



A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

GUNHEADS

Imperial Guard - 06

Steve Parker

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

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

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the 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.

To Mum and Dad again, 'cos one dedication just isn't enough.

EXPEDITIO RECLAMATUS

The Imperial Guard

General Mohamar Antoninus deViers — Supreme Commander, 18th Army Group Exolon
Major General Gerard Bergen — Divisional Commander, 10th Armoured Division
Major General Klotus Killian — Divisional Commander, 12th Heavy Infantry Division
Major General Aaron Rennkamp — Divisional Commander, 8th Mechanised Division
Colonel Tidor Stromm — Regimental Commander, 98th Mechanised Infantry Reg. (8th Mech. Div.)
Colonel Edwyn Marrenburg — Regimental Commander, 88th Mobile Infantry Reg. (10th Arm. Div.)
Colonel Darrik Graves — Regimental Commander, 71st Caedus Infantry Reg. (10th Arm. Div.)
Colonel Kochatkis Vinnemann — Regimental Commander, 81st Armoured Reg. (10th Arm. Div.)
Captain Villius Immrich — Company Commander, 1st Company, 81st Armoured Reg.
Lieutenant Gossefried van Droi — Company Commander, 10th Company, 81st Armoured Reg.
Sergeant Oskar Andreas Wulfe — Tank Commander, Leman Russ *Last Rites II*
Corporal Voeder Lenck — Tank Commander, Leman Russ Exterminator *New Champion of Cerbera*

The Adeptus Mechanicus

Tech-Magos Benendentius Sennesdiar — Senior tech-priest accompanying Exolon during ground operations on Golgotha
Tech-Adept Dionestra Armadron — A subordinate of Tech-Magos Sennesdiar
Tech-Adept Marthosal Xephous — A subordinate of Tech-Magos Sennesdiar

Munitorum/Ecclesiarchy Personnel

Confessor Friedrich Ministorum — Priest attached to the 81st Reg.
Commissar Vincent “Crusher” Slayte — Political officer attached to the 81st Reg.

PROLOGUE

Calafran Creides had stopped believing he would wake up. The nightmare was real. The monsters that surrounded him were solid, living, breathing things; he'd found out just how solid when one of them had cuffed him for not working fast enough. The power behind the blow was terrifying. Cal had flown backwards and smashed into one of the ammunition crates he was supposed to be loading. He was sure his rib was broken. Breathing had been painful ever since, and sleep, when it came at all, was more of a struggle than ever.

What was a broken rib, though, compared to the things they had done to Davran? Or to poor crippled Klaetas? Or to old Jovas, the pilot, when he'd collapsed from exhaustion? Best not to think about that. Wasn't it enough that he saw it every time he closed his eyes? The images of sickening torment were practically laser-etched onto the backs of his eyelids. Most nights, after he and the others had been pushed and kicked into an empty cargo container and locked there to rest in the stifling dark, he would wake up screaming. Quick but gentle hands would reach out to reassure him then, one always closing insistently over his mouth. Nobody wanted the monsters to return and investigate the noise.

Living in such a constant haze of fear, pain and misery, Cal had lost count of the days. How long had it been — ten? twenty, perhaps? — since the monsters had boarded *The Silverfin*. She and her crew had been contracted to scavenge naval wrecks from old war zones on the periphery of the Maelstrom. That hadn't lasted long. Early in the first leg of the operation, a bizarre ship, its prow constructed in the likeness of a grinning, nightmarish beast, had ambushed her, shooting out her main thrusters and ramming her from the side. Captain Benin had recognised the profile of the attacking craft immediately. Aliens, he said, man-haters.

Cal never imagined he would see the captain so afraid. Benin kept calling them *greenskins*, though their massive, leathery bodies were varying shades of brown. When they stormed the ship, the captain had ordered everyone onto the floor. "Don't look up!" he had told them. "No eye contact!" he had said. "Fighting back will only get us killed."

It was the first time Cal had ever heard a quaver in the big man's voice. Poor Nameth, never the sharpest tool in the box, looked up anyway, and died horribly for it. A glance was all it took — the briefest instant of gaze holding alien gaze — before one bellowing brute charged straight at him, its roar deafening in the tight confines of the ship. It tore Nameth's head from his neck with a single huge hand. Cal had been lying close by. His friend's hot blood had splashed over his back, soaking his clothes while the rest of the crew screamed and cried out for mercy. The monsters laughed at that, then bound the crew's hands, fixed metal collars around their throats, and chained them all together. Minutes later, the captured humans were locked tight in one of the lower holds and the journey to this Throne-forsaken place had begun. They had been brought to this world to live and die as slaves, and Cal wished now that he and the crew *had* fought back. Most of them had already been worked or beaten to death anyway. What was the point of drawing it out like this?

There was no hope of escape. Where would he go? The slavers' settlement sat high atop a plateau of solid black basalt. Beyond the plateau's sheer sides, red sands stretched to the wavering horizon in every direction. There were a few sloping paths down to the desert floor, but, even if he got to the bottom, there was nowhere to hide out there. He would be spotted and slain in short order. He didn't have the energy to run anymore. His aching body felt so heavy. Every motion, even the mere act of drawing breath, seemed to take so much more effort on this world. Why? Did anyone

even know which planet this was? He had asked around, but none of the other human slaves seemed to have the slightest idea.

There were hundreds of them. Some had arrived shortly after Cal, others had been here longer, but not by much. No one, it seemed, survived for very long. Those who had arrived before him had a dead look in their eyes, as if their souls had already departed, unwilling to stay locked within bodies forced to endure so much. Sometimes, though, when the monsters in charge were too busy fighting amongst themselves, or when the thick afternoon heat put them to sleep, a little glimmer of light would return and some of the older slaves would speak to the newcomers in hushed voices. They told of how they had been taken, their ships rammed and boarded just like *The Silverfin*. They told of those who resisted, and the cruel slaughter that followed. There were children here, too, they said, dozens of them starving to death in tiny cages. The monsters, communicating to their human slaves through crude mime, regularly threatened to devour them if their parents didn't work harder.

Children? Cal didn't want to believe it. He hoped never to see those cages. He didn't think he could bear it.

A furious roar snapped him back to his senses, and he realised that his legs had stopped moving. He was so exhausted, he could no longer feel the festering cuts and scratches that covered his limbs. Not for the first time, he had almost fallen asleep on his feet.

There was a sharp crack like a gunshot, and blazing pain lanced across his back. One of the brutish slave masters — a sadistic monster that the slaves called *Sawtooth* — stood ten metres behind him, bellowing hoarsely and brandishing a long, barbed whip.

The whip cracked again.

Drowning under a wave of sudden, intense agony, Cal felt the last of his strength dissolve. His legs buckled and gave way. He collapsed, dropping the crate of fat, gleaming bullets he was carrying. His back hit hard, dry rock. Bullets spilled from the broken crate, rolling to a stop against his body. Some of the smaller, skinnier aliens nearby — hideous creatures with leering faces and long, hooked noses — pointed down at him from atop a pyramid of stacked fuel barrels. They laughed and chattered to each other, eyes wide with anticipation.

Cal felt the rock tremble under his body as *Sawtooth* stomped over, growling with rage. The alien's massive, steel-booted feet halted on either side of Cal's head, and Cal knew that the greatest pain of his short life was about to follow. He remembered the terrible screams of Davran and the others. He could hardly breathe with panic. His heart galloped. Distantly, he felt a warm wetness spreading through his ragged trousers, and realised that he had loosed the contents of his bladder. Fear overwhelmed any sense of shame.

Sawtooth bent over him, assessing him, studying him closely with unsympathetic red eyes. Was this pathetic little human still capable of work, or only fit to be tortured and pulled apart as another warning to the rest?

Thick strands of saliva dripped from the monster's jaws onto Cal's face. Its hot breath stank like vomit.

Cal gagged. Bile burned his throat. This is it, he thought. This is how my life ends.

He had never been a strong believer in the Imperial Creed. He'd attended weekly services with his parents, and learned the mandatory prayers and hymns under the stinging tutelage of a priest's cane, just like every other resentful boy and girl in the Imperium of Man. But he had never really believed, not in any of it. The God-Emperor was just another old legend among so many. No, he was even less than that. He was a legend of a myth of a legend.

All the same, as *Sawtooth* straightened and began bellowing to the other monsters nearby, calling them over for a bit of fun, it was to the Ministorum's precious God-Emperor that Cal prayed and pleaded.

Lord of all Mankind, Beacon in the Darkness, Master of Holy Terra and all the galaxy, let me die quickly, I beg you. Don't let me suffer as Davran and the others did. I've sinned, I know it, and held no faith. But, in humble prayer, I ask this of You now.

He expected no answer. It was terror alone that made him pray, but what happened next was a striking example of those coincidences that the faithful so often claim as proof of the Divine. Calafran Creides could not have known that a fleet of Imperial ships held position in high orbit directly above him. They had arrived that very day.

Laughing at thoughts of the torture to follow, Sawtooth grasped Cal's arms and hauled him roughly into the air. Cal's limp feet dangled above the bullet-strewn rock. His undernourished bones cracked and splintered in the monster's iron grip, but he didn't scream. He didn't even whimper. His attention was locked on the sky above.

In it, Cal saw a glorious, blazing light that shunted the thick clouds aside. It was so bright that it hurt to look into it, but he couldn't turn away. Tears of joy rolled down his cheeks. Could it truly be? Yes! The Emperor was *real!* He had heard Cal's prayer, and He had answered it!

“Ave, Imperator,” Cal gasped. Gratitude, relief, love, contrition: all these feelings and more swept over him. He took a deep lungful of hot, stinking air and, with everything he had left, shouted upwards, “Ave, Imperator!”

The confused greenskins looked up, too, but there was nothing they could do. The blazing light struck the plateau, scouring it, purging it, erasing ork and human alike as if neither had existed there at all.

Soon, hundreds of Imperial drop-ships would begin their descent.

Operation Thunderstorm had begun.

CHAPTER ONE

Imperial spaceships, massive and ornate, comparable in size and baroque beauty to the largest cathedrals of Holy Terra, hung together in the infinite dark. They had slid from the warp almost forty days earlier, bisecting the orbits of the outer planets on trails of blazing plasma until finally closing on their ultimate goal. That goal lay somewhere below, on the world that spun beneath them, a world that glowed bright in the glare of the system's harsh sun.

Golgotha: a planet shrouded in thick, choking cloud, all reds, yellows and browns that swirled and bled together like so many spilled paints. In memoirs dating back thirty-eight years to the last Golgothan War, the celebrated Terraxian Guardsman-poet, Clavier Michelos, had remarked on the planet's ominous beauty, and with good reason. From high orbit, at least, it was a stunning sight, but that beauty masked an uncompromising nature, for Golgotha was not a world that welcomed men. Michelos had died here, captured and tortured to death by orks. He wasn't alone in that. The war had been a costly and embarrassing disaster. The orks had crushed everything in their path, and even Commissar Yarrick, the lauded Hero of Armageddon, had been unable to turn the tide of battle. He left Golgotha in bitter defeat with very few survivors at his side.

That was almost four decades ago. Yarrick, now an old man, still fought for the glory of the Imperium. The war with his nemesis, the ork warlord Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka, had taken him back to Armageddon, the world that had made his reputation, while Golgotha remained firmly in the hands of the enemy, a dark stain on his record that could never be expunged.

So, why had men returned? The small fleet that hung above the orange sphere lacked even a fraction of the power required to take it back by force, but that was not their mission, not this time. There was something else down there besides orks, something important that had been lost on Golgotha during the last war, something that the Imperium wanted back. It was a holy relic, a symbol so potent that it might turn the tide of Yarrick's new war. Its name was *The Fortress of Arrogance*.

The fleet sent to recover it was a mixed force. In the centre, a ship far larger than any of the others dominated the formation. This was the *Scion of Tharsis*, a Reclamator craft of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the ancient and inscrutable tech-priesthood of Mars without whom none of the ships present would have existed at all. The *Scion* was flanked on either side by the Imperial Navy's Tyrant-class heavy cruisers, the *Helicon Star* and the *Ganymede*, around which swarmed myriad smaller escort ships and armed transports. It was on one of these transports, an unassuming craft called the *Hand of Radiance*, that the men of the 81st Cadian Armoured Regiment, known less formally as *Rolling Thunder*, prepared for war.

* * *

"Form up, you greasy pukes!" roared an ugly, skin-headed sergeant with a pockmarked face. "You know the bloody drill. By the numbers, damn your eyes!"

The floor of the starboard-side hangar clanged with the sound of men snapping to attention. The troopers stood in formation, company by company from the first to the tenth, while their sergeants prowled back and forth like hungry wolves, eyes sharp, hunting keenly for the slightest signs of sloppiness. Hulking drop-ships sat behind the ordered ranks of men, their boarding ramps lowered, internal lights glaring yellow inside dark, gunmetal hulls.

A loud, hydraulic hiss sounded on the right of the massive chamber, and a thick door split down the middle, each half sliding backwards into the wall with a cough of oily steam. The metal floor rang with the crisp, pleasing tattoo of dozens of booted feet marching briskly into the hangar.

“Officers on deck!” yelled another of the sergeants. Thick veins throbbed at his temple with the effort of projecting his voice unaided to almost two thousand men.

When the officers had halted and turned to face the assembled troops, the oldest of the sergeants — a stocky man with lumpy scar-tissue in place of his left ear — strode forwards and proudly stated, “All men present and accounted for, sir. Vehicles already onboard, lashed and locked. Flight and tech-crews ready for the go. Companies one to ten awaiting permission to load.”

Colonel Kochatkis Vinnemann stood at the centre of the group of officers, hunched as ever, leaning heavily on his cane, but resplendent nonetheless in a smart uniform of deep green with glittering golden epaulets. Today was the last day that he would be able to wear the regimental colours for a while. The duration of the campaign would see everyone clothed in camouflaging fatigues of rust-red.

Vinnemann nodded at the sergeant in front of him and was about to issue the boarding command when Captain Immrich — tall, dark and broad-shouldered — leaned close and whispered a few words in his ear. Vinnemann frowned a little at first but finally nodded his agreement. He stepped forward, accepted a vox-amp receiver from the adjutant on his left, held the mouthpiece in front of his lips, and cleared his throat. The sound echoed back at him from the vast bulkheads.

“Those of you with me long enough know that I dislike long speeches,” said Vinnemann. “Something best left to your commissars and confessors, I think, to men who have a particular talent for it.”

Commissar Slayte, the regiment’s widely despised political officer, dressed as ever in the black and gold of his office, bowed slightly at the compliment. Confessor Friedrich, on the other hand, a flush-faced priest in his late thirties, merely swayed a little as if standing in a strong breeze that only he could feel.

“However,” continued Colonel Vinnemann, “as Captain Immrich has rightly reminded me, our regiment faces something unprecedented in its history. If a situation ever warranted a departure from my typical reticence, it is this one, for we are about to set foot on a world firmly and completely in the hands of the hated ork.”

It was Vinnemann’s particular habit to refer to the *old foe* in the singular. Some of the men did a pretty good impersonation of him, though never with any malice. There was tremendous love and respect for the old colonel among those who had served under him for any length of time. It was well earned. Those men whose jibes contained an edge of genuine insult, especially those that mocked his physical disability, quickly found themselves isolated, cast out by their fellows. Among Imperial Guardsmen, such exclusion was as good as a death sentence.

Vinnemann’s distinctive posture was caused by his augmetic spine. Twenty-four years earlier, while just a captain, he had undergone a life-saving augmentation procedure following the destruction of his Vanquisher battle tank. His body had never fully accepted the implant. Regular injections of immunosuppressants and painkillers eased things a little, but not much. The injury should have killed him, and so, too, the subsequent operation, but his indomitable spirit had kept him alive, that and the care of the Medicae nurse he later married. During his slow, painful recovery, his superiors had offered him the option of an honourable discharge. It seemed to them the only logical choice.

Vinnemann had rejected it without hesitation. “A rear echelon position, then,” they had suggested, but the old tanker had rejected that, too. “My duty,” he had insisted, “is to lead my men from the front, no matter what, and, so long as I am able, that is exactly what I intend to do.”

Twelve years later, he had risen to the rank of colonel, taking command of the entire 81st Armoured Regiment.

He studied them now, his brave troopers, during a short pause in his speech. A slim lieutenant at the rear coughed quietly behind his hand. The sound was magnified in the relative silence. Vinnemann drew a deep breath.

“Some of us have fought the ork before,” he continued, “and with notable success. Our victories on Phaegos II, Galamos and Indara stand us in good stead, though many of you, I suppose, had yet to be born at the time of the latter. Still, the point is this: we *know* the ork. We know that together, man and machine, tanker and tank, we are *stronger* than the ork. We know that we can *beat* the ork. We’ve proved it time after time.”

He found himself stunned by how young some of the most recent reinforcements looked when standing next to their more experienced peers. By the blasted Eye, he thought, some of them are practically children! Was I ever so fresh-faced?

Thoughts of his two sons bubbled up in his mind. Both were serving in the 92nd Infantry Division on Armageddon. They had grown into fine soldiers. Was it too much to hope for their safety? Was it foolish to pray for them? Millions would die to stop the foe on Armageddon, tens of millions, perhaps. Yarrick’s war demanded it. The very heart of the Imperium was at stake. Why should his sons be spared the fate of their comrades? He knew that glory, victory and a good death were the best he could ask for them. It was all that most good Cadians asked for themselves. Besides, were the men before him not also his sons? That was how he saw them sometimes. They certainly made him feel just as proud.

“Could General deViers be any more fortunate than to have our proud regiment roll out under his command? I hardly think so. Yes, I’ve heard the mutterings among you. I’ve sensed your dark mood. Why send us to Golgotha, you still wonder, when our kin are so pressed on Armageddon? What difference, you ask, can we make out here on a planet untouched by the Emperor’s light? Well, let me tell you something. Listen closely, now, because I want you to understand it. *I believe in this operation!* Do you hear me? *I believe* in it. Our success will make a difference to our beleaguered brothers that you can scarcely imagine. Our triumphant return will re-energise them as nothing else can. Those of you who doubt it will understand once you lay eyes on the prize. Until that moment, I know you’ll do whatever it takes, give your every bead of sweat, your last drop of blood if necessary, for the honour and tradition of our proud regiment, for the glory of Cadia, and for the everlasting dominion of the God-Emperor of mankind.”

He scanned their faces for signs of open dissent and found none. Instead, their response to his words was both immediate and deafening.

“For Cadia and the Emperor!” they roared and, like his own amplified words, the sound echoed back at him from the hangar walls.

He grinned at them, eager not to dwell on the doubts he secretly carried. “Sergeant Keppler,” he said, “get these brave soldiers loaded up!”

“Aye, sir,” said the old sergeant with the mutilated ear, and he threw up a salute that was so sharp it could have cut glass. He turned, took a deep breath, and roared at the men, “Right you maggots, you heard the colonel. About face! Squad leaders, take ‘em in nice and clean!”

Vinnemann watched them proudly as they marched up the ramps and into the bellies of the waiting drop-ships, each company to a ship of its own. Be strong, sons of Cadia, he thought, now more than ever.

He turned and dismissed his officers so that each could go to join his men. Finally, with his personal staff in tow, the colonel moved off to board his own shuttle.

The hangar air began vibrating with the whine of powerful engines as the naval flight-crews began warming up their craft. With a great metallic groan, the massive bay doors slowly opened onto space. Orange light flooded in, reflected from the planet below.

After seven long and troubled months aboard the *Hand of Radiance*, it was time, at last, to return to war.

CHAPTER TWO

Good solid ground, thought Sergeant Oskar Andreas Wulfe. Greenskins or not, he was looking forward to standing on good solid ground. It would be a fine thing to feel dirt and rock under his boot-heels again, the first time in far too long. He was sick of living day-to-day on this damned ship with its maze of gloomy corridors and its endlessly recycled air. With thoughts of dunes and mountains and broad open plains, he marched his crew up the boarding ramp and into the drop-ship that would ferry them down to the surface.

The trip from Palmeros to the Golgothan subsector had been the longest unbroken warp journey of his career, and plenty of tempers had frayed under the strain, not least his own. It wasn't just the journey, however. Warp travel was no picnic, but it didn't help that his mind was still wrestling with the memories of his last days on Palmeros, memories that often woke him in a cold sweat, gripping his bunched sheets and calling out the name of a dead friend.

He suspected that his crew was more bothered by this than they let on. They had to bunk with him, after all, and often got as little restful sleep as he did. He thought he detected it in their eyes sometimes, a loss of confidence in him where once it had been unshakeable. How much worse would matters be, he wondered, if he ever told them the truth about what he had seen in the canyon that day? *Much* worse. It didn't do for a tank commander to see ghosts. Those who reported such things tended to go missing shortly afterwards, marched off by whatever Imperial body had jurisdiction. So far, the only man Wulfe had confided in was Confessor Friedrich, and that was how he intended to keep it. Even drunk off his arse, as he often was, the confessor was a man to be trusted.

Wulfe forced his mind back to more positive territory. It would be good to see a sky overhead again, instead of pitted metal bulkheads veined with dripping pipes and tangled cables. It hardly mattered what that sky looked like, just so long as it was wide and open and any colour but the lustreless grey of starship bulkheads.

Following the squad in front, Wulfe led his men through one of the drop-ship's cargo holds, turning his head to look at the tanks and halftracks that rested there. Beyond them, further back in the shadows, sat the company's fuel and supply trucks. All of the vehicles were covered in heavy brown tarpaulins, lashed down with thick steel cables and bolted to solid fixtures in the floor. But, even with her bulk hidden under a tarp, it was all too easy for Wulfe to mark out his own tank. The Leman Russ *Last Rites II* boasted a Mars Alpha pattern hull, so she was fractionally longer in the body than the other Leman Russ. She was an old girl, and badly scarred — in Wulfe's opinion, one of the shabbiest tanks he had ever set eyes on. Her armour plating was riveted together, rather than mould-cast, and her turret was all vertical surfaces just begging to be hit with armour-piercing shells or rocket-propelled grenades. He was quite certain that she would get him and his entire crew killed during their first engagement. She was nothing like her predecessor, and he cursed her for that. He remembered seeing her for the first time and wondering if, in assigning him this old junker, the lieutenant had meant to punish him for something. Wulfe had thought his relationship with Lieutenant van Droi perfectly solid up to then, but now he felt he had cause to question it. To make things worse, some of the other sergeants had leapt on the chance to rip him up about it.

"Don't get too far ahead of us all, will you?" they said. "Let us know if you need help pushing her up a dune."

"What does she run on, Wulfe? Pedal power?"

"How many aurochs does it take to pull her?"

The list went on. Wulfe scowled over at the covered tank, glad she was cloaked by the tarp so he didn't have to look at her ugly hide. He quickly turned away.

The squad in front of him, Sergeant Richter's crew, stomped up a narrow metal staircase and disappeared from view. Wulfe put his hand on the guardrail and hoisted himself up after them, steel steps ringing under his polished marching boots. His men clambered up behind him, right at his back, silent except for the gunner, Holtz, who was grumbling unintelligibly. Wulfe didn't wonder that Holtz was uneasy, though the man was apt to grumble at the best of times. Emerging safely from the warp was one thing, and Wulfe's relief was genuine enough, but every man in the regiment knew what awaited them on Golgotha. Only the crazies and the liars — meaning most of the commissioned officers — professed to like the army group's odds of success here. To Wulfe's mind, Operation Thunderstorm seemed like the most incredible gamble. Colonel Vinnemann had done his level best to instil a sense of purpose and honour in them, of course, but that was all part of the job.

An entire world overrun with orks. By the blasted Eye! Who knew how many of the filthy buggers there would be?

Without realising he was doing it, Wulfe reached up to brush a fingertip over the long horizontal scar at his throat. Orks. His hatred of the greenskins was as strong today as it had ever been. Probably stronger, in fact.

A doorway led into one of the passenger holds at the top of the metal staircase. It was a long dark space barely three metres across, extending to the left and right like a tunnel. Twin rows of tiny orange guide-lights lined the floor, and numbers in faded white paint marked the walls. Wulfe and his men soon found their seats, buckled themselves in, and reached up to pull metal impact frames down over their heads and shoulders. The frames locked into place with a loud click. It was a sound filled with significance, with a distinct finality. Once you were locked in, there was no getting off this ride.

Only minutes remained until the drop. Wulfe felt a familiar tightness in his stomach. He glanced up and down the compartment, and nodded in friendly acknowledgement to Sergeant Viess.

Viess, only recently promoted, had been Wulfe's gunner for some years and remained a friend, though an undeniable distance had grown between them since he had been given his stripes. He had his own men to lead, and Holtz, formerly a sponson gunner, had taken his place on the main gun. Wulfe was glad for Viess. Most men in the regiment aspired to commanding their own tank. He missed having him on his crew, though. Together, they had notched up a good number of armour-kills.

Once the last squad had filed in to the compartment, the door hissed shut. Almost two hundred men sat in the compartment. They were Gossefried's Gunheads, the 81st Armoured Regiment's 10th Company. Only the lieutenant and his adjutant were absent, seated in the cockpit with the dropship's flight crew. The rest sat facing their fellows, trading jokes and nervous banter across the hold's narrow length. Corporal Metzger, Wulfe's driver, sat next to him, typically pensive, with Holtz and Siegler — the latter being Wulfe's long-serving loader — in the opposite seats.

This drop was different from the last, not just in terms of the nature of the mission, but for the smaller crew with which Wulfe was rolling out. His previous tank had boasted sponsons on either side of her hull, two protruding compartments, each housing a belt-fed heavy bolter that made messy work of anything foolish enough to close with her. She had been an awesome war machine, utterly unstoppable, and memories of abandoning her on a dark highway so many light-years away filled Wulfe with genuine longing and remorse. He had mourned her loss every day since then, but what choice had there been? Her top speed hadn't been nearly enough. Leaving her behind, he and his crew had boarded a much faster Chimera APC, and the lighter machine's speed had saved their lives. They had made it onto the last lifter into orbit just before the planet Palmeros was utterly obliterated.

Despite the pain of losing his beloved tank, Wulfe knew he had a lot to be thankful for. Billions of Imperial civilians had not been so lucky.

In any case, the new machine — hah! he thought. What was *new* about her? — lacked the same potent defences. Her flanks were practically naked. Her side-armour might be one hundred and fifty millimetres of solid plasteel, but there were weapons aplenty in the hands of mankind's enemies that could cut through it like butter. An attacker only had to close the gap. Without side sponsons, it would fall to Wulfe to cover the tank's blind spots from his cupola high atop the turret. There was a box-fed heavy stubber there, pintle-mounted with a nice, wide arc of fire, for exactly that purpose. He knew it was a good weapon, but he still lamented the absence of side sponsons.

A crackling voice sounded from speakers set in the ceiling. "Bay doors open. Locks released. Engines engaged. Activating onboard gravitational systems in three, two, one..."

Wulfe felt his stomach lurch, a brief moment in which his body weight doubled as the grav-field of the *Hand of Radiance* and the drop-ship's field overlapped. Just as quickly, the feeling was gone, and the drop-ship's onboard gravity became the only force pulling him into his seat.

"Bay doors cleared," reported the mechanical voice a minute later. "Firing thrusters. Beginning descent. Breaching thermosphere in ten, nine..."

Wulfe tuned out the rest of the count.

"What's a thermosphere, sarge?" piped a nervous-sounding trooper a dozen seats to the right.

"Stifle it, *drop-virgin*," barked his sergeant. "How would I know? Do I look like a cogboy to you?"

Wulfe grinned. New meat, he thought. This was the first drop for a good number of the men. The 18th Army Group's catastrophic losses on Palmeros had left it at less than half strength. Senior cadets from the Whiteshields — the tough, teenaged Cadian training regiments — had been drafted in to replenish the ranks, but most of those had been posted to regiments in the 8th and 12th divisions. After promoting suitable men from the tech-crews and support squads, the Cadian 81st had to make up the rest of their numbers with men drafted in from the 616th Reserve Regiment — men who, in most cases, had never crewed a tank in their lives. Lieutenant van Droi had expressed his grave concerns about this in private. He felt that most of the new men didn't make the grade, not by a long shot. The reserves were rarely employed at the front lines, tending instead to be used for garrisoning duties and the like. Wulfe knew that their first taste of front line action would sort the men from the boys.

Thinking about who made the grade and who didn't, he cast an involuntary glance along the opposite row of seats towards a man on his far left.

I've got my eye on you, squigshit, he thought.

The speakers crackled to life again. "Mesospheric penetration in ten, nine..."

"Sounds dirty, don't it?" quipped a ruddy-faced trooper on the opposite row.

"You're so full of crap, Garrel," said the young man next to him with a mirthless laugh. He tried to punch his comrade playfully on the arm, but the bars of his impact frame restricted his movement.

The anxious trooper who'd spoken up earlier opened his mouth to speak again, but he didn't get a word out before the same gruff sergeant cut him off.

"Go on, Vintners," he barked, "ask me what a mesosphere is. I dare you." Despite his manner, there was an unmistakable tone of humour in the sergeant's voice. "You'll be on latrines for the whole frakking op!"

Nervous laughter rippled along the rows. Vintners turned pale and clamped his mouth shut.

All this was mere background noise to Wulfe. He was too busy watching the man on the far left, studying the lines and angles of his hawkish face, watching the way he moved his lips as he talked in an undertone with the crewmen seated around him.

His name was Corporal Voeder Lenck, twenty-eight years old and commander of the Leman Russ Exterminator *New Champion of Cerbera*. He was a tall, slim, darkly handsome man, all poster-

boy good looks, easy smiles and warm handshakes. But Wulfe wasn't fooled, not for a second, not like the gang of doe-eyed sycophants that had surrounded Lenck since the moment he had transferred in. Why the rookies all flocked to him, Wulfe hadn't figured out yet. The man had been a bloody reserve, for Throne's sake. What was there to admire? Admittedly, he wasn't typical of the newcomers. He had some prior tank experience, for a start. Perhaps that was it: a combination of being fresh to the regiment, like the rest of the new meat, but being an experienced tanker at the same time. It was as good a guess as Wulfe could make.

The records showed that Lenck had been a sergeant earlier in his career, but something had gone wrong. There had been a trial, a court-martial. He had been locked up for thirty days and demoted to the rank of corporal. Only the commissioned officers knew why and, so far, they weren't telling, but Wulfe planned to find out sooner or later.

The day he and Lenck had first met aboard the *Hand of Radiance*, Wulfe had recognised an icy cruelty behind the man's purple-irised eyes. Lenck hadn't done anything overt to induce Wulfe's dislike, not so far anyway, but Wulfe knew it would come sooner or later. It didn't help that he was the spitting image of someone else, a convicted Cadian criminal by the name of Victor Dunst. Dunst and his gang of tattooed cronies had once tried to rob Wulfe in the under-streets of Kasr Gehr. Wulfe had been a Whiteshield at the time, just a teenage cadet on leave before graduating from basic. He had been heavily outnumbered but, like so many Whiteshields, his belief in his invincibility was so complete that he hadn't even thought to run. Instead, he had told the gang to piss off, and Dunst had decided to kill him. Only the chance intervention of a patrolling Civitas enforcer squad had saved Wulfe's life that day. Dunst's knife didn't get more than two centimetres into Wulfe's chest. Wulfe had been very lucky.

As Wulfe looked along the row, Lenck seemed to realise that he was being watched. He didn't turn his head or shift his eyes, he just seemed to sense it. Wulfe saw a grin creep over the younger man's face and felt a tremendous desire to punch him. The feeling of Lenck's bones cracking under his fist would be supremely satisfying, he imagined. Wulfe was no brawler, not like some of the men he knew, but he was no slouch, either. He was pretty sure he could take Lenck if it ever came down to a fair fight, though Lenck didn't seem the type to fight fair. Such an event was unlikely to occur, of course. For Lenck, striking Wulfe would constitute a capital offence due to the difference in rank. Still, thought Wulfe, if we were to put rank aside...

The ceiling speakers crackled again. "Particle shields holding at eighty per cent. Entering stratosphere in ten, nine, eight..."

Any jokes or remarks that this announcement might have drawn died in the throats of the troopers as the drop-ship began shaking and juddering. Most of the drop-virgins grimaced. A few started to look peaky, as if they might begin to puke.

"Time to put them in, gentlemen," said Wulfe to his crew. He reached into the right pocket of his field trousers and withdrew a small, transparent curve of hard rubber. It was a gumshield, the kind worn by troopers during hand-to-hand combat training. With a nod, Metzger, Siegler and Holtz drew identical items from their pockets and fitted them securely between their teeth. All along the facing rows, veteran tankers did the same thing. The new meat looked on with expressions of abject horror.

"By the bloody Eye! Why didn't anyone tell the rest of us to bring gumshields?" demanded a round-faced trooper ten seats to Wulfe's right. He was the newest man on Sergeant Rhaimes' crew, and it was Rhaimes — seasoned commander of the Leman Russ *Old Smashbones* — who answered, removing his gumshield for a moment to do so.

"Company tradition, bugfood," he said. He grinned, creasing the skin around the deep scar that ran from his left eye to his left ear. *Bugfood* was his personal term of affection for the new guys and, whenever he said it, he managed to make it sound like *idiot* or *arsehole*. Recently, a lot of the veterans had started using it, and not just in 10th Company. "You're still a drop-virgin till you break a tooth on the way down."

The trooper gaped in disbelief for a moment and then fished in his pocket for something. He pulled out a wadded piece of rag, the type of cloth used to shine boots or buttons before inspection, and stuffed it into his mouth. With a miserable expression, he bit down on it. Wulfe guessed it must taste strongly of polish.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Rhaimes nodding at the young trooper. "Good thinking, son. Good thinking. We'll make something of you yet."

"...three, two, one," buzzed the voice from the ceiling. "Tropospheric entry achieved. Height, nine thousand metres. All personnel brace for increased atmospheric buffeting. Touchdown in approximately nineteen minutes. Disengaging onboard gravitational systems. Switching to local gravity in three, two, one..."

For the second time since he had come aboard, there was an instant of gravitational overlap that made Wulfe feel twice as heavy as he normally did. Some of the men grunted as their bodies protested against the sudden strain but, once the grav-plates below their feet went dead, they hardly noticed the difference.

According to the thick wad of briefing papers that everyone had been issued — though few but the guys in recon, as usual, had bothered to read — Golgotha's surface gravity was a fairly manageable 1.12Gs. Wulfe, who typically weighed around eighty-five kilograms, now weighed twelve per cent more, a little over ninety-five, but the increase didn't bother him. The tech-crews onboard the *Hand of Radiance* had taken care of that. Since leaving Palmeros, they had incrementally increased the shipboard gravity each day, subtly preparing the troops for their eventual ground deployment. Men like Siegler and Sergeant Rhaimes, usually a little soft around the middle, had hardened up a lot over the last few months. Wulfe had felt his appetite increasing little by little, and had noticed his clothes tightening around his arms, legs and chest. His body had adapted. Now, with the planet's local gravity acting on him directly, he didn't feel any heavier than normal. It would make a big difference to the tanks, though; fuel efficiency, firing distance, trajectory, speed, wear and tear. All of these were matters of serious concern. The engineers in charge of the regimental tech-crews wouldn't be getting much sleep.

Thinking of the strange cybernetic tech-priests, Wulfe decided they probably didn't need much sleep anyway. Maybe they just popped in some fresh batteries. The image that formed in his mind was, in equal parts, both amusing and disturbing.

The drop-ship was really bouncing around. Golgotha's atmosphere was thicker than most populated worlds, and the pressure differentials between the planet's hot and cold zones reportedly made for some truly ferocious storms. Some of the rookies looked set to soil themselves as the craft was tossed this way and that.

Wulfe fought an instinct to tense his muscles. It was far smarter to relax if one didn't want to suffer torn tendons and the like. Such injuries were all too common during a drop.

"Altitude, seven thousand five—"

The static-ridden voice was suddenly drowned out by the most awful, ringing screech. Wulfe pressed his hands to his ears. He knew that sound, knew it never heralded good news. It was the sound of tearing metal!

The drop-ship suddenly rolled hard to the right. Wulfe's head flew backwards and struck the padded surface of the seat. His stomach felt like it was doing backflips. His vision dimmed. He saw stars. Some of the men on the opposite row were thrown so hard against their restraints that their gumshields flew out. Yelled curses filled the air.

"We're frakkin' hit!" shouted a young trooper in a panic. Wulfe's heart felt like it was stuck somewhere up by his throat.

"We're not hit, Webber," barked another. "Don't say that!"

"What the hell was it, then?" demanded someone else. "By the bloody Eye!"

"Quiet!" Sergeant Rhaimes yelled at them around his gumshield. "That's enough of that! It's turbulence, you kak-eating dung-worms. You heard the cogboy. Buffeting, he said. Now, pipe down!"

Rhaimes' lie was all too obvious. He was trying to keep them calm, but no one was buying a word of it.

The ship rolled hard in the other direction and righted itself, though the juddering was so severe, now, that it was painful. The men gripped their impact frames with white-knuckled hands.

Wulfe chanced a look up the row at Lenck and was irritated to see him sitting quietly, lips bulging over the tell-tale bump of a gumshield, apparently unfazed. The cocky upstart only jumped when a noise exploded from the vox-speakers. It was a deafening, high-pitched whine that cut off suddenly to be replaced by the cold flat tones of the cogboy addressing them once again. This time, the voice was amplified to ear-damaging levels and, whether Wulfe simply imagined it or not, he heard hints of his own panic reflected in the broken sentences.

"...concentrated anti-aircraft... storm... below... off course and... down. All personnel... for immediate..."

Suddenly, a great wave of nerve-searing pain blossomed in Wulfe's head. The whole galaxy seemed to roll over on its axis. Up was down, left was right. Then everything shifted again with frightening speed. He shut his eyes tight, saw fireworks bursting behind his eyelids, felt his muscles cry out in protest as his body's limits were brutally tested, and then, with his heart battering the inside of his chest like it wanted out...

Darkness. Thoughtlessness. Silence.

He sank into an unfeeling void in which even bad dreams ceased to exist.

Something stung Wulfe's left cheek. The pain was sharp, and, slowly, though he struggled against it, it dragged him back from the comfort of his dark oblivion. Half awake, he probed the inside of his cheek with his tongue. The flesh was ragged. He tasted blood. His tongue played over nearby teeth and... *Damn it!* Two of them were much sharper than before. They'd been broken. He wondered idly if he'd swallowed the pieces and decided that he probably had.

Next, there came a shooting pain in his eyes. He wanted to shut them tighter, but the lids were already squeezed together hard. Then a shadow fell across him, and the pain dissipated. Slowly, carefully, he eased the lids apart and saw...

"Holtz? Is that—"

Waves of fire surged through his muscles as he tried to rise. He grunted in pain and sank back down.

"Easy," said Holtz, leaning over him. "Siegler's gone to scare up a medic, but they've got their hands full. There were deaths, sarge. Brebner and half his crew. Some of Fuchs' men. Krauss and Siemens both lost their drivers. A score of lads from the support crews bought it, too."

Holtz paused for a second. Then, with sorrow giving way to relief, added, "By the bloody Eye, sarge, we thought you were out of the game for good this time. Just lie still for a bit, will you?"

They were wasted words. Wulfe was already moving. With another grunt of pain, he rolled to his left and braced himself with his right hand. His fingers pressed down into warm red sand and he froze.

"Golgotha," he whispered.

Holtz heard him. "Aye, sir. Golgotha, for better or worse."

Wulfe paused, letting the sensation of the fine red grains filter up into his brain. He raised a handful of sand up in front of his eyes and watched it pour like water from between his fingers. He rubbed his forefinger and thumb together and noticed that the sand left a stain there, a thick smear of dark red dust.

"Like blood," he murmured.

Holtz caught only the last of these words and mistook Wulfe's meaning. "No bleeding, sarge, except your mouth. You feel like anything's broken? If you'll just wait for the medic."

Again, Wulfe brushed off this advice. Injured or not, he didn't have time to lie around on his back. He lifted his head towards the horizon and, through his nose, drew a few deep, deliberate breaths of the Golgothan air. He immediately wished he hadn't. The air was thick, stung his nostrils a little, and smelled like eggs. Is that sulphur, he wondered, or something worse? Open sands stretched out all around him, flat and featureless, running all the way to the shimmering distance where land and sky seemed to melt and flow together in a mirage line that hovered above the surface of the desert.

He turned his face and looked directly up. The sky was heavily overcast with rich, swirling reds and browns. Quite beautiful, he supposed, but oppressive, too. The cloud ceiling was very low, and lightning flashed deep inside it, though no precipitation fell. He detected the muted glow of the local star, directly above him, hinting at midday, its light barely managing to struggle through. Then he realised how dark everything was. Even in the middle of the day, the ambient light was only a shade stronger than twilight on Cadia.

Holtz followed his gaze. "According to the cogboys, we should be glad of them clouds, sarge. They say one clear day is enough to kill a man."

"A million ways," Wulfe murmured.

"Again, sarge?"

"That Terraxian poet... I can't remember his name. He said Golgotha has a million ways to kill a man." Wulfe pulled himself up into a sitting position, wincing as he did so. Holtz watched without comment, giving up on trying to keep Wulfe still, merely shaking his head in frustrated disapproval.

"Is Siegler okay?" asked Wulfe. "Metzger? Viess and his men?"

"Siegler and Metzger are all right," said Holtz, "not a scratch on either of them. Same goes for Viess, though his driver is a bit messed up." Absently, he reached up and rubbed the ugly, discoloured mass of scar tissue that covered the left side of his face. Seven years ago on a world called Modessa Prime, a secessionist guerrilla had hit Wulfe's tank with a shaped-charge explosive. Holtz had been in one of the sponsons. A fine spray of molten metal had turned him from a handsome, confident trooper into one of the most bitter men Wulfe had ever known. Very occasionally, however, Wulfe saw hints of the old Holtz shining through, a bit like the Golgothan sun.

"Eye blast it!" exclaimed Wulfe suddenly. "Van Droi was up front with the pilot. He isn't—"

"No," said Holtz, cutting him off. "Chipped a tooth, though. Raging about it, he is. He was here earlier with that damned soggy cigar sticking out of his mouth. Seemed to know you'd be all right. Said you were to report to him once you were on your feet. You and the rest of the tank commanders, that is."

That prompted another question. "What about Lenck?" Wulfe asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Holtz snorted. He had declared his own dislike for the new tank commander early on. Wulfe guessed that Holtz's feelings were based on envy more than anything else, though. Holtz had enjoyed great success with the ladies before his face had been scorched and ruined. Lenck had reportedly enjoyed comparable attention from some of the nurses and female naval officers aboard the *Hand of Radiance*. From what Wulfe had heard, he wasn't shy about sharing the details, either.

"First out the lander, that one," said Holtz with a scowl. "He's back inside it now, checking on his tank."

"Damn it," muttered Wulfe. He looked up at the sky again, addressing the Emperor. "Was it too much to bloody ask?"

Holtz gave a dry laugh.

"Look on the bright side," he said. "If that Terraxian ponce was right, there'll be plenty more chances for him to snuff it before we pull out of here."

Wulfe shifted his weight and struggled gingerly to his feet. He was a little dizzy, but he managed to stand under his own power. Once he was up, he turned and cast his gaze over the wreckage of the crashed craft.

It was a sorry sight. The desert was littered for hundreds of metres with fragments of every size and shape. Black smoke poured from the aft section, churning on a hot breeze. Wulfe watched it rise, climbing towards the clouds, and thought, *frak!* Talk about advertising our position. We won't be able to stay here long, not running a flag like that.

He looked back at the crumpled body of the drop-ship. Scores of sweating men moved around it, carrying supply crates out from a tear in the hull. Others worked to manually widen the massive emergency doors at the ship's rear so that 10th Company's vehicles could be extracted. They were having a hard time of it, but there was little choice. There was no way to get the tanks out via the loading ramp. The ship's belly was pressed flat to the ground.

Another smaller group of men handled the grimmest task of all. They knelt in the sand, leaning over lifeless bodies to pull dog tags from their necks.

Wulfe's eyes lingered on the motionless form of a trooper not twenty metres away. The lad looked barely out of his teens. The pale skin of his face was bright against the dark red sand on which he lay.

Bugfood, thought Wulfe. He touched the silver aquila badge on the left breast pocket of his tanker's fatigues and whispered a quick prayer for the young trooper's soul. Such pitiful sights were something he had gotten used to after so long in the field. Life in the Guard: you either dealt with it or you didn't, and if you didn't, the commissars would sort you out, permanently.

A million ways to die here, he thought, and we've already had the first. Welcome to Golgotha, troopers.

"Right," he said, facing Holtz. "I'll see a medic later. For now, though, I'd better find van Droi. Get Siegler and Metzger together and see about getting our old junk-heap out of the ship. Come find me when it's done."

"Right, sarge," said Holtz, "but do me one favour, will you? Go easy on the tank-bashing. You'll turn her against us if you keep that up. Besides, you can't judge a tank on shipboard exercises, can you?"

"Maybe not," said Wulfe grudgingly. "Maybe not, but you and I both know she's got a heck of a lot to live up to." He turned and limped off to find Lieutenant van Droi, determined to ignore the fire in his joints and muscles as he went.

CHAPTER THREE

Far to the north of Wulfe's position, things were very different for those elements of the 18th Army Group that had landed safely. Their fourth evening on Golgotha saw General Mohamar deViers descend from orbit in his private aquila lander to personally oversee operations at the Imperial beachhead, located, as the ork slavers' base had so recently been, on the Hadron Plateau.

The preparatory stages of Operation Thunderstorm were already drawing to a close. Construction of the new Army Group HQ was almost complete, well ahead of schedule thanks to the contributions of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Their abundant technologies, the impressive prefabricated structures they had provided, the unceasing toil of their legions of brain-wiped biomechanical slaves, these things and more had seen the laser-blasted surface of the plateau converted and fortified in record time. The 10th Armoured Division was preparing to roll out on the morning of the following day, having been charged with securing the first of a series of outposts critical to establishing key supply lines in the east. So, with his private rooms already constructed and awaiting occupation, it was high time, in the opinion of General deViers, that the men on the ground felt the presence of their leader among them. Time, he thought, to remind them just whose show this was.

The sleek aquila touched down in the early evening, alighting on the base's small rockcrete runway without incident. The last of the day's light was just visible as a ruddy glow in the far west, and the base's floodlights were buzzing to life one by one. The lander's boarding ramp had barely touched rock when the general strode down it and began barking orders. He was a thin man, taller than average for a Cadian, clean-shaven with pomaded silver hair and sunken cheeks. At ninety-one years of age, seventy-six of those spent in military service, he looked surprisingly young, no older, in fact, than sixty. The treatments and surgeries he had undergone to achieve this were both expensive and painful, but never unacceptably so.

He was a man who placed a great deal of value on appearances, an attitude reflected in the tailoring of his immaculate uniform and in the polished sheen of the medals that glinted over his left breast pocket. His voice, when he spoke, was sharp and clear, and he had a tendency to emphasise certain words with little thrusts of his chin. The first order of business, he told his men, was a swift round of interviews and inspections, and no, they could *not* wait until the following morning.

He initiated the inspections, beginning, significantly, with the massive tank-crowded motor pool and progressing anti-clockwise through each area in turn. After two hours spent marching around the base snapping out questions and comments, trying in vain to acclimatise to the thick, unpleasant air, deViers confided to his long-suffering adjutant, Major Gruber, that he was deeply impressed. Things had apparently been proceeding very well without him. With its high curtain walls, towers topped with Manticore and Hydra anti-air defences, and the broad, extended parapets boasting row after row of Earthshaker artillery platforms, Exolon's new Army Group HQ represented a vital bastion of security on an otherwise hostile world. DeViers was quietly convinced that it would hold against even the most overwhelming ork siege. It would have to. In all likelihood, such an attack was mere days away. The Golgothan orks would have seen lights in the sky as the drop-ships had descended. Sooner or later, they would come to investigate. No matter how many came, the base could not be allowed to fall. It was the lynchpin of deViers' whole operation.

The plateau on which Hadron Base was being constructed measured over four kilometres in diameter and lay almost directly on the line of the equator. It had been selected on the basis of two

critical factors. Firstly, with its sheer sides and few sloping access routes, it was, even without fortification, eminently defensible. Secondly, and more significantly, at a distance of some six hundred kilometres from the general's ultimate objective, it was the closest suitable geological feature to the last known position of *The Fortress of Arrogance*.

His base inspection over, deViers ordered a briefing session with his three divisional commanders, Major Generals Rennkamp, Killian and Bergen. It was deViers' intention to keep the session short, for he had also arranged a rather splendid banquet to celebrate the auspicious beginning of his ground operation. This beginning, he felt, was marked, not by the descent of the first drop-ships, but by his own arrival planet-side, and he would not let the moment pass without some kind of commemorative function. After all, Operation Thunderstorm, as he so regularly reminded his officers, was a righteous quest the likes of which had rarely been seen in the recent annals of the Imperial Guard. Why should the end of its opening phase not be celebrated in good spirits?

That was the plan, at least, but deViers soon found his good spirits dampened.

"How many?" he hissed. His face was red with rage, and his fists were clenched on the surface of his desk. "Tell me again!"

"Six, sir," answered Major General Bergen. "Six missing, with a seventh discovered fifty kilometres to the northeast, spread across two-and-a-half kilometres of desert. All hands lost. Do you wish to hear a list of the individual elements?"

"Of course I do," snapped deViers. "Seven drop-ships on the first day. By the Eye of Terror!"

Major General Bergen's voice didn't waver as he read off the list, but his tone was heavy and his face betrayed a grim mood. "Drop-ship E44-a, the 116th Cadian Lasgunners, companies one and two, killed on descent. Drop-ship G22-a, the 122nd Tyrok Fusiliers, companies one to four, missing. Drop-ship G41-b, the 88th Mobile Infantry, companies three and four, missing. Drop-ship H17-C, the 303rd Skellas Rifles, companies eight to ten, missing. Drop-ship H19-a, the 98th Mechanised Infantry, companies one to six, missing. Drop-ship K22-C, the 71st Caedus Infantry, companies eight to ten, missing." Bergen paused for a split second before reading the final listing. The missing ship had been carrying some of his own tankers. "Drop-ship M13-J, the 81st Armoured Regiment, 10th Company, missing. No contact whatsoever from any of those listed."

General deViers listened quietly to all this, staggered by the blow his forces had taken just from landing on this damned rock. Thousands of men gone. It was outrageous. The last listing was a tank company? By the bloody Golden Throne! An entire tank company, lost somewhere out there in the desert, most probably killed in the crash. Filthy orks were probably looting the site even now. Men were one thing, and their loss was to be lamented, of course, but life was cheap in the Imperium of Man. There were always more soldiers to be had. That's what the reserves were for. But tanks? Tanks were another matter entirely. There were no replacements waiting in the wings for the war machines that had been lost. Each tank put out of action left a gap that nothing else could fill. The strength of his armoured regiment was absolutely critical given the itinerant nature of the operation. With his mind firmly fixated on the negative, the general's anger got the better of him. He leapt to his feet, throwing his chair backwards and banging his fists down on his desk.

"It's a damned fiasco! How could we lose seven drop-ships on the first day? Was it orks? Storms? What the heck are our naval liaisons saying about this? What about the Mechanicus? I want answers, damn it!" Veins bulged in his neck and his eyes looked ready to pop out of his head.

The three officers seated before him remained as still as statues while their general raged. They had seen it all before, and with increasing regularity of late. They knew better than to interrupt him before his tirade had ended. Attempting to soothe him was just asking for trouble. When deViers finally *did* stop spewing fire and sank slowly back into his chair, it was Killian, the shortest, stockiest and, in the general's eyes, least likeable of the three, who spoke up.

"The tech-priests have a team out in the desert, sir. They're studying the drop-ship in the north-east for the cause of the crash. No word yet, of course, since they're out of vox range."

Killian winced as soon as he said this, realising immediately that he had just poured fuel on the fire. Predictably, deViers pounced.

“Out of bloody vox range?” he roared, and launched into an entirely fresh diatribe. Imperial communications equipment, unreliable at the best of times in the general’s long years of experience, was almost useless on Golgotha. According to the tech-priests, there were profound levels of electromagnetic interference from the constant storms that cloaked this world. The Mechanicus contingent attached to the mission had promised a solution in due course, but, for now, communications at any range greater than a dozen kilometres simply degenerated into white noise. Clear communication at even half that distance required the expenditure of significant amounts of electrical power — more than was required to light the base for a whole day — and contact with the fleet in orbit was kept to an absolute minimum by sheer necessity. DeViers cursed and bellowed like a madman until he had spent himself again. It didn’t take long.

Despite external appearances, he was still an old man, and the intensity of his outbursts quickly exhausted him. He knew he should work harder to control his temper. He knew, too, that it had been getting far worse in recent months. There was a time, he thought, when nothing fazed me. What changed? Why do I respond so violently these days? I can’t let the pressure get to me like this.

He knew that shouting at his divisional commanders was poor therapy, and achieved very little. He would be relying on these men above all others in the days ahead. They would help him secure his prize, his legacy, his place among the good and the great. No, shouting at them didn’t help anyone. He forced his voice back down to normal levels. Ten minutes later, after a brief review of the schedule for their coming deployment, he dismissed them so that they might dress for the banquet. As the three senior officers stood and saluted him, deViers briefly considered apologising for his earlier explosiveness.

No, he told himself. Let my anger stand as a message that I expect far better. I won’t have them thinking me weak.

Weakness in any form was something Mohamar Antoninus deViers could not abide, especially his own.

* * *

The general stole an hour of sleep after the briefing, though it seemed to him that only seconds had passed before his adjutant shook him gently awake so that he might wash and dress for the banquet. Two hours later, he found himself standing at the head of a long krell-wood table in a bright, high-ceilinged room, ringing his goblet with a silver fork and asking his guests for their undivided attention.

“Officers of the 18th Army Group,” he began, beaming at them with theatrical magnanimity, “and, of course, my other honoured guests, I thank you all for taking the time to attend. It’s only right that we celebrate. Tonight, we mark the true start of our holy quest with the best that our circumstances allow. Look at you; the Emperor must be gazing down on you with pride, seated here, dressed so smartly, so ready and willing to be about His divine work. He’ll be prouder still when we find our prize. What a moment that will be! One for the history books, indeed. I’m sure you’ve all dreamed of it as much as I have: the fame, the glory, Army Group Exolon recovering the legendary *Fortress of Arrogance* from right under the nose of the old foe. Yes! For ever after, men will read of our exploits with awe. Let none of you doubt that. There is no cause greater than that which inspires one’s fellow man.”

He scanned the faces around the table, daring anyone to pay him less than full attention, and was pleased to see every eye, including several unblinking mechanical ones, turned in his direction.

“We could not have asked for a higher honour,” he told them. “I’ve heard mutterings among the men, just as you have, talk of wishing to join Commissar Yarrick and our Cadian brothers on Armageddon. Such talk is to be expected. Exolon is, after all, a fighting man’s army, and our men

want to make a difference. I appreciate their eagerness, for I too would see us lend Yarrick's forces our much-needed strength sooner rather than later. But all things in their proper time. We can offer so much more by claiming victory here. Through the successful recovery and restoration of *The Fortress of Arrogance*, this army will provide our Imperial brothers — not just Cadians, but all men of the Imperium — with a renewed strength of purpose and determination that no amount of reinforcement could possibly hope to offer. *The Fortress* is not just another Baneblade battle tank, as you all should know. She is a symbol of everything the Guard stands for: of strength and honour, of courage and duty, of unbending resistance against the foul traitors and alien hordes that strive to wipe our race from the face of the galaxy. I say her recovery is long overdue. So, join me in a toast. Fill your glasses, all of you."

DeViers waited as his guests sloshed cool golden liquor into goblets of fine black crystal. They were senior officers for the most part. His three divisional commanders, having changed out of their field tunics and into their finest dress uniforms, all looked splendid. The gold accoutrements on their lapels and breast pockets gleamed brightly in the light of the overhead lamps. The other officers present were regimental commanders from the 8th Mechanised and 12th Heavy Infantry Divisions, some of them colonels, the rest majors. They had also smartened themselves up adequately, though more than a few bore grisly facial scars that somewhat ruined the overall effect.

Even with their battle-ravaged features, they were far easier on the eye than the three hooded, red-robed figures that sat among them: Tech-Magos Sennesdiar, Tech-Adept Xephous, and Tech-Adept Armadron, the three most senior members of the Adeptus Mechanicus present at Hadron Base.

DeViers had felt it only proper to invite them, absolutely certain that they would decline. He would not have asked them otherwise. Propriety had backfired on him, however, as all three had come. He still couldn't understand why. They had expressly told him that they wouldn't be able to eat the food his chef prepared. One of them — the perpetually wheezing, twitching Armadron — seemed to lack anything that even approximated a functioning mouth. From what DeViers had glimpsed so far under that shadowy hood, it appeared that the adept's entire head was encased in twin hemispheres of steel, absolutely featureless but for a single glowing green eye. In terms of aesthetics, the other two weren't much better.

Sennesdiar, the highest ranking of the three — though his robes bore no markings to denote this — was also the largest figure in the room, his misshapen bulk nearly twice the mass of anyone else present. His robes were perforated all across his back, allowing a number of strange serpentine appendages to fall all the way to the floor where they coiled around the legs of his chair, their metal segments gleaming in the light. Sennesdiar's face — what little could be seen of it under his cowl — was grotesque, the flesh pale and bloodless, little more, in places, than flaps of skin stapled over dull steel, and his tiny mouth was a lipless slash that reminded DeViers of nothing so much as a fresh stab wound. The effect was a mask that made a mockery of human features.

The last of the three, Xephous, was no better. In some ways, he was actually worse, for his complex arrangement of mandibles and visual receptors gave him the aspect of a nightmarish biomechanical crab, and the intermittent clacking sounds that issued from him only added to the effect.

By the Golden Throne of Terra, thought DeViers, between the three of them, they're enough to ruin a man's appetite.

The more human guests had filled their glasses and were pushing their chairs back so that they might rise to their feet for the general's toast.

DeViers turned his eyes away from the tech-priests, glad that the ever-considerate Gruber had seated them among the men at the far end of the table. Much nearer and, thankfully, much easier to behold, were Bishop Augustus and High Commissar Morten.

The bishop, seated on the general's immediate right, was a tall, almost skeletally thin man in his late seventies with a prodigiously long nose. His tanned skin shimmered with a coating of the most

expensive and richly-scented oils, and precious gems glittered from the rings that graced each of his long fingers. Like the tech-priests, Bishop Augustus wore voluminous and finely made robes, though his were a dazzling white, symbolising a spiritual purity far beyond the grasp of other, lesser men. That was worth a laugh, thought deViers. If rumours about the bishop were true, he was anything but pure. On Cadia, he would have been publicly executed for his unorthodox predilections, but, perhaps, deViers told himself, the rumours were exactly that: idle rumours. The bishop was a fine conversationalist, already winning smiles and laughter from a number of the officers as they had listened intently to his anecdotes before being seated around the table. It was much more than could be said for his Martian counterparts.

The high commissar, seated on the general's immediate left, was a striking figure of a man, clearly of fine noble stock, dressed immaculately in his gold-braided tunic and black silk shirt. Such were Morten's good looks that the only other man present whose features stood up to any kind of comparison was Major General Bergen, whom deViers always thought looked just as if he'd stepped straight out of a recruitment poster.

As was only proper, High Commissar Morten had dispensed with his stiffened cap while at the table, but it was impossible to look at the man without seeing the ghost of it still perched firmly on his head, such was the strength of his identity. He was, in deViers' opinion, the quintessential political officer. Unswerving and utterly uncompromising in his duty, he had served with the 18th Army Group for the last eleven years and, though he and deViers had never developed anything that could be called a friendship, the general enjoyed the man's professional respect and returned it in kind.

The absence of friendship was no great loss. After all, deViers told himself, one must be careful around these commissars.

All his guests were standing now, their eyes on him, goblets filled and at the ready. DeViers lifted his straight out in front of him, took a breath, and projected his voice.

“To success, gentlemen,” he said. “To success and victory!”

“Success and victory!” they replied with fervour. Excepting the Mechanicus, each of the guests threw back his glass and drank. When they had finished, deViers gestured them back into their seats, smiling broadly at them.

Look at them, Mohamar, he thought, eating out of your hand. To success and victory, indeed, and to immortality, for I *will* have the glory I seek. And Throne help any bastard that gets in my way.

Major General Gerard Bergen looked down at his plate with absolute revulsion. What the devil *was* this abomination? The starter had been bad enough — chilled bladdercrab with ormin and caprium — so obscenely rich that he'd felt his stomach churning, though the general's other guests had seemed to enjoy it immensely judging by their praise for the general's personal chef. Now the old man's servants brought out the main course — quivering mountains of dark red meat that looked dangerously undercooked.

The general's adjutant, Gruber, placed himself on the old man's right and proudly announced, “Lightly roasted auroch heart stuffed with jellied grox liver and dogwort.”

Murmurs of appreciation sounded from around the table, but Bergen studied the thing on his plate as if it were an alien life form. It sat there glistening wetly in the light from the lamps, its pungent aroma clawing at his nostrils. He hoped the expression of delight he was struggling to maintain was enough to fool the general. He looked up the table involuntarily and immediately wished he hadn't. DeViers caught his eye. Bergen put extra effort into his artificial smile and saw the old man grin back, buying into his act.

He turned back to the food. Maybe it tastes better than it looks, he thought, but I doubt it.

Bergen considered himself a down-to-earth man for someone of his breeding and rank — it was, in fact, the thing he liked best about himself — and it required effort on his part to maintain the

social niceties so important to his station in the classist upper echelons of the Imperial Guard. Whether on the battlefield or off it, he liked to live as his men did, eating standard-issue rations and sleeping on a standard-issue bedroll, washing and shaving as little or as often as his men were able to. Such things allowed him a better understanding of the condition of his troops, of how far he could push them before they would start to come undone. Such information was critical to a good commander. Some of the old-school officers, a few of the colonels and majors seated around him perhaps, also held to such practices, but they were in the minority. Bergen's regimental commanders — Vinnemann, Marrenburg and Graves — had been allowed to abstain from attending the dinner so that they might continue their preparations for deployment, a concession that Bergen greatly envied them. DeViers hadn't given him that option. The old man had been adamant that *all* his divisional commanders attend.

Lifting his cutlery, Bergen began slicing bite-sized chunks from the undercooked heart. Spearing one with his fork, he lifted it towards his mouth. Here goes nothing, he told himself, and popped it in. The texture was highly unpleasant, but he was forced to admit that it tasted a lot better than it looked.

While the general's guests concentrated on the main course, the level of conversation dropped, stifled by the efforts of cutting and chewing, and of chasing each mouthful down with a sip of amasec. But it wasn't long until most of the plates lay empty save a smear of sauce on each, and a flock of servants emerged from the side corridors to clear them away.

Bergen sat back in silence and watched the others interact. His stomach was threatening to rebel against him.

Bishop Augustus dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a white silk napkin and said, "Exquisite, general, but quite cruel, don't you think, to acclimatise us to such outstanding fare? I suspect Golgotha offers nothing so delicious or refined."

General deViers faced the bishop, but gestured down the table to Tech-Magos Sennesdiar.

"The honoured magos," he said, "tells me that most of the animal and plant life on this world is fatal if ingested. Is that not so, magos?"

The blaring voice that replied was like a vox-caster unit with the volume turned up too high. Like most of the others, Bergen winced.

"If you'll permit me, general," boomed the tech-magos, each word toneless and harsh, "the probability of death would depend on the amount and type of matter ingested, the body-weight and constitution of the individual in question, the availability and quality of medical assistance—"

From Bergen's left, a few seats further down the table, the crab-faced Tech-Adept Xephous emitted a sudden burst of noise, high-pitched and raw, like fingernails scraping on a blackboard. His superior immediately replied with a similar condensed sonic burst. Bergen knew this for what it was. The tech-priests were communicating in Binary, the ancient machine-language of the Martian priesthood. When Sennesdiar reverted to speaking in Gothic a moment later, his voice was pitched just right. "My apologies, gentlemen. My adept informs me that my vocaliser settings may have caused you some discomfort. Is this setting acceptable?"

"A great improvement, magos," said General deViers.

"Then I shall continue listing the variables relevant to the question of toxicity in—"

DeViers held up a hand and cut the tech-priest off mid-sentence. "Thank you, magos, but that will not be necessary. A simple yes or no would have sufficed."

"It is not a simple matter," said the tech-priest. "I shall have an acolyte-logis compile a report for you on the subject. We have significant amounts of relevant data."

"If you must," said deViers, winking at Bishop Augustus, "but I'd rather you just warn me if I'm about to bite down on something I shouldn't."

You wouldn't want to bite off more than you could chew, thought Bergen automatically.

"Actually," continued General deViers, turning from the tech-magos, "I'd like to hear the high commissar's thoughts on this amasec. Commodore Galbraithe graciously donated eighteen bottles of the stuff for our little celebration. Such a pity that he wasn't able to share it with us in person."

"Wasn't able?" asked Major General Rennkamp brusquely, "Or wasn't willing? I've heard the old spacer hasn't been ground-side for over twenty years. You'd need a direct order from the High Lords to get him off that *Helicon Star* of his."

There was a ripple of polite laughter.

"A fine ship, that," murmured a colonel close to Bergen. It was von Holden, one of Rennkamp's men, commander of the 259th Mechanised Regiment. Bergen was a little surprised. He had privately admired both of the battlefleet's heavy cruisers, but it wasn't often one would hear a ground-pounder praising a naval vessel out loud. There were long-running tensions between the Guard and the Navy, a perpetuation of mistrusts that stretched back as far as the Age of Apostasy and beyond.

At the upper end of the table, High Commissar Morten was answering the general. "A very fine vintage, sir. The commodore is most gracious. This is very expensive stuff. It has a certain citrus quality, you agree? And the significance of his choice..."

"What significance would that be?" asked Bishop Augustus.

"Its origin, your grace," said Morten. "This particular amasec is produced exclusively by the Jaldyne prefectoral distilleries on Terrax Secundus. Quite rare outside the Ultima Segmentum."

"Ah, clever of him," said a glowing deViers. "Wonderful stuff."

Bishop Augustus was frowning. "I'm afraid I still don't see the connection."

"Terraxian and Cadian regiments fought side-by-side on this very plateau in the last war," answered the high commissar. "Together, they were able to buy Commissar Yarrick and his command staff the time they needed to escape the planet's surface. The orks swarmed this very plateau just as Yarrick's lifter ascended. I believe there were several popular books published about the battle."

A moment of quiet descended on the table as the fighting men present muttered a quick prayer for the fallen. It was Major General Killian that broke the spell.

"I don't suppose any of you have read Michelos?" he asked. "I've seen a few of my troopers with their noses in tattered copies."

"Finally taught your lot to read, eh, Klotus?" said Bergen with a grin.

Killian laughed heartily, chasing off the last of the sombre mood that had momentarily fallen on the table. "You can talk, tread-head. Your lot still think they need to take toilet paper to the mess tent. Must be all those promethium fumes."

The colonels seated nearby laughed out loud, prone to engage in a bit of good-natured ribbing themselves at times, but General deViers coughed sharply into his hand, and the sound cut through the laughter like a las-knife. The expression on the general's face sent a clear message: not the time, not the place.

Fair enough, thought Bergen. It's your show.

High Commissar Morten sat forward, ice blue eyes fixed on Killian, and said, "I'm not sure I approve, major general." Seeing Killian's face redden, he added, "Of troopers reading Michelos, I mean. His work has a very fatalistic bent. Not suitable material for front-line troops. Dreadful recruitment material, too. The way he refers to Guard service as 'the meat grinder'. If it were up to me, I'd have the text prohibited under article six."

