



A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

DEATH WORLD

Imperial Guard - 02

Steve Lyons

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

With thanks and praise to the

Flying Spaghetti Monster for

creating the universe!

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

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

As soon as he woke, Trooper Lorenzo knew there was something wrong.

He rolled to his feet, simultaneously drawing his fang. He crouched in silence, in the dark, ready to drive half a metre of Catachan steel into the heart of any man or beast that thought it could sneak up on him.

But Lorenzo was alone.

He turned on the light, suppressing a prickling, creeping feeling as he realised again just how close the walls of his basic cabin were. And beyond those walls...

Lorenzo's bed was undisturbed: he preferred the floor, though even this was too flat for his liking. He could feel the beginnings of a stiff neck. All the same, he had slept for almost five hours. Longer than usual. Warp space did that to him. Out there, beyond the adamantium shell of the ship that carried him, there was nothing. But the warp itself distorted space and time, and that played hell with Lorenzo's instincts—and his body clock.

His brain itched. He was tired, but he knew he wouldn't sleep again now. He cursed his weakness. His tiredness would make him less alert. In the jungle, it could mean the difference between life and death.

Lorenzo was safe here, in theory. No enemies of the Imperium lurked in the shadows. No predators to sneak up on him as he slept, unguarded. Only the warp itself to worry about, and the possibility that it might capriciously tear the ship and its occupants apart—and there was nothing he could do about that if it happened. Nothing anyone could do.

They said no one but the Navigators could look into the warp. They said it would drive a normal man insane. Still, Lorenzo wished he could take that chance. He wished the ship had windows, so he could face his enemy and, perhaps, begin to understand it as the Navigators did.

Lorenzo had been in the thick of a space battle once. He had sat inside a cabin like this one, gripping the side of an acceleration couch as he rode out the Shockwaves of near misses and glancing blows, his knuckles white, his life, his destiny, in the hands of a ship's captain and his gunners—and of the Emperor, of course. He had hated that feeling of helplessness. He had prayed for the attackers to board the ship, so he could have met

them face to face. When Lorenzo died, he wanted the comfort of knowing he had fought his best against a superior foe—and if he had his way, that foe would be no mere space pirate or ork, but something more worthy of his origins and training.

When Lorenzo died, he wanted to be able to salute his killer, and be buried in its soil.

He splashed a handful of water on his face, and ran a hand through his tangled black hair. He threw on his camouflage jacket, though it would be useless against the greys and whites of the ship's interior. He re-sheathed his knife, and was comforted by its weight against his leg, his Catachan fang was a part of him, as much as his limbs were. As unlikely as it was that an attack would come, he had learned always to be prepared. It was when you allowed yourself to get comfortable that death could strike unexpectedly.

Somewhere on this ship, he was sure that other members of the company would be awake. He could probably find a card game.

Lorenzo's booted feet rang against the metal floor as he left his cabin, tinny echoes returning to his ears. The air was recycled, stale, and it didn't carry sounds in the way that fresh air did. The artificial gravity wasn't quite the same as that of any planet he'd visited. And it was quiet—so deathly quiet. There were none of the sounds of nature to which Lorenzo was attuned, the subtle clues that mapped out his surroundings for him and warned when danger approached. Instead, there was only the faint throb of engines, the vibrations reverberating through the hull so their origin was untraceable.

There was something wrong...

Everything was wrong. Man wasn't meant to exist in this unnatural environment. None of its signs could be trusted, and this made Lorenzo uneasy. If he couldn't rely on his own instincts, what could he rely on? "Fear not the creatures of the jungle but those that lurk within your head." The old Catachan proverb came to him unbidden and he thanked the Emperor that his company had its next assignment. They were already on their way to a new world, a fresh challenge.

He didn't know the details yet. Still, he had no doubt of one thing. Soon—within days, he hoped—his squad would be fighting their way across hostile terrain and through hostile creatures, beset by threats from all directions. It was likely some of them would die. He would be in his element again, his destiny returned to his own hands.

He ached for that moment.

It was early afternoon, ship time, when Colonel "Stone Face" Graves summoned his Third Company of the Catachan XIV Regiment to the briefing room.

The men of four platoons, their bandoliers slung across their backs, crowded into the small area. Four platoons, comprising twenty-two squads—including two squads of Catachan Devils, who stood near the front and around whom even the most hardened veterans left a respectful space. Then there were the hulking, low-browed ogryns, included in the briefing as a courtesy though they would most likely understand only half of what was said. So long as they were pointed towards the enemy and permitted to rend and maim, they would be happy.

Lorenzo felt comforted by the presence of so many compatriots—by the press of their bodies and the natural, earthy odours of dirt and sweat.

“Listen up, you soft-skinned losers,” barked the colonel. A howl of good-natured protest rose from the assembled company, but Graves’ chiselled features remained harsh and rigid. “Naval Command think you lot have had it easy too long, and I agree with them. I begged them: ‘No more milk runs. I want no less than the dirtiest, most dangerous job you’ve got. I won’t have my Jungle Fighters turning into fat, lazy sons of acid grubs who wouldn’t lift a hand to scratch their own arses!’ So, ladies, last chance to pamper yourselves in your luxury quarters—because as of this evening, you’ll be working for your keep.”

This pronouncement was met by a rousing cheer.

“Planetfall at 19.00 hours,” the colonel continued, his voice loud and clear across the tumult though he’d made no effort to raise it. “Anyone not in full kit and waiting at the airlocks by 18.30 finds himself on punishment detail for a month!”

“*Yes, sir!*” came the answering swell from the crowd.

“Colonel,” someone yelled from the back. Lorenzo recognised the voice of “Hotshot” Woods, from his own squad. “You serious? Is this going to be a real challenge for us this time?”

“You idlers ever hear of Rogar III?” growled Graves. “It’s a jungle world, out in the back of beyond. Explorators found it a couple of years ago, decided it was right for colonising and strip-mining. Just one problem: They’d been beaten to it. That’s why they called on us. We have Guardsmen down there fighting orks for the past year and a half, but they’re starting to find it tough going.”

Lorenzo joined in the collective jeers of mock sympathy.

“They’re crying out for someone to hold their hands,” added Graves, to a roar of laughter. “You see, seems Rogar wasn’t the walk in the park they thought it’d be. Three weeks ago, in response to reports from the front, the planet was re-categorised as no longer suitable for colonisation...” He left a long pause there, but every man present knew what was coming, and anticipation hung heavy in the recycled air.

“...on account of it being classified as a deathworld!” concluded the sergeant—and this time, the cheer went on much longer and louder.

“It’s a crock, that’s what it is.”

Lorenzo was sharing a mess hall table with four other members of his squad. He looked down at his bowl gloomily, and let a dollop of over-processed grey mulch slide from his spoon. Another thing he hated: Imperial Guard rations. If he’d been planetside, he’d have found something—some herb or spice—to make them more palatable. Or someone would have hunted down some indigenous beast, and his squad would have feasted on meat.

Lorenzo considered not eating at all until he had made planetfall. But on top of his disturbed sleep patterns, the last thing he needed was to let his energy levels dip. He gathered another spoonful, thrust it into his mouth and tried to swallow without tasting it.

“Stone Face got it right,” continued Sergeant “Old Hardhead” Greiss in his gravelly voice. “This is just another wet-nursing mission for a bunch of city boys who got in over their heads. You tell me, how can a planet go from being colony material one day to deathworld the next? It can’t happen!”

“I don’t know, sergeant,” said Brains Donovits, his thick black eyebrows beetling as his brow furrowed. “I’ve been keeping an eye on the comms traffic, and the latest report from the commissars on the ground makes for pretty interesting reading. They’ve had some real problems out there.”

“Yeah,” put in Hotshot Woods, his blue eyes sparkling as he suppressed a grin, “and you know Command wouldn’t send us in without good reason, sergeant. They know what they’re doing.”

Greiss shot the young trooper a stern glare through narrowed eyes. It only lasted a second, though, before he dropped the pretence and let out a bark of laughter, slapping Woods amiably on the back.

“It’ll be the same old story,” grumbled the grizzled sergeant as his good humour subsided. “Things not going too well at the front, orks getting too close to Command HQ for the top brass’ liking. The next thing you know, some officer’s been stung by a bloodwasp or got himself a nettle rash, or... or...”

“Got his foot tangled in a poison creeper,” suggested Steel Toe Dougan in his usual laid-back tone.

“Suddenly, he’s screaming ‘Deathworld!’”

“There has also been some mention.” Donovits continued undeterred, “of abnormalities in Rogar III’s planetary readings. The Adeptus Mechanicus went in to investigate, but found nothing. Nothing but orks, anyhow.”

“Ah, listen to Brains,” scoffed Greiss. “Never happy ‘less he’s got his nose in some report or other.”

Donovits shrugged. “It pays to be forewarned, sergeant.”

“And since when did Navy reports tell you anything worth reading? The only place you get to know your enemy, trooper, is down there on its surface, in the thick of the jungle. Man against nature.”

Lorenzo felt something stirring in his chest at Greiss’ words. He’d been feeling less edgy since they’d dropped out of the warp into real space, for the final approach to their destination, but still he longed to escape this prison. It was almost worse, knowing that release was so close. Time seemed to have slowed down for him. Lorenzo knew the others were restless, too, chafing for action. He didn’t know if they shared his sense of unease, if the warp had affected them as it had him, and he wouldn’t ask. There were some things you didn’t talk about.

“I don’t know, sergeant,” said Woods. “There were times on that last world I wished I *had* stayed curled up on a bedroll with a good book. Might have made for more thrills, if you know what I mean.”

“Got a point there, Hotshot,” laughed Greiss. “I could almost have felt sorry for them... what were they called?”

“Rhinoceraptors,” prompted Donovits.

“Yeah, right. Few frag grenades under their hide plates, and boom! Didn’t know what’d hit them. A couple o’ squads could’ve taken out the lot of ’em. Hell, Marbo could probably have done it on his own.”

“He wouldn’t have thanked us for wasting his time, though.”

“You’re right there, Hotshot.”

“Of course,” said Dougan, quietly, “they did get Bryznowski.”

Greiss sighed. “Yes. They did get Bryznowski. Heard we lost a few of the ogryns, too.”

“And that rookie from Bulldog’s squad,” said Dougan, easing himself back in his chair so he could stretch out his bionic leg. It had taken a hit a couple of worlds ago, and now it had a tendency to seize up if he didn’t keep it exercised.

There was a short silence as the five soldiers remembered fallen comrades, then Greiss' craggy features folded into a scowl.

“Way things are going,” he grumbled, “I’m going to end up dying in my damn bed!” He waved aside Woods and Donovits’ well-intentioned protests. “Come off it, you lot. I’m thirty-six years old next birthday. Leaving it a bit late for that blaze of glory. But that’s okay. I made my mark. I just want to go out the right way, that’s all. Been too long since I had a scrap I couldn’t sleepwalk through. Long time since I faced a deathworld worthy of the name.”

“Maybe you should put in for a posting back home,” said Dougan, sympathetically. “Back to Catachan. Stone Face will understand. He’s coming up to the big three-oh himself.”

Lorenzo was aware that, by Imperial standards, Colonel Graves was a young man, and Greiss and Dougan only middle-aged. But then, most Imperial citizens didn’t grow up on Catachan. Life there was shorter.

“Ah, I couldn’t leave you jokers. But it’s the youngsters I feel sorry for. Like Lorenzo here. How’s he going to make a name for himself if he never sets foot on a world worth taming?”

Lorenzo looked up from his meal, to grunt an acknowledgement of the name check. He didn’t reveal how much it smarted. Greiss would never have called Hotshot Woods a “youngster”, and Lorenzo was two years older than he was.

“I got a name for Lorenzo,” quipped Woods. “Why don’t we call him ‘Chatterbox’ Lorenzo? Or ‘Never Shuts His Yap’ Lorenzo?”

Lorenzo glared at him.

Greiss pushed his bowl aside, and hauled himself to his feet. “All right, men,” he said, his voice suddenly full of confidence and authority. “You heard what Colonel Graves said. Drop positions by 17.30 hours.”

“The colonel said 18.30, sergeant.”

“That’s for the rest of those slackers, Donovits. *My* squad forms up at 17.30 sharp. Fifty deck reps, a few circuits of the deck—that should loosen up the muscles, get the adrenaline pumping. Then, when we get down to this ‘deathworld’, we’re going to tear through it like it was nothing, show those Guardsmen down there a thing or two. This time tomorrow, we’ll be back in warp space, headed for somewhere worth the sweat!”

Lorenzo greeted the prospect with mixed feelings.

The whole of Third Company could have fitted into one drop ship with room to spare. Instead, Colonel Graves had ordered them to split up, one platoon to a ship. That meant only one thing. He was expecting trouble on the way down. Better to lose a few squads and have the rest arrive intact than to risk losing all twenty-two to a lucky shot.

The five squads in Lorenzo's ship had separated to the edges of the troop deck, sitting in their own small clusters in the rows of narrow seats. It wasn't that they didn't get on, just that Deathworlders found it best to make no more attachments than they had to. They were too easily broken. Lorenzo had no friends, but he had something better. He had nine comrades, who would die for him in a heartbeat and he for them.

The shadowy spaces around the cramped seating area were empty, apart from a dusty Sentinel scout walker tucked into one. The Catachans carried little more equipment than would fit into their kit bags—and those bags stayed with them, nestled in their laps or deposited on an adjacent seat. Lorenzo pictured the four ships streaking towards the surface of Rogar III, blazing with the heat of re-entry, like meteors from the heavens. He wondered how many Guardsmen on the ground would turn their heads upwards and thank the Emperor for sending them such an omen. The thought made him feel good. It almost made him forget that he hadn't touched ground himself yet.

There had been a reallocation of troops a few days earlier. The commander of C Platoon, Lieutenant Vines, had disbanded one squad and reassigned its members to bring the rest up to strength. Greiss' squad had two new arrivals to complete its complement often—and old hands Myers and Storm were currently passing the time by quizzing one of them, a nervy youngster by the name of Landon.

Landon was eager to please, bragging about a time back on Catachan when he'd wrestled a blackback viper single-handed. Myers and Storm were pretending to be impressed, but Lorenzo knew they were poking fun at the rookie.

The other newcomer, Patch Armstrong, had an easier ride. It had taken an ambush by four ice apes on the frozen world of Tundrar to deprive Armstrong of his left eye—and even then he had snapped the spine of one beast, gutted two more and gunned down the fourth as it had fled. The patch he wore, and the crooked ends of the scar that protruded above and below it, were his badges of honour. Like Dougan's leg, and the plate in Sergeant Greiss' head.

The drop ship was being shaken.

It had only been a little at first, but now it was growing stronger. Sharkbait Muldoon had rolled up the left sleeve of his jacket to paint his own, better, camouflage pattern directly onto his skin, layering on natural dyes with his knife, he let out a curse as the blade slipped and nicked his arm. Lorenzo said nothing, but his fingers tightened around the armrests of his seat.

“Must be one hell of a storm,” commented Woods. But Lorenzo observed that Greiss’ jaw was set, his teeth clenched, his nostrils flaring, and he knew this was no mere storm.

Then, just like that, they were falling.

The drop ship plummeted like a brick, like it had when it had first been launched from its mother. Lorenzo’s stomach was in his mouth again, had he not been strapped in, he would have been slammed into the ceiling. Woods, cocky as ever, had loosened his own restraints, and now he was fighting to hold himself down as g-forces rippled the skin of his cheeks.

For eight long seconds, Lorenzo was facing his worst nightmare. Then the engines caught them and they were flying level again, but still buffeted, the deck lurching unpredictably beneath their feet. Behind the din of the protesting hull, the soft, artificial voice of the navigation servitor sounded over the vox-caster:

“Warning: extreme atmospheric turbulence encountered. Destination coordinates no longer attainable. Prepare for emergency landing. Repeat, prepare for emergency landing!”

The first impact came almost as soon as the warning was issued.

Lorenzo had barely had time to get into the brace position, his chin on his chest, his hands clasped over his head. It felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to every bone in his body at once. And then it happened again, with only marginally less force this second time.

The drop ship was skipping along the ground, its engines shrieking. Lorenzo was rattled in his seat, his straps biting into his chest. He concentrated on keeping his muscles relaxed, despite the situation, knowing that to resist the repeated shocks would do him more harm than good.

Then they hit the ground for the final time, but they were still barrelling forwards, and the scrape of earth and branches against the outer hull was almost deafening. Rogar III, as Donovits had taken pleasure in informing everyone, was blanketed in jungle. There were no open spaces in which to land, but for those cleared with axe and flame. Lorenzo pictured the scene outside the drop ship’s hull now, as it ploughed through tangled vegetation, the servitors straining to rein in its speed before it hit something that wouldn’t yield to its considerable mass. Before it crumpled in on itself like a ball of paper.

And then, at last, they were still, the engines letting out a last dying whine as the drop ship’s superstructure creaked and settled. The lighting flickered and cut out, and Lorenzo could see nothing in the sudden total darkness. But he knew his way to the hatchway, and his squad was the closest to it.

The drop ship had come to rest at an angle. The deck was tilted some forty-five degrees to the horizontal, so Lorenzo had to climb to reach his goal. He swung himself from one empty seat to the next, using their backs to keep his balance and his bearings. From all around, he could hear the sounds of buckles popping and men leaping to their feet.

He was almost there when he realised he had been beaten to it. The hatch had buckled a little and was sticking in its frame, but Woods managed to shoulder it open even as Lorenzo was about to lend him a hand. First a crack, then a rectangle of brilliant light blazed in Lorenzo's eyes, and he blinked to clear the patterns it burnt into his retinas.

In the meantime, Woods had clambered out onto the angled side of the ship. "Hey," he called down to the others enthusiastically. "You've got to see this. It's a beautiful evening!"

Lorenzo frowned. The upturned hatchway offered him the familiar sight of a jungle canopy—but behind the greens and browns, the leaves and the branches, the sky appeared to be a perfect, deep blue, free from cloud. Woods was right. If there *had* been a storm, it had passed, impossibly, without trace. But then, what else could have tossed the drop ship about like that?

It was there again: that sense of wrongness he had felt in the warp. He needed to get out into the open. The rest of the platoon were crowding up behind him anyway, so Lorenzo followed the sweet scent of fresh air, mingled though it was with the stench of burning. He gripped the sides of the hatchway and pulled himself up and out through it.

He had barely raised his head above the parapet and started to take in his new surroundings, when Trooper Woods pushed him down again, with a warning yell: "*Incoming!*"

Three plants were shuffling towards the drop ship. They looked like the mantraps of Catachan, but taller. Three bulbous pink heads, surely too heavy for their stalks to support, split open like mouths. No teeth within, though. These plants were spitters.

Three jets of clear liquid plumed through the air. Lorenzo and Woods tumbled back into the drop ship together. Woods had been hit, a thick goblet of acid sizzling on his arm. He whipped out his knife—a devil claw, typically ostentatious—and half-cut, half-tore his sleeve away before it was eaten through. Still, the attack had left a livid red burn on his skin.

Somewhere, not far away, a carrion bird was screeching in delight.

"So, how's it looking out there?" asked Greiss—and Lorenzo realised that the sergeant was addressing him.

A smile tugged at his lips as he gave the traditional answer: "Reckon I'm going to like this place, sergeant. It reminds me of home!"

CHAPTER TWO

The air outside the hatch filled with acid spray again, and a few drops made it inside the ship. The Catachans withdrew from the danger area, those at the front yelling at the others to get back. Lorenzo's bandolier was splashed—only a little, but enough to leave a steaming hole in the fabric.

Sergeant Greiss had shouldered his way up to Lorenzo and Woods through the crush. The platoon commander was only a few steps behind him. Lieutenant Vines was a quiet-voiced, unassuming man—but, because he had earned his rank, been elected to it by his fellow Catachans, they listened when he spoke. He asked the two troopers to describe what they'd seen, and Woods told him about the spitting plants. "Three of them, sir," Lorenzo confirmed, "at two o'clock."

"Who's your best marksman, sergeant?"

Without hesitation, Greiss answered, "Bullseye, sir. Trooper Myers." As he spoke, he seized the shoulder of a wiry, dark-skinned man, and pulled him forward.

"You know what to do, Myers," said Vines.

With a nod of understanding, Myers drew his lasgun. He waited a few seconds to be sure it was safe, then darted up to the sloping hatchway.

As soon as he popped his head up into the open, there came another deluge. Myers let off two shots, then dived and rolled back under cover, landing at Lorenzo's feet. Lorenzo heard acid spattering the drop ship's hull above his head. He looked down, and saw that the deck plates were bubbling beneath the droplets left from the previous attack.

Donovits was a second ahead of him, his eyes already turned upward. "Do you think it can melt through adamantium?" asked Lorenzo.

"It's possible," said Donovits, "with the damage we must have taken on the way down. I'd keep an eye out up there. You see that ceiling starting to discolour, you find yourself a steel umbrella quick."

"And that'd help?"

"For a few seconds, yes."

“I’ve never seen plant acid so strong,” breathed Sharkbait Muldoon, “not even back home.”

“Makes you wonder,” said Donovits, “what kind of insects live on this world if that’s what it takes to digest them.”

In the meantime, Myers had made his report to Lieutenant Vines: “Three of them, sir, like Hotshot and Lorenzo said. I picked off the first, but I swear the second ducked under my shot. Got the measure of it now, though.” Vines signalled his approval with a terse nod, and Myers approached the hatchway again.

He was halfway there when the plants fired a fourth time.

This time, their two sprays were perfectly aimed. They collided above the hatchway, so that a sheet of liquid dropped into the ship with a slap. Myers let out a curse and leapt back. Several troopers were splashed, but those who had alkali powders in their kits—ground from the vegetation of their last deathworld—had readied them, and they quickly pressed them into service.

An acid river trickled down the angled deck, petering out as it sizzled into the metal. Still, Lorenzo wasn’t the only trooper forced to climb onto a seat to escape its path.

“Cunning critters,” breathed Myers, almost admiringly. And then he was off, without awaiting instructions. He vaulted through the hatchway, the ship’s hull ringing as his booted feet connected with it. Then he was out of sight, but Lorenzo could still hear, and feel, his footsteps overhead, and the crack of a lasgun, firing once, twice, three times, four times, then another spattering of acid, uncomfortably close to the point from which the last footstep had sounded.

Then there was silence.

Lorenzo held his breath, alert for any sounds from outside the drop ship. Then he caught Sergeant Greiss’ eye, and realised that Old Hardhead was smiling. A moment later, Myers appeared in the hatchway again, and he too was grinning from ear to ear. He blew imaginary smoke from the barrel of his lasgun. “All clear,” he announced.

Four sergeants bellowed at once, ordering their respective troopers out of the ship double-quick. Lorenzo knew that whichever squad was last to form up outside would pay with extra duties for embarrassing their commander.

Fifty men rushed for the hatchway, but Woods reached it first. As Lorenzo climbed out onto the surface of a new world and looked for his squad, he felt a thrill of excitement. He was back in the jungle—back in his element. He knew that, whatever perils may lie in store for him on Rogar III, they couldn’t be as discomforting as that stifling room with its single bed, up there in space.

The trees of Rogar III were generally tall, thin and gnarled, but they grew close together—too close, in places, for a man to squeeze between them. Their leaves were jagged, some razor-edged—and creepers dangled from their topmost branches, bulging with poisonous pustules. The undergrowth was thick, green-brown and halfway to knee height, the occasional splash of colour thrown out in the shape of a flower or a brightly patterned thistle or patch of strangle-weed. From a distance, it looked like any jungle Lorenzo had seen. He wanted to get closer, to inspect the peculiar shapes and patterns of *this* jungle, to begin to learn which shapes he could trust and which spelled danger—but, for now, it was not to be.

The drop ship had gouged a great gash out of the planet. Undergrowth had been flattened, trees felled, branches shorn. Small fires were still burning, and creepers twitched like severed limbs in their heat.

Vines checked his compass, and received a navigational fix from the troop carrier in orbit. They were ten kilometres away from the Imperial encampment, he reported, and the quickest route to it was to retrace the trail of devastation to its source. It was also the safest route—for, although Lorenzo saw several more acid spitters among the ashes, most had been burnt or decapitated. When one plant did dare stir, and cracked open its pink head, it immediately became the focus of eight lasguns, and was promptly blasted out of existence.

The Catachans proceeded cautiously to begin with, and there was little talk. Each of them knew this was the most dangerous time: their first footsteps on a new world, not knowing the threats it posed, knowing that an attack could come at any second from any quarter. In time, they would become familiar with Rogar III—those of them who survived these early days. They would learn to anticipate and counter anything it could throw at them. Then this world would be no challenge anymore and, Emperor willing, they would move on to another.

Lorenzo loved this time. He loved the feeling of adrenaline pumping around his body, loved the edge it gave him.

For the moment, though, the planet was nursing its wounds, keeping its distance. He heard more birds screeching to each other, but apart from a brief flutter of wings on the edge of his vision he never saw a single one. A jungle lizard skittered away as the Catachans approached. Lorenzo estimated it to be about twenty centimetres long, but without a closer inspection he couldn't tell if it was an adult or a baby.

It was almost as if Rogar III was watching the new arrivals, sizing them up just as they were sizing up it.

Bulldog Rock was the first to order his squad to double time, and Greiss and the other sergeants followed. Not to be outdone, another squad struck up a cadence call.

A scream of engines drew his attention to the sky, and he caught a glint of red as the rays of the sinking sun struck metal. Two drop ships, ascending, from a point no more than a couple of kilometres ahead. He wondered what had happened to the third, and suppressed a shudder at the thought that one platoon may not have been as fortunate as his own.

Not long after that, they came to the end of their own ship's trail—the point at which it had hit ground. Lorenzo had looked forward to entering the jungle proper, but instead he found himself at the edge of an expansive clearing. It was man-made, about two kilometres in diameter, doubtless the product of many hours of toil by Imperium troops with flamers—and yet the vegetation at the clearing's edge was already showing signs of re-growth.

Without breaking step, the Jungle Fighters made for a huddle of prefabricated buildings in the clearing's centre, now little more than shadows in the twilight. As they reached it, the sergeants shouted more orders, and the Catachans formed up in their squads again and fell silent. Lorenzo was aware that their noisy arrival had turned the heads of several Guardsmen who'd been standing sentry. It had also given fair warning of their approach to the commissar who now came to meet them.

He was a young, fair-haired man with pale skin and ears that protruded very noticeably. The Imperial eagle spread its wings proudly on his peaked cap, and his slight form was almost swallowed by a long, black overcoat. Fresh out of training, Lorenzo thought. Even Lieutenant Vines, not a tall man, seemed to tower over the senior officer through presence alone. Lorenzo thought he could see a sneer pulling at Vines' lips as he folded his arm into a lazy salute and announced, "C Platoon, Third Company, Catachan XIV reporting for duty, sir."

"Not before time, lieutenant," said the commissar tersely. "I assume it was your drop ship that screamed over our heads an hour ago, and almost demolished the very camp we've been fighting to defend?" He made it sound like an accusation, as if Vines had been piloting the ship himself. Before Vines could speak, however, the commissar raised his voice to address the assembled platoon. "My name is Mackenzie. I am in command here—and as long as you are on Rogar III, my word is the Emperor's word, is that clear?"

A few of the Catachans mumbled a derisory, "Yes, sir." Most of them said nothing.

Mackenzie scowled. "Let me make this clear from the outset," he snapped. "I don't like deathworlders. In my experience, they are sloppy and undisciplined, with an arrogance that far outstrips their ability. The Emperor has seen fit to send you here, and I concede you may have certain expertise that will hasten a conclusion to this war. But had the decision been mine, let me tell you, I would rather have fought on with one squad from the blessed birth world than ten from Canak or Luther McIntyre or whatever hellhole it was you lot crawled out from."

"Catachan, sir!" hollered Vines, and a proud roar swelled from the ranks of his men. If Mackenzie had expected to get a rise out of the Jungle Fighters, he was disappointed.

Most of them ignored him, not quite looking at him, undermining him with a wave of indifference. Woods said something under his breath, a few men laughed, and the commissar's eyes narrowed—but he hadn't quite caught the words and couldn't pinpoint their source.

"As you *are* here," he continued, "I intend to make the best of it. I'm making it my mission to whip you rabble into shape. By the time I'm finished with you, you'll be the smartest Guardsmen in the Imperium."

Mackenzie turned on his heel, then, and snarled in Vines' direction, "Your platoon is late for my briefing, lieutenant. Ten laps round the camp perimeter, double time. Last squad back does another ten."

"With respect, sir..." began Vines, the look of contempt in his eyes suggesting that respect was the last thing he wanted to show.

"That includes you, lieutenant." Mackenzie barked—and he marched away stiffly, into the largest of the buildings.

Vines took a deep breath. "All right," he said, "you heard the man."

The Catachans took their circuits at a leisurely pace, and with a cadence call that contained a few choice lyrics about senior officers.

By the time they got to the lower ranks' mess hall, there was only enough slop left for half rations, and it was cold.

About fifty Catachans and a handful of ogryns from A and D Platoons had taken over a generous area, perching on tables with their feet up on chairs, swigging from flasks and punching each other boisterously. They had broken out the hooch to celebrate their arrival, it had been brewed on the troop ship, and put aside for a special occasion. They filled the large space with their raucous laughter.

There were other Guardsmen here—they outnumbered the Catachans two to one—but they were finishing their meals in silence, along one side of the hall, looking very much like they'd been edged out by the newcomers. They wore red and gold, and were identified by their flashes as members of the 32nd Royal Validian Regiment. To Lorenzo's eyes, most of them looked tall and gaunt—but then, he was aware that Catachan had a higher than average gravity, which made its people more squat and muscular than most.

It didn't surprise him that the two groups had self-segregated. The Catachans were Jungle Fighters—elite deathworld veterans. The best the Imperium had to offer, they believed.

The rank-and-file Guardsmen regarded them with a mixture of curiosity, admiration and, here more than in many places, outright resentment.

Lorenzo's squad picked up their meals and took over a table. Greiss joined them presently, he'd had the rookie, Landon, fetch his food for him while he'd pumped the other platoons for what they'd learned so far.

He threw a folded sheet of paper onto the table. Lorenzo saw the crudely printed header *Eagle & Bolter*, and needed to look no closer. Another propaganda broadsheet, doubtless full of consoling "news" about how the war here was being won. "Looks like we hit the jack pot this time," said the sergeant happily. "We got killer plants, man-eating slugs, poison insects, acid swamps, all the usual. On top of that, there's talk of invisible monsters—and ghosts, would you believe!" He saw that a couple of Validians were eavesdropping from the next table but one, and he added slyly, "Course we only got the word of a few rookie Guardsmen for that. Probably jumping at their own shadows."

"Ghosts?" echoed Donovits, interested.

"Yes: ghosts, lights, whatever. Supposed to appear at night, lure men into the jungle—and those crazy enough to follow them don't come back."

"Speaking of which, sergeant," said Armstrong, "any news on B Platoon?" The one-eyed trooper made the question sound nonchalant, but Lorenzo knew Armstrong had belonged to the missing platoon before his recent transfer.

"Not yet," said Greiss. "They had the same trouble we did on the way in, but it looks like they set down further away. They're out there somewhere."

"Lucky for them," said Woods. "They don't have to put up with Commissar Jug-Handles throwing his not considerable weight around."

"It must've been some storm," remarked Donovits.

"Blew up out of nowhere," said Greiss, "by all accounts. One second, the sky was clear, the next, our drop ships were drawing strikes like lightning rods. Then clear blue again."

"Still think Naval Command were exaggerating, sergeant," asked Woods with his characteristic cheeky grin, "about this place turning into a deathworld?"

"Can't see this place ever having been anything but," commented Bullseye Myers. "I don't know why it took 'em so long to admit it."

"Maybe it was Mackenzie," considered Dougan. "You heard what the man said. He doesn't want us here."

“Yeah,” said Woods—and in a passable impression of the commissar’s nasal whine, he continued, “I don’t like deathworlders. I’m making it my mission to whip you lot into shape. You hear me, Greiss? On your knees and lick my shiny black boots. And when you’re done with that, you can kiss my—”

“If I were you,” snarled a voice from behind him, “I’d be careful what you say about an officer of the Imperium.”

Woods didn’t even glance back to see who was talking, though Lorenzo could see that it was a broad-shouldered, square-headed Validian sergeant.

“Don’t care what his rank is,” said Woods offhandedly, “he’s still a damn idiot.”

“You want to repeat that to my face?”

Greiss’ eyes narrowed. “Stand down, sergeant,” he growled. “I’m in command of these men. You have a problem with them, you bring it to me.”

“Mackenzie was right about you deathworlders,” the Validian sneered. “You’ve no discipline, no respect.”

“Where we come from,” murmured Muldoon, idly sharpening his night reaper blade on a piece of flint, “respect is earned, not given.”

“You come charging in here, all gung-ho, bad-mouthing our people, thinking you can just take over.”

“And here I thought you begged us to come,” said Woods, “because your lot couldn’t do your jobs properly. What’s the problem—sun too hot for you?”

“We’ve been here eighteen months,” snapped the Validian, “and we’re winning this war. We’ve driven the orks right back, there hasn’t been an attack on this encampment or any other in three weeks. If you wanted to help, you should have been here when we were cleansing areas, holding the line, facing ambushes day and night. But no, true to form, you glory hounds show up in time for the mopping up and claim all me credit.”

Greiss was on his feet, his lip curling into a dangerous snarl. “Have you quite finished, sergeant?”

Woods stood now, too, on the pretext of clearing away his half-empty bowl. “It’s okay, sergeant,” he said, “just a bitter old man letting off some steam—and can you blame him? Can’t be many Imperial Guard regiments have had to go crying for reinforcements against a few trees and flowers.”

The Validian's eyes bulged and his face reddened. He pulled back his fist, but Woods had anticipated the move. He sidestepped the sergeant's blow, and simultaneously took hold of his attacker, using his own weight to flip him onto his back on the table.

The move had the effect of bringing the rest of Lorenzo's squad to their feet, as they leapt to avoid flying cups and bowls. Two tables away, the Validian's fellows were also pushing back their chairs and standing. Their downed sergeant tried to right himself, but Woods was keeping him off-balance. The sergeant kicked out, and Woods danced out of the way of his boot. As the sergeant swung his legs over the side of the table and made to stand at last, Woods head-butted him—the fabled "Catachan Kiss"—and his nose splintered in a fountain of blood.

The first two Validians came at Woods, but Armstrong and Dougan intercepted them. It looked like Steel Toe was just trying to calm things down, even at this stage, but his efforts were futile: as a Validian took a swing at him, he responded with a punch to the jaw that laid him right out. Another six Guardsmen surged forward as one, and Myers and Storm leapt onto the table and stood back to back, lashing out with fists and feet.

In just seconds, an all-out brawl had broken out. No guns or knives were drawn, but nor were any punches pulled. Even Landon joined in with gusto, pummelling away at the stomach of a man two heads taller than himself until he staggered and passed out through sheer inability to draw breath.

A pug-nosed, unshaven sergeant came at Lorenzo with a chair raised over his head. Lorenzo ducked under the makeshift weapon, and threw himself at its wielder. His head impacted with the soft tissue of the sergeant's stomach, and they went rolling end over end on the dirt-streaked floor.

The violence was spreading like unchecked fire. Other squads were pulled into the fray, taking sides according to regimental loyalty. Validian reinforced Validian, Catachan reinforced Catachan, until the entire hall had erupted into a cacophonic mass of screams and yells and crashes and the dull smacks of fists and feet against flesh. Out of the corner of his eye, Lorenzo saw two ogryns ploughing into the melee, picking up men by the throat two at a time and knocking their heads together.

He had managed to get on top of his opponent, surprising the sergeant with his litheness. He pinned him with a knee to his chest, and drove his knuckles repeatedly into the sergeant's face—until two Guardsmen seized him from behind, and tore him away. Lorenzo had seen them coming, but in the midst of such chaos it was impossible to avoid all the possible threats. Still, he was prepared for this one. He thrust his elbows back, catching his would-be captors off-guard, and threw himself into a forward roll, wrenching their hands from his shoulders. He dropped into an alert stance, expecting the Validians to come at him again, but they had other problems. Greiss had just waded into them.

The sergeant planted his hand in one man's face, and pushed him back with enough force to send him sprawling. Then he concentrated his efforts on the other, his expression feral,

a zealous gleam in his eyes as he laid into his victim with a barrage of punches so fast and furious that their sheer force kept him upright for a second after he was knocked cold.

Dougan was in trouble. He was surrounded, and it looked like his artificial leg was playing up again, slowing him down. Lorenzo flew to the older man's assistance, but two more Validians rose up in his path. He transferred his momentum to his fist, and drove it into the first man's skull. The second made a grab for Lorenzo's throat, and simultaneously knocked his legs out from under him. For an instant, he was suspended in midair, choking. He managed to plant his hands on his attacker's shoulders, and bring up his feet, kicking at the Validian's chest. They both fell, but Lorenzo spun and hit the ground on his feet, and was ready for the first Validian as he came at him again.

In the meantime, Muldoon had come to Dougan's aid, letting out a war cry as he bowled into the men surrounding his comrade and scattered them. Dougan got his second wind, hoisted one foe by the scruff of his flak jacket and hurled him, arms and legs thrashing furiously, into another. The ogrynes were still cracking skulls, the Validians now realising what they had taken on, almost trampling each other to get away from the misshapen creatures.

One particularly hapless specimen backed into Lorenzo, eyes wide with fear, just as the Catachan finished putting down his own two opponents. In the heat of a terrified moment, the Validian broke the unspoken rule, by drawing his lasgun.

Lorenzo was on him before he could aim it. The gun dropped from the Guardsman's grasp as Lorenzo seized his arm and twisted it until the bone snapped. The Validian let out a yelp and fell to his knees, but he had foregone any right to sympathy or mercy, and Lorenzo knocked him cold with a spinning kick to the head.

His keen ears caught the sound of a whining voice, straining to be heard across the tumult. Commissar Mackenzie had just strode into the hall, and he was demanding calm, to no avail. At his heels, however, was Graves—and when the colonel spoke, Catachans and Validians alike fell still.

“Just what the hell is going on here?” Graves roared, his voice resonating in the sudden guilty hush.

CHAPTER THREE

“I said, what the hell is going on? What do you think you’re doing?”

Colonel Graves strode deeper into the mess hall, his blazing eyes darting from Catachan to Validian to Catachan, sharing around the force of his scorn. “I’ve seen acid grubs behave with more dignity. You’re meant to be on the same side!”

Mackenzie scuttled after him. “Do you see?” he fumed. “This is why I was opposed to bringing Jungle Fighters into this campaign.” He raised his voice to address the hall. “I want—no, I *demand*—to know who the ringleaders were behind this disgraceful display. Names and ranks!”

A few eyes were cast down, a few feet shuffled, but the Validians were no more willing than the Catachans were to tell on their own. In the face of their intransigence, the commissar’s face grew steadily redder.

“Sergeant Wallace!”

The unlucky Validian who the commissar had singled out snapped to attention, and reported, “My apologies, sir, I didn’t see how the incident started. My men and I only acted to calm the situation when it seemed to be getting out of hand.”

Mackenzie got the same story, almost verbatim, from his next two sergeants.

Lorenzo sensed a surreptitious movement behind him, and he turned to see that the sergeant whose nose Woods had broken was being helped to his feet, a piece of cloth clasped to his bloodied face. He was glaring venomously at the cause of his woes, but Woods returned his gaze with a smug grin and cracked his knuckles into his palm.

It was this look that Commissar Mackenzie caught, and he hustled over to the pair, his nostrils flaring with self-righteous zeal. “Enright?”

The bloodied sergeant shrugged helplessly, using his cloth as a shield from interrogation. Mackenzie clicked his tongue in impatience, then dismissed Enright and the two Guardsmen who were supporting him with an impatient hand movement. The trio made their way to the door, and no doubt to whatever medical facility this camp offered.

Mackenzie fixed Woods with a shrivelling glare, which he then turned upon the Catachans around him until he saw the sergeant's stripes on Greiss' arm. "Perhaps *you* can shed some light on this matter, sergeant?"

"Greiss, sir."

"Sergeant Greiss. You seem to have had a ringside seat for the worst of it."

"My apologies, sir," said Greiss in a faintly mocking tone, "I didn't see how the incident started. My men and I only acted to calm the situation when it seemed to be getting out of hand."

One of the Catachans let out a harsh laugh, but Mackenzie wasn't amused. He cast another distasteful look at Woods, and snapped, "It seems clear to me, Sergeant Greiss, that you and your squad were responsible for this outrage, and I intend to make sure you regret it. How would you feel, Greiss, about sleeping out in the jungle tonight?"

Greiss' eyes lit up. "Delighted to, sir."

That wasn't the answer Mackenzie had been expecting, and he seethed impotently. "Let me tell you, Sergeant Greiss, what happens to Guardsmen who disrespect their senior officers."

"I'm all ears, sir," growled Greiss.

