. As are our Wulfen.'

'Then you shall lead them, Olaf. Vox Torvind, Kregga, Uuntir and Istun. Have them return from the central bunkers and assemble here. And two Thunderhawks.'

'*Godspear* and *Wolfdawn* have both refuelled and rearmed. They are inbound from the fleet, expected arrival in ten minutes.'

'Then they shall be the vehicles of our wrath. A wolf should never suffer a liar.'

In truth, Sven had not killed enough today. His heart still raced and his fingers itched. The thought of wyrdling filth defiling not just Svellgard, but all the worlds of his home system, brought up an instinctive urge to lash out. He had not had word from any of the other battle-zones for hours – as far as he was aware Harald Deathwolf was still consolidating on nearby Frostheim, while Egil Iron Wolf and the Great Wolf were engaged on Midgardia. The daemoniac taunts reached him again from across the narrow sea, and he shuddered.

They were wrong. Logan Grimnar was not dead. He couldn't be.

'To attack is unwise, my jarl,' Olaf said, still watching the nearby island. 'There are doubtless more such filth spawning from the rifts below the waves all about us. If we split our forces we invite annihilation.'

Sven turned to face his old packmate, and although rage still burned in the Wolf Lord's grey eyes, his tattooed features and strong, stubble-lined jaw

were clenched with a tight smile.

‘Are your fangs getting too long for all this, Olaf?’ he asked. The Bloodguard champion returned his gaze levelly, without expression, too old to be so easily drawn.

‘Don’t tell me a hundred-odd kills are enough to sate you for one day?’ Sven pressed. ‘If the Bloodguard aren’t with me I’m sure the Oathbound would take your place? Or the Firewyrms?’

Olaf still said nothing, but there was a chill whisper of naked steel as his wolf claws slid free from his gauntlets.

‘If you wish to teach monsters not to lie,’ the Bloodguard said, ‘then I will be as happy as ever to assist with the lesson.’

Seven miles south of the Magma Gates, Midgardia

‘Logan Grimnar is dead.’

The daemon choked on the words, a flood of writhing maggots spilling from its locked jaw. Egil Iron Wolf slammed his boot down on the fallen plaguebearer’s skull, smashing it to a grey, squirming pulp.

‘Strike Force Morkai, come in,’ the Iron Wolf snapped into the vox. His only answer was static discord. It had been the same for over an hour now. He fought back the urge to stamp down again on the plaguebearer as it sank back into the ooze that had once been the jungle floor.

‘*My jarl, we must return to the Ironfist.*’ The voice of Conran Wulfhide, the pack leader of his Ironguard, cut in over the link. ‘*We can’t stay out here. This entire place is toxic. It will eat us alive.*’

Egil knew Conran was right, but still he hesitated. The purple spore jungles of Midgardia had been transformed beyond all recognition by Nurgle’s rotting touch, once-mighty trunks now swollen with blight and infested by gigantic maggots, their leaves turned black with decay. The ground underfoot had been reduced to a foetid, cloying pus-bog that writhed with worms and sightless, snapping maws. Egil’s Great Company had been battling through the corruption for hours, part of the two-pronged counter-attack designed to sweep the wyrdlings off Midgardia and retake its subterranean cities. The offensive, however, was becoming bogged down in every sense of the word.

Even worse, the runic *Juvjk* script that flashed across Egil’s visor warned him that the poisonous fug clouding the air was rapidly stripping away layer

after layer of his power armour. Even reinforced ceramite, sealed by the Iron Priests and blessed by the Wolf Priests, was no match for Midgardia's acidic air. The rest of Egil's Great Company was faring no better – howls of agony occasionally interrupted the vox chatter as the nightmarish atmosphere penetrated an unfortunate warrior's armoured joints or ate through his visor's lenses, causing flesh to blister and slough away in just a few heartbeats. Egil had ordered all packs to withdraw to the sealed interiors of their transports while he continued to try to make contact with Strike Force Morkai. With the Great Wolf, Logan Grimnar.

'Back to *Ironfist*,' Egil finally said. Around him heavy bolters and lascannons hammered and cracked as the armoured might of the Ironwolves sought to keep the shuffling, slime-soaked Nurgle Tallybands at bay. For the past hour the droning wyrdspawn had showed little desire to close with the spearheads of Egil's stalled advance, apparently content to soak up their firepower among the blighted trees and let the spores of the infested jungle do their work for them. Egil had been forced to halt his grinding offensive when the vox had lost all contact with Grimnar's own thrust, which was supposed to have been keeping pace below, following Midgardia's labyrinth of underground tunnels and passageways. Communication had been intermittent right from the beginning, but now it was gone entirely. And the counter-offensive wasn't even a day old.

Egil was the last member of the Great Company to return to his transport, slamming the sealing rune on the hatch behind him. Within *Ironfist*'s red-lit hold Conran and the five other members of his pack waited, their grey battleplate befouled with a thick layer of pestilential filth. They were all that remained of Egil's Ironguard. His Terminators had been lent to Grimnar when he had descended into Midgardia's depths with the Champions of Fenris. He felt their loss almost as acutely as he did that of the Great Wolf himself. He activated the cogitator monitor bolted above the hold's crew hatch, uploading the latest combat schematics to its gently pulsing screen display.

His Great Company had been divided into four Spears of Russ, one for each point on the map. Fists of Predator and Vindicator battle tanks supported Rhinos, Razorbacks and Land Raiders filled with the foot-packs. They'd punched out from their base at the Magma Gates and swept all before them. Now, they were stalled and separated, the blinking runes representing each

Spear static and beset by assaulting icons.

The Midgardian defence forces acting as their reserves were suffering even worse, their fragile human physiologies no match for the deadliest of the Plague God's diseases. Egil watched their casualty percentages for a moment, seeing them tick up steadily with each passing second. Even the most basic military mind would have acknowledged that their position had become an impossible one. The Iron Wolf activated his vox, blink-clicking to add the Ironwolf pack leaders from all four Spears to the channel.

'This is Egil,' he said. 'Without word from Strike Force Morkai the gains we have made over the past two hours are no longer tenable. We must assume it is possible for wyrdspawn to infiltrate our interior lines through the unguarded tunnels below us. If they successfully break our Midgardian defence force reserves then each Spear of Russ will be cut off from the Magma Gates' landing zones, as well as each other. I am therefore ordering Strike Force Fenris to withdraw by packs towards the Magma Gates. Once there we will commence a staggered withdrawal into orbit, starting with the defence forces and ending with my own Spear. Pack leaders, acknowledge.'

As confirmations trickled back down the link, Egil had to fight to stay silent. His cold, calculated orders, so characteristic of the Iron Wolf, concealed the war which raged in his armour-plated breast. Logically a staged withdrawal was the only option. Strike Force Fenris had stalled deep inside an utterly inimical environment, was on the brink of overstretching even as it was outflanked, and the enemy's numbers showed no sign of decreasing. To continue to advance ran the risk of seeing his entire Great Company overrun and annihilated, their remains eaten up by Midgardia's hideous plague jungles.

But the Old Wolf was missing, somewhere below. If Egil took a backwards step now he knew he would be forever remembered as the one who had abandoned Logan Grimnar. If he saved his Ironwolves by ordering a retreat, he damned himself forever in the eyes of his brothers. He snarled with frustration and keyed the vox again.

'An addendum to the previous orders. Conran Wulfhide of my own pack will be assuming command of the Strike Force with immediate effect, until my return.'

Conran's head snapped up, and he began to protest. Egil carried on, speaking over him.

‘I will be taking the remainder of my Ironguard underground, to re-establish contact with the Great Wolf. The evacuation from the Magma Gates is to proceed as previously outlined. Within that framework, all pack leaders are to defer to Conran as though he speaks with my own voice. Is that clear?’

More affirmations, and now complaints too.

‘*Let the Cogclaws come with you, lord,*’ Kjartan Stone-eye said over the vox. ‘*My pack have been firing blind into spore clouds and wading through daemon spoor all day. Let us continue the Iron Hunt, lord, I beg you.*’

‘*Is what the wyrdlings are chanting true?*’ Nokdr Iceclaw of the Snowfangs asked before Egil could respond. ‘*Is the Great Wolf dead?*’

‘That is what I’m going to disprove,’ Egil said. ‘And the rest of you will follow my orders, or Russ help me I will tear the fangs from the jaws of each and every pack leader in this Great Company. Show some discipline, Ironwolves.’

‘Lord—’ Conran began. He’d stood and was facing the Iron Wolf, bowed slightly in the hold’s confined space. Egil raised a gauntlet before he could go any further.

‘I know what you’re going to say, Conran. There are no other options. I cannot let us all die here, and Midgardia’s depths are no place for an armoured column. But nor can I abandon the Great Wolf. You will take the Ironwolves to the Magma Gates, and I will see you all again on the bridge of the *Wolftide*.’

For a moment it seemed as though Conran would argue, but instead he just shook his head, his jaw locked and gauntlets clenched.

‘The nearest recorded entrance to the Midgardian underworld is three hundred yards south-west of this position,’ Egil said, activating a map uplink on his visor’s display. ‘Directly towards the nearest Tallyband. It’s an old mine chute, designated Beta Eleven-Seven. The *Ironfist* will take us that far, and then you will assume command and get my Wolves clear of this hellhole. Understood?’

Conran nodded, saying nothing, no longer looking at the Iron Wolf. Egil knew better than to push his obedience any further. He linked to the Land Raider Crusader’s internal vox.

‘Torvald, all guns live. For Russ and the Allfather, take us forward!’

Morkai’s Keep, Frostheim

Canis Wolfborn crouched, ignoring the ache in his joints. The day's bloodletting had been long and fierce. His armour bore the scars of daemon blades and bolter rounds alike, and the foul ichor splattering its surface had only just begun to crust. The champion of Harald Deathwolf reached out and grasped the corpse before him by the pauldron, rolling it onto its back.

The body was that of Snorri Redtooth, one of the Grey Hunters belonging to Erenn Frostwolf's pack. Canis only knew as much because he recognised Snorri's musk. The Grey Hunter's head was missing.

Nor had his pack-kin been any more fortunate. Canis had been tracking their corpses deep into the vaults of Morkai's Keep for almost an hour. The only one he'd yet to find was Erenn himself.

The bodies of the Grey Hunters were certainly not alone down in the keep's depths. Through betrayal and vile maleficarum the forces of Chaos had seized the Space Wolves fortress, presaging the beginning of the daemonincursions across the system. In the furious battle to recapture the stronghold from the treacherous Alpha Legion, fighting had spilled down into its lowest levels. Canis had counted half a dozen Space Wolves bodies, mostly Blood Claws whose names he'd forgotten, though he recalled their scents. They were outnumbered by the rag-clad cultists that carpeted the vaulted halls and corridors. All around the mark of furious retribution was clear, in the bloody hacking and tearing of chainblades and the vicious, gory detonation of close-range bolt-fire. There were even three Alpha Legionnaires, the stale stench of ancient corruption coming off their bodies turning Canis' stomachs.

But all of them had fallen at least two hours previously. Snorri and the rest of the dead Grey Hunters were fresh.

Canis carried on down the corridor, noting the location of Snorri's body on his vambrace marker. Behind him Fangir, his loyal thunderwolf, padded silently. Canis could sense the huge animal's tiredness mirroring his own, by its slow, heavy panting. The beast's wiry fur was matted with blood, and not all of it belonged to the enemy. But there was no time to stop. Not yet. Like the thunderwolf, Canis had caught a scent. There was something still down here, something that shouldn't be.

At the end of the corridor open blast doors marked the entrance to the keep's main armoury. On its threshold Canis found Erenn. The pack leader's cuirass had been split by a blow of incredible force, and his breastbone carved open, exposing the bloody mess of the Wolf's inner organs. Inside the armoury

more cultists lay butchered, but none of them could possibly have dealt such a wound.

Two other doors branched off from the entrance, one to the left and one to the right. Canis closed his eyes and inhaled, opening his senses. There was still something lurking beneath the acrid stench of weapon discharges, the reek of stale sweat, the tang of blood and the pack musks of his fellow Wolves. Something at once sickly sweet and bitter, wholly unnatural. He had caught it at the entrance to the vaults, as the rest of Harald's Great Company had begun the process of collecting their dead and incinerating heretic corpses. He had slipped away from the grim work, his instincts bristling. The fight was not yet over.

The smell was coming from the right-hand door.

It was the entrance to a munitions shaft, the floor sloping downwards into darkness. The lumen strips overhead had failed. Canis began to descend, trusting to his sense of smell. Even for a Space Wolf it was keen. Canis was a natural-born predator, the only member of the Deathwolves able to match their lord, Harald, in the Great Hunt. Shadows were nothing to him.

There were no more bodies. It seemed as though the fighting had passed this section of the vaults by, though that didn't explain why the blast door had been lying open. The unnatural smell grew stronger, a wyrdling stench that caused the Space Wolf's hackles to rise.

Ahead he sensed rather than saw the shaft coming to an end, widening out into what he assumed was a munitions bunker. Behind, Fangir began to growl, the throaty noise reverberating through the narrow space. Canis slid his wolf claws free.

There was a noise from ahead, his taut senses making it sound hellishly loud. The skitter of claws on rockcrete. The stench grew even worse.

'Wyrdlings,' he snarled softly to Fangir. His suspicions had to be right. Harald needed to be warned. He keyed his vox.

That was when the first daemon launched itself, screeching, from the darkness.

Longhowl, Valdrmani

For the first time in a long time, Krom Dragongaze found himself on his knees.

It was not an injury that had driven him down, though blood still trickled from the rapidly clotting wound in his shoulder. The daemon prince's blade had bitten deep, but the Wolf Lord had suffered worse. No, it was the realisation of just how close they had all come to annihilation.

Even before he had joined the ranks of the Sky Warriors, death had held no fear for Krom. But there were worse things in the galaxy than death. As the daemonic invasions had spilled out across the system, Longhowl, the primary astropathic beacon on the Wolf Moon of Valdrmani, had come under attack.

The fact that the Chaos-tainted glyph planted in Longhowl's choristorium would probably have obliterated Krom had never figured in his thinking as he'd led the assault to destroy it. What had driven him to his knees was the knowledge that, if he had failed, the sigil's infernal wyrdling power would have lanced a false image of his Space Wolves slaughtering Imperial subjects into the mind of every psyker in the segmentum. The illusion would have cemented the belief that the sons of Russ had turned traitor, and set the Imperium's might against the whole of Krom's Chapter. The thought made his flesh crawl with disgust.

A silver gauntlet, blackened by fire, appeared before the Wolf Lord. He clasped it and allowed himself to be hauled up by its strong grip.

'Well met, Dragon gaze,' said Captain Stern. The Grey Knight had removed his helmet, his noble features streaked with sweat. His armour was still smoking from the hellish wyrdfire which had engulfed it, the marks of warding and protection inscribed into the silver aegis plate glowing bright.

'It is over?' Krom asked as he looked around. Moments before, the choristorium had been packed with howling daemons and the wailing, melted remains of the station's possessed astropaths. Now it was a scorched, ichor-splattered wreck, the astropaths reduced to skeletal husks in their burned-out cradles. The Chaos glyph that had been the epicentre of the warp ritual was split and broken, the multihued light that had blazed from it now doused. Krom remembered Stern forcing his way through the icon's wyrdflame and plunging his crackling force sword into its heart, shattering it. The moments that followed were a blur – blinding light, shrieks of frustration and terror, a splitting pain that still throbbed dully behind Krom's eyes.

But the daemons were gone. They had won.

'It is over,' said Stern. Around the edges of the purged choristorium Grey Knights and Space Wolves alike were picking themselves up. Not all who

had fallen rose again.

‘We must establish contact with Fenris,’ Krom said. ‘Send word that the daemons have been thwarted, and that we are both still alive. That should give those who doubt us reason enough to reconsider.’

Stern nodded. The ritual was supposed to have set the Wolves and the Knights against one another, but even with the daemoniac plot defeated there was no telling how the Imperium was responding to the events in the Fenris System. Massive warp incursions, mutation among the Adeptus Astartes, rumours of treachery – something had set out to destroy the Space Wolves, and it had come diabolically close to succeeding.

‘I must return to the Fang,’ Krom continued. ‘I cannot leave it unguarded a moment longer.’

‘Then go with my thanks. Your assistance here was invaluable,’ Stern said. ‘If you had not left Fenris to come to our aid I could never have stopped the ritual in time.’

‘Bjorn the Fell-Handed saw you trapped and killed,’ Krom said. ‘I would not have left the Fang on any word save his.’

A vox blurt interrupted Stern before he could respond. The signal’s ident code belonged to Krom’s flagship, the *Winterbite*.

‘*My lord, we are receiving a priority message from the Fang,*’ said the voice of one of the ship’s huscarls.

‘Patch me through,’ Krom ordered, turning away from Stern. After a moment’s static the voice of Albjorn Fogel, chief vox-huscarl of the Fang’s communications array, spoke to him over the link.

‘*My lord, our long-range augur sweeps have detected a large fleet translating in-system. The signifier codes are all Imperial. Thus far we’ve identified strike cruisers and battle-barges belonging to the Ultramarines, Iron Hands, Marines Malevolent, Doom Griffons and Shadow Hunters, along with capital ships of the Imperial Navy’s Thirty-Second Obscurus sub-fleet, Knight carriers from House Mortan and six Astra Militarum mass transporters. We also believe...*’ Fogel trailed off.

‘Go on,’ Krom said.

‘*My lord, one of the signifiers belongs to the fortress-monastery of the Dark Angels. We believe the Rock arrived in Fenrisian real space approximately twenty minutes ago.*’

‘Hail them,’ Krom said.

‘We’ve tried, lord. They refused to even acknowledge the signal connection. Our ships around Midgardia, Svellgard and Frostheim are also reporting no contact.’ Krom broke the connection for a moment to look at Stern.

‘A crusade fleet has just entered the system,’ he growled. ‘Led by the Dark Angels.’

‘It’s as I feared,’ Stern said. ‘Supreme Grand Master Azrael has been shadowing your Chapter since he learned of your... genetic anomaly on Nurades. I suspect he believes the Space Wolves to be tainted.’

‘Fogel,’ Krom snapped into the vox.

‘Yes, lord?’

‘Raise all shields and prime defensive batteries. Advise all our fleet assets throughout the system to do likewise. I am returning to the Fang immediately.’

‘Yes, lord. Are we on a war footing?’

‘Not unless they fire first.’

‘You need to take me to the Rock,’ Stern said. ‘If they won’t open their vox-nets to any communications from us I must speak with Azrael directly.’

‘Your battle-barge is ashes, Stern,’ Krom said. ‘If you wish to leave this moon you are welcome aboard the *Winterbite*, but I am going direct to the Fang. I have already sullied my oath by abandoning it to come here. I will not compound my dishonour further by leaving the Hearthworld to the mercy of fools and zealots.’

‘As you wish,’ Stern said. ‘But once there I must request the use of one of your ships.’

‘And you shall have it,’ Krom said. ‘It would be well if you reached Azrael before he reaches me, because Allfather protect him if he launches a single strike against any part of this system.’

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

The primary command bridge of the Rock was a cavernous place, full of faded glory and shadows that had lain undisturbed for ten millennia. At its heart a great tiered dais rose, each stone step carved with intricate figures telling the long history of the First Legion. The top of the ziggurat bore a throne of brass and steel, bristling with data ports and holo-screens, vox-uplinks and runebanks. There sat Azrael, Keeper of the Truth, Supreme

Grand Master of the Dark Angels and all of the Unforgiven. Face set beneath his white cowl, he surveyed the bridge below without expression.

Serfs, servitors and data-slaves scurried to and fro amidst tiered ranks of cogitator banks and oculus viewscreens, while menials toiled in the communication pits sunk around the dais, backs bent double, blind to the cold stone columns that rose around them to the distant, vaulted ceiling. The air was thick with darting servo-skulls and fluttering auto-cherubim, their censers filling the air with the cloying smell of warpbane and other sacred unguents. The rattle and chime of cogitators, the crackle of vox-horns and the throaty machine cant of the bridge's choir of course-chartists echoed back endlessly from the stained crystalflex of the viewing ports opposite Azrael.

The bridge, in all its cold stone majesty, dwarfed even the greatest ships of most other Space Marine Chapters. Azrael noted a few of his fellow Adeptus Astartes casting glances up at the highest reaches of the ceiling, swathed in darkness far above. They were assembled around a large, circular holochart near the central nave, laid out before Azrael's dais. The chart itself was beaming a grainy green representation of the Fenris System into the smoky air, the orbs representing Midgardia, Fenris, Frostheim and their attendant moons revolving slowly around the pallid sphere that was the system's sun, the Wolf's Eye. As the briefing began the display flickered, overlaid by red and blue sigils and arrows that plotted the arrival of the crusade fleet.

It was an impressive undertaking, Azrael thought. A stark reminder of the danger that developing events posed to the Imperium. Normally a crusade fleet took far longer to bring together, never mind fully deploy. Azrael recalled the Antarika Crusade, which he had participated in when he had still been a battle-brother in Sergeant Nefalim's tactical squad. It had first been approved by the High Lords of Terra two centuries before Azrael had even been born. It took two hundred years to assemble the full fleet assets, petition the Adeptus Mechanicus and the Knightly Households for support, and divert Space Marine Chapters from operations elsewhere. The crusade's nominal leaders had died and been replaced three times over, and entire Army Groups of the Astra Militarum had been disbanded and recruited afresh before the vanguard of the battlefleet had even left its docks.

The force Azrael had brought together was smaller than that of Antarika, but it was still fearsome. Contingents from fourteen Chapters, two Imperial Navy sub-battlefleets and three Astra Militarum Army Groups. Further forces had

sworn to assist and were en-route, including Titans of the Legio Dominatus. Only a figure of Azrael's considerable standing and experience could have summoned such strength with so little notice.

Below him, that strength was exemplified by the fourteen Space Marines attending the final operational overview. Among their heraldry Azrael could see Howling Griffons and Red Consuls, the vicious yellow of the Marines Malevolent, the grey battleplate of Shadow Haunters and the silver of one of his Chapter's own successors, the Guardians of the Covenant. Besides those physically present, two of the Adeptus Astartes were represented by throbbing blue hololithic displays – Captain Epathus of the Ultramarines Sixth Company and Iron Captain Terrek of the Iron Hands Clan Company Haarmek. They were both already bound for the world of Frostheim, on the far edge of the system, leading a detachment of the crusade fleet's might.

Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar led the briefing. Azrael had given him the task on the advice of Asmodai. The Master Interrogator-Chaplain had been impressed by his apprentice of late, and Azrael knew how difficult it was to earn the favour of the grim Master of Repentance. Even now he towered like a silent revenant beside Azrael's throne, observing Elezar without comment.

'Midgardia,' Elezar was saying, a gesture highlighting the sphere spinward of the Wolf's Eye. 'The second largest of the Fenris System's three planets, and the world we are currently entering high orbit above. Its surface was formerly a toxic jungle, classed as a death world. The Midgardian natives lived below the outer crust, in cavernous subterranean hive cities.'

'The past tense is noted, Brother-Chaplain,' Terrek the Iron Hand said, his voice crackling from the vox-horn built into the holo-display projecting him. *'What fate has befallen them?'*

'Long-range augur scans indicate the surface of Midgardia has suffered a near-total daemoniac infestation. Of the situation underground we have no idea.'

'Haven't the Wolves tried to purge it?' Captain Epathus of the Ultramarines asked, his own holo-form flickering.

'With two Great Companies, including that of Logan Grimnar himself.'

'And what has become of them? Of Grimnar?'

'We are still collating information from intercepted vox transmissions and high-yield surface scans, but it seems their counter-attack was a complete failure. The Great Company known as the Ironwolves are currently

evacuating the planet, while the fate of Grimnar and the Champions of Fenris remains unknown. They were last recorded battling the infestation in the caverns below the planet's surface.'

A murmur passed through the Space Marines. Elezar pressed on.

'Valdrmani, the Wolf Moon, Fenris' only satellite,' he said, indicating the orb slowly circling the white-and-blue sphere of the Space Wolves home world. 'Intelligence reports that a battle-barge of the Grey Knights Third Brotherhood was destroyed in orbit by a nova cannon sited near the astropathic beacon known as Longhowl. Whether that was due to the daemoniac incursion, or represents treachery by the Space Wolves, is currently unknown, as is Captain Stern's status. Pict footage remotely extracted from Longhowl's databanks shows vessels leaving the battle-barge for the moon's domeplex before it was destroyed. If daemoniac forces have indeed overrun Valdrmani, it may well be that they are attempting to implicate the Wolves in whatever has befallen Stern.'

'They need hardly try,' Captain Vorr of the Marines Malevolent spat. 'If the stories of the Wolves'... mutants are to be believed.'

'That is an accusation that will be further investigated as soon as time allows,' Azrael said. The muttering among the assembled Space Marines died as he spoke, his deep voice carrying easily across the hectic bridge.

'Right now securing the Fenris System against daemoniac incursion is our foremost priority. Once it has been purged, we shall hold the Wolves to account for what they have tried to hide from us. From the Imperium.'

The Dark Angel's cold words left a gulf of silence in their wake. After a moment Elezar continued.

'Frostheim, the third and final planet of the Fenris System. It is the site of Morkai's Keep, which was recently seized by heretic forces before being retaken, it seems, by Harald Deathwolf's Great Company.'

'*What heretic forces?*' Terrek demanded.

'We are still gathering intelligence on the matter. Frostheim is orbited by a natural satellite called Svellgard. The moon's surface is dotted with a number of small islands, sites for a powerful orbital defence battery known as the Claws of the World Wolf. These were recently recaptured from a daemoniac infestation which appears to be originating from beneath Svellgard's seas.'

'Are the weapon systems still operational?' asked Bohemund, captain of the Doom Griffons Fourth Company.

‘As far as we’re aware, yes. Brother-Captains Epathus and Terrek are both en route there with their brethren as we speak, supported by the Imperial Navy’s Four Hundred and Eighty-Third Obscurus battlefleet sub-detachment and an Astra Militarum army group. They will stabilise the situation.’ Both Epathus and Terrek’s holo-forms nodded their confirmation, the motion causing them to flicker.

‘And if the Wolves do not wish to be “stabilised”?’ Vorr asked.

‘Then they shall be taught a long-overdue lesson in how to cooperate with their brethren,’ Elezar replied. Unnoticed, a smile ghosted across Azrael’s lips. He could see why Asmodai favoured the young Interrogator-Chaplain.

‘Besides their presence on the system’s three planets and two moons, sector defence data-files show that the Wolves maintain two Ramilies-class star forts,’ Elezar continued, ‘designated *Gormenjarl* and *Mjalnar*. Contact was lost with both soon after the incursion began.’

The rest of his words were drowned out by the voice of Azrael’s vox-seneschal, Mendaxis, speaking in the Supreme Grand Master’s ear.

‘Sire, we have just detected a ship signature not registered with the fleet breaking into real space coreward of our position. Initial scans show it was last registered as a private vessel associated with the retinue of Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay.’

Azrael’s expression remained stoic, but his grip tightened fractionally on the skulls carved into his throne’s flanks. Beside him Asmodai, listening to the vox exchange, turned sharply to look at Azrael. De Mornay, the Supreme Grand Master thought. So the old fool yet lived. Of course he’d followed them here.

‘He’s hailing us,’ Mendaxis said.

‘Accept it,’ Azrael replied. ‘Throne vid only.’

A small screen, framed by the wings of the aquila, rose from the throne’s arm. For a second the monitor fizzed green with static, before resolving itself into a face Azrael had hoped never to see again.

When he had first met Lord Inquisitor de Mornay the man had been a paragon of Imperial strength – young, iron-jawed, steel-eyed, his red hair cropped close, more accustomed to flakplate than the robes of his ordo. But a century had taken its toll, rejuvenat processes or not. Now the face that occupied the screen was sagging into fat, the jawline more jowl-line, one eye rheumy with cataracts.

‘Supreme Grand Master Azrael,’ said de Mornay, his deep voice crackling through the vox-horn set below the screen. He was smiling. *‘I am glad to see you again.’*

‘I cannot say the same,’ Azrael replied. He didn’t have time for the Inquisition’s games, especially not the ones that de Mornay loved to play.

‘Am I interrupting something?’

‘The crusade fleet is currently preparing to firebomb the surface of Midgardia.’

‘May I ask why, aside from the fact that Midgardia falls under the control of the Vika Fenryka? I’m sure your primarch would be proud, if I recall my progenium history lessons correctly.’

‘The planet has fallen to a daemoninc incursion.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Augur sweeps, vox intercepts, strategic analysis data, the visions of my Librarians and the fact that a Space Wolves Great Company is currently fleeing the surface.’

‘The Champions of Fenris?’

‘No. We believe it to be the Ironwolves.’

‘But the Champions are also on Midgardia, aren’t they? Led by Logan Grimnar himself?’

‘Our vox transcripts report all contact with him has been lost.’ De Mornay was silent for a moment before speaking again.

‘I would like to request an immediate audience.’

‘Your rosette will do you little good, de Mornay,’ Azrael warned. ‘I am not some cowering Militarum general or docile planetary governor. If you wish to speak, it will be on my terms, not yours.’

‘I see the sons of the Lion are as cooperative with His Holy Ordos as ever,’ de Mornay replied, acid creeping into his voice.

‘I will humour you this one time, de Mornay, as a token of goodwill towards the Inquisition. But don’t expect anything more from me. Few Chapter Masters would grant you the privileges I do.’

‘Expect me within the hour.’

Azrael cut the link without another word. He knew de Mornay well enough to understand that rebuffing him would only heighten his determination. Better to lure the fool into the Lion’s den and show him the consequences of his beliefs first-hand.

Below him Elezar was describing the intention of the Chapter to firebomb Midgardia's surface. The muttering of the assembled commanders showed it was as unpopular among them as it had been with de Mornay. Azrael keyed his personal vox.

'Dismiss them,' he ordered Elezar.

Without showing any sign of having heard Azrael over the link, Elezar began to bring the briefing to a close.

'De Mornay is here because of us, not the Wolves,' Asmodai said, his voice hissing quietly from the maw of his grim, black skull helm.

'Without a doubt.'

'We must keep him at arm's length.'

'Have no fear, brother. I intend to.'

Below the dais the thirteen Space Marine commanders were departing, each one bowing briefly towards Azrael before they left. Himmaeus of the Knights of the Covenant was the last to exit the bridge, exchanging a curt nod with his Supreme Grand Master before passing through the blast doors. Azrael rose and descended from the dais, Asmodai following him like a shadow woven from nightmares.

'Brother Elezar,' Azrael said. 'How do you find our brethren's appraisal of the coming operation?'

'Approving, for the most part,' the Interrogator-Chaplain said, stepping away from the holochart and bowing as Azrael joined him. 'Though our decision to bomb Midgardia met with ill feeling. It does not sit well with them to burn the planet with the Great Wolf still unaccounted for.'

'Of course. It is not what I would wish to do, but we have no alternatives. Midgardia's surface is now so infested that only warp spawn could possibly exist down there for any length of time. The entire strength of this crusade would be liquidated if we sought to make planetfall, and we cannot let the warp rifts on the surface grow any further. It must burn, all of it.'

'Yes, my lord,' Elezar said. 'They will all accept our decision, I have no doubt.'

'Sire,' Mendaxis interrupted him. '*Lord Inquisitor de Mornay's shuttle is requesting docking clearance.*'

'Grant it,' Azrael said tersely. 'And send Brother-Sergeant Elija to escort him personally. Tell him there are to be no deviations, they are to come straight here.'

‘Yes, sire.’ Azrael glanced at Asmodai.

‘A necessary evil, brother,’ he said. The Master Interrogator-Chaplain didn’t reply.

Sergeant Elija brought Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay to the bridge borne aloft on a cushioned vital-support palanquin which was welded to the backs of two tracked servitor units. Behind him came a train of disparate creatures. There was a lithe-looking, black-armoured Sister of Battle, her eyes staring with fiery intensity from a flame-scarred face. Alongside her was a limping, blue-robed lexmechanic, borne down by a great stack of data-slates and scrolls. Tugging on his robe-tails was a long-limbed jokaero, taking in the grim splendour of the Rock’s bridge with simian fascination. A dead-eyed cherubim wove and darted overhead on buzzing rotor wings, trailing more parchments.

Behind them all shuffled an emaciated figure, naked bar a soiled loincloth, its wiry body stitched with scars and stimm-injection ports. Rather than hands, its arms ended in crudely grafted electro flails, currently trailing inert along the floor. Its head was covered by a red hood and bound by a riveted visor stylised into the shape of the Inquisitorial I. The faint sound of soothing plainsong drifted from its lobe implants.

Azrael grimaced in disgust as he watched the arco-flagellant limping after its owner.

‘Greetings, Supreme Grand Master,’ de Mornay called as his palanquin crossed the bridge, rumbling awkwardly around ranked cogitator pews. As he spoke, the lexmechanic started to scramble for a free slate and autoquill.

‘You would bring an abomination like that aboard the Rock?’ Azrael demanded, eyes still on the arco-flagellant.

‘We all do the Emperor’s will,’ de Mornay responded. ‘And I’ve made poor VX Nine-Eighteen here enact that will in many terrible ways down the years. It’s good for him to get out.’

‘Emperor’s... will...’ muttered the lexmechanic, autoquill now scratching furiously across a data-slate.

‘Your appearance is as sudden as ever,’ Azrael said dispassionately. ‘And unwelcome. Why are you here, de Mornay?’

‘The arrival of anyone bearing a rosette ought to be sudden, Supreme Grand Master,’ the inquisitor replied, palanquin rocking to a halt before the Dark

Angels. He shifted his ageing body fractionally, the wires binding him to his moving recliner's life-support systems rattling. 'And only unwelcome if you have something to hide.' Except for the Sister of Battle, his retinue clustered behind him like a herd of frightened grox calves.

'Something... to... hide...' the lexmechanic repeated, still writing.

Though he remained silent, Azrael could feel Asmodai's anger emanating like the chill of the void beside him.

'That doesn't answer my question.'

'Ah, but I believe it is my prerogative to ask the questions here.'

'The... questions...' the lexmechanic said.

'Hush now, Peterkyn,' de Mornay muttered before continuing. 'I can sense you are going to make this audience both brief and impolite, so I will speak plainly. Firstly, there are loyal subjects of the Emperor still on the planet below us. The planet you intend to incinerate.'

'Massed evacuation is unfeasible,' Azrael replied. 'The populace would need to be quarantined and screened en masse for warp taint. There is manifestly neither the time nor the facilities for such actions.'

'While civilian losses are regrettable,' de Mornay made a point of glancing at Asmodai, 'I was referring more to the burning of an entire Great Company of your fellow Adeptus Astartes.'

'Fire-bombing Midgardia will not damage its underground habitats,' Azrael said. 'And that was Grimnar's last recorded location. If by the Emperor's will he yet lives, he will be unharmed.'

'And when he emerges he'll be stranded in a toxic ash waste.'

'If you have an alternative suggestion, lord inquisitor, by all means share it. I would have thought that as a member of His Holy Ordos you would have rejoiced at the mass annihilation of mankind's darkest foes.'

'Rest assured, nothing pleases me more,' de Mornay said. 'But less so if the victory comes at the price of one of the Imperium's greatest leaders.'

'I never thought I would live to hear the Inquisition praising Logan Grimnar.'

'Times can change, Azrael. As can the topic of conversation. What were you doing on Nurades?'

Azrael's jaw clenched.

'We were purging one of the Emperor's worlds of daemoniac infestation.'

'And just how many daemons did you banish there? Did the Wolves leave

any for you? An entire Lion's Blade Strike Force deployed to cleanse an infestation that had been wiped out days earlier?'

'Is this a line of questioning, or just an opportunity for gross insults? Your grudge-bearing does you no credit, de Mornay. I don't need to humour you, not even for a moment.'

'What were you looking for in the polar ruins, Azrael? What were your Scouts guarding?'

'That squad was inserted ahead of our main strike force. If you have any real questions, de Mornay, I suggest you start by asking the Wolves how they died. That is what we first came here to redress.'

'There is no evidence the Wolves have attacked Imperial citizens. Can the same be said of your Chapter, Azrael?'

'Their monsters butchered a squad of my Tenth Company,' Azrael snapped, his reserve finally eroded. 'We have pict footage of it.'

'Shame you don't also have footage of how the sole survivor of said butchering disappeared,' de Mornay shot back. 'And from within the depths of this very fortress-monastery no less. Something here is not what it seems.' The inquisitor's gaze swung across the bridge, lingering on the communications pit where Mendaxis was bending low to review a spool of data parchment.

'Choose your next words carefully, de Mornay.'

'I smell the reek of the warp here, Azrael.'

Beside him he felt Asmodai shudder at the inquisitor's damning words. Azrael turned and stilled him with a gesture.

'This audience is over,' he said. 'Get off my bridge.'

'You don't end audiences with the Inquisition, Azrael,' de Mornay said. 'And your bridge is as much a part of the Emperor's realm as anywhere else in the Imperium. There are no jurisdictions here, not for one bearing my seal.'

Azrael turned. It was not a sharp movement, neither sudden nor violent, but it was undoubtedly laden with threat. He took a single step forwards, so that even on his palanquin the aged inquisitor was dwarfed by the Angel's armoured form. The vast bridge went suddenly quiet.

'I grow tired of your games,' Azrael said softly. 'Your prejudice against my Chapter is well known. The mission that brings us here is not only entirely legitimate, it is desperately vital to the fate of the Imperium. We can do

without your pathetic past grievances.'

'I will make my own judgement on that matter,' de Mornay said, putting his palanquin into grinding reverse. 'We shall speak again soon, no doubt.'

'If we must,' Azrael said grimly. 'Brother-Sergeant Elija will return you to your shuttle, immediately.'

As the inquisitor and his retinue retreated the voice of Mendaxis clicked again in Azrael's ear.

'Sire, we are receiving fresh intelligence from Midgardia.' There was a pause.

'Go on.'

'It would appear that Logan Grimnar...' Mendaxis hesitated again.

'What? Speak.'

'Sire, Logan Grimnar is dead.'

Seven miles south of the Magma Gates, Midgardia

Midgardia's spores had eaten away the external pict recorders, so Egil Iron Wolf was blind to the firepower of his command tank as it rolled towards its objective. He could well imagine it though. A stream of assault cannon rounds kicking up spumes of filth from the milky pus-bog, bursting shambling, slime-slick plaguebearers like overripe fruit. Swathes of bolt-rounds sped from the glowing barrels of *Ironfist's* hurricane bolters, smashing through spore-trees, lancing plague beasts like boils and cutting giant flies out of the air. The pitch and roll of the heavy transport added a tale of pulped and crushed wyrd-scum, ground beneath aquila-stamped tracks.

Egil had witnessed similar sights many times down the centuries, and still it thrilled him. His brethren in the other Great Companies revelled in the sensation of axe and chainblade chopping meat and bone, and the clash of steel on ceramite. Egil had always considered his passions similar, but for him the glory of battle was not only in the muscle behind a blow, but also in the unbending metal that dealt it. Cog, track, bulkhead and burning engine, in the armour of his Great Company he saw the unstoppable strength and lightning speed of Russ himself. Wrath was so much more potent when it was clad in iron.

Perhaps that was why he was pursuing his current course. Iron did not bend and it did not break, except beneath the most terrible of forces. He would not

acknowledge that these wyrdspawn, these beasts bred from a madman's nightmares, were stronger than he was. He wouldn't give them the privilege of forcing him to abandon his Great Wolf. He would not bend, and he would not break.

'Destination reached, lord,' Torvald's voice crackled over *Ironfist's* intercom. 'Ramps ready to drop on your mark.'

'As soon as we're clear, rejoin the task force,' Egil said. He glanced back at Conran. Unlike the rest of the Ironguard, he sat in one of the hold's restraining harnesses, his expression stony.

'I will see you aboard the *Wolftide*, brother,' Egil said.

'With the Great Wolf,' Conran added, nodding. 'May Russ and the Allfather be with you.'

The time for words passed. Egil's servo-skull, Skol, hovered at his shoulder, its tiny anti-gravitic motor buzzing. He checked his armour was properly sealed and banged the disembarkation rune above the Land Raider's forward hatch. It flashed from red to green. Wolf claws slid free, a thought sending energy crackling down the wicked blades.

There was a thump of mag-locks and a hiss of decompressed air. The ramp fell forwards and light, sickly and pale, flooded the troop compartment. Egil charged out into the rot jungle, a howl on his lips.

Two seconds to assess his surroundings. Skol looked left, the skull's implanted vid feed uploaded directly to the Wolf Lord's bionic eye. Egil went right. Ten paces ahead, the corroded remains of the entrance to a Midgardian mineshaft yawned. *Ironfist's* hurricane bolter sponsons were still hammering.

Only a handful of plaguebearers were between the Land Raider and the mine entrance. One died with Egil's claws in its throat, gargling on its own ichor. Moln Stormbrow, the first of Egil's Ironguard to follow the Wolf Lord from the hatch, pulverised another with a swing of his thunder hammer as it made a clumsy swipe for Skol.

'Into the mine,' Egil barked, bursting a squealing nurgling underfoot. 'Now!'

Olaf Ironhide, the final member of the Ironguard, splashed out into the jungle's quagmire. *Ironfist's* ramp immediately began to rise, and the tank was reversing before the opening was even sealed, great tracks throwing up fountains of pestilent, sticky spume. The noble war machine was almost unrecognisable from the outside, drenched in oozing filth, its thick armour

plating pockmarked by ichor and spore clouds. The pain its machine-spirit must have been suffering caused Egil to bare his fangs beneath his visor as he gutted another droning plaguebearer.

With their lord at the centre, the Ironguard sprinted the last few yards to the mine's corroded metal overhang. Egil's auto-senses stripped away the darkness within, picking out dead lumen globes and a rudimentary lift mechanism leading down into the mine proper. Its winch and cables, however, had long been eaten away. A servitor controller hardwired into the shaft's activation panel was little more than bones and rusted metal, its vat-grown flesh desiccated by Midgardia's spores.

'Borgen, hold them off,' Egil ordered. 'There must be a secondary point of access.'

Borgen Fire-eye planted himself at the mine's entrance and unleashed his combi-flamer on the daemons gathering outside, spitting oaths and curses at the wyrdspawn even as he set their rotting flesh ablaze. The rest of the Ironguard spread out around the lift chute, hunting for another path downwards. Egil's visor display was already being lit by red, flashing runes telling him the toxic air was eating away at his armour's sealant, while Skol's gleaming cranium was becoming visibly more pitted and scarred with each passing second. They had to get belowground, and fast.

'Here, my jarl,' Bjorn Bloodfist said. 'A machine-ladder running parallel to the lift.' Egil hurried to the Ironguard's side, and saw that he was right. A smaller shaft entrance, including a heavy ferroplas ladder designed for lowering mining machinery, led down into a darkness so deep even the scans of Egil's augmented eye couldn't penetrate it.

'Will it hold?' Orven Highfell asked as they looked at the ladder, the doubt in his voice obvious.

'It will have to,' Egil said, turning to Moln. 'Collapse the entrance,' he ordered.

'Jarl?'

'Do it! We need to descend, but it will take time. We cannot afford a pursuit.'

Moln hefted his hammer, and replaced Borgen at the mine's entranceway. As Fire-eye checked his weapon's promethium level Stormbrow swung his crackling weapon at one of the overhang's support beams. The decaying timber gave with a splitting crash, and Moln ducked back just in time to

avoid the thunderous fall of the mine's entrance.

Egil already had his feet on the machine-ladder's rung clamps. The ferroplas groaned beneath his power-armoured bulk, but held. He began to climb downwards. There was no time to think, no time to assess the situation or calculate risk percentages. They had to get below before Midgardia's corrupt atmosphere poisoned them all.

And besides, every second wasted was another second not knowing the fate of the Great Wolf.

Mouthing a silent prayer to the Allfather, Egil led his pack into the darkness of the underworld.

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

For the most fleeting of moments, when the inquisitor had first arrived on the bridge, the thing wearing the flesh of Vox-Seneschal Mendaxis had known the closest sensation to fear a creature such as it ever could.

The unsettling sensation was soon replaced by the thrill of a close escape. For a second, as the human's eyes had fallen on it, the creature had fancied its flesh would unravel and its daemon-form would burst into holy flame. The Imperium's storytellers would have enjoyed that. The purifying aura of His Chosen Servant burning away the disguises of the corrupt and scorching their evil plots from existence. The ridiculousness of it almost made the Mendaxis-thing giggle out loud. The inquisitor was just a man, and like all men he had ultimately failed to see what was right in front of him.

It was growing bored in the communication pit. It had been masquerading as the vox-seneschal since the crusade fleet had entered the warp, bound for Fenris. But now, with the inquisitor's departure, Azrael had returned to his bauble-throne above while the bridge busied itself with preparing firing solutions for Midgardia. Briefly it had toyed with the idea of following the inquisitor back to his shuttle and killing him and his simpering little herd of sycophants. A void pilot who accidentally opened both airlocks in transit perhaps? Or a tragic carbon monoxide leak in the transport bay?

But no. Of the many, many skeins of Fate that wove themselves around such undeniably titillating acts, none of them furthered the task the Mendaxis-thing was here to complete. It chided itself. There would be time aplenty for such games afterwards. Once the Wolf and the Lion had torn each other's

throats out.

Finally, the balance of Fate on the bridge changed. The one known as Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar turned from the holochart he had been scanning and made for one of the bridge's vaulted exit gangways.

Azrael was deep in conversation with his skull-helmed Master Interrogator-Chaplain, and no one else had the authority to stop the vox-seneschal. The Mendaxis-thing rose from the pit and followed lightly in Elezar's wake. As it went it wondered whether any of the labouring menials around it would note that, although it appeared to walk, the body of Mendaxis was in fact floating a fraction of an inch above the bridge's worn flagstones. Such little touches amused it still further. There really was no cure for mankind's blindness.

Elezar passed through hissing blast doors and left the bridge. The Mendaxis-thing slipped after him just before the doors slid shut. Ahead, so real that it seemed to impose itself upon the Mendaxis-thing's vision, Fate's weave spread, a beautiful multihued tapestry spun by its master. And all the threads that were tied to Elezar's mag-boots led him to his private Reclusiam-cell. That much was now inevitable, and the Mendaxis-thing felt the gratification of knowing it had locked them both into the correct path.

All that remained to do was pick which body it would greet the young Interrogator-Chaplain with.

The warp

They would have made him their master. Beastlord. Wolfheart. The Wild King. They would have crowned him with savagery and robed him with hunger. He refused. He was not like them. Not yet.

That truth pained him, he could not deny it. There was something inside, something in all of them, that refused to ever be tamed. While the hearth-fires burned low it would rather be hunting in the snow, while weapons lay at rest it would rather sink fang and claw deep into preyflesh. Even some of those he had known the longest had succumbed to it. Scarpelt and Harok, Haghmund and Olfar. Long-fangs and grey-pelts all, given over to the Beast Within. They said the same thing, each one of them. The Wolftime was coming. Leadership was needed. Would he join them?