Bergen resisted the urge to roll his eyes. First offences under article six meant the lash. It seemed a little harsh for reading a bit of poetry, he thought.

"Come now, commissar," said Rennkamp. "Isn't it quite popular with the civs?"

"Civilians?" said Morten. "I hardly think so. The last I heard, hivers still prefer their entertainment filled with sex and unstoppable heroes."

"What have you got against unstoppable heroes?" asked Killian, smirking. "I like to think you're dining with at least one."

General deViers lifted his glass and said, "I'll drink to that!"

His adjutant, Gruber, appeared again from the side-door, walked to the right side of the general's chair and, in a deep, sonorous voice, announced the dessert — slices of candied bonifruit with hot caffeine to follow for those who wanted it.

Bergen stifled a groan. He could hardly cope with consuming more food, but there was little choice. Propriety made harsh demands. He doubted he could get away with refusing to partake of the sweetened fruit. The general had had quite a few glasses of amasec, but his eyes were missing nothing. It had crossed Bergen's mind that the whole event might have been orchestrated to serve a double purpose. He didn't doubt that the general wished to celebrate — deViers was voracious when it came to attention and respect — but it wouldn't have surprised him if the old man was also using the banquet as an opportunity to gauge the mood among his officers and to root out potential troublemakers. It was hardly an original method. One of the divisional commanders would have to replace the general one day. Bergen knew that Rennkamp was only too eager to step in and take over whenever the chance came up. He wasn't sure about Killian yet. When the amasec was flowing and the room was filled with chatter, it was easy to let one's guard down, confident that those around you were likewise swept up in the bonhomie. Bergen had been careful to sip slowly, conscious that he would be leading his troops out before dawn. Now, he was glad of that, certain that the old general was watching all of them like a hawk.

Warp damn the old bastard, he thought. Millions of our brother Cadians dead and dying in the Third War of Armageddon, and here he is throwing dinner parties on a world infested with greenskins. What happened to him? There was a time when I looked up to him, a time when he was rock-solid. He's not the same man, now. It's as if some kind of panic or mania has taken over. I can't stand what he's become.

He stabbed his dessert fork into a slice of bonifruit and, slowly, mechanically, chewed and swallowed, hardly tasting it at all.

At least tomorrow, he would be out of the general's shadow again.

* * *

There's a man who understands this quest, thought General deViers. Good officer, Gerard Bergen. Look at him, limiting his drink, careful not to gorge himself, mindful of tomorrow and the pressures on him. Not like some of these others. Damn, but I like this one. I like him a lot. Reminds me of myself.

Commodore Galbraithe's fine amasec was really working hard on the general. His head felt as light as air and there was a very pleasant numbness in his muscles. He was warm, just a little dizzy, and supremely satisfied with the way the evening had progressed.

Gruber had returned to his side to lean over and whisper the time to him. Good old Gruber. He did as he was told, no questions asked, and took care of business, even the nasty stuff.

DeViers rose unsteadily to his feet and addressed his guests for the last time that evening.

"Gentlemen," he said, "my adjutant tells me that the hour is late and, as you know, the 10th Armoured Division is rolling out tomorrow to secure the first of our waypoints. Major General Bergen should be in his bunk, and I dare say the rest of you need more than your share of beauty sleep, but I have a few words for you before you disperse."

His guests turned their heads towards him.

"Operation Thunderstorm is off to a fine, auspicious start. I've thoroughly enjoyed your company this evening and I thank you for helping me to mark this occasion in such a fitting manner."

His eyes settled for a brief moment on each of them, and he nodded in agreement with his own words as he said, “We’ve dangerous business ahead. The filthy orks aren’t about to make it easy for us. There’s nothing they love more than a fight, and they’ll come in their millions once they know men have returned to this place. Soon, our Major General Bergen here will be giving them their first taste of Imperial lead in almost forty years, and there’ll be plenty more to follow, by Throne! We’ll make the bastards suffer. It’s time to remind them whose bloody galaxy this is.”

“Hear, hear!” called out one of Killian’s colonels, earning him a broad grin from the general. Some of the other officers lifted their glasses.

“Yes,” said deViers, “lift your glasses, all of you. A final toast.”

Around the table, the necks of tall decanters clinked against goblet rims. Each guest rose from his seat, some less steadily than others.

DeViers turned to Bishop Augustus. “Through the counsel of the Emperor’s most holy Ministorum, may our faith remain strong.”

The bishop nodded sincerely, as if he would personally make it so.

“Ave Imperator,” replied the men around the table.

DeViers turned next to High Commissar Morten and said, “Through the uncompromising vigilance of our tireless commissars, may our hearts never falter.”

Morten tilted his head in acknowledgement.

“Ave Imperator.”

The general gestured at each of the tech-priests in turn with his glass. “Through the wisdom and scientific mastery of the Adeptus Mechanicus, may our guns blaze fierce and our engines never stall.”

“Ave Imperator,” said the officers, but the tech-priests replied “Ave Omnissiah!” and deViers heard Bishop Augustus mutter a quiet curse under his breath.

“Throne above,” the general went on, “even the Navy is doing its part!”

Some of the colonels and majors grunted in brief disapproval.

“Come now, you men,” chided deViers, still smiling. “Commodore Galbraithe sends us his best liquor and has promised me a Vulcan close-support wing once our hangars are finished. I won’t exclude him from my toast.”

“May we not also raise our glasses to Major General Bergen?” asked High Commissar Morten. He turned to face Bergen down the length of the table and said, “The very best of luck to you, sir, in your coming assault on Karavassa. The orks will crumble before you and the might of your glorious tanks.”

“Hear, hear!” agreed the other officers noisily.

“Thank you, high commissar,” said Bergen. “I’m confident my division will more than live up to the general’s expectations.”

Bishop Augustus raised his glass in Bergen’s direction and said, “May the Light of all mankind watch over you and your men, major general, and grant you victory in His Name. You go with the blessings of His Most Holy Ministorum.”

“The Emperor protects!” said deViers sharply, irked that the high commissar had seen fit to hijack his toast.

“The Emperor protects!” chorused the guests, and together, excepting the tech-priests as always, they drained their glasses. At a sign from Gruber, the general’s servants emerged from the side corridor again to withdraw the chairs from around the table, signalling an end to the general’s soiree. As the guests started filing out of the room’s broad double-doors, each saluting him as they went, deViers heard Tech-Magos Sennesdiar addressing Major General Bergen.

“I miscalculated the probability of your attendance tonight, major general,” said the magos. “Are your preparations complete? May I assume that your engineers are performing optimally?”

“They are,” answered Bergen. “As for my attendance, the general insisted. Perhaps he sought to distract my mind. Time to think is not always a welcome commodity the day before deployment.”

“Epinephrine,” said Tech-Adept Armadron.

“I’m sorry, adept?” said Bergen.

“And norepinephrine,” said Tech-Adept Xephous. “Armadron is correct. Troopers under study showed greatly increased levels of both hormones prior to engagement with the enemy. Sections of the brain may be excised to inhibit this, major general. Our skitarii legions do not experience the problem.”

Bishop Augustus was hovering nearby. Overhearing them, he interjected acidly, “That must be a great comfort to them.”

Tech-Magos Sennesdiar turned his cowled head to face the Ministorum man. “Their comfort is irrelevant, priest. Their efficiency is not.”

General deViers saw the bishop’s face flush and moved quickly to intervene. Before the bishop could respond and escalate matters, he gripped the bishop’s hand in his. “I was greatly honoured by your attendance tonight, your grace. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. Remember, if there’s anything you need from me, you may contact my adjutant, Gruber, directly. He’ll alert me to anything that requires my attention.”

Bishop Augustus gaped for a moment, and then, his tone still edged with displeasure, said, “Most kind, general. I won’t forget. And congratulations once again on such a fine banquet. I shall look forward to your next, providing the guest list is a little more... exclusive.”

Throwing a last contemptuous look at the tech-priests, the bishop lifted the hem of his robe from the floor and stalked out of the room. A string of officers moved up to salute the general and thank him. Without further discourse, the tech-priests took this opportunity to leave.

As the other officers moved off, deViers decided to pull Bergen aside just as he was about to depart.

Standing together, he found his eyes level with the younger man’s. Like the general, Bergen was taller than most Cadians. He was of a heavier, more muscular build than the general, too, but then, he was forty years younger. Rejuvenat treatments could only do so much. Face to face like this, deViers noted how much smoother and tighter Bergen’s skin was. Sometimes, when the general was awoken in the early hours of the morning by the need to relieve himself, he would catch his reflection in a mirror and gasp, shocked that his face could look so skull-like in a certain light. He knew that all the rejuvenat in the galaxy wouldn’t hold aging off forever. How long did he have left to achieve his dream?

“A quick word before you go, Gerard,” said deViers. “Just wanted to wish you the very best out there.”

Bergen gazed straight back at him and, for a second, deViers felt like he had entered some kind of staring contest. It was a strange moment, but then Bergen spoke, and the feeling, whatever its cause, vanished into nothing.

“I appreciate that, sir,” said Bergen, “but luck is overrated is it not? I’ve never much liked relying on it.”

DeViers nodded. “Don’t you worry. We’ll all come out of this as heroes.” He hesitated, trying to gain control over all the thoughts swimming around in his head. The commodore’s amasec was stronger than he had expected. It was difficult to put into order the things he wanted to say. In a rare moment of alcohol-induced frankness, he settled on saying, “You know, Gerard, my line — my bloodline, that is — ends with me. Perhaps I’ve mentioned that to you before.”

Bergen’s mouth was a tight line. “You have, sir.”

“Couldn’t father any of my own, you know. Not for lack of trying, by Throne, but my seed’s as thin as water, so the experts tell me.”

“I’m sure that it’s none of my business, sir,” said Bergen.

It was the cold, flat tone in which they were spoken, rather than the words themselves, that surprised deViers. He recovered quickly, however, clapping Bergen on the arm, and saying, "I suppose not, Gerard. I just wanted you to understand. A man must leave his mark on the Imperium. History must remember me. I've given my entire life to the Emperor's service."

Bergen stared back quietly for second. "We all have, sir."

DeViers nodded, "Yes, of course. A fighting man's outfit, my 18th Army Group. I've said it before. Good men we lead."

"Good men, sir," said Bergen. "I'm not sure we deserve them sometimes."

DeViers couldn't explain why, but those words hit him like a smack in the face. He gaped for a moment, unsure of how to respond. Bergen didn't give him the chance.

"With your permission, sir," he said. "I should get some rest before I lead my division out. I want to be ready when we meet the foe."

"Permission granted," replied deViers.

Bergen snapped his boot heels together and gave a fine, crisp salute which deViers returned. Then Bergen turned sharply, and marched out of the room.

DeViers watched him go. For a few minutes, he stood alone in silence, thinking how remarkable it was that the word *we* could be made to sound so much like *you*.

CHAPTER FOUR

After the general's dinner, Bergen emerged into the hot night air to find his adjutant, Katz, awaiting him in the driver's seat of an idling staff car, ready to take him back to his quarters. Despite the hour and the fact that he was due to lead his entire division out before dawn, Bergen wasn't in the mood to retire quite yet, and waved Katz on, telling him he would return on foot after a short walk. Though he had limited his consumption to a polite minimum, Commodore Galbraithe's rich amasec had numbed his fingertips, and he felt the need to walk it off. His stomach felt uncomfortably full and his mind was restless, awash with conflicting thoughts. He knew that sleep would not come easily. Perhaps a little time in the open air, even air tainted with the smell of sulphur, would do him some good.

He walked without a specific destination in mind, keeping to areas where the ground was less heavily trodden and less brightly lit, bringing him in short order to the southernmost section of the base. This was not the first time Bergen had been posted to a desert region, and he had expected the temperature to plummet at night, as it so often did in the deserts he had visited on other worlds. But the constant cloud cover on Golgotha trapped a layer of heat in the lower atmosphere that would take many hours to dissipate, and he unbuttoned his jacket and shirt collar as he walked.

Rounding the corner of a prefabricated barracks, he almost bumped into a squad of infantrymen on their way to the mess tents. They stopped to salute him smartly, though the colour of their berets said they weren't from his division. He returned the salute without breaking stride, noting absently that he hadn't recognised anyone he had passed so far. Nothing strange in that, of course. There were close to thirty thousand men in Hadron Base: two whole infantry divisions plus his own armoured, each at roughly ten thousand men apiece, not counting the drop-ship losses, and that was excluding the non-combat personnel so essential to basic operations.

Thirty thousand, he decided, was a conservative estimate. Crowded into the space between the towering curtain walls, it seemed like a vast number, an unstoppable military force, but Bergen knew it was nothing of the kind. Despite the difficulties inherent in scanning the shrouded surface of the planet, what little data they had suggested that Golgotha still seethed with the foe. Those few probe-servitors that had returned safely had shown that the more temperate regions north and south of the desert were dotted with vast settlements wherever the terrain allowed. Even now, thought Bergen, legions of orks might be racing through the darkness, crossing the open sands towards the plateau, following grunted reports of lights in the sky on the promise of a good blood-soaked battle.

Vermin, he thought. They're a plague on the galaxy, the damned greenskins.

He reached the foot of the south wall and began to climb a zigzagging staircase that led up to the battlements.

There was a powered elevator inside the nearest tower, but he opted to ascend under his own strength, conscious of the excess of calories that General deViers had forced on him. As he moved from step to step, enjoying the steady rhythm of the exercise, his thoughts dwelled on the Golgothan orks.

They'd had thirty-eight years of freedom to spread across the land, turning every scrap of captured or abandoned Imperial technology to their needs. Even taking into account the unprecedented hordes that had left this world and the surrounding systems to join Thraka's onslaught of Imperial space, there had to be literally millions of orks still present, perhaps billions. Who could say for sure how many?

Army Group Exolon was nothing in the face of such numbers and anyone who said otherwise was either a propaganda man, a fool, or both, as they so often were. Despite the general's grand speech about the importance of their quest, Bergen still shared the most fervent hopes of his men that this would all be over quickly so they could join the fight on Armageddon. *That* was a fight worthy of his beloved armoured division, for if Armageddon fell, Holy Terra, the sacred Cradle of mankind, would be under direct threat for the first time since the divine Emperor had walked the stars.

There could scarcely be a greater danger to the preservation of the Imperium in these dark times.

As Bergen reached the top of the stairs, breathing heavily, his forehead damp with sweat and his quadriceps burning, he stopped and turned to look down on Hadron Base. It was quite something, he admitted. It sat shimmering like an island of light in a sea of absolute darkness. His gaze crossed the small airfield in the north-east quarter, its hangars nearing completion and awaiting the arrival of the Vulcan gunships that the commodore had promised. To the south of it, scores of water towers and storage silos stood in tight, ordered rows like men under close inspection. On the east side, next to one of the base's massive reinforced gates, were the motor pool and mustering field. Both were large and well lit, and filled with red-robed engineers busily tending to row upon row of transports and war machines. There were hundreds of men in rust-coloured fatigues down there, too: troopers from the support echelons hefting ammunition and supplies back and forward, working hard against the clock. Large Guard-issue trucks — the ever-reliable Thirty-Sixers — were being driven into position so that fuel drums and supplies could be hoisted onto them. Scores of Sentinel walkers squatted in groups like flightless birds at rest, legs folded beneath them to allow for oiling and final weapons checks.

To Bergen, all this was a beautiful sight, something he appreciated every time he saw it, and he stood watching, motionless, for long minutes. He felt lucky, in many ways, to be the man he was. From the age of six, from the moment that his mother had explained his destiny to him, that he was already marked for military service, the Imperial Guard was the only thing that had given real meaning to his life. It was the Guard that had shaped and defined him.

He turned from his view of the base below and moved to the parapet wall, looking out into the black of the night. To his left, rows of Earthshaker guns sat silent, their machine-spirits resting until called upon to commit the explosive, long-range slaughter at which they excelled. Some of the gun-crews were absent, sleeping in their barracks or getting fed, most likely. Sirens would call them back to their stations in the event of an attack. Other crews had to remain on duty shifts. They sat by their guns, smoking, playing cards, a few of them sharpening knives or practising close-combat techniques with their fellows. Others moved in pairs along the wall, men on patrol duty, occasionally lifting night-vision magnoculars to their eyes and then dropping them again. Nothing to see out there.

Footsteps sounded behind Bergen and he turned to find a short, scruffy trooper looking up at him with a pipe of styrene cups in one hand and a green flask in the other.

“Care for some hot caffeine, sir?” asked the trooper a little nervously, eyeing the bright golden glyphs on Bergen’s collar and the bands at his sleeve.

Bergen smiled.

“Are you sure it’s hot, son?” he asked. There was no steam rising from the flask’s open lid.

The trooper nodded earnestly. “My sergeant says it’s the atmospheric pressure, sir. Stuff doesn’t steam here. Not at normal temperatures, leastwise. He says if it’s steaming, it’ll put you in the med-block with burns. Can’t pretend as I understand it myself, but I’ll take his word for it, sir. He’s a smart one, is my sarge.”

Bergen smiled, but refused a cup all the same. Any more caffeine tonight and he wouldn’t sleep at all.

“What’s your name and outfit, son?” he asked.

“Ritter, sir. Two-one-five-three-five. With the 88th Feros Artillery.”

"So these are your guns?" said Bergen, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder.

The little trooper looked proud. "Sure are, sir. Proper beauties, ain't they? I'm hoping to crew eventually. I'm just support right now, though."

"They're not half bad, private," said Bergen, glancing over his shoulder at them. "Not bad at all. You must be proud that your regiment is part of this operation. One for the history books, this."

"I suppose so, sir," said Ritter. "I mean, I just go where the regiment goes. So long as me and my mates are together, I don't mind where. The air here stinks a bit, though. And... well, there's no girls except them Medicae nurses. And it's only the officers have a devil's chance with any of that lot, isn't it? Even the rough-looking ones."

Bergen laughed. "Glad you've got your priorities straight. A man has to keep things in perspective, eh?"

"Too true, sir."

"Well, you'd best get back to it. I bet some of your mates could use a good shot of caff to keep them awake. Keep your chin up, soldier."

"Right, sir," said Ritter. "Thank you, sir." He fumbled with the flask and cups for a moment so that he could throw up a stiff salute before moving off to serve the gun crews he so hoped to join.

Bergen watched him go and then started walking anticlockwise along the wall in the general direction of his quarters, gesturing for the men he passed not to rise on his account. Talking with Ritter had lightened his mood. There was an undeniable value, he believed, in taking the time to talk with the rank-and-file. Their answers were often refreshingly honest, unshaped by the hidden agendas that tightly governed the words of most career-minded senior officers. Some of the younger troopers were blessed with a shining optimism — born of blissful naivety, he supposed — that he couldn't ever remember having possessed. Perhaps it was a class thing. Until the day he entered cadet school, his family, saints rest them, had worked tirelessly to prepare him for a life of war. The old phrase "harder than a Cadian grandmother" was born of fact, as the network of deep scars on his back attested.

As he walked further along the wall, his thoughts shifted to General deViers, and the upturn in his mood was suddenly reversed again. Mohamar Antoninus deViers. Alarm bells had been ringing in Bergen's head for months. There were no two ways about it, the general had been swiftly losing his grip on reality since the destruction of Palmeros.

It should have been the old man's crowning glory, the Palmeros campaign. He was long overdue for retirement and, if he had only managed to turn back the orks and save the majority of the planetary populace, he would certainly have received the coveted Honorifica, and would probably have been granted an Imperial title. Lord General Mohamar deViers: that would have gone some way towards satisfying his lust for fame. Instead, Ghazghkull Thraka had smashed the planet apart with seventeen massive asteroids, killing billions of loyal Imperial citizens and wiping a civilised world from the star-charts. DeViers had been forced to pull out fast with none of the everlasting glory he had anticipated. Perhaps he had imagined that the Palmerosi people would build statues in his honour. Yes, thought Bergen, he would have been looking forward to that.

Without victory, there were no statues.

Humiliated, the old man had scrawled for another cause and, in his desperation, had settled on a hopeless one that other, more wily generals had manoeuvred carefully to avoid: a half-mad recovery mission that Sector Command promised would earn the general his place in the history books.

What wouldn't the old man sacrifice, Bergen wondered grimly, for something like that? He was the last of his line. He'd said it himself. His obsession with leaving some kind of legacy had put the entire army group at extreme risk.

Bergen's steps grew heavier as he began his descent from the high battlements eager to return to his quarters. The walk had done its job. Tiredness settled over him like a heavy blanket. As he trudged down one of the southeastern stairwells, boots ringing on the metal steps, he cast his mind

back to the briefing session earlier that day, and the words the general had offered before dismissing his three divisional commanders.

“Expect a fight when you get to Karavassa, Gerard,” deViers had said. “You can be sure that every damned outpost that Yarrick established during the last war has been infested with the buggers. They’ve had plenty of time to dig in, by Throne. Let’s hope all that time has made them soft and complacent. Regardless, I know you’ll get the job done. I *must* have secure supply lines before I set out to claim the prize.”

“You still insist on taking to the field in person, sir?” Bergen had asked, knowing that it was as futile as ever to argue, but ploughing ahead anyway. With a glance at Killian and Rennkamp, he’d added, “I think all three of us would counsel you against it. It’s an unnecessary risk, to say the least.”

“There’s nothing unnecessary about it!” deViers had barked, and Bergen had thought another volcano of anger was about to erupt. But it hadn’t. Instead, deViers had simply shaken his head and said, “Things of value *demand* risk. If the damned Munitorum thought I was too precious to risk, they wouldn’t have sent me out here, would they? But that’s beside the point. I’ve prayed for something like this to come my way, Gerard. I deserve this chance. It’s my destiny to recover that Baneblade. And if any of you think I’m going to command from the rear on this one, you’re bloody well out of your minds.”

Well, one of us is definitely out of his mind, Bergen thought as he recalled the conversation, but I’m pretty sure it isn’t me.

He reached the rocky surface of the plateau, increased his walking pace, and soon spotted his quarters up ahead — a low, two-storey prefab that he shared with Colonels Vinnemann, Marrenburg and Graves. He was looking forward to slipping between cool sheets. Such comforts would be just a memory once he was on the move.

Tired as he was, though, his mind still churned.

He knew that thousands of men would die in the coming days. Given the unexpected drop-ship losses, it seemed all too likely that over two thousand already had. There would be worse to come. Golgotha would see to that. Scores of men had already reported to the med-block and they hadn’t even left the plateau yet. For some, it was the *fines* — particles of red dust so small that they could penetrate the cell membranes of the human body. The medics said there was little they could do beyond prescribing anti-toxic medication, but the real solution was to get off this blasted planet. The medicines induced short-term vomiting and cramps. Then there were the *dannih* — small chitinous bloodsuckers with powerful tripartite jaws. They seemed to get everywhere, even inside machines. If a man tried to pull one from his skin while it was feeding, only the fat red body would come away. The detached head would then burrow down into his flesh dispensing anti-coagulant, homing in on major arteries. A man could bleed to death if he wasn’t careful. It was a powerful deterrent against interfering with the creature’s feeding cycle. The only way to get rid of them without this happening was to douse the afflicted area of the body in strong alcohol, an unhappy solution on two counts. Firstly, troopers didn’t much like the idea of wasting their coveted liquor on shifting stubborn ticks, and, secondly, dousing oneself in alcohol was never a good idea. A handful of the heavier smokers had already discovered this first-hand.

There were other challenges, too. Aside from the *dannih* and the *fines*, there were numerous minor conditions related to atmospheric pressure, allergies, the unusual but breathable composition of the air, and all the problems caused by living at a constant gravity of one-point-twelve gees. It seemed to Bergen that Golgotha was waging its own war against the Cadians, and the orks hadn’t even got started yet.

Bergen had never been a dour man by nature. Quite the contrary, in fact. He had, in his days as a cadet, been selected to feature in a short series of Cadian propaganda and recruitment films, such was his natural warmth and appeal. But, as he opened the door to his quarters and saw Katz

snoozing in a chair by his desk, he decided there were three things about which he was depressingly certain.

The first was that his commanding officer was coming apart at the seams. DeViers had lost his way. A powerful aura of desperation hovered around him, and it heralded disaster for the 18th Army Group and everyone attached to it.

The second was that Exolon would never find the famous *Fortress of Arrogance*. Holy icon or not, the orks had enjoyed thirty-eight years in which to strip it down to its bare nuts and bolts. If there was anything left of it at all, it would be unrecognisable. No, *The Fortress of Arrogance* was little more than a carrot dangled in front of the Munitorum's nose by the Adeptus Mechanicus. Whatever interest they had in returning to Golgotha, Bergen would wager it had little to do with finding Yerrick's cherished tank.

The third and last thing, the thing that worried Bergen most of all, and the thing that he was convinced of above all else, was simply this: unless the Emperor Himself descended from the heavens to offer them His Divine Protection, not a single man in his beloved armoured division was going to make it off this blasted world alive. The cards were stacked against them like never before. Millions of men had died in the Golgothan War all those years ago. Now, like those men, the fate of Bergen's troopers would be written in the blood-red sand.

He'd fight it all the way of course. He swore it. He had been born and raised to fight, and there was nothing he wouldn't do to see his men through this.

I'll go over the old man's head if I have to. Killian and Rennkamp will back me up. Together, we'll go to Morten and...

The thought went unfinished. Tiredness crashed over Bergen like a tidal wave and he fell back onto the bed, asleep before his head hit the pillow.

* * *

Elsewhere on the base, about a kilometre west of Bergen's quarters, the three senior agents of the Adeptus Mechanicus had returned to their apartments and were being attended by a flock of child like slaves. True children would have perished very quickly in such a place — the pungent chemicals that misted the air would have dissolved the tissue of their lungs — but these were not true children. They had once been so, long ago, before extensive surgeries had converted them into ageless amalgams of flesh and metal like the tech-priests they served, though far less sophisticated. Their brains had been cruelly cut, rendering them incapable of independent thought, and their voices had been silenced forever. Their only function was to obey and, as such, they were beyond sin, beyond mischief or evil. Perhaps in recognition of this, their creator had crafted bronze masks for them, faces frozen in beatific smiles, like half-living sculptures of holy cherubim.

They clustered around their masters, disrobing them, removing peripheral devices, pulling data-plugs from flesh-sockets. Then they helped the tech-priests into a deep circular tub filled with a thick, glowing, milky substance that cast its light up to the metal ceiling. When this was done, the cherub-slaves retreated to shadowy alcoves set in the walls. There, they deactivated, and became like dolls at rest in upright coffins.

Apart from the area lit by the glowing pool, the Mechanicus quarters were dark and foul-smelling. To the tech-priests, these things mattered not at all. The darkness hid nothing from augmetic eyes that could see in many spectrums of light. The smells registered only as lists of airborne compounds in varying concentrations, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, simply there.

Wading to the far side of the small pool, Tech-Magos Sennesdiar submerged his misshapen, patchwork body all the way to his neck. Adepts Xephous and Armadron followed suit, and the glowing liquid within the tub bubbled and churned like hot soup.

It was Armadron who broke the silence. His words, when he spoke them, were delivered in the same chalkboard screech he had used at the general's table. <Should the general host such an event

again, I shall formally petition you, magos, that I may be excused. The experience was disagreeable. The ecstasy those men displayed in the consumption of organic compounds was disturbing to me.>

The tech-magos answered with his own condensed, high-pitched burst. <Though it was centuries ago, adept, you once ate as they did. You have transcended such weaknesses, and may glory in that, but do not forget the past, most especially your own. Those men require our guidance, rather than our disdain. They cannot comprehend the glory of the Omnissiah as we do.>

Armadron did not reply, a sign that he was reflecting on his superior's words.

<I, too, magos, wish to abstain from such events in the future,> said Xephous. His mandibles clacked together loudly at the end of his burst, something Sennesdiar considered an unworthy habit. <I calculated a three-point-seven-nine per cent chance that the matter consumed at the table would lead to one or more of the guests suffering a parasitic infestation of the lower intestine. Yet, you would not allow me to alert them. I find your reasoning most difficult to process. Do you wish them to host intestinal parasites?>

<Of course, I do not!> replied Sennesdiar. <The risk of infestation was acceptably low, adept, and the general would not have thanked you for the information. Neither would his guests. There are many things about which normal men prefer to remain ignorant.>

Xephous shifted, sending slow ripples over the surface of the milky goop, and said, <Ignorance as a preference, magos? The concept is offensive.>

<I agree,> said Armadron.

Sennesdiar turned his whirring eye-lenses from one to the other. <Taking personal offence indicates unacceptably high levels of subjectivity, adepts. Do not forget, either of you, that your next upgrade depends on my review of your performance here. The teachings of the Fabricator General emphasise the need to remain objective in all our dealings. You will both endeavour to uphold his principles in a more fitting manner or you will be subject to a forced adjustment procedure. Let us restrict ourselves instead to an assessment of the general's guests.>

<Of course, magos,> said Armadron. <It was apparent that the Ministorum man, Bishop Augustus, went to great lengths to cover the residual scent molecules of earlier physical activities.>

<Tried and failed,> added Xephous. <I estimate that he engaged in intimate physical congress with another individual not more than four hours prior to his arrival at the general's table. His partner was almost certainly —>

<The specifics of his actions were as apparent to me as they were to you, Xephous,> said Sennesdiar, cutting across his subordinate. <But they are irrelevant at this time.>

<But he is an Ecclesiarch, magos,> countered Xephous. <A man of the Imperial Creed is forbidden from engaging in such practices by the laws of his church. Should we not report this breach of conduct?>

<Not at this time, no. Deeds forbidden in law are often tolerated in life. The man, like all those in his preposterous organisation, is clearly prejudiced against us, and would benefit from a lesson in respect. His private pleasures do not currently interest me, but the information has been logged. We move on. Let us talk of the others.>

Xephous said, <The military men are predictably uncomplicated types, magos. I judged them typical of the Cadian officer class. They live to serve the Emperor, expect to die in battle, and greatly covet the respect of their peers. I found nothing remarkable in this. Nothing that threatens our plans at this junctures.>

<Armadron?> said the tech-magos. <Do you concur?>

Armadron bowed his near-featureless head, pulling taut the segmented cables that connected his steel-encased brain to the augmetic ports on his naked metal vertebrae. <I found several notable exceptions to the honourable adept's statement. For example, involuntary subtleties of expression made during conversation suggest that Major General Killian bears a strong dislike for General deViers. He was careful to present a contradictory impression.>

<I did not register that,> protested Xephous.

<I concur with your assessment, Armadron,> said the magos, <and I wish to discern the cause of this dislike. The information may be of use to us if General deViers becomes problematic. Klotus Killian is to be observed.>

<I note your use of the conditional, magos,> said Armadron. <Have you revised your projections for our success? Does the general present less of an obstacle than you posited earlier?>

<I am constantly revising my projections. The general presents a complex problem. The strength of his personal ambition is our greatest hope of reaching Dar Laq and the resting place of Ipharod. It is this very same ambition, however, that poses the greatest danger to our success. I cannot rule out the possibility that he will order us removed from his side once the truth becomes known. Should such an event occur, we will need strong allies and a case for overthrowing him. I have selected Major General Gerard Bergen as the officer most likely to accept a compromise with us. His lifelong association with heavy armour means that he has worked closely with enginseers. He may be more sympathetic to our needs than certain others.>

<I observed him closely,> said Armadron. <This Bergen bears the hallmarks of a man convinced of his own impending doom. Is there no other?>

<I have factored this into my calculations,> replied Sennesdiar. <It changes nothing.>

<Then you intend to proceed as planned, magos?> asked Xephous. <We did not account for the worsening of the electromagnetic phenomena in the decades since we last set foot here. The machine-spirits have become highly uncooperative. The logic engines we brought refuse to function at all. And vox-communications remain->

<I have already turned my mind to these technical problems,> the magos replied, interrupting his adept. <Armadron, you will deploy tomorrow with Major General Bergen. Make your authority known to Tech-Priest Aurien. He is the senior enginseer attached to the 10th Armoured Division. I will assign you a servitor bodyguard and adequate transportation. I am sure the major general will be pleased to have someone of your skill and knowledge on hand.>

Armadron bowed his head and issued a short burst of noise that expressed his understanding and absolute obedience.

Sennesdiar rose from the pool, broadcasting an activation code to the cherub-slaves in their alcoves. They jerked forwards to tend to him as he stepped out. Thick fluids ran down his bloodless body, along the piston housings and cables that jutted from the pallid remnants of the flesh into which he had been born almost four centuries earlier. Silvery drops rolled from his slender metal fingers to the grille floor below as he waited for the little slaves to dress him.

In his robes once more, he stepped to the door of his private chamber, turned and said, <I leave you to your duties, adepts. I have much processing to do. The blessings of the Machine-God upon you both.>

<Ave Omnissiah,> they intoned dutifully.

<May your logic be flawless, magos,> added Armadron.

<And yours, adept,> said Sennesdiar. <Do not disappoint me.> Then he swept from the room, leaving his adepts to soak in the bubbling pool. They left shortly after him, however, for there was much to be done.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Hold them back, you dogs,” bellowed Colonel Stromm. “Don’t let them pass the outer lines!” He fired his hellpistol into the charging mass of orks, but, squinting through the haze and the sweat that stung his eyes, it was difficult to see the level of damage he was causing. With his free hand, he grabbed his adjutant, Lieutenant Kassel, by the collar, yanking him close to shout in his ear. “Where the frak are my Kasrkin, Hans? Why aren’t they shoring up those blasted gaps?”

The air danced with tracer fire as the orks pushed closer, huge pistols and stubbers blazing. The Cadians fired back with deadly intensity, bright las-beams licking out from their sandbagged positions, slicing through the clouds of billowing dust thrown up by the anti-personnel mines that were detonating under the feet of the green-skins’ front ranks. Heavy brown bodies spun into the air to land in bloody, mangled heaps. Other orks trampled over them uncaring, undaunted, yelling and hooting, and roaring bestial battle cries with unrestrained glee.

Competing with all the noise, most particularly with the deafening crack and stutter of nearby las- and bolter-fire, Lieutenant Kassel placed his mouth at his colonel’s ear and replied, “Vonnel’s platoon is taking heavy losses on the right flank, sir. The Kasrkin have moved across to plug the breach.”

Damn it, thought Stromm. Five days. Five days we’ve lasted out here on the open sand, and not a single bloody sign of rescue, no vox-comms, nothing. And there’s no end to the greenskin bastards. Scores of men are dead or dying. Our perimeter is shrinking with every charge made against us. This looks like the last of it for The Fighting 98th.

His mind turned to his family, safe aboard the naval heavy-transport *The Incandescent*, which was anchored in high orbit with the rest of the fleet. He had a son, still just an infant, who had been born during the Palmeros campaign. Stromm had hoped to watch the lad grow, to see him strengthen and develop, and, one day, become an officer like his father. No, not *like* his father, *better* than his father. A son should always strive to achieve more than the man who sired him. He had hoped to see it, to live that long despite the odds. But he’d known the second old deViers had brought Exolon to Golgotha that his life expectancy had been suddenly, dramatically reduced. Here today, before his eyes, the truth of it was playing out.

Curse this world, he thought. To the blasted bloody warp with it! We should have virus-bombed it from space. That would have been poetic justice in that — revenge for all the people Thraka’s asteroids have killed. If it weren’t for Yarrick’s damned tank...

The orks were closing. Six hundred metres. Five-ninety. Five-eighty. The Cadians’ landmines were barely slowing them. Heavy alien bodies were being blasted high on pillars of smoke and sand, but the enemy far outnumbered Stromm’s men. The foe had bodies to spare. Those that escaped the deadly fragmentation and explosive pressure waves created by each blast just kept on coming, not faltering for even a moment.

On Stromm’s first day, the day his drop-ship had smashed nose-first into the red sand, he and his officers had decided that it was best to stay put, sure that Major General Rennkamp would send out reconnaissance units to look for his missing men. But vox-comms weren’t worth a damn out here, and darkness fell quickly in the desert, so Stromm hadn’t wasted any time in ordering makeshift defensives built, though progress was initially slow under lamp and torchlight.

Sand was, of course, in plentiful supply and had been put to good use. The sandbags had hardened like concrete, such was the effect of water on the Golgothan dust, though Stromm was

reluctant to spare even a fraction of their precious reserves for anything other than drinking. Scrap metal pulled from the wrecked ship was plentiful, too. With these resources, his 98th Mechanised Infantry Regiment had constructed outer and inner defensive works, reinforcing the heavy-weapons nests with plates from the ship's crumpled bulkheads.

The resulting fortifications were basic in the extreme, but at least they offered better protection than the open sand. As he fired shot after flesh-searing shot into the charging xenos horde, Stromm was damned glad of those defences.

Torrents of fire blazed out from each of the heavy-weapon nests, chewing apart scores of grotesque alien bodies with broad sweeps of enfilading fire. Some of the regiment's Chimeras and halftracks had survived the crash and were entrenched behind walls of compacted sand and steel, adding their considerable firepower to the desperate battle. The Chimeras' hull-mounted heavy bolters chattered deep and low, ripping the enemy into bloody hunks of meat with their explosive ammunition. Turret-mounted multi-lasers hissed and cracked, scoring the air with blinding brightness. A few of the Chimeras boasted autocannon as their main armament, their long barrels chambered for powerful thirty-millimetre rounds. They made a harsh chugging sound as they spewed shells out in devastating torrents. Over-muscled brown bodies dissolved into scraps and tatters wherever the autocannon found their mark.

The Chimeras and the weapon-nests were not alone in providing heavy support. Thick spears of lascannon fire blazed down from atop the crumpled hull of the drop-ship. The ship's cockpit had folded like a concertina in the crash and the flight crew had been killed outright, but a handful of navy ratings — tech-crew mostly — had survived. They had been insistent about manning the ship's turrets, only a few of which still functioned. Stromm had seen it in their faces: the fear, the panic. When he had agreed to let them man the turrets, their relief had been all too apparent. They were terrified of meeting the orks face-to-face. He cursed their cowardice, but he couldn't hate them for it.

They hadn't been raised on Cadia. They were lesser men by birth.

In his opinion, that said it all.

Despite such thoughts, he was glad to have those turrets manned by anyone. They poured blistering fire down on top of the orks, killing dozens at a time, charring their bodies to shrunken black husks.

Given the weight of combined fire the Cadians were pouring out, it seemed that scores of orks were dropping with every metre of ground they gained, but they were still gaining. Stromm could already see that it wouldn't be enough, not by any stretch. As so often in a straight fight with the orks, it would ultimately come down to numbers, and numbers were something he didn't have.

Each day that Stromm and his men had stayed by the shattered drop-ship, desperately and futilely trying to raise anyone, anyone at all, on their vox-casters, more and more orks had started to show up. They had been drawn to the site by the spectacular trail of fire and black smoke that the falling drop-ship had painted across the sky in a descent that had been visible for a hundred kilometres in every direction.

Stromm regretted entrenching his forces.

I should have moved us out into the desert, he thought, away from the crashsite. I should have got everyone away from here.

Even as he thought this, however, he rejected it. Hindsight was a fine thing, but he had made the best choice he could with the information he'd had. Moving off would have left his infantry companies vulnerable. There weren't enough vehicles left intact after the crash to carry everyone. And there were the wounded to think about, too. He had no idea of their exact coordinates, either. No one did. Where the bloody hell was the rest of Exolon?

His hellpistol clicked, another cell spent. On reflex, he hit the power-pack release, let the magazine fall to the ground, tore a fresh one from a pouch on his belt, slammed it home and

resumed firing. His first shot left a smoking black hole where one monster's ugly face had been. That he could now see the damage his shots were causing was not a good sign.

"Sir," said Kassel urgently, "you need to think about falling back to the inner defences. We're losing key sections of the outer perimeter."

Stromm nodded and, still facing and firing at the enemy, began walking slowly backwards in the direction of the wrecked hull.

"Give the order," he told Kassel. "I want all our lads falling back to secondary positions at once."

He chose his targets carefully, firing always at the biggest and darkest-skinned orks. He knew from long years of experience that they were the toughest and most ruthless. Their hides were harder than sun-baked leather, criss-crossed with battle-scars and signs of crude surgery.

They were veteran killers, relentless, blood-mad savages, and it was they who led the charge.

Throne, but the bastards are ugly, thought Stromm. What kind of universe tolerates such horrors?

It was easy to see why mankind sought the orks' absolute extermination. They were the stuff of nightmares, these greenskins, and they would never stop fighting, never stop killing until there was nothing left to kill. They seemed to wage war for fun, to revel in motiveless slaughter. Or was slaughter motive enough for them? Even now, as they pressed forward, eager to butcher his men, Stromm saw them laughing insanely, as if the whole matter of agony and death in combat was a great game. No, mutual tolerance had never been an option. From the moment the two species had met, the galaxy had set them against each other.

The orks raced closer through the churning dust, and Stromm saw their hideous faces rendered in increasingly sharp detail. He could make out the glint of savage madness in each beady red eye. Each face was a bestial mask. Their noses were small and flat, often pierced with the bones of some luckless animal or with rings or bars of metal. Their mouths were huge and slack, gaping wide and dripping with thick strands of blood-tinged saliva. Those jaws were large enough, in some cases, to close over a grown man's head, and each was crammed full of short, jutting, knife-like teeth dominated by two long, curving tusks that thrust upwards from the lower mandible.

Few things Stromm had ever gazed upon engendered such a feeling of loathing and disgust. The ork race seemed tailor-made to strike fear into the human heart, tapping an ancient vein of primal fear shared by all. It was as if the least worthy traits of his own species had been twisted and magnified a thousand times, and given monstrously powerful bodies with which to wage their bloody and incessant war on Man.

Where had such abominations come from?

Stromm's order to fall back to secondary positions had filtered down to the rank-and-file, and he saw men leap from sandy foxholes and sprint back towards him. Many left it too late. He shouted in frustration as he watched them cut down by sprays of ork stubber-fire. It was a brutal and bloody sight. The large-bore weapons made a real mess of their victims, barking as loud as any bolter, throwing massive metal slugs out in every direction. The orks barely bothered to aim, spraying fire left and right without a thought for accuracy or wasted ammunition. It was only the sheer volume of fire that took such a deadly toll. As the Cadians raced back to the inner defences, many fell screaming, great ragged holes punched into their backs, exit wounds the size of watermelons exploding from their chests and stomachs. Others, more fortunate only in that they suffered less, were struck in the back of the head. Even good, solid Cadian Mark VIII helmets couldn't protect them. Their skulls practically exploded with the impact of the heavy ork slugs, and their headless bodies stumbled and fell, gushing crimson on the sand.

To the last man, thought Stromm, gritting his teeth, firing back until another cell was spent. We'll die here, but we'll fight the bastards to the last bloody man. Damn you deViers! I hope you get your bloody glory.

"Artillery," someone shouted over the vox. "Ork artillery coming in from the north. Get down!"

Stromm heard a nerve-rattling whistle on the air, growing to a shriek.

Close. Closer. Damn it, that's going to hit right on top...

Both he and Kassel threw themselves to the ground. Great plumes of sand and dust spurted into the air between the Cadians and the orks, and the air shook with a deafening boom. Stromm found himself still breathing. No fatalities. It was a ranging shot, but the next would bring death down on the shrinking Cadian force.

“That’s them bringing up the big guns, sir,” shouted Kassel as he scrambled to his feet.

“You don’t say, Hans!” barked Stromm. “Tell those spacer runts in the las-turrets that I want focused fire on that artillery. Those Navy dogs are the only ones with a clear line of sight. Do it, man!”

Kassel plucked the mouthpiece of his back-mounted vox-caster from the clip on his belt, barked out the colonel’s orders in a clear, authoritative voice and waited for confirmation. He needn’t have bothered. The turret-gunners atop the crumpled drop-ship were already traversing their turrets to zero in on several massive ork machines — self-propelled guns that were emerging from a dust cloud about fifteen hundred metres away. The SPGs had short, fat barrels that sacrificed accuracy for a higher explosive payload. Their construction appeared so slapdash they looked as likely to blow themselves apart as to flatten their enemies. By rights, they shouldn’t have worked at all, but, as ever with greenskin machines, their performance defied their appearance. With great coughs of flame and ground-shaking booms, they launched another deadly salvo, this time aimed squarely at the las-turrets that had begun to open fire on them.

Most of the heavy artillery shells went wide of the mark, whining straight past the wreck and exploding in the sand on the far side. Most, but not all. Two struck the hull, packed with so much explosive that, between them, they ripped the super structure apart. The pressure wave that sped out from the twin blasts pulverised the turrets and the men inside them.

Stromm stood gaping for a split second at the terrible destruction, and then shielded his head as a shower of burning debris cascaded towards him. By the Emperor’s grace, neither he nor Kassel were struck, but a young trooper on the right fell without screaming, his head caved in by a turnip-sized chunk of heavy armplas.

“Try to raise them,” Stromm yelled at Kassel, already knowing in his heart that it was futile. Kassel tried. Nothing.

“Again, Hans. We can’t lose them now. If they can’t knock out those SPGs we won’t last another minute!”

“Nothing,” said Kassel. He tried a third time with the same result. “They’re gone, sir.”

“For Throne’s sake! The next bloody salvo will do for us. Can’t we get any of our heavy weapons on them? What about our mortar teams? They’re all we have left that doesn’t need line of sight.”

Kassel immediately tried to raise the mortar teams on the vox, but there was no reply, just hissing static and the sure knowledge that more men had died.

“Sir, we need to get you away from here. Those green-skin gun-crews won’t take long to reload. We should get you into one of the Chimeras. The Kasrkin might be able to open a corridor.”

“If you suggest that to me ever again, Hans, I’ll pistol-whip you. Do you hear me? You should know better by now. I’ve never run from a field of battle in my life.”

“I... Sorry, sir.”

“Sod your apologies, man. Just keep shooting. We’ll make a proper accounting of ourselves before the end. Get the word out. The Fighting 98th makes its last stand for the honour of Cadia!”

“The Fighting 98th forever, sir!” said Kassel, thrusting out his chest. Determination replaced the fear in his eyes. If they were to die, it would be as only Cadian men could die, strong and true, and unrelenting to the very last. The Emperor would welcome their souls to his glorious hall. Their places at his table would be assured.

The outer defences were swarming with xenos, all jostling for a chance to revel in the slaughter of Stromm's men. They pushed and shoved each other for better position, desperate to claim more kills than their fellows. They were so frantic with battle-lust that savage brawls began to break out here and there among their ranks. Stromm saw one of the beasts — spike-helmeted and heavily armoured, its dark skin textured like burned steak — turn to a marginally smaller monstrosity on its right and begin wrestling with it, trying to prise a large axe from its grasp. The smaller ork resisted until the larger rammed the point of a huge, rust-pitted knife right into its belly and unzipped it from sternum to crotch. Thick blood poured out, followed by a tumble of looping intestines that glistened pink as they slid out onto the sand. Then, with the newly won axe in hand, the big one bellowed a battle cry and continued its advance, eager to enter close-quarters combat where it could engage in bloody slaughter.

It took six men firing lasguns at close range to put that bastard down.

By Terra, thought Stromm, they're insane! Death means nothing to them. Whether we have men like Yarrick or not — whether we had a thousand Yarricks, a million even — how can humanity hope to hold back the savage tide?

In Stromm's earpiece, the vox-chatter from his surviving platoon leaders had degenerated into a cacophony of panicked shouts. The gap was closing ever further. Once the fighting went hand-to-hand, it would be over for the Cadians. Nothing could save them then.

"We're losing the inner defences. The bolter-nests are being overrun!"

"What do we do? Fall back to the drop-ship? They're hammering it with artillery!"

"I need heavy weapons support on our right flank, warp damn it! Get me mortars. Get me a heavy bolter. Anything!"

Stromm heard the words as if from a great distance. A strange and unexpected sense of calm had descended on him. All around, the air was churning with noise and heat, whining bullets and crackling las-fire, but, in his mind, everything was supremely clear. The end of his lifelong duty to the Emperor was at hand.

One more time, he allowed his thoughts to return to his family up there on *The Incandescent*, and said a silent prayer to the Emperor:

May my wife remember me proudly, and may our son's achievements exceed my own. To the Emperor's side, I commend the souls of my men, and I ask Saint Josmane to be our guide.

"Hans," he said, "the regimental banner."

"It's here, sir."

"Then unfurl it, soldier, and give it to me."

"At once, sir," said Kassel, and leapt to the task.

Stromm holstered his smoking hellpistol and accepted the heavy banner from his adjutant. Gripping its haft with both hands, he stepped forward, calling to his men as he waved it majestically in the hot, dusty afternoon air.

"Rally to me, Cadians," he shouted over the din of battle. "Rally to me, troopers! No more falling back. Here and now, we make our stand!"

The banner was a striking icon of gold and red. The pillared symbol of the Cadian gate dominated its centre and, on either side of it, the image of a grinning skull held a single stalk of wheat between its teeth. The wheat-stalk symbolised the regiment's glorious victory at Ruzarch Fields during the infamous Battle of Vogen nearly half a century before. Had the regiment survived General deViers' Golgothan expedition, another symbol of honour would have been added: a stylised cloud and lightning bolt.

The men close enough to hear his voice turned to see their colonel standing there, the banner snapping and fluttering as he waved it over his head. He looked like an image from a propaganda poster, and their spirits burned with fresh pride. Stromm could see it as he looked into their eyes. He saw the fires of determination surging there, the will to die fighting.

“Honour and glory!” shouted a sergeant off to the right.

“Honour and glory!” bellowed his squad.

Something changed in the air, building up like a massive electrical charge. Even the wounded seemed suddenly whole again, though their bodies still bled. They turned from the sight of their colonel and his banner, raised lasgun stocks to armoured shoulders, and met the orks with renewed ferocity, determined to dispatch as many of the slavering beasts as possible before they were overcome for good.

Push through your pain, Stromm willed them. Just a bit further, a bit longer so we know the Emperor’s eyes are on us.

Only a few hundred metres, now, until the orks were in among them. Mere moments until the fighting became hand-to-hand. At that range, the greenskins’ massive physiologies would allow them to rip through the Cadians like wet paper. Only the mighty Kasmir storm troopers, of which Stromm had started with a single company and now had less than three full platoons, had any chance in close quarters, and, even then, not much of one.

“Fix bayonets,” ordered Stromm. Kassel repeated the order over the vox. He might as well have said “get ready to die”. Against orks, it was essentially the same thing.

The call was taken up by officers and sergeants all along the line as the gap shrank to forty metres, then thirty. Las-fire blazed out in a last, desperate bid to make a difference before the clash of blade on blade. Plenty of orks went down, struck in the face with lethal, short-range blasts. But, if this bought the Cadians any time at all, it was mere seconds.

The ork artillery was rolling forward, too, unable to fire on the Cadians now that their own infantry had closed the gap. The greenskin gunnery crews, in the manner of all their race, were desperate to get closer to the centre of the murder, to stain their hands with the blood of dying men. For this, they kept their machines rolling in.

Twenty metres from Stromm, a massive ork with a broken tusk hacked one trooper to the ground with its cleaver, shoved roughly past another, and raced directly forwards. It was coming straight for the colonel, attracted by the bright, snapping banner above his head. As it closed, it raised its massive stubber with a single hand and fired a burst that caught the colonel on the right shoulder. His tough armplas body-armour was enough to deflect the shot, but the impact threw him from his feet. He landed on the red sand with a grunt. The force of the bullet’s impact had broken his arm, and the banner fell from his hands.

Lieutenant Kassel moved in a blur, catching the banner as it fell, hoisting it high, desperate not to dishonour the regiment by allowing its sanctified cloth to touch the ground. He stabbed the base of the haft into the sand, braced it with one hand, and crouched by his colonel, yelling his name. “Are you alive, sir? Speak to me, colonel! Please!”

Groaning in agony and clutching his shattered arm, Stromm rolled, and, with Kassel’s eager aid, struggled to his feet. He looked around to see men forming a defensive line around him, fighting back desperately with bayonets, pistols, sharpened entrenching tools — anything they had to hand — against the massive chipped axes and cleavers of the orks.

“For Cadia!” Stromm roared, leaving Kassel with the banner and drawing his hellpistol again, this time with his left hand.

“For Cadia!” his men roared back.

They fought with everything they had, but the air suddenly filled once again with the deafening boom of big guns. Stromm tensed, guessing the ork artillery crews had decided to fire after all, whether they killed their foul kin or not. He girded himself for the explosive blast that would bring an end to his life any second now.

Any second...

But it never came. There was no ear-splitting whistle overhead.

“Armour!” cried one of his platoon leaders over the vox-net. “In Terra’s Holy Name!”

“They’re fielding tanks, too?” asked another.

“No,” snapped the first. “Not the blasted orks, man! *Imperial* tanks! Leman Russ battle tanks inbound from the west!”

Stromm heard a second stutter of booming fire and this time, to his utter astonishment, a mob of orks pressing in on the left flank vanished, consumed by a great fountain of dirt and flame.

“Their artillery!” voxed another platoon leader. “The ork SPGs are burning. All of them. Junked!”

Another sharp stutter sounded from the west, announcing death for more of the foe. The horde was being blasted apart, knots of them disappearing in fountains of dust, raining back to earth as burnt and bloody pieces. Those that weren’t killed outright by the high-explosive shells were horribly maimed by flying shrapnel. They went down screaming and roaring as tank fire continued to scythe into their ranks.

Even those orks engaged in close-quarters combat couldn’t help themselves. The sounds of cannon fire reached them through their battle-lust. For just a second, they turned their heads towards the source, and Stromm’s fighters pressed their momentary advantage, downing scores of them, forging a gap across which they could once more employ their lasrifles and surviving heavy weapons. The Kasrkin platoons took this opportunity to press in from the right, shifting closer to Colonel Stromm, the better to protect him and react faster to his needs.

Through the space that had opened, Stromm could see the cause of his company’s unexpected respite. There, on the western flank, a great dust cloud rose, churning up from the desert floor. At its head, ten Cadian tanks charged forward in an assault wedge. Behind them, barely visible in their dusty wake, came a line of Heracles halftracks filled to the brim with men and supply crates. It looked like an entire armoured company. For a moment, Stromm thought he was dreaming.

“Colonel,” yelled Kassel excitedly, “there’s an urgent message coming through from... say again... roger that... from a Lieutenant van Droi, sir.”

“Van Droi?” said Stromm. He didn’t recognise the name. Most of Exolon’s armour was with 10th Division. He and his men were with the 8th. “Well, don’t keep it to yourself, Hans. What’s the message?”

Kassel beamed.

“To dig in, sir. Van Droi says the Gunheads are here.”

CHAPTER SIX

Gossefried's Gunheads roared forward, guns booming like thunder, far more than simple promethium fuelling their charge. Disgust, hatred, the desire for revenge, all of these things and more filled the hearts of the men inside the massive, rumbling war machines as they surged on, desperate to cut the foe down before it was too late for their fellow Guardsmen.

For Gossefried van Droi, the survival of the embattled Cadian infantrymen was paramount. Here at last, after days travelling through the desert without any sign whatsoever that others had survived planetfall, he had found welcome confirmation that his Gunheads were not alone. Someone else *had* survived and, right now, that meant everything in the world to him. But they wouldn't survive much longer if they didn't get the aid they so desperately needed.

It would be a close thing. He could see that from his cupola. Colonel Stromm's footsloggers were on their last legs. That much was all too clear, despite the dust and black smoke that shrouded the chaos of the battlefield.

"Spread out," van Droi ordered his tank commanders over the vox. "Keep your main guns blazing. I want secondary weapons on those hostiles as soon as you make range. Don't spare the treads! Our brother Cadians are dying out there!"

A stutter of cannon fire from the tanks on either side was answer enough for him. Up ahead, still more than a kilometre away, but closer with every passing second, pillars of sand and gore burst into the air. Firing on the move meant a big trade-off in accuracy for the gunners, but, given the sheer number of gargantuan brown-bodies in front of them, they could afford to be sloppy. What they *couldn't* afford to be was slow.

No fear of that. Their engines roared, spewing thick black fumes out behind them, powering the sixty-tonne war machines forward over the sand with surprising speed. Between the noise of his engine and the booming of his powerful main gun, van Droi could hear nothing at all of the fighting around the crashed drop-ship. He didn't need to hear it to know how badly it was going. As his tanks crossed the one kilometre line, he gripped the pintle-mounted heavy bolter in front of him and made ready to open fire. Much of the mad alien horde had turned its aggression towards the tanks, knowing they posed a far greater, more immediate threat than the infantry, and a better fight. His eyes picked out the biggest orks, long-tusk, black-skinned abominations wearing huge suits of armour and carrying ludicrously oversized blades. He saw them throw back their heads to bellow battle cries as they readied the rest of the horde to charge.

Bring it on, you godless freaks, thought van Droi. You don't stand a frakker's chance in hell against my 10th Company.

"Break them wide open, Gunheads," he called over the company command channel. "Sword, Hammer, move into line formation. Rhaimes, take your squadron out on the left flank. Angle in on their rear. Wulfe, Richter, move your squadrons straight up. Keep the pressure on. Not one of those alien bastards survives. No runners."

"Spear Leader to company command," replied Sergeant Rhaimes. "Read you loud and clear, sir. We'll make them wish they'd never crawled out of the dirt."

"Sword Leader to command," voxed Sergeant Wulfe. "Moving into formation."

Sergeant Richter was the last to vox in. "Hammer Squadron confirming, sir. Moving up now."

Van Droi looked to either side and saw his tanks fan out to form a broad fighting line abreast of his machine. *Old Smashbones*, *The Rage Imperius* and *The Adamantine* pressed left, bearing north-

east so that they could swing in on the greenskin flanks and funnel them into the killing zone. As van Droi watched, flame and smoke licked out from their barrels and the air shook with the sound of exploding propellant.

On the right, the tanks of Spear and Hammer squadrons were also keeping the pressure on. Not all of them were fitted with standard battle cannon, of course. Van Droi's company was a mixed force, glad to make do with whatever machines it could get its hands on. As he always impressed on the new meat, what the Gunheads lacked in uniformity, they made up in versatility. Who gave a flying damn if some of the other company commanders sneered? Czurloch and Brismund were the worst for it, those stuck-up pricks. Let them have their nice, ordered companies of identical machines. Specialise too much in one thing, van Droi knew, and you'd be properly stuffed when some bastard suddenly changed the rules.

That didn't happen to his Gunheads.

His machine, *Foe-Breaker*, was a rare and highly prized Leman Russ Vanquisher from the forges of Ryza. She was hundreds of years old — the saints alone knew how many kills she'd made since her inception — but she still excelled at taking out enemy machines with her 120mm smooth-bore cannon and its highly specialised, armour-piercing sabot rounds. No other Leman Russ could fire as far and as accurately, and van Droi conscientiously prayed to her machine-spirit every single day, making obeisance in the form of litanies approved by the regimental engineerers.

All this love and attention was repaid tenfold in her performance. She had added another armour-kill to her tally today when van Droi's gunner, "Bullseye" Dietz, had lit up one of the ugly ork artillery pieces like a bonfire. It was still gushing red flame and thick black smoke into the sky. Dietz hadn't let up, either. Van Droi's loader — a grumpy little short-arse by the name of Waller — was still slamming high-explosive shells into the main gun's breech with all the speed he could manage, and Dietz wasn't wasting them. Every time the gun belched, scores of orks disintegrated, turned into a downpour of red rain that muddied the desert sand.

Seconds now, thought van Droi, his finger beginning to squeeze gently on the heavy bolter's trigger. Just a few more seconds.

He revelled in the rush of hot desert air as it whipped at his collar. Adrenaline surged through him, familiar and welcome. Two and a half decades of this, with combat experience spanning a dozen contested worlds, and still it thrilled him like nothing else ever could. He would never tire of it, never.

In lethal range, he pulled the heavy bolter's trigger back and loosed a flood of explosive shells. The noise was deafening, even with his ear-protectors firmly in place. The recoil was wicked, too, despite much of it being absorbed by the pintle-mount. The gun kicked hard in his hands, pouring spent cartridges from its ejector like brass rain.

He strafed the orks in front of him as their return fire danced and sparked on the thick front armour of his tank. Dozens were struck, bolts punching deep into meaty bodies before detonating a fraction of a second later with sickening, yet satisfying effect.

All along the line, his tank commanders were doing the same, manning the heavy stubbers and bolters that graced the lip of each cupola. Those few tanks with sponson-mounted weapons chattered and blazed even louder than the others. Hull-mounted weapons, too, spat deadly torrents into the enemy force, leaving the orks nowhere to run to escape the slaughter.

Van Droi didn't shout or growl or laugh madly like some men did while they fired on the foe. That was for youngsters and fools, in his opinion. Instead, he let go of everything, losing his sense of self, becoming part of a kind of gestalt entity that encompassed the tank and her entire crew. The fighting always seemed to go so smoothly when this happened, as if each man instinctively knew what needed to be done without having to ask. The mark of a good crew, he thought. No. An *exceptional* one.

A sudden crackle of static on his intercom yanked van Droi from his almost trance-like state. The gruff voice of his loader sounded in his ear. “Vox-panel’s flashing down here, sir. Looks like you’ve got a call coming in from one of the footsloggers.”

Van Droi picked off a few more of the orks nearest *Foe-Breaker* and dropped down into the turret. As he checked the board, he told Dietz, “Hostiles closing on our two. Get the co-ax on them.” Then, he switched from intercom to vox, and said, “This is Lieutenant Gossefried van Droi, 81st Armoured Regiment, 10th Company. Go ahead.”

The voice that came back had the sharp ring of the Cadian upper ranks, but it sounded tired and more than a little desperate, too. “This is Colonel Stromm of the 98th Mechanised Infantry Regiment. Can you hear me, van Droi?”

“I can, sir.”

“Emperor bless your armoured arse, man! You and your men got here just in the nick of time. Bought us a bit of space to fight back, but not much. I’ve lost a lot of troopers, and it’s far from—”

He cut off mid-sentence to issue orders to his men. Van Droi could hear the sounds of intense fighting from the other end. It sounded all too close to the colonel’s position.

“Van Droi, are you still there?” asked the gasping colonel a moment later.

“Yes, sir. What’s your status? I have a squadron flanking the orks from the rear and two engaging from your left, but you’ll need to hold out a bit longer. I can’t risk firing any closer to your position. It looked like one of our earlier salvos was close enough to shave you.”

“I needed a shave anyway,” said Stromm. “But listen, it’s touch-and-go here. The loss of their artillery turned their heads, as did your arrival, and we made them pay. They’re fighting on two fronts, and that has split their forces, but there are still plenty of them hell-bent on bloodying us up in a bit of hand-to-hand. I don’t need to tell you how long we’re likely to last at that range. They grow the bastards tough on Golgotha, and our backs are to the wall, literally. Short of moving inside what’s left of the drop-ship hull, there’s nowhere else for us to go, and I’ve no intention of getting trapped in there. It’s suicide. If there’s any chance you can create a corridor for us, I have a few platoons of Karskin that might be able to hold it open long enough to facilitate our escape.”

Van Droi nodded as he listened. “You’ll have your corridor, sir. I’ll send one of my squadrons up flush with the drop-ship. They’ll cut a path in towards you. Keep your men back until the last moment. There’ll be plenty of lead in the air, you understand.”

“The more the better,” replied Stromm. Grunting and shouting almost drowned out his words. Chilling ork battle cries could be heard clearly in the background and, despite the security of his tank, van Droi felt his blood run cold. He knew he had to order Wulfe’s tanks forward at once. Sword Squadron fielded the company’s only Leman Russ Exterminator, *New Champion of Cerbera*. She would be best suited for the job.

“As soon as you can, van Droi,” Stromm added. “The Emperor protects. Stromm, out.”

Van Droi immediately switched back over to the company command channel and said, “Command to Sword Leader. Respond, Wulfe.”

“Sword Leader to Command,” Sergeant Wulfe voxed back. “Go ahead, sir.”

Van Droi could hear the drumming of a heavy stubber between the sergeant’s words.

“Listen up, Wulfe,” he said. “I have friendlies in urgent need of an escape corridor. I want the *New Champion* on it. Understood? Move your squad up and cut a path flush with the ship’s hull. Let the wreck cover the footsloggers’ backs. Carve them a path to safety. Colonel Stromm has the vox, F-channel, band six.”

There was only the briefest pause before Wulfe responded — “Wulfe to Company Command. Sword Squadron is on the move.” — but van Droi could read into it easily enough.

Wulfe was probably cursing. *New Champion of Cerbera* was Corporal Lenck’s machine.

“Let’s take it to them,” Wulfe told his crew over the intercom. “Metzger, get her in close, three hundred metres, a hull-down position if you can find one. Expect plenty of fire.” *Last Rites II* gunned forward, churning up the desert under her treads, throwing waves of sand up behind her.

Wulfe dropped down into the turret to switch vox channels. Once he had opened the link to his squadron, he said, “Sword Leader to One and Two. Orders from van Droi. We’re going in. *New Champion*, move up on my right and open a corridor for the infantry. Cut a path in line with the wreckage so their backs are covered. And try not to hit the friendlies, Lenck. *Last Rites II* and *Frontline Crusader* will give supporting fire centre and left. *Frontline Crusader*, stop parallel with me, fifty metre spacing. Hammer Squadron will be supporting us from the rear. Confirm.”

Corporal Siemens came back first. “*Frontline Crusader* confirms, sergeant. Moving up to cover your left. The Emperor protects.”

“The Emperor protects,” Wulfe replied automatically.

“*New Champion* confirms,” reported Lenck a moment later. “Watch and learn, sergeant.”

“Stow the backchat, corporal,” Wulfe spat back. “Just do your job.” He had seen enough of Lenck during training exercises in the massive holds of the *Hand of Radiance* to know that he was good — far better, in fact, than could be expected given his level of combat experience — but Wulfe wasn’t about to let Lenck know that. The man was already infuriatingly cocky.

With *Last Rites II* just edging in front, the three tanks of Sword Squadron closed with the charging orks. Wulfe scrambled back up into his cupola and grasped the twin grips of his heavy stubber. Looking out at the wall of roaring brown bodies that surged towards him, he realised that he barely needed to aim. Anywhere he fired, he was sure hit something. Hardly pausing to line up along the weapon’s iron sights, he pressed his thumbs down hard on the gun’s butterfly trigger. There was a deafening rattle as the stubber unloaded on the alien horde, cutting dozens of them to pieces. It was a strange, darkly comical sight, one that Wulfe had witnessed before. The bulky alien savages appeared to dance a deathly jig as they were literally chewed apart by the hail of lead.

Corporal Metzger stopped *Last Rites II* just behind a shallow dune, not much protection, but better than none. It would keep the tank’s vulnerable underside covered while the hull armour took the brunt of the enemy fire. Then Metzger manned the hull-mounted heavy bolter, adding his fire to Wulfe’s, devastating the press of enemies that were desperately trying to close the gap so they could swarm the tank’s hatches.

At this range, Wulfe could see their grotesque faces all too clearly, reminding him of so many other greenskins he had faced over the years. Some men said they all looked the same, but Wulfe knew better. One face in particular was burned into his brain: the wart-covered, lopsided face of the ork that had given him the scar on his throat. The old scar was itching like crazy, as it always did when he was under pressure. Though the Golgothan orks were similar enough to their distant kin to dredge up unwelcome memories, they were different, too. They were brown for a start, discoloured, he imagined, by the red dust to which they had been exposed for so many years. They were also leaner and harder than any he had seen before, their muscles rippling like steel cables. Golgotha had made its mark on them. It had shaped them. Toughened them.

Wulfe stole a glance to left and right, and saw that *Frontline Crusader* and *New Champion of Cerbera* had halted in formation, adding their lethal firepower to the slaughter. The toll on the orks was mind-boggling, and a number of the smallest turned and tried to break from the fight. These few began struggling against the tide pressing at their backs, eager to escape the sweeping arcs of fire that were killing so many of their foul kin. It was hopeless, of course. Wulfe swept his barrel from left to right, cutting them down without mercy.