Mackenzie flushed. "We bury them. Let me tell you what it's like, Greiss. It's too small for you to stand, too narrow for you to sit down. You'll spend the night—as many nights as I choose—in the most uncomfortable position you can imagine, until you think your spine will crack. You'll feel spiders gnawing at your feet, you'll be at the mercy of the jungle lizards. And during the day—in the daytime, when the sun's beating down on you and you don't have the room to lift an arm to shade your eyes—in the daytime, Greiss, let me tell you, you'll start to wish you were dead."

Graves had moved silently to the young commissar's side. He cleared his throat now, and murmured, "May I remind you, sir, that we need these men fresh and active for duty in the morning? I don't see much point in pursuing this matter. Especially—" and he laboured this point particularly heavily—"with no evidence to lay charges against any individual. No harm done, I'd say. In fact, it's probably best for all sides they got it out of their systems."

Mackenzie said nothing for a moment—and Lorenzo expected him to snap at the colonel the way he had at Lieutenant Vines. Instead, he seemed to accept the quiet wisdom in Graves' words. He turned and marched stiffly out of the door, the tension in the hall diffusing in his wake. People began to pick themselves up, to collect scattered bowls, chairs and tables and to tend to their wounded, Catachans and Validians working together to restore order.

“For any of you girls who were fretting,” announced Colonel Graves, “B Platoon have voxed in. They’ve had some casualties—lost eight men—but most of them are still standing, and they’re making their way to us, ETA 11.00. In view of this delay, Commissar Mackenzie has decided not to wait. All Jungle Fighters are to assemble in the briefing hut in twenty minutes.”

Lorenzo slept under the stars that night, on a bed of leaves picked from the edge of the jungle and carefully tested for hidden spines and poison sap. Basic quarters had been provided for the Catachans, but there weren’t enough bunks for all of them—and most would have chosen to sleep outdoors anyway. It had been too long.

The sounds of the jungle at night brought a feeling of calm to Lorenzo. The rustle of a breeze in its leaves, the caws and cackles of nocturnal predators, the gurgle of water—or some other liquid—carried from far away. He wished he could be deeper inside it. The area cleared out by the Validians had an acrid burnt scent to it. Lorenzo was used to having a canopy of green above him—but tonight it was black, and freckled with the white points of distant suns. The night sky was crystal clear, the air warm. It was as if Rogar III was showing him its good points, its aesthetic qualities. As if it wanted to lull him into a sense of security by hiding its true, savage beauty from him. Lorenzo wasn’t fooled. He looked forward to the morning, to testing this world’s mettle.

He thought back to Mackenzie’s briefing, and suppressed a thrill. The commissar had been furnished with a list of the Catachan squads, and had assigned them to various missions. B Platoon had drawn the short straw in their absence, they would arrive at the encampment to find that their comrades had moved out and left them to reinforce the security details here. If they were lucky, the orks would provide a distraction or two to break up the monotony.

The rest of the Catachans were to do what the Validians could not: take the fight to the orks themselves. Which meant, of course, fighting the jungle too.

“I know what you’re all thinking.” Colonel Graves had added to Mackenzie’s speech. “It’s a jungle world, maybe even a deathworld, nothing you haven’t seen before. Well, believe me, Rogar III *is* different. The commissar here tells me that, a year ago, this place was a little green corner of paradise. Well, I don’t know what’s happened, and to tell the truth I don’t much care—but as you ladies can see, this isn’t paradise anymore.”

Later, Donovits had tossed around a lot of phrases like “climate change” and “axis shifts”—but Lorenzo hadn’t cared much.

He’d been more interested in hearing how the Imperium’s attempts to expand its encampments had met with failure. It was a full-time job for a squad of Guardsmen to maintain this one, small though it was. For every jungle creeper they burnt away, two more seemed to replace it—and their rate of growth was prodigious.

“When the Explorators came to Rogar.” Graves had said, “they recorded some weird energy signature.” Of course, Lorenzo had already known that, thanks to Donovits. “Now, I’m not saying there’s anything in that—just warning you hotheads not to get too cocky. We don’t know what this deathworld has to throw at us, but we do know a couple of hundred Guardsmen have died trying to find out.”

Mackenzie had displayed a rough map of the area, and pointed out the known ork strongholds. He was planning an attack on one of these, intelligence suggested that it was lightly defended, the orks depending on the jungle itself to protect them. A derisive snort had gone up from the Catachans at this point.

The whole of A Platoon, ogryns and all, was committed to this offensive, while two of D Platoon’s four squads were to set traps and lay in wait for reinforcements from the other ork camps. Other squads would target supply lines—hit and run tactics, to divide the enemy’s attention.

Lorenzo’s squad had been the last to learn its assignment—and its ten men had let out a cheer when Mackenzie had explained that it was the most vital, and most dangerous, of all. The commissar had shouted at them to be silent.

“One particular ork has been giving us trouble,” he had said. “Their current warboss in this region. You know how it is—we take out one, another takes its place. But this one has a few more brain cells than most. The troops have taken to calling him Big Green. He’s actually got the beasts organised, to an extent. Their last few raids on us were almost well planned. And this ork has a keen sense of self-preservation. Most warbosses lead from the front, this one stays behind the lines. He’s become a legend to the orks, if only because he’s lasted longer than his predecessors. He’s good for their morale. Too good. I want him dead!”

According to the commissar, the Imperial Guard had been close to finding the warboss’ hideout when, in his own words, “the jungle became impassable”. They knew its general location, but the lair itself was well concealed. The Catachans’ job was to find the ork warboss and do the necessary deed. A stealth mission, a single assassination. Sounded simple, Lorenzo thought.

Then, Mackenzie had thrown a spanner in the works.

“Given the importance of this mission,” he had said, “I will be leading it myself. *Silence!*” he bellowed in response to the Catachans’ howls of protest.

Sergeant Greiss, who a moment earlier had sported a broad grin on his face, now looked as if he had been slapped. “With respect, sir,” he had growled, “you aren’t a Jungle Fighter. Better if the men take their orders from someone used to—”

“Contrary to popular belief, sergeant.” Mackenzie had sneered, “they do teach us to do more than sit around and drink amasec in officer training. I am fully qualified in jungle

warfare—and more importantly, in command. Now, I’m sure your style of leadership is adequate for charging at the enemy with your bayonets fixed—but this is to be a precision strike. For that to work, I need...” He raised his voice to speak over the growing grumbles of dissent. “I need a well-drilled, efficient squad of men, who know what’s expected of them and will comply without question or complaint. *With respect*, sergeant, I doubt you can provide that.”

Lorenzo wasn’t looking forward to serving under Mackenzie. Still, he wouldn’t have swapped this assignment for any other. He felt proud at the thought that Colonel Graves might have recommended his squad above all others—although he wasn’t kidding himself. He knew that, if they *had* been recommended, it would have been for Greiss’ experience or the distinguished war records of Dougan and Armstrong. Chances were, the colonel didn’t even know Lorenzo’s name. Anyway, it seemed more likely that Mackenzie had made the choice himself, probably just for the opportunity to laud it over Greiss.

The Catachans had insisted on providing their own night watch, to the chagrin of the Validians already standing sentry over the camp. Lorenzo had volunteered for the duty, but he hadn’t been quick enough. He slept soundly, knowing he was safe in the charge of his comrades—until, in the dark hours of the morning, some inbred danger sense woke him.

He opened his eyes, instantly alert, to face a yellow stare.

A jungle lizard, just a little larger than the one he had seen yesterday. Somehow it had slipped by the Guardsmen of two regiments, and crept up on him. Its eyes stared into his eyes. It was perfectly still, its trailing body propped up by two legs like miniature tree trunks. Tiny nostrils quivered as it breathed, slowly and calmly. Its mouth was a thin line, perhaps a little upturned at the edges. As if it was mocking him, gloating.

Lorenzo had seen lizards that could breathe fire and spit poison, or eviscerate a man with their claws in seconds. He had seen one burrow into a man’s stomach and attach itself to his nervous system, working him like a puppet. He had no idea of the capabilities of this one, but he didn’t doubt that it was deadly. Deathworlds bred no other type of animal. And it had the drop on him.

He lay still as a rock, staring into those yellow eyes, looking for the slightest glimmer of intent, the warning that the lizard was about to strike.

Slowly, painfully slowly, so slowly that his muscles screamed in protest, Lorenzo’s fingers worked their way down his leg. Toward his Catachan fang.

The lizard made its move.

Its mouth gaped open, impossibly wide, almost larger than its head—and during the briefest split-second that followed, Lorenzo got the impression of a coiled red tongue

with a glistening needlepoint end. He snatched his knife from its sheath, tried to roll out of the way, but he knew there was no time.

Something flashed through the air. Something metal.

Then there was blood—thick, green blood—and Lorenzo was up and armed, but only because the expected attack had not come.

A Catachan fang was buried up to its haft in the lizard's head. Its blade had passed through the creature's mouth, pinning its tongue, and into the scorched earth beneath it. An ordinary man might have thanked the God-Emperor for sparing him, but Lorenzo had long since learned there was no divine intervention in such matters. He thanked good comrades instead.

“Sorry ‘bout that, pal,” said Myers, reclaiming his knife from the dead lizard's head and casually wiping off its blood and brain matter with a leaf. “These critters are like chameleons, they can change their scale patterns to blend in with their surroundings.”

As usual, Myers was accompanied by Wildman Storm—a muscular, bearded Catachan who often looked like he would tear off your head as soon as look at you, until his features broke into a dazzling grin. “We've picked off a few tonight,” he said, “but we didn't hear this one until it was already past us. Took a minute to find it.”

“No problem,” said Lorenzo, adding a grateful nod for the rescue.

No longer pinned, the lizard had toppled onto its side. Its ruptured tongue lolled out of its mouth, leaking venom and blood. From above, no longer eye to eye with it, it seemed small and insignificant. It was easy to forget the real threat it had posed just a few seconds earlier. Lorenzo wondered what its poison would have done to him—weakened him, paralysed him, killed him outright?

“Do you suppose these are the ‘invisible monsters’ they talk about round here?” asked Storm.

Lorenzo shrugged.

“Hope not,” said Myers, as he re-sheathed his knife and sauntered away. “I was hoping for something more of a challenge.”

Breakfast for the Catachans was a vegetable broth, brewed by Dougan from local plants. It was the best meal Lorenzo had tasted in weeks—made even more so when Storm dropped a hunk of lizard steak into his bowl. The men were in high spirits, looking forward to their missions. The only shadow on the horizon was that of Commissar Mackenzie—and Greiss in particular was taking the usurpation of his position badly.

“You tell me what the Imperium is even doing here,” he grumbled over his soup. “We’re out at the rear end of nowhere, there aren’t any minerals here worth a light, and as for colonising, forget it! I’ll tell you this much: if the orks packed up tomorrow and left Rogar III, we wouldn’t be too far behind ’em. Seems to me the only reason we’re here is because they are, because the Emperor’s armies can’t be seen to be turning their backs on the enemy. The only reason the orks won’t leave is because they won’t turn their backs on us, so we just keep fighting.”

“Hey, steady on, sergeant,” said Woods. “You’re starting to sound like a heretic!”

“Hell, don’t get me wrong,” said Greiss, “I’m as up for a scrap as the next man. I’d just rather orks and Guardsmen alike moved their backsides out of here and left us to it. Jungle Fighters against the jungle, the way it should be.”

“Yeah, I can get on board with that,” grinned Woods.

“Course,” sighed Greiss, “ours is not to reason why. We just move where we’re told to move, fight who we’re told to fight, jump when we’re told to jump.”

Lorenzo remembered what the sergeant had said back on the ship, how he wanted his blaze of glory. He was unlikely to get it with Mackenzie calling the shots. He told himself there’d be other chances for the grizzled sergeant, but he could see it in Greiss’ despondent eyes: he’d convinced himself that this would be his last hurrah. Lorenzo had seen what happened to men who began to think that way. It was a thought that tended to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The hall was beginning to empty when a Validian approached Lorenzo’s table, and took a seat beside him. He was in his thirties, but still baby-faced. He wasn’t exactly fat, but then nor were his muscles exactly toned. He was beginning to grow jowls. Sizing him up in a second, Lorenzo concluded that he’d never have reached half his present age on Catachan.

Greiss looked up from his meal. “You’re at the wrong table, boy,” he growled, although the Validian couldn’t have been much younger than he was. “Your lot are over that side of the hall.”

“I know that, sergeant,” said the Guardsman. “I wanted to introduce myself before we set out. Braxton.” He held out a hand, which Greiss ignored. “Commissar Mackenzie’s adjutant—and I report for the *Eagle & Bolter*. Didn’t anyone tell you? I’ve been attached to your squad. I’m coming with you this morning.”

“Like hell!” snapped Greiss, and he pushed his bowl aside and stormed out of the hall. Woods shot Braxton a mocking sneer, then followed. Myers and Storm, further down the table, were absorbed in their own conversation, which left Lorenzo effectively, awkwardly, alone with the newcomer.

“Don’t mind Old Hardhead,” he said. “He’s had his nose put out of joint by your boss.”

Braxton nodded. “The commissar does seem to have a talent for that.” The Validian and the Jungle Fighter shared a brief smile. “I just thought you ought to know we aren’t all like him,” said Braxton. “Or Enright.”

“Enright?”

“The sergeant who started the trouble yesterday. Talk about noses being out of joint! Or if it wasn’t before the fight, your trooper over there sure saw to it... Enright and his cronies can’t face the fact that we need your help. They think we should be able to handle a few orks by ourselves.”

“But the orks aren’t the problem.” Lorenzo pointed out.

“I know,” said Braxton. “Rogar III has changed. I think I’ve noticed it more than some of the others, because... well...” He shifted in his seat. “Since I got this assignment, I haven’t seen much action, you know? But last week, I went out there, into the jungle, for the first time in a while, and...”

Lorenzo’s ears pricked up, eager for some hint of what was to come. “I swear,” said Braxton, “those jungle lizards had doubled in size since the last time I’d seen one—and they’d never been so vicious. They used to run for cover when we got within ten metres. We used them for target practice. Now, they’re getting bolder, sniffing around the camp itself. One of them stung Marks. The veins in his neck, and then his face, they turned black, throbbing. He was screaming, begging us to put him out of his misery. We had to do it. He’d have brought the orks down on us.”

“I just wanted to say,” said Braxton, “that it’s good to have the experts here.”

“Not according to Mackenzie,” said Lorenzo.

“I know—and if it were up to me, we’d leave you to do your jobs. We’re only going to slow you down out there. But the commissar—he’s young, he wants to prove himself. I think he wants to be the one to tame the famous Jungle Fighters. And deal with Big Green, of course.”

“And you just go where Mackenzie leads, huh?”

“My job is to report his glorious victory—if I’m lucky.”

Lorenzo regarded Braxton with a newly sympathetic gaze. It occurred to him that he was only obeying orders, like anyone—and that, in his own milieu, he was probably an able fighter. But, like most Guardsmen, he would have been conscripted at the age of sixteen or seventeen, already an adult. Lorenzo had been taught to defend himself with a knife before he could walk. By the age of eight, Catachan children were expected to be able to

tame a wild grox, a harsh lesson that some did not survive, but such was the nature of life on a deathworld. You could be forged in its jungle heat, or you could wither and die in it.

Beneath Guardsman Braxton's words was an unspoken plea for help. But the men of Lorenzo's world—like those of all deathworlds across the Imperium—obeyed only one law: that of the jungle. Survival of the fittest.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was another clear day. The sun blazed bright and hot, the morning temperature far in excess of that of the previous evening, the air bereft of breeze. Most of the Validians had been forced out of their stuffy huts, and some were evidently finding the heat uncomfortable. The Catachans, however, revelled in it. It opened Lorenzo's pores and invigorated him.

The clearing was full of sweaty bodies, moving in time to barked commands. Jungle Fighters were forming up in their squads and moving out. The men of A Platoon were arming themselves with autocannons and heavy bolters, and tuning up the three Sentinels that would precede them into battle.

Mackenzie was in the thick of the activity, dispensing words here and there to the sergeants, complaining repeatedly about the Catachans' lack of a formal uniform. "Uniforms get damaged." Colonel Graves told him, "when you're out in the jungle." But it didn't seem to calm Mackenzie's ire.

Greiss would normally have had his squad doing circuits or squat-thrusts by now, instead, he sat with his knees to his chest, and snarled at anyone who dared come near him. Muldoon had acquired the dyes of some indigenous plants, and was adapting his body camouflage to the local shapes and colours. A few other Catachans had followed his lead, Myers and Storm among them, glad to let the sun caress their skin. Lorenzo, however, was no artist, he would have to make do with his heavy jacket, and with a few streaks of dubbin across his face.

Mackenzie was annoyed to find the squad not standing to attention, awaiting his inspection, he made his displeasure known to Greiss, who shrugged and climbed to his feet in his own time. The Catachans fell in sloppily, making their feelings for the young officer clear. In turn, Mackenzie griped about the absence of regulation shoulder guards with identifying numbers, but there wasn't much he could do about it at this stage. He gave a stern speech that was mostly a reworking of the previous day's—"whip you rabble into shape", "smartest Guardsmen in the Imperium" and so forth—with a few clichés added: "When I say 'jump'... I expect you to crawl on your bellies over broken glass..."

"We're facing a four-day journey together," concluded the commissar. "Eight days, for those lucky enough to make the return trip. It'll go much easier if we all pull together." He produced a sheet of paper, then, and began a roll call. "Sergeant Greiss."

“Yes!”

“Yes, *what?*”

“Yes, sir!” said Greiss with a sneer.

“Trooper Armstrong.”

Patch Armstrong answered to his name, and Mackenzie went through the others, giving each trooper in turn an appraising look as he committed his face to memory. Dougan, Storm, Myers, Donovits, Muldoon, Woods, finally, Lorenzo and Landon.

Braxton, of course, was already well known to the commissar. The Validian had found an ill-fitting camouflage jacket in the stores, and was looking uncomfortable. Mackenzie was in camouflage too, though he had retained his peaked cap. It was a little too large for him, but his jutting ears kept it from sliding down. “Do you think it’s a good idea to be going into this with an eagle-shaped target on your head, sir?” Greiss asked, with measured disdain.

“It’s a symbol of authority, sergeant,” snarled Mackenzie. “You’ll learn. By the time I’m finished with you, you’ll all learn.”

They moved out, at the commissar’s insistence, at a quick march in two ranks of five, with Greiss leading the way. Mackenzie brought up the rear, occasionally shouting orders.

They broke step, however, as they crossed the tree line—and Lorenzo noted that Mackenzie worked his way into the centre of the group, so that there would always be a Catachan between him and any potential threat. The commissar had a rough sketched map, which he kept to himself, and a compass. He kept the squad moving on a bearing of approximately twenty-five degrees. “We’re taking a circuitous route,” he explained when questioned, “to avoid a small ork encampment to the north-west of here.”

“I’m sure we could take ‘em, sir,” offered Woods.

“I’m sure we could, trooper,” said Mackenzie icily, “but as I explained at the briefing last night, this is a stealth mission. A single ork gets wind of our presence in this area and lives to tell of it, and we may as well pack up and go home—because our chances of getting within shooting distance of their warboss will be zero.”

“I still say we could take ‘em,” muttered Woods resentfully. But Mackenzie was right, and he knew it.

The jungle closed in above them, sparing them the fiercest of the sun’s rays, though the air was still sweltering. Braxton was sweating, wiping his damp forehead with his sleeve every few steps. The burnt odour lingered, and the Catachans’ feet crunched on dead,

blackened leaves. This area had been torched—and recently—but with little effect. Some of the plants and trees seemed to have been growing here for years.

Their progress was punctuated by cracks of las-fire, whenever a jungle lizard was sighted. Myers and Storm had warned everyone of the creatures' chameleonic properties, and Lorenzo had added the information he'd received from Braxton, so the whole squad was on the alert. Out loud, each man swore he would never end his days like Braxton's ill-fated friend, pleading for the mercy of a quick death. Privately, Lorenzo knew—as the others must have known—that stronger men than he had been broken by such pain as only a deathworld could inflict.

In time, the discharges became less frequent, as if the lizards had learned from their mistakes and were keeping their distance. Lorenzo didn't imagine for a second, though, that they had seen the last of them.

That burnt smell was fading. The jungle grass was growing taller and the trees more closely together, letting less sunlight in through their branches. A pink-headed, acid-spitting plant reared up beside the Catachans without warning, but Myers blasted it to pieces before it could open its mouth.

Lorenzo felt goose bumps on his flesh, but it was a pleasant feeling.

He seemed to have been waiting a long time for this: to plunge into the darkest heart of the jungle. To face Rogar III on its own turf.

They were about two hours out when Braxton reported to the nearest Jungle Fighters—Myers and Storm—that he thought they were being followed. Their only response was a pair of knowing grins, so Braxton called out to Commissar Mackenzie. "Sir! Sir, I think we're being followed."

The young officer called a halt, and the squad stood silent for a minute or two. Mackenzie frowned. "Anyone hear anything?"

"No, sir," murmured the Catachans.

"It was up there, sir," said Braxton, pointing, "in the trees."

"You're imagining things, Braxton," decided Mackenzie, though his voice betrayed a doubt.

Lorenzo caught an aside from Storm to Myers: "Looks like the commissar's radar dish ears are just ornamental, then."

“Actually,” said Sergeant Greiss, with no little satisfaction, “there *is* someone stalking us. The rest of us have been aware of it since we left the clearing.”

Mackenzie turned pink. “What? Then why didn’t you speak up?”

“Because he’s on our side. In fact, we’re honoured to have him watching our backs.”

The commissar looked none the wiser, and fumbled with his list of names. “There’s no one missing,” he said.

“This man works alone,” said Dougan.

Mackenzie scowled. “That is not acceptable. This offensive has been planned to the last detail, and I will not have those plans jeopardised by a maverick.” He shouted into the jungle: “You, trooper. Come here, now!”

Dougan cleared his throat. “Should you be yelling like that, sir? If there are ork patrols or gretchin in the area—”

The commissar ignored him. “Trooper, my name is Commissar Mackenzie, and I am in command here. I demand you show yourself immediately. You have ten seconds. If I can’t see your face by then, you will be facing court-martial!”

The echoes of his words were soaked up by the foliage. In the distance, a bird took flight. There was no other sound.

“Could be out of earshot by now, sir,” offered Myers.

Mackenzie rounded on the Catachans, clenching his fists. “If anyone sees or hears a trace of that man again, I wish to be informed of it immediately, do you hear me? Immediately!”

They moved on.

Dougan dropped back in the marching order until he was alongside Braxton. He gave the Validian an approving nod. “Mostly, if Sly Marbo doesn’t want to be seen or heard, he isn’t—sometimes not even by those of us who know he’s around. I’m impressed.”

An hour after that, the jungle became so dense that the Catachans had to draw their knives and cut their way through. Armstrong and Muldoon took point to begin with, Armstrong’s devil claw and Muldoon’s sleek, black night reaper hacking at stinging plants and thick purple creepers.

All of a sudden, Muldoon let out a warning cry, and a cloud of insects blossomed from the undergrowth at his feet. Each was the length of one of Lorenzo's fingers, with hairy black bodies and gossamer wings. Armstrong hopped out of the way of the swarm, but it latched onto Muldoon, following him with an angry, high-pitched whine as he tried to back away from it. He swung his arms furiously, flattening several insects against the nearest tree, his blade slicing through two more.

The rest of the squad had withdrawn out of reach. Lorenzo brought up his lasgun, squinting along its sights until he knew he could fire without hitting Muldoon. His las-fire fried several insects, as did simultaneous shots from Greiss, Woods and Donovits. But there were too many of them. The cloud seemed hardly to have lessened in size.

Myers and Storm had flung their packs to the ground, and they pulled out the constituent parts of a heavy flamer. They clicked them together, then Storm steadied the bulky weapon while Myers aimed it at the swarm. The first explosion of fire singed the ends of Muldoon's hair, and lit up one flank of the insect cloud, sending them streaking to the ground as dying embers. Muldoon hurled himself face-first into the undergrowth, giving Myers a clearer second shot that took out the bulk of the remaining swarm.

There were still more than a dozen insects crawling over Muldoon, but he rolled and crushed those that couldn't take flight in time. The others rushed to stamp on the rest, or to skewer them with blades. Myers and Storm aimed one final, precautionary blast of flame at the ground from which the swarm had risen. Then the Catachans surrounded Muldoon where he lay on his back. He blinked up at them, flushed and chagrined, his face pimply with insect bites.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Muldoon?" barked Greiss without sympathy. "You know better than to disturb an insect nest. You didn't see it?"

"I saw it, sergeant," said Muldoon. "I was giving it a wide berth, but the bugs came out fighting all the same."

"They must be sensitive to vibrations in the ground," guessed Donovits. "Or to body heat—though that's less likely in this climate. But why would they attack if their nest wasn't directly threatened?"

"Just antisocial, I guess," said Greiss, reaching down to help Muldoon to his feet. "You feeling alright, Sharkbait?"

"Like a walking, talking colander," said Muldoon ruefully. "They took chunks out of me all over. I got them in my boots, under my backpack, in my collar..."

"Show me," rapped Greiss.

The sergeant spent the next few minutes examining Muldoon's bites. Lorenzo knew why. On Catachan, there was a creature known as the vein worm, which burrowed into its

victim's flesh and laid its eggs in his bloodstream. Greiss intended to make sure these alien insects had left no similar surprises in his trooper. When he'd satisfied himself on that count, he asked Muldoon to tell him how many fingers he was holding up, checking for toxins that may have begun to cloud his senses. Muldoon answered correctly, and Greiss rewarded him with a grim smile, and clapped him on the arm. "You'll live," he concluded. "Probably."

"Do you think we can get on now?" asked Mackenzie, impatiently.

They proceeded more cautiously after that, with Woods and Donovits taking over cutting duty up front. As soon as Woods sighted a second nest in among the creepers, they all fell back, and Myers and Storm readied the flamer. "What are you waiting for?" cried Mackenzie. "Just torch the damn thing!" But the troopers turned to Greiss for confirmation of that order, and the grizzled sergeant shook his head and reached for a stick.

He flung it at the hive, and once again a cloud of black insects darkened the air. Myers' finger twitched on his trigger, ready to unleash a stream of fire should any man be threatened. The insects, however, didn't seem to have detected the watching Catachans. They buzzed around for a while, finding no one upon whom to expend their wrath, and then settled resentfully back into their disturbed home.

"What the hell was the point of that?" demanded Mackenzie. "You just wanted to provoke those things?"

"To observe 'em." Greiss corrected him. "Anyone else see what I saw?"

"The red flower over there," spoke up Donovits. "The insects were giving it a wide berth."

Greiss nodded. "Let's find out, shall we?"

He followed Donovits' pointing finger to a delicate red flower sprouting from the trunk of a tree. It had eight perfectly formed petals, and it was quite the most beautiful thing Lorenzo had seen on this world so far. That left him in no doubt that it was dangerous.

Greiss found another stick, and poked the head of the flower with it. Immediately, its petals snapped shut like a vice, gripping the stick so strongly that he couldn't pull it free. He tried to uproot the flower with a yank, but its hold on the tree behind it was just as tenacious. It was crying, letting out a shrill wailing sound that, after a few seconds, bored into Lorenzo's ears like a drill.

Greiss whipped out his fang, and sliced the head of the flower from its stem. Immediately, the wailing ceased and the red petals flopped open. Greiss turned, and

displayed the decapitated head to the others. "Doesn't seem too dangerous on its own," he commented, "but watch one of these things doesn't grab your ankle. It might just hold you still long enough for something bigger to come along."

A flutter of wings drew everyone's attention upwards. A shadow flitted between the trees, and was gone. A bird of prey, Lorenzo surmised, answering the flower's alarm call, put off by the number of strangers present and by the fact that none of them were immobilised.

"Now," said Greiss. He flipped the flower head onto the insect nest, and withdrew to safety again. This time, there was a distressed quality to the displaced insects' humming—and a definite direction to their flight. Within a minute, they were all gone, deeper into the jungle.

Donovits nodded. "They didn't like that. The flower probably preys on the insects, so they've learned to detect its scent and avoid it."

"All right," rapped Greiss, "everyone spread out, look for more of these flowers."

Mackenzie's nostrils flared. "I think you're forgetting who's giving the orders here, sergeant."

"If you've got a better idea, commissar." Greiss shot back. "Now's the time to speak up."

"Sergeant," protested Hotshot Woods, "you expect us to wear flowers in our hair now?"

"In your hair, in your lapel, down your trousers," growled Greiss, "I don't care what you do with 'em, Hotshot, just as long as you wind up smelling right."

As he joined the search, Lorenzo noticed that Muldoon was looking a bit woozy. The trooper pulled himself together when he saw he was being observed, and he smiled grimly. "Dizzy spell," he said, apologetically. "I think those damn bugs sucked a few pints of blood out of me. I just need a minute..."

Lorenzo kept an eye on Muldoon after that, and realised he wasn't the only member of the squad to be doing so. He was usually more zealous than any of them, with the possible exception of Woods—always scouting ahead with a gleam in his eye, a feral smile on his face and his night reaper in his hand. Now, however, he lagged behind, finding the going tough. They all had plant tendrils grasping and tearing at their heels, of course—but Muldoon was the only man particularly troubled by them. He lost his footing a number of times, and almost fell, but Lorenzo knew better than to offer assistance where it wasn't requested.

Muldoon was swigging too freely from his bottle, too, the other Catachans were taking it steady, not knowing when they might find fresh water.

“You’re worried about him, aren’t you?” said a low voice beside Lorenzo. It was Braxton.

He shrugged. “What do you think? You ever come across bugs like that before on Rogar? Seen a man bitten by one?”

“A few times, yes. Didn’t seem to do any lasting harm. I’ve never seen a swarm attack like that, though.”

Lorenzo nodded. “Bugs carry diseases,” he said knowledgeably. “Sharkbait might get lucky—or he might get sick. Real sick, real soon. Or real dead. That’s why Old Hardhead had us take precautions.” They had all teased sap from the stems of the red flowers, rubbed it into their faces and hands. “New world, new rules—and there’s only one way to learn what they are. Sharkbait knows that as well as the rest of us do.”

“Why do you call him Sharkbait?”

“Before my time,” said Lorenzo.

Dougan fell into step beside them. “Poseidon Delta,” he grunted. “We had to cross a swamp, but there was a catch. The mother of all marsh sharks. It hunted by radar, could detect a ripple on the surface from ten kilometres. The span of its jaws was wider than you are tall. Sharkbait—he was just Trooper Muldoon then—took a Sentinel in. You saw them at the camp: armoured hunter-killer machines. Chainsaws, flamers... We use them when we don’t exactly care about being subtle. But this Sentinel got its leg jammed in the mud, came crashing right down. And the marsh shark was there, of course, peeling back the outsides of the crew compartment like a tin opener. It got Reed, swallowed him whole. But Muldoon...”

We were firing our lasguns from the bank. The shots just glanced off this monster, gave it no more than a bad case of sunburn. Muldoon was lying there, pinned by the wreckage, going under, and this shark was rearing over him, coming in for the kill. We thought he was a goner. Then, calm as you like, he just reached *into* its mouth, slung a whole pack of frag grenades down its throat.

We didn’t even hear the explosion, the damn thing’s hide was so thick. But suddenly, it was thrashing and groaning like it had the worst case of bellyache in history. Then it went down. Greiss and me, we went in and pulled Muldoon out of the mud. He was lucky not to have lost an arm—or a head. If that shark had snapped its teeth shut just a fraction of a second sooner... I don’t recall a discussion. We all knew ‘Sharkbait’ Muldoon had earned his name, that day.”

“That’s important to you people, isn’t it?” said Braxton. “Earning your name. I’ve heard Hotshot, Old Hardhead—and they call you Steel Toe, right?”

“Another story,” said Dougan, “for another day.”

“And ‘Sly’ Marbo?”

“Never been quite sure about that one,” Dougan confessed, “if it’s an earned name or a given name or just something he’s picked up along the way. Seems to suit him fine, though. What’s with all the questions, son?”

“*Eagle & Bolter*,” said Braxton. “Just wanted a bit of background info for my piece. Everyone knows what you Jungle Fighters do, but no one really knows all that much *about* you. I thought, if I could tell them what life’s like where you come from—Catachan, right?—there might be a few less, uh, misunderstandings.”

Dougan nodded. “A word of advice, son. Not everyone likes to talk. Oh, stick around long enough and you’ll hear all the old war stories, all right—but you start probing someone like Old Hardhead about his past, and he’s liable to probe you in return. With his bayonet, in your guts.”

Braxton fell silent for a time, after that. But it wasn’t long before he turned to Lorenzo, and asked the question the Catachan had been dreading.

“So, what’s *your* earned name, Lorenzo?”

“Don’t have one.” Lorenzo said. Not that he had anything to be ashamed of. “Not yet.”

Armstrong was the first to hear them. He froze, listening, and the others did the same one by one.

Footsteps, crashing through the undergrowth. A guttural grunt that could only have been formed by a larynx. There was somebody nearby. Several somebodies—and not bothering to hide their presence. Braxton turned to Lorenzo, and mouthed silently, “Marbo?” Lorenzo shook his head.

A second later, the Catachans had melted into their background—and Lorenzo saw the confusion in Braxton’s face as he turned to find himself standing alone. Lorenzo himself had slipped behind a tree trunk and was hugging its contours. Muldoon had chosen the same hiding place, and was crouched down beside him. From close up, Lorenzo could see that Muldoon was running a fever. His bandana was soaked with sweat, and his breathing was hoarse and ragged.

Storm lay flat on the ground nearby. He had arranged a few creepers across himself, breaking up the lines of his body so that its patterns blended perfectly with those of the foliage. From any further away, and most other angles, he would have been invisible. Indeed, to Lorenzo, the rest of the Catachans *were* invisible. He could make out only one other outline—that of Commissar Mackenzie, trying to conceal himself behind a blossoming nettle plant.

Guardsman Braxton caught on, and ducked under cover himself.

More footsteps, and the rustling of leaves. Whatever was out there, they were coming closer. Eight or nine of them, Lorenzo now estimated. Too small, too nimble, to be the muscular, lumbering orks. Gretchin, most likely. Genetic cousins to the orks—smaller, weaker, subservient, but far more cunning. If they realised they were outnumbered, they were likely to scatter and run, take word to their masters.

There was no urgency to their movements. Chances were, they didn't know they had enemies nearby. The gretchin were probably just out foraging—but they might get lucky. Thick as the jungle was, they wouldn't see the Catachans' trail of severed tendrils and uprooted plants unless they stumbled right onto it. It sounded to Lorenzo, though, like they were within a bloodwasp's length of doing just that.

Suddenly, somebody slammed into him from behind.

Lorenzo was taken by surprise, winded. No mean feat—but then this attack had come from the last direction he'd expected. From a comrade, a man he'd entrusted with his life countless times, and who was now bearing him down into the dirt, eyes ablaze with madness, a black knife raised to strike at Lorenzo's throat.

Muldoon was trying his best to kill him.

And he was screaming with incoherent fury as he did so—a sound that could hardly have failed to reach the gretchin's ears.

CHAPTER FIVE

Muldoon was bigger and stronger than Lorenzo, and certainly heavier. Lorenzo was pinned to the ground by his weight, the jungle grass now growing above his head, rough against his neck and his cheeks. His right arm, and his Catachan fang in its sheath, were trapped under Muldoon's knees. All he could do was strike out with his left elbow, knocking his attacker's knife hand aside.

Muldoon's night reaper was smaller than Lorenzo's fang, but just as deadly. Its blade was triangular, shaped to leave a large entrance wound that wouldn't clot—and knowing Muldoon it was almost certainly poisoned. Probably with the venom of a jungle lizard. He was always the first of the Catachan to turn a deathworld's threats to his advantage.

Lorenzo kicked out with both feet, trying to unseat Muldoon, but Muldoon knew too well how to spread his weight to maintain his balance. That knife hand was coming around to strike again. Muldoon loomed over Lorenzo, his unshaven features crazed with blind fury, his eyes wide, white, unblinking. There was no point talking to him, in appealing to reason. He was too far gone. There was no way to know what was going on in Muldoon's head, what those insect bites were making him see, but Lorenzo would have laid odds he didn't even recognise his old comrade right now. He was fighting his own daemons.

He couldn't afford to hold back. He found Muldoon's face with his free hand and dug his fingernails into his eyes. Momentarily blinded, Muldoon threw back his head and let out an uncharacteristic howl of pain and rage. Lorenzo pulled his right arm free, twisted out of the path of a badly aimed knife blow and seized Muldoon's wrist in his left hand. He tried to shake Muldoon's grip on his weapon, but his fingers were locked around its haft. As Muldoon lashed out again, Lorenzo guided his thrust and buried the night reaper's blade in the ground beside his head.

If Muldoon had been in his right mind, he would have abandoned the knife until it was safe to retrieve it. Working on primal instinct, however, he only knew the night reaper was a part of him, his most important possession, and he all but forgot about Lorenzo as he struggled to reclaim it from the unyielding earth. Lorenzo crawled out from beneath him, and tackled him side-on. He hurled blow after blow at Muldoon's head, praying each time that the next one would be the one to put him down, knowing he was made of sterner stuff than that. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop him without inflicting a lasting injury.

Lorenzo could have drawn his own knife. He could reach it now. Against any other foe, he would have done it. He would have ended this.

Blood rushed in his ears, dulling his senses. He could hear, though, that the rest of his squad had broken cover. They were slashing and beating their way through the jungle, regardless of the danger from hostile flora or more insect hives, toward the gretchin. The creatures couldn't help but hear them coming, and they turned and fled back up the path they had cleared for themselves.

Muldoon must have been in pain, near senseless, but he was fighting back. Lorenzo would have expected no less from him. Fortunately, his fever slowed his reaction time, and Lorenzo ducked the worst of his punches.

Help came, at last, in the form of Dougan. The older trooper knew his bionic leg slowed him down, and so it was natural that he should have been the one to stay behind. Dougan came up behind Muldoon, and tried to restrain him while Lorenzo knocked the wind out of him with a double jab to the solar plexus. He remembered head-butting a Validian Guardsman the previous day, finding his stomach soft and yielding, in contrast, hitting Muldoon was like driving his knuckles into rock.

Muldoon let out another animal roar, and broke Dougan's hold. Lorenzo held back for an instant, waiting to see what he'd do. Muldoon looked wildly from one of his comrades to the other, realising he was surrounded. His eyes flicked towards his night reaper, still buried in the ground, but it was too far away. Muldoon reached into a pouch of his bandolier and pulled out a demolition charge.

With a quick flex of his thumb, he popped out the charge's pin.

Lorenzo and Dougan hit him at the same time, from opposite sides. Dougan was trying to wrestle the charge out of Muldoon's hand, but his grip was as resolute as that on his night reaper had been. Lorenzo's survival instinct was telling him to dive for shelter, but he wasn't about to abandon Muldoon while there was the slightest chance he could be saved. He added his strength to Dougan's, taking one of Muldoon's fingers in each fist and forcing them open.

The demolition charge dropped out of Muldoon's hand.

Lorenzo had to dive for it, cradling his palms to give the explosive device the softest landing he could. In so doing, he left himself exposed, and Muldoon punished him with a brutal kick to the face. Lorenzo felt his lip splitting. He rolled with the blow, and was back in the grass again, his own blood on his tongue. But Dougan was keeping Muldoon busy, keeping him from pressing his advantage, and Lorenzo had the charge with—he estimated—less than a second to spare before it went up.

He hoisted himself onto one elbow, took a fraction of that second to orient himself, to check where the others were, then he put all the strength he had into an overarm throw.

The demolition charge seemed to have barely left his hand, arcing towards the treetops, when it burst and showered him with hot shrapnel.

Dougan had locked an arm around Muldoon's throat, and was holding on despite his kicking and screaming. Lack of oxygen had an effect on the frenzied trooper at last, and Muldoon's eyelids fluttered and closed. Dougan waited a moment longer before he relinquished his grip. A flicker of regret crossed his face as Muldoon's legs buckled beneath him and he crashed into the undergrowth.

Lorenzo and Dougan drew their Catachan fangs, cut down a couple of thin vines and bound their unconscious comrade's wrists and ankles with them. Lorenzo yanked the night reaper out of the ground, and respectfully returned it to its sheath. Even with Muldoon in this state, he couldn't deprive him of his knife—though he ensured that his tied hands couldn't reach it.

Lorenzo could hear las-fire through the foliage, and he knew the rest of his squad were close on the heels of their prey.

Myers and Storm were the first back from the gretchin hunt. They were followed by Donovits and Armstrong.

“How is he?” asked the one-eyed veteran, nodding in Muldoon's direction. He must have seen the start of the fight, and deduced the reason for it.

Dougan shrugged. “Hard to tell. His fever's broken, so he could be alright. Best leave him to sleep it off, and hope he's seeing things more clearly when he comes to. How'd it go with the gretchin?”

“We got 'em,” said Storm, baring his white teeth. “They won't be taking any tales back to their greenskin masters.”