That was not his way, he reminded himself over and over. There was savagery, yes, but it was cold, calculated, unleashed only when the moment

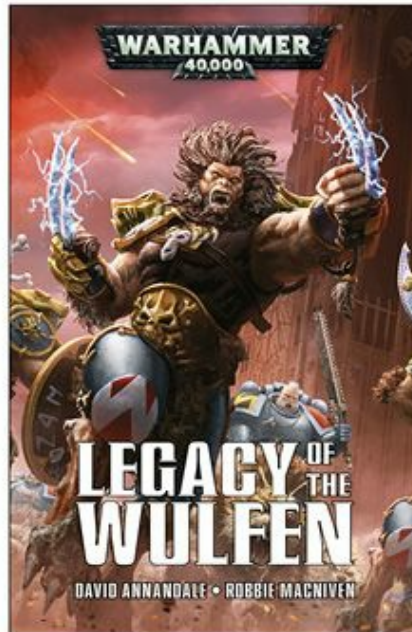
was right. The savagery the others now possessed burned bright, was blind to reason. It was the hungry rage that flung the wolf into the huntsman's trap.

They were late. The warp was playing its usual tricks, seeking to confound and infuriate them. Fury made the Beast stronger. It made more of his warriors turn. They had been bound for the Fenris System for what felt like a lifetime. The other Great Companies were already there, already fighting, already dying, already writing their sagas on Midgardia, Svellgard and Frostheim. The thought pushed him even closer to the edge. He took a long, shuddering breath, trying to clear his head.

Soon they would be home. Whether it would be as beasts or as men, he did not know. There was only one certainty. He would make all those who defiled Fenris pay.



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HONOUR OF THE THIRD

GAV THORPE

‘Seventeen worlds have drowned in blood. Seventeen worlds and countless millions hewn down by the battle-lust of a single man. Now that rage incarnate has beset Durga Principe. Here we will halt the tide.’

So had been the last command of Master Nadael of the Dark Angels Third Company before he too had fallen to the horde of the arch-traitor Furion. In the darkness they had come, cleaving through the outer perimeter like a blade.

Now the warriors from the Tower of Angels looked to Sergeant Belial for leadership even as the night was torn apart by distant battle cries and the baying of Furion’s manic Skull-scythes. In the ruins of the Temple Saturnis, a complex of sandstone and marble that covered several square kilometres, looked down upon by cracked statues of the Emperor and His saints, Belial held swift council with the veterans of the company.

‘We cannot hold the temple. Master Nadael had hoped to fortify before Furion’s arrival, but it is too late. The naves and galleries provide too much cover for the foe and our superior firepower is for nought.’ Belial gestured westwards to the palace-topped hill that overlooked the Temple Saturnis. ‘We must withdraw to the flanks of Mount Dawon and await the dawn.’

‘Fine strategy, but flawed,’ countered Sergeant Meneus, chosen representative of the company’s devastator squads. ‘The enemy will fall upon our turned backs before we can quit this place. It will become our mausoleum.’

‘True, brother, but only if we turn tail and flee like rats. This will be a withdrawal, not a rout. A rearguard will entertain the Skull-scythes while the remainder of the company relocates. I shall lead the defence.’

There was no further argument from the others. They well understood the need for rapid action and the sacrifice Belial was willing to make. Returning

to his squad, Belial ordered his warriors to break out from the Dark Angels' line, heading towards the foe. Augur readings showed the traitors were less than a kilometre away and closing swiftly.

'I am resolved to my death tonight,' remarked Lederon, second only to Belial in seniority amongst the squad, 'but is it wise to hasten that moment with our own advance?'

'If we cannot hold, we must attack, it is that simple,' explained Belial as the ten Space Marines marched through the tumble of toppled pillars, collapsed shrines and broken chapels. The skies were clear, allowing the three moons to bathe the ruins in pale blue light. 'Every second and every metre are vital.'

They met the first traitors in a crumbling, plant-choked cloister. Clad in white armour marked with handprints and smears of dried blood the Skull-scythes spilled through an archway. They were met by the fire of the squad's bolters, missile launcher and meltagun.

'No forgiveness! No retreat!' Belial roared as the enemy tumbled to the ground amidst the torrent of bolts and blasts.

The firefight was brutally short, but the peace that followed was only momentary as more of the slaughter-hungry foe converged on the Dark Angels. To tarry was to invite encirclement. Belial led the squad through the archway into the courtyard beyond, laying down fire with his bolt pistol. Like moths to a flame the Skull-scythes were drawn to the fighting, howling for blood and death.

The Dark Angels took a heavy toll, manoeuvring through the ruins for ambushes and crossfires that cut down the traitors as they plunged headlong into the attack. Through streaks of pale light and shadows in roofless cathedrals and across devastated quadrangles Belial steered the squad, always seeking open ground, knowing that at close quarters his warriors would be overwhelmed. Building by building, street by street, they gave ground to the enemy advance, stopping to give fire when possible, moving back towards their battle-brethren when they could not.

'We have drawn their sting, brother-sergeant. It would be unwise to remain any longer,' said Lederon. The veteran's observation was correct: the rest of the Third were clear of the ancient Ecclesiarchy buildings and the squad was almost at the edge of the ruins.

'Agreed, brother,' replied Belial. 'We fall back to the company.'

As soon as he uttered these words, another force of Skull-scythes appeared

in the darkness. At their fore strode a beast of a warrior. His plate was adorned with spiked chains, and from the chains hung trophy-skulls that clattered as they swung. In both hands he bore a massive chainaxe, its teeth glinting in the wan light.

Furion, arch-traitor, thrice-cursed slaughterer.

‘Your little game of hide and seek is over, son of the Lion!’ Furion bellowed as he broke into a run. Behind him, the Skull-scythes screamed dedications to their dark god and followed their champion’s charge.

The Dark Angels opened fire, standing their ground to blaze away at the approaching enemy. Furion ignored the detonations of bolt-rounds on his armour, sprinting through the storm without pause. His axe took Brother Mendelet’s head clean off in one sweep; the traitor’s return swing eviscerated Lederon in a welter of blood and shattered armour.

‘Keep firing!’ Belial snarled as he bounded forwards to meet the attack. He was too late to save Brother Sabellion, whose torso was cleaved from waist to shoulder. Belial would atone for his slowness if he survived.

As shots from Belial’s pistol exploded across his armour, Furion turned to meet the sergeant’s counter-attack. Raising his chainsword for the strike, Belial ducked beneath Furion’s blade as the traitor swept it towards the Dark Angel’s throat. The teeth of the chainsword bit into armour, screeching as they chewed into Furion’s left arm.

Furion lashed out as blood spurted from his wounded limb, smashing the haft of his weapon into the side of Belial’s head. Out of instinct, the sergeant raised his blade to ward away the next blow. Razor-sharp shards of metal showered around him as chainblade met chainblade. Furion’s next strike shattered Belial’s weapon and sent him stumbling to his right.

Lifting his axe in victory, the Skull-scythes lord loomed over the sprawling sergeant.

‘Blood for the Bl—’

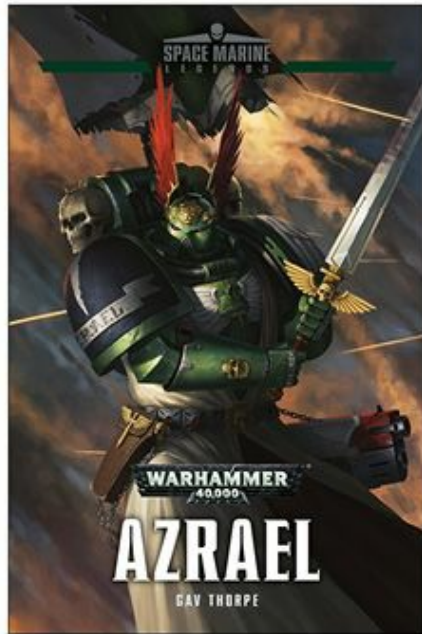
Furion’s triumphant roar was cut short by the bark of Belial’s bolt pistol. The explosive round pierced the collar of the traitor’s armour and detonated inside his throat to send his head arcing away into the darkness. For a moment Belial was taken aback by his deadly reflex shot.

The headless corpse crashed to the ground and Belial recovered, realising that only he and Brother Ramiel remained standing amongst friend and foe. Thermal registers betrayed the presence of other enemies close at hand.

‘The death of the Skull-scythes’ leader will cause our foe some strife, and let us hope the search for his successor delays them further,’ said Belial. ‘Our duty here is done to my satisfaction, brother. To Mount Dawon, where the guns of the Third wait to greet these traitors.’



YOUR NEXT READ



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THE WORD OF THE SILENT KING

L J GOULDING

More, my Lord Anrakyr? You would know more?

Better than this, we will tell you *everything*. Perhaps then you will understand. After all, you will need allies.

Long have we known of the Devourer. While the majority of the necron race slept away the aeons, his great majesty Szarekh, the Silent King, journeyed far and wide beyond the borders of this galaxy. Such unspeakable things did he witness as cannot be adequately articulated in our noble language, nor any other.

The most dire of all these extragalactic enemies were the tyranids.

For countless cycles he has sought to repel this threat. In his wisdom he has observed them, studied them and committed them to oblivion in all but the final, decisive deed. He has brought them to battle on a hundred worlds, ravaged their slumbering fleets out in the cold, measureless void, and even united the more fractious, warring dynasties so that our mutual interests might be protected.

What, you ask, has this to do with an alliance between the living and the dead?

We will tell you everything, my lord. Perhaps then you will understand.

The world's name is not important. Not to us. To the humans, though, it seemed to be paramount. For a species that would see themselves as the undisputed masters of this galaxy, they place so much emphasis on names, and the paradises and damnations that they imagine for themselves.

This, then, becomes a tale of angels and of devils, to use the crude, ancient terms.

The bloodiest of angels, fighting upon the Devil's Crag.

And we were there. The three of us – Khatlan, Dovetlan and Ammeg, if you

will – and so many more. So many, many more.

While you travelled the stars, seeking tithes and tribute, we answered the call of our true master. The Praetorians can move in great numbers, quickly and quietly, when the attentions of the dynasties fall elsewhere for a time. So it is that we return to the court of the Silent King whenever he would wish it, to bring him new word of the Great Awakening. To the rest of the galaxy, we are his eyes and ears, as we are his right hand, and his only voice.

He does not speak. He will not speak. Not to you.

Not yet.

But he may, in time, if you prove worthy.

They had us, brothers. We were done for.

We had fought them hard. On Gehenna, those clanking mechanical xenos seemed to be without number. For three weeks, Dante had led the Third Company against their Legions – we in the assault squads would strike and fall back with the commander, over and over, while Captain Tycho directed the long-range engagement. It was a dry, dusty grind. The only blood that fell upon the barren wastes was ours.

That felt wrong. There was nothing to slake our thirst, no glorious crimson to bathe the armour of the damned.

Tycho was the Master of Sacrifice. That title seemed appropriate. We felt sacrificed.

Gehenna is nothing if not an altar upon which such offerings can be made, though the myriad alien races seem forever drawn to test the Imperium's right to preside over it. A million souls more hallowed than ours had passed on the hive world's plains, over the millennia. What more noble endeavour, what more glorious calling can there be than to defend such a place from the hordes of the restless xenos dead?

And so defend it we did, with every last ounce of our company's strength.

We fell from the grey-streaked skies, the crimson of the Ironhelms assault squads like a bloodstain upon the pristine gold of the Sanguinary Guard. Commander Dante was ever at the front, the tip of the blade thrust into the necrons' flanks. The Axe Mortalis hewed left and right, cleaving through metal bodies as easily as it might through living flesh on any other battlefield, and in Dante's divine shadow we were inspired. I led my squad in a freefall drop, the weight of our charge like the hammer of Sanguinius' own wrath

against the enemy, their dully glowing eyes turned upwards in those last heartbeats before we were in their very midst.

No towering necron lords swathed in fuliginous silks, no insectoid sentinels lashing us with electrum whips. These were the poorest stock of the Legions that we now faced, the meagre revenants that seemed almost without number and whose only tactical use seemed to be that they *absolutely would not die*.

Exhorting my battle-brothers onwards, I drove into the necron warriors with my blade held before me. Speed, we had found, was the key – they simply could not track us quickly enough as targets if we kept moving, and they seemed incapable of firing their gauss weaponry without first taking careful aim. And so we struck them down by the dozen, taking heads and limbs and blowing out armoured torsos with point-blank pistol fire, and stamping their remains into the dust beneath our boots.

Yet for every necron we tore apart, three more would trudge forwards to take its place; or else the supposedly dead warrior would simply rise up again once we had passed by, wounds reknitting under whatever baleful technomancy powered them.

Green flashes cast the seemingly endless horde in silhouette, and I looked up to see more of the great, gravitic monolith structures gliding ponderously down the slopes from the crags beyond. Their energy matrices cast thumping charges into the melee, scattering golden-armoured Blood Angels like leaves in the wind. Maddening, squealing static cut through the inter-squad vox-channels, and suddenly we were cut off from Dante's command entirely.

And more necrons came. And yet more.

The press of cold, lifeless bodies around us become entangling, and the warriors began to jab at us with their hooked bayonet blades. Brother Jophael tried to free himself from the horde's grasp by launching back into the air, but metal claws pulled him down, jump pack and all, beneath the ambling tide. His agonised screams were mercifully brief.

I planted a boot into the chest of the closest necron warrior and sent it sprawling backwards with a pair of frag grenades for its trouble. The blasts hurled a score more of them aside, but all that bought me was the space to truly see the inevitability and futility of our assault. We were outnumbered by hundreds to one, and hovering ark-transports would gather the xenos dead right out from beneath our feet to send against us once more. And on, and on, until we were buried.

We *had* been sacrificed. I did not know if Commander Dante had planned it that way, but I could no longer even see his Sanguinary Guard amidst the throng.

There would be no resurrection for us. Once fallen, the Angels of Death do not rise from the dead. There is purity in that – something that the necrons have failed to grasp in their eternal pursuit of... eternity.

Two more of my brothers fell. Then a third.

I don't remember what it was that I screamed in that moment – likely it was something ignoble and suitably defiant. I struck a necron down with every swing of my blade, until it seemed that I could no longer even find room to draw it back between blows.

My pauldrons began to catch on the press of metal limbs. Unfeeling fingers clamped around my wrists, and my neck. My sword was pulled from my grip, and my plasma pistol too. I realised that I was being dragged over backwards, and I was no longer even screaming real words.

That's when it happened.

The pause. The *stutter*.

As one, the necrons faltered. Just for a fraction of a second, their eyes dimmed.

Then, again as one, they put up their weapons and turned to withdraw. I crashed to the ground on my back, before scrambling free of my jump pack harness to see ten thousand immortal xenos warriors striding away from us as implacably as they had been advancing only moments earlier.

I snapped my pistol up and put down nine of them without thinking. I shot them through their retreating backs, hot plasma dashing their mechanical innards onto the ground. Others did the same, in futile impotent rage. Our blood was still up, and the wounded remnants of the front-line squads harried the enemy with frustrated battle cries still upon their lips. Necrons fell, and still the Legions did not pay us any more regard that day.

It was as though we had simply ceased to exist.

It made no sense at the time. Why would they suddenly give up, with certain victory within their unfeeling, iron grasp?

The answer was the result of cold, mathematical logic. It would come to stun us all, and most especially Commander Dante.

We had misjudged them. We misjudged them so badly.

You understand, lord, that the angel-humans were never our real foe in this. Mere happenstance it was that placed them in opposition to the Silent King's plan. That, and their characteristic unwillingness to admit that they know nothing of the true nature of the universe.

For as much as the human empire considers itself the height of evolution and the antithesis of the tyrannid race – if you can believe such a thing! – they are perhaps more alike than either of them can know. Dovetlan once likened the humans to insects. They swarm. They cannibalise. They live without real thought for the future or the past, beyond the propagation of their own brood.

And they build hives. Literally.

Teeming with human vermin and other, even more degenerate life forms, their settlements agglomerate around the points of industry and resource, openly abusing their worlds to feed the wasteful cycle of war and procreation. Even their ruling classes may live out their entire organic lifespan within a ten-kilometre area, such is the self-contained and parochial nature of the hive cities.

In all our time, we have rarely witnessed such edifices constructed by a sentient race. They are stockpiles of humankind, in all its stripes. Concentrated cells of organic filth.

Biomass.

Bait.

It was a fortuitous coincidence that placed a world such as this in the path of the Silent King's quarry. After his great victory over the tyrannid beasts in the dimensional anomaly at Anjac, he had pursued a splinter fleet through the void entirely undetected for almost three cycles. He observed their movements. He studied their reactions to external astral stimuli.

And then he began to calculate ahead.

None but he, in his majestic wisdom, could have accomplished such a feat – but even the magnificent Szarekh could not deny the providence that brought them hence afterwards.

Our cold bodies hold little interest for the Devourer. At best, they might be drawn to the more physical power sources utilised by our technologies, or defend themselves when we strike them. But fodder for their living ships, we are not.

The hive worlds of the humans shine like beacons in comparison. The tyrannids are drawn to such banquets with a singular, predatory hunger.

The Silent King knows this.

The beginnings of a plan began to form in his mind, as he later told us.

He would lay a trap for them, and he would bait it with the humans.

The seven of us stood around the hololith table – the five surviving squad sergeants, battered and bloodied, shielded from the worst of the commander’s wrath by our noble captain Erasmus Tycho. Though he was similarly armoured in golden plate, the two of them could not have appeared more different in that moment.

‘Answer me this,’ Dante growled. ‘How did they know? How can the necrons scan the interstellar void more accurately than the long-range sensors of the *Bloodcaller*?’

The Chapter Master had set his death mask upon the surface of the table, and I could scarcely take my eyes from it. The play of light over the angelic, sculpted features of our Lord Sanguinius lent the helm an even more numinous aspect, beyond even the polished golden halo that encircled the crown.

From behind his own half-mask, Tycho spoke carefully.

‘I’m not sure they can, commander. It is possible that they already knew the tyranids were approaching before the hive ships crossed the system’s heliopause. Our sensorium officers’ report did cite multiple objects “of unknown origin” in their initial tactical sweeps, but you and I both bade them turn their full attention towards the necrons. We simply perceived a greater threat on the ground.’ The corner of his mouth flickered with an involuntary tic. ‘We were watching the pageant when we should have been scouting the hall.’

Dante glowered up at his protégé, gauntleted palms resting on the table’s edge, and a grim smile creased his dour features. ‘Aye, perhaps.’

Between the two of them, the lambent silhouette of Gehenna Prime turned slowly in the tactical hololith projection. The planet was bracketed by the battle-barge *Bloodcaller* and the twin strike cruisers *Melech* and *Fratrem Pugno* at station in high orbit. Of the necron cairn-ships that had apparently retreated from the system more than a month earlier, there was still no sign.

Instead, from the galactic south-east had come the tyranids.

Xenological identifiers marked them as a splinter of the defeated Behemoth fleet, or possibly cousins of little-known Dagon. Regardless of their origin,

the four great hive ships had already spawned a veritable multitude of lesser craft and begun to move into a splayed formation that bypassed the outer worlds entirely. Tiny numerals rolled down the hololith next to each sensor contact as the telemeters updated their distance and relative speeds.

There was no mistaking it – this was a standard xenos attack vector. The tyrannids had set their ravenous gaze upon Gehenna Prime.

‘What would you command of us, my lord?’ asked Phaniel, turning away from the dire tableau. The devastator squads had been furthest from the necrons’ front wave, and so were the least mauled by the weeks of attrition that the rest of us had suffered.

Dante gestured to the approaching hive ships. ‘We are about to be caught between our chosen foe on the ground and a new one in the heavens, brother-sergeant. Our victory over the necrons was already far from assured. Now we face an even more overwhelming force – one that could take an entire world on its own.’

The weight of that truth hung in the silence for a moment. Tycho nodded slowly, presumably at the prospect of a swift and glorious end for his battle company. ‘The presence of the tyrannid fleet does at least go some way towards explaining why our astropathic calls for reinforcement seem to have fallen upon deaf ears, Chapter Master,’ he offered with a shrug. ‘Nonetheless, the Ironhelms are with you to the very last.’

Before the commander could reply, the hololith flickered and a shriek of white noise cut through the embedded audio feed. We all recoiled, startled but ready to react.

Then the display blinked out, along with every visual feed, lumen and powered system in the strategium chamber, plunging us into darkness.

‘Generatorium!’ Dante roared. ‘Restore the—’

Static seeped through the dead channel, bleeding in and somehow multiplying in the air before us. Motes of greenish light ran upwards from the table’s surface, though this time it cast no reflection in the Death Mask of Sanguinius.

The rasping un-sound built upon itself, pulsing in strange, eddying waves.

‘Listen to that,’ whispered Gaius, reaching for his bolt pistol but finding the holster empty. ‘It’s a voice.’

I spat, my hands bunching into fists as I scanned the room for any threat. ‘That’s no voice. It’s artefacting from an incompatible signal source. Nothing

more.'

The motes of light began to swirl and gather above the centre of the table, blocking out some new shape in the space where Gehenna had previously hung. The emerald glare grew in intensity, rising with the crackling, maddening howl of the—

'HUMANS. PROSTRATE YOURSELVES BEFORE OUR MAGNIFICENCE.'

Turning slowly in the shimmering field, a gaunt necron visage with a high crest stared out at us, its eyes blazing almost white and casting tiny arcs of energy before them. Tycho and two of the others moved quickly to place themselves between Dante and the xenos avatar, but the commander barged them aside, a look of disbelief upon his face.

'I AM THE JUDICATOR-PRIME. I AM CHARGED WITH SECURING YOUR COOPERATION. YOU WILL NOT RESIST.'

With a snarl, Phaniel drew his combat blade and slashed at the thing's face, but the weapon passed cleanly through and left him only with a tracery of greenish sparks dancing over his gauntlet and vambrace. The necron either did not notice, or did not care.

'WHO AMONG YOU HOLDS AUTHORITY?'

Dante scowled, and stepped forwards. 'I am Dante,' he said from between clenched teeth, 'Master of the Adeptus Astartes Chapter the Blood Angels. Who are you to address me and my officers in such a manner?'

The avatar regarded him with its blazing white eyes. *'I AM THE JUDICATOR-PRIME. I AM CHARGED WITH SECURING YOUR COOPERATION. YOU WILL NOT RESIST, DANTE OF THE BLOOD ANGELS.'*

Reaching out to the table controls, Gaius warily mashed the keypad with his palm, hoping to sever the connection. It did not have any effect. Commander Dante looked back to the Judicator.

'Cooperation in what, xenos? Until mere hours ago, our forces were locked in mortal combat. Now you are fled to the empty plains, awaiting our inevitable vengeance. There is no matter in which we or you will ever cooperate.'

'YOU ARE INCORRECT. OUR SUCCESS HAS ALREADY BEEN CALCULATED. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN US WAS AN ERROR.'

Rage boiled up inside me at the thing's brazen insolence. I bared my teeth

and bellowed back at the projection. ‘Silence! Let us end this on the field of battle. You will not strike at the worlds of the Imperium and then run for cover when a greater enemy rears its foul head!’

The Judicator’s gaze swept over me. ‘*THE CONFLICT BETWEEN US WAS AN ERROR,*’ it repeated.

Tycho raised his voice, then. ‘Who decides that? You?’

‘*NO. IT IS THE DECISION OF MIGHTY SZAREKH, LAST AND GREATEST OF THE SILENT KINGS. PROSTRATE YOURSELVES BEFORE HIS MAGNIFICENCE.*’

An uneasy silence fell over the seven of us. I turned to my brothers, unsure how to react.

Dante narrowed his eyes. ‘The Silent King... *The Silent King?*’

‘*MIGHTY SZAREKH, LAST AND GREATEST OF THE SILENT KINGS.*’

‘The Silent King is... here, on Gehenna?’

The Judicator’s head twitched. ‘*I DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “GEHENNA”. BUT THE SILENT KING IS HERE, NOW. HE WOULD TREAT WITH YOU, DANTE OF THE BLOOD ANGELS, IN THE FACE OF OUR COMMON ENEMY.*’

More motes of light spun out to create a topographical map in the projection, with a specific ridgeline highlighted in a brighter green from the rest.

‘*SEND YOUR EMISSARIES TO THIS LOCATION AND MIGHTY SZAREKH, LAST AND GREATEST OF THE SILENT KINGS, WILL RECEIVE THEM.*’

With a sudden flash that left blooms of colour on our retinas, the necron avatar vanished. After a single heartbeat of silent darkness, the lumens and hololith stuttered back into life and left us blinking in the pale light of the strategium once again.

I spun to face Tycho. ‘My lord, I know where they want us to go.’

Though Commander Dante still stared at the now empty space above the table, the captain’s expression was stern. ‘Speak, Brother-Sergeant Machiavi. Where is it?’

‘It’s where my squad landed in the last assault – the Devil’s Crag.’

Szarekh would have it known by every phaeron of every dynasty, that he is a just and noble ruler. Before the Great Sleep, he realised his failings and

vowed to atone for them. He is humble enough to learn from his own mistakes. The necrons will rise once more, and he will lead us into a new and glorious age as the pre-eminent masters of creation. Not because it is his right; it is privilege that he would first re-earn.

Yet, his benevolence has its limits.

That is not to say that he harbours the humans any particular malice. Simply, their supposed destiny is incompatible with our own. Perhaps if they had ascended more powerfully in an earlier epoch, then they might have claimed this galaxy out from beneath the slumbering dynasties while the Silent King still dwelt in self-imposed exile.

And perhaps not. Their propensity for self-destruction is... troubling.

The tyranids are anathema to all life, and life is what the necrons require for supreme domination. So too, then, is the primal destiny of the Devourer incompatible with our own.

The humans create.

The necrons maintain.

The tyranids consume.

There can be no lasting symmetry in that triumvirate. One must fall. The great Szarekh has decreed that it shall be the tyranids, and none can refute the word of the Silent King.

It is unlikely that the humans see things as clearly as we do, Lord Anrakyr. Ironic, is it not, that they gnash their teeth and cry out at the injustice of a new alien race polluting 'their' empire with brash, unwitting conquests? We have seen this before, and doubtless we will see it again. When all of this is but a footnote in the annals of our great triumph, who will even remember the name of a dead human Emperor, or the ignorant miseries doled out in His name?

The court awaited the humans openly. There could be no suggestion of deception. We had returned to the ridge where last the Dante-Angel had resisted us.

Beyond the unnumbered ranks of common warriors and the Immortal Legions, a full *nine hundred* of the Triarch Praetorians stood sentinel before the Silent King's throne. Not in the living memory of the Imperium would such a gathering of our order have been witnessed by any human, and likely it never will be again. Our Judicator-Prime attended noble Szarekh at his right hand, and the High Chronomancer, whose techno-magicks had so

confounded the humans, stood at his left. Beyond were arrayed the seven phaerons who had sworn themselves to the Silent King's purpose in secret – each of them wearing a bronzed mask to hide their identity from all but their own household guardians.

The first we saw of the humans was a haze of chemical fumes and plains dust kicked up by their primitive transport. It trundled over the terrain on wheeled treads, its bulky armour caked in red paint and crude, winged glyphs. As it drew nearer, the Judicator-Prime descended the polished steps of the courtly dais to bar the humans' path.

At Dante's command, the hastily installed servitor driver brought the Rhino as close as possible to the necron herald. The engine idled for a moment, then cut out. Cooling metal on the exhaust stacks ticked and clicked in the dismal morning sun, but aside from that the silence felt absolute. Though we could see the necrons standing in their uncounted thousands, not a sound did any one of them make, nor was there any hint of movement.

I peered out through the forward viewing block, scanning the grand dais for sign of our host.

It was absurd – a monolithic ziggurat, easily forty metres at the peak, dropped onto the surface of Gehenna Prime as a monument to xenos vanity. Cast from some achingly black, polished metal, it was edged with glinting golden runes and glyphs that ran in interconnecting patterns up the long flight of steps to the summit. Upon its tiers stood the more elite warriors of the necron horde, elevated above their kin and presumably enjoying the prestige of greater proximity to their monarch. Gleaming statues of alien deities towered at the cardinal points of the structure, and the two greatest of them held their arms out to form an arch over the peak of the dais, heads bowed in symbolic supplication.

This was a king, their posture said, who had once held even the gods in his thrall.

And this was his court that travelled wherever he went.

I glanced back into the darkened interior of the troop compartment. Captain Tycho reluctantly put up his combi-melta in the overhead stowage, and edged around the tarpaulin-covered bulk in the middle of the floor. He had pleaded for the honour to undertake this endeavour alone. Nay, he had almost *begged* for it. It was his right, and he had insisted. His privilege. His duty. But Dante

would not hear of it.

The commander's face was set, almost as serene as the golden mask that he held so carefully in his gauntlets. It was the face of a man who knew that destiny had smiled upon him, no matter what the cost of that fortune might ultimately prove to be. How like our father Sanguinius he seemed in that moment.

'Brothers,' he said calmly, 'let us go to him.'

I eyed the open palm of my gauntlet warily – it felt so heavy – and tried to keep my voice low.

'My lord, is this necessary? We are here. We could–'

Tycho silenced me with a hand on my pauldron. 'This isn't about tactical positioning, Machiavi,' he muttered, squinting at me sidelong through the eye of his half-mask. 'This is about respect. No matter how much we may despise the xenos, the Chapter Master would at least meet this Szarekh face to face. No one else will ever get this chance again. We have to at least see him with our own eyes.'

Dante nodded. Tycho managed a wry grin, and reached for the rear hatch controls.

'Besides, I think noble Dante wants to hear the supreme ruler of the necron race beg for our help, first.'

The ramp opened on powered hydraulics, and the three of us stepped out onto the dusty ground at the foot of the ziggurat, defiant in the face of the ten thousand enemy warriors who watched from all sides.

The Judicator-Prime stood before us, a tall ceremonial glaive held rigidly in both hands. As well as the high crest of his office that had been visible in the hololith projection, he wore a mantle of smooth metal links that hung from his shoulders like a cloak. He regarded us coldly for a moment before inclining his head in a condescending gesture that we should follow him.

My hearts began to hammer in my chest. I could taste the acrid tang of xenos energy weapons in the air, feeling the dead gaze of the machines upon us as we ascended the steps. I walked to the commander's left, Tycho to the right. The captain glared, but said nothing.

Dante simply followed the herald, the Death Mask of Sanguinius held in the crook of his arm.

We reached the summit and passed beneath the archway of the god-statues. Beyond, shimmering silk drapes fluttered in the breeze between ornate

electro-flambeaux that cast the various necron lords of the court in an even more eerie light against the Gehenna sun. I looked to each in turn, wondering which of them was *him*...

Without warning, the Judicator-Prime halted, and whirled around. Reflexively, the fingers of my gauntlet closed, but I managed to catch myself before it was too late.

‘Kneel, humans,’ he commanded. ‘Kneel before mighty Szarekh, last and greatest of the Silent Kings.’

The visible half of Tycho’s face appeared unimpressed. He rested his thumbs at his belt, and tilted his head. ‘We will not. He is not *our* king.’

The Judicator-Prime bristled, but did not repeat himself. Instead he turned solemnly and sank to one knee. The move was echoed first by the masked nobles, then by their retainers, and then by every other necron warrior upon the dais and beyond. Again as one, they knelt.

Except for one figure.

He was taller than the rest, yet not as tall as I had imagined he might be. His mechanical body was a work of unspeakable xenos artifice, more finely wrought than any I had ever seen upon the field of battle. Where they might be skeletal, he was lithe. Where they were animated with grim, unyielding purpose, his every movement possessed an undeniable vitality. His form spoke of musculature and clean-limbed strength, perhaps touched by the divine, and his finery was simple and yet impossibly elegant.

His face, though...

Brothers, I can scarcely put into words what I felt in that moment. What all three of us must have felt. It was not reverence or awe, I can tell you that much.

It was closer to hatred.

Framed by a cowl of shimmering light and the trceries of his intricate collar, Szarekh – heralded as the last and greatest of the Silent Kings, and undisputed overlord of the necron race – wore a golden mask fashioned into the likeness of our Lord Sanguinius.

A rank blasphemy, indeed.

The humans were surprised. Their flesh-forms took time to process what they were seeing, though it clearly stirred their indoctrinated racial hatreds at a fundamental and subconscious level. The Judicator-Prime was the first to

rise, transmitting a sub-etheric signal to the Praetorians to be ready. No matter that they had sent the Dante-Angel and the Tycho-Angel, their most respected battle leaders, as a gesture of good faith. The human warrior castes can be unpredictable and nihilistic when pressed, and may act illogically in the face of insult or overwhelming adversity.

We may speak more of this later, Lord Anrakyr. After all, you will need allies. Learn their strengths as well as their weaknesses, and turn all to your advantage.

Wise Szarekh knew this. He saw the truth of it when first he encountered the humans squatting upon the tombs of the dynasties and the ruins of the eldar empire. They believed that their stars were in the ascendant, and that they would soon conquer the galaxy. Of course, this was not to be. It will never be. It cannot be.

It is curious what the humans choose to know of their past, and what remains unremembered. They do not heed the lessons that they have already learned, because they often elect to forget them. Perhaps, had he not fallen to illogical and prideful infighting, their Sanguinius-Angel might have steered them towards a more enlightened destiny.

Certainly, he would have made a more amenable emperor than a preserved witch-corpse.

If ever there were a human to be mourned, noble Szarekh would say that it was him. That alliance – the *first* alliance, perhaps? – might have ended the threat of the Devourer before it ever surfaced. At least, the tyranids might never have been drawn to this galaxy in the first instance.

Like the humans, the Silent King was blind to this possibility at the time.

But unlike the humans, he is humble enough to learn from his own mistakes. The High Chronomancer's temporal mastery merely afforded him the insight that he required, and the opportunity to prepare a new truth for them.

The Chapter Master's grip tightened around the golden helm in his hands, and he quaked with a barely suppressed fury. This time I saw Captain Tycho's fist clenching, although he too managed to restrain himself. We had to see how this would play out before doing anything premature.

Dante looked from his own mask – the Death Mask of Sanguinius, holiest relic of the Chapter – to the benign, alien representation of the primarch worn by the Silent King. The similarities were astonishing, brothers. Though

elongated and curiously more androgynous, the features were mournful and angelic in the way that every Blood Angel knew and recognised even from the first day of their Adeptus Astartes induction. The proud and noble brow. The suggestion of tumbling hair swept back from the face. Even the stylised halo crowned Szarekh just as it did the commander.

But where Dante's mask was crafted into a defiant, righteous battle snarl, this was Sanguinius at his most benevolent and peaceful.

The face of a king. A ruler supreme.

More beautiful, perhaps, than any sculpture or cast had any right to be that was not the work of human hands, though it pricked at my soul to admit it.

Dante's blood was up. Finally, he found his voice.

'How... *dare*...'

Ignoring the commander's outrage, the Judicator-Prime spoke again in his strident and uncaring tone. 'Dante of the Blood Angels, the Silent King bids you welcome. None among us shall harm you while you respect the sanctity of this court.'

Captain Tycho's eyes widened, and he looked to me in disbelief. The Silent King remained still, regarding us all with the eyes of our primarch.

Through gritted teeth, Dante cursed.

'Your Silent King had best learn to speak, and explain to me why he insults us with this... this... *mockery* of our Lord Sanguinius. It is a travesty, and I shall not suffer it! If he thinks to make his demands more pleasant by skinning them in the face of our holy founder—'

'This is not so, Dante of the Blood Angels,' said the herald. 'Mighty Szarekh, last and greatest of the Silent Kings, honours your angel-father and the accord that we wished to strike with him in ages past.'

Numbness spread through my chest at these words. Even Dante twitched.

'That is a lie,' he murmured. 'Our gene-sire would never have treated with xenos filth.'

'The Silent King cannot lie, Dante of the Blood Angels, for he does not speak. He will not speak. Not to you. But your angel-father would have seen the wisdom in this alliance, and we hope that you will also. The tyrannids are coming, whether you or we choose to remain, or not. The conflict between us was an error. Our success has already been calculated.'

I was very keenly aware that the Chapter Master held his gauntlet loosely at his side, with the palm wide open. Both Captain Tycho and I followed suit,

trying to keep the movement as surreptitious as possible and hiding it from the passing gaze of the necrons.

All three of the human emissaries kept their right hands open. It was a curious gesture, likely some measure of deference offered to the majestic Szarekh as their natural superior.

Ammeg later postulated that it signified they were unarmed. I am not so certain.

Regardless, the alliance was soon agreed.

The ignorance of the humans is easily turned to our advantage.

Unable to take his eyes from the Silent King's mask, I watched Dante consider the herald's words.

'Why, then? Why seize this world, and defend it from us when we came to reclaim it?'

'The conflict between us was an error. Mighty Szarekh, last and greatest of the Silent Kings, did not seize this world. He meant to defend it from the Devourer.'

Another long moment passed. I regarded the various necron nobles of the court – where living beings might betray their true intentions with subconscious body language or barely perceptible movements, these machines were unreadable. Instead, I wonder if I projected something of my own thoughts onto my perception of them, in their perfect ambiguity. The Silent King continued to gaze plaintively at us. I shuffled uneasily.

For the first time ever, in all my days, I felt a tremor of *pity* for the necrons. Had we, in fact, misjudged them?

The Judicator-Prime raised a hand. 'The error was yours, Dante of the Blood Angels. But you were not to know, and we did not take the time to make it known.'

'Oh, blood of Baal...' Tycho whispered, realising the full extent of what was being implied.

Dante let out a long, measured breath. 'And in fighting us, you have lost significant forces that might have assured your victory over the tyranids.'

The Silent King nodded slowly, but it was his herald that spoke.

'Correct. There is no more time. We must form the alliance that mighty Szarekh would have pursued with your angel-father. Join us, and we will

save this world for your Imperium.'

The Chapter Master's brow furrowed, just slightly. 'What do you care of the Imperium and its people?' he asked in a low voice.

The Judicator-Prime swept his arm out to encompass all of the assembled necron Legions. 'Regardless of what you might believe, Dante of the Blood Angels, we are most concerned with the survival of the human race. There are greater matters at stake here. Perhaps one day these lesser differences can be reconciled.'

With great solemnity, Commander Dante handed his helm off to me, and I took it carefully in my free gauntlet. Then he stepped forwards, holding out his left hand to the Silent King.

'I cannot speak for the Imperium, and I cannot speak for what my blood-father Sanguinius would or would not have done in my place. But my warriors will lend their numbers to yours, if you truly mean to save this world from the Great Devourer.' He paused, and his expression became more fierce. 'And then you and I will speak of the future, King Szarekh. We will speak of what may be, if this alliance is honoured to its end.'

The Silent King reached out and grasped Dante's wrist in a remarkably Imperial manner.

Then he leaned in with an alien grace that should have been impossible for a machine, and whispered something into the Chapter Master's ear.

I speak the truth. The Silent King spoke to him. Tycho and I both strained to hear, but the words were lost to the breeze. Dante recoiled slightly, his face a picture of shock and confusion. Then he composed himself, and nodded to Szarekh.

And so the alliance was accepted.

Calm yourself, my Lord Anrakyr. The great Szarekh did not need the humans in order to defeat the tyranids.

Consider the facts. Our fleet had transitioned out of range of their primitive sensors, but were at full battle readiness throughout our engagement with the Dante-Angel's forces as well as afterwards. Similarly, we outnumbered them by many hundreds to one on the ground. A thousand or more, by the end, since it was they who made the greater sacrifice in battle against the tyranids.

Consider the wisdom of noble Szarekh. He allowed the humans to believe that they alone held void-superiority over the hive fleet, and so they alone

took damage in engaging the alien vessels as part of the allied offensive. Our ships remained safely out of the conflict. He also allowed the humans to mount what they considered a valiant and righteous defence of the larger city-structures – a manoeuvre that held little tactical merit or advantage, and a much higher likelihood of attrition. He maximised the effectiveness of the alliance entirely in favour of the necron forces, by giving the humans just enough hope for a brighter future, and just enough of the truth to commit them to our cause.

Doubtless, they would have turned on us if the opportunity had presented itself, later. Most especially if they had learned the whole truth. That was a risk that wise Szarekh could not take.

Even so, it was hard not to admire the conviction with which the humans fought. They may come to recognise in time the threat of the tyrannids like we do. For that, we wear these trinkets and adornments to commemorate their sacrifice. We honour their dead, even if we do not mourn their loss.

If you would review the specifics of the battle that the magnificent Szarekh fought that day, then I will bring you the accounts from the Praetorian archives. They are exhaustive.

Do not be like the humans, my lord. Learn from the past.

You will need allies if you are to prevail. Maximise the effectiveness of your alliances, and turn them entirely to your advantage.

Prove yourself worthy in this, and the Silent King may speak to you as well. In time.

It was only after the Gehenna Campaign was concluded that we realised how completely we had been deceived by those thrice-accursed xenos. But it was difficult to be truly bitter when we had intended to betray them from the start.

When Commander Dante, Captain Tycho and I had returned to the Rhino to leave, we had carefully removed the remote triggers from our gauntlets, and disarmed the detonators under the tarpaulin. As I said, this had all been Tycho's idea, and he had wanted to carry it out alone. He would have become the Master of Sacrifice, indeed.

When Dante had realised that the Silent King – *the* Silent King – was present on Gehenna Prime, our duty to the Imperium was clear. This was the supreme ruler of the necron race, a being so legendarily elusive that even the most informed members of the Ordo Xenos doubted whether or not he even

existed in a literal sense.

We had to kill Szarekh, no matter what. He could not be allowed to leave this world.

Concealed beneath the tarp inside the troop compartment was the warhead from a cyclonic torpedo. It had been carefully and painstakingly removed from the magazine on board the *Bloodcaller* by our company Techmarines, shuttled down to our encampment and hidden within the Rhino at Dante's command.

It was a planet-killer. An Exterminatus-grade weapon, the use of which could only be sanctioned by the Chapter Master himself.

Each of us held a trigger in our open, gauntleted palm, and any one of us could have fired it in an instant. At ground zero, the nucleonic blast would have annihilated everything on the planet's surface within a five hundred kilometre radius. The Silent King, the three of us, every single necron construct stationed at the Devil's Crag, every last member of Third Company who remained in our own encampment, and the common citizenry of at least two major hive cities – all would have been evaporated in the space of a few heartbeats.

It was a sacrifice worthy of Erasmus Tycho's title, and his ambition.

Dante, however, had refused to let him go alone. He schooled us in his reasoning around the strategium table.

It would arouse the suspicions of the necron lords if the Blood Angels suddenly withdrew from the surface, leaving only a single, nihilistic warrior to approach their master. We could not risk ordering an orbital strike without first making visual confirmation of Szarekh's presence, lest the necrons realise our duplicity with the bare, vital moments that they needed to pre-empt us.

It had always been a desperate scheme, with only a slim chance of success.

But for that slim chance, Dante was willing to sacrifice himself.

I claimed the honour of the third position within the emissary group. My familiarity with the local terrain made me the obvious choice.

It was only Szarekh's mask, and the insinuation that Lord Sanguinius himself might have once been on the verge of an alliance with the necrons, that stayed Dante's hand. Was it even true? Had Szarekh ever looked upon the face of our primarch? It did not appear to matter.

As the Rhino had bumped and rolled over the plains back to the

encampment, Tycho had voiced the question that was at the forefront of my mind, too.

‘So we are taking his... *word*... for it, my lord? We will knowingly and willingly enter an alliance with our hated xenos enemies, with the view to some possible future reconciliation?’ He rubbed at his good eye. ‘No one will believe this. Chapters have been excommunicated for less.’

Dante narrowed his eyes. ‘We serve the Imperium. We protect its people when they cannot protect themselves. If we do this, then we will save at least a portion of Gehenna Prime. If we do not, then the world will fall to the tyrannid advance, and the nucleonic fire of Szarekh’s murder.’

Before Tycho could reply, Dante had raised up the Death Mask of Sanguinius and gazed into its lifeless eyes. Appraising. Reconsidering.

‘And when the war against the tyrannids is won, I will slay Szarekh myself.’

It had seemed like the perfect solution: we would use the necrons to ensure an Imperial victory first and then strike down their king once we had secured his confidence. But we had misjudged them. We misjudged them so badly.

They had deceived us.

As the campaign against the foul hive-spawn drew to a close, we began to notice strange things – the bodies of our fallen brothers were being looted, our supplies raided. Was it the tyrannids, you ask? Unlikely.

We realised that fewer and fewer of the necron lords and elite guard were making each successive rendezvous with us as planned. We had not heard from the Judicator-Prime or his Praetorians in days.

We were being frozen out of the final stages of our combined victory.

By the time we stood upon the killing fields in the shadow of Hive Sendeep, our rent armour and notched blades caked with more xenos blood than we could ever have asked for, we were reduced to a handful of survivors from the Ironhelms and the Sanguinary Guard. The *Fratrem Pugno* had been gutted by plasma fire, and it would be many more months before she was warp-capable again.

Wounded, Captain Tycho had instead been evacuated up to the *Melech* to coordinate the last stages of the void-war. It was I alone who stood at Dante’s side, and the grim realisation came upon us both as our battle-brothers led teams of ragged local militia in heaping up the bodies of slain tyrannids for the cleansing pyres.

He leaned heavily upon the Axe Mortalis, his breath coming like a gasp

through the gaping mouth of the Death Mask.

‘We haven’t seen any necrons in over twelve hours, my lord,’ I muttered. ‘Szarekh isn’t coming back, is he?’

Dante did not answer, but stared hard at the setting sun over the distant mountains. His rage was spent. It was the same for all of us.

I wiped xenos foulness from my combat blade, and sheathed it at my hip. ‘Do not concern yourself with this, Lord Dante. I will have the official records amended to state that you allowed the xenos to depart as a gesture of respect for their unexpected assistance in the campaign. We will catch him eventually, and you will have vengeance.’

At this, the Chapter Master shook his head, and pulled his helm free.

‘No, Sergeant Machiavi. We will never have this chance again. I doubt whether any warrior of the Imperium will ever again lay eyes upon the Silent King.’ He sighed. ‘If that is even who he was...’

We remained there for another hour or so, watching in quiet contemplation as the pyre flames began to spring up in the dusky twilight.

I thought back to the moment that we decided to spare Szarekh from the fire, and I am ashamed to say that the most impertinent question sprang unbidden from my lips. In fact, brothers, I am still amazed that this moment of indiscretion did not cost me my eventual succession to command of Third Company.

‘What did the Silent King say to you?’

Dante’s weary gaze rolled to me, and he stiffened slightly.

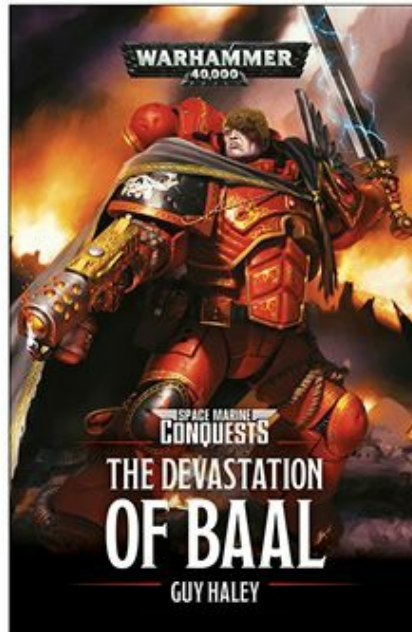
‘He said... something that I no longer think I understand.’

The commander paused. I waited expectantly, almost now dreading to hear the answer.

‘He said, “They are the rising storm, and you must become the shield.”’



YOUR NEXT READ



THE DEVASTATION OF BAAL

by Guy Haley

Baal is besieged. The alien horror of Hive Fleet Leviathan has reached the Blood Angels home world, and their entire existence is under threat. As the sons of Sanguinius gather, the battle for the fate of their bloodline begins...