Suffer not the alien to live.

Down in the turret, Corporal Holtz didn’t need Wulfe to tell him what to do. He had plenty of experience to guide him. *Last Rites II*, like so many other Leman Russ tanks, boasted a co-axial autocannon that could chew infantry and light armour apart with ease, allowing the gunner to spare the precious, limited ammunition of the main gun. Holtz employed the co-ax now, traversing the

turret slowly in a ninety-degree arc, firing relentlessly, covering the sand in lifeless alien debris. On the other side of the turret basket, Siegler was pulling a fresh ammunition belt from a stowage box. With its incredible rate of fire, Wulfe's heavy stubber would need reloading in a matter of seconds.

"Don't waste any time, Lenck," Wulfe voxed to the *New Champion*. "Cut that corridor. Those men can't last much longer."

"I'm *on* it, sergeant," Lenck snapped back.

Sure enough, Wulfe saw the Exterminator's turret-mounted heavy bolters blaze into life, stitching a bloody path straight through the foe. They made one hell of a mess, a kill for almost every hit scored.

Wulfe felt someone tap his shin twice. He tore his eyes from the bloodbath, dropped his hand down into the turret, and accepted the ammunition belt that Siegler was feeding up to him. Ork slugs rattled and spanged from the turret armour all around him, sending showers of sparks into the air. Wulfe ducked down, staying as low as possible without abandoning his cupola altogether.

"Sort those bastards out, Holtz!" he yelled over the intercom. "I'm taking an awful lot of fire up here!"

"If I could just use the main gun, sarge," Holtz argued.

"Well you can't!" barked Wulfe. "No high explosives. We're too near the bloody footsloggers."

Wordlessly, Holtz traversed the turret again, using the autocannon to pour out another lethal hail that bought Wulfe the time he needed to reload. With quick, practised hands, Wulfe re-threaded the belt into the heavy stubber, yanked hard on the cocking lever, and was about to resume firing when something huge and dark leapt high into the air on a trail of blue fire, curved straight towards him, and landed with a heavy clang on top of his turret. Just a metre closer and Wulfe would have been fatally crushed under the heavy body of a monstrous, mad-eyed brute with a smoking red rocket strapped to its back. It was some kind of insane greenskin assault trooper!

Wulfe and the ork looked at each other for the briefest instant, blue eye locked to red, and Wulfe knew that it was over. The ork's rusty cleaver was already in the air, poised at the start of a sweeping downward stroke that would hack him apart. His heavy stubber couldn't help him. The ork had one massive foot on either side of the barrel.

Oh, frak, thought Wulfe.

A tidal surge of adrenaline slowed time to a crawl and blocked out everything but the enormous figure of the monster that was about to end his life. Wulfe didn't hear the burst of fire from his right. He didn't hear his name being called over the vox. But he saw the ork's weapon hand disintegrate in a bloody mist, followed almost immediately by its massive, razor-toothed head. It burst like a rotten fruit, and he felt the monster's foul blood spray over his face and fatigues like hot rain.

The creature's heavy blade clattered against the turret armour as it fell. Then the headless body followed it, falling backwards, slipping over the tank's track guards to the red sand below.

Wulfe didn't move for another second, confused that he was somehow still alive. He didn't register the ork shells that were whining past his head.

There was something powerfully salty on his lips, and the foul taste of it snapped him back to his senses. It was ork blood. He wiped it off with his sleeve and turned. Looking to the right, he saw Corporal Lenck standing in the cupola of the *New Champion*, his heavy stubber still pointed in Wulfe's direction.

For just the briefest moment, Wulfe felt absolutely sure that Lenck was about to shoot him. There was a look of utter triumph in the arrogant corporal's eyes. He could end Wulfe's life with the merest pressure of thumb on trigger.

But the lethal impacts never came. After a tense second, Lenck laughed, turned his stubber back on the orks and continued firing. He looked sickeningly pleased with himself.

By the frakking Eye, Wulfe cursed. Now I'm in his debt. Damn it all! Why did it have to be Lenck?

His eyes followed the line of Lenck's tracers and he saw that the *New Champion* had cut a deep, broad path in the ork ranks, deep enough and wide enough to make all the difference to Stromm and his men. The orks were pushing away from the crashed drop-ship, eager to avoid being slaughtered under the torrent of explosive munitions and autocannon fire. They left hundreds of their dead behind them in great heaps of reeking meat. Wulfe looked beyond the piled bodies and saw Stromm's infantrymen fighting valiantly with their backs to the crashed ship's hull. Not smart, he thought, to get yourself grounded like that without an exit strategy. It was only by sheer luck, or perhaps the machinations of the Divine Emperor, that the Gunheads had found Stromm's lot in time. If Lieutenant van Droi had picked up the colonel's faint vox-transmissions any later, the Gunheads would have found only dead men and scavengers.

Wulfe had said it before, and he said it to himself again now; he wouldn't have been a footslogger for all the gold on Agripinæa. What kind of madness made men march to battle without at least a hundred millimetres of solid armour between them and the foe? Little wonder that the life of an infantryman was so short. One way or another, most died within their first six months of combat duty. The average for tankers was almost double. He knew some men resented that, but it was tanks and their crews that drew most fire on the battlefield.

Through the veils of churning smoke and dust, Wulfe spotted a man that could only have been Colonel Stromm. His poise, his movements, everything about him radiated strength and leadership. He and the men immediately around him were fighting desperately against those orks that were still pressing in from the far side, protected from the tank fire by the very men they were so eager to kill. At a glance, Wulfe judged that there wasn't much more than a company's worth of men left standing: two hundred, maybe three. The number was dropping even as he watched. The orks kept up a constant pressure, clambering over banks of their dead to fire clumsily-made pistols and stubbers, or to charge forward with blades raised high. The sand under the carpet of dead men and orks had turned into a blood-sodden quagmire.

Wulfe dropped down into the turret and nudged the vox-selector switch to F channel, band six.

"Colonel Stromm," he voxed, "you have your corridor, but it won't hold for long."

Stromm didn't waste time offering thanks. Instead, he answered, "Understood, armour. We'll make our push. Give us all the cover you can. Stromm, out."

Wulfe contacted Lenck and Siemens briefly and passed this on. For an instant, he considered thanking Lenck, but he couldn't forget the look in the man's eyes. He decided that they would talk about it later, providing they both lived through this. He scrambled back up into his cupola, intent on doing whatever he could to help Stromm's men. He saw two squads of Kasrkin storm troopers moving out from the colonel's side, swiftly taking up positions that would allow them to hold the passage open for as long as possible. They moved as one, firing clean, disciplined hellgun bursts for maximum effect, and Wulfe found he was profoundly impressed. The Kasrkin were a special breed. He wondered what it took to remain so cool-headed, surrounded by all that death and horror, by alien savages that outweighed you three or four times. He marvelled at their calm efficiency.

Like tankers, the Kasrkin drew a certain level of resentment from standard infantrymen. They received special training and superior kit, and commanders tended not to waste them in wars of attrition when there were other options available. Right now, however, that training and equipment was being employed to save lives.

Wulfe wondered how any soldier could resent *that*.

With the corridor momentarily secured, the remnants of the embattled infantry began pouring out, desperately making for the cover of Sword Squadron's tanks. As they ran, some stopped and turned, dropping to one knee to fire back at the pursuing orks. When the men behind had overtaken them, they rose again and ran while someone else covered the rear. It was as well-executed a staggered retreat as Wulfe had seen.

While Sword Squadron's secondary weapons continued to blaze and stutter, helping to hold the orks at bay, Wulfe saw Colonel Stromm run down the centre of the corridor, a wiry-looking comms-

officer at his side. The comms-officer was carrying a regimental banner of bright crimson and gold that rippled and waved above his head as he ran. It might have been glorious but for all the bullet holes in it. Wulfe noticed, too, that Stromm's right arm had been strapped to his body. It was probably broken, and yet he moved towards the tanks with as much speed as any of the others, slowing only to turn and fire blazing hellpistol shots back at his howling pursuers.

With men pouring out, racing to the relative safety behind the tanks, it wasn't long before only the Kasrkin storm troopers were left, holding the line until the last man was clear. The orks vented their full fury and rage on them, and some inevitably went down, though they fought to the bitter end through wounds that would have killed lesser men outright.

Sword Squadron gave them all the fire support they could manage. Most of the Kasrkin made it out, but not by much. As they raced towards the cover of the tanks, Wulfe ordered his squadron to keep the fire up but prepare to fall back. Then he contacted Colonel Stromm.

"You have wounded men in your group, sir. Get them up onto the tanks. Use the track-guards and the rear decking, but stay clear of the engine louvres and the radiator. We can carry them out of here and still cover the retreat. Those on foot will have to run. What do you say?"

Stromm began barking out orders immediately, and the track-guards of the three tanks were soon crowded with men in blood-soaked Guard-issue fatigues. Wulfe would have helped them up, but his continued fire was needed to keep the orks at bay.

"Sword One, Sword Two," he voxed to Siemens and Lenck, "fall back to Hammer's position. Keep your fire up as we move, but no main guns until van Droi gives the word. We don't want to scatter them."

A short series of acknowledgements followed and, slowly, steadily, Sword Squadron began to roll backwards. It was then that *Frontline Crusader*'s engine sputtered and died. Wulfe could hear Corporal Siemens swearing over the vox. The panic in his voice was all too clear. "Oh, Throne! We've stalled. Come in, Sword Leader. *Frontline Crusader* is in big trouble!"

From his cupola, Wulfe saw Siemens slamming his fists on the top of his turret. The wounded men perched on the *Frontline Crusader*'s track guards were looking agitated. The orks coming forward immediately angled straight towards the crippled tank.

Some of the wounded leapt off and started limping through the sand, clearly unwilling to gamble on the engine restarting. Others stayed put, bravely pouring las-fire down at the oncoming enemy. That didn't last long. Wulfe saw them struck by wild sprays of enemy fire. The wounded Cadians fell from the sides of the tank, as lifeless as rag dolls.

Wulfe barked orders over to Lenck, and both the *New Champion* and *Last Rites II* turned their weapons left, desperate to buy Corporal Siemens some time.

Wulfe knew Siemens needed more than time. He needed a bloody miracle.

None was forthcoming.

While the stubbers and bolters were busy raking the charging greenskins, three orks with rockets strapped to their backs suddenly careened upwards on trails of blue fire, landing just metres away from the *Frontline Crusader*'s armoured flanks.

Wulfe barely had time to register the thick, cylindrical weapons the orks were carrying, before they were put to murderous use. The moment they landed, each of the orks raised its tube to its shoulder, took aim at the sides of the crippled tank, and fired.

Three explosions sounded in rapid succession, and a cloud of dust and fire erupted into the air, cloaking the *Frontline Crusader* from view.

"Siemens!" shouted Wulfe over the vox. There was no answer. He immediately turned his stubber on the orks responsible, turning two of them into hunks of dead meat where they stood. Aiming at the third, his shells struck the red rocket on its back, and it detonated, scattering tiny burnt pieces of the ork in every direction.

As the cloak of dust and sand around the *Frontline Crusader* showered back down to the ground, Wulfe saw Siemens' body. It was still in the cupola, slumped forward. His flesh was black.

His clothes, hair and skin were still burning. One charred and lifeless arm was draped over the barrel of his heavy stubber.

There were holes in the tank's armour, too. Wulfe could see twin gaping wounds where the plating looked like it had melted straight through. Red flames were boiling up out of them, and out of the hatches the crew had tried frantically to open in their last moments.

Four men, men Wulfe had known, dead. Rage lit inside him like dry tinder. He turned his stubber back on the advancing horde with a vengeance.

"Throne curse you and your entire stinking race," he yelled at them.

"What are you doing, Wulfe?" a gruff voice demanded over the vox-link. It was Lieutenant van Droi speaking on the company command channel.

"It's the *Frontline Crusader*, sir," replied Wulfe, breaking only momentarily from his revenge. "She's been brewed up."

"I can see that, damn it," growled van Droi. "Keep falling back. Spear Squadron is in position. It's time we put a lid on this."

Wulfe gritted his teeth. Siemens had been all right, not a friend exactly, but a fellow tanker, a Cadian brother. He was one of the few left who had been with the company since before Palmeros. He didn't deserve to be cooked in his crate like that. Wulfe didn't want to think about what it had been like for the crew inside, struggling to free themselves while the flames devoured them. It seemed like every time Wulfe faced the orks, he came away mourning lost men.

He ordered Metzger to keep them rolling backwards, and Holtz to keep the autocannon firing. Moments later, they were back in line with van Droi's *Foe-Breaker* and the tanks of Sergeant Richter's Hammer Squadron. The *New Champion* had beaten them to it. Lenck hadn't wasted time venting anger on the orks. Maybe Siemens' death didn't really bother the cold-hearted son-of-a-bitch.

With the tanks pulling up into a horizontal firing line, Colonel Stromm ordered his able-bodied men to help their wounded brothers down from the track-guards and lead them back to cover behind the vehicles. There was little left for them to do, and it was better for them to stay well back from the main guns if they didn't want their eardrums ruptured.

Rhaimes and the rest of Spear Squadron were visible on the left, pressing the orks into a crossfire. *Last Rites II* and the *New Champion* were ordered to edge right, the better to cover any attempt by the orks to break and run in that direction. The greenskins seemed emboldened by their tank-kill and eagerly charged straight on, a mad howling mass of flesh and metal. Soon, they were exactly where van Droi wanted them. He gave the order.

"Fire main guns!"

What followed was no battle. It was the grisliest sort of massacre.

Against the full, unrestrained fury of the Gunheads, the mindless greenskins never stood a chance.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gossefried van Droi stood looking up at the ruin of the naval drop-ship, chewing on the end of a damp cigar while, all around him, Colonel Stromm's infantry went about the business of identifying their dead, stripping the bodies of anything that could still be put to use. Grim work, yes, but van Droi knew that it was essential. Out here in the desert, the supplies they had brought with them were all the supplies they would be getting. Speaking over the vox, Stromm had already confirmed van Droi's worst fears: no, there had not been word from anyone else. Exolon's status remained a bloody mystery.

Dark days, these, thought van Droi, and darker ones ahead. Saints guide you, Siemens. You were a good man. I hope you find peace with the Emperor.

The drop-ship that had carried six companies of The Fighting 98th to Golgotha was in a sorry state, even worse than the one that had carried van Droi's Gunheads. It looked like a carcass, the decaying body of a giant beast, huge and grey, landing legs twisted and bent, the bones of its titanium superstructure shining through where the hull had been ripped or blasted away. It was a wonder that any of Stromm's men had survived the crash. It was another wonder they'd lasted out the ork assaults as long as they had. Van Droi wondered how many men and machines he would have lost if he had ordered his Gunheads to dig in back at their own crash site? Might an Exolon reconnaissance patrol have found them? Or would the orks have got there first?

He chided himself. There was nothing to be gained by such speculation. He had made the decision to move out, and he stood by it. Throne above, if he hadn't, the infantrymen scurrying busily back and forth all around him would be corpses, probably headless ones, given the greenskins' propensity for taking grisly trophies.

Siemens' death weighed heavy on him. Ten tanks had become nine. A full crew had been lost. Morale had taken a beating, too, though his tankers were understandably glad to have found others who had made planetfall more or less intact.

Van Droi was still looking up at the ruined ship when he heard boot heels grinding the sand just behind him. He turned and found himself looking into the scarred and weathered face of a man he judged to be about twenty years older than himself. He was wrong. There was barely ten years between them. Even covered in blood and dust, though, Colonel Stromm somehow managed to look dignified.

"Colonel," said van Droi.

The colonel was a little shorter than van Droi. He filled his uniform well — muscular — fit to fight, and van Droi found himself nursing a hunch that Stromm had once been Kasrkin. That seemed to fit, but he wasn't about to ask. None of his business. Instead, he gave a sharp salute and received one back.

Formalities over, the colonel's face immediately broke into a wide grin.

"You know, van Droi, I'd shake your hand if my right arm wasn't in pieces," he said, glancing down at the limb in question. It was cradled in a white sling stained with dust. "Bloody orks. Damned good to see you and your boys come out of the desert like that. Like Saint Ignatius riding into Persipe. I thought I was dreaming."

Van Droi grinned back. "You won't find any saints among my lot, sir, but I'll bet we were as glad to find you as you were to be found. Five days without a trace of anyone, and we only came across you by sheer luck."

“Luck or the Emperor’s hand,” said Stromm. Gesturing up at the wrecked ship, he continued, “A proper mess, this. The cogboys should have warned us it would be so rough coming down. I know they mentioned the storms, but they didn’t say anything about them knocking our ships out of the sky. And why the hell weren’t we told about vox-range limitations? I’d love some bloody answers.”

“I wish I had some for you, sir. Hundreds of drop-ships launched. Where the others ended up is anyone’s guess, but some of them must have touched down safely at Hadron. If we could just see the damned stars clearly for one night, we might be able to navigate our way there.”

Stromm nodded gravely, and then gestured for van Droi to walk with him. Together, they moved off towards a large tent that was doubling as a temporary command centre. Stromm’s adjutant, Lieutenant Kassel, was inside. When the colonel and van Droi entered, he turned and saluted.

“Good to meet you, lieutenant,” said van Droi after a brief introduction. The two men, equal in rank, shook hands while Stromm walked over to a munitions crate and sat down.

“Damned heroes, those tankers. Eh, Kassel?”

“Heroes, sir,” answered Kassel with a smile. He produced two glasses of water and set them down on a large crate that was doubling as a table.

“That’s the next big problem,” said Stromm, looking down at the glasses before glancing up at van Droi. “How are you fixed for water, lieutenant?”

Van Droi frowned. “Not good, colonel. Not good at all. Fuel is another thing we’ll have to worry about soon. Food, not so much. I’ve had my lads on half rations since the crash. But we’ll be dead men before long if we don’t get water and fuel.”

Stromm nodded. “You’ve done a hell of a job keeping your boys alive and on the move. Throne knows, if it weren’t for you, my men would be dead. I’d be dead. So, I don’t want you to think of me as pulling rank—”

“But you want to fold us into your unit,” said van Droi, finishing the thought. He had anticipated this. It made sense.

“Just for the time being, and for the sake of having a clear command structure more than anything else.”

“No complaints here. Tanks and infantry work a lot better together than they do apart.”

“My thoughts exactly. I’m not a tyrant, van Droi. I’ll consult you at every turn. You’ll be kept in the loop.”

“You have a plan, sir?”

“It’s not much of one, but it’s clear that staying here is out of the question. If Army Group Command hasn’t found us by now, odds are they aren’t going to. It’s high time we moved on. The day we came down, I sent a number of scouting parties out. Most never returned, but one of the recon squads that did make it back reported seeing rocky uplands about two hundred clicks eastwards. The orks started hitting us before we could follow up on it, but I’m sure we’ll have a better chance of establishing vox-contact with someone if we can get to higher ground. Thoughts?”

“It could be the feet of the Ishawar Mountains, sir, which would suggest that we came down much further to the south-east than I originally estimated. If it *is* the Ishawar range, following the foothills north-east should take us within a few days’ travel of Balkar. Sooner or later, if Operation Thunderstorm is still rolling, the rest of Exolon will deploy near there. *The Fortress of Arrogance* was lost in the north-east Hadar region. So yes, sir. I’d say that’s about the best plan we’ve got.”

“Knew you’d see it my way,” said Stromm. “Let’s talk about numbers. What exactly are you fielding?”

“Nine tanks, all Leman Russ variants, all crewed, plus four Heracles halftracks and eight trucks. Five of those are packed with ammunition and supplies. Most of our personnel are crammed into the halftracks.”

“How many personnel?” asked Stromm.

"One hundred and twenty-nine, sir. Forty of those are tank crew. The rest are reserve crews and battlefield support. Half a dozen are wounded men, two of which are critical."

Stromm turned to Kassel and said, "There go our worries about transportation then, Hans." Kassel nodded.

"Sir?" said van Droi.

Stromm sat forward and lifted one of the glasses from the top of the crate in front of him. "We have a few Chimeras, mostly machines from the Kaskin Armoured Fist squads, and a couple of halftracks and trucks. Seventy per cent of our vehicles were wrecked in the crash." Stromm looked down at the water in his glass. "It was one of the factors in my decision to stay put, that and our wounded."

"Even if we had the transports," said Kassel, "it's not much good moving our people out of here if we don't have enough trucks to carry the supplies we're going to need."

"My support crews are pretty talented, colonel," said van Droi. "The vehicles you say are wrecked, are they still in the drop-ship?"

Stromm grinned. "Think your men can fix some of them up, van Droi?"

"Not like the cogboys could, sir, but I'd say it's worth a try, wouldn't you?"

"Get them on it right away, then. Kassel, make sure they get everything they need."

"Of course, sir."

Stromm stood and walked to the entrance of the tent. "We've got lots to do, gentlemen. Let's be about it."

Having been dismissed, van Droi and Kassel followed the colonel out into the open air. Van Droi judged that there were just a few hours of daylight left. His crews would have to work under lamps. It would be a long night for them, but there would be time enough for rest once they were under way again.

"If you'll follow me, lieutenant," said Kassel, "I'll show you what there is to work with."

"Lead the way," said van Droi, and together, he and Kassel moved off, walking around to the far side of the crashed ship to enter via the massive rent in its main hold.

With the two lieutenants gone, an exhausted Stromm let his facade slip, just for a moment. His shoulders sagged and he blew out a deep, exhausted breath. His arm still hurt like hell despite injections of anaesthesia. Sure that no one else was within earshot, he took a tiny, handcrafted icon of the Emperor from a side pocket in his fatigues, raised it level with his face and said, "Light of all Mankind, there's nothing I wouldn't do for you. You know that. So do you think you might get off your bloody Throne and help us out a bit?"

After checking *Last Rites II* for outer damage — her headlamps had been shot to pieces, some of her vision blocks needed replacing, and the turret's left-side external stowage boxes were riddled with bullet holes, but these things were easily fixed — Wulfe found himself with a little well-earned downtime. The support squads would take care of maintenance duties. Lieutenant van Droi had ordered the tank crews to rest and recover, knowing they would be crashing hard after the fight. Coming down off so much adrenaline was enough to knock some guys out, but Wulfe didn't feel ready to try for sleep yet. His throat was still itching, though whether it was because of his scar or because of the damned dust, he couldn't be sure. Sipping a little water — a little being all he could afford himself — seemed to help. He pulled a rebreather mask over his mouth and nose and went for a walk. If it was the dust that was bothering him, the mask would stop it getting worse.

Masked or not, his stroll was far from pleasant. The desert sands were cratered, fire-blackened, and absolutely littered with bodies. At least all the bodies were those of the foe. Colonel Stromm's men had finished removing their fallen brothers from the field of battle. Wulfe was glad of that as he weaved between piles of alien cadavers. Many of the bodies wore thick plates of black armour, iron pitted with rust and scored by las-fire. Between the plates, Wulfe saw gaping wounds caked with

blood-soaked sand. He was doubly glad of his rebreather now. The stench would have been unbearable without the mask's powerful filter.

Last Rites II had slain many of the beasts, surely over a hundred, though she wouldn't be wearing any new kill-markings for it. To an armoured company, infantry kills counted for little in terms of prestige, even in such numbers. Armour kills were what mattered, the challenge of machine against machine, crew against crew. Such were the fights a tank commander lived for. Until *Last Rites II* bested another tank in combat, she had proved nothing to Wulfe, nothing at all.

Wulfe's crew had a different outlook. After the battle, they had been quick to show their gratitude to her, offering sanctioned prayers to the machine-spirit housed in her metal body. Through the vision blocks, they had seen the *Frontline Crusader* brew up. They had seen Siemens' body roasting in the red fire. Why was it always the most horrific images that remained so clear in one's mind? Wulfe wondered. Why could he never remember a pretty girl's smile or a glorious sunset in the same kind of vivid detail?

The *Frontline Crusader* had stalled and it was all down to the damned dust. In the days the Gunheads had spent crossing the desert, eleven of their machines — five of the tanks, four of the halftracks, and two of the rugged Thirty-Sixers — had suffered the same kind of sudden cutouts: dust on the contacts, dust clogging the fuel lines. Clean the dust out and you were fine, good to go. It just took a little work, a few minutes' attention. Siemens and his crew had been dead men from the moment it happened. They never stood a chance.

It could have happened to any of them. *Last Rites II* could have stalled just as easily. He knew that. It was a cruel thing that had happened to Siemens, but Wulfe couldn't deny a guilty relief. His crew was alive. He was alive.

His footsteps took him towards the wreckage of *Frontline Crusader*, and he stopped just a few metres from her. She was nothing but a black husk now. Her machine-spirit was gone. She was a corpse like the countless bodies that surrounded her. Thankfully, someone had removed Siemens' remains from the turret. Wulfe hoped the bodies of the men inside had been removed, too. Throne help the support crew who had taken care of that. It was a miserable business. Wulfe had seen some terrible things in his time: turret baskets painted red with blood, equipment caked in bone fragments and gore, blackened bodies fused together by flame so that you couldn't tell where one man ended and another began. Little wonder that infantrymen sometimes referred to tanks as "steel coffins". Years ago, Confessor Friedrich had taken it on himself to deal with that kind of mess as often as possible, working quickly, quietly, and without solicitation or complaint. No one had asked him to take on such a burden, but it wasn't right, he said, for tank men to have to see such things. Wulfe hoped the confessor had got down safely with the rest of the regiment. He was a good man. Given the horrors he put himself through, it was no wonder he drank so much.

Moving closer to the black husk of the tank, Wulfe saw again the two great gouges in her side. The armour plating had melted around the wounds, creating a jutting lip of metal under each. He stretched out a hand and found that the metal was cool to the touch.

Walking around to her other side, he found another hole. She had been hit simultaneously on both flanks with three separate impacts. The weapons that had killed her had been rocket-propelled grenades with shaped charges. The implications were grim. Over more than two decades of battle, Wulfe had faced the full gamut of antitank weapons, from magnetic mines to man-portable lascannons. He had seen shaped charges employed by armies of rebels and heretics all too often, but he had never seen orks field them. He had seen them use simple rockets sometimes, but this was different. Here was a weapon that, with a jet of molten copper, made a mockery of armour up to two hundred millimetres thick.

From now on, he and the other tank commanders would have to be extra wary. The orks had always been dangerous at close quarters, especially to infantry. Now they were just as dangerous to tanks.

Leaving the wreckage of *Frontline Crusader* behind him, he started walking towards one of the wrecked ork artillery pieces that van Droi's Vanquisher had taken out at long range. Ten metres away, he stopped and stared at it, noting the bodies of the greenskin crew that lay around its shredded tracks. They were little more than heaps of smoking bone and gristle. Even before it had been turned into burning junk, the machine had been an ugly thing. It was often hard to believe that these ork vehicles could function at all. Its massive gun was ruptured, peeled back like the skin of a fruit, ragged metal ends twisted outwards from a blast within. Wulfe supposed a round had exploded in the barrel when the turret had been struck. What remained of the track assemblies showed them to be huge, almost as wide as Wulfe was tall, and cruelly spiked, though they hardly needed to be given the nature of the terrain. Flat, open desert was ideal for treaded machines. Wulfe knew that adding spikes was just something orks tended to do. There were other examples nearby, including suits of body armour adorned in a similar fashion. Orks built everything that way: big, heavy, spiky and loud. Laying waste to their misbegotten creations was a duty Wulfe relished.

"Showed the bastards this time, didn't we?" said a rasping voice behind him.

Wulfe turned to see a Kasrkin storm trooper crouching on the sand nearby, leaning over a lifeless greenskin, tugging hard on a pair of metal pliers that were clamped around one of the dead monster's jutting tusks. The Kasrkin had removed his helmet, laying it beside him on the sand while he worked. Clearly, the stench from the ork bodies didn't bother him much. He was younger than Wulfe, though the profusion of criss-crossing scars that marked his hard face added a few years. His skin was swarthy and his hair so blond it was almost white. A south-hiver, then, a Kasr Derth man, or Kasr Viklas, maybe. Back on Cadia, men from the north and south didn't always get on, but the friction usually vanished the moment they got off-world. Cadians tended to stick together in the end, whichever hive they originally came from.

"I reckon we did," Wulfe replied.

The Kasrkin didn't look up. He yanked hard on his pliers, and the ork tooth came loose with a spurt of thick red blood. He transferred the pliers to his clean hand and shook red droplets onto the sand, muttering an oath.

"Which one is yours then?" he asked.

"Sorry?"

"Which tank?"

"*Last Rites II*. She's a standard Leman Russ."

"Is that right?" asked the Kasrkin, not looking up. "What number?" He fixed his pliers to the dead ork's other tusk and began working them backwards and forwards, trying to free the roots from the massive jawbone.

"Nine-two-one," said Wulfe, slightly suspicious of the soldier's interest. Kasrkin weren't known to be garrulous. Conversation with them was rare.

"Nine-two-one," the storm trooper repeated between grunts. The corpse's remaining tusk was putting up a bit of a struggle. "Yeah, I saw you. Carried some of our wounded out, right?"

There was a sharp cracking sound. Wulfe winced as he saw the tusk come free with a gush of crimson. Grinning, the Kasrkin held up his prize so that Wulfe could see it, white as bone, as long as a man's middle finger, and tapering to a nasty point. He dropped the excised tooth into a darkly stained canvas bag by his right knee, and said, "I saw that one over there brew up. He was your mate, was he? No way to go, burning up like that in a big tin box."

Right, thought Wulfe bitterly, thanks for that. "They were good men. They'll be with the Emperor now."

The Kasrkin didn't speak. He picked up his bag of teeth, rose to his feet, and moved to the next greenskin carcass.

Wulfe didn't need to ask why the soldier was pulling teeth. He had seen it done before. Some said that the orks were superstitious and that finding their dead kin with tusks removed put a terrible fear into them. He doubted that. Fear wasn't something orks seemed prone to. On the other hand, he

knew troopers who traded the tusks for packets of smokes and bottles of alcohol. There was usually at least one man in a regiment who could fashion them into charms or trinkets. Sometimes, depending on the planet, civilian traders would offer a high price for them. It was illegal, of course, under the alien artefact laws. Commissar Slayte had executed two men for it a few years back. Repeat offenders. Rather than shoot them, he had chosen to snap their necks. It hadn't helped his popularity much.

The Kasrkin was focused on his morbid dentistry, and Wulfe decided to head back to his crew. Maybe van Droi had new orders for them. The sooner they left, the better.

Without saying another word to the Kasrkin, he turned and began walking, weaving his way between the heaped corpses, but he hadn't gone ten metres when he heard a shout.

"Hey! Nine-two-one!"

Wulfe turned.

"Souvenir!" called the Kasrkin, and he threw a shining object into the air. It curved towards Wulfe, who reached out a hand and caught it. Opening his fingers, he saw a long, curving tusk with four pointed roots. It was still sticky with blood.

He looked up, expecting some explanation, but the Kasrkin was already moving off towards another corpse, happily humming a tune.

Wulfe rubbed the ork tooth clean on his rust-coloured fatigues, stuffed it into his thigh pocket, and moved off. The muted glow of the sun was nearing the western horizon. There was perhaps another hour before nightfall. He hoped van Droi had a plan. Then again, he thought, maybe the lieutenant was no longer in charge.

Voeder Lenck was lying back, relaxing on one of his tank's track-guards after a good smoke, when Sergeant Wulfe walked by. The rest of the *New Champion*'s crew were sitting on the sand, playing cards and passing around a lho-stick that contained a few ingredients which were not exactly standard.

Lenck heard the sergeant's footsteps in the sand as he approached and raised one eyelid. Here we go, he thought. The uptight prick won't be able to help himself.

Sure enough, the sergeant's nose crinkled and he stopped dead in his tracks, looking down at the gambling crewmen. With their senses dulled by the smoky narcotic, and with the game absorbing their full attention, they didn't even notice him.

"Haha! Frak you, Varnuss," said a jubilant Private Riesmann. "That's twice I've had you with the same damned hand. Heretic's gotta pay up, you big grox's arse."

Private Varnuss, a thick-necked, low-browed man with a shock of bright orange hair, growled and said, "If I find out you're cheatin', Riesmann, I'm gonna bite your nose off and spit it in your face."

Despite the threat, he thrust a big hand inside his fatigues and drew out two vials of clear liquid. With a dark look, he passed them to Riesmann, who accepted them with a smug grin, pocketed them, and began to shuffle the cards again.

"You do realise, gentlemen," said Wulfe sharply, "that the game of Heretic is banned by Imperial edict." The three men seated on the ground gave a start and jumped to their feet, scattering cards everywhere. The lho-stick fell to the sand where it continued to burn, lacing the air with its intoxicating fumes.

"Sergeant Wulfe, sir," stammered Private Hobbs, the shortest of the men. "Wasn't playing no Heretic, sir. Just a harmless game of... er..."

Wulfe ignored him. He stepped forward, bent down, and picked up the burning lho-stick. Sniffing it, he said, "Do I frakking look like I was born yesterday, Hobbs?" He held the lho-stick up in front of the little man's face. "This groxshit addles the brain, which would explain why you'd think you could lie to me and get away with it."

Lenck opened both eyes now, turned his head in Sergeant Wulfe's direction, and, with an exaggerated sigh, slid down from the side of the *New Champion*. Time to see if saving the sergeant's life was a mistake or not, he thought. "My fault, sergeant. My fault. Sorry."

Wulfe's eyes narrowed. "You're accepting full responsibility for this, corporal? I find that hard to believe."

Lenck's shirt had been tied around his narrow waist while he rested, but now he pulled it up, shrugging into the sleeves and buttoning it over his chest. His dog tags clinked together as he did so. "I taught them a new game while we were still in the Empyrean, sir. S'called... er... Ship-shape. Yeah, that's the one. Isn't that right, lads? It's a good game is Ship-shape. I'll admit, though, sergeant, it does look a lot like Heretic to the untrained eye. I can understand you figuring one for the other."

Wulfe glared. "Really, Lenck? Because I could have sworn I heard Riesmann say something about the heretic having to pay up. But let's just say I believe you. What do you have to say about this!" For the second time, he raised the dubious lho-stick.

"Ah, now that one's not down to me, sergeant," said Lenck amiably. "No. That there was given to us by one of Colonel Stromm's lot. I thought there was something funny about it, to be honest. Didn't I say so, lads? Not like a bloody footslogger to go sharing his sticks with us tankers, is it, sergeant? Suspicious bit of generosity, that. I told them not to smoke it, but it wasn't an order or anything."

"And did this mysterious footslogger give you his name? Or any more of his smokes? Well?"

Lenck shook his head, unblinking, never breaking eye contact with his squadron leader. "Just the one, sergeant. Honest. Look, you can have it if you want. Not my business if you like a little smoke now and then."

He watched Wulfe's face change colour and knew he was stepping dangerously close to the line, but he had to know how far he could push things now that this man, who clearly hated him, owed him his life.

Wulfe dropped the lho-stick and ground it into the sand with his boot.

Private Riesmann winced miserably.

Wulfe stepped in close to Lenck and, in hushed tones, said, "You thought about it, didn't you, corporal? Earlier today?"

"Thought about what, sergeant?" Lenck replied innocently.

"Don't play the fool. I saw it in your eyes after you killed that ork. Thought about putting a few rounds in me, didn't you? Dangerous weapons, heavy stubbers. They kick like an auroch. Not hard for a few rounds to go wide in the heat of battle. Who knows? The others might have believed you."

Lenck blinked, feigning a look of horror. Matching his voice to the low level of the sergeant's, he said, "You're off your *damned* nut, Wulfe. I shouldn't be surprised. You've had it in for me since the day I joined this regiment. Damned if I know why. An inferiority complex, maybe? The only thing I shot today was orks, a lot of them. But, if you want to tell me what your bloody problem is, I'm all ears. If not..."

Wulfe stepped back, fists clenched, and Lenck readied himself to dodge a punch, but the growling sergeant didn't swing. Instead, he said one word. "Dunst."

"What?" asked Lenck.

"Does the name Dunst mean anything to you, corporal? Victor Dunst."

The sergeant was clearly expecting some kind of reaction, but the name meant absolutely nothing to Lenck. He shrugged and said, "Should it?"

Wulfe stared back. After a moment, the cold rage in his eyes seemed to dim, and he said, "No, I suppose not. Throne, Dunst would be twice your age by now."

Lenck stared back. This bastard has a screw loose, he thought. Rattling around inside a tank for so long has damaged the man's brain. He's no better than that idiot loader of his.

“I’ll forget what I saw here just this once,” said Wulfe, “because of what happened today. But now we’re square. Got it? You and your men had better shape the hell up, Lenck. Maybe life was a bit more relaxed in the frakking reserves, but let me tell you something about Gossefried’s Gunheads. We do our duty. We work for our chops. Start toeing the line or, Throne help me, I’ll make it my personal mission to help you regret it.”

The sergeant kept his eyes locked with Lenck’s, as if daring him to say something smart, but, if Wulfe had been hoping to see fear in them, he was out of luck. Lenck stared back with a barely suppressed grin. “You’re an example to us all, sergeant. Gentlemen,” he called to his crew. “Thank the sergeant for putting you straight and saving you from the potential dangerous of suspicious gifts and unsanctioned card games.”

As one and without any trace of sincerity, Lenck’s crew shouted, “Thank you, Sergeant Wulfe!”

Wulfe’s gaze didn’t shift. “And you, corporal?” he asked.

“Me, sergeant?” said Lenck, overplaying the innocent. “I was asleep on the tank. I wasn’t playing cards, and I’ve never smoked a lho-stick in my life, laced or otherwise. That’s the Emperor’s own truth, I swear.”

Wulfe sneered, but he apparently had nothing more to say. He turned and stalked off, fists still clenched at his side.

Lenck watched the sergeant’s back receding for a moment, wondering who in the warp this Victor Dunst was, and thinking that it might be useful to find out.

He drew a lho-stick from the breast pocket of his shirt and flipped it into the air, catching it between his lips. Then he pulled a lighter from another pocket, lit the end of his smoke, and drew in a deep, pungent lungful.

“Have a nice day, Sergeant Arsehole,” he said and turned to join the next hand of cards.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The low clouds overhead flickered like broken lamps, such was the intensity of the fighting outside the walls of Karavassa.

“Watch those gullies to the south-east,” yelled Bergen into the tiny microphone of his vox-bead. “Don’t let them flank those armour companies on the right!”

Basilisk mobile artillery pieces boomed all around his Chimera APC, vomiting clouds of black smoke into the air with every ear-splitting shot. Through his field glasses, the major general watched great spouts of fire and sand burst upwards wherever the massive shells struck. Currently, they were wreaking terrible destruction on the ork foot soldiers.

The 10th Armoured Division had reached the rocky hills around the former Imperial outpost an hour after dawn. It was the eleventh day since planetfall, and Bergen’s forces were running two whole days behind General deViers’ demanding mission schedule. The conditions on Golgotha were beyond frustrating. Hour after hour, his forces had been forced to interrupt their journey eastward to facilitate repairs. The damned dust was playing havoc with the Imperial machines. It wasn’t doing the men much good either. Dozens were sick. Bergen had developed a scratchy cough himself, and his spit was tinged with red.

When 10th Division had left Hadron base six days ago, the major general had been unsettled by the last-minute addition of Tech-Adept Armadron among their number. To his knowledge, no one in the 18th Army Group had petitioned the Adeptus Mechanicus for such an honour. Bergen took it as another indicator of the hidden agenda he was convinced they were following. So far, nothing Armadron had said in their limited conversations had managed to convince him otherwise. The tech-priest insisted that his superior had ordered him to accompany Bergen’s division purely out of concern for their success. Groxshit. The Machine Cult had manoeuvred Imperial forces here, and sooner or later, Bergen intended to find out why. Even so, Bergen had cause to be glad of Armadron’s attendance. Despite his unsettling presence, the tech-adept had proved to be a particular asset. He was a member of the priesthood’s *technicus* arm and, working closely with senior engineer Aurien, he had done much to keep the tank columns moving. Without his tireless efforts and expertise, Bergen doubted his division would have made it here for many more days yet. That would really have given old deViers something to rage about.

Despite being fraught with problems, the journey here was still the easy part. Now that they had engaged the orks — whole regiments rushing forward to clash with them as they poured from the outpost’s towering iron gates — the damned dust was proving just as problematic in battle as it had been on the move. Since the fighting had begun, a number of Colonel Vinnemann’s tanks had been forced to fight from static positions, immobilised early in the assault by engine stalls. The fines penetrated everything. If the brave crews of the Atlas recovery tanks hadn’t risked enemy fire to pull those tanks out, the crews would have died where they sat.

Squinting through his magnoculars, Bergen saw greenskin reinforcements pushing and jostling in their eagerness to join the fray.

“Get some fire on the main gates,” he voxed to his artillery commander. “Hit them while they’re bunched up. But don’t damage the superstructure! Remember, we need to take the outpost intact.”

His division had been unable to surprise the orks, but then, he hadn’t really expected to. The thick sandstone watchtowers of Karavassa had a commanding view from their seat on the basalt bluff up ahead. It wasn’t the towers that had raised the alarm first, however. His armour columns

had been sighted when they were still about thirty kilometres out from the target. Ork bike patrols had been roaming the area, their powerful headlamps throwing broad cones of light out into the darkness. Some of these patrols had roared out from between high dunes and almost run into the leading Imperial machines. A sudden stutter of gunfire had lit the sands as both sides leapt into action. The bikes were noisy, oversized things with huge wheels and more growling exhaust pipes than they could possibly have needed, but they were certainly fast. Their riders had shown surprising sense for orks, quickly turning tail and racing back the way they had come to alert the rest of the horde. Vinnemann's tanks had managed to take out most of them as they showed their backs, but a few had gotten away.

As the division had closed on the occupied outpost, with the cloud-smothered sunrise lending the scene a hellish red glow, Bergen had looked out from his cupola to see a huge ork force: a horde of greenskin infantry, numbering in the thousands, supported by tanks, artillery, light armour, and a good number of those ridiculous lumbering contraptions that the orks so loved to build. These dreadnoughts looked like oversized red buckets on piston legs. Their wicked arms flailed to and fro, blades whirring, claws clashing, eager to begin the bloodshed. They were covered in other weapons, too: flamers, rocket launchers, heavy stubbers and anything else that could be bolted to them. They were utterly lethal to infantry, but they were no match for Imperial tanks. Vinnemann's crews had already gunned down at least thirty of them at long range, turning them to burning scrap that rained down on the heads of the orks around them.

"Infantry, keep up the advance!" Bergen commanded. "Colonel Vinnemann, have three of your companies move forward in support of the infantry on the left flank. Send the rest straight up the middle. We need to knock out their armour support to give our boys a fighting chance. We have to drive a wedge into them."

Bergen's command Chimera, *Pride of Caedus*, had taken up position on a spur of rock just a few kilometres southwest of the outpost's walls. Even sitting hull down, it was a risky place to perch. Had he been the defender instead of the attacker, he would have put some artillery on the spur, sure that the enemy commander would have chosen this spot from which to oversee his forces. Did such things occur to ork leaders? Bergen didn't know, but his need for a good view of the battlefield overrode his concern.

A series of rippling explosions north-east of his position caused him to turn. One of Marrenburg's mechanised infantry companies, ten Chimeras each carrying a squad of hardened infantrymen, was trying to press forward in support of the troopers on foot. But a phalanx of ork tanks — looted Imperial machines from the last war, disfigured almost beyond recognition by the addition of spikes and strange armaments — had broken free from their engagement with a company of Vinnemann's Leman Russ and were speeding towards the Chimeras with cannons blazing.

Bergen saw two of the Chimeras struck head on, one of them hit so hard that it flipped onto its back. He saw the rear hatch open. Dizzy men began stumbling out, desperate to be away from the burning machine before its ammunition and fuel stores exploded. Most were injured. They fell. Their shaking legs wouldn't carry them. They scrambled desperately to get up again.

Too late. With a great boom and a mushrooming of fire and smoke, the Chimera lifted into the air. Only two of the troopers managed to escape the blast. Bergen cursed and turned his eyes from the sprawled, burning figures that hadn't.

The other Chimera was luckier. The cockpit was aflame, the driver certainly dead, but the hatch at the back had been thrown wide, and the soldiers within were pouring out, lasguns up and ready. Bergen knew those lasguns wouldn't do a damned thing against the ork machines.

He was about to vox Vinnemann for support when a trio of Leman Russ tanks crested a rise just north of the burning Chimeras. They traversed their turrets right, in unison, and blasted the ork tanks at mid-range. One of the ork machines was hit dead centre. The Russ' armour-piercing round must

have punctured the enemy tank's magazine, because Bergen saw it explode spectacularly, the entire turret spinning into the air on a pillar of glaring orange flame.

The other two ork machines were still closing on the no-longer-mechanised infantry. The soldiers fired on them in tight, ordered volleys, but it was futile. Las-bolts smacked harmlessly against thick red armour. A second later, however, the three Leman Russ fired again. The ork machines were struck hard, skidding sideways on their treads before halting. Greenskins started to bail out, some of them already howling as flames licked their leathery brown flesh. The Cadian infantrymen moved straight in, pouring las-fire onto the ork crews, cutting them down, blazing away on full charge until there was little left but smoking black hunks of meat.

"Armour Command to Division," said a voice on the vox. "Armour to Division. Please respond." It was Colonel Vinnemann.

"I read you, Armour," said Bergen. "Go ahead."

"I have a visual on enemy light vehicles breaking left to strafe our forward lines. Armour cannot engage. I repeat, armour cannot engage. We have hostile tanks front and right, and we're taking heavy fire from artillery located inside the base."

Bergen cursed. "Understood, Armour. Leave it to me. Division out."

He panned his glasses right until he found the machines in question. There were ten of them: ork war-buggies bristling with heavy stubbers, rocket launchers and more. They were roaring straight towards the Cadian assault line. The men were exposed, busy trying to push the hordes of ork infantry back. They would be slaughtered under the concentrated fire of the buggies unless...

"Division to Recon Two," Bergen voxed. "Come in please."

"Recon Two reading you loud and clear, sir. Go ahead."

"Ork light armour advancing on our infantry at speed. Look to your two. Those lads need a little Sentinel support, wouldn't you say?"

The man on the other end of the vox was Captain Munzer. Bergen could picture the grin on the man's scar-twisted face as he replied, "Sentinel's moving to intercept, sir. We'll light the bastards up. Enjoy the show."

Seconds later, Bergen saw Munzer's bipedal machines lope out from behind a rocky hill to the left and open fire. Each of the Cadian Sentinels sported an autocannon, ideal for ripping right through their current targets. Ork bodies were torn apart in the deadly hail. Fuel tanks ignited and the speeding buggies flipped and spun, rolling end over end, spilling the xenos filth onboard.

He couldn't hear them, but Bergen could see the infantry cheering the Sentinel pilots. The cheers stopped dead when five of the Sentinels vanished suddenly in a great ball of flame. A row of ugly black machines had emerged from Karavassa to join the fray. More ork artillery! The surviving Sentinels immediately turned to identify their attackers, but the range was far too great to strike back. Over the vox, Bergen heard Captain Munzer ordering his walkers to scatter so they wouldn't provide such an opportune target again.

"Command to Armour," voxed Bergen urgently, "be advised, we have additional ork artillery pushing out from the main gates. What's your status?"

My status, thought Colonel Kochatki Vinnemann, is that my back is bloody killing me.

He cursed his own stupidity. As he and his men had neared the outpost, completely preoccupied with the coming battle, he had neglected to take the vital medication that counteracted his body's immune system. It had been years since the implant surgery, but his body still steadfastly refused to accept the augmetic spine. He needed large, regular doses of immunosuppressants and pain mediators in order to function at his best. But there wasn't time to stop and take them now.

"Division, we are still engaged with hostile tanks. Ninth company is down to half strength. Fourth and Fifth companies have taken multiple losses. We're trying to push in, to flank the buggers

on the right, sir, but the damned artillery... I'll ask one more time, sir, will you not put some Basilisk fire down behind those walls? It would make one hell of a difference."

"That's a negative, colonel," Bergen answered with obvious regret. "The objective must be taken intact. We have enemy artillery fire from just outside the main gates. I need one of your companies to knock it out. I know you're up against it, colonel. It's damned messy out there. But do what you can."

By the blasted Eye, cursed Vinnemann. "Understood, Division. We're on it. Armour, out."

He tapped a button on his headset, switching from vox to tank intercom.

"Listen up," he told his crew. "Our troops are hurting out there. Not just our tankers, but Marrenburg's lot, Graves' lot. So it looks like the *Angel* gets to enter the fray after all."

This announcement was met with resounding cheers from his crew. To some extent, Vinnemann's tank, *Angel of the Apocalypse*, was a victim of her own superb design. She was a Shadowsword super-heavy tank, ancient and deadly, but her Volcano cannon, with its nine-metre barrel, had originally been designed for felling traitor Titans and the like. She was far too specialised to warrant being fielded in most conventional battles, including this one.

Today, though, she would get to show what she could do.

The very thought of it was almost enough to overcome the pain in Vinnemann's back.

"Bekker," he said, addressing his driver, "get us behind that ridge on the right. Hull down, but leave plenty of clearance for the gun. The rest of you, prep for firing. We're about to make things interesting around here."

With a great chugging cough from her exhausts, *Angel of the Apocalypse* rumbled into motion.

Bergen saw Vinnemann's massive Shadowsword roar towards a shallow rise and settle into firing position. The ork artillery pieces had turned their attention to the infantry's forward lines. The bodies of good Cadian men were being blasted apart to rain back down to the ground in ragged pieces. Scores of them were dying with every lethal shot, and the greenskins on foot were using the cover of the artillery fire to bridge the gap, hungry for the slaughter that would take place at close quarters. Elsewhere, Vinnemann's tanks were holding their own against the technically inferior but far more numerous ork machines. Smoking wrecks littered the land, providing cover for small groups of terrified men who had lost their nerve. Through his field glasses, Bergen saw one such group huddled together, eyes shut tight, hands pressed over their ears. It was hard to see through all the smoke and fire, but they were clearly green. New meat.

Where in the blasted warp was their sergeant?

If their regimental commissar noticed them huddled there, frozen in fear and panic, they wouldn't live to become old meat. Executions for cowardice were swift and brutal. There were no appeals. Bergen didn't like executions, but it was the way of the Guard: do your duty and die well, or run from it and die without honour.

He pitied them. It was easy to lose your balance when everything around you was going to hell. He voxed Colonel Graves. "Division to Infantry Command. It looks like some of your rookies have lost their officer. Check those burning tanks on your ten o'clock, Graves. Get someone over there. Get them back in the fight. If the orks find them first they'll be massacred."

Colonel Graves' response was brief and affirmative. Seconds later, Bergen saw a squad push left and join the huddled men. His attention was diverted, however, by a high-pitched whine that rose from the right. He had heard its like before, though on regrettably rare occasions. Hearing it now caused a thrill to run through him. He immediately panned his glasses towards Vinnemann's Shadowsword and saw a white glow forming at the muzzle of her huge cannon. Knowing what was to come, he turned his eyes towards the black artillery pieces by the outpost gates. Over-muscled greenskin gunnery crews were hefting shells the size of oil drums into the breech of each huge gun, readying to pulverise the advancing Cadian lines once again.

There was an almighty crack, like a clap of thunder, so close that Bergen felt it resonate deep in his bones. Everything in the area outside the outpost's main gates was engulfed in blinding white light. Bergen thought he saw the shot hit the row of greenskin war machines at an angle, cutting across them diagonally, but he could only watch for a fraction of a second. Looking directly at the beam was painful, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

A glowing afterimage of the Volcano's lethal beam remained behind his eyelids. When he opened his eyes again, he saw that a good number of the enemy machines had ceased to exist. Bubbling pools of liquid metal were the only trace left. Others, though not struck directly, would no longer be firing on his men. Their crews had been roasted to ash. The raw heat of the Volcano beam striking the neighbouring guns was simply too intense to survive.

The Cadian infantry had seen it all happen. A great cheer sounded from the battlefield as their spirits were lifted, and they surged forward, inspired by the incredible display of power they had witnessed from their own side. Bergen could feel it on the air, the special moment that every commander awaited so anxiously. It was the beginning of the end.

He voxed Vinnemann. "Division to Armour Command. Hell of a shot, Kochatkis. Hell of a shot. That showed the filthy savages."

Vinnemann answered through gasping breaths. "Thank you, sir. Great to fire up the old Volcano cannon again after so long. She's drained the tanks, though. And we lost two capacitors. We'll need a Trojan over here for a refuel."

"Are you all right, man? You sound..."

"Don't worry about me, sir," replied Vinnemann. "It's just the usual. I'll deal with it when this is over."

Bergen was scanning the field of combat, watching his forces surge forward, taking a murderous toll on the foe.

"You won't have to wait long, Kochatkis. Our lads are really pressing forward now. You've inspired them, by Terra. They're cutting into the ork lines like a bayonet through butter."

It was no lie. The greenskins' brute strength and instinct for battle simply weren't enough to hold off the well-coordinated Imperial forces any longer.

Within the hour, the walls of Karavassa were breached.

CHAPTER NINE

Gunfire still stuttered here and there along Karavassa's narrow streets, but the sounds of battle were little more than faint echoes of the madness and bloodshed that had now passed. The outpost had been retaken. Bergen had achieved his objective. General deViers had the first of the positions that would defend his supply and transport routes between Hadron Base and his intended destination in the east.

One of Colonel Marrenburg's mechanised platoons had found and killed the ork leader, an abomination of preposterous size and musculature, while securing the old Imperial communications building at the heart of the outpost. Bergen had been invited to verify this as soon as the area was judged clear of significant threats. Now he stood in a broad, low-ceilinged room, looking down on the body, marvelling at the size of the creature that lay motionless on the stone floor at his feet. The smell from it was overpowering, like stale sweat and rotting garbage.

He judged the fallen warboss to be at least two and a half metres tall, and not much less from shoulder to shoulder if one included the hunks of iron plate that had been bolted together to form its crude armour. It would have needed to hunch over just to fit inside the building, but then, orks tended to hunch anyway due to the massive slabs of overdeveloped muscle that covered their bodies. There was a poorly painted skull and dagger design on its angular breastplate, the symbol of whatever clan the foul wretch had lorded over. Bergen didn't recognise the glyph.

"Not the best looking bastard I've met, sir," said Colonel Marrenburg. He stepped forward, stopping at Bergen's side.

"He's no charmer, Edwyn," Bergen replied, "that's for sure. Are we certain this one is the leader?"

"It's always the biggest, isn't it?" said Marrenburg. "He had a bodyguard around him, too. Lost eleven men taking him and his guards down." The colonel kicked the dead ork's thick forearm in contempt. Bergen watched the huge lifeless hand flop on the floor. The creature's thick fingers looked like they could have crushed a man's bones to powder. "Made him pay in the end, though," said Marrenburg. "Mind if I smoke, sir?"

"Go ahead," said Bergen. "Maybe it'll cover the stink."

"We'll have this place cleaned out in no time, sir," replied Marrenburg as he pulled a packet of smokes from his breast pocket. "Offer you one?"

"No, thanks."

"Sorry, sir," said Marrenburg with a grin. "I always forget you don't. Anyway, if you're done looking at this one, the enginseers are waiting to set up some kind of equipment. Don't suppose they've come up with a solution to the long-range vox problem, do you?"

Bergen turned from the dead ork. "In a roundabout way, I suppose they have. The tech-priests have been laying cables under the sand all the way here, a kind of landline that they insist will do the job. Tech-Adept Armadron has promised to brief us fully once the system is operational. It'll save us having to send any more runners all the way back to Hadron to communicate with the general."

"Have you sent one to report on our victory here?"

Bergen nodded. "Two, actually, just in case. Hornet riders with coded parchments. I sent them out as soon as we entered the gates. I expect Tech-Adept Armadron will have his landline system up and running before they reach Hadron Base, but I like to have a little insurance."

Hornet motorcycles were a variant of the old standard-issue Blackshadow bikes. They were noisy, unarmed, and unarmoured, but they were the fastest machines available to 10th Division. Excepting for any problems, Bergen expected the couriers to reach Army Group HQ the following day.

“Very wise, sir,” replied Marrenburg with a nod.

Bergen didn’t feel wise. Today’s victory had lifted his spirits — he had seen the raw might of his armoured division overcome a significant enemy presence, and he knew a good number of his men, including no small percentage of those who had died, deserved medals for what they had achieved — but he still railed against the stupidity of the whole operation. Taking Karavassa wouldn’t matter a damn once General deViers got to the final way-point and found nothing left of the legendary tank he so desperately sought.

Bergen intended to be there when it happened, to see the look on the general’s face.

“Any word on getting a hospital set up?” he asked, returning his mind to more immediate concerns.

Marrenburg said he didn’t know, but Bergen’s adjutant, Katz, stepped forward and answered, “The Officio Medicæ staff have taken over a two-storey barracks building close to the west gate. It’s been swept for threats. No problems. Their triage teams have already brought in the high priority cases.”

“Good,” said Bergen. “Make sure they have everything they need. I’m also worried about Colonel Vinnemann. I want him seen by an augmetics specialist as soon as possible. The gravity here, the dust and all the rest of it... From the sounds of it, it’s all playing absolute hell with that damned metal spine of his.”

Marrenburg seemed about to comment when Colonel Graves marched in, boot heels loud and sharp on the stone floor. After a momentary glance in the direction of the dead warboss on the floor, he stopped, saluted, and said, “Just had word from one of my sweeper teams, sir. There’s something I think you ought to see.”

The something in question did nothing to improve Bergen’s dark mood. In fact, it had quite the opposite effect.

“Slaves,” he gasped. “Human slaves.”

He stood in an open square a few hundred metres inside the north wall, looking at a mound of dead men and women. All were stripped. All were chained together, each iron collar linked to the next, every wrist and ankle tightly manacled. The flesh of their skinny chests and buttocks had been cruelly branded with the same glyph that Bergen had seen on the greenskin leader’s breastplate. Worst of all, each torso bore broad axe and cleaver wounds. They had been slaughtered like grox. But why? He could only guess. Perhaps, with the battle-lust on them, the orks within the walls had lost control, desperate to share in the bloodletting, and turned on those humans closest to hand. The results were stomach-churning. If Bergen’s heart had not already been filled with hatred for the greenskin race, the sight before him would certainly have done the trick. Blood-drinking ticks crawled in swarms over the cooling bodies, searching for the sustenance they craved, but finding little in veins that no longer pulsed.

“We should have expected this,” muttered Lieutenant Katz from behind Bergen’s right shoulder.

“Should we, Jarryl?”

“I would have thought so, sir,” answered the adjutant. “Orks have been raiding the nearby systems unchecked for years. Salvage ships, mostly. The Navy can’t do much to protect those that break the spacing restrictions. High risk, high reward and all that.”

“I’m glad my adjutant is so well informed,” said Bergen.

“Sorry, sir,” stammered Katz. “I didn’t mean to sound—”

“Actually, Jarryl, I was being sincere. You know I value your observations. I just hadn’t thought to see something like this.”

“I imagine the poor souls were brought here from Hadron, sir. It was the only ork spaceport in the immediate area before the Navy cleansed it. We know ork clans sometimes trade with each other. These poor souls might have been traded for fuel or ammunition.”

“May the saints guide them on,” said Bergen. He pressed his hands to his chest in the sign of the aquila, and Katz immediately followed suit. Together, heads bowed, they offered a prayer for the dead. When they were done, Bergen said, “We’ll find more of them out there, won’t we?”

Katz looked grim. “I expect so, sir, but not alive. I imagine the other divisions will find some when they take Tyrellis and Balkar, but the orks will kill them before they can be saved.” He gestured miserably at the pile of bodies in front of him. “There’s nothing we could have done, of course.”

Bergen saw the truth of that, but it didn’t make him feel any better. These people’s lives had been stolen from them by dirty xenos scum. Their spirits, on the other hand, still belonged to the Emperor.

“Make sure the confessors are told of this, Jarryl. I’d like the souls of these men and women to be commended to the Emperor’s side as soon as possible. I know the priests are busy with our own dead right now, but these bodies will have to be burned. I don’t want the outpost crawling with disease now that we’ve taken it back. Understood?”

“Understood, sir,” said Katz. “With your permission, I’ll be about it, now.”

“Good man,” said Bergen. He listened to his adjutant’s footsteps fade behind him.

Above Karavassa, the sky was dimming with the onset of afternoon. The brown-bellied clouds looked almost low enough to touch. They flickered with sheet lightning. Booming claps of dry thunder shook the air.

A crackle of sound in Bergen’s right ear announced a short-range vox-transmission just a fraction of a second before Colonel Graves’ voice said, “Graves to Division Command. Are you there, sir?”

Bergen tapped a finger on the transmit stud of his vox-bead and replied, “Bergen, here. Go ahead, Darrik.”

“One of my squads just reported the discovery of primary and secondary ork munitions dumps, sir, plus a significant fuel reserve by the south-east corner. Looks like they didn’t get around to scuttling it. Also, I’ve set up sentry patrols on the walls, as ordered. No room up there for the Tarantulas, I’m afraid, unless we extend the parapets ourselves. One more thing, sir. Captain Immrich is requesting permission to refuel his tanks from the greenskin cache.”

“Immrich?” asked Bergen.

“Yes, sir. He’s standing in for Colonel Vinnemann. The colonel is seeing the medicae augmeticist on your orders, remember?”

“Right, yes,” voxed Bergen. “Tell Captain Immrich to go ahead, but I want the fuel store searched for nasty surprises first, and have him ask one of the tech-priests for a substance analysis before he fills up. Emperor alone knows what the orks put in their fuel tanks apart from promethium.”

“One more thing, sir,” said Graves. “Tech-Adept Armadron tells me his preparations are complete. A vox-node antenna has been set up and connected to the landlines. We’ve just opened a link with Army Group HQ. The sound quality isn’t too bad at all. General deViers expects you to report personally within the next thirty minutes.”

“Understood, colonel. I’ll be back at the comms station in ten. Meet me there. Division, out.”

Bergen turned and began marching back towards the centre of the outpost, retracing his steps along streets filled with rusting junk and reeking of ork blood and excrement. He was glad of a

reason to leave the piled bodies of the murdered slaves behind him, but the image of what he had seen stayed with him, a powerful memory that he would draw on later.

It would fuel his hate in the days to come.

Three days after Karavassa was secured, Major General Rennkamp's 8th Mechanised Division moved up to take the old Imperial supply base, Tyrellis, located in the Garrando region of the desert to the east-south-east of Bergen's position. Resistance was fractionally lighter than at Karavassa, and the troopers might have been in high spirits had it not been for the increase in sickness and parasitic infestation that they suffered. The flesh-boring dannih were a constant nuisance. Orders had gone out for the men to shave their heads and remove any thick body hair in order to help combat the problem. Some troopers, preferring to drink their valuable alcohol rations rather than use them to get rid of the vicious ticks, developed nasty infections. Others reported to the medicae station with skin so saturated by the fines that they looked as if they had been bathing in spinefruit juice. The jokes and taunts didn't last long. The worst afflicted men suffered so badly from the resulting sickness that they died. It was a miserable way to go, organs clogged by accumulating dust, failing one after the other until the whole body shut down. That cast a dark shadow over those who survived, for they knew it was only a matter of time before their own cells became choked with the stuff. The quicker the general gained his prize, they grumbled, the better.

In that respect, at least, things were proceeding well. It was apparent that the greenskin presence between Hadron Base and the last known coordinates of *The Fortress of Arrogance* had been greatly overestimated. It seemed Ghazghkull Thraka's pogrom against mankind had called far more of the orks away from Golgotha than the Officio Strategos had anticipated. This alone remained in Exolon's favour, for if the orks were proving less of a threat, Golgotha was doing her level best to make up for it.

Bergen and the men of his division remained garrisoned in Karavassa, anxiously patrolling the surrounding lands, waiting impatiently for the general's order to move east. That order was expected to come through on the landline once the fortified settlement at Balkar — last of the major outposts needed to secure the route between Hadron Base and the site of the objective — had been retaken by the 12th Heavy Infantry Division under Major General Killian. Until then, there was little to do but wait, and, with time on his hands, Bergen began to notice little things that worried him, such as the subtle change in the tone of his skin. Each time he shaved, he looked into the mirror and noted the deepening pink tinge that coloured the whites of his eyes. He was far from alone in this. Medicae staff had issued everyone in the division with detox packages to help them combat the fines, but they didn't seem to be doing much good. Bergen had pressed Sergeant Behr, the medic on his personal staff, for worst case scenarios.

The sergeant's answers offered little comfort.

There were wildly varying levels of resistance between men. The hardest would hold out for months, perhaps even a standard Imperial year, but the symptoms would steadily worsen throughout that time. Growing headaches and nausea could be dealt with easily enough; the pills to suppress these were plentiful. For the changes in skin and eye colour, and the damage to organs, nothing could be done with the equipment and facilities at hand. Despite Sergeant Behr's insistence that it would make little difference, Bergen nevertheless issued new orders to his men: they must wear goggles and rebreather masks as much as possible.

If the able-bodied men of 10th Division were suffering, though, it was as nothing compared to Colonel Vinnemann's pain. Day after day, Bergen marvelled at the colonel's resilience. The man rarely uttered a word of complaint, at least not in company, but, between the dust and the higher-than-standard gravity, his augmetic spine was bothering him like never before. The Medicae augmeticist kept Bergen informed of Vinnemann's condition, breaking his oath of patient confidence for the sake of keeping the divisional leader fully apprised. Colonel Vinnemann had been authorised to increase his self-administered injections of immunosuppressants and pain-

mediators, but the drugs were problematic if taken in high quantities. Bergen, who held great affection and respect for the resilient little officer, began to offer daily prayers to the Emperor and His Saints that Operation Thunderstorm would come to a speedy conclusion. To lose Vinnemann prematurely would be a huge blow to the expedition. To lose him at all would be a huge blow to the men who knew him.

Finally, on the fifteenth day after planetfall, it seemed as if the Emperor might be listening to Gerard Bergen's prayers.

Reports started coming through on the landline. With Karavassa and Tyrellis securely held and protecting Imperial supply lines, Killian's 12th Heavy Infantry Division had pushed forward, storming the ruined fortress at Balkar, capturing it, and converting it into a front-line stronghold. The fighting had been heavy there, and the casualty figures were high, hinting at a much heavier ork presence closer to the site of the general's ultimate objective. But Killian succeeded all the same, and the forward base so vital to supporting the final leg of the expedition was firmly and fully established. Those officers with a pessimistic bent predicted massive greenskin retaliation, but, for now, Hadron, Karavassa, Tyrellis and Balkar were all back in Imperial hands after almost forty years of enemy occupation. The final stage of the Operation Thunderstorm could commence at last.

Bergen received all this news with a feeling of great relief. He was even more relieved when the 10th Armoured Division's new instructions came through from Hadron Base shortly after dawn on the sixteenth day. General deViers ordered Bergen's forces — minus an adequate garrisoning force — to press east from Karavassa, heading straight for Balkar with all possible speed. Once there, they would link up with elements from the other divisions and await the general's arrival. DeViers would personally lead them out into the Hadar region, to the foothills of the Ishawar range, for the final phase of the operation.

Talking directly to Bergen over the landline, the old man sounded practically ecstatic, like an over-stimulated child on the night before Emperor's Day. Perhaps he sensed his long-sought immortality waiting just beyond his fingertips. He would find *The Fortress of Arrogance*, whatever was left of it, and the operation would enter its closing stage. The Mechanicus would fire a beacon into the upper atmosphere to signal their position. A lifter would then descend from *The Scion of Tharsis* to haul the holy machine from the desert sands and lift it back into space. Safely aboard the Reclamator craft, *The Fortress of Arrogance* would be restored to its former glory during transit to the Armageddon system. There, it would be presented to Commissar Yarrick, and he would ride it out onto the battlefields of Armageddon Prime, rousing the spirits of his tired soldiers, inspiring in them a glorious new strength. Thus uplifted, they would roll out to crush the foe.