Commissar Mackenzie came crashing through the foliage then, Guardsman Braxton at his heels. “What the hell was all the screaming about?” the young officer demanded to know. “And who let off a bomb? Where's the point in our chasing down gretchin left, right and centre if some idiot just broadcasts our position to every ork on the planet?”

“Couldn't be helped, sir,” said Dougan.

“And the jungle would have deadened the sound of the explosion,” added Donovits. “I'd say it couldn't have been heard more than, say—”

“I don't want to know, trooper!” snapped Mackenzie. “This operation is turning into a shambles. Where's Greiss?” He turned, and jumped to find that the sergeant had appeared noiselessly at his shoulder. Recovering himself, he snarled, “Sergeant Greiss! Is it too

much to expect you to exercise a modicum of restraint over your men? God-Emperor knows, I wasn't expecting much—but so far I'd have been better leading a squad of orks into the jungle. At least they have some semblance of self-control!"

Greiss glared at Mackenzie as if he was an acid grub he'd just found eating into his boot. The rest of the Catachans—somehow without seeming to move, just shifting their stances—formed into a vague circle around the commissar. No words had been spoken, but something had definitely changed.

Lorenzo caught Braxton's eye. The Validian didn't know what was happening—but he couldn't have been more aware at that moment that this was Catachan turf, that he and the commissar were the outsiders here. Instinctively, he shrank back against Mackenzie. He looked pale.

Mackenzie himself appeared to keep his cool, but Lorenzo could see the apprehension in his eyes.

Sergeant Greiss broke eye contact, took a half-step back, and just like that the threat was dissipated. "Well done, men," the sergeant barked. "A bit of bad luck, Sharkbait here going crazy when he did—but it couldn't have been helped, and you dealt with it well."

Greiss wasn't normally so effusive with his praise—it wasn't usually needed—so Lorenzo knew his words hadn't been for the Jungle Fighters' benefit. Mackenzie looked irritated, but he didn't protest.

It was only when Greiss detailed Woods to pick up the unconscious and bound Muldoon that the commissar broke his silence with an outraged sputter. "What the hell are you thinking, Greiss? That trooper has given us away once already. We can't afford to let it happen again."

"And it won't." Greiss promised. "I'll see to it."

His tone left no room for argument, but Mackenzie didn't take the hint. "That man is diseased. He might be infectious. Even if he isn't, what can we do for him out here?"

"You got anything at the camp that could help him?"

"No," said Mackenzie emphatically.

"Then Muldoon comes with us," said Greiss with equal force, "until I'm sure there isn't a cure for him."

"You think you can drag him all the way to the warboss' hideout and back? You think you can guarantee he won't wake up along the way and bring the orks down on us? No, sergeant. No, no, no. I don't like doing this—but I'm ordering you to abandon this trooper for the sake of the mission!"

“Sorry, sir,” said Woods, who by now had slung Muldoon over his shoulders and was carrying the bigger man effortlessly. “Isn’t the sergeant’s decision no more. Sharkbait is my buddy. You want me to drop him now, and leave him here for the lizards and the birds, you’ll have to shoot me.”

With that, Woods turned his back defiantly and set off into the jungle once more. The rest of the Catachans wasted no time in joining him, leaving Mackenzie standing. The commissar turned to Greiss as if for support, but recoiled at the malicious half-grin on his face. So he took the only course open to him at that moment. He lapsed into a judicious, if sullen, silence.

They moved on.

It was as the evening closed in that the birds launched their attack.

The sky, where it could be seen, was still a light shade of blue—but with the sun having surrendered its efforts to pierce the trees, the shadows had free rein down here. The canopy had captured much of the heat, but it was beginning to evaporate. The Catachans were used to jungle nights, of course, and their eyes adapted well to the gloom. The same could not be said of Mackenzie and Braxton. After stumbling one too many times, Braxton had made to light a torch, but Greiss had hissed at him to put it away. “You want to draw every critter in the jungle to us—and blitz our night vision while you’re at it?”

They were caught by surprise, because they hadn’t heard the birds massing. This in itself was unusual. It suggested a level of coordination unprecedented in such creatures, in Lorenzo’s experience—that the birds had appeared in such numbers, so quickly.

The beating of their wings was like oncoming thunder, except that it sounded from all directions at once. Their bodies were a storm cloud, drawing with it a darkness even the Catachans couldn’t penetrate. And then they were there, the birds, plummeting through the leaves like hailstones—but hailstones that, when they hit, burst into screeching, scratching darts of fury.

Lorenzo had just had time to draw his Catachan fang and lasgun. He was wielding the latter one-handed, keeping his knife hand back to protect his face. He fired repeatedly, aiming up above the heads of his comrades. It felt like the air was full of whirling blades, scratching, cutting, pecking at his flesh. He could barely see to take aim through the tumult of black wings—but as a particularly large bird flew up before him, claws outstretched, beady eyes trained upon him, Lorenzo saw his chance and struck. He felt his bayonet punching into the soft tissue of the bird’s heart, and he smiled grimly as blood welled onto his fingers. The bird had been skewered, and Lorenzo didn’t have time to remove it, so he fired the lasgun again and swung it like a club, knocking a few of his avian attackers from the sky, hopefully stunning some. The dead bird’s corpse split, lost its grip on the bayonet, and hit Lorenzo’s boot with a wet slap.

A sharp beak had clamped onto his ear and was tugging at it, so he sideswiped its owner with his fang, which left his face exposed for a split-second and gave another bird the chance to swoop in and jab at his eye. Lorenzo twisted his head aside in time, but they were tugging at his hair, clawing at his scalp. The birds had torn away his bandana, and drawn blood. He was pumping las-bolt after las-bolt through feathered bodies, but for each one that dropped two more seemed to replace it. And, unexpectedly, they had his gun, their claws scrabbling at its furniture, working in concert to yank it from Lorenzo's grasp. They didn't quite have the strength, so instead they piled their weight on top of it, forcing its barrel down until he couldn't pull the trigger for fear of blowing off his own foot.

The gun was useless to him now, a dead weight in his hand, so he sacrificed it. He flung it to the ground, taking several startled birds with it. He delivered a vicious kick to one as it struggled to right itself, and sent it sprawling. Then he brought his boot down on another, and snapped its neck.

Was it his imagination or was the flock thinning at last? Lorenzo could focus on individual birds now, rather than being overwhelmed by their mass. They were indeed, as first impressions had suggested, jet black, from their wingtips to their claws, even their eyes. There was no expression in those eyes—no rage or satisfaction, just a matter-of-fact blankness. Their wings were short, flapping furiously to keep their squat bodies aloft. Their black beaks came to wicked hooked points.

Lorenzo found a tree and backed up to it, denying them the chance to come at him from behind. He kept his fang in motion, slashing at any bird that ventured too close. They had become less bold with fewer numbers, keeping their distance, giving the impression of watching, waiting for an opening, although their eyes were still glassy. Lorenzo feinted, drew one of them in, and tore open its stomach with his blade, showering himself in its guts.

Another tried to blindside him, but he caught it by the throat, squeezed, felt its bones popping between his fingers and thumb. Its body joined the growing pile at his feet—and then, something in that pile nipped his ankle. At first Lorenzo thought it was just one bird, crippled, unable to fly but still single-minded in purpose. He raised his foot, tried to kick the wretched creature away—but there were more of them down there, scratching and pecking. The air around him seemed to have darkened with their bodies again. Reinforcements?

A bird shot up from below and got past Lorenzo's defences, latching onto his face and hugging it, and he would have let out a cry if he hadn't bitten his tongue in time. He was blinded, he could barely breathe for the bird's sticky, bloodied feathers in his mouth and nose.

He clawed at it, but its brethren were pecking at his knuckles, biting his fingers, keeping him from getting a grip, and his tormentor's claws were like nails raking his cheeks. He dropped into a protective crouch, closed his fingers around the creature on his face at last,

and tore it away from him, taking too much of his own skin with it. He saw it properly for the first time as it struggled in his hands—and although Lorenzo had seen much in his short career as a Jungle Fighter, the sight that greeted him now caused his mouth to gape in surprise.

The bird's neck had been cut almost through. Its head flapped lifelessly against its wing until, as Lorenzo watched, it detached itself at last and plopped into the long grass. But the body was still moving—and not just the uncoordinated twitching that could follow death in some species, but a deliberate and almost successful attempt to squirm free from him. With a shudder of revulsion, he dashed the bird against the nearest tree, with enough strength that his hand cracked through its body like an egg. It didn't move again.

Then Lorenzo felt them, saw them clawing their way up his legs: more bird corpses, some nursing broken legs, wings, backs, some eviscerated. Some of them had been dead a long time before this battle had begun. Putrid flesh slid from their gnarled bones, the stench that hit Lorenzo's nostrils would have been sickening to someone less familiar with it.

The first few skeletons had climbed as far as his lap, and they sprang for his throat, falling short, their wings too tattered and rotted to catch an air current. Lorenzo tried to brush them off, but they were tenacious. He mimicked Muldoon's earlier actions, rolling on the ground, feeling a satisfying crunch of bones beneath him. One skeletal bird hopped onto his face, and he stabbed at it with his knife. The blade passed through its empty eye sockets, and he lifted the undead creature off him, its legs pedalling the air, wing bones cranking uselessly. He flicked it away.

And then, suddenly, he was unmolested, the last of the birds around him finally still in death. His own survival assured for the moment, Lorenzo's thoughts went to his comrades. He was relieved to see that each of them had won or was winning his own battle. He joined them in shooting, slicing and bayoneting the few remaining birds. Without their superior numbers, they were easy prey, and soon the Jungle Fighters were jumping and stamping on hundreds of small corpses.

Then there was silence.

They regrouped, and took stock of their injuries. Landon was the worst, his face red with his own blood—but nobody had escaped harm, apart from the unconscious Muldoon. Lorenzo's comrades all sported crazed scratch patterns on their arms and faces, and he could tell from the prickling pain in his cheeks and forehead that he looked no better than any of them. His jacket sleeves were gashed and ragged, one trouser leg also torn.

Guardsman Braxton appeared to have held his own, though he was exhausted. He leaned against a tree trunk for support, flushed and out of breath. Storm was looking particularly

irked that the birds had taken great clumps out of his beard. Dougan's bionic leg had been gummed up with feathers, which he was picking out of its joints ruefully.

Woods was the first to find his voice. "Well," he said, "that was interesting. Who's up for seconds?"

Mackenzie was in no mood for jokes. "What the hell just happened?" he demanded. "I've been on this world a year, and never seen the birds behave like that."

Greiss frowned. "No?" And, for a moment, their animosity was softened in the face of a shared concern.

"I mean, don't get me wrong," said Mackenzie, "they were always vicious—but after a few initial sorties, they kept their distance. They knew they were no match for us."

"They made no attempt to retreat," Donovits mused, "even when it became obvious they couldn't survive. "As if they had no choice but to fight us."

"Even in death," grumbled Mackenzie.

"Some of those birds had been dead for months," said Donovits. "There was no tissue left holding their skeletons together. What was animating them?"

There was silence for a long moment as everyone pondered that question. Lorenzo suppressed a shudder, and his eyes involuntarily flicked towards the crushed and splintered bones at his feet, as if they might yet somehow spring to life again, repair and rebuild themselves.

Greiss made an attempt to diffuse the tension. "You ask me, it was sheer bloody-mindedness!" he said, as if that might explain everything. "We probably stumbled into their territory. How about it, Brains? Think they could have been protecting something down here? Eggs, maybe?"

Mackenzie shook his head. "There was nothing here a few weeks ago. I sent a squad to reconnoitre this area, and they reported nothing like this."

Greiss raised an eyebrow. "This area? You sure about that, commissar?"

"Of course I'm sure, sergeant. What are you suggesting?"

"Well, I know the jungle can be good at covering tracks—but I'd swear that, till we turned up, there hadn't been anyone come this way in a long time."

That sent the commissar scrambling for his sketch map. In the meantime, his adjutant had recovered his breath, though he still looked pale. "I guess that could have been worse, right?" said Braxton—and Lorenzo looked at him, and tried to work out what he really

wanted. Some reassurance that the Catachans had everything under control? Or that things *couldn't* have been worse, that he'd just survived the best this jungle had to throw at him? He couldn't give the Validian either.

"I mean, most of us escaped with superficial cuts. Unless—"

"Unless?"

Braxton's eyes flickered towards Muldoon, and now Lorenzo understood.

"Relax, city boy," drawled Woods. "If the birds had poisoned us, we'd know about it by now. You feeling ill? Because I've never felt healthier in my whole life. Raring to go!"

"Muldoon didn't know," said Braxton quietly.

Lorenzo and Woods glanced at each other, and Lorenzo knew they were both thinking the same thought: that Muldoon *had* known, that he'd felt the sickness creeping up on him, even fought off the first of the hallucinations. He had known, but he had been too proud to speak up.

"You want to worry about something," said Woods, "you worry about those 'superficial cuts'—because out here, there's no such thing. Any cut can be deadly. Jungle worlds breed diseases—and not all of them are carried by insects and vermin. Most, you can't see—but they're around us all the same, in the air. And they're just looking for a way into your bloodstream!"

Woods wiggled his fingers, miming the action of a bacteria creeping its way under Braxton's flesh. Then he closed his fist with a clap, and Braxton jumped.

He laughed, but Lorenzo didn't join in. Woods had seemed to enjoy tormenting Braxton—but the threat he described was real, to all of them. Maybe, he thought numbly, that had been the point of the birds' attack all along.

CHAPTER SIX

Mackenzie was all for setting up camp there and then, the fight knocked out of him, but Greiss insisted on moving on. “This place stinks of death,” he growled, kicking out at a fresh bird corpse that, despite having lost its wings and its head, had crawled out from a bush to make a feeble attack on his ankle. “God-Emperor knows what that might attract here tonight. Bigger birds, maybe.”

Lorenzo knew there was one other reason. The Jungle Fighters’ mood had darkened since the attack. They were quieter now, and more apprehensive. They spoke few words as they treated their wounds with sterilising fluid and synth-skin. Even Woods, now he’d had time to reflect upon what had happened, seemed subdued. They had faced greater threats—Braxton had been right about that—but none like this. The way their attackers had fought on beyond death—that was different. The men of Catachan lived by the laws of Nature, and tonight those laws had been violated. Greiss wanted to get them away from the scene of that violation, from the broken bones, to give them something else to think about.

“Five minutes, troopers,” he growled. “Finish up what you’re doing, then we’re getting out of here!”

Landon’s left eye was bleeding. One of the birds must have found it with its hooked beak. Myers and Storm had sat the rookie against a tree, cleaned his face with swabs from their first aid kits, and now they were applying a field dressing to the injured area. “Look at you.” Storm tutted good-naturedly, “this is, what, your first, second, time out in the field, and you’re trying to get yourself scarred permanent-like. What, you bucking for your earned name already?”

“Can’t be that, Wildman,” said Myers. “Even a rookie wouldn’t be stupid enough to let those birds go for his eye, knowing we got a ‘Patch’ already.”

“Yes,” said Storm, nodding with mock gravity, “can’t have two of those.”

Landon smiled, but the smile turned into a wince. Lorenzo felt ice in his stomach. He knew Myers and Storm were only joking, trying to keep up the youngster’s spirits—but just for a second there he’d feared Landon *would* get his earned name before he did. He chided himself for that thought. A comrade was hurt. Would he rather it was him sprawled in the dirt, wondering if he would see out of both eyes again?

Armstrong sported a nasty gash on his arm, where it glistened amid the knotted tissue of old scars. He was sewing it up with a needle, biting on a stick to control the pain. When Greiss gave the word, however, he—like all the others—clambered to his feet and hoisted his pack, fresh and ready to go.

Mackenzie didn't question the sergeant's decision. He knew he was right. But Lorenzo could read the commissar's eyes. He resented the way the Catachans deferred so readily to their sergeant over him. That was going to mean trouble.

Ninety minutes later, in a less dense part of the jungle, Greiss came to a halt and called for silence. He listened for a moment, then declared this as good a spot as any. Braxton shucked off his pack and sank to the ground with a sigh—but he scrambled guiltily to his feet and joined in as the Catachans got straight to work. They identified any flora that could be classed as dangerous and cut it down. Donovits found an acid spitter behind a tree, almost as if it had been deliberately hiding there. They thinned out the undergrowth, and Myers unearthed a jungle lizard. It sprang at his crotch, its legs propelling it higher than Lorenzo would have thought possible. Myers flashed his knife, and bisected it in midair.

“I think we should light a fire,” said Donovits, addressing his sergeant rather than the commissar.

Greiss nodded his approval, and Mackenzie opened his mouth to object. “Worth the risk, I'd say.” Greiss interrupted sharply. “The men fight better with a hot meal inside 'em. And it's going to get dark around these parts pretty damn soon. Don't know about you, but I like to be able to see what's creeping up on me—and in the jungle, there's a whole new menagerie of critters come out at night.”

“Apart from anything else, sir,” said Dougan in his usual polite manner, “it's always good to know which of those creatures are afraid of fire.”

“And which ones aren't,” added Greiss under his breath.

“Where's Sly Marbo?” asked Braxton. “Is he joining us?”

Nobody answered him. The truth, Lorenzo knew, was that none of them had a clue where Marbo was now. They hadn't glimpsed or heard him in hours. He might have been present for the bird attack, perhaps firing in from the sidelines, in the chaos, Lorenzo could have missed him. Or he might have gone scouting ahead, maybe encountered orks and found a good sniping position in which he would wait for hours or days—as long as necessary. One thing, Lorenzo did not doubt: wherever Marbo was, he could look after himself. He would be back.

The Jungle Fighters broke into their standard rations, because they were tired and because none of them had the spirit to go hunting or gathering anything better. Anyway, their trust in what they knew about this jungle had been shaken, and no one was especially keen to sample its wares right now.

The night brought with it the fluttering of leathern bat-wings, the soft chittering of a new type of ground-based insect, and—at one point—the footfall of something bigger and heavier, which nevertheless slipped away before it could be seen. The fire drew curious moth-like creatures—and, although they seemed non-aggressive, Armstrong pointed out their barbed fangs and the Jungle Fighters took to swatting them when they could, just in case.

There were snakes, too. Storm found one, about a metre long, slender and black, coiled around a tree trunk, slithering its way down towards the roots. He glared into its slit eyes, challenging it, and the snake glared back. It hissed and struck, and—having ascertained that it was hostile, as if there had been much doubt—Storm caught it by its head, squeezing its mouth shut with his fingers. He yanked it from its perch, swung it over-arm and smacked its body hard into the ground like a whip. Lorenzo glimpsed a distinctive silver triangular pattern on the snake's back. Then Storm casually tossed its lifeless body to Donovits, who would probably spend his watch teasing venom out of its glands for analysis.

Lorenzo was loath to lie down, to close his eyes on an environment about which he still knew so little. But he had no choice, and he trusted his comrades to protect him. So, he lay down on the damp earth and slept.

He was woken by Trooper Storm.

He reached for his fang, and started to push himself to his feet. Storm clapped a steady hand on his shoulder, and a bright grin broke through his now ragged-looking black beard. "Easy trooper," he laughed. "There's no fire. It's time for your watch, that's all."

Lorenzo nodded and relaxed. He glanced at the small patch of sky immediately above him. It had been pitch black when he'd gone to sleep, but now it was showing just the earliest signs of lightening. If Rogar III had a moon, Lorenzo hadn't seen it yet. He threw on his jacket and his bandolier, and checked that his lasgun was locked and loaded.

The only other light source in the Catachan-made clearing was the embers of the fire. They popped and cracked as Myers poked them with a stick, keeping them alive but torpid. There was a slight chill in the air, and Lorenzo drew closer to the glowing coals, to soak up their scant warmth.

“Steel Toe was right, by the way,” said Storm. “The lizards really don’t like fire. Even this is enough to keep them away, though we’ve heard them hissing out there. You want steak for breakfast this morning, you’re going to have to go get one.”

Dougan greeted Lorenzo with a nod. They were to share the last two-hour watch. Typical of Greiss, thought Lorenzo, to pair him up with a veteran, as if he still needed watching over. The rest of his squad were shadowy mounds in the darkness—though he could identify the sergeant by his quiet but distinctive snore, like a grox breaking wind. Presumably, it was Braxton who was twitching in his sleep and sometimes letting out a quiet whimper—while Muldoon, of course, was the one tied to the tree. “Keep an eye on him,” advised Storm, nodding toward their unconscious comrade. “Woods says he woke during his watch, muttered all kinds of gibberish about daemons and monsters. Hotshot had to slug him one to put him back under.”

Lorenzo was disappointed to hear it. He’d hoped that time, or maybe one of the herbal remedies Donovits had forced down Muldoon’s throat, may have dispelled his hallucinations. For all that Greiss and Woods had said to Mackenzie, the Catachans knew they couldn’t lug Muldoon around with them indefinitely. There would come a time when they’d have to accept that he was lost.

Myers and Storm lay down, and soon their heavy breaths joined the sleeping chorus around Lorenzo. He sat on a tree stump, left behind after Armstrong had unpacked a machete and made firewood. It was a little too small for him, and he was uncomfortable—but then comfort was hardly desirable when the lives of your comrades depended on your staying alert.

Dougan knew that too, and he was circling the camp slowly. His soft footsteps were barely audible, but Lorenzo could tell that his artificial foot fell a little more heavily than the real one. Dougan didn’t like to sit on duty. He didn’t like to take the risk of his leg seizing up at a critical moment.

It was about forty minutes later that Lorenzo saw the light.

He wasn’t sure what it was at first: a faint blue glow, somewhere between the trees, lasting just an instant. He couldn’t pinpoint its location, he had no idea how far away it had been. He had been sharpening his Catachan fang, but now he froze—and Dougan, though he was somewhere behind Lorenzo on his latest circuit, picked up on his body language and did likewise.

It could have been a trick of the approaching dawn. The sky was now a deep indigo. But no, there it was again. Too soft, too muted to be a torch, it wasn’t the kind of light you could see by. And yet too wide, too sustained to be an accidental glint off a weapon or a suit of powered armour.

Lorenzo grabbed for a stick, and brushed it across the embers of the fire, smothering them in their own ashes.

The blue light was clearer to him now, but still maddeningly undefined, still seeming to lurk at the edge of his vision, never quite in focus. One second, it was at ground level, the next, it glimmered through the branches at head height, and every time he moved his eyes to find it, it slipped away from him. Some sort of glowing creature, Lorenzo wondered? What was that word Brains had once used? “Bioluminescence”. He wondered if he should wake the others, but he pictured their faces if he did and they found he’d been spooked by a swarm of fireflies.

Anyway, the light was coming no closer.

He watched it a moment longer.

It blinked out.

A second ago, there had been a wisp of smoke coiling up from the ashes of the campfire. Now, it was gone. The sky was a little lighter—wasn’t it? Lorenzo frowned, and crouched by the ashes. He touched them tentatively. They were still warm, but cooler than they ought to have been. His mind was straggling to catch up with what his senses were telling him: that some minutes had passed without him knowing it. It took some time for the message to get through—but when it finally did, Lorenzo stiffened in horror.

The light had hypnotised him, dulled his mind. Anything could have happened while he’d been distracted. Anything could have crept into the camp, and dragged his comrades away while they slept.

There *was* something. A shape at his shoulder. Lorenzo whirled around, but it was only Dougan. “It’s alright, son,” the veteran assured him in a whisper. “We zoned out for a minute or two, that’s all. Everyone’s alright.”

“Old Hardhead said something,” Lorenzo recalled, “in the mess hall yesterday.” Why was it so hard to remember?

“Something about… about ghosts. Lights that lured Guardsmen into… ambushes, I guess. I didn’t realise… I didn’t feel it, but that thing must have got inside my head.”

Dougan nodded gravely. “I’m going out there,” he announced.

“But—”

“We need to know what we’re facing. Don’t worry. We’ve seen what it does now, and we’ve shaken it off once. It won’t fool me again. It’s just a question of focus. It won’t even see me coming.”

“You’re right.” Of course he was right. Lorenzo wished he had realised it sooner, then he could have been the one to volunteer, to have gone out there alone. To have made a name for himself, perhaps. “I’ll come with you,” he offered.

Dougan shook his head. "You need to stay here, watch the camp. Could be this light's meant to lure us away while something worse creeps up from behind."

"I can wake one of the others."

"No need to panic them just yet. It's best I go alone. You could be right about there being an ambush. Any trouble out there, I'll shout a warning. *Then* you can wake the others, and point them in my direction. I'm counting on you, Lorenzo."

Lorenzo shook his head. "I'm coming with you."

Dougan laid a hand on his shoulder, and looked him right in the eye with an unnerving intensity. "Let me do this," he said. "I *need* to do this!"

Lorenzo was left in no doubt that he did. He nodded glumly, and Dougan smiled and clapped him companionably on the arm. Then he slipped away into the jungle, in the direction in which the blue light had last been sighted. After only a few seconds, Lorenzo could neither see nor hear him.

Why did Dougan need to do this?

He'd had his share of glory. Why couldn't he have let someone else have a taste of it, this once? Why had Lorenzo accepted what he'd said? Why hadn't he spoken up, persuaded Dougan that his need was greater?

He had picked up a stick—and as resentment welled in his chest like a living thing, he felt the wood snapping in his clenched fist, driving a splinter into his palm. How could he ever prove his worth?

He pulled himself together, horrified by what he had been thinking. He admired these men, trusted them more than anyone or anything else. He surveyed the sleeping bodies around him, tried to remind himself of that—but that feeling in his chest was back, and he hated them, all of them, for keeping him here. He hated Old Hardhead Greiss and Hotshot Woods, hated Steel Toe Dougan most of all.

The light was back. Lorenzo noted its presence with a numb feeling of acceptance, because somehow he knew it had been there all along. It was brighter than before—and behind him, this time. In the opposite direction from the one in which Dougan had gone. And closer. Almost close enough to touch, it seemed. For a second, just a second, Lorenzo's dulled mind grasped the idea that the blue light was fooling him, playing with his thoughts and feelings—but then that revelation slipped away and was forgotten.

It might not have seen him, he thought. It didn't know he was here. It probably thought he had gone off with Dougan, fallen for its lure. It probably thought it could move in now, for the kill—but the light had underestimated him.

A few steps. A few steps into the dark, that was all it would take. Lorenzo could be the hero for once, the man who had captured the light itself.

To his credit, he did hesitate. He tore his eyes away from the light and shook his head to clear it. He understood that the light had been clouding his thoughts, though he certainly didn't appreciate the extent of its influence. He remembered what Dougan had said. A question of focus. So he focused on what he knew, his comrades, and reassured himself with the knowledge that they were real and tangible. He tested his senses one by one, listening, breathing, feeling, and found each of them as sharp as he remembered.

Then Lorenzo turned back to the blue light, and found it waiting.

He should have called out to Dougan, but he didn't want to scare the light away. He should have woken the others, but the light made him think they would steal his glory. He shouldn't have abandoned them, sleeping, helpless, relying on him to keep them safe, but it was only a few steps and he was in control.

Just a few steps.

Then a few steps more.

The jungle closed around Lorenzo, but that was alright because he hadn't come far. He knew he hadn't come far, because he hadn't reached the light yet, and he knew the light hadn't moved. He knew that, if he looked back, he would still see the camp. His comrades would hear him if he called.

Not that he was likely to call. He didn't need them. In his mind, Lorenzo had left the jungle of Rogar III for a different jungle altogether: that of his home world. He was leading a group of children—some of them *his* children, probably—on a hunt, and they were hanging on his every word of advice, looking at him with awe in their eyes. A man who had earned his name, and more. One of Catachan's greatest heroes, and yet still humble enough to spend time with them, to pass on his wisdom.

Lorenzo pointed out a deadly spiker plant lurking in the foliage, and they gave it a wide berth. He heard snuffling ahead, and he held up his hand for silence. He crept forward, pushing aside the vegetation with his las-gun. There it was, in the centre of a small clearing, basking in the sunlight: The most fearsome of his world's predators, near legendary throughout the Imperium. The beast after which his own regiment had been named. A Catachan Devil.

They were downwind of it, and it hadn't scented them. Lorenzo beckoned to the children to come forward, to take a look at the beast. They obeyed, and let out hushed gasps of fear and wonder. Lorenzo recalled how, at their age, he had been afraid too, and he resolved to prove to them that there was no need, that Man could always triumph over Nature. If he was the right man.

At their age...

He laid his gun aside. This would be a fair fight. Lorenzo drew his knife—a devil claw, the finest of all Catachan blades, over a metre in length—and he pounced. The creature reared up on six bristling legs, opened its mighty claws, and whipped its spiny tail around to sting him. It was fast. He had almost forgotten how fast. Or perhaps it was just that he had slowed down with age. How old was he now, anyway?

He could still take it.

Lorenzo landed in the spot where the creature had been, his knife raised to strike. But the Devil was no longer there. He whirled, disoriented, but saw no trace of it. How could it have escaped from him? From... from... what was his earned name, anyway? He felt confused, standing in that clearing alone. Confused and humiliated. He thought he could hear the children laughing at him.

Then Lorenzo glimpsed a spiny tail a short distance ahead of him, and he knew what had happened. The Catachan Devil had simply wandered away, in search of a better light. A soft blue light. He could see it through the trees, and though he didn't know what the light was, he didn't wonder. The light was safe. Everything made sense again. Except...

How had he got so old?

Lorenzo knew what the children said about him behind his back. They said he couldn't be a hero as he claimed, because he had survived the war when all the real heroes had died. They called him a coward, said he'd never taken a risk, never distinguished himself. Never earned his name after all. He could hear their taunts now. He tried to blot them out, tried to focus on the creature in the blue light ahead of him. He couldn't see it anymore, but he could see the light, and he approached it with increasingly urgent steps. In that light, he would prove them all wrong about him. *"I don't know but I've been told, Jungle Fighters don't grow old..."*

This wasn't what Lorenzo wanted.

Even if it had been, he knew it was an impossible dream. Few Jungle Fighters ended their days like this, and he had never expected to be one of them.

It wasn't real.

It wasn't real.

With that sudden knowledge, he snapped back to the present, to Rogar III. It hit him between the eyes like a smack of cold air, and he was on the bank of a stagnant lake, one foot poised over its surface. He pulled back, and sent loose dirt skittering over the side. As it hit, it evaporated in a cloud of white steam. Acid.

The blue light was hovering in the centre of the lake—but now, as if it knew its ploy had failed, it blinked out again and left Lorenzo in the dark. Alone. Without his lasgun.

In a part of the jungle he had not seen before.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lorenzo was afraid.

It was a feeling to which he wasn't accustomed. But then, nor was he used to being alone, separated from his squad—to having abandoned them. It was their lives he was afraid for, not his own.

He didn't know where he was, nor where Dougan had got to. He didn't know how far he had walked, mesmerised by the blue light. He just knew he had to get back to the campsite. He crashed through the jungle, following a trail he didn't remember leaving, cursing himself for his weakness.

It wasn't as if he hadn't been warned. He could see it clearly now. The light had been inside him all the time, a more subtle presence than he could have imagined. It had heightened his desires and his fears, whatever it had taken to lead him where it had wanted him to go. To his death. He had been lucky. It hadn't been strong enough.

Somehow, he had found the will to focus, to snap himself out of its spell.

The only thing he wanted right now, the total of his hopes and ambitions, was to find his comrades alive. He remembered what Dougan had said, how he'd suspected that the blue light was trying to lure them away. What if there had been an attack in his absence? What if they were all dead, and it was his fault?

Dougan. Suddenly, Lorenzo could hear his voice again, and see the intensity in his gaze. "*Let me do this... I need to do this!*" He hadn't questioned him, hadn't seen that the light had cast its spell over Dougan too.

He stumbled to a halt. Somehow, impossibly, his trail had petered out.

He was lost for a moment, scrabbling in the undergrowth, looking for something—a snapped twig, a crushed leaf—anything to show he had passed this way before. There was nothing. Until, just as he was beginning to give up hope, wondering if he should risk calling out to the others, Lorenzo's fingers brushed against something. Something cold, hard, smooth, angular. Wood and metal.

His lasgun. He had to tear it from the clutches of weeds, as if it had lain here for weeks, been claimed as the jungle's own. He felt another stab of anxiety. He didn't feel as if

more than a few minutes, maybe a half-hour, had passed, and the pre-dawn sky supported that theory—but in the blue light’s embrace, time hadn’t meant a great deal. His comrades’ corpses could be rotting already.

He tried not to think about it. No point in worrying about what he couldn’t change. Just get back to the campsite, and deal with what was real.

A pair of yellow lizard eyes blinked at Lorenzo from under a flowering plant. He fried their owner with a las-round, just to test that his gun wasn’t clogged.

A faint breath of air caressed his face, and made his scratches sting. So, he hadn’t been entranced long enough for them to heal. He remembered stalking an imaginary Devil, standing downwind of it. He had to hope that this part of the fantasy, at least, had been real. He closed his eyes and oriented himself at the spot where he’d found the lasgun, tried to transport himself back to that Catachan clearing and to mentally retrace his steps towards it.

When he opened his eyes again, he knew which way he had to go.

Lorenzo heard movements through the trees—and was that the sergeant’s voice?

He broke into a run, and came up short when two familiar figures loomed before him, Armstrong and Landon.

“What happened?” asked Armstrong and Landon at the same time.

“We’ve been searching for you,” said Armstrong. “Where—?”

“Is everyone—?”

“We thought something must have dragged you away. We were lucky Sharkbait woke when he did, and started yelling. Landon here had a lizard on his neck, we only just got it off him in time.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Where’s Steel Toe? Is he with you?”

Lorenzo felt as if his blood had just frozen. “You haven’t seen him?”

He swallowed, and told Armstrong everything, burning with shame beneath the veteran’s one-eyed gaze. Before Lorenzo’s story was done, Armstrong was leading the way back to the camp. En route, they were joined by Myers and Storm, both bursting with questions. Armstrong filled them in brusquely, and Lorenzo pointed across the ashes of last night’s

fire to where he had last seen Dougan. Myers and Storm went straight off to resume their search in that direction.

Armstrong mimicked the screeching call of a Catachan flying swamp mamba, and the rest of the Jungle Fighters answered his summons, appearing two by two to hear the news and to have their own efforts redirected.

Sergeant Greiss cast an appraising eye over Lorenzo, and asked if he was alright. Lorenzo nodded, and Greiss crooked a finger in his direction and growled, “You’re with me, trooper.”

Lorenzo fell in at the sergeant’s heels, avoiding his gaze. He knew what he must have been thinking.

The search went on for another hour, aided by the reappearance of the sun. Donovits and Woods found a partial trail, and Donovits identified the uniquely heavy indentation of Dougan’s bionic leg—but as with Lorenzo’s trail earlier, it led them nowhere.

Greiss was about ready to give up, Lorenzo could feel it. Until he gave the order, though, there was still hope. He found a path they hadn’t searched, because it was so overgrown, and he started to hack at the vegetation with his knife. Greiss regarded him for a second then, to his immense gratitude, the sergeant drew his own Catachan fang and joined him.

They hadn’t gone far when a figure dropped out of a tree in front of them. It was a lithe man in camouflage fatigues and the customary bandana, with tanned skin and dark hair like Dougan’s. Lorenzo’s heart leapt—and it stayed in his mouth as he recognised this newcomer, not as the man they were looking for but as Sly Marbo.

He had never been this close to the legendary one-man army before. In other circumstances, he might have felt honoured—but Marbo seemed hardly to have seen Lorenzo. His face was taut, denied so much as a flicker of emotion, and his eyes were white and penetrating but dead inside, as he addressed Greiss. “You won’t find your trooper this way.”

Greiss accepted the pronouncement without question. “Have you seen him?”

Marbo shook his head. “This jungle has a way of hiding things, and people. Haven’t worked it out yet.”

Greiss sighed, and called out, “Right, let’s call it a day. Reassemble at the campsite.” There was no response, but Lorenzo knew that one of the others would have heard, and passed the message on.

“One more thing,” said Marbo in his deep, throaty voice. “There’s an ork encampment forty kilometres from here, twenty-two degrees. A big one. Don’t think the Validians know about it—but your course will take you right through it.”

Lorenzo didn't question how he could have scouted so far ahead. He was Sly Marbo.

"No way round?"

"Not unless you want to go wading through an acid swamp—or adding four days to your journey."

Greiss expressed his gratitude with a curt nod—then Marbo was gone. Just gone, in the time it took Lorenzo to blink, leaving not the faintest ripple in the foliage. Sergeant Greiss turned to retrace his steps too, but Lorenzo stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "No. You can't... Trooper Dougan, he could still be..."

Greiss raised an eyebrow. "You heard what Marbo said. Steel Toe's gone. Accept it and move on."

"But what if the light still has him? If he's been hypnotised... He could be out there!"

"You say this light of yours tried to give you an acid bath."

"Yes, but I broke free."

"And if Steel Toe had done the same, he'd have found his way back to us, like you did. What's up with you, Lorenzo? You've lost comrades before."

Lorenzo didn't say anything. How could he articulate the pain he'd felt, like a body blow, when Greiss had called off the search? That terrible moment when his last hope had been snatched from him. The sergeant was right, he *had* lost comrades before—you couldn't fight the Emperor's war, nor grow up on Catachan, without seeing death on a regular basis, becoming inured to it almost. But it was different this time. Different, because he could hear Dougan's words in his head: "*I'm counting on you, Lorenzo.*"

He had let Dougan down. He had let them all down. Lorenzo had been given his chance to be a hero, at last, and he'd failed. He had seen what happened, just a couple of times, to Jungle Fighters who lost the trust of their squad. It was as if they weren't there, as if they didn't exist. And he had felt no sympathy for those wretches. In this environment, if you didn't have the trust of your comrades, you had nothing. Lorenzo would be as invisible to the others as he had been to Marbo.

"I can't help wondering," said Sergeant Greiss as they trudged back to the campsite empty-handed, "how you did it."

"Did what?" asked Lorenzo.

"Broke the spell. Brought yourself to your senses before you took the big plunge. I mean, no disrespect to Steel Toe, God-Emperor rest his soul, I'd have said he was as strong-willed as any of us—but you're the one who made it back."

“I don’t know, sergeant. I just don’t know.”

“Must’ve taken some force of mind. You know, some of the others and me, we were talking—figured you were about due your earned name.”

“No!” said Lorenzo, firmly. “Not for this, sergeant.”

Greiss nodded, and Lorenzo suddenly realised that the grizzled sergeant knew what he was feeling, and understood. He hadn’t lost the sergeant’s trust. Quite the opposite—Greiss didn’t blame him for losing Dougan *because* he trusted him, because he knew Lorenzo had done all he could and that few among them could have done better, not even a veteran of Dougan’s experience.

Lorenzo felt ashamed, now, for not trusting *him*—for believing that his squad would turn their backs on him, when he should have known them better. He swore he’d make it up to them. His tread felt just that little lighter as he and Sergeant Greiss walked on. They wouldn’t talk about it again.

The commissar was in a foul mood.

He hadn’t recognised Armstrong’s Catachan call, so he and Braxton had been searching alone in the wrong area all this time. Mackenzie blamed Armstrong personally for this, but Woods had leapt to his defence and a row had broken out. As Lorenzo and Greiss arrived, Mackenzie was jabbing a finger into Woods’ chest, yelling almost hysterically about how he had almost died because of the Jungle Fighters’ negligence.

“I was attacked out there—by the biggest jungle lizard you’ve ever seen! It dropped from a branch, right onto my shoulder. It’s only because of Braxton’s quick thinking and keen aim that I’m here to tell the tale.”

Lorenzo hid a smile, imagining Mackenzie’s expression as his adjutant was forced to shoot the lizard from his shoulder. Woods was less polite, and just laughed. Armstrong turned to Braxton and congratulated him. “I’m not sure I could’ve hit such a small target.”

The commissar was already scowling, but before Mackenzie could give vent to his anger again, Greiss marched forward, his fists clenched, a scowl on his face. “I’ll tell you what I told your sergeant back at the encampment, commissar,” he growled. “You have a problem with my men, you bring it to me.”

Mackenzie squared up to him, his nostrils flaring. “And what good would that have done, Greiss? You’ve demonstrated repeatedly that you can’t keep your squad in line. We’ve wasted the best part of the morning looking for two of your men—contrary to my explicit wishes—because they decided to go for a stroll in the night.”

“And I suppose your Validians would have stayed put?” sneered Greiss.

“My Guardsmen know better than to follow pretty lights into the jungle, sergeant. That’s because they’ve been taught self-control! If Trooper Dougan couldn’t hold himself in check, then we’re better off without him.”

Greiss’ voice was low, but the threat it carried was unmistakeable. “Don’t push me, commissar. I’ve just lost a good man, who deserved better than to be taken down without a scrap. I’m in no mood for this right now.” He handed his lasgun to Woods, who received it without comment.