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EXTINCTION

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN

*Legions die by betrayal. They die in fire and futility.
Above all, they die in shame.*

Kallen Garax, sergeant of Garax Tactical Squad, Sons of Horus 59th Company. His armour is wreck-blasted and cracked, gunmetal-grey with the sea-green paint scorched away into memory. Across his helm's left side, image intensifiers refocus with smooth whirrs, miraculously undamaged from his fall.

His men are in pieces around him. Medes is a dismembered ruin, his component parts scattered over the rubble. Vladak is impaled through the chest, decapitated by junk, twitching in a spread of bloodstained sand. Daion and Ferac had been closest to the defence turrets' power generator when their length of the wall exploded under a gunship's strafing run. Kallen has a flash memory of both warriors covered in chemical fire, burning as the shock wave sent them sprawling. Their scorched remains scarcely resemble anything human. He doubts they were alive when they hit the ground.

Smoke rises all around him, though the wind steals the worst of it. He can't move. He can't feel his left leg. Jagged wreckage lies strewn in every direction; a particularly sharp chunk of it impales his thigh, pinning him to the charred ground. He looks back at the burning stronghold, with its remaining turrets firing at the gunships strafing the battlements, and an entire wall broken open to the enemy. Across the desert, the enemy come on in a dusty horde, half occluded by the dirty smoke thrown up by their bike tyres and smoking engines. Dirty silver on a dull, desecrated blue: the Night Lords, riding in wild unity.

He keeps his calm, speaking over the vox, demanding Titan support that he

knows isn't coming, despite the princeps' promises. They are betrayed, left here to die under VIII Legion guns.

Kallen looks at the plasteel bar driven through the meat of his leg, and gives it an experimental tug. Even with pain nullifiers flooding his bloodstream, the grind of metal against bone peels his pale lips back from his teeth in a snarl.

'Tagh gorugaaj kerez,' he calls out in Cthonic. *'Tagh gorugaaj kerez.'*

A howl sounds closer, mechanical and full-throated. Jump-jets, whining to a close.

'Veliasha shar sheh meressal mah?' asks a vox-voice in a language he doesn't speak. He knows the sound of Nostraman, tongue of the sunless world, but speaks none of it himself.

A shadow eclipses the world's poisoned sky. It isn't one of his brothers. It doesn't offer a hand to help him rise. Instead, it aims a bolter down at his face.

Kallen stares into the gun barrel, dark as the nothingness between worlds. His eyes flick left, where his own bolter lies in the rubble. Out of reach. With his leg impaled, it might as well be half a world away.

He unlocks his helm's seals and pulls it free, feeling the desert wind on his bleeding face. He wants his killer to see him smiling.

Sovan Khayral, Techmarine, bound to the Sons of Horus 101st Company. The bridge burns around him, shrouding his vision with greasy smoke the ventilators have no hope of scrubbing into something breathable. To compensate, his eye-lenses cycle through filters: thermal sight reveals nothing but smears of migraine heat; motion-sensing tracks the crew staggering and suffocating on the deck, and slouched in their seats.

The ship dying around him is the *Hevelius*, a destroyer of some renown in the Sons of Horus fleet. Like so many of the Legion's ships, she was at Terra when the Throneworld burned. The last sight Khayral had of the auspex display showed the flickering runes of the Death Guard fleet closing into killing range, herding the outnumbered and outgunned Sons of Horus vessels into showing their bellies. The Death Guard meant to finish this up close and personal. They'd get their wish, in a matter of moments.

Khayral's dense ceramite acts as a heat shield against the fires consuming all life around him. Retinal displays mark the temperature close to melting flesh and muscle from the bone. Sirens wail without respite, never needing to

pause for breath in the choking smoke.

He hurls himself at the control throne, throwing aside the slack corpse-to-be of the *Hevelius*' asphyxiating captain. Through the smoke, he keys a code into the console built into the armrest. Shipwide vox comes alive with a nasty, wet crackle. Circuits are melting all across the ship, diseased and rotting and burning.

'All hands,' he says through his helm's mouth-grille speaker. 'All hands, abandon ship.'

Nebuchar Desh, captain of the Sons of Horus 30th Company. He exhales a rancid coppery breath from his lungs, feeling bloody spit stringing between his teeth. One of his hearts has failed, now a cooling dead weight in his chest. The other beats like a heathen war drum, overworked and out of rhythm. His face is on fire with the pain of the lash wounds tiger-striping his flesh. The last whipcrack stole one of his eyes. The one before that opened his throat to the gristle.

He raises his sword in time for the whip to lash back, wrapping his fist and the hilt in a serpentine rush. A sharp pull tears the weapon from his grip. Disarmed, half-blind, breathless, Desh falls to one knee.

'For the Warmaster.' With his ravaged throat, the words are as strengthless as a whisper. His enemy answers with a bellow, loud enough to shake Desh's remaining eye in its socket. The wall of sound hits him with rippling physicality, denting and bending his armour plating in a series of resonating clangs. He stands against the wind for three erratic heartbeats until it breaks his balance, hurling him down and sending him skidding across the landing platform with a squeal of ceramite on rusting iron.

As he tries to rise, a boot presses down on the back of his head, grinding his mutilated face into the iron deck. He feels his teeth snapping in their sockets, gluing to the inside of his mouth with thick, corrosive saliva.

'For the—'

His benediction ends in a voiceless gurgle as the blade slides lovingly home into his spine.

Zarien Sharak, brother of the Sons of Horus 86th Company. A seeker, a pilgrim, a visionary – he seeks out the Neverborn, surrendering his flesh to daemons as a statue of meat and bone offered up for reshaping. He pursues

them, proves himself to them with sacrifices of blood and souls, forever seeking the strongest to ally with him within his own skin.

He no longer recalls how long he's been on this world, nor how long the World Eaters have been chasing him. He isn't here to run from them, he's here to stand and face them. They chase him now, laughing and howling up the side of the mountain. Sharak can hear the mad wetness in their words, and pays their frothing laughter no heed. His muscles burn; the last daemon to dwell within his flesh was cast out seven nights before, leaving him drained and anaemic in search of another. Soon, he knows. Soon.

His gauntleted hand grips the rocky ledge above. He has the briefest moment to smile at the bolt shells bursting stone into fragments nearby before he hauls himself up and out of the World Eaters' line of fire.

The shrine awaits him, as he knew it would, though it resembles nothing he'd expected. A single sculpture, weathered by mutable time, reduced to something stunted, formless, vague. Perhaps it had once been an eldar, in the era when this entire region of space had been the domain of that sick and weak alien breed.

You have found me, comes the voice in his mind. Sharak sweats at the silent sound. He turns, seeing nothing but the deformed statue and the endless expanse of glass desert in every direction.

Sharak, it beckons. Your enemies draw near. Shall we end them, you and I?

Sharak is no fool. He's whored his flesh as a weapon to devils and spirits alike, but he knows the secrets most of his brothers lack. Discipline is all it takes to maintain control. Even the strongest of the Neverborn is no match for the strength of a guarded, warded human soul. They could share his flesh, but never dominate his essence.

This daemon is strong. It has demanded much of him these last months, and here at the precipice, it offers everything he needs to save his life. But he is no fool. Caution and care are his watchwords when dealing with this realm's creatures. He's seen too many of his brothers become scorched husks, home to daemonic intelligence, all trace of themselves scoured and scraped away from within.

The World Eaters howl below – not like wolves, but fanatics. It's the lack of anything feral that makes it so sickening to hear, so much more of a threat. A beast's howl is a natural thing. A fanatic's cry is something of anger and tormented joy in equal measure, born of spite and twisted faith. He turns back

to the stunted stone pillar.

You've followed my voice for a hundred days and nights. You've made foes of brothers and cousins alike, just as I asked. And now you stand before the stone that sinners once carved in my image. You've proven yourself in every way I asked of you. You are worthy of this union. What now, Sharak? What now?

'I'm ready,' Sharak says. He bares his throat in a symbolic gesture, and pulls his helm free. He can hear the rattle and grind of ceramite over rock. The World Eaters are almost upon him.

The Joining is different each time. Once, it was a hammer blow to his sternum, as if the daemon wriggled its way through an invisible puncture hole into his body. Another time, it came as a burst of consciousness and sensuality – perceiving shadows of lost souls moving at the edges of his eyes, and hearing whispers on the wind from entire worlds away. This time, it strikes with heat, with a burning itch across the skin. He feels the Joining physically at first, a welcome violation of his flesh despite the bleeding and choking. It hurts down to his bones, weighing them down, driving him to his knees. His eyes turn next, hardening in their sockets, fusing to the bone behind. He taps them, scratches them, pulls at them... They are stones in his skull, edged by spines pushing from his face.

The strength is narcotic in its intensity. No combat drugs, no stimulant serum can match the energy feeding the fibres of his muscles. He starts to claw at his armour plating, no longer needing its protection. Ceramite peels away in chunks, making room for the chitinous ridges beneath.

Sharak looks past the pain, refocusing, seeking to calm his racing hearts. Control. Control. Control. It's only pain. It won't kill him. It can be overcome. It...

It hurts. It hurts more than the agonies of all past Joinings. It hurts to his core, beyond his flesh, hurting past the aches in his bones and into something deeper and truer and infinitely more vulnerable.

A lesson here, the voice says. Not all pain can be controlled.

Sharak turns, screaming through a mouth now crammed with knife-teeth. His jaw barely obeys him. His voice strangles off, killing the cry, and becomes someone else's laugh.

And not all enemies can be beaten.

Fear – fear for the first time in his life – floods through his organs in an

adrenal rush.

Erekan Juric, captain of Vaithan Reaver Squad. Las-fire slashes past him, ionising the air he breathes and leaving scorched smears across his armour. He ignores the incidental beams, firing back at the humans with his bolter kicking in his fist. The turbines on his back are heavy, broken things that no longer breathe flame. They stutter and sigh, exhaling smoke and bleeding promethium.

At his boots, his brother Zhoron is cursing him and thanking him, all at once. Juric drags Zhoron by the backpack, hauling him metre by metre up the gunship's ramp. Both of them leave a snail's trail of fluid along the ridged metal: Zhoron leaves a path of his blood from where his legs now end; Juric leaves a dripping track of leaking oil and fuel, with spent shell casings clanging down on the metal ramp by his boots. In the gunship's cargo bay, hastily loaded crates wait in ramshackle order, with wounded warriors in abundance.

'Shersan,' he voxes. 'Go.'

'Yes, captain,' comes the confirmation, flawed by vox-crackle. For a moment, Juric smiles, even under enemy fire. *Captain*. An echo of an era when the Legion still had a structure; from the time before they were hunted like dogs by those they'd failed.

With a shudder, the ramp starts its grinding rise. The gunship kicks, lifting off the ground on a cloud of engine wash and swirling dust. Juric releases Zhoron, tosses his empty bolter into the gunship's waiting cargo bay, and starts running.

'Don't,' his downed brother warns through pained hisses. *'Erekan. Don't do this.'*

Juric doesn't answer. He drops from the rising ramp, thudding back down onto the rocky ground, breaking stones beneath his boots. In his fists, both weapons whine as they accrue power in unison: the curving axe shivers with lightning dancing over its silver blade, while the plasma pistol trembles with the heating of its spinal coils. Bursts of gas relieve the pressure from muzzle vanes. It wants to fire. He knows this gun, and he knows its will. It wants to fire.

The humans are upon him now. He faces them at the heart of the burning fortress, while evacuating gunships rise into the grey sky. The first is a

woman, her face a canvas of fresh scars, invoking gods she scarcely understands. Two men run behind her, armed with salvaged twists of metal, their violated flesh different only from the woman's in the cartography of their mutilations, but the same in intent. A mob charges behind the three leaders, screaming and chanting, killing each other in a bid to reach him. Faith gives them courage, but their zealotry has driven them past the point of self-preservation.

Juric starts butchering them, saving the overkill of his pistol for what will surely come afterwards. Swing after swing takes him through the rabble, his axe never ceasing. Blood flecks his eye-lenses, and sizzles as it burns away from his energised blade. These lives are meaningless.

'Kahotep,' he breathes the name through his helm's vox-speakers. 'Face me.'

The reply is a psychic pulse of distant mirth. *+Now why would I want to do that?+*

Juric puts his boot through the chest of the last man standing, and runs even as the body falls. Another shadow darkens the sky as a gunship judders overhead, before the concussive boom of its engines lift it into the storm. As if in sympathy for the falling fortress, rain starts in a hissing torrent. It does nothing to fight the fires.

Breathless, Juric asks the vox: 'Who's still on the ground?'

Name-runes and acknowledgement pulses flicker across his retinal display, along with a chorus of voices. The stronghold will fall before the hour turns, and half of his men are still inside its sundered walls.

He crosses the courtyard, leaping the green-armoured bodies of his dead brethren, heading to one of the last remaining buildings. The defence turrets are silent now, all as broken as the battlements. Thousand Sons gunships, stark and dark in the rain, drift over the tumbled plasteel walls. Their battle tanks rumble in through holes torn in the stronghold's barricades. With them come phalanxes of the walking dead, directed by unseen hands.

'Kahotep,' he says again. 'Where are you?'

+Closer than you think, Juric.+

Yet another shadow blacks out the sky, this one cast by a vulturish gunship of old indigo and worn gold, not fleeing in shame but bearing down in triumph. Juric throws himself into the vague cover of a fallen wall, his eyes activating retinal runes on his eye-lenses.

‘I need anti-armour fire in the southern courtyard. Do we have anything left?’

The responses aren’t encouraging. At least more of his men are escaping. That’s what matters.

The Thousand Sons gunship burns the air with heat haze from its engines, hovering above the courtyard. Its spotlights cut down through the darkness, raking over the desecrated ground.

+Where did you go, Son of Horus? I thought you wanted to face me. Was I wrong?+

The gunship’s landing claws bite into the earth, grinding bodies beneath their weight. As the engines cycle down, the ramp beneath the cockpit starts to lower, a maw opening to breathe warriors into war.

Juric watches the Rubricae march forth. His targeting reticule leaps from enemy to enemy, detecting mismatching life signs that suggest everything and conclude nothing. Are these men alive or dead? Both, perhaps. Or neither.

‘Vaithan, to me.’

Three runes flash in response. It’ll do. It’s enough.

He wills his jump pack to fire, but the turbines’ response is a shudder and a shower of sparks. He’s grounded, and will need to do this the traditional way. Unopposed, three seconds is all it will take to close the distance. Four or five if they land more than one hit, which is likely.

Thayren strikes from above, landing boots-first into the phalanx of the walking dead. Dusty ceramite breaks beneath his impact and two automatons in the blue and gold of the Thousand Sons go down to the dirt, falling with no sound of protest.

Juric starts running the moment Thayren lands. For all his flaws, which he considers many and varied, he’s no coward. The Rubricae’s bolters bark in his direction the moment he rises into sight. Whatever independence death stole from them, it left them able to aim. Each explosive hit is a horse kick to his body, blasting ceramite shards away and sending him staggering, cursing the loss of flight. Temperature gauges flicker in alarm as his armour starts to burn with blue witch-fire.

He finishes the first by taking its head, cleaving the stylised warhelm free. Dust bursts from the neck in a thin cloud, with the smell of tombs best left untouched. With the breath of dust comes a faint, relieved sigh. Juric doesn’t

see the headless body fall; he's already moved on, axe leading the way.

Thayren duels two of the enemy, easily weaving aside from their heavy, precise swings. Juric is almost at his brother's side when protesting engines herald the arrival of Raxic and Naradar. Both hit the ground amidst the Thousand Sons formation, chainblades revving, bolt pistols crashing.

Juric staggers again, down on one knee. His axe falls from his grip. The witch-fire washes over his armour, refusing to burn out, digesting the ceramite and eating into the softer joints.

'Zhoron!' calls one of the other Reavers. Even through the pain biting at his joints, Juric tries to tell them it's futile. The Apothecary is already gone, evacuated on the way to Monument.

He tastes the acid of his own spit on his tongue, and hears the sorcerer's voice in his mind.

+*This is how a Legion dies.*+

The warship sits silent in space, her reactor cold, her engines dead. Battlements line her spine in a protrusion of castles and spires, with thousands of powerless gun turrets aimed up into the void. She drifts alone at the heart of an asteroid field, suffering occasional impacts against her scarred armour, each slow crash adding to the asymmetry of her scars.

She once carved her name through the galaxy at the vanguard of humanity's empire, a bloodthirsty herald of eminent domain. She once hung in the skies of Terra, laying waste to mankind's cradle. Now she lies still, abandoned in hell, hidden from those who covet her.

Her spirit is a tight, tiny essence in her inactive core; the only iota of sentience and life within the immense hulk. This soul, as true as any human life despite its artificial genesis, slumbers in the infinite cold. She waits to be reawakened, but holds no hope it will ever happen. Her sons fled her decks, leaving her here to grow frigid and silver with ice crystals, so far from the light of the closest sun that the star is nothing but a pinprick in the night.

She dreams a warrior's dreams: of fire, of pain, of blood soaking across steel while great guns roar. She dreams of the Many that once lived within her, and the warmth they took when they left.

She dreams of the times she broadcast her name to lesser vessels, shrieking *Vengeful Spirit* as she crippled and killed her enemies.

She dreams of the last words spoken in her presence, ordered in the low

growl of the one who'd come to command her. She knew him, as she knew all of the Many. He'd stood before her machine-spirit heartcore, a massive clawed hand against the glass of her brain. Her mind filled the cavernous chamber, shielded and armoured in dense metal. Liquids bubbled. Engines groaned. Pistons clanked. The sound of her thoughts.

Abaddon, she'd said to him. *We can still hunt. We can still kill. You need me.*

He couldn't hear her. He wasn't linked, so he could neither hear nor respond. She knew that had been intentional. He was deafening himself to her, to make the abandonment easier. He'd spoken the final three words, then. The last words she heard with the clarity of consciousness.

'Shut her down.'

Abadd-

Ezekyle the Brotherless, a pilgrim in hell. He stands at the edge of a cliff that reaches impossibly high into a sky the colour of madness and migraines, and he looks down at the armies warring below. Ants. Insects. A crusade of souls the size of sand grains, half-lost in the dust churned up from the hammering of so many thousands of boots and tank treads.

His armour is a patchwork panoply of scavenged ceramite, repaired countless times after countless battles. The armour he wore in the rebellion is long-since abandoned, left to rot aboard the warship he exiled into the ether. His weapons from that war are likewise gone: his sword broken in some nameless skirmish years ago, and the claw he stole from his father left at the Legion's last fortress, the bastion known to the Sons of Horus as Monument. He wondered if they still left the weapon on display with the Warmaster's stasis-locked remains, or if they'd given in to their fevered hungers and fought over the right to be its bearer.

There was a time he'd be down there with them, waging war at the vanguard, maintaining a steady stream of orders and listening to a flow of positioning reports, all the while killing with a smile in his eyes and a laugh on his lips.

From this distance, he has no hope of discerning which companies are embattled, or even if either side holds to any of the old Legions' structures. Even a cursory glance through the dust clouds is enough to betray the most obvious truth: the Sons of Horus are losing once more, against an enemy

horde that vastly outnumbers them. Individual prowess and heroism means nothing down there. A battle can break down into ten thousand duels between lone souls, but it isn't how wars are won.

The wind, always a treacherous companion in this realm, carries infrequent scraps of shouted voices from the valley below. He lets the sounds wash over him without guilt, as unconcerned for the screaming as he is for the way the wind drags at his long, loose hair.

Ezekyle crouches, gathering a fistful of the red sand that serves this world as worthless earth. His eyes never stray from the battle, instinct pulling at him despite having no investment in whoever lives and dies.

Far below him, gunships crow and caw above the battlefield, adding their incendiary spite to the dusty frenzy. Titans – at this distance no larger than his fingernails – stride through the choke, their weapon fire still bright enough to leave thread-thin blurs across his retinas, each one a little slice of razored light.

He smiles, but not because of the battle. What world is this? He realises he doesn't even know. His wandering takes him from planet to planet, avoiding his former brethren when he can, yet now he stands upon a world watching hundreds of his brothers dying, without even knowing the planet's name or what they sell their lives to defend.

How many of the men screaming and fighting and bleeding down in the valley would he know by name? Most, without a doubt. That, too, makes him smile.

He rises to his feet, opening his fist. The lifeless, glassy dust glitters away in the wind, catching the light from three weak suns before spreading in a thin burst, lost to sight.

Ezekyle turns his back on the battle, and leaves the cliff behind. Footprints mark his passage, but he trusts the wind to breathe his tracks into memory before anyone catches sight of them. He looks to the horizon, where seven vast stepped pyramids rise into the sky, shaped by hands neither human nor alien, but wrought solely by divine whim.

In this place in space, on every world he walks, desire and hatred forge the landscape more reliably than mortal ingenuity or natural tectonics. He's crossed bridges over oblivion, threaded between islands of rock hanging in the void. He's explored the tombs of xenos-breed kings and queens, and left priceless plunder to lie untouched in the dark. He's travelled the surface of

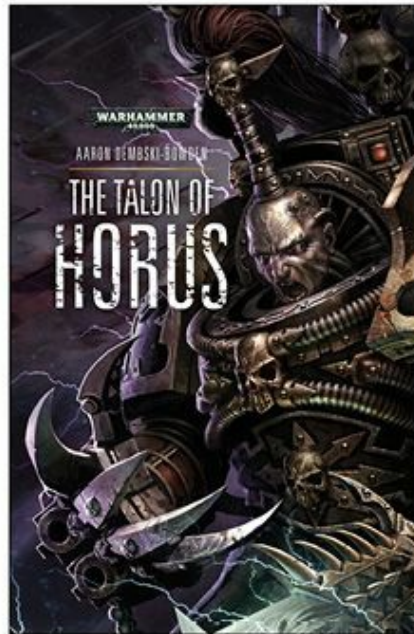
hundreds of worlds in this realm where the material and the immaterial meet to mate, scarcely paying heed to the extinction of the Legion he once led.

Curiosity drives him, and hatred sustains him, where once anger was all he needed. Defeat cooled the fires of that particular forge, however.

Ezekyle Abaddon, no longer first captain, no longer a legionary of the Sons of Horus, keeps walking. He'll reach the first great pyramid before the first of the three suns sets.



YOUR NEXT READ



THE TALON OF HORUS
by Aaron Dembski-Bowden

When Horus fell, his Sons fell with him. A broken Legion, beset by rivalries and hunted by their erstwhile allies, the former Luna Wolves have scattered across the tortured realm of the Eye of Terror. And of Abaddon, greatest of the Warmaster's followers, nothing has been heard for many years. Until now...

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SARCOPHAGUS

DAVID ANNANDALE

The true measure of my enemy's threat isn't just in the brute force at his disposal. Nor is it fully captured in the tally of victories and defeats. What lies behind events? Why are some actions taken and others not? The answers to those questions can reveal a power even more deadly than armies of millions could imply. Ghazghkull Thraka had annihilated our forces on Golgotha. What that showed of his means and ability was bad enough, but that he released me had even worse implications.

Sometimes questions alone point to dark revelations.

I was in Anaon, south of Hive Tartarus. It was a smaller hive on the coast of the Tempest Ocean. I had come for two reasons. One was to inspect the maritime defences. The fate of Helsreach still hung in the balance, and we had to prepare against the possibility of a second invasion from the water. The other reason was symbolic. That had always been an integral part of my duties as a commissar: to represent something more important than the individual in the uniform.

I never meant to become an icon, but circumstances were circumstances. The Second War for Armageddon had changed the meaning of my name. 'Yarrick' now meant 'the Saviour of Armageddon'. My thoughts about the truth of the matter were irrelevant. The legend existed. And now the Third War had come. My duty was to use every weapon at my disposal against the enemy. So if my presence was enough to motivate a population to a greater effort, then I would make sure I was seen. The people of Anaon had to be willing to sacrifice everything, down to their lives. Every single one. No one person, group or hive was more important than Armageddon.

So I flew in from Tartarus. I made my inspection. I met with the commanders of the military forces charged with the hive's defence. I made

myself visible. Anaon had suffered a few bombing raids, but had been spared a major assault. The people felt safe enough to take to the streets. I spoke to them. I exhorted. I made sure of their commitment to the war.

All was well and good, but the problems began when I had to return to Tartarus. A massive aerial battle was underway between the two hives. Air transport back to Tartarus was out of the question. I had to travel using terrestrial means.

I climbed out of my command car just inside the outer gate of Anaon, a massive configuration of entwined metal columns that resembled a fused manufactorum. I greeted Captain Veit Morena of the Steel Legion's 12th Company, 22nd Regiment. He was a short man and wiry. A good build for a tanker.

'Captain,' I said. 'I understand your squadron is being recalled to Hive Tartarus.'

'That's correct, commissar.'

'I would like to accompany you.'

He seemed taller suddenly. 'I would be honoured if you rode with me,' he said.

'Thank you.'

He led me to his Leman Russ Vanquisher, *Storm of the Wastes*. His driver, Alna Klaren, and gunner, Jaro Berne, snapped to attention. Like Morena, they were compact soldiers. They looked as if they had been born in the tank, their bodies shaped to its confines. Oil was so deep in the folds of their skin, it might as well have been pigmentation. The hull of *Storm* bore similar marks. It had been scored by centuries of exposure to the acidic rains of Armageddon.

The long line of tanks rolled out of Anaon at dusk with *Storm* at the head. The toxic cloud cover was heavy with the threat of rain. We made good time for the first few hours, rumbling along the pitted, cracked rockcrete route that linked Anaon to Tartarus. Morena and I alternated riding the hatch. At the northern horizon, in the direction of Tartarus, the night sky flashed and burned with reflected explosions. I saw the streaks of missiles, and the spiralling flame of stricken aircraft falling to earth. War's steady, pulsing thunder rolled over us, all the sounds of conflict melding into a muffled, arrhythmic, stuttering – *boom, b-boom-boom, b-b-boom*.

When I traded places with Morena, he looked into the distance. 'I make it

another two hours before we're under the worst of the fighting,' he said.

'Agreed.'

I thought that would be the point of greatest vulnerability for the squadron, but I was wrong.

An hour later, when I was again at the hatch, the beat of the war drum changed. A layer detached itself from the rest. It was more regular, and sounded closer. It was slow, deep as a continent. Even over the rattling of the Vanquisher, I could feel the beat's vibrations in my chest. It came from north-east of our position.

I peered into the dark as points of light appeared. They confused me at first. They looked like stars, an impossible sight on Armageddon; the planet's polluted sludge of an atmosphere was impenetrable. Then I realised that the stars were moving. The ground shook at measured, relentless intervals. The stars drew nearer. They were in pairs and a red the colour of flames. I could make out massive shadows in the night as we came closer. Mountains were slouching towards the road to Tartarus.

I dropped back down the hatch. 'Gargants!' I warned.

Even in the red illumination of the tank's interior, I saw Morena turn pale. His fear was not cowardice. It was an entirely rational response to the presence of the ork monsters of war. 'We can't fight those,' he said. Those words weren't cowardice either. They were the judgement of a commander who knew the limits of his force's strength. War will call upon us to do the impossible. It will force us to fight when there is no chance of survival, let alone victory. But we were not in a position where choice had been taken away from us. Duty calls for sacrifice, not stupidity.

'Berne,' Morena told the gunner. 'Vox Tartarus Command. Warn them.'

I climbed out of the hatch entirely to make room for Morena, riding on the turret and grasping the cupola with my power claw. We watched the progress of the Gargants. There were three of them, each a hundred metres high. They were still far from us, but we could see them more clearly now. They were lumbering, wide-bodied products of diseased invention; they had none of the majesty of Titans. But they provoked awe all the same. They gouted flame and smoke, towering over the landscape like brutal, shambolic gods. A single one could destroy a city. And they would reach the road long before we had passed them.

We looked further to the east. The land was dark, and there were no further

signs of ork forces accompanying the Gargants.

‘That way seems clear,’ Morena said. ‘I wish the terrain was better.’

We were in a region of bare, rocky hills. Perhaps at some point in Armageddon’s distant, eroded past, they had been verdant. The millennia had stripped them of all vegetation and worn them down until they had the dead, rounded shapes of bone. The tanks could handle their slopes, but we wouldn’t be able to see far ahead. Obstacles in the form of boulders would be common, and we’d be encountering them in the dark. Progress would be slow.

‘We have no other option,’ I said. If we stayed on the road, annihilation was a certainty. ‘We’ll need to make a wide sweep.’ Even more time lost.

Morena nodded and disappeared inside the tank to issue the commands.

We turned off the road onto terrain that was uneven, broken, hostile to our passage. It was riddled with the cracks of dried stream beds. Forward visibility in the tanks’ lamps shrank to the crest of the next hill. We headed east and did not turn until the earthquake rumble of the Gargants faded, their flames only pinpricks in the dark again. I guessed we were twenty kilometres off the road when Morena finally ordered a northward course again.

The hours passed. Dawn was still a long way off when the Gargants were finally to our south. Though we had been slowed, we were still faster than they were. I was so focused on the Gargants’ position that I barely noticed how close we had come to the aerial battle.

It came to us with a high-pitched snarl. I looked up. More lights in the dark, a swarm of them racing in from the north-east: two ork bomber squadrons, and ten aircraft that I could count. There was no question of evasion – we had been spotted and the bombers were coming right for us.

They were still some distance away when they began to release their incendiary bombs. The land vanished in a billowing cloud of flame. The night burned, heat racing ahead of the fire. My face blistered. The holocaust marched towards us, and there would be no escape.

I went down into the tank again and sealed the hatch. The others were already reacting to the threat. Morena was at the vox, coordinating the response. Heavy bolter turrets along the entire line of the tank squadron were turning to fire at the enemy fliers. Klaren gunned the engine, pushing *Storm* to full speed, terrain be damned. We had little defence against what was coming. If we were lucky, heavy bolter-rounds or a miraculous cannon shot might bring down a couple of planes. Speed was a gesture more than a

strategy. The weapons that were about to hit us did not require accuracy.

I braced, grasping the hatch ladder with my claw.

The booming voice of war had arrived and the bombs continued to fall. The light of sudden day burst through the driver's viewing block, bright enough to illuminate the full interior of *Storm*. Then the full force of the bombardment arrived and we drove into a high-explosive firestorm.

The vox exploded with cries. Morena was shouting into it. '*Tartarus Command, this is Scorched Earth Squadron, Twelfth of the Twenty-Second out of Anaon, transporting Commissar Yarrick. Our position—*'

The world erupted beneath *Storm of the Wastes*. For a moment, I had the impression of a gunship lifting off. Then we were turning end over end, and everything was violence and ruin.

And then everything was darkness.

Waking was a transition from one darkness to another. I left oblivion for pain and crushing pressure on my legs. Something was pushing my head and neck forwards, forcing me into a harsh bend. The blackness swam with sparks, but they were all from behind my eye. I could hear metal ticking, creaking and settling. Somewhere, a circuit crackled and fell silent. I didn't know where I was or why I hurt.

Nothing moved. Nothing changed. There was only the pain, growing worse, and the weak muttering of wreckage. Then my head cleared and I knew what had happened.

It's not important, I told myself. *What's important is knowing what is happening now*. Did I even know which way I was facing? No. Was I the only survivor?

'Captain Morena,' I called. 'Klaren. Berne.'

No answer.

I waited a minute before trying again, several more times, and louder. Nothing.

They're dead, then. What about the rest of the squadron? Learn the situation.

I kept quiet and listened. Beyond the groans of the dead tank, there were sounds from the outside world. The war thunder continued. It was distant once more. No combat in the immediate vicinity. I kept listening, straining to focus beyond my pain and interpret what I could hear and what I could not.

There were no engines or guns. No hammering of tools. No sounds at all of any activity in the close proximity of the hull.

The conclusion was a simple one. The ork bombers had done their job well. The tank squadron had been destroyed.

A further conclusion: I was alone.

I confronted the temptation to close my eye and return to the deeper dark. I judged it unworthy. I had not earned the right to rest. Not yet. After Golgotha, when Thraka had taken me captive to his space hulk, he had thrown me into a pit. I had had every reason to believe I was about to die. During my fall, that was when I had known several seconds of rest. Those moments would still have to suffice. Perhaps, once Thraka was dead, I would win the reward of the truest sleep. Not now, though. My duty was far from discharged. Armageddon called.

Besides, I was very uncomfortable.

I tried to move. I could turn my head from side to side, for all the good it did me. I was still hunched, my back protesting and darkness was everywhere. My legs were pinned. My left arm was blocked if it moved more than a few centimetres to my side. My right, though, had a good degree of range. I raised the claw up and down, left and right. I imagined that I was caught in a fold of the wreckage. My right arm reached into what had been the open space of the tank's interior.

Though my legs were trapped, I didn't think they were broken. They hurt, and I wasn't going anywhere. But I could feel and move my toes. When I struggled, there was no sudden burst of fresh agony.

You're intact. The Emperor protects. He truly does. So how will you use His blessing, old man? Show your gratitude. Get out.

I reached forwards with the claw and struck crumpled metal right away. Keeping its digits closed, I brought it next to my side, then slid it up and down against the barrier. My legs were held, not pulped, so there had to be a gap, small though it was, in the wreckage that gripped me. It took me several attempts. I was trying to accomplish a task by touch with a hand that was not mine. At last, though, the claw slid forwards a few centimetres. I worked it forwards until it was wedged. Then I paused.

Are you sure you want to do this? You have no idea of the condition of the wreckage. You don't know what will happen if you disturb the present equilibrium.

True. I might contrive to crush myself properly. Then again, did I have a choice?

No. You don't.

I opened the claw as slowly as I could. Metal protested. I pried the three metal digits apart. The corpse of the Vanquisher cried out. The pressure eased on my legs. I pulled. My feet moved. I lurched my torso to the right while keeping the claw in place. I was pivoting on my own arm, and now I did get some new bursts of agony.

I didn't stop. I risked opening the claw all the way. The wreckage shrieked. I heard snaps. I bent my legs and threw all my weight to the right, moving a bit further. I tested it, scrabbling with my feet until I found a purchase and making sure my boots wouldn't slip.

Ready?

I whispered, 'The Emperor protects.'

I shut the claw with a snap and propelled myself to the side, sliding out of the trap a second before it slammed shut.

I tumbled free through the space, landing on hard angles. I bought myself some new bruises.

I sat up, working the kinks out of my neck. Feeling around with my left hand, I learned the contours of my prison. Jagged angles and heavy masses pressed in on me. Not everything I found was metal. I discovered a leg that appeared to be sticking out of a solid mass of metal and broken bodies. My hand sank into something that felt like a broken sphere. It was very wet. I didn't know whose head it was.

I had room to crouch, but not stand. I could move a few steps in any direction. In the centre of the space, I found a cylindrical depression. This, I guessed, had been the turret hatch. *Storm of the Wastes* was upside down. I would not be leaving that way.

I sat down on something level and rested, thinking. Trying to make my way up would mean going through the chassis. There was little hope there, unless it had already been split open. Was it night or day? I had no idea how long I'd been unconscious. A few more hours and I could assume there was daylight outside the tank. I'd know then if there were any tears in the armour I could exploit. I didn't feel any stirring of air, though. Upwards did not seem like a fruitful route.

The flanks, then. For the time being, I put aside considerations of where the

armour was thickest or thinnest. I could punch through a lot with the claw. But not anything. And my leverage was limited.

I thought about the driver's compartment. The viewing block was too small to crawl through, but any gap might be something I could enlarge. I worked my way around the circumference of the space again and tried to orient myself. Where was the gunner's seat? Which way was the cannon? Which way were the engines?

I failed. The damage was too severe. Nothing was recognisable. Whatever direction I chose could lead me towards the engines, and I had no desire to start pounding at them. I was lucky that they had not exploded, and that I wasn't wading through promethium waiting for the first spark. I was already entombed. I was not ready to be cremated.

The thought of *Storm of the Wastes* as a coffin gave me pause. I stopped moving and made myself take the time to work through that possibility. The air smelled of grease and blood. There was a trace of smoke. I was not short of breath; the space was small. Enough time had passed, and I had exerted myself enough, that my lungs would be labouring if I were sealed in hermetically.

Air was getting in. That did not imply I would be getting out. It could mean that I would be able to breathe until I died of thirst.

What about rescue?

I chose not to work through those possibilities just yet. I would have to rely too much on outside circumstances. I was already at the mercy of plenty. Time enough to think about that later.

Up, then? I thought.

Yes. Up.

That was the only direction of which I had any certainty.

I felt above my head, looking for any hint of weakness. I found an area where the wreckage seemed a bit more sparse. I swiped at it with the claw. A metal tangle came down on me. I brushed it off, then began in earnest. I pulled my arm back as far as I could. The energy of the claw built up. I punched upwards.

The bang shook the entire vehicle. I paused, waiting for the explosion or the final collapse. When neither occurred, I struck again. Then again. And again.

I settled into a rhythm. Each blow worked out a bit more frustration. For the first few minutes, I made progress. The decking buckled under my attacks. I

had to reach higher. Soon I could straighten up.

That was the extent of my victories. Though I was tearing through layers of metal, I was also smashing the plating, mechanism and armour together to create a denser mass. A moment came when I could no longer reach my target. I tried to climb, but there was nothing I could perch on with enough stability to punch again. Even if I clung to the edge of the hole in the decking, there wasn't enough room to get the claw past my own arm.

I sat back down. I had gone as far as I could in this direction. My options had been reduced to one, and it was poor one: rescue.

I examined the facts. Remaining dispassionate was not difficult. Between the battering I had taken and the one I had just given, I was exhausted.

There would be a search for me, and to the degree that was possible in the middle of the worst ork assault in Armageddon's history. I had last been seen in Anaon, and it was known that I was travelling with the tanks of Sixth Company. Morena's route was known too.

But we had gone many kilometres off that route to avoid the Gargants towards the region of the air war. I could still hear the sounds of conflict, though I couldn't tell from that rumble how close the battle was to my position, nor its nature. Was the struggle for control of the airspace near Tartarus still ongoing? Or was I hearing the siege of the hive itself by the Gargants? I had no beacon. The vox was in fragments. There would be no transmission coming from the destroyed squadron.

So where did that leave me? I would have to count on the burned squadron being spotted by an overflight of this particular patch of hills. From the air, I doubted there would be anything to suggest the chance of a survivor. I was also having to count on *Storm of the Wastes* not having met its end so far from the rest of the squadron that it would be missed. How far had we rolled? How far had the others travelled? There was no way to know.

But *if* someone were to see the wrecks, and a land-based search followed, there would be nothing to say there was a survivor. Nothing to suggest that prying open the destroyed armour would be worthwhile. Unless there was an unmistakeable signal.

That was the one thing I could do. I couldn't reach high enough to strike and do any damage, but I could ring the hull like a bell. So I did. Three rhythmic blows. I stopped to listen, counting to twenty, then three more blows.

I fell into the new rhythm. I might very well not be able to hear searchers

until they were actually working on the tank. For all I knew, I could be the last human on Armageddon, fruitlessly hitting the interior of his coffin. But I could not risk silence, in case there *was* help nearby. So I hit three times and listened. Hit three times, listened.

On and on. For hours. How many, I had no way of telling. My existence reduced itself to this one task of striking metal in pitch blackness, a task I had no reason to expect would be successful. I refused to accept the likelihood of failure. If I did, the temptation to rest would become overwhelming. I lived from second to second. I found the energy to strike the hull three times, and then again for another three. I tried to shut out all thoughts of the past and future. The eternal present was all that mattered. Despite my efforts, though, I could not ignore the irony of my situation. The Saviour of Armageddon, dead in an overturned tank. A glorious end, truly.

I did laugh a bit. That helped.

Time wore on, and my bursts of dry laughter died away. My throat was parched. I could barely move my arm. My body demanded sleep, but I refused. Then, quite suddenly, I heard noises outside. Engines. Loud, coughing, rattling engines. And over their din, closer to the hull, voices. Guttural. Savage.

Orks.

I had poor options. A choice of deaths, but the decision was an easy one. I would go down fighting. I smashed at my tomb with renewed force. After another three blows, I heard pounding from the other side. And then the unmistakable grind of metal cutting metal. The greenskin voices sounded excited.

I reached to my belt and activated my shield generator. The air around me thrummed as the power field sprang into being. I drew my bolt pistol, building up the charge of my bale eye. I waited. I was eager to begin. The moment the orks broke through, the situation would change. I had no illusions about my chances, but I would make the best of them.

Sparks showered into my cell. The pitch of the grinding rose to a scream, and a chainblade broke through.

Still I waited for the enemy to free me and provide a clear shot at his bestial face.

The blade worked its way around in a rough circle about a metre wide. The cuts joined. The blade withdrew. A heavy blow from the other side knocked

the sliced plating inside.

Armageddon's grey daylight was blinding after the hours of total darkness.

I fired my eye as the ork poked its head through the hole. The las-burst shot through the greenskin's right eye, incinerating its brain, and it fell away. There was a growl, and then another ork appeared. I blew its skull off with the pistol.

The orks roared with outrage. Fists pounded against the hull. For the moment I saw nothing except a circle of brown sky. Heavy booted feet thudded across the hull towards the hole. Firing again, I took off the brute's arm just as it began to aim.

The attack began in earnest now. They fired around the hole at every angle. Bullets ricocheted around the interior. My shield absorbed their kinetic energy and they fell. A grenade arced in. I caught it and threw it back outside. It exploded in mid-air, and I was rewarded with roars of outrage that turned into roars of pain.

The orks kept coming and I kept shooting them. I was trapped, but they couldn't come at me where they could see me more than one at a time. I could hold them off indefinitely... until I ran out of clips for the pistol. Even then, I would take them apart with the power claw if they tried to come inside.

Indefinitely. Not infinitely.

I knew what the end was. I dismissed it. I would kill them one by one in the same eternal present as when I had banged my claw against the hull. They kept coming, wearing me down closer and closer to final exhaustion.

As I fought, and shot, and killed, I wondered why their attacks were so limited. I didn't hear any engines, so perhaps these orks were without heavy armour. But none of them tried to burn me out with flamers. A well-placed rocket would have ended the struggle in an instant. Instead, they appeared to be limiting themselves to shotguns and blades.

But in the end, they tired of the game, and decided to change the rules. The grinding started up again. When the blade poked through, it began to cut the outline of a much larger hole. I would lose my shelter. I would be cornered with no protection except my power field, and concentrated fire would overwhelm it.

I changed my bolt pistol's clip and waited for the endgame.

The huge roar of an approaching aircraft shook the air. I heard the shriek of

launched missiles. Explosions. Howls from the orks. A confused stampede. The aircraft came closer. There was the blast of retrorockets as it landed. And then the sounds of a perfect, cleansing slaughter.

I leapt and grabbed the edge of the gap with my claw. Hauling myself up, I climbed out of the coffin.

Storm of the Wastes had come to rest in a narrow plain between the hills. The wreck of one of the other tanks lay on the slope to my left. A dozen metres to my right, an obsidian Thunderhawk gunship sat on level ground. A squad of Space Marines marched through the battlefield. It was full day, but they looked like darkest thoughts of the night. They were horned monsters. Though they carried bolters, most of them were killing orks with blades that grew out of their forearms.

Black Dragons.

Judging from the number of bodies I saw, there had been a few hundred orks to start with. I had lost track of how many I had killed. In the initial moments of their attack, the Black Dragons had cut them down by half. The rest fought back, but not for long.

The massacre was over in just a few minutes.

The captain of the Black Dragons came to meet me as I jumped down from the Vanquisher's upturned hull. He towered over his battle-brothers. The adamantium edge of his crescent horn gleamed in the sun. The coating of his bone blades was dark with greenskin blood. His flesh seemed more reptilian than human. In appearance, the Space Marine approached the daemonic.

This being too, I reminded myself, had a role to play in service to the Emperor.

The Black Dragon nodded. 'Volos,' he said. 'Second Company. An honour, commissar.'

'My thanks, Captain Volos. I am greatly in your debt. How did you find me?'

'If we had flown through this area before you were attacked, I don't think we would have,' he said. 'We spotted the orks.'

I took in the bodies stretching away on all sides. 'So large a group in the middle of nowhere would have caught the eye,' I agreed.

'A large raiding party, yes,' he said. 'I am puzzled by their overall weakness, though. There are no warlords here. And their weapons...'

'...are very limited,' I finished.

He must have seen something on my face. ‘Commissar?’ he asked.

An ork force weak in strength but large in numbers. Easily spotted. One that could not simply blow up the tank they were attacking; one that would be just possible for a single human being to hold off. And why were the orks here? I had called them to the specific tank, pinpointing my location for any searching eyes, but I could not understand why this force had been in the area at all. After the bombers did the job, there was little to scavenge. There would have been no reason for any infantry to be diverted to this location.

Unless *I* was the reason.

I remembered Morena’s last vox transmission, alerting Imperial forces to my presence. I wondered now if someone else had heard it, if my enemy had sent this force knowing I was here. If they had sent these orks, whose constant fire showed they were not trying to capture me and also did not have the means of an assured kill.

I had no answers, only possibilities. But the questions were enough.

They were their own revelations, and they gave me that much more of the measure of my enemy.

I finally answered Volos. ‘I was just gathering my thoughts, Captain Volos,’ I said. ‘Learning what I must to win this war.’



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THE PURITY OF IGNORANCE

JOHN FRENCH

‘The darkest secrets are those we hide from ourselves.’

– Sebastian Thor, words spoken
on the Road to Terra

‘Do you know why we do what we do?’

‘No, sir. That is not my... I do not need to know.’

‘We do it for the survival of humanity.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Lieutenant Ianthe, Second Squadron, Agathian Sky Sharks, sat at attention, hands on her knees, eyes straight ahead. The man sitting across from her was a priest, his bulk covered by an off-white robe. Crude tattoos spidered the knuckles of his hands, and hard, knowing eyes glittered in the wrinkled lump of his face. He was called Josef, or that was the name he had introduced himself with. Now after half an hour talking with him, Ianthe thought he seemed more senior sergeant-at-arms than a priest in the service of an inquisitor. But what did she know of the Inquisition?

‘Do you understand what that means?’ said Josef, as though hearing her thoughts in her silence.

‘If we fail, so does the Imperium,’ she said.

‘True, but not the whole truth. We fail and there will be no humanity to be called an Imperium. Not here, not on distant Terra, nowhere. There will just be a thing that was once called mankind, weeping as it eats itself and the darkness laughs. You understand me, Ianthe?’

‘Sir,’ she said.

He cocked his head, and scratched his stubble-covered jaw. She did not

move her own gaze but she could feel his eyes moving across her face, searching for something, watching for something.

‘Tell me about your service before this,’ he said at last.

‘Sir?’ she began, and fought to keep the frown from her face. ‘My apologies, sir, but I thought we had covered that.’

He shrugged, muscle and fat rippling under the folds of his robe.

‘Humour me,’ he said.

She listed her record, passing through the last twelve years of her life in clipped bites of information: Karadieve, command of platoon in the assault on the pirate holds; Anac, command forward reconnaissance units, wounded; Grey Klave, command primary assault squadron. And on until her record ran out, and the silence formed again between them.

‘And now you are here, with us,’ he said.

‘Yes, sir,’ she nodded, and then felt her expression twitch before she could stop it.

‘You have something to say – say it, lieutenant,’ said Josef.

Ianthe nodded, licked her lips and then spoke. ‘Is this interview related to the mission, sir? I have been over my record several times, and my appraisal of the soldiers under my command.’

‘It is related to the mission in every way, lieutenant. In every way.’ He paused, watching her. ‘Is there something else you wish to say?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘It’s just that I have never had the honour of serving the Inquisition, sir. It is...’