It sounded wonderful, and in Bergen's heart of hearts, he hoped it would be so, but the voice in his head still held to the certainty that it was nothing but a pretty dream. Things would not come to pass that way.

Thirty-eight years, he thought. To imagine that she would still be there...

The moment General deViers closed the vox-link from the other end, Bergen sent out a call to his regimental commanders. When he gave them their updated orders, all three sounded genuinely glad to hear that they would be on the move again within hours. Colonel Vinnemann in particular expressed his relief in no uncertain terms. Bergen had considered ordering the man to remain here, convinced that it would be the best thing for his health. But he knew Vinnemann would only have railed against him, seeing it as the ultimate betrayal. The man was a tanker through and through, just as Bergen had once been, and Bergen knew that, for any real tanker, nothing beat riding out in your crate, treads chewing up the dirt, the hearty roar of a promethium engine vibrating through your whole body. So Vinnemann would stay in command of his regiment despite his suffering, and Captain Immrich would be there to step in if needed.

The regimental commanders broke the link to pass the new orders on to their executive officers and company commanders. From these men, the news filtered down to everyone in the base.

Soon, Karavassa was buzzing with preparations as the 10th Armoured Division prepared to roll out once again.

In all the scurrying around, the loading, the refuelling, the last-minute checks, and everything else that went on prior to deployment, few men spared a thought for the fate of those companies that had mysteriously disappeared on that first fateful day. Some men did. Kochatjis Vinnemann was one of them. Despite having troubles enough of his own, he prayed regularly for the souls of Lieutenant Gossefried van Droi and his men, convinced that, after so many days without word or sign, they had perished.

As he rolled out of Karavassa at the head of the 81st Armoured Regiment, the long-suffering colonel could not have guessed that, just ten days' journey to the southeast of his position, Gossefried's Gunheads were doing their best to avoid exactly that.

CHAPTER TEN

Colonel Stromm was a man of his word. He embraced the Gunheads as if they had always been part of his outfit, and it pleased Lieutenant van Droi greatly, because, though he admitted it to no one, he had harboured grave doubts about placing his men and machines at the disposal of a man he had only just met. There were those in the upper ranks who might have said he knew all he needed to about the colonel. He had seen Stromm turn aside certain death, after all, and there were surely few better measures of a man than that; but an officer's performance in combat gave few clues, if any, as to how he would command on the move. Then there was Golgotha herself to consider. She was an enemy that couldn't be fought. Her endless sands ground away at the Cadians' morale, and the more time they spent crossing them, the more they seemed to stretch forever.

Van Droi knew his tanks were slowing the whole column down. The Chimeras were much faster, and the Thirty-Sixers were faster still at top speed, but without the tanks, the column would have made an easy target for greenskin marauders. Colonel Stromm kept everyone moving together, with the exception of the Chimeras he sent to scout ahead in shifts. Did it frustrate him that the Leman Russ could barely manage thirty kilometres an hour? wondered van Droi. If so, he didn't show it.

For days, the tired, dirty, ragged column had pressed north-east over rolling dunes and, gradually, the landscape began to change, becoming rockier and more uneven in stages. Was the change in terrain a good sign? Van Droi wasn't sure. If it meant they were nearing high ground, it certainly didn't show. The horizon to the north-east remained choked in a pink haze. He saw no jutting spurs of rock, no distant hints of a towering mountain range.

The mood of the men was as dark as the mud-coloured sky and getting darker all the time. Little communication passed from tank to tank. Almost a dozen of van Droi's men had taken seriously ill, and the number was three times greater among Stromm's infantry. There were two medics with The Fighting 98th, two who had survived the dreadful onslaught at the crash site. They took a look at van Droi's sick, consulted with each other, and told him that at least three of the twelve would be dead within a day. Nothing could be done to save them. The dust had poisoned them. Liver, kidneys, lungs, everything was shutting down. The other nine would almost certainly follow soon afterwards if they didn't get specialist medical care. With hopes of finding Exolon having dwindled to almost nothing, that didn't seem probable. Van Droi's anger and frustration got the better of him a few times, and he vented inside the turret of his tank, where his shouts and curses were drowned out by the rumble of the engine.

Colonel Stromm made a difficult decision regarding the seriously ill; he withheld their water and provisions. There was nothing to be gained by spending scarce resources on men who simply weren't going to last much longer. This, of course, did not sit well with friends of the dying men. There were sharp protestations that came near to violence, but the platoon leaders cracked down hard.

Van Droi didn't judge Stromm for the extremity of the measure. Stromm had given him a chance to object, but, to a practical man like van Droi, it made perfect, if unpleasantly harsh, sense. Ultimately, the two medics resolved the issue, administering large doses of anaesthesia to the worst afflicted, letting them die peacefully in a drug-induced sleep.

With the column stopping only briefly, grim, hollow-faced troopers buried their dead comrades in the sand. There was no Ministorum man to pray for them, but one of Stromm's lieutenants, a man

called Boyd, had trained briefly as a confessor before abandoning the so-called Righteous Road in order to enlist in the Guard. He said a few words for the souls of the dead, and the column moved on, lighter in number, heavier in spirit.

The mood got even worse when Stromm had his lieutenants issue empty jerry cans and additional water purification tablets to everyone. If they wanted to survive beyond the next few days, he told them, they would have to drink the undrinkable. They would have to drink their own urine.

As if the lost Cadians didn't have enough problems, the dawn of the sixteenth day brought more bad news. As the cloud-smothered sun rose once more, casting its dull red glow over the desert, the vox-link began to erupt with anxious chatter. The intercom system aboard *Foe-Breaker* did likewise.

"There must be millions of them!" yelled Bullseye Dietz. "There's no beating numbers like that, sir. They won't be on foot, not moving at that speed."

Dietz wasn't wrong. Orks were closing in on them. Judging by the dark line that had appeared in the southeast with the coming of day, there were far too many of them to engage. Raising his head so that he could peer through his tank's vision blocks, van Droi looked again, hoping that somehow his mind had played a trick on him, that it had exaggerated the size of the enemy force.

It hadn't.

The horizon was seething with them. How close were they? Between the heat haze, the dust and the mirage-line, it was practically impossible to tell. That they were visible at all, van Droi decided, meant they were too damned close by far.

The greenskin host had moved up during the hours of darkness, unnoticed by exhausted, overheated, dehydrated men more intent on fighting sleep and sickness than fighting the enemies of mankind.

The Cadians were being chased down. Perhaps this greenskin war party had stumbled onto their tracks, following them out from the drop-ship crashsite, easily tracing them by the deep furrows the tanks made in the sand. Now, the prey was in sight.

"Nails," said van Droi, "keep her bloody speed up. And I want to know the moment you feel anything out of order, the slightest jink or engine stutter, any give in the shocks or the drive train. You got that? Let's not have a repeat of what happened to Siemens. We won't have time to frak about with repairs."

"Don't you worry, boss," replied Nails. "We're *sympatico*, this girl and me. She won't let us down. *Sympatico*, says I."

It took a lot to faze Karl "Nails" Nalzigg. He had earned his nickname the hard way back in the days before he had joined van Droi's crew. He had earned a few medals to go with it, too. Van Droi wished he shared his driver's easy confidence, but *Foe-Breaker* had suffered engine trouble twice already in the days since planetfall. Not her fault, of course.

Van Droi's old girl was only as prone to stalling as any of the other machines. With every passing hour, another would stop dead, refusing to start again until the contacts on its engines were properly cleared of the red dust.

To van Droi's knowledge, there was only a single exception.

Wulfe's old crate hadn't stalled once in all the time since the crash. She might look her age, thought van Droi, but *Last Rites II* had already proved that she'd got what it takes under the engine covers.

He hadn't mentioned it to Wulfe, but, of all the tanks assigned to replace the losses from Palmeros, van Droi had hand-picked the Mars-Alpha pattern Leman Russ out for the sergeant personally. Wulfe had taken the loss of his old machine badly. What kind of tanker, after all, could ride into battle time after time in the same tank, come out alive when so many around him died, and not feel some kind of special bond with her? It was exactly the way van Droi felt about *Foe-Breaker*.

His choice of replacement tank for Wulfe seemed to have backfired, though. The rugged sergeant hadn't taken to *Last Rites II* at all. In fact, he seemed to think van Droi had assigned him the new tank out of spite. Van Droi wanted to believe it was simply a matter of time, that Wulfe would come around soon enough, but, with the ork host tailing them, time looked like it might be up. How fast were the ork machines chasing them? There would be buggies in their hundreds. Assault bikes, too, perhaps. Might they even have air support? Bombers? Greenskins were certainly insane enough to fly in such dangerous skies.

A red light began flickering on the vox-board by van Droi's left shoulder. He turned in his command seat, flipped the toggle that turned the light green, and said, "10th Company Command here. Go ahead."

"Tenth, this is Regiment," said Colonel Stromm. "It looks like we're caught between a rock and a hard place. Have you looked south-east recently?"

"I have, sir," said van Droi. "Don't like the view much. Very difficult to estimate party strength given distance and conditions, but I think it's fair to say we're a little outnumbered. Assuming the majority of those green-skins are on wheels, they could well catch us by midday."

"The galaxy does like to stack the odds against us, doesn't it, lieutenant?" said Stromm.

"No glory in easy victories, sir. Still, a man should know his limits."

"Or in this case," replied Stromm, "the limits of his machines. I think... Hold on a moment, lieutenant."

Stromm cut the link. A few seconds later, the same light on van Droi's vox-board started flashing again. He hit the toggle. "Sir?"

"Sorry about that, van Droi," said Stromm. "Just got word from our scouts. I'll let you judge for yourself whether it's good or bad. He's reporting a massive dust storm up ahead. Point your magnoculars a few degrees east of our current heading. You can just about make it out."

"It's going to hit?"

"Soon, apparently. It's moving fast. If we cut south-east we can probably escape the worst of it, but—"

"But it'll put us within easy striking range of the orks at our back, sir. By the blasted Eye!"

"You said it, lieutenant. I'm not about to order our lads into a battle we won't survive without a damned good reason. I say we head straight into the storm. Take our chances. If anything, it might serve to cover our tracks. We might actually lose the bastards. What do you say?"

It's a ballsy move, thought van Droi. There's plenty that could go wrong. On the other hand...

"The machine-spirits aren't going to like it, sir," he said. "I'd put money on mechanical failures. Any estimates on how long the storm will last? We won't be able to see a damned thing while we're in there. If we move at all, it'll have to be very slowly."

"There's no way to say how long, van Droi," voxed Stromm. "The environmental summaries the Mechanicus issued during warp transit painted a pretty bleak picture. Some storms last a few hours, others last days, even weeks."

"That's one hell of a gamble, sir."

"Are you much of a gambling man, lieutenant?"

"I guess I am today," said van Droi.

"That's what I thought. Let's roll the dice and hope for the best. And may the Emperor's luck be with us. Stromm out."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Colonel Stromm ordered his column to a complete stop as it was hit by the fringes of the coming dust storm. Visibility had dropped to about fifty metres already. The air around the Imperial machines was dark with veils of gusting sand, and the wind howled, rocking the vehicles on their suspension. The sky was gone from view. On the colonel's orders, anxious men emerged from hatches and cabin doors with their faces goggled and masked, their bodies covered as much as possible against the stinging assault of the hard red grains.

Their voices didn't travel far. Words already muffled by rebreather masks were snatched away by the rising storm. Van Droi was forced to shout at the top of his voice. "Hurry it up. I want all the tanks chained together before it gets any worse out here. Come on. Only a few minutes left. Work faster."

The Gunheads hauled heavy steel chains from the stowage bins on the rear of each tank and worked hard to attach them to the towing pegs at the front and back of their machines.

"Twenty metres between each tank," shouted van Droi. He wished he had a vox-amp handy. The bead he wore in his right ear linked him to his tank commanders, but the crews didn't wear such advanced tech. They took their orders through their tanks' intercom systems. There was no time for van Droi to return to *Foe-Breaker* and dig out a vox-amp now, though. The winds were really picking up. The men worked quickly despite their thirst and fatigue. Some struggled through bouts of coughing that doubled them over in pain and discomfort, but they fought through it to get the job done. It was just as well they did. In the few minutes it took to link all the tanks together, the storm had become incredibly fierce. Visibility dropped another ten metres. Then another. Then another. Van Droi could only just make out the red silhouette of the tanks to the front and rear of his own. The wind was buffeting him so hard that it almost pitched him from his feet as he reached up to climb back into his turret.

After wrestling his way up *Foe-Breaker*'s back, he dropped down into her basket, slamming and locking the hatch above him. Hitting the intercom, he said, "Are we all buttoned up, lads?"

"Tighter than a governor's daughter, sir," said Waller. He had been van Droi's loader for more than ten years, a compact, ruddy-faced man, good at his work, but a truculent devil when he had a bit of drink in him.

"Right then," said van Droi. "We wait for Stromm's lot to finish, then roll forward nice and slow."

Seated out of eyesight behind his crew, he allowed himself a small shake of the head. This is a bit of bloody madness, he thought. If it weren't for the orks at our backs...

"Van Droi to Colonel Stromm," he voxed. "Can you hear me, sir?"

"Not too well, van Droi," said Stromm, "but go ahead." The clarity of the transmission was terrible. The dust-storm had brought with it a shocking drop in the quality of short-range comms. If it got much worse, van Droi thought, they might lose comms altogether. That would ground them here completely until the storm passed.

"My crates are linked and ready. Awaiting your order to move out, sir."

"Hold on for another minute, van Droi. The last of my lot are getting hooked together now. Can't believe how bad it is out there. Throne help those poor lads in the soft-tops. I hope the extra tarps will be enough to protect them."

Van Droi grimaced. He was worried too. It hadn't been possible to squeeze everyone from the open-backed trucks and halftracks into sealed cabins and the troop compartments of the Chimeras, but they had done their best. As few men as possible were left to endure the storm in the less protected vehicles. They had been given as much extra cover as was available to protect them, but Van Droi had no idea just how much worse the storm was likely to get.

"I'm sure they'll be all right, sir," he said, managing to sound far more positive than he felt.

"One moment, lieutenant."

There was a pause and a flicker of vox-board lights. Then the colonel returned. "The last of my machines has been linked up, van Droi. Have your tanks lead us out. Keep the speed to a steady ten kilometres per hour, no more, no less."

"Ten it is, sir. Giving the order now."

"Very good, Armour. Stromm, out."

"You all ready for this?" van Droi asked his crew.

The half-hearted grunts that came back to him over the intercom spoke volumes about how his crew felt riding blind. There was no hiding their anxiety.

Van Droi flicked over to the company command channel and said, "Company Commander to all tanks. Confirm readiness to deploy."

"Spear Leader confirms," came the static-riddled response from Sergeant Rhaimes.

Spear One's confirmation followed, then, Spear Two's. So it went until all eight of van Droi's surviving tank commanders had called in.

"Keep your crates absolutely steady at ten per hour. Stay on this heading. I don't want any accidents. *Cold Deliverance* has point. Corporal Muller, lead us out."

One by one, the tanks of 10th Company started to edge forward blindly, tow chains giving out metallic groans as they went taut.

The rumble of *Foe-Breaker*'s engine deepened, and she lurched forward gently as her gears caught, feeding power to the massive axle that turned her drive sprocket. The heavy, cog-like wheel turned, iron teeth pulling link after link towards it, driving the tank forward slowly and steadily. The tank directly in front of *Foe-Breaker* — Corporal Fuchs' *Rage Imperius* — was practically invisible now. Van Droi checked the rear vision blocks and found that the tank behind — Corporal Kurtz's *The Adamantine* — was just as difficult to see. The screech of grinding metal sounded over the howling wind and the rumble of the engine as hooks took the strain against towing pegs.

"Keep her real steady, won't you, Nails?" said van Droi.

"Sure thing, sir," replied the grizzled old driver. His voice was clear. The tank's intercom system wasn't affected by the storm in the same way the vox-link was. "As steady as Waller's hands after a few bottles of the rough stuff."

Van Droi frowned. That wasn't very steady at all.

Lenck's men were far more worried than he was, and they weren't beyond showing it. As the *New Champion* rolled forward, they grumbled and griped on the intercom, snapping at each other, letting their nerves get the better of them. Lenck tuned them out.

As the storm intensified, gusts battering against his tank, rocking her as if she weighed far less than her sixty-three tonnes, he sat back in his command seat, idly playing with the cruelly serrated knife he kept in his boot. It was a non-regulation blade, officially forbidden, but it had saved his neck a few times back in the reserves, particularly when bigger men came looking for him, burning with anger, ready to pulp him for cheating them out of money or bedding their women. Most lost the will to fight after they'd been cut a few times.

Lenck rated himself with a blade.

He hadn't needed to use his little equaliser since joining the 81st Armoured, but he was sure there would come a time. Sooner or later, someone would come looking for him with a mind to do

some damage. He had a feeling it would be Sergeant Wulfe. Most of the men in 10th Company were younger than Lenck, recent reinforcements who looked up to him for one reason or another. It was something different for each, but Lenck could always find it and use it to his advantage. For some, it was his skill with women that they envied. They wanted to share in the secret of his success, not realising there *was* no secret; he was simply better than they were. For others, it was his ability to procure the things without which some men found Guard life unbearable, from extra smokes or booze all the way up to restricted meds. Before that damned drop-ship had ditched him on the red sands, Lenck had enjoyed a nice little arrangement with a certain medicae officer whose sinful appetites he had threatened to reveal to a member of the Ministorum. The man would have faced execution for sure. Throne knew where the bloody clown was now. Maybe he had made it down on another ship. Maybe he was dead. No matter. When Lenck got out of this mess — and he knew he would, for if he believed in anything, it was that he had been born lucky — he would find another source. Everyone could be bent to his will one way or another.

That thought brought him to the curious matter of Victor Dunst, and he felt a rare flash of irritation. Dunst, whoever he was, seemed to be the reason that Sergeant Wulfe had it in for him. Lenck wanted details, sure that the knowledge would give him the upper hand, but he had no idea how to get them. Wulfe's crew seemed to dislike him just as much as their precious commander did, especially that bastard Holtz, the one with the mashed-up groxburger for a face.

“Ain’t you listening, Lenck?” growled Varnuss over the intercom.

“No, I’m not,” said Lenck, “but don’t let that stop you.”

The big loader turned to scowl, tattoos on his neck and shoulders rippling as the muscles under them shifted, but he changed his mind when he saw the way Lenck was stroking his knife. He turned back to his station and muttered, “I said it’s getting worse out there, not better. Look through the vision blocks. It’s like night-time, only its all red. We shouldn’t be moving at all.”

“Least we’re not out in front like *Cold Deliverance*,” said Riesmann, chipping in. “Second in line suits me fine. I wouldn’t want to be on Muller’s crew for love nor money.”

“And that’s saying something,” Lenck quipped, “since you’ve always had so damned little of either. Relax, both of you. That’s an order. You don’t hear Hobbs complaining, do you?”

“He only stopped “cos you threatened to fix it so everyone in the army group thinks he’s a fruit,” replied Riesmann sourly.

“Right,” laughed Lenck, “and the same goes for you. Think of it like this: so long as we’re stuck in this storm, van Droi and that flag-waving fool of an infantry colonel have enough to worry about. We’re not out in front. Hobbs is doing all the driving. All we can do is sit back and ride it out.”

The others didn’t reply. They listened to the wind for a moment as it screamed around the edges of the tank. Lenck could hear the tow chains creaking. Riesmann and Varnuss glanced at each other nervously.

“What’re they saying on the vox?” Riesmann asked.

“Nothing,” Lenck replied.

“You sure? The lights are on. Someone’s talking.”

“It’s just interference,” said Lenck. He reached into one of the stowage bins and pulled out a green metal jerry can. It was much smaller than the ones they had been given to piss in. He unscrewed the cap, tipped the can to his mouth, and drank.

“Hey,” said Varnuss, “what’s that? If you’ve been holding back water...”

“It’s not water,” said Lenck smugly. “It’s a little something special I’ve been keeping aside.” He tossed his head. “Damn it goes down rough. Good kick though.”

Varnus and Riesmann half-turned. It was the most they could manage in the incredibly cramped turret basket. Riesmann sniffed the air and said, “That’s liquor. You’d better share it out, Lenck. We look after you, you look after us, remember?”

“Teah,” rumbled Varnuss, “that’s what you said, Lenck.”

"I know what I said, you dolts. Give me a bloody break. Would I have shown you at all if I didn't intend to share?"

He lifted the jerrycan and handed it to Riesmann, who took it greedily and raised it to his lips. Before he could gulp any down, however, *New Champion of Cerbera* skidded forward with a sudden surge, and then stopped. Her front suspension strained, groaning as it was compressed to its limits while her rear lifted into the air. Then there was a sharp clang that shook the whole tank, and the front suspension sprang upwards again.

The men inside were thrown from their seats. Lenck just managed to avoid splitting his head wide open on the corner of one of the stowage bins. Varnuss wasn't so lucky. Blood spilled from a deep cut in his crown.

Riesmann was thrown painfully against the manual traverse wheel, grunting as the metal handle dug into his side. He spilled Lenck's liquor all over his fatigues.

"What the frak was that?" shouted Lenck. "Hobbs, what in the bloody warp just happened?"

Fear and shock raised the pitch of Hobbs' voice as he replied over the intercom, "By the frakkin" Eye, Lenck. I think... I think we just lost *Cold Deliverance*."

Wulfe had to strain his ears to make out the lieutenant's voice as it said, "All tanks, halt! That's an order. Stop where you are. Do not move an inch." He didn't waste any time.

"Dead stop, Metzger," he snapped over the intercom.

Last Rites II ground to an immediate halt.

"What's going on, sarge?" asked Holtz, pressing his eyes to the main gun's scope.

"Quiet," said Wulfe. He squinted with effort as he listened carefully to the voice on the vox-link. After a moment, he said, "It's *Cold Deliverance*. She's gone quiet. From the sounds of it, she dropped."

"Into what?" asked Siegler, turning to stare at Wulfe.

"We won't know till the storm's passed," said Holtz. "Will we?"

Wulfe was listening to the vox again. Then he said, "The *New Champion* called it in. From the sounds of it, the front tow peg snapped right off. Damned lucky she didn't go over, too."

"Or unlucky," grumbled Holtz, "depending on how you look at it."

Wulfe knew what he meant, but, if any of Muller's crew were still alive, it was just as well Lenck's tank hadn't gone over.

"What's van Droi saying?" asked Siegler nervously.

Wulfe listened for a another moment. He shook his head miserably as he answered, "Nothing we can do. So long as the storm continues at this intensity, we can't move a bloody muscle. Muller and his boys will need to wait it out like the rest of us."

"But they'll need medical attention!" piped Siegler.

"I know that, Sig," snapped Wulfe, "but look outside the tank, damn it. You think we can help them in this?"

Siegler looked down at his hands, obviously upset, and Wulfe felt immediately contrite. He leaned forward and patted the loader's broad, powerful shoulder.

"Sorry, Sig," he said. "I know you're just worried about them. I am, too."

Warp-damn it all, he thought. We can't keep taking knocks like this. Where in the blasted Eye are the rest of the army group?

Forcing calm into his voice, he told his crew, "Let's keep it together. Gunheads never give up, remember? We keep fighting. It's what we do."

Siegler looked slightly mollified. He said, "Maybe Borscht's ghost will help us again."

Wulfe's blood turned to ice-water.

"What did you just say?"

"Damn it, Siegler," Holtz hissed. "I frakking told you about that."

Siegler seemed to realise the gravity of the mistake he had just made. His eyes flashed from Wulfe to Holtz in a panic. "Sorry, Holtz! It just came out."

Wulfe turned to Holtz. "Explain yourself, corporal. And that's not a request. It's an order."

Holtz shook his head and sighed. "What did you expect, sarge? Did you think we were too stupid to put it together? That canyon on Palmeros, you losing it and stopping the tank for no reason. Then Strieber's lads getting hamstrung by that landmine. And there was the medicae report. Old Borsch died at almost the exact moment you started hearing a voice on the intercom that no one else could."

Wulfe slumped in his chair.

"You knew all this time?" he muttered. "Why the hell didn't you put in for a transfer? Your sergeant thinks he saw a ghost, for Throne's sake. Metzger, did you know about this?"

The driver answered in a sullen tone, "Afraid so, sarge. It was your warp-dreams mostly. You did a lot of shouting in your sleep while we were between systems."

Wulfe was dumbfounded.

"We don't think you've lost it," said Siegler.

"Right," said Holtz. "In fact, we were pissed off that you didn't tell us yourself. I mean, the ghost didn't just save you. It saved all of us. We could have prayed for Borsch's soul together. Viess took it pretty badly. Said you should have trusted us more."

Wulfe saw how foolish he had been to think they wouldn't put two and two together. "I couldn't tell you the truth. I wasn't sure it was the truth myself. I still haven't come to terms with it. Not really. If it ever got out... I don't want van Droi to think I've lost it. I don't want to lose my command."

"You really *have* lost it if you think the lieutenant doesn't already suspect the truth," said Holtz. "I mean, he never really pushed for a full account, did he? He just accepted that groxshit report you submitted. No questions asked."

Wulfe thought about that. It was true. He had been too relieved at the time to question the lieutenant's easy acceptance of the report.

"Who else knows?" he asked.

Holtz shrugged. "No one but us, Viess, and probably van Droi."

"It *has* to stay that way," said Wulfe. "You all know how well it would go down with the commissars."

"You gonna tell us what actually happened then?" asked Holtz, hoping to bargain.

Wulfe didn't get the chance to respond. The vox-board on his left started blinking. It was the company command channel.

"Sword Leader here, sir," said Wulfe. "Go ahead."

He listened to the lieutenant's transmission. It crackled with static, but he noted how much the vox-signal had improved in the last few minutes. Then he toggled back over to the intercom system.

"Well?" Holtz asked.

"The storm's clearing," said Wulfe. "Van Droi wants all vehicles checked for damage. I'm going up front. It's time to find out what happened to Muller and his men."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The wind was still howling, and the air dragged at his clothes and hurled sand at him with stinging force, but Gossefried van Droi knew he couldn't wait any longer. If there were men still alive in Corporal Muller's tank, they would need extrication and medical attention as soon as possible. Now if he could just find the bloody thing.

"Here, sir!" yelled a trooper barely visible as a shadow up ahead. The wind snatched at the man's words, but van Droi could just make them out. He hurried over.

"Over here!" said the man as van Droi closed. Others had heard and gathered towards him. "Careful!" he told them. "There's a sheer drop."

Van Droi halted at the man's side and, peering through his goggles, read the name strip above the left breast pocket of his fatigues. It said Brunner, one of Richter's crew.

"Show me, Brunner," said van Droi. Brunner moved forward carefully for a couple of metres, guiding van Droi. Then he pointed down towards the area in front of his feet. Van Droi moved level with him and looked down to find himself standing right on the edge of a sheer drop.

Brunner directed his attention to the ground on the left, and van Droi saw two tank tracks leading straight to the edge. Damn it, he thought. Ten kilometres per hour was too fast, after all. They'd have been over before they could stop, and the chains weren't made to suspend a tank's full weight.

He squinted down into the shadows, but the drop was too deep to show him anything solid. The storm was still cloaking the area enough to hamper vision at that range, but it was weakening all the time. What would be revealed when it had passed completely? Had the orks followed them in? Were they closing on their backs even now? There was nowhere to run. Forward progress was blocked by the edge of the escarpment. How far did it extend to left and right?

The answers would have to wait. Van Droi needed to speak to Colonel Stromm at once. He ordered everyone back to their tanks in the meantime, and then returned to *Foe-Breaker*. Once he was inside and the hatches were all locked, he flipped a switch on his vox-board and said, "Armour Leader to Colonel Stromm, come in, please."

"Go ahead, lieutenant. What's the situation?"

"Not good, sir. As I feared, one of our tanks took a dive. There's a precipice about ten or twelve metres in front of my lead tank. No idea how deep it runs, sir. The bottom isn't visible in all this dust. I'm guessing it's deep. Deep enough to be a big problem, anyway."

"Do we know its extent? If the orks are right behind us..."

"There's no way of knowing right now, sir. The storm is moving on quickly, though, so I expect we'll have decent visibility in half an hour or less. Suggest we wait it out until then."

"Of course, lieutenant. I don't want any more accidents. Could any of your men, the ones in the tank... could they have survived?"

Van Droi thought about this for a second before answering. For all the reliability of the Leman Russ — a design that had barely changed in many thousands of years — the turret basket was still a dangerous place to be. The centre of the hot, cramped, noisy little space was usually dominated by the huge mechanism of the main gun. On one side of this sat the gunner, on the other sat the loader. Close behind the gunner, the commander sat within easy reach of everything he needed: maps, comms equipment, small arms and more. What made it so dangerous were the stowage boxes bolted to every surface, their metal edges and corners responsible for more wounds than enemy fire. The

locking levers for the hatches weren't much better. They stuck out like blunted metal barbs. Veterans got used to this and reported fewer injuries with each passing year of service, but the new meat learned the hard way.

"Chances are, sir, that most of the men inside are badly injured," said van Droi. "More than likely there's at least one dead."

"But you think there will be survivors?"

"Can't really say at this juncture, sir. It depends on the height of the drop."

Stromm paused, leaving van Droi to listen to the white noise that filled his right ear for a moment. "You know, van Droi, that if the orks are close by, I can't give you the time you need."

Van Droi shook his head. "I know that, sir. If there's any chance at all, though, that some of them are stuck in there, I owe it to them to get them out."

He was actually thinking that Stromm's Fighting 98th owed it to them, but he didn't say so. A second later, he was glad he hadn't.

"My boys and I will do everything we can to help, van Droi, but time really is of the essence here. Hold for one second."

Stromm broke the link, and then re-connected a few seconds later. "Take a look outside, lieutenant," he said. "It looks like the storm has all but passed."

Van Droi craned his neck and peered through the forward vision block set in the ceiling just above his station. He could see the tank in front of him in sharp detail, the treads on her windward side piled high with red sand. Beyond her, he thought he glimpsed the horizon and... could it be? Was that the pale silhouette of a jutting mountain range? It was difficult to be sure. Behind the thick brown clouds in the west, there were hints of the sun moving lower, but the day was still hot, and the mirage line shimmered. If there really were mountains over there...

Suddenly, something else occurred to van Droi. The orks! He spun to look through the rear vision blocks, but *The Adamantine* was blocking his view.

"Any sign of the orks, sir?" he voxed to Stromm. "Have you got anyone checking the rear?"

Again there was a pause while Stromm talked to his people. Then, "No sign of the filthy beasts, lieutenant. I can't believe we lost them so easily, but eyes at the rear report no sign of them. Nothing whatsoever to our backs."

By the Emperor, thought van Droi. Could it really have worked? Had the storm covered their tracks and sent the orks off somewhere else?

"You still there, lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry. I was just wondering where in the warp the buggers went. May I suggest we get scouts out looking for a way down from here, sir? If we want to continue north-east, we'll need a slope or a trail down from this ridge. And, with your permission, I'd like to have some of my men abseil down to *Cold Deliverance*."

"You have it, lieutenant. Be quick. I want us all moving again as soon as possible. You need anything else, just let me know. Stromm, out."

Muller's tank lay belly up at the bottom of a two-hundred-metre drop, and van Droi knew as soon as he saw her that the chances of any of Muller's men surviving were next to none.

With five other men, all hand-picked, he rappelled down to the rocky desert floor and moved closer to observe the results of the fall. The barrel of the main gun was crumpled and bent, and the secondary weapons had suffered such an impact that pieces of them lay scattered around the inverted hull.

Her turret wasn't even visible, buried deep in sand and loose rock. No one would be crawling from its hatches.

He directed his team to move in and check for signs of life. Sergeant Wulfe was among them and immediately clambered up onto the machine's upturned belly. He removed his laspistol from its

thigh holster, lay flat against the tank's belly armour and began tapping out a message in cipher-one. It was an old code, a series of taps and pauses that the Cadian military still taught to cadets in their first year, though there was little cause to use it given the prevalence of vox-comms. Van Droi was amazed that Wulfe remembered the code at all. It had been over twenty years since the man had been a cadet. Reaching back to memories of his own days in training, it took van Droi a moment to unscramble the message. It was the same code, repeated over and over again: *Survivors, respond. Survivors, respond.*

Wulfe pressed his ear to metal for about a minute, after which his movements took on a distinctly urgent quality. Noting this, van Droi moved closer, but he didn't dare speak. This was no time to distract the sergeant.

Wulfe's message changed: *Number of casualties?*

Van Droi saw him press his ear to the armour again, and then, after a short pause, tap a single word: *Wait.*

Leaping down from the belly of the tank, Wulfe marched straight over to van Droi.

"Three dead, one alive, sir. It's the driver, Private Krausse."

"Status?" asked van Droi.

"Not good, sir. Lots of broken bones. Lacerations."

"Damn," spat van Droi. "I think we both know how this is going to turn out, Wulfe."

The sergeant looked at the ground. "Frakking hell, sir. We can't."

"We both know that's not our call. Stromm's the man in charge. Don't hate him for it. He has to think about the rest of us."

"Can't we at least try, sir?"

"I wish we could, Oskar," said van Droi heavily, "but with our limited resources, it would take the rest of this day and half of the next to cut him out. And that's cutting where the armour is thinnest."

Van Droi couldn't see Wulfe's face. It was masked and goggled, like his own, against the airborne dust, but he knew the sergeant's expression would be much the same as his: bloody miserable.

"Get yourself and the others back up to your tanks. Stromm will have orders for us to move out soon. His people will have found a trail down for the vehicles by now. Do something else for me, will you? Tell the others... Tell them there were no survivors."

"You want me to lie, sir?" asked Wulfe. There was a knife-edge of bitterness in his voice.

"I want you to think of what's best, sergeant," snapped van Droi. "Morale is bastard low as it is. So you go up there and you tell them no one made it. And we move on. Is that clear?"

Wulfe snapped his boots together. The tone of his voice became flat and hard as he said, "Crystal clear, sir. My apologies. I should not have questioned you."

"No, Oskar," said van Droi. "No apologies from you. Just... do as I've asked, will you?"

"Of course, sir. You can count on me."

With that, Wulfe turned, gathered the other four men together and led them back up the ropes to the waiting tanks above.

Van Droi hauled himself up onto *Cold Deliverance*, frowning under his mask at how dizzy the effort made him feel. He wasn't drinking enough water each day, not by far. Who could blame him? The purification kits didn't do much to take away the bitter saline taste of the processed urine. Food rations were also running very low. He must have lost a dozen kilograms over the last ten days, if not more.

He removed a finely-crafted autopistol from the holster at his hip, and lay down on the upturned belly of the tank in the spot Wulfe had occupied a moment earlier. With the heel of his pistol he began tapping a message to the man trapped inside: *Company commander here.*

He listened for a response. After a few seconds, there came a series of clangs. In his mind, van Droi translated the beats and pauses: *Understood. Greetings.*

Van Droi tapped again: *Extrication impossible.*

There was a much longer pause this time before the response came back. This time, a single word: *Understood.*

Do you have a weapon? van Droi tapped.

Yes, tapped Krausse. There was a long pause, then he added, *Will use.*

Van Droi wanted to tap the word *sorry*, but something stayed his hand. Instead, he tapped, *Go with the Emperor, son.*

He listened carefully, ear pressed hard to the thick metal below him, but the tank driver had stopped tapping back. There was only a single last clang from inside the overturned machine. It was the sound of a weapon discharging. Van Droi didn't need to decrypt it to know that it meant goodbye.

As he scrambled down from the tank, walked over to the rope, and began the tiring climb back up, the lieutenant's heart felt like it weighed about sixty tonnes itself. Damn it all, he thought. Who would be a bloody leader of men?

At the top of the rope, arms reached out to help him over, and he stood to find himself facing a row of his tankers clad in masks and goggles. They stood to attention as he rose and dusted off his fatigues.

“Why aren’t you lot in your tanks?” he asked them. “Have Stromm’s lot found a way down yet?”

It was the burly Sergeant Rhaimes who stepped forward and said, “They’ve found a lot more than that, sir. Switch your vox over to band nine.”

Van Droi huffed impatiently and lifted a finger to his vox bead. He switched it to band nine and froze. He could hardly believe his ears. There was rapid chatter bouncing back and forth. One of the voices was immediately familiar, the gruff but well-educated voice of Colonel Stromm.

The other, however, was new to van Droi, and that in itself was significant.

“Sentinel patrol ident tag nine-theta-nine-six-five confirms your last transmission, colonel. Relaying it back to field headquarters. Standby.”

Van Droi gasped. He moved towards Rhaimes.

“Is that what I think it is?” he demanded.

He didn’t need to see Rhaimes’ face to know he was smiling as he said, “Bet your balls on it, sir. A Sentinel patrol! It’s Exolon. They must have secured a base nearby.”

Van Droi suddenly felt like leaping into the air. “By the bloody Golden Throne! They made it down after all. But I can barely hear them on this bead. Everyone back to your tanks on the double. Get ready to move out as soon as we have instructions.”

The men saluted and trotted off at speed. Van Droi felt better than he had in days. Salvation at last. He had been sure they would all die out here one way or another. But now... hope!

Inside his turret, using the more powerful vox-caster there, he heard the communications from the Sentinel patrol coming in much louder and clearer.

“Colonel Stromm,” said the voice, “I have orders for you from Major General Bergen. You are to move due east, proceed down from the escarpment, rendezvous with this patrol at the base of the cliffs and follow us back to the base at Balkar. Confirm.”

Balkar! thought van Droi. I can’t believe we’re this far out.

He thought back to General deViers’ briefing sessions. From Balkar, it was a short journey eastwards to the last known location of *The Fortress of Arrogance*. From there, the Mechanicus ship in orbit above the planet would be signalled. A recovery craft would be sent for the tank. Then it was back to Hadron base for extrication by the Navy. Throne above, things were looking up!

Suddenly, with the thought of extrication, the lieutenant's mind was yanked roughly back to Private Krausse, the driver trapped inside *Cold Deliverance*.

Extrication impossible.

Van Droi had tapped the message.

Extrication frakking impossible!

There had been no time to save Krausse, no time to wait while fuel and rations were burned up, no time to stop, hoping the orks wouldn't happen across them as they tried to rescue one of their own. It would have put everyone at risk. Van Droi had been sure he was doing the right thing. Only now, suddenly, it seemed that there *was* time. But there was no life left to save.

Van Droi had made that call. Weariness and the weight of his command hit him again like a sledgehammer, and he sat at the rear of the Vanquisher's turret with his hands pressed tight to his face.

By the blasted Eye of Terror!

Absently, with that fraction of his awareness that wasn't drowning in guilt, he heard Stromm's voice again on the vox-link. The colonel confirmed the major general's orders with the Sentinel pilot who was relaying them. Then Stromm contacted each of his officers and gave them his instructions.

To van Droi, he said, "Damned good news, eh, lieutenant? After all we've been through."

"It certainly is, sir," said van Droi. "My tanks are ready to move out on your command."

Stromm had served a long time in the Guard. He knew when an officer wasn't telling him something. "You all right, van Droi? You sound a bit less ecstatic than I would've expected given the circ — Oh! The tank. I'm sorry, van Droi. In all the excitement..."

"That's all right, sir. Of course, I couldn't be happier about making contact with the rest of the army group."

"Survivors?"

"No, sir," said van Droi wearily. "No survivors, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry, lieutenant. Of course, they'll be honoured properly when we get to Balkar. I imagine there will be plenty of decorations after the campaign. Throne knows, our lads deserve them. We've had a devil of a time out here, van Droi. Good men lost. But we came through it, man. We came through. The confessors will organise a service for those that didn't."

Van Droi knew they would, but it did nothing to comfort him. Once Stromm had signed off, he opened a link to his tank commanders on the company channel. There were only seven of them now, eight tanks left including his own.

"I want a double column. Two fours. *Foe-Breaker* front left. *Old Smashbones* right. We roll east behind the colonel's Chimeras. Keep your eyes open for trouble. You know the drill. I know you're all tired, but we're almost home. See it through."

When each of the tanks had confirmed and rumbled into position, he gave the order and they all moved out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Balkar, like all of the old Imperial ruins out in the equatorial desert, was a fortified base built on a rocky upthrust that had endured the onslaught of the wind-borne sands. The orks had moved in as soon as the Imperial forces had retreated but, in all those years, they had done little to change the base other than to fill its streets with rusting junk. Several of the structures, mostly barracks buildings and concrete garages, had collapsed in on themselves under the weight of the sand that had accumulated on their broad roofs. Other structures had once been decorated with proud Imperial iconography, but the winds had eaten it away to almost nothing, sandblasting the exposed surfaces smooth. The orks had subsequently covered them in childishly rendered glyphs and impenetrable scrawls of alien gibberish.

Much of the metal used in the construction of the base was flaking away. The rest, anything that the orks had thought to utilise for the modification of their strange war machines, had been stripped out, leaving bunkers without doors and barracks buildings without shutters.

To anyone looking down from the air, the base would have appeared hexagonal in plan, though not symmetrical, designed with uneven sides to take full advantage of all the space afforded by the broad, flat rock underneath. There were a number of wells, cut straight down, very deep into the ground. Unfortunately for the 18th Army Group, they contained no water. They must have dried up long ago. The base's former occupants — the great greenskin horde that Major General Killian's men had fought so hard to eliminate — had been using them as latrines. Killian had ordered them sealed.

It was the topic of water discipline that Colonel Vinnemann was discussing with his staff when a runner from Major General Bergen's office interrupted, bringing him some rare good news. Vinnemann's expression said it all as he sat listening, a mixture of disbelief and joy lighting his battle-scarred features. The look was mirrored on the faces of his staff officers.

“Say that again, son,” he told the runner. The words had gushed out of the gasping lad’s mouth. Vinnemann wasn’t sure he had heard them correctly.

“Lieutenant van Droi calling for you on the vox, sir. He and his 10th Company are heading towards our position with the remnants of Colonel Stromm’s 98th Mechanised Infantry Regiment. The major general thought you would want to know, sir.”

Vinnemann clapped his hands together.

“Did you hear that, Alex?” he asked his adjutant. The young man nodded, smiling. Vinnemann barked out a laugh. “Fine officer, that van Droi. Fine officer! I knew he’d get his boys through. Come on, you lot. We must welcome them!” He turned to the runner. “Which direction are they approaching from, son?”

“From the south-east, sir,” replied the young man. He, too, was smiling, infected by the colonel’s open joy.

“They’re about two hours out. They’ll enter through the south gates. The Sentinel pilots who picked up their transmissions are guiding them in.”

“Outstanding,” said Vinnemann. He grasped the head of his cane and struggled to his feet, wincing for a moment with the pain that shot through his back. It would soon be time for more blasted injections, but he wouldn’t let the thought of that spoil this wonderful moment. His 10th Company had survived. Gossefried’s Gunheads were returning to the fold. Say what you liked about them — and certain officers had plenty to say — they were a bloody resilient lot.

When General deViers ordered Vinnemann's regiment east to secure *The Fortress of Arrogance* at last, every single one of his companies would be accounted for. *Rolling Thunder* would be deploying in full strength. It would do wonders for the regiment's morale.

From his cupola, Wulfe saw the walls of the base appear through the dusty pink haze in the distance. They rose from atop a rocky mound with a gentle, easy gradient on one side, and they were topped with watchtowers and weapons batteries. He could see long barrels protruding from the old-fashioned crenellations, even at this distance. Home at last, he thought, for home, to him, was with the rest of the regiment. Sure, there was competition, even the odd bitter rivalry, between the companies of the 81st. What regiment didn't endure such things? But they were all tankers together in the end, and all of them were Cadians, and therefore brothers when it came to the fight for mankind's survival. It would be good to see old Vinnemann again, to know that the man was still up front, leading as few other officers of his rank dared to do. Wulfe was surprised at how much that thought suddenly meant to him. Lieutenant van Droi was a great man and company commander in own right — he was direct, honest and approachable, though he could be bastard hard at times — but Vinnemann was practically a legend among his men. His refusal to lie down and die when other men would certainly have done so epitomised the unrelenting spirit that *Rolling Thunder* was famous for.

"Can't believe we made it back to the rest of the pack," muttered Holtz over the intercom. "Never thought we'd live to see this."

"Can't wait to sleep in a proper bunk again," said Siegler.

Metzger was typically silent, concentrating on keeping *Last Rites II* in formation behind the tank in front as the walls of Balkar loomed ever larger in his vision slit.

"Do you think they'll have water and food waiting for us, sarge?" Siegler asked.

"They had bloody well better," griped Holtz. "I've been running on fumes for the last three days. I'll die if I have to drink recycled piss again. Fit to collapse, I am. Someone'll have to help me out of the hatch."

"I'm sure the Officio Logistica has taken our supply needs into consideration," said Wulfe. "Balkar is the launching point for the general's big gambit, right? He won't have left anything to chance. First thing I'll do after we dismount is find the mess hall. I'll bloody well faint if they try to debrief me first."

The others laughed at that. Even Metzger. No one would be trying to debrief *him*. Only the tank commanders would have to deal with that, and, as far as fainting was concerned, they all knew that their sergeant had only collapsed once in his life — that day so many years ago when an ork had cut his throat. Blood loss had knocked him unconscious, but the medic that had leapt onto the tank's turret to save him had got there just in time. That very medic, Wulfe later found out, had died a few days later, captured in a raid and tortured to death in a greenskin camp. A mop-up detail had found his body hanging from a makeshift gibbet, hands, feet and other parts lopped off. He had been taken while trying to save a wounded trooper on open ground.

Wulfe was still about the business of avenging him, and only death would ever make him stop. In that sense, he felt a great closeness with Colonel Vinnemann, though he had only ever spoken to the man twice in person. Vinnemann's never-ending quest to avenge his wife was well known.

Look at what he endures to pursue it, thought Wulfe, having heard stories of the endless pain the colonel suffered.

As the tanks and halftracks got closer and closer to Balkar, a strange noise began to cut into Wulfe's uplifted mood. It came from the rear of his tank, and Wulfe knew at once that something had gone wrong. Metzger reported over the intercom a moment later that the engine's temperature was increasing rapidly. Wulfe checked the rear vision blocks and saw thick black smoke pouring out of the back of his tank from beneath the metal engine covers.

"The blasted radiator has packed in," he told his crew. "Metzger, warp damn it, can we at least make it inside the gates? Tell me we can!"

Before the driver could answer, *Last Rites II* gave a great shudder and stopped dead in her tracks. Wulfe cursed so long and loud that he almost went hoarse. He watched the other vehicles move up from behind, come abreast of him, and then overtake. *New Champion of Cerbera* passed within a metre on the right. The vox board started blinking. Wulfe, thinking it must be van Droi, immediately opened the link.

"Oh dear, oh dear, sergeant," said a smug voice. "Looks like you've pushed the old girl too hard at last. Time she was put out to pasture, don't you think?"

"What the frak do you want, Lenck?" Wulfe growled back. "Just calling to gloat? Frivolous use of vox-communications during an operation... that's a punishable offence. Old Crusher would love to hear about that."

"Get over yourself, sergeant. I was just voxing to see if you and your men would like a lift into base. There's room on the track-guards. Can't have you sitting out here like idiots, embarrassing the lieutenant and the rest of the company like that."

Wulfe gritted his teeth. He would rather dance naked at the general's next banquet than let that weasel-faced son-of-a-bitch gloat over this for the rest of his hopefully short life. *Last Rites II* had been running smooth ever since they had left the crashed drop-ship. All the other tanks — *all* of them — had needed to stop sooner or later for field repairs, but not her.

So why in the warp had she chosen now to break down?

Wulfe smacked a fist against the inside of her turret and said, "Damn it, girl. Couldn't you have waited a few more kilometres?" Then he hit the transmit stud and said to Lenck, "Move on, corporal, before my gunner blows you into the hereafter."

"Such hostility, sergeant. Save it for the greenskins, why don't you? *New Champion* is moving on. Maybe we'll see you in the mess hall. We'll try to leave some food for you, but no promises. Lenck, out."

Wulfe cut the link and roared with frustration in his turret. "This stupid old bucket! She couldn't have picked a worse time! We'll be the laughing stock of the whole damned base."

"Yes she could," said Metzger. His voice was almost a growl.

"What?" said Wulfe. It was rare for Metzger to speak up, but it was the confrontational tone of his voice that really caught Wulfe by surprise.

"She could have picked a far worse time to give out on us, and you bloody know it, sarge. In fact, this old girl has lasted out longer than we had any right to ask. She's the last crate in the whole damned company to give out, and she waited right up until now, the safest moment since we crashed on this rock. So, I don't give a five-copper back-alley frak whether we're a laughing stock or not, I'm bloody glad to be her driver. And I reckon you ought to shake yourself." Wulfe was stunned.

"Yeah, I think so, too!" said Siegler with a firm nod of his head. Wulfe looked at Holtz. "Well?"

Holtz scratched his chin. "Three against one. I wouldn't change her for any other crate in the company, and that includes the lieutenant's Vanquisher. I can't think of any other way to put it, sarge: they just don't make them like this anymore. She ain't no beauty, but she'll do for me."

Wulfe leaned back against the turret wall, looking at both of the crewmen who shared the tiny space with him. Everyone on this crew had served in Wulfe's previous tank, though Metzger had only rolled out with her once before they'd had to abandon her. The first *Last Rites* had been something special, at least in Wulfe's eyes. It was easy to get attached to a machine that had saved your life so many times. Only her speed had let her down on that final day, when the clock was against her, and they had been forced to leave her behind. Wulfe realised now that his close affinity with the original *Last Rites* had blinded him to the worth of her replacement. *Last Rites II* might look like hell, but she was tougher than old boots. She had got them this far.

"Seems like this old girl has found a few fans," he said, "and I've been a bit unfair."

"Just a bit, sarge," said Siegler. Of the four-man crew, he had served with Wulfe the longest and the trust between them was strongest, not least because of Siegler's childlike loyalty. "*Last Rites* was a hard act to follow."

"She was," said Wulfe, "but you're right; I reckon this crate is overdue a bit of respect from me. One of you idiots should have told me I was out of order."

The looks both men gave him said they wouldn't have dared. Had his mood been so bad recently? he wondered. He had always believed himself an approachable man. Was he blind to the truth in that respect as well?

A light began blinking on the vox-board. Wulfe dreaded opening the link. No doubt another of the Gunheads was calling in to gloat. Maybe it was Rhaimes. The company's longest-serving sergeant was never short of a quip.

What would it be this time?

As Wulfe reached over to the board to open the vox-link, he told his crew, "I'll say a litany of thanks to the old girl's machine-spirit when I get a bit of downtime."

The men in the turret smiled, and he turned from them, hit the toggle on the vox-board, and said, "Who the frak is it and what do you want?"

The voice on the other end was not amused.

"Well you could show some damned decorum for a start, sergeant," snapped van Droi over the link. "The next man who speaks to me like that gets thrown to Commissar Slayte."

Wulfe blanched.

"Sorry, sir," he told Lieutenant van Droi. "Thought it was someone else. What can I do for you?"

"For a start, you can sit tight until we get an Atlas out to you. It will tow you into Balkar. I've voxed ahead for it already. Damned unfortunate time to break down, Oskar, what with all those people on the walls to greet us. Colonel Vinnemann is up there, and Major General Bergen, too, no doubt."

Looking across the turret, Wulfe met Siegler's gaze and winked. To van Droi, he said, "With respect, sir, I can't think of a better time to suffer a breakdown, can you? *Last Rites II* is the only machine in the company to have lasted this long without serious engine trouble. I'd rather it happened here and now than back there in the desert with the orks at our backs."

Van Droi was silent for a moment. When he replied, a touch of his usual good humour had returned to his voice. "Fair comment, sergeant. Glad to hear she's finally grown on you. Took bloody long enough, mind you. Anyway, what's this about refusing Lenck's assistance?"

Wulfe knew van Droi was probing with that last addition. Wulfe's contempt for Lenck was still a matter of concern to the lieutenant, then. "Didn't want to hold him up, sir," he said. "We've been on quarter rations and bog-water for so long, I figured that rookie crew of his would fall over if they didn't get some proper provisions."

"You're a damned poor liar, sergeant," said van Droi. "And there are no rookies in my company, not anymore. They bled and sweated like the rest of us, and they killed their share of greenskins, so let's drop the whole *them and us* bit, shall we? I'm moving through the gates now. Find me in the officers' mess when you've been fed and watered."

"Understood, sir."

Van Droi signed off, but another light was blinking on the vox-board now. Wulfe hit the switch and said, "This is *Last Rites II*. Go ahead."

"*Last Rites II*, this is Atlas recovery tank *Orion VI*. We're pulling up to you now. Give us a minute to get tow-lines hooked up and we'll be under way, over."

The Atlas commander sounded young, and his voice made Wulfe reflect on van Droi's words: no more *us and them*. He had been obstinate in his refusal to accept the new tank. He had been obstinate in not telling his crew about the apparition in the canyon on Palmeros. Was he being just

as obstinate about the new meat? Was Lenck really as bad as he seemed, or had Wulfe cultivated bad feeling between them from the start on account of the man's likeness to Victor Dunst? He was starting to suspect it was the latter.

"Understood, *Orion VI*," he voxed. "Let me know when you're ready to take us in."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Evening fell quickly over the base at Balkar. The sky turned black just as *Last Rites II* finally reached the motor pool where she would undergo her much-needed repairs. Wulfe thanked the young commander of the Atlas tank, asked him where the mess hall and barracks buildings were, and led his crew off to find them. Their search would have been impossible but for the electric lamps that had been strung up throughout the base, their thick cables running along streets and dangling from rooftops. Even so, it wasn't easy. The lights were kept relatively dim at night in order to avoid drawing attention from itinerant ork bands. Earlier that day, units from the 259th Mechanised Infantry Regiment under Colonel von Holden — part of Rennkamp's 8th Mechanised Division — had been sent out to eliminate a band of travelling greenskin scavengers. The greenskins had been spotted forty-some kilometres out from the base by scouts on Hornet bikes as they patrolled the low hills to the north. The scouts had then guided Armoured Fist units in for the attack. The action was short, bloody and decisive, and, importantly, none of the orks had escaped. Even a single fleeing greenskin might have brought a larger force back down on the Imperial camp. The last thing Exolon needed was a full-scale assault on their forward position. The top brass were desperate to avoid anything that might delay success, and a siege more than qualified.

The mechanised units that engaged the orks actually managed something quite unusual; they brought two of the orks back alive. Naturally, both of them were horribly maimed and crippled, hanging onto their worthless alien lives by virtue of their raw inhuman resilience alone. Even so, the struggle to capture them had been immense. Wounded orks were often even more dangerous than healthy ones.

Wulfe heard of it first from a group of soldiers in the mess tent as he finished off a few slices of cooked meal-brick and a glass of rather tepid, but thankfully clear and salt-free water. He shook his head as he listened. Captive orks? It sounded like the officer in charge of the Armoured Fist unit in question was some kind of show-off. Wulfe wouldn't have brought them back. He'd have executed them on the spot. The top brass, on the other hand, must have seen some gain in the situation — a morale boost, probably — because someone had approved the construction of two cages in an area by the east wall. According to the troopers that told Wulfe all this, the captured xenos were proving quite a draw.

Wulfe was just finishing his meal when word reached him that the men of 10th Company were to pay the caged aliens a visit. Wulfe guessed van Droi wanted the less experienced men to see the foe up close and personal, based perhaps on some notion that familiarity eliminated fear.

Groxshit, thought Wulfe. The closer you got to orks, the more you saw how damned dangerous they were.

Despite his earlier promise to give thanks to the machine-spirit of his tank, he found himself with little time to do so. Stopping briefly at his barracks, he made arrangements to meet his crew by the cages a little later, but his first order of business was to find Lieutenant van Droi in the officer's mess. Thus, after a few moments spent trying to smarten himself up a bit — not easy given all he had been through — he crossed the base and arrived outside a single-storey sandstone building with the appropriate marker-glyph on the door.

There was a surly, bored-looking soldier on guard duty outside.

“Sergeant Wulfe to see Lieutenant van Droi,” said Wulfe. The trooper nodded, asked him to wait, and then popped inside to verify things with the lieutenant. A moment later, he reappeared and ushered Wulfe inside.

The officer’s mess had a low ceiling of cracked plaster, and at least half of the red floor tiles were missing, leaving large areas of bare concrete visible. Strip-lights hung above long trestle tables, buzzing and flickering, their bright glare somewhat harsh to eyes accustomed to the dull Golgothan day. As he looked around, Wulfe decided this place wasn’t much of an improvement on the grunts’ mess. He wondered idly if the food and drink was any better.

Even here, inside this building, the orks had painted typically crude images of the things that generally occupied their tiny minds: guns, blades, skulls, strange gods, and much more besides. Many of the scrawls were so obscure, so badly rendered that Wulfe couldn’t begin to guess what they might represent. Some effort had been made to cover them up, of course, but there were so many. They were literally everywhere. As he had walked here, Wulfe had seen miserable troopers plastering the walls with propaganda material from the *Departamento Munitorum*. It was a minor punishment detail. The commissars had ordered it. One of the posters near Wulfe’s assigned barracks building had caught his eye. *Check your kills!* it ordered. There was a well painted image of a big, strong Cadian trooper blowing an ork’s brains out as it lay limp on the ground. The bottom of the poster read:

Destroying the brain will put most targets down for good!

The ork in the poster was a damned sight smaller than any of the ones Wulfe had met, but there was no denying the artist’s talent. His or her work graced a number of other posters, too. Most were concerned with showing proper reverence to the Emperor and the authority of his agents, from the political to the theological. Others yet bore the seal of the *Adeptus Mechanicus* and offered concise reminders on the proper care and operation of standard-issue field equipment.

It wasn’t that the troops needed reminding — their drill sergeants back on Cadia had seen to that with an abundance of cruel enthusiasm — but leaving the walls of an Imperial base covered in ork iconography, no matter how short the intended stay, was tantamount to heresy under Imperial Law.

The mess hall was busy. The air was filled with the constant hum of conversation, and no one paid him much attention. Wulfe soon spotted van Droi at a table on the far left. The lieutenant was sitting with a number of officers from the other companies of the 81st Armoured Regiment. As Wulfe walked over to present himself, he noted how damned tired his company commander was looking. The others didn’t look much better. Golgotha hadn’t been particularly kind to any of them.

“Sergeant Wulfe reporting as ordered, sir,” he said, saluting stiffly. The men seated around the table looked up.

“At ease, Wulfe,” said van Droi around a mouthful of food. Wulfe glanced at the lieutenant’s plate automatically and saw a dark, thick slice of meal-brick. It looked hard and cold. So, he thought, the food *isn’t* any better. They’re on the same rations as us grunts.

He took no satisfaction in the knowledge. He wouldn’t have grudged the lieutenant a better standard of fare.

“Take a seat, Oskar,” said van Droi, indicating an empty chair at the corner of the table.

Wulfe hesitated, looking at the other officers. Most were busy chewing or chatting to their neighbours. A few smiled at him or nodded. Wulfe recognised Captain Immrich among them, Colonel Vinnemann’s right-hand man, tipped to replace him if the old tiger ever got bored of his quest for vengeance.

“I wouldn’t want to impose on the captain and his companions, sir.”

“None of that, sergeant,” laughed Captain Immrich. “Sit down at once. Let’s not make it an order. You’ll find none of that classist crap at my table. Isn’t that right, gentlemen?”

The other officers agreed, though some less readily than others. Wulfe bowed a little to the captain, and then sat down, stiff as a board. Immrich noted it, grinned and shook his head. “We’ve met before, sergeant,” he said, “aboard the *Hand of Radiance*. You remember?”

“I do, sir.”

“Just after that blasted mercy run we sent you on.” He turned to the other officers and added, “The Kurdheim affair,” before turning back to Wulfe. “Bad business that. You should never have been sent back out there with so little time left.”

Damned right we shouldn’t, thought Wulfe angrily, remembering the men who had given their lives that day. Not that it was Immrich’s fault.

The captain seemed to read Wulfe’s mind. Tremendous pressure from *up top* on that one. The damned Officio Strategos were adamant about it. Colonel Vinnemann objected from the start, but it was never going to count for much. Did those posthumous decorations ever come through for the other two? Medallion Crimson, second class, wasn’t it?”

This question was directed, not at Wulfe, but at van Droi, who forced down a dry mouthful of meal-brick before answering.

“Sergeants Kohl and Strieber,” he said, sorrow stealing across his face. “No medals. I must’ve pushed for them half a dozen times. Damned OS classified the whole operation *Zenith Eyes Only*. Officially speaking, it never even happened. All the normal channels are closed.”

Immrich’s smile had vanished.

“Damned Strategos have a lot to answer for,” he hissed. “How many Imperial heroes have died unsung on account of those pen-pushing bastards, I wonder. I’m sure Sergeant Wulfe here deserves a medal for what he went through.”

“The captain is too kind,” Wulfe said absently. He was thinking, not of medals, but of the ghostly vision he had seen that day.

What I went through, he thought? You don’t know the half of it.

Another officer piped up, eager to guide the conversation in a slightly different direction.

“Decorations aplenty,” he said, “when our General deViers gets his name in the history books, though, what?”

It was Hal Keissler, a sturdy, heavy-browed lieutenant with deep-set eyes. He was commander of the regiment’s 2nd Company, Colonel Vinnemann’s number three man, and something of an occasional rival to Immrich. Wulfe wasn’t overly fond of him — the man’s love of extreme physical discipline bordered on sadism — but he knew him for a solid battlefield commander. The ribbons and tin on his chest had been earned fair and square, just like van Droi’s.

Immrich laughed, changing his mood in short order. “We all know how much you and your boys love a bit of decoration, Hal. Tell you what, if you leave now, you could have *The Fortress of Arrogance* back here before breakfast. They might even give you a damned governorship for that.”

The others laughed, and Wulfe joined in politely, though not loud enough to draw attention to himself. In his head, he was thinking, frak your bits of tin. If Strieber and Kohl couldn’t get theirs, why in the blasted Eye should anyone else? They served the Golden Throne with honour and courage. They gave their lives.

As the officers embarked on a round of good-natured jibes, Wulfe leaned across to van Droi and said pointedly, “If you don’t mind, sir... What was it you wanted to see me about?”

Van Droi had been chuckling at the banter of the other men. When he looked across at Wulfe, however, the humour quickly bled away from his face.

“Markus is sick, Oskar.”

“Rhaimes?” asked Wulfe, taken aback. His fellow sergeant had been goggled and masked last time they had talked, but he had seemed healthy enough.

“He’s in a medicae bed right now. Held out as long as he could. He wanted to see his crew to safety, at the very least. It all caught up with him just as we came in.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“It’s the fines, mostly,” said van Droi. He sipped from his glass of water, and then placed it heavily on the table. “He’s having a bad reaction to the build-up in his body. Allergic, apparently. He can’t command anymore, not in his current state.”

“How long will he be out? Days? Weeks?”

Van Droi locked eyes with Wulfe. “I won’t sugar-coat it, Oskar. We’re not talking about recovery. We’re talking about death. You saw what happened to those lads who got sick on our way across the desert. You heard Colonel Stromm’s medics. Even with the facilities here at Balkar, Markus will die unless he gets off this planet soon. And he’s not alone. The beds are full of sick troopers.” He pointed at the back of Wulfe’s hand. “More to come, too. Don’t pretend you haven’t noticed the colour change.”

Wulfe looked down at his fingers. The reddish tinge was undeniable.

“I don’t get it, sir,” he said. “Golgotha was a Mechanicus world once. They must’ve had millions of workers here. How did *they* manage?”

“If I get the chance to ask them, I’ll let you know, sergeant. Maybe the planet has changed since then. Perhaps the factory-settlements were sealed somehow. I think most of them were in the polar zones, anyway. It hardly matters now, does it?”

Wulfe couldn’t miss the bitterness in van Droi’s voice. Rhaimes and the lieutenant had been good friends for longer than Wulfe had known either man.

“I’m sorry to hear about Rhaimes, sir,” said Wulfe. “I’ll offer prayers to the Emperor that he pulls through. With luck and a blessing, we’ll find Yarrick’s tank quickly, and the sick will be lifted out in time. I should visit him.”

“No, Oskar,” said van Droi. “He doesn’t want that. Respect his wishes.”

Wulfe couldn’t find anything to say to that.

“General deViers is expected tomorrow,” continued van Droi. “He’s flying in. According to Major General Bergen, he’s keen not to waste any time. The major general has been in regular contact with him via a cable-based communications system that the tech-priests set up. Didn’t quite get the gist of it myself, but at least it seems to be more reliable than the bloody vox. Anyway, the general wants all forward elements to be ready for deployment on his arrival. Gives you about fourteen hours, Wulfe. How serious are the repairs you need?”

“She just needs a new radiator, new fuel lines, new filters, and a bit of love from the cogboys, sir. She’ll be good to go after that. I’d say eight or nine hours, give or take.”

“Good,” said van Droi, “but it’s not just the condition of your tank that concerns me right now.” He stared at Wulfe without blinking. “Listen, I’m sorry to do this to you, but I have to pull Corporal Holtz off your crew.”

Wulfe felt like he had been slapped in the face. “Holtz? You must be bloody joking, sir! He’s only just mastered the main gun. You already stripped Viess out. Now you’re reassigning his replacement? What’s it about?”

“War is what it’s about, sergeant,” replied van Droi, suddenly brisk. “With Markus out of the game, you’re my senior man. You had better understand what that means. The crew of *Old Smashbones* came in as new meat before the drop. Holtz has plenty of combat experience and he’s worked his way up from sponson-man. Plus he’s a hard bastard. They’ll need someone like that to get them through.”

Damn it, thought Wulfe, if I thought he was ready for command...

“Put me in charge of Rhaimes’ crate,” he told van Droi. “I’ve got more experience. I can deal with a rookie crew. Put Holtz in charge of mine. He’ll be much better off with men he already knows.”

Van Droi shook his head. “I’ve thought about that,” he said, “but, to be frank, Wulfe, your crew is unorthodox, and I’m being kind with my wording here. With you at the helm, they’re working out all right, but with anyone else...”

“Unorthodox?”

“For starters, you’ve got a driver most troopers still believe is cursed. They still call him *Lucky* Metzger. It’s damned hard to erase a reputation for being the only survivor on crew after crew.”

“That’s all behind him,” said Wulfe. “His luck hasn’t killed me yet, has it?”

“I hope it stays that way. But then there’s Siegler.”

“What about him?”

“Come on, Oskar. He’s damaged goods. You know what he’s like. As hard as it’ll be for a new commander to get used to him, it’ll be twice as hard for *him* if you leave that crew. The only reason he still functions as a frontline loader is the strength he draws from your presence. I honestly think he’d lose it under someone else.”

Wulfe was quiet while he thought about that. Since the accident that had damaged his brain, Siegler had clung to Wulfe like a lifeline, a rock in a turbulent ocean, one of the few things that remained familiar to the man after so much about his universe had changed. What would he be like without his sarge to watch out for him? Van Droi was right.

“I promise you,” said the lieutenant, “you’re getting the best gunner we could find from the reserve squads, a lad from Muntz’s platoon that I’ve had marked out for a while. Good scores on the ranges and I reckon he’s got the right stuff. He only missed out on a frontline posting earlier because of misconduct. Nothing serious, you understand. Commissar Slayte has given him the lash a few times for brawling, but you weren’t exactly an angel yourself at his age. You’ll like him.”

Wulfe was still angry over Holtz being swapped out, but he was in no position to argue.