Mackenzie’s eyes bulged. “Well, I don’t have to wonder where troopers like Woods and Armstrong here learn their impudence!” he stormed. “I’ve had enough, Greiss. I’ve had enough of this attitude of yours—of having my every order questioned by you. As far as I’m concerned, you aren’t fit to lead a squad of dung beetles, and I’ll be saying as much in my report!”

Greiss drew his Catachan fang, weighed it in his hands for a second, then handed it to Woods.

“In the meantime.” Mackenzie continued, “you will consider yourself demoted to the rank of trooper. Guardsman Braxton will be my second-in-command for the duration of this operation.”

It was obvious from the paling of Braxton’s face that he was anything but happy with this sudden promotion.

Greiss shucked off his pack and rolled up his sleeves, slowly and deliberately. Mackenzie was still ranting as if he hadn’t seen what was coming. It occurred to Lorenzo that, had he been here, Dougan would have been the one to step in, to defuse the situation. But then, Dougan had always known what needed to be said, and how to make it sound polite and reasonable. No one would have thanked Lorenzo for interfering, so he held his tongue.

Greiss’ first punch took the commissar by surprise. It snapped his head around, staggered him and almost made him lose his balance. It wasn’t that Mackenzie hadn’t seen the signs, Lorenzo realised—it was just that he’d hardly been able to conceive of a subordinate actually striking him. Even now, his first thought was for his lost dignity. He was steadying himself, pulling himself up to his full, unimpressive height, drawing breath to remonstrate with Greiss, when a second fist connected squarely with his jaw.

This time, Mackenzie fell, flipping almost head over heels to land on his back, losing his peaked cap. Greiss planted his boot on the commissar’s chest and leered down at him. “That’s for what you said about Steel Toe!” Then he took his foot away and turned his back in a gesture of utmost contempt.

Lorenzo thought it was over—until Mackenzie did the last thing he had expected. He sprang to his feet, and with a speed and ferocity that Lorenzo would never have credited to him, he leapt at Greiss.

Greiss heard him coming and half-turned, as Mackenzie cannoned into his side. Jungle Fighters danced out of their way as they careened back and forth, shifting their grips on each other, each looking for a clear shot at the other. Greiss found one first, and delivered a punishing blow to Mackenzie’s stomach, which doubled him up and brought his chin within striking distance. Woods let out a passionate “Yes!” as a two-fisted uppercut left the commissar stunned and reeling. Greiss bore his opponent down into the dirt, but Mackenzie recovered and planted a foot in the sergeant’s stomach, flipping him over and away from him. Woods winced as Greiss landed hard—and then Mackenzie was on top of him, and it was all Greiss could do to fend off his punches.

The rookie, Landon, looked to Armstrong with concern in his eyes, but he just shook his head: *No. We stay out of it.*

Greiss had caught Mackenzie’s wrist in his left hand. He planted his right arm across the commissar’s throat, protecting his head from Mackenzie’s free fist with his elbow. He pushed up with both knees. Mackenzie’s eyes were almost popping out of their sockets as he fought to retain his position. He was good—far better than Lorenzo would have imagined—but Greiss was better. He knew his body, every muscle in it, like he knew his Catachan fang. He knew when to tense, when to push, when to shift unexpectedly so that Mackenzie reacted to an absent force and unseated himself.

Slowly, inexorably, Greiss gained the advantage, and their positions were reversed. Greiss had the commissar pinned now, his arm resting across Mackenzie’s windpipe, his eyes blazing with ruthless zeal as he pressed down hard. Mackenzie kicked and scrabbled at the arm that was choking him, but Greiss wasn’t giving a millimetre. “Braxton,” the commissar spluttered.

Braxton had almost started forward once already, but he’d been frozen by a glare from Storm. Now, he took Sergeant Greiss’ arms in a nervous grip, glancing over his shoulder as if he expected the rest of the Jungle Fighters to stop him. He was able to tear the sergeant away from his opponent only because Greiss chose not to resist him. He let Braxton haul him to his feet, then threw off the Validian’s hands and brushed himself down, glaring at the prone Mackenzie as if challenging him to a second round.

Mackenzie was having enough trouble trying to breathe. As soon as he could, he lifted a trembling finger to point at Greiss—a feeble attempt to assert some authority—and he wheezed, “I’ll have you court-martialled for this, Greiss. If you thought Trooper Dougan died an undignified death, just you wait. You’ll end your days in front of a firing squad! If we weren’t on radio silence, I’d be voxing a squad of Validians to come and collect you right now. And the rest of you... You just stood there and watched while this man assaulted a senior officer. You’ll pay for this, all of you. When I make my report, you’ll pay dearly. You’ll be an example to every damn Jungle Fighter in the Imperial Guard!”

Mackenzie picked himself up and marched into the jungle, with a curt order to the Jungle Fighters to follow him. Braxton looked around as if he wanted to say something, then thought better of it and hurried after his commissar. The others gathered their equipment, Myers and Storm hoisting Muldoon between them, and set off in their own time. Lorenzo caught the looks that passed between the others—Greiss and Woods in particular—and he suppressed a shiver.

Somehow, he doubted the commissar would ever make that report.

The going was easier than it had been the day before, and the squad made good progress though they were in sullen spirits. They were starting to get the measure of Rogar III. They knew which plants to avoid—and the flower sap they'd been careful to reapply to their skin kept the biting insects away. More jungle lizards tried to pounce on them from the trees, like the one that had attacked Mackenzie—evidently, this was their latest trick—but the Catachans were forewarned, and it became a sport to them to pick off the creatures with las-fire in midair. Myers was the champion of this game, of course.

Braxton broke the silence to express his admiration at the speed with which the Jungle Fighters had adapted to their new environment. It was an attempt to build bridges, but it fell on stony ground.

If there were any birds left in the vicinity, they were keeping a low profile. Lorenzo didn't hear a single call. But the memory of the creatures that had pressed their attacks beyond death hung over the squad like a pall.

There was some good news, though. Muldoon had come round again, and this time he was quite lucid. Myers and Storm continued to support him for some time after he'd started to complain that he could walk unaided. They fed him simple questions until they were sure he was in control of his faculties. Muldoon had no memory of anything after he'd disturbed the hive, so Storm had to fill him in about his attack on Lorenzo.

"I can't have been trying too hard," he commented. "I seem to have left him in one piece."

Lorenzo turned to him with a grin. "You're just lucky I was going easy on you, because you were an invalid."

"Ha! If I hadn't been holding back, I'd have dropped you before you knew I was coming." He was certainly back to his old self. He turned to Myers and Storm. "Seriously—Lorenzo here knocked me out all by himself?"

"Well," said Myers with a grimace, "he did have help."

Lorenzo's stomach knotted as he remembered how Dougan had come to his assistance. "Yes," he said numbly. "I had help."

It was about twenty minutes after that, trailing a short way behind the others, deep in thought, that Lorenzo got the feeling he was being followed. He whirled around, and thought he saw a shape through the trees. A humanoid figure, just standing, watching. But as he brought it into focus, it slipped away like a shadow. Like last night's blue light. Was he being tricked again?

He called out a challenge, which alerted his squad and brought them to a halt. He hurried up to where he thought the figure had been, his lasgun trained on a thorny bush behind which it could have taken cover. There was nobody there.

"Sorry," he said. "False alarm." The others accepted his apology, and moved on.

For Lorenzo, it wasn't so simple. This *wasn't* like last night—when, having snapped out of the blue light's trance, he had seen so clearly what had been real and what had been an illusion. Perhaps something like the light was still working on his senses, because this time, he was certain that there *had* been something.

No, not just something. Someone...

He knew it didn't make sense. He knew that, even without external provocation, the mind could play tricks. Especially the grieving mind. Especially the guilty mind. But, just for a moment as he'd glimpsed that figure, Lorenzo had been sure—as sure as he'd been of anything in his life—that he had known it.

He was sure he had recognised Trooper Dougan.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The jungle seized Trooper Woods without warning.

The red flowers were particularly prevalent in this area, and Lorenzo and his squad had been treading carefully. Woods was sharing a joke with Greiss, who was in a surprisingly sanguine mood, when his feet were yanked out from under him. The Catachans went for their weapons as their comrade dropped. Woods was on the ground, in the long jungle grass, and the red flowers were all screaming.

Lorenzo's first thought was that he had been careless, stepped too close to the flowers—though he had to admit, that didn't sound much like Hotshot. But Woods, he realised, wasn't just being held, he was being *dragged*.

It wasn't the flowers' heads that had Woods, it was their roots. They had burst out of the ground, tangled themselves around his ankles—and they were grasping now for his wrists. They were coiling and writhing around him like living things, like serpents, striking when they sensed an opening. The closest troopers—Muldoon and Landon—had dropped to their haunches, knives drawn, but the roots were thick and tough. By the time Landon had drawn sap, and Muldoon had cut his first root through, ten more had erupted from the undergrowth to replace them. And the wailing flower heads were snapping at the would-be rescuers, straining at their stems.

Woods was pulled out from under Landon. The rookie lunged after him, desperate not to lose the root he had almost severed—and a flower head caught his finger. Landon fought to free himself, but the red petals held him as tightly as they'd held Greiss' stick the previous day. Landon redistributed his weight, tried to gain leverage, and another flower opened its petals wide and clamped itself onto his left ankle. He was immobilised.

Muldoon had fared better, snatching his hand away from a similar attack—but by the time he and his night reaper resumed their work, Woods had been pulled another metre toward uncharted territory. The nearest roots had relaxed their grips now, having passed their captive on to those behind. They were rearing up, twitching from side to side as if on the lookout for fresh prey.

Woods had one hand free, and he was clutching at the undergrowth, at anything that might anchor him. After pulling up a third clump of weeds, he abandoned this plan and reached instead for his devil claw. As he tried to manoeuvre it through the living bonds that held him, a flower caught the blade and wrenched it from his grip.

“Hey,” called Woods, the strain in his voice belying his forced jovial tone, “a little help would be appreciated, you know?”

The entreaty was unnecessary. Most of the Jungle Fighters were on him, or struggling to reach him through the minefield of grasping vegetation. They were cutting, tearing, hacking, but Woods was still being pulled away from them. A root caught his free arm, and pinned it to his side like the other one. Now he was trussed up good and proper, like a fish in a net, hardly able to even struggle anymore.

Mackenzie was shouting, “Don’t just stand there, do something! Cut him loose!” as if it might help. Lorenzo was just watching, thinking... looking for a way, a safe path, to reach Woods through the press of bodies that surrounded him, realising that even if he could find one he would only be joining a losing battle...

He remembered the acid lake, and it occurred to him that the roots might be pulling Hotshot *towards* something...

Lorenzo bounded past his comrades, drawing his las-gun. He was surprised to find that Guardsman Braxton had had the same thought. They stood side by side, and scanned their surroundings, fingers uneasy on their triggers.

Lorenzo saw it first: an acid spitter, lurking in the heart of a flowering bush, almost totally concealed. It stiffened, as if sensing eyes upon it, and opened its mouth. He was sure it was too far away to reach him with its deadly spray—but instinct made him leap aside anyway, and push Braxton with him.

The spitter’s aim was perfect, its liquid plume sluicing into the dirt at just the spot where they had been standing. A few seconds later, and Woods’ head would have entered its range.

A dual burst of las-fire destroyed the acid spitter. Then, without having to confer, both Lorenzo and Braxton pointed their guns at the undergrowth in Woods’ path, and began to blast the flowers that waited there. The flowers’ siren wail went up an octave, becoming louder, more intense, more painful, and Lorenzo’s head began to throb. He could see black spots at the edge of his vision, and he knew the rest of his squad was affected too, because they were starting to reel and shake their heads and put their hands to their ears.

He kept on firing, because it was the only way to end it. Each time he incinerated a red flower head, its roots thrashed for a few seconds longer and then fell limp, but that dreadful sound never seemed to ease.

Lorenzo had to cease firing when he was too blind to aim properly, when the remaining flowers were too close to the prone Woods for safety. He was going nowhere now, the roots around him dead and blackened, but he was still firmly entangled. The other Jungle Fighters followed Lorenzo and Braxton’s lead, targeting the flower heads rather than their roots. They seized them by the red petals, holding their “mouths” closed, and sawed

them from their stems. With each flower that died, more of Woods' bonds fell loose, and finally he was able to tear himself free and stand, evidently in pain from the continuing screaming.

Mackenzie was feeling the worst of it, though. He was practically on his knees, his hands clasped over his ears, and Lorenzo was alarmed to see blood trickling through his fingers.

With Woods out of the danger area, however—and Landon freed now, along with Woods' knife—lasguns could be employed again, and it wasn't long before the final red flower was blasted to a cinder. Lorenzo closed his eyes and let out a long, shuddering sigh as he was soothed by a blessed silence.

“Well, that seals it,” muttered Greiss, when their ears had finally stopped ringing.
“There’s something seriously nuts about this place.”

Donovits was sitting on the ground with his knees drawn up to his chest, his forehead shiny with sweat. “It’s as if evolution has been speeded up here,” he considered. “The red flowers couldn’t catch their prey any more, because the insects—and we—had learned to keep out of their way, so they evolved a means of bringing their prey to them. Likewise for the spitters, they’ve learned how to spit further. The different species are even working together—but all this should take generations. Instead, it’s happened in a few days. I’d say it was impossible, but we’re seeing it with our own eyes.”

Lorenzo felt that chill of the unnatural playing about his spine again. He didn’t want to hear this, didn’t want to believe, but he had no choice. “That’s why the birds and the lizards have been growing more hostile,” he said in a hollow tone.

“And changing their tactics.” Donovits confirmed.

“And why they only started calling Rogar III a deathworld a few weeks ago,” said Armstrong.

“I’d guess,” said Donovits, “that it was the arrival of the orks and the Imperium that upset the ecological balance here. Since then...”

“Rogar has been evolving ways to combat them.” Armstrong concluded the thought grimly. “Now, it’s evolving ways to combat *us*!”

It took a moment for that to sink in, for the consequences to register with everyone, before Greiss put them into words.

“That means we can’t take a thing for granted,” he said glumly. “Soon as we think we know what a creature or plant can do, it’s likely to up and develop a whole new set of offensive capabilities. You need to stay on your toes, troopers.”

Mackenzie had been leaning against a tree, hands on his knees, getting his breath back, licking his wounds. Now he pushed himself up to an unsteady vertical. “You’re forgetting, Trooper Greiss, you don’t give the orders around here anymore.”

“Will do, sergeant,” said Woods as if the commissar hadn’t spoken.

“Too right, sergeant,” said Myers.

“Whatever you say, sergeant,” said Storm.

Mackenzie just scowled, and ordered them to get moving. He was no longer so keen, though, to lead from the front as he had been doing. He instructed Woods to take point in his place, and fell back to his more accustomed position among the troops. He saw that Greiss was regarding him through hooded eyes, and he said curtly, “I’m watching you, Greiss. One misstep and I’ll have you in chains.”

“With respect, commissar,” Greiss growled, “you might be better off watching your own back. The jungle’s a dangerous place—and if you get dragged away like Hotshot just did, you don’t want to be relying on an ‘undisciplined rabble’ to save your scrawny hide, now do you?”

He bared his teeth in a cruel smile.

They reached the river early in the afternoon.

Mackenzie looked pleased about this, as it suggested he had kept his squad on course despite Greiss’ reservations. “Five minutes, everyone,” he said magnanimously. “Fill your water bottles, wash up, whatever you feel you need to do. Just remember, this is the last known fresh water between us and the warboss.”

“You’re assuming it *is* fresh water,” said Greiss.

“I told you before, Greiss, my men reconnoitred this area. We tested the water for all known poisons and diseases.”

“We might know a few you don’t,” suggested Armstrong.

Mackenzie’s voice rose in indignation. “That water is perfectly safe. I’ve drunk it myself. Or did you think we’d been sitting on our hands for the past year just waiting for the almighty Jungle Fighters to show up and rescue us?”

“Just saying I’d like to see for myself,” growled Greiss. “Sharkbait?”

“Aye, sergeant.” Muldoon tore up a handful of weeds and approached the riverbank. The water, a short way below him, was impossibly clear and fast flowing. It was six metres wide, and it sparkled hypnotically as it caught the sun. Lorenzo shared the sergeant’s suspicion: it looked too good to be true.

Muldoon cast his weeds into the river. It hissed and bubbled where they hit, and Lorenzo could see that the water was eating into the vegetation, even as the current swept it away in a telltale cloud of vapour.

Mackenzie blanched. “It... The reports... My men assured me... Why would they...?”

“Just a guess, commissar, sir,” said Greiss with a crooked grin, “but perhaps your men just don’t like you much.”

Braxton hurried to offer a kinder explanation. “It must be as Donovits said, sir. The planet is adapting to our presence, finding new ways to fight us.”

“Maybe,” agreed Donovits, “but this goes beyond evolution, accelerated or not. If this really was a freshwater river—if it’s become so highly acidic in a matter of weeks—we’re talking about a sizeable ecological shift.”

“Could it be the orks?” asked Braxton—and he wasn’t the only man present, Lorenzo sensed, who wanted to think that—to cling to a rational, *knowable* cause for their woes. “Could they have poisoned the water somehow?”

“Maybe,” conceded Donovits, though he sounded doubtful.

“Don’t underestimate these orks,” muttered Mackenzie. “I told you, this new warboss is smart!”

“Yes, well,” said Greiss. “Right now, the important thing isn’t what may or may not have happened in the past—it’s what we do about it in the here and now.”

Mackenzie had been staring into the acid river. Now, he snapped to attention as if remembering his responsibilities. “Right. I hope I don’t have to tell you people to conserve supplies from here on. In the meantime, we have a more pressing problem.”

“Don’t tell me,” said Greiss wryly. “We have to cross that thing.”

They began by sending Woods up a tree.

He shinned up to its topmost branches, until its leaves hid him from view. He disturbed a bird—the first the squad had seen all day—but instead of attacking him it squawked in terror and took flight.

From his new vantage point, Woods scanned the length of the river in each direction, looking for a natural crossing. No one was really surprised when he returned with the news that there was none. That would have been too easy.

Armstrong had brought rope, so the rest of the squad stood back as Myers tied a lasso, swung it over his head and let the looped end fly. It soared across the acid river to the opposite bank, and caught hold of a tree branch. Myers tugged at it to confirm it was secure. The rope came loose, and there was a collective wince as it slapped into the river and was dissolved in an instant, before he could even think about reeling it in. Myers was left with just the two-metre length that had been coiled in his hands.

The Jungle Fighters tested a few creepers, but found them brittle, dried out by the relentless heat. Muldoon suggested they dig up some snapper flowers, and Greiss approved the idea. Mackenzie grumbled something under his breath, but he didn't object —so soon, they were working in a heavy silence, weaving a replacement rope from the flowers' hardy roots. They knotted several short strands together, and finally they were ready for Myers to try again.

This time, the lasso caught and held. Myers tied his end of the rope around the sturdiest tree he could find, and Mackenzie asked for a volunteer to be first across.

Lorenzo's was the second hand in the air, as usual. The first belonged to Landon.

"You sure about this?" Greiss quizzed him.

"Makes sense, sergeant," said the rookie. Lorenzo could see how nervous he felt about saying this, but he was saying it anyway. "Someone's got to go over there and tie the rope up securely, and I'm the lightest. I'm the most likely to make it."

Greiss accepted that, so Muldoon set about tying his remaining two metres of rope around the volunteer's waist, passing it between his legs and finally over the knotted plant roots to act as a safety harness. To this, he attached the end of another length of roots, which would pay itself out as Landon went across.

Then the Jungle Fighters watched in tense silence as Muldoon hoisted Landon up until he could grip the precarious root bridge with his hands and feet. The rookie had left his heavy pack behind, but his lasgun was slung across his back, he never knew what he might encounter, alone on the far side.

Landon made his way across quickly, hanging upside-down from the makeshift rope like a squirrel. He only slowed as he neared the middle of the river, where the slack brought him down almost to its level. If he'd made a slip there, he would have been dead before his harness could catch him.

It was at this moment that Myers' lasso, straining to cope with Landon's additional weight, lost its grip on the branch.

Mercifully, it snagged again, only a centimetre further along. Almost a centimetre too far. Lorenzo, watching, sucked air between his teeth, knowing he could do nothing as his youthful comrade dropped—as he was caught an instant later, holding on for his life to his shaking, swaying lifeline. The acid river lapped against Landon’s lasgun, but as far as Lorenzo could see, Landon himself was unharmed.

When the rope had steadied, he resumed his crossing, hugging more closely to the rope than before until it had begun to rise again, to lift him out of danger. Then he struck out more confidently towards the far bank, and set foot on dry land at last.

Landon untied himself from his harness, and made a quick check of the area for immediate threats. He inspected his lasgun and discarded it, evidently, the acid had rendered it useless. Then he knotted the rope he had carried across with him around a tree. He retrieved the end of the first rope from its branch, and tied it around a different tree nearby, making sure he pulled it good and taut. Then he turned to his comrades, and gave them a thumbs-up sign.

Mackenzie sent Woods across next. The other Jungle Fighters had almost made enough root rope to construct a harness for him, but he didn’t bother waiting for it. The crossing was less fraught for him than it had been for Landon, Woods had two ropes to cling to, and he knew both were firmly anchored at each end. He reached the other side of the river in seconds.

Armstrong was more prudent, waiting until his safety rope was prepared and in place, attached to both crossing ropes, before he set off at a perfectly measured pace. Once he’d set foot on the far bank, he hurled his harness, and Landon’s, back to the others, so Myers and Storm were able to follow him in short order. Donovits was next, once he’d crossed the river, he called back a warning that the first rope was beginning to fray in the middle. “Best keep most of your weight on the second,” he advised.

Braxton had been watching the Jungle Fighters closely, and when his turn came he tried to mimic their actions. Only a third of the way across the ropes, however, he missed a handhold and fell. His harness brought him up short, but for a moment he was bouncing and flailing in midair.

That was when the second rope snapped, its loose ends flopping into the acid to be eaten away. Braxton scrabbled for the remaining rope, and held onto it with white knuckles. A minute passed before he felt confident to proceed further. He made one more slip, but his harness saved him again and he was quicker to recover this time. Lorenzo let out a breath of relief—and realised he had been holding it—as Braxton joined the others. Mackenzie had been rigid with worry, too. Who’d have thought the commissar cared about his adjutant as anything more than a human shield?

Greiss and Muldoon, on the other hand, had been conferring in low whispers, ignoring the drama playing out over the river. As the threat to Braxton passed, and Mackenzie’s attention turned back towards them, they parted smoothly—but their eyes met for a

second, and Lorenzo thought he saw something ominous in that gaze. A flicker of a resolution made and confirmed.

Mackenzie ordered the three remaining Jungle Fighters to begin work on another rope. “Waste of time,” opined Greiss. “We don’t need two ropes. The second was a backup, that’s all.”

“A safety precaution,” said Mackenzie stiffly, “that turned out to be entirely necessary.”

“Only because your Guardsman didn’t know what he was doing,” countered Greiss. “If he’d followed Brains’ advice—”

“I’m not trusting my life to—” Mackenzie began.

Greiss interrupted with, “There’s only four of us left to cross, and Muldoon and Lorenzo here aren’t crying about it. That rope’s held up just fine so far. Better to take a chance than spend another hour sitting around here doing craftwork. We’re already behind schedule.” And with that, he hoisted Landon’s pack on his right arm, and slipped his own onto the left to keep himself balanced. Then he hauled himself up onto the remaining rope and, emulating Woods, began to swarm across it without a harness.

“Come back here, Greiss!” roared Mackenzie. “I’m warning you, if you don’t come back here this instant, I’ll... I’ll...”

“Way I see it, sir,” said Muldoon nonchalantly, “there isn’t much more you can threaten him with.”

“I’ll be adding this to the list of charges against you, trooper!” the commissar yelled after the departing Greiss. “Muldoon, what do you think you’re doing?”

Muldoon had beckoned Lorenzo forward, and was tying a rope around his waist. Mackenzie pushed Lorenzo aside, and announced, “I’ll be going across next. I don’t trust Greiss and Woods over there unsupervised.”

“I’m sure Guardsman Braxton can keep an eye on them, sir,” said Muldoon, tongue-in-cheek. Mackenzie just glared at him, and said nothing.

Muldoon tied Mackenzie into his harness, then gave him the nod that he was ready to go. He didn’t help him up to the rope as he had most of the Jungle Fighters, he just watched as the commissar scrambled up to it himself. He took hold unsteadily, and eyed the acid river below him.

Then the commissar began to cross, moving hand over hand and foot over foot at a confident, unhurried pace. That was when Lorenzo caught that glint in Muldoon’s eye again, and he felt his heart miss a beat.

He had heard that the attrition rate of commissars assigned to Catachan squads was many times the Imperium average. These losses were officially dismissed as accidents, of course—a natural consequence of sending non-deathworlders, no matter how high-ranking, how well-trained, into an environment to which they weren’t suited. It was rarely acknowledged that there might be anything more to it than that—at least, it hadn’t happened within Lorenzo’s earshot. But everybody knew—or at least suspected—the unspoken truth.

The deathworlds of the Imperium bred men who were independent, proud, and loyal only to those who had earned their respect. That went double for Catachan.

“He’s doing well,” murmured Muldoon, watching the commissar’s progress with obvious resentment, “for a city boy. Too well.”

He reached up to the end of the root rope, still tied to the tree beside him, and he looked at Lorenzo as if he was challenging him to say something, to stop him—and it did occur to Lorenzo that maybe he should, maybe it was the right thing to do, but his throat was dry and the words wouldn’t come, and anyway this was nothing to do with him and even if it was, his loyalties lay with his own kind, didn’t they?

Didn’t they?

Too late. He was always too late.

Muldoon wrapped his fingers around the end of the rope and, with a smile of grim satisfaction, he gave it a good tug.

Lorenzo watched as the vibrations travelled the first half of the rope’s length, to where Mackenzie was clinging on. There wasn’t time to shout a warning, even if he had wanted to. The rope jerked itself out of the commissar’s hands, simultaneously flipping him so that he was on top of it. He flailed, caught by surprise, trying to find fresh purchase, slipped, plummeted to the extent of his harness’ slack—and then the harness gave way, as Lorenzo had known it must. A simple slipknot.

There was nothing holding Commissar Mackenzie now.

He was in freefall.

CHAPTER NINE

Lorenzo didn't want to look, but he couldn't turn away.

There was no time, anyhow. Mackenzie would hit the acid before he could blink.

Unless, somehow, impossibly, the direction of his fall was reversed.

Unless he had managed to reach up and, with a last desperate lunge, catch the rope above his head and ride it back up as it bounced.

The commissar's grunt of pain was loud enough to reach Lorenzo's ears, even over the rushing of the river. He was clinging, one-handed, to a rope that was still bucking, trying its best to shake him. The way he had dropped, the way he'd arrested his fall, the way he was hanging now, his feet pedalling the air—Lorenzo was sure Mackenzie must have dislocated his shoulder. It must have been a supreme effort of will for him to hold on at all, as the pain spread to his fingers and numbed them. But hold on he did—and more than that, he managed to lift himself, find the rope with his other hand, and finally grip it between his knees.

Lorenzo was impressed despite himself. Muldoon looked like he could hardly believe his eyes. Then his expression darkened, and he reached for the end of the rope again.

Lorenzo put out a hand without thinking, and caught his comrade's own. Muldoon looked angry, and Lorenzo didn't blame him, he wasn't sure of his own motives for intervening, so how could he expect Sharkbait to understand? He held his gaze, and shook his head: *Enough!* But he knew he was going to blink first.

To Lorenzo's surprise, Muldoon gave a nod of acceptance. He took his hand away. He turned so that Lorenzo couldn't see his expression.

The rope began to tremble again. Lorenzo didn't look, but he knew Mackenzie must be back on the move. A moment later, the rope gave a little jerk as it was relieved of the commissar's weight, and Muldoon turned to catch the remaining harness as Myers flung it back to him.

He said nothing as he tied the rope around Lorenzo's waist. As Muldoon hoisted his comrade into position on the crossing rope, however, their eyes met, and Lorenzo thought they shared a moment of mutual respect.

Then Muldoon turned away again, and Lorenzo was alone, concentrating on the rope between his hands and feet, the muscles in his arms and legs, and the rushing acid river below his dangling head.

Halfway across, it occurred to him that if he *had* upset Muldoon, he was probably about to find out all about it.

When Muldoon stepped onto the far riverbank, the last of the squad to cross, Mackenzie was waiting for him.

Braxton had reset the commissar's shoulder, and fixed him a makeshift sling, but he was obviously in pain. Still, he greeted Muldoon with a left-handed punch to the jaw that was fast, accurate and powerful enough to knock him off his feet.

Muldoon lay sprawled in the undergrowth, wiping the blood from his lip.

Mackenzie stepped back and straightened his jacket, glaring down at the trooper.

The Catachan rubbed his chin ruefully and conceded, "Alright. I deserved that." He got to his feet and dusted himself down.

"And a damn sight more," hissed Mackenzie. "If you wanted to join Greiss on Death Row, you couldn't have thought up a better way of doing it, Muldoon."

"Hey," said Muldoon, all injured innocence, "you can't blame a trooper for a simple accident."

Mackenzie's nostrils flared. "Accident my—!"

Greiss interrupted, "You want to be careful, commissar, accusing a good man of attempted murder when you've no evidence, especially in front of his squad. Muldoon says it was an accident, that's good enough for me."

Mackenzie ignored him. He was glaring at Muldoon. "I want him restrained," he said icily. "*Silence!*" he bellowed at the chorus of protest that greeted the order. "I want this man stripped of weapons, and his hands tied. Braxton!"

Braxton started forward, seeming almost relieved when Greiss barred his way with an outstretched arm. "You can't do that, commissar," he snarled. "You make a man defenceless in the jungle, you're as good as killing him, without a trial, without nothing."

"What do you suggest I do, Greiss? Muldoon has proven himself a danger to this mission —to me personally. "I have the authority to execute him on the spot. Is that what you want?"

“It was an accident.”

Lorenzo had surprised himself again, but he felt he owed Muldoon something. He was committed now, everyone had turned to look at him.

“I was right there,” he said. “I saw it all. A bird flew at Muldoon. One of the black ones, from yesterday. It came right out of the tree above his head. It startled him. His arm jolted the rope.”

“That’s right.” Woods spoke up. “I saw it from here. Sharkbait slashed at it with his reaper, injured its wing I think, and sent it flapping away.”

A couple of the others gave nods and murmurs of agreement.

Mackenzie looked from one of the Jungle Fighters to another, evidently not believing a word of their story. “My harness—”

“—must have been frayed,” said Muldoon. “I’m sorry. I should have checked it more closely. I should have seen the damage before I sent you off. Sir.”

Mackenzie glared at Muldoon for a long moment. Then he turned to Braxton. “I still want him bound,” he said. “To ensure there are no more ‘accidents’.”

This time, both Myers and Storm stepped forward, placing themselves between Braxton and Muldoon, their arms folded in defiance. Woods drew his devil claw, the glint of it catching the commissar’s eye and giving him pause for thought.

“I don’t think you’re hearing us, Mackenzie,” growled Greiss, stepping forward until he was nose to nose with the slighter man. “You may be Mr High-and-Mighty Commissar back in your comfortable quarters, surrounded by a thousand Guardsmen ready to bow and scrape and lay down their lives for you—but you’re on a deathworld now. This is our territory—that’s why we’re here! Until you start to wise up and do things our way, ‘accidents’ are going to keep on happening, you get my drift?”

“Are you threatening me, Greiss?” demanded Mackenzie. “I have witnesses.”

“You have Braxton.”

“If anything happens to me, anything at all—”

“It’ll be in his report. Yes, I worked that out. If he ever gets to make one, that is. Like I keep telling you, Mackenzie, accidents happen out here.”

Mackenzie’s ears were still red, but the rest of his face had turned very white indeed. He’d got the message, at last.

“He’s a good man, you know.”

Lorenzo’s attention had been focused on the jungle. There had been more lizards stirring in the foliage, and he’d had that feeling of being followed again although he could see no proof. He hadn’t noticed Braxton until he had spoken, hadn’t seen that he’d dropped back in the marching order to be at Lorenzo’s side. Briefly, he felt irritated that the Validian always seemed to come to him. Lorenzo didn’t feel like talking right now, least of all about what had happened by the river.

But Braxton was determined. “The commissar, I mean,” he continued. “You’ll see that when you’ve worked beside him for a while.”

Lorenzo raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“I know he’s been tough on you all. He’s fresh out of training. Maybe he’s trying too hard to prove he can do the job.”

“His problem,” said Lorenzo curtly. “We can’t afford to carry him. On Catachan, he’d have been dead twenty years ago.”

“Thank you, anyway,” said Braxton.

“For what?”

“For stopping Muldoon. I saw you.”

“You were too far away. You’re mistaken.”

“You must agree with me—that the commissar doesn’t deserve to die.”

“I agree with my comrades,” said Lorenzo, “that Old Hardhead doesn’t deserve what Mackenzie has planned for him, that Steel Toe was a good soldier, who didn’t deserve what Mackenzie said about him.”

“There has to be a way—”

“It’s him or Greiss.”

“You know, if it comes down to that,” said Braxton, “I... I have to...” Lorenzo nodded. He knew. They said no more. There was nothing more to say.

They rested in an area lush with what Muldoon and Donovits judged were water-bearing vines. They snacked on purple berries that Muldoon had picked and tested earlier. Then Lorenzo drew his Catachan fang, took a vine in his hand and scored a thin cut in its skin. The vine bled clear, and Lorenzo positioned his near-empty bottle to capture the precious drops of liquid, of which there were all too few.

Within twenty minutes, the Jungle Fighters had drained the vines of all they had, replenishing their supplies just a little. As Lorenzo returned his bottle to his pack, he heard low voices, and realised that Greiss wasn't with them.

He could just make out Sergeant Greiss through the jungle. He was talking to somebody else: a man whom Lorenzo couldn't see at all, so easily did he blend into his surroundings, but he knew it could only have been Sly Marbo. He couldn't make out what was being said—but as Greiss turned and trudged back to the others, it was with slumped shoulders and a dark, brooding expression.

He gathered the Jungle Fighters around—and to Lorenzo's surprise, Mackenzie didn't object, he just joined them and listened. Greiss told the squad what Lorenzo already knew: that there were orks ahead—and Mackenzie raised his eyebrows and frowned at his sketch map but again said nothing. "Marbo's scouted a path for us," said Greiss, "that'll take us around the greenskins, but still too close for my liking. Now, the commissar here explained why we can't blow our cover, but here's another reason for you: Marbo figures, from the size of this camp and the number of huts, that the greenskins outnumber us about thirty to one. Even Hotshot can't take down thirty orks on his own!"

"Oh yeah?" grinned Woods. "Lead me to 'em, that's all I'm saying."

"So the only way we're getting through this one." Greiss continued, "is by stealth."

"How far is this camp?" asked Donovits.

"Another five kilometres," said Greiss, "before we start running into patrols. I say we make up that ground, then break early for the night. We get some food, some shut-eye, then make our move in the small hours."

There was a general murmur of assent, and the Jungle Fighters were starting to get to their feet, to retrieve their packs, when Greiss stopped them. "One more thing. Any of you felt like you're being followed? Since Lorenzo's little outburst, I mean."

Nobody spoke up. A few of the Jungle Fighters exchanged uncomfortable glances. Greiss' eyes narrowed. "I don't hear any of you denying it."

Unexpectedly, it was Mackenzie who spoke up. "I thought I heard something. Footsteps, about an hour and a half ago. When I looked, there was no one there. I assumed it was Marbo."

“I saw something,” offered Donovits, “more recently. I didn’t speak up because... Sergeant, it was just a flicker in the corner of my eye. A trick of the light. A... a feeling, more than anything.”

“Wildman and me, we dropped back without telling the rest of you,” said Myers, “checked out a bush where I thought I’d seen something move. It would’ve been about the time the commissar said.”

“But there was no one there.” Storm took up the story, “and believe me, if there had been, there was nowhere he could’ve gone without us seeing him.”

Greiss took all this in with a grim nod. “Marbo reckons there *is* something. He’s caught glimpses of it, like the rest of us, reckons it’s stalking us. But whenever he gets too close, it disappears. It leaves no tracks, no nothing.” With a smile, he added, “Marbo says it’s almost as good as he is.”

“Ghosts!” said Braxton.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“That’s what the Validians have been saying. I reported on it for *Eagle & Bolter*, our broadsheet. The same story, from four different squads. They all had the feeling they were being followed, but there was no evidence of it. I thought it might be connected to the blue lights, the jungle playing tricks on their minds.”

“Hallucinogens in the atmosphere?” mused Donovits. “Could be put out by one of the plants. They could even be in the berries we’ve eaten.”

“I didn’t eat any berries,” said Myers, “at least not till after I saw that... thing.”

“This could be serious,” grumbled Greiss. “First Sharkbait goes off the deep end, then Steel Toe and Lorenzo go wandering in the night, now this. If this jungle gets us so we can’t trust our own senses...”

“You said Marbo saw this ‘ghost’,” said Donovits. “He saw it following *us*. If the jungle were affecting him, making him—making all of us—paranoid, then surely he’d have thought the ghost was following *him*. That makes sense, yes?”

“Then it has to be real,” said Lorenzo.

“We need to know for sure,” said Armstrong.

“Maybe we should leave well enough alone,” said Braxton. “I mean, there’s no record of these ‘ghosts’ attacking anyone.”

“Yet,” said Armstrong. “You should have learned by now, that could change in a heartbeat. I say we search.”

Greiss nodded his agreement, and the squad separated, each man taking a sector of the jungle around them, though each was sure to stay within sight of two others at all times. They kicked and cut their way through the undergrowth, beat bushes, shook trees and even shinned up some to search their leaf-shrouded upper branches. The Jungle Fighters checked all the places where *they* would have hidden. Finally, they regrouped, having covered an area some three hundred metres in radius and found nothing. No one. No sign that anyone had been here, other than the Jungle Fighters themselves.

There was nothing they could do after that but go on. It was only a few minutes later, however, that Lorenzo had that feeling again, like a prickling on his neck.

He wasn’t the only one. As he whipped around to inspect the foliage behind him, Storm and Braxton did the same. And this time, Lorenzo was sure of it. There was something there. He could just make out a shape between the trees. A head and shoulders. Fie drew his lasgun and stepped forward, not wanting to move too fast, not daring to blink, to take his eyes off the shape. His other senses told him that Storm and Braxton were beside him, and the rest of his squad not far behind. Lorenzo took another step. The head moved, shifting just a fraction, in a very human gesture.

He was only a few metres away from the shape when it changed. It seemed to metamorphose—or, more accurately, to come into focus—in front of his eyes. The shape resolved itself into a cluster of thistles. Thistles that had always been there, the rest, Lorenzo had imagined. He started as Storm shot the thistles anyway, and fired into the surrounding undergrowth a few times for good measure. “In case this thing is a shape-shifter,” he explained. But he disturbed nothing more than a few black insects, which smelt the flower sap on the Jungle Fighters and buzzed away.

The whole squad was on the alert after that, on edge. Lorenzo had to force himself not to jump at every shadow he saw, every distant sound that came to his ears. He thought about what Greiss had said, about losing trust in their own senses. The others hadn’t seemed too worried, probably didn’t believe it could happen to them, but he remembered the blue light. He remembered how real its lies had seemed.

Landon had approached Greiss, and Lorenzo was just close enough for his keen ears to pick up their hushed conversation. “I’ve had an idea, sergeant,” said the rookie. “Why don’t I hide in a tree and let the rest of you go on a way? If we are being followed, I’ll soon find out.”

“I don’t know,” said Greiss. “We’re talking about someone or something that’s given Sly Marbo the slip—and that isn’t easy.”

“Maybe he knew Marbo was around. Maybe he heard us talking about him. I’m the smallest of us, sergeant, the one he’s least likely to miss if he *is* watching us. The rest of you could gather around, block his view for a second, and I’ll be gone. Next time our ‘ghost’ sees me, he’ll be passing right under me, and I’ll raise the alarm.”

Greiss raised a cynical eyebrow. “That a promise? Swear on your blade? Because you’ve been pushing yourself forward today, Landon—and that’s good, don’t get me wrong, we’ll make a fine soldier of you, maybe even a sergeant one day—but this isn’t the time for grandstanding, hoping to hog some glory for yourself.”

“Soon as I see a thing,” Landon promised, “I’ll yell my lungs out.”

Greiss considered the proposal, and finally nodded. By the time he passed it on to the rest of the squad, however, two men at a time, in a quiet growl, he’d made a few alterations. He approached Mackenzie last—but by this time, the commissar had heard what was afoot. “If you’re asking for my permission to proceed, Greiss,” he remarked acidly, “then consider it granted.”

A short time later, they came to a mournful-looking tree with branches that sagged almost to ground level, dripping with water-bearing vines. It was almost too perfect.

They gathered round and set to work with their knives, teasing out what liquid they could. Lorenzo stopped Braxton from putting his thirsty lips directly to a vine, pointing out that the skin was probably poisonous.