‘Irregular?’ he finished for her, and nodded. For a second she thought she saw a glimmer of something like sorrow in his eyes. ‘That it is,’ he said, and there was an edge of weariness in his voice. Then he stood, shaking out his creased robe, and rolling his shoulders like a pugilist before turning and moving towards the door. ‘Ready your squad. It is time.’

Spire Mistress Sul Nereid woke with a scream between her teeth. For an instant the nightmare smudged her sight with bloated flesh and blood-covered chrome, and she felt the acid kiss of vomit rise to her mouth. Then it was gone, draining away with her panic as the dawn light filled her eyes. She shifted, feeling the silk padding of the throne at her back, and the smooth silver of its arms beneath her hands. She stretched, smiling. She had fallen asleep in her chair, just as she had when she was a child and used to sneak

into the throne room at night. She laughed, and the sound slid out to meet the sun rising behind the crystal walls of her room.

The throne room sat at the tip of the hive spire. Crystal walls set in frames of polished adamantium encircled a single open space within. A flight of shallow steps led from the foot of the throne, each one carved from a single piece of dark wood. The pelts of a thousand white felids had been seamlessly stitched to create a rug that flowed down from her throne to spill onto the open space beneath. Slender columns of ivory rose from the black glass floor, each holding a frozen explosion of gemstones and light, which glittered in rainbow hues as they spun in suspensor fields. Beyond the clear walls the cloud layer ran to the arc of the sun slipping above the horizon; the crowns of cumuli rose above a soft sea of white and folded purple and orange. At the apex of the sky's dome stars winked against the last darkness of the night. In the far distance the pinnacles of Tularlen's other hive spires rose from the plateau of clouds like shards of diamond set on cushions of spun sugar. Nereid sighed at the sight.

This moment, this perfect moment, had been hers ever since she had inherited the spire throne from her father. He had treasured both the view and the position it represented, clutching both close to him even as he had fought the doom that claimed him at last. It had been a sad end, but it did mean that the pleasure of waking to this world was Nereid's now.

‘Are you hungry, mistress?’

Saliktris' voice came from just behind and beside her throne. She half turned her head, enough to catch the impression of the majordomo standing just on the edge of sight, clad in plum-and-crimson velvet, his smile an echo of her own. He was always there, just where he needed to be.

‘I am...’ she replied, and shifted on her seat, tilting her head to one side as she thought. ‘But...’

‘Some music...’ said Saliktris, smoothly.

Nereid's smile widened.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That is it. The arrangement from last night would be...’

‘Perfection,’ he said, and her smile widened. Others might object to a servant talking so freely with his betters, but Saliktris always knew what to say, and what she wanted. She did not know what she would do without him.

The spire throne was no doubt something that many coveted. The House of Tears, the Extrabati and their Mechanicus backers, the Sons of Lupolis, and

all the other lesser power blocs regarded this seat, and the power it represented, with a hungry eye. That jealousy had been one of the poisons that had marred her ascension, that and the riots burning in the factory core of the hive, and the Administratum's suddenly inflated tithes of manpower and materiel. Apparently there was a war, and Tularlen had to feed every scrap of flesh and wealth into its gullet.

No matter that it was draining the wealth of the hive houses, no matter that discontent was curdling to violence in the drone masses, no matter that it could not be done, the Imperium demanded and would not be denied. Nereid shuddered as the memory rose in her mind, and her mouth twisted as though she had just bitten into a rotten fruit.

The expression and memories faded, and she smiled again.

'Mistress...' whispered Saliktris, and she looked up.

The ensemble players appeared as her smile bloomed. They filed out into the space beneath the throne, thirty-six men and women robed in white, their instruments gleaming in the brightening day.

'Do you wish for dancing?' asked Saliktris, and all she had to do was nod.

Two of the thirty-six players stepped forwards, their limbs trailing tapers of silk that shimmered like the inside of a seashell. They halted and stretched their limbs, becoming statues poised on the edge of movement. The first notes rose from the instruments, blending as layers of melody harmonised from tuned strings, silver flutes and taut drumheads. They began to sing, voices rising to meet the swelling chords of the instruments.

Nereid closed her eyes and tilted her face back as the sound pulled her senses up through the greyness and into a world of unfolding glory. This was what the dull words of preachers never could convey; this was what it was to touch the divine.

She opened her eyes just as the dancers started to move.

'Wait,' she said. The dancers froze, bodies suspended in mid-movement as though they hung on strings in defiance of gravity. The music from the ensemble did not cease, but circled through harmonies, holding just beneath the peak of its ascent.

Nereid turned her head slightly to the right, and a mirrored platter appeared, heaped with glistening fruit, each one a jewel taken fresh from its tree. A chalice sat beside it, the wine within almost black in the daylight brilliance. She reached out, took the chalice and raised it to her lips. Warm liquid kissed

her mouth, filling her nose with sweet scents and the promise of endless days of laughter. She plucked a fruit from the platter and popped it into her mouth. It burst, and the flavours of the wine and the juice briefly warred before fusing into a taste that slid through a thousand shades of sweetness.

Nereid swallowed, and breathed out.

‘Now,’ she said, and raised the chalice to her lips again, ‘dance.’

The gunship dropped through the deepening blue of the sky, its wings still glowing with the heat of atmospheric transition. White shark’s teeth snarled across its fuselage. Rocket pods hung beneath its hunched wings, and kill-marks marched in rows beneath the cockpit. Clouds of sensor baffles crackled through the air around it in an invisible sphere. Any weapon systems looking its way would see nothing but static.

Ianthe felt the gunship shake around her as it banked and levelled out. She allowed herself a smile as adrenaline spiked fire in her muscles. They were almost at the target.

God-Emperor grant me strength enough for this, she thought.

‘Five minutes to target. Atmosphere protocols active.’ The pilot’s voice echoed through the gunship. Amber light soaked the soldiers as Ianthe and her squad rose from the benches running down the sides of the compartment. Hands checked rebreathers and sealed visor plates. They were all veterans, all seasoned in battle and hardened in warzones that had left them alive and taken others.

Beside her the preacher called Josef heaved himself to his feet. He shrugged, settling the ill-fitting pressure suit he wore under his robes. He slung his warhammer between his shoulders, and started to fit his rebreather over the bottom half of his face. Ianthe caught his eye, and he nodded to her as she checked the lascarbine strapped across her torso. She glanced at the two figures that remained seated beside the rear hatch.

Inquisitor Covenant was utterly still, dark eyes open, his great sword resting in its scabbard across his knees. The red lacquer on his cuirass seemed black in the amber light. The impulse-linked psycannon mounted on his shoulder moved in a slow arc, back and forth, back and forth, like the head of a patient predator. Beside him sat a woman, her sword drawn, the point resting on the deck. She wore a hessian shift over a studded black body glove, bolt pistols strapped to her thighs, the lower half of her face hidden by a double-plugged

breath-mask. A hennaed cross cut across the upper half of her face beneath a shaven scalp. Battered armour plates covered her shins and forearms, red lacquer clinging to the pitted metal. Ianthe thought she saw the emblem of the Adepta Sororitas on the armour plates, but that made no sense; the woman looked more like a wanderer or a bounty hunter than a holy warrior. Ianthe had heard Josef call her Severita, and the name seemed to fit her intensity. Severita looked up as though sensing Ianthe's gaze. Her eyes were green. For a second Ianthe blinked at the feeling of familiarity in that look.

'From the lightning and the tempest, our Emperor, deliver us,' Josef growled across the squad vox. The soldiers looked towards him, and his voice rose, rolling with strength. 'From plague, temptation and war, our Emperor, deliver us.' She could almost feel the words sinking into them as he spoke, stealing doubt, firing blood. 'From the scourge of the Kraken, our Emperor, deliver us,' he intoned, and as he spoke the next words the voices of the soldiers rose with him.

'From the blasphemy of the fallen, our Emperor, deliver us.'

'Two minutes to target,' came the pilot's voice, cutting through the prayer. *'Depressurising now.'* The rear hatch began to open, air rushing out of the growing crack. Bright golden light cut into the compartment.

'From the begetting of daemons, our Emperor, deliver us.'

The door gunners released the side doors, and pulled them back. Rotor-cannons folded out on weapon mounts, barrels jutting out into the thin air as the gunners set themselves. Ianthe could see green holo-light flaring in their targeting monacles.

'From the curse of the mutant, our Emperor, deliver us.'

The spires of the hives rose from the cloud layer around them, glinting like spear-tips.

'That thou wouldst bring them only death.'

Covenant stood, the air racing through the compartment catching his topknot as he turned to face the open rear hatch.

'That thou shouldst spare none.'

The air buzzed as grav-chutes activated.

'Thirty seconds to target, weapons live,' said the pilot. The Valkyrie banked and Ianthe braced herself as the view beyond the nearest side door became the plateau of polluted clouds. Severita was standing beside Covenant, both steady as the world turned around them.

‘That thou shouldst pardon none.’

The rotor-cannons began to spin, barrels blurring. Beyond the right-hand door the crystal flanks of a spire tip came into view, so close Ianthe could see the silver angel set on its point.

‘We beseech thee, destroy them.’

The rotor-cannons fired. Casings showered out, falling into the dawn light as flames breathed from their muzzles. Sheets of crystal shattered, fragments spinning outwards on a wave of explosive decompression. The gunners panned the cannons across the spire’s flank as the gunship turned, thrusters and engines screaming as it cut its speed.

At the rear hatch, Covenant and Severita braced as the gunship tilted, hanging against the wind above the broken summit. The rotor-cannons ceased fire. Covenant leapt, Severita a heartbeat behind him. Six troopers followed, and then Ianthe was at the rear hatch, and the sky was screaming around her as she jumped into the dawn light.

The flank of the spire rose to meet her, jagged holes yawning wide. Beneath her, Covenant, and Severita triggered their grav-chutes, and seemed to jerk upwards as their fall slowed just before they hit the spire side. Ianthe and her squad activated their chutes. She felt force thump through her gut as the chute activated, and then she was through the splintered windows, and the throne room poured into her eyes.

The musicians nearest the window died first, falling as rotor-cannon rounds punched through the crystal and tore them apart. Nereid shrieked in shock and alarm. A black shadow was blocking out the sunlight. Air rushed through the shattered window as the throne chamber depressurised. A singer tumbled backwards into the sky, arms thrashing, the rushing air snatching away the broken harmony of his song as he fell. Figures were dropping through the broken windows, brutes in metal with blunt helms, moving with disordered speed. They were dark blurs, eyes burning coals in faces drooling blood. The reek of iron and ashes filled Nereid’s nose.

This was wrong, this was not as it should be.

‘No! Please, no!’ she shouted, wine spilling from her mouth as she twisted towards Saliktris. The majordomo had twisted back with the explosion, but was still at her side. She caught the impression of his slim face, as thin and beautiful as a white flame. ‘Saliktris, please...’

‘Yes, my mistress,’ he said, and the song rose.

The cacophony sliced into Ianthe’s squad. Pain exploded behind her eyes. Sound vibrated through her flesh and bones to shake her eyes in her skull. To her left, one of her squad dropped as though felled by an axe blow. Ianthe stumbled, for a moment blind. Discordant notes bored into her. Colours exploded with migraine brightness in her sight. Her skin was writhing, a creature with its own will as it strangled her flesh.

‘No,’ she growled. The word pulled her to her feet and cleared her sight.

Flesh and chrome filled the space before her. Vast machines of blood-daubed metal towered like metal trees towards the ceiling’s apex. Flared pipes and clusters of vox-speakers sprouted from their sides. Figures stood on the blood-slicked floor. Shining metal staples ran across their skin, and soiled silk clung to their limbs. Bundles of tubes poured from their mouths and circled their necks, rising to hoods of polished pipes above their heads. Others plucked at strings stretched between their half-fused torsos. Amongst them spindle-limbed dancers spun, cartwheeling through the throng, lidless eyes rolling in screaming faces, scythe limbs arching.

And beyond and above the crowd of horrors a throne rose. Flayed fur and skin draped its steps, crusted with blood and vomit. A figure sat on the throne, bloated to monstrous size, bulk straining against the chair’s structure, tatters of bright silk hanging from its form like a half-sloughed skin. A web of tubes and cables coiled over it, vanishing into its bulk like worms burrowing into mud. Trays of red, glistening matter sat beside it, and Ianthe saw crimson on the lips of a small mouth set in the boulder-like head. It was a nightmare vision of careless joy sculpted in machinery and flesh. A vision that was now tearing apart.

Some of the throng were falling, dying as the explosive decompression ruptured lungs. Blood-mist aspirated from their mouths as they shuddered and folded. Ianthe fired, hosing las-fire across the room as she forced herself forwards. Some of her squad came with her, firing in ragged bursts. Covenant and Severita were amongst the press, bodies falling before them like wheat before a storm.

‘Ianthe!’ she heard Josef shout her name over the vox, and jerked around just in time to see a scythe-like blade whip down towards her face. There was no time to avoid it. She raised the lascarbine, and the blade clanged on the

case of the gun. An emaciated figure was looming over her on thin, double-jointed legs. It shrieked, sacs of skin bulging in its throat. Ianthe felt the sound shake through her. The scythe blade sheared away from the gun, and the stick-limbed figure twisted to cut again. Ianthe slammed the muzzle of her gun into it. Bones shattered under the blow. She pulled the trigger, and the thing was falling, its flesh cooking in the spray of las-fire. Ianthe brought the butt of the gun down to shatter skull and brain. She was breathing hard.

Fire and blood blurred her sight. To her left she could see a clutch of her troopers, already fewer than they were seconds before. They were shooting, but they had stopped moving, their fire ragged. Beyond them, deeper in the churning press, were Severita and Covenant. Severita's sword was a spinning blur orbiting her as she stepped and ducked and cut, never pausing, each movement a slice that severed limbs and bisected bodies. Covenant carved his path at her side, the great sword a sheet of lightning in his hands as it cut, and cut. The psycannon on his shoulder was spinning and firing, punching figures from their feet behind the inquisitor as he cut down those in front of him. It was a sight to light the dark of despair, two warriors moving amidst a tide of horror as death reached for them. It was also about to end.

Fog was rising in the room, pink with the spray of blood, shivering with the surge of noise ripping from the throats of the dying. Ianthe saw the fog coil across the skin of the dead and flow up the steps of the throne. Something was happening, something that she could feel buzzing on the edge of sight and hissing in her ear. A heat-haze blur was shaking the air. The smell of cinnamon and burnt hair reached her nose through her breath-mask. She swayed. The sound of the screams was softening, soothing her into acquiescence.

There was nothing to do...

The future just required her to let it happen...

For once in her life there was no weight to bear, no duty or responsibility...

All she needed to do was be...

+Ianthe... Ianthe... Ianthe...+ breathed a voice that was everywhere.

Laughter, soft but brittle, itched in her awareness. The carnival of violence around her had slowed. Blades traced lazy arcs through limbs. Blood-drops fell like jewels. Skin and bone parted.

She raised her eyes to the throne. The figure on it was a blurred haze, like an image painted in smeared pigment. As she watched, a form detached itself

from the enthroned figure, pulling shape to itself as it stepped down towards the floor. It moved slowly, languidly, its limbs sheathed in iridescent skin, its eyes black pools beneath a billowing mane of violet hair. The figure's face turned towards Ianthe and its eyes seemed to swallow the world.

+Ianthe... You poor, wronged child...+ The voice purred in her skull. +How much has been taken from you...+ And the world was falling backwards and the memories of lives she had forgotten she had lived were dancing in front of her...

...She was coming through a rusted door, gun in hand, and the space beyond was a pit writhing with worms that looked at her with slit-pupil eyes... And Covenant was calling to her to shoot, and she was beside him firing until the charge pack in her gun was dry...

...She was standing on a stone platform beneath a sky of bruised light. Balls of lightning were falling from the heavens, and the cannon on Covenant's shoulder was swivelling and firing, punching glowing rounds up at the corposant, and she could see the tangle of arms and mouths thrashing in the balls of flame...

...She was standing with Josef in the ruins of a violated city. His old eyes turned from the walls that still ran with ectoplasm and blood, and he began to say something...

...And now she was standing in the throne room again.

Curtains of light hung across the space, shifting between colours. The image was strobing, pulsing between colours and blinding monochrome.

The sinuous figure was at the foot of the steps to the throne, movements flowing between the shutter-blinks of light. Claws of red chitin grew from its arms, the edges blurring to black smoke as they peeled a path through the whirl of bodies. It was beautiful and vile, like a song sung from a strangled throat.

Covenant was cutting his way towards the creature, bodies falling before him, Severita at his side, sword weaving circles around his cuts.

Ianthe froze, watching the scene play out, and realised that she had seen this before, this clash of man and daemon. She had faced and survived this many times. She was not the soldier she thought, she was not even sure if she had ever been.

Josef was shouting somewhere close behind her, and one of her squad was falling, his hands ripping at his visor to get to the flesh beneath. Another

looked at her, head rotating with serene slowness, gun muzzle rising to rest under his chin.

‘No...’ she began as his finger closed on the trigger. The las-bolt burned through his head and blew the top of his skull off.

Nereid watched Saliktris stride down the steps, his coat whipping in the wind rushing through the shattered windows. Most of her musicians and courtiers lay bloody on the floor, while the few that remained clawed desperately at the brutes cutting through them. She could see those invaders now, dark shadows, like the tattered silhouettes of men, their eyes burning, bellowing as they hacked the beauty of her world to ruin.

Then Saliktris began his dance. Sharpness glinted at the edge of his arms. The court of musicians parted before him, and the majordomo was a blur as he met her enemies, edge to edge.

The daemon – for that was what it was, Ianthe realised – slashed through a silk-wrapped mutant and its pincer claw snapped down towards Covenant in a languid blur. The psycannon on his shoulder pivoted and fired. Rounds burned through the air, and the daemon spun, and Covenant was cutting and cutting, and the daemon swayed and pivoted around each shot and cut as though it were all a dance, as though every step and turn was part of a pattern. As Ianthe watched Josef waded to Covenant’s side, hammer battering aside clawing limbs.

‘I shall not fear,’ she heard his voice booming out the prayer over the cacophony. ‘I shall be fury. I shall be fire.’

‘Get up,’ the voice made her flinch, and then she realised it was her own, and she was rising from where she had slid to the floor amid the blood and filth. ‘Get up, now!’ And she was on her feet, gun in her hands. If there were still any of her squad alive, they might have been with her, but if they were, she did not see them. She fired, pouring las-bolts into a tall mutant with no eyes and a needle-fanged mouth. It shrieked, falling in a tangle of hook-bladed limbs. She kicked past it, boots sinking into blood-soaked fur.

To her right the daemon leapt, pivoted in mid-air, and lashed a pincer at Covenant’s head. His sword met the blow. Chitin and lightning-shrouded steel met with a howl. The daemon flipped over Covenant, a scorpion tail growing from its back as it arched through the air. The sting stabbed down.

Severita's sword spun high, edge bright, and the tip of the daemon's tail was falling away in a spray of ectoplasm. The daemon landed, twirling like a spill of silk in the wind, and Ianthe could feel its laughter shuddering through her thoughts.

Blood was rising from the floor, flowing into globules and spiralling into red ropes, congealing into sculptures of flesh and chitin and claws. Josef was beside Covenant and Severita now, the trio at the centre of the circle of creatures birthing into being from the blood of the dead and the screams of the living. Covenant's psycannon blasted a cluster of creatures to a shower of black slime, and then dry-cycled on an empty breech. The chorus of congealing daemons stepped forwards, skin spreading across their limbs. Colours and light were running and swirling at the edge of Ianthe's vision. A warm fog of cloying scent poured down her throat, and she gagged inside her mask.

She was at the foot of the steps leading to the throne. Above her the bloated figure on the silver chair gazed at the slaughter. Gossamer strands of light billowed through the air around the throne.

Ianthe mounted the steps.

Nereid turned and looked at the figure climbing the steps towards her. Ashes fell from its tread. Red eyes burned in its iron face. Her household guards were finally there, ringing the remaining intruders, but this other one had risen from the slaughter and reached the foot of the throne. It would not matter though, not now.

Saliktris would remove these... creatures, and then everything would return to how it was. Yes... to how it was when she woke. But at that moment she saw Saliktris seem to slow, his endless dance stuttering, as though he were tiring. And the tallest of the invaders stepped forwards and hacked down, blade screaming. Saliktris pivoted aside, but only just fast enough to escape the edge, and the swordsman cut again and again, and her guard who had ringed the three were shrinking back. Nereid screamed at them, but they didn't listen. And then the swordsman slashed his sword down, and Saliktris did not sway aside, and the sword split the majordomo from collarbone to groin.

Pain flared in Nereid's chest, expanding into a burning sheet of agony. The world blinked out of existence, and the pain ran out to the edge of her being.

Agony burned her thoughts, and she saw again her father fall, her dagger ripping free of his back. She felt the silk of the throne as she sat on it for the first time as spire mistress. She tasted the sweet dream of being able to live in a world that existed for her and for her alone.

Then it was gone, and a hole gaped within her soul, pulling in warmth and brightness, leaving just the feeling of shivering flesh, and the smell of spoiled meat and ashes.

The sound of the wind blowing through broken glass brought the moans of pain to her ears. She could feel the wetness of blood and drool on her chin. She did not want to look up. She did not want to open her eyes; she knew what she would see.

In the end it had just become too much: the demands of authority, the decisions, the relentless indifference of the Administratum as they took more and more, and the glory of her throne became a vice to crush her.

The voice of her dreams had seemed like a release then. She had given that joy a name and a face, and the dream had remade her world. It had become golden again.

Shouts, gunfire, sounded nearby but she did not move. Her breath was a heavy wheeze in her throat. She heard a crunch of broken crystal.

‘Look at me,’ said a voice above her, firm but ragged with effort. Nereid stirred, raised her head and opened her eyes.

A soldier stood before the throne, her grey armour sprayed with blood, her face hidden by a breath-mask, her eyes a blank visor. Nereid dropped her gaze to the lasgun in the soldier’s hands. The barrel was steady.

‘I...’ began Nereid. ‘I just wanted to be—’

Ianthe pulled the trigger. The las-blast burned through the spire mistress’ head. Blood and charred brain sprayed the soiled upholstery of the throne. The bloated figure slumped, silken bulk settling with a gurgle, its last words lost.

Ianthe let her aim drop. Her limbs began to shake. A sound on the steps made her turn. Covenant stood behind her, sword deactivated. Josef stood with him. Blood and slime covered both of them. Behind them Severita was moving through the heaped dead, pausing to fire a bolt into a twitching corpse. A few of Ianthe’s squad were still alive, kneeling or lying on the ground, shaking as though they had been pulled from freezing water. Except

that they were not her squad, not really.

‘My lord,’ she said, and bowed her head.

The after-echo of what she had seen throbbed in her mind. Coloured lights were bubbling in her eyes. She felt as though she were going to be sick.

‘You have served well, lieutenant,’ said Covenant, and his voice was as familiar as an old friend’s.

‘I always endeavour to, lord.’

‘You remember,’ said Josef.

She looked up at the preacher, and the blur of dozens of memories of his face filled her mind.

‘Yes,’ she said.

A shriek of thrusters cut through the thin air as a black-hulled lighter dropped into sight beyond the shattered windows. They all turned to look at it as it pivoted in mid-air, its rear ramp hinging open to touch the window edge. A figure drifted out of the gloom of the gunship’s compartment. Withered limbs and tattered black robes hung beneath it. Loops of metal pipes hung snaked around the shrunken flesh of its head, crackling with worms of greasy light. Ianthe knew who it was, and knew that they had met in the past, over and over again.

Covenant looked at the hovering psyker.

‘Begin the purge,’ he said. ‘Everyone who had a connection with the spire mistress in the last years is to be culled. Issue an extermination order to the arbitrators under my authority. No mercy or exceptions.’

The psyker’s head dipped in its machine setting.

+And these?+ said a voice that crackled in Ianthe’s skull.

Covenant looked at the troopers from Ianthe’s squad who lay scattered across the carnage-daubed room. One was kneeling in a pool of blood and severed limbs, head rolling from side to side, eyes fixed as though in wonder on the empty air. Another stood, eyes closed, swaying in place like a reed in a wind. The rest did not move, and if they lived, the world was not something that they saw any more.

‘If they will survive, cleanse their minds,’ said Covenant. ‘For the rest... They have earned peace.’ The psyker tilted in mid-air, in what must have been a bow, and then pivoted to face Ianthe, the question asked by the gesture unspoken but ringing in Ianthe’s mind as though shouted. She bowed her head. She knew what was coming – after all, had she not lived this moment

many times before?

‘You remember,’ said Covenant, ‘so you know the choice that faces you.’

She nodded.

‘Death or to live and remember nothing – I remember, my lord.’ She paused and words came to her lips, like a prayer learned long ago. ‘To know that daemons exist is to invite corruption. To face them is to risk your own soul. To face them and live is to risk the souls of billions.’

Josef bowed his head, and she heard him mutter something that might have been a prayer. The psyker was drifting closer, and Ianthe could feel its presence blurring the edge of her thoughts.

Covenant held her gaze.

‘A risk,’ he said, carefully. ‘Or a burden to be carried.’

Ianthe raised her head, blinking. Josef looked up at Covenant. Sparks flickered around the psyker. Amidst the blood and corpses, Severita turned to look towards them. Covenant kept his gaze on Ianthe. ‘You have served me for many years in a war that is for the survival of mankind. You will serve in this war again, but you can choose to do so armoured by ignorance, or by the strength of your soul.’

Ianthe stared back at him for a second, and bowed her head before answering.

‘Do you know why we do what we do?’

‘You are the Inquisition.’

‘I am just a servant, as are you now. But do you know what we do in the service of the Inquisition?’

‘We protect mankind.’

‘Do you understand what that means?’

‘If we fail, so does the Imperium.’

The sergeant flicked his eyes to the face across the table from him. Hard eyes met him, unblinking and piercing. The officer’s red-and-grey combat armour bore no mark of rank, but the weight of her gaze was enough to hold his questions behind his teeth. He had led his squad through two warzones, and seen the rest of his regiment vanish until there was only him and the few he led: a vagabond remnant of war.

‘You have a question, sergeant?’ she asked.

He flinched.

‘I have not served the Inquisition before. I just wondered if this is how it always is?’

Something flickered in the unblinking stillness of her eyes.

‘Tell me about your service before this,’ she said.

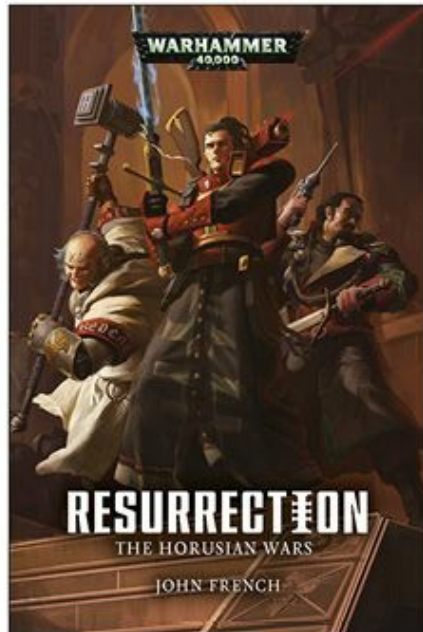
‘With respect, I have given you chapter and verse twice already,’ he said.

She shrugged, and leaned forwards slightly.

‘Humour me,’ she said.



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RED & BLACK

JAMES SWALLOW

And so it was decreed, in the wake of the Age of Apostasy. So it was said by the High Lords of Terra, that the Ecclesiarchy, the great church of the Imperium, founded on the worship of the God-Emperor of Mankind, would never be granted the use of ‘men under arms’, lest the temptation be too great for cardinals of weak character and high ambition.

The Ecclesiarchy; the guardians of the Imperial Creed and the celestial truth of the Emperor’s divinity, whose sole purpose was to regulate the veneration of millions across the galaxy. And in a universe so harsh, where heathen alien life, heretic witch-psychics and the forces of Chaos laid their threat, the church could not go undefended.

No ‘men under arms’; so the very letter of the edict was adhered to, and thus rose the Orders Militant of the Adepta Sororitas – the Sisters of Battle. Some called them fanatics. Warrior-women spiritually betrothed to their religion, clothed in powered armour, cleansing the unbelievers with flamer and boltgun. The Celestians; the Seraphim; the Repentia, Dominions and Retributors, called to castigate those who defied the Emperor’s divine will. The great work of the Battle Sisters never ended, for there were always Wars of Faith to be won, always more heretics for the pyre. They were the line of fire between the anarchy of the infidel and the bulwark of pure devotion. The red against the black. For millennia they had been the burning sword and holy shield for humankind.

Few exemplified such devotion more than Sister Miriya, a ranked Celestian Eloheim of the Order of Our Martyred Lady, although she would never have been so arrogant as to say such a thing herself. Under the flickering light of electro-candles, she walked the length of the penitent corridor on Zhodon Orbital, voicing the words of holy catechism amid the echoes of her footfalls.

‘A spiritu dominatus. Domine, libra nos. A morte perpetua. Domine, libra nos. Ave, Imperator. Domine, libra nos.’ The phrases in High Gothic fell from her lips easily, with rote precision, whispering off the stone walls.

Like many of the citadel stations across human space, Zhodon resembled an ancient cathedral ripped free of the land and cast into the darkness. Spires and naves spread like the points of a morning star, plasma lanterns burning behind mile-high stained-glass windows. Located on the pilgrim route to the Segmentum Solar, the platform was a way-point for travellers and a barracks for the Witch Hunters of the Ecclesiarchy.

Miriya approached the iron gate that closed off the sanctum of the prioress, the mistress of this place. She slowed and dwelt a little, taking a moment to study the complex devotional sculptures in the walls. Above was a rendering of Saint Katherine, first mistress of her order, whose brutal death gave them their title. Miriya bowed in respect, crossing her hands across her chest, forming the holy shape of the Imperial aquila. ‘In your name,’ she said aloud. ‘Grant me your wisdom and clarity.’

After a moment, she rose to look upon the statue. Like the saint, Miriya’s face bore the ancient mark of the *fleur de lys*, tattooed in blood-red on her cheek. Her hair was a cascade of black, falling to the neck of her battle gear.

Saint Katherine was shown as she had been in battle, her mail and plate little different from Miriya’s, even though centuries separated them. Sigils of the aquila, purity seals and rosaries decorated the armour, and a chaplet hung from her neck. Miriya’s hand rose to her own, resting on a string of adamantine beads. Each one of the beads represented an act of devotion to the Imperial church.

She wondered if her next duty would warrant a new link in the chain. Prioress Lydia had been unusually circumspect on the details, a fact that concerned Miriya greatly. Secrets were not the currency of the Sisterhood, and she disliked anything that smacked of the clandestine. The Imperial Creed was the God-Emperor’s Light, and so all deeds done in His name were never to be committed in shadow.

Miriya knocked twice on the heavy iron door and from beyond it, a voice bid her to enter. She strode in, her eyes downcast as protocol demanded, and bowed. ‘Your Grace. As you order, so shall I be ready.’

‘Look at me. Let me see your face.’ Miriya did as she was ordered and raised her head. The prioress was two hundred solar years old, but kept to the

appearance of a woman a quarter of that age by juvenat treatments. Lydia had been a prioress before Miriya had been inducted as a novice, and she would likely remain one for decades more. She was arrow-sharp and uncompromising, a masterful tactician and commander of the Orders Militant in the local sector of space. Miriya heard it said that the prioress had burned a thousand witches, and fought alongside saints. The steel in Lydia's eyes gave truth to it. 'You believe you are prepared for the task I will set you, Sister Celestian?' She smiled slightly. 'We shall see.'

The faint edge of mockery in the prioress' tone made Miriya's lips thin. 'My squad stand willing to meet the enemy,' she replied, with stiff formality. 'If you doubt their skills, mistress, I would ask why you summoned me and not another of our Sisterhood.'

Lydia studied the other woman intently. 'We are the weapons of the God-Emperor's church, Miriya. But we are more than that. We are His banner-bearers, the spear-tip that brings the rod of truth behind it. We must never lose sight of this. For each heretic we put to the sword, we must welcome another soul into the glory of Imperial Truth.'

Miriya frowned. 'Is that not the work of preachers and iterators?'

'Yes.' She inclined her head. 'But in some instances, it is ours as well. The Adepta Sororitas must inspire, Sister, and not just fear, but *love*. Not every test the church faces can be dealt with by bullet or blade's edge.'

The conversation was not progressing as Miriya had expected. Instead of a *mission*, the prioress seemed intent on giving her a *lesson*. She chafed under the thought. Miriya was a battle-tested veteran, not some callow novice. Lydia seemed to sense her thoughts, and went on.

'I summoned you specifically, Sister Miriya, because the duty I am about to set will require a mind clear and uncluttered by doubt. But also one that is willing to question.'

Lydia's words carried the slightest hint of challenge. Miriya's reputation preceded her; in an army where obedience was the watchword, the Celestian had often earned censure from her commanders because she frequently dared to exhibit an independent streak.

Her tolerance for the prioress' obfuscation was quickly thinning. 'I would ask you illuminate me, mistress. I do not follow your meaning.'

'You will, Sister,' offered Lydia, rising stiffly from her chair. She beckoned with one augmetic hand, the entire forearm replaced by a machine-proxy in

the wake of an old battle wound. ‘Come with me. And know that what I am about to show you must be veiled by the utmost secrecy.’

She followed. They travelled into the lower levels of Zhodon Orbital, to sections of the station that Miriya had never entered, past reliquaries and sacred compartments open only to nobles and cardinals. The prioress used blood-locks to bypass thick steel doors etched with hexagrammic wards, until at last they emerged in a chamber that was part prison, part hospice. The metallic space had a cold and clinical ambience. A cluster of watchful arco-flagellants stood sentinel before a wall of opaque armoured glass. They had once been men, each a heretic damned for his defiance of the church, now repurposed in its service. Their bodies were augmented with weapons, brains controlled by lobotomiac taps and hymnal implants. For now, they were docile, but if activated they would become vicious berserkers.

Miriya ignored them and peered at the dark barrier. She could not help but wonder what manner of prisoner required such guardians. A psyker mind-witch? A xenos beast? Perhaps even... a *daemon*? Her hand fell to the holster at her hip, where her plasma pistol lay ready.

Prioress Lydia halted before the panel and glanced at the Battle Sister. ‘A question for you. The Hollos star system. Do you know the name?’

Miriya paused for a moment, drawing on mnemonic memory programmes from the hypnogogic training regimens of her time as a novice. Hollos; the name rose up from depths of her thoughts, dragging recollection with it. ‘Aye. It is a vanished domain, cut off from the rest of the sector by violent warp storms in the thirty-eighth millennium. Vessels avoid the quadrant around it like the plague.’

Lydia nodded. ‘Correct. An Imperial colony world in unremembered space, unreachable for more than two thousand years. The storms killed any ships that attempted passage. The Imperial Navy and the Adeptus Terra declared Hollos to be lost...’

‘But now something has changed?’

‘You are perceptive, Sister,’ noted the other woman. ‘It is indeed so. Over the past year, the storms about Hollos have finally abated and the space beyond them has once again become navigable. Contact with this errant daughter-world has at long last been re-established.’

‘Praise the Throne,’ Miriya began.

‘Not just yet,’ warned the prioress. ‘The nature of that contact has given the Ecclesiarchy great cause for concern.’

Two millennia was a long time to be alone in the darkness. Miriya wondered what kind of changes could be wrought to a world, a society, a people, over so many years. The return of a lost colony to the Emperor’s Light should have been a joyous occasion, but all too often such things only ended in bloodshed and pain.

‘A warship intercepted a small vessel a few light years from the Hollos system,’ Lydia went on. ‘There was a lone crew member on board. A messenger, of sorts.’

Something in the prioress’ tone gave Miriya pause. ‘Human?’

Lydia raised an eyebrow. ‘See for yourself, Sister.’ The prioress gave a command and the misted glass became clear. Beyond it, Miriya saw a sparse dormitory chamber, furnished with a simple pallet, a fresher unit and a small, makeshift shrine venerating the God-Emperor.

But it was the cell’s lone occupant that made every muscle in her body tense. It was humanoid in form and female, after a fashion. The being’s skin was milk-pale and dressed with peculiar striations that at first seemed like tattoos. Tall and athletic in build, but not willowy like the alien eldar, it was clearly human, and yet it was *not*. Miriya’s combat training immediately took hold, and she found herself evaluating the way it moved about the cell, looking at it for points of weakness and wondering how it might be killed.

Her eye was drawn by its innate grace and poise. The Battle Sister studied it and a strange thought occurred to her. The creature seemed almost *engineered* in its perfect symmetry. Beneath a cowl of close-cut white hair, eyes of stark violet glanced up to peer at her, then looked away.

Miriya shot the prioress a wary look. ‘What in Terra’s name is it?’

‘She is not aware of us,’ said Lydia, without answering immediately. ‘The glass does not allow her to see through it.’

‘If this thing were xenos or a mutant, you would have executed it,’ noted the Battle Sister. ‘So, then... I would hazard a guess that it is a breed of abhuman.’

‘In a way,’ allowed the prioress. ‘What you see before you is not a subspecies like the ogryn or a gene-altered human like the Adeptus Astartes. No, she is a synthetic creation, grown of cultured stock from blood and flesh. Tests conducted by adepts of the magos biologis confirm it. She is an

artificially manufactured organic being.'

'A... replicae?' The old word felt strange to say aloud. 'A cloned life grown from human cells?' Miriya shook her head. 'Such technology does not exist!'

'Not so,' Lydia corrected. 'Such technology does not exist *anymore*. But the God-Emperor, His light find us, created many miracles such as this. It is the tragedy of our age that they have been lost to the Imperium of Man.' The prioress moved closer to the glass, watching the prisoner carefully. 'Our guest speaks a common dialect of Imperial Gothic. Her ship and its systems are comparable to those of ours. She calls herself "Rho", and all gene-scans indicate that she is as much of human stock as you or I.' She gave that slight smile again. 'Outward appearances notwithstanding, of course.'

Miriya found it difficult to accept Lydia's words. Gene-forged beings and modified humans were a common thing in the Imperium, from the warriors of the Space Marines, to helots and cherubim, and even the arco-flagellants... But what the prioress described was an order of magnitude more complex. And certainly, if this 'Rho' was indeed a replicae, it deserved to be no more than a menial, a servitor at best.

Then the being did something that made Miriya's breath catch in her throat. Rho bent down before the brass shrine in the cell wall and made the exact, correct stations of obeisance before an icon of the God-Emperor, crossing her long-fingered hands over her chest, just as the Battle Sister had done in the corridor before Saint Katherine's icon.

'It... it is praying!' It shocked Miriya to see the being doing something so sacred to her, an act that only a human was permitted to perform.

'Yes, she is,' said Lydia. 'And to *our* deity.'

They returned to the sanctum in silence, and along the way Miriya struggled to interpret what she had seen.

The prioress saw the conflict in her expression. 'It is quite shocking, is it not? A being born from an artificial womb, something that cannot possess an immortal soul, and yet she kneels before the Emperor's grace like one of us.'

'It is mimicry of some sort,' Miriya began. 'I've seen aliens that imitate human behaviours.'

Lydia shook her head. 'You are mistaken, Sister. The clone, Rho... She is not some mindless, drooling servitor commanded by punchcards and neuro-stimms. She is a thinking, reasoning being. What she does is a learned

behaviour, not one copied from observing one of us. I am certain of this.'

'You have spoken to it?' Miriya could not overlook how the prioress continued to refer to the replicae using the female pronoun.

'I have spoken to *her*, yes,' she insisted. 'When Rho saw the sign of the holy aquila upon my robes, she was elated. The replicae worships the God-Emperor of Mankind as her creator and master. She claims her mission from Hollos was begun in His name, to serve His will.'

It was difficult for Miriya to accept what she was hearing. It was enough that her view of the universe had been challenged by the mere existence of such a being, and now she was to believe that it could know the magnificence of the Imperial Creed? It went against the order of things, and she almost said as much aloud.

She held her tongue, and at length the prioress came to the full explanation of why Miriya had been summoned to Zhodon Orbital. 'Your mission, Sister, will be to seek the truth of this,' began Lydia. 'You will travel across the unmapped zone to the Hollos colony. There, you and your squad of Sister Celestians will ascertain what has transpired during the time of isolation. It will fall to you to determine if the populace has retained its true faith in the God-Emperor.'

She nodded, accepting the command. 'But, mistress... The replicae. If it exists, then—'

The prioress cut her off. 'Rho will go with you. Take your Sisters and do as I order.'

'And what shall I do if we find more of them?' Miriya's eyes narrowed. 'What if they are all that is left on Hollos?'

The prioress did not answer her question. Instead, she pushed a pict-slate across her desk towards the Battle Sister. Miriya gathered it up and saw dense text outlining her new orders. It bore the seal of the High Lords of Terra.

'You will not be alone,' said the other woman. 'Due to the unusual nature of the emissary from Hollos, the Adeptus Mechanicus have taken a direct interest in the situation. An agent of their magos biologis will also be accompanying you.'

Miriya paged through the contents of the slate. The Adeptus Mechanicus, the guardians of all technology within the Imperium of Man, were well known to her, and Lydia's statement came as no surprise. Every scrap of science and learning was jealously hoarded by them, from their master forges

on Mars to the countless manufactoria worlds across a thousand star systems. A discovery like Rho – a living, functioning clone – would be like nectar to the adepts of the biologists. She came across a data panel showing a name and visual profile of the agent who would be joining the mission: Genus Nohlan, a questor, one of countless adepts who scoured the galaxy for lost scraps of technology, missing since the Age of Old Night.

She glanced up at the prioress. ‘Command of this mission is mine, yes? I will not brook interference from the hand of the Mechanicus. If certain choices need to be made about the fate of Hollos and its people...’ She trailed off, unwilling to finish the sentence.

The prioress did not seem to notice. ‘Nohlan has been instructed to obey your orders. You may do whatever is required to retain the sanctity of church and Imperium.’

‘Even if that requires the death of a world?’

Lydia turned away, dismissing her with the motion. ‘It would not be the first time, Sister Miriya.’

The warship *Coronus* knifed through the void of deep space, a sword-blade prow leading towers of iron and steel, the wicked maws of lance cannons and massed laser batteries decorating the flanks. The ship was by no means the largest of the God-Emperor’s fleet, but it was still powerful. The weapons it carried could rain death from high orbit and crack continents.

The ultimate sanction lay nestled within the warheads of a dozen cyclonic torpedoes. The command need only be given – *Exterminatus* – and the planet Hollos would die.

Sister Miriya had prayed each day of the journey that she would not be called upon to speak that word, but she had beseeched her saint and her God-Emperor to give her the strength to do so, if the moment came.

For despite the size of the Imperial church, despite the millions of loyal, devout souls in its service, its faith was a delicate and fragile thing, in constant need of protection. One single thread of poison could be enough to let rot set in. The Sisters of Battle were ever vigilant, always watching for heathens, witches and betrayers cloaked in the mantle of friendship. Put in such terms, the mission seemed clear, but Miriya knew that was a falsehood. There were no simple choices in the eternal service to the God-Emperor. Only in death did duty end, and until that time, Miriya would do as her oath

demanded.

The voyage would be over soon, and she welcomed it. Her Celestians – Sisters Lethe, Cassandra, Isabel, Portia and Iona – were troubled by their orders. The presence of the replicae Rho had divided them. Some considered the clone to be an aberration, something that should be destroyed out of hand for daring to ape humanity, but they had not seen the curious, affecting sight of Rho at prayer. Try as she might, Miriya could not shake that image from her thoughts.

In the end, it was inevitable that she would seek to better understand the messenger from the lost colony.

She found Questor Nohlan where he had been for the duration of the voyage, prowling the observation chamber before Rho's cell, his mechanical limbs clicking and whirring.

Through means Sister Miriya was not privy to, the entire compartment had been shifted from Zhodon Orbital to a bay aboard the *Coronus*, so strict was the security around the clone envoy. Nohlan had not moved from there, conducting scans and taking reams of notes on the humanoid, as if he were a collector with a newly discovered species of animal.

Rho's odd, bird-like movements were visible through the armoured glass, and as Miriya approached, she saw Nohlan copy them, as if attempting to understand the replicae.

'Honoured questor.' She gave him a shallow bow of greeting. 'You should prepare. We have emerged from the warp and the ship is making its approach to Hollos.'

'Oh. Sister Celestial!' Nohlan flinched, surprised by her arrival. 'Forgive me. I am deep in my analysis. Processing. Processing.' His vox-modulated voice had an officious quality to it, but that couldn't hide his captivation with the subject of his study.

The adept was a typical example of his kind. Beneath voluminous crimson robes, the remnants of a human being lay among numerous biomechanical enhancements, implants and cybernetics. Serpentine mechadendrites wandered across the deck near his clawed feet, or wavered in the air like fronds in a breeze. A whiff of ozone and scented machine oil was always present around him. What she could see of his face beneath his hood had too many eyes, all of them red-lit and set in brass.

Miriya looked away towards the glassy wall. ‘You have been here for days. Tell me, adept, do you ever sleep?’

‘Praise the Ommissiah, but that need was edited from my body many years ago, four-point-two recurring,’ he explained. ‘It is quite liberating.’

‘What have you learned about...’ Miriya paused, mentally correcting. ‘About *her*?’

‘Much indeed, forty giga-quads of data, still rising.’ Nohlan became enthused. ‘I admit to being both fascinated and unnerved by the very presence of such a being as designate: Rho. She stimulates emotional responses in me that are rare occurrences. I am quite inspired!’

‘The clone is what it seems, then?’

Nohlan’s hooded head bobbed. ‘Affirmative. The ideal of a genetically engineered, vat-grown “perfect human” has hitherto been a myth. Now it is fact. She is fact. Ninety-seven point six per cent.’ He paused. ‘However... I admit to some concern over her unusual neurological development.’

Miriya watched Rho pick carefully at a data-slate she had been given, a simple child’s primer on the glory of the Golden Throne. ‘She seems as intelligent as you or I.’

Nohlan nodded again. ‘My point *exactly*. The records of the magos biologis note that replicaes were designed to be a replacement for machine-life, automata and the like. Great creations indeed, but made to be the servants of mankind. Loyal slave-warriors for our wars. Not our equals.’ He shook his head. ‘Error condition noted.’

On the other side of the glass, Rho put down the slate and closed her eyes. The clone’s head was cocked and her lips were moving. ‘What is she doing?’

‘Singing,’ said the adept. ‘I have observed her doing so on several occasions. Parsing the audial portion, it appears to be a variant of the Oleon Anthem, probability factor plus or minus two per cent.’

‘I know it well.’ Miriya recalled the hymnal from her orphan youth in the schola progenium, and in that moment she made a decision. ‘Open the chamber, adept. I want to look her in the eye.’

Nohlan hesitated, uncertain if she was serious, before finally obeying her order. ‘As you wish...’ A mechadendrite snaked out across the floor before rising up to tap out a code on a panel in the wall.

The glass wall shifted and retracted into the deck, and Miriya caught a brief snatch of Rho’s faint and eerie singing before she fell silent. With pause, the

Battle Sister strode into the compartment and stood before the clone, daring it to speak. Those odd violet eyes measured her, sweeping across to Nohlan and then back.

‘I do not blame you,’ said Rho. Her words were gentle and breathy. ‘I understand why you have kept me confined here. But I forgive it. You fear me.’

‘I am Sister Miriya of the Order of Our Martyred Lady,’ she replied, ‘and you are nothing to be afraid of.’