“This trooper got a name, then, sir?” he asked.

Van Droi sat back. “Most of the troopers call him Beans. Heard of him?”

“Beans?” repeated Wulfe suspiciously. “Why the hell do they call him that?”

“I think I’ll leave you to discover the specifics yourself,” said van Droi with a grin. “It’ll give you something to talk about. You’ll find him waiting for you at C-barracks. He’s expecting you. You’ll need to break the news to Holtz, of course.”

“That won’t be pleasant,” said Wulfe darkly.

“For you? Or for him?” asked van Droi. “Trust me, Oskar. Holtz will light up like Skellas Plaza on Emperor’s Day. Think about it. If he does well, he could make sergeant by the end of this bloody fiasco.”

Wulfe had never considered Holtz particularly ambitious, but most troopers aspired to having sergeant’s stripes sewn onto their sleeves. It was more to do with the perks than anything else. Holtz would certainly enjoy the increased alcohol and tabac rations... if he made the grade.

Having finished with Wulfe for now, Lieutenant van Droi was on the verge of dismissing him when a commotion erupted at a table across the room. A short, silver-haired, red-faced man in a colonel’s uniform stood and slammed his palms down on the table’s surface. His chair crashed to the floor behind him. “I will *not* hold my damned tongue, Pruscht. You’re not my senior officer. It’s about time someone spoke his damned mind around here.”

There were five other men seated at the table. Four of them looked desperate to be somewhere else. The fifth was Colonel Pruscht, commander of the 118th Cadian Lasgunners. He was a heavy-set, dark-eyed man with a neatly trimmed beard. Calmly and quietly, he stood and addressed his angry peer.

“Calm down, von Holden,” he said, hands raised in placation. “You don’t want trouble. Think of your men. You don’t want them to see you like this, do you? Let’s put this one down to strong drink and forget about it. We can’t have you talking like—”

“Like what?” exploded von Holden. “Like someone with a bloody brain?” He spun and cast his bleary gaze over men at the other tables. “Who among you has the gall to deny it?” he yelled. “Where’s your damned integrity? You all feel the same. I know you do. Armageddon is where we should be, fighting where it counts, where we can do some bloody good. Not out here on this

backwater. Men dying of dust and bug-bites and Throne knows what else. And all for a bit of scrap metal no one gave a flying damn about until now. It's been forty blasted years. DeViers should—”

“Should what?” demanded a sharp, clear voice from the door of the mess.

Wulfe turned his head and saw Major General Bergen standing in the doorway flanked by two commissars. His heart skipped a beat when he recognised one of them: Commissar Slayte.

Crusher!

Some men in the regiment boasted that they were afraid of nothing, but they stopped boasting, all of them, when they met the man known informally as Crusher. He was the commissar attached to Wulfe's regiment, and to say he was unpopular was an understatement of titanic proportions.

By the Eye, thought Wulfe, that colonel has dropped himself right in it. Open dissent in front of commissars? I don't want to be around for this.

“Please continue, colonel,” said Major General Bergen, striding into the room, removing his cap and overcoat. The electric lamplight glinted from the medals on his chest and the golden boards on his shoulders. The commissars stalked silently forward at his flanks, like a pair of sleek attack dogs just barely held in check. “I'll be happy to pass on any recommendations you or anyone else has directly to the general for his consideration.”

Von Holden, his face turning redder by the second, stuttered and looked desperately at Pruscht for support. Pruscht, though, seemed to know better. He sat back down in his chair and sipped from his glass.

With Major General Bergen in the room, Wulfe felt extremely self-conscious. This was no place for a noncommissioned man, despite Captain Immrich's earlier welcome. It certainly wasn't right for a sergeant to see a decorated colonel like von Holden being dressed down.

But the dressing down never actually came. To everyone's surprise, Major General Bergen walked calmly over to von Holden, picked his chair up from the floor, and politely invited the colonel to sit back down. Speechless, perhaps taking this for the calm before the storm, von Holden did so, all the while gaping at the higher-ranking man.

Wulfe glanced discreetly at Commissar Slayte while this was going on, but the man's face was emotionless and his gaze was fixed straight ahead. If he had noticed Wulfe and van Droi, he didn't let on. Perhaps he was waiting for a cue from the major general, some sign at which he would pounce on Colonel von Holden and drag him away. The sign didn't come, and the only movement Crusher made was the flexing of his metal fingers back and forth into fists. Wulfe knew that the action was habitual. The man probably did it in his sleep.

Van Droi turned his attention back to Wulfe and said, “Best get yourself away now, Oskar. Go about the business we discussed.”

“Right, sir,” said Wulfe. “Be glad to.” As he rose, he offered a quiet farewell to the other men at the table, “Have a good evening, sirs.”

A few, Captain Immrich among them, smiled and nodded back. Wulfe saluted, turned, and walked out of the door, relieved to be away from the officers' mess and the tension inside it. He knew there were some good men in the upper ranks, but they made everything so bloody complicated sometimes, not like the grunts. You could speak your mind among the rank-and-file. There might be the odd punch-up afterwards, but you didn't have to worry about bloodlines, family honour and all that career lark, and the bond of brotherhood shared between the men of the lower ranks was one of those things that made life in the Guard more bearable. Wulfe had always thought so, until Lenck had shown up.

Wulfe was torn over that one. The bastard had saved his life, but he was the antithesis of everything Wulfe valued and respected. He was a boaster and a manipulator. Wulfe could almost smell the cruelty within him. Sooner or later, there would be a reckoning between them. It was inevitable.

Wulfe turned his mind to the new gunner, Beans. Was he as good a shot as van Droi said? Would he fit in with Metzger and Siegler? The lieutenant had a point; they weren't the most typical of tank crews.

He walked towards C-barracks, muttering to himself.

"Beans. I hope it doesn't mean what I think it does."

Wulfe found Beans waiting for him outside C-barracks with his belongings already packed into a canvas bag. He was sitting on a concrete step, smoking a lho-stick, and examining the red dust that had gathered under his fingernails. Wulfe automatically assessed him as he drew closer. Judging by his smooth, open facial features, Beans was young, no older than twenty standard most probably. His fatigues hung loose on a skinny frame. He had rolled the sleeves of his red field-tunic up to reveal heavily tattooed forearms but, if any of the tats were hive-ganger symbols from his life back on Cadia, Wulfe didn't recognise them. That didn't mean much, of course. There were literally tens of thousands of gangs in the vast, crowded fortress-hives where the men of Exolon had been raised.

"You'll be Beans," said Wulfe as he stopped in front of the trooper.

"Are you Wulfe?" Beans' voice was high and he spoke with the soft, drawling vowels of a Kasr Feros man.

"I'm *Sergeant* Wulfe, and you can call me sergeant, or sarge. If you call me anything else, I'll break your teeth."

Beans stood up, dropping his smoke at the side of the step and crushing it under a booted foot. He was a good head shorter than Wulfe and had to look up at an angle to meet his gaze. "All right, sergeant. Throne above. I didn't mean any disrespect, did I? Don't want to get off on the wrong foot. I'm nervous enough already, by Throne."

Wulfe nodded. At least the trooper was frank. "Why do they call you Beans?"

"It's my name, isn't it? Mirkos Biehn. Beans. See?" Wulfe let the relief show on his face.

"What?" said Beans. "Thought I was going to stink up the air in your turret? Nah, it's nothing like that, sergeant. Then again, I can't promise I'll be forest fresh *all* the time. I'm only human."

"I'll make sure the rest of the crew don't shoot you for your first offence," said Wulfe. "To be honest, it stinks so bad in there when we're on manoeuvres that no one would notice. You'll learn to breathe through your mouth pretty quickly."

Beans looked horrified and Wulfe couldn't help but laugh.

"As for being nervous, Beans, don't be. My lot look out for each other. It's the first rule. You'll be seeing proper combat on my crew. Make no mistake about that. But the lieutenant tells me you're a good shot, and he thinks you'll fit in well."

Beans brightened up on hearing this, as Wulfe had intended. "The lieutenant said that?"

"He hasn't picked out a bad gunner for me yet. Both of my last two went on to command tanks of their own. That could be you in a few years if you do right by me. Now, if that's your bag there, pick it up and follow. We'll drop it off at A-barracks on the way."

Beans hefted his bag over his shoulder and fell into pace at Wulfe's side.

"On the way where, sarge?" he asked.

"On the way to see some orks," Wulfe answered.

Quite a crowd had gathered around the cages by the time Wulfe and Beans arrived. Troopers were jostling each other to get closer to the front where a couple of lieutenants from the 303rd Cadian Fusiliers were trying to keep order, largely in vain. Wulfe couldn't see Metzger, Siegler or Holtz among the crowd, so he and Beans hung back until two other sergeants arrived and began shouting at their men. "Playtime is over, ladies!"

"Back to the barracks! Double-time it, you lot!"

About twenty grumbling men pushed their way to the back of the mob and split off from it. With their sergeants leading them, they jogged off down dark, sand-filled streets. Now, with fresh gaps opening in the crowd, Wulfe and Beans pushed forward, using their elbows and shoulders to gain ground.

What a lot of fuss, thought Wulfe, to see monsters I've had more than enough of, but he kept pushing all the same, moving as if on autopilot.

A few rows from the front, he found himself standing next to Siegler and Holtz.

"There you are," he said. "Where's Metzger?"

"Gone for a walk," Siegler answered. "Said this was bloody stupid."

Wulfe turned to Beans and said, "Which should tell you that Metzger is the smart one."

"I resent that," said Siegler looking genuinely insulted.

"Me, too," protested Holtz.

"Don't kid yourselves," Wulfe told them with a grin.

"Who's the kid?" Holtz asked, turning a scowl on Beans.

"This is Beans," said Wulfe. "He farts a lot."

"Hey!" protested Beans, but he caught a look in Wulfe's eye and laughed.

"Holtz," said Wulfe, "you and I need to have a word. Come with me. Beans, stay here with Siegler."

"Right, sarge," said Beans.

Wulfe and Holtz broke from the group around the cages and moved off to stand at the side of an old storage building. Together, they leaned back against the pitted sandstone bricks. Holtz reached into his hip pocket, pulled out a smoke and placed it between his lips.

Wulfe decided not to mince words. "You're getting your own command, Piter. Effective immediately. Van Droi thought I should tell you myself."

The lho-stick fell from Holtz's gaping jaw to the ground at his feet.

"You're pulling my leg!" he said.

"I'm not."

"By the Eye," gasped Holtz. "My own crate? You mean that Beans kid is taking over on the main gun?"

"Got it in one," said Wulfe. "The lieutenant rates him. He scored high in the standard tests. Apparently he's a good shot. But that's not the point. This isn't about Beans. It's about you."

Holtz barked out a laugh. "There's a hell of a difference between being a good shot on the practice course and being a good shot in combat. What if he gets the jinks?"

It was a legitimate concern. Wulfe had known other crews that had taken on a new man only to have him suffer the jinks. It was a nervous condition characterised by sever twitches and spasms, and it seemed to be brought on by the noise of the main gun or the impact of heavy enemy fire on the tank's armour. Once a trooper contracted the jinks, he was as good as useless on the battlefield. It took some men years to recover. Others never did.

"You're not listening, Holtz. Forget about Beans. I'll deal with him. He'll be fine. We're talking about you. We're talking about commanding a tank."

"What's to say?" said Holtz. "Show me a man in this regiment who doesn't want his own crate!"

Something in Holtz's voice didn't manage to convince Wulfe.

"Come on, Piter," he said. "Some men are happier taking orders than giving them out. I sometimes wish—"

"Which crate?" asked Holtz, talking over him. "And why now?"

"It's Rhaimes' tank, *Old Smashbones*. She's a good, solid machine. Hell of a service record. Rhaimes is sick with the fines. It's serious. Van Droi is treating this as permanent. Says you might make sergeant if you do your duty."

Holtz bent down, picked up the lho-stick at his feet, blew red dust off it, and popped it back between his lips.

Talking around it, he said, "Rhaimes. Damn. I'd rather be replacing someone else. His crew aren't gonna like this much. Don't expect I'll get a very warm welcome."

"They're a young crew. New meat. They didn't have much time with Rhaimes, so you should be all right. Besides, they need someone with plenty of combat experience and the stones to get them through whatever's coming. If not you, then who?"

Holtz had no answer for that. He was too busy processing it all.

"Anyway," said Wulfe. "Your new crew is in A-barracks, so you won't need to move your stuff far. General deViers is supposed to arrive tomorrow. You won't have much time to get to know them before we roll out, so you'd best start now."

Holtz nodded, unable to hide a degree of nerves. The side of his face that looked like hashed grox barely moved anymore, and showed little emotion, but Wulfe had had enough practice in reading the other half to know that Holtz saw the announcement for the mixed bag it was.

"Just remember," Wulfe told him, "you've been through much more than they have. You're in charge. Tank men live or die by the decisions of their commander."

"No pressure, then," Holtz replied with literally half a grin. "Only joking, sarge. I appreciate your confidence. If it's all the same to you, though, I'll head to the motor pool first. Make a bit of a farewell to *Last Rites II* and introduce myself to the new girl."

"Sounds like a plan," said Wulfe, clapping his friend on the shoulder. He returned Holtz's brief salute, and then watched him walk off in the direction of the motor pool, wishing him all the luck in the galaxy. Command was hard on any man, but far harder on those new to it. The lives of the crew and the survival of each precious war machine were heavy burdens to bear. Sometimes, Wulfe envied the men under his command. He remembered the freedom that came with being on the bottom rung of the ladder, of having someone else make most of your decisions for you. It was a good place to be when you had good officers. Wulfe trusted van Droi that way, and knew that van Droi, in turn, trusted Colonel Vinnemann, but the chain of command went much higher than that. Major General Bergen had a good reputation, but was it justified? It was hard to tell. Officers at such a senior level were so distant.

All Wulfe could say for sure was that command would be hard on Piter Holtz. At least in the early days. He would sink, or he would swim. It was as simple as that.

Wulfe walked back over to the soldiers jostling around the cages, noting how the crowd had thinned further now that others had begun drifting away. It took much less effort to get to the front of the crowd where he found Siegler and Beans talking animatedly about the creatures in front of them.

The ferocity of the imprisoned orks was impressive given their pitiful condition. The two monsters sat in their steel cages, legs reduced to tattered stumps, bellowing and spitting at the smaller, weaker humans that surrounded them. Beans was stepping in towards the cages to get a closer look when Wulfe grabbed him by the back of the collar and said, "No you don't, trooper. This is close enough."

The new gunner looked disappointed and perhaps a little angry, but he said nothing, merely stepping back into line with all the other men. From the same distance, Wulfe eyed the greenskins coldly. One was larger than the other, though not by much. Its skin was a darker brown, too. Both had the nightmare features that had been burned into Wulfe's brain since his first encounter with their kind: tiny nose, deeply-sunken red eyes, wide jaws rimmed with razor-sharp fangs. Their hides looked as hard and coarse as an adult carnataur's, covered in red dust, lined with cracks. On their massive shoulders, great patches of dead skin were peeling away. They looked as dry as the desert.

So Golgotha is not being particularly kind to them either, Wulfe thought, though I notice the blasted ticks don't bother them. I wonder why.

Wulfe's first deployment as a tanker had been as part of the operation to defend Phaegos II against ork incursions from the Ghoul Stars. That was more than twenty years ago, a different time, a different segmentum, and here he was still fighting the same foe, still losing more friends to them each time they clashed. It sometimes seemed as if all mankind's efforts, all the blood spilled, all the battles won, all of it might count for nothing at all. In galactic terms, had anything really changed? Had anything he had done ever made a blind bit of difference?

Dangerous thoughts, he cautioned himself. If every Guardsman doubted the necessity of his actions, the Imperium would crumble and die. *Of course* he had made a difference. He had killed thousands of mankind's foes in his time. If every man in the Guard accounted for the same number, the green tide would surely be overcome someday.

Wulfe wanted to believe that, he really did, but it was a struggle. For every victory in the history books, how many losses went unpublicised?

As he studied the darker of the two orks, his eyes locked with the creature's. Immediately perceiving a challenge, it began roaring at him and hammering its head against the bars of its cage. It grunted and hissed and bellowed at him in what Wulfe supposed was the orkish language. Commissar Yarrick, the stories said, could understand this bestial gibberish, but Wulfe had never met anyone else who could. No one ever admitted as much, anyway. It was a horrible sound, something wild canids might make as they guzzled meat from a fresh kill, but there was definitely a syntax in there, however unrefined. Wulfe instinctively knew that he was hearing language.

With the force of its violent motions, the dark-skinned ork's wounds had begun to bleed again, but the flow was slow. The blood that oozed out was thick and sticky. Wulfe thought he understood why. It was the low availability of water here. It changed the blood of those that lived in the desert, making it clot far more quickly: a water-conservation mechanism, a survival mechanism, and that wasn't the only gift the hard desert life had given the greenskins. These two orks were distinctly different from those he had encountered before. They were leaner, almost wiry by greenskin standards, though still far larger and more powerful-looking than any human. Somehow, they seemed faster and all the more deadly because of it.

He was about to turn away, to lead Siegler and Beans off at last, when someone began shouting from the rear of the crowd.

“Make way! Make way at once, you damned fools.”

There was no mistaking the cold, crisp voice. Wulfe knew that it was Crusher even before he saw the stiff peak of the man's black cap moving towards him over the heads of the others.

Crusher violently thrust his way to the front row.

“Commissar Slayte,” said Wulfe with a nod. “Come to view the exhibits?”

“Hardly, sergeant,” hissed the commissar, clocking Wulfe's stripes. “I'm here to put a bloody stop to this nonsense.”

The commissar swept back the folds of his long black coat and drew a bolt pistol from the holster at his thigh. The motion was smooth, well-practiced. Wulfe knew what was coming. He stepped away.

One of the lieutenants from the 303rd saw it coming, too. He protested. “Come now, commissar. You can't mean to spoil the fun prematurely. It's good for morale to see our enemies caged and helpless. You must agree.”

Crusher didn't even glance at the man. Instead, he took aim at the smaller, lighter-skinned alien, eased a black metal finger back on the trigger of his pistol, and loosed off a barking shot.

Wulfe had been about to shout, “Stand back!” to Siegler and Beans, but it was too late. The bolt punched a coin-sized hole in the ork's skull and detonated there, showering the closest men with a foul spray of blood and brain matter. The men behind them, shielded from the spray by their luckless comrades, laughed out loud. The headless ork body slid down to the floor of its cage.

Seeing the slaughter of its foul kin, the darker ork began thrashing madly. Slayte calmly turned towards it and repeated the exact same procedure. Those in the front rows of the crowd pushed

backwards. There was another loud crack as the bolt pistol fired and, again, the air filled with a bloody mist.

Crusher holstered his pistol, turned and addressed all those present. "Damn your eyes, the lot of you. Have you forgotten the principles of intolerance set forth in the Imperial Creed? Perhaps the sting of the lash would help you all to remember."

The crowd parted wide for him as he stalked off, calling out as he went, "Suffer not the alien to live!"

"Damn it," said one of the lieutenants from the 303rd as he dabbed at his bloodstained tunic with a handkerchief. "Which regiment is that bastard attached to? I feel sorry for them."

"That would be my regiment, lieutenant," said Wulfe grimly, "the 81st Armoured."

"Colonel Vinnemann's lot?" asked the other officer. "Throne help you, sergeant. You've got a bad one there. Execute many, does he?"

Wulfe shook his head. "He likes his punishments, does old Crusher, but the colonel can usually talk him down from a killing. The alternative isn't much better, mind you. He gives out a hell of a beating."

"Is that why you call him Crusher?" asked the first man.

"You didn't notice, sir?" said Wulfe, surprised. "His hands. Augmetic replacements, both of them. He lost his organic pair to the jaws of a bull carnotaur some years back. Not that he complains. He caught a deserter back on Palmeros in the first months of the campaign and forced us all to watch the execution. The boy was nineteen. New meat. He saw his cousin get killed and lost it. Commissar Slayte crushed his skull with one hand. Broke it like it was an egg."

The officers from the 303rd both frowned and shook their heads.

"Those boys in the 259th Mechanised aren't going to be pleased," said one. "They had the kill-rights to these two. They made the capture."

"Might as well disperse, you lot," shouted the other to the grumbling crowd. "Nothing much to see now."

The troopers moved off trailing a palpable air of disappointment and resentment. For a short time, the imprisoned enemies had offered a distraction from the biting of the ticks and the coughing and sneezing caused by the dust. Wulfe stayed a moment longer, staring in silence at the headless alien bodies. Siegler and Beans waited for him a dozen paces away, also silent.

It's not enough, thought Wulfe. No matter how many we kill, it's never enough. They keep coming. We send troops to purge them from one world, and another falls at our backs. Can we ever break the stalemate? Will we ever do more than just survive against them?

He reached a hand up and stroked the scar on his neck. Where had all his faith gone? Aboard the *Hand of Radiance*, Wulfe had always turned to Confessor Friedrich for spiritual strength. *There* was a man he could talk to. Despite being a year younger than Wulfe, the priest had a calm wisdom about him that Wulfe envied, though he wasn't prepared to drink quite as much as the priest did to achieve it. As he led Beans and Siegler back to the barracks, he considered seeking out the priest, but it was already late. He would have to wake his crew at sunrise tomorrow. General deViers wasn't about to let them rest up. That was fine with Wulfe. The hardest part of any soldier's life was down-time: too much time to think, to notice the little things. Typically stoic men would begin to grumble. Colonel von Holden was a stark example and he wouldn't be alone. Dissidence was far from exclusive to the officer class. Fights would start breaking out. There would be more incidents of drunkenness. Some would turn to less legal distractions. Before you knew it, the commissars would be executing men left, right and centre.

It was just as well that the bulk of the 18th Army Group would be moving out soon. Nothing cleared the mind like going into battle.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was still early, but the day was already uncomfortably hot. The Golgothan sky was lighter than Lenck had ever seen it. The chief medicae liaison issued a warning; all personnel at Balkar should stay in the shadows as much as possible until further notification. But it was difficult to follow the Imperial Medicae's advice when Lieutenant van Droi had ordered all crews to run maintenance details. Still, Lenck did his best. He slouched with his back against the *New Champion*, taking shelter in her shadow while his crew griped and whined and ran the necessary checks.

Since daylight had broken over the base, Balkar had been abuzz with activity. Word hadn't reached him why this should be, but it wasn't hard to guess. They'd be moving out again soon. The final leg of Operation Thunderstorm would commence shortly.

Fine with me, thought Lenck. The sooner it's done, the sooner we can get off this blasted ball of dirt. If the next deployment doesn't take us somewhere populated, I'll kill someone.

A scowling Varnuss stuck his head around the rear corner of the tank and said, "We've finished with the headlamps."

Riesmann and Hobbs appeared beside Varnuss, both wearing murderous looks that told how much they hated menial work.

"Congratulations," said Lenck. "You can start oiling the treads, then. Shouldn't take long with three of you."

"Sod off," spat Hobbs. "Why don't you get off your arse and pitch in?"

Lenck lifted an eyebrow and gazed at his driver coldly. "Because I'm the one that keeps you lot in extra smokes and booze. Earn it."

Hobbs spat on the ground and disappeared around the corner of the tank shaking his head and muttering. Lenck got to his feet and dusted himself off.

"I'm going for a wander," he said.

"Where?" asked Varnuss.

"A little place called none-of-your-frakking-business, that's where. Just have the treads done by the time I get back, all right? Throne knows when van Droi might show up for an inspection or something."

A few hundred yards away, in the south-east corner of Staging Area Four, Wulfe and his crew were likewise engaged with running basic maintenance. Van Droi required all his crews to be able to undertake basic field repairs and the like. If there were problems the crews couldn't handle, the tech-crews took care of them. If it was something even they couldn't manage, the engineers and their mindless, half-human servitors took over.

"Make sure they're locked down tight, Sig," said Wulfe, pointing at the spare track links that Siegler was fixing to the armoured sides of the turret. At the rear of the turret, Beans was working, fatigues soaked in sweat as he packed and sealed the stowage boxes that extended backwards from the turret bustle.

Metzger was at the front of the tank, seated in his station with the hatch open, running checks on the remote control system he used to operate the hull-mounted lascannon. He had already checked everything else he was responsible for, working with a wordless efficiency that Wulfe appreciated.

It was their first day with Beans on crew, but the new gunner seemed to be fitting in well enough. Early days, of course, and Wulfe was yet to see how Beans handled the main gun, but he worked without complaint despite the heat and heavy lifting. He may have found Metzger a little cold — the driver took a long time to warm up to people and, even then, he was far from talkative — but Siegler had taken a shine to him. He laughed loudly at even the worst of Beans' jokes. Wulfe cracked the odd smile himself at how bad they were. The one about the two-headed whore on Emperor's Day had been going around since Wulfe's days as a Whiteshield. It hadn't been funny then, either.

Footsteps approaching from the right made Wulfe turn, and a smile spread over his face. A man in simple brown robes was approaching, a heavy, gold-leafed, leather-bound copy of the Imperial Creed swinging from a bronze chain at his belt.

“Confessor!”

The priest smiled back, came to a stop beside Wulfe, and stretched out a hand. “Damned good to see you, sergeant. I prayed you would make it back to the flock. It seems that the Emperor was listening.”

Wulfe had the sudden impression that Confessor Friedrich had been about to add “for a bloody change” before he stopped himself.

“I think you might be right, confessor,” said Wulfe. “It certainly seemed like a miracle when we heard the voice of that Sentinel pilot. I doubt even van Droi believed we would actually make it out of the deep desert alive.”

The priest nodded. “I heard about Siemens and Muller, Throne rest them. I’ve already had their crews listed for remembrance at the next honours service.”

Wulfe shuddered as he recalled Siemens’ limp body burning atop the turret, but he said, “They died doing their duty, confessor. I hear Golgotha hasn’t exactly been a sightseeing trip for the rest of the army group.”

“Then you heard right. The things I’ve seen... Sometimes I think the Guiding Light of all Mankind is testing me, sergeant.”

“Maybe He’s testing all of us.”

A look of pain crossed the confessor’s face. “Aye, only dead men are free of that. I pulled ten bodies out of a brewed up Chimera yesterday. You couldn’t tell one man from the other. Ten shrivelled black mannequins. Two of them fell apart in my hands as I was trying to lift them out. For them, at least, the test is over.”

Wulfe nodded, his face mirroring the priest’s sadness.

Confessor Friedrich raised a hand to Wulfe’s elbow and drew him away from *Last Rites II*. “Let’s talk where others cannot hear, Oskar. Just for a moment. I would like to know of your spiritual health.”

They stopped in the shadows at the back of an empty Thirty-Sixer, and Confessor Friedrich took a quick look around to make sure they were alone.

“Tell me,” he said, “are you still troubled by your memories of Lugo’s Ditch? I had hoped that redeployment might give you a new perspective on what you saw there. Perhaps your nightmares have receded?”

Wulfe held the priest’s gaze. “I haven’t been sleeping enough to judge, confessor. We’ve been on the move night and day. I slept well enough last night, but I was exhausted. I think perhaps the worst of the dreams are behind me. It may be that you’re right. The mission might be crowding the memories out a bit.”

“I would have your mind at ease, my friend, but forgetting your experience completely would be a mistake. We’ve already talked of the positive. You’ve seen something that others wish desperately to see. You’ve had proof of that which lies beyond death. Does that still give you no comfort?”

“I’ve told you, confessor. His eyes were so hollow. He did *not* look like a man restored. On the journey here to Balkar, my crew confessed that they had guessed the truth. If any weight has been lifted from me, it’s that I no longer need to hide it from them. But can you imagine what others would say?”

“If they knew you had seen a ghost?”

“It sounds like bloody nonsense when you say it aloud. I think I’d rather believe I was mad.”

“I don’t think you are, but believe that if it helps. There are those who say even Yarrick is mad, driven beyond obsession. Many of the Imperium’s heroes would be judged mad by the standards of normal men. It’s no bad thing to be different,” he grinned. “To a degree.”

“That’s some choice, confessor, mad or haunted.” Wulfe went silent for a moment as other ghosts rose in his mind. “If you had seen Siemens...”

The priest closed his eyes and bowed his head. “It doesn’t get easier.”

“Sorry,” said Wulfe. “You’ve seen more than your share of horrors. I didn’t mean... I wish I had your fortitude. Why do you do it? Clearing the tanks of bodies is a job for the support crews. Why do you continue to torture yourself?”

Confessor Friedrich gazed off into space. “How could I let those boys face such horrors, Wulfe, knowing that they’ll crew tanks themselves one day? They shouldn’t have to see the likes of that. They shouldn’t have to know how bad it gets before the end. And neither should you.”

“The orks didn’t give me much choice.”

They both thought about that for a silent moment.

Changing tack suddenly, the priest said, “You heard that General deViers has arrived, yes?”

Wulfe shook his head. “I didn’t know. I thought the officers would have had us all lined up to greet him. He likes a big reception.”

“He does, but between them, the major generals decided that preparations for deployment took priority. If deViers wants his forces rolling out before sundown, he’ll have to do without the usual pomp this time.”

“He flew in?”

The confessor nodded. “Touched down just west of the outer wall about three hours ago. He arrived on a Valkyrie transport escorted by four Vulcan gunships. It seems Commodore Galbraithe was as good as his word regarding the close support he promised.”

“Five birds?” asked Wulfe. “Not exactly a major contribution.”

“Better than four,” said the priest with a wink. “Anyway, I expect you’ll be rolling out very soon, Wulfe. That’s why I came to see you. May I bless you and your crew?”

“You’re not rolling out with us, confessor?”

“Not this time. The regiment has many sick in the field hospital here. You heard about Markus Rhaimes, of course. I’m staying to offer last rites to those who need it. But I’m sure your expedition will be over quickly. You’ll find *The Fortress of Arrogance* and return. I know you will.”

Wulfe wished he shared the priest’s confidence. “I think my crew would appreciate a blessing, confessor. We need all the help we can get.”

“Excellent,” said the priest. Together, he and Wulfe walked back towards *Last Rites II*.

Squatting in the shadow of a nearby Chimera, grinning from ear to ear, Lenck watched them go. “Gotcha!” he muttered.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two hours after Confessor Friedrich had bid them farewell, the crew of *Last Rites II* were nearing completion of their final checks. Together, Siegler and Beans went over every single track link, checking and oiling the heavy iron pins that held them together. Metzger tightened the latches that held the tow cables, entrenching tools, fire axe, bolt cutters and numerous other essentials in place on the tank's hull.

Wulfe, not content to supervise, checked each of the vision blocks and their spares for cracks before turning his attention to the vox-caster. He cycled through each of the listed channels that Exolon would be using in the field until he was satisfied that he could tune into any of them at the flip of a toggle. Finishing this, he took off his headset and sat back in his command seat.

Damn, it's hot, he thought. But, once we're under way, the wind should cool us a bit.

It was only now, with his hearing unhindered by the headset's mufflers, that he heard raised voices outside.

Recognising them at once, he leapt up from his seat and hauled himself through the top hatch. From his cupola, he looked down to the left and saw Metzger and Siegler standing off against Lenck and his crew. Beans stood off to one side, shuffling anxiously.

"What the frak is going on here?" Wulfe shouted down at Lenck as he climbed from the cupola, and then leapt from the track-guard to the ground. "What the hell do you want, Lenck?"

"An apology for starters, sergeant," said Lenck. "My lads and I were just on our way back from the supply depot when your brain-addled idiot of a loader walked right into us and spilled half our coolant." He gestured at two jerrycans lying on their side in the sand.

"Siegler?" said Wulfe.

"Groxshit, sarge," replied the loader. "They were walking by and started in on our tank."

"That's right," said Metzger, eyes locked on Hobbs, who stood directly in front of him, shoulders loose, ready to lunge forward. "The bastards were at it."

Wulfe had never seen Metzger like this before. He looked unusually dangerous, as tall and rangy as ever, but with teeth bared in a snarl, long arms ready to lash out. He looked more like a soldier at that moment than at any other time in the months Wulfe had known him. This wasn't the time or place for him to prove his boxing skills, though. Brawling would mean the lash if Crusher found out.

"Lenck," said Wulfe in a growl, "get your mongrels away from here before something happens that you'll regret."

The big one, Varnuss, stepped to Lenck's side, rolling his shoulders and stretching his neck. Wulfe glimpsed ganger tattoos under the collar of his tunic. Was he just posturing, wondered Wulfe, or was he really stupid enough to make trouble with a senior man? Both possibilities seemed equally credible at that moment.

Posturing or not, it was only when Lenck put out a hand and stopped Varnuss from advancing that the big man seemed to reconsider.

"Come on, you lot," Lenck told his crew in mock exasperation. "Looks like we'd better go back to the depot and get some more coolant."

Muttering and cursing, the crew of the *New Champion* turned and fell in behind Lenck as he stalked off. After a few paces, however, Lenck stopped and turned. He pointed at Siegler, though his

eyes were locked on Wulfe's as he said, "With respect, sergeant, you might want to keep your pet moron on a leash in future."

Wulfe felt something snap inside him. He bolted straight at Lenck and grabbed him roughly by the collar, hauling him up on his tiptoes. Other hands immediately tried to free Lenck, tugging at Wulfe's wrists in vain, trying to break a grip that was like solid steel.

"What're you going to do?" Lenck sneered, looking down his nose at Wulfe without a hint of worry. "You know the regs."

Wulfe growled. "I ought to rip your bloody tongue out, you piece of garbage."

"But you know you'd pay for it," said Lenck.

"That's where you're wrong, Lenck. It doesn't go both ways. I could beat you to within an inch of your life, and no commissar could touch me for it."

Lenck's eyes narrowed. His voice became a hiss. "I wasn't talking about commissars."

There was a sudden shout from atop *Last Rites II*. It was Beans.

"Good morning, commissar! How are you?"

Wulfe turned and saw a dark figure emerge from between two tanks about a hundred metres away. His grip automatically loosened on Lenck's collar and the younger man wrenched himself away.

When Wulfe turned around to face Lenck again, the corporal was smiling sardonically.

"I'm sure we'll have a chance to pick this up again sometime, sergeant," he said. "In the meantime, my crew has work to do. Excuse us."

Wulfe watched them go, fists clenched white at his sides. How far would I have gone? he asked himself. Would I have killed him? Could I have stopped myself? He remembered the panic he had felt as Victor Dunst's gang had restrained him all those years ago on Cadia. He winced as he recalled the pain of Dunst's knife being pushed into his torso. He heard the laughter of the gangers, laughter that turned to curses when they heard the siren of the Civitas patrol car.

Lenck's crew cast filthy looks back at him over their shoulders as they went, all of them but Lenck.

He's not Dunst, Wulfe told himself. For Throne's sake, he's not Dunst.

When Lenck was about twenty-five metres away, he turned back towards Wulfe without breaking stride and called out to him. Just five words. Five little words. But they hit Wulfe like a flurry of bolter shells that detonated in his mind.

Wulfe was struck motionless. He saw Lenck laugh, then turn around and lead his men off between two rows of Chimeras.

A hard, sharp voice at his shoulder woke Wulfe from his paralysis. "What's going on, sergeant?"

Wulfe turned to meet the icy stare of Commissar Slayte, his eyes glittering in the shadow of the brim of his black cap.

"Not sure what you mean, commissar," said Wulfe readying to move off towards his tank. The commissar moved faster. Wulfe felt a heavy mechanical hand grasp his upper arm.

Crusher turned his eyes in the direction Lenck and his men had taken, but they were gone from view. After a pause, he leaned in towards Wulfe and said, "You've been away from your vox-set, so maybe you haven't heard, but Colonel Vinnemann has ordered the regiment to muster at the east gate. We leave Balkar in fifteen minutes. Make sure your people are ready, Sergeant Wulfe. I'll make a very memorable example of anyone that isn't."

Wulfe looked down at the perfectly-machined, black metal hand. "We'll be ready, commissar."

"Make sure of it," said Crusher. There was the slightest whirring of gears as he released the sergeant. Then he walked off, taking his threats to other ears.

Wulfe's crew was looking at him wordlessly as he marched past them.

"Get to your stations, all of you," he said gruffly. "We're moving out in fifteen."

Sieglar, Beans and Metzger leapt to comply, warned off asking questions by the dark look on Wulfe's face. As always, Wulfe was the last one in.

As he swung his legs over the lip of his hatch, he thought about Lenck's parting words. They had frozen his blood. As he dropped into his command seat, those five words rang in his ears. Did they mean what he thought they meant?

Five little words, each one rocking him like a cannon shell.

"Watch out for ghosts, sergeant!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Two days east of Balkar, Wulfe and the rest of the expeditionary force entered a rocky region of the Hadar desert known as Vargas. Led by General deViers, riding comfortably in a specially outfitted command Chimera, the Cadians moved in a long column that slowly snaked along the floor of a deep canyon marked on Officio Cartographica charts as Red Gorge.

The gorge ran for almost three hundred kilometres along a meandering path that would eventually lead the men of the 18th Army Group to the site of the largest and bloodiest battle of the last Golgothan War. It was there, at long last, that General deViers expected to find *The Fortress of Arrogance*. It was there, also, that he expected to face the greatest ork resistance to his progress so far. By all accounts, the foothills and low valleys of the Ishawar Mountains were littered with wrecks from the war. What better place for the scavenging greenskins to build a major settlement?

Despite the likelihood of violent confrontation, the mood among the men was mixed. Some were upbeat, seeing the final phase for what it truly represented, an end to their tormented time on a world unfit for human habitation. Others were less optimistic. Some, like Major General Bergen, anticipated great disappointment on arrival at the coordinates the Mechanicus had provided. Even so, the realists in the army group were as keen to get the whole thing over as the optimists were.

On the other hand, few were happy about having the entire expeditionary force negotiate Red Gorge. There was simply no other choice. The rocky clifftops and surrounding highlands were riddled with chasms and crevasses, many of them impossible to spot from the ground until too late. Under other circumstances, Commodore Galbraithe's Vulcan gunships could perhaps have guided the column from the air, but flying conditions were far from ideal over the Hadar. Frequent dust storms threatened to clog air intakes, something that would have sent the Vulcans crashing to the ground. Electromagnetic surges from the thick clouds made mid-and high-altitude flights just as deadly. So the Vulcan pilots were forced to fly low, making slow passes along the canyon floor, just a few hundred metres above the heads of the Cadian troops, visored eyes scanning for signs of ambush.

Wulfe watched the Vulcans from his cupola, black birds roaring as they crossed the strip of red sky overhead. They left trails of grey smoke that moved like ribbons on the wind.

For Wulfe, this phase of the journey was particularly harrowing. The sharp crags and deep, shadowed gullies along which the column moved were a powerful reminder of Lugo's Ditch. As the rock walls rose to fantastic heights on either side, a cold sweat began to soak Wulfe's tunic.

Watch out for ghosts, sergeant!

Even now, with the glow of the second day fading, Lenck's words were still eating away at Wulfe's insides. What had the bastard corporal meant? The most obvious answer was that he knew about Lugo's Ditch. But how? Wulfe was sure that Confessor Friedrich wouldn't have betrayed him. He doubted any of his crew would have, either. Beans didn't know anything about it so that ruled him out.

Had Lenck simply meant Victor Dunst? A ghost of the past rather than of the dead? That was almost as much of a stretch. All Lenck had regarding Dunst was a name, wasn't it?

Wulfe wracked his brain, desperate to remember who he had told about Dunst. He hadn't recounted the story often — it wasn't exactly one of his favourites — but it was an old custom among Cadian troopers to compare scars and tell the tales of how they had been won. Wulfe had

shared the Dunst story with a handful of men in his early years with the regiment. Had someone told Lenck? Did the rotten corporal know just how much his appearance troubled Wulfe?

As the day wore on, Wulfe tried to put the matter to the back of his mind. He sat in his cupola, occupying himself with a study of his surroundings as *Last Rites II* rambled through the dust kicked up by the tanks in front. There was vegetation in the canyon, the first that he had seen since crashing on this world. Not much of it, of course — mostly dry grasses and scrawny, thorn-covered tangles of brash — but it meant moisture. There was animal life, too, and far larger than the biting ticks the Cadians had endured so far. Wulfe saw great, slothful, flat-bodied lizards basking on the rocks. Their skins were armoured with hundreds of small, bony plates, and they were coloured like the land around them. As the Imperial column rolled past, they hissed and slid quickly into the mouths of inky black caves.

Observing these things offered Wulfe only temporary respite from his thoughts. Again and again, he returned to the matters that troubled him most. As the strip of sky above Red Gorge grew dark, he dropped back down into his turret basket, leaving the hatch open above him so that a cooling wind could circulate.

Sieglar was dozing in his seat, thick arms folded on top of the shell magazine, head resting in the crook of his elbow. By the glow of the turret's internal lamps, Beans was leafing through a tattered magazine featuring monochrome pictos of hard-faced Cadian women stripping out of military uniform. Judging by the state of the pages, the magazine had had a great many owners over the years.

Wulfe smiled to himself and tapped Beans on the shoulder. Speaking low on the intercom so as not to wake Sieglar, he said, "That stuff will rot your soul."

"Damage done," said Beans with a grin. "I've been through this one so many times I think I've desensitised myself. You want it?"

Wulfe laughed, but his tone was serious when he said, "Listen, Beans. You and I need to have a talk."

"What about, sarge?"

"I think you know what."

Was it Wulfe's imagination, or did the new gunner flush a little?

"The stand-off in the staging area, right?"

Wulfe nodded, frowning. "A tanker stands with his crew, no matter what. You know the rules. You're lucky Sieglar and Metzger overlooked it, but if I ever see you standing on the sidelines like that again, you'll be back on the support crews before you can say 'the Emperor protects'. What the hell were you thinking?"

Beans shrugged guiltily. "If it had been any other crew, sarge... But it was Lenck's lot."

"What difference does that make?"

"Plenty."

There was a pause, a moment of uncomfortable mutual silence, before Wulfe said, "Tell me what you know about Lenck."

Beans looked up. "I know not to mess with him. The officers might have all the official power in the Guard, but it's guys like Lenck that control the shadows. Every regiment has them, right? The guys who can get you more booze, more smokes, more meds." He held up his shabby, pornographic pictomag. "More stuff like this. They make a business of it, and the officers let it go on because the men grumble a little less. Fewer fights break out. I can't imagine Guard life without such guys, can you? Well, that's Lenck. If the price is right, he can get just about anything. He's more like a hive-gang boss than a soldier. And he thinks you're out to shut him down."

Wulfe knew all this, of course. Beans was still a relative newcomer to the regiment, but he clearly had a good handle on things. Everything he had said was true. Regiments needed their hustlers and fixers. Things became unbearable all too fast without them. It explained a lot about

Lenck's mysterious popularity with the newer guys. Still, the idea that Lenck should be allowed some slack on account of this alleged service to the regiment didn't sit well. Wulfe huffed. "This is the Imperial Guard, not the blasted underhives. Voeder Lenck is a cocky, jumped-up little arsehole and, sooner or later, he's going to wish he'd never met me."

Beans looked uncomfortable as he said, "Um... Didn't he save your life, sarge?"

Wulfe spat a curse. "He killed an ork that was about to kill me. Duty demanded it. Any trooper would have done the same." His voice had taken on an angry edge, all the harder because, in truth, he was grateful and it bothered him immensely.

Beans raised a placatory hand. "I'm just saying what I heard."

Wulfe muttered under his breath. Glancing up through his open hatch, he saw that the sky was almost pitch black. Would old deViers have them pressing on throughout the night again?

Wulfe addressed his driver, "You need me to take a shift on the sticks, Metzger?"

"I'll be fine for another few hours, sarge," replied Metzger. "How about you take a shift then?"

In his long and bloody career, Wulfe had manned every single station aboard a Leman Russ tank. He wasn't nearly as talented a driver as Lucky Metzger, but he was more than capable of keeping his crate in place while Metzger got some much-needed sleep.

"Fine," said Wulfe. "Two hours. Let me know if you get tired before that."

"Will do, sarge," said Metzger.

Wulfe sat back in his command seat. He wasn't feeling particularly sleepy right now. He mind was running laps. He kept hearing Lenck's words in his head. The old scar on his throat was irritating him, too. He scratched it lightly.

The vox channels were mostly quiet. The only regular traffic was coming from the Sentinel and motorbike scouts up front. After a minute, Beans' voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Want a read?" said the gunner with a grin as he offered his sergeant his magazine.

"Not much reading in it," Wulfe replied with a half-smile, but he took it anyway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

By the sixth day out of Balkar, General deViers had started to develop a dry, itchy cough. It wasn't nearly as bad as those of some of his officers, but it caused him a certain degree of panic because he was so much older and, therefore, more vulnerable to Golgotha's subtle assaults on his health. He had seen what the red dust had done to some of his troopers. The damned medicae staff were being about as much use as a paper lasgun, in his opinion.

Last night, the high canyon walls of Red Gorge had come to an abrupt end. The column had made it through without incident and had set up camp briefly on the open sand at the canyon's mouth. Dawn had broken only an hour ago, revealing just how fortuitous the decision to halt the column had been. *His* decision, of course. Had the men of Exolon continued pushing eastwards, they would have run straight into the biggest ork fortification that deViers had ever seen.

He was looking at it now.

He stood just outside the doorway of a hastily-erected command tent, magnoculars pressed to his eyes, scanning the massive ugly structure that seemed to run from one end of the horizon to the other. Behind it, visible as little more than a faint silhouette in the morning light, he could see the slopes of the towering Ishawar Mountains. Their peaks were invisible, lost in the bellies of blood-coloured clouds.

"Why in blazes wasn't I told about this?" he raged. "It's colossal. How could the probe-servitors possibly have missed something like this? Get those tech-priests in here. Get Magos Sennesdiar. I want some damned answers at once."

The ork wall was easily a hundred metres tall. Throne knew how long it was. It was breathtaking in its scale. It was plated with great metal slabs of armour painted red from top to bottom, and decorated with oversized ork glyphs daubed crudely in white. There were sharp, uneven crenellations all along the battlements, and the barrels of huge cannon could be seen thrusting outwards from behind them. But was the wall manned? In the short time deViers had been watching, he hadn't witnessed any signs of life. Could he trust his eyes? The haze of dust and shimmering air made it difficult to discern movement at this range. The gun-towers and battlements could, in fact, be seething with the foe.

If they were there at all, however, it seemed that they hadn't spotted the 18th Army Group. Not yet.

Their eyesight, thought deViers, isn't as good as ours, but the longer we watch and wait, the more time we give them to discover us. We can't lose the element of surprise. A sudden thrust is our best chance to get through, and we must get through. Glory and fame await, Mohamar. It won't be long now.

There were vast iron gates, as tall as the wall itself, spaced at intervals all along its length, but none were open. They looked very heavy, very solid.

One of the major generals cleared his throat. DeViers couldn't tell which one.

"And we've no idea how far it extends?" deViers asked. "No idea at all?"

Bergen, Killian and Rennkamp all stood a pace behind him, staring out at the ork wall through their own magnoculars.

"There hasn't been time to properly reconnoitre it yet, sir," said Bergen. "The Vulcan pilots say they're awaiting your order to go up, if that's what you want. There might be a way around it. Best estimates at this time suggest it's over a hundred kilometres long, though."

“By the Golden Throne,” hissed deViers. “Over a hundred kilometres.”

He wasn’t optimistic about finding a way around. A feeling in his gut, an instinct developed over decades of battlefield command, told him this was all part of his great test. Here was an obstacle put before him to see if he was worthy of everlasting fame. No, there would be no going around it. There was nothing for free in this universe.

The sheer size of the wall suggested it might have been built to keep out Titans. A foolish notion, of course. Nothing could keep out a Titan for long, but it probably made some kind of rudimentary sense to the greenskins. Was the construction of the wall a reaction to Yarrick’s assault on Golgotha? The mighty commissar had employed Titans throughout his campaign. Perhaps the greenskins had anticipated an Imperial return all along.

“Gather the officers together,” deViers told his three major generals. “I want us through those gates by the end of the day.”

“Sir!” protested Killian. “We have no idea of the enemy’s strength. We need full and proper reconnaissance. At least let us get some idea of their numbers before we—”

“I didn’t ask for opinions, Klotus,” snapped the general. “You can see those gates as well as I can, can’t you? Reconnoitre all we like, I tell you now, we’ll find no way around. We’ll have to punch our way through one of them. I will *not* be stopped, not by a damned wall, not by anything.”

Bergen, Killian and Rennkamp dropped their magnoculars and shared a quick look that deViers decided to pretend he hadn’t seen.

“Might we not send the Vulcans on a forward sweep, sir?” asked Bergen. “Order it now and we’ll know what we’re dealing with. At the very least, they could give us some idea of what’s beyond it.”

“We don’t exactly have air support to spare, Gerard,” said deViers. “You know that. They could be cut to pieces by triple-A fire. I don’t suppose you’d like to explain that to Commodore Galbraith?”

“But surely just one, sir,” said Rennkamp.

“It would be better than charging in blind,” said Bergen.

“You know,” said Killian, “with luck and a prayer, the bloody orks might well have moved on. I didn’t see any movement. No signs of occupation at all. I mean, who knows how old that thing is?”

DeViers shook his head. “No, Klotus. They’re there all right. It took a lot of work to make that wall. Our prize lies behind it. And I’m damned sure that the xenos filth who made it are still behind it, too.”

“Honestly, sir,” said Rennkamp. “A single Vulcan. Just one fast sweep and we’ll know for sure.”

“And put the whole damned greenskin horde on immediate high alert? No, Aaron. No aerial recon. The Vulcans can’t fly high enough in this accursed weather to evade detection. Give me something else.”

“A Hornet then, sir,” said Bergen. “A single Hornet reconnaissance bike might be mistaken for one of the orks’ own at long range. That’s no guarantee they won’t fire on it anyway, of course, but if we’re lucky, it’ll draw a lot less attention and still let us get a man close enough to make a difference.”

DeViers nodded. “That sounds feasible. Make it happen. Get the best scout we have out there. Someone with experience. I’ll want a full report, including a list of as many weak points as possible, within the hour.”

Bergen saluted and moved off to see it done.

It didn’t take an hour. It was only forty minutes later that the Hornet rider chosen for the reconnaissance run reported back to Colonel Marrenburg. The colonel cut the scout’s verbal report short, ordering him to save it for the general’s command tent where the army group’s senior officers

— more than a dozen men ranking colonel and higher — awaited them. Marrenburg then led his man over the red sand and in through the tent flap. The day was already baking hot.

In the cooler shade of the general's tent, Marrenburg introduced his scout to the assembled officers.

"Gentlemen," he said proudly, "this is Sergeant Bussmann. He's the best damned scout in my outfit. You can have absolute confidence in his report, I assure you."

Since Sergeant Bussmann belonged to Bergen's division, deViers asked Bergen to conduct the briefing, giving the general and the others a chance to concentrate on the details and any questions they needed to ask. There wasn't much good news. Judging by the sergeant's account, the wall was more daunting the closer one got to it. Whatever lay inside must have been of great value to the greenskins, for they had expended tremendous resources in its construction, resources that might otherwise have gone into the construction of hundreds, if not thousands, of their war machines.

This bothered Bergen on two counts. Firstly, it suggested that the orks had enough resources to be able to afford such a grand static defence. This led him to suspect they had established ore refineries somewhere. Were they close by? Golgotha had been selected for occupation by the Adeptus Mechanicus centuries ago for the amount and variety of metals deep within its crust. It wasn't much of a stretch to believe the orks were taking similar advantage of the resources. Secondly, the use of so much valuable metal in construction of the wall could only mean that whatever lay on the other side was something the orks considered very important. Yes, they were beastlike and savage, but they could be cunning, too. They weren't nearly as mindless as men believed. They had built a wall, and there had to be a good reason.

As he listened to Bussmann, Bergen found himself wondering if *The Fortress of Arrogance* might not be the thing the aliens were trying to protect. Had they known all along that the Imperium would come back to Golgotha to collect it? Had they planned and built the wall knowing that the fight would come to *them*?

Bussmann reported large amounts of artillery present on the parapets. Some of the barrels he had seen extending out from between the wall's teeth were unnervingly broad, chambered for rounds of such size they might have been more at home on the prow of an interstellar battleship.

That's it then, thought Bergen. They must still be here. There's no way the greenskins would leave weapons like that behind. By the blasted Eye, we've got a fight on our hands.

It had been impossible for Bussmann to gauge the thickness of the wall and how well it would stand up to the weaponry of the 18th Army Group, but it certainly looked like it could take a beating. On the other hand, some of the plates were rusting, and orks rarely built anything with consistent strength throughout. There would be irregularities in the structure that Exolon could exploit if only they could find them.

The question was, would they have the chance? Bussmann had spotted numerous hinged plates set in the wall at apparently random points. A few of them had fallen off, their bolts having rusted, revealing the nature of the others. They were firing ports, and the cannon they hid were massive.

At the end of his report, Sergeant Bussmann cast a somewhat anxious glance at Colonel Marrenburg. Then he took a deep breath and said, "In my opinion, sirs, a direct frontal assault on the ork wall will result in very heavy losses. If it were up to me—"

"Sergeant," snapped Marrenburg, cutting Bussmann off. "You will restrict yourself to answering direct questions."

Bussmann flushed and an angry look stole across his face, but he said, "I apologise if I spoke out of turn, sir."

General deViers cleared his throat and addressed the sergeant. "We'll overlook it this time, sergeant, but think on this: without hardship there can be no glory. Show me something worth doing that doesn't have its price."

Bergen wanted to roll his eyes, and, judging by the sergeant's sudden look of disbelief, Bussmann felt the same. Before the scout could dig himself a deeper hole, however, Bergen jumped

in and said, "Thank you very much for your report, sergeant. Your service today has been noted. Unless the general wishes to ask anything else..."

DeViers shook his head.

"In that case," continued Bergen, "you're dismissed."

Bussmann snapped out a sharp salute, turned, and marched out into the light of day.

"We need to focus on the gates," said Killian. "From his report, it sounds like they're hinged to open outwards. They're far too big to ram open anyway. How in the blasted warp are we going to breach them?"

It was Colonel Vinnemann, hunched in his chair like some kind of cathedral gargoyle, who answered. "We all know orks. Chances are, when they see us coming, they'll open the gates and start spilling out like rats from a burning building. We can fight our way through if we don't give them a chance to close the gates again."

Bergen caught General deViers looking over at the disfigured form of Vinnemann with an expression of barely concealed distaste, and, for the first time since leaving Hadron Base, he felt a sudden powerful resurgence in his contempt for the old general.

"And if they don't come spilling out?" asked a dark-skinned colonel by the name of Meyers. He was tall and thin, vulture-like, and one of his eyes was a white orb without a hint of iris or pupil. He was one of Killian's men.

Colonel Vinnemann smiled his crooked smile and said, "Then *Angel of the Apocalypse* will have to roll up and knock on their door."

Bergen scanned the faces of the men seated in the tent and saw a few smiling at Vinnemann's remark, but the atmosphere was still heavy. No one had really expected this. They weren't prepared for any kind of extended siege. They were hundreds of kilometres from their forward base, and if they entered any kind of stalemate with the orks, their supply lines would be extremely vulnerable. If the orks had any kind of air power, bombing Red Gorge would cut the expeditionary force off from all contact with Balkar. The intelligence guiding the mission had been sketchy from the beginning — a patchwork of Mechanicus probe data, military maps dating back forty years, and Officio Strategos guesswork — but Bergen had never been so sharply aware of the entire mission's freewheeling, underpinned nature as he was right now.

"So, a full frontal assault," said Killian unenthusiastically. "We'll be naked, mind you. All our machines racing forwards across open ground... If the Emperor isn't watching over us, it'll be a bloody massacre at mid-range. You all heard what Bussmann said about the number of cannon on the wall."

"I think we can discount much of that," said a scowling deViers. "Half of the time, ork weaponry doesn't even work."

"And the other half," said Rennkamp, his eyes flashing, "it rips our boys apart."

DeViers looked suddenly furious, on the verge of throwing one of his rages, but the sheer number of men present and their quiet, concentrated manner seemed enough to quell the outburst before it got started.

That was close, thought Bergen. Rennkamp and Killian are really letting loose on him. Fine with me, but I'm not sure the colonels need to see it.

Bergen didn't disagree with his peers. They had merely voiced the thoughts that had been circling in his own head all this time. Here they all were, after so many days crossing bare sand and rock, chasing a relic that, in all likelihood, no longer existed, and before them was the last and greatest obstacle they would face. Beyond that towering wall of iron and steel, in a rocky valley somewhere at the foot of the Ishawar range, lay the end of this nightmare. Yerrick's tank would either be there or it wouldn't. In either case, breaking through the wall would bring a close to this whole endeavour. They could pull out. They could head for Armageddon, where the fighting really mattered.

“I say we do it,” said Bergen, suddenly committed. Every eye in the room turned towards him. “A full frontal assault, hammering them with everything we have. If we concentrate our efforts on a small enough section, I think we can pull it off. I think we can break through.”

“Knew you’d see it my way,” said a delighted deViers, leaning across in his chair to slap Bergen on the shoulder.

Bergen fought not to flinch away from the general’s hand.

What choice have I got? he thought bitterly. Throne forgive me if I want a quick end to this. It’s your fault we’re here at all, you glory-hunting old bastard. By the Emperor, I hope this is the last time I serve under you. With a bit of luck, it’ll be the last time anyone does.

“Colonel Vinnemann, you’ll lead the vanguard,” said deViers. “I want your Shadrowsword right up front, primed and ready. If the orks do rush out as expected, you will pull back to a safer distance and offer fire support under Major General Bergen’s directions. But if the greenskins decide to play it safe, I want you ready to show them the Emperor’s wrath. Understood?”

“You pick the gate, sir,” said Vinnemann, “and my old girl will peel it apart. You’ll see.”

Bergen felt he had to speak. He faced Vinnemann, but his words were for deViers. “What the noble colonel is *not* telling you, general, is that such a shot will leave his tank utterly stationary for long seconds both before and after firing. The *Angel of the Apocalypse* will draw heavy enemy fire during that time.”

Vinnemann actually looked hurt, as if he thought Bergen was criticising him and his tank.

“She has more armour than any other machine in the army group,” he said defensively. “She can shrug off whatever they throw at us. Besides,” he added matter-of-factly, “if things get too heavy, we’ll pop smoke.”

Bergen frowned.

“Then it’s decided,” said General deViers, eager to move on. With two fingers, he tapped a sheet of crumpled parchment he had laid out on a small table in front of him. It was the map Marrenburg’s scout had drawn. “Now listen carefully, all of you. We’ll be attacking this gate here. It’s more isolated than the others, which will give us more time to react to any flanking manoeuvres. I expect they’ll send troops out from a number of the nearest gates once we’ve engaged. Anyway, this is our target and I’m designating it *point alpha*. With the exception of Colonel Vinnemann, all officers ranked major or higher will stay behind this area here.” With a finger, he drew an imaginary line across the map where he believed the ork artillery would be unable to strike. “I don’t imagine the orks have anything that can reach quite this far out. I’ll be coordinating the attack personally from my Chimera. Rennkamp, Killian, Bergen, you’ll relay my orders to your respective divisions from your own vehicles.”

“Understood, sir,” said Killian.

Bergen didn’t speak. He noticed a fresh gleam that had crept into the general’s eyes.

“Then let’s disperse, gentlemen,” deViers told the colonels in the tent. “Prepare for the assault. Your divisional commanders will have more specifics for you within the hour. Dismissed.”

The regimental leaders saluted, turned, and marched out of the tent. Bergen considered following Vinnemann out for a private word, but deViers said, “You three stay a while longer. I want your input on formations.”

What did Vinnemann think he was doing? Bergen wondered. When the orks spotted *Angel of the Apocalypse* sitting out there on the sand, they would hit her with everything they had. She was one hell of a target, easily three times the size of the vehicles that would be escorting her, and, just like at Karavassa, she would be utterly immobile while her capacitors charged for firing. The blast from her Volcano cannon would draw every ork eye on the wall to her, and after the shot, the crew would need valuable seconds to switch the generator back over to power the treads again. Seconds counted for everything when the shells were falling all around you. Popping smoke would only help shield the *Angel of the Apocalypse* if the wind stayed low. If it picked up, it would blow the cover straight off of her.

Vinnemann knew all this, of course. He just wasn't about to let any of it stop him doing his duty. Bergen wondered if perhaps the colonel's pain had become too much for him after all these years. Was the man growing impatient for an honourable death? Throne, thought Bergen, I hope it's not that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The chaos of battle erupted the moment the orks spotted them. The wall *was* manned, as General deViers had known it would be. In fact, there were many thousands of greenskins on it, a huge garrison force, and they leapt to man their long-guns as soon as they noticed the approaching dust cloud of the speeding Cadian armour.

The tanks of the 81st Armoured Regiment moved in loose formation, a broad fighting line with van Droi's Gunheads on the far right flank. Captain Immrich's 1st Company ran escort to Colonel Vinnemann's massive Shadowsword.

It was midday, searing hot, and the thick, muddy sky churned and roiled above the battlefield.

"Charge!" yelled van Droi to his tank commanders over the vox.

The Gunheads roared towards the wall, tearing up the ground that lay between them and their foes. The entire strength of Vinnemann's regiment was being thrown at the wall in one massive surge: ten companies of Imperial tanks, though no company could boast of being at full strength. Every single one had taken losses on the journey east. They were still a force to be reckoned with, however, still something special to see as they tore across the sand. Bursts of black smoke announced heavy firing from the parapets, and the hot desert air filled with deep booming thunder. Great black-rimmed craters began appearing in the sand where the first artillery rounds struck. The orks could hammer the Cadians from this distance with impunity, and the constant barrage soon claimed its first victims. Three of Lieutenant Keissler's 2nd Company tanks were torn apart by tremendous explosions. They were the first of many to fall. Keissler rallied his surviving crews, keeping them in the line.

The men that died at least died quickly. The ork shells were huge and heavy, packed with devastating amounts of explosive. The tanks they struck were smashed apart by the blasts. There was no brewing up, no burning alive in steel coffins, just a sudden, brutal end. Three black husks, barely recognisable as Leman Russ tanks, sat pouring out smoke while other tanks surged past them to continue the push.

The orks had found their range, and Colonel Vinnemann ordered all companies to fan out. Bunching together, with the full weight of the ork defences raining down on them, was suicide.

There was still some way to go before the Cadians entered effective firing range. Even in Golgotha's gravity, a standard Leman Russ battle cannon could take out targets at a distance of over two kilometres but the ork artillery was pounding them from twice that. Closing the gap at speed was paramount.

Like her sister tanks, *Last Rites II* roared over the low dunes with all her hatches closed. Wulfe sat in the rear of the turret basket, peering through the vision blocks that ringed the rim of his cupola, shouting instructions to his crew. "That's it, Metzger. Keep her speed up."

Looking left along the Cadian line, he saw van Droi's *Foe-Breaker* to his immediate right. Beyond her, scores of other tanks raced forwards. It was quite a sight. Suddenly, bright light stabbed at his eyes and he grunted in pain. When he opened them again, he was glad to see van Droi's tank still at his side. He turned to look behind and saw a burning black wreck. Someone else had been hit. Thick black smoke poured outwards and upwards.

That could have been us, thought Wulfe.

Metzger was squeezing every bit of speed he could from the old girl, pushing her forward at full tilt, her engine roaring like a mad carnautaur, her suspension bouncing and juddering, tossing the men

in the turret basket around like dolls. There were more flashes of light, more bone-shaking booms. Wulfe saw two more wrecks drop from the Cadian line, fountains of dirt and rock exploding on all sides as the greenskins continued to rain shells on the rapidly advancing Imperial force. Van Droi's Vanquisher had pulled ahead. Wulfe saw her swerve violently to one side, just missing a huge pillar of fire and dust that geysered upwards into the air. Van Droi's driver, Nalzigg, really was good, thought Wulfe. *Foe-Breaker* had escaped destruction by a hair's breadth. Metzger must have seen it too. A second later, he swerved to avoid ditching *Last Rites II* into the crater caused by the explosion.

Beans banged his head on the metal housing of his gun scope. "Damn it!"

"Watch yourself," shouted Wulfe over the cacophony of battle. "Keep your eyes pressed to the scope's padding."

Even over the intercom, it was difficult to hear each other. The artillery fire, explosions and engine noise were deafening.

"I want this crate ready to fire the moment we make range," said Wulfe. "High explosives. We've got to take out those wall-guns so the infantry don't get minced following us in."

Up ahead and to the left, some of the tanks from the other companies had pressed forward into firing range, and their guns began to answer the orks'. The tanks were travelling too fast to fire with any real accuracy, but Wulfe saw bright blossoms of fire burst into life as shells hit the wall. It didn't look like they were very effective. The orks' answering barrage, however, managed to destroy a number of tanks from the 5th and 8th Companies.

"By the frakking Eye!" spat Wulfe. "How can we expect to hit anything in a full sprint? Who conceived this bloody plan?"

Metzger spoke over the intercom. "We just made range!"

"Beans," said Wulfe, "line her up on one of those wall-guns. The bigger the better."

"Got one," said Beans. "Halfway up the wall on our two o'clock. How about it? The gun-port to the upper left of the central gate, sarge?"

Wulfe scanned the wall and found it. It was one of the biggest barrels visible. A good target. The muzzle was so damned wide a man could have sat comfortably inside it.

"Nice," said Wulfe. "Siegler, high-explosive. Beans, zero in. It'll be a tough shot. We'll have to fire on the move."

"I can do it, sarge," said Beans.

Siegler slammed a shell into the battle cannon's breech, yanked the locking lever and yelled, "She's lit!"

"Metzger," said Wulfe, "drop her down into third but, for Throne's sake, keep us moving. Steady as you can."

"Aye, sir," said Metzger.

Last Rites II slowed abruptly, and the tanks on either side began to pull further away from her.

Wulfe barely noticed. His eyes were locked to the target. When he felt that Metzger had her steady in third, he called, "Fire!"

"Brace," shouted Beans, and he stamped on the firing pedal with his right foot. *Last Rites II* rocked backwards with the blast. Three plumes of fire burst from her cannon, one from the mouth of the barrel and one from each of the apertures in either side of the muzzle brake.

The turret basket filled with the coppery stink of spent fyceline propellant. Wulfe didn't give it a thought. He was watching the ork wall-cannon. A fraction of a second after *Last Rites II* spat her shell, a yellow ball of fire burst into existence just below the wall-cannon's firing port. Pieces of burning metal showered the sand at the foot of the wall. Black smoke moved on the breeze. When it cleared, Wulfe saw...

Frak!

"It's a miss," he reported to the crew. "Metzger! Floor it! Take her back up to full speed. We have to keep moving."

He took his eyes away from the vision blocks for a second and saw Beans hammering a fist onto his thigh.

"Damn it!" shouted the youngster. "By the blasted Eye."

Wulfe leaned forward and gripped his shoulder. "Beat yourself up later, son. Right now, I want another shot lined up. Siegler? High-ex. Now!"

The loader didn't waste any time confirming. He rammed another shell home, yanked the locking lever and shouted, "Lit, sarge!"

Come on, Beans, thought Wulfe. Concentrate, boy.

"Metzger," said Wulfe, "drop to third."

"You've got it, sarge," said the driver.

"Adjust your shot, Beans," Wulfe told the gunner. "Up a little. A little more. We're closer now. You ready?"

"I have the shot," said Beans.

"Take it!" said Wulfe.

There was a deep boom and a rush of pungent smoke. *Last Rites II* reared up on her treads with the power of the recoil, and then hit the sand again with a rough bounce. The main gun's breech slid back and dumped the spent shell casing in the brass catcher on the floor.

Wulfe held on tight, eyes scanning the wall through his vision blocks. The massive gun-port Beans had been aiming for erupted in bright red flame and black smoke.

Debris exploded outwards. Whooping and cheering filled the compartment.