After a few minutes of this, Landon worked his way to the centre of the group, and was handed a lasgun by Donovits to replace the one he had lost in the river. He stepped onto Muldoon’s cupped hands and was hoisted onto the tree’s lowest branch, his camouflage uniform and dubbin-streaked face immediately lost among its leaves. Lorenzo heard the faintest of rustles above his head as the rookie climbed higher, and he resisted the urge to look up.

“Right, men,” announced Greiss, in what was maybe a slighter louder voice than usual, for the benefit of any eavesdroppers, “time we made a move. We’ve still got lost time to make up.”

As the squad set off again, the Jungle Fighters spread out more widely than they would normally have done, yet contrived to cross each other’s paths frequently. An observer would have been hard-pressed even to count them, let alone to work out which of them might be missing. They also moved more slowly than before—because, although nobody said anything, each of them was reluctant to leave his inexperienced comrade too far behind. Indeed, the further they strayed from Landon’s position, the slower, the more reticent, their steps became—and Lorenzo noticed a certain amount of jostling for the rearmost position, the man who would be able to respond first to the alarm call when it came. Woods, of course, came out on top.

Lorenzo had been counting out a minute in his head. As he reached sixty, Greiss gave a nod, and Muldoon disappeared into a bush. Myers provided a distraction, this time, by yelling “jungle lizard!” and firing into the undergrowth before professing, with mock sheepishness, to have been mistaken.

They proceeded at length, expecting Trooper Landon to reappear before too long, at which point somebody else would slip into hiding. After twenty seconds had passed, though, Lorenzo saw that Greiss was getting worried. Another five, and he came to a halt, and drew breath to give the prearranged signal that would call off the operation.

That was when Landon yelled out, at last.

Only this wasn’t a yell of discovery. It was a yell of fear.

Lorenzo was running before the echoes had subsided. They *had* come too far, because Landon was still all the way back where they had left him, and Lorenzo was pushing his muscles as hard as he could, willing himself forward, and yet still the path to his comrade seemed to stretch a near-infinite distance. He concentrated on what he could do: pumping his legs, faster than he could think, so fast that he was sure only sheer force of will kept him from falling. There were sounds ahead—ugly sounds, full of foreboding—but they were almost drowned out by his heartbeat, by the crashing footsteps of comrades around him and of Woods in front.

Every second counted. Every fraction of a second.

And there weren’t enough of them.

Landon yelled again: a terrible gurgling scream, which was cut off in mid-flow and could only have meant one thing.

He came into sight at last, limp and no longer straggling in the grip of a figure that was humanoid in shape but a mockery of a human in its aspect.

The monster was caked in dirt, centimetres thick, and it bristled with grass, dead leaves, living flowers and the severed roots of larger plants as if a whole section of the planet had been scooped up and wrapped around its frame. Lorenzo thought the monster *was* flora, at first, but he could make out patches of suntanned skin, and human fingers around Landon’s neck. Woods had already charged it, a lasgun fanfare presaging his arrival.

Lorenzo had brought up his weapon but hadn’t fired, fearful of hitting the monster’s captive—but Woods had seen what he hadn’t, or rather accepted what he didn’t want to accept.

It must have waited for Landon, he realised. It was right under the tree in which the Guardsman had concealed himself—but he wouldn’t have come down from there unless

he was sure it was safe. The monster had discovered the Jungle Fighters' trap, and set its own in return.

As Woods hit the monster, it dropped Landon, and he fell to the ground, his head coming to rest at an acute angle to his body. Lorenzo was halfway to him when he realised there was no point. He changed course and leapt at the monster instead, along with Myers and Storm, whose howl of rage echoed in Lorenzo's ears. Woods could probably have handled the monster on his own—and he would have enjoyed bragging about it later—but Lorenzo wasn't thinking about that right now. He was thinking about Landon.

The monster, it turned out, was stronger than they had expected. It dislodged Woods and Myers, and sent them flying with a sweep of its arm. As the two troopers fell, however, Muldoon and Greiss appeared in their places. The monster was borne down under the combined weight of four Catachans, but showed no sign of slowing or weakening as they pounded at it with their fists. Lorenzo drew his fang, and plunged it into the monster's heart with a snarl, but the blade came out encrusted with muck and no blood, and still the monster fought on.

It shifted beneath his knees, and he realised with a start that it was *sinking*... as if the monster lay in quicksand, though the earth around it felt as hard as it ever had to the touch of Lorenzo's foot. He was scrabbling at the monster, desperate to stop it, to hold it here, because all he could think was that it was getting away—it had killed Landon and it was getting away—but the pull of the earth was inexorable, and the monster was gone, leaving Lorenzo with only two handfuls of mud and an empty feeling in his heart.

He staggered to his feet, and stepped back from where the monster had been, from the spot where the jungle grass still grew as if it had never been disturbed—and he looked at Greiss, with bewilderment in his eyes, as he realised that the sergeant had claimed a souvenir, wrenched it free from the monster's mass even as it went under. He was just staring at it, the first time Lorenzo had seen him speechless, as the rest of the Jungle Fighters gathered round.

Greiss held up his find, and one by one they realised what it was, and then they had no words either.

It was a bionic leg.

CHAPTER TEN

Lorenzo couldn't sleep.

This was highly unusual—at least when he was planetside, out in the jungle.

They had set up camp before the sun had gone down. They were resting in preparation for their passage by the ork encampment—a trial in which the night would be their ally. Lorenzo could feel the distant sun on his face, and its red glow penetrated his eyelids—but he was used to that. He was used to making the best of sleep whenever, wherever and for however long he could grab it. It wasn't just the sunlight that kept him awake.

Nor was it just the death of a trooper he had hardly known, to whom he didn't remember saying a word, a young man who could have become a good comrade, even a hero, had he lived to earn his name.

The monster—Lorenzo couldn't think of it as Dougan—could sink into the ground, and rise from it as silently.

Little wonder, then, it had proved so elusive so far. Little wonder Landon hadn't seen it coming.

Lorenzo was feeling the same discomfort, the same restless itch, as he had on the carrier ship. That creeping realisation that the world around him didn't bow to the edicts of nature, to the physical laws he had thought inviolable. The feeling that nothing made much sense anymore.

"It couldn't have been Steel Toe," Woods had insisted, in the aftermath of the brief fight with the monster, manifestly ignoring the proof that had been there for all to see, in Greiss' hand. "I don't care what happened to him, what this planet did to him, he wouldn't have... He wouldn't have. Not Steel Toe."

"Sorry, Hotshot." Greiss had said gloomily, "we have to face facts. I'd recognise this hunk o' metal anywhere. See under the dirt here? Scorch marks from where Steel Toe was bitten by that critter on Vortis. It shorted the circuits, sent a lethal shock across its own mandibles. Steel Toe couldn't walk for a fortnight, till we got the leg fixed, but he saved our bacon that day."

“It *wasn’t* him,” said Donovits firmly. “It may have been his body, but it wasn’t Steel Toe. He’s dead!”

Myers had rubbed his chin where the mud-encrusted monster had hit him. “Well, he was sure taking a long time to lie down.”

“Brains is right,” said Muldoon. “What we just fought wasn’t Steel Toe. It wasn’t alive. It was some kind of a zombie. I looked into its eyes—and I’m telling you, Steel Toe wasn’t in there.”

Greiss, as usual, had turned the topic to the future, to what they did next, not letting his troopers dwell on what they couldn’t explain. “Right, men,” he had announced, “that means we have a problem.”

“I can’t see that thing coming back, sergeant,” said Myers, “not minus its leg.”

“Not what I meant, Bullseye. There’s something on this planet can bring the dead back to life.”

“Not exactly bring them back.” Donovits had corrected him, “just reanimate them. Without getting a closer look at Steel Toe’s body, I couldn’t tell you if it was host to some parasite, or...” He’d tailed off as he had followed Greiss’ gaze.

They’d all looked down at Landon’s body.

Lorenzo let out a sigh, now, and rolled onto his back, accepting that he was awake for the duration—until he could calm the raging thoughts that filled his head to bursting. He listened to Myers, who was on watch, humming a quiet tune as he cleaned his knife. He stared, almost sightlessly, at the plastic sheeting that Muldoon and Donovits had tied around the leafiest branches of the surrounding trees, collecting condensation for the squad’s water bottles. He listened to Braxton’s breathing, beside him, and he knew the Validian was awake too.

Rogar III was winning. It was beating them—and the fact that it could only do so by changing the rules was cold comfort to Lorenzo.

He had wanted a challenge. He had wanted to earn his name. But his squad was already two men down, and they hadn’t seen a single ork yet. There would be more casualties, of that, he was certain. More chances to prove himself. Or die trying. Not that Lorenzo was afraid of death, but he thought about the rest of his company, by now no doubt engaged in fierce battle. He wondered if they had scratched the surface of Rogar yet, if they’d learned its secrets—or if the planet was concentrating its forces on this one small squad, the twelve men who had dared try to penetrate its dark heart. Ten men, now. He wondered what those fellow Jungle Fighters would think, upon completing their missions, if they found their bravery had all been for nothing—if there was no word from the squad that had been entrusted with the most important assignment.

No, Lorenzo wasn't afraid of death. But he *was* afraid of failure. And of going to an unmarked grave, with no one left to remember his name or to tell of his heroism at the end.

They hadn't been able to cremate Landon. They were too close to the orks now to risk lighting a fire. Myers had expressed the dubious hope that their fallen comrade's broken neck might prevent his resurrection by the force that had animated Dougan. But Donovits had just shaken his head.

Greiss had done the deed himself, in the end. He hadn't let anyone else help, he'd roared at Woods when he'd tried to ignore that order. He had told them to remember Landon as he was in life. Still, Lorenzo couldn't shake the image from his thoughts: Old Hardhead, driving the butt of his lasgun down into the dead rookie's arms and legs, over and over again. Until his body was no more than a fleshy sack for the fragments of his shattered bones. Until no force in the Imperium or beyond could have made Landon's limbs support his weight.

The sound of a shovel striking the earth had seemed to repeat forever. Greiss had reappeared, at last, with his face dirt-streaked and red. He had reported, in a hollow tone, that it was over, that Landon could rest in peace.

Lorenzo drifted into a fitful doze, haunted by nightmares in which he was fighting his own comrades, and the bony hands of Dougan and Landon were grasping at his ankles, trying to pull him down into the earth to join them.

He could hear low voices.

He opened his eyes, catching his breath at a lingering vestige of some dream horror already fading in his memory. The night had swooped in when he hadn't been looking. It was dark, and the huddled shapes around him were stirring, preparing. It was time, already.

He scrambled to his feet, still unsettled by the dream but trying not to show it. He pulled on his jacket and bandolier, checked his pack. Few words were spoken, the Jungle Fighters all concentrating on what lay ahead of them, knowing its import. Mackenzie and Braxton looked especially tired, and Lorenzo realised that each must have slept only half the short rest period. Neither had been placed on the watch rota, but the commissar probably hadn't dared close his eyes without his adjutant to look out for him. He didn't trust anybody else.

Lorenzo hadn't been placed on watch either. A part of him wondered if it was because Greiss didn't trust *him*. Despite his pretence to the contrary. Because of last night. The sergeant's briefing soon quelled that fear, though.

Greiss spoke quietly and didn't say much. Sounds carried further at night. Anyway, the Catachans knew what was expected of them, and Mackenzie and Braxton would just have to follow their lead. He reminded the squad of the importance of stealth: "One ork or gretchin gets sight or sound of us and lives to tell of it, and we've not only blown our mission, we won't be around to explain to Colonel Graves what the hell we thought we were doing." Then he made the pronouncement that caused Lorenzo's heart to leap.

"Lorenzo takes point," said Greiss. "That's because we might have more to contend with than just greenskins. Remember, people, those blue lights come out at night. I want you to pair up, keep an eye on your opposite number—first sign he shows of going misty-eyed, you give him a slap. Lorenzo, I'm trusting you upfront alone because you've shaken off the effects of the light once. If it comes back, you can resist it, right?"

"Right, sergeant."

Greiss outlined their proposed route, and Lorenzo felt a swell of pride when he turned to him in particular and asked if he was clear on it. He confirmed that he was, and Greiss drew him to one side, and clapped him on the back. "I know I don't have to tell you to go slow and careful. Hell, if you're as quiet out there as you are around us half the time, those orks will never hear you coming."

Then Greiss gave the order to move out, and Lorenzo drew his Catachan fang and slipped into the jungle, quickly but quietly, staying low, in cover. He used his lasgun to part the vines and creepers in his way, surveying the ground for predators and other hazards. He advanced cautiously, doing his best to leave no trail. The foliage yielded to his soft but firm touch, but closed in again behind him until he felt like he was travelling in his own green cocoon. He knew his comrades were behind him, but all he could hear of them was an occasional rustle that might have been a lizard or a whisper of the night breeze. They were keeping their distance, in case Lorenzo made a misstep, set off an ork trap and blew himself to pieces. He was alone now, to all intents and purposes. In the most dangerous position, but that was alright. He wanted that responsibility.

The danger focused Lorenzo's mind. It sharpened his senses. It blew away the doubts of a few hours earlier, like a strong, fresh wind.

He maintained a good pace for the first hour or so, but slowed when he knew the encampment was near. He saw no evidence of its presence yet, but he fancied he detected a hint of greenskin stink on the air. Something stirred in a bush beside him, and Lorenzo froze, hoping his camouflage would hide him—but it was only a snake. One of those with the silver triangles on their skins.

He crept on—but, a few minutes later, he spotted another triangle-backed snake in the undergrowth, and this one had seen him. Its head reared up. It bared its tiny fangs and hissed, but it made no move to strike Lorenzo. It appeared to be watching him.

He remembered how the birds had stalked the Catachans, how he'd kept spying them out of the corner of his eye before they launched their attack. He remembered Braxton saying that the lizards had done something similar, poking around the edges of the Validian camp for a few days before they'd dared enter it. The silver-backed snake didn't appear to be a threat right now, but as Armstrong had said, that could change in a heartbeat. Particularly if it wasn't alone, and especially if a concerted attack on the Jungle Fighters drew the orks' attention.

Lorenzo took a step forward, fingers twitching on his knife. The snake tensed, watching him. A lasgun would have done the job more efficiently, but with too much noise. Lorenzo stooped down, holding out his free hand as bait. The snake backed away a centimetre, suspiciously. Lorenzo took another step.

The snake struck. From further away than he'd expected. As if its coiled tail had acted as a spring to propel it out of the grass. It jabbed at the proffered hand, and Lorenzo snatched it away and decapitated the snake with his fang before it could land and reorient itself. He stamped on its severed head, exploding it in a mass of black blood. He grabbed the twitching body, wrung it until it was still, and tossed it aside into the dark. A quiet, discordant hiss of alarm told him that his message had been received by multiple unseen onlookers. The jungle grass swayed and rustled in a dozen thin paths away from him.

It was shortly after that that he came across the first trap.

Lorenzo had known it was imminent, because the undergrowth in this area was flattened, plants and branches broken. The orks had been here, and recently.

The trap was crude and obvious, like most of their constructs: a cord stretched between trees at knee height, connected to something hidden in the lower branches of one. A grenade, most likely. Still, a Guardsman in a hurry might not have spotted it. It was more evidence of the warboss' cunning, spreading to his followers.

Lorenzo stepped over the tripwire carefully, and waited. Thirty seconds passed before Muldoon's head peeked out of a bush a few metres behind him. He saw Lorenzo, and an inquisitive expression crossed his face. Lorenzo indicated the wire, Muldoon would probably have seen it anyway, but better safe than sorry. Muldoon nodded, then waited for Lorenzo to regain his lead.

Alone again.

The second tripwire was higher, and better placed. To its right, the jungle was dense with poison creepers—and Lorenzo knew that that way lay the acid swamp of which Sly Marbo had spoken. To the left: a cluster of red snapper flowers, through which he could see no safe route. Again, his inability to use his lasgun narrowed his options. Bad enough to be grabbed by those intractable petals—but the greater peril would be the flowers' alarm wail, certain to attract attention.

He approached the wire, and stooped beside it gingerly. It was too high to step over. He could disarm the trap: cut the wire or retrieve the grenade from the tree. The risk in so doing would be minimal, but actual. If an ork or a gretchin came this way after the Jungle Fighters had passed, it would know they had been here.

No. Far better, far safer, to take no chances. To go under.

Lorenzo lowered himself onto his stomach, noting that the ground was a little soft, a little wet. He removed his pack and his lasgun from his back, to reduce his prone height, and pushed them under the wire before him. Then he dragged himself through the mud on his elbows, keeping his head down.

He had plenty of clearance. So long as nothing unexpected happened, so long as he didn't get careless, he had nothing to worry about.

So long as nothing unexpected happened...

The blue light snapped on like a shipboard lighting panel, just ignited into a glowing ball ahead of him, a few centimetres off the ground. Lorenzo felt his stomach tighten as he craned his neck to look at it without raising his chin. He sensed that it was calling to him, urging him to stand and approach it, and he felt the muscles in his arms and legs tensing to obey.

He stopped himself, before his back could brush the tripwire.

He closed his eyes, and immediately felt better. His head was clearer. Lorenzo listened to his own breathing, and he felt the cold of the mud against his stomach. He thought about Steel Toe Dougan. He knew the blue light was still out there, but he was certain it hadn't entered his mind. He was certain that it couldn't, so long as he didn't look at it.

But what if the blue light wanted that? What if its purpose, this time, was to blind him to something else? To something creeping up on him...

...something rustling in the undergrowth beside his head...

Lorenzo opened his eyes, as breathless and disconcerted as he had been after his nightmare. He looked around quickly, but saw nothing. Nothing but the blue light, drawing his eyes in like it was the only thing in the world. The only thing that mattered, anyway. It occurred to Lorenzo that it was closer than it had been last night, that this time he really could catch it, catch whatever it was that was generating it. End its threat. Save his comrades.

In the blue light, Lorenzo saw Sergeant Greiss' approval, so rarely bestowed. Yet, in his memory, he heard his voice: *"I'm trusting you up front alone... If it comes back, you can resist it, right?"*

Greiss was counting on him.

“Right?”

Lorenzo remembered how determined he had been to prove himself worthy of Old Hardhead’s trust, not to let him down again. He knew the only way to do that was to obey his orders, to do what he’d promised he would do... *“Right?”*

“Right, sergeant.”

To resist. That was Lorenzo’s greatest ambition, what he wanted most at this moment, and so—as a part of him was only dimly aware—that was what the blue light showed to him, and in so doing it defeated itself. Lorenzo blinked, and the light was still there, but suddenly it was just a light, and it had no hold over him.

Still, he stayed where he was for a moment longer, exploring the crannies of his mind, ensuring there was no trace of the blue light left in there. Ensuring that he wasn’t being tricked again. He concentrated on what he remembered, what Greiss had told him—and he reassured himself that, as long as he heeded those words, those explicit instructions, he would be doing the right thing.

Lorenzo dug his elbows into the mud and pulled himself forward again, until he was clear of the ork tripwire, then he climbed to his feet and collected his belongings. The blue light was gone. Blinked out. As if it had sensed it had no power here anymore. Somehow, Lorenzo knew it wouldn’t be back. Not for him. He realised something else too: that his hands were stinging.

He looked down, saw that his palms were red and beginning to blister. He had been so wrapped up in his thoughts, in the light, that he hadn’t noticed. The wet ground. Acid. It must have seeped from the nearby swamp. The knees of his trousers had almost burnt through, and the soles of his boots had begun to melt. Not much harm done yet, but in time...

Lorenzo cleaned his hands on a leaf, and waited for Muldoon to appear again. This time, once he’d pointed out the tripwire, he beckoned him forward. Greiss came too, holding up a hand to halt the troopers behind him.

“I think we need to bear a little further north,” whispered Lorenzo, displaying his damaged boots.

“That’ll take us closer to the orks.” Muldoon pointed out.

But Greiss looked down at his own feet, and scowled. “Lorenzo’s right. No point our finding Big Green if we’re all walking on bloody stumps by the time we do.” Then, with grudging admiration, he conceded, “Mackenzie was right about that greenskin. Building

his camp on the edge of the swamp, making the best of the natural defences—he's a clever bastard, all right."

The encampment was even closer than Lorenzo had estimated.

Almost as soon as he changed his course, he found himself at the edge of a clearing, a little smaller than the Imperial Guard's, crammed with ramshackle buildings of metal and wood.

He lay and watched it for a while, scrutinising each shadow until he was sure of its nature, until he knew it wasn't an enemy waiting in ambush. He studied the ork huts, familiarising himself with their layout, with every blind corner from which an ork or a gretchin could spring out at him as he passed. He saw no sentries—which worried him, because he knew there would be sentries. Somewhere.

At last, Lorenzo glanced behind him, saw his squad waiting, gave them a thumbs-up signal and moved on. He moved on slowly—almost painfully so, knowing that stealth was more imperative now than ever. A single thin line of trees separated him from the orks. He had to make maximum use of the scant cover he had—and he had to be sure he didn't make the slightest sound.

It seemed to take an age for him to reach that first danger point, that first gangway between two huts, to be able to edge forward and peer down it, to reassure himself that it was empty. It seemed to take an age—although he knew it had only been a few minutes. But Lorenzo wasn't impatient. He lived for moments like this.

There was something in the trees ahead of him.

He froze.

It was taller than a man, but hunched, enormous arms hanging down to its knees, its shoulders broad and muscular. It was wearing dulled armour—and, although the darkness made it difficult to pick out colours, the skin that showed through the metal plates had a decidedly green tint.

The ork didn't seem to be trying to hide. Lorenzo wondered, for a heart-stopping moment, if it was searching for him, if it had heard something. Any closer, and he feared it might catch his scent.

Then it turned away from him, grunting as it fumbled with its protective metal layers, and he realised it had only come out here to relieve itself. Lorenzo would never find an enemy more exposed, more helpless, he could attack it from behind, wrap a cord around its throat and strangle it. But orks were a sturdy breed, and it would certainly have

struggled loudly as it died. Reluctantly, he let it be—and when it had done its business, the ork shuffled away and faded into the shadow of a metal hut.

Lorenzo crept forward again. He stepped over another tripwire, and waited to point it out to Muldoon. Glancing ahead, he saw that he was almost there, almost past the camp. Maybe they'd call him "Sneaky" Lorenzo. No, he wasn't sure he liked that. "Shadow" Lorenzo? "Sly" Lorenzo?

Voices.

They were hushed—but against the muted sounds of the night, they sounded unnatural, harsh and as loud as las-fire discharges.

He thought one of the voices belonged to Greiss. There was an urgent tone to it, almost a plea. Lorenzo looked to the ork camp, certain that the voices must have carried that far, but nothing was stirring. Not yet. He ached to know what was happening, but he knew he ought to maintain his position. He sheathed his knife and fingered his lasgun, ready to draw it if necessary.

The explosion caught him totally unawares.

The night erupted into daylight, too quickly, too shockingly, for Lorenzo to avert his gaze, to protect his night vision. He was half blinded.

But, as the echoes of the explosion died away and his deadened ears popped, he could hear movement and grunting from the encampment just a few footsteps away. And the shadows, the only things he could make out now, were shifting.

Lorenzo's mind raced. Had his comrades blundered into a trap he had missed? Had something else found them? Was it his fault?

There had to have been casualties, he realised, his throat drying at the thought. The explosion had been centred right at the spot where he'd heard Greiss' voice. It had sounded like a frag grenade.

The shadows were converging on that spot now, orks snarling and roaring with battle lust as they rushed to defend their territory.

A wave of despair passed over Lorenzo as he realised it didn't matter now which of his comrades were alive or dead. The orks knew where they were—and as Greiss had said, the orks outnumbered them thirty to one. They had nowhere to run, trapped between the encampment on one side and the acid swamp on the other.

There was no doubt about it. They were all dead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The orks were an oncoming mass, one indistinguishable from the next, at least to Lorenzo's compromised sight. The air was filled with noise, and the ground shook to the staccato flashes of more explosions: makeshift grenades, hurled over the heads of the orks' front ranks by those in the rear.

In response, las-fire barked out of the jungle, striking the foremost orks and passing through them into their comrades. Lorenzo felt like cheering. At least five, six, seven of his fellow Catachans were alive and fighting back—and the next explosions blossomed in the heart of the orks' own ranks. The Jungle Fighters' frag grenades were more effective than the orks' bombs, because the greenskins were packed so closely together, each of them more likely to take a shrapnel hit. Their armour, and their thick hides, would protect them from the worst of it, but many would be injured, some badly. Some were knocked off their feet by the concussive force of the blasts, as Lorenzo's eyes cleared, he saw orks stumbling over each other, trampling on the fallen, pushing each other aside—and yet still advancing.

They didn't know where he was.

As the orks closed in on Lorenzo's squad, he realised they were passing him by, in his solitary position ahead of the others. The others were dead anyway. He had a chance to save himself, to sneak away, maybe take a report back to Lieutenant Vines so that the next men sent out here would know what lay ahead of them.

He didn't consider it for a second.

Lorenzo broke cover, letting out the loudest, wildest war cry in his repertoire, his finger locked around the trigger of his lasgun so that it fired repeatedly into the enemy mass. He didn't care how accurate his shots were, chances were they'd find a few orks wherever he aimed them. He just wanted to draw attention to himself. Maybe—with luck—convince the greenskins that he was more than one trooper, that their enemies had surrounded them in a pincer movement. The more of them he could distract from his squad, the better their chances would be, the worse his own chances.

He was dead anyway, he told himself. They were all dead. But the longer the Jungle Fighters survived, the more orks they could take down with them. The more orks they took down, the greater the chance there'd be stories told of them back home. Assuming that, by some miracle, this story made it back home at all.

The nearest orks responded with alarm and confusion to Lorenzo's attack, took a moment to pinpoint the source of it, and aimed their weapons: crude, solid-shot guns. They were too slow. Lorenzo had already dived into the sheltered gap between two huts, and he was still running as bullets pinged off metal behind him. He heard grunts and howls and footsteps, and he knew he'd succeeded in drawing the attention of a few dozen orks. Now he just had to survive the consequences of that success.

He ducked and weaved and twisted between huts at random. The longer he could keep his pursuers searching for him, the fewer orks the others had to contend with in the meantime. But he couldn't disappear completely, couldn't flee back into the jungle, because the orks might just abandon their hunt in frustration and return to the combat. Lorenzo let out a whoop and fired his lasgun three times into the air, drawing his foes further into their own camp. He rounded another corner and disturbed a knot of gretchin, who screeched and jabbered in their own crude, incomprehensible tongue, and came at him.

Lorenzo brought up his lasgun, fired, downed several targets—and then the rest were upon him, or streaming around to attack him from behind. They were kicking and scratching, squealing for their masters. He swung his lasgun like a club, dislodging two of them. He kicked and punched at the others, he reached over his shoulder, seized a gretchin that had clung to his back, and slammed it into the ground. He tried to run, kicking more of the creatures out of his path, but they dogged his heels. He spun around, fired, claimed two more kills, and the rest of the gretchin scampered out of sight. They emerged again as soon as Lorenzo had turned his back.

Their cries drew the orks, as he had known they must.

The first of them appeared ahead, and barred Lorenzo's path. It snarled at him, as if to intimidate him with its presence. That worked, he had heard, against some men, the ork, with its sloping brow, its jutting jaw and its recessed, baleful eyes, cut an imposing figure—and his eye line was level with its fearsome tusks and its slobbering lips. To a man who had faced down a Catachan devil, though, a single ork was nothing special. It might walk and talk, but to a Deathworlder this green-skinned monster was just another thing to be killed.

Lorenzo snapped off a round, the shot narrowly missing the ork though the flash sent it howling and reeling in pain—but he'd pay for the second's distraction it had caused him. The ork's comrades had found him too, and they came at him, rounding the ramshackle buildings from all directions. More than one of them mimicked the Catachan's earlier actions, kicking aside the gretchin that had summoned them. The pathetic, stunted creatures slunk away, their job done.

Surrounded and outnumbered, Lorenzo concentrated his fire in one direction, hoping to clear an escape route for himself. His one advantage was that the greenskins couldn't use their guns without hitting each other—though, given the speed at which they were coming, that wouldn't keep him alive for long. He finished off two of them, but the

lasgun's power pack whined and died as the third bore down on him. He tried to impale the ork on his bayonet, but it wrestled his gun away and tossed it aside. Another ork smacked into Lorenzo from behind, and he rolled with the blow, drawing his knife as he hit the ground and twisted out of the way of a descending axe blade. It sliced into the earth a whisker from Lorenzo's ear. Its wielder wasn't far behind it, choosing not to retrieve its weapon but to leap instead on its fallen prey and rend him with its bare hands. Lorenzo threw up his knife so the ork's own momentum forced the blade through the roof of its mouth and into its brain.

Its dead weight smacked onto him, winding him, pinning him down, but providing him with cover and a moment's respite. By the time two other orks had hoisted their dead comrade aside, Lorenzo was ready to act. On hands and knees, he slipped between the legs of one of his attackers, and tripped it in the process. The orks fumbled and stumbled and generally fell over each other in their eagerness to apprehend the slippery, squirming Catachan—but any green hands that found him were rewarded with a slash of Lorenzo's fang.

Then, joyously, he was through them all, open space looming ahead of him, and he was pushing himself to his feet, snatching his stolen lasgun, reaching for a fresh power pack from his bandolier and a meaty hand grabbed him by the back of his jacket and pulled him back, twisted him around, slammed him into the metal wall of a hut, and while he was still trying to get his breath back from that, a giant ork fist pounded into his stomach and Lorenzo coughed up blood and felt his legs giving way.

He managed to block another axe thrust with his las-gun—the last time it would save him. The blade embedded itself in the gun's furniture, and came free with a cracking and a splintering and a last sullen fizz of energy. Lorenzo found an ork snout with his bayonet, drawing blood and making the creature squeal and fall back, but then he let the gun go and it was just him and his Catachan fang, and he knew that at best he'd be able to kill one more ork before they killed him.

He focused on doing just that. He picked his target, pushed himself away from the wall behind him, ducked beneath a pair of flailing green arms. He locked himself into a deadly embrace with the luckless ork, denying it the chance to swing its axe or raise its gun. He buried his knife in its stomach, twisted it, cutting through the ork's guts, feeling its blood spilling out, soaking into his own clothes, at the same time, its fingers closed around his neck, cutting off his oxygen, fading his surroundings to black. A deadly dance from which neither partner would ever break.

Lorenzo wasn't sure at first if the pops and cracks he could hear as if from the end of a long tunnel were those of his own bones breaking—but the orks were reeling in confusion again, and the grip on his throat was loosened, and he thought he could see a lithe, dark-haired figure hurling grenades from the roof of a nearby hut, although he might have imagined it.

He raised his fang to make the most of his reprieve, thinking he might claim another ork life, but the world was still darkening and the commands from his brain didn't seem to be reaching his muscles... and now Lorenzo was sliding to the ground, falling in slow-motion but still too fast to put out a hand to save himself. He was lying facedown, and his back was showered first with hot shrapnel and then an ork body landed on top of him, hiding him, and he just lay there, clinging to consciousness, his face sticky with blood but he didn't know whose.

A long time after that, it seemed, Lorenzo heard the orks moving away from him. They were turning their attention to a new enemy, leaving him for dead, and he couldn't have said for certain that they were so wrong. It was only after a long minute had passed and he was still breathing, his heart still beating and his head clearing as his lungs heaved precious oxygen into his bloodstream, that he knew he would fight on. Only then that Lorenzo breathed a grateful prayer to the God-Emperor for sparing his life, until he recovered his wits and realised he ought to thank Sly Marbo instead.

He didn't know why Marbo had chosen to save him, above the others. Maybe he'd just been lucky—in the right place at the right time. Knowing Marbo, it was possible he'd been on that roof all night, waiting for his moment. Whatever the reason, Lorenzo was determined to return the favour, or to pass it on.

Marbo, he decided, had the right idea. Find high ground.

He pulled himself up onto the roof of the nearest hut, finding plenty of handholds in the old, pitted metal but almost falling as his muscles protested at being put to so much effort so soon. He'd half-expected to find Marbo up there, but he had moved on, of course. Lorenzo lowered himself onto his stomach, and craned his neck to see over the edge of the building without being seen in return.

Much of the fighting had now moved out of the encampment. The Catachans had drawn their more numerous foes into the jungle environment they knew best, though with the acid swamp at their backs they had precious little room to manoeuvre. From here, Lorenzo couldn't see any of his camouflaged comrades—but he guessed, by the positions of the orks, that they'd separated along the perimeter line, making themselves harder to find. The orks, in turn, seemed to be everywhere, shaking trees, firing into bushes, doing everything they could to beat their foes out of hiding.

There were more of them, of course, among the buildings, searching for the long-gone Marbo, liable to find Lorenzo instead.

His eyes alighted upon one building in particular: a small metal structure, built with a little more care than most, no windows cut into its walls, its door secured by thick chains. Ammo store, he guessed. He strained to reach his backpack, unfastened it, and rummaged out the two demolition charges with which he'd been equipped. They weren't really for combat use—the Catachans employed them to clear hard-going areas of the jungle when

they were in a hurry and stealth wasn't such an issue—but they were just what he needed now.

The first charge landed with a plop beside the chained door, when no orks were looking that way. Lorenzo set the second to detonate only two seconds after, and he felt his palm sweating as he held the cold sphere in his hand, counting down.

He let the second charge go even as the first explosion shook the buildings around him. By the time its vibrations overtook him, he was running, but they made him mistime his leap to the next hut across. Lorenzo pedalled empty air, desperate to propel himself that vital centimetre further, and somehow he caught the protruding edge of the roof as it passed him, and almost yanked his fingers out of their sockets as they caught his falling weight.

There were two orks below him, and they turned their guns upwards. Before they could squeeze their triggers, they were knocked off their feet—and Lorenzo felt it simultaneously: a furious Shockwave of heat and sound, like a hurricane raging around him, in which it was all he could do to grit his teeth and maintain his hold on the parapet while his back was peppered with debris.

The hurricane lessened, and he strained and pulled himself up, attaining his new perch at last. He rolled onto his back, breathless, but raised himself on his elbows because he couldn't resist the chance to inspect his handiwork.

It looked like the sky was on fire. The building he had just leapt from had collapsed, along with several others, and Lorenzo could see the burning, smoking hole where the ammo store had been. Evidently, he'd guessed right about its contents. His first charge had blown off the door, the second must have bounced neatly through the resulting aperture. Its detonation had sparked a chain reaction, just as he had planned. The sturdy walls had absorbed much of it before they had given, else he would have been dead. To his satisfaction, several orks—presumably reacting to the first explosion, too late to stop the second—had perished, their burnt corpses twitching and steaming in the midst of the devastation.

Dozens more orks were turning from the jungle, streaming back into the camp, looking for the enemy that had penetrated their home. Lorenzo couldn't have hoped for a bigger distraction—and it had certainly been well timed for at least one Jungle Fighter. He saw a blur of activity, heard the howls of stricken orks, and then Muldoon came streaking out of the foliage, his lasgun firing. From this distance, Lorenzo couldn't see what had happened, but he could guess. One of Muldoon's favourite tricks: he would gather up a cluster of deadly creepers, secrete himself in a tree and, when the enemy got too close, let the creepers go. Lorenzo could see orks dancing and twisting as they fought to disentangle themselves, as the creepers stung them and burst their poisonous pustules in their grotesque faces.

But he was exposed now, left with nowhere to run but out into the open where his painted skin couldn't camouflage him. Like Lorenzo before him, he raced for the shelter of the ork huts, miraculously untouched by a hail of bullets—but one great brute of an ork had avoided his trap, and it came charging after him, and cannoned into him from behind.

Lorenzo was on his way before Muldoon hit the ground. He leapt onto the sloping roof of the next hut, almost lost his footing on its slick surface, righted himself and jumped again. His fingers hovered over his bandolier, over the pockets that held his frag grenades—but unless more orks moved in, unless they formed a living shield between Lorenzo and Muldoon as they had between him and Marbo, a grenade could do more harm than good. His lasgun was gone. That left him with his knife.

He launched himself from the last roof, at the ork's broad back, and he let out a cry—enough for it to hear him coming and half-turn its head, not soon enough for it to bring around its gun and pick him off in midair. Enough for it to take its eyes off Muldoon for a moment. The ork jerked backwards, easing its weight off its fallen prey, as Lorenzo's fang sliced down between its shoulder blades—and in that same moment, Muldoon drove his night reaper up into the ork's throat.

The ork took a long, long second to die—but at last it toppled like a felled tree, and Lorenzo fancied he could feel the ground shaking with the impact of its heavy corpse. Or with something else...

Something was coming. Something big. Lorenzo didn't have to look, didn't have to waste the half-second it would take him, to know it was bad, that they had to take cover. But Muldoon was slowed, having trouble standing, and Lorenzo saw that his head was cut, his eyes glazed over. Concussion.

He reached out a hand, and Muldoon laughed giddily as he took it, as Lorenzo hauled him to his feet. "Looks like... like I owe you my life," he giggled. Then, suddenly earnest, he gripped Lorenzo by the arms and stared into his eyes as if he had the most important information in the Imperium to impart. "Hey, Lorenzo, you noticed? There isn't... isn't half as many of the greenskins as Greiss said there'd be. Thirty... thirty to one, my eye! More like ten to one. And we can take down ten orks apiece, right? Hell, I must've killed five already."

That noise was getting closer... The rumbling of an engine. Lorenzo looked now, and he saw it—saw its piercing light first, through the drifting smoke of the battlefield, and then the shape of the behemoth behind it.

It was black, daubed with crude paintings of human skulls and bones—ramshackle in appearance, but bristling with armour plating and weapons. Lorenzo had seen vehicles like this before. It was the ork equivalent of a tank—a battlewagon, they called it—manned by a greenskin mob. They howled and strained forward on the back of this unnatural beast as they saw their two exposed foes. The pilot trained the vehicle's searchlight upon the Catachans, and wrestled its great wheels around.

Muldoon's mood had changed again, and suddenly he looked distant and extremely pale, apart from the livid red gash across his head. "Trouble is," he said to himself in a hollow voice, "they got Brains. I saw him go down. So, we have to take out a few more orks each to make up his share."

Lorenzo couldn't allow himself to react to this news. There would be time for mourning the dead later, when the act of so doing wouldn't add to their numbers.

The battlewagon had two guns, like eyes on stalks protruding before it. The one on the right flared, and Lorenzo pushed Muldoon aside as a shell whistled by and thumped into the dirt, and filled the world with light and sound again. His comrade sagged in his arms like a dead weight, and Lorenzo slapped him across the face, hoping to shock him back to alertness. More gunfire—the right-hand gun again—but the searchlight had lost its targets and the smoke from the first impact was swirling around them and ork weapons, mostly lashed together from spare parts, were notoriously unreliable anyway. Still, the impact almost knocked Lorenzo off his feet.

Muldoon blinked as blood seeped into his eye, and coughed as smoke crept into his throat. Lorenzo tried to drag him toward the huts, but there came another explosion from that direction and they were thrown back, back into the open, and the searchlight had rediscovered them and there were more orks coming, silhouettes through the haze, from the encampment, from the jungle.

Muldoon was pressing his lasgun into Lorenzo's hands, saying, "Here—you can make better use of this than I can."

"What... what are you—?"

He wouldn't have had to finish the question, even had the smoke not robbed him of speech. He could see the answer. Muldoon was rummaging in his bandolier, finding a demolition charge with each hand—and although Lorenzo's first instinct was to stop him, to save him, he held himself back because his comrade was grinning at him now. "You saved my life. That makes it my turn. And besides, I count nine greenskins on that tank. Add them to the other five, and that's my share and a few for Brains to boot." Looking into his comrade's ashen face, Lorenzo saw the pain he was holding at arm's length, the darkness lurking at the edges of his eyes, and he knew then as Muldoon surely did that this was how it had to be.

Then he was gone, tearing himself from Lorenzo's grip before he could think of a word to say. He was racing into the light—and before the orks knew what was happening, he was too close for them to train their gun upon him, but not too close for them to bring their other weapon—the one on the left—to bear...

It was a flamethrower. That explained what this single wagon was doing out here, thought Lorenzo, why the orks had assembled it in the depths of a jungle that would only impede it: they'd been using it for clearance operations. A fierce jet of flame licked

around Muldoon now, and although he seemed to avoid the worst of it, and though Lorenzo's vision was obscured by smoke and by the battlewagon's glaring light, he was certain that Muldoon had been winged, that he'd been burnt, and yet like the relentless orks themselves he kept going.

He vaulted over the guns onto the front of the tank, planting his feet and his fists into the faces of the orks at the triggers. Those behind saw the threat to them and, snarling, drew their own guns, and one of them leapt at him but he turned its momentum and its weight against it, and threw it over his shoulder and off the moving vehicle. The others fired, and Muldoon's body twitched and jerked as their bullets ripped into him, and Lorenzo feared that he too would fall and die in a splatter of mud and blood, but he was *climbing*—climbing onto the back of the battlewagon as if animated by willpower alone, and he fell into the midst of the ork mob and they leapt upon him and tore him apart, but by then his final goal had been achieved.