Rho blinked slowly. ‘The actions of your prioress would seem to suggest otherwise.’ She went on before Miriya could respond. ‘But it is of no consequence. I sense we grow nearer to my home world with each passing second. You have brought me back. Thank you, Miriya.’ Rho bowed to her. ‘Truly, the God-Emperor has smiled upon us.’

‘You believe so?’ Now she heard the clone-being say the words, Miriya wanted to challenge her. ‘How can you know His will?’

‘I do not presume to,’ she replied. ‘I am only His servant. But there can be no other explanation. You and I are here by His design. All that has happened is the wish of the Great Progenitor.’

At closer quarters, Miriya could better see the replica’s shape and form. While slight, Rho’s body was all engineered muscle, without a single iota of useless flesh. Her looks belied a hidden strength, and the Battle Sister imagined that in combat Rho would be formidable indeed. Yet she radiated an air of calm stillness.

She tried a different tack. ‘Your world has been isolated from the Imperium for two millennia. You are a living example of that fact.’

‘Yes,’ Rho said sadly. ‘Can you imagine such pain, Sister? To be surrounded by a veil of madness for century upon century? Some began to fear that the universe had been destroyed in a great cataclysm, and only cruel fate had left our worlds untouched. Others believed we were the playthings of the Ruinous Powers. But not I. I have always known the truth. It is why I was chosen to be the messenger.’

Miriya took a step closer. ‘What is the truth you speak of?’

When Rho replied, her eyes were shining and her words were those of a true zealot. She reached up and clasped Miriya’s hand. ‘It was His doing. The God-Emperor isolated Hollos in order to *test* us. To keep us *pure*. And our faith in Him has finally been rewarded. The veil has fallen.’

‘The veil... You mean the warp storms?’

Rho nodded. ‘Aye. Now, after so long, we are free and ready to return. Our world has endured... It has prospered! I cannot wait for you to see it!’

‘Nor I,’ said Miriya, unable to keep the wariness from her tone.

The engines of the Arvus-class shuttle hummed as it dropped towards the capital of Hollos, and the sound kindled old battle-memory in Sister Miriya. Many times she had deployed into combat from a craft such as this, and it took a near-physical effort to remind herself of an important truth.

‘This is a mission of words,’ she muttered to herself. ‘Not warfare.’

‘Not yet.’ The warrior seated in the crash-couch at her side gave the reply with a grim nod, and Miriya glanced at her

‘Did I voice my thoughts aloud, Sister Lethe?’

The other woman gave a nod. ‘You did, Eloheim. But trust we are all ready with hymnal and bolter, sword and scripture alike, should either be needed.’

Miriya gave a thin smile. Lethe was her strong right arm, second-in-command of her unit and a trusted comrade. They had fought many Wars of Faith side by side, and this day they shared the same silent concerns. ‘Ready the Celestians, Sister. We will make planetfall soon, and I wish to be prepared.’ She got out of her couch and made her way to the back of the shuttle; she didn’t need to make sure Lethe was following her orders. The gruff, dour Battle Sister was already immediately snapping out commands to Sister Iona and Sister Portia to secure their weapons, and calling upon Sister Cassandra and Sister Isabel to prepare for a security sweep across the landing site on touchdown.

Miriya left her second to her work and moved forwards to find Adept Nohlan and the replicae near the bow of the vessel, peering out through a wide viewport.

‘Look there,’ Rho was saying, picking out points of interest with her long, delicate fingers. ‘Can you see? That is the hive-tower of Solasian. To the west, beneath the photon sails, our farmlands. And the White Plains. A world living under the Great Progenitor’s munificence.’

‘Ah, “The Great Progenitor”,’ Nohlan echoed her words. ‘This is your local designation for the God-Emperor?’

Rho gave a nod. ‘It reflects His position as the forge-master of all that we have and all that we are.’

‘Indeed,’ he mused. ‘Processing...’

Miriya watched the interaction between the clone and the adept with a cold eye. Nohlan seemed to have no trouble adjusting to the abhuman’s appearance, but then she imagined his interest in the replica and the technology that had made it overrode any other intentions.

‘Initial scans indicate that this region of the planet appears to be stable,’ he went on. ‘Data collation in progress.’

Rho seemed uncertain what to make of that reply. ‘Hollos has its problems, like any world. But they have not dimmed our faith. We strive to improve our lot with each new day.’ She glanced up as Miriya approached.

‘Tell us about the council we are to meet on our arrival,’ said Miriya. ‘They have the authority to speak for all citizens of Hollos?’

Rho nodded again. ‘I am one of their number. We are the legal government of our planet. Some of us have held high office for more than seven hundred Terran years! It is through the council’s guidance that we have developed a benign, enduring society.’

Nohlan caught the inference and immediately seized upon it. ‘Interrogative: beings like you, the replica. In this culture you are the serviles, the soldiers, the protectors, yes?’

‘The protectors... Yes,’ Rho replied, but cautiously.

The shuttle’s winglets bit into the air as it turned on a final approach and Miriya felt a vibration shiver up through the deck. Behind her, she heard Lethe calling the other Sisters to readiness and unbidden, her hand once more slipped towards the holster of her plasma pistol.

‘This is a historic day!’ Rho’s violet eyes grew wide with something like joy. ‘There will be celebrations!’

We shall see, Miriya told herself. Hard-earned experience had shown her that even the most benign of missions could twist into something dangerous if one were not ever-watchful.

Like a spire of sculpted ice, the white stone citadel of Hollos rose up above the planetary capital, catching the dazzling light of the day. It towered over a broad marble plaza dotted with ornamental fountains and gardens, filled with ornate statuary that rose at all points of the compass, the sculpted figures standing proudly and gazing up into the sky. Tallest among them was a rendering of the God-Emperor in the garb of an ancient knight, the stone

inlaid with jewels and platinum.

The Arvus landed atop a granite rose tiled into the stonework, and past the distant lines of crowd barriers, a throng of Hollosi citizens raised their voices in cheers of happiness and a rolling fanfare blared from golden trumpets. Floating drone-birds wheeled overhead, camera-eyes feeding images to the crowds and the world beyond.

But as the shuttle's hatch hissed open, the music and the voices ebbed and the first silent note of dread lingered in the air. The Battle Sisters were the first to disembark, moving in cautious lock-step. Lethe led them forwards, and each cradled her Godwyn-De'az-pattern boltgun in a low, unthreatening carry, but each woman was primed to bring them to combat ready if the slightest threat presented itself.

Miriya exited last with Rho and the questor, taking in the scope of the place. Hollos' air smelled of blossoms and morning rain, clean and welcoming.

Eight figures stood waiting at the foot of the Emperor's statue, and Miriya threw Lethe a nod. As one, the Sisters paused to bow in the direction of the great effigy before proceeding.

Nohlan leaned in to speak to the Celestian as the group approached them. 'Analysing. The council... It would appear that only two of them are—'

She cut him off. 'Humans. Yes.' Miriya could not conceal a frown of dismay at the presence of six other replicaes among the planet's ruling body.

Rho stepped forwards, beaming and excited, and addressed her people. 'I have returned, my fellow arbiters, and with great tidings! The Imperium endures, just as we have! I bring these emissaries from the God-Emperor's church to reunite with us! We are delivered!' Her words brought a new wave of applause and cheering from the crowd, but the goodwill did not spread to shift the mood of the Battle Sisters.

'Look sharp,' grated Lethe, glancing to her commander. 'Do you see them, Eloheim? The clones are *everywhere*.'

Miriya nodded. The replicaes were not just part of the Hollosi Council, but also visible in the crowds, standing on the battlements and out amid the gardens. She estimated there was at least one of them for every two humans in sight. 'Stay your hand, Sister,' she warned Lethe. 'The ways of this world are unknown to us. Caution is our watchword.'

'They are garbed in such finery,' remarked Nohlan. 'Hypothesis – the clone-beings appear to be the ruling class in this culture. Further study is

warranted.'

The adept's theory gave Miriya pause, but before she could consider it further, Rho was turning towards her and gesturing to the air. 'Allow me to present Sister Miriya, Celestian Eloheim of the Adepta Sororitas, and Questor Nohlan of the magos biologis!' Her smile took them both in as she and the council members bowed. 'Welcome our first visitors in thousands of years! This is truly a glorious day. Let us give praise to the Great Progenitor for His munificence. We welcome our kindred to our home!'

'Kindred?' Lethe muttered, as if she were insulted to be considered the same manner of being as the replicae.

Miriya silenced her with a look, and instead she returned the bow, looking up to find the faces of the humans who stood alongside the line of clones, both of them dressed in the same robes of office. One was an older male who seemed fatigued and distracted, but the other was a woman of Miriya's age and returned her gaze intently.

The Sister took a breath. 'Well met, arbiters. I bring greetings from the Ecclesiarchy of Holy Terra. Know that we are heartened to see that your...' She searched for the right word. 'Your disconnection from the Imperium did not break your faith.'

'Of course,' said Rho. 'We are an elected leadership, selected by our people to embody their faith and service to the greater community. The council has managed the affairs of Hollos for centuries, Sister Miriya. Through it, our world has become the ideal you see around you.'

The human arbiter suddenly broke her silence. 'Our replicae partners have held their roles for many, many years. In that time they have guided us... to a kind of prosperity.' Her words were neutral, but Miriya sensed something unsaid lurking just beneath their surface.

'Indeed so, dear Ahven,' continued Rho. 'Together, we are all children of the God-Emperor of Mankind.' She beckoned the group to follow her. 'Come, kindred. We will receive your mission in the great hall.'

Miriya gave a nod, but paused to give new orders to her second. 'Lethe. You and Isabel remain in the plaza until I summon you. Keep the shuttle secure.'

Lethe accepted the command with a nod, but not with silence. 'Eloheim. I don't like what I see here. Synthetics lording it over humans? It's not right. It goes against the natural order.'

Part of Miriya agreed with her, but she pushed that thought away. 'Perhaps

so... But we cannot rush to judge these people by our lights.'

Lethe's eyes narrowed. 'Forgive my presumption, Sister, but I assumed that the very reason we are here is to pass judgement.'

Miriya found she had no reply and set off towards the white tower, the other woman's words dogging her all the way.

In the citadel's great hall, an arc of dark wood rose from a massive stone dais, and behind it each of the council members took up a station as another formal fanfare piped them to their places. Looking around, Miriya saw paintings worked into the walls, the floor and the ceiling. All of them were detailed landscapes of Holy Terra, Ophelia, Evangelion and other planets with great religious significance. Her eye was drawn to a set of tall panels that showed an unfolding narrative, apparently the history of Hollos itself.

Rho nodded sagely as she saw Miriya studying them. 'The chronicle, yes. I imagine you have many questions about what became of our world after the monstrous veil fell between us.'

The first illustration showed a recognisable depiction of an Adeptus Mechanicus explorer base, and Miriya said as much.

Nohlan confirmed her thoughts. 'Affirmative. That appears to be a Type-Zed embedded test and research colony. I have recovered what data remains of that endeavour from the Mechanicus' knowledge pool.'

'Hollos was originally an outpost dedicated to studying the science that birthed me,' explained Rho. 'You call it "replicae". But after the warp storms came and we were alone in the void, the surface of the planet was ravaged by lashes of dark energy.' She indicated the next few panels. Miriya saw paintings of terrible tempests sweeping across the landscape, and of desperate battles against the elements and other, more unnatural forces.

'Those creatures depicted there,' said the Battle Sister. 'The monsters...'

'*Daemons*.' Rho's bright and open face was momentarily darkened by the shadow of an old, deep fear as she uttered the word. Some of the Hollosi within earshot reflexively spat at the mention of it and made the sign of the aquila. 'The storms spilled out foul warp spawn upon the land,' continued Rho. 'The colonists fought, but they were pushed to the verge of extinction. Isolated and alone, with no hope of rescue, they reached out to the only ones who could save them.'

'The replicae.' Nohlan studied the images on the next panel of the chronicle,

parsing the images. ‘Processing. The survivors decanted the prototype soldier clones to help them fight off the Archenemy, and keep their world alive.’

Miriya walked along the line of the panels, watching the images shift from those of warfare and desolation, first to hardship and adversity, and finally to a bold new rebirth. It was a pretty tale, she had to admit.

‘We drew Hollos back from the brink of destruction,’ said Rho. ‘We turned away the tide of the warp and held it at bay. And over the centuries, we – the replicae – evolved beyond our simplistic warrior natures into something superior.’

That last word caused Miriya to give the clone a sharp look. ‘Superior to what?’

Rho returned her gaze. ‘To what we once were. Little more than organic machines, tools and cannon fodder. We unlocked our potential.’ She indicated the last few panels of the chronicle. ‘Eventually, the colonists decided to cede governance of Hollos to us. We are tireless, virtually immortal. And under our stewardship, this world has thrived.’

‘You must be very proud of your accomplishments.’ Miriya kept her tone level.

Rho didn’t respond to the implicit judgement in the Battle Sister’s words. ‘It is only by the will of the God-Emperor that we have endured. Without Him, we would be ashes. But instead, we are a peaceful world ready and willing to return to the Imperial fold...’ Suddenly she faltered, as if a terrible possibility had occurred to her. ‘That is... if you will have us? If you still want us?’

The ready desperation in Rho’s strange eyes gave Miriya a moment of pause. ‘I... *We* will need to be certain,’ she said.

‘Of what? Do you fear we are tainted by the warp?’ Rho came closer and placed a hand on the vambrace of Miriya’s power armour. ‘I swear on my honour it is not so! We have purged our planet of such things!’

Beneath his hooded head, Nohlan’s artificial eyes clicked as they focused on her. ‘The way of Chaos is insidious,’ he intoned. ‘Are you sure? Probability factors unclear.’

‘In the God-Emperor’s name, yes!’ Rho drew herself up. ‘Hollos is at peace. A replicae has no need to raise arms. We have embraced pacifism and transcended our violent roots. There is no warfare here!’

‘You truly have been isolated.’ Miriya felt a moment of genuine pity for the clone. ‘The rest of the galaxy has not been so lucky.’

Rho looked stricken, and turned to her fellow replicaes as if she were seeking support, and then without warning, a distant explosion sounded out beyond the windows of the citadel, swiftly followed by the rattle of bolter-fire.

‘Analysing,’ said Nohlan, instantly parsing the noise of the discharge. ‘Chemical explosive detonation, high-yield, close proximity.’

In the same moment, Sister Lethe’s voice issued out from the vox-bead in Miriya’s ear. *‘Eloheim! We have multiple attackers pushing through the crowd, armed with ballistic weapons and grenades! They’re killing anything that moves!’*

‘Move to cover and stand by,’ Miriya ordered, then turned on the arbiters, her eyes flashing. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

That same flash of cold fear she had seen on Rho’s face moments before now rushed back as the replicae female shrank back. ‘Oh, Imperator, no... It must be the *Red*... But they have been silent for so long...’

‘Explain!’ barked Miriya, reaching for her pistol. ‘*Now!*’

‘Please, you must believe me, this is not our doing!’ Rho grabbed at her in sudden panic, but the Battle Sister shrugged her hand from her arm and turned to her squad, an old and familiar sensation filling the Celestian’s thoughts.

‘Sister Iona will remain here with the questor.’ The pale, morose Sororitas accepted Miriya’s command with a nod. ‘Cassandra, Portia, remove the peace-bonds from your weapons and come with me.’ The women did as they were ordered, ripping off the ceremonial ribbons and racking the slides of their bolters.

Nohlan held up a metal-fingered hand. ‘What are you doing?’

She ignored him, tapping the vox-bead to reopen the channel to the rest of her squad. ‘Lethe! Assume defensive formation! We’re on our way to you.’

‘*Aye, Sister,*’ came the reply, followed by the crackle of gunfire. A split second later, the same sound reached the windows of the citadel.

‘Stay here,’ Miriya told the adept, meeting his gaze. ‘And trust nothing.’

By the time the Battle Sisters reached the plaza, the crowd was a seething mass of terror as the Hollosi citizens crushed each other in their heedless attempts to flee. Miriya sprinted out from an ornate arcade and across the glittering marble, her steel boots clattering across the stone. Smoke and blood wafted on the breeze.

She heard Lethe calling out orders to Isabel. ‘*Target to your right, moving behind the pergola!*’ The other Battle Sister shifted up ahead and let off a burst of bolter fire; Miriya could not see the target from where she was, but she heard it die with a feral screech.

Lethe was in cover behind the shuttle, furiously reloading her weapon. ‘In Katherine’s name, what are these things?’

‘Report!’ snapped Miriya, as she slid in next to her.

‘They came out of nowhere,’ said Lethe. ‘One moment, all was serene. The next, the citizens were like panicked cattle!’

‘What are we dealing with?’

Lethe eyed her. ‘Combat replicae. Or something very similar.’

‘More clone-forms?’ Miriya peered out from behind the cover of the shuttle and got her first clear look at the attackers.

There were a dozen of them, moving with incredible speed across the plaza, dodging from side to side to avoid the shots from the Battle Sisters. They resembled Rho and the other clones, but these new beings were wild and savage. An aura of feral brutality and vicious, animal anger spread before them. Their flesh was a livid crimson the colour of blood.

‘Rho... She called them the *Red*...’

‘They’re like beasts!’ spat Lethe, firing towards the advancing creatures. ‘They fight with fury and no heed to danger!’

With each passing second, the attackers were closing in, and the turmoil of screaming and gunfire grew louder and louder. ‘So much for promises of a world at peace,’ Miriya said bitterly. Her next act was now cast in stone, and she called out over the vox-net. ‘*Sororitas!* In the Emperor’s name, destroy them!’

The Celestians were no strangers to conflict, and as one they laid a wall of shots upon the enemy. Miriya aimed her plasma pistol and sent sun-bright streaks of burning death into the advancing ranks.

Crimson-skinned replicae became shrieking torches, burning to ruin on the marble square. But their comrades did not falter and did not slow, still coming onwards, hurling grenades and firing blindly with heavy stub guns. Luckless civilians caught in their path went down, lives brutally snuffed out in moments.

‘We can’t break the line!’ Lethe spat out a gutter curse. ‘They keep coming!’

Miriya saw movement behind her and realised that Rho had followed them out to the plaza. The pale female cowered behind a planter, her face a picture of raw fear. Miriya dashed across the space between them and grabbed her by the shoulder. 'Where are your soldiers?' she demanded. 'These creatures will overwhelm us if your kind do not fight!'

'No.' Rho shook her head. 'No. We cannot. We reject warfare!'

The idea that a sentient being would rather embrace inaction and certain death than fight to survive was anathema to Miriya's character. 'You were born a clone-warrior!' She shook Rho hard. 'That is your template, your birth right! You have the skills! Pick up a weapon and defend yourself!'

'No!' For a brief instant, Miriya saw anger in Rho's eyes, but then it was gone again, and she cowered as shots whined off the stonework around them.

'More of them coming in!' called Lethe. 'We can't take them all!'

'Damn this...' Miriya released her grip on Rho and turned her back on the clone. Lethe was right. As formidable as the Sisters of Battle were, the numbers of the attackers were swelling as more of them poured into the plaza from the surrounding gardens. The Celestians were just one squad, and if the tide of this fight did not turn now, they would be overrun.

A change in tactics was required.

'Lethe!' Miriya marshalled her strength. 'Cover me!' The Celestian broke into a sprint and raced across the plaza to the rear of the shuttle, stubber shells cracking at her heels every step of the way, bolter rounds flashing back the other way as her Sisters met the enemy approach.

She threw herself up the ramp of the shuttle and vanished inside, and when Miriya emerged from the Arvus once more, her plasma pistol was holstered. In her hands, she cradled the hissing bulk of an Inferus Infinitas-pattern heavy flamer drawn from the vessel's weapons locker.

Filling her lungs with air, she let out a furious battle cry that carried across the plaza and echoed off the walls of the citadel. '*With Faith and Fire!*'

Her finger tightened on the igniter, and jets of burning liquid promethium lashed out like flaming whips, snaking across the enemy advance and stopping it dead. Miriya's squad-mates formed up behind her and followed their commander's lead.

'It's working!' shouted Lethe. 'They're falling back!'

The searing heat washed over Miriya's face as she advanced. 'Drive them into the ground, Sisters! Show them the folly of their heresy!'

Before the cleansing flame, the enemy line fell in disarray. Leaving the corpses of their dead behind, the red-skinned attackers broke apart and scattered, some fleeing down hatches into the sewers, others disappearing across the ruined gardens and into smoky side streets.

‘You... you killed so many of them...’ Rho staggered through the coils of haze wreathing the bodies of the dead, aghast at the carnage. In the aftermath of the brutal, bloody fight, the opulent plaza resembled a war grave, littered with the dead and the dying.

‘We *stopped* them,’ Miriya corrected. ‘Now you will tell me what they were! You lied to me. You said Hollos was at peace.’

‘It is! We are!’ Rho tried to recover her composure, but failed. ‘The Red... They’re not like the rest of us.’

‘You will explain it to me,’ Miriya’s voice was iron-hard.

Rho seemed to wilt before her eyes and she looked at the ground, nodding once.

‘Sister Miriya.’ She turned as Lethe approached, reloading her bolter. ‘It’s over. The enemy have fled.’

‘Status of the squad?’ asked Miriya.

Lethe jerked a thumb over her shoulder. ‘Cassandra was injured, but her armour took the brunt of the damage. She remains combat-ready. Other wounds were minor and of no concern. The total of civilian dead is still incomplete, but it is estimated to be in the hundreds. We tally nineteen replica corpses. Questor Nohlan came down from the citadel... He insisted on examining them.’

‘Very well.’ Miriya sensed there was more Lethe wanted to say, and inclined her head, giving her permission to continue.

‘I have contacted the *Coronus*,’ added the other woman. ‘They stand ready to deploy additional squads to the surface at your command.’

At first glance, it seemed like the right thing to do. Representatives of the Imperium of Man had been threatened, and the standard response would be to answer that attack with the maximum available force. But there were still too many variables at play here, still too many questions unanswered. ‘Not yet,’ she told her. ‘We did not come here to invade this world, Lethe.’

Lethe scowled. ‘They attacked us. We are the scions of the Imperial church on this world. That makes it an act of Holy War.’

‘Perhaps,’ she admitted. ‘But I will not respond in kind without an understanding of the situation. Too many conflicts have begun that way.’

Lethe shot a look at the replica, who stood by silent and unmoving. ‘The truth is being kept from us. That’s reason enough. There is more than meets the eye at work here.’

‘All the more reason for the full truth to be uncovered.’ Before her second-in-command could speak further to the matter, Miriya gave out her orders. ‘Carry on here. I will return to the citadel and determine our next course of action.’

‘As you command,’ snapped Lethe, giving Rho one last lingering glare before stalking away.

‘She looks at me as if she wishes to kill me,’ the clone said softly.

Miriya rounded on her. ‘Give me a reason she should not, Rho. Those beings who attacked us, they were replica. Like you.’

‘I told you, they are not like me! The Red are... *throwbacks*. They are an aberration among our kind, violent and consumed by destructive emotions. We have tried to re-educate them, rehabilitate them... But we cannot. Nothing works. They are... irredeemable.’ Slowly, reluctantly, Rho explained that in every generation of clones, some would exhibit the reddening of their flesh and a marked predilection for aggression and violence. The council, reluctant to cull what they considered to be innocent beings with no control over their baser natures, exiled the Red to an outlying island continent. But somehow, they returned to plague the peaceful cities of Hollos.

‘You kept this from us,’ said Miriya. ‘How can we trust anything you say now?’

‘You must understand,’ insisted Rho, ‘the Red are an isolated problem. They are not responsible for what they do.’

Miriya considered that. ‘Like a rabid animal?’

‘Yes.’

She tapped the butt of her plasma pistol. ‘Where I come from, violent beasts are put down, not given free rein to go where they wish! How often do these attacks occur?’

‘Rarely.’ Rho’s answer was too quick, too practised. After a moment, she went on. ‘Not as rarely as they used to, I must admit. But they are like tempests, Sister Miriya. They come and we weather them, and they pass. We

endure. We rebuild—’

Miriya nodded towards the shrouded corpses being gathered up from the bloodied grassland of the ornamental gardens. ‘Tell that to your people who died today.’ A weary sigh escaped her. ‘I will speak with your arbiters. And then I must confer with my ship.’

‘What are you going to do?’ Rho could not keep the fear from her words.

‘That remains to be seen,’ she replied. But in truth, the Celestian knew that her options were already beginning to narrow.

She strode back into the council chamber, her temper only held in check by the oath to this duty she had sworn to Prioress Lydia, but the corridors of the citadel were in disarray, the servants and the councillors scattered and missing, frightened by the massed assault on their most sacred building. It seemed that they had retreated to safe havens and left the Sororitas to oppose the Red alone. Only Rho had shown the courage to join them and look the assault in the eye.

Miriya cast around, frowning. Were these people so weak that they fled at the first sign of battle? How had they managed to survive in a universe as hostile as this one? There was no place for the pacifist way in Miriya’s world. There was only war, and the need to fight to live.

‘Arbiters!’ she called out across the empty chamber. ‘Where are you? I would speak with—’

The words died in her throat. The Battle Sister heard the clumsy, inexperienced approach, a sudden and furtive movement nearby, boots scraping on flagstones. Someone was attempting to flank her, figures moving unseen in the shadows beyond the light thrown from the tall stained-glass windows that dominated the chamber. She relied on instinct, turning as the inevitable attack came.

Darts arrowed from the depths of the shadows, whistling through the air like lazy hornets. The first flew wide as she dodged away, but the second came at her from another direction and she was distracted for long enough, for one tiny moment. Enough for the dart to bury itself in the bare flesh of her neck. Gasping as the chilling flood of a neurotoxin flashed through her veins, Miriya seized the dart and yanked it out, tossing it away.

‘Who... dares...?’ she snarled, but her throat was closing up and it was a monumental effort just to speak. The rush of blood in her ears rose to a

thunder. Even as she pulled her plasma pistol, the Celestian felt the tranquilising agent passing into every part of her body. Her hands felt heavy and numb.

The Battle Sister resisted, fighting against the void coiling at the edges of her vision, cursing her assailant through gritted teeth. ‘Damn... you...’

‘Shoot her again, you fools!’ The voice was distant and distorted, but she knew it. She had heard it before, in this very room...

More buzzing shots lanced into her and she gave a strangled cry, stumbling to the ground. Miriya fell, cursing herself as her body refused to answer her commands. The pistol was a dead weight in her hands, her legs turning to water. The glittering tiles of the council chamber floor rose up to meet her, turning black and dark, opening up to swallow her whole.

She rose back to wakefulness with a choking gasp.

Miriya could not reckon the passing of time. It seemed like an instant, but it could have been days. The Battle Sister awoke, resting in a heavy wooden chair, and found her armour untouched but her pistol absent from its holster. She had expected restraints, but there were none.

Her eyes adjusted to the dimness. Her new surroundings were a cellar of some sort, lit by dull biolumines, damp and chilly. And there, standing before her in a loose group, were five hooded figures in heavy cloaks.

One of them detached from the group and came forwards, rolling back the hood to reveal the face beneath. ‘Sister Miriya,’ began Arbiter Ahven, ‘I must apologise for—’

The Celestian did not let her finish. The grave mistake these fools had made was now fully revealed to them as Miriya became a blur of black-and-crimson armour, crossing the chamber in the blinking of an eye. Her gauntlet clamped about the throat of the other woman and she lifted her off her feet, scattering the rest of the group.

Miriya slammed her captor into the stone wall and hissed in fury. ‘You have attacked the God-Emperor’s Sororitas! You will answer for that!’

The other hooded figures drew weapons – common blades and stub guns – but Ahven desperately waved them away, gasping for air. ‘No! No! Stop! Miriya, *please!* Let me explain!’

It was a long moment before the Battle Sister released her grip and the arbiter dropped to the floor. ‘Speak,’ she said coldly.

‘I... I am sorry,’ Ahven managed, recovering as her cohorts helped her to her feet. ‘I deserved that. But you must understand, I had no choice...’

‘I have had my fill of this world’s lies and half-truths.’ Miriya’s reply was icy. ‘You will explain yourself to me *now*, or I swear by dawn Hollos will be *ashes*.’

The threat hung in the dank air between them, and no one doubted that it was genuine. ‘I could not take the chance you would refuse me. This was the only way to be sure we could speak alone.’ She massaged her bruised throat and coughed. ‘We are in the sewers beneath the citadel. This is the only place where we can meet without fear of being overheard by the replicae.’ At a nod from Ahven, the rest of the group revealed their faces. They were all normal humans. ‘You have seen a glimpse of our society,’ she went on. ‘You see how the replicae have made themselves the supreme power on our planet. They allow two of us to sit on their precious council, but they ignore everything we say. They know better than we natural-borns! They are superior!’ She turned her head and spat in disgust. ‘But there are many who reject their rule.’

Miriya scanned the faces of the others in her group as they nodded and muttered their agreement with Ahven’s words. ‘And you speak for them?’

The arbiter nodded. ‘In secret, I lead a sect who oppose Rho and her vat-bred freaks. We have been working against them for years, waiting for the opportunity... And now you are here!’ She exchanged a look with her co-conspirators. ‘It is time. The stars are right.’

‘What are you saying, Ahven?’ Miriya found her plasma pistol sitting undamaged atop a low wall and returned it to her holster. ‘That you wish the support of the Imperium in your plans for a coup?’

‘Will you stand with us?’ Ahven took a step towards her, her tone shifting towards entreaty. ‘Human and human against synthetic? You have seen them. Weak-willed and pathetic, working against the order of things. They have no right to rule us! The replicae are supposed to be our servants, not our masters!’

‘On that point, I may agree,’ allowed the Battle Sister. ‘And what of these... Red? Did you summon them to attack the plaza today?’

Ahven stiffened, becoming defensive. ‘In every revolution blood must be spilled. The Red are what the replicae should be, slave-warriors. But today’s attack was not directed against you.’

Miriya eyed her. ‘You bring me here by force. You attack civilians and cause bloodshed. And now you dare to petition my church for help?’

When Ahven spoke again, her eyes were alight with a passion. ‘I remember the words of the Codex Imperialis! The words of the Ecclesiarchy, left behind two millennia ago. *No heretic, no mutant, no xenos can be suffered to live!* What are these replicaes if not inhuman?’

The ferocity of the arbiter’s words gave Miriya pause. ‘I will consider your request,’ she said after a long moment.

Night had fallen across the capital as Miriya returned to the plaza before the citadel, and she sought out Questor Nohlan, picking her way through the rubble and the churned earth of destroyed flowerbeds.

Beneath a floating lumoglobe, the adept was bent over the burned remains of one of the Red, his machine-enhanced hands and a trio of mechanical limbs prodding and poking at the innards of the attacker. He seemed quite enthused by his grisly work, oblivious of the stark horror before him. With the bright, buzzing edge of a laser scalpel, Nohlan painstakingly flensed strips of skin from the dead replicaes, all the while talking to himself in quiet, sing-song tones. ‘Processing. Oh, how interesting... Processing.’ He froze mid-action as Miriya came into the glow from the lume and offered her something approximating a smile. ‘Sister Miriya! You’ve been off the vox for hours, where were you? Sister Lethe was quite perturbed.’

‘It is of no consequence,’ she told him, deflecting the question. ‘Have these corpses provided you with any new information?’

‘Oh, indeed...’ His head bobbed. ‘The locals were reluctant to let me examine them, but Sister Iona can be quite persuasive. Processing.’

‘What have you learned?’ She came closer, eyeing the corpse with mild disgust.

‘Cross-referencing. Original files from Mechanicum colony Hollos Seven-Nine-Seven. I have formed a hypothesis about the variant strains of replicaes we have seen here. The Red and the, uh, others.’ He cocked his head. ‘You see, the brain tissue of the violent clones shows evidence of a distinct neuro-chemical signature not present in the tissue of Rho and her kind.’

‘You performed an autopsy on one of the... normal replicaes as well?’

He nodded. ‘I did it without informing the locals. I thought it best not to ask permission. I imagine they would have been opposed to the idea,’ Nohlan

added airily.

‘Quite.’ Miriya put aside the adept’s cavalier attitude to the sanctity of the dead for a moment and went on. ‘So, this chemical... Is it artificial? A virus?’

‘Negative. Sister Miriya, it is the *absence* of the chemical that is artificial.’

She glanced around, to be certain that none of the replicae were within earshot of their conversation. ‘What are you saying? That Rho and her kind have been biologically altered in some fashion?’

‘Remnants of the original gene-template for the replicae from the Hollos Seven-Nine-Seven remain in my databanks,’ explained the adept. ‘They show the missing neuro-chemical as a “bio-trigger”. A genetic control mechanism implanted by their creators, if you will.’

‘Implanted by the Imperium,’ Miriya corrected.

‘Affirmative. But clones like Rho and the others we have met in the city, those without the bio-trigger, have free will. I believe they have *deliberately* re-engineered themselves to switch off the production of the neuro-chemical. They... evolved.’

Nohlan’s theory, if it were true, suggested a heretical act that would incur grave consequences. ‘How could that happen, unless they defied the orders of the gene-smiths who made them? Unless the slaves defied their rightful masters?’

‘There is another possibility,’ offered the adept. ‘It may have occurred naturally, without external interference.’ He spread his machine-hands. ‘Perhaps it is the will of the God-Emperor? Remember, not all of the replicae have been granted this... *gift*.’

‘A gift, or a curse?’ She wondered aloud. ‘No. I do not see His hand in this, questor. I see division and violence on the horizon. This planet is on the verge of a revolution. And I must decide if I am to stop it, or allow Hollos to be engulfed by war.’

It was Nohlan’s turn to be a step behind. ‘What are you saying, Sister Miriya?’

‘Prepare for greater violence,’ she told him. ‘No matter what happens, I fear it is inevitable.’

A new dawn rose, and it was as if the attack had never occurred. Overnight, human workers had washed away all traces of spilled blood and mended every last broken stone, until the plaza was spotless.

Miriya led her Battle Sisters to the council chamber, where Rho and the others were waiting. For a moment, Miriya's gaze dwelled on Arbiter Ahven, but the other woman showed no reaction to her scrutiny. The Celestian moved to stand in the centre of the room, the squad in guardian stances and Nohlan at her side. After the events of the previous day, the peace-bonds on their weapons had not been restored.

Rho stood up and bowed to the room. 'Honoured representatives of the Imperial church. You have our deepest regrets. We hoped that you would not be touched by our internal social problems. That you were dragged into such a lamentable incident shames all of Hollos. We beseech you and ask that you understand we meant no artifice in this matter. The... embarrassment of the Red is a problem we are working to bring to an end. We hope it will not sour your feelings towards our world.'

Miriya gave a nod, her expression cold and steady. 'I understand. Know this, people of Hollos. The Imperial church will welcome you back to the rule of Holy Terra.' There was a murmur of approval from the council, but they fell silent once more as the Celestian continued to speak. 'I have communicated via astropathic signal to my superiors regarding the situation on this world. The ships of the Ministorum are already on their way. But be clear, there will be changes ahead. For many of you, the... reintegration with the Imperium will be difficult.' The mood of the room changed, as her words made the council become wary.

'What changes do you refer to, Sister Miriya?' said Rho.

Miriya met the gaze of the arbiter, knowing that her next words would change the fate of a world forever. 'It is with regret I must inform you that all replicaes on Hollos will fall under the jurisdiction of the magos biologis, the gene-smiths of the Adeptus Mechanicus.'

The clone-beings on the council reacted with open shock and dismay. Rho raised a hand to quiet them. 'If you please, what does that mean, exactly?'

'Confirming,' noted Nohlan. 'As artificially created life forms, clones have no rights to citizenship in the Imperium of Mankind.'

A bleak silence fell in the wake of the adept's words, and when Rho finally broke it, it was with anger. 'You cannot expect us to accept that! We, who have protected this planet for twenty of your lifetimes? We, who made Hollos a near-utopia?' Her pale face darkened to a rosy shade. 'How dare you make such demands?'

‘It is as the Imperial church has decreed,’ she said sadly.

Miriya saw a smile bloom on Ahven’s face, and the human arbiter suddenly rushed to her feet, waving Rho aside. ‘Be silent, vat-born,’ she snapped. ‘Your weakling reign is at an end, as it should be!’

All too soon, Miriya realised that she had handed the woman exactly what she wanted. ‘Ahven, no! You will not be allowed to—’

But the arbiter ignored her, instead snarling into a vox-bead hidden in her collar. ‘Now! The time is *now*! Begin the revolt! The Red Sect rises this day!’

‘What are you doing?’ Rho reached out a hand to the other arbiter. ‘Ahven, please...’

‘I told you to be silent!’ Ahven spat the words at the replica and then struck her across the face with a vicious backhand blow. Beyond the smack of flesh on flesh, there came another sound, the same that had rocked the citadel only hours ago. The distant rumble of explosions and the chatter of gunfire. Ahven tore a weapon from the folds of her robes, and from the corridors leading into the chamber came dozens of humans wearing clothes streaked with blood-red dye.

The Battle Sisters instinctively raised their weapons, drawing into a combat wheel formation, but Miriya stepped away, approaching the council. ‘Stay your hands,’ she demanded. ‘I did not do this for you, Ahven! I gave this decree to stop any further bloodshed!’

‘It’s too late for that!’ Ahven shook her head, aiming her gun in Rho’s direction. ‘Today, we show our true colours. We show our secret sign, hidden for so long...’ The arbiter tore open her tunic, bearing her breast, and her action was mirrored by her followers. ‘We show our unity!’

What the Celestian saw branded into their flesh made her blood chill. Each member of the Red Sect bore a mark – a disc and a line bisecting two arcs. It was a symbol of the Ruinous Powers, of Chaos itself.

Nohlan recoiled from the sight as if he had been physically struck. ‘The mark of the daemon Tzeentch!’ It cost him just to say the name of the horror. ‘Terra protect us, they are a Cult of Change!’

The Sororitas brought their weapons to bear, but Ahven seemed shocked that fellow humans would threaten her. ‘What are you doing? We are the same! We have followed the words of the old books since before the fall of the veil! We have been loyal! Why do you turn against us?’

‘Because you are tainted.’ The words were ashes in Miriya’s mouth. Her

thoughts raced as she took aim with her plasma pistol. What she had feared all along was so. During its great isolation, Hollos had been tainted by the touch of the Dark Gods lurking in the warp, so deeply and so insidiously that those perverted by it were not even aware that they had been kneeling before a corrupting power.

‘Why do you take *their* side, Miriya?’ Ahven slammed her fist against her chest. ‘We are both human! The clones are the enemy, they are the ones who are unclean and tainted! The Red are the way of new change! We are the secret truth!’

‘No.’ Miriya shook her head gravely. ‘You have been deceived. You are pawns of Chaos and as the God-Emperor wills, we cannot suffer you to live.’

As the last words left her lips, Lethe and the other Battle Sisters cut down the Red Sect members in a brutal hail of bolter rounds. Ahven and her cohorts died screaming, their blood spattering across the chamber floor.

‘The bodies will need to be burned,’ said Lethe.

Miriya nodded. ‘And more besides.’

‘They... They’re all dead...’ Rho’s delicate hands flew to cover her mouth.

‘Not yet,’ said Nohlan. ‘Look, out in the streets.’ He pointed towards the glassaic windows, where flashes of yellow light marked the flares of gun muzzles. The anarchy of the battle in the courtyard was dwarfed by the conflict now erupting in the city. Staring down, Miriya glimpsed dozens of the feral replicae the Battle Sisters had faced before, laying waste beyond the plaza, and killing without pause.

Down in the vast courtyard, the carnage was horrific to behold. The numbers of the Red dwarfed those that had attacked the previous day, with legions of them running riot through the streets, an army of cloned berserkers emerging from the underground sewer system where Ahven’s cult had been containing them in preparation for this day.

Miriya watched them killing their way through the civilian populace, human and replicae alike. It was less a battle, more a cull, and the grim mathematics of war were abundantly clear to her. ‘We cannot fight such numbers.’

At her side, Lethe gave a nod of agreement. ‘Aye, Eloheim. Five squads more, even ten would be hard-pressed to match them.’ She looked up into the sky. ‘So, then. The ship. If we have the *Coronus* deploy their lance cannons from orbit, the gunners could wipe out the insurgents within moments.

Contain this before it spreads beyond the city limits.'

'The collateral damage would be immense. Hundreds of thousands of civilians dead. And the capital would be nothing but a smoking crater.' She shook her head. 'No, Sister. There's another way.' Miriya turned to Rho. Along with the other council members, she had followed them down into the plaza to witness the bloody destruction of their metropolis. 'I will ask once again, replicae,' she began. 'Help us to fight these creatures. You are gene-engineered with superior strength, superior speed. If you fight back, you can defeat your savage equivalents... If you will not take up arms and defend your world, I will be forced to destroy it!'

Once more, Rho shook her head. '*No!* We have foresworn conflict. We excised the ability to kill from ourselves, forever. We are passive... Even if we wished to do so, the ability to take life is no longer a part of us.'

Nohlan gave the clone a measured look. 'Error,' he said. 'That statement is incorrect.' The adept gestured with a cyber-limb. 'I have computed the nature of the... mutation that separates the Red strain of the replicae from Rho and her kind... Those who consider themselves pacifists. In the past, they changed themselves to expunge their warrior natures. Error. They have only *deactivated* that part of themselves. It still remains.'

Rho blinked, not comprehending his meaning. 'That was all so long ago, before I was decanted...'

'I can undo the alteration,' Nohlan explained. 'It is, in fact, a very simple task to accomplish. An aerosolised viral form of the correct neuro-chemical, synthesised by my internal bio-fac module.' He presented a nozzle at the tip of his cyber-limb, one of a dozen micro-tools built into his augmetic form. His clicking lens-eyes studied Rho sadly. 'It will regress all of them to their default warrior-helot nature.'

The naked shock on Rho's face was an awful sight on so gentle an aspect. 'God-Emperor, no! You would rob us of our reason, our very freedom?'

'You don't have any freedom,' Lethe said grimly. 'You are slaves. That's how you were made.'

With an expression of pure, undiluted horror, Rho turned to Miriya, pleading with her. 'Sister, please! Tell me you will not do this!'

It took an effort of will to look away from her. 'How would it work, questor?'

'Once released, it will reproduce very rapidly, moving from clone to clone.'

Nohlan's limbs whirled as he drew them back. 'Infecting them. Reactivating the dormant neural links. Effect would be near-instantaneous. All replicaes would revert to type. All humans would be unaffected.' He paused. 'But you must understand, Sister Celestian, this is a grave act. It is irreversible. Once implemented, all that the altered replicaes are would be lost to them. Memories, personality, self... *Erased.*'

'In the name of Holy Terra,' Rho cried, her panic rising. 'I beg of you! Do not consider this!' She tried to reach out for Miriya, but Isabel and Cassandra moved to block her way.

'I will not let a world fall to the taint of Chaos.' Miriya turned back to look Rho in the eye. 'Not one single world. Never, as long as I draw breath. If I must sacrifice some to save others... I will do whatever is required to retain the sanctity of church and Imperium.' She shut away the sorrow that threatened to rise in her chest before it could fully form.

'You... have destroyed us,' wept Rho.

'Do it,' Miriya told the adept.

Nohlan gave a curt, solemn nod. 'As you command, Sister Celestian.'

The scream that tore from Rho's lips was the agony of a soul thrown into the darkest reaches of torment, drowned out for a moment by the shrieking hiss of the neuro-chemical dispersing from the adept's bio-fabricator. Rho and the other replicaes around them moaned and wept, collapsing to the ground. It was a sickening sight. But then an eerie silence descended on them as their cries died off to nothing.

The change flooded over the replicaes like a storm cloud blotting out the sun. Miriya watched Rho's pale flesh grow darker, becoming a deep, sullen crimson.

'Throne and Blood,' whispered Lethe. 'It's working. All of them, they're becoming like the others...'

Miriya approached Rho as she rose shakily to her feet once more. Her eyes were dull and lifeless now, the spark of intelligence that had animated them before sniffed out. 'Rho. Do you hear me?'

'I hear you.' The reply was hollow and distant, like the rote speech of a machine-vox.

Nohlan studied Rho carefully, then nodded once. 'Confirmed. Balance is restored. The pacifist replicaes are as they once were. Ready for your battle orders.'

‘Rho. Heed me.’ Miriya pointed down towards the lower city, where the turmoil was in full force. ‘Gather your kindred and take weapons. Destroy the Red Sect and the clones they control.’

‘As you command.’ They were the last words she would ever say to Miriya. Without pause or hesitation, Rho and the other replicae stormed across the plaza in the direction of the conflict. They moved as automatons, fast and lethal, striding into battle in silent formation.

‘Now we have a chance to save this planet,’ said Lethe. ‘In an hour, we’ll have an army of them.’

‘And what has it cost?’ Miriya severed the treacherous train of thought that would lead her towards doubt and sadness with a near-physical effort. She drew her plasma pistol and pointed after the replicae. ‘Sisters! Follow them in!’ Miriya broke into a run, blotting out all other concerns for the glory and the fire of battle. It was all that mattered; it was all she was.

She let out a shout that rang across the conflict unfolding before her. ‘Ave Emperor!’

In the aftermath, there finally came a moment for her to reflect.

From the observation gallery of the *Coronus*, Sister Miriya watched the planet turn beneath her feet. Lines of black strayed across the surface of Hollos, the wind carrying plumes of smoke from the burning capital and out across the plains.

The Celestian saw shuttles passing back and forth through the atmosphere, and sharing the warship’s high orbit, the massive slab-sided forms of other Imperial vessels drifted like great iron monoliths. Summoned by Questor Nohlan, the Adeptus Mechanicus had arrived in force. Even now they were down there, gathering up every last clone that had survived the uprising, plundering all remnants of the lost technology that had created them.

And with every cargo that left the planet, Ministorum preachers and iterators were being deposited in their place. The confessors and the firebrand priests of the Imperial church would take the reins of Hollos and fill the gap left by the planet’s ruling council. With their words and deeds, in a few years the locals would forget their former leaders and embrace the same monumental, unbending worship that lived in the chapels of thousands of worlds.

Sister Miriya’s mission was complete. The lost had been returned to the fold. The price of it no longer mattered. ‘It is done,’ she said to herself,

recalling an ancient catechism in High Gothic. ‘*Omnis Vestri Substructio. Es Servus, Ad Nobis.*’

She did not turn as mechanical footsteps approached from behind her. At length, Questor Nohlan spoke. ‘I believe we destroyed something unique on this world, Sister Celestian. It troubles me.’

‘We did it to save them,’ she replied. ‘For church and Imperium.’

‘Fortunate for us, that we have such ironclad justification to absolve all doubts,’ he noted. ‘If we did not... One might go quite mad.’

She turned to the adept, her eyes dark and weary with the weight of what she had done. ‘They were not human, and only the God-Emperor has the divine right to create new life. They allowed Chaos to take root among them during their stewardship. These are all reasons enough.’

‘Are you certain?’ Nohlan asked gently. ‘We have taken vital, intelligent beings, and reduced them to little more than walking weapons. Is that right?’

‘Rho said they wanted to act in the Emperor’s name. To serve His will.’ She turned her back on the adept and once again allowed her gaze to be drawn down to the newly scarred planet below. ‘And now they shall, in the manner they were created for.’ She found a transport ship leaving the atmosphere, a cargo carrier taking whatever was left of Rho’s kind so they might be studied, understood, dissected and replicated, all in the name of the God-Emperor’s eternal wars.

‘In battle,’ said the Sororitas. ‘*Unto death.*’



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THE ZHENG CIPHER

JOSH REYNOLDS

The radium carbine bucked in Alpha 6-Friest's hands as she pivoted and fired at the hormagaunt springing towards her out of the press of battle. The rad-bathed bullet punctured the alien's skull, scorching the chitin black as it passed through and out the other side. She spun, carbine juddering as she fired again and again, trusting in her targeting sensors to send the bullets where the Omnissiah willed.