"That's more like it!" shouted Wulfe. "Metzger, back up to fifth, now!"

The engine roared. The base of the wall was no more than a kilometre away. The other companies were already slowing to blast every last gun-port they could see. Fire and smoke poured from the wall's gun-ports and towers. Leman Russ Conquerors and Demolishers from the 8th and 9th Companies were lobbing shells up onto the parapets, too, desperate to take out the artillery pieces before they could shred the infantry vehicles that would follow in the wake of the tanks.

Black smoke billowed up into the sky from all directions. Angry fires blazed all around.

From the corner of his eye, Wulfe saw a light blinking on his vox-board. He hit the toggle. It was van Droi.

"Company leader to all tanks. We've been ordered to peel right. It doesn't look like the orks are coming out of their own accord after all. Colonel Vinnemann is about to kick their door in."

"Metzger," said Wulfe, "take us right, parallel with the wall. *Angel of the Apocalypse* is moving up."

Vinnemann's massive Shadowsword had so far enjoyed the cover of the dust clouds kicked up by the other machines as it rolled forward, moving into position to attack point alpha.

One shot, thought Vinnemann. We'll have one shot at this. We absolutely must force a breach.

Over the vox, he heard Major General Bergen say, "Are you in position, colonel?"

"A few more seconds, sir," Vinnemann replied. Then his driver reported over the intercom that they had position. The gunner confirmed line-of-sight. Vinnemann voxed back to Bergen. "In position now, sir. Readyng to fire."

"We're counting on you, Kochatjis," said Bergen.

Vinnemann heard Bergen notify all units on the divisional command channel, "Division to all armour, be advised. *Angel of the Apocalypse* is about to fire. I repeat, *Angel* is about to fire."

On the tank's intercom, Vinnemann told Schwartz, his engineer, "Switch all power to main gun. Tell me when she's charged."

"Yes, sir."

“Vamburg,” said Vinnemann, addressing his gunner. “Full blast, full duration. Let’s turn that gate to vapour.”

“No worries, sir. Ready to light it up.”

“Capacitors full, sir!” reported Schwartz.

“Right, Vamburg,” said Vinnemann. “You heard him. Do it!”

“Brace for firing!” shouted the gunner.

A hum filled the air inside the tank, like thousands of voices joined in a single tone that rose until it drowned out all else. A charge passed through Vinnemann’s twisted body as he felt the space around him vibrate. The pain he usually felt melted away for a moment as the tone rose higher and higher. Then, suddenly, the whole bulk of the Shadowsword shook as if it had been kicked by a giant. Blazing white light burst from her cannon, lancing straight across the battlefield, striking the massive ork gate dead centre.

The air shook with a massive thunderous crack. The iron gate glowed blindingly bright for an instant, and then seemed to vanish completely just as if it had never been there at all. The armoured wall all around it glowed white, then yellow, then orange and red. Gobs of molten metal began to rain down on the ground. Seconds later, the armour-plating had cooled again and solidified. It looked like melted wax.

The wall was breached. The 18th Army Group had its passage, but the battle was just beginning. Beyond the hole, ork structures burned, damaged by the destructive energy that spilled through from the Shadowsword’s powerful blast.

Vinnemann surveyed the results of his crew’s efforts and opened a vox-link to Major General Bergen. “Objective achieved, sir. Point alpha is open. The wall has been breached. But we must secure it at once.”

Bergen, in turn, voxed the rest of his forces. “Division Command to all units. Move up and secure the breach at all costs. I repeat, secure the breach at once.”

Through his vision blocks, Vinnemann saw scores of tanks wheel around and race for the gap he had just made.

“Schwartz,” he called over his intercom, “all power to the main drive. We’ve got to move.”

Already, the ork artillery had started cutting a deadly path of dirt and fire towards *Angel of the Apocalypse*. More and more of the ork guns swivelled to focus on her.

“Vamburg,” said Vinnemann. “Fine shot. But get some bloody smoke up, will you? Bekker, pull us straight back as soon as you can. We’re a sitting target out here.”

“All power back to main drive, sir,” reported Schwartz. “Ready to move her on your say.”

“Good man,” said Vinnemann. “You heard him, Bekker. Get us out of here.”

A trio of heavy shells struck the earth just in front of the *Angel’s* hull, making a tight triple-beat of explosions. The blast waves rocked her on her suspension. Vinnemann heard pieces of rock raining down on the roof of the turret. “Damned close. The next lot will hit us for sure if we don’t get the hell out of here. Move it!”

The mighty Shadowsword rumbled and shuddered as her giant drive sprockets started turning in reverse, but she weighed three hundred and eight tonnes. Accelerating from a dead stop wasn’t exactly effortless.

As she started rumbling backwards, Vinnemann heard Bergen hailing him again on the vox.

“Division to Armour Command. Can you hear me, Kochatkis?”

“Go ahead, sir,” said Vinnemann.

“You have to pull back faster. Ork fighter-bombers are inbound from the south. They’re coming in fast.”

“From the south, sir?”

“Affirmative,” replied Bergen. “Throne knows where the hell they launched from, but, judging by their angle of approach, they didn’t come from behind the wall.”

"You think the orks have long-range comms, sir?" asked Vinnemann. "Could the orks on the wall have called in an airstrike from somewhere?"

"If they have comms with that kind of range here on Golgotha," said Bergen, "then they're a damned sight better off than we are. And I'll be asking the tech-priests why. But listen, Kochatjis, your crate is the biggest thing we're fielding out there. Expect lots of unwelcome attention. I'm sending some of our Hydras forward in support of you. We've already lost one of the Vulcans. They weren't designed for dogfighting. They can't handle anything with that kind of airspeed."

"Understood, sir," said Vinnemann. "We're pulling back as fast as we can, but the anti-air cover would be much appreciated."

"The Hydras will be with you in a few minutes, Kochatjis," said Bergen. "Inform me when they reach you."

"I will, sir. Armour Command out."

Bombers from the south, thought Vinnemann. Didn't Stromm and van Droi report a great ork host moving in that direction?

"Move in, move in," shouted Wulfe over the intercom.

Metzger gunned *Last Rites II* forward, and they passed the melted edges of the ork wall. The sight that greeted Wulfe was of a place in turmoil. Shoddy ork buildings were everywhere, each an ugly mishmash of rusting steel poles and sheets of corrugated metal all bolted together at odd angles, looped by barbed wire and painted with bright glyphs of white on red. Greenskin foot soldiers were everywhere, crowded onto raised platforms or charging in great tides over the sandy ground, blazing away at the intruding tanks with everything they had.

Most of the weapons they carried were heavy stubbers and flame-throwers, oversized cleavers and axes, none of them much good against fifteen centimetres of heavy armour, but Wulfe knew that far more dangerous weapons were available to the Golgothan orks. His eyes scanned the roaring mobs, frantically searching for signs of the thick, tube-like weapons that had brewed up Siemens' tank. It was an impossible task. There were too many of them, and too much movement all around.

Wulfe didn't have time to make a count of how many tanks from the 81st had survived to pass the breach. He had some sense that the number might be around fifty, meaning that fully half of the regiment's armour had been lost in getting this far. As he thought this, trails of bright flame streaked out from one of the tower-like constructions and struck a tank to his left. The tank exploded in a spectacular ball of orange flame.

"Shaped charges," he yelled over the vox to any of the other tank commanders that might be listening. "They've got anti-tank weaponry!"

The vox-chatter he heard back told him which tank had been hit.

"*Dark Majestic* is down," shouted someone. "Anti-tank fire from ten o'clock high."

Dark Majestic was a 3rd Company machine, one of Lieutenant Albrecht's.

"Beans," called Wulfe over the intercom. "Traverse left. Ork tower. Three hundred metres. High-explosive."

Siegler heaved a shell into the main gun's breech. "She's lit."

Wulfe tapped Beans on the left shoulder, twice, a sign to fire at will.

"Brace!" shouted the gunner.

Last Rites II shook, coughing fire from her muzzle, and the ork tower disintegrated spectacularly. Bodies rained to the ground amid the storm of burning junk.

"Eat that!" shouted Beans.

"That's a kill," said Wulfe. "Nice shot, son. But don't get cocky. Traverse right. Target ork tower, five hundred metres. High-ex. Fire at will."

Siegler slung another shell into place. As the traverse motors hummed, turning the main gun towards the specified target, Wulfe took the briefest second to check the rear. He saw the burning

wrecks of Imperial tanks on all sides. Black bodies, too small to be orks, littered the ground, their clothes still on fire. He cursed.

Most of the regiment's tanks were still fighting desperately, however, holding back the seething tide of orks with booming volleys of explosive fire that killed countless hundreds with every passing moment.

Thank the Throne, thought Wulfe, that most of the greenskin bastards only have blades and guns. With the exception of those carrying explosives, the ork infantry were largely powerless against the might of Imperial armour. Their wall-mounted cannon and artillery pieces were useless back here. The Cadian tanks were gradually pushing out from the breach, forming a wide semi-circular perimeter so that the infantry vehicles pouring in behind them had room to deploy. Wulfe saw halftracks, Chimeras and trucks skid to a halt behind him and start unloading men.

The soldiers immediately added their fire to that of the tanks, and the death toll among the orks mounted faster and faster. Torrents of stubber and bolter fire blazed out from the Chimeras and halftracks, and the Cadians continued to gain ground.

Keep it up, thought Wulfe. We're beating them. By the Golden Throne, we're beating them.

Then he heard van Droi's voice on the company command channel.

Ork armour had been spotted approaching from the north along the inside of the wall. Wulfe turned his head in that direction and caught a glimpse of hulking black machines just as Siegler shouted, "She's lit!"

"Brace!" shouted Beans.

The tank rocked and the turret basket filled with the sharp stink of propellant once again. Wulfe quickly checked and saw that Beans had made another direct hit. The tower collapsed sideways, spilling green bodies all around it.

"Good work, soldier," Wulfe told the gunner. "No time to rest, though. We've got enemy heavy armour coming in. Siegler, I want armour-piercing up the spout. Beans, traverse left."

Rumbling through the smoke, fire and dusty haze, three hulking metal monsters emerged. Wulfe gaped. The ork machines had been fashioned to look like some kind of carnivorous creature. Their insane alien creators had given them metal jaws with long steel tusks that clanged together as they gnashed. They were bristling with cannon and secondary armaments. Wulfe could only imagine the fear such machines might drive into infantrymen, but, to *Last Rites II*, the ork tanks were big fat targets, begging to be turned into burning scrap.

Wulfe had every intention of obliging.

His fellow tank commanders clearly had the same idea. As the monstrous ork armour closed, all three machines rumbling and spluttering their way along a wide avenue that ran parallel to the inside of the wall, the Leman Russ tanks loosed a stuttering volley of armour-piercing shells.

Most of the shells struck home, and one of the ork machines stopped dead in its tracks. The greenskin crew began bailing out at speed, leaping from high hatches to land on the heads and shoulders of the ork infantry that surged around the treads of their machine. They weren't quick enough. The magazine inside the tank detonated seconds later, and both the escaping crew and the orks on which they had dropped were roasted to death in a massive rush of red fire.

Wulfe heard Captain Immrich broadcasting on the regimental channel.

"Good kill, armour," he said. "But the other two aren't taking it very well."

The other monstrosities brought all their cannon to bear on the Leman Russ machines closest to them and unleashed a ground-shaking fusillade of high-explosive shells. Two Imperial tanks — one a Conqueror, the other a Destroyer — erupted into fire almost simultaneously. The Destroyer's onboard plasma-containment field lost integrity almost immediately. It exploded with a spectacular and lethal burst of energy that turned a dozen Cadian infantrymen nearby into piles of ash.

Wulfe yelled out in protest as he watched. He heard Captain Immrich's voice on the vox.

“Armour down,” the man was yelling. “I want those bloody abominations taken out, now! That’s an order!”

Wulfe wondered who the dead tank crews were. There hadn’t been any chance to read the names on their crates before they were brewed up. There would be time to find out after the battle, if he lived through it. For some men, the absence of friends would become brutally, painfully apparent after the fighting was done. Thinking of this, he looked around for Viess and Holtz. Were they still alive? Still fighting?

They were. *Old Smashbones* was blasting away at a sturdy-looking ork tower on the far right. *Steelhearted II* was standing parallel with van Droi’s tank, its turret slowly turning to face the ork armour.

Wulfe realised that his own crate had a clear line-of-sight on the right-hand target.

“Beans,” he said, “target the one on the right. See that plate of armour just right of the main gun’s mantlet? The one with the glyph?”

“The skull-looking thing?” said Beans. “Yeah, I see it.”

“There’s a damned good chance that armour is protecting the gunner’s station. If we can put one through it...”

Beans didn’t answer. He hit the traverse pedal, already busy lining up the main gun. Electric motors hummed as he adjusted elevation. He had to get it right. A miss might very well mean more Cadian deaths.

“Lit,” said Siegler.

Beans was just about to call out *Brace!* when the whole tank was suddenly shunted backwards about three metres. Wulfe shook his head, trying to lose the ringing sound in his ears. They had been hit right on the front armour, the glacis plate.

“Damn,” spat Wulfe, simultaneously checking himself for injuries. “Metzger, you all right?”

“More armour approaching from front-right, sarge,” reported the driver. “They look like looted Leman Russ.”

“Try to hit their treads with the lascannon,” ordered Wulfe. “Buy us some time.”

The vox was filled with reports of the new machines’ approach. Beans was already reacquiring his original target. His crosshairs were quickly re-centred on the skull-glyph that decorated the multi-cannoned monster to the north.

“I have it, sarge,” he said.

“Take the shot,” said Wulfe.

“Brace!” called Beans, and stamped on the floor trigger.

The shot hit the ork machine exactly where it was supposed to, and Beans let out a whoop of joy, but there was no explosion, no sudden burst of flame, just a neat black hole the size of a grapefruit right in the centre of the skull-glyph’s forehead. The ork tank’s turret stopped moving. It stopped firing, too.

“That’s a kill,” said Wulfe, slapping Beans on the back. Quickly, he turned his attention to the machines Metzger had reported. Bright spears of lascannon fire were blazing out from *Last Rites II*’s hull-mounted weapon. The Cadian tanks on either side had also turned their attention to the newcomers, while others blasted the last monster in the avenue to the north, reducing it to twisted, blazing metal.

Wulfe was impressed. Beans was doing well. That last kill had been a fine shot. His men were functioning as a unit. This was the way it was supposed to be. Nothing else weighed on his mind but the heat of battle and the drive to win. No ghosts. No gangers. He felt less burdened than he had in a long time.

One of the orks’ looted Leman Russ tanks soaked up a lascannon blast and lurched forward, coughing flame from its main gun. Dirt and smoke exploded into the air just a few metres to the right of Wulfe’s machine.

“Gunner, traverse right,” Wulfe barked over the intercom. “Ork armour, eight hundred metres and closing. Armour-piercing. Fire at will!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Say again, Eagle Three,” said Bergen into the mouthpiece of his vox-set. “Say again.”

“Eagle Three to Command,” said the sharp, high voice of the female pilot. “Eagles One, Two and Four are down. Where the hell is that Hydra support? I can’t outrun the damned ork jets. And I can’t keep them off the *Angel* on my own.”

“The Hydras are almost there,” said Bergen. “Listen, Eagle Three. I know you’re up against it out there, but just hold on. We’ll have triple-A support for you in a few seconds. You should be able to see them now.”

“Two on my tail. Can’t shake them. Wait... By the Golden Throne!”

“What is it, Eagle Three?”

“Command, I have visual on a massive ork horde closing in from the south. A huge number of vehicles. The land is black with them, sir.”

“Confirm, Eagle Three. Significant enemy force advancing from the south.”

The vox hissed.

“Eagle Three,” said Bergen, already sensing she wasn’t there, “confirm enemy force in the south. Eagle Three, respond. Oh, for frak’s sake!”

Anger welled up inside him. Bergen had fought alongside women before. There were Cadian regiments entirely composed of the so-called fairer sex, though they tended to serve on Cadia’s Interior Guard rather than off-world. They were as tough and ruthless as any male soldiers he had known, but his attitudes were still old-fashioned in some respects. The knowledge that a woman attached to Operation Thunderstorm had just been killed by orks stung him with unusual sharpness. Eagle Three was Navy, and there was no love lost between the Navy and the Guard, but she had hung on bravely to the end, as brave as any of his tankers.

If he lived through this, he swore he would try to find out her name, to make sure she and her fellow Vulcan crews were honoured.

Commodore Galbraithe will have to be told, he thought. Throne help the poor bastard tasked with that.

Of more immediate concern, of course, was Eagle Three’s last report: a significant ork force moving north towards their position. It had to be the host that Stromm and van Droi had reported. How fast were they moving? When would they arrive? He couldn’t know. And all the forces at his disposal were already engaged with the orks on and inside the wall. He had to tell deViers. But first...

“10th Division Command to Armour,” he voxed. “Are you there, Kochatkis?”

“I’m here, sir,” said Vinnemann. “Go ahead.”

“You just lost close support from the Vulcans. Thought you should know.”

“I saw that, sir. The fuselage hit just a few hundred metres away. Looks like those bombers are swinging around for a run on us.”

“Can you see those Hydras? They should be all around you by now.”

“They’ve just joined us, sir,” said Vinnemann. “We lost two, but four of them are still in the game. The wind is stripping our smoke cover off and the ork artillery isn’t missing us by much. But the Hydras will be a real surprise for those bombers the next time they make a pass.”

"Let's hope so," said Bergen, "but there's something else I have to tell you. We're being flanked from the south."

"Flanked, sir?" asked Vinnemann. "What kind of numbers?"

"Can't confirm that, but from the sounds of it, far more than we can reasonably handle."

"Our forces have breached, sir," said Vinnemann. "There's no way we can fight on two fronts and still push through to reach *The Fortress of Arrogance*. What does the general say?"

"I'm going to report to him now, Kochatjis," said Bergen. "Just wanted you to know."

"Appreciate that, sir. Armour, out."

DeViers exploded when Bergen told him the news.

"They're bloody *what*? he demanded.

"They're flanking us from the south, sir," replied Bergen. "Last transmission from Eagle Three stated the land was black with them. Serious numbers, sir. We're about to find ourselves between a rock and a hard place."

"By the blasted Eye of Terror!" raged DeViers. "Why now? We've just gained the breach."

"If I might suggest something, sir," said Major General Killian.

"Out with it, Klotus," snapped DeViers.

"Well, sir. It seems to me that the only place we can hope to fight them and win would be Red Gorge. We'd be cutting it fine in terms of the time left to us, but, if we could effect a retreat to the canyon just before the second ork force arrives, we could fight them on a much smaller single front."

Rennkamp nodded. "Straight out of the Tactica. Engage a superior force at a bottleneck. It would give us more control."

DeViers eyes were so wide and bug-like with anger that Bergen thought they might pop out of his head. "Retreat to the canyon? And turn this whole thing into a protracted fight? I suppose you think we should just let the orks patch their wall up, too, so we can waste time and resources attacking it all over again? You bloody clods!"

Killian and Rennkamp each took a step backwards. "You can't mean to fight it out on open land, sir," said Killian. "It'll be a bloody whitewash. A massacre."

"I'm afraid I agree with them on that count, sir," said Bergen. "Our expedition will end here if we engage in a stand up fight. You can forget your place in the history books if that happens."

The last sentence seemed to surprise DeViers. He looked like he had been slapped. He turned on Bergen, hissing, "What would you have me do, Gerard? Call a general retreat? Should we run back to Balkar with our tails between our legs? No holy tank? No glory of any kind? I'll die before I let that happen. Nothing will get in the way of my success here. Do you understand? Do you all get it?"

Bergen thought he understood only too well. Whatever happened, it was DeViers' obsession with glory that would decide their fate. For a long moment, no one said anything. It was a metallic voice from the entrance to the tent that broke the spell of silence. Tech-Magos Sennesdiar stood there, his huge, angular bulk a dark silhouette. Just beyond him, standing outside in the daylight, Tech-Adepts Armadron and Xephous waited patiently.

"There will be no retreat," Sennesdiar boomed at them in Gothic. "There will be no going back to Balkan."

Bergen turned.

"With respect, magos," he said. "That decision rests with the general."

Sennesdiar stooped a little so that he could fully enter the tent. Then he moved towards them, stopping a few metres away, dominating them with his size, causing them all to look up at him.

"I did not mean to suggest otherwise, gentlemen. But some moments ago, Adept Armadron received a land-line transmission from Balkar. Our forward base is under assault. The orks have

managed to breach Balkar's walls. The garrison commander does not expect his forces to last another hour."

"They what?" gasped deViers. "Balkar is under siege?"

"As are our bases at Hadron, Karavassa and Tyrellis, if word from Balkar is to be believed. Great numbers of orks have assaulted our outposts from the north and south. It is clear that the orks have found a way to communicate effectively over long range and are coordinating their attacks."

DeViers looked ready to fall down. For all his rejuvenat treatments, he suddenly seemed every bit the ninety-one-year-old man he was. "Coordinated attacks?" he muttered. "By orks?"

"I think our current dilemma confirms the possibility quite solidly," said Killian. "The orks on the wall called in fighter-bombers, after all."

"Yes," said Sennesdiar. "The attacks are most certainly coordinated. The question I wish to have answered, however, is what the good general intends to do next."

"We should go to Balkar's aid at once," said Rennkamp. "How can we even consider going on with our supply lines interrupted?"

Bergen shook his head. "By the time we get back to Balkar, it'll be too late to make a difference anyway."

Killian agreed. "There'll be no one left, not if the outpost walls have already been compromised. Damn it all. All those medicae personnel, the sick and wounded..."

Bergen scowled. He knew good men back there, men who had been too sick to go on, and women, too. He didn't want to think about all those gentle medicae nurses left to face the savagery of the orks without hope of salvation.

"There will be no retreat," said General deViers icily. "Understand that now."

"We of the Adeptus Mechanicus," said Sennesdiar, "wish to recommend that this expeditionary force continues to push east. *The Fortress of Arrogance* has never been closer. The general's glorious quest is still well within acceptable feasibility parameters."

"You've got to be joking," said Rennkamp. "General, please. I think Klotus is right. If we can't go back to Balkar, at the very least we need to fall back to Red Gorge and dig in there. Fight the orks on our own terms."

Killian nodded emphatically. He looked at the magos. "Once we've secured the gorge, we could send up one of the orbital beacons to call for evacuation."

"Absolutely not," raged General deViers. "Magos, the beacons must only be used if and when we secure *The Fortress of Arrogance*. Is that clear?"

Bergen studied the general's face, thinking how disappointed he was that the man he had once looked up to had become so self-serving and obsessive. Despite all that, however, he felt that the general was right. To get bogged down in a long-term engagement at Red Gorge would do them no good.

"Neither I nor my adepts have any intention of utilising the beacons until the moment is right, general. You may be assured of that. You do not intend to leave without your prize. So, too, it is with us. No one will be lifted from Golgotha until our objective is met."

Bergen read between the lines. He heard the unspoken words. At no time had the magos said that his objectives were the same as the general's, but whatever the tech-priests wanted, it suited them to support deViers. He saw that fact give strength to the general now. The old man stood taller, the years falling from him once again.

"Every last damned one of you," deViers said. "When you get back to your vehicles, I want you to tell our forward elements to hold that breach at all costs. And get every other man and machine under my command through it before the orks get here from the south. That means the fuel trucks, the water trucks, food, supplies, munitions, every last damn bit of it. I want everything we have, everything we'll need, through that breach and heading east towards *The Fortress of Arrogance* before the ork reinforcements are on us. Is that understood?"

Rennkamp mumbled something incoherent.
“I said is that understood?” hissed deViers.
“Understood, sir,” said the three major generals.
Tech-Magos Sennesdiar didn’t wait to be dismissed. He turned and left the tent, saying nothing more.

“You’re mad, sir,” said Rennkamp. “You do realise that?”
DeViers looked at him and grinned. “Mad, Aaron? Or inspired?”

It’s a thin line between the two, thought Bergen. He felt miserable. He had known for a long time that deViers would get them all killed for his own sake: Balkar lost, supply lines cut, every major outpost they had won under siege by the greenskins. It was worse even than he had imagined it would be, but still *The Fortress of Arrogance* pulled the general on relentlessly, and with him, the men and machines of the 18th Army Group.

“You’ll see that I’m right, gentlemen,” said deViers. “It’s odds like these that make legends of men. We can still find Yarrick’s tank. It awaits us not far from here. And one day, all of the Imperium will know our story.”

No they won’t, thought Bergen. Because none of us will survive this to tell it.

DeViers dismissed them, and, after a salute that lacked any sincerity whatsoever, Bergen returned to his Chimera. The men of his division were still out there, fighting for their lives, fighting to hold the breach in the ork wall so that the infantry could keep pouring through, helping to secure more and more ground on the other side.

If he and the other divisional commanders could just get everyone through before the orks from the south moved into range, then maybe, just maybe, they *could* run east. With luck, they might stay ahead of the orks for a while. They might even reach the supposed coordinates of Yarrick’s tank.

Bergen hoped he survived that long. He hoped the tank *was* there, despite his doubts. He wanted to know that the dead had fallen for something greater than an old man’s self-importance.

In the back of *Pride of Caedus*, he hit a toggle on his vox-caster and opened a link to Colonel Vinnemann.

“Armour, this is Division.”

No answer. Bergen felt his skin crawl.

“Armour Command,” he voxed, “this is Divisional Command. Respond, please.”

Nothing but static.

“Damn it, Vinnemann, respond. That’s an order, you hear?”

Words tumbled over and over in his mind, like a mantra: *don’t let it be, don’t let it be*.

Perhaps there was just something wrong with the *Angel’s* vox.

Emperor, let it be that, he pleaded.

He switched channels, contacting Colonel Marrenburg, who was overseeing the artillery companies not far from deViers’ forward command tent. “Marrenburg, can you get a visual on *Angel of the Apocalypse*? I can’t raise Vinnemann on the vox.”

Marrenburg sounded like a different man when he answered, and Bergen realised that his fears were well-founded.

“It was the ork bombers, sir,” said the colonel. “The Hydras got most of them, but Vinnemann’s tank took too many direct hits. We just took the last one down, but not before it managed to deliver a final payload. Not much left the *Angel of the Apocalypse* now, sir. Throne rest the souls of all those who crewed her.”

Bergen’s mouth went dry. He was speechless. He thought of Vinnemann, of the hunched little man who had endured so much pain, so much struggle just to keep on fighting. Few men Bergen had ever met could be said to embody the Cadian spirit of honour and resilience so well. His eyes began to sting, and his throat felt tight. He would miss Kochatki Vinnemann. The unrelenting colonel had

gone beyond the call of duty long ago. Perhaps now, his soul would be reunited with that of the wife he had spent so long avenging. He had more than earned his peace.

The 81st Armoured Regiment's second-in-command would have to take over. That was Captain Immrich.

Bergen would promote Immrich later... if he was still alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Captain Immrich was alive, and he was working damned hard to stay that way. He was doing a fine job of it, too, and of gaining ground as he led the tanks of the 81st Armoured Regiment against the ork hordes that swarmed towards them from almost every direction.

Under Immrich's command, the Imperial armour kept pushing out beyond the wall, and the space they created behind them became filled with ever greater numbers of Chimeras, halftracks, Thirty-Sixers full of troops, and Sentinel walkers that added the firepower of their auto-cannon to the battle, slaughtering hundreds of greenskin filth with great sweeps of fire.

The ground was a carpet of smoking metal, big brown bodies and raw red meat. Ork carcasses covered every inch of sand and rock. The Cadian tanks pulped them as they rolled forward. There was no way to avoid them. The bodies were everywhere. Treads of black iron became slick and shiny and red. Only the filter-masks worn by the Cadians protected them from the stench. Without the masks, it would have been impossible to breathe without vomiting.

Even with all his hatches locked up tight, Wulfe's nose crinkled in disgust as the smell of so much death permeated his turret, competing with the powerful combined stink of oil, sweat and fyceline.

Last Rites II had knocked out three ramshackle ork machines already, and Beans was swinging the turret around on a fourth that was approaching from front-left, when Wulfe heard Immrich's voice on the vox-link. It sounded different, drained, as if something had sapped the life out of the man. He sounded lost. "All units, listen up. This is Captain Immrich. New orders from General deViers. All tanks are to focus on carving and holding a corridor east. The rest of the army group is coming through behind us. When they're clear, I'll give the word. I want all tanks to fall in behind them and cover the column's rear."

We're running east, thought Wulfe. Why the frak aren't we solidifying our position here first? The orks will close in behind us and harry our flanks if we run now. Does the general mean to let them cut off our route back to Balkar?

"There's more," said Immrich. "I've just been placed in temporary command of the regiment. Colonel Vinnemann... Colonel Vinnemann has gone to meet the Emperor."

Wulfe reeled backwards in his seat. It couldn't be true. It just couldn't be. Vinnemann *was* the regiment. To every man who knew him, he was as permanent as the stars. What would the regiment be without its guiding light, its living symbol of honour and duty? He felt the news hit him like a physical blow.

The sudden boom of his tank's main gun shook him back into himself. The turret jolted. The smell of burnt propellant tugged his nose. He checked the vision blocks and saw a heap of burning black metal straight ahead. The main gun was still pointing directly at it.

Beans whooped with satisfaction. "How many points do I get for a truck full of the bastards?"

"Metzger," said Wulfe, ignoring the gunner's celebration, "wheel us around to the north. We're to hold a corridor here for the others to come through."

"Aye, sir," said Metzger, and the tank started to move.

"Siegler, Beans, keep that rate of fire up," said Wulfe. "Armour-piercing. Focus on their armour. Our infantry can deal with their foot soldiers."

He hoped that were true. So far, they'd given the orks a damned hard time getting anywhere near the Cadian tanks. Every vehicle that careered towards them had been lit up like fireworks at a

Founding Festival. The orks were still coming, though, pouring towards the breach from all along the wall, desperate to join the fray where the fighting was at its thickest. As the Imperial tanks steadily thinned down the number of ork machines, the fight became one of lighter weapons: lasguns, bolters, stubbers and the like. Wulfe moved automatically, unlocking the hatch of his cupola without thinking, still numbed by the news of Vinnemann's death. How would van Droi be taking it? The lieutenant had idolised his senior officer.

Shock and numbness bled off the moment Wulfe poked his head and shoulders above the rim of the hatch. There was no time for them. The air was filled with the noise of gunfire, alien battle-cries and the screams of the dying. In his peripheral vision, Wulfe saw the guns of the vehicles on either side of him blazing away, cutting down dozens of heavy brown bodies as they charged. Distantly, he noted that one of the tanks, the one to his right, was an Exterminator. Lenck's machine.

Wulfe grabbed the grips of his heavy stubber, knocked the safety off, cocked it, and hit the thumb-triggers hard. He barely needed to line up.

Fire blazed from the stubber's muzzle. The recoil shook him, a deep juddering that travelled right through his body. It was a satisfying feeling. More satisfying still was the sight of a row of massive greenskin warriors in iron plate being literally chewed apart by his hail of fire.

"Beans," said Wulfe over the intercom, "if you don't have any armoured targets, get on the damned co-ax. Put some autocannon fire on them. We have to hold them here until the rear elements get through!"

"I'm on it," replied Beans. Seconds later, the co-axial autocannon rattled to life.

More orks fell.

"Push through," shouted General deViers over the vox. "I want every last one of you through that damned gap at once. Don't look back."

The orks' flankers from the south were closing fast. DeViers had moved the vulnerable machines ahead — fuel and water trucks, all the transports with their critical supplies — and ordered a rearguard of Chimeras to follow, turrets turned to protect the flanks. If any of the ork light armour closed before his rear echelons passed the breach, the Chimeras would have to hold them off. It was far from ideal, but all the heavy armour was up front, holding the corridor eastward. There was no time to reshuffle his forces. Together, the orks behind the wall and those from the south would try to smash his force, like glowing steel between anvil and hammer.

The general's Chimera, *Arrow of Alibris*, moved at the head of the racing column, churning up the dusty ground towards the gap that *Angel of the Apocalypse* had made. Beside him, the Chimeras of his divisional and regimental commanders matched his speed.

We *will* make it, he told himself. If the tech-priests have it right, *The Fortress of Arrogance* isn't more than eighty kilometres east of here. But how will I be able to recover it with all the damned pressure from our rear? How long will the Mechanicus need to send their damned beacon into space and bring down the lifter?

Thinking of the tech-priests, he put out a verification call. Were they still alongside him? What was their condition?

Tech-Magos Sennesdiar answered the call personally. His tinny voice was disturbingly calm. "Worry not, general. We are still with you. But you must ensure that our vehicles are adequately protected. If anything were to happen to them, your mission would end prematurely. Given atmospheric conditions, only we can signal the fleet for evacuation."

It almost sounded like a threat to deViers, but that didn't make it untrue.

"We've got a solid rearguard in place," answered the general. "The orks at our backs will not take us, even if my men have to die to guarantee our window of escape. And the armour ahead is holding a road east for us as we speak. If you can think of anything I'm forgetting, don't hold your tongue!"

Actually, he doubted the old Martian priest still had a tongue. He doubted he had a soul, either. If only the damned Mechanicus could have been kept out of all this. No doubt they would try to claim some, if not all, of the glory of the imminent recovery. He wouldn't let that happen. He would...

No, Mohamar, he told himself. It isn't the time to think about that.

"General deViers to all divisional commanders," he voxed. "Status report. Now!"

"Armour in position and holding the corridor," replied Bergen. "North and south parallels secure, sir, but let's not gamble on holding them any longer than necessary. We've taken losses all across the board."

"Rennkamp here. I've split my infantry to support Bergen's armour on both sides of the corridor. I'm working with Killian to forge east. Forward elements are pushing away from the battle."

"Major General Killian?" voxed deViers.

"Here, sir. My forward elements report a clean run on the far side of the corridor. No large ork structures to speak of, but the terrain gets rough a few kilometres out. The Ishawar peaks aren't far, sir. If we keep heading east, we'll soon be moving into the foothills."

"That's exactly where we *want* to go, major general," said deViers. "That's where she waits."

It took all Bergen's efforts just to make sense of the constant vox-chatter that sounded in his ears. The corridor was holding, but the rearguard had been engaged by the orks from the south. Their light armour wasn't a serious threat, but he had seen this all before. The orks used their fast trucks, bikes and buggies to slow prey down while they moved the heavy stuff up for the kill. It wouldn't happen like that today. The 18th Army Group couldn't afford to turn and fight.

DeViers was pushing everything he had left into a desperate dash, but what the devil would he do when he got there? Bergen wondered. The orks would be coming right along behind them, right on their tail. There would be a face off, sooner or later. It would be a straight, stand-up fight, and the Cadians were looking at bad odds.

Immrich seemed to be holding up, at least. Bergen had worried that the news of Vinnemann's death might undo him, but battle had a way of keeping a man's priorities in order. There would be time for sorrow and mourning later. Right now, the fight for survival was keeping him together.

Bergen's driver, Meekes, called back to him that they were through the breach. Bergen would have known it anyway. The sound of battle was deafening. He moved into the Chimera's turret to get a look through the vision blocks. All around him, he saw Imperial machines blasting away with everything they had. Dead xenos lay in dense heaps all around, but every second, hundreds more clambered over the corpse-mountains to add their fire to the battle. Pistol and stubber fire danced and ricocheted off the Chimera's hull. There were other weapons, too. The orks seemed to have developed las and plasma analogues. Could it be that they were learning from their battles with the Guard?

"Keep your speed up," he told Meekes. "There's no time to join the fight. The sooner we're clear and running for the hills, the sooner we can pull our armour back in behind us." And the sooner deViers will realise that this was a bloody wild grox chase from the start, he thought.

He knew Rennkamp and Killian were thinking the same thing. All three men seemed to have a silent understanding. DeViers was out of control. His ambition had become an obsession, and the obsession had led to madness. Look where his haste, his impatience, had got them: orks left and right, orks at the rear. It was a blasted miracle that Exolon had survived this long.

He saw Vinnemann's tanks — no, *Immrich's* tanks — blasting away for all they were worth, great tongues of flame and beams of las-fire leaping out from their weapons. No, he thought, it's nothing to do with miracles. It's *them*. It's their determination, their refusal to lie down and die.

Vinnemann lived on in them.

They were Cadians, and he was damned proud of them all.

“Immrich to all tanks,” voxed the captain. “The command staff are clear. Rear echelons are through. I want all machines to fall in by company. We run east, but keep your turrets covering the rear. There’ll be more ork machines coming through that breach once we move off. Keep your speed up. They’ll be chasing us all the way. Let’s make it as unpleasant as possible for the bastards.”

Wulfe listened carefully, and then relayed the information to Metzger. In formation with the tanks on either side, *Last Rites II* started rolling again, still firing as she went.

The orks on foot rushed into the space left by the departing Imperial machines, but they couldn’t hope to match the speed of the fleeing armour. Wulfe watched the tide of brown bodies grow smaller. He could still see the breach, but the light that shone through from the other side was cut off by massive angular shadows, the first rows of reinforcing ork armour moving through to give chase.

They could only come through three abreast. That’ll slow them down, thought Wulfe. If the top brass hadn’t been in such a damned hurry to move, we could have used the bottleneck to slaughter the filthy sods. What the hell are the brass thinking? If we come back this way, we’ll have to go through this all over again.

Metzger was pushing *Last Rites II* along at full speed, tearing up the ground. There was nothing orderly about the retreat. It was a mad, desperate flight. There was an undeniable sense of panic and disorder about the whole thing. Wulfe hoped someone knew what they were doing, because right now, he couldn’t see a good end to any of this.

As the ork wall disappeared behind the Imperial column in clouds of dust, smoke and heat-haze, Wulfe turned his attention straight ahead and saw the Ishawar mountain range rising above him. They dominated the landscape, towering over everything like dark, glowering gods. The foothills were much nearer. The land was already rising to meet them.

We’re going up, thought Wulfe?

Looking back the way he’d come, he saw the sun’s dull red glow behind the clouds. It was barely visible, just peeking now and then from cracks in the thick cover. Night would be coming soon. That would help. Orks didn’t cover so much ground at night. He remembered the Kaskin he had met earlier — the tooth collector from Stromm’s 98th — and the general belief that orks were highly superstitious. Wulfe wondered if that extended to feelings about the dark. Mankind had always held a special fear of the night. It was a primal thing. Even now, Throne only knew how many millions of years since mankind’s mastery of fire, it was still deeply ingrained. The darkness was to be feared. Did the orks feel something similar?

Wulfe dropped down into the turret basket, reached up, and locked the hatch of his cupola.

Sitting in his command seat, battle having turned to flight, he allowed his exhaustion to finally settle on him. His muscles ached. Straining against a growing stiffness, he lifted a jerrycan from a rack on the floor and took a mouthful of lukewarm water. Siegler and Beans were looking at him expectantly. Beans in particular looked keen for his sergeant to speak.

Wulfe nodded at them, but he couldn’t smile. Colonel Vinnemann was gone. Things already felt different.

On the intercom, he told his crew, “Good job, you lot.”

“Thanks, sarge,” replied Beans, but Wulfe sensed he was waiting for more, which was only natural given the fact that he had just survived his first front-line engagement. In fact, he had distinguished himself. Wulfe wasn’t in the mood to give him his dues right now, though. He felt like he’d had the wind knocked out of him.

“Beans,” he said, “you and Siegler need to get some rest. Metzger, I’ll cover for you as soon as we get a chance to stop, but that might not be for a while yet. Can you go on?”

“I’ve got a flask of caffeine that’ll see me through,” said Metzger. “Get some rest, sarge. Sounds like you need it.”

Wulfe decided he would tell them about Vinnemann later. He would spare them the grief for now.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the inside wall. The rumble of the tank rattled his teeth together, but, after so many years of sleeping on the move, he was well used to it. It actually seemed to help him sleep these days.

“Wake me if something bad happens.”

Raising an eyelid, he checked to see if Siegler and Beans were following his example. Siegler was, but Beans was still looking at his sergeant.

“I meant what I said, Beans,” said Wulfe. “Get some shut-eye while you can. There’s going to be more fighting soon. And if you thought today was bad...”

He never finished the sentence. A warm darkness embraced him, and thoughts of battle slipped from his mind. He dreamed of a blue sky and the green banks of a shimmering lake. There were purple mountains in the distance, each with a perfect cap of white snow, and, on one of the grassy hills at the foot of the mountains, he saw a great structure of white marble, a shining fortress.

To Wulfe’s eyes, it seemed close, just a few hours walking distance, but, at the same time, and with an inexplicable surety that can only exist in dreams, Wulfe knew that the fortress was much, much further away than it looked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Then where the frakking hell is it?” raged General deViers.

A blood-red dawn found the general and his beleaguered forces in a dry, rocky valley between the foothills of the Ishawar Mountains. It was a scene that held the eye and boggled the mind. Here, at long last, was the reported resting place of *The Fortress of Arrogance*, at least, so the Adeptus Mechanicus had told the Munitorum. General deViers had pinned all his hopes on it.

But there was no sign of Yarrick’s tank. In fact there was no sign that it had ever been here at all.

The valley was two kilometres long, curving away to the north-east where its floor gradually rose to meet the mountain slopes. The hills between which it nestled were of loose orange sand and darker orange rock, but much of the land was covered by rusting metal, for it was here that a great battle had once been fought. Yarrick’s forces had passed through these foothills, hounded by Ghazghkull Thraka’s hordes from the north. It was here that the Imperial troops had truly foundered, sandwiched between their pursuers and a well-equipped secondary ork force that came up from the southeast in a pincer movement. Thraka had surprised Yarrick and wreaked havoc on his army, fielding some of the greatest monstrosities available to any ork commander, massive avatars of war to rival in power and stature the mighty Titans of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

For the sake of target identification, the Officio Strategos tagged these towering creations Gargants. Similar designs of a lighter class had been code-named Stompers. They looked much the same but for the difference in size. There were reports of Gargants as tall as the greatest machines of the Legio Titanicus. They were as tall as the orks could make them: massive effigies of their savage gods, dressed for war in great skirts of the thickest armour plating the greenskins could find. Clouds of toxic gas and steam vented from them with every lumbering, earth-shaking step, and they were typically armed with more weapons than was practical.

More often than not, their arms were comprised of cannon of outrageous calibre, all grouped together so that they might launch volleys of devastating shells at a single target. Atop each giant body sat a control deck in the shape of a monstrous metal head. The orks designed these to look much like themselves; they had red eyes, albeit glowing ones made up of sensors, and jutting metal jaws that thrust forward, providing a parapet for the insane infantry that manned the gun positions there. Each shoulder was a firing platform bearing everything from artillery pieces to mortars and fixed stubber positions. Nothing else in the ork arsenal embodied their enthusiasm for war like these oversized abominations.

It was the wreckage of one of these Gargants that told General deViers he was looking in the right place.

The Gargant was practically skeletal. Over the years since Yarrick had managed to fell it, ork bands had come, stripping away everything they could use from its mighty carcass. They took the weapons. They took the armour plates. All that lay before deViers and his forces was a rusting frame that barely hinted at the terror of the original machine.

Other, smaller machines lay all around it, also half buried in the sand, also looted. They were mostly dreadnoughts, much smaller than a Stomper, but deadly enough in their own right. There were signs that Imperial Titans had fought here, too. The wreckage of their mighty guns lay half-buried in the hillsides. The valley had seen a great battle, so great, in fact, that few living beings had walked away from it, and few machines had survived it intact.

It was here that Yarrick had lost his Baneblade *and* his freedom. It was here that the greenskin warlord Ghazghkull Thraka finally captured his nemesis, though he released him soon afterwards so that he would have a worthy opponent for his second war on Armageddon.

“Someone answer me,” demanded deViers. He was standing halfway up the left hillside, scanning the valley desperately, and the air of panic he exuded was palpable. Bergen stood close by, shaking his head.

I knew it, he thought. He wasn’t gloating. His feeling was one of resignation. Here was the proof that his doubts had been justified all along. There was no need to feel guilty for harbouring such scepticism. He had been right, but he had truly wanted to be wrong. The current question was this: what would Tech-Magos Sennesdiar do now? The ancient tech-priest *must* have known all along that the whole expedition would eventually come to this. He must have known he’d have to answer for the missing Baneblade eventually.

General deViers was thinking about the tech-priests, too. “Get the damned cogboys over here. I want a bloody explanation. And don’t let the men stop searching. I want to know the moment anyone finds anything, absolutely anything at all.”

Bergen looked out over the opposite slope. The day was still new, but the air was already warm. There was no breeze, not yet anyway. Looking westwards, he gazed along the row of tanks and transports that sat waiting patiently for their orders. The tank crews were out, stretching their legs after a long hard run from the orks. The Sentinels were up on the high ground, keeping watch on the gullies below. The greenskins couldn’t be far off. The hours of pitch darkness might have slowed them down a little, but Bergen knew it was a temporary reprieve. The orks wanted to fight.

What would deViers do, Bergen wondered? Would he have Exolon make a stand? Or would he urge them on? Where was there left to go after this?

“You called, general,” said a mechanical voice from Bergen’s right. He turned his head to see the three senior tech-priests drift forward, red robes rippling around them as they moved. “May we assume that your men have found *The Fortress of Arrogance*? I shall launch an orbital beacon as soon as I have verified this.”

“No they bloody well have *not* found it,” deViers practically screamed. Purple veins bulged at his temples and up the side of his neck. His eyes were wide, and Bergen saw for the first time that the whites had turned pink, just like everyone else’s had.

So, he thought, the old man is suffering the effects of the fines, too.

“Tell me right now, magos,” demanded deViers, “are we in the right place? Is this not the valley in your reports? These *are* the coordinates I was given!”

“This is the place, general. All our intelligence indicated that *The Fortress of Arrogance* was here.”

“*Was* being the operative word,” deViers exploded.

“Clearly, general,” said the magos with perfect self-control, “if it is not here, it must have been moved. Do not fret, however. We of the Adeptus Mechanicus come prepared for such a contingency. We have the knowledge and equipment that will allow us to track the movement of the machine. *The Fortress of Arrogance* was possessed of a unique and powerful machine-spirit. Through our ancient arts, we may still be able to commune with that spirit and learn where its vessel has been taken.”

DeViers looked far from placated by this, but his desperation seemed to bleed off a little. Bergen, on the other hand, didn’t know what to think. As a lifelong tanker, he had come to believe in the machine-spirits that inhabited each of the tanks he had personally commanded. He had seen how much better they functioned when one observed the proper rites. He had witnessed firsthand the peculiar techno-sorcery of the Martian Priesthood in action. There were so many things he would never understand about it all. Was Sennesdiar speaking the truth? Could he really commune with the spirit of the revered machine?

Tech-Magos Sennesdiar let out a piercing mechanical shriek, and his adepts immediately turned and stalked back to their idling Chimera where it sat atop the southern slope.

“My subordinates and I need to perform a ritual, general,” said Sennesdiar to deViers. “We shall consult the machine-spirit and bring you your answer. Have faith. I am no lowly engineer. I would not have opted to join this mission in person had I harboured any doubts about its success. You will have your prize.”

DeViers’ jaw was tight. He didn’t answer. Bergen suspected that the old man was simply too damned angry for words. Sennesdiar didn’t wait for them anyway. With a swish of his robes, he turned his massive bulk and headed back to his Chimera, leaving deViers and his senior officers halfway down the hillside, looking up, watching him go.

“Damned tech-priests,” hissed Killian. He glanced over at Bergen, caught his eye, and said, “Sorry, Gerard. I know you tankers are close with them.”

Bergen shook his head. “Not really, my friend. They only let us know as much as they want us to. I don’t delude myself about that.”

“Do you think they really can perform some kind of sorcery?” asked Rennkamp. “If they can’t, we’ve come all this way, lost all those men, for absolutely nothing.”

Bergen shrugged. “I guess we’ll know—”

He stopped short of finishing his sentence. There was fresh chatter on the vox-bead in his ear. The others heard it, too. He saw the same expression steal over their faces as he knew must be present on his own.

“Throne curse it all,” spat General deViers. “Back to your machines all of you,” he ordered. “The tech-priests had better perform their rites damned quickly.”

The senior officers turned and marched at speed to their idling vehicles. The Sentinel pilots were reporting orksign. The greenskins were only two hours out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

<We must be quick,> Tech-Magos Sennesdiar told his adepts in the security of their personal Chimera. <But not so quick as to raise the officers' suspicions even further. This has always been a moment of great risk for us. There will be others to come, but they will hinge on the outcome of what we do here. We must be convincing. The general must believe we lacked all foreknowledge of the situation.>

<Finally we are closing on Dar Laq,> said Xephous. <I am eager to see it for myself.>

<I envy Magos Ipharod his discovery,> added Armadron.

<Do not let anticipation get the better of you,> Sennesdiar told them. <For all we know, Ipharod's discovery may have killed him. I do not know what kind of state we will find him in, if we find him at all. Concern yourselves with matters of the present. Everything yet depends on evading the orks and leading Exolon up into the mountains. The Cadians will not be keen to follow our lead.>

<Then, how do we proceed, magos?> asked Armadron.

<We must convince them that our rites are genuine. At the very least, General deViers must strongly believe that his prize is still within reach. He must believe that we have located *The Fortress of Arrogance* through our communion with the machine-spirit.>

<His anger consumes him,> said Xephous. <He expected the Baneblade to be here. He will not trust us readily.>

<He is desperate,> said Sennesdiar. <We offer the last possible hope of salvaging his quest. Angry or not, he will grasp at anything we offer him, no matter how thin. I am not concerned about General deViers so much as I am about his divisional commanders. Armadron, you spent the most time with Major General Bergen. How much of a problem does he represent?>

Armadron prefixed his sonic burst with a single tone that signified his lack of absolute certainty. <Gerard Bergen lacks confidence in his general. I feel that he longs to be rid of the man, but that his respect for the methods and order of the Imperial Guard override every other instinct he has. I project that he will continue to follow the proper chain of command no matter what.>

<Xephous,> said Sennesdiar. <You have observed Major Generals Rennkamp and Killian. Speak.>

<Neither one, magos, seems the type to advance himself by illicit means. The Cadian code of military honour holds fast. They adhere rigidly to mission protocols.>

<As it should be,> said Sennesdiar. <That is to our advantage. DeViers will follow us out of desperation. The others will follow deViers out of duty. That will be enough to get us to Dar Laq. Once we enter the tunnels, however, there will be questions, questions we do not wish to answer.>

<The veil will be lifted, magos,> said Armadron. <They will sense our deception. Even if they do not, the truth remains. We cannot locate *The Fortress of Arrogance* for them. Ipharod's transmission merely states — >

<I received a copy of the transmission, adept,> said Sennesdiar. <I am well aware of its contents.>

Armadron bowed. <Apologies, magos.>

<I do not need apologies. I need you both to gather the engineers together. I will lead the ceremony. It will be convincing. The Guardsmen will have no idea that it is a simple blessing rite.

They will see what they want to see. They will see us commune with the Ommissiah, and, when the charade is over, we will guide them to *our* objective. Now, disperse.>

Wulfe yawned. He was lying on the rear decking of his tank, cap pulled down across his eyes, but true rest seemed out of reach. Perhaps it was the dust. Perhaps he was sick and hadn't realised it. There was an ache in his muscles that would not go away. It had dulled somewhat since he lay down, but it was still there, at the edge of his awareness.

Beans and Siegler were preparing rations of sliced meal-brick and water by the side of the tank. There was nothing else to be had, but at least they weren't back to drinking purified piss.

Would they even live long enough for that to happen again? Wulfe wondered. It seemed to him that the 18th Army Group was practically broken already. Lifting his cap and looking around, he saw crewmen resting on rear decking or track-guards just like he was, but there had been significant losses. Van Droi's 10th Company was down to just five tanks. The lieutenant's crate, *Foe-Breaker*, was still in the game, though the man himself had become extremely quiet since the death of the colonel. Viess and his *Steelhearted II* had made it through. The man was a solid commander. Van Droi had made a good move, promoting him to sergeant on the voyage to Golgotha. Viess had justified that choice back at the wall, taking out his share of the ork armour, and Holtz seemed to be doing all right with *Old Smashbones*. It was a small miracle that he had survived when so many others had not. Perhaps it was beginner's luck. In any case, Wulfe was damned glad van Droi hadn't promoted Holtz just to have him die in his first firefight as a commander.

Then, of course, there was Lenck.

Wulfe hadn't given the bastard much thought during all the madness that had erupted since their passage through Red Gorge. Battle was good that way. One could achieve an almost peaceful state in the middle of all that mayhem.

Wulfe glanced over at Lenck's tank, but if the crew was outside, they must've been lying low, because he couldn't see them. Perhaps, like Metzger, they were all sleeping.

Wulfe sat up and swung around to watch the tech-priests. They were down on the valley floor performing some kind of arcane ritual he couldn't begin to fathom. It looked different to the rites he had watched them perform on the regiment's tanks but not much. Every tech-priest and engineer attached to the expedition was down there, all dressed in the red robes of their cult, heads bowed in prayer. They moved in a clockwise circle, chanting and emitting strange mechanical noises that no human throat could have made.

Some of them carried censers that they swung back and forward, lacing the air with blue smoke that hung above them, gently shifting in slow motion. There was no breeze. The air was thick and warm. He looked up. The tall red peaks of the Ishawar rose so high in the near east that they pierced the bellies of the clouds like tusks.

Why did everything have to remind him of orks? He would be facing them again soon enough. Van Droi had voxed him just twenty minutes ago to say so. The orks were closing in on them, still pursuing from the west. The Sentinels had used long-range scopes to spot them well out from the valley, but, in a little over ninety minutes, the orks would be here, and the fighting would start all over again. Would deViers lead them in another run? Or would he have them turn and fight?

Wulfe would have preferred to fight. It had become increasingly clear to him that no one was going to make it out of this alive. The officers still talked of finding Yerrick's lost tank, and they put a lot of faith on the tech-priests' ability to signal for evacuation. A lifter would come for them when the time was right. At least, that was how Wulfe understood it. He just didn't think it was going to be that easy.

The thought of dying here didn't anger him. He had spent his whole life knowing that he would perish in the service of the Emperor. What better way was there?

None, he told himself, but Armageddon would have been preferable. There, at least, his last moments could have been spent fighting to protect Holy Terra, rather than to retrieve an abandoned

relic. He told himself that any fight against orks was a good fight. If he and his crew were to die here today, so be it. He would meet his fate head-on.

He turned his attention back to the tech-priests. Their ceremony intrigued him. He was a firm believer in machine-spirits. Nothing strange in that, of course. All tankers came to feel that way, no matter their original outlook on the matter. Throughout his career, he had seen members of the Adeptus Mechanicus achieve things he couldn't hope to explain. It wasn't stretching credence to imagine that the senior cogboys down there might actually come away with some kind of answer.

The Fortress of Arrogance was gone, but how far had it gone? If it was still within reach, then he would like to see it before he died. It was a rare machine, after all, almost unique in the galaxy in that, since its loss thirty-eight years ago, it had been sanctified by both the Ministorum and the tech-priests, and those two august bodies almost never saw eye to optic sensor.

"Grub's up, sarge," called Siegler from the side of the tank. "You want to wake Metzger?"

Wulfe slid off the track-guard and landed on his feet by Siegler and Beans.

"Let him rest a little more," he told them. "We'll keep some for when he wakes up."

The three men sat and enjoyed their small repast as chanting lifted towards them from the valley floor.

"I still don't get it," said Beans. "They think they can find out where it went?"

Wulfe nodded and spoke around a mouthful of tough, dry meal-brick. "You'd better hope they can. The orks will be on us soon. I think deViers will give the cogboys enough time to finish their little communion and then lead us off somewhere. He won't give up looking."

Siegler shook his head. "And people call me crazy," he said. Wulfe grinned and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Yes, they do." Beans laughed.

A burst of vox-chatter from the bead in his ear made the smile suddenly drop from Wulfe's face. He spat his mouthful of meal-brick onto the hard ground at his side.

"What's up, sarge?" asked Siegler.

Wulfe stood bolt upright.

"Get your arses into the tank," he told them, "and wake Metzger at once."

All around them, the air shook with the rumble of engines being turned. A Chimera just ten metres away rumbled noisily to life, coughing blue-black fumes from her exhausts. Siegler and Beans jumped to their feet.

"That was van Droi," said Wulfe, picking up the remains of his meal and stuffing them into a tin box. "The tech-priests say they got their answer. We're moving out."

"But where to, sarge?" asked Beans.

Wulfe had turned and was already clambering up the side of the tank. He didn't stop climbing, but called over his shoulder, "To the mountains, trooper. We're going into the mountains."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The path the 18th Army Group took from the valley up into the Ishawar Mountains soon became treacherous, especially for the tanks, most of which weighed over sixty tonnes, but there was no time to be careful. The orks were less than an hour behind them. They had spotted the Cadians rising up into the hills and had turned on a burst of speed. Bergen didn't know how long it would be before the orks caught up to them, but he knew the machines at the rear of the column would soon face the threat of ork bikes and buggies. The light, speedy greenskin machines were far more adept at handling rough terrain like this. The steep gradients and narrow trails that Exolon found itself forced to follow were really challenging the heaviest of the Cadian machines.

For now, though, there was little choice but to push on with all the speed they could muster. General deViers was taking Tech-Magos Sennesdiar extremely seriously. The magos claimed that the almighty Omnissiah, tech-aspect of the Divine Emperor of Mankind, had been roused by their ceremony and had spoken to them directly through their most powerful and sophisticated auspex scanners. The data was irrefutable, the tech-priests insisted. *The Fortress of Arrogance* had indeed lain in the valley for many years, but had been moved in the recent past. Even now, Sennesdiar told them, the orks that had taken it were within striking distance, if only the general would lead his forces up into the mountains exactly as the magos directed.

It sounded entirely too convenient to Gerard Bergen. He was sure the tech-priests had known from the start that Yarrick's lost tank was no longer in the valley. DeViers was still in charge, however, and the old general had become so frantic, so desperate, that he might believe just about anything he was told. Whether deViers was mad or not, Bergen and the other divisional leaders weren't about to protest. Not now. What was the point? Rennkamp and Killian both seemed to feel as he did. Cut off from the rest of the Imperial forces with little hope of ever returning, there was little choice but to follow the path they were on and see where it led them in the end.

Bergen rode high in the cupola of his Chimera, a habit he had developed over his long years as a tank commander. He remembered those times fondly, times before he had been singled out for greater things.

Greater things? That was a laugh. Operation Thunderstorm had gone to hell. The Munitorum wouldn't want to lose face. They'd expunge it from the Imperial records once it was clear how spectacularly it had failed.

It hasn't failed yet, said a tiny voice in the back of his mind, but another, louder voice at the front said, hasn't it?

Bergen tried to ignore both and looked up at the sky.

The cloaked Golgothan sun was close to its zenith, judging by the bright patch in the thick red clouds overhead. At this altitude, the clouds seemed so low they might choke him, and he automatically checked that his rebreather mask and goggles were firmly in place.

The expedition force had ascended over a thousand metres already.

Where in the blasted warp are the cogboys taking us, he wondered?

He tried to look back down the mountainside along the route they had followed, but all he could see was the clouds of dust kicked up by the line of coughing, spluttering vehicles behind him. The column was significantly shorter than it had been when it had set out from Balkar. He still didn't know exactly how many had died rushing the ork wall.

He felt two sharp tugs on his trouser leg and dropped back down into the Chimera's passenger compartment. His adjutant indicated a flickering light on the vox-caster.

"Major General Killian wants a word, sir," he said.

Bergen told his adjutant to patch Killian through, and then spoke through the tiny vox-mic built into his rebreather mask.

"Bergen here," he said. "Go ahead."

"Gerard, this is Klotus. I've just had a vox from my scout captain. Something you should definitely hear."

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"It's about the trail we're following," said Killian. "We're not the first to tread it."

"So the orks *did* bring *The Fortress of Arrogance* this way?" said Bergen in genuine surprise. Whatever he had expected, it hadn't been that the tech-priests might be telling the truth.

"Too difficult to say, the tracks are vague, all but eroded. But the scouts say there is sign of at least one vehicle and a fair number of foot soldiers."

"It has to be orks. According to the records, we're the first Imperial troops to set foot here since the last war."

"Maybe. But not everything goes into the records, does it? And it depends on whose records we're talking about. There's no way the tracks are thirty-eight years old. I can tell you that much."

Bergen sat silent for a moment. It had to be orks. It just had to be, but, if the tracks *were* Imperial, it meant that someone else had got here first. Why hadn't Exolon been told? By all accounts, theirs was the first officially sanctioned mission ever to attempt a recovery of Yerrick's tank. If the tracks they followed belonged to an Imperial force, who the hell were they, and what were they doing here?

"Will you tell me the moment you know more?"

"Of course I will," said Killian. "I don't like this any more than you do."

"You've told Rennkamp? General deViers?"

"About to," said Killian.

Bergen thought about that. "Why did you come to me first, Klotus?"

Killian hesitated, perhaps checking for a second that the channel was properly encrypted. "Because deViers has been losing it for months. We both know it. And he's closer to cracking right now than I've ever seen him. If he has some kind of breakdown, the mission will fall to you. And so will our survival. I want to get off this rock alive, Gerard. I'm not meant to die here and neither are my men."

"Thanks for the update, Klotus," Bergen said. "Keep me posted, won't you?"

"You've got it. Killian signing off."

The light on the vox-board blinked out.

In Tech-Magos Sennesdiar's specially fitted Chimera, Tech-Adept Xephous hit a toggle and watched a similar green light die. He turned to his superior and said, <They have found traces of Ipharod's force.>

<That was inevitable,> replied Sennesdiar. <It changes nothing. I am far more concerned that orks may have followed Ipharod's unit down into Dar Laq. If so, we may not find Ipharod after all.>

There was a moment of silence as each of the Martian priests processed the ramifications of this. It was Armadron who ultimately broke it. <The fragment may be lost, then. What do you propose, magos?>

<Our plans must cover both eventualities,> Sennesdiar replied. <It may be that Ipharod has managed to protect the fragment. If not, we will need to employ the 18th Army Group in recovering it. They will play their part, whether they wish to or not.>

<You cannot be thinking of telling them the truth, magos?> said Xephous.

<I will tell them whatever I must,> answered Sennesdiar. <We must have the fragment. Even if it costs the life of every last man on the expedition force, we *will* have it. Nothing must stand in our way.>

<We are with you, magos,> said Xephous.

<Ask,> said Armadron, <and we shall serve.>

Wulfe growled as another wave of dust smothered him and his tank. If he didn't know better, he would have said the *New Champion* was churning up the ground deliberately to impair his vision, but all the tanks were suffering the same problem. The trail was so narrow that the Imperial machines had to move in single file. As the convoy climbed higher and higher into the mountains, the danger increased.

Metzger was guiding *Last Rites II* carefully along a crumbling ridge while trying to keep her at a reasonable speed. Everyone knew that the orks weren't far behind, though they couldn't be sighted, hidden from view by the dust and the drop-off.

Wulfe took a look to his right and, not for the first time, felt something flip inside his stomach. A vast chasm yawned between the peak they were ascending and the next. He turned his eyes to the front again and felt his stomach muscles relax.

What the hell are we doing up here, he asked himself? High altitude is no bloody place for heavy armour.

Wulfe and the rest of the Gunheads were near the rear of the column, part of an armour detachment charged with defending the Thirty-Sixers and Heracles halftracks that carried most of the remaining supplies. As such, the orks were snapping at their heels. They were most at risk.

Behind *Last Rites II* came *Old Smashbones* and a few Leman Russ Conquerors from Major General Rennkamp's 12th Mechanised division. Wulfe didn't know the crews, but that didn't matter. Whatever division they came from, the Cadians really had to stick together. There weren't all that many left of them, just a few thousand men packed tightly into a few hundred machines. By contrast, scouts attached to the rearguard reported ork vehicles pursuing in the thousands. Turning to face them was not an option. The Cadians could only keep going while the tech-priests insisted that this was the way.

Orks or not, the mountain trail was proving enough of a challenge on its own.

Still looking ahead, trying to guide his driver as well as he possibly could despite the dust, Wulfe decided to vox Lieutenant van Droi. Van Droi had been too damned quiet since learning of Colonel Vinnemann's death. It wasn't like him.

"Sword Lead to Company Command," he said. "This is Wulfe, sir. Please respond, over."

"Company here, Wulfe," replied van Droi. He didn't sound well. "What can I do for you?"

Wulfe wondered how to say it without causing offence. "Just reporting in, sir. Still quiet back here. No sign of the orks so far. I don't suppose it's too much to hope that they called off the chase?"

"How long have you been a soldier, Wulfe?" said van Droi. "You know better than that."

"I know, sir," said Wulfe. "I know. Just wishful thinking. Listen... about the colonel, sir..."

"What about him, sergeant?"

The lieutenant's tone told Wulfe he was treading dangerous ground. "I'll miss him, sir. That's all."

Van Droi was silent for a good ten seconds. Wulfe thought the lieutenant had actually broken the link for a moment, but then van Droi said, "You know, Oskar, when young men get their first combat posting, it's as if they're suddenly children again. Doesn't matter if they're officers or grunts. They feel inadequate, confused and scared. They feel like they don't belong. And the fear that builds up in them sometimes... Maybe you felt that way yourself."

"I'm sure I did, sir," said Wulfe. "It was a long time ago, but I'm sure I did."

“I never forgot that feeling,” voxed van Droi wistfully. “I hated it more than anything, you know. I felt like a burden to those around me. I had so much to learn and they had no time to teach. It was Vinnemann that pulled me out of it. He was just a captain back then. It was before his injury. He was one hell of a leader.”

“He was a good man, sir,” said Wulfe.

“He was a great man,” said van Droi. Again there was a long pause. “It’s not looking good for us out here, Wulfe. But if we have any chance at all to make him proud, I say there’s nothing we shouldn’t do to honour him. Understand?”

Wulfe thought he did. It wasn’t about nice neat plans anymore. Things had gone way beyond that. Van Droi was looking for something to hold on to, something solid, and, in the honour of the regiment and his duty to Colonel Vinnemann, it was clear that he had found it, despite the mess they were in. Wulfe hoped he might draw a little strength from that himself. If it worked for van Droi, it could work for him, too.

He was a soldier. He was a Cadian.

“For the colonel, sir,” he told van Droi, “and for the regiment. If we go out, we’ll go out with a hell of a bang, sir.”

Van Droi sounded a little brighter when he answered. “That’s the stuff, Oskar. Not many of the Gunheads left now, but we’ll make our mark, by Throne.”

“You bet, sir,” said Wulfe. “You can count on me and my crew.”

“I know I can, sergeant. Van Droi out.”

“Major General Killian would like to speak with you again, sir,” said Bergen’s adjutant over the intercom.

Bergen, up in his cupola again, immediately changed the channel on his vox-bead and said, “News, Klotus?”

“I’ll say. My scout leader just reported in. This trail takes us up into the clouds just a few hundred metres around the next curve and ends shortly afterwards. Visibility is poor, and the going is extremely treacherous. But that’s not all. The scouts... they’ve found something strange. I thought you ought to know.”

“Strange? What are we talking about exactly?”

“They had difficulty describing it to me. Look, Gerard, I’m not sure what we’re getting into here, but I know I don’t like it and neither do my men. According to my scouts, it’s something we’d better see for ourselves.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Human?” asked General deViers.

“I wouldn’t want to bet on that, sir,” replied Rennkamp. “I suppose it could be. Difficult to tell with all the erosion. All the same, it’s damned strange, if you ask me. What in blazes is it doing up here?”