The charges blew the battlewagon apart from the inside, and eight orks died screaming.

By that time, Lorenzo had replaced the depleted pack in the lasgun his comrade had given him, and he was firing at the shapes that loomed about him, making sure he kept moving, an impossible target amid the sensory chaos. He felt a grim sense of triumph as he claimed his tenth kill of the night, and he thought of Sharkbait Muldoon and knew he would have been proud.

But he also knew he was surrounded, and the orks were homing in on him now, closing him down. They came at Lorenzo from all sides, moving in to close combat as usual, trusting in their greater strength and numbers against his greater dexterity. This time, he knew, he had no right to expect a reprieve, no Marbo to save him. He had used up all his luck. So he dropped his gun and hurled the last of his grenades, and he thought about how bravely Muldoon had died—and Donovits too, he didn't doubt—and he drew his Catachan fang.

And finally, Lorenzo ran to greet his enemies, with his trusty knife in his hand and a defiant roar in his throat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The fighting seemed to have gone on forever.

Lorenzo remembered the first tint of sunlight touching the sky, remembered how amazed he'd been that only one night had passed because it seemed so long since he'd thought of anything but blood and smoke and fire. Yet when he looked back on that time, much of it was no more than a blur of sneering ork faces and knife thrusts and death. Lots of death. He thought that, at one point, he'd stood back to back with Sergeant Greiss, but he couldn't be sure. Once they'd moved into hand-to-hand combat, he'd had no choice but to surrender himself to his instincts. Otherwise he'd have thought about the tiredness in his muscles and the aches from his bruises and the still-overwhelming odds against him, and he would have lain down and died. Or, worse still, he'd have thought about dying.

He *could* have died, and he'd probably have known nothing about it. Just wound down like a spring, from a wound he hadn't yet felt, and that wouldn't have been so bad, would it?

Lorenzo was fighting in his sleep, muscle memory twitching his arms in response to an imaginary parade of blood-crazed enemies. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought he must have wondered if he would ever wake up, or if he would fight this nightmare struggle forever.

Yes, it had been a glorious battle.

And it was made all the more so by the fact that, in the end, Lorenzo felt sunlight touching his face, and he opened his eyes and knew that he had *lived*.

It took him a moment to work out where he was. The light was bright, but his surroundings seemed dim. He realised that the light was streaming through a small window, to be swallowed by the dust and the dirt in here.

An ork hut. Lorenzo was lying on a makeshift bunk, really no more than a pile of junk draped with rags, and he was swaddled in stinking furs. He was hot, burning up. It crossed his mind only briefly that the orks themselves might have brought him here, as a hostage. That wasn't their style. The fact that he *was* here meant his small squad had achieved the impossible. They had won. But at what price?

Lorenzo felt a stiffness in his side, and sent a tentative hand under his bulky coverings to investigate. His questing fingers found a hard knot of synth-skin, between the ribs in his right side, and he winced at the sudden white hot memory of an axe blade scything through his flesh. His memories were disordered, still vague, but that pain, he felt sure, was among the most recent of them. He sighed regretfully. He would have liked to be found standing, at the end.

“Hey, Lorenzo? You moving under all that lot?”

The familiar voice drew Lorenzo’s gaze to his left, to the next bunk, where lay Woods. He must have been injured too, though Lorenzo wouldn’t have known it from the cocky grin on his face. “Bout time too,” said Woods. “Been lying here awake on my own the past couple of hours, while you’ve been snoring away. What’s the point in winning the biggest damn scrap this squad’s ever seen if you can’t jaw about it with your buddies afterwards, huh?”

“We... did win, then?”

Woods raised an eyebrow. “I’ll put that down to your being flak happy. Of course we won, Lorenzo!”

“What I mean is... I heard about Brains.”

Woods pouted. “Yeah. We lost Brains. And they’re starting to give up on Sharkbait, too. Been looking for him all morning.”

Lorenzo’s mind’s eye flashed up a picture of Muldoon racing into the light of the ork battlewagon, and he felt a pang in his stomach. “They won’t find him,” he said numbly. Woods fixed him with an inquisitive, almost needy gaze, and Lorenzo realised that it was up to him to tell Sharkbait Muldoon’s last story, to keep it alive. He had that honour, and that responsibility. So he took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment as he picked his words, and he told it.

He emphasised how brave Muldoon had been. He mentioned the gash in his head, because it made him seem all the more heroic for having overcome such an injury—and he exaggerated the number of orks on the wagon, that he had killed, because after all it had been dark and there’d been so much smoke and there *could* have been fourteen or fifteen of them, and Lorenzo didn’t want to sell his comrade short. Woods listened to the story with growing admiration, and when it was done he breathed in through his teeth and agreed that Sharkbait had died well. Lorenzo felt an odd sort of pride at having been there, at having seen something so inspiring, but most of all at knowing he’d done justice to his fallen comrade’s memory, and somehow everything seemed a little brighter then.

“A couple of the others saw how Brains went.” Woods related in return. “There were a few of them together, and the orks were searching the jungle, and they hadn’t had time to find a proper hiding place what with everything going to hell so fast. They say Brains let

the greenskins find him, because a couple more steps and they would've stumbled right onto Wildman and maybe Bullseye. He gave his own life to buy the rest of us time. Course, he came out firing. I have to confess, sometimes I didn't have much time for old Brains, thought he yapped too much when he should've been getting on with it—but the way the others tell it, he would've done Marbo proud last night. Took on ten, twelve orks by his lonesome, and stayed standing long enough for the others to retrench, to start fighting back."

"What happened?" asked Lorenzo. "What started it, I mean? We were almost there, almost past the encampment, and then..."

"Oh yeah," said Woods, screwing his face up into a scowl, "I almost forgot you were up front, missed it all. I bet you can guess, though. I bet you can guess who was brainless enough to step on an ork trap, blow himself right up."

"Mackenzie?" Lorenzo hazarded. The disdain in Woods' voice and expression had been something of a giveaway.

"Mackenzie," he confirmed. "The commissar."

"I wouldn't have thought even he—"

"It was the blue light. Came up on us all unexpected like. I felt it in my head for a bit—just a second—like it was scanning me, reading my mind, then it moved on. Mackenzie... I figure what happened was, the light picked on the weakest of us. Mackenzie got up, started walking towards it like he was in a trance or something. The sergeant tried to stop him—brought up his lasgun, told Mackenzie he'd shoot him dead if he took another step, though I don't know why he cared, can't say I'd have shed a tear if Mackenzie had gone on, if he'd sunk into the swamp and never come out again. But Old Hardhead seemed to be getting through to him. Mackenzie just froze, and he was looking at Old Hardhead, and at the blue light, all confused—and it was Bullseye, I think, who saw the wire. Mackenzie was standing with one foot in front of it, one foot behind. God-Emperor knows how he hadn't tripped it already. Old Hardhead, he motioned to the rest of us to get back, and he kept talking to the commissar, all quiet and calm. Mackenzie, he was listening, he could see the sergeant was making sense, but he still wanted to go to that light, you could tell. He kept asking why he should trust any of us. He talked about what happened at the river, and he accused the sergeant of wanting him dead. I knew we were in trouble right then, knew he'd bring the orks down on us eventually even if he didn't trip that wire. Old Hardhead was whispering, trying to hush the commissar, but he was getting hysterical."

"That's what the light does to you," said Lorenzo sombrely. "It plays on your hopes, your fears. And Mackenzie was already so afraid..." He fell silent as he realised what he'd said. He'd admitted to a weakness, in front of Woods of all people—a soldier who, if he'd ever feared anything, would certainly not have confessed to it.

It didn't seem to matter. "Makes sense," said Woods. "I think, deep down, Mackenzie maybe *wanted* to believe—he wanted to be convinced—but that light was just too damn strong for him."

"What about Braxton?"

"Give him his due." Woods conceded, "he tried. He crawled forward, put himself in the danger zone, just so he could talk to Mackenzie, back up what Old Hardhead was saying. But as soon as he opened his mouth, Mackenzie, he just... it was like he freaked out good and proper. He accused Braxton of betraying him, said he was alone now and he wasn't going to listen to anyone anymore. He closed his eyes, put his hands over his ears, like he was in pain, and he was screaming for everyone to stop talking, to leave him alone, to let him think.

"Well, it was all over then, of course. Braxton started forward—I don't know why, like maybe he thought he could drag Mackenzie to safety or something—but the commissar had made up his mind."

"Or rather." Lorenzo murmured, "the light had made it up for him."

"And the rest, like Commissar Mackenzie, is history."

"And Braxton?"

"Oh, he's alright. Old Hardhead grabbed hold of him, pulled him back, damn near got himself killed in the process. Now, that—that *would've* been a tragedy!"

"I shouldn't have stopped him," said Lorenzo. "Sharkbait. At the river. He would've killed Mackenzie, but I thought... I don't know what I thought. If I'd kept quiet, if I'd let him... Sharkbait would still be alive. And Brains."

"Doesn't work like that," said Woods, with more understanding than Lorenzo would have expected from him. "No one made Sharkbait do anything he didn't want to do. You made him think, is all. He let Mackenzie off the hook for the same reason any of us would've done it: because when the commissar's harness went and he grabbed for that rope and he held on, he surprised us all. You were right, Lorenzo. You can't deny a man a second chance after proving himself like that."

"Even so..."

"If the light hadn't got Mackenzie," said Woods, "it would've worked its influence on someone else. Braxton, maybe. Or... or... I told you, Lorenzo, I felt it in my head. I felt it calling to me—and in that second, I think I would've done just about anything it told me to do."

That sealed it. This wasn't the Woods that Lorenzo knew. He turned to his comrade with a new anxiety prickling at him, and he said, "You never told me about yourself. How you ended up... I mean, how you went on. Last night."

"Hey, don't worry about me," said Woods cheerfully. "I did okay. Really. Just tired myself out, is all—and you know Greiss: he likes to think he's looking after us. He said if I didn't come in here for a lie-down, he'd knock me out himself."

"Right," said Lorenzo, not quite buying it. He was just starting to realise how pale his comrade seemed where the daylight fell across him. Sweat beaded his brow, as if he was feverish—or perhaps he too was just hot in his ork furs.

"Seriously," said Woods, "you think this looks bad, you should see the ork that did it to me. I should say, the twenty orks!" And he launched into a detailed and bloody account of every punch he had thrown, every shot he had fired, every thrust of his devil claw against the ork hordes.

Lorenzo stopped listening after a time. He tuned out the words, and strained to catch the distant, muffled sounds beyond the hut's walls: footsteps, scraping, the odd snatch of conversation. He felt as if he had been lying in this bed for an age, and he longed to feel fresh air on his face, to catch up with the comrades he had thought he would never see again. To see what fresh challenges had arisen in his absence.

He knew he should wait. He didn't know the extent of his injuries. He didn't *feel* too badly hurt, but then his head was muzzy and he could have been in shock. He could have been infected. But normally, the person to tell him that—the man who ought to have been at his bedside with his revolting herbal cures—was Brains. Lorenzo couldn't bear to wait any longer.

Woods had fallen silent. Lorenzo realised he was asleep.

He peeled off his bed coverings and tested each of his limbs, trying his weight on them, before he levered himself to his feet. He swayed a little, and felt sickness rising in his throat but suppressed it. Morning air breezed in through the window, and prickled his skin like pins and needles. He crept over to Woods and put his hand to his forehead, finding it hot like a simmering pan. He located his clothes and backpack in a pile in the corner, with Muldoon's lasgun laid out almost reverently across them.

His jacket felt heavy and grimy against his skin, its insides caked with his own dried blood. It was only when he saw his water bottle that he realised how dry his throat was, and how cracked his lips. He gulped from the bottle greedily, and had to stop himself before he emptied it. There had to be fresh water somewhere in the camp, he reasoned. The skin around his patched-up wound had evidently been cleaned. He longed for a pool to bathe in, though a bit of dirt didn't usually bother him.

Finally, Lorenzo approached the door to the outside world—and thought it was locked at first, as it jammed in its frame. He put his shoulder to it, and tried to pretend that the effort hadn't made stars explode in front of his eyes. He stumbled out into the sunlight, unsteady and blinking, and walked straight into Sergeant Greiss.

Somewhere, there was a fire burning, and Lorenzo caught a glimpse of Myers and Storm lugger an ork corpse between them.

Then Greiss was guiding him back into the hut, telling him to take it easy in his gentlest growl, and Lorenzo tried to throw off his hold, tried to prove he could stand unassisted, but before he knew it he was sitting on the bunk again, just grateful that the room wasn't spinning anymore. Greiss took Lorenzo's head in his callused hands, peered into his eyes, and nodded, satisfied. "You'll live."

"We did okay—right, sergeant?"

"Yes, Lorenzo. We did okay. We did more than okay. We've been tossing ork bodies on the flames all morning." Lorenzo didn't question that statement. He knew the Catachans didn't burn their enemies' corpses for the sake of their souls. Orks were renowned for their regenerative properties, it was common for one thought dead to rise from a cold battlefield in search of revenge. On Rogar III, he realised, there was even more reason to take precautions.

"Sergeant!" Lorenzo's fellow patient was awake again. Lorenzo found himself wondering if Woods' voice had sounded so weak, so subdued, the last time he had spoken. Perhaps it had, and he just hadn't noticed. "Lorenzo tell you about Sharkbait?" asked Woods. Greiss replied that he hadn't, and Woods repeated the story as the sergeant listened patiently. This time, there were twenty orks on the battlewagon, and Muldoon had to hack his way through four more to reach it, but Lorenzo didn't bother to correct the details. Woods' version made a better story, and Muldoon deserved his glory.

"We ready to move out yet, sergeant?" asked Woods, when the story was told.

"Not yet, Hotshot," said Sergeant Greiss. "Still cleaning up behind ourselves. We've taken apart all the comms we can find, but you can bet a few gretchin would've made a run for it when they realised they were beaten."

Woods grimaced. "Sooner or later, they'll find more greenskins, and then the whole planet will know we're here."

"If we're lucky," said Greiss, "the orks won't put two and two together in a hurry. For all they know, this camp could've been our target all along."

"Yeah, "specially when they hear about the attacks on their other camps."

“But they’ll know we’re closing in on their warboss—whether they believe we know it or not—and if Big Green has half the brains Mackenzie reckoned he had, he’ll be doubling his personal guard about now. Our dear, departed commissar just made getting to our target about ten times harder than it ever was.”

“I thought as much,” said Woods. “But, we just came through against thirty-to-one odds. Shouldn’t think there’s a whole lot can stop us now, yeah?”

“Funny thing about that.” Greiss growled. “There aren’t half as many dead orks about these parts as there ought to be. I think we got lucky, Hotshot. I think our job was half-done before we got here.”

“You think Rogar’s been as hard on them as it’s been on us?”

“About the size of it, yes.”

“Now you’re wondering what happened to the orks it killed. And how long it took the survivors to work out that any bodies they leave intact...”

Lorenzo didn’t remember lying down, but he was staring at the ceiling. He didn’t remember discarding his backpack and jacket, but he was unencumbered by them. He had been thinking about Dougan, or rather about the mockery this deathworld had made of his memory. About the skeletal birds that had refused to lie down. And now, about a hundred, two hundred, dead orks, in varying stages of decay, clambering from the ground all over the planet...

“Should make for an interesting few days,” murmured Greiss.

“Nothing we can’t handle though,” said Woods, “right, sergeant?”

Lorenzo drifted into a dreamless sleep, then, and opened his eyes only once in the next few hours to find himself on the cot again, and Greiss in the doorway of the hut. He must have been leaving, waking Lorenzo as he shouldered the sticking door out of its frame. But something had stopped him. He was looking at Woods, and with the sunlight behind him casting his face into shadow, Greiss seemed weighed down by every one of his thirty-five years, older and more tired than Lorenzo had seen him before.

When next he woke, Greiss was there again, standing over him, shaking him, and from the quality of the light through the window he guessed it was early afternoon. “Time you dragged yourself out of that pit, trooper,” he said. “We got a lot of ground to make up if we still want a chance of catching the warboss by surprise. You up to it?”

“Yes, sergeant,” said Lorenzo, getting to his feet, relieved when his body didn’t make a liar of him. He still felt weak, drained, and his side hurt like hell, but his senses were clearer now. Catachan men healed quickly. He donned his jacket and his backpack again, picked up the lasgun that he supposed was now his, and made for the door. He stopped

when he realised Greiss wasn't following. He was sitting on the bunk Lorenzo had vacated, staring into space, a lasgun laid across his lap. Not his own gun: that was slung under his pack as normal. Lorenzo felt a knot forming in his stomach as he was finally forced to face an unpleasant truth.

"What about Hotshot, sergeant? Aren't you going to wake him?"

"In a minute," the sergeant said.

Lorenzo looked at Woods. His skin was whiter than ever, drenched in perspiration. His breathing was ragged, and his face twitched with emotions that Lorenzo had never seen writ there before. Every few seconds he let out a low moan, almost a whimper. He seemed to be having the mother of all nightmares. The young trooper looked surprisingly, awfully small.

"Is he...?" Lorenzo ventured.

"Hotshot managed to find a sniping position," said Greiss, "up a tree. He was cutting down those greenskins like dummies on a shooting range. But one of 'em got lucky—happened to be looking the right way when an explosion went off and the light glinted off Hotshot's lasgun. He couldn't get down in time. The orks surrounded him, started firing up into the branches. Hotshot took a bullet in the leg, was grazed by two more, but nothing critical, he knew how to make himself small, use his backpack and the tree trunk to protect himself—and with his camouflage and all, the greenskins didn't know where they were aiming. Hotshot was firing at 'em, dropping grenades on their heads—he must've taken out a dozen or more. But you know what orks are like. They don't give up easy. They were swarming up that tree, and Hotshot was shooting and slashing down at 'em, but even he couldn't stay put forever. He made a jump for it, sailed right over their heads." There had been a touch of admiration in Old Hardhead's voice, but now it faded, and his shoulders slumped. Lorenzo knew how fond he had always been of Woods.

"He didn't make it."

"If it hadn't been for that damn slug in his leg..." Greiss was silent for a moment, then with pride in his voice, he continued, "He kept fighting. Even though he'd shattered his spine, he was on the ground, and the orks were piling onto him... I should've got there sooner."

"No, sergeant!" Lorenzo protested automatically.

"Don't give me that," Greiss growled. "If any of us had to end his days a cripple, better it be an old warhorse with no fight left in him. Better it be someone who's had his day, whose story's been told."

Lorenzo was still digesting the full import of what Greiss was saying. "...end his days a cripple..." They were on a stealth mission, without backup, unable to vox for an airlift—

and even if they could get Woods back to an Imperium facility, it would certainly have been the last thing he wanted. It was unlikely a medic could do much for him. The only person who could save him now from a fate worse than death was Greiss. Lorenzo's gaze strayed to the spare lasgun on the sergeant's knee.

"He'll be remembered," was all he could think of to say. It seemed to cheer Greiss up a little.

Then there was an awkward silence as Lorenzo realised there was nothing more he could say, and eventually turned to the door again.

The last thing he saw as he left that hut, as he left another comrade behind forever, was Greiss leaning over Woods, shaking him gently awake, telling him it was time and pressing the lasgun into his hands. And Woods' smile—not afraid, but relieved. Grateful, even.

Just one of those things. Lorenzo had learned to accept it. He walked away from the hut, and ignored the part of him that wanted to break into a run, to get away from there before he had to hear...

He thought about his promise: "*He'll be remembered.*" He walked, and waited. And thought about his comrade, relating his last story, and he wished he'd known, wished he'd been more attentive. He thought about the dangers that still lay ahead, all his depleted squad still had to do, and he told himself they'd come through somehow.

Lorenzo pretended not to hear the dark voice in the back of his head. The voice that said: *Yes, Hotshot Woods will be remembered. Sharkbait Muldoon will be remembered. They will all be remembered.*

But for how long?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The rain came early in the evening.

The Jungle Fighters had seen the clouds, felt the cool, fresh breeze that presaged the outburst—but the speed and ferocity with which it broke defied their expectations.

The rain was acidic. Guardsman Braxton winced as the first drop splashed off his cheek, and Lorenzo threw a hand to his neck as the skin there began to smart. The acid, fortunately, wasn't strong, not like that from the spitter plants—but with prolonged exposure, it could do as much damage.

They found some shelter beneath the spreading branches of a huge tree. Lorenzo listened as the rain beat down on its roof of leaves, and he looked gloomily at the cascade of redirected liquid like a waterfall around him. He wondered how long it would be before the leaves were burnt through, and he couldn't help but feel that even this downpour was deliberate. It was as if the planet was so determined to destroy them that it would sacrifice a part of itself.

They debated the wisdom of turning back, of scavenging sheets of metal from the ork camp, but Greiss in particular was reluctant to lose ground. "Aside from which," he growled, casting a wary glance back over his shoulder, "we don't know what might be behind us." They all knew what he meant. Ever since they had set off, they had all been aware of ghosts dogging their footsteps again.

It had been inevitable, of course. Still, Lorenzo had hoped for at least some respite. He wasn't the only one of the six remaining men in his squad—half their original complement—to have been injured in the previous night's battle, nor to feel profoundly tired. Armstrong's left arm was useless, the nerve tendons in his shoulder severed by an ork axe, and Braxton hadn't said a word all afternoon and looked like he could drop at any moment. Their lasguns were low on energy, too, Myers wore a belt of strung-together power packs, letting the dwindling sunlight do what it could to recharge them until they could build a fire to do the job properly. But the nature of their mission—and Greiss, now firmly back in command—had required they press on, and not one of those six men was prepared to admit defeat.

Their map had been incinerated along with Mackenzie, but Armstrong knew where they were and was sure he could remember the location of the warboss' lair from the briefing. He could get them close, at least.

They broke out the alkaline powders from their backpacks, rubbed them into their exposed skin and hair. As they worked, the ghosts began to gather, in the corners of their vision. This time, they had attracted more than one stalker. Many more. And these creatures, it seemed, were trying less hard to conceal their presence.

Or maybe it was just that they were bigger and clumsier than Dougan, less able to hide. Ork corpses, as the Jungle Fighters had anticipated. This close, there was no denying the stink of death that rose from them, it had been wafting past Lorenzo's nostrils for the past few hours, whenever the breeze was right. Some of these orks had been dead weeks or months, but now they were a part of the planet itself, cocooned in its substance and animated by its mysterious energy.

It had taken six Jungle Fighters to send one monster into retreat. A smaller monster. Six Jungle Fighters, relatively refreshed and ready for battle.

For now, the zombies seemed content to keep their distance, to watch. Greiss moved his squad on quickly anyway, worried that if they stayed put too long they might be surrounded. They moved through the rain at a faster-than-normal pace, with their packs over their heads, hugging the trees. Fortunately, they knew enough about Rogar now to avoid its more obvious traps—though Lorenzo remembered what Donovits had said about this world's rapid evolution, and he eyed even the safest-looking flowers with suspicion.

He twitched at another rustle from the foliage. It was closer than usual, to the left of the squad rather than behind them. He brought his lasgun around but didn't dare fire lest he start something they couldn't finish. Another ork shape was clearly outlined, watching him with unblinking eyes, one of which had slid half out of its socket on a slagheap of dried blood. As Lorenzo watched, it withdrew and sank silently into the ground.

"They're watching us," he announced. "We've survived everything else Rogar has to throw at us, so it's got its zombies watching us, looking for a weakness."

"I'd almost rather they made their move," murmured Braxton, "and got it over with."

"Careful what you wish for." Storm cautioned him grimly.

"When you people first arrived," said Braxton, "and you were talking about Rogar like it was a—I don't know – a living thing, an enemy, like an ork or something, I didn't know... I mean, I'm starting to see it now. I'm starting to feel like this planet *is* alive, like it's intelligent, like it really wants us dead." He sounded as if he wanted somebody to contradict him. No one did.

The jungle had started to close in again. Greiss had sent Myers and Storm ahead to clear the way, and the squad's pace had dropped to a crawl.

And the ghosts were gathering at their backs.

“Maybe we should send a few las-shots their way,” suggested Armstrong, worriedly, hefting his gun in his good hand as if to reassure himself he could still operate it. “Discourage them a little.”

“Don’t know if it’d work,” murmured Greiss.

“Hotshot fired at...” Lorenzo began, then was unable to say Dougan’s name, “...the first one. It didn’t seem to react at all.”

“They don’t feel pain,” said Greiss. “You remember what Brains said. We’ve got to stop thinking of these things as living creatures. They’re less than that—less than orks, even. They don’t have hearts—or if they do, they sure aren’t beating anymore. No internal organs, no nerves, no pressure points, and I doubt their brains are getting much use. They’re plants, no more than that. Part of the jungle—the planet itself—just wrapped around the remains of the dead.”

Lorenzo stole a quick look at the collecting shadows, searching for one that was shorter and thinner than the others, hoping he wouldn’t find it. If the God-Emperor had any influence at all here, so far from his Golden Throne, he would see to it that Dougan could rest in peace.

“Then we deal with them like we would any hostile plant,” reasoned Armstrong.

“Can’t tear ‘em up by the roots,” growled Greiss. “They’re up and walking about already.”

“Shred ‘em?” suggested Storm, his fingers twitching over his knife hilt.

“Take too long with the knives,” said Greiss. “Way I’m thinking, those things will keep going till you get to the skeleton and can take it apart.”

“We’ve got to do something,” said Braxton, “before they attack!”

“Boy’s right,” said Armstrong. “We need a show of strength, give them something to think about. If they *can* think, that is.”

“If they can’t,” muttered Myers, “looks like something does it for them.”

“How much ordnance do we have left between us?” asked Lorenzo.

“Couple of shredder mines,” offered Storm.

“Still got my demolition charges,” said Myers.

“Save ‘em,” said Greiss, with a gleam in his eye, “for a special occasion. I got a better idea.” He and Armstrong spoke as one: “Burn ‘em!”

Lorenzo and Braxton took over clearance duty as Myers and Storm assembled the flamer again. Greiss wielded it himself, straining under the weight of the device as he lugged it a few steps closer to the watching zombies. Then he pulled the trigger, and simultaneously swept the flamer around in a wide arc.

It was like a dozen explosions had gone off at once, plants and trees erupting as if they’d just combusted from within. The zombies—those Lorenzo could see—they were burning too, starting with the parts of them that were the most flammable: the clumps of weeds and grass embedded in their bodies. They reeled in apparent confusion, their arms pumping in futile slow-motion, patting themselves down, trying to extinguish themselves, succeeding only in setting fire to their hands or bumping into each other and spreading the flames to their comrades.

Lorenzo was amazed at the severity of the reaction, until he remembered that Rogar III had felt fire before—from the Jungle Fighters’ small campfire of two nights ago to the all-out attempts by humans and orks alike at deforestation. It knew what fire could do to it, and—Lorenzo knew this didn’t make sense, but he was suddenly sure of it, more sure than he’d been of anything his instincts had told him of late—it was afraid of it. The deathworld itself was afraid, and in its fear, it chose to attack the creatures that had hurt it so much, while it still had the means to do so. And it sent its soldiers forward...

The Jungle Fighters drew their lasguns as six flaming zombies—those that could still walk—came stumbling towards them, trailing smoke, like a small army of infernal daemons. They let off a fusillade of shots, to no effect, and Greiss sent another blast of fire the zombies’ way in the hope of hastening their demise, before abandoning the flamer and leaping aside, not an instant too soon. A zombie hurled itself at him, and hit the ground where Greiss had been, setting light to the undergrowth. It tried to stand again, but scorched earth was sloughing from it like dead skin, withering to ash, and the bones of its purloined skeleton were beginning to show through and it could no longer lift its own weight.

The rest of the squad dropped their packs and tried to scatter, but they couldn’t go far, confined to the narrowed corridor their knives had cleared. The same couldn’t be said of the zombies: their movements were slow and awkward but unhampered, the foliage itself seeming to part for them. They separated too, each choosing a target. Lorenzo found himself side by side with Braxton, both trying to press themselves back into the jungle, thorns tearing at their jackets and their hair, nettles stinging their hands, as two flaming zombies homed in on them.

He heard a yell, “Aim for their kneecaps!” and he followed Armstrong’s suggestion and tried to shoot the nearest zombie’s leg out from under it. He got in four shots before it

was upon him. It raised a ponderous fist, and Lorenzo wasn't sure who its target was—him or Braxton—but then the fist came down towards him, and he ducked, and he tried to scramble past the zombie's leg, but his hand recoiled from a flaming footprint in the grass. The zombie swung around to follow him but a bone snapped, and its leg buckled, and Lorenzo knew his las-shots had done some good after all.

The zombie was falling—but it managed to turn its fall into a lunge, and Lorenzo couldn't get out of the way in time as the creature, now little more than a burning skeleton, plummeted towards him. For an instant, he was staring into its hollow eye sockets—piggy ork eye sockets—and they seemed to be mocking him. A tusked mouth gaped in a rictus grin. Lorenzo brought up a foot, planted it in the zombie's stomach and tried to fling it over him. It fell apart with the impact of his boot, and though the bulk of its mass passed safely over his head, Lorenzo was showered with bones and mud and burning leaves.

He rolled, to put out any flames that may have taken hold of his clothing. Then he sprang to his feet, lasgun in hand, to find that the other zombies had suffered the same fate as his. The combination of flames and las-fire had destroyed their cohesion, and they were collapsing at the feet of the relieved Jungle Fighters. Two skeletons were relatively intact, and as Lorenzo watched they were drawn into the ground. Storm reached one before it could vanish, and drove his gun butt into its spine, breaking it. The other—the skeleton of the monster that had attacked Greiss—escaped.

The Jungle Fighters relaxed and regrouped in the sudden silence, dozens of small fires flickering around them until the rain extinguished them.

“Think that's the last we'll see of them, sergeant?” asked Myers.

“I hope so, Bullseye,” growled Greiss. He cast a disparaging eye over the discarded flamer. “Because this thing's just about on empty.” Myers and Storm packed up the device anyway, in case they were being watched—although for the first time in two days, none of the Catachans felt as if they were.

“There were more of those things out there.” Armstrong pointed out to Greiss. “You only burnt the front ranks of them. There were at least a dozen more behind—they escaped into the ground when they saw the flames.”

“Not to mention all the other orks that must've died on Rogar these past few years,” said Lorenzo.

“And Guardsmen,” said Braxton quietly.

Greiss nodded. He knew.

“Do you think they can move underground, sergeant?” Braxton asked. “Or will they have to resurface where they went down?”

“I don’t know,” said Greiss. “What’re you thinking?”

“That it might be the right occasion to break out those mines.”

Greiss studied Braxton for a moment, then a grin tugged at his lips. “I like the way you think, Guardsman. Right, troopers, all the shredders you have, hand ‘em over. Patch, you’re with me. You saw where some of them walking corpses disappeared, right? Well, the next time they try climbing out of their graves, they’ll have a nasty shock waiting for ‘em. Lorenzo, Braxton, you get back to clearing the way. Once these babies are laid, we’re going to want to get out of here real quick.”

“Yes, sergeant,” said Lorenzo.

Greiss had half-turned away when a thought occurred to him and he looked back at Braxton. “Let me see your knife,” he demanded. Braxton showed him the small, blunt blade he had been using, and Greiss expressed his contempt for what he called an “Imperial pig-sticker”.

Lorenzo had noticed that he had been wearing two knives today, and he’d guessed where the second had come from. Still, he felt his eyes widening as the sergeant drew Woods’ devil claw—at over a metre long, more a sword than a knife—and handed it to the Validian. “Here,” he granted, “you should find it easier going with this. It’s only a loan, mind.”

Braxton accepted the claw, and turned it over in his hands. He admired its well-honed edge, and gauged how light and well balanced it was thanks to its hollow blade, half-filled with mercury. “Yes, sergeant,” he said, in a voice full of awe.

“I can see now why you think so much of him,” said the Validian, when he and Lorenzo were alone together. Greiss and Armstrong were still some way behind, laying mines, and Myers and Storm had taken this opportunity—while their progress was impeded—to fall back and hunt jungle lizards and anything else they deemed edible. Lorenzo and Braxton were left with the repetitive and wearying work of swinging their knives, forging ahead—though Lorenzo had to admit, it was going a lot faster now that Braxton was properly equipped.

“Who?” he asked.

“Sergeant Greiss.”

“Of course we do. He wouldn’t have that rank if he hadn’t earned the respect of all of us.”

“I didn’t realise. At first, he seemed—I don’t know—surly, I guess. Distant. Disapproving.”

“If you’re looking for a soft approach,” said Lorenzo, “I’m afraid Catachan doesn’t breed ‘em like that.”

“I guess not. But now I’ve seen Greiss in action—the way he leads from the front, keeps this squad together, keeps us focused on the mission. And the way he… I mean, he really does care about his troopers, even if he doesn’t always…”

“He’d give his life for us,” said Lorenzo simply, “as we would for him. Your point is?”

“I’m used to sergeants who do things by the book, that’s all. Same with the commissar. If Mackenzie had survived, if he could see Greiss now…”

“If he’d been willing to look,” said Lorenzo pointedly.

“Yes. I just think, Mackenzie, he was like most of us. We don’t know till we see for ourselves. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you, for Greiss, for all of you, being brought up on a world like this. A deathworld. But I’m starting to understand, and Mackenzie—I think he would have understood too, in time.”

“You don’t think he’d have filed his complaint against Old Hardhead? You don’t think he’d have had him shot?”

“We’ll never know,” said the Validian. “Best thing, I think, is to let it lie. I certainly won’t be saying a thing.”

Lorenzo was about to agree when he spotted something. A triangle. Silver. He could easily have mistaken it for an exotic leaf, lying flat against a branch, had the pattern not connected with something in his memory. A warning. Braxton’s knife hand was moving towards it, and Lorenzo batted it away even before his conscious mind remembered what the pattern represented. The triangle wrinkled, as a snake head jerked out from beneath it and made a stab at where the hand had just been.

“I think we should both talk less,” said Lorenzo, “and pay more attention to where we’re going.”

Braxton nodded. But it wasn’t long before he spoke up again. “I just wondered,” he said, “if I should say something. To the others. Let them know. That they can trust me, I mean.”

Lorenzo smiled tightly. “They know. Old Hardhead in particular.” He indicated the devil claw in Braxton’s hand. “Trust me, he knows.”

Then Greiss and Armstrong came pelting towards them, sweeping Myers and Storm along in their wake.

They had barely come to a halt when a series of explosions from behind them rattled the ground and shook leaves from their branches. The trap had been sprung. Greiss' cruel grin exposed his teeth and flared his nostrils. They all waited for a minute, listening for the shuffling footsteps of zombies, squinting through the rain for the shape of an ork, but there was nothing.

And, a few minutes after that, Braxton found a trap. A snare in the undergrowth, ready to tighten about the ankle of an unwary traveller and hoist him into the trees. A sign, Lorenzo agreed when the Validian pointed it out to him, that orks had been here. Crafty orks. Then he inspected the snare more closely. It was fashioned from creepers—but, far than having been knotted together by hand, it seemed to have grown into its unnatural shape.

“Rogar’s still learning,” he murmured as Braxton used his devil claw to slice through the snare. “It’s learning from us.”

They forged on well into the night, making up for their late start, until Lorenzo’s body wanted nothing more than to shut down. He’d been running on adrenaline, but now even this was spent. The acid rain hadn’t let up, and despite his precautions Lorenzo’s face and neck were red raw. The wound in his side felt like it was ablaze. He had begun to wonder if Sergeant Greiss would ever call a halt to this torture, though of course he would never have complained.

At last, Greiss accepted that even his squad needed rest. He warned, however, that they didn’t have much time. He intended to move out early in the morning—and until then, the Jungle Fighters would have to keep watch in three shifts of two in case the blue light returned.

For the first time, Lorenzo didn’t volunteer for first watch. Greiss detailed Myers and Storm to that duty, and Lorenzo was grateful to be placed on the third and final watch with Armstrong, possibly in deference to the fact that both were wounded. Only as they set up camp—positioning their plastic sheeting not to collect water tonight but to deflect the rain—did he realise how tired the sergeant himself looked.

They built the biggest, hottest fire they could, despite the risk that it might be seen. They did it to spite what they now saw to be their real enemy: Rogar III.

Lorenzo was asleep almost before his head touched the ground. But it seemed like his eyes had only been closed a minute when the shouting began.

He thought he was dreaming again, at first. That dream from the previous night, before the ork camp, when dead comrades had pulled him down into the earth to join them. Only this time it was real, and it was the earth itself that pulled at him. Lorenzo was already half-buried, he tried to stand, to tear himself free, but he couldn't gain leverage and the pull of the earth only increased.

Quicksand? He was sinking, though the ground had been perfectly firm when he had lain down on it. He fought the urge to lash out, because he knew he would only go down faster. Somebody was shouting his name, yelling at him to wake, and the rain was still drumming on the plastic sheets above his head, searing them brown.

This was worse than quicksand. Lorenzo knew how to deal with quicksand, knew how hard it was to actually drown in it, but this—this was Rogar III itself, grasping at him, drawing him to its heart. His first instinct was to unsheathe his Catachan fang, though he had no use for it yet, because if his legs went under he didn't want to lose it with them.

With a supreme effort, he raised his head. The whole campsite was a quagmire. Armstrong and Myers had been caught sleeping too, and were being sucked under. Greiss and Braxton were standing but buried up to their knees, it must have been their watch when the planet had struck. It was Braxton who had shouted, presumably unable to see from where he was that Lorenzo had already woken. There was no sign of the campfire: it must have been pulled under and smothered.

Storm was doing better than any of them. He was on his hands and knees in the mud, but pulling himself along with his powerful muscles, almost swimming, his teeth clenched, face red with exertion, until he came to the edge of the Catachan's small clearing and his flailing hand caught a tree branch. He had something to hold on to now, and he could begin to haul himself upright.

Lorenzo was determined to follow Storm's example. But suddenly, the earth beside him seemed to explode, and he recoiled and sank a little further as a figure erupted from beneath it. A large, hunched figure with tusks protruding through a matted layer of plants and dirt. An ork zombie.

And there were more of them, bursting from the ground all across the clearing, outnumbering the Jungle Fighters and surrounding them. In contrast to their floundering targets, they waded easily through the mud, their ponderous gait now seeming only too fast.

The nearest zombie loomed over Lorenzo, and raised both fists above its head as it prepared to strike him dead.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lorenzo brought up his right hand, his knife hand, to protect his head, and tried to do the same with his left, but the earth had it. He pulled at it, and brushed something below the surface: a familiar shape. He wrapped his fingers around it, feeling like he was squeezing cold slime until they closed around hard metal. With a gut-wrenching effort, he brought his hand, and his lasgun, tearing out into the open and braced the weapon in both hands above his face.

The ork zombie's blow landed, hit the gun, and Lorenzo felt the vibrations juddering through his bones and thought he'd lost another lasgun, thought it would snap in two, but somehow it remained intact. He realised that his shoulders were in the earth again, the impact and his own efforts driving him downwards.

The zombie was preparing to strike again, and Lorenzo turned the lasgun around and pulled the trigger, but it jammed. Mud in the barrel. He could just reach the zombie's leg with the tip of his knife, and he slashed at it, scoring a groove, but it didn't react. The quagmire was sucking at the back of his head, caressing his ears with cold tendrils.

He couldn't beat the monster. The best he could hope for was to keep it from killing him long enough for the planet to take him, to fill his nose and mouth with its substance and suffocate him.

He couldn't beat the monster. So he stopped fighting it.

A clump of flowers protruded, ridiculously, from the zombie's thigh, and Lorenzo strained to reach them, trusted them to support his weight as he hauled himself up, mud slurping and sucking at him but losing the contest of strength. With both hands full, holding his lasgun, his knife and the flowers, he couldn't defend himself against another double-fisted blow to the back of his stooped head. He took it with gritted teeth, blinded for a moment as he almost blacked out. He felt as if his skull must have cracked. Then he felt the flowers give way, their roots torn clean out of the zombie's earthen flesh.

Lorenzo was falling back, and he couldn't shift his trapped legs to steady himself, but he threw out his arms and found the zombie's legs, and he hugged them tightly, holding on for his life. This had the useful side-effect of unbalancing the zombie, which reacted too slowly, toppled, and splashed into the quagmire on its back. Lorenzo was scrabbling, clawing at its cold, wet mass, using it like a log in a river. He climbed onto it, dragging

his legs after him, he pulled himself along the zombie's length, yanking dead leaves from the vegetation that coated it, simultaneously trampling the zombie further down.

He hauled himself upright as the zombie's head sank underground. He used its chest as a springboard, pushing off it, leaping for the edge of the clearing. He landed with both feet in the mud, and was instantly buried up to the waist again, but as the top half of his body fell forwards, he was able to grab at a branch and, like Storm before him, use it as a lifeline.