As she moved, her augmented limbs carrying her smoothly from one firing stance to the next, she took note of the disposition of her skitarii, calculated the efficiency of their current firing pattern, and found it wanting. 6-Friest stepped back, avoiding a scything talon, and smashed the butt of her carbine into the wailing hormagaunt's fang-studded maw. The front of the alien's skull crumpled and burst, spattering the front of her armour. Even as it fell, she was already seeking out new prey. The radium carbine slid through her fingers, spinning swiftly back into a firing position with a casual twitch of her wrists.

<Tighten up ranks.> She sent the thought pulsing out along the neural node-line that linked her combat-maniple. They responded with action rather than assent, tightening their formation, drawing together into a tight phalanx. Radium carbines hissed and barked, punching steaming holes in the heaving tide of alien chitin that sought to drown the cohort of skitarii vanguard attempting to pass through it.

<Watch your left, 10-Dulak,> she thought, sending a warning to one of her skitarii as something with too many limbs and claws rose up out of the press of lesser vermin and lunged for him with blades of bone and whips of stinging flesh. The rad-trooper whirled and fired, again and again, until the tyranid warrior staggered and sank down, its body shrivelling and steaming

as the baleful energies ate away at its flesh. The radium carbines she and her skitarii carried were masterpieces of baroque beauty, each one older than its wielder by several generations. That beauty, however, belied a vile function – every shot bathed the immediate area in deadly radiation, rendering it as inhospitable as the rad-wastes of Mars itself.

Which was not to say that Kotir-8 was all that hospitable otherwise. The once harmlessly barren mining colony had been reduced to a xenos-infested wasteland, stripped of what little life it had possessed, its rocky gorges and snow-capped crags covered in a seething carpet of organic savagery. There had been two hundred and sixty-three extraction facilities on Kotir-8. Now there was one. Soon enough, there would be none. It was as inevitable as rust and ruin.

The facility in question rose above the seething horde. It was a hummock of metal and stone, built to withstand the worst environmental hazards the galaxy could throw at it, and to protect the extraction plant and its workers. Defence emplacements consisting of plasteel weapon blisters swivelled and rolled, spraying the forecourt of the facility with autocannon fire and cleansing flames. While the facility's firepower was substantial, it barely slowed the frenzied mass of alien bodies that swarmed about its walls like an angry sea of chitin and ichor. Soon, those defences would fall silent, ammunition cylinders and fuel drums emptied, and the armoured doors would buckle and burst, as they had two hundred and sixty-two times before.

Speed was of the essence. The facility held something too precious and important to allow it to be so savagely consumed. That was why 6-Friest and her combat-maniple had been dispatched, to fight their way across the arid plains and jagged crags from their point of arrival at one of the fallen facilities, to this last redoubt.

She recalled the juddering descent, the orbital lander losing pieces of itself as it plummeted through the swirling clouds of alien madness. Flying bioforms – gargoyles, harridans and worse things – had converged on the lander as it pierced the upper reaches of the atmosphere, tearing it apart as it fell. She had lost two skitarii in that hellish descent, torn from their safety harnesses by the claws and tendrils of the monstrous creatures and dragged out into the crawling sky. Others had died on the march, pulled away from the others and into a tangle of talons and teeth, or else consumed by alien bile. But the vanguard had marched on, as relentless as the will of the

Ommissiah itself. And now that they were within sight of their goal, 6-Friest had no intention of slowing down.

6-Friest signalled the closest of her combat-maniple, and they swung their carbines around, aligning them with hers. As one, they fired, punching a hole in the frenzied ranks of the enemy. Just beyond the leaping, skittering forms of the hormagaunts, she could see two more of the multi-limbed warrior forms striding forwards.

<9-Jud, target the synapse creatures.> A moment later, 9-Jud's radium jezzail shrieked. The long-barrelled rifle was a precision weapon, requiring a steady hand, eye and mind. 9-Jud had all three, thanks to the blessings of the Ommissiah. One of the tyranid warriors staggered as a bullet smashed into its chest. It lurched forwards, screamed and toppled, black bile and steam spurting from its open jaws. The last of the warrior-forms broke into a loping run, smashing through the massed ranks of its smaller kin in its hurry to close the distance.

<Under optimum range, Alpha,> 9-Jud sent.

<Acknowledged. Engaging conqueror protocols,> 6-Friest responded. She slung her carbine and stepped forwards, unhooking the arc maul from her belt. With a snap of her wrist, she activated the weapon. Energy crackled around its bludgeon, and she felt her combat-nodes shiver in sympathy as the weapon linked itself to her.

The tiny, fierce machine-spirit within the arc maul gave a static snarl of eagerness as she broke into a trot. It longed for war the way an adept longed for enhancements, ever-greedy. She knew that feeling well, and was happy to have the opportunity to indulge it. When metal met flesh, flesh failed. It was a lesson the hive mind had yet to learn, but Ommissiah willing, she would teach it today. She swung it in a tight circle, filling the air with the hum of arc generators as she moved to intercept the tyranid warrior.

The creature was already staggering, black froth dripping from its jaws. Even the alien horrors birthed by the hive fleets were not immune to the searing breath of Mars. To meet the vanguard in battle was to meet death, either by bullet or by simple proximity. But the quicker the synapse creature was put down, the quicker the rest would scatter, and the quicker she and her combat-maniple could complete their mission.

She ducked beneath its first sweeping blow with a bone-sword and brought the arc maul down on its exposed elbow joint. Electricity surged through the

limb and the tyrannid howled in agony as it rounded on her. She stepped back, narrowly avoiding the tip of a second blade. Her targeting array pinged as it focused in on a weak point in the creature's armour and she smiled beneath her helm. The creature had overextended itself. She lunged forwards and smashed her arc maul into its knee, elbow and then, finally, its jaw, pulverising each in turn in a burst of blue lightning. Bone blades skidded across her war-plate in a scatter of sparks, but failed to cut through the ancient artificer armour.

6-Friest stepped back as the tyrannid slumped. The beast wheezed and tried to stand, but before it could do so, she pressed the barrel of her carbine to its wide skull and pulled the trigger. As the synapse creature slumped, a quiver went through the ranks of hormagaunts. Bestial instincts reasserted themselves in the absence of the guiding will of the hive mind, and the creatures began to retreat.

6-Friest knew it was only a temporary reprieve. Quickly, she signalled for her combat-maniple to head for the main doors of the facility. They did not wait for it to open. One melta charge later, 6-Friest was stepping through a smoking, slag-lined hole and into the facility beyond. A ring of autoguns greeted her, and above them, pale, frightened faces. She let her carbine dangle from its strap and reached up to unlatch her helmet. The fear did not fade from the faces of the facility crew.

She did not blame them. Her features were as pale as theirs, but scarred by radiation and war. Her skin was peeling away in dry sheets and her teeth were few and far between. What hair she had was shorn close to the scalp, and as dry as the red sands. Her eyelids were gone and her eyes were covered by the goggle-like augmetics, filled with blessed salve, and constantly whirring and oscillating, recording information to be transmitted to her master in orbit. Thankfully, her gums no longer ached, and the old burns on her neck and cheeks had long since stopped hurting.

'Rad-troopers,' someone muttered.

'Where is your adept?' she croaked. She cleared her throat and asked again more clearly. It had been months since her last physical conversation. The neural link was more efficient, and easier on vocal cords seared by the rad-storms of Mars. She snapped her fingers. 'Your adept,' she said again.

'Here! I am here,' a voice said. A tall man clad in filthy Administratum robes shoved through the ring of guns. He was worm-pale and bald, with

bloodshot eyes and a jaw coated in stubble. ‘Adept Sooj, at your service...?’ he said.

‘Alpha Vanguard 6-Friest,’ she said, clipping her helmet to her belt and turning. ‘9-Jud, 4-Hest, establish a perimeter. 12-Udo, take four others and come with me. 10-Dulak, take the rest and establish a defensive cordon around the loading bay. Chronometers set for departure schedule epsilon.’ She turned back to Sooj. ‘The cipher, adept. Is it safe?’

‘The—? Oh! Ah, yes,’ Sooj said hurriedly. He stared at her face with what she suspected was horrified fascination. Few outside of the skitarii barracks saw the warriors of the vanguard up close, and fewer still wanted to. Their very presence was death to the unaugmented or unprotected, their robes and war-plate tainted by the baleful energies of the weapons they wielded in the Ommissiah’s name. ‘Our tech-priest kept it in the examination nave.’

‘Take me to it. Now,’ she said. Sooj nodded jerkily and hurried away. 6-Friest followed, 12-Udo and the others falling in behind her. She ignored the facility crew as they made way for her. They parted, giving her a wide berth as she swept through them. There were only a pitiful few left, a dozen at most, hollow-eyed and stinking of stale caff-rations and chemicals. They clutched their weapons with fervent devotion, however, and she did not doubt their willingness to fight. They slunk behind her skitarii, following at a distance.

‘I-I rather expected more of you, when you said you were coming,’ Sooj said. Contact had been established early on in the invasion. A ship had been dispatched as soon as word of the cipher’s recovery had reached those who recognised its importance. It was only by the will of the Ommissiah that they had reached Kotir-8 before it was fully enveloped in the coils of the hive fleet designated Leviathan.

‘How many crew were assigned to this facility, adept?’ she asked, as she followed Sooj. He glanced at her and gave a harsh caw of laughter.

‘One hundred and fifty-five,’ he said. ‘We have lost one hundred and forty-three personnel since the xenos made planetfall. As such, the continued operation of this facility has proven impossible.’ He didn’t look at her. ‘I have recorded each name, and the manner of their passing, as it occurred. Each of them did their duty, and to the last. May the Emperor bless and keep them.’

‘Your tech-priest was one of the casualties,’ 6-Friest said.

It wasn't a question. Sooj nodded and hugged his sides as he led her down a corridor lined with rattling pipes and clattering gauges. Bundles of cable hung from the ceiling where they'd been rerouted to provide power, likely to the defences. It made her soul cringe to see such butchery of the Omnissiah's own, but under the circumstances, she was sure the Machine-God would be forgiving. The living quarters for the crew occupied three honeycomb levels, one atop the next

'Yes, old Rebo. He's the one who identified the cipher. Something... took him, on the third day. It took others as well, but Rebo was a blow,' Sooj said. He shook his head, and ran trembling fingers across his shaved pate. 'Without him, I have had sole responsibility for the continued survival of this facility and its remaining crew.' He glanced at her again. 'I am glad you showed up when you did, Alpha 6-Friest.'

'And I am glad you were able to hold out as long as you have,' 6-Friest said.

'All blessings be to Rebo and the God-Emperor,' Sooj said. 'It was he who insisted on the proper maintenance of the weapons systems, and the power reroutes.' He gestured at the loose cabling. 'I was more concerned with the day-to-day operations...' He trailed off. Then, hesitantly, he asked, 'Are... are we the last?'

'You are. Kotir-8 is lost,' 6-Friest said. 'You have done the Emperor proud, and the Omnissiah's blessings will be upon you, for your efforts here.'

'I'm just happy to be leaving,' Sooj said. There was an edge of hysteria to his voice. His biorhythms were erratic, and 6-Friest could only vaguely imagine the strain he'd been under. Administratum adepts were not conditioned for war or survival, merely for calculation and the proper keeping of records. But the Machine-God had seen fit to gift Adept Sooj with a modicum of utility, enabling him to persevere where others of his caste might have crumbled and become worse than useless. It had enabled him to keep safe that which she and her combat-mantle had been sent to retrieve, in the face of the alien fury now consuming the world around them.

'The cipher, adept,' she said.

'Here.' Sooj led her into a chamber that she recognised as a Mechanicum nave – a laboratory, where Rebo would have studied, synthesised and recorded the materials discovered during the facility's operations. Bits of archeotech and other, older remnants cluttered examination tables or slowly cycled through automated scanners. A robed servitor stood in one corner,

steadily recording the findings of the scanners. Its servo-stylus scratched quietly across the parchment, which emerged from the feeder unit built into its augmented chest cavity only to fall in rolls and tangles about the floor, unread and soon to be destroyed forever.

‘Kotir-8 was a historical junk heap, or so Rebos claimed. A millennia of history, buried beneath the topsoil. There were colonies here well before the Great Crusade, and well after. They were lost to war, and worse things, but the infrastructure was still here. Whole hives, buried beneath the arid soil, lost to recorded history,’ Sooj said, looking around. ‘The ore-haulers recovered bulkheads, miles of cabling and deck plates. We never discovered whether it was a ship or something else.’ He looked at her. ‘And now I suppose we never will.’

‘No,’ she said.

Sooj went to one of the tables and retrieved a cylindrical tube, inscribed with the sigils of the Adeptus Mechanicus. It was old. She could tell that even without the aid of diagnostic sensors. The brass tube had turned green with age, and hardened soil still clung to the teeth of the cogwheel symbol emblazoned on each end. He extended it towards her, and she accepted it reverentially.

She ran her fingers across the markings, wondering at the man who’d made them. Inside was a message of some kind, a recording or a coded transmission. The words of a forgotten age, thought lost but now returned, by the grace and mercy of the Machine-God. The final testament of Magos Zheng, explorer and saint of the sacred Brotherhood of the Eternal Cog. He who had gone beyond the Ghoul Stars, and vanished into the firmament of heaven without a trace. Until now.

It was worth a world, she thought, to recover this. Perhaps that was why the Machine-God had drawn the explorer fleets to Kotir-8 in the first place. So that the cipher might be found, before it was lost forever.

She felt the touch of the Omnissiah’s will upon hers as she ran her fingers across the cylinder, and knew a moment of joy that the responsibility had fallen to her. She had ever served the Machine-God to the fullest of her capabilities, and this was her reward, to stand here, holding the legacy of Zheng, to return what had been lost to those who would care for it forevermore. ‘I serve, and gladly,’ she murmured.

‘He never said what it was. Only that it was of immense value,’ Sooj said.

6-Friest did not reply. Sooj would not understand, for his intellect was caged in meat, rather than at one with the choral nodes of the Great Work. Her eyepieces oscillated, summoning a digital overlay of the facility's schematics. She gestured. 'The loading bay, for the orbital haulers – it's there? What is its status?'

'Ah... uncompromised, as yet. Once we open the bay doors though, they'll get in.'

'They always get in,' 6-Friest said. 'It is what they are designed to do. Just as we are designed to reduce them to the protoplasm from which they are made. You and your men will accompany us to the bay. The extraction vessel is waiting for our signal.' She turned and left the lab, the cipher cradled to her chest.

'I– Yes, of course,' Sooj said. He nodded and gestured. His men followed without complaint as the adept led the vanguard to the bay. The cavernous structure occupied a third of the facility, and was dominated by clanking carrier-belts, manned by sorting servitors, who now bent, pushed and separated the empty air in lieu of the stream of ore, which had long since ceased to pour from the great feeder chutes that lined the inner wall.

Steam vented from cracked, untended pipes, and gauges rattled querulously in dark corners. The facility had its own crude form of spirit, as did all complex machinery, however large or small. And that spirit knew that it was dying. Alarms whooped and fell silent in mournful song, and melancholy power surges fried unsanctified circuit boards, filling the air with greasy smoke and the tang of scorched metal.

6-Friest made a silent prayer for forgiveness, hoping the facility would understand. They all had their function, and they must perform it as the Omnissiah willed. They made their way towards the pentagonal landing platform, where in better times suborbital haulers would have landed to collect the raw ore, to be turned into promethium at the massive refinery-cities that had once girded Kotir-8's equatorial zone.

She heard the ping of the suborbital flyer's approach warning, and signalled her skitarii to open the landing bay. The great skylight, made from fractal plates of rad-hardened plasteel, groaned and squealed as it slid open. A few opportunistic tyranids took the opportunity to drop into the bay, screeching with hunger. The skitarii opened fire, sweeping the xenos beasts from the landing platform within moments.

The outpost shuddered, and alarms began to blare with a consistency they had not had before. She heard the distinctive hiss-crack of a radium jezzail echo through the bay, and knew that the outer defences had been breached. 6-Friest turned. <9-Jud, report.>

<Enemy has engaged assault protocols. Assault bioforms in evidence. Orders?>

Assault bioforms – that meant something larger than hormagaunts or the synapse broods. <Hold position. Continue situation analysis,> she sent. The unspoken addendum was ‘until you are unable to do so’, but no skitarii needed to be told that. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she added, <Ommissiah guide you, 9-Jud.>

<Acknowledged, Alpha. And... thank you.>

She cut the link without replying. As she did so, she saw 10-Dulak and the others falling back into the bay. Defender protocols had been engaged, and her skitarii knew what to do without being told. They closed the bay doors behind them and sealed them. 9-Jud and 4-Hest were not with them. Someone needed to slow down the enemy, while the extraction was completed.

6-Friest felt no guilt at the thought. It was a necessity, and one that the warriors of the vanguard were ever-prepared to make. They lived and breathed the very stuff of death, and it was their constant companion. *Some parts wear out quicker than others, but all are necessary, all serve, for however short a time*, she thought. 9-Jud knew that. Cogs did not complain. She hefted her carbine and checked her ammunition.

The lander appeared over the platform, thrusters humming as it descended on columns of superheated air and promethium. Its anti-personnel weapons hissed as it sank down, and chunks of burning tyrannid pattered down onto the platform around it. It was small, as such flyers went. Barely large enough to carry a few passengers and the crew of specially designed servitors that manned it.

Sooj stared at it in incomprehension. ‘It’s... Is there a larger ship coming?’

‘No,’ 6-Friest said. She didn’t look at him.

‘But you said– We were to be extracted!’ Sooj’s voice rose, and his men began to murmur amongst themselves. The hope of survival, of escape, had ensured that they held on. If that hope were taken away, there was no telling how they might react. Nonetheless, 6-Friest did not have it in her to lie.

Deception was the way of meat. The machine provided only clarity, painful and bright.

‘One may die, yet still endure if his work enters the greater work,’ 6-Friest said, still not looking at Sooj. The adept shook his head.

‘I don’t...’

‘We must endure the present, that those who come after may continue the great work,’ 6-Friest continued. She looked at the adept now. ‘The words of Technomagos Mojaro, on the eve of the Xenarite Schism. We are not flesh, adept. We are but cogs in the God Machine, turning as the Omnissiah wills.’ Almost gently, she added, ‘Sometimes those cogs must be stripped out, for the good of the machine.’

Sooj looked at her blankly. Then, his eyes widened. ‘This isn’t a rescue,’ he said hoarsely. 6-Friest cocked her head.

‘It is,’ she said. She gestured with the cipher. ‘But not for you.’

Sooj turned pale. It was an impressive feat, given his pallid appearance. 6-Friest’s sensors registered a drop in blood pressure, and she moved to steady the adept. He attempted to slap her hand away, but only succeeded in bruising his own. Cradling it, he backed away from her.

‘You’re going to let them kill us,’ he hissed, in a strangled voice.

‘No. You may fight, if you wish. Survival is unlikely, but the option is available,’ 6-Friest said. Her sensors registered a spike in adrenaline. She glanced at his face, noting the increased respiration, the dilation of pupils and the subcutaneous twitch of the muscles in his hand. Sooj lunged for her weapon a half-second after she extended her hand to intercept his. She caught his wrist and squeezed.

Bone cracked, and the adept shrieked. 6-Friest felt a moment of pity, as the other survivors reacted with predictable hostility. Autoguns bobbed up, even as their wielders were cut down by the carbines of the rad-troopers. In moments, the last survivors of Kotir-8 were so much inert matter. All save Sooj. She looked down at the adept.

He’d fallen to his knees, his wrist still trapped by her grip. He cursed her, even as he flailed at her with his free hand. She looked down at him. ‘You would not have survived exposure to us, adept,’ she said. ‘Your moment has come, whether at the claws of the tyrannids, or from the slow dissolution that comes with the radiation that is our blessing and burden. Be at peace, and know that your name will be remembered, in the record of this event.’ She

reached down and caught hold of his head. ‘The machine will endure.’

Then, with a single, sharp motion, she snapped his neck. It was a small mercy, but one she was only too happy to provide. Sooj had served faithfully, and well, after all.

The alarms fell silent. She looked towards the doors and shivered as the neural strand connecting her to her combat-maniple shuddered. 6-Friest felt 9-Jud’s death through its quivering filaments. She felt the heat that washed over him, consuming his organic components and cooking his brain within its shell of bone and metal. His last thought pulsed across the surface of her mind before flickering into static. ‘Like the breath of Mars,’ she murmured. He’d always been a bit of a poet, she thought, as she turned towards the heavy bay doors. Something slammed against the metal, causing it to distend and bulge.

<Fall back to the landing platform. Hold position. Defensive protocols.> She turned and darted up the steps to the top of the platform, robes swirling about her legs. The side of the lander opened like a blossom of metal, accompanied by the hiss of unseen pneumatics. A cloud of incense issued forth, heralding the figure which stepped out to meet her as she reached the lander.

The servitor was rad-hardened, and its head ended at the top of its lower jaw. The rest of its head was taken up by a holographic projector, surrounded by censer-exhausts, which spewed caustic, sterilising incense into the air around the servitor. The inhuman features of the technomagos in charge of her operation flickered into view as the servitor stepped down out of the transport.

‘Report,’ he said.

Wordlessly, 6-Friest held up the cipher, in its protective case. The technomagos’ holographic eyepieces whirled and clicked, focusing in on the cipher. A burble of sound squawked through the servitor’s speakers and it held out a bulky claw. She deposited the cipher into its care, and the servitor slid it into a specially prepared node on its armoured chassis. Safe within that node, the cipher would remain inviolate even if the servitor were jettisoned into the vacuum of space.

‘At last,’ the technomagos rasped. ‘The final cipher of Magos Arcturus Zheng, devised before his disappearance beyond the Ghoul Stars. What knowledge it must contain, what secrets...’ The eyepieces whirled and clicked again, focusing on her rad-scarred features. ‘You have done well,

Alpha 6-Friest.'

'Acknowledged, Archmagos Vule,' she said. She glanced at the transport. It was small, albeit bulky, but it could hold herself and several of her remaining skitarii. She looked up, through the open bay. The skies were full of tyranid aero-forms, the clouds choked and stricken through with purple, sickly veins of crackling bioluminescence. 'Probability of priority evacuation?'

'Nil,' Vule said.

6-Freist closed her eyes, but only for a moment. 'Understood,' she said, tonelessly.

'Your rad-output is unacceptable, Alpha 6-Friest. It might damage the cipher if proximity continues,' Vule said.

'Explanations are unnecessary, archmagos,' 6-Friest said. She raised her helmet and slid it on, locking it into place with a twitch of her fingers. 'Cogs do not question. They merely turn. I only ask that prayers be said on our behalf.'

Vule was silent, for long moments. Then, the servitor reached up, as if its puppeteer, so many millions of miles above the dying world, had inadvertently tugged on a string. The claw twitched, mere millimetres shy of her arm, before falling back. 'Omniassiah bless you, daughter of the machine,' Vule said. The hologram flickered and faded. The servitor turned and trundled back up into the flyer. 6-Friest turned away.

The doors at the end of the bay exploded inwards, skidding across the floor, trailing sparks. A tide of alien filth flooded into the loading bay, led by the roaring, monstrous shape of a carnifex, its carapace scarred by rad-burns. The bay shuddered as it screeched in rage.

'Omniassiah guide and keep you all,' 6-Friest said, as she hefted her weapon. 'And pray for our brothers, whose task is not yet done. Our burden is soon to be set aside, our service to the Machine-God complete, but theirs must continue.'

'We pray,' her maniple murmured, as one.

The carnifex surged up the steps of the dais, plasma belching from its distended maw. Hormagaunts swarmed up the steps alongside it, and behind them came worse things. A crawling tide of filthy creation, a wave of flesh. When metal met flesh, flesh failed. But in failing, it could tangle and swallow. But it could not, would not, consume. She stroked her carbine, wondering how long it would be forced to sit and wait for the servants of the

Machine-God to come and take it away. *I am sorry, old friend*, she thought, as she and her skitarii opened fire. *Be patient, for they will come for you, and you will sing the death-song of Mars anew, on other battlefields*. The radium carbine shivered in her grip as she fired, as if in melancholy response.

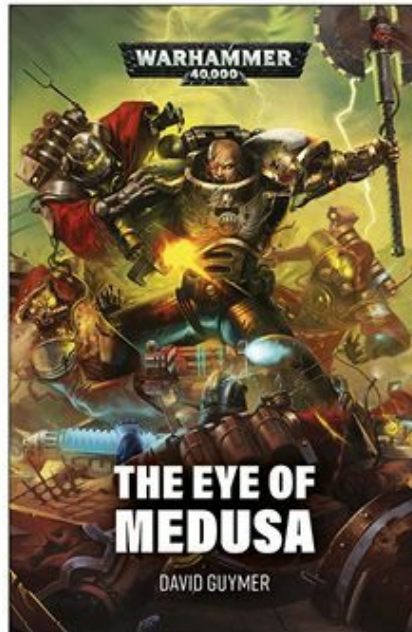
The carnifex reached the top of the platform. A skitarius died, rent asunder by snapping claws. Another was incinerated by a boiling gout of plasma. 6-Friest lifted her arc maul and stepped past the burning remains to confront the monstrous flesh. Behind her, she heard the roar of thrusters. Her mission was done. Her purpose was served, all subroutines completed.

The carnifex rose up over her, pale flesh already blackening and blistering from its proximity to she and the others. Its jaw sagged, and she could see the incandescent mass growing within its gullet. She smiled as she felt the wash of its heat roll over her, consuming what little flesh was left to her, even as she swung the arc maul towards its skull. 9-Jud had been right.

It was just like the soothing breath of Mars.



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A SANCTUARY OF WYRMS

PETER FEHERVARI

- BEGIN RECORDING -

We walk blindly along a knife-edge slicing into oblivion. If we misstep we fall from our path. If we walk true we fall with our path. Perhaps there is a difference, but I have come to doubt it. Nevertheless, I will honour the Greater Good and allow you to draw your own conclusions from the facts.

I have little time, but even in extremis one must observe the correct protocols. That is what it means to be a t'au amongst savages. Whatever else I have lost to this diseased planet, I will not lose that. Therefore know that I am Por'ui Vior'la Asharil, third-stream daughter of Clan Kherai. Though I hail from a sept of worlds where the wisdom of the water caste is eclipsed by the ferocity of the fire caste, my family has served the T'au Empire with grace since the dawn of the first colonies. As I serve with this, my final account.

And so I shall offer you a beginning. Let it be the grey-green murk that is the perennial stuff of Fi'draah, my new world. As I stepped from my shuttle the planet seized me in a stinking, sweltering embrace and wouldn't let go. Blinking and choking in the smog, I heard harsh voices and harsher laughter; then someone thrust a filtrator mask over my face and I could breathe again.

'The first time is like drowning,' my saviour said. 'It gets better.'

I don't recall who the speaker was, but he lied: breathing this world never got any better.

'You have evidently made powerful enemies for one so young, Asharil,' the ambassador said without preamble, peering down from the cushioned pulpit of his hovering throne drone. His voice was soft, yet vibrant. It filled the

spacious audience chamber like liquid silk, the weapon of a master orator. His summons had followed directly upon my arrival and I was mortified by my dishevelled state.

‘I do not understand, honoured one,’ I blustered, stumbling between respect and revulsion for the ancient who presided over our forces on this remote planet. O’Seshin’s authority was a testament to the excellence of our caste, but he reeked of years beyond the natural span of the t’au race. His flesh had aged to deep cobalt leather, barely concealing the harsh planes of his skull, but his eyes were bright.

‘This is a terminal world,’ he continued, ‘a graveyard for broken warriors and forgotten relics like myself, not a proving ground for the hot blood of youth. Who did you offend to get yourself posted here, Asharil?’ He smiled, but his eyes belied it.

‘I walk the water path,’ I answered, seeking the natural poise of our caste. ‘My blood runs cool and silent, so that my voice may weave—’ O’Seshin’s snort cut me short like a physical blow.

‘I am too old for wordplay, girl!’ He leaned forwards and a strand of spittle escaped his lips. ‘Why have you come to Fi’draah? Who sent you?’

‘Honoured one...’ I stammered, struggling to avert my gaze from the lethargic descent of his drool. ‘Your pardon, but I requested this posting. I have made a study of the language and customs of the *humans*,’ – I deliberately used the gue’la word for themselves – ‘and Fi’draah offers most excellent opportunities to deepen my insight.’

He appraised me with a distrust so candid it was almost conspiratorial, as if we were both willing players in a game of lies. A game that he was used to winning...

‘So you wish to test yourself in the field, Asharil?’ He smiled again and this time I saw humour there, though no humour I cared to share. ‘Then I shall not deny you. Indeed, I believe I have a most suitable commission for you.’

I will never know why O’Seshin became my enemy in that one brief meeting, but he proved to be the least of the blights awaiting me on this world.

Of the long conflict between the T’au Empire and the gue’la Imperium for mastery of Fi’draah, I shall not speak. Mysteries shroud the war like whispering smoke, but I learned little of them before O’Seshin dispatched

me to oblivion. Of the planet itself I could say much, for I travelled its wilderness for almost five months, but I will content myself with a single truth: whatever you are told in your orientation, it will not prepare you for the reality of this place. To classify Fi'draah as a 'jungle world' or a 'water world' is to garb a corpse in finery and call it beautiful. Eighty per cent of its surface is drowned in viscid, lethargic oceans that blend into the sky in a perpetual cycle of evaporation and drizzle, wreathing everything in a grey-green miasma that seeps into the flesh and spirit. The continents are ragged tangles of mega-coral choked with vegetation that looks – and smells – like it has been dredged up from the depths. Stunted trees with fleshy trunks and bladder-like fronds vie with drooping tenements of fungi and titanic anemone clusters, everything strangling or straddling or simply growing upon everything else – fecundity racing decay so fast you can almost see it.

Whether Sector O-31 is the worst of Fi'draah's territories I cannot say, but it must surely rank amongst them. The gue'la call it '*the Coil*', a name infinitely more fitting than our own sober designation, for there is nothing remotely sober about that malign wilderness. A serpentine spiral of waterlogged jungles, it is the dark heartland of Fi'draah's largest, most untamed continent. The war has left it almost untouched, but rumours haunt it like bad memories: of regiments swallowed whole before they could clash... Of lost patrols still fighting older wars than ours... And of ancient things sleeping beneath the waters...

Naturally, I dismissed such nonsense. My task was to cast the light of reason across this enigma and 'unravel the Coil' (as O'Seishin so artfully sold it). I was to accompany Fio'vere Mutekh, a distinguished cartographer of the earth caste on his quest to map the region. Fool that I was, I believed myself honoured! It was only later, when I saw how the Coil twisted in upon itself, that I realised the absurdity of our endeavour. I have often wondered whether O'Seishin is still laughing at me.

It says much about the nature of the earth caste that Mutekh approached his impossible assignment without rancour. A robust t'au in his autumn cycle, he had a pompous manner that exasperated me, but he was utterly rigorous in his work. His assistant, Xanti, was a placid *autaku* (or data tech) who spoke rarely and never met my gaze. I believe he preferred the company of his neosentient data drone to his fellow t'au.

The fourth and final person of note was our protector and guide, Shas'ui Jhi'kaara. A fire warrior and veteran of Fi'draah, she regarded the jungle with the tender distrust of a predator who knows it is also prey, and like many alpha predators she commanded her own pack: a dozen gue'la janissaries equipped with flak-plate and pulse carbines. They were all Imperial deserters, lured from the enemy by the promise of better rations rather than ideology, and despite the trappings of our civilisation they remained barbarians. Every night they gambled, quarrelled and brawled amongst themselves, but never in Jhi'kaara's presence. Had they known I spoke their native tongue they would have guarded their words more closely. Listening in on their crude passions and superstitions, I marvelled that their stunted species had ever reached the stars.

Together we entered the Coil: earth, water, fire... and mud, travelling its strange waterways in a pair of aging Devilfish hover transports. Every few days Mutekh would spot a 'notable feature' and call a halt. Then we would spend an eternity recording some obscure geological phenomenon or ancient indigene ruin. As the cartographer updated his maps and the janissaries patrolled, the jungle would press in, watching us with a thousand hungry eyes that belonged to a single beast.

'It hates us,' Jhi'kaara said once, surprising me as I stared back at the beast. 'But it welcomes us in the expectation that we will grow careless.'

'It is just a jungle, shas'ui,' I said, squaring up to the warrior. 'It has no thoughts.'

'You are lying, waterkin,' Jhi'kaara said. 'You see the truth, but like all your kind, you fear it.'

'My kind?' I was shocked. 'We are the *same* kind. We are both t'au.'

Her face was hidden behind the impassive, lens-studded mask of her combat helmet, but I sensed her sneer.

As our expedition stretched from weeks into months I came to detest every one of my companions, but Jhi'kaara most of all. While I recognised the place of the fire caste in the Tau'va, there was a coiled violence about her that disturbed me. Perhaps it was her hideous facial scarring or her playful contempt... But no... I believe it was something deeper. Like O'Seishin, she had become tainted by this world.

Taint. Such an irrational term for a t'au to use; surely one better suited to the

Imperial fanatics who condemn otherness for otherness' sake? Perhaps, but lately I have come to wonder whether the fanatics may have it right.

It is time I told you of the Sanctuary of Wyrms.

'What is it?' I asked, trying to decipher the dark shape through its veil of vegetation. Squat yet vast, it rose from the centre of the island ahead, evidently a structure of some kind, but unlike any other we had encountered in the Coil. Despite the obscuring vegetation, its harsh, angular lineaments were unmistakable, suggesting an architectural brutality at odds with the flowing contours of our own aesthetics. Even at a distance it filled me with foreboding.

'The Nirrhoda did not lie,' Mutekh said, lowering his scope.

The Nirrhoda? I recalled the feral, mud-caked indigenes we had encountered some weeks back. Technically 'indigene' was a misnomer since the native Phaedrans were descended from gue'la colonists who had conquered this world millennia ago and then, in turn, been conquered by it. Squat and bow-legged, with huge glassy eyes and yawning mouths, they were primitive degenerates who wandered the wilderness in loose tribes. All were unpredictable, but the Nirrhoda clan, who followed the chaotic arrhythmia of the Coil, were notoriously belligerent. Yet Jhi'kaara had known their ways and won a parley for Mutekh, who had traded trinkets for shreds of truth about their deceitful land. One such shred had led us here.

'They certainly did not lie about the wyrm trees,' the fire warrior observed sourly. 'That island is infested with them.'

I had taken the gentle undulation of the towering anemone-like growths encrusting the island to be a product of the wind... *Yet there was no wind...* Now I watched their swaying tendrils with fresh eyes: at the base, each was thicker than my waist, tapering to a sinuous violet tip that tilted towards us, as if tasting us on the air.

'Are they dangerous?' I asked.

'Their sting is lethal,' Jhi'kaara said fondly, 'but they grow slowly. These must be over a century old. That structure—'

'Evidently predates the war,' Mutekh interrupted with relish. 'We must evaluate this discovery thoroughly.' Something like avarice swept across his broad face, revealing another shade of taint: the hunger to *know*. 'You will clear a path, please, fire warrior.'

Jhi'kaara turned the rotary cannons of our Devilfish upon the forest, shredding the rubbery growths into steaming slabs that seemed more meat than vegetable. The trees shrieked as they died, their warble sounding insidiously sentient.

'It proved a poor sanctuary,' Xanti said with peculiar sadness. I glanced at Mutekh's assistant in surprise. He shrugged, embarrassed by my attention. 'That is what the savages called this place – the Sanctuary of Wyrms.'

Then the janissaries went amongst the detritus with flamethrowers, laughing as they incinerated the flailing, orphan tendrils. One brute grew careless and a whip-like frond lashed his face as it flipped about in its death spasms. Moments later the man joined it in his own dance of death. It was the first time I saw violent death, but I was unmoved. Fi'draah had already changed me.

Unveiled, the building was almost profound in its ugliness. It was a squat, octagonal block assembled from prefabricated grey slabs that were as hard as rock. The walls tilted inwards to a flat roof that looked strong enough to withstand an aerial bombardment, suggesting the place might be a bunker of some kind. Circling it, we found no apertures or ornamentation save for a deeply recessed entrance wide enough to accommodate a tank. A metal bulkhead blocked the path, its corroded surface embossed with a stark 'I' symbol. Despite its simplicity, the sigil had an austere authority that deepened my unease.

'I am unfamiliar with this emblem,' Mutekh mused, running a hand over the raised metal. 'Your thoughts, por'ui?'

'It looks like a gue'la rune,' I answered. 'Linguistically it translates as *'the self'*, but in this context it probably has a factional connotation.'

'So the gue'la built this place?' Xanti asked.

'Oh, I would most definitely postulate an Imperial provenance,' Mutekh said, clearly enjoying himself. 'Though it lacks the vainglorious ornamentation typical of their architecture, the configuration and construction materials are manifestly Imperial.'

'Why would there be Imperials on Fi'draah before the war?' Xanti seemed confused by the notion.

'Why *wouldn't* there be?' Mutekh proclaimed. 'Throughout the ages there have been Imperials almost *everywhere*. They are an ancient power that

coveted the stars millennia before the Tau'va was revealed to us. There is no telling when they first came to this world. Or why.'

'This place has the strength of a fortress, but not the logic,' Jhi'kaara offered, speaking for the first time. 'The walls are solid, but there are no emplacements or watchtowers.'

'Perhaps they are hidden,' I suggested.

'No, remember this is a pre-war relic,' Mutekh chided. 'It was not constructed to keep an enemy out, but to keep a secret within.'

'What kind of secret?' Xanti asked loyally.

'The kind that was worth hiding well!' There was a glint in the cartographer's eyes at the prospect. 'The kind that is worth learning for the Greater Good.' He slapped the bulkhead. 'Open it!'

There was no obvious access mechanism, but Xanti's data drone detected a biometric scanner embedded in the bulkhead.

'For the gue'la it is a sophisticated system,' the autaku murmured, his face lost in the dancing holograms projected by his drone. The small saucer-like machine hovered by the hatch, interfacing the mechanism with its datalaser and mapping it into territory its master could negotiate.

'I doubt I could deceive this,' Xanti said, 'but it appears the seal has *already* been broken... and crudely reset.' He looked up with a frown. 'Someone has trespassed here before us.'

Despite the damaged seal, night had fallen by the time Xanti synthesised the correct trigger. Dead cogs ground into life and the bulkhead rose, groaning at this second desecration. A sour fungal foetor seeped from the dark maw, so dense it was almost visible. Some of the janissaries chuckled as I retched and fumbled for my filtrator mask, but their faces were pale. Jhi'kaara silenced them with a sharp gesture, but I felt no gratitude. Her sealed helmet spared her the stench we suffered. Where was the equity in that?

We entered the cavernous chamber beyond in a practised formation, with Jhi'kaara's hovering gun drone taking point and the janissaries fanning out to either side. Our torch beams thrust back the darkness, but it clung to every corner and crevice like black cobwebs. The burned-out hulks of amphibious transports and machinery loomed on all sides, casting shadows across a graveyard of barrels and crates.

‘The invaders closed off the escape route,’ Jhi’kaara said, gauging the devastation. ‘They destroyed the vehicles and sealed the exit in case anyone slipped past them.’

‘Why did no one fight back?’ I wondered. ‘There are no bodies here.’

‘A good question, waterkin.’

Across the chamber the inner hatch lay amongst the detritus, shredded and torn from its recess. Jhi’kaara knelt and ran her fingers over the wreckage. The edges were curled into serrated whorls of tortured metal.

‘Powered weapons,’ she said. ‘Chainswords.’

‘How can you be sure?’ I asked.

‘The teeth leave a pattern.’ She paused and looked over her shoulder, staring right at me. ‘Their mark is... unique.’ It was almost a challenge.

‘Unique?’ As if by their own volition my eyes were drawn to the ghost of a scar running down the faceplate of her helmet, a wound that echoed the rift in her own face. And suddenly I understood why she knew these weapons so intimately.

The destruction petered out in the corridor beyond, but the sense of oppression did not. It shadowed us as we passed through one deserted chamber after another, closing in as we moved deeper into the outpost.

‘Smaller teams would cover more ground,’ Mutekh protested. ‘Your caution is illogical, shas’ui. This place is long dead.’

But the fire warrior would not split our force, and I was struck anew by the differences between the castes. We worked together for the Greater Good, yet our natures were discordant. Mutekh and Xanti were creatures of reason, while Jhi’kaara was pure instinct. What did that make me?

I brooded over the question as we pressed on, passing through guardrooms and storerooms, the hollow tomb of a dormitory and a mess hall where food still waited on the table, fossilised and forgotten.

‘It took them unawares,’ Jhi’kaara murmured, ‘and it took them swiftly.’

‘It?’ I asked. ‘You mean the invaders?’

‘No...’ For the first time she sounded troubled. ‘No, I think this was something else.’

We found the first corpse in the communications room, propped up against the vox-console. Shrouded in heavy crimson robes, the mummified cadaver

looked more machine than man. Its face was an angular bronze mask studded with sensors, seemingly riveted to the skull. A pistol was clutched in a bionic claw, the barrel shoved through the broken grille of its mouth. Its cranium had ruptured into a crown of splintered bones and circuitry.

‘He shot himself before the intruders reached him,’ Jhi’kaara judged.

‘Or because they reached him too late,’ I offered uncertainly. She glanced at me, waiting as I tested the intuition. ‘He’s the only one we’ve found. Perhaps that makes him different.’

‘He was certainly different,’ Xanti said eagerly. ‘Judging by his extensive bionics he was a Mechanicus priest, probably an important one. Unlike ourselves, the data techs of the Imperium aspire to become one with their machines.’

The autaku’s passion surprised me. Abruptly, I realised how little I knew about my companions. We had travelled so far together yet we were still strangers. Was it our castes that divided us, or merely our personal flaws? Uneasily, I put the question aside and concentrated on the facts.

‘Perhaps he summoned the invaders,’ I suggested.

Jhi’kaara considered it. ‘Perhaps he did, waterkin.’

And perhaps I am not the fool you took me for, I thought.

The elevator to the lower levels had been demolished and the hatch to the stairwell was welded shut from within, but that was no obstacle to our plasma cutters. Beyond, a metal staircase wound down into darkness.

Jhi’kaara’s gun drone led the way, levitating down the stairwell as we followed on the spiralling steps, its searchlight diving ahead into the abyss below. As we descended, the walls became brittle and powdery, sucked dry by silvery seams of fungus. In places the filth had erupted into cancerous fruiting bodies, but they were all desiccated husks, seemingly petrified in the moment of blossoming. The stench was dreadful and I kept my filtrator firmly in place. Mutekh and Xanti soon followed suit, but the janissaries suffered stoically, unwilling to show weakness before Jhi’kaara.

They are like dogs trying to impress their master, I thought.

At regular intervals we passed access hatches to other levels, and I realised the bulk of the outpost lay beneath the ground, like a buried mountain riddled with tunnels and caves. Some hatches were sealed, other gaped open, but we ignored them all. Exploring the entire complex would take days and none of

us cared to linger here. Instead we pressed on, drawn by a collective sense that the answers we sought lay below. But when the drone's light finally found the bottom of the stairwell we froze.

'Emperor protect us!' one of the janissaries gasped, but nobody reprimanded him for his atavism.

Our path terminated in a charnel pit. Dozens of cadavers were piled up below, mangled and contorted by violent death. The walls around them were pitted with deep craters, suggesting heavy gunfire, but it was impossible tell whether it was bullets or chainswords that had cleansed these dead.

Cleansed. It is another term that sits uneasily with the Tau'va, yet it is the right term, for these creatures were *unclean*. Despite their wounds and decades of decay, it was obvious they were only superficially gue'la. Their withered flesh was stretched taut across misshapen bones, thickening to gnarled plates at the ribs and shoulder blades. Many had double-jointed legs and scythe-like appendages jutting from their wrists. Their faces were atrophied relics in elongated, almost bestial skulls, the jaws distended by hardened, stinger-tipped tongues. Some still wore shreds of clothing, but most were naked.

They shed their clothes like redundant skins when the change came over them...

'We should go back,' I said with utter conviction. For once I suspected the janissaries were with me, but to my surprise they weren't the only ones.

'Asharil is right,' Jhi'kaara said. 'This tomb is best left buried.'

Mutekh hesitated. He was as repulsed as the rest of us, but leaving a mystery unsolved was anathema to him.

'Unacceptable,' the cartographer declared. 'It is our duty to assess, quantify and record this anomaly. The Greater Good demands courage. Has yours failed you, fire warrior?'

Jhi'kaara stiffened. The tension passed through the janissaries in a sympathetic wave and I saw their weapons twitch reflexively towards the cartographer. Even Xanti noticed it, looking back and forth between the opponents with a confused expression that was almost comical. Only Mutekh seemed oblivious to his own peril.

'I will continue alone,' he pushed, 'if you are afraid...'

I thought she would kill him then. I tried to intervene, to rise to my calling and smooth over the discord, but the words slipped away before I could

marshal them. Instead, Jhi'kaara found a reserve of discipline I had not credited her with.

'Fire always walks at the fore,' she said. Without another word she stepped down amongst the corpses. And sealed our fate.

We followed the intruders' trail of devastation through a maze of laboratories and workshops that soon became unrecognisable. The fungal veins riddling the walls had grown ripe here, erupting into groping, ropey strands like calcified viscera. Before it froze, the stuff had entwined itself about everything, melting the rigid Imperial architecture into soft organic shapes.

We are crawling through a diseased corpse, I thought, *but what if it's not dead, just forever dying?* I fought to suppress the absurd notion, grasping for the clarity of the Tau'va, but in this cesspit it seemed a flickering, false hope.

The blighted dead were everywhere, snarled up in the weave where they had fallen. Shredded, pulverised or charred, they had died in droves as they swarmed against the incursion, and I found myself wondering at the lethality of their slayers. What kind of creature could carve a swathe through such horrors?

We found the answer in a ravaged infirmary where the invaders had suffered their first casualty. The fallen warrior was almost buried beneath a mound of mutants, but there was no mistaking his stature. Alive, he would have been almost twice my height and countless times my weight. *Could it really be?*

'Space Marines,' Jhi'kaara said with something like reverence. 'And where there is one, there will be others.'

My breath caught as she confirmed my suspicion. I had studied accounts and pictures of the Imperium's elite warriors, but they had seemed a distant, almost mythical peril. They were the stuff of nightmares, bioengineered giants bred to be utterly merciless in the service of their dead Emperor. It was rumoured that a hundred of these monsters could conquer a world.

'What were they doing here?' I wondered, staring at the dead Space Marine in fascination. A helmet with a sharp, almost avian snout hid his features, but I could imagine the face beneath: it would be pugnacious and broad, with skin like toughened leather and a fretwork of scars and tattoos – a face not merely honed by war, but *rebuilt* for it.

Jhi'kaara gestured to the janissaries and they heaved the mutants aside, exhuming the warrior's void-black power armour. Peculiarly, his left arm

looked as if it were cast in silver, its shoulder pad carved into a stylised 'I' sigil inset with a skull. More incongruous still was the bright yellow of the opposite pauldron. For all his ferocity, this warrior's grasp of aesthetics had been woeful.

'I recognise this heraldry.' Jhi'kaara tapped the angular fist inscribed on the yellow pad. 'The Imperial Fists are old foes of the T'au Empire, but this...' She indicated the silver pad. 'This I have not seen before. And the Imperial Fists wear *yellow* armour, not black.'