The Cadian senior officers — deViers, his division commanders, and various attached staff — stood at the very end of the mountain trail, surrounded by anxious scouts from the 88th Mobile Infantry Regiment, the men that Marrenburg had sent forward to lead the column. Massive spurs of dark rock curved around them on either side, and the upper reaches of the mountain stretched high above them, peaks lost in the roiling clouds. The eyes of the Cadians barely lingered on any of these things, however. Instead, they were locked to the sight that lay straight in front of them.

It was ancient, that much was certain, and it was something that none of the Cadians had been prepared for.

A great rectangular space had been excavated in the side of the mountain, forming an alcove so wide and deep that one could have parked an entire Naval lifter inside it. The edges looked like they might once have been angular, squared off by the tools or machines of the masons that had carved it, but they weren’t very square now. Thousands of years of harsh weather had smoothed and rounded them, as it had also done to the twin godlike figures, cut from the same stone, which knelt below the alcove’s roof, taking the immense weight of it on their broad rocky shoulders.

The figures were vast and strange. They looked immensely powerful, but were they supposed to appear so distorted? Or had they just been badly rendered? Their huge block-like heads were preposterously oversized by comparison to their sturdy torsos. Each arm and leg seemed likewise exaggerated in its thickness, presenting the beings as having impossibly heavy musculature, and their hands and feet, much like their heads, seemed so big as to make the statues appear like some kind of grotesque caricatures. They were a strange sight indeed, and they looked like no statue of a man that Bergen had ever seen.

He wondered what had they looked like in their heyday. Had they been intricately carved? Had their faces been rendered in exquisite or terrifying detail? Had they been covered in glyphs or precious metals? How long had they knelt here, locked in a battle with gravity to prevent the side of the mountain from burying them? A great many millennia, surely.

The surface of each was pitted, their features long gone, lost in time. They were utterly faceless. In the millennia to come, they would crumble altogether and the roof of the alcove would collapse, burying all evidence that they had ever existed.

Thank the Throne, thought Bergen, that all that rock hasn’t come down already, or we’d be facing a dead end. The orks would have us properly trapped.

The expedition force *wasn’t* trapped. There *was* a way ahead.

The cavernous black mouth of a tunnel gaped between the two huge figures. It looked wide enough to take four or five Leman Russ tanks driving abreast of each other. This ancient structure was a gate, a doorway into the belly of the mountain. The mighty statues were its guardians.

“Abhumans, I’d say,” said Killian. “Maybe some kind of mutated human colonists. Who knows how old this is. It might date back to pre-Strife times.”

“Gruber, get the tech-priests up here,” snapped deViers. “We don’t have time to stand around discussing it, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to lead us all down there before I know what we’re looking at.”

The general’s adjutant put out a hurried call for the senior Martian priests to move up the column.

Yes, thought Bergen, let’s see what the cogboys have to say about this. I’m sure this is where they’ve been leading us the whole time. Whatever the Mechanicus wants, I’ll bet my boots it’s in that tunnel somewhere, or on the other side of it, perhaps. One way or another, though, we’re going in. Emperor protect us.

He knew that the men wouldn’t like it. He didn’t like it much himself. Alien things were anathema. From the moment a child of the Imperium could understand Low Gothic, he or she was drilled to hate all xenos and everything they stood for, and, from the moment they joined the Guard, that hatred was fed and nurtured and beaten into them until, for many, it became a consuming passion.

Suffer not the alien to live.

Wonder not at its works, thought Bergen, reciting from the Imperial Creed. For such things weave their corruption into the minds of men and make us weak in the face of our foes.

Many a man with too much curiosity had been burned at the stake by commissars, members of the Holy Inquisition, or even by outraged civilian mobs. Heresy carried a high price.

A monotone voice, like metal rasping on metal, sounded from behind Bergen. He turned to see Magos Sennesdiar approach, face shadowed under his cowl, long red robes snapping at his ankles. In his own way, he was even more alien than the grotesque stone twins. The metal tendrils that sprouted from his back and his monstrous machine-bulk made the kneeling stone giants seem so much more human. He was flanked, as usual, by the equally disturbing Adepts Xephous and Armadron.

“Fortune favours us, general,” said Sennesdiar.

Bergen noted that, unlike the Cadians around him, the tech-priests did not wear goggles and rebreathers. They didn’t need them.

How fragile we must seem to them sometimes, he thought to himself. Do they pity us, or do they view us with contempt?

The officers had turned to greet the tech-magos, and he stopped in front of them. Raising his dark, unblinking eye-lenses, he gestured with long metal fingers towards the ancient structure up ahead. “Dar Laq lies open before us. Why do we not proceed? The ork legion will be upon us soon.”

“Dar Laq?” asked Killian. “Is that what you just called it?”

“May I assume, magos,” said deViers testily, “that this... this *place* is known to you?”

“In name only, general,” replied the magos. “Dar Laq was long rumoured to be somewhere in this region, though it was never located and catalogued while Golgotha belonged to us. At this altitude, the clouds render auspex scanners almost entirely useless, and, as you can see for yourself, we are shrouded from view up here. There were tales of other ancient settlements, too, of course, but, though my revered brothers searched, it seemed that time had hidden them too well. It is remarkable that this gateway still stands, and it pleases me that our expedition has led to its accidental discovery.”

“Gateway to what exactly?” asked Bergen.

The magos turned and looked straight at him. Bergen tried to read him, to search for some sign of deceit, a twitch perhaps, some hint of conspiracy, but the magos’ body language was impossible to read, for there simply was none. Bergen felt he might as well have tried to read the emotions of an automatic sentry-gun.

“We do not know the name of the sentient race that occupied Golgotha before us, major general,” Sennesdiar answered. “We found no remains of their dead, no written records. They were

long gone when the Great Crusade came this way, and where they went remains a mystery. We of the Mechanicus do not like to posit suppositions without adequate data.”

“Meaning you can’t really tell us what lies ahead, right?” said Rennkamp, cutting in. He shook his head and turned to General deViers. “Could be walking into anything, sir.”

“I said they were long gone, major general,” said Sennesdiar, “and I meant it. I doubt we shall find any cause for alarm within. If your concern is greenskins, on the other hand, perhaps I may offer some reassurance. By their extremely superstitious nature there is a very high probability that the orks will not pursue us. There is no sign that they have entered here. If they ever discovered it, they did not deface it as they usually do. No glyphs. No spoor, unless your scouts have uncovered some. I recognise that there may be some resistance to proceeding this way among the troopers. This is a xenos place, but I project that the most we shall encounter is rubble and ruins.”

“And an exit that will get us out on the other side,” said Bergen. “Or what’s the point in going down there at all?”

“I’m not leading this expedition into a dead end, magos,” growled General deViers. “We’ve got a critical mission to complete, by Terra. Tell me what this place has to do with *The Fortress of Arrogance*. And your answer had better satisfy me.”

Sennesdiar turned his hooded head from Bergen to deViers and back again. The threat inherent in the general’s words seemed not to register at all, either that or he judged it entirely beneath his attention.

“We can be sure there is a way out,” he said, “because the machine-spirit is our guide. Even were it not so, an exit must exist, for it would be illogical not to create one. Animals of the lowest forms know better than to build a lair with only a single exit. And we are not talking about a low-born animal species here. We are talking about an intelligent, technological race that dominated Golgotha for many ages. The scant evidence we have indexed tells us that much.”

Then the magos turned to deViers and added, “I calculate an extremely high probability, general, that this tunnel will lead us safely to the far side of the Ishawar range. For the sake of your grand quest, and for all our lives, that is exactly where we must go. You see, as my adepts and I learned from our communion with the machine-spirit, *that* is where *The Fortress of Arrogance* awaits us.”

The column was moving again.

About bloody time, too, thought Wulfe. Reports from the spotters at the very rear put the ork forces almost within striking range, and the scar on his throat had begun to itch like crazy in the last few minutes. That was never a happy sign.

It was good to be moving again, but, from his position in the rearguard, it was difficult to work out exactly what was going on. As Wulfe sat high in his cupola guiding Metzger around another bend in the trail, he listened carefully to the regimental vox-channel, trying to learn as much as he could. All he could really draw from the broken chatter was that scouts had found a way forward, and that, inexplicably, a good many of the troopers didn’t seem to like it much.

That doesn’t make sense, he told himself. Everyone with half a brain knows we’ve got to keep moving if we’re going to stay ahead of those bastards. What’s got everyone so damned twitchy all of a sudden?

Soon enough, he found out first-hand.

“By the bloody Golden Throne,” he gasped as Metzger followed the tank in front between two eerily symmetrical columns of red stone. Beyond the weathered pillars, the ancient alcove with its kneeling gods was revealed in all its glory. “We’re going inside *that*?”

There was a crackle on the vox.

“Company Command to all tanks. Keep your pace up. I’m talking to you, Holtz. Keep your crate in line. Why have you stopped? Get moving.”

Wulfe heard Holtz growling back, "Sorry, lieutenant. Just caught us a bit off-guard. I mean, it's alien, isn't it? I don't like it, sir. We shouldn't be going in there. Throne knows, we shouldn't. We could be walking right into a xenos trap, sir."

The link spat a harsh burst of static in Wulfe's ear for a few seconds before he heard van Droi's answer. "It's not exactly my first choice either, corporal, but we're out of options. If you'd rather stay here and face the orks on your own, I can petition Captain Immrich for you. Of course, the commissars have already made it very clear that they'll execute anyone who refuses to enter on charges of cowardice."

Holtz managed to sound angry and chastised at the same time. "I'm no frakking coward, sir. Of course, I'm going in. I just don't like xenos abominations, that's all."

Van Droi's voice, on the other hand, had a hint of humour in it as he replied, "That's all I thought it was, corporal. That's all I thought it was."

As Wulfe was listening to this, he watched more and more of the vehicles in front being swallowed up by the gaping black maw of the ancient tunnel. As soon as each vehicle went in, its driver hit the headlights, but, from Wulfe's vantage point, it didn't seem as though the lights were doing much to illuminate the path ahead.

Last Rites II rolled nearer and nearer the tunnel mouth. Wulfe looked from side to side at the huge stone guardians as he passed them. What in the warp were they supposed to be? He might have said ogryn, but they were too misshapen even for that. They didn't look like orks, either. In fact, they didn't match the appearance of any xenos race that Wulfe had ever encountered or read about.

All too soon, the tunnel swallowed him. Black walls cut off his view and he was plunged into darkness. The air that moved around him was immediately cooler. He noted this as a breeze played over the hairs on his forearms and on the back of his neck. He noted, too, that the featureless black floor of the tunnel was sloping downwards.

The tanks on either side lit their headlamps, and cones of light shot forward, striking the clouds of oily exhaust fumes put out by the machines in front. There didn't seem much else to see, at least for now, just featureless tunnel walls, blue-grey clouds of exhaust smoke and the backs of the machines in front.

"Metzger," said Wulfe over the intercom, "hit the lights."

"Aye, sir," said Metzger, and *Last Rites II* added her own illumination to the darkness. It didn't make much difference.

On the vox, van Droi's voice sounded again. "Are we all in?"

Wulfe turned and looked over his shoulder at the shrinking square of red daylight behind him. Silhouetted against it were the dark hulls of the last machines in the column. "Looks like it, sir," he reported to van Droi. "I see the last of the Conquerors coming in now."

"Good," voxed van Droi. "Then I want all of you to move in to the sides of the tunnel, nice and slow. We don't need any accidents. There'll be a Chimera coming back through here in a couple of minutes, heading up towards the entrance."

"What the devil for, sir?" voxed Sergeant Viess. "We can't send men back out there."

Wulfe noted the hesitation in van Droi's voice, and the weariness when he said at last, "It's a demolitions team, sergeant. General deViers has ordered the entrance sealed behind us."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Cadian column moved slowly and carefully through the dark, for the best part of three hours, guided by Sentinel walkers with searchlights fitted. They discovered a plethora of side tunnels as they went, smaller passageways that branched from the broad one they were following. Each of these was given a cursory inspection, but they twisted away in countless directions and were far too small to accommodate the tanks. With little choice, the expedition force found itself committed to a single path that led ever downwards, deeper into the darkness.

DeViers marked the passing of time on the antique pocket-chronometer his grandfather, for whom he had been named, had bequeathed him over eighty years before. It was an exquisite piece of Agripinaan craftsmanship, inlaid with emeralds and white diamonds, finished in platinum, and decorated across the face with a filigree of the most delicate gold. It had been with him a long, long time. Looking at its pristine face always brought feelings of peace and comfort. He had been turning to it more and more often since his arrival on this accursed planet.

Did they think he didn't know what was going on, those damned Mechanicus? Did they think he was so easily used? Warp blast and damn them, he was Mohamar Antoninus deViers, Saviour of Thessaly IX, Protector of Chedon Secundus, decorated with the Iron Star for his overwhelming victory at Rystok, awarded the Platinum Skull 1st Class for exemplary leadership at Dionysus. Then there were Modessa Prime, Phaegos II, and a host of other glories. Age hadn't addled his mind *that* much. He knew all too well that they had an agenda. He knew they were guiding him along the path that best suited their purposes, but what could he do? He needed them to help find Yarrick's tank. Their Machine-God didn't speak to normal men, even men as worthy as him.

He hadn't missed the looks his senior officers had been giving each other, either. They were losing confidence in him. That much was evident. Even Gerard Bergen seemed ready to question him these days. That stung deViers particularly sharply. Prior to that mess on Palmeros, he had started to consider the handsome officer something of a protégé.

Well, they'd all see the error of their ways in the end. This wasn't over, not by a long shot. *The Fortress of Arrogance* was still out there somewhere. It couldn't be far. Orks had taken it, and it was his job to get it back. The Imperium depended on him. Whether the Mechanicus had initiated this expedition or not, it was a Munitorum operation now, and he was in charge. Not one man, not one ounce of Guard materiel would leave this blasted world until he had his prize. There was still everything to play for. His place in the history books was still within reach. He would join the list alongside Yarrick, Macaroth and Harazahn. He would be forever remembered as one of the great men of his age.

He looked down at the chronometer's ticking hands. There was still time enough for that.

"Caffeine, sir?" asked Gruber from the other side of the Chimera's passenger compartment. "It's hot."

"No thank you, Gruber. I'm wound up enough already."

Gruber looked at the chronometer in the general's hand and let out a snort of laughter. "Good one, sir. Wound up. I get it."

DeViers smiled weakly. He hadn't meant to make a joke at all, but fine. Let his adjutant think what he would. Laughing in the face of such desperation made him seem strong in the eyes of others. Let them think him unfazed by the frustrating turns the expedition had taken.

What lies ahead, he wondered? What obstacle will test me next?

He was about to find out.

“Vox is flashing, sir,” said Gruber, indicating a blinking green light on the wall-mounted unit above the general’s left shoulder. “Let me get that for you.”

Even though deViers was closest to the device, he let Gruber take care of the call. It was the man’s job, and it didn’t do to have the other officers think they could bother their general directly with every little detail. He had enough on his mind. Over the years, Gruber had learned to screen the general’s incoming vox-calls with great intuition.

Absently, deViers half-listened as Gruber spoke into the vox-caster’s mouthpiece. Then the adjutant turned and said, “It’s Colonel Marrenburg, sir. He says his scouts have found the end of the tunnel.”

DeViers felt his pulse quicken.

“I’ll speak to him,” he said, and accepted the mouthpiece from Gruber, who immediately returned to his seat and his flask of hot caffeine.

“General deViers, here. Go ahead, colonel.”

“Yes, sir,” said Marrenburg. “I’ve just had it confirmed. About three hundred metres ahead, the main tunnel levels out. It straightens there, too. I’m told it ends another two hundred metres after that.”

“I see, colonel. And just how does it end.”

“Well, sir, I’m not sure how to say—”

“Let’s not play guessing games, man. I don’t have the patience.”

Marrenburg’s voice was suddenly brusque as he answered. “My apologies, general. From what I understand, it opens onto some kind of city, sir. An underground city.”

Of course it does, thought deViers sarcastically. Let’s see how the magos explains this one.

When Gerard Bergen’s Chimera, *Pride of Caedus*, emerged from the end of the tunnel and into the huge open space under the mountain, half of the force’s vehicles were already there, the crews gaping, staring wide-eyed at what lay before them. The other half were still moving down through the last stretches of the main tunnel. The rearguard would enter within the hour.

Bergen stood in his cupola, turning his head from left to right, taking it all in. The air around him was thick with exhaust fumes, but they were less dense than they had been in the confines of the tunnel. There was more space for them to dissipate here. The air pressure had changed. He could feel it on his skin. It was cooler here, too.

With the vehicles spreading out in an ever-widening perimeter, there was plenty of light, though not nearly enough to illuminate the cavern’s ceiling or the far walls. Bergen still couldn’t begin to estimate the size of the excavation. What he did see, however, stole his breath away.

A city of smooth, dark metal stretched out from the mouth of the tunnel into the blackness beyond. It was a dead city, a city without movement or sound or energy of its own, but a city nonetheless.

“So this is Dar Laq,” Bergen muttered to himself.

The buildings framed in the headlights of the Cadian vehicles shone back at him. Every single surface, every corner, every wall, was made of a shimmering, iridescent metal the likes of which Bergen had never seen before. As his eyes moved from one structure to the next, the colours seemed to shift and change like sunlight on the surface of an oily pool. It was beautiful in its own way. It reminded him of a shell he had once found on the south-western shores of the Caducades Sea. He had been practically an infant back then. The memory had been lost in the recesses of his mind until this very moment. Suddenly it was as sharp as a high-resolution pictograph.

Troopers were spilling out of trucks and halftracks around his Chimera. The beams from their torches cut like sabres through the murk as their sergeants led them down alleys and avenues, each footstep kicking up little puffs of dust. “Safeties off!” he heard one sergeant call out as he passed

within a few metres of *Pride of Caedus*. "If there *are* any bloody xenos here, we'll be ready for them."

Bergen doubted the barking sergeant would find any xenos alive down here. This place was as dead as the desert they had ridden through to get here. He could feel it. More so, in fact, for there was life in the desert if one only knew where to look. This place had all the atmosphere of a mausoleum.

That was changing even as he watched. After the-Throne-knew how many millennia of utter silence and stillness, Dar Laq was filling with bustle and noise. It seemed an almost sacrilegious intrusion. Bergen watched the troopers march off until they were lost behind the rows of blocky alien structures.

Each of the buildings he looked at raised the same questions in his mind. Where were the doors? Where were the windows? There seemed no obvious access points to any of them.

General deViers had questions, too. Bergen heard him bark out a short order on the vox, and powerful searchlights came on one at a time, reaching out for the ceiling and the far walls with their brilliant white beams. For the first time, Bergen saw massive towers standing tall over all the other structures. He looked up in wonder at the nearest, approximately three hundred metres away. It recalled to his mind the famous Cadian pylons that protected his home world from the vicious warp storm known as the Eye of Terror. As an officer-cadet, he had once visited the base of one of the Cadian pylons, a rare privilege largely forbidden to those of the noncommissioned ranks. He remembered the aura of power he had sensed around that inexplicable monolith. He had imagined at the time that some kind of living force resided there, something of incredible energy and potency. The Cadian pylons and the towers of Dar Laq were certainly both ancient and mysterious, but the latter exuded no sense of power or presence, only an aura of death and decay, and of a splendour lost forever to the ages.

The towers looked to be constructed of the same nacreous metal as the lower structures, but there the similarities ended. They were less blocky, less angular, suggesting that they had been conceived with a sense of the artistic at least as much as the functional. A few of them were broken, the outer shells rusting or tearing away, revealing themselves to be stuffed full of what looked like clockwork on the most massive scale. Great black cogs sat unmoving, frozen in the glare of the searchlights, teeth bared at the human interlopers. Bergen's natural curiosity kept throwing up questions in his mind and it took some effort to quash them. What feats of science or wonders of sorcery might the creators of Dar Laq have been able to work in their day? It was dangerous to ask, more dangerous still to actively seek such knowledge. Heresy lurked at the boundaries of such thinking. It was natural, too, though. It was part of the human condition to revel in discovery, despite the warnings of the Imperial Creed.

The tech-priests were guiltier than anyone of that. Bergen imagined they would be readying their bands of slaves and servitors to go out and search for answers. They must have planned all this from the very beginning. Had they ever intended to help find *The Fortress of Arrogance*? Or did their real interest in Golgotha begin and end with Dar Laq?

He watched the white discs thrown out by the searchlights as they climbed the far wall, and his jaw dropped open. He had the measure of the cavern now, and it was vast, easily two to three kilometres across at its widest, and a kilometre high where the cavern walls curved inwards to meet at a single point. Every inch of the walls had been worked by alien hands. There were alcoves within alcoves, pillared walkways, exquisitely wrought galleries of metal and so much more, all with the same sharp, angular aesthetic of the ground-level buildings. How many had lived here? How had they fashioned such a place? And why had they chosen to live down here inside the mountain, shunning the light and the sky above?

As the searchlights reached for the ceiling of the chamber, Bergen gaped. There above him hung the most incredible feature of all, perhaps a score of inverted black ziggurat-type structures linked by metal gantries and platforms. They seemed to be floating in the air.

They can't be, he told himself.

He dropped back down into his Chimera and pulled his magnoculars from their stowage box. Returning to his cupola, he pressed the magnoculars to his eyes and looked up again. It was only when he squinted hard through the lenses that he realised they truly were floating as they had no right to.

"Emperor protect us," he muttered. "What the devil is going on here?"

A sudden burst of loud static from his vox-bead almost made him drop his magnoculars. A sharp, familiar voice said, "Bergen, come in. I'm calling a session of my senior officers at once. Meet me at the rear of my Chimera in three minutes. I'm calling on the tech-priests to account for all this. It's about time we had some blasted answers."

"I'd say so, sir," said Bergen, thinking he had a few questions of his own.

Wulfe didn't like this one damned bit, and neither did any of his crew. Tanks didn't belong underground. It wasn't right. It wasn't natural. What if there was a cave-in or something? He wasn't claustrophobic. No tanker would last very long with that particular affliction, but something about this whole place made his scar itch like crazy. No human hands had built it.

Damned xenos, he thought. Nowhere is safe from them.

Things could have been worse. Emperor protect all the footsloggers who'd gone off down those dark alleyways looking for signs of alien occupation, and he wouldn't have swapped places with the Sentinel pilots and Hornet riders that were out mapping the cavern's extents, but sitting and waiting wasn't much fun either.

He and his crew, like most of the other tankers, had got out to stretch their legs after the long journey up the mountainside and down through the tunnel. Wulfe still felt stiff, but he tried to shake it off. Metzger was sipping water from one of the jerrycans, while Beans and Siegler were standing by the front of the tank speculating about what they saw.

Wulfe heard footsteps behind him.

"Your lot doing all right, Oskar?" asked Lieutenant van Droi, stopping right in front of him.

Perhaps it was just the quality of the light, but Wulfe thought the lieutenant looked terrible. He had never seen him like this before, so gaunt and tinged with red. His concern must have shown on his face, because van Droi suddenly stood up a little straighter, fixed his cap lower on his brow and said, "You don't look so hot yourself, you know."

Wulfe winced. "I'm sure I don't, lieutenant. Sorry."

Van Droi waved the apology off.

Wulfe gestured around at the strange metal buildings. He didn't like the angles, the proportions, the lines. They didn't look like any Imperial buildings he had ever seen, and that made them *wrong*.

"What the devil's going on, sir?" he asked. "We weren't told anything about underground cities and alien races, excepting orks, that is."

Van Droi nodded. "No, I wasn't told about any of this either. To be honest, Oskar, I don't think the higher-ups expected this. General deViers was furious when *The Fortress of Arrogance* wasn't where it should have been."

"Is it supposed to be down here somewhere? Or are we just improvising?"

Van Droi frowned. "According to the tech-priests, their little ritual in the valley was some kind of communion with the Machine-God. They claim this route will take us directly to the objective. The general's buying it. He wants us to push on, despite the circumstances."

"You ever met a general that *didn't* want that?"

Van Droi grinned. "Not that I remember, no."

When Wulfe spoke again, he was suddenly serious. "Listen, sir. I have to ask you something. I hope you won't take offence."

"Sounds ominous."

“It’s about Palmeros.”

Van Droi looked immediately uncomfortable, but he said, “Go on.”

“We were talking about it in the officer’s mess back in Balkar. You remember, sir. The day we lost Strieber and Kohl...”

“The canyon,” said Van Droi, not meeting Wulfe’s gaze. “Lugo’s Ditch.”

“Right,” said Wulfe. “Well, sir, things happened there... Things that I couldn’t come to terms with at the time. I’m afraid I omitted them from my report, sir. I’m not sure if—”

“We don’t need to do this, Oskar,” van Droi interrupted. “I’ve never pushed you on what exactly happened out there. If you hadn’t omitted certain things, I would have done it for you. I’ve seen some things in my time, let me tell you, things that beggared belief. High Command doesn’t thank you for reporting things like that.”

Wulfe knew van Droi was being deliberately vague, trying to offer him a nice safe exit from the topic, but he had already committed himself.

“I saw the ghost of Dolphus Borscht in Lugo’s Ditch, sir. I saw him standing on the highway as real as you are right now. He told me to stop the tank. And if I hadn’t listened to him, my crew and I would be dead right now.”

Finally, it was out. The words hung in the air like ghosts themselves, hovering between the two men.

“Damn it,” hissed van Droi. “Don’t ever say that out loud. You want other people to hear?”

“Did you know, sir?” Wulfe demanded.

“Of course, I knew, Oskar. I’m not a total idiot. It wasn’t hard to put it all together. But for Throne’s sake, you’ve got to keep it to yourself, man. If the commissar ever finds out...”

“Someone would have to tell him first, sir. Someone like Corporal Lenck, perhaps.”

“Lenck?” asked van Droi. “Are you saying he knows?”

“I can’t be sure,” said Wulfe. “Just something he said to me last time we clashed.”

Van Droi actually looked hurt for a fraction of a second, but he recovered well. “He didn’t find out from me, sergeant, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Wulfe shook his head. “I wasn’t thinking that, sir. Not really. But I had to ask.”

“Listen, Oskar, Lenck might be less of a problem if you hadn’t started some kind of damned vendetta with him the moment he joined the regiment. If you’ve got something on him, something that I should know about, don’t keep it to your bloody self. If you don’t, you need to accept that he’s a Gunhead now. We stick together. It’s the only way any of us will get through this alive. For the Throne’s sake, man, he saved your life.”

“Duty, sir,” said Wulfe. “I’d have done the same under the circumstances.”

In truth, he still wasn’t sure he would have.

“That doesn’t change the facts, Oskar. Lenck has more than proven himself worthy of being among us. He might be a bit of a rogue, but he’s done a damned fine job with that crate of his, and he manages a difficult crew. For the sake of the mission, will you put your personal differences aside and act like proper bloody soldiers?”

Wulfe grumbled to himself, but finally he said, “I’ll try, sir. Since you asked.”

Van Droi looked pleased. He straightened his jacket and said, “Unless there’s anything else...”

“Nothing, sir,” said Wulfe.

“Right. I’d better get moving,” said van Droi. “General deViers is having a war council, and I expect Immrich will have fresh orders for the regiment when it’s done. Get some rest while you can, Oskar. And some rations while you’re at it. I can’t say when we’ll be leaving this unholy place, but Throne willing it’ll be soon.”

“Yes, sir,” said Wulfe. He saluted, and received one in return before van Droi turned smartly and marched off towards a column of parked Chimeras.

And get some rest yourself, thought Wulfe with genuine concern. You really look like you need it.

General deViers had ordered a cordon set up around his Chimera. He didn't want the rank-and-file getting too close to the meeting he had called. Kasrkin troopers from Colonel Stromm's 98th Regiment were positioned in a wide circle, hellguns in hand, told to keep everyone below the rank of lieutenant out.

They were Kasrkin. He knew they could be trusted.

Bergen stood with Killian and Rennkamp at the front of a small crowd mostly comprised of regiment and company level officers, adjutants, executive officers and, at the very front, positioned somewhat separate from the others, the three senior representatives of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

DeViers stood atop the back of his Chimera so that all the officers could see him. He looked, to Bergen, like a vulture on a branch glaring fiercely down at the three tech-priests, who observed him impassively with lidless mechanical eyes. If the general had thought taking an elevated position would rob Magos Sennesdiar of some of his dominating presence, or would force him to acknowledge his proper place as a mere accessory to the expedition's true leader, he had been wrong. The hulking, red-robed figure of the magos still cast its powerful aura over the proceedings.

"How do you answer *that*?" deViers demanded. He had just charged the Mechanicus with conspiring to lead the expedition force here for purposes outside the primary mission objective. As one, the crowd of officers edged forward a little, eager to hear the magos' answer.

"The accusation is false, general," boomed the magos, "false, but understandable. Your view of matters is being coloured by frustration and, perhaps, by the loss of so many men. The Mechanicus is not offended. We guided you to the last reported location of *The Fortress of Arrogance*. It was not there. You asked us to aid you in finding its new location. We are doing so. That our path led us to the discovery of Dar Laq is coincidence, nothing more."

"And you expect us to take you at your word?" asked deViers.

"We were attached to the 18th Army Group to provide assistance to you. We have done little else. *The Fortress of Arrogance* is a sanctified machine. It was fashioned by us. Its machine-spirit is revered by us. We seek its recovery as much as you do, but with one small difference. We of the Mechanicus do not seek any kind of glory in recovering the tank the way you men of the Imperial Guard do."

DeViers looked to be on the verge of being personally affronted by that remark when Rennkamp stepped forward and addressed the magos. "Then you won't object if we leave this Dar Laq place at once, magos, since further investigation of this place is irrelevant to our mission?"

The magos turned and fixed his lenses on Rennkamp, who suddenly looked a lot less confident than when he had spoken. "It would be most regrettable to leave Dar Laq without taking the opportunity to conduct a study of its mysteries, major general. There are gravity fields affecting the upper reaches of the chamber, though no grav-generators can be detected. There is the metal all around us. It is of a composition so far unknown to the Imperium. Its potential value can barely be estimated at this time. These are only the most obvious examples of what Dar Laq might offer us. Its existence was rumoured for thousands of years. Might we not conduct an analysis while the troops are being fed and the vehicles prepared for the next stage of their deployment?"

"This is no mission of discovery, magos," said General deViers gruffly. "Our rations are running low. Our fuel is limited. Our numbers, I'd rather not talk about. The Mechanicus may return to this place on its own damned time. For now, the secrets of this place will have to remain just that." He raised his eyes from the magos and searched the group of officers, quickly finding the face he sought there. "Ah, Marrenburg. Have your scouts found a way out yet?"

Colonel Marrenburg stepped to Bergen's side, looked up at General deViers and said, "They have, sir: a tunnel the exact size and gradient of that which we descended. The air currents suggest it

leads back to the surface on the far side of the Ishawar range. I have a Sentinel unit scouting it out right now, sir.”

“Excellent, colonel. Keep me apprised.”

There was a sudden metallic screech from one of the magos’ adepts, which was immediately answered by a similar screech from the magos. Sennesdiar then said to deViers, “General, my adept, Xephous, wishes to address you. Will you hear him?”

DeViers looked impatient, but he said, “Very well.”

The clacking, chittering form of Adept Xephous stepped forward, and, in an absolute monotone, said, “With respect, general, are we not allowing our distrust of things alien to hasten our egress from this place before time? Our back is protected by the collapse of the tunnel behind us. The orks cannot, and in all probability *would* not, follow us down here. Might we not take this chance to effect maintenance on our vehicles, to tend to our wounded, and to recover our strength for the battles that must surely lie on the other side of this mountain?”

The general’s expression said he saw the validity of the adept’s comments. Bergen, too, saw the sense in what Xephous had said. Looking around at the other officers, he saw them nodding.

“Fine points, adept,” said deViers at last. “Of course, I wasn’t born yesterday. Do you suggest this for the benefit of the operation, or to allow you and your Martian brothers a window of time in which to conduct some limited study?”

Xephous was on the verge of answering when Magos Sennesdiar emitted a short burst of noise. The adept bowed and stepped back. It was Sennesdiar who spoke in his place. “My adept makes his point for both reasons, general. Our engineers will take care of vehicular maintenance. My adepts and I will conduct what research we can while your medicae perform their duties and your troopers prepare for what lies ahead. Clearly it is in both our interests not to rush headlong from this place.”

“Do you *know* what lies ahead, magos? deViers asked sourly. “Did your ritual offer any clues to that?”

“Only that *The Fortress of Arrogance* awaits us, general, and it is no great feat of predictive power to say that the orks will not give it up easily.”

Bergen watched deViers closely. He saw a look of resolve harden on his face. The magos had chosen his words well, hitting the general where he was weakest, telling him his prize was still within reach. Perhaps it is, thought Bergen. But I still contend that the tech-priests led us here deliberately for their own ends.

After the meeting, with the other officers dispersing to issue new orders to their troops, Bergen took his adjutant, Katz, aside.

“I haven’t called on your special talents for quite a while, my friend. But I think it’s about time you got some practice in.”

Katz grinned. “You want me to follow those tech-priests, don’t you, sir?”

Bergen patted Katz on the upper arm.

“Don’t let them see you,” he said and turned to march back to *Pride of Caedus*.

Katz watched him go for a moment, and then turned in time to see the three red-robed Martian priests moving off into deep shadow at the edges of the Cadians’ lamplight. They were moving north along the cavern wall with a definite purpose, heading deeper into the jumble of alien structures.

Katz hurried after them, looking forward to employing his Emperor-given gifts again after so long.

“Don’t let them see me?” he muttered to himself. “You’re having a laugh, boss. No one sees Jarryl Katz unless he means them to.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Darkness held no fear for Lieutenant Katz, even in an alien place like this. Shadows hid few secrets from him. The tiny, sophisticated mirrors implanted at the back of his eyeballs allowed him to see perfectly well in anything but the most absolute blackness. The three tech-priests he was following didn't seem to be having any trouble either, of course. Katz guessed they could see in a variety of spectrums. He knew it would take all his expertise not to be spotted by them, but the thought of such a challenge didn't make him anxious. It excited him. It had been too long since he'd had a chance to track a worthy quarry.

Katz had served as Bergen's adjutant for over a decade, hand-picked by the man himself, and few who looked at him would have guessed he was any more than a boot-polishing, shirt-pressing lackey. It suited him and the major general both to perpetuate such an illusion. Would anyone have believed even half the things he had seen and done? Not a chance. His history was far from that of a typical Cadian soldier.

Katz had been specially selected for sniper training barely a month after he had joined the Whiteshields. He had been in his mid-teens, but already his sharp eyes, steady aim and cold composure marked him as a young man of great potential. From sniper school, he had been inducted into a special reconnaissance commando program so classified that it didn't appear on any Munitorum listing, one of a number of black projects ordered by Cadian High Command and funded directly by the planetary government. Most of the other trainees had been drawn from the ranks of the Karskin, and they were anything but kind to the precocious youngster in their midst. Katz had learned his lessons the hard way and, in due course, proved himself the equal of the older men, earning their respect and, in some cases, their jealousy. It was as part of that program that his eyes had been augmented. Throne, had it really been twenty-five years ago?

He almost snorted out loud at the speed with which those years had seemed to pass: all those missions deep behind enemy lines; all those figures, human and alien both, that he had lined up in his sights, only to watch them topple lifelessly at the next squeeze of his index finger on that little curve of metal.

Things are much different now, he thought. But I wouldn't change it even if I could. I wouldn't go back. What would the major general do without me?

Katz was fiercely loyal to Gerard Bergen. He was proud of having been chosen to guard his life, for he judged Bergen a far better man than those around him, and it wasn't easy to be a good man when you were under orders from a soulless pig like Mohamar deViers. Whatever Bergen needed, Katz would do. Right now, that meant following the tech-priests.

Up ahead, the robed and hooded trio screeched something to each other in that infernal machine language of theirs, and Katz scolded himself for allowing reminiscences into his mind while he was *en mission*. Perhaps his skills *had* dulled with time.

With the light from the Cadian vehicles well behind them, the shortest of the tech-priests, the one with a face like a metal crab, pulled a small, pulsing electronic device from the folds of his robe. Katz soon got the impression that the device was guiding them somewhere. He saw them consult it several times and alter their course through dusty alleys lined on either side with towering hulks of dark metal.

He was concentrating so hard on his quarry that he didn't have time to wonder at his surroundings. The major general said it was alien, but ancient and long abandoned. That was enough for Katz. Like his own past, it was best not to dwell on it. The moment was all that mattered.

As the tech-priests shuffled on, he followed with all the stealth at his disposal, moving deeper and deeper into the derelict underground city, getting further and further away from the Cadian camp. They were heading northwards, and Katz soon began to wonder when they would stop. Surely the chamber didn't extend much further. They had already travelled over a kilometre in the dark.

<There,> said Xephous. <The base of that tower. The auspex reading is strong.>

<He is still behind us,> said Sennesdiar as he led his adepts in the direction Xephous had indicated. <That is most regrettable. He shows remarkable skill. Had you not noticed his thermal signature, Armadron, we might not have registered him at all.>

<I would have detected him by his breath, or his heartbeat, or the scrape of his boots in the dust,> insisted Xephous.

<All irrelevant now,> said Sennesdiar. <We shall proceed as planned. I will deal with our unwelcome observer when the time comes. Hurry. Let us uncover Ipharod and be done with this. The column will be preparing to leave soon and we cannot linger long.>

They stopped at the base of a great crumbling tower. Sennesdiar looked up, and, in infra-red, noted the ornate black cogs and carved metal beams that were visible where large curving sections of the outer shell had fallen away.

<Xephous?>

<Here, magos.>

The adept pointed at one particularly large metal plate on the ground in front of him, and together the three tech-priests moved to lift it. It would have taken a dozen men significant effort, but, to the priests of the Machine Cult, it was an easy matter. Their mehadendrites snaked forwards from their backs, and, with a casual gesture that bordered on contempt, they flipped the heavy plate of alien metal aside.

The noise of it crashing was all the louder for the depth of the silence that had preceded it. The rumble of the Cadian machines was barely detectable in this part of the chamber.

Sennesdiar crouched down, his voluminous robe spreading out around him. <Here, at last,> he said, <is Magos Ipharod.>

The others crouched, too.

<Your wait is at an end, brother,> said Sennesdiar. <And so is ours.>

Katz used the crashing of the massive metal plate to cover the noise of his footsteps as he moved closer to the tech-priests. It seemed to him that they had found the thing they sought. He could see a bundle of rags on the ground between them. He crept closer and closer, ever mindful of the slightest noise that might give him away.

Damn their bloody chirping and beeping, he thought. If only I could understand what they were saying.

He saw the largest one, the magos, unfurl the rags on the ground to reveal a skull attached to metal vertebrae.

It's another one, Katz said to himself. It's a bloody tech-priest.

He could see augmetic attachments bolted to the skull. He could see a metal collar bone. Magos Sennesdiar kept uncovering more and more. There was a structure like a rib cage, but formed of steel spars and pistons. One of the arms was missing, but the other was bulky and ended in something more claw than hand. Cables and flexible tubing trailed from the midriff like the entrails of an eviscerated man.

Katz wondered how much closer he could get without risking detection. He had to know more. The major general was relying on him.

Slowly, carefully, he moved in, keeping to the wall on his right.

So far, so good, he thought. They're preoccupied. They don't have a clue I'm here.

<How audacious,> said Armadron. <The Cadian is barely ten metres from us now.>

<I want your attention on the task at hand,> said Sennesdiar. <I have already stated that I will deal with our observer. Now raise the body into a sitting position. Lean it against the wall. I want this done quickly.>

Xephous and Armadron saw to it. With precise and careful movements, they lifted the remains of Magos Ipharod into position. He was in a poor state. With the exception of his skull and teeth, the few biological elements left over from his human form had rotted away almost completely. His missing left arm and the absence of his legs spoke of violent damage prior to his seeking refuge here in Dar Laq. What had happened to him? If the procedure was successful, Sennesdiar would soon know.

<Armadron,> said Sennesdiar, <assist me in opening the skull. I will extract the intelligence core. Xephous, prepare to accept it. The magos will speak to us through you.>

<As you command,> said Xephous, reaching up to pull back his hood. His fingers worked a panel on the side of his metal head. There was a brief whining noise as tiny motors lifted a square section and rotated it away, revealing sockets sunk into the tissue of his living brain.

Sennesdiar detected no fear in his adept's tone, but he sensed an increase in secretions from his biological systems that suggested he was less than happy. Giving one's systems over to the control of another tech-priest's intelligence core was a dangerous and highly irregular affair. Ipharod was even older than Sennesdiar, and had enough authority to demand permanent control of the adept's body. Officially, Sennesdiar would be unable to refuse, but he valued Xephous enough to resent the idea. He did not want to lose his adept quite yet.

No, he decided, Ipharod's 1C module will reveal the information I seek, and then I will deactivate it for eventual return to Mars. If Ipharod wishes to live again, let it be inside another body constructed for just that purpose.

<I have it, magos,> said Armadron. He lifted a small cylinder of metal, covered in traceries of gold, from a hatch in Ipharod's grinning skull. It glowed ever so slightly in the dark, still charged with the energy needed to maintain its integrity.

<Plug it into Xephous,> ordered Sennesdiar. <Be sure to limit control to sense and vocaliser subsystems. No motor control. Is that understood?>

<Of course, magos>

<I am ready,> said Xephous, presenting the top of his head to his fellow adept.

<Do not be concerned,> said Sennesdiar. <I will restore you once I have the information we need.>

<I am beyond fear,> said Xephous. <The Omnissiah asks it of me. You ask it of me. It is my duty and my honour to serve both.>

Armadron carefully plugged the intelligence core into Xephous' brain and closed the metal hatch.

<Shut down your central operating systems and memory sub-systems. Reboot now as Ipharod.>

Xephous shuddered. Green diodes on his metal face winked out. His head lolled slackly onto his shoulder.

Sennesdiar and Armadron waited. Nothing happened.

<Are you sure you connected it properly, adept?> asked Sennesdiar. <You have made no errors?>

<I do not make errors easily, magos,> said Armadron.

A faint, tinny voice issued from Xephous' vocaliser. <Pride is an emotion. It is unworthy of a place in a tech-priest's mind. No errors have been made. I can hear you, followers of the Machine-God. I am Ipharod. And I am returned to consciousness once more.>

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ipharod's recall was absolute. Had his rescuers thought to bring a hololithic projector, they could have watched a perfect record of events in three dimensions as seen through his lenses. Unfortunately, not all Martian priests were equal. Ipharod was not impressed with Sennesdiar. He had come unprepared and under-equipped. He was probably no older than four centuries, and he was incompetent like all the new breed.

For all its flaws, its inherent ambiguities, Ipharod had no recourse but to employ spoken language. The first thing he shared with the other three tech-priests, however, was nothing to do with the past.

<We are being observed,> he told them. <Behind you, Magos Sennesdiar, there lurks a man in military fatigues.>

<His presence is known to us,> said Sennesdiar. <He will be dealt with in due course. Concentrate on the information we need, magos. In your emergency transmission, you stated that you had the fragment in your possessions.>

<A partial truth, Sennesdiar. A partial truth. I located the fragment as ordered and was in the process of recovering it from the wreckage of *The Fortress of Arrogance* when my skitarii were attacked by a significant ork force. My guards were slaughtered and their bodies were taken as trophies. I was hacked apart and left for dead. They took one of my arms and both of my legs as salvage. They also took the commissar's ruined Baneblade.>

<Then you never actually had the fragment in your possessions.>

<I judged that the Fabricator General would not authorise a Reclamator mission to extract me if he knew the truth. I was charged with securing the fragment, but was not given adequate resources to achieve this. A computational oversight.>

<The fragment is still aboard *The Fortress of Arrogance*?> asked Armadron.

<Who are you to address me so, adept? Your superior alone may question me. Is that understood?>

<Please answer, magos, as if the question had been mine,> said Sennesdiar.

<Very well. I crawled after the ork force, following their tracks in the sand, dragging behind me a single orbital beacon with which I could broadcast my coordinates for rescue, but the orks moved fast, heading north then east. They travelled through a heavily fortified pass in the mountains. I could not follow that way and had to find an alternative route to their base. I happened across Dar Laq, and decided it would be a safe place to await rescue, but only after I had once again located the fragment and launched my beacon. Five hundred and sixteen point seven hours later, I located a significant ork settlement to the east. *The Fortress of Arrogance* was there. From a distance, I observed that the dominant ork had discovered the fragment and judged it worth possessing. The creature was wearing it around his neck. I cannot comment on the status of the fragment now, but my probability algorithms suggest that there is a high chance it remains with the dominant ork. I coded my message into the beacon, released it and crawled down here to wait.>

<And the fragment?> asked Sennesdiar. <Is it all we hoped it would be?>

<Yes,> said Ipharod. <It is a relic from before the Age of Strife. Tech-Adept Reiyon, Yarrick's former engineer, was the first to discover its existence on Golgotha. He planned to transport it back to Mars after the war, never predicting that Yarrick's forces would fall here. He was killed during

the commissar's capture. If the fragment can be recovered once more, it will allow us to significantly refine our teleportation technologies. It must be retrieved at any cost.>

<Have you any other information relevant to our mission?> asked Sennesdiar.

<Now that I have a body again, albeit one of such limited capacity, it is fitting that I now take overall command of the retrieval mission. I'm certain you see the logic in this, magos,> said Ipharod. <It is the task I was charged with.>

<It is a task you have already failed to complete, brother magos,> said Sennesdiar. <You mishandled the original recovery operation. You transmitted false information in order to secure your rescue. Since I am the only other magos present, it falls to me to judge your actions. Thus, your 1C module will be returned to Mars where you will face a tribunal. That is all.>

<Upstart. I am closer to the Omnissiah than you shall ever be. You presume to pass judgement on me?>

There was a moment of silence while Ipharod tried in vain to rise, but Xephous' body would not follow his neural commands.

<Do not waste your time, magos,> said Sennesdiar. <My adept's motor control systems are locked. I will now remove your module from his brain.>

<You must not,> insisted Ipharod. <I can still be of great value to this mission.>

Sennesdiar reached forward and touched a recessed button on Xephous' head. The metal panel whined open again to reveal the adept's soft grey brain.

<Do not do this,> said Ipharod. <I can still *ccccccck* — >

Sennesdiar yanked the tiny, lambent cylinder from its socket and closed the panel. Moments later, the diodes on Xephous' face glimmered to life again.

<It is done,> Sennesdiar told him. He raised the intelligence core in front of the adept's face.

The first thing the adept did was to pull his cowl up over his head. <Did he not demand full control of all my systems?>

<He was unworthy of that. I am certain Adept Armadron concurs.>

Armadron nodded once. <Magos Ipharod is guilty of self-interest and deceit. He will be sentenced on Mars.>

<Incorrect,> said Sennesdiar. <He has been sentenced already. I have the necessary authority.>

Without further discussion, he crushed Ipharod's intelligence core between his metal thumb and forefinger. The cylinder crumpled easily. Its dim glow went out. Then Sennesdiar threw the ruined core over his shoulder with a very deliberate and precise motion.

It hit something soft before it struck the ground.

It hit Jarryl Katz.

"You may come forward now, Cadian," said Sennesdiar in Low Gothic. "We have known of your presence for quite some time."

Katz shook his head. The game was up. He should have known better than to get too close. They were tech-priests, so of course their senses were augmented beyond his own. Had they smelled him? Or heard him? Had they sensed his body heat?

Resigned, he stepped towards them, sweat beading on his head despite the cool, dry air. "What is your name?" asked the largest of the three.

"Schweitzer," said Katz defiantly.

"A falsehood," said the magos. The slightest fluctuation in your heartbeat gives your deceit away. "Speak the truth."

Katz couldn't help but be impressed. "You can detect that?"

"From this distance, yes," replied Sennesdiar. "That and much more. No matter who you are, you could not have followed us without our knowledge. Still, it is remarkable that you moved so quickly and quietly in this darkness. You are augmented, yes?"

The magos took a sudden pace forward, and Katz found himself looking up into a face more dead than alive. It was expressionless, unreadable, and he knew he had to get away. Whatever humanity might have once existed beneath that pallid mask of ancient skin was long gone. Despite whatever vestiges of organic matter remained, it was a machine that stared back at him through black lenses — a cold, calculating, ruthlessly efficient machine.

“The expedition force will be moving out shortly,” said Katz, working to keep his voice level. “If you’re finished here, we should all be getting back. We don’t want to get left behind, now, do we?”

Katz wondered if the tech-priests were reading his heartbeat now. It was galloping.

The magos said nothing more. Katz had just decided to turn away when something metallic whipped towards him from the bottom edge of his vision. Bright, flaring agony gripped him. His lungs felt filled with liquid fire. He looked down and saw that one of the magos’ writhing mechadendrites had punched straight through the fabric of his tunic and into the muscles of his upper abdomen. Hot blood began to pour out over his tunic and trousers.

He grunted in pain. He tried to speak, but there was no breath behind the words. He couldn’t draw any. His lungs wouldn’t work. He fumbled weakly, uselessly, for the knife at his belt.

“You will not suffer long, Cadian,” said the magos. “Your death is inconvenient, but we cannot allow you to report what you have seen. There is already enough mistrust between the expedition commanders and the Machine Cult. The relationship must not be destabilised further at this critical time.”

Katz felt a savagely painful tug inside him. The end of the blood-covered mechadendrite withdrew from his body, taking his heart with it. Blood pattered like rain on the ground. For the briefest instant, Katz saw the wet heart held up in front of him, gripped by the sharp manipulators at the steel tentacle’s tip.

Then true darkness closed over him, a darkness his augmented eyes couldn’t possibly pierce.

He didn’t feel anything when his body hit the floor.

The three tech-priests returned to the light and noise of the Cadian vehicles just as the preparations to move out were drawing to an end. The wounded had been stitched and bandaged and gathered into trucks. Those who were beyond medical help were given the painless death of lethal injection. In a brief, hurried ceremony, their souls were commended to the Emperor’s side by a hard-faced confessor from the 88th. The supplies freed up by their deaths would help the rest of the force last that little bit longer. Vehicles were refuelled and rearmed. Troops were fed and watered, and the whole expedition force awaited only the command of General deViers to leave the ruins of Dar Laq behind them and head back to the surface, to the open air and the daylight.

For the most part, the troops were eager to put this unholy place behind them.

Only Gerard Bergen prayed for a delay. His ever-faithful adjutant had not returned from his mission. When Bergen saw the three tech-priests walking towards their Chimera, he charged over to them.

“Where have you been?” he demanded.

Magos Sennesdiar turned to face him.

“Recovering samples of metal,” he said, lifting a piece he had taken from one of the derelict towers. “I’m certain that a proper study of it will be of great benefit to the Imperium.”

Bergen squinted up into the shadows under the magos’ hood.

“You haven’t seen my adjutant?” he asked. “I sent him personally to bring you back. The general will be issuing the order to move out any minute now.”

The magos bowed. “I am grateful that you thought of us. You are a man of fine character, major general. Alas, we did not see your adjutant. We encountered no living soul during our explorations.

Dar Laq is a dead place. There is much to study here. The Mechanicus may visit again once this planet is returned to Imperial control, but, for now, we must prepare for our egress. Excuse us."

Bergen watched the trio of cloaked figures move off.

Had Katz simply got lost? No. That couldn't be it. Bergen had tried raising him on the vox, but there was no response. Damn it all, he thought, there's no way deViers will delay leading us out of here for a single missing man. If I know the old bastard half as well as I think I do, he wouldn't even wait for Major Gruber.

Bergen turned and marched back to *Pride of Caedus*, determined to plead with the general anyway. The Chimera's engine was idling noisily, like those of the vehicles around her.

Sure enough, the general told Bergen he could not, and *would* not, order everyone to stand down because of one missing man. Had it been Bergen out there, deViers insisted, it would have been another matter entirely, but a mere lieutenant?

DeViers gave the order to move out. Drivers began revving their engines, filling the air with blue clouds of exhaust. Then, one by one, they began to move off through the eerie, lifeless streets, their headlights chasing off the shadows as they headed towards the tunnel on the far side of the cavern.

Bergen stood in his cupola the entire time, eyes facing out into the darkness on the north side, heart pounding in his chest, almost sick with emotion. It was far worse than grief. It felt like betrayal.

"I'm sorry, Jarryl," he muttered beneath his rebreather. "I'm so sorry, my friend."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

It was two hours after dawn when the remnants of General deViers' expedition force emerged from the cool darkness of the tunnel into the baking heat of the Golgothan morning. They were halfway up the east face of a mountainside, but the landscape beyond was largely shielded from view. Sharp fingers of rock thrust upwards on every side, forcing the Cadians to follow a single treacherous path, the only route wide and shallow enough to accommodate sixty-tonners like the Leman Russ tanks.

The clouds were low overhead, a churning mix of orange, red and brown. Gusting winds pulled curtains of dust across the slopes. By midday, however, the winds dropped to a hot breeze. Tall rocks and ridges still confounded the view. Privately, some of the Cadians almost regretted leaving Dar Laq. Alien or not, the temperature had been more to their liking. The air there hadn't seared their lungs.

The mountain trail took them down onto more manageable ground, and additional vehicles moved up from the rear to support the vanguard. The column began moving in a meandering line along a series of low rocky gullies. Sandstone hills rose on all sides, but it wasn't long before the Cadians noticed something amiss. The sky beyond the next rise was darker than it was elsewhere, stained with copious amounts of smoke.

General deViers ordered scouts to investigate further, and small groups of Sentinels lurched off, careful to keep low so that they presented no silhouettes above the hill-line. Minutes later, the scout leader called back to recommend that the general halt the column and come in person to the forward observation point. He had found the source of the smoke.

Bergen lay on his belly with his magnoculars pressed to his eyes, scanning the scene before him, uncaring of the fact that his uniform was filthy with red dust. A dozen officers on either side of him lay in similar positions, muttering and cursing at the focus of their attention.

Beyond the rise, the land was broad and open, gently curving upwards on either side. The Cadians were looking down into a huge crater, a volcanic caldera ten kilometres across. The volcano was long dead, but at its centre sat the source of the dark smoke.

"Millions of them," said Killian, lying on Bergen's right. "There must be millions of them."

"A hundred thousand at the most," said Rennkamp.

"Either way," said Killian, "we're still heavily outnumbered."

Bergen couldn't really decide what he was looking at. Either it was the ork equivalent of a town, or it was simply the biggest collection of scrap metal he had ever seen. Finally, he decided it was both, and in equal parts. Heaps of rusting armour plate and twisted girders rose a hundred metres into the air, the most prominent feature of the scene before him. Here and there, ruined vehicles poked their noses out, some recognisable as the crumpled remnants of Chimera APCs and Leman Russ tanks, others not so familiar.

Wreckage from the Golgothan War, thought Bergen. For thirty-eight years they've scavenged the old battlefields and brought it all back here. Was this the place where Thraka constructed his war machines for the assault on Armageddon? Was *The Fortress of Arrogance* brought here?

He hardly dared to hope that it was still here today. The old certainty that deViers would never find his prize was still strong. Peering hard through the lenses of his magnoculars, he struggled to find anything even approximating the profile of the famous Baneblade.

No, nothing came close.

Perhaps they took it off-world, he thought. Here we are desperately searching for her on Golgotha so that we might repair her and ship her to Armageddon, and the blasted orks have probably moved her there already!

He zoomed in on a pair of massive cylindrical structures at the southern edge of the ork base. They appeared to be some kind of greenskin foundries. They were covered in snaking pipes and valves, and were pouring smoke into the air, some of it black, some of it a noxious yellow-brown. Now and then, great plumes of fire erupted from a series of thin, teetering chimneys. He saw hundreds of beastly figures hefting scrap through massive doors. There were workshops attached where the sharp white glare of promethium blowtorches could be seen. Showers of orange sparks accompanied the harsh metallic banging sounds that rolled towards him across the floor of the caldera.

In the centre of the base, surrounded by the mountains of scrap, there were hundreds of huts and hangars, all made of corrugated steel and arranged in no particular order that Bergen could discern. Unsurprisingly, every single surface was painted red and decorated with crude glyphs, the vast majority of which seemed to be skulls or faces.

There were towers placed all around the perimeter, too, unsteady-looking frameworks of iron and steel that rose as high as any of the mountainous junk heaps. Atop each of these, Bergen saw observation posts boasting pintle-mounted heavy weapons. They were manned by members of the smaller, skinnier greenskin slave caste. They were hideous, chittering things, known to the soldiers of the Imperial Guard as gretchin — relatively weak at close quarters, but more capable of aiming a gun than their bigger kin.

“What in the name of Terra is *that* for?” asked Colonel Graves. “There, on the north side. Is that a cage?”

Bergen panned left and saw the structure Graves was talking about. It certainly looked like a cage, but it stood well over fifty metres tall. What in the warp had it been built to contain? The bars were thicker than an average steel girder. There was no sign of life inside, but the sight of great piles of reddish-brown dung left Bergen with a distinct sinking feeling. He thought he knew the kind of creature such a cage might have been built for. If they were lucky, the empty cage meant it was already dead. If they were unlucky, it was out on patrol somewhere, perhaps on the far rim of the crater.

He saw dozens of smaller pens around the cage, filled with the vicious-looking ovoid creatures that orks were known to eat. These were called squigs. Just over a decade ago on Phaegos II, Bergen had witnessed them being fired into the midst of a Mordian infantry regiment via a kind of crude ork catapult device. It was one of the strangest tactics he had ever seen the greenskins use. Strange, but effective. The result of such voracious and aggressive creatures landing smack in the middle of tightly packed troops was absolute panic as the squigs attacked everything they could get their razor-like teeth into. His tanks, moving up in support of the Mordians, had destroyed the catapults, but not before a good many men had died.

“That’s a lot of armour they’ve got sitting around,” said Captain Immrich. “And they’ve plenty of light vehicles, too. They’ll give your infantry something extra to worry about, colonel.”

Graves grunted something by way of reply. Bergen didn’t catch it.

Immrich was a few metres away on Bergen’s left. He seemed to be managing well in his new position as leader of the 81st Armoured Regiment, but Bergen had been a little stunned at the physical change in him. He looked a lot less robust than Bergen could ever remember him being. Then again, they all did. Bergen had studiously avoided looking in a mirror recently. The reddish tinge of his flesh was warning enough that Golgotha was taking its dreadful toll.

As Immrich had pointed out, ork vehicles were everywhere. Bikes and buggies roared back and forth as if their drivers were engaged in some kind of game. They hooted and hollered, and their passengers lashed out with hammers and blades every time they came within a few metres of each other. Bergen saw one ork beheaded in such a pass. The others howled with laughter as its lifeless

body tumbled from the back of the buggy it had been riding. Seconds later, a trio of bikes ran straight over the corpse.

Mad savages, thought Bergen, but his revulsion was nothing to the apprehension he felt as he panned his gaze over the disorganised ranks of the greenskin armour. There were literally hundreds of tanks, halftracks, APCs, artillery pieces, dreadnought walkers and more. Each looked just as likely to fall apart as to put up any kind of fight, but Bergen wasn't fooled. Ork machinery could be deceptively effective. Whichever Eye-blasted warboss ruled here, he was certainly well equipped.

"I've seen enough," said a sharp, clipped voice.

Bergen heard shuffling to his left and lowered his magnoculars. General deViers was moving backwards down the slope. When he was below the ridgeline, he rose to his feet and dusted himself off.

"The scouts say there is no other way forward," he said, addressing them all at once. "We'll have to wipe them out. We'll need time to search all those mountains of scrap for *The Fortress of Arrogance*."

Other officers had begun shuffling backwards down the slope. Many of them stopped at his words and turned to gape at him. Judging by the look on Colonel von Holden's face the man was just about ready to explode, but Pruscht, who had always seemed such a pragmatic and level-headed officer, beat him to it.

"You can't be serious, sir," he hissed. "In the name of Terra, think of the numbers. It'll be a massacre and we'll be on the wrong side of it, mark you."

DeViers looked around, eyes suddenly hard, and Bergen had the distinct impression he was searching for a commissar. Fortunately, they had been left to watch over the troopers while the senior officers moved up to observe.

"It *will* be massacre," the general snapped. "A massacre of orks. *The Fortress of Arrogance* must be out there. Any coward who turns from our glorious path will be shot dead. There will be no trials. Our very fingertips brush the prize. Today, we seize it."

Emboldened by the dismayed looks of the others, Colonel Meyers of the 303rd Skellas Rifles added his voice to the protest. "But there's no evidence that—"

The crack of a bolt pistol cut his sentence short. His skull detonated, spraying Colonels Brismund and von Holden with a fine shower of gore.

"In the name of Terra!" exclaimed Colonel Marrenburg, turning suddenly pale.

"That man was a senior officer!" gasped Major General Killian.

"Sir," hissed Major General Rennkamp, "are you trying to get us all killed? If the orks heard that shot..."

DeViers' voice was utterly level. He eyed each of the men before him. "Does anyone else wish to meet the Emperor's judgement as a coward and a traitor? If so, step forward."

No one moved.

"Our mission has but one goal," he continued. "All else is irrelevant. Whether we live or die, gentlemen, we will ensure that *The Fortress of Arrogance* is taken from the orks and turned over to the Adeptus Mechanicus. Yerrick *will* have his tank back, and our expedition will be forever remembered in the proud annals of the Imperial Guard. As you have just witnessed, I will kill any man who stands in the way of that, for he is an enemy of the Emperor and no true son of Cadian."

Those last words struck out at the officers like a lash. Bergen saw von Holden physically steadying himself against their impact. They affected the speaker, however, in quite a different way. As he finished his pronouncement, the general stood noticeably taller and prouder, his chest expanding until Bergen thought the buttons of his tunic might actually fly off.

The mad old bastard had really lost it, now.

The other officers were frozen. No one else dared speak. No one, that is, except the tall, hooded figure who approached from the bottom of the slope, his fluttering robes as red as the rocks on which he trod.

As red as blood, thought Bergen, eyes narrowing.

Magos Sennesdiar's toneless voice seemed to echo from the near hillsides as he said, "A rousing speech, general. And I believe you will soon fulfil your destiny. My adepts have just completed consultations with the spirits of our auspex scanners. We have every reason to believe that the tank you seek is indeed located in the ork base up ahead. It is time for you to earn your place in history, and the Adeptus Mechanicus stands ready to offer our support."

His hopes confirmed, a broad grin spread across the general's face, creasing the skin around his eyes. Bergen, however, saw all too clearly that the old fool was being manipulated. His desperation, his need to leave some mark on the Imperium, had made him a willing pawn of greater forces. Perhaps it wasn't entirely his fault. He *had* been great once, before the disaster on Palmeros had unhinged him. Most men, men of the aristocracy in particular, sought to leave something behind, though in the main this was achieved by the continuation of their bloodlines. DeViers had been denied that path to immortality, so he'd found another.

The poet Michelos had said something about fools writing history in the blood of better men, but Bergen couldn't remember the exact words.

Suddenly, Magos Sennesdiar turned his head southwards. Something had caught his attention.

"We must move at once," he said. "Quickly. Back to the vehicles. We have to hurry." Though his vocaliser couldn't convey a sense of urgency through tone, his words were adequate to the task.

Everyone turned to face the same direction.

"What do you hear?" demanded Rennkamp, but the magos didn't need to answer. The officers could hear it for themselves now, the roar of an engine getting louder all the time until it was almost deafening.

"Above us," shouted Colonel von Holden over the noise.

Bergen looked up just in time to see a chunky, snub-nosed jet fighter scream past them only a few dozen metres above the ridge line. It was painted red with some kind of shark's tooth pattern around the air intake at the front. There were rocket-pods and bombs fixed to the pylons under its wings. For the very briefest instant, Bergen thought he saw the leering face of the pilot, a hideous goggled ork with slavering, tusk-filled jaws.

"Move!" shouted DeViers, and everyone broke into a sliding run that carried them to the bottom of the slope in a torrent of rolling rocks and dust.

The pilot must have reported their presence over some kind of greenskin vox device because, from the ork settlement at the centre of the crater, the thunder of war drums began.

The Cadians' chance to properly plan an assault was gone. Any advantage was lost. The beasts were already spilling out to meet them.

It was time to kill or be killed.

CHAPTER THIRTY

They clashed halfway towards the ork settlement with a violence that shattered iron and bone. Things descended into madness almost immediately. There was no cover. It was open ground all the way in. The Cadians dropped hundreds of the foe at range, their Basilisk artillery pieces taking a terrible toll from about five kilometres back, but the orks had numbers to spare. They were a roaring, seething storm front of blades and guns, tusks and muscle, and they had gone a long time without a fight. At last, war had returned to Golgotha. The greenskins roared and laughed as long-range fighting quickly gave way to mutual slaughter at close-quarters, and the bloodletting began in earnest.

Sheet lighting began to flash regularly in the sky above, almost as if the excitement of the orks was somehow charging the atmosphere.

Leman Russ Exterminators and Conquerors, Chimera APCs and Heracles halftracks all pushed in to support the out-muscled Cadian infantry with sheets of blistering fire, opening temporary gaps that allowed the footsloggers to employ their lasguns briefly before the enemy surged forward again, trampling the bodies of the dead. Sentinels stalked the far left and right flanks charged with preventing the fast, light ork bikes and buggies from circling around the main force and striking from the rear. Their autocannon blazed, spewing brass casings on the sand. Those sections of the battlefield soon became littered with smoking machines from both sides.

In the centre, the air burned and throbbed, filled with scorching las- and plasma-fire. Solid rounds whipped and whined in every direction. Streams of liquid flame turned men and orks alike into roasted black marionettes that fell as if their strings had been cut. Shelling from both sides made the floor of the crater shake as if it might give way any second and plunge everyone into a sea of orange magma.

Outside the buttoned-up turret of *Last Rites II*, the world had descended into deafening, dust-choked mayhem.

Lesser men might have lost their minds in the face of such ferocity, for nothing could match the savagery, the gleeful brutality, of the orks. Cadians, however, were *not* lesser men. They were born and bred for war. This was their duty, and Wulfe was not afraid. His years of training and experience took over from the start, moving to the fore of his consciousness. His senses felt sharper, his movements faster and more assured, and his scar was itching, a reminder of all the hate he carried within him.

Whether or not he died today, he intended to take a heavy toll on the race that had killed so many of the men he'd known.

He heard van Droi on the vox. "Take it to them, Gunheads. Show those bastards what it means to unleash the Emperor's wrath!"

FOOM!

The sound of cannon fire cut across everything else as the Cadian tanks loosed round after round into the melee.

Beans stamped his foot trigger and added to the fusillade.

Major General Bergen had ordered all the regiment's Vanquishers, standard Leman Russ, Executioners and Destroyers to race straight forward through the xenos lines, guns blazing, with the objective of knocking out the enemy armour and artillery pieces lined up on the settlement's western edge. From there, they could wheel around and strike at the orks' rear.

It wouldn't be easy. They were already drawing massive amounts of fire. Ploughing straight through the ork horde would put them at even greater risk, but the long-guns had to be taken out if the infantry were to push forward. There was simply no other way.

Bergen thumbed the trigger of his autocannon, strafing the orks from the turret of *Pride of Caedus*, sending a row of them to the ground as lifeless heaps. All around him, the men of the 71st Caedus Infantry fought like rabid dogs. They were inspiring, even as their numbers dropped lower and lower. They made him proud. He was doing his best to support them, as was their commander, Colonel Graves, but if Immrich's tanks couldn't gain the advantage soon, all would be lost. General deViers' holy quest would end here.

The general was raging over the vox at anyone and everyone who was listening, demanding that they gain ground and break the ork charge. Bergen might normally have cursed him or ignored him, but not this time. This time, the old man was right in among them, in the eye of the storm, pouring out a hailstorm of multi-laser fire from the turret of his own Chimera. No one, he had insisted, could sit this one out. The odds were too great, and too much was riding on victory.

That suited Bergen. He figured it was about time the mad old bastard got his hands dirty.