He glanced over his shoulder, to see that the zombie was thrashing about, resurfacing and beginning to stand—and that another was heading his way. There wasn't time to free himself completely from Rogar's grip. He settled instead for dragging his backside up onto the dry ground beyond the clearing, his legs still in the mud but his shoulder hooked behind a tree, bracing him, allowing him to resist the suction force from below. He plunged his fingers into his lasgun barrel and scooped out as much mud as he could. Then he dug the butt into his shoulder, aimed for the second zombie and fired. The gun whined and let out a feeble light. The second zombie lurched closer. Lorenzo pumped the trigger again, and on his fourth attempt, the lasgun finally coughed up dirt and struck true.

He had aimed for the knee again, it took four shots to penetrate through to the bone, and then the oncoming creature collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, and disappeared below the surface.

By that time, the first zombie had somehow managed to right itself and was bearing down on him. This one took six shots, and fell less than a metre from him, hands reaching for him. He thanked the God-Emperor for the creatures' sluggish reflexes: if this one had only shifted its weight onto its good leg, it could have stayed upright long enough to wrap its fingers around his throat.

In no immediate danger now, Lorenzo took a second to scan the battlefield. Myers and Armstrong were engaged in their own struggles, each beginning to gain the upper hand—but Braxton was in trouble.

Three zombies had surrounded the Validian, overpowered him, and pushed him headlong into the mud. His face was buried, he couldn't breathe.

Greiss had seen what was happening, and was just finishing up with his own opponent. Astonishingly, he had whittled into it with his Catachan fang until he had exposed its spine, which he had then seized and yanked right out of its body. He tossed the wretched creature's remains aside, with a sneer, and began to wade towards Braxton, but the mud was up to his stomach and his progress was slow.

Storm was firing in from the sidelines, and as Lorenzo watched, the first of Braxton's attackers fell beneath his las-fire at last. Storm switched targets, and Lorenzo joined him, their shots converged on the back of the second zombie's knee and burnt through it in seconds.

The third and final zombie swung around to greet Greiss with a hefty punch, which the grizzled sergeant dodged. His face was level with the creature's stomach—with its greater bulk, it looked like it could crush him with its thumb—but he drove the butt of his lasgun into its leg and, to Lorenzo's amazement, shattered it. The bone must have been old and brittle. But this zombie's reflexes were better than most. Instead of falling, it swayed on one leg, and looked down to where its other leg hung loose, still attached to its body by muddy tendrils.

Then Greiss laid into it with his gun butt again, roaring like an animal, and slowly, as if it was fighting gravity itself, the zombie fell and was gone. Greiss' path to Braxton was clear—but the Validian was gone now, too.

There was nothing Lorenzo could do for him, no chance of reaching him. He shifted his attention to the zombies still standing, supporting Myers and Armstrong's efforts with his las-shots. But his eyes kept flicking to the patch of mud where Braxton's head had gone under, and he found himself holding his breath as Greiss propelled himself towards that spot and plunged his hands into the shifting earth.

Myers was free of ork zombies, but his struggle had cost him. He was sinking fast. Storm leapt back into the quagmire, and waded to his comrade's aid. He reached Myers and gripped him beneath the arms. He tried to drag him free, but for every two centimetres the pair gained, the quagmire reclaimed one, and Myers was buried up to his neck now.

Lorenzo concentrated on freeing his own legs. When the planet let go, it did so suddenly, and he fell back into a bush and lost vital seconds disentangling his vest from its thorns. He raced around the edge of the quagmire, to the point at which Storm had re-entered it. He could reach him from here, by placing one foot in the mud while leaving the other braced behind him. He caught Storm's reaching hand, and pulled at it with all his strength.

Across the clearing, to Lorenzo's relief, Greiss pulled Braxton, coughing and spluttering, to the surface—but the effort had cost him, and now they were both treading mud, only their heads visible, helpless.

Armstrong's las-bolts despatched the final zombie, and he was in trouble now too, he wasn't too far from the edge, but with his useless arm he had no way of reaching it. Lorenzo gritted his teeth and pulled harder, and at last Storm stumbled onto the bank beside him, and they took one of Myers' arms each and dragged him up after them.

Myers was trying to bring something with him. He strained and pulled, and the earth released its grip on his muddied backpack. Lorenzo had lost his, along with his jacket and his bandolier. Myers was rummaging in the pack before his legs were even out of the quagmire, and Storm grinned behind his black beard as his comrade produced a rope. He must have woven it himself from plant roots, after they'd lost the others at the river.

Myers made the throw, of course. The end of the rope slapped into the mud a centimetre or two from Greiss' head, but was absorbed before he could free an arm to reach for it. Both Greiss and Braxton strained to move their submerged limbs, to find their sinking lifeline, and Braxton's chin went under and he spluttered again as he took a mouthful of earth. Then, a tense moment later, the Validian yelled out, "Got it!" and Myers and Lorenzo pulled for all they were worth.

Storm, in the meantime, had found a branch that jutted out over Armstrong's position. He climbed up to it and swarmed along it, the branch bending beneath his weight. Armstrong raised his good arm, and their fingers strained to find each other.

At last the struggle was won, and six muddy, exhausted soldiers lay on dry land and looked mournfully at the swamp that had been their campsite, thinking of the precious kit they had lost to its embrace, and of how much more they could have lost.

They had just three half-filled water bottles between them now, Lorenzo's, Storm's and Armstrong's having gone down with their backpacks. The flamer could never be assembled again without the parts Storm had been carrying. They were just grateful that Myers still had the power packs for their lasguns.

But Lorenzo felt most sorry for Armstrong, because his devil claw knife had been snatched from him. The veteran Jungle Fighter looked devastated about that, far more hurt than he'd been by his shoulder injury. Braxton offered him Woods' old devil claw, but he just shrugged the Validian away. It wasn't the same.

"I hate to say this," announced Greiss, "but we need to move on before we can bed down again."

"You think there's anywhere safe on this damned planet?" asked Armstrong, sullenly.

"I'm gambling it takes a good while for Rogar to turn an area like this into a bog," said Greiss, "else why would it have waited till now? In future, we're just going to have to move between two or three campsites a night, grab our sleep a few hours at a time." They all saw the sense in that, though it was a disheartening proposition.

In the event, they moved only a few hundred metres before Greiss gave the order to start clearing the ground again. Lorenzo and Armstrong took their watch while the others slept. Armstrong was poor company, sitting on a tree trunk and stared at his own feet. Lorenzo, fortunately, had slept long enough to feel relatively refreshed. He hoisted the protective plastic sheets over his comrades' heads by himself, though shortly after he had done so the rain subsided at last.

A few silver-backed snakes hissed in the undergrowth—but to Lorenzo's relief, the rest of the night passed without incident.

The next morning, the Jungle Fighters had an unexpected visitor.

The figure stepped out of the trees as they were making to move out—and instantly, six lasguns were drawn and aimed at it. The figure made no threatening move, however.

Lorenzo peered at it curiously. It was humanoid in shape, about his height and build—and to an extent, it resembled one of the ork zombies, fashioned as it was from Rogar's vegetation. But this figure was wearing a jacket woven from varicoloured leaves, and a branch slung across its back where the Jungle Fighters kept their lasguns, and it even seemed to have a face, wide-eyed and grinning, though this was just a pattern formed—accidentally?—by the twisted stalks and plants that ran through its rough, sculpted head. A thatch of straw was perched atop that head, like a mop of blond hair.

It grinned at the Jungle Fighters for a minute or more, as they watched it warily. Then the figure let out a bizarre, inhuman noise: a series of guttural clicks and warbling vowel sounds. Then it turned, and with a clumsy, rolling gait like it might shake itself apart, it moved away from them, in the direction they intended to go, until its path was blocked. Then it brought up an arm, jerkily, and sliced it down, then up and down again.

“What the hell is it meant to be?” breathed Myers.

“Best guess?” growled Greiss. “It’s meant to be one of us. Look at it, Bullseye! Pretending it’s cutting its way through the jungle like we’ve been doing.”

“I think it was trying to talk.” Armstrong said. “It was trying to sound like us, imitate the noises we make, but it doesn’t understand language.”

“You think we’re supposed to be taken in by that?” asked Lorenzo, not sure if he should be amused or disturbed by the idea. “We’re supposed to think that’s one of us, let it join us, and—then what?”

“I vote we don’t give it the chance to show us,” said Myers.

“I’ll second that,” said Greiss.

Six lasguns converged on the unlikely doppelganger—and it whirled around to face the Jungle Fighters, and if Lorenzo hadn’t known better he could have sworn it seemed surprised. Then the figure exploded.

Hidden spines shot out from its chest and mouth, like slender darts, and the Jungle Fighters leapt for cover, and fortunately had kept enough distance between them and the twisted effigy to avoid being struck. Lorenzo raised his head to find a dozen spines embedded in a tree beside him. More lay in the grass, and he noted that their needle points dripped with poison. Of the effigy, there was no trace at all now. It had fallen apart, returned to its constituent components and reclaimed by the jungle, and Lorenzo

couldn't tell which of the leaves and plants that strewed the ground before them had belonged to its mass.

The second effigy showed itself almost four hours later, just stepping out behind the Jungle Fighters into the path they'd cut, greeting them with its incoherent warble. It didn't last a second before it was gunned down, falling onto its back and shooting its poisonous payload into the sky. Lorenzo had barely set eyes upon it before it was gone—but he was left with the distinct impression that this doppelganger had been more sophisticated, a far more accurate likeness of its template, than its predecessor had been. It was about then that they all felt the first tremor.

It had been a quiet day by the Jungle Fighters' standards. They had dealt with routine attacks by jungle lizards, snakes and spitter plants, but nothing that had really challenged them. Since the incident with the second effigy, they'd had no sense of being followed, so it seemed that—for now at least—they were safe from zombies.

As they had progressed, so too had their spirits lightened. Lorenzo had started to feel like they had finally got the measure of this deathworld, like Rogar had run out of new ways to torment them and accepted their mastery of it. It was a good feeling. A reaffirming feeling. It made their sacrifices worthwhile.

They didn't speak about the tremor. With luck, it had been an isolated incident—and the more time passed without a recurrence, the more likely this seemed.

Then, as the daylight began to die, the jungle opened up again, and they were able to sheathe their knives as their passage through it eased. Shortly thereafter, they uncovered gretchin footprints and knew they were close to their goal. They withdrew a short way, and found a secluded spot in which they could rest for a time. The last time, they all knew, before the culmination of their mission. Find the ork warboss and take him out. They were starting to look forward to it again.

Greiss agreed to let them light a cooking fire, because the canopy was thick here and a small amount of smoke would likely go unnoticed. Anyway, they were low on standard rations, but they did have the lizards Myers and Storm had caught, along with a few handfuls of Rogar's choicest spices. Myers tasted each one before he added it to the pot, in case its nature had changed since the last batch he'd gathered. In case the planet had brewed up a new poison to surprise them.

They knew there was a small chance that foraging gretchin would happen upon them, so Lorenzo helped Armstrong set up a few traps. Any creature that came within earshot of them would be strung up in a net, unable to raise an alarm.

They ate, and their conversation turned to the usual subject: to comrades gone but not forgotten. They spoke of Hotshot, Sharkbait and Brains' defiance of the ork hordes. They

had all heard the stories by now, of course, but it helped to reiterate them. It comforted them, and ensured that they had the details right, for the next time the stories were told. They talked of Landon's bravery, and of the heroic fight Steel Toe Dougan had no doubt put up against the blue light. In time, their conversation turned to earlier exploits, and they found these stories were even more worth the telling because Armstrong and Guardsman Braxton were new to their squad and hadn't heard them before.

Greiss recalled how, as an eager young rookie, Hotshot Woods had rushed an ork sniper that had pinned the squad down, miraculously reaching it without a scratch and wrestling it from its emplacement. Myers and Storm took it in turns to relate how Brains Donovits had survived an encounter with a stranded Chaos Space Marine, simply by outthinking it, and were pleased when Braxton asked questions and made expressions of admiration in all the right places. Then they all listened attentively to Armstrong's fresh tales of heroes from his former squad, and expressed a collective wish that they could have known these great men and witnessed their deeds.

Myers followed that with the tale of how Old Hardhead had earned his name. It was a story from before Lorenzo's time, of course—before Myers', for that matter—but they had both heard it often enough. Trooper Greiss, as he had been then, had been part of a single platoon that had taken down a Chaos Dreadnought. He had lain some of the snares into which it had walked, and planted a mine on its leg as it had struggled to free itself. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to outran the explosion that had ripped the Dreadnought apart. Or maybe it hadn't been fortune but fate that had lodged a sizeable hunk of shrapnel in Greiss' skull. The surgeons had reportedly written him off, but his strength of character had buoyed him to a full recovery. "Without that metal plate they put in his head," Myers concluded, "he wouldn't be the cantankerous old sod we know today."

"Knock it off, Bullseye," growled Greiss, "unless you want latrine duty when we get back to civilisation."

"You wait till you're splashed over the front page of *Eagle & Bolter*, sergeant," said Myers. "We got their star reporter in our midst, you know."

"Yes, that's right," remembered Storm, turning to Braxton. "Didn't I hear you were working on a story about us?"

"We give you enough material yet?" put in Myers.

"Ease off, you two," said Greiss. "You know what those rags are like. The higher-ups wouldn't let Braxton print any of this stuff if he wanted to. They're only interested in their own truths."

"I wish I could argue with that," said Braxton, "but you're right, yes. I always wrote what I was told to write—about successful missions, and ground that we'd gained. I don't think half of it was even true. I didn't ask."

“Never saw a broadsheet that was any different,” remarked Myers.

“And I thought that was alright,” continued Braxton, “because it was all about morale. That was what Mackenzie always said, and the commissar before him. Put the best possible spin on it, they said. Tell the troops about the overall campaign, about the Imperium resisting its enemies, and remind them why they’re doing it. Don’t let them dwell on the details, how people like them—like us—are suffering and dying for the cause. Your story would have been no different. Just a few lines about your great victory, maybe a name check for the commissar. They’d never have let me write about Woods or Dougan or the others.”

“All the more reason for us to make it back alive,” said Storm. “Because if we don’t tell those stories, who will?”

“I will,” swore Braxton. “One day. I’ll tell them how it is with you—how you make sure that everyone matters, every life counts for something.”

“Keep talking like that,” said Greiss, “and your next commissar will probably boot you right out on the first suicide mission to cross his desk.”

Braxton grimaced, but took the joke in the spirit it was intended.

They were all still smiling when the ground shook again.

This tremor was worse than the first one. It lasted longer, felt deeper and more destructive, although the only visible signs of it above ground were a slight blurring of the trees and the dislodging of a few leaves and fruits. The tremor died down with no harm done, but Lorenzo could see his apprehension mirrored in the other Jungle Fighters’ eyes, because they knew what it might presage.

Maybe Rogar III hadn’t conceded defeat after all. Maybe it was just waiting, planning, and building up to its biggest offensive against its interlopers yet.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Sergeant—you’ve got to see this.”

As the Jungle Fighters had ventured deeper into ork territory, they had switched to stealth tactics, as they had by the encampment. This time, it was Myers who had the task of scouting ahead for traps. He had already guided the squad around several tripwires and a concealed pit. Now he came scurrying back to them, face flushed.

They followed him through the foliage, all too aware that they were moving parallel to a path worn down and churned up by footprints. Lorenzo could hear clinking and clunking and the guttural sounds of ork voices ahead, and he moved as carefully as he could, disturbing hardly a leaf.

A light spilled into the jungle, and Lorenzo feared at first that it was the mind-altering blue light. It was white, though, far more harsh, and it seemed to emanate from many sources. The Jungle Fighters were careful to stick to the shadows, not to let the light reveal them.

Then, with a cautious touch, Myers parted a cluster of spiny fronds, and Lorenzo saw what the excitement was about.

The orks had set up a mining operation. They were working well into the night. A clearing was illuminated by lanterns strung up in trees, turned inwards, their light bleaching out all but the faintest hints of colour. Across the clearing, the ground rose steeply, and a tunnel had been dug into the side of this hillock. A square wooden frame propped up its entrance—and as the Jungle Fighters watched, another light appeared in the tunnel’s depths. An ork emerged, the light streaming from a battered helmet that was balanced atop its misshapen head. It was wheeling a lopsided barrow overloaded with rocks, which it dumped unceremoniously onto one of several heaps dotting the area.

Four gretchin were sorting through this heap, giving each rock a cursory glance before they tossed it onto a discard pile. Nearby, two orks quarrelled over a pickaxe—and ten more stood sentry at regular intervals around the clearing, with one stationed to each side of the mine entrance. A few more gretchin were scampering about, fetching and carrying, offering their ork masters food and drink.

“What do you suppose they’re looking for?” asked Armstrong, after the Jungle Fighters had backed up a safe distance.

“Isn’t much worth digging up on Rogar,” said Wildman Storm, “at least not according to Brains—or did I hear that wrong?”

Greiss shook his head. “You heard right, Wildman. But remember what else Brains said—about this world’s energy signature. There’s something here, something the explorators couldn’t identify. I’m guessing the green-skins are after it.”

“How?” protested Lorenzo. “If the explorators couldn’t find it...”

Greiss shrugged. “You know orks. Bloody-minded. Likelihood is they got nothing, know nothing, but they’ll just keep on looking on the off-chance that there’s some miracle rock down there they can mine and use against us. Probably hollow out this whole planet before they admit defeat.”

“Emperor help us if they do find something,” murmured Armstrong.

“So what now?” asked Storm—and Lorenzo recognised the impatient gleam in his eyes. “The odds are way better than they were two nights ago, and this time we have the advantage of surprise. We come out firing, we’ll have half those greenskins down before they know what’s hit them.”

“I don’t care about ‘half those greenskins’,” growled Greiss. “We’re here for one reason, and one reason only—and I didn’t see anyone out there answering Big Green’s description.”

“There were no huts.” Braxton realised. “Where do these orks live?”

“Another encampment, somewhere nearby?” hazarded Myers.

“Your job to find out,” said Greiss. “When I give the word, you take a scout round that clearing, see if there’s any wheel tracks or evidence of orks tramping to and fro. My guess is, there won’t be. I reckon these greenskins have taken their equipment and their beds underground, into the mine itself.”

“So, getting to their boss won’t be as easy as it sounded,” added Myers.

“He’s got to show his face on the surface sometime,” opined Braxton.

“Has he?” said Armstrong, cynically.

“Normally, I’d say wait,” said Greiss. “Set up sniper positions, sit it out for a few days, let our target come to us. But this is Rogar III. We sit around here too long, we don’t know what it’s going to throw at us.”

“If we go into that mine with all guns blazing,” said Armstrong, “Big Green will know about it—and I’m betting, if he’s half as smart as Mackenzie reckoned, he won’t let himself be cornered in there.”

“Something else for you to keep an eye out for, Bullseye,” said Greiss, “on your reconnoitre: a back way in—though if there is one, it’s probably kilometres away, and well hidden. No, I’ve a feeling in my old bones: the only way we’re getting in sniffing distance of our man is if we barge in the front door. Question is, how to do it without tipping off the warboss that we’re coming?”

Twenty minutes later, Lorenzo was lying flat on his face in the grass, having mud slapped onto his back by his comrades—some of them, he thought, with a little too much relish. He protested as Storm tried to tie a branch into his hair with clumsy fingers, but succeeded only in poking him in the eye.

Finally, Sergeant Greiss suggested he try standing, and Lorenzo did so, helped to his feet by Braxton. A heap of vegetation crashed to the ground around his feet, and he looked at Armstrong, upon whom similar indignities had been heaped, and stifled a laugh.

It took another ten minutes’ work to achieve anything like the effect they wanted. Lorenzo and Armstrong remained standing for this final stage, and Lorenzo watched admiringly as his comrade disappeared beneath layer after layer of dirt. Much of it didn’t stick, and even now some patches of Armstrong’s skin showed through, but that didn’t matter so much. A garland of plants had been knotted together and draped around Armstrong’s shoulders, from a distance, it might have looked like the leaves were growing out of him. The likeness wasn’t perfect, but even Lorenzo had to suppress a shudder, staring now at a figure that reminded him of the zombies that had almost killed them all. Of course, although he couldn’t see it, didn’t dare tilt his head for fear of dislodging its dressings, he knew he had undergone a similar transformation.

Greiss cast an appraising eye over his two troopers, and announced that they were ready. “At least,” he added, “I’d say we’ve done as much as we can with you. I suggest you stick to the shadows at the edge of the clearing, and—I don’t know—try and puff yourselves up a bit, stick your shoulders out. You’re supposed to be orks under all that muck. Pair of scrawny buggers like you two, you’ll be lucky to pass for gretchin.”

“So long as the greenskins don’t pick ’em as Catachans, eh, sergeant?” said Myers. He had surprised everyone by producing two ork guns from his backpack, now he pressed one into Lorenzo’s hands, and the other into Armstrong’s. “Here, this should help keep up the illusion.”

“You got any more of them, Bullseye?” asked Greiss.

“Afraid not, sergeant. Just picked up two at the encampment, for a rainy day. I loaded ‘em both up, though.”

“Rest of us will have to make do with lasguns, then. We let Patch and Lorenzo start firing first, and with a bit of luck the orks won’t think about it in the confusion.”

It sounded like a risky plan. For a start, the Jungle Fighters were relying upon the likelihood that the orks had had their own encounters with the plant zombies. “When they start falling.” Greiss had said, “we want them to think that that’s who’s behind it: their own living dead. So, no heroics. We’re just going to pick off a few sentries, narrow the odds against us and fall back, no more than that.”

Greiss, Myers, Storm and Braxton slipped away to their positions then, and left Lorenzo and Armstrong standing, looking at each other. Lorenzo hoped that Armstrong, with all he’d been through, was up to this—but when Greiss had expressed a similar sentiment, the veteran had snapped that he had lost an eye and an arm, not the use of his legs or his brain.

They waited two minutes as arranged, then began to shuffle toward the lights and the sounds of ork voices. It was easier than Lorenzo had expected to replicate the zombies’ stiff, unnatural gait: it came naturally to him, so worried was he about shedding his disguise before it was even put to use.

They split up as they neared the clearing, Armstrong going right, Lorenzo left. He saw no sign of his other comrades, but he knew they were nearby. He drew in a deep breath and stepped out into the open, stopping just short of the footprint of the nearest lantern. The nearest ork sentry was a little closer than he’d anticipated, and he squeezed the trigger of his gun and sent a hail of bullets its way. Somewhere to Lorenzo’s right, the chatter of a second ork gun echoed his own.

The ork was coming at him, snarling, foaming at the mouth. It must have known it was dead, but it was using its body as a shield, giving its fellows time to react to the intruders in their midst. There was every chance that if it could cling to life long enough to reach Lorenzo, it could do some real damage. He took a step back, but he couldn’t display too much speed or agility for fear of exposing his deception. All he could do was keep shooting, and pray.

Then the ork fell, and the clearing was full of answering fire, then the whines of las-bolts shooting in from positions unknown, and there were four more orks coming Lorenzo’s way and it was time to get the hell out of there.

It took all the self-control he could muster not to duck or run—to turn his back and to shamble away, hearing ork feet pounding ever closer, making himself a clear target for an agonising second. A bullet whistled by his ear, another blew a clump of mud from his shoulder and grazed his skin. Then Lorenzo rounded a bush, passed out of his enemies’ sight, and abandoned all pretence.

He left a trail of debris behind him as he raced through the jungle, he just hoped his pursuers wouldn't recognise it for what it was. He put as many obstacles as he could between him and them. The orks were snarling and howling, and letting off gunfire in random directions, so he knew they wouldn't hear him, as long as they didn't see him either, they should assume he had sunk underground like Rogar's other zombies. In theory, at least.

The explosions came in quick succession—two of them. The orks had run into their own traps, the positions of the tripwires changed by Greiss and Myers. Some of them would have died. It was still too early to tell, though, if the rest of the plan—the important part—had succeeded.

There was mud in Lorenzo's eyes and mouth, but he had reached his rendezvous point with the rest of his squad. He was the first there. He clawed great handfuls of dirt from his face, breathed deeply of the warm night air and coughed up a leaf. He was recognisably Lorenzo now, but a film of the planet's substance clung to him like a second skin. He didn't think he would ever feel clean again.

Somebody spoke, and he jumped, he hadn't heard anybody approaching. Then he recognised Greiss' voice, and saw the familiar figure of his sergeant out of the corner of his eye, though he couldn't make out what he was saying, so bunged up were his ears. He started to clean them with his fingers, as Greiss padded up to him and laid a hand on Lorenzo's shoulder.

That was when he saw his mistake.

Lorenzo's head snapped up, and he looked into the hollow eyes of an effigy. A better effigy, far better, than the first two, Rogar had sculpted Greiss' craggy features perfectly, even found plant tendrils to match the iron grey of his hair. And that voice—it had possessed exactly the right gruff tone, even if, Lorenzo now realised, it hadn't been saying a thing. He muttered a curse, aimed at himself for not having paid attention, as he pushed the effigy away from him and dived at the same time, but knew it was hopeless.

The effigy exploded, and Lorenzo felt his ears popping, felt its spines stabbing into him before he hit the ground, his left side feeling as if it was on fire.

He rolled onto his back, raised his left arm, and saw four spines protruding along its length, three more embedded between his ribs. He yanked them out quickly, some tearing his skin and sending more lances of pain through him. Most of the spines, he was grateful to see, still dripped poison and therefore hadn't pumped the whole of their doses into him. Seven spines, though... He was bleeding through some of his wounds, and this too was good because it meant he might bleed some of the poison out. He twisted his arm around until he could reach two of its punctures with his mouth, and he sucked at them, his tongue recoiling at a strong, sour taste.

His heart was hammering, his head light. The first effects of the poison—or of his own fear? He didn't want it to end like this. Not through his own carelessness. Not without a name by which his comrades could remember him.

He searched his pockets, found the capsule of herbs that Donovits had given him some months ago. A generic antitoxin, he had called it—though he had warned it wouldn't work in all situations. Deathworlds, Donovits had said, had a habit of evolving poisons faster than men could combat them—and, Lorenzo supposed gloomily, he would have said that went double for a world like Rogar III.

He gulped the herbs down anyway, taking hold of all the lifelines he could. He clambered unsteadily to his feet as Armstrong burst through the jungle behind him, followed by Storm, Greiss and then Braxton.

Lorenzo told them what had happened to him. He had no choice: he had to warn them in case Rogar tried the same trick on them. He downplayed his injuries, though, claiming to have been hit by only three spines and professing a false confidence that he had sucked most of the poison out of his bloodstream. Greiss gave him a sceptical look, but Lorenzo was able to return it with clear, focused eyes. Maybe, he thought, he would be alright after all?

Myers returned a few minutes after that—having stayed to view the aftermath of the Jungle Fighters' incursion—and Lorenzo could tell from his broad grin that he had the news they wanted to hear. "We gunned down three greenskins altogether," he reported, "and wounded a few more. They lost another three, and most of the gretchin, to their own traps."

"They called for replacements?" asked Greiss.

Myers shook his head. "Just spread their sentries more thinly. "It worked, sergeant. Judging by the way they're looking around and pointing guns at the plants, they think the planet did this to them."

"How many orks left?" asked Armstrong, performing a quick mental calculation. "Six?"

"Five," said Myers. "One went and stood itself right next to my bush. I caught a jungle lizard creeping up on me. I couldn't resist it. I gave it a flick with my lasgun, catapulted it onto the greenskin's shoulder. The lizard stuck the ork's neck with its tongue before it could move. It was on the ground, thrashing and howling, when I slipped away."

"Five orks," said Greiss, "and how many gretchin?"

"I reckon about four. Five, maybe," said Myers.

"Not bad," mused Armstrong. "We got the greenskins down to less than half strength, and they don't even know they're under attack yet."

The Jungle Fighters' next step was to make their presence well and truly felt.

They synchronised their assault, bursting out of cover from six points simultaneously, their lasguns flaring. Lorenzo, Braxton, Greiss, Armstrong and Storm took an ork each, though Armstrong had grumbled under his breath about being assigned one that was already injured. As Lorenzo fired repeatedly at his target, he was aware of gretchin scampering away towards the mine, intent on taking a warning to their warboss. That was Myers' job: to stop them.

Myers' las-bolts struck the stunted creatures unerringly, often finding the best angles from which to penetrate two or three of them. Two gretchin fell, and the remaining three were deterred from their course, giving Myers the chance to get between them and the mine tunnel. The single ork that had been guarding the entrance had been lured away by Greiss, now it hesitated, glancing back, not sure whether to press its attack against Greiss or to tackle this new foe. In the event, it was spared that decision. One of Greiss' las-bolts passed through the ork's thick skull and fried its brain.

Lorenzo's ork was thundering towards him, weakened but not defeated. He dropped his gun, pulled his Catachan fang, and greeted his opponent with a well-aimed slash to the throat. The ork was dead, but still fighting. Lorenzo avoided its clumsy grasp, but almost fell as it rammed him with its shoulder. The ork toppled, catching him off-balance, and bore him down with its weight. Its left hand was trapped beneath it, but it seized his throat with its right, and Lorenzo grabbed a chunky green finger in each hand and strained to pry them apart.

The ork ran out of strength, and its eyes rolled back into its head as it heaved its final breath. Lorenzo pulled himself out from under it, in time to see Sergeant Greiss gunning down the last of the gretchin. The rest of his squad were already pulling ork corpses into the foliage, hiding them, and Lorenzo followed suit. None of their targets had survived to spread word, but it was possible that the sounds of battle had carried into the mine.

Lorenzo waited, crouching silently, watching the tunnel entrance, the blood of his dead enemy seeping into his boot. After a minute or so, something stirred down there, and Lorenzo tensed at the sight of an oncoming light.

It was another barrow-pushing ork. Evidently, it hadn't heard anything amiss, because it strode right out into the clearing and stood there, blinking in the harsh light of the lanterns, just beginning to register the fact that it was alone.

It dropped its barrow, which teetered and upturned itself, spilling its contents. A look of confusion, tinged with fear, began to spread across the ork's face—and froze there as multiple las-bolts stabbed out of the darkness to impale it.

The Jungle Fighters emerged into the clearing again, and Greiss jabbed the fallen ork with his toe to check that it was really dead, that it wouldn't spring up and surprise them. Myers asked if they should burn the bodies, to prevent the planet from making use of them. Greiss concluded, reluctantly, that they had no time, that their work here could be discovered at any moment, and that they would just have to take that chance.

They headed into the mine tunnel, in single file, Storm taking point wearing an ork miner's helmet, lighting their way through the darkness. Myers was behind him, then Armstrong, Braxton, Lorenzo and finally Greiss, his knife drawn, ready for anything that might try sneaking up on them from behind.

They had taken only ten steps, hardly left the lights of the clearing behind them, when they came across another ork with a barrow. Its helmet beam dazzled Lorenzo—but Storm's beam blinded the ork in turn so that, for a fateful moment, it didn't recognise the intruders for what they were. Sergeant Greiss had decreed that lasguns should only be used now when strictly necessary—not just because they were low on ammo, but because who knew how far the sound would carry through these tunnels—so Storm leapt at the creature with a muted snarl and his Catachan fang raised and, impressively, he gutted it before it could raise much more than a whimper.

Storm took the dead ork's helmet and passed it back along the line to Greiss, who turned off the helmet's light but placed it on his head for future use. Then they crept on downward, the slope of the tunnel becoming more pronounced until Lorenzo judged that they were descending below ground level.

He eyed the precarious wooden struts—most of them just branches chopped to size, still sprouting offshoots and leaves—that were wedged into the passageway supporting the increasing weight of the earth above their heads. He didn't trust them.

The ground shook again then, as if to underscore his fears, and Lorenzo swallowed as the makeshift struts rattled fiercely and a shower of loose soil fell about his ears. He couldn't tell if this tremor was lighter or heavier than the first two, he only knew that it felt more ominous down here, where it wasn't just below him but around him and above him too, and where he knew there would be nowhere to hide from a more severe quake, no way to avoid being buried alive.

"You realise," said Braxton, putting Lorenzo's own thoughts into words as the tremor subsided, "if this place caves in, we'll have come all this way for nothing. Rogar will have dealt with Big Green for us."

"Maybe," grunted Greiss, "and maybe not. Maybe he'll just slip away through his escape tunnel, wherever that is, and maybe it'll take us a year to find him again. No, I don't care if this whole damn world blows itself apart around us—I for one am not backing out of this on a 'maybe'. Far as I'm concerned, that brute's still alive until I clap my own eyes on his stinking corpse!"

Lorenzo became aware of a sick ache in his stomach, and he fought down a surge of bile in his throat. His skin felt hot, prickly, and he was short of breath. The symptoms came from nowhere, and at first he thought the tunnel must have caused them, this unfamiliar, claustrophobic environment.

Then he remembered the effigy, and its spines.

His precautions had done him no good. Rogar III's poison was coursing through his veins. He knew he should tell the others, warn them in case he went crazy like Muldoon had, became a threat to them. But then they would probably have left him behind, to die on his back like Woods, and he couldn't face that. Not when they were so close to their goal. Not when he was so close to a chance to earn his name, at last.

He *would* earn his name. Lorenzo swore that to himself. He didn't know how—but if he couldn't find a way down here with a world against him, then where could he? A way to surrender his life for his squad, for his cause, for a chance to be remembered, and he knew he wouldn't hesitate this time. Because, this time, he had nothing to lose. This time, he was dying anyway.

Might as well go out in a blaze of glory.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sergeant Greiss swore under his breath.

The orks' mine tunnel had opened into a cave—and Lorenzo could see, from the lack of wooden props and the uneven texture of the rock where Storm's light fell upon it, that it was natural. Passages snaked from the cave in all directions—ominous black holes in the walls.

“Looks like the greenskins have bust their way into a whole underground complex,” Greiss grumbled. “Could spread for kilometres.”

“What do we do now, sergeant?” asked Braxton.

Before Greiss could answer, Myers let out a “Ssshh,” and held up his hand for silence. A second later, they all heard it: lumbering footsteps, echoing from the walls until there was no way of knowing which direction they came from.

Storm snatched off his helmet, snapped off the light, and the Jungle Fighters dispersed, navigating by memory in the total darkness, finding nooks into which they could squeeze. Lorenzo found himself in the mouth of a narrow, twisting passageway, and feared for a moment that it was along this very route that the orks were approaching. Then the footsteps—two sets, he estimated—seemed to move around him, and he saw the bobbing beam of a helmet light, and then there were two hulking shapes in the cave, striding toward the exit tunnel.

Then the Jungle Fighters were upon the orks, Storm reaching them first, leaping onto the back of the nearest and drawing his blade across its throat. Greiss and Braxton crashed into the second creature, staggered it, and Lorenzo lent his shoulder to their efforts and it fell, three knives plunged into its chest and stomach.

“You notice something?” asked Armstrong, as the others confirmed their kills. “These two were going up to the surface, but they don't have barrows. No pickaxes, no spades, just guns.”

“You think they suspect something?” murmured Greiss darkly.

“I think Big Green’s maybe starting to wonder what’s been happening to his barrow boys. Or maybe the sentries up top were supposed to report in. Either way, I’ll bet these two were coming to investigate.”

“When they don’t come back either...” breathed Myers. “Alright.” Greiss nodded. “We’ve got—how long would you say?—a few minutes before all hell breaks loose down here. Meantime, we need to make inroads into these caves, make sure the warboss can’t go nowhere without getting past us first. Anyone else hear that? Sounds like digging?”

Myers reported that he did hear it—and, screwing up his face in concentration, Storm agreed. Lorenzo didn’t hear a thing, and he scabbled at the insides of his ears in frustration, evacuating more of Rogar III’s mud. The effort disturbed his equilibrium, and his brain performed a lurching spin. The sickness in his stomach made another surge for his throat, and he swallowed it down.

Greiss and Myers followed the digging sounds to the right-hand side of the cave, and Myers located a tunnel that was wider and straighter than the others, its floor a little smoother. “I’d say there’s been a few barrows pushed up this way, sergeant,” he reported—and, standing at the tunnel entrance, even Lorenzo could now hear the distant clink of metal against rock from somewhere below.

“Right,” sighed Greiss, “this is how it’s going to have to be. We split into three teams. Patch and Lorenzo, you follow this tunnel here. Braxton, you’re with me—we’ll take the passage those two orks came up from. Bullseye, Wildman, you wait around here a while, stick to the shadows. Chances are, there’ll be more greenskins along soon, and I’m betting once they find their buddies’ corpses littering the place, they’ll send word back to the big boss.”

“We can follow ‘em,” concluded Storm. “Right, sergeant.”

Everyone seemed happy with that plan, and Lorenzo didn’t want to be the one to object. Still, he felt numb. His chances of being *the* one to find the warboss had just been slashed by two-thirds. He pictured himself dying quietly in a dark tunnel somewhere, while Greiss and Braxton, or Myers and Storm, stumbled upon their target and grabbed all the glory. He wouldn’t let that happen.

Greiss handed him the miner’s helmet from one of the dead orks, and Lorenzo jammed it onto his head and practically dragged Armstrong away, down the tunnel towards the digging sounds. “Steady on,” whispered Patch in his ear, “you’ll run straight into the greenskins at this rate.” But Lorenzo wasn’t listening. He’d had a lifetime of being too cautious. All he cared about now was covering as much ground as he could. More ground than the other two teams could cover. Being the first to find the ork warboss. Earning his name, before it was too late.

There were lights up ahead—harsh, like the lanterns outside. Lorenzo switched off his helmet beam and crept forward, Armstrong at his heels.

The tunnel they were following took a sharp dip, its gradient so steep that they were half-walking, half-sliding. The sounds of picks and shovels were unmistakeable now, and there was something else. The squeak of a wheel. Armstrong tapped Lorenzo on the shoulder and indicated a side passageway, narrow and level, also well lit. Lorenzo nodded, and they slipped into it, and pressed themselves against its walls so the light wouldn't cast their shadows across the junction.

An ork appeared, grunting as it strained to push a loaded barrow up the slope. Lorenzo's hand moved to his lasgun, knowing that if the creature saw them their cover was blown. It only had to yell out. To his relief, it moved on. Let Myers and Wildman take care of it when it reached them, he thought.

They moved further down the side passageway, until the right-hand wall fell away and they were in a natural gallery, looking out across a vast cavern. Its floor lay some ten metres below them, its far wall was four times that distance. The cavern was swarming with orks, hefting tools, battering at the walls, breaking off chunks of rock that gretchin gathered and piled into waiting barrows. The area was lit by six lanterns, squeezed into niches at varying heights, connected by tangles of thick cabling. There was a lantern beside the Jungle Fighters, on the gallery, lying on its side—and they crouched behind it so any ork that glanced their way wouldn't see them behind its intense light.

Lorenzo scanned the throng with his eyes, fervently hoping to find an ork with cleaner, better armour than the others, an ork that was giving the orders, an ork perhaps a little larger than its fellows. He was disappointed.

“Another nine, ten passageways off this chamber,” breathed Armstrong. “This place is like a maze!”

“I don’t know,” Lorenzo muttered. “Most of those tunnels, I think the orks dug themselves—and I think they’re still digging them. See how the gretchin keep coming back along them with more rubble. I’m betting most of them are dead ends.”

“Doesn’t mean we won’t find Big Green’s quarters down one of them.”

Lorenzo conceded the point, but nodded towards a wide tunnel entrance below them to the left. “Seems to be a lot of coming and going through there,” he remarked, “and the passageway we’re in heads in that direction. I think it’s worth a look.”

“Your call,” said Armstrong.

They crept on, until rock closed in around them again and their passageway dipped and narrowed and came to an abrupt end. Its floor didn’t quite meet the wall, however, and Lorenzo peered through the gap thus created and saw another passageway below. Even as

he watched, an ork passed along it, he could almost have reached down and touched its head. He listened a moment, but the only sounds he could hear came from the main chamber behind and below them. He glanced at Armstrong, who nodded—and Lorenzo lowered himself through the hole, until he was hanging from his fingertips, then let himself drop.

The world gave another spin as he hit the ground, and he lost his balance and fell. He picked himself up quickly, humiliated, and gestured up to Armstrong that he was alright. He had guessed right. This tunnel sloped back down to the main chamber in one direction, climbed more gently into darkness in the other. He could only see a short way in the lantern light that bled up from below, but it was enough to see that the tunnel walls were riddled with openings.

At Lorenzo's signal, Armstrong joined him, hampered by his dead arm but still affecting a more graceful landing than his comrade had managed.

Two orks were coming their way. Quickly, they clucked into the nearest of the openings, and found themselves pushing through a tattered curtain. Beyond this, a small cave was littered with skins and debris, and Lorenzo realised that orks had been sleeping here. Fortunately, there were none present at the moment.

A little further up, the tunnel levelled out and split into three, and they followed the left-hand branch. They found more quarters, some rumbling with the grunts and snores of sleeping residents, some apparently empty. Some had lights within, spilling around the edges of their curtains—and in one, the curtain was pulled aside and four orks sat around a flat-topped boulder, playing with knuckle dice. Lorenzo and Armstrong didn't dare risk passing that cave, so they backtracked and chose another path from the three-way junction.