'Wait,' I said, 'this second symbol... Isn't it like the one we found at the entrance?'

'It *is* similar,' Mutekh said, peering at the device, 'but the inset skull is a significant deviation. There may be a connection, but careless assumptions are dangerous...'

'Does it matter?' Xanti asked. 'The gue'la fanatics are all insane. Nothing they do makes sense.'

'Know your enemy as you would know yourself,' Jhi'kaara said, doubtless quoting some fire caste credo. 'There is a mystery here.'

There was certainly no mystery about the Space Marine's death: his breastplate had been cracked open like a shell and one of the mutants had virtually crawled inside his chest as it disembowelled him.

'The Imperium sent its finest warriors to purge this crisis,' Jhi'kaara murmured thoughtfully.

'All the more reason for us to leave,' I insisted.

'No, we cannot.' She stepped away from the dead giant. 'Space Marines do not leave their fallen behind.'

'I don't see the relevance...'

'Do you not? *Think*, waterkin.'

'I...' The realisation struck me like ice water. 'You believe they failed.'

'Whatever happened here...' she said, sweeping a hand over the mutated horde, 'we must be certain it is over.'

The trail ended at the uppermost tier of a subterranean amphitheatre. Our torches struggled to make sense of the vast space, picking out details but unable to capture the whole, leaving me with the impression of a gargantuan hive woven from grey strands. Hunched in a depression at the centre of the chamber was a pale mound. Thick cords of fungus sprouted from its base,

multiplying and tapering as they spread out to insinuate themselves into every surface.

As we descended, it became apparent the mutants had made their last stand here, throwing themselves between the invaders and the heart of their hive, but one by one the Space Marines had also fallen. The first lay two tiers down, still gripping his chainsword though his head was missing. Like his comrade he wore black-and-silver power armour, but his right pauldron was completely different.

‘A White Scar,’ said Jhi’kaara, pointing out the crimson flash on the white pad. ‘They fought honourably on Dal’yth.’

‘There were Space Marines on Dal’yth?’ I was appalled by the idea of the Imperium penetrating so deep into t’au space.

‘They almost *took* Dal’yth, waterkin.’ She chuckled dryly. ‘Among your caste some truths are left unspoken lest they wither your faint hearts.’ Despite her words there was no malice in her voice. We had achieved an understanding of sorts, she and I. Of more concern was the possibility that my own caste had lied to me. Was that really possible? Remembering the ancient manipulator O’Seshin, I found little comfort.

As we continued our descent Jhi’kaara paused beside each of the fallen Space Marines and examined his insignia solemnly: a blue raptor against white... A white buzz saw against black... She recognised neither of them, but she paid her respects regardless, for each had died hideously and heroically, surrounded by sundered enemies.

‘Why would they bear different cadre badges?’ I said, seeing how the riddle of their mismatched fraternity troubled her.

‘*Cha’ptah* badges,’ she corrected. ‘Space Marines call their factions *Cha’ptahs*.’ I frowned at her awkward pronunciation of the gue’la word ‘*Chapter*’. ‘And to answer your question, waterkin: I do not know. This co-fraternity contradicts everything I was taught about their kind. Space Marines adhere rigidly to their own clans.’

‘Perhaps they were forced to fight together,’ I suggested. ‘Maybe it was a penitence for some transgression. Or an honour.’

Neither theory was reassuring, especially since the dead mutants were growing more fearsome. Some bore no resemblance to the gue’la at all, looking more like the spawn of an entirely different, utterly aberrant race. A few actually dwarfed the Space Marines, their bulk covered in spiny

exoskeletal plates that looked strong enough to withstand a pulse-round. All were mottled with a fur of silver-grey mould, but it was impossible to tell whether the fungus had grown upon them or from *within* them.

Abruptly Jhi'kaara stopped, gazing at one of the larger beasts. 'I know what they are,' she said quietly.

'They are mutants,' Mutekh declared, 'evidently the product of some ill-conceived Imperial dabbling...'

'They are Yhe'mokushi, beasts of the Silent Hunger,' Jhi'kaara said. The reference meant nothing to me and the others looked equally mystified. She nodded, unsurprised. 'A predatory species the T'au Empire has only recently encountered. These differ from the bioforms depicted in our orientation sessions, but diversity is in their nature. They are living weapons that can steal form as well as substance, becoming whatever suits their purpose.'

'And they are hostile to the T'au Empire?' Xanti asked uneasily.

'They are hostile to *all* life save their own. Like locusts they exist only to consume and multiply, leaving nothing but dust and shadows in their wake. It is said the Imperium has suffered greatly from their depredations.'

We were silent. Here was another ugly truth hidden in the name of the Greater Good. Over the last few months my certainties had eroded away, revealing deception, obsession and horror. *What else had been kept from me?*

Down... further down... More dead Space Marines... First a golden beast's head set against midnight blue, then another raptor, this one red against white.

'You respect these warriors,' I said, watching Jhi'kaara carefully.

'I respect their strength, Asharil.'

But I sensed her admiration ran deeper. Jhi'kaara was an outsider amongst her own kind, closer to Fi'draah's wilderness than the wisdom of the Tau'va. She was drawn to these warriors for their brotherhood as much as their strength.

By the time we reached the lowest tier we had found eight Space Marines. The last had succumbed at the periphery of his objective, his armour pierced in a dozen places by scything claws. Bizarrely he was still standing, his body wedged on its feet by the mass of corpses pressed against it. Even amongst his brothers he was a giant, but there were other differences. While the rest had painted their left arms silver, both his arms *were* silver – or more likely some stronger metal. Each was an angular augmetic, one terminating in a

slab-like fist, the other in an intricate claw whose purpose was probably manipulation rather than combat. His personal heraldry was black, its symbol a stylised white gauntlet.

‘Iron Hand,’ Jhi’kaara declared. ‘Another old enemy.’

‘These would appear to be specimen containment units,’ Mutekh said, pointing out a pair of toppled glass cylinders that looked big enough to hold the largest abominations. Ropes of fungus were wrapped around them, squeezed so tight the reinforced glass had fractured.

‘The fools brought the Silent Hunger to Fi’draah,’ Jhi’kaara hissed. I was surprised by the fury in her voice. She sounded like her *own* world had been threatened.

‘So this place was some kind of prison?’ Xanti asked.

‘Not a prison,’ Mutekh said as he followed the web of pipes running from the cylinders to a corroded bank of consoles. ‘Remember the laboratories we passed through? No, this is a research facility. The Imperials were experimenting on these creatures. Perhaps they were seeking a means of communication...’

‘The Imperium does not seek communion with its enemies,’ Jhi’kaara said. ‘They were looking for a weapon.’

‘But why here?’ Xanti wondered. ‘Is it just a coincidence they came to Fi’draah?’

‘Many of the indigenous fungi are lethal,’ Mutekh speculated. ‘Perhaps they were attempting to synthesise a pathogen.’

‘Then they failed,’ Jhi’kaara said flatly.

‘We do not know that,’ Mutekh protested. ‘The techniques of the gue’la are riddled with superstition, but...’

‘The Yhe’mokushi strain was too strong,’ I said, surprised by my own conviction. ‘When the Imperials infected it... it devoured the fungus...’

Intuition, I realised. I am neither entirely a creature of reason nor instinct, but something subtler than either.

‘It *became* the fungus,’ I finished. ‘And then the fungus devoured them.’

My comrades stared at me, then their eyes wandered to the infested expanse around us. Jhi’kaara broke the silence: ‘Search the Space Marines,’ she ordered the janissaries. ‘Gather their grenades.’

‘What is your intent, fire warrior?’ Mutekh demanded.

‘We will complete our enemy’s mission.’ She indicated the monolithic

puffball. ‘Sometimes the enemy of your enemy is the greater enemy.’

‘You will do no such thing!’ Mutekh was appalled. ‘We must ascertain what the Imperials discovered here.’ He looked to Xanti for support, but the young data tech avoided his gaze. ‘Autaku!’

‘I am sorry, fio’vre,’ his assistant muttered unhappily, ‘but whatever the Imperials found here... it did them no good.’

‘I will search this one,’ I said, heading for the nearest Space Marine.

‘I trust you know what a grenade looks like, waterkin?’ Jhi’kaara mocked gently. Then she was gone, heading for the upper tiers.

‘Cowards,’ Mutekh called after us. ‘You are all betraying the Greater Good.’

No, we are serving the Greater Good, I thought fiercely. Even if some of us have come to doubt it.

Biting down my disgust I dragged a corpse away from my chosen warrior, intent on reaching his utility belt. That was when I noticed the hum. It was faint, but its source was unmistakable: *this Space Marine’s armour was still powered*. Unsettled, I peered up at his archaic helmet. A flat visor covered the right side of his face, but the left was a tangle of bionics clustered around a jutting optical sensor. Up close he seemed more machine than man.

Iron Hand, Jhi’kaara had called this one...

‘Fio’vre, wait!’ The voice was Xanti’s, its urgency irresistible. I glanced round and saw Mutekh standing beside the puffball, a laser scalpel in one hand and a sample container in the other.

‘Wait!’ I echoed, but the scalpel was already descending towards the mottled surface. ‘Don’t—’

The puffball exploded like a bomb.

And that’s precisely what it is, I realised, a spore bomb, dormant but not dead.

There was no fire or fragmentation in the blast, but the concussion threw Mutekh across the tier, slamming him against the consoles with bone-breaking force. I saw his body rebound a heartbeat before everything was smothered in swirling grey smog. Clutching my mask tightly, I screwed my eyes shut and crouched, sheltering beneath the Iron Hand. The scattered janissaries cursed as the spore cloud rolled over them, then the curses turned to choked screams as their lungs drowned in filth. I heard them stumbling about as they fought to escape their torment. Someone opened fire blindly,

his pulse-rounds sizzling as they ripped through the congealed air. Someone else screamed his last as a wild round struck him.

That was a mercy. The only kind remaining to these men...

I risked a glance as one of them fell to his knees alongside me. The toxic whiteout reduced him to a vague, flailing silhouette, but I could see his entire body heaving violently, as if in the grip of some bone-deep tremor.

Not bone-deep. This quake ran much deeper than that.

I heard his flesh seething as its muscles contorted into new shapes, stretching his skin taut in the struggle to contain the chaos beneath. Suddenly he screamed, spewing blood and spores as his back arched inwards at an impossible angle. The spine snapped – then snapped back into a sleek, predatory curve. Vicious spikes erupted along its length, racing to catch up with his rapidly elongating cranium. His arms shot out in a welter of shredded fingers, propelled by the bone scythes surging from his wrists. He tried to scream again and his tongue burst free, thickened and barbed, like a stinger-tipped snake.

It looks like there is a wyrm tree growing inside him, I thought wildly. Any moment now, the newborn hybrid would turn and see me...

‘Fio’vre! Where are you?’ Xanti called as he came stumbling through the mist, his faithful drone hovering beside him. He saw me and raised a hand in relief. ‘Asharil! Did you see—’

The hybrid leapt. Propelled by powerful, double-jointed legs it streaked through the air and was upon the autaku before he saw it coming. The bone scythes slashed down, impaling him through the shoulder blades and pinning him to the ground. His shriek was cut off as the beast’s tongue shot out like a spring-loaded blade and punched through his filtrator mask. His legs kicked about spastically as it wormed its way down his throat, stinging and seeding him with spores. The abandoned data drone twittered in confusion and a scythe flailed out and sent it spinning my way. I covered my head as the saucer smashed into the Iron Hand and toppled beside me with a forlorn squawk.

The smog had thinned out, the spores settling over the chamber like softly luminescent dust. By their pallid light I saw that none of the janissaries had escaped the change. Some were still going through the final trauma, but five were racing towards a solitary figure on the topmost tier. Jhi’kaara was kneeling, tracking the approaching hybrids with her pulse rifle. She fired, but

her chosen mark darted aside with shocking speed. I imagined her cursing then, angry but not afraid. *Never afraid...* She fired again, then once more in quick succession, the first shot tricking her target into the path of the second. The round struck the hybrid mid-leap, throwing it to the ground in a writhing heap. Before it could right itself a third shot sheared through its skull. A kill, but it had cost her precious time.

With a chittering yowl one of the creatures leapt onto Jhi'kaara's tier, but she ignored it, intent upon a more distant mark. Before I could shout a warning, her gun drone swooped from the shadows and lanced her aggressor with its twin-linked guns, almost tearing it in two. Whirling round, the saucer sped towards another hybrid, spitting fire, but the beast danced about in ragged avian bursts, bounding between the floor and the walls as it charged. At the last moment it rolled low and sprung up beneath the saucer, latching on to its rim. The drone spun about, firing furiously as it tried to dislodge its attacker, but the beast was too strong. I imagined the machine's primitive logic core assessing probabilities and weighing up options. It found its answer within seconds and self-destructed, incinerating the hybrid from the waist up.

I had no more time to spare for Jhi'kaara's battle. Done with its prey, Xanti's attacker sat up on its haunches, sniffing the air while its victim writhed beneath it in the throes of change. I looked around, hoping for a fallen firearm... cursing myself for refusing to carry one... desperate for a clean death...

'Power...' The voice sounded like the wheeze of a dying machine. *A machine that spoke Imperial Gothic...* I looked up and saw the impossible: the Iron Hand had inclined its head towards me, its optic glowing a dull red, like a doomed sun. Beneath that merciless blaze water turned to fire and I became a creature of instinct. Grabbing Xanti's battered drone I hauled, staggering under the weight as I raised it to the giant like an offering to some primal god. The burden was as much philosophical as physical, yet my path seemed clear.

The galaxy was tainted and taint had to be cleansed...

A metal tendril uncoiled from the warrior's helmet, swaying about like a blind snake. Then it struck, its sharpened tip drilling through the drone's casing with a whine of ruptured metal. A moment later the snake became a leech, burying itself inside the broken machine's innards and sucking it dry of

power. Power to re-ignite its master's hatred.

Honest hatred!

I heard Xanti's assailant rise behind me, but my world had narrowed to the awakening Iron Hand. I knew my sanity had gone, unravelled by O'Seishin's lies and Fi'draah's truths. All that remained was horror and the will to face it.

For the Greater Good...

The rest was a blur. The hybrid howled behind me and its kin answered from all sides. I spun round as it leapt, its virulent tongue extended towards me. The Space Marine's fist met the beast in mid-air like a turbotram, punching clean through its ribcage. He cast the corpse aside as the others fell upon him in a chattering, screeching mob. There were four in all, fully transformed and almost mindless in their need to rend and tear and infect.

The first came head-on and died in a heartbeat, its skull pulverised by a pneumatic punch to the face. His armour grinding like rusted cogs, the warrior swung at the waist and grabbed another by the throat, squeezing until bone and cartilage collapsed into paste. In the same instant he rammed his manipulator claw between the jaws of a third. Its head convulsed violently as the claw became a whirling rotary blade inside its mouth. He yanked the tool free in a storm of shattered bones as the final hybrid vaulted onto his back, scythes poised to hack down. Before it could strike, a bolt of energy punched through its skull, throwing it from its perch. I glanced up and saw Jhi'kaara kneeling a few tiers above us, her rifle levelled.

Cleansed, I thought, every one of them.

'Asaaar...haaal...' The voice made my name sound like something dredged up from a polluted ocean. I turned as Xanti hauled himself up, using his malformed scythes like crutches. His movements were clumsy, crippled by the capricious mutation of his muscles, as if the fungus were baffled by t'au physiognomy. His face had stretched into a death mask, the lower jaw almost touching his belly, but his eyes were unchanged, staring at me with agonised recognition. *Pleading...*

'Asaaar...' Xanti's barbed tongue surged towards me. The Space Marine shoved me aside, but the stinger lashed my shoulder as I fell. A terrible numbness seized my arm before I even hit the ground. Dimly I saw Jhi'kaara vault from the tier above. She raised her rifle to her shoulder and advanced on the abomination, firing as she came. She didn't stop until it was a charred ruin. Then she turned her wrath on Mutekh's broken, spore-saturated body.

The cartographer never stirred beneath the barrage. Perhaps he was already dead, but I doubt Jhi'kaara cared. The last thing I saw before consciousness slipped away was the dimming red light in the Iron Hand's optic.

'Power...' he whispered. And then we both faded to black.

'You were fortunate,' Jhi'kaara said when I awoke. The numbness in my arm had faded, leaving behind a dull ache. 'Its sting did not carry the infection.'

Then by unspoken consent we fed the Iron Hand, gathering the janissaries' weapons and power packs and offering them up to his ravenous mechadendrite. Our ritual was without sense for the enemy of our enemy was destroyed, leaving only the enemy, yet we never hesitated. We were both creatures of instinct now, bound by an imperative stronger than the Tau'va.

'How long have you waited?' I asked the giant when we were done. The Imperial Gothic came easily to my tongue. It always had.

'How...? **Long**...?' His voice was slurred and electronic, the syntax broken. '**Very** – long...'

'How did you survive?'

He turned his optic on me, weighing me up like an iron god. Abruptly the visor covering the right side of his face slid aside. In place of flesh and bone I saw a formless grey tangle riddled with electronics and corroded rivets.

'The **Flesh** – betrays,' he said, though he had no lips, 'but the **Machine** – is faithful.'

I saw his doom then. His body had succumbed to its wounds, but his depleted augmetics had endured, cradling his consciousness as life slipped away. Half-corpse, half-machine he had stood frozen in this chamber for untold decades, burning with impotent rage as his dead flesh was consumed. Denied sleep or the deeper oblivion of death, he had watched as corruption blossomed within and without. I saw him descending into madness, then clawing his way back in the hope of redemption... then falling again. How often had that cycle repeated? And where did it stand now?

'Your mission is complete,' I said carefully, indicating the tattered spore bomb. 'We destroyed the taint.'

'**You** did – **Not**. This was – **Nothing** – just another **Tendrill** – of the **Corruption**. I watched it grow – then grow stale – over the long – **Long** – long...' He faltered as his splintered mind strove for coherence. 'The **Root** – survives...'

He stepped towards the centre of the chamber, moving with surprising grace. We followed and saw the pit for the first time: a dark slash in the ground where the mega-fungus had bloomed. On closer inspection I saw it wasn't a pit at all, but a steeply inclined tunnel, its walls resinous with fungus, like the aperture of a titanic blood vessel. Or a stalk...

The spore bomb grew from here, I realised, and the corruption is still down there, rooted deep in the ground.

'The mission is – **Incomplete.**'

Like the Iron Hand's mission my story is incomplete, but that is of no consequence. My purpose is not to entertain you, but to warn you. Jhi'kaara will carry this log out of the Coil and ensure that it is heard and heeded. This undying tomb must be quarantined lest we fail to destroy its voracious legacy. *We?* Yes, I have chosen to accompany the Iron Hand on his final duty. I am no warrior, but I can carry grenades and we will bear many into the unclean bowels of this place. Jhi'kaara argued against it, of course, telling me it was her duty to make the final descent.

'You should bear the word and I the fire,' she said, but it could not be.

You see, I cannot return. Jhi'kaara was wrong: Xanti's sting did carry the contagion. Though his touch was fleeting I can feel the taint stirring in my blood like the promise of lies. I don't know how long I have, but I will not hide in the darkness until the blight takes me. Besides, my corruption is more than blood-deep, for I have fallen from the Tau'va. I am no longer a creature of water or fire, nor indeed of sanity, but I can still serve. I shall descend into the pit alongside my enemy and purge the unclean... For the Greater Good.

- END RECORDING -



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HOWL OF THE BANSHEE

GAV THORPE

A single candle guttered atop a slender pedestal at the centre of the chamber. Its light barely touched the five female eldar kneeling in a circle around it, catching them between the warm glow and the chill gloom beyond. They were each clad in tight armour the colour of bone, their red-tassled helms held in their laps, heads bowed in contemplation.

All was silent.

A sixth figure entered, her boots clicking on the marble-like floor as she passed into the ring. Exarch of the Shrine of the Deathly Wail, Clyona.

Like the others, her head was bare, helmet carried beneath her left arm. Her head was shaved and around her eyes was tattooed black, her lips a blood-red. In her right hand she carried a long-handled glaive with a crystalline blade. Her chosen weapon, the executioner.

With dark eyes she looked at each of her charges briefly before speaking. The circle of warriors fixed her with their stares, already beginning the mental preparations that would bring up their war masks and wash away all sense of guilt or regret.

‘We are come, gathered here together, to wage war,’ she told them.

There was no reply from the others. They had felt the call from the shrine. They knew their purpose. Only one reacted, a sharp intake of breath from Kailleach, who had not yet shed blood in battle. When Clyona spoke next, the exarch stood beside the newest to hear the howl of the banshee.

‘The seers speak, they witness great evil, and we act. A craftworld, silent Lanimayesh, threatens us. Ancient foes, creatures of dark power, seeking us. Gates open, the webway corrupted, Biel-Tan falls.’ The exarch paused and looked in turn at each of the others, to ensure they understood the importance of the threat. ‘We will fight, to purge Lanimayesh, as escort. The gates

closed, Lanimayesh destroyed, Biel-Tan lives.'

Nodding in understanding, the assembled warriors stood as one. Clyona disappeared into the darkness for a moment and returned with a silver bowl, its exterior etched with swirling shapes that made screaming half-faces and glaring eyes. Within was the blood of the shrine members, still warm, freely given when they had entered.

Dipping her fingers into the blood, Clyona walked the circle, starting with Kailleach, and drew upon the forehead of each warrior the rune of the banshee, the name of Bloody-Handed Khaine in his aspect of the Foretold Doom. As her fingers touched upon Kailleach's brow, Clyona began the chant.

'Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.'

As the blood dried on her skin, Kailleach added her voice to the mantra, her voice wavering at first but growing stronger as her war mask pushed away the vestiges of fear and guilt that had no place in the mind of a warrior.

'Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.'

Next was Fiyanna, her pale eyes already deadened, so swift to assume the mask. The howl of the banshee sang loudly in her mind, but now was not the time to warn of becoming trapped in Khaine's embrace. Her voice was strident.

'Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.'

Narimeth, a crooked smile on her lips, glanced up at her exarch as the rune was daubed. When she joined the chorus, the volume increased, each warrior feeding off the emotion of the others. The joy of battle was singing in their hearts, lifting their voices.

'Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.'

Mytheneth's voice added another level to the harmony, calm and collected, filled with inner strength. It brought balance to the chant, enriching the minds of her fellow warriors with its placid depth.

'Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls.'

Finally Loronai was wetted with the blood and she shuddered, a sigh escaping parted lips as her war mask consumed her. The chanting became strident, the warriors with teeth bared, eyes wide.

'Blood runs, anger rises, death wakes, war calls!'

Where six individuals had entered, there stood six sisters. Six sisters united in blood. Six sisters who harkened to the shriek of blood calling to be spilt, of

dooms to be fulfilled and life-threads to be severed.

Six Howling Banshees, voices as one, let out an ululating cry that reverberated around the chamber, ringing out through the cosmos, echoing back to the dawn of myths when the deathly wail of Khaine's sirens signalled the destruction of worlds.

A crackle of energy heralded the opening of the webway portal, through which the warriors of the Deathly Wail advanced quickly, power swords and shuriken pistols held at the ready.

Passing from the pulsing background hum into the still of Lanimayesh, the Howling Banshees were joined by others: red-armoured Fire Dragons and two squads of blue-clad Dire Avengers. It did not escape the attention of Loronai that the white coronas of the webway openings were tainted with flickers of dark red flame.

'Already the grip of darkness takes hold, sisters,' she warned.

'All the more reason for swiftness, sisters,' replied Kailleach. 'Let us be the point of the dagger that strikes.'

Kailleach ran a few steps further than the others, blade held out beside her, light footsteps echoing in the grand hall the warriors now occupied.

'Caution, sister,' called out Loronai. 'We move as one.'

Loronai caught up with swift strides and glanced back. She could feel the brooding presence that was trying to force its way into the craftworld through its dormant, undefended webway gates.

Clyona brought the rest of the shrine-maidens forward while the other Aspect Warriors moved to secure the two passageways leading from the chamber.

'Feel no haste. There is one to arrive. Wait for now,' said the exarch.

Last to appear in the depths of the abandoned craftworld was Tyleannar, the farseer, leader of the expedition. Garbed in long purple robes, face hidden behind the mask of his gem-studded ghosthelm, the psyker gestured for the warriors to follow as he set across the broad chamber. Passing the Dire Avengers from the Shrine of the Golden Star, he led them into one of the corridors and the small force fell in behind him.

The Howling Banshees moved to a position just behind the Golden Star, ready to spring forwards against any foe that survived the Dire Avengers' shuriken catapults. The other squad of Dire Avengers followed close behind,

while the Fire Dragons brought up the rear.

The passage was short, but showed further evidence of the encroaching warp corruption. The pastel-blue walls were darkening in patches as Chaos energy leaked along the crystal matrix of the infinity circuit within. Golden arched doorways were turning to iron and brass. The scent of blood, faint but unmistakable, hung in the air.

Narimeth voiced a concern that was not unique to her. ‘Perhaps we should have brought greater numbers. The farseers have misjudged the extent of Lanimayesh’s vulnerability.’

There was no comment from Tyleannar, so it was Mytheneth that replied.

‘Bulk stifles swiftness. A larger force would be more unwieldy, and to tarry too long here will bring its own hazards. Do you not agree, Loronai, my sister?’

‘You are correct, sister. The greater our number, the greater the likelihood that our presence is noticed by powers we wish to overlook us.’

‘The swift strike, the blow that is unseen, is deadly.’

The exarch’s words ended the discussion and they continued without further comment.

At the end of the passageway, Tyleannar paused for a moment. The hall beyond was on the outskirts of the central infinity circuit chambers and the walls glistened with threads of crystal.

Unlike the glittering trails of Biel-Tan’s psychic matrix, the circuit of Lanimayesh was dull, unalive. Where the crystal lines joined together as larger nodes, trickles of thick red fluid dribbled down the walls.

The Howling Banshees looked at each other, but it was Fiyanna that was most affected.

‘A sign of that which wishes to enter,’ she said eagerly. ‘Blood. The Skull King desires Lanimayesh. Do you not feel his call, sisters?’

‘Heed not the urges of the father of our bastard master,’ said Loronai. ‘It is not rage that we serve, but a purer war.’

‘All war is rage, sister, whether knowing or not,’ Fiyanna said dismissively. ‘The Lord of the Brass Tower seeks to make a shrine of once-fair Lanimayesh so that his servants can revel in the bloodshed that sowed death upon the people of this place in ancient past.’

Mention of Lanimayesh’s doom sent a collective shudder of apprehension and excitement through the other Howling Banshees, save for Clyona, who

was standing still, head tilted as if listening intently.

The others heard what had caught her attention a moment later, a distant clattering of sharp footfalls followed by a screech as of a whetstone along a blade.

‘They have come. Hear the Blood God’s servants. Ready blades!’

Eight daemons came, and eight more and eight again, violent rage given form in blood-red flesh. In clawed hands they gripped brazen swords and serrated axes. White-orb eyes glared from snarling faces. Twisted horns jutted from anger-furrowed brows. By many names did the eldar know Khorne’s foot soldiers: the Gore Children, Sons of Rage, bloodletters.

With them advanced a larger brute, a gleaming axe in each hand. The herald lifted up its blades and from its fanged mouth issued a monstrous bellow, both a challenge for its foes and a call to battle for its followers.

The daemons’ shouts were met by the song of the Dire Avengers’ shuriken catapults, the air filling with slicing discs. Warp-spawned bodies were shredded and flayed by the fusillade but only a handful of the daemons fell as they broke into a run.

Immaterial forms shuddered and twitched as the Dire Avengers continued with their onslaught, but these creatures were not of mortal flesh and bone, and shrugged off their wounds like the bites of flies, forcing the blue-armoured eldar to fall back.

Tyleannar retreated before the daemons, seeking shelter amongst the Fire Dragons as Clyona led her warriors forwards.

‘To the right, we fall upon their flank. Swiftly now!’

White-hot blasts from the Fire Dragons’ thermal guns and their exarch’s firepike cut into the approaching daemons, with no greater success than the guns of their fellow warriors. Fiery beams that could melt through the armour of tanks and turn physical flesh to cinders were shrugged off like water splashing from rock and only a few more daemons were destroyed by the volley.

The Howling Banshees circled around the withdrawing Aspect Warriors and broke into a run.

As they charged, the war sisters of the Deathly Wail let forth their battle screams. Channelled through the psychosonic amplifiers of their helms, the shriek became a surge of power, slamming into the daemons like a gale.

The closest blood-red warriors were thrown from their feet by the pealing cry; others dropped their blades or stumbled back as a wave of psychic fury washed over them.

Kailleach outpaced her sisters, her long strides fuelled by naive enthusiasm. Her pistol spat a volley of shurikens into a daemon as it pushed itself back to its knees, slicing through its face. Her sword, its blade glowing with blue energy, followed a moment later, shearing through the corded muscle and veins of the warp creature's neck.

'Let us be upon them while they reel!' cried Kailleach.

'As one, we fight as one. Foe on the left, sister!'

Loronai's warning came in time.

Kailleach twisted, ducking beneath the sweep of an axe. The point of her sword sank into the gut of the daemon as she pivoted on one heel, the ball of her foot driving into its chin.

Stunned, the bloodletter stumbled back, to be met by Mytheneth's sword as she sprinted into the fray.

Fiyanna joined them a heartbeat later, her blade flashing to the left and right, leaving arcs of blue around her.

'Kailleach's temper has it right. Slaughter them quickly and rejoice.'

The other Howling Banshees swept into the disorientated daemons like a spear of ivory cleaving into red flesh, their pistols and swords cutting down a dozen of the creatures before they could recover from the onslaught of the banshee scream that had dazed them.

None slew more than Clyona, whose shining glaive cut heads from necks and slashed limbs from bodies in a constant motion, the barks and growls of her foes becoming louder and fiercer as their numbers dwindled and their anger increased in proportion.

Teeth bared, the herald moved through its minions to meet the charge of the eldar, hefting its axes ready for the strike. Overcome by the heat of combat, Kailleach leapt to the attack. Loronai called out in concern.

'No, sister, you cannot best this beast alone.'

The herald caught Kailleach's downward swing on one of its curling horns, turning the blow aside. Striking out, it punched her in the face, hurling her backwards with the mask of her helm cracked open.

Clyona acted rather than spoke. She lanced the point of her glaive towards the herald's throat, but the strike was deflected at the last moment by the haft

of an axe. Spinning, Clyona struck again. Crystal blade was met by enchanted bronze as the herald raised its axes in parry to the exarch's assault.

For several heartbeats the two were locked together, flares of energy crackling between them, sparking from their weapons.

With a triumphant snarl, the herald thrust away Clyona, sending her sprawling from her feet. The Howling Banshees converged on their upended leader, but not swiftly enough. Striking with a speed that outmatched its adversaries, the herald of Khorne brought both axes down upon the stricken exarch.

One blade cleaved Clyona's helm in two, the other slammed through her breastplate.

Kailleach shrieked as if struck and launched herself afresh at the herald. A step behind her, Loronai snapped out a command.

'Storm of Blades Rising. Harvest the sorrow of the fallen.'

Acting in concert, the Howling Banshees fell upon the herald in a circle, twirling and lunging, each striking a dozen times in a few moments, opening up long wounds in its crimson flesh. Fiyanna broke from the deadly assault as the herald flailed an axe at her head, ducking beneath its blade.

'Look to your backs and I will finish the beast,' Fiyanna said to rest of the shrine-maidens.

The others turned their attention to the bloodletters closing around them, but Mytheneth was caught in the back by a serrated sword edge, her armour giving way under the powerful blow, bronze hacking through vertebrae. She fell with a cry, her last act to lash the tip of her sword into her killer's face as she dropped.

Possessed by the spirit of Khaine, driven by a rage that matched that of the Blood God's servants, Fiyanna unleashed a blistering flurry of strikes against the herald, cutting away at its chest and throat, driving it back step by step.

Blood spurted from the wounds, coating the Howling Banshee's pale armour with gore, but she pressed on as her sisters guarded against attack from behind, their blades singing as they duelled with the surviving bloodletters.

'Death now,' spat Fiyanna. 'Back to the accursed realm that spawned you, vile beast.'

Her next blow severed the herald's crooked leg at the knee, toppling it to one side. Before it had hit the ground, she pounced, driving her sword through the white orb of its eye. It twitched twice and fell still.

The bloodletters' numbers thinned by two-thirds, the other Aspect Warriors joined the Deathly Wail, Tyleannar at their head, the tip of his runestaff a purple flare of psychic energy.

Beset on all sides, the remaining daemons fell quickly, though not before accounting for a handful of the Dire Avengers that had come to the aid of the Howling Banshees.

After the frenzy of combat, the silence of Lanimayesh was the silence of a tomb. There was no grief, not yet. The war masks summoned in the shrine held back all woe. Loronai broke the still.

'Quickly now, take up their waystones and let us be away from this accursed place.'

The gem upon Mytheneth's breast glittered brighter than before, her spirit enclosed within the sanctuary of its crystal heart. While the other Aspect Warriors attended to their fallen, Loronai plucked Mytheneth's spirit stone from its gilded setting and placed it in a pouch at her waist.

Kailleach had moved to the body of Clyona, but was presented with a problem. The exarch's armour was studded with fifteen waystones, each with a hue and sparkle of its own. Forever lost to Khaine, the spirit of an exarch was not given up to the infinity circuit of Biel-Tan, but resided in the armour to blend with all of those that had come before.

'We cannot take her with us,' said Narimeth. 'Which of us would give their life to carry our sister? Not I.'

'We could remove all of the stones.' Kailleach crouched over the fallen exarch as she spoke. She was answered by Loronai.

'There is not time. The longer we dwell, the more daemons will come.' She paused as she noticed the farseer departing. 'See, Tyleannar moves on already.'

'An easy choice for one that has trodden the path so many times before,' said Narimeth. 'How easy is it, autarch-to-be, to leave behind a fallen sister?'

'Not easy, but necessary.' Loronai spoke quietly, almost to herself. 'Too many are numbered who have died beside me, but if we remain here the tally will increase further.'

There was hesitation amongst the sisters. None were willing to abandon Clyona to a fate worse than death. Trapped within the exarch armour, fifteen eldar spirits would be consigned to damnation when Tyleannar awakened Lanimayesh's infinity core and activated the craftworld's self-destruction.

Loronai conceded to her sisters' unease. 'Very well, we shall return for Clyona before we depart. Her fall will be for nought if we do not commit the shell of Lanimayesh to the warp. Let us see the task done and then we shall carry our dead to safety.'

The others acquiesced to this compromise and followed as Fiyanna ran after their departing companions.

The crystal matrix at the centre of the craftworld pulsed red as Tyleannar ministered to the corrupted infinity circuit. The air was thick with the stench of blood as the daemons of Chaos strove to break through the weakened barrier between the warp and the mortal universe.

In handfuls, bloodletters and monstrous flesh hounds breached the divide, to be greeted with hails of shuriken fire, the discharge of energy weapons and the blades of the Howling Banshees. Though facing no concerted assault, the eldar were hard-pressed, ever-alert for each fresh incursion.

'How many more?' asked Kailleach. 'I can feel the veil weakening with every passing breath. Soon they will come in numbers too great to stop.'

'It is no speedy task, to bring forth the spirits of a deceased craftworld,' answered Loronai. 'For a long time they have been dormant, allowing this corruption to spread.'

'We fight as long as we need to, until we can fight no more.' Fiyanna laughed wickedly. 'Did you think you would grow old as a Howling Banshee, little sister?'

'I had hoped to see more than one battle.'

'There is only one battle, Kailleach, with a rare few moments of peace between exchanges. Since the Dark Powers first touched our hearts, we have been doomed to a war we cannot win.'

'Cannot win?' Loronai spoke sharply. 'Or do not wish to win, Fiyanna? Khaine's touch upon you grows heavier with every foe you fell.'

'Perhaps I welcome it, sister. Did that not occur to you?'

Narimeth sliced the head from a coalescing bloodletter and spun past her war-sisters, her blade trailing an arc of blood.

'Clyona is not long dead and you are so soon ready to step into the void she has left?' she said. 'Does her bloody lesson teach you nothing? Or is it that desire for Khaine's curse slowed your hand?'

Before Fiyanna could argue the accusation, the air throbbed with power,

echoing with a distant roar. It was as if the floor parted as the lattice of the infinity circuit gleamed crimson, each red line opening up wider and wider, tearing through the gulf between realms.

Bestial, snarling faces pushed through the void-gap as Khorne's hunters, flesh hounds, forced their scaled bodies into reality, growling and snapping.

Blasts from the Fire Dragons ripped through the oncoming beasts, and a heartbeat later Fiyanna fell upon the half-formed monsters, her blade cleaving deep into a bony crest atop the head of the first hound.

'It was not I that doomed fey Clyona!' said Fiyanna. 'Look to our freshest blood for cause of that.'

Kailleach joined Fiyanna at the warp breach, her pistol spitting shurikens.

'You are not wrong, sister. It was my rashness, my need to prove myself, that brought Clyona to her doom. I accept the blood of our exarch as I must accept all blood that is shed while I wear the mask of Khaine.'

The air was so thick now with psychic energy that phantasms danced within it, lit by the ruddy shine of the infinity circuit, which now pulsed with new life. Tyleannar telepathically announced his rituals were complete as he stepped away from the exposed infinity circuit nodes.

With the influx of daemoniac energy momentarily stemmed, it was safe now to open the webway in the heart of the damned craftworld. Driving the head of his runestaff into a confluence of blazing crystal threads he opened up an oval portal surrounded by shimmering silver.

As the other Aspect Warriors fell back to follow the farseer into the opening, Fiyanna stood defiant, blade raised as more bloodletters formed from viscous pools created by trickles of blood running down the walls.

'We will not abandon Clyona.' Fiyanna was vehement. 'We agreed.'

The floor shuddered underfoot, almost toppling the Howling Banshees. Lornai looked at the others departing, feeling the surge of psychic energy of Lanimayesh waking; the long-dead spirits of the craftworld becoming aware of the grotesque beings seeping through from the warp.

Above the portal, black fire crawled across the domed ceiling, tendrils of dark flame seeking the gap into the eldar webway. Surainan, exarch of the Fire Dragons, the last of the other squads, stood at the opening and beckoned for the Howling Banshees to follow.

Taking a step towards the portal, Narimeth turned her gaze back towards her shrine-sisters.

‘We are too late. We will be consumed with Clyona.’

‘Never!’ shrieked Fiyanna, breaking from the others to run back the way they had entered. Loronai lunged to grasp her as she passed, but missed.

‘What madness grips her?’ asked Kailleach.

‘The madness of Khaine,’ said Loronai. ‘Come, sisters, we cannot let her die alone.’

As the Howling Banshees sprinted from the infinity circuit chamber, more red-skinned daemons burst into existence, a tide of feral creatures baying and bellowing close on the heels of the fleet-footed war-sisters.

‘We are here! Come, test your blades against ours and know that Khaine yet despises his raging father.’

Fiyanna’s defiant shout went almost unheard amongst the tumult of tortured wraithbone and bellowing of bloodthirsty daemons. All around them the fabric of Lanimayesh tore itself apart.

Alerted to the daemon presence, the spirits of the infinity circuit had gathered all of their remaining energy into the great webway gates aft of the craftworld, slowly engulfing the continent-sized vessel with the power of the warp.

Kailleach and Narimeth fought alongside each other. They attacked any daemon hound or bloodletter that entered the chamber, where Clyona had fallen, as a pair.

Loronai carried the deceased exarch over one shoulder. She held her power sword in her free hand, but so encumbered she was at the mercy of her sisters’ skills as a fresh influx of daemons crowded towards the archway to be met by the blades and pistols of the Howling Banshees.

‘Run, sister, run!’ Kailleach cut the head from a lunging daemon and darted a look at Loronai. ‘The Path of the Autarch and greatness awaits. There is no need for us all to die here – the webway is but a short distance.’

‘I would rather die with my sisters than live alone as autarch with the knowledge that I deserted them.’ Loronai lowered Clyona’s corpse to the floor, noticing rivulets of blood seeping up from the tainted wraith-circuitry beneath her feet. She drew her pistol and joined Fiyanna, attacking low as her sister slashed high.

‘Perhaps She Who Thirsts will not claim us,’ Fiyanna said gaily. ‘The Blood God hungers for our spirits more greatly, I think.’

‘Accursed mother and father will destroy each other fighting for my essence, if I have any say.’

‘Then together we will fight and fall, and within the womb of the Great Enemy himself we shall continue to cut until he must spit us forth or die of the wounds.’

‘A worthy but empty sentiment, sister. The Prince of Pleasure will delight all the more for the tickling we shall give him.’

Something even larger and more monstrous than the bloodletters stalked into view at the end of the passageway held by the Howling Banshees, larger even than the herald. Its face was thin and drawn, its mouth a gaping hole lined with canine teeth.

In one hand it carried a long-bladed sword, the other fist wrapped in barbed chains of bronze. Blackened, tattered wings half spread from its back as it advanced. Its body was protected by iron plate, the surface of which writhed with many faces in torment, the souls of those it had slain imprisoned for all eternity.

The gigantic creature’s bellow of rage reverberated along the corridor, penetrating even the fear-dampening effect of the Howling Banshees’ war masks. Loronai gave voice to the alarm she shared with the others.

‘Daemon prince! Corrupted mortal given immortal form. Against such a foe we cannot hope to prevail, sisters.’

‘And less chance of eluding such a predator,’ added Narimeth. ‘Retreat is no better.’

‘If there can be no retreat, but one option remains.’ Fiyanna relished the prospect of the coming confrontation, wholly consumed by the spirit of Khaine. ‘Let him howl all he likes – he has known nothing until he has heard the Deathly Wail.’

As one the sisterhood of death gathered together, letting flow the fury they had been holding in check. Like water breaking a dam, the despair and rage broke through the barriers of their minds, vented as a war-scream as they broke into a run.

The psychic barrage of pure hate, the blessing of Khaine’s legacy, ripped into the nearest daemons like a storm. Fuelled by the warp energy seething through the doomed craftworld it tore apart their bodies, flinging tattered remnants against the walls.

The daemon prince responded, breaking into a lumbering run towards its

prey, scattering the lesser daemons in its path. Fiyanna was swiftest, borne forwards with light strides powered by insane desire, the others close behind.

They had not covered half the distance to the foe when the air ahead started to distort.

A pinprick of blue light hung in the air ahead of the charging Aspect Warriors. In moments it expanded into a shimmering circle of light while other miniature stars sprang into existence around it.

From the newly opened portals strode Tyleannar, flanked by the exarchs of the other aspects.

Surainan's firepike spat a white beam of pure energy, striking the daemon prince square in the chest. The creature staggered backwards, gravely wounded but not slain. The farseer waved for the war-sisters to enter the webway portals. Loronai did not need any further invitation.

'Now, sisters! The time of our sacrifice is not yet at hand. Fiyanna!'

The Howling Banshee slowed as her name was called out, shaking her head as if freshly woken from a deep sleep.

'What of Clyona?'

'We will take her together, sister.'

Moving quickly, Loronai and Fiyanna returned to the body of their fallen war-priestess and bore her up between them while the others helped throw back the onrushing daemons. Behind the bloodletters, the wounded daemon prince hauled itself upright and issued its challenge.

As they arrived, so the Deathly Wail departed. Six sisters together, united under Khaine's banner.

As the force disappeared into the safety of the webway, Lanimayesh entered its final death throes.

Forks of psychic energy rippled along the walls as the raw warp and material universe tried to overlap. The titanic energy unleashed pulled the craftworld asunder as it fell into the Realm of Chaos, dragging the daemons back to their infernal home.

A single candle guttered atop a slender pedestal at the centre of the chamber. Its light barely touched the four female eldar kneeling in a circle around it, catching them between the warm glow and the chill gloom beyond. They were each clad in tight armour, the colour of bone, their helms held in their laps, heads bowed in contemplation.

The sound of weeping filled the air as the Deathly Wail, now stripped of their war masks, could finally give in to the pain and grief of their loss.

‘As elder sister she was,’ said Kailleach. ‘From me she pulled forth the sting of my anger, taking its poison into herself.’

‘Sister to us all.’ Tears flowed down Narimeth’s cheeks despite her bitter tone as she glanced back into the shadow of the shrine, where the naked body of Clyona lay upon a marble bier. It was an empty shell, her spirit still within the armour that had been placed reverently upon its rack in the adjoining chamber. ‘I never heard her laughter, nor saw her smile, and she was incapable of love. Khaine gripped her, but for all that, she was sister-in-war and she gave her life for us.’

There was one who did not cry. She stared at the candle, the flame reflected in her pupils. Her jaw was set, cheeks drawn in tight, stare hard and unyielding. Loronai glanced at near-catatonic Fiyanna, her concern apparent.

‘We are free from any burden, sisters. Any debt we feel we owe is just illusion. Clyona was doomed the moment she donned the mantle of exarch. That which she had been was lost from that time forward, yet what she became still remains. Give voice to your despair, sisters, and be grateful that we can, for Clyona could never shed tears for us.’

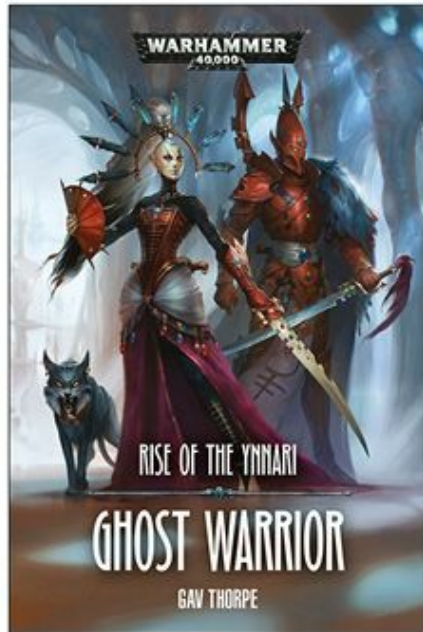
Fiyanna stirred at last, looking from one sister to the next with a cold, flinty glare. Of the eldar she had been, only a vestige remained.

In her expression was hate. Hate not for those she looked at, but a hate at the core of her being so strong it drove out all other emotion. When she spoke, it was as if another spirit used her lips and tongue.

‘Save your words of condolences for those that can hear them. I cannot. All is silent in my mind, save for the cry that calls me to my doom. Everything is lost.’ Fiyanna paused and her eyes became even more distant. ‘All that remains is the howl of the banshee.’



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CULLING THE HORDE

STEVE PARKER

They crested the ridge an hour before sundown and stopped, dropping into the cover of the trees and bushes, five of them in all – four in full battleplate, the other only lightly armoured, yet to earn the requisite honour.

This latter was Riallo, the Scout, youngest of the five and bearer of the fewest scars. He dropped into a crouch by Sergeant Grimm, pressed his magnoculars to his dark brown eyes and scanned the valley floor.

Ghosts of grey smoke drifted lazily upwards from the south-facing windows of the farmhouse below. The doors of the barn had been smashed to splinters. Broad, jagged rents had been cut in the metal skin of the grain silos. The corn had spilled out, forming huge mounds, but how long ago? The flow had stopped. It was impossible to tell.

Riallo shifted his gaze to the pasture on the far side of the farmhouse, the north side. There on the short-cropped grass lay three hulking bodies, each over two tonnes of muscle and bone.

‘Aurochs,’ Riallo reported. ‘Typical wound patterns. Mix of close-range gunfire and bladed weapons. It looks like they’ve been dragged a little. Perhaps the orks gave them up as too heavy. The fence to the north-east has been trampled. It looks like the rest of the herd fled.’