From left to right, the battlefield was a sea of monstrous brown bodies clad in black iron plate. Gaudily painted dreadnoughts waddled alongside them, almost comical in their clumsy movements. There was nothing comical, though, in the torrents of death they spewed from hip-mounted stubbers and flame-throwers. Cadians went down in great screaming lines, their bodies cooked or ripped to pieces by sprays of heavy enfilading fire.

The 8th Mechanised Division and 12th Heavy Infantry Divisions were pressing the enemy from the north-west and south-west quarters, hemming them in and forcing them to fight on three fronts. The 10th Armoured Division had the middle ground. In terms of strategy, it was hardly elegant, but there hadn't been time for much else.

Van Droi heard Captain Immrich cutting across the 10th Company command channel with a priority message. "Immrich to spearhead. Drive straight over their infantry. Crush them under you. Once you're through, I want you to light up that damned artillery. Destroyers, focus on their tanks. Everyone else, targets of opportunity. We can make all the difference here. Do it for Vinnemann!"

For Vinnemann, thought van Droi resolutely. Throne, yes!

Foe-Breaker bounced and shook as she rolled over scores of screaming greenskins, pulping their meaty bodies under her treads. They turned on each other to get out of her way, hacking in fevered panic at the backs of their kin, but they were too slow. More fell with every metre she gained. In her wake, the sand became a blood-sodden bog.

Something slapped the turret hard, ringing the tank like a bell. The loader, Waller, cried out, "We're hit."

"Damage report," van Droi called back.

"No breach, no breach," reported Bullseye Dietz. "Anybody hurt? Any spalling?"

They had been lucky. Looking through the vision blocks, van Droi saw a spiral trail of smoke hanging in the air between his tank and a rusty-looking dreadnought that was clanking its way towards him kicking ork infantry from its path. A rocket had struck *Foe-Breaker*'s gun mantlet, detonating with enough power to give the crew a nasty headache, but little else. Without needing to be told, Dietz traversed the turret and lined her up.

"Brace!" he shouted.

Foe-Breaker rocked. Her turret basket filled with stinking smoke. The dreadnought seemed frozen in time for a split second. A melon-sized black hole had appeared in its armour, transfixing it. Then it exploded outwards in a burst of white fire, raining debris on the howling orks around its feet.

“Keep pushing her, Nails,” said van Droi to his driver. “If we let them slow us down, we’re done for.”

Orks were clamouring at her hull as she rolled on, hacking futilely at her armoured sides with their big chipped blades. Another rocket arced in and smacked the hull. Van Droi saw a different dreadnought, this one almost twice as big as the last.

“Damn it, Bullseye,” he called to his gunner. “Take that bastard out.”

“I can only shoot one at a time, sir,” snapped Dietz, but he stamped on the floor trigger a second later. The breech slid back, dumping an empty brass shell casing. The dreadnought had its right leg blown off. It fell forward and landed on its face, bladed arms wheeling frantically, dicing ork foot soldiers on either side.

“Nice shot,” said van Droi. He scanned the battlefield for the rest of his company. It was hard to see anything. Dark, billowing smoke rose everywhere and the horde was still pressing towards him on every side. Blades clanged relentlessly on the hull.

“*Foe-Breaker* to all Gunheads,” voxed van Droi. “Call in.” Three of his tank commanders responded. One did not.

“Van Droi to Holtz, respond.” Still nothing.

“*Old Smashbones*, respond.”

Van Droi knew Wulfe would be listening. They all knew what that silence would mean: another veteran dead. If van Droi had just let him stay on Wulfe’s crew...

No, there was no use in thinking like that. A man could go mad on what ifs.

Go with the Emperor, corporal, van Droi thought. From the looks of it, the rest of us will be following you soon. I don’t think anyone will be left to grieve, but we’ll hurt the bastards on the way out. I promise you that.

“Nails,” he yelled over the intercom. “We need more speed, damn it. Give her all she’s got. Let’s get our treads bloody!”

Pressing in on the orks from the south, the infantrymen of the 303rd Skellas Rifles fought valiantly without Colonel Meyers. The word was that he had been shot for cowardice. The remains of his regiment — some four hundred and sixty men — set out to prove that they were made of sterner stuff. They achieved exactly that, though there was little opportunity for anyone near them to truly notice in the dust-choked maelstrom of battle.

Under their newly appointed commander, Major Gehrer, who led from the very front, waving the regimental banner in one hand and brandishing a bloodstained chainsword in the other, the 303rd railed hard against the ork infantry and momentarily managed to drive them back. It didn’t last long. At such close quarters and without adequate armour support, the Cadian troopers were simply out-muscled, and, all too soon, the orks closed around them and butchered them with heavy, rusting blades.

Gehrer was the last to fall, protected to the bitter end by a swiftly shrinking circle of his strongest men. Even as the orks hacked him down and chopped at his fallen body, he fought to keep the banner upright, to stop its sacred cloth from touching the ground.

Seconds later, greenskin feet trampled it into the dust.

“Shore up the southern flank,” screamed General deViers. “Where the devil are the 303rd? And what’s wrong with our artillery? Gruber! Tell them to increase their rate of fire. That’s the worst excuse for a sustained barrage I’ve ever seen. Our men are getting slaughtered out there!”

He sat high in the turret of his Chimera, hatch locked above his head, firing rapid multi-laser bursts at anything and everything that came into range. It had been too long, decades in fact, since he had led from the front. The sight of hideous greenskins being cut into smoking chunks by his own hand brought a murderous satisfaction that he had forgotten was possible. He revelled in it.

There was no leading from the rear this time. He had known it the moment he had first laid eyes on the ork base. Every man, every machine, every bead of sweat and drop of blood would be needed to win this day. The only individuals not engaging in combat were those damned Martian priests.

“We are not a combat unit,” Sennesdiar had said, as if it weren’t already obvious. “And we are not under the command of the *Departamento Munitorum*. We shall stay back with the artillery and offer technical assistance. Our servitor bodyguards will help to protect the Basilisks in the event that orks outflank your forces, general.”

Outflank my forces, thought deViers? That Eye-blasted cogboy!

The orks would *not* get through. To hell with the odds. Only in a crucible such as this could true legends be forged. The blessing of the Emperor had given him this chance, this shot at genuine glory. Every last one of his senior officers felt it, too, he was sure. They were out there now, Bergen, Killian and Rennkamp, leading their divisions from the front, turret guns blazing as their Chimeras pressed forward inch by inch.

It was hard to see much, what with the clouds of dust and smoke that cloaked everything, but up ahead, just a little to his left, he glimpsed the tanks of the 81st Armoured Regiment roaring straight across the thick press of enemy infantry. Big alien bodies were being mashed into the sand, pulped by the rolling, grinding iron treads.

Stubber-fire danced and sparked across hulls. Huge handheld blades clattered uselessly against armour plates. As he watched, two were struck with anti-tank rockets or perhaps some kind of limpet charge. DeViers couldn’t tell which. They stopped dead in their tracks, turned into blazing cauldrons, the men inside cooking to death.

DeViers thanked the Throne that he couldn’t hear their screams.

The other Cadian tanks were almost through. Their guns coughed. He could just make out the first of the enemy armour starting to burn up.

“Gruber,” deViers yelled again, “what about my artillery fire?”

“I’ve told them, sir,” replied the adjutant from the troop compartment at the back of the vehicle. “They say they’re firing at full capacity. And they’re worried about hitting our own troops now.”

“Damn it,” deViers called back. “Get in touch with their commissar. Tell him to make an example of someone. Then we’ll see what full capacity is!”

He saw a massive black ork kick two others from its path and race towards the troopers in front of his Chimera with a chilling war cry. It was wielding a massive, whirring chainsword with both hands.

“No you don’t,” said deViers.

With a grin, he thumbed his butterfly-trigger and gunned the monster down.

Holtz, thought Wulfe, by the blasted Eye!

He kept repeating the name in his head, like a mantra against the truth of what he had just heard. He couldn’t believe he was gone. It hurt like a hot knife in his chest. He kept seeing Holtz’s face behind his eyelids when he blinked — not the disfigured face he had worn in recent years, but Holtz as he had been in the years before Modessa Prime. The man had changed a lot after that, everything but those ice-blue eyes.

He had been a good friend. Wulfe promised to let the real pain in, to stop holding it at bay, if he lived through this. For now, though, he had to fight it off. There was no time to miss anyone out here in all this madness.

“Incoming,” shouted Metzger over the intercom.

Something hit the tank’s glacis plate with so much force that the back end lifted clear of the sand. Half a second later, it crashed down again. The treads bit into the dirt, and *Last Rites II* leapt forward, pulling more orks underneath her.

Through his vision blocks, Wulfe saw a black shadow peel away in the sky above.

“Damn and blast! Don’t we have anything that can take out their air support? How are we supposed to clear their artillery out if we keep getting bombed from the air?”

Just as he finished his sentence, something small and bright screamed towards the jet and clipped its tail section. There was a burst of red flame and a puff of black smoke that quickly became an elegant curving trail. The ork fighter rolled slowly onto its back, and then slammed down into the horde. There was a mighty boom and a mushroom of dirt and fire. Wulfe judged that hundreds of orks must have been maimed or killed.

“By Terra, yes!” he shouted. He couldn’t see the heavy weapons team that had fired the missile, but he saluted them anyway.

He had enough to worry about without the damned greenskin fliers trying to blow up his crate. In trying to crush their way through the thickest press of orks, the Cadian tanks had been forced to slow down. That made them easier targets for the ork tanks that spluttered and rumbled at the rear of the horde. They were massive, lumbering junk heaps with far too much armour bolted on at all angles. They crawled forward on rusting treads, traversing their turrets almost in slow motion, trying to draw a bead on their faster Imperial counterparts. Every few seconds, they would fire a volley. Some of them had already exploded due to misfires, while others had killed scores of their own infantry, but the closer Wulfe got, the more he knew that, sooner or later, they would make a lucky shot.

Captain Immrich must have thought so too, because, in addition to 6th Company’s Destroyers, he ordered his first and second companies to break off and attack the tanks while the others dealt with artillery and static defences. As soon as the 1st and 2nd Companies broke through, they roared straight past the enemy armour, turned their turrets one hundred and eighty degrees, and began blasting them to pieces from the rear.

The Destroyers joined the attack from the front, the raw destructive power of their lethal beams cutting straight through hulls and turrets irrespective of armour thickness or density. They were a fearsome sight. Soon, most of the ork tanks were reduced to blazing metal heaps.

With the exception of Lenck, who had been ordered to support Marrenburg’s mechanised infantry, Wulfe and the remaining Gunheads broke through the rear ork ranks just seconds later. The artillery pieces were only a few hundred metres away: rows of massive, thundering howitzers crewed by skinny gretchin. They struggled to lift shells the size of fuel drums into the breech of each monstrous weapon.

From his left, there was a flash and a boom, and Wulfe saw that van Droi had opened up with *Foe-Breaker*’s main gun. *Steelhearted II*’s battle cannon coughed half a second later. Two of the ork artillery pieces came apart in great balls of orange flame.

“Beans,” Wulfe called over the intercom, “light those bastards up. Don’t stop until there are none left.”

“You’ve got it, sarge,” replied the gunner.

Traverse motors hummed, and then stopped. The gun kicked hard. Extractors whined and sucked out all the smoke from the turret basket. *Last Rites II* had notched up another kill.

Colonel von Holden’s 259th Mechanised Infantry Regiment held its section of the line with a mix of Chimeras, halftracks and troopers on foot. The vehicle gunners were charged with supporting the footsloggers by knocking out any ork vehicle that pushed in their direction. This they did with great success, pouring las and autocannon fire on them, turning a number of light, fast enemy buggies into spinning metal junk that scattered burning debris and dead bodies in all directions.

Their weapons were far less effective, however, on the heavily armed and armoured trucks that the orks were using as frontline APCs and light tanks. Some of these machines mounted fearsome customised weapons that really belonged on a more stable firing platform. The orks didn’t care. Each time the trucks fired, they came dangerously close to toppling over, but the effect on the Cadians was devastating. The shots that missed the Chimeras hit the men behind them, killing

dozens outright and fatally maiming scores nearby. The shots that struck managed to shred tracks and cause spalling, killing many of the men inside.

Von Holden saw it all. It happened to a Chimera just ten metres away from him, and he ordered his driver to pull back immediately.

“But we’ll crush the men behind us!” protested his driver.

“Do it at once!” von Holden snapped. “Or I’ll have you shot for insubordination.”

With a prayer for the Emperor’s forgiveness, the reluctant driver shifted the Chimera into reverse and began accelerating away from the oncoming ork trucks. Shots landed to the left and right, and the men that didn’t die instantly went down screaming for the Emperor and their home world.

“Faster!” shouted von Holden, ignoring voxed demands, from Major General Rennkamp that he explain his impromptu retreat.

One of the ork trucks spat a great gout of flame, and von Holden’s Chimera was knocked sideways, slewing to a halt. The high-explosive round had shredded her right tread.

Von Holden checked himself for injuries.

“I’m all right,” he gasped. “By the Throne, I’m all right!”

He didn’t see the dark shadow in the sky above him. It dropped something small and oval. Seconds later, the burning debris of his Chimera rained back to the ground.

Janz von Holden was dead.

Without Katz, Bergen was having a hard time monitoring all the vox traffic from his regimental commanders. He had taken on a temporary aide by the name of Simms, a youngster from one of Captain Immrich’s support crews. All things considered, Simms wasn’t doing a bad job.

Over the noise of stubber fire rattling off his Chimera’s armour, Bergen heard Captain Immrich’s voice in his right ear. Simms had patched him straight through. At least the boy was a quick learner.

“We’ve practically wiped out their tanks, sir,” said Immrich. “They looked tough, but they were a bunch of junkers. Half of them blew themselves up. Just a few left now. Companies one through four are tackling the static defences. I’ve ordered them to ram the gun-towers rather than waste ammunition. Those things look ready to fall over in the next breeze anyway. There are other garrisoned structures here, so I’m hitting them with high-ex shells. Companies five to ten are already mopping up the last of the artillery pieces. However, six and seven took heavy losses on the way through the horde. The orks are employing short-range RPGs and magnetic mines. Warn the Armoured Fist units not to get as close as we did. I’m ordering my Exterminators and Executioners to push through and join us. With my armour on this side and the infantry on the other, we can really start to punish them.”

Bergen was about to respond when a terrifying sound, halfway between a scream and a roar, cut across the noise of the battle.

Captain Immrich had heard it, too. Then, apparently, he saw it.

“Holy frak!” he voxed. “That’s big.”

By the Golden Throne, thought Bergen. Don’t let it be what I think it is.

“What can you see, captain?” he demanded. “What the hell is it?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Immrich was absolutely frozen in his seat.

An armoured behemoth lumbered into view around a towering mountain of rusting scrap metal. It was easily twenty metres tall at the shoulder, almost thirty with its heavily armed howdah.

This was no rickety ork contraption. It was a living thing, a member of the ork race, but so gigantic, so utterly different in physical form from its smaller kin that it seemed a different species altogether, unrelated in anything other than skin colour and temperament.

“Squiggoth!” Immrich gasped.

“Damn,” voxed Bergen. “Did you just say *squiggoth*?”

“I did, sir. But I’ve never... It’s *gargantuan*, sir! And it’s not happy to see us.”

With a calmness Immrich did not feel, he added, “You’ll have to excuse me, sir. I think my tankers and I are about to be very, very busy.”

* * *

Wulfe’s mouth hung open as the biggest living thing he had ever seen filled his forward vision blocks. It was a nightmare of armour-plated muscle and teeth. Its scaly skin looked as tough as rock. Each of the jutting lower tusks was easily as long as a Vanquisher cannon barrel and many times thicker, and its eyes, those giant glistening red orbs, burned with all the rage and insane bloodlust of its kind. The squiggoth shook its massive head and bellowed a challenge at the Cadian tanks. Wulfe felt his whole turret vibrating.

“By the bloody Throne!” exclaimed Beans.

“You can say that again,” Metzger replied.

“Siegler,” said Wulfe, still unable to blink. “High-explosive. Load her up. Beans, draw a bead on that thing and make it fast. You can’t miss.”

To the left and right, other turrets were already turning. Surely together, thought Wulfe, with all our firepower combined, we’ll be able to put the bastard down.

It was Lieutenant Keissler, recently appointed second-in-command of the regiment, who was the first to issue the fire command. Flame licked out from the muzzle of his tank, *The Damascine*. The first shell struck the beast’s armour-plated shoulder with a burst of fire and smoke. The squiggoth made an angry rumbling noise deep in its throat and turned to face Keissler’s tank full on. It wasn’t even scratched.

“Frak,” muttered Wulfe. “That’s just made it angry.”

Over the intercom, he said, “Metzger, get ready to run. You understand?”

“Already ahead of you, sarge,” replied the driver. He began rotating the hull away from the squiggoth, rolling one tread forward, the other one back.

“Beans,” said Wulfe. “Hit it somewhere soft.”

“Belly shot,” said Beans. “I think I can get one under the skirts of the howdah.”

Other tanks began blasting away. Most of the shells struck the howdah, and the orks onboard began firing back with rockets and heavy stubbers. Their aim was terrible. Bullets stitched the dirt. The rockets corkscrewed and exploded harmlessly in the air.

Then the howdah’s gigantic main gun fired.

The sound made the squiggoth buck and rear, throwing off most of its passengers. They plummeted, hit the sand hard, and lay there, twisted and unmoving.

A Destroyer on Wulfe's left was suddenly swallowed in a great ball of fire. Tiny metal pieces rained down on *Last Rites II*.

"Frak," exclaimed Metzger over the intercom. "We have to move."

The other tanks were pounding it, but the squiggoth wasn't even bleeding.

It clawed at the dirt, preparing to charge.

"What are you waiting for, Beans?" Wulfe demanded. "Fire!"

"Brace!" shouted Beans.

Last Rites II kicked and sent a glowing round towards the squiggoth's belly.

There was a burst of fire. The monster brayed. When the smoke cleared, its belly scales were blackened, but undamaged.

That damned thing's skin must be thicker than our bloody hull, thought Wulfe.

The squiggoth had had more than enough of the tanks. With another deep bellow, it lumbered towards them, kicking ork huts and squig pens out of its way, trampling everything unlucky enough to get in its path. For the most part, this meant squigs, orks and gretchin, but one of the tanks from Lieutenant Czurloch's 3rd Company wasn't quick enough.

It had stalled.

As *Last Rites II* accelerated away, Wulfe looked back to see the unlucky tank and its crew crushed almost flat by a massive clawed foot.

"That thing must weigh a thousand tonnes!" he exclaimed.

Tanks were scattering in every direction, and officers started shouting over the vox, trying to keep their companies together, to maintain some kind of discipline. Turrets turned to fire back at the enraged beast, but shot after shot burst on its armour, only serving to enrage it further.

Immrich's urgent voice cut across all the panicked chatter. "Listen up, tankers. Switch to armour-piercing. High-ex isn't doing a damned thing. And try to draw it onto the rear ork lines. It's mad as hell. We can use that to our advantage."

Wulfe took half a second to survey the rest of the battlefield. Much of it was obscured by dust and smoke, but what he could see was an absolute maelstrom, the fighting insanely fierce in every quarter.

Once Immrich had dropped the link, van Droi's voice came through.

"You heard the captain, Gunheads," he voxed. "Stick together. Follow 1st Company's lead. And keep firing, for Throne's sake."

"That idiot captain is going to get us all killed, lieutenant," said a voice that made Wulfe scowl. "We should scatter. Think about it. The minute we crash back into the rear ork lines, our speed'll drop by half. That big beast will stomp us."

"Do as you're bloody told, Lenck," van Droi barked back. "That's an order!"

Wulfe cursed. He could picture Lenck's snide face. That piece of crap! He would put his own survival first every damned time. Maybe van Droi would see that now.

Wulfe looked out and saw that the giant squiggoth was giving chase. The ground shook. Every footfall was like a miniature earthquake.

Last Rites II bounced and swayed as she crashed over the orks' backs, Metzger keeping her speed as high as he could.

"Armour-piercing up the spout, sarge," reported Siegler. "Locked and lit."

"Line her up, Beans," said Wulfe. "You'll have to fire on the move. Just do your best."

Beans didn't answer. He was concentrating hard.

"Brace!" he shouted.

The tank kicked. The turret basket filled with smoke.

"What are they playing at?" demanded General deViers. "I want that damned thing killed this instant!"

A wind had picked up, dragging the smoke and dust away from the battlefield, improving visibility with each passing moment.

Brave men were fighting for their lives all around his Chimera, but it was the squiggoth that held the general's eye. It was the biggest threat on the battlefield, and that made it the biggest threat to his success. He saw his chances for victory thinning. Already, the beast had crushed or kicked apart eight of the Imperial machines, and Captain Immrich was leading the damned thing back towards the Cadian lines. What in blazes was he thinking?

"Gruber," he yelled at his adjutant, "get me Bergen on the vox, right now!"

Something explosive hit the side of his Chimera and set her rocking on her suspension. He heard the rattle of stubber-fire as it struck her glacis plate like a hard rain.

"Nothing to worry about, general," his driver shouted. "No breach. No warnings lights on the board."

"Bergen here," said a crackling voice in deViers' ear. "Go ahead."

"What the devil are your tankers playing at, Gerard? If they lead that monster back towards us, it'll run rampage through our infantry. We'll be slaughtered wholesale."

"Captain Immrich knows what he's doing, sir," replied Bergen icily. "Right now, the beast is out of control. They're baiting it. They've got it charging straight over the orks. It's killing hundreds of them, as I'm sure you can see for yourself."

"I've seen eight of our tanks get crushed by the bloody thing. Tell me again that your damned Captain Immrich knows what he's doing. I want it killed right now. We've already knocked out most of their vehicles. Let's turn the infantry battle around and win this. What about their air support?"

"Dealt with, sir. Killian moved his missile teams forward with the Tyrok Fusiliers and took them out. All hostile birds are down. Is there anything else, sir?"

DeViers didn't like Bergen's tone. It was dismissive. Did he think *he* was leading this offensive? If the man lived through today, deViers planned to give him one hell of a dressing down. He had been too easy on Gerard Bergen up to now, too eager to believe they were on the same page.

It was increasingly clear to him that they were not.

"Just tell Immrich to kill that damned monster," he said, and shut off the link. "Gruber, get me Sennesdiar. I have to speak with him immediately."

Seconds later, the voice of the magos said, "I am listening, general."

"Make sure you are," said deViers. "I want you to send that damned beacon of yours up. Code in our coordinates. Get that Mechanicus lifter down here, and tell your people to load her up with fighters, bombers, tanks... anything they can send us. Anything at all. We can win this fight if we just get some kind of edge."

"Negative," Sennesdiar replied.

DeViers exploded. "Negative? What the hell do you mean by that? Do as I say."

"General, as I have already stated, I am not part of the *Departamento Munitorum* command structure. I alone have the authority to decide when the beacon will be released. I will not call down a Mechanicus craft while there is still a significant threat to its safety. This battle is not yet won."

"Don't you have eyes, you fool?" said deViers. "My men are fighting for their lives. Now send the damned beacon up or I'll have you shot for obstructing an Imperial operation."

"Eliminate the squiggoth and all static defences, general," said Sennesdiar plainly. "Purge any remaining forces from the settlement up ahead. Find the warboss. When you have achieved these things, the beacon shall be launched. Not before."

DeViers heard the tell-tale click of the vox-link being cut from the other end.

"Gruber," he yelled, "get me Gerard Bergen again."

Four tanks, they were all that remained of Gossefried van Droi's 10th Company: his own *Foe-Breaker*, Wulfe's *Last Rites II*, Viess' *Steelhearted II*, and Lenck's Exterminator, *New Champion of Cerbera*.

Of these, only Lenck's was firing on anything other than the giant squiggoth. His crate's twin-linked heavy bolters were outstanding anti-infantry weapons, and they had helped cut a bloody path of carnage through the ork ranks, but they were little use against something like the insane behemoth that was chasing him. Instead, Lenck ordered Riesmann to concentrate on keeping the way clear with a torrent of fire. There was no way he was getting trampled to death like those other idiots.

Damn that stupid Immrich for ordering them back into the middle of the horde. Not only was it slowing them down, putting them in reach of the squiggoth's tusks and feet, but six tanks from the 2nd, 4th and 7th Companies had been slapped with magnetic mines that blew them to tiny, spinning pieces. Other tanks were struggling through the press of bodies with dozens of orks on top of them, all yanking hard at the hatches and hammering at the vision blocks with the butts of their blades. All the weight of those hangers-on slowed the tanks to a crawl. As Lenck watched, the squiggoth thundered forward, crushing one and knocking two others onto their backs. Broken ork bodies flew in every direction. In the wake of the beast's rampage, however, more orks immediately moved in on the upturned machines. They began trying to cut their way through belly armour with chainaxes and blowtorches, desperate to get at the helpless men inside.

Lenck grimaced. It wasn't that he cared for his fellow tankers per se, but he imagined that it might not be long until *New Champion* was on her back like that. He definitely wasn't ready to die. Most of the dolts around him thought it was an honour to die for a so-called God-Emperor they had never even seen, or to die for a planet that had sacrificed them to a life of war in that same. Emperor's name. Not Lenck. He still had scores to settle. He enjoyed being Voeder Lenck far too much to give it up on some foolish notion of honour and duty.

It wasn't his destiny to die here. He knew he would make it through.

Part of him hoped Wulfe would make it, too.

Wulfe watched two massive, ugly, scar-faced orks climb up onto the outside of his turret and start hacking at it with their axes. Futile, of course, but he knew how lucky he was that neither of them appeared to be carrying explosives or a burner. All he could do was tell Metzger to keep the old girl moving and pray they wouldn't get tagged with something nasty.

Beans was firing back at the squiggoth, but it was hard to aim with all the jouncing around. With armour-piercing rounds, he had managed to wound the beast twice, hitting it both times in the thick muscles of its front right leg.

Now a third sound punched through its skin and buried deep, causing the creature to scream and rear up on its hind legs, towering like a Titan over the battlefield. Even the orks turned and gaped.

It was at that very moment, with the monster's belly exposed to the tanks below, that a long yellow muzzle flame erupted from the end of *Foe-Breaker*'s Vanquisher cannon. The special high-velocity armour-piercing shell lanced straight into the monster's heart.

With a scream that hurt Wulfe's ears even through his baffles, the squiggoth collapsed sideways, tumbling heavily to the ground, crushing hundreds of orks and throwing out a great ring-shaped cloud of dust. The impact shook the entire crater, knocking foot soldiers on both sides from their feet.

Wulfe's tank was filled with cheering and whooping. The vox erupted with similar noises.

"Hell of a shot, sir!" Wulfe voxed. "Give old Bullseye a slap on the back from me."

The squiggoth was not dead yet. Few things smaller than a Titan could have killed such a beast outright, certainly not a Vanquisher tank. As the dust cleared, Wulfe could see the slow rise and fall

of its belly. It was still breathing, but it was desperately weakened and pinned to the ground by the weight of the massive howdah on its back.

It wouldn't be getting back to its feet. Ever. Its death would be long and slow.

It was too much for the orks.

Bad enough that the squiggoth had rampaged through their ranks, leaving so many of them as little more than red smears on the battlefield; now, they saw the Cadian tanks put it out of the fight, and their morale shattered like glass. Those at the rear broke ranks first, fleeing back towards the settlement, dropping heavy guns and blades on the blood-soaked sand.

The Cadian officers recognised this for exactly what it was: the shift that signalled victory. They rallied their troops, pressed their advantage, and surged forward. Those orks that did not flee suddenly found themselves facing a resurgent foe. Without the overwhelming numbers at their back, they were lost. Their charred bodies fell to the sand, and the Cadians charged over them.

General deViers felt that the Emperor must surely be watching him at that moment. His destiny had not abandoned him. His legacy, his immortality, was within reach.

“Forward, Cadians,” he voxed, “in the name of the Emperor. This day is ours!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Cadian artillery moved up to join the rest of the expedition force, and began pounding the ork settlement to rusting rubble. This was something for which the orks no longer had an answer. Thousands died taking shelter in their pathetic corrugated huts and barracks. Thousands more were crushed and killed when the Basilisks turned their muzzles towards the ork foundries and levelled them. It was only when General deViers received an emergency vox-call from Magos Sennesdiar that the shelling abruptly stopped.

“What the devil are you doing, sir?” asked Major General Rennkamp on the vox. “We’ve got them right where we want them. Keep shelling.”

“Damn it, no!” snapped deViers. “I want our tanks and Chimeras to move in. Each vehicle is to have infantry support. I want them to sweep each street, each building, and converge on the far side. That’s how we’re going to do this.”

“With respect, sir,” voxed Major General Killian, “that’s bloody nonsense. The orks will have retreated to their fallback positions. They’ll be dug-in. You’re sending our boys straight into a death trap. I agree with Aaron. We have to pound them to nothing with the Basilisks and *then* send the infantry in to mop up. Anything else is just—”

“Enough!” snapped deViers. “I’ve already executed one officer today. Will I have to repeat that action? I will not risk destroying *The Fortress of Arrogance*. We go in with tanks and troops. We’ve already beaten them, by Throne. They won’t put up much more of a fight. I want our tanks up front, is that clear? Bergen?”

“Clear, sir,” voxed Bergen. There was no mistaking the tone of exhausted resignation in his voice. His armour had just won a great victory. The Basilisks could have made it complete. However, if the damned tech-priests weren’t lying for once, the most famous and sacred Baneblade battle tank in the entire Imperium was somewhere up ahead. It might be buried under a frak-load of rusting junk, but the general clearly believed it was there, and not one man present would be leaving Golgotha until it was retrieved.

From a pre-expedition total of over one hundred, only twenty-six tanks remained in the ranks of the 81st Armoured Regiment. They moved slowly and deliberately through the twisting, junk-filled streets of the ork camp, halting frequently to blast apart ramshackle towers and barracks buildings from which ork rockets and stubber-fire stabbed out. Vox-chatter was terse, betraying the Cadians’ anxiety. No one liked moving through the narrow lanes. The shaky metal buildings on either side looked ready to topple at any second. Their construction was almost laughable. Beams and girders stuck out at every angle. Most of the corrugated metal walls looked set to tear away on the next wind. It was a wonder any of them stood at all.

Again and again, the Cadians found themselves boxed in. Huge armoured orks, some of them almost three metres tall, poured out from shadowed corners in a frenzy, screaming oaths in their foul xenos tongue, bloodstained blades and hammers held high above their heads. The tallest were so dark-skinned they were almost black, and they fought with ferocity of a different magnitude altogether. It took twice as much fire to put them down as it did to slay the other members of the squads they led.

If not for the tanks and their crews providing hard cover and fire support to the footsloggers, any progress at all through the settlement would have been impossible. There were too many damned

bottlenecks. The Cadian armour made all the difference, but it wasn't long before van Droi started hearing voxed reports of tanks being lost.

The fourth such loss was *Steelhearted II*.

Captain Immrich had assigned Viess and his crate as armour support to a company of Colonel Pruscht's 116th Lasgunners. They were purging an avenue half a kilometre north of van Droi's position when rockets had shredded the tank's left tread, rooting her to the spot. The infantry had immediately moved forward to return fire, only to be cut down by ork heavy weapon teams perched on the nearby roofs. Then the ork foot soldiers had poured in, dragging Viess and his crew out of their hatches and hacking them to pieces on the street.

A few of the lasgunners had managed to break away from the fighting and report what had happened. The commissars would probably execute them later on charges of cowardice.

The Gunheads were down to three tanks. Van Droi could hardly believe it. Soul-sapping misery hovered over him, threatening to descend and engulf him at any second, but he fought hard to keep it at bay. Other men were depending on him, now, a platoon of Colonel Stromm's Kasrkin troopers. They followed just behind his crate, hellgun stocks raised to their armoured shoulders.

He couldn't afford to lose focus.

Van Droi looked out from his cupola, fists tight around the grips of his pintle-mounted heavy bolter. His Vanquisher had already been stung twice — once on the glacis and once on the mantlet — by rockets fired from blind corners. She had soaked up both hits, but how much more could she take? Her hide was scarred silver by all the stubber-fire she had drawn, and stained black where the rockets had struck.

Thinking that his remaining Gunheads deserved to know of the company's latest loss, he hit the vox-link button on his headset and said, "This is 10th Company Command. Listen up, Gunheads. I've just heard from Colonel Pruscht that *Steelhearted II* is dead. Viess and his crew are gone. So, keep your damned eyes open, both of you. If Yarrick's tank is here, this will all be over soon. You have to keep it tight until then."

Two brief acknowledgements came back to him. One from Wulfe, one from Lenck. Van Droi knew they utterly detested each other. They were just about as different as two men could be, but they were both survivors. They had that much in common.

What was it about the character of each man, he wondered, that had got him this far when so many others had fallen along the way? Was it Lenck's self-serving ruthlessness? Wulfe's rigid honour code? Or his almost paternal concern for the lives of his crew?

If they both survived this, maybe van Droi could find a way to bridge the gap between them. Troopers who disliked each other at first were often bonded by the trials they shared. He had seen it before.

Then again, he thought, maybe not.

Up ahead, he noticed that the avenue was quickly widening. The ork structures were bigger and more widely spaced apart. From some of the roofs, great crooked armatures reached up towards the sky. They looked like construction cranes. Their heavy steel cables swung in the wind.

"Take it slow, Nails," van Droi told his driver over the intercom. "It looks like we're approaching the eastern edge of the settlement. I can't believe we've seen everything the orks have left."

Nails shifted down a gear, prompting a question from the Kasrkin lieutenant at the rear.

"Trouble up ahead?" he voxed.

"Can't be sure," replied van Droi. "Come up and take a look."

The Kasrkin officer, a rough-spoken man by the name of Gradz, clambered up the back of *Foe-Breaker* and stopped close to van Droi. Despite their proximity, they spoke over the vox. The noise of the engine was too loud for anything else.

"What do you think?" asked van Droi.

The Kasrkin took a moment to answer. "I think we've just found our warboss, armour. That hangar dead ahead is the biggest structure I've seen so far. Twice the size of those ones to the side. I'll bet you ten bottles of *joi* the bastard is in there right now. The minute our lads move into that open square, the orks'll launch their last stand. The warboss will lead it."

Van Droi nodded in silent agreement.

"Well?" asked Gradz. "You gonna take the bet?"

Something large moved in the shadowed mouth of the hangar. The muzzle brake of a massive battle cannon poked out into the daylight. Van Droi and Gradz both saw it at the same time, but it was too late to do anything. The gun belched fire and smoke. There was a clap of thunder.

They didn't see the shell that killed them. It happened too fast for that.

Foe-Breaker was flipped onto her back by the power of the explosion, crushing eight of the men behind her.

Then her magazine ignited, and her armour blew outwards as a million spinning shrapnel shards. No one within ten metres of her survived.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Orks were spewing out from buildings on all sides.

“We need to fall back right now,” Lieutenant Keissler voxed to Captain Immrich. “Draw them back into the narrower streets.”

“No,” snapped Immrich. “I will not disobey the general’s orders. We are to stand firm and engage. There will be no retreat. This is their last stand, and it is ours as well.”

“You’re a bloody fool, Immrich,” hissed Keissler. “I always thought so. Death or glory, is it?”

“What else is there?” Immrich replied and took aim.

General deViers could barely hear himself think over all the noise on the vox.

Killian was yelling for permission to pull his men *out* of the ork settlement. Rennkamp was calling on him to send everything they had *in* to support the Cadian tanks, and Bergen was raving about some monstrous ork battle tank five times the size of a Leman Russ that was ripping the forward elements of his armoured division apart.

In the general’s mind, there was only one pertinent fact. His prize was in there somewhere. The path was clear.

“Army Group Command to all units. This is General Mohamar deViers. In the name of the Emperor, I order you to move in. Converge on the east side of the settlement. Give your lives if necessary, but sell them dear. Our victory must be absolute. *The Fortress of Arrogance* is within reach. For Cadia and for the glory of all mankind, we will recover her this day. Fight hard, brave Cadians. The Emperor protects!”

The Emperor wasn’t doing a very good job of protecting the men of the 88th Mobile Infantry.

Wulfe had been attached to one of their platoons for the sweep eastwards, but the men were dropping like flies, hemmed in on all sides by savage aliens of simply breathtaking bulk and power. Lasgun blasts hardly seemed to affect the orks at all.

Wulfe’s stubber-fire was only marginally more effective. He did his best to keep the orks off the men around him, gunning them down mercilessly with enfilading fire from his cupola, but there were simply too many. They weren’t the worst of it, either, not by far.

Between them, the Cadian armour and infantry would have found a way to overcome the unmounted troops. It would have needed time, coordination, and a healthy serving of old-fashioned Cadian courage, but the orks had armour support of their own — a single lethal machine that nothing on the Cadian side seemed capable of damaging — and it was picking the 18th Army Group tanks off one by one.

Beans had fired on that clanking, rumbling, smoke-spewing monstrosity three times already, switching from high-explosive to armour-piercing when it was clear the former was utterly ineffective, but the armour-piercing shot hadn’t done much in the way of damage either. The other tanks had discovered this too. Their rounds either exploded without effect or lodged in metre-thick slabs of iron skin.

Some of the remaining Executioners and Destroyers had enjoyed slightly more success, managing to blast a few pieces off here and there, but the oversized lump of metal was still rolling forward, emerging into the daylight with aching slowness.

This was the monstrosity that had brewed up *Foe-Breaker*. Wulfe had heard it all over the vox, his gut knotting until it caused him actual physical pain. Seconds after the vox report, he and the other mixed units had arrived on the open ground before the big hangar. That was when the orks had poured out to surround them.

What in the blasted warp is it? Wulfe wondered, glancing in the direction of the ork machine.

Only half of it was visible so far, but Wulfe guessed its speed had nothing at all to do with an underpowered engine. It had been built by orks. Already its armour had proved superior to the Cadian weapons. It was most likely fitted with an insane excess of weaponry, too.

As he thought this, the machine's main gun fired again, its thunderous roar shaking the hangar walls and the buildings on either side. The air trembled. A Leman Russ Conqueror belonging to 2nd Company spun on a pillar of flame and crashed to the ground on its side.

Wulfe wondered darkly if *Foe-Breaker* had landed the same way.

The report of van Droi's death had hit him with all the force of an Earthshaker round, harder, if he was honest, than the death of Holtz or Viess. He had known van Droi longer. The man had seemed immortal to a young Wulfe when he had first joined the regiment. He had been somewhat like Colonel Vinnemann in that regard. For Wulfe, Gossefried van Droi had embodied everything that was strong and true and noble about the Imperial Guard. He was a symbol. Gossefried's Gunheads had been named for him. Symbols weren't supposed to die. Only people died. People and orks.

Hungry for revenge, he loosed a battle cry and thumbed the trigger of his heavy stubber, sending another lethal torrent straight into a pack of orks that were hacking the arms and legs from an infantryman on the left. Wulfe couldn't save him — it was too late for that — but he punished the soldier's killers. Their grotesquely muscled bodies crumpled to the ground, torsos almost cut in half by the stubber's high rate of fire. Their thick red blood mixed with that of the man they had just killed.

Wulfe heard Beans calling "Brace!" on the intercom just-before a tongue of fire flickered at the end of *Last Rites II*'s battle cannon. The sharp boom it made set his ears ringing.

The round went curving in towards the massive ork machine, striking a plate of red-painted iron bolted to the front. White sparks showered out as the round ricocheted and punched a hole in the corrugated surface of the hangar wall. After a second, the plate fell off and was pulled under a set of massive iron treads.

"Damn it!" cursed Beans over the intercom, but Wulfe wasn't listening to him. He was listening to the divisional vox channel. The chatter there had suddenly intensified, for Beans' shot had uncovered the forward edge of a massive black track-guard, on top of which sat an icon cast in bright, shining gold.

Every man on the battlefield recognised it. It hung from their necks, imprinted on one side of the dog-tags they all wore. Many had paid to have it tattooed on their bodies.

It was the holy aquila, two-headed eagle, icon of the Imperium of Man.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

General deViers felt his heart hammering in his chest as his Chimera raced in towards the battle. He ordered his driver to crash straight through the orks that filled the street up ahead. Beyond them, he could already see the ground where his forces were fighting for their lives. There was the massive hangar he had heard about on the vox, and, there she was: *The Fortress of Arrogance*.

There was no doubt it was her. Some tanker in the 10th Armoured Division had knocked off a piece of her disguise, and now everyone knew. They had found her. They had tracked her down at last, but what in blazes had the greenskins done to her? In all the general's dreams of how this moment would unfold, he had never imagined this. In the ultimate act of sacrilege, the orks were using her to slaughter Imperial forces. *His* forces.

Even so, he had no choice but to give the order.

Through gritted teeth, he voxed, "This is Army Group Command to all units. Cease fire on the enemy superheavy at once. I repeat, do not fire on the ork super-heavy under any circumstances. Concentrate on the enemy infantry."

Gerard Bergen wasn't slow to respond. He didn't bother with propriety, either.

"You're out of your frakking mind, general," he hissed. "Whether that abomination is Yarrick's Baneblade or not, it's devastating my armour. We have to take it out right now. Reverse that order!"

"Mind your damned tone, major general," deViers barked back. "I will do no such thing. Ask Magos Sennesdiar; if a round pierces the onboard fuel or ammunition supplies, she'll be beyond all hope of repair."

"And if we don't put her out of commission, there won't be anyone left to claim her. Have you lost your mind, you old fool? You're acting like a damned Mechanicus puppet. You know that?"

DeViers felt his face grow hot.

"I hope you live through this, Gerard," he growled, "I really do, because if you ever speak like that to me again, I'll see you swing from the gallows. Is that clear? The order stands. Anyone who fires on *The Fortress of Arrogance* will answer to me."

"Fine," said Bergen bitterly, "and may you answer to the souls of the men you've just condemned. Bergen out."

"You have got to be bloody joking!" exclaimed Beans.

"I wish I was," answered Wulfe. He turned to his left and fired on an ork wielding a bulky heavy flamer as if it were little more than a pistol. It had just finished roasting three Guardsmen to death at close range. When Wulfe's stubber-rounds punched into its body, the ork threw up its hands. One of the rounds punctured the fuel tanks on its back, and it exploded in a fountain of bright fire and burning meat.

The bastardised Baneblade was almost fully out of the hangar. Wulfe could see an absolutely massive ork standing on top of it. It had to be the warboss. It wasn't just the size of the creature, though it certainly made even the biggest of the black-skinned veterans look almost small. It was the massive suit of power armour that it wore. Energy crackled in blue arcs along its arms. It flexed huge blade-like claws and bellowed its war cry through some kind of amplifier attached to its shoulder.

The bestial roar swept over the battlefield, and the orks all around began fighting with fresh reserves of energy and zeal.

“Look,” said Beans, “I might just be a gunner, but I know that order is utter bloody ball-rot, sarge. If we can’t fire on it, we’re dead men.”

As if to prove his point, the Baneblade’s main gun fired again. The last surviving Leman Russ Executioner detonated in a spectacular burst of orange fire and glowing blue plasma.

“Throne damn it,” cursed Wulfe. “Listen, Beans, do you think you can hit the warboss without hitting the tank?”

About twenty metres behind *Last Rites II*, a Chimera exploded. Wulfe felt the intense heat of the blast on the back of his neck and turned.

A slavering black ork was hauling its way up the back of his tank with an axe in one hand and a rusty metal hook in the other. A suing of desiccated human heads bobbed around its waist.

Wulfe dropped down into the turret basket just in time. The beast’s axe clanged on the rim just as his head disappeared inside.

“By the Throne!” shouted Siegler. He began scrambling to unhook one of the lasguns from the fixings by his station. In the meantime, the ork had thrust its metal hook into the turret basket and was slashing backwards and forwards, trying to snag the crewmen it knew were inside.

Wulfe threw both his arms around the ork’s massive wrist, but the damned thing was so powerful it began battering him off the turret walls. In desperation, Wulfe let go with one hand and scrambled for his knife. He grasped the handle, drew it from its sheath, and stabbed it hard into the ork’s forearm.

With a roar of pain, the ork withdrew its arm, taking the knife with it, but the reprieve was only temporary. Seconds later, it thrust its massive head down into the turret and began snapping at Wulfe with its razor-toothed jaws. The stink of its foul breath filled the compartment.

“Down,” shouted Siegler, and Wulfe dropped his weight to the floor just in time. Tusks clashed an inch above his head. Then the ork turned to face the loader, drawn by his shout.

Siegler rammed the barrel of a lasgun into the creature’s mouth and yanked back hard on the trigger. The blast blew out the back of the ork’s head, spattering the wall of the turret basket and two of its occupants with blood and brain matter.

“By the bloody Eye of Terror,” shouted Beans. The back of his head was drenched in foul-smelling gore.

“Good work, Sig,” said Wulfe. He immediately set about trying to clear the cupola, but it wasn’t easy. Shifting the heavy corpse took all his strength.

When the hatch was free, he poked his head out to check for any other orks waiting to lop his head off. There were none. He stood and gripped the handles of his heavy stubber again. In the few seconds it had taken to deal with the hook-wielding ork, yet another Cadian tank had been reduced to a flaming black skeleton.

Something else had changed, too. There were more Cadians than before. The reinforcements from the rear had arrived. Chimeras were pouring laser and autocannon fire in every direction but that of *The Fortress of Arrogance*, and the foot soldiers were tapping in to some kind of hidden reserves. They fought back with a renewed sense of purpose. Wulfe decided it must be the sight, or perhaps the proximity, of the holy tank that had inspired them. If they could only stop it knocking out their damned armour...

Just as he was thinking this, the disfigured Baneblade fired again.

This time, the victim was Hal Keissler and *The Damascine*. The 2nd Company leader died instantly, blown apart with the rest of his crew. Wulfe swore, realising that he could count the number of surviving tanks on the fingers of two hands. To the right he saw *New Champion of Cerbera* and was amazed that she had stayed in the fight for this long.

Perhaps he had underestimated Lenck’s skill as a commander.

It hardly mattered. If *The Fortress of Arrogance* kept picking them off like this, none of it would mean a damned thing.

“Beans, you never answered my question.”

Having been denied the only armoured target on the field, Beans was strafing ork infantry with the co-ax. “What question?”

“Do you think you can hit the damned warboss?”

“I can try,” said Beans, “but if I hit his ride instead, the general will have me shot!”

“Do it anyway,” barked Wulfe. “I’ll answer for it, but you have to take the shot. That damned thing is getting ready to fire again, and we might just be the next target. Siegler? Load her up. High-explosive. Let’s blow that greenskin bastard into the next life.”

“We’re out of high-ex, sarge,” replied Siegler. “Only armour-piercing left, and not many of ‘em.”

“Damn it,” spat Wulfe. “AP it is. Load her up. Aim well, Beans.”

“Locked and lit,” shouted Siegler.

“Do it,” said Wulfe, “and may the Emperor guide your shot!”

Beans stamped on the floor trigger.

Last Rites II shuddered as exploding propellant burst from her muzzle brake. The shot zipped straight in towards *The Fortress of Arrogance*. Wulfe held his breath, praying that the ork leader would disintegrate in a shower of blood and bone shards.

The shot curved low and smacked straight into the Baneblade’s turret instead.

Another massive armoured plate fell away, revealing more of the black and gold that lay underneath.

The reaction on the vox was immediate. Wulfe heard General deViers screeching at the top of his voice. “Who fired that shot? Identify yourself at once. You are disobeying a direct order from your general!”

Wulfe was about to respond when another voice cut in. It was Major General Bergen.

“Frak it!” said Bergen. “This is a direct order from 10th Division Command. All tanks, open up on that monstrosity with everything you have. We won’t lose anyone else to it. You hear me? Fire at will.”

Wulfe knew that the general’s orders overrode Bergen’s, but he wasn’t about to let that stop him. “Siegler, load. Beans, do what you do best, son!”

Thunderclaps echoed from the rusting metal walls all around as the surviving tanks of the 10th Armoured Division blasted the bastardised Baneblade with everything they had. Fire blossomed all over it and heavy pieces of armour spun away in all directions.

“Stop!” yelled deViers over the vox, but nobody was listening. “I command you to stop!”

The Adeptus Mechanicus also added their protestations, overriding the Cadian vox-comms to issue warnings of their own, but to no avail.

Again and again, the tanks fired. More and more of the true shape of *The Fortress of Arrogance* was revealed. Then one shot struck the raging warboss that stood atop the turret. There was a sudden burst of bright blue light and a loud cracking sound as the energy field generated by the warboss’ armour straggled to absorb the blast. Against lesser weapons like lascannons, it might have held indefinitely, but it simply wasn’t powerful enough to repel the sheer force of a tank round impacting at full velocity. The field collapsed and the beast’s right arm vanished completely in a fine red mist.

The warboss staggered and looked sideways at the ragged, bleeding stump of flesh with an expression of slack-jawed disbelief. That was when a second round, an armour-piercing shell from Captain Immrich’s Vanquisher, *Firemane*, struck it dead centre in the torso. The round punched straight through the ork’s power armour, blew its guts out its back, and blasted it from its feet.

A great cheer went up from the Cadian soldiers, and they rallied for the third time that day. Wulfe marvelled at them. He knew how tired they were, but they were Cadians, all of them. They

would rather die of exhaustion than give up the fight. It was their planetary heritage, this discipline and strength.

“Cease fire,” shouted deViers again. “Cease fire, at once!”

The tankers stopped firing. The Baneblade still rumbled forward, but without their commander, the crew were confused and lost. The ork foot soldiers were distracted by the sound of the Cadian cheer and turned to find that their warboss had been slain. Without his overwhelming strength and dominance, the unity of the ork force collapsed. Old factions that had once been rivals were suddenly free to wage war against each other again, and the entire force fell into absolute and immediate disarray. Greenskins began hacking and firing at other greenskins just as fiercely as they were fighting with the Cadians. It didn’t take the Guardsmen long to capitalise on this.

The clashing of heavy blades and the barking of large calibre stubbers and pistols gradually gave way to the ordered crack of las and hellgun volleys.

Within the hour, the sounds of fighting died off altogether.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“Get those men down from there,” deViers stormed. “Get back all of you. Damn your eyes, I’d have some of you shot but for the fact that we have our prize at last. Gruber, give me that vox-amp unit. And you there! Yes, you. Help me up at once.”

A young trooper bearing the insignia of the 110th Mechanised Regiment gave General deViers a boost up onto the track-guards of *The Fortress of Arrogance*.

Kasrkin storm troopers had already popped her hatches and slaughtered her greenskin crew, and her engines had stopped rumbling. She stood still and silent as the general climbed up to stand on the top of the turret. It had been a pulpit once, a place from which Commissar Yarrick had given his rousing speeches to Imperial troops before leading them into battle. DeViers could feel it now, all that glory settling on his shoulders like a fine heavy cloak. He glanced down at the body of the warboss where it lay on its back.

Disgusting beast, he thought.

The stench from its innards made his nose crinkle, but it would take much more than that to ruin the moment. He turned and faced out towards the ordered ranks of troopers. There were so damned few of them. Had he really started all this with over twenty thousand men? The losses seemed incredible, but Yarrick had demanded victory at any cost. DeViers had held to that remark, and now he had his victory.

He saw Magos Sennesdiar and his tech-adepts moving towards the front, their robes stained dark at the hem by all the blood that soaked the ground.

DeViers lifted the microphone of his vox-amp unit and began, “Men of Exolon and of the Adeptus Mechanicus, let us always remember this day. It has taken time, resources and the sacrifice of many of our Cadian brothers to make this dream a reality. But here we stand, victorious, and the greatest prize in all the Imperium of Man is finally in our hands. I stand upon it, and I feel its holy spirit all around me: *The Fortress of Arrogance*, a holy relic the likes of which few men could ever hope to see. Come forward if you wish. Lay your hands on it. Feel its holy spirit wash over you and inspire you. Even in this wretched state, desecrated by our enemies, robbed of its true glory, it still exudes a power that surely embodies something of the Emperor Himself.”

On he went, talking of a glory that would never be forgotten. He believed every word that came out of his mouth, and the strength of his conviction convinced many of the men who listened.

Caught up in the moment with all those eyes fixed on him, all those ears hanging on his every word, General deViers didn’t hear the scrape of metal on metal.

He didn’t know anything was wrong until he felt hot, stinking breath on the back of his neck.

His blood ran cold as ice and he moved to turn, but it was a motion he never finished. The ork warboss was barely alive, able to stand only by virtue of a central nervous system that had been developed to work through indescribable levels of physical pain; that, and the all-consuming hatred it felt for weak, pathetic humans.

It closed its remaining power claw around the general’s middle and, with the briefest twitch of its fingers, cut the man in half.

Colonel Stromm of The Fighting 98th was in the front row, standing just a few metres in front of the Baneblade’s hull. He was moving before the general’s upper body tumbled sideways from the turret.

“Kasrkin!” he yelled to his men as he tore his hellpistol from its holster. Together, he and his storm troopers began blazing away at the giant swaying ork.

It shuddered as it was peppered with searing shots. Then it fell backwards again.

The firing stopped.

Magos Sennesdiar wasted no time. He surged forward, leaping onto the front of the Baneblade with an agility that was totally at odds with his bulk. His adepts immediately climbed up after him. As they hurried onto the top of the turret, Armadron said, <They may have damaged the fragment, magos.>

<Or destroyed it completely,> said Xephous. <The fools.>

Sennesdiar was the first to reach the body of the ork. The creature was breathing no more. There, around its tree-trunk neck, he saw a glimmer of green and gold.

The fragments he told his adepts. <It is intact. We have it at last>

<Praise the Omnipotent,> his adepts intoned together.

“Is the damned thing dead?” asked a gruff voice.

Sennesdiar quickly tugged the fragment from around the warboss’ neck, breaking the leather cord that held it there, and hid it within the deep folds of his robe. Then he rose and turned to face the speaker.

“Colonel Stromm. The ork leader no longer lives. Adepts,” he said, addressing his subordinates in Low Gothic, “it is time we launched our beacon.”

Together, the three Martian priests climbed down from *The Fortress of Arrogance*, and strode towards their Chimera, passing Major Generals Bergen, Killian and Rennkamp on the way. All three men looked drawn and exhausted, and they were speechless as the tech-priests passed.

When Sennesdiar was within a few metres of them, he said, “One of our lifters can be expected to arrive within the hour, major generals. My servitors will tend to the Baneblade, but I suggest we all make haste in our preparations to leave. Golgotha is still home to a vast population of orks. Tarrying too long could prove to be a grave mistake.”

The magos moved off, but he had only gone about ten metres when Bergen called out to him.

“Sennesdiar,” he said. “Tell me, will you answer a question?”

Sennesdiar turned. “Ask it.”

Bergen’s eyes were hard. “Did you get what you were looking for?”

The magos paused for the briefest instant, and Bergen found himself imagining that, had Sennesdiar still possessed a face capable of it, he would be wearing a smile.

“Didn’t we all?” said the magos. Then he turned and moved off again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The sky was turning from red to murky brown. It would be night soon, but Wulfe and the others wouldn't be here to see it. They were leaving. What remained of the 18th Army Group's vehicles had already been rolled or towed up the ramps and into the gaping holds of the Mechanicus lifter. On the battlefield, the fires had gone out in most of the wrecks. Men moved among the dead, collecting dog tags from the necks of their fallen brothers, and retrieving lasguns, pistols, grenades and anything else that Munitorum procedure said was too valuable to leave behind.

Wulfe's crew was already onboard the lifter, tying *Last Rites II* down in preparation for the flight. Wulfe had asked Siegler to come and fetch him when the last call to board went out. Then he had come, alone, to the place where Gossefried van Droi had died.

He stood looking at the twisted, burnt-out wreck that had once been the man's pride and joy: *Foe-Breaker*. The bodies of her brave crew were still inside her. There was no Confessor Friedrich here to take care of them. The confessor had almost certainly died in the ork siege at Balkar, another good man lost.

Wulfe's heart felt like it was made of lead. He had known van Droi for almost all of his fighting life. He trusted few people as much as he had trusted the lieutenant. That he was suddenly gone, after so many years of beating the odds, just didn't seem real, neither did the loss of Holtz or Viess. These were men he had respected, men he had liked, not just fellow troopers, but friends.

That thought threw up another name, and a shiver ran the length of his spine, despite the heat. He remembered a whispering voice he had heard on his intercom once, and a hollow-eyed face that looked anything but peaceful: *Corporal Borscht*.

Wulfe prayed that van Droi and the others would not appear to him inexplicably like his former driver had. Surely the Emperor had already welcomed them to his side. They had more than earned it.

Footsteps sounded on the sand behind him.

"Time to ship out, right Sig?" asked Wulfe without turning.

"In a hurry to leave?" replied Voeder Lenck.

Wulfe turned, his brows drawing down into a scowl. "What are you doing here?"

Lenck grinned, but his eyes were dark and cold as he said, "Came to pay my respects, didn't I? Think you've got a monopoly on that?"

Wulfe's eyes narrowed. There was something about Lenck's stance that he didn't like. The wiry corporal looked loose and relaxed, but it seemed forced somehow.

Silence hung between them on the warm, still air.

"What are you really doing out here, corporal?"

Lenck shifted, stepping forward, bringing his hands around from behind his back. Wulfe saw a glimmer of metal in the corporal's right hand. "I'm doing what your mother should have done at birth, you grox-rutter."

Lenck settled into a fighting stance, well balanced on the balls of his feet, blade ready in his lead hand.

Wulfe immediately reached for his own knife, but it wasn't there. It was lodged in the forearm of a dead ork.

“You’re frakking insane,” he spat. “Put that blade away, corporal. You’re making one hell of a mistake.”

Lenck laughed. “The way I hear it, Wulfe, you’ve quite a thing for ghosts. Well, guess what. Now you get to be one. You’ve had it in for me since the day we met, you self-righteous prick. But you didn’t know who you were messing with. Time to show you.”

Lenck lunged at Wulfe in a blur, thrusting the knife out towards his belly. Wulfe barely managed to twist away in time. He heard the ripping of fabric and looked down to see a wide cut in his tunic.

Lenck reset his stance, and then lunged again, this time with a high-to-low backhand slash that caught Wulfe on the right forearm. The blade bit into his flesh and sent a flare of pain along his nerves.

“Damn you, Lenck. Are you insane? How do you expect to get away with this?”

Lenck laughed. “You were out here grieving for van Droi when a wounded ork stumbled out of the shadows, surprised you and cut you down. Siegler will find your body.”

Lenck stepped in with another vicious slash, but Wulfe saw it coming and kicked out at the corporal’s knife-hand.

He missed.

The knife sliced deep into the meat of his left shoulder.

Wulfe gritted his teeth and grasped Lenck’s wrist, but the corporal punched him in the face with his free hand and sent him reeling backwards.

“You’re a relic, Wulfe, like Yarrick’s tank. You’ve had your day.”

Wulfe knew he couldn’t beat Lenck’s speed. Lenck had proved that already, but Wulfe was bigger and stronger.

His only chance lay in clinching, but it was a huge gamble. At close range, the knife would slash him to pieces. If he could just wrestle it free.

With a sneer of triumph, Lenck said, “I can see the fear in—”

Wulfe didn’t let him finish. He bull-rushed him, ramming his wounded shoulder hard into Lenck’s abdomen. Pain exploded throughout Wulfe’s body, but it was worth it. Lenck hit the ground hard with Wulfe on top of him, the air rushing out of his lungs.

“Bastard,” he hissed and immediately slashed at Wulfe’s face. Wulfe blocked with his forearm again and took another painful cut for his troubles.

Wulfe roared at the pain through gritted teeth, but he noticed something, too. On the ground next to Lenck lay something long and white and familiar. It had fallen from Wulfe’s pocket when they had landed on the ground.

Still straddling his enemy, Wulfe snatched it up desperately.

Lenck saw Wulfe grab for something and lashed out again at his face, but this time, Wulfe caught his wrist firmly in one hand and stabbed the ork tusk straight down into Lenck’s biceps with the other. The corporal howled as Wulfe yanked the tusk left and right, doing as much tissue damage as possible.

Lenck’s fingers went weak. The blade dropped.

“All right, enough,” he whined, grasping at his wounded arm. “You win, sergeant. You win. Just don’t kill me. I wasn’t gonna kill you, I swear. I just wanted to teach you a lesson.”

Wulfe loomed over him, growling, baring his teeth. It would be so easy to murder this worthless wretch. So many problems would be solved in an instant. So why did he hesitate? He wasn’t sure what it was at first. For a brief moment, he thought it might be that there were so few Gunheads left, and Lenck had been through the same hell as he had, but it wasn’t that. It was simply duty. Lenck was an Imperial Guardsman, whether he liked it or not. His life belonged to the Emperor. It wasn’t Wulfe’s to take.

“Listen carefully, you piece of groxshit,” he rumbled. “You walk around like some kind of hive-ganger boss and think it counts for something. It counts for *nothing* out here. You got that? I saw

through you from the start, you little punker. You'll never have another chance like you did just now. Do you hear me? This will never happen again. I know you, Lenck. And, whether I'm dead or alive, I'm going to haunt you for the rest of your worthless frakking life."

Having said his piece, Wulfe threw his whole body weight forward into a crushing elbow strike that smashed Lenck's nose and split both his lips wide open. The back of his head bounced hard off the ground. He was out cold.

Wulfe looked down at the corporal's ruined face. "That one's for you, Holtz," he muttered.

Wulfe carried Lenck's limp form back to the Mechanicus lifter, the corporal draped over one shoulder like a sack of grain, and was climbing the boarding ramp just as Siegler appeared at the top.

"I was coming to fetch you," said the loader. "Six minutes till take-off."

Wulfe nodded and walked past him, and Siegler fell into step behind.

"What happened to Lenck?" he asked without a trace of concern.

"He was born stupid," replied Wulfe.

The Fortress of Arrogance sat in the middle of the hold, tied down with dozens of thick steel cables. She was swarming with tech-servitors and engineers hell-bent on removing the ork modifications as soon as possible. On the far left, between a pair of half-tracks, Wulfe spotted the *New Champion of Cerbera* and its shifty, no-good crew. They looked anxious, and stood up nervously when Wulfe began striding towards them with their unconscious leader.

None of them seemed inclined to speak.

Wulfe threw the sleeping corporal down hard on the metal deck, and then eyeballed each of the three crewmen in turn. "Your corporal got himself in a bit of trouble. He came off the worse for it. If any of you stupid sons-of-bitches think you'd like to find out what *kind* of trouble, make a move. Now."

No one, not even the bully boy, Varnuss, so much as twitched.

"Is he... is he dead?" asked Hobbs finally.

Without looking down, Wulfe kicked Lenck in the ribs and was rewarded with a feeble groan. It was answer enough. Then he gestured to Siegler and together they walked off between the tanks and halftracks in the direction of *Last Rites II*.

The loading ramp was being raised, crowding out a shrinking slice of ruddy Golgothan sky. Klaxons blared, announcing imminent take-off. Orange warning lights began to spin. From scores of loudspeakers, the rhythmic, atonal chanting of the Mechanicus tech-crew began, reciting litanies for the safe, efficient operation of the lifter's ancient engines.

Onboard gravitational fields kicked in. The hull shook with the power of the ship's massive thrusters as they heaved its metal bulk up into the air. Within minutes, it had risen beyond the churning clouds of Golgotha and was making for high orbit.

There, *The Scion of Tharsis* waited.

Operation Thunderstorm was over.

EPILOGUE

The midday sky was a brilliant blue laced with the shimmering white trails of Lightning fighter squadrons and formations of Marauder bombers out of the Tethys-Alpha airbase in the north. Standing in his pulpit atop *The Fortress of Arrogance*, Yarrick looked out across the open plains. The Palidus Mountains sat like patient giants on the far side, waiting for the grand spectacle to begin. The ground was hard, good footing, excellent for tanks and infantry alike. In a few hours, it would be a stinking, blood-sodden marshland littered with the dead.

With the Emperor's blessing, most of the bodies would be alien.

The far foothills were already dark with the shadows of the descending xenos horde: such incredible numbers. Good, it would be a worthy fight, a fitting end to a lifetime of vendetta. There was no fear in him. Decades of constant war had desensitised him to it. All that time spent in the forge of battle had made his soul as hard as ceramite. His mind was tougher than folded steel. Victory alone was what mattered, and today he would have it, whatever the cost. Damn his detractors. They were blind to the bigger picture. They squabbled like children over body counts and budgets when it was *this*, life or death on the battlefield, that truly mattered.

It was *here* the future would be decided, *here* that he would meet Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka for the very last time. The ork warlord would die today, or they both would. Either way was fine with Yarrick, so long as his life's work, the mission that had made him a legend among men, was complete.

Looking left and right, Yarrick cast his eyes over the forces that Segmentum Command had amassed and placed at his disposal. Millions of men and women stood ready to do their duty. Their ranks stretched away to the north and south as far as the eye could see, and there were more to the rear.

Yarrick could sense their determination and resolve. They were here to win. He could smell it on the air. They had come from all across the Imperium, from worlds as different as night and day, but they were utterly unified in purpose. They would turn back the greenskin threat. They would protect Holy Terra. They would safeguard the destiny of mankind as the supreme race in the galaxy.

It was a rousing sight, a force greater than he had ever commanded before. Entire divisions of tanks and artillery pieces sat idling, coughing smoke out onto the breeze. Sentinel scouts prowled the forward lines like anxious predators, alert to any signs of change on the wind. There were trucks and halftracks by the thousand, all filled with devoted infantrymen, and almost as many Chimera APCs loaded with battle-hardened storm troopers.

Mightiest of all were the god-like Emperor-class Titans that towered over everything, arms raised parallel to the ground, vast guns ready to unleash death on a planet-shaking scale. They looked like gods of war cast in metal and ceramite. Surely no other creation embodied the strength of humanity so absolutely. Well, perhaps just one.

From the railing of his turret-mounted pulpit, Yarrick looked down at her glacis plate: *The Fortress of Arrogance*.

It still astounded him that she was the same tank, the very same damned tank that he had lost on Golgotha all those years ago. From her black armour plates to her massive main battle cannon, from her fine gold detailing to the Mechanicus shrine that graced her rear, she looked exactly as she had on the day he had first laid eyes on her. To him, she was the spirit of the Imperial Guard made manifest.

He had thought her lost forever until a Mechanicus transmission received over two years ago mentioned her location. Now he knew he had been right to push for a recovery mission. Yes, men had died to get her here. By all accounts, the blood-price had been horribly high, but the effect of her presence on Armageddon was far beyond such a price. Her spirit charged the air. Men reached out to touch her cold, hard flanks, muttering prayers for strength and glory. Even now, he felt their eyes on her. She was as much a legend as he was.

A tinny voice sounded in his ear. It was his comms-officer speaking over the intercom. "The lord generals wish to inform you that their armies are ready to march, sir. They await your order to advance."

"Good," said Yarrick. He looked again at the far foothills. More and more orks were swarming over them, far more than he had ever faced before. Their ugly machines filled the air above with thick black smoke. Numerous weapon misfires sent rockets screaming into the air.

Yarrick activated the vox-speakers that protruded from the Baneblade's turret. Then he raised his oversized power claw high above his head.

"All troops..." he bellowed.

His amplified words rolled out over the battlefield like thunder.

He swung his power claw downwards with a chopping motion.

"*Forward!*"

Engines roared. Treads turned. Boot-heels struck the ground in perfect rhythm.

The Fortress of Arrogance rumbled into battle, and the land trembled.

For ever after, men would remember this day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Edinburgh, Scotland, **Steve Parker** now lives and works in Tokyo, Japan. In 2005, his short fiction started appearing in American SF/fantasy/horror magazines. In 2006, his story “The Falls of Marakross” was published in the Black Library’s *Tales from the Dark Millennium* anthology. His first novel, *Rebel Winter*, was published in 2007.

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