Lorenzo felt angry. What the orks were doing here—it was wrong. At least, when the men of Catachan tamed a deathworld, it was a fair fight. They didn't burrow under its skin, try to destroy it from within like a virus. The thought of it made him itch, made the sickness rise in his stomach... He wasn't sure why, didn't know where these feelings were coming from, because it wasn't as if the Imperium had never strip-mined a world. Maybe just not a world like Rogar III...

They came across a particularly large entranceway and Lorenzo hesitated, wondering if this could be the cave to house the warboss. He didn't want to poke his head around the curtain, though: he'd have been unlikely to see anything in the dark and he might have disturbed somebody. Anyway, he could hear at least three different snores from within—and it was probable, he thought, that the orks' warboss had a cave to himself.

A moment later, however, more footsteps—shuffling unexpectedly from an unseen tunnel, little more than a fissure in the rock—forced the two Jungle Fighters to duck into another cave. And this one was occupied.

Lorenzo held his breath, and not just because of the stink of ork bodies around him. He could just make them out: three festering lumps crammed together on the floor. He had almost stepped on one as he'd entered, and he eased his foot away from it. For a moment, he thought he had left Armstrong behind outside, so silent was he—but then he saw the glint of a single eye in the darkness, and was comforted.

The footsteps shuffled up to the cave entrance, and for a moment Lorenzo feared he might have had the bad luck to have taken cover in the wandering ork's own quarters—but then the moment passed and the footsteps were receding. Heading for the main chamber, he guessed.

But there was still something wrong—badly wrong—if only he could put his finger on it. Lorenzo's spine prickled with dread.

He realised what was about to happen a second before it did, and he knew that his luck had turned bad after all. As bad as it could have been.

The tremor shook the soles of his feet, then seemed to rise through the walls and meet again above his head. One of the sleeping orks stirred instantly, and Lorenzo was trapped. He didn't think it had seen him or Armstrong yet, but that could change in an instant, if they moved—and the footsteps outside the cave had come to a halt, so where could they have gone anyway?

The waking ork was fumbling for something, and Lorenzo wondered if there was a chance, a tiny chance, that he could reach it and muffle it before it yelled out, plant his hand over its mouth and his knife in its throat. But that tremor wasn't subsiding—and as he took his first step, the earth bucked underneath him and he fell, put out his hands to catch himself, ended up sprawled across one of the two sleeping orks. Which, of course, was awake too now.

The first ork had found a miner's helmet, and it snapped on the light, shining it around the cave.

Armstrong let loose with a las-bolt volley, which kept the ork pinned down but didn't prevent it from letting out an alarm howl.

So now the third ork was clambering to its feet, blinking, reaching for its weapon, and Lorenzo was still trying to avoid the flailing grasp of the second. It caught him by the arm, and he was trying to pull away from it, dragging it to its feet after him, its fingers digging painfully into him. He turned, braced his shoulder against the ork's chest and tried to throw it. It was too heavy, shifting its weight to counter his move, but in so doing it relaxed its hold, and Lorenzo wrenched himself free from it, though it felt like he had lost a handful of his flesh.

Then he and Armstrong were running, as the third ork found its gun and fired—in entirely the wrong direction, confused by the shifting shadows and its wounded fellow's

dancing beam of light. The Jungle Fighters burst out into the passageway, where the ork they had been hiding from was waiting, its gun raised. Lorenzo lowered his head, rushed it, and a bullet pinged off his helmet, then he cannoned into the ork and it gave a few paces but braced itself. They were fighting for the ork's gun, and Lorenzo feinted, let the greenskin have the weapon but unbalanced it in the process. It stumbled, and fell onto his freshly drawn knife, impaling itself. Planting his foot in the ork's stomach, he pulled the blade free. It was still alive, but he didn't have time to finish the job.

There were more orks in the passageway, pouring out of the openings on all sides, reacting to the clamour, and the only thing that kept Lorenzo and Armstrong alive was the fact that the earth was still shaking, and with increasing ferocity, confusing the issue, giving the orks more to worry about than just them. Armstrong made to flee back the way they had come, Lorenzo's impulse was to go deeper into the mine, find the ork leader, and they both came up short as they realised they were pulling in opposite directions.

Lorenzo knew, just *knew* they were in danger, and he threw himself at Armstrong, barged him into the wall as the roof caved in. They were coated in soil, disturbed dust tearing at Lorenzo's throat, making his eyes water, but they had avoided the worst of it and the orks were reeling around them, and Lorenzo grabbed Armstrong by the hand and pulled him along, guiding him through the chaos by instinct, at a loss to explain where that instinct had come from.

The tremor was more than a tremor now. It was a fully-fledged earthquake—and Lorenzo knew, with a gut-wrenching certainty, that this was only the beginning. The tunnel was shaking so fiercely, it felt like he had double vision, cracks were opening in the walls, the floor was churning itself up, tossing him about like a wild grox, and the roof was groaning and grinding and collapsing in stages. Rogar III was taking its revenge on the orks that had defiled it, driving them out of itself or just burying them. Lorenzo had lost all sense of direction, but he was moving broadly with the ork flow, and he knew that this meant he was headed back to the main chamber, and from there to the mine entrance. As if the planet itself was herding him that way. What hope did he have now of finding the ork warboss? What hope for him at all in that lantern-lit clearing, with a hundred evacuated greenskins waiting for him? Even assuming he could make it that far.

He was looking for another option, a way to cheat his fate, when an ork reared up in front of him, a spade levelled at his throat like a knife. Lorenzo swung his fang, but the quake made the ork appear to be in ten places at once, and his thrust passed through its ghost image. He didn't know which of its ten spades to avoid.

But then, with a tremendous crack, the wall behind the ork split, and Lorenzo caught his breath in the face of an explosion of fire.

Molten lava, bright red with its own luminescence. It burst through the sundered rock, broke over the ork's back, and the creature let out a howl of incandescent pain. Lorenzo didn't stop to ask how it was possible, how the planet could have pumped its own lifeblood so close to its surface. This was Rogar—and he could feel the lava's heat

scorching his face even before it reached him. He kicked out at the scalded, screeching ork, and landed his boot dead centre where all its images combined. It staggered, fell backwards, and its bulky form all but plugged the fissure as Lorenzo had planned. The ork's screams were quelled, its body shuddered and fell still, as liquid fire crept over its shoulders and between its legs.

Lorenzo and Armstrong had a moment's respite. Many of the orks behind them had held back, or tried to back up along the narrow tunnel, when they'd seen the lava. They were colliding with each other, knocking each other down. From the chorus of screams that suddenly rose from up there, somewhere in the darkness, Lorenzo guessed that another lava spring had just opened behind them.

The Jungle Fighters ran—but Lorenzo dragged his comrade to a halt as, suddenly, he saw where they were. Above them was the hole in the roof through which they had dropped: the one that led up to the natural gallery. A way to circumvent the main chamber and all the confused, frightened, angry orks within.

He gave Armstrong a boost, and the veteran shouldered his way up through the narrow opening, attained the ledge above, then turned and reached down with his good arm for his comrade. As Lorenzo took it and scrambled up after him, an ork came roaring out of nowhere and swung its axe at his dangling legs. The shifting earth threw off its aim, and Lorenzo stamped on the ork's face and pushed himself up the final section of his climb. He fired his lasgun down the hole behind him to discourage pursuit, then turned and followed Armstrong along the narrow passageway—to find, to his horror, that it came to an abrupt end.

The gallery, their route to freedom, had crumbled away. They were looking out of a hole in the side of the main chamber, at another hole too far to reach by jumping, the intervening expanse of wall too sheer to climb along even if it hadn't been shaking madly. Lorenzo's foot touched something: the lantern they had passed earlier, still on its side, wedged into position by a stubborn outcrop. He followed its light beam, and on the floor of the chamber he saw a molten river.

The chamber had split down the middle, and its halves were divided by a roiling, bubbling lava flow. Dozens of orks had been trapped on its far side, and panic had broken out. An ork tried to leap the stream, but fell short, howling as its legs were dissolved, the rest of its body sinking after them until only a thin wisp of steam remained of it.

Lorenzo had his own problems. An ork head popped up through the hole in the floor behind him. He and Armstrong fired at it—and, holding on with both hands, there wasn't much it could do to defend itself. Even in death, though, it kept coming, the head followed into the passageway by a pair of broad shoulders, then a green-skinned torso. Lorenzo realised that the corpse was being pushed up by more orks below, shielding them as they followed it. The muzzle of a crude ork gun appeared over the hole's edge and fired blindly. Bullets ricocheted around the confined space, and Lorenzo drew a sharp breath through his teeth as his shoulder was nicked.

“We’re easy targets up here,” muttered Armstrong. “We can hold off these greenskins for a while—but our backs are exposed to the main chamber. Once the orks down there see us, we’ll be caught in a crossfire, dead meat.”

He was saying nothing Lorenzo didn’t know. He cast around for something, anything—and his eyes found the lantern. It was trailing tangled cables in each direction around the great cavern, clockwise, the next lantern still clung to the wall, but anticlockwise, the nearest two had been wrenched free from their moorings and were hanging suspended. Lorenzo pulled at the cables in that direction, and found plenty of slack.

Armstrong glanced at him, saw what he was thinking and nodded his approval. “That might get one of us out of here,” he said. “Go. I’ll buy you some time.”

With that he was off, before Lorenzo could stop him—back down the passageway, leaping onto the first ork as it hauled itself up out of the hole, taking it by surprise, forcing it back down but falling with it, toward the bloodthirsty pack that Lorenzo knew must have gathered below. His instinct was to go after his comrade, to do what he could to help him—but not only was it hopeless, he would have been doing him a disservice. Armstrong had sacrificed himself to save Lorenzo, to give him a chance at least—because Lorenzo had let him, because he hadn’t spoken up first, because he hadn’t told his comrade that his life was over anyway, that if the orks and the quake didn’t finish him the poison would.

Armstrong was relying on Lorenzo to tell that story—which was all that kept him going now as he yanked on the lantern, tore out the taut cables from one side of it and gathered the loose ones to the other. He looked for a safe landing spot, clear of orks and lava and falling rocks.

That was when he saw it. Amid the chaos below, a great brutish ork, trapped on the far side of the lava stream but walking taller, more confidently, than its fellows. It was surrounded by an entourage seven-strong—one of which was festooned with bizarre totems and carried a staff.

As Lorenzo watched, two of the guards seized another gretchin, and bore it face-first into the lava. First the larger ork then the shaman used it as a stepping-stone, hopping onto its back and across to safety before it boiled away. Then the big ork turned and shouted impatient curses at its guards, and they tried to follow but without any such assistance. Four of them made the leap, two did not.

Lorenzo didn’t care about them. He had eyes only for their master, with its tough, leathery skin and its gleaming new axe, twice the size of the other orks’ weapons and with ceremonial trappings. He had no doubt that this was him. The warboss. Big Green. He even knew, with a flash of insight, what the strange-looking ork with the staff had to be, why it was getting preferential treatment. The source of Big Green’s vaunted intelligence. An ork psyker—a weirdboy!

Everything he had ever wanted. His blaze of glory...

Lorenzo wrapped his hands around the entwined cables, calculated the trajectory of his swing. The ork leader was facing away from him, at the edge of the lava flow. One kick between the shoulder blades, with enough weight behind it, would send him reeling. Hit him at the right angle, and the weirdboy might even go with him. And the fact that Lorenzo would doubtless follow both orks into the fire—well, that was good too. A fitting end for a hero.

Only, he realised, with a pang of despair, who would see it? Who would tell the story of this, his greatest moment? He hesitated.

Which, in turn, made him angry with himself. Not this time, he thought. His last chance to count, to make his life mean something. At least *he'd* know.

So, Lorenzo pushed himself off from the rock, and his heart leapt as he saw that his path was true, that even the quake hadn't shaken him off-course. He saw his destiny rushing towards him, and in that moment he *knew* that someone, somewhere, would tell a story about this some day.

Even if it was only the orks themselves.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Everything had changed in an instant.

Lorenzo was on the ground, fighting unconsciousness, not sure how much of the violent, lurching motion around him came from the earthquake and how much from inside him. He tried to put together the pieces of what had just happened.

He had seen it lain out before him: the rest of his life. His heroic death. The ork warboss, growing larger and closer until there was nothing else in the world, nothing else that mattered. Only the warboss, and the river of fire.

Only Big Green, somehow, had heard him coming, or maybe a follower had shouted a warning or his psyker had muttered a prediction, because he had turned—and, with no time to swing his axe nor to sidestep, he had *leapt* instead, and met his oncoming attacker head on. His muscular arms had encircled Lorenzo's legs, and they had hit the ground together but the warboss had landed on his feet while Lorenzo had been smacked down onto his back.

He expected to die a failure—until he realised that the warboss had staggered, at least. He had taken a step back to brace himself—and his foot had slipped into the lava stream. The psyker let out a panicked chittering sound at his master's peril and hobbled away. Lorenzo held his breath but the warboss' self-control was incredible. He triumphed over what must have been searing agony to keep his balance—and he loomed over the Catachan with his axe raised high, though one of his legs now tapered to a dripping, cauterised stump at the ankle. Lorenzo still didn't know what to do, because he hadn't planned for this situation, hadn't planned to survive this long.

So it was just as well that his instincts took over—and he kicked out at the warboss' intact leg with all his might, and he managed to fell him but not backwards as he'd hoped. Lorenzo scrambled on top of the huge ork, still hoping that somehow he could roll them both into the lava—but Big Green was too heavy and unyielding, and Lorenzo was seized from behind by two of his four remaining bodyguards.

He kicked and yelled as he was dragged from his foe—as more orks streamed towards him from all directions, disregarding their own peril in the face of his threat to their leader. Rarely had he seen such a display of loyalty from the greenskins. Now a curtain of snarling faces closed in front of Lorenzo, and he couldn't see the ork leader anymore, and he knew it was all over.

The sounds of las-fire seemed distant at first, as if they came from a world that was no longer his concern. It was only when the orks began to scatter, when one of those that held him was hit and loosed its grip, that Lorenzo realised a new element had entered the equation. Or rather, two new elements. Sergeant Greiss and Braxton. Lorenzo didn't know where they'd come from—a tunnel opening beneath the collapsed gallery was his best bet—but they had bought him another chance when he had thought he was out of chances, and he wasn't about to waste it.

He tried to throw his remaining captor, but failed. Again, his instincts came to the rescue, predicting the patterns of the quake, telling him when the ground would buck beneath the ork's feet, which way to push when it did. The greenskin squealed as it fell, surfed the shifting floor on its back and wound up with its head in the lava.

Lorenzo drew his gun, and immediately found a target. The greenskin psyker. He had thought it long gone, but it must have run into the new arrivals and reversed its flight. At least, he thought as he killed it, that was the end of the warboss' advantage. He was just a normal warboss now. But his squad's orders hadn't been to kill the psyker, they'd been to kill Big Green himself, and he intended to do just that.

The warboss couldn't have gone far—not with only one foot. Indeed, there he was, just a few metres distant, being helped along by two guards. But Greiss was closer, and Lorenzo could see the familiar gleam in his sergeant's eyes, knew he had spied an opening and would take it, heedless of the cost to himself. While Lorenzo's path was blocked again, and he couldn't clear, it in time—though he ploughed into the orks anyway, lasgun flaring, fang flashing, and he wasn't sure if the red mist he could see was a product of his own unreasoning anger or his poisoning or just an afterglow from the lava stream.

All he knew, in that desperate moment, was that he had to reach the warboss before his sergeant did. He couldn't help himself. Greiss was tired of life, wanted to go out on a high—but he had earned his name. Weren't there enough stories told of him already?

Greiss was wading through orks like they were nothing. They'd given up trying to shoot him, because it was hopeless aiming through the quake, and they were throwing themselves at him to be hurled aside or gutted or just trampled as they mistimed their rushes and fell at Greiss' feet. Lorenzo was so busy watching this performance that he was barely aware of his own actions, moving on autopilot, stabbing at an ork throat here, reacting to the whistle of a descending axe there. It was only as a substantial chunk of the chamber's roof fell, as Lorenzo danced out of its way and a dozen orks were crushed, that he realised what he'd been doing: drawing his foes to him, bunching them together, setting them up for a fate no man could have predicted... could he?

Dust billowed black around him, rubble made his footing treacherous, and the last of the lanterns toppled from its high perch, smashed and died. The only light now came from the lava—and Lorenzo almost plunged into it as, scrambling to find the warboss, he slid on a layer of scree. Then the earth cracked again, and suddenly the molten stream had a

hundred narrow tributaries, crazing the cavern floor. Lorenzo vaulted them two at a time, he knew where he was going, almost as if he could sense his prey's ponderous, one-legged footsteps through the ground itself.

There he was—stranded on an island, only one guard left at his side, the lava flows around him thin and shallow but impassable to one with his disability. As Big Green saw Lorenzo, his eyes widened with fear and hatred, and he yelled and gesticulated to his guard, ordering it to lay itself down as a bridge for him. The ork signalled its refusal by swiping at the warboss' neck with its axe, evidently, loyalty had its limits, especially when an ork sensed that its leader's day was done.

But Big Green had earned his position for a reason. Some warbosses had been known to go toe to toe with Space Marines. Displaying the same lightning reflexes with which he'd met the Jungle Fighters' first attack upon him, the warboss caught the axe's blade between both hands, a centimetre from his slavering sneer, and twisted the weapon right out of his startled guard's hands.

Lorenzo was firing frantically—but like the orks, he found his shots knocked astray, the warboss had his traitor guard by the neck, had wrenched its arm up behind its back, and was pushing it down, and it looked like he was about to get his bridge after all, so Lorenzo sprang for the warboss' back.

He timed his leap just right, to benefit from an upsurge beneath his feet, Big Green whipped around and swung his giant axe, but Lorenzo was higher than he could have expected, and the blade passed beneath his feet—and then he was on the warboss' shoulders, and he plunged his knife into the ork's eye and tried to work its point up into his brain.

Big Green howled and threw back his arms, trying to swat the Jungle Fighter from his back. Lorenzo held on as long as he could, but between the warboss and the quake it was like trying to straddle three grox at once. He pulled his knife free and jumped before he could be thrown, landing nimbly on his feet.

He parried an axe thrust with his knife, and simultaneously kicked out at the warboss' injured leg, making him howl again. But Big Green didn't fall. He barely even flinched—and Lorenzo had been counting on at least a momentary respite to drop back into a defensive position. The axe blade whistled toward him again, and the flat of its blade struck a resounding blow against his wrist, splintering bones, and his knife flew out of his grasp.

It was spinning towards the lava, and Lorenzo leapt after it without thinking, dropping his lasgun, catching the knife with his off-hand in midair, twisting to avoid a scalding death himself. He landed on his back, winded as the ground rose up to meet him. The warboss lunged, and Lorenzo barely brought up a foot in time, tried to kick the warboss away, but the ork batted it aside. Then he was on Lorenzo, the sharp points of his tusks almost touching the Catachan's face, dripping drool onto his cheek and blood from his punctured

eye, and Big Green's axe haft was pressed down across Lorenzo's throat, crushing his windpipe.

All Lorenzo could do was take that haft himself, try to force it upwards, away from him, but *the warboss* was too strong, and he could feel the breath being choked out of him. His lungs were empty, burning, and his head felt light. He held on, because every fraction of a second he could keep Big Green here dealing with him was a further delay to the warboss' escape. Lorenzo may have failed to kill this monster, but he could be the hero who engaged it in single combat, kept it trapped long enough for the earthquake to finish it. A forlorn hope, he realised.

Then, suddenly, the pressure on his throat was released, and Lorenzo tried to see what was happening, but without him knowing it his eyes had closed and he couldn't open them because they were prickling with tears and his entire body was preoccupied with just trying to breathe. His stomach convulsed as he heaved in air, and spluttered on its gritty texture.

By the time he could look again, he knew what he would see: Sergeant Greiss, wrestling with the warboss. Greiss had landed a few good blows, too—the warboss had a livid scar on his cheek to add to the one Lorenzo had left across his eye. But he was fighting on, as if nothing would ever stop him.

Lorenzo's legs were too weak to stand, so he contented himself with hitting his opponent low, the combination of his efforts and Greiss', and Big Green's missing foot, flooring the big ork again. They piled on top of him, fists and knives flying, but they couldn't still his axe—and its blade swung and impacted with Greiss' head, cleaving his miner's helmet in two, cutting into his scalp and, with a resounding clang, hitting the metal plate just below the surface. Greiss fell back, blood matting his grey hair as Lorenzo used the momentum of the warboss' swing against him, and with a tremendous, last-ditch heave, tipped and *rolled* him into one of the narrow streams. The ork leader was facedown in the lava but still thrashing, and Lorenzo placed his good hand on the back of the warboss' head and, releasing a strangulated roar of utter hatred from the back of his throat. He pushed down...

Then he was scrambling towards Greiss, though he didn't know what he could do for him. The sergeant was bleeding freely, but all Lorenzo could see in his face was a malicious satisfaction at the death of an enemy. And maybe, when he looked at Lorenzo, a hint of approval?

Then, a sudden change of expression—a warning glint in Greiss' eyes. Lorenzo whirled around and the warboss was standing, molten lava streaming from his face, most of the skin burnt away, but he was coming at them again...

Greiss was firing at him, pumping las-round after las-round into the warboss' chest, and Lorenzo didn't think it would be enough—but then there was las-fire from behind Big Green too, and a bedraggled, soot-blackened figure emerged through a haze of dust—and

even as the ork leader reached his targets, as he made to bring his axe down, it was one of Guardsman Braxton's rounds that finally sizzled through his skull and put out the feral light in those eyes once and for all.

Lorenzo had thought he'd feel different when the ork leader died at last. Lie had expected to feel... something. Relieved, perhaps. Or dismayed, that another man had delivered the killing blow. Somehow, he had thought mere would be silence, and time to reflect—but as another great chunk of rock was dislodged from the cavern roof to thunk into the ground beside him, he knew it was not to be.

Braxton helped Lorenzo to his feet, and they both turned to give Greiss a lift, but the grizzled sergeant waved them away stubbornly. "We've got to get out of here, sergeant," insisted Braxton as Lorenzo retrieved his gun and slapped a new pack into position. "This place won't hold up much longer. Most of the orks have already run for it. Where's Patch?"

Lorenzo shook his head. "Bullseye and Wildman?"

"Dead," said Greiss, flatly. "Me and Braxton, we stumbled across their bodies on our way in. Looks like they found Big Green before we did, more's the pity."

"I'm sure they put up a good fight," said Lorenzo, almost automatically. "I'm sure if it hadn't been for them, if they hadn't weakened—"

"Time enough for eulogies later," growled Greiss. "Looked like the greenskins were mostly headed back up to the clearing, but we found another way out." He nodded in the direction from which he and Braxton had appeared. "We take that, chances are we'll run into less opposition along the way. That is, if the whole tunnel hasn't collapsed by now."

"Let me lead the way," said Lorenzo.

Greiss snarled. "Like hell! In case you hadn't noticed, trooper, I am not dead yet—and I'm still in charge of this squad, what's left of it."

"That's not what I meant, sergeant. I've been having a... a... I don't know how to describe it, some kind of an instinct about the quake. Like I know how the earth's going to move, where it's safe to step, where..." Lorenzo tailed off, embarrassed at how implausible the words sounded out loud.

But Greiss just regarded him coolly for a moment, then nodded and grunted, "Step to it, then."

Lorenzo set off sure-footedly, affecting confidence while inwardly he half-expected his luck to run out at any moment. Then, there it was again: that indefinable feeling, that tug in a certain direction. Greiss indicated a tunnel mouth ahead of them, but Lorenzo balked at a direct approach, and picked out a circuitous path towards their goal instead. His

caution was rewarded as a lava stream bubbled and spat its contents straight up like a geyser.

The Jungle Fighters hugged the wall, keeping just out of range of burning droplets, until they reached the tunnel and stumbled gratefully into its stale but cooler embrace. After that, their progress was a little easier, because there were no lava streams up here and because they could lean on the walls for support. To some extent, anyway. A particularly violent shudder pinballed the trio from one side of the passageway to the other and back, and made Greiss curse and demand to know why Lorenzo hadn't felt that one coming.

Darkness enveloped them, and Lorenzo snapped on his helmet light, which luckily still worked. They passed several junctions, with Greiss bellowing directions at each one—and they found their path strewn with crushed ork bodies, and had to squeeze their way around more than one partial cave-in.

It was Braxton who first voiced the feeling that they were being followed, though when Lorenzo shone his light behind them they could see nothing. Greiss urged them on, and eventually he directed them into an upward-leading passageway that was smoother and straighter than the others, obviously worked, like the one they had followed down from the clearing.

The first set of wooden struts they came across had slipped and buckled but, miraculously, held, they climbed past them gingerly. The second had broken into splinters, but fortunately the roof was staying up by itself.

It was just past the third that their luck ran out.

Lorenzo heard the orks ahead of them before he saw them. There were a half-dozen of them, jabbering in panic as they tried to dig through a pile of rubble that had completely blocked the tunnel. They were succeeding mostly in getting in each other's way: as the Jungle Fighters watched, one ork accidentally embedded its pickaxe in the skull of another.

They were sitting ducks for a volley of las-fire, the narrow confines ensuring that even through the quake most of the Jungle Fighters' shots found a target. The orks, in turn, didn't seem to be armed—and, taken by surprise, they jostled with each other in their haste to close with their attackers, more than one of them stumbling in the melee and being manhandled aside. A single greenskin made it within knife range—and this, Lorenzo made short work of with his Catachan fang.

As he yanked his blade out of the ork's chest, he stumbled, brushed the tunnel wall with his bare arm and recoiled from its unexpected heat. Greiss had felt it too, and he gave Lorenzo a quizzical look. "Lava," he confirmed. "It's alright—it hasn't built up enough pressure yet to cause a burst. We've got a few minutes."

Greiss nodded, and asked, "How far to the surface?"

“Almost there. Just the other side of that cave-in.”

“Guess the orks had the right idea, then,” said Greiss—and the Jungle Fighters rummaged amid the corpses of their enemies to retrieve their pickaxes and spades, and set about the blockage with gusto and a great deal more efficiency and teamwork than the greenskins had demonstrated.

Lorenzo was worried about Greiss. He had retied his bandana like a bandage over his head wound—but the bleeding showed no sign of abating, red rivulets rolling down his cheek. None of this seemed to lessen the zeal with which he swung his pickaxe, but then Lorenzo had learned to expect no less from him.

“Looks like you were right, Braxton,” Greiss murmured—and Lorenzo swung around, and this time his light beam *did* pick out something. A lot of somethings, no longer bothering to hide.

Ork zombies, shuffling up the tunnel behind them. They could only fit two abreast with their broad shoulders, but their ranks extended further back than Lorenzo could see—and, at their heart: the chilling sight of an even bulkier creature that could only have been the warboss himself, his skull half-caked with mud but stripped to the bone beneath this.

There was still too far to dig, no way they could escape in time. There were too many sources of fresh corpses for Rogar to use against them, even discounting those orks that had been melted in lava or whose bones had been shattered. Lorenzo found himself averting his gaze from the oncoming army—not through fear of their strength and numbers, but lest he glimpse the familiar shape of a lost comrade among them.

“Looks like this is it,” growled Greiss.

“No, sergeant,” protested Lorenzo—though he knew it was hopeless too. “Not now. Not when we’re so close!”

“I didn’t mean the end for all of us. Just me. About damn time!”

“What... what are you...?” Lorenzo began—but Greiss hefted his pickaxe, and Lorenzo saw that gleam in his eyes, saw where it was focused, and suddenly he knew what the sergeant was planning. And, impulsively, he laid a restraining hand on his shoulder and he said, “Let me.”

“What’s wrong with you, trooper?” snapped Greiss. “That’s twice you’ve questioned my orders, and I’m telling you, I don’t like it!”

“You’ve taken worse hits than this, sergeant. I know you have. You aren’t going to let some dumb ork get the better of you, are you?”

“Too damn old,” grumbled Greiss. “This was always going to be my last outing. And you, Lorenzo, you got a job to do. You’re the only one who can tell Patch’s story. I’m only sorry I won’t be around to hear it.”

“I... I’m dying too, sergeant. Poisoned.”

Greiss looked Lorenzo up and down, and said curtly, “You look alright to me.” Lorenzo couldn’t argue, because Greiss was right—because, exhausted and hurt though he was, he realised only now that the effects of the effigy’s venom, the nausea and the dizziness, had receded.

Then Greiss clapped him on the arm and smiled grimly. “Live for me. Tell everyone I did it, got my blaze of glory. And don’t be so damn impatient for yours. Way I see it, you got a lot of stories in you yet, you only just earned your name.”

He turned and, before Lorenzo could say anything else—before he could think what *to* say—he was charging at the front rank of zombies with a bloodcurdling scream. As he reached them, as they grabbed and clawed at him, he smashed his pickaxe into the wall beside them, again and again, until the first crack began to show... and to widen... and *explode*.

A deluge of lava crashed into the passageway, and surged downhill. It subsumed Sergeant Greiss and the zombies, swept them away, and Lorenzo knew that this time there wouldn’t be enough left of any of them for Rogar to reanimate. He turned away, couldn’t watch, concentrated on the blockage in front of him, swinging his pickaxe in time with Braxton’s, driving himself on, ignoring the pain in his fractured wrist, not letting himself think about anything but the task at hand because if he did think about it, what had happened to Greiss and Armstrong and Myers and Storm and all the others, if he really *thought* about it, he might have been overwhelmed by the unfairness of it all. Why them? Why them and not him?

Lorenzo thought about their sacrifices, and his greatest fear was that they would all be for nothing.

His pickaxe rose and fell, and he could feel the heat from the lava at his back and the rock walls closed in around him, and his pickaxe rose and fell, and there were tears in his eyes but that might have been the dirt. He remembered the ship, out in warp space, so long ago now, and that feeling of being trapped, surrounded by hostile forces, helpless to influence his own fate, and he longed for the open air but feared he would never breathe it again.

Lorenzo’s pickaxe rose and fell, and he felt as if he had been doing this forever, getting nowhere. He could sense the planet, his enemy, a living presence in his thoughts, and he knew it had won, defeated him, that he would never find his way out from inside it—that Rogar III would bury him as it had buried the rest of his squad. Just swallowed them up, left no trace of them. No one to tell their stories.

No one to remember...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Daylight.

Lorenzo hardly registered it at first, couldn't bring himself to believe in what might have been a cruel trick on the planet's part. It was only a pinprick, after all, not enough to make out any details of what might be out there. But it was daylight, nonetheless, and its touch invigorated him.

His right wrist was bruise-blackened, stiffening, and he couldn't wield the pickaxe anymore without suffering a lance of pain up his arm. But he and Braxton had chipped most of the bigger pieces of rock away, and Lorenzo's knife was now sufficient to whittle at the packed soil that remained. To make that pinprick wider.

Finally, thankfully, after what seemed like an age in the dark, they pushed their way through a curtain of loose earth and emerged, stumbling and choking, into the dew-pregnant morning. Only a few hours, Lorenzo calculated from the height of the sun, since they had entered the ork mine—but what a difference those few hours had made.

The earth had stopped shaking, Lorenzo didn't know when. Maybe Rogar III had expended its energy—or maybe it was just content with its fresh kills, for now. Nothing stirred in the jungle—and, after so much noise, the silence felt eerie. It heightened Lorenzo's creeping sense of loneliness.

There was a shape in the undergrowth. An ork, lying face-down. He thought it was sleeping at first, but on closer inspection it proved to be dead. He recognised the multiple scorched entrance wounds of las-rounds on its green skin. A short way from it, he discovered another two greenskin corpses, and a gretchin that had evidently tried to run and had been cut down from behind. They must have escaped the mine before the tunnel collapse, he thought, to find a greater peril waiting outside. He was grateful. In his current condition, even a trio of orks, if they had taken him by surprise, might have proved too much.

Lorenzo sensed, rather than heard, movement behind him, and he knew it could only be one man. He turned to greet Sly Marbo with a cool nod.

The legendary Catachan stood just a few metres away, but Lorenzo could hardly make him out against the greens and browns of his background. He recognised his dead, white eyes, though, and his deep voice, empty of emotion.

“Did you get him?” asked Sly Marbo.

“Big Green?” said Lorenzo. “Yes, yes, we got him.”

Marbo nodded. He had heard what he needed to know. He left without a footstep or a rustle, seeming to melt into the jungle without moving at all. For a moment, Lorenzo fought the discomfiting feeling that he *hadn’t* moved, that he was still there, watching with his white eyes. But that was just paranoia, he knew. Marbo was gone—and it was unlikely Lorenzo would see him again.

Braxton, meanwhile, had sagged to the ground, and was sitting with his back to a tree, knees up to his chest. “I could sleep for a week,” he moaned.

“Go ahead,” said Lorenzo, checking for jungle lizards in the grass before he sat down beside him. “For an hour or two, anyway. I’ll keep watch—but I think it’s safe. I think it’ll take Rogar a while to gather its strength, to be ready for its next move.”

“How can you know that?” asked Braxton.

Lorenzo shrugged. “I just do. It’s like I can feel it in the back of my brain. Like I could feel, underground, when the earth was going to move, where the lava was flowing... I’ve been feeling it ever since the effigy poisoned me.”

“You told Sergeant Greiss you were dying.”

“I thought I was. But this was something different. A part of the planet in me. I think it was trying to... In some weird way, I think it wanted to... communicate.”

“Didn’t stop it trying to kill you,” remarked Braxton. “Or any of us.”

“No,” agreed Lorenzo. “I think—I *feel*—it didn’t have much choice in that.”

“And I expect it’ll try again.”

“I expect it will.” It felt strange to say the words, to accept something that a few days earlier he’d have sworn was impossible. If Brains had been here, he reflected, he’d probably have been able to make it all sound rational. As it was, there was only one way Lorenzo could make sense of all he’d been through. “Remember,” he said, “when the zombies were stalking us, you said something about the planet itself being intelligent.”

“It seemed that way, at the time.”

“Yes, it did. To all of us. But I’m not sure that was quite right. No, I don’t think Rogar III is intelligent as such—not in a calculating way. It’s more like... like it’s just been reacting. To what’s been happening on its surface. To the orks. To us. To the fighting. Like it can’t help it.”

“Like some kind of an allergy,” suggested Braxton. “The more we fight, the more we harm the planet, the more deadly the defences it evolves. New plants and animals, springing up on its skin like rashes. Or antibodies.”

“Yes. Like that. And whatever it is, whatever’s caused this, I doubt it’s something that can be mined. The orks are wasting their time.”

“That’s what Rogar wanted you—wanted all of us—to understand,” said Braxton. “We’re all wasting our time.”

Lorenzo looked at the Validian, and he remembered the nervous, apologetic adjutant who had joined their squad four days ago, the stranger whose intrusion he and the other Catachans had so resented. “You did well,” he said. “I mean, really well. All the men, good men, who died trying to see this mission through to the end—but you’re the one who finished it. You struck the killing blow.”

Braxton waved aside the compliment. “I did nothing. It was a team effort. You took on the ork leader by yourself, and crippled him. And Sergeant Greiss—if it hadn’t been for him, we’d both be dead. I just blundered along at the right moment.”

“You made it this far,” said Lorenzo, “when most didn’t. I guess that makes you one of us, after all.”

“It isn’t over yet,” said Braxton. “We’ve got a four-day trek ahead of us, if we’re to make it back to the encampment.”

“Even if we don’t,” said Lorenzo, “Marbo will. They’ll know we did our job. They’ll know Big Green is dead.”

“Maybe,” said Braxton, “but they ought to know more than that. They ought to know about Old Hardhead and the others, what they did for us—what they did for everyone. Don’t suppose I’ll get to write that story, though.”

Lorenzo grinned. “You could always try. You get drummed out of the Imperial Guard, I’m sure the Jungle Fighters would have you.”

They sat there, side by side, for a long time, warmed by the sun, exchanging no words but sharing a deep bond of comradeship forged in the fires of their mutual experience. Eventually, Braxton got up and searched the dead orks, finding a water bottle and taking a long swig from it before he passed it to Lorenzo. The Catachan hadn’t realised how thirsty he was, and the cold liquid felt blissful against his parched throat.

“So, what do I call you now?” asked Braxton, sitting beside him again.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he lied.

“Now you’ve earned your name. I heard what Greiss said.”

“He didn’t want me sacrificing myself instead of him. He wanted his blaze of glory. He was just telling me what I wanted to hear.”

“You really think?” Braxton raised an eyebrow. “Maybe I didn’t know Old Hardhead as well as you did—but tell me this: in all the time he led your squad, did he ever once just tell anyone what they wanted to hear?”

Lorenzo let out a bark of a laugh, and conceded, “Suppose not.”

“So, what do I call you?”

He sighed. “Lorenzo, still. Just Trooper Lorenzo. A Catachan’s earned name—it’s given to him by his comrades. It’s like a mark of their respect, a sign that they accept him. And I’ve got no comrades left.”

“Maybe, when the other platoons hear—”

“Maybe. But hearing about it isn’t the same as being there. I’ll probably be assigned to another squad, with men who don’t know me, and they won’t care that my old sergeant *meant* to give me my name if he’d been able to think of one, if he hadn’t been too busy charging to his death. I’ll have to prove myself all over again. Anyway, what *are* they going to call me? What did I do that was so special? I wanted to... I wanted to be the one who held off the orks so Patch could escape, but he got there first. I wanted to be the one who took out Big Green, but I wasn’t strong enough. I wanted to stop the zombies, but Old Hardhead...”

“Sounds to me,” said Braxton, “like you got a suicide wish—like you think you can’t prove yourself unless you die in the process. What was it you just said to me? ‘*You made it this far...*’”

“By not being brave enough,” Lorenzo muttered.

“By taking everything this planet had to throw at you,” countered Braxton. “Birds, acid plants, lights, zombies, the earthquake... By facing all that and surviving! You think that was dumb luck? I’ve been watching you, Lorenzo, and okay, maybe you aren’t always the first to stick your head in the lion’s mouth, but that’s because you think about things, assess the situation, then deal with it—not in a showy way, not looking for glory, but efficiently. You get the job done. You were the first person to give me a chance, to look beyond the fact that Mackenzie had foisted me on you. Maybe it took the others too long to appreciate that, maybe they took you for granted. But I’ll bet that’s what Old Hardhead Greiss realised at the end there: that you were always there, for him, for all of us, that you were the most dependable man on this squad. I’ll bet if he were here now, he’d find a name for you to say all that. Something like... like... ‘Long Run’.”

“‘Long Run’?”

“‘Long Run’ Lorenzo. What do you think? Got a ring to it?”

“I don’t know. I...”

Braxton grinned. “You’ve got to accept it. You just told me, I’m one of you now.”

“You enjoy throwing my words back in my face, don’t you?”

“So I’ve a right to give you your name. The name you’ve earned. And I like the sound of Long Run.”

Lorenzo sat back, turned the words over in his head, tried to find an argument against accepting them, and smiled. “Yes,” he said. “I like it too.”

“So,” said Braxton, “what do you say, Long Run? Ready to move off?”

“I thought you wanted to sleep.”

“I feel okay now. More than okay. I think we should get some distance under our belts, while things are quiet.”

Lorenzo nodded. “Maybe Rogar hasn’t covered over the paths we cut through the jungle yet. We’re not likely to run into any more orks for a while. I reckon we can make this return trip in three days—less, if we hustle.”

“I guess that depends,” said Braxton, getting to his feet, “on how hard Rogar III tries to stop us.”

“Whatever it does,” said Lorenzo, straightening his bandana, “we’ll deal with it. We have to. We’ve got a story to take back. The other squads, the other platoons, they’ll be back from fighting orks by now, probably razed a few settlements. They’ll want to know how we got on, if any of it was worth the sweat. We have to warn them about Rogar. We have to tell them what it is, what they’re doing to it.”

“You think it’ll change anything?” asked Braxton.

Lorenzo shook his head. He remembered something Old Hardhead had said, on the morning they’d set out from the encampment. “Best thing we could do now would be to leave this world alone. That’s all it wants. But the Imperium won’t leave as long as the orks are here, and the orks won’t leave until we do. Neither side can afford to turn its back on the other, so we’ll just keep fighting.”

“Over nothing,” said Braxton.

“Over nothing.” Lorenzo agreed. “And in the meantime, our violence will breed violence in turn. They only started calling Rogar III a deathworld a month ago. You have to wonder, what will it be like in another month? A year? A decade?”

“I don’t know,” said Braxton, “but I’m counting on being around to find out.”

Lorenzo grinned. “Look forward to it.”

Then, like Sly Marbo before them, they disappeared into the jungle together, in near-total silence. They left only the faintest footprints to suggest that either of them had ever been here. And, a few minutes later, the deathworld had erased even them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Lyons has written novels, short stories, radio plays and comic strips for characters including the X-Men, Doctor Who, Strontium Dog and Sapphire & Steel. He has written several non-fiction books about television shows, and contributes to magazines. Death World is his twentieth novel.

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