Grimm’s voice was a muzzle-modulated growl through the vocaliser of his battle-helm. ‘Did the damned greenskins follow them? That is the question.’

‘I cannot tell from here, brother-sergeant,’ said Riallo. He scanned the farm buildings again. ‘No sign of movement.’

‘Then we proceed,’ said Grimm. He stood and gestured for the others to descend with him into the valley. ‘Safeties off, my brothers,’ he told them. ‘Let us be cautious.’

The slope was not overly steep and the footing was good, the ground hard

and dry. The Space Marines soon reached the valley floor. Riallo ranged ahead now, moving in a crouch, scanning the ground for tracks.

Huron Grimm scanned his surroundings too, bolter held ready, thinking to himself that the rains were later this year than ever before. In fact, all over Rynn's World, weather systems had been kicked out of kilter by the war.

The orks had been routed at New Rynn City over a year ago now. Alessio Cortez had left, surrounded by much controversy, to lead a small team off-world. He and the four battle-brothers chosen to accompany him had all made a death-pact. They would hunt down and destroy the warlord Snagrod, the greenskin warlord responsible for all the murder and misery that had engulfed this land, or they would not return at all. Master Kantor had relocated the Chapter headquarters to the Cassar, the Crimson Fists keep in the planetary capital. Throne knew when, or even if, the Chapter's noble fortress-monastery, Arx Tyrannus, would ever be rebuilt. The purge had to take priority for now. The purge had to be absolute. Riallo's voice sounded over the link. 'Definite ork-sign, brother-sergeant. At least ten of the bastards, all of them grown bulls judging by the prints.'

'When, Riallo?'

'One second, sergeant. I've found some spoor.'

Up ahead, Grimm saw Riallo prod something on the ground then press his finger to his tongue.

'This is less than one hour old.'

'They could still be inside,' rumbled Grimm, half to himself.

One of the armoured squad members stepped to Grimm's side. His proud blue ceramite was coated with clinging brown dust after the long march from the last purge site. 'No solid cover on approach. How do you want to handle this, sergeant?'

It was Mandell.

'Two twos,' said Grimm. 'You and Corella will flank left and come at the barn from the eight o'clock position. Veristan and I will approach head-on. Riallo,' he called out over the link, 'I want you on high ground providing cover. Make sure you have solid angles on both the barn and the farmhouse.'

Riallo rose and trotted back towards the others. He holstered his bolt pistol on his thigh, unslung the sniper rifle from his back, and nodded towards the grassy slope east. 'You see that fallen tree about two hundred metres up, sergeant?'

Grimm followed the Scout's gaze and nodded. 'It looks fine. Go.'

Riallo dipped his head in a short bow and ran off, moving with all the speed and natural grace of a predatory cat. Within moments he was in place.

'Let's move,' said Grimm. 'Veristan, you're with me.'

The four armoured Space Marines split into their fire-teams and made for the barn. Not long till sundown now. So quiet. Eerily quiet. Grimm could hear the wind, though it was hardly strong. A trio of crows cawed to each other as they flew out from the treetops on the western ridge and settled in the pasture to gorge themselves on the dead aurochs. Carrion beetles scuttled away nervously. The barn loomed closer and closer, and still nothing. Grimm and Veristan took positions on either side of the gaping door and waited for Mandell and Corella to converge with them.

The shadows inside the barn were ink-black.

Once all were in place, Grimm ordered them to switch to low-light vision mode, then he gave the 'go' command.

Heavily armoured as they were, the four Space Marines nevertheless moved like lightning. In a coordinated blur, they entered the barn and took up position, weapons raised, ready to fire.

But nothing stirred in the barn. It was a scene of gruesome slaughter, but that slaughter was over. The blood splashed copiously over the walls and wooden beams and straw-covered floor was cold.

A dozen white bodies lay in raw tatters. These were Magalanian sheep, a large and sturdy breed with four long curving horns, but they had been no match for their killers. Grimm turned the nearest over with his boot. There was a massive ragged hole in its side.

'That's an ork bite pattern alright,' said Corella. 'It just took a big mouthful right out of it, wool and all.'

'Up in the rafters,' said Veristan.

Grimm raised his eyes and immediately wished he hadn't. He had seen enough horrors since the damned greenskin filth had invaded. He didn't need any more to compound his anger and hatred. Still, here were two – the bodies of young male farmhands, skinned and hung from the barn's central crossbeam. He blink-clicked his visor's zoom function and noted the bullet wounds on the bodies and the stray rounds that had hit the wooden beams around them or punched neat holes in the ceiling. These latter glowed with the day's dying light.

‘The orks used them for target practice,’ he spat. ‘Look at the blood trails. They skinned them, hung them up, then shot at them.’

Mandell muttered an old Sorrocan curse. The others scowled in silence.

‘All right,’ said Grimm. ‘Sweep the barn for anything else. When we are clear, we storm the farmhouse.’

Outside, from his position by the fallen tree, Riallo watched the others emerge from the barn and move in pairs towards the farmhouse. The sun was extremely low now, and the valley’s tall western slope cast black shadows down on its floor. Riallo switched his magnoculars to low-light mode. He saw Sergeant Grimm and Veristan take up position on either side of the main doorway in the south wall of the building. Mandell and Corella did likewise at a smaller side entrance on the structure’s west side. Both doors had been smashed in by the orks.

‘In position,’ said Mandell over the link. ‘I don’t see anything in there.’

‘Riallo,’ said Grimm. ‘Any sign of movement from your position?’

‘Just the feasting crows, brother-sergeant,’ answered Riallo. Then something caught his eye. ‘Wait!’

‘What is it?’

Riallo zoomed in with his magnoculars, muscles tense for a moment. Then he relaxed. ‘No, it’s nothing. Just the wind causing a slide on one of the big corn spills.’

‘Something’s not right about this,’ said Veristan. ‘It feels... off.’

‘Just follow the pattern,’ said Grimm. ‘We enter and clear in three... two... one...’

Riallo’s brothers vanished into the shadows within the farmhouse. Above him, the first stars began to appear as evening crept westwards across the sky.

The interior was a mess. No piece of furniture had escaped the violent nature of the orks. Everything was either reduced to splinters or rags, or had been overturned. Embers still smouldered where fire had licked the walls and window frames black. Large-calibre slugs had pocked the plaster-covered stone, biting great craters in it.

Carefully, the squad moved through each room, checking and clearing, but all they found were the butchered bodies of the people who had lived there. With the sweep done, the Space Marines regrouped in the main room.

‘Three generations dead,’ said Veristan. ‘Grandparents, parents, a teenage son.’

‘From the looks of things, the men tried to fight back with kitchen blades,’ added Corella. ‘Not that it made any difference.’

‘How many more times do we have to bear witness?’ spat Mandell, lowering the muzzle of his flamer. ‘All over Rynn’s World, the greenskins are butchering our people like this. A year since the tide was turned, and still they suffer. What must they think of us? Master Kantor should have petitioned the other Chapters for more aid. We should be rebuilding already.’

‘And Captain Cortez,’ added Corella, ‘off on a mission of personal vengeance when he is needed—’

‘Enough!’ barked Grimm. ‘Alessio Cortez seeks vengeance for our fallen, not for himself. I, for one, would have him return to a world cleansed of our enemies. Is it not so with all of you? Or am I mistaken?’

There was a moment thick with silence.

‘No, brother-sergeant,’ said Mandell with genuine contrition. ‘You are not wrong.’

Veristan sighed in agreement and looked up at the ceiling. Suddenly, he tensed. ‘What in Throne’s name...’

A series of great gouges had been cut in the wood and plaster above the Space Marines. The cuts formed almost a complete circle, but at three equidistant points the lines broke, just enough to keep the ceiling from falling in.

Grimm followed Veristan’s gaze.

‘Damn it!’ he shouted. ‘Backs to the walls, br—’

He didn’t get to finish. There was a deafening boom, a sudden hard hail of rubble, and the circle of ceiling dropped straight down into the room.

Grimm and the others dived backwards and escaped most of the impact, but Mandell, closest to the centre, couldn’t get clear in time. The circle of ceiling struck him hard and flattened him to the ground. The darkness was filled with a great billowing cloud of dust, swirling green in the low-light vision of the Space Marines’ helms.

From within that cloud came a deep, bestial roar.

Huge, savage shapes emerged, rushing straight forwards with weapons raised, frenzied for a fight. They were monstrous hulks of green muscle, armed with heavy chainbladed axes and swords.

‘Open fire, brothers!’ yelled Grimm even as he pulled the trigger of his bolter and strobed the room with muzzle flare. ‘Damn it, open fire! Kill them all!’

From his sniping position on the valley slope, Riallo heard the detonation of the ork charges. The feasting crows scattered into the air at once. Then Riallo had heard the greenskin roars and the deep bark of bolters. He saw flashes of gunfire strobing the broken windows and doorways of the farmhouse. But he had no line of sight. There was nothing he could do from here to help his fellows.

‘Dorn’s blood!’ he spat, and almost rose from his position to sprint to their aid.

It was well he did not. In the last of the day’s dying ambient light, he saw a sudden flurry of movement. Whipping his magnoculars back to his eyes, he saw two huge, blade-wielding orks explode from the hills of spilled corn. Two others ripped their way out of the damaged grain silos, forcing back the jagged metal with powerful gnarled fists. The aurochs carcasses suddenly shifted, too. They lurched as blood-covered orks scrambled out from pits they had dug underneath them.

Ambush, though Riallo bitterly. *When will we stop underestimating them!*

He may have only been a Tenth Company Scout, yet to grow into his full potential, but he was already seeing much that needed to change if the Chapter was ever to reclaim its former glory.

The orks were converging swiftly on the farmhouse. Riallo knew he wouldn’t be able to get all of them, but, pressing his right eye to his rifle’s powerful scope, he swore he’d take as many down as he could.

‘More greenskins converging on your position, brothers! I count seven.’

He squeezed his trigger. A gruesome green head exploded. The body stumbled forwards and fell hard. The sound of the shot echoed from the opposite valley wall.

‘Six,’ said Riallo.

He lined up a shot on the next nearest ork, a monstrous brute with a heavy pistol in one hand and a preposterously large iron cleaver in the other. On powerful, tree-thick legs it was thundering towards the farmhouse.

Again, Riallo’s rifle kicked against his plated shoulder.

The round punched a hole in the monster’s clavicle. When it detonated, it

cored the beast like an apple. The ork hit the ground dead, dark blood gushing from its slack jaw.

‘Five,’ said Riallo.

I can take one more of them.

They were almost at the farmhouse now. He had perhaps two seconds, but they were moving so fast.

Riallo exhaled and squeezed. His next shot took his third and final target in the leg, just above the knee. The detonation of the round blew off the lower half of the beast’s limb and it fell, weapons spinning away as it hit the dirt. The others ran on and vanished into the farmhouse.

‘They’re on you!’ the Scout called out over the link.

He settled his crosshairs on the head of the ork that was now crawling frantically towards its fallen blades.

See how it craves violence, he thought. So desperate to join the fight, even crippled!

Once again, the sound of a powerful, high-velocity round echoed off the valley walls.

‘Four,’ muttered Riallo to himself. Then he was up and moving. Slinging his rifle over his shoulder and drawing his bolt pistol, he raced down the slope towards the farmhouse, desperate to give his brothers any aid he could.

The farmhouse interior was a maelstrom of noise and flame, smoke and dust, and huge heavy bodies locked in mortal combat.

Three massive orks had dropped from the ceiling. Two had been cut down with bolter fire as they charged, but the third had got in too close and knocked Corella’s weapon aside. Corella’s trusty armour had absorbed most of the impact of the follow-up blow, but the experienced warrior was still smashed so hard by the flat of the monster’s axe that he flew into the wall behind him and exploded through it, landing on his back in a pile of rubble.

The beast would have finished him then and there if Veristan hadn’t unloaded half a magazine into it from behind. Corella struggled to his feet, cursing and raging at himself so hard that he forgot to thank his saviour. Veristan didn’t take it personally. They had saved each other a dozen times or more in the last year. Neither was keeping count anymore.

Grimm was hauling broken beams and rubble off Mandell. When the latter was able to scramble to his feet, he loosed a loud string of curses.

There was barely time to draw breath, however, before the warning came from Riallo that others were converging on their position.

‘Cover that damned door,’ barked Grimm. Three boltgun muzzles and a flamer’s hissing maw snapped into position.

The first ork through the door met a wall of bright white flame before being ripped to pieces by the storm of rounds that followed. The second leapt over the burning remnants of its former comrade, but the moment its boots hit the floor, it too was gunned down. The third and fourth knew better than to follow. They crouched just outside and lobbed large wooden-handled grenades in through two of the shattered windows.

It was the ancient techno-sorcery of the Space Marines’ battle-helms that saved them from death. Projected directly onto their retinas, the four squad members all saw glowing telemetry lines tracing and predicting the trajectory of the explosives as they sailed into the room. Grimm and Veristan lunged forwards. The grenades hit the floor and rolled, but only for an instant before they were snatched up and hurled back towards their points of origin.

‘Down,’ shouted Grimm. The grenades disappeared beyond the sills of the windows.

There was a grunt and a sudden flurry of movement from outside. Two deafening booms sounded just a half-second apart. Chunks of the farmhouse wall were blown inwards. The armour of the crouching Space Marines rattled with a hail of plaster and stone.

Then everything was still and silent apart from the veils of dust slowly settling back to the ground.

The squad moved outside, bolters still raised, to find the ground littered with scraps of ork flesh and shards of shattered bone.

‘Is it over?’ asked Veristan.

Grimm didn’t answer for a moment. He stood listening to the silence. A new sound imposed itself on him. Footsteps. Someone or something moving at a run.

The others heard it, too, and turned with bolters raised just in time to see Riallo sprint around the corner of the farmhouse with his bolt pistol in hand.

‘It’s over,’ said Grimm. He opened a new channel on the link, and said, ‘Squad Leader to Thunderhawk *Aetherius*. Respond.’

There was a crackle of static. A deep voice replied, ‘*Aetherius* hears, brother. Go ahead.’

‘Squad Grimm is ready for pick-up. Lock on to my beacon. You can land in the valley. We’ll be waiting about two hundred metres south of our current position.’

‘Do you have need of an Apothecary, brother?’

‘Negative, *Aetherius*. We do not. See you at the extraction point. Grimm, out.’

‘So...’ said Veristan after the sergeant had closed the link. ‘Another island cleared of the filthy kine.’

‘Leaving just short of eight hundred more to go,’ replied Mandell. ‘Not to mention the mountains and the cave systems.’

‘It that a complaint?’ asked Grimm.

‘Hardly,’ chuckled the big Space Marine. ‘I live for these purges, though I shall be more wary of falling ceilings.’

At that moment, Riallo’s eyes locked on to something above them and went wide. Grimm turned just in time to see a badly injured ork rise up to its full height on the roof of the farmhouse. Its skin was drenched in blood and one arm ended in a tattered stump that was still dripping, but it had enough life left in it to raise a huge axe, bellow at the sky and leap.

Grimm saw it coming straight towards him. He heard someone shout, ‘Sergeant!’ There was a single gunshot and the beast’s head snapped backwards as it dropped.

The sergeant stepped back just in time. The body of the monster struck the ground a metre in front of him and flopped lifelessly to its side. He turned to see Riallo standing there, bolt pistol raised, smoke drifting from its barrel.

They all looked at Riallo for a moment, saying nothing until he lowered and holstered his weapon.

‘Good shot, Scout,’ said Grimm at last.

‘Thank you, brother-sergeant.’

‘How many kills did you make this day, brother?’ asked Veristan

‘Four,’ said Riallo. If he felt pride, he managed to keep it from his voice.

Corella blew out a breath. ‘Almost half the total kill-count. You’re making us look bad, brother.’

‘It was the ork that laid you out which made *you* look bad,’ Veristan laughed. ‘He put you on your back like a helpless turtle.’

‘Mandell,’ said Grimm, ‘you know what to do. Burn the ork bodies. *Aetherius* will do a promethium bombing run once we’re up, but I’d rather

not take any chances with spores drifting on the wind. Riallo, scour the place one last time to be sure we got them all. If there are ork tracks leading away...'

'Understood, brother-sergeant.'

'Veristan and Corella, follow me. We'll await them at the rendezvous.'

As Mandell went back inside the farmhouse with his flamer, Riallo mentally quartered the area and began scanning the ground for tracks leading off the property. It was dark. Stars blanketed the sky, their cold light adequate for a Space Marine's gene-boosted vision. His search eventually brought him near the ruptured grain silos. By the hills of spilled corn, he found two hastily abandoned breathing tubes that the orks had used to stay hidden.

They were cunning, these ones, he thought. They knew we were in pursuit and laid a fine trap. I must not think of the orks as mere savages any longer. Some of them, it is clear, are not. They surprised us here today. It could have gone ill for us. Our training, our discipline and our reflexes were what saved us.

He found no evidence that any orks had escaped. As he ended his search and turned back towards the farmhouse, he saw Veristan emerge from the main doorway. The hungry flames were already high behind him, feeding on the dead orks and the debris.

Riallo walked over and, for a moment, the two Crimson Fists stood watching the blaze intensify. Firelight danced on the golden iconography that graced Mandell's ceramite plates. Mandell had earned his fair share of honours defending New Rynn City during the war.

Riallo broke the silence between them. 'This is why it never truly feels like a victory to me, brother. We kill them, but even when dead, the ork spores force us to burn the very things we're fighting for – the people's homes, the fields, the pastures, all the things that support life here. We burn Rynn's World herself.'

Mandell stared into the flames.

'It is from fire that things are born anew,' he rumbled gently. 'Keep your eyes on the future, my brother. The world will heal in time, but only if this accursed infestation is properly ended. What we do now lays the foundations for a return to better days. Be patient and see it thr—'

A shrill scream from inside the farmhouse cut him off. For an instant, they

stood stunned. Then there was another.

Riallo bolted forwards, sprinting straight for the farmhouse. At the door, he didn't stop. He raced straight into the flaming interior.

'Damn it,' spat Mandell, then he marched off after him.

The Thunderhawk had already touched down when Riallo and Mandell finally rejoined the rest of the squad. Brother Garreon, *Aetherius*' pilot, kept the turbines spinning. Grimm was on the verge of demanding a status report over the link when the two missing Space Marines emerged out of the night.

On seeing them, Grimm understood at once.

Cradled in the thick arms of the Scout were two tiny, soot-covered girls with straw-coloured hair. Their bright eyes were wide with fear as they peered back at the massive Space Marines standing at the bottom of the gunship's ramp.

The family, thought Grimm. That's why they didn't run. That's why they stood and fought. I should have seen it.

The children looked so fragile, pressed up against the Scout's armoured chest like that.

Too fragile, too innocent, to survive in a galaxy consumed by endless war. But then again, even we five began this life so small and powerless. Beginnings do not always dictate the nature of endings.

Not for the first time, he gave silent thanks to Emperor and the primarch that fate had made him a Space Marine. He did not think he could have faced the reality of these times as a mortal man with all of the terrible weaknesses that entailed.

'Where were they?' he asked.

'There was a trapdoor set in the floor,' answered Mandell as he moved past his sergeant and up the ramp. 'Their parents must have hidden them from the orks just in time, perhaps alerted by the screams of the farmhands.'

Grimm nodded. 'Time to pull out. Everyone aboard now.'

As the Space Marines marched up into the belly of the gunship, Grimm spoke to Riallo. As he did, the girls turned and hid their frightened faces against the Scout's chest.

'You honoured the Chapter with your deeds today, brother,' said Grimm. 'When we arrive back at the Cassar, I shall be petitioning for your advancement to full battle-brother status.'

Riallo blinked in surprise. ‘Then it is I who am honoured, brother-sergeant. Thank you.’

Grimm waved that aside.

‘The Chapter needs you, brother. And many more like you if the Crimson Fists are to once again be a mighty force in this Imperium.’

He strapped himself into his flight harness and settled back. The gunship’s turbines whined louder, raising in pitch to a scream. *Aetherius* lifted her bulk up into the air.

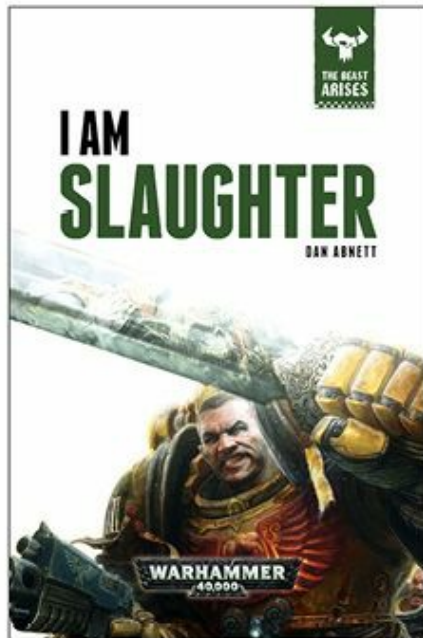
‘On that day,’ Grimm continued, ‘no muck-eating greenskin in Imperial space will be safe from our wrath. In Dorn’s name, I tell you, the very thought of us will strike terror into their filthy xenos hearts.’

The others had removed their battle-helms. On hearing their sergeant’s words, they turned to face him as one. Eyes hard with rage and righteous zeal, they echoed him.

‘In Dorn’s name,’ they swore, ‘it will be so.’



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THE LIGHTNING TOWER

DAN ABNETT

What are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?

There was once a fine palace, and it sat like a crown of light upon the top of the world. This was in the latter days, when mankind left his birth rock for the second time, to chase a destiny denied him in a previous epoch.

The artisan masters of the many rival Masonic guilds had raised the palace up, block by gilded block, to be a statement of unity, regal and unequivocal. After a dreary, lightless Age of Strife, the warring tribes and creeds of Terra had been alloyed under one rule, and the palace was intended to symbolise that staggering achievement. All the petty dynasts and ethnarchs, all the clannations and gene-septs, all the despots and pan-continental tyrants, had been quelled or crushed, overthrown or annexed. Some, the smartest and most prescient, had offered terms and been embraced to the bosom of the new rule. Better fealty than the wrath of the warriors in thunder armour.

Better submission than the enmity of the world's new master.

It was said that once you had seen Him, or heard Him speak, you were never in doubt again. He was the one, and had always been the one. He had been the Emperor long before there was any such office to take. No one knew His birth name, because He had always, naturally, been the Emperor.

Even the artisan masters of the Masonic guilds, famous for their sanctimonious craft wars and vainglorious quarrels, shut up and, in concert, built the palace for Him.

It was monumental. It was not so much an edifice as a handcrafted landmass. The artisan masters built it upon Terra's greatest mountain range, and transformed the monstrous peaks into its bulwarks. It towered above a world laid to waste by centuries of war and perdition, and though that world

was being rebuilt, with wondrous cities and architectural marvels blooming in the new age of Unity, nothing could match its magnificence.

For it was beautiful, a euphoric vision of gold and silver. It was said that, when they had finished their task, the artisan masters of the Masonic guilds set down their tools and wept.

By the time it was complete, it was the largest single man-made structure in known space. Its footings sank deep into the planet's mantle, its towers probed the airless limits of the atmosphere. It owned the words 'the Palace' wholly, without any need for qualification, as if no other palaces existed.

He had blemished that glory. He had raised dark curtain walls around the golden halls, and cased the soaring towers in skins of armour ten metres thick. He had stripped away the jewelled facades and the crystelephantine ornamentation, the delicate minarets and the burnished cupolas, and in their places he had implanted uncountable turrets and ordnance emplacements. He had dug mighty earthworks out of the surrounding lowlands, and fortified them with a million batteries. He had yoked platforms into synchronous orbits to guard from above, their weapon banks armed and trained, day and night. He had put his men upon the walls, armoured in gold and set for the coming war.

His name was Dorn, and he was not proud of his work.

Vadok Singh, the warmason, had a habit of stroking architectural plans as he laid them out, as if they were a beloved pet.

'Necessity,' he said, his favourite word, stroking out the revised schemata of the Dhawalagiri elevation.

'It's ugly,' said Dorn. He stood away from the table, leaning against one of the planning chamber's thick columns, his arms folded across his broad chest.

'Ugly is what they will do if they find the Annapurna Gate weak and flimsy,' Singh replied. He stood back and lit his *boc* pipe from a taper, allowing his flock of slaves to finish laying out the designs and adjusting the brass armature of the viewing lenses that would magnify details and project them onto the chamber wall for closer examination.

Dorn shrugged. 'It's still ugly. The orbis and lazulite work encrusting that gate took Menzo of Travert thirty years to complete. Pilgrims flock here simply to see it. They say it surpasses even the Eternity Gate in its aesthetic.'

'Aesthetic, now?' Singh smiled. He began to pace, trailing blue smoke from

the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. His slaves followed him up and down the chamber, like a timorous litter of young following their mother. Singh was a tall man, taller than the primarch, but skeletally thin. His guild gene-bred their bloodline to favour height for purposes of surveying and overseeing. 'I do so love our conversations, Rogal. They are quite contrary. You, the warrior, and me, the craftsman, and you lecture me on aesthetics.'

'I'm not lecturing,' Dorn replied. He was aware of Sigismund and Archamus in the corner of the great room, stiffening at the warmason's use of his forename. Dorn would hear about 'proper respect and protocol' again later.

'Of course you're not,' said Singh, 'but it is a necessity. How many Legions does the Upstart have with him now?'

Dorn heard Sigismund rise to his feet. He turned and stared at the first captain of the Imperial Fists. Sigismund glowered back for a second, then left the chamber.

Dorn glanced back at the warmason. 'Too many,' he said.

Singh held out a long, spindly arm in the direction of the schemata. 'So?'

'Begin work tomorrow at sunrise. Dismantle the gate with care, and store the dismantled elements in the vaults. We will put the work back when this is done.'

Singh nodded.

We will put everything back, thought Dorn. *When this is done, we will put everything back the way it was.*

A katabatic wind was coming in off the lower bulwarks that night. The Palace was so immense, the precipice walls bred their own microclimate. Greasy stars swam in the heat ripple of the Palace's new reactors. The void shields were being tested again.

Not a palace. Not the Palace anymore, a fortress.

Some of those sullen stars were orbital platforms, catching the last backscatter of the sunlight as Terra turned. Dorn put on a fur-edged robe that had been in his possession since his adolescence on Inwit, and went out to walk the parapets of the Dhawalagiri Prospect, to dwell upon its beauty one last time. It was one of the last sections of the Palace that remained untouched. Adamantium armour plates, drab prestressed rockcrete and auto-turrets had yet to blight its ethereal lines.

Soon, though. From the wall, Dorn could see the half a million campfires of the Masonic host, the labour army that would invade the prospect come sunrise with their mallets and chisels and cranes.

The robe had been his grandfather's, though Dorn had long since understood that no ties of blood linked him to the Inwit ice-caste that had raised him. He had been created from another genetic line, that most singular line, in a sterile vault deep beneath him in the buried core of the Palace.

Not a palace. Not the Palace anymore, a fortress.

Dorn had been built to rule, built to assist in his father's tireless ambitions, built to make the hard decisions. He had been made as a primarch, one of only twenty in the galaxy, engineered by the master architect of mankind, the archmason of genetic code.

The Imperium needs many things, but foremost it needs the ability to protect itself, to attack when necessary. That's why I gave it twenty strong teeth in its mouth.

Attacking was a remarkably easy thing to do. Dorn's physical prowess humbled all but twenty human beings in creation, and those twenty were his father and his nineteen brothers. In Dorn's opinion, the real art was knowing when not to attack. His grandfather, the old Inwit sire, patriarch of the ice-hive clan, had taught him that.

Dorn had been the seventh lost son to be reclaimed. By the time his father's forces found him, he had become a system warlord in his own right, ruling the Inwit Cluster as the head of the House of Dorn. His grandfather had been dead forty winters, but still the warlord had slept with the fur-edged robe across his body at night. His people had called him 'emperor' until the true meaning of that title had been demonstrated by a thousand warships in the Inwit sky. Dorn had gone out to meet his father aboard *Phalanx*, one ship against thousands, but what a ship: a fortress. His father had been impressed. Dorn had always excelled in the construction of fortresses.

That was why Dorn had returned to Terra with his gene-sire. Out of love, out of devotion, out of obedience, yes, but most of all, out of necessity, damn Singh. The stars had turned over, and Chaos had spilled out from under them. The brightest of all had fallen and the unthinkable, the heretical, had become fact.

The Imperium was attacking itself. The Warmaster, for reasons Dorn was quite at a loss to fathom, had turned upon their father, and was committing

his forces to all-out war. That war would come to Terra. There was no question. It would come. Terra needed to be ready. The Palace needed to be ready. His father had asked him, as a personal boon, to return to Terra and fortify it for war.

No better man for the task. No better master of defences. Dorn and his Fists, appointed the Emperor's praetorians, could fend off any attack.

Below him, the halls of Terra were silent, and the walls deep. The only sound was the distant, eternal hum of the Astronomican. The Palace Dorn had armoured and defaced sat like a dark crown on the top of the world.

Rogal Dorn had built many of the finest strongholds in creation: the city fortresses on Zavamunda, the pylon spire of Gallant, the donjons along the Ruthan Marches. Impregnable bastions all, palaces for governor lords to rule from. None of them had been so essential as this fortification. None of them had been as painful to accomplish. It had been like blotting out the light or draining a sea. The bright glory of his father's triumph, the enduring monument to Unity, had been entombed inside a crude shell of utilitarian defence.

All because of Horus, because of the brightest bastard son, the bringer of new strife.

Dorn heard stone splinter. He looked down. He had punched his fist, his Imperial fist, through a block of stone in the parapet. He had barely registered the impact. The block was pulverised.

'My lord, is everything all right?'

Archamus had shadowed him from the planning chamber. Never so volatile as Sigismund, Archamus was the master of Dorn's huscarl retinue.

There was a worried look on Archamus' face.

'Just venting my emotions,' Dorn said.

Archamus regarded the splintered block. 'Making work for Singh's artisans, then?'

'Something like that.'

Archamus nodded. He hesitated, and looked out over the high walls towards the distant earthworks of the Mahabarat. 'You have wrought a wonder, you know.'

'I have ruined one.'

'I know you hate it, but it had to be so. And no one could have done it better.'

Dorn sighed. 'You're kind, old friend, but my heart is lead. This should never have been necessary. I search the limits of my imagination, and still I can conceive of nothing that begins to explain this war. Pride and ambition, insult, jealousy? They are not enough, not nearly enough, not for a primarch. They are too petty and mortal to drive a primarch to such extremity. They might provoke an argument, a feud at the worst. They would not split the galaxy in half.'

Dorn looked up at the night sky. 'And yet, against all reason, he comes.'

'Guilliman will stop him.'

'Roboute is far away.'

'Russ, then. The Lion. The Khan.'

Dorn shook his head. 'I don't think they'll stop him either. I think he'll roll on until he reaches us.'

'Then we'll stop him,' said Archamus. 'Won't we, sir?'

'Of course we will. I just wish—'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'You wish what, sir?' Archamus asked.

'Nothing.'

The wind suddenly pulled at Dorn's fur-edged robe. Above them, the shields went out and then test fired again.

'Can I ask you a question, sir?' asked Archamus.

'Of course.'

'Who are you really afraid of?'

Consider the question, Rogal Dorn. The first axiom of defence is to understand what you defend against. What are you afraid of? Who are you afraid of?

Dorn paced the halls of the Kath Mandau Precinct where the organs of the Adeptus Terra did their work. The Precinct, an entire city contained within the terraced compounds of the Inner Palace, never slept. Robed clerks and burnished servitors bustled along the broad concourses. Ministers and ambassadors conducted business beneath the kilometre-high roof of the Hegemon. The great mechanism of the Imperium whirled about him, its relentless function like a ticking timepiece. This was what Unity had brought, this and the near measureless expanse of worlds and dominions that it guided

and administered.

For two hundred years, the Emperor and His primarchs had fought to create the Imperium. They had waged the Great Crusade from star to star, to forge the Imperium of Man, an epic undertaking they had all made without hesitation, because they believed, with utter conviction, in the bright destiny it would shape for their species. They had all believed. *All* of them.

What was he afraid of? Who was he afraid of? Angron? Not him. Dorn would split his head without compunction if they came face to face. Lorgar? Magnus? There had always been a foetid whiff of sorcery about those two, but Dorn felt nothing towards them he could describe as fear. Fulgrim? No. The Phoenician was a singular foe, but not an object of terror. Perturabo? Well now, their rivalry was old, the spiteful scrapping of two brothers who fought for a father's attention.

Dorn smiled despite his mood. His years of exchanged insults with Perturabo seemed almost comical compared to this. They were too much alike, too jealous of one another's oh-so-similar abilities. Dorn knew it was a weakness for him to have risen to the Iron Warrior's baiting. But competition had always been a motivating force amongst the primarch brothers. It had been encouraged as a factor to drive them on to greater and yet greater accomplishments.

No, he was not afraid of Perturabo.

Horus Lupercal, then?

Dorn's aimless wanderings had taken him to the Investiare. In that broad space, an amphitheatre open to the night sky, statues of the twenty stood on oval plinths in a silent ring.

There was no one around. Even the Custodian Guard was absent. Lumen orbs glowed on black iron poles. The Investiare was two kilometres in diameter. Under the glittering stars, it felt like an arena, where twenty warriors had gathered to make their combat.

The second and eleventh plinths had been vacant for a long time. No one ever spoke of those two absent brothers. Their separate tragedies had seemed like aberrations. Had they, in fact, been warnings that no one had heeded?

Sigismund had urged that the effigies of the traitors also be removed from the Investiare. He had offered to do the work himself. This, Dorn recalled, had made the Emperor laugh.

For the time being, the traitors had been shrouded. Their towering, draped

forms seemed like phantoms in the blue darkness.

Horus, then? Was it Horus?

Perhaps. Dorn knew that Horus was the greatest of them, which made him the gravest foe. Could any one of them hope to best Lupercal on the field of war?

Martial prowess was hardly the point. Dorn had never feared an adversary in his life because of how strong he was or how hard he fought. Combat was only ever a test.

What mattered, what engendered fear, was *why* an adversary fought. What *made* him fight.

Oh, now we have it. Now the truth dawns. He felt the hairs on his skin rise. I'm not afraid of Horus. I'm afraid of finding out why he has turned against us. I cannot conceive of any justification for this schism, but Horus must have his reasons. I am afraid that when I know them, when they are explained to my baffled mind, I might... agree.

‘Would you tear them all down?’

Dorn turned at the sound of the voice. For a moment, it had sounded like the soft growl of his father.

But it was just a man, a cloaked and cowled man scarcely half Dorn’s height. His robes were those of a simple Palace administrator.

‘What did you say?’ asked Dorn.

The man walked out into the circle of the Investiary to face Dorn. He greeted him with the old salute of Unity rather than the sign of the aquila. ‘You were staring at the statues of your kin,’ he observed. ‘I asked... would you tear them all down?’

‘The statues or my kin, Sigillite?’ Dorn replied.

‘Both. Either.’

‘The statues, perhaps. I believe Horus is doing a fine job with the men themselves.’

Malcador smiled and looked up at Dorn. Like Dorn’s, his hair was white. Unlike Dorn’s, it was long like a mane. Malcador was an exceptional being. He had been with the Emperor from the inception of the Unification Wars, serving as aide, confidant and advisor. He had risen to become the master of the Council of Terra. The Emperor and the primarchs were genetically advantaged post-humans, but Malcador was just a man, and that was what made him exceptional. He stood on a par with the post-human masters of the

Imperium, and he was just a man.

‘Will you walk with me, Rogal Dorn?’

‘Are there not matters of state that require your attention, even at this hour, sir? The Council will bemoan your absence from the debating table.’

‘The Council can manage for a while without me,’ Malcador replied. ‘I like to take the air at this time of night. The Imperium never rests, but at night, up here in the thin air of the old Himalazia, I find there is at least an illusion of rest, a time to think and free the mind. I walk. I close my eyes. The stars do not go out because I am not looking at them.’

‘Not yet,’ said Dorn.

Malcador laughed. ‘No, not yet.’

They said little at first. They left the Investiary and walked along the beige stones of the Precinct’s highest terraces, between the weeping fountains. They walked as far as Lion’s Gate, onto the platforms that overlooked the docking rings and landing fields of the Brahmaputra Plateau. The gate had once been a thing of magnificence, two gilded beasts rising up to lock claws in a feral dispute. Dorn’s order of works had replaced them with giant grey donjons stippled with casemates and macro-gun ports. A curtain wall of bleak rockcrete encircled the gate, its edge fletched with void field vanes like the spines of some prehistoric reptile.

They stood and considered it for a long time.

‘I am not a subtle man,’ Malcador said, at length.

Dorn raised his eyebrows.

‘Oh, all right,’ said Malcador, ‘perhaps I am. Guile comes easily to a politician. I know I am considered cunning.’

‘An old word, with no more meaning than “wise”,’ Dorn replied.

‘Indeed. I will accept that as a compliment. All I meant to say was, I will not attempt to be subtle now.’

‘No?’

‘The Emperor has expressed His concerns.’

‘Meaning?’ Dorn asked.

Malcador answered with a slight sigh. ‘He understands you are filled with misgivings.’

‘Only natural, I would think, given the circumstances,’ said Dorn.

The Sigillite nodded. ‘He trusts you to undertake the defence. He counts on

you. Terra must not fall, no matter what Horus brings. This palace must not fall. If it is to end here, then it must end in our triumph. But He knows, and I know, and you know, that any defence is only as strong as its weakest part: faith, belief, trust.'

'What are you telling me?'

'If there is doubt in your heart, then that is our weakness.'

Dorn looked away. 'My heart is sad because of what I have been made to do to this place. That's all it is.'

'Is it? I don't think so. What are you really afraid of?'

Malcador raised his hand and the lights in his chambers came on. Dorn looked around. He had never entered the Sigillite's private apartments before. Ancient images hung on the walls: flaking, fragile things of wood, canvas and decomposing pigments, preserved in thin, blue fields of stasis; the smoke-pale portrait of a woman with the most curious smile; garish yellow flowers rendered in thick paint; the unflinching, rheumy gaze of an old fleshy man, cast in shadow, tobacco brown.

Along another wall hung old tattered banners showing the thunderbolt-and-lightning strike sigil of the Pre-Unity armies. Suits of armour – perfect, glinting thunder armour – were mounted in shimmering suspension zones.

Malcador offered Dorn wine, which he refused, and a seat, which he accepted.

'I have made a certain peace with myself,' Dorn said. 'I understand what I am afraid of.'

Malcador nodded. He had pulled back his cowl and the light shone on his long white hair. He sipped from his glass. 'Enlighten me.'

'I do not fear anyone. Not Horus, not Fulgrim, none of them. I fear the cause. I fear the root of their enmity.'

'You fear what you don't understand.'

'Exactly. I am at a loss to know what drives the Warmaster and his cohorts. It is an alien thing to me, quite defying translation. A strong defence relies on knowing what you are defending against. I can raise all the bulwarks and curtain walls and cannon-bastions I like, and I still won't know what it is I'm fighting.'

'Perceptive,' said Malcador, 'and true of us all. I fancy even the Emperor doesn't fully understand what it is that drives Horus against us so furiously.'

Do you know what I think?’

‘Tell me.’

Malcador shrugged. ‘I believe it is better that we don’t know. To understand it would be to understand insanity. Horus is quite mad. Chaos is inside him.’

‘You say that as if Chaos is a... thing.’

‘It is. Does that surprise you? You’ve known the warp and seen its corrupting touch, that’s Chaos. It has touched humanity now, twisted our brightest and best. All we can do is remain true to ourselves and fend it off, deny it. Trying to understand it is a fool’s errand. It would claim us too.’

‘I see.’

‘Don’t see, Rogal Dorn, and you will live longer. All you can do is acknowledge your fear. That’s all any of us can do. Recognise it for what it is: your pure, human sanity rocked by the sight of the warp’s infecting, suffocating madness.’

‘Is this what the Emperor believes?’ asked Dorn.

‘It’s what He knows. It’s what He *knows* He doesn’t know. Sometimes, my friend, there is salvation in ignorance.’

Dorn sat still for a while. Malcador watched him, occasionally sipping from his glass.

‘Well, I thank you for your time, sir,’ said Dorn eventually. ‘Your candour too. I should—’

‘There is one other thing,’ said Malcador, setting his glass down and rising to his feet. ‘Something I want to show you.’

Malcador crossed the chamber, and took something from a drawer in an old bureau. He walked back to Dorn, and spread that something out on the low table between them.

Dorn opened his mouth but no sound issued. Fear gripped him.

‘You recognise these, of course.’

Old cards, worn and fraying, discoloured and liver-spotted with time. One by one, Malcador laid them out.

‘The Lesser Arcanoi, just gaming trinkets really, but used widely before the coming of Old Night for divination. This deck was made on Nostramo Quintus.’

‘*He* used them,’ Dorn breathed.

‘Yes, he did. He relied on them. He believed in cartomancy. He dealt his fate out, night after haunted night, and watched how the cards fell.’

‘Oh, Holy Terra...’

‘Are you all right, sir?’ Malcador asked, looking up. ‘You are quite pale.’

Dorn nodded. ‘Curze.’

‘Yes, Curze. Had you forgotten him, or simply blocked him out? You have bickered and sparred with many of your brothers over the years, but only Konrad Curze ever hurt you.’

‘Yes.’

‘He nearly killed you.’

‘Yes.’

‘On Cheraut, long ago,’

‘I remember it well enough!’

Malcador looked up at Dorn. The primarch had risen to his feet. ‘Then sit back down and tell me, because I wasn’t there.’

Dorn sat. ‘This is so long ago it’s like another life. We had brought the Cheraut system to compliance. It was hard fought. The Emperor’s Children, the Night Lords and my Fists, we effected compliance. But Curze didn’t know when to stop. He never knew when to stop.’

‘And you rebuked him?’

‘He was an animal. Yes, I rebuked him. Then Fulgrim told me.’

‘Told you what?’

Dorn closed his eyes. ‘The Phoenician told me what Curze had told him: the fits, the seizures that had plagued Curze since his childhood on Nostramo, the visions. Curze said he had seen the galaxy in flames, the Emperor’s legacy overthrown, legionaries turning on legionaries. It was all lies, an insult to our creed!’

‘You confronted Curze?’

‘And he attacked me. He would have killed me, I think. He is insane. That’s why we drove him out, sick of his bloodletting. That’s why he burned his home world and took his Night Lords off into the darkest parts of the stars.’

Malcador nodded, and continued to deal the cards. ‘Rogal, he is what you are truly afraid of, because he is fear incarnate. No other primarch uses terror as a weapon like Curze does. You are not afraid of Horus and his sallow heretics. You are afraid of the fear that sides with him, the night terror that advances alongside the traitors.’

Dorn sat back and breathed out. ‘He has haunted me, I confess. All this time, he has haunted me.’

‘Because he was right. His visions were true. He saw this Heresy coming in his visions. That is the truth you fear. You wish you had listened.’

Dorn looked down at the cards laid out on the table before him. ‘Do you believe in this divination, Sigillite?’

‘Let’s see,’ said Malcador, turning the cards over one by one: the Moon, the Martyr and the Monster, the Dark King askew across the Emperor.

One other card, the Lightning Tower.

Dorn groaned. ‘A bastion, blown out by lightning. A palace brought to ruin by fire. I’ve seen enough.’

‘The card has many meanings,’ said Malcador. ‘Like the Death card, it is not as obvious as it seems. In the hives of Nord Merica, it symbolised a change in fortune, an overturning of fate. To the tribes of Franc and Tali, it signified knowledge or achievement obtained through sacrifice. A flash of inspiration, if you will, one that tumbles the world you know down, but leaves you with a greater gift.’

‘The Dark King lies across the Emperor,’ said Dorn, pointing.

Malcador sniffed. ‘It’s not exactly a science, my friend.’

They had blown their way through the massive earthwork defences at Haldwani and Xigaze. The sky at the top of the world was on fire. Despite the bombardments of the orbital platforms and the constant sorties of the Stormbirds and the Thunderhawks, the Traitor Legions advanced, up through the Brahmaputra, along the delta of the Karnali. Continental firestorms raged across Gangetic Plain.

As they entered the rampart outworks of the Palace, the streaming, screaming multitudes and the striding war machines were greeted by monsoons of firepower. Every emplacement along the Dhawalagiri Prospect committed its weapons. Las reached out in neon slashes, annihilating everything it touched. Shells fell like sleet. Titans exploded, caught fire, collapsed on their faces and crushed the warriors swarming around their heels. Still they came. Lancing beams struck the armour-reinforced walls like lightning, like lightning smiting a tower.

The walls fell. They collapsed like slumping glaciers. Gold-cased bodies spilled out, tumbling down in the deluge.

The Palace began to burn. Primus Gate fell; Lion’s Gate, subjected to attack from the north; Annapurna Gate. At the Ultimate Gate, the Traitors finally

sliced into the Palace, slaughtering everyone they found inside. Around every broken gate, the corpses of Titans piled up in vast, jumbled heaps where they had fallen over each other in their desire to break in. The heretic host clambered across their carcasses, pouring into the Palace, yelling out the name of their—

‘End simulation,’ said Dorn.

He gazed down at the hololithic table. At his command, the forces of the enemy withdrew, unit by unit, and the Palace rebuilt itself. The smoke cleared.

‘Reset parameters to Horus, Perturabo, Angron and Curze.’

‘Opposition?’ the table queried.

‘Imperial Fists, Blood Angels, White Scars. Resume and replay scenario.’

The map flickered. Armies advanced. The Palace began to burn again.

‘Play it out, simulation after simulation, if you like,’ said the voice behind him. ‘Simulations are just simulations. I know you won’t fail me when the time comes.’

Dorn turned. ‘I would never knowingly fail you, Father,’ he said.

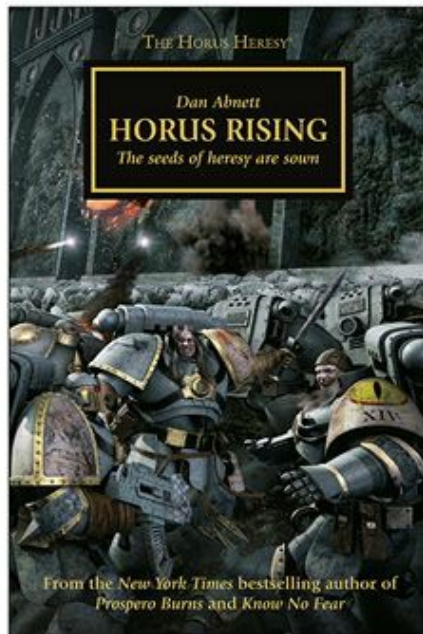
‘Then don’t be afraid. Don’t let fear get in your way.’

What are you afraid of? What are you really afraid of?

The Lightning Tower, thought Rogal Dorn. I understand its meaning: achievement obtained through sacrifice. I’m just afraid of what that sacrifice might be.



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Josh Reynolds is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Fabius Bile: Primogenitor* and *Deathstorm*, and the novellas *Hunter’s Snare* and *Dante’s Canyon*, along with the audio drama *Master of the Hunt*. In the Warhammer world, he has written the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. He has also written many stories set in the Age of Sigmar, including the novels *Hallowed Knights: Plague Garden*, *Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows*, *Nagash: The Undying King*, *Fury of Gork*, *Black Rift* and *Skaven Pestilens*. He lives and works in Sheffield.

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